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ON CENTRE AND PERIPHERY: A BRIEF SURVEY OF GRAND STRATEGIES¹ AND MILITARY STRATEGIES² FOCUSED ON PERIPHERIAL THEATRES OF OPERATIONS (PTOs)

FLORIN DIACONU

Centre and *periphery* are important concepts, each of them with several different meanings in International Relations and Strategic Studies (including Geopolitics and Geo-strategy). These two concepts – together with the *immensely* significant *political* reality they are correlated with, that of *national (or state) power*³ – are useful tools enabling an effective, complex and flexible understanding of the way in which war *is* (or *is not*) an adequate political tool, able (or, on the contrary, not able) to accomplish major geo-strategic goals (which are very important elements of the *national interest*⁴ in its dynamics).

Centre and periphery: three major different meanings

According to some authors, the two concepts are to be evaluated mainly in terms of *global economics* (economic modernity and industrial output):

¹ The meaning of *grand strategy* is, in the context of this study, that one presented by B. H. Liddell Hart – an effort to properly mobilize and coordinate all the resources of a nation (or those of alliance) in order to accomplish the *political* goals of the war. For this definition see B. H. LIDDELL HART, *Strategia. Acțiunile indirecte*, Ed. Militară, București, 1973, p. 334; for other definitions of strategy and grand strategy see EDWARD N. LUTTWAK. *Strategy. The logic of war and peace*, The Bellknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England, 1987.

² *Military strategy* is a concept designating the ability of military commanders to win wars. The more military victories are, the larger become the chances that political goals will be reached in the end. For a more complex and flexible definition of military strategy, as an element (or instrument) of grand strategy, see B. H. LIDDELL HART, *Strategia. Acțiunile indirecte*, Ed. Militară, București, 1973, p. 331-343.

³ For the definition of national power and a detailed presentation of its constitutive elements, see HANS J. MORGENTHAU, *Politics among nations. The struggle for power and peace*, third edition, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1964, pp. 27-31 and 110-148.

⁴ For a brief definition of national interest, see JOSEPH S. NYE, JR., *Descifrarea conflictelor internaționale. Teorie și istorie*, Ed. Antet XX Press, București, 2005, pp. 53-54.

centrality is, according to such authors, in many occasions and directly connected with the more modern and more developed ability to produce a lot of manufactured goods of all sorts, while peripheral status is directly associated with the ability of producing only raw materials to be used by the centre(s)⁵. Such a thinking pattern clearly leads us to understand that *centre = (or means) modernity* and *centre = development*, while *periphery = underdevelopment*. The fact that peripheral status of some regions (states) is a direct result of insufficient modernity (development) is presented with a lot of significant details by some works analysing major trends in Eastern Europe. John R. Lampe, for example, the author of an important part of a collective volume called *The origins of backwardness in Eastern Europe*, formulates – and then offers a detailed answer to – an interesting question: the lack of modernity and development in the Balkans along several centuries (between the early stages of the 16th century and 1914, to be more accurate) is to be studied in terms of “imperial frontier” or in terms of “capitalist periphery”?⁶

Other authors, on the contrary, focus the attention mainly on the *geographic* meaning of the two concepts. For such authors, both *centrality and peripheral status are of almost geometric nature: the geographic/geometric core of a region (continent) is the centre, while actors on the placed far away from the centre, on the outer rim of that region, do have peripheral status*. This is the type of logic which led politicians and historians to call *Central Powers* the mighty political and military alliance build by Germany at the end of the 19th century.

A third way of using the concepts *centre* and *periphery* is that one focusing almost the entire attention on *the relative or absolute significance of actors on the international arena*. According to such a vision, *centre* is a concept used to designate the group of major powers, with global interests and global capabilities, while *periphery* designates the very large group of minor powers, lacking both global interests and global capabilities. A third category – *semi-periphery* – exists as well, say those using this paradigm, and it groups both former elements of the centre (former great powers now in clear decline), and emerging powers within the periphery, and also regional powers (too powerful to naturally belong to periphery, but also too weak to fully belong to the centre)⁷. Such a thinking pattern means that *centre/centrality = (or means) very*

⁵ JOSHUA S. GOLDSTEIN, JOHN C. PEVEHOUSE, *Relații internaționale*, Ed. Polirom, Iași, 2008, p. 606. According to some economists, clearly state these two authors, centre(s) and periphery(ies) are not clearly separated; sometimes, within the periphery some centres do exist, while central regions have their own less developed areas (peripheries).

⁶ JOHN R. LAMPE, “Frontieră imperială sau periferie capitalistă? Despre cum trebuie definită înapoierea balcanică între 1520 și 1914”, in Daniel Chirot (coord.), *Originile înapoierii în Europa de Est*, Ed. Corint, București, 2004, pp. 219-253.

⁷ For such a structure of the international system, see IMMANUEL WALLERSTEIN, *Sistemul mondial modern*, I-IV, Ed. Meridiane, București, 1992-1993, but also a more recent and very

*significant (or even main, leading) role on the international arena, while periphery/peripheral status = only secondary role on the international arena. In direct correlation with such a thinking pattern, what some authors call geo-strategic players do naturally belong to the centre (are major actors), while geo-political pivots are peripheral (secondary) elements of the international arena*⁸

Along the following pages, I will systematically use elements belonging mainly to the second and the third ways of understanding the problems of centre and periphery. I mean by this that, within the framework of this study, the concept *central theatre of operations (CTO)* designates a significant geo-strategic reality with some obvious features: *it is placed directly between the two competitors we are speaking about (which means geographic/geometric centrality – see, for example, the case of north eastern France as a CTO in the context of the war between France and Prussia at 1870-1871); it has a major (potentially even vital) strategic importance for both competitors; it absorbs the largest part of available military resources of both competitors (in terms of manpower, strategically significant technologies, logistic support, reinforcements).* Quite clearly, in such a situation *peripheral theatre of operations (PTO)* is to designate a geo-strategic reality with a different set of features: *it is not necessarily placed directly between the two competitors (so that it embodies what we can accurately call peripheral geographic status/position, which is the opposite of geometric/geographic centrality of the CTO); it is not vitally important (or at least it is not regarded to be so, mainly in the opening stages of the conflict); it does not absorb the largest part of the available resources of the competitors; in spite of all these, the military and political consequences of major and clear victories on these PTOs can be really immense (sometimes clearly larger than even the consequences of major events taking place on CTOs).*

In order to better understand all these I selected four significant historical examples. Two of them (the case of Athens in the 5th century B.C. and that of Alexander the Great) are from Ancient Times; a third one is from the end of the 18th and early stages of the 19th century (in the era dominated by the political and military plans and deeds of Napoleon Bonaparte) and the fourth one is belonging to the 20th century (the naval PTOs in World War I). These four examples clearly have both a strong common denominator (which is the significant role of PTOs) and major differences (technologies used, the very nature of political regimes involved, size of armed forces, nature of political and military goals etc).

brief text: ANDREI MIROIU, “Evoluția sistemului internațional până în 1914”, in Andrei Miroiu, Radu-Sebastian Ungureanu (coord.), *Manual de relații internaționale*, Ed. Polirom, Iași, 2006, p. 17.

⁸ For these two concepts – geo-strategic active players and geo-strategic pivots – see ZBIGNIEW BRZEZINSKI, *Marea tablă de șah. Supremația americană și imperativele sale geostrategice*, Ed. Univers Enciclopedic, București, 2000, pp. 53-55.

Athens and PTOs in the Peloponnesian War (5th century B.C.)

Athens, mainly as a result of major domestic political changes (above all the decision to implement what we call now democracy) quickly consolidated its power status (both by sharply increasing the total number of citizens with political rights and with the correlated military responsibilities and by massively developing the Navy, in which very large numbers of poor city dwellers were used as rowers), managing to become the dominant power⁹ in the Aegean region and to maintain this extraordinary geo-strategic position for several decades¹⁰.

In several occasions, *Athenian political decision-makers and commanding generals cleverly used PTOs*. The most important competitor Athens had to cope with, after the moment when the Persian Empire had been badly defeated in 480-479 BC, was Sparta, with an enormous military potential (large and very strong land army) and with a huge political prestige. The geographic distance between Sparta and Athens was quite small (less than 200 miles, across the Corinth Isthmus, a situation strongly resembling that of the more recent civil War in USA, with the Federal capital and the Confederate capital separated by only 160 kilometres¹¹). *The Athenians never attempted to directly threaten or attack Sparta along the shortest possible route, so that what we call CTO was not very much used* (with the significant exceptions of the early massive invasions of Attica by land armies of Sparta). *On the contrary, PTOs were extensively used*. Athens skilfully used the huge potential of a PTO in the Black Sea area (the core elements of this PTO were major trade lines and the wheat producers on the shores of the Black Sea; as long as the crops were fine and the trade routes open, Athens – able to properly feed its quite large population – had all the chances to survive and maintain its exceptional power status, even if militarily defeated). The Black Sea PTO had been consolidated by a massive naval and political mission led by Pericles himself, a few years before the Peloponnesian War. Plutarch describes with all necessary details the major naval raid led by Pericles. A very large fleet was used. And – clearly stated Plutarch – the political gains were enormous, matching the vast resources used: several city-states asked the Athenians to act as protectors and/or mediators; the barbarian kings on the shores of Black Sea had the occasion to see with their own eyes how powerful Athens was; political and strategic area of influence was significantly extended; a quite important squadron, 13 ships strong (which means more than 2,200 crew members and up to 200 heavily armoured

⁹ For various power statuses and their basic features (great power, dominant power, world power, minor power, etc), see MARTIN WIGHT, *Politica de putere*, Ed. Arc, Chişinău, 1998, pp. 31-75.

¹⁰ For the evolution of Athens in the 5th century BC, see J. B. BURY, RUSSELL MEIGGS, *Istoria Greciei până la moartea lui Alexandru cel Mare*, ediția a IV-a revăzută, Ed. BIC ALL, Bucureşti, 2006, pp. 127-322; and RUSSELL MEIGGS, *The Athenian Empire*, Oxford University Press, 1979.

¹¹ ALAN FARMER, *Războiul civil american, 1861-1865*, Ed. BIC ALL, Bucureşti, 2004, pp. 35-36.

warriors) was left to support the emerging democratic regime at Sinope (on the northern shores of Asia Minor) in the fight against the former ruler, tyrant Timesilaos. When the democrats prevailed in the end, Pericles immediately sent 600 colonists to reside at Sinope, boosting even more the already very potent Athenian influence in PTO we are speaking about, the Black Sea area¹². There is a definite correlation of the obvious and major success of the massive raid in the Black Sea area and the history of the direct confrontation of Athens with Sparta. For more than 25 years, the Athenians managed to maintain complete control of the Straits, of the wheat trade and of the minor allies in the Black Sea area. As a direct result of all these, Athens managed to overcome both defeats, and military blunders and natural disasters (as the plague which killed a large share of the population, together with the so ambitious and gifted Pericles). Only in the final stages of the Peloponnesian War, a Spartan political and military leader managed to understand that defeating Athens is possible only by severing its communications and trade routes with the PTO in the Black Sea area. Xenophon presents with lots of details the way in which the war came to an end: in spite of the fact that the financial situation of the state was already *very* difficult, the Athenians were still able to deploy in the region of the Straits 180 triremes led by Conon. The Spartan fleet, led by Lysandros, had more than 200 warships. Directly threatening the trade routes vital for Athens, Lysandros made the Athenians to engage in a battle they lost (the battle at Aegospotami, in 405 B.C.), mainly as a direct result of logistics: Athenian crews were on shore, too seek for food, when the Spartans suddenly attacked and easily captured 171 ships. Quite soon, as long as the mastery of open seas was not any more belonging to the Athenians, several major allies of Athens in the Aegean Sea area were forced to surrender and Athens itself, blocked and starved, accepted a peace severely diminishing its power status¹³.

Another interesting – and significant – PTO was that in the lower part of the Adriatic Sea (what we usually call the Ionian Sea). Athens deployed there a small squadron (led in several occasions by talented admirals, including Phormio, probably the most effective naval commander along the entire Peloponnesian War), first of all to help Corcyra against Corinth. This *deployment of very limited resources to a distant and secondary PTO led in the end to several major naval engagements, with strategic and political consequences larger than the aggregate costs of the resources (ships, crews, cost of logistical support) used*. Corcyra managed to survive and remained for a long time a loyal ally of Athens; and the sea trade of the Peloponnesians was blocked as a direct result of two major victories won by Phormio. In 429 BC, several dozen Peloponnesian ships were defeated at Rhion. Then, with only 20 triremes, Phormio managed to

¹² For all these, see PLUTARH, “Pericles”, in *Vieți Paralele*, I, Ed. Științifică, București, 1960, XX (p. 207), and also RUSSELL MEIGGS, *The Athenian Empire*, pp. 197-199.

¹³ XENOFON, *Helenicele*, Ed. Științifică, București, 1965, II, 1, 20-II, 2, 10.

defeat another large Peloponnesian fleet, 77 ships strong, at Naupaktos. Four years later, in 425, the same PTO became the stage of one of the most humiliating defeats Sparta ever suffered: 120 hoplites were forced to surrender on the tiny island of Pylos, together with other 172 allied hoplites from other Peloponnesian city-states (a share of almost 75% of the 420 hoplites which had had landed on Pylos and had had been blocked and besieged for 72 days)¹⁴.

Sicily was the third PTO which was, in the end, more important than expected for the final outcome of the Peloponnesian War. Geographically speaking, it was far away from Greece. If we speak about resources, its value was minimal for both sides (as long as Sparta was agriculturally self-sustainable and Athens still had free access to the wheat coming from another PHO, the Black Sea area. But some of the Athenian leaders designed a too ambitious grand strategic design: to capture Sicily (and, if possible, even Carthage¹⁵) in order to enhance even more the power of Athens (and in order to deny the Spartans – with Dorian ancestors – the chance to operate a strategic partnership with Syracuse, which were Dorians too). We have to take into account the fact that, at least in Alcibiade's mind, conquest of Sicily was just a step leading to larger goals: to “build up an Athenian empire in the west... and then, with the overwhelming resources of the west, to crush the Peloponnese”¹⁶. The fact that this plan was poorly implemented is almost irrelevant for our debate; had it been at least partially successful, another distant PTO could have become an extra positive asset for the Athenian imperial policies. The Sicilian expedition is, anyhow, important from another perspective as well: it proves that even failure (defeat) on PTOs can generate, up to a certain point, positive results for both sides. The winners (Sparta) gained extra prestige, while the losers (Athens) won something too: for some time, very important resources (ships, land forces and skilled generals) of their main foes were deployed to (and used on) a peripheral theatre of operations (PTO), far away from the real central theatre of operations (CTO) in the Aegean and on land, in southern central Greece.

In the end, *the synergetic geo-strategic value of PTOs led to a peculiar situation: in spite of being not decisively defeated on the CTO (either on land or at sea), Athens lost the Peloponnesian War as a direct result of being defeated, several times in a row, on different PTOs (in Sicily and later on in the region of the Straits linking the Aegean with the Black Sea area).*

¹⁴ For all these, see HELMUT PEMSEL, *Von Salamis bis Okinawa. Eine Chronik zur Seekriegsgeschichte*, J. F. Lehmanns Verlag, Munchen, 1975, p. 20. For a very suggestive and detailed description of the battle off Naupaktos, see THUCYDIDES, *Războiul peloponesiac*, Ed. Științifică, București, 1966, II, 86-92. For the episode at Pylos, see THUCYDIDES, *op. cit.*, IV, 29-38.

¹⁵ THUCYDIDES, *op. cit.*, VI, 15-18 (mainly the speech of Alcibiades in front of the Assembly).

¹⁶ RUSSELL MEIGGS, *The Athenian Empire*, pp. 346-347.

PTOs in the era of Alexander the Great

Peripheral theatres of operations (PTOs) were significant elements in the grand strategy and military strategy of Alexander the Great. As a preliminary step of his major campaigns against the Persian Empire, the young Macedonian king led a massive raid to the north, in Illyria and then across the Balkans and across the Danube. Arrianus vividly present, with a lot of useful details, the Macedonian actions on this peripheral theatre of operations (PTO). The main strategic goal of these Alexander's early military campaigns was to defeat several powerful and aggressive tribes in the north, before starting his Asian expedition. He attacked to the North in order to deny the barbarians any chance to threaten or to harm Macedonia, even if the largest part of its troops were to be deployed far away for many years¹⁷. A second goal (one Arrianus does not mention) must have been that of showing the Greeks that the young king is resolute and able to successfully lead military campaigns. The march to the Balkans was very short, only ten days long¹⁸, so that the local Thracian tribes were unable to concentrate all their forces and to organize a successful defence. Skilfully using both the heavily armoured infantry (the phalanx) together with his light troops and heavy cavalry (including the elite Companions), Alexander killed more than 1,500 enemies and captured many hostages. Quickly advancing to the Danube, the Macedonians attacked another large Thracian army and defeated it. The combat losses were clearly unbalanced (a clear sign of what strategic and tactical surprise can generate, both on CTOs and PTOs): while the barbarians lost more than 3,000 warriors, the Macedonians lost only 51 (40 of them foot soldiers and 11 cavalrymen)¹⁹. The final stage of this astonishingly quick strategic raid led the Macedonians across the Danube, in the southern part of what is now Romania. The local Thracians managed to concentrate almost 15,000 men (almost a third of them on horseback) and hoped that with such large an army they could easily stop the Macedonians, while Alexander could cross the river with only 1,500 elite cavalrymen and 4,000 other soldiers (including some units of his mighty, even if quite slow, phalanx)²⁰. In spite of being smaller, the Macedonian force was superbly led, armed and trained. It quite quickly advanced to a fortified village, making the locals to completely abandon their positions. The fortified village was deliberately destroyed by the Macedonians and quite large amounts of goods were captured. The results of these victories were immediate and important: other barbarian rulers on the shores of Danube decided not to confront Alexander and became allies of him²¹

¹⁷ ARRIANUS, *Expediția lui Alexandru cel Mare în Asia*, Ed. Științifică, București, 1966, I, 1, 3.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, I, 1, 5.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, I, 2, 7.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, I, 3, 5-6.

²¹ *Ibid.*, I, 4, 1-8.

(an early but significant example of what we call today *bandwagoning*²²). As a consequence of all these “astonishing campaigns”²³ against the “wild tribes”, *the western and northern PTOs were properly and completely secured, so that Alexander could concentrate all his forces to start his campaign against Persia, swiftly advancing to the CTO in Asia, after defeating the last major rebellion in Greece.* The episode shows how important victories on peripheral theatres of operations (PTOs) can be, simply by allowing the winner to concentrate all (or almost all) resources of all sorts to more important theatres of operations (TOs).

The peripheral theatres of operations (PTOs) were to play an important role in the next stage of Alexander’s actions as well. In the opening stages of the campaign against Persia, he had the chance to completely destroy, in early summer of 334 B.C., an entire army (almost twice larger than his own one) at Granicus²⁴, a naturally strong position within the central theatre of operations (CTO). After this early success, he decided to pursue a *peripheral grand (and military) strategy*, aiming to conquer the entire western part of the Persian Empire. His most obvious intention was “to wrest the command of the sea from the Persians, not by destroying their fleet, for he had not the means to do so, but by occupying all its ports and bases on the shores of the eastern Mediterranean. His formidable task took him two years to accomplish”²⁵. Such an intention was strategically sound, mainly because newly appointed commander of the Persian forces, Memnon, was already trying to counterattack in Greece and Macedonia, across the Aegean Sea²⁶. But Alexander managed to defend both his overextended lines of communications and the chances of success for his peripheral military strategy by defeating a second major Persian army at Issus²⁷. After that, he quickly advanced to Phoenicia, *another peripheral region* of the Persian Empire, conquering all its major cities and ports. Some modern authors clearly state that the decision to go to peripheral Phoenicia and not directly to the very core regions of Persia was “*dictated*” to him by *grand strategy*²⁸. After successfully besieging the mighty island city of Tyre (and peacefully integrating other Phoenician major cities and fleets within his emerging empire), Alexander

²² For the meaning of bandwagoning (“alignment with the source of danger”) and for its role in alliance generating processes, see STEPHEN M. WALT, *Originile alianțelor*, Ed. Institutul European, Iași, 2008, pp. 57-75.

²³ J. F. C. FULLER, Major General, *A military history of the Western World*, volume I: *From the earliest times to the battle of Lepanto*, Da Capo Press, 1987, p. 91.

²⁴ ARRIANUS, I, 13-16 (the Persians lost some 1,000 cavalymen and up to 18,000 mercenary Greek hoplites, while the Macedonians lost only 115 soldiers, more than 50% of them belonging to the elite heavy cavalry led by the young king himself).

²⁵ J. F. C. FULLER, Major General, *op. cit.*, vol. I, p. 93.

²⁶ ARRIANUS, *op. cit.*, II, 1, 1.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, II, 7-11 (again, the Macedonian combat casualties were quite small, while the Persians lost not only a very large number of soldiers, but also a huge amount of cash – some 3,000 talents – and also several members of the imperial family, captured by the Macedonians).

²⁸ B. H. LIDDELL HART, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

went on with his grand strategic design, aiming to conquer *another peripheral region*, Egypt. Only after consolidating his authority in that *peripheral* former province of the Persian Empire, Alexander boldly advanced, with a quite small army, to the central regions of Persian state – and to what we can call the *natural* (and obvious) central theatre of operations (CTO) of the entire campaign. Quite soon, he engaged the Persian army in another major battle, that at Arbela (Gaugamela)²⁹, in which he defeated again his opponents.

Peripheral theatres of operations (PTOs) played again a significant role in Alexander's plans and deeds in the *final* stages of his imperial conquests. Massive strategic raids were launched, in several successive occasions, against foes threatening some of the vulnerable *peripheral provinces* (and borders) of the new Macedonian Empire. *In some occasions, these PTOs absorbed more resources than previously expected and generated immensely difficult challenges (really huge distances³⁰, heavily fortified settlements to be conquered, severe logistic problems, extreme weather conditions of all sorts, plus difficult terrain – including some of the tallest mountains in Eurasia and several major deserts to be crossed)*. To better understand *how demanding and dangerous military and political actions on these PTOs could be*, it is useful to remember, for example, that Alexander himself was wounded not only at Issus (a clearly minor hip wound³¹), but also (more severely, by an arrow which punctured the upper part of his body armour) in such a quite late raid against the aggressive tribes from the present north-western India or eastern Pakistan³². Later on, in the context of the very difficult fights against the large kingdoms of India, Alexander lost in battle his beloved horse and was wounded again (this time a really dangerous wound, a heavy arrow penetrating, through the frontal armour, his breastbone; a few minutes later he was wounded again, several times, and started to falter when his companions came to rescue him)³³.

PTOs in the era of Napoleon Bonaparte

In the era of the French Revolution and of the 1st French Empire, two central theatres of operations (CTOs) were immensely important: the north-eastern one, that between France and its mighty continental and conservative powers, financially and politically supported by London (we are speaking about powers as Prussia, Austria

²⁹ J. F. C. FULLER, Major General, *op. cit.*, I, pp. 96-106.

³⁰ The Macedonian army marched “some 17,000 miles” (which means more than 27,200 km.), most of them *after* defeating the Persian Empire. For this figure see J. F. C. FULLER, Major General, *op. cit.*, I, p. 109.

³¹ ARRIANUS, *op. cit.*, II, 12, 1.

³² *Ibid.*, IV, 23, 3.

³³ PLUTARH, “Alexandru”, in *Vieți paralele*, IX (Alexandru și Cezar), Ed. Științifică, București, 1957, LXI and LXIII, and ARRIANUS, *op. cit.*, V, 14, 4-5 and VI, 10, 1-3.

and Russia) and the western one, with its core region in the part of the Atlantic separating France and England. On the other hand, *several peripheral theatres of operations (PTOs) proved themselves to be areas of direct and intense confrontation of France with its foes.*

But significant campaigns (sometimes generating significant consequences) were also fought on different peripheral theatres of operations (PTOs). The earliest one was that in Italy, in 1796-1797. Control of Lombardy (northern Italy) could generate at least two positive *strategic* consequences for the French: first of all, Austria could be threatened – or even attached – on two fronts, if Lombardy was in French hands; and secondly, French control of Lombardy could be a major and effective buffer zone protecting large shares of the territory controlled by Paris, simply by denying the Austrians the chance to easily invade south-eastern France. More than this, control of Italy could easily lead to other positive (and very attractive) consequences. The economic potential of the territory was high, so that an army of 400,000 soldiers could be easily logistically supported. More than this, a proper defence of the peninsula against enemies invading from Switzerland or Austria/Germany could be done with at most 200,000 soldiers³⁴, so that controlling Italy directly led to increased chances to mobilize extra soldiers for active (aggressive) campaigns in other regions of Europe. But Italy had also a geographic position and a naval tradition potentially enabling it to generate a large Navy (with combined crews, estimated Napoleon himself, of 120,000 sailors and gunners)³⁵. The Italian campaign in 1796-1797 (in which a French army with only 30,000 soldiers and 30 guns defeated 80,000 Austrians with 200 guns³⁶, later on heavily reinforced by Vienna, and several heavily defended fortresses) generated, in spite of the minimal resources used by the French, huge strategic benefits for Paris: the frontier on the Rhine became more secure; France gained supplementary influence in Italy; the French army absorbed a large number of precious volunteers; many weapons were captured; a large part of the costs of war were covered, in a way or another, by either the defeated Austrians or by the ‘liberated’ Italians³⁷. More than this, the Italian campaign in 1796-1797 clearly shows us, if we carefully explore the strategic decisions and actions of the Austrians, what types of strategic (political and military) mistakes can be done when making war on peripheral theatres of operations (PTOs), and how huge the consequences of such mistakes can be. In such a context, we have to remember that the most important mistake the Austrians did was that of “mobilizing only a segment of the forces available, mobilizing a second

³⁴ For these figures, see NAPOLEON, *Memorii*, I, Ed. Militară, București, 1981, p. 53.

³⁵ For the really significant naval potential of Italy, see *ibid.*, I, pp. 54-55.

³⁶ For the strength of the two armies, see *ibid.*, p. 62.

³⁷ For all these, see *ibid.*, pp. 199-205.

segment after the first had been defeated, and then a third”, instead of using “the fullest employment of all means available”³⁸.

A second campaign fought by Napoleon on a clearly peripheral theatre of operations (PTO) was that aiming to conquer Egypt, in order to use this country as a land base against England’s strategic interests in India. At that very moment, the central theatre of operations (CTO) was that in the Atlantic and in the English Channel. The French military commanders and political decision makers thought that the major goal to be accomplished is to defeat Great Britain, by means of a large landing operation able to project a large French army across the Channel. In order to increase the chances of success on the CTO, the French designed a strategic plan with three elements: first of all, bold attacks were to be launched against two PTOs: that in Ireland (where a French army with 30,000 soldiers could improve the chances of approximately 100,000 Irish insurgents) and that in Egypt (where another quite small army, also with 30,000 soldiers, could establish a major strategic base across the sea, at the opposite end of the Mediterranean, in order to threaten – or, if possible, to conquer – the British colonies in India. The French thought that, while fighting these campaigns on two PTOs several thousand miles apart, a huge window of opportunity will occur: the British will be forced to use an important part of their strategic reserves to defend both PTOs, Ireland and India; they will also use a quite large part of their mighty Navy to transport soldiers to Ireland and India; in such a situation, the CTO was to automatically become more vulnerable (because of two different reasons: British naval forces protecting the British shores against a landing operation were to become smaller, if many ships were to be deployed for operations aiming to defend Ireland and India; and also because the massive French army, with 150,000 soldiers concentrated around ports in the Channel area, could land in a Britain less protected than before, with many of its soldiers already deployed far away from the CTO, in order to stop the advance of the French on the PTOs)³⁹. In spite of its final failure, this strategic design led to an overextension of the British forces (so that forces protecting British homeland territories became clearly weaker). For example, when Napoleon started his Egyptian campaign (which started in 1798 and came to an end in 1799), the British were forced to deploy a quite large share of their Navy in the Mediterranean, far away from the CTO in the Channel. Nelson was given 13 (other authors wrote about 14) ships of the line to hunt and destroy the French fleet, this number representing approximately 12% of the 115⁴⁰ heavy ships of the British Navy at that very moment (again, *quite large a share of all available forces of a state are operating on a distant peripheral theatre of operations*).

³⁸ PETER PARET, “Napoleon and the Revolution in War”, in Peter Paret (ed.), *Makers of modern strategy from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*, Princeton University Press, 1986, p. 129.

³⁹ For this bold and clever strategic plan, see NAPOLEON, *op. cit.*, I, pp. 252-253.

⁴⁰ For these figures, see HELMUT PEMSEL, *op. cit.*, p. 154.

A third campaign led by Napoleon on a PTO was that in Italy, in 1800. This time, the Austrian army was not any more a weak one, as in 1796. On the contrary, it was “powerful and very well equipped”⁴¹. Skilfully and swiftly moving his own forces in northern Italy, Napoleon managed to occupy a strong position behind the main enemy line of resistance, threatening the entire rear of the Austrian armies. Later on, at Marengo, he managed to defeat the Austrians (even if with very heavy losses) and the synergetic consequences of military victories on the Italian CTO and of the obvious weaknesses inside the 2nd coalition made the Austrian morale to collapse and the Austrian decision makers to accept to evacuate Lombardy⁴². Again, *significant results on a PTO led to major changes in the evolution of the entire war*. And the dimensions of the consequences of major victory on the Italian PTO is strongly underlined by the very fact that roughly 100,000 foes of the revolution who took refuge abroad for many years were granted the permission to come back to France⁴³ (*so important were the strategic and above all political results gained at Marengo, on a PTO, that both domestic problems and foreign pressures suddenly became realities easier to cope with and officially regarded with more optimism*).

Spain was to become, for several years, another significant PTO, absorbing quite important French resources of all sorts and generating significant strategic and political consequences, both for France and for the powers Paris was directly challenging. In a way, *Spain was for France, in the early stages of the 19th century, exactly what Vietnam was to become for USA a century and a half later: a peripheral theatre of operations (PTO), far away from the major CTO of the confrontation (territories along an imaginary line linking Paris and Moscow, in the era of Napoleon, and Europe, in the era of the Cold War)*; a country where the effectiveness of regular warfare and regular troops was directly challenged by guerrillas and irregulars of all sorts; a country where popular resistance against a vastly superior enemy was deliberately boosted by another foreign major power (Spaniards were helped a lot in their fight against Napoleon by the direct – and larger and larger – military involvement of Great Britain, while the Vietnamese were granted a lot of help – mainly in terms of military hardware, for example – by the Soviet Union). One of the most important features of the Spanish campaigns in the era of Napoleon is that it absorbed more and more resources, that there is no positive correlation between the amount of resources used and the results generated by their use. In the end, the peripheral theatre of operations (PTO) in Spain eroded in an exceptionally effective way the military might – and the prestige – of France. We have to accept that, without the “Spanish ulcer”⁴⁴, Napoleon might have been able to

⁴¹ E. V. TARLE, *Napoleon*, ediția a III-a, Ed. pentru Literatură Universală, București, 1964, p. 100.

⁴² B. H. LIDDELL HART, *op. cit.*, pp. 112-113

⁴³ E. V. TARLE, *op. cit.*, p. 110.

⁴⁴ B. H. LIDDELL HART, *op. cit.*, p. 118.

attack Russia, in 1812 (his main enemy, on the central theatre of operations – CTO), with more and better troops. So that, another correlation occurs: *sometimes, challenging /difficult situations on PTOs force the political and military decision makers to deploy there more and more resources (mainly troops and military hardware). But such decisions do not automatically lead to success; on the contrary, they can harm a lot the capabilities of the great power acting aggressively on that PTO, denying it the chances to decisively act on the CTO (simply because any extra soldier sent to the PTO we are speaking about significantly erodes the capabilities to be used on the CTO).*

Naval PTOs in World War I

At sea, the central theatre of operations (CTO) was, from the very beginning of World War I, that in the North Sea. That was the tiny spot of the World Ocean where the probability of a direct and major clash of the *Grand Fleet* (the largest part of British Navy, concentrated at Scapa Flow in the Orkneys) with the German *Hochseeflotte* remained high almost to the very end of hostilities. That was the region where the most important naval engagements of the war were fought: Battle in the Heligoland Bight (August 28, 1914), battle of Doggerbank (January 24, 1915) and battle of Jutland (Skagerrak, in many history books)⁴⁵, fought in 1916 (May 31-June 1).

But in several occasions, *naval* peripheral theatres of operations (PTOs) were the stage on which violent (and potentially very important) clashes took place. The best known ones are directly associated with the operational decisions of Admiral Maximilian von Spee. In the opening stages of the war, he became commander in chief of a heterogeneous squadron, made up of two modern battle-cruisers, *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau* (12,000 tons each, armed with eight 8 in. guns) and three other smaller warships. In order to generate as much as possible confusion and panic (and in order to sharply increase the chances of his main battle group to freely operate), Spee detached the light cruiser *Emden* “to prey on Allied merchant shipping” in the Indian Ocean. *Emden*’s captain brilliantly accomplished his orders. Between September and early November 1914, *Emden* (a light cruiser with a total displacement of only 3,600 tons) managed to sink or to capture merchant ships of the Entente with a total displacement of almost 70.000 tons, plus several warships. In the end, *Emden* was crippled and sunk by a larger and better armed Australian cruiser, *Sydney*, on November 9, 1914. Anyhow, *the effectiveness of the quite weak*

⁴⁵ For a detailed analysis of the battles of Heligoland Bight, Doggerbank and Jutland (but also of the broad picture of the naval competition and of the arms race of Germany and Great Britain), see JOHN COSTELLO, TERRY HUGHES, *Jutland 1916*, Futura Publications Limited, 1976; for the tactical aspects of these battles see (text and very detailed maps) HELMUT PEMSEL, *op. cit.*, pp. 204-213.

German raider, operating alone, for almost three months, on a distant PTO, had been astonishingly high: for several weeks, merchant shipping was almost stopped in large areas of the Indian Ocean; the Australians were forced to organize large – and expensive, in terms of money and time – escorted convoys to protect their troop transports; and, above all, the British Admiralty had to organize a massive and *very* expensive hunt, using almost 70 warships to find and destroy the *Emden*⁴⁶.

At the same time, the rest of von Spee's squadron tried to reach another peripheral theatre of operations (PTO), that in South Atlantic, in order to harm – or, if possible, even to sever – the sea routes so important for the British Empire⁴⁷. On the road from the Central Pacific to the South Atlantic, Spee destroyed (on the evening of November 1st, 1914), off Chile, at Coronel, a British squadron (three old cruisers and an auxiliary one) under the command of Rear-Admiral Christopher Craddock. As a direct result of this action, British authorities decided to immediately send to South Atlantic (the obvious target of any move von Spee could do after Coronel) two mighty very modern capital ships. The *Inflexible* and the *Invincible*, large and well armed battle-cruisers, were selected for this mission. They sailed at full speed to the Falklands, reaching the islands on December the 7th, together with three older armoured cruisers and three light ones. Next day, von Spee's squadron appeared off Port Stanley and the battle was quickly engaged. The British battle-cruisers (each of them with a displacement of 20,125 tons, full load and armed with 8 12 in. guns) quickly outgunned the German ones (each of them with a displacement of only 11,600 tons and armed with smaller, 8 in. guns)⁴⁸. So that, in the end the entire German squadron was destroyed, and this victory on a so distant PTO improved a lot the strategic position of Great Britain at sea. It is important to properly underline how massive the British effort to defend a so distant PTO had been. When the decision to deploy the *Invincible* and the *Inflexible* to the South Atlantic was reached, The British Admiralty had only 9 modern battle-cruisers, with only 6 of them in home waters⁴⁹, so that 33% (*which mean a full third!*) of the entire available battle-cruiser force was immediately dispatched to defend a clearly peripheral theatre of operations (PTO).

Another naval peripheral theatre of operations in World War I was that at the Dardanelles. The heavily fortified Turkish positions defending the Straits

⁴⁶ For the story of *Emden*, see JACQUES MORDAL, *Twenty-five centuries of sea warfare*, Abbey Library, 1973, pp. 293-301.

⁴⁷ For this episode and the two battles it led to – those at Coronel and off the Falklands – see *ibid.*, pp. 266-270 and Richard Humble (ed.), *Naval warfare. An illustrated history*, Silverdale Books, 2004, pp. 136-139.

⁴⁸ For the technological features of both the British and the German battle-cruisers which fought the battle off the Falklands, see Tony Gibbons (general editor), *The encyclopedia of ships*, Silverdale Books, 2001, pp. 318-319 and 326.

⁴⁹ JOHN COSTELLO, TERRY HUGHES, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

linking the Black Sea and the Aegean Sea were strongly attacked, along several years, by the Entente. The strategic goal of such a move was an important part of a *peripheral grand strategy*, aiming to completely defeat first of all at least one of the peripheral allies of Germany, and only afterwards the core element of the Central Powers. The earliest attacks took place on November 3rd, 1914, when several British and French major warships shelled the forts defending the Dardanelles. In February 1915, 18 heavy warships of the Entente were already concentrated off the Dardanelles. The first major attempt to break through the Straits took place on March 18th, 1915, when three large ships (a French one and two British) were sunk when they hit a minefield, and a fourth capital ship (a British battle-cruiser) was badly damaged and had to be immediately abandon the mission. Failing to break the Turkish defences only by naval bombardment, the Entente staged a massive landing operation, using large British and Australian and New Zealand (ANZAC) units. Again, *very large resources were used in order get decisive (or at least important) results on a very distant peripheral theatre of operations*. The 18 major warships of the Entente used to shell the Turkish forts protecting the Dardanelles represented an important share of the total naval forces of Great Britain and France (in the opening stages of World War I, the British had 21 dreadnoughts, 40 older battleships and 9 modern battle-cruisers, while the French had only 4 dreadnoughts and 18 older battleships⁵⁰; these figures, put together, generate a grand total of 92 major ships, and *those 18 large ships deployed to the Dardanelles represent a share of almost 20% of the total available forces, a really very large percentage for a PTO*).

Final remarks

All the four case studies selected for this not very large presentation have a clear *common denominator*: they prove (even if with different intensities) that, *at least sometimes, peripheral theatres of operations (PTOs) can play a really important role in shaping the final results of major strategic confrontations. And, sometimes, final results of such major strategic confrontations can be influenced more by partial results on PTOs than by the results of the effort to control (which means to conquer or to maintain) the central theatres of operations (CTOs)*. At least two major topics have to be more properly investigated, with a lot of extra details, in some future studies I am already planning: first of all, the problem of PTOs after World War I (PTOs in World War II, together with answers to questions as “were PTOs important in the context of the Cold War?” and “is there any central theatre of operations (CTO) – and, if they do exist, where PTOs are placed – in the context of the global war

⁵⁰ HELMUT PEMSEL, *op. cit.*, p. 198.

against terror?”. Secondly, a large amount of attention might be paid to the problem of synergetic PTOs in more recent times (for example, “did PTOs generate synergetic consequences in more recent times, in a way resembling, for example, the Peloponnesian War?”).

**ON CENTRE AND PERIPHERY: A BRIEF SURVEY OF GRAND STRATEGIES
AND MILITARY STRATEGIES FOCUSED ON PERIPHERIAL
THEATRES OF OPERATIONS (PTOs)**

Summary

First of all, the study explores three different meanings of centre (centrality) and periphery (peripheral status) on the international arena. Then, the author presents four case studies (that of Athens in the context of the Peloponnesian War in the 5th century B.C., that of the campaigns of Alexander the Great, that of some of the campaigns of Napoleon and that of naval operations in World War I) which are significant for better understanding what fighting wars on peripheral theatres of operations (PTOs) means. The study offers compact definitions of central theatres of operations (CTOs) and peripheral theatres of operations (PTOs). Constraints, limits, costs, consequences, synergetic effects of all sorts, relatively stable correlations of resources, goals and results (all these significant both for the level of military strategy and for that of grand strategy) are taken into account. Major positive results (strategic successes) and negative results (together with the strategic mistakes generating them) in campaigns fought on PTOs are evaluated with a lot of details.

Keywords: central theatre of operations (CTO); peripheral theatre of operations (PTO); grand strategy; military strategy; synergetic strategic consequences; war.