



Athens, Mytilene and Melos. Rebellion, Resistance and Coercion.



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Thucydides reports from the first phase of the Peloponnesian War the episodes of rebellion by an Athenian ally in the Delian League, Mytilene, and of resistance to occupation by a neutral state, Melos, both in face of clear Athenian military superiority and imminent danger of punishment. The purpose of the paper is to theorize about what rationale was behind the decision of Mytilene to rebel and Melos to not concede to Athenian occupation, when many would judge that Athens presented an objectively effective danger. Two short case studies based on concepts of game theory will look into whether we are able to understand this as rational calculated responses?

How did Mytilene and Melos come to decide to stand up against the dominant Athens? What were motivation and circumstances that help explain the decisions by Mytilene and Melos, and can we recreate a decision-making that rationally explains them? Why did the Athenian threat fail in both cases? What does it tell us about two central means of coercion, deterrence and compellence, and issues of credibility (risk/commitment) inherent therein?

I. Mytilene – Can a revolt be deterred?

In 427 BC, years of war against Sparta and its Peloponnesian allies and a plague had left Athens undefeated but diminished in military strength and morale, facing a depleted and shrinking treasury, and without clear confidence in its strategy of attrition that was exhausting Athens and was excruciatingly slow.¹ Short on funds, Athens was more likely to press its nominal allies and factual empire (the Delian League) for increased tributes, a move likely to stir up discontent among them.

Mytilene was the most important city on the island of Lesbos, of the coast of Asia Minor and governed by an oligarchy. The smaller towns of Antissa, Pyrrha, and Eresos on the island usually followed Mytilene's political lead; only the democracy of Methymna on the Northern coast stood apart. Mytilene was one of the last allies who had preserved a nominal and practical autonomy vis-à-vis Athens; they sent ships instead of tribute payments as contributions to the confederation.² "Mytilene had considered withdrawing from the Athenian alliance even before the war, but had been deterred by the refusal of the Peloponnesians to accept them into their alliance. That had been in peacetime, but during a war a rebellion on Lesbos would surely be welcome to the enemies of Athens."³ However, defection during

war was likely to be judged as treason by Athens and dealt with as such. Hostile action against Methymna was not acceptable to Athens, as defender of democratic cities, and known for its opposition to formation of larger autonomous units among its confederates.⁴

Keenly aware of the weakened condition of Athens, Mytilene initiated its revolt just as Sparta was making its yearly incursion into Attica to devastate the Athenian fields in May 428, a time that Athens usually sits out behind its huge walls, waiting for the Spartan supplies to become exhausted.⁵ Mytilene is anxious to raise its chances of resistance against any Athenian counterstrike and to potentially preempt such action by establishing a *fait accompli*: they raised new and widened old defensive walls, blocked up their harbor, increased their navy and looked for grain supplies and mercenary archers.⁶ These suspicious preparations could not be kept secret; Methymna was eager to inform Athens of these suspicious preparations as were domestic opponents of the oligarchy.⁷

Slow to react and without sufficient forces for a decisive battle, Athens could only reach a stalemate. Mytilene had already brought much of the island under its control and now demanded Athens' assent to its taking over Methymna in return for future loyalty.⁸ This was no wise move by Mytilene, as it had raised the stakes by openly attacking an asset of Athens' reputation. For to “permit their will to be flouted, to abandon Methymna to the mercy of Mytilene, would have abdicated the leadership and refused the protection which guaranteed and justified their command of the empire. The Athenians would have invited and justified rebellions elsewhere and completely jeopardized their security.”⁹ This challenge to Athenian authority was so clear that Donald Kagan describes the “Athenian response [as] necessary by any reasonable judgment.”¹⁰ Hostilities recommenced.

The Mytilenean rulers sent several envoys to Olympia to call for help from Sparta and its allies.¹¹ There, they were trying to tell the Spartans that their rebellion had precipitated a situation that would compromise Spartan interests unless they came to the help of Mytilene, even though they may have initially disapproved of or been apprehensive of the revolt.¹² The envoys were saying that the rebellion had created a risk to Mytilene *and* Sparta. Such creation of a shared and not fully controlled risk in order to induce some action of the other party is “brinkmanship”.¹³ In order to convince the Spartans of the expediency of the rebellion and their need to support it, the envoys from Lesbos make explicit that it represents an act of brinkmanship that limits the Peloponnesians' options: “[W]hether or not you

approve of our rebellion you cannot afford to let us be defeated once it has begun.”¹⁴ Mytilene had unilaterally created a risk to the war fortunes of the Spartans that carried the potential to inflict damage on Mytilene *and* Sparta if they did not come to the assistance of the rebels. For “[t]his war will not be decided in Attica (...) but in those places from which Athens gets its support. For her revenues come from her allies, and they will be still greater if we are conquered. No one else will rebel and our wealth will be added to hers, for we will be treated worse than those who were enslaved earlier.”¹⁵

It is interesting to see that they try to impress the need and urgency of support to the Peloponnesians first by this argument. Only, then do they sweeten it up by the promises that lie in a successful defiance of Athens such as the contribution of Mytilene's navy as a key asset and the instigation of further revolt among Athens' allies, as well as bolstering Spartan credentials as the 'liberators' of the Hellenic peoples from Athenian predominance.¹⁶ In fact, this combination of incentives convinces Sparta to act, but its preparations were delayed and lacked a cohesive plan. The Athenians mastered all their resources and sent 1,000 hoplite infantry to Lesbos to besiege Mytilene by land and by sea.¹⁷ As no help was forthcoming, and imminent starvation threatened a popular uprising in the city, the rulers of Mytilene abandoned all hope and unconditionally surrendered, putting their fate into the hands of Athens.¹⁸ All those suspected of hostility towards Athens were sent to Athens where they would plead their case in front of the Athenian assembly.¹⁹ Mytilene was thereby secured and pacified.

After being initially found guilty, the Athenians reconsidered the case in an assembly that in the end would acquit the Mytileneans. It is reported in detail by Thucydides, and presented by him as an argument that centers around the value and content of deterrence.²⁰ As Schelling defines it, “[d]eterrence is concerned with the exploitation of potential force. It is concerned with persuading a potential enemy that he should in his own interest avoid certain courses of activity.”²¹ Those calling for harsh punishment as an explicit deterrent message to all Athenian allies were represented by Cleon, his opponents weighing the demands of expediency differently by Diodotus.

As a strategic concept, deterrence is concerned with influencing the choice of the opponent by shaping his expectations of how one will behave.²² According to Cleon, oppression would have been necessary already earlier to not invite rebellion by leniency: “We should never have treated the

Mytileneans differently from the others [i.e. the more oppressed allies] and then they would not have reached this point of insolence. In general, it is the nature of man to despise flattery and admire firmness.”²³ However, in order to change the expected value of punishment (i.e. the disincentive to rebellion), the harshness of the punishment is only one factor, the other being the certainty of this threat, i.e. the probability that Athens will get a chance to punish after defeating the rebel force. Logically, this probability is the inverse of the probability of a success of the rebellion.

Various factors were likely to compromise the probability of successful reprisal by Athens, though, and thus the value of the deterrent threat. While Cleon's proposed 'calculated terror' may have increased the threatened punishment, Athens' continuing rivalry with Sparta is likely to give rebels enough hope to not have to bear this threat alone, diluting its deterrence value.²⁴ The time and cost involved in raising and equipping forces, and the delay caused by the voyage to the rebel city were more objective impediments. In addition, whether any action would be taken at all hinged on the decision-making process in Athens via the assembly – a process that especially oligarchies would be likely to underestimate as prolonged and indecisive. Should they perceive this democratic mandate necessary for retaliation as a procedural loophole, they are likely to consider any Athenian commitment inherently compromised and not fully credible as a threat.²⁵ Deterrence in the age of triremes and hoplites involved threats not of the same level of dreadful certainty as that by satellite-guided ICBMs launchable by a button. Nuclear war has heightened the destructive reality of deterrence, for there, other than in the scenario the Mytileneans faced, “[v]ictory is no longer a prerequisite for hurting the enemy.”²⁶ The probability of being inflicted the threatened pain is much higher and is no longer merely the inverse of the success of one's own military schemes. The calculus of hope and deterrence changes significantly.

In any case, there was at least no precedent that would have caused real fear among the conspirators. For the harshest treatment imposed by Athens on rebel cities before had been deprivation of their land, imposition of Athenian settlers in the city, demolition of defensive walls and any naval forces. Lives had been spared so far.²⁷ This lack of a clear precedent may indeed complicate the persuasive communication of a threat of retaliation – merely declared intentions are hard to get across, thus missing their intended effect on the incentive structure of the opponent.²⁸ “[T]alk is not a substitute for moves”.²⁹

Cleon seems to make another important point, when rhetorically asking “who will not rebel on the smallest pretext when the reward for success is freedom and the price of failure is nothing irreparable?”³⁰ Freedom may indeed present an incentive of a peculiar character, one hard to deter. The expectation that there is some chance of victory in combat will be present in anyone considering an uprising (i.e. the addressee of deterrence) if enemy action is fraught with uncertainty as explained above. Now, if freedom is an incentive that carries a very high (symbolic) value – or even an infinite one (‘rather dead than red’) – it is unlikely that any threat that Athens may have posed, compromised as its probability was, would have been sufficient for deterring revolt in those who felt strongly about it.

Moreover, the object of deterrence may matter. Deterring a city from rebellion could potentially be likened to ‘extended deterrence’. Other than in the case of attacking Athens, where anyone would have to expect retaliation with certainty and gravity, the stakes are not as clearly discernible concerning a revolt by an ally on an outlying island. Just like during the Cold War to planners in Washington and Brussels it never appeared fully convincing that an attack on Western Europe would arouse the same kind of resolve as on the United States proper – and therefore be just as deterrable.³¹ Athens would have to manipulate the nature of the circumstances to make a threat more credible. “Establishing credibility in the strategic sense means that you are expected to carry out your unconditional moves, keep your promises, and make good on your threats.”³² To this end, Athens would be supposed to take a supporting or collateral action – a commitment – that supports its strategic posture against revolts.³³

Potentially Athens could have done this by relinquishing some control over the punishment, e.g. by constituting a threat directly *in situ* through a promise of assistance to all those popular parties who would rise up against any party conspiring against Athens. This would have ensured a promptness of reaction and an escalation that would have reordered Athenian priorities more clearly in favor of a reprisal against the rebels. By relinquishing the initial initiative to local dissidents who have an immediate interest in not being dragged down by their domestic rivals, less would be left to chance. Their resolution to act may be less doubtful than that of an initially distant Athens.³⁴ As it makes an unconditional promise to come to their assistance, Athens puts its “reputation for action” at stake. The implied danger of a loss of ‘face’ increases the credibility of the deterrent threats against revolt.³⁵ “[T]his kind of face is one of the few things worth fighting over”³⁶, so Schelling, for on it depends fundamentally how serious

others believe a state to be in its various commitments. If Athens cared about the hope to deter future aggression against more important assets, it would have to stand by its promise.

Diodotus, on the other hand, rebutted Cleon's notion of deterrence saying that, “the use of the death penalty for unsuccessful rebels was not an effective deterrent for rebellion. Men rebel because they think they will be successful; no threat of punishment, therefore, can prevent them.”³⁷ Once they are in open revolt, however, the expectation of Athenian moderation paired with Athenian force will be more likely in persuading them to give up, return to loyalty and paying the tribute plus an indemnity.³⁸

Dissecting Diodotus' argument, we find that first he appears to say that misperception is a factor that cannot be eradicated because the hope for success will blind men to the probability and severity of failure. Such misperception may be particularly present in cases where one's own freedom appears to be the prize. Second, he argues, the conspiracy was an affair of the oligarchy and the population should not be punished for it due to practical, strategic considerations. He asserts that “now the demos in all the cities is well disposed to you and either does not rebel along with the oligarchs or, if it is compelled, is immediately hostile to those who made the revolution, so that you go to war having the majority of the opposing city as an ally.”³⁹ In the later example of Melos, Athens fails to heed this advice and turn the latent support for it enjoys as 'champion of democracy in Hellas' into actual advantage. What is more, Diodotus even suggest strategically overlooking any involvement by the commoners, to not turn them against it by changing their expectations towards Athens. “Even if the demos were guilty you should pretend otherwise so that the only group that is still friendly to you should not become hostile.”⁴⁰

Thucydides presents the debate as an argument about the strategic moves most expedient to Athens from different point of reference. They consider how a change in actual and promised action influences expectations and thereby behavior of potentially (Cleon) and eventually (Diodotus) rebellious allies.

In the end, the second assembly voted by a very narrow margin to only punish those exiled to Athens; by another vote it was decided that they all be put to death.⁴¹ Mytilene itself received the usual punishment of being stripped of its walls and ships, but was imposed no tribute or war indemnity. Instead it had to fund an Athenian garrison there and pay 10 talents a year as revenue from land dedicated to the gods, i.e. the sacred treasuries of the Delian League managed by Athens.⁴²

II. Melos – The failure of 'compellence'?

Melos, an island on the Southern reaches of the Cycladic islands, strategically located between the Peloponnesos and Athens' allies off the coast of Asia Minor, was nominally neutral but was suspected to aid Sparta.⁴³ By the spring of 416, Athens was strong enough to take up new action against Sparta. Melos was to be a first victim. Having set up camp on the island with some 2,700 hoplites, 300 archers and 20 mounted archers, the generals Tisias and Cleomedes laid waste to the land and sent ambassadors to Melos to convince its citizens to surrender. More clearly than words coming out of Athens could have conveyed, these actions bespoke their intention to subdue Melos – by force if necessary.⁴⁴

Whereas Cleon and Diodotus had quarreled over how to *deter* rebellion, the commanders of the Athenian forces desired to *compel* Melos to surrender. They wanted them to *do* rather than *not do* something.⁴⁵ As such, they needed the collaboration of the Melians. “Brute force can only accomplish what requires no collaboration. (...) [However, the] threat of pain and damage may make [them] want to do it”.⁴⁶ For 'compellence' Athens had to initiate “an action (or an irrevocable commitment to action) that can cease, or become harmless, only if the opponent responds”⁴⁷ as demanded – rather than threatening reaction. It is the prospect of suffering that is supposed to make the opponent do something. In fact, the Athenians present the Melians with an 'opportunity' whose value is being impressed on the opponent by the immediate presence of the '...or else': their army ready to destroy the city.

In order to induce an affirmative action by the opponent, rendering the threatened punishment more immediate is also more important due to the different nature of threats and hopes he faces. In deterrence both his desired action (and its positive value) and the announced punishment are shrouded in uncertainty – an uncertainty pertaining to the probability of succeeding or incurring retaliation *and* the eventual value of either scenario to him. In the situation the Melians face, though, they know how much they value their current freedom and neutrality. It is an everyday reality to them. What is uncertain here is how likely they are to lose it and what kind of punishment they thus bring on them. Other than a case of deterrence as discussed before, it is not two irrealities or likelihoods that are in immediate comparison but a known reality against an unreal promise of uncertain trustworthiness. Or to put it differently: a bird in the hand against maybe one in the bush.

The Athenian envoys are not permitted to address the citizens directly but only a council of magistrates and the ruling oligarchy. In the ensuing dialogue of lasting fame,⁴⁸ the Athenians emphasize from the outset that questions of justice or injustice of claims are irrelevant given the sheer inequality of power.⁴⁹ Basically the Athenians were asking for unconditional surrender, and offered in return a lenient tribute regime and protection. And yet, as Thomas Schelling makes clear, for bargaining, “there must be some common interest, if only the avoidance of mutual damage”⁵⁰. And in fact, Melos and Athens share an interest in avoiding any test of force of arms and the ensuing destruction. They both prefer to obtain their objective – surrender for the Athenians, withdrawal and autonomy for the Melians – without the costs of violence, and therefore engage in diplomacy.

The inequality in power that the Athenians so clearly demonstrate with the mighty army they have drawn up at the gates of Melos is an instrument of diplomacy in the way it is used by its commanders. Although their superiority would offer the path of “undiplomatic” recourse to strength⁵¹, i.e. storming the city, their first intent is to use it in a coercive manner. For “if there is no room for doubt how a contest in strength will come out,” - as the Athenians certainly felt - “it may be possible to bypass the military stage altogether and to proceed at once to the coercive bargaining.”⁵² “To be coercive, violence has to be anticipated. And it has to be avoidable by accommodation.”⁵³ Thus, they present the Melians with the alternatives: the prospect of inflicting suffering on them, and the possibility to avoid this prospect by agreeing to the demands of the Athenians. The frankness and harshness with which the Athenians tried to impress their demands and potential consequences on the Melians has disturbed readers of Thucydides for a long time. However, from a game theoretical point such outspokenness should be seen as instrumental in making a threat that could win the bargaining for the Athenian side. In any case, the presence of massive Athenian forces, and Athens' recent shift to a policy of “calculated terror”⁵⁴ against rebellious allies should have backed up this threat.

However, it may be that for the effective use of threats of suffering that are intended to compel the enemy, the Athenians had not clearly enough seen through the interests of their direct counterparts. For to coerce in the foreseen manner, the threat needs to exploit enemy wants and fears.⁵⁵ To the average inhabitant of Melos the fear of a siege and destruction of his city was likely to be outweighed by the

desire to be alive – a shift of allegiance to Athens and the payment of some tribute would have figured relatively low in his priority of fears and wants given the imminent threat.

To the ruling oligarchy, though, who represented the interlocutors the Athenians were facing, the situation may well have looked differently, resulting in a divergent order of preferences. While one may well suppose that they just as well feared death (after all they were no Spartans), accommodation by surrendering to Athens could not promise them survival or impunity with reasonable certainty. However, “*both* sides of the choice, the threatened penalty and the proffered avoidance or reward need to be credible”⁵⁶ if ‘compellence’ is to work. The Melian aristocracy would have to expect that under Athenian suzerainty they could not sustain their rule but would suffer a popular revolt such as Athens had supported before, which ended in the massacre of the oligarchs.⁵⁷ Athenian occupation, rather than a promise of remaining domestic autonomy might therefore hold a loss of economic and political power over the city’s society and potentially even loss of life at the hands of revolutionaries for them. Furthermore, how could they be sure that the example that had been set with the killing of the Mytileneans at the whims of the Athenian assembly would not portend their own fate? After all, they had aroused Athenian anger by remaining obstinately neutral while secretly aiding and abetting the Spartans.

For the Melian oligarchy, then, the Athenian threat of violence did not involve a credible promise that they be spared violence in case they complied. Both the threatened response and the demanded accommodation were scenarios of latent violence, and thus not able to clearly influence the Melians either way. The coercive threat held no convincing assurance (inherently hard to demonstrate in advance) for the Melian oligarchs; here, accommodation did not offer relief.⁵⁸ Yet, “[c]oercion requires finding a bargain, arranging for [the opponent] to be better off doing what we want – worse off not doing what we want – when he takes the threatened penalty into account.”⁵⁹ Such bargain was not at hand in the Melian dialogue. Kagan takes the exclusion of the *demos* from the discussion of war and peace to illustrate that the “Melian leaders plainly did not trust the populace to support their stubborn and dangerous policy.”⁶⁰ But to the oligarchs, the apparent suicide option of resisting Athens, still held more hope (or expected value to put it mathematically) than capitulation. Thus, they dragged the city down with them.

As Thomas Schelling showed, for a military threat to compel an adversary to do something, it “is (...)

important to know who is in charge on the other side, what he treasures, what he can do for us”⁶¹. Indeed, “[t]he art of looking at the problem from the other person's point of view, identifying his opportunities and his interests (...) is at the center of strategic analysis.”⁶² On this account the envoys failed. Had the Athenians recognized this problem inherent in their attempt at 'compellence', they would have had two options. Either to distinguish the value of accommodation clearer from the “...or else” they threatened (e.g. by giving the oligarchs credible guarantees) or to redirect their coercive diplomacy to those where the preference order would have been more propitious to Athens (i.e. the Melian masses). Not considering that there may be diverging incentive structures among Melians, and the consequences it had for communicating its compelling threat, Athens had missed a chance. It had overlooked that “to coerce a government (...) [w]hat may be required is some change in the complexion of the government itself, in the authority, prestige, or bargaining power or particular individuals or factions or parties”.⁶³

Communication - the negotiations initiated by the Athenian envoys – had provided an opportunity to avoid moves that involve mutual damage.⁶⁴ Obstinate, the Melians refused to surrender. Once they are serious about starving Melos out, i.e. increase the imminence of the penalty,⁶⁵ the spirits of the besieged soon wane as they suffer from hunger, and face a far superior force encircling them. The fears of the Melian oligarchy against the commoners now bear out in Athens' favor: anxious of treachery from within they surrender. Ignoring again the potential value of the population, the Athenians now in possession of the city vote to kill all the men and sell the women and children into slavery.⁶⁶

¹ cf. Kagan 1974:129

² cf. *ibid* p.132-134

³ cf. *ibid* p.134, see also Thucydides 3.13.1, and 3.2.1

⁴ cf. Kagan 1974:135

⁵ cf. *ibid* p.132, and cf. Thucydides 3.13.3

⁶ cf. Thucydides 3.2.2

⁷ cf. Kagan 1974:135

⁸ cf. *ibid* p. 136f

⁹ *ibid* p. 137f

¹⁰ *ibid* p. 138

¹¹ cf. *ibid* p. 138f – Sparta and its Peloponnesian allies had just celebrated the sacred games of Zeus at Olympia.

¹² cf. Dixit/Nalebuff 1991:207 - “This risk [created by brinkmanship] should be sufficiently intolerable to your opponent [i.e. here to the Spartans from whom they want to extort assistance] to induce him to eliminate the risk by following your wishes.”

¹³ Schelling 1966:91 For an extensive discussion of “brinkmanship” cf. Schelling 1966:92-125; For the notion of brinkmanship as a risk where outcomes are no longer fully under control by either side, cf. Schelling 1963:200; also cf. Dixit/Nalebuff 1991:205-222

¹⁴ Kagan 1974:140

¹⁵ Thucydides 3.13.5

¹⁶ cf. Thucydides 3.13.6f

¹⁷ cf. Kagan 1974:141-144

18 cf. *ibid* p.151f
19 cf. Thucydides 3.35.1f
20 cf. Thucydides 3.36ff
21 Schelling 1963:9
22 cf. *ibid* p.13
23 Thucydides 3.39.5
24 cf. Schelling 1963:38
25 cf. *ibid* p.40
26 Schelling 1966:22
27 cf. Kagan 1974:158
28 cf. Schelling 1963:107, and cf. Schelling 1966:35 “The hardest part [of deterrence] is communicating our own intentions.”
29 Schelling 1963:117 “Moves can in some way alter the game, by incurring manifest costs, risks, or a reduced range of subsequent choice; they have an information content, or *evidence* content, of a different character from that of speech.”
30 cf. Thucydides 3.39.7
31 cf. Schelling 1966:38 and 56-62
32 Dixit/Nalebuff 1991:143
33 cf. *ibid* p.144
34 cf. Schelling 1963:137ff, 142 and Schelling 1966:43ff; also cf. Dixit/Nalebuff 1991:160f on “mandated negotiating agents” - Local dissident would receive Athens official blessing as their agents, in advance, if they decide to act against rebels. They don't have a full mandate to do anything on behalf of Athens but would bring Athens in a substitute form into the conflict, raising the likelihood that Athens will also feel compelled to take up the fight, as it now involves violence by and against agents of them.
35 cf. Dixit/Nalebuff 1991:145f and cf. Schelling 1966:49f In a sense, such action by Athens would be akin to “binding itself”, making a 'self-commitment', i.e. limiting its freedom of choice or at least biasing its incentives as a means of increasing its strength in the implicit 'bargaining' that goes on when adversaries reflect on where the limits would be to what Athens would tolerate. cf. Schelling 1963:22ff
36 cf. Schelling 1966:124
37 Kagan 1974:160
38 cf. *ibid* p.161
39 Thucydides 3.47.2
40 Thucydides 3.47.4
41 cf. Thucydides 3.50.1
42 cf. Kagan 1974:163f
43 cf. Thucydides 3.91.2
44 cf. Schelling 1963:115 and 102: “moves can reveal information about a player's value system or about the choices of action available to him” They brought evidence that the commitment of Athens to the cause was real, cf. *ibid* p.147
45 cf. Dixit/Nalebuff 1991:125 For a more extensive discussion of 'compellence' cf. Schelling 1966:69-91
46 Schelling 1966:8
47 *ibid* p.72
48 For the entire Melian dialogue, cf. Thucydides 5.85-111
49 cf. Kagan 1981:149
50 Schelling 1966:1
51 *Ibid* p.3
52 *Ibid* p.12
53 *Ibid* p.2
54 Kagan 1974:158 Athens had reneged from its earlier leniency in treating with upheaval among its allies. Under the leadership of Cleon, the people of Scione were put to death after their rebellion in 423, and the women and children of Torone sold into slavery after the town was recaptured in 422.
55 cf. Schelling 1966:3
56 *Ibid* p.75
57 cf. Thucydides 3.70-85 and 4.46-48: The island of Corcyra had experienced revolution in 427-425. Athens had intervened on behalf of the popular faction, permitting it to prevail, capture the adherents of the oligarchic party and kill them. Also cf. Thucydides 5.82: Only shortly before the attack on Melos, in the Summer of 417 the overthrow of the oligarchy at Argos had occurred under clear pro-Athenian circumstances.
58 cf. Schelling 1966:3f and 74f
59 Schelling 1966:4
60 Kagan 1981:149 (note 46)
61 Schelling 1966:175
62 Schelling 1984:200
63 Schelling 1966:86
64 cf. Schelling 1963:170
65 cf. Schelling 1966:75
66 cf. Thucydides 5.116.3f

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Appendix

Mytilene – Additional information

In 427 Athens had been weakened on several accounts. "The death of Pericles left a vacuum in Athenian political life. No towering figure stood ready and able to exercise the enormous influence he had held."ⁱ No side clearly dominated of public opinion, making the domestic political situation "revert to the more competitive, equal, and unstable condition more typical of democracies."ⁱⁱ The destructive plague was still raging in the city and had diminished Athenian military strength and morale, left the treasury depleted and shrinking. Athenians were no longer confident of having a successful strategy against Sparta; the strategy of exhaustion recommended by Pericles was exhausting Athens as well and was excruciatingly slow.ⁱⁱⁱ

A thus weakened Athens with an urgent need for funds to pursue the war with Sparta was likely to press its allies of the Delian League more, unilaterally increasing their allocated tributes. Such action was foreseeable and likely to increase incentives for defection. Athens had so far not interfered with the independence of Mytilene but the tide in the Delian League seemed to be obviously turning against independent allies: Athens had made them one by one subservient. The Mytileneans will present this as one of their key motivations (and without doubt also justification) when stating their case in front of the Peloponnesians (Sparta and its allies) at Olympia to call for their support.^{iv}

Athens' enemies, though, could not really offer much hope for the cause of Mytilene. While they were duly contacted by Mytilene to rally support – Spartans and Boeotians are alleged to have known about Mytilene's plans,^v these enemies could not be expected to provide any significant assistance to a

rebellious Lesbos: they lacked a fleet and were caught up in their land expedition in Attica, while Athens could still, trusting the defensive value of its Long Walls against the attack from land, man a fleet to send it to Lesbos.

The Greek historian Diodorus Siculus assumes that there was also an *activist* motivation for Mytilenean rebellion: their desire to bring all of Lesbos under their domain. A plan for which they would have to take hostile action against Methymna. Athens, as defender of democratic cities, and known for its opposition to formation of larger autonomous units among its confederates could not be expected to accept this without resistance.^{vi} Kagan concludes that “[t]he Mytilenean oligarchs, long eager to break with Athens and to control their island fully, seized the moment of Athenian weakness to achieve their ends, acting, so it seems, more from hope than from fear.”^{vii} If this is the case, then Athenian control of the Delian League and its own military prowess had indeed failed to deter such rebellious intentions.

Athenian resolve was limited at first, and they initially refused to believe the news from Lesbos. But once a reconnaissance mission had confirmed the troubling information, Athens was constrained to act, for its reputation was on the line, which depended immensely on the claim that it was the defender of democratic cities, most of which were members in its Delian League. When an initial expedition of only 40 ships to Mytilene brought about a stalemate as Athens could not marshal enough forces for fighting on land while Mytilene's naval forces could not be certain to roundly defeat the Athenian vessels, Athens could not be expected to agree to the suggestion by Mytilene to accept their rule over Lesbos in return for future loyalty.^{viii} After the Athenians had (foreseeably) rejected the Mytilenean proposal, hostilities on Lesbos recommence but remain inconclusive with Methymna and the Athenian expeditionary force holding only the land around the city, while the rest of the island is under control by Mytilene. The Athenian naval blockade appeared effective and Athens considered the situation under control for the moment. The Mytilenean oligarchy, though, used the time to send several envoys to Sparta to call for help. They were invited to state their case before the assembled Peloponnesian alliance after the conclusion of the sacred games of Zeus at Olympia.^{ix}

In fact, this combination of brinkmanship and the prospect of gaining a new ally with a significant navy, convinces Sparta to act, but its preparations were held back by allies who needed to attend to their fields where harvest time was imminent and a lack of a cohesive plan. The Athenians mastered all their resources to build a new fleet of 100 triremes that attacked on various sites of the Peloponnesos and destroyed any remaining resolve the Spartans and their allies had.^x

Sparta, however, had not yet lost interest in the potential that lay in the revolt on Lesbos and in the winter of 428/427 sent its general Salaethus secretly to Mytilene who was to take over command there and announced that in the next spring the usual land invasion of Attica would be accompanied by a mission of 40 vessels to Lesbos.^{xi} But this fleet was slow to arrive and its commander, Alcidas, lacked courage and resolve to exploit Athenian unpreparedness in the region. Mytilene and Salaethus faced starvation as the siege was drawing down food reserves in the city. An attack on the besieging forces seemed to be the last hope but more hoplites would be needed than wealthy, free citizens were in the

city.^{xiii} Salaethus suggested to equip as many commoners as possible as hoplites for his bold scheme of an attempted breakthrough. But once armed, they turned against the upper classes demanding that the available food be divided among all citizens. They threatened to turn the city over to Athens making a separate peace that would exclude the oligarchy who had instigated the revolt. Facing this dire situation, the rulers of Mytilene abandoned all hope and unconditionally surrendered to the Athenian general Paches, putting their fate into the hands of Athens.^{xiii} Paches, brought all those behind the rebellion and suspected of hostility towards Athens out of the city (also for their own safety) and sent them to Athens where envoys would plead their case in front of the Athenian assembly.^{xiv}

Facing the Athenian assembly, the Mytilenean envoys soon split making on the one hand the case that an oligarchic conspiracy stood behind the revolt in the hope that the few would be punished and the many spared, and on the other hand those representing the interests of the oligarchy who tried to share the blame as widely as possible expecting that Athens would refrain from punishing an entire people.^{xv} Both parties had made their arguments as strategically motivated moves in a negotiation process, with Athenian interests and emotions in mind to assess their effectiveness towards a favorable vote. But both failed to correctly account for the degree of outrage at the rebellion – and especially the sense of weakness and extreme strain it had brought home to Athenians – and a proposal by Cleon to kill all adult males and sell the women and children as slaves narrowly carried the day. However, the anger ebbed off and moderates could convince the citizens to call another assembly for the next day to reconsider the decision.^{xvi}

Melos – Additional information

Sparta had just installed a new threat close to Athens by establishing a colony at Heraclea on Euboea. The Athenians looked for some sort of offensive measure of that character, and came across the island of Melos which had so far remained neutral but positively inclined towards Sparta. It lies on the Southern reaches of the Cycladic islands, and strategically located between the Peloponnesos and Athens' allies off the coast of Asia Minor. A Dorian settlement (in contrast to Athens and its Ionian allies) it was a colony of Sparta.^{xvii} In 426, Athens sent “a fleet of 60 ships and a force of 2,000 hoplites under the command of Nicias against the island of Melos. Nicias ravaged the land but could not compel the Melians to surrender.”^{xviii} While earlier the neutrality of Melos had been a minor issue (even more so given its strength), it appears that Melos had lent support to the Spartan fleet of Alcidas on his way to and from Mytilene in 427. A newly assertive Athens decided to punish that but did not bring the forces to actually besiege and capture the city.^{xix}

Ten years later, Athens had recovered during a first peace with Sparta: its funds were replenished as were its ranks of young men able to serve as hoplites or on the triremes. For some time, all action had remained inconclusive, renewed hostilities were not brought to an end. “The Athenians needed an

outlet for their energy and frustration, and the attack on Melos in the spring of 416 provided one.”^{xx} An earlier Spartan victory at Mantinea had upset the balance between the two major Greek powers – the need to “restore it and Athenian prestige was vital.”^{xxi}

Athens was interested in obtaining Melos without a costly battle or prolonged siege. Certain that it would eventually prevail, Athens nonetheless wanted to minimize the costs involved. Or as Donald Kagan says, “[t]heir purpose was to convince the Melians to surrender without fighting, and they may have hoped to achieve this more readily by menace than by any other device.”^{xxii} Other than the aspects discussed in the attempt at coercion that the Athenians made at Melos, may there be an element of more or less 'objective irrationality' in the Melian decision? “Melian resistance to the Athenian demands was based on the Melian conviction that since their cause was just, the gods would protect them, on their confidence that the Spartans would come to their aid, and on their hope that in some unaccountable way fortune would bring success to their efforts despite Athens' superior power.”^{xxiii}

Also, given the situation of the land war on the Peloponnesos, renewed Athenian strength on land and sea, any hope for Spartan intervention must have been evidently vague, and the Athenians try to make clear that it would totally be in vain. For the Spartans, according to Athenian judgment, would not feel bound by friendship with Melos if expediency – i.e. Athenian control of the sea and therefore superiority in power – told them otherwise.^{xxiv}

Having failed to convince the Melians to hand over their city with an immediately present threat alone, Athens starts the siege by building a wall and leaving a part of the army to guard it. A siege itself is an attempt at 'compellence' that threatens to continue and increase the suffering of the besieged population unless the city surrenders. But again, the threat of being able to sustainably inflict pain on Melos was not wholly convincing, given the diminished forces outside the city. In fact, a mere “[b]lockade (...) can be interpreted as [way] of evading the dangers and difficulties of compellence. Blockade in a cold war sets up a tactical 'status quo' that is damaging in the long run but momentarily safe for both sides unless the victim tries to run the blockade.”^{xxv} This long-run damage, while not necessarily enough to forcibly accomplish its objective, may be expected to hurt enough to induce compliance.^{xxvi}

In any case, Melos indeed does succeed at breaking out of the blockade in a night attack and bringing in some supplies, but the Athenians soon send reinforcement. With them, they bring the siege to a bloody end for the inhabitants of Melos.

- i Kagan 1974:124
ii Ibid p.129
iii cf. ibid p.129
iv cf. Thucydides 3.9-12
v cf. Thucydides 3.2.3
vi cf. Kagan 1974:135
vii Ibid p.135
viii cf. ibid p.136f
ix cf. ibid p.138f
x cf. ibid p.141f
xi cf. ibid p.146
xii Hoplites were heavily-armed infantry; they were citizen-soldiers who had to pay for their own equipment, expensive armor that commoners could usually not afford. Commoners were usually used as *thetes*, rowers on the triremes. Sparta was an exception as it had a subdued population of *metoikoi* who labored on the fields and in other occupations while the free Spartans dedicated their life to military exercise and combat.
xiii cf. Kagan 1974:151f
xiv cf. Thucydides 3.35.1f
xv cf. Kagan 1974:155
xvi cf. ibid p.155f
xvii cf. Thucydides 3.91.2
xviii Kagan 1974:197
xix cf. ibid p.199
xx Kagan 1981:148
xxi Ibid p.167
xxii Ibid p.150
xxiii Ibid p.151
xxiv cf. Thucydides 5.109
xxv Schelling 1966:77
xxvi cf. ibid p.80