



City Research Online

City St George's, University of London

Citation: Fawcett, L. & Payne, A. (2023). Stuck on a hostile path? US policy towards Iran since the revolution. *Contemporary Politics*, 29(1), pp. 1-21. doi: 10.1080/13569775.2022.2029239

This is the published version of the paper.

This version of the publication may differ from the final published version. To cite this item please consult the publisher's version.

Permanent repository link: <https://openaccess.city.ac.uk/id/eprint/31445/>

Link to published version: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2022.2029239>

Copyright and Reuse: Copyright and Moral Rights remain with the author(s) and/or copyright holders. Copies of full items can be used for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, unless otherwise indicated, provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way. For full details of reuse please refer to [City Research Online policy](#).

Stuck on a hostile path? US policy towards Iran since the revolution

Louise Fawcett and Andrew Payne 

Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK

ABSTRACT


Since Iran's revolution in 1979, relations between Washington and Tehran have been invariably fraught. The Trump presidency saw escalating tensions which the Biden administration has sought to moderate with uncertain results. This article locates contemporary events within a broader analysis of US policy towards Iran, which for over four decades has oscillated between attempted rapprochement and hostility short-of-war. Seeking to explain the fluctuation and failures of US policy, it shows how two intersecting logics have shaped and constrained the decision-making environment – path dependent at the international level, cyclical at the domestic level. Going beyond accounts which treat domestic constraints in an *ad hoc* manner, the article explores how the electoral cycle systematically shapes decision-makers' ability to respond to geopolitical conditions. Shedding light on contemporary policy debates, it concludes that any lasting departure from the default posture of hostility will require a favourable alignment of conditions on both levels.


KEYWORDS

US-Iran relations; US foreign policy; elections; international politics; domestic politics

Introduction

Since the Iranian Revolution in 1979, relations between Washington and Tehran have been fraught, characterised by cycles of hostility and misunderstanding. The tensions generated by Iran's so-called 'rogue state' behaviour, including hostage taking, proxy warfare, association with terrorist activities and its nuclear programme have provided multiple flash points, but arguably peaked during the Trump administration. This saw the US exit from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2018, followed by renewed sanctions, and finally, in 2020, the assassination of prominent Iranian general, Qasem Soleimani, bringing the situation close to war. On assuming office, Joe Biden signalled a willingness to re-join the JCPOA subject to Iranian compliance. With negotiations ongoing, these recent events fit into a broader pattern of policy, oscillating between paths of military and diplomatic escalation on one hand and attempts at rapprochement on the other. So far, Washington's enduring preoccupation with Tehran has yielded little

CONTACT Andrew Payne  andrew.payne@politics.ox.ac.uk  Department of Politics and International Relations, Manor Road, University of Oxford, OX1 3UQ

 Supplemental data for this article can be accessed <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2022.2029239>.

© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

other than fleeting attempts to take one step forwards, only for long-standing grievances and a legacy of mistrust to reassert themselves and block efforts to place US-Iran relations on a more normal path.

In seeking to understand both the fluctuation in US policy towards Iran and its failure to achieve meaningful progress, this article highlights the close interdependence of international and domestic political explanations. Specifically, it argues that two distinct logics have shaped the decision-making environment in ways which make any lasting departure from the default posture of hostility difficult. At the international level, realist-style geopolitical considerations, combining the effects of geography, material resources and power politics (Dalby, 1990) have introduced a degree of path dependency into the rivalry. Building on these, powerful and ideologically charged narratives have taken hold on both sides, depicting Iran as a persistent threat to US interests in the Middle East and vice versa (Haas, 2012). Such narratives reflect deep US frustration at the Cold War 'loss' of Iran, the two states' competitive visions of regional order in the Middle East, and their wider ramifications. This international context, while fraught, has not been entirely without opportunities for a relaxation of tensions, nor has the hostile rhetoric necessarily matched the reality of the material threat posed by Iran. Indeed, scholars have long puzzled over Washington's 'obsession' with Tehran, which recent observers have characterised as increasingly 'absurd' in balance of power terms (Benjamin & Simon, 2019, p. 57). The sense of threat is real, however (Walt, 1987), and this paper demonstrates how the perceptions of Tehran's capabilities and intentions have tended to reproduce and sustain generally unfavourable conditions for lasting rapprochement.

These perceptions translate into specific policy outcomes at the domestic level, and it is here where a cross-cutting cyclical logic operates, at times reinforcing the path dependent hostility, at others opening more room for manoeuvre. Public opinion and interest groups closely constrain the political space in which successive US administrations have approached policy towards Iran, yet do so in a non-linear manner broadly corresponding with three phases of the American domestic political calendar. During the post-electoral 'honeymoon' phase, an initially permissive political environment creates space for tentative attempts at rapprochement, only for such hopes to be extinguished as congressional patience ebbs. Over time, and into an incumbent's third year in office, re-election concerns tend to fuel a rush toward tougher measures and threat inflation, reflecting remarkably durable public enmity and a perception of Iran as a graveyard for presidential ambition. During a second term, safely re-elected administrations benefit from reduced sensitivity to political pressures, often leading the incumbent to revisit the possibility of pursuing a thaw. However, legacy concerns and the erosion of presidential influence following the second off-year elections cool any residual appetite for engagement, leaving little time for meaningful progress.

This article is sensitive to the reality that policy outcomes are not reducible to electoral cycles alone – indeed, such pressures vary across presidencies and are necessarily dependent on other contextual issues. These include not only factors at the international level, but also those which go beyond the two levels of analysis emphasised in this paper. The 'goals, abilities, and foibles' of individual actors (Byman & Pollack 2001, p. 109) are vital elements to consider in any analysis of specific foreign policy outcomes, for instance. Both the idiosyncrasies of each US president, the agency of their Iranian counterparts, and those of third-party intermediaries between the two – here European actors in

particular come to mind – cannot be overlooked. For example, a full account of the causal path leading to the JCPOA must acknowledge the significance of the more conciliatory approach of Iran's reformist President Hassan Rouhani and his Western-educated foreign minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, compared to that of President Mahmoud Ahmadi-nejad, whose fiery rhetoric and combative style only added to the technical obstacles to a deal. European leaders, notably including Catherine Ashton as the inaugural High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, also played a crucial role in facilitating dialogue between each side of those talks. Similarly, while this paper emphasises the significance of US domestic politics, we recognise that multiple, albeit rather different constraints also operate at the level of Iranian domestic politics, with decision makers navigating a complex terrain informed by diverse political factions and pressure groups (Adib-Moghaddam, 2007, pp. 66–67; Tabatabai, 2020; Vatanka, 2021). Indeed, some of the best recent work has explored Iranian decision-making through an explicitly multilevel approach (Juneau, 2015).

Nevertheless, we contend that considerable heuristic value can be gained by adopting a two-level approach. It is true that some existing accounts of US-Iran relations feature domestic political explanations of certain policy outcomes (Ansari, 2006; Bill, 1988; Murray, 2010; Parsi, 2017). However, in bringing this literature up to date by including coverage of the policies of more recent administrations, this paper offers an important empirical contribution of its own. Drawing on recently declassified documents, memoirs and the secondary literature, it places this highly salient contemporary issue into its historical context, thereby extending our understanding of a turbulent bilateral relationship which is now in its fifth decade. Moreover, by presenting the false starts and missed opportunities in terms of its international and domestic dimensions, and identifying the distinct logics that drive decision-making at each level, it also provides a conceptual contribution, revealing more regular patterns than may be apparent in purely historical accounts which tend to treat political pressures in an *ad hoc* way. Recent work depicting US-Iran nuclear negotiations as a two-level game (Hurst, 2016) has already shown the value of applying this conceptual lens to a single issue. In this paper, we seek to widen the aperture to reveal how US-Iran relations more broadly have been buffeted along a hostile path by forces at both the international and domestic levels. In doing so, we combine the explanatory depth of historical accounts with the conceptual clarity of employing a levels of analysis framework (Putnam, 1988; Waltz, 1959).

By emphasising the role of the US electoral cycle in particular, this article also makes an important contribution to the study of the domestic determinants of US foreign policy. The notion that elections somehow 'matter' in the development and execution of policy is of course somewhat intuitive. Yet exactly how and when they do so is poorly understood. Though there is renewed scholarly interest in presidential elections and foreign policy among historians (Johnstone & Priest, 2017), the way in which electoral pressures wax and wane across the US domestic political calendar has received less sustained analysis. This gap is particularly apparent among scholars of international relations, perhaps due to the fact that contemporary theories of international politics remain ill-equipped to capture the nuance of domestic political processes (Kaarbo, 2015), an argument that can readily be applied to IR approaches to the Middle East (Darwich & Kaarbo, 2020). To be sure, former policymakers have reflected on how the four-year electoral cycle comprises different phases which generate a recurring set of constraints on decision-

makers – from the temptation for a newly elected president to act boldly at the outset of their term to the tendency to avoid politically controversial issues during the general election campaign (Armocost, 2015; Quandt, 1986a). In the past, the domestic political calendar has been cited as an obstacle to the kind of patient diplomacy and long-term strategic thinking required to resolve certain intractable policy dilemmas. William Quandt (1986b), for instance, lamented how the electoral cycle inhibited progress in mediating the Arab-Israeli conflict by gearing decision-making in Washington to short-term considerations. Miroslav Nincic (1990) documented how efforts to stabilise the bilateral competition between the US and the Soviet Union through arms control agreements, summit meetings and defence spending fluctuated with different phases of the US political calendar. Yet while the track record of false hopes and missed opportunities for rapprochement between Washington and Tehran stands out as ripe for analysis through a similar prism, to date we lack such an account. In seeking to fill this gap, then, this study contributes to a nascent resurgence of scholarly interest in electoral cycles and periodicity in US foreign policy, moving beyond issues of conflict initiation (Gaubatz, 1999) and wartime decision-making (Payne, 2020).

The remainder of the article proceeds as follows. First, it examines the geopolitical roots of US-Iranian tension and how events at the international level have often reinforced this deep-seated hostility. Second, it explores how these pressures are refracted through a domestic political lens in Washington, tracing both the historical foundations and cyclical manifestation of the powerful constraints that have shaped the development of US policy towards Iran across the ‘honeymoon’, ‘re-election’, and ‘second term’ phases of the American political calendar. In the conclusion, the article draws on the analytical frame provided to reflect on the possibilities for a lasting rapprochement or ‘reset’ in US-Iranian relations. While the Biden presidency, alongside the election of Ebrahim Raisi as Iran’s new president, could prove to be a key inflection point, history shows that for any short-term thaw in tensions to translate into a lasting *modus vivendi*, a positive and durable alignment of geopolitical and domestic conditions will be required. These favourable conditions have so far proven elusive and short-lived, however, due to the nature of the underlying sources of tension between Washington and Iran and the often-incompatible logics which drive decision-making at each level.

Unpacking the geopolitical sources of US-Iran tensions

Since its Revolution in 1979, which led to the departure of Mohammed Reza Shah, and the establishment of an Islamic Republic, successive US administrations have portrayed Iran as a significant strategic threat. Despite popular impressions, the prior relationship between Iran and the US was not tensions-free – Iran’s desire for self-sufficiency and independence of action had at times led the Shah to pursue alternative alignments. Ultimately, however, the Shah, who owed his very throne to the US following a coup in 1953, in which Britain and the US supported action to remove the nationalist premier Mohammed Mossadeq and thereby consolidate the position of the monarchy (Allen-Abrahamian, 2017), remained a close ally, and a vital element in the US security equation, making the rupture as dramatic as it was unanticipated.

The above point is central to understanding the origins of US-Iran tensions, and the deep-rooted and mutual hostility of both sides. From a simple geopolitical perspective,

the revolution, in a continuing Cold War climate, lost the US an important partner in a strategically and economically important region when allies mattered greatly in the global balance of power. Not only did Iran share a border with the USSR – placing it on the periphery of the Eurasian ‘heartland’ (Mackinder, 1904), it was also an important supplier of oil to Western markets through its Gulf ports. Friendship with Iran, reaching a peak under President Nixon, provided the US with security in the Persian Gulf and, by extension, in the wider Middle East (Alvandi, 2014, p. 29). Interestingly, the revolution did not produce any immediate tilt to the USSR: its slogan was ‘neither East nor West but the Islamic Republic’, yet it was perceived as a Soviet foreign policy gain (Asinovsky, 2018, p. 195). As the US vacillated, still seeking openings with the new regime, this wider Cold War element, compounded by the damaging effects of the hostage crisis, and Iran’s own hostile rhetoric and actions, fed by narratives of US betrayal, explain how the US was seriously unnerved, and felt strategically compromised, by the ‘loss’ of Iran. ‘For Washington’, one observer remarks (Maloney, 2019), ‘the revolution represented a devastating strategic loss. Since the British withdrawal from the Persian Gulf in 1971, Iran had become the cornerstone of America’s security architecture for protecting Western interests across the region’.

The extent of that loss, and the US response to it, was demonstrated by President Reagan’s military support to former US rival Iraq in the ensuing Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988). Some partial openings to Iran, notably the infamous arms deal or ‘Iran-Contra’ affair, in part to discourage closer Soviet alignment, failed to disguise the fact that this move represented a transparent attempt to unseat or contain the newly established and, for the US and its allies, hostile and regionally threatening Islamic Republic. Right through to the later stages of the war, and at the cost of considerable Iranian resentment, the US and its allies in Europe and the Gulf, now joined by the USSR, offered material support to Iraq, helping to prolong the war until the final (and reluctant) acceptance by Iran in 1988 of UN resolution 598 (Amanat, 2017, pp. 840–848). If the ending of the war was a mini-victory for East–West relations, it did not mend US relations with either Iran or Iraq.

This background set the pace for the subsequent relationship between the US and Iran, aptly described using the Cold War term of ‘containment’ (Ansari, 2006, p. 3). That relationship was never immovable, as different efforts at détente showed, but beyond the revolution, hostage crisis, and Iran-Iraq War, it assumed some highly path dependent characteristics: where ‘self-reinforcing processes make reversals very difficult’ (Pierson, 2004, p. 10). Here we can understand the revolution as providing the ‘critical juncture’ (Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007, p. 348) in radically reshaping what had been a stable partnership. Once established, this new relationship proved durable and resistant to change, with subsequent events often reinforcing the hostile default setting. Even as the Cold War became history, and Iran’s international position was overtly less threatening, the rivalry continued apace. Patterns of engagement shifted onto new regional axes with Iran aligning with more radical Arab states and political actors, and the US drawing closer to Israel and the conservative states of Arab Gulf. Though punctuated by intermittent attempts at cooperation, none, so far, have provided the necessary conditions for a permanent change.

There were many reasons for this continuing hostility. Beyond the legacy problems of the revolution and the hostage crisis, the prolonged war with Iraq, itself a test for the legitimacy of the new republic (Takeyh, 2008, p. 16), left Iran resilient and poised to

extend the foreign policy ambitions of the Shah: to promote Iran's status as a major regional power – one now hostile to US interests. That ambition has remained remarkably constant, as the dogged pursuit of its nuclear programme and activist regional politics show. It is true that despite widespread fears, Iran's early attempts to export its revolution to neighbouring states mostly failed, yet it was still widely viewed as a revolutionary state (Fawcett, 2015). Among its early partners were states and non-state actors viewed with suspicion by the US and its allies – in Palestine, Lebanon, Libya, Syria and Yemen, but also further afield, in Venezuela and Cuba, for example, earning it a reputation as a radical 'southern' or Third World state (Adib-Moghaddam, 2007, pp. 67–68, 71). China and Russia also moved closer over time, becoming increasingly important strategic and trading partners respectively. With the benefit of hindsight, the loss of Iran to the US was an economic, political and strategic gain for both China and Russia helping to reinforce the hostile default setting. It also represented a gain for that group of states called 'regional powers' who actively sought to renegotiate the prevailing terms of international order (Fawcett & Jagtiani, 2022).

The revolution and its aftermath therefore heralded what for the Western powers, but notably the US, were unwelcome changes in the regional and even global balance of power, prompting adjustments to alliance behaviour and reinforcing strategies of containment. The effects of these may have been overstated: European powers for example, frequently diverged from US in their perception of the 'Iran threat', preferring negotiation to confrontation. Nor did these changes only concern Iran, but Iran was invariably a reference point in any new power equation. The brief US turn to Iraq was reversed when the ending of the Iran-Iraq war saw Iraqi troops mobilise on border with Kuwait, soon to embark on another military adventure – triggering the Gulf War of 1990–91 – one duly crushed by the US-led coalition. And, when opportunities for rapprochement with Iran arose, under both the presidencies of Rafsanjani (1989–1997) and Khatami (1997–2005) the US failed to capitalise on these, instead advocating 'dual containment' while prioritising commitment to the flagship Middle East Peace Process (MEPP). Indeed, Iran was isolated in President Bush's 'New World Order' as US relations with Israel grew closer. Rafsanjani and Khatami's cautious attempts to improve relations, whether over the ending of the Gulf War and release of US hostages in Lebanon, in the former case, or through the 'dialogue of civilisations' and talk of 'democratic peace', in the latter, failed to persuade the US to change track (Ramazani 1988). Instead, following the terrorist attacks of September 2001, Iran, though not directly implicated in these, joined Iraq and North Korea as part of President Bush's 'axis of evil', and any window of opportunity to reset relations was lost (Heradstveit & Bonham, 2007, p. 422). Whether the Iran threat was grounded in any rational strategic basis, or subject to similar inflation as was the threat posed by Iraq at that time (Kaufmann, 2004), Iran became identified with the new global security threats of terrorism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. Its perceived status as a 'rogue state' secure, the underlying features of the early, hostile relationship reasserted themselves more forcefully with important domestic repercussions as discussed below.

These hardening lines, amid growing regional instability, following the failure of the MEPP, the effects of 9/11 and the Afghan War, became particularly visible over the course of the 2003 Iraq War and its regional fall-out, which strengthened Iran's position (Fawcett, 2013). Its regional position was reinforced after the Arab uprisings when both

its longstanding rival Iraq, alongside key Arab states were weakened, and even fragmented, by civil conflicts, international interventions and regime changes. This *relative* strengthening of Iran and deteriorating relations with the US also roughly coincided with the presidency of the hard-liner Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005–13) which further hampered possibilities for cooperation, showing how individual agency, in this case, could play an aggravating role. The reconstitution of Iraq, albeit under US auspices, worked in Iran's favour. Iraq was a much-weakened state, but its new power sharing arrangements elevated the position of the country's formerly suppressed Shi'i majority permitting greatly improved relations with mainly Shi'i Iran, particularly under Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki (2006–14). The Arab uprisings, which started late in 2010 in Tunisia, but quickly spread to Egypt, Libya, Syria and other Arab states, though not a direct result of the Iraq War, were influenced by its fall-out, and afforded Iran a relatively privileged position within a deeply unsettled regional order.

The uprisings did not, as Iran's leaders predicted, and many Western powers feared, mark the start of a wave of sympathetic Islamic revolutions, but they did present Iran with further opportunities for influence and limited possibilities for further engagement (Chubin, 2012, pp. 16–19). First, because Iran, having secured its own place in the pantheon of 'great revolutions', mostly escaped their fallout (Arjomand, 1988, p. 6). Iran's Green Movement, a response to the contested presidential 2009 elections, was an important expression of political unrest, but had been contained, securing Ahmadinejad's re-election for a second term. The Iranian state, despite rumours to the contrary, was not in real danger of implosion, assuring its standing in the changing regional order. Second, Iran was able to consolidate its position and exercise influence among local states and actors – and here the cases of Iraq, and Syria, one of the few states that supported Iran in the Iran-Iraq War (Ahmadian & Mohseni, 2019), and its support for Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Palestine, are exemplary. Sectarian allegiances across the Shi'i-Sunni divide, though not at the root of regional tensions, became more important as Shi'i-led Iran, and Sunni-led Saudi Arabia, used these instrumentally to promote their respective regional positions (Wehrey, 2014, pp. xii, xiv). Talk of a 'Shi'i axis' and Iran's influence over regional clients may be overstated, but the Hamas-Iran-Syria-Hezbollah alliance strengthened Iran's regional position while heightening threat perceptions. Its later intervention in the Yemen conflict saw Iran offering support to the (Zaydi) Shi-i Houthis against the Saudi-backed Sunni regime. Iran's regional posture and alliances, coupled with its repeated association with terrorist-related activities, use of regional proxies and asymmetrical methods of warfare linked to the operations of the powerful Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, all contributed to heightened tensions, consolidating the view of Iran as a major strategic threat to the US and its allies. Third, Iran's regional status and the prevailing insecurity encouraged it to progress its longstanding nuclear ambitions. Pursued by the Shah, with intermittent US encouragement, these remained quiescent in the immediate post-revolutionary period, but Majlis Speaker Rafsanjani who became President in 1989, was a consistent advocate. Though considerable opacity has surrounded the origins, nature and intentions of the programme, Iran's leadership circles have consistently viewed a nuclear capability as an essential means of building greater self-sufficiency, security and prestige. Progress towards that goal has not been linear and has resulted in protracted negotiations and punitive international sanctions, sometimes distancing the US from its European allies, who on the nuclear and other matters

regarding Iran have favoured more conciliatory roles, but Iran's pursuit of nuclear technology in the face of considerable obstacles has been remarkably consistent – with the right to enrichment becoming a 'red line' for the regime (Parsi, 2017, pp. 75–77).

Arguably, it was exposure of Iran's nuclear programme that became *the* cause célèbre, particularly in a volatile region where efforts to establish a Nuclear-Weapons-Free Zone have been frustrated. For Israel, a nuclear state outside the NPT, Iran's nuclear ambitions, particularly across the Netanyahu administrations, became all consuming, such that fearing Iran was 'like a religion' (Kaye & Efron, 2020, p. 7). Arab Gulf states too, led by Saudi Arabia, repeatedly warned of the spill-over consequences of any regional proliferation and moved closer to Israel. Recognising these dangers, newly elected President Obama, set out, in 2009, to explore a new relationship, characterised, finally, by a move from containment to engagement, one that resulted in the protracted multilateral negotiations leading to the JCPOA in 2015. This attempt at reset, which arguably met some of the conditions necessary for providing a critical juncture – and reflecting a changed domestic and international context – ultimately failed to secure any new regime of cooperation. The JCPOA had many opponents in the US, the Middle East and among Iranian hardliners, and the Trump administration's withdrawal in 2018, together with the reimposition of sanctions, was popular among those who supported a 'maximum pressure' approach. By 2020, not only had the default hostile setting returned – but tensions had heightened considerably with the killing of Soleimani and Iran's retaliatory acts against US sanctions. Time will tell whether or not the Biden administration can restore a JCPOA-type equilibrium.

This geopolitical story, in which international and regional level explanations, together with powerfully grounded threat perceptions, are closely entangled, remains compelling, yet insufficient. It helps to explain why Iran is 'too powerful to ignore and cannot be easily contained' (Takeyh, 2009, p. 7). As argued here, powerful path dependencies were established post-revolution which have not been disrupted by fitful attempts at reconciliation; indeed, the fall-out from the war on terror, Iraq War, Arab uprisings and the nuclear programme have helped to reinforce the Iran threat and what scholars have called the persistent 'otherising' of Iran as reflected in US political discourse (Kadkhodae & Tari, 2019). Yet, as the above account shows, there have been opportunities for engagement. Cold War with Iran was not inevitable. Iran's importance in the regional balance of power and the evident challenges it poses to US interests, cannot disguise the fact that in real power terms, with or without nuclear technology, it poses relatively little significant threat, certainly to the United States and even, arguably, to its regional allies. Iran has a large army and significant military capabilities in some areas, like air defences, but in others they are aging and stretched. Arab Gulf states are spending more and modernising faster (Cordesman, 2020). They disagree on the nature of the challenge from Iran and its management, despite the disruption caused to shipping routes and oil supplies. Any threat it poses is reduced by economic woes, worsened by US sanctions and the devastating effects of the COVID pandemic which has hit Iran particularly hard. Despite Iran's enduring geopolitical significance, and technological capabilities, its oil is no longer so vital to the Western world. The US, even in a period of relative decline, is vastly more powerful across all major economic and military measures. And unlike its predecessor, the Islamic Republic has had few opportunities to exercise direct influence over the US, or to change its behaviour. It was only with the support of an international coalition –

the Permanent Five members of the UN Security Council (including an amenable US president and active European participation) that Iran was able to influence US handling of its nuclear file, achieving a reasonably favourable settlement on nuclear enrichment in 2015. But even here success was finite, as President Trump's decision to exit the JCPOA in 2018 revealed. As argued below, if geopolitics helped to frame these issues, US handling of that file had as much to do with the exigencies of the US political calendar as it did with Iran's negotiating capacity. It is, therefore, to US politics that we must turn to better understand both the varied and uneven trajectory of bilateral relations and the opportunities and constraints for engagement.

From open hands to clenched fists: the American electoral cycle and Iran policy

In responding to geopolitical sources of tension, US policymakers are themselves bound by a series of domestic political constraints which limit their ability to act upon rational strategic assessments of the threat posed by Iran. These constraints do not independently determine policy outcomes, but instead constrict the range of options available at an acceptable political cost. In contrast to the path dependent logic operating at the international level, however, these pressures operate according to a cyclical logic, corresponding with three phases of the domestic political calendar. While existing accounts acknowledge the role played by public opinion and interest groups in disincentivising rapprochement and reinforcing the default hostility described above, these are often invoked in an *ad hoc* manner which fails to capture systematic patterns in US policy. Only by accounting for the non-linear manifestation of these constraints is it possible to understand the frequent oscillation in policy responses between engagement and hostility short-of-war, often within a single administration. Before unpacking further how the electoral cycle shapes each administration's sensitivity to these pressures, however, it is first necessary to explore the historical foundations of those hostile threat perceptions which, drawing on the geopolitical framework above, have become deeply embedded within the US political system.

Jimmy Carter and the domestic political roots of hostility

If the Iranian Revolution represented a strategic setback for the US, it was also a deeply political 'loss' for President Carter. For several months, a sprawling network of pro-Shah figures spearheaded by prominent Republicans lambasted the president for his lack of support for the Pahlavi regime and lobbied to have the deposed monarch admitted to the United States. The electoral significance of this pressure was not lost on Carter, who reluctantly agreed to permit the Shah's entry, ostensibly for medical treatment, in a move that triggered the seizure of the US embassy in Tehran in November 1979. In turn, the ensuing hostage crisis was a major contributing factor behind Carter's defeat in 1980 and planted the seeds of enduring mistrust of Iran among policymakers and public alike. 'We never discuss it openly', recalls one veteran of several administrations (Pollack, 2004, p. 172), 'but the residual anger that so many Americans feel toward Iran for those 444 days has coloured every decision made about Iran ever since'.

In truth, electoral considerations shaped every phase of Washington's response to the crisis. As news of the seizure of the embassy reached Washington, one question kept cropping up among top aides: 'what would it do to the campaign?' (Jordan, 1982, p. 19). Leading the administration's negotiating efforts in early 1980, Carter's Chief of Staff admitted that 'the hostages and the election were woven together in my mind. When I wasn't thinking about [Democratic presidential candidate Ted] Kennedy, I was thinking about Khomeini, and when I wasn't thinking about Khomeini, I was thinking about Kennedy' (Jordan, 1982, p. 127). While the dramatic events initially generated a beneficial 'rally 'round the flag' effect, as Carter himself would later acknowledge (Carter, 1982, p. 548), the safe return of hostages from Iran was among the most critical 'prerequisites for a successful campaign year', and none of the nonmilitary instruments applied through the spring of 1980 had worked.

It was precisely in the context of growing public dissatisfaction with the administration's policy of restraint that Carter decided to resort to more coercive measures. Several advisers grew 'increasingly frustrated and concerned about rising public pressure for more direct action against Iran' (Brzezinski, 1982), and it was to those aides that Carter now turned. 'We need to increase our pressure', the president declared in March 1980, since 'the American people are getting sick of the situation' (FRUS, 2020 Document 212). First came sanctions, a measure which one aide (Jordan, 1982, pp. 248–9) considered unlikely to bring the hostages home any sooner, but which might 'buy us a little more time and patience from the public'. Shortly thereafter came a daring, and ultimately doomed, rescue mission, *Operation Eagle Claw*. In opting to resolve the crisis by force, Carter was belatedly heeding the advice of hawkish advisers like Zbigniew Brzezinski, who had castigated the earlier 'litigational' strategy as carrying a significant 'risk of jeopardizing our electoral chances' (FRUS, 2020 Document 61). Another top NSC aide (Sick, 1985, p. 295) later agreed that continued passivity would have 'condemned the president to self-immolation at the polls'. Even Jordan, who had long championed a diplomatic approach to the crisis, had come to look favourably on a military option, frankly advising Carter that 'a measured punitive act is absolutely essential to your own re-election' (FRUS, 2020 Document 56).

With neither diplomacy nor the use of force having dug Carter out of his electoral ditch, the course of subsequent negotiations only further cemented the relationship between electoral politics and dealings with the Iranian government. Tehran's sudden appetite for a deal in September 1980 apparently stemmed from an eagerness to capitalise on Carter's perceived willingness to grant concessions on the eve of the election (Sick, 1985, p. 309). Yet while the conditions offered would ultimately form the basis of a final deal, Iran pushed a resolution beyond Election Day 1980, sealing Carter's political fate. Some have suggested that Khomeini held onto the hostages to undermine Carter's chances for re-election, demonstrating that Iran could shape political outcomes in the United States (Pollack, 2004, p. 171). More infamous is the 'October surprise' theory. According to Gary Sick (1991), the Reagan campaign struck a deal with Iranian officials, whereby Iran agreed to hand over the hostages under a Republican administration in exchange for a supply of arms and the promise of improved relations. While a congressional investigation found insufficient evidence to corroborate the claims, documents appearing to support elements of the allegations continue to surface (Eizenstat, 2020, pp. 828–829). Either way, it was not without good justification that Carter noted

that in deciding how to respond to Iranian negotiators, the administration was ‘walking through a political minefield’ (DNSA, 1980).

That minefield became an enduring reality of US-Iranian relations. In the decades since the hostage crisis, large and durable majorities of Americans have held unfavourable views of Iran (Gallup, 2021a). Since Gallup (2021b) began asking the question in 2001, Iran has topped the list of countries Americans consider to be the greatest enemy of the US more frequently than any other. The peculiar salience and remarkable consistency of the perceived Iranian threat among voters, real or imagined, gives elected officials reasonable cause for concern. Four decades of crises and scandals have marked Iran out as a graveyard of presidential ambition. This enmity has been further amplified by interest groups seeking to leverage US policy for their own ends. While the Pahlavi ‘lobby’ has faded away, organisations like the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) have since sought to refract US policy towards Iran through the lens of Israel’s regional security concerns. Israeli objectives in the Persian Gulf have evolved over time, often in ways which have not aligned with those of the incumbent US administration, yet a drumbeat of anti-Iranian rhetoric has gained significant traction in the United States, especially on Capitol Hill (Mearsheimer & Walt, 2007, pp. 280–305; Parsi, 2007).

With such consistent hostility etched into the national psyche and running through the sinews of the American political system, elected officials have had plenty of political incentives to engage in the relentless vilification of Iran and criticism of any policymaker willing to advocate for a more pragmatic approach. In this sense, if the revolution was the critical juncture that set US-Iranian relations upon a hostile path at the geopolitical level, the events of 1979–80 intersected strongly with the domestic political level, embedding mistrust and a baseline of animosity from which it is hard for policymakers to deviate. Yet since these pressures tend to point in a similar direction – towards a more confrontational posture – the puzzle of US policy fluctuation remains. It is here where a more nuanced understanding of the differential effects of domestic constraints across the political calendar is crucial. While the exact trajectory may differ based on contingent events and variation across and between different levels of analysis, successive administrations have crafted policy bound by the exigencies of three broad phases of the electoral cycle.

The honeymoon phase: false starts and missed opportunities

In the first year of any new president’s term, each administration typically benefits from an unusually permissive domestic political environment. With a fresh mandate and breathing room before the next election, there is often sufficient political space to approach controversial issues in a pragmatic manner. This freedom of action is not boundless. As the Biden administration soon discovered, the cumulative effects of a predecessor’s actions can spill over and make it difficult to embark on a new course. Moreover, adversaries recognise the advent of a new administration to be a potentially fruitful moment to test the resolve of the incoming team. Even if geopolitical conditions are favourable, moreover, domestic room for manoeuvre during this ‘honeymoon’ phase is strictly time-limited. Congressional appetite for the continued pursuit of unpopular, slow-burn diplomatic initiatives diminishes quickly. While this is a challenge present across many policy domains, the Iranian case is particularly notable, since the paucity of personal or institutional contacts between Washington and Tehran since the severance of diplomatic relations in April 1980

has made it difficult to resolve any of the underlying sources of tension before this early window of opportunity closes. From George H. W. Bush's inaugural promise that 'goodwill begets goodwill' to Barack Obama's offer to 'extend a hand' if adversaries would 'unclench' their fist, diplomatic gestures remain about the best that can be achieved.

The early record of the Obama administration provides a compelling example of these dynamics, with a series of moves explicitly designed to 'take immediate advantage of the window of opportunity' and 'test the waters with Iran' (Burns, 2009). Intent on using carrots before resorting to sticks, Obama issued a conciliatory statement to mark Nowruz before following this public gesture up with a private exchange of letters with Khamenei in which he expressed his interest in dialogue. Tehran did not exactly reciprocate in kind – in fact Obama (2020, p. 454) recently wrote that the Ayatollah's response was essentially to 'give me the middle finger'. Yet before the year was out, officials would agree to a confidence-building measure whereby Iran would commit to exchange 1200 kilograms of low-enriched uranium for fuel pads to be used in a research reactor. Throughout Obama's first year, the pace at which the new administration had sought to engage Iran reflected a clear awareness that the president's greatest strength – his novelty and lack of baggage with Iran – would only erode over time. 'Obama', it was said (Parsi, 2012, pp. 48–49), 'could be a virgin only once'.

Obama was of course unusual in that he came into office intent on repairing the decades of mistrust between Washington and Tehran as part of a broader effort to shift the tone and nature of US policy in the Middle East. Yet it is important not to read history backwards. Well before the JCPOA was agreed, Obama's outreach during his first year in office had come to a juddering halt as the window of political opportunity swiftly closed. Under pressure from Netanyahu, with draft sanctions legislation gaining traction on Capitol Hill, the White House understood that further attempts at engagement would cost considerable capital which was better spent on other priorities such as health-care in the run-up to the 2010 midterms. 'Opposing sanctions might have been good policy', policymakers privately felt (Parsi, 2012, p. 110), 'but it was bad politics'. The administration spent much of the remainder of its first term pursuing an open-ended policy of economic coercion.

If Obama's starting point was more conciliatory than that of his predecessors, even those who ended up on the brink of war with Iran had started out with less hostile relations. Under George W. Bush, Iran is remembered as part of the 'Axis of Evil'. Yet before the president's ill-advised rhetorical flourish, the 9/11 attacks created favourable geopolitical conditions which inspired a degree of cooperation not seen since the days of the Shah, showing that détente was possible when coupled with permissive electoral conditions at home. Indeed, in a series of meetings in Europe, US and Iranian officials developed 'amicable and productive relations' (Khalilzad, 2016, p. 119) and agreed to a series of measures designed to support US military operations in Afghanistan. While the breadth of support in Washington for a broader thaw must not be overstated, Tehran's role as mediator with the Northern Alliance during the post-war reconstruction talks at Bonn was deemed so critical by senior US officials, including the Secretary of State, that they came to see common interests in Afghanistan as 'as an avenue for rapprochement with Iran' (in Solomon, 2016, p. 42).

The most frequent approach to Iran policy during the opening months of each new administration, however, can be best characterised as benign neglect. For all the

melodrama of the hostage crisis, Ronald Reagan initially turned a blind eye towards Israeli shipments of weapons into Iran, with some officials considering a direct arms supply relationship as 'the most significant policy tool in terms of re-establishing relations with Iran' (DNSA, 1981). George HW Bush took nine months before unveiling a policy review setting out Washington's willingness to embark on 'a normal relationship with Iran on the basis of strict reciprocity' (DNSA, 1989). Even Trump took well over a year to fulfil his pledge to withdraw from the JCPOA, and when the policy of 'maximum pressure' was finally announced it was initially applied at a pace which continually left advisers frustrated (Bolton, 2020, pp. 365–368). Collectively, then, this pattern of initial neglect, punctuated with glimmers of cooperation, appears to suggest that the sabre-rattling about Iran heard on the campaign trail is largely an exercise in instrumental threat inflation driven by political motives, since few seemed to consider it so significant a geopolitical problem as to warrant their immediate attention once elected. Presidents may appreciate the limited strategic threat posed by Iran, but too often lack the political incentives or time required to do much about it.

The re-election phase: 'a political minefield'

After the 'honeymoon' window closes, anticipation of the incumbent's re-election campaign builds, accelerating quickly after the mid-terms and bringing with it a foreclosure of any residual opportunity for progress on issues likely to prove politically thorny as the presidential election season approaches. While the administration may have the necessary experience to pursue meaningful diplomatic engagement with Tehran by this stage, Iran has nearly always sat in the 'thorny' category of foreign policy issues thanks to the remarkable consistency of public attitudes alongside the geopolitical concerns dividing the two states. As a result, the political risk of failure is often deemed to outweigh the potential upside of continued goodwill. Instead, the political incentives behind punitive measures, such as sanctions or even the use of force, may prove irresistible in an election year. Importantly, the extent of this recurrent trend towards hostility is kept in check by the widespread fear among policymakers of the political cost associated with putting large numbers of troops in harm's way. Yet the disinclination of successive administrations to pursue rapprochement in this increasingly sensitive electoral phase has been a surprisingly persistent feature of US policy. Arguably, none of the presidents who ran for re-election since the hostage crisis sought to make a serious attempt to engage Iran in the months leading up to polling day.¹

The timing and intensification of Reagan's Iraq 'tilt' during the Iran-Iraq War is a good example of these dynamics. It was only in spring 1982 that the US position began to change from its posture of benign neglect, and while events on the battlefield partially determined the shift, senior officials like James Baker – someone described by colleagues as 'political to his fingertips' (Powell, 1995, p. 383) – admitted that 'the decision to contain Iran embodied emotional and political components as well' (Baker, 1996, p. 262). Specifically, the electoral significance of the hostage crisis loomed large as 'a metaphor for a paralyzed presidency', and a warning of the damage that anything less than a tough posture towards Tehran could wreak in domestic political terms (Baker, 1996, p. 262). Indeed, discussion papers of a senior interagency group in late 1983 listed congressional and public opinion as one of four key considerations in weighing up the decision to push

harder on the scales in Iraq's favour, reasoning that 'while support for Iraq is quite limited in the U.S., Iran enjoys an even less favorable image' (DNSA, 1983).

Re-election concerns also played a role in blunting efforts to respond to changes in the Iranian political landscape. They were a key factor, for instance, in explaining why Rafsanjani's cooperation during the Gulf War and efforts to secure the release of US hostages in Lebanon went unreciprocated. 'One of the things I think you have to remember', explained former CIA Director Robert Gates (2000), 'is all these players from the President on down had been on the edges of Iran-Contra, and Iran essentially was the third rail of foreign policy'. With questions also continuing to swirl around Bush's involvement in the alleged 'October surprise' of 1980, the administration understood the pitfalls that lay before them. 'As the electoral beneficiaries of this unhappy period in American diplomacy, and having witnessed the unfortunate consequences of the Iran-contra scandal in 1986, we were all too aware of the Ayatollah's destructive capacities in terms of domestic politics', recalls Baker (1996, p. 262). By the time all hostages were released it was December 1991, with a tough re-election fight against Bill Clinton on the horizon. As Ansari (2006, p. 132) notes, 'Bush was unwilling to risk valuable political capital in an election year by appearing to be soft on Iran', so despite Rafsanjani's best efforts to fulfil the pre-conditions for dialogue set by the administration, 'Bush unfortunately decided that it would be wise to defer his response to Rafsanjani until after he had won the election'.

Bush, of course, never had the opportunity to go further. Instead, his electoral defeat at the hands of Clinton in 1992 seemed only to press repeat on similar electoral dynamics which further illustrate how the regional security concerns of allies can filter into US policy with increased potency during this phase. Though pro-Israeli voices began lobbying Clinton within days of his inauguration, the administration's signature 'dual containment' policy would be unveiled two years later, and at first was largely declarative in nature. Only after the 1994 midterms ushered in a potent alliance between a Republican-controlled Congress and the Israel 'lobby' would Clinton go along with an uncompromising programme of economic coercion, fearing misery at the polls in 1996 for insufficient 'toughness' (Mearsheimer & Walt, 2007, pp. 286–291; Parsi, 2007, pp. 157–189). 'The right, AIPAC, the Israelis were all screaming for new sanctions', recalls Pollack (in Parsi, 2007, p. 186). It was in this context that the White House scrapped a lucrative oil deal offered to the US firm Conoco and effectively banned all trade with Iran by executive order. Officials understood that the moves likely killed residual hopes of restoring relations, yet, as Clinton's Middle East envoy explained (in Parsi, 2007, p. 188), 'from a political standpoint, nobody pays a price to be tough on Iran'. The point was underscored the following year, when Clinton reluctantly passed the draconian Iran-Libya Sanctions Act into law just three months prior to Election Day 1996, under guidance from domestic policy advisers who considered it 'sheer stupidity' not to endorse the bill (Pollack, 2004, p. 287).

If electoral incentives thus contribute to escalatory moves in US-Iran relations, so too do they ensure that the pressure has yet to spill over into war. The most recent near misses illustrate the point well. By the summer of 2019, President Trump was apparently receptive to arguments that he could 'kiss his chances of re-election goodbye' if he got the United States embroiled in a war, calling off retaliatory airstrikes against Iranian targets at the last minute (*New York Times*, 21 June 2019). The peak of US-Iranian tension under Trump, however, came in January 2020, with the killing of Soleimani.

Some involved in the presidential campaign speculated that Trump's decision was a cynical ploy to generate a political boost ahead of his impeachment trial, the kind of 'wag the dog' behaviour of which the president had repeatedly accused his predecessor (*Guardian*, 5 January 2020). Political confidants warned Trump before the attack that 'with the election coming', he would do well to think through the implications before proceeding (Woodward, 2020, p. 196). The president reportedly pushed back, arguing that the attack would be politically popular, but his subsequent decision to de-escalate the ensuing crisis after polling data revealed his political instincts to be off the mark is striking (Kahn, 2020). In this sense, the Soleimani strike is the exception that proves the rule, underlining how cyclical bouts of election-year hostility shown towards Iran by successive presidents remain firmly bound by the public's distaste for large-scale military operations which might incur casualties. Hostility *short-of-war* instead remained the name of the game, with hot rhetoric on the eve of polling day declaring Iran to be the 'greatest threat' facing Americans simply further evidence of Iran's utility as an electorally expedient bogeyman (Pompeo, 2020).

Second term dynamics: legacies and lame ducks

Such inflated rhetoric carries political utility only during electorally sensitive phases, of course. At the outset of a second term, these pressures dissipate and a re-elected president may finally have sufficient domestic political space to reassess the wisdom of continued competition at the international level. With four years of experience, a renewed mandate and reduced sensitivity to political constraints, the second 'honeymoon' may represent the best opportunity for the implementation of policy which prioritises the national interest over political survival. This freedom of manoeuvre is not total, of course. Given the absence of congressional term limits, political pressures remain far more sustained in the legislative branch, limiting the executive's ability to freely draw on those instruments of power which depend on congressional support, such as sanctions and formal treaties.

Consider the timing of the Obama administration's concession on nuclear enrichment, a breakthrough which led to the JCPOA. Tehran's aforementioned red line was readily apparent to negotiators. 'That was the overriding message [the Iranians] were sending', recalled Jake Sullivan (in Parsi, 2017, p. 176). 'We are not going to talk seriously about any kind of nuclear deal that is a zero-enrichment nuclear deal. Period'. Crucially, the Obama White House was willing to make this concession – the president had in fact 'made this decision long ago', according to Ben Rhodes (in Parsi, 2017, p. 174). And yet he waited until *after* he was safely re-elected to signal that the US would be willing to explore a limited civilian enrichment programme. Only in his second term could Obama absorb the ferocious backlash from political opponents that inevitably followed. However, if Obama's second-term status eased the path towards the historic nuclear accord, the JCPOA was on borrowed time. While Obama could protect the deal by repeatedly suspending congressional sanctions through presidential waivers, there was no guarantee that his successor would continue to do so, leaving his signature accomplishment vulnerable to future electoral shifts.

Other presidents have simply left things too late, waiting until the twilight stage of their presidency to engage Iran, preferring to expend political capital on domestic

issues attracting greater public interest. Incumbents may be less sensitive to political pressures after the second mid-terms, but a new set of constraints can still impede progress. Indeed, while 'lame ducks' may be surprisingly active in foreign affairs, hoping to burnish their legacies through increased diplomatic engagement, international agreements and even the use of force, these efforts rarely yield lasting success (Potter, 2016). Though the incumbent's name is no longer on the ballot, rhetorical commitments made by rival candidates can undermine the existing administration's policies. Moreover, with presidents having limited time left in office, allies and adversaries become increasingly wary of making agreements which risk being undone at the stroke of a pen by their successor.

Take President Clinton, for instance. After winning re-election in 1996, he and Secretary of State Madeleine Albright were 'intrigued by the possibility of better relations with Iran' from the earliest days of the second term (Albright, 2004, p. 319). As Ansari (2006, p. 176) puts it, 'with no electoral contest and in search of a foreign policy legacy, Iran appeared ready and full of Eastern promise'. Yet since the principal impediment to improved relations remained the congressional sanctions imposed during Clinton's first term, the administration's response to Khatami's call for a 'dialogue of civilisations' could extend little further than a series of diplomatic gestures, as sanctions relief remained politically radioactive during the 1998 midterms. By the time Clinton had sufficient political space to embark on a more substantive, it was already too late. The modest US response to Khatami's olive branch had weakened the influence of moderate voices in Tehran, with the result that Albright's otherwise momentous speech in March 2000, in which she announced a lifting of sanctions on critical Iranian exports, fell largely on deaf ears.

President Reagan offers another compelling example of the difficulty 'lame duck' presidents face in responding to geopolitical shifts as their time in office runs out. Amid a broader de-escalation of tensions with the Soviet Union, the conclusion of the Iran-Iraq War created favourable geopolitical conditions for a reset of relations with Tehran. Yet at the time of the ceasefire in August 1988, the Reagan administration was in its final months, with cabinet secretaries privately lamenting that 'Ronald Reagan has had the landing lights on and the flaps down for the last year' (Carlucci, 2001). As such, recalled James Baker (1996, p. 262), 'President Reagan decided that any serious reappraisal of Persian Gulf policy should be left to his successor'. In turn, the administration's interest in helping then-Vice President Bush become that successor introduced additional political disincentives to rapprochement. 'President [Reagan] was a conservative, and the country was going into an election year', Powell (1995, p. 374) noted, adding that, 'the administration was determined to hold on to its conservative base and hand it to the next Republican candidate'. Thus, while Reagan's instincts were pro-engagement – Powell (1995, p. 338) felt he 'would have gone for another hostage-freeing scheme at the drop of a Hawk missile' – his foreign policy team remained acutely aware of the need ensure that no controversial policy moves jeopardised Bush's chances. It is telling, in this context, that George Schultz rejected a recommendation by mid-level officials for a relaxation of economic sanctions in a 'tilt' toward Iran, aiming to restore a balance of power between Tehran and Baghdad. Upon receipt of the memorandum, the Secretary of State grew red in the face, marking it with a big 'NO' across the first page. 'This makes great geopolitical sense', said Schultz, 'but no political sense!' (in Khalilzad, 2016, pp. 69–70).

Conclusion

Today, the broader US commitment to the Middle East remains a subject of debate. Yet even allowing for the declining importance of the region to US interests, imminent abandonment seems unlikely, and any path out of the Middle East would still require constructive engagement with allies and adversaries. Whether or not Iran's foreign policy will still command the same level of attention as in the past, its political, regional and international repercussions will continue to impact on the different incumbents of the White House. As this article has demonstrated, the ability of successive administrations to embark on a new relationship with Iran has been powerfully constrained both by geopolitical pressures and the accompanying precedents and perceptions developed and hardened during a forty-year relationship that has tended towards hostility and misunderstanding. In turn, Washington's capacity to take advantage of moments of opportunity for a thaw has been hamstrung by domestic political pressures, which manifest in accordance with the dictates of the US electoral cycle. Meaningful attempts to engage Tehran have come only in the more permissive 'honeymoon' or 'lame duck' phases, but quickly return to a more confrontational stance as time runs out and political pressures come back to bite. For over four decades, US policy towards Iran has been developed with one eye on the domestic political calendar, oscillating between attempts at rapprochement and unremitting hostility.

To break the impasse, a favourable alignment of conditions at the international and domestic levels will be required. As this paper reveals, such moments of opportunity have been few and far between. For much of the past forty years, geopolitical and domestic political considerations have served to perpetuate the tense relationship between Washington and Tehran. In the rush to place sanctions on Iran during Clinton's first term, for instance, or in the 'emotional and political components' of the decision to contain Iran under Reagan, there is strong evidence of mutually reinforcing pressures to double down on the path of hostile competition. In these instances, the geopolitical and electoral incentives behind a tough posture towards Tehran were fundamentally aligned, overdetermining continued hostility.

At other times, favourable conditions on one level have been offset by obstacles at the other, leaving a record of false hopes and missed opportunities. Schultz's unwillingness to consider a relaxation of economic pressure after the Iran-Iraq War is a prime example of one such misalignment, yet there are others. George HW Bush's failure to reciprocate for Iran's cooperation during the Gulf War may be seen as a possible geopolitical opportunity dashed by the incumbent's growing preoccupation with electoral politics at home. Barack Obama's forlorn efforts to engage Tehran in 2009 illustrate the reverse scenario of favourable domestic conditions in the US meeting a cold reception overseas.

Obama's eventual success with the JCPOA was arguably the product of the most favourable alignment of conditions to date. Notably, this permissive context was shaped by electoral shifts not only in Washington in November 2012, which alleviated constraints on a safely re-elected Obama, but also in Tehran in June 2013, with the arrival of a new Iranian president more favourably inclined to deal with the United States. Indeed, this episode highlights how future research might extend the framework offered here by integrating analysis of the interplay between the domestic political calendars of both states. Though the parallel cannot be pushed too far, the electoral cycles of

the United States and Iran are both four years long and share common term limits, and as such generate a familiar sequencing of leadership turnover worthy of further study. These complexities are not within the scope of this paper, but the fate of the JCPOA serves to underline the difficulty of sustaining a partial rapprochement even without the Iranian dimension. Ultimately, absent an exogenous shock sufficient to both force a critical juncture at the geopolitical level and freeze the cyclical pattern of domestic constraints, it will be difficult for the current administration to finally throw out the 'carcass of dead policies' (Murray, 2010) and set the US on a new path in its relationship with Iran. For Iran and its leaders also, the baggage of past policies and domestic imperatives will similarly constrain options making a reset difficult, though not impossible.

Note

1. One exception is the Obama administration's back-channel talks in 2012, yet even here great effort was made to keep this initiative secret (see Parsi, 2017, pp. 169–173, 176).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

Louise Fawcett is Professor of International Relations and Wilfrid Knapp Fellow and Tutor in Politics at St Catherine's College, University of Oxford. Her research focuses on the Middle East and international relations of developing countries. Publications include *Iran and the Cold War: The Azerbaijan Crisis of 1946* (pbk 2009) and *The International Relations of the Middle East* (5th ed. 2019). Email: louise.fawcett@stcatz.ox.ac.uk.

Andrew Payne is the Hedley Bull Research Fellow in International Relations and a William Golding Junior Research Fellow at Brasenose College, University of Oxford. His recent publications include articles published in *International Security* and *Politics*, and he is currently working on a book manuscript exploring the impact of US electoral politics on presidential decision-making in war. Email: andrew.payne@politics.ox.ac.uk.

ORCID

Andrew Payne  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1936-8062>

References

- Adib-Moghaddam, A. (2007). *Iran in world politics*. Hurst.
- Ahmadian, H., & Mohseni, P. (2019). Iran's Syria strategy: The evolution of deterrence. *International Affairs*, 95(2), 341–364. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iyy271>
- Albright, M. with Bill Woodward. (2004). *Madam secretary: A memoir*. Pan Books.
- Allen-Abrahamian, B. (2017, June 20). 64 years later, CIA finally releases details of Iranian coup. *Foreign Policy*. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/06/20/64-years-later-cia-finally-releases-details-of-iranian-coup-iran-tehran-oil/>
- Alvandi, R. (2014). *Nixon, Kissinger and the Shah: The United States and Iran in the Cold War*. Oxford University Press.
- Amanat, A. (2017). *Iran: A modern history*. Yale University Press.

- Ansari, A. M. (2006). *Confronting Iran: The failure of American foreign policy and the roots of mistrust*. Hurst.
- Arjomand, A. (1988). *The turban for the crown: The Islamic revolution in Iran*. Oxford University Press.
- Armacost, M. H. (2015). *Ballots, bullets, and bargains: American foreign policy and presidential elections*. Columbia University Press.
- Asinovsky, D. (2018). The Soviet Union and the Iranian revolution. *Russia in Global Affairs*, 16(3), 190–208. DOI: [10.31278/1810-6374-2018-16-3-190-208](https://doi.org/10.31278/1810-6374-2018-16-3-190-208)
- Baker, J. A. with Thomas M DeFrank. (1996). *The politics of diplomacy: Revolution, war and peace, 1989–1992*. G P Putnam's Sons.
- Benjamin, D., & Simon, S. (2019). America's great Satan: The 40-year obsession with Iran. *Foreign Affairs*, 98(6), 56–66. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2019-10-15/americas-great-satan>
- Bill, J. A. (1988). *The eagle and the lion: The tragedy of American-Iranian relations*. Yale University Press.
- Bolton, J. (2020). *The room where it happened: A White House memoir*. Simon & Schuster.
- Brzezinski, Z. (1982, April 18). The failed mission. *New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/1982/04/18/magazine/the-failed-mission.html>
- Burns, W. J. (2009, January 24). A new strategy toward Iran, memorandum to Secretary Clinton. <https://carnegieendowment.org/pdf/back-channel/2009MemotoClinton1.pdf>
- Byman, D. L. & Pollack, K. M. (2001). Let us now praise great men: Bringing the statesman back in. *International Security*, 25(4), 107–146. <https://doi.org/10.1162/01622880151091916>.
- Capoccia, G., & Kelemen, D. R. (2007). The study of critical junctures: Theory, narrative, and counterfactuals in historical institutionalism. *World Politics*, 59(3), 341–369. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0043887100020852>
- Carlucci, F. (2001). Oral history interview, 28 August, Miller Center, University of Virginia.
- Carter, J. (1982). *Keeping faith: Memoirs of a president*. University of Arkansas Press.
- Chubin, S. (2012). *Iran and the Arab Spring: Ascendancy frustrated*. Gulf Research Center Gulf Papers.
- Cordesman, A. (2020). *Iran and the changing military balance in the Gulf: Net assessment indicators*. CSIS.
- Dalby, S. (1990). American security discourse: The persistence of geopolitics. *Political Geography Quarterly*, 9(2), 171–188. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0260-9827\(90\)90017-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/0260-9827(90)90017-5)
- Darwich, M., & Kaarbo, J. (2020). IR in the Middle East: Foreign policy analysis in theoretical approaches. *International Relations*, 34(2), 225–245. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0047117819870238>
- Digital National Security Archive (DNSA). (1980). 'Meeting on Iran', memorandum, 2 November, accession number IU00533.
- Digital National Security Archive (DNSA). (1981). 'Interagency group meeting on Iran', memorandum, 1 April, accession number IU00571.
- Digital National Security Archive (DNSA). (1983). 'Iran-Iraq War', memorandum, 27 October, accession number IU00672.
- Digital National Security Archive (DNSA). (1989). 'US policy toward the Persian Gulf', National Security Directive, 2 October, accession number IU00941.
- Eizenstat, S. E. (2020). *President Carter: the White House years*. Thomas Dunne Books. pbk ed.
- Fawcett, L. (2013). The Iraq War ten years on: Assessing the fallout. *International Affairs*, 89(2), 325–343. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12020>
- Fawcett, L. (2015). Iran and the regionalization of (in)security. *International Politics*, 52(5), 646–656. <https://doi.org/10.1057/ip.2015.21>
- Fawcett, L., & Jagtiani, S. L. (2022). Regional powers, global aspirations: India and Iran. *International Politics*, (forthcoming). <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-022-00374-z>.
- FRUS. (2020). *Foreign relations of the United States, 1977–1980, Volume XI, Part I, Iran: Hostage crisis, November 1979–September 1980*. United States Government Publishing Office.
- Gallup. (2021a). Iran. Retrieved February 27, 2021, from <https://news.gallup.com/poll/116236/iran.aspx>

- Gallup. (2021b). Americans' views of the United States' greatest enemy (trends). Retrieved February 27, 2021, from <https://news.gallup.com/poll/227906/americans-views-united-states-greatest-enemy-trends.aspx>
- Gates, R. (2000). Oral history interview, 23–24 July, Miller Center, University of Virginia.
- Gaubatz, K. T. (1999). *Elections and war: The electoral incentive in the democratic politics of war and peace*. Stanford University Press.
- Haas, M. L. (2012). *The clash of ideologies: Middle Eastern politics and American security*. Oxford University Press.
- Heradstveit, D., & Bonham, G. M. (2007). What the axis of evil metaphor did to Iran. *The Middle East Journal*, 61(3), 421–440. <https://doi.org/10.3751/61.3.12>
- Hurst, S. (2016). The Iranian nuclear negotiations as a two-level game: The importance of domestic politics. *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, 27(3), 545–567. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592296.2016.1196075>
- Johnstone, A., & Priest, A. (Eds.). (2017). *US presidential elections and foreign policy: Candidates, campaigns, and global politics from FDR to Bill Clinton*. University Press of Kentucky.
- Jordan, H. (1982). *Crisis: The last year of the Carter presidency*. GM Putnam's Sons.
- Juneau, T. (2015). *Squandered opportunity: Neoclassical realism and Iran's foreign policy*. Stanford University Press.
- Kaarbo, J. (2015). A foreign policy analysis perspective on the domestic politics turn in IR theory. *International Studies Review*, 17(2), 189–216. <https://doi.org/10.1111/misr.12213>
- Kadkhodae, E., & Tari, Z. G. (2019). Otherising Iran in American political discourse: Case study of a post-JCPOA senate hearing on Iran sanctions. *Third World Quarterly*, 40(1), 109–128. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2018.1513786>
- Kahn, C. (2020, January 7). Americans increasingly critical of Trump's record on Iran, most expect war: Reuters/Ipsos poll. *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-iran-poll/americans-increasingly-critical-of-trumps-record-on-iran-most-expect-war-reuters-ipsos-poll-idUSKBN1Z62KF>
- Kaufmann, C. (2004). Threat inflation and the failure of the marketplace of ideas: The selling of the Iraq War. *International Security*, 29(1), 5–48. <https://doi.org/10.1162/0162288041762940>
- Kaye, D. D., & Efron, S. (2020). Israel's evolving Iran policy. *Survival*, 62(4), 7–30. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2020.1792095>
- Khalilzad, Z. (2016). *The envoy: From Kabul to the White House, my journey through a turbulent world*. St. Martin's Press.
- Mackinder, H. J. (1904). The geographical pivot of history. *The Geographical Journal*, 23(4), 421–437. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1775498>
- Maloney, S. (2019). 1979: Iran and America. *Brookings*. <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/1979-iran-and-america/>
- Mearsheimer, J. J., & Walt, S. M. (2007). *The Israel lobby and US foreign policy*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Murray, D. (2010). The carcass of dead policies: Lessons for Obama in dealing with Iran. *Contemporary Politics*, 16(2), 209–223. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569771003783992>
- Nincic, M. (1990). US Soviet policy and the electoral connection. *World Politics*, 42(3), 370–396. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2010416>
- Obama, B. (2020). *A promised land*. Crown.
- Parsi, T. (2007). *Treacherous alliance: The secret dealings of Israel, Iran, and the United States*. Yale University Press.
- Parsi, T. (2012). *A single roll of the dice: Obama's diplomacy with Iran*. Yale University Press.
- Parsi, T. (2017). *Losing an enemy: Obama, Iran, and the triumph of diplomacy*. Yale University Press.
- Payne, A. (2020). Presidents, politics, and military strategy: Electoral constraints during the Iraq War. *International Security*, 44(3), 163–203. https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00371
- Pierson, P. (2004). *Politics in time*. Princeton University Press.
- Pollack, K. M. (2004). *The Persian puzzle: The conflict between Iran and America*. Random House.
- Pompeo, M. R. (2020, October 9). Secretary Michael R Pompeo with Greg Kelly of Greg Kelly reports on Newsmax TV. <https://2017-2021.state.gov/secretary-michael-r-pompeo-with-greg-kelly-of-greg-kelly-reports-on-newsmax-tv/index.html>

- Potter, P. B. (2016). Lame-duck foreign policy. *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 46(4), 849–867. <https://doi.org/10.1111/psq.12322>
- Powell, C. with Joseph E Persico (1995). *My American journey*. Random House.
- Putnam, R. D. (1988). Diplomacy and domestic politics: The logic of two-level games. *International Organization*, 42(3), 427–460. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818300027697>
- Quandt, W. B. (1986a). The electoral cycle and the conduct of foreign policy. *Political Science Quarterly*, 101(5), 825–837. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2150980>
- Quandt, W. B. (1986b). *Camp David: Peacemaking and politics*. Brookings.
- Ramazani, R. K. (1988). The shifting premise of Iran's foreign policy: Towards a democratic peace? *Middle East Journal*, 52(2), 177–187. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4329184>
- Sick, G. (1985). *All fall down: America's tragic encounter with Iran*. Random House.
- Sick, G. (1991). *October surprise: America's hostages in Iran and the election of Ronald Reagan*. Random House.
- Solomon, J. (2016). *The Iran Wars: Spy games, bank battles, and the secret deals that reshaped the Middle East*. Random House.
- Tabatabai, A. (2020). *No conquest, no defeat. Iran's national security strategy*. Oxford University Press.
- Takeyh, R. (2008). Iran's new Iraq. *The Middle East Journal*, 62(1), 13–30. <https://doi.org/10.3751/62.1.11>
- Takeyh, R. (2009). *Guardians of the revolution: Iran and the world in the age of the Ayatollahs*. Oxford University Press.
- Vatanka, A. (2021). *The battle of the ayatollahs in Iran: The United States, foreign policy, and political rivalry since 1979*. I.B. Tauris.
- Walt, S. M. (1987). *The origins of alliances*. Cornell University Press.
- Waltz, K. N. (1959). *Man, the state, and war: A theoretical analysis*. Columbia University Press.
- Wehrey, F. M. (2014). *Sectarian politics in the Gulf: From the Iraq War to the Arab uprisings*. Columbia University Press.
- Woodward, B. (2020). *Rage*. Simon & Schuster.