European Union

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EUROPE AND IRAN'S NUCLEAR CRISIS

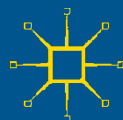## Lead Groups and EU Foreign Policy-Making

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ABBREVIATIONS

AEOI	Atomic Energy Organisation of Iran
Brexit	British exit from the European Union
CBI	Central Bank of Iran
CFSP	Common Foreign and Security Policy (EU)
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency (US)
CISADA	Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability and Divestment Act (US)
E3	France, Germany and the United Kingdom
E3/EU	France, Germany, the United Kingdom and the High Representative for CFSP (later Foreign Affairs and Security Policy) (EU)
E3/EU+3	France, Germany, the United Kingdom and the High Representative plus China, Russia and the United States
ESS	European Security Strategy (EU)
EU	European Union
EUGS	European Union Global Strategy
FAC	Foreign Affairs Council (formerly GAERC) (EU)
FCO	Foreign and Commonwealth Office (UK)
GAERC	General Affairs and External Relations Council (later FAC) (EU)
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
HEU	Highly Enriched Uranium
HR	High Representative for CFSP (later for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy) (EU)
IAEA	International Atomic Energy Agency

ILSA	Iran-Libya Sanctions Act (later ISA) (US)
INARA	Iran Nuclear Agreement Review Act (US)
IRGC	Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (Iran)
IRISL	Islamic Republic of Iran Shipping Line
ISA	Iran Sanctions Act (formerly ILSA) (US)
JCPOA	Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (E3/EU+3-Iran final nuclear deal)
JPOA	Joint Plan of Action (E3/EU+3-Iran interim nuclear deal)
LEU	Low-Enriched Uranium
LWR	Light Water Reactor
MEPP	Middle East Peace Process
NCRI	National Council of Resistance of Iran
NDAA	National Defence Authorisation Act (US)
NIE	National Intelligence Estimate (US)
NIOC	National Iranian Oil Company
NPT	Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty
NSS	National Security Strategy (US)
P5+1	China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States plus Germany (and the European Union), officially E3/EU+3
PDA	Political Dialogue Agreement (EU)
PMDs	Potential Military Dimensions of Iran's Nuclear Programme
PSC	Political and Security Committee (EU)
R&D	Research and Development
SNSC	Supreme National Security Council (Iran)
TCA	Trade and Cooperation Agreement (EU)
TEU	Treaty on the European Union
UF_6	Uranium Hexafluoride
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNGA	United Nations General Assembly
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
UNSCR	United Nations Security Council Resolution
US	United States
WMD	Weapons of Mass Destruction

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Introduction: The E3/EU Iran Group

For the best part of the 2000s and 2010s, Iran's nuclear programme was a major source of international concern. In spite of Iran's insistence that it sought the capability to use atomic energy for electricity production, policy-makers and experts in America, Europe and elsewhere feared that the Islamic Republic could in fact be after the technological and industrial capacity to build nuclear weapons.

A nuclear-capable Iran was associated with a number of threats. One was that the antagonism between Iran and Israel would reach the boiling point. The Israelis feared that a nuclear Iran would diminish their military edge and jeopardise their regional monopoly over nuclear arms. Many in Israel—the government included—depicted a nuclear Iran as nothing less than an existential threat. The Sunni Arab states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), especially Saudi Arabia, were concerned that, sheltered by a nuclear deterrent, the Islamic Republic would pursue a more aggressive foreign policy. A further risk was that an Iranian nuclear weapons capacity could engender a desire for emulation in Saudi Arabia, but also countries that saw themselves as critical regional players such as Egypt or Turkey. A nuclear arms race would not only plunge the region into further instability but also deal a fatal blow to the nuclear non-proliferation regime.

Iran's nuclear plans did pose, then, a real and multifaceted challenge to international security. A coalition of six world powers—China, France,

Germany, Russia, the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States (US), along with the European Union (EU)—determined to bring Iran to agree to verifiable guarantees of the solely peaceful nature of its nuclear programme. Thanks to a combination of diplomacy and sanctions, their efforts were eventually successful. On 14 July 2015, after marathon talks in Vienna, the group and Iran struck a landmark deal that removed the prospect of an Iranian nuclear breakout for an extended period of time.

The agreement created a complex system of temporary limits to the ability of Iran to carry out key nuclear and nuclear-related activities, and gave the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the nuclear watchdog of the United Nations (UN), the authority to conduct intrusive inspections to detect improper, suspicious or illicit behaviour. In return, the six powers and the European Union agreed to lift or suspend the wide-ranging sanctions regime that they had imposed on Iran for defying international demands for more cooperation and transparency.

The agreement did not meet with universal acclaim. Its critics, numerous in the United States, Israel and Saudi Arabia, complained that it was at best a transitory framework. They pointed out that, once the most restrictive provisions of the deal would expire between 10 and 15 years after its inception, Iran would be entitled to develop a full-fledged nuclear industry that it could then try to divert to military uses. Supporters retorted that critics had failed to provide workable alternatives. In addition, they contended that a deal in which all parties had invested so much political capital would create strong incentives for Iran not to pursue the military option after the expiration date of the deal (at least stronger incentives than it would have been the case absent any agreement). Neither party could pretend to have a definitive argument invalidating the opposite one. Nonetheless, the lack of any viable alternative to the final deal and the plausibility of Iran being less willing to risk again confrontation with the international community were strong reasons to conclude that, all considered, the deal was worth striking.

For sure, the agreement is not perfect. Its value would amount to little if the parties failed to implement its terms or withdrew from it altogether— a prospect that cannot be ruled out, not least given US President Donald Trump's view that the deal is deeply flawed. And even if all parties did comply with the agreement, the question of how to make sure that Iran would not go nuclear after the deal's expiration would remain. In these terms, the Vienna agreement did not put an end to Iran's nuclear *issue*. It

was the end of Iran's nuclear *crisis*, however, in the sense that it turned a dynamic of confrontation into one of rules-based interaction.

At the time of writing, the endurance of the deal is imperilled by President Trump's decision to disavow it. The potential US-induced collapse of the deal would usher in a new phase in Iran's nuclear issue and probably an even graver crisis than the one before 2015. This new crisis would be different in nature because its proliferation dimension would be entirely subordinated to the more volatile dynamics of US-Iranian antagonism. The way the pre-2015 crisis was resolved, however, would contribute to shaping the contours of the new crisis and would constrain the policy choices of all involved players. The US administration—as much as Iran—would find it impossible to neglect entirely the rules-based interaction mechanisms created by the deal. Iran and the other signatories of the deal, for their part, would react to US policies including by drawing heavily on those mechanisms, if only to lend legitimacy to their position.

The nuclear deal, in a word, would continue to have an effect even if one of its two most important parties, the United States (the other being Iran), were to distance itself from it. Studying the process that resulted in the deal, even with a narrow focus on the role played by an important but secondary actor as Europe (as this book does), retains value thus both in academic research a policy-relevant terms.

1   Aim of the Book

The culmination of a 12 years' process, the Iran nuclear deal set a precedent for the consensual resolution of contentious issues between countries divided by bitter ideological and geopolitical antagonism, such as the United States and Iran. It was also an unusual example of effective multilateral crisis management in a time of increasing tensions between the established powers of the West and their rising or resurgent rivals, China and Russia. Moreover, the deal restored a degree of authority to international institutions and treaties, notably the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), which oversaw and sanctioned the overall process, and the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT), to which Iran was a nonnuclear party. Finally, the nuclear agreement was a resounding success in the generally unimpressive foreign policy record of the European Union.

Undoubtedly, the nuclear drama mostly revolved around other characters than Europe, namely Iran and the United States. Yet, as it often happens in complex ploys, supporting actors play an important, and sometimes

even essential, role. This book assumes that the Europeans were such supporting actors and that the part they had in Iran's nuclear crisis was indeed essential.

Initially the Europeans even occupied the driver's seat, as the process that eventually resulted in the nuclear agreement originated from a tripartite initiative by France, Germany and the United Kingdom. It was the three European countries (the E3) that first engaged the Iranians in nuclear talks in 2003, with a wary United States remaining on the sidelines for about two years. The Americans entered the stage only after the E3-Iran talks collapsed, but even then they did so by joining the diplomatic framework created by the Europeans—as China and Russia did. Even while the United States gradually became the main driver of the negotiation, the Europeans continued to contribute to the process, including by having an EU official, the High Representative (HR) for Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), act as chief interlocutor of Iran on behalf of the six powers. Besides, a series of increasingly harsh restrictions enacted by the European Union inflicted serious harm on Iran's public finances and economy, making the overall sanctions regime both comprehensive and pervasive. No analysis of Iran's nuclear crisis would therefore be complete or accurate if it overlooked the European part in it.

The E3's bold initiative to reach out to Iran in spite of US wariness in the early 2000s soon captured the attention of scholars and experts, who analysed and assessed the early E3-Iran engagement (Kile 2005a; Quille and Keane 2005: 111–119; Denza 2005; Perthes 2005a, b; Zammit Borda 2005; International Crisis Group 2004, 2006: 6–13; Martellini and Redaelli 2006; Posch 2006). The issue continued to generate expert and scholarly interest in the following years. Scholars dissected the negotiating tactics of the E3 (Roudsari 2007; Sauer 2007, 2008; Harnisch 2007b; Dupont 2009; Alcaro 2010) and deconstructed the European discourse on Iran to trace the origin of the E3's policy (Hanau Santini 2010; Kienzle 2013). Alternatively, they analysed the European initiative in the context of wider EU policies on non-proliferation (Kile 2005b; Bergenäs 2010), multilateralism (Harnisch 2007a), human rights (Kaussler 2008; Kienzle 2012) and transatlantic relations (Alcaro 2011; Ërastö 2011), or tried to establish a connection between the initiative on Iran and the global role of the European Union (Dryburgh 2008). Some studies focused exclusively on sanctions, which became increasingly salient in the European Union's Iran policy (Makinsky 2009; Bassiri Tabrizi and Hanau Santini 2012; Van de Graaf 2013). Finally, as a diplomatic breakthrough came in

sight in 2014–15, experts attempted an overall evaluation of Europe's role in Iran's nuclear issue (Meier 2013; Alcaro and Bassiri Tabrizi 2014; Onderco 2015; Fabius 2016; Adebahr 2017).

These studies produced a comprehensive analysis of the European role in the nuclear talks. They looked at *what* the European Union did (on the specific issue of Iran's nuclear programme) to draw conclusions about *who* the Union was—whether it was an effective non-proliferation actor, a reliable human rights promoter or, more generally speaking, a credible international security player. Taken together, they resulted in a better understanding of the potential and limits of EU foreign policy.

This work intends to contribute to this effort by taking a different path. Like the aforementioned studies, it uses the action on Iran's nuclear crisis to say something about EU foreign policy. To get there, however, it focuses not so much on 'what' the European Union did as on *how* it did it—and what it says about EU foreign policy and the Union as an international agent. Indeed, a research driven by the 'how' question is the missing link in the present literature on the European Union's involvement in the nuclear dispute with Iran.

With few exceptions (an early one is Linden 2006, a more recent Bassiri Tabrizi 2016), the peculiar formula through which the Europeans managed Iran's nuclear issue has attracted less expert attention, and certainly less scholarly analysis, than the policy itself. Yet, this 'formula' is significant because it followed a quite unorthodox pattern combining leadership of the E3, close coordination between the E3 and the HR, and support for the E3 by the EU Council—that is, by the other member states.

In other words, the European Union's involvement in Iran's nuclear crisis was indirect, even accounting for the important role played by the HR. It was the E3 and not the Union as a whole that reached out to the Iranians, set out and implemented strategies, and interacted with other external players, most notably the United States. True, after a short initial period in which they acted entirely outside EU frameworks, the E3 associated then HR Javier Solana to the negotiating team—thereby becoming the *E3/EU*—and won the support of the other member states. However, they never ceded control of the initiative to EU institutions, nor did they involve other member states. In fact, the E3/EU group not only was in charge of the nuclear issue, but eventually came to dominate the Iran policies of all other member states. The process of formation of the E3/EU group, the leadership it exerted over the other member states and the impact it had on EU foreign policy are the object of this work.

2   EU Lead Groups

The few scholars who paid attention to the E3/EU format (Linden 2006; Schwegmann 2005; Harnisch 2007a) rightly treated it as an instance of 'contact group', an established pattern according to which a restricted number of states team up to address one specific problem or set of inter-related problems. In essence, contact groups are 'minilateral' mechanisms that allow for speedier action because they rely on informal procedures of consultation and decision-making (Naìm 2009). Sometimes contact groups work as fora for coordinating crisis management efforts among a relatively large number of stakeholders, including both states and international organisations. Alternatively, they can be smaller groups that decide strategies and policies, oversee negotiations or directly engage in negotiations (as the E3/EU did). Like many other countries, EU member states have regularly partaken in contact groups or other forms of minilateral cooperation, both within and outside international organisations.

Contact groups consisting of EU member states have a specificity of their own, which relates to the nature of the European Union. Contrary to ordinary international organisations, which provide frameworks for interstate cooperation, the European Union is itself an actor, although a sui generis one. Hence, contact groups within the Union or comprising EU member states exercise influence over the decisions of the Union as a whole, and in some cases they shape its policies altogether.

These groupings of EU member states, which often operate within larger contact groups, are sometimes called 'core groups'. The term is inaccurate in that it seems to indicate a more integrated core of a whole—the way for instance the eurozone delimits the economically and monetarily more integrated part of the European Union. But the groups discussed here have not so much to do with EU foreign policy supranationalisation as with its definition, operationalisation and ultimately effectiveness. They lead the European Union into foreign policy action, not towards a higher stage of integration. As such, they are more *lead* groups than *core* groups, and so they are called in this work.

Empirically, the assumption that lead groups pertain to EU foreign policy is relatively uncontroversial. In the case of the E3/EU, for instance, any gap between the group's approach and a separate EU's Iran policy vanished soon, to the extent that policy-makers and experts—including several authors of the aforementioned studies—spoke of the E3 and the European Union interchangeably. If they cared about making a distinction, they assumed that

the former were representing the latter (some authors disagreed, however: see Onderco 2015). After all, with the E3 being the most influential EU member states, the HR taking part in the nuclear talks with Iran and the EU Council following the E3/EU's policy line, the distinction between the lead group and the Union as a separate entity seemed to have little practical consequence. In addition, the E3/EU group was hardly a novelty. As discussed below, other instances of lead groups both preceded and followed it.

This work does not dispute the assumption that lead groups are an EU foreign policy practice—on the contrary, it shares it. Yet it contests the notion that this assumption, which is empirical in nature, can be taken at face value. After all, the action on Iran's nuclear issue could equally and apparently more properly be seen as an instance of national foreign policies—the E3 leading, the other member states following—rather than EU foreign policy. The same applies to all other cases of lead groups. The relationship between lead groups and EU foreign policy is thus problematic, as it raises a number of questions regarding the relationship between national foreign policies and EU foreign policy.

3   NATIONAL FOREIGN POLICIES AND EU FOREIGN POLICY

EU theorists have long come to terms with the fact that EU foreign policy—much as the European Union itself—is a strange 'beast' that has proved to be beyond any traditional categorisation.[1] Opinions abound, diverging in their premises as well as their conclusions, on how best to conceptualise it. Still, there is widespread scholarly consensus that EU foreign policy—which includes all EU external relations policies—cannot be understood properly without exploring its links with the foreign policies of the member states. Nor can these be fully appreciated without considering these countries' EU membership. Unsurprisingly, assessments of EU foreign policy are often a function of how its relationship with national foreign policies is interpreted.

One such interpretation is that EU foreign policy and national foreign policies are discrete realities whose relationship is hierarchically organised. The unanimity rule governing the CFSP, in particular, entails that key security policy decisions can be taken only if the interests of the member states overlap. Since this is not always the case, EU foreign policy is

reduced to lowest common denominator-based positions, often of little practical impact (Pijpers 1991; Gordon 1997–98; Zielonka 1998). Not all scholars attribute to the unanimity rule the responsibility for the unproductive relationship between EU foreign policy and national foreign policies. Reinhardt Rummel and Jörg Wiedemann argued in a 1998 article that the problem with the CFSP was its institutional set-up, which did not allow for carefully balancing the influence of the member states with their actual capabilities and commitment (Rummel and Wiedemann 1998: 64).[2] While their conclusion was quite blunt—they dismissed the CFSP as "neither *common*, nor *foreign*, nor dealing with *security*, nor […] a *policy*" (ibidem: 53)—Rummel and Wiedemann nonetheless acknowledged that EU foreign policy was potentially to the advantage of EU member states. Criticism of EU foreign policy was also framed in identity-related terms, such as Jean-Marie Guéhenno's assessment that EU foreign policy can only exist if 'backed' by an EU polity with a defined identity and resulting interests (Guéhenno 1998). In conclusion, scholars have pinpointed clashing interests and/or different identities of EU member states as the cause of a number of paradoxes that characterise, and often paralyse, EU foreign policy (Zielonka 1998).

However, not all see such factors as structurally impairing the development of a common foreign policy. Writing in 2003, Karen Smith argued that EU foreign policy had proceeded far enough to lend the Union an international identity (Smith 2003: 17; see also Aggestam 2004; Hyde-Price 2004). As evidence of this, she pointed to the institutional upgrades of CFSP structures and the consolidation of the practice of acting, as much as possible, within the EU context or with the support of EU institutions. The latter is a particularly interesting point, as it implied the possibility to consider national actions supported by EU institutions as EU foreign policy (Smith 2003: 4–5). Around the same period, Knud Erik Jørgensen spoke of a CFSP 'underlying order' spanning norms and rules, treaty provisions, practices, policy areas and aspirations, which attested to a "collective intentionality" having developed and strengthened within the European Union (Jørgensen 2004: 18).

These arguments were reminiscent of Christopher Hill's earlier contention that all member states share an '*acquis politique*' that makes the "idea of an EU without an international presence almost literally inconceivable" (Hill 1998: 37). Such an *acquis politique*, Hill had explained a few years before, is characterised by several lines of tensions, including the one between the expectations that EU member states create of EU foreign

policy and their inability to equip the Union with the capabilities actually needed to fulfil those expectations (Hill 1993). This mismatch is itself the result of the contrast between two logics, one of convergence and the other of diversity, that run through the EU *acquis politique* (Hill 1998: 35–39).

A certain degree of tension between multilateral and national dynamics is then inherent to EU foreign policy-making. This tension is reflected in the multiple patterns of action along which EU foreign policy unfolds, patterns that can be traced back both to actors (member states and EU institutions) and decision-making methods (consensus in CFSP and qualified majority voting in communitarised policy areas). EU foreign policy emerges, in Hill's words, as a complex or 'system' involving different actors and operating on multiple levels (Hill 1993, 1998). While such a system may lack an in-built mechanism to ensure intra-EU unity of purpose in all instances, it is sufficiently elastic to incorporate the foreign policies of individual member states (Hill 1998: 46–48).

Hill drew a "picture of a *continuing dialectical relationship* between centripetal and centrifugal forces in the making of foreign policy in Europe, where assuming a victory for either side would be to commit the crassest of teleological errors" (Hill 1996, emphasis added; see also Hill 1998: 48). Some years later, Brian White attempted to systematise this argument by stating that, due to the combined effect of decades of institutional integration and elites interaction in the European Union, national foreign policies could be regarded as 'subsystems' of European foreign policy alongside policies carried out by EU institutions in both communitarised and intergovernmental areas (White 2004: 51–54, 60–61).

Conceptualising EU foreign policy as a multi-vector and multidimensional system, following Hill, White and others, has the important implication of shifting the analytical focus from the narrow remit of *decision-making* to the broader field of (foreign) *policy-making*. This expanded outlook involves an understanding of the nexus between national foreign policies and EU foreign policy as one of reciprocal influence and even constitution.

In a 2000 survey of the foreign policies of EU member states, Ian Manners and Richard Whitman concluded that "the complex system of collective European policy-making necessitates an analytical approach encompassing the transformational context, process, and actions of the national foreign policy of EU member states" (Manners and Whitman 2000: 246). Not dissimilarly, White argued that "the nature of the [European foreign] policy process is affected by the identity of the actors

involved" as well as by "the context within which policy is made" (White 2004: 54). In 2008, Stephan Keukeleire and Jennifer MacNaughtan argued that the analytical shift from decision-making to policy-making allowed for establishing links between processes, actions and practices recollected under the single heading of 'EU foreign policy' (Keukeleire and MacNaughtan 2008: 99, ff.).

In sum, the context in which national foreign policy is pursued—the European Union—matters in many ways, given that EU membership, while serving specific national interests, has also altered the relationship of EU member states among themselves and vis-à-vis external players. The habit of interacting and cooperating on a regular basis has exposed national foreign policy-makers (diplomats, officials and politicians) to processes of socialisation through which certain practices have been gradually internalised (with significant variations according to the state and, within the state, to officials from different government agencies). Socialisation processes are at the origin of the 'coordination reflex' developed by EU policy-makers, which is the tendency to take account of the opinion and position of the other member states while defining their own (see, among others, Wessels 1982; Øhrgaard 2004: 30–32; White 2004: 55–56, 59). As socialisation processes create expectations of and feed a demand for EU collective action both within and outside the Union, they also affect domestic as well as extra-EU actors.

This is the backdrop against which Manners and Whitman argued that an appropriate analytical framework for EU foreign policy needed to account for identity issues, beliefs, norms, practices and expectations generated in the unique political environment brought about by EU integration (Manners and Whitman 2000: 269). Their assertion that national foreign policies are "separable, but not separate", from the EU context, is therefore analytically accurate (ibidem: 269–270).

Likewise, Keukeleire and MacNaughtan argued that the label 'EU foreign policy' applies to "national foreign policies in so far as these are developed at least to some extent through interaction with the EU mechanism" (Keukeleire and MacNaughtan 2008: 29). On this basis, they felt legitimised to list core groups of EU member states, alongside the Commission and the Council, in the catalogue of the "steering forces" of EU foreign policy, despite the fact that such groups have no legal basis in the treaties (ibidem: 112–113). The 'core groups' of which Keukeleire and MacNaughtan spoke are the very same thing referred to here as 'lead

groups', which thus seem to find their proper place within EU foreign policy and, consequently, EU foreign policy studies.

Keukeleire and MacNaughtan considered them a mechanism to operationalise EU foreign policy, notably when disparities in the degree of member states' commitment to a determined issue are so pronounced as to block EU-wide action (ibidem: 113; see also Schwegmann 2000, 2003, 2005; Janning 2005). In their eyes, core/lead groups are a consequence of intra-EU specialisation or division of labour. In a 2017 article, Keukeleire and Tom Delreux argued that intra-EU division of labour is a manifestation of informal policy-making, which is itself a constituent part of EU policy-making (Delreux and Keukeleire 2017: 3). Informal division of labour is an efficiency-generating process that bolsters the output legitimacy of the European Union both among member states—who see EU frameworks as multipliers of national action—and vis-à-vis external players—who recognise the Union as an effective player (ibidem: 15–16). Thus, not only do Keukeleire and Delreux posit that member states are an inherent part of EU foreign policy, they insist that lead groups ('ad hoc groups' in their terminology) constitute the European Union as a multi-level actor—or system, as Hill had it (ibidem: 3).

Three main points follow from this brief literature review. The first is that there is a prevailing (albeit not universal) consensus that indeed national foreign policies are not separable from EU foreign policy. The second is that such a conclusion warrants a conceptualisation of the European Union as a multi-level international agent or, if one wants to put greater emphasis on the original character of national foreign policies, a multi-actor system. Consequently—and this is the third point—informal, ad hoc or lead groups can indeed be regarded as an EU foreign policy practice. To be sure, this remains an assumption in need of theoretical elaboration, yet it is a legitimate assumption that can serve as a starting point to inquire about EU lead groups in general and the E3/EU-Iran group in particular.

4   Lead Groups and EU Foreign Policy

Interestingly, the Treaty on the European Union (TEU) contains specific provisions regulating intra-EU division of labour. Articles 42.5 and 44 of TEU even contemplate the possibility that the Council entrust the implementation of certain tasks to a group of willing and able member states, who act on behalf of the Union within the limits set by the Council's mandate.[3] Member states, however, have never used this mechanism and have

opted for informal formats instead (Delreux and Keukeleire 2017: 3–4). In the field of crisis management, these informal formats are the lead groups.

Lead groups include highly prominent cases of crisis management. Perhaps the most famous one is also the first and longest running: the Contact Group for the Balkans. Established in 1994, it comprised France, Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom, along with the United States and Russia, and was responsible for devising and supervising the implementation of a multinational response to conflicts in Bosnia and Kosovo. A more recent example is the Franco-German duo that in early 2015 took the lead in brokering peace between Ukraine's government and pro-Russia separatists within the so-called Normandy format (consisting of France, Germany, Russia and Ukraine).

Other, less known cases include the groups on the Democratic Republic of Congo (created in 2002), with Belgium, France, the United Kingdom and the Council among its key members; Somalia (formed in 2006), made up of Italy, Sweden, the United Kingdom and the Commission, alongside some African partners and the United States; and Syria (formed in 2012), comprising the four largest EU member states along with several Arab states, Turkey and again the United States. The larger Contact Groups for Afghanistan (active since 2001), involving France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, the United Kingdom, as well as the Council and the Commission, and for Libya (founded in 2011), involving, among others, ten EU member states and EU institutions, can also be seen as further instances of lead groups. Some has even pointed to the loosely coordinated action by HR Solana and Poland, Lithuania and Germany to help Ukraine sail peacefully through the electoral conundrum that triggered the Orange Revolution in December 2004 as another example (Posch 2006: 114).

The historical circumstances at the origin of lead groups are critical factors in determining their membership, goals, type of action and duration, which therefore cannot be set a priori. To work out a definition that can fit all cases, it is thus necessary to go beyond contingent factors and look at the constants. All lead groups include a 'member state element' and an 'EU element', as after all they are a dual entity involving the intergovernmental action by a select group of EU member states and the common action by EU institutions.[4] It is this nexus between the member state element and the EU element that spawns the research questions this book is concerned with.

How to explain the fact that, in certain cases, EU member states accept the leadership of a restricted group yet in other ones they do not? The recollection of the historical circumstances in which a lead group formed helps trace its genesis, but does not explain its formation and even less so its endurance. Lead groups must therefore have structural conditions of existence. Identifying such conditions is the first fundamental question a research about lead groups should ask.

Fundamental, yet insufficient. Also needed is to investigate how lead group members realise the possibilities for action opened up by those conditions. The relationship between the lead group and the European Union always takes the form of intra-EU leadership by some of its member states. Exploring this relationship between leaders and followers means to determine whether this lead group practice is a pathology diluting the identity of the European Union as an international agent or is a manifestation of its complex physiology (in simpler terms, whether it is a bad or a good thing for the Union). Once this has been established, it is possible to identify the kinds of lead groups that have greater potential to strengthen EU foreign policy and those poorly suited to the task.

In conclusion, a proper investigation of the lead group phenomenon involves putting forward theoretically consistent arguments about two interrelated orders of question. The first concerns the *conditions of possibility* of lead groups, the second its overall *implications for EU foreign policy*, a generic formulation indicating the capacity to make EU foreign policy and thereby constitute the identity of the European Union as an international agent. As these questions concerns constant or structural factors, rather than the contingent ones, comparing two or more cases of lead groups would add little to our understanding of the lead group phenomenon (although it would certainly reveal interesting empirical differences, thereby expanding the taxonomy of lead groups). All that is needed is a single instance, and the E3/EU provides the perfect case study.

5   The E3/EU Case Study

There are several reasons that explain the selection of the E3/EU as a particularly interesting case of lead group. Arguably, the most important one is the *geopolitical magnitude* of Iran's nuclear issue. Because the Iran case had so extensive implications, intra-EU disagreements concerning both the E3/EU format as well as its policy choices were not uncommon. Had the Iran case been uncontroversial, the formation of the E3/EU

could have simply reflected a lack of interest by the group's outsiders. This is an important point also on a theoretical level, as some scholars (notably Delreux and Keukeleire 2017: 9) posit that lack of interest on the part of certain member states is a precondition for lead groups. But the E3/EU, among others, showed that this is not always the case. The group formed in spite of a number of EU member states' misgivings, which makes it even more interesting to investigate the reasons for which the outsiders eventually supported the E3.

Iran's importance to a number of EU countries constantly generated a desire to maintain a separate track on which a more 'national' foreign policy could be carried out. Yet, EU member states eventually stuck to a policy line devised by the E3/EU group (and later by the enlarged group comprising the E3/EU and the United States, China and Russia). Examining how the E3/EU managed to muster consensus for their own policy on such a critical issue as Iran's nuclear dispute within the Union sheds light into the capacity of an EU lead group to make EU foreign policy at large.

Besides, the geopolitical magnitude of Iran's nuclear issue makes it easier to observe the effect of the E3/EU action on the identity of the European Union as an international agent. The Iran case tested the Union's resolve to be a proactive international player bearing special responsibilities for the security of its neighbourhood and the endurance of a rules-based international system.

Another factor that makes the E3/EU group an interesting case study is its *longevity*. Focusing on a lead group that was active for over 12 years means that ample empirical evidence is available to trace the reasons for its sustainability and investigate its effects on EU foreign policy.

A final reason making the E3/EU a particularly interesting case is the *role of the HR*. The involvement in the nuclear negotiation of Javier Solana and his successors, Catherine Ashton and Federica Mogherini, injected greater complexity into the relationship between the E3 and the other EU member states. This peculiar feature of the E3/EU (seldom, if ever, replicated by other lead groups) adds considerable substance to the 'EU element' of the E3/EU, providing evidence to assess its capacity to orientate the lead group's action along a pattern consistent with stated EU objectives and values. In addition, the fact that the Iran case spanned across two phases of the recent history of EU integration, notably before and after the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty, is also significant. As the new treaty introduced novelties concerning the CFSP apparatus, the Iran case offers a privileged viewpoint to appreciate how the transition from a less to a (slightly) more integrated stage did or did not affect the internal balance of the E3/EU.

6   Structure of the Book

This book is divided into three main parts. Part I comprises two chapters, one on theory and another on history. These two apparently unrelated pieces of analysis are in fact both necessary preliminary steps to make sense of the E3/EU group. Chapter 2 (theory) introduces and investigates the concept of 'lead group' itself. The chapter is structured as a heuristic 'quest' for a theoretical framework resting on viable statements regarding the conditions of possibility of lead groups as well as their broader implications for the European Union as an international agent. Chapter 3 (history) reconstructs the chronology of the Iranian nuclear crisis, taking as start and end points the summer of 2003, when the E3 reached out to Iran for the first time, and January 2016, when the Iran nuclear deal finally became fully operational. Thus, Part I provides the reader with the theoretical standpoint that guides the research on the E3/EU as an EU lead group as well as the historical context in which the group's action played out. It works then as a dual introduction to the study of the E3/EU.

Parts II and III carry out the empirical analysis of the E3/EU in light of the theoretical framework elaborated in Chap. 2 (as well as against the historical background provided by Chap. 3). The research questions guiding the empirical research are consequently the same that drive the theoretical inquiry. As the latter results in a theoretically hybrid set of arguments regarding the conditions of possibility and implications for EU foreign policy of lead groups, so the empirical research investigates the conditions of possibility and the implications for EU foreign policy of a specific lead group, the E3/EU.

Specifically, Part II deals with the conditions of possibility of the E3/EU. Chapter 4 considers the rationally driven intergovernmental bargain between the E3 and the other member states underlying the group. Chapter 5 integrates the analysis by focusing on the normative and discursive context in which the bargain took place.

In Part III the empirical analysis moves into the research remit opened by the second main question, the implications for EU foreign policy of the E3/EU experience. Chapters 6, 7 and 8 show how the E3/EU made EU foreign policy. They did so first by innovating on a pre-existing EU policy (Chap. 6), then by tying their leadership to the promotion of an EU-wide ownership of their initiative (Chap. 7) and finally by creating a mutually reinforcing dynamic between EU cohesion and transatlantic convergence (Chap. 8). Chapter 9 considers how the E3/EU contributed to shaping

the role identity of the European Union as an international agent as well as its type identity as a multi-actor foreign policy system. Whereas leadership is the prevailing theme of Chaps. 6, 7 and 8, identity is the dominant one in Chap. 9.

The concluding chapter (Chap. 10) shows how the theoretical and empirical research dovetail before providing some broad reflections on the experience of the E3/EU and the potential for Europeanisation of national foreign policies enshrined in the lead group phenomenon.

NOTES

1. The metaphor of the 'strange beast' was first introduced, or at least popularised, by Thomas Risse in a 1996 article in which he made the case for a sophisticated theoretical approach to the problem of EU integration, capable of overcoming the stalled debate between intergovernmentalism and neofunctionalism (Risse-Kappen 1996).
2. Rummel and Wiedemann contended that introducing majority voting in the CFSP would not solve its effectiveness problem. A majority voting rule would give member states lacking strong foreign policy assets the power to force into action the member states having those assets – hardly a recipe for cohesion. They argued that EU member states should instead agree in advance, based on their respective interests, commitment and assets, which issues the Union should address collectively (Rummel and Wiedemann 1998: 63–64).
3. Article 44.2 specifies that this procedure involves the Council taking formal decisions clearly indicating objectives, scope and conditions for the implementation of the task.
4. This standard definition implies that the (now moribund) Quartet for the Middle East, the forum made up of the United States, Russia, the UN and the European Union, responsible for brokering Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations, does not fall into the lead group category. The European Union took part in the Quartet according to treaty provisions, which contrasts with the assumption that lead groups follow an extra-treaty pattern of conduct.

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Theory and History

The Theory: Lead Groups and EU Foreign Policy-Making

EU lead groups are an informal crisis management practice involving a limited number of member states supported by EU institutions. As a certain degree of asymmetry in responsibilities among member states is consequently inherent to them, lead groups imply an understanding, a sort of compromise (including of a tacit or implicit nature), which allows for the 'activation' of EU institutions in support of the groups' action. Exploring the *conditions of possibility* of this compromise or understanding is the first question an inquiry about lead groups should engage with. Why do some EU member states—the *insiders*—seek the support and involvement of the EU institutions? And why do the group's non-members—the *outsiders*—agree to support, to whatever extent, the lead group?

The lead group practice is also interesting for the consequences it may have. The practice has no basis in the EU treaties, so one may legitimately wonder whether its effect is that of fragmenting and therefore weakening EU foreign policy, or whether it can make it more effective. The *implications for EU foreign policy* of lead groups emerge as another critical research question. Do lead groups empty EU foreign policy of significance? Or do they give EU foreign policy direction, substance and ultimately effectiveness?

To answer these questions, it is necessary to trace the theoretical foundations of the lead group practice, a task addressed and fulfilled in this

chapter. The chapter is problem-driven (Rieker 2004), which means that it unfolds as a heuristic quest for those propositions that provide the most exhaustive and compelling answers to the questions highlighted above. Sections 1 and 2 single out the elements relevant to answering the research questions and trace them back to the premises of various international relations (IR) theory strands, namely realism, liberalism (both in its institutionalist and intergovernmental variants) and constructivism. Section 3 identifies the spots of convergence between competing theoretical solutions and addresses the problem of how to keep together theoretical statements drawn from competing theories. Section 4 finally builds the theoretical framework that guides the empirical research.

1   RATIONALIST SOLUTIONS

Lead groups result from an understanding between EU member states concerning the management of an international crisis by a restricted group of EU members only. As some member states accept to follow the lead of other member states, a de facto hierarchical relationship is established. At first glance, the member states act as rational units that engage with one another to better look after their security. Driven by instrumental rationality, the agents—that is, the member states—factor in membership in the European Union as a way to pursue the most advantageous outcome for their interests.

The statement above implies a number of assumptions. EU member states are rational actors; their goal is to pursue their security; their interaction is dependent on power or at least resource asymmetries; and EU membership matter if instrumentally considered relevant to the pursuit of the agents' material interests (the term 'material' is used here in an over-specified way, meaning anything that is not strictly ideational).

These assumptions all share what in the IR academic debate is generally referred to as a rationalist standpoint—not a theory per se, but a meta-theoretical foundation of different IR and EU integration theories. Rationalists reduce the complex realities of IR to elementary units. Their theories however differ from one another, as they assign a different role to the actors they consider (states, institutions, domestic actors) and, more importantly, because they are not agreed as regards the process of preference generation or, which is the same, their theory of interest. Rationalists use the same tools to different purposes. Hence, their theories diverge significantly, even radically, in their conclusions. Provided in what follows

is an analysis of the solutions to the problem at hand drawn from different rationalist theories, realism and liberalism, the latter in both its institutionalist and intergovernmentalist variants.

Realist Solutions

Realists contend that states are rational choice-driven units that pursue selfish goals in a structurally competitive international system (Waltz 1979). Differences in power—that is, an uneven distribution of resources—shape interstate relations. The power differential triggers a dual dynamic of aggregation and competition, as states invariably choose between siding with the most powerful (bandwagoning) or balancing off against potential enemies (counterbalancing). International institutions and alliances are both a manifestation of this dual dynamic and an arena in which this dynamic plays out (Walt 1987; Mearsheimer 2010). As such they are weak actors—in fact, they are no actors at all. Even an organisation as integrated as the European Union is just an outcome of national foreign policies.

The realist standpoint has it then that EU member states keep pursuing their national foreign policies beneath the surface of a fictional EU foreign policy. The illusion of EU foreign policy results from the fact that, on certain matters, member states calculate that using CFSP mechanisms better serves their security interests than doing otherwise. In no way, however, does this choice imply a surrender of their capacity to act on the international stage as it most pleases them (Pijpers 1991).

Against this backdrop, a realist would see the conditions of possibility of lead groups as a natural consequence of the imbalance of power between the group's insiders and outsiders. The former demand support from the latter (namely their consent to 'activate' EU structures) to augment the impact of their action. The outsiders consent because they will be rewarded with the gains promised by the insiders: the settlement of a crisis affecting their security. From a realist point of view, the problem of what impact EU lead groups have on EU foreign policy is a non-issue, since realists are unwilling to think of the European Union as a foreign and security policy actor (Pijpers 1991). The recurrence of the lead group phenomenon only confirms the inanity of the notion of EU foreign policy itself.

Should these answers be considered exhaustive?

In realist terms, an EU lead group reflects a specific hierarchy of power between strong and weak member states (here the term 'hierarchy'

indicates acceptance of a power disparity deriving from what Kenneth Waltz would call an asymmetric 'distribution of capabilities', not a formalised structure with legal authority; Waltz 1979). If this is indeed the case, the membership of lead groups cannot contradict the intra-EU hierarchy. It is the powerful countries that decide over additions to, or exclusions from, lead groups. That includes the option of self-exclusion, as the 'hierarchical' powers might after all calculate that the stakes they have in the crisis are of negligible nature. Variation in the membership of lead groups presents therefore no invalidation of a realist explanation of the phenomenon. But for a realist interpretation of EU lead groups to be assumed, it is still necessary to demonstrate, first, that indeed the relationship between the lead group's members and non-members is based on a structural hierarchy within the European Union and, second, that EU institutions truly matter only inasmuch as they serve the purpose of the Union's powerful countries.

That lead groups form to safeguard, directly and indirectly, the security of their members is a fully plausible assertion, particularly since their sphere of activity is crisis management, evidently an instance of high politics where security-related considerations occupy the centre stage. This argument is not flawless, however, as the rejection of any factors other than security as a driver for action is more postulated than demonstrated. But the real 'rub' lies less in realism's fixation on security than in its infatuation with power, which leads it to frame intra-EU power asymmetries in fixed hierarchical terms. Even sophisticated forms of realism, such as Adrian Hyde-Price's reinterpretation of classical realism, which is a deliberate attempt to avoid the traps of neo-realist 'theoretical parsimony' by emphasising the role of history, culture and ideas, remain ensnared by the 'power of power' as the ultimate factor shaping IR (Hyde-Price 2000: 19–20).

According to David A. Lake (2006: 28, ff.), sovereign states (as EU member states are in the field of foreign policy) can recognise other sovereign states as 'rulers' only insofar as the 'ruler' is able to ensure an enduring 'political order', that is, a system of relations in which the 'ruled' feel safe. According to this interpretation (which is compatible with realist premises), lead groups would develop as a naturally occurring understanding between the group's members and non-members, the former offering security ('political order' in Lake's terms) and the latter obedience.

As argued by Anand Menon (2009), the E3/EU case showed that lead groups can in fact satisfy neither of Lake's conditions for a hierarchical relationship. To begin with, the lead group was unable to ensure order and stability: not so much because it failed to solve the nuclear dispute with Iran,

as because it admitted that its chances of success depended on another actor, the United States. The task that properly characterises the 'ruler', ensuring order, was then assigned to a third country. Furthermore, Menon underlined that the E3/EU team's action was constrained by EU internal rules and by the desire of other members to be included in the initiative in some way. He stressed the fact that both incentives (an EU-Iran comprehensive agreement) and threats (sanctions) expounded by the E3/EU team ultimately involved unanimous approval by the EU Council (ibidem: 20). Menon's assessment of the E3/EU group shows that the arrangement underlying the formation of an EU lead group seems to have little in common with a power-based hierarchy, given the relative weakness of even the largest member states and the constraints imposed on them by EU decision-making mechanisms.

The realist solutions to the question of an EU lead group's conditions of possibility seem only partially accurate, and certainly not exhaustive. Menon's argument was not meant to support a liberal institutionalist understanding of the E3/EU process. Nevertheless, the related liberal institutionalist implication that the European Union, due to its organisational structure, is 'resistant' to the practice of lead groups, needs to be tested.

Liberal Institutionalist Solutions

For liberals, the degree of contemporary interstate and transnational interdependence, primarily in the economic domain but also in other areas such as security, has greatly enhanced the appeal of cooperative win-win solutions at the expense of power-based competition (Keohane 1984). The upshot of such absolute gains-oriented logic is international institutions, which are generally (yet not always) given formal existence through a statute, a governance structure and dedicated personnel.

This positive appreciation of institutions derives from the liberal conceptualisation of multilateral cooperation as ensuing from the rational design of states, understood primarily as absolute gains maximisers. Abiding by norms, respecting accepted rules and cooperating within formalised institutional settings are all advantageous practices for states—particularly if interdependent as EU member states are in so many respects. Institutions ensure predictability of behaviour, greater information sharing, inclusive management of problems and access to a larger array of assets. The advantages resulting from a norm-abiding attitude outweigh short-term gains deriving from free-riding, non-compliance or defection.

For a liberal institutionalist, the logic of absolute gains perfectly explains the compromise underlying an EU lead group. The insiders seek the support of the outsiders because the former are aware of the limits of their national capabilities. In order to maximise their gains, the insiders offer the other member states limited participation in the crisis management effort 'via' EU institutions. This is very different from the realist assumption that the group's insiders are strong enough to demand (and obtain) loyalty from the weaker outsiders. The outsiders do not consent to the lead group's leadership because of the 'political order' they hope to be rewarded with in return, but rather because, through the involvement of EU institutions, they aim to get some influence on an issue on which they would otherwise have hardly a say.

While this argument seems to be a more satisfying explanation than the realist insistence on the 'political order' guaranteed by a presumed 'ruler', it nonetheless leaves some issues unaddressed. Liberal institutionalism does not provide any specific explanation of why EU lead groups display strong continuity in terms of participation (insiders often include the larger member states), nor does it explain membership variations.

The matter is even more complicated with respect to the question of EU lead groups' implications for EU foreign policy. On the one hand, a liberal institutionalist would be critical of lead groups because they contrast with the principle that the European Union ought to serve the interests of its member states without discrimination. This version of liberal institutionalism—where the emphasis is put more on the 'institutionalist' component of the phrase—is uncomfortable with any derogation from institutionalised mechanisms of EU cooperation.

On the other hand, EU lead groups can be seen as an informal institution created to fill an inbuilt capability gap in the CFSP institutional design. The CFSP suffers at the same time from a high degree of centralisation of tasks (the scope of foreign policy issues on which CFSP institutions such as the Council, the High Representative and their auxiliary bodies focus is limitless) and a low degree of centralisation of powers (any member state can veto CFSP decisions). This imbalance poses a serious problem of enforcement of rules and therefore of the effectiveness of the institutions. As Barbara Koremenos, Charles Lipson and Duncan Snidal argue, the "severity of the enforcement problem" is generally inversely proportional to the number of participants in a cooperative action (Koremenos et al. 2001: 783). EU lead groups would then offer the advantage of reducing the implementation problem of policies set or shared by the European

Union—and consequently the effectiveness of EU foreign policy—by reducing the number of those responsible for implementing those policies.

This conclusion finds some support in the literature. In an article on leadership and the role of states within the European Union, Josef Janning argues that lead groups are the result of a tacit bargain between the most and the least resourceful EU member states of a more modest magnitude than the one implied by the concept of hierarchy used by Menon (Janning 2005). According to Janning, the kind of intra-EU bargain underlying lead groups consists of the recognition by the outsiders that they can take part in the management of major crises (like the one over Iran's nuclear programme) only through the mediating action of the lead group and under an EU umbrella. Lead groups would thus work as 'enablers' of EU foreign policy.

The above statement, however, glosses over a serious theoretical problem. Drawing on liberal institutionalist premises, two contrasting solutions to the question on the implications of lead groups for EU foreign policy are equally defensible. In the first case, the interest of the European Union is assumed to correspond to the interest of all its member states in cooperating on an equal footing or, more precisely, according to the letter of EU treaties. Here, the national interest is perfectly aligned with the EU interest: promoting the latter means promoting the former. In the second solution, the interest of the Union becomes a function of the interests of its member states. From this perspective, opting for an alternative practice to what EU treaties prescribe does not necessarily reduce the advantages that member states get from their membership in the Union. In fact, the member states aim to increase such advantages by 'enabling' EU policies that, due to inbuilt deficiencies in the CFSP institutional design, risk otherwise remaining dead letter.

Both diverging interpretations apply the logic of absolute gains so dear to liberals. Yet they differ radically in their conclusions, bringing about a situation that, in philosophical terms, is referred to as an *aporia*, wherein diverging conclusions descend from the same premise. By setting up lead groups, do EU member states harm their own interest in a strong EU by creating disincentives to seek consensus within the CFSP? Or do they pursue their interest in strengthening the European Union by 'enabling' policies set at EU level, albeit through an informal regime outside of the Union's institutionalised boundaries?

A liberal institutionalist could be tempted to make a distinction between 'bad' and 'good' lead groups based on the degree of involvement of EU

institutions. To fall into the category of 'good' lead groups, a group would need to have a strong 'EU element'. However, *all* lead groups—irrespective of how much room EU institutions have in them—are extra-treaty patterns of action, whereby a liberal institutionalist would always run into a problem of theoretical coherence. As long as both theoretical components of liberal institutionalism—the liberal theory of absolute gains and the institutionalist view of international cooperation—are kept together, it seems difficult to escape the aporetic outcome recalled above. Either solution relies on a shaky theoretical ground. Evidence of lead groups working as *enablers* of EU foreign policy can be equally used to make the case that such groups *in fact weaken* the very Union they pretend to support—and this without leaving the shores of liberal institutionalism.

Still, the argument that lead groups are informal institutions that do not necessarily harm the member states' interest in a strong EU is too promising to be discarded. It deserves further scrutiny, but from a different point of view. As said above, that argument presupposes that the interest in a strong Union of the member states does not necessarily translate into an interest in cooperating on an equal footing, as institutionalism (or at least a 'hard' version of it) would have it. The next move implies then a shift from an institutionalist perspective to an intergovernmentalist one.

Liberal Intergovernmentalist Solutions

Notwithstanding their differences, realism and liberal institutionalism share a common feature. Both lack a sophisticated theory of interests, which they see as connatural to agents acting in an anarchical system. As interests are given or fixed, what matters is how they are pursued, not how they are construed. For both realists and liberal institutionalists, EU membership does not alter the interests of states, just their list of strategic options. However, not all rationalist approaches are impervious to consider interest formation as an endogenous process. One example is the aforementioned reinterpretation of classical realism by the likes of Hyde-Price (see section 'Realist Solutions'). But Andrew Moravcsik's version of liberalism, for reasons explained below, is a more interesting case.

Moravcsik does not assume that state interests are uniform and has no problem in accepting that identities and norms play a role in constituting such interests. "Liberal IR theory", he wrote in a 1997 article, "elaborates the insight that state-society relations – the relationship of states to the domestic and transnational social context in which they are embedded – have

a fundamental impact on state behaviour in world politics. Societal ideas, interests, and institutions influence state behaviour *by shaping state preferences*, that is, the fundamental social purposes underlying the strategic calculations of governments" (Moravcsik 1997: 513, emphasis added; see also Moravcsik and Schimmelfennig 2009).[1]

Like all rationalist theories, liberal intergovernmentalism assumes that state action is driven by rational choice (although, contrary to realism and institutionalism, liberal intergovernmentalism considers states as 'second-tier' actors, meaning that they in fact represent the interests of influential domestic constituencies). Similarly to liberal institutionalism, liberal intergovernmentalism acknowledges that state interaction is not solely based on power and coercion, but rather bargaining and negotiation. It also acknowledges that the institutions resulting from that bargaining exercise contribute to orientating state choices. Hence, liberal intergovernmentalism assumes a wider array of potential triggers for intra-EU cooperation than realism or liberal institutionalism: "the fundamental goals of states – or 'state preferences' – are neither fixed nor uniform: they vary among states and within the same state across time and issues according to issue-specific societal interdependence and domestic institutions" (Moravcsik and Schimmelfennig 2009: 69).

This theory of interest allows for an important shift in perspective. Liberal intergovernmentalism can see a combination of different elements lying at the heart of the decision of a lead group's insiders to seek EU support and of the outsiders to consent. These elements may include security concerns, instrumental considerations concerning the European Union's greater ability to deliver on promises and threats, the ambition to play a major role in high politics issues, as well as (relative) conformity to the norm committing to EU foreign policy cooperation. This conception of state interests not only offers the advantage of disentangling the analysis of state choices concerning EU lead groups from purely material, and particularly security-based, factors. More importantly, it also posits that interests are inextricable from a state's history, societal composition, social equilibria, constitutional structure, international commitments and self-perceived role in the world (Moravcsik 1997: 525–528, 530–533).

For the purpose of this book, the fundamental assumption of liberal intergovernmentalism that domestic actors are shapers of state interests is relevant because it assumes state interests to be the result of a social, economic and political process rather than unchangeable structural factors. Of course, the analysis of an empirical case of lead group may and actually

should reconstruct the society-state interactions underlying a particular state's interest in a particular situation. On a theoretical level, however, that states are 'second-tier agents' is not really pertinent. Its theory of interests aside, the aspects of liberal intergovernmentalism that can be fruitfully applied to lead groups kick in *after* a member state has defined its own interests, and precisely when it starts interacting with other member states according to those interests.

Moravcsik makes two fundamental statements in this regard. He first contends that a foreign policy action ultimately depends on the stakes that the state has, or perceives to have, in a determined issue. Then he adds that a state's foreign policy is equally determined by the interaction of its own preferences with the preferences of other states: "States require a 'purpose,' a perceived underlying stake in the matter at hand, in order to provoke conflict, propose cooperation, or take any other significant foreign policy action. The precise nature of these stakes drives policy […]; each state seeks to realize *its* distinctive preferences under varying constraints imposed by the preferences of *other states*" (Moravcsik 1997: 520, emphasis in the original).

Such an interaction, which Moravcsik labels *policy interdependence*, may follow a pattern of conflict, convergence or a mixed one. In all cases, an element of bargaining is critical in order to prevail in the conflict, smooth cooperation or find constructive solutions to less-than-existential disagreements, respectively. Interdependence is not symmetrical. Even in such a densely regulated regime as the European Union, size, wealth, resources and strategic culture mark profound differences among member states. Such differences are obviously important but not always relevant, since the stakes that member states may have in a specific issue are not homogeneous. Such an *asymmetric interdependence* provides the backdrop against which states engage in *bargaining*.

The concepts of asymmetric interdependence and bargaining make it possible to account for how lead groups form and why their membership varies only slightly. These two fundamentally 'liberal' factors make liberal intergovernmentalism a sharper prism through which lead groups can be theorised about than Hyde-Price's social constructivist-infused reinterpretation of classical realism (see section 'Realist Solutions'). While Hyde-Price (2000: 12–14) does recognise that state interests are imbued with cultural and historical legacy, and ideational factors may be as important foreign policy drivers as material ones, he continues to assume power as

the shaper of state interactions. This assumption is not much wrong as it is somewhat too narrow, as it fails to account for how power plays out in state interaction, particularly in such a sui generis environment as the European Union. The liberal intergovernmentalist notions of asymmetric interdependence and bargaining fill the gap.

Consider the following. A liberal intergovernmentalist would expect that some EU member states have a greater interest in the management of a certain crisis than other member states. Going through treaty-set CFSP procedures, however, would hand the least interested member states disproportionate bargaining power, because the cost of inaction resulting from a lack of consensus would be irrelevant or low for the least interested countries, while high for the most interested ones. In spite of their superior resources and power, even the European Union's largest member states may be on the losing end of the asymmetric interdependence link.

In the face of a crisis affecting EU member states, both the member states with the greatest stake in that crisis and the other ones have an incentive to find a way to coordinate policy. The former are reluctant to do so in the EU framework, as they are unwilling to give the latter excessive influence over a matter they deeply care about. Hence, they initially opt to act outside of EU structures, only to ask for EU support at a later stage. In so doing, the countries with the greatest stake in the crisis reduce the bargaining power of the other ones. When they ask for help, the crisis management undertaking has already been in place for a while, and modifying the lead group format might jeopardise its success. As the group's members can count on the lingering interest of the other member states to participate in the initiative, they are able to reverse their initial disadvantage.

In keeping with the liberal intergovernmentalist view of EU member states interaction, the incentive to coordinate policy eventually produces a compromise between the group's insiders and outsiders. The latter consent to the use of EU assets in return for the marginal gain of participating—through EU institutions—in the crisis management effort. The former obtain support and assistance at the relatively low price of involving EU institutions in an initiative they continue to control. Such an informal arrangement is often of a tacit or implicit nature due to the unwillingness of the outsiders to make explicit their support for an extra-treaty practice from which they are excluded, as well as to the reluctance of the insiders to hurt their sensitivity.

Hence, from a liberal intergovernmentalist perspective, formation and membership of lead groups do not ultimately depend on power, although

power plays a role. They rather result from the specific preferences of EU member states (asymmetric interdependence) and their ability to turn them into a group-based action (bargaining). As Moravcsik states, "the willingness of states to expend resources or make concessions is itself primarily a function of preferences, not capabilities." It follows that "*bargaining outcomes reflect the nature and relative intensity of actor preferences*" (ibidem: 523, emphasis added).

Liberal intergovernmentalism provides then a compelling argument about the conditions of possibility of lead groups. Unfortunately, it is less forthcoming concerning the implications of lead groups for EU foreign policy. This difficulty stems in part from the fact that liberal intergovernmentalism was conceived as a theory explaining the causes and outcomes of the various stages of European integration, but not the causes underlying the Union's everyday functioning (Ginsberg 2001: 34). For a liberal intergovernmentalist, the manner in which EU foreign policy develops follows from the institutional choice made by all EU member states at the last 'epoch-making' moment, that is, the latest intergovernmental conference that amended the EU treaties. As lead groups are extra-treaty practices, liberal intergovernmentalism struggles to understand how choices and compromises outside intergovernmental conferences affect EU interests and identity. In this respect, it is akin to institutionalism ('hard' version), which also rejects the notion of lead groups as belonging to EU foreign policy.

There is nonetheless a key difference between the 'hard' institutionalist and intergovernmentalist branches of IR liberalism. While the former maintains that lead groups undermine the rationale of EU foreign policy, the latter draws no such a conclusion. For a liberal intergovernmentalist, an 'EU lead group' is just a cumbersome expression to indicate *two* distinct realities unfolding in parallel: on the one hand, the action by sovereign states operating in an informal coalition; on the other, the corresponding action by the European Union, which takes place through institutionalised mechanisms of cooperation. Since the group's members are also EU member states, the two actions exert reciprocal influence on one another and might become empirically difficult to distinguish. But conceptually they remain separate things.

From a liberal intergovernmentalist point of view, lead groups are shapers of *national* foreign policies rather than shapers of *EU* foreign policy. Institutions (including informal and ad hoc ones, such as the lead groups) are *outcomes* rather than actors, whereby the analysis of the impact

of an informal institution (the lead group) on a formal institution (the CFSP) turns into an odd undertaking. Lead groups and the CFSP are reciprocally supplementing patterns of action through which *sovereign states* try to pursue their specific foreign policy interests. The apparent effect that the European Union develops, thanks to the lead group, a sharper foreign policy profile is just that: *apparent*. The actual effect is that all member states see their foreign policy interests somewhat met by a process of reciprocal approximation. Hence, the most a liberal intergovernmentalist can say about the implications of lead groups for EU foreign policy is that they facilitate intra-EU cohesion on certain issues. The fundamentally ad hoc, contingent nature of this convergence process makes it impossible to speak of a durable effect on 'EU foreign policy', which for a liberal intergovernmentalist remains a conceptually elusive notion.

The result is that the empirical fact that lead groups get the support of the European Union, whereby they partially transfer the ownership of their action to the Union, remains somewhat unexplained. Equally obscure remains the question of why lead groups are considered by a number of EU integration and foreign policy analysts an integral part of EU foreign policy. To get around this difficulty, one must draw from a notion of EU foreign policy—such as the one proposed by Hill (see Sect. 3 in Chap. 1)—which is broader than what the treaty content prescribes. But liberal intergovernmentalism, consistently with its conceptual premises, is incapable of doing it.

Liberal IR theory sees the relationship between EU member states and the European Union as a one-way street, whereby the analysis of the preferences and relative bargaining power of the former are all that serves to understand the latter. While liberal intergovernmentalism assumes that state interests are generated through domestic processes, it still considers such domestically produced preferences as exogenous to the international social context in which states operate. State interests may be endogenous to the agent, but they are exogenous to the social (international) structure because they are produced autonomously from it. Liberals such as Moravcsik remain anchored to an individualistic ontological perspective. The social structure is for liberal intergovernmentalists just the outcome of the utilitarian interaction of agents acting upon domestically produced preferences. As such, it is incapable of generating any feedback on the agents' interests and identities.

A theoretical approach that also considers the 'counter-action' exercised by the social context on agents, by the European Union on its member

states, can offer a more exhaustive explanation of the EU lead group phe-nomenon, or at least integrate the liberal intergovernmentalist arguments. All elements considered thus far—states' rational (i.e. instrumental) choices, interests, identity, institutions—should be reconsidered in light of the mutually constitutive nature of agents (the EU member states) and struc-ture (the normative context in which EU member states interact). This means leaving the harbour of rationalism to navigate the seas of social constructivism.

2   SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVIST SOLUTIONS

In constructivist terms, the foreign policy choices of EU member states, even when made according to an interest-driven rational pattern, in fact reflect their identity. The latter informs, and is at the same time informed by, the social (international, European) normative structure in which member states act (Wendt 1992, 1999; Christiansen et al. 2001). Interaction between EU member states is therefore assumed to follow a 'logic of appropriateness' (March and Olsen 2006), that is, a logic of con-formity to the values and norms that contribute to constituting their iden-tities, including those set at EU level (Manners and Whitman 2000: 250–252). The apparently purely instrumental considerations about state interests are inseparable from identity issues, which therefore can serve as explanations of an agent's choices.

'Identity' refers to the set of values, norms, rules and conducts that define an agent's self-representation in international affairs. This concept of identity draws from what Alexander Wendt calls 'type' and 'role iden-tity', in that it implies a process of self-definition that indicates how an agent is constituted and what it should do based on how it is constituted. For EU member states both processes imply an additional identity layer, namely a 'collective' identity or 'EU identity' (Wendt 1999: 224–233). It is because of this collective identity that the European Union gains its own *actorness*, which is in turn "a social construct between the agents involved, based on shared understandings of the EU as an actor" (Dryburgh 2008: 257). Actorness and identity are intrinsically linked because the former is the medium in which the latter exists and evolves.

The relationship between the national and EU identity layers of EU member states is dynamic, meaning that it may change in line with domes-tic or systemic transformations. Certain member states have developed a

mutually reinforcing relationship between their national and EU identity layers. Others have experienced more of a conflictual relationship. Yet even when conflict is brought to the point of rupture—as has been the case with the United Kingdom's decision to exit the European Union— the EU identity layer continues to operate, at least until it is fully ejected from the process of self-definition of that country's identity.[2]

The relationship between national and EU identity layers underlies the 'continuing dialectical relationship' between national foreign policies and EU foreign policy that was mentioned in Chap. 1. When not conflictual, this relationship takes the form of Europeanisation of national policies, a composite empirical concept that describes different processes: adaptation of national foreign policies to EU foreign policy, projection of national foreign policies onto EU foreign policy, as well as growing pursuit of foreign policy at the EU level (Keukeleire and MacNaughtan 2008: 142, ff.).[3] Europeanisation also entails socialisation of EU elites into certain norms and practices (ibidem: 146–147). Socialisation has its limits, since it struggles to add a European identity layer when such layer conflicts with pre-existing national identity components (Marcussen et al. 2001: 114–118; Aggestam 2004: 92–96). Nevertheless, it undeniably goes hand in hand with Europeanisation processes, as it is a manner in which norms and practices are internalised by policy-makers and EU-wide interests and identity develop.

From a social constructivist perspective, Europeanisation is a manifestation of the relationship between agents and structure.[4] In the process, the role conception of individual member states (their self-conscious identity) undergoes a shift towards the European Union, and so do their preferences, whose formation is so deeply dependent on their identity. Consider how Thomas Risse's following statement on EU integration can be applied to EU foreign policy, as long as the latter is considered part of the integration process: "European integration studies increasingly analyse the EU as a two-way process of policy-making and institution-building at the European level which then feed back into the member states and their political processes and structures. It is here that the difference between the methodological individualism emphasised by rational choice [...] and the constructivist focus on the mutual constitutiveness of agency and structure matters a lot" (Risse 2009: 147).

Social constructivism provides a consistent matrix to conceive of the nexus between national foreign policies and EU foreign policy as a two-way street process of intersubjective identity-shaping. As Risse points out,

"the EU as an emerging polity is expected not just to constrain the range of choices available to, say, nation states, but the way in which they define their interests and even their identities. […] EU membership implies the voluntary acceptance of a particular political order as legitimate and entails the recognition of a set of rules and obligations as binding" (ibidem: 148). Where the 'binding' element has a rather loose nature as in the case in the consensus-based field of foreign policy, analysing the link between collective identity and collective interests is a tricky endeavour. However, it is not impossible.

A collective identity involves that the process of self-definition of the collective agent is intersubjective and shared, whereby it tends to be—and in fact should be—*explicit*. The collective identity is conveyed by what the collective agent says about itself, its internal constitution, its values, interests and international responsibilities—in other words, by its *discourse*. Discourse conveys ideas (Schmidt 2008: 3), which in turn constitute interests (Wendt 1999: 113, ff.). Given that socially constructed interests are what agents act upon, discourse directly affects their choices, so that discourse is "at the juncture between identity, ideas and policy" (Hanau Santini 2010: 468). 'Discourse' should then be understood in the first place as a 'container of identity', the communicative action through which EU member states make explicit their shared understanding of what the European Union's identity and the related international role are.

As a container of identity, discourse is a term of reference to which EU countries can point to argue that a certain course of action is expected of the European Union. As Ulrich Sedelmeier (2003: 13) argues, the European Union's collective identity conveyed by discourse "is to a certain extent taken for granted by the actors involved", for instance the member states, and therefore "increases the bargaining power of actors that can present a certain course of action" as being consistent with it (ibidem). The collective identity of EU member states may be too thin to be considered a direct cause of collective action. It is nonetheless sufficiently thick to enable "conditions and an argumentative logic that are conducive to such [collective] courses of action". Even if commitment to certain norms—for instance, the upholding of the non-proliferation norm—varies greatly according to member states, "it does make a difference if these norms become explicitly articulated, embedded and specified at the EU level" (ibidem: 15). As argued by Henrik Larsen, "discursive representations are assumed to constitute an enabling framework *for certain policies and to exclude other policies. The focus in the play of discursive practices is the discursive struggle which is*

played out between competing discourses" (Larsen 2004: 68; emphasis added). Discursive practices, in other words, concern the process through which one interpretation of a certain situation and what the European Union is expected to do about it is preferred to another.

A rationalist sees in discursive practices just the rhetorical action of rational choice-driven strategists. Accordingly, the losing side acquiesces to the winning side not because it has indeed internalised identity norms, but because it fears the reputational and social costs of defying the prevailing interpretation of what the collective identity involves in terms of policy choices (Sedelmeier 2003: 15). Alternatively, a rationalist could argue that the proponents of the winning proposition create a diagnostic frame of the issue at hand with which the target audience finds impossible not to relate, as it 'resonates' with its own ideas. This resonance makes it possible for the proponents of a course of action to create a second, prognostic frame with which the audience cannot but sympathise (Snow and Benford 1988: 200–4).

However, as Harald Müller has persuasively argued, the notion that interaction based on arguing can take place between purely strategic actors is contradictory (Müller 2004: 410). A communicative logic invariably plays out between actors relating to one another on the basis of the 'better argument'; and communicative logic, Müller goes on, is ultimately an instance of the logic of appropriateness (ibidem: 410, ff.). Similarly, the process of framing might appear to be driven by rational choice (it is part of a political strategy), yet it only works because it frames a cognitive space and a related course of action that the target audience deems appropriate to its own type and role identities. The mobilisation strategy based on frame resonance is the rationalist account of what constructivists see as discursive struggles playing out at a deeper level.

In light of the above, the notion that discourse is just a 'container of identity' turns out to be too narrow. Those engaged in discursive struggles or exchanges are not just arguing about policy contents, they are arguing about what constitutes the policy course most consistent with the identity of the agent. Hence, discourse performs an identity-construction function. In Thomas Diez's words, discourse is 'the power [that] makes us understand certain problems in certain ways, and pose questions accordingly' (Diez 2001: 90). Whereas rationalists see discourse as a means in the hands of agents, constructivists see it as an intersubjective social structure in which agents are embedded.

The different interpretations of what EU discourse means—and consequently what the European Union's identity would dictate in terms of

policies—are more than a rhetorical contest. Diez ascribes to discourse not only a policy-enabling function, but also a policy-delimiting function, whereby discourse produces meaning for a policy also by drawing the boundaries within which the policy can be carried out (Diez 2014: 32–33). Diez observes that discursive struggles are often fought over the exact location of these limits and that such limits remain inherently prone to being moved again back and forth (ibidem: 38–39). Despite the appearances, discursive struggles are not strategic because discourse is not so much an instrument as a social structure. The EU member states that engage in discursive exchanges are not just promoting their selfish goals, they are giving meaning to EU foreign policy and consequently construing their own international identity.

Against this backdrop, the social constructivist argument about the conditions of possibility of lead groups unfolds as follows. The insiders of a lead group frame the management of a certain crisis consistently with EU foreign policy discourse, whereby they create an expectation of the other member states to support them. The outsiders have an interest in the group's existence and success because of their self-recognition as EU member states with a related role identity. The lead group's action is discursively represented in ways that makes it hardly distinguishable from an EU action. The distinction between the actors actually driving the action and those with only a supporting role is blurred. Discourse is not only a container of identity, it is also about interpreting that identity as encompassing different practices, including the 'lead group' one.

What about the second question, the implications for EU foreign policy of the lead group practice? For social constructivists, insofar as the group's insiders and outsiders follow a logic of appropriateness to their EU identity, lead groups are an EU foreign policy pattern. Such a pattern is not necessarily conducive towards greater decision-making integration. However, because the lead group is structurally unable to act in contrast with EU-set norms and perceived interests (otherwise, it would lose support from the group's outsiders), it should be expected to work not only as an *enabler* of EU foreign policy, but also and more importantly, as a *shaper* of it. If, according to liberal intergovernmentalist premises, the 'implications' for EU foreign policy of lead groups were that they could be seen as promoters of greater EU cohesion, social constructivists see lead groups go farther. They do not simply facilitate intra-EU cohesion; they give direction and substance—and ultimately effectiveness—to EU foreign policy.

The identity of the European Union as an international agent thus 'manifests itself' in the policy-shaping function performed by lead groups. As Sedelmeier notes with regard to EU enlargement policy, it is not only the identity that shapes the policy, but the policy that constitutes the identity (Sedelmeier 2003: 5–6). Thus, in social constructivist terms, the question about the implications for EU foreign policy of lead groups becomes a question about the lead groups' capacity to substantiate and shape the European Union's international identity.

The social constructivist overall argument about lead groups can be summed up as follows. A group of EU member states take action over a crisis they have an interest in. Such an interest is of a composite nature, involving material as well as ideational factors that reflect the identity or self-conscious international role of the agents. The agents' identity results in turn from the social context in which they are embedded, of which EU membership is a critical component. EU membership involves a commitment to certain norms and practices of cooperation, as well as interests, articulated in the EU foreign policy discourse. Through discourse, these norms, practices and interests are shared also by the member states that have not taken part in the group's action. Commonality of norms and interests provides the basis on which the group's insiders can obtain support from the outsiders. EU institutions take part in the crisis management. The European Union thereby acquires a degree of ownership of the action. The Union's role as an international agent takes on a more articulated role—as crisis manager, regional security player, norm-enforcer and so on. This role then informs the self-conception of all EU member states as crisis managers etc. The outcome is that lead groups lend EU foreign policy direction and contents, which in turn contribute to defining the identity of the European Union and its member states as international agents.

If, as it seems, social constructivism provides viable solutions to both research questions, what should be made of the liberal intergovernmentalist solutions seen above? After all, Moravcsik's concepts of state preferences, asymmetric interdependence and intergovernmental bargaining seem as pertinent as social constructivism's insistence on social appropriateness and discursive practices to solve at least the problem of the conditions of possibility of an EU lead group. Dismissing the liberal intergovernmentalist solution as inadequate is therefore unwise. The lesson is not that liberal intergovernmentalist arguments are groundless, but rather that they are incomplete. It remains to be seen how they can be considered complementary to, rather than competing with, the social constructivist ones.

3   Bridging the Rationalist-Constructivist Divide

Rationalism and social constructivism can be considered complementary in two ways (Hurd 2008: 311, ff.). One way is to assume that they investigate separate planes or levels of social reality, whereby they are posited as compatible but irreducible approaches. Another is to acknowledge that they investigate the same reality, but offer complementary explanations of it. In this case, they supplement each other. The aim of this section is to see whether the rationalist and constructivist arguments about lead groups can fit together. In this regard, the focus is more on testing their potential for complementariness on an empirical level rather than on an ontological one, which could be left unaddressed as a problem falling outside the remit of this work. However, that rationalism and constructivism advance contrasting ontological claims cannot be entirely ignored (Müller 2004: 396).

Rationalists are associated with an individualist ontology, according to which the nature of the system—for instance a balance of power, or a Deutschan security community—is entirely shaped by the properties of the actors and their interaction. The rationalist understanding of social reality can be figured as a micro-to-macro process, in which the outcome (the macro level) is entirely dependent on the actors (the micro level), which are thus regarded as exogenous to the system (Wendt refers to this as 'micro-foundationalism'; Wendt 1999: 147–150). By contrast, the constructivist holist ontology is better captured by a two-way street metaphor (as suggested by Risse: see above). Here, actors are assumed to be endogenous to the system because they are almost entirely explained through the system's specific social nature (Fearon and Wendt 2002: 62 and 65–66).

In their seminal work on the rationalism-constructivism divide, Wendt and James Fearon put forward the idea that the rationalist-constructivist contrast can be solved 'pragmatically' (ibidem: 52). Their recommendation was that rationalist and constructivist perspectives should be seen as methodological assumptions through which international politics can be variously explored. Hence, rationalist and constructivist approaches to the same problems do not necessarily produce contradicting views, but can instead be complementary in shedding light on the object of the research from different angles and contribute to its explanation/understanding in a cumulative, rather than zero-sum, way.

For the purpose of this work, it is not necessary to delve deep into the merit of the Fearon-Wendt 'pragmatic' solution. It is nonetheless worth underlining that not all constructivists would feel comfortable with the

definition of constructivism the authors work with, which seems to be a rather narrow one. This is not to say that these theorists deny the problem inherent to the difference in ontological perspectives of rationalism and constructivism. Rather, they doubt that this difference can be 'suspended', 'bracketed' or only treated as an 'analytical assumption', as Fearon and Wendt would have it, for constructivism to engage with rationalism.

Kenneth Glarbo, for instance, maintains that socially constructed mechanisms of foreign policy cooperation "might work as a *supplement* to instrumental rationality" and are consequently key to understanding the nature and functioning of EU foreign policy (Glarbo 2001: 141; emphasis added). Thomas Risse and Antje Wiener go further and argue that constructivism can positively interrelate with rationalist accounts of social reality without incurring contradictions with its ontological claims (Risse and Wiener 2001: 200–201). Social constructivism, Risse argues elsewhere, is not exclusive in nature, and its conceptual premises can be harmonised with (certain) rationalist accounts of international politics (Risse 2009: 144). Müller's argument that bargaining and arguing are ultimately different instances of the logic of appropriateness also makes a strong case for embedding individualistic-based propositions about social interaction in a holistic ontology (2004: 411, ff.). Wendt himself, in other works, seems convinced that rational choice can be accommodated with the idealist and holist ontology of social constructivism (Wendt 1999: 115, ff.).

Two points are worth elaborating. One is that the potential for complementariness between rationalism and constructivism considered here is not of the first type identified by Hurd. Liberal intergovernmentalist and constructivist solutions are not understood as answers to different kinds of questions, as if they addressed separate and unrelated planes of reality. Underlying this proposition is the notion that social constructivism does not aim to *explain* why international politics develops in a certain manner, but rather to *understand* how such developments are constituted.[5] However, by positing an epistemologically radical difference between 'explaining' and 'understanding', one pretends to solve the problem while in fact getting around it. Certain social constructivist accounts explicitly claim that they are able to 'explain' international politics in that they 'understand' the causes—or the 'reasons', to use a term less controversial for constructivists—underlying international developments.

For instance, Ernst Haas contends that neo-functionalism is a social constructivism-based *explanation* of EU integration, even though he admits that, as a theory, neo-functionalism has now become obsolescent

(Haas 2001: 26–27, 29).[6] Wendt himself has made a strong case for considering constructivist analyses as explanations, although explanations focused not (only) on causal relationships as on constitutive ones (Wendt 1998: 108, ff., 1999: 77, ff., 85–88). Diez insists that, with discourse providing the context for policy articulation, discourse analysis contributes to explaining foreign policy choices and outcomes, although it does not do so along a positivist cause-effect continuum (Diez 2014: 28). In ultimate analysis, liberal intergovernmentalist and social constructivist arguments about lead groups are attempts to understand and explain the same social reality.[7]

The other point is that, *contra* Fearon and Wendt,[8] this exercise in 'building bridges' between rationalist and constructivist solutions can be carried out while relying on a social constructivist ontology. The latter does not preclude the possibility of accepting the validity of certain rationalist solutions (whereas its rationalist alternative leaves little room for social constructivist solutions). A constructivist such as Risse has no problem in stating that "[c]onstructivists may join an intergovernmentalist reading of interstate negotiations as the *central way* to understand the EU," a statement of great significance for a study on EU lead groups (Risse 2009: 144; emphasis added).

To illustrate how rationalist arguments can hold even if inserted into a constructivist ontological framework, the following discusses a flaw in a key passage of Fearon and Wendt's long and convoluted argument in favour of a 'pragmatic solution'.

Fearon and Wendt warn against the attempts to reduce the logic of appropriateness, of which constructivists are so fond, to the logic of consequentiality[9] assumed by rationalists, and vice versa. Rationalists consider the logic of appropriateness a sort of logic of consequentiality 'in disguise' in which the strategic concern of the agent regards the conformity of the action to a specific set of norms and roles. While such a concern has a moral/ethic (as opposed to a purely utilitarian) undertone, the logic driving the action is still premised on the selection of the consequences that would be more in keeping with the given set of norms and roles. The constructivist version of reductionism works as follows: the logic of consequentiality seems at work in situations in which existing norms and roles allow for a 'space' in which consequence selection is considered appropriate; in this respect, it operates as a logic of appropriateness, to which it should be reduced (Fearon and Wendt 2002: 60; Hurd 2008: 310).

Fearon and Wendt's argument against this dual reductionism is that, in certain situations, choices made on the basis of consequence selection are so severely constrained by 'webs of norms and roles' that they seem more 'appropriate' choices than instrumentally calculated ones. In other cases, when choices are subjected to less severe constraints, an agent makes a choice between conflicting normative claims, which entails a degree of consequentialism. Fearon and Wendt contend that, "if we are not to obscure these empirical differences", the distinction between the two logics should be kept (Fearon and Wendt 2002: 60; Hurd 2008: 310).

This argument is effective in dismissing the reduction of the logic of appropriateness to consequentialism, but it is less persuasive when it considers the constructivist reduction of consequentialism to appropriateness. Fearon and Wendt's critique holds if the reductionist argument is interpreted as an outright *denial* of the logic of consequentiality, but rests on shakier ground if 'reductionism' is understood not as a form of denial but rather as a form of *subsumption* (Müller 2004: 403). In this case, the social constructivist argument would not come down to positing the fictional nature of the logic of consequentiality, but to determining that such a logic can be applied under specific normative conditions. In social constructivist terms the logic of consequentiality is conceptually subordinated to the logic of appropriateness—so to speak, it applies only if the latter gives 'permission'. As Müller writes, "one logic must inexorably dominate." The above argument shows that appropriateness is the dominating logic (ibidem: 404, 414).

The case of EU lead groups illustrates the point above. When considering the reasons for which a lead group's insiders seek the support and involvement of the European Union, and the reasons for which the outsiders consent to this, the logic of consequentiality clearly seems to be applicable. EU member states appear to ponder carefully the pros and cons of asking for/giving support to the lead group, that is, they seem to make a choice based on the anticipation and assessment of the potential consequences. However, the whole issue can also be regarded as a particular instance of the logic of appropriateness. The European Union has woven a dense web of norms that contribute to shaping national preferences and the resulting policy choices. EU member states feel less compelled to abide by the CFSP norm because foreign policy is an area where EU member states' interest is less shaped by their EU membership than is the case in other areas, something reflected in the unanimity rule governing EU foreign policy-making. Yet, the fact that EU member states, through treaties, provisos and informal practices of

socialisation, have developed norms also in the field of foreign policy, and that these norms reflect evolving national identities and operate as regulative principles influencing national choices, cannot be neglected. In fact, this web of norms and relations is so thick that decisions that are apparently taken on the sole basis of consequence selection do in fact also descend from a feeling of appropriateness that all EU states share because of their common belonging to the same polity. This is why discursive practices would play such an important role in the formation of EU lead groups.

The gap between liberal intergovernmentalist and social constructivist conceptual premises is not as wide as to make any attempt at building bridges a vain enterprise. It is possible to use the overlaps in intergovernmentalist and constructivist arguments about lead groups that point to a potential for complementariness without necessarily incurring contradiction on a theoretical level. The key is not to inquire whether these solutions reciprocally exclude each other (which they do not), but rather whether one solution is incompatible with the theoretical premise on which the other one rests. Presented in visual terms, the question does not concern horizontal complementariness, but vertical compatibility (see Fig. 2.1).

Horizontally, the liberal intergovernmentalist and social constructivist arguments about EU lead groups are compatible, as no element in either set of arguments contradicts elements contained in the other one. However, their theoretical premises are incompatible because they draw from a radically different ontological understanding of IR—individualist the former and holist the latter.

Thus, the only way to keep both sets of arguments without giving up entirely on the possibility to explain EU lead groups theoretically is to see whether one solution contains elements that fundamentally contrast with the ontology that informs the theoretical premise of the other solution. As Fig. 2.1 shows, there is a vertical incompatibility between the individualist ontology of liberal intergovernmentalism and the social constructivist explanation of an EU lead group's conditions of possibility and implications for EU foreign policy. By contrast, the liberal intergovernmentalist arguments do not contain elements that radically contrast with the holist ontology of constructivism. There is a vertical compatibility between the latter and the former. If the two approaches can be reconciled under a broad constructivist ontology, and if they provide complementary insights on an analytical level, there is a strong case for adopting a hybrid theoretical framework.
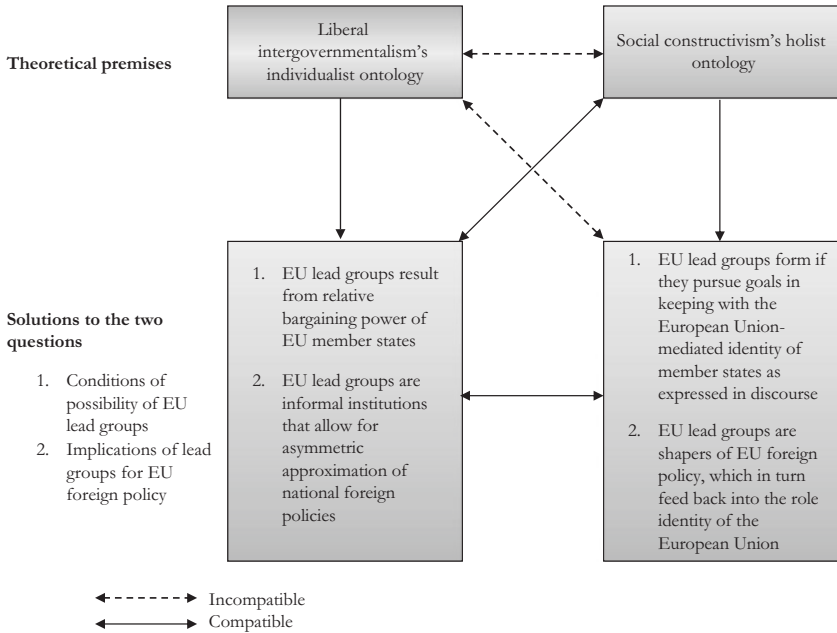
Fig. 2.1 Horizontal vs. vertical compatibility between liberal intergovernmentalist and social constructivist explanations of EU lead groups

4   BUILDING A HYBRID THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The review of the IR theoretical approaches has laid bare the need for a theoretical perspective compatible with a comprehensive concept of EU foreign policy as a multi-actor system. Key to this analysis is the notion that EU foreign policy encompasses the foreign policy of its member states, which allows for the inclusion of lead groups, in spite of their extra-treaty nature, in the realm of EU foreign policy. The heuristic quest has found that both liberal intergovernmentalism and social constructivism have much to say about lead groups. It is time to combine their respective arguments in a coherent hybrid theoretical framework.

Explaining the Conditions of Possibility of EU Lead Groups

Framing the question in *liberal intergovernmentalist terms,* lead groups result from the relative bargaining power of the group's members and non-members. Bargaining power is a reflection of an asymmetric interdependence between EU member states, which relates to the intensity of the interest they have in the management of a certain issue. This interest can be, and usually is, of a composite nature. Security and influence and possibly economic advantages are involved, but ideational factors such as prestige, concerns of a humanitarian nature, a desire to uphold international norms and a commitment to sharpening the European Union's profile as a credible crisis manager also have a part. EU member states join in a lead group on the grounds of these diverse set of interests. Power asymmetries play a role in securing a place within the lead group, but more important still is the composite nature of their interests in the management of a crisis, and their resulting resolve to commit to it. This explains, in the same breath, the relative continuity in EU lead groups' membership, more often than not featuring the Union's largest states, as well as its variations.

The conditions of possibility of lead groups emerge, then, whenever the interest of both insiders and outsiders in a crisis management undertaking outweighs the insiders' interest in unrestricted autonomy and the outsiders' one in opposing the group's leadership. This solution is eminently rationalist, but of a different nature than the equally rationalist solution that a realist would give. While power asymmetries are brought into the equation, the emphasis is on bargaining rather than power and coercion and its corollary behaviours (bandwagoning or counterbalancing). It is not power but interests that drive the bargaining process, and such interests, contrary to what realists (and institutionalists) maintain, are understood as being inherently susceptible to variation.

This liberal intergovernmentalist solution contains nothing that one could not hold from a social constructivist point of view. A social constructivist can work with categories such as bargaining and power asymmetries (which are not 'rationalist' in themselves, but rather the ones that rationalists temphasise). However, a social constructivist would reframe those categories in ontologically holist terms and would put more emphasis on elements, such as identity, which a liberal intergovernmentalist would consider of secondary importance. Assuming a *social constructivist standpoint*, a shift of focus takes place from the *causes* of state action—interests—to the nature, or *constitution*, of such interests. To use

a terminology that de-emphasises the dichotomy between causal and constitutive explanations, the move is from an explanation that assumes causes as being purely *efficient* to one that understands causes as encompassing all elements that contribute to explaining and understanding (foreign) policy-making processes (Kurki 2008).

For a social constructivist, material factors such as security, power assets or economic benefits enter the picture because interests can be framed along them, but they are not interests per se. Instead, interests are social constructs that result from the manner in which existing values, norms and institutions allow us to conceive of material and ideational factors as potential drivers for state action. Interests are thus a function of the agent's identity, which in turn is constitutively informed with the agent's social context or structure. EU membership is part—arguably not an irrelevant one—of the social and normative context embedding its member states. As such, it contributes to shaping their identity, their interests and ultimately their foreign policy.

In the field of foreign policy, the 'EU layer' of EU member states' identity does not manifest itself in the form of an irresistible call to cooperate. Intra-EU foreign policy cooperation is a regulative norm. Hence, unless it contradicts the 'EU layer' of an EU member state's identity, the pursuit of autonomous national foreign policy does not bring about an identity conflict. Lead groups exemplify this situation. The group insiders act on a national basis, yet they also act upon interests in the formation of which EU membership has played a role. Lead groups can only carry out policies in line with the EU identity layer of the insiders, as it is the sharing of that layer that makes it possible for the outsiders to support an extra-CFSP practice.

EU lead groups arise, then, whenever the pursuit of national foreign policy by a restricted number of member states is in line with the EU identity layer of the member states outside the group. As discourse is the social structure in which the collective identity of EU member states take shape, no EU lead group can exist if it frames the crisis it addresses in terms that contradict the established EU discourse. What liberal intergovernmentalists see as an interest-based bargaining is for social constructivists *also*—and *always*—an exercise at arguing (or a discursive struggle) about EU member states' identities and international role (Müller 2004; Diez 2014). In these terms, the social constructivist argument is not only complementary with the liberal intergovernmentalist one, but integrates it by way of subsumption.

Understanding the Implications for EU Foreign Policy of Lead Groups

For a *liberal intergovernmentalist*, the question about the implications of lead groups for EU foreign policy is ill-posed, as lead groups are relevant to explaining *national* foreign policy, not *EU* foreign policy. Like other formal institutions, the lead group is a way to promote the interest of sovereign states at the cost of a relative reduction of their room for action. To the extent that the outsiders see an advantage for themselves in supporting the insiders, a convergence dynamic ensues. Such an approximation is facilitated by the fact that it takes place within the EU context. This notwithstanding, liberal intergovernmentalism struggles to see lead groups *as* EU foreign policy because it only has a 'formal' theory of EU foreign policy (which is only what EU treaties dictate). Yet, a liberal intergovernmentalist should be comfortable with the idea that lead groups, by fostering reciprocal convergence among EU member states, have the effect of *enabling an EU foreign policy action*, even though this is conceptually separate from, and subordinate to, the group's action.

From a *social constructivist* point of view, by contrast, the expression 'EU lead group' makes perfect sense. EU foreign policy is conceptualised as a multi-actor and multi-level system unfolding along various patterns, including those not envisaged by EU treaties. Since lead groups act in line with the EU foreign policy discourse, they should be regarded as 'enablers' of EU foreign policy in social constructivist terms; and since they might create a policy for the Union where there was none, they are 'shapers' of EU foreign policy.

There is no radical incompatibility between the liberal intergovernmentalist and the social constructivist views. The only significant difference is that constructivists see lead groups as an *EU* foreign policy practice and liberal intergovernmentalists as a *national* foreign policy practice (which, however, work also as an enabler of policies defined at the EU level).

At first sight, this difference has so little practical effect that it could be ridiculed as mere academic hair-splitting. Nevertheless, the difference in theoretical perspective matters, and considerably so. That social constructivism sees lead groups as part of EU foreign policy does not depend on an act of will. Instead, it descends from constructivism's holist ontology that conceives of agency and structure as being mutually constitutive. Lead groups' policies are EU foreign policies not only because the social structure (the European Union) constitutes the agents' identities and ensuing

interests, but also because agents (the member states) construe their social structure (the European Union) through practices. The main implication of the difference between the liberal intergovernmentalist and social constructivist views of lead groups is that the latter assumes that, by enabling or shaping EU foreign policy, a lead group contributes to constituting the identity of the European Union and, following the feedback loop, EU member states themselves. Borrowing the term from Sedelmeier, lead groups can be represented as 'norm entrepreneurs' or, more precisely, 'identity entrepreneurs'. "Norm entrepreneurs", he writes, "articulate and call attention to norms and identity by making the case that in a particular situation the European Union's identity is at stake, suggest particular options for "appropriate behaviour", or warn of potential discrepancies between behaviour and collectively professed norms and identity" (Sedelmeier 2003: 16).

For sure, this passage does not argue that states or even less so groups of states can be referred to as norm entrepreneurs. Yet, the reasoning underlying it can be applied to the case of lead groups insofar as lead groups act in line with the European Union's self-representation as an international actor with certain responsibilities. Action is not only the result of identity but also shapes it. Similarly, EU foreign policy is not only the result of the Union's identity, but it shapes such an identity.

Lead groups contribute to shaping the European Union's identity in two ways. First, lead groups operate the transition from statements about the European Union's identity to action substantiating those statements (to say it more prosaically, transition from words to deeds). Second, they articulate the Union's international actorness as a multi-level system operating through EU institutions *and* member states. In social constructivist terms, the notion that EU lead groups are *national* foreign policy practices—which is the liberal intergovernmentalist position—presents no logical difficulty. A social constructivist would actually contend that lead groups are *both* a national *and* an EU foreign policy practice because a social constructivist sees EU foreign policy as also encompassing national foreign policies by virtue of the agency-structure mutual constitutiveness. In addition, the liberal intergovernmentalist explanation of the effect of the lead group's action as an approximation of the group's outsiders to the position of the insiders is compatible with the social constructivist view that the group's action shapes EU foreign policy. As was the case with the first question, the social constructivist solution to the second question integrates the liberal intergovernmentalist one by way of subsumption. The former retains the basic insights of the latter but goes farther.

An Intergovernmentalist-Constructivist Framework

This final section collapses the conclusions drawn above into a single theoretical framework combining the liberal intergovernmentalist and social constructivist arguments about lead groups' conditions of possibility and implications for EU foreign policy. These arguments not only coexist. They are actually integrated with one another by way of subsumption: in both cases, the social constructivist solutions subsume the rationalist solutions. The latter are used, in Wendt's terms, as 'methodologically convenient instruments' (Wendt 1999: 367) because they are disconnected from their individualist ontological premises and actually grounded in a holist ontology. The theoretical framework is visually presented in Fig. 2.2.

Figure 2.2 illustrates how EU lead groups result from the interest asymmetries and the ensuing bargaining power of member states. The

Conditions of possibility

EU lead groups form whenever the interest of both insiders and outsiders in a crisis management undertaking outweighs the interest in unrestricted autonomy of the insiders and the interest of the outsiders in opposing the group's leadership (liberal intergovernmentalist argument)

The interest of both insiders and outsiders in a crisis management undertaking outweighs the insiders' interest in unrestricted autonomy and the outsiders' one in opposing the group's leadership *only if* the insiders pursue foreign policy goals that are in keeping with EU foreign policy discourse (social constructivist integration of the intergovernmentalist argument)

Lead groups are informal institutions that foster the approximation of the policy positions of the group's outsiders towards the policy positions of the insiders. While lead groups are a national foreign policy practice, they can enable EU foreign policy (liberal intergovernmentalist argument)

Implications for EU foreign policy

By promoting policy approximation among member states, lead groups shape EU foreign policy , whereby they are an EU foreign policy practice that contributes to constituting the identity of the European Union and its member states as international agents (social constructivist integration of the intergovernmentalist argument)

Legend

↓   Is subsumed by

↷   Implies

Fig. 2.2   Intergovernmentalist-constructivist understanding of EU lead groups

possibility for their formation is given whenever the interest of both insiders and outsiders in a crisis management undertaking outweighs the interest in unrestricted autonomy of the insiders and the interest of the outsiders in opposing the group's leadership.

While this explanation draws from liberal intergovernmentalism, social constructivism can accept it, provided it is integrated with the following: lead groups form if they pursue goals in line with the EU-mediated identity of member states as it is expressed and articulated in the existing EU foreign policy discourse. As interests, in social constructivist terms, are a function of identity, this explanation *subsumes* the former. The social constructivist ontological understanding of IR allows for linking the liberal emphasis on the asymmetries of interests with the understanding of such interests as organically connected to the 'EU layer' of the identity of both insiders and outsiders of the lead group.

Consider now the liberal argument about the second question. EU lead groups are informal institutions set up by a restricted number of member states that opt to pursue national foreign policy objectives in cooperation, whereby they create an incentive for the other member states to bring their policy positions in line with their own. In so doing, lead groups enable EU foreign policy because their action is in line with pre-existing EU goals.

As above, the social constructivist standpoint subsumes the liberal intergovernmentalist one. Because the lead group's action is in line with EU-stated goals and objectives, the process of policy approximation triggered by lead groups shapes EU foreign policy. Ergo, lead groups are not only a national foreign policy practice but also an EU foreign policy practice. Through them, the European Union acquires a thicker international identity.

This hybrid theoretical framework provides the terms of reference that guide the empirical research on any instance of EU lead groups, the E3/EU Iran team included. Before delving into the empirical analysis, however, it is useful to introduce the reader to the greater story in which the E3/EU process was situated, the Iranian nuclear crisis.

Notes

1. Writing in 1997, Moravcsik felt compelled to remind his readers that a number of liberal theories (most of them non-institutionalist) already rejected the notion that interests are given, and in fact contained elements of a theory of interests as endogenous to actors. He complained that this fact was generally neglected due to the prevailing tendency to assimilate liberalism with its institutionalist version (Moravcsik 1997: 514).

2. The British referendum on EU membership split the country into those who felt that the national and EU identity layers were compatible and those who felt the opposite. The fact that almost half of voters, and a majority of elites, thought of the United Kingdom as a sovereign state *and* an EU member revealed that EU membership had profoundly impacted even traditionally Eurosceptic Britain.

3. Europeanisation also refers to the export of EU values and standards beyond the Union's borders. In these terms, Europeanisation indicates a process of approximation by external actors to EU values and standards and is therefore irrelevant to the present discussion.

4. Accepting the definition of social constructivism as the theoretical approach that posits the mutual constitutiveness of agency and structure logically implies the acceptance of other assumptions, namely the socially constructed nature of interests. Coupled with the critique of the neorealist notion of anarchy as having no real explanatory potential, these assumptions make up the core of all branches of social constructivism (Wendt 1992, 1999; Hurd 2008: 300–305).

5. For a review of the criticisms of social constructivism's alleged inability to prove its claims, see, among others, Risse (2009): 144–147 and Steans et al. (2010): 201–202. On the difference between 'explaining' and 'understanding', see Hollis and Smith (1990).

6. Not all EU theorists share Haas' opinion that neo-functionalism has run its course. Jakob O. Øhrgaard maintains that it still provides the "most promising basis for theorising" about the *sui generis* nature of the CFSP (Øhrgaard 2004: 27). Øhrgaard's core argument is based on the rejection of Haas' strict definition of integration as a shift of nation states' expectations, loyalties and eventually attributions to a supranational centre. He argues instead that the neo-functionalist understanding of integration as a three-staged process consisting of socialisation, cooperation and formalisation remains valid even if the last step does not involve supranationalisation of policies. He justifies this conclusion by stressing that such neo-functionalist categories as socialisation of EU elites, the upgrading of common interests and spillover effects retain theorising potential also about the CFSP (ibidem: 38–40).

   Assuming Øhrgaard's perspective, EU lead groups could be seen as a result of socialisation and a (peculiar) instance of cooperation that nonetheless occurs at the expense of formalisation. If lead groups are regarded as a form of intra-EU cooperation on issues where CFSP mechanisms are hardly applicable, they should be conceptualised as suboptimal solutions to functional deficiencies. In this sense, they might (or should?) paradoxically lead to greater foreign policy integration, or at least create a strong demand for it. Øhrgaard's 'use' of neo-functionalism has a certain appeal for the purpose of this study, since it provides a clear-cut solution to the question regarding the implications of lead groups for EU foreign policy, namely that they lead

to, or at least smooth the way for, foreign policy supranationalisation. This (hidden) form of automatism, of which not even Øhrgaard's softer version of neo-functionalism is fully free, eventually discourages the inclusion of neo-functionalist solutions in a working theoretical framework for EU lead groups.

7. Parsons (2015) insists forcefully on the need for constructivists to engage rationalists on their own ground.

8. But, awkwardly, in line with Wendt's position about the role of rationalism within a constructivist account of international politics, as articulated in his *Social Theory of International Politics.*

9. Otherwise referred to as 'logic of consequentialism' or of 'the expected consequences'.

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The History: The 2003–16 Iran Nuclear Crisis

The analysis of the E3/EU lead group involves going back and forth in time to consider pieces of evidence taken from different phases of the story and yet collected together to support an analytical point. The reader would thus find it difficult to reconstruct the chronology of the dispute from the continuous, but unsystematic, references to historical facts that fill the next chapters. It makes sense then to present the chronology of events separately from the proper empirical analysis. This chapter provides a historical overview of events occurred between late 2003 and early 2016, which mark the beginning and the end of the E3's attempt to solve the nuclear dispute through an agreement with Iran. This chapter works as a complement to the previous one: whereas Chap. 2 was a theoretical introduction to the concept of lead group, Chap. 3 is a historical introduction to one specific case study of lead group, the E3/EU Iran group.

1 Clouds over the Horizon: The Nuclear Dispute Begins

In summer 2002, a federation of different groups of anti-regime exiles known as the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI) made public the existence of hitherto undisclosed nuclear facilities in Iran. The revelations, perhaps passed along by US and British intelligence services (Gaietta 2015: 88–89), deeply embarrassed the Iranian government, eventually

forcing it to extend an invitation to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to verify the claim. After visiting the undisclosed facilities in February 2003, the agency confirmed that the NCRI's claims were mostly accurate (IAEA Board of Governors 2003a).

The leaked information concerned, among other things, an industrial-scale uranium enrichment plant some 30 km from the town of Natanz in north-central Iran and a heavy water production plant at Arak—a preliminary step to the construction of a heavy water nuclear reactor. The facilities were in part built underground, ostensibly to withstand an attack from the air. These were all worrisome revelations, as highly enriched uranium (HEU) and plutonium, which is more easily produced in heavy water reactors, are the fissile material used in nuclear explosive devices.[1]

Uranium enrichment is not forbidden under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, to which Iran is a party as a non-nuclear-weapon state. However, it is a highly sensitive activity because it can be diverted to military use with relative ease, depending on the level of enrichment. While low-enriched uranium (LEU) or uranium containing 3–4 per cent of U_{235} (where U_{235} is the uranium isotope susceptible to nuclear fission) is sufficient for fuel used in reactors, the core of a nuclear device consists of HEU, which is 90 per cent made up of U_{235}. In addition, the technological expertise and financial costs needed for uranium enrichment are so significant that most nuclear experts deem it the single most important step towards a nuclear weapon capacity. The same goes for plutonium, which is a by-product of the enrichment process.

Combined with other information about Iran's nuclear activities that had been available for some time—which included uranium ore mines, a research nuclear reactor in Tehran, a nuclear power plant under construction at Bushehr, a uranium conversion centre in Esfahan and still others—the new findings drew a bleak picture. Iran was evidently bent on reaching full autonomy in constructing and operating a comprehensive nuclear fuel cycle. Then Iranian President Mohammed Khatami admitted as much in February 2003 (International Crisis Group 2003: 1).

Iran claimed that the nuclear programme only served the purpose to generate electricity, thereby freeing up oil and gas resources for export markets, a much more lucrative option than burning fossil fuels for domestic consumption. However, many disputed the economic rationale of investing in nuclear power—an expensive, massively capital-intensive industry—for a country so rich in hydrocarbon resources. It seemed more plausible that Iran would embark on such a costly undertaking to attain a

higher goal, namely acquiring a nuclear weapon capacity (though not necessarily an actual nuclear arsenal). Although the IAEA inspectors had found no evidence of military diversion, the fact that Iran had kept its nuclear activities hidden for years, ostensibly in violation of its international transparency obligations, made alarm bells ring in many quarters.

In June 2003, IAEA Director General Mohammed El Baradei blamed Iran for failing to meet its reporting responsibilities under its IAEA Safeguard Agreement (IAEA Board of Governors 2003a). In September the agency's executive body, the Board of Governors, formally reproached Iran and made the two requests that would become the basic tenets of the international effort to curb Iran's nuclear plans: intensify transparency and cooperation with IAEA inspectors and suspend sensitive nuclear work. Specifically, the IAEA board demanded that Iran froze enrichment-related and reprocessing activities—the latter being the process by which plutonium is produced—until proper scrutiny of its nuclear programme was re-established. To this end, the board called on Iran to ratify and implement the so-called Additional Protocol, a 1997 document expanding the agency's inspection powers, as a confidence-building measure (IAEA Board of Governors 2003b).

Iran retorted to have a right to enrich uranium and develop a civilian nuclear industry as a non-nuclear-weapon member state of the NPT (Bowen and Kidd 2004: 258–259). It further argued that discretion over its nuclear activities was not only a legitimate political choice, but was warranted by its deeply disappointing experience with foreign suppliers of nuclear materials and technologies.

Iran had first ventured into the nuclear field in the 1950s, although it was only in the early 1970s that Iran's absolutist ruler, Reza Shah Pahlavi, began investing huge resources in an industrial programme. The United States, albeit suspicious, grudgingly assisted the shah, who was its main ally in the region. France agreed to provide Iran with enriched uranium supplies, while German company Siemens was tasked with building a nuclear power plant at Bushehr (Gaietta 2015: 14–20). US and French assistance was terminated following the establishment of Islamic Republic in 1979 (problems had however already emerged during the last years of the shah's reign). The Germans followed suit shortly after (ibidem: 36).

The Islamic Republic took steps to restart the nuclear industry in the late 1980s, but found little international support. In the 1990s, first Argentina and then China obliged to US requests and ceased nuclear cooperation with Tehran (Gaietta 2015: 65, 70). Russia stepped in

Germany's place for the construction of the Bushehr plant,[2] but proved to be a quite difficult partner, and not entirely invulnerable to US pressure to complicate or delay work on the facility (on Iran's troubled relations with its nuclear suppliers, see Albright and Hibbs 1992; Kile 2005: 2–3; Gaietta 2015: 26–38). Against this backdrop, many Iranians believed that the Islamic Republic could not rely on foreign assistance to create a nuclear industrial base. Iran, in other words, was not ready to bow to international pressure without a fight.

The United States was itself hardly in a compromising mood. Poisoned by 25 years of reciprocal contempt and antagonism, US-Iranian relations had turned even sourer after US President George W. Bush declared Iran, along with Iraq and North Korea, part of an 'axis of evil' in early 2002 (Bush 2002). Earning Iran membership in this club of 'rogue states' was its support for terrorist groups, but also its alleged proliferation activities.[3]

Such concerns had spurred the United States to adopt an extensive sanctions regime in the 1990s and discourage third countries to assist Iran's nuclear activities (Einhorn and Samore 2002). Unsurprisingly, the discovery of the Natanz and Arak facilities reinforced the perception in Washington that swift action was needed. The United States urged the IAEA to declare Iran in non-compliance with the NPT and refer it to the Security Council (Brill 2003).

President Bush's demonstrated resolve to use force to address alleged proliferation threats in Iraq, coupled with the deep and widespread hostility towards Iran and the apparent influence of the interventionist camp in his administration, lent plausibility to the prospect of a US pre-emptive strike against Iranian nuclear facilities (Keller 2003; Remnick 2003). A debate about military options was certainly ongoing behind closed doors in the US administration, with Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld reportedly arguing in favour of a regime change strategy as early as May 2003 (Dinmore and Bozormehr 2003). Just a few months after the world had experienced the bitter division over the US-led invasion of Iraq, the stage was set for another, potentially bigger crisis in the Middle East (Bowen and Kidd 2004; Pollack 2013: 64–100).

2   THE UNUSUAL SUSPECTS: THE E3 ENTER THE STAGE

It was in this heated atmosphere that the action by France, Germany and the United Kingdom took shape. Although they did not hold as bleak an assessment of Iran's clerical regime as their American or Israeli

counterparts, and were actually supporting an EU-led process of dialogue and gradual engagement (see Sect. 1 in Chap. 6), they nonetheless found the 2003 revelations about Iran's nuclear activities deeply troubling.

The three found fertile ground for a resolute stance on Iran's alleged misconduct in the European Union (International Crisis Group 2003: 24). In summer 2003, HR for CFSP Solana made an official visit to Tehran in which he urged Iran to restore confidence in its nuclear plans (Solana 2003). Solana's words were echoed in an EU statement submitted to the IAEA board that called on Iran to implement and ratify the Additional Protocol and stop enriching uranium (European Union 2003).

Initially, then, E3 efforts unfolded in the IAEA and EU multilateral settings. However, by late summer 2003 the contours of a bolder, tripartite diplomatic move were taking shape. In early August the E3 sent a letter to Iran's leaders in which they raised the prospect of assisting Iran's peaceful nuclear activities if Iran met IAEA demands (Taylor and Charbonneau 2003; Mousavian 2008: 149). The E3 dispatched a delegation of senior diplomats to Tehran to sound out the Iranians about establishing a dialogue to soothe international concerns. They found a quite forthcoming audience, particularly in Hassan Rouhani, who at the time was the secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council (SNSC), an advisory body to Supreme Leader Seyyed Ali Khamenei.[4] In August 2003, Iranian President Khatami sent a letter to the leaders of France, Germany and the United Kingdom (as well as Italy, the holder of the EU Presidency in the second half of 2003). He repeated that Iran was not interested in developing nuclear weapons, but also expressed willingness to open a negotiation over the Islamic Republic's accession to the IAEA Additional Protocol (*Down.com* 2003). The exploratory visit turned into something more substantial, as E3 and Iranian officials outlined the basic components of an E3-Iran deal (BBC News 2003).

The deal eventually materialised on 21 October, when the British, French and German foreign ministers—Jack Straw, Dominique de Villepin and Joschka Fischer, respectively—made a much publicised visit to Tehran. The E3 ministers released along with the Iranian government the so-called Tehran Agreed Statement, in which Iran announced it would suspend uranium enrichment and reprocessing activities temporarily. Iran also agreed to sign and implement—pending ratification—the Additional Protocol as a confidence-building measure. In return, the Europeans promised

enhanced dialogue and cooperation on a number of issues, including civilian nuclear assistance, trade relations and regional security (Iranian Government and Visiting EU Foreign Ministers 2003).

The Agreed Statement calmed things down (Kile 2005; Balouji 2005). In late November, the IAEA Board of Governors adopted a resolution commending both the E3 and Iran (IAEA Board of Governors 2003c). Even US President Bush said that the Agreed Statement was a "very positive development" (quoted in International Crisis Group 2003: 22). However, deep scepticism lingered in the US administration, where critics worried that Iran was just trying to buy time and avoid international reproach (International Crisis Group 2003: 23; Bowen and Kidd 2004: 267).

Concerns about the sustainability of the Tehran Agreed Statement were well-grounded. The parties quarrelled about the exact interpretation of key parts of the deal—in particular the length and extension of the uranium enrichment freeze (Kile 2005: 11–13; Gaietta 2015: 98–100). In addition, the Iranians kept producing large amounts of uranium hexafluoride (UF_6), a preliminary step to enrichment, at the gas conversion facility of Esfahan, and continued work on the Arak heavy water reactor, which raised concerns that it could soon be able to produce weapon-grade plutonium.[5] It also offered subpar cooperation with IAEA inspectors, in particular with regard to the agency's request to access military facilities. More worryingly, Iran admitted to have acquired designs and equipment necessary for enriching uranium from a clandestine network run by a Pakistani nuclear scientist, Abdul Qadeer Khan, which was known to have contributed to Libya's and North Korea's nuclear programmes (Bowen and Kidd 2004: 262; Kile 2005: 8; Mousavian 2008: 167; Gaietta 2015: 80–81, 98–99).[6] By June 2004, it was clear that the E3-Iran arrangements had all but collapsed (International Crisis Group 2004: 4; Mousavian 2008: 171–172).

In September, the IAEA board warned Iran that, if no positive development were to occur soon, it would take "appropriate steps" to address the issue—a veiled threat that referral to the Security Council was an increasingly plausible prospect (IAEA Board of Governors 2004). The E3, now formally joined by HR Solana (whence the 'E3/EU' phrase was coined), made a last attempt to create new breathing space for diplomacy. Convening in Paris, European and Iranian negotiators were eventually able to find common ground again (IAEA 2004; International Crisis Group 2004: 4–5; Mousavian 2008: 174–6).

The Paris Agreement, struck on 15 November 2004, specified the activities that Iran was expected to halt and the incentives the Europeans were putting on the table in greater detail than its doomed predecessor (International Crisis Group 2004, 2006; Kile 2005). Iran agreed to stop working on the heavy water nuclear reactor in Arak and freeze all enrichment-related activities, including preliminary steps such as UF_6 production, as well as the manufacture or import of gas centrifuges, the machines needed to enrich uranium.[7] The suspension was voluntary, however, and its duration linked to the pursuit of "a mutually acceptable agreement on long-term arrangements" with the E3. For their part, the Europeans promised greater assistance in the nuclear sector and economic and trade benefits (IAEA 2004; Solana 2004).[8]

3   Dashed Hopes: The Failure of the E3/EU-Iran Talks

The E3/EU and the Iranians started to negotiate in a spirit of cautious optimism. Iran kept frozen the most sensitive parts of its nuclear programme, notably uranium enrichment and such related activities as uranium conversion into gas. It also implemented the IAEA Additional Protocol, which gave IAEA inspectors greater leeway. In late spring 2005, however, the negotiation stalled due to the inability of the two sides to agree on the 'objective guarantees' that the E3/EU wanted to extract from Iran over the purely peaceful nature of its nuclear programme.

In the eyes of the Europeans, such guarantees could only be drawn-out uranium enrichment suspension. The E3/EU concurred with Iran that any peaceful nuclear programme would need enriched uranium, but they contended that Iran did not have any pressing need to fabricate it on its own. International fuel markets were a significantly less costly and politically more reassuring option. The E3/EU did not deny Iran's right to enrich domestically, but insisted this could happen only once Iran had rebuilt international trust in its intentions. The Iranians were of a different opinion. As they saw it, they were already making a significant concession by keeping uranium enrichment frozen during the negotiation, given that they had a right to it under the NPT.

In March 2005, the Iranians tabled a proposal for a 'framework agreement' under which they would develop an industrial-scale enrichment capacity in successive phases and under IAEA safeguards (Government of

the Islamic Republic of Iran 2005a). The proposal envisaged a four-step process during which the Islamic Republic would take measures to guarantee that its nuclear programme was only peaceful, including ratification of the IAEA Additional Protocol, while the E3/EU would provide a number of assets, among them assured provision of nuclear fuel and assistance in the construction of new nuclear power plants (Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran 2005a).

While the E3 saw margins for a compromise on verification and assistance in the peaceful nuclear sector, they were unwilling to accept that Iran could enrich uranium. Iran, in their views, was offering insufficient guarantees that its nuclear programme would not be diverted to military use. In addition, the Islamic Republic was about to have a change of government, and the E3/EU were unsure that any deal they could strike before the election would not be called into question by the next administration. As Iran moved into presidential elections in June, the E3 opted for a fence-sitting approach. They pinned their hopes on the pragmatic credentials of the presumed winner, former President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani.[9] As it happened, their calculations proved wrong. Disappointment about Khatami's poor reform record, combined with a conservative crackdown on reformist candidates, delivered the presidency to a hard-line candidate, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. As the new administration prepared to take office in Tehran in July 2005, prospects for a nuclear breakthrough grew dim.

In August the Iranians disdainfully returned to sender an E3/EU proposal for a final agreement, arguing that it was just a repackaging of previous offers that they had already rejected (IAEA Director General 2005; Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran 2005b).[10] In the meantime, they restarted operating the gas conversion facility near Esfahan, which had been shut down in keeping with the Paris Agreement. In response, the E3/EU joined the United States in pushing for a formal condemnation of Iran's behaviour by the IAEA. On 24 September 2005, the agency board finally declared Iran in non-compliance with its safeguard agreement with the IAEA and threatened to refer it to the Security Council (IAEA Board of Governors 2005).

Actual referral was postponed for some months, as Russia, supported by the E3/EU, proposed to enrich the uranium for Iranian reactors on Russian soil in the framework of a Russian-Iranian joint enrichment venture. Iran first declared interest in the Russian proposal, but then, in January 2006, opted for restarting enrichment activities at the Natanz

facility. The E3/EU informed the IAEA that the nuclear talks had "reached an impasse" (IAEA 2006).[11] Shortly after, they released a joint statement with the United States, China and Russia, calling for Iran's referral to the Security Council (E3/EU+3 2006a). The IAEA board put aside any hesitations and in February instructed Director General El Baradei to send the Iran file to the UN headquarters in New York (IAEA Board of Governors 2006). The E3/EU-Iran nuclear talks thus came to an end.

4   ON THE BRINK: THE E3/EU+3-IRAN STAND-OFF

In the months and years following Iran's referral to the Security Council, the Islamic Republic and the six powers, officially dubbed the 'E3/EU+3' (in recognition of the European origin of the initiative) but more commonly known as P5+1 (as all its members except Germany held a UNSC permanent seat), went through a period of growing, albeit irregular, confrontation.

Vowing that it would never be bullied by foreign powers into giving up its 'nuclear rights', Iran not only continued to move forward on the nuclear path but also ended its voluntary implementation of the Additional Protocol, thereby reducing the ability of UN inspectors to collect information. Although its nuclear activities remained behind what could be described as an efficient industrial programme, the Islamic Republic undeniably made progress.

The E3/EU+3 responded with a combination of sanctions and offers of cooperation, a 'dual track' approach modelled along the E3/EU policy of combining diplomacy with conditionality. The six powers, along with the European Union, continued to emphasise their readiness to re-engage with Iran in comprehensive negotiations that could solve the dispute in a mutually acceptable manner, offering in return economic incentives, assistance in the civilian nuclear industry and political dialogue.[12]

In June 2006 and then again in June 2008, the E3/EU+3 presented the Iranians with a package of incentives (E3/EU+3 2006b, 2008). While broadly based on what the E3/EU had put on the table in 2005 (which the Iranians had rejected as 'insulting'), the package included some new important elements, such as assistance in the construction of a state-of-the-art light water reactor (LWR), the most proliferation-resistant typology of nuclear reactors, as well as support for Iran's bid to enter the World Trade Organisation (WTO). More important was the stated intention by the United States to take part in direct talks with the Iranians after 25

years of bad blood, on the condition however that Iran halted all uranium enrichment-related work. Iran would have none of it and kept enriching.

Prospects for a settlement arose after Barack Obama was elected US president in November 2008. Obama had campaigned on the promise to engage the Iranians directly and without preconditions. In the first months of 2009 top officials from the White House and the Department of State indicated that the United States was willing to explore the conditions for starting a constructive dialogue with Iran on all issues on which the two were at odds. Obama himself delivered a televised address to the "Iranian people and leadership",[13] and White House officials declined to deny press reports that the president had twice written to Iran's Supreme Leader Khamenei, although there remained uncertainty as to the letters' exact content (*The Washington Times* 2009).

Obama's conviction that a deal could be reached with the existing Iranian leadership did not change even after the Iranian government cracked down on demonstrators protesting against Ahmadinejad's allegedly rigged re-election in June 2009. The next October facts seemed to prove the US president right. Iran agreed to ship most of its LEU to Russia, where it was to have been enriched to 20 per cent (the level needed for medical application), and then to France, where it was to have been converted into rods, suitable for reactors but not for weapons (Solana 2009). This process would have deprived Iran of enough nuclear material to potentially build a bomb for around a year, thereby opening up a window of opportunity to launch broader negotiations on Iran's enrichment activity. Furthermore, it would have given Iran no reason to start enriching to 20 per cent, which experts generally consider a critical step towards a military capability because it is much easier to enrich from 20 to 90 per cent, the level needed for a weapon, than from 3–4 to 20 per cent. As it was premised on Iran swapping most of its LEU stock with fuel rods, the deal came to be known as the 'nuclear fuel swap' (Fitzpatrick 2010).

In a couple of months' time, however, the arrangement floundered. Iran presented a revised proposal for the swap that the E3/EU+3 considered to be short of confidence-building elements—in particular, it was devised so as to eliminate the timeframe during which Iran's LEU reserves would have been insufficient to produce the HEU needed for a bomb. The deal was de facto killed in February 2010 when Iran said it would enrich uranium to 20 per cent, precisely the know-how the United States and its partners wanted to prevent the Iranians from acquiring (ibidem). A later attempt, in May 2010, by Brazil and Turkey to resuscitate the fuel

swap deal was dismissed by the E3/EU+3 on the grounds that it did nothing to halt Iran's enrichment programme (Reuters 2010).[14]

The failure of the October 2009 nuclear fuel swap was especially worrisome because it shortly followed the revelation by the United States that Iran had been secretly constructing a new enrichment facility in a place called Fordow, not far from Qom, in north-central Iran. The news was as damaging to Iran's credibility as had been the initial revelations about Natanz and Arak in 2002–3. The new enrichment centre, which was built deep into a mountain to protect it from air strikes, was described to be too small for a civilian enrichment programme but big enough for a military one (Obama et al. 2009), although some experts contended it was just a back-up option in case Natanz was bombed (Barzashka 2010). Iran moved the infrastructure for enrichment—the centrifuges—to Fordow in 2011 (Institute for Science and International Security 2011). It also installed there more advanced models of centrifuges capable of enriching uranium at faster speed, although it never used them. The site started producing 20 per cent-enriched uranium (with the older centrifuges) sometime between 2012 and early 2013 (IAEA Board of Governors 2013: 5).

As Iran continued to gradually expand its nuclear activities, the new IAEA director general, Yukiya Amano, produced a number of reports that were considerably more critical of Iran's behaviour than had been the case under his predecessor El Baradei. In particular, Amano did not shy from explicitly mentioning the possibility that Iran had carried out—and perhaps was still carrying out—military-related nuclear activities. In November 2011, Amano listed Iran's alleged military and military-related nuclear activities, technically known as the 'potential military dimensions' (PMDs), in an annex to his report on Iran to the board (IAEA Board of Governors 2011: 11–25).

The annex on Iran's PMDs created furore, but also added to the confusion of the international community. The IAEA's mention of possible *ongoing* military activities seemed to contradict a late 2007 assessment by the US intelligence community that Iran had suspended military-related work in 2003 (National Intelligence Council 2007).[15] In fact, the annex to Amano's report mostly confirmed the US intelligence's main conclusion that Iran had indeed an operational nuclear weapons programme run by the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), but that it had put an end to all major military and military-related work in 2003. The novelty was that the IAEA was now stating that some military or military-compatible activities had likely continued after that date, although it

acknowledged that information concerning the post-2003 period was tenuous and in any case insufficient to assume large-scale military nuclear work.

By the time the IAEA's report on the PMDs broke out, the E3/EU+3's dual track approach had already seen the sanctions track prevailing over diplomacy. Between mid-2006 and mid-2010, the group had pushed through the Security Council six legally binding resolutions requiring that Iran halt all enrichment-related activities and intensify cooperation with the IAEA (United Nations Security Council 2006a, b, 2007, 2008a, b, 2010). Four such resolutions—UNSCRs 1737, 1747, 1803 and 1929—included punitive measures.

Due to reservations of Russia and China, which were not particularly eager to punish a country with which they had political ties and a good trade relationship, the initial UNSC-endorsed sanctions could hardly be described as draconian. Apart from banning trade in nuclear- and missile-related products with Iran, they mostly targeted individuals and companies linked to Iran's nuclear and ballistic programmes with the freezing of financial assets and visa denials. It was only in June 2010, after the failure of the nuclear fuel swap, that the Security Council adopted resolution 1929, which contained such tough novelties as restrictions on Iran's access to financial and banking services that could finance its nuclear and ballistic programmes, as well as on the provision of insurance and reinsurance to Iran's oil shipments.[16]

The United States and the European Union took additional steps to ratchet up the pressure. The US government imposed restrictions on the US-based activities of foreign companies that did business in Iran's energy sector, provided Iranian entities with refinery and shipping insurance services or had links with Iranian banks and firms tied to the IRGC.[17] In 2012 the US Congress included in the National Defence Authorisation Act (NDAA) a provision expanding the authority of the US Treasury to inflict huge fines on foreign banks operating transactions for Iranian financial institutions, including the Central Bank of Iran (CBI). This measure was meant to reduce Iran's energy export capacity, as oil and gas transactions were processed by the CBI.

The European Union, which had hitherto only added a few names to the lists of individuals and firms subjected to sanctions (Council of the European Union 2007), also upped the ante and agreed upon a wider array of tough restrictions. These comprised a ban on new investments in Iran's energy sector; measures to curtail trade, financial services, banking

relations and transport between EU countries and Iran; a ban on the provision of insurance and reinsurance services to Iran's shipping companies and their foreign partners; and eventually an oil and gas embargo (Council of the European Union 2010a, b, 2011, 2012a, b).[18]

Meanwhile, a form of underground conflict between the United States, Israel and Iran supervened, with mysterious cyberattacks infecting nuclear facilities in Iran (Gaietta 2015: 165–167; Sanger and Mazzetti 2016) and Iranian nuclear scientists falling victims to equally mysterious assassinations (Spengler 2010; Sanger 2012; Gaietta 2015: 144, 167, 171).[19] Israel was growing increasingly impatient and started to talk of military strikes openly (Sherwood 2012; Ravid 2012). Iran's Arab rivals in the GCC were equally anxious. Many worried that lack of progress in the E3/EU+3-Iran talks would spark an ultimately irresistible call for military action by the large US constituency that supported Israel and Saudi Arabia's stance (International Crisis Group 2012: 4). For the time being, however, the United States stuck to the line that the time was not ripe for military action. With the sanctions regime, the E3/EU+3 had put in place a financial siege of Iran that they believed would eventually break the Islamic Republic's resolve.

5   The Light at the End of the Tunnel: The Interim Deal

By early 2013, the E3's original goal of keeping Iran from developing an autonomous nuclear fuel cycle seemed to have become permanently out of reach. The IAEA reported that Iran's stock of LEU was growing (although not massively), that enrichment to 20 per cent as well as work on more advanced centrifuges were progressing, and that Iran fell short of providing all the information that the agency was after, particularly concerning the PMDs (IAEA Board of Governors 2013: 12). Iran's progress was such that the 'breakout time'—the time Iran would have theoretically needed to produce enough HEU for a single bomb—began being measured in months rather than years.[20]

At the same time, the international coalition opposing Iran's nuclear plans grew larger, with more and more countries scaling down their business and political ties with Tehran. Whatever hope the Iranians might still have had in 2010 that sanctions would not hit the economy and public finances hard, by early 2013 it was gone (Pollack 2013: 129–139). State

revenues were declining fast due to sanctions and the decision by such critical oil importers as China, India, Japan and South Korea to reduce their energy purchases from Iran (Katzman 2016: 36–38). In 2011, Iranian oil exports went down by 60 per cent, and they kept declining in 2012–13, as did oil production. Hard currency became increasingly unavailable, the rial-dollar exchange rate collapsed, inflation rose to somewhere between 50 and 70 per cent. Overall, Iran's GDP shrank considerably—according to the US Treasury, in early 2016 it was 15–20 per cent smaller than what would have been if no sanctions had been in place (ibidem: 49–50). All this took its toll on the living standards of ordinary Iranians, and riot police was forced to quell protests in late 2012 (BBC News 2012).

During the Ahmadinejad years, Iran's strategy was based on the conviction that Iran would be able to withstand international pressure by finding ways to circumnavigate sanctions or simply by absorbing the costs (International Crisis Group 2013). To an extent, this strategy was successful. Iran created 'facts on the ground', most of all its capacity to enrich, that soon became extremely difficult to reverse. Yet the Iranian leadership underestimated both the impact of sanctions and the cohesion of the coalition of states and institutions built by the United States and its partners. Moreover, the prospect for a military escalation had grown rather than receded. This must have greatly alarmed the most sensible minds in the Iranian leadership and especially the IRGC, as they would have certainly borne the brunt of US military might had the White House indeed ordered an attack against Iran's nuclear facilities (International Crisis Group 2012).

Entrenched in mutual recriminations and opposing views, Iran and its E3/EU+3 opponents nonetheless were in agreement about one point, namely that worse could still come. While tiny, this margin of overlap was sufficient to keep the E3/EU+3-Iran negotiating forum in place. In fact, the deterioration of the controversy in 2010–13 also witnessed a dramatic increase in pace and number of meetings between Iran and the E3/EU+3 group.

The first contacts occurred in late 2010. After a hiatus of over a year, the parties met in Geneva and Istanbul. The meetings yielded no results, as Iran and the E3/EU+3 did not go farther than mulishly repeating their respective, and incompatible, positions. In the following year, contacts between the E3/EU+3 and Iran were limited to exchanges of letters between Saeed Jalili, the Iranian chief nuclear negotiator, and the EU HR

Catherine Ashton, who like her predecessor Solana acted as the chief inter-locutor of the Iranians on behalf of the E3+3 (Fabius 2016: 8). Admittedly, this exercise at 'epistolary diplomacy' did not amount to much, yet it served the purpose of keeping channels of communication open (ibidem).

When negotiations eventually resumed in Istanbul, Baghdad and in April, May and June 2012, the E3/EU+3 presented the Iranians with another package of incentives in the civilian nuclear field. In return, they demanded that Iran halt enrichment to 20 per cent, close the Fordow enrichment centre and transfer all its stock of 20 per cent-enriched ura-nium to a third country under IAEA custody (accordingly, diplomats referred to this proposal as 'stop, shut and ship'; Gaietta 2015: 173–4). This was the frame of reference for a round of talks that took place in the Kazakh city of Almaty in February and April 2013. Softening their demands, the E3/EU+3 now consented to Iran's keeping a small amount of its 20 per cent-enriched uranium stock and suspending all activities in Fordow rather than shutting it down altogether. The Iranians said they were ready to freeze the installation of centrifuges in the Fordow facility and suspend further enrichment to 20 per cent, but no more (ibidem: 177–9).

Even if the parties failed to come to an agreement, somehow they man-aged to improve the atmosphere in the talks, as for the first time in years they had at least made some progress and brought their respective posi-tions closer to one another (ibidem: 179; Fabius 2016: 11). Iran also took some secondary yet important de-escalating measures, such as turning part of its stock of 20 per cent-enriched uranium to fuel plates, which are a much lesser proliferation concern than 20 per cent-enriched uranium in gaseous form (Thielmann 2012). But the most important development occurring at the time, at least in retrospect, was the establishment of a secret channel of communication between Iran and the United States in Oman's capital, Muscat.

Iran's Supreme Leader Khamenei had reportedly consented to this sep-arate track of nuclear diplomacy already in 2011, yet it was not before July 2012 that a preliminary meeting was organised and not until March 2013 that the two teams managed to discuss substantive matters (Rozen 2015). It was in the context of these initial Muscat meetings that the US repre-sentatives conveyed the message to the Iranians that the Obama adminis-tration was willing to accept a limited uranium enrichment programme in Iran (ibidem).[21] The breakthrough, however, occurred only in June 2013,

when Iranian voters elected a pragmatic regime insider as president, the same Hassan Rouhani who had been instrumental in starting and managing the E3/EU-Iran talks in 2003–5. Rouhani had campaigned on the promise to end Iran's isolation and revive the economy by having sanctions lifted, which evidently presupposed a compromise on the nuclear front (for an analysis of Rouhani's 2013 victory, see Maloney 2013). With his inauguration as president, a completely new phase in the nuclear dispute began.

Rouhani's new negotiating team, headed by Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, wasted no time in reaching out to the E3/EU+3. The parties met on the margin of the annual session of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in late September. Remarkably, the meeting was held at ministerial level and included a lengthy bilateral exchange between Zarif and US Secretary of State John Kerry (Gaietta 2015: 189; Fabius 2016: 13–17). Rouhani himself sounded much more conciliatory than his predecessor in his speech before the UNGA (Rouhani 2013). He even met with French President François Hollande in person (Reuters 2013a) and famously had a brief yet unprecedented phone call with President Obama himself (Reuters 2013b). Detractors attacked Rouhani as a 'wolf in sheep's clothing'—the preferred line of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu (Al-Jazeera 2013). However, that did not stop the E3/EU+3 and Iran to finally reach a preliminary agreement in Geneva on 24 November 2013 (Gaietta 2015: 191–6).

The Joint Plan of Action (JPOA), as the preliminary nuclear deal was officially called, was the most significant breakthrough since the 2004 Paris Agreement. Iran agreed to neutralise its stockpile of 20 per cent-enriched uranium,[22] cap enrichment to 5 per cent, refrain from installing new centrifuges and building new nuclear facilities, freeze the commissioning of the Arak nuclear reactor and suspend all work potentially leading to production of plutonium. It also consented to allow daily visits to Natanz and Fordow by IAEA inspectors and re-engage in talks with the agency over the PMDs (E3/EU+3 and Iran 2013: 1–2). In return, the E3/EU+3 pledged to halt efforts at reducing further Iran's oil exports, repatriate part of Iran's oil revenues, suspend restrictions on trade in petrochemicals and precious metals, avoid adoption of other nuclear-related sanctions, plus a number of other secondary steps (ibidem: 3). Iranian and E3/EU+3 negotiators, with the help of IAEA officials, finalised the details of the JPOA on 20 January 2014. They gave themselves until the end of June to agree on a final agreement.

6   On Two Fronts: Negotiating the Final Deal

Even to optimists a six-month deadline seemed a tall order. To get through the finish line, the E3/EU+3 and Iran had to agree on terms that could soothe proliferation concerns without permanently compromising Iran's nuclear infrastructure. This was a challenge of first order. Determining the technological and industrial limits to Iran's nuclear programme and verification procedures that would make military diversion impossible or at least extremely difficult to pursue was indeed no easy task. Counter-intuitively, the eminently technical nature of the negotiation did not provide a scientific background against which the merits and flaws of an eventual deal could be evaluated objectively. On the contrary, technical complexity fuelled politicisation, as theoretically neutral concepts—such as establishing a link between the scope of Iran's enrichment programme and its 'practical needs', or calculating the 'break-out time'—were in fact subjected to widely diverging interpretations (International Crisis Group 2014a: 16, ff.).

This irreducible grey area provided detractors with (almost) unlimited ammunition to criticise the nascent agreement. Powerful constituencies existed both in Iran and the United States that did not welcome the prospect of a deal, or at least the reciprocal concessions they anticipated a deal would have entailed. Iran's leadership, however, seemed to have solved its internal disagreements before the actual negotiation started. Supreme Leader Khamenei's decision to agree to the Oman-based secret talks signalled that he was willing to consider a deal with the Americans already before Rouhani's election. In September 2013, the supreme leader even made the case for 'heroic flexibility' in diplomacy before an audience of Revolutionary Guards (Bozorgmehr 2013). Afterwards, he consistently expressed support for Rouhani and his negotiating team, although he continued to complain about America's untrustworthiness.

By contrast, President Obama faced an unrelenting barrage of attacks from the US Congress as well as America's Middle Eastern allies. Saudi Arabia and the Sunni Gulf states preferred to convey their anxieties privately, but not so Israel. Prime Minister Netanyahu called the JPOA a 'historic mistake' (BBC News 2013) and constantly worked to undermine domestic US support for the final deal. He found a willing audience in the US Senate, which in early 2014 was prevented from discussing a bill introducing new sanctions on Iran only by Obama's threat to veto it (Obama 2014; see also Sect. 2 in Chap. 8).

Tensions between Obama and his domestic opponents peaked in March 2015, when John Boehner, the Speaker of the Republican-controlled House of Representatives, invited Netanyahu to speak before Congress against the wishes of the White House. The Israeli prime minister delivered a fiercely critical speech of Obama's approach, arguing against any deal that would leave Iran's enrichment capacity intact, even if temporarily limited (Netanyahu 2015).

A week later a Republican senator, Tom Cotton, persuaded 46 of his colleagues to sign a letter warning Iran's leaders that, absent Congressional approval, Obama's successor could have revoked any nuclear agreement "with the stroke of a pen" (Cotton et al. 2015). In May 2015, Congress adopted a law that gave it the power to reject the deal. The act, however, did not include any provision that could be seen in itself as an impediment to the ongoing negotiation process, leaving the Obama administration the leeway it needed to finalise the deal (Goldsmith 2015).

The entry into force of the JPOA had raised hopes that a diplomatic solution was indeed within reach. In January 2014, both the United States and the European Union provided Iran with the agreed level of sanctions relief (United States Department of State 2014; Council of the European Union 2014). In February, the IAEA reported that Iran had stopped enriching uranium to 20 per cent and had consented to more frequent inspections of the Fordow and Natanz enrichment facilities and the Arak heavy water reactor (IAEA Board of Governors 2014a, b). In July, the agency confirmed that Iran had neutralised its pre-existing stock of 20 per cent-enriched uranium (IAEA Board of Governors 2014c, d).

These encouraging developments notwithstanding, E3/EU+3 and Iranian negotiators struggled to make progress. The parties clashed, in particular, on the limits to Iran's enrichment capacity, the scope of IAEA verification powers, the duration of the accord, the resolution of the PMD issue and the mechanism presiding over the lifting of sanctions (International Crisis Group 2014b). The difficulty in overcoming these obstacles compelled the negotiators to postpone the deadline for the finalisation of the deal first to November 2014 and then to June 2015 (Fabius 2016: 17–25). The parties reported nonetheless that progress had been made during ten E3/EU+3-Iran rounds of negotiations in Vienna as well as in meetings in smaller formats in Rome (US-Russia-Iran) and Muscat (US-EU-Iran). Zarif and Ashton both insisted that there was a 'credible path' towards a comprehensive solution (Ashton and Zarif 2014; International Crisis Group 2014c).

In the first months of 2015, the E3/EU+3 and Iran intensified contacts at all levels. Zarif and Kerry decided to involve Ali Akbar Salehi, the head of the Atomic Energy Organisation of Iran (AEOI), and Ernest Moniz, the US secretary of energy—both trained nuclear physicists—to work out the technical details. Zarif, Kerry and the new EU HR Federica Mogherini, as well as the foreign ministers from the other E3+3, all invested personal energy and political capital in the endeavour. The efforts bore fruits, as the E3/EU+3 and Iran were able to agree on the parameters of a final deal in Lausanne in early April (United States Department of State 2015)[23] and, after marathon talks in June and July, finally sealed the deal in Vienna on 14 July 2015 (Fabius 2016: 27–36).

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), as the final deal was dubbed, attempted to block all possible pathways that Iran could take to develop a nuclear weapons capability while leaving Iran's nuclear industry intact and actually capable of expanding gradually over the years.

The agreement imposed limits on Iran's nuclear research and development (R&D), reduced the number of operational centrifuges by several thousands,[24] severely constrained development of more advanced centrifuges, trimmed down Iran's stock of LEU[25] and prevented any nuclear material from being introduced into the Fordow enrichment centre. These measures, to be phased out after 10–15 years, lengthened the time Iran would need to fabricate the core of a single bomb considerably, thus hampering the 'uranium path' towards a nuclear weapons capacity.[26] The JCPOA blocked the 'plutonium path' even more definitively, as Iran agreed to re-design the heavy water reactor of Arak (capable of producing plutonium once operational) in ways that posed much lesser proliferation concerns, and vowed never to produce weapons-grade plutonium. As for the 'clandestine path', the agreement gave the IAEA great latitude for inspecting Iran's nuclear supply chain for a period of up to 25 years and compelled Iran to implement the Additional Protocol for an unlimited period of time. The JCPOA also committed Iran and the IAEA to clarifying all lingering uncertainties surrounding Iran's past military-related nuclear activities.

In return, the E3/EU+3 committed to terminating all UN and EU sanctions and suspending all nuclear-related US sanctions (with some exceptions concerning trade with Iran in nuclear and ballistic materials and technologies as well as weapons sales).[27] The agreement set up a Joint Commission, consisting of E3/EU+3 and Iranian representatives, to address cases of alleged non- or insufficient compliance (E3/EU+3 and Iran 2015).

The JCPOA was a masterful arrangement that aimed to solve, tackle or get around all issues of concern at once. Few could doubt that the limits to Iran's nuclear programme, coupled with an unprecedented intrusive inspection regime, would make it extremely difficult for Iran to amass enough nuclear material for a bomb in a period of time so short that the IAEA or any foreign intelligence service would fail to notice. That would have given the E3/EU+3 the time to put together a concerted response. Anticipating the criticism that recreating the large sanction coalition against Iran would be impractical, the Obama administration and its EU partners had successfully pushed into the JCPOA a mechanism reinstating all UN, EU and US sanctions automatically if the Joint Commission failed to address a non-compliance complaint (the so-called snap-back mechanism).

The Western partners, however, did not have a definitive answer to the question of what Iran would do after the expiration of the JCPOA, when it would be fully entitled to develop an industrial-scale nuclear programme. They could only point to the fact that, given the 10–15 years' pause, Iran's nuclear industry would hardly be able to rush uranium enrichment production and that Iran's leaders would have few incentives to jeopardise again the nuclear programme by pursuing a nuclear weapons capacity with IAEA inspectors still on their territory (Einhorn 2015a).

The Iranian negotiators would certainly not have accepted anything less. While the talks were still ongoing, Khamenei had made public a number of red lines that Zarif and his team could not afford to ignore (The Iran Primer 2015). Keeping the potential for an industrial-scale nuclear programme, even if far removed in the future, topped the supreme leader's list. Another issue was his demand that economic, financial and banking sanctions be terminated upon the conclusion of the deal and not according to a step-by-step process, as it had been hitherto believed. The negotiators got around this problem by envisaging an elaborate implementation procedure according to which the Security Council would endorse the JCPOA immediately but sanctions would be lifted at a later stage, upon notification by the IAEA that Iran had addressed the PMDs and complied with its initial obligations.

The process unfolded as E3/EU+3 and Iranian negotiators anticipated. On 20 July 2015, the Security Council adopted Resolution 2231, which endorsed the JCPOA and superseded all other previously adopted resolutions (United Nations Security Council 2015). By September, it had become clear that US senators opposing the JCPOA had failed to muster enough votes to break the obstructionist tactics of the supporters of the

deal, let alone to override a presidential veto (CNN 2015). In October, both the Iranian Parliament and the Guardian Council, a body that is largely an emanation of the supreme leader,[28] endorsed the deal (AP 2015).

In December 2015, the IAEA issued a report on the PMDs, confirming again that Iran had conducted a coordinated effort to acquire the technical know-how for a nuclear weapons capability before 2003. Yet it asserted that the sparser military-related activities carried out after that date had been uncoordinated and "did not advance beyond feasibility and scientific studies" (IAEA Board of Governors 2015: 14). The agency was also allowed to inspect the military site of Parchin, where it found circumstantial evidence of past nuclear-related activities, but determined that there were "no credible indications of the diversion of the nuclear material in connection with the possible military dimensions to Iran's nuclear programme" after 2009 (ibidem: 15). While the IAEA report could not be seen as definitively closing the PMD file, it was enough for the E3/EU+3 and Iran to proceed to the next stage of the JCPOA implementation plan (Einhorn 2015b).

Between October 2015 and January 2016, Iran complied with the initial steps foreseen by the JCPOA, including modification of the Natanz, Fordow and Arak nuclear facilities. Upon notification by the IAEA, on 16 January 2016 UNSCR 2231 provisos terminating all UN sanctions became effective, as did the European Union's regulations lifting all economic, energy and banking restrictions on Iran (Council of the European Union 2015, 2016)[29] as well as the US president's suspension of all nuclear-related measures (Obama 2016a). The JCPOA was fully operational.[30]

The Vienna agreement did not end Iran's nuclear issue. Because it was such a complex agreement, a number of grey areas existed whose different interpretations could result in renewed tensions. In case of outright breach of, or withdrawal from, the deal by one of the parties, another crisis would be on the horizon. US President Trump's disavowal of the deal in October 2017 may be the first step towards the dismantlement of the JCPOA. Yet this would be a new crisis, different in nature from the one that unfolded between late 2003, when Iran and the E3 first reached an agreement on how to address international concerns over Iran's nuclear programme, and January 2016, when the JCPOA put those concerns to rest, at least on paper. This is the crisis that makes up the historical background of this research, and therefore it is opportune to end this brief historical overview on the day the JCPOA became fully operational.

NOTES

1. More alarming still was the finding of traces of enriched uranium at the Natanz facility as well as the Kalaye Electrical Company in Tehran, as it indirectly implied that Iran could have already started to secretly enrich uranium at some undeclared facilities (Gaietta 2015: 92). At the time, Iran was not known to have enriched uranium – in fact, it was not even assumed to possess the necessary technology or to have mastered the know-how. Sometime later, Western experts concluded that the traces of enriched uranium found in Iran derived from contaminated machinery that Iran had imported from Pakistan (Linzer 2005). This finding removed the concern that Iran could have enriched uranium in undisclosed facilities, but not the one over Iran's enrichment programme.

2. In the early 1990s, Iran tried to persuade the Germans to reactivate work at Bushehr, but their efforts hit against a wall. According to Seyed Hossein Mousavian, Iran's ambassador to Germany from 1990 to 1997 (and nuclear negotiator in 2003–5), the Germans declined Iran's requests under pressure from the United States and Israel (Mousavian 2008: 65).

3. The United States commonly refers to Iran as a state 'sponsor of terrorism'. Iran was allegedly involved in attacks against Iranian exiles as well as US, Israeli and Saudi targets in countries such as Argentina, France, Germany, Kenya, Lebanon and Saudi Arabia itself. While several cases of 'terrorism' involved political assassinations of Iranian dissidents and enemies to the regime (Mousavian 2008: 135–136), others made casualties among foreign civilians, such as the 1992 bombing of the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires. The US Department of State believed Iran to have provided a limited number of al-Qaeda operatives with safe haven in exchange for a pledge to abstain from any activity inside Iran. In addition, Iran actively and openly supported armed groups such as Hezbollah in Lebanon as well as Hamas and Islamic Jihad in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, which the US Department of State officially designated terrorist organisations (Department of State 2012).

4. Phone interview with a high-level E3 official, 21 April 2009.

5. Production of uranium hexafluoride is alternatively called 'gas conversion' because it consists of the transformation of uranium oxide (the so-called yellow cake, as it appears in the form of yellow concentrate powder) into gaseous form. Uranium hexafluoride is the feedstock used in enrichment activities.

6. On the 'Khan network', see Broad et al. (2004) and Albright and Hinderstein (2005).

7. The centrifuges are rotating cylinders fed with uranium hexafluoride (which is in gaseous form) that separate the more fissionable U_{235} isotope

from the less fissionable U_{238} by spinning at supersonic speed. Uranium is then turned again into solid form, ready to be crafted into a fuel rod (necessary for a nuclear reactor) or, after further enrichment, into the core material of a bomb.

8. The full text of the Paris Agreement was included in a communication by IAEA Director General El Baradei to the Board of Governors, based on a letter sent to him by the E3 and Iran on 26 November 2004.

9. According to Iran's constitution, the two-term limit only applies to consecutive terms. Having been president from 1989 to 1997, Rafsanjani was entitled to run again in 2005.

10. The full text of the E3/EU August 2005 offer to Iran is included in a communication by the IAEA director general to the agency's executive board dated 5 August. The Iranian government's response was delivered some time at the end of August 2005.

11. The E3/EU statement was included in a communication by the IAEA.

12. A brief *History of official proposals on the Iranian nuclear issue* is posted on the website of the Arms Control Association, the US-based non-governmental organisation (https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/Iran_Nuclear_Proposals). The page was last updated in January 2014.

13. Obama delivered his TV address on Nowruz, the Persian New Year's Day (19 March 2009). The video is available on the White House's website at www.whitehouse.gov/video/The-Presidents-Message-to-the-Iranian-People. In a less publicised way, the message was conveyed again in 2010.

14. Interview with an official from the HR office, 22 June 2010. Iran's May 2010 deal with Brazil and Turkey superficially resembled the US-French-Russian-Iranian nuclear fuel swap of October 2009. On substance, however, it was flawed in many respects. The agreement committed Iran to shipping abroad the same amount of LEU foreseen by the October 2009 deal, but neglected three critical factors: first, in the interval between the two deals Iran had increased its LEU stock, whereby it would have remained in possession of enough LEU for fabricating the necessary HEU for a bomb anyway; second, the original deal was supposed to deprive Iran of any reason to enrich uranium to the 20 per cent threshold, which Iran had started doing after the deal's collapse; third, the Brazilian-Turkish version of the deal failed to address Iran's autonomous enrichment capacity, which was the main bone of contention for the E3/EU+3. Brazil and Turkey seemed to view the nuclear fuel swap as an end in itself, while the E3/EU+3 had seen it as a confidence-building measure whose purpose was to create enough room for a negotiation over a comprehensive agreement (Alcaro 2011: 127–8).

15. The US intelligence community asserted in 2007 that it had high confidence that Iran had frozen all military or military-related nuclear work in 2003 and moderate confidence that by 2007 it had not yet restarted it.
16. Other measures included a prohibition to develop ballistic capabilities (which Iran seemed to be acquiring at good pace), an embargo on certain heavy weapons, as well as a framework for intercepting and inspecting cargoes suspected of transporting forbidden goods to Iran.
17. The legal basis for actions against companies with links to the IRGC are Presidential Executive Orders 13,224 (23 September 2001) and 13,382 (28 June 2005). The Treasury Department maintains and periodically updates black lists of persons and companies.
18. An up-to-date and detailed account of UN, EU and US sanctions against Iran is available on the website of Iran Watch, an observatory set up by the Wisconsin Project on Nuclear Arms Control (www.iranwatch.org/).
19. The cyberattacks were reportedly the result of coordinated US-Israeli action. The targeted assassinations have been attributed to Israel's intelligence (Pollack 2013: 147–150).
20. Iran Watch compiled a list of nuclear milestones that Iran crossed over the last 50 years. The timeline is available here: http://www.iran-watch.org/our-publications/weapon-program-background-report/iran-nuclear-milestones-1967-2016
21. The US delegations included high-level or top officials from the State Department: Jake Sullivan, Secretary Clinton's deputy chief of staff in July 2012, and Deputy Secretary of State William Burns in March 2013 (Rozen 2015).
22. Iran committed to doing so by converting part of the stock to oxidised form, which is less prone to proliferation risks, as well as by blending it down to 3–5 per cent levels of enrichment.
23. As the E3/EU+3 and Iran had not really agreed to a text in Lausanne, but only to some general parameters, the 'fact sheet' that the State Department published on its website reflected the US view of the set of arrangements on which the parties had reached an understanding of the sort (Fabius 2016: 32).
24. To approximately 5000, down from around 19,000, 9000 of which operational.
25. From 10 tons to 300 kg.
26. Experts estimated that Iran would need about one year to produce enough HEU for a bomb. It is worth underlining that Iran would still need to 'weaponise' the HEU, that is, shape it to fit atop a ballistic missile (the only credible delivery system Iran would use). In short, the time for Iran to have a single weapon ready to use would be longer than one year (probably significantly longer).

27. Iran was allowed to trade in nuclear technologies under a special arrangement. The embargo on weapons sales and technologies and materials for ballistic missiles were to remain in place for five and eight years, respectively.

28. Six of the twelve members of the Guardian Council are appointed directly by the supreme leader, while the other six are picked by the parliament from a list of jurists provided by the head of the judiciary (who is himself appointed by the supreme leader). The Guardian Council has the power to disqualify would-be candidates for the presidency or parliamentary seats and veto any law passed by parliament.

29. For a list of all actions that the European Union was committed to taking in accordance with the JCPOA on Implementation Day, see EEAS (2016).

30. The Brookings Institution and the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), two leading Washington-based think tanks, have posted on their website a useful summary of the JCPOA's implementation timetable. The Brookings' timetable is available at: https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2015/07/21/a-comprehensive-timeline-of-the-iran-nuclear-deal/. The CSIS' one is available here: http://jcpoatimeline.csis.org/

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The Creation and Endurance of the E3/EU

With both introductory chapters on theory and history completed, the empirical analysis of the E3/EU lead group can finally begin. The following research inquires about the same questions that guided the theoretical effort, namely the conditions of possibility and the implications for EU foreign policy of lead groups. The remainder of the book consequently asks how the E3/EU formed and why it endured, and what the group's EU foreign policy-shaping and identity-constituting capacity was. This part is dedicated to fulfilling the first of these two tasks.

As explained in Chap. 2, lead groups form if the insiders determine that their interest in crisis management is better served by seeking support from EU institutions and the outsiders conclude that their own interest is better served by accepting the leadership of a few member states rather than by opposing it. This can only happen if the group's insiders frame their action consistently with the EU-mediated identity of the outsiders, as relayed and construed in discourse. In empirical terms, this composite theoretical statement translates into two tasks:

- An inquiry about the bargain or compromise underlying the E3/EU team
- A review of how the E3/EU action was discursively framed by the E3

The two tasks are fulfilled in Chaps. 4 and 5, respectively.

The Bargain: How the E3/EU Came About

This chapter focuses on the formation of the E3/EU group, a question that extends beyond its historical genesis and looks into its structural conditions. This is done by process tracing, understood as a method that connects a historical account of events with a theoretically defined pattern (George and Bennett 2005). The point here is to connect the formation of the E3/EU to an interest-driven intergovernmental bargain between EU member states, thus following the liberal intergovernmentalist explanation of the conditions of possibility of lead groups (sections 'Liberal Intergovernmentalist Solutions', 'Building a Hybrid Theoretical Framework' and 'Explaining the Conditions of Possibility of EU Lead Groups' in Chap. 2).

The chapter first sheds light on the external circumstances that opened the room for the E3 to take the initiative. It is worth remembering that lead groups are affected by an irreducible degree of contingency—they are, after all, ad hoc solutions to specific problems (Sect. 3 in Chap. 1). Their genesis is thus always rooted in a historical context shaped by factors on which lead groups have little influence, if any at all. Tracing these *permissive* conditions is therefore a preliminary but necessary step to pave the way for the analysis of the group's *structural* conditions. Whereas Sect. 1 deals with the former, Sects. 2 and 3 trace and discuss the latter. Section 2 elaborates on the stakes that the E3 had in Iran's nuclear crisis and their interest in cooperating with each other. Section 3 explores the nature of

the bargain underlying the E3/EU, namely the reasons for which the E3 determined to seek EU support and the other member states consented to the E3's leadership.

1   The Perfect Storm: The Permissive Conditions of the E3 Action

The November 2004 Paris Agreement between the E3/EU and Iran was supposed to restore confidence in Iran's ultimate objectives. While it was not sufficient to dispel suspicions about Iran's plans, the agreement represented a significant breakthrough, not least because it lent credibility to the notion that the nuclear dispute could be resolved diplomatically. International observers praised the work done by the Europeans. The British, French and Germans started and ran the whole process. For countries that just over a year earlier had spearheaded opposite camps within the European Union over the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq, such display of unity—between themselves as well as within the Union—was no minor achievement. How did they get there?

The Europeans who reached out to the Iranians in 2003 were no strangers in Tehran. After the landslide of reform-minded Khatami in Iran's 1997 presidential elections, the European Union had made an effort to establish a broad, stable relationship with Iran based on political dialogue and blossoming trade and investment ties. The process, as explained in more detail in Sect. 1 in Chap. 6, was anything but smooth, nor had it really achieved substantial results. But it reflected a mutual resolve to remain engaged. The E3/EU action, in short, did not come from nowhere.

That said, years of increasing trade exchanges and irregular diplomatic engagement had not made the Europeans the natural promoters of the initiative on the nuclear file. Most observers in Europe,[1] Iran and elsewhere were keenly aware that the E3 were catapulted onto the main stage by circumstances that were, for the most part, independent from their own will and power. The E3 and the European Union did not possess the authority of a *super partes* international body such as the United Nations Security Council. They also lacked full credibility, since opposition from Washington could hamper the delivery of what they were negotiating. Yet, neither the Security Council nor the United States were in the position to negotiate a settlement with Iran or force one upon it.

Consider where the United States stood in 2003. When the nuclear dispute broke out, analysts and practitioners alike read it as a further, perhaps final, chapter in the history of US-Iranian antagonism (*The Economist* 2003; International Crisis Group 2003b, 2004; International Institute for Strategic Studies 2004; Bowen and Kidd 2004; Samore 2004; Milani 2005; Perthes 2005a, b; Zaborski 2005; Tarock 2005; Linden 2006). Such was the magnitude of the nuclear issue, so potentially dangerous and destabilising its consequences, that it would eventually force the United States to move from passive antagonism towards action. Yet the result in Washington was exactly the opposite: paralysis (International Crisis Group 2004: 14).

Having declared Iran part of the 'axis of evil', President Bush had left little doubt that his preference was regime change in Tehran. The nuclear dispute forced his administration to devise a response, however, when no real thought had been put as to how to bring about regime change and, critically, when the United States was spending much of its foreign policy resources in the occupation and reorganisation of Iraq. As a result, the administration could not agree upon a proactive course of action (Einhorn 2004: 21).

Appetite for a negotiation was scarce or non-existent. In later years, the story broke that in May or June 2003 the Bush administration, reportedly upon insistence of Vice President Dick Cheney, spurned an offer by Iranian President Khatami to address all contentious issues between Tehran and Washington, including Iran's nuclear plans, in exchange for full normalisation of relations.[2] While US officials later argued that the offer was not authoritative (Litwak 2008: 101–2), it is unlikely that the Bush administration would have considered it anyway. Having been warning about proliferation risks in Iran for years, the United States felt vindicated by the 2003 IAEA findings. The prevailing position in the administration was that talking with Iran would have been an unduly reward for a reprehensible conduct that the Iranians had to reverse under threat of punitive measures and not because lured by the promise of incentives. In addition, the designation of Iran as 'evil' had made any notion of engagement politically toxic because, according to the administration, it would have implied a form of legitimisation of the clerical regime.

US unwillingness to talk with Iran was no secret. Much of the world, including the Europeans, actually worried that Iran could become the next testing ground, after Iraq, of the newly announced doctrine of 'preemptive war', arguably the most remarkable element of the 2002 US

National Security Strategy (NSS) (Bush 2002: 19).[3] To be sure, few believed that the United States could embark in a major invasion and subsequent occupation of a country three times the size and population of Iraq while still busy with stabilising Iraq itself. But the prospect of a 'surgical' strike aimed at destroying Iran's nuclear facilities from the air did not seem remote (Dinmore 2004). However, opinions varied abundantly as to the conditions and the timing for taking such a bold step. In the end, in 2003 the US administration was unprepared to go down that path (International Crisis Group 2003b: 28).

The problem was that it was unprepared to do much else (*The Economist* 2003). Unwilling to talk, unable to take proactive action, the Bush administration fell back on its decades-long policy of urging states around the world to increase pressure on Iran. Arguably, its anti-Iran campaign had greater appeal this time, as the IAEA findings had raised legitimate concerns about Iran's compliance with non-proliferation standards. Yet, the insistence of US officials to have Iran referred to the Security Council was anything but universally shared (Agence Europe 2004). Secretary of State Colin Powell was not even able to garner support within the IAEA to set a 'trigger mechanism' according to which Iran would automatically be referred to the Security Council if it failed to abide by the Paris Agreement with the Europeans (Kessler 2006).

The irony of US policy at the time was that, had it been successful in referring Iran to the Security Council, it would have achieved little. Neither Russia nor China, both veto-wielding UNSC permanent members, shared the American assessment of Iran's nuclear programme as an imminent threat. Consequently, they were not ready to talk about sanctions. This is not to say that Moscow and Beijing were not worried at all.

Russia found the eventuality of a nuclear power run by an opaque regime emerging not far from Russia's troubled southern border anything but reassuring (Adomeit 2006). It was nonetheless unwilling to let tensions rise, partly because it feared the consequences of a US-Iran confrontation, partly because it did not want to strain its own relations with the Iranians. Burdened with the weight of a history of competition in the Caucasus, Russian-Iranian relations were not exactly friendly. Yet both Moscow and Tehran had learned to engage pragmatically. The main item in the Iranian-Russian bilateral agenda was the agreement over the Bushehr nuclear power plant, which the Iranians had commissioned from the Russians in the early 1990s (Sect. 1 in Chap. 3). The Russians were determined to honour their commitments, and kept

resisting US pressure to do otherwise (International Crisis Group 2003b: 25). They did, however, turn the Bushehr issue into leverage on the Iranians by delaying work or raising costs—the power plant was only completed in 2010, almost ten years behind schedule (Khlopkov and Lutkova 2010). More importantly, the Russians ensured that the Bushehr power plant would pose no proliferation risks in that it would use only Russian-produced nuclear fuel and Iran would be required to give back all the spent fuel—which otherwise could have been used for reprocessing purposes.[4]

China's position on the nuclear dispute was akin to Russia's, although for different reasons. The Chinese had their own proliferation concerns and were willing to bolster the NPT regime. Indeed, contrary to Russia, China did bow to US pressure and in 1997 interrupted nuclear cooperation with Iran—although it later admitted to have passed on to Iran 1.8 tons of uranium compound (International Crisis Group 2003b: 26). At the same time, they viewed Iran's claim to nuclear energy as legal and judged the evidence available insufficient to justify a formal Security Council reprimand. China also had more parochial and nonetheless compelling reasons to urge caution. Ever hungrier for energy resources to sustain its industrialisation process, Beijing took special care to cultivate relations with energy-rich countries, especially those where US investment was modest or non-existent, such as Iran. It was out of question that the Chinese would support sanctions in 2003.

France and the United Kingdom were also unwilling to involve the Security Council early on. They anticipated opposition from China and Russia and feared a repetition of the show of bitter divisions and recriminations in the run-up to the American invasion of Iraq. The French and the British, as well as the Germans, maintained that diplomacy was the wisest choice. This conviction was not the product of wishful thinking. The debate about the nuclear programme in Iran was open and diverse enough for the Europeans to have reasonable expectations that an overture would not be spurned out of hand.

In the early 2000s, the reformist season of Iranian President Khatami was drawing to a close. This had less to do with the fact that the reform-minded cleric was approaching the end of his second and last term than it had with his modest achievements (Kaussler 2008: 276, 279–280, 286–7). In spite of his landslides in 1997 and 2001, Khatami had eventually been incapable of bringing about real change. The regime remained largely oppressive of political pluralism and civil activism, the presidency

constrained by opposition from hard-line quarters and lack of support from Supreme Leader Khamenei. Conservatives rather than Khatami loyalists dominated institutions such as the judiciary and the IRGC. Public opinion had also cooled on the reformist camp, viewed as incapable of effectively confronting hard-line forces (International Crisis Group 2003a: 4–5).

The conservatives were divided themselves. Facing the old guard who had steered the country during the war with Iraq and overseen its partial recovery in the 1990s—and which was in turn split into traditionalists such as Khamenei and pragmatists like former President Rafsanjani and SNSC secretary Rouhani—was a new generation of hard-liners. These were men who shared with the population at large dissatisfaction with the conservative establishment, although for opposite reasons. They had come of age in the trenches of the war with Iraq and tended to identify the Islamic Republic not so much with a revolutionary promise of change and elation but with a desperate defence of Shia and Persian identity (Hunter 2014). It was in this latter group that advocates of a more assertive course in regional and other matters were to be found. Many of these Iranian 'neo-conservatives' (International Crisis Group 2004: 7) had links or were members of the Revolutionary Guards, who had a prominent role in the nuclear programme (see Sect. 4 in Chap. 3).

The greater influence of the conservatives—in which the 'neo-cons' were particularly vocal—prevented the insulation of the nuclear issue from a broader debate about Iran's security policy and regional role. Conservatives made compelling arguments about the fact that Iran was in a precarious predicament, with a US administration not only hostile but willing to put troops on the ground both west (Iraq) and east (Afghanistan) of the Islamic Republic, not to speak of US navy and air forces in the Gulf. Few failed to notice the different treatment that the United States had given Iraq, a country not possessing nuclear weapons that was invaded, and North Korea, which was left in peace despite the fact that it had left the NPT and was rushing towards the bomb. In light of this, some Iranians found the nuclear military option increasingly appealing (International Crisis Group 2003b: 18–19).

These arguments were insufficient to tilt the balance towards a decision to build up a nuclear arsenal. On that account, the debate remained polarised and unfinished. But hawkish arguments resonated in the public opinion (and in the establishment too) and decisively contributed to the politicisation of the nuclear issue. Iran, it was said, was being unjustly

singled out. As usual, the West was applying a double standard: Iran, an NPT member, was being denied its rights under that treaty while Israel was never censored for having built a nuclear arsenal and never acceded the NPT. Iran had to withstand pressure. Soon, no politician, not even in the reformist camp, could fail to stand up for Iran's rights to produce nuclear energy autonomously and hope to have a political career thereafter (International Crisis Group 2004: 8–9).

The politicisation of the nuclear issue resulted in overwhelming support, spread across reformists and conservatives as well as the public opinion and the establishment, not only for the nuclear programme, but also for Iran's right to develop the whole fuel cycle. Apart from this, opinions varied enormously (Mousavian 2008: 152). At stake was not—or not only—whether Iran should eventually build a nuclear arsenal. After all, since the government always insisted that it had no military ambitions, the merits of building nuclear weapons were publicly discussed only by pundits and experts, not officials (International Crisis Group 2003b: 17–18). The urgent question was how far Iran should go in advancing its nuclear programme.

Lack of consensus about where to draw the finish line of Iran's nuclear progress resulted in a widely shared agreement that the programme should at the very least advance further than it was in 2003. Most people, including the government, evidently considered the capacity of Iran to master the nuclear fuel cycle autonomously as the baseline. It remained unclear though whether that implied that Iran should become a 'virtual' nuclear weapon state, meaning that it would have all necessary know-how, technology and material to build a small arsenal in a short time span, or whether it could be content with less.

The European overture provided the government with a reasonable middle path (Mousavian 2008: 153). By agreeing to negotiate, the Iranians achieved several short-term objectives. They undermined the case for bringing the nuclear file to the Security Council; created an incentive for the Europeans to resist calls for tougher action by the United States (so possibly driving a wedge between Europe and America); and turned the nuclear dispute into a bargain, whereby Iran would meet IAEA requests not under duress but in exchange for incentives (thus avoiding appearing weak). In return, the Iranians agreed to open the nuclear programme to more intrusive IAEA inspections and, more broadly speaking, implicitly admitted that their past behaviour left much to be desired and had to be rectified. It was a calculated gamble, full of uncertainties but also of potential benefits (Mousavian 2012: 97–100).

In conclusion, the E3 and later E3/EU action was made possible by a combination of elements on which the Europeans had no real influence. They intercepted the Iranian government's readiness to negotiate—and, by some accounts, a discreet request coming from parts of the US administration (Linden 2006: 60–61)—and took the initiative because the natural promoters of any action on Iran, that is, the United States or the Security Council, were unavailable.[5]

2   A FAVOURABLE STAR ALIGNMENT: THE CONVERGENCE OF E3 INTERESTS

Iran's nuclear plans intersected with the interests of the E3 in several respects: security, normative, economic.

Concerns about Iran's progress in developing ballistic missile capabilities notwithstanding, the three did not perceive a nuclear-capable Iran as a direct threat to their territory.[6] However, the E3 reckoned that the nuclear dispute would indirectly impinge on their security interests because of its severe destabilising potential in the Gulf area.[7] The three knew that Iran's alleged pursuit of nuclear weapon capabilities would result in a further deterioration of relations with its Arab rivals and Israel and possibly, if not eventually, lead to a US or a coordinated US-Israeli bombing campaign (Bertram 2008: 31; Alcaro 2012: 7–10; Pollack 2013: 70–79). As the E3 did not count on Iran remaining a passive target, they anticipated a prolonged conflict in an area ranging from Afghanistan to Iraq and the Levant. The United Kingdom in particular had understandable worries that an open conflict with Iran would put British troops deployed in southern Iraq—a mostly Shia-populated area where Iran's influence was widely felt—in jeopardy.

At stake in the nuclear dispute with Iran was also the upholding of the nuclear non-proliferation regime (Bergenäs 2010: 504; Pollack 2013: 83–100). The E3 were very much concerned that the NPT, a pillar of international security for several decades, was faltering. The decision by the Bush administration to invade Iraq to prevent it from acquiring weapons of mass destruction had already undermined the credibility of IAEA inspectors, who had not found evidence supporting US claims of an imminent threat. The inspectors' conclusions eventually proved accurate, but in 2003 there was a widespread perception that the IAEA verification system could not be entirely relied upon. Confidence in the non-proliferation regime was further eroded by North Korea's January 2003 announcement

that it was pulling out of the NPT. If Iran too withdrew, the E3 (and many others) feared, it would deal a devastating blow to the treaty. If other countries in the area emulated the Islamic Republic—as many worried they would—the whole non-proliferation regime would crumble under the unsustainable pressure of a nuclear arms race in the Gulf.[8]

The dispute with Iran also affected the economic interests of France and Germany. In 2003 German exports to Iran amounted to 2.7 billion euros (versus a mere 300 million worth of imports). The French imported significantly more from Iran (about 1 billion euros, mostly crude), although the trade balance was positive for them too (French exports hovered around 2 billion euros).[9] These figures were not impressive. But they were not irrelevant either and, importantly, they were growing (German and French trade with Iran would in fact continue to grow for several years thereafter). In addition, Iran's energy sector was a tempting target for direct investments as well as an important source of oil supplies, particularly for France.[10]

With their security, normative and to a lesser extent economic interests affected, the E3 had good reasons to fret about Iran's nuclear plans. US ostracism towards the Islamic Republic and the divisions within the Security Council made them even more anxious, as the diplomatic vacuum in which the issue was unfolding could turn into a slippery slope towards escalation. In the words of a German expert, "Paris and Berlin worried that the United States could do something stupid,"[11] namely fuelling a confrontation that would end up in air strikes or worse. Such shared interests warranted some form of preventive action.

Finally, Iran's nuclear dispute presented Germany and France, as well as the United Kingdom, with an opportunity to relaunch cooperation and bolster Europe's credentials. The failure to find common ground on how to react to America's Iraq plans had left the future E3 bruised and concerned about their standing in Europe and beyond. All three countries felt an urgent need to mend fences.[12] While they had strongly disagreed on how to handle Iraq, and continued to have diverging assessments of the wisdom of the Bush administration's aggressive counter-proliferation policy, the three dreaded the prospect of another Middle Eastern crisis.

For the British, a working relationship with France and Germany was a precondition for being an influential player in the shaping of EU institutions and policies as well as in ensuring London's ability to act as a bridge between Europe and the United States. These were key objectives that the Labour government led by Tony Blair had been tirelessly pursuing since

its inauguration in 1997. The Blair government was not, in principle, opposed to a muscular approach to proliferation crises. Yet, the British did not think of a 'muscular approach' as being the same as 'unilateralism', and actually continued to value the legitimacy benefits emanating from multilateral endorsements (Davidson and Powers 2005: 419–421; Kitchen and Vickers 2013: 307). Moreover, Foreign Minister Straw, who did not possess the same interventionist zeal that animated Prime Minister Blair, initially handled the Iran file. Blair himself was unwilling to precipitate another crisis while the occupation of Iraq was still ongoing, thus making British preferences converge with France and Germany's.

For the continental powers, having the United Kingdom on their side was of the utmost importance. The rift over Iraq had been more harmful to France and Germany than it had to the United States, as neither country could hope to achieve much on the international stage if the European Union continued to split. British participation in the E3 action would shelter them from criticisms from the United States and at the same time help win a broader support across Europe, especially in the pro-US camp that had backed the Iraq war.[13]

During the crisis over Iraq, the French and Germans felt vulnerable to the charge that they failed to present alternative options to US counter-proliferation policies. Even before the Iran issue became a priority, the French and Germans had engaged their partners across the English Channel in a discussion about how to take responsibility for international security and confront proliferation crises. A revived focus on the merits of diplomacy—including coercive diplomacy—and the imperative to carry out non-proliferation policies without compromising on the authority of relevant multilateral fora were at the core of this debate. The point was to show that European countries were capable of taking responsibility for the security of their neighbourhood (Bertram 2008: 17). French President Jacques Chirac, who openly urged Europe to stand on its own feet in an increasingly multipolar world (Sciolino 2004), supported this proposition.

Restoring European unity and cohesion was a theme that resonated widely in Germany. Chancellor Gerhard Schröder spoke of the need for Europe's 'emancipation' from the United States, even though he insisted that that implied cooperation, not divergence. The problem, Schröder said, was not "too much of America, but too little of Europe" (Hofmann and Naumann 2003). By teaming with more established powers such as France and the United Kingdom, the Germans wanted to convey a message that they felt directly responsible for managing issues that infringed

not only on their security interests, but also on that of the United States. The Germans also felt a special commitment to providing security to Israel due to Nazi Germany's responsibility for the extermination of European Jews during World War II.[14]

Berlin's activism on Iran's nuclear issue reflected a deliberate attempt to have Germany play a security policy role more commensurate with its economic strength. Schröder saw this as a quest for 'normalcy', a way to catch up with the two military powerhouses of Europe, France and the United Kingdom, and gain legitimacy for pursuing the national interest with no prejudice of Germany's standing. Germany would engage in a campaign to win a permanent seat at the United Nations Security Council in 2004–5 against this backdrop. On the record, the Germans never linked participation in the E3 group on Iran with Berlin's UNSC bid and they acknowledged that the link was tenuous at best even when speaking off the records.[15] Still, the two things combined in lending substance to Germany's desire to raise its international profile.[16]

When the Iran case started to climb up the international non-proliferation agenda, then, France, Germany and the United Kingdom were already engaged in a debate on how to face strategic challenges. They shared security and normative interests; they were determined to show that they were no bystanders in Europe's enlarged neighbourhood; and they were very much keen to heal the wounds left by the divisions over Iraq. The E3 were also quite close in their assessment of the risks emanating from the looming dispute with Iran and the way the issue had to be handled.

3   THREE IS THE NUMBER: HOW THE E3 ENDED UP REPRESENTING THE EUROPEAN UNION

In the account of several E3 officials, the process that led France, Germany and the United Kingdom to join forces was incremental (albeit very quick) and largely determined by considerations of practical, rather than political, expedience.[17] Intensified contacts between the E3 diplomacies soon generated a dynamic on its own, which in turn created momentum for a joint action.

The three were relatively comparable as far as their resources and international influence were concerned, and looked at each other as natural partners. The Iraq crisis actually reinforced this attitude in Paris and Berlin, because it contributed to shaping a personal bond between President Chirac and Chancellor Schröder. Prime Minister Blair, as stated above, was

very much keen to have a good relationship with the most influential players in the European Union, so a tripartite coordinated action was looked upon favourably in London. More in general, lacking the catalysing pull of the United States, it made sense for each E3 country to look at one another for consultation and possibly joint action.

Precisely because the E3 action was not the result of a predetermined calculus but of an incremental process, the E3 were not particularly worried about how their action would reverberate on their European Union partners—at least in the beginning. The E3 believed that they had the required skills and capabilities (barely) for what initially seemed a one-time initiative, the process that led to the October 2003 Tehran Agreed Statement. The European Union, by contrast, had no strong crisis management record.[18] In addition, the E3 calculated that a restricted group, comprising Europe's largest countries, would be more capable of abiding by strict confidentiality standards and would therefore be more credible and less vulnerable to divisive tactics by Iran than a larger grouping.[19]

That said, that the European Union would at a certain stage have to be involved must have been in the back of the mind of E3 negotiators from the start—and, according to some E3 officials at least, it actually was.[20] The E3 had no incentive to keep their EU partners entirely in the dark. They made no secret of their exploratory meetings with the Iranians in August 2003 and reportedly informed Italy, the then holder of the EU presidency, about the October 2003 travel of the E3 foreign ministers to Tehran.[21] Subsequently, they took care to share information about progress in the implementation of the deal on a regular basis. For instance, during the monthly meeting of the EU ambassadors to Tehran, the then holder of the presidency usually gave the floor to an E3 representative for a briefing on the nuclear issue. The same occurred in the relevant working groups in Brussels.

Thus, a regular exchange mechanism was in place prior to the formal association of the European Union to the negotiating team. In the words of a former E3 ambassador to Tehran, the three "recognised the need to work *alongside* the European Union", even though they maintained that "working *through* the EU's formal mechanisms would have been unfeasible."[22] A senior E3 official (from a different E3 country) concurred that "in a way, the [E3] initiative was conducted on behalf of the Union even prior to the special arrangement under which the High Representative was incorporated into the negotiating team."[23] In fact, the same senior official continued, the issue for the E3 was not *if* to involve the European Union, but *how* to do that.

Why did the E3 get to this conclusion? What had changed with respect to the period prior to October 2003?

For one, several EU member states wanted to have a say on the issue. In early fall 2003, the Italian and Spanish governments expressed concerns that the E3 action would incur the ire of the United States and provoke another transatlantic spat.[24] Spanish Foreign Minister Ana Palacio, who was a staunch supporter of the Bush administration's counter-proliferation policies, nurtured serious doubts about the wisdom of talking to the Iranians (she apparently described the prospective E3-Iran talks as a 'futile exercise'). She was also displeased by "three EU members purporting to act on behalf of the EU as a whole" (as she reportedly said to US Undersecretary of Defence John Bolton in October 2003).[25] Palacio said that Poland, another strongly pro-US country, was of the same opinion, and that the Spanish would "stand firm against the formation of a 'directoire of three' that proposes to act on behalf of the EU without the consent of all EU members".[26] Nevertheless, Italy and Spain kept their misgivings largely behind closed doors.

Other EU member states were less concerned or even showed benevolent tolerance, as they were either uninterested or thought that the E3 were better-resourced and better-equipped to do the job. But as time passed and the E3 contemplated the use of EU assets in their negotiation with the Iranians, a desire for greater participation spread across the Union.[27] The E3 were aware of this growing discomfort and were willing to address their EU partners' concerns.

In addition, the E3 realised that the collapse of the Tehran Agreed Statement warranted a renewed diplomatic effort to re-engage the Iranians. The formal involvement of the European Union was helpful in this regard for at least three reasons. First, it would bolster the *legitimacy* of the E3 diplomatic effort, both within the European Union and outside of it. Second, it would add *political weight* to the team negotiating with the Iranians. Third, it would allow the E3 to get *access to EU assets* to use as bargaining chips in the talks.[28]

A former E3 ambassador to Iran argued that the desire to avoid splits within the European Union and win greater legitimacy for the E3 action was by far the most important driver. The EU assets for which the E3 were aiming at the time basically consisted in the offer of a Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA) to Iran, a rather basic deal that contained only limited benefits for third parties ("something countries such as Tunisia were being offered some thirty years ago," he said). In addition,

the trade facilitations in the economic sectors in which the Iranians might have had an interest, such as nuclear technology and related products, mostly fell under the competences of the member states rather than the Union.[29] Other E3 diplomats were of a different opinion, however. A senior official maintained that the E3 could not present the Iranians with a truly comprehensive offer of cooperation and engagement, comprising political dialogue as well as assistance in the civilian nuclear sector and intensified economic links, other than in an EU framework.[30]

These differences aside, in mid-2004 the E3 clearly believed the time was ripe for involving the European Union. It remained to be seen how they could do it.

The E3 would not agree to any formula that would alter the balance within the negotiating team. They excluded the possibility of enlarging the group to other EU member states or hand responsibility for the talks with Iran over to the EU troika, namely the six-monthly rotating EU presidency, the HR and the Commissioner for External Relations.[31]

The E3's reservations might have included more than a dose of opportunism, but were not misplaced. Enlarging the group would have made sense if other member states had been able to bring a real benefit. The reality was, however, that non-E3 EU countries did not really have much to offer at the time.[32] The troika was a bureaucratic elephant ostensibly inadequate to handle such a delicate issue as the talks over Iran's nuclear programme. It was unthinkable that the Iranians could be willing to engage with an interlocutor that was short on diplomatic assets, was known to be leak-prone, suffered from competition between the presidency and the Commission, lacked the authority to impose its decisions on the member states and whose composition was subject to six-monthly changes. Senior officials within the EU Council shared this opinion, as did probably a number of national diplomacies.[33]

In the end, the inclusion of the Office of the High Representative in the E3 group—from now on the 'E3/EU'—emerged as the most sensible solution. HR Solana was generally trusted as a 'fair player' by EU member states.[34] He was an experienced diplomat with an impressive security pedigree. He had coordinated allied action during the 1999 Kosovo war during his tenure as secretary general of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). After his appointment as HR, he had been instrumental in containing the looming conflict between Slavs and Albanians in Macedonia in 2001. Solana was also knowledgeable about nuclear proliferation and was consequently able to grasp the full extent of the negotiations with Iran. In

addition, the HR office had been briefed by the E3 about their contacts with the Iranians already before November 2004. Thus, when it formally joined the negotiating team, it did not have to go through a long learning process.[35]

For the E3 it was also very important that Solana viewed the nuclear dispute with Iran in the same terms as they did. This convergence of views all but ensured that the greater legitimacy benefit and the access to EU assets they were seeking by involving the European Union would come at no or little cost for their negotiating strategy. Solana's inclusion also presented another key advantage in terms of added political weight. The E3 counted on the fact that the EU HR was well placed to create bridges with both the United States and the other Security Council permanent members, Russia and China, as he represented a multilateral organisation with a strong record of support for the United Nations (but also thanks to his personal connections: see Sects. 1 and 4 in Chap. 7). The E3 were aware that, whatever direction the talks with Iran took, they would eventually need US participation and UNSC endorsement, either to support and oversee an agreement or to forge an effective response to Iran's continued defiance.[36]

By associating Solana, the E3 obtained greater legitimacy and gained in negotiating strength without giving away much. The speed, flexibility and confidentiality of decision-making was guaranteed and, more importantly, the three remained in full control. Unsurprisingly, an E3 official described the solution of associating the HR office to the E3 as an 'optimal compromise'.[37] For the E3 it certainly was, but was it so for the other member states too?

Most EU countries did not have much to offer to the effort; but neither did they have much to lose in giving support to the E3. There were countries, such as Sweden, that harboured a desire to be more actively involved because they had a strong normative interest in the upholding of the multilateral non-proliferation regime and felt that they possessed the diplomatic capabilities needed for a high-level negotiation. These countries were active in the IAEA, where they enjoyed equal standing as the E3. Indeed, according to a senior E3 official, intra-EU contacts within the IAEA were very important in building a sense of collective commitment.[38] Once the HR Solana joined the E3 and started to brief the other members about developments, most EU members felt that, considering all pros and cons, they had not been given a bad deal.[39]

Not all EU member states, however, regarded the E3/EU as a good or neutral solution for them. For Italy, it was a net loss.

Italy had enjoyed a special position in Iran's system of international partnerships since the late 1950s, when the Italian energy company Eni made its first inroads into Iran's market. Eni managed to do so by pursuing an aggressive policy based on the offer of a joint venture between an Eni affiliate (Agip) and the National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC). Given the widespread resentment in Iran against foreign control of national resources, Eni's strategy paid off not only economically but also in political terms, winning Italy a deal of goodwill.

The 1979 revolution forced the Italian government to review its policy, not least because all foreign participation in upstream activities, including Eni's, was nationalised. But it did not change Rome's strategic calculus that Iran was a country worth having good relations with. After the long lull brought about by the Iran-Iraq war, in the early 1990s Italy sought to renew its contacts with Tehran (see Sect. 1 in Chap. 6). In March 1999, Eni, along with other EU energy companies, was allowed to get back to Iran, where it made considerable investments in the development of large oil fields both on- and offshore. In 2003, the Islamic Republic had become as lucrative an export market for the Italians as it was an important source of energy supplies. Hovering around 3.8 billion euros, overall Italian trade with Iran exceeded even Germany's.[40]

The background of Italy's political and economic relations with Iran could not but shape Rome's opinion about the nuclear dispute. The Italians believed that a bolder policy of engagement of the Khatami reformist camp was the best option available to influence Iran's nuclear policy. According to a former E3 ambassador to Iran, however, the E3 were persuaded that no single party or faction could ever really hope to 'take over' the government in Tehran, which was destined to remain an arena where various power centres would battle for influence. Hence, for the E3 predicating the approach to Iran on the forces controlling the presidency was a mistake. It was wiser to focus on the regime's behaviour instead, offering conditional engagement but also preparing to resort to coercion in case diplomacy failed. The E3 were concerned that Italy would have resisted the straight implementation of this strategic approach and preferred not to involve it in the group.[41]

It is difficult to say whether this reconstruction of the events is accurate. The E3 were indeed worried about Italy, but not necessarily because they thought that Rome would have been too sensitive to Iran's arguments (or too prone to defend its commercial interests). Then Italian

Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi's reliability was also a source of concern, as Berlusconi was very much keen to please the Bush administration. The mix of a strongly pro-Bush leader and Italy's historic good ties with Iran was far from ideal from the E3's point of view, as it made the Italian government look unpredictable.[42]

The irony is that, in the end, the E3 did not even have to exclude Italy, since Italy managed to do that itself. In the summer 2003, when the E3 group was in its formation process, the Iranians made known that they would be glad if Italy joined the E3. In all likelihood, Tehran wanted to negotiate with a group in which they could count on a friendly interlocutor, as they expected Italy to be. Yet, senior officials in the Italian foreign ministry believed that the E3 action would provoke resentment in Washington and, since Italy was holding the EU presidency at the time, feared that Italy would have had to handle a new transatlantic rift. They discouraged Berlusconi to use Iran's opening as a lever to enter the group, and Berlusconi followed their advice.[43] It soon came to regret this decision, but it was too late.[44]

In the following years, in particular when a centre-left coalition led by Romano Prodi replaced the Berlusconi government for around two years (2006–8), the Italians unsuccessfully tried to sneak into the group.[45] The E3 were adamant that no addition could be made to the group unless it brought some real added value. In fact, for the E3 the E3/EU formula had solved two problems potentially related to Italy. First, because they were out of the E3/EU group, the Italians would be unable to influence the negotiation directly. Second, because the E3/EU was the result of a compromise involving all EU countries, the Italians would also be discouraged to break ranks.[46] Even if profoundly unhappy with the E3/EU format, Italy 'behaved'. Rome managed to have the phrase 'E3/EU' dropped from officials documents, but did not get in the way of the E3.

The E3/EU was not the universally preferred format (Kienzle 2013: 1151). Under-the-surface tensions never disappeared completely and actually resurfaced when failure to reach an agreement with Iran prompted the E3/EU to support the adoption of EU sanctions from 2007 onwards (see Sect. 3 in Chap. 7). However, even then the E3/EU was not put into question. The tacit compromise underlying it might have been uneasy, but it proved solid—surprisingly solid. In the end, the outsiders of the group rationally calculated that they had an interest in the E3 action that prevailed over their interest in opposing it. It is time to look into this interest, as it is here that lies the key to the sustainability of the E3/EU group.

Notes

1. Including all E3 and EU officials whom I have interviewed.
2. An early mention of the May/June 2003 offer is in Samore (2004: 2). According to press reports first appeared in 2006, the offer was contained in a two-page document transmitted to the White House through the Swiss Embassy in Tehran, which performs consular tasks for the United States in Iran (Kessler 2006). European and American diplomats confirmed the news both in off-the-records exchanges (including with me) and openly (James Dobbins, the US special envoy to Afghanistan following 9/11, speaks of it in a 2010 article; see Dobbins 2010: 157).
3. Interview with a former E3 foreign minister, 2 March 2009.
4. The spent fuel – meaning the fuel used in reactors no longer capable of undergoing nuclear fission – is chemically recycled to produce uranium usable again in reactors as well as plutonium.
5. In the words of a former E3 foreign minister, the E3/EU "has been a unique case, born under a combination of unprecedented circumstances that are unlikely to occur again" (interview by the author, 2 March 2009). Yet lead groups did occur thereafter, as the Normandy framework clearly attests to.
6. Skype interview with a former E3 official, 12 February and 25 March 2015.
7. Skype interview with a former E3 official, 12 February and 25 March 2015.
8. Kitchen and Vickers (2013: 305–7) argue that this concern was what motivated the British Labour government to take action. German, French and EU officials whom I have interviewed concurred about the centrality of this concern, although they also emphasised other aspects. They never mentioned instead the possibility that the Iranian government could transfer nuclear technologies, know-how, materials or even a weapon to terrorist organisations (analysts tended to agree that this was a minimal or non-existent risk: Ferguson and Potter 2004: 57; Byman 2008; Pollack 2013: 68–70).
9. Data on EU member states' trade exchanges with third countries are available on the website of the European Commission, Directorate-General Trade, Export Helpdesk: http://exporthelp.europa.eu/thdapp/display. htm;jsessionid=916E3376F3D5A2C0DE69E7C25406CF48?page=st%2 fst_Statistics.html&docType=main&languageId=en. British imports amounted to 43.7 million euros and exports oscillated around 685 million euros.
10. In 2003 France was the only E3 country importing significant amounts of crude from Iran (worth just slightly less than 1 billion euros). German crude imports amounted to a mere 4.7 million, whereas the British did not import any hydrocarbon from Iran.

11. Interview with a senior German foreign policy expert, 12 February 2009.

12. Interview with a former E3 foreign minister, 2 March 2009; phone interview with a senior E3 official, 21 April 2009; written response by a senior E3 official, 31 July 2009; and Skype interview with a former E3 official, 12 February and 25 March 2015. See also Quille and Keane 2005.

13. Interview with a senior German foreign policy expert, 12 February 2009.

14. Israel security was a theme that surfaced in interviews with both officials and a senior member of the Bundestag (interviews by the author, 12 and 20 February 2009). See also Mousavian (2008: 62–63).

15. German officials and politicians alike ridiculed the notion that Germany's action on Iran would help its campaign to win permanent membership in the Security Council (interviews by the author, February 2009). This remained true even after the non-European UNSC permanent members joined the E3/EU in January 2006, forming the E3/EU+3 or, as it is more commonly known, the P5+1. A senior German official stated that even the idea of an informal regular association of Germany to the Security Council was out of question (interview, 12 February 2009). A senior member of the Bundestag was blunter still: "The association of Germany to the P5", he said, "certainly benefited its international reputation, but for the Germans to see it as a bridge to a permanent seat in the Council would be delusional" (interview, 20 February 2009).

16. For a critical analysis of Schröder's foreign policy, see Grant (2005).

17. Interviews with E3 officials, February and April 2009; Skype interview with a former E3 official, 12 February and 25 March 2015.

18. Interviews with a former E3 foreign minister (2 March 2009) and a senior E3 official (21 April 2009). The former E3 foreign minister recalled that the possible involvement of the European Union was never raised during meetings with his counterparts. "This was not an issue", he said.

19. Phone interview with a senior E3 official, 21 April 2009.

20. This point was confirmed to me by senior officials, including two former E3 political directors (interviews with the author, 21 and 23 April 2009).

21. Phone interview with a senior E3 official, 21 April 2009.

22. Interview with a former E3 ambassador to Iran, 7 April 2009.

23. Interview with a senior E3 official, 23 April 2009.

24. Interview with a senior Italian official, 24 March 2015.

25. Spain's misgivings were reported in a confidential US diplomatic cable made public by WikiLeaks (the cable is available at https://www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/03ROME4585_a.html).

26. Ibidem. The cable further reads: "The 'EU3', she [FM Palacio] said, doesn't exist, so who are they representing when they sign the letter [to Iran's President Khatami]? [Straw, de Villepin and Fischer] will have to discuss the letter with all EU members before it can be sent as an EU initiative, and no-one has discussed it with her".

27. Phone interview with an E3 official, 14 May 2009.
28. Interview with a former E3 ambassador to Iran, 7 April 2009. This was also the assessment of an aide to HR Solana (interview by the author, 24 October 2008).
29. The former ambassador assigned precise percentage values to each of the three reasons: he said that greater legitimacy accounted for 50–60 per cent of the E3's decision to involve the European Union; added political weight for 30 per cent; and access to EU assets for no more than 10–20 per cent (interview, 7 April 2009).
30. Phone interview with an E3 official, 14 May 2009.
31. Interviews with a former E3 foreign minister (2 March 2009), senior E3 officials (21 April 2009, 12 May 2009), an aide to Solana (24 October 2008) and an HR office official (22 June 2010). The much better known troika consisting of the International Monetary Fund, the European Central Bank and the Commission would be born only years later.
32. Skype interview with a former E3 official, 12 February and 15 March 2015.
33. Interview with an aide to Solana, 24 October 2008.
34. Interview with an aide to Solana, 24 October 2008.
35. Interview with an HR office official, 23 June 2010.
36. Interview with a former top EU official, 14 April 2014.
37. Interview with an E3 official, 13 February 2009.
38. Interview with a senior E3 official, 12 February 2009. The official went as far as to say that, over time, the attitude of the EU member states not involved in the E3/EU turned from sceptical to supportive to cooperative. This was of course before the E3 raised the prospect of adopting sanctions.
39. Phone interview with an E3 official, 14 May 2009, and Skype interview with a former E3 official, 12 February and 25 March 2015. Of course, E3 officials were aware that their positive assessment of the E3/EU would hardly be shared by their colleagues from other EU countries. Several maintained that this gap in perceptions was nonetheless no good reason to question the validity of their argument. In 2004, the group's outsiders could not achieve much else other than having HR Solana in the group.
40. Italian exports amounted to circa 1.951 billion and imports (90 per cent consisting in crude) to around 1.897 billion euros. Data on EU member states' trade exchanges with third countries are available on the website of the European Commission, Directorate-General Trade, Export Helpdesk: http://exporthelp.europa.eu/thdapp/display.htm;jsessionid=916E3376 F3D5A2C0DE69E7C25406CF48?page=st%2fst_Statistics.html&docTyp e=main&languageId=en
41. Interview with a former E3 ambassador to Iran, 7 April 2009.

42. Interview with a former E3 foreign minister, 2 March 2009.
43. Interview with a senior Italian official, 24 March 2015.
44. Interview with an aide to HR Solana, 24 October 2008.
45. Interviews with E3 officials, 21 April and 14 May 2009, and with an aide to HR Solana, 24 October 2008.
46. Interview with an HR office official, 23 June 2010.

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The Discourse: Why the E3/EU Endured

Rational choice can explain the intra-EU balance of interests in Iran's nuclear issue only to a point. To complete the picture, it is necessary to trace such interests back to the discursive context in which the E3/EU group took shape—indeed, the discourse that enabled it (Sect. 2 in Chap. 2). This is in line with the social constructivist argument that the balance of interests can sustain a lead group only if the group's action does not conflict with the EU identity layer of member states (as expressed and articulated in the established EU discourse).

This chapter conducts a 'discursive review' that draws from a constructivist revisiting of the concept of 'frame resonance' (Snow and Benford 1988). The latter is a process by which a group transitions from one frame to another because the first frame is shown to be congruous with the group's assumptions about what the framed issue is (the diagnostic frame) and what should be done about it (the prognostic frame). As explained in section 'Social Constructivist Solutions' in Chap. 2, the process of framing is only superficially a strategic choice, as in reality its roots are in the appropriateness of the diagnostic and prognostic frames with the identity of the target audience. The chapter sheds light on the connection of the common cognitive space created by the diagnostic frame and the policy options indicated in the prognostic frame with the representations of the world and the ensuing role identity of the European Union. As such, what

it does is more akin to discourse analysis (an analysis of the linkage between identity and interests) than frame analysis (an analysis of a mobilisation strategy).

Section 1 looks into the two 2003 documents that articulated the European Union's representations of the world and its corresponding responsibilities, namely the European Security Strategy (ESS) and the Strategy against the Spread of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD strategy). Section 2 explores the E3/EU's diagnostic and prognostic frames. As for the diagnosis, it identifies the terms—such as European security, stability in the neighbourhood and nuclear proliferation—in which the E3 framed the challenge posed by Iran's nuclear programme. As for the prognosis, it looks at the terms used by the E3 to depict Iran (an enemy, a rogue state, a legitimate interlocutor, a partner?), envisage the kind of relationship between the European Union and Iran that the E3 aimed at (competition, coexistence, partnership?) and justify the use of the selected means (persuasive or coercive?). Section 3 combines the research findings of Chaps. 4 and 5 to draw conclusions about the conditions of possibility of the E3/EU.

1   Construing the EU Role: The ESS and WMD Strategy

Chapter 4 delved into the E3's security, normative, economic and political interests while also recalling that other countries—notably Italy but also, for instance, Sweden—had their own specific preferences. For the most part, however, it just assumed that the rest of EU countries had an interest in Iran's nuclear issue. Certainly, some individual member states might have had a stake in Iran—an energy interest, for instance, if they imported a substantial amount of oil products from the Islamic Republic.[1] But these were nationally determined interests that varied considerably according to member states and could therefore not make up the shared area of interest on which the E3 acted upon. What ultimately provided such a shared area of interest was membership in the European Union.

For the majority of EU member states, small in size and population and with limited or no capacity to project power abroad, Iran's nuclear ambitions were barely a national security issue. These countries were affected because they were part of a large and integrated community of states extending from the North Atlantic to Eurasia and the Mediterranean. EU membership had broadened their strategic outlook and compelled them

to articulate a vision of their role and responsibilities in geographical areas that otherwise would have been far off their radar screens. The compromise underlying the formation of the E3/EU was a consequence of the fact that the E3 were pursuing interests that had been articulated in the established EU discourse.

As argued in Sect. 2 in Chap. 2, discourse is as much a container as it is a producer of identity, particularly for collective entities like the European Union. In discourse, the member states make a set of agreed upon statements about what the European Union is and consequently is expected to do. EU membership orientates the act of self-definition of EU countries in relation to the 'other' (the other member states of the Union) towards what is common to them. These commonalities are the background against which the member states construe collective representations of how the world is and what role the European Union should play in it (Schmidt calls them cognitive and normative ideas, respectively; Schmidt 2008).

Because of the intergovernmental nature of foreign policy, these representations are general and vague. In fact, they are relatively weak concepts that can serve as inspiring principles but alone are hardly capable of setting the European Union on a specific course of action. Yet, these representations remain unifying elements and as such do play a fundamental part in explaining EU cooperation (Kienzle 2013: 425). They enable EU policymakers to discursively construct the Union's interests in specific international issues and therefore make it easier to frame common challenges and produce joint responses.

The unifying representations underlying the European Union's role in international security can be found in particular in the ESS and the WMD strategy, both adopted in 2003. According to an E3 senior official, the origin of the two strategies lay in the concern of France and Germany to avoid another Iraq-like rift and forge a non-proliferation policy framework with which all other EU member states could feel comfortable.[2] The E3 were not the only ones concerned in the European Union. Most member states were keen to bridge the Iraq divide and some of them were also convinced, as the E3 were, that more proactiveness would advance the cause of unity. In an April 2003 article, the foreign ministers of Sweden and Greece, Anna Lindh and Giorgios Papandreou, indicated a series of steps that the European Union should take in order to "avoid a new Iraq", including the adoption of a strategy against the spread of WMD (Lindh

and Papandereou 2003).[3] Evidently, the E3 debate was taking place in fertile ground (Ahlström 2005: 32; Quille and Keane 2005: 98; Tertrais 2006: 39; Sauer 2007: 8).

While the need to restore EU cohesion after Iraq was the trigger that pushed EU member states to agree upon a non-proliferation strategy, other factors were also important. In the wake of the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks, the mix of jihadism and the spread of WMD and related know-how and materials had become a main concern of European strategic thinkers (Ahlström 2005: 31; Bailes 2005: 9; Tertrais 2006: 39). The decision to draft a WMD strategy, to which the Iraq crisis gave irresistible urgency, was moreover rooted in an attempt to organise the patchwork of measures that the European Union had taken in the non-proliferation field since the 1990s into a more coherent set (Ahlström 2005: 30; Bailes 2005: 6–8; Bergenäs 2010: 499).

A desire to emulate—as well as present an alternative to—the US NSS and the Strategy to Combat Weapons of Mass Destruction, both released in December 2002, should also be factored in (Tertrais 2006: 39). The ESS and even more so the WMD strategy were meant to show the Americans that Europe had not only the will to tackle WMD proliferation but also original ideas about how to do that. With their strong, indeed essential, emphasis on multilateralism, the ESS and WMD strategy were supposed to allow the Europeans to re-engage with the Bush administration, widely perceived as unilateralist, on terms they felt more comfortable with (Portela 2004).

The two European strategies amounted to the most ambitious attempt to organise national perceptions and forge an EU-wide strategic culture (Toje 2004). Not only did they identify threats and challenges, but also conveyed an idea of how the world should be and what role the European Union was expected to play in it. As such, they were more than an exercise at strategic thinking. They were an identity-constituting process.

The ESS stated unequivocally that WMD proliferation was the "greatest threat to [Europe's] security" (European Union 2003: 3). It singled out the Middle East as a region of particular concern for Europe. Regional conflicts were said to "impact on European interest directly and indirectly […], above all in the Middle East" (ibidem: 4). The ESS made clear that the European Union would tackle the threats to its security with a mix of tools, including by addressing the "underlying political causes" of such threats (ibidem: 7). As a recipe for long-term security, the ESS emphasised "an effective multilateral system" and "well functioning institutions", and consequently stated that "a rule-based international order" was an EU objective (ibidem: 9).

The European Union, the ESS continued, realised that "some countries [...] placed themselves outside the bounds of international society" and expressed the desire that they "rejoin the international community", something "the EU should be ready" to provide assistance for. The European Union was "ready to act when [international] rules are broken". Defiance would not go unpunished, as the ESS made clear that these countries of concern would pay a "price", "including in their relations with the European Union" (ibidem: 10). The ESS did not specify how heavy such a price could be, nor did it include the possibility of unilaterally using force as a last resort. Instead, it reiterated that the European Union saw the United Nations Security Council as the ultimate responsible for "the maintenance of international peace and security" (ibidem: 9).

The WMD strategy, a more detailed document, echoed the ESS in many ways (Council of the European Union 2003f).[4] The strategy committed the European Union to "prevent, deter, halt and, where possible, eliminate proliferation programmes of concern" (ibidem: 2). It emphasised the imperative to defend the NPT and expand the powers of the IAEA, including by pressing countries around the world to ratify the Additional Protocol. As a matter of fact, the European Union was ready to support, in special cases, even stricter inspection regimes than the protocol (ibidem: 6). Noticeably, EU member states recognised that would-be proliferators might have legitimate security interests that had to be factored in any non-proliferation initiative (ibidem: 7). Like the emphasis on multilateralism, the focus on the root causes of proliferation was reflected in the clear preference accorded to diplomacy as the first and most appropriate means to deal with proliferation crises. The strategy did acknowledge, however, that coercive measures could not be ruled out altogether, provided they were in keeping with the UN Charter (ibidem: 5).

Overall, the ESS and the WMD strategy sketched a world in which states came out as members of an international society rather than isolated units engaged in power competition. This was clearly a projection of how EU countries looked on one another into the wider arena of IR. The ESS ascribed disturbances in the international society to deviations from the expected behaviour that members of a society should espouse. More offenders than enemies or rivals, countries displaying deviating habits had to be brought back into the fold, an objective to which the European Union, as a committed member of the "international society", should contribute by making use of the whole array of its diplomatic, trade, economic and development assets. Whatever punishment was envisaged, it

remained within the borders of reversible actions and aimed at the elimination of the offence rather than the offender—at behavioural, not regime, change. The ESS and WMD did mention coercive measures, yet justified their use in narrow terms and only if consistent with the UN Charter.

While they contributed to articulating the identity of the European Union, the ideas contained in the ESS and WMD strategy were too general to produce a pre-existing consensus about how to address specific crises. It is doubtful, for instance, if an earlier adoption of the ESS (drafted between the spring and December 2003) would have spared the European Union the division over Iraq in 2002 and early 2003 (Kienzle 2013). Ideas are too malleable to cause action directly, at least at the EU level (Béland and Cox 2011). And after all, broad strategies such as the ESS are not exactly meant to dictate specific courses of action regarding specific issues. In fact, malleability of the ideas worked both ways: if it was too soft for an enduring consensus about EU foreign policy, it was sufficiently elastic to facilitate occasional agreements regarding specific crises.

The dispute over Iran's nuclear programme was one of such instances. The overall discourse about EU foreign policy provided the ground on which the E3 and EU discourses on Iran could be brought together and merged. As Kienzle (2013: 427) concludes, "the formulation of EU-level policies in the international arena can be generally achieved if ideas foster broadly converging interpretations among actors." The EU discourse on Iran was eventually the result of interpretations of a given situation—Iran's nuclear ambitions—that converged in the light of the representations of the world and the European Union's role in it contained in the ESS and WMD strategy.

2   Framing the Challenge: E3 and EU Discourse on Iran

No EU countries, not even the E3, depicted Iran's nuclear plans as a mortal threat to their security. Only the E3 (with perhaps the addition of Italy) framed the issue in national interest terms. For all others it was the European dimension that created an interest in the issue. As "brute material forces" (Wendt 1999: 94, ff.) such as territorial defence were not involved, it was ideas—such as the ones contained in the ESS—that constituted interests. The E3 framed the Iranian nuclear challenge along these interests—and, consequently, the role identity that informed them.

In a 2010 study, Ruth Hanau Santini identified different but coexisting themes that multiple EU actors, ranging from the E3 to the Council, used with regard to Iran and its nuclear ambitions. One theme was *security-oriented* and concentrated mostly on Iran's nuclear programme. This theme relayed the image of an untrustworthy Iranian regime, whose opaque and devious nuclear activities were a source of increasing concern (Hanau Santini 2010: 470). Another discursive theme was infused with a *cultural and historical undertone* and emphasised Iran's resources and rights. It depicted Iran as an ancient and proud civilisation with a history of tensions and conflicts with aggressive external powers. The motives running through this theme displayed a degree of understanding of Iran's difficult predicament and awareness that the Islamic Republic had, like all other countries, legitimate concerns and aspirations (ibidem: 471).

Hanau Santini held that these themes were non-exclusive. The European Union (or the E3, she does not differentiate) alternatively used them over the course of the years, although she complained that in the end the security-oriented theme became over-dominant. She maintained that the securitisation of the EU discourse on Iran—manifested in the prevalence of the first discursive theme—forced the Union through a series of steps: first constructive engagement, then the dual track diplomacy and eventually a sanctions-only policy that made the prospect of military escalation more plausible (ibidem: 482).

Undoubtedly, the worsening of the dispute in the years 2005–12 turned certain options—isolation and sanctions, in particular—from potential into possible and from possible into actual. Some of the E3 did use over the years motives that were not in line with the established EU discourse on Iran (and the underlying ideas contained in the ESS), such as when British officials alluded to the possibility of using force.[5] Yet, they took care not to turn such utterances into their dominant discursive theme regarding Iran, sticking instead to the discursive framework first defined at the EU level in 2003–4. Such a framework remained largely consistent over the years.

The Diagnostic Frame: An Unlawful Conduct

In statements and interviews, E3 leaders and officials framed Iran's nuclear programme as a grave proliferation concern. The issue with Iran's government was one of decreasing international confidence in its real intentions. At the same time, the Europeans showed respect for Iran as a country and

civilisation, emphasised the complexity of its society and government, and underlined its importance for regional stability. A recurring theme in this respect was the insistence that Iran was a different country from Saddam Hussein's Iraq, which made it unsusceptible to being framed discursively in the same way Iraq had been in many quarters prior to the Anglo-American invasion.

In April 2003, for instance, British Foreign Secretary Straw (in office 2001–6) distanced the United Kingdom's position from US warnings against Iran: "Iran is a completely different country and situation from Iraq […]. Iran is an emerging democracy" (Black and Wintour 2003). A few years later, Straw stated that for the United Kingdom and its partners "the core issue" had always been "one of international confidence in respect of Iran's nuclear ambitions" (Straw 2006). Such a loss of confidence derived from the Iranians having "been trying to hide what they [had] been doing" for years. The opaqueness of Iran's activities cast a shadow over the "nature of the Iranian nuclear programme itself" and raised concerns about "the damage Iran's actions would do the global non-proliferation regime". Straw's successor, Margaret Beckett (in office 2006–7), said in 2007 that Iran's nuclear programme "raised the spectre of a huge push for proliferation" in an unstable region (Beckett 2007).

German Chancellor Schröder had expressed himself in similar terms. During the February 2005 Munich Security Conference he said that Germany remained committed "to avoiding a nuclear arms race in the Middle East", and that the talks with the Iranians were "intended to serve this objective" (Schröder 2005).

Philippe Douste-Blazy, French foreign minister in 2005–7, recalled in an August 2005 interview that Iran had "never been able to explain the necessity of proceeding with the conversion and enrichment of uranium" in a country so full of natural resources, signalling that for France too the main problem revolved around trust (Douste-Blazy 2005). In a 2007 interview with *The New York Times*, French President Chirac insisted that the real danger emanating from Iran's nuclear programme was not the possibility of nuclear aggression by the Islamic Republic. Rather, he concluded, "what is dangerous is proliferation" (Sciolino and Bennhold 2007).

In these statements the E3 expressed sentiments that had been around in the European Union since the beginning of the controversy. The EU Council had started to voice such feelings very early. In June 2003, after IAEA Director General El Baradei had blamed Iran for

failing to disclose all its nuclear activities (Sect. 1 in Chap. 3), the Council expressed the hope that Iran could soon show progress on a number of issues of EU concern, in particular in the field of non-proliferation (Council of the European Union 2003a: 24). The next July the Council stated that Iran's nuclear programme and "the proliferation risks implied" (meaning the risk of a nuclear arms race in the Middle East) were a source of "increasing concern" (Council of the European Union 2003c: 9). HR Solana also expressed "grave concern" about Iran's nuclear programme during a two-day visit in Tehran in September 2003 (Agence Europe 2003b).

The Europeans were nonetheless uncomfortable with the idea that Iran's nuclear plans could simplistically be traced to a desire to dominate its surrounding region by intimidating its neighbours with threats of a nuclear Armageddon. Iran's motives, this was the underlying assumption, were complex and rooted in national history as well as the very difficult predicament in which the Islamic Republic was in 2003. They urged and called on Iran to correct its behaviour, yet they did so in a discursive framework that acknowledged the legitimacy of the regime and left open the possibility for the Europeans to engage it. At stake were multilateral norms and rules, the very thing upon which the whole edifice of the European Union was founded.

In 2004, Straw acknowledged that Iran's confidence problem was partly rooted in its troubled history of relations with foreign powers, notably the United Kingdom due to the latter's role in the ousting of Iranian Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadeq in 1953.[6] Straw described Iran as "a very important country" and a "dominant player in the region" that the United Kingdom could not "ignore" (quoted in Hanau Santini 2010: 475). The British parliament shared this "historically aware" (ibidem: 471) image of Iran. In a March 2004 report, the House of Commons Select Committee on Foreign Affairs openly admitted British responsibility for the overthrow of Mossadeq. It also confirmed its 2002 dismissal of any comparison between Iraq—"an unredeemed autocracy"—and Iran, a country with "a number of elements of democracy" (Select Committee on Foreign Affairs 2004). In his February 2005 speech in Munich, Chancellor Schröder hinted at that when he argued that, in order to have "Iran renounce the nuclear option", its international isolation had to be "overcome" and its economic and security interests "taken into account" (Schröder 2005). President Chirac stroke a similar chord in his 2007 interview with *The New York Times*, in which he speculated that behind

Iran's nuclear ambitions there was a "desire to be recognized and respected by the international community and in particular the United States" (Sciolino and Bennhold 2007).

These 'historically aware' discursive themes surfaced also in statements by EU officials. In early 2003 Chris Patten, the then Commissioner for External Relations (a position later merged with the HR post), said that "Iran should not be isolated." Yet he also pointed to the European Union's concerns about non-proliferation as a potential obstacle in developing further EU-Iran ties (Agence Europe 2003a). For the good part of 2003–4, the EU Council spoke of Iran mostly as a source of non-proliferation concerns and as a poor human rights defender (Council of the European Union 2003d, e, 2004a, b). One should not infer from this any significant distance between the E3 discourse and the EU one. The E3 were, like all member states, obviously involved in the drafting of the Council's conclusions, so they must have been in agreement with the final text.

Even if the E3, as well as the EU Council, identified Iran's nuclear programme as a non-proliferation issue, they abstained from chastising the proliferator. Lack of confidence, not fear of aggression or evilness of the proliferator, was the dominant theme concerning Iran's behaviour, an echo of the ESS' reference to countries that place themselves "outside the bounds of the international society" by deviating from lawful behavioural patterns. The insistence that Iran could have genuine concerns and aspirations echoed the ESS' recommendation about being aware of the "root causes" of proliferation activities. Finally, the recognition of the Iranian regime as a legitimate interlocutor recalled a number of themes that punctuated the ESS and the WMD strategy, such as the value of diplomacy, engagement and the reluctance to contemplate the use of force as a means to solve international crises. The importance of this latter point cannot be exaggerated. By repeatedly discarding the idea that Iran was similar to Saddam's Iraq, the E3 lay the ground for a prognostic framework in which force had no place, something all other EU member states could agree upon.

The Prognostic Frame: Conditional Engagement

The diagnostic frame outlined above created a common cognitive space for both the E3 and the European Union to make sense of the challenge represented by Iran's nuclear plans. The prognostic frame considered in this section shifts the focus onto the prescriptive side of the issue, namely

the definition of a commonly accepted set of goals and means that should guide the E3 and later E3/EU action on Iran. Technically, a prognosis is a prediction of the most likely evolution of a disease. In this context, however, the prognosis is less a prediction than it is an expectation of how the dispute with Iran could unfold if treated with certain prescriptions instead of other ones.

The first prescription flowed naturally from the diagnosis: if the issue with Iran was about a loss of confidence, the solution was the *restoration of confidence*. E3 and EU statements played very much in unison in this regard. Iran had to comply with the requests for full transparency and greater cooperation first made by the IAEA in June 2003 (IAEA Board of Governors 2003). In July 2003 French Foreign Minister De Villepin (in office 2002–4) said that Iran faced a "strategic choice" about whether to assuage the IAEA's concerns (RFE/RL 2003). Two years later, another French foreign minister, Douste-Blazy, said that "restoration of confidence" had always been the principle on which the E3 action had been predicated. The E3 took care that the text of the Tehran Agreed Statement reflected this overall goal. The Iranian government, the text read, was ready to "engage in full co-operation with the IAEA to address and resolve through full transparency all requirements and outstanding issues of the Agency" (Iranian Government and Visiting EU Foreign Ministers 2003). The focus on 'transparency' and 'cooperation' was clearly in line with the diagnosis of a 'lack of confidence' problem.

A look at EU officials' statements confirms the proximity between E3 and EU discursive choices. In June 2003, the GAERC had already urged Iran to take steps, such as the adoption of the IAEA Additional Protocol, to dispel fears about the true purpose of its nuclear plans (Council of the European Union 2003a). In September 2003, the Council openly stated that Iran had to take measures "to build confidence" and "restore trust in the peaceful nature of its nuclear programme" (Council of the European Union 2003d: 9). In a September 2004 public statement, the then Dutch foreign minister and holder of the EU Presidency, Bernard Bot, urged Iran to comply with its obligations with the IAEA in order to "restore international confidence" (Agence Europe 2004a).

While seeking to make Iran abide by NPT rules, the E3 also pursued another goal, namely the *reintegration of Iran into the "international society of states"*, to borrow the phrase from the ESS. German Foreign Minister Fischer (in office 1997–2005) referred to the E3-Iran Tehran Agreed Statement as a "great chance [Iran] should not miss" if it wanted, as a

foreign ministry spokesperson said at the time, "to re-integrate into the international community" (Narkive 2003). The language used by the E3 was in line with the emphasis of the ESS (which by then was being finalised) on the 'offence' rather than the 'offender'. Potentially dangerous behaviours such as Iran's could be corrected if the country displaying such behavioural deviations could be persuaded to abandon a path that would put it "outside the bounds of international society" (European Union 2003: 10). In the terms used by E3 officials and even in the wording of the E3-Iran Tehran Agreed Statement there was an echo of these expressions.

Military force was in no way compatible with this way of framing the problem. Consequently, E3 representatives made a number of on-the-record statements rejecting this option. A military attack against Iran, Foreign Minister De Villepin said in 2003, was an "absolutely ridiculous" idea (Tisdall and MacAskill 2003). Also in 2003, Foreign Secretary Straw said that "Iran is a democracy and there would be no case whatsoever for taking any kind of [military] action" (Black and Wintour 2003). One year later, Straw insisted that he did not see "any circumstances in which military action against Iran would be justified" (BBC News 2004). Chancellor Schröder reiterated the point in 2005, when he said bluntly: "let's take the military option off the table" (BBC News 2005). British officials did hint at the possibility of using force in later years, when the stand-off with Iran worsened, yet they kept such comments very low-profile and, more critically, did not support language construing Iran in terms that could have justified an attack.

With the military option being inadequate to achieve the goal of facilitating Iran's reintegration into the international community, the E3 agreed on a "strategy of cooperation", as Chancellor Schröder once called it (Schröder 2005). In June 2003, Foreign Secretary Straw explicitly said that the British strategy towards Iran was based on "constructive and conditional engagement" (Straw 2003). In November 2003, Foreign Minister Fischer made a passionate case before US reporters for "keeping the dialogue with Iran open" (Weisman 2003). In March 2005, Michel Barnier, French foreign minister in 2004–5, said that the direction that the E3 had taken since 2003 pointed to "new ways for dialogue, cooperation, and listening" (Barnier 2005).

The pursuit of a "constructive and conditional engagement of Iran" was probably the theme on which there was greatest proximity, if not overlap altogether, between the E3 and EU discursive choices. 'Conditionality' at the time was the bread and butter of EU external action, being the domi-

nant principle around which the Union had premised its enlargement and neighbourhood policies, as well as its relations with African, Caribbean and Pacific countries (Grabbe 2002; Sasse 2008; Zimelis 2011). It is no surprise then that the theme emerged quite early in EU discourse on Iran.

In June 2003 the Council stated that it saw the improvement of EU-Iran relations and progress by Iran on a number of issues (non-proliferation included, of course) as "interdependent" (Council of the European Union 2003a: 24). The next July the Council's language veered clearly towards an explicit form of conditionality: "[m]ore intense economic relations"—a reference to the EU-Iran Trade and Cooperation Agreement—"can be achieved only if progress is reached in the four areas of concern, namely human rights, terrorism, *non-proliferation* and the Middle East Peace Process" (Council of the European Union 2003c: 9, emphasis added). In December, the Council reiterated the point (Council of the European Union 2003f).

The conditionality emphasised by both E3 and EU officials involved that there were benefits to gain or lose for Iran. While the EU Council threatened to withhold a benefit (the TCA), the E3 adopted a more proactive approach and put on the table a set of incentives. The October 2003 Tehran Agreed Statement assumed that implementation by Iran of the agreement would "open the way to a dialogue on a basis for longer-term cooperation" between the Islamic Republic and the E3, which were willing to give Iran "easier access to modern technology and supplies in a range of areas". The text also included a pledge by the E3 "to co-operate with Iran to promote security and stability in the region, including the establishment of a zone free of weapons of mass destruction in the Middle East" (Iranian Government and Visiting EU Foreign Ministers 2003).

While unspecific in terms of contents, the language used by the E3 was subtler than the discourse that permeated the EU Council's conclusions. Seen from Brussels, the ball was in Iran's court: EU conditionality was of the 'negative' kind, meaning it was a warning about withholding a benefit if Iran did not comply with EU desiderata (Smith 2005: 23). Instead, the conditionality approach followed by the E3 was of the 'positive' kind (ibidem), with the focus shifting from warnings to rewards. While the goals were the same, the means were slightly different. Negative conditionality implied a rightful European Union warning Iran about the consequences of its actions. Positive conditionality sought constructive engagement with Iran on a more equal basis.

With the formation of the E3/EU, these discursive variants of the same theme merged. In October 2004 Bot, the Dutch foreign minister who was also holder of the EU Presidency, stated that "for the time being, the EU should follow a *policy of engagement* with Iran, along with a number of *incentives*" (Agence Europe 2004c; emphasis added). In November, the E3/EU struck the Paris Agreement with Iran, which reflected much of the prognostic framework outlined by E3 statements in the previous year. The text entailed a promise to provide "objective guarantees" of the solely peaceful nature of Iran's nuclear programme (thereby addressing the problem of confidence) as well as "firm guarantees on nuclear, technological and economic cooperation and firm commitments on security issues" (a positive conditionality-infused language). The text also included a pledge by the E3/EU to resume talks over the TCA and support Iran's application to join the WTO, provided Iran held its part of the deal (IAEA 2004).

The GAERC conclusions of December 2004 bore a resemblance with the language used in the Paris Agreement. The Council "confirmed the EU's readiness to explore ways to further develop political and economic cooperation with Iran", although it maintained an explicit link between such an improvement in EU-Iran relations and action by Iran on the nuclear front and such issues as human rights, terrorism and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Council of the European Union 2004d). EU leaders gathering for the European Council used the same language (European Council 2004: 14).

Thus, at the end of 2004 the European Union's prognostic framework regarding Iran's nuclear issue was in effect in alignment with the E3's one. Iran had to be brought back into the fold of the international society by way of dialogue, constructive engagement, incentives and conditionality. No mention of coercive measures (barring conditionality) entered the discursive frameworks used by the E3 or the EU Council at the time.

The E3 did not want the issue to end up on the Security Council's table yet and were unwilling to contemplate the use of sanctions, not least because they knew that EU member states were anything but in agreement on the point. British Foreign Secretary Straw confirmed that in 2005, when he said that "[o]ur aim all the way through in this when we started this negotiation was to keep the matter out of the Security Council" (Linzer and Lynch 2005).

In September 2004, the EU Council explicitly indicated the IAEA—not the Security Council, as the United States wanted—as the locus where the nuclear dispute should be discussed and solved. The strong support for the

IAEA's role was discursively in line with the ESS' purpose of making multilateralism "effective", in that a problem of potential infringement of international law (Iran having concealed sensitive nuclear activities) was to be addressed with existing law enforcement mechanisms (IAEA inspections).

Yet, the ESS and WMD strategy also mentioned the Security Council as the legitimate guarantor of international peace, and the IAEA Board of Governors had the authority to refer non-compliance cases to it. Hence, nothing in the E3 or EU discourse on Iran in 2003–4 was in contrast with the involvement of the Security Council and the possible adoption of coercive measures if the lack of confidence in Iran's intention were not addressed satisfactorily.

French Foreign Ministers Barnier and Douste-Blazy did not dodge the issue when directly asked. In September 2004 Barnier said that if the IAEA Board of Governors had judged Iran's cooperation insufficient to dispel all doubts about its intentions, it could have "brought the case before the UNSC" (Agence Europe 2004b). In August 2005, Douste-Blazy said that France had always been aware that "the Security Council might have [had] to deal with the issue" (Douste-Blazy 2005).

Hence, when the E3 took control of the EU policy towards the Iranian nuclear dispute in late 2004, they were already operating within a discursive framework that allowed for the adoption of coercive measures, even if no explicit mention of such measures had been made until then. It is important to underline this point because this existing discursive environment made it easier for the E3 to win support from the other EU member states for the imposition of EU-wide sanctions at a later stage.

Some experts have contested that the rationale behind the E3/EU's decision to push for sanctions was in keeping with the discursive themes espoused by the ESS and WMD strategy (notably Meier 2013: 18–19). Whereas the WMD strategy had pointed to sanctions as a last resort for ensuring compliance with non-proliferation obligations, the E3/EU used them to force Iran to accept limits to its nuclear programme that went beyond its formal obligations under the NPT and its safeguard agreement with the IAEA. This could be seen as an instance in which the focus of the E3 shifted from the 'offence' to the 'offender' and thus contrasted with the EU discourse analysed above.

This criticism is legitimate, yet it does not invalidate the argument about the importance of discourse for the sustainability of the E3/EU. In fact, it strengthens it. To understand why, it should be recalled that understanding discourse as a 'container of identity' does not preclude the

possibility of contested interpretations of discourse (Sect. 2 in Chap. 2). Since 2004, the E3 managed to make their interpretation of the EU discourse on Iran the dominant one. They were thus able to present their action, including when that encompassed EU sanctions, as being consistent with the diagnostic and prognostic components of the EU discourse on Iran seen above.

The E3/EU's discursive framework remained consistent over the years. The group never stopped to frame discursively Iran as a legitimate interlocutor who had put itself outside the bounds of international society by breaking international trust in its intentions. A June 2008 letter by the E3+3 foreign ministers and HR Solana to Iran's leadership hailed Iran as "one of the oldest civilisations of the world", legitimately "proud of [its] history, culture and heritage" (E3/EU+3 2008). The letter went on by noting how "mistrust" of Iran's behaviour had created tensions with the international community, and described a nuclear negotiation as the way "to restore the confidence of the international community in Iran's nuclear programme" (ibidem). In a June 2010 joint statement, the E3/EU+3 again emphasised that their efforts aimed to "achieve a comprehensive and long-term settlement that would restore confidence" in Iran's intentions while "respecting Iran's legitimate rights" to a peaceful nuclear programme (E3/EU+3 2010). This line was repeated verbatim in the EU Council conclusions with which the European Union announced the adoption of the oil embargo in January 2012 (Council of the European Union 2012: 2).

Much as the engagement-oriented discursive theme prevailing in the early phase of the dispute was not abandoned afterwards, so the conditionality-infused theme that prevailed in the later stages was already present in 2003–4. The prognostic framework used by the E3/EU had implicitly alluded to the possibility of using coercive measures in line with the UN Charter from the start. Whether this included unilateral EU sanctions was not specified, but it was not denied either. For the E3 and the HR the point was not so much to restrict the adoption of sanctions to grave violations of non-proliferation obligations, as to clarify that the Union would take such measures in line with Chapter VII of the UN Charter and international law (Council of the European Union 2003g: 5). The E3 and the HR constantly referred to UNSC resolutions to make the case for sanctions, including 'unilateral' sanctions that went beyond what the Security Council had strictly mandated (see Sect. 3 in Chap. 7). The E3/EU's push for far-reaching sanctions cannot be seen as contradicting

the discursive construction of Iran's nuclear issue and the management of it in line with the European Union's role identity construed by the ESS and WMD strategy.

3   SHIFTING THE BOUNDARIES OF DISCOURSE: THE SUSTAINABILITY OF THE E3/EU

The bargain discussed in Chap. 4 was a curious thing. A rational choice-driven process leading to a compromise, it actually lacked a real negotiation. The tacit understanding between the E3 and the rest of EU member states cannot be explained in instrumentalist terms, as the interest considerations that drove EU member states' choices were less a result of a consequentialist choice than they were a matter of appropriateness. The bargain underlying the E3/EU was 'silent' precisely because all EU member states, non-E3 countries included, had construed an EU-wide interest in Iran's nuclear issue and articulated it in a common discourse. In it, Iran's nuclear programme emerged as a non-proliferation problem, Iran's government as legitimate yet not entirely trustworthy interlocutor (hence the need to restore confidence through transparency and cooperation with the IAEA) and the role of Europe as a facilitator of such a process of confidence rebuilding. This 'Europe', however, had changed skin between 2003 and 2004.

In 2003 Europe involved two levels: the European Union as a whole, which had committed to a policy of negative conditionality, and the E3, who had moved a step farther and sought direct engagement of the Iranians including through the offer of incentives. Tellingly, the EU Council abstained from mentioning the October 2003 Tehran Agreed Statement between the E3 and Iran despite the fact that the agreement was clearly in keeping with the goals that the Council had established in the previous months. Evidently, in some EU quarters there was little appetite for a formal recognition of the E3 as a group. Yet, not all saw the E3 action as detrimental to Europe's international profile. HR Solana, for one, not only welcomed the October 2003 agreement but put the E3 action into a "European framework" (Agence Europe 2003c).

By late summer 2004, it had become almost impossible to see any significant line of demarcation between the discourses of the European Union and the E3. With the formation of the E3/EU, the two levels eventually collapsed into one another. Unlike the Tehran Agreed Statement, the November 2004 Paris Agreement, an achievement that

had followed "talks with France, Germany and the UK supported by the High Representative", was explicitly mentioned by the EU Council (Council of the European Union 2004c).

A terminological gap remained. While the 'E3/EU' formula was used in the Paris Agreement and would remain in use in the years thereafter (even after the group enlarged to China, Russia and the United States), the Council refrained from using it.[7] This gap was meaningless though, as the E3/EU group was discursively framed so that it became impossible not to consider it an instance of EU foreign policy. That this was in fact the case was recognised by European leaders themselves, who in a 2009 declaration recalled that the European Union had been trying to solve the nuclear dispute diplomatically "since 2004" (European Council 2009).

In conclusion, the silent bargain underlying the E3/EU presupposed an area of shared interests. For several EU countries (particularly the small ones) this shared interest derived exclusively from EU membership. For them, Iran was a distant country that posed no direct threat to their security. Iran's nuclear programme did pose a challenge, however, to the international non-proliferation regime as well as to the stability of a region on Europe's doorstep. The European Union had construed its role in the world as encompassing responsibility for regional stability and non-proliferation, which made Iran's nuclear issue a salient topic for these countries. A reflection of their EU-mediated identity, this interest was discursively constructed mainly—if not *only*—in an EU setting, especially in two critical documents in terms of identity-construction such as the ESS and the WMD strategy. These did not 'cause' the action, but the discussion over both strategies that the E3 were having with their EU partners and HR Solana informed it. It is thus possible to establish a constitutive nexus between EU foreign policy discourse and the E3/EU action.

The E3 obtained the other member states' support because they framed the problem of Iran's nuclear programme in terms that were in line with the nascent EU security discourse. The diagnostic frames used by the E3 and EU institutions with regard to Iran's nuclear programme were very much alike, and so were the prognostic frames and the corresponding actions. Because of these wide discursive overlaps, the E3/EU was not just an intergovernmental compromise but also an instance of EU foreign policy, albeit an unorthodox one. At stake were not only the purely national interests of the E3 and the other member states. Also present was an EU interest or, better, a national interest mediated by the EU layer of the member states' identity.

Notes

1. Greece, to make one example, imported over 1 billion euro worth of oil products from Iran in 2004, a sizeable figure indeed. Compare this with France's 1.3 billion euro worth of oil imports from Iran in 2004; given the difference in GDP between France (1630 billion euros) and Greece (179bn) at the time, Greek energy imports from Iran were proportionally much more relevant for the country's energy security than French imports (Eurostat 2015). Data on EU member states' trade exchanges with third countries are available on the website of the European Commission, Directorate-General Trade, Export Helpdesk: http://exporthelp.europa.eu/thdapp/display.htm;jsessionid=916E3376F3D5A2C0DE69E7C25406CF48?page=st%2fst_Statistics.html&docType=main&languageId=en

2. Interview with a senior E3 official, 21 April 2009.

3. Ahlström (2005: 32–33) assigns to Lindh the merit of having initiated the debate that would lead to the ESS. I was unable to ascertain whether Lindh's initiative preceded that of the E3 or went on in parallel.

4. For a history and analysis of the WMD strategy, see Ahlström (2005). The document built upon an action plan (Council of the European Union 2003b).

5. In October 2007 *The Telegraph* reported about an "understanding" between President Bush and Prime Minister Gordon Brown that UK forces would help a US military strike against Iran's IRGC facilities for supporting anti-coalition forces in Iraq (Shipman 2007); while the rationale of the attack was not Iran's nuclear programme, it is safe to say that the programme would have become a target in a possible escalation with Iran. Former British Prime Minister Blair spoke publicly of the possibility of using force against Iran's nuclear facilities after he left office, in 2010 (Tran 2010). British defence secretary Liam Fox seemed to imply that force may be used when he said before the House of Commons on 31 January 2011 that it was necessary "to act in accordance with [the] warning" that Iran might have had nuclear weapons in 2012 (quoted in Ellner 2013: 239).

6. While never a formal colony, Iran/Persia was a critical theatre in the 'Great Game', the competition between the British Empire and Tsarist Russia for control of the area south and east of the Caucasus and west of India. Between the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the British and Russians exerted almost total control over Persia, even occupying parts of it militarily (Frankopan 2015: 293–321). After the fall of the tsars in 1917, the British sway over Tehran solidified, eventually leading London to back Reza Shah Pahlavi (the father of the dynasty ousted in 1979) in his bid for power (ibidem: 341–356). Persia was invaded and shortly occupied by British and Soviet forces during the Second World War to secure Iranian oil wells and

Allied supply lines. Later, the British MI6 intelligence service was involved, with support from the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), in the 1953 coup that removed Mossadeq and restored Mohammed Reza Shah Pahlavi (the son) to power (ibidem: 399–418).

7. The FAC refrained from using the E3/EU+3 formulation even when it welcomed the JCPOA in July 2015, notwithstanding the fact that the phrase was on display on backdrops and banners in the room where HR Mogherini and Foreign Minister Zarif held press conferences and was used extensively in both the JCPOA and UNSCR 2231. Similarly to what it did in November 2004, in July 2015 the Council preferred to spell out fully the names of the member countries of the E3/EU (Council of the European Union 2015).

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The E3/EU in Action

Part II has established the conditions that made it possible for the E3/EU to form and endure drawing on both liberal intergovernmentalist arguments (Chap. 4) and social constructivist ones (Chap. 5). This part replicates the process with regard to the second question asked in Chap. 2, namely how lead groups actually make EU foreign policy and what implications that has for the EU as an international agent.

The liberal intergovernmentalist solution to this question was inconclusive. On the one hand, it admitted that lead groups can work as enablers of EU foreign policy in that they facilitate convergence between insiders and outsiders on pre-existing policy goals set at the EU level. On the other, it contended that lead groups nonetheless remain a *national* foreign policy practice (see sections "Liberal Intergovernmentalist Solutions" and "Understanding the Implications for EU Foreign Policy of Lead Groups" in Chap. 2).

The social constructivist argument went farther. If lead groups form because the insiders carry out a foreign policy action in line with the EU-mediated identity of the other member states, then that action can legitimately be considered an *EU* foreign policy action, and consequently the lead groups' foreign policy-making capacity is also an identity-shaping capacity (see sections "Social Constructivist Solutions" and "Understanding the Implications for EU Foreign Policy of Lead Groups" in Chap. 2). This argument has its roots in the mutual constitution of agents (here, the member states) and structure (the EU social

and normative context in which the member states operate). Applied to the empirical case of the E3/EU, this composite argument turns into a research endeavour tasked with:

– Reconstructing the E3/EU's capacity to enable and shape EU foreign policy
– Determining how the E3/EU contributed to constituting the identity of the EU and its member states as international agents

The two tasks are addressed in Chaps. 6, 7, 8 and 9, respectively.

The Premise: The Underneath Continuity in the E3/EU's Iran Policy

This chapter, and even more so the two that follow, look at the E3/EU in action. Conceptually, Chaps. 6, 7 and 8 address the main problem—the policy-making capacity of the E3/EU—and should therefore be collected in a single chapter. However, the amount of empirical material they review and discuss is big enough for a single chapter to become oversized. In addition, while the issue addressed is the same, each chapter looks at it from a different angle, whereby the analysis would risk losing focus if not properly organised. Better to unpack the study of the E3/EU as foreign policy-makers in three different chapters, each considering one particular dimension of the group's policy-making capacity. This should at the same time result in easier reading and a more straightforward line of arguments.

The three-dimensional backdrop against which the analysis unfolds is the following: the capacity of the E3/EU to give a new direction to a pre-existing EU policy; the capacity to manage and solve intra-EU disputes; and the capacity to coordinate with the United States, the country that most exerted influence on the Europeans. At a closer look, only the second and third dimensions actually deal with how the E3/EU made foreign policy. The first dimension, namely the capacity to innovate on a pre-existing policy, concerns the antecedent of the E3/EU's actual policy. As such, it is more a preliminary step into the analysis of the group's action than part of it.

Because it emphasises EU policy continuity before and after the nuclear crisis, this chapter may be seen as pertaining to the analysis of the bargain underlying the E3/EU group. Putting it into the previous strand of research would however be inaccurate. Even if the European Union had had no pre-existing Iran policy, the group would have formed nonetheless, for the reasons explained in Part II: a balance of interest resting on a shared EU identity. Policy continuity, in other words, does not contribute to understanding why the E3/EU formed, but it definitely helps reconstruct the process through which the E3/EU was able to shape EU policy *after* the group formed.

The chapter reviews the European Union's Iran policy prior to the emergence of the nuclear issue to show how the E3/EU adapted, and did not break with, previous policies. Section 1 briefly summarises the pre-2003 EU's Iran policy, Sect. 2 contrasts the residual EU's Iran policy after 2003 with the E3's nuclear policy and Sect. 3 argues that the E3/ EU re-elaborated and adjusted a pre-existing set of policy principles to a changed context.

1   THE DIALOGUE OF THE (HALF) DEAF: EU-IRAN ENGAGEMENT PRIOR TO THE NUCLEAR CRISIS

In the 1980s, the Europeans showed little interest in engaging the Islamic Republic of Iran, which Saddam's Iraq had drawn into a long, brutal and eventually pointless war. In fact, British, French, Italian and West German banks and companies even aided Iraqi war efforts by transferring money and selling weapons and dual-use technologies (Timmerman 1991). Iran only re-entered Europe's radar screens in the eventful years that followed the war with Iraq. The death in 1989 of Supreme Leader Ruhollah Khomeini, the dominant political figure of the Islamic Republic's first decade, removed a major obstacle to the resumption of relations, as Khomeini had been a fierce critic of Western policies and culture. In 1990–91, Iran observed a policy of neutrality during the short war that the US-led coalition waged against Iraqi forces occupying Kuwait. Iran's restraint was interpreted in some quarters in Europe as a deliberate show of moderation, as was help by the Iranian intelligence in freeing Western hostages held in Lebanon (Halliday 1998: 141; Mousavian 2008: 194). Senior European policy-makers, most notably in Germany, concluded that the time was ripe for a rapprochement.

Soon, the hard reality of Iran's domestic politics and the region's geopolitics laid bare the impracticality of a normalisation of Iran's relations with Europe and its Arab neighbours (ibidem: 195). Khomeini's successors embraced the late supreme leader's legacy and insisted that the Islamic Republic was a successful experiment in no need of reform. Repression at home continued, as did assassinations of Iranian political exiles abroad, including in European countries (Mousavian 2008: 218–222). The validity of Khomeini's infamous 1989 *fatwa* calling for the killing of Indian writer Salman Rushdie for allegedly offending Islamic beliefs was reaffirmed. Anti-Zionism and anti-Americanism remained main facets of the ideological fabric of the Islamic Republic. Iran continued to support anti-Western Islamist movements in Algeria, Sudan, Afghanistan and Lebanon (Halliday 1998: 144) and opposed the Arab-Israeli peace talks in Madrid (ibidem: 141) as well as the presence of US armed forces in the Gulf.

Although the Europeans were not willing to adopt a confrontational approach, they could not afford to ignore American, Israeli and Arab sensibilities altogether (Halliday 1998: 143). While they scaled back their Iran plans, however, they did not forfeit them (Mousavian 2008: 195). Convening in Edinburgh in December 1992, the European Council highlighted human rights, support for terrorist activities and the death sentence against Rushdie—who had found refuge in London—as issues of concern. Nevertheless, in recognition of "Iran's importance in the region", the European Council stated its intention to pursue a policy of dialogue (European Council 1992: 96).

This 'Critical' Dialogue—as the Council described it to emphasise its selective and conditional nature—consisted of meetings between representatives from Iran and the EU Presidency and the Commission with the objective of promoting greater mutual understanding. Besides human rights, the Rushdie affair and terrorism, the European Union also wanted the dialogue to encompass the Middle East Peace Process (MEPP), unsolved territorial disputes in the Gulf and, especially since the mid-1990s, nuclear non-proliferation (Struwe 1998: 15, ff.; Mousavian 2008: 195).

While both parties valued it, the Critical Dialogue did not make much progress. Differences among EU member states were a first problem. France and Italy viewed the dialogue as a way to engage a key country in a critical region rather than to promote domestic reform in Iran (Struwe 1998: 46–47). The French government, to make one example, defended

its decision to repatriate two Iranian nationals suspected of executing an exile in Switzerland on grounds of national interest (Halliday 1998: 142). The Italians had doubts about the wisdom of making the issue of 'terrorism-sponsoring' activities so prominent—visiting Iran in 1998, Italian Foreign Minister Lamberto Dini denied that Iran was a terrorist state (Nigro 1998). Other EU countries, including the United Kingdom and Denmark, were keener to criticise Iran. British-Iranian relations had soured after London's decision to grant Rushdie safe haven, and diplomatic ties had been broken. Denmark was so appalled by Iran's poor human rights record that in 1996 unilaterally withdrew from the Critical Dialogue.

A second problem was that the US administration wanted the Europeans to join its own policy of containment and isolation of Iran (Halliday 1998: 142; Mousavian 2008: 205). In 1995–96, President Bill Clinton imposed a de facto comprehensive embargo on US-Iran trade. Congress went further and passed a law imposing fines and other restrictions on foreign firms doing business in Iran's energy sector. The Iran-Libya Sanctions Act (ILSA)[1] provoked an angry reaction from the European Union (Struwe 1998: 34–35). The EU Council made it illegal for EU companies to comply with foreign laws having extraterritorial effects (Council of the European Union 1996). The spat dragged on until April 1997, when the European Union agreed not to challenge the legality of ILSA in the WTO in return for a US pledge to waive ILSA provisions for EU companies (Struwe 1998: 50).

In the ILSA case, the Europeans showed resolve in defending their policy of conditional engagement of Iran. Yet all their efforts risked foundering when relations between Iran and Germany took a sudden turn for the worse. In April 1997, a German court issued a verdict in which Iran's top leaders were implicitly held accountable for the 1992 murder of four Kurdish Iranian exiles in Berlin's *Mykonos* restaurant (Mousavian 2008: 106; the crisis is analysed in-depth on pp. 94–123). In the face of mounting pressure from the media and the opposition, the German government recalled its ambassador to Iran, expelled Iranian intelligence officers and halted German-Iranian exchanges at the ministerial level (ibidem: 107). The rest of EU countries followed suit at the end of April and Iran immediately responded in kind (Council of the European Union 1997; Mousavian 2008: 112, ff.). The whole edifice of the Critical Dialogue had crumbled in less than a month.

The crisis was not to last, however. Iranian voters saved the day when they gave the reform-minded Khatami a resounding victory in the May 1997 presidential elections. The new president had made the strengthening of the rule of law and civil rights the centrepiece of his campaign. The Europeans saw an opportunity for a thaw and reached out to the new Iranian administration.

By fall 1997, European and Iranian ambassadors had retaken their seats and the ban on ministerial meetings was lifted. In 1998, the United Kingdom and Iran restored relations at the ambassadorial level, also because the Khatami administration apparently downgraded its commitment to the *fatwa* against Rushdie (which, however, was not disowned; BBC News 1998). Eager to restore political and economic ties with the Islamic Republic, Italy's Prime Minister Prodi visited Tehran in July 1998 (*La Repubblica* 1998) and the following year Khatami went to Rome, the first Iranian president to go to an EU country after 1979. The visit stirred controversy across Europe and between Italy and the United States (*La Repubblica* 1999), yet the fact that it was possible attests to the climate of optimism that animated European-Iranian relations at the end of the 1990s. Iran's lucrative energy sector was opened again to foreign investment, an opportunity quickly seized by several European oil majors, including Shell, Total, Repsol and Eni (Makinsky 2009).

With the *Mykonos* incident behind them, the Europeans resuscitated the Critical Dialogue and upgraded it into a more ambitious initiative. The so-called Comprehensive Dialogue focused not only on the controversial areas of human rights, the MEPP, terrorism and non-proliferation, but also on areas of potential cooperation, such as the fight against drug trafficking, management of refugees (particularly from Afghanistan), trade, transport and energy. In 1999 the European Commission set up an EU-Iran high-level working group on energy and transport and the next year followed up with a similar body that dealt with trade and investment (Dupont 2009: 18–19). In 2001, the volume of EU-Iran exchanges reached sufficient critical mass for the Commission to draw a more systematic plan of engagement on human rights and security issues in the Gulf (European Commission 2001). Negotiations over a Political Dialogue Agreement (PDA) and a TCA were formally launched in 2002.

It is necessary to put the improvement in EU-Iran relations into context. Although Iran was an important energy supplier for some EU countries such as France, Italy, Spain and Greece, its economic importance for Europe was limited. Moreover, political relations continued to be difficult.

The Europeans looked at Tehran and saw an opaque clerical leadership filled with (genuine or instrumental) revolutionary zeal that objected to a pillar of EU member states' Middle East policy—a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict—and proudly declared its enmity towards their main ally, the United States (Kaussler 2012: 53–54). For sure, few people in Europe contemplated forced regime change in Tehran, as some in America did. Nevertheless, the Europeans made no secret that they would welcome domestic reforms and a different foreign policy, something that made the Iranian leadership suspicious and in some cases outright paranoid.

The Iranians feared that the Europeans, just like the Americans, aimed to undermine the legitimacy of the Islamist regime. The memory of the colonial era, during which the British in particular had interfered repeatedly in Persia's affairs, was another lingering source of mistrust. It was out of pragmatism, not an ideological and strategic shift, that Iran had welcomed the European Union's attempts at engagement (Halliday 1998: 145–6). Iran's leaders wanted to break their country's international isolation, access European technologies, attract wealthy investors and gain energy-hungry customers. But they were not ready to carry out domestic reforms that could threaten the sustainability of the clerical regime. Genuinely or opportunistically, they remained very much committed to the ideological core of the Islamic revolution.

In short, the Comprehensive Dialogue was based on a promise, not reality. In 1999–2002 that promise seemed to hold true, particularly after Khatami won a second mandate in 2001, again with an overwhelming majority. Yet the promise remained unfulfilled.

2   ON SEPARATE TRACKS: THE HUMAN RIGHTS DIALOGUE AND THE NUCLEAR TALKS

Before the nuclear issue came to dominate the agenda, the human rights dialogue constituted the bulk of EU-Iran interactions. The European Union and Iran agreed to hold a series of official roundtables at regular intervals. The dialogue was open to experts of a different background, ranging from police forces to academics and NGO people. Discrimination against women and minorities, torture and the death penalty, the accountability and independence of the judiciary, the police and prison systems, as well as freedom of expression, were the issues on the table

(Kjærum 2007: 13–16). In all, four human rights meetings took place in Tehran (in December 2002 and June 2004) and Brussels (in March and October 2003).

In 2002, expectations in Europe that the human rights dialogue would bring about real change were high (Council of the European Union 2002: 7). Just two years later, the enthusiasm had withered. Taking advantage of low turnout and the disqualification of numerous reformist candidates, Iran's conservatives crushed Khatami's supporters in the February 2004 elections for the Majlis, Iran's parliament. The president's room for manoeuvre was curtailed and his openings to the Europeans became the target of criticism (International Crisis Group 2004). In October 2004, the EU Council expressed dismay at the growing restrictions to political freedoms and other fundamental rights (Council of the European Union 2004a: 8). Such harsh tones made deference to EU requests politically inexpedient for the Khatami administration, which refused to accept EU invitations to continue the roundtable practice. The European Union urged the Iranian government to rejoin the process one last time at the end of 2005, but to no avail (European Union 2005).

With the human rights dialogue stalled, non-nuclear EU-Iran contacts continued on the TCA track, which was restarted at the end of 2004 after a one-and-a-half year suspension. In theory, the Commission was in charge of the negotiation. In practice, its scope of action was very narrow as the TCA talks took place within the overall framework of the Paris Agreement-launched nuclear negotiations and were consequently heavily influenced by the E3.

In January 2005 the GAERC dispatched HR Solana to Tehran to explore ways to move EU-Iran dialogue forward "on all areas", including nuclear proliferation (Council of the European Union 2004b). In March 2005, the Council expressed support for the approach "set out by the High Representative", by which it meant the E3-led negotiation (Council of the European Union 2005a). In June, EU leaders reaffirmed their support for the Paris Agreement (European Council 2005: 16). In October, the Council endorsed the IAEA Board of Governors resolution that had declared Iran in breach of its safeguard obligations (Sect. 3 in Chap. 3).

A turning point came in November 2005, when the Council "reviewed its overall approach to Iran". Lack of progress on the nuclear file combined with a series of anti-Israel utterances by President Ahmadinejad—which many saw as direct threats—to harden the European Union's stance

(Council of the European Union 2005b).[2] Implicit in the 'review' of the EU approach to Iran was an admission that years of conditional engagement under the Critical and Comprehensive Dialogues had ended in failure. Results were ways below expectations in most areas, most notably in the non-proliferation field. Yet the review was no real review, as no new policy was announced. The reality was that by late 2005 the European Union was left without any Iran policy other than the E3/EU process.

Evidence of this accumulated in the following months. The January 2006 Council conclusions incorporated verbatim parts of the statement to the IAEA in which the E3 said that the nuclear talks had reached a dead end (Council of the European Union 2006a; for the E3's statement, see IAEA 2006). During a March 2006 meeting of the IAEA board, the Austrian EU Presidency read a statement that supported the E3/EU policy line (European Union 2006). Later, the Council stated that action by Iran on the areas of concern was now not only affecting the possibility of improved relations with Iran, but also raising the chance of their downgrading (Council of the European Union 2006b: 13–14, 2006c: 19–20). Given that most EU public statements concerning Iran regarded its nuclear ambitions, there was no doubt that lack of progress on that front complicated EU-Iran relations. The other issues—including human rights—were irritants that would have not sufficed alone to undermine the framework of EU-Iran relations. Only the nuclear issue could, and the nuclear issue was in the hands of the E3.

3   ADJUSTMENT, NOT RUPTURE: EU'S IRAN POLICY AFTER THE E3/EU

The EU dialogue policy, while failing to produce substantial reform in the Islamic Republic, was not entirely short of results. The Europeans pushed Iran to create human rights-dedicated bodies and give verbal assurances that it would not carry out the *fatwa* against Rushdie. Participation in the EU-Iran roundtables won Iranian human rights activists a degree of protection that would have been absent otherwise. Moreover, the roundtable experience contributed to depoliticising human rights by "allowing Iranian civil society to approach it from within a *Shi'a* discourse" (Kaussler 2012: 57). Finally, the 'dialogues experience' helped push Iran to participate constructively in the 2001 Bonn process over the stabilisation and political transition of post-Taliban Afghanistan (Mousavian 2008: 207, ff.).

Underlying the constructive engagement sought by the European Union was a twofold assumption: that engagement would have bolstered Iranian reformers and that Iran could be lured into changing its most controversial behaviour via the offer of incentives. Some scholars (Kaussler 2008, 2012) and policy-makers[3] believed that the E3/EU approach, with its exclusive focus on the nuclear issue, made it impossible for the Europeans to capitalise on these achievements. They claimed that the E3/EU process blocked all other venues to engage Iran, leading the European Union to abandon its previous non-coercive strategy to foster change in Iran and adopt a strategy based on negotiations, conditionality and coercive means (Kaussler 2012: 57).

While it has elements of truth, the argument is hardly persuasive. There are several reasons to believe that the E3/EU's policy reflected versatility and adaptation rather than rupture with the past (Dryburgh 2008: 260, ff.). First, EU countries had made nuclear non-proliferation one of the key issues of concern in the dialogue with Iran in the 1990s. It was just natural that, as the magnitude of Iran's nuclear issue grew, so did the European Union's willingness to confront Iran on the issue (Quille and Keane 2005: 114, ff.; Dryburgh 2008: 260).

Second, even if the E3/EU indirectly presided over the freezing of the overall EU-Iran agenda, they retained engagement as the strategic principle around which they organised their action. There was, for sure, a switch from the persuasion-based approach of the Comprehensive Dialogue to a 'manipulative' one—that is, one combining negotiations and conditionality (Kienzle 2012: 82–83). Given Iran's stubbornness in defending its 'nuclear rights', however, the Europeans could hardly bet on the gradualism of a dialogue-based approach to persuade it to change tack. Negotiating, bargaining and pressure—in short, a more proactive and assertive diplomatic approach—looked, and actually were, more sensible choices. In addition, the shift from dialogue to assertive diplomacy was not premised on a change of discourse on Iran, which the Europeans continued to construe as a legitimate interlocutor and a potential partner (as discussed in Chap. 5; on this point, see also Dryburgh 2008: 261).

Third, the E3/EU process neither fragmented EU's Iran policy nor made individual EU countries keener on bilateral relations (if anything, the opposite was the case, as discussed in Chaps. 7 and 8). What it did was to insert a specific sequencing into the development of the EU-Iran relationship. As stated in the preamble to their August 2005 offer to Iran (Sect. 3 in Chap. 3), the E3/EU wanted the long-term nuclear agreement

to "define the relationship between the E3/EU process and the EU/Iran negotiations on a Political Dialogue Agreement and a Trade & Cooperation Agreement as complementary and mutually reinforcing" (IAEA Director General 2005: 2). Since Iran rejected the E3/EU offer, the time to define the relationship between the E3/EU process and the EU-led talks over the PDA and TCA never came. Nevertheless, the E3/EU made it clear that deepened contractual links between Iran and the European Union were conceived of as an integral part of the proposed long-term nuclear agreement.

In conclusion, the E3/EU did not undercut a pre-existing EU foreign policy. They re-elaborated elements of it—focus on non-proliferation, engagement, promise of improved EU-Iran relation, promotion of rules-based regimes—so as to make them fit changed circumstances. The E3/EU action operationalised patterns of action that the European Union had already agreed upon in general terms with regard to both Iran and non-proliferation. While the E3/EU narrowed the scope of EU's Iran policy, they also gave it a new direction and a more proactive character.

Notes

1. Later simply the Iran Sanctions Act (ISA), as in 2004 Congress lifted sanctions against Libya following Libyan dictator Muammar Qaddafi's decision to give up the pursuit of WMDs.
2. Ahmadinejad's remark that Israel "must be wiped off the map", in particular, created international furore. Farsi-speaking Iran experts, such as Juan Cole, a University of Michigan professor of Modern Middle East and South Asian History, claimed that the Iranian president was quoting a speech by great ayatollah Khomeini, which read as follows: "the Zionist occupation of Jerusalem would vanish from the page of history", and that militarily threatening the state of Israel was not Ahmadinejad's intent (Cole 2006). Other commentators, among them *The New York Times* Jerusalem bureau chief Ethan Bronner, disagreed with the softening of the comment's meaning (Bronner 2006). International news agencies picked up Ahmadinejad's remark from the English-language website of the Iranian IRIB news agency (IRIB 2005).
3. Interviews by the author with a European Commission official, 22 June 2010, and with a senior Italian diplomat, 17 March 2015.

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The Action/1: E3 Leadership and EU Ownership

This chapter delves into the actual policy-making capacity of the E3/EU. Throughout the course of the nuclear dispute, the E3/EU reacted to Iran's moves, coordinated with other relevant players (within the E3/EU+3 and beyond) and reviewed strategies and the means to implement them. The E3/EU were able to shape an innovative policy course that combined a certain degree of adaptability with a high degree of consistency. This chapter illustrates how the E3/EU were able to do so by tracing how they took decisions (Sect. 1), managed communications with the other member states (Sect. 2) and solved intra-EU conflicts (Sect. 3). The chapter concludes (Sect. 4) that the E3 and the HR effected EU policy convergence by exerting intra-EU leadership (as per the liberal intergovernmentalist argument) and promoting EU-wide ownership of their action (in line with the social constructivist argument).

1   The Principals and Their Agent: Decision-Making Within the E3/EU

France, Germany and the United Kingdom ran the show during the early phase of the controversy. Following the conclusion of the Paris Agreement in November 2004, each E3 country chaired one of three working groups that were supposed to advance cooperation between the E3/EU and Iran. France chaired the working group on nuclear cooperation, Germany the

one dealing with economic and trade relations, and the United Kingdom the one on regional and security issues. The working groups reported to a steering committee tasked with overseeing the technical discussions while conducting the broad negotiations over the long-term nuclear agreement (IAEA 2004). After Iran restarted sensitive nuclear activities in summer 2005, however, the whole negotiation structure created by the Paris Agreement ceased to function.

The collapse of the talks did not diminish the need for the E3 to coordinate closely. For as long as they remained in office, the E3 foreign ministers that had started the action in 2003—De Villepin, Fischer and Straw—were personally invested in the issue.[1] They weighed on negotiation details in a manner in which their successors would not until the late 2013 turning point in the E3/EU+3-Iran talks (Sect. 5 in Chap. 3). For the most part, however, actual policy-making was in the hands of political directors and their advisors (Meier 2013: 4).[2]

In France, the nuclear issue was in the hands of the foreign ministry's political director and the non-proliferation department at the Quay d'Orsay.[3] The British Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) set up an Iran team, itself part of an Iran coordination group operational at least since 2007, which dealt with all aspects related to the nuclear issue.[4] Since summer 2008 an Iran task force was created within the German Auswärtiges Amt (the federal foreign ministry) with the aim to bring the expertise of the various desks involved—Middle East, non-proliferation, sanctions implementation—under a single roof and coordinate with other government agencies (the federal chancellery, the ministries of finance and the economy, the foreign intelligence service).[5] Even if the British and Germans added expertise on regional issues and human rights, just like the French they continued to look to Iran mainly through nuclear proliferation lenses.[6]

The E3 neither set up an office in charge of secretarial duties nor met according to a fixed schedule.[7] Nevertheless, the intensity of exchanges between the E3 and Iran teams was reportedly unprecedented.[8] Meetings between representatives of the E3/EU took place at irregular intervals, but communication by phone or email between the E3 mid-level officials who ran the ordinary work (mostly on sanctions) occurred almost on a daily basis. Information sharing with Russia and China followed traditional diplomatic channels and usually went through the embassies, but E3 communication with the US Department of State was frequent,

particularly after the Obama administration took office. It was in this informal network of exchanges that the E3/EU+3 policy took shape.[9]

Throughout the course of the nuclear dispute the E3 counted on the support, assistance and advice from the HR for CFSP (after the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty, 'for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy'): first Solana (until 2009), then Ashton (2009–14) and lastly Mogherini (since late 2014).

Under the 2004–5 E3/EU format, the HR's role was secondary. Solana's office consulted regularly with the E3 foreign ministries and his staff accompanied E3 delegations. The E3 foreign ministers, not he, were the main interlocutors of Iran's chief negotiator Rouhani. Nevertheless, his advice was listened to, and Solana and his main aide Robert Cooper contributed to shaping the E3 negotiating position.[10]

With the expansion of the negotiating format to China, Russia and the United States, the HR's role experienced a boost. The creation of the E3/EU+3 made it harder for the E3 foreign ministers to negotiate with Iran directly. As Solana was not a national official from any of the E3+3, it was decided that he would take on the responsibility for being the chief interlocutor of the Iranians, a position he bequeathed to his successors. Solana, Ashton and Mogherini met face-to-face with the Iranian chief negotiators that followed Rouhani, first SNSC secretaries Ali Larijani (until 2007) and Jalili (until 2013) and then Foreign Minister Zarif (since 2013), several times. Solana went twice to Tehran, in June 2006 and June 2008, to deliver the package of incentives that the E3/EU+3 hoped would lure the Iranians into rejoining the negotiating table (Sect. 4 in Chap. 3). Lady Ashton visited Tehran in March 2014, while Mogherini did so after the final agreement of July 2015.

Representing the E3/EU+3 won the HR some bigger room for manoeuvre. Solana used his newly gained direct access to the foreign ministers of all E3+3 to advocate engagement with the Iranians.[11] In September 2006, he was reportedly inches away from agreeing with Larijani on a formula to restart negotiations (*Financial Times* 2006: 1). In spring 2007, he floated the idea of a 'double suspension', according to which Iran would freeze sensitive activities and the E3/EU+3 would stop implementation of sanctions pending negotiations on a long-term agreement (Afrasiabi 2007). The idea was further elaborated in summer 2008, when the Iranians hinted that they could enter talks with the E3/EU+3 on a 'freeze-for-freeze' basis (no further advancement of Iran's nuclear

programme in return for no additional sanctions) for a period of six weeks. All this attests to Solana's capacity of initiative and creativeness. The Iranians, however, were aware that he lacked real authority, which helps explain why Solana was unable to achieve the desired results. During his tenure, no actual negotiation between Iran and the E3/EU+3 took place. The only exception was the failed nuclear fuel swap deal of late 2009, the terms of which, however, were defined by the United States in cooperation with France, and the IAEA and not by the HR office (Sect. 4 in Chap. 3).

Lady Ashton, whose foreign policy expertise and personal network of relations were nowhere close to Solana's, was less ambitious (Meier 2013: 15). During the numerous meetings between the E3/EU+3 and Iran in 2011–13, she limited herself to her chairmanship duties, which she performed diligently, winning the respect of the E3 and the United States (Howorth 2014: 19, ff.). In the end, the breakthrough came only in the wake of the separate US-Iranian bilateral communication track (Sect. 5 in Chap. 3). Ashton was nonetheless heavily involved in the negotiations over the November 2013 nuclear interim deal (Blair 2013).[12] Mogherini stuck to Ashton's conduct in the run-up to the final deal. Having taken over the post of HR in the very last phase of the controversy, she heavily relied on Helga Schmid, the EU official in charge of the Iran nuclear dossier.[13]

Both Ashton and Mogherini took advantage of the institutional novelties introduced by the Lisbon Treaty (in force since 2009), most notably the creation of a European External Action Service (EEAS), an embryonic diplomatic corps. While Solana had to lean heavily on E3 ministers and their aides, Ashton and Mogherini could rely on a growing dedicated staff within the EEAS to help them coordinate the complex set of negotiations over the interim and final deals in 2013–15. These 'Iran people' within the EEAS provided the HRs with helpful insights resulting from their years-long experience in negotiating with Iran.

At times overlooked, the HR's mediating role was in fact important. Ashton and Mogherini (along with Schmid) controlled the agenda, determined the timing of bilateral exchanges and plenary meetings, coordinated with all delegations, reached out to other relevant players (ranging from Israel to the Sunni Arab states to the United States' Asian allies) and negotiated the wording of the interim and final deals, as well as the annexes (De La Baume 2015). Schmid developed an excellent working relationship with the US lead negotiator, Undersecretary of State Wendy Sherman,

and engaged constantly with Zarif's deputy Seyed Abbas Araghchi (Lefkoff 2013). In at least one occasion—the definition of the conflict resolution mechanism through the establishment of the Joint Commission (see Sect. 6 in Chap. 3), Schmid and Sherman worked out the details without first consulting the E3 (Fabius 2016: 29–30).

In conclusion, the decision-making process within the E3/EU was characterised by two elements. First were the intense, almost daily, exchanges between E3 officials, which made it easier for the E3 to reach consensus among themselves and with their US partners, while also helping them forge a common position with Russia and China. The second element was a division of labour between the 'nation state element' (the E3) and the 'EU element' (the HR) that took on clearer contours over time. In the beginning, the E3 were both deciders and negotiators, with the HR relegated to an advisory role. After the creation of the E3/EU+3, the E3 remained in the decision room but took a step back and let the HR represent them and the rest of the group vis-à-vis the Iranians. In a way, the E3-HR relationship was one between the principals and their agent, an asymmetric yet still mutually interdependent relationship.[14]

2   A One-Way Street: Communication Between the E3/EU and the Other Member States

Negotiating with the Iranians was undoubtedly the hard part of the E3/EU's job. Strategic acumen, diplomatic skills and expertise on things nuclear and Iran-related were all critical conditions for success. Yet equally important was intra-EU cohesion, without which E3 efforts would have been largely ineffective.

In the beginning, it was the E3 that briefed the other member states about progress (or lack thereof) in the nuclear talks. They had established an unorthodox procedure according to which representatives from France, Germany or the United Kingdom addressed in turn the Political and Security Committee (PSC) and the GAERC. E3 representatives met before GAERC or PSC meetings, sometimes even exchanging their speaking notes to make sure that their message sounded coherent.[15] Gradually, they handed over this task to the HR office.[16] In theory, the HR's formal duty was to ensure that positions agreed at the EU level were respected, but since those positions were agreed mostly

upon insistence of the E3 and based on their assessments, this was rarely a problem. In practice, the HR's role in communicating with the other EU member states was no different from the E3's, in that the HR only shared information that the E3 had, so to speak, 'cleared'.

The E3 and the HR's approach to the other EU institutions was predicated on the need to maintain confidentiality. The EU Presidency was deliberately sidelined, as the E3 did not want an EU-wide discussion about the details of an ongoing negotiation. Excluding the Commission proved slightly more difficult, particularly in the 2004–5 E3/EU-Iran nuclear talks. The Commission was legally responsible for negotiating the TCA with Iran, by then the biggest carrot that the E3/EU could wave before the Iranians. The inclusion in the nuclear negotiating team of the Commission, whose bureaucratic machine was notoriously leak-prone, was nonetheless never an option.[17] The E3/EU limited themselves to inviting the Commission to the economic working group established by the Paris Agreement[18] and sought its technical advice when drafting the part on the economic incentives of the August 2005 proposal for a long-term agreement with Iran.[19] The problem faded away after the collapse of the Paris Agreement, which led the EU Council to suspend again the TCA talks.

Managing relations with the group's outsiders became a more complicated task after the E3/EU+3 determined to activate the sanctions track. The E3 could discuss UN measures with their E3/EU+3 partners independently from the other EU member states. But they had to involve them when it came to add EU-only sanctions, for which EU unanimity was required. This gave the outsiders some leverage.

Italy tried to take advantage of this new situation. According to an EU official, in 2008 the Italian government extracted from the E3 the promise of a 'privileged' channel of communication by threatening to stall reception of the UN sanctions in the GAERC.[20] I have been unable to verify the claim, yet several E3 officials contended that since 2008 special arrangements with the Italians were in fact agreed.[21] An E3 official said that Italy belonged to a 'second circle' somewhere in-between the E3/EU and the other EU member states, whose main job was to invigorate support for the E3/EU+3 effort within the European Union.[22] Accounts about whether the Italians were helpful vary, with some pointing to a more cooperative Italy since 2008 and others underlining the inability of the Italians to make a difference.[23] Whatever its value, the scope of this special arrangement was extremely limited. The Italians did not take part in the

negotiations, did not contribute to shaping the E3/EU+3 policies and had no access to confidential information about the E3/EU+3-Iran talks in 2013–15 that led first to the JPOA and then to the JCPOA.[24]

For the E3 it was critical that the E3/EU+3 choices would not become a matter of intra-EU negotiation. The E3/EU passed along the information that, they believed, would suffice to invigorate support for the E3/EU+3 policy line in briefings for all EU member states in Berlin, London and Paris. When the three had reasons to anticipate objections by another member state, they instructed their embassies in that country to lobby, including in an E3 format, the local government. To avoid the risk that a lack of instructions from national capitals could block decisions at the EU level, the E3 and the HR also made sure that all national delegations in Brussels received appropriate information before PSC meetings in which Iran was on the agenda.[25]

With few exceptions, the E3 officials with whom I have spoken contested that the E3/EU imposed their will on the other member states. Some contended that the flow of information within the European Union made the E3/EU's final position the result of intra-EU consultation to a greater extent than it was commonly assumed.[26] It is unlikely that many outside the E3/EU circles would subscribe to this view, which, in truth, does seem to jar with the empirical evidence.[27] To what, one may legitimately ask, did intra-EU consultation exactly amount, if the offers of incentives that the E3/EU and the E3/EU+3 made to Iran in August 2005, June 2006 and June 2008 were just circulated but not debated by the EU Council? And to what did transparency amount if the E3 rarely passed along more information than what non-E3 officials could find in well-informed newspapers? In June 2010, a European Commission official recalled a FAC meeting in which the E3 were criticised for not circulating the draft text of UNSCR 1929.[28] A senior Italian diplomat later complained that he had been unable to obtain the text of the November 2013 interim nuclear deal from the E3 (he managed to have it only after an Iranian outlet published it online).[29] It is not unreasonable to presume that other non-E3 diplomats could tell similar anecdotes.

A number of E3 officials concurred that the intra-EU consultation process was limited and that the E3 controlled the debate on Iran. Some admitted that they could not recall a single occasion in which a proposal from a non-E3 member state had found its way into the E3 negotiating strategy.[30] Yet, they contended that occasional glitches in the flow of

information were due to poor management rather than deliberate choice. More importantly, they pointed out that, in spite of lingering discontent about the E3 format, the non-E3 member states remained supportive of the policies, eventually developing a sense of ownership.[31] Those who feared a three-strong *directoire* failed to notice that the E3/EU could not afford to neglect the interests and sensibilities of the other member states entirely (Menon 2009).[32] But when conflict did emerge, how did the E3/EU manage it?

3   Arguing, Discouraging, Scaring: E3/EU Conflict Resolution Tactics

Throughout the nuclear dispute, and especially after the E3/EU-Iran talks collapsed and the sanctions track was activated, the E3/EU faced two types of challenges. The first was the possibility that an EU member state would take decisions that could run counter to their efforts. The second and most obvious one was to persuade all member states to adopt EU-wide sanctions.

Both were delicate tasks, as some EU member states were reluctant to subcontract their relationship with Iran to the E3/EU, some doubted the wisdom of imposing sanctions, and several others did not want to harm their commercial or energy interests in the Islamic Republic. While divergences of opinion abounded (Wagner and Onderco 2014; Onderco 2015), they rarely came to the surface. In hindsight, the absence of any open conflict within the European Union on Iran is remarkable, and speaks of the convergence turn that the E3/EU process imparted to EU foreign policy.

For sure, Iran's conduct contributed to facilitating the E3's task of fostering intra-EU cohesion. Under the Ahmadinejad administration (2005–13), in particular, EU-Iran relations deteriorated. Iran not only kept expanding its nuclear programme. It also appalled Western countries with anti-Israel utterances (International Crisis Group 2007) and cracked down on demonstrators protesting against alleged irregularities in Ahmadinejad's 2009 re-election (Human Rights Watch 2009). It clashed with the United States in Iraq (International Crisis Group 2005), complicated NATO's efforts to stabilise Afghanistan (Kugelman 2014) and indulged in provocative behaviour, such as when it detained for about two weeks 15 British sailors for supposedly trespassing into Iran's waters in the

Gulf (Harding et al. 2007). In 2011, the US Department of Justice even claimed to have foiled an Iranian plot to assassinate the Saudi ambassador in Washington (Pollack 2013: 24–25).[33]

EU member states often held different views on how to handle these spats. Given the pre-eminence of the nuclear issue, it was mostly the E3 that called the shots. This understandably created tensions. Sweden, for instance, wanted to put more emphasis on human rights, in keeping with its long-standing tradition of a value-driven diplomacy. As its July– December 2009 stint at the head of the European Union approached, it advocated a policy of engagement of Iran's civil society,[34] which the E3/ EU, as well as the United States, were reluctant to contemplate.[35] The Swedes had hoped that they could promote a human rights agenda in parallel with the E3/EU process. They were aware, however, that they played "second violin" to the "E3 foreign policy machine"[36] on anything related to Iran. Thus, when their ideas did not find enough support, they abstained from initiatives that could engulf the E3/EU process or engender the perception of intra-EU divisions.

A more serious incident occurred in spring 2009. The cause of disagreement was the plan by the Italian foreign minister at the time, Franco Frattini, to make an official visit to Iran. Ostensibly, his purpose was to talk about Italian-Iranian cooperation in the fight against drug trafficking and the stabilisation of Herat, Afghanistan's western region in which Italy had command of NATO forces and Iran's influence was strongest. The nuclear issue was not on the agenda, but the E3 were nonetheless furious. Not only had Frattini failed to inform his EU partners (Dinmore 2009a), he was also breaking a tacit agreement among EU countries about leaving high-level contacts with Iran to HR Solana (Dinmore 2009b). The rift was serious enough to compel Frattini to cancel the visit (ibidem), causing a good deal of embarrassment to his government.[37] The Italians had a hard time in shaking off the lingering mistrust of their allies. Even in the much-improved atmosphere created by the interim nuclear deal, a December 2013 visit to Tehran by another Italian foreign minister, Emma Bonino, raised eyebrows in Washington and E3 capitals. The Italians struggled to convince the United States that Bonino's visit, far from breaking ranks with the E3/EU+3, aimed to incentivise the Iranians to stick to their new course of diplomatic engagement (Alcaro 2014a).

Iran's erratic course under Ahmadinejad made it easier for the E3 to 'discipline' the other member states. When it came to sanctions, however,

the task was far more complicated. While EU-Iran political relations deteriorated since 2005, EU-Iran trade expanded, even peaking at the height of Western-Iranian tensions in 2011.

In 2003 imports from Iran by the EU28[38] were just short of 7 billion euros, while exports oscillated around 10 billion. Eight years later, EU imports crossed the 17.3 billion euros threshold and exports slightly increased to 10.5 billion euros.[39] Italy, Spain, Greece, France and the Netherlands absorbed most imports from Iran, 90 per cent of which were oil or oil-related (Bassiri Tabrizi and Hanau Santini 2012: 4). By contrast, EU exports to Iran—mostly of machinery, transport infrastructures, manufactured goods and chemicals—were more evenly distributed among member states. The disproportion in oil imports created a powerful minority very reluctant to jeopardise energy security interests (even if France, which was willing to take a very tough approach, was taken out of the picture). With exporters scattered across Europe, no EU member state was even remotely dependent on exports to Iran. Yet many governments faced pressure from their exporters' lobbies, especially mid-size enterprises, not to obstruct their businesses with Iran.[40]

For a time, the European Union's commitment to the sanctions track remained limited. In early 2007 the GAERC expanded the list of Iranian individuals and firms blacklisted by UNSCRs 1737 and 1747. Due to their involvement in the nuclear and ballistic programmes, individuals were denied EU visas and individuals and firms' financial assets held in Europe were frozen (Council of the European Union 2007). The adoption of these measures, however modest they were, showed that the European Union could go further than the United Nations. At the same time, the precedent clearly highlighted the need, for the E3/EU, to create a functioning link between the legal basis and the actual size of the sanctions regime.

The relevance of this issue was laid bare in April 2007, when Austria's energy company OMV signed an 18 billion dollars natural gas deal with the NIOC (Reuters 2007). The deal, announced right after the European Union had agreed to its own first set of sanctions, was a source of major frustration for the E3/EU because it undermined their efforts to send a message of EU cohesion to the Iranians.[41] Yet the E3 could neither prevent it nor reverse it. They were not in the position of blaming the Austrians either, given that, after all, the deal was not illegal under UN or EU sanctions. What they did was to increase consultation among themselves and with the United States to find ways to avoid other similar moves by EU countries.

The result of this debate was visible in UNSCR 1803, drafted and tabled by the E3 in March 2008. The resolution included, among other things, calls to exert vigilance that state-provided support for trade with Iran, as well as financial relations with banks domiciled in Iran, would not indirectly support the latter's nuclear plans (United Nations Security Council 2008a). Although the text did not include references to any specific economic sector (with the exception, of course, of the nuclear and ballistic ones), one could divine the intention to provide a bedrock for more forcefully discouraging major economic investments in Iran, particularly in such a sensitive field as energy. Loan guarantees to EU exporters were reduced across Europe and EU oil majors refrained from signing big new contracts with Iran.

The OMV-NIOC remained thus an isolated case. But even if EU member states proceeded towards greater convergence, sanctions remained a highly contested topic. Some, like Swedish Foreign Minister Carl Bildt (in office 2006–14), feared they would become a surrogate of diplomacy (Bildt 2013). Others had more mundane concerns.

In February 2009 Sweden, along with Austria, Cyprus, Greece and Spain, blocked another E3 effort to expand the black lists of Iranian companies and individuals (Dinmore et al. 2009). As this quarrel happened right after the inauguration of Obama as US president, it might be that Sweden and the others wanted to test the new administration's stated willingness to engage Iran directly before adding new sanctions. But the fear that the push for sanctions would become a slippery slope that would result in a self-reinforcing drive for adding sanctions on sanctions, eventually jeopardising trade with Iran, definitely played a role.

None of the five countries that opposed new EU sanctions could feign a fully unbiased, principled stance. Iran was Sweden's main export market in the Middle East (Bloomberg 2017). Austria was perhaps concerned that the OMV-NIOC deal would become harder—or even impossible—to implement. Spain and Greece were large importers of Iranian oil. Greece also worried about the depressing effects of trade restrictions with Iran on its shipping industry, as Cyprus did. In the end, the E3 opted for a 'strategic retreat',[42] waiting for riper times to make the case for additional measures against Iran.

It was not before long that such times came about. After the failure of the nuclear fuel swap, in June 2010 the E3/EU+3 pushed a new sanctions resolution into the Security Council (Sect. 4 in Chap. 3). The result, UNSCR 1929, was a watershed in EU-Iran relations.[43]

In agreement with the United States, the E3 constructed the wording of the resolution so that it provided the ground into which the European Union could anchor far-reaching additional measures. Of special importance were the call upon states to terminate the provision of any financial service—including insurance and reinsurance—that Iran could use to advance its nuclear plans, as well as the ban on the opening of new banking relations with Iranian banks (United Nations Security Council 2010). Building on this, the European Union forbade new investments in Iran's oil and gas sectors by EU firms, prohibited the provision of insurance and reinsurance services to Iranian or Iranian-controlled companies and imposed strict oversight over financial transactions involving Iranian entities (Council of the European Union 2010).

EU sanctions were adopted in July 2010, less than a month after the UN sanctions. The short timeframe within which the European Union was expected to implement and expand on UNSCR 1929 made it impossible for the European Commission, which was responsible for drafting the text of EU sanctions, to conduct an assessment of the possible implications for EU-Iran trade. This spared the E3 a lengthy and potentially contentious debate about the merit of each individual measure. Tellingly, however, no EU country made such a request before UNSCR 1929 was passed, despite the fact that the E3/EU+3 had agreed on a draft resolution one month before its formal adoption by the Security Council.[44] The E3 had not felt the need to inform their EU partners about the exact contents of UNSCR 1929.[45] Evidently, they were not expecting much resistance.

The E3 could point to the E3/EU+3's stated intention to keep the door open for a negotiated solution as testimony that they saw sanctions as a means, not an end in itself (E3/EU+3 2010). The EU Presidency holder, Spanish Foreign Minister Miguel Àngel Moratinos, subscribed to this view in June 2010 (quoted in Meier 2013: 15). As Iran continued to advance its uranium enrichment programme, however, the E3 increasingly sold the case for new EU sanctions as a way to avoid a worse alternative, namely an Israeli and/or US military strike against Iran's nuclear facilities.

In 2011, France and the United Kingdom seized on the IAEA's report about Iran's past and possibly ongoing military-related nuclear activities (the aforementioned PMDs) to urge further action (Sect. 4 in Chap. 3).[46] The United Kingdom actually went ahead of its EU partners

and adopted comprehensive sanctions against Iran already in fall 2011, prompting the Islamic Republic to expel the British ambassador. Shortly after, an Iranian mob stormed the British embassy, which led the United Kingdom to cut diplomatic relations with Iran in protest (Ellner 2013: 240). Meanwhile, calls for tougher measures, conveyed both publicly and privately by US, Israeli and Saudi officials, mounted. The E3 channelled them into the European Union, even making the case for additional restrictions in a joint letter to the other EU member states (Fabius 2016: 9). Eventually they achieved the critical mass necessary to overcome the lingering opposition by countries such as Spain, Italy and Greece (Bassiri Tabrizi and Hanau Santini 2012: 3–4).

Formally adopted in early 2012, this late round of EU sanctions was as comprehensive as it was draconian. Visa bans and asset freezing targeting individuals and entities linked to the IRGC and the Islamic Republic of Iran Shipping Line (IRISL), Iran's main shipping company, were expanded. Bans on insurance and reinsurance services provided to Iranian or Iranian-controlled entities were strengthened. Trade in precious metals with Iran was prohibited. The Council instructed the Brussels-based SWIFT firm, which handles banking transactions around the world, to refuse its services to Iranian entities, thus curtailing Iran's access to international financial markets. Transactions with the Central Bank of Iran, which operated Iran's energy sales, were forbidden in the attempt to reduce Iran's ability to export oil and gas (Council of the European Union 2012).

On top of all this, EU member states adopted an embargo on the import of petroleum products from Iran, thereby depriving the Islamic Republic of some of its most valuable energy customers (ibidem). The E3 struggled to the last before getting countries such as Italy, Spain and especially Greece—which imported about 35 per cent of its oil from Iran—to consent to the oil embargo (Blair 2012). Eventually, they won them over by agreeing to postpone actual implementation of the embargo for about six months (until July 2012), so that countries overly dependent on imports from Iran be given enough time to make alternative arrangements with other suppliers, notably Saudi Arabia (Pollack 2013: 127).

The adoption of the oil embargo signalled the pervasiveness of the E3/EU's grip on the European Union's Iran policy. The outsiders remained passive bystanders as the E3 and HR Ashton, along with their partners within the E3/EU+3, negotiated the terms of the JPOA, despite the fact

that the interim deal's implementation required all EU member states to agree on suspending part of the sanctions regime. The E3 even rejected the idea that the December 2013 Foreign Affairs Council formally endorse the interim nuclear deal for fear of giving the impression that the Europeans were again ready to return to business as usual with Iran.[47]

The E3/EU and especially the Obama administration were indeed concerned about giving ammunition to domestic opponents to the deal, particularly in a highly sceptical US Congress. As a flurry of visits to Tehran by EU ministers and business delegations followed the conclusion of the interim nuclear deal, they felt the need to delicately but firmly disciplining EU governments and reassuring sceptics in . The task fell on HR Ashton, who used a two-day visit to Tehran in March 2014 to stress the link between any improvements in EU-Iran relations with the success of the E3/EU+3-Iran nuclear talks (Alcaro 2014b).

Concerns about EU member states breaking ranks with the E3/EU+3 were misplaced. For one, EU sanctions could only be lifted via a unanimous vote, which the E3 would have blocked. More importantly, EU member states had long committed to the E3/EU+3 policy line and would not have acted against it. In spite of all divisions and differences of opinion, EU cohesion held.

4   The Making of EU Foreign Policy, Part One: The Leadership-Ownership Nexus

The E3's leadership on Iran was often resented, at times questioned, but never truly challenged.[48] The British, French and Germans, one may conclude, made an overall sensible use of the leadership toolkit at their disposal.

Access to Iran allowed the E3 to claim better knowledge of Iran's moves and possible intentions, and define proposals and counterproposals in autonomy. The E3's grip on exclusive access eased over time, first when the HR was associated with the European negotiating team, then when the group enlarged to China, Russia and the United States, and finally when Washington opened a separate communication channel with Tehran in Oman. Nevertheless, among EU member states things changed little: access to Iran remained a prerogative of the E3 and the HR, certainly on the nuclear issue and later on other ones too (as the E3's successful boycott of Italian Foreign Minister Frattini's visit to Tehran eloquently attests).

The enlargement of the group to China, Russia and the United States insulated the process further, which gave not only the E3 but also the HR, in his or her capacity as representative of the E3/EU+3, even less incentives to involve the other member states.

Control of information made it easier for the E3/EU to generate consensus or prevent opposition. As pieces of information were generally released at a pace that suited their plans, the E3/EU were well positioned to steer intra-EU consensus. Indeed, the purpose of the regular exchanges in which the E3 or the HR briefed the other member states about the state of the talks with Iran was less to generate a consultation process as to lay the groundwork for the next move. As an E3 official put it, for the E3 the important thing was that no EU member state would be "caught by surprise" by their proposed course of action.[49] Selective information sharing was a cause of irritation within the European Union, yet it achieved the desired result of shaping the expectations of the group's outsiders according to the E3/EU's desiderata.

Another factor sustaining the E3/EU's leadership on Iran was that the E3 hardly faced a cohesive bloc resisting their plans. Some EU countries, such as Italy, Spain, Belgium and Greece, tolerated at best the E3/EU format, but others were neutral or actually content with it. As a result, the intra-EU debate over controversial decisions such as the adoption of sanctions rarely unfolded along an E3/non-E3 cleavage. Several EU countries often sided with the E3, among them Belgium (which was critical of the format but not the policies), Denmark, the Netherlands, Poland and the Czech Republic, while others were uninterested.[50] In other words, the E3 had ample room to *build intra-EU coalitions* to corner member states that opposed their moves and eventually wear down opposition.

A distinctive aspect of the kind of leadership that the E3 exerted is that it did not descend from any formally conferred authority. The E3 were initially given leeway because the other countries agreed to their unspoken claim that they had the necessary diplomatic experience and non-proliferation expertise to solve the nuclear dispute with Iran. But if that was the only reason, the collapse of the E3/EU-Iran talks should have resulted in the collapse of E3 leadership on Iran. Yet the three managed to remain on track by enlarging the group to China, and the United States, through which they obtained a *sort of formal investiture from the United Nations Security Council.*

All UNSC resolutions on Iran included references to the E3/EU+3 format as the negotiating venue in which the nuclear controversy should

be solved (United Nations Security Council 2006a, b, 2007, 2008a, b, 2010). The E3/EU+3 June 2008 offer of incentives to Iran was attached to UNSCR 1929 and the JCPOA to UNSCR 2231 (United Nations Security Council 2010, 2015). From mid-2006 on, in other words, the E3/EU+3 endeavour was enshrined in a UN framework, from which the E3 would derive, if not direct authority, then greater legitimacy and leverage over their fellow EU partners.

Even accounting for the aforementioned factors, however, the E3's leadership in the European Union always remained the product of an unspoken bargain. As they obtained recognition of their leadership, the E3 reciprocated by promoting EU ownership of the E3/EU process. Such 'ownership promotion' broke down into two main elements: participation by and representation of the non-E3 member states through EU institutions and resources.

Participation was always indirect. Initially, it came down to the E3's promise to Iran that a nuclear agreement would have resulted in improved ties with the European Union. The text of the August 2005 E3/EU offer to Iran contained plenty of references to EU assets from which Iran could benefit. They ranged from an action plan to combat drug trafficking to assistance in setting up a sound regulatory regime for nuclear safety and effective control over technology exports, to scientific and technological cooperation, support for Iran's WTO application, and stronger trade and investment relations under the EU-Iran TCA (IAEA Director General 2005: 15, 20, 27, ff). Likewise, the European Union was supposed to provide some of the incentives included in the two 'packages' with which the E3/EU+3 presented Iran in June 2006 and June 2008, including the development of a stronger EU-Iran energy partnership (E3/EU+3 2006: 3; 2008: 3).

Participation grew as the sanctions track gathered steam. The unanimity rule governing EU decision-making on sanctions made all EU member states players, albeit secondary ones, in the nuclear dispute with Iran. After all, neither the JPOA nor the JCPOA could be implemented without formal assent by the EU Council, which first suspended part of the sanctions and then lifted them altogether (Council of the European Union 2014, 2015).

Arguably more important than participation was *representation*. This is where the role of the HR comes to the fore in full. The HR was, in the words of an EU official, the "guarantor" that EU interests would be represented and taken due account of in the E3-Iran talks.[51] Yet, there is little

evidence that either Solana or Ashton or Mogherini took the side of the group's outsiders in any clash they had with the E3. On the contrary, the HR worked side-by-side with the E3 to spread EU-wide support for their approach to the nuclear dispute.

Information sharing, while channelled through the HR, remained a thoroughly controlled process in the hands of the E3 and their E3+3 partners. Intra-EU consultation was always limited, and so was the HR's contribution to the task. More relevant was the HR's role in conflict management. Here, the HR usually reinforced the E3's message concerning what the other member states were expected to do (or not do) to avoid harming the E3/EU+3 process, such as when Lady Ashton travelled to Iran after the conclusion of the JPOA to reinforce the message that Iran was not yet open for business. But it was through his/her role in the E3/EU+3-Iran talks that the HR was most effective in promoting EU ownership of the endeavour.

This important achievement was above all due to the capacity of initiative and diplomatic deftness of Solana, who profited from favourable circumstances to establish the HR as a pillar of the E3/EU+3 format. A complex negotiation involving a multi-actor party such as the E3/EU+3 needed coordination, and Solana just happened to have the right profile for the coordinator's job. He had a good working relationship with the E3 and full grasp of the policy-making machine of the European Union (Regelsberger 2011; Maior 2011). In addition, over the course of his career as Spain's foreign minister and then at the top of NATO and CFSP, Solana had built a wide network of personal relations in the three non-European 3+3 countries. The US government appreciated his solid Atlanticist credentials, while his distrust of the neoconservative ideas that informed the Bush administration's foreign policy boded well with the Russians and Chinese.[52] Having followed the nuclear issue since prior to his formal association to the E3 in late 2004, Solana also had a perfect grasp of the process.[53] Finally, he represented the collective position of the European Union, which would guarantee against intra-EU divisions.[54] The E3+3 recognised the importance of this latter aspect and agreed to hand over the responsibility for representing them in the talks with Iran to Solana's successors when he stepped down.

It is true that the HR's role was more akin to that of an E3/EU+3 special envoy than to the foreign policy chief of the European Union.[55] In a way, however, this was an achievement in itself. Non-specialists do not appreciate the extraordinariness of an EU official representing not only

the European Union, but also its three largest countries and, which is still more unusual, China, Russia and the United States, in the handling of such a sensitive issue as the negotiation over Iran's nuclear plans.[56] The very presence of an EU top official within the negotiating group, and in such a prominent position, gave the European Union a degree of visibility that it would have never been able to achieve otherwise. This in turn made it harder for non-E3 member states to break ranks with the E3/EU+3.

The E3's sensible use of their leadership tools, as well as the modalities through which they promoted a degree of EU-wide ownership of their Iran policy, contribute to explaining how the group was able to steer EU foreign policy in the face of never-abated divergences of views and priorities among EU member states. However, the E3/EU did not act in a vacuum. They were exposed to external forces that affected their approach to Iran and strategies to generate intra-EU consensus. As the United States was by far the most important of such forces, the analysis of the E3/EU's leadership would be incomplete unless more light is shed on the transatlantic dimension of it.

NOTES

1. Interview with a former E3 foreign minister, 2 March 2009.
2. Skype interview with an E3 official, 12 February 2015.
3. Skype interview with an E3 official, 12 February 2015.
4. Interview with an E3 official, 22 April 2009.
5. Interview with an E3 official, 20 February 2009.
6. Interview with an E3 official, 22 April 2009.
7. Interview with an E3 official, 13 February 2009.
8. Interview with an E3 official, 22 April 2009.
9. Ibidem.
10. Interviews with an official from the HR office, 24 October 2008 and a senior E3 official, 21 April 2009.
11. Interviews with officials from the HR office, 24 October 2008 and 22 June 2010.
12. Skype interview with an E3 official, 12 February 2015.
13. Interview with a senior Italian official, 17 March 2015. Schmid's official position was EEAS Deputy Secretary General for Political Affairs.
14. I owe the 'principals-agent' metaphor to Bengtsson and Allen (2011). While they use it in general terms, the metaphor well captures the dynamics of E3-HR cooperation on Iran.
15. Interview with a former E3 ambassador to Iran, 7 April 2009.

16. Interview with an E3 official, 26 February 2009.
17. Interview with an official from the HR office, 24 October 2008.
18. Interview with an official from the HR office, 24 October 2008.
19. Interview with an E3 official, 14 May 2009.
20. Interview with an official from the HR office, 24 October 2008.
21. Interviews with E3 officials, 22 April, 23 April and 14 May 2009.
22. Interview with an E3 official, 14 May 2009.
23. Interviews with E3 official, 20 February and 22 April 2009. An E3 official argued that Italian passivity was due to a "slight lack of interest" and "a relative scarcity of adequate resources".
24. Interview with a senior Italian official, 17 March 2015.
25. Interview with an E3 official, 22 April 2009.
26. Interviews with E3 officials, 13 and 20 February 2009.
27. In a 2009 article, Anand Menon reported about widespread dissatisfaction in Brussels regarding the degree of participation of non-E3 states in the decision-making process (Menon 2009: 14–15). In 2010, a European Commission official expressed similar dissatisfaction about the degree of transparency, and so did a senior Italian official in 2015 (interviews, 22 June 2010 and 17 March 2015).
28. Interview with a European Commission official, 22 June 2010.
29. Interview with a senior Italian official, 17 March 2015.
30. Interviews with E3 officials, 12 and 20 February 2009.
31. Interviews with E3 officials, 12, 13, 20 and 21 February 2009; 7 and 21 April 2009 (the latter was a phone interview); and with an official from the HR office, 22 June 2010.
32. Interview with an official from the HR office, 22 June 2010.
33. The Iranian agent operating in the United States pleaded guilty in 2012, yet the US government was unable to determine who in Iran bore responsibility for ordering the plot (or at least it did not make it public).
34. US diplomats reported as such to Washington in confidential cables dated 7 January 2009 published by WikiLeaks and available at https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09STOCKHOLM5_a.html
35. Skype interviews with a former E3 official, 14 February 2015.
36. The quotes come from the US diplomatic cables made public by WikiLeaks.
37. Frattini naively believed that the US government would support his initiative, since President Obama was at the time focussing extensively on Afghanistan's pacification. Interview with a senior Italian official, 17 March 2015.
38. The figure includes data from the 13 countries that would join the European Union after 2003.

39. Data on EU member states' trade exchanges with Iran are available on the website of the European Commission, Directorate-General Trade, Export Helpdesk: http://exporthelp.europa.eu/thdapp/display.htm;jsessionid= 916E3376F3D5A2C0DE69E7C25406CF48?page=st%2fst_Statistics.htm l&docType=main&languageId=en (accessed on 8 March 2016).
40. Interview with a European Commission official, 22 June 2010.
41. Interviews with an official form the HR office, 24 October 2008, and E3 officials, 13 and 20 February 2009, 22 April 2009.
42. The phrase "strategic retreat" was used by an E3 official (interview, 22 April 2009). Another E3 official stated that it was incorrect to assume that the list of new targets was decided only by the E3. Various member states contributed (interview, 26 February 2009).
43. A senior Italian diplomat noticed that, from then on, sanctions were the only topic related to Iran that was formally debated in the EU Council (interview, 17 March 2015).
44. Interview with a European Commission official, 22 June 2010.
45. Interview with a European Commission official, 22 June 2010.
46. British officials referred to the report's findings as a 'game changer' (Ellner 2013: 239).
47. Interview with a senior Italian official, 17 March 2015.
48. Skype interview with a former E3 official, 12 February 2015. E3 and EU officials whom I have interviewed underlined the point over and over.
49. Interview with an E3 official, 22 April 2009.
50. Interview with an E3 official, 22 April 2009.
51. Interview with an official from the HR office, 22 June 2010.
52. Interview with a former US State Department official, 27 April 2009.
53. A former E3 foreign minister argued that by 2006 Solana was the only senior figure involved in the 2003–5 European-Iranian talks still in office, with the exception of British Foreign Minister Straw (who left in early 2007 anyway). An element of personal continuity, he said, was necessary and Solana was perfectly suited for the job (interview, 2 March 2009). A former high-level E3 diplomat concurred that the need for continuity explained the choice of Solana as the E3/EU+3 representative (interview, 23 April 2009).
54. Interviews with a former US State Department official, 27 April 2009, and an E3 official, 14 May 2009.
55. Interviews with E3 officials, 22 April, 23 April, 14 May 2009. A former EU top official concurred (interview, 14 April 2014).
56. Interviews with an E3 official, 13 February 2009 and with an official from the HR office, 22 June 2010.

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The Action/2: The E3/EU and the United States

This chapter brings the analysis of the E3/EU policy-making capacity to an end. One may wonder why another chapter is needed to fulfil this task, given that this was the focus of the previous one. The answer to this question lies in an empirical observation. One way or the other, throughout the nuclear dispute with Iran the E3/EU always felt the influence of the United Sates. The E3 knew that the controversy over the nuclear programme was playing out against the backdrop of the deep-seated, virulent antagonism between Iran and the United States and its regional allies, especially Israel and Saudi Arabia. From the beginning, the E3 had been aware that the nuclear issue could only be solved on terms acceptable to the United States, when not through America's direct participation in the negotiation. In a way, the E3 were always active on two fronts, Iran on the one side and the United States on the other. The making of EU foreign policy by the E3 was therefore a product of their ability as much to consolidate their leadership (as shown in Chap. 7) as it was to coordinate with Washington.

Section 1 explores the relationship between the E3/EU and the Bush administration. During the early phase of the dispute, the most urgent priority on the US front for the E3 was to manage their differences with the United States. President Bush only gradually (and somewhat grudgingly) agreed first to support the European effort and then join the E3/EU group along with China and Russia. For the remainder of President

Bush's term, the challenge for the E3 was to strike a balance between meeting the US requests for cutting Europe's economic ties with Iran while keeping the United States committed to the diplomacy track. Section 2 looks at how the E3/EU adapted to the change of administration in Washington. When Obama decided to engage the Iranians directly, the US front became a venue to coordinate moves to press Iran to re-engage in serious negotiations and, later, to support the interim and final nuclear deals in the face of mounting opposition to it, especially from the US Congress and Israel. Section 3 recaps the main research findings to argue that the ability to create a mutually reinforcing dynamic between EU cohesion and transatlantic convergence was central to the E3/EU policy-making capacity.

1   Managing Divergence: The E3/EU and the Bush Administration

In 2002–3, the Bush administration was implacable in its antagonism towards the Islamic Republic. The president claimed that Iran was ruled by an evil or rogue regime ostensibly bent on fomenting disorder and violence in its neighbourhood and—critically—acquiring weapons of mass destruction to threaten foes and blackmail the international community (Bush 2002; see also Sect. 1 in Chap. 4 and Sect. 2 in Chap. 5).

Such a US discourse struck few cords in Europe (BBC News 2002a; Black et al. 2002; Einhorn 2004: 23–25).[1] The inclusion of Iran in the 'axis of evil' seemed to many Europeans an unnecessary provocation towards a country that was actually providing help in Afghanistan's political transition after the ouster of the Taliban in late 2001. Even after Iran's nuclear programme was revealed to be significantly bigger than expected, the notion that it represented an imminent threat to international security remained contested in Europe. To EU governments, Iran hardly matched the apocalyptic threat that many in the United States and Israel warned against. They were in general more receptive to the argument that explained Iran's nuclear plans as being defensive in nature and, at any rate, not necessarily bent on producing a nuclear arsenal. In some quarters, the perception that the Iranian nuclear issue was a somewhat exaggerated threat, inflated by Israeli and US paranoia, never fully abated, even if concerns did increase following President Ahmadinejad's anti-Israel rants.[2] Although Iran fell short of its obligations for transparency

and cooperation with the IAEA, most of what it was doing was not prohibited by the NPT.

Nonetheless, the E3 had little doubts that Iran's nuclear activities concealed a desire to acquire a nuclear weapon capacity, although they were not sure whether that also meant building a real nuclear arsenal (Einhorn 2004: 24). These considerations, as well as the concern about an Israeli or US overreaction, formed the bedrock of the E3's outreach to Iran in 2003 (Sect. 2 in Chap. 4).

The US administration's initial reaction to that was mixed. President Bush hailed the 2003 Tehran Agreed Statement as a positive development, yet many in his administration remained sceptical and some openly critical (Sect. 2 in Chap. 3). The conclusion of the November 2004 Paris Agreement between the E3/EU and Iran prompted Bush to rethink his options. He continued to treat Iran as a hostile rogue state, yet his administration stopped criticising the Europeans. In fact, in December 2004 President Bush went as far as to say that the United States had "sanctioned [itself] out" on Iran and that it could not but "rely upon others", meaning the Europeans, to address the nuclear issue (Fletcher and Baker 2004).

A few months later, in the framework of a charm offensive aimed to mend the wound of Iraq, the Bush administration flagged Iran as one of the issues on which the transatlantic relationship could rebound. Newly appointed US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice announced that, in a show of support for the E3/EU, the United States would drop opposition to Tehran's application for joining the WTO. Washington would also consider allowing the sale of spare parts for the Iranian civilian air fleet, which was in a ruinous state under years of US sanctions (Reuters 2005a).

It might be that Bush and Rice were genuinely overseeing a strategic turnaround (Gordon 2005). Or perhaps Bush was expecting the Europeans to fail in order to build a stronger case for sanctions against Iran (Rice[3] 2004). Be it as it may, the apparent subcontracting of US-Iran policy to the E3/EU did the Europeans no real favour. The Bush administration kept saying that the treacherous nature of Iran's regime warranted a much tougher international response to its threatening behaviour, thus implying that the European approach was, if not misguided, insufficient (International Crisis Group 2004: 3–4, fn. 13, 6). In addition, while US officials would not comment on the E3/EU-Iran talks—about which the

E3 and the HR kept them informed—they made it clear what the US redlines were both in bilateral contacts and at the IAEA.[4] The most important of such redlines was that Iran ought not to be allowed to enrich uranium on its soil.

In principle, the E3 were comfortable with the notion of 'zero enrichment'. They had insisted on that since October 2003 and had actually extracted from the Iranians the concession that enrichment and related activities be frozen for as long as the E3/EU-Iran negotiations were underway. The rub was whether the E3/EU should make zero enrichment a condition for striking a long-term agreement with Iran, or whether they could show flexibility on the matter. The E3 discussed the issue in confidential meetings after the Iranian nuclear team put forward their own proposal for a long-term agreement in March 2005, of which Iran's claim to an industrial-scale enrichment capacity was a cornerstone (Sect. 3 in Chap. 3). Eventually the E3 decided to insist that enrichment should be suspended indefinitely before any long-term arrangement could be negotiated.

The E3's averseness against letting Iran enrich uranium had its roots in established non-proliferation practices. Denying enrichment technologies to countries that, like Iran, were not in compliance with the standards of the Nuclear Suppliers' Group, a cartel regulating exports of nuclear fuel and technologies, was a standard practice for all three countries.[5] It also reflected a genuine, specific concern. The E3, in particular France and the United Kingdom, worried that they would not be able to agree with Tehran upon a rock-solid system of verification that would dispel fears of military diversion of Iran's self-produced enriched uranium.[6]

Some E3 officials, particularly in Germany, nonetheless felt that an agreement that would constrain Iran's industrial-scale enrichment programme for several years but would let it do R&D was worth exploring.[7] While such an idea did not get traction, the fact that it was discussed proves that the E3 were not unreceptive to options other than zero enrichment. In the end Washington's adamant opposition to this proposition tilted the balance.[8] Had the US government not been so intransigent, the E3 would have been more willing to take the Iranian March 2005 proposal as a platform for talks, even though the proposal still left plenty to be desired in terms of verification and timing.[9]

Another example shows how the Bush administration's inflexibility constrained the E3/EU's negotiation options. In summer 2005, the E3/EU faced the problem of how to flesh out their counter-proposal to Iran. They were aware that their main incentive, the EU-Iran TCA, had only limited appeal, as it was not a particularly advanced form of trade agreement. Moreover, Iran would have seen the benefits of it only in the mid- to long-term, as some time was to pass before negotiations could be concluded and the treaty ratified.

The E3/EU needed something more immediate and attractive and believed that the offer of a state-of-the-art LWR (the most proliferation-resistant type of nuclear reactors) could serve the purpose. The United States, however, saw that as an undesirable development. This killed the idea, because the French company supposed to provide the technology for the reactor refused to be involved in the scheme for fear of jeopardising its US-based businesses. In their August 2005 offer, the E3/EU could only include measures to guarantee supply of nuclear fuel for future Iranian-built LWRs.[10] Unsurprisingly, the Iranians found very little they liked in the E3/EU proposal and rejected it out of hand (Sect. 3 in Chap. 3).

With the nuclear talks in tatters, the E3/EU had few arguments to oppose the US push for declaring Iran in non-compliance with its IAEA safeguard agreement—a precondition for referral to the Security Council. The IAEA Board of Governors took the step at the end of September 2005, with full backing from the E3 (Sect. 3 in Chap. 3). The move made sense from the point of view of the E3, as they had long determined that their priority was to build a common transatlantic front. With or without an LWR, the Europeans knew that their offer to Iran would always fall short if the United States was not behind it. The E3 had failed to win greater support from Washington for their negotiation efforts, which had led the Iranians to lose interest in the process. But they could still work on influencing US policies in a way more congenial to their own preferences. To this end, it was imperative to render the proposition that the Iranian nuclear issue could be solved diplomatically more palatable to US audiences.

In September 2005, HR Solana and the E3 foreign ministers—Douste-Blazy, Fischer and Straw—co-authored an op-ed in *The Wall Street Journal*, a paper known for its neoconservative sympathies and uncompromising stance on Iran. Solana and his E3 peers questioned Iran's rationale for a

nuclear programme (although they did not deny that it had a right to it), chastised its failure to be transparent and more cooperative with the IAEA, blamed it for jeopardising the NPT-based non-proliferation regime, and called for a collective response by the international community (Douste-Blazy et al. 2005).

By linking Iran's nuclear issue to a breach of its non-proliferation obligations, the E3/EU framed the threat in normative terms rather than political ones: the problem was Iran's behaviour, not Iran's 'rogue' regime. This rules-informed assessment strengthened the case for a response based on multilateral institutions and rules. Coercive measures were implicitly accepted, but only if multilaterally agreed—in the op-ed there was no room for unilateral responses. Doubtless, the article did little to persuade those in the United States (and elsewhere) who advocated isolation and containment of Iran that engagement was a workable proposition. However, it signalled that there was room for convergence between the United States and its European allies, including on coercive measures, provided the Security Council endorsed them.

In 2005 and early 2006 senior diplomats from the E3 travelled to Russia, China and such UNSC non-permanent members as India and South Africa to urge international cohesion to curb Iran's nuclear plans.[11] Russia and China were the main targets of the rally call due to their status as veto-wielding permanent members of the Security Council. Moscow responded immediately and in late 2005 proposed that Iran's uranium enrichment could be entrusted to a Russia-based Iranian-Russian joint venture (Sect. 3 in Chap. 3). The move failed to stop Iran from resuming enrichment at Natanz, but generated the need for greater consultation on Iran between the E3, the United States and Russia. China was not as proactive but was nonetheless involved in the exchange.

The need to coordinate moves with more players made the United States' policy of supporting the E3/EU process at arm's length no longer tenable. Involvement, even if limited, now looked a sensible choice. The Bush administration started to make modest but nonetheless significant adjustments to sound more alike the E3/EU-shared internationally accepted discourse. In September 2005, President Bush publicly admitted that Iran, like every other NPT member state, had a right to nuclear energy, although not to an enrichment programme (Reuters 2005b). Also important was that the US president, upon E3/EU insistence, agreed to delay Iran's referral to the Security Council for a few months, so that the E3 would have more time to commit Russia and China to the process.

To be sure, divergences between the E3/EU and the Bush administration persisted. Immensely frustrating for the E3 was President Bush's obstinate refusal to let US officials meet their Iranian counterparts unless Tehran agreed to suspend enrichment and related activities first—and not, as for a time some argued, America's failure to give Iran unspecified security assurances (Quille 2005: 54; Bergenäs 2010: 503). This 'precondition' set by the Bush administration was the backdrop against which HR Solana tried in vain to restart the diplomatic track with his various 'freeze-for-freeze' proposals (Sect. 1 in Chap. 7). Even if Solana had succeeded, however, the question of whether to stick to the demand for permanent zero enrichment would still have confronted E3 and US officials.

In late 2005, in the first half of 2006 and then again in mid-2007 the German government argued for reconsidering the zero enrichment redline, but found support neither in Washington nor in Paris and London.[12] By February 2006, Iran was not only enriching uranium again but had also stopped the voluntary implementation of the IAEA Additional Protocol. The Germans were told that rewarding Iran's defiance by dropping such a key demand as zero enrichment would have been a sign of weakness that could have encouraged further provocations. Even more important was that neither France nor the United Kingdom (nor, eventually, Germany itself) wanted to jeopardise the newly found convergence with the United States. An incident occurred later shows how central this objective was for all three countries.

The US administration was aware that the price for the broadening of the international coalition opposed to Iran's nuclear plans was that coercive measures would only come gradually and would not be nearly as incisive as it would have wanted them to be. Thus, it sought other ways to exert pressure on Iran. Notable in this regard was the US Department of Treasury's behind-the-doors campaign to encourage firms from allied countries to cut their businesses in the Islamic Republic.[13] The US offensive relied as much on persuasion as on veiled threats that foreign banks facilitating investments in and exports to Iran could come in for scrutiny by US anti-money laundering and counterterrorism authorities (McGlynn 2008).

Unsurprisingly, this tactic stirred discontent, most notably in Germany, whose banks were among the main targets of the US Treasury (Beste et al. 2007). Yet it also found receptive audiences, particularly in France, where newly elected President Nicolas Sarkozy was keen to show himself tougher on Iran than his predecessor (Makinsky 2009: 113–114). The US-French push for more punitive measures against Iran created a significant fissure

within the E3/EU, especially when France and the United States publicly hinted that Germany was not doing enough. In response, the German government leaked to the press a confidential document in which it showed that German exports were on a declining curve, while French and American firms used front companies in the United Arab Emirates to continue their businesses in the Islamic Republic (*Der Spiegel* 2007; Sauer 2008: 281).

This incident was one of the very few instances in which intra-E3/EU divisions went public. However, it is noteworthy not so much because it laid bare the fragility of the E3/EU-US front as because it actually signalled its resilience. The incident was overcome quickly. At the time, the E3's rhetoric was already shifting towards the more confrontational tones that were common currency in US public utterances about Iran (Hanau Santini 2010: 470). In August 2007 President Sarkozy had evoked the spectre of a military confrontation in the Gulf when he had publicly stated that two equally appalling scenarios loomed large, namely "an Iranian bomb or the bombing of Iran" (Reuters 2007b). In March 2008, speaking before Israel's Knesset, German Chancellor Angela Merkel strongly criticised Iran's nuclear plans and Ahmadinejad's anti-Israel rhetoric, and added that her government was ready to adopt new sanctions (Merkel 2008: 6). In that same month, the E3 successfully tabled resolution 1803 in the Security Council.

It is crucial to underline that the change of tone by the E3 did not amount to a change of strategy. The E3 abstained from indulging in the apocalyptic rhetoric of the Bush administration—the US president once even remarked that a nuclear Iran would precipitate a third world war (Reuters 2007c). Nor did the E3's threat assessment—centred on the menace to the NPT—moved closer to the American one, according to which Iran, as the 2006 NSS read, was "an enemy of freedom, justice and peace" (Bush 2006: 12) and the greatest challenge to the United States (ibidem: 20).

Underlying the hardening of the E3's tones was not a discursive shift towards enmity and confrontation. Rather, the E3 wanted to send the Iranians a signal of resolve and intra-EU and transatlantic cohesion to force them to reconsider their refusal to negotiate. The tones might have been harsh, but the content of the message was consistent with the dual track approach. Sarkozy warned about the two scenarios of an Iranian bomb or the bombing of Iran to make the case for diplomacy after all. In her remarks before the Knesset, Chancellor Merkel

emphasised that Germany was "setting its sights on a diplomatic solution" (Merkel 2008: 6).[14] This was not empty rhetoric. The E3/EU's efforts were as much aimed at augmenting pressure on Iran as they were at keeping the diplomatic track on course. And they were not fruitless, at least not on the US front.

True, President Bush refused to engage Iran in nuclear talks until the very end of his term. However, he made a number of incremental concessions that left the United States in a very different place in January 2009 (when he left office) from where it was at the time of the 'axis of evil' speech in January 2002 (Meier 2013: 10). In 2006 and again in 2008 Bush backed the idea of offering Iran incentives, including support for the building of a state-of-the-art LWR, to lure it out of the nuclear path (E3/EU+3 2006, 2008). Twice in 2006, the US president obliged to E3/EU requests and braked the drive for UN sanctions. The first time was in the summer, so as to wait for Iran's reaction to the E3/EU+3 June proposal (Dupont 2009: 26), and the second in the fall, so as to give HR Solana time to seek a way to resume the talks (on both occasions the Security Council did take action in the end). In January 2007, Secretary of State Rice declared that she was ready to meet Iranian representatives "anytime, anywhere" if Tehran halted enrichment, a dramatic turnaround from Bush's previous policy of no talk with 'evil' regimes (Reuters 2007a).[15] Finally, in July 2008 Rice dispatched Undersecretary of State William Burns, the third highest-ranking official in the Department of State, to an E3/EU+3-Iran meeting in Geneva, although she instructed him not to take part in the conversation (Reuters 2008).[16]

It was just appropriate that this meeting (from which nothing came out) was the last one held under Bush. The conservative president had brought US policy—albeit not its discourse—towards Iran's nuclear issue closer to the E3/EU's. His successor Obama took the last steps that bridged the divide.

2   Managing Convergence: The E3/EU and the Obama Administration

In most respects, the Obama administration was the partner that the E3/EU had dreamed of for years. Obama not only dropped the Bush administration's veto on direct US-Iran nuclear talks, but was also ready to exert greater flexibility on the one issue on which all attempts at a diplomatic

breakthrough had floundered, namely the possibility for Iran to keep an autonomous enrichment capacity (Meier 2013: 11). In addition, Obama framed the whole issue discursively in terms with which the Europeans felt comfortable.

While the new US administration continued to see, and depict, Iran as a regional troublemaker, it downgraded its enmity with it to a more manageable rivalry. In a manner reminiscent of the E3's early characterisation of the nuclear issue, Obama's 2010 NSS focused on Iran's behaviour and the ensuing threat to the NPT rather than the Islamist regime (Obama 2010: 4).[17] Actually, President Obama set the promotion of a "responsible Iran", meaning a country willing to contribute to regional stability and with good neighbourly relations, as a US foreign policy goal (ibidem: 26).

Much as the Europeans, Obama kept the nuclear dossier separate from all other issues on which the United States was at loggerheads with Iran, including the state of human rights and democracy in the Islamic Republic. Attesting to this, he resolved to keep negotiating even after Iranian authorities cracked down on demonstrators protesting against Ahmadinejad's 2009 re-election. More important still was that Obama, while remaining committed to the multilateral E3/EU+3 framework, authorised the activation of a bilateral track with the Iranians.[18] In the face of all this, one EU official felt legitimised to say that by 2010 the United States and the E3/EU had reached "full convergence".[19]

Full, or almost full, convergence with the US administration eased the burden on the E3/EU, yet it also confronted them with new challenges. One problem was striking a balance between a policy that increasingly relied on sanctions and the strategic objective of reaching a diplomatic resolution. The Obama administration and its European allies worked to make sure that the sanctions track would not permanently undermine the possibility of reactivating the diplomacy track.

The task was not easy, as Iran's attitude was anything but forthcoming. The Islamic Republic's nuclear advancements made its regional enemies, notably Israel and the Arab Gulf states, increasingly impatient. Israeli anxieties, in particular, fuelled a demand for tougher action by influential US constituencies. Such a demand was often channelled through the US Congress, where Israel counted on many supporters and deep anti-Iranian sentiments crossed party lines.

The Europeans got a taste of how difficult it would be to manage relations with Congress in the run-up to the adoption of UNSCR 1929 in June 2010. At the time, Congress had been pressing Obama for months

to sign into law the Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability, and Divestment Act (CISADA), which targeted foreign companies doing business with Iran with (potentially huge) fines and denials of public contracts (Sect. 4 in Chap. 3). It was only through constant lobbying that the Obama administration managed to persuade Congress to wait to pass CISADA until after UNSCR 1929 was approved. The White House was concerned that early enactment could make its E3/EU+3 partner governments vulnerable to protests from firms and banks resenting what they perceived as CISADA's extraterritorial application. This would have risked derailing E3/EU+3 talks on UNSCR 1929, which in turn would have dampened the European Union's resolve to expand its own set of sanctions.

In the 1990s, the European Union had put up a vigorous fight against the extraterritorial application of US legislation (Sect. 1 in Chap. 6), but in 2010 the political context had changed dramatically. It was not only that, this time around, EU countries faced a much more determined Congress. They were also committed, through the E3/EU process, to backing up the diplomacy track with punitive measures (as seen in Sect. 3 in Chap. 7). The priority thus shifted from opposing CISADA to watering down those provisions in it that were more threatening to EU firms.

HR Ashton wrote a confidential letter to Hillary Clinton, the then US secretary of state, requesting special exemptions for EU companies that might be targeted by CISADA, and European Commission officials made similar calls in meetings with congressional staffers.[20] Meanwhile, E3/EU officials assured their US partners that the European Union was ready to adopt its own set of sanctions and downgrade further its economic ties with the Islamic Republic.[21] Thanks to the help of a sympathetic Obama administration, EU efforts were not futile. US lawmakers refused to include an explicit EU-wide exemption in the new law, but agreed to give the president the authority to waive CISADA's application to companies from countries that were cooperating with the US efforts to curb Iran's nuclear programme.[22]

The diatribe over CISADA set a pattern for the next two to three years. With Iran showing no apparent desire to stop developing its nuclear programme, the Obama administration faced mounting pressure from Israel and its Arab allies, as well as their backers in Congress, to contain, isolate and financially squeeze Iran. The administration manoeuvred on various

fronts, including a highly secretive cyber campaign to infect the computers running Iranian nuclear facilities and, in case things turned for the worst, air defences, communication systems and power grids (Sanger and Mazzetti 2016). The Europeans had little role in such activities, but were central to the success of the dual track-based strategy on which Obama still pinned his hopes for a diplomatic resolution.

Between 2010 and 2012 those EU firms, such as Italy's energy company Eni, which still had activities in sensitive sectors of Iran's market agreed with the Department of State to end them. In the meantime, upon US insistence, the E3/EU successfully lobbied their fellow EU partners to consent to further sanctions (Ellner 2013: 239). EU measures to block transactions operated by the CBI, shut down Iran's access to financial markets and insurance services, and prohibit energy imports from Iran complemented similar measures taken by the US Treasury and Congress in late 2011 and early 2012, such as the NDAA's ban on transactions with the CBI (see Sect. 4 in Chap. 3 and Sect. 3 in Chap. 7).

Obama and the E3/EU pursued the massive expansion of the sanctions regime with two interrelated goals in mind, namely raise the price of Iran's defiance and stave off the chance that an ever more worried Israel could take the issue in its hands and precipitate a military conflict (Sect. 4 in Chap. 3). Underlying the sanctions strategy was, in other words, the belief that the diplomacy track could still be revived. Eventually the strategy paid off. After Rouhani's election as president, US-Iranian contacts intensified, paving the way for the E3/EU+3 and Iran to strike the interim and final nuclear deals (Sects. 5 and 6 in Chap. 3).

By then the Europeans were no longer playing the prominent, highly visible part they had enjoyed before. Obama saw a settlement of the nuclear dispute with Iran as a signature foreign policy achievement of his presidential tenure and wanted as much control over it as possible. The US president tended to take his decisions in full autonomy and usually expected his E3/EU+3 partners, or at least the Europeans, to follow suit, even though he was open to negotiate details. This said, the notion that the E3/EU+3 was just rubber-stamping decisions taken bilaterally by the United States and Iran is wrong. E3 and EU diplomats played an active role in the talks, as the bilateral US-Iranian channel generally produced understandings in need of further specification.[23]

At times this created frictions, particularly with France, which had resented not being informed of the Oman-based US-Iranian talks. A notable episode occurred when the French blocked the conclusion of the 2013 interim nuclear deal until the Iranians accepted not to make the Arak heavy water reactor operational (in the end, Iran gave in; on the clash with France, see Fabius 2016: 14–16). To an extent, the spat was more illusory than real, as the Obama administration did not see the Arak issue differently from France and it would have addressed it at any rate in the final deal (Javedanfar 2013).[24] Yet it is fair to recognise that French complaints were instrumental in fleshing out the JPOA and, perhaps even more importantly, again putting the E3/EU+3 framework above the US-Iranian bilateral channel.

Both the JPOA and the JCPOA stirred controversy and opposition, requiring the Obama administration and the E3/EU to put up a coordinated defence. Obama managed to soothe Arab Gulf states' concerns, but Israel fought against the nuclear deals with Iran at every turn. As said above, the Israelis could count on a sympathetic US Congress, which in 2014–15 became a parallel fighting arena to the E3/EU+3-Iran negotiation. Opposition to the deal was unanimous among Republicans, who controlled the House and since 2015 the Senate too, while many Democrats were torn between their desire not to harm Obama and their mistrust of Iran.

In winter 2013–14 Congress worked on a new bill, known as 'Kirk-Menendez' after its sponsoring senators, that among other things would have restored the sanctions suspended under the JPOA (although it also gave the president a waiver authority) (Wong 2015). If enacted, this piece of legislation would have put the administration in a difficult spot, since a key requirement of the interim deal was that no E3/EU+3 country would adopt new sanctions during the negotiation over the final agreement. Obama warned several times that he would veto the measure, including in his 2014 State of the Union address (Obama 2014). As the negotiations dragged on and were postponed twice, however, Congress grew frustrated.

The E3/EU came to the aid of the administration, notably through an op-ed in *The Washington Post* jointly authored by HR Mogherini and the British, French and German foreign ministers—Laurent Fabius, Philip

Hammond and Frank-Walter Steinmeier, respectively. In the article, the four made an impassioned call for diplomacy and warned that the adoption of new nuclear-related sanctions would squander the opportunity to settle the nuclear dispute (Fabius et al. 2015). While it is impossible to gauge the extent to which the E3/EU's lobbying was effective, it strengthened the Obama administration's case that the diplomatic option had not been exhausted. In the end, Obama got the support of enough Democrats to deny Congress the two-thirds majority needed to override the presidential veto, and Congress set the Kirk-Menendez bill aside (Wong 2015).

A similar episode occurred in the immediate aftermath of the July 2015 final nuclear agreement. The May 2015 Iran Nuclear Agreement Review Act (INARA) gave Congress the power to delay implementation of the deal for up to 82 days and vote a resolution of disapproval that would have eliminated the president's authority to lift sanctions. With Republicans controlling both houses, there was no chance the deal could get through Congress. Although Obama could still veto the bill—as he promised he would—Congress' rejection of the agreement would have weakened the US standing in the E3/EU+3-Iran forum and boosted Iranian hard-liners' argument that the United States could not be trusted.

Again, Obama's strategy focused on winning the support of enough Democratic senators to put up effective obstructionism in the Senate ('filibustering', in US senatorial jargon). Again, a component of this strategy was coordination with the US partners in the E3/EU+3. In early August 2015 representatives from France, Germany and the United Kingdom, as well as from China and Russia, met a number of Democratic senators to deliver the blunt message that they would go on with implementing the JCPOA irrespective of how Congress would vote.

This time around, there was no doubt that the warning achieved the desired result and that the Europeans threw the hardest punch. After all, the sanctions regime against Iran massively relied on the European Union's willingness to keep it in place. With the prospect of seeing EU sanctions gone anyway and the E3/EU+3 group split, there was no point for the Democratic senators to reject the JCPOA. They admitted as much and agreed to support the deal, depriving the Republicans of any chance to put the agreement to a vote (Hulse and Herszenhorn 2015). The path for the JCPOA to go into effect, as it finally did in January 2016, was open.

3   THE MAKING OF EU FOREIGN POLICY, PART TWO: THE NEXUS BETWEEN EU COHESION AND TRANSATLANTIC CONVERGENCE

The extent to which the E3/EU showed sensitivity to America's concerns lends some credibility to the proposition that the transatlantic dimension of the nuclear dispute with Iran was the most important driver behind the E3's, and by extension European Union's, policy (Onderco 2015: 63). However, this interpretation should ultimately be rejected. One thing is to assert, rightly, that the 'US factor' was indeed critical in shaping the European Union's policy towards Iran. Another thing is to assume, wrongly, that US pressure was what delivered EU cohesion. Rather, *it was the E3/EU process that turned the US factor into a driver for convergence in the European Union*. In these terms, managing relations with the United States was another key tool that the E3 and the HR used to sustain their intra-EU leadership and promote EU ownership of the nuclear action.

The advantage of having the E3 facilitate consensus within the European Union did not go unnoticed in Washington. In 2007 Philip Gordon, a foreign policy expert who would later work in the Department of State as assistant secretary, argued that the E3/EU "kept the Europeans relatively united and made it more difficult for Iran to play different member states off against each other" (Gordon 2007). Implied in this reasoning was that the United States had only to gain from cooperating with the E3. Indeed, the E3/EU's good offices (although sometimes they were anything but 'good') were instrumental in persuading EU member states to agree on the tougher measures that the United States championed. The most important result achieved by the E3/EU approach to Iran, Gordon continued, was that it gave the Europeans "a major stake in the Iran nuclear issue" (Gordon 2007). By that, he meant that the E3/EU process had created the political conditions for the European Union to join the US effort to confront Iran, including through punitive measures. The missing part in this explanation is that the E3/EU process also informed the US approach to Iran in ways that, eventually, suited Europe's interests in multilateral crisis management.

A few examples may help illustrate the point. In late 2003 there were EU countries, such as Italy, the Netherlands and Spain, apparently in favour of supporting Iran's referral to the Security Council even if such a move collided with the Tehran Agreed Statement that the E3 and Iran had

just released (Mousavian 2008: 163). Such divergences highlighted a main risk for the E3, namely that the United States could exploit intra-EU differences to undermine their effort. By bringing in the HR and thus gaining support from the other member states, the E3 strengthened their hands vis-à-vis the Americans.

The E3/EU process incentivised other EU member states to align with the E3's position. In 2008, with its first EU presidency stint approaching, the Czech Republic resumed full diplomatic ties with Iran, which had been downgraded some ten years earlier following a spat over the broadcasting of anti-regime programmes in Farsi by the Prague-based, US-funded Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. At the time, the traditionally US-leaning Czechs were in the midst of a negotiation over the placing of a US radar system—part of a larger missile defence infrastructure—on their territory. The anti-ballistic system was ostensibly meant to protect from threats from Iran, which created an incentive for the Czechs to stay closer to the Bush administration's policy of no contacts with Tehran. They nonetheless opted for diplomatic normalisation, because they had an interest in strengthening EU cohesion and reinforce the message to Iran that diplomacy could still be the way out of the nuclear dispute (Emadi 2008).

Even the adoption of sanctions, which had been a main US objective since the beginning, did not happen because of US pressure. The United States had, after all, advocated sanctions against Iran since 2003 (actually, since the 1990s), but the European Union agreed to take modest punitive steps only in 2007. Three more years and a tedious succession of failures in the E3/EU+3-Iran 'talks over talks' had to pass before Brussels agreed to more robust restrictions. In the end, it was not US pressure but Iran's failure to respond positively to the E3/EU-initiated diplomatic overture that put the Europeans onto the sanctions track.

In conclusion, US pressure was always a factor, but never the cause, of intra-EU deliberations. While the E3 relied, and greatly so, on the United States to foster convergence within the European Union, they also used the card of EU unity to moderate US requests. The E3/EU process created a critical mass around the European Union's preference for multilateral crisis management that was ultimately impossible for the United States to ignore. This generated a dual dynamic of reciprocal approximation, according to which EU member states became more receptive to US calls for punitive measures, while the United States agreed to play the diplomatic game that the E3/EU had started. With

an oxymoron, the E3/EU's leadership within the European Union could be termed 'subordinate leadership'. Yet leadership it was, as thanks to the E3/EU process the European Union achieved something that it would not have been able to attain otherwise: it played a fundamental role in Iran's nuclear crisis.

Notes

1. European External Relations Commissioner Chris Patten dismissed the 'axis of evil speech' as "absolutist and simplistic" (BBC News 2002b).
2. Interview with an official from the HR office, 23 June 2010.
3. This Rice should obviously not be confused with US Secretary of State *Condoleezza* Rice. The author was *Susan* Rice, who at the time was a scholar at the Brookings Institution and later became one of President Obama's most trusted foreign policy advisors. She served first as US ambassador to the United Nations (2009–2013) and then as national security advisor (2013–17).
4. Interview with a former official from the US Department of State, 27 April 2009.
5. Interview with a former official from the US Department of State, 27 April 2009.
6. Interview with an E3 official, 12 February 2009, and Skype interview with a former E3 official, 12 February 2015.
7. Phone interview with a senior E3 official, 21 April 2009. The official claimed that, prior to Iran's 2005 presidential election, he outlined a 'formula' that the Iranian negotiators found acceptable. The basic idea of this 'formula' was that Iran would not enrich on an industrial scale until the economic need for indigenous production of nuclear fuel emerged, which meant a situation in which Iran would already possess 10–12 LWRs and would be unable to find the necessary fuel on the international market. In the meantime, Iran would be allowed to do only R&D work involving about 20 centrifuges (an industrial-scale programme employs around 50,000 centrifuges, although 3000 are sufficient for producing the HEU needed for a bomb). The diplomat conceded though that there was no guarantee that the new negotiating team under the Ahmadinejad administration would have responded as positively as the previous one had.
8. Interview with an E3 official, 20 February 2009. See also Sauer (2008: 278).
9. Interview with a former E3 foreign minister, 2 March 2009. The Iranian proposal did not specify the exact timing of the four phases in which it would unfold.

10. Interviews with a former E3 foreign minister, 2 March 2009, and an official from the HR office, 22 June 2010. See also International Crisis Group (2006: 2, fn. 7). For details of the E3/EU's proposed assistance in the fuel procurement for Iran's LWRs, see IAEA Board of Governors (2005: 15–17).

11. Phone interview with an E3 senior official, 21 April 2009.

12. Interview with a former E3 ambassador to Iran, 7 April 2009. "At the time Germany was not a good ally", the former ambassador said. He acknowledged however that the Germans were careful not to let the debate leave confidential meetings between the E3/EU and the United States, thus preventing Iran (or anyone else) from seizing on it to foment divisions within the E3/EU+3 group. See also Sauer (2008: 278 and 280).

13. A commentator equated the Treasury campaign to nothing less than a war against Iran (McGlynn 2008).

14. As proof that the Europeans were not yet ready to go down the path of outright confrontation, they refrained from adopting comprehensive unilateral sanctions for as long as the Bush administration was in office. While large EU energy firms started decreasing their activities in Iran, many others continued to invest in and trade with the Islamic Republic, including French ones (Makinsky 2009: 110).

15. Rice also agreed to sign an accompanying letter that was attached to the text of the E3/EU+3 proposal brought to Tehran by Solana in June 2008.

16. For a detailed list of all changes in the Bush administration's Iran policy between 2005 and 2008, see Fitzpatrick (2008: 63).

17. Tellingly, in his 2009 *Nowruz* message to Iran, Obama addressed not only the Iranian people but also Iran's leaders (Sect. 4 in Chap. 3, fn. 15).

18. Interview with a former official from the Department of State, 27 April 2009.

19. Interview with an official from the HR office, 22 June 2010.

20. Interview with a European Commission official, 22 June 2010.

21. Interview with a European Commission official, 22 June 2010.

22. Interview with a European Commission official, 22 June 2010.

23. Skype interview with an E3 official involved in the negotiations over the 2013 interim nuclear deal, 12 February 2015.

24. It is true, however, that Secretary of State Kerry, as well as other E3/EU+3 and Iranian negotiators, were not pleased by the way French Foreign Minister Fabius went public about the Arak issue (Skype interview with a former E3 official involved in the interim nuclear deal negotiations, 12 February 2015). Fabius has a different take of the whole issue in his self-congratulatory account of the 2013–15 negotiations (Fabius 2016, see in particular pp. 14–16).

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The Outcome: The E3/EU as Identity Shapers

One of the theoretical arguments informing this research is that the course of action of an EU lead group cannot be reduced to the rational choice-driven interplay of national policies. Lead groups can only act within the framework defined by the established EU foreign policy discourse. This is why, in the theoretical framework, the liberal intergovernmentalist argument that lead groups are a *national* practice was subsumed to the social constructivist argument that they are in fact an *EU* foreign policy practice (section 'Understanding the Implications for EU Foreign Policy of Lead Groups' in Chap. 2). The constructivist argument further specified that, if lead groups-driven actions are EU foreign policy, lead groups contribute to constituting the identity of the European Union and its member states as international agents (ibidem).

In methodological terms, applying this second segment of the social constructivist argument is a tricky undertaking. It is impossible to establish a direct line of causality between the E3/EU action and the evolution of the international identity of the European Union. This does not mean, however, that the E3/EU action had no effect at all. As is the case with human beings, the identity of internationally active entities is also a function of their actions and experiences, of their achievements and failures. If the E3/EU action on Iran's nuclear issue was a significant experience for the European Union, assuming a constitutive relationship between experience and identity is legitimate.

Identity here refers to the set of norms and objectives that contribute to defining how an agent construes its interests, responsibilities and ensuing role in the international arena. Because it informs interests, identity can be a driver for action—a shaper of foreign policy. Chapter 5 showed how the correspondence of the E3's action with the EU-mediated identity of the other EU member states, as realised in discourse, sustained the E3/EU. The relationship between identity and action, however, goes both ways. EU foreign policy as much descends from the European Union's identity, as it also constitutes that identity and—concurrently— that of its member states. Whereas Chap. 5 explored the identity-to-action side of the equation, this chapter shifts onto the action-to-identity side and advances the claim that the E3/EU acted as identity shapers or, paraphrasing Sedelmeier (2003: 16, ff.), 'identity entrepreneurs' (Sect. 2 in Chap. 2).

The E3/EU gave substance to statements about EU responsibilities for global and regional security, whereby the Union's actorness thickened and the gap between its projected and actual role identity narrowed. The group also articulated the European Union as a collective, rather than unitary, agent, or as a multi-actor foreign policy system. To explore the action-to-identity nexus, this chapter first reviews the E3/EU's achievements (Sect. 1), then reconsiders the identity of the European Union as an international agent in light of such achievements (Sect. 2), and finally looks at the link between the E3/EU experience and individual member states' identity (Sect. 3).

1   The Fruits of Perseverance: The E3/EU's Achievements

The E3/EU showed remarkable consistency throughout the nuclear dispute with Iran, as did the E3/EU+3 (particularly after Obama took office). The rationale of the dual track approach was solid (Alcaro 2010), and the perseverance with which the E3/EU+3 stuck to it was what ultimately delivered the final nuclear deal. As initiators and active members of the group, the E3/EU deserve special credit.[1]

The first achievement of the E3/EU is that they *filled a dangerous diplomatic vacuum* back when the nuclear dispute started to grab headlines around the world (Wisconsin Project on Nuclear Arms Control 2008; Alcaro and Bassiri Tabrizi 2014: 15; Meier 2013: 3; Kienzle 2013: 1152). In 2003–4, the trajectory of US-Iran relations pointed to conflict. Brought closer to one another by the American invasion of Iraq, the

United States and Iran were operating in a landscape filled with mines. With the prospect of a nuclear Iran looming, even minor incidents had the potential to trigger a chain reaction that leaders in Washington or Tehran could have found impossible to stop. The E3/EU-Iran negotiations provided a firewall against uncontrolled escalation, in that they prevented the issue from becoming victim of the conflictual relationship between the United States and the Islamic Republic. The Europeans also avoided early involvement of the Security Council, which, being no closer to agreement on Iran than it had been on Iraq, was spared the embarrassment of again laying bare its internal divisions.

The E3/EU initiative contributed to *casting a shadow of illegitimacy over Iran's nuclear programme*, which is the E3's second main achievement. By agreeing to talk to the Europeans, the Iranians implicitly gave credibility to the E3/EU's argument that something was amiss with the Islamic Republic's nuclear activities. The existence of a negotiating forum that involved Iran itself diminished the plausibility of Iran's claims that all allegations against it were the fruit of biased politicisation. Contrary to Iranian expectations (Mousavian 2012: 90–91), the European-started process eventually reduced Iran's ability to control the politics of the nuclear issue—arguably in much greater fashion than the apocalyptic rhetoric used by Israeli and some US leaders. This leads directly to the third E3/EU's achievement.

The negotiation with the E3 compelled the Iranians to adjust their nuclear plans and *temporarily limit the nuclear programme's development* (Wisconsin Project on Nuclear Arms Control 2008; Alcaro and Bassiri Tabrizi 2014: 15–16). It is worth underlining that in 2003—and especially afterwards, when the virulence of the Iraqi insurgency bogged down the US forces and diminished the plausibility of a US attack on Iran—the government in Tehran could still have opted to follow North Korea's example, leave the NPT and develop a nuclear weapons programme. Arguing that the E3/EU process prevented Iran from emulating North Korea is presuming too much. Nonetheless, the nuclear talks with the Europeans strengthened the case for Iran to remain in the NPT and address some of the concerns raised by the IAEA (Denza 2005: 310–311). Iran agreed to implement the Additional Protocol until early 2006. More importantly, it froze uranium enrichment between late 2003 and early 2006 and kept on hold such other relevant activities as uranium conversion into gas between late 2004 and mid-2005. Given that greater IAEA inspections and suspension of uranium enrichment were the two main

roadblocks in the later talks between the Islamic Republic and the E3/EU+3, having achieved both (even if temporarily) was a remarkable feat for the Europeans.

Of great importance is that the E3/EU *created the conditions for the Security Council to find common ground* (Sauer 2008: 278; Kienzle 2013: 1152; Alcaro and Bassiri Tabrizi 2014: 16). Given how distant from one another the UNSC permanent members were in 2003, bridging the gap was again no small accomplishment. The Americans leaned heavily on pressure and sanctions. The Russians and the Chinese did not want to subscribe to a policy that would risk entangling them in a US-promoted containment of Iran. The E3/EU's initiative created avenues to circumvent these difficulties. The dual track approach encompassed the potentially conflicting options favoured by the more hawkish Americans and the more dovish Russians and Chinese in one single framework. It allowed the group to adapt to circumstances and put the blame for stalemate in the talks on Iran. The E3/EU+3 could argue that they had shown good faith by offering Iran a package of incentives twice, in 2006 and 2008, and that sanctions were unavoidable in the face of Tehran's stubborn refusal to engage in serious negotiations. Whether all diplomatic avenues had indeed been exhausted before the E3/EU+3 supported the adoption of sanctions is highly disputed (Leverett and Leverett 2010; Parsi 2014). Nevertheless, there is little doubt that incrementalism in the adoption of sanctions and perseverance in keeping the diplomacy track alive were instrumental in expanding the international coalition opposed to Iran's nuclear plans (Meier 2013: 10–11 and 17; Alcaro 2010: 19; Alcaro and Bassiri Tabrizi 2014: 16). Unity in the E3/EU+3 group persuaded many countries around the world that Iran's nuclear plans were a serious security matter.

By fostering consensus within the Security Council and championing the dual track approach, the E3/EU were furthermore able to *provide the United States with a way out of its decades-long policy of non-dialogue with Iran* (Sauer 2008: 278; Meier 2013: 18; Alcaro and Bassiri Tabrizi 2014: 16–17).[2] This result was even more remarkable as the United States and the E3 started off from quite different positions. Whereas in 2003 the United States was adamantly opposed to negotiations with Iran, in 2015 it was the main architect of the JCPOA. On the surface, the change of attitude just reflected the 2009 change of administration, as criticism of President Bush's Iran policy had featured high in Obama's

victorious 2008 presidential campaign. At a closer look, however, it would be inaccurate to trace the oscillations in America's Iran policy exclusively to domestic politics. Obama did not have to start from scratch. The Bush administration had already made considerable adjustments to its initial Iran policy, most notably by joining the E3/EU+3 in early 2006. Once in the group, the United States invariably entangled itself in a discursive framework that legitimised diplomatic engagement with the Islamic Republic. When Obama took office, the E3/EU+3 group had been in place for three full years and US engagement of Iran was no longer a taboo.

Part of the bargain underlying transatlantic cooperation on Iran was the Europeans' resolve to *adopt increasingly harsh sanctions* in spite of the high costs that EU countries incurred by doing so.[3] Combined with US restrictions, EU measures made up the main pillar of the sanctions regime. The EU oil embargo deprived Iran of customers that in 2011 bought about 600,000 barrels per day, roughly a quarter of Iran's total oil exports (Katzman 2016: 41). Still more effective was the ban on the provision of insurance and reinsurance services, a sector in which EU, and particularly London-based, companies enjoyed a position of structural power. Along with EU-US financial restrictions, the insurance and reinsurance ban severely constrained Iran's ability to export oil and gas by making sales both riskier and costlier (Van de Graaf 2013: 146). The lifting of the sanctions regime provided a prize generous enough for the Iranians to put much of the nuclear programme on hold for 10–15 years and under strict IAEA inspections for a lengthier period. The lifting of EU sanctions amounted to the greatest part of the prize, as UN sanctions were of limited impact and the United States kept all non-nuclear-related sanctions in place anyway.

A final achievement of the E3/EU was their *staunch defence of the JCPOA against its critics*. As Sect. 6 in Chap. 3 and Sect. 2 in Chap. 8 recalled, the most notable of these critics was the US Congress. For a while, the Europeans struggled to make an impact in the US domestic debate on Iran (Meier 2013; Alcaro and Bassiri Tabrizi 2014: 18), yet following the signing of the JCPOA they upped the ante and strongly committed to the deal's implementation. This time around their resolve proved effective, as many Democrats in the US Senate saw no point in having a vote on a multinational deal that all other parties wanted to carry out anyway. The entry into force of the JCPOA, which happened

shortly after, would also guarantee against an abrupt US withdrawal from the deal, if the next president came from the Republican camp—as he actually did.

Clearly, a US president hostile to the JCPOA like Trump could do the deal great harm, or even derail it. The deal, however, provided the Europeans with assets that increased their leverage on their transatlantic ally. A first one was the capacity to raise the reputational costs of a US withdrawal simply by refusing to join it in the absence of proved violations by Iran. A second and related asset was the ability to constrain US options by failing to re-enact EU restrictions against Iran, which had been instrumental in making the sanctions regime so effective. Finally, the Europeans could make a credible case that the prospect of a renewed trade and investment partnership with Europe would be a strong reason for Iran to keep respecting the JCPOA. While it remains uncertain that the agreement could indeed survive a US withdrawal, the fact that such a possibility exists should be counted among the E3/EU's achievements.

In conclusion, the E3/EU proved that EU foreign policy was more than a talking point. Shortly after the conclusion of the Vienna agreement, EU HR Mogherini hailed the JCPOA as a precedent demonstrating the value of multilateral cooperation and the merits of resolute, creative diplomacy—a precedent, she specified, that Iran and the E3+3 had set "*under the steer of the European Union*" (Mogherini 2015; emphasis added).[4] Mogherini's claim certainly had a measure of exaggeration in it, as without the dual US-Iranian commitment to finding an agreement the European Union would not have been able to steer anybody anywhere. Nevertheless, it is significant that she could make such a bold statement in the first place. Even those who did not dwell on the E3/EU's achievements conceded that the Europeans had been anything but bystanders.

2   The E3/EU and EU Identity: A Multi-role Collective Agent

The E3/EU operationalised principles of action agreed at the EU level, presided over the creation of a dedicated diplomatic apparatus that involved both national diplomats and EU officials, used such EU resources as the TCA and sanctions, made the Union a referent for their partners within the E3+3 group, third countries and obviously Iran. These features, taken together, are what make up international actorness

(Dryburgh 2008: 259–266). Actorness is the medium in which identity exists and evolves (Sect. 2 in Chap. 2). If the E3/EU's action 'thickened' the actorness of the European Union, it follows that it also articulated and specified the identity of the Union and its member states as international agents.

The E3/EU action unfolded in the time interval between two systematic attempts by the European Union to give normative cohesion and strategic direction to its foreign policy. The temporal concurrence of the E3/ EU group's formation in 2003–4 and the publication of the European Security Strategy in 2003 has been mentioned already (Sect. 1 in Chap. 5). Luck has it that when the E3/EU+3 and Iran struck the JCPOA in July 2015, HR Mogherini's staff was working on a new European Union Global Strategy (EUGS), which was eventually published in June 2016.

This fortunate circumstance allows for the evaluation of the relationship between the E3/EU action and the Union's international identity, as discursively framed in the two strategies, from two opposite angles. One such angle looks from the E3/EU action 'backwards' towards the ESS and focuses on the extent to which the group's achievements fit into the self-construed role of the European Union in international security affairs. The other angle looks from the E3/EU action 'forward' to the EUGS to see whether something of the E3/EU experience was internalised in the new discourse about the Union's evolving role in international security.

A Multi-role Agent

Consider the action-to-identity nexus first from the angle that looks from the E3/EU experience 'backwards' towards the ESS. Reviewing the group's aforementioned achievements in this light draws a picture of a European Union that is largely consistent with the image of itself construed in the ESS (and WMD strategy).

The first achievement was that the E3/EU filled a diplomatic vacuum in Europe's neighbourhood. The Union consequently came out as a proactive player capable of initiating a major diplomatic initiative on its own. Proactiveness, namely the capacity to put forward ideas to manage security issues and act upon them, was a main topic in the discussion over the ESS (Bailes 2005) and a recurring theme in the ESS itself, which spoke forcefully in favour of 'preventive engagement' (European Union 2003: 7).

The E3/EU initiative aimed at preventing a crisis in an area critical to EU interests such as the Middle East, a theme underlined again and again by the ESS (ibidem: 7–8) and the WMD strategy (Council of the European Union 2003: 7 and 13), whereby the Union emerged as a *proactive regional security player*.

The second achievement was that of casting a shadow of illegitimacy over Iran's nuclear programme. As explained in Chap. 5, the E3/EU identified Iran's deviation from lawful behavioural patterns—namely compliance with its non-proliferation obligations—as the issue of concern, and engaged Iran, as a fellow member of the international society, in a process ultimately aimed at correcting Iran's course. From this perspective, the E3/EU—and consequently the European Union—acted as *vigilant members of a rules-based international society*, a dominant idea of the ESS (European Union 2003: 9).

The E3/EU's third achievement was that of having greatly facilitated the formation of a large international coalition determined to curb Iran's nuclear plans. The diplomacy track of the dual track approach would not have encompassed the necessary guarantees of verification without the systematic involvement of IAEA inspectors. Likewise, the incorporation of the JCPOA into UNSCR 2231 enhanced the legal status of the agreement and raised the costs that the parties would incur by walking away from it. The Security Council provided the overall framework legitimising pressure on Iran, including through the imposition of sanctions. The E3/EU process thus bolstered the authority of the multilateral institutions presiding over international security in general and non-proliferation in particular, namely the United Nations Security Council, the NPT and the IAEA. The E3/EU+3 group was also a successful experience of informal, ad hoc cooperation between states and international organisations. The European Union came out of the process as a *flexible multilateralist agent*, reflecting the strong emphasis that the ESS and WMD strategy had put on effective multilateralism and cooperative partnerships (European Union 2003: 9, ff.; Council of the European Union 2003: 3 and 9).

The fourth achievement listed above concerned the E3/EU's ability to revive the transatlantic relationship. Indeed, the management of Iran's nuclear issue can be seen as a high point, and perhaps *the* high point, of transatlantic cooperation in the new millennium. The E3/EU action was started at a time when the bitter rift caused by the Iraq war had engendered a lively debate about the differences and similarities (more the former than the latter, actually) of America and Europe's approaches to world

politics, themselves a reflection of a different identity and appreciation of their international role. However, even if the ESS construed the European Union's role in a way that did not match the prevailing view in the US administration at the time, it also reaffirmed the crucial importance of the transatlantic dimension of the European Union's international action (European Union 2003: 13). Through the E3/EU, the Union acted not so much as a competitor of the United States, but as a *committed transatlantic ally*.

The E3/EU's fifth and sixth achievements, namely the adoption of painful yet ultimately effective EU sanctions and the defence of the nuclear deals with Iran, can be considered together. As an early analyst of the E3/EU argued, the group presided over the transition of the European Union's non-proliferation policy from norm-setting to norm-enforcement (Linden 2006: 118–119; see also Rynning 2007: 267, according to whom before 2003 the European Union had no real non-proliferation policy). The European Union construed the adoption of sanctions as a way to rectify an unlawful behaviour and restore compliance with internationally agreed norms through negotiations (Council of the European Union 2010: 1). In other words, sanctions were framed as a complementary tool of an approach aimed at producing an international arrangement. The JCPOA represented in this regard the restoration of a commonly accepted set of rules that reframed Iran's non-proliferation obligations and created a formal mechanism of dispute resolution (the Joint Commission; see Sect. 6 in Chap. 3). Again, the role played by the E3/EU as a *norm-enforcer* reflected the European Union's willingness, stated in the ESS and the WMD strategy, to support, with all legal means in keeping with Chapter VII of the UN Charter, the respect for international arrangements and the creation of rules-based regimes (Council of the European Union 2003: 5).

Remarkably, the E3/EU never framed its norm-enforcing role in military terms, again in accordance with the ESS and the WMD strategy, as neither envisioned the possibility for the European Union to use or threaten to use force if not in UN-mandated peace-enforcing or post-conflict stabilisation efforts.

Wrapping up, the multiple roles played by the E3/EU—initiator of a diplomatic initiative, defender of rules-based regimes, supporter of multilateral institutions and cooperative crisis management, committed transatlantic ally and enforcer of international norms and arrangements—can all be traced back to the identity of the European Union construed in the

ESS and WMD strategy. From this perspective, it is not incorrect to conclude that the E3/EU proved that the European Union could behave like an 'action organisation', an agent capable of autonomous thinking and action (Hill 2004: 159; see Sect. 3 in Chap. 1). While accurate, this conclusion is however incomplete.

A Multi-actor System

The E3/EU experience conferred greater actorness to the European Union, yet it also proved that such an actorness emanated less from the Union's institutional set-up than from the intra-EU leadership of a small group of member states. The 'member state element' of the E3/EU group was what ultimately made it possible for the European Union to play the role it played in the Iranian nuclear conundrum. Traces of a connection between this 'member state element' and the Union's international role can be found in the ESS, in that the strategy stated that the Union would coordinate its action with that of its individual member states (European Union 2003: 11–13). Yet these traces are tenuous, as the discourse informing the ESS presupposed an understanding of the European Union's nature as a 'collective actor' as if it were a 'unitary' actor of the sort.

The framers of the 2016 EUGS showed greater awareness about the composite nature of the EU foreign policy system, and the E3/EU experience was arguably critical in this regard. Looking from the E3/EU action 'forward' to the EUGS, the following analysis shows that there is enough evidence to infer that the Iran case was in the back of the mind of the EUGS framers when they drafted key passages of it.

The Global Strategy of 2016 innovated on its 2003 predecessor in many respects. Its outlook was grander. It linked security policy matters to all other aspects of EU external action in the deliberate attempt to construe the European Union as a global actor with global interests and global responsibilities. Its design was more systematic, with the Union's interests, principles, priorities and assets duly listed and organised. And its drafting process was more collaborative and elaborate, as the final text eventually reflected a long series of exchanges between the HR office and national representatives of the member states. The process of drafting the strategy was consequently longer (two years against a few months for the ESS) and more cumbersome, yet it had the advantage of spreading ownership of the Global Strategy's contents across the member states (Tocci 2017: 43–46).

Just like the ESS, the EUGS posited responsibility for global and regional security, as well as good governance and the promotion of a rules-based system, as elements inherent to the Union's international identity. Yet it also showed greater awareness of the composite nature of the Union as an alliance, a pact, a *collective undertaking*. Attesting to this, the discursive theme of 'sharing'—values, norms, interests, institutions—was dominant throughout the document.[5] Similarly, the element of (national) diversity was not downplayed, but actually singled out as one of the Union's strengths (European Union 2016: 4). This might sound counterintuitive, as centralised systems for decision-making and generation of capabilities provide for more coherent, rapid and effective action. Yet the purpose of the EUGS was not to functionally indicate what would work best, as to construe the global role of the European Union in line with its composite identity as a supranational-intergovernmental hybrid.

Reflecting this, the EUGS framed EU foreign policy as encompassing national foreign policies, if duly coordinated: "EU foreign policy is not a solo performance. […] Cooperation among Member States can strengthen our engagement in the world" (ibidem: 46–47). Even more interesting, the EUGS explicitly acknowledged the possibility for one or a few member states, in coordination with the HR and the Council, to act on behalf of the whole European Union. It is not by chance that the EUGS made this statement while committing the Union to be 'responsive'. The underlying reasoning was that, in certain circumstances, acting through the offices of a restricted number of member states—in other words, a *lead group*—was the best way to indeed make the Union 'responsive'. In these terms, the claim that the diversity constituting the European Union was actually one of its strengths sounded less rhetorical and more substantial than it appeared at first. Tellingly, the pen holder of the EUGS referred to the paragraph on lead groups, which apparently was "the last knot to be untied" before releasing the strategy, as "one of the most innovative points of the entire document" (Tocci 2017: 79–80).

It should have become clear now how the experience of the E3/EU group affected the evolving identity of the European Union as an international actor. By 2016 EU foreign policy-makers had internalised the 'lead group' practice and made it a constitutive part of EU foreign policy. Thanks to lead groups, the European Union can be more responsive, which is another way to say that these groups can *enable* and *shape* EU foreign policy—just the way the E3/EU did.

For sure, the Global Strategy spoke of lead groups in ways that did not fit the E3/EU entirely, for instance stating that such groups can "implement agreed positions of the [EU] Council" *upon invitation* by the HR (European Union 2016: 47; emphasis added). In the Iran case, the HR did not invite the E3 to act—actually, things went the other way round. The point of who invited whom, however, is of no great importance. What counts is that the intra-EU leadership of the E3 hinged on the HR being part of the group, according to the asymmetric but mutually dependent relationship between the former and the latter illustrated in Sect. 1 in Chap. 7. This kind of relationship was alluded to in the passage of the EUGS describing the cooperation between the smaller group and the rest of the Union. "The HR", the text read, "shall keep the Council fully informed and shall ensure consistency with agreed EU policies" (ibidem), which was an implicit admission of the subordinate role of the HR—that is, the 'EU element' of the group—to the leadership of a few member states—the 'national element' of the lead group.

Also significant is that the Global Strategy twice mentioned the Iran case as testament to the potential of EU foreign policy. The 'combined weight' of EU assets—which evidently included national assets too—was said to be critical in the pursuit of a world in which rules and accepted practices organise IRs at the expense of power politics, even in the face of a strong potential for conflict as it was the case with Iran (ibidem: 15). The second time the Iran case was mentioned regarded the Union's stated resolve to make full use of all its assets—including national ones—to address nuclear proliferation crises and defend such a key pillar of a rules-based international order as the non-proliferation regime (ibidem: 42). The EUGS, in short, *referred to an action carried out by a lead group as an example of how the Union could have an effective foreign policy.*

Admittedly, assuming a line of efficient causation between the E3/EU action and the new foreign policy discourse of the EUGS would be as incorrect as it was to assume it between the formation of the group and the ESS (Sect. 3 in Chap. 5). Yet, then as later, the evidence suggests a constitutive relationship (or a broader, 'Aristotelian' causal relationship, as argued by Kurki 2008) between the process through which the European Union and its members discursively framed EU foreign policy and the process through which they actually made EU foreign policy.

The nexus between the E3/EU and EU identity can now be espoused fully. The EU Iran lead group presided over the thickening of the European Union's actorness. Because actorness is the medium in which identity exists, the E3/EU action—as stated repeatedly in this chapter—substantiated the self-representation of the European Union as an international agent whose identity encompassed special responsibility for regional security and non-proliferation. The multiple roles played by the E3/EU, ranging from initiator of a major diplomatic initiative to transatlantic ally to supporter and enforcer of internationally agreed norms and regimes, matched the role identity of the European Union construed in the ESS.

But identity not only exists in actorness, it also evolves in it. The manner in which such actorness articulates and unfolds is therefore capable of shaping identity, and the E3/EU process did so by facilitating the internalisation of the lead group practice in the EU foreign policy discourse and the ensuing articulation of EU identity as a composite foreign policy system comprising both member states and institutions. The 2016 EUGS, in its drafting process as well as in its contents, showed greater appreciation of the specifics of the European Union's identity as a supranational-intergovernmental foreign policy hybrid. Unlike the ESS, the EUGS construed a common foreign policy of a coherent collective agent, rather than a unitary one. The new strategy understood that EU foreign policy could only work as an orchestra, not a solo performance.

3   The E3/EU and National Identity: Outsiders and Insiders

The E3/EU performed an identity-shaping function not only with regard to the European Union as an organisation, but to its individual member states. This proposition is a corollary of the social constructivist argument about the 'feedback' effect of lead groups (Sect. 2 and 4 in Chap. 2, Fig. 2.2). By shaping EU policy (itself driven by identity-informed interests), lead groups effect a Europeanisation of the foreign policies of the member states, which implies a further articulation of the nexus between the national layer and the EU layer of their identity.

Europeanisation is a problematic concept, as it can be used to refer to different processes. Following Keukeleire and MacNaughtan (2008), this work identified adaptation, projection and the 'progressive pursuit of foreign policy at the EU level' as relevant definitions of Europeanisation (Sect. 2 in Chap. 2). Determining which one(s) of these definitions prevails over the other ones is an empirical exercise based on a case-by-case, ex-post analysis. The E3/EU case saw Europeanisation processes unfold in line with all three aforementioned definitions, yet they did so along different patterns for insiders and outsiders.

The Outsiders

Consider first the outsiders. The responsibility for managing major international disputes and enforcing the non-proliferation norm in Iran was only marginally inherent to the international identity of most EU member states, notably the small ones with a modest strategic outlook. These countries shared in that responsibility, and consequently construed an interest in Iran's nuclear issue, only because they accepted that responsibility for global and regional security was inherent to the international identity of the European Union as a collective agent. For these countries, Iran's nuclear issue was a foreign policy matter that was to be pursued at the EU level, and consequently their stance on Iran resulted from an adaptation to what was decided at the EU level. The E3/EU enabled the internalisation in these countries' identity of the multiple EU role identity seen above.

Not all outsiders had an interest in Iran's nuclear issue only because of the EU-mediated identity, however. For Sweden, for instance, the upholding of the non-proliferation norm was part and parcel of a consolidated tradition of foreign policy (Bergenäs 2010). Italy, Europe's fourth largest economy and military spender as well as a G7 member, conceived of global or at least regional security as a national responsibility (Menotti 2007; Alcaro 2014). For reasons ranging from a genuine commitment to European integration to a sober assessment of limited state resources, both Italy and Sweden had also an interest in pursuing their foreign policy objectives towards Iran in a broader EU framework. For such countries, following the lead of the E3 was as much a consequence of this as it was the result of a process of adaptation. In other words, countries such as Italy or Sweden experienced the E3/EU process as ultimately a subordination of the national layer to the EU layer of their identity.

The Insiders

An element of adaptation was also present in the Europeanisation of the Iran policy of the insiders. The E3, after all, adapted their Iran policy to interests, goals and principles of action articulated in a common EU discourse. This adaptation move explains why the option of supporting a US or Israeli military strike against Iran's nuclear facilities was never raised in the context of the E3/EU. That would have overstepped the discursive contours within which the action on Iran could be presented as compatible with the identity of the European Union. In the EU foreign policy discourse, resort to military means was basically limited to post-conflict stabilisation tasks (European Union 2003: 7).

For Germany this was not a big issue, as at no point in the dispute Iran's breaches of its international obligations seemed so threatening as to cross Germany's post-World War II high threshold for supporting the use of force. For France and the United Kingdom things stood differently. Both countries saw the possibility of using force (or supporting the use of force) as fully consistent with their international identity as responsible global powers. Although we do not have much evidence, British and French policy-makers must have considered what the best course of action for them would have been if indeed the United States had started making the case for a pre-emptive strike. Whether they would have actually participated in the attack, provided some other forms of military assistance or just backed the intervention diplomatically is not relevant here. The point is that the French and British could not have appealed to the EU-mediated identity of the other member states to make the case for the use of force against Iran, at least not in any circumstance occurred in 2003–15. The E3 had to adapt their Iran policy to an EU framework for action that did not exhaust all possible courses of action consistent with their own international identity.

This said, there is little doubt that the 'Europeanisation' of the E3's Iran policy mostly unfolded along a 'projection' pattern. After all, they made their own policy the policy of the European Union. In so doing, the three followed a pattern of action ingrained in their self-representation as international agents *and* EU member states.

Germany's foreign policy was traditionally predicated on the pursuit of multilateral cooperation and a rules-based international system. Along with NATO and the United Nations, the European Union was an essential framework to augment German international influence and prestige,

share responsibilities on the global stage, as well as socialise non-Western global powers such as Russia and China into collective crisis management (Federal Ministry of Defence 2006: 14; Stelzenmüller 2016: 55 and 57–8). The 2006 German White Paper on Defence described "a capable European Union" as a national interest (Federal Ministry of Defence 2006: 33), while its 2016 upgrade indicated EU unity as a critical component of Germany's security policy (Federal Ministry of Defence 2016: 7).

Similarly, the French 2008 White Paper on Defence explicitly stated that "[m]aking the European Union a major player in crisis management and international security" was "one of the central tenets of [France's] security policy" (Presidency of the Republic 2008: 7). The 2013 French White Paper included an entire section dedicated to spelling out how France could contribute to enhancing the Union's capacity to provide for its own security and that of its neighbourhood (Presidency of the Republic 2013: Chapter 5.b).

The 2010 British Strategic Defence and Security Review defined EU membership as a key element of the United Kingdom's international engagement and highlighted "an outward-facing European Union that promotes security and prosperity" as a priority of British foreign policy (HM Government 2010: 61 and 58). The Union continued to be indicated among the main international frameworks through which British influence expanded in the United Kingdom's 2015 National Security Strategy (HM Government 2015: 14, 26, 45 and 53 in particular).

For sure, nowhere did these documents advocate an integrationist approach to foreign policy. Action through the European Union was a foreign policy option among others (although one of the most important ones). Actually, in the most recent strategic papers the E3 viewed the European Union more as a security policy-enabling framework than as an autonomous security policy actor. This was a constant theme in spite of the sometimes stark differences in the way Germany, France and the United Kingdom historically appreciated the European integration project. However, the fact remains that EU membership played an important role in the constitution of the international role identity of the E3, as much as it did for the other member states. The British, French and German strategic framers construed the E3's membership in the European Union as enabling wider engagement with the rest of the world, amplifying their influence in the pursuit of national foreign policy objectives, and more effectively promoting shared norms and values.

This internalisation of EU membership in the national identity remains true even in the face of the referendum that sanctioned the United Kingdom's upcoming exit from the European Union (Brexit). There is plenty of evidence in the 'Remain' campaign of how EU membership had been internalised as part of the British international identity, including in security matters, by key foreign policy constituents (Kerr 2016).

The then prime minister, David Cameron, made an impassioned case against Brexit on national security grounds, even pointing to the nuclear talks with Iran—"led by the EU"—as evidence supporting his argument (Cameron 2016). His predecessor Blair had expressed himself in similar terms (Blair 2015). The EU-mediated identity of the United Kingdom had been internalised by external actors too. President Obama, among others, used very similar arguments to Cameron and Blair's to support the Remain campaign, again mentioning the Iran case as testimony that, as an EU member, the United Kingdom was better able to pursue its interest and spread its values (Obama 2016). The result of the referendum will undoubtedly change this, as British foreign policy-makers will be compelled to reframe the international role and responsibilities of their country to reflect the identity shift that leaving the EU social context will bring about. But this consideration, rather than invalidating the argument that EU membership did mediate British international identity, actually supports it.

The Europeanisation of the E3's policy presided over by the E3/EU group occurred then within certain limits. The interest of the three in Iran's nuclear issue did not originate from the 'EU layer' of their international identity (as it did for several smaller states). All three viewed crisis management and non-proliferation as tasks commensurate with their self-representation as responsible stakeholders in the stability of Europe's neighbourhood and the endurance of rules-based multilateral regimes. No E3 country, however, could entirely detach their EU membership from such responsibilities, as all three saw the European Union as an enabling framework for meeting those responsibilities more effectively. In these terms, EU membership did play an important role in construing the E3's interest in Iran's nuclear issue, even if an indirect one. The 'EU identity layer' made it possible for these countries to act *through* and *along* the European Union to substantiate their—and the Union's—international identity as crisis managers and non-proliferation players.

The study of the E3/EU, with its peculiar mix of an 'EU element' and a 'member state element', provides ample empirical evidence to support

the notion of a continuing dialectical relationship between EU foreign policy and national foreign policies. This was the conceptual assumption from which this book started. Chapter 2 gave this assumption theoretical validation, Chaps. 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9 provided it with empirical validation. The research endeavour undertaken in this work has thus come full circle.

NOTES

1. The following review of the E3/EU's achievements is a re-elaboration of Alcaro and Bassiri Tabrizi 2014: 15–17. For an early appraisal of Europe's achievements in the nuclear talks with Iran, the conclusions of a roundtable organised by the Wisconsin Project on Nuclear Arms Control in 2008 make for an insightful reading (Wisconsin Project on Nuclear Arms Control 2008). Philip Gordon, Hans-Peter Hinrichson, Danielle Pletka, Simon Shercliff and Terence Taylor were the roundtable participants.

2. Pollack (2013: 121–122) agrees that the Bush administration had initially no working policy towards Iran. However, he believes that the shift towards the dual track approach was entirely endogenous, as he regretfully ignores the E3/EU-Iran talks and whatever role they may have played to give Washington a way to revisit its options.

3. Experts from the National Iranian American Council in Washington, DC, estimated that sanctions cost EU countries tens, if not hundreds, of billions of dollars in lost trade revenues. The estimates oscillated between 23.1 and 73 billion dollars for Germany, between 13.6 and 43.8 for Italy, between 10.9 and 34.2 for France, between 4.1 and 12.9 for Spain, and between 145 and 458 million dollars for tiny Greece (Leslie et al. 2014: 12–13). Both the large ranges of variation and the absolute figures on the higher end of the variation range are such that I would caution to accept these estimates at face value. Yet, the point is not to quantify exactly the amount of trade revenues lost by the Europeans because of sanctions, as to emphasise that sanctions came anything but cost-free for the Europeans, and that strategic and political considerations trumped economic advantages.

4. HR Mogherini did not shy from openly claiming ownership of the nuclear deal: "The Vienna accord *I* negotiated on behalf of the EU […]", she wrote (emphasis added).

5. The term 'shared' only appeared twice in the 14-page long ESS, once linked to 'assets' and the other time to 'threats'. By contrast, the 50-page long EUGS used the term 'shared' around 40 times, mostly in relation to 'interests' and 'responsibilities', and in the title itself: *Shared Vision, Common Action*.

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Conclusion: The E3/EU and EU Foreign Policy

Between 2003 and 2015, the European Union (EU) and its member states were directly involved in the management of one of the most prominent issues of international concern: how to bring the Islamic Republic of Iran to give verifiable guarantees that its nuclear programme would not be diverted to military purposes.

Over the course of this 13-year-long period, a group of member states consisting of the 'big three' shaped the European Union's approach: France, Germany and the United Kingdom. In late 2004 the E3 associated the EU HR to the negotiation team, which then became the E3/EU and, following a 2006 expansion to China, Russia and the United States, the E3/EU+3 (more commonly known as the P5+1). Given the pre-eminence of the nuclear issue, the other components of the Iran policy of the European Union were either subordinated to the E3/EU (and later E3/ EU+3) efforts or abandoned altogether. This shift in priorities eventually gave the group full or almost full control of the Iran policy of both EU institutions and EU member states.

This empirical observation was the starting point of the book (Sect. 1 in Chap. 1). If a group of member states could determine the foreign policy course of the rest of the Union, can we refer to their coordinated action as an instance of EU foreign policy? If so, in what terms exactly?

Policy-makers and IR observers sometimes spoke of the E3 group and the European Union interchangeably (Sect. 2 in Chap. 1). Those who cared about making a distinction between the E3 and the rest of EU countries nonetheless assumed that the former were speaking for the latter. After all, the E3/EU group was not an isolated case. Before and after the formation of the group, there were occasions in which the policy of the European Union was driven by a small group of member states, sometimes working in cooperation with EU institutions and extra-EU countries in a so-called contact group format. The Contact Group for the Balkans or the Franco-German-brokered Normandy negotiation between Russia and Ukraine were cases in point (among others). These groups varied in terms of membership, purpose, type of action and duration. The constant beneath all these variations was that they shaped the policy course that the European Union would take (Sect. 4 in Chap. 1). Thus, blurring the lines between national foreign policy and EU foreign policy did not pose insurmountable problems, at least in empirical terms.

In conceptual terms, things were more complicated. Here, a distinction between what amounts to national foreign policy and what to EU foreign policy was inescapable.

To some scholars, the very notion of 'EU foreign policy' is problematic. Those who draw from realist schools of thought argue that international institutions, the European Union included, are incapable of overcoming the structural limits to international cooperation deriving from the anarchical nature of the state-based international system. For them, EU foreign policy is a misleading concept, as in reality EU foreign policy amounts to nothing more than the sum of its parts, namely national foreign policies. Such scepticism is not limited to realist-leaning theorists. Some scholars believe that the institutional set-up of the European Union is ill-suited to generate the degree of cohesion necessary for common action. Others point to the fact that EU member states have different identities, namely a different representation of their international role, and that these differences are too stark for a truly common foreign policy to exist (Sect. 3 in Chap. 1).

This said, the majority of scholars believe that the notion of EU foreign policy is perfectly legitimate, provided it is tailored to the peculiar nature of the European Union. These scholars contend that the Union and its foreign policy should not be assessed with the same metrics used to assess the foreign policy of sovereign states. The European Union is a unique blending of intergovernmental and supranational decision-making, which has developed its own specific identity over the course of its history. That

EU member states display a national identity along with and above an EU-wide identity does not invalidate this point. The corollary is that EU foreign policy is a more complex reality than national foreign policy, in that it encompasses not only the action taken and carried out by EU institutions, but also the foreign policy of EU member states. One author who dwelled considerably on the problem such as Christopher Hill contended that national foreign policies and EU foreign policy are engaged in a "continuing dialectical relationship" and that EU foreign policy should be conceptualised as a multi-level system (ibidem).

The above made up the conceptual assumption on which this research was based. Yet this assumption was exactly that, an *assumption*—useful as a starting point, but in need of further specification. It was necessary, in particular, to inquire about two fundamental and interrelated issues.

The first issue regarded the conditions of possibility of EU lead groups and revolved around the compromise according to which the lead group's outsiders accept the leadership of the insiders. The second issue concerned the implications of lead groups for EU foreign policy, a generic formulation that pointed to the need to clarify the terms in which lead groups promote intra-EU cohesion and thus constitute EU foreign policy. This second question involved research on the capacity of the lead group to enable EU foreign policy by operationalising principles of action agreed at the EU level and to shape EU foreign policy by giving it direction and content. It also entailed a reflection about how the lead group practice contributes to determining the nature of the European Union as a multi-level international agent (or system, following Hill's terminology) with a specific identity or, which is the same here, a specific representation of its role and responsibilities in the world.

Answering these questions warranted an effort to place the initial conceptual assumption—that national foreign policies can be EU foreign policy—in some more rigorous theoretical ground. This effort eventually produced a hybrid theoretical framework that combined elements drawn from liberal intergovernmentalism and social constructivism. In particular, the social constructivist holistic ontology, whereby agents and structure engage in a mutually constitutive relationship, could sustain liberal intergovernmentalist arguments about the lead groups' conditions of possibility and implications for EU foreign policy without incurring contradiction. Thus, it was possible to assume the two sets of arguments as complementary and coexisting within a broader social constructivist ontological framework (Sect. 3 in Chap. 2).

The purpose of this concluding chapter is twofold. First, it reviews how theory about lead groups and empirical evidence of the E3/EU dovetail (Sect. 1). Second, it makes some final considerations about lead groups and the Europeanisation of foreign policy that they effect (Sect. 2).

1   The Conditions of Possibility of the E3/EU

The first theoretical question was simple: what are the conditions that allow for an EU lead group to form and be sustainable over time?

The Intergovernmentalist Argument: An Interest-Driven Bargain

The liberal intergovernmentalist argument is that lead groups originate from intergovernmental bargaining. Underlying the bargain is the existence of a common interest in a specific issue or crisis, yet what drives it are the differences within that common interest. Unlike standard rationalist accounts of IR, liberal intergovernmentalism does not assume interests as given but subject to variation according to country and within the same country to issue and time. Thus, while all EU member states may have an interest in the said issue or crisis, they may, and actually do, construe that interest differently. The *intensity of the interest* emerges then as a more important variable in the process of formation of a lead group than imbalances in resources, experience and wealth.

Another critical variable, actually the decisive one, is the *bargaining ability* of member states, that is, the capacity to act upon that interest to win a seat in the group (sections 'Explaining the Conditions of Possibility of EU Lead Groups' and 'An Intergovernmentalist-Constructivist Framework' in Chap. 2). The other members, both the uninterested and the outmanoeuvred, accept the leadership of the insiders because they calculate that, all considered, this better serves their own interest in the management of the issue at hand. Accordingly, the liberal intergovernmentalist argument was that

> EU lead groups form whenever the interest of both insiders and outsiders in a crisis management undertaking outweighs the insiders' interest in unrestricted autonomy and the outsiders' one in opposing the group's leadership. (see Fig. 2.2)

The formation process of the E3/EU analysed in Chap. 4 fits in this segment of the theoretical framework. France, Germany and the United Kingdom certainly profited from extraordinary circumstances to take the initiative—US unpreparedness to engage Iran diplomatically, the lack of consensus within the Security Council and Iran's willingness to legitimise its nuclear activities in the eyes of the international community (Sect. 1 in Chap. 4). Yet alone these permissive conditions do not suffice to explain the creation of the E3 group. All three countries had specific interests in the issue, as did the other member states. The E3/EU resulted from an asymmetric accommodation of such interests.

The E3 had much and more at stake. They feared that, if unchecked, Iran's progress on the nuclear front could eventually provoke a preventive military strike by Israel and/or the United States, thereby triggering a chain reaction with ominous consequences for the security of the region and Europe itself. The E3 were also worried that a nuclear arms race in the Gulf would have dealt a fatal blow to the nuclear non-proliferation regime based on the NPT. Economic considerations mattered as well: Iran was the destination of a growing proportion of German exports and was an important energy supply source for France. Finally, the E3 were eager to heal the wound left by the bitter dispute over the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq (Sect. 2 in Chap. 4). The intensity of this composite set of security, economic, energy, normative and political interests was such that it prompted the E3 to take the initiative.

While all interests listed above were shared by the other EU countries, initially the E3 acted on a purely national basis, with no involvement of the European Union. Yet, in a year's time, the E3 group had become the E3/EU, following the association of HR Solana with the negotiating team. What had changed? Why did the E3 seek EU support and why did the other member states agree to their leadership?

The liberal intergovernmentalist answer to these questions has it that the E3 and the other member states reached a sort of tacit understanding that met the interests of all, although with variations according to country. The E3 determined that EU support was necessary because it would have bolstered the legitimacy of their initiative, lent more weight to their demands to Iran and provided the negotiators with greater assets, including the offer of an EU-Iran trade deal (and later the threat of EU sanctions). The other member states had few arguments to question the E3 format, which after all had been in place already for a year. The E3 took

advantage of this *fait accompli* to exclude other EU member states that had a comparably intense interest in managing Iran's nuclear issue, most notably Italy. For sure, the E3 could flaunt superior diplomatic skills and resources than Italy, but ultimately it was not because of their greater power that Italy (and the rest of EU member states) gave in. It was because the E3 had a stronger bargaining position than Italy, which moreover played its cards badly (Sect. 3 in Chap. 4).

The E3 presented the other member states with two options. The group outsiders could either support a diplomatic action that was carried out with the support of the HR. Or they could oppose the E3's lead on the grounds that there was no legal basis for them to act on behalf of the whole Union. However reluctant to subcontract their Iran policy to the E3 the outsiders were, they had a stronger interest in preventing a conflict with Iran and nuclear proliferation in the Gulf. If this was true for a country such as Italy, whose interest in the issue was perhaps as intense as the E3's, it was even truer for other EU member states with much less at stake (ibidem). Rephrasing the liberal intergovernmentalist argument about the conditions of possibility of lead groups, it can thus be argued that

> the interest of the E3 in getting EU support outweighed their interest in unrestricted autonomy, while the interest of the group's outsiders in managing Iran's nuclear issue through the E3/EU outweighed their interest in opposing the E3's leadership.

The Constructivist Argument: A Discourse-Enabled Format

The core of the liberal intergovernmentalist argument above is a rational choice-driven bargaining process in which all parties involved—the group's insiders as well as the outsiders—reason in terms of interests. This argument concedes that these interests are of a composite nature, yet it falls short on an important account. It fails to shed light on whether these interests are somehow impacted by the fact that EU countries shared membership in such a highly integrated organisation as the European Union. This flaw in the liberal intergovernmentalist argument was the reason for which it could be just one segment of the theoretical framework. Also needed was a social constructivist segment that could account for EU membership as an element constituting the interests of EU countries.

The focus of this argument was not so much on the bargaining processes (implicit or explicit) between rational actors, as on the constitution of such interests. Specifically, it concentrated on the nexus between interests and identity, and on how this nexus affected state behaviour.

For social constructivists, the interaction between states create a social context that exerts a feedback effect on their identity, so that the latter is not the result of purely domestic processes but evolve and change in line with the overall structure in which states operate. If such a structure involves a high degree of shared norms and values and is built on solid patterns of cooperation, as is the case with the European Union, states see cooperation in the pursuit of goals reflecting those norms and values as an interest in itself. EU membership does play a role, then, in the interest formation of EU member states, even though this process is never uniform across states and is subjected to variations within the same state.

Member states construe a collective identity by articulating the norms and interests that should guide the European Union's action in the world in formal statements and declarations—that is, in discourse. The latter is therefore not a mere rhetorical exercise but an identity-construing process (Sect. 2 in Chap. 2). Because identity is an evolving process, the corresponding EU foreign policy discourse is subject to different interpretations. This involves that, while discourse performs the function of being a 'container of identity', the contours of discourse itself are not set in stone. Member states can put forward diverging claims as to what EU foreign policy discourse contains. In this light, the action by lead groups is predicated not only on their stronger bargaining position, but also on the ability of the insiders to establish that such action is in line with the existing, albeit elastic, EU foreign policy discourse (ibidem).

The bottom line of the social constructivist argument was that lead groups form because the action taken by the insiders is compatible with the *established EU foreign policy discourse*, which reflects the EU-mediated identity of the group's outsiders. The norm dictating cooperation among member states being more regulative than constitutive (as member states retain sovereignty over foreign policy matters), such cooperation could take unorthodox shapes such as lead groups, provided that the group's insiders embed their action in EU foreign policy discourse (section 'Explaining the Conditions of Possibility of EU Lead Groups' in Chap. 2). The social constructivist integration of the intergovernmentalist explanation of the conditions of possibility of lead groups read thus as follows:

the interest of both insiders and outsiders in a crisis management undertaking outweighs the insiders' interest in unrestricted autonomy and the outsiders' one in opposing the group's leadership *only if* the insiders pursue foreign policy goals that are in line with EU foreign policy discourse. (see Fig. 2.2)

Chapter 5 showed how the E3 framed their initiative towards Iran in ways that were compatible with the EU foreign policy discourse spelled out in the 2003 WMD strategy and especially the European Security Strategy. The E3 framed Iran's behaviour as a deviance from the conduct it was supposed to follow as a non-nuclear party to the NPT. This was clearly in keeping with the underlying theme of the ESS that all countries in the world were part of an international society and that the problem with troublemakers was that they put themselves "outside the bounds" of such a society.

According to the ESS, the European Union had a responsibility to bring such countries into the fold of multilaterally accepted rules and practices, including by resorting to coercive measures if sanctioned by UNSC authority. The E3/EU framed their action, including the use of sanctions, as an attempt to restore confidence in Iran's nuclear ambitions and the authority of the relevant international regimes and institutions, namely the NPT, the IAEA and the Security Council. In short, both diagnostic and prognostic frameworks used by the E3/EU to construe the problem (Iran's behaviour) and the solution (restoration of a rules-based nonproliferation system) were compatible with the EU-mediated identity of the other member states. Applying this social constructivist argument to the E3/EU case results in the following statement:

> The interest of the E3 and the other member states in Iran's nuclear issue outweighed the E3's interest in unrestricted autonomy and the outsiders' interest in opposing the E3 leadership because the E3/EU discursively construed Iran's nuclear issue and the way to handle it consistently with how the European Union construed threats and the corresponding policy responses.

2   The E3/EU as Foreign Policy-Makers

The second question asked in the theory chapter was a more generic but at the same time a more fundamental one: how do lead groups actually make EU foreign policy, and what implications do they have for the European Union's international identity?

The Intergovernmentalist Argument: Enablers
of EU Foreign Policy

Here, liberal intergovernmentalism could help only to a point, because it struggles to view anything that is not enshrined in institutionalised mechanisms of cooperation as EU foreign policy. As the practice of lead groups is inherently informal, a liberal intergovernmentalist would have little reason to put it under the EU foreign policy heading. In intergovernmentalist terms, lead groups are a foreign policy practice of *sovereign states* engaging in ad hoc forums (or informal institutions). The very phrase 'EU lead groups' looks awkward, if not confusing, because it squeezes two different things, namely the coordinated foreign policies of sovereign states and the corresponding action taken by EU institutions, into one reality.

On one point, however, liberal intergovernmentalists agree, namely that lead groups facilitate policy cohesion among member states, as those excluded from the group align their positions to that of the insiders. In this respect, if lead groups bring the European Union to act upon preexisting goals, they can be seen as performing an *EU foreign policy-enabling function* (section 'Understanding the Implications for EU Foreign Policy of Lead Groups' in Chap. 2). Accordingly, the liberal intergovernmentalist argument was that

> lead groups are informal institutions that foster the approximation of the policy positions of the group's outsiders towards the policy positions of the insiders. While lead groups are a national foreign policy practice, they can enable EU foreign policy. (see Fig. 2.2)

If, theoretically, the point about lead groups is that they foster policy convergence within the European Union, empirically the task is to show how this process takes place in individual cases of lead groups. Accordingly, Chaps. 6, 7 and 8 looked at the E3/EU lead group as an exercise in leadership aimed at generating intra-EU policy convergence.

The intra-EU policy convergence on Iran was, first, a consequence of the pre-eminence of the nuclear issue. Nuclear proliferation had after all been a prominent item in EU-Iran exchanges even during the hopeful years of the Critical and Comprehensive Dialogues (Sect. 1 in Chap. 6). Hence, it came as no surprise that the issue climbed the list of priorities in the European Union's agenda when Iran's nuclear programme turned out

to be far more advanced than previously anticipated. When the E3 engaged the Iranians, then, they were pursuing an established EU non-proliferation objective (Sect. 2 in Chap. 6). The E3 adopted an approach based on engagement, dialogue, the promise of improved EU-Iran relations and the promotion of rules-based regimes, all elements already contained in the pre-existing EU's Iran policy. Even though the E3/EU narrowed down the remit of EU-Iran relations to the nuclear issue, they presided over an adaptation of and not a break with the pre-existing EU policy (Sect. 3 in Chap. 6).

Intra-EU leadership on Iran always remained the product of a 'bargain'. The three could not take their leadership for granted, but had to ensure that it remained the best possible outcome for all involved. To do that, the E3 had to strike a balance between two potentially conflicting requirements: first, ensure that they remained in control of the EU policy towards Iran; second, promote a sense of EU-wide ownership of their action (Chap. 7).

Being in the Iran group gave the E3 obvious advantages, of which they made an overall sensible use. The E3 enjoyed exclusive access to Iran (at least on nuclear matters), whereby they could claim that their recommended course of action reflected their deeper understanding of Iran's tactics and motives. Selective intra-EU information sharing—a tactic to which the E3 resorted regularly—helped them prevent opposition. In fact, for the E3 sharing information with the other member states was less a way to trigger a consultation process (although this occurred too) than it was a tactic to steer the European Union in the direction they wanted it to go. The E3 also put energy in building intra-EU alliances, so that conflict very rarely ran along an E3/non-E3 cleavage; throughout the process, the E3 could always count on substantial support from other member states. Finally, the E3 benefitted from the involvement of the Security Council, which gave the group—in its enlarged E3/EU+3 format—a sort of formal recognition in several resolutions (Sect. 4 in Chap. 7).

The E3's leadership, however, ultimately rested on the ability to promote an EU-wide sense of ownership of their initiative, which the E3 achieved by giving the group's outsiders a degree of participation and representation. Participation was indirect. The E3 could pledge economic benefits or threaten sanctions that they could deliver only with the consent

of the other EU member states. While the economic incentives never materialised, sanctions did, giving the other member states a say on critical decisions.

Arguably more important to generate EU-wide ownership was representation, which the E3 ensured by involving the HR in the negotiation. In principle, the HR was a guarantor that the E3 would take the other member states' sensitivities and concerns into account, although there is scant evidence of Solana, Ashton or Mogherini defending the position of this or that other member state vis-à-vis the E3. In fact, the HR worked side-by-side with the E3, helping them share information or solve conflict with the other member states. The HR's contribution to this endeavour was important, yet secondary. In the negotiation process, however, the HR found a way to stand out, as he/she became the chief interlocutor of the Iranians on behalf of the E3+3, chaired the negotiation sessions and coordinated among the E3+3 (particularly between the E3 and the United States). It was thanks to the HR's role in the E3+3 format that it was ultimately possible to attach an 'EU badge' to the whole endeavour (ibidem).

Another crucial asset used by the E3 to promote their intra-EU leadership and ensuing capacity to generate EU foreign policy towards the Iranian nuclear crisis was the 'US factor' (Chap. 8). Intra-EU unity and transatlantic convergence were intrinsically tied. On the one hand, EU unity *resulted* from transatlantic convergence. The E3 used the 'US factor' throughout the nuclear dispute to defend themselves from intra-EU criticisms, build support for their policy line or persuade the other member states to take difficult decisions. Underlying the E3's arguments was that no deal could be reached with the Iranians if the United States did not back it. The E3 also exploited widespread concerns in the European Union that the US government, alone or in cooperation with Israel, would take military action against Iran's nuclear facilities to win their consent to otherwise controversial measures such as sanctions.

On the other hand, EU unity *facilitated* transatlantic convergence. During the Bush presidency, the E3 managed to moderate US requests for tougher action by insisting that the European Union would only support coercive measures if they were incremental, reversible and had a legal basis in UNSC resolutions (Sect. 1 in Chap. 8). When Obama took office and steered US policy closer to EU preferences, the E3 and the HR could argue that EU-sanctioned coercive measures were a way to strengthen Obama's

hand in forcing Iran back to the negotiating table and fend off criticisms from America's Middle Eastern allies—above all Israel—and their supporters in the US Congress (Sect. 2 in Chap. 8).

EU and transatlantic unity, in other words, mutually reinforced each other along a circular, rather than linear, causal pattern. The E3/EU were at the juncture of these two processes, providing the belt transmitting power to the whole system (Sect. 3 in Chap. 8). Against this backdrop, the theoretical can be empirically rephrased as follows:

> the E3/EU group was an informal institution that generated intra-EU cohesion on Iran's nuclear issue. The E3/EU secured their leadership by promoting a sense of EU-wide ownership and creating a mutually reinforcing dynamic between EU unity and transatlantic convergence.

The Constructivist Argument: Shapers of EU Identity

From a social constructivist point of view, the notion that lead groups are informal institutions that promote policy convergence among EU member states is perfectly legitimate. Nevertheless, the social constructivist argument goes a step further and states that such a process of policy approximation is theoretically indistinguishable from EU foreign policy-making (Sect. 2 in Chap. 2).

This claim is legitimate because social constructivism understands EU foreign policy as a process, whereby liberal intergovernmentalism sees it as an outcome. For the latter, the Europeanisation of national policies is a tangible result, enshrined in the treaty text that establishes the decision-making methods according to which the European Union can act—either by majority vote or by unanimity. Any action taken outside this framework is national action. Not so for social constructivists, who contend that national foreign policies, when they reflect the EU-mediated identity of EU member states, in fact constitute EU foreign policy.

As shapers of EU foreign policy, lead groups act as 'identity-entrepreneurs', in that they substantiate the role identity of the European Union and its member states as foreign policy actors bearing special responsibilities. In addition, lead groups not only substantiate identity, but also shape it, as foreign policy is as much a reflection of identity as it is a generator of identity (section 'Understanding the

Implications for EU Foreign Policy of Lead Groups' in Chap. 2).
Accordingly, the social constructivist argument about lead groups and
EU foreign policy was that,

> by promoting policy approximation among member states, EU lead groups
> shape EU foreign policy, whereby they are an EU foreign policy practice
> that contributes to constituting the identity of the European Union and its
> member states as international agents. (see Fig. 2.2)

In light of the above, the empirical research conducted in Chaps. 6, 7
and 8 is not simply a study of intra-EU leadership, but a study of how EU
foreign policy is made according to a specific pattern (the lead group pat-
tern). The E3 enabled the European Union to have a proactive policy
towards a major foreign policy issue on which the Union, hindered by the
CFSP's cumbersome decision-making procedures, would have otherwise
been a bystander. The E3 also shaped EU policy, in that they gave it con-
tents (limits on Iran's enrichment programme, the IAEA verification sys-
tem, sanctions) and direction (the consensual resolution of the nuclear
dispute).

From the social constructivist point of view, these conclusions reached
in Chaps. 6, 7 and 8 should furthermore be integrated with an assessment
of the 'feedback' effect on both EU and national role identities brought
about by the E3/EU action itself. Section 1 in Chap. 9 contended that the
E3/EU's achievements contributed to thickening the actorness of the
European Union and narrowing the gap between what the Union said its
responsibilities were in the ESS and WMD strategy and what it actually
did. With a thicker actorness came a more defined role identity. The E3/
EU process indeed enabled the Union to play multiple roles: initiator of a
major diplomatic initiative, vigilant member of a rules-based international
system, supporter of multilateral institutions and cooperative crisis man-
agement, committed transatlantic ally, and non-proliferation norm-
enforcer (section 'A Multi-role Agent' in Chap. 9).

The E3/EU experience also contributed to articulating the type iden-
tity of the European Union as a multi-actor foreign policy system encom-
passing both EU institutions and member states. In the 2016 EU Global
Strategy, the practice of lead groups was incorporated into the EU foreign
policy system: the EUGS explicitly acknowledged that in certain
circumstances one or more EU member states, in close consultation with

the HR, could act on behalf of the Union. Given that the E3/EU experience was mentioned twice as one of the Union's greatest foreign policy successes, it is hard not to infer that the EUGS framers had the E3/EU in the backs of their minds when they framed the passages about 'lead groups' (section 'A Multi-actor System' in Chap. 9).

The E3/EU effected a process of Europeanisation of the national policies of EU member states. Both insiders and outsiders of the E3/EU group eventually found themselves pursuing national foreign policies at the EU level, yet the former (mostly) by way of projection and the latter by way of adaptation. While this did not entail an identity shift leading towards an integrated EU foreign policy, it did involve a process through which the international identity of member states was channelled through their EU membership. In the case of the outsiders, this happened because the management of Iran's nuclear issue reflected an interest informed by EU membership (section 'The Outsiders' in Chap. 9). In the case of the insiders, this happened because the 'EU option' (i.e. acting through and along EU institutions) was internalised as a foreign policy practice that substantiated the E3's self-representation as international agents (section 'The Insiders' in Chap. 9).

In light of all this, the social constructivist argument recalled above can be turned into the following statement:

> by promoting an EU-wide sense of ownership of their action and creating a mutually reinforcing dynamic between EU unity and transatlantic convergence, the E3/EU shaped EU policy towards Iran's nuclear issue. In so doing, the E3/EU substantiated and articulated the identity of the European Union and its member states as multi-role international agents and contributed to internalising the lead group practice in EU foreign policy discourse.

3   Lead Groups and the Europeanisation of Foreign Policy

The degree to which a lead group actually effects Europeanisation of national foreign policies cannot be established a priori. Even though the E3 promoted substantial policy convergence among member states, and the group proved to be a strong shaper of EU foreign policy, the group cannot be taken as a model entirely replicable in other circumstances.

The experience of the E3/EU has nonetheless set an important precedent, from which some broad generalisations can be inferred.

The first one is that the potential for Europeanisation of lead groups ultimately depends on the solidity of the intergovernmental bargain underlying the group, which is in itself rooted in the EU-mediated interests of both insiders and outsiders. In the E3/EU case, the group followed a course of action that was fully compatible with the EU-mediated identity (and thus the ensuing interests) of the other member states, which made it possible for the E3 to generate intra-EU consensus.

It certainly helped that the E3/EU group contained, along the 'member state element' that the E3 embodied, a prominent 'EU element' in the person of the HR. As recalled in Chap. 4, the association of HR Solana to the E3 negotiating team was the move that secured the bargain between insiders and outsiders in late 2004. This consideration raises the question about whether lead groups can only form in the presence of a comparable degree of participation by EU institutions.

The experience of two other lead groups apparently disproves the point. The Contact Group for the Balkans presided over the decision by the European Union to invest significant resources in the post-conflict stabilisation of Bosnia and Kosovo and, eventually, to integrate all Balkan states. Thus, the group effected a higher degree of Europeanisation than the E3/EU did despite the fact that EU institutions were not involved in it.[1] The Franco-German-driven Normandy negotiating format between Russia and Ukraine provides recent evidence. France and Germany were able to drive EU policy towards the war in Ukraine, in particular by conditioning the maintenance of EU sanctions against Russia to the full implementation of the 2015 Minsk peace agreement, even though EU institutions were excluded from the format.

The Normandy format, however, tells a more complex story about the relationship between national foreign policy and EU foreign policy. While France and Germany were able to secure a bargaining position strong enough for the outsiders to accept their lead rather than oppose it, the bargain rested on shaky ground. The reason is simple: given how deeply relations with Russia affected their national interests, the group outsiders were understandably uncomfortable with subcontracting such an essential component of their foreign policy as relations with Russia to France and Germany only.

The experience of the E3/EU proves that the association of EU institutions, notably the HR, can do a lot to improve relations between

insiders and outsiders, which in turn reinforces the lead group's sustainability and increases its policy-making ability. As argued in Sect. 4 in Chap. 7, the HR played an essential role in fostering a degree of EU-wide ownership of the E3's action on Iran, whereby the group was better positioned to make the outsiders agree to its policy adaptations, including the controversial decision to adopt unilateral EU sanctions. Moreover, if it is true that the E3/EU process was instrumental in facilitating the internalisation of the lead group practice in EU foreign policy discourse, it is legitimate to argue that the internalised form of lead group involves some balance in the relationship between the 'member states element' and the 'EU element'.

This consideration does not invalidate the general point made above, namely that lead groups depend, for their formation, on EU-mediated interests of insiders and outsiders rather than participation by EU institutions. However, it adds to that point the important corollary that the lead group's capacity to make EU foreign policy diminishes in the absence of a visible 'EU element'. Without the representation and participation functions enabled by EU institutions, the lead group is invariably destined to face less forthcoming outsiders. Consequently, it has a smaller room for adapting its policies to circumstances, as each policy change is likely to be subjected to a higher degree of intra-EU contestation.

From this perspective, it is not unreasonable to conclude that the E3/EU experience has marked a watershed in the brief history of EU lead groups, as it has set a standard against which 'good' lead groups (those with a relevant EU presence) can be separated by 'bad' lead groups (those without a relevant EU presence). Lead groups can form, and historically have formed, because of interest-driven bargaining, yet after the E3/EU their capacity to shape policy is more dependent on the balance between the 'EU element' and the 'member states element' than it was the case before.

Another broad generalisation is that the Europeanisation effected by lead groups somehow inherits the contingent and ad hoc nature of the lead groups themselves. The policy approximation dynamic occurs over a single issue and usually remains limited to that issue. The E3/EU experience did not usher in an era of EU foreign policy cohesion. The Union split on NATO's intervention in Libya and would have split again on Syria if President Obama had not reneged on attacking the Syrian regime following allegations that it had used chemical weapons against civilians.

These are admittedly extreme cases as both involved the use of force, the latter even outside a UN framework, which (as stated repeatedly) contrasts with the established EU foreign policy discourse. Still, the point is that the Europeanisation effected by lead groups is more contingent than structural. This 'ad-hocism' of lead groups leads to a third, and final, generalisation.

Europeanisation—at least the kind of Europeanisation effected by lead groups—in no way amounts to a supranationalisation of foreign policy. Nor does it imply that the lead group practice necessarily creates a functionalist dynamic of spillover that ultimately leads to supranationalisation. While the lead group practice entails nothing that fundamentally contrasts with this argument, it is equally compatible with a purely intergovernmentalist view of foreign policy.

Perhaps the most accurate way to tell the story of lead groups is that they bridge the gap between the intergovernmental nature of EU foreign policy decision-making and the norm dictating foreign policy cooperation, indeed common action, by EU member states. Some might just see in this the limits of an intergovernmental EU foreign policy. Lead groups are affected by too much contingency and internal contestation to lend the Union a consistent foreign policy platform that extends beyond the specific problem they manage (Menon 2009). Others take the opposite view and argue that lead groups make it possible for the European Union to undertake actions that go much farther than what a common denominator-based position would allow for (Delreux and Keukeleire 2017: 14–16). This work shares the second view. It has established that *lead groups are interest-based bargaining processes unfolding in the intersubjective normative context constituted by EU membership*. As such, they are not only a theoretically consistent pattern of EU foreign policy-making, but an empirically effective foreign policy practice.

Of all cases of lead groups, the E3/EU experience is the one that perhaps lends greater credibility to this claim. It would certainly be disingenuous to deny that the Europeans remained supporting actors in a play that saw the United States and Iran as the main protagonists. They lacked the power assets to lure Iran into a negotiated settlement and the authority and legitimacy to sustain that settlement. Yet the E3/EU made use of what assets they had to bring the players who held the power (the United States) and the authority (the Security Council) to play the game according to rules largely set by the Europeans themselves.

The E3/EU set up a negotiating framework that worked as a de-escalating tool, a catalyst for UNSC unity and a permanent forum for crisis management. They inflicted real pain on Iran by adopting a comprehensive sanctions regime in coordination with the United States, but did so only having pre-emptively secured US commitment to seeking a diplomatic way out of the crisis. Once the diplomatic settlement was reached, they defended it with deeds and not only with words. And if President Trump were indeed to reverse course and withdraw from the JCPOA or seek to undermine it, the European Union can still defend it by refusing to cooperate unless the United States abide by the multilateral conflict management mechanism set up by the JCPOA itself. Supporting actors the E3/EU might have been, yet their achievements were real and fundamental.

Note

1. The one policy move that the Contact Group was unable to transfer into EU frameworks was the formal recognition of Kosovo's independence, as this decision fundamentally contrasted with the national identity of five EU member states (Cyprus, Greece, Romania, Slovakia and Spain). This occurrence further validates the argument that the Europeanisation effected by lead groups can only advance as far as the EU-mediated interests of member states extend. The Contact Group was able to drive EU policy because it recommended policies that served the EU-mediated interest of insiders and outsiders in pacifying, stabilising and democratising the Balkans. When it came to Kosovo's independence, however, the national identity and ensuing interests of Spain and the others (all concerned about setting a dangerous precedent for domestic secessionist forces) prevailed over their EU identity layers.

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Appendix: Timeline of Iran's Nuclear Crisis 2002–16

2002

- **January**. US President Bush designates Iran as part of an 'axis of evil'.
- **Summer**. The NCRI claims Iran's nuclear programme far more advanced than previously thought.

2003

- **February**.

- IAEA confirms existence of previously undeclared nuclear facilities in Iran, most notably the Natanz uranium enrichment centre.

- **June**.

- IAEA blames Iran for failing to comply with its transparency obligations.
- EU suspends talks over EU-Iran TCA.

- **September**. IAEA board calls on Iran to increase transparency and cooperation with the agency, including by ratifying the Additional Protocol.

– **October**. E3 and Iran release Tehran Agreed Statement. Iran suspends uranium enrichment and implements Additional Protocol in exchange for dialogue and assistance in trade, political and nuclear matters. The agreement founders in the following months.

2004

– **November.**

- Bush re-elected US president.
- E3/EU and Iran agree on the Paris Agreement, a beefed-up version of the Tehran Agreed Statement.

2005

– **January**.

- Talks over EU-Iran TCA resume.
- Iran admits to IAEA to have had contacts with the nuclear know-how and technology-smuggling 'Khan network'.

– **March.**

- Iran puts forward a General Framework for a long-term agreement with E3/EU.
- The Bush administration declares it now supports E3/EU effort, provided E3/EU insist on full cessation of enrichment activities.

– **June.**

- E3/EU rejects Iran's General Framework.
- Hard-line candidate Ahmadinejad elected Iran's president.

– **July.** Iran restarts conversion facilities at Esfahan.
– **August**.

- SNSC secretary Larijani replaces Rouhani as head of Iran negotiating team.
- E3/EU puts forward proposal for a final agreement, which Iran rejects.

–   **September**. IAEA board declares Iran in non-compliance with its obligations but defers referral to UNSC.
–   **November**. Russian proposal to enrich uranium for Iran in a Russian-Iranian plant on Russian soil.
–   **December**. Iran allows Russia's proposal to lapse.

2006

–   **January**.

• Iran restarts enrichment activities at Natanz.
• China, Russia and the US join the E3/EU in the E3/EU+3 (P5+1) and call for Iran's referral to UNSC.

–   **February**.

• IAEA executive board refers Iran to UNSC.
• Iran stops implementation of Additional Protocol.

–   **June**. HR Solana presents Iran with E3/EU+3 package of incentives, incorporating and expanding on the E3/EU August 2005 proposal.
–   **July**. Following Iran's delay in responding to E3/EU+3 offer, UNSC adopts resolution UNSC 1696 demanding uranium enrichment suspension and greater cooperation with IAEA.
–   **August**. Iran releases non-committal response to E3/EU+3 package.
–   **September–October.** Solana-Larijani fail to restart talks.
–   **December**. UNSC adopts resolution 1737 establishing first sanctions regime.

2007

–   **March**.

• UNSC adopts resolution 1747, expanding sanctions regime.
• EU expands list of Iranian individuals and firms targeted by UNSCR 1747.

- **March–April**. Iran holds captive, then frees, British sailors for allegedly trespassing into Iran's waters.
- **Spring**. Iran increases anti-US activities in Iraq and repatriation of Afghan refugees.
- **June**. Germany proposes to give Iran limited enrichment capacity. France and UK disagree.
- **August**. Iran and IAEA agree on 'work plan', which increases Iran's level of cooperation with IAEA.
- **October.** Jalili replaces Larijani as SNSC secretary and lead nuclear negotiator.
- **November**. US intelligence community releases the NIE, saying that Iran's nuclear military activities stopped in 2003, probably not resumed thereafter.

2008

- **March**.

- UNSC adopts resolution 1803, further expanding sanctions.
- Iran-IAEA cooperation curtailed again.
- E3/EU+3 send letter to IAEA Director General El Baradei stating willingness to restart talks with Iran.

- **June**.

- E3/EU+3 offer again a package of incentives to Iran. The proposal is accompanied by a letter signed by all E3/EU+3 foreign ministers, including US Secretary of State Rice.
- Solana unsuccessfully puts forward again the idea of a 'freeze for freeze' (no further advancement of Iran's nuclear programme, no new sanctions by UNSC) as a preliminary step to restart negotiations.

- **July.** Iran releases non-committal response to the E3/EU+3 offer.
- **September.** UNSC adopts resolution 1835, but adds no new sanctions.
- **November**. Obama elected US president.

2009

- **March**. Obama addresses Iranian leaders and people on *Nowruz* (Persian New Year's Day).
- **May–June.** Obama reportedly sends two personal letters to Supreme Leader Khamenei.
- **June**. Following disputed re-election of Ahmadinejad, Iran's government cracks down on protesters.
- **July.** Amano appointed El Baradei's successor as IAEA director general (takes office in November).
- **September**. Obama reveals existence of Fordow enrichment facility in Iran.
- **October.** Iran and France/Russia/US agree on 'nuclear fuel swap deal' in Geneva, with US taking direct part in negotiations for the first time.
- **November**. Ashton succeeds Solana as HR and E3/EU+3 representative.
- **End of 2009**. Nuclear fuel swap deal collapses.
- **2009–start of 2010.** Cyberattack, allegedly orchestrated by US and Israel, against Iran's nuclear facilities.

2010

- **January.** Assassination of Iranian nuclear scientist in Tehran.
- **February**. Iran announces it will enrich uranium to 20 per cent.
- **May**. E3/EU+3 dismiss Iran's agreement with Brazil and Turkey for failing to provide sufficient confidence-building guarantees.
- **June**.

- UNSC adopts resolution 1929, significantly expanding sanctions regime.
- Ashton sends letter to Jalili calling for a prompt resumption of talks.
- US Congress adopts CISADA, targeting foreign companies doing businesses in Iran.

- **July**. EU adopts far-reaching sanctions against Iran.
- **November**. Another Iranian nuclear scientist is assassinated, one is wounded in mysterious attacks.

2011

- **January**. E3/EU+3 and Iran meet in Istanbul after a hiatus of over a year.
- **Winter/spring 2011**. Iran moves 20 per cent enrichment activities to Fordow.
- **July**.

• Another Iranian scientist assassinated.
• Russia's proposal for a 'step-by-step' approach in nuclear talks sinks amid US scepticism.

- **October**. US claims Iran had plans to kill Saudi ambassador to the US.
- **November**.

• UK embassy in Tehran stormed by Iranian protesters, UK-Iran diplomatic relations interrupted.
• IAEA releases reports detailing PMDs of Iran's nuclear programme.

2012

- **January**.

• Another Iranian scientist assassinated.
• US Congress approves NDAA, which includes sanctions against CBI.
• EU adopts embargo on oil (and later gas) imports from Iran.

- **April**. E3/EU+3 and Iran meet in Istanbul to discuss Russia's proposal for step-by-step approach.
- **May**. E3/EU+3 and Iran meet in Baghdad to discuss E3/EU+3's 'stop, shut and ship' proposal.
- **June**. E3/EU+3 and Iran meet in Moscow to discuss Iran's counter-proposal to 'stop, shut and ship' proposal.
- **November**. Obama re-elected US president.
- **December**. EU adopts financial sanctions, instructs SWIFT not to operate transactions with Iranian entities, including CBI.

2013

  – **February–April**. E3/EU+3 and Iran meet in Almaty to discuss E3/EU+3 proposal that includes the possibility of indigenous production of nuclear fuel. Talks end in 'encouraging failure'.
  – **Spring**. US and Iran hold secret bilateral talks in Oman.
  – **June**. Rouhani elected Iran's president.
  – **June–July**. Zarif appointed foreign minister, put in charge of nuclear talks.
  – **September**.

• Khamenei advocates 'heroic flexibility' in nuclear talks.
• French President Holland is the first Western head of state to meet Rouhani at the annual UNGA session.
• Iran agrees to re-engage in talks with IAEA over PMDs.
• E3/EU+3 and Iran meet in New York. US Secretary of State Kerry and Foreign Minister Zarif hold bilateral talks, the highest level of contacts between US and Iranian officials since 1979.
• Rouhani and Obama speak over the phone.

  – **October**.

• Iran says it is ready to discuss caps on level of enrichment, volume of LEU and 'method of enrichment' (a reference to the type of centrifuge).
• Iran and IAEA lay the groundwork for new framework for Iran's cooperation with the agency about outstanding issues.

  – **November**.

• E3/EU+3 and Iran hold talks in Geneva.
• France blocks deal unless Iran addresses concerns over Arak heavy-water reactor.
• Iran agrees to improve cooperation with IAEA, reduce work on advanced centrifuges.
• E3/EU+3 and Iran sign interim nuclear deal in Geneva, later called JPOA.

  – **Winter 2013–14**. Obama threatens veto if Congress adopts new sanctions.

2014

- – **January**. E3/EU+3 and Iran start implementing JPOA.
- – **February**.

- • IAEA confirms Iran has suspended enrichment to 20 per cent and reduced LEU stock enriched to 20 per cent.
- • US says it is open to limited enrichment programme in Iran.

- – **March**.

- • Ashton visits Iran.

- – **April–May**. E3/EU+3 and Iran hold talks in Geneva and Vienna, wide differences remain.
- – **June**. Iran holds bilateral meetings with the US in Geneva (9 June) and Russia in Rome (10 June). Parties stuck in their respective positions.
- – **July**.

- • Khamenei sets controversial red lines in nuclear talks.
- • Ashton and Zarif announce extension of talks to 24 November.
- • IAEA confirms Iran is abiding by JPOA.

- – **September**. E3/EU+3 and Iran meet in New York; US-Iran meet also bilaterally.
- – **October**. E3/EU+3 and Iran meet in Vienna.
- – **November**.

- • Mogherini replaces Ashton as HR.
- • JPOA extended to 30 June 2015.

2015

- – **March**. Netanyahu delivers speech fiercely critical of Obama's approach to Iran before Congress.
- – **April**. E3/EU+3 and Iran define framework agreement in Lausanne.
- – **May**. US Congress adopts INARA, giving itself the authority to review the nuclear deal.

   – **July**.

- E3/EU+3 and Iran strike JCPOA in Vienna. Iran agrees to limits to nuclear programme for 10–15 years, special inspection regime for up to 25 years and implement Additional Protocol indefinitely, in return for the lifting of UN and EU sanctions and suspension of US sanctions.
- UNSC adopts resolution 2231 endorsing JCPOA and superseding previous resolutions.

   – **September**. Democrats in US Senate succeed in obstructing vote on JCPOA.
   – **October**. Iran's parliament and Guardian Council endorse JCPOA.
   – **December**. IAEA releases report on PMDs, clearing the field for JCPOA implementation.

2016
   – **January**. JCPOA becomes fully operational.

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