

A Fight to Reclaim the Central Asian Frontier. The Seleucid and Parthian Rivalry in the 230s BC

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the initial conflict between the Parthians and Seleucids in the late 230s BC that established a much longer period of rivalry between these opposing forces. Arsaces I founded the independent Parthian kingdom in northeastern Iran during a period of geopolitical crisis throughout the Hellenistic Middle East. Although he successfully removed and replaced the rebellious Seleucid satrap in the region and quickly integrated his followers into the local aristocracy, the Parthian state remained vulnerable. The Parthians could expect some form of imminent Seleucid retaliation if the war between Seleucus II and his brother Antiochus Hierax subsided. This article reconsiders the eastern campaign of Seleucus against the Parthians to appreciate better the agency and accomplishments of the Parthians. It challenges the tradition that the Parthians were weak and acted cowardly. Instead, it concludes that the Parthians proved resourceful, clever, and triumphant.

KEYWORDS

Parthians; Parthia; Bactria; Arsacids; Seleucids; Central Asia; Middle East; Hellenistic.

In the 240s–230s BC Seleucid hegemony over the Iranian plateau collapsed during a period of crisis fueled by damaging external conflicts and internal turmoil (OVERTOOM 2016a; OVERTOOM 2020, 65–93).¹ It was at this time that Seleucid governors in Parthia and Bactria broke away from the Seleucid state to form rival regimes. Moreover, the hereto insignificant Parni tribe living along the Central Asian frontier, under the leadership of the capable and charismatic Arsaces I, used this crisis to establish itself in northeastern Iran, swiftly occupying a region known as Parthia and integrating into the local communities.² With this occupation the independent kingdom of Parthia emerged, establishing the Arsacid dynasty as a new force within the geopolitics of the Hellenistic Middle East and sparking rivalry between the Parthians and Seleucids.

The focus of this article is an investigation of the initial conflict between the Parthians and Seleucids in the late 230s that established a much longer period of rivalry. With the success of Arsaces I in founding the independent Parthian kingdom in northeastern Iran, the Parthians could expect some form of imminent Seleucid retaliation. The disintegration of the Seleucids' eastern frontier during the crisis made a Seleucid campaign to reconquer the region and punish the Parthians and Bactrians increasingly necessary.

By the latter half of the 230s, the Seleucid king, Seleucus II, could no longer afford to ignore the growing power of the Parthians and Bactrians in the east. Justin records that Seleucus 'came to take vengeance on the rebels (*ad defectors persequendos veniente*)' (Justin, XXXXI, 4.9). Seleucus mounted the first royal campaign into the east since his great-grandfather but with much different results.

1 All dates in this study are BC unless otherwise indicated.

2 Arsaces successfully gained the support of the indigenous population. FRYE 1984, 208; SHAHBAZI 1986; OLBRYCHT 2003, 73–75.

It appears that the initial stages of the eastern campaign went well for Seleucus II. He pacified Babylonia, strengthened Media, and reclaimed much of Parthia, temporarily forcing Arsaces I to withdraw toward the Central Asian steppe. Strabo states, 'Later Arsaces, when he fled (φεύγων) from Seleucus Callinicus, withdrew into the country of the Apasiacae' (Strabo, XI, 8.8).³ Yet there is no record of a military victory over the Parthians by Seleucus, nor is there sufficient evidence to assume that Seleucus restored Seleucid dominion over northeastern Iran by establishing Parthia as a vassal principality.⁴ Moreover, the Roman tradition is clear that Arsaces later defeated Seleucus (Justin, XXXI, 4.9–10; Ammianus, XXIII, 6.3; Malalas, VIII, 198).

Arsaces I's resources were quite limited.⁵ If Seleucus II had defeated the Parthians decisively, this would have devastated Arsaces' position. It would have been almost impossible for him to then raise another army strong enough to defeat Seleucus later in the campaign. If there was a military engagement in the early stages of the invasion, it must have been minor and inconclusive.

Thus, Strabo's brief account is peculiar and requires further consideration. Arsaces I had been readying for a Seleucid invasion for years by the time Seleucus II entered Parthia, levying soldiers, expanding his territory, and forging an alliance with the new king of Bactria, Diodotus II (Justin, XXXI, 4.8–9). It perhaps seems odd then that Arsaces would 'flee' Parthia without a major engagement. Strabo's passage directly connects the flight of Arsaces from Seleucus to the flight of the Persian general, Spitamenes, from Alexander the Great (Strabo, XI, 8.8; Arrian, *Anab.*, III, 28.16, 29.12, 30.1). In Strabo's account both eastern commanders appear cowardly, desperate, and inferior compared to their Macedonian counterparts. Yet Strabo here follows a well-established Graeco-Roman literary tradition of portraying easterners as inferior, and therefore these stereotyped characteristics of easterners in this passage likely are a superficial exaggeration of the actual motives of Arsaces.⁶

Instead of viewing Arsaces I as a weak easterner, fleeing in the face of the superior Macedonian general, Seleucus II, it is preferable to consider the actions of Arsaces in a more constructive light. If we view Seleucus' eastern campaign within the larger contexts of a long series of asymmetrical defensive wars waged by the Parthians against more traditionally armed Macedonian and Roman invaders over the next two centuries, then we get a sense that Arsaces' withdrawal in the face of Seleucus' advance was in fact a planned Parthian strategy, rather than a cowardly escape.⁷ Strabo here inadvertently appears to record the first

3 For background on the Apasiacae and the relationship of Parthia with other Central Asian tribes, see LERNER 1999, 34, note 6. For Strabo and the Parthians, see DRIJVERS 1998.

4 Many scholars argue the Parthians remained at least loosely integrated within Seleucid hegemony during their early history; however, the defeat and/or submission of the Parthians in this period is an exaggeration. WIESEHÖFER 1986; SHERWIN-WHITE – KUHR 1993; WIESEHÖFER 1994a; 1994b; BROSIUS 2006; ENGELS 2011; STROOTMAN 2011–2012; ENGELS 2014a; 2014b; SAMPSON 2015, 42; STROOTMAN 2015; WENGHOFER – HOULE 2016; STROOTMAN 2017; 2018; WENGHOFER 2018; ERICKSON ed. 2018; KOSMIN 2018; OVERTOOM 2020.

5 Even after forging an empire, the Parthian field army remained relatively small (between 20,000–30,000 men). POTTER 2010, 157; OLBRYCHT 2016, 295; MCLAUGHLIN 2016, 223–224. Arsaces would have commanded only a fraction of these later resources.

6 The Greeks and Romans viewed the Parthians as a mixture between the Scythians and Persians. Thus, for the Romans, the Parthians were fiercer than the Persians, but they too suffered from eastern despotism and duplicity. (ISAAC 2006, chs. 4–5, 8; LEROUGE-COHEN 2007; LEROUGE-COHEN 2009; GREGORATTI 2015, 203–204; OVERTOOM 2016b; MÜLLER 2017; ENGELS 2017; OVERTOOM 2017a; 2017b).

7 Reimagining Parthian militarism is a subject upon which I have written extensively (OVERTOOM 2016a; 2016b; 2016c; 2017a; 2017b; 2019a; 2019b; 2019c; 2020; forthcoming a; forthcoming b; forthcoming c; forthcoming d).

surviving reference to a unique mode of warfare developed by the Parthians, what I have called their ‘Feign Retreat, Defeat in Detail’ mode of warfare (OVERTOOM 2017b; OVERTOOM 2020, 27–64). The Parthians’ unique mode of warfare gave them an important advantage in their longstanding rivalry with the Seleucids, and I would argue played a major factor in the failure of Seleucus’ invasion.

Within this longstanding military tradition, the Parthians applied their tactical approaches to battle to their larger strategic objectives. Mobility, flexibility, deception, intimidation, and concentration of force were at the core of their campaign strategies. The Parthians had three fundamental strategic approaches, what I call the ‘Overwhelm Strategy’, the ‘Harass Strategy’, and the ‘Deceptive Withdrawal Strategy’ (OVERTOOM 2020, 49). Similar to their tactical approaches to war, these strategies were flexible and interchangeable over the course of a campaign, and since the Parthians rarely possessed a numerical advantage in a conflict, they tended to favor the latter two strategies.

In campaigns where an enemy became vulnerable through miscalculation, coercion, or deception, the Parthians utilized their Overwhelm Strategy to engage the enemy aggressively with overwhelming force and defeat that enemy in detail (OVERTOOM 2020, 49–50, 103, 124–125, 183, 204, 209–210, 236, 244–245, 266, 270). For example, the Parthians implemented their Overwhelm Strategy to attack Crassus at Carrhae and later to destroy Marc Antony’s baggage train during his invasion of Media. In 36 the Parthians surrounded and annihilated around 10,000 Roman soldiers along with Antony’s legate, Oppius Statianus, and the crucially important Roman siege engines (Paterculus, II, 82; Plutarch, *Ant.* 38.2–3; Dio, XXXIX, 25–26; Florus, II, 20.3; Livy, *Perioch.* 130). Yet the Parthians also utilized the Overwhelm Strategy to defeat the Seleucids several times (Justin, XXXVI, 1.5, XXXVIII, 9.2, 10.7–10, XLI, 4.9–10; Justin, *Prol.* 35–36; Diodorus, XXXIII–XXXV; Josephus, *Ant.* XIII, 186, 218–219, 253; *I Maccabees*, 14.2–3; *V Maccabees*, 21.23–24; Appian, *Syr.* 11.67–8; Ammianus, XXIII, 6.3; Malalas, VIII, 198; Athenaeus, 5.38; Posidonius, 16 = *FGrH*, III.258). The mobility, flexibility, and sustainability of the Parthian army on campaign generally was an effective, often devastating approach to warfare that frustrated many of the Parthians’ numerous enemies.

If the Parthians faced an enemy that could not be overcome with brute force, they preferred to act aggressively with an asymmetric style of strategic warfare that distressed, hounded, and confused that enemy over great distances. The Parthians’ Harass Strategy attempted to force an enemy through coercion into making mistakes during its advance or retreat that might create an opportunity for the Parthians to exploit (OVERTOOM 2020, 50–51, 121, 124–25, 182, 183, 202–203). It utilized mobility, coordination, and psychological warfare to demoralize and weaken an enemy. For example, the Parthians implemented their Harass Strategy especially during the retreats of Crassus and Antony. The Parthians outmaneuvered, isolated, and enveloped Roman detachments numerous times during Antony’s advance and retreat from Media as they aggressively pursued the Roman army (Plutarch, *Ant.* 39.2–50.1; Florus, II, 20.4–10). Yet the Parthians also utilized the Harass Strategy to manipulate multiple Seleucid armies (Polybius, X, 29.3–31.3; Justin, XXXVI, 1.4, XXXVIII, 9.2).

If the more aggressive Harass Strategy did not work or was not applicable, the Parthians could turn to their Deceptive Withdrawal Strategy (OVERTOOM 2020, 50–51, 99, 103, 114, 117–118, 203). Because of their superior mobility, the Parthians deceptively could withdrawal deep into their territory in the hope that they could encourage overconfidence or complacency in an enemy. For example, the Parthians implemented the Deceptive Withdrawal Strategy to persuade Crassus to advance toward Carrhae and to encourage Antony to leave his baggage train in a vulnerable position. Yet the Parthians also utilized the Deceptive Withdrawal Strategy to outmaneuver and deceive the Seleucids several times (Strabo, XI, 8.8; Justin, XXXVIII,

10.6–10, XLI, 4.9–10; Polybius, X, 28.5–7, 31.3–5; Josephus, *Ant.* XIII, 251). Once the enemy had relaxed its guard or made a dangerous blunder, the Parthians could counterattack with their Overwhelm or Harass strategies.

Some might wonder if the strategic deceptive withdrawals of the Parthians in these various campaigns simply could be *real* retreats. A military retreat is not necessarily a surrender or a defeat; it can be part of a policy of strategic withdrawal, the main intent of which is to preserve one's forces and to reengage later under circumstances that are more favorable. However, first, the Parthian style of retreat was unique compared to more conventionally armed Persian, Hellenistic, or Roman examples because of its more mobile and flexible nomadic elements. Ancient armies traditionally sought out climactic, decisive battles with face-to-face strength of arms as the determining factor. Yet the Parthians rarely did this because their style of warfare was nontraditional, and they never developed the heavy infantry necessary to match Hellenistic or Roman armies on more traditional terms. This major difference in military philosophy helps explain the confusion and frustration of the Seleucids and Romans in their numerous unsuccessful conflicts with the Parthians. The strategic deceptive withdrawals of the Parthians, because of their vastly superior mobility and different military philosophy, were indeed unique compared to the more standard understanding of retreats by other contemporary militaries in the Graeco-Roman world.

Second, it is clear from the sources that the Parthians wanted their enemies to assume that they were not only retreating but also *fleeing*. The Parthians went through great difficulties to implement a system of organized chaos during their strategic withdrawals. They wanted to create the impression of disorder and weakness, while maintaining strict discipline and awareness, to capitalize on opportunities. Thus, the Parthians *feigned* weakness to accomplish similar objectives, namely the defeat of an overconfident and vulnerable enemy in detail. When the Parthians 'fled' an important territory in the face of a major invasion; they were not *really* abandoning it. They ultimately wanted to lure their enemies into making poor military decisions so that the Parthians could isolate, harass, and overwhelm them.

Finally, there is enough evidence to suggest that the Parthians' strategic approach to warfare, including their policy of strategic deceptive withdrawals, was fairly uniform over the course of two centuries (OVERTOOM 2020). The Parthians could apply their asymmetric mode of warfare in a well-developed strategy over many months and over hundreds of miles. The Parthians' unique approach to implementing a retreat in the form of strategic deceptive withdrawals complimented their military advantages. It also helps explain their ability to withstand major efforts on several occasions by the Seleucids and Romans to subdue them.

After agreeing to a truce with his brother, Antiochus Hierax, in 236, Seleucus II came to the east to take vengeance on the Parthians and Bactrians. Although Arsaces I of Parthia and Diodotus II of Bactria had formed a military alliance against this impending threat, Parthia was the most immediate and vulnerable target of the Seleucids (HOLT 1999, 62–64; OVERTOOM 2020, 95–99). When Seleucus invaded Parthia sometime in the latter half of the 230s, the Parthians were not able to overwhelm him in a conventional battle.

Strabo records that Arsaces fled in the face of Seleucus' invasion to his allies on the Central Asian steppe. However, Strabo's biased portrayal of weak easterners in direct comparison to Alexander the Great and Seleucus disregards any strategic objectives on the part of the Parthians (Strabo, XI, 8.8). Again, there is no evidence for a major engagement early in this conflict, and therefore, we should consider why Arsaces chose to 'flee'.

If we consider the eastern campaign of Seleucus II within the context of the Parthians' unique asymmetric mode of warfare, Arsaces I's withdrawal into the Central Asian steppe does not appear to be a cowardly or disorganized rout; rather, it appears to be a calculated,

strategic maneuver (OVERTOOM 2020, 99–107). Despite Arsaces' recent efforts to solidify his regional strength and expand his army, he quickly recognized that his force was no match for the royal Seleucid army in a conventional battle, and therefore, he did not risk a major engagement at this time. Arsaces decided to conserve his strength and attempted to deceive Seleucus into thinking the Parthians were weak.

Within their unique mode of warfare, Arsaces I implemented the first possible example we have of the Parthians' Deceptive Withdrawal Strategy. Because of his army's superior mobility, Arsaces could afford to withdraw deep into his territory in the hope that he could encourage overconfidence or complacency in Seleucus II. Thus, the Parthian strategy, at least initially, was to buy time and encourage Seleucus into making a mistake.

The Parthian army had the mobility and the flexibility to avoid enemy forces, which allowed them to maintain the initiative during campaigns even though they were in retreat. With experience from years of interactions along the Seleucid eastern frontier and after watching the recent crisis in the Hellenistic Middle East unfold, Arsaces I understood that in the latter half of the 230s Seleucus II could not maintain a static campaign in the far-off eastern lands of the Iranian plateau for an extended period. Tensions with Seleucus' brother, Antiochus Hierax, who ruled from Anatolia, remained considerable and a renewal of the civil war was looming. In fact, Justin states that after Seleucus suffered a defeat at the hands of the Parthians he was 'recalled into Asia [Minor] by new disturbances' (Justin, XLI, 4.9–5.1). Meanwhile, Arsaces was not Seleucus' only target. Seleucus also wanted to punish the Bactrians while he was in the east. With a clear understanding of the many obstacles that Seleucus faced, Arsaces could afford to be cautious and bide his time. Seleucus could not force a major engagement with the more mobile Parthians, but he also could not remain in Parthia permanently. Whether the Seleucids returned to Syria or invaded Bactria, the position of Arsaces remained strong on the southern edge of the Central Asian steppe if he could retain control over his army. Arsaces could wait for the Seleucids to leave southern Parthia, and he was in a great position to take advantage of any military opportunities in the meantime. If we accept that the militarily experienced and capable Arsaces did not simply flee in panic in the face of Seleucus' advance, then his attempt to lull the Seleucids into a state of dangerous complacency and his calculations about the pressures facing Seleucus were correct. Arsaces would demonstrate the effectiveness of the Parthians' mode of warfare.

Unfortunately, only a brief outline of the campaign has survived; however, two events are certain. After the initial withdrawal of the Parthians, they soon after defeated the Seleucids decisively in battle. Justin records, 'Engaging with king Seleucus [II], who came to take vengeance on the rebels [in Parthia and Bactria], he [Arsaces] obtained a victory; and the Parthians observe the day on which it was gained with great solemnity, as the date of the commencement of their liberty' (Justin, XLI, 4.9–10). Moreover, although Ammianus Marcellinus confuses Seleucus II with his great-grandfather Seleucus I, he similarly records, 'After many glorious and valiant deeds, and after he [Arsaces] had conquered Seleucus [I] Nicator [in reality, Seleucus II], successor of the said Alexander, on whom his many victories had conferred that surname, and [after Arsaces] had driven out the Macedonian [that is, the Seleucid] garrisons [from Parthia], he passed his life in quiet peace, and was a mild ruler and judge of his subjects' (Ammianus, XXIII, 6.3).⁸ Justin and Ammianus are clear that the defeat of Seleucus II's eastern campaign was swift and unexpected.

8 John Malalas offers a similar account and makes the same mistake as Ammianus. See Malalas, VIII, 198. For the Parthians in John Malalas, see HACKL – JACOBS – WEBER eds. 2010, 285–292.

It is also possible that the Parthians even captured Seleucus II in the aftermath of their victory. The principal evidence supporting the conclusion that the victorious Arsaces I also captured Seleucus is a brief account in Athenaeus, who states, ‘And in his [Posidonius] eleventh book [but perhaps his sixteenth book], speaking of Seleucus [II] the king, and relating how he came against Media, and warred against Arsaces, but was taken prisoner by the barbarian, and how he remained a long time in captivity to Arsaces, being treated like a king by him’ (Athenaeus, 5.38).⁹ Some scholars discount this passage by arguing that Athenaeus and Posidonius here mistake Seleucus II either for Demetrius II, whom the Parthians later captured, or simply for a *Seleucus*, who they claim was a little known son of the later king, Antiochus VII.¹⁰ There is a further speculative argument that Seleucus II launched two eastern expeditions, one that succeeded in driving off Arsaces I and another that resulted in defeat at the hands of Arsaces (SCHIPPMAN 1980, 22; WOLSKI 1996, 182–183; LERNER 1999, 36–37).¹¹ Yet it is highly unlikely that Seleucus II had the time or resources to conduct two major eastern expeditions; rather, the sources simply emphasize two phases of Seleucus’ eastern campaign. In the first phase, the Seleucids encountered initial success, or at least what appeared to be success since the Parthians looked to have fled. Then in the second phase, Seleucus suffered a considerable defeat against the Parthians, after which he returned to the west.¹²

What remains to be considered is the fate of Seleucus II during his eastern campaign.¹³ Athenaeus and Posidonius state that he became a prisoner, and Seleucus’ adopted personal image and coinage perhaps also supports the conclusion that the Parthians held him in captivity, at least briefly.¹⁴ Seleucus adopted the epithet Pogon (‘Bearded’), and he and Demetrius II, whom the Parthians later captured, produced coinage portraying themselves with a full beard (an image that became standard in Parthian coinage).¹⁵ Seleucus II also adopted the epithet *Callinicus* (‘Gloriously Triumphant’); however, this appellation celebrated his victory over his brother, not the Parthians (LERNER 1999, 37; COŞKUN 2018: 221–222; OLBRYCHT forthcoming). It is perhaps most likely that Seleucus and later Demetrius adopted their bearded identities to reflect the length and emphasize the religious importance of their eastern campaigns (LORBER – IOSSIF 2009, 105, 111–112). Yet it is highly unlikely that their bearded images marked major victories over the Parthians, which they did not gain, or symbolized an attempt to associate themselves directly with senior Greek gods, such as Zeus (LORBER – IOSSIF 2009, 87, 105, 107–111).¹⁶ After returning to the west, their beards likely served as a reminder of their

9 Posidonius, 16 (= *FGrH*, III.258).

10 For Demetrius’ capture, which admittedly bears several similarities, see Justin, XXXVI, 1.5, XXXVIII, 9.2; Justin, *Prolog.* 35–6; Appian, *Syr.* XI, 67; Josephus, *Ant.* XIII, 186, 218–9; *I Maccabees* 14.2–3; Diodorus, XXXIII, 28.1; Eusebius, *Chron.*, 255; Sebeos in THOMSON ed. 1978, 364–365. Note KIDD 1988, 303.

11 Assar suggests an even more unlikely scenario that Seleucus originally fought Arsaces unsuccessfully in 247 before conducting an inconclusive invasion of Parthia again in 229 (ASSAR 2011, 114).

12 Strootman suggests Seleucus successfully vassalized Parthia (STROOTMAN 2011; 2015; 2018). However, there is no evidence that Arsaces served as Seleucus’ vassal, and the sources are clear that Seleucus’ eastern campaign was a failure (Justin, XL, 4.9–10, 5.1; Ammianus, XXIII, 6.3; Malalas, VIII, 198; Athenaeus, 5.38; Posidonius, 16 = *FGrH*, III.258).

13 For those who argue that Seleucus was a Parthian captive, see FROELICH 1744, 30–31, 66; CLINTON 1881, 311–313; CUNNINGHAM 1884, 113–114; ECKHEL 1888, 218; HEAD 1911, 639; LERNER 1999, 35; OLBRYCHT 2019. For those who attempt to reject this argument, see VISCONTI 1808, 298–299; BABELON 1890, lxxv; NEWELL 1938, 64, 135, 200–203; WILL 1967, i 311–313; KIDD 1988, 304; STROOTMAN 2011; 2015; 2018.

14 For Seleucus’ bearded coinage, see NEWELL 1938, 64, 135, 200–203; LORBER – IOSSIF 2009, 95–96.

15 For the use of beards in Seleucid coinage, see MESSINA 2003; LORBER – IOSSIF 2009. For Seleucus adopting the epithet *Pogon*, see Polybius, II, 71. 4.

16 Compare GÜNTHER 2011; WRIGHT 2013.

unfinished business in the east against the Parthians, and therefore, ‘the beard would have been a damaging symbol of failure— yet the alternative of impiety was perhaps even more unacceptable’ (LORBER – IOSSIF 2009, 105). Apart from Athenaeus’ account of Posidonius, the evidence admittedly is circumstantial; however, the capture of Seleucus by the Parthians remains possible and should not be rejected out of hand.

Although Seleucus II may or may not have become a captive of Arsaces I, the Parthians under Arsaces’ guidance unequivocally gained a significant military victory over the Seleucids, and Seleucus fell victim to the Parthians’ unique mode of warfare. The sudden reversal of Seleucus’ fortune and the swiftness of his defeat makes it likely that he made a military or logistical error that left his army vulnerable to a Parthian counterattack. With a unified force, the Seleucids had been too strong for the Parthians to confront in battle, and therefore, Seleucus’ defeat appears to have been a consequence of dividing his army and his attention.

Ammianus and Photius state that Arsaces I had to remove Seleucid garrisons from Parthia after his defeat of Seleucus II (Ammianus, XXIII, 6.3; Photius, *Bib.* 58). Therefore, after the Parthians under Arsaces ‘fled’ and appeared not to be a threat, Seleucus apparently attempted to reoccupy southern Parthia by dividing a portion of his army into garrisons.¹⁷ Once Seleucus had divided his main force, Arsaces saw his opportunity and successfully counterattacked against what remained of Seleucus’ divided field army.¹⁸ It is quite plausible that, misunderstanding the purpose of the Parthians’ unique mode of warfare, Seleucus viewed Arsaces’ withdrawal to the north as a sign of weakness. By not pursuing Arsaces and by dividing his army to reoccupy Parthia, Seleucus demonstrated that he did not consider the Parthians a serious threat. Further, this complacency could have encouraged Seleucus to turn his attention toward Bactria, which at the time was considered the stronger regional rival. Yet a march toward Bactria would have exposed the flanks of Seleucus’ divided army to Arsaces’ decisive counterattack. In fact, some scholars argue that Arsaces’ new ally, Diodotus II, sent troops from Bactria to aid the Parthians (WOLSKI 1996, 182–183; LERNER 1999, 36). If Bactrian troops played any role in the climactic battle between Arsaces and Seleucus, then the conflict likely occurred closer to Bactria in eastern Parthia.

Seleucus II never reached Bactria, and therefore, his eastern campaign ended in disaster at the hands of the Parthians somewhere in between his invasions of Parthia and Bactria. It appears that the Parthians’ Deceptive Withdrawal Strategy accomplished two key objectives. First, it inspired complacency in Seleucus, who began reoccupying Parthia instead of pursuing the Parthians, and second, it encouraged overconfidence in Seleucus, who decided to divide his army and turn his attention toward the Bactrians without first defeating the Parthians.

By dividing his army, ignoring the threat of the Parthians, and increasingly isolating himself between Arsaces I and Diodotus II as he continued east, Seleucus II created a major opportunity for his enemies. Arsaces shifted from the Parthians’ Deceptive Withdrawal Strategy to their Overwhelm Strategy, which he utilized to engage Seleucus aggressively with overwhelming force and defeat him in detail. The vulnerability of the Seleucid army made the sweeping victory of Arsaces possible. Thus, our first recorded instance of the Parthians implementing their ‘Feign Retreat, Defeat in Detail’ mode of warfare demonstrates its early

17 These garrisons might have been necessary winter quarters. Antiochus VII later had to divide his army into garrisons during his campaign against the Parthians as well (Justin, XXXVIII, 10.8; Diodorus, XXXIV/XXXV, 17.2). Contrary to Strootman’s conclusion that Seleucus transitioned Seleucid imperialism in the east toward a vassalage model (STROOTMAN 2011; 2015; 2018), it appears Seleucus maintained the traditional model of direct imperialism.

18 Antiochus VII suffered a similar defeat (Justin, XXXVIII, 10.8–10; Diodorus, XXXIV/XXXV, 15–17; Appian, *Syr.* XI, 68).

association with the Arsacids and its effectiveness. Arsaces executed the Parthians' asymmetric approach to warfare to perfection because Seleucus played directly into its strengths.

Seleucus II's defeat and possible capture in the latter half of the 230s had enormous geopolitical ramifications.¹⁹ The reputation of the already reeling Seleucid state was damaged considerably and the prestige of the Seleucid king significantly diminished. This military defeat against the Parthians, paired with the possible shameful capture of the Seleucid king, severely threatened the stability of the Seleucid state in the west and further weakened Seleucid authority. This encouraged other regions like Persis, Elymais, and Media Atropatene to challenge Seleucid hegemony and helped cause another cycle of civil wars (GRAINGER 2015, 20, 56; GRAINGER 2016, 52; COŞKUN 2018; OLBRYCHT forthcoming).²⁰

Seleucus II's failures in the east also suddenly left Mesopotamia and Syria vulnerable. Power relations within the lands of the Near East established by the 236 truce between Seleucus and Antiochus Hierax no longer reflected the realities of power distribution in that region. The defeat of Seleucus drastically and suddenly reduced the power of the Seleucid Empire and Seleucus' authority. This helps explain why Antiochus renewed the civil war against Seleucus in 229/228 with the invasion of Syria and Mesopotamia (Justin, XL, 5.1).²¹ The sudden weakness of Seleucus and his regime because of his failed eastern campaign encouraged further pressure from competitors.

Meanwhile, in the east the failure of Seleucus II to subdue Parthia and Bactria reinforced the tripolar balance of power between the Seleucids, Parthians, and Bactrians (OVERTOOM 2016a, 985, 987–988, 992, 998–999; OVERTOOM 2020, 77, 104). It also helped further solidify Parthian power regionally and expanded Arsaces I's regional influence.²² Finally, it allowed Arsaces to establish a solid economic and military foundation in Parthia that his successors continued to develop over the next century (OLBRYCHT 1998, 51–76; OLBRYCHT 2003, 74–75; OLBRYCHT 2010, 229; SHAYEGAN 2011; OVERTOOM 2019a; 2019b; 2020; OVERTOOM forthcoming a).

The defeat and possible capture of Seleucus II appears also to have led to the establishment of formal and recognized independence for Parthia and Bactria (LERNER 1999, 36–37).²³ Justin records, 'The Parthians observe the day on which it [victory over Seleucus II] was gained with great solemnity, as the date of the commencement of their liberty (*libertatis*)' (Justin, XLI, 4.10). By defeating Seleucus and repulsing his eastern campaign, the Parthians and Bactrians had reassured their sovereignty in direct opposition to the Seleucid state. Yet Arsaces I and Diodotus II still would have desired formal recognition of their independence by Seleucus to enhance their legitimacy and international standing. They did not want to remain 'rebels' within the Hellenistic Middle East, and the defeat of Seleucus gave them the opportunity they needed to demand formal recognition of their independence.

There were practical reasons for Seleucus II to recognize the sovereignty of Parthia and Bactria as well. It appears Seleucus conducted his eastern campaign in the latter half of the 230s, perhaps entering Babylonia as early as 235/234 to prepare the campaign (SACHS – HUN-

19 Lerouge-Cohen unfairly belittles the Parthian struggle against Seleucus (LEROUGE-COHN 2007, 274).

20 For Elymais under the Seleucids, note DĄBROWA 2004; 2014.

21 Cf. LERNER 1999, 37.

22 In fact, Justin compares Arsaces' military success to Cyrus the Great and Alexander the Great, each of whom capitalized on hegemonic war during a power-transition crisis (Justin, XLI, 5.1–6. Note OVERTOOM 2016a, 985–987. For the reception of Alexander in Iranian and Roman traditions, see OVERTOOM 2011; 2012; 2013; NABEL 2017; MOORE ed. 2017).

23 Cf. SCHIPPMMANN 1980, 22; WOLSKI 1996, 182. Contra ENGELS 2011; 2014a; 2014b; STROOTMAN 2015; WENGHOFFER 2018.

GER 1989, no. 234; OVERTOOM forthcoming c). After settling affairs in Babylonia and Media, he attempted to reoccupy Parthia before suffering his defeat. This expedition seemingly spanned several years, lasting long enough for Seleucus to grow his iconic large beard. Whether or not Seleucus was a captive of the Parthians for a portion of his time in the east, it does not appear he returned to Babylonia until 229/228 (SACHS – HUNGER 1989, no. 229).

Seleucus II's long absence and eventual defeat in the east encouraged his brother, Antiochus Hierax, to renew the civil war in the west and to invade Syria and Mesopotamia. Antiochus' aggression in the west created a desperate situation for Seleucus. If Seleucus remained at odds with the Parthians and Bactrians (or, more desperately, if he remained a prisoner), he risked losing the western portion of the empire to his hostile brother. By 229/228 Seleucus needed to come to terms with Arsaces I and Diodotus II to avoid a two-front war, to deter further expansion by the Parthians and Bactrians against Seleucid lands, and to pursue the civil war against his brother in the west. After his defeat against the Parthians, Seleucus had little choice but to acquiesce to the demands of Arsaces and Diodotus, and if Seleucus had become a captive, he had even less leverage. To this point Jeffrey Lerner has argued, 'There is also nothing to preclude the possibility that one of the conditions for Seleucus' release was his formal recognition of the sovereignty of Arsaces I and that of Diodotus II' (LERNER 1999, 36). If Seleucus had in fact become a Parthian prisoner, it is hard to imagine that Arsaces would have released Seleucus without such assurances. Yet Seleucus' defeat in the east and the renewal of civil war in the west was enough on its own to force Seleucus' hand in recognizing the sovereignty of Parthia and Bactria. By agreeing to peace with Arsaces, Seleucus was able to take the garrisons he had established throughout Parthia with him back to Babylonia. This allowed Seleucus to consolidate his remaining forces to pursue the war against his brother and freed the Parthians of the burden of attacking fortified garrisons, allowing Arsaces to reoccupy southern Parthia with ease (Ammianus, XXIII, 6.3; Photius, *Bib.* 58; Justin, XLI, 4.10).

Although Seleucus II and the Seleucids did not abandon the possibility of future eastern campaigns to subdue the Parthians and Bactrians, the focus of the empire was in the west, and the renewed civil war against Antiochus Hierax took precedence. Justin criticizes Seleucus and Antiochus for not putting aside their differences to face outside threats to the empire, stating, 'Leaving their foreign enemies unmolested, [they] continued the [civil] war for the destruction of each other' (Justin, XXVII, 3.6). Western conflicts consumed Seleucus' attention for the remainder of his reign, and it fell to his son, Antiochus III, to avenge Seleucus' failures in the east.

Even after forming an alliance with Bactria and defeating the Seleucids in battle, Arsaces I still understood the dangers of the international environment in the Hellenistic Middle East and the potential power and threat of his neighbors. Once Seleucus II returned to the west to fight his brother, Arsaces immediately set into motion policies to maximize his power and the security of his kingdom. He settled the Parthian government, levied more soldiers, built new fortresses, and secured his urban centers (Justin, XLI, 5.1-4). Justin praises Arsaces, recording, 'Thus Arsaces, having at once acquired and established a kingdom, and having become no less memorable among the Parthians than Cyrus among the Persians, Alexander among the Macedonians, or Romulus among the Romans, died at a mature old age; and the Parthians paid this honor to his memory, that they called all their kings thenceforward by the name of Arsaces' (Justin, XLI, 5.5-6).²⁴ Thus, these actions by Arsaces were a continuation of his earlier policy, when he had expanded his territory in northern Iran and enlarged his army (Justin, XLI, 4.8).

24 Cf. Strabo, XV, 1. 36.

Yet despite the recent victory against the Seleucids, Parthian power remained fragile for several generations and the survival of the Parthian state was threatened continually (OVERTOOM 2019a; 2019b; 2019c; OVERTOOM 2020, chs. 3–6; OVERTOOM forthcoming a).²⁵ The Seleucids had been defeated, but their power remained unrivalled in the east. Moreover, Bactria, although recently an ally, was another rival in the east that could return to its former hostility. Meanwhile, the uncertainty and volatility of the Central Asian steppe meant that nomadic raids or invasions remained a constant threat. These threats made complacency dangerous, and therefore, Arsaces I spent the rest of his reign securing his new kingdom, emphasizing political stability, military growth, and frontier security. Ammianus records, ‘Finally, after all the neighboring lands had been brought under his [Arsaces’] rule, by force, by regard for justice, or by fear, and he had filled Persia with cities, with fortified camps, and with strongholds, and to all the neighboring peoples, which she [the Parthian state] had previously feared, he had made her a constant cause of dread, he died a peaceful death in middle life’ (Ammianus, XXIII, 6.3–4). Again, although Ammianus exaggerates Arsaces’ accomplishments, we see the importance of the perception of power in the ancient world and an emphasis on the creation of state stability and security. Photius in his summary of Arrian’s *Parthica* also records that Arsaces set up his government and established a powerful state (Photius, *Bib.* 58).²⁶

Fear was an important aspect of ancient geopolitical interactions between states. The uncertainty of power relations and power capabilities in interstate politics meant that fear of neighboring states and the use of fear to project power was common in the ancient world.²⁷ One of Arsaces I’s principle policies after his defeat of Seleucus II’s eastern campaign was to establish a fearful reputation for the Parthians. In so doing he enhanced the perceived power of the Parthians in the region, deterring aggression from warlike neighbors and enhancing the security of Parthia. Arsaces’ militarized policies in part were a reaction to the harsh realities of the bellicose and volatile international environment in the Hellenistic Middle East in this period.

Arsaces I’s defeat of Seleucus II barred the Seleucids from reclaiming their eastern frontier along the Central Asian steppe for another generation, and Parthia firmly emerged as a power on the Iranian plateau. The remainder of Arsaces’ reign was a period of stability and prosperity; however, this period of peace did not last. Although the rivalry of the Parthians and Seleucids began in the 230s, it would dominate the geopolitics of the Hellenistic Middle East for another century-and-a-half.

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25 Rawlinson’s antiquated conclusion that after the Parthians defeated Seleucus ‘they had nothing to fear’ and that they were assured of their strength ‘to preserve their freedom’ is incorrect (RAWLINSON 1885/2002, 28, 33).

26 For Arsaces’ titulature and concept of government, note GASLAIN 2005, 221–213; GASLAIN 2009, 27–39; ASSAR 2011, 114; OLBRYCHT 2013a.

27 For the prominent role of fear in the decision making of ancient states, see Thucydides, I, 23.6, 88. For an example of the prominent role of fear and hatred in ancient warfare, see Paternus, I, 12. For examples of the power of fear in antiquity, especially under a system of interstate anarchy, see ECKSTEIN 2006, 22 and *passim*; ECKSTEIN 2012, 9 and *passim*. Cf. WHEELER 2002, 288.

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