Thucydides, the Peloponnesian War and Small State Foreign Policy in the 21st Century: Lessons for New Zealand¹

Vangelis Vitalis

Centre for Defence and Strategic Studies
Australian Defence College
March 2012

Abstract

This paper makes the case that New Zealand could learn a great deal about managing its foreign relations by reflecting on how small powers managed their relations with large powers during the Peloponnesian Wars. Citing timeless similarities between Ancient Greece and the modern day Asia-Pacific region, the paper finds that lessons from history can provide insights and ideas not only about the behaviours of great states, but just as importantly, about how smaller states can operate in an international system where all seek to maximise power, interests and influence.

This paper is 18 pages long.

¹ Editor’s Note. The views contained in this paper are those of the author alone and do not necessarily represent those of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade. This paper is based on a presentation delivered by the author to the Centre for Defence and Strategic Studies in Canberra on 28 April 2011.
The Centre for Defence and Strategic Studies (CDSS) is the senior educational institution of the Australian Defence College. It delivers a one-year Defence and Strategic Studies Course, a postgraduate-level educational programme which places emphasis on practical, rather than theoretical research, on teamwork and support for the personal and professional goals of all course members. Course members and staff share a commitment to achieving scholarly and professional excellence, with course members graduating with a Master of Arts awarded by Deakin University or a Graduate Diploma awarded by the CDSS. These papers have been submitted as coursework and have been chosen for publication based on their scholarly attributes and the timeliness of their topic.

For further information about the CDSS publications please visit: http://www.defence.gov.au/adc_centres_cdss_publications.html

© Commonwealth of Australia

This work is copyright. It may be downloaded, displayed, printed and reproduced in unaltered form, including the retention of this notice, for personal, non-commercial use or use for professional purposes. Apart from any use as permitted under the Copyright Act 1968, all other rights are reserved. To replicate all or part of this document for any purpose other than those stipulated above, contact the CDSS.

Shedden Papers: ISSN 1836-0769

Disclaimer

This work is the sole opinion of the author, and does not necessarily represent the views of the Centre for Strategic and Defence Studies or the Department of Defence. The Commonwealth of Australia will not be legally responsible in contract, tort or otherwise, for any statement made in this publication.

Editor, Stephanie Koorey, CDSS Publications Editor.
About the Author

Vangelis Vitalis is currently New Zealand’s Ambassador to the European Union, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, Belgium, Bulgaria, Luxembourg and Romania. He was formerly New Zealand’s Deputy High Commissioner to Australia from 2009-2011 and has worked as an economist at the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), and as a trade negotiator at the World Trade Organisation. Ambassador Vitalis was the New Zealand Chief Negotiator who concluded the ASEAN-Australia-New Zealand Free Trade Agreement, the New Zealand-Malaysia Free Trade Agreement and is also leading the negotiations for an FTA with Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus. Ambassador Vitalis studied politics and economics at Auckland and Harvard.
Introduction

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union and subsequent end to decades of belligerence between the great powers, American scholar Francis Fukuyama famously and exuberantly announced the ‘end of history’ in 1992. Despite initial high hopes however, the world has not become a simpler or easier place in which to live. Indeed, it can be said that the end of the Cold War heralded the end of many certainties that had sustained the international order since 1945, and many analysts foresaw a ‘New World Disorder’ - a new era of complex inter-relationships the like of which some suggested we had not seen before.

Yet to look back even further, two thousand five hundred years ago, former Athenian General Thucydides wrote the seminal History of the Peloponnesian War. This magisterial work described and analysed the epic conflict between the two most powerful Greek city states at the time – Athens and Sparta. This conflict engulfed the region and, while the periods at arms were relatively short, the era is characterised by the emergence of regional architectural arrangements designed to both constrain the ambitions of larger rising states, and to manage the decline of those whose time had passed. It also contains timeless insights into the nature of politics and power, most famously captured in the ‘Melian Dialogue’ which continues to be studied by students of international affairs to this day.

Indeed it is hard not to be struck by the similarities between the world two thousand five hundred years ago and the one we are in today. This is particularly apparent when considering the Asia-Pacific region, the rise of China and India as well as the ongoing influence of the United States, not to mention the cluster of medium and small states such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) the ASEAN Regional Forum, the East Asia Summit process and so on. In fact, it is not surprising that there has been a fresh enthusiasm for appreciating Thucydides’ insights about the world – leading to a discovery of parallels between both the Cold War and its aftermath, and the struggle for power and influence in Ancient Greece.

It is against this background, that this paper considers the relevance of Thucydides and his History of the Peloponnesian War, with specific reference to a small contemporary state in the Asia Pacific: New Zealand. This paper begins by briefly outlining the continuing relevance of Thucydides, and argues that there is much to learn from the History of the Peloponnesian War and particularly understanding how smaller states conduct their international affairs. In essence, the paper argues that New Zealand could learn much about the ways in which small states operated during those turbulent years from 431 - 404 BCE, including by being both creative and rather more self-promoting about its value, particularly to medium-sized states like Australia.
The Relevance of Thucydides Today

It was the former US Secretary of State George Marshall who famously revived classical studies as a way of interpreting current events when he said in 1947: ‘I doubt seriously whether a man can think with full wisdom and with deep convictions regarding certain of the basic international issues today who has not at least reviewed in his mind the period of the Peloponnesian War.’

In fact, Thucydides presciently referred to the History of the Peloponnesian War ‘not as an essay which is to win the applause of the moment, but as a possession for all time’.

Those who follow the ‘realist’ or indeed the ‘neo-realist’ theories of international relations regard Thucydides as their founder. More than two and a half millennia after it was written, political leaders, students of politics, military historians, military scholars, and others appreciate this History as a means for understanding contemporary politics and the role of military power in achieving political goals. In the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Germany and Australia (including at the Australian Centre for Defence and Strategic Studies), Thucydides’ History of the Peloponnesian War is a key part of the curriculum in military academies. In fact one commentator has referred to Thucydides’ history of the war in Greece as ‘the surest guide to what we are likely to face in the early decades of the twenty-first century.’

There was a time of course when the Thucydidean ‘model’ in some way or other so dominated theoretical approaches that it was often easy to forget that historiography, or indeed the study of international relations in general needs to go beyond the somewhat simplistic framework Thucydides describes – that of history, war and diplomacy. It needs also to take into account society, culture, economy, trade and - to follow Huntington’s thought provoking thesis – even the role of civilisations as important strands in shaping and influencing state behaviour.

Throughout history, many great scholars have sought to explain why states go to war, what drives them into complex sets of inter-relationships and how they have sought to understand their own role in the history of the period. It is precisely these kinds of issues that need to be considered when reflecting on a country’s place in the region, let alone the world. Indeed, Aristotle in his Nicomachean Ethics put it rather well when he set out the issues he considered to be most significant. He wrote ‘let us study what sorts of influence preserve and

---

3 Thucydides, History of the Peloponnesian War, (Translated by C C F Smith), Cambridge MASS, Harvard University Press, 1930, Chapter 1.
destroy states.’\textsuperscript{6} The key word here is ‘influence’ – because that is what both preserves, and also destroys, states.

Thucydides’ History also examines the important question of the strengths and weaknesses of alliances between states. Reflecting on the same point, it is said that Otto von Bismarck observed that when the international system is divided into competing clusters of alliance networks, he purportedly claimed that it was better to be ‘the rider, not the horse.’\textsuperscript{7} Thucydides would no doubt have approved of such a sentiment.

**Thucydides and the Small States Problem**

Such issues are complex for large and powerful city states, as Athens and Sparta were. There are also various perspectives on which countries currently best represent those city states, both in our region and in the world.\textsuperscript{8} Looking at these issues of power and relationships from the perspective of a small state, however, it might even be argued that they are more complicated for smaller states which observe, and are confronted by, the rivalry around them. Small states too are international actors. They too have to think hard and ask themselves difficult questions about their own positioning and roles. Indeed, the History of the Peloponnesian War is not just about Athens and Sparta – it is also about the states of Corinth, Thebes, Argos, Plataea and others. This then raises the question, can Thucydides and his History of the Peloponnesian War tell us anything useful about how a small state like New Zealand might interpret and think about its own foreign policy? It is this paper’s contention that Thucydides, and particularly the behaviour of the small state of Plataea before, during and after the period covered by the History of the Peloponnesian War, can tell us a great deal about how New Zealand might wish to conduct itself in the international arena.

At this point, the obvious question is to ask what New Zealand’s place in the region and the world is. In geo-strategic terms, New Zealand has often been wryly described as ‘a strategic dagger pointed at the heart of Antarctica’. This is shorthand for the fact that:

---


\textsuperscript{8} See for example Stefan Haid, Why President Obama Should Read Thucydides: Ancient Lessons for the 21st Century, Duesseldorfer Institut fuer Aussen-und Sicherheitspolitik, No. 34, November 2008.
(a) New Zealand poses no threat to anyone; and
(b) New Zealand is of marginal strategic value.

Put simply, New Zealand is a long way away from the main centres of global power and influence. For all its catchiness, however, this description of New Zealand is obviously something of a caricature. It needs to be qualified in two ways.

First, with the rise of China, and ASEAN, and thus the broader long-term trends of economic development in Asia, New Zealand is now geographically closer to some of the main engines of global political and economic influence than was the case thirty years ago. Importantly too, as the Asia-Pacific region increasingly becomes the place where evolving global rivalries are played out, New Zealand will, like it or not, have to think about how and where it needs to be situated in a geo-strategic sense, as well as economically.

Second, the emergence of Australia as a middle power of increasing heft in the past twenty years is a significant benefit for New Zealand and the wider region. That provides opportunity, but also risk.

For example, there is obvious opportunity for New Zealand as a consequence of the ever-increasing integration between New Zealand and Australia. By working together, Australia and New Zealand have a measure of influence they simply do not enjoy alone. Yet there is a clear risk too – maintaining New Zealand’s relevance in political and economic terms as Australia ploughs ahead with its middle power aspirations is going to be a challenge for New Zealand. The smaller partner always needs to justify its relevance. In simple terms, it has to be able to consistently, and persuasively, answer the hard question ‘what value do you add?’ And that question is as much about tomorrow as it is about next year. Australia is familiar with precisely this challenge in its own relationship with the United States.

There are no favours in international relations and small states – and even medium sized ones - need to accept that hard edged reality. In recalling lessons to be learned from Thucydides, it is possible to see Australia as the modern day equivalent of Corinth, or Thebes or Argos; an emerging medium sized power with a sophisticated view of the world and its engagement therein, but with a clear-headed sense of its own national interests, the context it operates in regarding the larger powers and how other smaller states, like New Zealand can assist in securing that interest. This was the way a number of the smaller Greek states operated during the period described so vividly by Thucydides.
Is New Zealand Unique? Size, Distance and Economic Expectations Matter

As noted above, New Zealand is obviously small and distant, and in this regard unique among OECD countries. This is not meant to be a pompous exaltation of New Zealand’s role as an ‘independent small state’ or indeed a reference to its anti-nuclear policy, or its striking role in anti-whaling or disarmament issues or even New Zealand’s ‘clean green – 100 per cent pure’ credentials. Nor is it a reference to New Zealand’s credibility as a creative trader or trade negotiator. All of these comments are all more or less true, or more or less false depending on your perspective. In any case – these are rather less interesting than the way New Zealand could conduct its future foreign policy.

New Zealand’s uniqueness is simply a reflection of the brutal ‘facts on the ground.’ Specifically, New Zealand is a developed country. Its four million people continue to have developed world expectations of its infrastructure, transport systems, education, healthcare and so on. These expectations are no different to those held by populations in other OECD countries. That in itself is of course not unique. Combine this with the reality of distance, however, and the case can be made that New Zealand is indeed unique among OECD economies in being both small and distant.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Geographically Close</th>
<th>Small Economy</th>
<th>Large Economy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Austria, Belgium,</td>
<td></td>
<td>Germany, France,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Czech Republic,</td>
<td></td>
<td>United Kingdom, Italy,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denmark, Finland,</td>
<td></td>
<td>United States, Canada,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greece, Hungary,</td>
<td></td>
<td>Mexico, Netherlands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iceland, Ireland,</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luxembourg, Norway,</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portugal, Spain,</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden, Switzerland,</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slovak Republic,</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poland, Turkey</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geographically Distant</td>
<td>New Zealand</td>
<td>Australia, Japan, Korea</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: OECD Economies: Size and Distance

9 The category of size is determined by country levels of GDP drawn from the World Bank *World Bank Development Indicators*, Washington, World Bank, 2010.
Small State International Engagement: The Arcs of Engagement and Influence

With this knowledge, it is useful to examine how New Zealand thinks about its engagement with the region and the world. One way of doing so is to frame the following discussion in the context of three specific ‘arcs of influence and engagement’. Such a mechanism provides a means through which to understand the context for the conduct and management of New Zealand’s international relationships. These arcs are first, from Australia to the Pacific – New Zealand’s immediate neighbourhood; second, from the Pacific to the Asia-Pacific region – New Zealand’s near abroad; and third, from the Asia-Pacific region to the world.

What underpins all three of these arcs of engagement is the value proposition New Zealand can bring to international relations. New Zealand can deliver a nimble and agile diplomacy - a unique small power attribute that could be a fruitful attribute to bring to the big issues that dominate the region. Above all, other countries need to see New Zealand as a credible, creative and serious country and this will maximise the quality of its engagement.

New Zealand is fortunate that it is geographically proximate to the most dynamic and fast-growing region in the world. It is, however, a region that has come relatively late to the waves of regional integration that swept over Europe or over the Americas (through NAFTA \(^\text{10}\)) over the past sixty years.

While it may be a latecomer to the processes of regionalisation, the region is catching up fast. In fact the Asia-Pacific region is a far safer place than it was during the Cold War. For the first time perhaps, countries in the Asia-Pacific region are not motivated by the threat of extinction or by the furious geopolitics that characterised the 1960s and 1970s. That said, New Zealand cannot be complacent and now pretend to some Panglossian vision of a region of contentment. That is clearly not the case.

Can the rise of China or India be seen as a modern-day Sparta, drifting towards rivalry and tension with an American Athens and a cluster of Delian League supporters? Or, to take a leap forward in history, is it possible to learn a lesson from the 19th Century; perhaps a Metternichian ‘Concert of Great Powers’ could help as an antidote to this pending crisis?

These are all interesting ways to think about the Asia-Pacific region. Yet is this era of *Pax Americana* necessarily under threat? Rather, it may be more useful to consider a *Pax Asiatica* that is evolving, and that there may be more confidence now that the presence of more and more powerful players – a plurilateral world – is a meaningful constituency for peace and stability – possibly even more so than the previous order. Hugh White’s essay on the ‘power shift’ underway

---

\(^{10}\) North American Free Trade Agreement.
between Beijing and Washington\textsuperscript{11} provides much food for thought in this regard.

It is this paper’s contention that the international order simply cannot be maintained by some kind of oligopolistic process that privileges the giants of the region and shunts aside the middle sized and smaller regional powers like Korea, Vietnam, Australia, Indonesia, Singapore and New Zealand to name but a few. Reflecting on the Peloponnesian War, this would in fact be iminical to larger states’ interests as well. It is worth recalling that when arrangements (ie. networks of alliances and agreements between smaller city states) emerged during the war, the consequences for the major players were far-reaching. It is also why a number of the smaller and medium sized Greek city states were actively encouraged by one or other of the major powers either within the region such as Sparta and Athens, or by external actors like Persia, to help develop and support alliance structures – the ‘Leagues’ - as a way of managing the emerging regional giants.

It is for this reason too that the state of Plataea was actively contributing to Athenian efforts to establish league-type structures in a bid to balance the rise of Sparta. Moreover, Plataea did not confine its efforts to activist diplomacy alone. It made its high-quality military force available to the Athenians for regional actions. Proportionately it also appears to have provided more than almost any other state to the Athenian war effort. It understood, as all small states do, that working together really does matter and that small states cannot be seen to shirk their share of the burden. Indeed, this even extended to Plataea – a land-based city-state with no naval capacity - at various times being prepared to offer its soldiers as sailors, even though they had limited abilities in this regard\textsuperscript{12}

In a similar fashion to the small states in the Peloponnesian War – small countries like New Zealand understand the importance of concentrating resources on issues and areas that matter to its vital national interests. New Zealand well understands that it cannot do everything and there is a very good economic principle – the Pareto Principle - that usefully encapsulates the way small states might look at their international engagement.\textsuperscript{13} This economic principle is not a bad way of thinking about the tradeoffs small states have to make on a day to day basis when they engage internationally.


\textsuperscript{13} The Pareto Principle is a means of understanding the unequal relationship between inputs and outputs. It finds that 80 per cent of any given outcome is the result of 20 percent of effort or investment.
Countries like New Zealand understand that they need to have an ear, an eye, a view and a voice on the wide range of initiatives and actions in their regions so that they can be credible as an international player who adds value to bilateral and plurilateral relationships. In New Zealand’s case, not least its relationship with Australia.

**Small States: Leveraging Opportunities and Managing Risks**

As a way of maintaining relevance and ensuring that its view and voice are considered, small countries like New Zealand might consider taking a leaf out of the book of a number of the smaller Greek city states, not least by being:

1. active and creative; and
2. more self-promoting.

The following offers an outline, and practical examples of what precisely this means for New Zealand.

**Being Active and Creative**

New Zealand needs to continue to bring its distinct world view to the table with Australia and other partners and demonstrate where and how it adds value. Crucially, however, New Zealand cannot wait for an invitation.

Like most middle-sized powers, Australia and others respect and understand the assertion of national interests and New Zealand would do well to remember this in its engagement with Canberra and other regional capitals. Small states, in their relations with medium and larger powers, always need to remind their counterparts - both political appointees and public service officials - of what they have to offer and how their approach can measurably assist the other state in its pursuit of its own national interests. Essentially, it is all about explaining, and promoting, a country’s value proposition.

The following provides two examples of New Zealand’s diplomacy in action designed to generate a multiplier effect that underlines the value of New Zealand as a country with considerable value to add – a country with interesting ideas and thus one worth spending time with. Creating such an impression is designed very deliberately to help provide New Zealand with a ticket at the ‘small table’ when deals are done and key decisions are taken – particularly where these touch on New Zealand national interests.

First, in 2009, the G20 announced a commitment to eliminate fossil fuel subsidies. New Zealand supports this commitment not least given its clear economic and climate change mitigation benefits. New Zealand also wanted to find a way into G20 conversations. This is because at the time, the G20 was considering issues like banking reform – matters which touch on New
Zealand’s national interests. Since New Zealand is not a G20 member, it needed to find a way into a conversation with G20 countries that provided an opportunity to canvass the members of the G20 and ensure its view was heard and understood.

To this end, New Zealand led the establishment of an initiative called the Friends of Fossil Fuel Subsidy Reform. It joined with Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Ethiopia, Finland, Singapore and Costa Rica to lobby G20 countries to implement the latter’s stated commitments ambitiously and transparently. This gave New Zealand a specific reason to call on these G20 countries in their capitals and, incidentally, to talk about other issues of interest to it on the G20’s agenda, beyond fossil fuel subsidy reform.

On its own, New Zealand would have had no real ability to insist on seeing the G20 senior official in Beijing or Washington, let alone Canberra, but at the head of a cluster of respectable, serious and credible small countries, New Zealand’s cachet was enhanced and its influence was maximised.

The second initiative was closer to home. New Zealand has been observing the development of a Regional Economic Community among ASEAN countries by 2015. This is an exciting initiative – not least because of the AANZFTA trade treaty14, which helps to better align the Australian and New Zealand economies with ASEAN over time. The AAZNFTA therefore represents an important hook for further engagement.

At the same time, however, New Zealand wondered how the ASEAN Regional Economic Community would evolve. After all, as a small country, the lens through which New Zealand observes the world is that it needs to be sighted in some way or the other – riding every Bismarckian horse there is and trying to avoid difficult decisions about which horse to favour remains a key element in New Zealand’s thinking. What New Zealand devised was a CER-ASEAN Integration Partnership Forum.15 The idea was straightforward. New Zealand wanted to share with ASEAN the lessons it had learnt in developing CER between Australia and New Zealand. New Zealand understood that ASEAN was going through its own regional economic integration process and thought that a high-level seminar series sharing experiences would be a way to engage ASEAN directly. New Zealand’s objectives in doing this were two-fold: to further enhance Australia and New Zealand’s credentials as partners of choice for ASEAN when it considers regional economic integration, and to help inform the process of ASEAN regional integration. By developing this kind of mechanism for engagement with ASEAN, New Zealand has created for itself – along with a key bilateral partner, Australia - another avenue into interesting conversations and ways to try and help inform thinking in the development of a key regional organisation over the medium term. In other words – creativity

14 ASEAN Australia New Zealand Free Trade Agreement.
15 Closer Economic Relations-ASEAN Integration Partnership Forum.
and ideas can help deliver access and a measure of influence not otherwise available to a small country like New Zealand.

**Being More Self Promoting**

New Zealand cannot pretend to be a ‘middle power’. What it can do is promote itself more to both larger and medium-sized powers, especially Australia. New Zealand is a useful partner that adds a valuable and supportive dimension to other country’s global engagements, not least where that dovetails neatly (and sometimes not so neatly) with New Zealand’s own national interests. A good example is the way in which New Zealand managed its engagement with the G20 Leadership process.

New Zealand was perhaps the only country that was quick to understand that, given its relative economic weight, it might not be able to make a credible claim to be in the G20. That policy of making a virtue out of necessity was informed of course by a ruthlessly hard-nosed assessment by New Zealand of where its long term national interests lay and how it might maximise influence in the short to medium term and beyond. New Zealand did not resort to statistical or other spurious arguments to make a risible claim to G20 membership – or to lobby for a larger grouping that could include New Zealand, a G-40 or a G-50 say – as many other smaller countries were arguing.

Instead, New Zealand concluded that a larger grouping would be simply too clumsy and ineffective to deal with the big global financial issues that the G20 was expected to grapple with. Membership for membership’s sake did not make sense to New Zealand. Its strong preference was for a serious credible grouping that could actually address the key economic issues in a relatively nimble and focused way. That said, New Zealand also wanted to ensure it had a way of accessing those conversations among the G20 membership.

For this reason, New Zealand looked to support and actively shore-up Australia’s own credentials, thereby ensuring a measure of influence (through the deep and broad linkages between New Zealand and Australia) that New Zealand could not otherwise enjoy in that country’s absence. In addition, New Zealand focused its lobbying on G20 composition around the need for this body to establish and sustain substantive outreach mechanisms that would include New Zealand – something that was also secured. New Zealand’s promotion of Australia’s bid for the G20 did not go unnoticed in some key capitals and had the benefit of focusing attention on the importance of G20 outreach processes.

This example simply serves to underline the value in continuing to remind Australia – and indeed others - of New Zealand’s hard-headed decision to promote Australia’s credentials tied into a meaningful outreach mechanism by the G20. This was something on which then Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, and now the current Prime Minister Julia Gillard, placed the highest priority. It also highlights the value New Zealand might usefully extract by
actively promoting itself and reminding Australia (and others) of what ‘we have done for it lately’, rather than modestly stepping back and underplaying its own role.

**Thucydides and New Zealand**

This paper has explained how small states can leverage opportunity and effectively manage their relationships with other smaller countries and middle powers like Australia. In particular it has shown that this can be achieved by being creative, pro-active and self-promoting.

Small states like New Zealand are navigating a complex range of policy challenges; foreign, defence and trade. This complexity is compounded by the continuing effects of the global financial crisis, very real climate/environment-related and other challenges over time to our economy, and a near-abroad - the Pacific - which is in danger of being increasingly politically and economically unstable. It is here where we can return to Thucydides to understand how the role and behaviour of small states is timeless. This paper has already identified the small Greek city state of Plataea as providing the model for how we might think of New Zealand in a Thucydidean paradigm.

Plataea was one of the few city states to survive beyond the arrival in Greece of both Persia and Rome – it certainly survived longer than many of the other small and even medium-sized states of the era. It went through some particularly difficult patches – but it survived. What was the secret of this small state’s success? It had a core integrated military, economic and political alliance with Athens, and replicated such arrangements with a range of medium-sized states clustered around Attica and beyond. It had a sophisticated understanding of the importance of regional alliance structures. It parlayed those key relationships, with Corinth, Thebes, Argos and Athens to name a few, into positions of greater influence than other small states. And it did this in part by ensuring it was part of, seen to be on, on every ‘League’ – or alliance network that was available; the Dorian, the Delian, Corinthian, Ionian, Theban and so forth. In other words, Plataea rode every horse that was going. Plataea was, however, careful not to over-reach itself. It did not behave like Corinth nor was it given to extravagance or military adventurism like Thebes. It did, however, pursue a patient and skilful diplomacy with the Greek city states throughout the region and beyond.

Like New Zealand, Plataea too understood that robust economic notion that there is no such thing as a free lunch – especially for small states. It did not shirk its ‘international’ military responsibilities. It provided ships at Salamis to the Athenian naval commanders in the great defeat of the Persian invasion in 490 BC, and was the only city state to join Athens at the Battle of Marathon in the same year. The numbers were small, but proportionately they were more
significant than any of the medium sized states and indeed, commensurate with the levels of commitment made by Athens.

Moreover, Athens, Thebes, Corinth and others used Plataea to coordinate other alliances in their support. They also looked to Plataea to help make sense of the regional evolution of hegemonic postures. It was the Plataeans who helped establish the various emerging regional alliances, including their evolution over time and it was the Plataeans who maintained lines of trusted communications at all times to all parties. In short, the Plataeans mattered because they understood that small states which are prepared to be serious and credible – active, creative and self-promoting - can parlay that into force multipliers.

The conclusion New Zealand might usefully draw from the Plataean experience is straightforward: New Zealand needs to behave like Plataea; it must be a part of every process going forward, but it needs to simultaneously work closely with a major regional power, or cluster or countries forming a regional bloc (like ASEAN). It has to be seen as serious, credible, creative and active and needs to self-promote its significance. It also needs a strong grasp of the evolution of regional structures and must avoid being trapped – as Plataea once was between Thebes and Sparta. Above all it needs partners – and to do that New Zealand needs to understand its own value and advance that with whom it wants to work closely. In this regard Australia remains a critical relationship for New Zealand in the same way that Athens was for Plataea. Indeed, as the Battle of Marathon so vividly demonstrates, Plataea was critical to Athens’ long term survival too – as New Zealand continues to be for Australia.

There is no doubt that the world looks better, and one can make better sense of it all, if one has a trusted partner that adds value. From New Zealand’s perspective it needs to continue to be more self promoting about the things it does well and how these add value to their partner’s own objectives in ways that serve shared national interests. A small state and a medium sized state, like New Zealand and Australia, work better together. The value proposition makes sense.