

A Guide to Covert Action

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Covert action is nebulous. Should a colour wheel describe the spheres of intelligence, covert action is identifiable by hues of grey. Marred by controversy, let a vital function of intelligence and statecraft. An option nestled between the suit and tie-wearing pedigree of diplomacy and the crimson-stained investment required of conventional warfare. The *third* option. *The quiet option*...

This guide will summarise covert action, keeping some elements of its nature broad, and others narrow. It is written as a generalist approach to the topic, focusing primarily on the theory and techniques behind its practice.

1. What is covert action?

In a general sense, covert action is an activity that aims to pursue the goals of a state by intervening in another state through secret means. From an American perspective, there are some nuances in that definition, as covert action has developed over time and codified into law through the legislation responsible for intelligence community (IC) oversight. ([source](#))

Although the terms ‘covert’ and ‘clandestine’ often find interchangeable use, such use is a contextual error. *Clandestine* translates to an activity done in secret and undetected. *Covert* activities are primarily concerned with plausible deniability: outside of the public purview, yet not required to be undiscoverable by the target state. While they *can* have a clandestine component, the crux of the action is not.

When balanced against other intelligence disciplines, such as collection, analysis, and counterintelligence, covert action shares a relation yet exists in a different space. As noted by Michael Herman, covert action’s structural attachment to intelligence is “a matter of semantics”. However, these semantics are domestic to the Western view of intelligence. In contrast, covert action in the old (or neo) Soviet world is standard intelligence doctrine – aka, ‘active measures’. ([source](#))

1.2 Types of covert action

Covert action is, in its nature, an umbrella term for many forms. Contemporary scholarship accepts the overall ‘main’ forms of covert action, which includes propaganda, political action, and paramilitary operations. In addition, some frameworks include economic operations and intelligence assistance as separate categories beyond the common three.

1.2.1 Propaganda

Propaganda is a term deeply ingrained in the annals of politics and statecraft, particularly amid today’s information age. What was once the exclusive domain of powerful institutions and states, the creation and spread of propaganda have undergone decentralization. With minimal barriers to entry, actors—both state-affiliated and non-state—now wield the vast expanse of cyberspace to wage their battles in the realm of information.

Of course, propaganda is not exclusive to the third option. Defined in plain terms, it is “to disseminate or promote particular ideas.” In the 17th century, the Roman Catholic Church established the *Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide* – an office dedicated to ‘propagating’ the faith and countering the Protestant narrative. Even earlier, in ancient Rome, people used the idea of fear as propaganda.

They constructed and projected the message of fear in this form towards the enemies of Rome, hoping to deter or demoralise them. ([source](#), [source](#))

In these brief examples, propaganda is *overt*. The sender is clear – the church or government – and there is no display of ulterior motives behind the message. Within the modern understanding of propaganda, that is often the case. The Soviet Union and Maoist China both utilised such direct visual propaganda to great benefit, with posters and visual media directed towards the proletariat class in reflection of party ideas. Even today, military recruitment videos and ad campaigns in the US clearly fit within the style.

Covert propaganda and its forms

Covert propaganda elevates the concept of idea dissemination by introducing an additional layer of complexity. As articulated by Roy Godson, covert propaganda encompasses “information, ideas, and symbolic actions whose sponsor remains undisclosed.” The crux lies in maintaining this secrecy, or, in technical terms, *plausible deniability*. Consequently, the originator and disseminator of the propaganda operate several degrees removed from the message’s destination in the public sphere. ([source](#))

To add further detail, we can subdivide covert propaganda into three categories: white, grey, and black. For each category, consider the premise that at their core, the same idea applies: the sender’s motive is to further some sort of foreign policy without exposure. ([source](#), [source](#))

- **White propaganda:** Truthful and clear messaging. It does not require spin or deceit to be effective. All it needs is the right medium, such as through a foreign news broadcast promoting a true story by the directive of entities within the US intelligence community.
- **Grey propaganda:** Johnson calls this “Clandestine spin-doctoring” – in essence, the propaganda is neither honest nor an outright lie. The originator heavily obscures the centrality of the message to craft it persuasively.
- **Black propaganda:** Pure disinformation. The designer of the propaganda weaponises falsehoods to promote an agenda. Contemporarily, think foreign election interference in the US through memetic warfare, such as Russia during the 2016 election.

In any case, whether white, grey, or black, covert propaganda is a relatively low-stakes form of covert action. Especially when compared to its other forms. In general, it requires funding and a coherent plan of production and dissemination while maintaining plausible deniability. However, when executed proficiently, the risk of blow-back or other negative outcomes from exposure is minimal than a more ‘hands on’ activity, such as political action.

1.2.2 Political action

Layers of mystery shroud the diplomatic sphere of statecraft. While public summits and conferences offer visible spectacles complete with photo-ops and generic rhetoric, there is a clandestine dimension. In this realm, sensitive diplomatic cables traverse between Washington D.C. and foreign embassies, while diplomatic ambassadors engage in closed-door meetings with entities from their host nations.

Covert political action operates in the diplomatic sphere, but under a different set of rules. There is, of course, the element of plausible deniability that we have established as a core tenet of covert action doctrine. Also, the ‘agent’ of the action does not *have* to be a card-carrying diplomat. Much like human intelligence collection uses human agents as sources, political action uses human agents, albeit in a more ‘hands on’ capacity.

For example, the purveyors of the action will strategically place assets near heads of state, relevant state officials, and even the leadership of non-governmental organisations that could be of benefit to national interests. ([source](#))

To preserve plausible deniability, the assets used are generally not career diplomats. The success of the action relies on the ability to remain discrete yet possess strong tradecraft social engineering skills.

Political action methods

Agents of influence is a term describing political action assets. An intelligence agency – typically the CIA – recruits the agents and dispatches them. While they can be overt personnel in the strategic locations, their agenda is covert. And, their influence objectives can have a symbiotic relationship with other covert action forms. The same agent that has the ear of a head of state could also seed propaganda. ([source](#))

Moreover, pertinent non-governmental organisations (NGOs) within target nations can prove invaluable. Within these organisations, agents of influence can strategically operate to leverage them as instruments for shaping or influencing a populace. By overtly manipulating these entities, the agent can subtly advance the agenda of the architect. ([source](#))

Within the boundaries of political action, agents of influence carry out activities with varying degrees of sensitivity. Stakes can be higher than propaganda, and there is a greater risk of exposure.

Further considerations highlight the diversity of activities within political action. As written by Johnson, fiscal coercion – i.e., bribery – is elemental. Through agents of influence or even intelligence officers, the idiom ‘money talks’ is present. For example, money can bolster foreign political campaigns for candidates aligned with state interests, or possibly vulnerable to future recruitment or espionage. ([source](#), [source](#))

1.2.3 Economic operations

Economic operations are covert actions directed at a foreign economy. Such operations are incredibly sensitive, with potentially devastating ramifications for the target and entities adjacent to it. Further, the economic dimension of statecraft has a wide breadth and depth, thus requiring the purveyor to plan and operate with care and precision.

More than just money is at stake. The purveyor must plan and operate with care and precision because of the intertwined supply chains and the production and flow of goods through them. Globalisation set conditions for vast webs of commerce, and the related effects of the digital age need no introduction. Sabotaging an industrial plant in one nation can cause a chain reaction that affects a non-target.

Given these points, there are a few noteworthy strains of covert economic action worth mentioning ([source](#)):

- **Cyber warfare:** Using offensive cyber warfare towards a specific industry or economic sector within the target nation.
- **Market manipulation:** Using different methods of manipulation to create dissonance and chaos within a target nation’s marketplace – i.e., stock manipulation.
- **Currency manipulation:** Manipulating the value of a target nation’s currency, either positively or negatively, to further state interests.
- **Evading sanctions:** Covertly working around sanctions to further foreign policy interests – i.e., in the present, if the US was to covertly violate sanctions against Russia to supplement a policy objective that would otherwise be illegal.
- **Industrial/economic espionage:** Stealing intellectual property and trade secrets to gain an advantage, or, in this case, support foreign policy.

1.2.4 Paramilitary operations

Paramilitary operations is the most 'hands on' type of covert action. It is the type of action that brings the third option closest to the second (military). In essence, such operations are generally tied to unconventional and irregular warfare. And, they are generally conducted by special operations capable forces, such as the CIA's [Special Activities Centre](#) (SAC), Special Operations Command (SOCOM) and [Joint Special Operations Command](#) (JSOC) units.

Depending on the mission set, there may not need to be a deployment of such units. In fact, some of the more sensitive paramilitary operations are best conducted without any US personnel, as their presence can jeopardise plausible deniability. ([source](#))

Examples of paramilitary operations include:

- Assassinations
- Coup d'état and regime change
- Training guerrilla forces
- Drone strikes
- Cyberwarfare

1.3 The ladder of clandestine escalation

The ladder of clandestine escalation offers a thorough framework delineating the spectrum of potential covert actions, ordered according to ascending levels of risk. While acknowledging its imperfections and the inherent variability within each category, this model provides a foundational understanding of different covert action disciplines. It serves as a practical tool for illustrating the range of actions and associated risks within the covert operations landscape.

Credit for this model goes to intelligence scholar Loch K. Johnson who has done comprehensive work on covert action and its relationship to US national security. In terms of nomenclature, Johnson divides the ladder into four 'thresholds'. (source, source)

First, is Threshold One: Routine operations. These are actions that are relatively small scale and low risk.

Second, is Threshold Two: Modest intrusions. These are actions that raise the level of intensity and risk, yet are overall modest in scale.

Third, is Threshold Three: High-risk operations. It is already said in the name. These are actions that have a high risk, and require a high level of dedication for all involved parties.

Last, is Threshold Four: Extreme operations. Again, just as the name describes. These are the operations that carry the most risk, and have the highest potential to do severe damage to US national security in the event of exposure. And, they require the most resources and funding to execute.

Further, Johnson provides a helpful set of symbols attached to each rung that describes the type of action:

- **P**: Covert propaganda
- **E**: Economic action
- **POL**: Covert political action
- **PM**: Paramilitary operations

1.3.1 Threshold One: Routine Operations

1. Truthful benign propaganda aimed at US non-democratic adversaries, with no free press involved **[P]**
2. Truthful, but contentious propaganda aimed at US non-democratic adversaries **[P]**
3. False propaganda aimed at US non-democratic adversaries **[P]**

4. Truthful, benign propaganda aimed at nations “neutral” neither pro-US or pro-US adversaries – but no free press involved [P]
5. Truthful, but contentious, propaganda aimed at “neutral” nations [P]
6. CIA security advisement to pro-Western nations seeking counterintelligence and counterterrorism guidance from the US in resisting encroachment by autocrats or terrorists [PM]
7. CIA security advisement to neutral nations seeking counterintelligence and counterterrorism guidance from the US in resisting encroachment by autocrats or terrorists [PM]
8. Political and economic counsel to pro-Western nations in resisting encroachment by the autocracies [POL, E]

1.3.2 Threshold Two: Modest Intrusions

9. Intensified false propaganda aimed at US non-democratic adversaries [P]
10. False propaganda aimed at “neutral” nations [P]
11. Truthful, benign propaganda aimed at fellow democratic nations [P]
12. Low-level funding of nations and groups friendly toward the democratic regimes, when overt funding is rejected for one reason or another [POL]

1.3.3 Threshold Three: High-Risk Operations

13. Truthful, yet contentious, propaganda aimed at fellow democratic nations [P]
14. Moderate increases in funding for a party or faction within a “neutral” nation [POL]
15. Large increases in funding for a party or faction within a “neutral” nation [POL]
16. Moderate increases in funding for a party or faction within a pro-Western nation [POL]
17. Military guidance to the “neutral” nations [PM]
18. Military guidance to pro-Western nations [PM]
19. Operations that have a price tag above \$5 million [PM, POL, E, P]
20. Joint CA operations [PM, POL, E]
21. Operations targeted against a nation or organisation that have resulted in significant prior CA failures [PM, POL, E]
22. Operations that target a particularly dangerous nation or organisation [PM, POL, E]
23. Operations carried out against a target nation or organisation without a local allied faction [PM, POL]
24. Economic disruptions without loss of life [E]
25. Limited arms supplies to pro-Western nations for defensive balancing purposes [PM]
26. Limited arms supplies to “neutral” nations for defensive balancing purposes, or for a *quid pro quo* deal [PM]
27. Limited arms supplies to pro-Western nations for offensive purposes [PM]
28. Limited arms supplies to “neutral” nations (or factions therein) for offensive purposes [PM]
29. False (black) propaganda aimed at fellow democratic nations with a free press [P]
30. Massive increases in funding for a party or faction within a “neutral” nation [POL]
31. Massive increases in funding for a party or faction within a non-democratic adversarial nation [POL]
32. Massive increases in funding for a party or faction within a pro-Western nation [POL]
33. Sophisticated arms supplies and counsel provided to pro-Western nations [PM]
34. Supply of advanced weaponry provided to “neutral” nations [PM]
35. Propaganda aimed at inciting rebellion or other forms of violence within a target nation or faction [P]
36. CIA officers directly involved in paramilitary operations within a “neutral” country [PM]

1.3.4 Threshold Four: Extreme Operations

37. Major hostage-rescue attempts [PM]
38. Hostage-taking and “snatch” operations (“extraordinary renditions”) [PM]
39. Supply of advanced weaponry to factions within a non-democratic adversarial nation [PM]
40. Limited cyberattacks [PM, E, POL, P]
41. Limited environmental alterations, such as cloud-seeding [PM, E]

42. Major environmental alterations, such as the covert use of poisonous defoliates or the creation of floors [PM, E]
43. Major economic dislocations, including the creation of food shortages, crop or livestock destruction, and the mass destruction of property, and even the loss of life [E]
44. Small-scale *coup d'état* without a paramilitary component [POL, E, P]
45. Small-scale *coup d'état* that includes a paramilitary component [PM]
46. Assassination of suspected terrorists [PM]
47. Use of CIA drones or other violent means to target for death high-ranking public officials overseas, in contrast to uniformed soldiers and terrorists on an acknowledged battlefield, or suspected terrorists outside a battlefield [PM]
48. Major “secret” *coup d'état* against a populous “neutral” regime [PM, POL, E, P]
49. Major “secret” *coup d'état* against a powerful autocrat regime [PM, POL, E, P]
50. Major “secret” coup against a fellow democratic regime, with a paramilitary component [PM, POL, E, P]
51. Major cyberattack against a powerful foreign government [PM, E, POL, P]
52. A Defiance of US law governing covert actions [P, POL, E, PM]
53. An assault on the US Constitution [P, POL, E, PM]
54. Violence targeted against groups of innocent civilians, torture against anyone, and other gross violations of human rights [PM]
55. Use of NBC (nuclear, biological, chemical) and radiological weapons [PM]

2. Why is covert action important?

“We know the future only by the past we project into it. History, in this sense, is all we have.”

John Lewis Gaddis

As history unfolds, it reveals the paramount importance of covert actions within the realms of intelligence and statecraft. Just as espionage, often dubbed the world’s second oldest profession, finds its roots in ancient times, so too does its close kin, covert action, in its primitive incarnations.

The significance of covert action becomes increasingly apparent through the annals of history. The successes and failures, particularly in modern times as it matures, underscore the imperative for legislation and oversight. These measures establish critical boundaries that have the power to shape pivotal moments in history, profoundly influencing the trajectory of global events.

Furthermore, as an instrument of statecraft and a strategic option, covert action empowers nations to execute their will in ways that would otherwise be nearly impossible.

2.1 A brief history of covert action

When delving into the history of covert action, it is most beneficial for our cause to start right around the end of the Second Great War. As mentioned, covert action does not begin in this era. However, WWII set conditions for strong advancements in formal intelligence – both in practice and as an institution.

Following the Allies’ victory over the Axis powers, the latent ideological threat of communism began to emerge amidst the post-war rubble in Eurasia. This shift in power concentrations from the Axis and Allies to the Eastern and Western blocs marked the onset of the Cold War. In essence, the wild west that covert action initially flourished in.

2.1.1 The National Security Act of 1947

At this time – 1947 – the US government signed the National Security Act into law. This legislation marked a watershed moment, serving as the basis for the development of the modern intelligence community. It formed the National Security Council (NSC), which included the President, Vice

President, Secretary of Defense, and heads of intelligence. In essence, a formal group to strategise and carry out foreign policy goals. ([source](#))

Not only that, but the Act created the CIA, and established loose boundaries for it to operate within. Interestingly, there was no direct mention of covert action in the Act. Indeed, the section highlighting the CIA's role focused on intelligence collection and analysis. Except for one open-ended mandate: for the CIA to “perform such other functions and duties related to intelligence affecting the national security as the President or the Director of National Intelligence may direct.” To this point, scholarship commonly agrees that this moment was when covert action emerged – in its proto form – as an established tool of statecraft. ([source](#), [source](#))

In addition, this clarified that such “functions and duties” are by the direction of the Executive branch, or the Director of National Intelligence. Beyond that limited oversight, the fledgling CIA had immense power at its disposal. Power that would later shift the tides against covert action, and place it under intense congressional scrutiny.

2.1.2 The Cold War

The Cold War (1947-1991) is one of the most active periods of covert action activity in US history. During this time, the CIA – an organisation that is to this day the primary planner and executor of covert action – operated with considerable latitude in a multitude of global locales.

Some authors refer to this period in the US intelligence community as having a ‘wild west’ temperament. The boundaries were permeable, and oversight sparse. Unsurprisingly, however, as the phenomenon of ‘treading unfamiliar territory’ comes with the initial period of ‘just figuring it out’. Of course, in this period, the spectre of communism, from a Western perspective, was the single largest threat to US national security. And with that perspective, the US took great lengths to inoculate the perceived ideological epidemic. ([source](#))

For a war that was predominantly unconventional, covert action was a suitable ‘great length’ to further US policy goals. Poking the proverbial hornets’ nest through conventional war with the Eastern Bloc was not outside the realm of possibility, yet not desired. Treaty power could only do so much, if anything at all. For that reason, the CIA relied heavily on the third option. ([source](#))

1974: The culling of the intelligence community

Beginning in 1974, the US IC went through what Johnson calls, ‘the era of uneasy partnership’. Indeed, the halcyon days of limited government oversight shrivelled. The partnership between the IC and the government and public sphere faced a schism.

A published New York Times article about the CIA spying on domestic citizens functioned as a scathing rebuke of intelligence power. And, demonstrated the beauty of a free press, that placed a check against an institution that appeared to be untouchable. ([source](#))

Journalist Seymour Hersch argued the case that the CIA under President Nixon conducted a wide reaching domestic intelligence operation targeting anti-war and counterculture oriented groups. In this situation, the agency clearly violated the 1947 Act that prohibited the IC from domestic activity. ([source](#))

If the New York Times revelation was the ‘shot heard round the world’, the senate hearings to follow are the revolution against the intelligence establishment. Indeed, Senator Frank Church initiated the infamous ‘Church Hearing’, which led to the subsequent Pike Hearing chaired by congressional representative Otis Pike, and the Rockefeller Commission led by Vice President Nelson Rockefeller.

As a result, the concluding findings of the hearings created a vast schism between an IC gone rogue and two of the three branches of US government. Not only did the CIA use domestic spying in violation of the 1947 Act, but kept other sins internal. What came to light was damning – multiple

instances of the CIA conducting covert actions in foreign nations with independence from the executive branch or legislative powers. ([source](#))

Thus, the “era of uneasy partnership” was just that. And, a new period of history in the intelligence community began. There needed to be a deconstruction of the status quo and a reconstruction of the IC’s inner workings to be aligned with the checks and balances system dominant in American governance.

2.1.3 The IC reformation

The Church and Pike hearings and Rockefeller commission set conditions for stringent IC reforms. These reforms began in 1974 and continued evolving into the present era. Further, some reforms directly affected covert action. No longer was the 1947 Act gospel – new boundaries emerged, penning covert action directly into law and under the mercy of the president ([source](#)):

- **Hughes-Ryan Act (1974):** Established a requirement for presidential approval of covert actions and further requirement for the action to be reported to congress ‘in a timely manner’.
- **Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (1978):** Created the FISA Court system which reviews all requests for warrants and wiretaps. Its goal is to prevent the IC from improper actions.
- **Intelligence Oversight Act (1980):** Required a congressional notification prior to all intelligence activities.
- **Intelligence Identities Act (1982):** Added protections on names of undercover IC employees.
- **CIA Inspector General Act (1989):** Established the office of CIA inspector general who is accountable to congress.
- **Intelligence Oversight Act (1991):** Defined covert action in US law and gave the president power to expand the reporting time to within two days of the action if needed.
- **USA Patriot Act (2001):** Broad expansion of intelligence sharing and domestic collection privileges.
- **Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act (2004):** the creation of the Director of National Intelligence.

While these attempts at accountability are not infallible, they certainly helped provide ethical boundaries to covert action. And, placed the ultimate authority into the hands of the executive branch, with additional congressional oversight. Because of this, the IC cannot – in theory – act with an independent will. Instead, they must conduct covert actions with great care, as a tool of statecraft and foreign policy.

2.2 Statecraft and its instruments

While this guide does not focus on statecraft, it is helpful to take a brief detour in that direction.

There are two noteworthy theoretical frameworks that can help illustrate the role covert action plays in the grand scheme of statecraft and foreign policy. First, there is the national security strategy scheme, known by the acronym DIME-FIL (diplomatic, information, military, economic, financial, intelligence, law enforcement). Second, to revisit Johnson, the instruments of foreign policy, explained in his book *The Third Option*. ([source](#), [source](#))

2.1.1 DIME-FIL

DIME-FIL is a national security strategy that encompasses the entirety of government. According to US doctrine, the executive branch and national security council, in relationship, can use these instruments – alone or multiple – to further strategic national objectives. DIME comprised this concept until the recent addition of FIL, an update in response to the ever-growing complexity of modern statecraft. ([source](#))

- **Diplomatic:** Interactions with foreign states and entities to advance and gain support for US policy objectives.

- **Information:** All forms of visual and audible media used by the US to gain a strategic advantage.
- **Military:** Using the Armed Forces, domestically and internationally, to support US conventional, unconventional, and other (i.e., humanitarian aid and assistance, training partner nations) operations.
- **Economic:** Using international markets and other economic tools for the pursuit of policy objectives.
- **Financial:** The employment of various means, such as foreign aid, trade agreements, tariffs, embargoes, and economic sanctions, to prevent specific individuals, groups, or entities, including both states and non-state actors, from accessing financial systems or sources of funding.
- **Intelligence:** Intelligence comprises information gathered by diverse organisations through multiple channels, refined into actionable insights about the environment, future intentions, capabilities, and key actors, offering decision makers, including commanders and policymakers, a strategic advantage.
- **Law enforcement:** The government's enforcement of laws through various agencies, organisations, and host-nation partners to support national security.

DIME-FIL and covert action

Although DIME-FIL does not explicitly mention covert action, there is an overlap between the latter and each instrument on the acronym. In essence, it is just an elaborate breakdown of the various instruments of statecraft available to the president and policymakers.

2.1.2 Instruments of foreign policy

In contrast to the intricacies of DIME-FIL, Johnson, in his book “The Third Option,” delineates three primary instruments, or ‘powers,’ of foreign policy. Similar to DIME-FIL, these instruments serve as implements for governmental bodies holding pertinent authority or jurisdictional control:

1. **The Treaty power (first option):** Pure diplomacy. This option is preferred if rhetoric can be a potent enough force for policy change. It is overt and the go-to option for the executive branch and policymakers.
2. **The War Power (second option):** Conventional and unconventional warfare. This option could also be referred to as “the loud option,” as it is the most aggressive and violent. Of course, war is a costly affair, both with human lives and strained resources. However, it is at times unavoidable, given the right conditions.
3. **The Spy Power (third option):** The point where a covert action is the ideal direction to lean towards achieving foreign policy objectives.

3. How is covert action performed?

It is difficult to explain with accuracy the exact process of performing a covert action at an operational and tactical level. By no surprise, the IC maintains secrecy within its inner workings. However, the strategic level is more transparent, as it deals with the legislative and oversight spheres of the process.

In his book “Dirty Tricks and Trump Cards,” Roy Godson proposes some general baseline principles that need to be present before launching any covert action. In theory, these principles are not unique to the US ([source](#)):

- It must strictly be a policy tool.
- The ends must justify the means.
- There should be intense pre-calculations about the potential outcomes of the action.
- The chance of success is greater if the action is long term.
- There must be both an opportunity to alter foreign events and the personnel available to seize those opportunities.

- The initiating entity must use proper timing to its advantage.

3.1 Presidential action

For the initiation of covert action, in a US context, the executive branch is the impetus. The series of legislative and oversight reforms in the IC has removed its ability to carry out actions independently. And, the president, as the driver of foreign policy initiatives, dictates what instrument of power to use. ([source](#))

Metaphorically speaking, once the president has a covert action in mind, they work with the IC – chiefly the CIA – to conduct operational planning. Additionally, the president must inform congress quickly, under the 1991 Intelligence Oversight Act.

As the president carries out their own agenda, there is the potential for partisanship and an independent will to blind them from seeing the full scope of a covert action. Despite having its own flaws, the bipartisan nature of the congressional branch and its distance from the isolation within the IC and executive relationship empower it to provide a second opinion with less bias. Congress has its own set of guidelines to evaluate a covert action, yet is imperfect at times. Especially if the branches own will and agenda creep into their evaluation. ([source](#))

4. Tactics, techniques, and procedures

Covert action is a tradecraft heavy practice. As established, the risks are high, and the ramifications of exposure and blowback increase in severity the higher up the ladder you traverse. Once the covert action goes through the strategic level process of initiation and approval, it must ensure meticulous planning before its execution. It also shares a close relationship with other intelligence disciplines, as it is a process that relies on products.

4.1 Support infrastructure

Principle considerations aside, there are layers of support infrastructure like any other intelligence operation. For personnel support, it is vital to find people within the IC and professionals external to it who can influence foreign affairs. Godson refers to deep-cover officers, assets, or technical specialists as recruitable foreign personnel. Examples are ([source](#)):

- Politicians
- Student leaders
- Academic professionals
- Trade union leadership
- Retired military officers
- Businesspeople
- Public relations specialists

For material support, there are areas like communication, funding, and resource allocation. Secrecy is especially paramount when dealing with the financial and resource driven areas, as the operational security of the action is at risk if the material items trace back to the originator. To this end, funnelling money through shell companies, donations to organisations, and utilising offshore bank accounts (i.e. Switzerland, the Cayman Islands, Panama), are valid options to avoid detection.

For communications, it is imperative that there is a connection between the field and headquarters. Of course, that is true for virtually all types of intelligence collection operations. In this case, it is *especially* important. If there is an asset in the operational environment that needs a quick extraction, for instance, not having a clear line of communication can be the one mistake that exposes the entire action.

4.2 Symbiosis with other disciplines

This guide mentions the idea of an intelligence process and intelligence product as separate yet related sides of a whole a few times. While covert action is a *process*, it contains a strong symbiosis with other intelligence disciplines.

There is a serious operational security risk for a covert action program to be revealed across other elements in the IC, but that does not negate the utility of collection, analysis, and counterintelligence.

Collection and analysis are themselves drivers of foreign policy, as products. With the value assigned to information that analysis delivers, covert action finds its inspiration. To this end, actionable intelligence, disseminated to the executive branch, can be the impetus for a future covert action. In addition, covert action provides a reciprocal benefit. Not only does it receive an advantage from collection and analytical support, but delivers it back. Operations have strong potential to be collection grounds. with the right assets in place, and secure communication between the field and headquarters. ([source](#))

4.3 Operational security

Operational security (OPSEC) is critical to the integrity of a covert action operation. The term itself is militaristic in nature, yet applies across the intelligence and security sectors. US National Security Directive 298 defines OPSEC as ([source](#), [source](#), [source](#)):

“a systematic and proved process by which the U.S. government and its supporting contractors can deny to potential adversaries information about capabilities and intentions by identifying, controlling, and protecting generally unclassified evidence of the planning and execution of sensitive government activities.”

The same directive frames it as a five-step process ([source](#), [source](#)):

1. Identify critical information;
2. Analyse threat;
3. Analyse the vulnerabilities;
4. Assess the risk;
5. Apply the appropriate countermeasures.

As can be seen, the theme of defence stands out as a core tenet of OPSEC. This is an interesting connection, as it points to the symbiosis between covert action and counterintelligence. However, counterintelligence is a vast topic. And, to spare venturing off into foreign lands and dense forests of extra information is beyond the scope of this paper.

What should be noted, is that a strong counterintelligence component of a covert action mission will help manage the sensitive compartments of a program. OPSEC is a strong defensive measure that does not require heavy resources and can be practised with great efficiency across the spectrum of personnel and on an individual level.

5. Conclusion: the future of covert action

The world and its affairs are radically different now than in the early ‘wild west’ days of covert action. Indeed, since the conclusion of the Cold War, it is an extremely common known fact that the world has gone through rapid changes in virtually every sphere of existence, thanks to globalisation, cyberspace, and the Internet of Things.

Even more important, is the negation of privacy. No longer can most humans be anonymous, or have their lives restricted to their locale environment. As is it also known, our lives, data, privacy... at all at the whim of the technology that most of the developed world’s population uses regularly.

This presents a set of unique challenges for covert action that is in too early of a stage for formal academic study. Open Source Intelligence (OSINT) is a perfect example of a modern challenge. In the modern landscape of online media and banter about the intelligence craft, OSINT is a term

mentioned now ad nauseum. For good reason at that – despite the controversy and flaws in the terms overuse, OSINT has proven to be a massive effective tool not only for intelligence practitioners but also open-source researchers and journalists, like the Bellingcat outfit.

As seen by Bellingcat's revolutionary investigations, very few private or public individuals or entities are safe from the will of a independent researcher with a creative mind and baseline understanding of OSINT tools. Take this consideration, and apply it to covert action: the very nature of 'covert' is under siege.

In the end, only time will tell what covert action looks like in the next decade. Perhaps even less time, given the trajectory of our civilization's quest for the tree of knowledge. To preserve its utility, covert action requires a constant recalibration and reformation, just like the familiar of elements it shares within the intelligence discipline.