

**IMAGINING EMPATHY: COUNTERFACTUAL  
METHODS AND THE US-IRAN SECURITY  
DILEMMA**

**By**

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**A thesis submitted to  
The University of Birmingham for the degree of  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

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January 2017

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## **Abstract**

The overall contribution of this thesis is to develop a conceptualisation of empathy for the security dilemma, and to empirically explore this conceptualisation through a counterfactual case study of US foreign policy towards Iran, 2001-2010. It achieves this in three stages. First, it shows how the concept of empathy has long been implicitly central to security dilemma theorising. In particular, it demonstrates that security dilemma theorists have drawn upon implicit and unspecified notions of empathy in order to answer the crucial question of how security dilemma dynamics between adversaries can be overcome. Second, it addresses this omission by developing a conceptualisation of empathy that speaks to the unique context of the security dilemma. In mediating between different understandings of empathy across a number of literatures, the thesis proposes a conceptualisation that emphasises the importance of reflexivity and notions of difference. And third, it uses an innovative counterfactual methodology to empirically map the dynamics of empathy onto US foreign policy towards Iran. In doing so the thesis shows how empathy can promote cooperation between adversaries in some instances, but can be inhibited by broader contextual factors in others.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would firstly like to thank the Economic and Social Research Council for their financial support. I would also like to thank my supervisors, Nick Wheeler and Scott Lucas, for their outstanding support, advice, and guidance over the past four years. Scott has consistently pushed me to clarify the conceptual framing the thesis, while providing invaluable insights into the US-Iran relationship. I am indebted to Nick for taking me under his wing as an intern some five and a half years ago and mentoring me through every twist and turn since then. He has been a constant source of enthusiasm and encouragement, and our conversations about trust, empathy, the security dilemma, and the Iran nuclear negotiations have had a profound impact upon this thesis.

During the PhD I was fortunate to spend time at other institutions as well as Birmingham. These trips proved to be invaluable experiences and I am extremely grateful to the individuals who made them possible. Thank you to John Tirman at the MIT Centre for International Studies for hosting me and supporting my funding application. And thank you to Matias Spektor at the Getulio Vargas Foundation in Sao Paulo for granting me a Stanton International Security Fellowship and for making me feel so welcome in Brazil. I am also grateful to the various people I met on these trips that made them so rewarding and memorable. During these visits I conducted many of the interviews that make up the primary data of the thesis. Thank you to everyone that so graciously gave up their time and agreed to be interviewed. They are listed in the appendix.

The University of Birmingham has been a wonderful place to conduct this research. Thank you to all the staff in the ICCS and POLIS that engaged with my work in one way or another and undoubtedly improved it. One of the great pleasures of studying at Birmingham has been the vibrant PhD community in the ICCS and POLSIS. It is often said that doing a PhD is a lonely process. I feel incredibly fortunate that this was not the case. Thank you for the support, collegiality, beers, and friendship to Ana Alecsandru, Lindsay Clark, Laurence Cooley, Simon Copeland, Rhys Crilley, Lance Davies, Scott Edwards, Mattias Hjort, Jamie Johnson, Max Lempriere, David Norman, Jonna Nyman, Daniel Rio Tinto, Sumedh Rao, Liam Stanley, and Sam Warner.

By far my biggest debt of gratitude goes to my family and to my girlfriend Hannah. Each of them has contributed to this thesis in a major way, whether they are fully aware of it or not. My parents and sister could not have been more supportive and encouraging. From last minute thesis editing (thanks Dad!), to financial support when my studentship ran out, to well-timed tea and gin breaks during a few writing periods at home, I cannot thank them enough for their faith and patience. I hope I can repay them soon by finally spending some time at home that is not interrupted by manically working on my thesis. Hannah has been a constant presence throughout this long process and her influence is felt on every page. The innumerable ways she has positively impacted this thesis are far too many to list, but suffice to say that without her unwavering love, support and patience none of this would have been possible.

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## **List of abbreviations and acronyms**

AEOI – Atomic Energy Organisation of Iran

fMRI - Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging

HEU- High-Enriched Uranium

IAEA – International Atomic Energy Agency

INF – Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty

JCPOA – Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action

JPOA – Joint Plan of Action

LEU – Low-Enriched Uranium

MEK – Mojahedin-e Khalk

NPT – Nuclear non-Proliferation Treaty

NSC – National Security Council

P5+1 – term for the permanent five of the UNSC plus Germany.

UNSC – United Nations Security Council

TRR – Tehran Research Reactor



# Introduction

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After twelve years of periodic negotiations, Iran and the P5+1 announced in July 2015 that they had finally reached a comprehensive deal on Iran's nuclear program.<sup>1</sup> Titled the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the deal severely limits Iran's nuclear activities for a period of up to fifteen years, while subjecting them to one of the most stringent verification regimes in history. In exchange, Iran received significant relief from the multitude of unilateral and multilateral sanctions that had been levied at them, and continue to operate a small but not insignificant civilian nuclear program that includes uranium enrichment (US Department of State, 2015). Following the deal's announcement, President Barack Obama sat down for a lengthy interview with Thomas Friedman of the New York Times in order to make his case for why this was such an important achievement. With the prospect of a lengthy congressional battle looming, the administration was quick to roll out its arguments and establish the parameters of the coming debate.

In the interview Obama made a number of expected arguments that indicated an untrusting and sceptical view of Iran's behaviour. For instance, he stated that the deal was made possible because of the relative leverage the United States and their allies had over Iran. He said that the deal was not based on trust in Iran, but rather upon the scientific certainty provided by the most intrusive arms control verification regime in history. And finally, he re-iterated that there is still a great deal that divides Iran and the United States, and much that he finds troubling about their behaviour (Obama, 2015a). Amongst this rhetoric, however, Obama also managed to strike a more empathic tone that revealed a reflexive understanding of Iran's insecurities and the US's role in creating them. In one passage, he said the following:

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<sup>1</sup> The P5+1 is the collective term for the UN Security Council's five permanent members (the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Russia and China) plus Germany. In the context of the Iran nuclear negotiations they are sometimes also referred to as the E3+3.

‘And then I think the last thing that — this is maybe not something I’ve learned but has been confirmed — even with your enemies, even with your adversaries, I do think that you have to have the capacity to put yourself occasionally in their shoes, and if you look at Iranian history, the fact is that we had some involvement with overthrowing a democratically elected regime in Iran. We have had in the past supported Saddam Hussein when we know he used chemical weapons in the war between Iran and Iraq, and so, as a consequence, they have their own security concerns, their own narrative. It may not be one we agree with. It in no way rationalizes the kinds of sponsorship from terrorism or destabilizing activities that they engage in, but I think that when we are able to see their country and their culture in specific terms, historical terms, as opposed to just applying a broad brush, that’s when you have the possibility at least of some movement’ (Obama, 2015a)

In this passage Obama argued that one reason ‘some movement’ became possible between the United States and Iran was that he and his negotiators were able put themselves in the shoes of their Iranian counterparts, and see the world from their point of view. He acknowledged both the existence and the legitimacy of some of the grievances Iran has long held against the United States, and the importance of understanding, if not agreeing with, the narrative they tell about themselves and their relationship with the United States. While he remained ambivalent as to the relative causal weighting of this empathy in leading to the JCPOA, the fact that a sitting president of the United States uttered these empathically motivated words about the Islamic Republic of Iran was significant.

Although the specific question of how important or not empathy was to the JCPOA sits beyond the focus of this thesis, this brief example does, however, illuminate part of the central puzzle that drives this project. Fundamentally, it is interested in exploring the role of empathy in overcoming security dilemma dynamics between adversaries in international politics. Applying this broad question to the US-Iran relationship, it seeks to determine whether greater empathy from key US officials would have increased the prospects of cooperation between the United States and Iran at specific points between 2001 and 2010. These questions emerge from a wider debate in International Relations (IR) regarding the role of empathy, and specifically the role that security

dilemma theorists have given to empathy in explaining how security dilemma dynamics can be overcome.<sup>2</sup> I will briefly review some of this literature before outlining the US-Iran case study.

The security dilemma has long been a cornerstone of IR. Utilised by scholars from a wide-range of theoretical perspectives, it has given a number of varying explanations for how conflicts can arise between actors both international and domestic. More importantly for our present purposes, scholars have also sought to explain and theorise the processes through which security dilemma dynamics can be overcome, mitigated, or transformed entirely (Booth and Wheeler, 2008; Herz, 1959; Holmes and Yarhi-Milo, 2016; Jervis, 1976, 1978; Kydd, 2000). In exploring this latter body of literature, one of the aims of this thesis is to highlight that security dilemma theorists have rested upon particular assumptions regarding the concept of empathy in theorising these processes. Security dilemma theorists, dating back to John Herz, have explored how attempting to understand your adversary, and considering the possibility that they too may be acting through fear as opposed to aggression, may enable actors to take the bold steps necessary to break spirals of conflict (Bleiker, 2005; Booth and Wheeler, 2008; Herz, 1959; Jervis, 1976, 1978; Wheeler, 2008). As Nicholas Wheeler has observed, ‘The importance of showing empathy for an adversary’s security concerns and interests is an idea rooted in the classic works of Herbert Butterfield, John Herz, and Robert Jervis’ (2013, p. 482).

Indeed, Herz, who had initially introduced the concept of the security dilemma in 1950 (1950), theorised that if security dilemma dynamics are created by misperception and misunderstanding, it would then follow that if actors could ‘put oneself into the other fellow’s

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<sup>2</sup> A brief definitional note is required. For the purposes of this thesis, the term security dilemma is defined as the dilemmas of interpretation and response that actors face in international politics. Within the context of existential uncertainty, actors face a dilemma over how to interpret the actions of others, and then a dilemma over how to respond to these actions (Booth and Wheeler, 2008, pp. 4–5). ‘Security dilemma dynamics’ describes one possible outcome of the security dilemma, which is ‘hostility driven by mutual fear’ (Wheeler, 2009, p. 495). I acknowledge that the majority of literature uses ‘security dilemma’ to describe what Wheeler calls ‘security dilemma dynamics’. Thus, the security dilemma will only be used to refer to the definition described above or to the general body of literature.

place' (1959, p. 249) then the conflict could be mitigated or transcended entirely. Robert Jervis took on this mantle in the late 1970s, likewise arguing that empathy was necessary for actors to break out of spirals of conflict, as he termed them. Jervis, however, saw empathy as a decidedly secondary factor to other more pressing issues. If empathy was to play a role, it would be determined by and dependent upon the material balance of world politics as dictated by this theory of the offence-defence balance, and by the anarchic nature of international politics (Jervis, 1976, 1978). Jervis was therefore ambivalent about empathy's transformative potential, and seemed to suggest that it would ultimately only prove a central factor to promoting cooperation between adversaries if other, more important, conditions aligned themselves first. Thirty years later, Booth and Wheeler sought to free the security dilemma from these structural shackles by highlighting how 'agency is one of the neglected dimensions of security dilemma theorising' (2008, p. 7). In introducing the concept of 'security dilemma sensibility' (Booth and Wheeler, 2008, p. 7), they envisioned the transformative power that a particularly self-reflexive agent might have upon deep conflicts. Although they cautioned that empathy of this kind 'is not a panacea for the achievement of reciprocal security between actors' (Booth and Wheeler, 2008, p. 7), they nevertheless held out hope that an agent's ability to see how the other sees them might engender increased cooperation between rivals and adversaries. Finally, Roland Bleiker has implicitly advocated for greater empathy in the security dilemma dynamics between North and South Korea. He writes that 'An active engagement policy is badly needed on the [Korean] peninsula, but in order to overcome some of the most difficult existing security dilemmas, the policy must integrate an understanding and appreciation of difference' (Bleiker, 2005, p. 95). In doing so, he drew an explicit link between the policies of engagement and the ability to understand the source and legitimacy of another's differences to oneself (Bleiker, 2005, pp. 95–97).

These contributions have been central to establishing empathy as an important concept in security dilemma theorising. But, this literature has largely rested upon vague and unspecified notions of empathy. Moreover, these attempts to theorise the concept and develop specific means

for empirical investigation have only been done fleetingly or not at all. The charge made here, therefore, is that in researching how security dilemma dynamics can be overcome, the literature has treated empathy as an unproblematic part of everyday language, as opposed to a concept that is deeply contested across numerous disciplines. In this sense, the security dilemma is guilty of Neta Crawford's charge that 'Theories of international politics and security depend on assumptions about emotion that are rarely articulated and which may not be correct' (2000, p. 116). This neglect is unsurprising because, as Naomi Head has put it, 'Although...[empathy] has emerged as a relevant concept in the fields of peace studies and conflict resolution, it has received relatively little attention in International Relations' (2016a, p. 95). James Blight and Janet Lang similarly write that 'The significance of empathy – when it is present and when it is not – has been underestimated in the study of war, peace, and conflict' (2010, p. 41). Finally, Booth and Wheeler note that 'Empathy is a potentially significant but under-theorised concept in foreign policy analysis' (2008, p. 237).

The consequence of ignoring the fierce cross-disciplinary debates is that the security dilemma has been unable to substantiate the very basis of one of its core components. It gives great explanatory power to the idea that actors can overcome security dilemma conflicts by, in part, empathising with their counterparts. Yet, it provides no detailed conceptual exogenesis of this concept, and moreover, no methodology for enquiring into this claim. Since John Herz's initial contribution to this notion, where he surmised that security dilemma dynamics could be overcome by 'put[ing] oneself into the other's place' (1959, p. 249), the failure to explore the role of empathy in the security dilemma has become its great unfulfilled promise. This project attempts to develop some of the conceptual and methodological tools for filling the gap in this literature. I will first outline the conceptual scaffolding for my engagement with the security dilemma and empathy, and then further highlight the methodological challenge the existing literature poses.

A primary aim of this thesis is to develop a conceptualisation of empathy that addresses the specific context of security dilemma dynamics. This thesis cannot address this omission entirely, but it strives to contribute to recent attempts to understand the role of empathy in IR. Indeed, while little of it has addressed the security dilemma directly, a growing body of literature has made the case that processes of empathy are important for the promotion of cooperation and the resolution of conflicts (Blight and Lang, 2010; Crawford, 2014; Head, 2012, 2016a; Holmes, 2013; Holmes and Yarhi-Milo, 2016; Wheeler, 2013, 2017; White, 1984). Ralph White, for instance, has described empathy as the ‘great corrective for all forms of war-promoting misperception’ (White, 1984, p. 160), while Wheeler has argued that empathy is an important precursor to the establishment of interpersonal trust between adversaries (Wheeler, 2013, 2017). Likewise, Holmes and Yarhi-Milo have recently claimed that empathy is ‘critical to the process and outcomes of diplomatic negotiations’ (2016, p. 1), and Crawford has argued that ‘Increasing empathy often precedes and may indeed be an important cause of the reduction in tensions and conflicts between groups’ (2014, p. 538). As such, the general thrust of this narrative in both the security dilemma, and IR more broadly, is that empathy is a crucial but understudied element in the potential transformation of adversarial relations into cooperative ones.

If we accept the centrality of empathy to the security dilemma, then this opens up further questions regarding what we mean by empathy. Where do we locate it in human experiences and agency? How do we define it? And, perhaps most challenging of all, how do we make use of it? Since it’s inauguration into the English language by Edward Titchener in 1909, the meaning of the term has been fiercely contested.<sup>3</sup> The political theorist Michael Morrell has identified at least six different meanings of empathy in common usage (2010, pp. 39–40), while psychologist Daniel Batson claims there are eight ‘related but distinct phenomena’ that can be called empathy (2009a,

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<sup>3</sup> Empathy was translated from the German term *Einfühlung* in 1909 by Edward Titchener. *Einfühlung* was first used by Robert Vischer (1873) as a ‘technical term’, but was later used by Theodor Lipps (1903) to ‘explain both how people experience aesthetic objects and how they come to know other’s mental states’ (Coplan and Goldie, 2011, p. xii)

p. 4). Peter Goldie and Amy Coplan lament the conflation of empathy with other related yet, according to them, distinct concepts (2000, pp. 176–177). Others operate with a purposefully open reading of empathy, arguing that attempts to distinguish empathy from similar concepts are no more than semantic exercises (Miller, 2011). Nevertheless, given empathy’s importance to the security dilemma, and essentially contested nature, it is insufficient to treat it as a ‘black-box’, catch all concept. It has multiple meanings in numerous different contexts, and while it may be undesirable to suggest what empathy fundamentally ‘is’, this should not preclude a more nuanced discussion in IR of how different conceptualisations of empathy relate to different social contexts.

I begin to bridge this gap between the security dilemma and the broader literature on empathy in two primary ways. First, I argue that the type of empathy envisaged by security dilemma theorists, from Herz (1959) to Booth and Wheeler (2008), sits uncomfortably alongside the many prominent uses of the term which see it as automatic neural function, where there is little role for individual agency. This conceptualisation, which I describe as *automatic empathy*, sees the process of intersubjectively reading others as an effortless and unconscious activity, where we simply catch the emotions of those around us through a neural mirroring function in our brains (Gallese, 2001; Holmes, 2013; Iacoboni, 2008). This version of empathy, I claim, is ill-suited to a number of the contextual factors that are observable in the security dilemma literature. These factors are, first, pervasive notions of difference, diversity, and competing visions of international order that underpin many security dilemma dynamics; and second, the necessity for empathy to be an agent-centred and self-reflexive practice, where perspective taking includes deliberately contemplating how other’s experience oneself. Present in both these contextual factors is the role of agency, which is written out of many versions of empathy that are prevalent within and beyond IR. This has troubling implications for studying the security dilemma, because, as Booth and Wheeler argue, ‘human agency...[is] a critical variable in shaping whether security dilemma dynamics result in a mistrustful spiral of deteriorating relations, or a virtuous circle of cooperation’ (2008, p. 7).

The second way I bridge this gap between the security dilemma and empathy is by offering an alternative conceptualisation of empathy that is more adept at responding to these specific contextual challenges presented by the security dilemma literature. This conceptualisation does not seek to do away with the automatic account, but rather supplement it by seeing empathy as a deliberate and effortful concept that can be difficult to achieve in complex social environments (Cameron, 2011; Coplan, 2011a; Halpern and Weinstein, 2004; Head, 2016a; Zahavi, 2014a). Whereas a solely automatic account would explicitly or implicitly draw out the innate similarities of humans across time, culture, and context, a deliberate understanding of empathy is one that sees a plurality of world-views. Or, as LHM Ling puts it, that ‘There are multiple emotional worlds... [that] need to be recognised and appreciated as such’ (2014, p. 580). It embraces and takes seriously Bleiker’s call to establish an ‘ethics of difference’ as a means of responding to security dilemma dynamics (2005). In addition, the conceptualisation I offer re-instates the self-reflexive element of empathy that has been central to security dilemma theorists, but ignored by many later writers. And finally, it demarcates empathy for the context of the security dilemma from the associated concepts of sympathy, compassion, and emotional contagion.

The above is the conceptual scaffolding of the gap I identify and the contribution I make to this literature. But this still leaves the methodological problem of how one might enquire into the relationship between the security dilemma and empathy. Given empathy’s underdeveloped nature in the security dilemma and wider IR literature, few answers have been offered to this question. Holmes, drawing on his theory of intention-understanding that he derives from the ‘automatic empathy’ literature, uses primary and secondary sources to highlight where diplomats and leaders might have unconsciously used neural mirroring to understand the intentions of others (Holmes, 2013; see also Hall and Yarhi-Milo, 2012; Wong, 2016). Naomi Head has conducted interviews with activists and NGO workers in Israel and Palestine in order to map the ‘costs’ of empathic encounters between members of in-groups and out-groups in conflict situations (2016a, 2016b).



Grant Marlier and Neta Crawford have sought to show how empathy can become institutionalised within international norms and structures of global governance (Marlier and Crawford, 2013; see also Crawford, 2014). Using the Responsibility to Protect doctrine as case study, they argue that ‘The Responsibility to Protect doctrine institutionalised empathy by restructuring the UN Security Council’s ‘organisational responsibility’ (Marlier and Crawford, 2013, p. 421). Todd Hall, using the language of sympathy as opposed to empathy, asks how instrumental displays of emotion are used by states to pursue their interests (2011, 2015). Because Hall explores the different ways that state actors ‘deploy...emotional behaviour to achieve political goals’ (Hall, 2015, p. 6), he is distinct from other scholars in that he is uninterested in whether these behaviours are genuine expressions of emotion or not. Indeed, he expects that states will make insincere emotional expressions if doing so contributes to pursuing their interests. While each these contributions are instructive in various ways, individually they are unable to address what I see as a counterfactual logic at the heart of security dilemma thinking on empathy.

The method I propose for squaring this circle is an unconventional one, and one that invites a certain amount of criticism, but it emerges organically from both the conceptual premise of the security dilemma as well as the details of my case study. In short, the security dilemma’s musings on the importance of empathy pose a particularly vexing problem for researchers as they are often based on a counterfactual. This counterfactual can be past or future orientated, but it is a counterfactual nevertheless. From Max Weber onwards, it has been recognised that causal arguments – broadly defined – carry an associated counterfactual (Lebow, 2010; Ringer, 2002). Broadly speaking, by saying that  $x$  caused  $y$  there is an implicit assumption that in the absence of  $x$ ,  $y$  would either have not occurred at all, or that it would be different in one way or another. I outline the full logic behind this approach in chapter 3, but for now it is enough to say that security dilemma’s relationship with empathy has been built upon a similar associated counterfactual. Take the work of Herbert Butterfield, who was the first to locate security dilemma dynamics in the inability to get into the mind of an adversary and know their motives and intentions (1951). By

saying that the ‘other-minds’ problem is a root cause of security dilemma dynamics, Butterfield implicitly suggested that if this conflict inducing gap between one’s own mind and another’s could be bridged, in one way or another, then reassurance and cooperation could become possible. Without drawing on the concept of counterfactuals, Herz was the first to connect these dots. In 1959 Herz wrote:

‘it would then follow that elucidation of this fact might be itself enable one...to put oneself into the other’s place, to understand that he, too, may be motivated by one’s own kind of fears, and thus to abate this fear’ (1959, p. 249).

The implication of this is clear: if actors caught in security dilemma dynamics could empathise with their adversary, then they would be better placed to take the steps necessary to reassure them and promote cooperation.

Traditionally, IR scholarship has brushed over the counterfactual logics that underpin much of its work. However, in recent years, scholars have developed a set of methodological tools for exploring counterfactual questions such as the one that underpins this thesis (Blight et al., 2012; Blight and Lang, 2010; Fearon, 1991; Harvey, 2012; Hawthorn, 1991; Lebow, 2010, 2015a; Lebow and Breslauer, 2004; Levy, 2015; Tetlock and Belkin, 1996a; Weber, 1996). These developments allow this project to confront these implicit counterfactuals head-on, rather than side-stepping them as many researchers do. The utility of counterfactuals, beyond attuning us to these implicit assumptions, is that they are an effective tool for probing the contingency of the social world, and determining whether things could have happened differently. The importance of making determinations such as this is not to give these constructed worlds an equivalent epistemological status to the actual world, but to use these counterfactuals to probe and question the limits of what we know about the actual world. As Richard Ned Lebow, who has done more than anyone else to bring this methodology to IR, puts it, ‘I do not use counterfactuals to make the case for alternative world, but use the construction of those worlds to probe the causes and contingency of the world we know’ (2010, p. 6). The choice of this methodology also relates closely to the case study. The reasons for this will be outlined in the next section.

## **Why US foreign policy towards Iran?**

The standoff between the United States of America and the Islamic Republic of Iran over the latter's nuclear program lasted for thirteen years.<sup>4</sup> The broader enmity between the two countries, in which the nuclear case is embedded, has lasted for some thirty-seven years. It would be uncontroversial to say that the two states have been engaged in one of the most sustained and entrenched inter-state conflicts in recent history. Indeed, Roger Cohen of the New York Times has described the conflict as 'the most traumatised relationship on earth' (2010). The litany of grievances on both sides is equally lengthy. Iranians cite the US Central Intelligence Agencies' (CIA) role in the overthrow of democratically elected Iranian President Mohamed Mossadeq in 1953, the United States support of the repressive Shah of Iran, American assistance to Iraq during the Iran-Iraq war, and frequent US attempts to covertly disrupt and overthrow the Islamic Republic (Khamenei, 2009). Any speech given by Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, that concerns the United States will undoubtedly refer to these issues. For an American audience, the defining features of the relationship have been the 1979-1980 Iranian hostage crisis, Iran's support for violent Islamic groups in the Middle East, and more recently its nuclear activities.

For the vast majority of these events, the interpretations offered by each side differ wildly. On the nuclear issue, for example, Iran's concealment of its activities, for over a decade prior to their public disclosure in 2002, is seen by many Iranians as justified. They have argued that the international community, led by the United States, would not have countenanced an Iranian civilian nuclear program in any form, and thus they had no choice but to pursue it secretly. For most in the United States government, however, Iran's decision to pursue its program covertly is evidence of their intention to develop a nuclear weapons capability.

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<sup>4</sup> Although the United States and its European allies had been aware and concerned of Iran's nuclear activities prior to 2002, August of that year marks the point when the issue was thrust into the public sphere and galvanised action from governments and international institutions.

However, another side to this relationship is captured in the second part of Cohen's aforementioned quote. To give the full quote, Cohen observed that US-Iran relations are both 'the most traumatised relationship on earth and the most tantalising. Tantalising because Iran and the United States are unnatural enemies with plenty they might agree on if they ever broke their ice' (2010). The striking feature of US-Iran relations is thus that throughout its history significant moments of optimism have occupied the relationship's otherwise predominantly bleak landscape. Scholars and policy-makers alike have routinely pointed to a number of episodes where the two sides have come close to cooperation. As former Iranian Secretary of Energy, Abbas Maleki, and John Tirman note, 'The list of attempts to improve the bilateral relationship is...significant – small meetings, gestures, expressions of goodwill, actual cooperation, favours done, channels for discussion opened' (Maleki and Tirman, 2014, p. 9). These events have contributed to a narrative of missed opportunities that runs through the academic and policy debates on the subject. Although the bitter hostilities and antagonisms have continued to form the popular image of the interaction, and have consequently received the majority of popular and scholarly attention, this thesis is concerned with contributing to a growing body of literature that seeks to take a deeper look at these fleeting moments of optimism.

Focusing on two of the more recent episodes in the conflicts history – a two year period between 2001-3 during the Bush administration, and the first twelve months of Obama's presidency – it takes the conceptual and methodological tools outlined above and asks the question of whether greater empathy from key US officials would have increased the likelihood of cooperation during these periods. Taking cases that are considered by many as missed opportunities for cooperation, it asks the pertinent question of whether these moments could have proceeded otherwise. In doing so, the thesis as a whole draws a parallel between the theoretical assertions that greater empathy would have promoted cooperation in security dilemma dynamics, with the often implicitly articulated argument that US-Iran relations is, at its root, a conflict defined by a mutual failure of understanding the perspective of the other.

### ***US foreign policy towards Iran: two competing narratives***

The primary narrative that guides the empirical part of this investigation, and the selection of this case study in the first place, is the perseverance of a *narrative of missed opportunities* surrounding US-Iran relations. This narrative, taken broadly, has consistently put forward the notion that over the conflict's turbulent history, opportunities for cooperation have been missed by both the United States and Iran; that amidst the bellicose rhetoric and sporadic outbursts of violence, US-Iran relations can also be defined by collective failures to understand the true motives of the other and seize opportunities presented. This, in many respects, is the empirical aim and contribution of this thesis; to explore the legitimacy of the missed opportunities narrative through an in-depth reading of two carefully chosen episodes in the conflicts more recent history.

As I have alluded, this is not a new question to ask. A significant number of authors, commentators, and political actors have talked about missed opportunities in the relationship dating back to 1979. Blight *et al*, for instance, begun their study of the roots of US-Iran enmity in the Iran-Iraq war by asking, 'Were significant opportunities to avoid enmity between Iran and American missed in these years?' (2012, p. xiii). They ask, 'What if President Jimmy Carter had listened to his own internal doubts instead of his senior advisers and had decided not to let the Shah come to the United States for medical treatment?' (Blight et al., 2012: xiii). Would this have prevented the conflict that arose through both the 1979 hostage crisis and Iran's perception of American duplicity during the Iran-Iraq war? One of the authors of this study has written elsewhere that 'a number of scholars and journalists in America have sorrowfully described the "missed opportunities" that have sporadically occurred in the US-Iran relationship' (Tirman, 2009, p. 527). Suzanne Maloney, a former State Department official and scholar at the Brookings Institution, is one such example of what Tirman describes. She wrote in 2008 of a catalogue of 'lost opportunities' in US-Iran relations. Highlighting Iranian President Khatami's openings to the United States 2001-2003, for example, she wrote that 'with the wisdom of hindsight, it is clear that

the Bush administration's miscalculations—based in part on a wholesale misreading of Iran's internal political dynamics—forfeited perhaps the best opportunity in recent history to generate real momentum on Iran.' (Maloney, 2008, p. 28). Peter Jenkins, the former British Ambassador to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and participant in the nuclear negotiations between the EU3 and Iran 2003-2005, has similarly stated that 'When two or more aficionados of the Iranian nuclear controversy are gathered together, the conversation will turn at some point to whether opportunities for resolving the issue peacefully have been missed' (Jenkins, 2012). Writing in the wake of a provisional nuclear agreement reached between the P5+1 and Iran in April 2015, William Burns, a former US Deputy Secretary of State who negotiated with the Iranians during the Obama administration, argued that:

'The history of the Iranian nuclear issue is littered with missed opportunities. It is a history in which fixation on the perfect crowded out the good, and in whose rear-view mirror we can see deals that look a lot better now than they seemed then' (2015a; see also Burns, 2015b).

A similar sentiment has been aired on the Iranian side as well. Seyed Hossein Mousavian, a former senior member of Iran's Supreme National Security Council and a member of Iran's nuclear negotiating team 2003-2005, argued that 'a long, dark history of missed opportunities between Iran and the US' has prevented sustained cooperation from being achieved (Mousavian and Shabani, 2012). Furthermore, he has argued that 'A lack of mutual understanding has always been one of the major obstacles to sustainable and meaningful talks between Iran and the US.' (Mousavian, 2014, p. 230). Abbas Maleki has similarly argued that 'mutual negative perceptions (and misperceptions) inform the policy choices of both states, and impose substantial barriers to achieving mutual gain where it is possible' (Maleki and Reardon, 2014, p. 149).

At the heart of many of these claims of missed opportunities is a similar counterfactual logic that underpins the security dilemma literature. This argument has been made about narratives of missed opportunities in general. Alexander George and Janet Holl, for instance, in their work on failures of preventative diplomacy, state that 'The assertion that a missed opportunity occurred is

an example of counterfactual reasoning' (1999, p. 33). Furthermore, they argue that 'statements that missed opportunities occurred...must be evaluated to distinguish highly plausible from implausible to barely plausible claims' (George and Holl, 1999, p. 34). Likewise, in Deborah Larson's book on missed opportunities for cooperation during the Cold War, she states that 'Missed opportunities refer to what might have been, to possibilities that for one reason or another were never realised' (1997: 2), and that they entail 'showing how changes in a set of historical conditions could have led to a different outcome' (1997, p. 3). The problem with the narrative of missed opportunities in US-Iran relations is not just that it is naïve to these methodological challenges, but that a second narrative also challenges many of its central premises.

A great deal of other scholars, commentators, and policy-makers have challenged this narrative upon multiple grounds. In the years of the Bush administration, for instance, hard-line individuals argued that cooperation would never be possible with Iran as they are presently constructed. Individuals such as Vice-President Dick Cheney, for instance, reportedly quipped that "We don't speak to evil", in response to those in the State Department who wanted to explore an Iranian overture in 2003 (quoted in Corera, 2006; interview with Wilkerson, 2015). Such is the power of this view that some have argued Iran's supposed irrational nature is now 'an established fact among influential strata of international society' (Adib-Moghaddam, 2007, p. 636). An official from the United Arab Emirates, concerned by Obama's outreach efforts to Iran in the first year of his presidency, argued that 'you cannot trust or deal with Iran and the UAE knows this...There is no solution with Iran. The Iranian people and Government will give you no solution.' (US Department of State, 2009a). This view exists as strongly on the Iranian side as the American. Indeed, in June 2013 Iran's Supreme Leader argued that 'The opposition from against Iran does not want the nuclear issue to be solved', and that an agreement would be 'easy' if Iran's counterparts were serious about reaching one (Khamenei quoted in The Associated Press, 2013).

This rebuke of the missed opportunities narrative exists on material as well as ideological grounds. For instance, James Sebenius and Michael Singh argued in 2012 that ‘the failure...to make serious progress toward a sustainable nuclear agreement with Iran suggests a deeper cause—the absence of any underlying zone of possible agreement’ (2012, p. 87). The reasons for this is the underlying incompatibility of US and Iranian interests: ‘Simply put, a wide gulf apparently stands between the least nuclear capability the Iranian regime is willing to accept and the most nuclear capability the United States is prepared to concede to Iran’ (Sebenius and Singh, 2012, p. 87). That a deal has now been reached would not, for many, invalidate this argument, because they explain the deal itself through looking at the material conditions at play. This is captured well by Matthew Kroenig’s belief that ‘Without the tough international sanctions regime imposed on Iran...it is highly unlikely that Iran would have come to the negotiating table and agreed to the November 2013 interim deal’ (Kroenig, 2014, p. 100). This view has been criticised by, amongst others, Paul Pillar, who has observed that these arguments rest upon flawed assumptions concerning the epistemic accuracy of both Iranian and US motives and interests (Pillar et al., 2013, p. 174).

Empirically, therefore, this thesis seeks to mediate between these two differing narratives of US-Iran relations. The missed opportunities narrative is methodologically naïve to the need to show more specifically why particular instances can be considered missed opportunities. And the ideological-material inevitability argument takes the motives and intentions of the actors involved for granted. By treating both of these as eminently knowable, they miss the existential uncertainty and security dilemma dynamics at the heart of this conflict. But while I concur with Pillar’s critique (2013), the opposite of this is not necessarily true. It is still necessary to make the case that missed opportunities occurred.

Before moving on to discuss methods it is necessary to briefly justify one further aspect of this study, which is; why I am looking at US foreign policy as opposed to a more holistic view of US-Iran relations? There are two primary reasons. The first is a pragmatic one, which is that



Iranian sources are extremely difficult, if not impossible, to come by. There is no documentary evidence regarding Iran's foreign policy making that is publicly available. And no Iranian decision-makers are available for interview. After trying to establish connections that might lead to interviews, and speaking to other Western academics who had tried and failed to do so, it became apparent that telling the Iranian side of the story can only be done by referring to public statements, speaking to Western based experts, and relying on secondary accounts. In comparison to the significant amount of data I have gathered on the US side, this seemed an insufficient basis for giving a fair interpretation of Iran's side of the story.

The second reason emanates from the conceptual framework of the security dilemma. In short, the general understanding in the security dilemma literature is that in order to get cooperation going between adversaries, it is almost always necessary for one actor to make the first move. As Jervis put it in his influential 1976 book, 'On the basis of this understanding, one side must take an initiative that increases the other side's security' (Jervis, 1976, p. 83). Furthermore, he states that 'When two countries are locked in a spiral of arms and hostility... The first step must be the realisation, by at least one side... that they are or at least may be, caught in a dilemma that neither desires.' (Jervis, 1976, p. 82). For Jervis, therefore, the initial first step towards cooperation – which is what this thesis is fundamentally interested in – is, more often than not, instigated by one party in particular. The broader literature on the security dilemma makes a similar point (Booth and Wheeler, 2008; Kydd, 2001). This is not to say that mutual and simultaneous empathic interactions categorically cannot take place. As Jervis notes, such a circumstance would be preferable (1976, p. 83). But it is also highly unlikely, particularly in a context such as the US-Iran relationship where fear and suspicion runs deep, and is institutionalised within the political and cultural structures of each country. Following this, I am therefore interested in the unilateral empathic understandings of the other and how these might generate the prospects for cooperation. However, this might be enough to get a limited amount of cooperation going, but for fully-fledged cooperation and trust it will not be. This does not deter the central thrust of this project, though, as

the point here is to ask whether empathy from one side of the conflict – the United States – would have increased the chances for even limited cooperation. Future studies could feasibly supplement this one by doing the same for the Iranians, if the sources become available

### **Methods and methodology**

In this section I will briefly discuss the various methods used in this thesis. Because the broad methodology falls under the umbrella of counterfactual analysis, many of the primary methodological issues are dealt with in Chapter 3, which is devoted entirely to discussing these issues and laying out how and why I use counterfactuals. Here, therefore, I will briefly outline my philosophical approach to social science, before outlining each of the individual methods that make up the broader methodology.

This project has been designed in accordance with the core tenets of case study design, with the US foreign policy towards Iran being selected from a universe of cases consisting of other security dilemma conflicts in which the United States has been historical and contemporaneously embroiled (e.g. the Soviet Union, North Korea, Libya). The specific reasons for this choice relate to the parallels drawn between the security dilemma and the broader US-Iran relationship. These are, first, that both episodes are highlighted in the literature as examples of missed opportunities for cooperation. And second, that because they are distinctly different enough from each other to warrant an interesting comparison. Namely, they occurred during different US administrations and different Iranian presidencies (although Iran's Supreme Leader remained a constant. In addition, the 2001-2003 episode sees Iran reaching out to the United States, while the 2009 episode sees the United States initiating engagement efforts. Specifically, case studies are used because they provide an in-depth understanding of the case itself, as well as a means of exploring existing theoretical concepts and developing new ones (George and Bennett, 2005). The two key episodes that comprise the project are not, however, treated as separate case studies themselves, but rather

as in-case episodes or in-case variants within the holistic case of US foreign policy towards Iran. One of the reasons I used two episodes was simply to make this project achievable in the time-length of a PhD. A third within case episode would have enhanced both the in-depth understanding of the case itself, as well as the theoretical rigour of the relationship drawn between security dilemma dynamics and empathy. However, this would have been too ambitious a task within the given time frame, but it is something that could be explored in future.

My broad approach to the social sciences, and thus to this project, can be described as interpretive (Lebow, 2007). By this I mean that I reject the notion that fact and value can be separated from one another, and that the biases and beliefs of the researcher do not impact upon the research process. Research implies making a number of informed choices. Choices about which methods to use, which case studies to select, which questions to ask participants, and then how to present and narrate those findings to an audience. As Lebow puts it, ‘methods are conditioned by culture, beliefs, and life experiences. So too is receptivity to research findings’ (2007, p. 18). Although the dichotomy between positivist and interpretive research is often too starkly made – positivist researchers do not always see themselves as producing objective knowledge that is removed from the value laden process of research (King et al., 1994) – it is still worth noting that no matter how stringent a set of rules or selection criteria, it is impossible to remove the self from the conduct of enquiry. As Mark Salter observes, ‘the researcher plays a serious role in the both the activity of investigation and the narration of results’ (2012, p. 20). This leads to the conclusion that ‘Social understanding is inherently subjective’ (Lebow, 2007, p. 18). This conclusion has informed the methodological choices I’ve made throughout the process of conducting the research for this project.

The above comprises the design and philosophy of the project. I will now discuss the specific methods themselves. These are, primarily, elite interviews, counterfactual analysis, and analysis of available documentary sources such as memoirs, speeches, and a limited amount of

documents from the time. These approaches complement each other as the factual data – interviews and documentary sources– will provide the necessary evidence rich environment for effective counterfactual intervention, whilst the construction of the counterfactuals allows the researcher to reflect upon the data found uncovered in the first stage. Conducting research on international events in the near past is a challenging endeavour. The vast majority of documentary material is still classified, which is one of the primary reasons why this thesis has relied so heavily on elite-interviews. My guiding approach to reconstructing historical narrative is summarised by Jack Snyder, who writes that ‘Good qualitative research depends on two opposite skills: unearthing valuable bits of evidence and assembling those bits into a mosaic that forms a meaningful picture.’ (Snyder, 2014, p. 711). The interaction of these two activities is important because:

‘Rarely does any single bit of evidence make or break the picture as a whole. More often, each bit is interpreted in light of the pieces that have already been assembled in the mosaic. It is only when the placement of many pieces looks wrong that the assembler decides to start over on a new picture’ (Snyder, 2014, p. 711).

I approached the data collection process with this acutely in mind. Despite the scarcity of official documents, I was able to draw upon a number of memoirs of former officials, speeches and public statements, and some available policy documents.

The most important method, however, was elite-interviews. I conducted over thirty semi-structured interviews with US officials from both the Bush and Obama administrations, officials from the International Atomic Energy Agency, and Brazilian officials who were tasked with the role of communicating with Iran on behalf of the Obama administration in 2009 and 2010. Part of the interview process was accessing the interpretations of those who were actively involved at the time. As well as this, I took an active approach to interviewing where I encouraged the participants to be as reflexive and reflective as possible. Whereas some profess that the interviewer should be a neutral gatherer of data, and should not seek to influence the participant, the approach I took followed Blight and Lang (2010) by trying to challenge the interviewee at specific times. If they presented an interpretation of a particular issue that differed drastically from other interviewees, or

from the documentary data, I would ask them to reflect upon the interpretations held by others. This works as a check and balance against the interview data, while also pushing the interviewee to respond in a reflexive and reflective manner.

### **The contribution**

The overall contribution of this thesis is that it develops a conceptualisation of empathy for the security dilemma, and uses it to counterfactually explore whether opportunities for cooperation were missed by the United States at key moments in their relations with Iran. This overall contribution can be broken down into its theoretical, methodological, and empirical components. Theoretically, it identifies the implicit role that empathy has played in existing understandings of the security dilemma. As I've alluded to in this introduction, the literature on the security dilemma has, in a variety of ways, made empathy the central vehicle for explaining how security dilemma dynamics can be overcome. But it has neglected to provide the conceptual and methodological tools for making good upon this. I develop a conceptualisation of empathy that can address the unique social context of the security dilemma. By tracing the history of this concept within the security dilemma, I highlight its centrality to many of the core claims that the literature makes. In order to address this omission, I draw upon the vast literature on empathy in order to develop a conceptualisation of empathy that is relevant for the context of the security dilemma. This entailed surveying the literature on empathy in order to highlight which areas are relevant for this task, and indeed, which are not. This conceptualisation holds that empathy in this context is self-reflexive. It entails your attempt to not just understand the other, but also to contemplate how the other views you, and your own role in creating that perception. The second is that empathy in security dilemma dynamics is an imaginative and difficult process as it requires trying to understand another who is not only different from you but also who you may have profound disagreements. The third is that empathy is an integral part of the communicative process of overcoming security dilemma dynamics as well as the initial imaginative process.

Methodologically, the thesis contributes to the literature by being the first to bring the methodological tool of counterfactuals to the study of security dilemma dynamics. In bridging the gap between this nascent methodological tool and a foundational concept in IR, I have proposed a new approach that scholars could use to study the process of overcoming security dilemma dynamics. While I follow the lineage of existing counterfactual literature, I've also made a direct contribution to counterfactual methodologies themselves. This has been to incorporate individual-level aspects of international politics into the framework by showing how these individual-level properties can be considered contingent features of world politics.

Empirically, the thesis brings these new conceptual and methodological tools to the pertinent case of US foreign policy towards Iran, 2001-2010. In doing so, it argues that important opportunities for cooperation were missed by US officials at specific points in time, and that greater empathy on their part would have increased the likelihood that some form of cooperation could have been established. At the same time however, I show how the impact of empathy can only go so far in promoting cooperation between adversaries in security dilemma dynamics. Where moments of contingency are present, empathy can have a meaningful impact upon an actor's ability to engender cooperation, but to assume this for all circumstances misses how empathy is dependent upon the contextual dynamics of particular episodes. In Chapter 4 I argue that following the 9/11 attacks a genuine opportunity for cooperation was missed by the United States, and it is conceivable that within this context it could have been taken if key actors – least not Colin Powell – had been more empathic towards Iran. But later in this episode, when Iran reach out again with an offer of a Grand Bargain, I argue that the moment of contingency was no longer present and thus to consider this a missed opportunity is a misnomer. In Chapter 5 I argue that Obama's outreach towards Iran in the early months of his presidency did display an unusual level of empathy towards Iran for a US president. But contrary to the literature that suggested he should have gone much further (Leverett and Leverett, 2013; Nasr, 2013; Wheeler, 2017), I argue that

situational constraints on Obama's ability to enact even greater overtures would not have been altered by a counterfactual increase in empathy. In the second half of the chapter, however, I change track and argue that a genuine opportunity for cooperation was missed during negotiations of a nuclear deal that would have seen Iran limit its stock-pile of low-enriched uranium in return for nuclear technology. While the proposal showed empathy and inventiveness from Obama and his advisors, they failed to respond to the legitimate concerns of the Iranians as the deal teetered on the brink. Increased empathy here, I suggest, could have feasibly led to the deal being accepted.

### **Structure of the thesis**

Chapters 1, 2, and 3 review the relevant literature and outline the conceptual and methodological arguments and contributions of the thesis. Chapter 1 begins by outlining the concept of the security dilemma, and the different approaches taken in the literature regarding the question of whether security dilemma dynamics can be overcome or not. In doing so, I highlight how many of these perspectives implicitly rely upon the concept of empathy. The implication of this has been that the security dilemma has provided neither the conceptual framework nor the methodological tools for enquiring further into this problem.

Chapter 2 sets out to address this omission by proposing a conceptualisation of empathy that is relevant for the specific contextual dynamics of the security dilemma. I argue that a context specific conceptualisation is necessary because the concept of empathy is so broad and fragmented that it risks losing any meaning at all. The chapter doesn't try to demarcate what empathy is and what it is not – empathy, I suggest, is multifaceted and can mean lots of different things to different people – but rather reviews the literature in order to clarify which elements are useful to the challenges of overcoming security dilemma dynamics and which are not. Similarly, I do not seek to develop a general theory of empathy for IR, but instead suggest that the concept is most useful

when placed within a particular conceptual context. The chapter concludes by discussing how this conceptualisation is useful for the case study of US foreign policy towards Iran, 2001-2010.

Chapter 3 reviews the literature on counterfactual methods both within and beyond IR, and clarifies their utility for this thesis. Because counterfactuals are not a frequently used method, it makes a detailed defence of the general principles of counterfactual research. In addition to outlining the existing literature, and highlighting some of the key debates, it makes one primary argument. This is that counterfactual methods have, for the most part, ignored individual-level properties such as empathy, which has been detrimental to the methodology's ability to explain the contingency of the social world. I argue that existing counterfactual work has been wedded to a materialist view of contingency, which is at odds with agent-centric theoretical and philosophical commitments that these authors bring to their work (Lebow, 2010; Lebow and Breslauer, 2004). I establish how counterfactual methods can be used to explore implicit individual-level assumptions within theories, and test for missed opportunities within historical security dilemma dynamics.

Chapters 4 and 5 make good upon these conceptual and methodological discussions by exploring their implications for two recent periods of US foreign policy towards Iran. Chapter 4 covers the period from 2001 to 2003. In particular it looks at the contingency of US foreign policy towards Iran in the immediate months following the 9/11 attacks, and makes the that argument that if key officials, such as Colin Powell, had been more empathic towards Iran then the chances for limited cooperation would have increased. The second major episode that this chapter considers is a proposal sent from Iran to the United States in early May 2003. The proposal put all of the differences between the United States and Iran on the table, and suggests a 'Roadmap' towards closer relations. While this episode gives a tantalising view into Iran's views of their relationship with the United States, I argue that in counterfactual terms this episode cannot be considered a genuine missed opportunity. The reason for this is that by May 2003, the contingency that invited counterfactual intervention in 2001 is largely absent. While Iran is still a contested area of policy, I



argue that even with a more empathic Powell, and those around him, the embedded bureaucratic structure of the Bush administration's foreign policy machine precludes a realistic counterfactual intervention being made here.

Chapter 5 makes a similar argument to the last; the context that empathy is embedded can play a determining role in whether it can be expressed in a manner that is conducive to overcoming security dilemma dynamics and sparking a process of cooperation. In exploring Obama's foreign policy towards Iran during the first year of his presidency, the chapter firstly argues that there was little more that Obama could have realistically done to get cooperation going with Iran, regardless of any counterfactual increase in empathy. The second half of the chapter argues that as opportunities for serious cooperation arose, and as US and Iranian officials found themselves across the negotiating table from each other, the empathy that Obama had exhibited earlier in his presidency was found wanting. I therefore argue that in this latter part of his first year in office, there were missed opportunities for cooperation that could have been adverted if Obama had been more empathic towards the concerns of his Iranian interlocutors.

# Chapter 1: Locating empathy in the security dilemma

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In a path-breaking article on the role of emotions in IR, Neta Crawford suggested that ‘realist and idealist discourse about emotions – what has been said and not said about anger, fear, love, empathy, the desire for revenge, and so on – has shaped the discipline in important respects’ (Crawford, 2000, p. 156). This chapter finds that Crawford was in-part correct, and that the literature on the security dilemma contains a number of unarticulated but powerful assumptions regarding empathy. The principle aim of this chapter, therefore, is to review the literature on the security dilemma with the sole purpose of revealing how the concept of empathy has been implicitly central to one of its core elements. Specifically, the chapter shows that security dilemma theorists have explained various processes of overcoming security dilemma dynamics by drawing upon implicit and often unsubstantiated understandings of empathy. The primary criticism that can be attributed to much of the literature is that it poses crucial questions regarding the potential role of empathy in overcoming security dilemma dynamics, but have failed to suggest any innovative means for exploring this question. Security dilemma theorists have asked a tantalising and ultimately concept-defining question, but fail to provide any convincing answers either way. However, if empathy is a concept that is to be taken seriously in security dilemma theory, then it is vital that a more refined and sophisticated understanding of it is produced for this context. By surveying the literature’s approach to empathy, a loose conceptualisation is drawn that can then be measured against the broader multi-disciplinary literature on empathy that is covered in the next chapter.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> It’s important to note that this is not a wholesale review of the security dilemma literature, but rather a focussed discussion on this one aspect. This does lead to some omissions as the general criteria for inclusion was the extent to which authors discussed empathy as opposed their general imprint on the security dilemma literature. For a detailed review of the literature see Booth and Wheeler (2008).

The chapter is structured around the three logics of security dilemma dynamics, as identified by Booth and Wheeler (2008), where I review what scholars from each of these positions have to say about empathy. I start with what Booth and Wheeler call the ‘fatalist logic’ (2008, pp. 11–14), which is the view that security dilemma dynamics are an ever present threat in international politics because the security dilemma itself can never be overcome. Perhaps unexpectedly, the fatalistic logic still has something to say about empathy. I then outline the ‘mitigator logic’ (Booth and Wheeler, 2008, pp. 14–16), which suggests that the security dilemma itself is a timeless feature of international politics, but nevertheless holds that uncertainty about the motives and intentions of others can at times be resolved cooperatively in a variety of ways. Finally, I discuss what Booth and Wheeler describe as the ‘transcender logic’ (2008, pp. 16–18), which is the view that systemic insecurity can be transcended entirely. In each of these sections I do not review the full extent of the literature, but rather which speaks mostly directly to the central question regarding empathy. I conclude the chapter by sketching out a loose conceptualisation of empathy that emerges from these three logics.

### **Empathy and the fatalist logic**

The two individuals who coined the term the ‘security dilemma’ can also, in their early works at least, be described as advocating a ‘fatalist’ view of the possibility that actors may be able to escape the security dilemmas’ most pernicious effects. These two individuals are John Herz and Herbert Butterfield. Working independently of each other, and with no knowledge of the other’s work during the time (Wheeler, 2008), they were the first to explicitly introduce the concept of the security dilemma into IR and can be credited with many of its central tenets still in use today. Indeed, since the seminal works of John Herz (1950, 1951) and Herbert Butterfield (1951), the idea of the security dilemma has been built around the notion that conflicts are, at least in part, driven by a shared inability of individuals to get into the minds of others and know their thoughts, feelings, and intentions. Taken together with the material ambiguity of the social world, this

particular reading of the philosophical problem of ‘other-minds’ has been foundational to many of the assumptions upon which the security dilemma has subsequently been based. This section will firstly discuss Herbert Butterfield’s contributions to the security dilemma. It will secondly discuss the early work of John Herz, who coined the term security dilemma. It will conclude by briefly outlining some of the more recent works that epitomise fatalistic logics.

Both Butterfield and Herz believed that it was the inherent failure of actors to understand their adversaries that would ensnare them in conflicts that neither actor truly desired. In his description of what he tellingly called ‘the irreducible dilemma’ (1951, p. 20), Butterfield stated the following:

It is the peculiar characteristic of the situation I am describing – the situation of what I should call Hobbesian fear - that you may vividly feel the terrible fear that you have of the other party, but you cannot enter into the other man’s counter-fear, or even understand why he should be particularly nervous. For you know that you yourself mean him no harm, and that you want nothing from him save the guarantees for your own safety; and it is never possible for you to realize or remember properly that since he cannot see the inside of your mind, he can never have the same assurance of your intentions that you have. As this operates on both sides the Chinese puzzle is complete in all its interlockings and neither party can see the nature of the predicament he is in, for each only imagines that the other part is being hostile and unreasonable. It is even possible for each to feel that the other is wilfully withholding the guarantees that would have enabled him to have a sense of security (1951, p. 21).

Butterfield, in this now famous passage, unwittingly brought the philosophical and psychological problem of ‘other minds’ to the study of International Relations. For Butterfield it was this inability to ‘enter into the other man’s counter-fear’, and to ‘realize or remember properly that since he cannot see the inside of your mind, he can never have the same assurances of your intentions that you have’ (1951, p. 21), that drove what he saw to be at the heart of the ‘geometry of human conflict’ (1951: 20). Butterfield did not explicitly enter into wider debates regarding the problem of other minds. For him it appeared that the absence of a window into the mind of the adversary precluded any form of insight into the internal processes of others, which could potentially transform conflict. Because this was paralleled on the other side – as they too cannot see into your mind – the potential for strategies of reassurance was implicitly ruled out. Given the

conditions he describes, Butterfield seemed to be extremely fatalistic about the possibility of this dilemma being escaped. Instead, he argued that only ‘future historiography may expose the limitations of our vision’ (Butterfield, 1951: 15), contending that only historians could do what policy-makers and diplomats could not, which is to enter into the counter-fear of another.

Butterfield’s argument has an implicit counterfactual logic at its heart. From Max Weber onwards, it has been recognised that causal arguments – broadly defined – carry an accompanying counterfactual (Lebow, 2010; Ringer, 2002). By saying that the other-minds problem is the cause of security dilemma dynamics and precludes the possibility that actors will effectively reassure one another, Butterfield implicitly suggests that if this conflict inducing gap between one’s own mind and another’s could be bridged in one way or another then reassurance and cooperation would become possible. By locating the security dilemma in an individual’s psychology, Butterfield inadvertently opened up the crucial question of whether individuals who are able to recognise the situation they are in – that their adversary too may be motivated out of fear as opposed to malevolence – might then be able to take measures to overcome security dilemma dynamics. This is important not just because of the underlying counterfactual logic itself – which is discussed in Chapter 3 – but also because it in turn prompted later security dilemma theorists to enquire into this problem.

Fatalism is not, however, the only story that can be told about Butterfield’s contribution to the security dilemma. In the 1951 chapter, from the essay collection *History and Human Relations*, there is a clear tension as to how far this fatalism should really be followed through to its logical conclusion. On the one hand, Butterfield seemed to hold out little hope for the role that empathy might play in bridging this conflict inducing gap between one’s own mind and another’s. But on the other, beyond a fairly limited discussion of the other minds problem, Butterfield did not provide a convincing reason for this state of affairs. Thus, the extent to which Butterfield really does epitomise fatalist logic is not entirely clear or straightforward. Indeed, the central contention

of the 1951 chapter has arguably more to do with his view that contemporary historians are more prone to being shaped and blinded by the events of the day than policy-makers are. What he actually thought about the extent to which policy-makers can overcome security dilemma dynamics is not, I argue, as clear as much of the secondary literature has since claimed (Booth and Wheeler, 2008; e.g Jervis, 1976, p. 69; Tang, 2009).

My contention here is that the latter part of this seminal chapter has been slightly taken out of the context. Butterfield alluded that historians in the present often fail to mediate the intense partisanship that consumes actors during times of conflict, but believed that historians studying the events many years later could, and indeed should, try to provide an account which took a 'loftier perspective' (1951, p. 13). When discussing how later historians viewed past events, Butterfield came close on a number of occasions to using the language of empathy. Speaking of how historians of the time cover a conflict, he argued that:

'We who come long afterwards generally find that this kind of history has overdramatized the struggle in its aspect as a battle of right versus wrong; and to us it seems that these writers refused to exercise imaginative sympathy over the defeated enemy, so that they lack the perspective which might have been achieved if they had allowed themselves to be driven to a deeper analysis of the whole affair' (1951, p.11).

Here he seems to be saying that commentators and contemporary historians of conflict are often so embroiled within its very intensity that they miss the nuance and tragedy, which is far more evident to those who study conflicts many years later. But whether, for Butterfield, this negates the possibility for transcending this boundary in the present is unclear. In some ways, it seems that such a quality was eminently desired above all others. As he saw it, and again using the language of empathy, 'historical imagination comes to its sublimest achievements when it can succeed in comprehending the people not like-minded with oneself' (Butterfield, 1951, p. 12). He clearly shows, then, that he sees empathy as possible in the context of conflictual relations but only after the event has occurred. What is therefore puzzling is that, beyond the other minds problem, he does not state why this might be the case. Whether this was because he saw the other-minds problem and his 'irreducible dilemma' as immutable dynamics of humanity that could not be escaped, or,

alternatively, whether the chapter is more concerned with how historians should approach the study of past conflicts is not clear. He believed that conflicts are often ripe with moral indignation, but does not provide a convincing reason as to why these conflicts cannot be overcome. In part, it may have simply been that the aim of the chapter was to elucidate the dynamics that drive conflict as opposed to considering possibilities of reassurance and cooperation. Therefore, although for many Butterfield epitomises a quintessential example of fatalist logic when it comes to the security dilemma, he recognised the potential for empathy, but, for reasons he never truly made clear, did not see how it could overcome the self-righteousness in which conflicts played out in the present.<sup>6</sup>

Though both Herz and Butterfield laid the groundwork of the security dilemma during the same period, it was Herz who first brought the term itself into the International Relations lexicon. His 1950 article provided its first description:

‘Wherever...anarchic society has existed...there has arisen what may be called the ‘security dilemma’ of men, or groups, or their leaders. Groups or individuals living in such a constellation must be, and usually are, concerned about their security from being attacked, subjected, dominated, or annihilated by other groups and individuals. Striving to attain security from such an attack, they are driven to acquire more and more power in order to escape the impact of the power of others. This, in turn, renders the others more insecure and compels them to prepare for the worst. Since none can ever feel entirely secure in such a world of competing units, power competition ensues, and vicious circle of security and power accumulation is on’ (1950, p. 157).

In this passage Herz provides what has become the classic definition of security dilemma dynamics: that by making yourself more secure due to an existential fear of attack you are inadvertently increasing the insecurity of others. These others, in turn, move to increase their security and thus the spiral of insecurity has begun. Herz expressed a fatalist position in relation to this problem, writing that security dilemma dynamics was ‘a fundamental social constellation’ where individuals are confronted with ‘a mutual suspicion and mutual dilemma: the dilemma of “kill or perish”, of attacking first or running the risk of being destroyed’ (1951, p. 3). He saw this problem not as one attributable to the innate aggressiveness of human nature, but rather to the

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<sup>6</sup> This difficulty in determining exactly what Butterfield really meant is not unique to his writings on the security dilemma. As Ian Hall summarises, ‘Butterfield’s thought is still widely considered woolly and imprecise, presenting supposedly contradictory arguments in successive works’ (Hall, 2012, p. 423).

inescapable uncertainty within which all social interaction takes place. As he put it, ‘Whether man is “by nature” peaceful and co-operative, or aggressive and domineering, is not the question. The condition that concerns us here is not an anthropological or biological, but a social one’ (Herz, 1951, p. 3). Because individuals cannot objectively determine the intentions of their fellow humans, he surmised, this leads them to feel insecure: ‘it is his uncertainty and anxiety as to his neighbours’ intentions that places man in this basic dilemma’ (1951, p. 3). Without mentioning empathy directly, Herz likewise subscribed to the view that it was through an innate and inescapable failure to read one’s counterparts in international politics that fuelled this pernicious problem.

Similarly to Butterfield, however, Herz also expressed some latent views that seemed to challenge the apparent fatalism present in the quotations above. In these early works he displayed a limited view that individuals could express empathic feelings, but, crucially, also professed with far more conviction than Butterfield that this could take place to some extent in a contemporary context as well. For Herz, a clear tension existed as to how far security dilemma dynamics were truly inescapable, and whether they would always lead to conflict. Although Herz on the one hand sounded fatalistic about whether humanity as a whole could avoid its perilous effects, he also saw other necessities of social life that pushed actors to cooperate as well as compete. For instance, he not only added the caveat that security dilemma dynamics ‘need not be taken literally as implying that every individual, isolated, always appears and acts as everybody else’s enemy’ (Herz, 1951, p. 3), but also highlighted an important paradox between what he saw as the impulses of competition and cooperation. At the same time as emphasising the insecurity one human creates in another, Herz also contended that we depend upon each other for ‘producing and obtaining the necessities of life’ (1951, p.3). He argued that this very dependence ‘creates the paradoxical situation that man is at the same time foe and friend to his fellow man, and that social co-operation and social struggle seem to go hand in hand’ (Herz, 1951, p. 3). Although the aim of Herz’s 1951 work was to bridge this ‘fundamental antagonism between co-operation and conflict’ (1951, p. 16), which he



saw mirrored in the theories of idealism and realism, it is unclear whether at this stage Herz was ever able to reconcile this disconnect. Herz's theorising was thus structural on the one hand, but also recognised the potential for individual agency on another. He reified the structural constraints of uncertainty by stating the inescapability of security dilemma dynamics; that 'ultimately, somewhere, the conflicts caused by the security dilemma are bound to emerge among political units of power' (Herz, 1951: 15). But he also saw that a 'person whose sympathy feeling reaches out to and includes all groups and all human beings' (1951: 15) has the agency to 'answer the demands arising from the power dilemma with a clear and unambiguous "No!"' (1951: 16). Even so, the determining structure of international politics would ensure that even these individuals with 'sympathy feelings' 'are nevertheless forced to play the power game' (Herz, 1951, p. 15). Importantly, this is not the final word on Herz and his view of empathy and the security dilemma. As I will show in the section on transcendent logics, Herz's 1959 contribution showed a significant change in his thinking by embracing, to some degree at least, the possibility that individuals enter into the other's counter-fear and take measures to reassure them.

In comparison to Butterfield and Herz's latent views about the mitigating potential for empathy, more recent works that epitomise the fatalist logic take more stringently pessimistic positions. As Sebastian Rosato summarises, the intentions of others in international politics are 'inscrutable', and thus 'self-help is persistent, balancing is endless, the security dilemma is intractable...competition is the norm and cooperation is both fleeting and rare' (2015, p. 88). For these scholars, although empathy is often recognised as potentially transformative in theory, it is promptly dismissed as being unable to break through the intensity of most conflicts. The other minds problem is pervasive and there are no consistently reliable mechanisms for overcoming it and discerning another's motives and intentions (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 31; Rosato, 2015). Indicators of a state's intentions and motives, such as regime type, ideology, arms policies, memberships of institutions, and past behaviours are not instructive because 'uncertainty is exacerbated by the significant incentives great powers have to conceal or misrepresent their

intentions' (Rosato, 2015, p. 87). This does not mean that all actors hold hostile motives and intent. Mearsheimer acknowledges that 'all of the states in the system may be reliably benign' (2001, p. 31), but because the international system pushes actors to acquire as much power and security as possible one actor can never be sure that its counterparts 'do not have offensive intentions to go along with their offensive capabilities' (2001, p. 31). Simply put, these authors hold that 'intentions are private information. Only states know their own intentions' (Rosato, 2015, p. 86). Many of these approaches rest upon the same implicit counterfactual logic that Butterfield did. By arguing that existential uncertainty is a persistent feature that drives security dilemma dynamics, they set up the counterfactual of whether more complete information derived through empathy would mean that reassurance and cooperation would become possible.

Barry Posen also gives a fatalist answer to the question of whether security dilemma dynamics can be overcome by empathy for one's adversary. He does so in a slightly different way, however. He notes how the absence of empathy creates security dilemma dynamics, arguing that 'Often statesmen do not recognise that [the security dilemma exists]: they do not empathise with their neighbours; they are unaware that their own actions can seem threatening' (Posen, 1993, p. 28). But he also argues that 'it does not matter if they know of this problem. The nature of their situation compels them to take the steps they do' (Posen, 1993, p. 28). Alan Collins makes a similar point, arguing that 'the implication that even statesmen who are sensitive to the security dilemma may be unable to avoid it is probably correct' (Collins, 2004, p. 32) Thus, for Posen and Collins, unlike Mearsheimer and Rosato, they do not see empathy and intention understanding as impossible tasks, they just simply doubt its efficacy for overcoming security dilemma dynamics. Even if decision-makers were able to exercise a level of empathy that elucidated the nature of the conflict in which they were embroiled, it would not matter as they would not have the necessary capacity to act upon this understanding due to 'the nature of their situation' (1993, p. 28). Although Collins and Posen recognised the security dilemma dynamics will rage at their hardest when this

type of self-realisation is entirely absent, they likewise did not believe that this self-realisation would make any difference to an actors ability to take the steps to overcome these dynamics.

### **Empathy and the mitigator logic**

The mitigator logic suggests that the intentions of others are far from ‘inscrutable’ (Rosato, 2015), and that there are a number of steps that actors can take to both read their counterparts motives and intentions and reassure them as to their own peaceful and defensive nature. This section stays very much within the realist cannon, but looks at how more moderate realist theories have argued that there are certain opportunities for mitigating the worst effects of the security dilemma. For the most part, these approaches share the assumption that security dilemma dynamics are a given and timeless feature of international politics. But they contend that these dynamics may be stymied to certain degrees in certain circumstances, even if they can never be transcended entirely (Booth and Wheeler, 2008). This section will first discuss the work of Robert Jervis and will locate the role of empathy in his psychological and material ways of overcoming security dilemma dynamics. It will then discuss some of the literature on costly-signalling, and argue that it pays insufficient attention to the role of empathy which weakens some of its core claims.

Robert Jervis has been hugely influential to both psychological and the material dimensions of the security dilemma literature (1976, 1978). This section will discuss the interaction between these two elements of his approach to security dilemma dynamics and how it relates to his view of empathy in overcoming these dynamics.<sup>7</sup> Jervis struggled to present a clear picture regarding how far he believed empathy was truly central to overcoming security dilemma dynamics or not. What underpins this is how, for him, the psychological and material worlds interact in the processes of generating and resolving conflict. Jervis brought psychology to the security dilemma in a way that changed the concept for all who thereafter worked with it, yet

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<sup>7</sup> Jervis uses the terms security dilemma and spiral model interchangeably. What he means by both is a version of security dilemma dynamics. For a discussion of this relationship for Jervis, see his interview with Nicholas Wheeler (Wheeler, 2014).

remained acutely aware of structural and material factors as well (Booth and Wheeler, 2008, pp. 45–50). I will firstly discuss his views on empathy in relation to the material components of Jervis's theory, before turning to how he viewed empathy under the conditions of anarchy.

Much like his predecessors Herz and Butterfield, Jervis saw failures of empathy as important to explaining the development and escalation of security dilemma dynamics. As he put it:

'The inability to recognise that one's own actions could be seen as menacing and the concomitant belief that the other's hostility can only be explained by its aggressiveness help explain how conflicts can easily expand beyond that which analysis of the objective situation would indicate is necessary' (1976, p. 75)

In a later work on the offence-defence balance Jervis made the same argument. He warned against such 'failures of empathy' (1978, p. 81), and argued that the outcome of not realising the nature of one's predicament was potentially catastrophic:

'The dilemma will operate much more strongly if statesmen do not understand it, and do not see that their arms sought only to secure the status quo may alarm others and that others may arm, not because they are contemplating aggression, but because they fear attack from the first state' (1978, p. 181) (1978: 181).

In theory at least, Jervis seemed to advocate the view that empathy could go some way to at least overcoming security dilemma dynamics. But he was still relatively reserved in making arguments regarding the potential of empathy, as for him the extent to which empathy and understanding could prove instrumental was still dictated and constrained in large part by material aspects of world politics. That the last quotation appeared in the same article where Jervis introduced the importance of the offence-defence balance hints towards the complex relationship Jervis saw between so-called material realities and the potential of empathy.

Jervis's view of the material world was based upon what he described as the offense-defence balance and offense-defence differentiation. These were defined simply as 'whether the offense or defence has the advantage, and whether offensive postures can be distinguished from defensive ones' (Jervis, 1978, p. 211). The offense-defence balance concerns whether

technological, geographical and political factors made it easier and more advantageous for actors to either be aggressive and expand their territory (offensive advantage) or to sit back and defend (defensive advantage). Offense-defence differentiation simply refers to whether actors are able to differentiate offensive postures from defensive ones at a given moment in time (Glaser, 1997; Jervis, 1978). Jervis's discussion of the outbreak of the First World War provides a good example of how this materialist theory interacted with his views of empathy. In pre-war Europe, Jervis argued, offense had the advantage and it was difficult for policy-makers to differentiate between offensive and defensive force postures. In these circumstances he argued that 'There was no way for a country to increase its ability to defend itself without simultaneously increasing its ability to destroy others' and that 'to wait for the other side to clarify its intentions could mean defeat' (1976, p. 94). It was an example of what he would later describe as a 'deep security dilemma' (Jervis, 2001, p. 41).

The reality of this situation meant there would have been little room for empathic understanding to operate. As he argued, 'Under these conditions it would have required unusual empathy and statesmanship – and unusual willingness to risk receiving the first blow – to halt the final rush toward war' (1976, p. 94). Jervis therefore considered the importance of empathy to overcoming security dilemma conflicts as secondary to and dependent upon the material conditions at play, as dictated by his offense-defence theory. Where offense had the advantage, and it was not possible to distinguish between offence and defence, he saw little chance that actors would be able to understand the workings of security dilemma dynamics and take steps to reassure others. Even if in this context an actor empathically considered that they and their adversary might be entangled in security dilemma dynamics, they would be extremely unlikely to act upon this information due to the extreme risk involved. But in situations where technology, geography and politics suggested that defence had the advantage and there was a discernible difference between force postures he believed that actors would be able to empathise with their adversary and take steps to reassure them. Consequently, it seems the extent to which Jervis believed empathy to be potentially

important corresponds with his views regarding the offense-defence balance and offense-defence differentiation. That said, in the road from security dilemma dynamics to cooperation he saw empathy as not only extremely important, but also the initial catalyst for change (Jervis, 1976, p. 82-83). However, Jervis did little to follow up these claims. Jervis provided no tools for thinking about what these instances might look like, and under what conditions, beyond the offense-defence question, this empathy might be acted upon in a positive manner.

In addition to the material factor, Jervis's work also exhibits a tension between the insights of psychology, which seem to suggest that empathy could play a role, and his views on how anarchy influences the behaviour of states. On the one hand he has advocated the view that by understanding the workings of security dilemma dynamics, actors could defuse tensions and de-escalate conflicts. Exemplifying the former position, Jervis said that sometimes decision-makers might not recognise or even contemplate that another's build-up of arms may be the result of fear and insecurity as opposed to aggression, and that when policies were based on this assumption they would 'deepen the dilemma and create needless conflict' (1978, p. 212). The way out of such an impasse, he argued, was through 'empathy and skilful statesmanship' which he believed could 'reduce this danger' (1978, p.212). Thus, where there was what he called a genuine spiral situation, he saw that empathy could play a part in de-escalating tensions: 'If both sides primarily desire security, then the two images of the future do not clash, and any incompatibility must...be illusory' (Jervis, 1976, p. 76). But he has also argued that these psychological insights should not be privileged above the push and pull of anarchy, which is for him the ultimate basis for security dilemma dynamics. Jervis professed the view that empathic understandings of the dilemma's dynamics were often not enough, and that one state's security driven policies will often have the inevitable effect of making others less secure. He argued that,

'While an understanding of the security dilemma and psychological dynamics will dampen some arms-hostility spirals, it will not change the fact that some policies aimed at security will threaten others. To call the incompatibility that results from such policies 'illusory' is to misunderstand the nature of the problem and to encourage

the illusion that if states only saw themselves and others more objectively they could attain their common interests' (1976, p. 76)

Here, Jervis's reasoning is rooted less in the material realm but rather in the belief that anarchy is the primary driver of security dilemma dynamics. Indeed, he warns that the cost of psychological insights into IR 'is the slighting of the role of the system in inducing conflict' (1976: 75). In this sense Jervis epitomised the mitigator logic (Booth and Wheeler, 2008). He was optimistic that actors could take steps to overcome security dilemma dynamics in certain circumstances and with the right level of empathy to understand the situation they were in, but at the same time believed that the security dilemma itself would remain as long as anarchy persisted. In short, he saw that 'escape is impossible. The security dilemma cannot be abolished, it can only be ameliorated' (Jervis, 1976, p. 82).

Despite these material and structural impediments, the takeaway here is that Jervis saw the exercise of empathy as critical to an actor's ability to overcome security dilemma dynamics. This empathy was imaginative as it required taking on the perspective of someone you consider to be an adversary, and it was self-reflexive because it entailed looking at yourself and considering how your adversary views you. Demonstrating empathy's importance, in the right circumstances he also saw it as the initial piece of the puzzle on the road from security dilemma dynamics to cooperation. He tellingly argued that in order to become unlocked from spirals of conflict and hostility 'The first step must be the realisation, by at least one side but preferably by both, that they are or at least may be, caught in a dilemma that neither desires (Jervis, 1976, p. 82). The implication of describing this kind of self-reflexive understanding as 'the first step' is that the actual methods of reassurance come secondary to this initial empathic moment. This is not to say that reassurance is itself not imbued with empathy – the next section attests to this – but what it suggests is that a self-reflexive awareness of oneself is crucial to creating the conditions where de-escalation becomes possible in the first place.

I will now briefly discuss one of the prominent means of reassurance that is discussed in the literature on the security dilemma, which is costly signalling. In summary, this literature argues that actors caught in security dilemma dynamics can signal their peaceful-defensive intent by sending signals that are sufficiently costly to convince your counterpart of your sincerity. As Andrew Kydd explains, ‘Costly signals...are signals designed to persuade the other side that one is trustworthy by virtue of the fact that they are so costly that one would hesitate to send them if one were untrustworthy’ (2000, p. 327). For Glaser, ‘an effective costly signal convinces the adversary to revise its information about the state, reducing its estimate that the state is greedy, thereby increasing the willingness of an opposing security seeker to cooperate’ (2010, pp. 7–8). An effective costly signal can, the literature argues, lead to security dilemma dynamics being mitigated. As Glaser puts it, ‘if both states are sure that the opposing state is a security seeker (and if both also know that the other knows this), the security dilemma is eliminated and neither state has incentives to compete’ (2010, pp. 8–9).

Kydd argues that Gorbachev’s moves to reassure the United States in the late 1980s is one such example. He contends that the signing of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty in 1987, and the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan in 1988 are prime examples of costly signals. Because of the cost attached to them Gorbachev was able to convince Reagan of his trustworthiness, thus providing an explanation for how trust was built between the Soviet Union and the United States (Kydd, 2000, 2005). The opposite of a costly signal is often described as ‘cheap talk’ (Kydd, 2000), which are signals that are of insufficient cost to demonstrate security-seeking status. The problem with signals that are cheap as opposed to costly is that they can be sent by untrustworthy actors as well as trustworthy ones (Kydd, 2000, p. 340). Therefore there is not sufficient evidence for the receiving actor to determine with some degree of confidence that the other is trustworthy. There are various ways of measuring what a costly signal entails, but the unifying detail is the belief that all states are rational actors and are thus prone to interpret information in broadly the same way. This leads to two specific problems, both of which relate to



empathy.

Kydd and others in the literature do not mention empathy explicitly, and are silent altogether on the question of how an actor becomes emboldened to send a costly signal to an adversary in the first place (Wheeler, 2013, pp. 485–487). But, following Jervis, it is logical to say that an actor would only send a costly signal if they have already interpreted their conflict with the adversary in terms of security dilemma dynamics, which requires empathy. Wheeler makes the important argument that Kydd, and other costly-signalling literature, effectively miss a stage in explaining how security dilemma dynamics are overcome. He writes that ‘Kydd...has no mechanism for generating the changed perceptions of trustworthiness that lead decision-makers to send costly signals’ (Wheeler, 2013, p. 487). In other-words, Kydd’s approach is unable to account for how leaders in security dilemma dynamics can become emboldened to send a costly signal in the first place. By missing this crucial step, Wheeler suggests, Kydd’s theory is insufficient for understanding how security dilemma dynamics can be overcome. Wheeler fills this gap by arguing that leaders only feel able to send costly signals when they have developed perceptions of trustworthiness, which are most effectively built through interpersonal interactions (2013, 2017; Wheeler et al., 2016). I, however, consider the initial spark to this process to be empathy. This is not to understate the importance of trusting relationships and perceptions of trustworthiness, but before trust can develop an initial empathic understanding of the nature of security dilemma dynamics is first required. Wheeler recognises this in his work (2013), but ultimately does not provide an explicit conceptualisation of empathy or an explanation of the relationship between trust and empathy.

The second issue is that the costly signalling literature sees information as being too complete and unbiased by other factors. Keren Yarhi-Milo calls into question the veracity of the costly signalling literature, and argues that it does not pay adequate attention to how an individual’s psychological biases dictate how costly signals are interpreted. In response, she

develops the ‘selective attention thesis’, which ‘posits that individual perceptual biases and organizational interests and practices influence which types of indicators observers regard as credible signals of the adversary’s intentions.’ (Yarhi-Milo, 2013, p. 9, see also 2014). Consequently, there is no external and objective measure of what signals will accurately convey intentions, which is a fundamental assumption made in costly signalling. This is because of both varying organizational modes of interpretation and individual psychological biases. She argues that there are:

‘differences between a state’s political leaders and its intelligence community in their selection of which signals to focus on and how to interpret those signals. In particular, decision-makers often base their interpretations on their own theories, expectations, and needs, sometimes ignoring costly signals and paying more attention to information that, though less costly, is more vivid (i.e. personalized and emotionally involving)’ (Yarhi-Milo, 2013, p. 9).

In comparison, intelligence organisations emphasise ‘the collection and analysis of data on the adversary’s military inventory typically receive priority’ (Yarhi-Milo, 2013, p. 9). This suggests that ‘decision-makers often interpret multiple signals, some of which may suggest that the adversary’s intentions are becoming more benign, whereas others may suggest the opposite’ (Yarhi-Milo, 2013, p. 51). This notion is supported by a wealth of literature on foreign policy psychology that shows the different ways information is interpreted (Finlay et al., 1967; George, 1969). Rationalist accounts, on the other hand, do not account for this variance in human behaviour and organisational interests. Not all costly signals will be received in a uniformly similar manner.

This poses problems for the costly signalling literature, but more pertinently for this chapter raises questions concerning the role of empathy in the sending of costly signals. In short, empathy is not considered in this stage of the process. In response, Marcus Holmes and Yarhi-Milo argue that a greater appreciation of empathy would be beneficial to the sending of costly signals. As they put it,

‘Leaders without the ability to empathize may well be sending the wrong reassurance signals since they may not understand the domestic constraints or sensitivities that will affect how the signals are understood and received; “pushing the right buttons” requires understanding how the other will react’ (Holmes and Yarhi-Milo, 2016, p.

14).

This is an important contribution as it shows that even the rationalist literature that sees costly signalling as a means of mitigating security dilemma dynamics is reliant to some extent on empathy. If we accept Yarhi-Milo's first argument that the problem of communication and signalling in international politics is one beset with biases and misperception, then it becomes clear that effective signals will depend in large part upon empathy. If you have a greater empathic understanding of the receiver it follows that signals can be crafted in a way that responds not to objective notions of cost, but rather to 'the right buttons' of a leader or group (Holmes and Yarhi-Milo, 2016, p. 14). Likewise, when receiving a signal from another actor, empathy will dictate in part how that information is interpreted. Incorporating the sending and receiving of signals is important as the case study of US foreign policy towards Iran shows the importance of empathy in both. In the 2001-03 episode, the Bush administration are on the receiving end up multiple signals from Iran but do not send many of their own. But in 2009-10 it is the Obama administration that are sending most of the signals while receiving relatively few from Iran. The significance of this for our present purposes is that it establishes empathy as crucial to another key element of overcoming security dilemma dynamics. Empathy is imbued not just in the self-reflexive move of realising that you are embroiled in security dilemma dynamics, but also in the subsequent steps an actor may take in order to communicate this to an adversary and reassure them and in how they interpret signals sent by their adversary.

### **Empathy and the transcender logic**

The final logic to discuss is the transcender logic, which broadly holds that security dilemma dynamics can be transcended entirely. I will briefly discuss Adler and Barnett's conceptualisation of security communities, before then turning the contributions of Herz and Booth and Wheeler. Emanuel Adler and Michael Barnett take a transcender view by arguing that 'security communities' can overcome the self-help logic of anarchy and transcend the supposed ever present

possibility of security dilemma dynamics. The term ‘security community’ was first used by Karl Deutsch in research on the development of a European security community in the 1950s, but has since risen to prominence in the last two decades. But, how far Adler and Barnett consider empathy to be important in the development of security communities is debatable. They present three tiers of security community emergence or development. These are, first ‘precipitating factors that encourage states to orient themselves in each other's direction and coordinate their policies’; second, ““structural” elements of power and ideas, and the “process” elements of transactions, international organizations, and social learning’; and third, ‘the development of trust and collective identity formation’ (Adler and Barnett, 1998, p. 29). While these provide a macro explanation for how security dilemma dynamics can be overcome, when viewed through the lens of empathy it is evident that these arguments miss a vital step in explaining how individual actors are able to make the necessary moves to overcome security dilemma dynamics. Particularly in instances of entrenched conflict, such as between the United States and Iran, an explanation is required for how individual level actors are able to make level 1 moves.<sup>8</sup> These arguments, whilst they are not disagreeable, are not helpful in answering the questions that are faced in this thesis. The primary reason for this is that they are macro level solutions to the wider problem of anarchy and uncertainty, and do not address the specific resolution of security dilemma dynamics between two or more actors caught in an adversarial setting. Principally, they show how the international system as a whole can mitigate the effects of uncertainty and anarchy, but they do not provide an explanation of how two states trapped in an intractable conflict can overcome this. (Keating and Wheeler, 2014, pp. 65–66).

The original contribution to the transcender logic comes from John Herz. Though it is debatable whether he can be considered as a transcender or not, the importance of his contribution to thinking about the role of empathy in overcoming security dilemma dynamics necessitates that it is discussed in this section. In many ways his later work does not fit comfortably in any of Booth

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<sup>8</sup> Keating and Wheeler make a similar argument but not in relation to empathy (2014, pp. 65–66).

and Wheeler's three logics. In nine years, John Herz went from stating that the security dilemma could never be completely escaped to deliberating the extent to which knowledge of the dilemma itself could be pivotal for policy-makers in trying to escape from it. Though an argument could possibly be made regarding a personal transformation in Herz's thinking from fatalist to mitigator/transcender, it was argued above that the supposed 'fatalism' of Herz – and of Butterfield for that matter – has to an extent been historically exaggerated. In his 1959 book, the latent mitigator/transcender logic comes to fruition.

Herz was the first to explicitly recognise the important counterfactual logic underpinning his and Butterfield's initial contributions; namely, that if these dynamics can create conflict, it then follows that by understanding their workings, policy-makers may be able take the steps necessary to mitigate or even transform its effects. Butterfield displayed awareness of this possibility, showing that the security dilemma was dependent upon the shared misperception and lack of understanding between enemies, but he did not follow this argument to the same conclusion that Herz so eloquently did in 1959. In this truly pioneering passage, Herz wrote:

'For, if it is true – as Butterfield has pointed out – that inability to put oneself into the other fellow's place and to realise his fears and distrust has always constituted one chief reason for the dilemma's poignancy, it would then follow that elucidation of this fact might by itself enable one to do what so far has proved impossible – to put oneself into the other's place, to understand that he, too, may be motivated by one's own kind of fears, and thus to abate this fear' (1959, p. 249).

In this passage Herz, much like Jervis after him, saw the capacity of self-reflexivity as a crucial initial step. Herz did not use the term empathy to describe this process of 'elucidation', but what Herz is implicitly talking about is processes of both empathy and dyspathy. Dyspathy, which is understood as anything that blocks empathy (Cameron, 2011), can be seen in the 'inability to put oneself into the other fellow's place', which for Butterfield and Herz was due to the problem of other minds that inhibits policy-makers from knowing the thoughts and feelings of their adversaries. Herz made an essential contribution when he recognised that this problem is perhaps not as immutable as he and Butterfield has previously thought. By bringing an implicit

conceptualisation of empathy into the analysis, Herz began to recognise that actually there might be processes by which individuals can understand the disparate perspectives of others. He therefore saw what neither he nor Butterfield did in their early writings; that if what created the security dilemma was an absence of perspective and understanding from those individuals who held the power to make decisions of national security, then the reverse logic of this dilemma also existed. Namely, that if these same individuals were able to gain a different perspective and understanding of the relationship which recognised ‘that he, too, may be motivated by one’s own kind of fears’ (Herz, 1959: 249), then surely they became positioned to take the steps to overcome the conflict.

The influence of this cannot be overstated. As Wheeler states, ‘In suggesting that through “facing and understanding” security dilemma dynamics, decision-makers might ameliorate the fear and suspicion which drives security competition, Herz blazed a trail that later security dilemma theorists have followed’ (2009, p. 495). This is particularly evident in Jervis’s views on the role of self-reflexive empathy as a way out of security dilemma dynamics. Though, like Jervis, the significance of introducing this idea to the security dilemma literature is muted by the fact that the actual tools Herz left for exploring these processes of elucidation are limited. Herz left two questions unanswered. The first concerns how empathy can be translated into moves that reassure the other, and the second is the problem of future uncertainty.

The first is important because there is a significant difference between the private and self-reflexive empathic move that leads an actor to realise the nature of the predicament they are in, and empathic move that motivates an actor to take the steps to reassure their adversary. This poses a number of important questions regarding how and when self-reflexive empathy can lead to empathic action. This is not to over dichotomise the distinction between empathy and action. Both are indeed actions in the true sense of the word, and both are bold moves, but the former alone cannot lead to security dilemma dynamics being overcome. For example, how do the institutional

and social structures in which actors operate dictate how their empathy is expressed; and how and when are processes of empathy suppressed by additional intervening variables? If we see empathy as containing immanent transformative potential, it is vital that we ask these questions about how within conflict settings this potential can be realised. This opens up further questions regarding what counts as a sufficient empathic move in security dilemma dynamics. For instance, what importance should language be given in contrast to costly signals? As discussed above, traditional IR literature discounts speech and language as ‘cheap’, and says that actions which are intended to communicate with adversaries require greater tangibility and cost attached to them. US and Iranian leaders have occasionally used empathic language but have struggled to craft effective policies for communicating this. This is a critical question for the 2009-10 case, as Obama was continually unable to convince the Iranians that he was empathic and sought a sustainable and compromised solution to the nuclear dispute.

This is supported by Holmes and Yarhi-Milo who recently argued that ‘conveying empathy to the other may be as important as actually possessing it’ (2016, p. 3). They argue that ‘For empathy to have effects in diplomacy, actors must convey it to others. Individuals who do not believe that their counterparts have the ability to understand their interests are less likely to engage in good-faith negotiations’ (2016, p. 4). This is an important argument, but I also depart from Holmes and Yarhi-Milo in that I consider the translation of empathy into effective communication to be an empathically determined process in and of itself. Holmes and Yarhi-Milo draw a sharp line between the internal process of empathy and communicating this empathy to an adversary. Using the example of the failure of the 2000 Camp David Summit, they argue that Bill Clinton was ‘an empathic person, but on this occasion, he did not express it’ (Holmes and Yarhi-Milo, 2016, p. 1). The problem with this formulation is that an individual cannot be said to have strong empathic capacities in a relational setting if they are unable to get their message across. This is one of the reasons why I argue in Chapter 5 that Obama had limited but not strong empathy towards Iran.

Communication is critical to empathy, but empathy is also equally important to communication because empathy entails internalising and appreciating the context in which a counterpart will receive a particular message. I elucidate this argument in more detail in the case study chapters.

Herz did not enquire into these questions. He theorised that empathy can embolden an actor to take steps ‘to abate this fear’ (1959, p. 249), but did not ask what these steps might be or how they would be communicated. He did, however, begin to address the difficulty of this by discussing the problem of ‘future uncertainty’. In addition to the impediment of present-day uncertainty, Herz was also concerned about how future uncertainty might prohibit empathic policy-makers from making these moves. He explained this problem as so:

“Even if a nation could do so [enter into another’s counter-fear], how could it trust in the continuance of good intentions in the case of collective entities with leaders and policies forever changing? How could it, then, afford not to be prepared for “the worst”?” (Herz, 1959, p. 235).

So even if security dilemma dynamics could be overcome in the present, Herz worried that they could never be truly transcended because of the problem of future uncertainty. Despite the hints of transcender logic given in his passage on elucidating the dynamics of the security dilemma, it is clear that he ultimately believed that it could only ever be ‘mitigated’ (Herz, 1959, p. 235) and never transcended entirely. This is evident in his argument that elucidation ‘would not resolve the dilemma entirely, of course, for one could never be entirely certain; but it might at least take some of the sting out of it and insert a wedge toward a more rational, less fear-ridden, less ideology-laden...attitude’ (Herz, 1959, p. 249). Unfortunately, Herz did little to explore the possible implications of these ideas and how they may or may not work in practice. Regardless, this interjection nevertheless laid an important lineage that can be seen throughout scholarship on the security dilemma that followed.

The most contemporary treatment of this theme has come from Booth and Wheeler, who explicitly bring empathy into the fold in a manner not previously done. Previous contributions may



have used the term empathy, but none have seen it as a concept. Where Posen and Jervis, for instance, talk of empathy, they were not discussing a contested concept but rather were treating it as a part of everyday language that needed no investigation or unpacking. This is not necessarily a criticism as every single word one uses cannot be untangled in this way. However, it is important to highlight the difference between treating empathy as a concept, compared to simply using it as part of everyday language. As Chapter 2 shows in detail, the differences between how empathy is understood in an academic context and in an everyday sense are significant. To reconcile this problem, I argue that this should be dependent upon how much work this term is doing for a particular theory. For theorists of the security dilemma, then, who have theorised about possibilities of overcoming security dilemma dynamics, empathy is given significant explanatory power and potential. Booth and Wheeler, therefore, can be credited with being the first in security dilemma theorising to acknowledge that empathy is as much a concept as it is a part of everyday language. Although I go on to show that their preliminary conceptual discussions should be taken much further, the recognition of it as a concept in the first place should not be understated.

Booth and Wheeler rightly acknowledge that ‘Empathy is a potentially significant but under theorized concept in foreign policy analysis’ (2008, p. 237). Empathy, for them, is an attempt ‘to internalize the hopes and fears of another by imaginatively taking on as far as possible their emotions/feelings and psychological realities’ (Booth and Wheeler, 2008, p. 237). Linking it to their work on trust, they argue that ‘Trust requires empathy’, and that ‘a capacity to empathize with the fear and suffering of one’s adversaries is a critical precondition for building trust’ (Booth and Wheeler, 2008, p. 237; see also Wheeler, 2013, 2017). Building this into their approach to the security dilemma, they introduce the concept of ‘security dilemma sensibility’ (Booth and Wheeler, 2008, p. 7). Echoing Herz in 1959, they define security dilemma sensibility as:

‘an actor’s intention and capacity to perceive the motives behind, and to show responsiveness towards the potential complexity of the military intentions of others. In particular, it refers to ability to understand the role that fear might play in their attitudes and behaviour, including, crucially, the role that one’s own actions may play in provoking that fear’ (2008: 7).

Though they do not directly link this concept to empathy from the outset (this is done more thoroughly in Wheeler 2013), they later go on to say it can be seen ‘as a particular expression of the general concept of empathy, focussed on an appreciation of how one’s own actions can generate fear and mistrust in others’ (Booth and Wheeler, 2008, p. 237). Arguably, the concept of security dilemma sensibility is the most thorough expression of empathy in the security dilemma literature. However – and this criticism should not be read as a weakness of the concept itself as such – I contend that the concept should be accompanied by a more in-depth conceptual discussion of what empathy is in order to further clarify the parameters of what security dilemma sensibility is and what it is not. This is done in Chapter 2, where I compare a loose conceptualisation of empathy derived from the security dilemma literature with the broader multidisciplinary literature on empathy.

Two parts of security dilemma sensibility will be briefly dissected; the first concerns the importance Booth and Wheeler give to self-reflexivity. Within the context of security dilemma dynamics, Booth and Wheeler highlight that if one is able to understand that the other is also acting out fear and not malevolence, then by association actors also understand something about themselves. This is because it requires an actor to consider ‘the role that one’s own actions may play in provoking that fear’ (Booth and Wheeler, 2008, p. 7). Security dilemma sensibility, consequently, is not just about an empathic understanding of the other, but it also entails understanding something regarding the self. This is a crucial contribution as it challenges the idea that empathy in the security dilemma is always orientated towards understanding your adversary. In making security dilemma sensibility an individual level phenomenon Booth and Wheeler also reinstate agency at the heart of security dilemma theory. As they put it, ‘human agency...[is] a critical variable in shaping whether security dilemmas result in a mistrustful spiral...or cooperation’ (Booth and Wheeler, 2008, p. 7).

Moreover, Booth and Wheeler inject a much needed dose of humility into security dilemma theorising by stating that empathy in this context entails considering the role that ‘fear *might* play’ in the other’s attitudes as opposed to the role that ‘fear *will* play’ (emphasis my own). They recognised that policy-makers, as Blight and Lang put it, ‘live life forward, groping in the dark’ (2010, p. 34), simply meaning that a decision-maker is never able to tell for sure whether they are ensnared within security dilemma dynamics because they always have incomplete information. As Wheeler has put it elsewhere, there is no ‘Olympian viewpoint from which observers or policy-makers can make a definitive claim that a particular case fits... security dilemma dynamics’ (Wheeler, 2012). As Wheeler points out, this is true of both practitioners seeking to discern the motives and intentions of adversaries in the present, as well as scholars studying contemporary and historical conflicts.

My second point concerns the relationship between the empathic understanding of one’s adversary that is obtained through a process of self-reflexivity and how actors then ‘show responsiveness towards’ this adversary (Booth and Wheeler, 2008, p. 7). Simply, Booth and Wheeler encounter the same problem as Herz, as they do not clarify how this responsiveness can stem from the ‘ability to understand the role that fear might play’ (2008, p. 7). Though susceptible to the charge that this is merely an issue of semantics, I would counter that what is at stake in this discussion is a rigorous explanation of under what conditions empathic actions are deemed possible, and under what conditions might empathy be formed internally but not expressed externally. If we can regard empathy as holding a form of ‘immanent potential’ (Head, 2016a, p. 102), then a more nuanced understanding needs to be advanced of how this potential can be realised. In the case study that occupies Chapters 4 and 5 I show how empathy can exist internally but constrained from external expression due its relationship with other competing concerns. My use of the word internal can mean two things here. First, it can refer to the internal empathy an individual may feel but not express externally through speech or action. And second, internal empathy can exist in a top-down manner within a group but is not expressed beyond this group.

What I have in mind here is how Obama's empathy towards Iran in 2009 was evident to those in the administration that worked with him, but was not to the Iranians who were the target of this empathy. Though clear cut answers to these questions may be hard to come by, and will be primarily dependent upon the context in which empathy operates, this distinction should still be articulated by those who wish to take empathy seriously. My primary criticism of security dilemma sensibility, therefore, is that in encompassing an actor's 'responsiveness' it implies an unproblematic relationship between empathy itself and the external manifestation and development of that empathy.

### **Conclusion**

Taken together, this body of literature presents a loose conceptualisation of empathy as it relates to overcoming security dilemma dynamics. It is comprised of a few specific elements. The first is that empathy in this context is self-reflexive. It entails the attempt to not just understand the other, but also the self-reflexive act of contemplating how the other views you and your own role in creating that perception. The second is that empathy in security dilemma dynamics is an imaginative and difficult process as it entails trying to understand another who is not only different from you but also who you may have profound disagreements. The third is empathy is an integral part of the communicative process of overcoming security dilemma dynamics as well as the initial imaginative process. While the relationship is not necessarily a linear one, empathy should be considered as central to both the initial understanding of the other as well as to the process of crafting and receiving signals. There is no point where empathy ends and communication begins as successful communication is dependent in part on an empathic reading of the other.

Underpinning many conceptions of security dilemma dynamics, and pivotal to explaining their 'timelessness' in the eyes of some, has been assumptions relating to shared inability to get into the mind of others and perceive their thoughts, feelings and intentions. Combined with the

extreme material ambiguity of weaponry and potential weaponry (I include this with the nuclear fuel cycle in mind), the potential for bridging this conflict inducing gap between one's own mind and another's has traditionally been seen as unfeasible. As the concept developed, scholars began to theorise the processes through which actors could mitigate and even transform security dilemma dynamics. All of the contributions to this debate have, in one way or another, drawn upon loose articulations of the concept of empathy in order to make their claims. Consequently, the primary argument of this chapter is that by either ignoring empathy entirely, or overlooking its complexities, theorists of the security dilemma have missed a fundamental step in explaining processes of mitigating and transforming conflicts. Taking these propositions as the starting point, the next chapter brings the concept of empathy explicitly into the fold.

## Chapter 2: Conceptualising empathy

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The last chapter showed how the concept of empathy has long been implicitly central to the security dilemma. Despite its relative centrality to many security dilemma theorists' arguments, the chapter showed that little sustained thought has been given to theorising this important concept. While the security dilemma has convincingly explained how conflicts arise, by neglecting empathy it has struggled to explain the initial steps that are necessary if actors are to overcome security dilemma dynamics. This chapter, therefore, seeks to contribute to addressing this omission. It does so by surveying literature on empathy, within and beyond IR, and asking how it can contribute to security dilemma theorising. It is important to note that the aim here is not to develop a general theory of empathy for IR. This would be too ambitious a task for this thesis, and indeed it is questionable whether such an endeavour would be possible at all. Rather, it seeks to develop a conceptualisation of empathy that speaks to the core concerns of the security dilemma, and one that can be operationalised in a way that is relevant for the case study US foreign policy towards Iran.

The conceptualisation therefore needs to be able to address two specific factors relating to security dilemma dynamics that were identified at the end of the last chapter. The first is that security dilemma dynamics are often underpinned by pervasive notions of difference and diversity, where competing actors interpret the key elements of the conflict in different ways. Empathising with the other in this context therefore often entails imaginative leaps into a perspective that oneself does not hold and might find profoundly alien. Empathy is consequently a difficult and effortful process that requires agency on the part of the empathising actor. The second contextual factor is the importance that security dilemma theorists give to self-reflexivity. This factor seeks to build upon Booth and Wheeler's concept of 'security dilemma sensibility', which entails actors self-reflexively understanding the role that fear can play in the attitudes and behaviours of others,

while considering ‘one’s own actions...in provoking that fear’ (2008, p. 7). This type of self-reflexivity also allows actors to consider how the messages and signals they send to their adversaries will be interpreted, and furthermore how to read the messages and signals their adversary sends to them. A conception of how the other views oneself is therefore crucial. What unites these two factors is that both can be profoundly difficult to achieve. As security dilemma theorists have long emphasised, overcoming the effects of security dilemma dynamics by understanding the motives and intentions of the others and finding ways to reassure them is far from an easy task.

In bringing the multidisciplinary literature on empathy into conversation with these contextual factors it is apparent that many conceptualisations of empathy are ill-suited to account for them. This is because contemporary accounts of empathy, found predominantly in psychology and neuroscience, consider it to be an effortless and automatic process where the active of agency of individuals is not required (Iacoboni, 2008). These accounts argue that our ability to understand others comes from an internal and neural mirroring process. Notions such as this have been extremely influential to recent IR literature (Edkins, 2015; Hall and Ross, 2015; Hopf, 2010), and have been used to explain how conflicts are overcome and cooperation established (Holmes, 2013; Wong, 2016). In challenging these accounts I am not suggesting that these automatic and effortless processes do not occur. Unconscious simulation is heavily implicated in a number of important empathic capacities, such as processes where individuals ‘catch’ the emotions of others.<sup>9</sup> However, there has been a tendency for the neuroscience and psychology literature to understand empathy by *only* looking at unconscious simulation, rather than accounting for the full range of human intersubjectivity. This criticism can be extended to the IR literature that makes use of it. I understand these processes to be part of the broad church of empathy, but suggest that they alone cannot account for how actors are able to promote cooperation within the context of security dilemma dynamics. To make this point I draw on scholarship from various areas of philosophy

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<sup>9</sup> This is often referred to as emotional contagion.

linguistics, and IR that presents an alternative but complementary conceptualisation of empathy that sees it as deliberate and effortful.

It is clear from this brief discussion that empathy is a contested concept, and that in bringing empathy to the security dilemma scholars must negotiate between competing visions of what empathy is and what potentialities it holds. Due to its broad scope, I take the approach that to speak of empathy in general terms holds little conceptual or empirical worth. Rather, it is a highly context dependent concept. Thus, what I propose is not a general conceptualisation of empathy, but rather something very specific that speaks to the literature on the security dilemma discussed in Chapter 1. To account for this, the chapter concludes by discussing the specifics of how empathy will be used in this thesis. I do this by specifying a number of empathic capacities that are pertinent to the case of US foreign policy towards Iran, and then by discussing the concept of ‘empathic intensity’ that I use to account for the variance of empathy across individuals and time. This shows how my conceptualisation of empathy works in action, while also setting up the counterfactual intervention that makes up the empirical body of the thesis.

The chapter is structured around the principle dividing lines in research on empathy. I take each of these divisions in turn and discuss the various approaches they entail. In doing so I draw out the key aspects that are helpful to thinking about empathy in the context of the security dilemma, while justifying why other approaches are deficient for this particular purpose. It is important to note that these dividing lines are a heuristic device for surveying the literature and do not represent a definitive view of the divisions across all literature on empathy. Inevitably, given the sheer size of the literature on this topic, it is almost impossible to cover every aspect of this debate.



## **Dividing lines in empathy research**

As outlined in the introduction of the thesis, the extent to which this relatively recent inclusion into our lexicon has divided opinion across disciplines cannot be understated. In an early review of this vast literature, Nancy Eisenberg and Janet Strayer argued that ‘Because of its wide-ranging application, the notion of empathy is, and always has been, a broad, somewhat slippery concept – one that has provoked considerable speculation, excitement, and confusion (1987, p. 3). Engelen and Röttger-Rössler concur, writing that ‘Almost anybody writing in the field would declare that there is no accepted standard definition of empathy’ (2012, p. 3). Numerous other authors have also highlighted the ‘slippery’ nature of empathy by showing its close relation to many other similar concepts (Coplan, 2011a; Engelen and Röttger-Rössler, 2012; Goldie, 2000, pp. 176–177; Miller, 2011; Zahavi, 2012, p. 82). The psychologist Daniel Batson has identified at least eight different conceptualisations of empathy in current use (2009b), while political philosopher Michael Morrell has identified six ‘different but related concepts’ (2010, pp. 39–40), ranging from the basic ability to automatically read another’s emotions, to ‘cognitive empathy’ (Morrell, 2010, p. 40). The extent of this confusion within the literature hints towards the concept’s complexity.

### ***Automatic empathy and deliberate empathy***

The distinction between what can be described as automatic empathy and deliberate empathy is one of the most pronounced in the literature. It is also perhaps the most important for my conceptualisation of empathy. The distinction has numerous labels, all of which mean broadly the same thing. Automatic empathy has been described, amongst other things, as emotional empathy (Cameron, 2011), affective empathy, basic empathy (Stueber, 2010; Zahavi, 2012) and emotional contagion. Deliberate empathy has been called complex empathy (Zahavi, 2012), perspective-taking (Coplan, 2011a; Goldman, 2008) and reenactive empathy (Stueber, 2010). The term automatic empathy is widely used, but I borrow the term deliberate empathy from the linguist, Lynne Cameron (2011). Broadly speaking, the divide falls along disciplinary lines. Many within

psychology and neuroscience see empathy as an automatic phenomenon where individuals unconsciously internalise the emotions, feelings and actions of others. The majority of the literature from philosophy, linguistics, and peace studies, however, sees empathy as a deliberate and effortful attempt to take the perspective of another. These categories are not, however, mutually exclusive. While some of the literature has portrayed them in opposition, many researchers recognise that there is a complex relationship between these two broad approaches to empathy that has not yet been fully accounted for (Coplan, 2011a; Decety and Lamm, 2006). My position is that neither hold a more accurate account of what empathy fundamentally is, but rather that some conceptualisations are more useful than others to understanding the operation of empathy in particular contexts. Consequently, I argue that accounts of deliberate empathy are more suited to the contextual dynamics of the security dilemma and US-Iran relations. I will first outline automatic accounts before showing the various ways in which deliberate empathy challenge them.

Automatic empathy can be defined as the unconscious process of taking the perspective of another. It entails the ‘automatic process of “embodied simulation” that enable an observer to make sense of the physical actions of others’ (Cameron, 2011, p. 9). It is an instantaneous and instinctive reaction to the observable actions of others that requires no conscious effort. To give an example, when you see someone bang their elbow, it is the process that allows you to feel their pain. When you see someone who is visibly upset or angry, it is how you are able to compute this. These understandings happen instantaneously and are not the product of active deliberation. As leading Neuroscientist Marco Iacoboni has put it, empathy ‘is not an effortful, deliberate pretence of being in somebody else’s shoes. It is an *effortless*, automatic, and unconscious inner mirroring’ (2008, p. 120).

For the most part, this set of authors take an overtly materialist view of empathy, seeing it fundamentally as brain activity (Holmes, 2014). Most accounts of automatic empathy derive from the discovery of mirror neurons by Giacomo Rizzolatti, Victor Gallese and their colleagues in the

early 1990s (Gallese et al., 1996; Rizzolatti et al., 1996). In experiments on macaque monkeys they observed that when a macaque viewed an action being carried out – such as another macaque reaching for a banana – the same neurons fired as when the macaque carried out the action for themselves. This new method of researching the neural basis of empathy was propelled by technological advancements, such as functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), which allowed researchers to measure and locate brain activity in relation to blood flow (Gallese et al., 1996). Work across the cognitive sciences has proposed that the discovery of mirror neurons provides the neural basis for understanding the process of empathy. While controversial and still in development, this field of research has posed a major challenge to the centuries-old philosophical problem of other minds. The conventional view in the theory of mind literature was that we read others by relying on a set of ‘innate theories of mental states that we have derived throughout life’ (Holmes, 2013, p. 834). As the Cognitive Philosopher Alvin Goldman summarises, this approach ‘says that ordinary people construct, or are endowed with, a naïve psychological theory that guides their assessments of mental states’ (2008, p. 4; see also Goldie, 2000, p. 177; Zahavi, 2010, p. 286). In theory of mind this position is called ‘theory theory’, and is the approach that loosely underpins most accounts of deliberate empathy.

The discovery of mirror neurons presented a significant challenge to this view and contributed to the school of thought known as simulation theory (Goldman, 2008). Instead of relying on naïve psychological theories, this view proposes that we mirror the emotions and actions of others in our brains through a complex process of neural simulation. It contends that our brains are actively trying to work out what the other is thinking and feeling through this shared neural architecture (Holmes, 2013; Iacoboni, 2008). The implications of this, it has been argued, are vast: ‘By helping us recognise the actions of other people, mirror neurons also help us to recognise and understand the deepest motives behind those actions, the intentions of the other individuals’ (Iacoboni, 2008, p. 6). Crucially, this kind of empathy is not based upon experience or memory, but on the hard-wiring of our brains. It is this simulationist view of mindreading that underpins

accounts of automatic empathy. It sees little role for conscious human agency and decision-making, but instead suggests that intersubjectivity is a complex process of unconscious neural resonance with another individual.

These ideas have become increasingly influential in IR. Jenny Edkins, for instance, has drawn upon research on mirror neurons in her work on face-politics (2015, pp. 72–78). Ted Hopf has drawn parallels between Bourdieu’s practice theory and contemporary Neuroscience in order to argue that international political practice is underpinned by a ‘logic of habit’ (2010). Outlining an argument that is complementary to automatic accounts of empathy, he contends that ‘people regularly perceive, feel, and act before they think; we respond to the world without rational reflection.’ (2010, p. 539). Other scholars have suggested that these mirroring processes provide an explanation for how emotions can become group level properties as well as individual. Todd Hall and Andrew Ross, for instance, highlight that ‘Far from being purely internal, affective states find outward manifestation in corresponding expressive displays... These displays, can, in turn, influence the affective experience of those exposed to them’ (2015, p. 855; see also Ross, 2013, pp. 25–27). If we catch the emotions of others around us, and others catch ours, then it follows that this resonance can take place on a larger scale. Hall and Ross describe the process of mirroring, which can occur in ‘bottom up, horizontal, and top-down’ patterns, as ‘possible sources of collective affective experience’ (2015, p. 859). As well as showing how these insights are useful to the study of IR, this also raises important questions regarding the level of analysis problem in my use of the term empathy.

The other use of mirror neurons in IR is more pertinent for this thesis. This is the claim that the discovery of mirror neurons should prompt IR scholars to fundamentally rethink its approach to intention understanding and the other-minds problem (Hall and Yarhi-Milo, 2012; Holmes, 2013; Wong, 2016). This body of literature, with the work of Marcus Holmes being most notable, suggests that mirror neurons, ‘which are heavily implicated in empathy’ (Holmes, 2013, p.

830), do not simply provide an explanation of how we read another's mental states but also allow individuals under certain conditions to discern the intentions of others. As Holmes puts it, 'The shared neural connection, while not fail proof, allows individuals to better understand what the other intends to do, how they intend to act, and whether they are being truthful with respect to their intentions under certain conditions' (2013, p. 830). Seanon Wong similarly argues that 'when diplomats negotiate, they pay attention not only to what others say, but also to their emotional cues' (2016, p. 145). The consequence of this is that 'Diplomacy...enables practitioners to exchange individual-level expressions of intentions' (Wong, 2016, p. 145). If these simulationist insights are correct they fundamentally transform current understandings of the security dilemmas as constituted by 'existential uncertainty' (Booth and Wheeler, 2008). Indeed, Holmes argues that 'the discovery of mirror neurons suggests a new physical baseline for our thinking about diplomacy' that challenges 'the long-standing problem of intentions and uncertainty in IR theory' (2013, p. 831).

The scientific evidence is fairly definitive that mirror neurons do indeed exist, leading to the conclusion that there is some form of neural architecture behind our ability to empathise with others. What is less clear-cut, however, is how far mirror neurons are implicated in processes of empathy in complex social environments where multiple layers of meaning and interpretation exist. This reflects a broader debate currently taking place in IR over how, or indeed whether at all, findings and methods from biological sciences should be incorporated into the discipline. Some have argued that this productive cross-fertilisation of disciplines can shed light upon a persistent problem faced in IR; namely how to unlock the metaphorical black box of the individual. Bradley Thayer, who is one such proponent, has said that 'The progress of biological science is nothing short of revolutionary. It is as important for understanding human behaviour as the great discoveries of Newton or Einstein are for the physical world' (2009, p. 1). Holmes similarly writes that:

‘other disciplines, which tackle many of the same types of questions as we do, including the nature of decision making, development of trust, and so forth, have taken the brain seriously as a source of study while IR has not’ (2014, p. 2).

Iver Neumann has argued that ‘The issue is not *if* we should engage biological and psychological thinking about our subject matter, but *how* we should do it’ (2014, p. 350 emphasis in original). These same sentiments are found in a now substantive body of literature that argues for scholars of IR to take the biological body seriously, be that the brain, hormone systems, or evolutionary theory (e.g. McDermott, 2004; Hatemi and McDermott, 2011; Johnson and Toft, 2014; Crawford, 2014).

Others, however, have sounded a cautious note in embracing these principles too readily. Some authors argue that the turn to biology can ultimately tell us little about human behaviour in complex social environments (Bell, 2006; Epstein, 2015; Wilcox, 2014). I contend that this is the case when it comes to the debate over mirror neurons and empathy. Mirror neurons provide a convincing explanation for how we intuitively ‘catch’ the emotions of others, which is itself a form of empathy. They also provide one explanation for how individual emotions can become collectivised. But by stripping away context, culture, and agency, these approaches are unable to fully account for empathy in security dilemma dynamics. Findings from neuroscience can be extremely useful to IR scholars. Not least because they provide ‘concrete evidence for the idea that decisions and judgments are fundamentally imbued with emotion’ (Hutchison and Bleiker, 2014, p. 496), which is an important counter to the traditional view that emotions, in the words of Hans Morgenthau, are no more than ‘deviations from rationality’ (quoted in Jeffery, 2014, p. 6). But the claim that leaders and diplomats unconsciously and unreflexively enter into minds of others in order to discern their intentions is a far cry from this. So, while Neuroscience is crucial for understanding emotions and empathy at some level, I concur with the view that Neuroscience ‘is not sufficient, in and of itself, to understand how emotions work in social contexts, especially complex ones.’ (Reus-Smit 2014: 537). Duncan Bell makes a similar point, arguing more generally that while ‘Science may be powerful... it is also inherently limited’, and therefore cannot ‘help us

very much in comprehending the vast and dynamic complexity of culture and politics' (Bell, 2006, p. 509).

I don't seek to enter into this debate in a general sense, but the scepticism of Reus-Smith and Bell is emblematic of the position I take on conceptualising empathy for the security dilemma. I argue that many purely Neuroscientific accounts provide an insufficient basis for conceptualising empathy as it operates in complex social environments. As security dilemma dynamics can be considered an example par excellence of complex social environments, this raises serious questions regarding automatic empathy's applicability and usefulness to this context. I argue that automatic accounts of empathy often overreach in the claims they make, and are unable to account for the deliberate aspect of empathy that necessarily follows any automatic process. Instantaneously knowing that someone is angry, sad, or happy through their facial expressions and observable actions is one thing, but deliberately contemplating why it is that someone may feel that way is another entirely. Knowing that Iranian leaders feel historically disrespected by their US counterparts is a related but also fundamentally distinct activity to deliberately contemplating why this is the case. Both are components of empathy. The first may be dependent upon automatic processes of mirroring, but the second requires self-reflexive knowledge of history, culture, politics and context. It is this second layer of understanding that is so crucial to overcoming security dilemma dynamics. I will now utilise a variety of literatures to support my argument regarding empathy and security dilemma dynamics.

The opposite side of automatic accounts is deliberate empathy. There is a wide-ranging literature that attests to empathy being more than the process of simulating the minds of others, and it is this literature that primarily informs my conceptualisation. It's important to note, as I did above, that this literature does not deny the existence of mirror-neurons and other such processes of mirroring. Neither does it deny simulation theory. They merely claim that this simulationist and automatic kind of empathy is limited in the type of intersubjectivity it can explain. The Philosopher

Kirsten Stueber puts it well when he writes that, ‘One can grant the centrality of basic empathy to interpersonal relations while claiming that explanation, prediction, and interpretation of an agent’s complex social behaviour requires knowledge of a folk-psychological theory as proposed by a theory-theorist’ (2010, p. 219; see also Decety and Lamm, 2006, p. 1146; Coplan, 2011a, p. 59). Dan Zahavi, who is a Philosopher in the phenomenological tradition, takes a similar view. In emphasising the ‘multifaceted character of interpersonal understanding’ (Zahavi, 2014b, p. 141), Zahavi argues that for a complex understanding of others to be achieved:

‘it is not sufficient simply to observe facial expressions and actions; we also have to rely on interpretation, and have to draw on a highly structured context of meaning. In short, if we wish to reach a deeper level of interpersonal understanding, we have to look beyond what is directly available’ (2012, p. 81).

This is important as the facial expressions and actions of others are not unambiguous phenomena any more than their actions are. As Zahavi writes, ‘They do not reveal psychological states simply or uniformly. The ‘same’ expression can take on different meanings in different contexts’ (2014a, p. 163). Understanding the deeper meaning behind another’s expressions, actions, or language, therefore requires not solely an unconscious simulation or mirroring in the brain, but an understanding of the broader social context from which these emotions, expressions and actions emerge. Again, Zahavi is instructive here: ‘Expressions occur in a given context, and our understanding of the context, of what comes before and after, helps us to understand whether a blush means shame or anger, or is the result of physical exertion’ (Zahavi, 2014a, p. 163). Naomi Head also makes this point. She writes that:

‘The constitution of empathy...is not reducible to the biological or neuroscientific processes of the individual, as individuals are always embedded in social contexts. These contexts shape whether empathy is likely to be expressed, how it may be expressed, and by and for whom’ (Head, 2016b, p. 179).

It is important to note that while Zahavi refers to expressions, like Head I extend this to include empathic readings of a whole host of actions that are pertinent to security dilemma dynamics, such as the sending of letters, the making of speeches, and even foreign policy decisions more broadly.



There are two implications of this point regarding context. The first is that, as Zahavi and Head point out, without an apperception of context, emotions and empathy will not always be as they appear on a visceral level. The second is that even where an individual can accurately discern the emotion, expression, or action of another, automatic empathy is still inherently limited as without comprehending the broader context that gives rise to that emotion, that individual is unable to consider why the other is feeling it. An understanding of the ‘why’ behind the emotions and actions of others is a crucial element in theorising empathy for security dilemma dynamics. Douglas Hollan makes a similar point, arguing that ‘The second type of empathy [deliberate empathy] may grow out of and be dependent upon the visceral and perceptual mechanisms enabling the first [automatic empathy], but its full realization also requires knowledge that is more sensitive to situation and context’ (2012, p. 71). In the context of security dilemma dynamics, such as those between the United States and Iran, it is not enough to simply know how the other feels, but it is necessary to try and comprehend ‘why’ they feel that way as well. To be able to do this an actor must be able to appreciate the cultural, historical, and political context in which they are embedded and from which their expression or action emerges. This will often entail a self-reflexive imagining, as in iterated security dilemma dynamics it is likely that oneself will have played a fundamental role in creating and reproducing that context. This attempted comprehension is itself an empathic capacity and is not subordinate to the initial understanding. Zahavi seemingly concurs, writing that ‘We shouldn’t forget that emotions... are about something, and in order to understand them it is not enough simply to pay attention to their expressions; we also need to look at the context in order to determine what they are about’ (2014a, p. 163).

Many automatic versions of empathy, and particularly those based upon mirror neurons, lack this crucial move. Both automatic and deliberate conceptualisations can be considered processes of empathy, but the latter entails a significantly deeper understanding of the other. Neta Crawford similarly recognises this in her work on ‘institutionalising empathy’ in world politics. She argues that ‘Empathy as a social and cognitive process thus includes the ability to understand

how and why others feel and think the way they do (Crawford, 2014, p. 54). For empathy to have any utility in overcoming security dilemma dynamics it cannot just entail realising that the other person *is* angry, but it must entail the act of deliberating *why* they are angry as well.

This raises a further point, which concerns the role of agency in empathy. As I've stated, my conceptualisation of empathy is an agent-orientated one. In addition to meaning that empathy is primarily an individual level property within the context of security dilemma dynamics, this also means that I envisage it to be an effortful process that actors actively engage in. This view finds support in both the security dilemma literature outlined in chapter 1, and a broader multidisciplinary literature that will be briefly discussed. The type of empathy envisaged by many philosophers and linguists stands in contrast to automatic empathy in that it often requires concerted and sustained effort on the part of the empathising actor (Cameron, 2011; Coplan, 2011a; Coplan and Goldie, 2011; Goldie, 2000; Zahavi, 2012, 2014a). This is captured in the argument of Philosopher Amy Coplan:

‘Genuine empathy is difficult to achieve. To stay focussed on the target individual and move us beyond our own experiences, perspective taking requires mental flexibility and relies on regulatory mechanisms to modulate our level of affective arousal and suppress our own perspectives’ (2011a, p. 58).

Drawing on research on in-groups and out-groups, Crawford suggests that ‘Individuals, who already see themselves as more similar to another, often more easily identify with another’ (2014, p. 541). It follows, therefore, that when difference is the pervasive characteristic of a relationship empathy will be more difficult to achieve (Head, 2016b, p. 171). Coplan likewise argues that:

‘when the other is someone very different from ourselves; the more unlike a target we are, the more difficult it is to reconstruct her subjective experiences... In order to represent the situation and experiences of those we know less well and with whom we fail to identify, we must work harder, and even then, we will often be unable to simulate their situated psychological states. (2011a, pp. 58–59).

This theme exists in the conflict resolution literature as well. Naomi Head has persuasively argued that empathy can be extremely costly to the empathising actor because it ‘is a demanding

psychological and embodied experience which has the potential to trigger the disruption of one's identity in multiple ways' (2016b, p. 192). Jodi Halpern and Harvey Weinstein similarly argue that in the context of resolution and reconciliation, 'The work of empathy is precisely trying to imagine a view of the world that one does not share, and in fact may find it quite difficult to share' (2004: 581). Cameron, a Linguist working at the intersection of conflict resolution, also writes that:

'empathy requires that people seek to understand the other person's perspectives on the world; their perspectives on themselves and how they fit into society; their perspective on history; their perspective on their future, and how conflict appeared necessary to improve that future' (2011, p. 11).

These authors each subscribe to the notion that 'empathy is difficult to achieve' (Coplan, 2011a, p. 58), mounting an important counter to automatic accounts that reject this view. This is particularly true of complex social contexts where there are large differences between the empathiser and their target. In many cases of security dilemma dynamics, the actors involved hold divergently different interpretations of the issues that divide them. It is therefore supremely difficult for actors to escape from these kind of dynamics, and any conceptualisation of empathy that is relevant for this context needs to be able to account for this difficulty.

These two points taken together make up the counterargument to automatic accounts of empathy help to address some of the core concerns of security dilemma theorists. The next two sections discuss different parts of the debate on empathy, and while these distinctions are important parts of the debate in their own right, many of the arguments made only serve to reinforce the points made here. That, firstly, empathy in the context of security dilemma dynamics requires accessing a higher level of meaning to what is instantaneously available through processes of mirroring; and second, that empathy in this context is an effortful and difficult act and as such agency plays an important role.

### *Sympathy and empathy*

This section will discuss the relationship between empathy and sympathy as well as the narrative of empathy as a benign and wholly positive phenomenon. Demarcating where empathy ends and sympathy begins has been a consistent problem for researchers of empathy. Whereas sympathy, care, compassion, and kindness are central tenets of some versions of empathy, others argue that empathy need not take account of these features at all. Zahavi has bemoaned the fact that ‘there is no clear consensus about how to demarcate empathy from related phenomena such as emotional contagion and sympathy’ (2012, p. 81). Lauren Wispe has similarly stated that ‘The concepts of sympathy and empathy are frequently confused, and both have been variously and vaguely defined’ (1986, p. 318), while Susanne Langer has claimed that ‘Empathy is sometimes equated with sympathy, but is really something else’ (1974, p. 129).

At the heart of this debate is the related question of whether empathy is necessarily a wholly positive concept that is a benign force for good, or alternatively whether it is a more neutral process of perspective-taking without a strong relationship to compassion and morality. In recent years, numerous scholars, politicians, and commentators have argued in favour of the former, leading one scholar to remark that ‘Empathy...has become a Euro-American political obsession’ (Pedwell, 2014, p. ix). Barack Obama, for instance, stated in 2006 that the ‘empathy deficit’ is more pressing challenge to the United States than the ‘federal deficit’ (Obama, 2006). The public intellectual Jeremy Rifkin has gone as far as to say that ‘Empathy is the very means by which we create social life and advance civilization’ (2010, p. 10), and that ‘The most important question facing humanity is this: Can we reach global empathy in time to avoid the collapse of civilization and save the Earth?’ (2010, p. 5). And in international politics a think tank called the Centre for Empathy in International Affairs has been established, with the modus operandi to ‘promote empathy in international policy-making and practice’ (Centre for Empathy in International Affairs, 2016). Implicit in many of these pronouncements is the assumption that empathy is unproblematically related to compassion, sympathy, and even moral action.

Recent literature has sought to problematise this overtly positive narrative of empathy by showing the unintended consequences it can have in particular contexts. This literature does not necessarily disagree with the conclusion that moral and transformative action *can* result from empathy, but take issue with the ingrained assumption that such an outcome is predetermined, and thus empathy is always a force for good. Head has shown that while empathy is presented as a benign force for good by many, it is not a costless action when conducted by in-group members towards an out-group (2016a, 2016b). Using the Israel-Palestine conflict as a case study, she shows, for instance, that Palestinian actors who have been empathic towards their Israeli counterparts have suffered from ‘accusations of normalisation which is one of the most powerful narratives within the contemporary Palestinian political climate (Head, 2016b, p. 187). An academic interviewee of hers reported of the ‘personal attacks’ against him for attempting to empathise with Israel, and stated that his career has been destroyed and he has been labelled a ‘traitor’ who is ‘betraying the cause’ (Head, 2016b, p. 188). This is one of a number of examples of how expressions of empathy can be costly, and should prompt us to ask the questions of ‘whom empathy may serve and for what ends’ (Head, 2016a, p. 113). In a related vein, Carolyn Pedwell has interrogated the power dynamics implicit in the positive narrative of empathy. In doing so, she has argued that while ‘empathy may enable transformative connections, it can also (re)produce dominant hierarchies and exclusions’ (Pedwell, 2012, p. 294). In looking at empathy in a range of social contexts, she argues that ‘*discourses and rhetoric*’s of empathy are strategically mobilised to suit a wide range of political agendas and interests’ (Pedwell, 2014, p. 183 emphasis in original).

It’s important, however, to distinguish Head’s and Pedwell’s work from an additional perspective that challenges the necessarily positive view of empathy. This other literature challenges the narrative that empathy is a benign force for good by arguing that empathy is implicated in processes of purposeful harm and exploitation. Reminiscent of the dictum ‘know your enemy’, that can be dated to Sun Tzu’s *Art of War*, Zahavi encapsulates this view as thus:

‘It is important not to conflate empathy and sympathy. Whereas the latter necessarily involves a component of care and concern, this is not the case with the former. Just think of the skilled interrogator or the sadist. A high degree of empathic sensitivity might precisely be of use if one wants to humiliate somebody’ (Zahavi 2012: 82).

Fairbairn shares this view, stating that ‘empathy can be used for bad as well as good purposes... [it] allows those who wish to subjugate others to decide the best tactics to adopt in order to do so, and that allows the best torturers to practice their art so well’ (Fairbairn, 2009, pp. 192–193; see also Linklater, 2011). While I wholly concur with the interjections of Head and Pedwell, who both highlight that empathy has unintended consequences that can be both costly and accosted for political-economic gain, I argue that this is a step removed from suggesting that empathy is practiced by torturers, sadists, or Generals at war. Because these actors set out to understand the other with the intention of causing harm and destruction, I would contest that this does not entail empathy but rather manipulation. Empathy does not have to necessarily be a positive expression of understanding, indeed it could be a broadly neutral one, but overtly negative attempts to understand the other sit outside most understandings of empathy. The position I take is that ‘There is no reason to see empathy and morality as either systematically opposed to one another, or inevitably complementary’ (Decety and Cowell, 2014, p. 339).

The work of political psychologist and former State Department official Ralph White is also useful in demarcating between sympathy and empathy. White was arguably the first to bring the concept of empathy to IR (White, 1983, 1984, 1991). Although other’s had used the term before him, White was the first to show any level of awareness of the conceptual difficulties surrounding its use, and was the first to try and define the term. Unlike security dilemma theorists, he saw empathy as a contested concept that required unpacking and conceptualising. In advancing his concept of ‘realistic empathy’, White’s key contribution was to distinguish between empathy and sympathy in a manner that was useful in the context of international politics and conflict resolution. On empathy and sympathy, he argued that:

‘Empathy is the *great* corrective for all forms of war-promoting misperception... It is distinguished from sympathy, which as defined as feeling with others – as being in

agreement with them. Empathy with opponents is therefore psychologically possible even when conflict is so intense that sympathy is out of the question... We are not talking about warmth or approval, and certainly not about agreeing with, or siding with, but only about realistic understanding' (1984, p. 160 emphasis in original)

The consequence, for White, is that empathy does not require the empathising actor to agree with the world-view, actions, or beliefs of the other in order to try and understand them and put themselves in their narrative position. As he said elsewhere, 'Empathy...does not necessarily imply sympathy, or tolerance, or liking, or agreement with that person – but simply understanding' (White, 1991, p. 292). Sympathy on the other hand denotes some form of agreement or concern with the object of one's sympathy. Sympathy therefore is markedly different than attempting to understand another individual or group that you may feel strongly against. I may vehemently disagree with the actions and worldview of a terrorist, but it is still possible to imaginatively see things from their perspective and understand why, to them at least, their actions might seem justified.<sup>10</sup>

As such, this distinction is closely linked to the argument made in the last section, that empathy is a deliberate act that can be profoundly difficult when the other is very different to oneself. In this sense, empathy can be seen as trying to comprehend the narratives individuals and groups tell about themselves, and how these narratives influence the actions they take. That an individual or group is markedly different from oneself does not negate the possibility of coming to terms with their position. Empathy does not require agreement, nor compassion, or love, or sympathy, or any of the other concepts it is often conflated with. White's great contribution to empathy research in the context of understanding conflict was to show that two individuals or groups may hold great distaste for one another whilst also moving towards compromise or reconciliation. Empathy therefore requires recognition of a plurality of worldviews that is not necessary in processes of sympathy. It involves accepting what L.H.M. Ling has called 'multiple emotional worlds' and the need to recognise and appreciate them (2014, p. 580). This is not to

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<sup>10</sup> The terrorism scholar Richard Jackson makes this argument in his novel, *Confessions of a Terrorist* (2014).

misunderstand the difficulty of the cognitive, emotional, political and material barriers to this type of empathy, but to open up new potentialities for thinking about conflict resolution.<sup>11</sup> It is finally important to note that utilising this distinction need not entail agreeing with White on his definition of empathy. This is an important aside because although White drew a useful dividing line between sympathy and empathy, his actual understanding of empathy can be categorised along with those that see empathy as a positive and benign act. White held an overtly positive view of what empathy could achieve, believing it to be the ‘great corrective’ to many adversarial relationships. As such, although White made a significant contribution to demarcating empathy from sympathy, his actual conceptualisation of empathy is not discussed in detail and is relatively limited.

### *Self-orientated and other-orientated empathy*

Finally, I will briefly discuss the difference between self-orientated and other-orientated empathy, and make the case for why it is important that empathy be primarily other-orientated. Empathy of all forms is necessarily underpinned by some kind of perspective-taking. In contemplating the emotions, views, and actions of others we are required to take on their perspective to varying extents in one way or another. However, to claim that perspective taking is at the heart of empathy paints an incomplete picture. There has been an important interjection into this debate that distinguishes between forms of perspective taking known as self-orientated and other-orientated (Coplan, 2011a, 2011b). This distinction captures the important difference between empathy on the one hand and what can be called projection on the other. The difference between these can be aptly demonstrated through an example taken from the US debate on Iran’s nuclear programme. A common argument (e.g Waltz, 2012) maintains that it is understandable that Iran has sought nuclear weapons due to their regional security environment and strategic context. The argument goes that they are surrounded by US military bases, have been the subject of consistent military threats from the United States and Israel, and co-exist in a region with a nuclear weapons state who

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<sup>11</sup> It should be noted that the work of James Blight and Janet Lang, and their fellow researchers, draws upon White’s conceptualisation as well. Their work is discussed in chapter 3 as opposed to here because their primary contribution is their unique use of a counterfactual methodology as a means of exploring empathy.



is hostile to them; so why would they not want nuclear weapon capabilities? For some, this might be called empathy as it is attempting to take the perspective of another in order to explain their actions.

On the contrary, this reasoning rests less upon empathy than on what Coplan has described as ‘self-orientated perspective taking’ (2011a, p. 53).<sup>12</sup> This position is taken from the perspective of the self; what would *I* do if *I* was in the Iranian government. This marginalises the complex nature and myriad of variables that simultaneously influence, enable, and constrain the Iranian other. The perspective-taking actor is not trying to get into the mind and cultural narrative of the other, but is assuming that all actors in international politics are propelled by the same wants and needs, and therefore will all see the external strategic environment in the same way. Goldman describes this type of mind-reading as ‘rationality theory’ because, ‘She assumes that her friends are rational and seeks to map their thoughts and choices by means of this rationality postulate’ (2008, p. 4). Crucially, in projecting one’s own perspectives onto the other, the differentiation and identification between self-other is lost. The self is becoming the other rather than trying to understand it.

In other-orientated perspective taking, on the other hand, Coplan argues that ‘we stay focused...on the other’s experiences and characteristics rather than reverting to imagining based on our own experiences and characteristics’ (Coplan, 2011b, p. 13). The Psychologists Decety and Lamm similarly write that empathy should be viewed ‘as an other-orientated social emotion’ (Decety and Lamm, 2006, p. 1146). Other-orientated perspective taking therefore entails imaginatively putting oneself into the mind and cultural narrative of the other. It sees empathy as the attempt to understand the other’s perspective from within the other’s beliefs, values, and world view, and how the other is coming to act in this way.

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<sup>12</sup> Coplan also describes this as ‘pseudo-empathy’ (2011a, p. 53).

This should not, however, be taken to mean that the self can or should be completely subsumed by the perspective of one's counterpart in other-orientated perspective taking. In the Iran example the self-other distinction breaks down as the actor projects his rationalities onto the other. At the other end of the spectrum the self will always be present in empathic encounters with others, particularly if that other is very different to oneself. As Decety and Lamm emphasise, 'Empathy is the ability to experience and understand what others feel without confusion between oneself and others' (Decety and Lamm, 2006, p. 1146). Similarly, Coplan writes that "'empathy" [is] a process through which an observer simulates another's situated psychological states, while maintaining clear self-other differentiation.' (Coplan, 2011a, p. 58). When an empathising actor attempts to understand the narrative of the other, the subjectivity of the self is inescapable and it is through this that the other is interpreted. Similar to how the researcher can never remove themselves from the research process, an empathising actor can never completely take the self out of an empathic encounter. Zahavi rightly points out that 'any convincing account of our understanding of others must respect the asymmetry between self-experience and other-experience' (2014a, p. 165).

Going back to the notion of deliberate empathy, there is, however, clearly scope for recognising the presence of the self and reflexively factoring this into how one attempts to understand the other. Moreover, Coplan's self-other distinction further elucidates a difference between automatic and deliberate forms of empathy. The ability to firstly reflexively locate the self in our empathic encounters, and secondly to attempt to limit the self in overly colouring or biasing these encounters, is something that is only available to deliberative accounts of empathy. In this sense, automatic empathy is skewed towards self-orientated perspective taking. When I witness someone bang their elbow the feeling my reaction is predicated on how *I* would feel in that encounter. In such instances there is neither the room nor the time for the reorientation of this self-other relationship to take place. This is only available to deliberative forms of empathy where agency is far more central.

## **Operationalising empathy**

Having discussed many of the approaches to empathy across a number of disciplines, I will now summarise the main points that make-up my conceptualisation of empathy that will be operationalised in the case study chapters. I do this first by briefly condensing the discussion above into three key points, and then by outlining some of the empathic capacities that can be envisaged in the case study of US foreign policy towards Iran. What I offer below are three components that I see as necessary for empathy in the context of security dilemma dynamics.

The first component, the *deliberate* element, drew upon a wide-ranging literature to suggest that empathy in complex social contexts will often require concerted effort from the empathising actor. To understand the other they will have to imagine a world-view that might be very different from their own, and that might well be beyond their reach if seen solely through more automatic or contagious understandings of empathy. To use the word deliberate suggests the necessity of agency, which I see as a critical component to empathy for the security dilemma. Secondly, I described empathy as distinct from sympathy. Utilising Ralph White's demarcation, unlike sympathy, empathy does not denote any form of agreement with the other, and thus it is theoretically possible to empathise with those that you vehemently disagree with on important issues. The final component is that empathy is *other-orientated* because the purpose is to imagine the world through the eyes of the other whilst shutting out as best possible one's own biases, beliefs and emotions. It is distinct from self-orientated understandings of empathy, where the emphasis is on individuals imagining how they themselves would feel in a given situation. Consequently, by building upon a variety of literatures and approaches this chapter has developed an agent-centred conceptualisation of empathy that speaks to the core concerns of the security dilemma. It argued that empathy entails taking the perspective of other actors in relation to a specific issue or set of issues, and, crucially, self-reflexively considering the role oneself may play and have played in the formation and cultivation of that perspective. While in some circumstances

groups can take on emotional traits such as empathy through socialisation and contagion, I focus solely on individuals as the agents of empathy in latent diplomatic interaction between adversaries. The subject (or ‘target’) of empathy, however, can be both individuals and groups. Thus, for this thesis, neither the Obama administration nor the United States are considered as empathising agents. But, importantly, individual agents such as Obama can empathise with both collectives (e.g. the Iranian government) as well as individuals (e.g. Khamenei). I discuss the levels of analysis problem further below.

In foreign policy and diplomacy empathy can entail remaining open to compromise and persuasion, all while staying true to core interests and preferences. Empathy in this context is thus not the same as compassion, sympathy or altruism, as bringing empathy, and indeed other emotional categories, into the fold does not entail actors abandoning specific interests and preferences (Rathbun, 2014, p. 20). As Robert McNamara and James Blight argue, ‘it is easy to caricature those who emphasize the importance of empathy as soft-headed.... But no matter how empathy may be caricatured, it is also a serious, difficult, and important enterprise’ (2003, p. 257). This is crucial as the constitution of an actor’s interests and preferences result in-part from emotional dynamics such as empathy (Crawford, 2000; Hall and Ross, 2015, p. 848; Rathbun, 2014, p. 20).

This follows the now established linkage between concepts such as rationality and reason on the one hand and emotional categories on the other. Traditional thinking on these topics has seen emotions as useful solely for explaining ruptures and deviations in rational thinking, and hence rationality as free of emotion and psychology (Mercer, 2005). As George Marcus et al. explain, ‘Being emotional about politics is generally associated with psychological distraction, distortion, extremity, and unreasonableness’ (2000, p. 2). Emotions in IR are portrayed as ‘epiphenomenal at best and a source of irrationality at worst’ (Mercer, 2006, p. 288). But recent work in philosophy and neuroscience has persuasively shown that reason and rationality, in as far

as they can be useful categories at all, are themselves the products of emotional dynamics such as empathy (Jeffery, 2014). In neuroscience, Antonio Damasio has made the highly influential argument that ‘emotions and feelings may not be intruders in the bastion of reason at all: they may be enmeshed in its networks, for worse and for better’ (1995, p. xii). Marcus et al. also make this point; ‘our research has led us to conceptualise affect and reason not as oppositional but as complementary, as two functional mental faculties in a delicate, interactive, highly functional dynamic balance. To idealise rational choice and to vilify the affective domain is to misunderstand how the brain works’ (Marcus et al., 2000, p. 2). This has been influential in IR, where neuroscience has been credited with providing ‘concrete evidence for the idea that decisions and judgements are fundamentally imbued with emotion’ (Hutchison and Bleiker, 2014, p. 496). The choice between emotion and rationality therefore is a false one, as the very thing we consider rationality to be is constituted in part by emotional dynamics.

One of the many consequences of this for International Relations is that interests and preferences, which all too often are seen as the purview of rationalist scholarship, can be considered ‘largely unmotivated and directionless without affective dynamics’ (Hall and Ross, 2015, p. 856). ‘Interests’ and ‘preferences’, therefore, do not exist a priori to emotion and affect but are shaped by these phenomena. Empathy does not supersede or replace interests with some form of altruistic motivation, but instead gives direction and meaning to interests. Adopting this understanding of the relationship between interests and empathy opens up space for acknowledging the multiple pathways through which actors can articulate and pursue their interests. While rationalist scholarship in International Relations has focussed on coercive pressure and bargaining as the primary means in which actors pursue their interests (George, 1992; Schelling, 1966; Sechser, 2016), re-thinking the relationship between interests and empathy allows for a broader view that interests may be more effectively served through a range of activities such as the ‘pursuit of fair compromises and win-win outcomes’ (Rathbun, 2014, p.20). In this reading, the limited empathy Obama held towards Iran was pivotal in his view of how US interests were

best pursued. He rejected the idea, prevalent during the Bush administration, that not talking to and isolating one's adversaries was a viable way to pursue a state's interests, instead arguing that only through engagement and dialogue could this be achieved.

### ***Empathic capacities***

Drawing on this conceptualisation, it is possible to identify and operationalise a number of context specific empathic capacities and outline some of those that are relevant to US foreign policy towards Iran 2001-2010. Some of these are more relevant for one time period over another, and I will make that apparent where it is the case. The first is an appreciation of the importance that Iranian policy-makers across the political spectrum give to notions such as respect, dignity, and recognition (Mousavian and Shabani, 2013), and understanding that the traditional hostile rhetoric that has characterised the relationship has only served to entrench identities associated with disrespect, conflict, and victimhood (Duncombe, 2016; see also Wolf, 2011). Constance Duncombe has shown, for instance, that for Iranian decision-makers 'inadequate or failed recognition quickly becomes perceived as disrespect' towards Iran (2016, p. 623). Indeed, many Iranian decision-makers have long held the view, rightly or wrongly, that the United States seeks to deny them legitimacy by holding the country to a different set of standards on a multitude of issues, not least on nuclear matters. Iranian President, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, captured this sentiment in April 2009, after the Obama administration announced it would formally join the P5+1 nuclear talks: 'The Iranian nation has always been for talks', but 'dialogue has to be based on justice and respecting rights... Justice means both sides are treated equally and bilateral rights are respected' (Ahmadinejad, 2009a). Seyed Hossein Mousavian, the former Iranian nuclear negotiator, has also recognised the necessity of respect in facilitating cooperation, arguing that 'The only way to stop the dispute over Iran's nuclear program from spinning out of control is to offer the Islamic Republic a face-saving way out' (Mousavian and Shabani, 2013). The Iranian negotiators, he argued, 'won't put expediency above dignity' when it comes to the nuclear issue (Mousavian and Shabani, 2013) Thus, empathy in this regard is to understand the importance many

Iranian decision-makers give to notions of respect, dignity and recognition, and to adapt policy and rhetoric to reflect this.

The second empathic capacity that can be considered important is an appreciation of the historical reasoning behind Iran's sensitivity to notions of respect and dignity, and how the actions of the United States have historically contributed to Iran's extreme distrust of the United States. As Khamenei expressed it in 2009, Iran holds the view that 'Since the victory of the revolution, the US government – both Republican and Democratic presidents – treated the Islamic Republic unfairly' (2009). This empathic capacity resembles Booth and Wheeler's 'security dilemma sensibility' (Booth and Wheeler, 2008, p. 7), as discussed in chapter 1, in that it requires a reflexive appreciation of one's own role in constructing the narratives that another tells. Importantly, following White (1984), acknowledging the existence of these narratives does not necessarily require agreeing with them. Thus, Bush and Obama administration officials need not agree with Khamenei's assessment in order to empathically internalise it and act upon it. The likelihood is that US policy-makers will hold divergently different interpretations of the events that constitute Iran's narratives of victimhood; but empathy in this regard entails acknowledging the existence of Iranian interpretations and narratives and understanding why it is that their interpretations of particular events may differ to one's own.

The third is an empathic awareness of the situational factors that can simultaneously shape, constrain, and enable Iranian foreign policy decision-making. This empathic capacity stems from research on psychological biases such as the 'fundamental attribution error' (Levy, 2003, p. 266). The fundamental attribution error concerns the tendency to explain the behaviour of others as motivated by dispositional factors, such as their personal characteristics and beliefs, yet attributing one's own similar actions to situational factors, such as the pressures and constraints of structural factors beyond one's control (Levy, 2003, p. 266). Consider Iran's domestic politics. Empathising with this situational factor would not entail possessing a complete understanding of every aspect of

Iran's domestic politics and its relationship to national security decision-making. While it is expected that expertise could make this empathic capacity easier, it is not a necessary condition. Instead it entails, at the very least, understanding that Iran's domestic politics shapes, enables, and constrains their foreign policy making and negotiating positions in a myriad of ways.

The final empathic capacity discussed here is, in many ways, an amalgamation of all of the above into a specific policy area. It is an awareness of Iran's interpretation of its civilian nuclear rights as a signatory of the Nuclear non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), and of the need to consider how this might factor into negotiations regarding Iran's nuclear program. This is a contested point, as both Iranian and US policymakers hold drastically different interpretations of the NPT. While Iran maintain that Article IV of the NPT assures their 'inalienable right' to enrich uranium, the US government has long held that no such right exists (Interview 10, 2016).<sup>13</sup> The United States have long argued that Iran is in violation of Article II of the NPT, which they claim is a pre-condition for the rights granted under Article IV.<sup>14</sup> Empathy in this regard does not mean conceding ground of these legal points, but instead entails recognising that there is room for compromise on this issue that allows Iran to save-face. Recalling Mousavian and Shabani's point about the importance of face-saving mechanisms (2013), the legal arguments need not be antithetical to the idea that Iran should be able to retain some form of civilian nuclear capability – including enrichment – even if merely intended to save-face. While this was ultimately what transpired in the 2015 Iran nuclear deal, it was clear to many in the Obama administration even in 2009 that any sustainable nuclear agreement with Iran would have to include some level of domestic uranium enrichment within Iran (interview with Einhorn, 2015; interview with Nephew, 2015, 2016, interview with Samore, 2015,

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<sup>13</sup> Article IV of the NPT states that Parties to the Treaty have the 'inalienable right...to develop research, production and use of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes without discrimination'. It does not, however, specifically mention what these activities amount to. While the majority of the Parties to the Treaty have held that it includes enrichment, the United States (and a few others) have long held that this is not an automatic right. They argue that these rights are dependent upon fulfilment of Article II of the treaty, which states that non-nuclear-weapon State Parties to the Treaty will not pursue nuclear weapons (United Nations, n.d.).

<sup>14</sup> For a detailed discussion of the international legal aspects of the NPT and the Iran nuclear negotiations see Daniel Joyner (Joyner, 2013, 2016)



2016). This empathic capacity is emblematic of the broader point that it is often necessary to remain open to compromise and concede ground on certain points in order to achieve cooperation.<sup>15</sup>

### ***Empathic intensity***

It is important to note that empathy of all types is subjectively experienced. It exists on a spectrum, and it is not something that is either experienced or not. Thus, empathic capacities such as these will exist at different levels for different individuals at different times. This presents a challenge for counterfactually re-imagining something as complex and dynamic as empathy. I deal with this problem by borrowing Todd Hall and Andrew Ross's notion of 'affective intensity' (2015, p. 848) and arguing that it is appropriate to similarly speak of what can be called empathic intensity. Intensity, Hall and Ross write, 'refers to the subjectively felt strength of an affective response. Like the experience of sound – which can range from deafeningly loud to virtually inaudible – so too the feeling of an affective experience can vary significantly in intensity' (Hall and Ross, 2015, p. 848).<sup>16</sup> Neta Crawford has also spoken of emotional intensity in a similar manner, proposing that 'we can expect to see emotions everywhere, but the expression and intensity of emotions, and the behaviours associated with particular emotions, will vary' (Crawford, 2000, p. 119). Similarly, the expression and intensity of empathy is prone to variation. If empathic capacities can be considered behavioural expressions of empathy, then the notion of intensity attempts to account for some of the variance in how these capacities are experienced across time and individuals. This notion of intensity helps to account for the fact that empathy can be considered a 'dynamic process' (Cameron, 2011). This simply means that it exists at varying levels of intensity over certain periods

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<sup>15</sup> It is important to note that this empathic capacity was eminently more plausible for the Obama administration in 2009-2010 than for the Bush administration in 2001-2003. In the earlier period no centrifuges span in Iran on an industrial scale, whereas by the time Obama enters office in January 2010 Iran was operating a sophisticated industrial sized enrichment program.

<sup>16</sup> Some authors use affect as opposed to emotion without differentiating between them. Others make a distinction; that affect is a more primordial and unconscious process that is almost prior to emotion. Yet, many authors write of affect yet don't make this distinction. Hall and Ross seem to fit into this latter category, whereas Jack Holland and Ty Solomon, for instance, see affect as distinct from, and indeed prior to, emotion (Holland and Solomon, 2014)

of time.

This variation can occur not only between different individuals but within the same individual as well. When the empathic intensity of one individual is examined across time it is apparent that significant variation can take place. This can help account for why we see the empathic intensity of Obama and his key advisors fluctuate and change over time. The empathic capacities Obama exhibited towards Iran, for instance, were not static but fluctuated and evolved over the course of even his first year in office. By using the device of intensity I am able to describe both the real and imagined intensity of specific empathic capacities in varying contexts. This is necessary as to speak of the Obama administration's empathy, or the United States' empathy, is too reductionist as it does not capture the inter-personal and inter-agency differences that existed in the administration. Hilary Clinton, the Secretary of State, for instance, experienced vastly different levels of empathic intensity than Obama. While he often strove to see things from the perspective of Iran, and embraced from early on in his presidency that compromise was necessary to prevent a nuclear armed Iran, Clinton firmly believed that Iran would only cooperate with the United States if they were subjected to more pressure (Clinton, 2015, pp. 347–377; Landler, 2016; interview with Ross, 2016; Solomon, 2016, pp. 176–177). Both wanted to find a non-violent solution to the Iran nuclear crisis, but their favoured methods of getting there differed considerably. Similarly, while Colin Powell was open to the possibility of exploring avenues of cooperation with Iran post-9/11 (Powell, 2001a, 2001b; interview with Wilkerson, 2015), Dick Cheney refused to countenance any notion of engaging with Iran (Corera, 2006; interview with Dobbins, 2015; interview with Wilkerson, 2015). Using empathy as a blanket term to describe organisations and collectives risks missing internal nuances such as this. As Janice Gross Stein wrote about the similar group concept of 'state learning', 'To speak of "state learning" is to anthropomorphise individual processes in ways that leave out the critical political and organisational variables' (Stein, 1994, p. 180). To speak of state empathy is problematic for similar reasons. Moreover, it would be methodologically difficult to counterfactually suggest that all

individuals within a collective hold the same level of empathic intensity. Such a proviso would all but rule out the possibility of counterfactuals that are built around the power of emotional dynamics such as empathy.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has presented a conceptualisation of empathy that speaks to the unique context of the security dilemma. It argued that accounts of empathy that downplay the importance of agency are unable to fully account for the difficult task of putting oneself into the shoes of an adversary, and reflexively considering how the other views oneself. In response, I drew upon a variety of different literatures in order to present a conceptualisation of empathy that was able to respond to these challenges, and can be utilised by scholars of the security dilemma. Finally, the chapter outlined how this conceptualisation will be utilised by introducing the concepts of empathic capacities and empathic intensity. The challenge now is to develop a methodology that be used to make good upon these claims. The next chapter, therefore, turns to making the case that counterfactual methodologies are a useful means for doing so.

## Chapter 3: Counterfactual methods

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Having outlined the conceptual framework of the thesis, this chapter turns to the methodological question of how these ideas might be explored and developed empirically. This is a pertinent question as a further critique of the security dilemma literature is that it has provided no real means for exploring the linkage between empathy and cooperation. In response to these methodological shortcomings, this chapter seeks to make the case for why counterfactual methods should be considered a fruitful means of enquiring into this problem.

The chapter has three key aims. The first is to make a defence of the general principle of counterfactual research, broadly defined. This is necessary as within political science counterfactual research has traditionally occupied controversial ground. Following recent research on counterfactuals in IR, I show how counterfactuals are already implicitly present in the vast majority of research, and that the differences between counterfactual and so-called factual research are not as pronounced as many assume.<sup>17</sup> The second is to highlight that to agree on the legitimacy of counterfactual research is not necessarily to agree upon very much at all. The existing research on counterfactuals has been divisive in both its stated goals and methods. The chapter situates this thesis's approach to counterfactuals within these existing debates, and argues that the merits of using counterfactuals as a means of hypothesis testing has been over-stated. I align myself with the more interpretive work of Geoffrey Hawthorn, Richard Ned Lebow (2010, 2014, 2015a; Lebow and Breslauer, 2004), Steven Weber (1996), Heikki Patomaki (2007; 2011) by arguing that the worth of counterfactual research is not found solely in the epistemic accuracy of the knowledge claims it produces, but in the extent to which it effectively probes the limits of what we know about the actual world. The third aim is to make an interjection into this debate by arguing for the

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<sup>17</sup> It is convention in the literature to describe non-counterfactual research as 'factual' research. This should not be interpreted as meaning it is anymore epistemically accurate or meaningful than counterfactual research. It is simply a means of demarcating counterfactual from non-counterfactual research.

inclusion of individual-level categories such as emotions and empathy as legitimate focuses of counterfactual analysis.

### **Justifying counterfactual research**

In their simplest form, counterfactuals are statements or invocations that alter something regarding either the past or future. They can take a number of different forms; for instance, they may be ‘what if’ questions that speculatively wonder whether some aspect of the past may have been different to what it was (e.g. what if Adolf Hitler had been killed fighting in World War I). Or, more concrete counterfactual statements that draw a causal link between this hypothetical change and an envisaged consequent (e.g. if Adolf Hitler was killed fighting in World War I, World War II would not have taken place). The latter example can be described as a counterfactual conditional, as it makes the consequent (the outcome) conditional upon the antecedent (the altered cause). Thus, in this scenario, World War II not taking place is conditional on the counterfactual death of Hitler in World War I. These examples are clearly not exhaustive, and in theory there is an indefinite number of forms that a counterfactual can take. What many share in common is this enquiry – implicit or explicit – into the relationship between the stated counterfactual antecedent and consequent. In this project the antecedent is the subjective levels of empathy of specific decision-makers in the United States’ governments, and the (potential) consequent are of reassurance moves and potential cooperation between the United States and Iran. I will now introduce how research in Psychology makes sense of counterfactuals, before then drawing a link between so-called factual and counterfactual research.

### ***Counterfactuals and psychology***

Counterfactual statements and questions are common place in the everyday lives of individuals; least not policy-makers who often employ implicit counterfactual reasoning in order to make sense

of the world (Hermann and Fischerkeller, 1996; Lebow, 2010; Lebow and Stein, 1996; Tetlock, 1999). As Lebow points out:

‘The ability to imagine alternative scenarios is a ubiquitous, if not essential, part of human mental life’, and such thinking is ‘routinely used by ordinary people and policymakers to work their way through problems, reach decisions, cope with anxiety, and make normative judgements’ (2010, p. 29).

Psychologists have also highlighted that resorting to counterfactual inference is a common mechanism for dealing with the innate uncertainty of social life. They suggest that it is fuelled by a desire to see the world as ordered and predictable (Hoerl et al., 2012b; Roese and Morrison, 2009). This also speaks to the connection between the use of counterfactuals and individual’s internal understandings of the meaning of causality. Research in Psychology has shown that ‘people find it helpful, in considering complex causal scenarios, to engage in certain sorts of counterfactual thinking’ (Hoerl et al., 2012a, p. 2). In both policy contexts and everyday situations it is therefore routine for individuals to make simplistic assumptions about complex questions of causation explicit through counterfactual statements. This may be as simple as “if only I wasn’t late for my interview I would have gotten the job”, or as complex as “if deterrence strategies were pursued by European leaders against Nazi Germany in the 1930s World War II would have been avoided”. Reasoning of this kind is common; it makes causal arguments that are supported by the construction of alternative worlds, often with little thought given to the actual likelihood of the counterfactual statement.

These findings have been exported to IR in order to explore how and why practitioners use counterfactual reasoning. Lebow and Stein, for instance, have explored how counterfactual reasoning was used by Soviet and US officials to make sense of events surrounding the Cuban Missile Crisis, often with little “factual” basis to support their counterfactual inferences (1996, pp. 125–6). They argue that following the Cuban Missile Crisis it became conventional wisdom for deterrence experts to claim that ‘Khrushchev would not have deployed missiles in Cuba had Kennedy behaved more decisively at the Bay of Pigs, the Vienna summit, and in Berlin’ (Lebow,

2010, p. 35). Whether this assessment is correct or incorrect is beyond the point; what is of interest is the psychological phenomenon of the construction of alternative worlds in order to present particular interpretations of the actual world. This practice is, unsurprisingly, widespread in international politics. Richard Hermann and Michael Fischerkeller argue that ‘retrospective counterfactuals...played an important role in American policy formulation’ towards Iran during the Iran-Iraq war (1996, pp. 150–151). In addition, they show how policy-makers use these historical counterfactuals as lessons from history in ‘forward-looking conditional scenarios’ (1996, p. 150). In the contemporary US-Iran relationship such logics can also be identified. It has become conventional wisdom in Washington that the stringent unilateral sanctions regimes imposed on Iran were crucial to reaching the 2015 Iran nuclear deal. Others have gone as far as to say that without sanctions Iran would not have even been at the negotiating table, let alone signing away significant aspects of their nuclear programme (Interview with Samore, 2016; Kroenig, 2014).

### ***Counterfactuals in scholarship***

Counterfactuals can also be used as a means of investigation in and of themselves. Counterfactuals of this kind have been around for a long time, but an increasing body of scholarship in IR has begun to recognise the legitimacy of the purposeful construction of alternative counterfactual realities and scenarios to fulfil a variety of means. Challenging the long-held view that this type of counterfactual does not constitute ‘real’ research, this literature has formulated various guidelines and principles for how counterfactuals should be carried out (Fearon, 1991; George and Bennett, 2005; Lebow, 2010; Tetlock and Belkin, 1996a; Weber, 1996). There are, however, significant disagreements within this literature about how best to proceed and the stated aims of counterfactuals. These differences will be discussed in the following section.

This second branch of counterfactual research is thus less concerned with the internal processes of how and why individuals routinely invoke this logic in everyday circumstances, but instead in producing its own counterfactual inferences and thought experiments as a particular

means of studying various historical and/or future events. Prominent examples from IR include whether empathy and trust would have developed between the leaders of the Soviet Union and the United States in the mid-to-late 1980s, if those leaders had not been Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev (Lebow and Breslauer, 2004; Lebow, 2010). In this scenario, George Breslauer and Lebow make the plausible change that Reagan is killed by James Hinkley's bullet in the assassination attempt in 1981, meaning George H.W. Bush becomes President, and that Viktor Grishin is elected as the Soviet General Secretary and not Gorbachev. They argue that because the personalities of Reagan and Gorbachev were uniquely important to the de-escalation of tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union, the same process would likely not have occurred if their roles were filled by the two plausible alternatives stated above (Breslauer and Lebow 2004). Frank Harvey similarly asks whether the United States would have still invaded Iraq in 2003 if Al Gore was President (2012). He makes a minimal historical rewrite where 'a few more hanging chads during the recounting of precinct votes in Florida following the 2000 US Presidential election' (Harvey, 2012, p. 25) resulted in a Gore presidency. Harvey argues against the common belief that this was a war of choice and not necessity by claiming that a Gore administration would actually have acted similarly to Bush's. Both of these examples enquire into the role of leadership and personality in international politics. Breslauer and Lebow find that it mattered a great deal, while Harvey finds that these claims are overstated. Intriguingly, both locate contingency in the material conditions – bullets and ballots, if you like – in which individuals are embedded rather than in the individuals themselves. I offer a more in-depth discussion of this particular aspect later in the chapter.

Contra Lebow, who strives to show the contingent nature of the social world, Harvey uses counterfactuals to argue for the inevitability of certain historical events. While Harvey does not make this criticism directly, his contribution poses an important challenge to Lebow. By using 'counterfactuals to demonstrate the contingency of cases' (Lebow, 2010, p. 5), it could be argued that Lebow puts the cart before the horse. In other words, counterfactuals should not be used to



*show* the contingent nature of the social world, but rather should set out to determine how contingent or determined a particular event, case study, or relationship was. As the Harvey example aptly demonstrates, the finding that something was determined is itself an important contribution. In later work, Lebow partially addresses this concern by using the more nuanced language that counterfactuals are used to ‘probe contingency’ (2015a, p. 405). He states here that the social world should not be considered as either contingent or highly determined, but instead as existing along a spectrum where some events are more contingent or determined than others (2015a, p. 405). The challenge for counterfactual methods, therefore, is to locate events on that spectrum. Both Harvey’s inadvertent criticism and Lebow’s refinement of his view inform the approach I take. I use counterfactuals as a way of probing how contingent or not US foreign policy towards Iran was. This is important to note, as in the 2009-2010 case study I argue that for much of this period an increase in Obama’s empathy would have made little difference to his ability to reassure Iran and promote cooperation.

Both Lebow and Harvey make the point that counterfactual reasoning is also implicitly present in much academic research. From Max Weber onwards, it has been recognised that many invocations of causality (broadly defined) have an implicit accompanying counterfactual. In its simplest terms, to say that  $x$  caused  $y$  is also to put forward the counterfactual that in the absence of  $x$  there would not be  $y$  (Harvey, 2012, pp. 23–25; Lebow, 2000, p. 561, 2010, p. 55; Ringer, 2002; Tetlock and Belkin, 1996a, p. 3). Following this logic, it can be argued just about every scholar is engaged in counterfactual research because ‘every causal argument has its associated counterfactual’ (Lebow, 2010, p. 42). Moreover, the efficacy of a causal explanation is often considered to be dependent upon the associated counterfactual. The above example, however, paints a simplistic picture as it utilises a narrow and singular view of causation.

Some scholars have therefore suggested that the relationship between causation and counterfactuals is more complex. Alexander George and Andrew Bennett, for example, argue that

‘a historical explanation does not necessarily imply a counterfactual argument’ as there could be ‘causal substitution – i.e., some other set of causes might have substituted for the variable in question and caused the same outcome’ (2005, p. 169). Heikki Patomaki presents a similar argument, stating that ‘a specific outcome may be contingent on a number of activity and concept dependent conditions and manifold actions’, meaning that ‘it is...essential to consider the possibility that there could have been other sufficient conditions capable of producing a similar result’ (2007, p. 578). In other words, outcomes are never the result of a single cause but always a complex myriad of causes. Even where one causal factor is taken away an outcome may stay the same. To say that if  $x$  equals  $y$  does not necessarily have a strong counterfactual conditional as causal complexity means that  $y$  may have also have occurred regardless. Rules about counterfactual conditionals, therefore, do not always hold if we consider the social world to be an open system where causation is complex and multiple (Patomaki, 2007). Returning to the security dilemma, to say that security dilemma dynamics were a contributing cause in leading to a conflict is not the same as saying they were *the* cause. We may say that security dilemma dynamics played a role in creating a particular conflict, but must allow for the possibility that it could have occurred anyway. That said, most scholars would likely hold that the phenomena they seek to explain or understand would be different in some way if a particular cause were removed. The phenomena would still be present, but it would likely be different in one way or another. Thus, counterfactual logic still applies to some extent.

Indeed, many constructivists argue that they conduct constitutive rather than causal analysis, and would consequently take issue with the view that all accounts of world politics contain implicit counterfactuals due to the association with causation (e.g. Fierke, 2005; Jackson, 2007). Fierke, for instance, draws a sharp distinction between scientific causal explanations where identities are artificially fixed, and the ‘language of constitution’ that asks how particular phenomena become possible (2005, p. 16). But Fierke’s distinction collapses when a broader and more inclusive definition of cause is adopted (Kurki, 2008; Kurki and Suganami, 2012; Lebow,

2015b). Fierke's work on the end of the Cold War provides a useful illustration of how counterfactuals exist within constitutive scholarship as well (1998). In response to those who argue that it was Gorbachev's 'new thinking' that led to the end of the Cold War, she argues that scholars should pay attention to processes that made Gorbachev's 'new thinking' possible in the first place. In doing so, Fierke claims that she seeks to understand how particular actions become possible as opposed to explaining why they happened (1998, 2005). But, counterfactually speaking, her argument still relies upon a loosely based causal explanation. She draws attention to the myriad of other factors, such as the independent social movements in Eastern Europe, to show how Gorbachev's actions became possible. It therefore follows that if one of these other factors were absent, the outcome of her explanation – Gorbachev's 'new thinking' – would be different in one way or another. It may still exist, but it would differ in degree or kind. The implication is that even so-called constitutive accounts of world politics, which arguably draw a false and unhelpful distinction between causation and constitution (Kurki, 2008), have an implicit counterfactual at their heart.

Counterfactuals are therefore present in almost all scholarly enquiry in one way or another.

As Philip Tetlock and Aaron Belkin persuasively argue:

'We can avoid counterfactuals only if we eschew all causal inference and limit ourselves to strictly noncausal narratives of what actually happened (no smuggling causal claims under the guise of verbs such as "influenced", "responded", "triggered", "precipitated", and the like)' (1996a, p. 3).

This leads Lebow to argue that 'Any sharp distinction between factials and counterfactuals is based on questionable epistemological claims' (Lebow, 2010, p. 35). Harvey also writes that 'there is no significant (or theoretically relevant) distinction between factual and counterfactual reasoning' (2012, p. 25). Acknowledging the interrelatedness of factual and counterfactual scholarship is therefore an important point for legitimising counterfactual research. It forms the basis of Lebow's important contention that 'the difference between so-called factual and counterfactual arguments is more one of degree than of kind' (2010, p. 21). Introducing ideas

about complex causation and constitutive analysis does not undermine the claim that all research makes implicit use of counterfactuals. It makes clear that by highlighting the factual/counterfactual relationship we should not be dependent on a singular version of causation. Just because we acknowledge the complexity of causation does not mean that counterfactuals are not routinely smuggled into factual scholarship. It thus still holds that ‘the force of an explanation turns on the counterfactual which implies it’ (Hawthorn, 1991, p. 14).

If counterfactuals underpin our factual accounts of the world, then it seems obvious that good counterfactuals are equally beholden to certain features of the factual world. Stylistically, counterfactual and factual research will often appear similar, and the relationship between theory and evidence should be the same. Breslauer and Lebow rightly state that ‘Counterfactual analysis is not based on mere speculation; in fact, it may be as richly documented as “normal” history’ (2004, p. 163). Harvey concurs, stating that ‘counterfactual analysis demands a meticulous attention to the detail of the case’ (Harvey, 2012, p. 25). In much the same way, seeing the legitimacy of counterfactual research is also to recognise that so called factual accounts of the world are by no means definitive and often rely upon imaginative techniques themselves. Lebow points out that the evidence researchers draw upon to construct factual narratives of events are never ‘smoking guns that allow researchers to maintain with any degree of certainty that a particular cause was responsible for an outcome’ (Lebow, 2010, p. 21; see also Snyder, 2014, p. 711). In both factual and counterfactual accounts the accumulation of evidence into a causal narrative is an interpretive exercise (Lebow, 2010; Snyder, 2014). In short, ‘The plausibility of factual and counterfactual arguments alike rests on the appeal of their assumptions, the tightness of the logic connection cause to effect, and the richness of the evidence that supports them’ (Lebow, 2010, p. 21).

The points made above highlight that while on first glance counterfactual research may appear drastically different to factual research, the similarities between these two strands are

numerous. Any rigidly defined distinction between them misunderstands that factual and counterfactual logics rest upon each other, and that their standards of evidence and explanation are the same. Having justified the use of counterfactual research strategies in the first place, I will now turn to discussing how they are used in IR.

### **Counterfactuals and International Relations**

Now that counterfactuals themselves have been justified in numerous ways, this chapter will turn away from the question of whether they are a legitimate means of enquiry to the more crucial question of how they should be conducted at all. Settling the first debate does not necessarily help in settling the second one, as to agree upon the legitimacy of counterfactual research is to not agree upon very much at all. This section covers elements of an indirect debate between those who see counterfactuals as an unfortunate necessity for theory-testing in a social world where evidence is scarce, and those who contend that the utility of counterfactuals is not found solely in their ability to test theories but in their ‘mind-opening’ (Lebow, 2010, p. 54) qualities and their sensitising influence upon our understandings of temporality, history, contingency, and determinism. The former worry about an ‘anything goes’ attitude towards counterfactuals (Tetlock and Belkin, 1996a, p. 3), whereas the latter argue that overly restrictive measures represent nothing more than theoretical preferences that effectively ‘straight-jacket’ any potential for innovation. While siding more with the latter argument, I suggest that it is possible, and indeed desirable, to utilise both these approaches in conducting counterfactual research.

#### ***Counterfactual debates in IR***

I will start by introducing the positivist approaches to counterfactuals, that see them as means for testing hypotheses where strong theoretical generalisations already exist (Fearon, 1991; Levy and Goertz, 2007; Levy, 2015). These approaches also contend that a restrictive set of criteria for valid counterfactuals is necessary. These authors want to specify how we are able to distinguish between

good and bad uses of counterfactuals, and, for the most part, answer this question by advocating a fairly limited and often philosophically positivist view of how this should be done. For James Fearon, who can be credited with bringing the methodological discussion of counterfactuals to IR, they should primarily be used for hypothesis testing in circumstances where data is hard to come by (1991, 1996). In non-experimental research settings Fearon argues that counterfactuals can be ‘a viable means of assessing causal hypotheses’ (1991, p. 170). Crucially, however, he argues that counterfactuals can only be used when a validated theoretical generalisation already exists (Fearon, 1991; see also Levy, 2015). Where the comparison of factual cases is not possible researchers may need to resort to ‘counterfactual argument’ (Fearon, 1991, p. 171) where researchers compare actual cases with counterfactual ones. As he puts it:

when experimental control and replication are not possible, analysts have available a choice between two and only two strategies for “empirically” assessing this hypothesis. Either they can imagine that C had been absent and ask whether E would have (or might have) occurred *in that counterfactual case*; or they can search for other *actual* cases that resemble the case in question in significant respects, except that in some of these cases C is absent (Fearon, 1991, p. 171 emphasis in original).

Though Fearon saw the first strategy as important in making explicit the implicit counterfactual assumptions which have permeated most social science, he was sceptical of the true value of this approach, worrying that where counterfactuals are invoked it becomes simply too difficult to assess the validity of claims based on these grounds. Thus, what Fearon presents is a picture of counterfactuals as often a last resort strategy: ‘there are...reasons to believe that social scientists, who generally cannot conduct true experiments, may have no choice but to rely on counterfactual assertions in one way or another’ (1996, p. 40). This view is shared by Alexander George and Andrew Bennett who have argued that ‘the investigator resorts to counterfactual analysis and mental experiments in an effort to create a controlled comparison’ (2005, p. 189). For these authors, then, counterfactuals are something that social scientists have ‘no choice’ but to ‘resort’ too, as opposed to being a valuable research strategy in and of themselves.

Tetlock and Belkin are less pessimistic, and argue that if a loose set of criteria are followed counterfactual research strategies can produce sound scholarship. Whilst acknowledging that ‘there is no single answer to the question of what counts as a good counterfactual argument’ (Tetlock and Belkin, 1996a, p. 16), they nevertheless argue that it is necessary to ‘embrace at least some common standards for judging the plausibility of each other’s counterfactual claims’ (Tetlock and Belkin, 1996a, p. 17). They propose six criteria that counterfactuals should try to adhere to. They are 1) clarity, which means specifying the hypothesised antecedent and consequent; 2) logical consistency that connects that antecedent to the consequent; 3) historical consistency, which entails changing as little of history as possible. This is also known as the ‘minimal rewrite rule’; 4) theoretical consistency in the connection between the antecedent and the consequent; 5) statistical consistency in the connection between the antecedent and the consequent; and 6) projectability, which entails teasing out the implications of the connecting principles (Tetlock and Belkin, 1996a, p. 18). Importantly, they do not advocate ‘universal consent’ (Tetlock and Belkin, 1996a, p. 17) to all of these principles and acknowledge that researchers with varying philosophical commitments may contest some of these. Despite their greater openness to the possibilities of counterfactual research, Tetlock and Belkin are nevertheless still attached to the idea of counterfactuals as a means of hypothesis and theory testing. They argue that ‘Counterfactuals must not only fit existing historical and statistical data... they must stipulate testable predictions that hold up reasonably well against new data’ (Tetlock and Belkin, 1996b, p. 27).

This has been challenged on the grounds that counterfactuals should be considered ‘learning devices’ and ‘mind-set changers’, as opposed to ‘data points in explanation’ (Weber, 1996, p. 270). Lebow seems to partially concur with this point, stating that ‘We should worry less about the uncertainty of counterfactual experiments and profit more from their mind-opening implications’ (2010, pp. 53–54). The approach taken in this thesis sides far more with the latter of these perspectives, while also maintaining that some set of standard must be met. Lebow balances this divide effectively. On the one hand he writes, ‘I do not use counterfactuals to make the case

for alternative worlds, but to use the construction of those worlds to probe the causes and contingency of the world we know' (Lebow, 2010, p. 6). But on the other hand he too highlights nine criteria that counterfactual research should adhere to. Following Lebow, it should therefore be considered possible to broaden counterfactual research from the strict hypothesis testing route advocated by Fearon (1991, 1996) and George and Bennet (2005), and utilised in recent research by Eric Grynaviski (2014). But, at the same time, this should not be taken to suggest that stipulating a set of criteria is always undesirable. As Tetlock and Belkin rightly claim, sensible criteria that are not overly restrictive can aid scholars in conducting counterfactuals and evaluating the claims of others.

The approach taken by Fearon can be dismissed on additional grounds. Weber and Lebow have been extremely critical of Fearon's attempt to limit counterfactuals to instances where the antecedent (the counterfactually altered variable) and consequent (the envisaged consequence of changing this variable) have a clear relationship from the outset. This is because:

'it rewards the psychologically easy and comfortable task of generating counterfactuals close to the margins of existing theories. It predisposes toward varying only the familiar variables, the ones that we think we know are tied into causal paths that we feel we know well' (Weber, 1996, p. 278).

Following Fearon's logic, if we are only to investigate causal pathways that we already know to exist 'we would no longer need counterfactuals' (Weber, 199, p. 272) at all. The positivist position is, Lebow concurs, 'extraordinarily restrictive' as 'these conditions...would rule out some of the most important uses of counterfactual experimentation' (2010, pp. 52–53). Fearon's approach would, therefore, all but rule out my counterfactual as the relationship between empathy and overcoming security dilemma dynamics has not been theoretically or statistically established.

Weber draws a useful analogy of these counterfactual dividing lines by comparing them to category 1 and category 2 problems for Cosmologists. Category 1 problems, he explains, can be worked out within the parameters of current scientific frameworks: 'They may require new insights



and new models, but they fit comfortably in Khunian normal science and fall under the covering laws we know and rely on' (Weber, 1996, p. 269). This, he argues, is the picture of counterfactuals held by Fearon and Levy. A Category 2 problem, he continues, sits 'at the outer limits or outside the boundaries and language of science as it is currently constructed' (Weber, 1996, p. 269). As I have argued, the existing literature tells us little about the operation of empathy in security dilemma dynamics. We may intuitively think that it can aid actors in overcoming conflicts. Or we may suggest quite the opposite. But our reasoning here is not found in agreed notions of empathy and security dilemma dynamics, or in any shared covering laws or theories. Such laws do not exist in IR, which leaves our endeavour much closer to category 2 than category 1. Weber argues that in category 2, 'Counterfactuals are useful for testing arguments here, because well-developed arguments...don't yet exist in this category' (1996, p. 269). If we accept the view that law-like regularities do not exist in IR, as many in the discipline now do, we are left with the notion that the constraints on counterfactuals that Fearon and others wish to establish 'make good sense in category 1' but 'are not helpful in category 2' (Weber, 1996, p. 269).

### ***Counterfactuals and individual-level properties***

This section outlines the justification for a counterfactual intervention into the subjective levels of empathy of specific policy-makers in specific contexts. This task is necessary, as there has been a surprising lack of discussion on the issue of individual-level categories in counterfactual research. I make the case that these types of counterfactuals are achievable on a number of grounds.

The first is, quite simply, that existing scholarship has not provided any convincing reasons for not doing so. Prominent proponents of counterfactuals have warned against altering individual-level properties in counterfactual scenarios, but they have done so only fleetingly and have not given convincing accounts of why this is the case. Tetlock and Belkin, for instance, have argued that counterfactuals should 'not unduly disturb what we otherwise know about the original actors and their beliefs and goals' (1996, p. 23). This specification is listed under the 'consistency

with well-established historical facts' element of their counterfactual research criteria that I outlined earlier. Although they say nothing else about this particular principle, it can be deduced from this that individual-level properties should not be changed because they consider these to be 'established historical facts'. Why this is the case they do not say. Lebow is equally unspecific. He similarly argues that 'When we change ideas...minimal rewrites are out of the question', but also adds the proviso that this is 'unless we go back to a point in time when those ideas...had not jelled and might be significantly altered by small, plausible changes' (2010, p. 62; 274). Beyond this, he says nothing more on this issue in his 2010 book. However, in a later work he does seem to moderate this slightly, writing that: "There is no reason to think that it is generally easier to change leaders than it is to change their decisions, but it is certainly more difficult to change ideas and institutional structures." (Lebow, 2015: 405).

Apart from the underspecified nature of these objections, there are other reasons to find this unsatisfactory. Although methodologically and conceptually difficult, to close off these particular avenues is highly problematic for many of the claims Lebow in particular makes. Lebow claims, on a number of instances, that a significant strength of counterfactuals as a methodology is that they emphasise the power of agency throughout history. For example, he argues that 'counterfactuals can make us more receptive to complex, non-linear models [of causation] that recognise that international relations is an open system whose outcomes are sensitive to...change, agency, and confluence' (Lebow, 2010, p. 266). Yet, this view is not commensurable with how Lebow deals with agency in his own counterfactual experiments, nor with his premise that the realm of individual-agents is out of bounds when it comes to minimal-rewrite counterfactuals. In a number of his counterfactual scenarios he seeks to show the importance of individuals to particular historical-political outcomes. But it is not the idea, emotion, or decision of the individual that is altered, but the actual individual themselves. In a counterfactual experiment looking at the relationship between Reagan and Gorbachev, Lebow and Breslauer argue that the trust and empathy developed between these two leaders was instrumental in the cooling of tensions which

took place in the mid-to-late 1980s (Lebow and Breslauer, 2004; Lebow, 2010). Yet, they make this argument by manipulating the material conditions that brought Reagan and Gorbachev to power, creating plausible scenarios where Reagan dies in Hinkley's assassination attempt, and Gorbachev is not elected as General Secretary. The two individuals they replace them with do not, in their scenario, share the empathy and trust developed by the real world leaders. For Breslauer and Lebow, this counterfactual scenario champions agent-centric interpretations of the end of the Cold War against those of the materialists (see Brooks and Wohlforth, 2000).

However, serious questions must be asked about how individuals as agents are dealt with and conceptualised in this scenario. Though there is nothing logically wrong with this counterfactual, it is illuminating in a number of ways. In order to study the importance of agency, they do not look at how individuals make decisions and come to choose certain paths over other alternative ones. Instead, they change the individual for one that holds different characteristics. What this approach seemingly fails to recognise – or at least fails to incorporate – is the possibility that agents themselves are imminently susceptible to change, and that the individual is also a site of contingency and critical juncture. They seem to take the subjectivity of the individual as an 'established historical-fact', as Tetlock and Belkin do (1996, p. 23). Lebow and others make the argument that the social world is contingent, un-determined, a product of both agents and structures, and that the way the world *is* represents just one possibility among many. But in counterfactual research the search for 'critical junctures' in history has thus far only looked at the material world whilst neglecting the importance of the ideational, emotional, and psychological. Acknowledging contingency at one level and not at another paints a picture of ideas, emotion, and cognition as static, unchanging and over-determined. It seems to say that the way individuals were, and the decisions they took, was always over-determined, and that the contingency of the world comes not from these individuals but from the materiality that surrounds them. Contingency, for them comes from bullets and ballots, to use the examples of Lebow and Harvey's separate

counterfactuals. It is to give contingent and agent-centric accounts at the holistic level but over-determined structural arguments at the individual level.

Yet, in reality, there was nothing determined about the ideas, emotions, decisions, and psychology of either Reagan or Gorbachev. Reagan himself underwent a monumental transformation in his thinking towards the Soviet Union. He transitioned from describing them as the 'evil empire' to calling Gorbachev his friend four years later (Wheeler, 2013). To dismiss the counterfactual study of individual seems to undercut the factual basis of Lebow's own counterfactual. Moreover, when considered in the context of the turn towards individual-levels of analysis in IR, it makes little sense to include these approaches in factual accounts of world politics but not counterfactual ones. If the 'the difference between so-called factual and counterfactual arguments is more one of degree than of kind' (2010, p. 21), as Lebow suggests, then there appears no good reason for marginalising of individual-level properties from counterfactual research strategies. And indeed, if there is one it has yet to be made.

Furthermore, the materialist 'bullets and ballots' approach is an unsatisfactory way of probing narratives of missed opportunities. A different methodology for this thesis could have been to change the actors themselves in similar means to Lebow and Breslauer (2004; Lebow, 2010) and Harvey (2012). But this would be fundamentally unable to get to the heart of the empirical question of missed opportunities that is central to this thesis. The argument of many scholars and commentators has been that misperception and misunderstanding between leaders in the United States and Iran, as they are currently constituted, led to opportunities for cooperation being missed. The counterfactual logic that underpins this is that if actors in one or both countries had empathised more readily with the other, then some degree of cooperation could have been established. An argument of missed opportunities cannot be sustained if, for instance, the Bush administration is simply substituted for the hypothetical Gore administration (2012). By following

the formulae set out by current counterfactual scholarship, and finding material means of changing the actual actors themselves, then this would not probe the narrative of missed opportunities.

Despite the objections of Lebow and others, there is a body of literature that provides some support for altering individual-level properties. Geoffrey Hawthorn, for instance, argued that the practical reasoning's of particular agents 'are not pre-determined by nature', and nor are they 'entirely pre-ordained by rules or reasons. They are conditional, subjunctive hypotheticals, a matter of counterfactual judgement' (1991, p. 15). The contingency of agents and their decisions, therefore, is determined by 'what agents more or less reflectively believe, in the light of their inclinations and circumstances, to be possible (Hawthorn, 1991, p. 15). In this sense, all that is necessary for this project's counterfactual is to show that individuals of significant standing within the US government, believed to some extent that alternative scenarios and pathways were possible. In the case study chapters I argue in support of this view. How this empathy then interacts with wider situational factors such as politics and bureaucracy is, however, another matter. But it is important to note that I am simply arguing here that individual-level properties should be considered legitimate antecedents to change, not that they will necessarily prove transformative to the security dilemma dynamics between the United States and Iran. That is a question for empirical study.

In addition to Hawthorn, the work of James Blight and Janet Lang, as well as their fellow researchers, also makes this case to some extent. Their starting point is the agreeable notion that 'the significance of empathy – when it is present and when it is not – has been underestimated in the study of war, peace, and conflict' (Blight and Lang, 2010, p. 41). Blight and Lang have argued on a number of occasions that if only empathy could have been present in certain conflict and diplomatic situations then the likelihood for cooperation would have increased (Blight et al., 2012; Blight and Lang, 2010). In order to make this argument, they have conducted what they describe as 'Critical Oral History' (COH) conferences relating to specific case studies (e.g. the Cuban Missile

Crisis, the end of the Cold War *Détente* period). These conferences combine policy-makers who have direct experience of the events, declassified documentary sources, and expert scholars on the subject, to see whether empathy can develop in these controlled settings. Blight and Lang are interested in discovering whether empathy can develop between former adversaries after-the-fact during these conferences. Following this, Blight and Lang produce ‘virtual histories’ of the case in question where the empathy that developed between former adversaries in the conference setting is counterfactually placed into the historical setting. Whereas I justify the changed antecedent on the prior-identification of some level of empathy within the case material itself, Blight and Lang justify it upon the development of empathy in the COH setting. If empathy is possible retrospectively, then they suggest it is reasonable to suppose that it would have been at the time as well. In doing so, they make the argument that if policy-makers were able to empathise with each other more readily, then such crises and conflicts would perhaps be avoidable. Curiously, however, Blight and Lang have eschewed both the literature on empathy and on counterfactuals. They develop a loose conceptualisation of empathy based around Ralph White’s work (1984), but neglect to see empathy as a deeply contested concept that needs unpacking and situating within a context. Moreover, their lack of engagement with the counterfactuals literature means that they give no indication of what criteria guides their work. If criteria is too strict it can shut down more creative and epistemically interesting counterfactual scenarios, but this does not mean that anything goes. Counterfactual research strategies need to clearly state how a changed antecedent could have feasibly arisen in a given historical context, and should pay careful attention to that antecedent if it is something as tricky and contested as empathy. To be clear, the issue is not with their historical method itself. COH has produced some seminal insights into re-thinking past adversarial relations. It is rather that they set no prior criteria or standards for how they go about ‘imagining empathy’, as I call it. This brings me to the final section of this chapter, where I outline the guiding principles of the counterfactual intervention that follows over the next two chapters.

## **Counterfactuals, Empathy and US foreign policy**

This chapter will conclude by laying out the specifics of how counterfactual will work in the case study chapters. I do this by setting out some guiding principles that show both why the increased subjective levels of empathic intensity of specific policy-makers is a workable antecedent change itself, and by clarifying how this will be operated.

The first thing to note is that each chapter will establish the empirical precedent of the counterfactual alteration itself within the specific context of the case study. One often-cited condition of counterfactual research of this kind is that the changed antecedent should to some degree be ‘easily imagined’ (Tetlock and Belkin 1996: 8). I make the case for this in the case study chapters and not here as it requires a great deal of contextual detail regarding why imagining empathy is both realistic and possible. I establish the plausibility of the counterfactual increase in empathy in key individuals by identifying what can be described as *sites of contingency*. By sites of contingency I mean the features of any factual narrative that invite counterfactual intervention. This is necessary for all counterfactual approaches as legitimate counterfactual interventions do not lie in every part of every narrative, but emerge from a combination of empirical detail and conceptual blind-spots. The first part of this thesis drew attention to such a conceptual blind-spot in the form of the under-theorised concept of empathy in the security dilemma. The case study chapters then highlight the empirical detail that suggests an increase in empathy is a plausible counterfactual intervention to make. This is an important detail as ‘Good counterfactuals ought to arise from...context’ (Lebow, 2010, p. 54), and the feasibility of any counterfactual research design ultimately lies in specificities of the case itself (Hawthorn, 1991).

The second point, which is a stylistic one, is that the counterfactual discussion is presented alongside the ‘factual’ narrative and not as a separate section. This follows in the footsteps of other recent counterfactual work (Harvey, 2012; Lebow, 2010, 2014) by weaving together factual and

counterfactual arguments, so as the latter flows explicitly and deliberately from the sites of contingency located in the former. Counterfactual research strategies are not fictional supplements to factual accounts of world politics, but are a particular lens for investigating the contingent elements of dominant factual accounts. This meets the important criteria that counterfactual research should not appear to be drastically different from so-called factual research. As Richard Ned Lebow has put it, ‘good counterfactual thought experiments differ little from “factual” modes of historical reconstruction’ (Lebow, 2010, p. 34). The questions asked may be different but the means of answering them should appear much the same.

The third point is that while the altered antecedent is the empathy of specific US officials in relation to Iran, the potential consequent itself should remain open and undetermined. It is therefore important to distinguish between the counterfactual intervention (also called the altered antecedent) itself, which is the increase in empathy, and any possible connection this may or may not have to a consequent. The starting point of this project was an investigation into whether empathy for one’s adversary alters the prospects for cooperation in security dilemma dynamics. There is no pre-determined answer to this question. As the case studies illuminate, an individual’s empathy towards another interacts with the broader political and bureaucratic contexts in a myriad of ways that can either enable or disable the possibilities for cooperation. By following the ‘minimal rewrite’ rule, the only thing that is altered is the empathy of specifically identified individuals, thus leaving the context in which they are embedded as a constant. Because this interaction between empathy and these contexts will be unique to each case study it is impossible to determine in advance the likelihood of one answer over another. This gets to the heart of Weber’s criticism of Fearon. Weber was concerned by Fearon’s (1991, 1996; see also Levy, 2015) dictum that we should only use counterfactuals where there is a well-established relationship between antecedent and consequent. I share this concern, and contend that the strength of counterfactual research should not be that they simply confirm what we already know, but that they explore the implicit counterfactual logics of conceptual approaches and probe the contingency



of dominant historical narratives (Lebow, 2015a, p. 405). It is important to reiterate that even where I do find a logical connection between counterfactual antecedent and consequent – i.e. empathy and low-level cooperation – the case is not being made that cooperation would have categorically taken place if, for instance, Obama had been more empathic towards Iran. Such an assertion is beyond the realm of both counterfactual and factual research. Rather, the intention is that by showing how cooperation could have plausibly – but not definitively – been achieved in some instances but not others, the chapter challenges and contributes to thinking on not only the history and future of US foreign policy towards Iran, but also on the relationship between empathy and security dilemma dynamics.

Relatedly, it is important to highlight the ‘specificity’ (Jentleson, 1999, p. 19) of the counterfactual. This means that it is not only sufficient to say that something else could have been done, but rather it is necessary to explicitly specify what acts, policies, or decisions would have led to different outcomes (Jentleson, 1999, p. 19). Deborah Larson adopts a similar criteria in her study of missed opportunities between United States and Soviet Union during the Cold War. She argues that ‘To propose what *might have been*...entails showing how changes in a set of historical conditions could have led to a different outcome’ (Larson, 1997, p. 3 emphasis in original). Thus, it is not enough to merely argue that increased empathy may have led to cooperation, but the counterfactual must also map out what actions could had to have been taken and why. Hawthorn has likewise argued that counterfactuals should always ask themselves ‘could those men, at that time, in the circumstances in which they found themselves, with the information that was available to them, have acted other than they did?’ (1991, p. 121). The usefulness of adopting this approach is also that it forces the researcher to consider additional intervening factors.

The fourth point is that to increase an individual’s empathic relationship towards another does not mean that empathy is therefore increased in every realm of their professional and personal lives. For instance, to imagine Obama’s increased empathy towards Iran has no effect on his

empathy towards China, the United States Congress, Michelle Obama or any other factor that is part of his life. It is possible to be empathic in one relationship and it have no noticeable effect on another. Thomas Christensen has argued that China has shown an acute understanding of their security dilemma dynamics vis-à-vis the United States, and have taken steps to dampen them, but have exhibited no such understanding in their security dilemma dynamics with Japan (1999). The implication is that it is possible to increase the empathy of an individual and avoid the problem of creating what are described as ‘second-order counterfactuals’ (Lebow, 2010, p. 57), where this one change leads to a host of other additional changes.

This leads to the final point, which is that conducting a counterfactual where the altered antecedent is something as subjective as an emotion, belief or mind-set, it is necessary to develop a conceptualisation of that concept prior to its counterfactual placement within a given context. Imagining empathy, to use the title of this thesis, is both a similar and different act than imagining the altered trajectory of a bullet or the malfunction of a voting machine. At the end of the last chapter I outlined many of the key principles that determined how I conceptualise empathy. I won’t repeat them here, but suffice to say that a far greater degree of care and clarification is necessary when dealing with individual-level categories such as empathy.

## **Conclusion**

This project follows in the lineage of existing counterfactual literature, whilst also attempting to expand upon them by incorporating individual-level aspects of international politics. This chapter has sought to first legitimatise and then outline the construction of counterfactual intervention that probes the underdeveloped theoretical assumptions regarding empathy in the security dilemma; counterfactuals consequently hold a dual purpose for the project. I enquire into the limits and possibilities of the empathy thesis put forward by those within the security dilemma literature, whilst also engaging with questions regarding how the US foreign policy towards Iran might have

happened otherwise in light of these theoretical ideas. In short, I use counterfactual methods as a means of ‘taking ourselves outside of the world and our assumptions about it’ in order to subject these assumptions ‘to active and open interrogation’ (Lebow, 2010, p. 5). Counterfactuals allow scholars to rewind the tape and return, to the best of our ability, to the events themselves without being overwhelmingly beholden to information and events that occurred afterwards. History is often read backwards, but counterfactual methods encourage us to read it forwards without these biases. Although future orientated narratives may determine how we think about the future and the past, counterfactuals can go some way to counteracting this tendency by taking ‘us to the particular setting of uncertainty in which decisions are actually confronted, made and implemented’ (Black, 2008, p. 1).

## Chapter 4: US foreign policy towards Iran, 2001-2003

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The next two chapters apply the conceptual and methodological issues discussed so far to the extended case study of US foreign policy towards Iran between 2001 and 2010. As I outlined in the introduction, I have identified specific episodes that have been described as missed opportunities for cooperation between the United States and Iran during this period. The aim of these two chapters is to explore the legitimacy of this narrative through an in-depth reading of two episodes in the conflicts recent history. The first is the period between 2001 and 2003, which is the focus of this chapter. And the second is from 2009 to 2010, which is covered in the next.

The defining feature of US foreign policy towards Iran between 2001 and 2003 is contradiction. On the one hand, it seems impossible to imagine cooperation ensuing between these two states during this time. After the 9/11 attacks on the United States, the fundamental ordering principle of the Bush administration seemingly revolved around the prevention and extermination of terrorism, and the use pre-emptive force to achieve this. Given Iran's designation by the US government as a state-sponsor of terror, it would be expected that sights would be set on Iran. Indeed, for many within the administration this was the case. The connection between Iran's support for terrorism and the belief that they pursued a nuclear weapons capability meant that regime change was the only realistic option for some within the administration (Dunn, 2007). Indeed, as president George Bush would proclaim in his first State of the Union address, Iran, along with Iraq and North Korea, were part of an 'Axis of Evil' (2002) that promoted terrorism around the world and sought weapons of mass destruction. However, these events sit uncomfortably alongside what we also know about this period. In spite of this ostensibly restrictive context, 2001 to 2003 saw some of the most sustained and meaningful periods of cooperation between the United States and Iran in their history up to this point. Iran provided assistance in the

Afghanistan invasion, and at the Bonn conference in December 2001, where they played a pivotal role in facilitating the agreement that the United States sought. In addition, Iran attempted on numerous occasions to broaden the scope of this cooperation to encompass a wider-range of issues. This culminated in a May 2003 letter that put everything from Iran's nuclear program to their military support for Hezbollah on the table (Government of Iran, 2003; interview with Dobbins, 2015; interview with Wilkerson, 2015; Interview 7, 2015).

This chapter explores US foreign policy towards Iran during these first few years in Bush's first term. Continuing with the thesis's central exploration of the role of empathy in overcoming security dilemma dynamics, it asks the counterfactual question of whether increasing the empathic intensity of specific US decision-makers towards Iran could have altered the prospects for cooperation during this period. Put another way, would an increase in the expression of empathic capacities on the part of US decision-makers have led to some form of limited cooperation, as security dilemma theorists might expect, or would this counterfactual re-write have ultimately changed little about the events briefly described above? Unlike the next chapter that explores the creation and implementation of engagement efforts by the Obama administration, this chapter is primarily focussed on how Iran's own engagement efforts were received by the Bush administration. The implication of these two episodes taken together is that empathy is a critical variable to consider in both the crafting and receiving of signals if security dilemma dynamics are to be ameliorated. The chapter's purpose is not solely to narrate the key events of the Bush administration's interactions with Iran, but to explore how contingent or not these events and interactions were on the empathy – or lack thereof, – of key US decision-makers. As Richard Ned Lebow observes, the social world should not be considered as either contingent or highly determined, but instead as existing along a spectrum where some events are more contingent or determined than others (2015a, p. 405). This chapter seeks to determine where on the spectrum of contingency and determinacy the Bush administration's foreign policy with Iran lies.

The central argument of this chapter is that US Secretary of State Colin Powell displayed a limited degree of empathy towards Iran in the period 2001-2003, but that had his level of empathic intensity been increased during this period, this could plausibly have led to deeper levels of cooperation in this period. It shows that the possibility for cooperation as a result of empathy existed at different points on Lebow's spectrum at different moments in time. The chapter as a whole shows that the context in which empathy is counterfactually embedded is highly determinative of whether cooperation can be considered possible or not. As I made clear in the previous chapter, in counterfactually changing one aspect of history it is necessary that everything else be held the same. The only way other aspects of the historical narrative can change is if these changes occur as a direct result of the initial counterfactual alteration.

This chapter is predominantly comprised of a thorough discussion of the post-9/11 period in US foreign policy towards Iran. I will first cover the limited cooperation that ensued between Iran and the United States following 9/11, and the 2002 State of the Union address, and limited attempts that Iran made to engage Iran shortly after this. In this section I argue that opportunities for cooperation were missed, and that a realistic increase in the empathic intensity of Powell would have enabled new opportunities for cooperation taking place. I will then outline a section on the key developments in Iran's nuclear program between August 2002 and early 2003, and the Bush administration's response to them, as a means of setting out the context in which the second counterfactual intervention will be made. The final section will then consider whether Iran's letter to the United States in May 2003 amounts to a genuine missed opportunity. The finding here is that even if Powell's empathic intensity is increased in a counterfactual rewrite, leading to new empathic capacities in relation to Iran, the ordering principles and bureaucratic context of the administration had changed to such an extent that this would have likely made no difference to the policy process. Whereas in 2001-2002 individuals such as Colin Powell had a degree of agency to explore cooperation with Iran, by May 2003 this had all but disappeared.

## **9/11, Afghanistan, and the beginnings of cooperation**

This section traces the Bush administration's approach to Iran from coming into office through to the infamous Axis of Evil speech in January 2002. In doing so, it also seeks to establish the plausibility of the counterfactual intervention by identifying specific sites of contingency. By sites of contingency I mean the features of the factual narrative that invite counterfactual intervention. I will firstly provide some broader context to the Bush administration's foreign policy agenda by briefly discussing the pre-9/11 period.

### ***The Pre-9/11 context***

One of the interesting ironies of US-Iran relations during the Bush years was the general view in Iran that a Republican administration was a preferable adversary to a Democratic one. When George W. Bush narrowly won the US Presidential Elections in November 2000 it was greeted positively in Tehran. The general position was that 'a Bush victory would herald a return of oil and realism to American foreign policy, both of which played to Iran's advantage' (Ansari, 2006, p. 178; see also Seliktar, 2012, pp. 121–2). Mousavian has since written that 'When Bush took office...the prevailing opinion was that we would see another pragmatic Bush and that there might be the possibility of reducing tension during his presidency' (2014, p. 166). Although Ansari has since called this judgement a 'fatal miscalculation' (2006, p. 178), there are justifications of why this reasoning may have been made. For instance, while on the campaign trail, Condoleezza Rice, who was appointed the National Security Advisor during the Bush's first term, wrote in *Foreign Affairs* of the need to revert American foreign policy away from the idealism of the Clinton years, and the need to 'refocus the United States on the national interest and the pursuit of key priorities' (2000, p. 46). Further underscoring the pragmatic reading of the Bush administration and how it may have transferred to Iran policy, Powell stated in his confirmation hearing that 'We have important differences [with Iran] on matters of policy. But these differences need not preclude

greater interaction, whether in more normal commerce or increased dialogue. Our national security team will be reviewing such possibilities' (2001c).

Roger Cohen of the *New York Times* reiterated this perception, arguing that 'Bush's foreign policy can be summed up as The Un-Clinton Doctrine: Whatever he did, they will undo' (Cohen, 2001; see also Will, 2001). The general view of the Bush administration from around the world, not just Iran, was that it would revert to a more traditional and realist foreign policy, in contrast to the liberal internationalism of Clinton (Quinn, 2010, p. 142; Will, 2001). Tellingly, Thomas Friedman bemoaned in July 2001 that Bush's foreign policy towards rogue states was one of biology as opposed to diplomacy: 'A biological foreign policy means that you have run out of ideas or political room to maneuver for how to deal with a certain foreign leader, so your whole approach is waiting for that leader to die. Biology!' (Friedman, 2001). At this point at least, few expected the preemptive doctrine that would develop in the years following 9/11, particularly when it came to a state such as Iran.

This pragmatism was manifest to some extent in the debate surrounding the Iran-Libya Sanctions Act (ILSA) in the early months of the Bush administration. Although the full five year extension of the ILSA eventually passed through Congress in July 2001 (Agence France Presse, 2001), there was considerable debate in amongst the Bush foreign policy team about whether this was actually a desirable outcome. The renewal was reportedly 'opposed by some in the Bush administration' who would have preferred 'to see a much shorter extension -- one or two years -- so as not to cover the entire four-year term of the president and allow some leeway in deciding policy' (de Roquefeuil, 2001). It was also reported that 'Supporters of a more lenient approach...do not want American hands to be tied' in their decision-making in regard to Iran (de Roquefeuil, 2001; interview with Wilkerson, 2015). Interviewees also reported that the State Department were working on a document in the weeks prior to 9/11 that advocated how the United States and Iran might look to cooperate with each other on certain issues (interview with Danin,



2015; interview with Wilkerson, 2015; Haass, 2010, p. 176). While approaching this discourse from the vantage point of history makes it particularly surprising, knowing what we now do about the defining features of US foreign policy under Bush, it only serves to underscore the importance of counterfactual investigations such as this.

In many ways, the question of whether or not these calculations were correct or not became a point of irrelevance following 9/11. While I debate in this chapter the extent to which the administration's post-9/11 foreign policy was really the all-encompassing paradigm shift that many make out, particularly in respect to Iran, the impact of this series of events on galvanising foreign policy cannot be denied. In addition to this, however, the events of 9/11, and Iranian condemnation of them, kick-started a series of events that included the most sustained and direct dialogue between Iran and the United States since the mid-1980s.

### ***The impact of 9/11 and cooperation in Afghanistan***

The argument made in this section is that the immediate post-9/11 period created opportunities for the United States and Iran to cooperate, thus making the period a particularly contingent one. Far from coalescing the Bush administration around a unifying narrative from the outset, this was a period in which issues such as Iran hung in the balance and were still to be determined.

The Iranian government was swift to condemn the 9/11 attacks. In a public address, President Mohammad Khatami said the following: 'My deepest sympathy goes out to the American nation...Terrorism is condemned and the world public should identify its rooms and its dimensions and should take fundamental steps to eliminate it' (quoted in Crist, 2012, pp. 427–8; The New York Times, 2001). The Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, echoed these words, stating that "Mass killing is wrong, whether it's in Hiroshima, Bosnia, New York, or Washington" (quoted in IRNA News, 2001). Vigils were held in Tehran for the victims of 9/11, and Khamenei ordered that clerics to suspend the "Death to America" cries that traditionally accompanied Friday

Prayer in Tehran (Abtahi, 2007). These gestures were interpreted positively by many in the Bush administration (interview with Danin, 2015; Interview 7, 2015; interview with Wilkerson, 2015).

In the days following 9/11, when it became clear that the United States would be invading Afghanistan, Iran came forward and offered their assistance in these efforts. Although the exact timeline for this is unclear, Powell stated on 16 September that ‘they gave a rather forthcoming statement of condolence and how there might be ways of cooperating with us in the response to what happened’ (2001d, see also 2001a), indicating that it happened within days of the attacks themselves.<sup>18</sup> He also issued a more cautious note:

But at the same time we have always seen Iran as a state that sponsors terrorism. So we will explore what they have said to us without making any commitments, of course. And if they are interested in fighting terrorism, it has to be terrorism not just related to this incident but terrorism of the kind that they have sponsored in the past. So if this represents a new page in Iranian thinking, then let's see what's written on that new page’ (2001d).

So, while expressing his concerns about Iran’s support for other terrorist groups, he also made clear that if Iran were willing to change then the United States would listen. While Powell expressed caution with regard to how far Iran could truly change its character, he reiterated his statement of nine months earlier by suggesting that dialogue and cooperation should be explored to some degree.

A flurry of similar statements were made over the coming days, weeks, and months, each indicating that countries such as Iran had a choice to make, but that the United States were open to the idea of cooperation and what this could ultimately lead to. On 17 September Powell said the following:

So I am hoping that the difficulties that we have had with these two countries in the past, because of this we might be able to explore a new way for the future. But you

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<sup>18</sup> Ambassador Ryan Crocker also attests to these contacts starting right away. He said, ‘I was on one of the first planes out of Dulles after they reopened airports following 9/11, bound for Geneva and conversations under the UN flag with the Iranians’ (Crocker, 2012)

can't just pick the terrorist group you are against and then say all the others are okay. If we are going to explore this with those countries, Syria and Iran, I think we will have to explore the entire issue of terrorist organizations or whatever. (Powell, 2001e).

In separate statement he also said:

I think some new opportunities may be presenting themselves. We have no illusions about the nature of those regimes [Iran and Syria]. They are on our list of states that sponsor terrorism. The President has made it clear, and we have made it clear to them that you can't be for one kind of terrorism and against another kind of terrorism. And so we are prepared to explore those opportunities.' (Powell, 2001f)

This language continued in the months following 9/11. On 9 November 2001 Powell said the following:

'We are willing to explore opportunities with Iran. We have made it clear that if they want to be a member in this campaign against terrorism, then it has to be against all forms of terrorism, and not just the terrorism that they happen to condemn today. They have a choice to make. And we are exploring those opportunities and those openings with Iran, and I hope to do so over the weekend at meetings in New York' (Powell, 2001g).

These statements taken together suggest that although 9/11 ushered in an era of US foreign policy, and one that scholars and commentators have retrospectively seen as damaging for the prospects of US-Iran relations (Ansari, 2006). But, from these cooperative statements, it can simultaneously be seen as bringing about a moment of contingency in how US positioned itself in relation to states such as Iran.

This notion finds support in the accounts of administration officials. Robert Danin, who was initially on the Policy Planning staff at the State Department, and then later moved to the National Security Council (NSC), argued that '9/11 created a new opportunity... [and] a new reality in which the Iranian reaction to 9/11 is noted' (interview with Danin, 2015). The point here is not that the United States would go rushing into the open arms of Iran, nor vice-versa, but that in this 'new reality' the Bush administration were 'leaving open the door to [Iranian] reform and redemption' (interview with Danin, 2015). Bush infamously stated on 21 September 2001 that,

‘Every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make. Either you are with us or you are with the terrorists’ (2001). Danin’s point is that Iran’s position in this new reality was contingent upon the choices they would subsequently make. If Iran indicated that they would respond positively to Bush’s decree then there was a chance that a new opening in the relationship could be forged. Lawrence Wilkerson, who was Powell’s Chief of Staff, (interview with Wilkerson, 2015) also held this interpretation. He argued that many in the State Department saw this confluence of interests as an opportunity to explore further areas for cooperation. This is a crucial point as it opens up the narrative of US-Iran relations in the post-9/11 context to other contingent possibilities.

For Iran’s part, they attempted to answer Powell’s concerns by showing that they were ready and willing to cooperate. In addition to hoping to unseat their regional adversary the Taliban, Iran, according to Seyed Hossein Mousavian, how at the time was Head of Foreign Relations Committee on Iran’s National Security Council, ‘wanted to look for ways to test cooperation with the Americans, thus decreasing the level of mistrust and tension between us’ (2014, p. 167). This stands in contrast to many US officials who interpreted Iran’s involvement as simply a momentary allegiance of interests (Interview 7, 2015; interview with Khalilzad, 2015). Some in the United States took the view that Iran was not interested in cooperating with the United States, but merely saw an opportunity to remove the Taliban all while exerting influence over the state-building process. Because there was this coalescence of interests it seemed to cheapen Iran’s cooperation in the eyes of some. There is little to no evidence of this being the case, particularly when viewed in light of Iran’s efforts to expand this cooperation to other issues, which will be discussed shortly. An empathic understanding of Iran may have helped Powell and others to see Iran’s cooperation here in a more positive light.

There are two distinct features to Iran’s post-9/11 cooperation with the United States concerning Afghanistan. Both of these can be seen as contingent moments where the chances for further cooperation were rife. The first was through a series of meetings with Ambassador Ryan

Crocker where the Iranians assisted in the war effort itself. And the second came in the Bonn conference in December 2001. I will briefly outline the first before discussing the second. The Iranian offer of assistance in Afghanistan came through pre-existing diplomatic channels shortly after 9/11 (Crocker, 2012; interview with Dobbins, 2015). Talks of a multi-lateral nature regarding Afghanistan had been going on under the auspices of the UN since 1996 (Crocker, 2012; Mousavian, 2014), but it was 9/11 and the subsequent invasion of Afghanistan that raised their stakes. According to Crocker, the channel had been around for some time but ‘It never was taken seriously, at least by us, until after 9/11’ (Crocker, 2012). Having had various grievances with the Taliban over the years, it was in Iran’s interest to see a stable Afghanistan emerge. According to Flynt Leverett, at the time the Middle East Director of the US National Security Council, ‘Iran had real contacts with important players in Afghanistan and were prepared to use their influence in constructive ways in coordination with the United States’ (quoted in Parsi, 2007, p. 226). Crocker began meeting in secret with Iranian diplomats from mid-September 2001 onwards (Crist, 2012, p. 429; Maloney, 2008; Parsi, 2007, p. 227). Crocker described the nature and content of the cooperation as follows:

‘The Iranian thrust was: what do you need to know to knock their blocks off? You want their order of battle? Here’s the map. You want to know where we think their weak points are? Here, here, and here. You want to know how we think they’re going to react to an air campaign? Do you want to know how we think the Northern Alliance will behave? Ask us. We’ve got the answers; we’ve been working with those guys for years.’ (Crocker, 2012)

As far as Crocker was concerned, ‘This was an unprecedented period... of U.S.- Iranian dialogue’ (Crocker, 2012).

In addition to Crocker’s channel, James Dobbins, who was designated as the Special Representative to Afghanistan, was also meeting with the Iranians. His brief had less to do with the war effort, and more with coordinating with the various groups within Afghanistan that would likely form the post-Taliban interim government. Seeing as Iran had deep connections with many

of these groups, he sought approval from Powell to speak with the Iranians (interview with Dobbins, 2015). The White House also sent a representative to these talks, indicating their approval of the process as well. The White House representative was Zalmay Khalilzad, a senior NSC Director. In these initial discussions, which were held in a variety of venues and also under the auspices of the UN, it became clear to Dobbins that ‘The Iranians were very much of the same line as we were in terms of policy substance’ (interview with Dobbins, 2015).

Despite the Iran’s positive impact upon both the intervention and state-building plans, these developments were met with resistance by some within the Bush administration (Crist, 2012, p. 430). Individuals such as Deputy Secretary of Defence, Paul Wolfowitz, and NSC Director, William Luti, objected strongly to any engagement with Iran whatsoever (Dobbins, 2008, pp. 54, 75–76). Simultaneous to Crocker’s and Dobbins’s meetings, Luti and a few other officials from Defence and the NSC were trying to arrange contacts with violent opponents of the Iranian government in a bid to undermine any potential good-will between the United States and Iran (interview with Dobbins, 2015, 2008, p. 75). Neither Dobbins nor Crocker were aware of this at the time because Luti and his team were acting without authorisation from either the White House or the State Department. Upon learning of these contacts they were shut down by Powell (Dobbins, 2008, p. 75). At this point, therefore, Powell still did have some leverage in the administration and was able to bureaucratically protect these particular tracks from being undone by spoilers.

### ***The Bonn Conference***

The months of cooperation in the two tracks with Crocker and Dobbins came to a head at the Bonn conference in December 2001. The Bonn conference was convened after weeks of work to formulate an interim government to take over from the ousted Taliban. As Dobbins recalls, going into the conference there was a clear understanding amongst all parties as to the outcome of the conference, which would be a power-sharing agreement that brought together a number of groups who had resisted the Taliban (interview with Dobbins, 2015). Unexpectedly, however, the

Northern Alliance demanded control of 18 of the 26 Afghan ministries, even though they represented only approximately 30% of the population (Dobbins, 2007, p. 2). Whilst the US attempted to negotiate for less, the Northern Alliance would not concede. Dobbins's account, which he gave in testimony to the House Subcommittee on National Security and Foreign Affairs in 2007, states that it was only through the efforts of the Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister, Javad Zarif, that the Northern Alliance was convinced to change their mind and accept the US proposal for government (2007, p. 2). As Dobbins put it, 'Zarif had achieved the final breakthrough without which the Karzai government might never have been formed' (2007, 2010). As both Dobbins and Khalilzad have since argued, which corresponds with the interviews they both gave me, 'The Bonn agreement...was the apogee of this cooperation, and it would have been difficult, if not impossible, to achieve without Iran's support' (Khalilzad and Dobbins, 2016).

After these various rounds of engagement, then, the situation seemed ripe for both the United States and Iran to explore other areas where they could cooperate. Powell seemed recognised as such, stating shortly after the Bonn conference that Bonn:

'On Iran...I am open to explore opportunities. We have been in discussions with the Iranians on a variety of levels and in some new ways since September 11. Jim Dobbins spoke with Iranians in Bonn as we put together the new interim administration in Afghanistan, and I had a brief handshake and discussion with the Iranian Prime Minister in the UN. So there are a number of things going on' (Powell, 2001h, see also 2001b).

Dobbins and Crocker were not authorised to discuss broader issues about US-Iran relations, and nor were their interlocutors (Mousavian, 2014, pp. 166–167). But, according to Trita Parsi, 'a tight-knit group around Powell had prepared a secret comprehensive package...to offer the Iranians' (Parsi, 2007, p. 228). Parsi does not offer any details regarding this, and I was not able to unearth anything in my interviews, beyond the fact that there was genuine interest within the State Department concerning the possibility of exploring other avenues for cooperation (interview with Danin, 2015; interview with Wilkerson, 2015). The notion behind this was not that the United States and Iran stood at the precipice of a new partnership as allies. But rather that 'the United

States and Iran could expand their intelligence-sharing cooperation and coordinate more robust border sweeps to capture al-Qaeda fighters who were fleeing into Pakistan and Iran' (Parsi, 2007, p. 228). It seems, therefore, that Powell and others around him in the State Department like Dobbins and Crocker exhibited empathy, albeit to varying degrees, towards Iran.

The period between September 2001 and January 2002 saw the most sustained and fruitful dialogue and cooperation between Iran and the United States since before the Islamic revolution in 1979. Like many of these windows of cooperation, it was 'undone by terrorism' (Tirman, 2009, p. 534), or at least accusations of terrorism. In mid-January, a ship named *Karine A* that was headed to Gaza was detained by Israel in international waters. The vessel contained weapons that Israel claimed were still in factory wrapping and marked as having been produced in Iran (Parsi, 2007, p. 233). Israeli officials paraded the haul on television and claimed that Iran were trying to arm the Palestinian Authority and caught them red-handed. The Iranians denied having any connection with it at all. To the Iranians the entire affair was a ruse (Parsi, 2007, p. 234). According to Zarif, 'in a matter of a few days, a policy of cooperation was transformed into a policy of confrontation...*Karine A* continues to be a mystery that happened at an exactly opportune moment for those who wanted to prevent US-Iran engagement' (quoted in Parsi, 2007, p. 234) Even US officials have speculated about this event, with Wilkerson saying that 'subsequently, we have all pondered on whether it was a hoax or not' (quoted in Parsi, 2007, p. 234)

The *Karine A* incident put the issue of state-support for terrorism at the front and centre of debates concerning US-Iran relations. These allegations arguably set US-Iran relations back and re-established in the American mind Iranian connections with terrorism. As Rice said at the time, 'Iran's direct support of terrorism...belie any good intentions it displayed in the days after the world's worst terrorist attacks in history' (Rice, 2002). However, given the good will and forthcoming cooperation exhibited by the Iranian government in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, it is not unreasonable to ask questions about how the United States might have responded



differently to these events. The point here is not that US officials should have questioned the veracity of Israel's claims, but rather that they could have conceivably de-linked the Iran they had been cooperating with in Afghanistan and Bonn from the Iran that sent these weapons to Gaza. This takes no great leap in imagination, because the majority of Bush administration officials I interviewed drew a sharp distinction between the Iranian government, represented by the President, the Foreign Ministry, and the Iranian National Security Council on the one hand, and the intelligence services and Revolutionary Guard on the other (e.g. interview with Khalilzad, 2015; interview with Pillar, 2015; interview with Wilkerson, 2015). Many of them believed that it was highly likely that the Iranian government did not know about Karine A at all. This empathic capacity to appreciate different domestic political contexts could have gone a long way to forestalling this issue from derailing cooperation.

This is further underscored by the fact Iran were seeking further cooperation with the United States simultaneous to these revelations. As Dobbins, recalls, a few days after the Karine A incident, he was approached at a conference by an Iranian diplomat who expressed Iran's readiness to begin talks beyond just the issue of Afghanistan (interview with Dobbins, 2015, 2007) Dobbins reported this back to Powell, who seemed interested in the proposal, but afterwards became unaware of anyone acting upon it (interview with Dobbins, 2015). Similarly, two months later in Geneva, at a meeting regarding Afghanistan, an Iranian General proposed that Iran could contribute to a US led effort to build an Afghan national army. 'We're prepared to house and train up to 20,000 troops in a broader program under American leadership', Dobbins cites the general as saying (2007). After briefing Rice, Powell and Rumsfeld on this offer, Dobbins states that 'the issue was never again discussed, and the Iranians never received a response' (2007). A more empathic Powell could have pushed harder on these issues, and could have suggested that the Bush administration respond positively in some way, even if only a small and private gesture. Because of the Israel issue, it would have likely been too costly to do anything publicly. But there is no evidence that such a question was asked at any point during this period. The quite unique feature

about Iran's assistance was the fact that it came with – as far as we are aware – no attached preconditions. Accounts of those involved at the time show how the Iranian interlocutors consistently expressed a desire to explore cooperation and dialogue in other areas beyond the issue of Afghanistan (Dobbins, 2007, 2010). Under Powell's direction, the US State department could have feasibly explored how other outstanding issues with Iran could have been brought into the fold, either using the Geneva channel itself or through opening a further back-channel working-group to explore the potential for cooperation in other areas. The Bush administration had expressed on a number of occasions concerns relating to Iran's alleged development of WMD, and were already making the links between terrorism, WMD, and 'rogue states' that came to dominate Bush's foreign policy. With a seemingly conciliatory Iran that was domestically poised for at the very least exploring other issues, the United States could have used this occasion to discuss this issue. This is a core point of my counterfactual criteria. The increase of empathy does not change the interests and preferences of the actors in question; it simply reshapes the range of options through which those interests are achievable.

The notion that this was not possible because of the overarching neoconservative structure is ill-founded. Numerous accounts attest to the fact that Bush himself had no fixed position on this issue. Though Bush has become synonymously connected to neo-conservatism and an aggressive foreign policy, it has been strongly argued that this had more to do with his advisors than it did with his own policy formulations. David Crist, for instance, has argued that although 'Bush fashioned himself as a decisive captain', in reality he 'avoided making stark choices. Detractors and advisers alike who worked in the White House agreed that the president wanted his subordinates to form a consensus on foreign policy and then present the decider with a single course of action' (2012, p. 421). Crist also quotes Bolton as saying 'there was breakdown in the national security decision-making function. Understanding the president's managerial style, Condi did not want to present disagreements to the president' (quoted in 2012, pp. 442–443). Pollack et

al take a broader view of the administration, and argue that it was not just down to Bush's indecisiveness: As they argue:

‘the Bush 43 administration had no explicit policy toward Tehran for its first two to three years. The administration simply did not know what to do about Iran and relegated it to the “too hard box”, which led to crosswise tactical decisions’ (Pollack et al., 2009, p. 2)

This inability to agree on a central policy does not suggest, however, that there was not strong resistance from others in the administration. While Powell, Dobbins, and Crocker, amongst others (Haass, 2010, p. 176) sought to explore whether cooperation could be expanded, others in the administration resisted this. Indicative of this, when Rice sent out draft of talking points on Iran, in an effort to get a concrete policy, one Defence Department official replied that cooperation would ‘undercut our policy of rejection of the Iranian regime’s legitimacy... We don’t want stories in the press about reconciliation (quoted in Crist, 2012).’

### ***The Axis of Evil***

The next moment of contingency came in one of the most significant events in the Bush administration’s tenure; the first State of the Union address, where Bush labelled Iran as part of an Axis of Evil (Bush, 2002). What makes this event particularly interesting is the relationship between the impact of the event itself on the chances for further cooperation, and failure of those involved to realise the potency and significance of this phrasing. A number of accounts suggest that the phrase was not seen a major part of the speech. It was coined by speechwriters David Frum and Michael Geerson, but was largely overlooked by the bureaucracy (Draper, 2008; Frum, 2003; Rice, 2012). Given an increase in the empathic intensity of Powell, it is plausible that he may have advocated more adamantly that this phrase not be used. Here, therefore, an increase in empathy does not create new avenues for cooperation as much as it simply attunes officials to potential spoilers to cooperation.

But despite this impact, it is easy to imagine this phrase not being uttered at all. As Rice recalls:

‘The substance of the sentence was unremarkable, but the phrase “axis of evil,” which was, in fact, inserted by a speechwriter, was only meant to vivify the point that certain kinds of regimes with WMD might transfer those weapons to terrorists. I don’t remember a great deal of focus on the phrase during the speechwriting process. Steve and I had talked about whether “evil” sounded too dire but didn’t think at all about “axis” and the fact that it might be over-interpreted to mean an alliance of rogue states’ (Rice, 2012)

Rice, it seems, was more concerned with the impact of another aspect of the speech. The State of the Union also talked about democracy and the rights of women in the Middle East, and how US allies in the region were not doing enough in this regard. Indeed, Rice was so concerned about this aspect that she called the Saudi Ambassador in advance so they weren’t blindsided by this (Draper, 2008, p. 169). As Rice told Slavin a few years later, ‘what is funny is it is that [that phrase] didn’t really catch my eye’ (quoted in Slavin, 2009, p. 12). Importantly, she noted that, ‘The idea that it was some kind of conscious phrase that was supposed to describe a policy shift is just not right’ (quoted in Slavin, 2009, p. 200).

The writers of the speech were under no direction to make any points about Iran. One of the main thrusts of the speech was to draw the connection between Iraq’s support for terrorism and their WMD programs (Pollack, 2005, p. 352; see also Woodward, 2004). The term ‘Axis of Evil’ was discussed by the speechwriters, who, as one recalls, ‘knowing they had come up with a great line...needed a third country to make up the axis’ (quoted in Pollack, 2005, p. 352). This is crucial to the contingency of this event, because it shows that it was not a coordinated move that came from any policy-discussions. Bush ultimately liked the phrasing and decided to use it, but, as Draper has argued, ‘No one, from Bush on own, thought it do be anything other than a catchy way of describing the relationship between terrorists and three rogue nations’ (Draper, 2008). Richard Haass, who was the Director for Policy Planning in the State Department, similarly recalls that ‘We all underestimated the impact those words would have’ (Haass, 2010, p. 205).

What is clear is that the speech cleared Powell's desk. As one senior Bush administration official noted, the 'State of the Union speech is one of the most tightly controlled documents around. It would have passed Powell's desk' (Interview 7, 2015). What Powell ultimately made of it is less clear. The Deputy Secretary of State, Richard Armitage, states that the phrase just past by him. He didn't read too much into it:

"Yeah, the axis of evil. ... Both Secretary Powell and I saw that speech, and we had several suggestions, changes. But I must say the axis of evil, speaking for me, it just flew by. I didn't take it as sort of a menu of nations to be attacked or anything of that nature. It seemed a rather accurate description, not unlike Ronald Reagan's description of the Soviet empire one time as an "evil empire." I guess this was something that I wasn't attentive enough to." (Armitage, 2007)

But if Powell's empathic intensity is increased in a counterfactual re-write then it seems hard not to suggest that this phrasing would have been raised. The empathic capacity in operation here would be Iran's sensitivity to notions of dignity and respect, and a more empathic Powell would have surely realised that this language was highly problematic in this regard. Comparing his earlier statements that I highlighted in the previous section is instructive, as the language of Bush's State of the Union compares unfavourably to the more cooperative language that Powell had been using. Moreover, the fact that not much stock was put into the 'Axis of Evil' term, it can be argued that an empathically motivated Powell could have influenced whether this phrase made it into the speech. How the US-Iran relationship in early 2002 would have looked without the axis of evil speech is a tantalising prospect. Diplomatically it offended the Iranian government which had been trying to negotiate with the United States and push for greater interaction (Kharrazi, 2004). In the Iranian foreign policy establishment there was a sense of shock regarding this language. As the Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi stated in a 2004 interview: 'It was very strange for us and shocked everyone why Americans after all this cooperation in Afghanistan come up with this notion of the 'axis of evil.' Everyone was shocked.' (Kharrazi, 2004). Crocker's Geneva meetings were temporarily suspended by the Iranians, and when they did resume the same significance was

not given to them by his Iranian counterparts as prior to the speech (Crocker, 2012; Pollack, 2005, p. 353). ‘Just as things were starting to get really interesting’, one senior administration said, the wind was taken out of Geneva talks (Pollack, 2005, p. 353)

The speech also had the opposite of its intended effect politically in Iran. Instead of putting the conservative elements of the regime on watch, and strengthening the hand of the reformists, it fed the conservative critique that the reformers were dealing with a duplicitous US regime that could not be trusted. It made Khatami and others look naïve for even countenancing the idea of cooperation. By scorning the reformists the United States effectively made them look foolish in ever trying to cooperate with the ‘Great Satan’. As David Dunn has likewise argued, the impact of the ‘axis of evil’ categorization....was to strengthen considerably the position of the conservative nationalists in Iran, culminating ultimately in the election of a new and hard-line president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, in July 2005’ (2007, p. 23). Ray Takeyh concurs, writing that ‘In his 2002 State of the Union Address, President Bush effectively closed off the possibility of a new chapter in US-Iranian relations’ (2007, p. 128).

This section has shown that the contingent possibilities for cooperation were at their strongest in the immediate months following the 9/11 attacks. If, at this point, Powell, had exhibited greater empathic capacity in relation to both Iran’s cooperative behaviour and its domestic political context, then perhaps the United States could have taken the steps to reassure Iran and go some way to mitigating the security dilemma dynamics that fuelled the conflict between the two states. This would have been possible because the bureaucratic and political ordering principles that would come to define the Bush administration were still in their latent stages in this immediate post-9/11 context. This has been missed by much of the literature on US foreign policy in this period, which tends to overstate the extent of neo-conservatism’s status as an overarching political structure through which every policy area was viewed. As Adam Quinn has observed, on ‘lifting the bonnet of an administration’ it is fascinating to ‘realise just how much

difference in fact existed within what often took on the surface appearance of a coherent whole' (2013, p. 280). The significance of highlighting this point is that it allows us to see this period as more contingent and malleable than otherwise assumed.

### **The Beginnings of the Nuclear Impasse**

This section links the two counterfactual interventions but does not make one of its own. There were no efforts here by either party to engage the other, and no talks between the US and Iran apart from continued low-level discussions regarding Afghanistan and, increasingly, Iraq. The purpose of this section, therefore, is to simply outline the changing context in which these episodes took place. It is important to do so because of revelations concerning Iran's nuclear program that emerged in August 2002. While Iran's broad WMD program was an issue of concern for many prior to this date, the August 2002 disclosures mark the beginning of the Iran nuclear crisis in earnest. It was not until Autumn 2003 that negotiations on this issue began. For this reason, and because the United States did not participate them, they are not discussed in the thesis.

By August 2002, US-Iran relations were still yet to fully recover from Bush's State of the Union address. What ground had been made up, however, was to be undone by revelations which dramatically shifted the trajectory of US-Iran relations. On 14 August, an Iranian dissident group, Mojahedin-e Khalk (MEK), held a press conference in Washington D.C. during which they made public the status of a number of previously undisclosed nuclear facilities in Iran (Patrikarakos, 2012, p. 176). While this information was not new to either the IAEA, the United States, or European intelligence agencies, and nor was it in the abstract fatal evidence of any Iranian wrongdoing, the fact that it was publicly declared set off a process of inspections, verification and diplomatic activity that we now know as the Iranian Nuclear Crisis.

Following this announcement, Mohamed ElBaradei, the then Director General of the IAEA, contacted Iran in order to visit and inspect these disclosed facilities. After having an October 2002 visit cancelled by Iran, ElBaradei did not eventually visit Iran until February 2013 (ElBaradei, 2012, p. 113; Alexander and Hoenig, 2007, p. 119). During this visit, ElBaradei was assured by various officials, including Khatami, that Iran had not violated their safeguards agreement as nuclear materials had not been introduced during centrifuge testing.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, he was told that all of their centrifuges were indigenously designed and created (ElBaradei, 2012, pp. 114–115). Shortly after the visit, open source intelligence led the IAEA to an undisclosed facility called the Kalaye Electric Company (KEC). Although it was not listed as a nuclear facility, upon inspection it was revealed to be a centrifuge workshop. Iran, yet again, said no nuclear materials were introduced (interview with Heinonen, 2015; ElBaradei, 2012, p. 116; Alexander and Hoenig, 2007, p. 120).

However, between February and October 2003, Iran took a number of steps to conceal aspects of its nuclear programme. For instance, IAEA access to the KEC was denied in February under the premise that it was not a nuclear facility. When IAEA inspectors did visit in March they were refused permission to take samples from the centrifuges, and it was not until August 2003 that samples were finally allowed to be taken (interview with Heinonen, 2015). Upon inspection, traces of nuclear materials were detected from the KEC. When confronted with this information, the Iranians changed their story, now stating that the centrifuges were imported and the detected uranium must be from contamination elsewhere (ElBaradei, 2012, pp. 117–118). Additionally, IAEA inspectors noted that undeclared nuclear materials began showing up, such as natural uranium imported from China, and three cylinders of uranium gas found in storage. When one cylinder was found to have some gas missing, Iran stated that it must have accidentally leaked. It

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<sup>19</sup> An IAEA mechanism for ensuring that nuclear materials are not diverted from peaceful uses. Iran completed and ratified its agreement with the IAEA in 1974 (IAEA, 1974)



was later discovered that this gas was used in centrifuge testing at the KEC (ElBaradei, 2012, p. 117; Patrikarakos, 2012).

The impact that this had upon Iran's relationship with the US government, and how it may have affected their continued attempts to reach out to America is an important element in this narrative. Arguably, it only contributed to the notion that was made explicit in Bush's Axis of Evil Speech, while undermining those in the administration that expressed a more empathic and cooperative approach to Iran. In the context of the war on terror, and particularly considering the nexus drawn between terrorism, rogue states and weapons of mass-destruction, the US clearly saw the threat from Iran as significant. As Steven Wright argues, a strict reading of the Bush doctrine and its accompanying documentation, such as the 2002 National Security Strategy and the 2002 National Strategy to Combat Weapons of Mass Destruction, would without question posit Iran as a significant threat to the security of the United States (Wright, 2007, p. 199). Although Iran eventually agreed to provide something resembling a full picture of their past activities in October 2003, in doing so they argued their actions were necessitated by the US's "illegitimate sanctions" that "targeted...Iran's legitimate nuclear programme" (Zarif, 2003)<sup>20</sup>.

However, these developments should not be taken out of the context of the anti-Iran rhetoric coming from the United States. It has been well documented how some individuals within the Bush administration favoured regime change over dialogue with Iran. This became a point of contention within the Executive branch with many in the State Department favouring diplomacy and dialogue, and others in the Department of Defence adopting a stronger approach that sought to undermine the regime. For example, according to David Crist, the Defence Department circulated a memo stating that it 'takes a strong position on regime change and sees very little value in continuing any engagement with Iran' (quoted in Crist, 2012, p. 445). Furthermore, Iran also had

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<sup>20</sup> After the Iranian revolution ongoing contracts to build nuclear plants with French and German companies were halted under pressure from the US (Zarif, 2007, p. 81). In the 1990s Iran turned to China and Russia to form cooperative nuclear agreements, but China eventually yielded to US pressure also.

reason to fear referral to the UNSC. In November 2003, the IAEA stated that, ‘To date, there is no evidence that the previously undeclared nuclear material and activities...were related to a nuclear weapons programme’ (IAEA, 2003). In response, John Bolton claimed that ‘this was simply impossible to believe’ (quoted in Bowen and Kidd, 2004, p. 271), arguing that Iran must have a secret weapons programme. In addition, Ken Brill, the US ambassador to the IAEA, stated that there is “no doubt” that Iran was in “non-compliance with its safeguards obligations”, indicating that the IAEA had no choice but to refer them to the UNSC (quoted in Bowen and Kidd, 2004, p. 271). As Bowen and Kidd argue, which ElBaradei also attests to, the US effectively lobbied the IAEA to find Iran in non-compliance, regardless of the lack of evidence which suggested this (Bowen and Kidd, 2004, p. 268; ElBaradei, 2012, pp. 122–123). According to Mousavian, ‘Iran’s policymakers were suspicious and concerned that even if Iran cooperated with the IAEA... the US might use Iranian disclosures about past activities to justify proceeding with reporting Iran’s case to the UNSC’ (2012, p. 96). The view in Iran was that whether they chose disclosure or concealment, ‘Both seemed to lead to New York’ (Mousavian, 2012, p. 96).

### **The ‘Roadmap’ Proposal**

These nuclear disclosures are part of the broader context in which the next major development occurred. In this section I look at the ‘Roadmap’ proposal of May 2003, and ask whether it amounts to a missed opportunity or not. The argument I make here is that Powell’s ability to operate within the bureaucracy had severely diminished. Even if, therefore, we counterfactual re-imagine him with more empathic intensity in this context, the chances that this could have had an impact upon the broader context are slim.

As the Geneva channel closed, and Iranian offers to assist in the Iraq invasion were rejected, Iran gave their engagement efforts one more roll of the dice. What materialised was the most significant and fear-reaching negotiating proposal that either had suggested up to this point. It was

leaked in 2007, and is therefore in the public realm (Kessler, 2006). In late April 2003, Sadeq Kharrazi, Iran's ambassador to France, met with the Swiss ambassador to Tehran, Tim Guldemann. The Swiss represent US interests in Iran and are the official channel for communication between the United States and Iran. At this meeting, Kharrazi reportedly expressed the Iranian government's willingness to offer a comprehensive proposal for negotiations to the US (Crist, 2012, p. 476). Over the next few weeks, Kharrazi met with the Supreme Leader and President Khatami a number of times to develop this proposal. Once a draft was complete, Zarif, who was by now Iran's ambassador to the UN, reviewed it before it was sent via the Swiss to the US State Department (Crist, 2012, pp. 476–477; Parsi, 2007, pp. 243–4). The proposal stated that Iran would agree to full transparency over their nuclear programme, and work towards the demilitarization of Hezbollah (Government of Iran, 2003). In return, Iran wanted the United States to stop trying to change Iran's political system, recognise its 'legitimate security interests in the region', and to hand over dissident members of an anti-Iranian terrorist group the US were holding (Government of Iran, 2003). The proposal then laid out a 'roadmap' for achieving this, stating they could begin with issuing a joint statement, and moving to direct meetings and establishing working groups (Government of Iran, 2003). Guldemann included a cover letter with the proposal detailing his meetings with Kharrazi, outlining that Kharrazi 'told me that he had two long discussions with the Leader on the Roadmap' (Government of Iran, 2003).

The reaction of the Bush administration was, and still is in retrospect, decidedly mixed. According to Flynt Leverett, the proposal stunned many in the State Department as 'The Iranians acknowledged that WMD and support for terror were serious causes of concern for us' (quoted in Parsi, 2007, p. 244). However, others were less enthusiastic. John Bolton argued that, 'They used diplomacy-stalling techniques' and that 'This was little more than a rouse to buy more time for their nefarious activities and nuclear weapons programme' (quoted in Crist, 2012, p. 478). In a later interview, he repeated this, stating that Iran's goal was to get "more time to do what it's been busily doing in a clandestine fashion for close to twenty years" (Bolton, 2007). Upon seeing the

proposal, Bolton's initial response was to phone the Swiss Embassy demanding that Guldemann be dismissed for over-stepping his mandate (Crist, 2012, p. 476). Even individuals such as Richard Armitage, who previously had advocated limited dialogue, were sceptical of the letter's legitimacy (Armitage, 2007). Armitage has since reversed his position. Stating that if he knew what he now does, "Yes, I would have taken it far more seriously" (Crist, 2012, p. 479).

Following the receipt of the letter, a number of internal discussions in the State Department took place between Powell and Wilkerson over how, if at all, to respond to the letter (interview with Wilkerson, 2015). They agreed to take it to Rice in the White House, where she deemed it sufficiently interesting to raise it with Bush. Upon reaching this level, however, it hit a roadblock. Rice, Powell, Bush, Cheney all meet to discuss the Iranian letter (interview with Wilkerson, 2015), but at this meeting Cheney promptly shut it down, arguing that Iran was only making this offer out of weakness. The striking feature of this episode was not so much that the proposal was viewed with suspicion and even pessimism. Given the nature of the conflict this may be expected. But, rather, that this belief system inhibited these decision-makers from even seeking to clarify the origins and the intentions of this overture. If they had done so, evidence suggests, they would have learnt of the proposal's legitimacy. But instead of contacting Guldemann to discuss the proposal, Cheney and Rumsfeld's response to this invitation to talk was simply, 'We don't speak to evil' (quoted in Corera, 2006; interview with Wilkerson, 2015).

In this time the bureaucratic context shifted. The neo-conservatives had won the argument that engagement with Iran was undesirable, and were even laying the ground for regime change (Haass, 2010, p. 176). The perception became that Iran was now hanging by a thread, and that any type of engagement would just legitimise the regime and delay the inevitable. As an August 2002 letter from Rumsfeld to Bush attests:

'I believe that the situations in Iran and North Korea are sufficiently interesting and unsettled that fashioning a major US government effort, for the most part confidential,

to undermine the current regimes and encourage regime change from within is worth consideration' (quoted in Crist, 2012, p. 446) (Crist 446)

Haass recalls that Powell's place in the bureaucracy had diminished in comparison to Rumsfeld, Cheney, and Rice, who all had the ear of the president in a far more informal way. In his Memoir, Haass argues that 'I am not too sure the president and those around him trusted Powell all that much. Powell was too popular, too moderate, and too independent for their taste' (2010, p. 185).

He goes on:

Rumsfeld, Cheney, and Rice would hand around with the president and engage in West Wing bull sessions; Powell tended not to. The president, who didn't have close ties to either Cheney or Rumsfeld at the outset, over time developed them, but not with Powell, who president felt did not respond to his overtures. Whatever the reason or reasons, the bottom line is that George W. Bush and Colin Powell never forged the sort of close relationship that is essential if a secretary of state is to succeed' (Haass, 2010, p. 185).

This context proved uncondusive to Iranian efforts at engagement, no matter how grand they may have been.

Given this context, it is questionable that this episode, as significant as it was, amounts to a missed opportunity. As has been argued, a missed opportunity requires a plausible alteration to the historical record; it requires showing that something else could have plausibly emanated from the counterfactual intervention. It is difficult, however, to see how this would have been the case. Much has been said about the response to the letter, and how they could have at least warranted it with a response of some kind. However, what underpinned much of the apathy towards this outreach was the idea that Iran was acting through weakness and isolation and not through an ingrained desire to change the nature of the relationship. The letter was effectively de-linked from the recent history of US-Iran relations, which suggested that Iran was in a unique position in that it was being conciliatory without asking for anything in return. The view that Iran were acting from weakness is also offered by Allin and Simon, who state that 'any Iranian readiness for talks was inspired by the presence of victorious American troops on Iran's border' (2016, p. 38). Even Parsi,

who argues that this was a missed opportunity, has summed up Iran's calculations as thus: 'Figuring that the regime's very existence was at stake, the Iranians put everything on the table' (2007, p. 243).

The letter has been categorised by the public debate and literature in a number of ways. The first has been to underscore the ambiguity of the contents and to express doubt in its legitimacy (Bolton, 2007; Rubin, 2015, n.d.). Though it is perhaps undeniable that the invasion of Iraq did create fear in Tehran, it is a tenuous link at best to relate this directly to the May 2003 offer. Firstly, Iran had been making attempts to establish similar cooperation since October 2001; and secondly, it does not follow that Iran would put the two defining issues which have separated these two governments, terrorism and nuclear weapons, on the table because of this. Stating that Iran only came to the table out of weakness and desperation is akin to the 'bad-faith thinking' US administration officials have exhibited in relation to Iranian overtures. There is a distinct difference between actions taken out of fear, and actions taken out of what Leverett described as a realisation of the "serious causes" of this US mistrust and hostility. Thus, what this case displays is a clear example of Kharrazi, Khatami and Zarif, and potentially even the Supreme Leader, realising that Iran's own actions did not exist outside the context of the US-Iran conflict, but directly contributed to the mistrust and hostility in equal measure. If this interpretation is correct then the May 2003 letter can be seen as nothing less than a stunning display of security dilemma sensibility.

What seems clear is that by the time Iran send the Roadmap proposal in May 2003, these contingent possibilities had begun to slip away. As the bureaucratic battles were won by those opposed to engaging Iran, the room for empathic individuals to operate within the bureaucracy of the Bush administration was significantly lessened. This does not make the counterfactual intervention – an increase in empathic intensity on the part of Powell – invalid, but it does suggest that there would have been no relationship between this alteration and the theorised consequent. There were still pro-engagement individuals within the government, but their ability affect change

was limited. This is seen in the accounts of many on the pro-engagement side, who saw their agency slowly taken away as individuals such as Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld began to coordinate almost every area of foreign policy. As one pro-engagement interviewee recalls, the reason this contingency receded was not to do with a lack of appetite from certain individuals, but more with how Cheney in particular managed to exert control upon the bureaucracy (interview with Wilkerson, 2015). The finding, therefore, is that increasing the empathic intensity of Powell would have made little difference in terms of mitigating security dilemma dynamics between the United States and Iran. Short of replacing Cheney, Rumsfeld and many of their deputies, it is difficult to see how this example amounts to the missed opportunity that many make it out to be (Parsi, 2007; Slavin, 2009). As I've argued, for the missed opportunities narrative to be taken seriously it has to be able to show the realistic paths to cooperation that could have been taken. In the case of the May 2003 letter I argue that, despite Iran's apparent sincerity, no such pathway existed. The result of this episode was that it hardened Iran's resolve, and made the position of reformers such as Khatami all the more untenable. As Mousavian has characterised it, 'The absence of a response to Iran in 2003 convinced Tehran that Washington was not sincere in its stated desire for rapprochement.' (2012, p. 65)

## **Conclusion**

Two main conclusions can be drawn from this chapter. The first relates to the specific episodes themselves. In the 2001-2002 period, I argue that opportunities for cooperation between Iran and the United States were missed. This is because a plausible increase in the empathic intensity - and as a result the empathic capacities of Powell (who displayed some empathy in this period in relation to Iran) - could have contributed to increased cooperation. This argument was made by showing how contingent the development of US foreign policy towards Iran during this period truly was. The 9/11 attacks created both the reasoning behind the Bush administration's emphasis on regime change that came to dominate his presidency, but, paradoxically, they also engendered

of the most significant and sustained periods of cooperation between the United States and Iran in their history. It's important to recognise the contingency of this particular time, rather than painting the entire Bush period with the broad-brush of Neo-conservatism. By looking at the debate over US policy towards Iran, I showed that there was a considerable push for more concerted engagement with Iran at certain points. With a plausible increase in empathy, it can be argued that many of the steps the Bush administration took to undo this limited cooperation might have been averted. This argument does not, however, extend for the whole 2001-2003 period. While there was a moment of contingency post-9/11, by the time Iran sends the Roadmap proposal in May 2003, this is no longer the case. By this time, these bureaucratic structures and ordering principles had become engrained into the administration's policy processes, and the ability for a lone empathic voice – particularly one that came from the State Department – to cut through this context should be considered unlikely. Contrary to the popular belief that this was a genuine missed opportunity (Parsi, 2007; Slavin, 2009), I have shown by using the counterfactual method that in-fact no such opportunity existed.



## Chapter 5: US foreign policy towards Iran, 2009-2010

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The election of Barack Obama in November 2008 was seen by many at the time as a potential watershed moment in US relations with Iran (Borger, 2009a; Stein, 2009; Tavernise, 2008; Tisdall, 2009). During the campaign Obama repeatedly stated that his administration would seek to engage Iran and enter into dialogue without preconditions (Interview with Kurtzer, 2015; New York Times, 2007; Obama, 2007, 2008), distancing himself from both his electoral challengers (Associated Press, 2007) and from what he saw as the rigid and counterproductive policies of the Bush administration (Patrikarakos, 2012, p. 244; Sestanovich, 2014, pp. 412–413; Solomon, 2016). Through the early months of his presidency Obama succeeded in sounding a different note on Iran and rolling out a strategy predicated upon positive engagement. Obama and Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the Iranian Supreme Leader, exchanged letters in a historic first for holders of these two offices; the United States went some way towards recognising Iran's civilian nuclear rights by dropping the Bush-era precondition that Iran suspend all nuclear activities prior to negotiation; and high-ranking American and Iranian officials engaged in their first bilateral meeting since before the 1979 Iranian revolution (Borger, 2009a, 2009b; Mann, 2012, p. 194; Parsi, 2012; Solomon, 2009; Tait and MacAskill, 2009).

This sense of optimism was, however, short lived. In November 2009, a deal that would have seen Iran ship much of their stockpile of low-enriched uranium (LEU) out of the country, in exchange for nuclear fuel needed for their Tehran Research Reactor (hereafter the TRR deal or TRR proposal), collapsed. Following this, the Obama administration abruptly abandoned their engagement efforts and instead turned towards galvanising support for another round of United Nations Security Council (UNSC) sanctions against Iran. As the first year of Obama's presidency expired, the administration argued that they had exhausted their engagement strategy, leaving them

with no option but to exert greater coercive pressure on Iran (Interview 6, 2015; Poneman, 2010a, 2010b, US Department of State, 2009b, 2010). While still hoping, ostensibly at least, to achieve a diplomatic solution to the Iran nuclear issue, US officials calculated that this would only be possible if the United States increased its leverage over Iran by seeking further sanctions and refusing to take the option of military action off the table (Gates, 2014, p. 391; Goldberg, 2012; Ross, 2015). By early-to-mid 2010 it appeared as though the prospects for of any ‘new way forward’ (Obama, 2009a) with Iran in the near-term had given-way to the familiar logics of coercive pressure (Cohen, 2010; Interview 1 2015; Leverett and Leverett, 2013; interview with Limbert, 2015a; Marashi, 2010; Parsi, 2012). This shift culminated in the suspension of efforts to engage Iran in early 2010, followed by the passing of UNSC resolution 1929 which imposed further sanctions on Iran in June 2010 (United Nations Security Council, 2010). It would be at least another two years until the United States and Iran were again able to engage in serious and substantive talks on the nuclear issue.

This chapter explores US foreign policy towards Iran during these first twelve months of Obama’s presidency. Continuing with the thesis’s central exploration of the role of empathy in breaking out of security dilemma dynamics, it asks the counterfactual question of whether greater empathy from key Obama administration officials towards Iran could have altered the prospects for cooperation during this period. Put another way, would greater empathy from key US actors have led to the beginnings of cooperation? Or, alternatively, would a counterfactual re-write of this kind have ultimately changed little in terms of the levels of hostility between the two sides? Would this have led to some form of limited cooperation, as some IR theorists might expect, or would this counterfactual re-write have ultimately changed little about the events briefly described above? The chapter’s purpose, consequently, is not solely to narrate the key events of the Obama administration’s interactions with Iran during this period, but to explore how contingent or not these events and interactions were on the empathy – or lack thereof, as the case may be – of Obama and his closest advisors.

This chapter argues that while greater empathy would have increased the prospects for cooperation at certain instances during this period, this cannot be said for all of Obama's first year in office. The argument, therefore, is made in two parts. The first is that increasing Obama's empathic intensity – and the potential manifestation of this in increased empathic capacities (see Chapter 2 for a discussion of these terms) in the period between January and August 2009 – would have made little difference to the prospects for cooperation. This is due to a multitude of factors, ranging from a deep-seated uncertainty within the administration of *how* exactly to engage Iran, turmoil within Iran caused by the disputed June presidential election, and Obama's prioritisation of a radical domestic agenda over any potentially costly foreign entanglements. Furthermore, it is during these early-months that we find Obama and his team at their most empathic and thus the scope for increasing the US president's empathic intensity is more constrained than some of his critics have suggested.

From September 2009 to February 2010 however, the chapter changes track and argues that greater empathy from Obama and other key US decision-makers would have positively impacted upon the prospects for cooperation. However, I argue that Obama's empathic intensity lowered during this period as the clock continued to tick on his controversial engagement plan. Yet, this lowering of the president's empathy occurred at the same time as a new opportunity for cooperation on the nuclear issue materialised. Given this context, several alternative pathways stem from this plausible increase in the empathic intensities of US decision-makers, that could have plausibly led to a cooperation on the nuclear issue being achieved. Simply put, the contingent possibilities of this later period were far greater than those of the first six months. By exploring these alternative pathways, the chapter argues that this confluence of events, combined with the growing empathic deficit of Obama and key decision-makers around him, led to an important opportunity for cooperation being missed.

### **The making of the engagement strategy: January–July 2009**

This section explores the making and implementation of the Obama administration's engagement strategy towards Iran during their first six months in office. As well as providing the empirical substance to the thesis's central argument, this section also justifies the legitimacy of the counterfactual scenario itself. This is done by highlighting the empirical evidence that suggests an increase in empathic intensity on the part of key US decision-makers is a plausible counterfactual intervention to make. Briefly, these sites of contingency are, first, the pre-existence of certain empathic capacities on the part of Obama and other US decision-makers towards Iran; and second, the emphasis Obama gave to establishing cooperation with Iran on at least some of the issues that divided the two states in 2009 (interview with Kurtzer, 2015; interview with Ross, 2016; interview with Samore, 2015).

Briefly, the argument made here is that there was precious little more that the Obama administration could have done to get cooperation going with Iran during this time, regardless of the counterfactual intervention. This conclusion has been reached for two reasons. The first is that Obama and other members of his core team were already operating with historically high levels of empathy for US officials when it came to Iran. While this empathy was still limited both in its intensity and its scope, it was nevertheless unprecedented when considered in the context of the tumultuous history of US-Iran relations. Consequently, the scope for the counterfactual intervention is relatively small in comparison to other time periods in the relationship. The second reason is that the Obama administration were heavily restricted in the early months by a multitude of situational factors and competing considerations in their ability to implement even costlier diplomatic signals. Chief among these were the lack of 'playbook' about how exactly to engage Iran, considering that no American president had attempted anything of this magnitude;<sup>21</sup> an internal debate about how bold to go, given that the Iranian presidential elections were upcoming

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<sup>21</sup> In a review of think-tank proposals on US policy towards Iran in early 2009, Kenneth Pollack *et al*, wrote that 'No one has been able to devise an approach toward Iran that would have a high likelihood of achieving American objectives at a reasonable price' (2009, p. 3)

in June; scepticism and pressure from both Israel and domestic political elites to either not engage at all, to do so only half-heartedly, or to set a strict ultimatum date; and the internal prioritisation of a radical domestic political agenda over any potentially costly foreign entanglements that could derail these domestic programs. While a counterfactually more empathic Obama would have likely done some things differently – and I outline the nature of these differences below – it is highly questionable whether any additional measures would have moved the needle towards a breakthrough in cooperation. It is argued, therefore, that the relative contingency of this period in respect to empathy was low.

This is an important counter to a number of prominent criticisms of Obama's engagement strategy during this period. Some, for instance, hold the view that Obama was overly cautious and did not do enough to engage Iran during this time (interview with Marashi, 2015; Parsi, 2012). Others have argued that the administration's engagement policies were made in bad-faith and designed to fail (interview with Berman, 2015; e.g. Leverett and Leverett, 2009a, 2009b, 2013; Nasr, 2013). The logic behind this latter interpretation is that Obama and his advisors pursued engagement with no genuine belief that it would work, and thus saw it as the quickest way of getting to multi-lateral sanctions. Only by being seen to try engagement could they convince the rest of the world to join them in further isolating Iran. This chapter debunks both of these arguments. For the first, I explore the context in which the Obama administration were operating in order to show that their room for manoeuvre was limited at best. And for the second, I use my primary interview material to show why this narrative is far too simplistic. To be sure, there were members of Obama's team who took this view of the utility of the engagement, not least Obama's secretary of state, Hilary Clinton, but to tarnish the entire administration with the same brush misses both the magnitude of the measures that the administration did put in place, as well as the nuance of the engagement-sanctions debate within Obama's core team. The chapter will now begin to discuss the initial stages of Obama's approach to Iran.

### *Initial openings*

Immediately upon taking office Obama made good upon his commitment to change the rhetoric towards Iran. The first gradual steps of an engagement strategy were taken during his inaugural address in January 2009. Although Iran was not addressed directly – the only states named were Iraq and Afghanistan – Obama outlined the rhetorical basis of a new approach to the Middle East. He stated, ‘To the Muslim world, we seek a new way forward based on mutual interest and mutual respect’, and that ‘we will extend a hand if you are willing to unclench your fist’ (Obama, 2009a). A flurry of similar statements were made in the days preceding and following the inauguration, further entrenching Obama’s campaign pledge that he was prepared to engage directly with senior Iranian decision-makers. In an interview a few days prior, the President-elect expressed his view that ‘we are going to have to take a new approach [with Iran]. And I’ve outlined my belief that engagement is the place to start’ (Obama, 2009b; see also Office of the President Elect, 2009).

During his first televised interview as president, he said that it is ‘important for us to be willing to talk to Iran, to express very clearly where our differences are, but where there are potential avenues for progress’ (Obama, 2009c).<sup>22</sup> Directing a line from his inauguration address at the Iranians, Obama stated that ‘if countries like Iran are willing to unclench their fist, they will find an extended hand from us’ (Obama, 2009c). Although the details of what engagement would ultimately entail were unclear, Obama nevertheless exhibited the empathic capacity to recognise the importance Iranian decision-makers gave to notions of respect, dignity and recognition, affirming that his administration’s approach to Iran would be predicated upon ‘a new emphasis on respect and a new emphasis on being willing to talk’ (Obama, 2009b). Further exemplifying his empathic capacity in this regard, Obama moved quickly to eliminate the Bush-era language of ‘carrot and stick’ diplomacy from the administration’s vocabulary (Parsi, 2012, p. 45), realising that it insulted the Iranians. As one Iranian official put it, this language is ‘for the donkeys. Iranians

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<sup>22</sup> The interview was conducted by Al Arabiya, the Saudi owned, pan-Arabic news channel, further symbolising Obama’s desire to rehabilitate the image of the United States in the Middle East (MacLeod, 2009).

do not want to feel like donkeys’ (quoted in Colleau, 2016, p. 39; see also Pickering et al., 2009). As well as this change in tone, Obama made clear that his administration were actively searching for opportunities to engage Iranian officials face-to-face. During a press conference on 9 February, Obama reported that his national security team was ‘looking at areas where we can have constructive dialogue, where we can directly engage with them’ (2009d). He outlined his expectation that ‘in the coming months we will be looking for openings that can be created where we can start sitting across the table, face to face, diplomatic overtures that will allow us to move our policy in a new direction’ (2009d).

But before any progress could be made, Obama saw fit to order a review of the United States’ policies towards Iran (Parsi, 2012, p. 43; interview with Samore, 2015, interview with 2016). This review process stemmed from the view of most Obama administration officials that previous administration’s policies towards Iran had systematically failed. While the administration was united in the view that engagement needed to be tried, they were divided on whether the engagement strategy would ultimately work, and how to go about implementing it. (Interview 6, 2015; interview with Ross, 2016; interview with Samore, 2015, 2016). These divisions were evident from the outcome of the review, which took about two months to complete. The administration adopted what officials have since described as a ‘dual-track strategy’ (Interview 5, 2016; Interview 6, 2015; interview with Ross, 2016; interview with Samore, 2015, 2016; see also Parsi, 2012, pp. 54–58). This meant that their strategy would draw upon elements of both engagement and pressure. Obama would try to engage Iran in the first instance, but if this proved unsuccessful the United States would turn towards implementing new packages of coercive measures.

‘Dual-track strategy’ was consequently an unhelpful description as it suggests a strategy where pressure and engagement were to be used simultaneously. But, in actual fact, these two components existed in a sequential relationship during the first two years of Obama’s presidency

(Interview 5, 2016; interview with Ross, 2016; interview with Samore, 2016). As one interviewee put it, ‘engagement got the benefit of going first’ (interview with Nephew, 2016). As Richard Nephew put it, pressure ‘wasn’t ratcheted up, at least over those initial several months. The idea was that we were basically holding off sanctions for a while.... there was definitely a “were not doing pressure right now” mind-set to the administration’ (interview with Nephew, 2015). This detail is one of the most misunderstood features of Obama’s approach to Iran, and has been overlooked by many of the administration’s strongest critics who suggest that Obama’s continuation of coercive measures is evidence of his duplicity when it came to Iran. These critics conflate a number of related things. The first is that they conflate the imposition of new coercive measures with the continuation of inherited coercive activities, such as the Iran Sanctions Act (ISA) (Kaussler, 2013, p. 75; Leverett and Leverett, 2009a, 2013).<sup>23</sup> The Iranians were already subjected to existing pressures, but the Obama administration ‘didn’t seek to add to that price’ (interview with Ross, 2016) while engagement efforts were still ongoing.<sup>24</sup> Secondly, they conflate the imposition of new sanctions with the work done to prepare the ground for sanctions in the eventuality that the engagement efforts fails. The fact that pressure and engagement were to exist simultaneously did not mean, however, that all work on pressure would stop during the engagement period.

It is important to try and understand the dual-track strategy and its place in US foreign policy during this point in time. This is because it has been the target of much criticism from those who believe the United States were not bold enough in reaching out to Iran. The dual-track strategy had multiple logics at play. It was at once an insurance policy; a principle that united individuals and organisations with different beliefs and priorities; a method of compellence; and an incremental strategy of unilateral engagement. In short, the dual-track strategy represented many things to different people. Philip Crowley, the State Department’s spokesman and Assistant

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<sup>23</sup> Brought into law in 1996, this was originally titled the Iran-Libya Sanctions Act. Libya were dropped from this in 2006. In 2016 it was renewed for ten more years by Congress.



Secretary of Public Affairs, saw it as thus; the ‘Administration felt that it should give engagement a chance, either with the outcome being that first engagement might succeed, or if the engagement did not succeed it would put the United States and its allies in a stronger position to take decisive action’ (interview with Crowley, 2015). Another senior administration official explained that the outreach was ‘sincere, in the sense that they were meant to try to open up a direct dialogue after thirty-five years in which we really hadn’t had any sustained dialogue... But it was also investment in building a wider support international support base for a different kind of approach [if the engagement track failed]’ (Interview 6, 2015).

For many, both critics and hawkish supporters alike, even the existence of the dual-track strategy was a clear indication that the ‘Obama administration was not interested in real rapprochement with the Islamic Republic’ (Parsi, 2012). Yet, these critics often do not sufficiently account for its sequential nature. A number of scholars, commentators and former policy-makers have argued that the Obama administration never intended for diplomacy with Iran to succeed in this early stage, if at all, but merely deemed it necessary to appear to try engagement as a means of building an international consensus against Iran (Interview with Berman, 2015; Leverett and Leverett, 2009a, 2013; Marashi, 2010; Nasr, 2013; Sanger, 2013; Sanger et al., 2010). Congressman Howard Berman, who at the time was the Chairman of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, said that, in his view:

‘the engagement track was undertaken not with the belief that the Supreme Leader and President Ahmadinejad would accept the Administration’s offer to engage, but rather that it was very important for the Administration to make the offer in order to create the conditions to put together an international coalition to apply pressure through sanctions, and that the sanctions strategy was always the anticipated next step once Iran rejected the offer to engage’ (interview with Berman, 2015)

Berman’s intention here was not to criticise the Obama administration, as he held the view that only through the build-up of leverage against Iran would the nuclear dispute be resolved. Sanger concurred with this view, writing that:

‘Obama had expected that his outreach would likely fail. He had to reach out, he thought, because the mullahs could well calculate that their own survival required an end to the escalating sanctions that had begun under the Bush administration. But even if they did not yield, as one of Obama’s top advisers put it to me soon after moving into the West Wing, “we can’t get the rest of the world to turn the screws unless they believe we made a serious, bona-fide offer for a diplomatic solution.” (Sanger, 2013, p. 159)

Others, however, have used this same argument in order to criticise US policy. Vali Nasr, a former State Department official who worked with Richard Holbrooke, has argued that the president ‘tried his hand at diplomacy, but only to get to the sanctions track faster, and to make sanctions more effective’. For Nasr, ‘Engagement was a cover for a coercive campaign of sabotage, economic pressure, and cyber warfare’ (Nasr, 2013, p. 114). Flynt Leverett and Hilary Mann Leveret, who have been consistent critics of the Obama administration’s approach to Iran, similarly saw diplomacy ‘primarily as a way to set the stage for more coercive measures – tougher sanctions, and at some point, military strikes and to bring international partners and the American public on board’ (Leverett and Leverett, 2013, p. 357). They claim that the public rhetoric of engagement was merely a means for the United States to build an international sanctions regime against Iran, and to shift the onus and burden of responsibility away from the United States and towards the Iranians. For Nasr, Berman, and Leverett and Leverett, amongst others, therefore, the engagement strategy wasn’t supposed to work at all, but was designed to fail.

There are a number of issues with this broad argument. First, to assume bad-faith is to collectively attribute one characteristic to the entire administration. In reality, the dual-track strategy meant different things to different people. In all likelihood, this was one its enduring appeals as it managed to unite proponents of engagement and pressure under a single rubric. Even one of the administration’s more hawkish members, Gary Samore, admitted as such, telling me that although ‘the administration quickly came to an agreement on a dual track strategy’ everyone had their different reasons for doing so and different conceptualisations of what this meant;

‘Optimists hoped that the Iranians would reciprocate and that would lead to a genuine discussion of our differences. Realists, pessimists like me, believed that Iran would reject that outreach and that would put us in a much stronger position to double down on sanctions’ (interview with Samore, 2015).

Moreover, when asked if the optimists or pessimists were more prominent in crafting the administration’s Iran policies, Samore replied that it was neither, and that ‘In all honesty, no one knew what the result of the outreach would be’ (interview with Samore, 2015). Despite his personal belief that the engagement strategy would not work, and that its main utility would be to build a consensus on sanctions, he maintained that ‘It was a genuine effort... Did we genuinely hope that these gestures would lead to the Iranians to accept a direct discussion? Yes.’ (interview with Samore, 2015).

Second, the dual-track strategy simply reflected the deep-seated uncertainty that many US officials had in Iran’s motives and intentions. Although the president and many of his advisors clearly saw the constitutive role the United States had historically played in creating insecurity in Iran’s leaders, and exhibited a great deal of security dilemma sensibility in crafting the engagement strategy, this does not equate to clear-eyed certainty that he could simply charm Iran’s leaders into trusting him. There was no guarantee that an engagement strategy would work, and the Obama administration was acutely aware of the costs of its failure. As such, it was necessary to form a contingency plan if it failed. As a Department of Treasury official who worked on Iran sanctions put it to me, ‘in all negotiations, be it commercial or political, you need to prepare for what happens if your *plan a* does not work’ (Interview 4, 2015). Simply put, to expect the United States not to have a contingency plan is just not realistic, and these critics have not posed a credible alternative to this insurance policy of the dual-track strategy.

Although Obama’s conciliatory tone was well-received by some commentators (Borger, 2009a; Pickering et al., 2009; Tisdall, 2009) and in many capitals around the world (CBS News, 2009a; US Department of State, 2009c), Tehran offered a more measured and cautious response.

Evoking Obama's plea that Iran should unclench its fist, the spokesmen for Iran's Foreign Ministry promptly responded that 'If there is any clenched fist in the world, it is the fist of the USA', and that 'in the aftermath of President Obama's slogan of 'change', the world is waiting to see what is in the unclenched fist of President Obama' (quoted in CBS News, 2009b). Ahmadinejad similarly stated in the days after Obama's inauguration that 'we will listen to the statements closely, we will carefully study their actions, and, if there are real changes, we will welcome it' (quoted in Parsi, 2012, p. 38). Iran's Foreign Minister, Manouchehr Mottaki, echoed this a few days later, saying Iran would wait and see what 'practical policies' (quoted in CBS News, 2009a) were adopted before making a move. Iranian officials made clear, therefore, that they drew a sharp distinction between rhetorical pronouncements of good-will and engagement on the one hand, and more tangible actions that clearly signalled a change in US policy on the other. Iran's response posed a familiar dilemma regarding the sequencing of any prospective reconciliatory process, and one that got to the heart of the difficult road that lay ahead for Obama's engagement strategy. Importantly, however, Iran's response also made it clear that if true engagement were to come they would welcome it. They did not rebuff American's advances, but rather demanded that they be clarified. In early February, Ahmadinejad demonstrated this by saying, 'It is clear that change should be fundamental, not tactical, and our people welcome real changes...Our nation is ready to hold talks based on mutual respect and in a fair atmosphere' (quoted in Fathi and Sanger, 2009).

This point regarding sequencing reflected the difficulty the Obama administration faced in making good upon specific empathic capacities, particularly with the stakes as high as they were. Obama's statements early in his presidency, while offering a new respectful and empathic tone, seemed to indicate that the metaphorical hand of the United States would only be extended if the Iranians were first willing to unclench their fists. The meaning was clear; the Iranian government first had to indicate their receptiveness to Obama's approach before any hand would be extended. The Obama administration appeared loath to risk any political capital on any significant gesture that may only be rebuffed. Hilary Clinton, the newly inaugurated Secretary of State, used her

characteristically more bellicose tone to further underline this point on the same day as Obama's Al Arabiya interview. She stated that there 'is a clear opportunity for the Iranians...to demonstrate some willingness to engage meaningfully with the international community. Whether or not that hand becomes less clenched is really up to them' (Clinton, 2009a). While the United States were committed to exploring the possibilities of engagement, they did so cautiously and hoped to induce Iran into making the first move. The paradox here was that the Iranians similarly stood firm against being the first to make themselves vulnerable. The position in Tehran was that 'Obama's intentions and capabilities were unclear, and as a result Iran could not take a risk by making conciliatory moves toward the Obama administration' (Parsi, 2012, p. 38). Both sides were open to exploring a new direction in their relationship, but each side was stuck in their apparent default positions, aptly characterised by John Limbert, the US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Iran, as 'Never say yes to anything. You will look weak. Insist the other side must change first' (Limbert, 2015b). This is an all too common scenario for actors in security dilemma dynamics who seek a way out of spirals of hostility. Wheeler has rightly argued that 'the exercise of security dilemma sensibility is a rarity among decision-makers, who as a result tend to expect their adversary to make the critical opening moves in ending a conflict' (2013, p. 483). But even where security dilemma sensibility is present, empathy of this kind is not necessarily always enough to embolden a decision-maker to take the first step. This paradoxical stalemate exhibits how difficult it is for particular empathic capacities to become actualised in ways that effectively communicate benign intent. Important empathic capacities may have existed in Obama and some of his advisors, but the empathic intensity was not sufficiently strong enough for a way out of this stalemate.

### ***The Nowruz Address***

The pinnacle of Obama's rhetorical outreach came at midnight on 20 March 2009 when the White House released a videotaped message from Obama 'in celebration of Nowruz' (Iranian New Year) (Obama, 2009e). In this video Obama reached out to the people and leaders of Iran and reaffirmed his desire to end the decades of hostility. In it he said the following:

I would like to speak directly to the people and leaders of the Islamic Republic of Iran...For nearly three decades relations between our nations have been strained. But at this holiday we are reminded of the common humanity that binds us together.... So in this season of new beginnings. I would like to speak clearly to Iran's leaders. We have serious differences that have grown over time. My administration is now committed to diplomacy that addresses the full range of issues before us, and to pursuing constructive ties among the United States, Iran and the international community. This process will not be advanced by threats. We seek instead engagement that is honest and grounded in mutual respect....So on the occasion of your New Year, I want you, the people and leaders of Iran, to understand the future that we seek. It's a future with renewed exchanges among our people, and greater opportunities for partnership and commerce. It's a future where the old divisions are overcome, where you and all of your neighbours and the wider world can live in greater security and greater peace. I know that this won't be reached easily. There are those who insist that we be defined by our differences. But let us remember the words that were written by the poet Saadi, so many years ago: "The children of Adam are limbs to each other, having been created of one essence." (2009e)

The address contained a number of important elements that showed the empathic motivation behind Obama's engagement efforts. Symbolically, it sought to move beyond the Bush-era rhetoric of 'regimes' and 'rogue states' by talking to Iran as an equal. Obama was the first president to refer to Iran by its full title, the Islamic Republic of Iran. The intention behind this was to reassure Iran that the United States saw them as a legitimate government, and did not seek to overthrow or covertly subvert them (Interview 6, 2015). Kenneth Pollack similarly writes that 'administration officials...believed that they had to convince the Iranian regime that the United States was not trying to overthrow them if they were going to get Iran to accept the offer of engagement and agree to a deal on the nuclear program' (2013, p. 124). Given Iran's insecurities regarding US-led subversion, this was arguably an important statement to make. In addition, Obama's assurance that 'This process will not be advanced by threats' and that the United States 'seek instead engagement that is honest and grounded in mutual respect' (2009e), was noteworthy for the fact that it exhibited an awareness of the problematic nature of pressure and threats as instruments of foreign policy.

While Obama has continued in this tradition and released an address to mark every Nowruz, at the time this type of approach was unprecedented. One commentator called it 'a major turning point in the United States' approach to Iran' (Stein, 2009), while another suggested that

‘Obama is showing that he's serious with his promises of change’ (Dehghan, 2009). In Iran the reception was less transparent. Some sources suggested that the Iranian public and certain parts of the Iranian establishment received Obama’s message positively (US Department of State, 2009d, 2009e, 2009f). Indeed, one leaked US cable reported that ‘Iranian Ambassador Soltanieh was “almost in tears” upon watching the video message’ (US Department of State, 2009f).<sup>25</sup>

Yet, Iran’s Supreme Leader did not share this wholly positive interpretation. He responded the very next day – this in itself indicating the importance given to Obama’s message - and decried the lack of tangible action to back up Obama’s words. Without such action, he made clear, it would be very difficult from him to see Obama as a trustworthy interlocutor. As part of a lengthy speech given in Mashhad, the Supreme Leader said the following:

Now the new US administration says that it is prepared to negotiate with Iran, urging us to let bygones be bygones. They say they have extended a hand towards Iran. What kind of hand is that? If the hand that has been extended to us is an iron hand covered with a velvet glove, it does not have any positive meaning. They congratulated the Iranian nation on Nowruz, but in the same message they accused the Iranian nation of supporting terrorism, seeking nuclear weapons, and things like that (2009).

He went on:

They invite us to negotiate and form relations with them. They shout slogans of change. Where is the change you are talking about? What is it that has changed? Clarify this for us. What is it exactly that has changed?...If you really believe there has been a change, show us. We cannot see any change... verbal change is not enough...If there is any genuine change, it must manifest itself in action (2009).

And finally, addressing the simultaneous use of negotiation and pressure, he said:

Our nation hates to be the subject of your simultaneous attempts at negotiation and pressurising. Our nation hates to negotiate while being pressurised. The simultaneous use of threats and negotiation will not work with our nation. We do not have a record of the new US President and administration. We will observe and then judge them. If you change, our behaviour will change too (2009).

Khamenei made a number of things clear in his response. First, he had no trust in the new administration, and that without some kind of tangible action that indicated their trustworthiness

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<sup>25</sup> At the time Soltanieh was Iran’s Ambassador to the International Atomic Energy Agency

this was not going to change. Even if Obama was the agent of change that he so claimed, Khamenei held, and perhaps rightly so, a deep-seated scepticism that one charismatic individual could make any difference to the institution of the United States. As he expressed later in the speech, ‘I do not know who is making the decisions in America. Is it the President? Is it the Congress? Or is it the unknown people who pull the strings?’ (Khamenei, 2009). Second, he made clear that the US practice of increasing the pressure on Iran while pursuing engagement had little hope of convincing them that the Obama administration could be trusted. Finally, while the speech contained the usual diatribes against the United States for past actions against Iran – which was the aspect that the mainstream Western press focused on (see The Associated Press, 2009) – the most important feature of Khamenei’s response was that it left the door open to the possibility of engagement. The level of distrust that Khamenei felt towards the United States was on clear display, yet he unambiguously stated that if the United States were willing to change then so was Iran.

These details are important to emphasise as the narrative espoused by some suggests that Khamenei outright rejected Obama’s message. Clinton, for instance, wrote in her memoir of the Nowruz address that ‘these feelers were met with a stone wall in Tehran’ (Clinton, 2015, p. 352), while the Associated Press ran the headline, ‘Iran’s Supreme Leader Rebuffs Obama’s Message’ (The Associated Press, 2009; see also Kaussler, 2013, p. 75). Yet, the Obama administration officials I interviewed stressed that Khamenei’s signal of openness to engagement was the most important aspect they took away from his response (Interview 6, 2015; Samore, 2015) The president and his advisors made the conscious decision to overlook Khamenei’s usual bellicose rhetoric and to take the positives from his response. To expect Khamenei to address the United States without the usual litany of grievances would be unrealistic (Interview 6, 2015; interview with Samore, 2016). This was an empathically motivated choice as it required recognising, though not accepting, the seeds of Khamenei’s discontent and the political necessity of this rhetoric within Iran. This interpretation finds support in leaked diplomatic cables that show many of the



administration's contacts in the region also arguing that Khamenei's response should be interpreted as receptive and open to engagement (US Department of State, 2009f, 2009d). Consequently, contra to the interpretation that Obama's outreach 'was immediately rejected by Khamenei' (Kaussler, 2013, p. 75), Khamenei left the door open to the United States, and Obama made the conscious effort to interpret this in a positive light.

Despite this positive interpretation, the case of the Nowruz address, as well as the broader rhetorical changes seen throughout this period, invites some degree of counterfactual intervention. While I have argued that these changes represented evidence of Obama's empathic capacities towards Iran, many commentators in the United States who favoured rapprochement with Iran have been extremely critical of the administration, suggesting that they simply did not do enough to reach out to Iran (Leverett and Leverett, 2009a, 2009b, 2013; Marashi, 2010; Nasr, 2013; Parsi, 2012). The presumption on their part is that the Obama administration should have and could have done more. Here I will consider the counterfactual impact that greater empathy may have had on these initial US engagement attempts. I am not supplanting these initial attempts with different measures, but instead asking how and whether increased empathic intensity on the part of Obama and key US decision-makers could have led to increased cooperation. I then place them within a broader context that, I argue, explains why increasing empathy in this way would have changed little about the success of these initial engagement efforts.

At the heart of this counterfactual discussion is communication. As Holmes and Yarhi-Milo have argued, the communicative aspect of empathy is crucial to de-escalating security dilemma dynamics: 'For empathy to have effects in diplomacy, actors must convey it to others' (Holmes and Yarhi-Milo, 2016, p. 4). It is no good being empathic towards your adversary but being unable or incapable to communicate this to them. As I have outline above, Obama and his advisors were already extremely perceptive in this regard. One of Obama's key empathic capacities was to appreciate the importance that Iran's leaders gave to notions of respect and

recognition. In crafting the Nowruz address Obama sought to communicate this to Iran, and to reassure them that the United States respected their integrity and independence. He did this primarily through directing the message towards Iran's leaders as well as Iran's people – previous US presidents were careful to address Iran's populace and not its government – and by using their official name, the Islamic Republic of Iran. Yet, on the other hand, the gestures that the Obama did make were shrouded in ambiguity and thus vulnerable to being distorted or indeed lost entirely. There is no evidence that Iran interpreted the Nowruz address in the manner intended. IR scholarship on signalling and communication has consistently shown that the intended message of one actor will often be interpreted differently by their recipient (e.g. Larson, 1997). Obama did not outright say that the United States was committed to non-interference, but instead chose to do so symbolically, creating a problem of interpretation for the Iranians. It is one thing for Obama to see the US-Iran relationship in a manner reminiscent of security dilemma sensibility, but it is another to conceive of and implement measures that effectively communicate this to Iran

While the problem of signalling type in international politics cannot be overcome entirely by empathy, it is reasonable to think that a more empathic Obama might have made this same point in the Nowruz address regarding legitimacy and non-interference with more clarity. He might have been more sensitive to the fact that sending ambiguous and symbolic messages to Iran, with whom the United States had no diplomatic contact with for thirty years, might not have the desired effect. One feasible method of cutting through some of the noise, and communicating the same message, could have been to re-affirm the Algiers Accord. The Algiers Accord was signed by the United States and Iran in 1981 as a resolution to the Iran hostage crisis, and in it the United States pledged, amongst other things, not to interfere politically or militarily in Iran's internal affairs. Crucially, this was an actual suggestion made by prominent former policy makers in early 2009, including veteran diplomats, Thomas Pickering and William Leurs, and non-proliferation expert Jim Walsh (2009). If Obama had announced that the United States would not interfere in the internal affairs of the Islamic Republic, and that it respects their sovereignty, it would have exhibited a level of

empathic intensity that was absent from the Nowruz address. But instead the gesture was symbolic. Obama and his advisors knew the intention behind using Iran's full title, but by not clarifying this they left it very much open to interpretation. If, therefore, effective communication is an integral part of any empathic capacity, then it was clear that Obama's empathy only went so far.

The question remains, however, whether a measure such as reaffirming the Algiers accord would have a demonstrably greater effect upon the prospects for cooperation. While it would have been a move born from a greater empathic intensity, it is doubtful that it would have moved the needle significantly towards cooperation at that moment in time. Iranian replies to all of Obama's initiatives during this period were the same; the only way to reassure us of your intentions is through tangible actions. Words, they repeatedly said, are not enough. While re-affirming the Algiers Accord would have been more significant an act than simply calling Iran by their official name, it was still at its heart a rhetorical move, and one that was eminently reversible at that. It still may have been interpreted by Iran as cheap talk. Iranian leaders would likely have greater clarity regarding the intention behind it – which cannot be said for the Nowruz message – but it was still rhetorical. That said, it is important to note that not all rhetorical moves are created equal. Some carry far more weight than others, and I go on to make this point later in relation to Obama's shifting attitudes towards Iran's nuclear program. Although the Algiers Accord may have not been impactful in the short term, it could, however, arguably have had a cumulative impact upon the prospects for cooperation with Iran in the longer term. It may, for instance, have reassured the Iranians when they did eventually come to sit across the table from their American counterparts in October 2009.

### ***Shifting attitudes towards Iran's nuclear program***

The next move came a little over two weeks later. In early April the administration announced that it would officially enter the P5+1 nuclear talks for the first time (Landler and Fathi, 2009; US Department of State, 2009g). Although this was largely expected, it was nevertheless a significant

moment, as up until this point the United States had refused to formally negotiate with Iran. The Bush administration had stuck firm to the condition that Iran should cease enriching uranium before the United States would negotiate, effectively using negotiation as an incentive.<sup>26</sup> Obama roundly rejected this line of thinking. During the campaign he said, ‘Demanding that a country meets all your conditions before you meet with them, that’s not a strategy; it’s just naïve, wishful thinking’ (Obama, 2008). The change in policy, announced on 8 April, was accompanied by further declarations stating the importance of respect and the necessity for diplomacy to be a collaborative effort. As the State Department spokesperson put it, ‘A diplomatic solution [to the nuclear crisis] necessitates a willingness to engage directly with each other on the basis of mutual respect and mutual interest...Any breakthrough will be the result of the collective efforts of all the parties, including Iran’ (US Department of State, 2009g). These statements importantly displayed an awareness that any future successful resolution to the dispute over Iran’s nuclear program would necessarily be con-constitute in its nature. It would be as reliant upon the actions of Iran as those of the United States.

This policy announcement was an important expression of Obama’s empathic capacity towards Iran. By not holding Iran to this Bush-era policy of zero enrichment prior to negotiation, Obama and his advisors showed the empathic capacity to appreciate the importance Iran’s leaders gave to its nuclear program. This was the first real sign that a more flexible stance had been adopted by representatives of the United States. On the face of it, Obama had not dropped the United States’ long-standing position that the ultimate aim was an Iran with zero enrichment capabilities. Multiple UNSC resolutions called on Iran to suspend all enrichment activities (e.g. UNSC, 2006, 2007) and Obama was in no position to circumvent these. But, interviews with key officials revealed that the administration were already aware that any future sustainable nuclear deal would need to allow Iran some form of enrichment capability. This didn’t mean conceding

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<sup>26</sup> Towards the end of the Bush administration the United States began sitting in on negotiations but not actively participating in them.

Iran's longstanding claim that all countries have a right to enrich uranium (Ahmadinejad, 2009b; Khazaei, 2008), which United States has historically argued that the NPT does not grant.<sup>27</sup> But it did mean that the Obama administration already knew in early 2009 that Iran would need some form of enrichment capability if a nuclear deal were to be both agreeable to Iran and ultimately sustainable. While they were yet to begin discussing complex calculations regarding centrifuge numbers at the highest levels, this more theoretical conversation was already in full flow. The fact that this conversation was taking place at all was testament to the new thinking and empathy that Obama and some of his team brought to the issue.

This argument finds support in the recollections of those involved in the administration's re-thinking of the nuclear issue. Numerous interviewees affirmed that these conversations were taking place, and the administration was, privately at least, walking back from the zero enrichment target. As one senior official working on nuclear issues recalls, early in the administration's tenure 'there was a general belief that if there was going to be a deal, it would have to permit some level of enrichment' (interview with Einhorn, 2016). In a different interview, the same official said that while 'at this stage it was still pretty much taboo [to countenance the idea of domestic enrichment in Iran]...in private conversations between administration officials there was an acknowledgement that we were never going to get them to stop enriching all together' (interview with Einhorn, 2015). There was an acknowledgement that zero was now not a realistic goal and that no deal would be possible if the United States continued to demand this (interview with Nephew, 2016). Obama rarely spoke publicly on the specifics of the nuclear issue at this point in his presidency, but during his now famous speech in Cairo, in June 2009, he also exhibited a more nuanced take of Iran's rights under the NPT. Though he did not mention enrichment, he made clear that, 'any nation -- including Iran -- should have the right to access peaceful nuclear power if it complies with its responsibilities under the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. That commitment is at the core of the treaty, and it must be kept for all who fully abide by it' (Obama, 2009f).

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<sup>27</sup> It is worth noting here that the United States is one of only a few states who take this position.

The significance of this expression of Obama's empathic capacities has not been adequately recognised in the debate on Obama's Iran policies. While some of the literature glosses over this announcement, presumably seeing it as an inevitable matter of fact, others have criticised Obama for relying purely on rhetoric in trying to engage Iran. Flynt Leverett and Hilary Mann Leverett, for instance, Obama's 'efforts at engagement have been almost completely rhetorical, with no new policy substance to entice Iranian leaders' (Leverett and Leverett, 2013, p. 384). The issue with this position is that they fail to understand the policy implications, and thus the 'substance', associated with what was admittedly a rhetorical or declaratory move. To criticise an announcement purely on the basis that it is declaratory misses the crucial point that not all rhetoric is created equal. Drawing such a sharp distinction between rhetoric and substance obscures the fact that some rhetorical moves have strong policy implications. Using Obama's Cairo speech as an example of how rhetoric has tangible implications, Paul Sharp has likewise argued that while this declaratory step would likely not ensure peace or cooperation, 'it is probably harder for the US and Iran to go to war after this speech [Cairo] than before it' (2010, p. 270). Consequently, although the announcement in April was 'completely rhetorical' (Leverett and Leverett, 2013, p. 384), this rhetoric exemplified the point that some words have specific policy implications behind them.

Ahmadinejad offered a cautiously optimistic response that was in keeping with Iran's reaction to Obama's earlier rhetorical outreaches. He stated that, 'The Iranian people would welcome a hand extended to it if the hand is truly based on honesty', adding that 'the change should be in action, not in words' (quoted in Landler and Fathi, 2009). Yet, he also appeared to recognise the importance of this step, saying that talks failed in the past because 'they [the Bush administration] were insisting on stopping our peaceful activities, they were trying to impose that. It was clear the Iranian people would not accept that' (quoted in Associated Press, 2009). Saeed Jalili, the chief Iranian nuclear negotiator, also signalled Iran's willingness to enter negotiations. Iran's state television quoted Jalili as saying that Iran was ready for 'constructive dialogue and

interaction', where he also reiterated that Iran would not give up its nuclear program (Al Arabiya, 2009).

This episode invites a similar counterfactual intervention to the Nowruz address. In a comparable manner there was a disconnect between the empathically motivated intentions of Obama and his advisors, and their ability to communicate this to their Iranian counterparts. Although Ahmadinejad's and Jalili's responses seem tepidly optimistic, it is not clear whether they grasped the Obama administration's true intent behind this move. The Obama administration sought to communicate the United States' changing views on Iran's enrichment program, but again this message, if it can be considered a message at all, was shrouded in a layer of ambiguity that obscured its true meaning. It was a tacit nod towards Iran's nuclear rights, and as such was far from a clear signal that Iran could interpret. The question remains, therefore, would a more empathic Obama have sought, like in the Nowruz example, to cut through this ambiguity and communicate this with greater clarity to Iran?

I argue that, unlike in the Nowruz example, this would be extremely unlikely. Despite the evolution in the administration's private thinking on Iran's enrichment, they refrained from taking it public for two primary reasons. The first was the aforementioned 'taboo' that Einhorn spoke of (interview with Einhorn, 2015). Obama and his advisors may have been comfortable privately discussing Iran's enrichment, but they were fully aware that this would play badly domestically and to many of their Middle Eastern allies. Throughout the Iran policy review Israeli officials frequently sought clarity on the issue of enrichment and 'insisted that the Bush administration's zero enrichment objective be kept in place' (Parsi, 2012, p. 58). To abandon the commitment at this stage would have likely incensed the Israeli government, and perhaps even pushed them to pursue additional unilateral actions. As I discuss in more detail below, one of the primary difficulties the Obama administration encountered was how to seek engagement with Iran without destabilising existing alliances. The second reason is that administration officials saw this change

in their thinking not merely as necessary for a sustainable nuclear deal, but also as a valuable negotiating card to play (interview with Einhorn, 2016). Obama and his team were content to make implicit hints towards this eventuality, but saw no reason to show its full hand at this point in time. By not demanding that enrichment be halted prior to negotiation, Obama believed that he could bring Iran to the negotiating table, but he calculated that this particular chip needed to be reserved for when Iran showed themselves to be ready to make a final comprehensive deal. This was not a confidence building measure, it was their ace in the hole. Obama found himself in a familiar position for negotiators and diplomats; he held a ‘value creating’ (Rathbun, 2014, p. 24; see also Wong, 2016) position in that he wanted to reach a mutually agreeable solution to the nuclear issue, but simultaneously felt a strong incentive to conceal information and preferences. So while increasing empathic intensity on the part of Obama and his key advisors might have heightened their awareness to these problems regarding communication and interpretation, it is unlikely that empathy alone would have circumvented these broader issues and considerations.

### ***Letter diplomacy***

Following these public acts of engagement, the Obama administration moved to supplement them by privately reaching out to Iran. The first measure was to write to the Iranian Supreme Leader in early April 2009. Reportedly this letter had been in the works since Obama was president-elect (Tait and MacAskill, 2009), demonstrating the thought and care that went into it. The intention was that this channel would be kept private for as long as possible, insulating the interaction from the political costs that may be associated with direct talks. This initiative compares favourably to previous administration’s attempts to reach out to Iran. Here, Obama sought to communicate directly to the Supreme Leader, as opposed to seeking out so-called ‘moderate’ interlocutors in the country, as other administrations had done (Solomon, 2016, p. 169).

A response came in late May (interview with Ross, 2016; interview with Samore, 2016), in what was the first reciprocal contact between American and Iranian heads of state since before



1979. In many ways, the content of the letter was no great surprise to the Obama administration. As Samore described, ‘the letter that Obama got back from Khamenei was tiresome because it reiterated all the usual Iranian grievances but it didn’t close the door’ (interview with Samore, 2015). Despite this, because of the simple fact that Khamenei did not rebuff Obama’s advances, it was interpreted as a success and warranted a second letter from Obama. Samore said of Khamenei’s letter that ‘we interpreted this in the most positive way’. Indeed, ‘everybody’ (interview with Samore, 2015) in the administration interpreted it in this way regardless of where they stood on the issue of Obama’s Iran outreach. As a consequence, Samore recalled, ‘we sent back a second letter proposing that we actually begin a dialogue’ (interview with Samore, 2015). The administration ‘proposed to set up specific arrangements for a direct bilateral’, and made clear that ‘Obama was prepared to name an envoy to meet publicly or privately with Khamenei’s envoy’ (interview with Samore, 2015). Obama proposed a secret bilateral meeting between high-ranking figures in the US and Iranian governments. He nominated William Burns, the number three in the State Department, and Puneet Talwar, a senior NSC Director as his emissaries, and invited Khamenei to put forward his own trusted representatives. The letter would arrive in the days before Iran’s presidential elections in June.

This ‘brave initiative’ (Mousavian, 2012, p. 338) on the part of Obama was ultimately not reciprocated. Mousavian has claimed that ‘Khamenei was ready to respond positively again’, and that ‘Tehran was even working on the draft of the letter (2014, p. 231). But the turmoil over the contested election, fuelled by Khamenei’s belief that the United States were behind the protestors that flooded the streets of Tehran (Mousavian, 2014, p. 231; Reuters, 2009), nixed any hope that the nascent letter diplomacy that was developing between the two leaders could lead to something more significant. Obama tried to avoid such outcome, realising that any hint of US involvement would danger the progress made in engaging Iran while also undermining the legitimacy of the protestors in Tehran. Limbert remembers that ‘the President in fact was, for the most part, very careful about what was said’ (interview with Limbert, 2015a). Indeed, Obama sought to minimise

the importance of the election for US policy, claiming in the run up that ‘The difference between Ahmadinejad and Mousavi in terms of their actual policies may not be as great as has been advertised’ (quoted in BBC, 2009). As Pollack puts it, ‘The administration was so intent on securing a nuclear deal that they were unwilling to condone the regime’s brutality to get it’ (2013, p. 124). The June 2009 election was not only ‘the biggest internal crisis since the Islamic Republic’s inception’ (Mousavian, 2014, p. 228; see also Farhi, 2012, p. 4), but it also proved to be a major setback in the engagement efforts.

### **Contextual factors and competing accounts**

Before going on to discuss the TRR negotiations and Obama’s turn towards pressure, the chapter will first take a closer look at the context of the Obama’s efforts to engage Iran. This chapter has so far shown that the Obama administration achieved some success in rolling out their engagement strategy through the early months of its tenure. It has also argued greater empathy would have likely had little impact upon either the Obama administration’s actions or the likelihood of cooperation. This section considers the context in which Obama was operating as a way of making this case more forcefully, and also setting up the second half of the chapter. In doing so, this section also responds to the literature that argues Obama should and could have done more to elicit cooperation from Iran. The key point made here is that the critics of Obama’s approach to Iran do not take sufficient account of the context in which his administration was operating. They make implicit counterfactual claims – that something else should have been done – without specifying what or how the Obama administration could have done differently.

It challenges the argument made by some that the Obama administration should have been bolder and more empathic in crafting their initial outreach policy. Flynt Leverett and Hilary Mann Leverett, for instance, have criticised Obama for taking office ‘with no understanding of what strategic engagement with the Islamic Republic would take.’ They go on: ‘And once in the White

House, he flinched from the task' (Leverett and Leverett, 2013, p. 354). In May 2009 they wrote that Obama should have pursued a "Grand Bargain" from the outset, which they see as 'a comprehensive framework for resolving major bilateral differences and fundamentally realigning relations' (Leverett and Leverett, 2009a). Leverett and Leverett are making an implicitly counterfactual argument; that Obama should have pursued a "Grand Bargain" with Iran, and that if he had done so cooperation would have been likely. The issue here is not the normative sentiment behind their claim. In fact, I broadly concur with their assessment that bolder moves from the Obama administration would have been more effective in soliciting reciprocation from Iran. But what Leverett and Leverett, as well as other voices in the scholarly and public debate on this issue, abstract from the conversation is an appreciation of the wider policy-making context. As I have argued, counterfactual research strategies are a useful means of attuning oneself to these factors and instilling a scholarly reflexivity into historical knowledge claims. While bolder moves may have been desirable, I argue that at this time they were not possible. As such, it is highly problematic to advance a criticism of the Obama administration along these lines. I will now explore some of the contextual reasons for this.

The first point is that at this early stage there was little resemblance of a plan or strategy of *how* to engage Iran, or *how* to set up a face-to-face meeting.<sup>28</sup> The reasoning for this lag in implementation was that unlike other policy areas where a degree of expertise had been built-up over years, Obama was the first president to actively and publicly seek high-level engagement with Iran.<sup>29</sup> There were few Iran experts that worked in the foreign policy bureaucracy, and as such there was no pre-determined playbook and no real institutional knowledge to draw upon (interview

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<sup>28</sup> Indicative of this, the administration's Iran policy took far longer to formulate in comparison to other substantive foreign policy issues (interview with Kurtzer, 2015). The administration appointed key personnel for the Israel-Palestine peace talks and the war in Afghanistan immediately upon taking office (interview with Kurtzer, 2015). Yet, with Iran, a lengthy policy review was needed. The day after Obama's inauguration the State Department introduced the newly appointed special envoys for Middle East Peace, George Mitchell, and Afghanistan and Pakistan, Richard Holbrooke (US Department of State, 2009h).

<sup>29</sup> The exceptions being Reagan's negotiations over hostages held in Beirut that resulted in the Iran Contra scandal, and Clinton's rather lacklustre efforts at establishing some good-will towards the end of his presidency.

with Limbert, 2015a; interview with Marashi, 2015). The bureaucracy knew how to pressure and coerce Iran. It did not know how to try and engage with its leaders. Gary Samore, the White House Coordinator for Weapons of Mass Destruction and Arms Control, stated that given this sense of unfamiliarity the administration ‘can’t be expected to know precisely what buttons to push’ (interview with Samore, 2015). Explaining his exasperation with both the process itself, and with those who have criticised the administration’s outreach as ineffectual, he said that ‘Very often the US does things that we think are going to be productive, but turn out to be counterproductive’ (interview with Samore, 2015). The Obama administration was, in effect, wading into uncharted waters with little understanding or expectation of what they were to find.

The majority of administration officials I interviewed were equally eager to stress just how difficult and unusual the task of crafting an engagement strategy towards Iran was. As Limbert explained:

‘We and the Iranians have been yelling at each other for 35 years. That was a situation, for better or worse, that both sides were comfortable with. Careers had been built on it. What people were uncomfortable with was doing something different’ (interview with Limbert, 2015a).

Consequently, one interviewee explained, neither ‘he [Obama] or Secretary Clinton, or anybody else at that time, had an expectation that somehow this was going to be an easy door to open’ (Interview 6, 2015). Obama acknowledged this repeatedly. In February 2009 he made clear that ‘There’s been a lot of mistrust built up over the years, so it’s not going to happen overnight’ (2009d). In May 2009, when questioned on the slow pace of the engagement track, he replied: ‘Look, we’ve been in office a little over a hundred days now....We didn’t expect...that 30 years of antagonism and suspicion between Iran and the United States would be resolved in four months’ (Obama, 2009g). One State Department official who worked on Iran made a similar point:

‘the President only gets inaugurated on Jan 20<sup>th</sup>, he in the middle of global financial collapse, he’s also in the middle of Iraq war, Afghanistan war. He’s busy, and to say that in the five months he had between coming into office and when the streets of Tehran are being filled with kids that he wasn’t bold enough is a little unfair’ (interview with Nephew, 2015).

The point, therefore, is that neither Obama nor any other administration officials went into this venture with a clear-eyed notion of the path to cooperation with Iran. So, in addition to situational constraints, there was also a deep uncertainty regarding how best to proceed. If international politics takes place in the context of existential uncertainty at the best of times (Booth and Wheeler, 2008, p. 21), the uncertainty that Obama and his team experienced in this context was magnified many times over. Much of the literature has overlooked this. Instead it has proselytised a normative critique that is far removed from any sense of what was achievable.

In addition to these internal uncertainties over the meaning of engagement itself, administration officials were concerned with how to pursue these engagements efforts within the broader situational environment in which they found themselves. Chief among their concerns was how to go about the engagement effort without alienating regional allies, or creating a vacuum in which Israel might feel justified in taking military action (Sanger, 2009; Sanger and Broad, 2009). Indeed, in June 2008 the Israeli Deputy Prime Minister, Shaul Mofaz, warned that 'If Iran continued with its program for developing nuclear weapons, we will attack it' (quoted in BBC, 2008). Similarly, in June 2009, Israel's Defence Minister, Ehud Barak, privately told US Congressman that he saw 'a window between six and eighteen months from now in which stopping Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons might still be viable' (US Department of State, 2009i). As a consequence of statements and meetings such as these, when he came into office 'Obama and his aides worried Israel might make good on its threats to attack Iran's nuclear infrastructure' (Solomon, 2016, p. 24). Given this context, a great deal of thought was put into managing the impact of the engagement efforts overseas. As one State Department official recalled, 'there was a concern about looking over-eager... not wanting to make Saudis, the Israelis and other allies in the Middle East feel alienated, like we were trading our relationship with them for a relationship with Iran' (interview with Marashi, 2015).

This concern was warranted given Israel's tepid endorsement of the engagement strategy. Within the administration's first few days in office an Israeli delegation met with Dennis Ross to discuss Iran. According to Ross, although the Israelis acquiesced to the engagement strategy in the short term, they voiced their displeasure and applied pressure to the United States, saying that 'given the progress in Iran's nuclear program, Israel might have to take military action in a year, maybe a year and a half' (Sanger, 2013, p. 161). In a similar vein, the first meeting in May 2009 between Obama and Israel's Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, saw the latter pressuring the United States to set a hard deadline on the engagement strategy and ramp up the pressure on Iran (see also Landler and Cooper, 2009; Netanyahu, 2009). Obama held firm and replied that he didn't 'want to set an artificial deadline', but acknowledged that 'we're not going to have talks forever' (Obama, 2009g; see also Landler and Cooper, 2009).

Regarding other Middle Eastern states, Obama administration officials set out in the early months of their tenure on numerous trips to the Gulf States, Egypt and Saudi Arabia. The aim of these visits, which were made public in leaked diplomatic cables (US Department of State, 2009j, 2009a, 2009k, 2009l), was to allay the fears of their regional allies and to explain their approach on Iran. This message was not always well received. In one meeting, a UAE official asserted that 'you cannot trust or deal with Iran and the UAE knows this... There is no solution with Iran. The Iranian people and Government will give you no solution.' (US Department of State, 2009a). These sources all support Parsi's account that 'Though the policy review ostensibly addressed America's interests vis-à-vis Iran, a significant portion of the discussion dealt with alliance management' (2012, p. 49). The administration were acutely aware that they needed these states to go along with them and not live up to their potential as saboteurs of the whole process.

The potential for major domestic political ramifications as a result of Obama's Iran policies also contributed to the administration's caution. By even considering the idea of engaging Iran, the Obama administration were opening themselves to scrutiny from Congress, pressure groups such

as the American-Israel Public Affairs Committee, and the electorate. In 2009 Gallup polling showed eighty per-cent of the American public deemed Iran either ‘very unfavourable’ or ‘mostly unfavourable’ (Gallup, n.d.). For Obama and his advisors this was a major concern given the significance the president gave to his domestic political agenda. The administration’s preferences, therefore, while open-minded and committed to seeking cooperation with Iran, were governed in a large part by domestic political considerations (Dueck, 2015). Obama was, in the words of his Secretary of Defence, Robert Gates, ‘determined to change America’s approach to the world...and equally determined from day one to win re-election’ (Gates, 2014, p. 584). Obama and his inner-sanctum of political experts seemed to be acutely aware of the political costs that might come with over-stretching in their attempt to engage Iran (Dueck, 2015; Interview 1, 2015; Singh, 2012). They recognised the broader historical dynamics at play, and that diplomatic initiatives of this kind were ‘very difficult to undertake with both parties under intense pressure to confront one another no matter what’ (Sharp, 2010, p. 257). This was not due to any particular failure to empathise with Iran, but rather a reflection of the political and strategic context at play combined with great uncertainty over how to balance this belief in the necessity to engage Iran with these political realities.

In Colin Dueck’s assessment, this interplay between domestic politics and foreign policy is one of the primary reasons why Obama proceeded with relative caution on a number of international issues. Dueck has argued that ‘US presidents are among other things practical politicians, and practical politicians understand that domestic political support must be built and sustained for even the most high-minded initiatives overseas’ (2015, p. 3). He suggests that this is particularly true of Obama, ‘Since his [Obama’s] greatest ambitions are in the domestic policy arena, he is loath to risk them through international strategic entanglements’ (2015, p. 14). This explanation also finds support from Miroslav Nincic, who has argued that ‘U.S. political history suggests greater electoral costs for policies deemed overly conciliatory toward adversaries than for those that appear excessively harsh’ (2010, p. 182). While this may be the case for any act of

positive engagement with any adversarial actor, it can be considered even more so in the case of Iran.

This political caution was reflected in some of Obama's appointments to key national security positions. In particular, the appointment of Thomas Donilon, as the Deputy National Security Advisor – and the central role he played in respect to Iran – was seen by some as a deeply political move given Donilon's lack of experience in national security affairs (Interview 1, 2015). As one State Department official put it to me, Donilon's 'principle objective was to get Obama re-elected. It was clear in everything he decided to do, that the election was being calculated' (Interview 1, 2015). This shouldn't necessarily be interpreted as electoral vanity on the part of Obama and his inner sanctum, but instead as a reflection of both their internal prioritisation of domestic politics over international affairs, and the extent of the opposition the Republican party posed on a host of other issues such as the economy and healthcare.<sup>30</sup>

Empathy not only holds the immanent potential for the dramatic resolution of conflicts, but given the risks involved it is also an inherently costly mind-set (Head, 2016b). As a consequence of all these factors, and likely many more, the administration spent their first months in office not trying to conjure some grand-bargain based on a large and costly gesture, but instead focused on changing the atmospherics of the relationship and clearing the ground for dialogue at a later stage. Because of the variety of factors explored above, the case made here is that this caution is counterfactually defensible, and precludes the possibility that greater empathy from the Obama administration would have made a substantial difference to the chances of cooperation with Iran during this period. The remarkable thing about this period, however, is that despite all of the impediments listed above, the Obama administration were still able to take a number of decisions

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<sup>30</sup> Obama chose to spend the entirety of his first weekly address discussing the economy. If there were any doubts of where his priorities lay, he opened the statement saying 'We begin this year and this administration in the midst of an unprecedented crisis that calls for unprecedented action' (2009h).



that reflected the empathic intensity and subsequent capacities that Obama was able to bring to bear on this area of policy as president.

### **The Tehran Research Reactor fuel-swap negotiations**

This section investigates the contingency of the negotiations over the proposed TRR deal, which at the time were arguably the most significant diplomatic interaction between the United States and Iran since pre-1979. It traces the proposed deal from its genesis in June 2009 through to its collapse in November/December of that year. In this section I argue that, unlike Obama's first six months in office, opportunities for cooperation were missed during this period. This argument is made by highlighting two areas where the empathy Obama and his advisors had shown lapsed. The first is that as US rhetoric soured considerably as the empathic language of mutual respect and engagement was replaced with threats of coercive action and sanctions. While US policy was far from devoid of empathy by this point, it was not present in the same degree as in the previous six months. The second is that in the TRR negotiations themselves the US failed on a number of accounts to see the legitimacy of Iran's position on particular issues, interpreting them as delaying tactics as opposed to genuine concerns that they held. Through a plausible increase in empathy it is conceivable that both of these factors would not have occurred, and that a deal may have been reached. It's also important to note that while the same structural impediments to cooperation were still present, events unexpectedly transpired – most notably the Iran's request for fuel for its Tehran Research Reactor (TRR), and the face-to-face meetings between US and Iranian officials – that created new opportunities and contingent possibilities for cooperation that simply did not exist in Obama's first six months in office. My argument therefore does not dismiss the push and pull of the broader context, but argues that in this face-to-face context there was more room for manoeuvre.

### *The origins of the fuel-swap proposal*

Concurrent to the fallout over Iran's contested election, an opportunity to finally engage Iran on a substantive issue unexpectedly presented itself to the Obama administration. In June 2009, the Atomic Energy Organisation of Iran (AEOI) approached the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) requesting to purchase a new batch of fuel rods<sup>31</sup> to use in the Tehran Research Reactor (TRR) (ElBaradei, 2012).<sup>32</sup> Instead of circulating this request to the international nuclear fuel market, as would ordinarily be the case, the IAEA, and specifically its Director General, Mohamed ElBaradei, took this request directly to the United States, sensing that 'finding a way to help Iran secure nuclear fuel for this legitimate use could send a positive signal' (interview with Einhorn, 2015; ElBaradei, 2012, p. 294; interview with Heinonen, 2015; Interview 3, 2015; see also Parsi, 2012; interview with Samore, 2015).<sup>33</sup> As my interviews with Obama officials attest, the United States immediately recognised this an opportunity to finally put into practice Obama's promises of engagement and dialogue on substantive issues, while at the same time addressing concerns about the rapid pace of Iran's nuclear development.

Initially, however, opinion differed in the United States over how to read Iran's approach to the IAEA and the US actions that followed. Officials who were more sceptical of Iran's motives and intentions, such as Gary Samore, 'saw their letter to the Agency as the first step towards building a justification to increase their enrichment to 20%' (interview with Samore, 2015; see also Fitzpatrick, 2010; Solomon, 2016, p. 187). Iran believed their request would be rejected, Samore argued, which would in-turn provide them with a justification for increasing their level of

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<sup>31</sup> Fuel rods are the materials used in research reactors such as the TRR to produce the isotopes needed for treating cancer patients. From a non-proliferation perspective the production of fuel rods is particularly attractive because when LEU is converted into fuel rods it becomes extremely difficult to reverse the process and then further enrich it towards weapons grade uranium

<sup>32</sup> The TRR is a research reactor in Tehran. It's primary functions are for training purposes and the production of medical isotopes for the treatment of cancer patients. It is not believed to be a site that is deemed sensitive in terms of proliferation. The previous batch of fuel that Iran had purchased from Argentina was due to run out around the end of 2010 (Parsi, 2012, p.115).

<sup>33</sup> This is a sticking point with many nuclear experts. Some argue that the United States could have supplied the fuel, whereas others, such as Gary Samore, have argued that under the Atomic Energy Act the United States cannot supply nuclear materials to another country unless there is a nuclear cooperation agreement (interview with Samore, 2015).

enrichment. While the veracity of this claim cannot be verified without more robust Iranian sources, which likely won't be available anytime soon, it should be noted that Fitzpatrick and Samore offer no evidence for this position beyond their own beliefs that Iran is a malign actor hell-bent on pursuing a nuclear weapon.

Yet, this theory sits uneasily with the sheer amount of effort that the United States put into tabling this proposal, which I briefly detail below. It seems inconceivable that a huge interagency process would be initiated, and one which heavily involved Obama, purely in order to call Iran's bluff. Another senior official, who worked closely on the Iran file, abruptly rejected this interpretation: 'we weren't playing games. The proposal was made in the hope that it would be accepted. It wasn't made just so we could take no for an answer and move on to tougher sanctions' (Interview 6, 2015). Similarly, Robert Einhorn, who along with Samore was the brains behind the TRR proposal, and was part of the TRR negotiating team, has said that 'they [Iran] genuinely wanted the fuel. I don't know what their expectation was of getting it, but I think they genuinely wanted it. I don't think at that point they were shopping around for a pretext' (interview with Einhorn, 2015). This view is supported by the fact that Iran were quite genuinely running out of their fuel supply, and if they didn't restock would be unable to manufacture medical isotopes by the end of 2010 (Acton, 2010).

Upon receiving the communique from the IAEA, non-proliferation and arms control experts in the White House and State Department (the principal architects were Samore and Einhorn) set-about finding a proposal that would simultaneously meet a number of US objectives while also creating an opportunity for dialogue. While a number of options were discussed, such as simply finding a means of providing Iran with the fuel (US Department of State, 2009m), the eventual proposal sought to achieve more than just taking away any possible justification Iran might have for increasing their levels of enrichment capability. The eventual proposal, that became the basis for the negotiations that followed, cleverly addressed international concerns about Iran's

growing stockpile of 3.75% LEU, while also providing Iran with a number of explicit and implicit incentives. At the heart the proposal was a swap or exchange of nuclear material. The United States proposed that if Iran were to transfer around 1,200 kilograms of their stockpile out of the country – which at the time comprised about 80% of their total – then the US would ‘make sure that they found the fuel for the TRR’ (interview with Einhorn, 2015).

Ultimately, what was tabled was an elaborate exchange whereby Russia would enrich Iran’s LEU to around 19.75% (as Iran did not yet have the capability to do this). The quantities were no accident as they represented a precise calculation of Iranian breakout time. By leaving a residual stockpile of approximately 300 kilograms in Iran, it would take roughly a year to produce enough material necessary to build one nuclear weapon (Interview 1, 2015; interview with Samore, 2015). Importantly, the Obama administration understood that the Iranians would have some reservations about the deal, and that it represented a risky manoeuvre for them on a number of grounds. There was, therefore, an empathically motivated understanding that this was a risky proposition for Iran. As Einhorn put it to me, ‘we recognised that there might be some hesitation to send the stuff out of the country’ but reasoned that ‘they could justify...sending it...because they didn’t have the capability to produce it [the fuel plates] themselves’ (interview with Einhorn, 2015). Moreover, any nuclear agreement that made no demands of Iran’s rapidly developing enrichment program could be interpreted as, at the very least, a tacit acknowledgement of Iran’s right to enrich uranium. If Iran could sell it upon these grounds, Obama officials reasoned, then there were sufficient incentives on both sides to make this work.

In addition to these material incentives, there was also a hope that if the TRR was successful it would build confidence between the United States and Iran. The hope was that this would represent a gradual first step towards a wider nuclear accord. Merely showing that they could do business together would have been a major achievement for these two estranged states. While no one involved believed that this would provide a permanent solution to the nuclear issue

as its terms were so limited, there was optimism that it could act ‘as an interim measure that would create time and space for negotiation of a more durable solution’ (interview with Einhorn, 2015). It did not need to solve the Iran nuclear crisis in its entirety, but instead begin a process in which confidence in the intentions and motives of the other could be incrementally built. As one official put it, ‘there was enormous hope. There was sheer unashamed hope that it would be a confidence building measure’ (Interview 1, 2015). Likewise, the counterfactual alternative I present here is not intended as a comprehensive solution to the Iran nuclear crisis. Instead, I suggest that this limited cooperation described above was eminently possible and that the likelihood of its actualisation rested in part on the empathy of the actors involved.

ElBaradei, for his part, has since commented that the proposal was an ‘ingenious’ idea (2012, p. 362). He clearly took this view at the time as well, evidenced by the sheer amount of energy and effort he threw into the initiative (interview with Heinonen, 2015; Interview 3, 2015; interview with Interview 9, 2015; Parsi, 2012). ElBaradei’s role in this story is of great importance as, at present, it represents one of the few windows into Iranian thinking that are currently available. As he recounts in his *Memoir*, he spent a great deal of time with Iranian decision-makers in the run up to the TRR negotiations. They were clearly intrigued by the proposal at the beginning of this process, and seemed fully supportive of it going into the talks. As Einhorn recalls, ‘Mohammed [ElBaradei] really ran with this football... before Oct 1 we didn’t have any contact with the Iranians, so Mohamed was the one doing the running for us’ (interview with Einhorn, 2015).

The sequence of events that followed, which I will describe in detail, represented at the time the best chance of cooperation between the United States and Iran since the 2001-2003 period discussed in the last chapter. Whereas the Obama administration was justifiably unable to make the bold moves necessary to get cooperation going in the first half of 2009, the situation changed drastically when the TRR opening presented itself. The United States were no longer clearing the

ground and speculating about a prospective face-to-face dialogue. Instead, they sat across from their Iranian counterparts and had a mutually agreeable framework in which to negotiate. Within this changed context, the case is made below that the Obama administration could have done more to get cooperation going with Iran, and that a more empathic reading of Iran's position by Obama could have helped facilitate this. In order to make this argument, this section will draw attention to particular instances where the United States could have done something different. As ElBaradei has since claimed of the TRR negotiations, 'If ever there was to be a breakthrough...now was the time' (2012, p. 296).

### ***Geneva***

After two months of preparatory work by the United States and Russia in crafting the proposal, and after it had been presented to Iranian officials on multiple occasions by ElBaradei, the parties to the agreement finally met in Geneva on 1 October as part of the P5+1 talks. Based on my interviews with US and IAEA officials (interview with Einhorn, 2015; interview with Heinonen, 2015; Interview 3, 2015; Interview 9, 2015), and on secondary accounts of the Iranian position (ElBaradei, 2012; Parsi, 2012), it is evident that both the United States and Iran went into these meetings with every intention of reaching a mutually acceptable deal. Both sides were aware of the outlines of the proposal and, led by the enthusiastic charge of ElBaradei, it seemed as if a deal was in grasping distance.

Interviews and secondary accounts attest that the meeting in Geneva went as well as anyone could have realistically expected. As the representatives of each state met in Geneva, the atmosphere was 'surprisingly positive' (Parsi, 2012, p. 128). The meeting began with introductory remarks by each state. After this, Burns, who led the US delegation, approached Jalili about having a brief one-on-one to go over the TRR proposal. Jalili agreed, so the two of them, joined by Einhorn and Ali Bagheri, who was Deputy Secretary on Iran's Supreme National Security Council, went a side room to conduct the highest-level face-to-face interactions between the United States

and Iran in decades (interview with Einhorn, 2015; Interview 6, 2015; Parsi, 2012, pp. 129–130). As the meeting began, Burns emphasised ‘that the president was entering this process with pure intentions’ (Parsi, 2012, p. 129) and that the Obama administration did not have a policy of regime change in Iran (interview with Einhorn, 2015). Burns then outlined the proposal again, which, to their surprise, ‘was accepted [by Jalili] without much argument or hesitation’ (interview with Einhorn, 2015). Einhorn stayed afterwards to go over the details with Bagheri and to check they were on the same page. It was ‘totally unambiguous’ that the two states were on the same page, Einhorn recalled (interview with Einhorn, 2015). The final proposal was that 1,200 kg of 3.5% LEU would be exported from Iran and shipped to Russia. Russia would then provide some 19.75% LEU, either by further enriching Iran’s exported material, or just using their own. It would then be transferred to France who would fabricate it into the fuel plates needed for the TRR. The meeting ended on a positive note, with the understanding that they would go back to their capitals to get further guidance and reconvene before the end of the month to hold the final technical discussions. It is not clear from existing accounts or interview material whether this shared understanding also included the timeframe for these various transfers, which would later go on to be a point of contention.

In the Geneva negotiations there is no conceivable counterfactual room where empathy might be increased. There is no site of contingency. By all accounts, the meeting went as well as anyone could reasonably expect. Those involved whom I interviewed stressed the positive nature of the interaction and reported as such back to Washington. But in the post-Geneva period a site of contingency does emerge, where it is plausible to both increase the empathy of key actors and also consider the impact this may have had upon the TRR episode as a whole. This site of contingency is found in the hardening rhetoric of the Obama administration. Here, Obama’s mantra of mutual respect failed to truly materialise when it mattered the most. Despite this positive meeting, Obama at this stage began to inadvertently plant the seeds that would lead to the deals downfall. The Obama administration’s rhetoric began to shift away from the language of mutual respect, and

towards a more coercive mode of communication. This invites a counterfactual intervention, as the impact of this rhetoric on the Iranians after Geneva would have been noted. The first things that Obama could have done differently, therefore, was to reign in rhetoric that exerted more pressure upon Iran. Having gotten word from Geneva that the meeting was a success, he said the following on the very same day:

‘We’re not interested in talking for the sake of talking. If Iran does not take steps in the near future to live up to its obligations, then the United States will not continue to negotiate indefinitely, and we are prepared to move towards increased pressure. . . . Our patience is not unlimited’ (Obama, 2009i).

The White House Press Secretary made the same point the day after: ‘As the president said pretty clearly yesterday, if this ever — if this gets to a point where we feel like the Iranians are simply doing this to talk for talk’s sake, then we’ll move to the next step’ (Gibbs, 2009). Obama seemingly made the calculation that to get Iran to agree to the deal, they should hold their feet to the fire and let them know the severity of turning it down.

Given that Iran had agreed in principle to take a significant step towards reducing their nuclear stockpile, and reassure the United States of their intentions, this reaction from the White House was uncharacteristic. As Helene Cooper of the New York Times poignantly observed, this reaction was, in many ways:

‘the exact opposite of what a White House usually does after major international talks. Instead of painting lukewarm concessions as major breakthroughs and going on and on about “warm substantive” meetings, officials were treating a potentially major breakthrough as if it were a suspicious package’ (2009).

While it’s impossible to trace a direct line between Obama’s statements and Iran’s ultimate rejection of the deal, it is not unreasonable to say that this language would have not gone down well in Tehran. Considering their sensitivity to notions of respect and fairness, that were discussed in chapter 2, this would have been antithetical to Iran’s sense of self. What is clear, however, is that this rhetoric failed to convince Iran that the costs of non-agreement were sufficiently high, but instead deepened their resolve and belief that their American counterparts could not be trusted. To recall Khamenei’s statement in March 2009, he said; ‘Our nation hates to be the subject of your



simultaneous attempts at negotiation and pressurising. Our nation hates to negotiate while being pressurised. The simultaneous use of threats and negotiation will not work with our nation' (Khamenei, 2009). This finds support in Nincic's contention that 'threats and sanctions [are] counterproductive... strengthening, rather than weakening, commitment to nuclear programs and other objectionable behaviour' (2011, p. 168). If this is indeed the case, then it is conceivable that in the absence of this rhetoric – which would result greater empathic intensity – Iran would have been better placed to respond positively to the deal, and could have avoided much of the domestic turmoil that undid the deal politically in Tehran. Moreover, a more empathic approach at this stage would have only impacted positively upon the follow-up meeting in Vienna, perhaps giving Iran impression that an agreeable and mutually beneficial deal was indeed possible. In reality, however, this rhetoric fuelled the latent belief in Tehran that the deal was a bad one, and that it should be resisted at all costs. I will outline Tehran's views and objections in more detail shortly.

In addition to the White House's new position, Clinton also demonstrated a rhetoric that belied the positive meeting that had come only one week prior. On 9 October Clinton made similar comments in a press conference, stating that 'The international community will not wait indefinitely for evidence that Iran is prepared to live up to its international obligations' (2009b). Furthermore, she took the opportunity to address Iran's human rights record and June election:

'We know that decisions about the future of Iran are up to the Iranian people. But we will continue to speak out on behalf of human rights, on behalf of democracy, on behalf of freedom of expression, that are really at the core of human freedom. And it's important that the people in Iran know that the United States, the United Kingdom, and others in the international community, are watching very closely as to what is happening, and standing on their side when it comes to their willingness to take great risks on behalf of the kind of future that they would like to see for their country' (Clinton, 2009b).

In making these comments, Clinton raised additional Iranian concerns to do with legitimacy and regime subversion that played deeply into Iran's suspicions of the United States. Moreover, it had a demonstrable impact on Iran. ElBardei recalls that 'Ahmadinejad and his colleagues were irate. The Iranian ambassador [to the IAEA] came to inform us that Salehi would now not come to the

fuel proposal meeting' (ElBaradei, 2012, p. 305). This was significant because Salehi, the head of Iran's Atomic Energy Agency, was a senior figure in Iran who had both the ear of the Supreme Leader and ElBaradei. ElBaradei contacted the Obama administration, insisting they tone down their rhetoric and that Clinton make a more moderate statement (ElBaradei, 2012, p. 305) She made one the very next day, stating that 'We believe it is important to pursue the diplomatic track and to do everything we can do to make it successful' (Clinton, 2009c).

In making this point I am not suggesting that it is counterfactually possible to alter Clinton's empathy towards Iran. She was widely acknowledged to have a more hawkish view on Iran, and was less invested in engagement as Obama was (Landler, 2016; interview with Ross, 2016). These facts preclude such a counterfactual intervention. But what can be said about Clinton's rhetoric is that increased empathy from Obama would have likely had a trickledown effect on the rest of his bureaucracy, and perhaps prevented harmful announcements such as this. Although Clinton was known to hold differing views to Obama, she had a reputation as a loyal foot-soldier who stayed on message when given instructions by the White House. This was demonstrated by the more toned down statement that resulted from ElBaradei's phone call to Washington. Thus, a more empathic Obama would have likely had the associated effect of preventing these kind of outburst at such a sensitive time.

Not only did it display a lack of empathy, but it was also unnecessary for one primary reason. Only a week before the Geneva meeting, Obama had stood alongside Gordon Brown and Nicholas Sarkozy and condemned Iran for its 'concealed nuclear facility' at Fordo. Sarkozy said that 'If by December there is not an in-depth change by the Iranian leaders, sanctions will have to be taken' (quoted in Traynor et al., 2009). Thus, the notion that the Obama administration even needed to hold Iran's feet to the fire over the TRR in the first place seems unaware of the extreme leverage they already held. To then labour the point in the way they did was likely counterproductive to US interests as it made it harder for Iran to cooperate. Increased empathy

towards Iran in this regard, therefore, would have less to do with engendering new approaches and policies, and more with simply not antagonising Iran given their already tumultuous domestic political context.

As we now know, the TRR deal came unstuck during the period between Geneva and after the Vienna meeting. The principle reason for this given by the literature and interviews conducted for this project is that Iran's domestic politics turned on it. As Mousavian explains, 'Ahmadinejad's domestic opponents didn't want him to be able to consolidate his position in Iran or internationally by reaching an agreement with America' (2012, p. 359; see also Parsi, 2012, pp. 147–150). This undoubtedly played a major role in derailing the proposal. But to put all of the explanatory weight into this ignores the Obama administration's implicit role in bringing this situation about. It can therefore also be argued that the Obama administration's rhetoric played a hand in creating this situation. As one Iranian diplomat put it, 'just because the negotiation team agree to terms does not mean that the government will. But before we could decide in Tehran the Americans and Europeans were already pressing for sanctions. That was not the way one showed mutual respect' (quoted in Crist, 2012, p. 549).

### ***Vienna***

This brings us to the Vienna meeting, which was held between 17-19 October. As this session was intended to clarify the details of the specific proposal provisionally agreed upon in Geneva, it involved only those party to the swap itself; Iran, Russia, France, and the United States. And whereas the Javier Solana, the EU High Representative, oversaw the Geneva meeting, it was ElBaradei who chaired this session. Despite the sense that Iran's domestic politics was beginning to sour on the deal, interviewees recalled that the atmosphere was nevertheless positive at the opening of the Vienna meeting (Interview 9, 2016). There was some sense that the Iranians had some difficulties, but, as one member of the US delegation put it to me, they were under the

impression that they were there to ‘seal the deal’ on the original Geneva proposal (Interview 9, 2015).

However, things got off to a bad start. The French arrived with a host of amendments to the original plan, and exhibited a hard-headed attitude to the Iranians. As ElBaradei recalls, ‘The French...came across as hard-line and legalistic’, and they ‘arrived with scores of proposed amendments to our prepared draft’ (2012, p. 306). This had also come in the context of a number of scathing rebukes from Sarkozy over the proceeding days, where he decried Iran’s human rights record. This angered the Iranian delegation, which was headed by Ali Soltanieh, the Ambassador to the IAEA, causing him to go into a lengthy tirade during the negotiations about how the French were untrustworthy, and that Iran no longer wanted them as part of the deal (Interview 10, 2016; ElBaradei, 2012, pp. 306–307; Parsi, 2012, pp. 135–138).<sup>34</sup> This was significant because France was only one of two countries who possessed the ability to produce the type of fuel that the TRR required. The other was Argentina, who refused to be involved. Although ElBaradei was able to smooth over this particular aspect of Iran’s objections and persuade them that France’s involvement was essential, it was the first sign that the Iranians were far from enamoured with the proposed deal. Furthermore, a senior Obama administration official present in Vienna stated that the French were ‘mercenary’ in their approach. As they put it, ‘Everyone else was trying to solve the proliferation problem...They were trying to solve a commercial problem’ (Interview 10, 2016). This hard-headed attitude was also demonstrated by Bernard Koucher, the French Foreign Minister, who told reporters on the second day of negotiations that the transfer of the uranium out of the Iran ‘must be before the end of the year... [and] there must be at the least 1,200 kilograms – on that we won’t back down’ (quoted in Crail, 2009). So even while there were intense negotiations underway, the French were approaching them in a manner uncondusive to

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<sup>34</sup> There were historical reasons for this. After the Iranian revolution in 1979, France reneged on a nuclear deal with Iran that was centred around a multi-national enrichment facility in France called EURODIF, which Iran had a ten per-cent share in. France’s refusal to deliver uranium to Iran has fuelled a deep mistrust in the international fuel market, and France in particular (Parsi, 2012, p. 136).

collaborative problem solving. They saw the negotiations in competitive terms rather than collaborative ones.

The same cannot be said for the Obama administration, who by all accounts conducted themselves professionally in both Geneva and Vienna. ElBaradei describes the head of the US delegation, Daniel Poneman, who was the Deputy Secretary of Energy, as a ‘breath of fresh air; bright, modest, a big-picture thinker, always eager to find solutions’ (2012, p. 306). The fact that the Obama administration came to the meeting with this ‘value creating’ attitude, as opposed to a ‘value claiming’ one was significant (Rathbun, 2014, pp. 2–3), and indicated their sincerity and genuine desire to reach a deal. But this value creating attitude only went so far. As far as Poneman and Obama were concerned, the value had already been created in Geneva, and the task now was to just close the deal. Iran, however, had other ideas, and promptly listed a number of problems they had with the proposal as it was currently composed. Their biggest issue was with the stipulation that Iran would export the full 1,200 kg in one go, but would then not receive the fuel-plates for a year (interview with Einhorn, 2015). Indeed, Parsi states that ‘Jalili thought he was agreeing to in Geneva was not the single-batch request, but rather a discussion of the proposal in Vienna’ (2012, p. 134). While the Obama administration did not dismiss Iran’s concerns outright, the fact that no substantive alternative proposals were tabled is indicative of the lack of flexibility they brought to the issue. In Vienna, Iran’s concerns were not seen as legitimate expressions of concern, but rather as delaying tactics (Interview 9, 2015). The Iranians were therefore comfortable with the idea of the swap itself, but sought some kind of guarantee that their counterparts in Vienna would live up their obligations as well (Parsi, 2012, p. 137). As one Iranian negotiator said to Parsi, ‘From the outset, Iran was ready to ship out the LEU, granted that a guarantee for the delivery of the fuel pads was given’ (2012, p. 138). While the US delegation did try to find a work-around, their failure to take Iran’s concerns seriously ultimately meant that there was no proposal that would seemingly satisfy both parties.

This leads to the second counterfactual intervention of the TRR episode. By increasing the empathic intensity of Obama and his top policy advisors it is plausible that they would have recognised some of the problems that Iran had with the deal, and started from the premise that they were legitimate concerns. When re-analysed, it is conceivable how many of the aspects of the deal may have been unpalatable to the Iranian government. Apart from the fact that their mistrust in the French was equal to, if not greater, than the United States, there was also no mechanism for ensuring the return of the material, apart from the word of their counterparts. At the end of the negotiations, with no concrete agreement in place, the negotiating parties agreed that they would again go back to their capitals. Despite various proposals and counter-proposals, and concerns raised by both the French and Iranians, the details of the deal remained the same. In a phone call with ElBaradei immediately after the talks, Obama said ‘If this agreement is approved...it will change the dynamics here for me’, apparently referencing the ticking clock on his controversial engagement strategy (quoted in ElBaradei, 2012, p. 309).

Following Vienna, each actor was given a few days to discuss the proposal in their respective capitals, and to give their official responses to the IAEA by 23 October (ElBaradei, 2012, p. 309). Everyone but Iran responded promptly by the deadline with a positive reply. The Iranians, however, informed ElBaradei ‘that it is considering the proposal in depth and in a favourable light, but it needs more time until the middle of next week to provide a response’ (quoted in Parsi, 2012). On 29 October the Iranians again contacted ElBaradei, and requested to meet with the Vienna group again to try and figure out a means of ensuring they would receive the fuel-plates. But the answer from Washington was definitive: ‘This is a pivotal moment for Iran. We urge Iran to accept the agreement as proposed and we will not alter it we will not wait forever’ (Clinton, 2009d)

Although many have argued that the United States remained flexible post-Vienna and continued to seek a way forward, (Interview 9, 2015), this was not clear to the Iranians. Clinton’s

statement epitomised their view on the TRR deal; take it or leave it. Peter Wittig, who was German's representative at the Geneva meetings, supports this view. He stated that, 'For us there was never ever a very thorough soul-searching discussion whether we should modify it or not' (Wittig quoted in Parsi, 2012, p. 142). In addition, he said 'that it would be wrong to make it even more attractive for them because we could not be sure that they would come around' (Wittig quoted in Parsi, 2012, p. 142). Clinton put it similarly on 2 November, which was shortly after Iran had asked for more time: 'we urge Iran to accept the agreement as proposed because we are not altering it – it is the proposal that they agreed to in principle' (Clinton, 2009e).

The reason this happened, I contend, and the reason the deal faltered, lies in part with the lack of empathic intensity exhibited by Obama towards Iran on this issue. By the time of the Vienna talks, the deal had not yet been torpedoed in Tehran, and there is every reason to think that a more tactful and nuanced approach could have resulted in a deal, and one that was not as politically potent for the Iranian government. This is not to suggest that Obama was not experiencing real pressures that influenced his views on the matter. It is evident from the changing rhetoric that not only did the administration start turning the rhetorical screw, but mentions of deadlines for cooperation became more frequent. Whereas Obama stated back in May that he does not 'want to set an artificial deadline' (Obama, 2009g; see also Landler and Cooper, 2009), by early October Clinton was saying that 'The president has said that we want to see actin from Iran by the end of this year' (Clinton, 2009b), and in November his press secretary proclaimed that 'Time is running out for Iran to address the international community's growing concerns about its nuclear program' (quoted in Bayefsky, 2009). The pressure was clearly being felt, but this is not the same as saying the break-down of talks was inevitable.

Trita Parsi captures the paradoxical nature of the TRR proposal well: 'In Vienna, the Obama administration was so fearful that negotiations would drag that it was unwilling to entertain any compromise on the central modalities of the deal. What was initially proposed as a negotiated

solution quickly turned into an ultimatum’ (2012, p. 219). The conclusion drawn here is that Obama and his advisors lacked sufficient flexibility in their dealings with Iran over the proposed TRR deal. The original conception of the TRR proposal may have demonstrated a number of empathic capacities by offering both sides a ‘win win’ that ‘would create time and space for negotiation of a more durable solution’ (interview with Einhorn, 2015), but its actual attempted implementation and delivery showed an empathy deficit. Iran had a number of legitimate concerns that could have feasibly addressed, but instead the United States played an ultimatum game and refused to budge from the initial proposal. Although a few proposals and counter-proposals were sent back and forth between Iran and the United States through ElBaradei, the political moment in Iran had gone. The TRR deal was becoming undignified for the Supreme Leader, who was in a uniquely perilous situation politically (Farhi, 2012) Despite their contestations to the contrary, the chapter argues that the United States could have feasibly done more to close the TRR deal and allay Iran of their primary concerns surrounding it. As Pollack puts it:

‘We cannot know if a more concrete, tit-for-tat approach to compromise would have succeeded where the nebulous offer of “engagement” failed, but it could not have hurt and there is evidence to suggest that it might have worked. After Iran rejected the 2009 TRR deal in Vienna, Tehran floated a number of compromise positions that posed a more sequenced process in which Iran would receive incremental returns for making equivalent concessions, rather than the original proposal, which would have required Iran to ship all of the LEU up front..... A revised policy, especially one that featured more discrete and tangible benefits for Iran in response to specific concessions, might do better the next time’ (Pollack, 2013, p. 132)

This argument is an important counter to the dominant narrative of this period, which suggests that the Iranian government abruptly slammed the door on the chance of any potential cooperation over the nuclear issue, despite every effort from the United States to seek a compromise (see US Department of State, 2009o, 2009p, 2010; Poneman, 2010b, 2010a; Fitzpatrick, 2010; Crist, 2012, p.561; Pollack, 2013, p.124; Clinton, 2015). Obama himself neatly summed up this position in March 2010, stating that when ‘Faced with an extended hand, Iran’s leaders have shown only a clenched fist’ (Obama, 2010). The question as to whether this episode amounts to a missed opportunity for cooperation is a contentious one. For the vast majority of US



officials I interviewed for this project the answer is an affirmative “no”. As Einhorn bluntly put it, ‘We made the offer. It was a bona-fide offer. They accepted it and then they walked away from it’ (interview with Einhorn, 2015). Richard Nephew concurred, arguing that ‘they closed the door on us’ (Nephew, 2016). Dennis Ross said of the engagement track, ‘It didn’t close until the Iranians closed it’ (interview with Ross, 2016). Yet, the context of this interaction suggests that it could have played out differently. While this narrative isn’t dismissed entirely, and the Iranian government is by no means exonerated of their role in the breakdown of engagement, the argument put forward here is that the Obama administration were also responsible for the slamming of this door. This breakdown in the engagement track was not an inevitable feature of US-Iran relations, but resulted in part from Obama’s retreat from the empathic capacities he exhibited in the first half of 2009. While this empathy was still evident in some part, the intensity of it had diminished significantly during this period. Whether this is due to increased exacerbation with the Iranians, or because of the various pressures pushing him to adopt a more hard-line approach is unclear. But what is clear, is that if this empathy hadn’t receded from view in the way it did, then it would be reasonable to argue that the TRR deal could have been agreed to and cooperation established. This was recognised by one interviewee. A State Department official argues that ‘If we had given the Supreme Leader time...we would have been better off. So among the pro-engagement camp in the State Department, a lot of people blamed themselves, blamed the US for going public with it too quickly’ (Interview 1, 2015).

It is not necessarily incorrect to say that the deal was killed in Tehran, as much of the literature and the majority of officials interviewed for this project do. But it is also important to pay attention to how the administration’s rapidly changing rhetoric, where sanctions and pressure were being mentioned with ever increasing regularity, helped to cultivate an inhospitable environment in Iran. If we take Khamenei’s statement that Iran hates negotiating under pressure seriously – which we should – then it is no great leap to suggest that in the absence of the Obama administration’s increasingly bellicose rhetoric the TRR proposal would have been received differently in Tehran.

While the individuals that targeted it would still have no great affinity with Ahmadinejad, the impression that he was capitulating to US pressure and giving everything up for nothing would have been harder to make stick. If everyone agrees that the deal fell apart due to the political attacks in Iran, then it is reasonable to argue that by not fuelling that fire – which happened due to a breakdown of empathy – the chances of the deal surviving would have been increased.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has argued that opportunities for cooperation with Iran were missed by the United States at specific points during Obama's first year in office, and crucially that if key members of the Obama administration had exercised more empathy for Iran then it is likely that cooperation over the nuclear stand-off could have been established. While making this case, however, the chapter has argued for an injection of humility into the claim that empathy can be the 'great corrective' (White, 1984, p. 160) in international conflict. Although it was determined that empathy could have acted as a corrective of sorts in the negotiations over the TRR fuel-swap deal, the same cannot be said for all of this period. It was argued that greater empathy would have mattered little to the outcome of Obama's first six months in office. These conclusions were reached by examining the views and beliefs of the principal actors and the decisions that were made, but also by situating these factors into the broader context of the interaction and asking what alternative pathways were possible. Such an approach sought to move beyond presenting a retrospective assessment of what US foreign policy towards Iran should have looked like, in the opinion of the author, and instead sought to understand what it realistically could have looked like. It argued that while 'imagining empathy' itself was not a difficult or unrealistic task, such an injection of empathic intensity would not necessarily have led to cooperation in all circumstances.

Ultimately, therefore, the chapter is partly sympathetic to the argument that the Obama administration 'did all we could given the political realities' (Interview 2, 2015), as one National

Security Council official put it to me. But, I also argued that these political realities were more of a constraining factor in the first six months of Obama's first year than the second. The Obama administration did as much as could conceivably have been asked of it in their first six months in office by adeptly laying the groundwork for dialogue and negotiations. A more empathic approach from Obama might have seen some of the ambiguities of his engagement efforts communicated in a clearer manner, but on balance increasing his empathic intensity would have had little effect on the prospects for cooperation during this short period. Yet, when such an opportunity presented itself, Obama was unable to summon up the level of empathic intensity and potential empathic capacities that might have made possible a breakthrough on the nuclear issue. To be sure, other factors also worked against cooperation during the TRR talks, crucially Iran's tumultuous domestic political context and the 'mercantile' (Interview 10, 2016) attitude of the French delegation. However, it was Obama's lack of empathic intensity that was a key obstacle to his administration navigating a way around these obstacles to cooperation.



# Conclusion

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In January 2016 the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) confirmed that Iran had complied in full with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which had been reached in July 2015 between the P5+1 and Iran. The IAEA reported that Iran had filled the core of its heavy water reactor at Arack with concrete, dismantled the majority of its centrifuges at both Natanz and Fordo, and loaded 90% of its stockpile of low-enriched uranium onto a Russian ship ready to leave Iran (IAEA, 2016). Just over thirteen years after Iran's nuclear program was first thrust into the public sphere, the United States and Iran, along with others, had implemented a cooperative agreement on this issue that sought to allay the concerns of all parties involved. While this by no means suggests the end of the enmity that has divided these countries since 1979, the significance of this achievement should not be overstated.

By bringing together disparate literatures on the security dilemma, the concept of empathy, and counterfactual methods, this thesis has sought to provide a conceptual and methodological framework for enquiring into the question of whether cooperation between the United States and Iran could have been reached at an earlier stage. It did not seek to discover whether cooperation of the magnitude seen in the JCPOA was possible in the short term due to empathy, but rather the smaller incremental steps that are often necessary for grand diplomatic bargains such as this one. The JCPOA started life as a secret back channel in Muscat in 2012 (Solomon, 2016), at a time when intentional or inadvertent military action seemed a more likely outcome than a comprehensive solution to the nuclear issue (Goldberg, 2012; Riedel, 2012). The empirical impetus to this question has been the dual-narratives of US-Iran relations that I outlined in the introduction. That on the one-hand this conflict should be defined by near misses, bad luck, and misunderstanding, and on the other as a fundamental clash of interests, or even civilisations, that precludes any chance of cooperation unless one or both parties drastically changed track. The

former would explain the JCPOA as an idea whose time has come, while the latter would contend that it resulted from Iran's hand being forced due to the crippling sanctions regime spear-headed by the United States. For Trita Parsi, Flynt Leverett, Hilary Mann Leveret, and Hossein Mousavian, amongst others, this conflict falls into the first category. They suggest that it has been sustained by the failure of each side – though most notably the United States – to see the other's security concerns and behaviour as legitimate expressions of insecurity and fear. The counterfactual logic underpinning this account is that if only each side had empathised more readily with the other, then cooperation would have been possible. For others, however, this conflict has been defined by a clash of either ideological world-views or competing interests, or indeed both. The position taken by many in the United States was that so long as Iran was hell-bent on pursuing nuclear weapons, no meaningful compromise would be possible (interview with Heinonen, 2015; interview with Samore, 2015).

My way into this debate was firstly to consider empathy as a central feature to explaining how actors in international politics are able to overcome conflicts, and secondly to locate this question at the heart of security dilemma theorising in IR. As Naomi Head has poignantly observed, 'Once we begin to question how adversarial and mistrusting relationships might be transformed into more cooperative ones, it is a relatively small step to suggest this requires conceptual tools for understanding empathy' (2012, p. 33). Beyond a relatively small set of literature, however, IR has not taken the concept of empathy seriously (Crawford, 2014; Head, 2012, 2016a, 2016b; Holmes and Yarhi-Milo, 2016). Likewise, empathy has long been an implicitly central but under-theorised component of the security dilemma literature. The security dilemma literature leads to the proposition that greater levels of empathy in conflict situations can promote cooperation. The implicit logic behind Butterfield's pioneering contribution in locating the security dilemma at the individual-level mirrors the one mentioned above; if only actors could empathise with each other, security dilemma dynamics could feasibly be overcome.

By utilising the growing literature on counterfactual methods, the thesis has tackled this logic head on. It has suggested that we can do this by making small ‘plausible’ (Lebow, 2010) counterfactual increases to the empathic intensity of specific individuals in order to explore these theoretical and empirical arguments. The point of this research has not been to simply confirm the narrative that empathy has a positive impact upon conflict resolution – which is all too easy to buy into and ignores the costs associated with empathy (Head, 2016a, 2016b; Pedwell, 2014) – but rather to use this methodology as a means of further explicating the operation of empathy within the context of US foreign policy towards Iran.

In order to make this counterfactual move, it was first necessary to be clear about what exactly it was that I wanted to change. This question is particularly pressing for scholars of IR, as there has not been a great deal of research that has taken the concept of empathy seriously. Few scholars have sought to enquire into the meaning behind this term, or into the vast multidisciplinary literature on it. The first task of this thesis was therefore to outline exactly what I meant by the concept of empathy. In mediating between the various conceptualisations of empathy, I argued that it should be considered a deliberate attempt to take the perspective of the other. I also argued that, for our present purposes, it should be considered distinct from the related phenomena of sympathy and compassion. And finally I argued that empathy should be orientated towards the other and not the self. While it is impossible to remove the self entirely from any empathic encounter, empathy does not entail rationalising the actions of another within your own worldview. In the context of IR, it is an imaginative leap into the perspective of another who holds a different worldview.

It was then necessary to specify how the concept of empathy was operationalised both factually and counterfactually. In order to do this I introduced a number of empathic capacities that were pertinent to the case of US foreign policy towards Iran. These ranged from appreciating the role that domestic politics and other situational factors can play in impacting on Iran’s behaviour,

to an empathic capacity to understand the importance Iran has historically given to notions of legitimacy and respect. These empathic capacities did not entail specific policy positions as such, as the relationship between an empathic understanding of another and the articulation of policies that reflect this is not a linear one, but rather is highly dependent upon both the empathic intensity of the empathising actor as well the situational context in which this actor is embedded. This brings me to the second point, which concerns empathic intensity. I argued that these empathic capacities are also dependent upon the empathic intensity of the empathising individual. I have partly borrowed this term from Todd Hall and Andrew Ross (2015, p. 848), who coined the term affective intensity in order to describe the subjective felt strength of particular affective responses. Empathy, and its associated empathic capacities, therefore, are subjective experiences that will exist at varying levels of intensity. Both the capacity to empathise with another and the intensity on this empathic encounter are key variables in determining whether actions can be taken that mitigate security dilemma dynamics.

Empathic capacities and empathic intensity were the concepts that I brought to the case studies where I counterfactually changed the empathic intensity of key US decision-makers where this was a plausible change to make. One key stipulation was that this change must be a realistic endeavour, and rooted in pre-existing or established understandings of what was possible in a given time or place. Thus, increasing the empathic intensity of US Secretary of State, Colin Powell, in his dealings with Iran is a realistic rewrite to imagine, but the same could not be said for Vice-President Dick Cheney. Likewise, increasing Obama's empathic intensity towards Iran is a drastically different proposition than changing Hillary Clinton's, or Gary Samore's, both of whom held bad-faith models regarding Iran. As Martin Hollis and Steve Smith wrote in their classic book, *Explaining and Understanding International Relations*, 'the very thought of Brzezinski [President Carter's hawkish National Security Advisor] cooing like a dove is enough to suggest caution' (1990, p. 154). Such an exercise, they proclaimed, would be an 'ornithological wonder', implying



that it could not happen (Hollis and Smith, 1990, p. 164). Hollis and Smith do not address the other side of this coin and provide guidance for what types of counterfactuals can be conducted. But this distinction is instructive for the approach I took to counterfactually re-imagine the empathic intensity of specific individuals. The altered element of history – the antecedent – has to be plausible and justifiable in one way or another (Harvey, 2012; Lebow, 2010; Tetlock and Belkin, 1996). By following this logic I argue that the changes I make meet these criteria.

### **Contribution and implications**

The overall contribution of this thesis has been to develop a conceptualisation of empathy for the security dilemma, and then to counterfactually map this conceptualisation onto the case study of US foreign policy towards Iran, 2001-2010. In short, the thesis has argued that empathy holds the immanent potential to promote the type of cooperation and reassurance envisioned by security dilemma theorists from John Herz (1959) to Ken Booth and Nicholas Wheeler (2008). But, at the same time, it has shown how empathy is not the ‘great corrective’ to conflict that Ralph White once theorised it to be (1984, p. 160). By showing how an individual’s empathy can promote cooperation in some contexts, but can be bureaucratically and strategically inhibited in others, I have contributed to mapping the empirical dynamics of this understudied and undertheorized concept in IR. This is an important move, as all too often the term empathy has been used with little prior thought or engagement with the broader meaning behind it. Using the US foreign policy towards Iran since 2001 as an extended case study, this thesis has added empirical weight to this claim that empathy can be important in processes of conflict resolution, but it has also highlighted the limits of empathy.

The contribution can be broken down further into three key areas. The first contribution is to theoretical understandings of empathy. As I have already highlighted in this conclusion, the concept of empathy is an undertheorized one in IR, and even more so in the security dilemma

literature. A great deal has been said about its virtues (Blight et al., 2012; Blight and Lang, 2005; Booth and Wheeler, 2008; Herz, 1959; Jervis, 1976, 1978; McNamara and Blight, 2003), but for the most part it is has not been treated as a concept worthy of interrogation, but rather as an everyday word that we simply know what it means when we speak it. Even a cursory review of the multidisciplinary literature reveals this to be unsatisfactory. My theoretical contribution, therefore, has been to develop a conceptualisation of empathy for the context of security dilemma dynamics that is rooted in the multidisciplinary literature on empathy, but still true to the core concerns and principles of security dilemma theorists. The conceptual implications of this project are at once vast and narrow. They are vast because this project stands as one of the few instances in IR where the concept of empathy is taken seriously and given the due it deserves. The important exceptions to this are found in the work of Naomi Head (2012, 2016b, 2016a), Neta Crawford (2014), and Keren Yarhi-Milo and Marcus Holmes (2016). But the conceptual implications are also narrow because of the focus on the application of empathy to the specific issue area of security dilemma dynamics between actors in international politics.

The methodological contribution of this thesis has been to establish counterfactual methods as a means for investigating how security dilemma dynamics can be overcome, and in probing narratives of missed opportunities within these contexts. As I have highlighted, this was a necessary move because of the counterfactual logics that implicitly underpinned both security dilemma theorising on empathy and narratives of missed opportunities. In doing so, I have drawn on literature on counterfactual methods that suggest these types of research strategies should not be considered drastically different to standard methodological approaches in IR. As Lebow put it, 'they differ in degree, but not in kind' (Lebow, 2010). I have also sought to establish individual-level properties, such as the subjective experience of empathy, as legitimate areas of enquiry in counterfactual analysis. The implication of ignoring these factors is that it paints a picture of contingency as located only in the material world and not the ideational. Given the recent surge in interest in emotions, psychology, trust, and empathy, and other such individual-level properties, it

is essential that these be incorporated into this methodology if it is to be taken seriously in IR (Åhäll and Gregory, 2015; Head, 2016a; Hutchison and Bleiker, 2014; Wheeler, 2013; Wheeler et al., 2016; Yarhi-Milo, 2014).

The methodological contribution merges into the empirical one. The reason for this is that counterfactual methods re-orientate discussions about missed opportunities away from normative speculation, and towards realistic investigations into credible alternatives to the historical record. This is a necessary intervention because much of the literature that is critical of US foreign policy towards Iran can be seen as a normative critique that does not adequately consider the context of the interaction (Leverett and Leverett, 2009a, 2013; Marashi, 2010; Nasr, 2013; Slavin, 2009; Wheeler, 2017). Much of it berates the United States for their empathic failings, but does not adequately consider the range of actions that may have actually been possible within a given context. Counterfactual research strategies, on the other hand, attempt to return the analysis of policies, events, and decisions to the context in which they originally took place. As such, they are specifically interested in asking *what feasibly could have happened differently*, as opposed to simply saying *what should have happened differently*. Arguing, for instance, that Obama could have done little more to engage Iran in his first six months in office should not be interpreted as suggesting that he executed a flawless Iran policy. Rather, the point is that counterfactual analysis requires judging what a given actor can do within a given context. In a sense, counterfactuals, when deployed in this manner, can be used to ‘intelligently explore the lessons that can be learned from the past while resisting the lure of hindsight and illusion of certainty’ (Kahneman, 2012, p. 14).

This brings us to the empirical contribution of this thesis. In short, the contribution here was to demonstrate instances in which opportunities for cooperation were missed, and to set out some of the alternative pathways that actors could have realistically followed in order to promote cooperation. I do not suggest that these pathways would have definitively been taken as a result of

my counterfactual alterations, or that the actors would have altered in the exact way I set out. This is fundamentally beyond the realm of both counterfactual and factual research. But by showing that some degree of contingency existed at key moments invites us to reconsider our interpretations of US foreign policy towards Iran. Although the missed opportunities argument has been made by some commentators on US-Iran relations already (Parsi, 2007; e.g. Slavin, 2009), by bringing the conceptual and methodological tools highlighted above to this question, I have approached the narrative of missed opportunities with a level of specificity and clarity that has been missing from the debate so far.

Moreover, I have shown that these missed opportunities were not necessarily the expected ones. In the Bush administration episode, I argued that while empathy was scarce, the existence of important moments of contingency combined with a low-intensity empathy in key officials in the State Department, meant that low-level cooperation was not only possible, but there was every chance that this cooperation could have gone further still. Iran was ready to extend its hand beyond the issue of Afghanistan, and genuinely desired improved relations. If Powell had read Iran's signals as they were likely intended, it is possible he would have pushed harder on this issue than he did. Moreover, given the success of Iran's cooperation in Afghanistan, and the praise it earned them from the United States, there is every reason to think that further cooperation could have been a mutually beneficial endeavour. Empathic capacities, therefore, do not suppress the interests of actors with some kind of altruistic sympathy for another, but rather constitute and re-constitute these interests in more collaborative ways (see also Rathbun, 2014). It took empathy to cooperate with Iran in Afghanistan in the first place, and it would not be a great leap to suggest that this empathy could have extended further beyond this one issue area. The second half of Chapter 4 argued that by May 2003, when Iran sent its comprehensive negotiating package, this contingency had become subsumed within a bureaucratic structure that was controlled by individuals with 'ideological fundamentalist' (Booth and Wheeler, 2008; Wheeler, 2013) views of Iran. Increasing Powell's empathy in reacting to the 2003 package was an eminently plausible counterfactual

alteration to make. But even if the antecedent is changed in this way, it is implausible to think that the resulting empathic capacities could have significantly changed the administration's response to the Iranian signal.

The first half of Chapter 5 makes a similar argument to the last; no-matter how empathic Obama was towards Iran, the existence of other factors that precluded the ability of empathy to be communicated in a clear and decisive manner negated any impact it could have potentially had. It was not ideological fundamentalism that prevented this, as in the Bush years, but rather a catalogue of constraining factors, ranging from an internal prioritisation of domestic politics, to a deep-seated uncertainty over how to engage Iran at all. Plausible counterfactuals require proposing a credible alternative to the historical record. The finding here was that in the first six months of Obama's administration no such credible alternative exists. The level of contingency changes, however, as unexpected possibilities for engaging Iran emerge in the second half of Obama's first term in office. It is in these moments that Obama missed an opportunity for cooperation with Iran. Most accounts of this period say that Iran walked away from the table, and thus the responsibility lies with them. While I do not discount this narrative entirely, I show how a number of the Obama administration's actions effectively undercut Iran's hand and made it difficult for them to accept the deal as presently constructed. Obama's empathic failures, therefore, were equally responsible for the breakdown of cooperation towards the end of the 2009. Through counterfactually re-imagining this period, it becomes plausible to argue that a more empathic Obama would have led to the TRR deal being accepted.

These episodes taken together suggest that the relationship between empathy and cooperation is more complicated than often assumed. Empathy can be considered a necessary condition for cooperation between adversaries entangled in security dilemma dynamics, but not necessarily a sufficient one (Wheeler, 2017). The broader implications of this for the security dilemma literature is that it tempers the arguments of those that see empathy as an overwhelmingly

positive force to security dilemma dynamics. Empathy does not exist within a vacuum, but its formation and expression will be dependent in large part upon the social context in which it is embedded. An actors competing preferences and interests may not inhibit the development of empathy internally, but can impact upon the expression and communication of this empathy.

Now that a cooperative agreement has been reached between the United States and Iran, it is tempting to sit back and watch the pieces fall into place, seeing everything that came before as somehow significant for or implicated in the reality that we now know. Sceptics might suggest that this type of enquiry – one that looks into missed opportunities – is inconsequential now that a wide-ranging and comprehensive nuclear deal is in place. Such logic may see the 2001-2003 and 2009-2010 periods as merely part of the causal pathway to leading to the historic 2015 agreement, or merely as data-points in history. Matt Kroenig, for example, looks at the sanctions regime that was built following the collapse of the Tehran Research Reactor negotiations, and argues that ‘Without the tough international sanctions regime imposed on Iran...it is highly unlikely that Iran would have come to the negotiating table and agreed to the November 2013 interim deal’ (Kroenig, 2014, p. 100). Moreover, this was the unwavering view taken by the vast majority of former US officials that I interviewed for this project. The implication of this historical view is not only that it works backwards, fitting past events into a linear narrative leading towards the present, but that in doing so it brushes over the contingency of social relations (Lebow, 2010). In this case, it does so in a way that legitimises the use of coercive measures, while conveniently forgetting that implementing these measures could have pushed either or both the United States and Israel to the point of war with Iran. By reading back through history from the view of the present it is easy to forget the contingency, confluence, and indeterminacy that can often determine the outcome of events.

Though comforting, the broader picture of this thesis suggests that this interpretation is incorrect. By highlighting and exploring the possibilities present in contingent moments in US

foreign policy towards Iran, I have sought to show that such a narrative of history is a deeply flawed one. Indeed, by showing that limited cooperation could have feasibly begun at earlier points in the US-Iran relationship, the findings of this thesis challenge the idea that a ramp up in coercion was a necessary tool for both bringing Iran to the table and reaching the final deal. This is not to suggest that the simultaneous building up of leverage by both the United States and Iran – Iran’s in the form of the number of centrifuges spinning and their technological advancement, and the United States’ in economic sanctions – had nothing to do with the nuclear agreement. But it does seek to dampen the determinism that many bring to this debate. Lebow eloquently highlights that this can be one of the benefits of counterfactual approaches:

‘they provide a vantage point for taking ourselves outside of our world and our assumptions about it where they can be subjected to active and open interrogation. Such an exercise...makes us aware of assumptions that are so deeply ingrained that we take them for granted’ (2010, p. 5).

In this sense, my findings have bearing beyond the growing literature on the history of the Iranian nuclear crisis, as they also speak to many of the current debates around the Iran nuclear deal reached in July 2015. They do this in two related ways; first, they show that the narrative of coercive pressure is over-deterministic, and second, that it obscures many of the considerable risks involved with a policy of coercion, by either playing-down or ignoring the likelihood of military action by either Israel or the United States – or indeed both – following the break-down of dialogue between 2010 and 2013. While a nuclear Iran was extremely undesirable to the United States, another war in the Middle East would have been equally detrimental to US interests. Obama himself recognised this, arguing in 2015 that ‘We know that a military strike or a series of military strikes can set back Iran’s nuclear program for a period of time — but almost certainly will prompt Iran to rush towards a bomb’ (Obama, 2015b).

During this period, many argued that the failure to establish cooperation on the nuclear issue in 2009-2010 brought the threat of military strikes against Iran to an all-time high. As Kenneth Pollack and Ray Takeyh wrote in mid-2011, ‘Many fear that the United States will soon

be left with nothing but the awful choice between accepting a nuclear Iran...and going to war with Tehran to forcibly eliminate its nuclear program' (see also Goldberg, 2010; Klaidman, 2012; Lake, 2012; 2011, p. 13). Indeed, Gates recalled that as early as December 2009 the United States were beginning to 'prepare for a possible Israeli attack and Iranian retaliation' (Gates, 2014, p. 390). Nincic reiterated the costs of such an approach in 2011, writing that 'the probable costs are so high as to make their use an unacceptable option' (2011, p. 170). John Kerry recognised the fragility of the situation, stating in a 2016 interview that, 'The President and I both had a sense that we were on an automatic pilot towards a potential conflict, because no one wanted to talk to anybody or find out what was possible...I have no doubt that we avoided a war [in reaching the nuclear deal]. None' (quoted in Solomon, 2016). Fortunately, a nuclear deal was reached in July 2015, and the ramping up of pressure and increase of coercive activity did not culminate in an intentional or inadvertent escalation to war. This was not, however, pre-determined, and neither was the failure to get cooperation going in 2001-2002 or 2009. It should be acknowledged that failures to cooperate in both these instances contributed considerably to this risk. For this reason alone, it is of great important to ask whether this situation could have been avoided and cooperation established at an earlier stage. The purpose of questioning particular predominant explanations and narratives is not purely to show that things could have been otherwise, but also to partake in a particular kind of resistance to these narratives. This aim is inspired by Hamid Dabashi's call for 'history' to be a 'resisting power' whereby narratives that 'eradicate history' and cultivate 'deliberate amnesia' are challenged (2007, p.8).

In this sense, the thesis can be read as a cautionary tale of the (over)use of negative pressure as instruments of foreign policy. Echoing the work of Miroslav Nincic (2006, 2010, 2011), not only do coercive strategies rarely work in changing the underlying motivations of an adversary, but they often create or at least increase the conditions for violence. Thankfully, such violence has not been seen on a large scale in the long-enmity of US-Iran relations. While small-scale violence has been carried out by both sides, in the form of support for militant groups on the



part of Iran, and the assassination of Iranian nuclear scientists by either or both the United States and Israel, full-scale war has been averted. But this was by no means inevitable. A counterfactual lens confirms the disorder, openness, and non-linearity of the social world; and particularly the world of International Relations where few, if any, theories are truly generalisable and replicable (Lebow, 2010; Patomäki, 2011). Consequently, I argue that this absence of violence is not necessarily a product of careful decision-making on the part of the successive Bush and Obama administration's, but rather a stroke of luck. Regardless of outcome – and counterfactual analysis is wary of research programs driven by outcomes, preferring to look at processes – these successive administrations exponentially increased the likelihood of violence. This thesis has tried to show that this coercive pressure was neither wholly necessary, nor wholly inevitable. There were opportunities – two that are highlighted in the proceeding chapters – for cooperation to have been established. Empathy in the US-Iran conflict, and indeed all other conflicts, does not ensure that cooperation will ensue. While I have tried to retrospectively show how empathy could have helped to promote cooperation between the United States and Iran, it is beyond the realm of social scientific enquiry to guarantee that the adoption of empathic capacities at a requisite intensity will result in the alleviation of conflict and the mitigation of security dilemma dynamics. But while empathy may not ensure cooperation, what it can do is to make the resort to war and violence more difficult and more unlikely (Sharp, 2010).

### **Limitations and future possibilities**

Despite the contributions and implications of this research, it is inevitable that it has a number of limitations, and that there is much scope for future research. The most obvious limitation of this research is that the conceptual framework is designed to elucidate a very specific contest; security dilemma dynamics in international politics. On the one hand I contest that it is necessary to situate empathy within a certain context, but on the other recognise that this limits its applicability to IR scholars interested in broader areas. Empirically, the first limitation is that I am not able to make

claims that are widely generalisable to different cases with this particular universe of case studies, which can be considered inter-state security dilemma dynamics. The reason for this is that while the two case studies are illustrative of how empathy operates within the US side of the US-Iran relationship it is debateable whether the findings could be applied further afield. More research would be needed to explore other counterfactual cases of a similar kind. A comparison of this research to US foreign policy towards North Korea would be instructive, and would also fit the mould of security dilemma dynamics between so-called superpowers and ‘outlier states’, as Robert Litwak describes them (2012). Moreover, if the sources became available, studies into the empathic capacities of individuals within states such as Iran would provide a fascinating new dimension to the findings I have displayed here.

A second limitation is that there are other methodological approaches to studying empathy in the context of security dilemma dynamics that would directly complement the outcomes of this project. While I am confident that taking on the implicit counterfactual logics behind many existing explanations resulted in an important contribution to the both the conceptual debate and prevailing understandings of US-Iran relations, there is reason to think these insights could be made clearer still through a so-called ‘factual’ study. As I outlined above, when the foundations of this project were laid, the prospects for a nuclear deal between the United States and Iran appeared slim. These recent changes to the relationship invite wider research into the dynamics of empathy in leading to the 2015 nuclear deal. The fact that an agreement has been reached during the time this project was underway raises new possibilities for future conceptual and empirical research in this area. I have alluded to the importance of this event on a number of occasions as a means of reflecting back upon my counterfactual interventions. And thus it would be complementary to this project to explore whether or not empathy was crucial to reaching this deal. The combination of counterfactual intervention with more traditional case studies would produce a deeper understanding of the case itself while further elucidating the impact of the theory.

Ultimately, this thesis has contributed towards conceptual understandings of the role of empathy in the context of security dilemma dynamics, and I have explored this in the context of US foreign policy towards Iran between 2001 and 2003, and 2009 and 2010. This study was necessary because the concept of empathy has long occupied an unusual place at the heart of security dilemma thinking. It has been a central component to how security dilemma theorists have explained processes of cooperation between adversaries, but it has also been largely neglected and undertheorized. Writing in 1951, Butterfield was unconvinced that actors caught in security dilemma dynamics could take the necessary steps to reassure each other and promote cooperation (Butterfield, 1951; see also Herz, 1950). He claimed that failures to empathise with the other – to see them as they see themselves – made this problem an irreducible dilemma (Butterfield, 1951, p. 21). This thesis has developed the conceptual and methodological tools to enquire into this problem, and has demonstrated through a counterfactual exploration of US foreign policy towards Iran, that the conflict-inducing gap between one's own mind and another's is not as pronounced as Butterfield made out.









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