

In order to engage in routine international activities, and sometimes even domestic activities, every country in the world must reckon with the United States, China, or Russia. Sometimes countries must reckon with two or even all three of them simultaneously. While this particular international order is nascent, it is tangible. Its consequences are reflected everywhere: in closely guarded official documents and orchestrated leaks; in expert punditry and popular art; in financial holdings and economic decisions, both public and private. This isn't a world that anyone planned, though lots of planning, like bread crumbs, marks our path here. But even if it is accidental, it is not a world that anyone can choose to ignore. Nor can we substantially change it.

Accidental multipolar systems like ours are not unusual, even if it feels strange to us. The first cultures which left a record of international relations existed in the Ancient Near East, during the Late Bronze Age. There was a multipolar system, too. From about 1600-1200 BCE, Egypt, Hatti, and Babylon were the region's "great powers." Their prominent strength and their relationships with one another constituted a system which everyone had to reckon with, great and small powers alike. Understanding that first international system can help us navigate our own. It can help us better understand the range of options available to us today.

In the Late Bronze Near East, the strongest powers were not all powerful and the weakest were not powerless, despite the sharp disparity in power and wealth. A nation's international influence and ability to navigate the system were an aggregate of both measurable and intangible components including material wealth, technological skill, social savvy, and ideology. My dissertation, tentatively titled *The Race Is Not to the Swift*, will describe the international system of the Late Bronze Near East and identify the smaller powers who most successfully played the hand they were dealt. Since the smaller powers had less material wealth, it will focus on their constructive use of skill, savvy, and ideology.

The primary texts which support my argument are diplomatic documents from the Late Bronze Near East. They include letters, treaties, and official histories which were written in a variety of languages, primarily Akkadian, Hittite, and Egyptian hieroglyphics. The largest two corpora that I will employ are the Amarna texts and the Hattusa archive. The Amarna corpus, from the reign of Akhenaten in the middle of the 14th century, consists of about 400 Akkadian texts, most of which are diplomatic correspondence between Egypt, its peers, and its vassals. The Amarna letters provide insight into an international system that revolved around the three perennial great powers of the era. Additionally, over one hundred letters are from vassals, the small powers. Thus, Amarna provides an unparalleled perspective of the weak navigating political life amongst hegemon.

More than 50 diplomatic texts found at Hattusa, mostly in Hittite but some in Akkadian, form another important corpus that provides information regarding the international system of the Late Bronze Near East. Unlike the Amarna letters, the Hattusa archive spans many generations, approximately 1500 – 1200. It includes both treaties and diplomatic correspondence. The treaties are largely between Hatti and its vassals. The correspondence includes letters to both vassals and peer powers. Perhaps uniquely, the Hattusa corpus provides insight into the trajectory of international relations from the very beginning of Late Bronze until its end.

Only a few Ancient Near East scholars have studied international relations in the Late Bronze Age. The most prominent is the Italian scholar Mario Liverani. Liverani deliberately chose not to inform his analysis with modern scholarship on international relations. He wanted his readers to understand the Late Bronze Age entirely on its own terms, without the influence of modern perspectives. While his motivation is commendable, subsequently his findings did not resonate well within the field of Ancient Near East nor did they communicate with political historians, political scientists, or the public. Of course, the Late Bronze Near East was very different than the modern era. But it was not different only. Used well, modern analogies and analytical tools are helpful.

Dissertation Concept  
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In order to make my argument legible to a wider audience, I will use elements of political theories proposed by Francis Fukuyama, Charles Tilly, and, most prominently, Carl von Clausewitz, who famously associated domestic resources and willpower with capacity for foreign policy. Engaging the conversations initiated by these scholars will make my dissertation relevant to a number of fields. It will also provide the contemporary analogues necessary to make my argument publicly accessible and meaningful. Moreover, my non-standard dissertation will explicitly compare the dynamics of the Late Bronze Near East to what we are experiencing today, demonstrating that ancient history provides access to our own world and the trajectory of our own domestic and international decisions.

A sample of Western headlines and social media comments reveals a deep concern over our nascent international order: China meets with Germany to coordinate a response to new US tariffs; China militarizes manmade islands in the South China Sea; Bashar al-Assad visited with Putin at the Kremlin two weeks ago; Russia micromanages repair parts for Iran's fleet of MiG fighters. Looking a little more deeply, pundits offer a range of opinions on what the US ought to do: five ways to stop China's rise or six reasons why we shouldn't want to. Experts are incredulous over Russia's ability to act like a great power, even though it isn't. Today's actors are different, but many of the questions, frictions, and traps are the same as those that faced Egypt, Hatti, and Babylon in the Late Bronze Age. Their race, and the race of those powers caught in between them, was not won by the swift or decisive. In fact, speed and decisiveness culminated in a bloody stalemate, with no measurable benefit for anyone involved. By examining the Late Bronze Age, I hope to illuminate alternative options for our own predicament.