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Communicative interaction and foreign policy change: re-evaluating the Carter administration's decision-making process during the iranian revolution

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Introduction

The last few years have been prolific in catalyzing the revolutionary sway in the Middle East. Revolutions are particularly trying for foreign policy decision-makers. They resemble “creeping crises”, i.e., they are slower to develop into more traditionally perceived critical events (Rosenthal and Kouzmin 1997). As a result, revolutions are difficult to understand and their development is hard to forecast, making foreign policy decision-making more complicated than usual.

The Carter Administration testifies to this complexity. Between 1978 and 1979 the Administration faced the first Islamic Revolution in the Middle East. American decision-makers tried industriously to develop and implement a policy to deal with the situation and safeguard US regional interests. However, the Iranian Revolution's dynamic character led the Administration to change its policy several times as events regularly outstripped the American decision-making process.

There are many studies on the US policy during the Iranian Revolution which bear witness to the continuous changes in the Carter Administration's policy throughout the revolution (Emery 2013; Ganji 2006; Moens 1991). Nevertheless, an adequate explanation of the change process has eluded most scholarly accounts. In particular, the causal mechanisms driving policy change are generally undisclosed. This is not surprising since research on foreign policy tends to emphasize stability over change. Change is preferentially understood as an episodic phenomenon in foreign policy. When it does occur it is viewed as the result of a rationally planned process.

However, the basic assumptions underlying conventional accounts of change have come under considerable criticism. The concept of emergent change has increasingly been gaining ground in several areas of scholarly research, particularly Organizational Development and Social Psychology.¹ The emergent approach views change as a continuous process of experimentation and adaptation in which

1. Emergent change is also referred to as “continuous change” in the thematic literature. Accordingly, throughout the remainder of the present article I will use the terms “continuous change” and “emergent change” interchangeably.

organizations seek to adapt to the dictates and requirements of their environment. This presumes that organizations, such as national governments, operate in a highly dynamic and unpredictable international environment.

The central mechanism underlying continuous change is the ongoing communicative interactions in which a decision-making group or organization is involved. Communication allows groups and organizations to continuously recreate shared meanings and beliefs. The more individuals communicate, the greater the possibility that new representations and narratives are constructed since opportunities for discussing new problem representations and policy options arise.

The field of Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) has been slow to incorporate this insight from organizational theories. In an attempt to link these fields of knowledge, the current article adopts the theoretical insight of the emergent change to re-evaluate the Carter Administration's foreign policy decision-making process during the Iranian Revolution. I argue that the Carter Administration's policy during the Iranian Revolution is best understood by applying an emergent change approach. More precisely, I claim that the Administration's policy resulted from the cumulative and continuous adaptations and adjustments resulting from the sustained interaction processes between multiple decision-makers and foreign policy actors.

The following section begins with a brief analysis of the dynamics involved in conventional accounts of foreign policy change, namely punctuated equilibrium and planned change. Subsequently, an alternative approach to understanding foreign policy change based on the concept of emergent change is presented. In addition, communicative interaction is identified as the mechanism of change and its basic causal process is presented. Finally, by applying process tracing, I use an emergent change approach to identify the communicative interaction processes shaping the Carter Administration's policy throughout the Iranian Revolution.

Conventional approaches to foreign policy change

Academic research has traditionally concentrated on political stability and inertia rather than on policy dynamics. FPA does not differ in this regard (Renshon 2008; Rosati 2005). One of the main impediments to extending the research agenda to include change is that FPA has dedicated very little theoretical effort to explaining foreign policy dynamics in comparison to other issues and phenomena. When change has been considered, it has traditionally been done through rational accounts. From this perspective, it is assessed through a process-oriented viewpoint highlighting the different policy stages at different moments in time. By applying stage-based approaches to change, such as punctuated equilibrium and planned change, conventional research reinforces the notion of stability as the norm (Tsoukas and Chia 2002).

Punctuated equilibrium epitomizes discontinuous episodic change. The general postulate is that organizational activities evolve through reasonably long

periods of stability (i.e., equilibrium) that are interrupted by short and abrupt periods of radical, or revolutionary, change. These revolutionary periods interrupt the established patterns of activity and subsequently set up the foundations of a period of renewed equilibrium (Rosati 1994; Schraeder 1994). This perspective assumes that organizations, such as governments, establish protracted and stable policies which are episodically disrupted by episodes of change which help correct deviancies and return organizational policies to a period of renewed stability (Marshak 2002; Weick and Quinn 1999).

Resistance to change is a fundamental dynamic underlying punctuated equilibrium since it is a critical factor in explaining revolutionary transformation as the primary means by which political organizations can achieve change (Romanelli and Tushman 1994). Several factors have been presented to justify the resistance of policy to change. Kjell Goldmann (1983) has identified an assortment of different stabilizers that hinder policy change: administrative (i.e., bureaucratic) stabilizers; political stabilizers; cognitive stabilizers; and international stabilizers.

When change does occur, is usually portrayed as episodic, and abrupt (Rosati 1994; Weick and Quinn 1999). It essentially results from a serious disparity between planned objectives and actual outcomes. Resistance to change is thus only surmounted through crises or critical events which reveal the inadequacy of existing policies (Hermann 1990). This failure sets-off a process for replacing the existing policy and leading to a wholesale transformation of the existing state of affairs.

The basic postulates of punctuated equilibrium fit perfectly with the planned change approach to foreign policy change. In fact, planned change is the traditional approach to organizational development and has dominated research agendas for over half a century (Burnes 2004). From this perspective, the change process is assumed to be orderly since developments are required to be predicted, steered, and controlled (Boonstra and de Caluwé 2007).

Planned change is accomplished by breaking down the change process into several discrete stages. Kurt Lewin's three stages of planned change – unfreeze, move (i.e., change), refreeze – continue to be the standard for most of the research involving change in individual and collective behavior (Weick 2000; Weick and Quinn 1999).

The unfreezing stage involves creating the motivation needed to proceed with a change in the current state of affairs. According to this rationale, resistance to change is only overcome through the occasioning of crises or critical events. Once the structures, beliefs, and politics of society, the state, and individuals are called into question, the change (i.e., move) stage can begin. New policy options must be assessed since it is considered that the “function of policy is problem-solving” (Goertz 2003, 10). Therefore, it is inherent that the majority of the accounts of foreign policy change assume that foreign policy change is the result of a planned, value-maximizing political enterprise. Accordingly, change is regarded as something

which is intentional and susceptible to a rational analysis and design, i.e., where requirements and objectives are decipherable, strategies are identifiable, and the process is controllable (c.f., Allison and Zelikow 1999; Yetiv 2004).

Finally the refreeze stage creates a renewed equilibrium in which policies are once again fixed. This is an essential characteristic of the change process since it is essential that policy becomes safeguarded from backsliding. Naturally, the refreezing stage implies not only that a change has occurred in foreign policy, but, above all, that a transformation has occurred in decision-making group and organizational norms and routines.

Re-thinking foreign policy change

In recent years, research carried out in several scientific disciplines has focused considerably on change and has questioned many conventional assumptions. In particular, the traditional perspectives of episodic and planned change have come under question.

The critics of episodic and planned change share two common assumptions (Burnes 2004). To begin with, they accept that change is an emergent and continuous process rather than sporadic, linear, pre-planned procedure with a well-defined beginning and endpoint. Additionally, they believe that organizations, such as governments, are open systems which affect and are affected by the environment and thus are not likely to be rationally managed.

Rather than focusing on change as a sporadic process separated into several distinct stages, the emergent approach acknowledges change as the norm. By approaching change as a continuous phenomenon in groups and organizations we can overcome many of the impediments inherent in punctuated equilibrium's stage-based approach to change. Standard "unfreeze, change, refreeze" models simply do not appreciate the subtle complexities of change, such as its fluid, pervasive, unrestricted, and indivisible nature. By attempting to understand change through a sequence of distinct stages we run the risk of obfuscating complex dynamics involved in foreign policy decision-making. In applying this approach to FPA, we assume that the policies of governmental organizations are in a constant state of change.²

The view of continuous change subscribed to in the present article advocates the performative nature of change. In this case, change is distinguished by taking place in a continuous, open-ended process of organizational adaptation to changing circumstances and environments. Rather than being planned and guided, change results from political improvisation, adaptation, and learning. It is

2. Continuous should not be confused with incremental change. As several researchers have suggested, incremental change describes adjustments in particular departments, operations, or policies (Burnes 2004). Even punctuated equilibrium theory concedes that an organization can register incremental change in policies during periods of stability. Incrementalism results from erratic adjustments to environmental or organizational constraints. Nevertheless, despite a random adjustment, the organizational policies remain largely unaltered. Continuous change for its part is concerned with wholesale organizational and political change. It is focused on changes that revamp existing policies as we know them.

founded on recurrent interactions between the members of a political body who develop ongoing responses to the challenges encountered:

Each variation of a given form is not an abrupt or discrete event, neither is it, by itself, discontinuous. Rather, through a series of ongoing and situated accommodations, adaptations, and alterations (that draw on previous variations and mediate future ones), sufficient modifications may be enacted over time that fundamental changes are achieved. There is no deliberate orchestration of change here, no technological inevitability, no dramatic discontinuity, just recurrent and reciprocal variations in practice over time. Each shift in practice creates the conditions for further breakdowns, unanticipated outcomes, and innovations, which in their turn are responded to with more variations. And such variations are ongoing; there is no beginning or end point in this change process. (Orlikowski 1996, 66)

This conceptualization of change argues that change is an ongoing, improvising enterprise which produces observable and prominent transformations in groups and organizations' actions and behaviors through adjustments, adaptations, and revisions of their existing representations and practices. Continuous change generally takes place without being noticed since "small alterations are lumped together as noise in otherwise uneventful inertia and because small changes are neither heroic nor plausible ways to make strategy" (Weick 2009, 238-239). Nevertheless, proponents of continuous the change approach argue that continuous change can lead to the same outcomes, but without the dramatic flair of revolutionary episodic change models such as punctuated equilibrium. According to this view, small continuous changes are amplified into something greater than initially intended and can, over time, lead to radical change (Plowman et al. 2007; Weick 2009).

Communicative interaction as a mechanism of change

I argue that the communicative interaction processes involved in foreign policy decision-making are the mechanisms catalyzing foreign policy change. Rather than focusing on the relationships between variables, a mechanism-centered approach focuses on the actors, particularly on their relationships, and the intentional and unintentional results of their actions (Hedström 2008). The underlying rationale is thus "to know not only whether X causes Y but also how it does so" (Gerring 2010, 1502).

From this perspective, language and communication are the heart of change. More precisely, it is through communication within and between groups that policy problems and options are recreated and transformed. This naturally assumes that communication is the essential process in creating a groups "reality" (Moscovici 1988; 2000). Therefore, the current article assumes that reality is socially constructed and that language is a vital instrument for constructing reality since it is through the combination of words, phrases, sentences, and other linguistic symbols that we describe, report, explain, and interpret all types of situations and affairs (Gergen et al. 2001; Heracleous and Barrett 2001; Plowman et al. 2007).

Therefore, language continuously defines and confines our ability to understand. In other words, “Communication, then, is not just a conduit for transferring information from one person to another, rather it is the very process by which organizing comes to acquire consensual meaning” (Barret et al., 1995: 354).

Thus, interaction is an intrinsic condition of the decision-making process, particularly in the information processing stage. In this sense, governmental organizations should be understood as networks of communication (Ford 1999). They do not have one monolithic communicative interaction. On the contrary, governments have numerous simultaneously sequential interactions all of which contribute to the construction of its reality.

Ford and Ford (1995; 2003) identify four different combinations of communicative acts, corresponding to four different types of communicative interactions, involved in the change process: 1) initiative communication; 2) communication for understanding; 3) communication for performance; and 4) communication for closure.³

Accordingly, initiative communication is usually prompted by the recognition of an incongruity or problem (Huber et al. 1993; Louis and Sutton 1991). As Moreland and Levine (1992) have pointed out, the identification of a problem is important because it initiates the process of group problem solving. The identification of a problem or incongruent situation must be communicated in order to initiate the change process. In the communication for understanding phase, decision-makers discuss the need for transforming the situation and initiate an interaction process in order to establish the actions necessary to solve the problem or incongruence detected (Ford and Ford 1995). Ultimately, communication for understanding is the fundamental dynamic involved in defining the problem representation, i.e., the definition of the situation. The construction of problem representation is critical for future action, for it has repercussions on “which kinds of evidence bear on the problem, which solutions are considered effective and feasible, who participates in the decision process, how policies are implemented, and by which criteria policies are assessed” (Weiss 1989, 97-98).

However, understanding does not imply action, so a catalyst is needed to move the change process forward. Communication for performance usually generates requests and promises that will produce the actions that will allegedly satisfy the desired objectives. As the discussions generate a new language for defining the situation, it correspondingly creates a new language for action. In other words, because communicative interactions transform existing assumptions and beliefs, the need for new actions and policies is also created (Barrett et al. 1995). Communicative interaction allows for group members to share their expectations and objectives in order work out the course of action that best satisfies the group or organizations’ requirements.

3. I describe the different dynamics involved in the communicative interaction process by breaking down the change process into discrete stages only for the purpose of analytical systematization and conceptual clarity.

Finally, the communication for closure stage involves placing in “perspective all that has happened and allow participants to complete their relationship with the change effort” (Ford and Ford 1995, 55). However, as suggested above, the interaction process is extremely dynamic. Therefore, closure is a temporary phenomenon at best. Tsoukas and Chia (2002) identify two reasons for the ephemeral nature of the closure process. The first is due to the organization and group's interaction with the outside world. Different and contradicting information can always be found outside our group which can once more call into question our problem representations. The second reason derives from the capability that humans have to interact with their own thoughts. An individual's reflexive nature is also a potential catalyst for further change. From this point of view individuals and groups are “conceived as webs of beliefs and habits of action that keep reweaving (and thus altering) as they try to coherently accommodate new experiences, which come from new interactions over time” (Tsoukas and Chia 2002, 575).

Furthermore, we must also consider the interaction with actors outside the organization. Once we have acted in the political environment, the system will react, creating feedback. In keeping with Sterman (2001), the effects of our political choices will define the political situations we must face in the future. In addition, our policy choices also produce unanticipated outcomes. For instance, “Other agents, seeking to achieve their goals, react to restore the balance we have upset” (Sterman 2001, 13), leading to a return to the interaction process in order to reappraise the situation.⁴

The communicative interactions in the Carter Administration's decision-making process

When Carter arrived in Washington, the idea of entrusting Iran with the security of the Middle East was deeply entrenched in the American bureaucracy (Sick 1985). The confidence in the Iranian policy was so persistent that the Carter Administration did not subject the existing policy to any major interagency review during his initial six months in Office. In fact, official documents and reports emphasized the need to strengthen the relationship (Njølstad 1995). This resulted from the shared belief within the Administration that the Shah was a valuable asset in helping the US face many of its regional and global challenges. As Vance (1983, 317) argued, “there was considerable harmony between the shah's policies and our regional interests”. The Shah contributed to this rapport by exploiting many of the Administration's uncertainties and concerns. For instance, during his

4. The communicative interaction process presented is a theoretical ideal. I acknowledge that besides these intrinsic dynamics, other factors also influence the change process. For instance, the organizational structure and environment is important for the change process since it can determine several stages of interaction. Also, there are several variables in the group's structure effecting communicative interactions such as composition, size, and power distribution. What's more, group dynamics are particularly relevant in determining the change process. Notwithstanding these numerous determinants, the communication process can also breakdown, hindering the course of change. However, for theoretical parsimony, I have not delved into these issues with greater depth.

visit to Washington in November 1977, the Shah accentuated the threat of the increasing Soviet involvement in the Third World, principally in the Middle East. In his interaction with Carter he was particularly emphatic in stressing that the Soviets might try to control the Middle East's oil resources (Carter, 1982). Therefore, the Shah argued in favor of maintaining a stable, independent, non-communist Iran which had could defend against potential Soviet aggressiveness and continue to guarantee regional stability (Njølstad 2005).

Despite the Shah's protestations about the mounting Soviet threat, it was the increasing internal problems that ultimately led to the fall of the Pahlavi regime. Domestic opposition to the regime had been growing over the years. As economic and social conditions worsened in Iran, protests broke out throughout the country in early-1978 (Bill 1988). The demonstrations erupted into violence as the regime tried to impose order and series of riots followed.

Nevertheless, the protests were at first met with skepticism within the Administration. Official reports and intelligence estimates had consistently underlined the stability of the Pahlavi regime (Brzezinski 1983; Vance 1983). In fact, the intelligence community kept providing the Administration with reassuring analyses regarding the Shah's ability to deal with the protests. As late as 27 October, Ambassador Sullivan reported that "the shah is the unique element which can, on the one hand, restrain the military and on the other hand lead the controlled transition" (reproduced in Brzezinski 1983, 359). Although there was some concern over the long-term repercussions of the unrest, the majority of the decision-makers in the Carter Administration were "reassured by the judgment of the ambassador, the experts in the State Department, the CIA and other agencies and foreign governments that even though he might be required to make political compromises that would dilute his power, the shah was not in serious danger" (Vance 1983, 325-326).

All the same, there was growing apprehension within the National Security Council (NSC). Throughout 1978 Gary Sick warned Brzezinski that tensions were mounting in Iran and that they would not be easy to mollify. Brzezinski revealed some concern due to his staff members' admonition and met with the Iranian Ambassador, Ardeshir Zahedi, in August to try to evaluate the situation in Iran. Zahedi acknowledged that the regime did face several problems, particularly its disconnect with the Iranian people. In the Ambassador's opinion, the Shah needed to make major changes in his policies and demonstrate greater leadership.

In September the situation in Iran deteriorated significantly after the riots in Tehran's Jaleh Square. At this time, reports began arriving in Washington that the Shah was afflicted by the ineffectiveness of his actions and was uncertain as to how to restore order to the country (Vance 1983). According to Bill (1988, 237), the Shah "repeatedly told American ambassador William Sullivan that the events of 1953 and 1963 could not be repeated and that it was impossible this time to quell the massive rebellion by military force alone". In light of this predicament,

President Carter called the Shah on 10 September, following the urgent appeals from Vance and Christopher, and reassured him of America's support.

Tentative interactions to understand the Iranian Revolution

The Administration's involvement with other important international issues – e.g., Egyptian-Israeli peace process, normalization with China, and SALT negotiations – postponed a comprehensive interagency debate on the situation in Iran. In fact, the State Department's first comprehensive analysis of the situation in Iran was only produced on 24 October (Brzezinski 1983; Sick 1985). The analysis revealed that the numerous statements and acts of US support in favor of the Shah had failed to have any significant effect. The situation was considered grave and it was predicted that if the Shah did not establish an effective government, military intervention was almost certain to follow. Nevertheless, the possibility of a military government was rejected outright by the State Department. As a result, the report proposed three complementary courses of action (Sick 1985): 1) continue supporting the Shah in the transition to a more comprehensive and stable government; 2) support the Shah's liberalization project; and 3) unwavering opposition to a military government. The study also contemplated the possibility of the US initiating contacts with opposition forces, namely Khomeini.

With the intent of initiating a broad discussion on the policy options available to the Administration, the State Department sent its report to Ambassador Sullivan and the NSC for comments. Sullivan agreed with most of the recommendations, although he assertively rejected increasing contacts with opposition figures, particularly Khomeini. For the Ambassador, the US was destined to work with the Shah (Moens 1991). In addition, Sullivan informed that there was neither need for more public statements by the President nor high-level visits to Iran (Brzezinski 1983). In contrast, the NSC still believed that the Shah needed to be encouraged to act more assertively and this required greater demonstrations of public support on the part of the US (Brzezinski 1983; Sick 1985). This interaction process was, however, short-lived. While the State Department's assessment intended to spark a broad discussion regarding the Iranian predicament, the rebuttal coming from the NSC and the American officials in Tehran dampened the debate and led the State Department to shelve the report before the President could evaluate it.

Sullivan's persistent interactions with the White House eventually contributed to jump-start the decision-making process. In particular, on 2 November, Sullivan submitted a cable reporting the Shah informed him that the National Front demanded a general referendum on the issue of the monarchy in order to cooperate (Brzezinski 1983; Sick 1985). The Shah also let him know that he would never accept a referendum, and that pressure was mounting for him to establish a military government. From the discussion it was agreed that the Emami government was incapable of dealing with the situation and an attempt to create a coalition government should be made. If this initiative failed, it was concluded that the

Shah would attempt to form a neutral government with the exclusive purpose of holding elections (Sick 1985).

As a result, the first formal high-level review of the situation in Iran finally occurred during the 2 November. Brzezinski (1983) recommended that a message be sent to Sullivan instructing him to express the President's unwavering support for the Shah and, while not dictating which policy the Shah should follow, emphasize the need for decisive action in order to restore order in Iran. In addition, Brzezinski argued that the US should not persist in requesting the Shah to implement any more liberalization measures and that a coalition government would not solve the Shah's problems. In Warren Christopher's view, the US should reaffirm its support for the Shah, albeit he should continue to pursue political reforms and eventually try to form a coalition government under his leadership (Moens 1991). Admiral Turner also alerted to the hazards involved in implementing a military government, while Brown suggested that if the option was for a military government the US should persuade the Shah to maintain his leadership (Sick 1985).

During the meeting, Brzezinski spoke to the President who authorized that a message of support be sent to the Shah. While there was some contention as to the issues pertaining to political reform and the military involvement in the future government, there was a general agreement in conveying a strong message of support for the Shah, whilst emphasizing that it was the Shah's responsibility to choose the best course of action. The following day Brzezinski (1983) spoke directly to the Shah underlining America's unconditional support for him and sent a message to Sullivan instructing him to reaffirm US support for the Shah regardless of his option on the form of the future government.

The message's lack of a definitive policy recommendation is revealing of the existing difference of opinions within the Administration. Brzezinski and the NSC argued against any measures that would further weaken the Shah's authority. Brzezinski's (1983) recommendations resulted from his belief that revolutions could be suppressed. Therefore, he was convinced that a military solution was the only feasible alternative for restoring order in Iran. The State Department for its part believed that a military government would only exacerbate the crisis in Iran. While increasingly skeptic as to the Shah's capability to deal with the situation, he was still considered a key-player in resolving the predicament. And, at this point, the President still believed it was possible for the Shah to salvage the situation and thus did not want him to abdicate (Carter 1982).

The Shah opted for a hybrid solution. After especially violent demonstrations in Tehran, the Shah appointed the Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces, General Reza Azhari, as Prime Minister on 6 November. Despite the military leadership, the new government was composed predominantly by civilians. The foreign policy team met again on 6 November to discuss the situation in Iran. However, little progress was made. According to Brzezinski (1983), the meeting was convened so the State Department could regain control over the policy-making process. There was no comprehensive discussion on the long-term strategy for Iran.

Multiple interactions in the midst of the political quagmire

The interaction process in the White House received an unexpected impetus on 09 November, when Ambassador Sullivan cabled a memo titled "Thinking the Unthinkable" (Brzezinski 1983; Vance 1983). Sullivan suggested that Administration had to begin contemplating options which previously did not seem relevant. The Shah was, in his assessment, in an extremely fragile position and had little if any backing in Iran (Sick 1985). The key to the revolutionary situation lay with the military and the clerics. The issue was how to balance the different interests between these two groups. Since both these groups were strongly anti-communist and anti-Soviet and thanks to the intense economic and military ties between Iran and the West, Sullivan believed that the Iranian military could survive, whilst the clerics would accommodate the new military leadership and find them useful for maintaining law and order throughout the country after the revolution. The future US relationship would be less intimate with the new regime, but, according to Sullivan, it could still be satisfactory. The Ambassador stated that, while the current American policy of supporting the Shah and the military was the only secure policy available at the moment, "if it should fail and if the Shah should abdicate, we need to think the unthinkable at this time in order to give our thought some precision should the unthinkable contingency arise" (quoted in Sick 1985, 83).

As the situation worsened, the State Department began analyzing alternative courses of action to deal with the chaotic state of affairs. The possibility of accommodating to a post-Shah regime was gaining enthusiasts, particularly in the State Department (Vance 1983). Brzezinski (1983), for his part, sought to reinforce the Shah's power and placate any additional measures which could undermine his existing authority. Moreover, while the interagency debate continued dealing with the Iranian revolution, Brzezinski also kept pressing Carter on the need to face the growing international challenges, particularly those posed by the Soviet Union. The events in Africa had colored Brzezinski's mental maps of the Middle East and hardened his attitude towards the Soviets. As a result, on 2 December, Brzezinski alerted Carter to the imminent threat of a major political destabilization of a large part of the Third World. According to the National Security Advisor, an "arc of crisis" had emerged which could have serious consequences for US international security interests (Brzezinski to Carter 02/12/1978).

In order to help assess the options and develop a policy for Iran, the President asked former Undersecretary of State George Ball to develop a comprehensive analysis of the situation and provide recommendations for action. The conclusions of the Ball Report were discussed in a meeting held on 13 December. In accordance with Ball, the Shah was finished unless he immediately handed power over to a civilian Council of Notables which would rule until elections could be held in the following year (Bill 1988; Sick 1985). Ball also argued against the use on any military force to help the Shah consolidate his position and recommended

that the US encourage the Shah to publicly declare that he would hand over power to a civilian government, while he would remain merely as head of the armed forces (Vance 1983).

Ball's recommendations were well received by Vance and the State Department. However, Brzezinski and Brown were apprehensive about giving the Shah such detailed instructions (Vance, 1983). Above all, Brzezinski was bothered by the fact that Ball proposed transferring power in the midst of a crisis. The idea of abruptly reassigning power in a country with no democratic tradition was alarming for Brzezinski (1983) who favored a military government. Carter decided to consult the Shah once more. However, by now, most senior foreign policy officials acknowledged "that we had passed the point of unreservedly supporting the shah, and he [Carter] was beginning to think in terms of advising him to compromise" (Vance 1983, 331).

Sullivan reported back the following day on his conversation with the Shah (Vance 1983). The Shah was now considering three options: 1) continue endeavors to form a civilian coalition government; 2) yield to the demands of the opposition by leaving Iran after appointing a regency council; or 3) form a military junta that would apply an iron fist policy that would try to forcefully suppress the uprisings.

In view of these options, the differences within the Administration widened. Brzezinski (1983) had gradually come to view a military government without the Shah as the only viable option. While not ruling out a military government altogether, Vance (1983) did not believe that the US should be responsible for such a decision. Above all, the Secretary of State, backed by Mondale and Christopher, was extremely concerned that the use of the iron fist option could cause large-scale bloodshed and possibly civil war. As the debate intensified, on 26 December the Shah explicitly asked Sullivan what the US wanted him to do (Brzezinski 1983). This unequivocal inquiry led to a meeting on 28 December in which Brzezinski, with the help of Brown and Turner, was able to persuade the President to approve a message to the Shah reinforcing the preference for a moderate civilian government, but emphasizing that "if there is uncertainty either about the underlying orientation of such a government or its capacity to govern or if the Army is in danger of becoming more fragmented, then the Shah should choose without delay a firm military government which would end disorder, violence, and bloodshed" (reproduced in Brzezinski 1983, 375).

Yet, while the Administration discussed its policy options, on 2 January, 1979, the Shah decided to appoint Shapour Bakhtiar as Prime Minister in an attempt to try to accommodate the opposition. The new Prime Minister requested that the Shah leave Iran. The Shah admitted to leaving, but did not indicate any precise date. In a meeting held on 3 January, the Administration finally acceded to the idea of the Shah's departure and instructed Sullivan to stress the need for unity amongst the military leaders (Brzezinski 1983; Sick 1985; Vance 1983). In order

to assist the military in this endeavor, the Administration agreed to send General Robert Huyser to Tehran to work directly with them to support the Bakhtiar government, assure military unity, and help restore order in case the government collapsed and civil disorder erupted (Sick 1985). However, Huyser's dispatch to Tehran created an additional (and at times conflicting) information channel directly to the White House.

Meanwhile, Sullivan informed the Administration that Iranian military leaders were increasingly wary of the Shah and had requested that the US initiate contacts with Khomeini in order to persuade him to give the Bakhtiar government a chance to restore order to the country (Vance 1983). On 7 January, Vance recommended that the US try to open a direct line of contact with Khomeini to Carter. Carter rejected the proposal on the grounds that it might signal that the US was circumventing the constitutional process by reaching out to Khomeini. As an alternative, after a lengthy discussion on 10 January the Administration decided to ask the French government to try to sway Khomeini to the idea of allowing Bakhtiar some political maneuverability. In the meantime, instructions were sent to Sullivan and Huyser to encourage the military to support Bakhtiar, to persuade the Shah to leave Iran without delay, and to continue planning for a military government in case the civilian government failed (Vance 1983).

As the efforts for propping up the Bakhtiar regime continued, Brzezinski pushed the coup option. In a conversation with Carter in early January, Brzezinski (1983) openly recommended that the military should assume power in Iran. He underlined this perspective in his messages to Huyser and to the Iranian military leaders. Notwithstanding Brzezinski's endeavor, the Iranian military failed to take the initiative. In his report to Brzezinski and Brown on 15 January, Huyser clarified that plans for a military coup were still in an embryonic stage and the military hardly had the capabilities needed for successfully pulling it off (Brzezinski 1983). As an alternative, Huyser was encouraging Iranian military leaders to open lines of communication with religious leaders, particularly those close to Khomeini (Brzezinski 1983; Sick 1985). Nevertheless, Brzezinski continued to stress the need to maintain the military option on the table.

Yet, even as military options were still being considered by US officials, direct contacts were established with Khomeini's associates in Paris. More precisely, on 15 January the political counselor at the US embassy in Paris, Warren Zimmerman, met with Ibrahim Yazdi to exchange views on the volatile situation in Iran (Sick 1985). Yazdi informed his counterpart that a Revolutionary Council was already preparing a transitional government in Iran. He also exhibited concern regarding the information regarding a potential military coup in the immediate future. In this sense, and on behalf of Khomeini, he insisted that the US do everything possible to avoid such an initiative.

As recommendations issued forth from the different foreign policy actors in Washington, on 22 January, Sullivan and Huyser made a joint-request for a

re-examination of US policy (Vance 1983). According to the American officials in Tehran, the situation in Iran was chaotic and the two main anti-Communist forces – i.e., the military and the clerics - were on a collision course. Huyser requested authorization to inform the military that the US no longer supported a coup and, should the Bakhtiar government fail, the military should try to establish a working relationship with Khomeini. After an intense debate pinning Vance against Brzezinski and Brown, on 23 January, the President decided to instruct Huyser and Sullivan to obtain Bakhtiar's and the military's agreement to a US overture to Khomeini to form a broad government coalition including all the parties (Vance 1983).

After Bakhtiar and the military agreed, the US used the Zimmerman-Yazdi channel in Paris to make the offer to Khomeini. Khomeini responded informing the Americans that if Bakhtiar or the military posed any opposition to him this would harm US interests in Iran. However, if there was no interference on their part, the situation would eventually stabilize. He also assured the US that the new provisional government he would nominate would be agreeable to the Americans, indicating that future cooperation would be possible (Sick 1985; Vance 1983).

In light of these developments, Vance (1983) believed that it was essential for the US to try to press for an understanding between the military and the secular and religious opposition forces rallying around Khomeini. Brzezinski (1983), for his part, continued to argue that the Administration had to support Bakhtiar and maintain the Iranian military united around him and be prepared for any contingency. This course of action was, however, becoming increasingly difficult as Huyser reported that the fractures within the Iranian armed forces continued to grow (Sick 1985).

Adjusting to the new regime in Tehran

The arrival of Khomeini in Iran on 1 February, 1979, and the subsequent appointment of Mehdi Bazargan as provisional Prime Minister compelled the Administration to once again review its policy. In a meeting with the key foreign policy decision-makers on 5 February, Huyser reported that there were two differing outlooks on how to deal with the situation. In his view the US should support Bakhtiar at all cost, even if that meant using the Iranian military. In contrast, Sullivan advocated that the military should not get involved in the political quarrel in Iran. Rather it should support the side that emerged victorious from the political clash – as should the US (Brzezinski 1983; Sick 1985). According to Huyser, Sullivan believed that the revolution would eventually drift towards democracy, while in his view it would turn towards Communism (Brzezinski 1983; Sick 1985). Carter clarified that a military option would only be sanctioned by the US if it implied supporting the Bakhtiar government and the constitutional process.

During the following days the Administration was compelled to reassess its policy as the Iranian military crumbled in the face of growing hostility. As fighting

erupted during the second week of October, the Iranian military decided not to intervene and declared neutrality in the political conflict. In a meeting on 11 October, despite Brzezinski's reluctance, the majority of the decision-makers acknowledged that the military's position was undeniable confirmation that they had accommodated to the opposition and the military option was definitively abandoned (Brzezinski 1983; Sick 1985).

Subsequently, Bakhtiar resigned and left Tehran leaving the Administration a new political conundrum. On 12 February Sullivan was instructed to maintain contacts with the new government pending a presidential decision regarding the question of relations (Vance 1983). The key priorities for the Administration at that moment were preventing sensitive military and intelligence equipment from falling into unfriendly hands, and securing the safety of US citizens in Iran (Vance 1983).

The cooperative relationship was tested on 14 February as the US embassy was attacked. The Barzagan government intervened and was able to quickly resolve the situation. The Iranian government's good offices led the US to respond by announcing that it would maintain normal diplomatic relations with the new regime. Moreover, on 21 February, Vance persuaded Carter to instruct Sullivan to call Barzagan and assure him and Khomeini, that "the United States accepted the revolution and did not intend to intervene in Iran's internal affairs" (Vance 1983, 343). In addition, Sullivan also informed the new regime that the US was willing to continue supplying Iran with arms.

Sustained reassurances coming from the upper echelons of power in Iran eased some of the Administration's concerns. Although the Barzagan regime was critical of America's previous Iranian policy, it did seek to ameliorate the strained situation between the two countries. As a result, bilateral governmental contacts increased over the ensuing months and in early-October high-level policy discussions were held between the two countries for the first time since the Shah's departure (Sick 1985).

Consequently, the Administration's general goal in mid-1979 was to secure a tentative accommodation with the new regime in Tehran. The underlying rationale for this outlook was that the moderate forces in the Iranian Government would ultimately prevail in the internal struggle for power in Iran. The Country Director for Iran in the State Department, Henry Precht, was principally responsible for carrying out US policy in the country and was a major advocate of this perspective (Sick 1985). In a report developed in February 1979 for discussion with NATO allies, Precht argued that Iranians were weary of the disorder brought about by the revolution and sought a return to normality under the moderate leadership of Barzagan. Precht recommended that a working relationship with Barzagan was the only viable option. Similarly, Saunders informed the Administration that the moderates in the Bazargan government were increasingly disenchanted with Khomeini and were seeking to establish compromises, better international

relations, and restart the economy (Saunders to Vance 05/09/1979).

This view prevailed until the beginning of the hostage crisis. During the summer, discussions proceeded within the Administration and with the Iranian Government on the nature of the relationship between both states. While much of the interagency debate during the summer focused on what to do regarding the Shah's request to move to the US, discussions on bilateral cooperation proceeded, particularly on security and military issues (c.f., Christopher to Carter 01/08/1979). The apparent cooperative rapport between the Administration and the Bazargan regime was additionally corroborated by the meeting in Algiers between Brzezinski and Bazargan and Yazdi.

As the interaction process within the Carter Administration was finally constructing a shared understanding of the situation in Iran and the appropriate policies to deal with it, events quickly turned somber as the American embassy in Tehran was attacked and seized by militant students on 4 November, 1979. The Iranian hostage crisis would completely transform US-Iranian relations. The hostage crisis would widen the division between the key foreign policy decision-makers on the nature of the problem and how to deal with it (c.f., Ganji 2006; Houghton 2001).

Conclusion

Several studies have assessed American policy during the Iranian Revolution. While the majority has revealed the dynamic nature of the Carter Administration's policy during that period, they have generally failed to provide the theoretical rationale underlying the change process. In particular, the causal mechanisms involved in the process are regularly omitted. This is a common trait of FPA which tends to emphasize policy stability over change. When foreign policy change is acknowledged it is portrayed as an episodic and planned endeavor.

This view contrasts with the theoretical insight of other fields of scholarly inquiry such as Organizational Development and Social Psychology. Research in these fields has increasingly emphasized the continuous nature of change in organizations. It has particularly focused on the emergent and adaptive nature of change. While the emergent approach tends to highlight small-scale and incremental transformations, it posits that over time the cumulative nature of the adjustments and adaptations can lead to a radical change in policy. The principal causal mechanism catalyzing policy change is the communicative interactions occurring within and among the political agents. As individuals communicate with each other they are constantly reinterpreting and reconstructing their reality.

Accordingly, by applying an approach emphasizing emergent change I have tried to demonstrate how the Carter Administration's policy towards Iran was in a state of constant flux throughout the Revolution. From an initial policy of unwavering support for the Shah, the Administration came to accept the revolution and establish a cooperative relationship with the revolutionary regime. However,

the change in policy was not straight forward. Throughout the Revolution, the Administration's policy shifted on numerous occasions. As the Administration's foreign policy decision-makers interacted with each other and with other political actors they continuously redefined their problem representations and the policy options which best seemed to secure American interests in Iran and the region.

While certainly requiring additional reflection and adaptations, the incorporation of the theoretical hindsight from continuous change models to FPA would be a significant contribution to the field. In particular, the accelerating rate of change in the different arenas of domestic and international life requires a new perspective regarding the study of foreign policy change. I argue that there are numerous advantages of adopting a perspective which privileges continuous change in FPA. For instance, we may better understand the micro-processes of change at work in foreign policy decision-making and which are usually overlooked in more rational or cognitive oriented approaches. Moreover, by viewing change as a *fait accompli* we miss out on identifying many of the complex mechanisms permanently involved in foreign policy decision-making and the dynamic nature of the foreign policy-making process. What's more, understanding the dynamic nature of foreign policy-making can help decision-makers become more aware of the complexities involved in managing change. Ultimately, it can aid decision-makers in keeping the foreign policy from running rampant.

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