10 The Interests of States

Some reflections on the essential character of states can be found even in ancient writers.

In his *Peleponnesian War*, for example, Thucydides describes and contrasts the observations of some of the participants in that war on the nature of state interests and the kinds of actions by states they regarded as justifiable to promote those interests. An example is his account of the discussions supposed to have taken place after Athenian forces landed on the island of Melos to persuade, or, if necessary, compel, the latter to join the war against Sparta. Melos, though a colony of Sparta, had so far remained neutral. But this was insufficient to satisfy Athens. She demanded that all the islands should join her in the war, regardless of their prior commitments, and she sent a force to Melos to bring that state to her side.

The discussion, as described by Thucydides, touches on some of the most fundamental questions of international relations. In the first place he presents a dialogue which typifies the relationship between strong and weak: between the representatives of a powerful state, capable of imposing its will by force, presenting the cynical arguments of *realpolitik* and *raison d'état*, against those of a weak state, unable to defend itself, placing its reliance on principles of decency, reason and friendly relations among states. Secondly, the discussion concerns the nature of state interests: short-term and long-term, tangible and intangible. The Athenian delegates are concerned only with the *immediate* interests of their state – the necessity of bringing Melos into her alliance against Sparta; while the Melians urge them to pay regard to Athens' *long-term* interests, including her good name and the disadvantages of becoming known as a tyrannical aggressor, so arousing other states against her. Finally, the discussion is an argument about justice: whether it is the case, as the Athenians state, that justice only means the will of the powerful: or, as the Melians argue, that it must involve “fair play and just dealing”.

The whole discussion constitutes a bitter comment on the reality of international relations. At the end of the day, as Thucydides makes clear with brutal simplicity, naked force prevails: the men of Melos are killed, their wives and children enslaved. The message seems to be that in international relations morality and principle count for little and only the will of the powerful finally matters. As the Athen-
ian delegates assert, the "strong do what they have the power to do and the weak accept what they have to accept". On this interpretation the state has no choice but to promote its own interests by whatever means it can.

The ancient Indian writer, Kautilya, also discussed state interests. In his book *Arthasastra* he advises rulers about the best strategy to employ in a competitive struggle with other rulers. Warfare is an essential and inevitable feature of that struggle. The advice given mainly concerns when to make war and against whom. Generally war should be made against weaker rulers or against rulers weakened by internal disorders. If a state is subject to national disasters, such as fire, flood and pestilence, or if its subjects are disaffected and impoverished, it is also suitable to be attacked. If two enemy states in alliance cannot be overcome together, it is wise to make peace with one and war with the other. To make war on another state allies may be sought; but if an ally in turn needs help, he can be provided with a weak or treacherous army; or peace can be made with his enemy and the ally therefore betrayed. Like Machiavelli, therefore, Kautilya does not hesitate to advocate deceit if this is the best way for a king to promote his own interests. The rules he lays down are presented somewhat like the rules of a game of chess. And he depicts an international society in which war is seen as something of a game, a game in which the rulers who control the fortunes of states use every possible ingenuity to overcome their opponents by any means they can.

Both these writers therefore (or those they describe) see the promotion of the state's interests as the highest goal of policy. In an ultra-competitive international environment each regards warfare as an inevitable feature of international society and is concerned with the policies that will enable the individual state to survive in that struggle. Because the character of the wider environment is taken for granted, attention is focused narrowly on the individual unit and its means of self-preservation within that environment. The possibility of changing the environment as a whole, and so directing attention to the wider society of states, is not considered.