

Trump's 'might makes right' upends world order

“We both know that, in this world, the question of what is right only matters between equals. Otherwise, the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.”

So spoke a delegation from ancient Athens to the people of Melos, according to Thucydides in his book, “The History of the Peloponnesian War.” Athens, the prototype for democracy, was seeking the submission of the small Aegean island in the 5th-century-B.C war.

“You should not destroy what protects us both, the privilege of being allowed in danger to invoke what is fair and right, and even to profit by arguments that fall a little short of the mark. This is in your interest as much as it is in anyone’s,” the Melians reply to the delegation.

This dialogue resembles to some degree the recent White House confrontation between U.S. President Donald Trump and his Ukrainian counterpart Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

Trump and the Athenian delegation share in the conviction that might makes right. Democracy, as long as it values free competition, induces a belief that might is the only political reality. Both Trump and the ancient Athenians apparently want to argue that, in negotiations, the weak countries should always accede to the strong countries. They also seem to maintain that conflicts occur because the weak insist on their territorial rights despite lacking in capabilities.

The Melians patiently explain to the Athenian delegation that when countries share common values, the strong should use their might wisely and show compassion for the weak countries, where many people are less fortunate. However, Trump, who values dealmaking, appears to favor Russian President Vladimir Putin, who believes that strength is justice, over Zelenskyy, even though the Ukrainian leader holds similar values to the United States.

Reviving territorial ambitions

Trump has announced his plan for the United States to “take over” and “own” the war-torn Gaza Strip so as to bring an end to decades of strife and develop the territory into a casino re-

sort. It has also been learned that the U.S. government approached South Sudan and Somalia and considered Albania and Indonesia as potential hosts for the relocation of the 2.2 million Palestinians in Gaza.

However, Trump’s plan to convert Gaza into a resort, which threatens Palestinians’ right to self-determination and undermines the dignity of the Arab world, has made Saudi Arabia, the leader of the Arab world, think twice about the



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INSIGHTS INTO THE WORLD

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U.S.-backed initiative for Riyadh to join hands with Israel to create an axis against Iran.

Trump has thrown out more ideas, saying that he wants Canada to become the 51st U.S. state; that the United States should purchase Greenland; and that he wants to “take back” the Panama Canal — which the United States formerly controlled through a lease. He seems to be trying to revive 19th-century-style territorial imperialism. But his approach to “making America great again” is unexpectedly peaceful, and is more like a property transaction.

The United States has a history of expanding its territory by cutting treaty-based deals for land. This includes the purchase of the Louisi-

ana territory in 1803 from France for \$15 million, and the 1867 purchase of Alaska from Russia for \$7.2 million.

If Trump is considering acquiring Greenland and the Gaza Strip through purchases similar to those made in the past for land, it will not be enough to simply ridicule his ideas as the thinking of a real estate mogul.

Trump’s approach resembles that of Athenian statesman Alcibiades. The ancient Athenian tended to unsettle the people around him because he ignored and even deviated from customs, in a manner akin to a tyrant.

And yet, Alcibiades still emerged as a darling of Greek democracy as Pericles, a statesman who advanced Athenian democracy, and the philosopher Socrates protected him. Just as Alcibiades boldly made friends with Sparta, the enemy of ancient Athens, as well as with the Persian Empire, Trump does not hesitate to accommodate the demands of Putin and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu by ignoring Ukrainians and Palestinians’ right to exist.

When Athens dispatched a military expedition to Sicily, Alcibiades dreamed of a massive Mediterranean campaign in which he would conquer Carthage (present-day Tunisia) and Libya, before laying siege to the Italian and Peloponnesian peninsulas. (Sparta was located on the Peloponnese.)

Thucydides characterized Alcibiades’ political style as that of an “unprincipled rogue.” Somehow, I’m reminded of Trump. In a 2020 speech, Trump declined to stress such common values as freedom and justice, but instead declared, “We have rejected globalism and embraced patriotism.”

What new kind of international order will emerge should the United States purchase Greenland to keep Russian control of the Arctic in check, take control of the Panama Canal, whose key ports are operated by a Hong Kong-based company, and acquire the Gaza Strip, which has received military aid from Iran? There is no answer for this question. All I can envision is a gloomy sense of nihilism, a world in which there are no shared values or universal norms.

Not a true conservative

In any case, Trump can hardly be called an

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authentic conservative. His decision to exempt Russia from his tariff measures but slap China with significant tariffs can be called audaciously destructive and revolutionary. And recall that those who carried out the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol without any hesitation were Trump supporters. Trump’s political tactics clearly have some elements of destruction and revolution, which are ill-suited to democracy.

Given Trump’s excessive support for Israel, he cannot be considered an isolationist. And given his trust in Putin, he cannot be called anti-communist or neoconservative. (Neoconservatives advocate for democracy.)

One critic has labeled Trump a “sovereignist,” linking him to a group of Republican senators who blocked the United States from joining the League of Nations in 1919.

Indeed, what best symbolizes his political stance is his series of orders withdrawing America from United Nations organizations and multilateral agreements. For example, he has signed an executive order to pull the United States out of the U.N. Human Rights Council, and pause funding for the U.N. Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNR-

WA), alleging it is a haven for terrorists.

Trump’s nihilistic view that might makes right has allowed Netanyahu and Putin to feel increasingly confident in their high-handed policies. In the Gaza Strip, more than 50,000 people have been killed. In Ukraine, people in both urban and rural areas have been killed. The conclusion drawn from these atrocities is that indiscriminate and ruthless tactics are the only effective ones, a typical example of nihilism.

Netanyahu has prioritized military campaigns to destroy Hamas over the release of hostages in order to protect himself, widening divisions in Israel while allowing the deaths of hostages in the Gaza Strip.

Gaza is also growing more divided. Residents there have staged demonstrations five times since late March to protest against Hamas for its continued armed struggle and disregard for the lives of ordinary citizens.

However, once Hamas disappears, there will be no central organization in Gaza to continue resistance to Israel, a situation that will make it easier for Israel to expel Gaza’s civilians en masse and reoccupy the territory. This is the paradox that lies at the heart of the tragedy. Even with the death of family members having become an everyday occurrence, Trump is unlikely to abandon his nihilism.

For people in Gaza and Ukraine who have no outlet for their anger or sadness, the following passage, which comes from the maqamat genre of Arabic stories, may express something they too have felt:

“If luck of time has not turned its back on me, I wish it would let me and my children leave this bitter world. Should only my children die, leaving me bereaved of them, I would be tormented by pain and remorse and at a loss about where to go and what to do.”

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