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Armis Exoscere Pacem (They Demanded Peace by Force of Arms): An Examination of the Relationship between Politics and War

Guy Williams

While many may contest the machinations behind the decision of the United States to invade Iraq and Afghanistan, none can dispute the effective fighting power of the United States military and the results rendered by the application of force. What of the relationship between the diplomatic and political efforts to achieve national goals and the decision to use force to impose the will of one nation state upon the other in order to achieve strategic or national goals? Are the two concepts mutually exclusive or is Carl von Clausewitz correct with his statement, “War is not a mere act of policy but a true political instrument, a continuation of political activity by other means. . . . The political objective is the goal, war is the means of reaching it, and means can never be considered in isolation from their purpose.”¹ Effective politics cannot occur without the specter of war to back political efforts. This essay will examine the relationship between politics and war by comparing historical precedents to the recent invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan by the United States.

Since the earliest recorded writings of the story of Gilgamesh, war and conflict remained an integral part of the human experience. Competition for resources, conflicting ideologies, territorial disputes and a myriad of other reasons provided the pretext for war—but what of politics? Did politics emerge as a result of war or perhaps evolve as a different form of warfare? The term politics originated from the Greek word *politikos* or *politika* and referred to the affairs of a city-state and her citizens. Greek historian H. D. F. Kitto described early Greek politics as, “State affairs were public affairs, not the private concern of a despot. He [the Greek citizen] was ruled by Law, a known Law which respected justice.”² The early Greeks respected justice because crimes carried hefty penalties and punishments. Civility and stability did not emerge from the ancient world as a result of a universal sense of *agape*, but at the point of spear that punished those that did not conform or acquiesce to the desired behavior of the *polis* or city-state. Thucydides captured this early sentiment with the statement, “since you know as well as we do that right, as the world goes, is only a question between equals in power, while the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.”³

This truism expressed by Thucydides went beyond the simple cliché of might makes right and discussed the veiled threat inherent in all politics. The political machinations, legislations, and treaties of any state entity rely on some type of coercion in the form of legal punishments, economic incentives, and the ultimate threat of war to enforce the dictates of the state.

War is an intrinsic part of any society because it acts as the final arbiter in a conflict. Historical analysis offered numerous examples of the horrific cost of war in loss of life and resources, but all ancient and modern societies experienced war in some form. Even though all societies understood the terrible cost of war, no one escaped the ravages of war. Thucydides commented, “It must be thoroughly understood that war is a necessity, and that the more readily we accept it, the less the ardor of our opponents, and that out of the greatest dangers communities and individuals acquire the greatest glory.”⁴ While Thucydides spoke to the individual sense of notoriety because of the rewards associated with braving dangers in battle, he also addressed the resolute acceptance required of any society to embrace war in order to discourage adversaries. While preparations for war do not prevent war, they do help a society to mobilize her citizens and resources to quickly defend against aggression or prosecute a war against an enemy if needed. These preparations for war do not guarantee success, but they facilitate the increased chance of success if war is required.

The magnitude and skill a state possesses to wage war translates to both real and perceived forms of power. The application of power and the evaluation of other nation states’ power lie at the heart of foreign policy. The *Realpolitik* of the modern era is a further refinement of Thucydides’ earlier observations. Henry Kissinger noted the concept of *Realpolitik* as “foreign policy based on calculations of power and national interest.”⁵ The politicians and diplomats of nation states today attempt to shape or modify the behavior of other states and advance their own state interests with the application of positive and negative economic tools, promises of support, and ultimately the threat of war if two or more states arrive at an impasse.

Even contemporary political and diplomatic efforts, such as the Congress of Vienna in 1815 formed as a result of war, used the threat of war to enforce the resolutions of the Congress. Although this Congress helped deter large scale warfare on the European Continent for nearly one hundred years, smaller scale wars and revolutions occurred in the interim before the onset of World War I (1914-1918). The Treaty of Versailles in 1919 offered another example of diplomatic

efforts that attempted to redress damages incurred during World War One and sought monetary reparations from Germany. While the treaty offered concessions to Germany in the form of retained land and no occupying forces, the perceived insult to the German national psyche offered a convenient pretext for the rise of Nazism and extreme nationalism. While both of the aforementioned treaties sought to end wars and redress the balance, the treaties only delayed war and did not prevent it.

War—or at least the threat of war—remained a salient part of any political or diplomatic efforts. As Commander George J. Meyers stated, “However much we of the military services may strive to strengthen our hands in war operations by making strategic dispositions, our efforts are weakened and sometimes nullified if diplomacy and statesmanship do not work hand in hand with us, particularly during peace time to support our national strategy.”⁶ Again, this statement refers to the intrinsic relationship between war and politics. The threat of war provides the incentive for compliance with treaties, alliances, and other political efforts. Politicians and diplomats convey power not solely by the appeal of their words but in conjunction with the perceived power their state possesses to wage war.

The state politicians and diplomats embody the promise of war and they act at the behest of their citizens or, in some despotic cases, in their own interests. Regardless of the motivations behind their actions, war is the central power that lends weight to their words. Noted Greek historian and author Victor Davis Hanson opines, “The essence of war is battle and the essence of battle is killing.”⁷ While this concept is brutal and runs contrary to modern sensibilities, war in the basest sense revolves around the ability of one nation state to inflict the most damage to another state in order to force it to lose national resolve and accede to the demands of the victor state. Laws do not prevent states or individuals from acting contrary to acceptable norms or international standards.

While laws do offer a certain deterrent value to discourage unacceptable behavior, they do not prevent bad behavior. Thucydides noted, “In short, it is impossible to prevent, and only great simplicity can hope to prevent, human nature doing what it has set its mind upon, by force of law or by any other deterrent force whatsoever.”⁸ Look to recent events and evaluate how well laws prevented Saddam Hussein from invading Kuwait or non-state actors from hijacking commercial aircraft to attack targets within the United States. Did laws prevent the former Soviet Union from invading West Germany or did the threat of nuclear war dissuade the Soviets from acting rashly?

The genocide in Rwanda in 1994 epitomized the ineffectiveness of international law and efforts to resolve conflicts without the threat or use of war. Even after the execution of ten United Nation (UN) peacekeepers and thousands of Rwandans, the world community and the United States failed to intervene with military force. As a direct result of inaction, numerous sources estimated that over 500,000 people died in Rwanda. Without the backing of military force, the countries in question largely ignored the UN resolutions that prohibit genocide, production of weapons of mass destruction, and so on. Recent events in Syria, Iran, and North Korea displayed the ineffectiveness of the UN and the international community in arranging a peaceful agreement that does not rely on the threat of war. The ineffectiveness of the UN was a source of parody in the movie *Team America: World Police*. In the movie, the character that portrayed a UN weapons inspector named Hans Blix, responded to North Korean leader Kim Jong Il's query about the consequences of not complying with UN resolutions. Blix states, "Or else we will be very angry with you . . . and we will write you a letter, telling you how angry we are."⁹ Although the movie was a work of fiction, it addressed the perceived weakness and inability of the UN to enforce its resolutions.

While genocide and human rights abuses offer examples of challenges to the UN, ideologies represent another struggle between international laws and politics. While many argue that it is impossible to kill the threat of an idea or a national ideology, historical evidence offers examples of ideologies that failed because of war or the threat of war. German Nazism, Italian Fascism, and Japanese Imperialism all failed because of war. Soviet Communism failed because of the economic burdens associated with preparing for war and maintaining a strong ability to counter the Western World's ability to wage war. These ideologies did not fail because of politics, but by force of arms or the threat of war.

The UN and the United States face another challenge of ideologies with the current conflict in Syria. Traditional realists such as Henry Kissinger recommend supporting societies that promote civil tolerance and individual rights but caution, "Our efforts must also be placed within a framework of U.S. strategic interests which should help define the extent and nature of our role."¹⁰ This is the quandary that the Obama administration faces. What are the United States' strategic interests in the region and at what point does she as a nation state acknowledge that political and diplomatic efforts failed? Reporter Michael Gerson summarized Obama's foreign policy as one of "deferred decisions."¹¹ This statement illustrated the

diminutive value of politics without the threat of war to back the negotiations. Syrian President Bashar Hafez al-Assad refuses to step down from power and comply with UN mandates. At what point does his refusal require the application of force? Does his refusal constitute *casus belli*?

The *casus belli* of war may not always be in the form of reprisals, defense, or to right a moral wrong. The Peloponnesian War of 431-404 BC occurred because Sparta feared the ascendancy of Athens. Thucydides observed, "They [Spartans] then felt that they could endure it no longer, but that the time had come for them to throw themselves heart and soul upon the hostile power, and break it, if they could, by commencing the present war."¹² This same sentiment occurred with the conflict between the United States and the regime of Saddam Hussein during Operation Iraqi Freedom. Although the United States did not face an existential threat from Saddam, she feared the destabilizing factor his regime represented in the region. Saddam did not respond to economic sanctions and international condemnations, consequently the United States resorted to war to advance its interests and remove a despotic regime because diplomacy and or politics failed.

The United States faced a different pretext for war after the attacks of September 11, 2001. Another nation state did not attack the United States, but rather a rogue non-state actor organization called al-Qaeda. How does a nation state respond to an act of aggression by a non-state actor? Al-Qaeda represented an ideology rather than a state interest and their status challenged the reprisal efforts of the United States. The United States did not wage a total war against Afghanistan, but targeted the Taliban government and infrastructure that facilitated the growth of al-Qaeda and allowed them to operate in Afghanistan. This measured response initially relied on the force of war but incrementally added diplomacy and soft power to shape the political climate in Afghanistan. Arguably the power of war did not stop the ideology of al-Qaeda to date, but severely diminished their influence and power on the world stage.

The status of al-Qaeda as a non-state actor begs the question of a measured response for the next form of aggression. What of cyber attacks by a non-state actor or a nation state? Does a nation state respond with war or a similar type of cyber attack? If a nation responds with an attack, then who or what does the nation target? The threat of war does little to affect the political dialogue if no viable target exists for a country to attack. Will the international community condemn country A if they use kinetic weapons to disable country B's power supply after country B's

successful cyber attack damaged the power grid of country A? These questions hint at the difficulty leaders face when dealing with an asymmetrical threat that may not warrant a kinetic response.

Warfare as currently understood is evolving to include cyber warfare that targets information technologies and supporting infrastructures of an opponent. Without some type of negative or positive incentive, political solutions stand little chance of success. Why should an individual or nation state heed any international law if no consequences or repercussions exist? As previously discussed, laws and treaties do not stop aggression, but they do question the resolve of the individual or state that disregards the law. The response or stated policy of a nation also sends a message to any future adversaries. The keystone for any future political solutions in regards to cyber warfare centers on the question: what defines the stick and carrot in this new arena of warfare? Some type of reprisal or consequence must exist in order to lend any credence to a political solution.

While many people may view war as an aberration, history consistently evidenced that warfare and conflict remain a constant with humanity. The great lengths civilizations strive toward to peacefully resolve disputes speak volumes about the noble aspirations of humanity. However, aspirations and physical reality do not always coincide and warfare often intrudes upon the best attempts at peaceful resolutions.

This paper did not attempt to advocate the use of war as the primary recourse for conflict resolution, but merely asserted that without the capability to wage war or the threat of war, political solutions stand little chance of any lasting success. As evidenced by the failure of a political solution between the United States and the regime of Saddam Hussein, effective politics cannot exist without war. The threat of war and the ability to make war form the basis for power and without power to back the machinations of politics, what incentive exists for states or individuals to comply? As previously discussed, deterrence does not prevent determined individual non-state actors and nation states from acting irrationally, but war allows nation states to modify an opponent's behavior or to destroy/degrade an opponent to the point that they no longer constitute a viable threat. Peace may arrive at the end of a pen, but lasting peace occurs when people guard it with their lives. *Armīs exposcere pacem*—They demanded peace by force of arms.

Notes

1. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. O.S. Matthijs Jolles (New York: Random House, 1943), 86-87, quoted in Michael I. Handel, *Masters of War: Classical Strategic Thought*, 3rd rev. and expanded ed. (London: Frank Cass Publishers, 2001), 68.
2. H. D. F. Kitto, *The Greeks* (London: Penguin Books, 1957), 9.
3. Robert B. Strassler and Richard Crawley, *The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to the Peloponnesian War; with Maps, Annotations, Appendices, and Encyclopedic Index* (New York, NY: Free Press, 1996), 352.
4. *Ibid.*, 85.
5. Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 137.
6. Russell F. Weigley, *The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy* (New York: Macmillan, 1973), 206.
7. Victor Davis Hanson, "Victor Davis Hanson: Carnage and Culture," You Tube, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EGrO6_Qf95Y (accessed 30 July, 2012).
8. Strassler, *The Landmark Thucydides*, 181.
9. *Team America: World Police*, Movie, directed by Trey Parker (Los Angeles, CA: Paramount Pictures, 2004).
10. Henry A. Kissinger, "Idealism and Pragmatism in the Middle East," *Washington Post*, August 5, 2012, 15.
11. Michael Gerson, "A Risky, Do-Nothing Doctrine," *Washington Post*, August 10, 2012, 13.
12. Strassler, *The Landmark Thucydides*, 65.

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