

THUCYDIDES WAS RIGHT: DEFINING THE FUTURE THREAT

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The purpose of this monograph is to examine the challenge in future threat definition. In order to do this, it is necessary to understand where identification of threat originates, and how and why such identification is made in the context of international political relations. This analysis makes fairly heavy use of the ideas in Thucydides' great *History of the Peloponnesian War*. Effort is expended here to explain why a work written in Greece, in the late-5th century B.C., has high value for us today as a vital aid to understanding of our own current, and indeed future, security context.

The reason why Thucydides remains all too relevant for us today is captured well in the potent implications of the high concept of the great stream of time. This monograph does not advance the argument that nothing important changes in the course of strategic history; that would be absurd. Rather, it is my claim that nothing of fundamental importance to the making and practice of statecraft and strategy has altered significantly since the time of the great war between Athens and Sparta. U.S. General of the Army George Catlin Marshall may well have startled an audience at Princeton University in 1947 when he uttered the claim that I have just made here. The sometimes awkward siblings, continuity and change, occupy much of the attention in this monograph. For definition of future threat, where should one look?

Obviously there is a basic and enduring problem that cannot really be evaded, no matter how ingeniously we try. Specifically, since our subject here is threat definition for the future, what can we do about the physical law that denies us the ability to consider any evidence in detail about the future from the future? This monograph does not endeavor to pierce the

veil on the future because that is a scientific impossibility. The only empirical evidence we have concerning the future is confined to our understanding of the past and the present. Given that the U.S. Army must plan for its vital contribution to future security, on what evidential base can it proceed? My analysis does not indulge in an exercise in particular threat identification, but instead seeks to locate a superior concept for the education of planners. If the U.S. Army knows how to define future threat better, we can have some confidence that appropriate choices will be made. The concept that this monograph endorses as the dominant and guiding light for Army planning is prudence. The core meaning of prudence is a determination to attend responsibly to possible and probable anticipated consequences. This translates as classic strategic reasoning, since strategy is all about the desired consequences of military enabling behavior at the tactical and operational levels.

The monograph accepts the inevitability of some events in our future that truly will be of a "Black Swan" nature—which is to say that they will be both beyond any reasonable anticipation and will prove highly consequential. Prudent Army planners cannot know what will occur in the future that will astonish them as a very great threat, but they will know in advance that hugely surprising events and episodes do happen. The fundamental basis for U.S. Army planning should be a grasp of the nature of international political and strategic relations that can rest with high confidence on an understanding of strategic history in the past and the present. There have been and will continue to be changes great and small that are highly relevant to the Army mission, but also there will be continuities out into the future that, functionally

regarded, link the United States in the 21st century to Athens and Sparta in the 5th century B.C. With the obvious exception of nuclear weapons, there is next to nothing of outstanding relative importance to Army planners and intelligence gatherers and analysts that, in functional terms, was not well known in Ancient Greece. Even nuclear weapons are addressed today with a strategic reasoning that was certainly familiar in times long past.

The monograph offers conclusions and recommendations in four broad clusters. First, prudence is recommended as the guiding light in the face of an irreducible ignorance about the future. Second, the monograph explains that there is considerable real (political and cultural) discretion about the particular identification and definition of threat: with very few historical exceptions, major threat is not a self-defining development. Third, the analysis flatly rejects the idea of historical analogy as a vital source of evidence on future threat; instead, I endorse robustly the concept of the historical parallel—the difference between the two ideas fortunately is very large. Fourth, I find that although the contemporary United States is indeed unique and exceptional as an actor on the world stage, it is nonetheless simply a very large and powerful state that is obliged to behave according to the same rule book, and plan with a familiar playbook, as have other great powers of the past and present. All states have composed popular narratives explaining what they are, why they are, and where they have come from. The American popular story is a familiar mixture of verifiable truth, along with much legend

and some myth. It is important for U.S. Army planners to appreciate their role functioning in the strategic (and national American) current of the great stream of time that had no certain beginning and has no commonly anticipated end. The definition of future threat requires prudent contextualization.

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