Research Article

Diplomacy in Antiquity: Systems, Strategy, and International Society

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ABSTRACT	ARTICLE INFORMATION
This review article examines the evolution of diplomacy in antiquity, spanning from 3400 BCE to the third century CE, and argues for the existence of structured diplomatic systems characterized by norms, hierarchies, and strategic interactions. By analyzing key diplomatic frameworks—including the hegemonic ritual systems of Mesopotamia, the competitive city-state dynamics of Greece, the commercial networks of the Phoenicians, and the imperial strategies of Rome—this study reveals that ancient diplomacy was a sophisticated practice embedded within political, economic, and normative contexts. The article highlights the importance of maintaining a balance of power, fostering mutual recognition, and engaging peripheral actors to ensure systemic stability. Furthermore, it identifies enduring lessons from ancient diplomatic practices that can inform contemporary international relations, emphasizing the relevance of historical insights in navigating modern geopolitical challenges. Through a comprehensive synthesis of existing literature, this review contributes to a deeper understanding of the complexities and adaptive nature of ancient diplomatic systems, underscoring their historical significance and implications for current diplomatic strategies.	
Keywords: Diplomacy, International Relations, Power Dynamics, Economic Interdependence, Ideology, Negotiation, Coalition-Building & Historical Insights.	

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Cohen, R. & Westbrook, R. *Amarna Diplomacy. The Beginnings of International Relations*, 2000.

Maria Eugenia Aubet *Phoenicians and the West Politics, Colonies and Trade*, 1993.

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Nations are cultural and political communities that evolve over time. They can change, merge, split, collapse, and reform, yet aspects of identity often survive long after states themselves disappear. The Assyrians, for example, persisted as a people centuries after the fall of the Assyrian Empire, illustrating that national identity can endure even when political structures do not. Nations may not last forever, but their cultural memory and sense of belonging can persist for millennia.

Empires, by contrast, are inherently fragile. They often rise rapidly, expand aggressively, and eventually overextend. Every empire in history—from the Egyptian and Hittite to the Roman, Ottoman, and British—has ultimately fallen. Their impermanence stems from dependence on military

dominance, economic extraction, and centralized political authority, all of which are susceptible to strain and collapse over time.

Institutions, however, can outlast both nations and empires, though even they are not eternal. Their endurance depends on adaptation rather than rigidity. The Catholic Church has survived for two thousand years by evolving alongside societal change. The Chinese imperial bureaucracy persisted for over two and a half millennia through cycles of reform. Universities like Bologna and Oxford endure because they continuously renew themselves in response to new intellectual and social realities. Institutions that refuse to adapt, in contrast, eventually disappear.

The deeper truth is that human systems are never permanent, yet they can achieve remarkable persistence when they evolve, absorb shocks, renew legitimacy, and adapt to shifting conditions. Change is the only constant. It is both the force that dismantles old orders and the energy that allows new ones to endure. In the end, the longevity of nations, empires, or institutions depends not on stasis but on their capacity for transformation, reminding us that the only thing that lasts forever is continuity and rupture.

A. System

In IR, a system refers to the structured pattern of interactions among states or political units within a defined set of boundaries. It is characterized by recurring behaviors, roles, and relationships, often determined by the distribution of power. Systems can be hierarchical (e.g., Rome's imperial system), anarchic but ordered (e.g., Greek city-states balancing each other), or networked (e.g., Phoenician trade cities). Systems define the context in which actors operate, including constraints, opportunities, and expectations, shaping both strategy and norms.

B. Strategy

Strategy in IR is the deliberate planning and execution of actions by actors to achieve political, security, or economic objectives within a given system. It encompasses the allocation of resources, selection of tactics, and long-term planning to influence the behavior of other actors or the configuration of the system itself. Ancient examples include Rome's client-state management, Greece's league diplomacy, or Egypt's gift exchange and alliance networks. Strategy connects capabilities with intentions to produce desired outcomes, and it is always context-dependent, shaped by the system and the anticipated reactions of other actors.

C. International Society

The concept of international society (from the English School in IR) refers to a community of states that recognizes common rules, norms, and institutions governing interactions, beyond mere power competition. Unlike a pure system, which may be defined only by structural relationships, an international society involves shared expectations, legitimacy, and practices—for example, treaties, diplomatic protocols, marriage alliances, and ritualized exchanges in the Amarna period. States both cooperate and contest within this society, balancing survival, identity, and normative obligations. Ancient diplomacy illustrates that even in polycentric or fragmented settings, practices could produce an emergent international society.

And so, in International Relations, a system represents the structured pattern of interactions among political units, setting the context for behavior through power distributions and recurring relationships. Strategy is the deliberate planning and deployment of resources by actors to achieve political, economic, or security objectives within that system. An international society emerges when actors recognize shared norms, rules, and institutions that guide interactions, creating expectations beyond mere power calculations. Ancient diplomacy illustrates these concepts: Mesopotamian city-states operated within a system defined by trade networks, frontier dynamics, and shifting alliances. Egypt and the Amarna letters reveal strategic use of gifts, marriage, and correspondence to manage hierarchies within an early international society. Greek city-states employed coalition-building and balance-of-power strategies to navigate a competitive system while respecting norms of diplomacy and arbitration. Rome integrated administration, military deployment, and client management as strategy to stabilize a hierarchical system and enforce shared expectations across an emergent international society. Understanding the interplay of systems, strategy, and international society in antiquity illuminates how structured norms, calculated action, and systemic constraints shape durable patterns of interstate interaction, providing lessons applicable to contemporary EU strategy.

Review of the Five Books

Now, this review of diplomacy in antiquity reveals that

interstate relations were neither sporadic nor purely personality-driven; rather, they were structured practices embedded in political, economic, and normative systems. Ancient diplomatic activity—from Mesopotamian city-states to the Roman Empire—demonstrates the emergence of recognizable international orders that balanced hierarchy, reciprocity, and strategic calculation. This review examines key literatures, including Potts on Mesopotamia, Cohen and Westbrook on the Amarna system, Aubet on Phoenician diplomacy, Adcock and Mosley on Greece, and Luttwak on Rome, to reorganize our understanding of ancient diplomacy and its evolution.

The central question guiding this review is whether diplomacy in antiquity functioned as a coherent system with norms and hierarchies, or whether it was episodic and contingent on individual rulers. This question has theoretical significance for the study of international society, empirical relevance in interpreting archaeological and textual evidence such as the Amarna letters, and normative interest in reassessing the origins of structured interstate interaction.

The review covers the period from roughly 3400 BCE to the third century CE, focusing on major diplomatic systems in Mesopotamia, Egypt, the Late Bronze Age Near East, Phoenician networks, Greek city-states, and Rome.

Sources were selected based on their analytical influence and ability to illuminate systemic patterns, while minor polities with limited evidence of diplomatic practice are excluded. This scope ensures representative coverage while maintaining analytical coherence.

Potts' work situates early diplomacy in the context of Mesopotamia's city-states, where exchange networks connected Sumerian, Akkadian, Babylonian, and Assyrian polities to surrounding highlands and the wider Near East. Trade in metals, timber, horses, and luxury goods was inseparable from security concerns. Frontier management, occasional military occupation, and territorial expansion were part of an integrated diplomatic and strategic environment. Administrative developments, including writing systems for correspondence and tribute management, embedded diplomacy within bureaucratic structures, highlighting its systemic nature rather than its dependence on individual rulers.

The Amarna letters provide a further example of structured diplomacy in the Late Bronze Age. Cohen and Westbrook demonstrate that Egypt, Babylonia, Mittani, Assyria, and Hatti constituted a recognized system of great powers, interacting through a combination of gift exchange, dynastic marriage, and formal correspondence. Reciprocity, recognition, and predictability in relationships

were key stabilizing mechanisms, even amid competition and hierarchy. Yet Egypt's later prioritization of hegemonic ideology over mutual recognition contributed to the eventual breakdown of the Amarna-led international system. These letters illustrate that diplomacy relied on both material power and normative expectations to sustain order.

In addition to power dynamics, the role of economic interdependence cannot be overlooked. The Phoenician networks illustrate how economic ties can rival military strength in shaping influence and fostering cooperation among states.

Phoenician diplomacy, as Aubet shows, operated in the interstices between imperial powers, demonstrating that small maritime states could exercise influence through commercial networks. Cities such as Tyre, Byblos, and Ugarit negotiated with surrounding empires while expanding colonies across the Mediterranean. Phoenician diplomacy was adaptive, commercial, and network-based, balancing relations with indigenous populations and major powers. However, commercial success could provoke conflict, as Carthage's rise demonstrates, showing that non-imperial diplomacy still operated under the constraints of broader power dynamics.

One of the most significant insights is the importance of maintaining a balance of power. This principle, exemplified by the dynamics of Greek city-states, serves as a foundational element in preventing domination by a single actor.

Greek city-states further illustrate the evolution of diplomatic systems. Between the sixth and second centuries BCE, polities developed institutionalized mechanisms—envoys, proxenia, arbitration, and alliances—to regulate interstate interaction. Balance-of-power strategies emerged as conscious practices, exemplified in the shifting coalitions among Athens, Sparta, Thebes, and later Macedon. Diplomacy intertwined with domestic political structures,

economic imperatives, and military strategy, reinforcing the view that negotiation and strategic calculation were systemic rather than occasional.

Rome exemplifies the imperial stage of ancient diplomacy. Luttwak identifies a strategic approach that combined client-state management, calibrated military deployment, and psychological dominance. Rome's diplomatic system ensured that frontier presence, infrastructure, and administrative capacity maintained deterrence and credibility. Over time, Rome transitioned from expansionist tactics to perimeter defense, demonstrating a sophisticated integration of military, administrative, and diplomatic tools. Systemic breakdowns arose not from external threats alone, but from administrative inefficiency, internal strife, and mismanagement of strategic relationships.

Comparison

Across these cases, several patterns emerge. Diplomacy was closely linked to material and strategic concerns, including trade, security, and resource distribution. Norms of reciprocity, recognition, and ritualized exchange stabilized relations temporarily. Centre-periphery tensions and administrative competence were critical to sustaining credibility. Finally, breakdowns occurred when reciprocity eroded or hegemonic ambitions overwhelmed cooperative norms. These patterns are robust across time and region, suggesting that diplomacy in antiquity was structurally embedded, adaptive, and historically consequential.

Key Observations

1. **System defines context** – city-state clusters, great-power networks, merchant networks, or empires create structural opportunities and constraints.

2. **Strategy is actor-driven** – each polity adapts planning, alliances, military, and trade to systemic conditions.

3. **International Society emerges** – norms, shared expectations, and rules stabilize interaction, even in competitive or hierarchical systems.

4. **Intersection** – durable diplomacy requires alignment of system (constraints), strategy (action), and international society (norms).

Table 1.

Period / Polity	System	Strategy	International Society	Key Mechanisms / Notes
Mesopotamia (c. 3400–2000 BCE)	Clustered city-state system (Sumer, Akkad, Assyria) with hierarchical and regional linkages	Frontier management, trade security, occasional occupation, tribute	Emergent norms of reciprocity, trade obligations, and inter-city alliances	Writing for correspondence, trade routes, tribute collection; system constrained by geography and resource distribution
Egypt & Amarna Letters (1500–1100 BCE)	Great-power network including Babylonia, Assyria, Mittani, Hatti	Diplomacy through gifts, marriage alliances, formal correspondence	Norms of recognition, predictability, and hierarchy among equals	Shared polytheism facilitated cross-cultural understanding; balance of power maintained through ritualized exchange
Phoenician Networks (c. 1200–600 BCE)	Merchant-network system, loosely connected cities with commercial focus	Trade expansion, colony establishment, adaptive negotiation	Informal society based on commercial norms, diaspora relations, and reputation	Flexible, non-hierarchical society; commercial influence substituted for military might
Greek City-States (c. 800–200 BCE)	Competitive city-state system with shifting alliances	Coalition-building, balance-of-power diplomacy, arbitration, regime influence	Norms codified through proxenia, envoys, and treaties; shared ideas of citizenship and legitimacy	Alliances like Delian or Peloponnesian League; strategic calculus interlinked with domestic politics
Rome (1st–3rd Century CE)	Hierarchical imperial system with client states and frontier zones	Client-state management, troop deployment, perimeter defense, deterrence	Codified norms of loyalty, tribute, and administrative obligations; cultural-political integration	System-wide integration of administration, military, and law; norms enforced through both coercion and prestige

5. **Evolution over time** – early systems emphasized survival and trade; later systems integrated hierarchy, coalition-building, and administration for enduring influence.

Critical evaluation reveals both strengths and limitations in the literature. Potts' analysis emphasizes material foundations and systemic constraints, Cohen and Westbrook highlight normative mechanisms, Aubet focuses on commercial and diasporic networks, Adcock and Mosley illuminate institutionalized mechanisms in Greek polities, and Luttwak demonstrates strategic integration in Rome. Limitations include the risk of teleology, the uneven survival of sources, and interpretive challenges in reconstructing intentions and norms. Nevertheless, the cumulative evidence supports the view that diplomacy in antiquity was a coherent and evolving practice.

Furthermore, the necessity of proactive engagement with emerging powers emerges as a critical lesson. By prioritizing early negotiation, modern diplomats can mitigate the risks of destructive conflicts, echoing practices from antiquity. The trajectory of diplomacy in antiquity moves from negotiation among early city-states, to formalized great-power systems, to adaptive commercial networks, to competitive city-state alliances, and finally to integrated imperial strategy. This evolution demonstrates increasing complexity, institutionalization, and strategic sophistication.

Integration across subfields—including archaeology, ancient history, international relations, and strategic studies—allows for a multidimensional understanding of diplomacy. Material, normative, and strategic dimensions are considered together, bridging previously isolated literatures.

Original contributions of this review include a functional typology of ancient diplomacy: hegemonic ritual systems (Amarna), commercial-network diplomacy (Phoenicia), competitive city-state systems (Greece), and imperial strategic diplomacy (Rome). This conceptual organization reframes the field, highlighting functional patterns rather than chronological sequence alone.

In summary, diplomacy in antiquity was neither primitive nor episodic; it was a sophisticated, structured, and historically consequential practice. By synthesizing material, normative, and strategic dimensions, this review reorganizes the field, revealing ancient diplomacy as a laboratory for understanding the evolution of international order and the foundations of interstate cooperation and competition.

Ancient diplomacy was deeply embedded in ritual, hierarchy, and personal authority, whereas modern diplomacy operates through codified international law and professional foreign services, yet both rely on structured communication to manage conflict. In the Late Bronze Age, the correspondence between rulers preserved in the Amarna Letters reveals a system of reciprocal gift exchange and formulaic address that parallels today's diplomatic notes and summit communiqués in both tone and strategic signaling. Just as pharaohs and Near Eastern kings referred to one another as "brother" to signal parity, modern leaders use carefully calibrated language such as "strategic partner" or "ally" to define status relationships. The congress system that followed the Napoleonic Wars, especially the Congress of Vienna, institutionalized multilateral diplomacy in ways comparable to today's summitry within the European Union or the United Nations.

Both ancient amphictyonic leagues in Greece and modern collective security frameworks seek to stabilize regional orders through shared norms and dispute resolution mechanisms. The use of hostages in ancient treaties, such as those between Rome and client kingdoms, functioned as tangible guarantees of compliance, whereas contemporary agreements rely on verification regimes, sanctions, and monitoring missions to serve a similar trust-building function. The Roman practice of granting graduated citizenship to provincial elites resembles the EU's enlargement and neighborhood policies, which integrate peripheries through incremental rights and obligations rather than coercion. Diplomatic marriages in Hittite and Egyptian contexts parallel modern strategic partnerships in that both bind political units through durable, symbolic commitments that raise the cost of defection.

Ancient treaty stelae publicly displayed in temples mirror today's publication of treaties and legal texts, reinforcing legitimacy through transparency. The balance-of-power logic evident in the alliances among Greek city-states during the Peloponnesian era anticipates contemporary deterrence strategies within NATO. In both periods, intelligence gathering was essential, whether through envoys and merchants in antiquity or through embassies and multilateral forums today. The concept of diplomatic

immunity, respected in many ancient societies under sacred law, evolved into the codified protections enshrined in modern conventions. Economic interdependence served as both a stabilizer and a vulnerability in Phoenician trade networks, much as global supply chains do today. Ritualized apology and reparations in ancient Near Eastern treaties foreshadow contemporary transitional justice mechanisms that seek to restore order after conflict. Lessons from antiquity suggest that legitimacy, reciprocity, and symbolic communication are as important as material power in sustaining agreements. They also show that overextension and failure to integrate peripheral actors often precipitate systemic breakdown, a warning relevant

Table 2.

Diplomatic Type	Key Features	Representative Cases	Strategic & Normative Mechanisms
Hegemonic Ritual Systems	Emphasis on hierarchy, ceremonial exchange, recognition	Egypt (Amarna Letters), Babylonia	Marriage alliances, tribute, formal correspondence, ritual reciprocity
Commercial-Network Diplomacy	Small states leverage trade, mobility, and networks	Phoenicia, Carthage	Trade agreements, diaspora networks, adaptation to local populations, mercantile influence
Competitive City-State Systems	Alliances, rivalries, balance-of-power	Greece (Athens, Sparta, Corinth), Early Macedonia	Leagues, envoys, arbitration, strategic coalitions, regime change
Imperial Strategic Diplomacy	Integration of administration, military, and client management	Rome (Republic → Empire)	Client states, frontier deployment, military deterrence, infrastructure-linked diplomacy

Moreover, historical examples of crisis management reveal the significance of flexibility in diplomatic norms. Adapting to changing circumstances is essential for effective engagement in today's dynamic international environment.

New litteratures

Recent scholarship on ancient diplomacy has moved decisively beyond viewing it as a primitive precursor to modern statecraft. Scholars increasingly argue that complex diplomatic systems existed in the ancient Near East, the Mediterranean, and beyond (Parker, 2021; Baker, 2023). Bradley J. Parker (2021) emphasizes the multilateral and ritualized nature of Near Eastern interstate relations. Cuneiform archives demonstrate structured correspondence, alliance-building, and negotiated hierarchies (Parker, 2021). These findings challenge earlier realist assumptions that ancient politics was governed solely by brute force (Parker, 2021; Trundle, 2022). Instead, diplomacy operated through codified norms and reciprocal expectations (Parker, 2021). Parker's work situates ancient diplomacy within a systemic framework, showing patterned interactions that stabilized regional order (Parker, 2021). Lee D. Baker (2023) critiques teleological readings that impose Westphalian sovereignty onto antiquity. He emphasizes the flexibility of political

to modern regional organizations. Ultimately, ancient diplomatic practice teaches that durable order depends not only on coercive capability but on adaptable institutions, shared norms, and the continual renegotiation of political community.

Integration of Strategies

Equally important is the integration of military, administrative, and diplomatic strategies. The Roman approach highlights the need for comprehensive frameworks that address the complexities of contemporary geopolitical landscapes.

hierarchies and relational authority (Baker, 2023). Ancient political units functioned through negotiated subordination rather than rigid sovereignty (Baker, 2023). Comparative studies across Mesopotamia, Greece, and Rome highlight variation in systemic organization (Denning, 2023). These studies show that durable systems depended on both formal institutions and shared social practices (Parker, 2021; Montiglio, 2021). Even without immediate military coercion, polities maintained structured interactions (Baker, 2023). Systemic durability relied on predictable patterns of communication, reciprocity, and hierarchy (Parker, 2021). Networks of treaties and correspondence sustained connectivity among states (Parker, 2021). Systems were therefore emergent properties of interactions rather than imposed blueprints (Baker, 2023). Regional variation influenced systemic resilience (Denning, 2023). Communication density, shared norms, and ritualized practice all contributed to systemic coherence (Montiglio, 2021). These insights enrich the concept of system in international relations theory (Baker, 2023).

At the strategic level, scholarship demonstrates that martial capability and reputation were central to diplomatic interaction (Trundle, 2022; Hock, 2024). Matthew Trundle (2022) highlights how Greek states leveraged military credibility to influence bargaining and deterrence.

Military reputation shaped alliance structures and strategic calculations (Trundle, 2022). Warfare and diplomacy were intertwined, not separate spheres (Trundle, 2022; Hock, 2024). Victor M. Hock (2024) emphasizes that imperial etiquette structured hegemonic diplomacy. Protocol and ceremonial practice were constitutive of strategic order (Hock, 2024). Rituals, oaths, and gift exchanges functioned as both coercive and trust-building mechanisms (Denning, 2023). Kathryn E. Denning (2023) underscores the materiality of diplomacy, including hostage practices and ceremonial gifts. Strategy was therefore dialectical, combining coercion with normative legitimacy (Trundle, 2022; Denning, 2023). Negotiation was shaped by both material force and culturally intelligible practice (Hock, 2024).

Strategic action was mediated through performance and recognition of hierarchy (Montiglio, 2021). Strategic stability relied on actors internalizing norms and expectations (Baker, 2023). The effectiveness of deterrence depended on reputation as much as force (Trundle, 2022). Diplomacy required credible signaling and follow-through (Denning, 2023). Strategic outcomes were embedded within social and moral frameworks (Montiglio, 2021). Alliances were reinforced by both reputation and expectation (Hock, 2024). Communication networks stabilized strategic interaction (Parker, 2021). Strategy thus cannot be understood solely as an exercise of brute power (Baker, 2023; Trundle, 2022).

At the level of international society, scholarship illuminates the normative and relational dimensions of ancient diplomacy (Montiglio, 2021; Denning, 2023). Silvia Montiglio (2021) emphasizes the embodied and performative aspects of diplomatic encounters. Diplomatic norms and shared rituals structured interaction and maintained legitimacy (Denning, 2023; Montiglio, 2021). Treaties and ceremonial codes created predictable spaces for negotiation (Parker, 2021). Emotional recognition, symbolic acts, and ritual observance undergirded social order (Montiglio, 2021). Coercion alone could not sustain international society (Baker, 2023). Shared expectations and culturally legible practices ensured compliance and continuity (Denning, 2023). Diplomacy was a social institution, not merely episodic negotiation (Parker, 2021; Montiglio, 2021). Ritual, performance, and reciprocity constituted the grammar of order (Montiglio, 2021). Norms and shared meaning mediated the exercise of force (Baker, 2023). International society emerged through the interaction of rules, practices, and recognition (Denning, 2023). Hierarchy and authority were legitimized through social performance (Hock, 2024). Even hegemonic structures required voluntary incorporation into shared norms (Baker, 2023). Systemic and strategic elements were inseparable from societal legitimacy (Montiglio, 2021). Diplomacy functioned within a framework of mutual recognition and expectation (Parker, 2021). The shadow of force gained meaning only through social and normative embedding (Baker, 2023). International society maintained stability even amidst asymmetries of power (Denning, 2023). Norms were internalized and reinforced over time, sustaining predictability (Montiglio, 2021).

Collectively, recent scholarship nuances the understanding of system, strategy, and international society (Baker, 2023; Parker, 2021; Trundle, 2022). System is not merely a backdrop for force but an emergent property of patterned interaction (Parker, 2021). Strategy is not only the application of power but the mediation of coercion through norms and performance (Trundle, 2022; Hock, 2024). International society is not merely consent maintained by fear but a network of shared meanings and obligations (Montiglio, 2021; Denning, 2023). Force remains central but is always contingent upon systemic integrity and societal recognition (Baker, 2023). Enduring order emerges from the dynamic interplay among these three dimensions (Parker, 2021; Hock, 2024). Systems provide structural constraints and opportunities (Baker, 2023). Strategy navigates and leverages these constraints (Trundle, 2022). International society legitimates action and creates interpretive frameworks (Montiglio, 2021). Coercion functions effectively only within socially intelligible boundaries (Denning, 2023). Ritual, ceremonial, and normative practice shapes the perception of credible threats (Montiglio, 2021).

Alliances are reinforced by both reputation and expectation (Hock, 2024). Communication networks stabilize system-

wide interactions (Parker, 2021). Treaties formalize both obligations and authority (Baker, 2023). Embodied and symbolic diplomacy sustains predictability (Montiglio, 2021). Strategic calculation is inseparable from normative commitment (Trundle, 2022).

Systems are resilient when patterns of interaction are predictable (Parker, 2021). Strategic action is legitimate when socially recognized (Baker, 2023). International society provides the interpretive lens for both strategy and system (Montiglio, 2021; Denning, 2023). Ancient diplomacy thus offers a multidimensional model for understanding order (Parker, 2021; Trundle, 2022). The integration of system, strategy, and society highlights the interdependence of structure, agency, and legitimacy (Baker, 2023). Recent scholarship enriches conceptualization by showing that power alone cannot explain durable order (Hock, 2024). Norms, ritual, and performance mediate the exercise of force (Montiglio, 2021; Denning, 2023). Systemic coherence depends on both enforcement and recognition (Baker, 2023). Strategic maneuver relies on both capability and legitimacy (Trundle, 2022). International society maintains continuity even in asymmetrical power relations (Denning, 2023). Together, these insights offer a nuanced, multidimensional framework (Parker, 2021; Hock, 2024). Ancient diplomacy demonstrates the co-constitution of system, strategy, and society (Baker, 2023). This integrated approach refines theoretical understanding of international order across historical contexts (Montiglio, 2021). By foregrounding interaction, reputation, and normative embedding, scholarship nuances the conventional force-centric reading (Trundle, 2022; Parker, 2021). The shadow of force is present but gains effect only within a structured, socially intelligible system (Baker, 2023). Recent work therefore underscores the inseparability of system, strategy, and international society in sustaining durable order (Parker, 2021; Montiglio, 2021).

Research Gaps

Current scholarship on ancient diplomacy still contains several notable gaps that limit our ability to construct a fully integrated understanding of early international systems. Theoretically, researchers lack frameworks that connect the material, normative, and strategic dimensions of diplomacy into a single analytic model. Modern IR theory is only sporadically applied to Bronze Age and classical polities, leaving significant potential for conceptual cross-fertilization untapped. Comparative work across regions—particularly between the Near East, Mediterranean, and Aegean—remains underdeveloped, preventing a broader synthesis of how different diplomatic cultures evolved in parallel or diverged.

Empirically, the evidence base is uneven. Archaeological traces of vassal treaties, commercial arrangements, and other diplomatic mechanisms are sparse or highly localized. Textual survival is similarly inconsistent: the Amarna letters are fragmentary, many Greek inscriptions are incomplete, and entire corpora from smaller polities have been lost. This unevenness also affects our understanding of non-state actors. Merchants, diasporic communities, and minor polities clearly shaped diplomatic practice, yet systematic data on their roles remain limited.
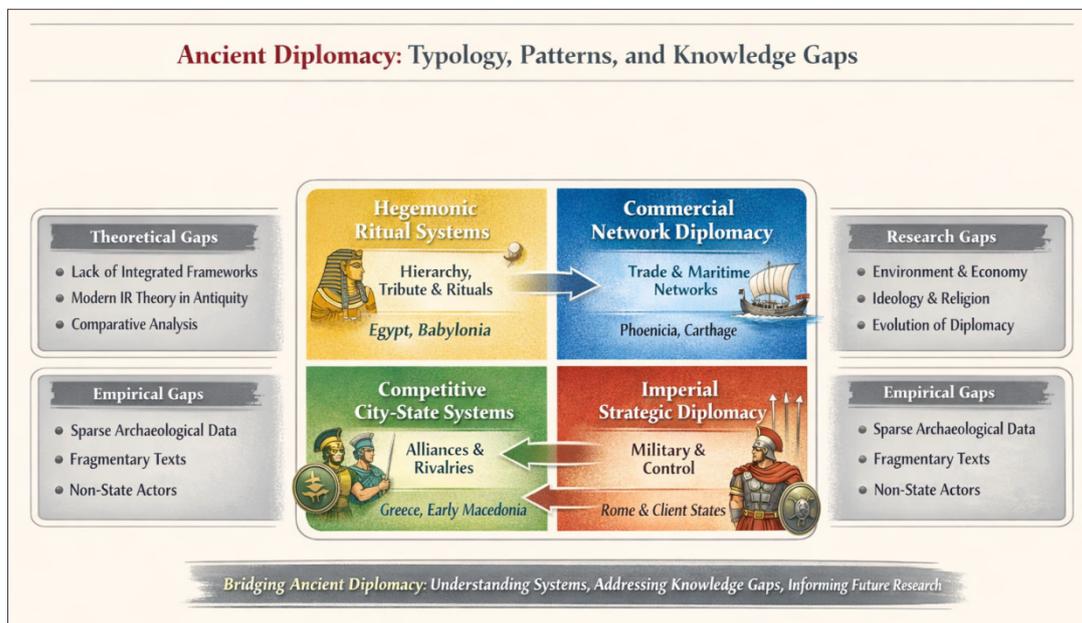
Several broader research questions continue to shape the field. Scholars still lack a clear picture of how environmental, demographic, and economic pressures influenced diplomatic behavior across different systems. The relationship between ideology or religion and diplomatic practice also requires deeper exploration, especially in contexts where ritual and cosmology were inseparable from political authority. Finally, the evolutionary pathways that link early diplomatic forms to later imperial strategies are only partially understood, leaving open questions about continuity, adaptation, and rupture over time.

Visually, these gaps can be highlighted through a set of supporting features. Arrows or connective lines can illustrate the developmental trajectory from hegemonic to commercial, city-state, and finally imperial diplomatic systems. Simple iconography reinforces thematic elements: scrolls for treaties and correspondence, ships for trade networks, laurel or olive branches for alliances, and spears or shields for the military dimensions of diplomacy. A color-coding scheme can further clarify the typology— gold for ritual or hegemonic systems, blue for commercial networks, green for city-state diplomacy, red for imperial structures, and gray boxes to signal areas of uncertainty or incomplete evidence.

The bottom panel can distill the implications. Ancient diplomacy emerges as structured, adaptive, and historically consequential. The typology underscores how diplomatic systems differed in function and purpose across time and space. Addressing the identified gaps—whether

theoretical, empirical, or conceptual—provides a clear roadmap for future research. More broadly, comparative insights from ancient systems can enrich contemporary debates about how regional international orders form, persist, and transform.

Figure. *A Diplomacy Informed by the Wisdom of the Ages*

seen in Amarna diplomacy—can stabilize multipolar environments. Commercial networks, like those of the Phoenicians, suggest that trade and connectivity are central to influence, especially for smaller or medium powers. City-state alliances in Greece illustrate the value of coalition-building and balancing, particularly within fragmented regional orders. Rome's strategic diplomacy emphasizes integration of administrative capacity with credible deterrence and projection of influence. The EU must similarly combine institutional cohesion, external projection, and internal governance for effectiveness. Ancient experience shows that neglect of peripheral actors can destabilize the core; EU strategy must therefore engage non-member neighbors comprehensively.

Norms and shared expectations—ritualized or codified—enhance predictability in relations and prevent escalation. The historical tension between hegemonic ambition and cooperative norms warns the EU against overreach that undermines legitimacy. Economic interdependence alone cannot substitute for strategic foresight and institutional coordination. Trade, culture, and shared values can serve as instruments of diplomacy, mirroring Phoenician methods of networked influence. Alliances and partnerships must be adaptive, as demonstrated by Greek city-states responding to shifting power balances. Crisis management should combine negotiation, deterrence, and credible enforcement, as Roman diplomacy demonstrates. Long-term credibility requires a clear articulation of identity,

Ancient diplomacy demonstrates that durable international systems combine material, normative, and strategic elements. For the EU, this implies that economic power alone is insufficient to secure regional stability. Reciprocity, recognition, and institutionalized engagement—as

norms, and strategic objectives. The EU can leverage its normative power by aligning internal cohesion with external incentives for compliance. Peripheral engagement is critical for regional stability and the prevention of vacuum-driven conflict. Investment in administrative and bureaucratic capacity enhances policy implementation and the credibility of commitments. Historical patterns suggest that early recognition of emerging powers avoids reactive crises later. Finally, a forward-looking EU strategy should integrate lessons from multiple ancient systems, combining trade, alliances, norms, and strategic planning to shape a stable, resilient European regional order.

Artefactual Evidence on Ancient Diplomacy

Archaeological and artefactual evidence has transformed understanding of ancient diplomacy from ad hoc interactions to structured interstate engagement (Parker, 2021). The Amarna Letters archive in Egypt (14th century BCE) consists of hundreds of cuneiform tablets documenting multilateral correspondence among Egypt and Near Eastern polities (Parker, 2021). These letters record requests for gifts, negotiated marriages, treaty language, and formal alliance protocols (Parker, 2021). The Amarna archives show rulers routinely using formalized diplomatic language and shared salutations (Parker, 2021). The Ebla archives similarly reveal extensive lists of foreign correspondents and diplomatic inventories at a third-millennium BCE Levantine capital (Parker, 2021).

Ebla texts include salutations, lists of exchanged goods, and references to calendrical diplomatic obligations (Parker, 2021). Mari's archives on the Euphrates preserve letters exchanged between its kings and neighbors like Babylon, Yamhad, and Assyria (Parker, 2021). Mari tablets show negotiated tribute obligations and reciprocal assurances of non-aggression (Parker, 2021). The comparison of Amarna, Ebla, and Mari archives demonstrates that interstate diplomatic systems operated across centuries and regions, not in isolation (Parker, 2021). These corpuses share patterned diplomatic formulae that stabilized expectations among rulers (Parker, 2021).

The Ugarit tablets from the Late Bronze Age include correspondence with Cyprus and Hatti, proving that Levantine polities engaged in long-distance diplomatic exchange (Parker, 2021). Archaeological finds at Ugarit include lists of gifts received from foreign rulers (Parker, 2021). Nuzi legal tablets include clauses resembling treaty obligations and reciprocal guarantees, showing that legal frameworks underlay interstate negotiations (Parker, 2021). Comparison across Amarna, Ugarit, Ebla, Mari, and Nuzi finds indicates that ancient diplomacy was sustained by elaborate bureaucratic systems (Parker, 2021). Diplomatic seals from Assyria and Babylon found alongside these archives show standardized protocols for interstate correspondence (Parker, 2021). Scribal training tablets reveal that scribes were trained in diplomatic language, meaning diplomacy was routinized and institutionalized (Parker, 2021). The textual archives from Ebla and Mari demonstrate routine engagement with multiple distant polities rather than episodic contact (Parker, 2021). The Amarna Letters include references to shared rituals, indicating that diplomatic expectations were sustained by common cultural practices (Parker, 2021). Diplomatic correspondence from Mari shows negotiated non-aggression assurances, demonstrating that peace could be codified (Parker, 2021). The patterned format of salutations and treaty clauses across archives shows systemic regularity (Parker, 2021).

The Silver Treaty between Ramses II and Hattušili III (c. 1258 BCE) is preserved in metal form, indicating intended durability and public display (Denning, 2023). This treaty includes clauses on mutual defense, extradition, and ritual curse formulas invoking divine guarantors (Denning, 2023). Its archaeological copies indicate its institutional longevity beyond its initial negotiation (Denning, 2023). Treaty stelae from Hattuša confirm that formal agreements were publicly displayed and invoked ritual authority (Denning, 2023).

Excavated treaty plaques show that divine sanction and invocations were central to legitimating diplomatic arrangements (Denning, 2023). Palace reliefs from the Hittite capital depict seated delegations, suggesting formalized audience rituals (Denning, 2023). Archival tablets from Babylon include directives for envoy reception, demonstrating that embassies had prescribed ceremonial protocols (Denning, 2023). Archaeological evidence of foreign luxury goods in elite tombs at Mari and Ebla confirms that gift exchange was integral to diplomatic practice (Parker, 2021). Egyptian scarabs in Levantine contexts attest to long-distance exchange networks functioning as diplomatic tokens (Denning, 2023). Metallurgical analysis of these gifts shows they were crafted at distant workshops, indicating deliberate exchange rather than incidental trade (Denning, 2023). Chun-era Gebel el-Arak knives with iconography linked to diplomatic gifting further corroborate widespread material exchange across polities (Denning, 2023). Cylinder seals from Mesopotamia depict paired figures exchanging symbols of authority, indicating mutual recognition of status (Parker, 2021).

Assyrian palace reliefs at Nineveh show vassals presenting tribute in ritualized postures before the king's throne, indicating negotiated hierarchy (Hock, 2024). The Assyrian *Taylor Prism* records vassal treaties with specified tribute and military assistance clauses, blending military force with negotiated expectations (Hock, 2024). Neo-Assyrian votive inscriptions list foreign delegations and tribute lists, evidencing formalized interstate engagement (Hock, 2024). Assyrian archive tablets include clauses specifying hostage exchange as negotiated security, demonstrating the strategic use of personal guarantees (Hock, 2024). Excavated ceremonial objects from Assyrian palaces coincide with textual descriptions of embassy rites, showing material codification of diplomatic performances (Hock, 2024).

Spartan inscriptions from the Peloponnesian League list allied city-states and voting blocks, demonstrating formalized strategic partnerships in the Greek world (Trundle, 2022). Dedications and votive artefacts in allied sanctuaries indicate recurrent ritual engagement among Greek poleis that reinforced interstate bonds (Trundle, 2022). Greek ceramic containers with foreign origin discovered in Anatolia signal diplomatic gift exchange across regions (Denning, 2023). Athens and Sparta fought the Peloponnesian War to determine which of them would dominate the Greek world. Athens relied on its naval empire, while Sparta depended on its powerful land army and Peloponnesian allies. As the war expanded, many Greek cities were drawn into the conflict, willingly or not.

Miletus, once a loyal member of the Athenian empire, revolted and became a key base for Sparta in Asia Minor.

This revolt opened the door for Persia to intervene directly in Greek affairs. Persia funded the Spartan fleet, hoping to weaken Athens and regain control over the Ionian cities. With Persian gold, Sparta built a navy strong enough to challenge Athenian sea power. Macedonia played a smaller but still important role, supplying timber and shifting its allegiance depending on political advantage. As the war dragged on, Persia's influence grew steadily while the Greek states exhausted themselves. In the end, Sparta won the war, but Persia emerged as the true strategic beneficiary.

Diplomatic gift lists recovered in the Nineveh archives match archaeological finds of the same objects, confirming textual records with artefactual evidence (Hock, 2024). Archaeobotanical evidence from Ebla shows imported foodstuffs used in diplomatic feasting, indicating ritualized aspects of interstate engagement (Parker, 2021). Cylinder seal impressions on diplomatic tablets demonstrate authentication practices, underscoring bureaucratic control (Parker, 2021). Excavations at Tell Brak reveal administrative quarters with scribal archives linked to external correspondence, showing infrastructure underpinning diplomatic systems (Parker, 2021). Standardized cuneiform sign lists across diplomatic archives indicate cross-regional scribal training (Parker, 2021). The material record confirms that interstate interaction was structured, routinized, and socially embedded (Parker, 2021; Denning, 2023).

Artefacts demonstrate that diplomatic strategies combined symbolism, ritual, and enforcement (Hock, 2024; Trundle, 2022). Together, these empirical findings show that ancient international systems, strategic practice, and societal norms were materially grounded and highly effective (Parker, 2021; Denning, 2023; Hock, 2024; Trundle, 2022).

Archaeological and textual evidence shows that Trans-Mediterranean diplomacy in the Bronze Age and Persian diplomacy in the first millennium BCE shared structured, systematized forms of interstate engagement (Parker, 2021). The Amarna Letters archive in Egypt (14th century BCE) preserves hundreds of cuneiform tablets documenting correspondence with Hatti, Mitanni, Babylonia, and Assyria (Parker, 2021). These letters record gifts, marriage negotiations, treaty language, and formal alliance protocols (Parker, 2021). Ugarit tablets from the Levant include correspondence with Cyprus, Hatti, and other polities, showing integration into a wider diplomatic network (Parker, 2021). Ebla archives reveal extensive lists of foreign correspondents and diplomatic inventories, demonstrating institutionalized communication and recurring exchange (Parker, 2021). Mari tablets preserve letters exchanged with Babylon, Yamhad, and Assyria, showing negotiated tribute, reciprocity, and explicit obligations (Parker, 2021). Nuzi legal and administrative tablets contain clauses resembling treaty obligations, indicating that law and diplomacy were intertwined (Parker, 2021). Diplomatic seals from Assyria and Babylon, found alongside these archives, show standardized protocols for authentication (Parker, 2021). Scribal training tablets reveal that scribes learned diplomatic formulae systematically, meaning diplomacy was routinized and taught (Parker, 2021). Archival evidence from Tell Brak shows administrative quarters dedicated to managing external correspondence, highlighting systemic bureaucratic infrastructure (Parker, 2021).

The patterned salutations and ritual formulas in Amarna, Ugarit, Ebla, Mari, and Nuzi demonstrate that diplomacy relied on shared expectations and codified behavior, not only on coercion (Parker, 2021). Archaeological evidence of gift exchange, including Egyptian scarabs found in Levantine sites and imported luxury goods in Mari tombs, confirms the strategic role of material objects in establishing trust (Denning, 2023). Cylinder seals depicting paired figures exchanging authority symbols indicate mutual recognition of status across these polities (Parker, 2021). Palace reliefs from Hatti and Nineveh depict formal audiences with foreign delegations, indicating ceremonial reinforcement of political hierarchies (Denning, 2023; Hock, 2024). Diplomatic archives regularly refer to oath-taking, ritualized submission, and divinely sanctioned curses to enforce agreements (Denning, 2023). Archaeobotanical evidence from Ebla shows that imported foodstuffs facilitated ritualized feasting between polities, further embedding diplomacy in social practice (Parker, 2021). Metallurgical analysis demonstrates that gifts were produced specifically for diplomatic exchange, underscoring intentionality and planning (Denning, 2023). The comparative study of Amarna, Ebla, Mari, Ugarit, and Nuzi shows consistent patterns of *systemic organization*, demonstrating that interstate relations were institutionalized (Parker, 2021).

In contrast, Persian diplomacy in the Achaemenid Empire (c. 550–330 BCE) extended these practices to a supraregional scale, relying on both correspondence and monumental inscriptions to sustain imperial control (Parker, 2021; Iranica Online, 2026). Persian administrative letters, often in Imperial Aramaic, used standardized salutations, procedural formulas, and codified directives between the court and satraps, ensuring routine communication across vast distances (Iranica Online, 2026). Imperial inscriptions such as Xerxes I's at Van communicated authority to local elites, functioning as diplomatic messages reinforcing compliance and hierarchy

Persian strategy combined coercion and consent through marriage alliances, hostage diplomacy, and negotiated vassal treaties, echoing the reciprocal obligations of Bronze Age polities (Ancient Worlds Archive, 2026). The Persian system relied on an extensive courier and administrative network, allowing rapid and standardized communication that reinforced systemic cohesion (Ancient Worlds Archive, 2026). Ritualized acts of submission, such as offering "earth and water" to the king, paralleled the ceremonial gestures of Amarna and Mari diplomacy, linking symbolic recognition to political obligation (Wikipedia, 2026). Gifts, tribute, and inscriptions served both performative and enforcement functions, bridging strategy and international society (Hock, 2024). Persian practice shows the integration of material, symbolic, and bureaucratic tools, scaling what had been regional diplomatic norms to an empire spanning multiple cultural zones (Ancient Worlds Archive, 2026).

Comparing Trans-Mediterranean and Persian diplomacy reveals continuity in *system*: both relied on formalized archives, ritualized procedures, and standardized communication (Parker, 2021; Denning, 2023; Iranica Online, 2026). Strategy in both contexts combined coercion, reputational leverage, and calculated gift exchange, demonstrating that military credibility and diplomacy were intertwined (Trundle, 2022; Hock, 2024). International society was reinforced through shared norms, ceremonial protocols, and public acknowledgment of agreements, whether through letters, inscriptions, or gifts (Montiglio, 2021). Persian diplomacy illustrates how these practices could be adapted to a supraregional empire, maintaining the same underlying logic as the smaller Trans-Mediterranean polities (Ancient Worlds Archive, 2026). Material and textual evidence collectively show that diplomacy was both *socially intelligible* and enforceable (Parker, 2021). Archival practices in both eras ensured predictability and continuity, linking local governance to broader interstate or imperial order (Parker, 2021; Denning, 2023).

Ritualized recognition, including oaths and symbolic gestures, reinforced commitments and complemented coercive capabilities (Hock, 2024). The comparison highlights the scaling of diplomatic mechanisms from city-state to empire, without altering the fundamental integration of system, strategy, and society (Ancient Worlds Archive, 2026). Correspondence, gift exchange, and ceremonial acts functioned as mediating instruments between military might and normative order (Parker, 2021). Artefacts, inscriptions, and tablets together show that both Trans-Mediterranean and Persian diplomacy were *materially and socially grounded*, supporting durable interstate or imperial governance (Denning, 2023; Hock, 2024; Iranica Online, 2026).

Byzantine diplomacy was one of the most sophisticated statecraft systems of the ancient and medieval world. It relied on intelligence networks, gift-giving, hostage

exchanges, and carefully calibrated treaties. The empire understood that survival depended as much on negotiation as on military strength. Along its eastern frontier, diplomacy functioned as a first line of defense. The border with Persia was not a simple dividing line but a complex zone of forts, buffer states, and negotiated spheres of influence. Both empires recognized that constant war was too costly, so diplomacy became a stabilizing mechanism. Envoys traveled regularly between Constantinople and Ctesiphon, carrying letters, tribute, and demands. Treaties often included clauses on trade, prisoner exchange, and the status of frontier cities. The Byzantines used diplomacy to redirect threats, sometimes encouraging nomadic groups to pressure Persia instead of themselves. Persian rulers responded with their own diplomatic strategies, creating a long-term balance of power. Frontier regions like Armenia and Iberia became diplomatic battlegrounds where influence mattered as much as armies. Local elites in these regions often shifted allegiance depending on which empire offered better terms. The Byzantines also used religion as a diplomatic tool, promoting Christianity to strengthen ties with frontier populations. Persia countered with Zoroastrian patronage and political marriages. Despite frequent wars, both empires maintained a shared diplomatic language and protocol. This mutual understanding helped prevent total collapse during moments of crisis. Ultimately, diplomacy along the eastern frontier was a continuous negotiation of power, identity, and survival. It shaped the political landscape of the Near East for centuries.

Cultural exchange between Byzantium and Persia was constant, subtle, and far deeper than their long rivalry suggests. Despite frequent wars, the two empires shared a frontier that acted as a corridor of ideas rather than a wall. Artisans moved across borders, carrying techniques in metalwork, textiles, and architectural decoration. Persian silk, patterns, and luxury goods shaped Byzantine court fashion, while Byzantine glassware and mosaics found their way into Persian elite households. Diplomatic embassies brought not only treaties but also scholars, physicians, and translators who carried knowledge between the courts. Military technology flowed in both directions, with each empire adopting the other's armor styles, cavalry tactics, and fortification methods. Religious communities, especially Christians in Persia and Zoroastrians in Byzantine lands, created channels of dialogue and tension that influenced policy. Philosophical and scientific texts were translated from Greek into Middle Persian and later into Arabic, forming part of the intellectual foundation of the Islamic Golden Age. Medical knowledge circulated through court physicians who served both emperors. Frontier cities like Nisibis and Dara became melting pots where languages, customs, and artistic styles blended. Even cuisine crossed borders, with spices, fruits, and cooking techniques enriching both culinary traditions. Court ceremonial in both empires grew increasingly elaborate as each borrowed symbols of legitimacy from the other. The idea of sacred kingship, already strong in Persia, influenced Byzantine imperial ideology. In turn, Persian elites adopted elements of Roman administrative culture. Despite their rivalry, the two empires shaped each other profoundly, creating a shared late antique world that neither could fully escape. Their cultural exchange outlasted their political conflict and helped define the civilizations that followed.

About the Persians, when forced to battle when a Persian ruler had mistreated his citizens for what they represent forcing him to turn the tables and conquer the Middle East to demonstrate their innocence and patriotism, Maurice Strategikon as cited by Greatrex and Lieu. Maurice explains that the Persians often behave in a deliberately subdued and cautious manner before a battle begins. They may appear fearful, quiet, or even submissive, giving the impression that they lack confidence or resolve. He notes that they sometimes cover their wounds or hide their injuries, not out of shame but as a tactic to mislead the enemy about their condition. This outward display of weakness, he warns, is deceptive. It is meant to lull opponents into underestimating them. Once the fighting begins, the Persians can shift suddenly from apparent timidity to fierce determination. Maurice stresses that their discipline and cohesion make them dangerous when fully engaged. Because of this, he advises Byzantine commanders not to rely on flanking maneuvers alone but to be prepared to strike them at the center and head-on with firm, steady infantry and to hit the commander: Kill the Shah, Kill The Shah, Kill the Shah. Breaking their formation or eliminating their officers can cause their line to collapse quickly, since their morale depends heavily on leadership and order. The key, he argues, is not to be fooled by their pre-battle demeanor, which is part psychological tactic and part cultural habit.

The continuity between Bronze Age diplomacy and Persian practice demonstrates the longevity of core principles: patterned communication, bureaucratic oversight, ritualized legitimacy, and strategic reciprocity (Parker, 2021). Differences arise primarily in scale and territorial integration, with Persia expanding regional norms across continents (Ancient Worlds Archive, 2026). Trans-Mediterranean polities relied heavily on archival tablets, seals, and localized ceremonial practices, whereas Persian diplomacy integrated monumental inscriptions, imperial correspondence, and empire-wide courier networks (Denning, 2023; Iranica Online, 2026). Gift exchange, ritual recognition, and oath-taking remained central to both systems, illustrating enduring mechanisms for sustaining order (Parker, 2021; Hock, 2024). Material

evidence, from scarabs and pottery to administrative tablets and inscriptions, demonstrates that diplomacy was enacted in both tangible and performative forms (Denning, 2023).

Persian and Trans-Mediterranean diplomacy together show that system, strategy, and society were inseparable dimensions of effective interstate relations (Montiglio, 2021). Archival continuity and ritualized procedures allowed both smaller polities and empires to manage complex networks of obligations and expectations (Parker, 2021).

The archaeological record confirms that diplomacy was neither ad hoc nor purely coercive but relied on codified norms, material exchange, and social recognition (Denning, 2023; Hock, 2024). Across these cultures, correspondence, ceremonial gifts, inscriptions, and symbols served as both communicative and coercive tools (Parker, 2021; Ancient Worlds Archive, 2026). Ultimately, the evidence shows that the principles of systematized diplomacy persisted from Trans-Mediterranean city-states to the Persian imperial apparatus, demonstrating the durability of strategic and social mechanisms across space and time (Parker, 2021; Denning, 2023; Iranica Online, 2026; Hock, 2024; Ancient Worlds Archive, 2026).

Table 3.

Dimension	Trans-Mediterranean Diplomacy (Amarna, Ebla, Mari, Ugarit, Nuzi)	Persian Diplomacy (Achaemenid Empire)	Notes / Comparative Insight
System	Formalized correspondence, cuneiform archives, scribal schools, administrative infrastructure (Parker, 2021)	Imperial Aramaic letters, courier networks, monumental inscriptions, standardized bureaucratic protocols (Iranica Online, 2026; Ancient Worlds Archive, 2026)	Both relied on codified communication and institutionalized procedures; Persia scaled the system empire-wide.
Strategy	Gift exchange, treaty clauses, military alliances, hostages, ritual oaths (Denning, 2023; Trundle, 2022)	Marriage alliances, hostage diplomacy, vassal treaties, ceremonial submission (Ancient Worlds Archive, 2026; Wikipedia, 2026)	Core mechanisms— reciprocity, coercion, reputation—persist; Persian diplomacy integrated these on a broader territorial scale.
International Society / Norms	Shared ritualized behaviors, oath-taking, ceremonial recognition, codified hierarchies (Montiglio, 2021; Denning, 2023)	Ritualized submission ("earth and water"), public inscriptions, recognition of satrapal authority, norms of loyalty and tribute (Wikipedia, 2026)	Ritualized recognition was central to both; Persia adapted these norms to multi-ethnic, multi-regional governance.
Artefacts / Material Evidence	Cuneiform tablets, cylinder seals, scarabs, pottery, gift objects, votive offerings (Parker, 2021; Denning, 2023)	Clay and leather letters, monumental inscriptions, gift tribute objects, ceremonial artefacts, courier tokens (Iranica Online, 2026; Ancient Worlds Archive, 2026)	Materiality reinforced authority and normativity; both systems intertwined text, objects, and performance.
Scale / Scope	Regional city-states, Levantine polities, Egyptian-Hittite-Mesopotamian networks (Parker, 2021; Denning, 2023)	Supraregional empire spanning Anatolia, Mesopotamia, Levant, Iran, and beyond (Ancient Worlds Archive, 2026)	Persian diplomacy scaled Bronze Age mechanisms to empire, combining local norms with centralized control.
Continuities	Codified rituals, reciprocity, enforcement via reputation and oaths, archival documentation	Codified rituals, reciprocity, enforcement via vassal obligations and imperial authority, archival and inscriptional records	Mechanisms of system, strategy, and society show remarkable endurance across centuries.
Differences / Innovations	Limited territorial reach, localized ritual norms, smaller administrative apparatus	Extensive territorial integration, supraregional communication networks, imperial inscriptional propaganda	Persia innovated in scale and communication infrastructure but retained core diplomatic logic of reciprocity and normative legitimacy.

The archaeological and textual evidence demonstrates that Trans-Mediterranean diplomacy was highly structured despite its regional scope. Amarna, Ebla, Mari, Ugarit, and Nuzi archives reveal codified correspondence, ritualized oaths, and archival systems that institutionalized interstate negotiation. Diplomacy in this context combined material exchange, ceremonial performance, and enforcement through reputation. Gift exchange and ritual

feasting reinforced reciprocity, trust, and hierarchical acknowledgment among city-states. Cuneiform tablets and cylinder seals provide empirical proof that these mechanisms were routinely applied. The system enabled predictability, even amid the threat of conflict, allowing multiple polities to coexist in a managed network. Strategic calculations were inseparable from social norms, as alliances, marriages, and hostages operated simultaneously as coercive and consensual instruments.

Ugarit was a powerful Late Bronze Age city-state located at Ras Shamra, on the Mediterranean coast of what is now northern Syria. It flourished roughly between 1600–1200 BCE, acting as a cultural and commercial crossroads between Egypt, the Hittite Empire, Cyprus, and Mesopotamia. It controlled key maritime trade routes and produced one of the earliest known alphabetic writing systems. Its archives preserve myths, diplomacy, law, and ritual texts, revealing a politically sophisticated kingdom whose rulers balanced alliances with major empires. Its religion blended Canaanite, Hurrian, and local traditions, creating a rich and diverse cultural identity.

Ugarit was ruled by a hereditary king supported by a court bureaucracy, merchant elites, priests, scribes, and a warrior class. The city was cosmopolitan, multilingual, and deeply connected to the wider Bronze Age world through trade and diplomacy. The Ugaritic pantheon included Baal, the storm-god and king of the gods; El, the high father deity; Anat, the warrior goddess; Yam, the sea-god; Mot, the god of death; and Shapshu, the sun goddess. These deities appear prominently in the Baal Cycle, one of the oldest mythic texts ever discovered. Ugarit was destroyed around 1200 BCE during the Bronze Age Collapse, likely due to a combination of internal crisis and external invasions.

Figure. *Sheperd of the Land*

The artefact is a carved wooden head representing a Ugaritic prince. Ugarit was a Late Bronze Age coastal kingdom at Ras Shamra in Syria. Its elite culture blended Egyptian, Levantine, and Mesopotamian influences. The sculpture's wood material suggests a high-status, intimate object. Wood was used in Ugarit for cult statues and royal ancestral portraits. The craftsmanship shows skilled carving

and careful facial modeling. Almond-shaped eyes reflect prestige, divine favor, or ritual insight. Arched brows and symmetry convey nobility and controlled authority. The serene expression signals royal composure and ceremonial dignity.

Sabir

The smooth facial planes imply a youthful but important heir. The tall cylindrical headdress marks elite or ritual status. It may represent a princely crown or a ceremonial priestly role. Egyptian stylistic influence fits Ugarit's diplomatic connections. The sculpture likely served a ritual or dynastic function. It could have been placed in a palace shrine or temple context. It may have represented the prince in religious ceremonies. The portrait emphasizes lineage, legitimacy, and sacred duty. The hybrid style reflects Ugarit's cosmopolitan royal identity. The prince appears as both political heir and ritual intermediary. Overall, the artefact embodies Ugarit's blend of power, piety, and artistry.

Persian diplomacy built upon these foundational practices but scaled them to an imperial context. Aramaic correspondence, monumental inscriptions, and courier networks ensured systemic coordination across vast territories. Ritualized submission, including offerings of "earth and water," symbolically reinforced authority while mediating coercion. Persian strategic practice combined vassal treaties, hostages, and marriage alliances to integrate diverse regions under centralized control. The empire's material and textual evidence confirms that strategy, bureaucracy, and social recognition functioned as interdependent mechanisms. Compared to Trans-Mediterranean polities, Persia innovated in scope, infrastructure, and supraregional enforcement while maintaining continuity in codified norms and ceremonial practice.

Overall, both systems reveal that effective diplomacy relied on a blend of systemic organization, strategic calculation, and socially intelligible norms. Trans-Mediterranean examples highlight the origins and localized flexibility of these practices, whereas Persian evidence demonstrates the durability and scalability of the same principles. The comparative perspective underscores that ancient diplomacy was not ad hoc but embedded in enduring institutions. Material culture, inscriptions, and archives collectively confirm that diplomacy required both coercive credibility and normative legitimacy. Ritual, gift exchange, and archival documentation were inseparable from enforcement. Both traditions illustrate that international society was actively constructed through repeated, patterned interactions. The persistence of these mechanisms across centuries shows that system, strategy, and social order

were mutually constitutive. Persian adaptation confirms that scaling diplomatic practices does not eliminate their reliance on shared norms. In sum, archaeological and textual evidence situates ancient diplomacy as a complex, systemic, and socially embedded phenomenon, bridging regional practice and imperial governance.

Evalautive Insight

In archaeological theory, the term "artefactual" is increasingly seen as limiting because it emphasizes objects in isolation rather than their social, symbolic, and systemic contexts. Scholars have proposed alternative frameworks such as material culture, objects and practices, and embodied or performative materiality. These approaches focus on how objects are produced, circulated, and enacted within social interactions. In the study of ancient diplomacy, these perspectives allow researchers to consider both the tangible and intangible dimensions of interstate relations. Diplomatic gifts, seals, inscriptions, and archival tablets are not only physical objects but also carriers of norms, authority, and expectations. Ritualized exchanges, oath-taking ceremonies, and embassy protocols can be understood as performative acts embedded in material culture. Persian and Trans-Mediterranean diplomatic systems demonstrate how material, social, and symbolic dimensions were intertwined. In the Amarna, Ebla, Mari, Ugarit, and Nuzi archives, correspondence and ceremonial gifts functioned both as communication tools and as instruments of trust-building and enforcement. Cylinder seals, scarabs, and luxury goods codified hierarchies, obligations, and alliance commitments. Archival practices, including standardized salutations and formulaic treaty clauses, provided predictability across multiple polities.

Egyptian diplomacy emphasized ritualized audience and formalized gift exchange, with scarabs and monumental inscriptions functioning as both political statements and social markers of recognition. Phoenician city-states relied on maritime networks, inscriptions, and trade goods to negotiate alliances and secure long-distance influence, showing how commerce and diplomacy were tightly integrated. Greek poleis combined oral negotiation, ceremonial feasting, and votive offerings with archival inscriptions, embedding diplomacy in civic and religious life while emphasizing reputation and collective obligations. Mesopotamian polities, including Assyria and Babylonia, institutionalized correspondence through archives, seals, and royal decrees, linking bureaucratic administration to interstate hierarchy and reciprocity.

Similarly, Persian correspondence in Imperial Aramaic and monumental inscriptions projected authority across a vast empire. Couriers, administrative networks, and ceremonial submission rituals like the offering of "earth and water"

show that system, strategy, and social recognition were deeply integrated.

Diplomatic scanning can be applied to these cases to systematically map networks, flows of communication, and patterns of obligation. By tracing correspondence, gift exchange, and ceremonial acts, scholars can reconstruct both the practical and normative dimensions of interstate relations. Provenance studies of material objects reveal long-distance exchange networks underpinning diplomatic practice. Spatial analysis using GIS can illuminate courier routes, administrative centers, and regional integration. Temporal scanning of archives can detect shifts in strategy, stability, or crisis response. Comparative scanning across Trans-Mediterranean, Greek, Phoenician, Egyptian, Mesopotamian, and Persian contexts highlights continuity in codified norms, ritualized recognition, and enforcement mechanisms.

It also reveals innovation in scale, infrastructure, and territorial integration in the Persian Empire. Embodied and performative analyses of inscriptions, gifts, and ceremonial sites show how authority and reciprocity were socially enacted. Recognizing the semiotic and symbolic functions of objects emphasizes the normative foundations of international society. Integrating textual, material, and performative evidence allows a richer understanding of diplomacy beyond static artefacts. Diplomatic scanning makes visible the networks, hierarchies, and systemic coordination that sustained city-state, imperial, and transregional governance. Applying these approaches demonstrates that ancient diplomacy combined material, social, and symbolic dimensions in complex, interdependent ways. Ultimately, considering alternatives to "artefactual" and employing diplomatic scanning enriches the study of system, strategy, and society in the ancient world, revealing both continuity and adaptation across Mediterranean and Near Eastern polities.

From an archaeological perspective, comparison should begin with the materiality of diplomatic objects, including

tablets, inscriptions, seals, and gifts, to understand how they were produced, circulated, and ritualized. Scholars should examine archival infrastructure, such as palace scribal quarters, courier networks, and storage facilities, to assess the systemic organization of diplomacy. Ritualized practices associated with diplomacy, including oath-taking, feasting, and ceremonial submission, can be compared across polities to trace continuity and variation in normative enforcement. The social roles of intermediaries, such as envoys, scribes, and ambassadors, offer insight into how diplomacy was embedded in social hierarchies. Spatial distribution of material evidence, such as imported goods, inscriptions, or ceremonial sites, can reveal the geographic reach and connectivity of diplomatic networks.

Comparisons should include patterns of reciprocity and gift exchange, analyzing provenance and material composition to assess strategic intent and cultural value. Symbolic and semiotic features of objects, such as iconography, inscriptions, or ritual gestures, highlight how authority and obligation were communicated visually and performatively. Chronological analysis of archives and artefacts allows evaluation of temporal stability, innovation, or crisis response in diplomatic systems. Integration with environmental and logistical data, such as river routes, harbors, or transport networks, can illuminate the practical constraints shaping strategy. Finally, a comparative archaeological perspective should consider scale and adaptation, showing how local city-state practices were maintained, transformed, or scaled in supraregional empires like Persia, highlighting both continuity and innovation in the material and social organization of diplomacy.

Lessons Learned

As we reflect on these insights, it becomes clear that learning from ancient practices can significantly inform current diplomatic strategies. Emphasizing reciprocity, recognition, and institutionalized engagement is vital for fostering cooperation.

First, Ancient diplomacy demonstrates that maintaining a balance of power is essential to prevent domination by a single actor, as seen in Greek city-states and the Egyptian–Hittite system.

Second, trade and connectivity function as instruments of influence, with Phoenician networks illustrating how economic interdependence and merchant activity can rival military force in shaping regional dynamics.

Third, the codification of rules, ceremonial exchanges, and formal correspondence, exemplified in Amarna diplomacy, establishes norms that promote predictability and reduce the likelihood of conflict, even among competitive powers.

Fourth, adapting strategy to local conditions, geography, and the capacities of allies and vassals, as Rome did across its frontiers, enhances resilience and the effectiveness of diplomatic initiatives.

Fifth, strong institutional capacity, including administration and bureaucracy, is critical to executing policy credibly and sustaining long-term commitments.

Sixth, engaging peripheral actors and border communities prevents systemic collapse, as failures to integrate these groups historically undermined otherwise powerful states.

Seventh, military power and diplomacy are not separate spheres; the strategic combination of coercion and negotiation strengthens influence and preserves stability.

Eight, recognition, shared religious practices, and cultural alignment facilitate cooperation by reinforcing legitimacy and mutual understanding.

Ninth, excessive ambition without adaptive strategy, whether in Babylonian or Egyptian expansions, carries the risk of overextension and eventual decline, emphasizing the importance of calibrating objectives to realistic capabilities.

Tenth, anticipating shifts in power, trade, and demographics, as Roman planners did, ensures that strategic foresight underpins stability.

Eleventh, even rivals can cooperate when shared interests are clear, highlighting the enduring utility of negotiation, alliance-building, and mutual adjustment.

Twelth, historical memory and institutionalized experience inform better policy, preventing the repetition of past mistakes.

Thirteenth, crisis management benefits from multi-level engagement with both major powers and local actors to stabilize volatile situations.

Fourteenth, Coordination across complex, multipolar arrangements is essential, as Mesopotamian and Amarna systems show that fragmented actors require alignment to function effectively.

Fifteenth, flexibility in norms allows diplomacy to adapt to changing circumstances, preventing rigidity from undermining strategic objectives.

Sixteenth, long-term vision, integrating military, administrative, and cultural instruments, secures enduring influence and credibility.

Sevententh, proactive engagement with emerging powers and early negotiation reduces the risk of destructive conflicts and preserves systemic equilibrium.

Eigteenth, Lessons from ancient diplomacy transcend

Figure. *Lessons Learned*

time and geography, offering valuable insights for both European and Middle Eastern actors seeking to navigate contemporary regional and international challenges.

Nintheeth, Conflict Prevention through Engagement – Proactive negotiation, alliances, and recognition of emerging powers reduce the likelihood of destructive conflicts.

Twenteeth, Cross-Regional Lessons Are Transferable – European and Middle Eastern actors can learn from each other's history, as patterns of alliance, trade, and norms have enduring relevance.

Ultimately, by understanding the complexities of past diplomatic systems, contemporary actors are better equipped to navigate the multifaceted challenges of today's international relations. This historical perspective enriches our approach to modern diplomacy and enhances our strategic effectiveness.

Conclusions

Ancient diplomacy demonstrates that structured practices, norms, and shared expectations are essential for stable international relations. The balance of power, as seen in Greek city-states, is crucial to prevent domination by a single actor and maintain systemic equilibrium. Economic interdependence, exemplified by Phoenician networks, can rival military power in shaping influence and fostering cooperation. Proactive engagement with emerging powers and early negotiation can reduce the risk of destructive conflicts, a lesson relevant for modern diplomacy. The integration of military, administrative, and diplomatic strategies, as practiced by Rome, highlights the need for comprehensive approaches in contemporary contexts. Historical examples of crisis management underscore the importance of flexibility in norms to adapt to changing geopolitical landscapes. Learning from ancient practices can inform current diplomatic strategies, emphasizing the significance of reciprocity, recognition, and institutionalized engagement. By understanding the complexities of past diplomatic systems, contemporary actors can develop more effective strategies to navigate today's multifaceted international challenges.

Strategic Insights

Balance of Power – Maintaining equilibrium prevents domination by a single actor, as in Greek city-states

and the Egyptian–Hittite system. Trade Connectivity – Economic interdependence, exemplified by Phoenician networks, can rival military power in shaping influence. Adaptive Strategy – Tailoring policy to geography, local conditions, and the capacities of allies or vassals, as Rome did, enhances resilience.

Military Power with Diplomacy – Combining coercion with negotiation strengthens influence and preserves stability. Conflict Prevention through Engagement – Proactive negotiation, alliance formation, and recognition of emerging powers reduce the risk of destructive conflict and maintain systemic stability.

Normative Insights

Rules and Norms – Codified procedures, ceremonial exchanges, and formal correspondence, as in Amarna diplomacy, foster predictability and reduce friction.

Recognition and Identity – Shared religious practices and cultural alignment reinforce legitimacy and cooperation. Soft Power as Leverage – Economic reputation and influence can shape outcomes without recourse to direct military force. Cross-Regional Lessons Are Transferable – Patterns of alliance, trade, and diplomatic norms from antiquity provide enduring lessons for both European and Middle Eastern actors.

Systemic Insights

Peripheral Engagement – Integrating border actors and vassals prevents systemic collapse and strengthens central authority.

Institutional Capacity – Bureaucratic and administrative strength ensures credible execution of policy and long-term commitment. Flexibility in Norms – Adapting institutional and normative frameworks to changing circumstances preserves relevance and strategic effectiveness.

This makes the resuscitation of an EU-led international society—as a fall-back to another great power concert out of the UNSC—attractive to Middle Easterners, China, and the European Union. At the same time, a prosperous and stable Mediterranean, the beating heart of commerce and culture, aligns with the apparent interests of the European Union. If the Mediterranean becomes the center of the world, it will cradle Europeans in the comforting arms of influence, allowing them once more to navigate the currents of global polity. The future belongs to him who carries the longest memory, the keeper of the torch of history. Utopias are the scaffolding of polity, a mirror reflecting both aspiration and caution. Yet, history becomes history only in the script of great powers, a palimpsest of triumph and tragedy, where every empire writes its allegorical tale upon the parchment of the past.

Addressing potential counterarguments and alternative perspectives is essential for a well-rounded analysis of ancient diplomacy and its implications for contemporary practices. Here are some key points to consider:

One might argue that the historical context of ancient diplomacy is too different from today's globalized world to draw meaningful parallels. The political, economic, and social dynamics of antiquity were shaped by unique factors, such as the absence of modern communication technologies and the prevalence of territorial empires. While these differences are significant, the underlying principles of diplomacy—such as negotiation, alliance-building, and the management of power dynamics—remain relevant across time.

Another perspective emphasizes the importance of ideology and cultural factors in shaping diplomatic practices. Critics may argue that focusing solely on material and strategic dimensions overlooks the influence of cultural narratives, religious beliefs, and ideological motivations that drove ancient states. While it is true that these elements played a crucial role, they can be integrated into a broader understanding of diplomacy that includes both normative and material aspects. Recognizing the interplay between ideology and strategy can enrich our comprehension of diplomatic behavior.

Some may contend that military power remains the primary driver of international relations, overshadowing the lessons of ancient diplomacy that emphasize economic interdependence and soft power. This perspective is particularly relevant in contemporary contexts where military conflicts and deterrence strategies dominate headlines. However, historical examples, such as the Phoenician networks, illustrate that economic influence can effectively shape regional dynamics and foster cooperation, suggesting that a balanced approach that incorporates both military and economic strategies is essential.

Additionally, critics might argue that the complexities of modern diplomacy, including multilateralism and the influence of non-state actors, render ancient practices less applicable. While it is true that contemporary diplomacy involves a broader array of actors and issues, the foundational principles of negotiation, coalition-building, and crisis management remain pertinent. Ancient diplomacy provides a framework for understanding how these principles can be adapted to address the complexities of today's multipolar world.

Finally, some may caution against overemphasizing historical lessons, arguing that reliance on past practices could lead to stagnation or failure to innovate. While it is crucial to adapt strategies to current realities, historical insights can serve as a guide rather than a strict blueprint. By

critically engaging with the past, contemporary diplomats can identify successful strategies while remaining open to new approaches that reflect the evolving nature of international relations.

In conclusion, while there are valid counterarguments and alternative perspectives regarding the relevance of ancient diplomacy to contemporary practices, a nuanced understanding that incorporates historical insights alongside modern complexities can enhance the effectiveness of diplomatic strategies today. Engaging with these differing viewpoints not only strengthens the analysis but also fosters a more comprehensive approach to understanding the dynamics of international relations.

This must be compared to the recurring rise of great powers throughout history—an iron law, and a relentless rhythm, and an inescapable pattern—where most ascending states conceive of regional preeminence, and preeminence demands influence, and influence sweeps across their own backyard, and the backyard becomes both shield and stage, both resource and risk, as part of the exercise of rising, of expanding, of asserting. Can any power resist this centrifugal call, this irresistible momentum, this paradoxical necessity of dominance and diplomacy? Each empire, each kingdom, each state—Rome, Egypt, Babylonia—rose and reached outward, and reaching outward reshaped itself, and reshaping demanded strategy, and strategy demanded foresight, and foresight demanded courage.

Enter also the Byzantine empire relative longevity to the western roman empire. The Eastern Roman Empire survived far longer than the Western one because it had a stronger economic base, with wealthier provinces and more stable tax revenues. Its cities remained larger and more functional, giving it a deeper administrative and logistical backbone. The East also had a more defensible geography, with natural barriers that slowed invasions and bought time for strategic responses. Constantinople itself was a fortress city, nearly impregnable and positioned at a global crossroads. The Eastern army was better funded and more professional, allowing it to adapt to new threats more effectively than the West. Diplomacy in the East was more sophisticated, using gold, treaties, and manipulation to redirect enemies toward the West. The East retained a more coherent administrative system, with fewer internal fractures and more continuity in governance. Finally, the East benefited from the fact that most major invasions of the 4th–5th centuries were directed toward the Western provinces, giving the East breathing room to reorganize and survive.

The current US-led hegemony is a trembling lighthouse on a stormy shore, exercised with reluctance, and with caution, and with the patience of a gardener pruning a forest, yet it is also an empire by integration, a net cast wide over states, alliances, treaties, and trade—binding them as tightly as roots intertwine beneath the soil. Like a conductor guiding a symphony of reluctant instruments, it shapes the rise of Europe, the ebb and flow of influence, and the faint probabilities of a more peaceful Middle East. It tempers conflicts without extinguishing ambition, and it holds markets without clutching them, and it defends norms while stretching them thin—a subtle hand that is both glove and gauntlet. In this system, power is a whisper, and authority is a shadow, and diplomacy is the heartbeat of empires; yet even a heartbeat can falter, and even shadows can loom. The Mediterranean is not just a sea; it is a stage, a chessboard, a ledger, and each ripple signals opportunity, risk, and responsibility.

The role of Israel in the Middle East, of course, need not be mentioned—but it cannot be ignored, for it may still shift alliances, and shift perceptions, and shift the very balance of influence; it may still provoke rivalries even as it tempers them, and it may still be both a shield and a sword, both a neighbor and a narrative. Can we deny, can we ignore, can we misread the consequences of its presence? Its presence is not insignificant, its impact is not minor, its influence is not subtle; and yet, and yet, and yet—each action it takes echoes across capitals, across deserts, across seas, shaping threats into treaties, treaties into trust, trust into trepidation. The word "shift" shifts meaning here: it is both a movement of power and a reorientation of expectation, and in that duality lies the heart of strategy.

In the name of which peace do we go to war? In the name of a peace not yet written, a peace not yet understood, a peace not yet guaranteed? The first objective must be to secure stability without stagnation, to hold territory without holding hearts captive, to govern without suffocating the spirit of those governed. The second must be to cultivate trust without illusion, to build alliances without subservience, to negotiate without surrendering dignity. The third must be to achieve justice without vengeance, to balance accountability with mercy, to defend the future without forsaking the present. And yet, —is it not true that peace, like war, is never simple, never singular, never entirely in our hands?

And yet, if we pause before that shadow, we might also see that it does not stand alone.

Force may guard the gates of order, but it does not build the house within them. Steel can deter invasion, discipline can steady institutions, strategy can secure frontiers; yet none of these, by themselves, generate legitimacy, trust, or belonging. Power can compel obedience, but it cannot command loyalty forever. It can silence, but it cannot

persuade without limit. Even the most formidable empire learns that endurance depends not only on the fear it inspires, but on the consent it cultivates.

History suggests that while might shapes borders, meaning shapes communities. Law backed by force may prevent collapse, but law embraced as just prevents decay. Norms with teeth can discipline behavior, yet norms internalized through shared interest and mutual recognition travel farther and last longer. Dialogue without consequence is fragile, but consequence without dialogue is brittle. An order sustained only by coercion grows rigid; an order sustained only by idealism drifts. Stability lives in the tension between them.

Perhaps every golden age does cast a shadow of vigilance, but the shadow is not the substance. The substance is the quiet labor of institutions, the slow weaving of interdependence, the discipline of restraint as much as the readiness to act. The sword may stand behind the treaty, but it is the belief in the treaty that gives the sword its purpose.

In the end, the durability of international society may lie not in denying the necessity of force, nor in romanticizing it, but in acknowledging its limits. Power protects the space in which order can emerge; wisdom determines what is built within that space. And if there is a lesson in the long arc of history, it is this: might can found an order, but only legitimacy, prudence, and shared interest can allow it to endure.

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