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Thucydides and the Constraints of Hegemony

In post-Cold War international relations theory, realist theories that focused on the bipolar nature of the Cold War and correspondingly drew upon Thucydides as a model (e. g., Gilpin 1981) are now joined by theories that question such paradigms as bipolarism (e. g., Neumann 1996; Knutsen 1997), or by classical scholarship that seeks a non-realist or non-bipolar model of international relations in Thucydides (Connor 1991; Crane 1998; Hornblower 2000; van Wees 2000). This same tension exists as well in Thucydides, and examination of this tension is helpful in understanding the challenges of hegemony for the hegemon. This paper argues that models for international relations in an hegemonic world, and specifically motives for hegemonic behavior beyond the desire for power, can be found in Thucydides' interest in the Athenian Empire alongside models for realist theory.

This tension is captured in the Athenian *apologia* for empire delivered to the Spartans at Thuc. 1.75-76. The passage emphasizes the natural human desire for power (and its exercise) and for security, motives that realist theorists attributed to states, especially in a bipolar system (respectively, Morgenthau 1949; Waltz 1979). Yet this passage also has the Athenians explaining why, in the face of worldwide opposition, unpopularity, and impending war, they feel constrained if not forced (*katēnagkasthēmen*, 1.75.3; *nikēthentes*, 1.76.2) by *ifear*, honor, and advantage¹ to maintain their empire. It is usually assumed that by *ifear* the Athenians mean fear of Persia, by *ihonor* honor from the other Greeks, and by *iadvantage* financial advantage from the payment of tribute. That is, all three motives for maintaining empire relate to Athenian interests and goals only, and so are in keeping with the tone of the rest of the speech, with its focus on the acquisition of power as an aspect of human nature.

But *ifear*, honor, and usefulness [a better translation here in the absence of any specific financial context]² inherently involve others, and so adhere to some sort of shared ethical code while human nature does not. Thucydides in fact combines a realist perspective with a focus on ethics (Forde 1992). All three motives for empire can be found throughout the history of Greek international relations: e. g., the Spartans go to war with Athens because of fear (Thuc. 1.23.6); Sparta claimed to go to war with Elis in 402 to avenge her honor; and *ōphelia* was something parties to a Greek treaty expected of one another. They thus should not necessarily be taken as part of Thucydides' realist theories about power and human nature, also expressed in this passage. In this context, it is significant that such motives as fear are associated not with human nature but with the idea of constraint (Thuc. 1.23.6, 1.75.3), attributing the desire to acquire power and to be safe to the internal motive of human nature and the desire to maintain power or to respond to another's exercise of power to externally determined motives such as fear of others or desire for honor (granted by others) or the agreement to help others.

Recognition of the distinction that Thucydides draws in this passage between internal motivation and external constraint can help analysis of modern international relations.

Hegemons do not necessarily act from internal constraint alone, whether it be desire for power or the pressure of domestic politics. Recent international relations theory views the international system as an interconnected society of sorts (Hartmann and Heuser 2000). As such, social pressures can be brought to bear on a hegemon, however powerful, and perhaps used to control her. The pressure of fear, honor, and usefulness brought to bear on Athens drove her to seek more power and security via empire. As the United States faces a similar situation ñ worldwide unpopularity and opposition, and attacks on American interests ñ it too may grasp for more power instead of surrendering it. Thucydides' focus was as much on empire and hegemony as it was on bipolarity, and so he is still useful today in international relations theory.