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Balogh István

The Theory of Strategic Blowback

US Strategy Towards Iran 1993-2010

Ph.D. dissertation

Advisor:

Dr. N. Rózsa Erzsébet
honorary university professor

Budapest, 2013

Nemzetközi Tanulmányok Intézet

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I. Introduction to the Hypotheses

The stalemate between the United States and the Islamic Republic of Iran has been high on the international political agenda ever since the rupture in the relationship of the two nations as a result of the 1979 revolution. The fact that more than three decades have gone by since the US and Iran have been at odds with each other in and of itself makes the topic worthy of discussion. However, the most important factor that makes the topic relevant and worth researching is that the US-Iran conflict has had a profound impact on international security in the wider Middle East and it still continues to have a significant effect on regional and global security. Despite a large number of works assessing the dilemmas concerning the standoff between the two entities, many sources forget to ask the most important question: *why? Why have the US and Iran been unable to resolve their conflict in the last thirty five years, when a number of opportunities arose for rapprochement?* The US has enormous resources, but it is still not capable of formulating a response to the challenge posed by Iran conducive to regional stability in the Middle East. Even if a large number of works do deal with this issue, they neglect the importance of patterns in the history of the enmity between the two countries.

Solving the US-Iran stalemate requires a sound theory for explaining the behavior of the two countries, as well as the factors responsible for the sustained enmity between them. Any theory should be based on *generalizations*, which assumes searching for *patterns*. The *observation* and *recognition* of patterns are needed for constructing a theory that identifies the primary factors responsible for the continuous stalemate between Tehran and Washington. Patterns lead to conjectures about our reality and these conjectures can be the basis of research hypotheses. (Waltz [1979])

History suggests there is such a pattern. The author argues that the post-Cold War period of US-Iran relations is a history of missed opportunities. (Parsi [2007]; [2012]) The US and Iran missed at least four opportunities to mend their relations since the beginning of the nineties. The first one came just after the Cold War, when Iran was trying to be a constructive player during the 1991 Gulf war. It pursued a policy of *détente* with Arab countries and it was open to discuss pressing regional issues. However, the US left many of its troops in the Gulf area and it sought to isolate Iran from regional processes by not inviting the Middle Eastern country to the Madrid peace conference in 1991. As a response, Iran later contributed to undermining the Oslo peace process from 1993 onwards.

The second opportunity came during the presidency of Mohammad Khatami.

President Khatami wished to engage the US and pursued a policy of détente with Arab countries. The Clinton administration wished to signal its willingness to engage in discussions with Iran, but Washington's response was only symbolic. The Clinton administration's hands were tied by certain US Congressional forces, which did not support détente with Iran. Hence, the Clinton White House could not alter the direction of US foreign policy in a meaningful way. Thus, symbolic US gestures were not enough to justify President Khatami's policies within the Iranian domestic political arena, and he was isolated by his own hardliners. The third opportunity came under the tenure of office of President George W. Bush. The 9/11 attacks provoked an aggressive US response, which led to the toppling of the Taliban and Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq. Iran offered a grand bargain in May 2003, agreeing to discuss the most significant sources of disagreement between itself and the US. However, the Bush administration rejected the offer, and this caused Iran to sabotage US policies in Iraq, Afghanistan and the wider Middle East in general.

The fourth opportunity came during the Geneva talks in the fall of 2009 under the Obama administration. The US put pressure on Iran by pursuing diplomacy and sanctions at the same time. Furthermore, Iran was caught up in a post-election turmoil, thus, it was unable to formulate a response to the US offer.

Thus, the pattern to be realized is that aggressive policies do not work out well from the perspective of regional stability and US national interests. Whenever the US pursues aggressive policies against Iran, they are likely to backfire, causing unintended consequences – *strategic blowbacks*. This is the central argument of this thesis. Thus, *the theory of strategic blowback* is elaborated on in great detail in order to formulate the hypotheses and to prove the relationship suggested by the argument put forth in the dissertation.

II. Methodology and Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1a (H1a)

In order to formulate the hypotheses, one needs to find a general theory that can be used for the specific case of the US-Iran stalemate. The author contends that the theory of strategic blowback is a theory well suited for explaining why the conflict between the US and Iran still persists.

The blowback dynamism has also been observed by a number of other authors and sources, although their observations are not necessarily related to the US-Iran stalemate

specifically. Most notably, the term “*blowback*” was first used by the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in the 50's to “*describe the likelihood that ... [US] ... covert operations in other people's countries would result in retaliations against Americans, civilian and military, at home and abroad.*” (Johnson [2004a]: p. ix.). More specifically, the CIA referred to the problem as follows:

“Possibilities of blowback against the United States should always be in the back of the minds of all CIA officers involved in this type of operation” (Appendix E - Military Critique - Lessons Learned from TPAJAX, paragraph “O”. [1954]: pp. 21-22.)

Since then, a number of other authors have applied the logic, or have observed a similar dynamic. (Kellner [2003]; Rogers [2002]; Layne [2006]: pp. 5-10; p. 190.; Maier [2008]: p. 61.; Fukuyama [2008]: p. 207.; Mearsheimer [2005]; Gore [2008]: p. 161.; Walt [2005]: p. 18.) The term was first introduced to the academic literature on IR by the late Chalmers Johnson, former professor of political science at the University of California, San Diego. (Johnson [2001]: p. 8.; Johnson [2004b]: p. 8.) He explains the definition as follows:

“In a broader sense, blowback is another way of saying that a nation reaps what it sows. [...] As a concept, blowback is obviously most easily grasped in its straightforward manifestations. The unintended consequences of American policies and acts in country X lead to a bomb at an American embassy in country Y or a dead American in country Z.” (Johnson [2004a]: a; p. xi.)¹

Thus, there is ample indirect evidence in the literature, which suggests that the blowback dynamism exists in some form or another. Despite being mentioned by a number of well-known authors, the phenomenon has not been explained by any theory – blowback theory is “*under-theorized*”. The author wishes to remedy this.

Thus, this doctoral thesis provides a test of the blowback theory as applied to the specific case of the conflict between the US and Iran. Therefore, the central argumentation of the author is built around the following hypothesis:

H1a: *The more aggressive foreign policy strategy the US pursues towards Iran, the more significant strategic blowbacks it is going to suffer.*

The above formulation of the hypotheses calls for the exact definition of expressions used. Thus, the following are established:

¹ The author *strongly disagrees* with the way Johnson formulated this definition, as it suggests that terrorist attacks are natural consequences of flawed policies, as if this linkage was the “natural state of affairs”, meaning that the US could not really expect anything else in turn for pursuing mistaken policies.

“aggressive foreign policy strategy”: Any effort on behalf of the US government to attack, bomb, deter, contain, sanction, roll-back, intimidate, isolate, reject a diplomatic offer from or change the Iranian regime either by covert or overt means.

“strategic blowback”: Any unintended direct or indirect consequence of aggressive foreign policies where a clear relation to such initiatives could be established.

“more”: A larger effort in either qualitative or quantitative terms.

Any assessment of any foreign policy has to take into consideration the costs associated with the path taken. (Baldwin [2000]) *The theory of strategic blowback and H1a is centered on this notion because it implies that the costs of aggressive action can outweigh the benefits.*

Of course, there are a lot of problematic issues regarding the above specifications, since the terms used are rather vague in some cases: “clear relation”, “larger effort in qualitative or quantitative terms”, not to mention a lack of definition of “foreign policy”.² Furthermore, how is one to distinguish between intimidation and various forms of containment, roll-back, deterrence, sanctions or isolation? *A number of these policies cannot be distinguished and various categories will inevitably overlap.* Sanctions, for example, may fit into the categories of “roll-back” and “isolation” as well. These categories cannot be further specified beyond a certain point. *Thus, there will be situations where the lines between these categories will be blurred and choices made during categorizing may be arbitrary at times.*

The issue of falsification must also be addressed. Some of the above definitions are not specific enough. The definition of “aggressive” policies is broad indeed and this may risk judging most policies as being aggressive in retrospect, thus H1a cannot be *falsified*. Most US policies will inevitably qualify as aggressive. *This is not the case, however.* Indeed, the majority of US initiatives will be considered “aggressive” – except for one, and that is diplomacy. *Thus, H1a is definitely possible to falsify, as diplomatic initiatives will be considered as nonaggressive policies.* Intuition suggests that this is logical. The Islamic Republic of Iran has been viewed as the enemy of the US, thus, most US policies so far must have been aggressive. *If that was not the case, then there would be no enmity between the two entities, and the idea of strategic blowback in relation to Iran would not be of importance.*

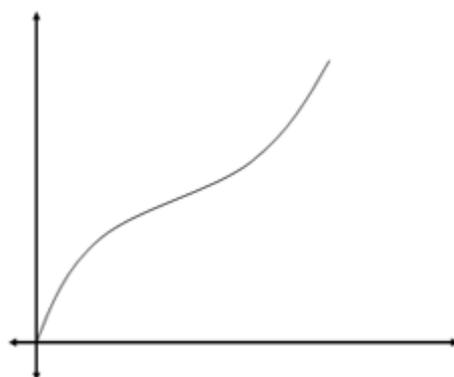
Diplomacy needs to be defined in order to apply the term in the thesis. Diplomacy is taken to mean **efforts by official representatives of the US to pursue direct talks and**

² Foreign policy is taken to mean “foreign policy strategy”, which is defined by the chapter on the ontology of the dissertation. (See: “*Theoretical Foundations: Ontological Assumptions I-II*” in the collection of the theses)

pursuing direct talks with official representatives of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the same place at the same time.

If one wishes to use statistical terminology for describing the above relationship, then variable “Xa” stands for aggressive foreign policy strategy toward Iran, while variable “Ya” represents unintended strategic setbacks. The nature of the relationship is causal, thus, “Xa” causes “Ya”. (“Xa”→“Ya”). “Ya” is the *explanandum*, “Xa” is the *explanans*, “Xa” is the independent, while “Ya” is the dependent variable. (See: Kiss J. [2009]: p. 206.) The relationship is also a positive one: it will be true most of the time that the more aggressive foreign policy strategy the US pursues, the more/ harsher harms its national interests are going to incur. It is also a nonlinear/ disproportionate relationship, meaning that the rate of change in the independent variable (“Xa” or aggressive foreign policy strategy) will not constantly lead to the same rate of change in the dependent variable (“Ya”, or “strategic blowback”) either in a relative or a total sense. Putting it simpler, the same additional “amount” of aggressive foreign policy strategy will not always result in the same additional “amount” of strategic blowback. *Figure 1* shows how the graph of such a mathematical relationship might look like – it indicates the alternations in the rates of change of both variables.

Figure 1. The Positive and Disproportionate Relationship Between the Variables of H1a and H1b



Source: PakAccountants.com. What is a non-linear variable cost? May 11, 2011
<http://pakaccountants.com/what-is-a-non-linear-variable-cost/> Accessed: 01-08-2011

There is an additional dilemma regarding the relationship between the two variables. Could it be that beyond a certain inflexion point additional pressure pays off, causing the amount and intensity of blowback effects to reduce, essentially suggesting that in some cases aggressive foreign policies do pay off. The author suggests that this is possible in certain cases. *A strategy of escalation and pressure may work between certain entities.* However, it is argued that such an approach would not work in the specific case of the US and Iran because of Iran’s regional economic and political influence, which may become a source of significant

strategic setbacks, in case Tehran was attacked. Thus, naturally, the application of force could be effective in certain cases, but conjecture suggests that a strategy of escalation would not work in the specific case examined in the dissertation.

Beyond other factors, it is exactly the nonlinear nature of the relationship that makes it extremely hard to tell just how much “additional” strategic blowback the further pursuit of aggressive foreign policies is going to cause. One possible method for overcoming difficulties associated with operationalization is applying an ordinal scale to describe the relationship between “Xa” and “Ya.” This would mean ascribing larger values to more aggressive US policies and blowback effects, e.g. a US rejection of an Iranian diplomatic offer causing a less significant strategic blowback than a more aggressive US policy (e.g. airstrikes against Iranian nuclear facilities). However, even this approach is very problematic, since it ignores a lot of qualitative factors, namely, that “aggressive foreign policy” can have different meanings in different circumstances.

The problem confronted here corresponds with David Baldwin’s suggestion that *there is no single analytic framework for measuring foreign policy success or the success of one particular foreign policy tool* (e.g. sanctions or military force). (Baldwin [2000]) Since there are obviously a number of other factors at play, the present dissertation will not apply a quantitative analysis, because the author would have to face difficult dilemmas during the operationalization of the two variables. Regression analysis would be a suitable method if the author was able to convert “Xa” and “Ya” into objectively measurable quantities. However, this is not the case, hence, the dissertation will conduct a qualitative instead of a quantitative analysis.

The thesis applies a deductive logic whereby the general theory of blowback is applied to the specific case of US-Iran relations. It is also inductive in a way, since it seeks to come up with generalizations on the dynamism of blowback based on the individual case of US-Iran relations. It is not without precedent, that such a dual logic is applied – Kenneth N. Waltz used a similar approach in constructing his seminal book, *Theory of International Politics*. He put forward that both *deductive* and *inductive logic* are needed in order to build theories. (Waltz [1979]: p. 11.)

Hypothesis 1b (H1b)

The second hypothesis (H1b) is logically related to H1a. *In fact, it is not an entirely different hypothesis – it is the inverse of H1a and it has been generated by applying counterfactual logic.* The thesis wishes to provide a hint as to how the US could find a way

out of the present stalemate. Establishing that aggressive foreign policy strategies cause strategic setbacks would be a significant result, but suggesting an alternative strategy would represent even more added value both from a social scientific, as well as from a policy perspective.

The author proposes that a possible solution to the present stalemate could be applying military theorist Basil Henry Liddell Hart's *indirect approach to strategy*. (Liddell Hart [1954]) In fact, Liddell Hart was among the first to elaborate in detail on the "indirect approach to grand strategy", which is of great relevance to this dissertation.³ (See: Liddell Hart [1954] p. 18; 33; p. 138.) It must be emphasized, that Liddell Hart's concept has been applied to US strategy before by Brimley and Singh. (Brimely; Singh, [2008]). However, *to the best of the author's knowledge*, it has not been applied to the particular case of US-Iran relations.

Since the first hypothesis suggests that aggressive policies do not pay off, it may particularly seem odd to apply a concept that was originally invented to provide a better understanding of warfare itself. However, Liddell Hart's concept of indirect strategy corresponds with the logic of H1a and the theory formulated by the CIA, Johnson, Layne and others (see above). Liddell Hart put forward that direct face-to-face confrontation almost never pays in the battlefield. *The harder a general seeks to push frontally, the greater the chances of losing the battle*. Instead, an indirect approach should be taken. Deception, dislocation, encirclement or getting behind the enemy are the ways to win battles – all of them being indirect solutions to problems that emerge in the battlefield. A direct solution would be to run directly at the enemy on the battlefield. Liddell Hart, however, strongly advises against such a strategy, since *the force of resistance* will be largest when approaching the enemy frontally and aggressively. (Liddell Hart [1954])

How does this approach provide a solution for the present US-Iran stalemate? The author argues that strategic blowback can be understood as a form of or consequence of *resistance* on behalf of the other party to the conflict – in this case the Islamic Republic of Iran. The more aggressive (direct) strategies and policies Washington pursues, the tougher resistance Tehran is going to put up. Strategic blowback and the resistance that Liddell Hart's concept implicitly warns of are very similar in their nature. This also explains how H1b is connected to H1a. Since aggressive policies will backfire due to resistance, which comes in the form of or causes strategic blowbacks, US strategists should look for *the path of least*

³ Of course, the first one to elaborate on this concept was Chinese military strategist Sun Tzu. (Sun Tzu [1988]). Furthermore, Clausewitz also had thoughts built on the indirect logic. (See: Clausewitz [1989]) However, the author chose to rely on Liddell Hart's somewhat more modern approach.

resistance – in this case, policies, which do not qualify for aggressive initiatives as defined above.⁴ (See: Liddell Hart [1954]: pp. 18-19; p. 209.)

Thus, following Liddell Hart's reasoning, the author contends that the "*strategy of seeking the least resistance*" should be applied for overcoming the stalemate in US-Iran relations. This highlights the logic and the specific part of Liddell Hart's concept that is to be borrowed in the thesis. Therefore, the second hypothesis is formulated as follows:

H1b: A "strategy of seeking the least resistance" should be applied vis a vis Iran in order to create circumstances conducive to realizing Washington's strategic interests in the Middle East and parts of Central Asia.

Again, there are a number of methodological risks that one should be mindful of. *First of all, the very fact that the author made the verification of H1b contingent on the verification of H1a is quite risky. If H1a cannot be proved, then automatically H1b cannot be verified either.* Nonetheless, H1a is about the assumption of aggressive foreign policies being counterproductive, thus, identifying nonaggressive policies as possible ways out of the US-Iran stalemate (H1b) is a logical conjecture. The conjecture is somewhat based on deductive logic – if the premises in H1a are valid, then the relationship between the two variables of H1b should also be valid. Thus, H1b is essentially a consequence of H1a. (H1a → H1b). There is an inverse logic behind this reasoning: the strategy of seeking least resistance may pay off, due to the fact that aggressive policies do not. If H1b is contingent on H1a, then proving the assumption inherent in H1a is crucial for the credibility of the thesis, *since H1b is the inverse of H1a.* Thus, in a methodological and logical sense, H1b is only a "second-tier" hypothesis. It is *counterfactual logic* that leads one to believe that if H1a is proven right, then H1b should also be correct.

Of course, problems of definition arise again. In order to minimize uncertainties concerning the definitions, the following meanings have been ascribed to the above expressions:

"strategy of seeking the least resistance": this is synonymous with nonaggressive foreign and security policies. Anything that does not belong under the category of "aggressive policies" will belong to the category of strategies seeking the least possible resistance.

"least": the alternative that is *perceived* to incur the least costs at the time of decision.

⁴ Of course, perceptions and cultural factors will also determine how parties interpret the other party's intentions and policies. A policy considered nonaggressive by Washington may well be interpreted as an aggressive one by Tehran. However, this will be determined based on the given context and on a case-by-case basis.

“circumstances conducive”: circumstances, which in theory make it possible for US strategic interests to be realized.

“Washington’s strategic interests”:

- concluding a peace treaty between Israel and Arab states (most notably Syria and Lebanon);
- the emergence of a stable and non-hostile Iraq that is capable of controlling its territory;
- the emergence of a stable Afghanistan that is capable of controlling its territory;
- the halting or making of Iran’s nuclear program fully transparent;
- securing the free flow of oil through the Strait of Hormuz; and
- minimizing or altogether eliminating tensions between the US and Iran.⁵

“Middle East and parts of Central Asia”: The expression “Middle East” here is used in a narrow sense – it is taken to refer to the following group of countries and entities: Egypt, Israel, the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, Lebanon, Syria, Turkey, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, Oman, Kuwait, Iran and Afghanistan.

Such framing of the suggested strategy highlights the inverse logical relationship between H1a and H1b. The term “perception” highlights the limits of objectivity. Deciding whether an alternative qualifies as one that guarantees the least costs, therefore, *will inevitably require making somewhat arbitrary decisions*. The insertion of the term “conducive” into the equation reflects caution on behalf of the author. It is absolutely essential, that if H1a proves right, it not lead to false conclusions. Thus, if aggressive policies indeed backfire, *it is not automatic that nonaggressive policies will not. Pursuing nonaggressive policies only creates the necessary international circumstances for a compromise with Iran in order to promote the realization of US interests. It does not automatically result in the realization of US goals*. This attests to the assumption that even if the US pursues alternative policies, which are least likely to backfire, other factors may still hinder the realization of US interests – such as domestic politics in Iran or the US.

Washington’s strategic interests obviously reflect the most contentious issues in the conflict between the two parties. This is due to Iran’s regional “web” of relations. Iran has ties to Lebanese Hezbollah, Palestinian Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad. All of these groups have a stake in the Arab-Israeli peace process. Iran has traditionally had ties with Afghanistan, especially its mostly Shiite Hazara population in Central Afghanistan, as well as Herat province in Western Afghanistan. It has also been investing in Afghanistan’s infrastructure. Tehran has a strategic alliance with Syria and it wields considerable political and cultural influence in Iraq. (See: Addis et al. [2010]; see also: N. Rózsa [2007]). Iran has the ability to

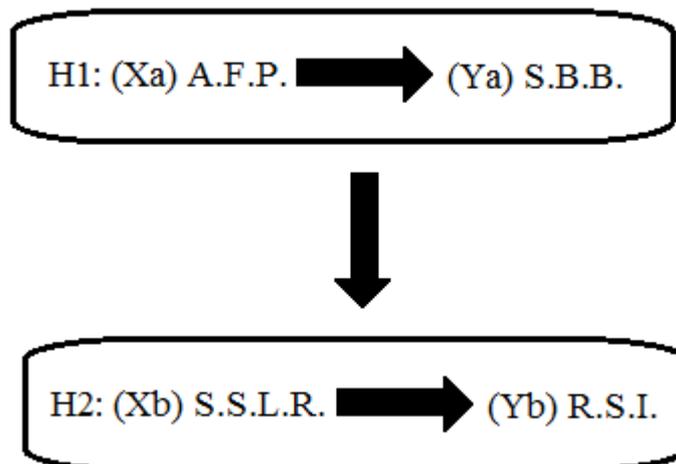
⁵ Seyed Hossein Mousavian uses a very similar list in his 2012 memoir. (See: Mousavian [2012b]: p. 2.)

control the Strait of Hormuz, where approximately 40% of the world's oil trade flows through. (*Ibid*, p. 2.) Indeed, Iran's regional influence even led King Abdullah of Jordan to talk of the "Shiite crescent", which sparked a large academic debate on the issue. (See: Barzegar [2008]; see also: Nasr [2006]) The concept is somewhat exaggerating, but it is obvious that Iran's regional significance cannot be dismissed. The final bullet point is closely connected to all the previously mentioned US interests. As a result of Iran's regional position, the US could be interested in pursuing a policy aiming to reach a grand bargain with Iran. Central Asia was added to the definition to allow for the inclusion of Afghanistan.

In the case of H1b, variable "Xb" stands for the strategy that follows the path of least resistance and variable "Yb" represents the presence of circumstances conducive to the realization of US strategic interests as defined above. To follow the above logic, "Xb" is the "*explanans*" and "Yb" is the "*explanandum*" (See: Kiss J.: *Ibid*), "Xb" is the independent variable and "Yb" is the dependent variable. As in the case of H1a, H1b also expresses a causal relationship. The relationship is a positive one – the more intensively least resistance strategies are pursued, the more likely that US interests will be realized. As for trying to determine "how much" "additional", or "more intensive" emergence of circumstances conducive to realizing US strategic interests will follow an "additional unit" of pursuing certain least resistance strategies is even harder than in the case of H1a. It can be established, however, that the relationship is nonlinear and disproportionate – an "additional unit of least resistance strategy" (Xb) will not always result in the same amount of changes in the "rate" of the emergence of circumstances conducive to realizing US strategic interests (Yb). Thus, the author will not conduct a quantitative assessment for the same reasons as in the case of H1a and operationalization will not be carried out either. The graph of a function representing such a relationship will most likely look like "Figure 1." above.

H1b suggests a deductive logic – Liddell Hart's general theory will be applied to the US-Iran case with some modifications. This experiment is also inductive in nature, since one of the goals of the dissertation is to suggest a new general philosophy of foreign policy strategy, viewing the latter as an effort of constantly looking for the path where the least possible resistance is put up by adversaries, rivals and allies. A wall is easier to punch through where its thinner, but if one keeps punching it where its thick, he will end up breaking his hand – *this is what strategic blowback theory is about*. H1b is based on a normative assumption, as it is a "prescription" for the way out of the present stalemate between the US and Iran.

Figure 2. The Relationship Between the Hypotheses of the Dissertation



A.F.P.= Aggressive Foreign Policy; S.B.B.= Strategic Blowback; S.S.L.R.: Strategy of Seeking the Least Resistance; R.S.I.= Realization of Strategic Interests.

Theoretical Foundations – Ontological Assumptions I.

The thesis applies two theoretical *traditions* (disciplines). The two disciplines are the *Theory of International Relations* and *Strategic Studies*.⁶ Within the tradition of IR, the Realist school of thought is applied. More specifically, the overall theoretical approach of the author is reflected by what students of theory of international relations call *Neoclassical Realism*.⁷

A number of methodological concerns arise as to how these two disciplines match. Does the application of two different theoretical traditions create “theoretical or methodological heterogeneity” to the extent that it undermines the logic of the dissertation? Is it not contradictory in a logical sense to have two different disciplines, two different theoretical traditions for explaining the same phenomena? *To be sure, it does create a fair chance for confusion.* However, the richness of a multidisciplinary approach to international relations suggests otherwise.

The possibility of a confusion occurring may be minimized if the author can establish a clear relationship between the theoretical assumptions derived from the two traditions. If this relationship is clear and does not suggest contradictory assumptions about the reality the two traditions wish to describe, then the theoretical foundations will remain sound. Hence, the

⁶ When the author writes “*Strategic Studies*” with capital letters at the beginning of the words, it refers to the discipline itself. Also, if “*Strategy*”, or “*Strategic Thought*” is written, it also refers to the discipline in general, or “*Strategy*” in general as an abstract concept and not to a specific set of policies or strategic concepts.

⁷ When the author writes “*Neoclassical Realism*” with capital letters it is to refer to the neoclassical offshoot of Realism in general.

author puts forth, that the following relationship can be identified between the two traditions.

Both traditions could be viewed as ontological assumptions about how the world – *our reality* – works. Neoclassical Realism depicts the world on two levels: the interstate level is complemented by the introduction of domestic factors. This tradition suggests that states pursue power in order to enhance their security. On the other hand, Strategic Thought – broadly understood – puts forward a set of assumptions about *how* states can achieve their goals. Thus, Neoclassical Realism provides a depiction of the international environment: an international system that is made up of actors (states) pursuing power in order to enhance their security and realize their national interests. It describes the nature of the international environment, as well as the motivations behind policies pursued by states. Strategic Studies, on the other hand, explains how states – driven by security and other motivations – attain or should attain their national goals. From this perspective, it is easy to establish a clear relationship between the two theories. Neoclassical Realism answers the question “*What?*” and Strategic Thought provides answer to the question “*How?*” *Therefore, they are not contradictory on a logical plain.*

The other reason suggesting that the two theories are not contradictory is the fact that both derive from the same tradition of political thought, namely, Realism. Strategic Thought, understood narrowly, originally dealt with how a state should use its military force to attain its politico-military goals. Broadly understood, it provides a prescription on how a state should use its power in order to reach its national goals. The core assumption of political Realism is the pursuit of national interest, or interests “*defined in terms of power.*” (Morgenthau [1993]: p. 5.) *Thus, strategy, broadly defined, has a very similar view of the world as political Realism does.* If strategy is only narrowly understood, it is reminiscent of Realism in that it views (military) power as central in international relations. Thus, Neoclassical Realism provides the researcher with how the international strategic environment looks like and Strategic Thought describes how actors wish to reach their national goals within that environment.

The reason why Neoclassical Realism was chosen should also be explained here. The author needed to find a strand of Realism, which is capable of depicting not only the international structure but sub-systemic variables as well. One can assume that variables on both levels influence the stalemate between the US and Iran. Only one strand of Realism is capable of fulfilling the above criteria. Lobell, Ripsman and Taliaferro point this out:

“How do states, or more specifically the decision-makers and institutions that act on their behalf, assess international threats and opportunities? What happens when there is disagreement about the nature of foreign threats? Who ultimately decides the range of acceptable and unacceptable foreign policy alternatives? To what extent, and under what conditions, can domestic actors bargain with state leaders and influence foreign and security policies? How and under what

circumstances will domestic factors impede states from pursuing the types of strategies predicted by balance of power theory and balance of threat theory? Finally, how do states go about extracting and mobilizing resources necessary to implement foreign and security policies? These are important questions that cannot be answered by the dominant neorealist or liberal theories of international politics.” (Lobell-Ripsmann-Taliaferro [2009]: p. 1.)

The authors go on to argue that a number of very significant foreign policy decisions and strategies cannot be explained by traditional realist approaches. They point out that the Bush doctrine too resulted from ““*a veritable witches’ brew of systemic and domestic-level factors.*” (*Ibid*, p. 3.)

There were a number of cases in which only structural factors were at play in producing the actual outcome. For example, closing Iran out of the Oslo Process led to Iranian efforts aimed at preventing the peace process, since it was perceived by Tehran as a way of isolating it in its own region. This was a pure case of realist balancing strategy. Iran perceived the US and Israeli efforts to foster peace with Palestinians and Arab countries as a way of balancing Iranian influence. It provoked Iranian policies aimed at breaking a potential anti-Iran Israeli-Arab alliance before it was even formed. (Parsi [2007]: pp. 175-176.)

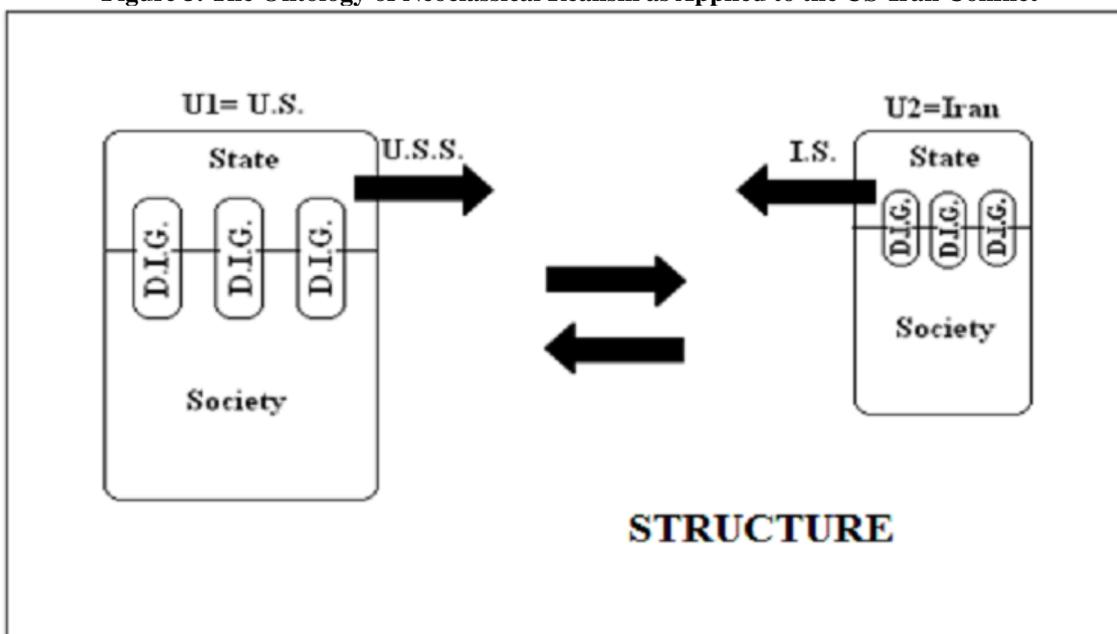
But a number of other instances remind us that domestic factors are just as important. For example, following the Geneva talks of October 2009 some have argued that President Ahmadinejad in fact wanted a deal with the west, but was isolated by his own domestic rivals and radicals. (Perthes [2010]: pp. 100-101.)

Thus, it is only a holistic and global approach that will be able to model the intricate realities of US-Iranian interactions. Neoclassical Realism was chosen for its “richness”. The problem with other offshoots of Realism is that they exclude domestic variables from the analysis, or – as in the case of Morgenthau’s Human Nature Realism – neglect the limits of rational choice. The basic tenets of *Neoclassical Realism* are rooted in the belief that, contrary to what Neorealism and its various other offshoots propose, *domestic factors are important in explaining foreign policies of states*. Security seeking states are the most important actors in the anarchic international environment. According to this view, states are both influenced by the structure of the international system, as well as domestic factors when seeking security. (See: Lobell-Ripsman-Taliaferro [2009]). Indeed, a significant part of the IR literature reflects a realist mindset, but also introduces unit-level factors such as (mis)perception (Wohlforth [1993]), mobilization (Christensen [1996]), state power (Zakaria [1998]) and revisionism (Schweller [1998]). According to their logic, these unit level variables are intervening variables between a state’s relative material capabilities and their actual foreign policy behavior. Thus, a state’s relative material power may not always correspond with its international position. (Rose [1998] pp. 146-147. For a general overview of Neoclassical

Realism see: Taliaferro [2006])

According to this reasoning, a neoclassical realist explanation of US strategy towards Iran would result in the following model. US foreign policy making and strategy formulation involves a large number of actors (the National Security Council, the Department of State, the Department of Defense, the Department of Commerce, the Department of Treasury, the Intelligence Community, respective committees of the House and Senate, various think tanks, lobby groups and different economic interest groups) and these actors can and indeed do influence foreign and security policy making. Therefore, even if the national interest is defined clearly, there is a considerable chance that US policies will “veer off the ideal course” due to particular interests. The same is true for Iran, where the system of foreign policy making is equally byzantine and intricate because of a large number of actors involved (the Supreme Leader; the President; the Supreme National Security Council; the Revolutionary Guards; the Ministry of Intelligence; the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; the Ministry of Defense; respective committees of the Majlis; the Shiite clergy; various think tanks; economic interest groups, such as the “bazaari;” and other informal networks). (See: Goodman [2008]) Even if the US is “able” to pursue cooperation with Tehran, those US policies still have to “stand the test” of the intricacies of Iranian domestic politics. Thus, Neoclassical Realism provides an accurate depiction of the environment in which the US has to implement its policies towards Iran.

Figure 3. The Ontology of Neoclassical Realism as Applied to the US-Iran Conflict



“U1;U2”=Unit; “D.I.G.”= Domestic Interest Groups; “U.S.S.”=US Strategy; “I.S.”=Iranian Strategy.

Theoretical Foundations – Ontological Assumptions II.

The dissertation turns to the discipline of Strategic Studies for further refining the theoretical foundations of the thesis. However, the author needs a definition of Strategy that can be applied in the field of foreign and security policy. Thus, the concept of ‘grand strategy’ will be applied when analyzing US policies towards Iran. The concept has a huge literature, thus, the author reviewed and applied only the most relevant works from the perspective of the dissertation. (See: Gaddis [1982]; Luttwak [1987]; Posen [1984]; Kennedy [1991]; Art [2003]; Art [2009]) The definition the author chose for ‘grand strategy’ is a combination of the definition used by Paul Kennedy and the one John Lewis Gaddis uses for “strategy”. Paul Kennedy applies the following definition:

“The crux of grand strategy lies therefore in policy, that is, in the capacity of the nation’s leaders to bring together all of the elements, both military and nonmilitary, for the preservation and enhancement of the nation’s long-term (that is, in wartime and peacetime) best interests.” (Kennedy [1991]: p. 5.)

Gaddis uses a simpler formulation:

“By “strategy,” I mean quite simply the process by which ends are related to means, intentions to capabilities, objectives to resources.” (Gaddis [1982]: p. viii.)

The combination the author has made up reads as follows:

Grand strategy is the practice of relating ends to means by using all the military and nonmilitary tools available to a state in order to preserve and enhance its long-term best interests.⁸

This definition of grand strategy will be taken to mean “Strategy” in general throughout the dissertation. The above combination is justified by the following reasons. It has the original logic of Strategy – the relating of ends to means. It embraces all military as well as nonmilitary means, thus, it also satisfies the criteria of comprehensiveness. The author could have chosen a definition, which specifically makes a distinction between political, economic, military and other tools, but that would not have been wise, since a number of tools/ policies (eg.: containment) do not necessarily fit into anyone of those categories. It would have to be a combination of all those policies covering all aspects of containment, thus, the author chose

⁸ This is taken from one of the author’s earlier publications. The earlier version has been slightly modified. See: Balogh [2010b]: p. 4. This definition has also been used in one of the author’s other publications: Balogh [2011]: p. 129.

not to specify the nature of those means. The distinction between military and nonmilitary means should leave enough space for covering all policies pursued by Washington. The formulation “long term best interests” also calls for explanation, since the formulation seems to be rather vague and problematic. Therefore, as applied to the specific case of US-Iran relations, the definition of a US (grand) strategy towards Iran is understood to mean:

The US practice of relating ends to means by using all its military and nonmilitary tools available in order to preserve and enhance its long-term best interests vis a vis the Islamic Republic of Iran.

In order to clarify vague expressions, the dissertation will use the following meanings:

“The US practice of relating ends to means by using all its military and nonmilitary tools available”: Any executive order, directive, strategy, decision, measure, law or “speech act”⁹ focusing on the application of any national tool in order to enhance and preserve US best interests vis a vis Iran. (Buzan-Waeber [1998])

“long term best interests”: The realization of one or more of the following strategic goals:

- concluding a peace treaty between Israel and Arab states (most notably Syria and Lebanon);
- the emergence of a stable and non-hostile Iraq that is able to control its territory;
- the emergence of a stable Afghanistan that is capable of controlling its territory;
- the halting or making fully transparent of Iran’s nuclear program;
- securing the free flow of oil through the Strait of Hormuz; and
- minimizing or altogether eliminating tensions between the US and Iran.

Specific administrations usually have their individual concept of US national interests and this will always be taken into consideration throughout the thesis. Other terms (“preserve and enhance”) in the definition, by and large, explain themselves.

The above definition of US strategic interests implies a conjecture: that most or all of the above US national interests cannot be realized without at least a limited cooperation with Tehran. Reaching a climate of cooperation with Iran is a pretext for:

⁹ “Speech act” is understood to mean rhetoric as well as government documents which outline policies. It is taken from the concept of “securitization” introduced by Barry Buzan and Ole Waeber. See: Buzan-Waeber [1998]

- reducing effects that are the results of the strategic blowback dynamic and, therefore,
- realizing US national interests both globally and in the wider Middle East.

There is a final theoretical problem which has to be addressed. The comprehensive logic of grand strategy suggests the application of a combination of national means – political, economic and military – for significant national goals. The strategy of containment was a grand strategy. The spread of democracy is a grand strategy. *Thus, the question arises: can such a comprehensive concept be applied to bilateral relations, such as the US-Iran nexus? Can the US have a grand strategy toward Iran? Is this not tantamount to applying the theory of an “overall strategy” on a tactical level?* Obviously, if one is able to find a precedent for applying the concept in a bilateral arrangement, then it could be argued that such application of the concept could be a viable methodology. In fact, there is a precedent for this approach. Mark Simakovsky applies the concept of grand strategy to US-Iran relations. He assesses the combined application of US diplomatic, informational, economic, political and security tools in order to change Iranian behavior. (Simakovsky, [year of publication unknown]) Well-known scholar Thomas J. Christensen also applies the concept to US-Chinese relations in one of his works. (See: Christensen, [2006]: p. 108; p. 110).

However, this is not enough for a sound methodological justification for using the concept for understanding a bilateral relationship. It is the manner in which a nation pursues its policies that decides whether the concept can be applied or not. It is not only “large” or “overarching” goals that justify the application of grand strategy in general. No definition states explicitly that it can only be applied to a state’s overall aspirations and no definition states that it cannot be applied to a bilateral relationship. Grand strategy can be applied when a state applies all of its tools available in order to attain its national goals – this is what most modern definitions of grand strategy postulate. In that sense, *it is synonymous with foreign and security policy strategy*. Since the US applies a host of different assets in order to influence Iranian behavior, grand strategy is a suitable concept for describing US motivations.

The other reason for applying the concept of grand strategy is that it offers the only “demilitarized” concept of strategy. *Such definition is imperative if one wishes to theorize about foreign and security policy strategy.*

Time Frame and Sample

As far as the time frame is concerned, the interval between the inauguration of the Clinton administration and the beginning of the 2010-2011 popular Arab uprisings will be researched in the dissertation. The Clinton administration was the first US presidency to be inaugurated after the end of the Cold War. By January 1993, the Soviet Union had been dissolved and William Jefferson Clinton was the president who presided over the first phase of US hegemony in the post-Cold War international system. The distribution of power changed in the international system altering the international structure. The US had more resources to commit to new priorities in the “*new world order*” – still, it never managed to solve the Iranian problem. Thus, from a methodological point of view, it is logical to choose the new set of historical circumstances as a starting point for the author’s analysis.

The beginning of the Arab uprisings has been chosen as the end of the time interval researched for more practical reasons. It is clearly a historical watershed in the development of the Middle East that may change the region’s political and social landscape forever. These popular unrests pose various strategic dilemmas for US policies towards the region and they imply a strategic environment fundamentally different from the order that prevailed after the end of the Cold War. The course the US takes may have profound effects on the region, as well as its own position within it. This specific event, however, will not be examined, only the period leading up to the end of 2010, precisely because of the watershed it represents. *To provide a specific date, the author will examine events up to December 18, 2010, the day the first large wave of protests began in Tunisia.*

As far as the “*sample*” chosen for research is concerned, the following set of policies implemented between January 1993 and December 2010 is to be examined:

The Clinton Administration (1993-2001):

- the Oslo process, and the US and Iranian roles within;
- the policy of dual containment, focusing on the Iranian dimension; and
- the attempt to engage Iran during the Khatami presidency.

The Bush Administration (2001-2009):

- the Bush doctrine and Iranian reactions from 2001 to 2006; and
- the policy of containing Iran (2006-2009).

The Obama Administration (2009-2010):

- overtures of the Obama administration; and
- the policy of containing Iran.

These are seven different policies embracing some 17 years – *a sample sufficiently large for drawing conclusions and making generalizations*. They were chosen because they cover *the most significant US initiatives towards Iran*. Therefore, this set is ideal for examining if there is a “blowback dynamic”.

III. Results of the Research

The Rightness of H1a

This dissertation has put forward that aggressive US policies towards Iran cause strategic blowbacks, which hinder the realization of US national interests in the Middle East and parts of Central Asia. The thesis tested the blowback hypothesis (H1) by applying the theory to the timespan between 1993 and 2010. It has reviewed virtually all major US initiatives related to Iran: The Oslo process, the policy of dual containment, détente under President Khatami, the Bush doctrine and the return to containment, and engagement and containment in the first two years of the Obama administration.

The author has found that the relationship between aggressive US policies and blowback effects is particularly strong in case of the first six policies examined. Those policy initiatives cover the Clinton and Bush administrations and partly the Obama presidency. The *Oslo process* under the Clinton administration was partly designed for isolating Iran. This policy was augmented when Martin Indyk introduced the *policy of dual containment*. Both initiatives rested on the assumption that barring Iran from participation in regional arrangements would hinder its ability to meddle in regional conflicts. Since Iran was never given a seat at the table, it had incentives to act as a spoiler, and so it did. Support for terrorism and hindering the Arab-Israeli process, which indirectly contributed to the emergence of circumstances conducive to the second intifada, came as results of trying to contain Iran. The Khatami presidency’s détente could have led to reconciliation between Washington and Tehran, however, Israel, AIPAC and other domestic political forces in Congress pushed the administration towards keeping up the effort at containing Iran. The US

only offered symbolic gestures, which were not enough to justify Khatami's policies at home. Halfhearted responses and domestic as well as external pressures in the US tied President Clinton's hands. This, in turn tied Khatami's hands in his own domestic political arena.

The strongest evidence of the relationship suggested by the hypothesis is provided by blowback effects under the Bush administration. The Bush presidency applied a relatively simplistic approach to international relations based on the extensive reliance on the use of force. Iran was encircled as a consequence of implementing the *Bush doctrine* and this provided Tehran with incentives to weaken the US in both Iraq and Afghanistan. When Iran offered a constructive proposal, the US rejected it, punishing even the Swiss ambassador acting as an intermediary. Thus, Iran contributed to escalating the Iraqi situation from 2004 to at least 2006. The US administration realized it does not have enough resources needed for fully implementing the Bush doctrine, thus, it returned to a policy of *containment* introducing sanctions against Iran and countering its influence by improving military capabilities of Gulf allies. However, containment under President Bush was based on the same flawed assumption put forward by the Clinton presidency, namely, that it was possible to forge an anti-Iran consensus in the region instead of an anti-Israel one. (See: Nasr-Takeyh [2008]) Both presidencies were aiming to persuade Arab allies that Iran was the real problem in the region. Even if those states were afraid of Iran, they were not willing to confront it openly, but they all agreed on countering Israel. Iran was aware of this division and it used it to promote its own goals by supporting its regional proxies. It sustained its nuclear program and elected a hardliner to power in 2005.

Engagement under the Obama administration was coupled with an initiative deemed aggressive by the dissertation, namely, containment. The combined pursuit of engagement and containment produced blowback effects, the two most important of which were the Iranian rejection of the Geneva fuel swap deal and the decision to enrich uranium at the 19.75% level. (Mousavian [2012]: pp. 365-367) The other important setback was the fact that Iran had not changed its policies. Absent a deal, Iran was motivated to further undermine US policies in the wider Middle East.

These six initiatives demonstrate a strong and (direct) relationship between US aggressive approaches and blowback effects. The final and seventh item of the set examined – the policy of containment under Obama – shows a weak linkage between aggressive US policies and blowback effects. These effects were identifiable, but they were not particularly harsh or as significant as in the case of previous policies examined, and Iran even showed willingness to negotiate at the end of 2012. (See: Cooper-Landler [2012]) The evidence

presented is overwhelmingly circumstantial and indirect, thus, it is difficult to tell whether the relatively minimal blowback effect occurred because of containment *per se*. One possible reason is that the author examined only the short period between the (re)introduction of containment in June 2010 and the start of the Tunisian demonstrations (December 18, 2010), since the latter date had been defined as the end of the time interval researched in the dissertation.

This means that in six out of seven cases the hypothesis provides a good explanation of why the realization of US national interests suffered difficulties. The final policy examined does not provide sufficient evidence of the relationship suggested by the dissertation. Expressed in numbers, this is approximately an 86% accuracy. *Thus, 86% of the time it held that the tougher policies the US pursued toward Iran (Xa), the more likely it was to suffer unintended consequences (Yb).*

The Rightness of H1b

Inverse logic leads one to believe that a Strategy of Seeking the Least Resistance (SSLR) could be the best possible strategy for finding a solution to the US-Iran stalemate (H1b). ***Since aggressive strategies have not worked out, a good case can be made that nonaggressive tools should be given priority.*** The one tool that this leaves the US with is *diplomacy without any sort of pressure*. In fact, the Obama administration started off right – engagement was the way to go forward. To the extent it was pursued, it did produce some limited results such as the negotiations themselves and an initial Iranian agreement to the Geneva offer. However, as pressure was also applied, Iran thought that it was falling for a trap set by the US and that US overtures were never really sincere. It has to be emphasized that it was not the Obama administration *per se* who made a mistake. The case was that domestic and foreign circumstances limited Obama’s maneuvering space. (See: Parsi [2012])

Arguing for a SSLR does not mean that such an approach will inevitably and automatically lead to a solution. However, it does mean that it could create the *circumstances conducive to a solution*. *The difference between the two is essential for understanding the limits of both H1a and H1b.*

Obviously, a number of questions arise concerning the SSLR concept. First, doesn’t the concept of “pure diplomacy” or “diplomacy alone” go against the entire concept of strategic thought and grand strategic thought in particular, both of which focus on an ideal combination of a number of tools in order to reach certain goals? Doesn’t the US make itself

(look) weak by denouncing other tools for pressuring Tehran? It is true that an ideal combination of tools is always the key to achieving specific foreign policy objectives. The US-Iran stalemate, however, is different. The author argues that there are only three options on Iran: airstrikes, containment and engagement. Containment has been pursued by just about every US administration since 1979 without causing a significant change in Iranian policies. It is interesting that whenever a given US administration failed at implementing its individual grand design on Iran or the Middle East in general, it always returned to the strategy of containment. This is particularly the case with the three presidencies examined in this thesis.

Airstrikes on Iranian nuclear facilities and other military installations is another *theoretical* option. However, as the author pointed out earlier, there is a strong consensus among mainstream experts that a military solution to the present stalemate would have disastrous regional consequences, thus, it is not a viable option. (See also: [Balogh [2010a]).

The only strategy that has not been tried yet is “diplomacy alone.” No one sat down to talk with Iran so far without applying some form of pressure. Containment is unable to produce real results apart from significantly weakening Iran and the military option is not a realistic one. Furthermore, a combination of different tools (e.g. pressure and engagement) has not yielded returns either. This leaves the US with only one viable strategy: *the policy of pursuing “diplomacy alone.”* This would also entail the lifting of some of the tougher sanctions as suggested by others. (Parsi-Marashi [2012]) This would deprive Iranian hardliners of their talking point regarding “real change for real change”, meaning that as long as real actions are not taken, rhetoric is not enough by itself.

SSLR is proven right indirectly due to the fact that aggressive strategies do not work and the fact that it has not been tried yet. Thus, H1b is proven right because H1a is proven right. By logically closing out other possibilities, *theoretically*, only one possible path may work and that is the SSLR. *Essentially, SSLR is not entirely different from H1a – H1b is the inverse of H1a.* Of course, in reality, H1b may be difficult to prove right because there is no empirical evidence, since no one has ever tried easing the pressure on Iran while pursuing diplomacy at the same time. Additionally, the counterproductive nature of pursuing aggressive policies does not necessarily mean that pursuing nonaggressive policies will be effective and successful. But that is not what H1a and H1b are about – *H1a and H1b only propose that nonaggressive policies produce circumstances conducive to realizing US national interests.* Thus, in a logical and strictly theoretical sense, H1b is proven right.

There is one more caveat to H1b as applied to the US and Iran. Neoclassical Realism suggests that domestic political constituencies have special relevance in influencing foreign

policies. An SSLR can only work if the domestic political situation in both the US and Iran is permissive in that regard. Diplomatic engagement coupled with the easing of pressure on Iran can be suitable for accommodating certain US and Iranian constituencies, however, there will always be significant domestic political forces, which will not support such solutions. (See: Parsi [2012]) This defines the domestic political limits of applying the SSLR-approach. Furthermore, the assumption that only negotiations may resolve the two countries' dispute also means that Neoclassical Realism has its limits. The inherent assumption behind the prospective success of talks is that direct contacts may help change the mindset of the players. Thus, the final steps toward full reconciliation may at least partly be explained by applying a constructive lens.

The General Application of the Theory of Strategic Blowback

Finally, one also has to address the possibilities of the general application of H1a-b and the blowback hypothesis in general. Can H1 be applied in general, meaning that aggressive policies do not pay off and the SSLR has a universal applicability? The answer to this is that H1 can be applied universally, however, only with significant caveats. It is the philosophy behind H1 that has universal implications. This is to say that it is obviously desirable to follow a strategy which seeks to avoid resistance in general. Thus, the philosophy behind H1 could provide a general guidance for foreign policy makers.

This, however, does not mean that relying on the use of force or other forms of aggressive behavior in international relations should not be part of national foreign policy tools – *quite to the contrary*. Indeed, in some cases the SSLR will imply applying force, provided that the costs and consequences are carefully calculated and considered durable. *Thus, the blowback hypothesis is not a pacifist approach to international relations.* There will be a great number of cases in which the application of force by a state against another will make sense because the attacker will not suffer long term blowback effects. However, the exact implications of applying the theory to other cases needs to be further researched. There could be a point of inflection, beyond which costs associated with aggressive policies and applying force could turn into payoffs – e.g. the application of force by a great power against a middle or a small power not possessing resources of strategic importance (e.g. oil, natural gas, minerals and other raw materials). The difference with the US-Iran relationship is that Iran is still deeply embedded in the regional and global economy despite all the sanctions and containment. Thus, the first blowback effect of any military action against Iran would be

steeply and rapidly increasing world oil prices. Furthermore, Iran is also an important part of the Middle Eastern social and political fabric; hence, in Iran's case there is no inflection point beyond which the escalation of pressure and force could bring positive results.

Afterword

Overall, the author found that the blowback hypothesis has a significant relevance in explaining why the US has not succeeded in remedying problems of the US-Iran relationship so far. The author has to emphasize that a fair share of the responsibility for lack of a solution to the stalemate belongs to Iran. The thesis highlighted how Iranian nefarious activities reduced the chances of resolving the conflict between the two entities. However, this dissertation examined the Iran policy of the US, thus, the US perspective prevailed throughout the research. The author applied a critical approach to US Iran policies in order to try and find the solution to one of the most vexing foreign and security policy dilemmas of contemporary international relations. The main driving force behind this dissertation was not to criticize the US. Rather, the objective was to provide an objective analysis and a possible explanation of what kept the two sides from resolving their conflicts so far. The author sincerely hopes that he succeeded in contributing to the present theoretical debate on the US-Iran stalemate and the discipline of strategic thought in general.

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V. List of the Author's Related Publications

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