



## Covert Action as Instrument of Statecraft: A Brief

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### Abstract

### Review Article

The successes and failures of state craft to influence the behavioral pattern of other states or governments depends to a large extent on the use of 'hard intelligence' – information collected from reliable sources and confirmed by subsequent analysis. It also involves the careful integration of psychological and economic strategies and in some situations, closely controlled covert operations. All these measures constitute the major methods of covert action. Covert action can be defined as those secret activities carried by government of a state or organization [state and non -state actors] to influence and manipulate events and situations abroad. It covers an indirect, non – attribution and clandestine operations. The role of governments or non- state actors in covert action are neither apparent nor publicly acknowledged, as everything is shrouded in secrecy. More often than not, the masses are not aware of the dynamics of state craft and the means adopted to achieve these ends. This paper is an analysis of the major methods of covert action. Using the analytical method, and relying mainly on few scholarships available in this area of study, the paper argues that the covert action approach adopted by actors to advance their interest is sometimes considered as 'the third option'. Based on its findings, this paper submits that the use of covert action at individual and state levels is as old as man because of its special appeal to some statemen as the quiet option with less cost, no debate nor publicity.

**Keywords:** Covert Action, Statecraft, Hard Intelligence, Psychological Strategies, Non-State Actors, Clandestine Operations.

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## INTRODUCTION:

Conventionally, there are two major instrument of state craft – diplomacy and military force, though to strategists like Carl Von Clausewitz, war is the continuation of diplomacy by other means. However, because of the nature and dynamics of man and society, sometimes, the third method of advancing of interest or influencing the behavior of others becomes necessary. Such third option falls within the purview of covert action. As earlier argued, covert action involves the secret or clandestine activities of state and non- state- actors to achieve certain ends or set goals, outside outright military missions and diplomatic initiatives. In most cases, covert action has the advantages of low cost, devoid of lengthy debates over tactics and broader objectives, hence, its appeal to most statemen and policy makers. In its operations, five major methods constitute the elements of covert action, depending on the choice of actors and peculiarity of circumstances. These methods include

propaganda, political covert action, economic covert action, paramilitary covert action and assassination plots. This paper analyses these methods to throw up the practical outcomes and ethical considerations of covert action. To achieve this aim, the paper is structured in six parts. Part, one discusses propaganda as the first method of covert action while part two focuses on political covert action. Part three takes a look at economic covert action and part for considers paramilitary covert action. Part five examines the assassination plots as the last method of covert action. Part six is the concluding remarks.

**[a] Propaganda:** Since the birth of modern nations state system, propaganda has been a veritable tool of influencing situations and events both at the national and international levels. At the level of interstate relations, state uses propaganda – [the spreading of ideas, information or rumor for purposes of helping or injuring an institution, a cause or person, or ideas, facts or allegations spread deliberately to further one's cause or

damage an opposing cause.] to promote or further their interests. State uses all means, including televisions, radio, newspapers, magazines, social media, among others to ensure overt flow of information to achieve some ends or objectives. Indigenous or local media agents can be used by foreign powers Propaganda as a method of covert action is used during war and peace time. During the Nigerian civil war of 1967, both the federal government and the secessionist Biafra used propaganda as instrument to tell the world the justification of their causes. The Biafra propagated that what was going was a calculated attempt to kill the Igbo, a kind of ethnic cleansing, while the federal government wanted the world to see the Biafra as secessionists.

One case of a state using propaganda against the government of another state is the case of the United States activities in Chile in the 1960s. in the Chilean presidential election of 1964, the American CIA spent about three million dollars to smear the reputation of Salvador Allende, the candidate of the socialist party with suspected link with the Soviets [Colby;1991]. The CIA thwarted the Allende's election in 1964 but he persisted and recontested in 1970 and won. The CIA then turned to a range of propaganda to destroy Allende's administration by paying much money to support anti Allende's propaganda between 1970 and 1973 in the form of press release. Radio commentary, films, pamphlet, posters, leaflet, among others, all gearing towards discrediting Allende' government. [James Wirtz and Loch Johnson,2008, p 262.]

Another case of propaganda operation took place in Guatemala, Central America in 1954 when the CIA set up a radio station in Guatemala. As a local media, the station began the fiction that a revolution had erupted and that the Guatemalans have joined the movement against the government of Jacobo Arbenz, using few CIA recruits to set a protest march against the communist government of Arbenz. With unprecedented speed, the propaganda became self fulfilling as President Arbenz was panicked by the prospects of the masses storming his presidential palace and hurriedly resigned even before a single gunshot was fired. [William Colby,1989, p 294]. In the early days of the cold war, American government through the CIA funded American National Students Association within America as part of its propaganda operations. The essence of this policy was to encourage young Americans to travel abroad and counter Soviets effort at manipulating international student conferences. Also, the specter of influencing the American audiences was witnessed in the publication of anti-soviets' books and journals written by communist defectors as well as American authors. [Witz and Johnson, 2008, p 268]

Governments around the globe have adopted this instrument of covert action to work on the minds and manipulates their action or inaction to suit their interests. It is true that government of various nations have some journalists in their payroll, with the sole aim of propagating fictions and rumor that may have little or no bearing with truth or reality of the situations. There are some newspapers that are pro government and most of their operations are secretly bankrolled by the government of the day. Sometimes, religious leaders and opinion leaders are used as agents of propaganda to manipulate public opinion. In Nigeria, during the 2023 presidential electioneering campaign,

some of the electorates, especially from the Christian population in southern Nigeria complained of the choice of the APC presidential candidate and his running mate from one religious sect – [Muslim- Muslim ticket] To mitigate this seemingly anomaly, people were paid to adorn catholic and methodist priest attire and visit Mr. Tinubu to convey the support of the Christendom in Nigeria. Many Christians became less concern about the Muslim – Muslim ticket since some of their leaders have allegedly accepted the situation. It was after some weeks that the national publicity secretary of the Christian association of Nigeria came out to debunk the claim that the purported priests who visited Tinubu were not priests from any church in Nigeria but hired men on the street who were paid to swayed public opinion in favor of the APC candidates. This is a case of covert action.

**[b] Political Covert Action:** Governments of many states engaged in covert action which are sometimes codenamed 'special activities. One of such activities is government secret payment to and sponsorship of friendly foreign politicians and bureaucrats. Most times, such foreign government sponsored political parties and individual politicians. It is on records that during the cold war, American government bankrolled the bills of friendly political parties in Jordan, Ecuador, El – Salvador, Angola, Egypt, among others. The secret fund was used to win favor of influential government officials to help win election for pro – western faction or parties. America governments during the early years of the cold war, turned Italy into a battle ground to recruit and build political parties and regimes that opposed communism and to strengthen labor unions that opposed communism. These are cases of political covert action.

Propaganda and political covert action are complimentary measures under the political label of state craft. In some countries especially in the developing world, the operation directorate of the American CIA were involved in the political campaign, with intelligence officers engaged in the mass production of brochures, speeches, placards, campaign buttons and bumper stickers. The main aim was to persuade important foreign officials to turn a favorable eye toward the United States and away from the Soviet Union, or away from regimes hostile to American interest such as Iraq under Saddam Hussein, Libya under Ghaddafi and Al- Qaeda terrorist group under Osama bin Laden. In this sense, the period of the cold war was a period of subterranean political struggle between the United States and its conceived enemy regimes abroad, in which the intelligence organizations have waged a clandestine war to win the hearts and minds of people around the globe and to place in positions of power men and women of an ideological persuasion compatible with capitalism, democracy and other western values/ [Loch Johnson and James Wirtz, 2008:265]

**[c] Economic Covert Action:** Another veritable weapon in the state's arsenal of clandestine operations is the use of subversion against an adversary means of economic production. During the campaign to ruin the administration of President Allende of Chile, the American CIA provided financial support to political factions in Chile for the purposes of encouraging strike action and make the government unpopular and caused economic

crisis. During the J F Kennedy administration in the United States, the CIA planned to undermine Soviet – Cuban relations by lacing 14,215 bags of sugar bound from Havana to Moscow with chemical substance, an economic covert action that was thwarted at the eleventh hour by an American white house official who considered the planned action as desperate and dangerous economic sabotage. [Gregory Treverton, 1987: p 13]. In the conduct of economic covert action, foreign currencies may be counterfeited and world price of trading commodities depressed. For instance, electrical power lines and oil storage tankers were dynamited in Nicaragua, oil supplies contaminated and even clouds seeded in an effort to disrupt weather conditions in North Vietnam by the Reagan administration in 1982. All these are economic covert action measures.

In today's world of information and communication technology, the prime target of economic dislocation is the enemy's computer system [ cyber warfare]. With skillful hacking of computer network, a state's financial transaction can be undermined, if not put in complete disarray, its bank assets stolen, its communication network disrupted and military command and control capabilities frozen and put in a state of disuse. [ Paul Blacstock, 1982: p 113].

**[d] Paramilitary Covert Action:** Another form of state craft is the paramilitary covert action. these measures are the most extreme and controversial forms of a state foreign policy. This usually involve large scale secret warfare because of the extensive use of the state military arsenal against an adversary. The CIA Special Operation Group, sponsored many guerilla wars during the cold war. Between 1963 and 1973, the American secret agency backed the Hmong Meo tribe of North Laos in a war against the communist Pathet Lao, who served as a puppet of North Vietnam. The two sides fought to a draw until the American forces were compelled to withdraw from the struggle. It is also on records that the CIA supported the pro – Western insurgents in Ukraine, Poland, Albania, Hungary, Indonesia, China, Oman, Malaysia, Iraq, The Dominican Republic, Venezuela, North Korea, Bolivia, Thailand, Haiti, Cuba, among others.

In these operations, the CIA major role was to provide advice and weaponry. During the early years of the cold war, the anti-communist dissidents in these regions were the beneficiaries of a wide range of arms shipment from the United States. Such weapons include high powered rifles, suitcase bombs, fragmentation grenades, rapid fire machine gun, 64mm anti - tank rockets and large supplies of ammunition. When Ronald Reagan came into office, he siphoned through the CIA, a reported three billion dollar worth of weaponry to anti – Soviet fighters in Afghanistan [ the mujahideen]. The weapons include shoulder -held Stinger and blowpipe missiles capable of bringing down Soviet bombers. This secret military aid is said to have been a vital consideration in Moscow decision to withdraw from Afghanistan. [ Gabriel Kolko, 1988: p. 67].

In the post-cold war era, the CIA had provided substantial amount of armament and financial support to some pro American political factions in the middle east, the Balkans, and South Asia. recipients of these secret arms supply and financial

support were the Iraqi national congress, a group of insurgents opposed to Saddam Hussein's regime, opponents of Serbian expansion in Bosnia and Kosovo and the Northern Alliance, along with other anti- Taliban factions. As the result of the Al-Qaida terrorist attack on the United States in 2001 an attack that was believed to have been organized by Osama bin Laden, based in Afghanistan. In the declared war on terrorists by President George Bush in late 2002, to uproot al-Qaida and Taliban forces from Afghanistan, the CIA introduced the use of unmanned aerial vehicle [UAV] such as the Predator equipped with cameras and hellfire missiles to spot and eliminate enemies. That was the newest and most lethal approach to paramilitary operations. [Victor Marchetti & John Mark, 2005: p.87].

As part of paramilitary operations, foreign government sometimes are involved in the training of mercenaries to fight and protect their interests. sometimes, these mercenaries are trained in the arts of guerrilla warfare and counter – terrorism. Sometimes, they provide training for military and police units in the developing states, especially security personnel responsible for the protection of their political leaders. Among the skills taught include lessons in how to protect communication channels and the techniques of executive driving designed to impart spin – away steering skills for maneuvering an automobile through terrorist roadblocks. [Loch Johnson, 2009: p 117]. These are good examples of paramilitary covert actions.

**[e] Assassination Plots:** Another form of covert action is the assassination plots which are considered as a special operation to eliminate individuals. This option has gone by a number of coded slangs used in hushed tones within official government circles as 'executive order', 'terminate with extreme prejudice' or 'neutralize', among others. During the cold war years, special units were created to handle these dirty deals. Within the American CIA, it was called 'Health Alteration Committee' and in the then Soviet Union KGB, it was codenamed 'Department of Wet Affairs'

Fidel Castro of Cuba was American prime target for death during President Kennedy's administration, though none of the various attempt worked out. Another target of the American health alteration was Patrice Lumumba of Congo. It is also believed that the American CIA were behind the bloody coup that led to the death of General Murtala Mohammed of Nigeria, the assassination of President Thomas Sankara of Burkina Faso, among others. In 2003, the American CIA launched a hellfire missile from a Predator platform hovering at about 10,000 feet above the desert of Yemen, destroying an automobile carrying suspected Al-Qaeda members. All the occupants died a fiery death. [Phillip Agee and Louis Wolf, 2007: 34]. These and other cases of assassination are examples of covert action.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Since the emergence of the modern nation state system which came with the establishment of intelligence community, down to the outbreak of the cold war in 1947, covert action has played a vital role in the art of statecraft. However, there is need to examine the practical outcomes and ethical consideration of

covert action. On one hand, the practical results of covert action have been mixed. Sometimes, covert action has led to stunning successes for some major powers like the United States, the then Soviet Union, United Kingdom, Israel, among others, at least for short term. In Europe, in the aftermath of the second world war, particularly in Greece and Italy, in Iran [1953], in Guatemala [1954], in Latin America [1950s], covert action played a major role in thwarting communist and Marxist political leaders. Over the short run, the CIA has chalked up notable operations in Laos [193 – 1973], Afghanistan [1982-1988], Panama [1989] toppling the government of Gen Antonio Noriega, the Taliban and Saddam Hussein [2002-2003] in Iraq.

Despite the short-term gains of these operations, the long-term consequences have been questionable. Iran is hardly a close ally of the United States today. Guatemala and Panama are as poor and repressive as ever, the first American intervention in Afghanistan brought the Taliban regime to power, which in turn supported the Al- Qaeda terrorist organization, and the second American intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq are unlikely to have brought global terrorism to a halt. There was the Bay of Pig invasion, the madcap plot to overthrow Fidel Castro [exploding cigars, secret powder designed to make his bear fall out], the pouring of million of dollars into the sinkhole of the Angolan civil war by the American government and the Iran gate scandal. Along the way, the CIA abandoned the American allies in a string of anti-communist paramilitary operations in Hungary and the South Vietnam, Indochina, the nationalist chinses in Burma and the Kurds in Iraq. [David Phillip,2007: p.123].

All said, the paper has considered the five major tools of covert action which form one variant of state craft. These tools include propaganda, political covert action, economic covert action, paramilitary covert action and assassination plots. On practical grounds, it is safe to submit that based on records, covert action like economic sanctions or aerial bombing sometimes succeeded to achieve the goals of the state and sometimes it failed. Its chances of success are guaranteed when the state's objectives or goals are limited or short term, when strong

opposition group already exist within a target nation or group. In the case of paramilitary operations, the success of such operations is guaranteed when such operations are aided or abetted by overt bombing and special forces on ground to take care of the unfinished part of the operations.

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