

# The Motives for Athens' Alliance with Corcyra (Thuc. 1.44)

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**D**ESPITE ABLE STUDIES of the Epidamnian affair, and in particular of the Corcyraean and Corinthian speeches at Athens reported in Thucydides 1.32–43,<sup>1</sup> the rationale of the Athenian decision to enter a defensive alliance with Corcyra has been misunderstood. This decision, described by Thucydides in 1.44, is more pragmatic, indeed Machiavellian, than regularly supposed.

The speakers of the two embassies to Athens had attempted to play on Athenian fears and ambitions. Corcyra, under the veil of a call for justice, had boldly argued the military advantage of an alliance. Their stated premise was that a war would soon break out between the Athenians and the Peloponnesians. Athenian support for Corcyra would be a necessary preparation for the war, for three reasons:

- (1) It would create a Corcyraean obligation toward Athens, such that the Corcyraean navy would always be at their service, especially in the coming war (33.2–3);
- (2) it would preserve Corcyra as an independent way-station on the route to Sicily, both to block Peloponnesian ships and to support those of Athens (36.2);
- (3) above all, it would prevent Corinth's conquest and control of the Corcyraean navy, the second largest in the Greek world, by which Corinth would possess combined forces larger than the Athenian navy (36.3).

The Corcyraeans firmly dismissed Athenian fears that such aid might break their thirty-year treaty with the Peloponnesians, since in their mind, the treaty was guaranteed only by Athenian strength (36.1).

<sup>1</sup> Cf. L. Craici, "I *Kerykaika* di Tucidide," *Acme* 6 (1953) 405–18; W. M. Calder, "The Corcyraean-Corinthian Speeches in Thucydides I," *CJ* 50 (1955) 179–80; J. de Romilly, *Histoire et raison chez Thucydide* (Paris 1956) 197–201; H. P. Stahl, *Thukydides. Die Stellung des Menschen im geschichtlichen Prozess* (Munich 1966) 36–40; Donald Kagan, *The Outbreak of the Peloponnesian War* (Ithaca/London 1969) 205–50; S. Accame, "Tucidide e la questione de Corcira," *Studi filologici e storici in onore de V. di Falco* (Naples 1971) 141–64; G. E. M. de Ste. Croix, *The Origins of the Peloponnesian War* (Ithaca 1972) 66–79.

The Corinthians, on the other hand, denied the premise that war was inevitable, replacing it with their own assertion that an Athenian alliance with Corcyra would rupture the treaty with the Peloponnesians (40.2–3). Like the Corcyraeans, they argued from advantage, but stressed the present and past, not the future:

- (1) It was to Athens' advantage to respect Corinth's right to punish its subject ally, Corcyra, as Corinth had respected Athens' right to punish Samos when it revolted (40.4–6);
- (2) Athens owed a debt to Corinth for her support in earlier years (41.1–3);
- (3) there was no war in sight, but an Athenian alliance with Corcyra would start one (42.2).

The first point might be called an ancient example of the Brezhnev doctrine applied in Czechoslovakia and elsewhere, that each hegemonic state has the right to control its subject states without interference from other powers. The Corinthians' argument carries a threat to interfere in Athens' relations with her subjects, if Athens interferes in Corcyra.

Both speeches relied upon similar unspoken assumptions of equality with Athens: Corcyra, trusting in its imposing navy, proposed an alliance on equal terms for mutual benefit, and implied that Athens would need its support on this occasion. Corinth, on the other hand, presented itself as a hegemonic state similar to Athens, and urged mutual respect of each other's rôle. The Athenians could accept individual points made by each side, but not this underlying premise of equality.

Stahl's analysis of the stages of escalation in the Epidamnian affair, from one level of power to another, demonstrates that Thucydides had a clear vision of a power hierarchy.<sup>2</sup> The quarrel began on a local level, the *stasis* between two factions at Epidamnus. It moved to a second level when two large cities, Corcyra and Corinth, took sides. But a quite different level of power was reached when Athens, a major hegemonic power—what we might call a super-power—became involved, thus provoking a clash of the two super-powers, Athens and Sparta. The Athenian decision about Corcyra demonstrates that they shared Thucydides' recognition of their superiority to all Greek states except Sparta, and rejected the assumption of equality implicit in the arguments of both Corcyra and Corinth.

On the first day of Athenian debate, Thucydides tells us (44.1), the Athenians gave as much weight to the Corinthian arguments as to the Corcyraean—that is, we may assume, they were not able to re-

<sup>2</sup> See Stahl (*supra* n.1) 36.

solve the dilemma between losing the Corcyraean navy to Corinth and rupturing the treaty with Sparta. But on the second day a new solution was found: a defensive alliance, by which Athens would agree to defend Corcyra's shores, but not to attack Corinth. It is wrong to think that Athens by this decision accepted the Corcyraean position and rejected the Corinthian. Rather they attempted to go between the horns of the dilemma, satisfying neither party completely. Corcyra, after all, had wanted active Athenian support in fighting the Corinthians as common enemies (35.5); Corinth a complete hands-off policy while she humbled her recalcitrant colony. Athens looked out for herself.

According to Thucydides<sup>3</sup> five factors influenced Athens' decision: (1) she did not want to break the treaty,<sup>4</sup> (2) war with the Peloponnesians was coming, (3) she did not want the Corcyraean navy to fall under Corinthian control, (4) she wanted Corinth and Corcyra to clash as much as possible, (5) Corcyra seemed a good way-station on the route to Italy and Sicily.

Athens' desire not to break the treaty is confirmed in the narrative that follows. The Athenian forces make every effort to avoid a direct confrontation, and even after they engage the Corinthians at Sybota, the Athenians refuse to admit that the treaty has been broken. Nevertheless, they expected war to break out even if they did not break the treaty.<sup>5</sup> Therefore the Athenians did not prefer to honor the treaty to prevent war from ever breaking out, but for other reasons not stated, such as to honor a sworn commitment, to avoid the opprobrium of being an aggressor, or to prepare better for the coming conflict. Thucydides does not state their reasons for agreeing with Corcyra on the inevitability of the war. Besides the Spartan fear and Corinthian hostility noted by the Corcyraeans (35.3), they may have thought of other sore points in their relations with the Peloponnesian league, such as Megara and Aegina.

<sup>3</sup> *ἔδοκει γὰρ ὁ πρὸς Πελοποννησίους πόλεμος καὶ ὡς ἔσεσθαι αὐτοῖς, καὶ τὴν Κέρκυραν ἐβούλοντο μὴ προσέσθαι τοῖς Κορινθίοις ναυτικὸν ἔχουσαν τοσοῦτον, ξυγκρούειν δὲ ὅτι μάλιστα αὐτοὺς ἀλλήλοις, ἵνα ἀσθενεστέροις οὖσιν, ἢν τι δέη, Κορινθίοις τε καὶ τοῖς ἄλλοις ναυτικὸν ἔχουσιν ἐς πόλεμον καθιστῶνται. ἅμα δὲ τῆς τε Ἰταλίας καὶ Σικελίας καλῶς ἐφαίνετο αὐτοῖς ἡ νῆσος ἐν παράπλῳ κείσθαι.*

<sup>4</sup> This factor is implicit in 1.44.1, *εἰ γὰρ . . . , ἐλύοντ' ἂν αὐτοῖς αἱ πρὸς Πελοποννησίους σπονδαί.*

<sup>5</sup> The precise interpretation of *καὶ ὡς ἔσεσθαι* is difficult: *ὡς* should refer to the immediately preceding condition, and therefore mean "even if they concluded only a defensive alliance." However, the implied sense seems more inclusive, "even if they did not break the treaty," expressing the sentiment behind the rejection of the alliance. Thucydides does not make explicit the effect of taking no action, but seems to imply that it would have been the same as that of making the defensive alliance.

However, there would have been no need for any Athenian action unless factors (3) and (5) were applicable as well. These points were made by the Corcyraeans, but no doubt had already been considered at Athens. It was essential that Corcyra's fleet not be made subject to Corinth. Athens' position as a super-power on a par with Sparta depended upon the superior size and expertise of her fleet. The transfer of Corcyra into the Peloponnesian sphere of influence would nullify that strength. Athens would no longer be Sparta's equal, not because its power had diminished, but because Sparta's had grown.

But they did not believe Corcyra's argument that an alliance between them would create a lasting debt of gratitude. They doubtless agreed with the Corinthians that the Corcyraeans were not to be trusted (37.2–3). An independent Corcyra, with a fleet of 120 ships, puffed up by a victory over Corinth, and strengthened further by captured Corinthian ships, might interfere with Athenian plans, or even turn against her. The history of the Delian league demonstrates that Athens in the mid-fifth century was not seeking independent allies among the Greeks, but subject states who would recognize her hegemony. We do not find Thucydides giving as a reason for the Athenian decision a desire to see a free and independent Corcyra. The ideal Athenian policy was different, and had been enunciated by the Corcyraeans themselves: "If you are able, it would be best to permit no one else to possess a navy, but if you cannot do that, you should have as a friend whoever is most reliable."<sup>6</sup> The fourth Athenian reason for their decision is a restatement of that ideal principle: "They wanted them to clash with each other as much as possible, so that when they went to war, the Corinthians and the others who possessed a navy would be weaker." The 'others' would include not only the allies of Corinth (*cf.* 1.27.1) but Corcyra herself. In their conflict with each other, Corcyra and Corinth would weaken their navies until they posed no threat to Athenian supremacy on the sea. The defensive alliance with Corcyra was for this purpose the ideal compromise. Athens, without breaking the treaty, could support Corcyra just enough for her to be able to resist Corinth, but not enough to win decisively or to become a threat to Athens. When the inevitable war came, Corinth—and all other naval powers—would be too weak to affect materially the course of the war.

The logic of this decision explains the small number of ships sent with Lakedaimonios to Corcyra. It was not to Athens' advantage for

<sup>6</sup> Thuc. 1.35.5: . . . μάλιστα μὲν, εἰ δύρασθε, μηδένα ἄλλον εἶν κεκτῆσθαι ναῦς, εἰ δὲ μή, ὅστις ἐχυρώτατος, τοῦτον φίλον ἔχειν.

Corinth to be so frightened by a large Athenian force (say, of fifty ships) as not to dare to engage. Moreover, a dramatic Corcyraean victory over Corinth, won with the help of a strong Athenian squadron, would have given Corcyra naval superiority in West Greek waters, and tempted her toward hegemony over states in the area. Lakedaimonios' command of ten ships was not an attempt by Pericles to discredit him, as Plutarch thinks,<sup>7</sup> but a carefully calculated force, designed to encourage the Corcyraeans to fight, but not to save them from disaster. The actual effect of the battle of Sybota—apart from the unexpected engagement of the Athenians and Corinthians—was that which the Athenians desired: the Corcyraean fleet suffered a loss of seventy ships, and was reduced from 120 to 50 units. The Corinthians and their allies lost thirty of a total of 150 (54.2). No doubt the Athenians would have preferred the Corinthians to lose more ships and the Corcyraeans fewer (worries about their calculations had led them to send the relief force of twenty ships), but their object had been accomplished. Both sides were weakened. In particular, Corcyra no longer figured as a major naval power, belying the arguments of the Corcyraean speech. Although in 431 they supported the Athenian fleet circling the Peloponnese with fifty ships, the only other Corcyraean force supporting Athenian operations whose strength is listed by Thucydides is the squadron of fifteen ships in 426 (3.94.1). Corinth for its part had to abandon its claim to a hegemonic rôle and turn to Sparta for support.

Finally, we note that the defensive alliance protecting Corcyra was all that Athens needed to maintain a friendly base on the route to Italy and Sicily. Despite its weakened navy, Corcyra was able to fulfill this rôle in 425 and 415–413. An independent and powerful Corcyra might have hindered Athenian movements or attempted to use them for its own purpose.

The war did come, but Athens by its decision had effectively safeguarded the superiority of its navy, and its rôle as a super-power. *Realpolitik* had achieved its goals—or at least some of them. One may wonder, however, what influence this calculatedly lukewarm support had on future developments in Corcyra. To the men captured at Sybota and held so long in Corinth, Athens may have seemed a dangerous ally, and Corinth despite its hostility more reliable or at least

<sup>7</sup> *Per.* 29.2. Plutarch ascribes the decision to aid Corcyra to Pericles, reasonably enough. However, it is doubtful that he had any precise information to that effect; he regularly ascribes to the hero of a life decisions which in his source are attributed to 'the Athenians' or other general groups of which the hero was a part: contrast, e.g., *Nic.* 10.2 and *Thuc.* 5.22.1–2.

predictable. Athenian cynicism may have been one of the causes of the *stasis* which would ravage the city and threaten to bring it over to the Peloponnesians. Machiavellian politics sometimes carries hidden costs.

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