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Thucydides Lives in Turkey: Operational and Strategic Consequences for Greece

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Abstract

This paper examines how Thucydides' strategic thought influences Turkey's evolving naval doctrine, emphasizing dominance over deterrence. Greece must respond with operational readiness, alliance-based maritime strategy, and diplomatic engagement to prevent regional escalation and misinterpretation of classical strategic principles.

Thucydides, the father of realism and founder of maritime strategic thinking, continues to influence global strategic analysis. His theories on sea power, interstate rivalry, and strategic hegemony take on special significance when integrated into the doctrine of emerging regional powers like Turkey. It is of particular interest how doctrines formulated by an Athenian historian and advocate of naval power appear to be shaping the maritime thinking of powers with interests diverging from those of Greece.

Assessing developments in Turkish strategic thought, it becomes operationally necessary for Athens to seek a structured dialogue on maritime strategy before the more aggressive interpretations of Thucydides become entrenched in Turkish naval

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doctrine—potentially impacting Greek deterrence and security in the Eastern Mediterranean.

At a recent European strategic forum, Turkish staff officers and analysts repeatedly invoked Thucydides, emphasizing not the complexity of strategic balance but rather a one-dimensional assertion of maritime dominance. A particularly repeated quote was:

“Naval supremacy means that oppressive power which either eliminates the enemy’s suppression or allows it to appear whenever necessary in terms of place and time, controlling the common medium and blocking the routes through which commercial traffic moves to and from the enemy’s coasts.”

The operational application of this concept reflects a gradual shift in Turkish naval power from deterrence to enforcement. The emerging doctrine prioritizes power projection, control over Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC), the development of Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) capabilities, and autonomous presence in multiple operational theaters. Focus on armored surface units, combined with operational independence from NATO in command and control (C2), reinforces this trajectory.

Turkey’s naval buildup follows predetermined timelines. By 2027, Turkey aims for full operational integration of the Istanbul-class frigates, while the launch of its second LHD (Landing Helicopter Dock) is expected in 2028. Simultaneously, Turkey is advancing autonomous naval UAV operations (e.g., Bayraktar TB3, MIUS Kızılelma) from maritime platforms. Within the decade, Ankara plans to achieve blue-water capability, with a permanent presence in the Red Sea and Indian Ocean. These capability development projections are reflected in documents like the Turkish Ministry of Defence's 2024–2028 Strategic Defence Planning Guide, as well as in regional naval demonstrations such as the “Mavi Vatan” (Blue Homeland) exercises.

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Turkish naval thought is evolving towards a “Hybrid Sea Control” doctrine, blending the concept of sea denial with limited power projection missions at critical points of interest. This model incorporates elements of Chinese and Russian A2/AD approaches but adapted to geographically confined spaces like the Eastern Mediterranean.

Strategic history offers a comparable precedent. In the early 20th century, the German Empire pursued naval armament to challenge the maritime supremacy of the United Kingdom, also citing Thucydides as an ideological foundation. Kaiser Wilhelm II once declared:

**“I do not simply read but devour the Peloponnesian War...”
—an indication of the ideological charge that can be embedded in naval arms competition.**

Germany's strategic error was twofold: overestimating naval power as a primary lever of global influence, and misinterpreting Thucydides as a prophet of strategic unilateralism and conflict. Turkey may face similar strategic challenges if it misreads sea power as the sole lever of influence.

Ankara’s ambition to act as an autonomous actor in the Mediterranean, Black Sea, and Indo-Pacific is reflected in its “Blue Homeland” program capabilities, including frigate construction, LHDs, drones, and forward logistics basing (e.g., Somalia, Libya). Reading Thucydides as a manual for enforcement may be steering Turkish naval thinking away from the concept of collective security.

A red-teaming approach—simulating the adversary’s perspective—reveals Turkey's perception of encirclement and its pursuit of strategic depth. From a Turkish point of view, naval supremacy is seen as a necessary counterweight to EU diplomatic pressure, the military presence of states like France or the UAE, and Greece’s

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archipelagic layout. A de-escalation strategy must therefore recognize Turkish threat perceptions without legitimizing them, while maintaining deterrence and operational readiness.

However, the Peloponnesian War offers warnings, not models: it chronicles the destructive impact of strategic hubris, overextension (e.g., the Sicilian Expedition), unrealistic alliance assessments, and the loss of initiative. Thucydides was not merely a chronicler of power but also an anatomist of strategic failure.

For Greece, the choice is threefold:

1. **Enhance naval deterrent capabilities** (deterrence by denial) with ISR (Intelligence, Surveillance, Reconnaissance), ASW (Anti-Submarine Warfare), area air defense, and targeting of enemy C2 nodes.
2. **Launch initiatives for Turkish engagement** in Confidence Building Measures (CBMs) to prevent escalation.
3. **Reinterpret Thucydides not as a justification for dominance**, but as a guide to strategic restraint, alliance cohesion, and operational rationality.

Greek naval strategy must be explicitly framed as a pillar of legitimacy, regional stability, and freedom of navigation, grounded in international law, NATO SOPs (Standard Operating Procedures), and interoperability. The Hellenic Navy should serve as a maritime security provider, not a contender for regional hegemony.

National naval strategy must align with the Alliance's modern framework, as defined in the NATO Allied Maritime Strategy and MC 400/4 (Military Committee Guidance for the Military Implementation of NATO's Strategic Concept). Moreover, documents like the **NATO Capstone Concept for Deterrence and Defence of the Euro-**

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Atlantic Area (DDA) emphasize the importance of collective deterrence through maritime interoperability and shared situational awareness. As a pillar of southeastern maritime security, Greece must embody these principles both operationally and rhetorically.

Conclusion

Strategic communication toward Ankara must clearly distinguish **deterrence from threat, stability from dominance, and influence from coercion**. If Thucydides “lives” in Turkey, Greece must draw upon the wisdom of his work as a tool for preventive strategy, not competitive mobilization.

The Peloponnesian War did not end in victory, but in exhaustion. Sea power is not an end in itself but a means of strategic balance. By properly drawing lessons from Thucydides, Greece can help avoid a repetition of historical tragedy.