

Austin Carson and Keren Yarhi-Milo. "Covert Communication: The Intelligibility and Credibility of Signaling in Secret." *Security Studies* 126:1 (2017): 124-156. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2017.1243921>.

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In "Covert Communication: The Intelligibility and Credibility of Signaling in Secret," Austin Carson and Keren Yarhi-Milo introduce a theoretical framework to illustrate how leaders can use covert action to signal their state's resolve to local allies and strategic adversaries. Contrary to the conventional wisdom that states intervene covertly to conceal their role in military operations and minimize the amount of information they reveal to third parties, the authors argue—and demonstrate empirically via case studies of Soviet and American interventions in Angola and Afghanistan during the Cold War—that states can and do use covert action to send intelligible and credible messages regarding their intentions. These actions take place on an international political "backstage" wherein "states share a basic communicative grammar regarding activity in the covert realm that allows leaders to send targeted messages to external actors" (125). Overall, the article is persuasive, clear, and makes a new and important contribution to the burgeoning literature on covert action. The case studies are intriguing and incorporate a variety of recently declassified documents. As a foundational piece on covert signaling, the article raises three important questions that could pose fruitful avenues for future research.

First, what messages can states effectively signal via covert action? The authors define resolve "as determination to stand firm to protect one's interest," and note that states can seek to "display their resolve along a continuum that ranges from narrowly situational to broadly dispositional" (138). Depending on the case, the signaling state's goals could be modest, such as deterring their adversary from revising the status quo within a specific country, or ambitious, such as signaling to their adversary that they will intervene similarly in other foreign crises or that they seek to expel them entirely from a geographic region (138-139). Given that "resolve" can encompass such a wide range of objectives, how do states decipher what a covert mission indicates in any particular scenario? Despite the range of hypothetical messages that could be conveyed, the

case studies at times feel circular in that the primary message being communicated via the covert intervention seems to be that the state was willing to covertly intervene in the dispute at hand. Can states use covert interventions to convey messages that they are resolved to take other non-covert actions? If so, how do they communicate that message?

Second, what is the relationship between covert and overt action? Specifically, when should policymakers interpret the fact that a state intervened covertly—as opposed to overtly—as a sign of weakness rather than resolve? The authors posit three mechanisms for signaling resolve within the covert sphere: sunk costs, counter-escalation hazards, and domestic risks. Each of these mechanisms is reasonable and the authors provide persuasive examples of each in the case studies. Nevertheless, it is easy to envision scenarios wherein these same three mechanisms could be interpreted as evidence of the reverse: that a state is irresolute in its commitment. For instance, the authors argue that “one reason why states using covert action distinguish themselves from more cautious ‘types’ is because such activity often carries significant expenditures of non-recoverable resources” (133). However, not only are covert interventions cheaper in terms of material costs than their overt counterparts, but the government is not publicly accountable for such resources in the covert cases.¹ This suggests that if policymakers are worried that sunk costs could bind them to a commitment, covert action is the better way to go. Likewise, the authors declare that “using covert action to signal resolve can also appear credible because of its impact on the risk of crisis escalation” (134). As Carson has argued elsewhere, however, states often intervene covertly to minimize the chances of military escalation.² Similarly, they claim that “in the presence of significant domestic opposition, covert action allows leaders to observably demonstrate to foreign audiences they are more hawkish and risk-acceptant than domestic political rivals” (135). Yet it is also reasonable to surmise that covert action could indicate that a leader is worried that an operation is domestically unpopular and therefore will back down if exposed. As Director of Central Intelligence Richard Helms once put it, covert actions are designed “so that these things did not explode in the President’s face and so that he was not held responsible for them.”³ In sum, it is true that covert action does imply sunk costs, counter-escalation hazards, and domestic political risks. However, it appears to involve fewer of these costs and risks than the alternative of overt action. Why don’t covert interventions therefore signal a state’s weakness or irresolution?

To parse out the conditions under which covert action signals resolve rather than weakness, the authors focus on the degree of domestic and international constraints facing the leader. Specifically, they assert that “when leaders are constrained from using more robust overt options by domestic or other sources, target audiences will tend to discount the practicality of overt alternative and compare observed covert action to the more plausible alternatives of inaction or diplomacy” (136). Nevertheless, this raises a new question of what it means to be constrained. At what point do the higher costs of overt conduct imply that the mission is infeasible? In my analysis of U.S.-backed regime changes during the Cold War, for instance, I found that the

¹ On the material cost-effectiveness of covert intervention see: Lindsey A. O’Rourke, “Secrecy and Security: U.S.-Orchestrated Regime Change during the Cold War,” Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 2013, Chapter 3.

² Austin Carson, “Facing Off and Saving Face: Covert Intervention and Escalation Management in the Korean War,” *International Organization* 70:1 (December 2016): 103-131

³ Helms quoted in Genevieve Lester, *When Should State Secrets Stay Secret?: Accountability, Democratic Governance, and Intelligence* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 130.

U.S. intervened covertly eleven times more often than it intervened overtly—66 covert compared to 6 overt regime change attempts.⁴ In some covert cases, such as those targeting the Soviet Union or its Eastern European allies, Washington immediately took overt intervention off the table because it feared that a direct confrontation with Moscow could spark World War III. In these instances, it is easy to see why target audiences would consider overt alternatives infeasible and discount them as a possibility. In most of America's Cold-War interventions, however, U.S. leaders were not deterred from overtly intervening by high potential costs, but opted against a direct military invasion because the stakes of the conflict were simply too low to justify putting U.S. boots on the ground. Indeed, in cases like these, such as Guatemala (1954) or Chile (1964-73), policymakers understood that a direct military intervention stood a better chance of success, but nevertheless intervened covertly to minimize the military, material, and reputational costs associated with intervention.⁵ What does covert conduct in cases like these signal?

Finally, how common is covert signaling? The article raises the question of the importance of signaling versus other rationales for covert action. Existing studies have highlighted numerous reasons why states intervene covertly, such as maximizing the chances of a successful surprise attack, minimizing military and economic costs, and allowing the state to behave hypocritically by secretly acting in ways that violate its purported values or public positions. The authors clearly acknowledge that states do not use covert action to signal in every case, and that these on-the-ground rationales for secrecy generally play a role as well (154-155). Considering the variety of other rationales for secrecy, however, how do target audiences know that a covert intervention is even meant to be interpreted as a signal at all? Furthermore, when the desire to signal clashes with these other incentives for secrecy, how do intervening states weigh the relative advantages of each?

In sum, the authors have made a convincing case that states use covert interventions to signal resolve and that “only analyzing operational effects, or the political benefits of hiding activity from particular audiences, misses an important message-sending component” (133). While it was beyond the scope of this article to address all the provocative questions raised by this insight, future researchers can build upon its theoretical framework to systematically analyze the conditions under which these signals will be sent and correctly interpreted.

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⁴ O'Rourke, “Secrecy and Security,” 2013.

⁵ O'Rourke, 2013, Chapter 3. Reiter and Stam also argue that covert conduct can increase the risk of policy failure. See Reiter, Dan, and Allan C. Stam, *Democracies at War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 159-162.