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## Covert Communication: The Intelligibility and Credibility of Signaling in Secret

Austin Carson and Keren Yarhi-Milo

### ABSTRACT

Can states credibly communicate their intentions through covert policy tools, despite the absence of credibility-enhancing publicity? Most extant research suggests covert action and secrecy in general are uniquely uninformative and often used as an alternative to signaling. Yet episodes such as Richard Nixon's secret bombing of Cambodia suggest that leaders have used covert action to convey intentions and coerce adversaries. This article builds a theoretical framework for understanding signaling in the covert sphere, developing reasons why states find covert communication both intelligible (that is, the basic intended message is understandable) and credible (that is, the message is believable). We argue that two target audiences—local allies and strategic adversaries—tend to observe covert action and that the costs and risks incurred by initiating and expanding covert action credibly convey resolve. We assess our arguments empirically through careful process tracing of a set of nested covert interventions by Soviet and American leaders in conflicts in Angola and Afghanistan. Drawing on a trove of recently declassified material, we assess intentions and inferences related to covert signaling. We find that both strategic adversaries and local partners observed and drew inferences about resolve. Covert lethal aid programs thereby served as a credible indicator of resolve through three mechanisms we identify in the paper: sunk costs, counter-escalation risks, and domestic political risks. These findings have important implications for the study of coercive bargaining, secrecy, and reputation. They also shed light on an important policy tool contemporary policymakers will likely use, suggesting the kinds of effects covert action has and elucidating the basic interpretive framework needed to communicate messages with new methods like covert cyber attacks.

In March 1969, US B-52 Stratofortress bombers conducted secret raids on Vietcong targets in Cambodia.<sup>1</sup> These massive bombers, capable of carrying seventy thousand pounds of explosives, conducted raids that could not feasibly be kept

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<sup>1</sup>A description of the Cambodian raids can be found in Seymour Hersh, *The Price of Power: Kissinger in the Nixon White House* (New York: Summit Book, 1983), 54–61.

secret from local leaders in Cambodia and North Vietnam. In fact, they were meant to know. According to one of the principal planners, the raids were primarily intended to “signal to North Vietnam that we meant business. [Henry] Kissinger wanted them to know that we were serious about possible escalation.”<sup>2</sup> Yet extraordinary measures, including the falsification and destruction of records, were taken to ensure that the bombing raids on Cambodia were kept secret from other audiences, including the American public.<sup>3</sup>

The use of secret bombing in Cambodia to signal resolve is but one example of a larger phenomenon almost entirely unexplored by scholars of international relations (IR): that is, whether and how leaders can use covert policy activity to communicate political messages. We define covert action as policy action undertaken by a government outside its own territory without official acknowledgment that most observing audiences do not know about or cannot attribute to the actor. The existing literature has largely been silent on the specific issue of whether and how states might communicate intentions through covert action. A careful reading of signaling literature, moreover, provides reason to be skeptical of the signaling efficacy of covert action. Secrecy is often seen as a tool useful for preventing information from reaching domestic or international audiences, and to the extent that any information is communicated, the conventional wisdom is that audiences will at best infer weakness rather than resolve from those activities. After all, the argument goes, words and actions that lack publicity lack accountability and thus can be issued without incurring domestic or international reputational costs.<sup>4</sup> A recent wave of studies on secrecy in international relations has advanced our understanding of the strategic, operational, and domestic political benefits of using secrecy. Once again, however, the value of covert actions as policy tools intended to signal resolve to external actors (either allies or adversaries) has been largely unstudied.

This paper thus puts forth the first systematic treatment of the conditions under which covert actions communicate resolve, the mechanisms by which such actions generate credibility, and the inferences adversaries and allies draw from them. The empirical analysis we conduct to test our theory indicates that this unexplored feature of covert actions should receive more attention in the burgeoning literature on secrecy and in international relations more broadly. At the core of our approach to understanding the role of secrecy is the idea that states share a basic communicative grammar regarding activity in the covert realm that allows leaders to send targeted messages to external actors. Covert action is rarely completely secret; the

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<sup>2</sup>Air Force Colonel Ray Sitton, as quoted in *ibid.*, 54.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 54–61; see also Stephen Wrage, “Major Knight and Cambodia,” in *Case Studies in Ethics for Military Leaders* (Boston, MA: Pearson, 2011), 105–7, 221–25.

<sup>4</sup>For example, James D. Fearon, “Domestic Political Audiences and the Escalation of International Disputes,” *American Political Science Review* 88, no. 3 (September 1994): 577–92, DOI:10.2307/2944796; James D. Fearon, “Signaling Foreign Policy Interests: Tying Hands versus Sinking Costs,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 41, no. 1 (February 1997): 68–90, DOI:10.2307/174487; Kenneth A. Schultz, “Domestic Opposition and Signaling in International Crises,” *American Political Science Review* 92, no. 4 (December 1998): 829–44, DOI:10.2307/2586306. For a recent analysis of the importance of reputation, see Alex Weisiger and Keren Yarhi-Milo, “Revisiting Reputation: How Past Actions Matter in International Politics,” *International Organization* 69, no. 2 (March 2015): 473–95, DOI:10.1017/S0020818314000393.

basic contours and many details are often observed by local partners and strategic adversaries with sophisticated intelligence capabilities. We contend states have developed a basic interpretive framework that assigns meaning to observed covert behavior. New covert initiatives and qualitative expansions thereof provide valuable insight into a sponsor's intentions.

This article builds a theoretical framework for understanding signaling in the covert sphere that develops reasons why states find covert communication both intelligible (the basic intended message is understood by perceivers) and credible (the message is believable). We focus on signals of resolve sent via a number of secret policy actions, including secret military mobilizations, covert aid programs, and discreet military strikes, which we refer to generally as "covert action."<sup>5</sup> To shed light on the intelligibility of covert signaling, we draw on insights about covert or "backstage" communication dynamics from the sociologist Erving Goffman and insights about how states make sense of observable deeds from Thomas C. Schelling and Alexander L. George. To shed light on credibility, we theorize the costs and risks incurred by sponsors of covert action, much of which is influenced by the secret nature of the activity itself.

We evaluate our theory through careful process tracing of two important conflicts: the civil wars in Angola (1970–76) and Afghanistan (1979–89) during the Cold War. Both conflicts hosted a set of nested covert interventions by Soviet and American leaders that provide multiple opportunities for evaluation of the theory. Both conflicts also benefit from a robust documentary record due to recent declassification. We find that, consistent with the theory, leaders on both sides used covert action to demonstrate resolve to the other superpower and to reassure local allies. We also see that leaders assessed expenditure of resources, domestic risks, and escalatory dynamics of these contests in ways that support our specific theoretical mechanisms.

To be clear, while our case analysis reveals that decision-makers launched covert interventions in order to signal their resolve, we do not claim leaders use covert action exclusively to signal in any given case. On-the-ground effects are almost always part of the story as well. We also do not contend signaling explains all cases of covert action. Sometimes a secret is just a secret with no signaling purpose. Concealed tunnels dug by Hamas fighters in Gaza, China's secrecy-enabled surprise entry into the Korean War, and the clandestine raid on Osama bin Laden's compound in Pakistan are examples of secret policy activity without a signaling component.<sup>6</sup>

The article features three primary contributions to debates in IR. First, we advance theoretical debates about how states signal and for whom those signals are intended. Credible communication under anarchy has been a central research area in IR for decades. We introduce a previously overlooked signaling tool—covert action—and provide

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<sup>5</sup>Covert action can be defined as "the effort of one government to influence politics, opinions, and events in another state through means which are not attributable to the sponsoring state." Elizabeth E. Anderson, "The Security Dilemma and Covert Action: The Truman Years," *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence* 11, no. 4 (1998/99): 423. Note the term has specific bureaucratic and legal connotations in the American context that we do not address.

<sup>6</sup>The distinction between secret operations that are clandestine (complete concealment) and covert (identity of sponsor is concealed or at least plausibly deniable) in the US foreign policy bureaucracy reflects this.

a novel theoretical explanation for why secret policy activity by states can intelligibly and credibly convey resolve. Our theory and empirics specifically highlight the role of multiple audiences. Existing studies of signaling resolve tend to focus on dyadic messaging between adversaries; we add the considerations of local allies. Our cases show the value added, as the appeal of superpower covert action in Angola and Afghanistan is difficult to understand without knowing the importance of demonstrating resolve to local partners such as Zaire and Pakistan to Moscow and Washington. The article furthers efforts to expand the aperture of scholarship on signaling to incorporate resolve's effects on other audiences like allies in addition to adversaries.<sup>7</sup> More broadly, our propositions about secrecy's unique signaling effects expand on insights in extant studies of private threats, offering new ideas that can be adapted and tested by scholars interested in messages other than resolve and secret activity in settings other than conflict.<sup>8</sup>

Second, the article makes an important methodological contribution. We test our claims with declassified primary materials that allow us to carefully trace intentions and inferences and address questions, such as whether a particular policy action was intended to be a signal of resolve and whether it was interpreted as such, which are often overlooked in signaling studies. These are not trivial questions; indeed, policymakers often struggle with understanding a message as much as diagnosing its credibility.<sup>9</sup> This issue of the intelligibility of signals is also essential when introducing a new domain for signaling. By empirically analyzing the communicative grammar of both covert signal senders and receivers, we underscore the value of qualitative archival materials for studies of signaling.

Third, the article has implications for larger debates in IR on signaling and reputation.<sup>10</sup> Demonstrating the efficacy of covert signaling contributes to recent debates about how signals credibly communicate—such as tying hands, sinking costs, and raising risks—and which mechanisms work best. We explain the applicability of these mechanisms in the covert realm and how that realm alters them. Moreover, extant studies on reputation have not addressed the impact of secret policy action and instead focus on how public actions build or hurt a state's reputation.<sup>11</sup> Yet we find clear evidence that, behind closed doors, leaders consistently

<sup>7</sup>See also Scott Wolford, "Showing Restraint, Signaling Resolve: Coalitions, Cooperation, and Crisis Bargaining," *American Journal of Political Science* 58, no. 1 (January 2014): 144–56, DOI:10.1111/ajps.12049.

<sup>8</sup>For example, see Anne E. Sartori, "The Might of the Pen: A Reputational Theory of Communication in International Disputes," *International Organization* 56, no. 1 (February 2002): 121–49, DOI:10.1162/002081802753485151; Shuhei Kurizaki, "Efficient Secrecy: Public versus Private Threats in Crisis Diplomacy," *American Political Science Review* 101, no. 3 (August 2007): 543–58; Robert F. Trager, "Diplomatic Calculus in Anarchy: How Communication Matters," *American Political Science Review* 104, no. 2 (May 2010): 347–68, DOI:10.1017/S0003055410000158.

<sup>9</sup>On assessing intentions, see Keren Yarhi-Milo, *Knowing the Adversary: Leaders, Intelligence, and Assessment of Intentions in International Relations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014). For an example of failed intelligibility, see Scott D. Sagan and Jeremi Suri, "The Madman Nuclear Alert: Secrecy, Signaling, and Safety in October 1969," *International Security* 27, no. 4 (Spring 2003): 150–83.

<sup>10</sup>Matthew Fuhrmann and Todd S. Sechser, "Signaling Alliance Commitments: Hand-Tying and Sunk Costs in Extended Nuclear Deterrence," *American Journal of Political Science* 58, no. 4 (October 2014): 919–35, DOI:10.1111/ajps.12082. For an early and influential contribution, see Fearon, "Signaling Foreign Policy Interests."

<sup>11</sup>For example, see Jonathan Mercer, *Reputation and International Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996); Daryl G. Press, *Calculating Credibility: How Leaders Assess Military Threats* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007); Weisiger and Yarhi-Milo, "Revisiting Reputation."

worry about loss of reputation as a result of their actions in the covert sphere and possible reputation recovery via covert action.

The article proceeds as follows. The first section reviews existing research on signaling and secrecy. The second section unpacks our theory of signaling via covert action and derives conditions and hypotheses for the empirical analysis. We then discuss our research design in section three and in section four assess the role of signaling in a set of nested covert actions during conflicts in Angola and Afghanistan. We conclude by reflecting on generalizability, policy implications, and future research.

## Muted Messages: Extant Research On Secrecy and Signaling

Our interest lies in the signaling potential of “covert military action” (or simply “covert action”). We use this term to refer to a variety of secret foreign policy actions that may be administered by military or intelligence bureaucracies. Their unifying feature is any attempt by a state to use intelligence or military policy instruments to influence outcomes abroad in a way that conceals and renders deniable the role of the sponsoring state for most audiences.

At the core of IR research on interstate communication is the concept of costly signals, or how words and behavior by states convey messages in ways that help observers distinguish between different kinds of “types.”<sup>12</sup> For example, leaders can demonstrate they are a more resolved type by engaging in expensive actions (sinking costs), deliberately increasing dangers such as the risk of crisis escalation (raising risks), and/or engaging constraining institutions or political dynamics to reduce future flexibility (tying hands). Following Fearon’s influential work on audience costs, most studies in the last two decades have implicitly or explicitly addressed the signaling power of publicity.<sup>13</sup> Making verbal and behavioral coercive threats public can generate credibility by activating political constraints that tie hands and/or generate greater risks and sink costs.<sup>14</sup> James D. Morrow’s summary of costly signaling, for example, mentions reassurance in the Arab–Israeli

<sup>12</sup>The literature on signaling resolve is vast; key reference points are Thomas Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960); Fearon, “Signaling Foreign Policy Interests.” For signaling restraint, see Andrew Kydd, “Trust, Reassurance, and Cooperation,” *International Organization* 54, no. 2 (Spring 2000): 325–57; Charles L. Glaser, *Rational Theory of International Politics: The Logic of Competition and Cooperation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).

<sup>13</sup>Fearon, “Domestic Political Audiences and the Escalation of International Disputes.” For an earlier analysis that also includes mechanisms not limited to domestic audiences, see Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, new ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1966). Studies testing, extending, refining, and critiquing the use of publicity to tie hands include Kenneth A. Schultz, “Looking for Audience Costs,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 45, no. 1 (February 2001): 32–60; Michael Tomz, “Domestic Audience Costs in International Relations: An Experimental Approach,” *International Organization* 61, no. 4 (Fall 2007): 821–40, DOI:10.1017/S0020818307070282; Jessica L. Weeks, “Autocratic Audience Costs: Regime Type and Signaling Resolve,” *International Organization* 62, no. 1 (January 2008): 35–64, DOI:10.1017/S0020818308080028; Jack Snyder and Erica D. Borghard, “The Cost of Empty Threats: A Penny, Not a Pound,” *American Political Science Review* 105, no. 3 (August 2011): 437–56, DOI:10.1017/S000305541100027X; Marc Trachtenberg, “Audience Costs: An Historical Analysis,” *Security Studies* 21, no. 1 (January 2012): 3–42, DOI:10.1080/09636412.2012.650590.

<sup>14</sup>An example of linking publicity to risk raising is Jessica Chen Weiss, “Authoritarian Signaling, Mass Audiences, and Nationalist Protest in China,” *International Organization* 67, no. 01 (January 2013): 1–35, DOI:10.1017/S0020818312000380.

peace process and argues that Anwar Sadat's public bid to reassure Israel was costly and therefore credible while Arab leaders' secret offers of peace "did not carry the same credibility as Sadat's signal precisely because they were private."<sup>15</sup> While the rationalist literature on signaling has not eliminated the possibility of costly "covert" action, most of the mechanisms for costly signaling discussed in the context of this literature (for example, significant arms reductions, membership in binding international institutions, or invasion of third countries) are inherently "public" in nature. This leaves open, both theoretically and empirically, our fundamental question of when and how covert actions might communicate resolve.

A growing literature on secrecy in IR, on the other hand, has advanced various important arguments as to when and why states use covert military operations.<sup>16</sup> The majority of these studies, however, is either silent about the potential signaling effects of covert operations or gives us reasons to be pessimistic about it. For example, Scott D. Sagan and Jeremi Suri's study of the effectiveness of a secret American nuclear alert by President Richard Nixon to signal resolve to Soviet leaders concludes that Nixon's attempt to signal resolve to Soviet leaders is an example of "cheap signals" that "avoid public commitments" and "can be explained away if discovered as military exercises, and therefore do not raise the stakes that leaders face if they back down in a crisis."<sup>17</sup> Still, some scholars have advanced a more positive link between secrecy and signaling. Beginning with Anne E. Sartori's study of reputation for honesty, a cluster of research on private diplomacy suggests verbal or written threats issued behind closed doors can still credibly express resolve or reassurance.<sup>18</sup> Unlike the focus of our paper, however, those studies explore secret but explicit and direct communication among leaders.

Finally, other studies have looked at secrecy as an alternative to signaling resolve. Brian Lai's analysis of military mobilization finds private mobilization lacks risk-raising properties and therefore cannot signal.<sup>19</sup> Perceiving private mobilization as a military move that is entirely unobservable to external audiences, he argues that "private" mobilization produces a tactical advantage if an opponent

<sup>15</sup>James D. Morrow, "The Strategic Setting of Choices: Signaling, Commitment, and Negotiation in International Politics," in *Strategic Choice and International Relations*, ed. David A. Lake and Robert Powell (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 87–88.

<sup>16</sup>Ward Thomas, "Norms and Security: The Case of International Assassination," *International Security* 25, no. 1 (July 2000): 105–33, DOI:10.1162/016228800560408; Alexander B. Downes and Mary Lauren Lilley, "Overt Peace, Covert War?: Covert Intervention and the Democratic Peace," *Security Studies* 19, no. 2 (April 2010): 266; Erik Gartzke and Jon R. Lindsay, "Weaving Tangled Webs: Offense, Defense, and Deception in Cyberspace," *Security Studies* 24, no. 2 (April 2015): 316–48, DOI:10.1080/09636412.2015.1038188; Austin Carson, "Facing Off and Saving Face: Covert Intervention and Escalation Management in the Korean War," *International Organization* 70, no. 1 (December 2016): 103–31, DOI:10.1017/S0020818315000284.

<sup>17</sup>Sagan and Suri, "Madman Nuclear Alert," 155. See also William Burr and Jeffrey Kimball, "Nixon's Secret Nuclear Alert: Vietnam War Diplomacy and the Joint Chiefs of Staff Readiness Test, October 1969," *Cold War History* 3, no. 2 (January 2003): 113–56.

<sup>18</sup>Sartori, "Might of the Pen"; Anne E. Sartori, *Deterrence by Diplomacy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005); Kurizaki, "Efficient Secrecy"; Trager, "Diplomatic Calculus in Anarchy"; Kristopher W. Ramsay, "Cheap Talk Diplomacy, Voluntary Negotiations, and Variable Bargaining Power," *International Studies Quarterly* 55, no. 4 (December 2011): 1003–23, DOI:10.1111/j.1468-2478.2011.00687.x.

<sup>19</sup>Brian Lai, "The Effects of Different Types of Military Mobilization on the Outcome of International Crises," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 48, no. 2 (April 2004): 211–29.

is caught off guard with a surprise attack. Branislav L. Slantchev models misrepresentation in war and China's secret entry into the Korean War. He links secrecy to operational military effects (that is, surprising one's adversary) and finds the "perverse incentives" from surprise attacks can make leaders "unwilling to send costly signals even when they could have done so."<sup>20</sup> Older studies similarly link the use of secrecy to surprising one's adversary and deception rather than any role in signaling.<sup>21</sup> A similar theme of covert action as an alternative signaling is present in theories of secrecy's value as a way to relieve leaders from domestic criticism.<sup>22</sup> While both of these literatures do not take head-on the question of whether states might also signal with covert tools, they have left the question open by focusing on the noncommunicative properties of secrecy.

In sum, the existing literature for the most part is either silent or pessimistic about the ability of covert military actions to signal resolve. Our emphasis on covert military action as a signaling tool leads us to two important points of departure: (1) theorizing how covert action can intelligibly signify resolve among leaders despite the use of secrecy and the ambiguity of interpreting state behavior; and (2) focusing on the unique properties of secret military action rather than the binding force of diplomatic messages. Our theory therefore addresses both the intelligibility (ability to be understood) and potential credibility (worthiness of belief) of covert action as a signal of resolve.

### Theory: Intelligibility and Credibility in Backstage Communication

We argue states can share a basic communicative grammar regarding activity in the covert realm that allows leaders to send targeted messages. This is possible because covert activity conducted over time and in a sensitive geostrategic area is rarely a complete secret. Other states with sophisticated intelligence capabilities and/or those that are located close to the action often know or are informed of the basic contours.<sup>23</sup> We believe states can use this partial observability as a signaling opportunity rather than merely regard it as an inconvenience. Our theory thus

<sup>20</sup>Branislav L. Slantchev, "Feigning Weakness," *International Organization* 64, no. 3 (Summer 2010): 384.

<sup>21</sup>Robert Axelrod, "The Rational Timing of Surprise," *World Politics* 31, no. 2 (January 1979): 228–46; Richard K. Betts, "Surprise Despite Warning: Why Sudden Attacks Succeed," *Political Science Quarterly* 95, no. 4 (Winter 1980–81): 551–72.

<sup>22</sup>David N. Gibbs, "Secrecy and International Relations," *Journal of Peace Research* 32, no. 2 (May 1995): 213–28; Matthew A. Baum, "Going Private: Public Opinion, Presidential Rhetoric, and the Domestic Politics of Audience Costs in U.S. Foreign Policy Crises," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 48, no. 5 (October 2004): 603–31; John M. Schuessler, "The Deception Dividend: FDR's Undeclared War," *International Security* 34, no. 4 (Spring 2010): 133–65, DOI:10.1162/isec.2010.34.4.133; Jonathan N. Brown and Anthony S. Marcum, "Avoiding Audience Costs: Domestic Political Accountability and Concessions in Crisis Diplomacy," *Security Studies* 20, no. 2 (April 2011): 141–70; Dan Reiter, "Democracy, Deception, and Entry into War," *Security Studies* 21, no. 4 (October 2012): 594–623. For democratic peace theory, see David P. Forsythe, "Democracy, War, and Covert Action," *Journal of Peace Research* 29, no. 4 (November 1992): 385–95; Downes and Lilley, "Overt Peace, Covert War?"

<sup>23</sup>Robert Jervis, *The Logic of Images in International Relations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970), 27–29, 35. Jervis analyzes observed secret activity that was not anticipated to be observable. We theorize covert activity that is likely to be detected by at least some states. For (dis)incentives for revealing this detected activity, see Carson, "Facing Off and Saving Face"; Austin Carson and Allison Carnegie, "The Spotlight's Harsh Glare: Rethinking Publicity and International Order," n.d., available from authors upon request.



proceeds in two steps. First we describe how observed covert action can convey intelligible messages about intentions to other leaders, such as “we intend to defend our ally” or “we intend to prevent the emergence of a new nuclear neighbor.” We then address why any message of resolve should be credible in the eyes of targeted audiences.

Sociologist Erving Goffman analyzed everyday social encounters to understand how we tailor our impressions to be socially appropriate and to avoid embarrassment. Invoking an analogy from theater performance, Goffman argued social life reflected dynamics on both the “frontstage” and “backstage.” The backstage is “a place, relative to a given performance, where the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted as a matter of course” and that safeguards the coherence and consistency of the visible (frontstage) performance.<sup>24</sup> Yet Goffman also notes there is partial visibility among others on the backstage because “illusions and impressions are openly constructed” in that space.<sup>25</sup> Psychologists drawing on similar insights note communicators that confront multiple audiences can use messages that contain “covert hidden content” to target one and avoid others.<sup>26</sup> These clever communications draw on familiarity and experience, allowing “shared knowledge” to create “successful covert communication” through a shared interpretive frame.<sup>27</sup>

We view state behavior vis-à-vis the covert sphere in similar terms. State-sponsored covert action is often visible to other states with access to the “backstage” via their intelligence capabilities and/or proximity to the site of activity. This permits sponsors to covertly communicate messages to others with access to the backstage. But how do other leaders know what the intended message is? This is a question of intelligibility, conceptually prior to the issue of credibility that is addressed in existing literature and theorized below.<sup>28</sup> The intelligibility of covert signaling was first suggested by Schelling and George. Schelling’s bargaining framework introduces “focal points” and “salient thresholds” as ways adversaries can communicate through deeds rather than words. Focal points and salient thresholds are coordinating features of a situation that allows observable behavior to express intentions like “they are resolved” or “they seek to fight limited war.” Schelling therefore suggests that qualitative changes in how states act in a crisis or war can send intelligible messages about intentions.<sup>29</sup> George applies these concepts to crisis behavior including covert action.<sup>30</sup> Analyzing the Cold War, he argues American and Soviet leaders developed “an ad hoc set of ground rules” regarding involvement in outside

<sup>24</sup>Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1959), 112–13.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid. For adapting Goffman’s backstage metaphor to IR, see Carson, “Facing Off and Saving Face.”

<sup>26</sup>John H. Fleming et al., “Multiple Audience Problem: A Strategic Communication Perspective on Social Perception,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 58, no. 4 (April 1990): 593–609, DOI:10.1037/0022-3514.58.4.593.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 599.

<sup>28</sup>On intelligibility in signaling, see Emanuel Adler and Vincent Pouliot, “International Practices,” *International Theory* 3, no. 1 (February 2011): 1–36.

<sup>29</sup>Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, 135.

<sup>30</sup>Alexander L. George, “Crisis Prevention Reexamined,” in *Managing U.S.-Soviet Rivalry: Problems of Crisis Prevention*, ed. Alexander L. George (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1983).

conflicts.<sup>31</sup> This framework meant “qualitative changes [that] represent the crossing of a new threshold,” such as “the introduction of a new weapon into combat, initiation of attacks against a type of target heretofore not under fire, intervention by external forces and/or a shift in their participation from an advisory or training role to a more important supporting or combat role,” came to signify readily interpretable messages about their intentions in the local contest.<sup>32</sup>

Collecting these insights, we argue using covert action is akin to states choosing to retreat to a metaphorical backstage; this permits communication with select states that share access to that backstage. Drawing on Schelling and George, we further argue covert action is intelligible because it contains a range of salient, qualitative thresholds that are mutually meaningful as symbols of a sponsor’s resolve. But who receives these covert signals? And why are these covertly conveyed messages believable? We now turn to the issue of credibility.

### ***Who Witnesses? Strategic Adversaries and Local Allies***

We specifically postulate that covert military action tends to be visible to two specific audiences that therefore constitute the targeted audience for signaling. The first consists of strategic adversaries. Covert action is often visible to a state’s main strategic rival due to the robust data provided by modern intelligence systems. Intelligence bureaucracies draw on a wide variety of intelligence sources (for example, human, signals, technical) to monitor the public and private activities of other states. As a result, the basic contours of covert behavior are often visible to other states. The long-term rivalry and large resources of Soviet and American governments, for example, led them to develop sophisticated intelligence collection capabilities to monitor one another’s activities. This was no idiosyncrasy of bipolarity; historians of the interwar period, for example, have documented a strikingly similar level of transparency among rival adversaries in the covert activity that accompanied the Spanish Civil War.<sup>33</sup> More recently, covert involvement by various outside powers in the Syrian Civil War and in Ukraine suggest states continue carefully monitoring covert activity.<sup>34</sup>

The second audience for whom covert action tends to be visible is leaders of local allies. The implementation of covert action often relies on cooperation with local partners. A covert airstrike may use the airspace of an ally; secret aid shipments on their journey to a distant rebel group may need to enter ports of partners; even military mobilization can alter military routines at bases in an ally’s territory

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<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 389.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., 390.

<sup>33</sup>Willard C. Frank Jr., “Politico-Military Deception at Sea in the Spanish Civil War, 1936–1939,” *Intelligence and National Security* 5, no. 3 (Autumn 1990): 84–112.

<sup>34</sup>See, for example, a report on the “shadow war” featuring Iran, Israel, and the United States in Nicholas Kulish and Jodi Rudoren, “Murky Plots and Attacks Tied to Shadow War of Iran and Israel,” *New York Times*, 8 August 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/09/world/middleeast/murky-plots-and-attacks-tied-to-shadow-war-of-iran-and-israel.html>.

tipping off local leaders. While extra concealment efforts can allow deception of these local partners, states may need or prefer to keep friendly leaders informed. A revealing remark from the American secretary of state Dean Acheson demonstrates that as part of their mobilization efforts early in the Korean War, American leaders secretly repositioned atomic weapons and bombers to bases in both Europe and the Pacific. Knowing that assets at military bases on British territory would be used, Acheson argued one benefit of this mobilization was to “impress the British with America’s determination to prevail in Korea” in a “demonstration of resolve.”<sup>35</sup>

### ***Credibility: Mechanisms of Covertly Signaling Resolve***

What makes a message of resolve credible? To be clear, we do not argue that signaling properties are independent from on-the-ground effects. Consider, for example, two different interpretations of a recent covert action: Israel’s secret strike against Syria’s nuclear reactor in 2007. In both versions, Israel is constrained from overt military action by concerns for regional stability but motivated to preemptively shut down Syrian nuclear development. In one interpretation, Israeli leaders proceed with the strike solely because it will set back Syria’s nuclear program. In a second version, Israeli leaders proceed both because it damages Syria’s nuclear program and sends a message to other nuclear proliferators in the region (that is, Iran), confident that intelligence monitoring will reveal its demonstration of resolve to both rivals and friends. We embrace this second view. (The second view of motivation for covert action is also relevant for the Stuxnet worm that damaged Iran’s industrial and nuclear facilities in 2010). We posit that only analyzing operational effects, or the political benefits of hiding activity from particular audiences, misses an important message-sending component. Our intuition of the relevance of signaling is supported by subsequent reporting on the signaling motive in the 2007 Israel–Syria episode.<sup>36</sup>

We identify three mechanisms that give credibility to signals of resolve in the covert sphere. In doing so we note the important distinction between costs/risks that derive from the action itself versus from the unique features of acting in secrecy.

*Sinking Costs.* One reason why states using covert action distinguish themselves from more cautious “types” is because such activity often carries significant expenditure of non-recoverable resources. A program to covertly provide weaponry to a local ally, for example, can involve the expenditure of millions of dollars on sophisticated weaponry, deplete national stocks, and potentially spread technical knowledge about such weaponry to other states. Similarly, a partial military mobilization or deployment of a specialized brigade abroad can create a strategically significant

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<sup>35</sup>Roger Dingman, “Atomic Diplomacy during the Korean War,” *International Security* 13, no. 3 (Winter 1988–1989): 58.

<sup>36</sup>Erich Follath and Holger Stark, “The Story of ‘Operation Orchard’: How Israel Destroyed Syria’s Al Kibar Nuclear Reactor,” *Spiegel Online*, February 11, 2009, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/the-story-of-operation-orchard-how-israel-destroyed-syria-s-al-kibar-nuclear-reactor-a-658663.html>; David Makovsky, “The Silent Strike,” *New Yorker*, 17 September 2012, [http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2012/09/17/120917fa\\_fact\\_makovsky](http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2012/09/17/120917fa_fact_makovsky).

opportunity cost by diverting those resources from normal strategic purposes. Sunk costs can also grow over time when a given covert action swells to include more expansive and expensive operations. A state's covert military interventions, which we focus on in empirical testing, may expand in terms of lethality, scope, and the directness of involvement.<sup>37</sup> Greater resolve should be communicated as a state moves toward the extreme end of the intervention spectrum, as in greater lethality (for example, from small arms to surface-to-air missile systems), expanding geographic scope, and more direct combat involvement.<sup>38</sup>

The use of secrecy itself can generate unique sunk costs. One observable cost is logistical: the act of concealing is effortful and can require circuitous planning. More significant, however, are the costs a sponsor can incur from acting secretly when domestic and other constraints remove overt alternatives from the menu of options. Covert action can permit leaders to employ a more "creative" way to address a given class of security threats. For example, leaders using covert means can work with cooperative partners that would be otherwise off limits. Legal concerns, both domestic and international, can be circumvented if states employ covert signaling methods. A democratic leader, for example, might covertly partner with a ruthless dictator; an autocratic leader might use secrecy to work with a partner from a rival ideology.<sup>39</sup> While the existence and kinds of constraints vary for different regime types, most democratic leaders and many autocrats can find acting covertly to be the only practical method for proactively addressing a crisis, therefore offering unique sunk cost opportunities.

*Counter-Escalation Risks.* Using covert action to signal resolve can also appear credible because of its impact on the risk of crisis escalation. Other states often react to covert action in ways that can scale up to a serious confrontation. Such reactions can risk an action-reaction sequence that intensifies or widens a crisis or war.<sup>40</sup> A covert military strike like that used by Israel, for example, can significantly raise the risk of crisis escalation by inviting reprisal by the target or additional covert or overt action by other third-party powers.

Like sunk costs, secrecy itself creates some unique escalation risks. As we note above, secrecy reduces domestic and international constraints on leaders. This permits riskier as well as costlier activity; leaders using covert signaling tools can be free to engage in more aggressive behavior. For example, a state might be more willing to tolerate an operation with collateral damage and civilian casualties, or one involving cooperation with a rival that shares an interest in confronting a third

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<sup>37</sup>On this variation, see George, "Crisis Prevention Reexamined," 389–93.

<sup>38</sup>A report on foreign involvement in Syria notes "the distinction between lethal and non-lethal weapons is a crucial one for the governments involved in their supply." See Louisa Loveluck, "What's Non-Lethal about Aid to the Syrian Opposition?" *Foreign Policy Blogs*, 20 September 2012, [http://mideastafrica.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/09/20/whats\\_non\\_lethal\\_about\\_aid\\_to\\_the\\_syrian\\_opposition](http://mideastafrica.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/09/20/whats_non_lethal_about_aid_to_the_syrian_opposition).

<sup>39</sup>An example of the latter is postrevolutionary Iran using secrecy to quietly work with Israel and the United States to oppose Iraq under Saddam Hussein. Trita Parsi, *Treacherous Alliance: The Secret Dealings of Israel, Iran, and the United States*, 1st ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007).

<sup>40</sup>On horizontal versus vertical escalation, see Richard Smoke, *War: Controlling Escalation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977).

party. Moreover, secrecy often entails much greater reliance on other states—allies and local intermediaries—for implementation. This can add to risks of unauthorized or unintended escalation.<sup>41</sup> As with the sunk cost mechanism, larger and more expansive covert action will tend to create large counter-escalation risks.

*Domestic Risks.* Lastly, in the presence of significant domestic opposition, covert action allows leaders to observably demonstrate to foreign audiences they are more hawkish and risk-acceptant than domestic political rivals. As existing secrecy research shows, states often use secrecy for military activity to avoid domestic political complications. When observers are aware of domestic constraints this creates an overlooked signaling opportunity. A state observing a new or intensified covert action despite domestic constraints sees an up-front demonstration that the sponsor is willing to act creatively and incur their own domestic risks to accomplish a policy goal. Acting covertly itself underscores the presence of domestic constraints but simultaneously shows the capacity to circumvent those. This dynamic does not depend on leaks; whether or not exposure is likely or actually takes place, observing covert action provides tangible evidence that more aggressive leadership controls decision-making.<sup>42</sup>

Additional domestic risk-generation is created by the potential for and actual exposure of covert action. Unwanted exposure can result from third party disclosures by journalists, nongovernmental organizations, dissatisfied bureaucrats, or other states who detect the program. A leaked covert action can trigger domestic political backlash and prompt policy interference by political rivals. This is additional basis for an inference of resolve.<sup>43</sup> Lastly, the domestic risk mechanism may initially appear limited to democratic leaders with free presses. However, studies of autocracies suggest many leaders are simply accountable to specific elite factions (for example, other party members, the military) who may be more or less dovish than the leader.<sup>44</sup> Thus, it is plausible covert action by at least some autocratic leaders can be a domestically risky proposition.

### **Conditions Favoring Covert Signaling**

While these mechanisms provide a plausible logic for why covert action can signal resolve credibly, one can imagine a very different inference: weakness. Leaders choosing to signal covertly do not make that choice in a vacuum; they have overt signaling methods as well. Moreover, while overt alternatives lack secrecy-specific costs and risks, they can have some similar effects. Choosing a public military

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<sup>41</sup>Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, 89–99.

<sup>42</sup>Put differently, a regime with total media control and a known faction of “doves” signals resolve with covert action because it is an observable indication that the “hawks” control policy.

<sup>43</sup>This is a corollary to the mechanism of reassurance in Keren Yarhi-Milo, “Tying Hands behind Closed Doors: The Logic and Practice of Secret Reassurance,” *Security Studies* 22, no. 3 (July 2013): 405–35, DOI:10.1080/09636412.2013.816126.

<sup>44</sup>For example, see Weeks, “Autocratic Audience Costs”; however, party insiders in an autocracy may be better placed to discover such covert action. See Brown and Marcum, “Avoiding Audience Costs.”

mobilization or lethal aid program, for example, can sink costs and raise risks in many of the ways a covert version would; in fact, an overt version may involve more robust costs and risks in some ways. Moreover, existing coercive diplomacy studies suggest the publicity of these alternatives could make their message more credible by tying leaders' hands. These overt alternatives provide a logic for the opposite inference about covert action. Even if intelligible, observers might infer restraint or even weakness from covert action. A sponsor opting to use covert tools might be seen as rejecting the boldest way of expressing resolve in favor of a more cautious and flexibility-preserving option.

These comparisons beg an important question: under what conditions does covert action generate a signal of resolve rather than weakness?<sup>45</sup> Answering this question both clarifies the logic of our theory and identifies the kinds of situations and historical eras in which leaders should be tempted to use covert signaling for resolve. Our answer, foreshadowed in the previous section, focuses on the degree of leader constraints. In short, observably constrained leaders can use covert action to signal resolve; in contrast, unconstrained leaders invite inferences of weakness. Constraints influence what observing audiences compare covert action against. When leaders are constrained from using more robust overt options by domestic or other sources, target audiences will tend to discount the practicality of overt alternatives and compare observed covert action to the more plausible alternatives of inaction or diplomacy. The cost and risk properties we describe above therefore tend to produce an inference of resolve. If a leader is unconstrained, however, observers are free to compare covert action to more robust and binding overt alternatives. An inference of weakness is more likely as a result. Lastly, we also consider an alternative inference. Constrained leaders resorting to covert action may be seen as unable to escalate or maintain their program in light of those constraints. This would reverse the relationship: more constrained leaders using covert action would be seen as weak.

What are the constraints that can remove overt options and, as a result, produce an inference of resolve rather than weakness from covert action? We specify constraints of two basic kinds: domestic and international.<sup>46</sup> The domestic environment can create legal and practical barriers to leaders using overt alternatives. In the American context, for example, congressional restrictions on foreign aid can prevent presidents from overtly providing aid to certain groups and governments; such aid can violate an embargo or be illegal. Similarly, a dominant domestic anti-war political climate can functionally eliminate the option to overtly use military force. In the American context, the periods following the Vietnam War and the recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have been in conditions in which other

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<sup>45</sup>Note that a necessary condition for a covert signal of any kind is visibility to at least one target audience. Partial observability to an adversary is most likely within long-term rivalries in which intelligence capabilities are regularly directed toward one another. Similarly, partial observability to allies is most likely when the sponsor is part of a network of partners who can be logistically involved in implementation. Covert actions by states with few partners and outside a long-term rivalry are therefore least likely to have possible covert signaling effects. Small, one-off covert operations implemented unilaterally are also unlikely to enable signaling.

<sup>46</sup>Our thanks to two anonymous reviewers for help clarifying these issues.

audiences likely perceived a domestic constraint on overt uses of force. Note that while domestic constraints are most likely in consolidated democracies, they can arise in some autocratic regimes as well.<sup>47</sup>

Second, several kinds of international constraints can render overt options infeasible. Some originate in the signaler's relationship with its adversary. Overtly signaling resolve may be impractical, for example, if adversaries are engaged in sensitive peace negotiations or have cooperative initiatives that both seek to protect and would be endangered by a public affront. Crises in the shadow of extreme risks of conflict escalation may also functionally eliminate overt options.<sup>48</sup> For example, covert signals sent by Iran or the United States during their sensitive nuclear negotiations were likely compared to doing nothing rather than to overt alternatives. International constraints can also originate from partner state considerations. A sponsor may not have the option to openly provide aid or use force if partnering states necessary for implementation face acute domestic political risks in their own countries.

### **Hypotheses**

Our empirical testing focuses specifically on covert interventions during ongoing civil or interstate conflicts. Any external intervention features an outside power sending lethal military assistance (for example, weapons and related equipment) and/or combat units (for example, personnel performing combat or combat support roles) to a local ally.<sup>49</sup> Such interventions can be public, or "overt"; an outside power can publicly announce and acknowledge the lethal aid and any combat personnel they send to a local ally. Interventions can also be secret, or "covert"; a state can send aid and/or personnel without an official announcement and take measures to conceal its role.

The discussion thus far suggests several hypotheses about signaling and covert interventions listed below. First, we assess a null hypothesis that reflects a skeptical view based on existing studies linking credibility in signaling resolve and publicity.

$H_1$  (*Null*). Strategic adversaries and local allies that detect any covert activity will disregard its significance as an indicator of resolve due to its absence of publicity and therefore political constraint.

We also assess a set of hypotheses that summarize our own claims about the intelligibility and credibility of covert signals of resolve. We decompose the inference hypothesis to reflect the importance of both initiating and expanding covert action.

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<sup>47</sup>Jessica L. Weeks, "Autocratic Audience Costs: Regime Type and Signaling Resolve," *International Organization* 62, no. 1 (January 2008): 35–64.

<sup>48</sup>Carson, "Facing Off and Saving Face."

<sup>49</sup>On defining intervention, see Patrick M. Regan, "Conditions of Successful Third-Party Intervention in Intrastate Conflicts," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 40, no. 2 (June 1996): 342; 339 n. 1, DOI:10.1177/0022002796040002006.

$H_2$  (*Intention to signal resolve*). Intervening states should expect covert military assistance to convey resolve to local allies and strategic adversaries.

$H_3$  (*Inferring credible resolve*). Strategic adversaries and local allies may draw inferences of resolve when witnessing covert interventions and should find them credible.

$H_{3a}$ . Initiation of a new intervention will lead to updated inferences of resolve based on the willingness to invest resources and tolerate both escalation and domestic risks.

$H_{3b}$ . Changes toward greater (lower) lethality, larger (smaller) scope, and more (less) direct involvement notwithstanding domestic risks should be the basis of inferring greater (lesser) resolve.

Finally, we consider a fourth hypothesis that reflects the potential inference weakness. As we note, under some conditions observers might discount the costs and risks incurred by a covert military intervention if an overt alternative was feasible and more comparatively costly/risky. The basis for this inference is a second order insight about signaling tools another leader chose not to utilize.

$H_4$  (*Inferring weakness*). Strategic adversaries and local allies may draw inferences of irresolution or weakness when observing covert intervention.

## Case Studies and Research Design

Our hypotheses focus on both states' intentions to communicate resolve through covert signaling and the inferences observers should draw therefrom. Our dependent variable is therefore not the conflict outcome but rather the beliefs leaders hold about how they can communicate resolve and inferences others draw given the kind of covert signal issued.<sup>50</sup> We define resolve as determination to stand firm to protect one's interest. In intervention scenarios, standing firm may be further linked to specific behavioral goals that vary in two ways. First, signaling states may seek to display their resolve along a continuum that ranges from narrowly situational to broadly dispositional. That is, a state engaging in covert intervention may want to display their willingness to stand firm specifically in the crisis/theater in which the intervention is taking place. This was Kissinger's goal in the opening anecdote: covertly bombing Cambodia was intended to show resolve to escalate further in the Vietnam War. More ambitiously, a signal sender may also hope a covert action shows their willingness to oppose an adversary in a class of other similar crises in

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<sup>50</sup>Whether the target of an intelligible and credible signal of resolve ultimately backs down is an important but distinct question. It is also not straightforwardly determined by the signaling process. The ultimate outcome of covertly waged geopolitical struggle can be overdetermined such that many factors besides assessments about resolve influence whether and how a given state's goals are reached.



the future. Both constitute attempts to signal resolve. In addition to situational/dispositional varieties, states signaling resolve may link their effort to specific behavioral goals regarding their adversary. To simplify, a signal sender may intend covert action to demonstrate their willingness to undermine a rival's exercise of power; a more ambitious goal would be to use covert action to signal resolve to reverse a rival's extant progress, force their backing down, and even expel them from a given region. Importantly, whether the goal is situational or dispositional resolve and modest or significant policy changes, leaders hope covert action provides tangible proof to local allies and/or strategic rivals that they are determined to stand firm in some way.<sup>51</sup> To empirically evaluate these arguments we present primary evidence on both signal sender and perceiver to assess the intention to signal, the intelligible receipt of that signal, and the ultimate inference of resolve (that is, credibility) from that signal. Admittedly, gaps in the evidentiary record preclude us from closely tracking the inference process of perceivers at places. Nevertheless, there is considerable documentary support to assess our hypotheses.

We test our claims in a set of nested cases of external military interventions within two conflicts during the Cold War: Angola and Afghanistan. Both conflicts fall within the scope of the theory. Angola and Afghanistan involved long-term rivals—the United States and the Soviet Union—regularly monitoring each other's activities. The use of covert interventions by both sides also involved local allies as an important potential audience. Both sets of cases feature multiple observations including within-case variation over time in our main independent variable (that is, the scope and nature of the covert military action) as well as between-case variation in domestic risks. Importantly, analyzing changes over time allows us to assess shifts in resolve, intentions, and inferences while holding larger contextual factors constant. The relatively robust declassified documentary record for each conflict also gives unique access to internal intentions and perceptions, though the availability of fewer records on the Soviet side limits our ability to make equally definitive claims at times. Analyzing conflicts in which American and Soviet leaders play both acting and observing/infering roles allows us to draw on the more robust American record to shed light on specific questions like inferences of resolve versus weakness.

Lastly, these two conflicts host cases that are by no means “easy” tests of the theory. Most obviously, Afghanistan and Angola were considered on the extreme periphery of the Cold War rivalry until the interventions themselves transformed perceived stakes. This makes the conflicts unlikely places for attempts to send covert signals and inferences of credible resolve for two reasons. Logistically, detection of covert activity by American and Soviet intelligence was comparatively less likely in these areas; strategic adversary signaling was therefore less likely.

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<sup>51</sup>On situational versus dispositional resolve, see Joshua Kertzer, *Resolve in International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016).

Politically, the reduced reputational implications of these conflicts should reduce the inferential value of any signals to both one another and to local allies. Thus, any findings that covert action was monitored effectively, interpreted correctly, and seen as credible is especially strong support.

### **Angola, 1970–76**

As Angola's struggle for self-government gained momentum, three national independence movements emerged: the People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA), the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA), and the National Liberation Front of Angola (FNLA). In 1974, Portugal considered independence for Angola, but the country soon dissolved into a civil war as the MPLA, led by Agostinho Neto and supported by the Soviet Union and Cuba, waged war against Holden Roberto's FNLA and Jonas Savimbi's UNITA, a political alliance that enjoyed the support of the United States.

The longitudinal pattern of superpower assistance in this case strongly corroborates hypotheses  $H_2$  and  $H_3$ . Both superpowers used covert aid primarily to signal resolve to local allies and each other, and inferred seriousness of purpose from observed changes in the magnitude and lethality of their opponent's aid.

### **Covert Signaling (1970–74)**

Although the Soviet leadership publicly disavowed any involvement, the US intelligence community detected Soviet covert involvement in the Angolan civil war and monitored changes over time. As early as 11 August 1970, intelligence reports noted "a team of four to six Soviets" entering Angola and an "extraordinarily large Soviet arms shipment to [the MPLA]." The United States viewed this aid as an attempt to send a message beyond the specific crisis about the Soviet disposition regarding region, noting the Soviets "would see stepped-up aid as a means to increase their own influence" with African liberation movements and "progressive leaders of independent African states who sympathize with them." Although the modesty of early Soviet aid led US officials to opt against their own involvement,<sup>52</sup> Washington agreed to provide symbolic assistance to Zaire (whose leader Mobutu Sese Seko was seen as "erratic" but according to Kissinger was "ruthless and [willing to] get the job done")<sup>53</sup> and the FNLA. William Colby, director of Central Intelligence, informed Kissinger in September 1974, "We intend to keep these payments fairly low but high enough to assure President Mobutu that we are sympathetic to his concern."<sup>54</sup> On 22 January 1975, the National Security Council's

<sup>52</sup>"Soviet and Cuban Intervention in the Angolan Civil War," Intelligence Memorandum, March 1977, Digital National Security Archive (DNSA), CT00970.

<sup>53</sup>Memorandum for the record, *Foreign Relations of the United States [FRUS]*, 1969–76, Southern Africa, 5 June 1975, doc. 106, vol. 28 (Washington, DC: GPO, 1976).

<sup>54</sup>Memorandum from Colby to Kissinger, September 1974. doc. 100, *ibid.*

(NSC) Forty Committee further allocated three hundred thousand dollars in covert assistance to the FNLA.

### *American Covert Weapons*

From April to June of 1975, the CIA detected a considerable increase in Soviet arms deliveries to the MPLA.<sup>55</sup> Administration officials saw this as a substantial Soviet escalation taking place prior to the US decision to increase its own covert funds.<sup>56</sup> The creation of a Cuban Military Mission in Angola helped the MPLA employ the Soviet arms and make gains against the FNLA.<sup>57</sup>

Consistent with *H*<sub>2</sub>, US decision-makers recognized that one benefit of their own lethal covert assistance was a more credible signal of their commitment to the defense of the region. They were also acutely aware of domestic exposure risks.<sup>58</sup> With Congress already angry over past CIA “rogue” activities, an NSC report on Angola in June argued, “there would be strong Congressional opposition to any U.S. involvement in support of one of the contending factions.”<sup>59</sup> Officials in the State Department actually objected to covert military aid in Angola for these and other reasons, noting “(1) we have no vital interests; (2) the risks of exposure are extreme; (3) our clients will be discredited; and (4) the results will be indecisive.”<sup>60</sup> Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Joseph Sisco believed Soviet leaders would match American aid and felt the United States could not keep up. Kissinger and President Gerald Ford disagreed and specifically invoked a signaling logic for local partners. Kissinger explained, “It is a question of [Mobutu’s] perception of who is behind him.... What he wants to know is if the U.S. is politically interested.”<sup>61</sup> Indeed, Mobutu was urging the United States to show more commitment by expanding the scope and lethality of its covert action. In private meetings, “Mobutu reiterated need for urgent action. ‘The Soviets are continuing to send arms into Angola,’” he said, “while we are sitting here talking.”<sup>62</sup>

The CIA’s wariness about congressional backlash led Director Colby to suggest, “Let’s give dollars ... and this will keep Congress off our backs.” Unconvinced, Kissinger pushed for covert arms supply as a means of signaling commitment, saying, “I’m scared of losing. Is anyone else? Why would Zaire break with the USSR and Yugoslavs if the U.S. will not give political support?”<sup>63</sup> Kissinger worried about the broader lesson about American involvement in the region. He saw a failure to covertly aid American friends as dangerous, asking, “If Angola is taken by the Communists, what conclusions can the African leaders draw about the United States? ...

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<sup>55</sup>CIA intelligence information cable, May 1975, *ibid.*

<sup>56</sup>Memorandum of conversation, 19 December 1975, doc. 156, *ibid.*

<sup>57</sup>CIA Intelligence Information Cable, 28 May 1975, *ibid.*

<sup>58</sup>Memorandum, 11 June 1975, doc. 108, *ibid.*

<sup>59</sup>Paper prepared by the National Security Council Interdepartmental Group for Africa, 13 June 1975, doc. 109, *ibid.*

<sup>60</sup>Memorandum for the record, 14 July 1975, doc. 115, *ibid.*

<sup>61</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup>Telegram from the Embassy in Zaire to the Department of State, 24 July 1975, doc. 120, *ibid.*

<sup>63</sup>Memorandum for the record, 14 July 1975, doc. 115, *ibid.*

They can only conclude that we don't care."<sup>64</sup> The advocates of covert assistance therefore sold the initiative as a tool for demonstrating American commitment to African leaders in general and Mobutu in particular in response to clear signs of Soviet determination (itself reflected in their escalating aid, consistent with  $H_3$ ).

By early July, the MPLA's military position began to improve due to the increasing flow of Soviet arms and Cuban military advisers. Consequently, on 18 July 1975, President Ford authorized the CIA to supply arms to the FNLA and UNITA covertly through Zaire. It represented a qualitative shift in US covert involvement that significantly increased US risks of exposure. The rationale for using Zaire was not just because of domestic political constraints; "Such an arms flow to Angola would be quickly detected and publicized ... with damage to the international standing and political prospects of the FNLA and UNITA. Similar side effects argue against the hiring of mercenaries or the provision of [American] aircraft."<sup>65</sup> The CIA clearly recognized the risk of exposure of American arms through Mobutu not just for its own domestic standing ("if it became public knowledge that we were sending American arms in.... There would be a great uproar about CIA getting involved in a war") but also because of concerns for the ability of their partners to work together if this became public (it "would tend to spoil political efforts to get African leaders such as [Kenneth] Kaunda, [Julius] Nyerere and [Yakubu] Gowon behind efforts to stop the fighting.")<sup>66</sup>

### *Monitoring Escalation and Inferring Intentions*

In September 1975, the United States detected a further increase in the scope and lethality of Soviet covert assistance, including armored vehicles, heavy artillery, air defense weapons, and possibly even MIG aircraft.<sup>67</sup> The introduction of roughly 1,200 Cuban troops<sup>68</sup>—"the first time that Cuba or any other Soviet ally had sent an expeditionary force to intervene in another country's civil war"<sup>69</sup>—was seen as a Soviet surrogate force that would avoid troop deployments from the United States and China.<sup>70</sup> After an increase in airlifts of Cuban troops in November, by December it was no longer the MPLA forces but Cuban troops who "were bearing the brunt of the fighting."<sup>71</sup>

This crucial point did not pass unnoticed as predicted by  $H_{3b}$ . "The November escalation," the intelligence community reasoned in a retrospective report, "shows the length to which the Soviets were willing to go and the risks they were willing to run to achieve their basic objective—imposition of the MPLA as the sole ruling

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<sup>64</sup>Memorandum of conversation, 20 June 1975, doc. 111, *ibid*.

<sup>65</sup>Memorandum, 11 June 1975, doc. 108, *ibid*.

<sup>66</sup>*ibid*.

<sup>67</sup>Message from President Ford to French President Giscard d'Estaing, 25 November 1975, doc. 141, *ibid*.

<sup>68</sup>Report prepared by the Working Group on Angola, 22 October 1975, doc. 132, *ibid*.

<sup>69</sup>"Soviet and Cuban Intervention in the Angolan Civil War," DNSA, 3.

<sup>70</sup>*ibid.*, 14.

<sup>71</sup>*ibid.*, 4.

group in Angola.”<sup>72</sup> Confirming hypothesis  $H_2$ , the Americans also believed Soviet leaders inferred the level of US resolve in Angola from the amount of American covert aid. “Since the Soviets had probably concluded that weapons alone could not win the war,” one report argued, “the amount of U.S. aid was probably of interest to them mainly for its relevance to the question of whether the U.S. attached sufficient importance to Angola to send troops.”<sup>73</sup>

The November airlift represented the point “at which the Soviets made a full commitment to secure an MPLA victory.... [It] symbolized the Soviets’ seriousness of purpose. Never before had the Soviet Union undertaken a military airlift over such long distances.”<sup>74</sup> President Ford specifically linked Soviet escalation to its broader reputation in the region, reasoning that “Angola would enable the Soviets to exert a major influence on the liberation drive in southern Africa.... It contributes to Soviet credibility and influence with other clients in the region.... *For the time being ... we believe that their primary goals are political rather than strategic.*”<sup>75</sup>

Importantly, American decision-makers and the intelligence community did not believe the Soviets escalated because they inferred US weakness or irresolution. Rather, they believed that three factors in particular shaped the Soviet decision to escalate: First, the Soviets viewed the airlift as a necessary rescue operation since “MPLA military defeat was a distinct possibility had aid not been stepped up.” Thus, the Soviets were faced with an “either/or situation” of winning or losing Angola. Second, the US intelligence community assessed that Fidel Castro probably urged the initially reluctant Soviets to escalate and offer him a guarantee that “there would be no repetition of the October crisis of 1962” in that there would be no agreement on Angola between the two superpowers, which would place the Cubans in a difficult position. As a result, the Soviets could not collude with the Americans and reach a settlement on Angola. Third, the Soviets, according to American assessments, had information at the time of a likely South African intervention and movement northward, increasing the risks of Soviet loss of Angola.<sup>76</sup>

Meanwhile, fearful that Congress would soon terminate its support for the operation, Kissinger and Ford grasped for other sources of coercive pressure. They chose to privately threaten to link Angola to détente, a form of cooperation they knew the Soviets hoped to protect. In an NSC meeting on 22 December, Kissinger reasoned: “If we keep going and the Soviets do not think there is a terminal date on our efforts and we threaten them with the loss of détente, we can have an effect.”<sup>77</sup> Ford concurred. And in a meeting with Andrei Gromyko, Kissinger accordingly reasoned: “We can’t defend to our people your massive airlift and the

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<sup>72</sup>Ibid., 4.

<sup>73</sup>Ibid., 17.

<sup>74</sup>Ibid., 25.

<sup>75</sup>Message from President Ford to French President Giscard d’Estaing, *FRUS*, 25 November 1975, doc. 141 (emphasis added).

<sup>76</sup>“Soviet and Cuban Intervention in the Angolan Civil War,” DNSA.

<sup>77</sup>Minutes of a National Security Council meeting, *FRUS*, 22 December 1975, doc. 163.

Cuban troops. It can't go on without raising serious questions here. We will have to find ways either to insulate it or match it."<sup>78</sup> Thus, the Soviet choice to escalate covertly gave American leaders a kind of leverage to threaten to escalate into the overt realm if necessary and to use their domestic constraints to make the adverse consequences of such a linkage credible.

To be sure, however, the US intelligence community estimated that the Soviet leadership at the time probably already understood that there would be some ramifications for their actions in Angola on bilateral relations. Thus, they inferred from their actions in Angola that they were determined to win there notwithstanding their domestic constraints and debates about the strategic bilateral desirability of these actions. As one intelligence memorandum concluded, "In the final analysis Soviet actions there [in Angola], at least in the last stage of the conflict, must be seen as taking place not in ignorance of the damage of détente, but in spite of that damage."<sup>79</sup> American decision-makers shared this assessment, viewing Soviet covert actions in Angola as conveying resolve despite, or especially in light of, being somewhat constrained by the desire of some members of their leadership to preserve détente. The president's assistant for National Security Affairs, Brent Scowcroft, and deputy national security advisor, William Hyland, for example, noted in a memo to Kissinger that the Soviets were split among themselves over Angola because of the ramifications of their actions on US-Soviet relations. Yet, they and others in the NSC drew the important inference that their decision to act in Angola, even covertly, was a signal of their commitment to winning Angola and of the determination to suffer the cost of disturbing détente. Thus, for example, Scowcroft and Hyland explain, "The Soviets are committed to the MPLA; and have resumed the airlift and given us no encouragement.... Linkage of SALT and Angola might shore up position of Kremlin hardliners who pressed Angolan operation.... They must have argued that Angola was worth some risk in any case. Even if they had argued they could score up a quick cheap victory and are now faced with the consequences of miscalculation, we are not sure that moderates in Kremlin, including [Leonid] Brezhnev, would have political punch to repudiate Angolan adventure just before a Party Congress."<sup>80</sup>

Such assessments consequently led them to predict that even "threat of cancellation [of his visit to discuss SALT with the Soviets] might have some sobering effect in [the] Kremlin, but will not alter the situation in Angola or cause Soviets to terminate this adventure."<sup>81</sup> That Kissinger and Ford nonetheless attempted to threaten the Soviets with such a linkage reflects their limited options at the time. In addition to the threat of escalation through strategic linkage, Kissinger and Ford

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<sup>78</sup>Memorandum of conversation, 9 December 1975, doc. 145, *ibid.*

<sup>79</sup>"Soviet and Cuban Intervention in the Angolan Civil War," DNSA, 34.

<sup>80</sup>Message from the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Scowcroft) and the President's Deputy Assistant for National Security Affairs (Hyland) to Secretary of State Kissinger in Jamaica, *FRUS*, 1969-1976, 31 December 1975, doc. 235, vol. 16.

<sup>81</sup>*Ibid.*

also sought help from US allies and other third parties (reportedly even apartheid South Africa) to join the fighting in Angola.<sup>82</sup>

In sum, contrary to the weakness hypothesis ( $H_4$ ), American decision-makers did not view Soviet covertness as indicating irresolution because of the quantitative and qualitative shifts in their involvement discussed above, and the risk their actions generated could jeopardize détente with the United States (and arms control negotiations). Moreover, Soviet covert activities in Angola were especially meaningful because they ran against the familiar grammar the two rivals had come to share when intervening in the Third World. In a candid remark after the operation ended, Kissinger explains how the deviation from Soviet standard covert practices was a significant signal by itself, noting that “if the MPLA won only with normal Soviet covert assistance, I wouldn’t like it but I would accept it as is the case of FRELIMO [Mozambique Liberation Front] in Mozambique.... We could have accepted \$20 million in Soviet assistance in Angola but not \$285 million, which was more than the whole world had put into black Africa.”<sup>83</sup>

Fears of exposure, as it turned out, were warranted. Media reports in November that the United States had joined forces with the apartheid government of South Africa in Angola caused outrage in Congress, particularly in light of the recently concluded war in Vietnam.<sup>84</sup> On 19 December, the Senate passed an amendment sponsored by John V. Tunney that effectively blocked any further covert support to Angola. This amendment was seen by advocates of covert aid in the Ford administration as a blow to America’s reputation.<sup>85</sup>

### **The Soviet Side**

Assessing Soviet intentions and inferences from the available record, we find solid support for our hypotheses, especially  $H_2$  and  $H_3$ . On the intention side, direct evidence is not available but, as one historian argues, Moscow enhanced its own covert aid to Neto in part as a way to send a broad signal of resolve to China and the United States and “believed that the Soviet Union had to come to the aid of its ally.”<sup>86</sup>

<sup>82</sup>For example, see backchannel message from Secretary of State Kissinger to the Ambassador to Iran (Helms), 20 December 1975, doc. 159, vol. 28. Kissinger notes continued American covert aid shows “the Executive Branch is resolved to pursue the Angola matter vigorously and with full determination” and that “a Soviet power play in the heart of Africa not be permitted to succeed unchallenged. ... We intend to do everything possible to continue our support of the FNLA and UNITA through Zaire, and we will also in our discussions with the Soviets, making clear to them that their involvement in Angola will inevitably raise questions about détente.”

<sup>83</sup>MemCon, 1 April 1976, DNSA, doc. 01924.

<sup>84</sup>Piero Gleijeses, *Conflicting Missions: Havana, Washington, and Africa, 1959–1976* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 362–65.

<sup>85</sup>MemCon, *FRUS*, 25 January 1976, vol. 76; MemCon, 18 December 1975, *ibid*.

<sup>86</sup>Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 234; Jiri Valenta, “The Soviet-Cuban Intervention in Angola, 1975,” *Studies in Comparative Communism* 11, no. 1 (March 1978): 15, DOI:10.1016/0039-3592(78)90029-7; Westad, “Moscow and the Angolan Crisis, 1974–1976: A New Pattern of Intervention,” *Cold War International History Project Bulletin* nos. 8–9 (Winter 1997/1996): 24, [http://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/CWIHP\\_Bulletin\\_8-9.pdf](http://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/CWIHP_Bulletin_8-9.pdf).

In terms of Soviet inferences, three aspects of the American covert aid effort in Angola prompted the Soviet Union to view the United States as resolved and hence to dramatically increase its own covert involvement in mid-November. One was intelligence about an imminent South African plan to invade Angola, which Moscow believed was in coordination with Washington. This is consistent with the counter-escalation risks the Soviets believed the United States was willing to take. The second aspect of US covert aid, consistent with the sinking costs mechanism, was the perceived increase in US covert military assistance that appeared to signal US determination to win in Angola.<sup>87</sup> As Odd Arne Westad points out, “the Soviet perception of the widening role of the CIA ... played a role in Moscow’s reevaluation of its Angolan policy. The KGB station in Brazzaville supplied vital information on the dramatic increases in US assistance, and Iurii Andropov believed that the Americans had a long-term strategy of equipping large groups of Angolan, Zairean, and Western mercenary troops, to be sent to Angola.”<sup>88</sup> The third aspect of American covert aid that led Moscow to infer resolve was the light it shed on domestic politics in Washington. Rather than inferring weakness from the congressional constraints American leaders were clearly laboring under, Moscow saw covert action as an expression of resourcefulness. As Ted Hopf’s analysis of Soviet perceptions of the United States notes, the “efforts of the United States to intervene covertly in the Angolan civil war caused a reversal in Soviet perceptions of American and allied capabilities,” thereby “enhancing American credibility.” Soviet officials appeared to learn a broad lesson from a covert action taken despite anti-intervention domestic sentiment; Hopf concludes Angola taught Soviet leaders “there remain ‘extremely persistent efforts in the leading circles for the United States to ... leave loopholes of the possible application of force in that or another concrete situation.’”<sup>89</sup>

Lastly, it is worth noting one specific point about the Cuban role in Soviet efforts in Angola that demonstrates unique escalatory dangers in covert signaling. During the summer of 1975, the Soviets refused repeated Cuban requests to send Soviet officers to transport Cuban troops out of concern that more direct Soviet involvement would affect US–Soviet relations.<sup>90</sup> Now available primary evidence on Cuba’s role suggests that the November airlift was decided in Havana without consulting the Politburo in Moscow.<sup>91</sup> Yet this contradicts Ford and Kissinger’s perceptions of decision-making power. Kissinger admits in his memoirs, “At the time, we thought he [Castro] was operating as a Soviet surrogate. We could not imagine that he would act so provocatively so far from home unless he was pressured by Moscow to repay the Soviet Union for its military and economic support. Evidence

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<sup>87</sup>Gleijeses, *Conflicting Missions*, 306.

<sup>88</sup>Westad, *Global Cold War*, 234.

<sup>89</sup>Ted Hopf, “Soviet Inferences from Their Victories in the Periphery: Visions of Resistance or Cumulating Gains?” in *Dominoes and Bandwagons: Strategic Beliefs and Great Power Competition in the Eurasian Rimland*, ed. Robert Jervis and Jack Snyder (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 170.

<sup>90</sup>Westad, *Global Cold War*, 233.

<sup>91</sup>Westad, “Moscow and the Angolan Crisis, 1974–1976,” 31.



now available suggests that the opposite was the case.”<sup>92</sup> The Cubans were thus far less beholden to their Soviet patrons than American decision-makers had supposed.<sup>93</sup> American escalation in response to Cuba’s entry, including soliciting support from others such as South Africa, was therefore based on a misunderstanding of the political dynamics between client and patron. This underscores how covert signaling has unique escalatory dangers not present in overt forms of external involvement; ambiguity about responsibility for specific decisions, even among adversaries carefully tracking one another, can ratchet up conflict intensity.

### **Discussion**

To summarize, the evidence generally supports  $H_2$ : American and Soviet decision-makers sought to signal resolve to each other as well as local allies and third parties through the use of covert military action that they knew would be detected. Moreover, sinking cost and escalation risks, consistent with  $H_{3b}$ , constituted the primary mechanisms US observers used to infer Soviet resolve. The way in which Soviet activity in Angola deviated from past covert interventions registered clearly in the eyes of American policymakers and underscores the development of a shared interpretive frame giving meaning to qualitative shifts in covert action. Notwithstanding the eventual defeat of the United States, Soviet leaders also drew important inferences about US resolve from covert activities. Domestic risks appear to have played a prominent role in their inference process: the Soviets saw Kissinger’s and Ford’s attempts to act decisively despite domestic anti-intervention constraints as evidence of its determination to rebuild the US reputation for resolve and resist Soviet expansion. We do not find support for  $H_4$ : covert actions were not seen as signaling weakness, although they were seen as indicating a measure of restraint during the early stages when scope of involvement was modest. Finally, it seems that Soviet and American willingness to inflict harm covertly through sinking cost and generating risks added credibility to their activities. But the fact that these actions were not public gave both sides the opportunity to signal in a setting that otherwise would have forced them to choose between two unpalatable options: publicly signaling resolve but wrecking détente or doing nothing, appearing weak to local allies and one another but safeguarding détente.

### **Afghanistan, 1979–89**

A coup in Kabul in 1978 catapulted Afghanistan into the very center of superpower relations. Soviet leaders embraced the communist People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) but found its new ally mired in a growing insurgency. Moscow first sent secret combat support units to help quell the insurgency. When this

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<sup>92</sup>Henry Kissinger, *Years of Renewal* (London: Simon and Schuster, 1999), 816.

<sup>93</sup>Gleijeses, *Conflicting Missions*.

failed, Soviet leaders authorized what they hoped was a short-term invasion. The nine-year conflict that ensued hosted a dense network of covert activity; we focus on three specific episodes. First, we analyze American and local ally inferences in 1979 about resolve based on observed activity prior to the Soviet invasion. Second, we analyze the role of signaling in the initiation and escalation of US covert aid to Afghan rebels. Lastly, we analyze covert cross-border military incursions into Pakistan by the Soviet military in the mid-1980s and the lessons American and Pakistani observers drew.

### ***Soviet Pre-Invasion Covert Involvement***

Uprisings in rural Afghanistan in March 1979 threatened the duumvirate of Nur Muhammad Taraki and Hafizullah Amin and prompted Soviet leaders to initially send covert combat support six months before the more well-known Soviet invasion.<sup>94</sup> Soviet leaders added additional combat units in November and early December after Amin assassinated Taraki to seize sole control of power in Kabul.<sup>95</sup> American intelligence carefully tracked changes in Soviet involvement and detected this covert activity by the summer. Embassy cables in May and June reported the presence of covertly deployed Soviet helicopter crews.<sup>96</sup> An interagency assessment in September concluded, “The Soviets increased the numbers and expanded the counterinsurgency role there of what now are at least 2,500 of their military personnel.”<sup>97</sup> Evidence of a covert Soviet role was also referenced in interagency warnings from CIA director Stansfield Turner and the NSC.<sup>98</sup>

Consistent with  $H_3$ , US leaders inferred greater Soviet resolve to protect its interests in Afghanistan and escalating further to do so. Reflecting the role of Schelling’s “salient thresholds” in signaling, intelligence memos analyzing Soviet intentions in mid-September used covert combat support as “key evidence” that Moscow was serious about saving the faltering regime, including

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<sup>94</sup>Raymond L. Garthoff, *Detente and Confrontation: American-Soviet Relations from Nixon to Reagan*, rev. ed. (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1994), 991; Odd Arne Westad, “Prelude to Invasion: The Soviet Union and the Afghan Communists, 1978-1979,” *International History Review* 16, no. 1 (February 1994): 57–58; Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001* (New York: Penguin, 2004), 39–40.

<sup>95</sup>Excerpt from Minutes of CC CPSU Politburo, 31 October 1979, Vol. 2: Russian and East European Documents, “Towards an International History of the War in Afghanistan, 1979–1989,” CWIHP Document Reader (CWIHP Vol. 2), 29–30 April 2002, [http://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/AfghanistanV2\\_1974-1989.pdf](http://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/AfghanistanV2_1974-1989.pdf). “The Soviet subunits located in Afghanistan (communications centers, the parachute battalion, the fixed-wing and helicopter transport squadrons) and also the Soviet institutions’ security detachment are to continue to perform the assigned missions.” Aleksandr Antonovich Lyakhovskiy, “Inside the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan and the Seizure of Kabul, December 1979,” January 2007, Working Paper No. 51, Cold War International History Project, 10, [http://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/WP51\\_Web\\_Final.pdf](http://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/WP51_Web_Final.pdf).

<sup>96</sup>Cable from Embassy Kabul to Secretary of State, 18 July 1979, from “Towards an International History of the War in Afghanistan, 1979–1989,” CWIHP Document Reader, Volume I: US Documents, 29–30 April 2002, [http://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/AfghanistanV1\\_1978-1979.pdf](http://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/AfghanistanV1_1978-1979.pdf) (hereafter CWIHP Vol. 1). Cable from Embassy Kabul to Secretary of State, 8 May 1979, CWIHP Vol. 1.

<sup>97</sup>Interagency Intelligence Memorandum, “Soviet Options in Afghanistan,” 28 September 1979, Central Intelligence Agency Electronic Reading Room (CIAERR), Document 0000267105.

<sup>98</sup>Memorandum from Stanfield Turner for the National Security Council, 14 September 1979, CWIHP Vol. 1; National Security Council Paper, August 1979, “Soviet Position in the Third World,” CWIHP Vol. 1.

potentially via invasion.<sup>99</sup> Subsequent changes in Soviet covert involvement that seemed to indicate a broadening role in defending the regime led to updated American inferences. Detection of additional covert Soviet combat battalions deployed to Bagram Airfield in early December led a defense intelligence assessment to conclude that “this significant escalation ... demonstrates Moscow’s resolve in pursuing its interests in Afghanistan *despite the obvious pitfalls* and at a time when the Kremlin might consider the U.S. preoccupied with events in Tehran.”<sup>100</sup> These “obvious pitfalls” were noted in previous American analysis, as when the Kabul embassy cabled headquarters noting the role of détente in constraining Soviet activity in Afghanistan.<sup>101</sup> Another noted a “qualitative increase in their military presence” whose arrival “signals greater Soviet concern for developments in Afghanistan than previously noted.”<sup>102</sup> A National Intelligence Daily update interpreted airborne battalions capable of performing counterinsurgency operations on behalf of the regime as “indicative of a decision by the Soviets to increase their military commitment in Afghanistan substantially.”<sup>103</sup> This led President Jimmy Carter to privately express concern about the Russian presence in Afghanistan to both Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin and Leonid Brezhnev.<sup>104</sup>

Soviet private meetings with American leaders in December did include oblique references to deepening Russian involvement, suggesting that Soviet leaders knew US leaders were generally aware of their activities. Available evidence on the Soviet covert action in 1979 does not provide conclusive support that Moscow hoped to signal to Washington covertly. However, a signaling motive is especially plausible regarding their local ally. A high-level March 1979 telephone conversation between Moscow and Kabul, for example, features Afghanistan’s leader pleading for Soviet assistance to address a growing rebellion. After Kosygin expresses reluctance, Taraki suggests the Soviets send personnel covertly because “no one will be any the wiser.... They will think these are government troops.”<sup>105</sup> Following the Politburo’s approval of a small covert personnel deployment, Soviet documents show regular requests for additional covert aid from Soviet representatives in Kabul in

<sup>99</sup>The final judgment at this time was that such an intervention was unlikely. See Interagency Intelligence Memorandum, October 1980, CIAERR, Document 0000278538, 21.

<sup>100</sup>*Ibid.*, 26–36 (quotation, 26). As Douglas MacEachin summarizes, “there were reports that additional military advisors were being assigned to Afghan units engaging in combat, and that some Soviet military personnel were piloting helicopters in ground strikes and operating tanks in combat.” MacEachin, “Predicting the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan: The Intelligence Community’s Record,” Books and Monographs, Center for the Study of Intelligence, Central Intelligence Agency, 2002.

<sup>101</sup>An overt Soviet role was judged unlikely because it “would deal a severe blow to détente with West at a time when Moscow is increasingly pre-occupied with the growing Chinese threat in the east. Such a move would almost certainly doom SALT.” Cable from Embassy Moscow to Secretary of State, 24 May 1979, CWIHP Vol. 1.

<sup>102</sup>Quoted in Interagency Intelligence Memorandum, October 1980, CIAERR, 26.

<sup>103</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>104</sup>Garthoff, *Detente and Confrontation*, 1051–52. Note that while Moscow’s covert role was perceived as a sign of greater willingness to run risks and tolerate costs to succeed, American intelligence did not specifically predict the Soviets would escalate to a full invasion. This led some policymakers to express disappointment with the performance of US intelligence despite detection of covert action once the invasion was apparent. See Interagency Intelligence Memorandum, October 1980, CIAERR; MacEachin, “Predicting the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan.”

<sup>105</sup>Kosygin/Taraki, telephone transcript, 18 March 1979, CWIHP Vol. 2.

light of continued rebellion growth.<sup>106</sup> The consistent requests from Afghanistan suggest an appreciation for the constraints on Moscow's ability to provide aid and acceptance of covert forms of support as a critical indicator of Soviet backing.

### *Initiating American Covert Lethal Aid*

Covert Soviet assistance proved insufficient and, in late December 1979, Soviet troops invaded the country to replace Taraki and restore stability. American policymakers viewed the Soviet invasion as "outrageous and unprecedented."<sup>107</sup> A NSC memo invokes shared, tacit rules about superpower involvement and Soviet transgression of them, arguing "Soviet action can only be taken as representing a qualitatively new, dangerous stage of Soviet assertiveness. In the past, the Soviet leadership has moved cautiously and deliberately in undertaking moves of such consequence. It is clear that the West should now reassess Soviet policy in terms of how likely it is that the 1980s will see greater Soviet willingness to achieve its foreign policy aims through the overt intervention of its military forces, particularly in the Third World."<sup>108</sup> National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski warned that "if the US is perceived as passive in the face of this blatant transgression of civilized norms, our international credibility and prestige will be seriously eroded, particularly in the eyes of those countries most vulnerable to Soviet intervention."<sup>109</sup> An intelligence report noted the Soviets themselves were watching the West's response and an aid to Brzezinski noted it was "imperative that we not only act to counter what the Soviets have done in Afghanistan, but that we are perceived as having done so."<sup>110</sup>

Consistent with  $H_2$ , American leaders believed their covert aid was a critical part of a targeted message it hoped to send to Moscow's friends in the region. President Carter quickly endorsed a package of public and private punishments to do just that. This included authorization for \$30 million to expand an existing covert non-lethal aid program to include weaponry and ammunition, sent to Afghan rebels via Pakistan and in coordination with Egypt, China, and Saudi Arabia.<sup>111</sup> Secrecy was helpful for Pakistan; American military aid was domestically controversial in some quarters for President Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq.<sup>112</sup> Advisors argued the United States had to make "a concerted effort to teach Moscow that aggression does not pay." To do so, the United States had to "make this a costly effort for the

<sup>106</sup>See, for example, Puzanov's relaying request for three special battalions of Soviet troops in Kabul and transport helicopters with crews; Memorandum, 12 August 1979, CWIHP Vol. 2.

<sup>107</sup>Memorandum from Marshall Brement for Zbigniew Brzezinski and David Aaron, 27 December 1979, CWIHP Vol. 1.

<sup>108</sup>Memorandum from Matthews, 29 December 1979, CWIHP Vol. 1.

<sup>109</sup>Memorandum from Brzezinski to the President, 2 January 1980, CWIHP Vol. 1.

<sup>110</sup>Memorandum from Matthews, 29 December 1979, 5; Memorandum from Matthews, 29 December 1979, 5; Memorandum from Brement for Brzezinski and Aaron, 27 December 1979, 1.

<sup>111</sup>Coll, *Ghost Wars*, 58–59. The preexisting CIA-run covert aid program was explicitly nonlethal and had begun in summer 1979. See Robert M. Gates, *From the Shadows: The Ultimate Insider's Story of Five Presidents and How They Won the Cold War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2007), 144–46.

<sup>112</sup>Coll, *Ghost Wars*, 59–65; Gates, *From the Shadows*, 251–52, 319–21.

Soviets” through “covert arms supply to Afghan insurgents.”<sup>113</sup> Covert measures would be a key part of a “strong and vivid US response.” The goal was a broad message beyond Afghanistan itself. The Soviets would be made to understand “this was a very expensive invasion and that it should not set a precedent for future action.”<sup>114</sup> A pre-invasion NSC memo suggested covert aid then only under consideration could show “our determination to become involved in Gulf security” and serve “as a global signal to the Soviets.”<sup>115</sup>

The American covert aid program also provided regular evidence of US resolve to Pakistan and showcases the unique signaling opportunities that can arise when using covert rather than direct supply chains. Pakistan’s role was critical for keeping the American program plausibly deniable. Evidence of Islamabad’s view of aid to Afghan rebels as an indicator of American resolve can be found in its increasingly urgent pleas for American aid prior to the Soviet invasion. A June 1979 American diplomatic cable from Islamabad, for example, describes the “perception of the strength of the U.S. commitment to Pakistan” and concerns that some believe “the U.S. has deserted her” in part because of the American “failure to stand up to the Soviets in Angola, Ethiopia, and Afghanistan.”<sup>116</sup> An NSC memo on American South Asia strategy from September, moreover, notes, “There seems to be increasing Pakistani interest in assistance to the insurgents” in reaction to growing signs of instability and Soviet activity in Afghanistan.<sup>117</sup> Pakistan’s was enthusiastic even after covert aid was initiated. Pakistan’s Zia reportedly developed a close relationship with CIA director William Casey and often emphasized Pakistan’s pessimistic view of Soviet ambitions in the region. Zia saw low-visibility covert aid as an ideal instrument—superior to overt aid—because it allowed costly pressure to be put on the Soviet Union without triggering retaliation against Pakistan.<sup>118</sup>

Domestic risks played an interesting role and contrast with those in the Angola case. The domestic risks for American leaders incurred by providing aid to Afghan rebels were minimal because the political mood had changed in Washington. American covert aid to fight a Soviet invasion was not a potential political liability at home; in fact, it proved a political windfall for the Reagan administration once its details began to leak in 1981.<sup>119</sup> Yet domestic risks did play a role in the covert

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<sup>113</sup>Memorandum from Oksenberg for Brzezinski, 28 December 1979, CWIHP Vol. 1.

<sup>114</sup>Memorandum from Brent for Brzezinski and Aaron, 27 December 1979.

<sup>115</sup>Note the memo ultimately opposed covertly arming the rebellion at this stage for other reasons. Memorandum from Thornton to Brzezinski, 24 September 1979, CWIHP Vol. 1.

<sup>116</sup>Cable from Embassy Islamabad to Secretary of State, 24 June 1979, CWIHP Vol. 1. Note that the “failure” in Angola is referencing the cutoff of the American aid program

<sup>117</sup>Memorandum from Thomas Thornton to Zbigniew Brzezinski, 24 September 1979, CWIHP Vol. 1.

<sup>118</sup>As one analyst summarizes, “Zia expressed his intent—in words which became his Afghan policy mantra—that the Afghan support program ‘keep the pot boiling, turn up the heat, but don’t let the pot boil over.’ In other words, irritate and undermine the Soviets, but don’t provoke them to massively escalate the level and intensity of their commitment. Make them pay for their incursion, but don’t drive them to retaliate against the Pakistanis.” Kirsten Lundberg, “Politics of a Covert Action: The US, the ‘Mujahideen,’ and the Stinger Missile,” Kennedy School of Government Case Study Program, 9 November 1999, 13.

<sup>119</sup>Carl Bernstein, “U.S. Weapons for Afghanistan,” *Chicago Tribune*, 22 July 1981. Note that other covert aid programs in response not to Soviet invasion but alleged Soviet patronage (that is, Nicaragua) remained controversial during the Reagan administration.

aid program—domestic risks in Pakistan. As noted above, Islamabad’s partnership with Washington in a covert aid program was divisive within Pakistan. The need for keeping aid limited and at least plausibly deniable was in large measure due to domestic Pakistani considerations.<sup>120</sup> Diplomatic reports from Pakistan reflect this constraint, noting that Islamabad “must walk a tightrope in dealing publicly with the insurgency in Afghanistan.”<sup>121</sup> Thus, part of what demonstrated American and Pakistani resolve to Soviet leaders was a local ally’s willingness to tolerate domestic political risks in order to impose costs on a Soviet occupation.

Direct evidence regarding inferences by Soviet leaders about American covert aid is unfortunately not available. Soviet leaders certainly anticipated and monitored the covert aid program. Some intelligence reports to Moscow from Kabul warned of a substantial increase in covert aid in January 1980 and described specific training and equipment coming via Pakistan in September 1980.<sup>122</sup> Reports in 1981 predicted increases in covert aid by the new Reagan administration and carefully described weapons flows.<sup>123</sup> The best evidence regarding inferences comes from a former CIA analyst whose history of détente noted American covert aid “contributed to Soviet fears of the desire and readiness of the United States ... to attempt to influence the situation in Afghanistan.”<sup>124</sup>

### *Soviet Secret Cross-Border Activity*

As President Reagan expanded the scope of covert aid, Soviet leaders faced an increasingly protracted counterinsurgency and sought to cut off the swelling flow of weapons via Pakistan. Soviet leaders launched secret cross-border air strikes into rebel camps in Pakistani territory as part of this effort. Consistent with our hypotheses on inferences and expanded covert action ( $H_{3a}$  and  $H_{3b}$ ), Washington and Islamabad interpreted escalating unpublicized cross-border attacks as a signal of Soviet resolve and willingness to raise risks in Afghanistan/Pakistan. A mid-1982 CIA report noted new Soviet border violations that “seemed deliberate ... and appeared aimed at intensifying pressure on Islamabad to come to terms with the Soviet-dominated government in Kabul.”<sup>125</sup> A Pakistani governor complained to American representatives that Soviet cross-border air strikes were intended “to demonstrate to Pakistanis that the [Government of Pakistan’s] Afghan policy and continued harboring of the refugees entailed great dangers.”<sup>126</sup> The message

<sup>120</sup>An Intelligence Assessment, July 1982, CIAERR, Document 0000534961. Congressional advocacy for more expansive and aggressive weaponry (for example, Stinger missile) initially exceeded what the Pakistani government would tolerate and was only approved after Pakistan gave its consent. See discussion of Pakistan as the “predominant overriding concern” for opponents of the Stinger missile in Lundberg, “Politics of a Covert Action,” 34–35.

<sup>121</sup>Cable from Embassy Islamabad to Secretary of State, 24 June 1979.

<sup>122</sup>Excerpt from Bogomolov, 20 January 1980, CWIHP Vol. 2; Unsourced document [presumably from intelligence sources], September 1980, CWIHP Vol. 2.

<sup>123</sup>Report from Gen. Mayarov et al., 10 May 1981, CWIHP Vol. 2; Report by Military Intelligence Representatives, September 1981, CWIHP Vol. 2.

<sup>124</sup>Garthoff, *Detente and Confrontation*, 1031, emphasis added.

<sup>125</sup>An Intelligence Assessment, July 1982, CIAERR, 5–6.

<sup>126</sup>Cable from Secretary Shultz to U.S. Embassy Afghanistan, 23 November 1982, DNSA, Document AF01403.

became even clearer in 1984 and 1985. An intelligence assessment in early 1985 noted “the Soviets ... have already signaled that more outside support will not dissuade them from pursuing their objective of full control over the country” in part by “continuing cross-border incidents.”<sup>127</sup>

These inferences specifically suggest American and Pakistani observers viewed the pace and intensity of Soviet cross-border activity as a bellwether regarding Soviet ambitions in Afghanistan and vis-à-vis Pakistan. Moreover, the cross-border raids specifically appear to involve the counter-escalatory risks mechanism; such strikes into Pakistani territory substantially increased the chances of an incident with Pakistani border defense units and threatened to destabilize Islamabad’s control of its northwestern frontier provinces. While cross-border actions had operational benefits as well, the primary documents show that American and Pakistani leaders inferred a larger coercive political message regarding Afghanistan. The timing of these increases and the Soviet preference for activity that was visible to Pakistani and American leaders, but not wider audiences, suggests a signaling motive. Definitive answers regarding  $H_2$  must await further document releases on this aspect of the Afghanistan campaign.

### Discussion

To summarize, the conflict in Afghanistan features three instances in which covert actions were used to signal resolve, interpreted as signals of resolve, or both. Consistent with  $H_2$  and  $H_3$ , pre-invasion covert combat support by the Soviet Union was detected by American intelligence, was critical to judgments of Soviet resolve, and likely helped express Moscow’s support to its local ally. Regarding the weakness hypothesis ( $H_4$ ), American leaders in 1979 did not interpret the constraint on Moscow created by détente as weakness; instead, expanded covert involvement despite the risks to détente was seen as a sign of resolve. American covert aid post-invasion was intended to convey to Washington’s regional partners and Moscow a willingness to punish aggression, was tracked by Soviet intelligence, and had a reassuring effect on a key American local partner (Pakistan). Later Soviet secret cross-border strikes were consistently interpreted as sending a coercive message to Pakistani leaders. Overall, reactions to developments in the covert sphere support our basic contention that leaders share an understanding about qualitative changes in covert interventions and the symbolic significance of crossing thresholds. We find specific support for the unique escalatory and domestic political risks incurred by covert aid and covert cross-border raids. We find less specific evidence regarding sunk costs. Finally, Afghanistan provides little evidence in favor of the null ( $H_1$ ) and weakness ( $H_4$ ) hypotheses. While observing leaders could have interpreted covert aid and secret cross-border raids as weak half-measures, we found

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<sup>127</sup>The report also cites evidence Soviet military leaders were doubling down on defeating the counterinsurgency within Afghanistan. Special National Intelligence Assessment, March 1985, CIAERR, Document 0000518057.

consistent evidence of an appreciation for limitations on overt alternatives and for resolve expressed through covert action.<sup>128</sup>

## Implications

Do leaders use covert action to send signals of resolve and are such messages intelligible and credible to signal receivers? We argue leaders share a basic interpretive framework that allows covert action to express intentions like resolve. Covert action is especially useful as a method for sending targeted signals to leaders of local allies and strategic adversaries. Moreover, these messages are credible because of the sunk costs and escalation and domestic risks they incur. As we note theoretically and identify in the cases, much of the costs and risks in covert action are unique to this form of signaling.

Readers may wonder whether this phenomenon is a curious artifact of the Cold War. This observation would suggest that a unique feature of the Soviet-American rivalry—unusually dense interactions, advanced intelligence collection capabilities, alliance networks, or the presence of nuclear weapons—was necessary for covert signaling to be detected, understood, and taken seriously. In fact, these features are quite common even outside the superpower rivalry, differing if at all in degree rather than kind. Dense and repeated interactions are common in regional rivalries including Israel and the Arab states, India and Pakistan, and the two Koreas. While Soviet and American intelligence organizations were large, other major powers also possess extensive intelligence coverage. Moreover, regional rivals often develop their own regional intelligence capacities to track local covert activity. Alliance considerations are hardly restricted to the Cold War era and have recently played an important role in Western debates over policy regarding Crimea/Eastern Ukraine. Shared nuclear weapons are featured in current rivalries like India and Pakistan. In any case, while nuclear weapons may push more activity to the covert sphere due to fears of direct war, their presence is not necessary for leaders to use covert action and find targeted signaling useful. Covert signaling therefore remains an attractive option for leaders in a range of regional and global geopolitical rivalries. While anecdotal, this point is underscored by the lessons from the Israeli covert strike in 2007 discussed above and reporting on covert activity regarding the Ukraine crisis.<sup>129</sup>

As we note in the article's opening, we do not claim leaders use covert action exclusively to signal in any given case. On-the-ground effects are often part of the

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<sup>128</sup>Though space constraints do not allow a full exploration, hints of the same dynamics regarding Chinese covert aid are available as well. An American intelligence report on a Chinese military delegation's visit to Islamabad in October 1979 (before the Soviet invasion) noted President Zia's request for Chinese weaponry for Afghan insurgents, Chinese opposition to public aid in light of sensitive Sino-Soviet relations, and Chinese and Pakistani satisfaction with covert arms arrangements instead. See Intelligence Report, October 30, 1979, DNSA, CIAERR, Document AF00716.

<sup>129</sup>For example, Michael R. Gordon, "Russia Displays a New Military Prowess in Ukraine's East," *New York Times*, 21 April 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/22/world/europe/new-prowess-for-russians.html>.



story as well, and our case evidence confirms as much in several examples. However, the evidence regarding cases in both Angola and Afghanistan makes clear that a primary motivation for these covert interventions was to signal resolve to local allies and strategic adversaries. In other words, while it is possible a state could use covert action primarily for operational reasons and any signaling function is relatively insignificant, the empirical record in the cases examined here shows that a primary function was signal sending. In general, establishing the reputation of being a global power determined to contest and even extend influence in the Third World influenced the use of covert action by both sides during this period. Geostrategic stakes of the Persian Gulf, coupled with the collapse of détente, magnified the importance of appearing resolved for the superpowers. These conditions are hardly unique. American leaders acting in the post-Iraq climate, and other states that use covert action, can face their own challenge of constraints on overt signaling and geostrategic demands for demonstrating resolve.

As we note, introducing and theorizing a novel signaling tool contributes to ongoing debates about how and under what conditions states can communicate intentions like resolve. Several specific aspects of the theory—the unique costs and risks of acting secretly, an emphasis on multiple audiences (for example, local allies), a general framework for and unique evidence regarding the intelligibility of covert actions—may prove especially useful for scholars interested in signaling, reputation, crisis escalation, and related research areas. There are useful policy implications as well for contemporary leaders seeking ways in which to respond to crises like those in Syria, Yemen, and Ukraine.<sup>130</sup> Moreover, findings about specific mechanisms such as sunk costs and risk generation provide critical lessons for leaders choosing among possible covert signaling tools. Cyber technology, for example, is a growing arena for covert action. Our theoretical framework and empirical findings suggest certain kinds of covert cyber attacks are more likely to convey resolve than others, with implications for the kinds of attacks to expect from rivals, the kinds of effects (that is, sinking costs, generating escalation, and domestic risk) to look for, and the necessity of an evolved interpretive framework if cyber attacks are to create intelligible messages of resolve in the first place.<sup>131</sup>

Finally, our theory and findings raise important questions for future research. Scholars could explore the larger universe of signaling messages to address whether and how states use secret policy tools to reassure rivals, court new allies, express restraint to adversaries, etc. Future work could systematically address conditions under which covert action signals restraint or reassurance to allies, and investigate

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<sup>130</sup>See, for example, proposals for military aid to Ukraine in Michael R. Gordon and Eric Schmitt, “U.S. Considers Supplying Arms to Ukraine Forces, Officials Say,” *New York Times*, 1 February 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/02/world/us-taking-a-fresh-look-at-arming-kiev-forces.html>.

<sup>131</sup>For example, Martin C. Libicki, *Cyberdeterrence and Cyberwar* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 2009); Martin C. Libicki, *Crisis and Escalation in Cyberspace*, MG-1215-AF (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2012), <http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG1215.html>.

how psychological biases and patterns of misperception influence the effectiveness of covert signaling games.

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