

# China, India and South Asia's Melian Dialogue

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The Greek historian Thucydides wrote his famous *History Of The Peloponnesian War* to explain the causes of the fierce conflict between his native Athens and its rival Sparta that engulfed the Hellenic world (431-404BC). This remains one classical text that has enormously influenced theorists of international relations ever since.

His Melian Dialogue, in particular, has special resonance in our times as the discourse between the envoys of Athens and the people of the tiny island of Melos, who wanted to remain neutral in the war, continues to resonate in the current political tensions in Asia.

The envoys of Athens, the rising power, had a blunt message for Melos – neutrality was unacceptable and it should surrender to Athens to avoid destruction. The Melians refused, arguing that the gods would support them because they were in the right. The Athenians' rejoinder echoes to this day: The gods are irrelevant. What matters is that iron law of nature: "The strong do what they can, and the weak suffer what they must." The Melians were unpersuaded. The Athenian envoys left, only for their army to return to slaughter the men of Melos and enslave all its women and children. It was a textbook example of "realism" in politics.

Fast forward to the present. Much has been written about the parallels between the United States-China rivalry and the Sparta-Athens power struggle. Less examined is the Melian Dialogue as applied to South Asia.

There are at least two levels at which one could explore the similarities. One is between China (Athens) and India (Melos), and the other between China (Athens) and its neighbours, particularly the smaller Himalayan states of Nepal and Bhutan (Melos).

There's a major difference vis-a-vis the classical case. At the first level, India is not as weak as Melos to China's Athens. But then, it is also not China's intention, nor would it have the capability, to crush a fellow nuclear power.

In the modern context, China's strategy in dealing with India is more circumscribed: The goal is not so much to subjugate its southern neighbour but to keep India from impeding China's rise to becoming peer of the US, by creating difficulties for it to completely align with the US, an alliance from which the Modi government has so far held back.

The sop from China to India has been the lure of "disengagement" along the Line of Actual Control, swapping a piece of India's restraint for a piece of peace.

At the second level, China is cast in the role of Athens while tiny Nepal and Bhutan play the part of Melos in the strategic game.

Again, there's a difference from the classical case. Here, China has penetrated the outer shell of Nepal, and possibly even Bhutan, normally treaty-bound with India to align foreign policies.

With a nudge and a wink from China, deeply involved with Nepal's infrastructure projects, Nepali Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli, a communist, feels emboldened to stand up to India. His government is fanning anti-Indian sentiments domestically and has incorporated into Nepal's map some territories also claimed by India.

Tiny Bhutan was already chary of opening itself to regional transport arrangements linking with India for fear of an onrush of tourists.

Left to itself, it would prefer direct diplomatic links with Beijing that India would not allow for. To exert pressure, China laid claim to a chunk of Bhutanese territory, creating further awkwardness for India, which is treaty-bound to protect Bhutan's security.

The Chinese intent here is also not to destroy the two Meloses, but to wean them from the adversary. How the strategy will pan out, we are yet to see.

## WHAT LIES AHEAD

Historically, when a rising power such as China runs up against an existing one, like the US, a modicum of instability is a necessary consequence. But war need not be inevitable. China and the US are too interlinked and conflict would go against realist calculations of self-preservation. Yet change is an inexorable process. The challenge is to understand this and, if possible, accommodate each other's aspirations, converting them into a paradigm of mutually beneficial relationship.

A lesson to be learnt from the Peloponnesian War, cited at the outset, was that when it ended, so did the sway of both Athens and Sparta. It was swept away by the consequences of that conflict, paving the way for the emergence of Alexander of Macedonia from what was then the backwaters of the Hellenic civilisation!

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