

THE PELOPONNESIAN WAR: A THEORETICAL ANALYSIS

Ehsan Mehmood Khan*

“War is a matter of vital importance to the State; the province of life or death; the road to survival or ruin. It is mandatory that it be thoroughly studied.”

– Sun Tzu¹

Abstract

Theoretical analysis of the war of ancient eras is as important as that of the modern and postmodern eras. Analysis of the primal, primitive, primordial and prehistoric wars shows that, by and large, they were driven by the same motives. The wars of the Hellenistic and the Greek era, too, have been as comparable. The Peloponnesian war fought from 431 BC to 404 BC between two main alliances of the Greek era — the Peloponnesian League, led by Sparta, and the Delian League, led by Athens— provides a lot for great analysis. It gives insight not only into the political affairs of the Greek era, but also an invaluable case study for the policymakers and theoreticians for drawing pertinent lessons for today’s international, regional and national environments. Theoretical analysis of the Peloponnesian War provides for study of the war in the light of a host of theories. However, as Thucydides upholds, the war in question was a mirror image of honour, interest and fear as a motive, and thus was fought in the theoretical folds of Realism. However, Balance of Power Theory, Just War Theory, Asymmetric War Theory, Hegemonic Stability Theory, Power Transition Theory, The Rubicon Theory and certain other theories can be found at its analytical foundations.

Key words: *alliances, balance of power, asymmetric war, just war, power transition, hegemonic stability*

Overview

The Peloponnesian War dates back to 5th Century BC. It was a protracted military conflict in Ancient Greece which dragged on from 431 BC to 404 BC. This war transformed the political environment of Greece and enfeebled the archetypal system of Greek city

* Ehsan Mehmood Khan is a PhD (Peace and Conflict Studies) scholar at NDU Islamabad. He is author of *Human Security in Pakistan* (published in 2013) and co-author of *Kashmir: Looking Beyond the Peril* (published in 2014).

¹ Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, trans. and intro. Samuel B. Griffith (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 63.

states, which had dominated the region for over three centuries before this war. The war was recorded by Thucydides, an Athenian General, who wrote a book *The History of the Peloponnesian War*,² which is read even today and bears relevance in military history both for theoretical analysis and strategic lessons.

Thucydides is known as the father of scientific history for his reliance on first-hand accounts, or primary sources.³ Thucydides often inserted dialogue into his account based on his own memory.⁴ Melian Dialogue is one of such examples. However, this also provides a chance for good theoretical analysis of the socio-political environment of the Greek era and the Peloponnesian War. Thucydides, also known as the father of the school of political realism, noted:

“It will be enough for me, however, if these words of mine are judged useful by those who want to understand clearly the events which happened in the past and which (human nature being what it is) will, at some time or other and in much the same ways, be repeated in the future. My work is not a piece of writing designed to meet the taste of an immediate public, but was done to last forever.”⁵

Thus, Thucydides wanted to see his work as universal. He succeeded indeed. Even twenty five centuries after he wrote the book, it is being read and analyzed.

These conflicts led to heavy casualties from all sides including civilians. By the end of war, the Athenian state fell. The entire region faced pervasive poverty, disease and human insecurity in various forms.

The Alliances

Athens and the Delian League: It was well-resourced NATO-like alliance led by the Athenian imperial democracy, whereto the member states paid tribute or contributed forces. Being major sea power of the continent, the alliance had the strength of 3,000 ships and 30,000 troops. The Athenian city walls allowed Athens to avoid land battles, permitted to leave the lands undefended and provided access to resources from the sea even when surrounded by the enemy on land.

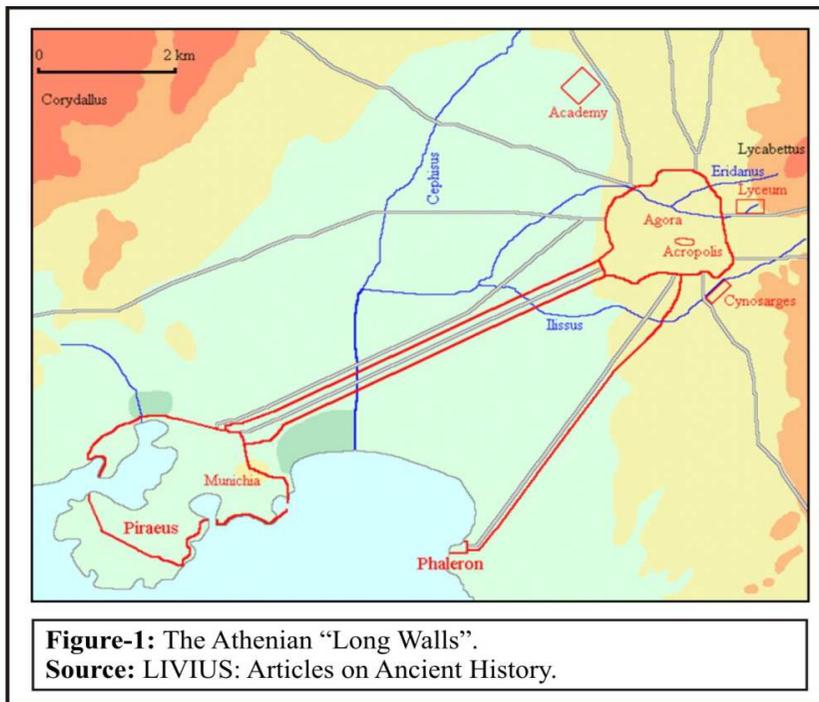
² Thucydides, *The History of the Peloponnesian War* (New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2006) is of the many editions of the book.

³ Deborah Vess, *SAT World History* (Piscataway, New Jersey: Research and Education Association, 2006), 87.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Quoted in Matthew H. Nitecki and Doris V. Nitecki, ed., *History and Evolution* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 22.

The Athenian “Long Walls” were built after King of Persia Xerxes' invasion of Greece (480-479 BC). Figure-1 illustrates.⁶



Sparta and the Peloponnesian League: It was a major land power, led by the Spartan oligarchy. Some 90 percent of population consisted of the helots as against only 10 percent Spartans. Helots were a subjugated class of agricultural labourers who were held as virtual serfs by the Spartans and others throughout much of the history of ancient Greece.⁷ They were intermediate in status between slaves and citizens.⁸ It was a loose collection of oligarchic states and tied by a treaty to Sparta. The main purpose for formation of the Peloponnesian League was to guarantee the Spartan security and domination of Peloponnesians.

The neutrals: There were three important neutrals including Argos; Corcyra (Corfu); and Persia.

Figure-2 shows the two alliances and the neutrals on map.

⁶ “The ‘Long Walls’ of Athens,” *LIVIUS: Articles on Ancient History*, <http://www.livius.org/lo-lt/long_walls/long_walls.html> (accessed on 25 November 2013).

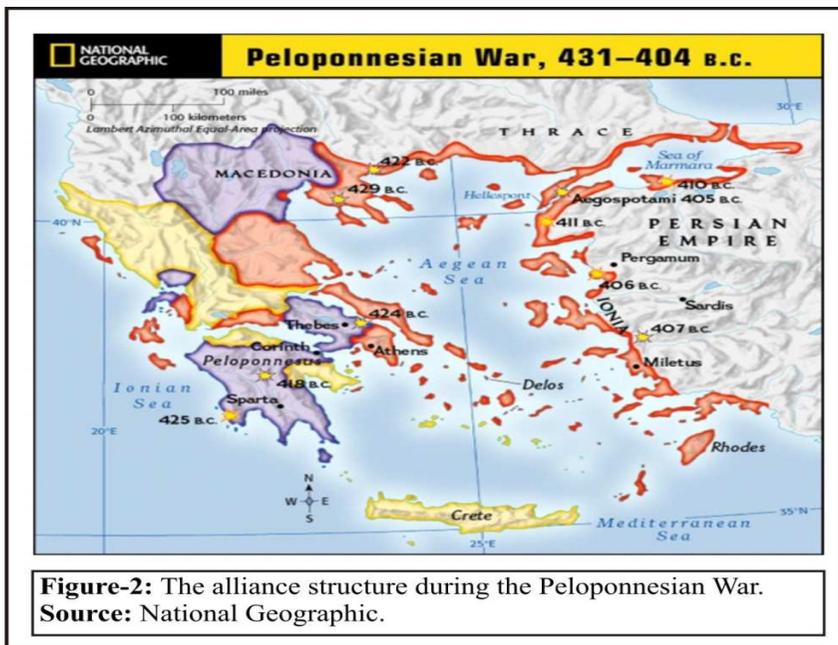
⁷ Junius P. Rodriguez, *Encyclopedia of Slave Resistance and Rebellion - Volume 1* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2007), 246.

⁸ Concise Oxford Dictionary.

Causes of war

The narratives of the cause of war are contested. There are contending views:

- **View-1:** Sparta resolved to destroy Athenian power. This view has been mainly argued by de Ste Croix.⁹
- **View-2:** Athens under the Pericles' leadership sought to embark on war to destroy Sparta.¹⁰
- **View-3:** This is Thucydides' view that 'the truest explanation' was that the growth of Athenian power made the Spartans afraid and forced them to go to war.¹¹ Thucydides also cited grievances and disputes as the real reason for war.



As matter of fact, there was a sort of power struggle in the region. Athens treated the Delian League city states as if they were their empire. Besides, Athens used the Delian League funds for projects in the city of Athens (statues, etc.). On the other hand, Sparta was shrinking and they could sense their own influence waning. Sparta feared that Athens was

⁹ George Cawkwell, *Thucydides and the Peloponnesian War* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1997), 26.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, trans. Martin Hammond (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 486.

getting too powerful seeing that most of the Greece was already subject to them, and sought to check it.

A retrospective analysis shows the causes of war as follows:

- Mutual feeling of insecurity by the two leading states i.e. Athens and Sparta.
- Fear of compromise of interest and power.
- Power struggle.
- Swinging balance of power.

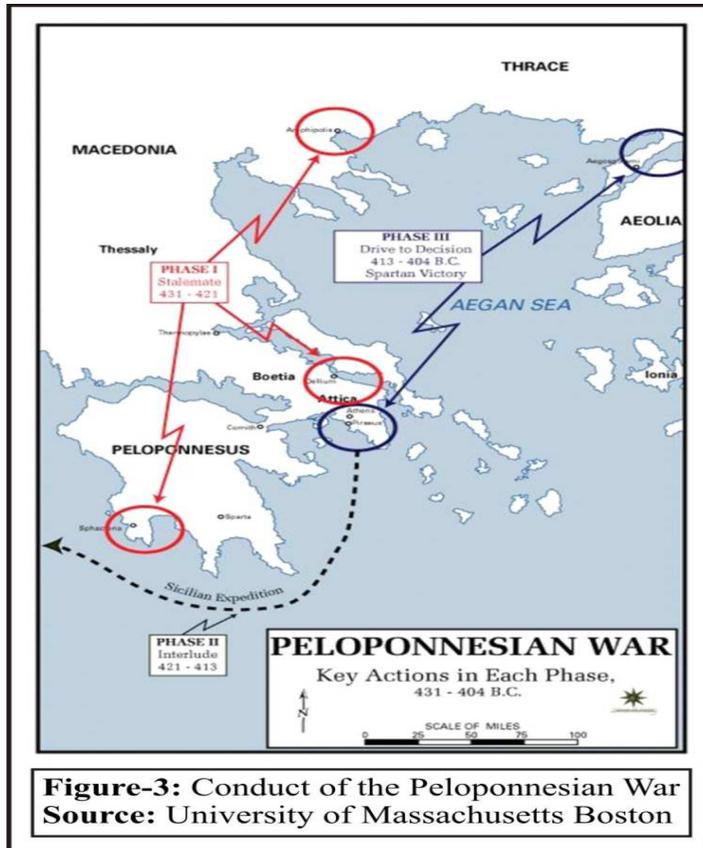
The Conduct of War

The Peloponnesian War was conducted in three main stages or phases including: (Figure-3 illustrates the conduct of war).¹²

Stage-1: The Archidamian War (431-421 BC) — During this stage of war, Sparta invaded Athens and the adjoining area. Both endeavoured for supremacy in Attica for about a decade, finally signing the *Peace of Nicias* in 421 BC.

Stage-2: The Sicilian Expedition (421-413 BC) — Soon after the Peace of Nicias, Athens invaded the city of Syracuse on the island of Sicily, sparking a new round of conflict. During the Athenian assault on Syracuse, the Athenians suffered a number of defeats. This led to the next phase of war.

¹² "Peloponnesian War: Alliances at the Start and Contrasting Strategies," University of Massachusetts Boston, <http://www.faculty.umb.edu/gary_zabel/Courses/Phil%20281b/Maps/peloponnesian_war_alliances.gif> (accessed on 25 November 2013).



Stage-3: The Decelean War or the Ionian War (413-404 BC).

During the Decelean War, the Spartans also promoted violence within Athens by instigating Athenian subjects to rebel. So Athens found itself attacked from within as well as without. This turned disastrous for Athens, which gave up in 404 BCE.

Outcome

Though Sparta won, yet no side was clearly triumphant. The drawn out conflict ended into extensive deaths and diseases. Both states faced economic devastation. Greece became socially as well as politically weaker. The Delian League was dissolved. Sparta emerged as the hegemonic power.

Theoretical Analysis

Levels of analysis: Since the primary aim of this paper is to carry out theoretical analysis of the Peloponnesian War, therefore, it is imperative to first have a look at the pertinent theories. To start with, it is important to glance over the levels of analysis. Kenneth

Waltz (1959) suggested three “images” of war: the individual, the state/society, and the system, and used these to categorize the causes of war.¹³ The attributes of Waltz’s images are as follows: Individual – biographical, personality and psychoanalysis; State and society – geography, regime, economy and macro-social; and System – anarchy, distribution of power (hard, soft, polarity, alliances).¹⁴ Figure-4 illustrates comparison of three main schools of thought in the light of Waltz’s images.¹⁵

		Realism: Machiavellians	Rationalists: Grotians	Revolutionists: Kantians
Waltz's Images	First Image: The Individual	<i>Human nature is violent</i>	<i>Some people are good some bad</i>	<i>People are good or can become good</i>
	Second Image: The State	<i>States are self-regarding</i>	<i>Some states good some are bad</i>	<i>States can become good</i>
	Third Image: System/Society of States	<i>The states system is self-help</i>	<i>The society of states has a degree of order</i>	<i>The system can become good and transcended</i>

Figure-4:Waltz’s Images of War.
Source: E-IR.

J.D. Singer (1961) referred to these as “levels of analysis.”¹⁶ Singer explained the levels as follows:

The Individual Level:

It focuses primarily on human nature and on individual political leaders and their belief systems, psychological processes, emotional states and personalities.¹⁷

The Nation-State or National Level

It includes factors such as the type of political system (authoritarian or democratic, and variations of each), the structure of economy, the role of interest groups, ethnicity and nationalism.¹⁸

¹³ Kenneth N. Waltz, *Man, the State, and War: A Theoretical Analysis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959).

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ A.C. McKeil, “Waltz, Wight and Our Study of World Politics,” *e-International Relations*, <<http://www.e-ir.info/2013/03/23/waltz-wight-and-our-study-of-world-politics/>> (accessed on 26 November 2013).

¹⁶ J. D. Singer, “The Level-of-Analysis Problem in International Relations,” *World Politics*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (October 1961):77-92.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

The International System Level

It includes the anarchic structure of the international system, the distribution of the military and economic power among the leading states in the system, patterns of military alliances and international trade.¹⁹

Applicability to the Peloponnesian War

The Individual Level

The politico-military leadership on both sides did affect the initiation, conduct and thus the outcome of war. Pericles, the Athenian political and military leader pronounced impact. He was known for his passionate, emotional and fiery speeches. In his speeches, he used to glorify the achievements and bravery of the Athenian people, which often fuelled the passions of the people with the consequence that the war went on for decades.

The Nation-State or National Level

The Peloponnesian War was fought between the two alliances led by two most powerful states of the era. As a matter of fact, it was a clash of interests between the Athenian imperial democracy and the Spartan oligarchy, the two political systems that were antithesis to each other. Yet again, at the root of it, it was perpetuated by imperialistic desire and design of the two powerful states.

The International System

International system was equally responsible for causing the war. Marked by bipolarity, the regional environment paved the way for contest at the level of alliance. The Persian Empire, the most powerful political entity, was located nearby. Persia, too, had its interest. It had the imprints and legacy of the Greco-Persian Wars fought from 499 to 449 BC, and was thus naturally inclined towards Sparta. Persia not only encouraged Sparta and the Peloponnesian League to wage war against Athens and the Delian League, but also supported physically during the final phase of the war i.e. the Decelean/Ionian War (413-404BC).

¹⁹ Ibid.

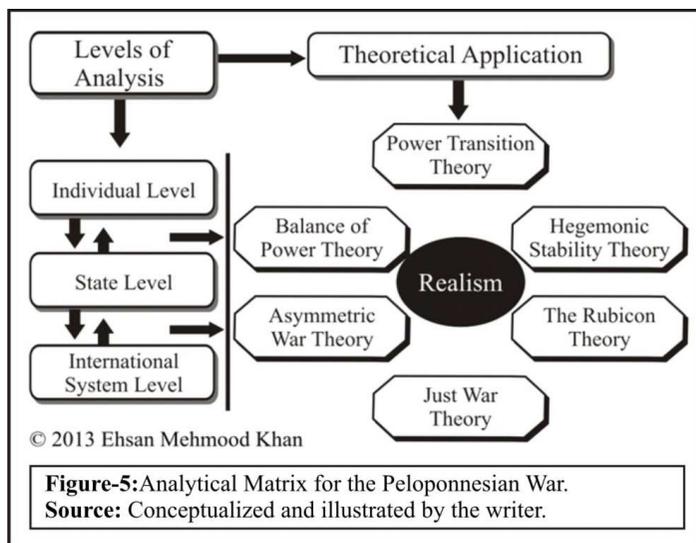


Figure-5 contains theoretical matrix of the Peloponnesian War as conceptualized by the writer.

Realism

Realism refers to *Realpolitik* which literally means politics based on real and practical rather than ethical or ideological considerations. It refers to a ruthlessly realistic and opportunist approach to statesmanship, rather than a moralistic or legalistic one. Realism is the oldest and most adopted theory of International Relations. It is the tradition of analysis that stresses the imperatives that states face to pursue power politics of national interest.²⁰ The tenets of realism go back several centuries and appear too many over time as eternal truths. Main assumptions of the theory of realism include the following:

- States are most important actors.
- Unitary-rational decision-making (by the states).
- International system is anarchic.
- All states must maximize power.
- States balance against threats.
- Morality has no place in international politics.
- International politics is more important than domestic politics.
- Human Nature: selfish, egocentric, drive for power and the will to dominate.

Inter alia, prominent realist thinkers include: Sun Tzu (Ancient China), Thucydides (Ancient Greece), Machiavelli (Medieval Italy), Thomas Hobbes (civil war-torn England), Mao Tse Tung (Communist China), Hans J. Morgenthau (USA 1950s), and Kenneth N. Waltz (USA 1950s, the founder

²⁰ Scott Burchill et al, *Theories of International Relations*, 3rd Ed (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), 30.

of Structural Realism). Other than the minor difference, they have all come to similar conclusions about the characteristics of the international system that can be grouped together as the theory of realism.

Applicability to the Peloponnesian War

Realism can aptly be applied to the Peloponnesian War. The details of the war have travelled down the history of over 2.5 millennia through Thucydides, an Athenian General, who wrote a book *The History of the Peloponnesian War*.²¹ Thucydides, himself, analysed the war in the light of the key assumptions of Realism. In first place, the human nation did have a strong role to play in the initiation and outcome of war. Honour, interest and fear, the fundamental human stimuli fuelled the causes and conduct of war. Human nature played its role both at the levels of leadership and the populace. The leadership stimulated by its personal motives fuelled jingoism in the masses who in turn acted as pawn on the politico-strategic chessboard of the region.

States remained to be the most important unitary-rational and decision-making actors during all stages of war. Sparta and Athens had made 'rational' choices to go to war to fulfil the national interests. The anarchic nature of international and regional system presented a zero-sum setting wherein victory of one of the two alliances could lead to defeat and devastation of the other, as it eventually transpired. Insofar as the pursuit of power by the states and struggle for survival are concerned, the nature of the Peloponnesian War, *per se*, bore evidence to it.

As a matter of fact, Realism is one such theory that is wholly applicable to the Peloponnesian War. In other words, the Peloponnesian War is a mirror image of the theory of Realism. Certainly, some postulates of various other theories are also applicable, as discussed in the succeeding paragraphs. However, no other theory is as applicable to this war in totality as is the theory of Realism. Thucydides' analysis and the essence of the Melian Dialogue also bear testimony to it.

Balance of Power Theory

The balance of power is a key postulate of both classical and structural realism. However, due to the very nature of this tenet, it is also considered by some as an independent Balance of Power Theory. Balance of power, if maintained in a regional or international politico-strategic setting, counteracts against onset of an interstate war. If disturbed it may lead to war. According to Kenneth Waltz, founder of neorealism, "balance-of-power politics prevail[s] wherever two, and only two requirements are

²¹ Thucydides, The Peloponnesian war...

met: that the order be anarchic and that it be populated by units wishing to survive.”²² Keith L. Shimko has well explained the theories as follows:

Balance of power theory predicts that states will do exactly what the theory’s name suggests – balance against the power of the other states. In order to prevent any one state or alliance from achieving dominance, states can do only two things; increase their own power or band together with other states. These options are sometimes referred to as *internal* and *external* balancing.²³

Applicability to the Peloponnesian War

The Balance of Power Theory, too, fittingly applicable to the Peloponnesian War in that it was all about power that the two most powerful states were trying to attain, retain and maintain. They tried to maximize power through internal and external resources. Failing this, they strove to attain internal and external balance, especially by means of alliances. The strategic balance was lost in a manner that over time Athens developed into a major maritime power of the region, whereas Sparta evolved into a major land power. In addition, due to the size, economy and expanding power of the Delian League, Sparta feared that Athens was getting too powerful seeing that most of the Greece was already subject to them, and sought to check it – to put right the balance of power. Thus, the swinging and indeed disturbed balance of power became one of the key causes of war.

Power Transition Theory

Power Transition Theory (PTT) also falls in the folds of Realism. According to Alfred Organski, “an even distribution of political, economic, and military capabilities between contending groups of states is likely to increase the probability of war; peace is preserved best when there is an imbalance of national capabilities between disadvantaged and advantaged nations; the aggressor will come from a small group of dissatisfied strong countries; and it is the weaker, rather than the stronger; power that is most likely to be the aggressor.”²⁴

Applicability to the Peloponnesian War

Power Transition Theory can be appositely applied to the Peloponnesian War in that the power was somewhat correspondingly, if not evenly, distributed among the two opposing alliances. This indeed became a bone of contention between the two. Both Sparta and Athens

²² Quoted in Keith L. Shimko, *International Relations: Perspectives, Controversies and Readings*, 4th Ed, (Stamford: Cengage Learning, 2012), 64.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Alfred Organski, *World Politics*. 2nd Ed. (New York: Knopf, 1968), 364–367.

wanted to dominate the region and maintain hegemony. Let us take the example of the Delian League. Despite grievances of some of the League members with regard to excesses by Athens, not even a single one of them rebelled or waged a war against Athens as it was too powerful. The case of the Peloponnesian League was not much different insofar as the alliance structure was concerned. However, when it came to the level of the two leagues, vying for power they collided in the hope to win and dominate the other.

Hegemonic Stability Theory

Hegemonic Stability Theory (HST) suggests that the international system is most stable and functions impeccably in case there is one dominant world power, which can assert itself.²⁵ The idea of hegemony and thus *Hegemonic Stability Theory* can be divided into two schools of thought- the realist school and the systemic school. Both can be further subdivided. Two dominant theories have emerged from each school. The term 'Theory of Hegemonic Stability' was introduced by Robert Keohane. A.F.K. Organski's *Power Transition Theory* is yet another approach to the realist school of thought. *Long Cycle Theory*, advocated by George Modelski, and the *World Systems Theory*, popularized by Immanuel Wallerstein, are the two dominant approaches within the systemic school of thought.²⁶

Applicability to the Peloponnesian War

Hegemonic Stability Theory (HST) is inversely applicable to the Peloponnesian War in that there was no hegemon on the international arena and thus could not play a role in ensuring stability in the region. The regional politico-strategic landscape was made up of two powers which led to a perfect bipolar system at least to the extent of the zone of war. The Persian Empire, which was certainly the most powerful and the largest political entity on the globe during the times of Peloponnesian War did not act to assert itself as a hegemon. At best, it acted as an accomplice, supporter, facilitator or sponsor – more like an ally – for Sparta during the culminating stage of the war. To be sure, the Persian support led to the conclusive victory by Sparta. However, in final analysis, the Persian involvement, too, does not bear an evidence for applicability of HST.

²⁵ Joshua S. Goldstein, *International Relations*, (New York: Pearson-Longman Publishers, 2005), 83-107.

²⁶ Terry Boswell and Mike Sweat, "Hegemony, Long Waves, and Major Wars: A Time Series Analysis of Systemic Dynamics, 1496-1967," *International Studies Quarterly* (1991): 124.

Asymmetric War Theory (AWT)

A war marked by asymmetry between the belligerents in power, resources, military system, war strategies, tactics and methods, is called an Asymmetric War. It may differ from 'normal' or 'symmetric' war only in the sense that one state is significantly weaker than the other; or it may involve one side not being a state or even a politically recognized body; or it may involve tactics of unconventional warfare.²⁷

Applicability to the Peloponnesian War

The AWT is not aptly applicable to the Peloponnesian War because there existed a general level of symmetry between the belligerents. Both were alliances led by the powerful states. Both had similar models and methods of waging war. However, asymmetry existed in one aspect: the form of military power. Athens was a major maritime power and was relatively weaker in land forces. On the other hand, Sparta was a major land power and was comparatively weaker in naval forces. A general atmosphere of symmetry existed virtually in all other fields.

Just War Theory

The Just War Theory (JWT) was originally introduced as the Just War Doctrine by Saint Augustine (354-430 AD).²⁸ The concepts of *Jus Ad Bellum* (Justice for resorting to war), *Jus in Bello* (Justice in conduct of war) and *Jus Post Bellum* (justice at the end of the war) take their roots from writings of Aristotle and Cicero. Since Saint Augustine's writings seem to be influenced by Cicero, there is a long winded debate on this theory. Later, Machiavelli venerated the war in *The Prince*: "every war that is necessary is just."²⁹ Put simply, JWT refers to the right of self-defence of a state or a party. Just war is fought as a last resort when all other efforts have failed and the proportional use of force is opted as a last resort.

Applicability to the Peloponnesian War

The JWT is applicable to the Peloponnesian War to the extent that both sides considered themselves to be morally just having reasonable motivations to wage war. However, finger could be pointed towards Sparta for being the initiator or aggressor. Athens' response is certainly based on JWT in that it acted in self-defence. However, Sparta, too, could claim to be morally right as it acted to check increasing power of Athens, which it feared would eventually be used against Sparta and the

²⁷ Greg Cashman, *What Causes War: An Introduction to Theories of War*, 2nd Ed, (Maryland, Rowman and Littlefield publishers, 2013), 277.

²⁸ Albert L. Weeks, *The Choice of War, The Iraq War and Just War Tradition* (Santa Barbara, ABC-CLIO Publishers, 2010), 15.

²⁹ Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince* (Boston, Harvard Classics, 1909-14) p.15.

Peloponnesian League. The intervention by the Persian empire also was “just” in Persia’s right to support an ally so that Athens, a potential enemy, with whom Persia had fought a 50-year war i.e. Greco-Persian War (499 – 449 BC) could be defeated.

The Rubicon Theory

According to the Rubicon Theory of Psychology, it is emotive behaviour of the individuals and a sort of “over confidence on the eve of war [that act as a] primary causal factor in the decision for war.”³⁰ This way, it is linked with the behaviour, personality makeup and attitude of the leadership, populace and in turn the political entity they belong to.

Applicability to the Peloponnesian War

The Rubicon Theory can be applied to the Peloponnesian War in case of both belligerents. On the one hand, the leadership of both key states i.e. Athens and Sparta was imbued with height of confidence to win and thus seize power. On the other hand, the populace had also been inflated with similar confidence. On the whole, political entities i.e. the states and the contending alliances, though not monoliths, were also instilled with the same level of confidence.

Conclusion

The phenomenon of war needs to be analysed with comprehensively taking into account all facets. War studies are important in all forms and dimensions, and all kinds of war. The interstate wars are even more important because they affect the entire regional and, at times, the global system. Analysis of wars needs to be done holistically so as to bring out the relevant and significant lessons for applicability to today’s postmodern day environment. The Peloponnesian War is but one such case with one of the most important sets of theoretical lessons embedded in it.

³⁰ Greg Cashman, op.cit., 97 – 98.

