

MELIAN MISREADING OF THE INDIAN RESOLVE

BY

MAJ GEN JAGATBIR SINGH, VSM (RETD)

‘The History of the Peloponnesian War’ that took place from 431 to 404 BC was written by Thucydides and is considered a classic .The gap between the 5th Century BC and the Twenty First Century is immense to say the least. Yet in spite of this, due to its clarity and honesty, something written nearly 2500 years ago continues to be relevant today.

One often wonders how an ancient war that led to the destruction of classical Greece continues to remain contemporary. Concepts we take for granted such as nation states, national sovereignty, equality of states and international laws, did not exist in those ancient times. Yet what the Ancient Greek historian and general, Thucydides wrote regarding a dialogue between Athens and Melos which is supposed to have taken place in 416 BC, and is often referred to as the Melian Dialogue; touches on certain aspects of human nature, which have endured, when he stated; **“The strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.”**

Over two millennia later, this line of reasoning still resonates .The crux is that the perceived imbalance of power fuels a notion of dominance. Conventions between countries seem to be upheld only when a sense of equality exists; “right, as the world goes, is only in question between equals in power”. However, when a country feels it is more powerful, it no longer finds it necessary to abide by the principles of fairness and established norms if contrary to its interests. Morality and ethics are simply cast aside; the use of coercive force now manifests itself.

“Knowing you and everybody else having the same power as we have, would do the same as we do. “ This essentially sums up the assertion of rights of uninhibited power. As Thucydides, states in this timeless dialogue which he was not witness to but dramatised; “the standard of justice depends on the equality of

power to compel". It's a sharp analysis of human behavior which has a direct influence on power and politics as far as nations are concerned.

One of the lessons to be learnt from this invaluable text is that appeals to reason and logic have their inherent limitations when one power sees itself as enjoying superiority over the other. Relations between countries lack a framework of regulations resulting in power displacing justice. It is therefore imperative to maintain a balance of power against someone who displays expansionist thinking, as aggressive belligerence may lead to serious conflicts.

Another important aspect is the effect of war on a nation which finds itself transformed and thereafter tries to unduly and unjustly assert itself in achieving its objectives. In reality, however, it is unprepared for the consequences of applying its power unwisely.

Lastly, is the link between the nature of war and human nature. This in turn shapes the strategic and military culture that manifests itself both in the character of war and the political objectives for which it is fought.

Can acting in a manner because you feel you are able be counterproductive to the outcome wished to be achieved and, be seen as a warning to the powerful? The sense of ideals have clearly fallen, and they are now willing to go to war in spite of the negative consequences of their strategic interests; "what is this then to make greater the enemies that you have already, and to force others to become so, who would otherwise never thought of it?" China may be a rising power, but can a new world order massed overwhelmingly against it, due to its behavior be construed as a victory.

Another, thread that merits attention is, "hostility injures us less than your friendship. That, to our subjects, is an illustration of weakness, whereas your hatred exhibits our power". Is that one of the reasons why China has kept the borders with India unresolved? And in spite of the hand of friendship being extended as recently in Wuhan and Mamallapuram, the tension at the borders has remained? Why should friendship be considered as a weakness rather than strength?

Knowledge of ancient history has been an aid to interpret the future, as it resembles it most closely. The past is filled with leaders who possessed extraordinary capabilities, enjoyed tremendous success, and directed societies that experienced problems similar to our own. Complexities of modern life have not yet rendered everything experienced by our past generations as irrelevant to current issues, challenges and problems being faced. Thucydides has provided a sound basis for enhancing our understanding regarding the subtleties leading to war.

China is now reviving a stand taken in a letter written by Premier Zhou En Lai to Prime Minister Nehru in November 1959, which has been consistently rejected. Ironically, it is under those two leaders that both countries have experienced the best and worst as far as our relationships go. It is the first time in years that China has clearly stated that it still goes by the 1959 LAC even though it was not agreed to at that time. A unilaterally defined LAC is untenable, and this has been consistently conveyed to China over the years. The stand taken by China is clearly one where all agreements and developments post 1959, which include bilateral boundary talks, agreements, and protocols, to maintain peace and tranquility on our borders, have been disregarded.

Both India and China have earlier committed to clarification and confirmation of the LAC to reach a common understanding of its alignment. This was done during various bilateral agreements including the 1993 Agreement on Maintenance of Peace and Tranquility along the LAC, 1996 Agreement on Confidence Building Measures (CBMs) in the military field, 2005 Protocol on Implementation of CBMs, and 2005 Agreement on Political Parameters and Guiding Principles for Settlement of the India-China Boundary Question.

Going back on its stated position is clearly a departure from its stance during the 22 rounds of talks by the Special Representatives of both countries as well as during the Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination (WMCC) on Indo- China border affairs set up in 2012; to consult and coordinate the management of borders. It merely reflects China's unwillingness to settle this issue. It seems more likely to be an attempt to justify its current intrusions and push the LAC westwards.

China has taken advantage of its early recovery from COVID 19, to push forth its agenda of escalating external aggression as the world grappled with an unprecedented health crisis. They took advantage of the Cuban missile crisis in 1962 and hence their sense of timing cannot be by coincidence but by design. They feel they are a preeminent power and hence have the right, means and ability to dictate terms by their posturing and muscle flexing, in fact they are literally lashing out in multiple directions. However, India by its military, economic, diplomatic and political responses has demonstrated it is prepared and ready to face up to the Chinese challenge. Our strategic environment may be shifting in fundamental ways but we have the capability and ability to withstand the pressure of this challenge.

In Galwan, the Chinese were taken aback by the speedy response, ferocity and bravery of our troops during the bloody brutal pre - medieval brawl. Thereafter, following a speedy build up of men and equipment, in a swift surgical manoeuvre, we occupied unheld but dominating features on the Kailash Range within our perception of the LAC; in what may be termed as a Quid Pro Quo (QPQ) action. From Doklam to Kailash; we have widened the spectrum of our response as well as signaled an intent, which included the funeral of Tenzin Nyima, draped in a Tibetan flag. It was just not another step in an escalatory ladder but the manner in which it was carried out achieving absolute surprise, which demonstrated our professionalism and expertise in High Altitude Warfare, something our troops have been committed to since 1984 in Siachen. You don't just battle the enemy in these altitudes, but also the weather and there is a psychological effect of fighting in such remote and rugged areas with rarefied air where you struggle to breathe. To draw a parallel from an Army tactical term, it has helped create a firm base; in this case for furtherance of the dialogue from a position of strength.

By reviving a stand taken by it over Sixty Years ago; namely the 1959 claimed alignment of the border, the Chinese feel that they are now strong and hence can impose their will in pursuit of their interests. Little did they expect that India is no longer weak and unable to face up to their aggression. We have demonstrated our resolve and determination as a nation as well as the skills and ability of our soldiers to face them firmly and to deliver when called upon to do so. The truth

for us lies in the fact that we need to prepare for war if we want to have peace or to quote a Japanese Samurai proverb “ the only solution for bad and violent people are good people that are more skilled in violence”.