

Abandoning policies of hostility and isolation: a punctuated equilibrium model of foreign policy  
change in U.S. foreign relations

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Thesis Project  
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in Public Policy and Administration  
June 2017

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**Abstract:**

This thesis explores the policy dynamics that have at times pushed the United States to normalize its diplomatic relations with states that had for decades been isolated. The model developed here using punctuated equilibrium theory (PET) argues that focusing events within the international system have pushed the United States to re-examine and, in some cases, alter its foreign policies and diplomatic relations toward Communist China, Iran, Cuba and North Korea. Focusing events do not cause policy failure but, instead, lead to a mobilization of foreign policymakers that can potentially cause hostility/isolation policies to be evaluated. Policy failures then break down existing policy images (ideas) and monopolies; this process generates positive feedback that punctuates the existing equilibrium or status quo, resulting in a new equilibrium or foreign policy. Focusing events may fail to generate mobilization and may fail to draw policy alternatives to the top of the “garbage can.” Utilizing punctuated equilibrium theory provides a useful framework that marries international and domestic level variables into a coherent theory to explain why changes in hostility/isolation policies do or do not occur.

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## Section 1: Introduction

On December 14, 2014, President Obama announced to the world that the United States would abandon its Cold War policies toward Cuba and begin the process of restoring diplomatic relations. Obama followed up his December 2014 statement with a state visit to the island on March 21, 2016, and the United States and Cuba look set to continue their slow march to further normalization. In watching news reports, I remained puzzled at why it took 54 years for the United States to change course on its policies toward Cuba. And why did foreign policy toward Cuba change at this specific point in time? While the embargo has created economic problems for the average Cuban citizen, Fidel Castro remained in power and retired of his own volition, and Communism remained the dominant ideology. If sanctions and embargoes were not toppling Fidel Castro in the 1960s, did it not stand to reason that he would not be going away so easily in the twenty-first century? Finally, President Obama, in December 2014, pulled the plug on the last bastion of U.S. Cold War policies and tossed out the playbook that previous U.S. administrations had used in dealing with Cuba. What dynamics occurred that permitted Obama to chuck this Cold War legacy into the proverbial dustbin of history?

Cuba, however, is not the only country with whom the United States has had a long period of no diplomatic relations. The United States and Iran had not had high level talks since the Iranian Revolution and Iranian Hostage situation (1979-1981), and it was not until the Obama Administration decided to deal directly with the Iranian regime in 2015 did the two countries sit down at the same table to hammer out their differences over Iran's nuclear ambitions. There are other examples of such policies on the part of the United States. North Korea and the United States have never had diplomatic relations, and, during the Cold War, China remained isolated by the United States for almost 22 years before Nixon's visit to China

brought Communist China back into the international community. For three of these four countries, the United States ultimately abandoned hostility/isolation policies for engagement and normalization of relations.

What was the impetus for these changes in U.S. foreign policy? New leadership is a possible answer, but a weak one. As Thompson and Dreyer point out, “domestic considerations in the United States restrain U.S. decision makers’ [call for] an end to the rivalry” (Thompson & Dreyer, 2012, pp. 138–139). In fact, The U.S. policy on Cuba has endured eight consecutive administrations since Eisenhower sanctioned the island and cut off diplomatic relations in the last year of his administration. Also, the retirement of Fidel Castro in 2008 did not see any noticeable adjustments in U.S. policy, nor did Cuba’s policy toward the United States change under the aegis of Raul Castro. Also, the United States and North Korea have never had diplomatic relations, and U.S. hostility/isolation policies toward North Korea has lasted for more than nine consecutive U.S. administration, and continues to this day.

I have described instances of these hostility/isolation policies, but what are hostility/isolation policies? I define hostility/isolation policies as those policies where one country attempts to isolate another by cutting off all diplomatic relations and channels and refusing to exchange ambassadors, thus limiting the potential for direct bilateral diplomacy. Another key component to hostility/isolation policies is the use of a variety of sanctions that restrict trade and commerce, travel, and access to international banking and credit. These sanctions are often codified statutes in U.S. public law, for example, Public Law 104–172 or the Iran and Libya Sanctions Act of 1996.

The literature on foreign policy and foreign policy change has been silent on how these policies of hostility/isolation are ultimately abandoned. This paper seeks to provide a framework

for understanding foreign policy change in this unexplored realm of hostility/isolation policies. In doing so, it explains why such hostility/isolation policies have persisted for decades through numerous U.S. administrations and why they are abandoned – sometimes suddenly.

Specifically, I seek to understand why U.S. hostility and isolation policies toward Communist China, Iran, and Cuba endured for decades, only to be abandoned in favor of more normal relations decades later. Rather than developing a theory that explains all foreign policy change, I see, instead, to understand why policies of non-diplomacy have endured for decades are abandoned. The scope of the theory is narrow in its application to a small subset of U.S. foreign policies, but it helps to explain not only change but also stasis and durability of these foreign policies.

Therefore, how can change best be explained? First, change, I argue, is a function of attentiveness; in other words, change happens when policymakers' attentions are drawn to specific hostility/isolation policies. Once foreign policymakers have these hostility/isolation policies in their sights, the potential for policy alternatives to be considered increases as such policies are reappraised – in other words, are such policies worthy of support while still providing the political benefits? Second, I reject the rational choice approach to the study of foreign policy, which argues that a rational actor selects an action most likely to achieve a desired outcome, and argued that decision-makers are boundedly rational (Simon, 1977, 1985). Rational choice theory posits that this actor chooses this preferred outcome after accounting for resources, time, and information constraints (McGinnis, 1994, pp. 67–68). Rational choice theory also takes motives, material variables, and information variables as given (Glaser, 2010, p. 27). If attentiveness drives the model presented here, motives and information cannot be seen as given: they change as attentiveness changes.

Instead of a rational choice model, I explore the policy change dynamics using punctuated equilibrium theory (PET) developed by Baumgartner and Jones (Baumgartner & Jones, 1991, 2009, 2012; Baumgartner, Jones, & True, 2006) to explain periods of stasis, where there is no change or only small incremental change, and periods of punctuated change. My argument is that a sufficiently strong focusing event in the international system increases the attentiveness foreign policymakers, which causes them to pay attention to policy alternatives floating around in the proverbial ‘garbage can’ (M. D. Cohen, March, & Olsen, 1972). As policy alternatives or new ideas are identified, policymakers simultaneously perform a political cost-political benefit analysis of current policies. If foreign policies of hostility/isolation cost more politically, foreign policymakers seek to dismantle them. This process of dismantling and replacing of a policy generates positive feedback, a mechanism that produces change in existing policy.

In the following sections, I seek to demonstrate this dynamic at work. Section 2 examines the literature on foreign policy change and the role of PET in public policy and international relations. Section 3 illustrates how PET functions and determines the universe of cases used to test PET. Section 4 describes the methodology used to test the theory, how variables are operationalized, and how process tracing is utilized to trace the causal mechanisms at work. Section 5 presents three case studies that are used to test the theory that policy failure generates positive feedback leading to policy change; a fourth case shows the complexity involved in changing policy and shows why some policies – even ‘bad’ ones – remain corner stones of U.S. foreign policy.

## Section 2: Literature Review

The study of foreign policy change has elicited a small, but theoretically rich, body of work. Foreign policy change is most often discussed in scholarship that attempts to rectify the theoretical divides in international relations (IR) between the unitary state approaches (Mearsheimer, 1994, 2014; Waltz, 1979) and domestic level approaches (Allison & Halperin, 1972; Allison & Zelikow, 2010; Moravcsik, 1997; Putnam, 1988). The theoretical divide has led many scholars to ask whether change is even worthy of study. “Opinion and scholarship seem to differ with regard to how consistent American foreign policy is and has been across time” (M. A. Hermann, 2012, p. 4), and Rosati, Sampson, and Hagan argue that “its systematic study has basically been ignored” (Rosati, Sampson, & Hagan, 1994, p. 5). They question why foreign policy change (or foreign policy “restructuring,” a more “wholesale, comprehensive change” ) has been relegated to the backburner by scholars of foreign policy and international relations (Rosati et al., 1994, pp. 5, 17).

Despite foreign policy being relegated to the backburner, there have been some efforts to rectify this neglect in the literature. *Foreign Policy Restructuring: How Governments Respond to Global Change*, an edited volume by Jerel Rosati, Joe Hagan, and Martin Sampson, III, note that the study of foreign policy change falls into five categories: political adaptation, foreign policy restructuring, foreign policy stabilization, foreign policy redirection, and foreign economic policy change (Rosati et al., 1994). While each of these four approaches attempts to account for change, each approach attacks the problem differently.

The political adaptation model, developed by James Rosenau, sees the nation-state as the principal unit of analysis. However, he noted that internal components of the state, such as political parties, legislatures, cabinets, and other domestic level factors, are important and

adapted to what he called “external circumstances” (Rosenau, 1981, pp. 1–2). From this, Rosenau identified four patterns of foreign policy adaptation, what he termed preservative, acquiescent, intransigent, and promotive. The preservative pattern was an attempt to respond to both internal and external demands and changes, whereas the acquiescent and intransigent patterns responded to either external or internal demands and change, respectively. Promotive adaptation patterns responded to neither. From these formulations, Rosenau sought to explain how nation-states adapted to transnational demands within an interdependent environment ((Rosati et al., 1994, p. 9).

The concept of foreign policy restructuring by Kal Holsti (Holsti, 2015) examined the foreign policies of small states. Holsti argued that small states were more likely to change or restructure their foreign policies than larger states, who would more likely be satisfied with their foreign policies since change would be too costly (Holsti, 2015, p. 7). Holsti saw the international environment as the primary determinant of change and noted that change was more likely to occur on the part of smaller states when such changes did not interfere with the security and economic interests of larger states (2015, p. 218).

The concept of foreign policy stabilization, elucidated by Kjell Goldmann (1988), saw foreign policy as ‘stuck’ between two extremes. External pressures force states to adapt their foreign policies while simultaneously being constrained by the fact that states have a tendency to keep doing what they do (Goldmann, 1988, pp. 3–4). For change to occur, Goldmann argued, stabilizers would need to be removed to allow inputs into the system to be processed. Goldmann also postulates the existence of what he terms “negative feedback” or “learning,” whereby the policies *themselves* are the source of change (1988, p. 6).

The theory of foreign policy redirection proposed by Charles Hermann (C. F. Hermann, 1990) argues that change comes from four different sources: a leader, a bureaucracy, domestic restructuring, or external shocks. Significant foreign policy change occurs when there is a change in means, ends, and overall orientation. However, before change can occur, there is an intervening decision-making process that separates the agents of change from the actual change in question. As Rosati, Hagan, and Sampson note, Hermann's theory deals with "day-to-day foreign policy" and seeks to explain why government seek to correct their foreign policy and "...move in a different policy direction" (C. F. Hermann, 1990, p. 5).

The last category, that focuses on foreign economic policy change, seeks to understand not only change but continuity. Two works exemplify this concept: G. John Ikenberry's *Reasons of State: Oil Capacities of American Government* (1988) and David Lake's *Power, Protection, and Free Trade: International Sources of U.S. Commercial Strategy, 1887-1939* (1988). Lake saw changes in foreign policy as a product of how society and state process changes in the international economic structure. For Lake, the interplay between the executive (which was more responsive to international changes) and the legislative (which tended to favor the status quo in favor of domestic and societal concerns) serve as the theoretical locus (Lake, 1988, p. 3; Rosati et al., 1994, p. 13). Whereas Lake sought to understand change, Ikenberry explored the reasons for continuity or stasis. Ikenberry looks at how the U.S. government relied on the market to regulate itself while "the state remained on the periphery of business, primarily as a peace keeper and a regulator" (Ikenberry, 1988, p. 188). Ikenberry argues that the fragmentary nature of the American system of government has thus far allowed businesses and market concerns to dominate energy policy, which, in turn, has retarded the forces of change (Ikenberry, 1988, pp. 193, 197).

More recent work conceives of foreign policy change as cyclical while seeking to combine disparate theories or utilizing theories of public policy to create a new body of theoretical work. Rosati seeks to show how U.S. foreign policy change is a cycle that moves between politics of the status quo and politics of adjustment. Rosati's model explains change as the interplay between state, society, and (international) environment. This interaction, Rosati argues, is what drives cycles of change between the politics of the status quo and politics of transition. While slightly analogous to punctuated equilibrium, the scope of Rosati's theory identifies four distinct eras of foreign policy change: the Interwar years (between WWI and WWII), the Cold War years, the Vietnam War, and the Post-Vietnam years (Rosati, 1994). Troubling is Rosati's use of the term "cyclical" (1994, p. 239), implying that foreign policy change occurs in cycles or is predictably recurrent. While Rosati's theory might explain some foreign policy change, by his logic, foreign policy toward Cuba and North Korea should have undergone changes at the end of the Cold War.

David Welch (2005), in contrast, argues for the creation of theories of foreign policy *change* by developing a decision based theory by combining three disparate theories (2005, p. 22). Welch's theory merges organizational theory, cognitive and motivational psychology, and prospect theory to explain policy change. These three theories, he notes, situate change as a rare occurrence (2005, p. 30). Ultimately, Welch's theory is focused around the decision makers' perception of loss (Alden and Amran, 2012, pp. 92-93), and Alden and Arman consider Welch's approach and focus on human decisions and behavior to be extremely narrow because Welch's theory does not sufficiently recognize the role of institutions in foreign policy analysis (p. 93). Welch also notes that foreign policy change is more likely to occur when current policies are

incurring painful costs (Welch, 2005, p. 46). Yet the question remains: how are these costs calculated? Are they economic, military/security, or political?

The last effort is more of a “call to arms.” Howard Lentner (2006) argues, yes, there is room for different and novel approaches to studying foreign policy, urging scholars to utilize theoretical tools developed for the study of domestic policy. Foreign policy, while often stuck on the debate between structure and agency (Alden & Aran, 2011, p. 1), has the potential to move beyond this debate by utilizing theories of public policy to analyze and explain developments of foreign policy and bridging the divide between domestic matters and foreign affairs (Lentner, 2006, p. 169).

One such theory of public policy, punctuated equilibrium theory (PET), is ripe for the choosing. While not unknown to international relations scholars, PET has been utilized in international relations by scholars seeking to understand how rivalries endure and end (Bennett, 1998; Diehl, 1998; Diehl & Goertz, 2001; Thompson & Dreyer, 2012). For example, Diehl and Goertz (2001, pp. 138–141) see the utility in employing PET in their research. Since punctuations of the equilibrium are evident only over longer periods of time, PET is an optimal theory for studying enduring rivalries with its long period of stasis. The approach of Diehl and Goertz situates enduring rivalries squarely at the systemic level of international politics, and they assume and emphasize (and rightly so) “a policy model of state behavior” in which “states make relatively long-term policy commitments and then stick with them, until some change in the environment dislodges those preferences and policy choices” (2001, p. 139). Lacking in their model, however, is an explanation for how and why those long-term policy commitments are ultimately abandoned. Environmental change plays a role, but it is not the tipping point. It is, at best, an accelerant. Their focus is changing how war is studied by emphasizing “other aspects of

international and militarized conflict” in order to emphasize not one dependent variable, but many (2001, p. 132).

Yet explanations of enduring rivalries are inadequate for understanding stasis and change. Because the president’s time and attention are limited and he/she is boundedly rational (Simon, 1977, 1983, 1985), foreign policy relies on subsystem dynamics to handle routine matters while assisting the president in devising strategies for issues that have captured his or her attention. Environmental shocks play a role, but not all shocks are created equal, and, more importantly, not all shocks capture the same level of attentiveness all the time. A president’s economy of attention is scarce, and there are constant competitions for the President’s time and attention (Wood & Peake, 1998). These subsystems help to explain why isolation policies toward China, Iran, and Cuba have remained dominant for so long, despite the fact the United States did not achieve the desired goals of regime change.

The use of PET to understand stasis and change helps to explain why a foreign policy has persisted for decades while helping to explain why isolation policies abruptly end. In other words, what are the conditions that must be in place that allow for change to occur? Placing these arguments within the frameworks developed by scholars of enduring rivalries (Bennett, 1998; Diehl, 1998; Diehl & Goertz, 2001; Thompson & Dreyer, 2012) does not fully explain state behavior. For example, when Nixon worked toward rapprochement toward China, did the United States and China cease to be rivals? Has Obama’s reaching out to the Iranians to secure the best nuclear deal possible did not lead to the United States and Iran becoming allies or signal a change in policy? The United States engages with many countries, many of whom are not allies, via competitive geopolitical relationships, diplomatic relations, and trade. Ironically, the United States and the Soviet Union were intense rivals during the Cold War. Yet both countries

maintained embassies in the other and maintained diplomatic relations to reduce the possibility of nuclear war.

Public policy theories like Punctuated Equilibrium Theory (PET) offer scholars a chance to situate the development of foreign policy within the greater policymaking process (at least, in the United States). Punctuated equilibrium theory is ideal for studying this interplay, because “...the separated institutions, overlapping jurisdictions, and relatively open access to mobilizations...combine to create a dynamic between the politics of subsystems and the macro politics of Congress and the presidency...” (Baumgartner, Jones, & Mortensen, 2014, p. 61). PET further considers the role of actors who are often marginalized in the study of international relations and foreign policy, such as the role of Congress in the determination of foreign policy (Carter and Scott, 2009; 2011). The application of public policy theories, such as PET, also have the potential elucidate the role of special interests and their effects on Congressional action (Mearsheimer & Walt, 2007). Theories of public policy can also help to understand the power and influence of ethnic and foreign lobbies and how pressure they apply or their reduction of information asymmetries functions as a form of negative feedback (Pevehouse & Vabulas, 2014, pp. 13-14). PET’s analysis of policy images, policy monopolies, feedback and policy entrepreneurship might help to provide important insights into how change processes take place and how attentiveness drives policy change and stasis. Even though the presidency is the primary venue by which foreign policy issues enter the U.S. system (Wood & Peake, 1998, p. 173), the existing literature tends to commit the same errors as unitary actor models by “black-boxing” the foreign policy environment. PET offers the potential for opening up this “black-box” by looking at how the attention of foreign policymakers is captured. If the president’s economy of attention

is scarce, then attentiveness, not preferences, is the key independent variable that maintains the status quo or permits changes to occur in U.S. foreign policy.

## Section 3: Theory & Case Selection

### 3.1: Theory

Because information and motives can change, punctuated equilibrium theory (PET) provides greater theoretical versatility than the rational actor model. Undergirding the model developed here (Figure 1) are two key assumptions: 1) that attentiveness determines choice reversals and 2) that policymakers are boundedly rational. First, I concur with Baumgartner, Jones, and Mortensen that attentiveness determines choice reversals while preferences remain fixed (2014, p. 68). Because of the importance of attentiveness, *focusing events* – sudden and uncommon events with the potential for greater harm in the future (Birkland, 1998, p. 54) – are the most logical place to start in evaluating policy change (Figure 1, #1).<sup>1</sup> The stronger the focusing event – what Birkland (1998) says must be “focal enough” or powerful enough to capture the limited attention of policymakers – the greater the chance that an hostility/isolation policy will be deemed a failure and be abandoned. An event is “focal enough” when media output spikes, signaling increased attention. These spikes in media attention, I argue, often bring policy alternatives to the foreground and cause policymakers to pay greater attention to specific hostility/isolation policies connected to these focusing events.

Second, because policymakers are boundedly rational (Simon 1977, 1985), they can only pay attention to a finite number of policy issues at any one time. Focusing events, if strong enough, lead to increased attention and mobilization regarding a foreign policy (Figure 1, #2). Within policy subsystems or monopolies, issues, usually considered in parallel, are now processed serially as attention focuses on the policy image (Baumgartner & Jones, 2012, p. 4). Increased attention can lead to claims of policy failure as the increased attention “can lead to

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout the text of Section 3, I have placed numerical indicators that refer to Figure 1, the Causal Model of Foreign Policy Change.

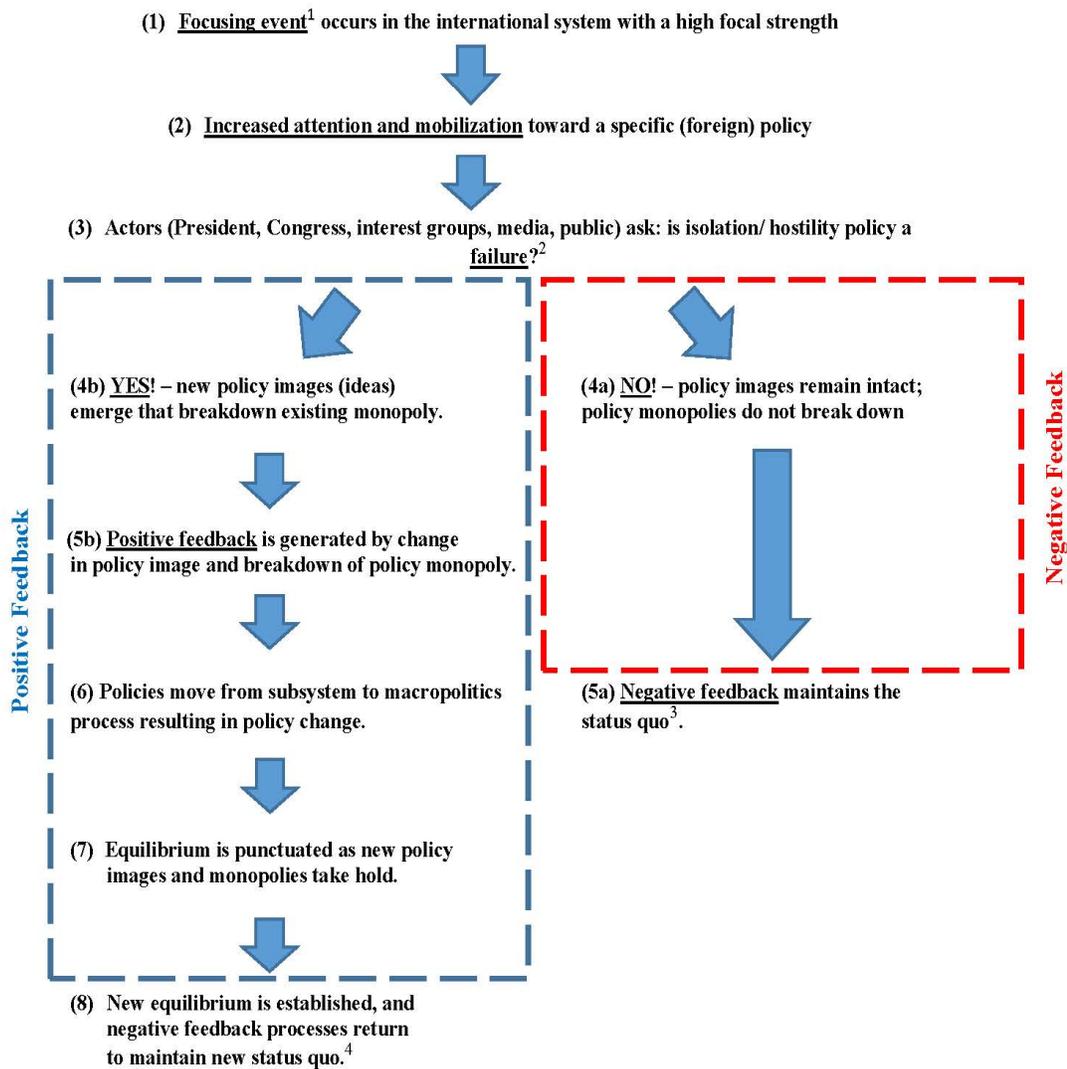
more claims of policy failure and a more active search for solutions, leading to a greater likelihood of policy change” (Birkland, 1998, p. 56).

What is a policy failure? McConnell notes that “...the word failure implies undesirability and the breaching of a goal, aspiration or value” (McConnell, 2016, p. 669). More specifically, a policy failure is when current policies are no longer achieving political and program goals that policymakers prefer. Policymakers thus conclude that continuing such a policy or policies affect the potential for reaching political aspirations (Walsh, 2006, pp. 495–499). It is critical that failure not be conceived of as indivisible or wholly objective; McConnell argues that there are an array of failure criteria by which policies can be measured (McConnell, 2016, p. 669).

How do policymakers arrive at this failure calculation? (Figure 1, #3). I argue that policymakers undertake a form of cost-benefit analysis. Cost-benefit analysis is often associated with rational choice theory, but some scholars argue otherwise. Gormely and Balla dispute that cost-benefit analyses “[resemble] bounded rationality in practice” due to the fact that such cost-benefit analyses suffer from incomplete and imperfect information (Gormley & Balla, 2013, p. 51). Utilizing McConnell’s public policy failure criteria, I conceive of four political costs that a particular policy pays if left in place. These costs are not fiscal but *political* of which there are four: 1) an electoral liability, 2) creates additional issues arise that cannot be suppressed, 3) jeopardizes other foreign policy goals, or 4) no longer provides additional political benefits because of lost support.

The first cost is clear-cut; a failed foreign policy has the potential to damage the electoral prospects of those in power. The second cost, the potential for a policy to create additional issues that cannot be suppressed, is not uncommon in foreign policy. For example, failure to negotiate

Figure 1: Causal Mode of Foreign Policy Change



<sup>1</sup> Independent variable 1

<sup>2</sup> Intervening variable 2

<sup>3</sup> Dependent variable ( $Y_{\text{status quo}}$ )

<sup>4</sup> Dependent variable ( $Y_{\text{punctuated equilibrium}}$ )

 = causal mechanism

directly with Iran on their nuclear ambitions was pushing other Middle East states to start their own nuclear programs or “rent” nuclear devices (McDowall, 2015, July 21). The third cost is when a foreign policy jeopardizes other foreign policy goals. In other words, failure to correct one failed policy has the potential to jeopardize a different foreign policy goal. When Communist China and the Soviet Union underwent an ideological rift, a failure to act might have jeopardized U.S. efforts to get the Soviets to support American initiatives to reduce nuclear proliferation (Gavin, 2004). The fifth and final political cost is when a foreign policy no longer provides political benefits due to lost support. U.S. Cold War sanctions and embargo toward Cuba are an example of this; as the Cuban-American demographics changed, younger Cubans were no longer reliable supporter of Cold War sanctions and embargo (Krogstad, 2014). Foreign policymakers must then decide whether the political costs borne from these foreign policies are worth paying.

This failure calculation is not a deterministic process. Even though focusing events have the potential to focalize dissatisfaction with the status quo and promote policy change, this dynamic does not always lead to a breakdown of existing policy monopolies and their respective policy images (Baumgartner & Jones, 2009, p. 25). Policy monopolies or subsystems are structural arrangements or groups that share an understanding over a particular issue or policy. This monopoly limits political participation and is buttressed by a powerful supporting image or idea. Often, policy monopolies are also “institutionalised” by rules or resources (Baumgartner & Jones, 2009, pp. 4, 6–9; Cairney, 2013; Redford, 1969, pp. 83, 96–106; Thurber, 1996, p. 82). Two examples of an “institutionalised” policy monopoly would be the sanctions against Iran and Cuba codified in U.S. law.

As Jones (2001) has indicated, policymakers “tend to stick with a particular decision design...until forced to reevaluate it” (Baumgartner et al., 2014, p. 71). Charles Hermann argues that change processes are not deterministic responses to events within the international system alone but are instead the result of a decision-making process (1990, p. 20). An important assumption that undergirds PET is that that this decision-making process is boundedly rational (Simon, 1977, 1983). What this means is that a change in policy (what Baumgartner, Jones, and Mortensen call “choice reversals”) does not come from a “flip-flop of preferences,” but, instead, comes from shifts in attention (Baumgartner et al., 2014, p. 69) generated by focusing events. These shifts in attention cause policymakers to ask whether a given policy is *still* achieving the political aspirations or goals (Walsh, 2006, pp. 495–499) of a given U.S. Administration.

Not every policy relating to U.S. diplomatic relations between states is reconceived as a policy failure. Such policies, even when questioned as failures both publicly and privately, continue to meet established political and program goals, despite having been preceded by a powerful focusing event. This dynamic happens “because political institutions amplify the tendency toward decisional stasis” and policy alternatives do not come into focus (Baumgartner et al., 2014, p. 71). This is dynamic is what Baumgartner and Jones call negative feedback (Figure 1, #4a)

Policy alternatives then remain inaccessible, buried deep in the “garbage can” (M. D. Cohen et al., 1972). Serial shifts of attention do not occur, and the equilibrium is not punctuated (Figure 1, #5a). Any change that might occur would then be incremental in nature or would simply maintain the status quo, a hallmark of negative feedback processes that typifies policy monopolies (Baumgartner et al., 2006, p. 8). The focusing event captures the attentiveness of policymakers, but policy alternatives remain elusive. U.S. policy toward North Korea, for

example, typifies this dynamic wherein repeated focusing events in the form of nuclear and missile testing preserve the status quo of continued sanctions and international condemnation through the United Nations. North Korea's intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) and nuclear testing are examples of focusing events that *seem* focal enough, but are instead contested by experts who see little chance that the isolated regime will give up its small arsenal (Sanger, 2016). Repeated nuclear tests render such events more common, which undercuts the focal strength of these successive nuclear events. Therefore, the status quo remains, even though, on the face of it, current U.S. policy does not deter North Korea from its nuclear ambition.

Once a focusing event has captured the attention of policymakers, that focusing event must be strong enough to cause foreign policymakers to seek out viable policy alternatives. Policymakers ask whether a policy continues to meet the political aspirations of the President. If political aspirations are in jeopardy, the policy in question is considered a failure. Evidence of policy failure can be found in public (and private statements) made by foreign policymakers in the context for U.S. foreign policy goals. When foreign policy goals are in jeopardy, a breakdown of the existing policy monopoly or policy subsystem begins to occur, and policy alternatives from the 'garbage can' come into view (Figure 1, #4b).

Therefore, policy change occurs when either a policy monopoly or policy image begin to break down; a breakdown of one causes a breakdown in the other. For example, new participants within a policy monopoly or subsystem have the potential to upset structural arrangements or groups. New participants might not share the same understanding over a policy. Also, a policy monopoly might remain strongly "institutionalized" but breakdown as the image serving as its foundation crumbles. Dramatic changes in the Obama Administration's policies toward Iran and Cuba typify this dynamic. First, these new policies are not only the result of a change in image or

ideas on how policy should be. They are also the result of the entry of new participants within foreign policy subsystems or monopolies who no longer share or support those understandings developed during the Bush Administration. Second, even though the policy image has changed, many “institutionalized” policies remain in the form of sanctions and embargoes anchored by U.S. public law statutes requiring greater issue expansion within the U.S. Congress.

The failure of a specific foreign policy – in this case, hostility/isolation policies – causes the policy image – the ideas about how a given policy is to be understood – to undergo changes that cause policy monopolies to break down. Policymakers are no longer satisfied with the status quo as increased attention focuses on real or perceived failures in hostility/isolation policies. As attentiveness increases, preferences shift and alternatives begin to compete with existing policy as policies are analyzed. This increase in attentiveness allows for new participants to be brought into the policymaking process to develop a new policy image or a new *understanding* on how to define the problem. The policy monopoly disintegrates as the old way of doing things no longer meets the foreign policy needs of the administration in power. This process of policy monopoly disintegration and policy image generates positive feedback (Figure 1, #5b) as each successive input or change leads to further changes and serves as the causal mechanism of the theoretical model developed here. In American foreign policy, the President must work quickly to re-secure the foreign policy monopoly and generate a new policy image undergirded by these new alternatives before other actors – namely Congress – can interfere.

This breakdown of the monopoly and reformulation of the policy image continues to generate positive feedback as the policy in question moves out of the policy subsystem into the macropolitical process involving the President (Figure 1, #6). This dynamic leads to an abandonment of hostility/isolation policies as the President abandons the old policy image for the

new (Figure 1, #7). The policy equilibrium becomes punctuated as more and more inputs lead to a policy of normalization of diplomatic relations (Figure 1, #8). For example, between 1967 and 1972, Nixon had gone from being lukewarm and reticent toward China, to relaxing trade and travel restrictions, and, finally, to visiting China and meeting Chairman Mao. Over time, the policy image (ideas) became more positive towards China with the U.S. formally recognizing China diplomatically on December 15, 1978, under President Jimmy Carter.

Once a policy enters the macropolitical process, the potential for change increases as positive feedback continues to build, as policy image and monopoly are attacked and eventually are supplanted with a new policy and image, resulting in a new equilibrium. Positive feedback does not continue indefinitely, as negative feedback processes take over (Figure 1, #8), thus maintaining the new equilibrium created through the processes of positive feedback.

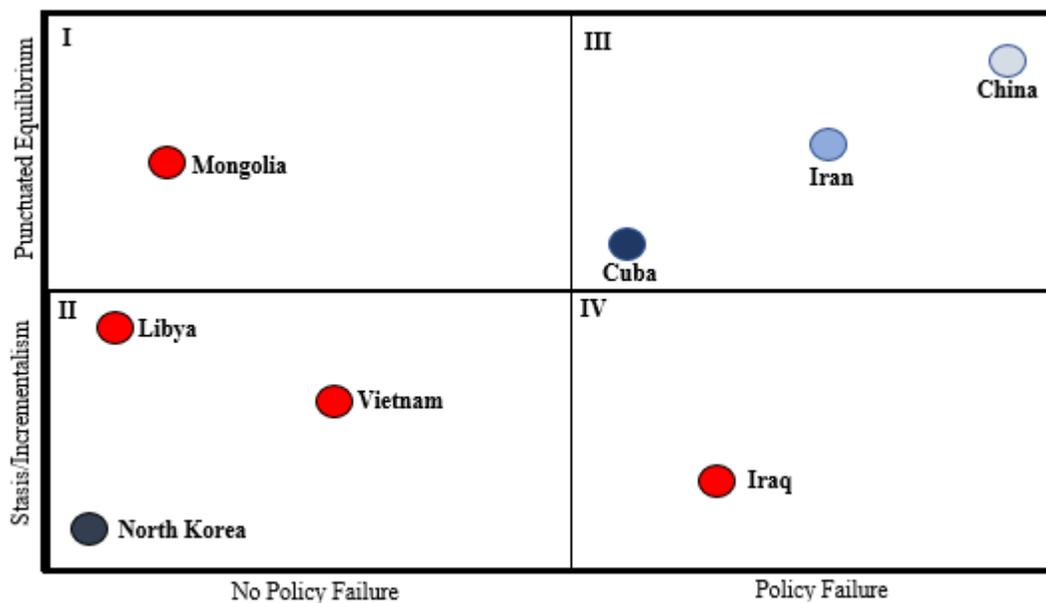
To show evidence of this dynamic, four case studies conducted here examine the causal mechanisms at work; the next section explores the logic behind the cases selected for investigation.

### **3.2: Case Selection**

For the theory developed here, the scope conditions are tight, and applies only to those cases of policy change showing a punctuation of the equilibrium due to policy failure. Figure 2 below shows the universe of cases using concepts of fuzzy set logic developed by Charles Ragin (Ragin, 2008). The *x*-axis in matrix represents our intervening variable of no policy failure/policy failure, while the *y*-axis of our matrix represents our outcome, stasis/incrementalism or punctuated equilibrium. Cases are sorted based on the presence of our intervening variable ( $X_2$ ) and the outcome assigned; they are then sorted in four quadrants (I, II, III, and IV).

The theory developed here explores those countries located in quadrant III where there are instances of policy failure leading to a punctuation of the equilibrium and change of the hostility/isolation policies. These three cases indicated by the blue markers – China (light blue), Iraq (sky blue), and Cuba (dark blue) – reflect varying degrees of policy failure, with China showing the highest degree of failure and Cuba the lowest degree of failure. They also offer the clearest opportunity for theory-testing due to long duration of the hostility/isolation policy or stasis. A fourth case on North Korea, represented by the black dot, represents a lack of policy failure and shows that not all focusing events lead to policy failure and then policy change.

Figure 2: Case Selection Matrix



The matrix expressed in figure 2 makes use of set theoretic logic whereby cases are selected “where  $X_1$  or  $X_2$ ] and  $Y$  are present along with the relevant scope conditions” (Beach & Pedersen, 2013, pp. 147–148). The use of set theoretic logic allows for the conceptualization of variables away from “regression-predicted scores,” where independent and intervening variables fluctuate along a range of values, to fuzzy set principles where differences in degree can be

evidenced (2013, p. 148). For example, the intervening variable, policy failure ( $X_2$ ), can have degrees of failure (on a range of 1 to 3). A degree of failure of 0 (in other words, no policy failure) would place such a case outside of the set of cases in quadrant III in either quadrant I or II.

Cases indicated in “red,” while not explored here, are situated *a priori* into their respective quadrants to show that a larger universe of hostility/isolation cases exists from those presented here. They are presented here to show that punctuated equilibrium can also occur in the absence of policy failure and that not all policy failure leads to punctuated equilibrium. For example, possible case studies on Libya and Vietnam (quadrant II) show no policy failure is observed, and policy change occurs incrementally. Punctuated equilibrium might potentially occur in a case study on Mongolia (quadrant I) where no policy failure can be seen. The United States has had no relations with Mongolia since Mongolia’s entry to the UN in 1961 (although several attempts were made). Diplomatic relations were not established until the fall of the Soviet Union (focusing event) when the United States and Mongolia ultimately exchanged memoranda of understanding, and diplomatic relations formally began (Dumbaugh & Morrison, 2009).

Quadrant III, therefore, is a collection of “typical cases.” These are explored in Section 5 and are typical because they feature instances of our independent and intervening variable while sharing the same outcome. These three cases also provide an opportunity to test the theory of punctuated equilibrium within the causal model developed here that shows how focusing events lead to the failure of isolation policies. These policy failures then cause a breakdown of policy image and monopoly that generates positive feedback and culminates in the punctuation of the equilibrium. The fourth case on North Korea shows that focusing events do not always lead to

policy failure, indicating that negative feedback processes can often dominate even in the face of a powerful focusing event. In other words, without policy failure, punctuated equilibrium (or dramatic and explosive change) does not necessarily occur.

The next section explores the methodology used to test the theory presented here by employing within-case process tracing to show the causal mechanisms at work (Figure 1).

## Section 4: Testing

### 4.1: Methodology

To demonstrate the causal mechanisms outlined in figure 1, this thesis utilizes process tracing in four case studies to show that focusing events ( $X_1$ , the independent variable) of a given focal strength cause policymakers to re-evaluate existing foreign policy. This re-evaluation of policy causes policymakers to deem a policy a success or failure ( $X_2$ , the intervening variable). While a focusing event is the trigger that “activates” our causal model, the intervening variable determines the direction the model takes akin to a railroad “switch.” In other words, if a policy is considered a failure and policymakers overcome conditions of ambiguity by selecting a new policy to replace the old one, positive feedback is generated as policy images and monopolies break down and punctuated equilibrium occurs. If a policy is not recognized as a failure, the status quo persists; punctuated equilibrium does not occur. Policy continues the same “track” with the potential for minor or incremental changes.

The goal of this study is to understand *why* long-standing isolation policies suddenly change, thus upsetting the status quo and decades of equilibrium or stasis. The model developed here applies only to the abandonment of isolation. The scope of the case studies presented in this paper are framed by focusing event(s) that either trigger or do not trigger the causal mechanism presented here.

Therefore, the study presented here examines the causal mechanism or lack of causal mechanism in the following cases and time periods:

Table 1: Cases and outcomes

<i>Country/Case</i>	<b>Period of Stasis</b>	<b>Length of stasis (years)</b>	<b>Punctuated Equilibrium</b>	<b>Principal Focusing Event</b>	<b>Outcome</b>
<b>Communist China (PRC)</b>	1950-1972	22	February 21, 1972 – December 15, 1978	Ussuri River Clashes (1969)	<i>Diplomatic relations are restored quickly over an almost seven-year period.</i>
<b>Iran</b>	1980-2015	35	October 1, 2009 – July 14, 2015	Israel/Iran Security Dilemma (2015)	<i>Nuclear agreement reached. Some sanctions persist, though.</i>
<b>Cuba</b>	1961-2015	54	December 16, 2014 - June 30, 2015	Drop in World Oil Prices (2014)	<i>Diplomatic relations formally restored on June 30, 2015; some sanctions persist, requiring Congressional action.</i>
<b>North Korea</b>	1945-2016	71	No punctuated equilibrium	Testing of nuclear devices (2006, 2009, 2013, 2016)	<i>U.S. policy has adjusted incrementally in response to North Korea's continued nuclear weapons development.</i>

The focus of the study is to understand why stasis is replaced by the periods of punctuated equilibrium highlighted in blue, leading to a new period of equilibrium or stasis after such periods of dramatic change. The fourth case on North Korea highlights the importance of identifying policy failure and why isolationist/hostility policies toward North Korea remain unchanged and not deemed a failure, despite repeated focusing events emanating from North Korea in the form of increased nuclear and ICBM testing.

These four cases are ideal for studying punctuated equilibrium. First, each case features one or more focusing events. Because hostility/isolation policies began with one administration and survive through successive presidential administrations, locating the critical juncture with

new administrations will unlikely provide the answers as to why hostility/isolation policies change.

Second, studying longer time horizons allows for a proper understanding of the patterns of stasis (status quo) and change (punctuated equilibrium). Rapid change, Diehl and Goertz point out, is expected at the beginning and end of a particular process: “If one examines a policy at random for a short period of time, one is likely to find stasis or incremental change. It is necessary to examine the long term or focus on specific beginning or end periods to evaluate the punctuated equilibrium model” (Diehl & Goertz, 2001, p. 138). The case studies presented here examine the end periods or the discontinuation of what is referred to as policy failure (or not, as the North Korea case shows) as political goals are no longer achieved with existing policy.

#### **4.2: Process Tracing**

Process tracing methods are utilized to understand and trace causal mechanisms, “a complex system, which produces an outcome by the interaction of a number of parts” (Glennan, 1996, p. 52). Process tracing thus seeks to understand the “intervening causal process,” what George and Bennett break down as the causal chain and the causal mechanism,” between the independent variable and the outcome or dependent variable (George & Bennett, 2005, pp. 206–7). Process tracing allows us to peek inside the “box of causality” to better understand these intermediate factors between our independent and dependent variable (Gerring, 2007, p. 45). More importantly, process tracing allows for the research to make strong within-case inferences about causal processes at work (Beach & Pedersen, 2013, p. 2).

Derek Beach and Rasmus Pedersen argue that process tracing does not have just one purpose but, instead, highlights three distinct types of process tracing: theory-testing, theory-building, and explaining outcome (Beach & Pedersen, 2013, pp. 11–12). Here the first type,

theory-testing process tracing, is employed to study changes in U.S. isolation policy toward China, Iran, and Cuba. The theory-testing variant is preferred over the theory-building variant because of the utilization of PET to guide us in understanding the causal mechanisms at work once a policy is/is not deemed a failure. Theory-testing process tracing is the preferred method when there is a theory to guide us that can potentially explain the link between our independent and dependent variable or outcome (Beach & Pedersen, 2013, p. 16).

### **4.3: Some caveats**

The use of process tracing case studies generates several important caveats. First, process tracing case studies must avoid a straight narrative of events and focus instead on presenting a “step-by-step test” of each part of the theorized mechanism(s) at work (Beach & Pedersen, 2013, p. 5). Second, when undertaking this “step-by-step test,” a distinction needs to be made regarding the type of causality being studied. Is the causation probabilistic or deterministic? Beach and Pedersen (2013) note that probabilistic causal relationships make more sense with cross-case methods because the mean causal effects are examined over the entire population or a sample population. Because the phenomenon investigated here, the abandonment of isolation policies, is done over a handful of cases, a deterministic approach makes the most sense because the focus is “whether X is either a necessary and/or sufficient cause of Y in an individual case” (2013, p. 27).

### **4.4: Measuring focusing event(s)**

Focusing events are isolated by counting the number of stories reported in the media on any given focusing event by performing keyword searches on ProQuest Historical Newspapers and NewsBank database. It is not sufficient to compare the number of articles since the scope and depth of focusing events make such comparison difficult.

Table 2: Focusing Events by Case

<i>Birkland's logic</i>	Focusing Events by Country						
	China		Iran		Cuba		N. Korea
	Testing of nuclear device (1964, 1966)	Ussuri River Clashes (1969)	Iran Currency Crisis (2012)	Israel/Iran Security Dilemma (2015)	Fidel Castro resigns as Cuban leader (2008)	Drop in World Oil Prices (2015)	Nuclear bomb testing (2006, 2009, 2013, 2016)
<i>Large number of people potentially affected?</i>	<u>Yes.</u> Testing done underground or in secret; U.S. foreign policymakers concerned for possible nuclear war with China.	<u>Yes.</u> At least 1 billion people in USSR & China could be affected should conflict turn into full-scale war and spread regionally.	<u>No.</u> Limited market exposure due to sanctions. Many countries trading with Iran utilized gold to avoid sanctions (Early, 2015).	<u>Yes.</u> Israeli bombing could lead to another Arab-Israeli war, regional instability.	<u>No.</u> Leadership change not surprising and had no immediate impact on U.S. or Cuban foreign policy.	<u>Yes.</u> All oil-exporting countries and populations.	<u>Yes.</u> Although testing done underground, nuclear strike feared in S. Korea, possibly Japan, and, however improbable, Guam.
<i>Focusing event causes visible and tangible harms (to US foreign policy)?</i>	<u>Yes.</u> United States worried that by allowing China to develop nuclear weapons, other states would ignore U.S. warnings in the future.	<u>Yes.</u> Breakdown of foreign relations between USSR and China could lead to a third World War; military casualties from clashes.	<u>No.</u> Sanctions were performing as intended.	<u>Yes.</u> Israel threats of unilateral action had potential to push Iran closer to acquiring a nuclear weapon.	<u>No.</u> If anything, a change of leadership had the potential to improve U.S./Cuban relations.	<u>Yes.</u> Low oil prices limit any potential subsidies Cuba might receive, generating political instability.	<u>Yes.</u> U.S. foreign policy's inability to rein in N. Korea could make it more difficult to stop other country's from developing nuclear weapons.
<i>Event is rare and/or novel?</i>	<u>No.</u> U.S. Intelligence aware of Chinese efforts to test/explode a nuclear device and Soviet assistance.	<u>Yes.</u> Clashes were unexpected given the alliance between the Soviets and Communist Chinese.	<u>No.</u> Currency crises was not unexpected given U.S. and UN sanctions.	<u>Yes.</u> Israeli statements made to U.S. Congress that publicly criticized Obama seen as surprising.	<u>No.</u> Given Castro's illness at the time, many expected him to step down.	<u>Yes.</u> Market and price fluctuations are notoriously difficult to predict.	<u>No.</u> U.S. intelligence aware of K. Q. Kahn network that supplied N. Korea with know-how and materials to construct nuclear devices.
<i># of media reports</i>	267 <sup>2</sup>	541 <sup>3</sup>	585 <sup>4</sup>	368 <sup>5</sup>	129 <sup>6</sup>	3778 <sup>7</sup>	2682 – 1887 – 2367 - 2224 <sup>8</sup>
<i>Focal strength score</i>	2 (medium)	3 (high)	0 (low)	3 (high)	0 (low)	3 (high)	2 (medium)

<sup>2</sup> Using ProQuest Historical Newspapers database, I performed the following command line search: ti(("China" OR "Red China" OR "Peking" OR "Communist China" NOT "Indo-China")) AND ti(("A-Bomb" or "H-Bomb" or "Nuclear" OR "The Bomb")) between January 1, 1954 to December 31, 1958.

<sup>3</sup> Using ProQuest Historical Newspaper database, I performed the following command line search: "Ussuri River" from January 1, 1964 to December 31, 1974.

<sup>4</sup> Using NewsBank Database, I performed a multiple Headline search with keywords: Iran AND Currency between 2008 to 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Using NewsBank Database, I performed a multiple Headline search with keywords: Israel AND Netanyahu AND Iran from 2008 to 2015.

<sup>6</sup> Using NewsBank Database, I performed a multiple Headline search with keywords: Fidel Castro AND Steps Down AND Resignation from 2005 to 2015.

<sup>7</sup> Using NewsBank Database, I performed a multiple Headline search with keywords: Oil prices AND low from 2005 to 2015.

<sup>8</sup> Using NewsBank Database, I performed a multiple Headline search with keywords: North Korea AND Nuclear Test from 2004 to 2016.

Therefore, I utilize Birkland’s qualitative logic of focal strength to compare the intensity of two focusing events within each case (Table 2). Focal strength can be determined on a scale of low (0-1 affirmatives), medium (2 affirmatives), and high (3 affirmatives) depending upon the number of criteria each focusing event meets.

#### 4.5: Measuring policy failure

Because foreign policy does not always result in some tangible product (such as building a new school or passage of a particular piece of legislation), discursive or constructivist approaches along with rational approaches should be employed simultaneously in evaluating the success or failure of a given policy (McConnell, 2010, pp. 350–351).

McConnell defines a successful policy as one that “...achieves the goals that proponents set out to achieve and attracts no criticism of any significance and/or support is virtually universal” (2010, p. 351). Because our definition of policy failure involves “political aspirations” or goals of foreign policymakers, I propose adapting McConnell’s degrees of policy failure from his “Policy as politics” criteria (2010, 234-235) to construct a matrix of political costs. For a policy to change, at least one cost must be borne by the Presidential Administration profiled in the case study.

<i>Political Costs</i>	<b>China</b>	<b>Iran</b>	<b>Cuba</b>	<b>North Korea</b>	<b>How operationalized</b>
<b>1. Foreign policy becomes an electoral liability.</b>	<b>Y</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>N</b>	Measures of public opinion and polling data showing dissatisfaction during Pres. Election.
<b>2. Issues that arise from foreign policy cannot be suppressed.</b>	<b>Y</b>	<b>Y</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>N</b>	Media reports and intelligence estimates.
<b>3. Foreign policy places government on a trajectory that jeopardizes other foreign policy goals.</b>	<b>Y</b>	<b>Y</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>N</b>	Media reports, intelligence estimates, and statements by third-party foreign governments.

Table 3: Political Costs Failure Matrix with Cases

<b>4. Foreign policy no longer provides political benefits due to small levels of support.</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Y</b>	<b>N</b>	Measures of public opinion and polling data showing a shift in public opinion toward a given foreign policy, media reports, archival materials.
<i>Degrees of failure</i>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>	

As shown in Table 3, each case exhibits a degree of failure from 0 to 3. Each failure type is uniquely operationalized. First, failure type #1, foreign policy as an electoral liability, can be evidenced from public opinion and polling data showing dissatisfaction with the President during an election campaign. Second, failure type #2 can be operationalized by examining media reports and intelligence estimates, where available. Failure type #3 can be operationalized by examining not only media and intelligence reports but also third-party foreign governments who might be on the receiving end of failing U.S. policies. Failure type #4 can be operationalized using archival materials that demonstrate changes in support for a specific foreign policy within the government, through polling data and opinion polls, and media reports.

Examples abound. First, Nixon viewed U.S. isolation toward China as jeopardizing other foreign policy goals, particularly toward the former Soviet Union. Second, current U.S. policy toward Iran raised the prospect of a unilateral Israeli attack against Iranian targets that could not be suppressed (Sinha & Beachy, 2013). Third, Nixon loosened trade and travel restrictions to China *after* making public declarations in favor of improved relations with Communist China as a show of good faith in American intentions. One can conclude that as policy images undergo change that specific actions would accompany those changes.

#### **4.6: Causal mechanisms: positive or negative feedback?**

According to Baumgartner and Jones, changes in rhetoric and policy venue lead policymakers to focus their attention on a new policy image or idea: “a slight change in either can build on itself, amplifying over time and leading eventually to important changes in policy

outcomes” (Baumgartner & Jones, 2009, p. 37) that is characteristic of policy feedback. In the case studies presented here, the change in rhetoric by policymakers and the changes of venue from the foreign policy subsystems of the NSC, State Department, CIA, culminating with the President are characterized by positive feedback.

Negative feedback, on the other hand, is “characterized by considerable friction. Standard operating procedures in organization, cultural norms, and facets of human cognitive architecture provide stability of behavior in a complex world” along with institutionalized rules (Baumgartner & Jones, 2012, p. 8). Change is not automatic and is often retarded by organizational and institutional friction; it “...occurs only when the informational signals from the external world [focusing events] are extraordinarily strong [or focal]...or when the signals accumulate over time [policy failure] to overcome the friction” (2012, p. 8).

#### **4.7: Transferability**

One question that remains is whether the theory developed here can be applied to the foreign policies of other countries besides the United States. I have strived to develop a model general enough to apply to any country by focusing on characteristics common to all foreign policy regardless of country: bounded rationality of decision makers, focusing events, and policy failure. Scholarly work in public policy has sought to export PET to non-US contexts; Baumgartner, Jones, and True provide a succinct summary of such efforts (2014, pp. 80-82). Future research should pursue this more extensively.

#### **4.7: Conclusion**

I intend to show through process tracing in the case studies to follow that, while focusing events draw attention to existing policies, they by themselves do not lead to policy change. Not all focusing events lead to increased attentiveness, and this increase in attentiveness depends on

the focal strength of the focusing event. When focusing events ( $X_1$ ) are strong enough, however, they capture the attention of policymakers and push them to study and reevaluate current policy. During this reevaluation process, policymakers ask: do these policies continue to meet the political goals of those in power? If such policies no longer meet the political goals of the President, alternatives are sought out from the ‘garbage can’ of policy alternatives.

A failed policy ( $X_2$ ) activates a specific causal mechanism that generates positive feedback, resulting in policy change as policy alternatives take the place of failed policies. A policy that does to meet the failure criteria developed in figure 6 activates a different causal mechanism that generates negative feedback, which maintains the status quo and adjusts only incrementally.

For policy change to occur, the focusing event must be of sufficient “focal strength” to trigger the re-evaluation process and search for policy alternatives. This policy re-evaluation process must also cause policymakers to deem current foreign policy a failure that creates an electoral liability; creates new issues that cannot be suppressed; jeopardizes other foreign policy goals; or has stopped providing political benefits due to lower levels of support. The case studies that follow on China, Iran, Cuba, and North Korea provide evidence of these dynamics at work.

## Section 5: Case Studies

### 5.1: Case Study 1 – Nixon Goes to China

#### 5.1.1: Introduction

After World War II in 1945, China split into two different entities after a Civil War between the Communists led by Mao Zedong and the Kuomintang (or Chinese Nationalists) led by Chiang Kai-shek. This led to the creation of two Chinas, the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Republic of China (ROC), which had retreated to the island of Taiwan. The United States had intended to recognize the Communist government in Beijing but perceived and real intentions but the Korean War put any opening to Communist China on hold. Communist Chinese intervention in the Korean War soured U.S. public opinion toward Communist China (Gallup Organization, 1950; National Opinion Research Center, Foreign Affairs Survey, 1951) and strengthened the “China Lobby” as the Communist mainland was seen as the enemy. The last vestiges of any U.S. diplomatic or cultural presence were purged from the Chinese mainland, and, as McCarthyism gripped America, U.S. officials decided against recognizing the Chinese Communist government in Beijing (Cohen, 2010, pp. 178–191). A policy of isolation was evident because it coincided with U.S. isolation and containment policies toward communism more generally. Another five years would pass from Nixon's initial visit until formal diplomatic recognition of China would occur under the Carter Administration (“Milestones: 1977–1980 - Office of the Historian,” n.d.).

President Johnson had the opportunity to change course on China but instead maintained the status quo even after Communist China tested two nuclear devices. What occurred at the start of Nixon Presidency that allowed for U.S. policy to make such a dramatic departure by opening talks with Communist China beginning with Nixon's visit to China in February of 1972? More

importantly, why at this juncture and not in the previous American administrations did U.S. policy toward Communist China abruptly change?

### **5.1.2: Chinese nuclear testing v. Ussuri River clashes**

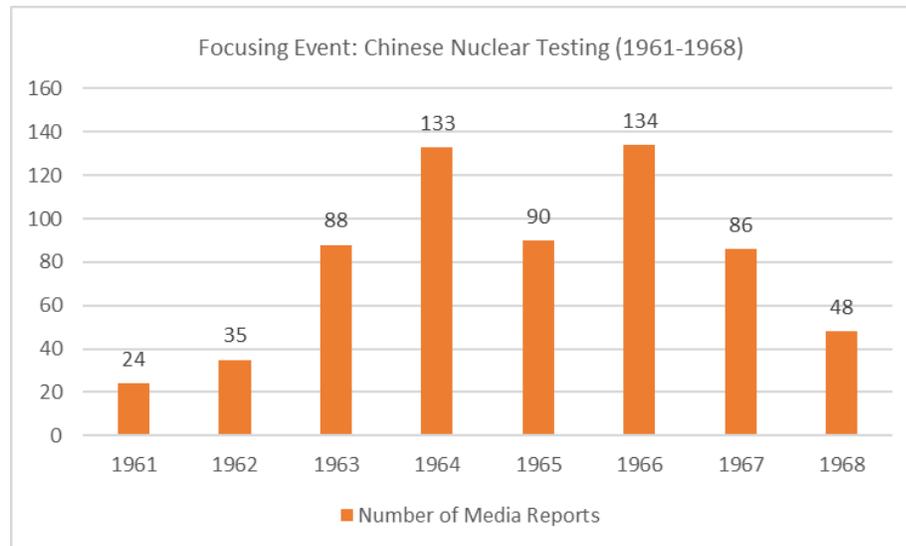
To better understand the role of focusing events in the mobilization of attention and pushing foreign policymakers to undertake a political cost-benefits analysis, it is important to understand the role of three disparate focusing events involving China (Table 4): Chinese nuclear testing in 1964 and 1966 and the Ussuri River Clashes between the Soviet Union and China in 1969. These three events are important focusing events, but only the Ussuri River clashes commanded the necessary focal strength to push President Nixon to reevaluate U.S. hostility/isolation policies toward Communist China.

In 1964 (and again in 1966), Communist China tested two nuclear devices, both of which captured the attention of the U.S. media. U.S. intelligence knew of Chinese efforts to develop nuclear weapons, and a report by General John B. Cary in 1962 advocated several deterrence postures should China acquire nuclear weapons. However, none of General Cary's recommendations advocated for the pursuit of rapprochement or establishment of diplomatic relations (Cary, 1962, pp. 140–142). The Johnson Administration had considered appeasing Communist China by “offering the PRC an assortment of economic and political incentives, such as UN membership, if it stopped its testing” along with “threats of force,” hoping to cajole the Chinese into a Soviet-style *détente* (Gavin, 2004, p. 115). In the end, Johnson's foreign policy toward China changed little from previous administrations.

This is surprising given the attention that these nuclear tests captured in the media. In 1964 and 1966, the media response to the Chinese nuclear tests elicited roughly the same response in the number of articles (Figure 3). The hub-bub that surrounded the first test did not

maintain the attention of the media, and stories regarding the nuclear test waned the following year only to pick back up again in 1966 with the completion of its second test.

*Figure 3: Focusing Event, Chinese Nuclear Testing and Media Response (1961-1968)*



First, while fears of the bomb being used by the Chinese had the potential to wreak havoc and kill millions of people, the bomb test by the Chinese did not in that specific moment in time affect a larger number of people. Second, while the United States did not relish China joining the club of nuclear states, the Chinese nuclear bomb test set off a debate within U.S. policy circles of the need to do more with regard to nuclear proliferation, especially with the publication of the Gilpatric committee's recommendations (Gavin, 2004, p. 129). While the Gilpatric Commission's report advocated a re-examination of U.S. policy toward China (Francis Gavin notes that "no specific were offered"), the report focused mainly on ensuring that West Germany remained with the West but remain a non-nuclear state while also compelling allies France and the United Kingdom to abandon their own nuclear arsenals (Gavin, 2004, p. 129). China's nuclear testing did not cause policymakers to pay attention to U.S. isolation policies; instead, it made it difficult for the United States to realize its foreign policy goal with regards to nuclear proliferation in Europe by keeping the Germans and other countries away from the bomb as well

as complicating U.S. foreign policy toward the Soviet Union, whose cooperation would be needed to limit proliferation (Gavin, 2004, pp. 124–125, 127–129). U.S. intelligence had been aware of Chinese efforts as early as 1961, and the United States had been aware of technical assistance provided to the Chinese by the Soviet Union (Burr & Richelson, 2000, p. 58).

China's nuclear testing diverted U.S. attention elsewhere, and a re-assessment of U.S. relations toward the Communist state did not occur under Johnson's watch, even though détente had been considered toward the end of his Administration (Lumbers, 2008, pp. 240–241). As policy entrepreneurs, Kennedy and Johnson made little change in U.S. policy toward the PRC given that their agendas were largely dominated by other Cold War concerns. As a focusing event, China's nuclear tests rank a medium-low. While the tests were dramatic, they were hardly novel given U.S. intelligence on China's ambitions. Also, the tests did not seem to impact a large number of people in the immediate days of the detonation, even though the potential for greater harm through use the nuclear device in warfare was not out of the realm of possibilities given Mao Zedong's statements that, "If the worse came to the worst and half of mankind died, the other half would remain while imperialism would be razed to the ground and the whole world would become socialist" (Zedong, M., "We must not fear nuclear war," quoted in Hughes, 2010;) Yet it would take the election of Richard Nixon in 1968 and the Ussuri River clashes between the PRC and Soviet Union before a punctuation of the equilibrium would occur, leading to swift and dramatic change in U.S. foreign policy toward the PRC.

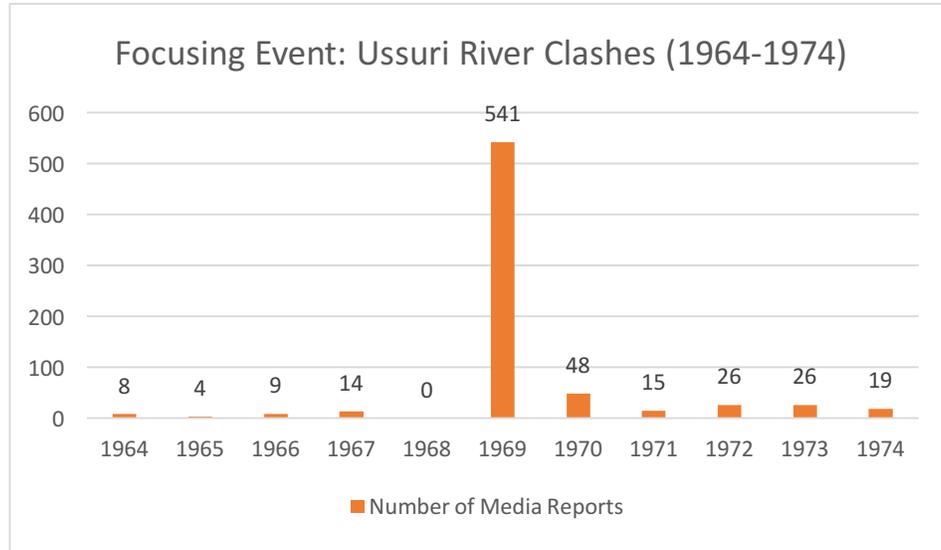
Having analyzed China nuclear testing as being insufficiently focal, I now turn to the Ussuri River clashes between the Soviet Union and China in 1969. While relations between the Soviet Union and China had been on the decline since 1960 over ideology, these clashes along the Ussuri River along several tracts of the border underscored the cavernous split that grown

only wider as the decade labored on. The frontier between China and the Soviet Union consisted of a 4,150-mile tract of land whose border had been drawn “with a broad brush” after a series of treaties in the nineteenth century (“War and conflict,” 1969, p. 66). These clashes mobilized the militaries of both countries, and difficulties in resolving the situation politically only heightened tensions between the two Communist powers, threatening to split the Communist world along racial lines (“War and conflict,” 1969, pp. 70, 72).

A spike in media activity (figure 4) reflects an intense focusing event as newspapers in the United States reported on the clashes between the Soviets and the Chinese Communist forces. There was a sudden increase in coverage as an immediate response to the focusing event. The media interest is stark as the number of the Ussuri River jumps from 0 articles/stories in 1968 to 541 in 1969.

Just how focal were the Ussuri River clashes? First, the skirmishes caused the officials in the U.S. government to worry about the potential for full-scale war (Hughes, 1969, June 3). Second, the skirmishes had the potential to cause visible and tangible harms to U.S. foreign policy with the Soviet Union. The United States was now forced to divert energy and attention to a possible conflict between the USSR and China, as unfounded charges of collusion between the United States and the Soviet Union toward China emerged (Holdridge, 1969, June 13). The possibility of an attack was not unimaginable given Soviet statements in the early 1960s that they would consider attacking China should its actions threaten the security of the Soviet Union (Lumbers, 2008, p. 69). Third, the skirmishes were rare and novel in the sense that Soviet troops performing routine patrols were ambushed and not expecting an attack by Communist Chinese troops, which resulted in at least 14 Russians wounded (“War and conflict,” 1969).

Figure 4: Focusing Events showing spike in media attention during the Ussuri River clashes between the Soviet Union and China in 1969



### 5.1.3: Three Degrees of Policy Failure

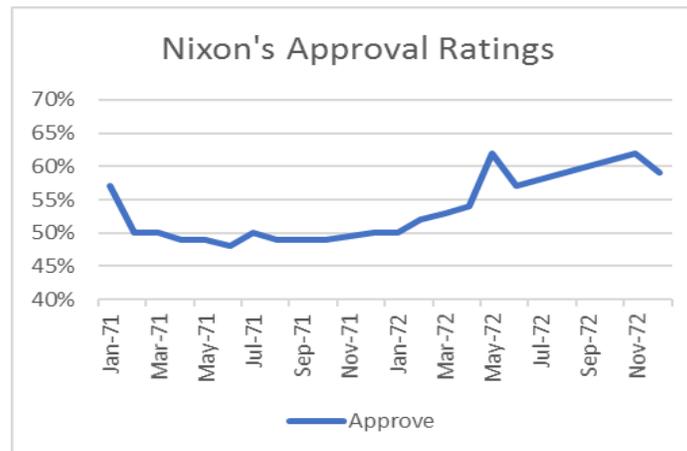
U.S. isolation policy toward China is categorized by three degrees of failure (Table 6). As the Ussuri River clashes unfolded, Nixon and Kissinger began to re-evaluate U.S. isolation policies toward China. A continuation of these policies would have entailed paying three political costs. First, Nixon perceived his foreign policy success (or failure) as an electoral liability.

Table 4: Political Cost Failure Matrix -- China

<i>Political Costs</i>	<b>China</b>
<b>1. Foreign policy becomes an electoral liability.</b>	Y
<b>2. Issues that arise from foreign policy cannot be suppressed.</b>	Y
<b>3. Foreign policy places government on a trajectory that jeopardizes other foreign policy goals.</b>	Y
<b>4. Foreign policy no longer provides political benefits due to small levels of support.</b>	N
<i>Degrees of failure</i>	<b>3</b>

He saw his visit to China as strengthening his chances for re-election in 1972. In January 1971, Nixon's approval ratings drop from a high of 57% to a low 48% and do not recover until Nixon's visit to China in 1972 when his popularity spikes between March and May 1972:

Figure 5: Nixon's Approval Ratings<sup>9</sup>



In many respects, a maintenance of isolation policy worked against Nixon as reflected in his approval ratings as he sought to improve his chances for re-election (which he ultimately won in a landslide against McGovern with 520 electoral vote). He needed, as Patrick Tyler notes, “a big play” from his trip to secure his re-election strategy (Tyler, 2000, p. 112).

U.S. policy of isolation toward China began to create issues that could no longer be suppressed. The United States could no longer afford to isolate China since isolation made U.S. policy toward Vietnam more difficult. China had been supporting North Vietnam providing troops to build transport links and airports, thus freeing up North Vietnamese troops to wage incursions in the South against the United States and South Vietnam (Jian, 1995). Also, China desired an end to the war and urged the United States to find a way to make peace with North Vietnam. At one point, Zhou Enlai even hinted that failure to resolve the Vietnam issue could derail Nixon's future visit to China (Tudda, 2012, pp. 132–133). Both countries had “strong

<sup>9</sup> Gallup Poll Question: “Do you approve or disapprove of the way Nixon is handling his job as President?”

geostrategic reasons to come together: mutual efforts to contain Soviet power, shared interests in ending the Vietnam War, and a belated recognition that they were both better off with increased trade and communication” (Suri, 2015, p. 3).

Maintenance of isolation policies began to affect other foreign policy goals. U.S. efforts to balance Soviet power could not be achieved by placing the United States “at the vertex of a new triangular relationship” between Moscow and Beijing (Suri, 2015, p. 18). More importantly, the United States needed rapprochement with China in order to push the Soviets to the negotiating table on arms control and finally put an end to the war in Vietnam (Tyler, 2000, p. 113).

#### **5.1.4: Conclusion**

U.S. policies of isolation and non-recognition toward China changed dramatically in 1972 after Nixon’s visit. While full diplomatic relations leading to an exchange of ambassadors, the opening of embassies, and relaxation of most sanctions did not occur until eight years later, Nixon’s visit broke more than two decades of isolation. Nixon and Kissinger faced institutional and organizational friction in achieving their foreign policy goals. The CIA, for example, argued “there is little prospect for change in China’s attitudes and policies regarding the US while the present leadership obtains, and the US has a limited ability to influence these attitudes and policies” (“Summary of the CIA response to NSSM 14,” n.d.). The CIA also proposed ramping up U.S. isolation policies by increasing support for China’s neighbors, providing increased support to the ROC, and further trade restrictions by the United States and its allies (“Summary of the CIA response to NSSM 14,” n.d.). The State Department under Rogers tried to throw a wrench in Nixon and Kissinger’s plans by ensuring Taiwan’s seat at the UN remained secure much to the anger of Kissinger during Kissinger’s visit to China in 1971. Positive feedback,

though, overcame institutional friction and was generated by Nixon's breakdown of the policy monopoly that had centralized power and decision-making firmly within the White House. These actions by Nixon and Kissinger lead to the formation of a new policy monopoly and accompanying image that "neutralized the opposition of domestic figures (especially on the political right), skeptical U.S. government officials, and defenders of the Republic of China in Taiwan" (Suri, 2015, p. 18; see also p. 19).

The China case study has shown that foreign policy change and the abandonment of isolation policies requires more than just *any* kind of focusing event. Instead, the case study has shown that focusing events must be strong enough to capture the attentiveness of policymakers and push them to seek out policy alternatives. While Nixon had argued for a return of Communist China to the international community in 1967, the focusing event ultimately provided a window of opportunity for this change to occur. This case study benefits from the passage of time and the number of CIA and classified documents now in the public domain that allows researchers to see the political costs being paid from these isolation policies. As the next case study on Iran shows, focusing events may trigger a re-evaluation of hostility and isolation policies, but a total normalization of relations is not a given.

## **5.2: Case Study 2 – Obama Administration's Nuclear Negotiations with Iran (2015)**

### **5.2.1: Introduction**

Since the Iranian Revolution and subsequent hostage crisis, relations between the United State and Iran have existed largely through back-channels or intermediaries. Once a stable U.S. partner in the Middle East, Iran has been a proverbial "thorn" in the side of U.S. foreign policy. Since the early 1980s, Iran has continually been a state sponsor of terrorism and has helped to prop up revisionist regimes in Syria and Lebanon. While U.S. policies during the Carter

Administration set the stage for complex relations in the decades to come, internal Iranian politics and Iranian foreign policy also played large parts in the schism between these two former allies. Owed in part to U.S. support of the unpopular Shah and his repressive policies, a recession and rising inflation created sizeable chasms between the classes and exacerbated tensions in Iranian society. These tensions allowed Ayatollah Khomeini, who lived in exile in Iraq, Turkey, and, later, France, to create strife for the Shah even from afar (Seliktar, 2012, pp. 5, 11–12).

Because of Carter's embrace of "new internationalism" in U.S. foreign policy, which emphasized human rights (what came to be called *moralpolitik*) over *realpolitik*, U.S. foreign policy toward Iran became crippled. U.S. foreign policy thus proved unable to respond agilely to crises that sprung up in Iran and reacted too slowly to calls for change while simultaneously blind to the darkening mood gripping Iran. U.S. allies in France and the United Kingdom warned that Washington's refusal to recognize realities on the ground only emboldened elements calling for change in Iran, but policy monopolies developed within the Carter Administration in the Department of State and the National Security Council. This created two competing images or a duopoly led by Secretary of State Cyrus Vance – who advocated for policies of *moralpolitik* and felt the Shah should be replaced – and NSC Chief Zbigniew Brzezinski – who advocated for a "Kissinger-esque" approach that better reflected realities on the ground and U.S. interests and in keeping the Shah in power (Seliktar, 2012, pp. 12–13, 15). These two policy entrepreneurs made it difficult for Carter to lead effectively, and U.S. Ambassador to Iran Sullivan sent his "thinking the unthinkable" cable" on November 9 urging the United States to court moderates within the Iranian government since the shah's power base had all but dissolved (Seliktar, 2012, p. 20). Carter waffled and proved unable to manage the competing voices of Vance and

Brzezinski, much to the detriment of the Shah who had expected greater support and leadership from his American allies in Washington (Seliktar, 2012, pp. 20–21).

The Shah made a final attempt to form a government to stop the Islamic Revolution from coming to power, but ill health plagued him, and, soon after, he fled Iran on January 17, 1979. The United States scrambled to make contacts with Khomeini, who many at the State Department mistakenly believed was a centrist and moderate. Buttressed by academics who had met Khomeini in Paris and other Iran experts, the White House, CIA, and the State Department rallied around this “body of rosy doctrine” that one U.S. analyst claimed was designed to “reject unpleasant realities” (Seliktar, 2012, pp. 23–25; Sick, 1985, p. 114).

### **5.2.2: Focusing events: currency crash v. Israeli threats of unilateral action**

As Iran began to develop its nuclear capability, the United States, Europe, and Israel became increasingly tense. Fearful that the development of a nuclear bomb would jeopardize Israeli and regional security, the George W. Bush Administration leveled a new round sanctions against the Iranian regime on top of those already in place from subsequent administrations (Hadley, 2010). These sanctions, however, were not always effective. While theoretically most states were not to trade directly with Iran, sanction busting by U.S. allies and other states allowed for countries to trade with Iran using gold, instead of the Iranian Rial as payment. Using loopholes in the U.S. and U.N. sanctions, countries, such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE), skirted official sanctions, while also serving as a middle-man for sanctions busting trade that allowed Iran to survive crippling U.S. sanctions (Early, 2015).

The Obama Administration leveled even more sanctions on the Iranian regime that began to wreak havoc on the Iranian economy. In 2012, the Iranian Rial collapsed, jeopardizing Iran’s economy both domestically and internationally. Media focus on the collapsing Iranian currency

(Figure 6) spiked in 2012 and seemingly played a strong role as a focusing event that could potentially lead to a change in U.S. hostility/isolation policies. However, as a focusing event, it defies Birkland's logic. First, the Iranian currency crisis affected few countries outside the region and had more of an impact domestically. Sanctions had limited Iran's access to the international banking system and therefore the impact of its currency crisis was low. Second, tangible harms from U.S. hostility/isolation policies did not exist; if anything, the currency crisis showed that U.S. and international sanctions were working to coerce Iranian to give up its nuclear ambitions. Third, the novelty or rarity of the currency collapse was also limited by the fact that sanctions proponents anticipated such a crisis given the severity of the sanctions imposed by Washington.

Figure 6: Focusing Event: Iranian Currency Crisis (2012)

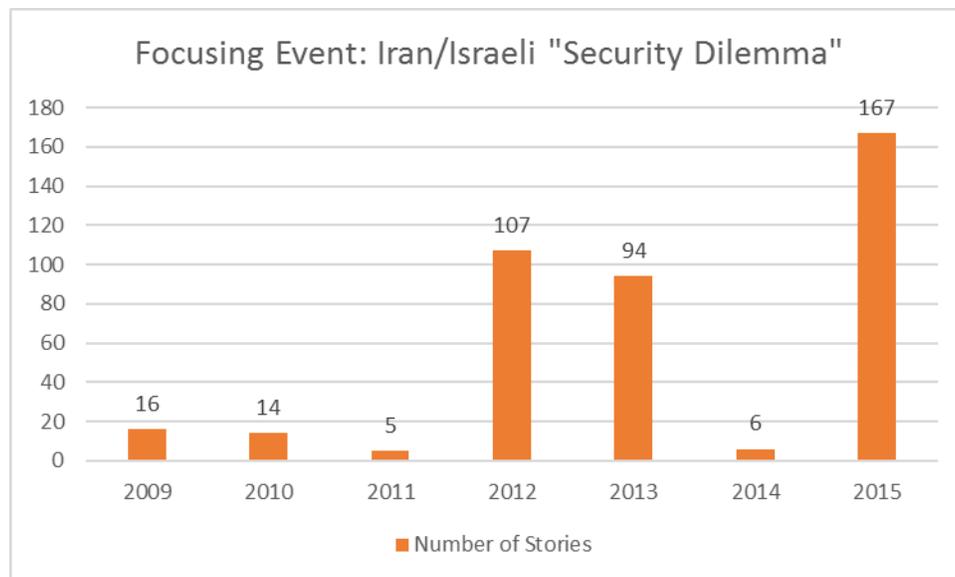


While the currency crisis and sanctions potentially played a minor role in getting Iran to sign the agreed framework in July 2015, the Israeli/Iranian “security dilemma” proves to have been a stronger focusing event that increased policymakers’ attentiveness toward new policy options. There are three significant spikes (Figure 7) in media attention in 2012, 2013, and 2015. First, the 2012 spike can be explained by Israeli President Netanyahu speaking before the

General Assembly at the United Nations in September 2012. In his speech, Netanyahu warned that Iran was a year away from having the bomb, and urged the international community to act (“Key portions of Israeli PM Netanyahu’s U.N. speech on Iran,” 2012, September 27).

Second, after the Iranian election of moderate Hassan Rouhani in August 2013, Iran became more serious in seeking to find a solution to the impasse. September 2013, a month after Rouhani’s victory, was the month in which President Obama and his Iranian counterpart held a telephone call, “the highest-level exchange between the two countries since Iran’s 1979 Islamic Revolution” (“Iran nuclear agreement,” 2015). The phone call between the two presidents brought out a remark by President Obama, who noted after the phone call, that “we [the United States and Iran] can reach a comprehensive solution” to Iran’s nuclear weapons development (“Iran nuclear agreement,” 2015).

Figure 7: Focusing Event, Iran/Israeli "Security Dilemma"



As a focusing event, the Israel/Iran “security dilemma” is significantly more focal. First, any Israeli bombing and unilateral action could have potentially killed thousands and dealt billions in damage in Iran and potentially in Israel, too, should the Iranians have retaliated. A

unilateral move by Israel could have potentially plunged the region into war, thereby risking the lives of millions of soldiers and civilians. Second, unilateral action by the Israelis potentially could have pushed Iran to further its nuclear weapons development as well as push other countries in the region to develop their own weapons. Such action would have caused visible and tangible harms not only to U.S. foreign policies on Iran but also with countless other Gulf states in the region and around the world. Lastly, Netanyahu's visit to the U.S. Congress in 2015 and subsequent criticisms of Obama were unprecedented, novel, and rare for an ally so reliant on U.S. military support and aid.

### **5.2.3: A Return to the Negotiating Table: A Reversal of Past Policy Failure(s)**

Senator Barack Obama, while running for President in 2008, had made mention of U.S. hostility/isolation policy toward Iran as a failure. U.S. foreign policy:

[p]reventing Iran from developing nuclear weapons is a vital national security interest of the United States. No tool of statecraft should be taken off the table, but *Senator McCain would continue a failed policy* that has seen Iran strengthen its position, advance its nuclear program, and stockpile 150 kilos of low enriched uranium. I will use all elements of American power to pressure the Iranian regime, starting with aggressive, principled and direct diplomacy - diplomacy backed with strong sanctions and without preconditions. (Obama, 2008, July 16)

In January 2009 President-elect Barack Obama made reaffirming his commitment to changing U.S. foreign policy in an interview with George Stephanopoulos: "We are going to have to take a new approach...My belief is that engagement is the place to start" while reaffirming Israel's right to self-defense (Knowlton, 2009, January 11). As President weeks later, Barack Obama reiterated again his desire to see U.S. foreign policy change toward Iran: "What I've also said is that we should take an approach with Iran that employs all of the resources at the United States disposal, and that includes diplomacy" (Obama, 2009, February 9). Statements by Barack Obama signaled a clear departure from the rhetoric of previous administrations. Furthermore, Obama's

policies sought engagement over isolation that labeled past foreign policies as failures while proposing policy alternatives to address the Iranian issue.

But to what degree is this a failure? I argue that U.S. policy toward Iran encompasses two degrees of failure (Table 7). First, new issues were arising from the failed hostility/isolation policy that were becoming more difficult to suppress and ignore, namely Israeli unilateralism. Second, U.S. hostility and isolation policies were making it extremely difficult for the United States and other negotiating powers to reach a deal with Iran that would guarantee Iranian security without putting Israeli interests at risk. Current U.S. policy notably began to jeopardize the ability of the United States to keep other Gulf states from acquiring nuclear weapons, a top goal of U.S. foreign policy in the region.

Table 5: Political Costs Failure Matrix -- Iran

<i>Political Costs</i>	<b>Iran</b>
<b>1. Foreign policy becomes an electoral liability.</b>	<b>N</b>
<b>2. Issues that arise from foreign policy cannot be suppressed.</b>	<b>Y</b>
<b>3. Foreign policy places government on a trajectory that jeopardizes other foreign policy goals.</b>	<b>Y</b>
<b>4. Foreign policy no longer provides political benefits due to small levels of support.</b>	<b>N</b>
<i>Degrees of failure</i>	<b>2</b>

First, U.S. policy toward Iran created issues that had arisen and could no longer be suppressed, particularly the fear that Israel would make a unilateral strike against Iranian nuclear sites (Gur, 2013, October 15; “Netanyahu vows to stop Iran, even in defiance of the United States,” 2012, November 5). Second, U.S. policy of non-engagement had the potential to

jeopardize other policy goals, particularly a desire to keep other Middle East countries from acquiring nuclear weapons. Saudi Arabia, for example, saw Iranian acquisition of nuclear weapons to be “completely unacceptable” and that Saudi Arabia would seek to purchase nuclear weapons of its own, presumably from Pakistan (Fitzsimons, 2012, February 10; Tomlinson, 2012, February 10).

President Obama was faced with two degrees of policy failure and needed to keep the Israelis from plunging the region into another Arab-Israeli War. Obama strived to break the cycle of “unimaginative, bankrupt policies” that comprised the complexities that were endemic to US-Iran relations (Murray, 2010, p. 144). Also, U.S. interests were keenly focused on keeping other countries in the region from acquiring nuclear weapons and pushing the region into a nuclear arms race (Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, 2008, p. vii).

#### **5.2.4: Conclusion**

President Obama’s decision to engage directly with Iran ended decades of hostility and isolation toward the Republic of Iran, breaking down previous policy images and policy monopolies. While members of Congress voiced their opposition and actively attempted to thwart progress on a deal with Iran, President Obama ultimately succeeded in reaching a deal with Iran on their nuclear program on July 14, 2015. Interest group activity worked both sides of the debate. Pro-Iranian groups helped to generate positive feedback that helped lead to changes, specifically the Iran Outreach Group, which Obama had signed onto while campaigning in 2008 (Seliktar, 2012, pp. 159–161). American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) worked the halls of Congress and met with influential lawmakers on Capitol Hill to scuttle the deal and maintain the status quo. With more than 11 registered lobbyists in Washington and a budget of

approximately \$3 million dollars per year, AIPAC lobbied Jewish members of Congress and made campaign contributions near \$12 million dollars in 2014 (Cowan, 2015).

Despite intense lobbying efforts on behalf of one of the United States' staunchest allies, efforts to avoid Israeli unilateralism and a nuclear arms race in the Middle East made engagement a priority for the Obama Administration. However, engagement with Iran did not gain full steam until Obama's second term due, in part, to the political violence that took place in Iran in 2009 that cut short any early attempts of engagement (Seliktar, 2012, pp. 166–167).

U.S. and European sanctions also played an important role in bringing Iran and the United States to the table. According to a Congressional Research Service Report, Iranian exports of crude oil dropped from 2.5 million barrels per day in 2011 to 1.1 million by 2013; Iran lost access to reserve funds to the tune of \$120 billion; and the Iranian economy shrank 9% (Katzman, 2017). However, sanctions imposed between 2010 and 2013 created further difficulty for the Iranian economy. These sanctions served not as a focusing event but instead helped to generate positive feedback that allowed for U.S. policy to change from coercion to diplomacy. While the United States and Iran have not gone as far as the United States and Cuba in restoring full diplomatic ties and re-opening embassies, sitting down at the table to secure regional peace signals the first punctuations of the equilibrium. Whether the United States and Iran will carry their relations further remains to be seen: only time will tell. Many analysts, politicians, and policymakers remain skeptical that the United States and Iran will ever reach a deal or that a deal would persist (Welsh, 2016). A year on from the deal, Iran has seemingly kept up its end of the bargain. This development bodes well to improved relations with the United States and continued punctuations of the equilibrium.

### **5.3: Case Study 3 – Cuba, Obama, and the restoration of diplomatic relations**

#### **5.3.1: Introduction**

The long era of sanctions and policies aimed at isolating the Cuban regime began during the final days of the Eisenhower Administration. With the passage of the Trading with the Enemy Act on January 3, 1961, the United States severed diplomatic relations with Cuba and closed the U.S. embassy in Havana (“Cuba - Countries - Office of the Historian,” n.d.; Haney, 2005, p. 15). The year before in October 1960, Eisenhower had instituted an embargo of Cuba after the Cuban government had begun to expropriate land from U.S. property holders and allow the Communist Party to operate freely on the island (Haney, 2005, pp. 12–13).

The expropriation of U.S. property by the Communist Cuban government also led to the passage of the Foreign Assistance Act in 1961. This act of Congress gave the President wide latitude in formulating a complete and total embargo on all trade with Cuba and replaced the partial embargo that had been in place since the Cuban resolution. Other countries in South and Latin America also joined U.S. sanction efforts by cutting Cuba at the multilateral level; Cuba soon found itself cut out of the Organization of American States (Sweig, 2016, pp. 88–89).

Eisenhower’s actions began decades of hostility/isolation policies toward Cuba. President John F. Kennedy (JFK) during his term in office attempted an invasion of Cuba, four months later, with the failed Bay of Pigs on April 17, 1961 (Sweig, 2016, pp. 78–79). The United States continued to try to topple Fidel Castro from power using covert operations (at least 8 times between 1960-1965). The Cuban Missile Crisis followed in 1962, and the Soviets, in exchange for removing missiles from the island, made demands of the United States at the United Nations. These demands amounted to the signing of accords respecting Cuban sovereignty and promises by the United States not to invade Cuba, but such an accord was never reached nor signed

(Sweig, 2016, p. 85). The Castro government made four demands on the United States: an end to economic sanctions, a cessation of covert operations, air attacks using Cuban airspace, as well as a return to Cuban control of the naval base at Guantanamo Bay.

By the mid-1970s, business interests in the United States were clamoring for a relaxation of sanctions, and President Ford instructed Kissinger to engage in secret talks with Cuba to reach a compromise. Unfortunately, as Cuban involvement in Angola came to light, any appetite for relaxing or repealing sanctions dissipated. With a difficult election for President Ford on the horizon, Ford's administration was unwilling to spend the necessary political capital, and Castro saw little need to change Cuba's foreign policy toward the United States (Sweig, 2016, pp. 90–92).

President Carter, however, took small, incremental steps to relieve tensions, and publicly announced bilateral talks meant to address problems between the two countries. An Interests Section was opened under the protection of the Swiss Embassy in Havana, Cuba, during the Carter Administration (“Cuba - Countries - Office of the Historian,” n.d.). A travel ban was also lifted (although reinstated by Reagan a few years later). Despite this minor thaw, several important issues still lingered, specifically compensation to American citizens and businesses as well as the continue demand for the return of Guantanamo Bay by the Cubans. Unfortunately, détente, which had taken hold during the Nixon Administration, began to wane as coalitions in the U.S. government, particular from the National Security Council led by Brzezinski, sought to derail further progress in Cuban-American foreign relations (Sweig, 2016, pp. 92–99).

U.S. policy towards Cuba took a harder line as President Ronald Reagan came to power. Reagan reversed many of Carter's policies as the Cold War began to heat up after Reagan's railed against Soviet and its satellites' (like Cuba) subversion. Reagan concentrated U.S. interests

on fighting communism in South and Latin America, which increasingly saw Cuba as the fomenter and spreader of communism in the Western Hemisphere. Cuban diplomats soon found travel to the United States more difficult, and Reagan worked to ensure that other countries “tighten the screws on Cuba” (Sweig, 2016, pp. 98–100).

The Clinton Administration saw the passage of the Cuba Democracy Act in 1992 that toughened sanctions and made it harder for U.S. subsidiaries to do business in Cuba. By re-imposing sanctions that had been lifted in 1975, U.S. companies incurred losses of \$700 million dollars in sales (and profits!). The Act sought to make it harder for Cuba to spend US dollars on the international market along with provisions aimed at regime change, the true goal of the bill’s chief sponsor, Robert Torricelli. This bill made it harder for President Clinton to take a fresh approach to Havana as a migrant and refugee crisis from Cuba began to grow in 1994. The Helms-Burton amendment or the *Libertad Act* further complicated the Clinton Administration’s ability to deal directly with Havana. Despite Congressional activism, Clinton attempted to make small openings to Cuba helped by a Papal visit in 1998 in an effort to scuttle hardliners in Congress and the U.S. government (Sweig, 2016, pp. 161–180).

With the ascendancy of President George W. Bush to the White House, the world soon found itself dealing with the terror attacks on September 11, 2001. Fidel Castro had offered humanitarian assistance to the U.S. government, but hardliners in the Bush Administration rebuffed Havana’s assistance. The Bush Administration sought to utilize the political climate to reinforce Cuba’s place on the U.S. list of state sponsors of terror. Still a renewed interest in policy change and a new way with the Castro regime began to grow, and the House of Representatives in 2002 voted to end trade and travel restrictions toward Cuba. However, the Bush Administration threatened to veto any such legislation aimed at giving the Cuban regime

any reprieve. While Cuba sought a thaw in relations with the United States, President Bush continued to roll back Clinton era efforts at “people-to-people” openings, making it even more difficult for educational and NGO-travel to Cuba. By 2005, Cuba began to tone down its public relations campaign aimed at denigrating the United States and even offered the U.S. assistance a second time in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in August 2005. Yet President Bush rebuffed Cuban aid a second time in the aftermath of the humanitarian crisis plaguing the Southeast United States (Sweig, 2016, pp. 187–191).

After the Obama Administration came to power in 2009, it immediately reversed Bush-era restrictions on remittances and travel and publicly acknowledged a desire for better relations with Cuba (“U.S.-Cuba Relations,” n.d.). During Obama’s first electoral campaign in May 2008, he made statements acknowledging wanting better relations with Havana:

“John McCain’s been going around the country talking about how much I want to meet with Raúl Castro, as if I’m looking for a social gathering or I’m going to invite him over and have some tea,” Mr. Obama said. “That’s not what I said, and John McCain knows it. After eight years of the disastrous policies of George Bush, it is time to pursue direct diplomacy, with friend and foe alike, without preconditions.” (Zeleny, 2008)

This statement by Obama shows a policy entrepreneur ready to take up the cause of policy change if elected. However, a normalization of relations with Cuba was not completed until well into his second term in office. Why did Obama succeed in reversing decades of isolation policies toward Cuba where other presidents, such as Ford and Carter, had failed? Just like the case study on rapprochement with China, the road to normalization began public statements by a future president coupled with two focusing events that provide policy entrepreneurs in the Obama Administration the opportunity to punctuate the long-standing equilibrium of U.S. policy toward Cuba.

### **5.3.2: Focusing events from the Bay of Pigs to world oil prices**

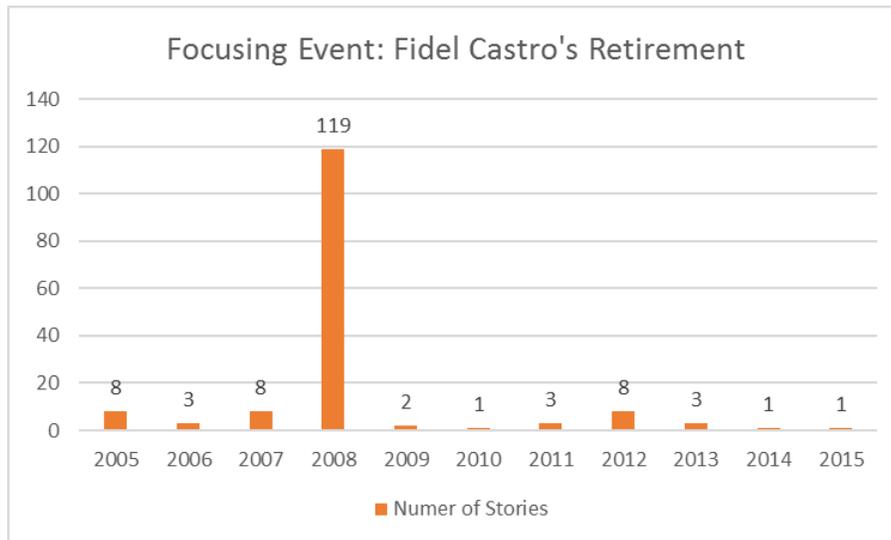
President Obama campaigned on promises to pursue a more conciliatory diplomacy with Cuba in May 2008, just three months before Fidel Castro's official retirement as leader of Cuba (Mckinley, Jr., 2008). While President Obama had not yet won the election, statements made by Obama indicated a willingness to change should a window of opportunity present itself (and should he win the election).

As noted in the introduction to this case study, a plethora of focusing events from 1960 to 2015 that had the potential to capture the attentiveness of foreign policymakers that would have lead policymakers to see the failure of hostility/isolation policies toward Cuba. Over the last fifty years, the political benefits of such policies outweighed the political costs. In other words, even if these focusing events had had the potential to initiate policy change to their high focal strength, negative feedback overrode any possibility of policy change occurring. Negative feedback did not emanate only from institutionalized policy monopolies by way of codified law and U.S. statutes. Negative feedback also came from Cuban constituents. Since 1991, Florida International University (FIU) has conducted the FIU Poll, "the longest-running research project tracking the opinions of Cuban-American community in South Florida" (Florida International University, n.d.). Three findings from these polls support the effects of negative feedback. First, FIU's earliest poll in 1993 noted that those interviewed had little tolerance for "views interpreted as supportive of the current situation on the island" and did not believe changes were likely with Fidel Castro still in power. The 1993 poll possibly explains the reason why U.S.-Cuban relations did not change dramatically at the end of the Cold War, given that Fidel Castro remained at the helm of the Cuban state long after the fall of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War. Second, a large number of respondents – per the study – also supported tougher sanctions in

1993 (Grenier, Gladwin, & McLaughen, 1993, p. 1). This finding resonates with FIU's most recent study that showed that public attitudes before 1980 indicated that political change would never come to Cuba (Grenier & Gladwin, 2016, p. 8).

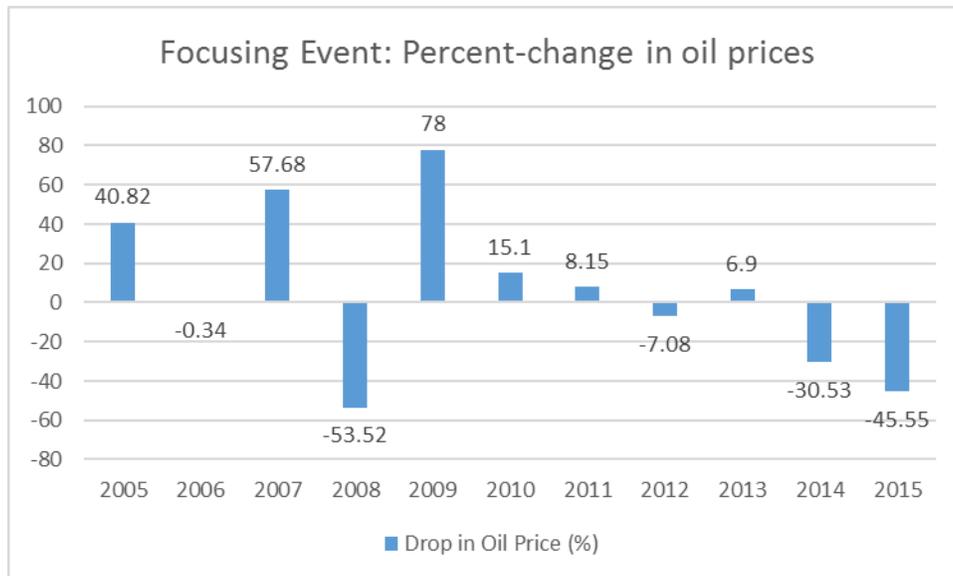
Given these findings, Fidel Castro's retirement announcement theoretically could have served as *the* focusing event that would have captured the attentiveness of lawmakers and allowed for policy alternatives to come to the fore. In fact, when Fidel Castro announced his retirement in 2008, media interest in the event spiked (Figure 8). Yet U.S.-Cuban relations hardly changed after the announcement, and the change in leadership did not lead to any substantial thaw in U.S.-Cuban relations. The weak strength of this focal event is not surprising for three reasons. First, Castro handed over control of the government to his brother, who shared his ideology. Both had been part of the Cuban Revolution so a change in the status quo could not be confidently predicted. While Raúl Castro spoke of Cuba needing important structural changes (Sanchez, 2007), a Human Rights Watch Report from 2009 noted that Raúl continued many of his predecessors' policies, especially in the area of human rights ("New castro, same Cuba," 2009). Second, Fidel Castro's retirement also did not cause any visible or tangible harms to U.S. foreign policy. If anything, U.S. policies promised to remain the same, or had the potential to improve given the appearance of new leadership. Raúl Castro in 2009 had made statements and appeared to offer an olive branch to President Obama in an effort to improve ties with the United States (Carroll, 2009). Third, Castro's retirement was not unforeseen, given that he had turned over most of the day-to-day government to Raúl in 2006, after undergoing treatment for stomach cancer.

Figure 8: Number of articles in U.S. and international media



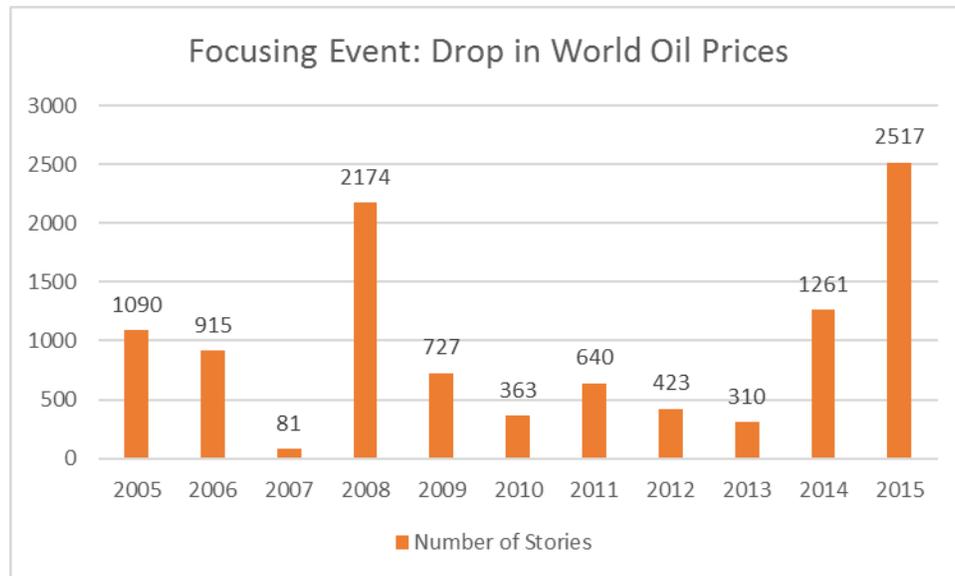
Using the qualitative logic adapted from Birkland, Fidel Castro's retirement had low focal strength. The attentiveness of U.S. foreign policymakers did not lead to abandoning hostility/isolation policies; sanctions remained, and business continued as usual. If the change in leadership did not provide the necessary focusing event to push foreign policymakers **to change course**, then what ultimately led the United States to alter its foreign policy toward Cuba? I argue that the focusing event that provided the window of opportunity for change in U.S.-Cuban relations was the fall in world oil prices in 2014 and 2015 (Figure 9).

Figure 9: Percent change in oil prices from previous Year (2005-2015) (Macrotrends, n.d.)



As the figure shows, the oil markets began to show drops in oil prices beginning in 2012. A very modest recovery then took place in 2012 and was soon followed by a price drop in 2014 along with a continued slide into 2015. The media reflected the decline in oil prices, with spikes in media reporting on the oil price crash (Figure 10). In 2008, 2014, and 2015, media interest in the price of oil jumped sharply, as the price of oil fell dramatically. The oil market price fluctuations corroborate the media attention generated by these price fluctuations. I argue that the strength of this focusing event captured the attentiveness of Obama Administration and signaled to the administration that the time was right for change. Using our qualitative adaptation of Birkland's logic, the drop in worldwide oil prices affected many people, not just in Cuba but in Venezuela, one of Cuba's principal suppliers of oil and energy, as well as the multitude of countries dependent on oil rents around the world. Second, while low energy prices tend to help the U.S. economy, low oil prices are known for having a destabilizing potential in other countries, such as in Cuba.

Figure 10: Number of stories reporting on drops in world oil price



By 2013, Venezuela had begun cutting back oil subsidies to countries in and around the Caribbean (Gjelten, 2013), and Cubans began to feel the pressure of energy shortages. Furthermore, according to media reports, more Cubans were attempting to leave the island (Kahn, 2016; Northam, 2015). Lastly, while oil price drops and market fluctuations might seem commonplace due to media exposure, experts argue that economic models are notoriously imprecise and do not always accurately predict impending troubles in the oil market. In other words, market fluctuations and oil price drops can have a shocking effect that captures the attentiveness of policymakers that demonstrates its potency as a focusing event. In their conclusion to oil price modeling, Alquist, Kilian and Vigfusson conclude, "...that oil price volatility measures commonly used to characterize predictive densities for the price of oil are not adequate measures of the risks faced by market participants.... Those risk 71 measures, however, are only as good as the underlying forecasting models and would not have provided any advance warning of the collapse of the real price of oil in late 2008, for example" (Alquist, Kilian, & Vigfusson, 2011, pp. 70–71). Indeed, predicting the price of oil – a mug’s game – is exceedingly difficult (Rapier, 2016).

The dramatic drop in oil prices and Venezuela's cutbacks to Cuba's oil subsidies provided a window of opportunity for the Obama Administration to change course on Cuba and dictate the terms of such change, capitalizing on demographic shifts among Cuban-Americans and the Cuban leadership change in 2008.

### **5.3.3: Cold War Policy failure**

Statements by President Obama during the election of 2008 and subsequent statements as President of the United States signaled a change to U.S. policy. Yet dramatic change in U.S. policy did not occur until December 2014 when Obama announced that the United States and Cuba would take steps toward normalization of relations. Cuba's loss of Venezuelan oil subsidies provided a window of opportunity that allowed President Obama to realize one, signature foreign policy accomplishment. A fall in oil prices captured the attentiveness of the administration that saw change possible, even without Congressional support, to roll back sanctions and statutes in U.S. public law.

If sanctions and U.S. statutes were designed to deprive the island economically, Cuban Americans often worked actively against U.S. policies, even when they supported them. For example, a Government Accountability Office (GAO) report from 2007 noted instances of "civil disobedience" toward the sanctions and embargo as well as criticism from human rights groups regarding the application of such policies that hurt the Cuban people more than the Cuban regime (U. S. Government Accountability Office (GAO), 2007, pp. 55–56). Also, in 2009, a survey conducted by the Institute for Public Opinion Research of Florida International University showed that more than 56% of Americans supported re-establishing diplomatic relations with Cuba, and 72% supported direct talks between the United States and Cuba "...on issues of bilateral concern" (Pascual & Huddleston, 2009, p. 3). Cuba's need for energy and infrastructural

improvements made Raúl Castro more amenable to restoring diplomatic ties with an important trading partner. That same report by the Brookings Institution also argued that United States “...must not tie [its] every action to those of the Cuban government, because doing so would allow Cuban officials to set U.S. policy, preventing the United States from serving its own interests” (2009, p. 2). While a change in leadership had occurred, Cuban foreign policy had not changed under the aegis of Raúl Castro. However, after the price of oil dropped and caused Venezuelan subsidies to decline substantially to Cuba, U.S. foreign policymakers saw an opening that allowed them to seek a more cooperative relationship with Cuba instead of reacting solely to Cuban policy.

Of the three cases presented thus far, Cuba reaches only one degree of failure: U.S. foreign policy no longer provided political benefits due to small levels of support (Table 6).

Table 6: Political Costs Failure Matrix -- Cuba

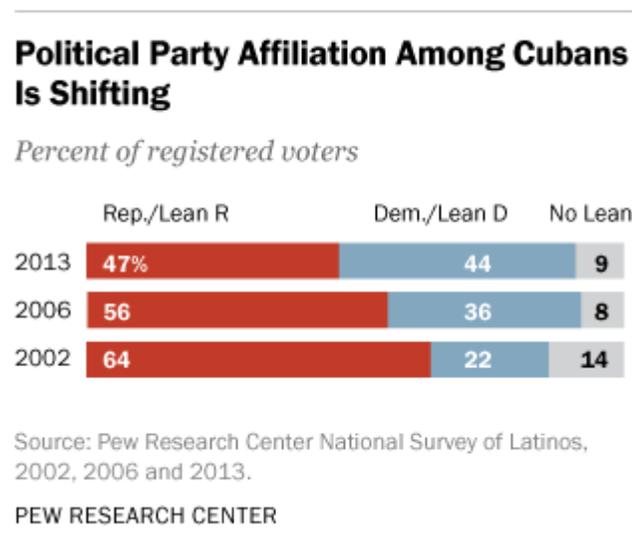
<i>Political Costs</i>	<b>Cuba</b>
<b>1. Foreign policy becomes an electoral liability.</b>	<b>N</b>
<b>2. Issues that arise from foreign policy cannot be suppressed.</b>	<b>N</b>
<b>3. Foreign policy places government on a trajectory that jeopardizes other foreign policy goals.</b>	<b>N</b>
<b>4. Foreign policy no longer provides political benefits due to small levels of support.</b>	<b>Y</b>
<i>Degrees of failure</i>	<b>1</b>

First, the Cuban-American “lobby” had, in the past, proved to be an important electoral consideration for candidates for President. U.S. foreign policies of isolation (and sanctions) toward Cuba no longer carried the levels of political support as they had in the past. A survey conducted by the Institute for Public Opinion Research of Florida International University

showed that more than 50% of Cuban Americans had voted for Obama, and 38% of Cuban Americans voted for President Obama (Pascual & Huddleston, 2009, p. 3). In comparison to the elections of George W. Bush in 2000 and 2004, Cuban Americans tended to be registered Republicans. In a Pew Research Center National Survey of Latinos (Figure 11), Cuban Americans typically leaned Republican at 64% in 2002 to 47% in 2013. Democrats since 2002 have increased their share of the Cuban American demographic by 22% (Krogstad, 2014). Cuban Americans, who were traditional Republican voters, thus began to show demographic and political shifts.

Democratic candidates for President no longer needed to preoccupy themselves with towing the hardline toward Cuba. Second, U.S. policymakers, who had held key posts during the

Figure 11: Political Affiliation Among Cubans as percent of registered voters



Bush Administration, were no longer in a position to advocate for a hardline against Cuba. Voices critical to Cuba, such as John Bolton's and former aides to Jessie Helms, who argued for a tough approach to the Castro regime, no longer dominated U.S. foreign policy.

### 5.3.4: Conclusion

On December 17, 2014, President Obama announced to the American people that the United States would begin the process of normalization of ties with Cuba. In his statement, President Obama ordered Secretary of State John Kerry to re-establish diplomatic relations severed in 1961 and to re-establish an embassy in Havana. President Obama also indicated that high-ranking officials would visit Cuba in the future. President Obama also improved travel links between the two countries, to improve commerce between the two countries, and to increase the flow of information to and from Cuba (Obama, 2014, December 17). On March 21, 2016, two years after his announcement that U.S.-Cuban ties would improve, President Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama visited the island on March 21, 2016. This historic visit brought “a giant American delegation...between 800 and 1200...intent on closing a final chapter in cold war history and sealing the diplomatic legacy of Obama’s presidency” (Roberts, 2016, March 21). Not surprisingly, the week before Senator Marco Rubio lost every county but one in the Florida primary to now President Donald Trump, “indicating that that antipathy toward Havana’s communist government among Cuban Americans in the state is no longer a decisive electoral issue, as it once was” (Roberts, 2016, March 21).

Even though ties have been restored and some sanctions have been relieved, Obama’s about-face on U.S.-Cuba policy is just the beginning of the punctuated equilibrium. While current President Trump has indicated he may reverse Obama policy on Cuba, a recent piece in the *Miami Herald* shows that the Trump Administration has not yet decided what actions or policy reversals it may or may not take (Gámez Torres, 2017, April 5).

Despite the new administration’s statements and a potential reversal of Obama policy, the case study on the normalization of diplomatic ties with Cuba is an example of how a highly focal

focusing event provided the necessary impetus for policy change. Public opinion toward the Cold War embargo that sanctioned and isolated Cuba no longer provided the necessary levels of political support they once held as younger and more liberal Cuban voters replaced the first wave of registered Republican Cubans.

While Cuba policy had only one degree of failure, the ranking should not be a surprise. The GOP-controlled Congress has shown no interest in changing U.S. law in the near future to accommodate former President Obama's changes to longstanding U.S. foreign policy (Zengerle, 2016). The previous isolation policies toward Cuba have very little effect on other foreign policy goals, which helps to explain why changing this law has not rated highly on the Congressional agenda. While partisanship might explain Congress' refusal to change U.S. law during President Obama's administration, a single degree of failure does a better job of taking into account the institutional friction and difficulties of alternative specification at the institutional level. U.S. policy toward Cuba also shows how decisive the role of the President can be in affecting policy change (Baumgartner & Jones, 2009, p. 241), especially when current policies do not reach a high degree of political failure as seen with Chin and Iran.

As the first three case studies have shown, focusing events of varying strength have caused foreign policymakers to pay attention to alternative policies that have led to the destruction of policy images and monopolies and the implementation of new policy that deviated from established norms. As the next case study shows, strong focusing events do not always lead to dramatic change, a punctuation of the equilibrium, in policy.

#### **5.4: Case Study 4 – What to do about North Korea: stasis and negative feedback**

### 5.4.1: Introduction

North Korea (along with Bhutan<sup>10</sup>) are the only two countries where the United States has never had diplomatic relations. After World War II, Korea, like Germany, was divided between the United States in the south and the Soviet Union in the north with the country divided along the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel. This division resulted in two countries: the Republic of Korea (ROK) in the south and Communist country of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) in the north ruled by Kim Il Sung's familial dynasty (Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, 2016).

In 1950, North Korean forces invaded South Korea, which resulted in the Korean War. The United States and U.N. forces provided by sixteen countries repelled the North Korean advance. The war resulted in no clear winner after China entered the conflict, resulting in an armistice on July 27, 1953. This armistice led to the creation of a demilitarized zone (DMZ), and no peace treaty between belligerents was ever signed (Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, 2016).

Relations became further complicated during the Cold War and made establishing diplomatic relations impossible. The North Korean military captured two U.S. pilots and held them for a year in 1963, and North Korean operatives destroyed two U.S. infantry barracks in May 1967. The capture of the *USS Pueblo* took place on January 23, 1968, immediately after North Korean failed efforts to assassinate ROK President Park in the Blue House raid (Jackson, 2016, pp. 31–34). The Pueblo incident led to U.S. naval personnel being held for almost a year. North Korea then released the prisoners just before the end of the Johnson presidency in 1968 (Jackson, 2016, p. 24). Further incidents, such as the EC-121 being shot down in 1969 at the start

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<sup>10</sup> Located between India and China in the Himalayas, Bhutan has no diplomatic relations with any of the five permanent members of the U.N. Security Council. Only Bangladesh and India have embassies in Bhutan's capital of Thimphu. Until 2007, India conducted Bhutan's foreign policy, and Bhutan has had a border dispute with China, which claims 10 percent of Bhutan's territory. Former U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry met with Thsering Tobgay, Bhutan's prime minister, during a regional summit in January 2015 (Schiavenza, 2015).

of Nixon's first term and the Panmunjom crisis in 1976 continued to complicate U.S.-North Korean relations, making rapprochement difficult, if not impossible.

North Korea's nuclear ambitions began to further complicate relations between the United State and North Korea. In 1992, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) discovered irregularities in North Korean plutonium reprocessing claims that led to North Korea activating the 90-day formal process to exit from the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) on March 12, 1993 (Jackson, 2016, pp. 146–147). The crisis of exiting from the NPT was averted only for a decade with the 1994 Agreed Framework, but North Korea ultimately exited from the NPT on January 10, 2003 ("North Korea leaves nuclear pact," 2003, January 10). North Korea's first nuclear test took place on October 9, 2006; this ultimately put to waste any prospect of diplomatic normalization.

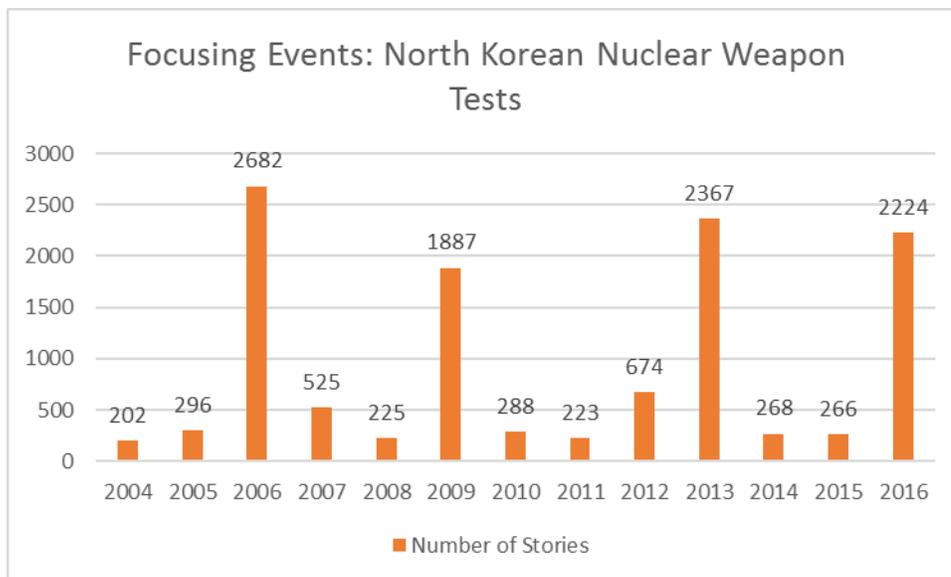
#### **5.4.2: North Korea Nuclear Testing**

While North Korea has dominated the media in the last decade (2006-2016) due to its testing of nuclear weapons and missiles as well as its human rights abuses, these two factors have not been the only source of focusing events. A number of clashes mentioned previously during the Cold War also served as focusing events (USS *Pueblo* Crisis in 1968; The EC-121 shoot-down in 1969; The Panmunjom Crisis in 1976). Also, several Americans have been captured by North Korea, and these detentions have resulted in high profile trips by former U.S. presidents and envoys that have generated increased media attention. Lastly, North Korea's attempt to withdrawn from the Nuclear Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1993-1994, and then North Korea's ultimate withdrawal in 2003 (Arms Control Association, 2016) have also brought greater media interest toward the North Korea state while highlighting the long diplomatic road U.S. foreign policymakers face when dealing with the reclusive Communist state. The sinking of

a South Korean vessel, ROKS Cheonan, in 2010 also served to draw attention to the Communist State and its provocative stance toward South Korea and the United States. These events might have triggered a new war, but U.S. restraint, strategic patience, and the importance of U.S.-China relations have been factors that have helped maintain the status quo. If anything, these focusing events, both small and large, have led to the United States further distancing itself from the reclusive state. More importantly, these focusing events have not led to increased attentiveness toward policy alternatives, but have, instead, reinforced the status quo.

North Korean nuclear testing from 2006 to 2016 has generated media interest (Figure 12). The focal strength of these events is compelling for two reasons. First, the number of media stories has declined since North Korea's first test in 2006. Second, as the strength of North Korea's nuclear devices has increased, media attention on these tests has continued to decline.

Figure 12: Media attention on North Korean Nuclear Testing



Using the model adapted from Birkland's logic, it had been clear that these nuclear tests and North Korean bellicosity, while being highly dramatic, came as no surprise to U.S. foreign policymakers. More importantly, they have not been of sufficient strength to signal a departure in

U.S. hostility and isolation policies. Given the repeated use of sanctions and incremental response to North Korea, the status quo persists.

Table 7: North Korea Focusing Events

<i>Birkland's logic</i>	Nuclear bomb testing (2006, 2009, 2013, 2016)
<i>Large number of people potentially affected?</i>	<u>No.</u> Testing done underground (although future harms possible from radiation contamination).
<i>Focusing event causes visible and tangible harms (to US foreign policy)?</i>	<u>Yes.</u> U.S. foreign policy's inability to rein in N. Korea could make it more difficult to stop other country's from developing nuclear weapons.
<i>Event is rare and/or novel?</i>	<u>No.</u> U.S. intelligence aware of K. Q. Kahn network that supplied N. Korea with know-how and materials to construct nuclear devices.
<i>Number of media reports</i>	2682 – 1887 – 2367 - 2224
<i>Focal strength</i>	Medium-Low

There are two reasons why these focusing events have not captured the attentiveness to U.S. foreign policymakers to consider policy alternatives. First, we must return to Birkland's definition of a focusing event, which he defines as:

...sudden; relatively uncommon; can be reasonably defined as harmful or revealing the possibility of potentially greater future harms, has harms that are concentrated in a particular geographical area or community of interest; and that is known to policy makers and the public simultaneously. (Birkland, 1998, p. 54)

While nuclear devices are not detonated every day, nuclear tests require preparation that is often detected by spy satellites whereby analysts can then attempt to predict the day of the test. Such tests are not necessarily uncommon given that North Korea's nuclear ambitions were evident more than ten years before conducting its first test in 2006 during the Bush Administration. Repeated tests by North Korea make such events more common, too. Also, such tests do not necessarily mean that a country has the necessary technology to deliver or launch a nuclear device; such harms or future harms might be years, if not decades, away, even though North Korea, per some experts, made great strides in 2016. For example, North Korea's ability to threaten the continental United States is not guaranteed, and could well be years away (Brumfield,

2017, January 6). Also, such events are not always known to the public and policymakers simultaneously. Often, intelligence agencies have warning that a nuclear test is on the horizon while the press and public find out only moments before the test or right after a test has been conducted.

The second reason is the fact that, unlike the Middle East with its unstable geopolitical environment and enmity between Saudi Arabia and Iran and Arab aggression toward Israel, North Korea has few neighbors, and it is surrounded by states that either already possess nuclear weapons (like China and Russia) or states that are unable to develop nuclear weapons programs of their own due to their strategic alliance with the United States (such as, South Korea and Japan).

Lastly, North Korea has never been reliable in carrying out its responsibility, even when it has come to the table. In fact, North Korea has reneged on almost every promise and commitment it has made (Princic, 2016, January 20). Repeated nuclear testing is drawing not only less of a response in the media, but an increase in bomb strength is also having a negative effect on the media response. These two factors are significant sources of negative feedback that protect the status quo and inhibit foreign policymakers from considering potentially more successful policy alternatives.

While these events lead to increased attention and mobilization, these events have not lead policymakers to recognize alternative policy options that would abandon the status quo. The increased attentiveness over nuclear testing has not draw new ideas from within the 'garbage can' of policy ideas and repeated weapons testing by North Korea only reinforced the status quo.

### **5.4.3: Why no policy failure?**

U.S. policies of hostility/isolation toward North Korea remain unchanged, even after repeated detonation of nuclear devices. While U.S. policy in the Middle East relies on delicate maneuvering and balancing the interests of many countries, U.S. policy toward North Korea is singular in nature, and U.S. policy is strongly focused on nonproliferation policies above all else (Jackson, 2016). While many anticipated a change in rhetoric from the Obama Administration in 2009, no such change occurred due to a nuclear and rocket test that took place in April and May, 2009 (“U.S. policy toward North Korea,” 2013). These tests have locked the United States’ focus on issues of nonproliferation.

In the previous case studies, focusing events have led to change because of an increased level of attentiveness on the part of policymakers to consider policy alternatives, causing them to pay attention to current policy. In the case of North Korea, while focusing events lead to an increase in attentiveness, policymakers do not seek alternatives. Attentiveness remains focused on incremental adjustments to current policy that ultimately maintains the status quo. As Jackson (2016) points out, U.S. preoccupation with issues of nonproliferation have not led policymakers to draw alternative policy prescriptions from the ‘garbage can’ of new policy ideas.

U.S. policy has remained focused on a concept of strategic patience, “...a policy that suggested that the United States could afford to wait for North Korea to make its decision to denuclearize...” (“U.S. policy toward North Korea,” 2013). Such a change is an incremental adjustment to the Bush era approach to dealing with North Korea. While the Bush Administration in 2008 had secured the destruction of some North Korea facilities in exchange for aid, a second nuclear test in 2009 and refusal to allow further inspections brought a return to U.N. sanctions. This cycle of accords, broken promises and further tests, and renewed sanctions

has dominated North Korean policy between 2006 and the present (“North Korea nuclear timeline fast facts,” 2017, January 18).

#### **5.4.4: Conclusion**

A key question remains: why have foreign policymakers not tried a different approach to North Korea by establishing embassies in each other’s countries or relaxing sanctions? If current U.S. foreign policy is not holding the North Korean regime from building nuclear weapons, then it stands to reason that some kind of new policy should be tried?

There are two reasons why this has not occurred. First, I argue that the political costs that North Korea policy has “billed” U.S. administrations has not been expensive enough to warrant a departure from the past and that the costs incurred re-establishing diplomatic relations is too high. These low cost policies generated considerable negative feedback and do not draw policymakers to the ‘garbage can’ of new ideas. North Korea rarely features as an important electoral consideration in U.S. elections: voters are not going to polls in large numbers asking which candidate will get North Korea to change. U.S. foreign policy toward North Korea has not created other issues that need to be suppressed (yet), and U.S. foreign policy has not jeopardized other foreign policy goals. In fact, were the U.S. to attempt a regime change, this *new policy* would certainly jeopardize U.S. foreign policy goals toward China, one of North Korea’s staunchest supporters. Also, current U.S. policy toward North Korea still has substantial political support domestically and internationally.

Second, institutional stasis has also been powerful in keeping policy alternatives from emerging from the ‘garbage can.’ In other words, the U.S. “slaps on the wrist” of North Korea’s leaders is now institutionalized. This “way of doing things” acts as a powerful force of negative

feedback that prevents policy change from occurring because new ideas do not have an opportunity to bubble up from the ‘garbage can’ of policy alternatives.

Will continued nuclear testing finally elicit a change in U.S. foreign policy? Recent developments point to a ‘maybe’ as Secretary of State Rex Tillerson’s recent 23 word public statement on North Korea suggests that Trump Administration’s patience has already been exhausted in less than 100 days (“North Korean Missile Launch,” 2017, April 4). President Trump has also ordered U.S. ships to the area, and this shift of U.S. forces has provoked a strong response from North Korea. Given North Korea’s lack of commitment to diplomacy, might they respect a strong show of force or might force be the only way to break with decades of failed policies of diplomacy, isolation, and hostility in favor of a military response? Only time will tell.

## Section 6: Conclusion

This thesis has argued that foreign policy change in U.S. policies of isolation toward rival or outlaw states takes place after a causal chain of events: a strong focusing event leads to increases U.S. foreign policymakers' attentiveness which then leads to hostility/isolation policies to be dumped and replaced with policies of greater engagement. The causal mechanism highlighted in this work does not argue with Hermann's (1990) assessment that change is a decision-making process. However, I argue that while changes in leadership can often lead to new ideas about foreign policy, something more is needed to get policymakers to re-evaluate and abandon longstanding policies of hostility and isolation. A focusing event alone is insufficient; policymakers must calculate the political costs. The higher the costs, the greater chance a policy will not survive.

We should remember that the hostility/isolation policies studied here are not or were not brief policy prescriptions but instead remained enduring fixtures – perhaps institutions in their own right – for decades. First, U.S. policies of hostility/isolation toward China lasted for over 25 years. Second, the United States broke off diplomatic relations with Iran in 1980 and only in 2015 did direct talks with Iran take place between policymakers in high levels of both governments. Third, our sanctions and cold shoulder to Cuba, just a few miles off the Florida coast, lasted more than 50 years.

While President Nixon had broached the subject of rapprochement with China in his *Foreign Affairs* piece just a few years before he became President, his ascension to the White House was not enough to explain a change in policy given his complex relationship with Communism. Focusing principally on a change of leadership or what Prindle calls the “critical elections framework” is not enough to explain change (Prindle, 2012, pp. 28–29). How many

elections took place since the United States severed diplomatic relations with Cuba that resulted in minimal policy change if all? President Johnson, for example, had ample opportunity to work with the Communist Chinese government, yet he never found the opportunity or time. As argued in the case study on Nixon's visit to China, Chinese nuclear testing reached a different place on Johnson's foreign policy agenda. The testing and detonation of the Chinese bomb, a strong focusing event, pushed Johnson to address issues of nuclear proliferation and U.S. policies towards future states that might develop and test nuclear weapons. Johnson's path is not unsurprising since there is no guarantee that having relations with any nation would hold them back from developing nuclear weapons, as was the case with France and Israel, two U.S. allies.

Similarly, the Iranian government made overtures to the Bush Administration to thaw relations but were rebuffed (Parsi, 2012), but it was only a few years later that President Barack Obama decided that policies of hostility/isolation were ineffectual during his first electoral campaign and agreed to deal directly with the Iranian regime to resolve their differences. In that short span of time, the Iranian economy began to suffer under the pressure of U.S. and international sanctions, Iran underwent a change in leadership more favorable to diplomacy, and Israel threatened to take unilateral action to stop Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon.

President Obama also made similar statements about our sanctions and lack of diplomatic ties to Cuba, calling such policies failures in numerous memos and public statements. In a word, the context in which U.S. presidents have come to power is a necessary condition for change that allows our causal model to work. While having a policy entrepreneur is integral to labeling hostility/isolation policies as failures, the international context determined by strong focusing events plan an integral role as the spark for change.

Situating policy change within the framework developed here accomplishes two goals. First, mechanisms for policy change are fleshed out so that they can be observed and measured, privileging neither the domestic or bureaucratic level factors nor international or systemic factors. These factors work in tandem in the development of policy. To assume away one or the other ignores that policy debates that take place within the Executive Branch on which ideas reach the President.

Second, using policy failure as our intervening variable adds a key piece to the conceptual puzzle and relates back to the first point: that people make policy. When Nixon, for example, wrote in 1967 of the need to bring China into the international community, this change in U.S. policy does not take place immediately upon Nixon taking office. Nixon must navigate the complex foreign policy subsystems that characterize U.S. foreign policymaking and reframe the issue of Communist isolation in such a way that does not harm his re-election chances, maintains his support of key conservatives, and, most of all, the public. Also, seeing failure not as whether a policy “works” or is “good” but as a function of political goals allows for a clearer assessment of policy. More importantly, for a policy to be considered a failure it must be juxtaposed against viable policy alternatives that do a better job of reaching political goals than existing policies. These opportunities are rare and few and far between given that policies of hostility and isolation for Cuba last more than fifty years, and current policy toward North Korea has been in place for more than 70 years with no end in sight to North Korea’s isolation.

### **6.1: Implications for policymakers**

If policymakers are indeed boundedly rational, they are only able to consider a few policy items at one time. Indeed, having a foreign policy establishment that is as large as it is (although recent cuts to the budgets of the State Department are a sign that smaller staffs might miss

important developments) allows for different areas to use their cognitive power for different areas. One person or a small group of people are too constrained cognitively to do it all.

This paper has shown that focusing events do not only capture the attention and attentiveness of policymakers but also offer a strong signal that a window of opportunity for change has presented itself. As the case study on North Korea has shown, problems invariably never go away on their own. Had previous administrations reached out to North Korea by offering stronger inducements (such as bilateral talks, which the United States has rebuffed for years), North Korea might not have felt pushed to continue to develop nuclear weapons.

The case study on Nixon's opening to China shows that even in the face of strong ideology, change is possible. Foreign policymakers should work hard not to allow ideological considerations (like Nixon faced with Communism) to ignore opportunities for change in U.S. foreign policy. Such opportunities might provide more benefits than policies of hostility and isolation. Scholars have shown that economic sanctions are not reliably effective; coercive measures of diplomacy are not always effective. Statecraft should make use of the carrot just as often as the stick and remember that money talks: financial inducements and aware of reputational constraints more likely to get foreign powers to acquiesce to U.S. demands.

## **6.2: Future research considerations**

There are several future research considerations presented by this paper. First, as the universe of cases has shown, there are several other case studies that could be done on Bhutan, Vietnam, Iraq, Mongolia, and Libya. Punctuated equilibrium can also come from other dynamics besides policy failure. For example, the end of the Cold War was a powerful focusing event that punctuated the equilibrium between the United States and Mongolia that was not buttressed by any solid policy of hostility and isolation. In fact, the United States tried many times since the

20<sup>th</sup> century to reach an accord with Mongolia on diplomatic relations. Libya, for example, is a case of where policy change came from outside the purview of U.S. policymakers. U.S. policy toward Libya had been largely successful at isolating the Libyan regime. Libya chose on its own accord to agree to abandon its policies of supporting terrorism and eliminating weapons of mass destruction. This development could potentially show that U.S. hostility/isolation policies *might work* under the right conditions. Yet just what are those conditions?

Second, a mixed methods approach might also prove fruitful. Baumgartner and Jones (2012) have argued that an empirical law of public budgets might exist; they note that tell-tale fat-tailed distributions in those public budgets is evidence of punctuated equilibrium (2012, p. 11). Might those similar tell-tale fat-tailed distributions be evidenced in some trade and economic indicators, such as foreign aid, total imports/exports? In other words, it might be possible to detect a similar “empirical law” of punctuated equilibrium in other policy areas besides budgeting. These effects could be measured using a variety of economic indicators and provide fruitful results to better understand why such policies persist even when they apparently are not achieving the normative ends they were designed to achieve.

A third avenue of research is the idea of signaling. Was it signaling by U.S. leaders that ultimately allowed for “windows of opportunity” to open and allow for significant departures from U.S. policy to take place? While testing an argument might be difficult, a successful model might be able to add more nuance to the ideas presented here.

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