

POLS 318: Theories of IR

Lecture 27 (04.21.2021): Covert Actions & International Relations

Rotem Dvir

Texas A&M University

rdvir@tamu.edu

Department of Political Science
Spring 2021

Overview

- 1 Quick review
- 2 Covert Action
- 3 Democratic peace Angle
- 4 Modern Tech & Covert actions
- 5 Public views
- 6 Extra Material

Review

WHAT WE COVERED LAST MEETING?

- How modern technology affects IR?
- Escalation effects? Tech as enabling political choices.
- Drones: efficiency, blowback, public views and international laws.
- AWS and public opinion: cost - effectiveness.
- Cyber technology: potential and limitations.
- Cyber threats and the 'user error'.

Questions?? Email me!

Covert Actions in IR



Covert Actions in IR

Introduction

- The *quiet option* / *third option*.
- Alternative to diplomacy and direct military action.
- Influence political, economic and military conditions.
- No public acknowledgement of action.
- Clandestine → less controversial, tactical secrecy.
- Motivations:
 - Avoid anger domestic/global audience.
 - Reduce triggering unwanted escalation.

Covert Actions in IR

US Interventions (1947-1989)

A



B



Covert Actions in IR

Background

- Prevalent US policy since 1800s.
- President J. Madison and Florida (1810 - 1812).
- Cold war: support existing leaders or install new ones.
- Examples:
 - Cuba (1961).
 - Vietnam (1963).
 - Angola (1975).
 - Afghanistan (1979).
- Paramilitary operations or assistance to insurgent groups.

Covert Actions in IR

Research

- Early work: historical cases on motivations/implications.
- Central puzzle of effectiveness.
- 2013 data: low odds of success for cold war covert regime change.
- Link covert policy to IR theory.
- Escalation and covert intervention in wars (Carson 2016).
- Exert influence without risks of conflict escalation.
- Soviet aerial campaign in Korea and US 'silent' response.

Covert action and IR theories

Democratic peace (Poznansky 2015)

- Do states engage in covert operations against fellow democracies?
- The challenge of covert action to democratic peace:
 - ① Audience costs and structural constraints.
 - ② Information flow - good against democracy.
 - ③ Identity and sociocultural concerns.

Covert action and IR theories

Why Covert action?

- Duration of regimes types.
- Dynamic approach to regime 'status'.
- Uncertainty about persistence of democracy.
- Potential 'avenues' for democracies:
 - 1 Democratic decay → covert regime change.
 - 2 Democratic stasis → no action.

Covert action and IR theories

Future views of other actors

- Covert action → view of future trajectory of regime.
- Leader's perception.
- Based on strategic conditions:
 - Rise of anti-democratic leaders in 'targets'.
 - Weak leaders threatened by radicals.
- Decaying democracies: future and present.
- Secret intervention → support weak leader, strengthen opposition, support forceful coup or regime change.

Covert Interventions

US operations in Chile (1963-1973)

"All the News That's Fit to Print"

The New York Times

LATE CITY EDITION

VOL. CXXII — No. 4233

NEW YORK, WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 11, 1973

13 CENTS

ALLENDE OUT, REPORTED SUICIDE; MARXIST REGIME IN CHILE FALLS IN ARMED FORCES' VIOLENT COUP

U.S. NOT SURPRISED

But Officials Are Wary of Any Comment on Santiago Events

AGUSTA IN CHARGE
State of Siege Decreed by Military Chiefs—Curfew Imposed

U.S. NOT SURPRISED
The United States officials were not surprised by the Chilean coup, they said today, the first time in the history of the country that the armed forces have overthrown a government. The officials said they had been aware of the possibility of a coup since the military leaders had been in contact with the United States since the 1960s.

AGUSTA IN CHARGE
State of Siege Decreed by Military Chiefs—Curfew Imposed

The military leaders, including Gen. Augusto Pinochet Ugarte, 48, the commander of Chile's Army, is a member of the far-right military junta that overthrew President Salvador Allende in a bloodless coup in 1973. The military leaders are now in charge of the country.



Covert action: Motivation vs. Risk

Exposure (Joseph and Poznansky 2018)

- Engage in covert action → escalation risks.
- An appealing policy - success with no bad publicity.
- However...
- Risk of exposure.
- When not to initiate the 'quiet option'?

Covert action - Motivation vs. Risk

Information and Communication Tech (ICT)

- Access to ICT in 'target'.
- ICT → enable information flow and complicates secrecy.
- Mechanisms of exposure:
 - ① Internal leaks: dissents within the government.
 - ② Powerful allies/rivals with capacity.
 - ③ Discovery by target (civilians, politicians, military).

Covert action - Motivation vs. Risk

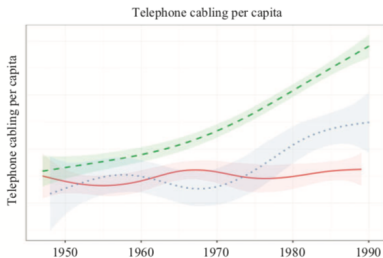
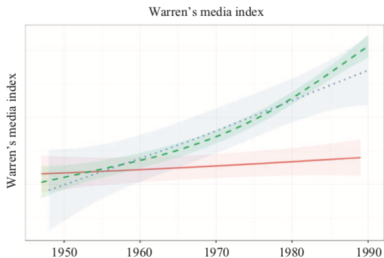
Information and Communication Tech (ICT)

- Dense ICT network → reduce coordination barriers.
- Growing risk of exposure. Why?
 - Easy and cheap domestic communications.
 - More informed citizens reject external intervention.



Covert actions and ICT

US covert and overt regime interventions ▶ ICT



Targets of: ■ Covert intervention ■ No intervention ■ Overt intervention

Covert actions and ICT

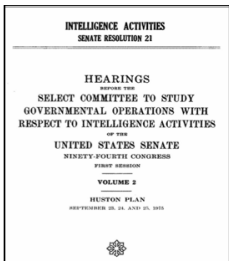
Implications

- (1) Research on covert action: shift focus on intervention decision (incentives and costs covert operations).
- (2) Modern technology → 'a double-edge sword'.
- Easier to execute covert actions.
- Easier to expose such actions - mobile phones, internet access.
- Complicates *Plausible deniability*.

Covert action and the Public

Government transparency (Myrick 2020)

- A crucial aspect of covert operations - public views.
- Do citizens support secret government actions?



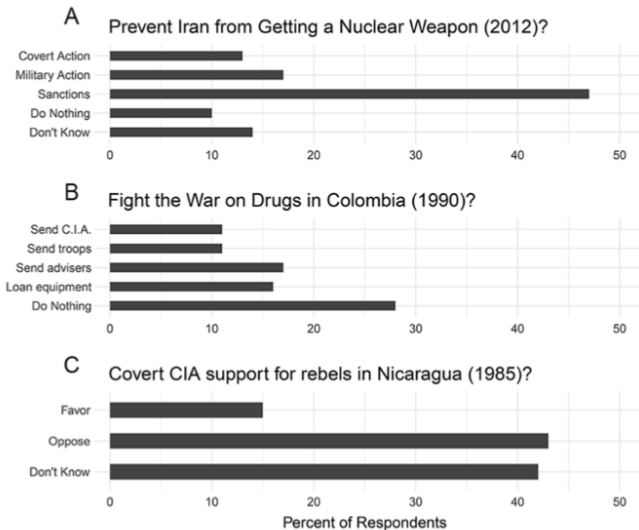
A Transparency Norm

Covert action and the Public

Government transparency (Myrick 2020)

- The norm → public oppose secret actions.
- Is it important? Why?
 - Policymakers care about public opinion - risk of losing popularity in case of exposure.
 - Research: IR behavior and political accountability, relevant even for covert foreign policies.

Covert action and the Public



Covert action and the Public

What do we know?

- Overall, low support for covert operations.
- Drawback of opinion polls - causality.
- Transparency → Low support for covert actions.
- Or maybe...
- Lower effectiveness of operations.
- Use of unacceptable methods.
- Shift focus to **Expected outcomes**.

Covert action and the Public

A Transparency Norm

- "The willingness of a government to release policy-relevant information."
- Institutional feature of democracy.
- Liberal norm.
- Expansion of democracies → increased demand for accountability and leaders transparency.
- Public incentives:
 - ① Public consent and democratic policies.
 - ② Abuse of government power due to information advantage.

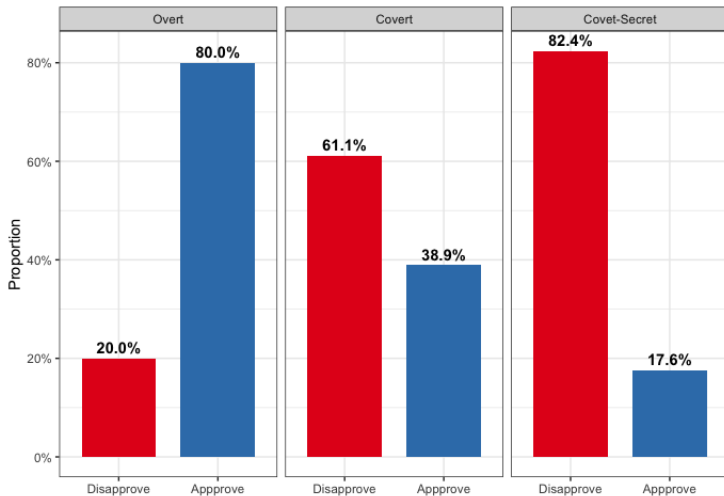
Covert action and the Public

An alternative

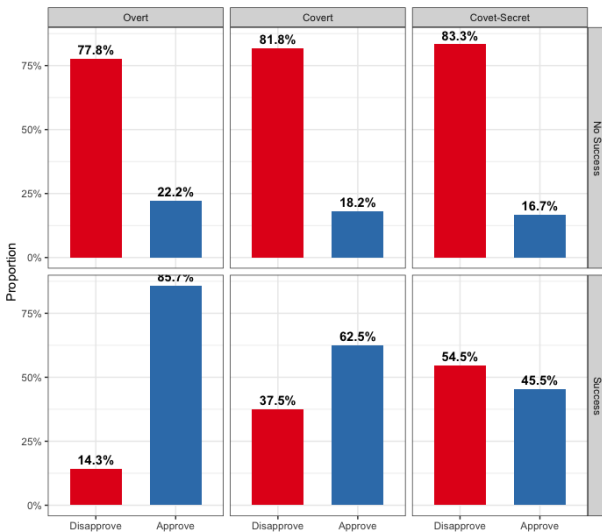
- Policy outcomes \gg transparency norm.
- Accountability driven by ends, not means.
- Success and conflict support.
- Context:
 - ① Nature of action: military vs. nonmilitary.
 - ② Public disapproval and secret actions.
 - ③ Efficiency - deception of public.

Covert action and the Public

TAMU Polsci views - approval

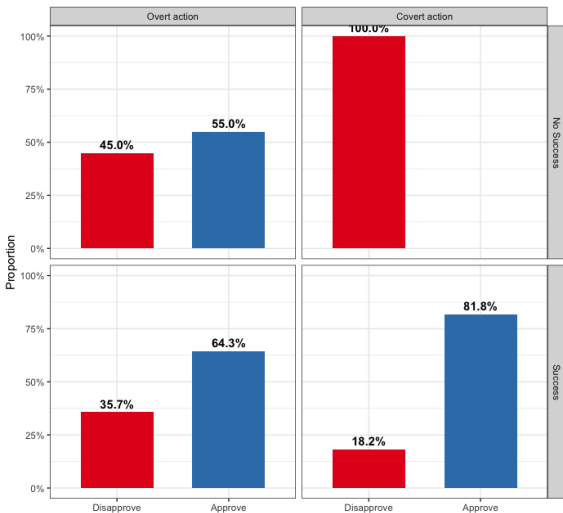


TAMU Polsci views - results matter!

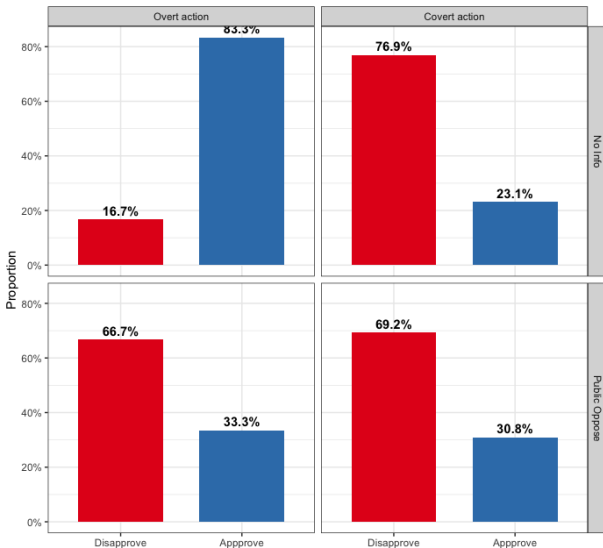


TAMU Polsci views - a terror threat

▶ Overall

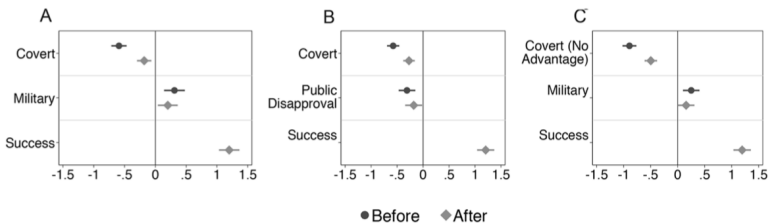


TAMU Polsci views - public opposition



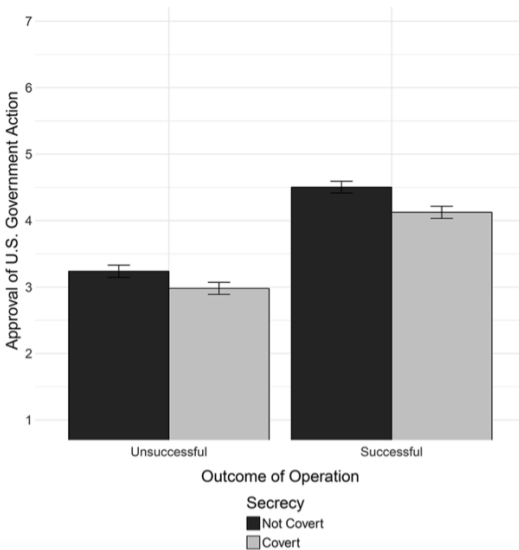
Covert action and the Public

Transparency or Outcomes? (Myrick 2020)



Covert action and the Public

Transparency or Outcomes? (Myrick 2020)



Theories of IR

The End...



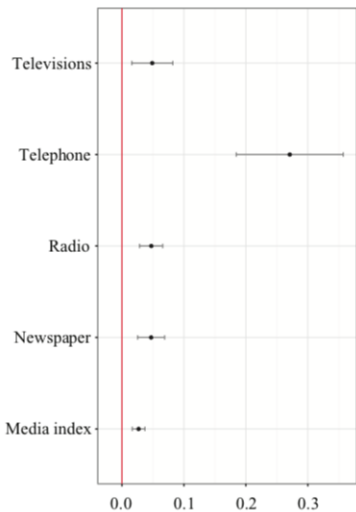
Recommended readings

More studies on covert actions and IR:

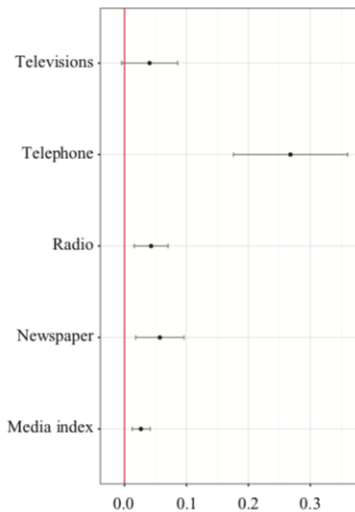
- 1 Carson, Austin, and Keren Yarhi-Milo. (2017). "Covert communication: The intelligibility and credibility of signaling in secret." *Security Studies* 26, 1, 124-156.
- 2 Johnson, Loch K. (2020). "Reflections on the ethics and effectiveness of America's 'third option': covert action and US foreign policy." *Intelligence and National Security*, 1-17.
- 3 Yarhi-Milo, Keren. (2013). "Tying hands behind closed doors: the logic and practice of secret reassurance." *Security Studies* 22, 3, 405-435.

ICT and US foreign interventions

(a) No intervention vs. covert



(b) Overt vs. covert



Importance of Government transparency

Information on public rejection

Public support for foreign intervention

