University of the People

PHIL 1402 Introduction to Philosophy

Unit 1 Written Assignment 1

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A Thucydidean Analysis of Political Realism and Its Contemporary Relevance

Thucydides and the Foundations of Political Realism

Introduction

Thucydides, the ancient Greek historian and political philosopher, stands as one of the foundational thinkers of political realism. His masterwork, "History of the Peloponnesian War," chronicles the devastating conflict between Athens and Sparta (431-404 BCE) while presenting sophisticated analysis of power politics that continues to influence modern international relations theory. This research examines Thucydides' realist philosophy, its historical context, and its enduring relevance to contemporary political discourse.

Biographical Context and Personal Influence

Born around 460 BCE into an aristocratic Athenian family, Thucydides experienced firsthand the dynamics of power he would later analyze. As a strategos (general) in the Peloponnesian War, he commanded troops until his exile in 424 BCE after failing to prevent Sparta's capture of Amphipolis. This military command experience and subsequent twenty-year exile profoundly shaped his analytical approach to history and politics. His position allowed him to gather detailed information from both Athenian and Spartan perspectives, contributing to his notably objective analysis of the conflict.

Historical Era and Cultural Context

Fifth-century BCE Greece represented a complex political landscape characterized by intense competition between city-states. Athens had evolved into a sophisticated democratic maritime empire following the Persian Wars, while Sparta maintained its traditional oligarchic system and land-based military prowess. This period witnessed unprecedented cultural and intellectual achievements in Athens alongside growing imperial ambitions that ultimately led to conflict with Sparta and its allies.

Power Politics and State Behavior

Thucydides argues that international relations are fundamentally driven by power considerations rather than moral principles. His famous Melian Dialogue demonstrates how powerful states can impose their will on weaker ones regardless of ethical considerations or appeals to justice. The dialogue's stark conclusion - that "the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must" - encapsulates his realist perspective on international relations.

Human Nature and Political Motivation

Thucydides identifies three primary motivations driving human and state behavior: fear, honor, and self-interest. This trinity of motivations, he argues, creates predictable patterns in political affairs. States act primarily out of fear of others, desire for honor or prestige, and calculation of self-interest rather than abstract moral principles.

The Security Dilemma

Perhaps most presciently, Thucydides identifies what modern scholars term the "security dilemma" - how actions states take to increase their security often make other states feel less secure, leading to conflict. His attribution of the Peloponnesian War to "the growth of Athenian power and the fear this caused in Sparta" remains a classic explanation of how security competition can lead to war.

Modern Power Dynamics

Thucydides' framework provides valuable insights into contemporary international relations challenges. The concept of the "Thucydides Trap" - where a rising power threatens to displace an established one - has been widely applied to current U.S.-China relations. His analysis of how power transitions can lead to conflict remains particularly relevant in today's shifting global order.

Technological Competition

While Thucydides focused on military power, his principles extend to modern technological competition. Contemporary states compete for advantages in artificial intelligence, cyber capabilities, and space exploration, creating new security dilemmas in digital domains. The fundamental dynamics he identified persist even as the nature of power evolves.

Economic Interdependence

Modern economic interconnection complicates pure power politics in ways Thucydides couldn't have anticipated. However, his insights about how states use economic power to achieve political aims remain relevant, as evidenced by the use of sanctions and trade policies as tools of statecraft.

Enduring Relevance and Limitations

Thucydides' realist framework, while providing valuable insights into political behavior, requires updating for the modern context. His emphasis on military power needs expansion to include economic and soft power in today's interconnected world. Additionally, international institutions and economic interdependence create constraints on state behavior that didn't exist in ancient Greece.

Conclusion

Thucydides' realist philosophy, grounded in careful observation of human nature and political behavior, continues to provide essential insights into international relations. While some aspects of his analysis require modification for contemporary circumstances, his core insights about power politics, human nature, and interstate competition remain remarkably relevant. His work demonstrates how careful analysis of historical events can reveal enduring principles of political behavior that transcend time and culture.

References

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