

*The Peloponnesian War:
The Struggle for Security*

In the years leading up to the Peloponnesian War Greece was ridden with strife and discord. This generated fear in the city-states that stood to lose influence and elicited hope in those who stood to gain influence. The major players in the war were Athens and Sparta, but most of the city-states on the Greek mainland and nearby islands were involved at some point. The underlying motivation for the conflict was the desire for security aggravated by the power shifts that arose in the aftermath of the Persian Wars. Sparta and her allies initiated the conflict with a desire to protect themselves against the newly demonstrated power of Athens. The dependence on alliances combined with the inconsistent nature of the alliances themselves exacerbated the struggle for security. Lastly, Athens' pursuit of empire, itself founded in Athenian security, spiraled out of control to prolong the war. These three security issues, the problems regarding Athens' rise to power, the unstable systems of alliances pervading Greece, and the increasing expansion of Athens, were instrumental in shaping the Peloponnesian War from start to finish.

Sparta had been the dominant force in Hellas for a long time and Athens' growing power posed a terrific threat to that previously unrivalled strength. With a stratified, militaristic system of government that had been in place for over 400 years¹ the Spartan system had developed a military far greater than any other in Greece. The hoplite army was renowned in the Greek world, and indeed all of Spartan society was a dedicated war machine. At the top of the social structure was a fighting class that was not allowed to engage in agriculture or business, but was raised solely to be full-time hoplite soldiers. At the bottom of the social hierarchy there was the lowest and also the largest class, the helot slave population. These slaves performed agricultural labor and were therefore extremely important to the survival of the rest of the population².

Sparta's slave population was its largest security issue and one they had been unable to resolve despite centuries of internal conflict. The helots suffered brutal

¹ Thucydides. History of the Peloponnesian War. NY: Penguin Books, 1972. Thuc. 1.18, pg 45

² Broadhead, William. Lecture, Oct 7

treatment and Sparta constantly feared that they would rise up. This was especially worrisome when Sparta was at war, because if an attacker should move into its main territory, the helots in addition to the attacking force could overwhelm Sparta's military. Sparta also could not afford to send any significant portion of its military far from its main lands since it always had to be prepared to put down a revolt³. Sparta's need to maintain control at home made them reluctant to send forces north to fight the Persians in the Persian Wars. Sparta's military policies not only allowed Athens to become a force to counter that of Sparta, but actually forced Athens to become a strong power.

Sparta's traditional prowess can be seen in its control over the long-standing Peloponnesian League, an alliance of city-states. The members of this league were ostensibly equal, but Sparta held all of the power, as the league was founded on the strength of Sparta's hoplite military. Each city-state made a bilateral alliance with Sparta, and swore to follow them. Sparta dictated when the league would go to war, in which case Sparta would have complete control, even over each allied contingent. Except when at war, each member of the league was autonomous⁴. The promise of elite Spartan military support provided security for the member city-states, and Sparta had additional forces it could call on in the event of a helot revolt.

Athens was not a weak power, but did not have the formidable reputation of Sparta. However, Athens' role during the Persian Wars and its aftermath set the stage for the Peloponnesian War by demonstrating that Athens was a significant military force in its own right. Whereas Sparta, in the southernmost region of the Greek mainland, had no need to rush to combat the Persians in the far north, Athens was nearer to the invasion and wanted to prevent the Persians from reaching Attica if at all possible for its own security. Therefore, Athens was helping itself by advocating a Greek alliance and trying to protect the northern city-states. With the famous military might of Sparta playing little part in the fighting, Athens was able to demonstrate that its army was capable of executing successful campaigns as well. The Persian Wars also showed Athens the importance of a strong navy, and they began to build it up⁵.

³ Hornblower, Simon. The Greek World 49-323 B.C. London: Routledge, 1996. pg 119

⁴ Broadhead, Nov 2

⁵ Broadhead, Oct 26.

Athens' performance against the Persians made them a leader among the Greek city-states. Since the Persians had not been entirely driven out of Greek waters, many city-states remained nervous about their defenses and they turned to Athens, who developed a Greek alliance. Like the Peloponnesian League, this Delian League was designed to be democratic, with the policy decided by an assembly in which each member state had an equal vote, but Athens was really at its head. The Athenians provided the commander for the Greek offensive, dictated the contributions of the other states in the league, and were in charge of distributing those contributions. This setup left Athens in control of the joint navy and large treasury of the league, further increasing Athenian power. As time progressed, Athens began to exhibit more control over the league and its members. While the initial members had voluntarily entered the league, they were not allowed to leave the league, and new members were forced to join. Naxos was the first to revolt and be "forced back to allegiance"⁶ but was far from the last. The money and manpower Athens received through the Delian League allowed her to begin to develop an empire.

The Peloponnesian and Delian Leagues themselves generated security issues for the Greek city-states. The highly unstable situation in Greece after the Persian Wars caused each city-state to look towards securing its status and independence amidst the turmoil. However, the security of one state was frequently dependent on others being weak, and this created a severe, and potentially violent, conflict of interests. Greece was particularly susceptible to security issues because it consisted of a large number of independent city-states. Since none of these city-states, not even the dominating powers of Sparta and Athens, were strong enough to establish sufficient control to stabilize the power hierarchy in the region, and therefore the individual city-states felt safer having others bound by treaty to bolster their own defenses.

Similarly, but on a larger scale, neither of the two competing leagues were able to dominate the Greek world. This bred difficulties in maintaining the alliances by making it easier to cross-over between them. Because the Peloponnesian and Delian leagues opposed each other, a city-state that had a grievance within their league could often count on the other to support the switch. This made the alliances themselves unreliable and a

⁶ Thucydides 1.98, pg 93

security problem, even though they were originally instituted to reduce that same problem.

The empirical tendencies of Athens were also driven by a need for security. As the Athenians told Melos after devastating their land, “By conquering you we shall increase not only the size but the security of our empire⁷”. On the military front, Athens feared that a coalition of city-states would be able to subdue them. Athens’ economic strength also depended on their relations with other city-states. “The inability of Attica as a whole to feed a large population⁸”, composed as it was of infertile land⁹, meant that resources had to be gained abroad. Accessibility to grain routes was necessary to feed the population, and availability of friendly trading centers was essential for commerce. Additionally, Athens needed to protect its lands and the resources they contained. Since Athens had large amounts of territory on the sea, its navy was instrumental in protecting its empire and commerce. Athens funded its formidable and expensive navy with tributes taken from the lands under its control, making them indispensable in yet another way to Athenian security. As Athens controlled more land, and therefore more resources, it also required more protection and the process became cyclic. The need for military strength, resources, and the protection of her assets made Athens’ continual territorial expansion a measure taken to increase Athenian security.

These security issues began to build up once the Persian threat was gone. Despite the alarm felt in response to Athens’ increasing power, the Spartans were reluctant to make an offensive move without further provocation, due to their perpetual helot problem at home. Sparta did try to subtly limit Athens’ expansion as early as 479 BC by trying to convince them not to rebuild their walls when Athens tried to strengthen its position by fortifying the city¹⁰, and even debated starting a war to prevent Athens from growing stronger. Not too long after, though, the helots erupted with enough force that Sparta actually called on Athens for help in putting down the slaves¹¹. Athens came to aid Spartans, and “it became clear to the Spartans that they themselves lacked experience in

⁷ Thucydides 5.97, pg 403

⁸ Hornblower, 125

⁹ Hornblower, 127

¹⁰ Thucydides 1.90, pg 88

¹¹ Broadhead, Nov 2

this department of warfare¹², and Sparta realized that they no longer had a monopoly over military power on land, compounding their fear.

Athens' new power threatened other city-states as well. Clearly, the city-states in the Delian League that had tried to revolt and those that were forced into the league were displeased with their loss of independence to Athens' expansionist policies, as well as those that feared they would be next. Sparta's ally Megara used Athens' power to aid in a border dispute with Corinth by joining the Athenian alliance. A request for support gave Athens a perfect excuse to set up garrisons, and so Athens was more than willing to fight for Megara. The Corinthians' security was hindered now that their rival was allied with a power stronger than them, so this incident spawned Corinth's anger with Athens¹³. Eventually, fighting with Corinth, and also dealing with rebellions from Megara and Euboea, Athens agreed to a truce. The revolts from within the Athenian alliance and Megara's defection from the Peloponnesian League demonstrate the unstable nature of the alliances in Greece that added to the security dilemma of the city-states.

The truce did nothing to eliminate the security issues of the city-states around Athens, but provided a good excuse for the hesitant Spartans to justify war with Athens. A few years after the truce, claims were made that Athens had broken the truce. Aegina claimed that Athens infringed on its independence, which was protected in the truce. Megara claimed that Athens broke the truce with them in issuing the Megarian Decree, which excluded them from trading with the Athenian empire¹⁴. The more decisive claims were those Corinth brought against the Athenians, in regards to Epidamnus and Potidaea. This is not to say that there was any more weight to Corinth's claims, but that Corinth itself had a significant amount of political influence. Corinth was a naval power, second only to Athens, and therefore a powerful ally or enemy. Both Sparta and Athens were dependent on their allies, Sparta because they needed a wide base of support to protect themselves against their own slave population, and Athens because they needed the tributes to fund their navy and the people to man the ships.

The dispute over Epidamnus reveals how the alliances, made for defense and protection, actually produced a fear of conquest. Epidamnus was a tiny colony involved

¹² Thucydides 1.102, pg 95

¹³ Thucydides 1.103, pg 96

¹⁴ Thucydides 1.67, pg 73

in a civil war that had historical ties to both Corcyra and Corinth. Corcyra felt that Corinth, who sent aid upon request to aid one of the warring parties, was interfering without cause, and they turned to Athens for help against Corinth. Athens in turn feared that Corinth, with its already strong navy, would win Corcyra's substantial fleet and weaken the margin of their naval superiority, so they established an alliance with Corcyra. This alliance was supposed to be defensive, meaning that Athens would only provide aid if Corinth was the attacker and Corcyra could not win on its own, because offensive action against Corinth by Athens would break the truce. It turned out to be difficult to distinguish between offensive and defensive actions, and allowed Corinth to claim that Athens took offensive action against them, thus breaking the truce. The small, relatively unimportant island was able to exploit its political connections for their own purposes and set off a domino effect, drawing in multiple increasingly powerful allies and severely escalating the civil war into a cause for a major inter-state war.

The next year, Athens attempt to tighten control over its tribute-paying ally Potidaea created another cause for complaint against the rising power. The reason for Athens' ordering of Potidaea to tear down its walls and hand over hostages was an Athenian fear that one revolt would trigger others in the area¹⁵ which would hurt Athens politically and economically. Athens was acting to preserve the resources and tribute garnered from her allies. Potidaea, promised help from Corinth and Sparta, refused the demands and revolted along with others. Without support from Athens' opponents, Potidaea would have had no hope in winning a revolt and would have remained submissive to the much stronger Athenian power. The result was that Athens and Corinth were again openly fighting because of the instability of the alliances.

All of these cases claiming Athens had broken the truce were brought to Sparta, where they were heard in council and debated. The Spartan king Archidamus' analysis of the relative strengths of the two powers concluded that it was highly unlikely that Sparta could win a war with Athens. Sparta had no significant source of revenue, and it would take time to build a navy to match that of Athens. Sparta's strength was in her land forces, which were incredibly effective in local conflicts but Athens had territory all over Greece, much of which consisted of islands. Athens' naval dominance and wealth

¹⁵ Thucydides 1.56, pg 68

meant that Athens could always import supplies, so there was no chance of restricting Athenian resources¹⁶. A Spartan victory required Athens to make a mistake. Despite recognizing that the war was likely to favor Athens, the “Spartans voted that the treaty had been broken and that war should be declared not so much because they were influenced by the speeches of their allies as because they were afraid of the further growth of Athenian power¹⁷”. Athens’ strength caused Sparta to fear for its security, and the claims made against Athens provided the justification Sparta needed to finally take action. Thus, at the outset of the Peloponnesian War, Sparta was acting to prevent further Athenian expansion while Athens was trying to protect her empire.

Each party’s goals dictated their policy in implementing the war. Sparta wanted to reduce Athenian power, or at least halt the growth of Athenian power. Sparta’s strategy was to mount an attack on the countryside of Attica, knowing that it would be difficult to take the fortified city of Athens. Sparta ravaged the land outside the walls hoping that the Athenians would come out and fight rather than “allow their land to be laid waste¹⁸”.

Under the leadership of Pericles, Athens’ goal was to protect its empire. Pericles was known to be a cautious leader and one who did not take chances that put his troops at unnecessary risk¹⁹ but his military aptitude was evident in his fifteen consecutive appointments as military commander²⁰. He designed and initiated a defensive plan for Athens. Recognizing, as Archidamus did for Sparta²¹, that Sparta could not afford an extensive engagement, Pericles decided to preserve his troops and focus on “[diverting] most of their resources to guarding and securing what they already had²²”. Expecting an attack on Attica, Pericles brought the populace into the city, and sent out the navy to counterattack on the coastal cities of the enemy. The navy was successful in its small expeditions, but sentiment in Athens was factional²³, and there were many who were

¹⁶ Thucydides 1.81/1.82, pg 83

¹⁷ Thucydides 1.88, pg 87

¹⁸ Thucydides 2.20, pg 137

¹⁹ Plutarch. *Greek Lives*. Trans. Robin Waterfield. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998. Plut. Pericles 18, pg 161

²⁰ Plutarch, Pericles 16, pg 160

²¹ Thucydides 1.141/1.142, pg 120

²² Plutarch, Pericles 21, pg 163

²³ Plutarch, Pericles 11, pg 154

unsatisfied with his purely defensive strategy against Sparta²⁴. Although Athens was in name a democracy, Pericles was able to manipulate the people so that he was essentially in complete control²⁵ and was able to “pacify those who were spoiling for a fight²⁶”.

The war was stalemated for two years as the Spartans burned farmland and the Athenians waited them out until a plague swept through Athens. The plague demoralized the Athenians, who were already angered at being crowded into close quarters in the city, and they “became eager to make peace with Sparta and actually sent ambassadors there²⁷”. The plague also took the life of Pericles, and furthered the faction that was vying to take an offensive. Cleon, “remarkable among the Athenians for the violence of his character²⁸”, came to power in Pericles’ place with aggressive plans. He believed that assaulting Sparta itself would incite a helot riot, and force the Spartans to stay out of Attica. The death of Pericles and the ensuing rise of the hawks in Athens spurred the next phase of the war, with a series of major battles leading up to the Peace of Nicias.

The escalation of the war under Cleon was a solid indication that the Athenians were allowing their war aims to grow beyond the original goal of defending what they had. Athens occupied Pylos and fortified it. Sparta was unable to win Pylos back despite hard fighting, and Athens ended up capturing some of the famed Spartan hoplites²⁹. This horrified the Spartans, and they immediately decided to “send ambassadors to Athens with a view for ending the war³⁰”. Athens, under the urging of Cleon and “aimed at winning still more³¹” refused, and then initiated further expeditions against Spartan allies, such as Corinth and Cythera³². Sparta was in serious trouble, having suffered multiple defeats and fighting a war mainly on the sea and out of their realm of military expertise. Still, the Athenians pressed on³³. Sparta managed to win some victories at Delium and Amphipolis, and with those setbacks combined with revolts from Athenian allies in the north, Athens agreed to the Peace of Nicias.

²⁴ Thucydides 2.21, pg 138

²⁵ Thucydides, 2.65, pg 164 & Plutarch 15, pg 158-59

²⁶ Plutarch, Pericles 33, pg 174

²⁷ Thucydides 2.59, pg 158

²⁸ Thucydides 3.36, pg 212

²⁹ Broadhead, Lecture Nov 4

³⁰ Thucydides 4.15, pg 273

³¹ Thucydides 4.22, pg 277

³² Thucydides 4.42, pg 290 & 4.54, pg 296

³³ Thucydides 4.56, pg 297

The Peace of Nicias did not end the Peloponnesian War, however, as the Athenians had not put aside their push for empire. The motivation for the war had shifted, becoming a war of conquest by Athens. Sparta, while not entirely happy with the peace, and fighting its allies who had refused to even agree to the treaty, had suffered too many losses at the hands of the Athenians. The Spartans' confidence had been shattered, and they were not eager to return to combat³⁴.

Athens, on the other hand, was overconfident. As previously described, Athenian war aims had drastically increased over the first part of the war. The original move for territorial expansion was founded in self-protection, but had spiraled out of control with the successes already achieved inflating Athenian desire for more. The Sicilian Expedition Athens developed was ostensibly to aid to their allies there who claimed the Syracusans on the island were looking to "utterly [destroy] the power of Athens", but was in reality a mission of conquest³⁵. Athens was excited to capture the grain and timber of the island³⁶, but knew nearly nothing about the island or the people living there³⁷. Nicias argued reasonably that Sicily would not be easy to conquer, and harder to control if it was³⁸. However, the Athenians were so focused on the benefits of a victory that they refused to look closely at the possible hazards. The massive force sent over, looking "like a demonstration of the power and greatness of Athens³⁹", failed to take the island. The expedition had some successes early on, but was overall disastrous for Athens. Alcibiades, one of the leaders, was recalled to Athens on the charge of mutilation of Hermae prior to his departure. Rather than returning to Athens to stand trial, he defected to Sparta and helped them relieve Sicily⁴⁰. Alcibiades' inside information allowed Sparta to regain some of their vaunted military reputation with big victories against Athens. Despite Nicias' letter explaining the poor situation in Sicily and asking to be recalled, Athens sent reinforcements⁴¹, and still Sparta shut them down. This renewed Sparta's

³⁴ Thucydides 5.14, pg 356

³⁵ Thucydides 6.6, pg 412

³⁶ Hornblower, 164

³⁷ Thucydides 6.1, pg 409

³⁸ Thucydides 6.11, pg 416

³⁹ Thucydides 6.31, pg 429

⁴⁰ Thucydides 6.61, pg 448 & Broadhead Lec Nov 9

⁴¹ Thucydides 7.16, pg 486 & Hornblower, 170

confidence, and they designed an invasion into Attica itself⁴². Athens' position kept getting worse, as they suffered a huge defeat at Syracuse that effectively wiped out the navy, but still Athens refused to cut their losses and back out. In the end, Athenian "losses were, as they say, total; army, navy, everything was destroyed⁴³". Money was in short supply, as most of the treasury had been used to support the expedition in the first place. There were revolts all around the Aegean, encouraged by Alcibiades, and Sparta was gaining momentum. The Spartans were able to set up a garrison in Attica itself at Decelea and monetary support from the Persians allowed them to be successful at building up their navy⁴⁴. Athens now began to fall apart entirely, with the city erupting in strife over the miserable failure of the Sicilian Expedition. Finally the Athenians were able to pull out a victory at Arginusae, but Sparta was able to recover with the addition of Persian support. In the final battle at Aegospotamoi Sparta captured nearly all of the Athenian ships, and Athens was utterly defeated with their navy and food imports now under Spartan control⁴⁵. Sparta had become the sole dominant power in Greece once again.

Sparta emerged victorious in the Peloponnesian War, and Athens was entirely decimated. The treaty that resulted forced Athens to destroy her fortifications and become a minor ally of Sparta⁴⁶. She lost her empire so completely that she never regained it. The city continued to enjoy a level of wealth, and as a center of culture she still counted among the leading towns of Greece, but her political influence was never again decisive. Sparta was now in an extremely advantageous position, having fulfilled all of its war aims in breaking apart the Athenian empire.

Where did the Peloponnesian War turn sour for Athens? At the outset of the war both Archidamus and Pericles arrived at the conclusion that Athens was superior in military might, financial backing, and tactical position. Sparta's military strategy was founded on hope and as predicted Athens dominated every aspect of the fighting for years. Pericles was "confident in ultimate victory" as long as Athens made no mistakes,

⁴² Thucydides 7.18, pg 487

⁴³ Thucydides 7.87, pg 537

⁴⁴ Hornblower, 174

⁴⁵ Broadhead, Lecture Nov 9

⁴⁶ Hornblower, 183

and contained their urge to “add to the empire while the war [was] in progress⁴⁷”.

Unfortunately for Athens, Pericles died in the plague and no one heeded his words. With Pericles in power, the war was extremely uneventful, but was also going extremely well for Athens, and was likely to continue to go well. Pericles’ defensive plan was strategically sound. The victories produced by the aggressive policies initiated after his death made Athens overconfident and greedy, ultimately leading to the destruction of the city’s political power.

Athens had multiple opportunities to exit the war in a better position than they had been on entering it, but squandered their chances. Cleon refused to accept a Spartan surrender after Pylos. At this point in the war, Sparta had yet to claim any significant victory, and any treaty would have followed Athenian desires closely. Cleon’s rejection of peace overtures from Sparta allowed them to win some battles fought out of desperation and regain some morale before Athens settled for peace talks.

Despite this, the Peace of Nicias was largely in favor of Athens. The treaty returned land taken in the fighting to the other side, and returned prisoners of war as well⁴⁸. This put the Greek city-states in a position very similar to that at the start of the war, with the Athenian empire intact. At this point Sparta had failed to succeed in their war aim, as they were unable to reduce the threat of the Athenian empire. Additionally, the peace treaty hurt Sparta’s military reputation and angered her allies⁴⁹. Athens had fulfilled her original goal of maintaining the status quo. If Athens had kept in mind Pericles’ warning against reaching for empire and let the Peace of Nicias stand, it could have remained a significant power in Greece for decades to come.

The Athenians, however, had been overwhelmed with their success, and their greed culminated in the disastrous Sicilian Expedition. Sicily was a mistake from the very beginning, and demonstrates the extent to which Athens was overcome by the desire to conquer. The recall of Alcibiades was a devastating error, not only depriving Athens of its main proponent for the expedition, but also providing Sparta with valuable information to use against Athens. Nicias had twice counseled Athens against the expedition, prior to the war and in his letter advising retreat, but was not a strong enough

⁴⁷ Thucydides 1.144, pg 122

⁴⁸ Plutarch, Nicias 10, pg 193-94

⁴⁹ Hornblower, 160

leader to force people to listen. After a hard won victory at Arginusae, Athens recalled and executed its generals over a war crime, even though the war was still going on⁵⁰. All of these mistakes demonstrate how Athens was overcome with imperialism to the degree of ignoring the reality of the situation. Pericles had originally laid out specific, attainable goals for Athens, but after his death Athens simply wanted more. Had Pericles survived to provide a persuasive voice of reason, perhaps Athens would have been satisfied with the Peace of Nicias, since Nicias was unable to convince the people despite all his efforts.

Sparta was victorious in the Peloponnesian War but unable to make that victory last. The Greek states rapidly fell into more squabbling, until Alexander came along and conquered all of Greece and Persia. How could an Athenian victory have changed history? If the plague had not taken the life of Pericles, would he have been able to convince Athens that the Peace of Nicias should last? If Nicias had been more persuasive, could he have done the same? Would a strong Athenian empire have taken the place of Alexander in history, or had an entirely different result? There is no definitive answer to these questions, but the speculation itself proposes the idea that a small event, or a single person, could have a huge impact on the world. An event of the magnitude of the Peloponnesian War must clearly have an even larger significance in defining history throughout the ages that were to follow.

Security in many guises motivated the Peloponnesian War. The Persian Wars shook up the Greek world and the unsteady situation produced drove each city-state to take a close look at its own interests. Sparta was concerned that Athens' newfound power could rival its own historic dominance, and smaller city-states feared that Athenian expansion would strip them of their independence. The Peloponnesian and Delian Leagues, created to provide a network of support for their members, experienced too many affiliation changes to be effective. Additionally, the backing of the alliances not only encouraged city-states to engage in military operations, but caused small local conflicts to expand and include a large portion of the Greek world. Athens, looking forward to a future of power and influence, fed off its own successes and growing strength until it ground itself into defeat. While we can never truly know what could

⁵⁰ Broadhead, Lec Nov 9

have happened if a few events were changed, history could have turned out entirely different. The Peloponnesian War had a huge impact in its time, and long after as well.