

POLS 318: Theories of IR  
Lecture 27 (11.19.2020):  
Covert Actions & International Relations

Rotem Dvir

Texas A&M University

*rdvir@tamu.edu*

Department of Political Science  
Fall 2020

# 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 technology: efficiency versus blowback.
- Public views and international laws.
- AWS and public opinion: cost - effectiveness.
- Cyber technology: potential and limitations.
- Public low attention to cyber threats and '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 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' of covert action.
- 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

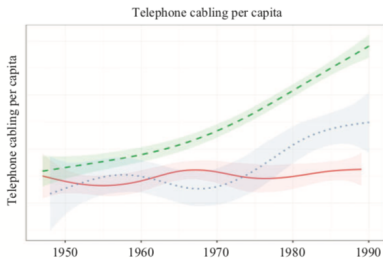
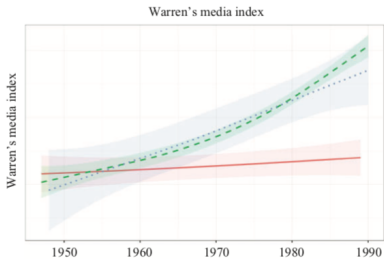
## Information and Communication Tech (ICT)

- 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

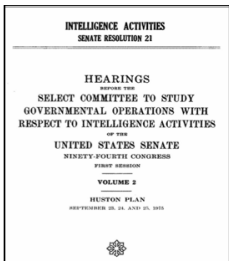
## Implications

- (1) Research on covert action: shift to focus on decision to intervene and costs (not just incentives for covert operations).
- (2) Modern technology → 'a double-edge sword'.
- Easier to execute covert actions.
- Also 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?



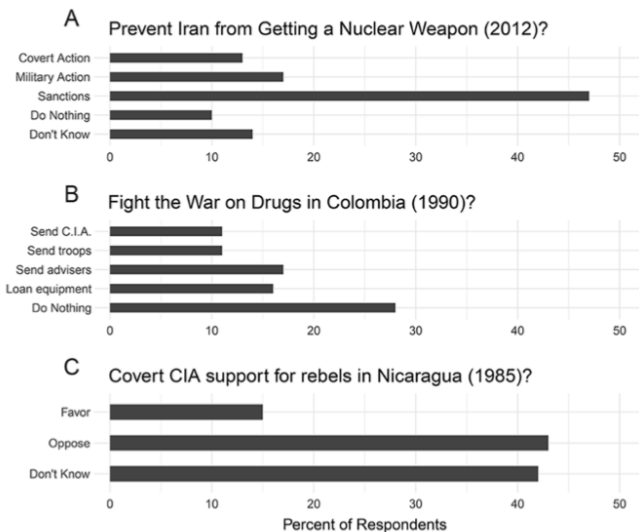
**A Transparency Norm**

# 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.
- Main 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.

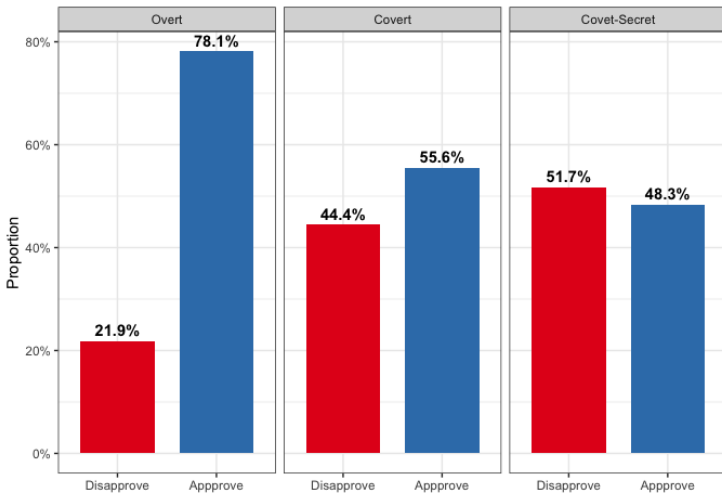
# Covert action and the Public

## 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.

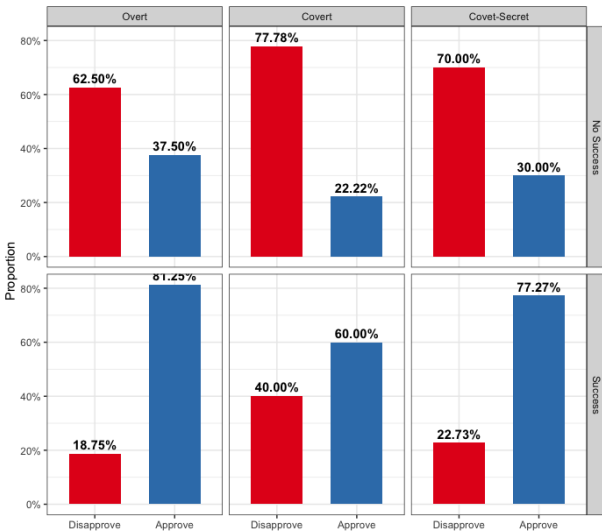
# Covert action and the Public

## TAMU Polsci views - approval ▶ Transparency

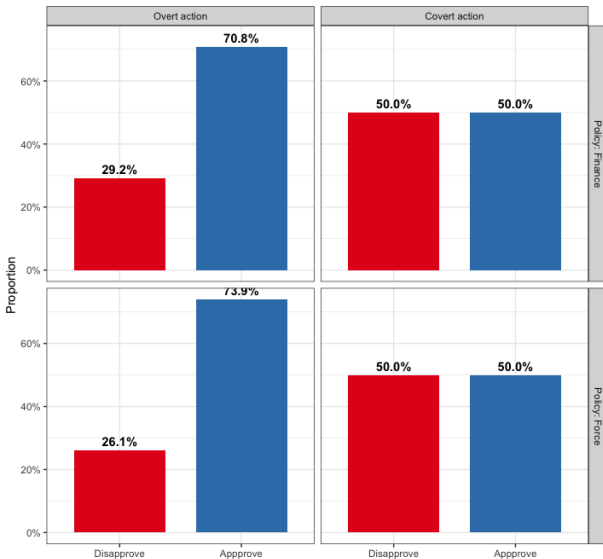




# TAMU Polsci views - results matter!

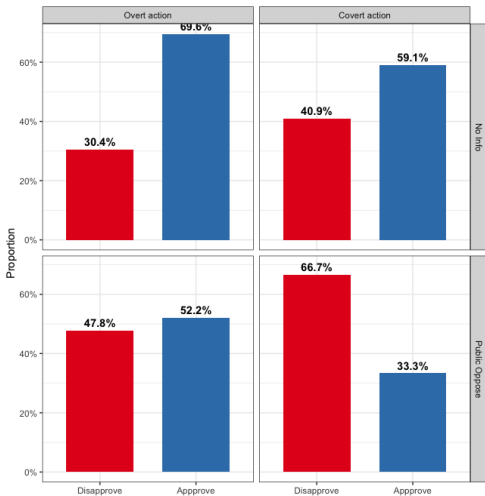


# TAMU Polsci views - policy type



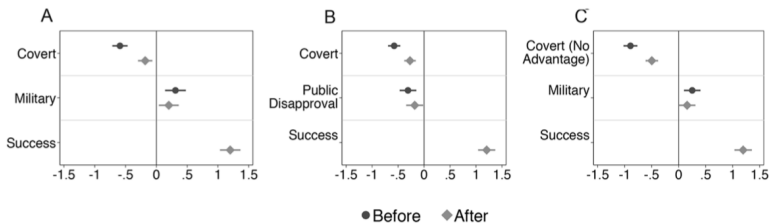
# TAMU Polsci views - public opposition

PublicReject



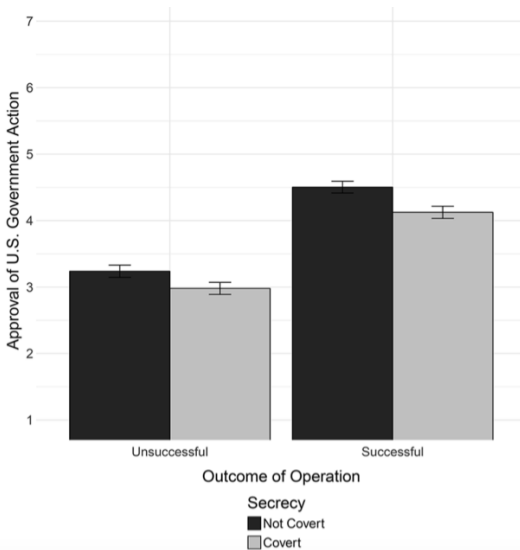
# Covert action and the Public

## Transparency or Outcomes? (Myrick 2020)



# Covert action and the Public

## Transparency or Outcomes? (Myrick 2020)



# Theories of IR

## The Last one



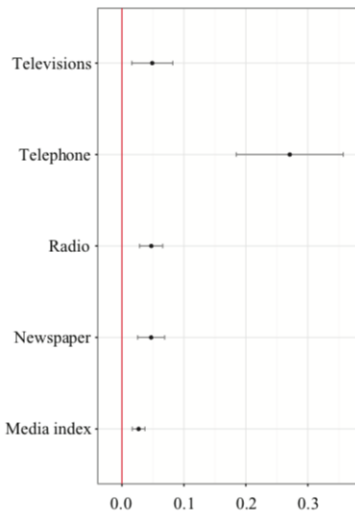
## Recommended readings

More studies on covert actions and IR:

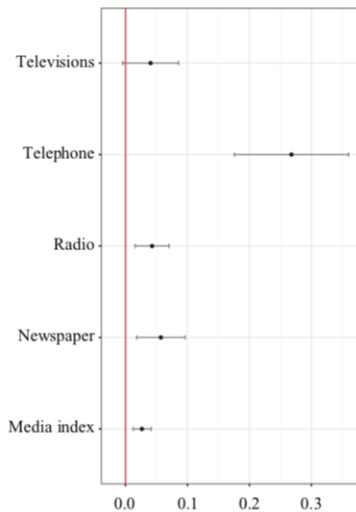
- 1 Carson, Austin, and Keren Yarhi-Milo. (2017). "Covert communication: The intelligibility and credibility of signaling in secret." *Security Studies* 26, 1, 124-156.
- 2 Johnson, Loch K. (2020). "Reflections on the ethics and effectiveness of America's 'third option': covert action and US foreign 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

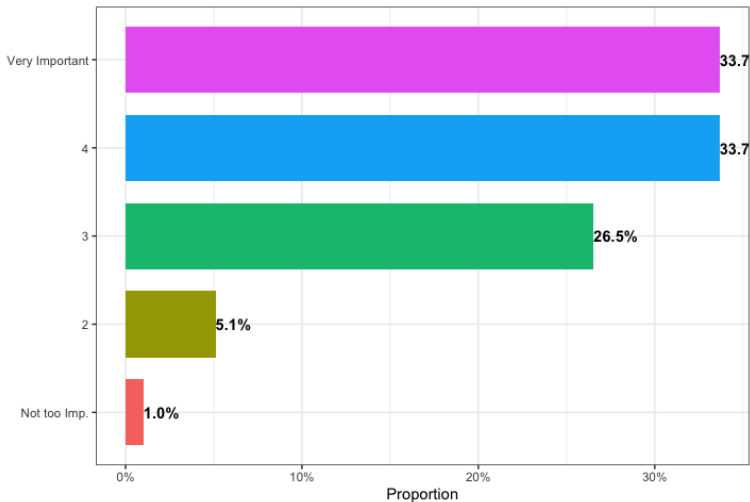


(b) Overt vs. covert





# Importance of Government transparency



# Information on public rejection

