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The Sicilian Expedition Reconsidered

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ABSTRACT
According to Thucydides, or the prevailing modern interpretation of his classic work, the Athenian campaign in Sicily was the main cause of the Athenian defeat in the Peloponnesian war. Modern scholars tend to favour this view, so much so that the Sicilian campaign is universally held up as a classic example of a strategic mistake. This essay attempts, through the lens of a structural realist or neorealist theory of International Relations, to demonstrate that this was not the case. In fact, the Sicilian expedition was a foreseeable and rational strategic choice which was in line with Athenian foreign policy, and was not the main cause of the Athenian defeat.

Neorealist theory and the structural foundations of Athens' grand strategy
After six years of peace with Sparta, briefly interrupted by open hostilities in 418 BCE, the Athenians, prompted by Pericles' charismatic nephew Alcibiades, decided in 415 BCE to launch a major expedition against the Greek great power of the West, and a Spartan sympathiser, the city of Syracuse on Sicily. Two years later that expedition ended in disaster, with thousands of men dead and an entire Athenian fleet destroyed. The renewed war with Sparta would carry on until Athens' final defeat in 404 BCE. The Sicilian disaster was a heavy blow to Athenian power, and is often considered to be the turning point for the fall of the Athenian Empire. But was it an outright strategic mistake?

This article does not claim that the Sicilian expedition was a safe or necessarily the best possible choice for Athens. The argument made here is that the Sicilian expedition confirms neorealist theory's views, as it was a rational strategic choice with a serious and realistic chance of success, that could indeed have altered decisively the balance of power to Athens' favour, while its outcome was not fatal for the city of Athens. The Sicilian expedition was risky, but not riskier than comparable expeditions in Greek/ancient history, which are instead considered to be genius strategic moves

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because they had a victorious outcome. A good example is Scipio Africanus's invasion of North Africa at a time when Hannibal and the Carthaginian army were still in Italy. Scipio is rightfully considered a strategic genius and Roman hero due to this risky operation with which Fabius Maximus, the Cunctator, did not agree. Although it should be noted that, according to a prominent Italian military historian, Scipio failed to beat Hannibal tactically at the Battle of Zama and the Romans won mainly thanks to Numidian help.[1] In any case, while outcome may be the most important criterion for judging a strategic choice, it should not be the only one, as Karl von Clausewitz might say.[2]

The argument of this paper is based on structural realist theory and will focus on the theory's core assumptions. These neorealist assumptions, which comply with Kenneth Walt's "defensive realist" paradigm[3] just as with John J. Mearsheimer's different "offensive realist" paradigm,[4] or Robert Gilpin's theory of war and change,[5] are: firstly, the structure of the international system is the major factor for the choices of the international actors, exceeding ideology and personal or group interests and ambitions. Secondly, states seek to increase or at least maintain the stability of their relative power in the international system and their influence on the international order. Thirdly, when the objective factors, that is, the state's demographics, economy and military power are growing, the state will probably have the tendency to reform the international order to its advantage. Fourthly, when an international actor thinks that their influence in the system could decrease because of the rise of another international actor, they could use force in order to counterbalance it. The Peloponnesian war, and Thucydides *History* in particular, is an exemplary model for this mechanism, and scholars often cite it as the founding work of realist thinking on international politics.[6]

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[1]Giovanni Brizzi, *Scipione e Annibale. La guerra per salvare Roma,* (Bari: Editori Laterza, 2010), p. 211.

[2]See Clausewitz's defence of Napoleon's choice to invade Russia in 1812, despite the disaster of the Grand Armée, in Karl von Clausewitz, *On War,* Book 8. 9, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).

[3]Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1979); Kenneth N. Waltz, *Realism and International Politics*, (London: Routledge, 2008).

[4]John J. Mearsheimer, *The tragedy of great power politics*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001); John J. Mearsheimer, 'Structural Realism', in Tim Dunne, Milja Kurki, Steve Smith (eds.), *International Relations Theories*: *Discipline and Diversity*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 77-94.

[5]Robert Gilpin, *War and change in international politics*, (New York: Cambridge University Press), 1981.

[6]For example Robert Gilpin, 'The theory of hegemonic war', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, Vol. 18, No. 4, Spring 1988, pp. 591-613; Robert Gilpin, *War and change in*

Neorealism explains the strategic choices of international actors by observing the structure of the international system and the necessities that arise for the individual actors.[7] Domestic processes are one of the processes that interact with others and which produce developments and results.[8] However, domestic processes are crucially affected by choices which are dictated by the structure on the basis of needs of the international system and cannot override structural requirements. The most obvious evidence for the decisive influence of structure and the secondary role of domestic processes in the stance taken by a country in the international arena is that states tend to maintain the same or a similar direction for their behaviour in the international system for as long as systemic factors remain the same, even when there is political and social change in those states.[9] Reductive analysis is therefore more useful in explaining how successful an international actor is and the specific ways in which they operate, than it is for explaining the reason behind their political stance.[10]

Therefore, in a structural realist view, Athens became a naval superpower because this was the most convenient way to face the existential Persian threat, and to increase its power relative to the hegemonic power of Sparta.[11] Given that the prerequisites for the development of Athenian naval power fell into place during the 6th Century BCE, what happened was exactly what could have been expected to happen on the

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international politics, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Giampiero Giacomello – Gianmarco Badialetti, *Manuale di studi strategici*, (Milano: Vita e Pensiero, 2009); Athanassios Platias & Konstantinos Koliopoulos, *Thucydides on Strategy*: *Grand Strategies in the Peloponnesian War and Their Relevance Today*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

[7]Other relevant books and studies: Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*, (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1990); A.F.K. Organski, *World Politics*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968); George Modelski, *Long cycles in world politics*, (Washington: University of Washington Press, 1987); Tobjorn Knutsen, *The rise and fall of world orders*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999); William C. Wohlforth, 'Gilpinian Realism and International Relations', *International Relations* 25 (4), 2011, pp. 499-511; Andreas Olsson, *A Study in structural realism*, (thesis, Lund University, 2012).

[8]Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1979), pp. 174-175.

[9]For a recent historical example Robert H. Donaldson & Joseph L. Nogee, *The foreign policy of Russia. Changing systems, enduring interests*, (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2009).

[10]Sotirios F. Drokalos, *Imperialismo Romano: scelta di élite o di popolo?*, (Zermeghedo, Vicenza: Edizioni Saecula, 2015), pp. 29-33.

[11]Athens was also engaged in a struggle with the significant maritime power of Aegina. But the silver mines at Laurion meant the Athenians could beat the Aeginetans at their own game by building more ships.

basis of neorealist theory, i.e. Athens followed this particular way of gaining strength in the international system of that time. Athens could not compete with Sparta in terms of know-how, tradition, and quality when it came to land forces; and Sparta – as, of course did the Persian Empire – had more people to call on than Athens and Attica, at a time when Sparta controlled most of the Peloponnese and had a hegemonic relationship with other parts of the Greek world. Thebes to the immediate north of Athens was also a Spartan ally, such as other Boeotians. However, Athens had its own important ally in the region, Plataea, and there is evidence that Athens also developed an effective defensive system in the mountains between Attica and Boeotia.[12] On the other hand, Athens' geographical position gave it an advantage in terms of naval control of the Aegean as it lay at the centre of that sea. Finally, Athens was protected from the tribes of the far north by the Macedonians

To some extent., Athenian land owning aristocrats opposed naval power and maritime imperialism, but their opposition was inconsistent and it fluctuated according to Athens' relative power in the system, as structural realism would have predicted. At the time of the campaign in Sicily, Athens was at the height of its power and opposition to maritime imperialism within Athens was therefore weak. There was not even a faction opposed to it, only a few individual voices, whose stance can be seen as an expression of that era's mild version of the oligarchic pro-Spartan opposition to the Athenian naval power, which had increased the wealth and influence of the commercial and industrial classes in Athens and throughout the Aegean.[13] This demonstrates a change to the period before the Persian Wars, when there was very significant and strong opposition to the development of naval power, which was still only an idea that seemed uncertain and risky to the Athenian aristocracy.

The major structural change with the appearance of the Persian threat was the force that gave birth to Athenian naval power. Themistocles only managed to get support for his policy of creating a very powerful fleet on the eve of the second Persian invasion, after the Battle of Marathon, when the existential Persian threat had taken shape and the aristocrat Miltiades had, against his hopes, needed to defeat the Persians

[12]Mark H. Munn, *The defense of Attica. The Dema wall and the Boiotian War of 378-375 B.C.*, (Berkeley: California University Press, 1993). That was true mostly for the 4 Century BCE, but a couple of passages of Xenophon (Memorabilia, 3.5.25-27; 3.6.10-11) suggest that the Athenians knew by the 5 Century BCE how to use the hilly area to their advantage for defensive purposes.

[13]Victor Davis Hanson, *A war like no other*, (New York: Random House, 2006), p. 13.

without the help of Spartan allies.[14] After the Battle of Marathon, Athens realised that it had to become capable of dealing with the Persian threat on its own.

After the fleet was created and Athens had triumphed at the Battle of Salamis, Athens gained even more confidence and realised that its naval power enabled it to extend its dominance far beyond what could have been imagined before. Consequently, opposition to naval power within democratic Athens diminished and eventually disappeared altogether. Cimon, the leader of the aristocrats, was identified with the fleet and the only thing he retained from the previous aristocratic policy was his liking for Sparta which he recognized as an ally.[15]

As naval power developed further during the following decades, even this view in favour of an alliance with Sparta weakened and disappeared. Athens now understood that it could become an imperial power throughout the Mediterranean, supplanting Sparta as the former hegemonic leader of Greece. It was only after the end of the Archidamian War that Nicias felt emboldened to advocate not just peace but an alliance with Sparta. He was an aristocratic politician and the only reminder of the old aristocratic policy still present in the era of Athens' greatest power. Yet, in 415 BCE even Nicias did not argue that there should be an alliance with Sparta. As neorealist analysis would suggest, the relative power of Athens in the system was now such, that the greatest opposition to maritime imperialism that could now be voiced was the more modest option of peace with Sparta – and this with the stated aim of consolidating and deepening the existing Athenian supremacy.[16]

Athens' policy towards the west

A neorealist analysis would also point out that the Athenian campaign in Sicily was neither the product of Alcibiades' personal ambition, nor a hasty decision by the Ecclesia. On the contrary, it was an attempt to carry out a plan that had been evolving for decades, a plan which envisioned a drastic strengthening of Athenian influence in Italy and the western Mediterranean. This was to be a development which would signal that Athenian power had grown to a point where Sparta would be eclipsed by Athens, something that in itself would mark Athens' dominance throughout the Greek world.

[14]Paul A. Rahe, *Sparta's first Attic War. The grand strategy of classical Sparta, 478-446 B.C.*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), p. 154; and Herodotus, *The Histories*, VI, 120, (London: Penguin Classics, 2015).

[15]Plutarch, *Parallel Lives, 'Life of Cimon'* 16. 8-9, (Cambridge Massachusetts: Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, 1914).

[16]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, VI, 10.2, VI, 11.5 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). See also Robert B. Strassler (ed.), *The Landmark Thucydides: A comprehensive guide to the Peloponnesian War*, (Simon & Schuster: Free Press, 1998).

It is possible to identify two main trends in Athenian foreign policy in the aftermath of the Persian Wars. The first was supported by the faction lead by Themistocles, the architect of Athenian naval power, and hero of the Battle of Salamis.[17] This policy promoted maritime imperialism and maintained a hostile attitude towards Sparta.[18] The second trend was supported by the aristocrats who continued to be on friendly terms with Sparta even though, as already noted, they had abandoned the old views held by Miltiades, the victor of the Battle of Marathon.[19] Miltiades' son Cimon accepted the need for maritime strength, and for a naval empire, but, despite this, his perception of foreign policy had some fundamental differences to that of Themistocles. These differences can be found in the different attitudes the two leaders held towards Sparta, positions which reflected the initial disagreement over strategic orientation. Themistocles' faction saw Sparta as an enemy with which Athens could not coexist in the long term and argued that Athens should expand its naval empire further into the Aegean and the Mediterranean in opposition to Sparta and the Peloponnesian League. On the other hand, Cimon and the aristocrats had a cordial relationship with Sparta and believed that a status quo where both sides cooperated could be established in the Greek world.[20] This would be characterized by a dual, balanced hegemony of Athens and Sparta, focused against the Pan-Hellenic enemy, the Persian Empire.[21]

Italy had been one of Athens' main commercial markets for decades. Indeed, even in the north of Italy, since the 6 Century BCE, the strongest cultural influences were those of the Athenians and the Etruscans.[22] It is also worth noting that on the eve of the naval Battle of Salamis, the most dramatic moment in ancient Greek history, Themistocles told the admirals of the other Greek forces that if they did not stay to fight alongside the Athenians he would embark the Athenian population and set sail for Italy to found a new city there.[23] For something like this to have been suggested as a way out of existential danger, the Athenians must have known the area very well and must already have had close contacts and links to it.

[17]Barry Strauss, *The battle of Salamis*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005), p. 241.
[18]Rahe, *Sparta's first Attic War*, p. 132.
[19]Aristotle, The *Athenian Constitution*, (London Penguin: Classics, 1984).
[20]Rahe, *Sparta's first Attic War*, p. 133.
[21]Plutarch, *Parallel Lives, 'Life of Cimon'* 16. 8-9; Jennifer T. Roberts, *The plague of war,* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 36.
[22]Antonio Ferri & Giancarlo Roversi (a cura di), *Storia di Bologna*, (Bologna: Bononia University Press, 2005), p. 52.
[23]Herodotus, *Histories*, VIII, 62.2.

Athens launched an intensive western-looking policy in 458 BCE, concluding an alliance with the largest Elymian city, Egesta.[24] Although Egesta had a mixed native and Greek population, it was to some degree culturally Hellenised, although it was not considered a Greek city, and was located on the west of the island, close to Carthaginian territories.[25] Athens' decision to form an alliance and act as the guarantor of Egesta's independence from the two great regional powers, namely Syracuse and Carthage, tells us something about the Athenians' keen interest in expanding their influence to the West.

The fact that Egesta also chose to enter into an alliance with distant Athens shows how strong and well-respected Attica's great city was at that time. Moreover, the fact that the alliance with Egesta was concluded at the same time as the Athenian campaign in Cyprus and Egypt and the First Peloponnesian War in Greece (461-446 BCE), creates a picture of how Athenian power had spread on all fronts and in all directions.[26] Athens was fighting simultaneously against the Persian Empire in the east and with Sparta within Greece, but now it was also intervening in the west, declaring its presence in Sicily to both Syracuse and Carthage. That Athenian politics were focused on the west at the same time as elsewhere is further confirmed by the fact that Athens secured access to the Ionian Sea by conquering Naupactus and expanding its influence in the Corinthian Gulf.[27] Athens' involvement in Sicily and Italy intensified immediately after the retreat of the Persians and the signing of the Peace of Callias in 449 BCE, and was followed by the completion of hostilities with the Peloponnesian League.

It follows that the moment Athens gained a significant degree of control over the Eastern Mediterranean and the Aegean Sea, and successfully ceased hostilities with Persia and Sparta, as the two rival powers recognised the Athenian sphere of influence, Athens looked to the west and began to intervene more intensively in the Sicilian conflicts. [28]

This specific expansion of Athenian influence in the West was probably part of a larger plan promoted by Pericles to show Athens as a leading Pan-Hellenic power. This can

[24]Christian Meier, *Athens. A portrait of the city in its golden* age, (New York: Metropolitan Books), p. 450; Donald Kagan, *The outbreak of the Peloponnesian War*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969), p. 226; Domenico Musti, *Storia greca, Linee di sviluppo dall'età micenea all'età romana*, (Bari: Editori Laterza), 2011 (1st edition 1989), p. 352.
[25]Philip Matyszak, *Expedition to disaster*, (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military, 2012), p. 71.
[26]Rahe, *Sparta's first Attic War*.
[27]Meier, *Athens*, p. 419-420; Thucydides, 104-105, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). See also Strassler, *The Landmark Thucydides*.
[28]Rahe, *Sparta's first Attic War.*, p. 201, 228; Donald Kagan, *Peloponnesian War*, pp. 156-157, p. 174.

be seen by the fact that in 448 BCE Athens proposed that a conference be held with the aim of reinstating the old Pan-Hellenic alliance.[29] However, Sparta and its allies refused to participate, considering the initiative to be a pretext that the Athenians would use to impose their rule on those Greeks who were not yet subject to it. The first conflict between Athenian and Spartan hegemony ended with the peace treaty of 446 BCE: with Athens agreeing to abandon its attempt to extend its hegemony into the mainland; and Sparta accepting Athens' status as ruler of the seas.[30] So, although the war had ended in a compromise, looking at the result in qualitative terms, and always in terms of the neorealist balance of power, one could say that Athens was, at least in part, victorious: Athens was the growing power, and the one using its historical momentum to strengthen and expand.[31] Sparta was the power which was attempting to defend the status quo, but failed to limit the rise of Athens, and by officially recognising Athenian domination of the seas and of Asia Minor, Sparta merely held it back in mainland Greece, accepting an equilibrium.[32]

After these positive events for Athens, Pericles continued his westward-looking policy and established the new colony of Thurii in Southern Italy in 444/443 BCE.[33] This city was inhabited by citizens drawn from throughout the Delian League, and in reality functioned as a western base for the alliance. The founding of Thurii does not seem to have been of secondary importance to Athenian foreign policy, or to have been a merely symbolic move made to strengthen certain links with Italian cities, or simply to create a centre for trade. This is shown by the fact that as soon as Athens was free strategically and was able to turn its gaze in other directions, it implemented this policy by founding its own city in the west as an addition to the alliances it had already begun to form there. The fact that the Thurians were viewed as Pan-Hellenic is also in line with the Athenian communications policy of presenting its leadership as being Pan-Hellenic, and as a hegemony that was a direct continuation of the anti-Persian struggle, in which Athens had defended the freedom of all Greeks.[34]

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[29]Plutarch, *Parallel Lives, vol. I and II, Pericles*, 21, pp. 373-375. Thucydides omits this episode from his history, perhaps because he thought it was unimportant to his narrative, that is, the Athenian proposal was indeed just a pretext, not worth mentioning in a history that aimed to explain the real causes of the war.

[30]Rahe, *Sparta's first Attic War*, p. 228.

[31]Hanson, *A war like no other*, p. 30; Kontantinos Koliopoulos, *Η Στρατηγική Σκέψη. Από την αρχαιότητα έως σήμερα [Strategic thought, from ancient times to the modern world]*, (Athens: Ποιότητα, 2008), p. 197.

[32]Platias & Koliopoulos, *Thucydides on strategy*, p. 48.

[33]Kagan, *Peloponnesian War*, p. 226.

[34]Donald Kagan, 'Pericles and the defense of empire', in Victor Davis Hanson (ed), *Makers of Ancient Strategy. From the Persian Wars to the Fall of Rome*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), pp. 31-57; Domenico Musti, *Storia greca, Linee di*

Approximately a decade later, on the eve of the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War, the Athenians, still led by Pericles, formed a military alliance with two Greek cities in Sicily and Southern Italy, Leontini and Rhegium.[35] This alliance was in addition to Athens' existing military alliance with Egesta. As well as the quantitative element to this move, the increase in the number of Athens' allies, we can also detect a geographical element which indicates an organised expansion and consolidation of Athens' strategic presence in Sicily. When viewed together, Rhegium, at the southern tip of the Italian peninsula, Leontini and Egesta formed a zone that covers and controls most of Sicily, i.e. the northern, central and eastern parts of the island, with the Carthaginians in the west and Syracuse with Akragas and Gela on the southern coast. Rhegium and Messina (at the northern tip of Sicily), had long been the two cities that controlled the Messina Straits, the strategic strait between mainland Italy and Sicily, which was one of the most critical geographical points in the ancient world, as it was also later in history.[36]

We can see therefore that before the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War Athens was creating its own sphere of influence in Sicily, and that Athens was in competition with the two other great powers in that region, that is the largest Greek city of the West, Syracuse, and the Carthaginians, who were limited at the western part of Sicily. Indeed, Athens had already established a colony on mainland Italy, which supported the area of Sicily allied to Athens, as well as ensuring Athenian control of the Straits in opposition to both Greek cities, and the other cities and tribes in Italy.

These actions prove that Athens had a keen interest in the West, an interest which was not only limited to establishing diplomatic and trade relations with the cities there, but extended to the methodical promotion and establishment of Athenian political and military power. This was achieved gradually and steadily over a period of 30 years, and at the same time as Athens was consolidating and further strengthening its hegemony in Greece, and maintaining Athenian dominance of the coast of Asia Minor and the eastern Mediterranean.

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sviluppo dall'età micenea all'età romana, [Bari: Editori Laterza, 2011 (1st edition 1989)], pp. 346-347, pp. 354-355; Kagan, *Peloponnesian War*, pp. 230-239.

[35]Meier, *Athens*, p. 583; Kagan, *Peloponnesian War*, p. 231; Domenico Musti, *Storia greca, Linee di sviluppo dall'età micenea all'età romana*, [Bari: Editori Laterza, 2011 (1st edition 1989)], p. 352.

[36]Sotirios F. Drokalos, *Έλληνες εναντίον Καρχηδονίων [Greeks versus Carthaginians]*, (Athens: Γνώμων Εκδοτική, 2017).

The continuity of Athenian strategy between Pericles and Alcibiades

Historians and strategic analysts often see the Sicilian campaign as an overly daring idea of Alcibiades, but this does not reflect Pericles' foreign policy or strategic thinking.[37] Perhaps strategists hold this view because they look mainly at the stance taken by Pericles during the initial phase of the Peloponnesian War, and not at the foreign policy he and Athens had pursued for decades before the war. This is why Alcibiades' critics believe that he changed Athens' grand strategy. In fact, the decision to pursue the campaign in Sicily, and the rationale behind it, were fully embedded in the grand strategy of maritime expansion that Athens had followed consistently since the Persian Wars, and which were in complete alignment with the specific actions it had put into practice in the years immediately preceding and after the Peloponnesian War.

Pericles' way of thinking in 431 BCE was dictated by the extraordinary circumstances of the massive Peloponnesian invasion of Attica, so it cannot be taken as a general and non-time-specific measure of comparison. The campaign in Sicily began in 415 BCE, which is six whole years after the Peace of Nicias had been signed. It is therefore wrong to judge Alcibiades' stance, and the decision taken by the Ecclesia, solely on the basis of the strategy Pericles and Athens followed during the extraordinary circumstances of the first period of the Peloponnesian War (431-421 BCE). The previous, and much longer-lived strategy, better reflects Athenian foreign policy during a period of stability, and should also be taken into account.

The main point from which a structural analysis should start, is that Pericles' grand strategy was not one of coexistence with Sparta. The democratic faction, led by Themistocles, and Ephialtes before him, did not, at any point, intend or attempt to establish a stable, international-transnational order that would include Sparta[38]. On the contrary, they tried to expand Athenian hegemony by maintaining a permanently hostile attitude towards the city on the Eurotas.[39] Objectively, Sparta was their main adversary, the primary obstacle to a smooth expansion of Athenian power and sovereignty throughout both the Greek world and the wider Mediterranean, rather than a state with which they could work to establish a balanced consensus. Indeed, beyond the pretexts, the deeper, structural cause of the war, as neorealist theorists would say, was that this trend towards growth in Athenian strength would completely upset the balance of power, with the result that Sparta itself would also become

[37]First of all Thucydides himself. In modern times, for example, Platias & Koliopoulos, *Thucydides on strategy*, p. 85, p. 147; Giampiero Giacomello – Gianmarco Badialetti, *Manuale di studi strategici*, (Milano: Vita e Pensiero, 2009).

[38]Aristotle, *The Athenian Constitution*, 23.3; 25.1; 27.1; Rahe, *Sparta's first Attic War*, pp. 142-143.

[39]For example, Plutarch, *Parallel Lives*, *Pericles* 21.

subordinate to Athens - if it did not first intervene to stop that growth.[40] Thucydides understood and wrote about this, creating a fundamental concept in the study of International Relations, while his distinction between underlying and proximate or precipitating causes is mentioned as a "historiographical pathbreaker".[41]

For the Athenians, this positive trend for Athens had to be realised, to be translated into a tangible change in the international order of things. Inevitably, this led to a push and an expansion of Athenian power and influence, which made the subjugation of the Peloponnese itself a practical possibility. Like any other hegemony, from a neorealist viewpoint, Athenian hegemony and expansionism came from structurally objective facts. Democratic Athens needed to expand if it wanted to ensure its survival, especially as it represented a form of government that was at odds with both the Persian Empire and the classical Greek oligarchies, that were often associated with, or were at least friendly towards, Sparta.[42] The existence of Spartan hegemony was a constant threat. It made it harder for Athenian power to spread, in both economic and political terms, and supported smaller states in their resistance to Athenian influence.[43]

There is a further, often overlooked, fact which again changes the picture. The campaign of 415 BCE was not Athens' first campaign in Sicily following the start of the Peloponnesian War - other campaigns had preceded it. And even if they were not as large as the 415 BCE campaign with its 134 ships, the forces mobilized were by no means insignificant.[44] The importance of Sicily and Italy for the Athenians can be seen in Athens sending 20 triremes to Sicily at the urging of Leontini, Rhegium and other Ionian cities at the end of the summer of 427.[45] This took place during the initial phase of the war with Sparta, at the same time as Peloponnesian raids were continuing in Attica, and while Athens was continuing its military operations on other fronts in Greece.

Athens' allies had been involved in a war with Syracuse and other Doric cities, which were within its sphere of influence. Athens intervened in favour of its allies in order

[40]Thucydides, I, 23, 6 . See also Strassler, *The Landmark Thucydides*.
[41]Lisa Kallet, 'The Pentecontaetia' in *The Oxford handbook of Thucydides*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 64.
[42]See also Donald Kagan, 'Pericles and the defense of empire', pp. 31-57.
[43]Hanson, *A war like no other*, pp. 12-15.
[44]Ibid., p. 205.
[45]Donald Kagan, *The Archidamian war* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974), pp. 229-234; Marie-Francoise Baslez, *Πολιτική ιστορία του αρχαίου Ελληνικού κόσμου [Histoire politique du monde grec antique (3e édition)]*, [Athens: Εκδόσεις Πατάκη, 2013 (1st edition 2004)], p. 167.

to hinder the movement of grain from Sicily to the Peloponnese, and, as Thucydides explicitly states, to make an initial attempt to impose Athenian sovereignty over Sicily.[46] When Thucydides' narrative reaches the great campaign of 415 BCE, he reiterates that the Athenian goal was to establish influence over the whole of Sicily rather than simply the pretext of supporting its allies.[47] Also, during those years the Athenians made wider efforts to secure control of the shores of the Gulf of Corinth, as a passage to Italy and Sicily.[48]

This first war on Sicilian and Italian soil has historically remained in the shadow of the simultaneous conflicts that took place in Greece. However, it was by no means an unimportant or minor conflict. The Athenians, who lost their general Haroiadis in this first war in Sicily, sent 40 additional triremes a year later, and their troops remained there until 424 BCE.[49] The conflicts during this first Sicilian war were mainly centred around the strategic area of the Messina Straits. Rhegium was an ally of the Athenians and functioned as their base, while the two rivals fought to secure control of Messina, the Aeolian Islands, and the area of Locris, a city which was allied to Syracuse and Sparta, and a traditional rival of Rhegium. Control of the Straits of Messina was the "prize" the two warring factions both wanted.[50] After Athenian troops withdrew, the war in Sicily continued and the Syracusans finally prevailed.

In this way, we can see that the Athenians had been systematically promoting their expansion to the West for decades. In addition, this specific policy was so important to them that they continued with it, and even sent troops to further their cause, during the most difficult and extraordinary conditions Athens had faced since the Persian Wars. The Athenians did all of that while following Pericles' defensive strategy. This should not be a surprise, since in addition to the events described above, and the conclusions that can be drawn from them, Plutarch also stated in the Life of Pericles that political factions promoting the Athenian conquest of Sicily and the expansion of the naval empire to the west had existed in Athenian politics from as early as 450 BCE. Indeed, Plutarch states that there had been talk of attacks, even on Carthage and Etruria, since that time, although Pericles managed to restrain them.[51]

Viewing the Athenians' actions in the West over a period of decades reveals that many Athenians had already supported a large, expansionist military operation in Sicily and to the West before the Peloponnesian War. It becomes clear that the great Sicilian

[46]Thucydides, III, 86. See also Strassler, *The Landmark Thucydides*.
[47]Thucydides, VI, 6.1. See also Strassler, *The Landmark Thucydides*.
[48]Hanson, *A war like no other*, p. 98.
[49]Ibid., p. 203.
[50]Thucydides, III, 88, 90, 115; IV, 1, 24, 25. See also Strassler, *The Landmark Thucydides*.
[51]Plutarch, Parallel Lives, *Pericles* 20-21.

campaign was an implementation of a strong, entrenched trend in Athenian society, and was not the paradoxical and irrational idea of an over-ambitious man – Alcibiades – who swept the Athenian citizens along with him, in contravention of Pericles' and Athenian strategy up to that point. This is evident from the writing of Thucydides himself, who states that almost all the speakers in the Ecclesia had spoken in favour of the great campaign of 415 BCE before it was implemented, and with only a few exceptions such as Nicias.[52] Also, the prospects both of strengthening Athens and of the potential individual gains and benefits had caused such a frenzy that Thucydides stresses that some of those who had not agreed to the plan did not oppose it for fear they would be accused of acting against the interests of their homeland.[53]

Therefore, it is wrong to say that Alcibiades swept the Athenians with him into the campaign in Sicily, when he had simply emerged as the leading figure of a movement that was clearly dominant in Athens at that time, long before he had become involved in politics. In fact, Plutarch states that it was a certain Demostratus who was the most active in agitating for the war.[54]

It is also clear that this tendency to expand westwards was in line with practical interests and was based on logical strategic reasoning, both in terms of Athens' general perspective, and in particular, the confrontation with Sparta. Pericles' strategy during the first phase of the Peloponnesian War is not incompatible with Alcibiades' strategy; they both had exactly the same grand strategy – the expansion of the Athenian maritime empire. The ultimate goal of both leaders was to promote a wider Athenian hegemony in the both Greek world and in the Mediterranean.

As neorealist theorists would argue, from the moment that Athens became identified with naval power, it was natural for its expansion to be focused to the west. It was also logical for Athens to seek to establish a stable modus vivendi with the Persian Empire once Athens had confined it to the Asian mainland. With the Eastern Mediterranean littoral under Athenian rule, and the Persians contained beyond the coast of Asia Minor after open hostilities had ceased, Athens could only expand westward. Athenian expansion to the west would lead to Sparta coming under Athenian control, as the resources and abilities that Athens acquired as a result of westward expansion would completely upset the balance of power within Greece, with Athens decisively and crucially becoming stronger than Sparta. A number of structural factors, therefore, gave Athens the impetus to expand to the West, something which meant that it had to bring Sicily under its control in this most critical phase of Athenian strategy.

[52]Thucydides, VI, 15.1 . See also Strassler, *The Landmark Thucydides*.
[53]Thucydides, VI, 24. 3-4. See also Strassler, *The Landmark Thucydides*.
[54]Plutarch, *Parallel Lives*, *Nicias*, 12.6.

The specific timing of the campaign was not by definition wrong or misjudged due to the concurrent war with Sparta. In 415 BCE, the Athenians probably considered that the Peloponnesian War had already ended in a positive way for them, and that Sparta had come off worse in the Peace of Nicias.[55] Evidence of this appears in the speech Nicias made to the Ecclesia.[56]

Looking at events from this point of view, the Athenian campaign in Sicily no longer appears to be mistimed; it took place at the moment structural realism would expect. That is, when the conditions resulting from Athens' success in halting Spartan efforts to stop Athenian expansion had stabilised. The Sicilian campaign came at a time when Athens could put into action a plan it had been promulgating for decades, a plan which would also lead to Sparta coming under Athenian control once and for all. It should be emphasised that even Nicias did not rule out this expansion, but suggested that the Athenians should not move on to new conquests at that specific time because they should first consolidate and secure their dominance over the areas they already controlled.[57] Sparta's move on the chessboard of strategy and history had been pushed back, at least in part, and it was now the time for Athens to make its move. According to a leading realist scholar, states tend to make their most daring offensive moves when they most feel fear, and of course that is how the Athenians would have felt during and after the great Peloponnesian invasion of Attica.[58]

On the causes of Athens' defeat

The prevailing view among scholars is that Athens fell into the error of overextension.[59] That is, it tried to expand beyond its capabilities, causing it to collapse.[60] The Sicilian campaign in particular is often seen as the turning point of the war: "after Sicily the balance of power had shifted".[61] However, in this particular case, there was an immense driving force for Athens to create a Mediterranean empire

[55]Peter Hunt, 'Thucydides on the first ten years of war' in *The Oxford handbook of Thucydides*, pp. 139-141.

[56]Thucydides, VI, 10.2, VI, 11.5. See Strassler, *The Landmark Thucydides*.

[57]Thucydides, VI, 10.5. See also Strassler, *The Landmark Thucydides*.

[58]John J. Mearsheimer, *The tragedy of great power politics*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001), pp. 42-43.
Platias & Koliopoulos, *Thucydides on strategy*, p. 85, p. 147; Philip Matyszak, *Expedition to disaster*, (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military, 2012), p. 15; also Mike Roberts & Bob Bennett, *The Spartan supremacy, 412-371 BC*, (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military), 2014.

[60]For a broad historical presentation of the concept of overextension, Paul Kennedy, *The rise and fall of the great powers. Economic change and military conflict from 1500 to 2000,* (New York: Random House, 1987).

[61]Platias & Koliopoulos, *Thucydides on strategy*, pp. 107-108.

when it was a realistic possibility.[62] The Athenian defeat in Sicily was the result of details, and if there had been a different result, then the road to domination over Sparta would have been wide open. [63] And even after failure in Sicily, the Athenians still had the opportunity of winning the war, or at least of not being completely defeated in 404 BCE.

It is therefore important to emphasise that the Athenian campaign in Sicily had a real and significant chance of success. The Athenians came very close to victory in Sicily, but it is also clear that, after victory had slipped from their hands, they had the chance to disengage and return to Athens without unacceptable losses.[64] The great catastrophe that happened was anything but inevitable. On the contrary, it would not have happened but for a series of mistakes and unfortunate circumstances that intervened to lead the Athenian expedition to disaster.

There is therefore no basis for regarding the Sicilian campaign as a strategic mistake per se, a war lost before it had begun. Instead, it must be seen as a war that could have been won by Athens, but was lost due to a series of tactical errors, misfortunes, misplaced calculations and, of course, by the enemy being strengthened significantly when Alcibiades defected to Sparta and the latter sent help to Syracuse.

The Sicilian catastrophe weakened Athens significantly and caused it many difficulties. After Sicily, many cities which had been subject to Athenian rule rebelled. However, it should be emphasised that seven years later, in 406 BCE, it was the Spartans who sued for peace, after their Persian supported fleet had been destroyed at Arginusae.[65] If the Ecclesia had then voted in favour of peace, and had not instead decided to continue the war and demand Sparta's submission, the winner of the Peloponnesian War would probably have been Athens. But this did not happen as the Athenians refused Sparta's request, while at the same time Athens was executing its victorious generals for not collecting the bodies of dead Athenian sailors in the midst of a storm after the naval battle had ended.[66] In the end, the Spartan victory came from an amateurish and unforgivable mistake made by the Athenian generals at Aegospotami.[67] This was against the advice of Alcibiades who was watching events from his land in eastern Thrace after appearing at the last moment, seemingly out of nowhere, and at

[62]Rahe, *Sparta's first Attic War*, p. 217.
[63]Hanson, *A war like no other*, pp. 212-216.
[64]Ibid., pp. 218-220.
[65]Aristotle, *The Athenian Constitution*, 34; and Xenophon, *Hellenica* I, 6. 28-34 (London: Penguin Classics, 1979).
[66]Xenophon, *Hellenica* I, 6. 35; I, 7, 1-34.
[67]Xenophon, *Hellenica*, II, 1. 26-28.

the height of the drama, as Jacqueline de Romilly might say, only to point out to them that they were in danger of destroying themselves.[68]

It is therefore not clear if the catastrophe in Sicily was the main cause of the final Athenian defeat. Thucydides himself, on closing Book VII, gives his reader the impression that the Sicilian expedition had sealed Athens' fate, while he writes in Book VIII about the Athenian recovery.[69] The fact is that even after defeat in Sicily, Athens had a chance to win the war. In one sense it did indeed win militarily at the naval Battle of Arginusae, but simply did not show the political maturity needed to capitalise on that victory, which resulted in a second phase that ended in a final military defeat. Also, as far as the Sicilian campaign is concerned, it should be remembered that the failure was preceded by a very unexpected and strange event, namely Alcibiades being convicted of sacrilege.

The condemnation of the triumphant Athenian generals after Arginusae, and that of the leader of the ongoing Sicilian campaign, ended up causing incalculable and irreparable damage to the city. This served both vested interests and the aspirations of individuals and factions.[70]

As for the assessment that the campaign in Sicily was the main cause of Athens' defeat, and that Alcibiades was primarily responsible for it, one could contest that it is based on a partial reading of Thucydides, which takes into account only some of that historian's claims while omitting others. Thucydides writes that at the end Pericles was proved right to think that Athens should avoid both expanding its dominance and avoid engaging in other wars against the Peloponnesians.[71] He also claims that most Athenians did not really understand that a war against Syracuse and Sicily would not

[68]Jacqueline de Romilly, *Alcibiade, ou les dangers de l'ambition*, (Paris: Èditions de Fallois, 1995); Xenophon, *Hellenica* II, 1. 25.

[69]Andrew Wolpert, 'Thucydides on the Four Hundred and the fall of Athens', in *The Oxford handbook of Thucydides*, p. 181.

[70]The Athenian constitution and its lack of a Roman style Senate or professional judiciary probably played a role in those events. For the Athenian constitution: Aristotle, *The Athenian constitution*,; also Luciano Canfora, *Il mondo di Atene*, (Bari: Editori Laterza, 2012); Claude Mossé, *Regards sur la démocratie athénienne*, (Paris: editions Perrin, 2013); R. K. Sinclair, *Δημοκρατία και συμμετοχή στην αρχαία Αθήνα [Democracy and participation in Athens]*, (Athens: Ινστιτούτο του βιβλίου – Α. Καρδαμίτσα, 2008; 1988); Gabriella Poma, *Le istituzioni politiche della Grecia in età classica*, (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2003); for the Roman constitution Gabriella Poma, *Le istituzioni politiche del mondo romano,* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2009; 2002).

[71]Thucydides, II, 65. 7; II, 65.13. See also Strassler and Hanson, *The Landmark Thucydides*

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be easier than the one against Sparta and the Peloponnese.[72] However, Thucydides mentions too that the cause of the Sicilian disaster was not a strategic miscalculation, but domestic rivalries.[73] In addition, he blames Alcibiades, not because the latter was in favor of invading Sicily, but because Thucydides thought that Alcibiades' attitude made the majority of the Athenian citizens suspect him of wanting to become a tyrant. Accordingly, they gave power to others, who soon brought Athens to its knees, despite their being inferior to Alcibiades in leadership and military talent.[74] Furthermore, Thucydides underlines that the Athenians were nevertheless capable of fighting back against their Greek enemies and their Persian allies after the disaster in Sicily, and that Athens eventually lost the war only because of internal conflicts.[75]

The arguments presented here do not contradict Thucydides, but do contradict the prevailing modern interpretation of his classic work, which considers the Sicilian expedition to have been a salutary example of strategic overextension. In either case, when thinking about Thucydides' strategic judgements we should keep in mind that he was writing at a time when the Athenians were furious with Alcibiades, and already feeling nostalgic for the glorious pre-war era associated with Pericles and other great leaders. The same is true for the great orator Isocrates, who also held a condemnatory view on the Sicilian expedition half a century later. This can be seen in his oration 'On the Peace'.[76] On the other hand it was Isocrates who introduced the idea of a great Greek campaign, under Athenian and then Macedonian leadership, to conquer the Persian Empire, which was finally implemented by Alexander the Great; a more difficult operation than was conquering Sicily.

Conclusion

The Sicilian expedition of 415 BCE ended in disaster for Athens, and it seriously damaged its relative power in the international system of that time. Nevertheless, the decision to invade Sicily was neither adventurist nor strategically ill-thought, but was the expected product of a reasoned, decades long, Athenian grand strategy. Creating a powerful navy and with that a maritime empire was the best way for Athens to confront both the Persian threat and Spartan hegemony, and by expanding its empire towards the west Athens could increase its power to a degree that Sparta could never reach. A successful conquest of Sicily would indeed have altered the balance of power to Athens' advantage in a decisive manner, as it was to do later for Rome.

[72]Thucydides, VI, 1.1. See also Strassler, *The Landmark Thucydides* .
[73]Thucydides, II, 65.10. See also, *The Landmark Thucydides*.
[74]Thucydides, VI, 15.3-4. See also Strassler, *The Landmark Thucydides* .
[75]Thucydides, II, 65.12 . See also Strassler, *The Landmark Thucydides* .
[76]Emily Greenwood, 'Thucydides on the Sicilian expedition', in *The Oxford handbook of Thucydides*, pp. 193-194.

Of course, the strategic choice to invade Sicily had risks. But it was no more risky than other strategic choices to be found in military history, which instead are recorded as game changing genius strategic moves. In order to accomplish a great achievement, one often has to take on risks that may end in failure. Moreover, the risk taken by the Athenians with the Sicilian expedition was not an exaggerated one, even after the obliteration of its "Sicilian" fleet. Athens remained the dominant power in the Aegean for another decade, and after destroying the Spartan fleet at Arginusae, had another opportunity to win the war.

In sum, the Sicilian expedition was in line with structural factors, it was not an irrational choice, it had serious chances of success, it was not fatal, and it could have increased Athenian influence to unprecedented levels. Although an enormous failure, the Sicilian expedition should not be seen as an outright strategic mistake.