

Overcoming Anglocentrism in Covert Action Scholarship

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Abstract

This study argues that Anglocentrism in the study of covert action is driven by factors unique to the discipline, requiring novel mitigations which differ from those already recommended for wider international relations and the social sciences. To demonstrate this, it presents a systematic literature review of 401 journal articles on covert action, estimated to represent over 80 per cent of published research on the subject. The findings highlight an overwhelming Anglocentrism, with 86 per cent of studies focusing exclusively on Western states and significantly higher citation rates for Western-focused research, acutely focused on the USA and UK. This is notably higher than comparable benchmark datasets from international relations and the social sciences. The study finds that an 'evidence bias' proposed by Cormac is supported by available data but does not fully account for all observed Anglocentrism. In addition, it argues that conceptual biases built around highly Westernised terminology and categorisations create unconscious barriers to scholarship of non-Western covert action. It proposes measures including a comparative approach to analysis and a composite framework for definitions to address these specific biases. Adopting these measures will allow scholars to broaden the study of covert action beyond its present Anglocentric research base.

Introduction

Anglocentrism in international relations scholarship was first discussed nearly five decades ago, with Hoffman's famous declaration that international relations was the 'American social science'.¹ This phenomenon has been demonstrated and confirmed at regular intervals since then, using bibliometric data such as author affiliations to highlight continuing Anglocentrism in international relations.² Alongside measures proposed for the wider social sciences, a range of general measures have been proposed to help overcome this bias, generally focused on targeted measures to lower barriers to publication and increase the accessibility of academia in the Global South.

Scholars of covert action have posited that the specific characteristics of covert action intensify this Anglocentrism, implying that general academic measures for widening representation may not be enough for this particular discipline. Some have noted that the Anglosphere has traditionally dominated academic coverage of covert action, while others have argued that there is an even more narrow focus on the USA.³ While this pattern of coverage is intuitive to many, it has not yet been robustly demonstrated, and the causes and effects of Anglocentrism specific to the study of covert action have not been examined at length. Anglocentrism has negative impacts on attention given to non-Western areas of study, the accuracy of data used for scholarship, and the approaches used to study both Western and non-Western states. The cumulative effect of these is to hinder effective scholarship of non-Western covert action, particularly in the Global South, leaving significant areas of potential scholarship seriously underserved by current academia. The emergence of similar issues of coverage and bias in the growing body of Chinese scholarship of international relations underscores the need for effective intercultural understanding in matters of state secrecy, and the importance of extending the research base and coverage of covert action scholarship.

This study first demonstrates the extent of Anglocentrism in covert action scholarship, using a systematic literature review of 401 journal articles, estimated to represent more than 80% of published articles on covert action. It finds that 86% of articles are focused on Western covert action, with the USA and UK specifically the focus of more than 78%, and that articles about Western covert action are cited three times as often as non-Western articles. The study repeats methodologies applied to measure relative geographic coverage of comparable datasets from across international relations and elsewhere in the social sciences, demonstrating a significantly greater concentration of Anglocentric scholarship in covert action than in wider disciplines.

Having demonstrated a more acute Anglocentrism in the study of covert action, the study then explores the data further to determine specific causes. Alongside wider academic biases prevalent across the social sciences and largely caused by the manner in which academia is conducted, the study tests the posited evidence bias which favours states with good transparency, open archives and press and academic freedoms, finding that it applies in some but not all cases. The study proposes that the remainder of observed Anglocentrism in covert action is rooted in conceptual biases in Anglocentric terminology, definitions and classifications. The study concludes by proposing measures to overcome these specific biases, including a novel composite approach to defining and classifying unacknowledged activities by non-Western states.

¹ Stanley Hoffmann, 'An American Social Science: International Relations', *Daedalus* 106, no. 3 (1977): 41–60.

² Peter Marcus Kristensen, 'Revisiting the "American Social Science"—Mapping the Geography of International Relations', *International Studies Perspectives* 16, no. 3 (2015): 246–69, <https://doi.org/10.1111/insp.12061>; Deborah Avant et al., 'Special Issue on "American Bias"', *Journal of Global Security Studies* 4, no. 3 (2019): 299, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jogss/ogz033>.

³ Rory Cormac et al., 'What Constitutes Successful Covert Action? Evaluating Unacknowledged Interventionism in Foreign Affairs', *Review of International Studies* 48, no. 1 (2022): 126, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210521000231>; Allison Carnegie, 'Secrecy in International Relations and Foreign Policy', *Annual Review of Political Science* 24, no. 1 (2021): 226, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-041719-102430>; Avant et al., 'Special Issue on "American Bias"', 299.

This quantitative study offers robust evidence of Anglocentrism in the study of covert action, but it does not attempt to reject or diminish the value of the Western-centred research base that it demonstrates has developed over the last few decades. Instead, it argues that the limitations of this body of work must be properly recognised, and that measures must be taken to overcome these limitations when broadening study beyond its existing focus. In particular, growing efforts to theorise covert action in a state-agnostic manner must not fall victim to accidental Anglocentrism because of a lack of awareness of the impact this has on existing scholarship. A characterisation of Anglocentrism and the issues it causes forms the first part of this study.

Characterising the Issue of Anglocentrism

A degree of Anglocentrism has already been demonstrated across international relations, the social sciences and academia in general. The factors driving this have been studied extensively, and exploration of academic biases have revealed a number of root cause issues. First, global academic publishing favours the English language, giving an inbuilt advantage to scholarship from the Anglosphere, while many non-Western states encourage publication of research at the national level in native languages in order to enrich local academic debate.⁴ Second, academic publishing has been demonstrated to favour high-profile institutions which are predominantly found in Western states, increasing the relative coverage of research originating in the West.⁵ Similarly, implicit association tests have demonstrated that reviewers exhibit a moderately strong association between high-income states – once again, predominantly Western – and good quality research, making studies involving Western states more likely to reach publication.⁶ Third, when scholars from the Anglosphere and the West conduct research concerning non-Western states, this is frequently conducted remotely or with little involvement of local scholars, preventing knowledge transfer from occurring and limiting the scope for local scholars to engage more effectively in generating scholarship relevant to their own states.⁷ Fourth, the use of paywalls for journal articles imposes a high financial burden on scholars in less developed states, limiting their ability to engage with the broader literature in their field despite better access to local data.⁸ Drawing all of these root causes together, scholarship is concentrated towards existing centres of gravity, which in the case of covert action scholarship is its heavily Anglocentric research base.⁹

Following from the body of existing research into these factors are a series of proposals for overcoming wider academic biases, which apply equally to covert action as to all scholarship with some degree of Anglocentrism. Many focus on attempting to reduce the impact of the entrenched advantages and encourage scholarship of non-Western states to grow. For example, simply encouraging scholarship focused on non-Western states and the Global South through measures such as special issues and calls for papers can allow journal editors to directly contribute towards overcoming Anglocentrism. In turn, the publication of non-Western focused articles in journals with higher impact factors encourages greater visibility, counteracting the accumulated advantage of

⁴ Lucinda Cash-Gibson et al., 'Inequalities in Global Health Inequalities Research: A 50-Year Bibliometric Analysis (1966-2015)', *PLOS ONE* 13, no. 1 (2018): 18, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0191901>.

⁵ Tobias Opthof et al., 'The Significance of the Peer Review Process against the Background of Bias: Priority Ratings of Reviewers and Editors and the Prediction of Citation, the Role of Geographical Bias', *Cardiovascular Research* 56, no. 3 (2002): 339–46, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0008-6363\(02\)00712-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0008-6363(02)00712-5).

⁶ Matthew Harris et al., 'Measuring the Bias against Low-Income Country Research: An Implicit Association Test', *Globalization and Health* 13, no. 1 (2017): 80, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12992-017-0304-y>.

⁷ Danny Haelewaters et al., 'Ten Simple Rules for Global North Researchers to Stop Perpetuating Helicopter Research in the Global South', *PLOS Computational Biology* 17, no. 8 (2021): e1009277, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pcbi.1009277>.

⁸ Kiarash Aramesh, 'Biopolitics, Pseudoscience, and Bioethics in the Global South', *The American Journal of Bioethics* 17, no. 10 (2017): 26–28, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15265161.2017.1365187>.

⁹ M. Bonitz et al., 'Characteristics and Impact of the Matthew Effect for Countries', *Scientometrics* 40, no. 3 (1997): 407, <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02459289>.

Western states through encouraging higher citation rates in journals. Likewise, co-publishing with non-Western journals and republishing in languages other than English can broaden the accessibility of scholarship.¹⁰ Measures such as these have the greatest effect in overcoming the attention bias of academia by increasing the visibility of non-Western scholarship, while additional measures such as co-authoring with non-Western scholars can help reduce biases related to the accuracy of data and information.¹¹

The negative effects of a Anglocentric approach to issues in international relations are well-documented. These effects have been grouped into three categories: attention, where Anglocentric work is more voluminous and crowds out other perspectives; accuracy, where Anglocentric assumptions are not recognised and challenged in data which is presented as objective; and approach, where the conceptual framing of the field is restricted to an Anglocentric perspective.¹² Together, the most important consequence of these effects is a reduced quality and quantity of scholarship covering non-Western states, significantly limiting the reach and impact of international relations as an academic field. Resolving this limitation is an uphill battle, as the large existing body of Anglocentric attention, accuracy and approach creates long-term feedback loops which are difficult to break. Goh argues that prevailing trends in the international system including the dilution of Western hegemony and diverging international systems make the insights of Anglocentric scholarship less applicable to wider international relations than was historically the case, and make overcoming Anglocentrism more important than ever.¹³

As a discipline within international relations, these factors apply to the study of covert action, but scholars have occasionally suggested that covert action as a topic of study presents its own unique challenges. These are best represented by Cormac, who describes an 'evidence bias' in the study of covert action, where Anglocentric scholarship is perpetuated based on the much higher quantity of available evidence of Western covert action that can be easily studied.¹⁴ The extent of this bias, particularly the degree to which it affects the field, has not yet been explored in detail. Though this evidence bias is intuitive to some scholars, a resulting Anglocentrism over and above the baseline Anglocentrism in international relations and the social sciences has not been demonstrated or attributed to this cause, leaving many open questions about the state and future course of Anglocentrism in covert action scholarship. Resolving these outstanding questions is the core purpose of this study.

Some studies refer to the effects of Anglocentrism as specifically American, while others adopt a US-UK categorisation or a more general view of a Western focus. An American focus in this context does not necessarily refer to a geographic limitation to the United States of America, instead being a series of perspectives, priorities and assumptions that align with an orthodox American understanding of the international system and actors within it. This worldview is generally shared by many Western states, creating difficulty in understanding whether to characterise the focus of scholarship as America-centric or Anglocentric. Many recognisably Western attitudes in the international system, such as the primacy of a unitary, sovereign state in international affairs and a tendency towards multilateral co-operative institutions, are recognisably European in origin rather

¹⁰ Juliana A Bol et al., 'How to Address the Geographical Bias in Academic Publishing', *BMJ Global Health* 8, no. 12 (2023): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjgh-2023-013111>.

¹¹ Jeff D Colgan, 'American Bias in Global Security Studies Data', *Journal of Global Security Studies* 4, no. 3 (2019): 368, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jogss/ogz030>.

¹² Evelyn Goh, 'US Dominance and American Bias in International Relations Scholarship: A View from the Outside', *Journal of Global Security Studies* 4, no. 3 (2019): 301, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jogss/ogz029>.

¹³ Goh, 'US Dominance and American Bias in International Relations Scholarship', 403.

¹⁴ Rory Cormac, 'Disruption and Deniable Interventionism: Explaining the Appeal of Covert Action and Special Forces in Contemporary British Policy', *International Relations* 31, no. 2 (2017): 169, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0047117816659532>.

than American and often descend from a Westphalian view of international relations.¹⁵ For covert action, the reverse appears true to some extent with the US perspective shaping European approaches. However, the development of the American covert action capability in the aftermath of the Second World War is traceable back to the experiences of the Office of Strategic Services, who were trained in covert action by British intelligence officers within the Special Operations Executive, whose approach can be traced back further to the work of a single British intelligence officer, Major-General Colin Gubbins.¹⁶ This suggests that an academic approach dominated by American experience and perspective cannot be claimed solely by the USA, making a broader grouping more suitable.

A hybrid approach is adopted for this study, favouring the term Anglocentrism to describe the phenomenon but considering this quantitatively the context of Western and non-Western states. This approach is borne out by the primary evidence below, and also ensures compatibility with broader discussion about diversity and the Global South in the study of covert action, intelligence, and the social sciences in general. This aligns with the view of Aldrich and Kasuku that the academic conceptualisation of state secrecy is inherently Anglocentric, as well as the insights of Van Puyvelde and Curtis who note that these same biases manifest practically across the Five Eyes and to a lesser extent Western states in general.¹⁷

The question therefore arises of which states to classify as Western. In answer to this, Colgan adapts terminology from psychology studies, noting that psychologists acknowledge a difference in experimental studies when participants are from so-called 'WEIRD' states: Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich and Democratic.¹⁸ Colgan's list of Western states (with the notable exception of Russia, which the 2022 invasion of Ukraine has placed firmly on the other axis of global society to the West) is instructive: North America, Western Europe, Australia and New Zealand, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, much of Eastern Europe and Israel along with a few others. Colgan's tests also make it easy to exclude otherwise hazily defined states from the list. For example, contrasting the extent of cultural similarity with other Western states in South Korea and Japan to that in India, Brazil and South Africa creates clearer distinctions which are instructive for this study.

There is nothing inherently anti-Western about taking measures to overcome Anglocentrism in scholarship. The issue at stake in this study of generalisability and growth, rather than an attempt to disprove or weaken the existing body of research. It cannot be overstated that Anglocentrism in the study of covert action does not necessarily detract from the quality or utility of established covert action scholarship, instead only acknowledging its limitations for non-Western covert action while seeking to determine which approaches will extend the reach of the field beyond its current area of focus. In plenty of studies an objective measurement is not necessary for studying the West in isolation, and an Anglocentric approach will have only a small effect on the conclusions of such a study.¹⁹ These studies remain useful for understanding the attitudes and perspectives of Western states, the conduct of Western covert action and the influences shaping the Western approach to covert action. Shiraz and Aldrich further argue that from a historical perspective, the application of Western intelligence insights to the Global South should not be dismissed out of hand given that

¹⁵ JASON FARR, 'POINT: THE WESTPHALIA LEGACY AND THE MODERN NATION-STATE', *International Social Science Review* 80 (January 2005): 157–58, <https://doi.org/10.2307/41887235>.

¹⁶ Aaron R B Linderman, 'Reclaiming the Ungentlemanly Arts' (PhD Thesis, Texas A&M University, 2012), iv.

¹⁷ Richard J. Aldrich and John Kasuku, 'Escaping from American Intelligence: Culture, Ethnocentrism and the Anglosphere', *International Affairs* 88, no. 5 (2012): 1012, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2346.2012.01116.x>; Damien Van Puyvelde and Sean Curtis, "'Standing on the Shoulders of Giants": Diversity and Scholarship in Intelligence Studies', *Intelligence and National Security* 31, no. 7 (2016): 1040–54, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02684527.2016.1185323>.

¹⁸ Joseph Henrich et al., 'The Weirdest People in the World?', *The Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 33, nos 2–3 (2010): 61–83; discussion 83–135, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0140525X0999152X>.

¹⁹ Sarah Sunn Bush, 'National Perspectives and Quantitative Datasets: A Silver Lining?', *Journal of Global Security Studies* 4, no. 3 (2019): 372–73, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jogss/ogz022>.

many intelligence organisations in these parts of the world, notably in Latin America, were incubated and in some cases funded by Western intelligence agencies and will have inherited or adopted many characteristics of Western covert action.²⁰ Nonetheless, care should be taken to avoid treating these studies of Western covert action as a general model for its employment by all states, and theorisations based solely on Western examples should therefore be avoided.

Furthermore, although the issue presently at stake is that of Anglocentrism, insulating the field against undue influence of all national perspectives will become increasingly important as states generate studies deliberately intended to skew scholarship towards a more favourable worldview. Wang Hung-jen notes that the Chinese Communist Party influences international relations scholarship produced in Chinese universities 'to meet its needs and interests'.²¹ He argues that Chinese-produced scholarship works to decouple international relations concepts from Anglocentrism and then actively introduces new Chinese biases which can be used 'in support of their country's aspirations', using the example of a definition of national sovereignty which was appropriated by China to justify parity with the USA in international affairs and is deliberately adjusted to suit national political priorities, even at the expense of scientific accuracy.²² The contrast between largely unconscious Anglocentrism and centrally directed Chinese bias is significant, but manifests in much the same way with scholarship that may have limited generalisability and lead to incorrect conclusions when applied to other states. Perhaps more significantly, it also suggests that the ability to mitigate national biases may become increasingly more important as highly politicised non-Western scholarship grows, and that some of the measures proposed in this study may soon be required in other national contexts beyond Western states.

Quantifying Anglocentrism in the Study of Covert Action

This study uses the relative coverage of non-Western states compared to Western states and the US and UK in particular in journal articles as the basis for determining the extent of Anglocentrism in covert action scholarship. Relative coverage of different areas of geographic focus is a basic measure of Anglocentrism, and does not offer insight alone into the factors driving the phenomenon, for which more nuanced interrogations are required such as those in subsequent sections of this study.²³ This measure nonetheless serves two foundational and fundamental purposes for the study. First, it adds a useful quantification of Anglocentrism in existing literature to the extensive qualitative and ethnographic debate in wider fields such as intelligence studies, confirming the need for measures to overcome the issue.²⁴ Second, it facilitates comparison with benchmark datasets from across international relations and elsewhere in the social sciences, to determine whether Anglocentrism in covert action is greater than that observed elsewhere and whether factors specific to the discipline are indeed driving this disparity with wider literature.

Peer-reviewed academic journals are an effective proxy for understanding a field at large. Publication of ideas in a journal is considered 'the most prominent and powerful' indicator of academic prominence, and the publications themselves are described as the 'currency of academia'.²⁵ Bibliometric studies have used publications to explore the geography of a given field,

²⁰ Zakia Shiraz and Richard J. Aldrich, 'Secrecy, Spies and the Global South: Intelligence Studies beyond the "Five Eyes" Alliance', *International Affairs* 95, no. 6 (2019): 1320, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiz200>.

²¹ Hung-jen Wang, *The Rise of China and Chinese International Relations Scholarship* (Lexington Books, 2013), 2; Goh, 'US Dominance and American Bias in International Relations Scholarship', 408.

²² Wang, *The Rise of China and Chinese International Relations Scholarship*, 3.

²³ Cullen S Hendrix and Jon Vreede, 'US Dominance in International Relations and Security Scholarship in Leading Journals', *Journal of Global Security Studies* 4, no. 3 (2019): 310, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jogss/ogz023>.

²⁴ Cormac et al., 'What Constitutes Successful Covert Action?', 126.

²⁵ Shannon Mason and Margaret K Merga, 'A Current View of the Thesis by Publication in the Humanities and Social Sciences', *International Journal of Doctoral Studies* 13 (2018): 140, <https://doi.org/10.28945/3983>; Bruno Starrs, 'Publish

finding evidence across academia that Western states are disproportionately represented in academic publishing across a wide range of disciplines. However, as one meta-analysis of 3,501 articles notes, systematic reviews of geographic bias in published scholarship are vanishingly rare, with only three geographic bias articles found across five journal databases - less than 0.1% of the sample.²⁶ Where these studies do exist, they tend to focus on the country of origin of study authors, such as a 2018 study exploring the geographic distribution of scientific production on health inequalities, which reviewed 42,451 journal articles published between 1966 and 2015 and found that 84.1% of published articles included authors from Western states, 42.6% included authors from the USA specifically and 10.8% included authors from the UK.²⁷ The scale of such fields of study make deeper analysis of the geographic context of articles impractical in many cases, which is generally acknowledged as a limitation of these studies.²⁸

The only detailed exception to this is a 2021 study by Mason et al, which manually reviewed the contents of 3,076 articles published over the preceding three years in higher education journals to determine their geographic focus, rather than the authors' or journal's national affiliations.²⁹ This study offers the only known systematic review of geographic context of published work in the social sciences, and has a sampling strategy incorporating both higher quartile and lower quartile journals to ensure broader representation. Mason et al identified that in higher education journals across the social sciences 83% of published work was geographically focused on Western states and 23.3% were focused on the USA.³⁰ As the only comparable dataset with a sufficiently large sample and sufficient data quality, Mason et al offers the best available benchmark for Anglocentrism in the wider social sciences.

No systematic literature review exploring the geographic context of published journal articles in international relations to a similar level of detail has been identified. The only comparable study was conducted by Hendrix and Vreede in 2019. Their review does not assign a single geographic focus to each article, with data grouped instead by country and counting the number of articles that specific tokens for a country name (e.g. USA, United States of America, American) appear in the title of.³¹ The limitation of this methodology, in failing to quantify whether title mentions of a non-Western state such as China is made only with reference to a Western focus such as US foreign policy, is acknowledged by the authors.³² However, given the relatively large sample size of 6,500 articles over a 50-year period, and use of title mentions rather than abstract or full-text mentions to focus on states which feature prominently in an article, it is usable as a benchmark for geographic focus within published work on international relations. These two benchmark datasets, for elsewhere in the social sciences and international relations respectively, informed the collection and analysis methodology as well as the criteria for determining the extent of Anglocentrism in covert action literature.

Through a manual census review of articles in *Intelligence and National Security* (INS) and *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence* (IJIC), Van Puyvelde and Curtis found that the US and UK were the focus of 71.2% of intelligence studies articles published between 1986

and Graduate?: Earning a PhD by Published Papers in Australia', *M/C Journal* 11, no. 4 (2008): 1, 4, <https://doi.org/10.5204/mcj.37>.

²⁶ Mark Skopec et al., 'The Role of Geographic Bias in Knowledge Diffusion: A Systematic Review and Narrative Synthesis', *Research Integrity and Peer Review* 5, no. 1 (2020): 2, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s41073-019-0088-0>.

²⁷ Cash-Gibson et al., 'Inequalities in Global Health Inequalities Research'.

²⁸ Cash-Gibson et al., 'Inequalities in Global Health Inequalities Research', 18.

²⁹ Shannon Mason et al., 'The Internationality of Published Higher Education Scholarship: How Do the "Top" Journals Compare?', *Journal of Informetrics* 15, no. 2 (2021): 5, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.joi.2021.101155>.

³⁰ Mason et al., 'The Internationality of Published Higher Education Scholarship', 10.

³¹ Hendrix and Vreede, 'US Dominance in International Relations and Security Scholarship in Leading Journals', 311.

³² Hendrix and Vreede, 'US Dominance in International Relations and Security Scholarship in Leading Journals', 319.

and 2015.³³ Although neither a dataset nor granular details are available for this study, the published headline figure offers another useful benchmark given that both *INS* and *IJC* prominently feature the study of covert action in their collections. They also note that coverage of non-Western states has increased over time in intelligence studies, suggesting that efforts in academia to actively broaden representation may be having a positive effect and be worth pursuing further.

The covert action dataset that forms the centrepiece of this study was collected from multiple indexes and then combined and deduplicated. For Scopus and Web of Science, the internal search function was used to search for ‘covert action’, and metadata for all results were exported. Both Scopus and Web of Science metadata is reproduced in this dataset with the permission of Elsevier and Clarivate, however for Web of Science only the publication year, citation count, DOI and Web of Science Unique ID (UID) could be published alongside subsequent enrichment data added by the author. For Google Scholar, searches were conducted using Harzing’s Publish or Perish 8 using the term ‘covert action’.³⁴ Unlike either Scopus or Web of Science, Google Scholar will continue to display results with decreasing relevance up to 1000 results. A sample size of 500 was determined with machine assistance from PageRank, where results were sorted in decreasing order of relevance and the author manually reviewed results in this order until almost all results were either duplicate entries or entirely unrelated to covert action, which occurred shortly before the 500 result mark. The metadata for these articles was exported from Publish or Perish. The resulting dataset contains articles published between 1975 and 2024, with mean of 2010 and median of 2013. All results were then manually filtered to identify articles which did not study covert action as well as duplicate articles. The table below details the initial and filtered article counts for each source.

Source	Initial	Filtered
Google Scholar	500	284
Scopus	269	170
Web of Science	247	124
Total	1016	578

Each dataset was enriched manually in a two-stage coding. The first stage used the title and abstract to identify a clear geographic focus, and then if a geographic focus was not clear, the second stage reviewed the full text of the article. Articles were coded with a single geographic focus based on the state most strongly associated with the conduct of covert action in the article – for example, an article about Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) interference in Nicaragua is coded as USA rather than Nicaragua.

The methodology introduces three elements of conservatism spanning the comparison with benchmark datasets, the collection methodology, and the coding technique. The inclusion of a far wider range of journals, compared to the restrictive sampling of only top-quartile journals for the IR dataset, increases the likelihood of greater representation from non-Western states. The use of multiple academic indexes greatly increases the coverage of the sample, with 69% of articles in the dataset only appearing in one of the three indexes, suggesting that a greater number of articles in this sample come from outside the academic mainstream for the field. Finally, the coding technique introduces a Neutral category which excludes articles that may be influenced by an American academic bias but do not foreground Western examples or approaches in their work. Together, these elements offer a high level of assurance of the study’s conclusions.

³³ Van Puyvelde and Curtis, “Standing on the Shoulders of Giants”, 1048.

³⁴ AW Harzing, *Publish or Perish*, released 2007, <https://harzing.com/resources/publish-or-perish>.

Following data collection and coding, the datasets were combined and deduplicated to remove articles repeated across multiple datasets, giving a sample size of 401. The total amount of published research in an academic field is effectively unknowable, with academic indexes such as those used for this study typically recommended as the best approximation of total field size. To determine the extent to which the sample reflects available literature, a subsample of the dataset from a single journal was compared to a manual review of all articles published by that journal over the most recent five-year period, to identify how many articles relevant to covert action have not been incorporated into the dataset. A manual review of *Intelligence and National Security*, the most commonly included journal in the dataset (46 articles in total compared with an average of 1.6 articles for all journals) between 2020-2024 determined that 21 articles had been published which study covert action, of which 17 were included in the dataset for this study. This suggests that the dataset for this study samples around 81% of total published articles on covert action, a very high percentage which gives a high degree of confidence that this study's results are representative of the field at large. To ensure that the fixed search strategy and reproducibility were maintained, these subsequently identified articles were not then incorporated into the dataset.

The assessment of Anglocentrism in published articles on covert action literature is based on volume of articles with a given geographic focus, as well as the relative citation count of these articles given published research which shows that articles with a higher number of citations tend to attract more interest, which in turn concentrates the geographic focus of subsequent research towards the focus of the previously more-cited articles.³⁵ This is applied both in the context of the US and UK specifically, and for Western states in general. In addition, comparison is made between the level of geographic focus in the covert action dataset and the identified benchmark datasets for the social sciences and international relations. Given the heterogenous nature of the benchmark datasets, different analysis and presentation techniques must be applied to the dataset for this study to give comparable outputs. The specific analysis and presentation techniques used in each case are discussed alongside the results of this study.

Results

Analysis of 401 journal articles, estimated to represent over 80% of published literature, demonstrates overwhelming Anglocentrism in the study of covert action. 86% of published articles in the sample focus specifically on Western states, while only 5.5% focus on non-Western states. The UK and USA together are the focus of 78.8% of articles, exceeding the baseline 71.2% across all intelligence studies articles in *INS* and *IJIC* identified by Van Puyvelde and Curtis.³⁶ In addition, articles focused on Western states receive 3.8 times as many citations as those focused on non-Western states, and 18% more than articles with no overt geographic focus, a trend repeated for the UK and USA in particular. The full results of this analysis are presented in the table below.

Geographic Focus	Proportion (n = 401)	Mean Citations per Article
Western	86.0%	12.9
USA	68.6%	13.8
UK	7.0%	8.2
General Western	4.2%	12.2
UK/USA	3.2%	12.3
France	1.0%	7.0

³⁵ Bonitz et al., 'Characteristics and Impact of the Matthew Effect for Countries', 407.

³⁶ Van Puyvelde and Curtis, "Standing on the Shoulders of Giants", 1048.

<i>Israel</i>	0.7%	10.7
<i>Australia</i>	0.5%	2.5
<i>Italy</i>	0.2%	0.0
<i>New Zealand</i>	0.2%	0.0
<i>Spain</i>	0.2%	0.0
Neutral	8.5%	10.9
Non-Western	5.5%	3.4
<i>Russia</i>	3.2%	4.4
<i>China</i>	1.0%	1.0
<i>Iran</i>	0.2%	0.0
<i>India</i>	0.2%	0.0
<i>Turkey</i>	0.2%	3.3
<i>Mexico</i>	0.2%	8.0
<i>North Korea</i>	0.2%	1.7
Total	100.0%	12.2

The three elements of conservatism built into data collection and analysis make these results a low estimate for the field of covert action at large. For example, a proportion of the 8.5% of articles which did not have a clear geographic focus will be heavily influenced by Anglocentric approaches and accuracy issues, which would increase the proportion of articles demonstrably affected by Anglocentrism. Even so, when such a high proportion of articles are focused on Western states and the US and UK in particular, and these receive more than three times the attention than their non-Western counterparts, there is strong evidence that overall scholarship of covert action is heavily Anglocentric.

Having analysed the dataset of covert action articles, comparative analysis with identified benchmark datasets is now feasible. To transform the dataset for comparison with the benchmark from the social sciences, Western states were aggregated under the slightly broader regional headings used by Mason et al such as Australia/New Zealand and Western Europe. This makes per-country comparisons impractical in all but a few specified cases for which per-country data is available, although even with this lower level of detail a conclusion on relative Anglocentrism can be drawn. Mason et al removed articles with no obvious geographic focus from their results, although a similar number of articles had no geographic focus (8.5% for the covert action dataset vs 10.9% for the social sciences dataset), and so these must be removed for comparable percentages to be generated for the covert action dataset. The table below compares the two datasets, showing a significantly higher number of publications focused on Western states - and the USA in particular - in covert action scholarship compared to the wider dataset.

Geographic Focus	Proportion of Covert Action Dataset* (n = 401)	Proportion of Social Sciences Dataset* (n = 3076)
Western	94.0%	83.0%
USA	78.4%	23.3%
Non-Western	6.0%	17.0%
Total	100.0%	100.0%

**Excluding articles with no geographic focus, as per Mason et al dataset*

This result shows that a notably higher proportion of the covert action dataset is geographically focused on Western states, with 65% fewer articles focused on non-Western states than the social sciences dataset. Meanwhile, articles focused on the USA dominate the covert action dataset to a

greater degree; over three quarters of articles which have a geographic focus are focused on the USA, compared with less than a quarter of the benchmark social sciences dataset. This suggests a greater degree of Anglocentrism is evident in covert action scholarship than in the wider social sciences.

For comparison with the International Relations dataset, a different transformation of the dataset is required. This involves comparing whether variations of the name of a state appear in the title of an article, used by Hendrix and Vreede as an indicator that the state received significant focus in the article.³⁷ By counting the number of articles for which each state's name appears, and allowing articles to count towards multiple countries where they appear, an effective comparison can be made with the results of the benchmark dataset. Although state names are generally much more likely to appear in the covert action dataset, appearing 10 times as often, there is a notable contrast between the proportions of American, Western and non-Western title mentions between the two datasets. The table below details results for all states which are the geographic focus of at least one article in the covert action dataset.

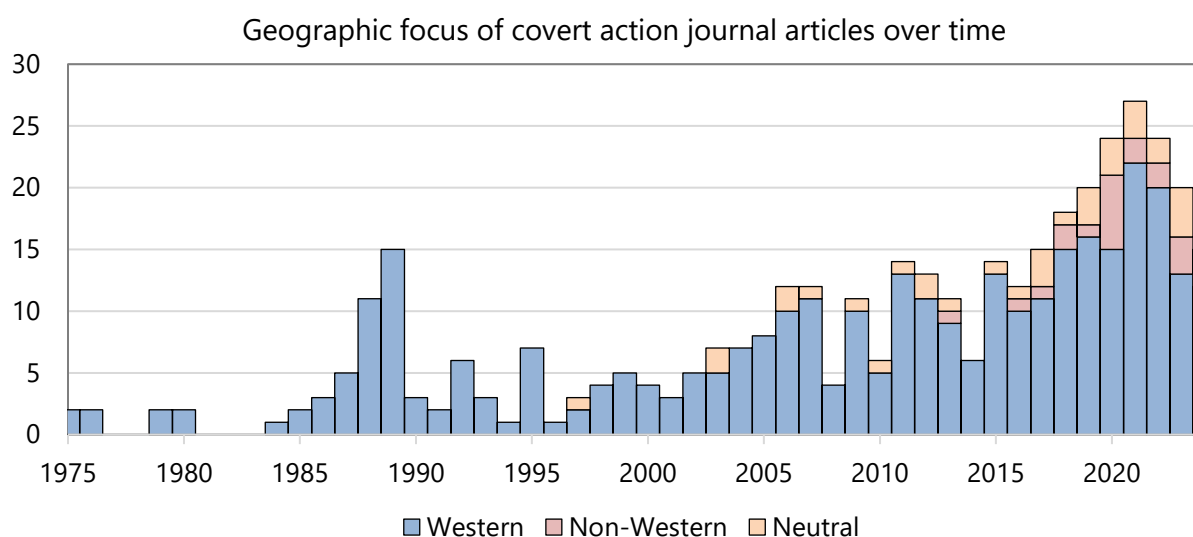
Geographic Focus	Title Mentions in Covert Action Dataset (n = 401)	Title Mentions in International Relations Dataset (n = 6503)
Western	5.55%	0.33%
<i>USA</i>	21.20%	1.66%
<i>UK</i>	16.46%	0.18%
<i>Israel</i>	2.49%	0.22%
<i>France</i>	1.50%	0.22%
<i>Australia</i>	0.75%	0.06%
<i>Italy</i>	1.50%	0.08%
<i>New Zealand</i>	0.25%	0.03%
<i>Spain</i>	0.25%	0.08%
Non-Western	1.78%	0.45%
<i>Russia</i>	4.74%	0.94%
<i>China</i>	1.25%	1.15%
<i>Iran</i>	4.74%	0.37%
<i>India</i>	0.50%	0.34%
<i>Turkey</i>	0.50%	0.11%
<i>Mexico</i>	0.50%	0.28%
<i>North Korea</i>	0.25%	0.17%

In the benchmark IR dataset Western states were less prominent, mentioned in article titles 0.73 times as often as non-Western states, although the USA is a clear outlier and appears 4.23 times as often as the average for the sample. Meanwhile, in the covert action dataset Western states appear in article titles 3.11 times as often as non-Western states, a dramatic difference compared to the benchmark for IR. Not only is a covert action article much more likely to feature a Western state in its title than a non-Western state, compared to wider IR articles Western articles are 4.21 times as likely to appear. The USA also stands out far more in the covert action dataset, appearing 5.59 times as often as average. Adding the term CIA to the criteria for USA title mentions raises the total proportion to 35.41%, meaning that more than a third of all covert action titles mention the USA in

³⁷ Hendrix and Vreede, 'US Dominance in International Relations and Security Scholarship in Leading Journals', 311.

some form, more than 9 times the average. The UK is also far above the average, appearing 3.74 times as often as any other country in the world besides the USA. Against the benchmark for international relations, Western states appear in the titles of articles about covert action far more frequently than non-Western states and the USA and UK dominate, suggesting that scholarship of covert action has a significantly greater degree of Anglocentrism than wider international relations.

Noting the trend observed by van Puyvelde and Curtis towards increasing diversity of scholarship in intelligence studies in recent years, the geographic focus of covert action articles is also plotted in the figure below over time. The trend towards increasing breadth of geographic focus of covert action scholarship is visible in the data. While 93.3% of articles published up to 2015 are Western-focused, this has declined to 76.6% in the last decade. A similar trend is observed for the UK and USA in particular, with an 88.9% focus dropping to a lower but still very high proportion of 65.7%. This data allows two distinct insights to be drawn: first, that wider efforts to broaden academic representation are having a positive effect on covert action scholarship; and second, that despite this trend there is still significant Anglocentrism observable across the most recently published work.



Overall, the results confirm a level of geographic focus on covert action conducted by Western states that is much greater than observed in benchmark datasets for international relations and the social sciences. This suggests that there are more acute influences on Anglocentrism in the study of covert action, which aligns with the prediction of a specific evidence bias in covert action scholarship. Although measures of relative coverage provide valuable evidence that Anglocentrism in covert action is greater than explainable by wider trends in academia, more nuanced analysis of the data is essential to understand what drives this more acute Anglocentrism. Such analysis is the focus of the remainder of this study.

Evidence Biases Driving Anglocentrism

The specific nature of covert action as an object of study drives the argument that it is affected more acutely by Anglocentrism than wider international relations, as demonstrated above. Indeed, scholarship of covert action is highly unusual compared to the majority of international relations and wider academia, most notably because of its inherently unacknowledged nature.³⁸ Covert action is famously challenging to study, with established scholars noting that ‘the ultimate confidential topic in government’ eludes comprehensive analysis because so much secrecy surrounds even historical activity, and the vast majority of relevant primary material is highly classified and may never be

³⁸ Jack Duffield, ‘A Narrative Approach to Analysis of Covert Action’, *Review of International Studies* 51, no. 4 (2025): 9, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210524000445>.

revealed to the public.³⁹ By default, reliable official information regarding covert action is not forthcoming for the vast majority of states, complicating efforts to extend the scope of the field beyond its Anglocentric base. However, such secrecy does not apply evenly to all states, which is the basis of the evidence bias posited by Cormac where Anglocentric scholarship is perpetuated based on the much higher quantity of available evidence of Western covert action that can be easily studied.⁴⁰

The principles of the evidence bias are best demonstrated by the USA. The American attitude to legislative transparency is extreme even by Western standards, and is heavily enshrined in law and practice. The Freedom of Information Act is described by scholars as the centrepiece of an unparalleled 'ecology of transparency' in the US government which energises the study of traditionally secretive activity.⁴¹ A robust regime of declassification and the absence of a legal presumption in favour of secrecy (such as the UK's Official Secrets Act) have created an extensive culture of bulk publishing of official national security information. The American attitude to journalistic disclosures of classified information is also unusually relaxed, applying the full force of the law to espionage cases but rarely prosecuting leaks to the press concerning activity such as covert action, which steadily increases available secondary evidence from media sources.⁴² Open government archives are widely accessible and complemented by online archives including Declassified Documents Online, the National Security Archive, the CIA CREST database, and databases of the National Security Agency and Department of Homeland Security Freedom of Information Act requests, further reducing geographic and financial barriers to accessing this information.⁴³ Altogether, the USA is matched by very few states in its transparency, with only a handful of Western states such as the UK matching this level of quantity and accessibility of declassified information. Van Puyvelde and Curtis argue that this unusual openness is a primary determinant of Anglocentrism in intelligence studies.⁴⁴

Even beyond the USA, Western states are generally stronger than average for wider government accountability and transparency. The Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI) provide annual rankings on 'Voice and Accountability', which measures overall democracy alongside 'freedom of expression, freedom of association, and a free media'.⁴⁵ Overlaying these with published literature on covert action, the set of Western states which feature in the covert action dataset are on average three times higher in global rankings than the non-Western states. Although it is not a direct comparison, this does suggest an overlap between states where strong political and press freedoms exist and states most likely to be the focus of articles on covert action. This is to some extent a result of the inherently ambiguous attributability of covert action: the effects of basic political freedoms on academic publications are magnified when discussing government activity sensitive enough that most states actively suppress evidence of their involvement in it.⁴⁶ To determine the correlation between government transparency and publication on covert action, the table below compares coverage of states in the dataset to percentile rankings from the WGI.

³⁹ Loch K. Johnson, *The Third Option: Covert Action and American Foreign Policy*, 1st edn (Oxford University Press, 2022), xv, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197604410.001.0001>.

⁴⁰ Cormac, 'Disruption and Deniable Interventionism', 169.

⁴¹ Seth F Kreimer, *The Freedom of Information Act and the Ecology of Transparency*, nos 08–06, Public Law and Legal Theory Research Paper Series (University of Pennsylvania Law School, 2007), 1015–16.

⁴² Stephen P Mulligan and Jennifer K Elsea, *Criminal Prohibitions on Leaks and Other Disclosures of Classified Defense Information*, CRS Report for Congress no. R41404 (Congressional Research Service, 2023).

⁴³ Richard Mobley, 'Classification & Declassification of Government Documents', National Security Law Research Guides, 2024, <https://guides.ll.georgetown.edu/c.php?g=365986&p=5376077>.

⁴⁴ Van Puyvelde and Curtis, "Standing on the Shoulders of Giants", 1023.

⁴⁵ Daniel Kaufmann and Aart Kraay, 'Worldwide Governance Indicators - 2023 Update', 2023, www.govindicators.org.

⁴⁶ Duffield, 'A Narrative Approach to Analysis of Covert Action', 9.

Geographic Focus	Proportion (n = 401)	Mean Citations per Article	WGI Voice and Accountability Percentile
Western	86.0%	12.9	86.2
<i>USA</i>	68.6%	13.8	72.9
<i>UK</i>	7.0%	8.2	89.4
<i>General Western</i>	4.2%	12.2	-
<i>UK/USA</i>	3.2%	12.3	-
<i>France</i>	1.0%	7.0	67.6
<i>Israel</i>	0.7%	10.7	86.0
<i>Australia</i>	0.5%	2.5	93.2
<i>Italy</i>	0.2%	0.0	82.6
<i>New Zealand</i>	0.2%	0.0	99.5
<i>Spain</i>	0.2%	0.0	79.7
Neutral	8.5%	10.9	-
Non-Western	5.5%	3.4	20.6
<i>Russia</i>	3.2%	4.4	14.5
<i>China</i>	1.0%	1.0	6.3
<i>Iran</i>	0.2%	0.0	8.7
<i>India</i>	0.2%	0.0	49.3
<i>Turkey</i>	0.2%	3.3	23.2
<i>Mexico</i>	0.2%	8.0	42.0
<i>North Korea</i>	0.2%	1.7	0.0
Total	100.0%	12.2	54.3

In general terms, state attitudes to voice and accountability are a good predictor of relative coverage in covert action scholarship, and holds out especially well for high-profile non-Western states such as China and Iran. However, the correlation between government transparency and publication volume on covert action does not hold out in several cases for high-transparency Western states. For example, the UK, France and Australia have very similar high scores in the WGI rankings, yet the UK is the subject of 41 articles on covert action while France and Australia combined are the subject of only 6. Canada, which scores more highly than all three of these countries, is the focus of no articles in the dataset at all, and a single reference to Canadian activity in the literature can be found detailing Canadian involvement in a US-backed operation in 1979 to rescue several American diplomats from their embassy in Tehran.⁴⁷ The data supports the existence of an evidence bias where a lack of government transparency and political freedom has a constraining effect on publication of work on covert action, but in cases where states have greater transparency the correlation does not hold as strongly. This suggests that other factors are at play and censorship is not the main determinant of the volume of covert action scholarship for a given state.

Instead, as some scholars have assumed, certain states may simply conduct more covert action than others. For the reasons described above, this is effectively impossible to prove – even intuitive indicators such as population size cannot be used to reliably estimate secretive state activity, as the example of the Vatican's prodigious foreign interventions demonstrate.⁴⁸ Unlike in other fields of study, covert action is often ambiguous, deniable or outright concealed, and states are coy even when presented with compelling evidence that they have conducted it. Returning to the example of Canada, it unusually has no foreign intelligence service, which is often a principal conductor of

⁴⁷ Robert Turner, 'Coercive Covert Action and the Law', *Yale Journal of International Law* 20, no. 2 (1995): 431.

⁴⁸ Yvonnick Denoël, *Vatican Spies: From the Second World War to Pope Francis* (Oxford University Press, 2025).

covert action in other Western states⁴⁹. Its main intelligence agency, the Canadian Security Intelligence Service, is legally bound to collect foreign intelligence only inside Canada itself, which is acknowledged to cause significant operational constraints and reduces the intelligence resource available to deliver covert effect.⁵⁰ Scholars have stated that outside of wartime Canada does not conduct CIA-style covert operations, and where Canada does appear to have been involved in covert activity overseas such as the covert acquisition of Russian Squall torpedoes, there are suggestions that this was only as a proxy for the UK and USA.⁵¹ The legal constraints, lack of dedicated resource within state security apparatus and apparent lack of evidence despite similar transparency scores to some of the most prolific known users of covert action suggest Canada conducts less covert action than a state with similar Western characteristics and transparency scores such as the UK. This lends credibility to the argument that Anglocentrism in covert action scholarship is shaped by states such as the USA and UK conducting more covert action than non-Western states. On a conceptual level, this argument can be framed as simply another sort of evidence bias, where a greater proportion of the object of study is found in Western states and so Western states naturally become the focus of more scholarship.

However, this hypothesis is not fully supported by data across all states, particularly major non-Western states. For example, the Russian concept of 'active measures' is expansive, but as described below can encompass covert action as well as other types of discreet and covert activity. Active measures were described by the former chief of the Soviet Committee for State Security (KGB) foreign intelligence as 'the heart and soul of Soviet intelligence', with greater importance than even intelligence collection.⁵² Given that 'at its peak the KGB was the largest secret-police and foreign-intelligence organization in the world', employing more than 280,000 personnel in non-border policing roles, the relative lack of literature on Russian covert action stands in stark contrast to coverage of covert action by the USA in the Cold War period.⁵³ As with government transparency and political freedom, the argument that states conducting more covert action receive more coverage appears to be far from a complete answer.

The relative attention given to the activities of global powers in general also plays some role in limiting scholarship of covert action in the Global South. Among non-Western states, all of those mentioned in the covert action dataset are ranked in the top 10% of global GDP except Iran and North Korea, suggesting that a larger economy does partially correlate with greater scholarly attention. Similarly, uniting all of the non-Western states in the dataset are their disproportionate consideration in US and UK foreign policy, especially compared to those African and South Asian states which despite large populations and economies do not feature at all in the covert action dataset. This foreign policy attention overlaps with the global ambitions of many of these states – both Western and non-Western – which would explain the absence of major economies and population centres such as Indonesia and Brazil from the dataset. Alongside other factors, the evidence bias does appear to synergise with attention and global ambition of some states, to the detriment of the Global South.

From this analysis it can be concluded that at least some of the enduring Anglocentrism in covert action stems from evidence bias of covert action, manifesting from its inherent ambiguity and the

⁴⁹ Richard James Kott, 'Reinventing the Looking Glass: Developing a Canadian Foreign Intelligence Service', *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies* 6, no. 1 (2009): 21, 1, <https://jmss.org/article/view/57812>.

⁵⁰ Kott, 'Reinventing the Looking Glass', 11–12.

⁵¹ Kott, 'Reinventing the Looking Glass', 21, 59.

⁵² Bogdan-George Rădulescu, 'Russia's Current Application of Active Measures' Concept -the New Political War against West' (2020), 2, <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.15297.58720>.

⁵³ Robert Pringle, 'KGB', Encyclopedia Britannica, 20 September 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/KGB/Creation-and-role-of-the-KGB>.

dramatic way in which the USA deviates from the norms of other states on public disclosure on covert action. No amount of academic effort will prevent this inherent factor driving Anglocentrism, and it would arguably be foolish to attempt to prevent further study of the richest vein of well-evidenced insight into covert action. Instead, the existing Anglocentric research base should be used as a starting point to overcome the inherent barriers to studying non-Western covert action, using comparison as a means of broadening the scope of covert action scholarship. Such an approach has been advocated recently in intelligence studies, where it is proposed as a means of broadening geographic coverage.⁵⁴

The essence of this comparative approach is that states which are the subject of most covert action literature – the UK and USA make up over 75% of published articles – can be used as a foundation to study other states where there is both a paucity of existing academic study and a lack of robust primary data. This requires two procedural changes to the dominant orthodox approach to covert action scholarship. First, moving beyond the US-influenced perspective requires decreasing scholarly reliance on official primary sources such as government records. This means that less traditional academic sources such as analysis of publicly available information become more important, as research into covert action conducted by many non-Western states is effectively precluded without this shift in approach.⁵⁵ To realise this change, the reassuring certainty of official confirmation must be complemented by an acceptance that only a moderate level of confirmation may ever be provided for non-Western examples. Instead, layers of corroboration will be necessary, with theoretical indications such as highly escalatory security narratives supplemented by practical evidence such as changes in the environment not attributable to overt action.⁵⁶ Second, a means of comparing between Western and non-Western covert action must be employed, one which accounts for differing cultural norms to those which influence the majority of existing covert action literature. This requires state attitudes to the use of covert action to be understood through a more culturally agnostic lens. The requirement for such a lens is increasingly recognised by some scholars of covert action, who favour measures of covert action such as narratives of security and success over traditional measures such as mission objectives and outcomes, decreasing reliance on metrics that are effectively only available when studying the USA.⁵⁷ Using such metrics provides the necessary analytic range to judge both Western and non-Western examples together. This approach has been developed into a complete framework for detection, attribution and comparative analysis of covert action which is inclusive of non-Western states, allowing scholars to gain the benefits of existing Western-focused research with effective comparison.⁵⁸ By decreasing reliance on official primary sources in favour of theoretical indication and evidential corroboration, and adopting a narrative lens to conduct comparative analysis, the evidence bias of covert action can be overcome with a revised approach that facilitates the study of non-Western covert action.

Other techniques from wider academia can then be employed to further overcome the paucity of non-Western research bases faced by many scholars. Shiraz and Aldrich note that given the disciplinary preference for empirical research, area studies techniques such as diaspora research and remote communication are essential to gaining primary data on non-Western covert action.⁵⁹ A recent *INS* forum similarly proposed a variety of collection methodologies drawing from other academic fields which could further facilitate collection of primary data.⁶⁰ This includes case studies,

⁵⁴ Shiraz and Aldrich, 'Secrecy, Spies and the Global South', 1325.

⁵⁵ Duffield, 'A Narrative Approach to Analysis of Covert Action', 9.

⁵⁶ Duffield, 'A Narrative Approach to Analysis of Covert Action', 12.

⁵⁷ Cormac et al., 'What Constitutes Successful Covert Action?', 115–17.

⁵⁸ Duffield, 'A Narrative Approach to Analysis of Covert Action', 19.

⁵⁹ Shiraz and Aldrich, 'Secrecy, Spies and the Global South', 1326.

⁶⁰ Peter De Werd et al., 'Special Forum on Intelligence and Theory', *Intelligence and National Security* 39, no. 7 (2024): 1230–53, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02684527.2024.2324534>.

elite interviews, participant observation, oral histories and confidential interviews with practitioners. One of the most intriguing proposals from this forum is the development of analytical techniques tailored to state secrecy and suitable for large-scale data mining and cross-language analysis, which is a promising avenue of further research in the study of covert action.⁶¹

Conceptual Biases Driving Anglocentrism

The examples above suggest that wider academic biases and evidence biases do not fully explain the enduring Anglocentrism of covert action scholarship, meaning that a comparative approach alone may not be sufficient. The example of Soviet active measures, which make up a small fraction of scholarship despite having been the primary task of the world's largest foreign intelligence and secret police organisation, draws attention to this. Some scholars have cautioned against making a direct comparison between active measures and covert action, given the complexity of the practice and its employment of overt as well as covert means.⁶² Others argue that active measures are sufficiently similar to covert action to be considered as entirely synonymous.⁶³ This highlights a major challenge in broadening the Anglocentric literature of covert action, where terminology and definitions are firmly anchored in Western understanding and may have limited applicability to non-Western manifestations of covert action, creating a conceptual bias which erects further barriers to studying non-Western covert action.

The challenge of conceptual biases extends as far as a definition of covert action itself. A simple approach to this problem might be to use legal definitions. Such a definition is readily available for the US, where Title 50 of the United States Code explicitly defines covert action as 'an activity or activities of the United States Government to influence political, economic, or military conditions abroad, where it is intended that the role of the United States Government will not be apparent or acknowledged publicly'. This quote is repeatedly employed at the beginning of book chapters and articles to frame covert action for readers. Helpfully, this definition establishes the type of activity, its permitted targets, and the manner in which the activity is conducted; unhelpfully, the definition only describes a single state's interpretation of covert action, which has already been demonstrated above to be a notable outlier in its legal treatment of covert action. International legal definitions are not forthcoming, and the main component of international law which affects covert action - the non-intervention principle - has a very wide scope and does not address covert action explicitly. Even other Western states with similar attitudes to government transparency are coy in their legal definitions of covert action. The UK's Intelligence Services Act 1994, for example, authorises the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS) to engage in 'other tasks' than intelligence collection. While this law is considered by some to be the legal basis for British covert action, the text of the law makes no further effort to define the scope and nature of these tasks. Other UK government documents refer to 'intelligence effects', which appears to fit the definition of covert action but is stated to also incorporate activity conducted by the Government Communications Headquarters and Defence Intelligence, which would not be covered by SIS authorisations.⁶⁴ Publicly available information suggests that in addition to Defence Intelligence, other parts of the UK military such as special forces also conducted covert operations overseas, including to kill the leaders of foreign non-state

⁶¹ De Werd et al., 'Special Forum on Intelligence and Theory', 1238–42.

⁶² Rory Cormac and Richard J. Aldrich, 'Grey Is the New Black: Covert Action and Implausible Deniability', *International Affairs* 94, no. 3 (2018): 484, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiy067>.

⁶³ William J. Daugherty, 'The Role of Covert Action', in *Handbook of Intelligence Studies*, 1st edn, ed. Loch K. Johnson (Routledge, 2007), 281, <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9780203089323-27/role-covert-action-william-daugherty>.

⁶⁴ Intelligence and Security Committee, *Russia*, Parliamentary Report (House of Commons, 2020), 20–26, https://isc.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/20200721_HC632_CCS001_CCS1019402408-001_ISC_Russia_Report_Web_Accessible.pdf.

armed groups which would meet the US definition of covert action.⁶⁵ This suggests that even where vague legal definitions exist that are relevant, they still may not adequately describe a state's actual employment of covert action. Scholars will therefore naturally tend towards reliance on the unusually prominent US definition as a reference point for a far broader scope than this single state's definition is intended to reflect.

Scholarly definitions are inevitably impacted in much the same way. A range of competing academic definitions exist for covert action, including 'the use of intelligence resources to carry out the national security policy of the state using surreptitious methods', 'government attempts to shape events and conditions overseas through the use of propaganda, political and economic operations, and paramilitary operations' and 'a policy tool used along with other instruments of national power to achieve a national security objective'. Though the range of definitions here cover a lot of ground, they share common characteristics including secrecy - or at least ambiguity of some kind - and active interference in other states in support of national objectives. However, once again these definitions are derived almost exclusively from Western sources, often citing Title 50 or using examples of declassified US covert actions to support these definitions. This sourcing to some extent reflects the evidence bias explored above. However, unlike the proposals for rectifying those inherent factors which target the treatment of primary information about covert action, issues regarding definitions and terminology instead affect secondary resources and cannot be resolved simply by changing the approach to analysis and collection of data. Conceptual biases more strongly influence categorisation, framing, and the scope of the discipline itself, central to the issue of approach that is caused by Anglocentrism.

The question of how to define covert action therefore becomes centrally important to characterising the conceptual bias. It may initially seem tempting to attempt to divorce a definition of covert action from Western-influenced concepts entirely, however to do so would be mistaken. Returning to the argument above that Anglocentrism does not diminish the value of existing scholarship, a definition based on Western understanding of covert action is not necessarily a drawback. Given that a comparative approach aims to use the existing research base for effective comparison, using a definition of covert action suited to this body of published work is advantageous as it enables both better like-for-like comparison and better means of identifying how states implement secretive activities differently. From the range of definitions proposed by various scholars, several common characteristics are shared. One characteristic is that covert action concerns foreign intervention by a state, rather than domestic activity or activity conducted by private entities such as corporations in isolation from the state. A second characteristic is high-level authorisation by central government, distinguishing covert action – which is inherently strategic – from other secretive activities which are far more localised and aim to achieve small-scale tactical objectives. A third, more nebulous characteristic is the ambiguity of covert action. This was traditionally referred to as plausible deniability, however Cormac and Aldrich have spearheaded a revised view that covert action has never really been truly secret and is instead 'implausibly deniable'.⁶⁶ The paradox between the supposedly inherent secrecy of covert action and the historical evidence of barely plausible denial of covert action by states can be reconciled by understanding covert action as a primarily narrative activity, where the action itself may be obfuscated but its narrative effects are intentionally detectable.⁶⁷ Although narrative-based approaches to understanding covert action are relatively new, they reflect the understanding of both Western and Soviet intelligence figures during the Cold War, and are part of a growing body of research which better integrates covert action with wider

⁶⁵ Dan Sabbagh, 'UK Special Forces Have Operated Secretly in 19 Countries since 2011', UK News, *The Guardian*, 23 May 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/may/23/uk-special-forces-have-operated-secretly-in-19-countries-since-2011>.

⁶⁶ Cormac and Aldrich, 'Grey Is the New Black', 483.

⁶⁷ Duffield, 'A Narrative Approach to Analysis of Covert Action', 5.

state security activity.⁶⁸ Combining these characteristics, covert action may be defined as unacknowledged foreign intervention which harnesses state power to influence security narratives.⁶⁹

With this definition based on existing literature, it becomes possible to demonstrate how non-Western terminology does not fit squarely with Anglocentric definitions. Returning to the example of active measures, leaked and declassified KGB documents suggest that all active measures involve some form of domestic interference, ranging from disinformation regarding foreign interference to direct suppression of domestic dissent and targeted covert killings of opposition figures.⁷⁰ This stands in direct contrast to the US Title 50 definition, which explicitly states that only foreign interference is considered covert action. Russia's FSB, like the Soviet KGB before it, considers active measures including foreign intervention to be a principal organisational function despite having a mainly domestic and security focused remit.⁷¹ Active measures also frequently involve economic or political support to Russian diasporas overseas, including in an extrajudicial law enforcement role which does not reflect known Western covert action practice.⁷² Some elements of active measures bear great resemblance to Western covert actions: disinformation, assassinations, paramilitary activity, political subversion, blackmail and discrediting of political figures, recruiting political agents of influence and funding friendly non-state groups.⁷³

Much like Russia, China has a strategic doctrine which shares some features of covert action, known as the 'three warfares'. Although the three warfares were only codified in 2003, they reflect a longstanding approach influenced by classical Chinese philosophy which places high value on subduing an enemy without fighting.⁷⁴ The three elements are public opinion warfare (舆论战), psychological warfare (心理战), and legal warfare (法律战); together, they have been described as 'critical components of China's strategic approach'.⁷⁵ Four articles about Chinese covert action appear in the dataset, and share a common theme of focusing exclusively on non-kinetic rather than kinetic forms of covert action. Instigation of armed resistance or coups, funding of paramilitaries, assassinations and targeted killings are all absent from literature of Chinese covert action despite being a near-permanent feature in wider literature. Conversely, some elements of the three warfares, such as the aggressive pursuit of favourable legal positions in international courts to undermine adversary freedom of action, do not feature in the western concept of covert action at all.⁷⁶ The three warfares as doctrine also extends to the tactical level for use by the People's Liberation Army, as well as centrally authorised strategic activity which better aligns with the western concept of covert action. Just like in the case of Russia, China conducts some activity which fits the definition of covert action, but often only partly so and in a different context – and certainly with a far different strategic emphasis.

⁶⁸ William Colby, *Honorable Men* (Simon and Schuster, 1978), 194–95; Rădulescu, 'Russia's Current Application of Active Measures' Concept -the New Political War against West', 2; Olga Bertelsen et al., *Russian Active Measures Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow* (Ibidem Verlag, 2021), 17.

⁶⁹ Jack Duffield, 'Why Do States Choose Covert Action?', *Intelligence and National Security*, 17 February 2025, 8, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02684527.2025.2461901>.

⁷⁰ Bertelsen et al., *Russian Active Measures Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow*, 7, 22.

⁷¹ Mark Galeotti, *Putin's Hydra: Inside Russia's Intelligence Services*, Policy Brief (European Council on Foreign Relations, 2016), 3; Bertelsen et al., *Russian Active Measures Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow*, 16.

⁷² Galeotti, *Putin's Hydra: Inside Russia's Intelligence Services*, 7.

⁷³ Galeotti, *Putin's Hydra: Inside Russia's Intelligence Services*, 7; Bertelsen et al., *Russian Active Measures Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow*, 16; Rădulescu, 'Russia's Current Application of Active Measures' Concept -the New Political War against West', 7.

⁷⁴ Cosmina Neculcea, 'China's Three Warfare Strategy: Origins, Evolution, Applicability', *Journal of Defense Resources Management (JoDRM)* 14, no. 1 (2023): 1, 22.

⁷⁵ Elsa Kania, 'The PLA's Latest Strategic Thinking on the Three Warfares', *China Brief* 16, no. 13 (2016): 10.

⁷⁶ Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, *Chinese Next-Generation Psychological Warfare*, RAND Research Report (RAND Corporation, 2023), 10, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RRA800/RRA853-1/RAND_RRA853-1.pdf?trk=public_post_comment-text.

The differing Russian and Chinese approaches to activity comparable to covert action highlight the impact of conceptual biases which restrict the development of new non-Western scholarship of covert action. A comparative approach has only limited reach if activity conducted by non-Western states is improperly integrated into wider study at the conceptual level. To overcome conceptual biases driving Anglocentrism in covert action, a better approach to classification and definition of covert action is required which facilitates comparison between Western and non-Western activity.

A viable alternative approach to classifying and defining covert actions emerges from the frequency with which covert action is already conflated in Anglocentric literature with other types of activity that share few characteristics with it besides secrecy. An example of this is the overlap between covert action and special operations. The two terms are frequently treated as synonymous by scholars, and recent labels such as 'hybrid warfare' have further blurred the distinction between these two types of activity.⁷⁷ However, besides a general ambience of secrecy and a pattern of intelligence agencies conducting both types of activity, there is little conceptual overlap between the two.

Covert action as defined above is unacknowledged foreign intervention which harnesses state power to influence security narratives, whereas NATO doctrine defines special operations as 'military activities conducted by specially designated, organised, trained, and equipped forces, manned with selected personnel, using unconventional tactics, techniques, and modes of employment'.⁷⁸ While covert action is characterised by its ambiguity of attribution, narrative effect and strategic level focus, special operations are characterised by specially designated military forces using unconventional tactics. The fact that neither the CIA nor SIS, the two most-studied organisations in this study's dataset, are military organisations suggests that these two concepts are far from synonymous. However, they are not mutually exclusive either. Instead, there is a conceptual overlap between the two, with various secretive state activities possessing elements of special operations, covert action or both. Some special operations, such as the UK's iconic 1976 Special Air Service hostage rescue from the Iranian embassy in London, fit the characteristics of a special operation perfectly while being so unambiguously attributable and tactical that they cannot be considered covert action under any circumstances.⁷⁹ Other special operations such as SOE activities in Crete during the Second World War involved the covert training of proxies for sabotage activities, which has the ambiguity of covert action but perhaps not the strategic level effect.⁸⁰ Meanwhile, scholars have proposed several types of special operation such as assassinations or targeted cyberattacks on critical infrastructure which could employ specially trained, equipped and designated military forces in tasks that have ambiguous attribution and strategic effect, and the examples above of targeted killings by UK Special Forces and avowed Defence Intelligence effects operations in the present day suggest that this is not a hypothetical.⁸¹ Available evidence strongly

⁷⁷ Arthur S. Hulnick, 'What's Wrong with the Intelligence Cycle', *Intelligence and National Security* 21, no. 6 (2006): 976, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02684520601046291>; Alexander Lanoszka, 'Russian Hybrid Warfare and Extended Deterrence in Eastern Europe', *International Affairs* 92, no. 1 (2016): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12509>.

⁷⁸ North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, 'Allied Joint Doctrine for Special Operations', December 2013, 1–1, https://cld.pt/dl/download/40e71e02-28d0-4c6e-b2f4-248aebd8ca49/CPOS_HERANCA/Fase%20Conjunta/Anexos/EOM%20%28Enquadramento%20%C3%A0s%20Opera%C3%A7%C3%B5es%20Militares%29/CMC%2004%20-%20Componente%20de%20Opera%C3%A7%C3%B5es%20Especiais/Referencias/AJP-3.5%20AJD%20for%20Special%20Operations_Ed%20A_V%201_Dec13.pdf?download=true.

⁷⁹ Gregory Fremont-Barnes, *Who Dares Wins: The SAS and the Iranian Embassy Siege 1980* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2012).

⁸⁰ Peter Monteath, 'SOE in Crete: An Alternative Model of "Special Operations"?', *Intelligence and National Security*, 9 May 2018, 840–48, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02684527.2018.1470214>.

⁸¹ Aaron Brantly, 'Cyber Actions by State Actors: Motivation and Utility', *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence* 27, no. 3 (2014): 476, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08850607.2014.900291>.

suggests several levels of overlap between covert action and special operations, and further suggests that in some cases – but not all – special operations can be analysed as covert action.

The same lesson can be applied when studying non-Western covert action. Existing scholarship is yet to subdivide concepts such as active measures and the three warfares into those elements which warrant analysis as covert action and those which do not. Instead, conceptual biases manifest when scholars identify a concept such as active measures as unitary in nature and attempt to study it in its entirety as either comparable or incomparable to Western covert action. To unlock the potential of a comparative approach which overcomes the evidence bias, a more composite understanding of non-Western secretive state activity is key. Individual activities conducted by non-Western states, such as assassinations of politically influential or symbolic dissidents overseas by Russia, can share characteristics of covert action without belonging conceptually to a distinct organisation or doctrine solely concerned with covert action as conceptualised by the West.⁸²

This composite approach to defining and categorising non-Western activity is critical to fully overcoming Anglocentrism in the study of covert action. These conceptual distinctions will only continue to blur as scholarship moves further away from a well-defined, well-structured and well-documented American core, towards states that have never publicised any doctrine, concept or approach to covert action and conduct secretive activities outside of any legal or organisational framework. A notable example of this is the overlap between Iranian proxies such as Lebanese Hezbollah, criminal networks which through links to Hezbollah are now two steps removed from the Iranian state, and activity conducted through criminal networks under orders from a terrorist organisation in a different country in furtherance of the security narratives of a state actor.⁸³ Such links are only beginning to be studied, and traditional ‘top-down’ definitions and terminology will be increasingly inadequate to conduct effective comparative analysis of non-Western covert action, making a flexible composite approach essential.

Conclusions

Anglocentrism in the study of covert action, and the issues of attention, accuracy and approach it creates for the field, has hindered the development of covert action scholarship beyond Western states. As growing geopolitical tensions and conflict increase the importance of intercultural understanding of state secrecy, the need to develop scholarship free of the biases which underpin Anglocentrism only grows.

This study validates the intuition of some scholars that Anglocentrism in covert action literature is greater than in international relations and the social sciences, and supports the argument that factors inherent to covert action as an object of study drive this more acute Anglocentrism. It has explored in detail the biases that underpin Anglocentrism in covert action and proposed measures to overcome these biases and improve coverage of non-Western states. While the academic biases which permeate academia in general have already been studied extensively elsewhere and require only reassertion in the context of covert action, others are more unique to covert action itself. The evidence bias caused by the inherent secrecy of covert action and differing state attitudes to covert action requires a comparative approach that leverages the existing body of Anglocentric research as a base for studying non-Western covert action. This approach requires broadening scholarly tools and sources, moving beyond conventional primary data (such as declassified records), and instead incorporating theoretically grounded methods including those

⁸² Rădulescu, ‘Russia’s Current Application of Active Measures’ Concept -the New Political War against West’, 21.

⁸³ Adriana Marin, ‘The Convergence of Terrorism and Organised Crime: An Examination of Hezbollah’s Activities in Latin America from a Crime-Terror Nexus Perspective’ (Coventry University, 2022), 5, <https://pure.coventry.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/85044069/Marin2023PhD.pdf>.

already proposed in wider academia that allow for layered corroboration. Meanwhile, to overcome conceptual biases which hinder effective comparison to non-Western states, key definitions must be reframed in terms of characteristics to better study non-Western activities which do not fit neatly into existing Anglocentric concepts.

The set of proposals made in this study acknowledge the unique challenges that prevent easy broadening of the field beyond its Anglocentric base, without discounting the value of that well-developed core of scholarship. In particular, using a comparative approach to studying non-Western covert action supported by a composite approach to categorising covert action by those states enables scholars to rapidly build upon existing scholarship to explore the most fertile areas for future study. Although covert action remains a highly challenging field of study, these measures will allow scholars to gradually overcome the acute Anglocentrism in the study of covert action.

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