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HIERARCHY AND THE REVOLUTIONARY CRISIS IN A SUBORDINATE POLITY: THE SHAH'S DEBACLE AND AMERICAN POLICY

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Abstract. *Introduction.* Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's (Shah) downfall in early 1979 raises questions about U.S. policy on regime change in its allies. Despite the Shah's expectation that the U.S. would intervene to support him against rising opposition, Washington made minimal efforts to restore his authority. This is surprising given the Shah's significant stockpiles of advanced American military equipment. The key issue is why the U.S. allowed the Shah's regime to collapse without decisive action, especially when intervention seemed possible. This paper *aims* to explore this puzzle through the lens of hierarchy theory, which offers a compelling framework for analyzing the behavior of great powers during revolutionary crises in allied states. This study seeks to advance our understanding of the dynamics at play when a dominant state (A) must decide whether to continue supporting an autocratic ruler (B) who is being challenged by opposition forces (C) in a subordinate polity. *Analysis and results.* It argues that when the autocratic ruler's survival and sovereignty appear unlikely, the dominant state may withdraw support and consider alternatives among the opposition. Consequently, the dominant state adopts a low-profile approach, aiming to influence the situation to preserve its own authority and reconstruct the political hierarchy through new alliances or arrangements. The focus shifts from the regime's immediate survival to reestablishing influence via alternative actors capable of maintaining stability and aligning with broader strategic interests. By applying "hierarchy theory," the paper sheds light on how the U.S. prioritized regional stability and influence over the Shah's regime's survival. *Authors' contributions.* This article is the result of almost equal participation of two authors. One of the authors (Muharrem Bagir) is a sociologist and has contributed to the article, especially regarding the socio-historical situation of the Pahlavi era in Iran. The second author (Hamed Pourhassan) studied international relations and has generally contributed to the political-systemic part of the article. The theory, research method, and generality of the article have been completed with the participation and consultation of the two authors.

Key words: hierarchy, US foreign policy, Shah, Iran, Middle East.

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ИЕРАРХИЯ И РЕВОЛЮЦИОННЫЙ КРИЗИС В ЗАВИСИМОМ ГОСУДАРСТВЕ: КРУШЕНИЕ ШАХА И ПОЛИТИКА США

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Аннотация. *Введение.* Падение Мухаммеда Резы Пахлави (шаха) в начале 1979 г. поднимает вопросы о политике США в отношении смены режимов в странах-союзниках. Несмотря на ожидания шаха, что США вмешаются и поддержат его в борьбе с растущей оппозицией, Вашингтон предпринял минимальные усилия для восстановления его власти. Это удивительно, учитывая значительные запасы современной американской военной техники у шаха. Ключевой вопрос заключается в том, почему США допустили крах режима шаха без решительных действий, особенно когда вмешательство казалось возможным. *Цель* данной работы – изучить этот вопрос через призму теории иерархии, которая предлагает убедительную основу для анализа поведения великих держав во время революционных кризисов в союзных государствах. Это исследование направлено на углубление нашего понимания динамики, которая происходит, когда доминирующее государство (А) должно решить, продолжать ли поддерживать авторитарного правителя (В), которому бросают вызов оппозиционные силы (С) в подчиненном государстве. *Анализ и результаты.* Утверждается, что, когда выживание и суверенитет авторитарного правителя кажутся маловероятными, доминирующее государство может отказаться от поддержки и рассмотреть альтернативы среди оппозиции. Следовательно, доминирующее государство принимает сдержанный подход, стремясь повлиять на ситуацию, чтобы сохранить свою власть и перестроить политическую иерархию посредством новых союзов или соглашений. В центре внимания оказывается не столько непосредственное выживание режима, сколько восстановление его влияния посредством альтернативных субъектов, способных поддерживать стабильность и соответствовать более широким стратегическим интересам. Применяя «теорию иерархии», статья проливает свет на то, как США отдавали приоритет региональной стабильности и влиянию над выживанием режима шаха. *Вклад авторов.* Мухаррем Багир проанализировал социально-историческую ситуацию эпохи Пехлеви в Иране. Хамед Пурхассан работал над политико-системной частью статьи. Выбор теории и метода исследования, а также подведение итогов работы осуществлены при участии двух авторов.

Ключевые слова: иерархия, внешняя политика США, шах, Иран, Ближний Восток.

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Introduction. At the Guadeloupe Conference held from January 4 to 7, 1979, Western allies concluded that the Shah of Iran must leave the country immediately [33]. Just eight days later, on January 16, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi departed Iran in tears, appointing Shapour Bakhtiar as prime minister in a final attempt to maintain control. On February 1, 1979, Ayatollah Khomeini returned to Tehran from exile, and within ten days, the Islamic Revolution succeeded through mass demonstrations, strikes, and street

clashes. The monarchy was abolished, and the Islamic Republic was proclaimed. Remarkably, just three days later, the Carter administration recognized the nascent Islamic state. However, in response to the Shah's admittance into the United States for medical treatment, on November 4, 1979, militant Iranian students seized the U.S. Embassy in Tehran, taking 66 American diplomats hostage [3; 17]. These events signified the replacement of a pro-American regime with an anti-American one, positioning Iran on the

frontlines of the Cold War, adjacent to the Soviet sphere of influence in the Middle East and Central Asia. This geopolitical shift had profound implications for U.S. foreign policy, extending well into the post-Cold War era [5].

Methods. The Iranian Revolution has prompted extensive scholarly debate, with analysts seeking to unpack the complexity of the crisis. However, one critical question has remained largely unexamined within the framework of hierarchical international relations: why did the United States, despite its close alliance with the Shah and its long-standing military and financial support, fail to intervene decisively to preserve his regime? This paper aims to explore this puzzle through the lens of hierarchy theory, which offers a compelling framework for analyzing the behavior of great powers during revolutionary crises in allied states. By situating the Iranian case within this theoretical model, this study seeks to advance our understanding of the dynamics at play when a dominant state (A) must decide whether to continue supporting an autocratic ruler (B) who is being challenged by opposition forces (C) in a subordinate polity.

Hierarchy theory is particularly well-suited to this case due to the structured, dependent relationship between the United States and the Shah. For over three decades, the U.S. had provided the Shah with military, economic, and political support, most notably during the 1946 Soviet occupation crisis and the 1953 coup against Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddeq. In return, the Shah aligned his regime with U.S. interests, adopting secular and militaristic policies and integrating Iran into American-led regional security arrangements [4, p. 621]. This enduring partnership exemplified the hierarchical pattern of dominant-subordinate relations, with the United States serving as the hegemon and Iran as a dependent ally.

Contrary to the developments outlined above, these hierarchical relations began to unravel in late 1977, as the Shah was increasingly challenged by a broad spectrum of intellectual and political opposition forces. As mass demonstrations, strikes, and civil resistance intensified, the Shah, unable to contain the unrest, turned to the United States for assistance in resolving the crisis. This moment marked a turning point in the triangular relationship between the U.S. (A), the Shah (B),

and opposition forces (C), presenting a critical opportunity to test and refine hierarchy theory. The interactions among these three actors during the crisis provide a valuable model for understanding how dominant states navigate challenges to their allies and how they prioritize strategic interests during periods of uncertainty.

Discussion. At the height of strategic relations, the Carter administration found itself entrapped in a profound dilemma stemming from the Shah's increasingly repressive autocratic rule and the widespread protests, including both right- and left-wing forces against his regime. Initially, President Carter offered strong rhetorical support for the Shah, calling Iran an "island of stability" in the region, while simultaneously urging political reforms. However, as the crisis escalated, the administration found itself caught between its strategic alliance with the Shah's regime and mounting international pressure to uphold human rights and promote political liberalization. This contradiction exposed the fragility of U.S. foreign policy, which struggled to reconcile its geopolitical objectives with its professed democratic values [41].

The Shah, confident in American support, initially resisted his opponents. However, as the unrest escalated, U.S. support began to quietly recede – shifting from overt backing to behind-the-scenes counsel. Ultimately, as strikes and protests paralyzed the Shah's regime, the United States adopted a mediation strategy, attempting to broker a resolution between the monarchy and moderate opposition forces – a strategy that eventually proved ineffective. When the Shah requested U.S. approval to implement a more forceful suppression strategy (commonly referred to as the "Iron Fist Policy"), Washington declined to provide the necessary political or material support [18, p. 95]. Although the Shah had long been considered a reliable ally, the U.S. refrained from offering decisive assistance during his regime's final crisis. This raises a central theoretical question: Why would a dominant power allow its preferred ally in a subordinate polity to collapse and instead accept an uncertain political alternative with potentially severe geopolitical consequences?

The Shah and President Carter emerged as key actors during the Iranian crisis of 1978–79, and their roles offer vital perspectives on U.S. conduct. In a 1980 interview, the Shah was asked

by a British journalist whether the U.S. and Britain could have done more to support him. He responded, “No, they couldn’t, but it was better to stop giving advice” – an ironic reflection of the perception that U.S. “tacit support” amounted to negligible aid [39]. A persistent view among many Iranians and analysts is that the United States could and should have done more to uphold the Shah’s regime.

President Carter echoed a nuanced stance in later interviews. In a 2007 conversation with Wolf Blitzer, Carter remarked, “The Shah was not overthrown by the U.S.; he was overthrown by his own people.” In another statement, he added: “If the Shah had remained in power, it would have been better for American politics.” These remarks suggest that, while the U.S. did not orchestrate the Shah’s downfall, his continued rule was seen as favorable for U.S. strategic interests.

While such political reflections are valuable, they often carry inherent biases and tend to obscure the deeper motivations underlying policy decisions. Scholarly debates on the crisis have typically fallen into two camps, as categorized by Haw (2013): orthodox critics, who argue that Carter’s foreign policy was ineffectual and overly idealistic, and revisionists, who adopt a more sympathetic or conservative view. Orthodox critiques often label Carter’s strategy as “amateurish,” “utopian,” or overly “ethical” [14; 21; 26; 28; 34; 37; 44]. Other scholars emphasize internal disarray within the administration, citing “inconsistency and divergence among advisers,” “policy confusion,” and “a lack of coordination” as key failures [23; 25, p. 235; 34; 40]. Carter’s “reluctance to make firm decisions,” “excessive caution,” and inability to act decisively until it was too late are frequently cited as contributing factors [17; 20; 30].

The debate continues to intensify in both academic and public spheres, particularly in three contexts: the declassification of new archival materials; the fluctuation in U.S. – Iran relations; and the emergence of new conceptual frameworks within international relations scholarship.

Despite extensive historical work on the crisis, relatively few international relations scholars have sought to construct testable, generalizable hypotheses that draw on the expanding empirical

literature. Historians, in some cases, may fall into the trap of retrospective bias, focusing on the consequences of U.S. inaction rather than its causes. In contrast, IR scholars tend to formulate broader assumptions about state behavior that can be evaluated across cases.

One notable example is the article “The Logic of ‘Offstage’ Signaling: Domestic Politics, Regime Type, and Major Power Protégé Relations” by Roseanne W. McManus and Keren Yarhi-Milo. The authors argue that domestic political constraints in both the U.S. and Iran limited the ability of the Carter administration to issue overt signals of support during the 1960s and 1970s. While this approach offers an important theoretical insight, it falls short of systematically explaining the internal and external dimensions of these “domestic constraints” in both the patron and the client states.

This paper seeks to avoid moralistic interpretations or partisan blame and instead offers a testable hypothesis: When the survival and exclusive sovereignty of a subordinate (B) become unlikely, the dominant power (A) begins to withdraw support and explore alternative alignments among opposition actors (C). This hypothesis will be examined through the case study of the Carter administration’s policy choices during the Iranian crisis of 1978–79, with the aim of contributing to a broader understanding of hierarchy theory as applied to revolutionary transformations in allied regimes [46].

Hierarchy approach and revolutionary crisis in subordinate polities. Hierarchy theory, as introduced by David A. Lake (2009), challenges the traditional realist view of international relations as a domain of pure anarchy. Instead, it conceptualizes the international system as one characterized by varying degrees of political authority and control, wherein stronger states exercise legitimate authority over weaker ones. At the heart of Lake’s formulation lies a relational contract between dominant and subordinate states, involving elements of submission, domination, the partial transfer of sovereignty, and the provision of political order in exchange for compliance. In this framework, authority is defined as “a rightful rule in which an authoritative ruler has the right to command subordinates to perform certain actions, and because the commands are rightful, the ruled have a duty to comply” [27].

However, Lake's model represents only one influential strand within the broader landscape of hierarchy theories in international relations. Other scholars have advanced alternative and critical interpretations, challenging the emphasis on voluntary contractualism. For instance, Mattern (2005) argues that hierarchy is not solely grounded in material capabilities or institutional arrangements but is constituted through discursive power – the representational practices and narratives that socially construct and sustain authority. Donnelly (2006) similarly critiques the voluntarist assumption and draws attention to normative justifications and historical continuities of domination as key elements of global hierarchies.

From a postcolonial perspective, Hobson (2012) extends the critique further by asserting that international hierarchies are frequently upheld through racialized discourses and assumptions of civilizational superiority, which tend to be overlooked in rationalist and liberal accounts. These insights underscore the significance of non-material dimensions such as ideology, identity, and normative legitimacy in the reproduction of hierarchical orders [31].

By integrating both unit differentiation (how states are categorized and perceived) and stratification (their ranked positions), hierarchy theory offers a powerful alternative to the anarchy/order binary dominant in mainstream IR theory [29]. Yet, as the scholarship shows, there is considerable variation in how hierarchy is conceptualized – ranging from liberal institutionalist perspectives, which view hierarchy as a means of fostering order and cooperation, to critical and postcolonial approaches, which emphasize its coercive, unequal, and often exploitative foundations [10; 13; 24].

In hierarchical arrangements, it is commonly assumed that the dominant state will safeguard its preferred elite or institutional configuration within the subordinate polity, particularly when that polity faces internal or external threats [27]. However, such protection is neither automatic nor unconditional. The failure to provide adequate support during moments of revolutionary upheaval exposes the contingent and strategic nature of hierarchical relationships. Understanding the conditions under which protection is withheld necessitates attention to both the domestic political

dynamics of the subordinate state and the strategic calculus of the dominant state during periods of acute uncertainty.

Although this specific dilemma remains underexplored in the literature, some scholars have offered partial insights. McCormack (2012) contends that great powers stabilize subordinate states either by directly supporting preferred regimes or by threatening those who challenge the status quo. Similarly, Clapton and Hameiri [9, p. 68] argue that in the post-Cold War period, dominant states have embraced a form of risk management, selectively engaging in state-building efforts to mitigate de-territorialized security threats. Yet, these frameworks often lack specificity regarding how risk perceptions evolve and how such perceptions shape decisions to intervene or disengage.

Lake (2011) introduces an important distinction between democratic and autocratic subordinate states, proposing that democracies benefit from more stable hierarchical relations due to policy alignment, whereas in autocracies, the benefits are concentrated within elite circles, leading to narrower bases of legitimacy. Nonetheless, this model downplays the potential for political fluidity and contestation from below, especially in volatile authoritarian contexts. In response, McManus and Yarhi-Milo (2017) introduce the concepts of “frontstage” and “offstage” support, arguing that major powers often navigate public opinion and regime type by providing covert assistance to autocratic allies. The preference for secrecy in these relationships is typically driven by concerns over international legitimacy and potential domestic backlash within the dominant state.

While Lake's hierarchy framework remains largely anchored in inter-state dynamics, other scholars have advocated for more expansive approaches. Mattern and Zarakol [30, p. 631], for instance, conceptualize global politics as a multi-layered and fluid order, shaped by diverse actors operating at multiple levels of authority. They critique traditional, anarchy-based models for assuming fixed and unitary state sovereignty, instead emphasizing that sovereignty is increasingly negotiable, fragmented, and shared across supranational institutions, transnational networks, and non-state entities. Their hierarchical lens thus enables a more nuanced understanding

of global order beyond rigid state-centric frameworks.

Crucially, much of the existing hierarchy literature reflects a Western epistemological bias, often framing U.S. foreign policy through the lens of strategic rationality, calculated risk assessment, and system maintenance. By contrast, non-Western perspectives, particularly those informed by postcolonial and dependency theories, offer a more critical reading of hierarchical power. From this vantage point, U.S. involvement in Iran during the crisis of 1978–79 is not simply a matter of failed deterrence or calculated inaction but a manifestation of neo-imperial control, wherein the autonomy of the subordinate state is structurally constrained, and domestic transformations are preemptively suppressed.

Within this framework, the Shah's regime is not merely a client of the United States but a proxy through which hierarchical domination was exercised. The U.S. reluctance to intervene decisively during the revolutionary crisis, therefore, reflects not just a strategic miscalculation but a crisis of imposed legitimacy. This unraveling underscored the fragility of hierarchical systems that rely on authoritarian subordinates lacking broad-based domestic legitimacy.

Taken together, this paper contributes to hierarchy theory by proposing the following hypothesis: when the survival and exclusive sovereignty of a subordinate state (B) becomes increasingly untenable, the dominant power (A) is likely to withdraw support and begin evaluating alternative partners or political configurations (C). The 1978–79 Iranian crisis under the Carter administration offers a compelling case study through which to examine this dynamic, illustrating how hegemonic calculations, domestic unrest, and concerns over international legitimacy intersect to influence the dominant state's strategic choices in moments of acute political upheaval.

The Shah enforces, the US endorses: A historical background. The Shah's policies toward opposition forces between 1945 and 1978, along with the U.S. response to these policies, are fundamental to understanding both the configuration of political forces in Iran and the broader dynamics that culminated in the revolutionary crisis of 1978–79. This historical context also provides crucial insights into the nature and characteristics of hierarchical relations.

To address this topic, it is first essential to examine the modalities of U.S. relations with the Shah throughout his reign. Second, to set the stage for an informed exploration of the 1978–79 crisis, it is important to analyze the nature of the opposition forces and how both the Shah and the U.S. responded to their challenges. The core argument is that, as long as a pattern of command and compliance was regularly practiced between the Shah and successive U.S. administrations, the relationship between the dominant power (the United States) and the subordinate polity (Iran) remained within the bounds of hierarchical norms. Accordingly, in the broader confrontation between the Shah and domestic opposition, U.S. policy typically aligned with and supported the Shah's regime.

Historically, the relationship between U.S. presidents and the Shah was marked by mutual alignment and strategic congruence, shaped by hierarchical dynamics akin to a patron-client model in which authority flowed from the dominant to the subordinate. In this context, the 1970s stand out as a period during which the relationship between the United States and Iran could best be described as dependent but tense. While the U.S. sought to use Iran as a "regional gendarme" against Soviet expansionism, the Shah's authoritarianism, growing domestic opposition, and human rights violations caused increasing discomfort in Washington. Americans were therefore skeptical of the Shah's absolute monarchy, but the Shah depended on the United States for protection from the Soviet Union, financial aid to revive the economy, and arms to strengthen his army. Several American presidents advised him that the best way to preserve his dynasty was through economic reform and a broadening of his political base [47]. Under the political and security order provided by the United States, the Shah was able to consolidate his rule and weather multiple significant challenges such as the 1945 Anglo-Soviet occupation and the 1953 oil nationalization crisis. Hierarchical ties deepened through a range of bilateral and multilateral agreements, including the Baghdad Pact (1955), the Mutual Defense Agreement (1959), and robust cooperation in military, intelligence, and economic domains.

Following the 1953 coup and with full U.S. backing, the Shah declared himself Shahanshah (King of Kings) [4] and presided over an

increasingly autocratic regime. This authoritarian consolidation provoked growing intellectual and political resistance, giving rise to a diverse spectrum of ideologically distinct opposition forces. These groups criticized both the Shah's personal rule and the political structure he had imposed. However, from 1948 to 1978, the opposition had not yet acquired the organizational capacity or mass mobilization strength necessary to fundamentally challenge the Shah's authority. Consequently, across multiple administrations, the United States continued to endorse the Shah's strategies for managing domestic dissent.

Thus, it can be inferred that U.S. policy toward the Shah and his opposition between 1953 and 1978 was characterized by consistent support for the Shah – a commitment typical of a dominant state backing its preferred actor within a subordinate polity. Concurrently, American policy toward opposition groups was guided by the overarching goal of preserving the Shah's rule and maintaining political stability in Iran. While successive U.S. administrations encouraged the Shah to undertake limited political liberalization – particularly to accommodate royalist secular elites – they simultaneously endorsed his repressive measures against communist forces. U.S. policy toward nationalist actors, however, was marked by ambiguity: while the United States played a central role in orchestrating the overthrow of Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddeq, it later viewed nationalist factions as a potential counterweight to the Shah and as agents of possible democratic reform. In contrast, American policy toward leftist groups focused squarely on enhancing the Shah's capacity to suppress communist threats – arguably the most explicit rationale for Washington's continued support for his regime. As for clerics and religious leaders, they were not prioritized in U.S. policy considerations, largely due to their lack of governance experience and their perceived irrelevance to U.S. strategic interests in Iran. This overarching American approach bolstered the Shah's confidence, enabling him to rule with near-total authority over Iran's political forces throughout his reign. The following sections examine how this endorsement-enforcement mechanism functioned with respect to nationalist, socialist, and religious factions during the period 1945–78, within the framework of hierarchical relations [42].

Throughout his rule, the Shah actively sought to minimize the political influence of secular nationalists. In contrast, during the early phase of U.S. involvement in Iran, American policymakers regarded nationalists as a useful counterbalance to the Shah's autocratic tendencies and as a bulwark against the left. Yet this perspective created a paradox within the hierarchical relationship: the nationalists' core values – anti-imperialism and constitutionalism – conflicted with U.S. authority in Iran, despite their secular and democratic inclinations, which otherwise resonated with American ideological preferences [25, p. 187]. In practice, the nationalist movement was seen as a threat to U.S. influence. Rallying around Mosaddeq, who became prime minister in 1951, nationalist forces pushed for democratic reforms and directly challenged the Shah's power, especially in the context of oil nationalization efforts [17, p. 58]. Faced with Mosaddeq's growing popular support and the Shah's diminished authority, the U.S., in coordination with MI6, orchestrated the 1953 coup that deposed Mosaddeq. His removal can be interpreted both as the consequence of his defiance of U.S. interests and as a reward to the Shah for his loyalty and compliance with American authority. Notably, his initial reign had been orchestrated by Britain, which had even imposed his prime minister [18, pp. 125-128]. Following the coup, the Shah moved swiftly to dismantle nationalist organizations and imprison their leaders, a practice he maintained from 1953 until 1978 [17, p. 223; 18]. Despite these repressive actions, the United States did not exert significant pressure on the Shah, though it continued to view the National Front as a potential balancing force – a contingency option if the Shah became untenable. Ultimately, because the Shah successfully ensured domestic stability, U.S. administrations were willing to tolerate his suppression of secular nationalist groups.

Alongside the nationalists, leftist forces represented a more immediate and significant threat to both the Shah's authority and American geopolitical interests. Iran's incorporation into the U.S.-led hierarchy was driven, in large part, by Cold War imperatives – particularly the containment of Soviet influence. As such, the Shah's principal role within this strategic framework was to eliminate socialist and pro-Soviet elements. The Tudeh Party, Iran's most

prominent leftist organization, advocated for a socialist political order and aligned closely with the Soviet Union. This orientation stood in direct opposition to both the U.S.-supported monarchical system and American strategic objectives. In the 1940s, the Tudeh Party played an active role in the Majlis and broader political discourse. However, by 1949, the Shah began a systematic campaign of suppression, confiscating party assets, dissolving affiliated organizations such as the Central Council, and arresting roughly 200 leaders and cadres [2]. Following the 1953 coup, the Shah officially banned the party, initiating widespread arrests, the dismantling of its organizational infrastructure, and the execution of 40 to 50 senior figures, an act described as effectively “destroying the Tudeh” [1, p. 92]. This pattern of repression continued throughout his reign and reflected strong U.S. approval. In this regard, what the Shah enforced, the United States endorsed.

The third, and politically lesser-known, force opposing the Shah and U.S. authority in Iran comprised religious intellectuals, clerics, and militant Islamist-socialist groups. These actors employed Islamic discourses to critique the Shah’s rule, with the central objective of liberating Iran from foreign domination and overthrowing what they perceived as an anti-Islamic regime. The Shah’s response to these groups followed the familiar pattern of repression: arresting, imprisoning, and exiling key figures [17, p. 34; 36]. Notably, a 1975 report by the State Department’s Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR) highlighted the growing importance of religious leaders and their ties to secular political currents in Iran. However, this perspective was largely dismissed by U.S. policymakers, particularly Secretary of State Henry Kissinger [16, p. 14]. Believing that religious forces lacked both the capacity and cohesion to mount a serious challenge to the Shah, U.S. officials continued to back the Shah’s modernization agenda, which included limited liberalization and social reforms.

In sum, the Shah’s approach to opposition forces throughout his reign was defined by the elimination of communist factions, the containment of nationalist movements, and the marginalization and demonization of religious elements. These efforts were enforced through SAVAK’s extensive surveillance and repression apparatus. Meanwhile,

the creation of symbolic political parties served only to manufacture a facade of political pluralism. Despite the Shah’s overtly autocratic governance, the United States refrained from applying meaningful pressure, as the Shah successfully maintained internal order and safeguarded American strategic interests in the region. Nonetheless, mounting concerns, especially during the Kennedy and Carter administrations, about the regime’s long-term stability led to calls for political liberalization. The Shah, however, emboldened by decades of American support, delayed genuine reforms until it was too late to avert collapse [6].

Thus, within the hierarchical relationship between the U.S. (A) and Iran under the Shah (B), the pattern of command and compliance was evident: directives or expectations from the dominant power were largely fulfilled by the subordinate, while repressive measures executed by the Shah were consistently endorsed by the United States. This hierarchical dynamic remained stable as long as the opposition remained ideologically fragmented, leaderless, and disorganized. American support for the Shah only began to waver once his monopoly on political authority faced an existential threat.

The alliance between the Shah and the United States was solidified in the aftermath of the 1953 coup against Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh, after which Washington backed the Zahedi government in consolidating power through a combination of harsh repression and symbolic judicial actions. This period witnessed the systematic suppression of political opponents, including the National Front, the Tudeh Party, and tribal actors such as the Qashqai [21, pp. 85-86]. The United States actively assisted in the construction of a more centralized and authoritarian regime, believing this would foster long-term stability and position Iran as a strategic bulwark against Soviet expansion.

Indeed, the U.S. played a central role in supporting Mohammad Reza Shah’s regime from 1941 until his overthrow in 1979. During the Cold War, Iran was regarded as a critical ally in the containment of Soviet influence across the Middle East. The 1953 coup, orchestrated jointly by the CIA and Britain’s MI6, was aimed at toppling Mossadegh after his move to nationalize Iran’s oil industry and challenge monarchical authority. This intervention not only reinstated the Shah’s

autocratic rule but also secured Western dominance over Iran's political and economic trajectory [48].

Over time, this strategic alliance enhanced Iran's coercive capacity while anchoring the country firmly within the U.S.-led global order. The influx of American military aid and security cooperation emboldened the Shah to pursue a program of authoritarian modernization. This included the expansion of state institutions into nearly every facet of Iranian society, the suppression of dissent, and the marginalization of oppositional forces. What began as a Cold War strategic partnership gradually evolved into a hierarchical relationship: the Shah became increasingly dependent on U.S. political, military, and economic support, while Iran's autonomy in policy decisions was significantly constrained by its subordinate position in the alliance.

The 1979 Islamic Revolution marked a dramatic rupture in this alignment. The revolutionary movement, led by Ayatollah Khomeini and a coalition of clerical and secular actors, was rooted in anti-imperialist and anti-Western ideologies. From the perspective of the revolutionaries, the United States was not merely a foreign power but the chief enabler of the Shah's repressive apparatus. The revolution was thus conceptualized not only as a domestic struggle against tyranny but also as part of a broader resistance to Western imperialism. Following the revolution, Iran radically reoriented its foreign policy in opposition to the U.S. and the Western-dominated international order, casting itself as a vanguard of global resistance [15, p. 64].

Nevertheless, despite this rupture, Iran's geopolitical significance to the United States endured. During the Cold War, Iran had functioned as a linchpin in America's containment strategy. After the revolution and the subsequent collapse of the Shah's regime, Iran transitioned from a strategic ally to a central challenge to U.S. regional interests. In the post-Cold War period, as the U.S. emerged as a global hegemon in a unipolar world, Washington adopted the policy of "dual containment" to isolate both Iran and Iraq – two states that asserted their sovereignty in ways that defied American strategic objectives [4, pp. 275-276; 35, pp. 131-135]. This shift underscores how Iran, even as an adversary, remained central to the U.S. vision of regional and global order.

Beyond the geopolitical and structuralist analysis, several scholars have emphasized the cultural and postcolonial dimensions of the 1979 Revolution. In *Iran: A People Interrupted*, Hamid Dabashi situates the revolution within a larger, two-century-long struggle between competing visions of modernity – one shaped by Western colonial legacies and the other emerging from postcolonial resistance. Dabashi argues that the revolution represented not merely a political or religious uprising but a deep, multifaceted assertion of cultural and intellectual sovereignty. It sought to reclaim national identity from the legacy of Western domination, particularly that imposed by the United States and Europe. This interpretation challenges reductionist portrayals of the revolution as purely ideological or geopolitical, framing it instead as a culturally rooted act of postcolonial resistance [12].

Incremental strategies: The US leaves the Shah alone. In late 1977 and early 1978, U.S.-Iranian relations entered a period of crisis, primarily due to the Shah's increasingly autocratic rule. A broad spectrum of intellectual and practical opposition emerged to challenge the governance system under the Shah. In response, the Shah turned to his patron, the United States, seeking to quell the growing unrest and reassert his authority across the country. Although the Carter administration maintained a relatively low profile in the standoff between the Shah and the opposition forces, it carefully attempted to preserve the hierarchical relationship through a range of strategic responses during the crisis. This period provides fertile ground for the theoretical analysis of hierarchy within a case study framework.

According to hierarchy theory, the primary goal of any hierarchical relationship is the preservation of political order, wherein persons, property, and promises are protected within the subordinate polity [28]. In such relationships, it is assumed that the dominant actor (A) will come to the aid of the subordinate actor (B) when B faces internal challenges. However, this assumption is not always accurate, as the decision to provide support depends on several factors related to the political dynamics within the subordinate polity. Specifically, the dominant actor closely monitors domestic developments, as any significant change within the subordinate polity could jeopardize the hierarchical relationship.

Revolutionary movements are seen as a direct threat to this hierarchy, as they can undermine the authority of A within the subordinate polity.

When the preferred element in the subordinate polity faces internal political challenges, the dominant actor (A) typically adopts incremental strategies to preserve order. In examining U.S. behavior during the Shah's confrontation with opposition forces, this paper explores the pattern of behavior that A follows when confronted with a revolutionary crisis in the subordinate polity. The question of whether the United States could have saved the Shah is an intriguing and multifaceted issue. However, the gradual path toward the Shah's downfall was shaped by the strategies the U.S. adopted in response to the crisis.

It is argued here that support is not automatically extended by A to B when B's exclusive sovereignty fractures and its survival become unlikely due to revolutionary forces. In such cases, A evaluates alternative options aimed at ensuring that developments take a course that preserves its legitimate authority and retains the hierarchical structure. Conversely, A is more likely to offer support if the subordinate actor (B) demonstrates the capacity to restore order and maintain exclusive sovereignty and full authority across the country. The strategies adopted by the U.S. during the Shah's crisis were inextricably linked to the modalities of sovereignty and authority that the Shah held during this critical period.

In the following, it is explicated how U.S. strategies during the crisis were closely tied to the Shah's fluctuating levels of control and legitimacy. Through this analysis, it becomes clear that the support of the dominant actor is contingent upon the perceived ability of the subordinate actor to retain its grip on power and the broader implications this has for the hierarchical relationship.

The configuration of political alignments among the various factions in early Iranian politics during the initial stages of the crisis reveals that order remained fully operational. Three key factors indicate the functionality of this order. First, the relationship between the dominant state (the United States) and the subordinate polity (the Shah's regime) was functioning harmoniously. Second, the Shah retained the capacity to exercise full authority through governmental institutions,

and his exclusive sovereignty had not yet been significantly challenged. Third, opposition forces were fragmented, lacking ideological unity and coordinated efforts to overthrow the regime.

When these three conditions are present as foundational principles of relations, it suggests that the hierarchy operates in a regular and predictable pattern. However, when these conditions are transgressed, whether by the dominant state, the element in power, or endogenous opposition forces, it signals that the hierarchy is under threat.

In the early phase of the crisis, President Carter offered unequivocal support to the Shah, stating: "Under the Shah's brilliant leadership, Iran is an island of stability in one of the most troubled regions of the world" [20, p. 57]. This statement serves as *prima facie* evidence of the U.S.'s initial approach to the impending crisis in Iran. Examining the broader context, it becomes evident that this support was not arbitrary. The Shah's sovereignty had not yet been dramatically challenged, and his full authority over the country remained intact. He was still capable of restoring order, largely because opposition forces were ideologically divided and had not yet consolidated under strong leadership.

Moreover, opposition to the Shah, led primarily by conservative clerics and communist-oriented leftists, was equally antagonistic toward U.S. influence in Iran. Nationalists, though secular and democratic, were also viewed as a threat to U.S.-Iran relations due to their anti-imperialist stance. Although dissatisfaction with the Shah was growing across the country, according to a CIA report from late 1977, opposition forces were still in the minority, demonstrations had not yet spread widely, and the Shah retained the ability to restore order [16]. Admittedly, political tensions had heightened in the final three years of the regime due to the formation of the Rastakhiz Party and the significant increase in oil prices [2].

Above all, in line with all hierarchical relations, the Shah was playing the game within the boundaries set by the U.S., which included restoring internal stability, Soviet containment, oil policy, and regional stability. Although there were several worrisome issues that could potentially deteriorate relations, including Carter's human rights agenda, the Shah's high oil price policy, and U.S. arms sales to the Shah [16], these factors, by all accounts, were not at a level that threatened

dominant-subordinate relations, as the Shah was appointed as the gendarme of the region and a loyal ally to the U.S. in containing the Soviet Union. Therefore, hierarchical politics were in a fully fledged stage and functioning harmoniously [38].

Consequently, in an early challenge between the Shah and the opposition forces, U.S. policy was not caught in a multifaceted conundrum. Insofar as the U.S. had to choose the best partner, it would have been the Shah. Accordingly, it is reasonable to argue that full support is provided by A to B when B complies with A's directives and can exercise full authority over the country. Likewise, mutual contentions are not at a level that threatens hierarchical relations. The opposition forces are equally hostile to the authority of A in the subordinate polity. They are divided in terms of ideologies and adopt various strategies to fight against the autocrat. Additionally, there is no coherent, planned course of action, and the movements suffer from a lack of strong leadership to guide them forward. Overall, the element in the subordinate polity can sustain order. Under these circumstances, A assures the autocrat of complete support in performing reforms and taking actions to restore order.

During the spring and early summer of 1978, protests against the Shah escalated across various cities, with Shia religious commemorations serving as an opportunity to criticize his regime [25]. The Shah responded with a heavy-handed approach, violently suppressing unrest and temporarily restoring order [32]. CIA reports from early summer 1978 assessed the situation as neither revolutionary nor pre-revolutionary [16], and the U.S. maintained its silence, signaling tacit approval of the Shah's efforts to regain control. However, despite this outward calm, there were growing concerns within the Carter administration about the Shah's long-term survival and continued sovereignty.

Looking at the background, indicators suggest that although the political order was still in practice, the Carter administration was increasingly suspicious of the Shah's ability to maintain exclusive sovereignty and power. While relations between the Shah and the U.S. were still in line with hierarchy, the U.S. was closely monitoring the dispute between opposition forces and the Shah through the embassy in Tehran. In fact, Carter pursued a dual policy toward the ruling regime in

Iran until its collapse. On one hand, he emphasized reducing arms exports and enforcing human rights regulations; on the other hand, he reviewed and pursued supportive programs. Additionally, Carter faced a political deadlock with the revolutionary forces and supported a transitional government [8; 45]. The configuration of political standings and the Carter administration's emphasis on human rights underscored the belief that the Shah's survival depended on liberalizing politics. Trapped between the human rights doctrine and supporting its repressive ally and witnessing the Shah's crackdown on opposition, the U.S. encouraged the Shah to liberalize politics and carry out reforms. This policy stemmed from a prevailing view in Washington that the Shah would survive the crisis through democratization [16]. Since the Shah could restore full authority across the country by taking necessary actions, the Carter administration kept a low profile in Iran's internal affairs during the spring and early summer. Accordingly, it can be inferred that as long as the autocrat can exercise full authority over the polity and sovereignty is not dramatically challenged, A maintains a low profile in the crisis, offering advice aimed at salvaging the element in the subordinate polity [42].

Mitigated for a short period during the spring, a series of events unfolded in August and September, such as the Rex Cinema fire and the Jaleh Square massacre, which compelled the Shah to declare martial law and resort to force in an attempt to alleviate the situation [1]. As demonstrations dramatically intensified, the U.S. Embassy became involved in negotiations with moderate and secular opposition groups, while concurrently encouraging the Shah to continue his liberalization efforts. Following U.S. directives regarding political liberalization and reforms, the Shah appointed Sharif Emami as prime minister to liberalize politics and satisfy both the U.S. patron and the opposition [16, p. 70].

In the background, it is evident that all political actors had mobilized to steer developments in their desired directions. The intuitive indicators suggest that the hierarchy was seriously at stake. Although opposition forces remained divided ideologically, the moderate wing was open to negotiating with the Shah, while radical factions gained popularity among a broader segment of the population. The Shah, as the central figure in the crisis, was losing authority across the country and was equally

suspicious of U.S. involvement in the protests, given the U.S. embassy's engagement with opposition leaders. Relying on CIA reports that had assessed the situation as still controllable, Carter contacted the Shah in September, offering his support. This prompted resentment from the opposition, particularly the clergy, who blamed Carter for both the unrest and the repression, as well as for the Shah's ability to cling to power. As Guerrero [22, p. 57] argues, "Carter was held responsible for both the unrest and the repression, as well as for the Shah's ability to cling to power." On October 11, Sullivan reported that moderate religious elements within the opposition and the National Front were open to negotiating with Emami's government to resolve the escalating unrest and strikes [20, p. 57]. However, as anti-American sentiment grew among the opposition, Carter was viewed as a power broker whose stance favored the Shah. Carter's support for the Shah and his engagement with opposition leaders reflected a belief within the Carter administration that the Shah could survive the revolution by liberalizing politics and sharing power with ideologically aligned opposition forces [44]. Thus, it can be inferred that Carter continued supporting the Shah based on the perception that he could survive the crisis if he took democratic steps to resolve the impasse.

Theoretically, it can be inferred that while A contacts moderate opposition leaders to help B maintain power, A urges B to implement reforms through political liberalization when the ruler's authority is significantly challenged by resolute dissident forces. Accordingly, A initiates a series of mediations and conciliations (both covert and overt), urging B to share power with the ideologically closest political forces. A assumes the role of a power broker in this situation. The opposition leaders are contacted by A, and diplomatic negotiations are conducted to salvage the autocrat's position. The autocrat takes democratic gestures and opens up the political sphere, inviting the ideologically closest opposition leaders to participate in forming the government. Although the opposition forces are united in their goal of overthrowing the autocrat, there remains a possibility of democratic power-sharing within a constitutional monarchy framework. Therefore, it is argued that if survival and sovereignty are deemed to be retained within the order through power-sharing

by B, A will mediate between the autocrat and the opposition.

As the democratic reforms and appeasement policies failed and strikes escalated to a nationwide level in the fall of 1978, Carter signaled support for any measures the Shah needed to restore order, while simultaneously encouraging him to persist with the liberalization program [20]. This message from Carter came at a time when divergent opinions had emerged in Washington, following Sullivan's telegram. While strikes in the oil and other sectors were intensifying and the opposition, largely unified around Ayatollah Khomeini in Neauphle-Chateau, gained momentum, Sullivan's telegram, titled "Thinking the Unthinkable: Iran Without the Shah," highlighted the possibility that the Shah might not survive the revolution and proposed three alternative courses of action [16; 34]. Sullivan's telegram reflected a situation where the political dynamics favored the opposition, suggesting that change was imminent.

In response, varying perspectives emerged among the embassy, the State Department, and the National Security Council. While the embassy and the State Department advocated for a conciliatory approach involving further liberalization, Brzezinski and the National Security Council believed that the Shah should be supported, even with military means, if necessary. Consequently, the Carter administration assured the Shah of its full support for his decision to establish a military government, viewing this as a temporary measure to restore order while eventually paving the way for liberalization. Accordingly, the Shah opted to implement a military government, explicitly acknowledging the reality of the approaching revolution [16, p. 96]. Following Carter's advice, the Shah reached out to the opposition to negotiate a deal in which he would remain in a ceremonial role within a constitutional democracy, but this proposal was swiftly rejected by the leading opposition figure, Ayatollah Khomeini [20, p. 116]. A close examination suggests that when democratic solutions falter and the survival of the preferred regime diminishes, A continues to advise B to restore order through more decisive measures.

By December, demonstrations and public marches had reached a scale where, despite differing ideological perspectives, the opposition

forces were united in their goal to overthrow the Shah. On December 26, amidst his dire predicament, the Shah asked Sullivan for guidance on what Carter wanted him to do. Sullivan informed him that the U.S. supported his efforts to restore order, but when the Shah inquired if Carter would back a harsh policy, even at the risk of widespread violence, Sullivan replied that he could not hold Carter accountable for decisions that were ultimately up to the Shah [20, p. 161]. While Carter, during his visit to Tehran in December 1977, ignored the statements of 29 leaders of opposition groups and instead spoke only about the Shah's sincerity and popularity [11], the worsening situation forced a shift in U.S. policy. On December 28, 1979, Carter sent a message to the Shah outlining three potential courses of action to end the crisis. The options included the following: if a new civilian government seemed unlikely, supporting a "firm military government" to restore order; if neither of these options was satisfactory to the Shah, recommending the establishment of a Regency Council, implicitly suggesting the Shah's abdication [20, p. 161]. The message clearly indicated that the decision was now the Shah's to make, and his support from the U.S. was waning. This support was insufficient and came too late to effectively counter the widespread demonstrations. The Shah's authority over both the public and private sectors had significantly diminished as protests, public marches, civil resistance, and governmental strikes reached an uncontrollable level. Ultimately, the Guadeloupe Conference determined the Shah's fate, with Carter declaring that the Shah must leave the country immediately [16, p. 100; 43]. The U.S. concluded that the Shah's continued sovereignty was highly unlikely, and that change was inevitable.

This shift in policy highlights the failure of the Shah's ability to restore order despite continued support from the U.S. Initially, Washington's strategy was to back the Shah and encourage reforms, believing that liberalization would help preserve the monarchy. However, as the situation worsened and the opposition gained strength, Carter's administration shifted to more pragmatic and less supportive options, culminating in the recognition that the Shah's sovereignty was unsustainable [44; 45].

In theoretical terms, it can be posited that when A (the external power) does not strongly advocate for B (the autocrat) to take extraordinary

measures against the opposition, it still exerts pressure on the autocrat to abdicate if B hesitates to act decisively and the opposition becomes significantly united in its efforts to overthrow the regime. In such scenarios, the opposition forces become highly determined, with strong leadership emerging and substantial popular support behind them. The prevalence of protests, mass demonstrations, civil resistance, and public strikes diminishes the feasibility of maintaining order. Thus, it is concluded that when the order is on the verge of collapse, the autocrat is compelled to abdicate and be succeeded by the closest opposition force.

During the last months of 1978, U.S. policymakers were evaluating plausible courses of action in which American interests could be preserved without the Shah. This underscores the notion that when harmonious functionality between the subordinate element and the dominant state is disrupted, the dominant state seeks alternative strategies to reestablish its authority. It endorses the assumption that when the harmonic functionality between the element in the subordinate polity and the dominant state is disrupted, the dominant state pursues strategies to reconstruct its authority through alternative options. This reflects the belief that hierarchy could be continued through different elements in authority within the subordinate polity. Secular nationalists, leftist groups, generals, Bakhtiar, and religious leaders were all subjects of U.S. scrutiny. At this point, Ayatollah Khomeini had emerged as the preeminent leader of the opposition, prompting the U.S. to engage with various opposition factions to facilitate an orderly transition in the post-Shah hierarchical structure.

During the early days of January, the political landscape was dominated by a struggle between generals loyal to the Shah, Bakhtiar (whose power was precarious), and the opposition forces under Ayatollah Khomeini's leadership. The political sphere at the time was drastically murky, with conspiracy theories suggesting a possible coup against Bakhtiar by generals in favor of the Shah. For this reason, aiming to orient developments in the desired direction, Carter sent General Huyser to Iran with the mission of preventing the army from resorting to any subversive action against Bakhtiar. Later, his mission evolved to mediating between the army and opposition forces [16, p. 108]. The U.S. priority was supporting Bakhtiar

to restore order and end the period of chaos, while simultaneously positioning him as a democratizing figure in Iranian politics. The United States feared that if a radical individual were to assume leadership of the military, they might contemplate a coup. Therefore, one of General Haig's key objectives during his trip to Iran was to assist General Gharabaghi in preventing a military coup against Prime Minister Bakhtiar [7, pp. 75-78].

This complex scenario highlights the delicate balancing act the U.S. faced in supporting the Shah's regime while trying to avoid further instability. The focus on Bakhtiar, despite his weak position, underscores a strategy of maintaining some semblance of order in the face of an increasingly likely regime change. It reflects a practical approach where the U.S. sought to preserve American interests while navigating the political volatility in Iran.

Notwithstanding, as Bakhtiar failed to appease the opposition and Khomeini rejected all negotiation offers – viewing Bakhtiar as a Shah-appointed figure lacking legitimacy – the United States began evaluating alternative strategies, including direct contact with Khomeini's camp, to manage a smooth transition. Consequently, Huyser's mission effectively neutralized the army in favor of the opposition, facilitating a relatively peaceful transfer of power. To allay concerns regarding the potentially hostile posture of the incoming revolutionary regime, the Carter administration reached out to Khomeini's representatives to secure assurances that the future Islamic Republic would not undermine U.S. interests or authority in Iran [19].

Together, Huyser's efforts to restrain the military, U.S. engagement with Khomeini's camp to preserve strategic interests, and Bakhtiar's political weakness contributed to a transition from monarchy to Islamic Republic that unfolded with limited violence.

Theoretically, this process illustrates how a dominant power (A) initiates intensive engagement with rising opposition forces when the collapse of a subordinate regime (B) appears imminent. A seeks to ensure a smooth transition by supporting actors with substantial popular legitimacy while marginalizing proponents of the former regime. During such periods of political uncertainty and ambiguity, A's strategy includes securing commitments from likely successors to

maintain continuity in strategic agreements, particularly where the subordinate polity holds significant military assets and plays a pivotal role in regional oil and security dynamics.

In early January 1979, the United States established communication with Ebrahim Yazdi, Khomeini's spokesperson, while Huyser maintained contact with key military leaders to prevent destabilizing actions. These efforts reflected A's intention to facilitate a peaceful transfer of power while minimizing the risk of an unpredictable or hostile regime change. Simultaneously, the incoming revolutionary forces remained cautious, suspecting potential subversion or interference from the dominant power to obstruct their ascension.

As a result, the dominant state, wary of the adverse implications of a hostile regime, pursued a strategy of accommodation. This included early recognition of the new leadership, abstention from antagonistic moves against former regime figures, and swift efforts to establish diplomatic relations. Interference or coercive measures were considered only as contingency options, to be employed if accommodation failed and the hierarchical structure collapsed entirely. Thus, following the revolution's success on February 11, President Carter moved swiftly to recognize the new regime and sought to rebuild diplomatic channels with the Islamic Republic.

Results. This paper has examined the behavior of the United States during the 1978–79 crisis in Iran, culminating in the Islamic Revolution. Employing a hierarchical framework, it sought to explain why the United States, as the dominant state (A), ultimately refrained from sustaining its support for its preferred element within the subordinate polity – the Shah (B) – in the face of revolutionary pressures from internal political forces (C). The primary objective was to advance a theoretical understanding of the modalities through which a dominant state calibrates its support for a threatened ally in a subordinate polity during a revolutionary crisis.

Methodologically, the paper identified three key indicators to analyze the evolving political dynamics: (1) the degree of harmonic functionality between the dominant state and the preferred element in the subordinate polity; (2) the extent of authority exercised by the regime across the country; and (3) the emergence of effective

leadership and unity among opposition forces. Together, these indicators reveal a triangular configuration of relationships that shaped the trajectory of U.S. policy.

The analysis demonstrates that the Carter administration initially maintained its support for the Shah as long as he retained considerable authority and the opposition remained fragmented. During this phase, the U.S. extended diplomatic support and engaged with moderate opposition elements to contain the crisis. However, as the Shah's grip on power weakened and a unified opposition emerged under charismatic leadership, the U.S. recalibrated its strategy. Support for the Shah was withdrawn, and attention shifted toward engaging opposition actors to preserve American interests through a managed transition.

Theoretically, the paper posits that when the continued rule of the incumbent (B) becomes implausible, the dominant state (A) disengages and begins evaluating alternative power centers among opposition forces (C). This pattern reflects a pragmatic adaptation to shifting political realities in an effort to maintain hierarchical influence through new actors.

This study opens several avenues for further research. First, the theoretical framework proposed here remains preliminary and warrants testing across a broader set of case studies. Revolutions in Eastern Europe and the Arab Spring provide fertile ground to explore dominant state behavior in similar hierarchical crises. Second, the question of legitimacy regarding the dominant state's support for embattled regimes presents an important normative and empirical puzzle. Third, the role of U.S. embassies and diplomatic staff in subordinate polities during crises offers a promising area for investigating the policymaking process and the role of on-the-ground intelligence in shaping responses.

Finally, this analysis underscores the significance of reconfiguring bilateral relations in the aftermath of revolutionary change. It highlights the strategic flexibility of dominant states as they seek to secure their interests amid geopolitical upheaval. Future research might examine the involvement of other global powers during this period, the domestic political constraints shaping U.S. foreign policy, and the long-term implications of the 1979 Iranian Revolution for U.S.-Iran relations and broader international dynamics.

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