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Why Do States Choose Covert Action?

Author: Jack Duffield (ORCiD 0000-0003-1578-156X)

Flight Lieutenant Jack Duffield commissioned into the Royal Air Force in 2018. He has deployed operationally in both counter-terrorism and counter-state threat roles. He holds an MA in International Relations, and is a Chief of the Air Staff's Fellow. His research is focused on covert action, intelligence, special operations and air and space power.

This work represents the views of the author and not of His Majesty's Government.

Abstract

This article proposes a narrative-based approach to understanding why states choose covert action. Drawing on narratology and securitisation theory, it argues that states employ covert action to shape and escalate security narratives, leveraging characteristics like tacit attribution and perceived severity to influence key audiences. This approach challenges the rationalist, risk-led perspective which dominates the field, and addresses the paradox of implausible deniability. It situates covert action within a cyclical process of narrative, power, and action, explaining how states use it to secure legitimacy and escalate security narratives rather than simply mitigate risks. The benefits of this approach are demonstrated through analysis of Israeli covert operations against Iran, showing how narrative considerations drive decisions to undertake actions that defy traditional rationalist explanations. The article bridges gaps between covert action scholarship and wider international relations theory, and unifies existing narrative-based proposals into a robust foundation for further research both within and beyond the study of unacknowledged state activity.

Introduction

The study of covert action is regarded even by prominent academics as a 'daunting challenge', despite both an increasing scholarly interest in the topic and a dramatic increase in the use of covert action in recent years.[1] The growing overlap between overt and covert activity by states, the scale of action being conducted in general and the improved understanding of covert action made possible by journalistic and scholarly coverage have all increased the prominence of covert action in academic thought.[2] Despite this, scholarship of covert action remains hampered by under-theorisation, which prevents covert action being effectively integrated into broader theoretical approaches to international relations.[3]

This study develops a new theoretical interpretation for why states choose covert action, drawing on the growing body of theoretical contributions to the field by Cormac, Walton and van Puyvelde, Carnegie, Johnson, Poznansky, Carson and Yarhi-Milo, O'Rourke and others, and integrating the resulting framework with narratology and securitisation theory. It presents covert action as a primarily narrative tool used to gain power over and through security narratives, and proposes that covert action is chosen for narrative benefit based on its inherent characteristics such as severity, tacit attribution and the salience of these characteristics for a state's key audiences for a given narrative. It rejects the risk-led model which currently dominates theoretical approaches to covert action, arguing that avoidance of risk and secrecy is a paradoxical motivator for the decision to use covert action which fails to predict many observable cases of its use.

The study will begin by exploring the challenges that have constrained traditional approaches to this question, and how these invalidate atheoretical explanations. It will map the current state of theorisation of this question, and introduce the paradox between implausible deniability and risk-led employment of covert options. It will then place covert action within the context of narratology in public policy as well as securitisation, exploring how this synthesises with a growing body of scholarship which takes a constructivist perspective on covert action. Combining these elements, state decision making is modelled as a cycle of action in which states choose covert action for narrative benefit. The model is applied in the context of Israeli covert action against Iran, demonstrating how it can offer insight into a state's decision to violate international norms and customs even when there is no obvious advantage to be gained in a traditional sense and a risk-based calculation would advise against the employment of covert action.

[1] Loch K. Johnson, *The Third Option: Covert Action and American Foreign Policy*, 1st ed. (Oxford University Press, 2022), xv, https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197604410.001.0001; Allison Carnegie, 'Secrecy in International Relations and Foreign Policy', *Annual Review of Political Science* 24, no. 1 (11 May 2021): 213, https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-041719-102430.

[2] Peter Lamb and Fiona Robertson-Snape, *Historical Dictionary of International Relations* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 165.

[3] Christopher Andrew, 'Intelligence, International Relations and "Under-Theorisation"', *Intelligence and National Security* 19, no. 2 (1 June 2004): 170–84, https://doi.org/10.1080/0268452042000302949.

Johnson's aphorism of the 'daunting challenge' rings true, and several distinct challenges have long faced scholars looking to develop theoretical approaches to this field. The first task of this article is to understand these challenges, and how they can be overcome to properly theorise why states choose covert action.

Challenges in the Theorisation of Covert Action

The study of covert action has not settled neatly within an academic field, with existing scholarship being published variously under international studies, history, intelligence studies and international relations.[4] Although this reflects the broad application of such an important area of study, it has limited the development of theoretical links between covert action and international relations more broadly, as well as allowing challenges to develop for those looking to build upon the established body of covert action research with theoretical work.

First, covert action is often conceptualised as an exquisite intelligence capability rather than a broader type of state power. Western scholars have traditionally considered covert action alongside secret intelligence as a function of intelligence agencies.[5] Although they do sometimes acknowledge the possibility, conceptual models of covert action based on this assumption such as Johnson's 'Third Option' do not properly account for the conduct of covert action by non-intelligence organisations.[6] This creates a false organisational, conceptual and functional alignment between covert action and intelligence, also detectable in models such as Hulnick's covert action cycle which does not extend its scope beyond the planning and execution of a covert action within an intelligence agency.[7] Other theoretical treatments such as Treverton et al's workshop report still consider covert action as a function of intelligence on the basis of institutional ownership, despite acknowledging that intelligence work and foreign intervention are distinct activities.[8]

This hinders the theorisation of many known forms of covert action, such that employed by China as part of its Three Warfares concept.[9] The three classifications used by Johnson of Treaty, War and Spy Power places covert action firmly within the purview of foreign intelligence agencies as a function of Spy Power. This model for covert action cannot be applied to China, where covert action is doctrinally conducted by the armed forces - the purveyors of War Power in the Third Option model.[10] In Western states, Britain's Information Research Department was run for nearly three decades by the Foreign Office, the users of Treaty Power in Johnson's model, yet conducted covert action in a litany of states across Asia, Africa and

[4] Jon Wiant, 'A Guide to Teaching about Covert Action', *The Intelligencer* 19, no. 2 (2012): 55.
[5] Michael Herman, *Intelligence Power in Peace and War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 55, https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/intelligence-power-in-peace-and-war/39B13810C2D49FD2894827D9BA373CCB.
[6] Johnson, *The Third Option*, 5.
[7] Arthur S. Hulnick, 'What's Wrong with the Intelligence Cycle', *Intelligence and National Security* 21, no. 6 (December 2006): 976, https://doi.org/10.1080/02684520601046291.
[8] Gregory F. Treverton and RAND Corporation, eds., *Toward a Theory of Intelligence: Workshop Report*, RAND Conference Proceedings, CF-219 (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2006), 8.
[9] Cosmina Neculcea, 'China's Three Warfare Strategy: Origins, Evolution, Applicability', *Journal of Defense Resources Management (JoDRM)* 14, no. 1 (2023): 22.
[10] Elsa Kania, 'The PLA's Latest Strategic Thinking on the Three Warfares', *China Brief* 16, no. 13 (2016): 10.

Europe with only limited involvement by intelligence agencies.[11] Even in the case of the USA, upon which the Third Option model was developed, scholars such as Wiant argue that there is little conceptual overlap between covert action and intelligence collection.[12] Instead, the conduct of covert action by intelligence agencies is often a result of economising on 'the use of intelligence resources', in particular the wide networks of covert capabilities already maintained by a country's intelligence services, rather than an acknowledgement that covert action is conceptually subordinate to intelligence.[13] Therefore, to properly theorise covert action it is important that any model is freed from the conceptual hinderance of incorporation into intelligence.

The second challenge is how scholarly preferences for positive confirmation and official sources are put under strain when studying covert action. Academic good practice implores scholars to examine covert actions as individual events where evidence is available, and seek patterns only in what can already be proven.[14] One effect of this is that scholarship is concentrated on well-documented eras such as the 'golden age' of the CIA under Allen Dulles or periods of history such as the Second World War or Vietnam War, meaning that existing conceptual models are based largely on covert action conducted by a single state over a period of less than 50 years.[15] Another is that high-profile failures of covert action receive the most coverage, as they are much more likely than other covert actions to generate the extensive primary evidence that facilitates a traditional positivist approach. Together, the tendency to focus on areas of covert action scholarship where official confirmation is available skews theorisations dramatically towards American covert actions with a high rate of failure, a poor foundation for a general theory of covert action.

Cormac describes this as the 'evidence bias' of the field, noting that paramilitary-style operations, favoured by the CIA and more likely to fail spectacularly than activities like propaganda, end up dominating the general perception of covert action despite documentary evidence of more subtle and successful forms.[16] Carnegie argues that this skew in the study of secretive state activity can be explicitly characterised as both a US-centric and Cold War-tainted perspective.[17] The main effect of concern to this study is that the weight given by scholars to different forms of covert action will be unbalanced by positivism.[18] Inevitably, this leads to over-representation of dramatic paramilitary covert actions in theory unless actively accounted for. This is evidenced in theorisations such as that made by O'Rourke, who proposes that a high rate of failure is a universal disadvantage of covert action, when due to the inherent secrecy of covert action and the reliance

[11] Andrew Defty, *Britain, America, and Anti-Communist Propaganda, 1945-53: The Information Research Department* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), 4.
[12] Wiant, 'A Guide to Teaching about Covert Action', 55.
[13] Hulnick, 'What's Wrong with the Intelligence Cycle', 976.
[14] Wesley K. Wark, 'Introduction: The Study of Espionage: Past, Present, Future?', *Intelligence and National Security* 8, no. 3 (July 1993): 5, https://doi.org/10.1080/02684529308432211.
[15] Loch K. Johnson, 'The Golden Age of the CIA', *Diplomatic History* 20, no. 4 (1996): 675.
[16] Rory Cormac, 'Disruption and Deniable Interventionism: Explaining the Appeal of Covert Action and Special Forces in Contemporary British Policy', *International Relations* 31, no. 2 (June 2017): 169, https://doi.org/10.1177/0047117816659532.
[17] Carnegie, 'Secrecy in International Relations and Foreign Policy', 226.
[18] Cormac, 'Disruption and Deniable Interventionism', 171.

on American sources the true failure rate is effectively unknowable.[19] Theories of covert action must therefore avoid weighting analysis towards the most provable elements, instead building models which acknowledge inevitable gaps in coverage and take these appropriately into account.

The third challenge is in understanding how covert action is authorised by states. This is an essential prerequisite to properly theorising *why* states choose covert action; thankfully, the question of *how* is separate and much less complex. Returning to the dominant American case study, covert action has been legally required to be authorised by the US President with congressional oversight since 1974, with approval by the head of state a *de facto* requirement long before this.[20] Examples from other states reflect a similar insistence on top-level authorisation, including direct approval by the Central Military Commission in China for covert action, Politburo assent for Soviet active measures (a type of activity which in many cases qualifies as covert action), and historic examples of covert action authorised by the monarch in the UK.[21] However, to avoid the pitfalls of the second challenge above, a more generalisable explanation must be sought for the apparent requirement for executive approval. This explanation comes from the non-intervention principle, a custom of international law in which states do not unilaterally interfere in the affairs and territories of other states – a custom which covert action stands in clear violation of.[22] State attitudes to the violation of this principle differ, which can alter how the severity of different types of covert action is perceived, but the overarching concept of requiring top-level endorsement before violation of the non-intervention principle is constant.[23]

The prominence of paramilitary special operations has blurred the line between covert action and other types of unacknowledged state activity. In the early 21st century, paramilitary operations have been disproportionately favoured by the US in particular.[24] The increasing use of uncrewed air systems to conduct targeted killings in foreign states further calls into question where covert action end and discreet special operations begin, most notably in the 2021 killing of Qasem Soleimani, head of the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, by the USA.[25] Scholars such as Hulnick and Jones see little distinction between covert action and special operations, treating them as a single category of activity.[26] However,

[19] Lindsey A. O'Rourke, *Covert Regime Change: America's Secret Cold War* (Cornell University Press, 2018); Michael Poznansky, 'Covert Regime Change: America's Secret Cold War', *Political Science Quarterly* 134, no. 4 (1 December 2019): 755–56, https://doi.org/10.1002/polq.12979.

[20] Loch K. Johnson, *Bombs, Bugs, Drugs, and Thugs: Intelligence and America's Quest for Security* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 204.

[21] Kania, 'The PLA's Latest Strategic Thinking on the Three Warfares', 10; Bogdan-George Rădulescu, 'Russia's Current Application of Active Measures' Concept -the New Political War against West' (2020), 3, https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.15297.58720; Rory Cormac, *Disrupt and Deny: Spies, Special Forces, and the Secret Pursuit of British Foreign Policy*, First edition (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 2.

[22] Lene Hansen, *Security as Practice: Discourse Analysis and the Bosnian War* (London: Routledge, 2013), 31.

[23] Jack Duffield, 'A Narrative Approach to Analysis of Covert Action', *Review of International Studies*, 23 September 2024, 7, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210524000445.

[24] Gregory F. Treverton, *Intelligence for an Age of Terror* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 223, https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511808708.

[25] Luca Trenta, 'Remote Killing? Remoteness, Covertness, and the US Government's Involvement in Assassination', *Defence Studies* 21, no. 4 (2 October 2021): 468, https://doi.org/10.1080/14702436.2021.1994393.

[26] Hulnick, 'What's Wrong with the Intelligence Cycle', 976; 'The Role of Special Operations Forces in Great Power Competition' (Washington, DC, 2 August 2023), https://www.csis.org/analysis/role-special-operations-forces-great-power-competition.

many special operations are conducted by uniformed forces in overt theatres of conflict, such as the deployment of US SOF to Syria, and are unrecognisable as covert action.[27] This is another case of partial overlap, where special operations are defined by the training, tactics and equipment required to undertake the task, while covert action is defined more by the unacknowledged nature of the activity.[28] Such diverging classifications mean that some, but not all, special operations would qualify as covert action. This highlights a useful method of constraining the academic scope of covert action, where the high-level authorisation required is a defining feature of covert action and separates it from the discreet tactical conduct of many targeted killings, special operations and other activities.

In any theorisation effort of covert action, including this study, these three challenges must be overcome. This means treating covert action as a whole-of-state activity rather than a subordinate function of intelligence, developing models which take account of the inevitable gaps in coverage and do not rely solely on the US-centred primary evidence base to build theory, and recognising that covert action is defined by its high-level authorisation and excludes discreet tactical activities. The difficulty in doing so is reflected in the relative isolation in which covert action is studied compared to wider international relations, which has hindered the integration of covert action into more general theoretical frameworks. [29] Though covert action is considered a core policy tool in some doctrines of international thought, most notably neorealism, even in this case it is not integrated on a theoretical level but acknowledged as an aside to a broader framework.[30] Nonetheless, this does also confer a small advantage to the field, as recent efforts to conduct theorisation of covert action are not burdened by orthodoxy that has required the total reinvention of fields such as security studies in recent decades.[31]

Understanding why states choose covert action is a conceptual prerequisite to many lines of inquiry within the field, which has often led scholars to briefly attempt to construct theoretical explanations for this decision as an introduction to other areas of focus. Worth briefly mentioning are the arguments of scholars such as Daugherty, who asserts that covert action is chosen by a head of state for a variety of ultimately personality-driven reasons, including (for the USA) the President's attitude towards the CIA, a desire to quietly correct an overt policy failure, a political intention to circumvent Congressional censure of foreign

[27] Anthony Messenger et al., 'Defeating the Islamic State: Special Operations Forces in Syria', in *Routledge Handbook of U.S. Counterterrorism and Irregular Warfare Operations*, by Liam Collins, Erich Marquardt, and Michael A. Sheehan, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 2021), 323, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003164500-25.

[28] Madeleine Moon, 'NATO Special Operations Forces in the Modern Security Environment' (NATO Parliamentary Assembly Defence and Security Committee, 4 April 2018), 4, https://www.nato-pa.int/download-file?filename=sites/default/files/2018-04/2018%20-%20NATO%20SPECIAL%20OPERATIONS%20FORCES%20-%20DRAFT%20REPORT%20MOON%20-%20064%20DSCFC%2018%20E.pdf.

[29] Rory Cormac, Calder Walton, and Damien Van Puyvelde, 'What Constitutes Successful Covert Action? Evaluating Unacknowledged Interventionism in Foreign Affairs', *Review of International Studies* 48, no. 1 (January 2022): 112–13, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210521000231.

[30] John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York : Norton, 2001), http://archive.org/details/tragedyofgreatpo00mear.

[31] J Burgess and J Grans, 'Human Security', in *Contemporary Security and Strategy*, 3rd ed. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 90.

policy objectives, or a romantic ambition to employ "spy-novel tactics" while in office.[32] This personality-focused argument fails to overcome the first and second challenges described above, focusing on the relationship between a head of state and a single agency and positivist interpretations of a narrow set of events. Such arguments can therefore be discounted as a viable theory for why states choose covert action.

Another group of explanations focus on the risk and secrecy of covert action as primary factors in the decision to use covert action. Although individual examples of this explanation do fall foul of the challenges above, the general theoretical approach appears only minimally impacted and is therefore plausible. This approach is most comprehensively explained by Johnson, who describes covert action as a 'quiet option' and a midpoint between low-risk but weak diplomatic efforts and high-risk but decisive military alternatives.[33] Wohlforth describes the same risk-based approach as explicitly realist and rationalist in nature, with states choosing to interfere in the affairs of other states based on a simple cost-benefit analysis of risk and reward.[34] Although not all versions of this approach are explicitly realist, they are all rationalist to some degree; rationalism and risk aversion are the defining features of this traditional approach. O'Rourke argues that states choose covert action as a means of avoiding risk and escalation, and Poznansky suggests that the reasons why a state chooses covert action include a risk of escalation by the target, a lack of public support or a lack of legal justification.[35] Carnegie offers a similar view of why states choose covert action, suggesting that they do so to 'enact unpopular policies, prevent escalation, reach bargains, send signals, and avoid destabilisation'.[36] In each of these cases, covert action is viewed primarily with respect to the risk of backlash or reprisal, and the use of secrecy to attempt to mitigate this risk.

However, this rationalist approach to understanding why states choose covert action introduces a paradox. One of the few areas of consensus on the nature of covert action is that it is inherently secretive and characterised by its deniability. Plausible deniability, the idea that the action cannot be reasonably attributed to the state conducting it, has historically been considered a defining principle of covert action. William Colby, the former Director of Central Intelligence, argued that the purpose of plausible deniability is to enable states to conduct activity without forcing a retaliation from the target, and without either state needing to formally acknowledge it.[37] Colby implies that it is assumed the target of covert action must at least strongly suspect who conducted it in order for the covert action to have had an effect. This is the cornerstone of 'implausible deniability', a viewpoint advocated by Cormac and Aldrich who argue that

[32] William J. Daugherty, *Executive Secrets: Covert Action and the Presidency* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2004), 48–57.
[33] Loch K. Johnson, 'Reflections on the Ethics and Effectiveness of America's "Third Option": Covert Action and U.S. Foreign Policy', *Intelligence and National Security* 35, no. 5 (28 July 2020): 669–85, https://doi.org/10.1080/02684527.2020.1739479; Johnson, *The Third Option*.
[34] William C Wohlforth, 'Realism and Great Power Subversion', *International Relations* 34, no. 4 (December 2020): 459–81, https://doi.org/10.1177/0047117820968858.
[35] O'Rourke, *Covert Regime Change*, 51; Michael Poznansky, 'The Psychology of Overt and Covert Intervention', *Security Studies* 30, no. 3 (27 May 2021): 329, https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2021.1951833.
[36] Carnegie, 'Secrecy in International Relations and Foreign Policy', 215.
[37] William Colby, *Honorable Men* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978), 194–95.

historical evidence does not support the idea that covert action is inherently secretive.[38] The evidence of implausible deniability demonstrates the paradox of risk-based approaches to understanding why states choose covert action. A state cannot choose to conduct covert action to reduce the risk of negative consequences through denial should an action fail, when historical evidence suggests that covert action is never truly deniable, and some attribution is generally possible or even desirable. This inconsistency between the risk-led theoretical approach and the historical evidence strongly suggests that avoiding risk or negative consequences is not the reason why states choose covert action, meaning that an alternative theoretical approach is required.

Existing literature offers several clues as to how this alternative approach might be constructed. Most importantly, the three challenges that emerge from the literature above must be overcome. In addition to these, Poznansky argues that the decision to employ covert action occurs after the decision to take action against an issue, proposing an important theoretical distinction which challenges the idea that covert action is decided upon in isolation from other government policy.[39] Carson and Yarhi-Milo propose that some covert action fulfils a signalling function to allies and adversaries rather than merely a tactical objective, an idea which begins to shift the focus of the analysis past the action itself and also suggests that narrative considerations play an important role in covert action. Cormac, Walton and Van Puyvelde add to this by arguing that the most important factor in the success of covert action is perception, pointing to examples from the 'golden age' of the CIA where successful outcomes were obtained despite the mission objective of a covert action not being fulfilled.[40] Lastly, the author's own work has explored the significant overlap between these approaches and wider international relations, linking elements of security studies to areas of consensus within the study of covert action.[41] Developing these arguments into a unified theoretical approach to why states choose covert action, which overcomes the challenges of covert action scholarship and the paradox of implausible deniability, is the focus of the remainder of this study.

Covert Action and Narratives of Security

Two key concepts from related disciplines within international relations form the basis of this theoretical approach: narratology, from the field of public and foreign policy analysis, and securitisation, from the field of security studies.

Narratology explores the role of political narratives in policymaking. In particular, it places perception at the heart of analysis of policy, considering narratives as sociological entities which are constructed by common perceptions. The role of narratives in policy has been acknowledged since at least the 1980s, and is

[38] Rory Cormac and Richard J. Aldrich, 'Grey Is the New Black: Covert Action and Implausible Deniability', *International Affairs* 94, no. 3 (1 May 2018): 477–94, https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiy067.
[39] Michael Poznansky, 'Stasis or Decay? Reconciling Covert War and the Democratic Peace*', *International Studies Quarterly* 59, no. 4 (1 December 2015): 818, https://doi.org/10.1111/isqu.12193.
[40] Cormac, Walton, and Puyvelde, 'What Constitutes Successful Covert Action?', 116–18.
[41] Duffield, 'A Narrative Approach to Analysis of Covert Action'.

increasingly explored elsewhere in the social sciences.[42] Of particular relevance to theorisation of covert action is the relationship it describes between narratives and power. A core tenet of narratology is that political narratives are composed of ideas which inherently carry power, and can be used by political leaders to deliver desired policy objectives.[43] Parsons argues that ideas are the driving force in the ability for states to take action, by empowering narratives, using these to justify actions, and gaining further influence through association with a powerful narrative.[44] These narratives are complex systems that are influenced by a variety of sources, with many actors able to influence and perpetuate narratives, both internally and externally to a state. Although states have some ability to influence these narratives, their decision making is also driven by these narratives as they are the sources of political power. Acting in accordance with these narratives enables states to take advantage of the power inherent to these ideas, gain influence over these ideas to shape them, and wield power through these ideas.[45] Perhaps most interestingly, the decision to take action is not about achieving a specific policy goal or influencing an objective state of affairs, but is instead about influencing the subjective narratives and perceptions which surround a given issue.

This narratological approach proposes that the power to take action is not absolute, but must be harnessed. This separates the capabilities and resources required to conduct covert action from the power required to use it in practice, meaning that states are dependent on harnessing narrative power to legitimise their use of covert action. This fundamentally conflicts with the realist concept of the state as a unitary actor from which power, legitimacy and sovereignty flow. It also disregards power in the realist sense, as a measure of raw capability, considering power instead solely from a narratological perspective as a function of the legitimacy that the executive branch of a state requires to continue to function credibly in an international system. When understanding the decision to use covert action from a narratological perspective, the driving force of the decision is shifted away from the executive branch of government and towards the narratives themselves. Furthermore, the concept of a unitary state wielding power is deconstructed into a government which depends on sufficiently empowered narratives to take action, and the internal and external audiences capable of empowering these narratives. The decision to use covert action is therefore dependent on the relationship between a state and the power-granting audiences for its salient narratives, and therefore on the relationship between narratives, power and action.

Power-granting audiences vary by actor, but are always present. This is self-evident in democracies, where constitutions make much of the mandate granted to government by an electorate. However, even totalitarian states still rely on certain audiences as a source of power – in the case of North Korea, for

[42] Barbara Czarniawska, 'The Uses of Narratology in Social and Policy Studies', *Critical Policy Studies* 4, no. 1 (28 April 2010): 59, https://doi.org/10.1080/19460171003715002.
[43] Daniel Béland, Martin B. Carstensen, and Leonard Seabrooke, 'Ideas, Political Power and Public Policy', *Journal of European Public Policy* 23, no. 3 (15 March 2016): 645, https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2015.1122163.
[44] Martin B. Carstensen and Vivien A. Schmidt, 'Power through, over and in Ideas: Conceptualizing Ideational Power in Discursive Institutionalism', *Journal of European Public Policy* 23, no. 3 (15 March 2016): 318–37, https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2015.1115534.
[45] Carstensen and Schmidt, 'Power through, over and in Ideas'.

example, their close and wide-ranging alliance with China has left the pariah state dependent on China for economic, diplomatic and military security.[46] Internally, despite apparent one-person rule Kim Jong-un relies on the support of others to wield political power, including other members of Kim dynasty.[47] The Council on Foreign Relations further judges that a group of around 50 elite families known as *donju* wield enormous power based on their roles leading economic development, executing state policy and controlling access to both raw materials and information.[48] The *donju* demonstrate how all states rely upon key audiences to empower their actions, not just democracies. This is inevitable given that even with enormously concentrated state power, a leader is still reliant upon others to implement this policy and provide the necessary information to make decisions. A simple test for determining the key audiences of a state is to ask who has the power to substantially weaken that state: an electorate, military or security establishment, oligarchy, powerful ally, large corporation or international organisation could all be a key audience.

The narratological framework offers insight into how constructed narratives drive a state's decision making on key policy issues, including an explanation for how states decide to take action against an issue, and which issues a state chooses to take action against. It shifts the focus away from the executive branch of government and towards the narrative and power-granting audiences as the motivating factor for the decision to take action. A narratological approach applied in the context of covert action offers a promising theoretical alternative to the existing risk-led approach, which focuses on the state apparatus and its own rational calculus as the driving force behind the decision to take action. However, to fully explain why states would choose a covert action over an overt alternative, particularly in the context of the violation of international norms and customs, a more detailed model of the relationships between narrative, power and action is required.

The Copenhagen school of international relations, which focuses on the processes underpinning the development of narratives which enable states to take more severe action, offers a greater level of detail relevant to covert action specifically. Scholars such as Waever argue that a specific type of narrative focused on a security threat is the basis for the decision by states to take action, in a process called securitisation.[49] These narratives of security threat are very versatile – far from simply being a military threat to the state, they can incorporate threats to individuals and communities, or threats to concepts such as the environment or access to energy sources.[50] A memorable example of this is the American War on Drugs, which presented a threat to security at the community level from social decline from mass drug

[46] Dick K Nanto and Mark E Manyin, 'China-North Korea Relations' (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 28 December 2010), 7.
[47] Sora Lim and Sunghwah Ko, 'North Korean Leaders' Personality Reflection on Provocation Patterns: Narcissism and Fear', *Journal of Contemporary Eastern Asia* 19, no. 2 (31 December 2020): 220, https://doi.org/10.17477/JCEA.2020.19.2.216.
[48] Eleanor Albert, 'Kim Jong-Un and North Korea's Power Structure', Council on Foreign Relations, 17 June 2020, https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/north-koreas-power-structure.
[49] Ole Wæver, *Securitization and Desecuritization*, vol. 1993, Working Papers 5 (Copenhagen: Centre for Peace and Conflict Research, 1993), 6.
[50] Burgess and Grans, 'Human Security', 89–90.

addiction, and at the level of individual families and young people in particular, neither of which match the traditional concept of a state security threat.[51] Because security can be so widely defined, incorporating freedom from want and fear as well as the ability to progress towards survival, development, freedom and identity, almost anything can be constructed as a threat to this security.[52] This means that there is no practical limit on what narratives could be constructed in terms of security and used as the basis for conducting covert action. While Waever and some subsequent authors place security itself as the end goal, a narratological lens is more cynical about this, treating security as the concept required to legitimise severe action rather than the actual goals of states, who instead aim to harness power to build and maintain legitimacy.[53]

As part of the securitisation process, a narrative escalates in severity, focusing on a security threat which has been constructed against the referent object. As noted above, both the threat and the referent object can be very broadly defined. Of particular relevance to covert action, the escalating narrative demands action, empowering a state to take more severe action against a threat and eventually legitimising the violation of international norms and treaties which covert action requires.[54] The concept of escalation is already familiar to scholars of covert action, and maps across neatly to traditional ladder models which describe various types of covert action in terms of the perceived severity of the action.[55] More recently, this ladder model has been mapped to the extent to which a security narrative must be escalated to legitimise that type of action, and adapted to a two axis class-severity model of escalation, which better applies the concept to non-Western cultural norms of severity for different classes of covert action across diplomatic, information, military and economic instruments.[56] The mapping across of escalation in covert action to escalation as understood in securitisation exemplifies the opportunities available through better theoretical integration of covert action with wider international relations.

This approach built on narratology and securitisation describes a process by which a state takes action when an empowered narrative demands action is taken. In this model, risk is not factored into the decision to use covert action at all. Instead, covert action is chosen entirely for narrative reasons. So far this process, already employed across public policy and security studies for other types of state activity, has been equally applicable to covert action and overt alternatives. The inherent characteristics of covert action therefore become the deciding factors in the decision to use covert action. Where this differs from the existing rationalist approach is that the characteristics of covert action are not viewed in terms of risk

[51] Carla Angulo-Pasel, 'Border Vigilante/Militia Activity, the National Security State, and the Migrant "Threat"', *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 7 February 2023, 8, https://doi.org/10.1080/17539153.2023.2170513.
[52] Burgess and Grans, 'Human Security', 90–91; Wæver, *Securitization and Desecuritization*, 1993:2.
[53] Wæver, *Securitization and Desecuritization*, 1993:6.
[54] Thierry Balzacq, 'The "Essence" of Securitization: Theory, Ideal Type, and a Sociological Science of Security', *International Relations* 29, no. 1 (2015): 106, https://doi.org/10.1177/0047117814526606b; Hansen, *Security as Practice*, 31.
[55] Aaron Brantly, 'Cyber Actions by State Actors: Motivation and Utility', *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence* 27, no. 3 (12 May 2014): 476, https://doi.org/10.1080/08850607.2014.900291; Loch K. Johnson, *Secret Agencies: U.S. Intelligence in a Hostile World* (Yale University Press, 1996), 60; Herman Kahn, *On Escalation: Metaphors and Scenarios.* (New York: Praeger, 1965), 37.
[56] Duffield, 'A Narrative Approach to Analysis of Covert Action', 8–9.

avoidance, but in terms of maximising narrative effect and resulting increases in power and legitimacy for the actor conducting it. Reflecting on the challenges identified above in the context of the wider literature, covert action is an instrument of state policy authorised at the highest level of government, which involves intervention in another state in violation of international norms and treaties and is therefore perceived as severe. It aims to induce a change in the environment, although in a primarily performative sense, seeking to affect the subjective narrative rather than an objective state of affairs. And it is ambiguous rather than plausibly deniable, going unacknowledged even when it is as brazenly attributable as the de-badged annexation of another country's territory.[57] Where a specifically unacknowledged instrument, be it the arming, funding or training or non-state actors, economic sabotage or disruption, inducement of a policy change in another state, denial of another state's capabilities, or any number of other actions, better serves the security narrative which demands action and in turn the key audiences who empower that narrative, a covert option will be employed.

A significant factor influencing the narrative benefit of covert action are cultural attitudes among key power-granting audiences towards covert policy options. Some audiences, particularly electorates in the West and especially the USA and UK, view the use of covert action as a critical and high-end choice reserved for the most pressing national security issues, meaning that their employment by states can have an outsize influence on security narratives.[58] Meanwhile, for other states a harsh view is taken by key audiences on foreign military intervention of any kind, overt or covert: 91% of the Swiss electorate continue to approve of neutrality, making the use of covert military or paramilitary intervention far less likely to have a narrative benefit than an overt alternative.[59] The attitudes of key audiences towards covert action sit alongside the securitisation of a narrative as one of the key influences in a state's decision to use covert action.

The critical difference between this model and the risk-led rationalist approach is that the narrative approach predicts covert action may be chosen specifically to escalate and intensify a security narrative, while models such as the Third Option predict that covert action will only be used to avoid the escalation that might result from entering into a war. The use of covert action for escalation is predicted narratologically, as states can use the characteristics of covert action such as its severity and tacit attribution to the government to gain power over and through a narrative, increasing its power and salience. It is also predicted in securitisation, where a state is one of many actors, including key audiences, who can conduct 'securitising moves' which further contribute to the securitisation process.[60] When a security narrative has not yet escalated to the point that a more severe covert action is empowered, a less severe

[57] Duffield, 'A Narrative Approach to Analysis of Covert Action'.
[58] 'The Role of Special Operations Forces in Great Power Competition'.
[59] Koh Ewe, 'Switzerland to Vote on Country's Neutrality Policy', TIME, 12 April 2024, https://time.com/6966223/switzerland-neutrality-initiative-vote/; Tibor Szvircsev Tresch, 'Survey Security 2023: Slight Majority for NATO Rapprochement - More Critical Assessment of Neutrality', ETH Zurich, 16 March 2023, https://css.ethz.ch/en/center/CSS-news/2023/03/studie-sicherheit-2023-bericht-zur-medienkonferenz-vom-16-maerz-2023.html.
[60] Ole Wæver, 'The Theory Act: Responsibility and Exactitude as Seen from Securitization', *International Relations* 29, no. 1 (March 2015): 121, https://doi.org/10.1177/0047117814526606d; Regina Kreide and Andreas Langenohl, *Conceptualizing Power in Dynamics of Securitization: Beyond State and International System* (Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, 2019), 8.

covert action such as covert propaganda or low-level cyber activity can effectively shape and develop a narrative to facilitate other goals, particularly increasing perceptions of the severity and seriousness of a constructed security threat among key audiences. An intriguing circularity is also introduced, as securitising actions such as covert action require the power granted by key audiences, but can also strengthen the narratives required to grant this power to more severe covert action.

The Cycle of Action

A narrative approach reconceptualises covert action, defining it as unacknowledged foreign intervention which harnesses state power to influence security narratives. It is chosen when these inherent characteristics offer greater benefit to the security narratives which demand it, as perceived by key power-granting audiences. This narrative model unifies several recent works which also challenge the traditional rationalist interpretation of why states choose covert action. For example, Cormac, Walton and Van Puyvelde when developing tools for measuring the effectiveness of covert action argue that perception of success is more important than mission success in covert action.[61] This builds upon earlier work by Cormac and Daddow, who adopted a constructivist approach to so-called 'fiascos' in covert action to argue that a tactical failure can be overcome by an effective narrative of success.[62] Carson and Yarhi-Milo consider the effects of covert action in terms of signalling, arguing that covert action communicates severity and resolve against a threat, which dovetails with the role of securitising moves in shaping a narrative and in turn the key audiences of a state.[63] Gentry alludes to a similar function in the context of diplomatic covert action, noting that covert action can have a stronger narrative effect than overt action in influencing the perception of key audiences.[64] Sobel argues that covert action can be understood better as a performance with actors and an audience than as operational activity, emphasising the narrative-driven nature of covert action.[65] Finally, Cormac and Aldrich note that covert action serves a communicative function and is performative rather than secretive in nature.[66]

This narrative approach, and its key departure from the rationalist approach in excluding risk from the decision to take action while predicting that covert action may be deliberately escalatory, models the use of covert action as part of a cyclical process incorporating power, action and narrative. Power in the context of a narrative approach is derived from the legitimacy granted by salient ideas. Some power is inherent to the idea itself. Power can be gained through ideas which are constructed as narratives of security threats, and power can also be gained over the narrative through securitising moves, including both speech acts and other actions. These actions may be overt or covert in nature, but their purpose is focused on influencing

[61] Cormac, Walton, and Puyvelde, 'What Constitutes Successful Covert Action?', 118.
[62] Rory Cormac and Oliver Daddow, 'Covert Action Failure and Fiasco Construction: William Hague's 2011 Libyan Venture', *Journal of European Public Policy* 25, no. 5 (4 May 2018): 702, https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2017.1291709.
[63] Austin Carson and Keren Yarhi-Milo, 'Covert Communication: The Intelligibility and Credibility of Signaling in Secret', *Security Studies* 26, no. 1 (2 January 2017): 155, https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2017.1243921.
[64] John A. Gentry, 'Diplomatic Spying: How Useful Is It?', *International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence* 34, no. 3 (3 July 2021): 434–35, https://doi.org/10.1080/08850607.2020.1748993.
[65] Ariel Whitfield Sobel, 'All the World's a Stage: Covert Action as Theatrical Performance', *Intelligence and National Security* 37, no. 4 (7 June 2022): 569–80, https://doi.org/10.1080/02684527.2022.2065607.
[66] Cormac and Aldrich, 'Grey Is the New Black', 493.

this narrative to gain power and legitimacy from key audiences, and therefore a covert option is chosen for the narrative benefit that its inherent characteristics provide. Together these three concepts create a cycle of action, which models how security narratives and power create the conditions for covert action to take place.

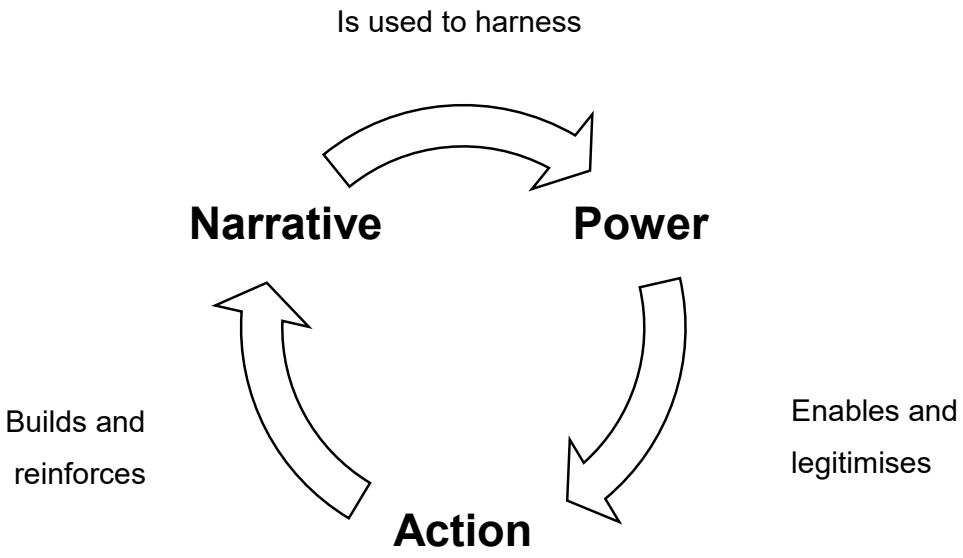

Figure 1 - The Cycle of Action (author's own work)

The cycle of action codifies the series of related processes which influence a state's decision to choose covert action. While much of this study is dedicated to exploring the theoretical mechanisms of this model and situating it within several areas of international relations thought, this cyclical model summarises these mechanisms and demonstrates how it differs from a rationalist approach by discounting risk and predicting the utility of covert action in an escalatory role. Covert action is chosen when a security narrative demands that action is taken, has been sufficiently securitised to empower the violation of international norms and treaties, and a covert policy option will provide a greater narrative benefit to the state.

Although the model is a single cycle, a narratological perspective lends credence to the concepts of both resolution and wider influence. Some narratives simply dissipate over time, as others become more prominent or key audiences for whom a narrative is salient wane in influence, such as after a change of government. Others can be resolved to the benefit of a state with a second-order effect on the legitimacy and salience of other narratives. Narratives that build to a final goal or resolution are typically more salient to audiences.[67] According to Klauk, Köppe and Onea, resolution requires three key elements: a feeling of finality in the audience, a feeling that all questions have been answered, and enough substance to these answers to warrant such feelings. [68] This does not mean that a threat actually needs to be resolved, only that the subjective interpretation of the security narrative lends itself to a feeling of closure as described

[67] John B. Black and Gordon H. Bower, 'Episodes as Chunks in Narrative Memory', *Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behavior* 18, no. 3 (June 1979): 316–17, https://doi.org/10.1016/S0022-5371(79)90173-7.
[68] Tobias Klauk, Tilmann Köppe, and Edgar Onea, 'More on Narrative Closure', *Journal of Literary Semantics* 45, no. 1 (1 April 2016): 45–46, https://doi.org/10.1515/jls-2016-0003.

above. This resolution grants further legitimacy to the state as perceived by its key audiences, facilitates greater power over subsequent narratives, and more closely ties the state to the demands for action that empower states to act.

To demonstrate how the cycle of action models a state's decision making compared to alternative approaches, consider the Israeli use of covert action against the Iranian nuclear programme. One explanation for why Israel chose covert action is modelled on risk avoidance. Sanger adopts a risk-led approach, arguing that Israeli covert action intended to slow Iran's nuclear programme without risking retaliation or escalation by Iran.[69] Maher concurs, framing the decision to choose covert action as a middle option between overt military intervention and inaction, echoing the model applied by Johnson and others.[70] This perspective raises questions about why covert action was repeatedly chosen despite being assessed to be increasingly ineffective at its main aim.[71] Given that the risk-led approach cannot account for the decision by Israel to choose covert action, scholars such as O'Rourke and Treverton who generally advocate for a rationalist understanding of covert action have proposed exceptions for cases such as this where 'mission creep' occurs, fallible humans become swept up in a covert campaign and lose sight of objectives, and detractors have to combat the momentum of an ongoing campaign.[72] Although convenient, this explanation for Israeli decision making is atheoretical. It asserts that states make rational calculations based on risk when deciding whether to use covert action, except that in some cases they do not.

By contrast, a narrative approach argues that regardless of whether a given covert action actually delayed the Israeli programme, Israel would choose to conduct covert action to shape and empower the narrative of an Iranian threat which granted the Israeli government legitimacy and power from their key audiences. One key audience for this security narrative was the Israeli electorate. In 2013, only 12% of Israeli voters viewed the security threat from Iran as an urgent issue, while security in general was considered a top issue by only 19% of voters.[73] By 2021, after more than a decade of covert action focused on this narrative, general public opinion in Israel had shifted significantly, with 54.3% of Israelis believing that Iran constituted an existential threat to Israel to a great extent and more than 85% believing this to at least some extent.[74] The risk-led model does not predict that Israeli government would choose covert action primarily to escalate the perception of threat among its own electorate, and counts this campaign of covert action as an inexplicable

[69] David E. Sanger, *Confront and Conceal: Obama's Secret Wars and Surprising Use of American Power*, Updated edition (New York: Crown, 2013), 145–46.
[70] Johnson, 'Reflections on the Ethics and Effectiveness of America's "Third Option"'.
[71] Richard Maher, 'The Covert War against Iran's Nuclear Program: An Effective Counterproliferation Strategy?', EU Working Papers (Florence: European University Institute, 2012), 14, https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/23395/MWP_2012_17_Maher.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.
[72] Lindsey A. O'Rourke et al., 'ISSF Roundtable on Covert Regime Change: America's Secret Cold War', ISSF Roundtables (ISS Forum, 2021), 22.
[73] Stephan Miller, 'For 43% of Likely Voters, Economic Issues — Not the Palestinians or Iran — Are Top Priority', *Times of Israel*, 8 January 2013, http://www.timesofisrael.com/for-43-of-likely-voters-economic-issues-not-the-palestinians-or-iran-are-top-priority/.
[74] Viterbi Center for Public Opinion and Policy Research, 'Israeli Voice Index - November 2021', Israeli Voice Index (Jerusalem: Israel Democracy Institute, December 2021), 4, https://en.idi.org.il/media/17058/israeli_voice_index_data_2111_eng.pdf.

or irrationally motivated failure which did not actually disrupt the Iranian nuclear programme.[75] A narrative approach predicts that Israel would continue to conduct covert action in this case, and the evidence from polling data suggests that Israel was successful in building the power in and through the corresponding security narrative. Domestic polling also bears out another prediction of the cycle of action, that increasing securitisation will legitimise further action. By 2021, more than half of Israelis supported unilateral military intervention to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons.[76]

Repeating this comparison for a specific action undertaken by Israel, a raid and leak of Iranian nuclear secrets in 2018, once again demonstrates the limitations of a risk-led approach when compared to a narrative approach.[77] In this case, the covert action served minimal function in slowing and disrupting Iran's nuclear programme, which Sanger asserts is the goal of the Israeli campaign, and Israel's brazen public disclosure of the material identified despite the raid itself going unacknowledged leaves little room to argue that it served a meaningful role in avoiding escalation through secrecy.[78] Furthermore, closer inspection of the documents released reveals little that had not already been known for several years about the Iranian nuclear programme, reinforcing that very little objective change to the security situation occurred as a result of this covert action.[79] A risk-led approach offers no explanation for such a decision, and would not predict that such an action would take place. However, from a narrative perspective, the audiences in this case are the focus. This raid took place during a key period of diplomacy regarding the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action on Iran, where Israel had a vested interest in escalating the narrative and increasing its salience to modify or nullify the deal and legitimise their narrative of an Iranian threat. The Israeli government invited Western intelligence agencies to a collective viewing of this material, and shortly after the USA ended negotiations and decided to withdraw from the JCPOA, which was by then becoming an increasingly pressing issue for the US administration.[80] Although this process did not reduce the threat or reduce the risk of escalation or retaliation, the narrative approach predicts that Israel would choose covert action in this situation. Sanger acknowledges that Iran was the most common subject of Israeli diplomatic pressure on the USA during the second Obama administration, with it taking precedence over the Palestine-focused security narrative in this time, which aligns with the narrative-led prediction that covert action would be conducted not to quietly reduce a threat but to escalate it to one of Israel's key audiences.[81]

[75] Efraim Inbar, 'Iran and Israel: The Inevitable War?', *SIRIUS – Zeitschrift Für Strategische Analysen* 4, no. 4 (25 November 2020): 528–29, https://doi.org/10.1515/sirius-2020-4007.
[76] Viterbi Center for Public Opinion and Policy Research, 'Israeli Voice Index - November 2021', 4.
[77] Judah Ari Gross, 'Mossad's Stunning Op in Iran Overshadows the Actual Intelligence It Stole', *Times of Israel*, 1 May 2018, https://www.timesofisrael.com/mossads-stunning-op-in-iran-casts-giant-shadow-over-the-intelligence-it-stole/.
[78] i24 News, 'Israel's Netanyahu Invites World Powers To Examine Secret Iran Nuclear Files', *I24 News*, 1 May 2018, https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/israel/173683-180501-france-britain-germany-sending-teams-to-israel-to-examine-iran-nuclear-files; Haaretz, 'How the Mossad Broke into an Iranian Facility and Stole Half a Ton of Nuclear Files', *Haaretz*, 16 July 2018, sec. Israel News, https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2018-07-16/ty-article/how-the-mossad-broke-into-an-iranian-facility-and-stole-nuclear-files/0000017f-db07-d856-a37f-ffc7b14c0000.
[79] Gross, 'Mossad's Stunning Op in Iran Overshadows the Actual Intelligence It Stole'.
[80] i24 News, 'Israel's Netanyahu Invites World Powers To Examine Secret Iran Nuclear Files'; Haaretz, 'How the Mossad Broke into an Iranian Facility and Stole Half a Ton of Nuclear Files'.
[81] Sanger, *Confront and Conceal*, 220.

Wider Implications

Existing covert action literature which aligns with this approach has already been highlighted, and the unification of these approaches into a single model may prove useful to those looking to theorise other elements of covert action without falling victim to the challenges in its study and the paradoxes of risk-led approaches. One of the most developed of these theorisations is the concept of covert action as a signalling activity. This concept shares some characteristics with a narrative approach, in particular that it considers the outcome of a mission to be less important than the communicative effect of the action. At present, the signalling function as laid out by Carson and Yarhi-Milo is built upon a risk-led approach to understanding why states use covert action, which imparts limitations such as those discussed above.[82] Migrating the core tents of this concept to a narrative approach would introduce the possibility of an adversary as a key audience, which would be a valuable area for further exploration in a narrative approach. Conversely, adopting a more explicitly narratological stance in studying the signalling function would widen its scope, where the signalling function is currently limited to local allies and strategic adversaries, while a narratological perspective places emphasis on key domestic and foreign audiences which may be neutral or supportive, with the focus on their mutual interactions with narratives rather than the audience itself.[83]

Elsewhere, a narrative approach has already been adopted and developed in answering other questions in covert action scholarship. Cormac, Walton and Van Puyvelde employ an approach broadly aligned with narratology in exploring how to measure the effectiveness of covert action.[84] This has been extended by others to support the detection and attribution of covert action, focused on how the lessons of securitisation and the common language of escalation can be used to detect otherwise untraceable covert action, and on how existing models for concepts such as severity can be developed beyond a positivist base to overcome the challenge of the evidence bias and better study covert action by non-Western states.[85]

Beyond the study of covert action, the integration of this field with wider international relations offers mutual benefit. The severity of covert action places it at one extreme of state activity, and while a narratological approach to public policy accounts for a broad range of policymaking this concept required interweaving with securitisation to produce a more robust model for the edge case of covert action. This integration may yield further insight into other areas of public policy, particularly with regard to escalation by actors other than the state which increases the salience of issues and demands action. Likewise, the cycle of action is not inherently limited to covert action, and has applicability in overt contexts as well. The recent successful exploration of securitisation in intra-state contexts such as at the level of cities and metropolitan areas suggests that the cycle has applicability beyond the state level, such as in actions taken in counter-

[82] Carson and Yarhi-Milo, ‘Covert Communication’.
[83] Carson and Yarhi-Milo, ‘Covert Communication’, 124.
[84] Cormac, Walton, and Puyvelde, ‘What Constitutes Successful Covert Action?’, 116–18.
[85] Duffield, ‘A Narrative Approach to Analysis of Covert Action’.

narcotics campaigns.[86] On a more theoretical level, although securitisation has been studied at length in international relations it is rarely linked to narratology in existing literature despite clear areas of overlap; combining these concepts in a similar manner to this study may lead to further insights in other international relations fields.

Awareness has recently increased of the relative isolation in which covert action is studied. As noted with examples by Cormac, Walton and Van Puyvelde, the role of covert action in shaping broader policy is often ignored by scholars who focus on the overt dimension, and greater theoretical integration will no doubt assist in resolving this.[87] Poznansky cites a belief that covert and overt action are governed by different processes as a key reason for the neglect of unacknowledged activities in wider international relations, which is explicitly rejected by the cycle of action model.[88] The dynamic that this model proposes, in which the decision to use covert action occurs late in the process of action and is governed by the same forces, allows scholars to more easily consider where covert action may have taken place or to propose covert solutions to policy issues. As covert action scholarship based on narrative-led models continues to grow, the disciplinary isolation of covert action can be expected to fall away.

Conclusions

Covert action, defined here as unacknowledged foreign intervention which harnesses state power to influence security narratives, is constrained in academic study by longstanding disciplinary challenges and a lack of proper theorisation. The rationalist, largely realist orthodoxy of the field suffers from paradoxes, and this study has highlighted the requirement for an alternative approach. A narratological perspective of covert action reframes ideas and power as the key drivers of state action, ands securitisation theory offers the key link between the use of covert action by states and wide-ranging narratives of security. These theoretical links establish a mutually reinforcing relationship between power, narrative and action, which can be resolved into a cycle of action that demonstrates the drivers behind the use of covert action. The decision is shaped by key audiences, and is influenced by cultural norms for these audiences.

Most importantly, the cycle of action models how states choose covert action for primarily narrative reasons, deploying it when its inherent characteristics are more salient to key audiences than overt alternatives. Action is demanded by security narratives shaped by external audiences, rather than being chosen by heads of state for personality-driven reasons. Risk does not factor into this decision, and an objective change in the environment is not required to influence the narrative or to deliver a resolution. The case study of Israeli covert action demonstrates the limitations of the risk-led approach, which fails to

[86] Kreide and Langenohl, *Conceptualizing Power in Dynamics of Securitization*, 16.
[87] Cormac, Walton, and Puyvelde, 'What Constitutes Successful Covert Action?', 127.
[88] Poznansky, 'Covert Regime Change', 755.

predict some covert actions and offers contradictory explanations for others, and highlights the practical benefits of shifting focus to narratives and audiences to better model why states opt for covert means.

Applying the cycle of action and a narrative approach to wider covert action scholarship is an exciting prospect. The general applicability of this model is made clearer by the growing integration between the study of covert action and wider areas of international relations. Perhaps, with the benefits of a narrative approach, studying covert action in the future will not be considered such a daunting challenge after all.

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