Trust and U.S.-Iran Relations: Between the Prisoners' Dilemma and the Assurance Game

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Abstract

Trust and its implications in international relations in general, and in conditions of longterm conflict and hostility between opposing states, has been the subject of considerable scholarly attention and debate in recent years. This study addresses the issue of trust in shaping U.S.-Iran relations in general, and in affecting a myriad of complex issues and interactions between the two states, including its role in framing direct or multilateral negotiations on the nuclear issue. The paper situates the discussion of trust in the context of international relations theories and examines the divergent views and approaches of both countries towards trust, the extent of their risk taking in "costly signaling", and both states' attitudes and behavior while engaging in both "prisoners' dilemma" and the "assurance game". It is argued that Iran's approach towards conflict resolution and overcoming the challenge of mistrust is generally driven by its "strategic culture" of being a "security seeker" which favors playing an "assurance game". The incongruency between the U.S's and Iran's strategic cultures and thus the U.S. tendency towards "prisoners' dilemma" in mistrusting conditions constitutes a foundational obstacle in bilateral and multilateral diplomacy and negotiations between the two countries. The study thus illustrates the complex and significant connection between trust and the U.S. and Iranian strategic cultures, introducing the concept of natural hubris in U.S. foreign policy identity and its ramifications for the dynamics of trust, and finally, what is termed here the effective balance between the two states.

Keywords: U.S.-Iran relations; trust; natural hubris, prisoners' dilemma; assurance game; strategic culture; ontological security; costly signaling; effective balance; reflexivity

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Introduction

Trust and its implications in international relations, especially in conditions of longterm conflict and hostility between opposing states, has been the subject of considerable scholarly attention and debate in recent years. This study addresses the issue of trust in shaping U.S.-Iran relations in general, and in affecting a myriad of complex issues and interactions between the two states, including the nuclear issue. The study further examines the divergent views and approaches of both countries towards trust, the extent of their risk taking in "costly signaling", and both states' attitudes and behavior while engaging in both "prisoners' dilemma" and the "assurance game". The study also analyzes the complex and significant connection between trust and the U.S. and Iranian "strategic cultures", and what is termed here the effective balance between the two states. The study will first provide a brief overview of the theoretical debate on trust, its typology and dynamics. Second, it will explore the debate about the nature and the character of the U.S. role in world politics and its implications for its propensity towards diplomacy, engagement and trusting others, including its attitudes towards negotiating with Iran. Third, the paper will analyze characteristics of Iran's diplomatic style and the complex matrix, which informs Iran's approach towards trust in general, and in relations with the United States in particular. Finally, the study will address the persistence of conditions for possible reconciliation, in spite of the long-term hostility, and the requisite strategic environment for preventing further intensification of the conflict.

I- Trust: Typology and Dynamics

Trust and its implications in international relations, in general and in conditions of longterm conflict and hostility between opposing states, has been the subject of considerable scholarly attention and debate in recent years. This renewed attention, though building on earlier works (Deutsch 1958; Swinth 1967; Held 1968; Barber 1983; Axelrod, 1984; Lewis and Weigert 1985; Gambetta, 1988), was particularly ignited by major studies on the role of trust in U.S.-Soviet rivalry during the Cold War (Larson 1997a), especially after the demise of the Soviet Union and the debate over opportunity costs in superpower relations on the one hand, and the challenges and perhaps impossibility of trust in a seemingly intractable geopolitical and ideological rivalry, on the other (Larson 2007; Forsberg 1999; Herman 1996; Collins 1998). While there have been studies on cases other than the Cold War, such as the development of the European community (Klingeman and Weldon 2012), or on the general importance of the role of trust in world politics, major studies were focused, or drew empirically, on the Cold War, and especially on the arms race and arms control dynamics. In more recent years, in responding to the nuclear proliferation crisis, there has been some attention devoted to the issue of trust in this crisis, which has produced a body of literature providing suggestions and new approaches in overcoming the trust barrier among the opposing sides that might contribute to its peaceful resolution (Wheeler 2009; Ruzicka and Wheeler 2010; Booth and Wheeler 2008).

Although there is considerable debate among scholars concerning the mechanism of trust, Aaron Hoffman argues that there is some general agreement on its basic characteristics: Trust involves a willingness to take the risk of relinquishing control over one's interests; Trust involves the belief that the other side will not harm or undermine these interests; Trust varies in levels of "intensity" --how much and for how long do you trust the other side to not harm your interest?; Trust involves prediction about future behavior (Hoffman

2002). This of course means that there is risk involved in the trusting exercises between actors, a level of uncertainty that can be overcome by increasing transparency, quality communication and correct information (Giddens 1990, p. 92). The necessity of risk taking by trusting in a condition of uncertainty is a reminder that the risk of betrayal is always on the horizon (Coleman 1990; Seligman 1997). Given the strong tendency of actors, even those that have a reputation of being seemingly trustworthy, to behave opportunistically (Axelrod 1984), makes trusting normally a conditional practice and exercise (Hardin 2002; 1996). Thus, naturally, there is an element of reciprocity at the core of a trusting relationship (Larson 1997b; Hardin 2004; Tyler 2001). Trust is predicated on "a belief that the other side is trustworthy, that is, willing to reciprocate cooperation", while mistrust is the "belief that the other is untrustworthy, or prefers to exploit one's cooperation" (Kydd 2005, p.41). Even in the condition of compatible interests, mistrust could exist as states make incorrect assumptions about the intentions and motives of opponents, a condition that could be overcome by either "step by step" agreements to test "the others' good faith", or through consistent "unilateral concessions" (Larson 1997b).

Applying two broad categories of theories of trust, one could possibly arrive at different explanations of the role of trust or mistrust in antagonistic relationships, including U.S.-Iran relations. While there are some general approximations among scholars about the definition of trust and its dynamics, mainstream rationalists/institutionalists, which focus on behavior (Hardin 2002), will point to what is usually referred to as "*strategic trust*", a calculated trust that is the result of a seemingly rational convergence of interests on a particular issue and some expectation of reciprocity for obtaining some specific benefit from cooperation. The dominant game environment being a "*prisoners' dilemma*", the chance for mutual defection is always high since there is no trust that the other side will follow the expected behavior, either

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out of fear of losing in balance, or more importantly, as a result of uncertainty about the opponent's intention. In prisoner's dilemma, the tendency to attribute aggressive intentions to each other is high. The constructivist/realist perspective (Kydd 2005), along with social psychology theories (Larson 1997a; 1997b), question the rationalist/behaviorist approach, and instead rely on the "ideology", "identity", "disposition" and "orientation" of actors (Rathbun 2012; 2009), and thus on differentiation in actors' behavior towards cooperation and trust even in the same structural condition. These theories argue that cooperation needs a level of trust that actors who are *security seekers* are usually ready to assume, but not so actors who are aggressive or expansionist. Actors who are therefore aggressive or expansionist normally frame their relations in prisoner's dilemma game preferences, and are "untrustworthy because they prefer to meet cooperation with defection" (Kydd 2005, p.6). Actors who are essentially "*security seekers*" frame their cooperation in an "*assurance game*", and are therefore more willing to bestow a level of trust to their enemy, and engage in the key requirement of the assurance game, namely "*costly signaling*" (Kydd 2005; Kydd 2000).

Brian Rathbun's recent work (Rathbun 2012), which is a severe critique of the rationalist approach, provides a typology of actors based on their specific identity/ideology/orientation and two associated distinct typologies of trust, namely "*strategic trust*" and "*generalized trust*". Rathbun argues that strategic trust, which is core to the rationalist approach and predicated on the rational assumption about universal political identity in the uncertain and anarchical system, is not the only operative type of trust. Generalized trust, the opposite of strategic trust, is the type of trust, which is not situational by nature, and is basically practiced by actors who are security seekers, and thereby trusting, and generally not prisoners' dilemma gamers but *assurance gamers. Generalized trusters* usually have a more positive view of their enemy's capacity to do the right thing, not just because of the coincidence of mutual interests that make for rational cooperation,

but because of a generic capacity to be "up right", to do the appropriate and honorable thing as a matter of character and integrity, and thus escape the pressure of defection in the prisoners' dilemma. The untrusting, on the other hand, are prisoners' dilemma gamers, which engage in exploitation of cooperation and opt for defection.

States, while sharing the same anarchical international system, as structural realists have argued, are educated and socialized to mistrust each others' intentions (Mearsheimer 2001), and thus engage in deception and lies to other states, and even more so to their own people (Mearsheimer 2011). States not only lie, but, like individuals, in philosopher Harry Frankfurt's words, engage in "bullshitting", a feat worse than lying, as the bullshitter "does not reject the authority of the truth…" but rather "… pays no attention to it at all" (Frankfurt 2005). One indication of bullshitting is the repetition of language, narratives, structure of words, and phrases that are foreboding and above reproach, delivered to sound authoritative, to impress and disarm, and to win the argument on the spot through routinized hyper-bullying. "Bullshitting" has a long history, was especially relevant during the Cold War, and got a major boost with the revolution in information technology and the demand for instantaneous and relentless commentary by leaders and talking heads. It reached a level of perfection in the months preceding the Iraq war with "the mushroom cloud" analogy; and has enjoyed an impressive history in U.S.-Iran relations.

States' compulsion to be distrustful or deceitful, though living in and being educated by the same anarchical system, is nevertheless, not homogenous, and thus their approach towards negotiations, cooperation, etc. is not easily predictable. The reason for this differentiation lies, in addition to their power status, largely in the differentiation of actors' ideational preferences, identity, and dispositional character.

II- The U.S.: Trust and Strategic Culture

There is considerable diversity among scholars of American foreign policy as to the nature of the U.S. as an actor in international relations. The U.S., as the (neo)realist school argues, is a typical great power interested in the promotion and expansion of its national interests in an anarchical international system of self help. The (neo)realists are divided between defensive realists who look at the U.S., like other great powers, ideally as rationally defensively oriented security seekers, interested in defense sufficiency and deterrence (Waltz 2008), and offensive realists who see a forward looking projective power inevitably and "tragically" engaged in expansion and hegemony in search of security (Mearsheimer 2001). The existing theoretical variations and split within the (neo)realist school has mostly faded in their collective bafflement over the intensity of the expansionist direction of U.S. foreign policy in recent years. Defensive and offensive (neo)realists, both, now generally perceive U.S. foreign policy as hegemonic in practice and contrarian to the logic of pursuing security, and are thus critical of its direction especially in the post 9/11 era (Walt 2005; Layne 2006). Christopher Layne's important work blending insights from defensive and offensive neorealism and neoclassical realism to analyze the U.S. grand strategy since early 1940's, points to the historical consistency of America's hegemonic direction, and thus rejects the significance of 9/11 as a watershed event, viewing it as only a "convenient-almost providential-rationale" for a decades long and well entrenched doctrine. The invasion of Iraq, the continuous conflict with Iran and North Korea, and the expansion of the U.S. presence in the Middle East, are all perceived as a natural and expected by-product of this foundational characteristic; a far cry from a more genuinely security seeking "offshore" balancing strategy that could have served U.S. legitimate national security interests (Layne 2006, pp.1-10).

The liberal views on U.S. foreign policy usually highlight U.S.

historical interests in advocating a liberal international order, international institution building and regimes, and patterns of alliance and security built along a set of domestically shared norms and institutions and responsibility for "democratic peace" (Doyle 2011; Russett and Oneal 2001). This perspective focuses, in addition to economic interdependence, on a specific amalgamation of soft power as a source of attraction and influence (Nye 2004; 2011), and the articulation of a U.S. led liberal and law abiding international order. According to John Ikenberry and Anne-Marie Slaughter of the Princeton Project, the U.S., building on its liberal internationalist historical legacies, should develop a "new institution", namely " a global Concert of Democracies" backed by "military predominance" and an expanded and "revived NATO alliance", where "at their core, liberty and law are backed up by force". In this world, "the predominance of liberal democracies is necessary to prevent a return to a destabilizing and dangerous great power security competition". Preventive military interventions could as last resort take place if necessary outside the UN by NATO. Deterrence should be "updated" to handle countries with "different strategic cultures". As for Iran's place in this world, its legitimate security fears have to be addressed by some form of assurance for "negative security". Nevertheless, to prevent a nuclear Iran, "America must take considerable risks", and guarantee that such undertaking will make life a "thoroughly miserable experience" (Ikenberry and Slaughter 2006, pp. 1-7).

The constructivist account of US foreign policy has some roots in views that historically saw the U.S. as an ideological entity, with claims of "exceptionalism" (Hunt 1987) and "providence" (Mead 2001). Among the initially realist historians, Gaddis, whose early works provided the post revisionist critique of the Left historians, later on took a more constructivist account of America's role by reassessing the Cold War in ideational and psychological terms, and put the main blame on the Soviet ideological predilection and polity

and the significant role of mistrust and paranoia emanating from it (Gaddis 1998). In the post 9/11 surprise attack, the U.S. returned to the early years of the Republic's world view and policy of hegemony based on unilateralism and preemption, "a nineteenth century vision that plays badly at the beginning of the twenty-first century" (Gaddis 2004, p.67).

Constructivists made a major contribution to the understating of international relations by underscoring the role of agency, language, and rules in the making of world politics (Onuf 1989) and resuscitating the role of ideas, preferences, and variations in patterns of relations (Wendt 1999). Constructivism saw in the bloodless end of the Cold War, convincing manifestations of the role of ideational shifts in the sudden and unexpected change of the international environment, and perhaps a more positive role for the United States in shaping the post-Cold War world. In the post-9/11 period, they analyzed the critical role of neoconservative ideology and preferences in shaping a more aggressive U.S. foreign policy orientation. (Schonberg 2009; *Jackson and McDonald 2009;* Widmaier *2007).* Critical theorists, pioneered by William Appleman Williams's work (Williams 2009), continued to direct attention to the significant role of class, capital accumulation, corporate finance, and material interests in driving U.S. policy abroad (Stokes 2009; Stokes and Raphael 2010; Cox 1998; Cox 2012; Hossein-Zadeh 2006), and the effective manipulation of international institutions and rules as a vehicle for establishing hegemonic rule.

Thus, while the liberal school generally has a much more benign view of U.S. foreign policy, in terms of commitment to international norms, and essentially considers the U.S. to be a security seeker, especially in dealing with democratic states, and capable of building trust through adherence to international rules and regimes, such as the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), other theories have far less certainty about the intrinsic nature of the U.S. as security seeker state. For constructivists it can go either way, depending on actors and

preferences, thus recognition of the role of the neoconservative ideology of "otherness" and the hopefulness for Obama's presidency as a harbinger of a new construction of foreign policy based on new language, values and norms. The clear distinction between the two language narratives notwithstanding, the striking similarity in policy substance between the two administrations requires further clarification by the constructivists; a more rigorous study of the role of language and speech in camouflaging securitization and actors' intentions, for example, would be useful. Avoiding excessive reliance on ideational utterances, furthermore, could facilitate the explanation of the continuity in policy between the two administrations. Instead, the constructivist account of U.S. foreign policy, will benefit from paying more attention to the somewhat neglected dimension of Nicholas Onuf's take on constructivism, which in addition to the role of actors' preferences, also points to the condition of rule that allows actors *to control others* in pursuit of their own interests (Onuf 1989; 2002).

Brent Steele, in an innovative and critical reflection on the U.S., identifies a new source of both power and vulnerability for America, which has been on display especially since 9/11. While the U.S.'s usual hegemonic power remains unchallenged with no real balancer on the horizon, its "aesthetic power", namely its aggrandized and romanticized vital "self" and the promises, which it projects and assumes for itself and others, has been unexpectedly challenged, interrupted and "defaced". It was this threat and harm to its aesthetic power and the intense need to resuscitate and to protect it that provides a window for understanding the intensity and scope of the U.S.'s "over re-action" to the 9/11 attacks, and the dialectical "aesthetic insecurity" that "re-action" has continued to generate (Steele 2010).

Ironically, the most skeptical group of theorists on the nature and practice of U.S. foreign policy are the defensive and offensive realists. While defensive realists, such as Waltz, are baffled by U.S.

policies after 9/11, viewing these as overblown, wasteful and dangerous (Walt 2005), the offensive realists, while theoretically not so surprised, are still even more critical of the unrealism of American foreign policy in the post Cold War era. While Waltz has frontally taken issue with U.S. policy on Iran's nuclear program through a widely read seminal article (Waltz 2012), in which he argued that an Iranian bomb will contribute to stability, two other prominent realists, each from different orientations, Mearsheimer and Walt, uncharacteristically focused on the role of domestic factors, the Israeli lobby, in shaping a U.S. Middle East policy which did not serve U.S. national interests (Mearsheimer and Walt 2007), and in particular became critical of the policy of sanctions, military threat and blackmailing against Iran (Walt 2013a; 2013b). This domestication points to a foreign policy decision making environment, which is extremely sensitive to internal calculations, and thus weak on taking risks and diplomatic initiatives that might deviate from the accepted norms of domestic political coalitions and interest groups.

Andrew Bacevich's work (Bacevich 2013) points, with a seemingly constructivist take, to a larger and unprecedented transformation of American foreign policy identity, namely its thorough internal and external militarization, and thus the emergence of a new strategic culture ushered in with the victory in the Gulf War, and then institutionalized in the post 9/11 war on terror. It is this transformative dynamic, which according to Bacevich includes and incorporates American polity and society, that has created a permissive environment for not just the ascendancy of the military in esteem and expectation, but a more trigger happy leadership and society when the country is facing external threats and opposition. Thus, the U.S. approach towards negotiation as an instrument of conflict resolution has taken a massive jolt as there is always a more certain and alternative approach towards resolving conflict, namely coercion and victory. The need for cooperation and compromise, which of course requires a level of trust, seems costly and

indeterminate, messy and inconclusive.

Looking at the totality of the American international experience in the post 1945 era, or in the post-Soviet/post 9/11 world in particular, one is left with the impression that there is a seeming *naturalness* in the U.S. inability to compromise with "unworthy" enemies, that is, those who are not equal to the United States. It is not only its sense of exceptionalism, but its sheer material and soft power prowess, that creates a sense of "self" that is not necessarily readily available for respecting others, being interested in their world, treating them with decorum, and contemplating compromise and recognition. *Hubris*, when it is embedded, not only in physical capability, but in soft power and a self referential sense of self (which results from intersubjective interaction "within" the self itself, and not with others), becomes *natural*, normal, legal, innocent, and non-offensive. Narcissism is a serious side effect of *natural hubris*, and in this, society joins the state and becomes culpable; all threats are existential and intolerable, pain is special and unique; mourning can't just be national, it deserves to be universal, and so is the demand for the remedy, political or otherwise. Universalization of pain, leads to universalization of the answer, and to: "Are you with us or against us?"

The *naturalness of hubris* transforms diplomacy from a place for engaging opponents and understanding, to a platform to dictate. It will be hard to envision a serious inclination for trusting others, especially those like the Iranians, who have not only shown their outlaw character by taking diplomats as hostages (Sick 2001; Farber 2006), but by calling you names and taking pride in it, and above all by denying your moral/political superior status in the international arena, thus questioning your "aesthetic power", and "defacing" it not just through an event or specular moment, but patiently and relentlessly for decades. Who the hell do they think they are? If Vietnam can eventually capitulate through Nike, and if the Soviet empire can be waited out and seen through, why can't an

anachronistic theocracy go away with a firm and ever tightening coercive policy? Herein lie the roots of "regime change" as an ideal type policy.

The naturalness of this hubris allows the U.S. to distrust Iran, but to still solicit its cooperation on critical issues that concern the U.S.; the counterintuitivity is never a bother. From demanding Iran's intervention to release the American hostages in Lebanon so that "good will beget good will", to critical game changer issues such as expecting Iran's cooperation on the first Gulf War, to the war on terror in Afghanistan, and the stabilization of the Maleki government in Iraq, contempt for Iran and lack of trust did not prevent the U.S. from requesting and getting assistance on issues that concerned the U.S. Not rewarding Iran in any of those circumstances also seemed natural. The U.S.'s demands are natural, and expectations of cooperation are not only reasonable, but in fact an entitlement. It is thus difficult for trust and reciprocity, within such a complex psychological sense of "self" and "other", to become a necessity, or even an issue. Iran's repeated request for the U.S. to show actual signs of reciprocity and trust, whether it is to reciprocate through the release the Iranian assets, or lifting sanctions on important though symbolic items such as spare parts, etc., has never met with any serious considerations.

The contemporary American and European mistrust of Iran, is also embedded in their socialization with and education in the earlier and rich Western orientalism and encounter with the so called "Persian Character", a notion widely reflected to various degrees in Western diplomatic travelogues and narratives (Curzon 1892; Brown 1893; Sykes 1902; Chardin 1927; Wilson 1929; Wright 2001). This orientalist legacy continues to inform. A member of the Office of the Secretary of Defense and a longterm advisor to the Pentagon on Iran between 1982-2010, who actually had the benefit of studying in Iran, at Ferdowsi University in Mashhad before the revolution, and earned a Ph.D. from Columbia University in Islamic Studies, delivers a

remarkable summary of the Iranian character The Iranians, having "invented or adopted the chess game" centuries ago as their "national game" and thus being always a few moves ahead of their opponents, are like "onions" with many layers, and use "ketman", "taqqiyeh" (precautionary dissimulation). "They do not consider this to be lying", and in fact "have developed it into a fine art", and thus "Western cultural biases regarding, and demanding, honesty make it easy to misunderstand Iranians" and consequently "all too often we have insisted on employing mirror-imaging, or seeing Iranians as we see ourselves" allowing "Iran to continually outsmart the West." As for engagement, they see negotiations as "opportunities to best others" and "do not consider weakness a reason to engage an adversary in compromise, but rather an opportunity to destroy them." Thus "good will and confidence-building measures should be avoided at all costs." (Rhode 2011)

One of the signs of Iran engaging in an assurance game as a security seeker was the introduction of the Supreme Leader's *Fatwa* on the inadmissibility of nuclear weapons. This was a potentially significant signal, since in addition to being a signatory to the "secular" Non- Proliferation Treaty (NPT) regime (the commitment to which was under Western scrutiny and suspiciousness), Iran was adding an unprecedented normative layer to their international legal obligation, which was authentically native to it and religious in nature and character. Iran was openly outlawing the development of nuclear weapons in religious terms. Regardless of one's belief in the binding character of the Fatwa, as a player in an assurance game, the U.S. could have used this opportunity to engage the Iranians in furthering their legal and normative commitment by adding this self-imposed important religious legal rendition to Iran's secular commitment to the nonproliferation regime. This could have been a win-win situation. Instead, the Fatwa was overlooked by the same normative and politico-psychological and cultural complexes that had framed the nuclear issue and negotiations about it as an exercise in demanding

one-sided compromise or in fact capitulation. The Fatwa, so it was argued, was another symbol of Iran's tactical ploy, along with the longstanding practice of taqqiyeh (dissimulation) (Eisenstadt and Khalaji 2013; Eisenstadt and Khalaji 2011; Shuster 2012; Freeman and Sherwell 2006), and thus dismissed and ignored.

It is ironic that Iran's fatwa on the nuclear issue is viewed as a dubious ploy for dissimulation, but the fatwa against Salman Rushdie was taken with absolute seriousness –"you need to take the Iranians at their word!"-- to the point of requiring a collective breaking of diplomatic relations. Remarks about Israel's demise are not situational rhetoric, but a true indication of intention and policy, a policy which requires assuming Iran to have a national collective suicide doctrine of attacking Israel as a fully nuclear armed state; again the "need to take the Iranians at their word"!

The U.S. nuclear doctrine is full of serious, but potentially far less reliable/binding declarations than the Fatwa, declarations that are incorporated in the mainstream discussion and works of the scholarly and policy community, and considered serious, consequential and thus credible and legitimate. The U.S. nuclear doctrine of "no first use", and even "deterrence" itself, have hardly a legal, secular or religious foundation. It is a declaratory policy with normative promissory connotation, or just a derived condition, but it is not so readily dismissed as American "taqqiyeh" or a tactical ploy. Not seeing in your opponent any redeeming quality, either because of your superior capability --when you are powerful why should you trust the adversary?-- or because of cultural and normative misgivings, has been a hallmark of the U.S./Western approach towards negotiations with Iran. It is only when Iran's help has been needed, that both the arrogance/hubris of power and the cultural biases take a back burner.

Beyond the generic impact of power imbalance on the lack of urgency for trust, and the culturally constructed knowledge of Iran's image and character, the domestication of U.S. foreign policy towards Iran and its triangulation with Israel's preferences, so deeply reflected

in U.S. domestic institutions, especially the congress, have played a significant role in shaping the trust factor.

The untrustworthiness of Iran, which disqualifies it as a serious partner for negotiation and engagement, has been the most effective paradigm in providing a domestic normative linkage between political leaders, the institutions of power, the media, opinion makers, and the public. If the most prominent *linguistic marker* in the securitization of Iran, especially on the nuclear issue, are not overwhelming and convincing empirical and factual arguments, but Iran's character as untrustworthy and aggressive, then domestic consensus building on policy becomes easy, and departure from policy becomes politically costly and thus extremely difficult. Any policy initiative which is predicated on some level of cooperation and compromise with Iran, which requires a level of acceptance of Iran's trustworthiness and thus some relatively "costly signaling", seems suspect, naïve, immoral, and a policy lapse in resolve, and appeasement.

As a result of the severe domestication of Iran policy, the U.S. *trust threshold* is very low, and thus, its record of costly signaling towards Iran is poor. It is not surprising that the U.S. engagement with Iran is heavily predisposed to a prisoners' dilemma game, and thus a constant and repeated practice of defection. This makes it very difficult for the U.S. to negotiate in "good faith" on the nuclear issue, let alone to engage in a diplomatic process for a longterm realignment of its relations with Iran.

Under such conditions, the only possible proof and litmus test of trustworthiness is a U.S./UN led, empirically proven and verifiable capitulation of Iran, i.e., official closing of Iranian nuclear facilities, and an open ended waiting process of "regaining the trust of the international community" by indefinite suspension. The irony is that while Obama's Iran policy was initially predicated on trusting the engagement strategy, it was very quickly transformed from engagement to a halfhearted attempt, or a "single roll of the dice" (Parsi 2012), and a coercive containment which included threat of war

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(Kaussler and Newkirk 2012). This clearly fits the character of one of the most domestically driven and risk averse foreign policy administrations in recent U.S. history, where the President's domestic agenda and calculations overshadowed and significantly framed critical foreign policy issues in South Asia and the Middle East, including relations with Iran (Nasr 2013a).

III- Iran: Trust and Strategic Culture

Does Iran trust the U.S.? Is Iran a security seeker? Has Iran engaged in a prisoners' dilemma game or an assurance game? Has Iran engaged in costly signaling? Reflecting on these questions might help shed light on what I call the *incommensurability of the practice and culture of trust* between the U.S. and Iran. It is not difficult to agree with the conventional wisdom that Iran does not trust the United States. While an explanation of Iran's conceptual model for understanding international relations and foreign policy behavior, particularly that of the United States, is beyond the scope of this study, suffice it to say that Iran's lack of trust could be explained through different paradigms, including realism, constructivism, and the critical perspective. Iranian leaders, as offensive realists, cannot trust a great power that is inherently aggressive and expansionist. Iranian leaders, as constructivists, will view the U.S. as an ideological power in pursuit of constructing the world in its own image, the spearhead of a "cultural onslaught/tahajom-e farhangi," backed by material power. Iranian leaders, as critical theorists, see the U.S. as a hegemonic power in pursuit of material acquisition, energy, and market domination, supported and camouflaged by orchestrated "liberal" international institutions and norms. While benefitting from these perspectives, Iran has its own normative paradigm, which looks at the U.S. as the embodiment of *global arrogance* that by its very nature is domineering and aggressive. In its application of global arrogance as an operative concept, the Iranian paradigm tends to look at the state as a "person", thus explaining the temptation of power and its relentless desire for

accumulation and aggrandizement; arrogance is not just a material, but a life/mental disposition, and world view.

The Iranian historiography of relations with the U.S. and their perception of the U.S. role, has, since 1953, and more specifically since the 1979 revolution, been thoroughly negative and supportive of these theoretical explanations (Hunter 2013; Leverett and Leverett 2013; Ramazani 2012; Crist 2012; Parsi 2012; Wright 2010; Milani 2009; Slavin 2009; Murray 2009; Ehteshami and Zweiri 2008; Ansari 2007; Beeman 2005; Polack 2005; Bill 1989). Nineteen fifty three marked a departure from an early period wherein the image of the United States in Iran was built on trust and friendship, where the U.S. was perceived as young and democratic, and as a distant balancer against old traditional British and Russian imperialists. These benign perceptions were built upon the imprint of earlier encounters, i.e. American missionaries in 1843, and the legacies of Americans such as the Cochran family ("the founders" of the medical school in Iran) (Speer 1911), Howard Baskerville, "martyr" of the Iranian Constitutional Revolution, and key financial advisors, Arthur Millspaugh (Millspaugh 1925; 1946), and Morgan Shuster (Shuster 2007).

These early positive images, perceptions and thus expectations, were still on display during the oil nationalization crisis, when Iranians hoped to employ the Americans against the old British imperialists. The positive image and reservoir of good will and trust was largely buried with the 1953 coup and its aftermath (Abrahamian 2013; Kinzer 2003), when rightly or wrongly, the totality of the sins of the Shah's dictatorship was laid at America's door, and its appetite for control of Iran and its resources. The history of U.S.-Iran relations since the revolution is too complex to revisit here. Suffice it to say that among all the items in the Iranian inventory of complaints, the U.S./Western support for Iraq, and especially, in their view, America's acquiescence to a brutal dictatorship, with the worst human rights record in the region that routinely and openly used chemical

weapons, left an indelible mark (Rajaee 1993; Blight, Lang and Banai 2012). U.S. support for Saddam Hussein was not only evidence of the degree of U.S. hostility, but was an irrevocable moral indictment of U.S./Western duplicity in upholding international norms and rules.

Subsequent U.S.-Iran encounters, in spite of occasional engagement, did very little to change this foundational mistrust. The U.S. global effort to develop a *reward and punishment structure* (Mesbahi 2011) around relations with Iran, where distance was awarded and cooperation was discouraged and punished, became the critical framework negatively affecting Iran's regional and global position. The current sanctions regime is the ultimate manifestation of the maturity of this reward/punishment structure. Preoccupation with the U.S. has been central to Iran's foreign, and to a great degree, domestic politics. The hostility has become a permanent fixture of Iran's mental world, where good relations with the U.S. seem impossible and at times even a dangerous illusion, contrary to Iran's interests and to its revolutionary and Islamic identity.

Yet, notwithstanding this well entrenched and hegemonic paradigm, one can discern, with a closer look at Iran's actual behavior and approach towards the U.S., two significant anomalies of long duration. First, the existence of an alternative view that perceives the resolution to the conflict with the U.S. and perhaps eventual relations to be in Iran's interest; something possible and recommendable, which should be explored. The recurring linguistic markers usually include: "It was after all the US who broke the relationship, not Iran", and "we never said never", and "only two countries the Zionist entity and racist South Africa" were off the chart, and in-spite of all serious issues of contention, Iran and the U.S. have "common interests". What is remarkable about this recurring and long standing anomaly is that contrary to the conventional scholarship on Iran, this is not faction-dependent; it has its imprint on the entire spectrum of the Iranian ruling elite, and has manifested itself in various degrees throughout the life of the Islamic republic under different Iranian

administrations.

Second, and as a result, there is an intriguing history of Iranian attempts at breaking the impasse in relations between the two countries, and in resolving its problem with the U.S. through cooperation and engagement on a series of small and major issues that required a level of trust, or a leap of faith, that the prevailing conventional view of the hostility would hardly have anticipated. This testing of the ground, occurred during different administrations with different ideological and factional predilections. Iran's initially positive response to the Reagan administration's unexpected and confusing gesture, the Iran-Contra affair, took place at the high point of Iran's revolutionary phase. Iran's response to President George Bush's "good will begets good will" by releasing American hostages in Lebanon and Iran's cooperation during the first Gulf War took place under President Rafsanjani. Iran's significant and hands on cooperation with the Americans on the military operation and subsequent political arrangement in Afghanistan, the "grand bargain memo", and Iran's suspension of its nuclear enrichment in agreements with the European big three (France, Germany, and the UK), took place under President Khatami. And the stabilization of the Maleki government in Iraq, and Iran's acceptance of the initially U.S. backed Brazil-Turkey nuclear agreement were under President Ahmadinejad.

The usual rationalist take will argue that Iran's cynical interests were served through this cooperation, -the enemy of my enemy is my friend. But this attractive and seemingly parsimonious explanation cannot necessarily explain why Iran's long-term interests could not have been served by not cooperating with the United States in the first Gulf war, and especially in the invasion of Afghanistan, and conflict Iraq? This would have also been rational especially in view of Iran's historical image of the United States as an untrusting arrogant temporary partner who had them next in sight? Why not make geopolitical and military life thoroughly far more difficult for the

U.S.? Why couldn't a policy of "neutrality" have served their interests? Why make an investment in working with the U.S. when there was no normative and political history to back up a beneficial outcome for Iran? Calculated interests have their place, but they do not always present a sufficient explanation. If sheer realism was the paradigm, Saddam and the Taliban, could have easily been calculated as strategic cushions and distractions in the long war of attrition with the U.S. A security seeker might benefit from tactical cooperation but it could also have a more foundational objective in mind; it is not only the immediate benefit of cooperation that matters but what the cooperation means, in the assurance game, for settling the larger issue of hostility.

The cooperation in Afghanistan reveals the extent of the engagement and the level of trust accorded to the process, again without any concrete agreement or precondition for reciprocity. There was no tit for tat. According to James Dobbins, a key American diplomat involved in the Bonn negotiations, this was "the most constructive period of U.S.-Iranian diplomacy since the fall of the shah of Iran," where the U.S. rode on a coalition that Iran had helped to build, and where Iran was key to persuading "the Northern Alliance to make the essential concession that allowed the meeting to conclude successfully." (Dobbins 2007) It was Iran that insisted on a democratic constitution and elections in Afghanistan. He laments that that experience was wasted, never followed, and in fact was marked by lack of decorum and appreciation: "Secretary of State Colin L. Powell sent personal letters of thanks to every foreign minister represented at the Bonn conference except the one whose envoy may have been the most helpful, the Iranian" (Dobbins 2004).

All these complex undertakings with the U.S. involved domestic consensus at the highest levels, risk taking, a level of trust, hopeful confidence building, some expectation of reciprocity, and appreciation, which, of course, never materialized. The Iranian elite voiced enthusiasm for Obama's presidency, a genuine optimism

cloaked in statements such as, "Obama is not part of the wolves", "he is a black person from a part of the downtrodden and in his heart has some affection for humanity" (Bultan News 2010), he might do the right thing if allowed by the "Zionists and Capitalists" (ILNA 2010), it "might be easier to work with him" (Aljazeera 2010), and his administration is "an exceptional opportunity for America" (Fars News Agency 2009). These were signs of an embedded psycho-political readiness, a certain level of anticipatory projection of hope and "trust" for a better treatment of Iran, and again an expectation that a different U.S. with different attitudes was possible. The experience with Obama's presidency was perhaps the harshest ever, an "iron fist in a velvet glove", yet did not stop Iran's policy of testing the waters.

It is ironic that the Iranian administrations' individual and cumulative experience in responding to U.S. needs for cooperation on critical issues has been thoroughly negative. In a cycle of trust, followed by dashed hopes, Iran, nevertheless, kept the window on trust open, and engaged in "costly signaling" through different administrations with different "ideological" tendencies and claims. While the U.S. seemed comfortable playing the *prisoners' dilemma game*-where parties tend to exploit and to defect, Iran generally played the *assurance game*, which according to Kydd's formulation (Kydd 2005), is a major characteristic of security seeker states. The current scholarship on trust does not quite explain why, in such a charged mistrusting environment, where claims of mistrust are normatively established and nurtured by a consistent, well articulated and empirically tested historiography of mistrust, exploitation and betrayal, the Iranians keep coming back? What type of political and social psychology is at work? And what type of strategic calculation is supplementing the normative cognitive world of the Iranian decision makers?

Three factors might be at work, namely, the challenges of *ontological (in)security*, *strategic culture*, and the subtle elements of a *traditional cultural milieu*. Together, they form a complex reinforcing sociological

matrix that might help explain Iran's approaches towards diplomacy and its requirements, which will at some point involve a level of trust and risk taking.

Realist theoretical explanations will point to the powerful presence of a differentiation in military capability, and thus differentiation in physical security between the two sides, as the key factor in Iran's eagerness to reach a negotiated and minimally equitable settlement. The relevance of this absence of balance of material power between Iran and the U.S. and its impact on the dynamics of trust will be addressed later, but the differentiation and the (im)balance in *ontological (in)security* is particularly relevant in view of its impact on U.S.-Iran relations and the cognitive framing of diplomatic efforts and negotiations. Ontological security, a concept developed by Anthony Giddens, which provides a sociological understanding of security for individual human beings (Giddens 1991) has been utilized in recent years by scholars of international relations (Huysmans1998; Mitzen 2006; Steele 2008; Kinnvall 2004; Manners 2002; Zarkol 2010) to understand states' behavior, especially in conflictual conditions.

The ontological security framework builds partially on the assumption of personhood of state (Jackson 2004; Wendt 2004; Korlikovski 2008) and variations in state identity as major theoretical and analytical variables. Ontological security is the existence of confidence in the continuity of the individual's self-identity and social environment, and thus the expectation of normalcy and predictability about one's future (Giddens 1991, p.243). It is in that normalcy and predictability that one can plan for continuity in life, development and progress. This ontological security has seldom been sufficiently present for Iran since the revolution. Iran's international environment has never generated a stable cognitive condition favoring normalcy and stability. The frontal attack against the new republic by Iraq and 8 years of thorough Western (and Soviet) (Mesbahi 1993) support for the aggressor who broke a century long taboo and used chemical

weapons with the acquiescence of the Western and international community, followed by an increasing and maturing crisis with the West in the subsequent decades, never allowed the establishment of trust in the routinization of security as a predictable expectation and right. Iran's existential security has been the subject of constant challenges, and thus its attainment has required a constant struggle. *Crippling sanctions* and *military threat* are the twin pillars of the latest challenge, not to Iran's physical, but to its ontological security.

The United States' ontological security has, on the other hand, never been, at least not in recent memory, in serious question. It is true that theoretically the U.S. lived under the assumption of an existential threat during the Cold War, but in practice, with the exception of a few moments (i.e., the Cuban missile crisis), it never had to doubt its ontological security. The post 9/11 assertions that the country is facing a contingency of nuclear terrorism-and thus the collapse of deterrence- are more of a *linguistic marker* in an effective securitization language, rather than a serious preoccupation. While the millennia continuity of Iran as a state has been cognitively reassuring for the Iranians, and the balance of great power interests favored the territorial/political continuity of the Iranian state in the 19th and 20th centuries, the decades since the revolution have seen the gradual, but serious, erosion of this condition. Iran's "strategic loneliness," (Mesbahi 2004; 2011) the decision since the revolution, to be a third voice critical of both superpowers, and not party to the Cold War, to be anti-U.S. imperialism, while challenging the Soviets in Afghanistan, laid the foundation. Iran's security concern has therefore, never been a real consideration among great powers, especially the U.S., a factor that has contributed to an international condition/environment inimical to a normal sense of continuity of Iran's "self". It is this threat to ontological security, in addition to the usual conflicts of interest, that have helped to make routinization of this conflict a key source of identity reassurance, and a key characteristic of U.S.-Iran interaction.

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The second factor that informs Iran's approach towards trust and risk-taking is Iran's *strategic culture*. This strategic culture is largely defensive in nature and as such, favors negotiations and diplomatic accommodation. "ezzat" (esteem/honor/respect), "maslahat" (expediency/advisable/best thing to do) and "hekmat" (wisdom), the three foundational principles of Iran's declared foreign policy doctrine, do not project expansionism. They are in fact accommodating ideational concepts, which reflect a psychology that favors prudence and rationality under conditions of integrity, equity and respect. Memories of invading others and territorial and political expansion are too deep back in history to be of any relevance for contemporary socialization and motivation for a new "Persian expansionism". Iran's military doctrine and deployment reflects deterrence and retaliation, rather than preemption and projection. "Iran's security strategy remains focused on deterring an attack", and if attacked, "on slowing an invasion" by targeting "its adversaries' economic, political, and military interests" and forcing "a diplomatic solution to hostilities…" so reads the newly declassified 2012 U.S. Department of Defense Annual Report (DoD Unclassified 2012).

The third factor, has its roots in a traditional cultural milieu, where one keeps promises and expects others, especially those known to have great public status and claims of greatness, to "do the right thing", "be honorable", "upright", and "a man of your word"; a "pre-liberal" culture of "honor" and "chivalry", especially when promises and signals of good intentions and reciprocity are made, either in public, or clearly in private. This expectation of honorable behavior from "the other" side is, in spite of the general argument that the Iranians usually blame "the other" for their problems, supplemented by Iran's self-reflection about the degree of its own "culpability" in perhaps causing genuine mistrust in the West via Iran's possible excess and misguided policies. A subtle revisionism in the legitimacy and rationality of the hostage crisis and occasional self-critique on the negative impact of irresponsible foreign policy rhetoric, during

various Iranian administrations throughout the life of the republic are indicative. This is particularly important in view of the domestic political cost of such an undertaking.

This complex traditional cultural milieu has also been at work in Iran's approach towards the notion of reciprocity. The Iranians have seldom dealt with the issue of reciprocity in a behavioral/rationalist sense, which requires the carefully negotiated apriori diplomatic guarantee demanded by prisoners' dilemma gamers. Delivery on the promised "goods" in a diplomatic tit-for-tat between untrusting enemies is usually predicated on concrete pre-delivery negotiations for tangible and verifiable reciprocity. But, in responding to U.S./Western critical demands for cooperation on issues such as the release of the hostages in Lebanon, intervention in Afghanistan, or the nuclear issue, Iran has usually proceeded without any concrete reliable or firmly agreed promise of reciprocity before delivering. Iran, as an assurance gamer, has acted on two assumptions: first, that Iran's action will automatically improve the level of confidence and trust, and second, that reciprocity-even if it is not cemented via negotiations- should *naturally* follow, especially given the self proclaimed status of greatness of the liberal Western powers.

The first two factors are structural explanations of Iran's character as a security seeker, one rooted in material conditions, and the other in strategic social identity. The third factor is normative-cognitive, and though affected by interactive dynamics, is particularly agent-based. All three have their roles and contributions in shaping Iran's important engagement with the U.S. and Europe, largely irrespective of Iran's domestic political make up and orientation.

Iran's nuclear negotiations were driven by these complex tendencies, especially during the negotiations and agreements with European powers during Khatami's presidency, and later under Ahmadinejad's administration. Peter Oborne who is co-author of a carefully chronicled story on the Western approach towards Iran on the nuclear issue (Oborne and Morrison 2013), in a recent article,

provides a window to the U.S./European diplomatic culture towards Iran. During the 2005 negotiations in Paris, the Iranian negotiators, Oborne states, suddenly broke the impasse and offered a far-reaching proposal to the European team, which in its thoroughness and level of compromise took the European team by surprise. Thus, "briefly, in the gilded 19th-century Parisian salon, a resolution of the nuclear stand-off between Iran and the West felt entirely possible." The rest is worth reading in full:

The European diplomats allowed not a trace of emotion to show on their faces. But one official recalls thinking that 'what we had just heard was a most interesting offer. We realized that what we had just heard was a valid and coherent proposal that was in full conformity with relevant international treaty provisions.' This diplomat adds today that *'trust was not an issue, because over the preceding 18 months we had got to know our Iranian counterparts and had acquired confidence in the Iranians' ability to honour their commitments'* (emphasis added). When the Iranians had finished their presentation, the Europeans asked for a break so that they could discuss the proposal among themselves. Once on their own, they agreed that there was no way that the Iranian offer would be acceptable to their political masters in Europe. One witness puts the problem like this: 'There was not the faintest chance that President George W. Bush's Republican advisers and Israeli allies would allow him to look benignly on such a deal. On the contrary, if the Europeans were to defy American wishes, they would be letting themselves in for a transatlantic row to end all rows.'So when they came back to the negotiating table one hour later they were studiously non-committal. They spoke highly of the Iranian offer, but asked for time so that their governments could consider it. And when Sir John Sawers took the Iranian offer back to London it was very quickly forgotten. According to Foreign Office sources, Tony Blair intervened to make sure that it went no further. Later, Sir John explained to Seyed Hossein Mousavian, spokesman of the Iranian nuclear negotiation team, why the offer could not be taken up.

'Washington would never tolerate the operation of even one centrifuge in Iran,' he told Mr. Mousavian, according to the latter's memoirs. So the peace proposal from the Iranian negotiators was killed stone dead even though the European negotiating team realized that it was both very well judged and in full conformity with international law. 'This was an extraordinary sleight its European clients are driven by a different compulsion: the humiliation and eventual destruction of Iran's Islamic regime (Oborne 2013).

Mohammad ElBaradei shared the same impression about Americans and Europeans: "They weren't interested in a compromise with the government in Tehran, but regime change -- by any means necessary." (ElBaradei Interview 2011) ElBaradei's reflections indicate that the West not only did not trust Iran, but also him (wiretapping his phone- Linzer 2004) and the IAEA, and thus engaged in "withholding important documents and information." (ElBaradei 2011) Although "there were two times when we were close to a solution," (to basically settle on a low number of nuclear centrifuges) "the United States immediately rejected the proposal because it believed that Iran should not have a single centrifuge." (ElBaradei Interview 2009) The naturalness of hubris makes it difficult to accept alternative views, not to see compromise as defeat, or to treat the opponent with respect: "The Americans thought they could threaten Iran with a big stick and force it to back down. But the arrogance of treating a country like Iran like a donkey led to a hardening of positions." (ElBaradei Interview 2009)

Hours following the 2010 Brazil-Turkey-Iran tripartite deal under President Ahmadinejad, it was not only Iran that went through the same cycle of disappointment, America's trusted interlocutors, Brazil and Turkey, were also subjected to a quick and shocking education in the U.S. diplomatic culture of dealing with Iran; a culture of broken promises, this time given at the highest level, and sudden, and non-apologetic defection. The attraction of the coercive approach, promised by the agreed sanctions at the UN, in spite of the

damages to the trust bestowed on the U.S. by the two important mediators, was too tempting to ignore. (Parsi 2012)

IV- The Ironic Persistence of Cooperative Conditions

The longevity of U.S.-Iran hostility is not surprising, as it is an agent driven dynamic. The mutual securitization has been, with a few moments of pause, constant and relentless. The agents have very few positive things to say about each other and are usually on the opposite side of major regional and global issues. Yet throughout decades of hostility, the two sides have often, and on critical issues, found themselves, "rationally," on the same side. Although hostility is the norm, why does the rational condition for cooperation present itself and persist? The reasons for this "anomaly" are embedded in, and generated from structural dynamics, and their unintended and unexpected consequences or manifestations. Agents may make their world, as Nicholas Onuf has argued (Onuf 1989), but they cannot necessarily predict or control the world of their making.

The structural reasons for the existence of a potentially alternative relationship between the two countries are twofold: the first is rooted in the peculiar and ironic incommensurability of the agent-based hostility with the structural responses and conditions, and the second is derivative of the delicate *effective balance* of power between the two countries and its significance for the continuous ambiguity surrounding the utility of the military option as the final arbiter of a maturing hostility.

The *incommensurability of agency and structure* refers to a condition wherein the structural pressure and dynamics for hostility have lagged behind the level of bilateral agent-based hostility. In other words, while both sides on the level of narrative, and largely also policy, have insisted on bilateral animosity and conflict, the structural dynamics do not always follow that animosity's logic, and ironically and incommensurably, create conditions for unintended partnership, mutual benefit or mutual loss, and thus a framework for potential

cooperation. U.S.-Iran hostility is not the result of an inevitable-top down- systemic condition, but is itself the key cause and machinery producing structural instability in the region.

The deep imprint of this hostility has left its mark on the genealogy of every single conflict from the Iran-Iraq war, Saddam's invasion and the Gulf War, the rise of "Talibanism" and "Wahhabism" in South Asia and its role in nurturing al-Qaedism, the Israeli-Palestinian crisis, the U.S. "war on terror" and invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, and now the crisis in Syria (Dubin 2012). The militarization of politics in the region has significant roots in this hostility, and until its replacement with reconciliation or accommodation, it will remain the central force of its sustenance.

Without this accommodation, the region will remain a super security complex (Buzan 2003) with no institutional mechanism for conflict resolution or long term stability in sight, and only further securitization and militarization in the horizon; a militarization that has now penetrated below the inter-state level, and has engulfed cross-regional social, political and ethno-religious movements. This is not to say that individual regional and global actors favor U.S.-Iran reconciliation, they do not. The American reward/punishment socio-political structure created to condition other actors' relations with Iran has been effective. U.S. preferences are an important element of regional and global calculations in dealing with Iran, and actors of all types bandwagon with this structure and utilize its leverage in dealing with both countries.

A host of actors, both friendly and unfriendly to both or either the U.S. or Iran, favors the maintenance or even the intensification of this conflict. This group includes diverse actors with totally different alliance patterns and concerns, including Israel, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the Persian Gulf states, Russia, China and others. One can and should add emerging social and militant actors, the so-called "jihadi" movements, now on the rise since the Arab Spring. Every single country on this list has benefitted in working the delicate elements of

the reward structure that has dominated U.S. policy towards Iran since 1979. Regional and global politics have been acculturated with this hostility. The result is that U.S.-Iran hostility has become, the organizing/hegemonic paradigm in shaping regional politics.

In spite of this complex matrix of hostility, major past, current and emerging regional conflicts and issues cannot be "settled" or addressed without some level of U.S.-Iran cooperation. It is as if the agent-based hostility and its apparent structural reflections favor conflict, but, in some deeper level, where the rules of unintended consequences manifest themselves, the structure lags behind the agency's intended structural artifacts, and in an "organic", "blind sense" demands or requires some level of *equilibrium*; an equilibrium, which has been lost due to U.S.-Iran hostility, and the two actors' awkward, uneven, and untrusting approaches towards diplomacy.

The second factor in the maintenance of hostility below the threshold of military confrontation, and thus the continuous "no war no peace condition", which generates a space for an unintended convergence of interests and opportunities for cooperation, is the presence of a delicate, but so far effective balance.

V- Trust and Effective Balance: The Breathing Space

In view of the fundamental mistrust between the two sides, the unevenness of the minimum threshold for risk taking and the incommensurate approaches towards negotiation, the critical contextual factor affecting the notion of trust in U.S.-Iran relations is the perceived strategic balance of power between the two states and the potential promise and utility of the coercive/military option. A strategic context that makes the use of force uncertain generates the systemic precondition that allows trust to enter into the equation. Iran and the U.S., in the abstract, are very unequal powers, yet it is not abstract balance of power but effective balance that matters most. In the absence of effective balance of power (power defined as the synthesis of all material and nonmaterial elements), trust usually has

no space to operate, as the superior power never looks at trust as a reciprocal process, but as a unilateral entitlement; demanding a verifiable trust that cannot be achieved short of capitulation. The maximalist preconditions for trust actually become a mechanism for coercion, and in reality a diplomatic component of the war to come.

Thus, the existence of the strategic deadlock emanating from the mutually, and universally perceived sterility of the military option is core to the condition that psychologically and socially favors the emergence of trust as an operative terminology penetrating the linguistic social world of the actors engaged in conflict. Seldom can a unilateral jail-breaker change the deadlock by a significant public gesture, concession, or costly signaling. A "Nixon-China move" is always possible, but Iran is not China for the United States. The powerful are by "nature", and contrary to expectation, not conditioned to make the first move. Their prestige is hostage to the arrogance and majesty of their power; they are risk averse and usually far more trapped in domestic politics than the lesser powers that are usually security seekers and counterintuitively, risk takers. The lesser-powers' gestures in the absence of effective balance, however, are almost always perceived as weakness and vulnerability.

Iran has managed, by design and by default, to maintain an ambiguous and yet effective balance through a systemic asymmetrical deterrence, which is predicated on missiles, regionally based and supported 4th generation warfare capability, and a stable and deep normative strategic depth at home. This complex effective balance promises not only retaliation but, far more importantly, a very costly, and eventually, non-consequential, war with no regime change in sight. This effective balance is, however, dynamic and subject to fluctuation and change. The fact that this effective balance is a delicate admixture of some material capability with potent external social power and domestic legitimacy makes its achievement and maintenance a constant strategic preoccupation. At core it is social, and thus never static or to be taken for granted.

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Analysts could argue that achieving an opaque nuclear capability is the ultimate source of deterrence for medium range powers vs. major nuclear states. But, this is an illusion. A country like Iran cannot rely on nuclear opacity (Japanese, soft, or Israeli, hard versions) to deter a U.S. attack; nuclear opaqueness is an uncertain, and in real conflict conditions, potentially insufficient source for security and deterrence. In the absence of a perfect nuclear deterrence, there is always a domain for war *below the nuclear threshold*, especially for a military superpower like the U.S., which can use conventional forces, even under such an opaque nuclear condition. Iran's deterrence lies elsewhere, namely in its effective balance.

The decade of 2000-2010, and beyond, witnessed a dynamic fluctuation in Iran's effective balance. While the decade started with the confident promise of the demise of effective balance after the U.S. occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq, when "Iran, the axis of evil, is next" was in the air, it soon witnessed its resuscitation and its eventual maturity in the latter part of the decade. With the U.S. trapped in Iraq and its ally Israel having reached strategic limitations by being checked by Hezbollah, and Iran's deep engagement in shaping the Palestinian angle via Hamas, a delicate effective balance began to emerge. A "Shia Crescent" controlled by Iran, real or imagined, seemed to dominate the region. Iran's effective balance was sufficient to create the strategic context for a shift from a purely coercive language to open talk of the necessity to negotiate with Iran. The Obama administration's campaign on the need to talk to Iran and the initial symbolic reconciliation gestures of respect when he took office, were far more than the result of an "agency" driven normative shift. Structural conditions made coercive policy a less attractive option, and made a symbolic *linguistic turn* and a search for "mutual" trust towards reconciliation a possibility. Even earlier, during the second term of the Bush administration, Secretary Gates indicated that dealing with Iran required a shift in the regional condition that was unfavorable to Iran; an objective that the U.S. has been

committed to, especially since 2009.

What is the condition of effective balance today? The gradual toughening of the U.S. and its allies' positions (Western and non-Western) against Iran is indicative of their changing perception of the realignment of effective balance. In addition to Iran's endemic strategic loneliness, which has remained unchanged, several factors have led to this perception of realignment: 1.The U.S.'s globally effective multilateralism, 2.its departure from Iraq, 3.the orchestrated UN sanctions, and 4.the multilateral "crippling sanctions". To these, one must add a fifth critical factor: The post Arab Spring emergence of regional anti-Iranian, so-called "jihadi", socio-military movements and organizations (a "Sunni Crescent"?), bank rolled by GCC resources, supported by a "neo-Ottomanist" Turkey, and by the U.S. and its Western allies (which is now all synthesized in Syria). These factors, collectively and symbiotically, have turned into a new strategic capacity, targeting the Iranian effective balance that had so far made the war option less likely. The regionally mediated, seemingly mutual strategic accommodation between the West and the "Jihadis" is potentially the biggest material-normative shift in the region since the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq. Iran's vulnerable and mismanaged economy, and the continuous intra elite political tensions were significant domestic factors. The boldness of the U.S. led coalition against Iran not only in imposing sanctions, but in completely resuscitating the language of war (Kemp and Gay 2013), even with occasional time tables and a continuous lamentation that Iran is not worthy of trust that cannot even be verified, are all indications of a perception that the regional condition that used to favor an effective balance emanating from Tehran is changing.

In this vexing strategic condition, and looking at the regional and domestic components of its effective balance, Iran is perhaps most fundamentally in control of improving its domestic element. It is here, as I have discussed elsewhere (Mesbahi 2011), that Iran's ultimate source of deterrence lies: effective economic performance

and political legitimacy as the bedrock of the effective balance system that had so far checked the war option. Notwithstanding the importance of regional developments, any new assessment of effective balance that can set the stage for the remainder of this decade and thus the future of U.S.-Iran relations will primarily depend on Iran's ability for robust realignment of its polity and economy. A successful renewal of polity at home will certainly go a long way to redress the perception of effective balance. It would help to create a breathing space, and probably pave the way for meaningful U.S.-Iran negotiations, where "crippling sanctions" and the war option are not considered rational and trust is contemplated, as an important, though challenging, achievable necessity, worth risk taking and requiring progressive reciprocity.

Coercive diplomacy, sanctions as an extension of war by other means, and the war option itself, could only be exhausted either by its execution and the costly, but eventually sterile, inability to deliver the desirable outcome, or by a clear and unambiguous Iranian effective balance that renders it irrational and unattractive. The willingness of the U.S. to negotiate in "good faith", and actually "trust" a genuine diplomatic solution, is the direct function of its perception of the existence or disappearance of Iran's effective balance. Effective balance, and not nuclear opacity, is, in a strategic sense, Iran's invulnerable "second strike" capability. To prevent a U.S./Western miscalculation about Iran's strategic effective balance, the ball is in Iran's domestic court.

Conclusion

The environment dominating U.S.-Iran relations is characterized by a high, though uneven level of mistrust, and a low threshold for costly signaling, where diplomatic engagement is reduced to a vehicle for scoring points domestically and internationally, and for justifying harsher future actions and escalation, and ultimately opportunistic exploitation and defection from cooperation. There is thus little room

or inclination for "courting the adversary" (Kupchan 2010a). As Charles Kupchan effectively argues, in making "enemies into friends", it is neither the regime type, as liberal democratic peace theorists claim, nor economic interdependence favored by the neoliberals, but the unilateral accommodation and development of an alternative narrative that counts (Kupchan 2010b).

This is also a relationship that is strategically, but wrongly, consumed by the singularity of the nuclear issue, as if nuclear (non)proliferation or capability is the cause or solution for strategic instability (Walton and Gray 2013). The result is a remarkable and myopic disregard of what could have been a positive and stabilizing Iranian role in shaping great power relations, if the hostility was not so intense and the U.S. did not need Russian and Chinese cooperation against Iran. The hostility so crystalized in the nuclear issue is central to creating an undeserving geopolitical space for these two great powers. Russia and the rising China are the major beneficiaries of this singularity and its dominance on U.S. regional and global policy; they have both maneuvered themselves to a position of maximalist triangulation between the two antagonists, to the detriment of both, the U.S. and Iran. The U.S.'s longterm capacity in shaping strategic stability in Eurasia, the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean has suffered greatly as a result. As Vali Nasr has argued, "the coming geopolitical competition with China will not be played out in the Pacific theater alone. Important parts of that competition will be played out in the Middle East." (Nasr 2013b) The role and the nature of U.S.-Iran relations in shaping this geopolitics will be very significant.

U.S.-Iran relations suffer from a low level of reflexivity. Reflexivity is a measurement of the true agency and "autonomy" of individuals and actors in shaping their environment, the structure of rules, habits and cultures that dominate their behavior and dictate their choices (Giddens 1994; 1986; Bourdieu 1992; Archer 2007). Prominent Western social thinkers, such as Anthony Giddens, have

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celebrated "late modernity" as the time for reflexivity (Giddens 1994; 1986). Late modern America might be well served by exercising this reflexivity, but the Iranians too, have a rich history of thought and philosophy in their religious and mystical tradition that encourages and in fact demands reflexivity.

Actors are seldom aware of just how trapped and tempted they are by the "condition of rule" that they themselves have unintentionally, but willfully, created. Actors create the world by talking about it, but the world they create, when it is routinized and structured, creates roles for them to perform. At that moment, they cease to be true agents; they are just playing their scripted part. This is the predicament of actors in international relations, especially those engaged in long conflicts. Reflexivity creates the opportunity for a new wisdom, moral clarity or "illumination", that usually comes from establishing a mental distance from the routine and regulated world; a moment that demands a different way of talking, and thus doing.

Leaders, as true agents of international politics, must actively reflect on the role that they can play through the art of statecraft, in changing their environment and in disrupting the structure of rules and norms of mistrust that have dominated their actions for so long, and avoid being simple pawns in well-entrenched conditions. Reflexivity in international relations is not, however, an exercise for the feint hearted and domesticated; it demands intelligent, yet normative and ethical risk taking, and faith in the assurance game. It is a standpoint that rewards those engaged and interested in win-win relations.

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