

A Social-Psychological Analysis of Amarna Diplomacy

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The Amarna Letters provide rare insight into the diplomatic relations among the Near East kingdoms of the fourteenth century B.C.E.. Given the large amount of scholarly work already completed, Mario Liverani asks whether there is anything more to be studied. He answers his own question by remarking that there is always room for more studies “because the methods of analysis have been improved, the frontiers of historical interest have widened, our cultural trends are changing, and every document can always be studied again and again.”¹ It is in this spirit that we offer another, perhaps new but tentative, approach to the analysis of the Letters. This chapter adopts a social-psychological perspective on international relations (IR), drawing on structural and processual concepts and the connections between them. Although each concept stands on its own, taken together, they illuminate the Amarna period.² Following a brief discussion of research methodology, the key features of the context and interactions of Amarna diplomacy are described. This description is then used to highlight certain themes, including the role played by values and interests, the emphasis placed on reciprocal exchanges, the consequences of strategic choices, and the way that the players attempted to manage the impressions that they conveyed through their messages. The chapter concludes by considering the implications of the analysis for the development of cooperative regional institutions.

On Research Methodology

Content analysis is the method preferred by analysts of international negotiation. To a large extent, our knowledge about negotiation processes is based on the results of studies using this methodology.³ Its use, however, is limited to negotiations in which complete transcripts are available or the material consists of a sample taken from a known “population” of negotiating interactions. Neither of these conditions exists with regard to the Letters. Severe sampling problems limit the kinds of inferences that can be drawn from the available material.⁴ We simply have no way of knowing the extent to which the surviving correspondence is representative of the sum total of letters or events. This leads to the question of whether the missing (or “uncoded”) data differ qualitatively from the data that are available (or “coded”). Any inferences made from this limited and possibly unrepresentative material are suspect and, at the very least, subject to systematic biases that are difficult to estimate and, thus, take into account or correct.

Although some of the more interesting uses of content analysis deal with the inferential questions “Why?” “How?” and “With What Effect?,” the technique has also been used to address such descriptive questions as “What?” “Who?” and “To Whom?” The latter questions are less sensitive to sampling problems, and their answers can provide a running commentary on the body of available Letters. For example, it would be possible to document the key types of arguments or tactics used by each of the kings. But even here, there are some limitations. One concerns the repetitiveness of the kings’ requests and arguments. Another is the one-sided communications, usually from the kings to Pharaohs, that characterize the material. Both these features limit the range of distinctions that can be made among coding categories; only a few categories are likely to be used frequently.

Further, even if the data requirements were satisfied, content analysis would only illuminate processes reflected in the words of the kings. Aspects of diplomatic interaction not captured by these rhetorical exchanges would be hidden from view. Also missing are the exchanges among messengers and kings that may have provided insights into the manner in which intermediaries exerted influence on the court.⁵ More generally, by focusing attention on the messages per se, we may miss the way that the international context shapes those communications as well as the larger meanings, referred to as the “meta-game,” implied by the texts.⁶

Another issue concerns the relevance of social-psychological approaches to and negotiation analyses of the Letters. For social psychologists, the most interesting questions concern the factors that influence attitudes and behav-

ior in face-to-face interactions among individuals or small groups over time. Factors include structural aspects of groups, elements in the immediate situation, and demographic variables, such as gender. For negotiation analysts, the most interesting questions are those asked about factors that influence a process in which two or more negotiators, usually accountable to agencies or constituencies, exchange offers and make concessions or work together to find solutions to joint problems. Many of these questions are difficult to answer with the information provided by the Letters, reducing the relevance of many of the findings in these fields. However, some research is pertinent, and these topics are identified following a description of the situation that existed. The description makes it possible to set bounds on the analysis by bringing proper analytical perspectives to bear on the diplomatic exchanges.

The Situation

Based on a selective reading of the Letters and some interpretive articles, we conclude that these kingdoms played a competitive game for status conferred by the kinds of exchanges made and the wealth accumulated and displayed. It seems clear that the kingdoms were not a “brotherhood” in the sense of a communal system in which each king acted to secure the welfare and security of the other kingdoms.⁷ Rather, they operated as if they held views on IR consonant with a Realpolitik framework. This conclusion derives from the following observations.

First, the kings functioned largely as unitary actors. They were not elected from below but selected from above, by the gods. Although they depended in part on the support of certain elites in their countries, they appeared to have considerable latitude in negotiations with other kings. Second, the international negotiations consisted of exchanges of material items (gold, horses, brides) in which attempts were made to enhance one’s own benefits *relative* to gains made by the other parties. Such relative-gain motivation is emphasized by Realist perspectives on IR.⁸ Third, as negotiators, the kings frequently insisted on *reciprocal* exchanges but seemed mostly concerned with the symbolic implications of these exchanges for their status or prestige. The instrumental value of the exchanges was evident even in the occasional use of such ingratiating communications as the repetitious salutations that appear at the beginning of letters. We note, especially in the Babylonian correspondence, a softening of positions and even unilateral concessions (see, for example, EA 3, 4, 7, 9). These moves, we would contend, were not demonstrations of concern for Pharaoh’s welfare but were tactics employed to encourage reciprocation of the favor in order not to jeopardize the (Babylonian) king’s

regional status. And, fourth, there appears to be a status differentiation between Egypt and the other kingdoms.

These features served to perpetuate or reinforce conflictual relations among the kingdoms, making it difficult, if not impossible, for them to develop norms, regimes, and institutions that would ensure long-term cooperation. By constantly jockeying for advantage, the kings avoided confronting the larger issues (values, relationships) that could have altered the normative climate in the direction of cooperation and community. By insisting on a rather strict reciprocity, they were subject to partisan biases that would, more often than not, lead to exchanges judged to be unfair. By being overly strategic, resolving conflicts of interest in favor of the more powerful party, they precluded the possibility of integrative or optimal solutions to their problems. And by managing the impressions they projected, the kings risked being viewed, at best, as appropriately tactical or, at worst, as manipulative or devious. Each of these points is elaborated further below.

Interests and Values

Maneuvering for competitive advantage, the kings focused on trading items that had “market value.” Acting strategically, they were aware of the connection between a shifting balance of power and the relative value of the exchanges arranged through negotiations. A similar process is observed in modern arms-control negotiations, where an urge for symmetry makes “states hypersensitive to newly perceived inadequacies (which they) tend to correct by leveling up to parity in a variety of force categories.”⁹ Like arms-control negotiators concerned about the size of their arsenals, they bargained over such narrowly defined interests as their stocks of gold, horses, and other material objects.

Trading relationships such as these typically focus on objects that have a known trade or monetary value, over which a bargain can be readily struck. Indeed, the notion of “fractionating” issues by reducing their size or their nonmeasurable properties has been proposed as a tactic for getting agreements; the evidence suggests that agreements do occur on “smaller” points.¹⁰ The agreements are, however, limited and are usually achieved at the cost of ignoring larger value-laden issues that may also divide the parties.

The only apparent reference to common values in the Letters is made when the kings acknowledge their ancestral ties and shared aims. The issues overwhelmingly concern distributive matters.¹¹ There is virtually no discussion of preferred political or economic systems, nor did the kings address issues concerning the design of international institutions or regimes. By ignoring these

issues, the kings avoided confronting organizational matters other than security alliances. One consequence of this emphasis was to preserve the existing competitive system, ruling out the benefits of cooperation that occur in communal systems.¹²

Reciprocity and Equivalence

In trading relationships, the parties must gauge the equivalent values of commodities. Some sense of the difficulties involved in assessing equivalence is evident in the Letters, where few deals are closed. (Exceptions are EA 19 and 32.) The problem evident in most of the messages was agreeing on a fair exchange: The players regularly insisted on reciprocal deals, frequently made conditional offers, and often complained about unfair proposals. The absence of Pharaohs' replies complicates the analysis. We can only surmise that had they reached agreement on equivalence, a deal would have followed. Why, then, was it so difficult for these kings to agree on the terms of trade?

Several reasons may be suggested. First, since perceived status was always at issue, the kings were highly sensitive to any deal that might have reduced their status. Second, the kings were subject to the well-known tendency to judge their own offers as being more valuable than the counteroffers made by others; such partisan biases have been found to be very prevalent in bargaining relationships.¹³ And, third, it was unclear which of the many forms of reciprocity was to serve as a trading standard—whether strict equality, equity, compensation, or compound justice. Although these distinctions refer to final outcomes, the question of fairness arises also with regard to the negotiation process or its procedures. Yet this was largely ignored in the Letters.¹⁴ The kings' insistence on the need for reciprocal trades has implications for the “relationship meta-game,”¹⁵ for example, when Kadashman-Enlil offered his daughter on condition that Pharaoh send gifts and not detain the Babylonian delegation (EA 3). These kinds of contingent offers have been shown to contribute to a deterioration rather than an improvement in relationships. They do so by raising questions of equivalence: Is the other's response to my offer an equivalent concession? What is an equivalent response to the other's initiative? When, however, Kadashman-Enlil also invited Pharaoh to a festival, despite having been snubbed by him earlier, he made an unconditional offer that, if not viewed as being tactical—as an attempt to “sweeten the pie”—avoided the issue of equivalence, thereby contributing to an improved relationship.

There may have been other problems as well. The protracted delays in responding through messengers (note here the two-year detention of mes-

sengers in EA 7) complicate the task of gauging the appropriate response to the original initiative. Negotiators have been shown to monitor the recent moves of contestants, paying much less attention to moves taken over longer periods: Their own concessions are responses to the relative size of the concessions made in the previous round.¹⁶ Furthermore, the climate of mistrust, made evident by the large number of threats and accusations, makes it likely that any attempt to reciprocate will be misinterpreted. Suspicions about Pharaoh's motives may have led to a denial that they constituted a fair counter-offer to the other king's proposal.

Interpretations of reciprocity are complicated further by the competitive game being played. The players could be construed as tacticians who calculate the consequences of their moves or choices. These consequences are the result of the combined choices of the players, where the best outcome for one may be the worst for the other. In this game, each player searches for his best outcome, which may be neither mutually beneficial nor optimal. Such a dilemma is illuminated in the next section.

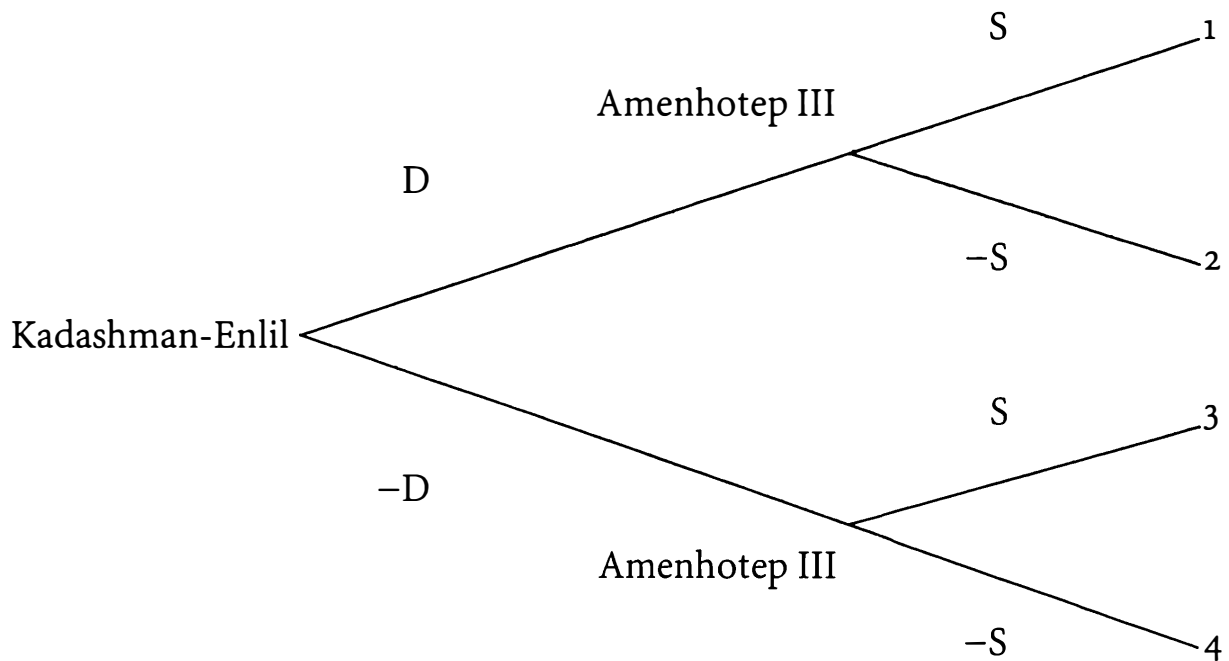
In the analysis to follow, we reason backward from known outcomes described in the Letters to the processes leading to those outcomes. The analysis is construed as a thought experiment in the form of an "if-then" simulation of a possible path that would have led to the decisions that were made. *If* we assume that the kings — referred to here as players — were acting strategically, *then* this is a plausible depiction of the processes; however, it may not have been the actual process, about which the Letters provide little information.

Four kinds of information would provide evidence for the postulated strategic calculations. First, it should be shown that the kings thought about these issues in dichotomous terms, as "either-or." Second, it should be clear from their statements that they ranked possible outcomes in the postulated order. Third, there should be indications that they were attentive to one another's preferences and choices. And fourth, it should be evident that the options exhaust the possible outcomes without recourse to side payments or deals made with other kings. Since the Letters are not clear on these points, we offer the game as a model of the processes leading to the outcome.

Strategic Choices

At stake in most of the transactions was relative status. This was a competitive game in which one player's status was gained at the expense of the other player(s). Thus, the players had conflicting interests, defined as different preferences for the distribution of status, a scarce resource. The conflict of interests could be resolved through a compromise whereby each player

Figure 14.1



settled for less but neither settled for his worst outcome, in other words, a non-zero-sum game. When power is asymmetrical, however, it is likely that the less powerful player will settle for less than his more powerful opponent. This situation is illustrated by an analysis of the exchange described in EA 1. This is one of the few cases in which an actual interaction occurs between Pharaoh and another king.

The players in this game are Amenhotep III (called “Nibmuarea” in this letter) and Kadashman-Enlil. Both have two courses of action: Amenhotep III chooses between showing the Babylonian Princess (S) or an impostor (-S), and Kadashman-Enlil chooses between sending dignitaries (D) or not sending dignitaries (-D). Kadashman-Enlil chooses first. Observing his choice, namely, whether Babylonian dignitaries were sent to Pharaoh’s court, Amenhotep III chooses between showing or not showing the Princess.

The four possible outcomes of this interaction are shown in Figure 14.1. The Princess is identified by the dignitaries in outcome 1. In outcome 2, Amenhotep III is caught in a lie; while knowing that the dignitaries can identify the Princess, Pharaoh presents someone else to them. (Given this outcome, the game could take another twist were Kadashman-Enlil to respond to the detection by breaking off relations with Egypt.) Amenhotep III claimed the third outcome, namely, that he had no incentive to present someone other than the Princess: “But if your sister were dead, what reason would there be for one’s concealing her death and presenting someone else?” (EA 1). He further says, “Did you, however, ever send here a dignitary of Yours truly,

who knows your sister, who could speak with her and identify her? Suppose he spoke with her. The men whom you sent here are nobodies. . . . There has been no one among them who knows her, who was an intimate of your father, and who could identify her” (EA 1). Kadashman-Enlil claimed the fourth outcome by accusing Pharaoh of not showing his sister to his low-ranking messengers.

Amenhotep III’s insistence that he “has no reason whatsoever to show someone else” suggests that he had a dominant choice—to show the Princess to any messengers sent by Kadashman-Enlil. If we take him at his word, we can assume that he valued outcomes 1 and 3 more than 2 and 4. Knowing this, Kadashman-Enlil could “prune the branches,” leading to outcomes 2 and 4. Outcomes 1 and 3 in Figure 13.1 then become the possibilities. Choosing between these outcomes, we have reason to believe that Kadashman-Enlil preferred outcome 3.

The first outcome does not serve Kadashman-Enlil’s objective of denying Pharaoh his daughter. He complains in EA 2 that Pharaoh would not send him an Egyptian princess. By using his sister’s “disappearance” as a pretext, he refuses to send his own daughter to Pharaoh. Here he conditions his response on Pharaoh’s willingness to send him a daughter. In this game, with complete information, Pharaoh knew Kadashman-Enlil’s objectives. Realizing that Pharaoh knows that he—Kadashman-Enlil—knows his preferences, he should have understood that his insistence on outcome 4 (the Princess is not shown and dignitaries are not sent) would not have helped him to deny a daughter to Pharaoh. Thus, by reasoning back in this way, we can understand why outcome 3 was inevitable.

This was an easy solution to discover. One player had dominant choices (outcomes 1 or 3) and the other, moving first, had to decide on his best reply in the light of those choices. We assumed that Amenhotep III was informed of the messengers’ rank prior to making his choice of showing or not showing the Princess. Now, let us relax that assumption. Suppose that Pharaoh decided to reveal the Princess without knowing which messengers were sent by the Babylonian king. Here each player moves without knowing each other’s prior choices. Such interactions involving imperfect information are analyzed by games in “strategic form”: each player devises his strategy before knowing what the other will do.

Analysis in Strategic Form

The players, their alternative choices, and the possible outcomes can be depicted as shown in Figure 14.2.

Figure 14.2

| | | Kadashman-Enlil | |
|----------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------------|
| | | <i>Send Dignitaries</i> | <i>Not Send Dignitaries</i> |
| Amenhotep III | <i>Show Princess</i> | Outcome 1 | Outcome 3 |
| | <i>Not Show Princess</i> | Outcome 2 | Outcome 4 |

Preferring outcome 1, Amenhotep III realizes that when the Princess is correctly identified, Kadashman-Enlil can no longer deny him a daughter. Although the Princess cannot be accurately identified by the messengers in outcome 3, they can report to Kadashman-Enlil that Pharaoh attempted to show someone. There is, then, a probability that the one presented is indeed the Princess. Kadashman-Enlil takes advantage of this situation by insisting that the one presented is, in fact, not the Princess. Outcomes 2 and 4 are of lesser value for Amenhotep III. Since no one is presented to the Babylonian messengers in outcome 4, this gives Kadashman-Enlil a stronger hand (than in outcome 3). Outcome 2 is particularly undesirable since Pharaoh is caught cheating. Thus, Amenhotep III's preference ordering is $1 > 3 > 4 > 2$.

Preferring outcome 2, Kadashman-Enlil realizes that he would gain bargaining power if Pharaoh is caught in a lie. Although Pharaoh's cheating cannot be detected in outcome 4, the fact that the Princess (or a surrogate) was not shown also serves the Babylonian king's interests. Still less preferred is outcome 3, whereby Pharaoh shows the Princess whose identity cannot be verified. Least preferred is outcome 1: The Princess is identified, and the Babylonian king loses leverage in the bargaining for his daughter's hand. Thus, Kadashman-Enlil's preference ordering is $2 > 4 > 3 > 1$. This is a reversal of Amenhotep III's preferences, resulting in a pure conflict of interest between the players.

We can now construct a game matrix (see Fig. 14.3). The first and second entries are Amenhotep III's and Kadashman-Enlil's ranking of the outcome, respectively. For example, by showing the Princess, Pharaoh obtains either his best outcome (4), if Kadashman-Enlil sends dignitaries, or his second-best outcome (3), if the Babylonian king sends low-ranking envoys. By not sending dignitaries, Kadashman-Enlil obtains either his second-best outcome (3),

Figure 14.3

| | | Kadashman-Enlil | |
|----------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------------|
| | | <i>Send Dignitaries</i> | <i>Not Send Dignitaries</i> |
| Amenhotep III | <i>Show Princess</i> | (4, 1)* | (3, 2) |
| | <i>Not Show Princess</i> | (1, 4) | (2, 3) |

*The higher the ranking, the more favorable the outcome.

if Pharaoh does not show the Princess, or his third-best outcome (2), if Pharaoh shows the Princess.

Amenhotep III's strategy of showing the Princess is dominant: he obtains either his best or second-best outcome. Had he decided to choose the dominated (inferior) strategy of not showing the Princess, he would have obtained either his worst or second-worst outcomes. Whether Kadashman-Enlil decides to send dignitaries or not, Amenhotep III comes out better by showing the Princess. Thus, Kadashman-Enlil must choose his best reply to Pharaoh's dominant strategy: since he can only obtain either his worst or next-to-worst outcomes, he chooses the latter, that is, not to send dignitaries.

The third outcome is thus the equilibrium solution to this game. By equilibrium solution, we mean the outcome that neither party expects to improve on, given what each knows about the likely choices of the other player. When interests conflict, as they do in this case, the equilibrium outcomes are not the same as the parties' optimal outcomes (outcome 1 for Amenhotep III, and 2 for Kadashman-Enlil). Knowing that the second row of the game matrix is eliminated, Kadashman-Enlil chooses his preferred strategy of not sending dignitaries. By so doing, he forces Amenhotep III to settle for his second-best outcome (3). In a sense, Kadashman-Enlil's choice becomes obvious once it is realized that Pharaoh has no incentive to present anyone other than the Princess. Then, knowing that Kadashman-Enlil was going to send low-ranking messengers, Amenhotep III was not surprised to see them at his court. He was entertained by declaring in EA 1, "Here is your mistress who stands before you."

The game analysis illuminates a relationship between the structure of an

interactive situation and the choices made by the contestants.¹⁷ In the situation described in EA 1, players of unequal power had conflicting interests indicated by their different preferred outcomes. The choices made in this situation produced a nonoptimal compromise that favored the more powerful player (Pharaoh).

Managing Impressions

An analysis of options does not include the attempts made by players to influence one another's choices or to persuade the others to make advantageous decisions. By focusing only on strategy, an analyst ignores the way players communicate their intentions and the impact of those communications on the others' choices. Influence tactics used by the kings are revealed, at least to some extent, by the Letters. It would, therefore, be useful to examine them for insights into the way that impressions were managed.

By impression management, we refer to communications intended to influence another's perceptions, evaluations, or decisions.¹⁸ Although a wide variety of tactics have been discussed in the literature, we can divide them into those that reward others for behaving in desired ways and those that punish them for behaving in undesired ways. Reward tactics include such attraction-seeking communications as ingratiation (compliments, flattery, esteem-enhancement) and agreeing with the other's opinions, as well as making promises about positive consequences for taking desired actions and reciprocating or making unilateral concessions. Coercive tactics include issuing threats or warnings, making commitments that prevent the other from achieving his or her goals, and depriving the other from receiving benefits, as when requests are ignored or concessions are not reciprocated. Many of these tactics are used in exchange transactions, referred to in this context as the "issue subgames," as well as in the psychological status/recognition games referred to as the "meta-game."¹⁹ We use these terms as interpretive concepts in examining the Letters, focusing especially on EA 1–41.

Whether one kind of influence tactic is more or less effective than another depends on the structure of the situation in which they are used. The dependency context in which the kings interacted—each depended on Pharaoh (and each other) for recognition—may have led them to employ certain approaches. When one party is dependent on the other, *and both know it*, an effective strategy is to mix agreements with disagreements (rather than to agree consistently) in order to avoid appearing manipulative.²⁰ This seems to have been the approach used by many of the kings. They were cautious to convey the impression that nonreciprocated exchanges would be unac-

ceptable, nor were they eager to convey the impression of being overly ingratiating or obedient. (These types of communications were rare.) However, there were also differences among the kings in their emphasis on rewards or punishments.

Despite his frequent complaints and occasional threats (e.g., EA 8), the Babylonian king conceded often (EA 3, 4, 7) and offered compliments that can be interpreted as ingratiation (EA 9, 11). In EA 16, the Assyrian king asserted demands for equal or better treatment to that given to the Mittanians. The Mittanian king used various tactics. In an act of apparent desperation, he settled for less (EA 19) but then expressed dissatisfaction with the deal (EA 20). Of particular interest was his attempt to use a “go-between” (the Egyptian Queen Mother) to influence Pharaoh (EA 26), while conveying a compelling threat in EA 27 (urging Pharaoh to act). He also resorted to shaming by unfavorably comparing recent Egyptian actions to those taken by Pharaoh’s ancestors (EA 28). He then softened his approach by issuing promises. When this did not work, he saved face by blaming Pharaoh for his troubles (EA 29).

Reacting to a common enemy, Hatti, Pharaoh struck a rare deal with the king of Arzawa (EA 31, 32). A very different approach was used by the king of Alashiya. His nonthreatening appeals for equal exchanges (EA 33), unilateral concessions (EA 34, 35, 37), and compliance with Egyptian views (EA 38) left him open to being exploited. This king presented himself as a dependent player who hoped that his cooperation would be rewarded by Pharaoh.²¹ In contrast, Suppiluliuma, the Hittite king, conjures up images of sibling rivalry in EA 41 when he asserted his claim that he was in a stronger bargaining position than Tushratta, the Mittanian king. These tactics are similar to those used in modern international negotiation, especially during the Cold War. Various studies have documented the frequent use of coercive strategies and tough rhetoric by negotiators in both inter- and intrabloc talks.²² Like these modern negotiators, the kings alternated between hard and soft communications, occasionally even ratcheting up the level of demands and threats when earlier attempts at being cooperative “fell on deaf ears.” (Note, in this regard, the Babylonian king’s escalating sequence, going from rewards to issuing warnings about an Egyptian loss of reputation, appealing to guilt, then threatening to call off giving his daughter in marriage as well as withholding his own gifts if none were received from Pharaoh [EA 1–11].)

Although distributive issues remain on the contemporary international agenda, a good deal of activity has shifted toward shared goals, problem solving, and cooperative relationships. This theme has gained momentum in post-Cold War theorizing, largely as a reaction to Realist approaches.²³

It emphasizes attitudes toward conflict that were absent during the Amarna period: namely, that many disputes are based on misperceptions and misunderstandings rather than conflicting interests, that quick fixes are less important than enduring resolutions, and that integrative solutions—outcomes that are best for all parties—can be found. The conditions for effective problem-solving include showing a concern for the other's payoffs as well as one's own, exchanging information about real priorities and needs, and being willing to put in some hard thinking in order to identify integrative outcomes.²⁴ Despite the frequent references to brotherhood and family, the kings showed no inclination toward this kind of problem-solving. Nor did they seem eager to consider issues with broad (regionwide) substantive implications. Indeed, it has been argued that international negotiators have only begun to consider the cognitive sources of conflict—as opposed to interests—over the past thirty years.²⁵

Effective problem solving depends also on the way negotiators view one another. Modern conflict theorists emphasize the importance of images in negotiation and strategic thinking. Complex images of other nations facilitate the search for integrative solutions; relatively simplistic images accompany the sorts of competitive tactics used by the kings. However, we can only speculate about what the kings thought about Pharaohs and how the Egyptian kings viewed the others. Could a “superior” Egypt have viewed the other kingdoms as being comparable to them in strength yet culturally inferior, leading Pharaohs to consider those kingdoms fair prey? This attitude enables a nation to rationalize aggressive postures or to take aggressive actions against the “inferior outgroups.”²⁶ The Letters suggest that Egypt had a sense of superiority to the surrounding peoples and was mostly indifferent to communications from them but not aggressively imperialistic. Could the “inferior” kingdoms have viewed the Egyptians as being superior in military and economic capabilities but not superior in culture? This view leads a nation to view the hegemon as being dangerous, serving to temper hasty aggressive actions.²⁷ The Letters suggest that most kings were cautious in dealing with Pharaohs, preferring the softer reward tactics over the harder coercive approaches. (The strong postures taken by the Assyrians were an exception.) However, as discussed above, these tactics were instrumental, serving to further selfish or national interests. This posture is consistent with the Realpolitik orientation that guided the kings' behavior.²⁸

Conclusions

The perspective taken in this paper suggests that the kings were engaged in a competitive game for status. By jockeying for competitive advantage, they avoided confronting the larger substantive issues that had ramifications for the broader regional system. By insisting on reciprocity, they were often unable to agree on a formula for exchange on which agreements could have been based. Although their tactical communications were intended to persuade Pharaohs to compromise or concede, their disadvantaged power position would lead (at best) to nonoptimal equilibrium solutions that favored Pharaoh. But few deals were made, and those that did occur resulted from concessions made by the kings in desperation or to preserve an alliance that bolstered security in the face of a common enemy.

These interpretations are based solely on available communications. They are not the result of applying systematic methodologies such as content analysis. Unavoidably, it is difficult to decide whether they reflect our own bias rather than the views of the kings themselves.²⁹ This discussion does, however, have the advantage of stimulating a debate among scholars from different disciplinary backgrounds. Although the varied interpretations are unlikely to converge on “the truth,” they can be regarded as equally plausible ways of conceiving of relations during the Amarna period.

With regard to our own interpretation, we welcome challenges to the Realpolitik framework from which we believe the kings were operating. In particular, other analyses and other information may reveal more about the perceptions that are hidden from our view. They may provide “missing” information that would, for example, suggest a willingness by the kings to engage in the sort of problem-solving processes that would enable them to make the transition from an exchange to a communal regional system.

In an effort to broaden our analysis, it would be advantageous to learn more about several aspects of the communications and about other interactions that probably took place. First, it would be useful to have more information about the Pharaohs’ initiatives and responses to offers made by the kings. Second, a better rendering of the chronological flow of the communications would clarify the response-counterresponse sequence. Third, ruminations by the kings in the form of thinking out loud would have provided a window on their images of the other nations. Fourth, messages among other kings would have illuminated further their relationships in the context of a dominant power. Fifth, missing are the internal communications that took place between the kings and their advisers or constituents; these could have

provided insights into the way strategies were developed and images formed. And, sixth, we would have benefited from more information about the messengers' interactions with their kings as well as with the targets of their messages; some evidence suggests that they performed numerous critical functions in their boundary roles, including acting as interpreters.³⁰ These "data" would broaden the framework that guides a social-psychological analysis of the diplomatic interactions.