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**Selfless Selfishness: Strategic Empathy in the US Foreign
Policy Talks toward Iran's Nuclear Program**

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Abstract

If the rationalist argument that war is a failure of communication is true, the endless conflicts in the 21st century seem to suggest that we have not yet learned how to communicate successfully with each other. Against the backdrop of recent conflicts, policy experts and scholars have urged for applying “strategic empathy” to conflicts to better communicate and negotiate with different parties, hoping to increase the possibility of mitigating violence, suffering, and the cost of wars. Strategic empathy calls for an imperative of understanding others, especially those who have conflicting interests. This thesis incorporates an interdisciplinary perspective and defines “strategic empathy” as a capacity for and an attempt to understand others’ thoughts and feelings to serve self-interest. By adopting mixed methodologies to code substantial presidential corpus, this thesis conceptualizes strategic empathy and manifests its expressions in the US foreign policy talks toward Iran’s nuclear programs across the Clinton, George. W. Bush, and Obama administrations. My thesis found that the presence of strategic empathy is not rare in US foreign policy talks toward Iran. However, whether strategic empathy can signal good intentions and foster effective communication depends on its expressive styles. Although the outcome of applying strategic empathy might be agnostic, this thesis suggests that when the expression of strategic empathy maintains a temporal consistency and a structure balance with its negative counterparts, it is more likely to leverage its relational momentum and effectively signal and communicate between different parties, to create dynamic relationships between states.

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Introduction

World politics settles in a dichotomic and self-perpetuating cycle: when violence rampantly prevails, the longing for peace inevitably arises. Since the outbreak of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the world seems to be dragged into chaotic violence, intensified by the intractable Israeli-Palestinian conflict, uncertain futures about cross-strait relations, and North Korea's nuclear ambitions. If the rationalist explanation is right that the wars result from misunderstanding and miscalculation, then these series of conflicts unfortunately indicate the world is confronting a major communication failure. Among this chaos, the discussion of strategic empathy has emerged, carrying an imperative of understanding between different states, especially those who have clashing interests. The ethos of strategic empathy is to understand others' thoughts and feelings to serve one's self-interest. This mindset does not see self-interest as necessarily clashing with others, nor does it view self-interest as a static property. The imperative of strategic empathy encourages an open-minded mentality to view relationships and interests as fluid in a dynamic process where information, perception, and understanding interplay. This call for strategic empathy helps mitigate the understanding problem because it lays a foundation for communication. Oftentimes, we tend to focus on the part that communication can improve understanding; the imperative of strategic empathy reveals the reverse, that signals others the intention and attempts to understand can open a window to communicate.

As a nascent concept, strategic empathy is mostly discussed in Business and policy domains, remaining unfledged in the field of International Relations. The initial discussion of strategic empathy was raised by military generals and intelligence agents who returned from the battlefield and urged the importance of reducing misperception and averting the miscalculation of opponents. Reviving from the ongoing conflicts, the concept of strategic empathy is tempting for those who want peace and who desire wins. However, extant

discussions on strategic empathy remain more or less like a slogan without going into details about what it is like in the actual context of world politics. This lack of systematic conceptualization incurs challenges and limits the potential of probing the causes and effects of strategic empathy on a broader agenda. This thesis strives to ask: What does strategic empathy look like in international relations? What measures and mediums can we use to identify and gauge its presence?

The significance of conceptualizing and measuring strategic empathy lies in its contribution to IR theories and practical value for policy implementation. Firstly, studying strategic empathy helps bridge the gap between rationality and emotion in IR theory. As a discipline of studying a state's behaviors, IR tends to prioritize rationality at the cost of playing down emotions. States are viewed as rational actors who make decisions and calculate moves based on reason and careful consideration that disregard emotions, as the latter is misperceived as irrational (Crawford, 2000; Fearon, 1997; Waltz, 1979). Nowadays, the limitations of this conventional paradigm are apparent, as rationality alone cannot fully explain many phenomena where emotion drives and strikes world politics, such as nationalism, religious conflicts, racism, and populism. This is because, human as fundamental decision-makers, we exercise a dual-process system that includes both cognition and emotion (Decety & Jackson, 2004; Haidt, 2001). States are composed of human subjects but go beyond their aggregate; thus, a state's behavior inevitably reflects a projection of emotion exhibited by its human decision-makers, not just purely being rational like a computer machine. In this sense, this thesis examines state behaviors with a focus on the properties of human beings (Mercer, 2014; Wendt, 2004). The discussion of strategic empathy elevates a human psychological need to be seen and understood at a state level, augmenting a relational dimension to observe states' interactions. Moreover, this thesis also augments rationalists' argument about costly signals and communication failure in

international relations (Fearon, 1997; Hall & Yarhi-Milo, 2012; Quek, 2021). Strategic empathy can be viewed as a signal indicating an attempt to understand and communicate, whose credibility is conditioned on its specific expressive styles. Second, a systematic conceptualization of strategic empathy serves future scholars who are interested in relevant concepts. This thesis also develops a measurement to assess strategic empathy that can help explore its connections in other topics, including the occurrence of conflicts, frequency of negotiations, the outcome of agreements, peace durability, and so forth. Lastly, a clear conceptualization of strategic empathy guides policymakers to implement strategic empathy. This concept has re-emerged and hangs on in the policy domain for a reason – it is a timely signal to encourage stakeholders to rethink the role of empathy in facilitating understanding in international politics, especially in diplomacy and conflict resolutions.

In this study, “strategic empathy” is defined as a capacity for and an attempt to feel and understand what others think and feel to serve self-interest. The concept of “empathy” is not an emotional state but a behavior-based capacity and attempt that indicates a tendency to understand others’ thoughts and feelings. This strategic empathy is applicable to different types of relationships in IR. The empathizer is often a group of decision-makers or the masses that can represent political sovereignty; the recipient of strategic empathy is the counterpart of the other political sovereignty. Empathetic expressions can signal messages and intentions between states, fulfilling the state’s psychological need to be seen and understood. Moreover, this conveyance of strategic empathy might conditionally constitute as costly signals. Empathy is not easy; it can be materially demanding and mentally draining. The implementation of strategic empathy is costly as it requires the empathizer’s consistent efforts in terms of epistemology, cognition, emotion, material, and so forth (Head, 2016, p. 173; Kertzer et al., 2020, p. 97). This capacity to communicate intentionality can generate a relational momentum to shape the dynamics of states’ relationships. Since cognitive and

affective processes are internal mental states that cannot be directly observed, this study primarily detects the presence of strategic empathy through its outputs. Strategic empathy can be identified through its expressive behaviors, including specific certain languages and narratives (Holmes & Yarhi-Milo, 2017; Keen, 2006; Yorke, 2023). Accordingly, this thesis regards foreign policy talks as a communicative space where empathy can be conveyed through certain linguistic expressions (Baker, 2019, p. 1256; Holmes & Yarhi-Milo, 2017, p. 110).

This thesis develops a measurement based on translating a well-established psychological assessment of empathy, the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI), into a foreign policy setting. This IRI-based measurement is composed of 10 criteria balanced with emotion and cognition to capture the empathetic expressions in foreign policy talks. This thesis draws evidence from the US foreign policy talks regarding Iran's nuclear programs to reflect the US's empathetic attempts to understand Iran's thoughts and feelings. This empirical case has been studied to prove the presence of empathy under Obama's administration (Baker, 2019). It is considered a real-life success where the deployment of empathy worked out and led to a strategic success, marked by the signed Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in July 2015. My thesis explicitly looks at the Clinton, Bush, and Obama administrations to manifest some general patterns and tendencies of strategic empathy that vary by time and space.

This thesis will proceed in five sections. The second section overviews two phases of empathy studies in IR since the Cold War to understand better how this concept has evolved. The third section illustrates a conceptual framework of treating strategic empathy as a costly signal to communication intentions between states that can be applied in foreign policy talks. The fourth section develops an IRI-based measurement and lays out my research design. This thesis adopts mixed methodologies to investigate the deployment of strategic empathy in the US foreign policy towards Iran's nuclear programs under the Clinton, Bush, and Obama

administrations. The fifth section presents my key findings: there are two types of expressing strategic empathy across the three administrations; one is sparser and occurs at the sentence level and scattered across different foreign policy talks, and the other is more institutionalized in a way that is balanced with negative perceptions of Iran and maintains consistency over time. These two styles of expressing empathy pave the way for future studies to explore what leads to different expressions of empathy and under what conditions strategic empathy achieves its goals.

Empathy in IR: Can Ripples Become Waves?

Two Ripples of Empathetic Studies

Despite receiving increased attention in policy debates, the concept of strategic empathy has not yet been specifically and systematically studied in academia. Even the broader study of empathy in International Relations is rare. The marginalized position of empathy studies in IR is puzzling - how can a subject dealing with relationships and interactions largely overlook such a critical concept? The degree of downplaying and undertheorizing empathy in IR is incompatible with other Social Science subjects (Baker, 2019; Booth & Wheeler, 2008; Holmes & Yarhi-Milo, 2017). The conventional IR disciplinary doctrine suggests that international relations are replete with power competition among sovereign states as rational actors. This transplantation of the “rational actors” approach from economics (Waltz, 1979) was inevitably affected by the cognitive revolution in psychology in the 1960s. Since then, mainstream psychology schools have worshiped “reason as the master of anything” (Haidt, 2001; Lerner et al., 2015). Although Psychology studies later evolved towards a comprehensive direction that perceives rationality, emotion, and intuition as not conflicting, the IR subject still carries its past baggage. This norm implies

an unspoken but well-assumed binary viewpoint: a state is a rational actor that is isolated from emotions (Crawford, 2009; Mercer, 2010, p. 10; Schmidt & Wight, 2023). This conventional emotion-free doctrine misses out on the full picture that emotion and rationality are two complementary parts of the human decision-making system to project human understandings and knowledge of the world, including states' behaviors in global politics (Beattie et al., 2019; Cash, 2020; Kertzer & Tingley, 2018; Mercer, 2014; Wendt, 2004). Just like a state's rationality is a result of humans projecting their own cognitive capacity for reasoning and prioritizing upon a state level, a state's emotion and its empathetic capacity is also a scaled-up projection of its constitutive human subjects who are able to feel, either elites or the masses. Like cognition and emotion act in concert to make human decisions, the rationality that a state exhibits does not suffocate its capacity to feel; and its emotional capacity by no means suppresses its rationality. Nevertheless, this partial "truth" of states as rational actors not only downplays the role of emotion in IR but also casts a shadow on research about empathy in international relations, as people usually regard empathy as a subcategory of emotion, although it is not. As Head (2016, p.11) rightly points out, "empathy is not an emotion per se, but a process which can trigger a wide range of emotions."

At the time of this review, existing studies of empathy in IR remain too sporadic to form waves in the ocean of IR, resembling more ephemeral ripples. Yet many scholars have attempted to bring the concept of empathy into IR, which still covers a diverse range (Baker, 2019; Bayram & Holmes, 2020; Bleiker & Hutchison, 2021; Crawford, 2014; M. H. Davis, 1994; Head, 2012; Holmes & Yarhi-Milo, 2017, 2017; Keller & Yang, 2009; Kelman, 2008; Yorke, 2023). As the recent world appears to be trapped in intractable conflicts, this field is now coming into the spotlight, showing a promising tendency to grow. Counterintuitive to skeptics' view that empathy advocates are naïve idealists who are obsessed with a fallacy of

peace and love and thus lack a realistic measure of world politics, many founding authors of empathy are experienced generals and intelligence agents who returned from brutal battlefields and championed the imperative of empathy (Cassam, 2021; McMaster, 2020; White, 1986).

The overall trajectory of empathy studies in IR is divided into two phases. The first ripple of empathy studies in IR occurred during the Cold War, in which empathy was instrumentalized as an intelligence tool to reduce misperceptions and moderate miscalculations. At the time when the world was stressing out about the catastrophic war between the US and USSR, Ralph White, a former American intelligence officer who later became a professor in political psychology, coined the term “realistic empathy” to articulate the importance of applying empathy with a pragmatic objective to understand others. White (1986, p.57) simply defines empathy as “understanding the thoughts and feelings of others”. This empathy is labeled “realistic” because by putting oneself in another’s shoes, the “self” can acquire knowledge and familiarity with others, hence optimizing the alignment between self-other understanding. Note that the adjective “realistic” has no affiliation with realism school in IR. White (1986, p. 59) indicates that empathy is a corrective for war-provoking misperception. He lists four historical tragedies of non-empathy, including Austria-Hungary’s war with Serbia in 1914, Germany’s attack on France through Belgium in the same year, Germany’s invasion of Poland during the Second World War, and Japan’s bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941 (White, 1986, p. 62). White suggested that American intelligence analysts empathize with the Soviets to avoid a disastrous miscalculation. His message is clear: non-empathy leads to misjudgment and wars. This utility of empathy resonates well with Robert Jervis’s (Jervis, 1976, p. 7) masterpiece *Perception and Misperception*, which attributes misperceptions and misinterpretation of signals as major causes of wars.

The first phase of empathy studies mostly regards empathy as an intelligence literacy at the individual level to increase understanding of others. At the time the IR discipline was soaked in the fad of rationality, White's (1986) study on empathy did not receive much attention. About a decade later, the rise of emotion studies in IR started referencing White's work on empathy as a pioneer study to build on. Almost at the same time, Jervis in his late-life reflection also acknowledged that the devoid of emotion in his work is a "major blunder" because it is "a foolish way to understand individuals and collectivities" (Balzacq & Jervis, 2004, p. 565). Omitting the role of emotion neglects the fact that emotion is a type of information signifying actors' intentions and environmental conditions (Davis, 1994). The absence of a close look at emotions leads to a loss of critical information in comprehending people and context, hence straying away from the path to augment understanding and dispelling misperception.

Since the early 2000s, carried by the rise of emotion studies in IR, the second ripple of empathy has been more expansive than its initial phrase, bringing in a wide range of topics and methods to the field (Ariffin, 2016; Beattie et al., 2019; Crawford, 2000; Gammon, 2020; Halperin, 2014; Holmes & Yarhi-Milo, 2017; Hutchison & Bleiker, 2014; Kertzer & Tingley, 2018; Mercer, 2010; Rifkin, 2009; Ross, 2016; Yorke, 2023). Empathy is seen as a bridge of emotion. Scholars explore the effects of empathy on mitigating fear and distrust in security dilemmas and conflicts (Baker, 2019; Halperin, 2014, 2016; Herz, 1959; Jervis, 1978); upskilling diplomacy and improving negotiation outcomes (Baker, 2019; Fisher & Shapiro, 2006; Holmes & Yarhi-Milo, 2017; Kertzer et al., 2020, 2024); improving global helping behaviors (Bayram & Holmes, 2020), and fostering national reconciliation in the aftermath of traumas (Bleiker & Hutchison, 2021). These positive implications of empathy motivate scholars to investigate the causes and consolidation of empathy. Empathy can be a byproduct

of individual leadership and interpersonal relationships (Hall & Yarhi-Milo, 2012; Shogan, 2009); it can also be promoted by institutionalized mechanisms, such as regular workshops and meetings between different parties (Crawford, 2014). Methods of studying empathy are diversified, including surveys and experiments with ordinary citizens, interviews with political elites and negotiators, and process tracing in historical cases (Baker, 2019; Holmes & Yarhi-Milo, 2017; Kertzer et al., 2020, 2024). These attempts have enriched empirical evidence and forms of data in studying empathy in IR. Empathy can be found through face-to-face diplomacy, written documents, or even by brain scan machines. The footprints of empathy are revealed in the Northern Ireland peace process, Israelis-Palestinians conflicts, the German unification process, and the Cuba missile crisis (Blight & Lang, 2004; Holmes & Yarhi-Milo, 2017; Yorke, 2023).

In this second phase, empathy has been scaled up from an individual level towards a more societal, national and international scope. Empathy is studied as a phenomenon between state sovereignties, nations, cultures and civilizations (Crawford, 2014, p.545). The majority of studies on empathy discuss its positive sides, examining its benefits in enabling mutual understanding and making justice, democracy, cooperation, and peace more likely (Crawford, 2014). These findings are largely in reference to numerous studies and experiments in Psychology, which show that empathy can foster understanding of other people's motivations, intentions, and behavior, as well as motivate pro-social behavior, including helping others, encouraging cooperation, and inhibiting aggression and harm (Leith & Baumeister, 1998; (Crawford, 2014; M. H. Davis, 1994; Decety et al., 2016; Decety & Cowell, 2015; Head, 2012; Hoffman, 1993). Empathy is regarded as a glue of the human community, as it sparks concern and care for other human fellows. As such, empathy is appreciated as the antidote to healing the long-imprinted fear in international relations, which sometimes hypes anxiety, threats, and violence hence reproducing itself in a vicious cycle.

That said, some scholars also draw lessons from psychologists and wisely inform the dark side of empathy of potentially being selective and parochial. These negative implications of empathy include intensifying biases, discrimination and division between in-groups and out-groups in conflicts (Bloom, 2017; Decety, 2021; Decety & Cowell, 2015; Yorke, 2023), as well as leading to innumeracy and immoral decisions that counter fairness (Bloom, 2017).

Nevertheless, empathy studies in IR are still marginalized. The predominant focus on empathy's peace effects and cooperation tendency does not address a fundamental motivation problem about why states want it. IR has long been a discipline full of power struggles that normalize competition, aggression, and domination. The flipped side is that the discipline tends to forget that maintaining peace is as important as preventing wars. Without deliberation on empathy as a foundation for understanding differences and self-other relationships, many conflate empathy with pro-sociality and altruism, regarding it as a weakness to sacrifice the self and make concessions, which is counterintuitive to core assumptions of IR that states are self-interested actors who always seek to maximize their power (Walt, 1998; Waltz, 1988). Among these hardline norms and biases, it is no wonder studying empathy loses its charm.

Endowing a Strategic Motivation to Empathy

The deficit of motivation for studying empathy in IR is offset by the recent discussion of strategic empathy. This combination equips a "strategic" hard shell with "empathy's soft interior, suggesting that a state's application of empathy is incentivized by its strategic interests. The concept of strategic empathy is brought up in the policy domain due to numerous real-life US miscalculations on its adversaries, including Vietnam, Iraq, and especially the unexpected Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Authors in this strand draw

on White's legacy of realistic empathy. Different from White's original usage of realistic to describe the degree of being "true to other's thoughts and feelings," policy critics tend to interpret this "realistic" from a strategic purpose to maximize self-interest. In a 2003 documentary film, *The Fog of War*, the former US Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara reflects on the Vietnam War and puts forward the lesson of "empathizing with your enemy." About a decade later, American historian Zachary Shore (2014) reframes White's "realistic empathy" as "strategic empathy", suggesting it as "the skill of understanding what drives and constrains one's adversary". Another heyday of "strategic empathy" occurred when the US general and former National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster (2020) reiterated this concept in their new book *Battlegrounds: The Fight to Defend the Free World*. McMaster argues that strategic empathy is America's best hope of understanding the emotions, motivations, cultural biases of its rivals (McMaster, 2020; Vowell & Evans, 2022). As such, these policy debates on strategic empathy tend to weaponize empathy as a means to defeat the enemy. McMaster believes that strategic empathy will make America stronger since it can "[result] in better policies and strategies for competing and prevailing in conflict." The objective of defeat hence becomes the motivation for applying empathy in global politics. It is fair that strategic empathy can be weaponized to pursue one's victory; however, the weaponization of strategic empathy is narrow-minded and limits the potential and opportunity of applying strategic empathy in a broader context.

Conceptual and Measurement Drawbacks of Weaponizing Strategic Empathy

This logic of weaponizing empathy as a strategic asset to defeat the enemy has two main disadvantages. Firstly, this weaponization of strategic empathy is conceptually misleading, diverting from how empathy has been studied in IR scholarship - as a means to

increase understanding. The weaponization of strategic empathy confines applying empathy within a closed relationship of hostility. However, strategic empathy is applicable to various types of relationships, such as alliances, friendships, and strategic partnerships. Being fixated on the assumption that strategic empathy only targets the enemy can be trapped into confirmation biases and detract from the original goal of empathy to deepen understanding and improve its accuracy. The word “enemy” itself carries negative meanings and hostile attitudes that might distort information and preclude certain options beforehand. More importantly, this assumption overlooks the fact that the relationship is defined by interests that are fluid through social interactions. This weaponization confines the empathy within a presumed closure of hostility. This logic dismisses the possibility that during the process of employing strategic empathy, relationships, identity, and interests are changeable. Enemy is not forever enemy.

Second, overemphasizing the type of recipient of strategic empathy distracts from studying the behavior and the process of applying empathy per se. This distraction worsens the unsolved identification and measurement problem of studying empathy in extant scholarship. Measuring empathy is challenging because the concept is intangible and subjective; it can also overlap with other emotional and behavioral phenomena, such as guilt, pro-social actions, and emotional regulation (Eckland et al., 2020; Lawrence et al., 2004; Mora-Pelegri n et al., 2021; Thompson et al., 2019). Moreover, since international politics is often framed as a realm with rationality and bureaucracy that should constrain emotion to safeguard formality and authority - the room for studying emotion and empathy has been put aside. Efforts to trace the footprint of empathy are limited, even though it happens on a daily basis, including body language between leaders, social engagement with ordinary people, and national apologies (Baker, 2019; Bleiker & Hutchison, 2021; Hall & Yarhi-Milo, 2012; Holmes & Yarhi-Milo, 2017). Questions such as what behaviors are counted as empathy are

underexplored. In other words, how can we know it when we see it? Without answering this question, future research exploring the implications and conditions of applying strategic empathy can be tricky. To fill the gap in the conceptual and measurement problems of the existing discussion on strategic empathy, the following section reconceptualizes this conception from a behavioral perspective in reference to psychological studies. This behavior-based focus situates strategic empathy within a broader context, making it applicable to various relationships. It also unpacks what expressive behaviors are considered empathy, thereby making the concept more measurable.

Reconceptualizing Strategic Empathy

Applying Strategic Empathy as a Behavior of Sending Costly Signals

In this conceptual framework, I define “strategic empathy” as the capacity and an attempt to understand others’ thoughts and feelings to serve self-interest. This definition views strategic empathy as behavior that can be dissected independently from the empathizers and the recipient. This independent behavior of expressing empathy can happen to actors at different levels, because the type of actor does not affect the essence of expressing empathy as it is to demonstrate an attempt to understand others. This behavior-based approach enables the elevation of empathy from an interpersonal level to an international level: the behavior demonstrating expressing empathy can take place between individuals or actors that represent political sovereignty. For instance, in the context of international relations, the empathizer and the recipient can be either political elites or ordinary masses as long as they represent a collective image of a sovereign state. A country’s leaders or the masses might show empathy towards another country’s leader or people. In

either context, the attempt to understand is not influenced; hence, it is independent of the empathizer's and the recipient's identity or positionality. However, different types of actors influence the nuances of specific formats and contents for expressing strategic empathy. For example, on a daily basis, a person might show the behavior of crying to demonstrate his empathy towards another person's sadness; whereas in a national setting, a state leader can use national mourning and apology to demonstrate empathy toward post-trauma society (Bleiker & Hutchison, 2021; Lecouteur, 2002).

The strategic element of strategic empathy lies in a deliberate process of pursuing the empathizer's self-advantages rather than being altruistic. This definition throws off the shackles of confining strategic empathy to the adversary. Since the purpose of seeking self-interest can occur in every relationship between the empathizer and the recipient, strategic empathy is applicable to a variety of relationships, including alliances, friends, competitors, and enemies, to fulfill the empathizer's self-interest. That said, the outcome of applying strategic empathy remains agnostic, as it is contingent on specific actors and contexts. Strategic empathy does not guarantee the authenticity of the empathizer's intent or the accuracy of its predictions on the recipient. Therefore, critics might doubt that if strategic empathy is not used to defeat the enemy, nor does it safeguard the outcome of accuracy and victory, then what is the incentive for state actors to apply it? The primary goal of this conceptualization focuses on the behavior and the process of applying strategic empathy per se. I argue that the application of strategic empathy acts as a costly signal that can communicate a state's intentionality in international relations, which has the potential to moderate communication failure that long lingers in international relations. This signal is less costly in the material sense, such as employing large-scale military mobilization and operating military exercises (Fearon, 1997; Quek, 2021). However, these empathetic expressions are costly in undertaking a lot of effort into changing epistemological

understanding, investing diplomatic efforts, intelligence training, audience costs, and reputation. None of these efforts are easier or cheaper, because the time and effort they consume require long-term planning and time investment, strategic anticipation, and diverse human resources (Halperin, 2016; Head, 2012; Holmes & Yarhi-Milo, 2017; Kertzer et al., 2020). Thus, the costliness of these efforts increases the credibility of signaling strategic empathy between states.

In short, strategic empathy constitutes a signal for states to communicate their intentions in a way that is relatively less costly than material signals but still costly enough to show credibility to others. The process of applying strategic empathy allows a state to exhibit a set of empathetic behaviors to express its attempt to understand its counterpart, which fulfills the recipient state's psychological need to be recognized and connected. The outcome of an accurate understanding between the empathizer and the recipient is a bonus that cannot be guaranteed. What is strategically important is that the process of applying strategic empathy can be sent and recognized as a credible signal to the recipient state, conveying an attempt to understand, thus facilitating communication.

Disaggregating Strategic Empathy from the Psychological Typology

The application of strategic empathy will not be effective unless the recipient senses and recognizes the empathizer's behavior of expressing empathy (Baker, 2019; Holmes & Yarhi-Milo, 2017; Yorke, 2023). Hence, exploring what expressive behaviors constitute as empathetic expressions is crucial. A behavior-based conceptualization of strategic empathy helps solve the aforementioned measurement problem. The signals of strategic empathy can be disaggregated into a set of behavioral constructs to be identified and assessed. In Psychology, empathy is inclusively defined as "a set of constructs having to do with the responses of one individual to the experiences of another" (Davis, 1994, p.12). Psychologists

generally agree on a twofold typology that studies the affective and cognitive domains of empathy. The affective empathy is also known as emotional contagion – referring to one’s affective response to the emotional state of another (Hoffman, 2000, p.4; Baron-Cohen & Wheelwright, 2004). This affective facet of empathy is understood as a neuro-mirroring effect of the human brain to mimic and feel others’ emotions. For example, one might feel sad when witnessing other people’s suffering. This type of empathy is often categorized as “effortless, automatic, and unconscious” (Baker, 2019,p.1263) because it is a biological and natural capacity for the affective sharing of other’s emotions (Decety & Cowell, 2015, p.3).

The second facet, cognitive empathy, refers to perspective-taking and mentalizing (Barnes-Holmes et al., 2004). Cognitive empathy demonstrates the “ability to consciously put oneself into the mind of another individual and imagine what that person is thinking or feeling” (Decety & Cowell, 2015, p. 3). Unlike affective empathy as an automatic emotional response, cognitive empathy involves an effortful and deliberate process to perceive and identify others’ perspectives and feelings, then imagine and infer about others’ mental states, intentions, beliefs, and so forth (Thompson et al., 2019; Shamay-Tsoory et al., 2009; Halperin, 2016, p.123). For example, one can use cognitive empathy to recognize another’s facial expression of frowning, which might mean a feeling of upset. With further processing of contextual information and knowledge, one can understand the signals of “frown” in terms of what it means to the person and why.

Although affective and cognitive components of empathy are independent systems, they interconnect and cooperate to understand other’s thoughts and feelings(Cuff et al., 2016; Thompson et al., 2019). Without affective empathy, cognitive empathy alone cannot capture accurate information about others’ feelings, given that it does not exercise the mimic function to share other’s feelings. Likewise, without processing cognitive empathy, analyzing and

understanding why one feels or thinks in that specific way and its meaning becomes difficult (Barnes-Holmes et al., 2004). In short, while affective and cognitive aspects of empathy are identified separately, they act in concert (Olderbak & Wilhelm, 2017) to facilitate the self's understanding toward others.

Psychology studies have developed numerous assessments to measure individuals' empathetic capacity through their "reactions to the observed experience of another" (M. H. Davis, 1983, p. 113). These assessments follow the twofold typology that categorizes assorted expressive behaviors or reactions into affective and cognitive empathy (Aune et al., 2019; Baron-Cohen & Wheelwright, 2004; M. H. Davis, 1983; Lawrence et al., 2004). One well-established assessment is the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI), which has been widely applied in clinical psychology and is prominent for its balance of both cognition and emotions (Baron-Cohen & Wheelwright, 2004, p.166). This assessment has also been widely used in different countries and validated in cross-cultural studies (Davis, 1983; Mora-Pelegri n et al., 2021; Olderbak & Wilhelm, 2017), buttressing its generalizability and applicability.

The IRI assessment is a self-report questionnaire that is composed of 28 questions, tapping some aspects of the global concept of empathy (Baker, 2019; M. H. Davis, 1983, p. 113). These questions are framed as behavior-based to evaluate a person's empathetic capacity according to four dimensions, namely perspective-taking, empathetic concern, fantasy and personal distress (Davis, 1983, 1994). Specifically, 1) perspective-taking is defined as the tendency to adopt the psychological point of view of others; this group of questions is designed for measuring cognitive empathy; 2) Empathetic concern is defined as "assessing other-oriented feelings of sympathy and concern for unfortunate others." This category evaluates emotional empathy; 3) The fantasy refers to respondent's tendencies to

transpose themselves imaginatively into the feelings and actions of fictitious characters; and 4) the personal distress measures the self-oriented feelings of personal anxiety and unease in tense interpersonal settings (Davis, 1983, p. 115). Crossing different types of empathy assessments, the dimensions of perspective-taking and empathetic concern are tested and considered the most relevant to appraise the capacity of empathy (Baron-Cohen & Wheelwright, 2004). The dimensions of fantasy and personal distress are less counted as empathetic capacity than the concept of emotional regulation. As such, the categories of perspective-taking and empathetic concerns are most pertinent to measuring the behavior of expressing empathy.

Although the IRI is designed by psychologists to assess an individual's empathetic capacity, its behavior-based framing aligns with my behavior-based conceptualization of strategic empathy, making it plausible to gauge the expressive behavior of conveying strategic empathy between states in international relations. As discussed earlier, the nuances of content and format of expressing empathy vary by actors at different levels. The following section uses the IRI as a template to translate its behavior measures to a foreign policy context, focusing only on the dimensions of perspective-taking and empathetic concerns, providing their relevance. This IRI-based measurement helps identify behaviors of expressing strategic empathy in states' foreign policy talks.

Measurement and Research Design

Measuring Empathy: from Interpersonal to International

This thesis proposes an IRI-based framework to measure the behaviors of expressing strategic empathy in foreign policy contexts. I took two steps to code and translate the

original IRI assessment into the context of foreign policy (see detailed coding mechanisms in Appendix 1). First, I code the original IRI's self-report questions into behavior-specific statements. For example, a first-person question such as "I sometimes find it difficult to see things from the "other guy's" point of view" is coded as a behavior statement that is "an attempt to see things from others' point of view." Secondly, given that these statements remain individual and interpersonal, I further reframe them to fit into international relations. For example, an original statement that "I sometimes find it difficult to see things from the other guy's point of view" is translated as "an attempt to see things from the other state's point of view."

Following the above translation steps, this thesis establishes a 10-criterion measurement to identify the expressions of strategic empathy in international relations (Table 1). This measurement is composed of both cognitive and emotional components of empathy. The expression of strategic empathy can be detected and examined through its external manifestations, including embodied gestures, facial cues, emotions, and language (Holmes & Yarhi-Milo, 2017; Keen, 2006; Lakoff, 2016). My research focuses on the linguistic and textual output of empathetic expressions, analyzing them through official statements, interviews, and declassified documents (Bleiker & Hutchison, 2018; De Buitrago, 2018; Koschut et al., 2017; Lynggaard, 2019; Perikos & Ioannis, 2013; Rathbun, 2012). This research regards foreign policy talks a communicative space, through which states can demonstrate their thoughts and convey their messages. The ten criteria shown in Table 1 are used to trace the empathetic expressions in foreign policy talks. By identifying the presence and patterns of strategic empathy through its linguistic formats, this framework narrows the measurement gap in studying empathy in IR.

TABLE 1. *The IRI-based Framework of Identifying Strategic Empathy*

Expression of Strategic Empathy	Expression of Perspective Taking (cognition)	1) Attempt to see things from the others state's point of view (putting into other states' shoes)
		2) Attempt to take multilateral perspectives of a disagreement before making a decision
		3) Attempt to imagine the feeling and thinking of states that are target of the criticism
		4) Attempt to think two sides of an issue and look at them both
		5) Demonstrating open-mindedness and not being self-referential
	Expression of Empathic Concerns (emotion)	6) Expressing a feeling of concern for misfortunate states
		7) Expressing sorry when other states are having problems
		8) Expressing a protective feeling toward states that are taken advantage of
		9) Expressing a feeling of pity when seeing other states are treated unfairly
		10) Expressing a response of being moved to events that happened

Empirical Case of the US's Strategic Empathy toward Iran

This research adopts mixed methodologies to assess the expression of strategic empathy in the US foreign policy talks regarding Iran's nuclear programs. This thesis specifically focuses on three US presidents, namely President Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama. Note that the unit of analysis of my thesis is the presidential administration, not the individual presidents. This unit of analysis means that I will look at foreign policy statements from the groups of administrative officials, including but not limited to individual presidential speeches. This unit of analysis does not downplay the significant role of the president in foreign policy making but sees the foreign policy talks as a collective product of each administration. Each president's personality does make a difference in shaping different foreign policy talks but is not absolute or determinant (Paquin & Morin, 2018).

The selection of the case of Iran's nuclear program across these three presidential administrations is justified for three reasons. First, extant scholarship has first-hand interview data from former officials who engaged in the US-Iran negotiations under Obama's administration (Baker, 2019). Those US officials suggested they purposefully attempted to understand Iran's perspectives during the negotiations. This available data supports the existence of strategic empathy under the Obama government. Moreover, the success of JCPOA makes Obama's foreign policy toward Iran constitute a positive case of applying strategic empathy. Accordingly, Obama's foreign policy talks towards Iran's nuclear program are regarded as a feasible starting point to measure strategic empathy. Second, this study also examines Clinton and Bush's administration. These two presidencies are chosen given their comparative values to Obama's administration. Three presidents all have distinctive personality traits that shape their salient styles of expressing US foreign policy towards Iran. On the one hand, Clinton and Obama are known as empathetic leaders. Clinton is famous for his empathetic capacity (Renshon, 1996), and Obama has explicitly publicized his empathy slogan (Shogan, 2009). On the other hand, the Bush presidency serves as a contrast case since he is known as a hardliner: his administration bluntly labelled Iran as an "Axis of Evil." Bush's case also constitutes a negative example to further gauge the conveyance of strategic empathy. Despite their different personal characteristics, the three presidents share the same foreign policy objective towards Iran's nuclear programs of preventing Iran from developing nuclear weapons. However, only under Obama's administration was the Iran Nuclear Deal made. Either Clinton, who shared a similar emphatic personal trait with Obama; or Bush, who was much tougher, failed to reach the agreement with Iran. In this sense, how does the expression of US foreign policy toward Iran's nuclear programs vary by the three administrations wroths deliberation. Lastly, all three presidents served two terms. In their respective 10-year incumbencies, there is available and sufficient data on their foreign policy

statements that can be researched to find general patterns and tendencies of their foreign policy talks toward Iran's nuclear programs.

Data Collection

This thesis collects substantial qualitative data from official documents and statements under three presidential administrations. Constrained by the data availability, my corpus's time coverage ranges from July 1, 1994, to January 16, 2017. The corpus is composed of a variety of presidential foreign policy documents, ranging from presidential statements, speeches, news conferences, and so forth. This thesis primarily examines US foreign policy talks derived from official textual data because it is regarded as collective artifacts produced by the US political elites, reflecting the US institutional identity of each administration. Moreover, these foreign policy talks are not symbolic gestures or tricks; they are concrete political products that provide insights into the US strategic orientations and objectives, uncovering the US's "specific understanding of security", and its meanings and emotions in those constructions (De Buitrago, 2018; Koschut et al., 2017; Kuperman et al., 2014; Perikos & Ioannis, 2013). As such, the corpus of US foreign policy talks provides informative evidence to prove its deployment of strategic empathy towards Iran.

The majority of documents are collected from *The American Presidency Project* database provided by the University of California, Santa Barbara. In this dataset, documents are collected by entering the search term as "Iran nuclear". This study also incorporates the National Security Strategy (NSS) papers published under each presidency. The NSS papers are collected from *the Historical Office of the Secretary of Defense*. There are seven NSS papers published under Clinton's presidency, and two each for that of Bush and Obama. Incorporating these NSS papers helps represent a more formal and institutionalized strategic picture of the

US foreign policy toward Iran’s nuclear programs. This incorporation also enhances the diversity and representability of my corpus. The total amount of documents in my corpus is listed in Table 2 below.

TABLE 2. *Overview of the Collected Corpus*

	The Number of Documents from The American Presidency Project	The Number of the NSS Papers
Clinton	13	7
Bush	74	2
Obama	442	2
Total	529	11

Mixed Methodologies: Thematic Analysis and Quantitative Content

Analysis

I conducted a two-round coding to analyze the collected corpus. In the first cycle of coding, I employed an inductive qualitative coding technique to explore different themes in each presidential administration’s foreign policy toward Iran’s nuclear programs. This first cycle provides a nuanced and comprehensive picture of the three administrations’ foreign policies. The data was manually coded using MAXQDA. While I did not apply a deductive framework in my initial coding, I paid particular attention to segments of empathetic expressions. As shown in Table 2, the volume of Obama’s administration was significantly larger than that of Clinton’s and Bush’s administrations. To minimize the influence caused by this discrepancy, I customized my coding mechanisms for each presidency. I coded Iran-related sections by sentence for Clinton's and Bush's administrations, regardless of whether the explicit keyword “Iran” was used. This approach is more granular and increases the number of codes of Clinton’s and Bush’s administrations so it can balance with that of Obama’s. For Obama’s corpus, given the substantial contents, I specifically searched for the keyword “Iran” and coded it by sentence or paragraph.

I used the process coding technique to investigate what was happening in the data. Process coding specifically observes and connotes actions in the raw data (Saldana, 2021, p.143). This technique is useful for identifying “routines” of human life and psychological behavior and dynamics because they are what people “do rather than have” (Willing, 2015, p.146, as cited in Saldana, 2021, p.143). This technique is particularly helpful in capturing the footprint of empathetic expressions in US foreign policy talks. These expressions indicate a deliberative process that can reflect the psychological dynamics and emotional undercurrents from the unspoken textual data. This technique aligns with my research objective of tracing strategic empathy in US foreign policies on Iran’s nuclear programs. By the end of my first cycle coding, I identified four emerging themes common across the administrations: 1) The overarching US strategies toward Iran’s nuclear programs, 2) Negative perceptions of Iran, 3) Prosocial expressions on Iran, and 4) Empathetic expressions on Iran. These themes provide a holistic picture of the continuity and changes of US foreign policy talks toward Iran across the three administrations. They paved the way for my second-round coding, where I delved deeper into the theme of prosocial and empathetic expressions. In short, this open coding process offers a comprehensive foreign policy analysis where strategic empathy can be grounded.

In the second cycle of coding, I used quantitative content analysis to examine the patterns and tendencies of each administration’s empathetic expression toward Iran in their foreign policy talks. I focused on the contents and styles of the empathetic expressions. The initial action codes from the first round were further categorized according to my IRI-based measurement. Guided by this measurement, I quantitatively analyzed the frequency of different types of empathetic expressions, calculated the ratio of certain codes, and traced their tendencies over time. This quantitative technique offers a systematic overview of the patterns of strategic empathy under each presidential administration, indicating how empathetic expressions vary by time and actor.

This research design acknowledges two limitations. First, this project lacks intercoder reliability. Since it is a one-year individual thesis project without funding, I conducted the coding process alone. Though in the second-round coding process, I used the IRI-based measurement to calibrate those empathetic expressions, I inevitably brought my subjectivity in identifying and assessing those expressions. For future improvement, more coders can be involved in coding the same corpus to reduce potential biases from my individual subjectivity and increase the precision and generalizability of my coding outcome. The second limitation is the imbalanced amount of each president's data. Under Clinton's presidency, only 13 sources are presented in the *American Presidency Project*, whereas there are 74 for the Bush and 442 under the Obama administration. In Clinton's case, there are 7 NSS papers that comprehensively illustrate the US strategies on Iran, compensating for its limited data availability from the *American Presidency Project*. Obama's case outweighs the other two groups. This imbalance might indicate the different levels of effort each presidential administration has paid toward Iran's nuclear issues and how this issue is significant to the incumbency. However, this discrepancy of raw data might limit the capacity for drawing sufficient analytical information from Clinton and Bush's presidency. To reduce the potential drawback of this imbalance, I calculated the ratio of representations of empathetic expressions in the total codes across three presidential administrations.

Overall, this thesis is a novel attempt to detect and measure strategic empathy in international relations. I developed an IRI-based measurement to assess the expressive behavior of strategic empathy in international relations. I applied the IRI-based measurement to the case of the US foreign policy toward Iran's nuclear program to empirically show how we can know strategic empathy when we see it. The following analytic section presents key findings of applying the IRI-based measurement to probe US foreign policy talks towards

Iran's nuclear programs across the Clinton, Bush, and Obama administrations, illustrating their patterns, variation and tendencies of strategic empathy over time.

Analyzing Strategic Empathy in the US-Iran Case

The case of the US foreign policy talks about Iran's nuclear programs provides an empirical ground to manifest the shape of strategic empathy. In this context, the US's strategic empathy refers to its empathetic capacity and attempt to understand Iran's thinking and feelings to serve the US's self-interest. This strategic empathy has a specific purpose to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons that might maintain the status quo in the Middle East region and hence is in line with the US interests. US foreign policy talks contain different presidential administrations' strategies and tactics on dealing with Iran's nuclear programs, their negative perceptions of Iran as a threat or regional destabilizer, and simultaneously a series of pro-social expressions to signal a willingness to talk and work together, as well the empathetic expressions that convey an intent to understand Iran's interests, motivation, feelings of developing its nuclear programs. These foreign policy talks are more than cheap talks; they construct a communicative space where the US can convey its signals and communicate its intention towards Iran and a broader audience. This communicative space is where the US's strategic empathy towards Iran grows and unfolds.

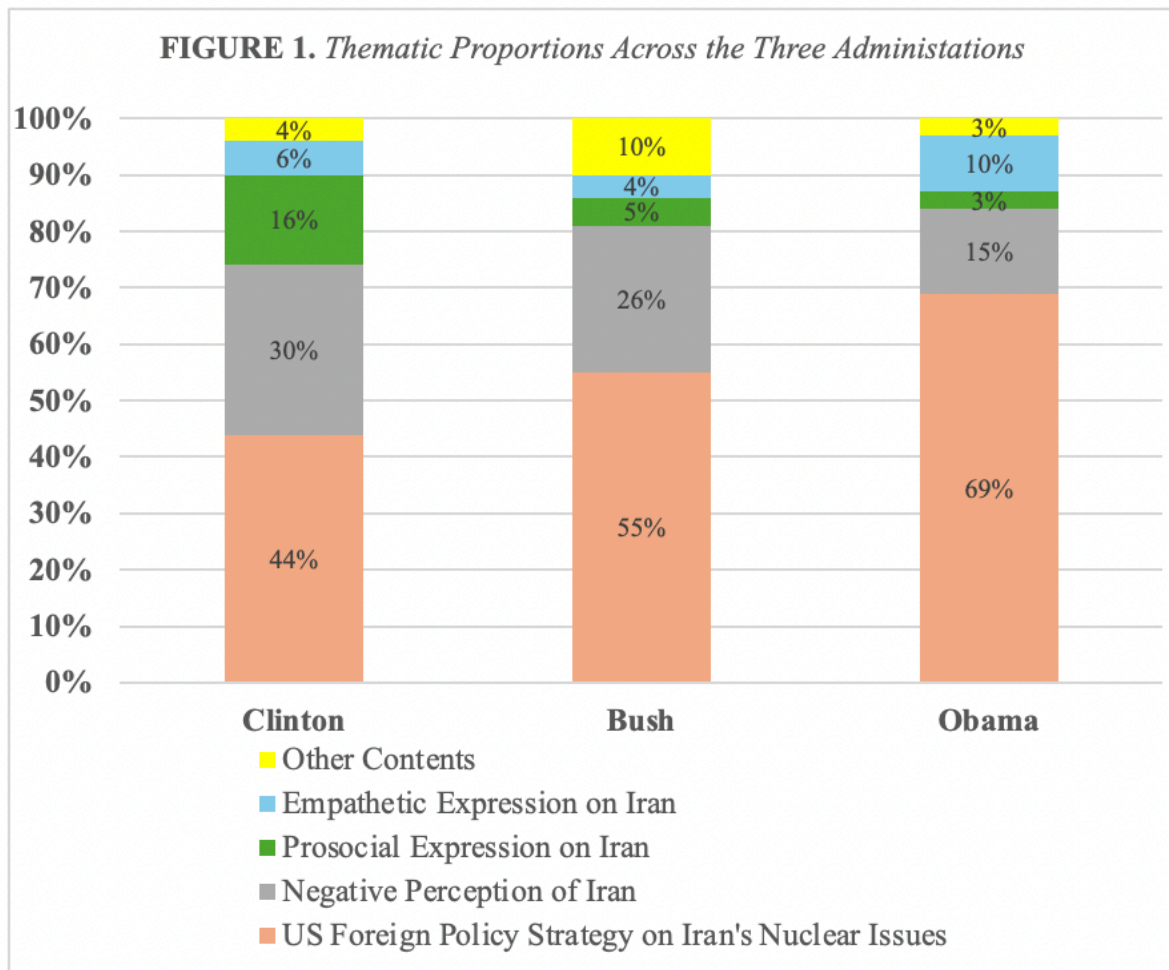
My findings show that under the Clinton, Bush, and Obama administrations, they all demonstrated empathy toward Iran to some degree; most of their empathetic expressions are categorized as cognitive empathy, such as taking Iran's perspectives to understand Iran's interests and incentives to foster negotiations. What distinguishes their empathetic expressions are their specific subtypes of empathy, the nuanced contents, and overarching expressive styles. This analysis identifies two styles of expressing strategic empathy among the three administrations. One occurs at a sentence level, where empathetic expressions are

scattered over different time periods and document sections. This sentence-level style is common in the Bush and Clinton administrations. The second is a more structured style of expressing empathy, featuring a content balance between negative perceptions and positive expressions of Iran that broadly reflects a both-sided thinking mentality. This balance also maintains temporal consistency, implying that these expressions of strategic empathy are more innate to the administration's personality rather than reactive toward external events. Only under the Obama administration did the second more institutionalized style of expressing empathy found. This more institutionalized way of expressing empathy is more likely to effectively signal messages to the recipient because its stability enhances credibility. The consistent effort of applying strategic empathy demonstrates a long-term investment that requires a high audience cost, government reputation, and human and material resources for the US government.

Thematic Compositions of the US Foreign Policy Talks on Iran

Under three presidencies, the US foreign policy talks about Iran's nuclear issues display similar themes, which are expressed and structured differently. Figure 1 displays the coverage of thematic compositions of three administrations' foreign policy talks. Each theme is presented as a percentage of the total codes in the respective administration's corpus. This analysis mainly discusses four common themes of the three administrations' foreign policy talks towards Iran's nuclear programs: 1) the US self-perceived strategy regarding Iran's nuclear programs, 2) negative perceptions of Iran, and 3) prosocial expressions on Iran, and 4) empathetic expressions on Iran. Both the prosocial and empathetic expressions are categorized as positive expressions that distinguish them from negative perceptions of Iran. The first theme outlines an overarching background of US strategy to tackle Iran's nuclear programs. Three presidents shared the same objective to prevent Iran from developing its

nuclear weapons, and they applied distinctive strategies to pursue this goal, considering their partisan interests, personnel resources, and communication styles. The rest of the themes in the bar chart present their proportions out of the overall foreign policy talks, demonstrating each administration's different structure of talks.



As Figure 1 indicates, the most salient variation lies in the relative shares between the elements of negative, prosocial, and empathetic expressions. All administrations express strong negative perceptions of Iran, accounting for around 25% on average. However, what makes a difference is not the negative perceptions per se but their relationship with positive expressions, especially regarding empathetic expressions. In Clinton's administration, the total proportion of prosociality and empathy (32%) is slightly more than negative perception

(30%), with little empathy (6%) and a lot of prosocial expressions (16%). This composition indicates the balanced relationship between the positive and negative elements, in which prosociality is expressed much more frequently than empathy. The functions of expressing prosociality and empathy are different. Expressing prosociality can be self-oriented compared to empathy because it demonstrates the self's preference to exhibit niceness towards the other rather than attempting to understand (Decety et al., 2016; Pfattheicher et al., 2022; Vasconcelos et al., 2012). In comparison, the Bush administration shows a strong asymmetry between negative and positive expressions. The negative perceptions (26%) are nearly three times more than the aggregate of positive expressions (5% prosocial element and 3% empathetic expressions). These overwhelming negative expressions dominate Bush's foreign policy talks toward Iran, whereas the prosocial and empathetic expressions are much weaker and have little role in adjusting the overall impression. This imbalance might not present a strong commitment to expressing empathy towards Iran, reducing the credibility of these signals. In contrast, Obama's administration presents a balanced account of its negative perception of Iran and positive expressions toward it. Although the negative perceptions of Iran still took place the most, its role is not as dominant as that of Bush. Like Clinton's case, the Obama administration demonstrates a balance of positive and negative expressions, its positive expressions (13%) are quite equal to its negative expressions (15%). What is different from Clinton's administration is that among Obama administration's positive expressions, the proportion of empathetic expressions (10%) outweighs the prosocial expressions (3%). The Obama administration exhibited the highest empathetic expression rate among the three administrations. This strong presence makes these empathetic expressions systematically impact the overall foreign policy talks. Compared to prosociality, empathy is more other-oriented and can foster mutual understanding (Decety et al., 2016; Lawrence et al., 2004; Silke et al., 2018). Stronger empathetic expressions created more

relational momentum, increasing the likelihood of Iran feeling understood and bringing the two parties together for negotiations.

Some doubt that the coexistence of negative perceptions, pro-social expressions and empathetic expressions will backfire because they are self-contradictory and insincere. This viewpoint sees positive and negative perceptions from a zero-sum lens. However, this critique overlooks that the judgment about authenticity cannot be assessed by outsiders, and it is hard to confirm by the actual parties. Moreover, the expressions of these three elements do not invalidate each other because they exercise independent functions and signal different messages. Expressing negative perceptions contains disapproval and disagreement toward one's behavior or positions; expressing pro-sociality shows one's willingness to cooperate and help; and expressing empathy demonstrates attempts and care to understand others. Furthermore, empathy is distinguished from the other two by its tendency to understand others, showing a strong self-other connection.

Across the three administrations, negative perceptions of Iran are ubiquitous, not reflecting a huge discrepancy. The negative perceptions of Iran were constructed in reference to the US's self-identity. The process of presenting negative perceptions towards Iran can define and defend the US's self-identity. By constructing Iran as the "otherness", the US's self-identity as a democratic great power and leader of the international liberal order is consolidated. Example codes of this category include distrusting Iran's nuclear program as peaceful, regarding Iran as a threat to regional security and international peace, viewing Iran as an enemy or destabilizer, and scolding Iran's poor domestic governance and shaming Iran's human rights violations. Clinton's administration framed Iran as the primary threat to Middle East peace and sought to undermine Western values (Clinton, 1995). In Bush's administration, absolute and strong words were used when criticizing Iran, such as regarding

Iran as the “enemy of freedom, justice, and peace.” (The White House, 2006, p. 17). Obama administration showed substantial distrust toward Iran, that “an unshackled Iran would pose more threats, and Iran was regarded as an irresponsible actor who posed a threat to the US, ally, and the international community” (Obama, 2015). When expressing negative perceptions toward Iran, these three administrations represented more of the US state as a whole than individual administrations with distinctive personalities, which explains the omnipresence and resemblance of these negative perceptions of Iran.

In addition to negative perceptions, the three administrations all have some degree of prosocial expressions toward Iran. Psychologists define pro-sociality as actions and intents that improve others’ welfare (Decety et al., 2016, p.4), including but not limited to encouraging, helping, cooperating and comforting. Both prosocial and empathetic expressions are categorized as positive expressions. However, being pro-social can be one-sided because it demonstrates one’s wants to improve the other’s welfare (Davis et al., 2019; Eckland et al., 2020; Pfattheicher et al., 2022; Vasconcelos et al., 2012). Comparatively, being empathetic is more relational because it aims to understand others, hence the focus is other-oriented, even though the ultimate goal can benefit the self (Weinstein et al., 1972; Keen, 2006). Some expressions can be prosocial but not empathetic because the sender can care about the recipient’s welfare without understanding its thoughts and feelings. For example, the Bush administration aimed to promote democracy in Iran. While the administration stated, “By supporting democratic change in Iran, we will hasten the day when the people of Iran can determine their own future and be free to choose their own leaders. Freedom in the Middle East requires freedom for the Iranian people, and America looks forward to the day when our Nation can be the closest of friends with a free and democratic Iran” (Bush, 2006a). While this expression shows goodwill toward the Iranian people by supporting its democratization, this way of expression does not necessarily exemplify Iranian

people's perspectives on what good and democracy mean to them according to their national and cultural background. This sort of expression hence is prosocial but not empathetic since it reflects the US's self-centric wish, not necessarily demonstrating an understanding toward Iran.

Lastly, as discussed, expressing empathy is different from negative perceptions and prosociality, given it is essentially other-oriented. Expressing empathy indicates a concentration on the self-other relationship. In empathetic expressions, the US and Iran are not emphasized as two individual states with incompatible characters. Instead, empathetic communication tends to see the common ground between the US and Iran, that they are both state actors that share the same functions to govern and the same desire and demand to be secure. This relational dimension of communication stresses the relationship between two states, building on the connections between two states, as well as crafting a basis for potential engagement, communication, and diplomacy.

A Closer Examination on Empathetic Expressions

The following tables provide a granular illustration of each administration's empathetic expressions using the ten criteria from the IRI-based measurement. Each table presents the composition of empathetic expressions and specific example codes for each administration. The number in brackets indicates specific types of empathetic expressions from the IRI-based measurement (as previously shown in Table 1), and the percentages show their proportions out of the overall empathetic expressions in each administration's foreign policy talks.

As Table 3 shows, most Clinton's administration's empathetic expressions are counted as attempts to see things from Iran's perspective and mentalize Iran's thoughts and feelings. Example codes include calling Iran the Islamic Republic to show respect, concerning what is

good for Iran's humanitarian condition when imposing sanctions and understanding the meaning of Iran's positive changes and its intention to develop nuclear programs.

TABLE 3. *Example Codes of Empathetic Components under Clinton's Administration*

1) See things from the others state's point of view (54%)	3) Imagine the feeling and thinking of states (23%)	6) Express a feeling of concern for misfortunate states (23%)
Attempting to understand Iran's intentions; reviewing sensitive information to concern Iran's true intention; Suggesting that Iran's positive changes might assume its rightful place in the world	Calling Iran as Islamic Republic to show respect	Modifying sanctions on Iran given humanitarian considerations

In the Bush administration, even though he is always featured as a tough guy given his harsh framing of Iran as one of the Axis of Evil, there are still various empathetic expressions during his presidency. Table 4 indicates that all empathetic expressions under the Bush administration were cognitive empathy, including putting into Iran's shoes, taking multilateral perspectives, and somewhat both-sided thinking. Specific example codes include taking Iran's perspective by acknowledging Iran's rights to pursue civilian nuclear power, taking multilateral perspectives from the EU3 countries, and thinking about Iran's benefits to design the incentive package that hopes to facilitate conversation with Iran.

TABLE 4. *Example Codes of Empathetic Components under Bush's Administration*

1) See things from the others state's point of view (79%)	2) Take multilateral perspectives of a disagreement before making a decision (14%)	4) Think two sides of an issue and look at them both (7%)
Acknowledging Iran's sovereign right to have civilian nuclear power plants; Suggesting a strategy that serves Iranian interests; Taking Iran's perspectives that it sees itself as a regional and global power; Calling full name of "Islamic Republic of Iran" and show respect	Suggesting that Bush was an active listener in his meeting with European partners; Bush taking multilateral perspectives from the EU3 countries	Suggesting solving Iran's nuclear programs is both pressure and an opportunity for Iran to achieve regional influences; Suggesting keep pressure but also a path for negotiation with Iran

Table 5 displays that Obama's presidency has the most diverse types of empathetic expressions. The tendency of predominant cognitive empathy in empathetic expressions was maintained. The most common subtype of cognitive empathetic expressions is the attempt to put into Iran's shoes to see things. Examples of codes include calling Iran's full name the Islamic Republic of Iran to show respect, understanding that Iran's rhetoric is to serve its domestic audience and domestic political interests, acknowledging different histories between the US and Iran, and demonstrating a willingness to face up and so forth. Moreover, in Obama's administration, their foreign policy talks toward Iran demonstrated open-mindedness and not being self-referential. This communication style is what the other two administrations did not have. In specific, the administration usually directly quoted Iranian officials' responses and opinions in press briefings and presidential talks. The administration also showed reluctance to make assumptions about Iran and emphasized verification mechanisms to test the actual outcomes. Specific statements include, "Iran has yet to build a nuclear weapon. My administration will seek engagement with Iran based on mutual interests and mutual respect" (Obama, 2009); "We are taking steps now, with our partners, to test whether, in fact, Iran is willing to do that" (Obama, 2014). The third common expression of cognitive empathy lies in the category of both-side thinking. When anticipating Iran's reactions, this administration tends to consider both positive and negative scenarios. For instance, one senior administrative official suggested that "If Iran does act in a more constructive fashion, it would be a positive development in resolving difficult issues. If they don't, we will continue to enforce our sanctions and continue to have very strong differences (Obama, 2016). This form of both-sided anticipation implies a willingness and open-mindedness to see things from different perspectives, which stands out in Obama's administration compared to the other two administrations.

TABLE 5. *Example Codes of Empathetic Components under Obama's Administration*

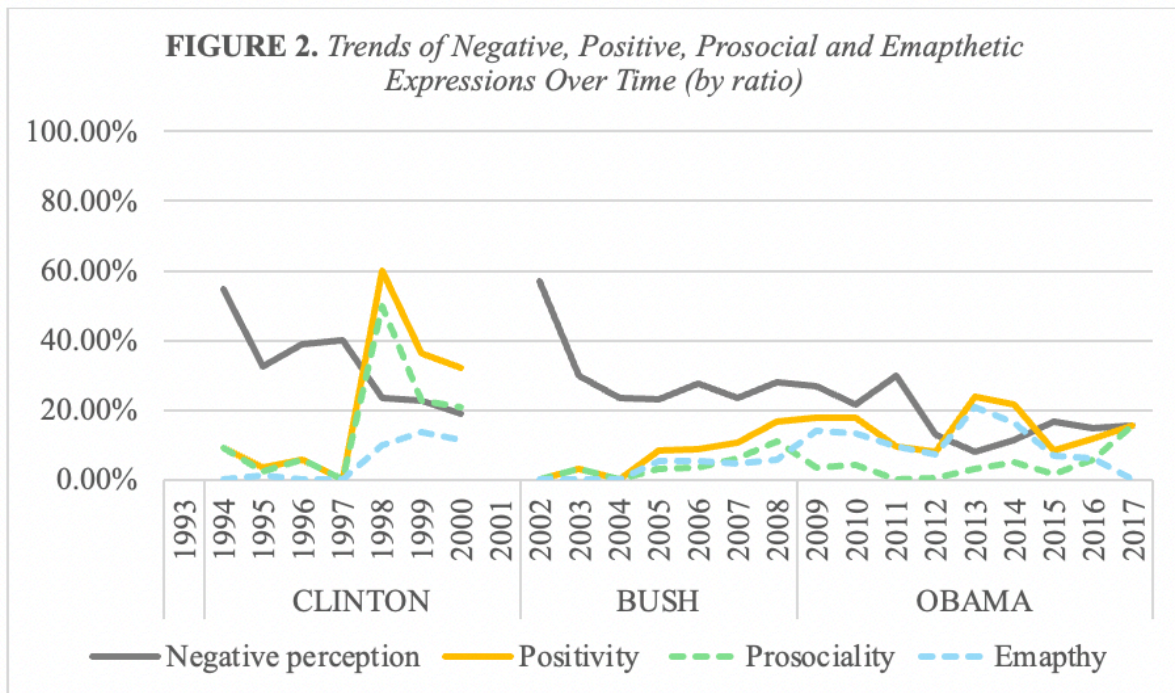
1) See things from the others state's point of view (74%)	4) Think two sides of an issue and look at them both (9%)	5) Demonstrate open-mindedness and not being self-referential (16%)	6) Express a feeling of concern for misfortunate states (1%)	8) Express a protective feeling toward states that are taken advantage of (1%)
Providing humanitarian transactions to Iran; Suggesting engaging Iran with mutual interests and mutual respect; Respecting Iran's right to develop peaceful nuclear programs; Taking perspective of Iranian domestic rhetoric	Anticipating Iran's future behaviors in both sides; Pressuring Iran but maintaining diplomatic engagement with Iran	Directly quoting Iranian responses; Demonstrating trust toward Iran; Showing reluctance to make assumptions on Iran	Concerning Iranian people's wellbeing; Concerning Iranian government's suppression of its people	Going after the people who are oppressing the people of Iran

In addition to the predominance of expressed cognitive empathy, there are a few statements from the Obama administration showing affective empathy, including expressing feelings of concern and protection towards Iran or Iranian people. Specifically, a sentiment of worrying about Iranian people's suffering can be founded on a statement such as "The people of Iran have paid a high and unnecessary price because of your leaders' unwillingness to address this issue" (Obama, 2013). The feeling of being protective toward Iranians was identified when the administration suggested that "We're going after the people who are oppressing the people of Iran, oppressing them politically and economically (Obama, 2010). These emotional expressions reflect the US's empathetic concerns toward Iranian people's well-being, but these expressions can be very subjective and do not necessarily resonate with Iranian people's true feelings. Nevertheless, affective empathy only marginally accounts for about 2% of the overall Obama administration's empathetic expressions.

In short, Figure 1 and the three tables present the variations of empathetic expressions across different administrations. Applying strategic empathy is not a yes-or-no question; there are different patterns and structures that emerge during the process of applying strategic empathy that can result in different impressions and results. Among the three administrations, most expressed empathy belongs to cognitive empathy, which primarily attempts to understand Iran's perspectives. Table 5 indicates that the Obama administration exhibits some affective empathy, presenting the most diverse types of empathetic expressions according to the IRI-based measurement. This finding resonates with Figure 1, which shows that Obama's administration has the highest percentage of empathetic expressions in its overall foreign policy talks, demonstrating a structural balance with its negative perceptions of Iran. In addition to a spatial view, the following section reveals a temporal dimension that assesses the consistency of this empathetic expression over time.

A Temporal Structure: Consistency from the Beginning Matters

Figure 2 illustrates the yearly variation in the percentages of negative, pro-social, and empathetic expressions across the three presidencies. As the graph shows, the tendencies of empathetic expressions under Clinton's and Bush's administrations are inconsistent and fluctuating. In contrast, the Obama administration's empathetic expressions remain relatively stable, indicating a degree of stability. There were specific turning points in the Clinton and Bush administrations where their positive expressions toward Iran suddenly shifted and surged. Their first terms suggest few empathetic expressions. However, they suddenly increased their empathetic expressions in their second terms. Many of their empathetic expressions were reactive to specific events.



Notes: The dataset does not have available data in 1993, 2001, hence there are two gaps in this graph.

During Clinton’s administration, the primary strategy toward Iran’s nuclear program was to work with Russia to solve Iran’s nuclear issues. The cooperation stemmed from the personal rapport between Clinton and Yeltsin. Concurrently, without directly engaging with Iran, the US used multilateral diplomacy to pressure Iran with other countries. For example, the US-led G-7 allies to impose economic sanctions on Iran. Japan continued to stop granting soft loans and concessionary credits to Iran. In Clinton’s second term, there was a sudden increase in positive expressions toward Iran. This might be given that in the 1997 Iran presidential election, President Mohammad Khatami won and came into power by implementing many reformist policies. In the 1998 and 1999 NSS papers, the Clinton administration explicitly praised President Khatami’s move to “condemn the killing of innocent Israelis” and Iranian officials’ efforts of welcoming Egypt Chairman Arafat to the Islamic Summit and diplomacy to contribute to peace in Afghanistan (The White House, 1998, p. 55). These published NSS papers started acknowledging Iran’s positive changes,

signalling some US reciprocal policies such as “issuing visas to Iranians who travel to the United States frequently” (The White House, 1998, p.56); welcoming people-to-people dialogue (The White House, 1999, p. 48). In 2000’s NSS, it stated that “we welcome statements by some Iranian officials that advocate improved relations with the United States” (The White House, 2000, p. 75). In short, the US foreign policy toward Iran under Clinton’s administration evolved toward a more positive direction in his second term. This shift came with some willingness to start a conversation and reduce misunderstandings toward Iran; however, from the collected data, there is not much evidence demonstrating the US’s empathetic understanding toward Iran. Many of the prosocial actions and comments toward Iran were more like a conditional result of the shifted leadership toward Iran, not internally driven by a consistent US foreign policy.

Against the backdrop of the 9/11 incident, the Bush administration’s foreign policy strategy was to isolate Iran by imposing diplomatic and economic pressure, with a focus on coordinating with other non-Iran countries, particularly the P5+1 (China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and Germany). Bush administration prescribed a set of self-referential preconditions without mutual negotiations, which constituted an imbalanced power relationship. For example, the administration repetitively stated that “[the US] will come to the table to negotiate, so long as the Iranians verifiably end any enrichment activities” (Bush, 2006b). These expressions make the aimed negotiations less a collaborative conversation that can augment mutual understandings but more like a conditional offer that Iran can be rewarded after fulfilling certain requirements. Under Bush’s administration, the tendency of positive expressions increased between 2006 and 2007, likely influenced by the Iraq insurgency in the middle of 2006 and EU3’s proposal for incentive packages to Iran. Bush administration took the EU3’s perspectives and prepared an incentive package to facilitate negotiations with Iran. This incentive package reflected the Bush administration’s attempt to

think about Iran's perspectives and interests, such as recognizing Iran's sovereign right to access peaceful civilian nuclear power. In one press brief on July 15, 2006, Bush pointed out that he had just met Iran's President in China and demonstrated a willingness to have negotiations. "if we elaborate common approaches to this difficult problem, we will see to it that our joint decisions are fulfilled. This is what we said honestly and directly to our Iranian partners. I said it at the meeting with the President of the Islamic Republic of Iran in China quite recently." (Bush, 2006c). Although this incentive package did not work out well, some terms that continue to be used in Obama's administration were communicated in an empathetic and pragmatic way, which seems to work effectively. As Figure 2 suggests, Bush's second term ended with some positive expressions toward Iran. This tendency lays a foundation for Obama's administration to continue expressing empathy with somewhat fewer negative perceptions.

Under Obama's presidency, the US strategy on Iran's nuclear issues is self-perceived as long-term, peaceful, comprehensive, and clear. They adopted a dual-track approach to directly engage with Iran and simultaneously impose multilateral sanctions. On the one hand, the US applied multilateral and comprehensive sanctions on Iran. The US substantially worked with the EU, Japan, South Korea, China, GCC (The Gulf Cooperation Council) countries, and so forth to build an internationalized sanction network to further pressure Iran. In their foreign policy talks, the US intention of imposing this sanction was emphasized as not to harm but to change Iran's behavior and merely focus on its nuclear programs. On the other hand, Obama and Secretary of State John Kerry met with Iran officials to negotiate the Iran nuclear deal directly. Since the beginning, Obama's administration's foreign policy talks have exhibited empathetic expressions toward Iran and reflexivity towards US foreign policy. The administration would directly quote Iranian officials' specific responses, showing that they are listening to Iranian opinions. Despite many negative perceptions of Iran's nuclear

programs and other regional activities, the administration still expressed various positive comments regarding Iran's history, culture, and people. Obama's administration also acknowledges the Iranian intention to develop nuclear programs as their national pride (Baker, 2019). This presence of empathetic expressions constitutes a structural balance against some negative and harsh comments.

As Figure 2 indicates, the reactive feature of expressing empathy is not exclusive to Clinton and Bush. Obama's expressions were also reactive, especially from 2013 to 2014 when significant negotiations were happening; there were substantially empathetic expressions, even exceeding the negative ones. However, Obama's reactive feature did not severely disrupt its consistency in expressing empathy as that of in the Clinton and Bush cases. Under Clinton and Bush's presidencies, their reactive features might have worsened their inconsistency because their policy tones shifted dramatically from their starting point. This contrast might raise the recipient's uncertainty about the sender's intention and the durability of positive expressions. The conditional and sudden expressions of pro-sociality and empathy might lose charm because the inconsistency makes them less trustworthy. Compared to Obama's case, his onset and upshot seemingly present a stable trend. The consistency from the beginning might construct an impression that this empathetic communication style is innate to the Obama administration, not triggered by the external environment. In other words, it is a consistency in quality, not quantity, that characterizes the style of administration. This consistency also wins some credibility of the expressed empathy, considering the efforts to understand bear the test of time. In November 2004, the Joint Plan of Action as a pilot deal was announced. A year and a half later, on 14 July 2005, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action was settled, according to which Iran agreed to cease its nuclear development, and the US, in turn, lifted its nuclear-relevant sanctions on Iran.

More Than Cheap Talks: Empathy as a Style

The case of the US foreign policy talks toward Iran uncovers two levels of expressing strategic empathy. The first is at a sentence level, where empathetic expressions are performed through certain wordings and meanings. This linguistic expression of conveying empathy occurs in every presidential administration. Second, empathetic expressions can be expressed at a structural level. These types of empathetic expression manifest through the structure and style of conveying strategic empathy that cannot be observed by the unit of sentence or phrase. As evidenced in the case of Obama's presidency, more structured expressions of empathy can be understood in two dimensions: spatial and temporal. From a spatial perspective, a structural way of empathetic expression demonstrates a balance of negative and positive expressions in the whole foreign policy context. This characteristic also holistically aligns with one criterion from the IRI-based framework: the capacity for demonstrating both-sided thinking. Both-sided thinking can be captured in communication where opposing perspectives are incorporated and tend to be more symmetrical. In this regard, the balance of negative and positive is recognized as an outcome of the both-sided mindset that showcases an empathetic feature.

As for a temporal dimension, being structured implies a temporal coherence over time, particularly an alignment with the beginning. This temporal consistency can leverage stability and credibility to the overall empathetic expressions. In contrast, the sudden and reactive expressions of empathy that especially deviate from the original non-empathetic expressions might raise concern and suspicion about the motivation and sustainability of the application of strategic empathy. In Bush and Clinton's cases, empathetic expressions were crumbs scattering over their talks without being integrated into a structural level. In Obama's case, consistently employing empathy toward Iran includes long-term investment in diplomatic efforts, time, and human resources. These are expensive capitals for the US government

because it is not only simply about collecting intelligence but also putting itself into Iran's shoes to unpack what the collected information means to Iran. This understanding and interpretation process is demanding not just in a material level but also challenges one's existing epistemological and cognitive and emotional patterns (Head, 2016). Therefore, consistency in expressing empathy can demonstrate a stronger commitment that is more likely to be viewed as a costly signal to assure the recipient of the empathizer's willingness to understand, which reduces the likelihood for the recipient to perceive the empathetic expressions as hypocritical. More importantly, the expression of empathy ought to be felt by Iran, otherwise this communication can be inept and invalid. While empathetic accuracy is not the focus of this study, it is an important component for Iran to think and feel that they are empathized and understood. The relationship between empathetic accuracy and a more structural form of expressions can be further explored by future studies.

Closing Up: Empathy as Empowerment

In conclusion, this study reconceptualizes strategic empathy as the capacity and an attempt to understand other's thoughts and feelings. This behavior-based account derives expressing empathy as an independent behavior that can be applied to different levels and types of actors and relationships. This conceptualization elevates the behavior of expressing empathy to an international relation level as a way of states' interactions. Moreover, this behavior-specific reconceptualization of strategic empathy contributes to better envisioning and assessing strategic empathy. As an interdisciplinary project, I borrow substantial knowledge from psychology to develop the IRI-based measurement to gauge the presence of strategic empathy in the context of foreign policy. The IRI-based measurement provides ten criteria to identify the footprint of empathetic behavior in foreign policy talks. I regard

foreign policy talks as a communicative space where states can reside and signal their messages to other states through specific linguistic expressions and narratives in a rich array of documents, including presidential speeches, news conferences, strategic documents, etc.

More importantly, this thesis regards expressing strategic empathy as a way of exhibiting costly signals that can communicate a state's intention. Psychologists have proved that intentionality can cause pain and hurt (Decety & Cacioppo, 2012). Experiments show that intent will magnify harm, that people tend to judge intentional harm causes more pain than accidental harm (Ames & Fiske, 2013). Likewise, in International Relations, a state's intentionality, which is usually performed by its human political elites, can trigger another state's potential fight-or-flight or tendency to cooperate and trust. Foreign policy talks provide an arena where key decision-makers, usually representing national sovereignty, can sense and infer each other's intents through different communication contents and styles. Small nuances like certain wordings are meaningful symbols that influence actors' emotions and cognition of the decision-making process. In this regard, intents can wield an implicit power dynamic to influence a state's anticipation and its empirical moves. For example, single-sided expressions that overwhelmingly stress negative expressions tend to convey more hostility and aggression that can trigger resistance and unwillingness to communicate. In contrast, expressing strategic empathy can reflect a state's attempt to understand the other, generating a relational momentum that closes the self-other distinction, attracting states to strike possible conversation and negotiation.

Analyzing the US foreign policy talks toward Iran's nuclear programs under Clinton, Bush, and Obama's administrations, this thesis further proposes two styles of empathetic expressions. One is a sentence-level empathetic expression that manifests through certain wordings and meanings; the other is at a structural level, shown as content balanced between

positive and negative expressions, as well as consistency of this balance over time. The structural level of expressing strategic empathy is more likely to be considered a costly signal as it demonstrates a stronger commitment and greater resource investment. Moreover, this costliness, though consuming and demanding, can be less materially expensive than conventional costly signals such as deploying troops and weapons, creating the motivation for states to apply it in real-life scenarios to communicate and reassure their intentions.

The outcome of applying strategic empathy can be agnostic. On the one hand, the recipient's psychological needs for being recognized and respected are satisfied, improving the likelihood of negotiations. In the case of US foreign policy talks toward Iran, this can refer to understanding Iran's desire to develop nuclear programs related to its national pride, historical heritage, and domestic political interests. On the other hand, this understanding causes deterrence effects because the recipient may feel being known as threatening; this includes examples that publicly quote Iran leadership's comments and intelligence information on Iran's banking system when imposing economic sanctions. The ultimate outcome of applying strategic empathy is determined by multiple factors and contingent on context. The unclear outcome might also result from the measurement problem in existing IR empathy scholarship. With the IRI-based measurement, future studies can study the presence of strategic empathy as the independent variable to further explore its potential causal or correlations with other variables, such as the possibility of negotiations, the number of agreements, and the length of the conflict.

Future research can also explore under what conditions strategic empathy is more likely to occur and last. While my thesis does not aim to explore this question, my analysis hints that the different personalities of spokespeople and the president matter. Three presidential administrations show different communication styles and disparities in their capacity for strategic empathy. With a lower capacity for strategic empathy, one's expression style is

more self-referential and egocentric. A more relational and interactive style reflects a more substantial capacity to apply strategic empathy. As for the data on studying empathy, this thesis only relies on textual data, future studies are welcome to research body embodiment to explore diverse formats of expressive empathy. It is also essential to distinguish whether empathetic expressions are ingrained in its agent's personality and capacity, or result from training; as the latter implies a potential of institutionalizing strategic empathy in state interactions (Crawford, 2014). As a discipline that exists to study the power, relationships, and interactions between state actors, it is in this thesis's minimum hope that the future IR will put forward relationality at the center, where studying empathy can serve as a stepping stone to generate more knowledge and comprehension of how relations look like and operate at an international level.

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Appendix 1. Coding Details of the IRI-based Measurement

Notes: The two tables below demonstrate the coding process that translated the original IRI questions into my IRI-based measurement in the thesis's measurement section. I first process the coding to make the original questions (first column) into a set of behavioral statements (second column). I then further translate the contents of the second column into foreign policy contexts (third column).

Cognitive Empathy - Expression of Perspective Taking (PT)

Original Question in the IRI	Process Coding	Transform to Foreign Policy Context
3. I sometimes find it difficult to see things from the "other guy's" point of view. (PT)	3. See things from others' point of view.	1) Attempt to see things from the others state's point of view (putting into other states' shoes)
8. I try to look at everybody's side of a disagreement before I make a decision. (PT)	8. Attempt to see different sides of a disagreement 3 Look at everyone's side of a disagreement	2) Attempt to take multilateral perspectives of a disagreement before making a decision
11. I sometimes try to understand my friends better by imagining how things look from their perspective. (PT)	11. Attempt to understand actors with a closer relationship by imagining their perspectives	3) Attempt to imagine the feeling and thinking of states that are target of the criticism
15. If I'm sure I'm right about something, I don't waste much time listening to other people's arguments. (PT) (-)	15. Attempt to listen to other's arguments even if knowing/feeling self is right	4) Attempt to think two sides of an issue and look at them both
21. I believe that there are two sides to every question and try to look at them both. (PT)	21. Be aware of things are non-binary and attempt to look at both sides	5) Demonstrating open-mindedness and not being self-referential
28. Before criticizing somebody, I try to imagine how I would feel if I were in their place. (PT)	28. Attempt to imagine other's feeling before criticizing others	
25. When I'm upset at someone, I usually try to "put myself in his shoes" for a while. (PT)	25. Attempt to take perspectives from others when upsetting about them	

Emotional Empathy - Expression of Empathic Concerns (EC)

Original Question in the IRI	Process Coding	Transform to Foreign Policy Context
2. I often have tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate than me. (EC)	2. Expressing concerned feeling for those who are less fortunate	6) Expressing a feeling of concern for misfortunate states
4. Sometimes I don't feel very sorry for other people when they are having problems. (EC)	4. Expressing a feeling of sorry to people have problems	7) Expressing sorry when other states are having problems
9. When I see someone being taken advantage of, I feel kind of protective towards them. (EC)	9. Expressing a feeling of protective toward those who are taken advantage of	8) Expressing a protective feeling toward states that are taken advantage of
14. Other people's misfortunes do not usually disturb me a great deal. (EC)	14. Expressing concerned feeling for other's misfortunes	9) Expressing a feeling of pity when seeing other states are treated unfairly
18. When I see someone being treated unfairly, I sometimes don't feel very much pity for them. (EC)	18. Expressing pity when seeing others are treated unfairly	10) Expressing a response of being moved to events that happened
20. I am often quite touched by things that I see happen. (EC)	20. Often getting moved by external events	
22. I would describe myself as a pretty soft-hearted person. (EC)	22. Describing self as a soft-hearted person	