

# The nature of international politics

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The Nature of International Politics The first principle that Thucydides addresses regarding the nature of international politics calls into question the conclusive goal that each individual entity in the world of international relations deems most important. Thucydides states that a country or state's ultimate goal is to gain power and ruling over other nations. He illustrates this best in The Melian Dialogue through the actions of the war-loving Athenians.

In their effort to maintain their stance of power against their rival Spartans, they travel to the island of Melos with the goal of conquering the Melians; either through force or through the Melian surrender. The people of Melos wish to remain neutral friends of both Sparta and Athens, but the Athenians will not hear of it. In their eyes, staying on friendly terms with a neutral country would be construed as a sign of weakness and fear. The Melians refuse to surrender, resulting in the ultimate destruction of their society while the Athenians gain further rule and power for their empire.

However, I believe that this principle need not to always hold true, especially in the terms of war through diplomatic countries such as the United States of America. The United States has always held its principles in the effort to spread democracy and morality in the international realm. In *The Fog of War*, John F. Kennedy disproves Thucydides first principle. In the midst of the Cuban Missile Crisis, the last thing Kennedy and his Secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara, wanted to do was to attack Cuba or go to war with the Soviet Union to gain power or ruling in any sense.

They wanted to deal with the frightening presence of the Soviet Union's extensive nuclear warheads on Cuban soil in the most diplomatic way

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possible in order to avoid nuclear war. While this was best for the self-interest of the American people, it was also for the benefit for the citizens of Cuba and the USSR, as nuclear war destroys nations. Thankfully JFK had the help of a man named Tommy Thompson on his team who personally knew the Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev. Thompson urged Kennedy to go forward with negotiations with Khrushchev in order to end the Cuban Missile Crisis peacefully.

Luckily, it worked. Kennedy and Khrushchev reached an agreement that the Soviet Union would dismantle the weapons as long as the United States would not invade Cuba. Through the peaceful, yet stressful, negotiations, both JFK and Khrushchev went against the international principle that countries only aim to rule and conquer, and instead in the arms of a rational governing body most often the countries own self-interest for safety overrules the desire to prove their power over other countries.

Thucydides' second principle of international politics relates to the idea that between a world of expansive cultures and beliefs, there is no international moral code for war and relations between states. In the Melian Dialogue, Thucydides exemplifies this idea through the war practices that the Athenians practiced in regards to the Melian people. While some may argue that their initial attempt to discuss the impending attack while offering the option of surrender was "humane", the brutal force they eventually brought upon the Island of Melos outweighed their weak attempts in the beginning.

Once the Melian people surrendered, the Athenians put all men of military age to death and sold the women and children as slaves. The Athenians practiced the "might makes right" way of thinking about morality: that those

who hold the most power also hold the ability to decide what actions are appropriate where they deem fit. In this case, they were the mighty ones. Their forceful actions toward the Melians were justifiable in their eyes, but across cultures such actions could easily be deemed excessive and radical.

Therein lies Thucydides' argument that there is no such moral code that every nation can be held accountable to. In *The Fog of War*, Robert McNamara is horrified with such a truth, and wonders aloud "What is morally appropriate in a wartime environment?" He illustrates his question by describing "Agent Orange", a chemical that was approved for usage during the Vietnam War while he was acting Secretary of Defense. "Agent Orange" is a chemical that was often used to take the leaves off of trees, and after the war was discovered to be highly toxic and lethal.

The usage of "Agent Orange" killed numerous citizens and soldiers who were exposed. He continues to ask whether those who issued the approval of "Agent Orange" criminals? Within the definition of the word 'criminal' is the assumption that there is a crime being broken that is made illegal by a system of written laws. But McNamara points out that there are no such kinds of laws in war to determine what is acceptable and what is not and ultimately there is no such thing as an international moral code that can be upheld, especially in the times of war.

While there exists no international moral standard, does that mean that no state can be trusted? Thucydides' third principle of international politics would answer "yes". He believes that in the sense of self-interest, one state cannot rely upon alliances and only those alliances that are in line with national honor should be upheld. This principle is evident in the Melian

Dialogue when the Melian people state their hope and belief in the Spartan people coming to their aid in the prospect of attack from the Athenians.

They believe that if not solely for the Spartan's will to preserve their neighboring allies (that will surely take note if they don't come to aid Melos), then for the kinship of the Melian and Spartan race. Ultimately, the people of Melos are proven to have had too much hope in the Spartans, as no one comes to their aid. However, much like in the throes of friendship where not all can be trusted, surely some friends and allies can. The Fog of War displays a twisted sense of camaraderie between the USSR and Cuba, a bond that was forged in the joint disparage toward the United States.

Their alliance built and housed nuclear weapons on Cuban soil, weapons that had the ability to destroy most of the continental United States. Once the American Government took hold of the dangerous situation and offered negotiations to the USSR in the hopes of avoiding destructive warfare, Nikita Khrushchev had a decision to make...and he had two major options. He could ignore the offer of diplomatic problem solving and strike the United States with the nuclear weapons or he could agree to the negotiations JFK brought to the table.

On the one hand, attacking the United States guaranteed a responsive strike from the US that would undoubtedly destroy Cuba and kill thousands (not to mention create real problems between the USSR and the US). And on the other, he could agree to take out the weapons in return for the promise that the US would not attack Cuba. He could be known as the man who saved Cuba from an attack by the United States and could gain national respect for upholding USSR honor and morality.

Despite the disturbing urgings from war-mongering Fidel Castro, Khrushchev decided to agree to negotiations. While his actions may have been solely done for self-interest and preservation of the USSR's teetering relationship with the US, he ultimately had the interest of the people of Cuba in mind even when their own President did not. This act by Khrushchev, despite the reasons behind it, upheld the ideals of alliances: that one nation must be reliable and ready in the ability to protect the people and rights of the ally nation.