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# Might Makes Right Revisited: Is Greenland a Modern Day Melos? <sup>[1]</sup>

A contemporary version of Thucydides' famous Melian Dialogue from his *History of the Peloponnesian War* (Book 5, chapters 84-116) took place in Washington, DC, when the foreign ministers of Iceland and Greenland met with Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Vice President J.D. Vance to plead the case of a sovereign Greenland and to argue against a U.S. takeover of the island.

Thucydides recounts the 416 BCE negotiations between the Athenians, rulers of a vast empire, and the underdog inhabitants of the island of Melos over the right of the Melians to remain neutral. Before laying them to waste, the Athenians attempted to reason with the Melians and urged them to capitulate. Subjugation beats utter destruction, argued the Athenians. But the Melians rejected the offer, resigning themselves to a desperate, and ultimately futile, last stand.

As overwhelming victors, the Athenians, deaf to Melian pleas of justice and fairness, razed Melian towns, massacred the men and took the women and children as slaves.

In countless introductory international relations classes, Thucydides's conclusion about this episode in the Peloponnesian wars—"the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must", or "might makes right"—is taught as the foundation for the doctrine of realism that dominates policymaking in international affairs. It also guides the Trump administration.

In the first Trump term, advisers such as H.R. McMaster and James Mattis—who knew Thucydides inside out—cited the Greek historian in the context of trying to avoid a conflict with China, but now Stephen Miller has spouted a bare bones version of Thucydides: "we live in a world..... that is governed by strength, that is governed by force, that is governed by power." If the Trump White House is following Thucydides – whether deliberately or by coincidence – things do not look good for Greenland.

Trump's matter-of-fact explanation of why he wants Greenland—"The United States needs Greenland for the purpose of National Security.....we are going to do something on Greenland ....because, if we don't do it, Russia or China will take over Greenland...."—resembles Athenian justifications for expanding their domain: "We have done nothing amazing or contrary to human nature if we accepted an empire that was given to use and then refused to give it up, since we were conquered by the strongest motives – honor, fear, and self-interest. And we are not the first to have acted this way, for it has been ordained that the weaker are kept down by the stronger." (Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 1.76.2, cited in Kagan, *The Peloponnesian War*, Viking, 2003, p.248). Trump speaks about taking over Greenland with a similar sense of inevitability and entitlement, even though Greenland, Denmark, as well as other countries in NATO and the EU, strongly oppose this plan.

So far, President Trump is following the Melian Dialogue game plan by pressuring Greenland to submit to his will, and, if not, threatening to take it over. Like Melos facing Athens,

Greenland appears defenseless against the will of President Trump. Following the Melian Dialogue formula, the Trump administration appears poised to take over Greenland. End of story. Or not.

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## **"What if international relations classes taught Euripides's *The Trojan Women* as a seminal text, rather than the *Melian Dialogue*? Instead of 'might equals right,' students would grapple with the human cost of war."**

The "might makes right" lesson drawn from the Melian Dialogue ignores what happened next to the Athenians.

In fact, Athens's sense of invincibility after Melos ultimately led to its downfall. Hubris and pressure from allies to expand the empire motivated the Athenians to invade Sicily in 415 BCE to capture Syracuse. Within two years, Athens faced defeat at the hands of the Syracusans, aided by Sparta. It was the beginning of the end of the Athenian Empire.

In light of Athens's decline after Melos, "might make right" does not seem like such a good idea after all. Arguably, the Melian Dialogue could be interpreted as a cautionary tale about the dangers of pride and inflated self-confidence, but that is not how the episode is generally understood and taught.

Another episode in the life of post-Melos Athens casts further doubt on the validity of "might makes right" as a strategy for a global empire, or, a contemporary superpower.

In the early stages of the disastrous Sicilian campaign, the Athenian military and civil elite were confronted with their own inhumanity towards the Melians when they gathered at the Dionysia Festival in 415 BCE, just months after the Melian campaign, to watch a performance of Euripides's *The Trojan Women*. Widely considered to be the first anti-war play, Euripides flipped the script, and portrayed war in all its brutality, not through its heroes, but from the perspective of its most vulnerable victims: women and children. On stage, the women of Troy, once proud but now enslaved to the Greek victors, came to grips with the deaths of their husbands, brothers, and sons, and confronted their fate as slaves.

Possibly in response to the barbarity of the Melian conquest, Euripides focused on the human suffering caused by man's pursuit of military dominance, a timeless theme. In 2013, Syrian refugee women gathered in Jordan to create and perform a version of *The Trojan Women* that integrated the ancient text into narratives of their harrowing escapes from Syria.

What if international relations classes taught Euripides's *The Trojan Women* as a seminal text, rather than the Melian Dialogue? Instead of "might equals right," students would grapple with the human cost of war. Seeing war from the perspective of the losers might inspire compassion and empathy, rather than bravado, as well as a recognition of the dangers of letting the humiliation of defeat fester. Such sentiments might lead to more strategies like that of the Marshall Plan, which ushered in seven decades of peace in Europe.

There is no danger of the Trump administration following a foreign policy grounded in

empathy. Hubris and an inflated sense of entitlement, not unlike that of the Greeks after Melos, back the claims to Greenland and Canada.

Greenland looks like a modern-day Melos, small and unimportant in the grand scheme of global power. If Donald Trump gains control of Greenland “one way or another,” will it be a pyrrhic victory? Will Trump, like the Athenians, be clouded by a belief in his invincibility, and might Greenland signal the beginning of the end for Trump’s imperialist foreign policy?

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