Secrecy, Acknowledgement, and War Escalation: A Study in Covert Competition

DISSERTATION

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By

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Abstract

Why do states use secrecy? Specifically, why do great powers often seem to create a kind of “backstage” area around local conflicts? That is, why create a covert realm where external powers can meddle in local conflicts to pursue their security interests? This project generally analyzes how secrecy is used in international politics and why states are individually and collectively motivated to use it. Existing scholarship suggests states use secrecy to surprise their adversaries or insulate their leaders from dovish domestic political groups. I develop an alternative logic rooted in the desire to control conflict escalation risks. In the context of interventions in local conflicts by outside powers, I find intervening states use covert methods to maintain control over the perceptions and interpretations of outside audiences whose reactions determine the magnitude of external pressure on leaders to escalate further. Intervening in a secret, plausibly deniable manner makes restraint and withdrawal on the part of the intervening state easier. It also creates ambiguity about their role which can give the political space to responding states to ignore covert meddling and respond with restraint. Escalation control dynamics therefore make sense of why states intervene secretly and, more puzzling, why other states – even adversaries – may join in ignoring and covering up such covert activity (what I call “tacit collusion”).
Drawing on Erving Goffman and others, I develop an “impression management” theory for why states individually and jointly use secrecy and political denial to achieve their goals. To illustrate several new concepts and evaluate the theory’s value-added, I use a sophisticated comparative case study research design that leverages within- and between-case variation in the Korean War, Spanish Civil War, and the civil war in Soviet-occupied Afghanistan. Each conflict hosts several external interventions and several opportunities for tacit collusion; variation among these outcomes helps distinguish the relative importance of escalation and other considerations. Together, the conflicts span the early and late Cold War as well as a particularly important set of cases in the pre-bipolar, pre-nuclear 1930s. Similar findings across time and space suggest the generalizability of the findings. My data are drawn primarily from primary documentation from internal decision-making and assessments, including original archival research on the American awareness of and reaction to Soviet pilots fighting in the air war over Korea in the early 1950s.

The project attempts to contribute to scholarly and policy knowledge in several ways. It provides a rare window into the tactics and politics of covert security competition, a set of practices that remain alive and well in places like the Middle East. The project also offers new historical findings, presents a novel theoretical framework for understanding how states manage publicity and use secrecy in international affairs, and helps better understand the difficult dilemma between political accountability and secrecy in foreign policy in democracy.
Dedicated to

Bruce and Nancy, for years of unwavering affection and support

and

Sarah, for her love and companionship
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As always, I alone am responsible for any shortcomings in what follows that the wisdom of others could not root out.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

On only his third day in office, American President Barrack Obama authorized a secret, deadly use of military force inside the sovereign borders of an American ally. On that January day in 2004, an armed unmanned aerial vehicle, or drone, delivered precision-guided missiles to a target in rural Pakistan, killing an estimated twenty people. The drone strike was the one of many such actions authorized by the Bush and Obama administrations; one recent study estimates the total number of strikes at 420 killing 3,500 people. The geographic scope of the drone program has been wide reportedly covering targets in Pakistan, Yemen, Ethiopia, Somalia, the Indian Ocean, and the Philippines. The drone program remains classified and, until only recently, American officials steadfastly refused to acknowledge any details about it or individual strikes. Yet new reports of alleged covert drone strikes have been common, including over 600 stories in the American press in 2012 alone. While a major development in its own right, the American program is likely only the leading edge of a trend. Many experts foresee a global drone “arms race” and a regional race for drones appears to already be underway.
in the Middle East. Even in the United States, the drone program is only the most visible trace of a kind of renaissance in using covert military power.

Drone technology and the controversy it has stoked have raised a number of important political, normative, and practical issues. Drones are the latest American example of periodic controversies over secrecy in foreign policy, echoing past controversies over covert operations in the 1970s. Yet even though the program has been classified since its inception, leaks and off-the-record statements have, over time, rendered it something of an “open secret.” Why does the program remain secret? Why was it covert in the first place? Can democratic accountability exist when officials cannot openly acknowledge or debate a foreign policy initiative? Drone technology also provides a new way for states to use deadly force inside sovereign borders without a clear “signature.” This raises issues at the core of international security and international law. Why does a state using drone technology seek a low profile? Why does it embrace publicity? What does secrecy do for states? Are drone strikes an act of war? Are secret, unacknowledged uses of force bound by principles of just war like proportionality and civilian protection?

While drone technology is new, many of the political and normative issues it raises are not. This project seeks to provide new answers to these and other important questions.

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2 Sanger, Confront and Conceal.
about secrecy and international politics. The project specifically analyzes how secrecy is used in international affair and why states so often resort to its use. My goals are two-fold: first, to lay a foundation for rigorous theoretical and empirical study of secrecy; second, to develop a novel theoretical approach for understanding why states use it and assess that theory’s value-added. The project’s focus is both broad and narrow. Most broadly, I challenge how secrecy has been conceptualized in the study of International Relations (IR) and provide a new approach; I assess the historical continuities and change in uses of secrecy in international affairs; I offer a set of general theoretical insights about what secrecy does and why leaders use it with implications across empirical domains. More narrowly, I tailor the theoretical approach to understand the various ways secrecy is used when outside states intervene militarily in an ongoing war. I explore why states choose covert methods of intervention (or not) and why other states who detect secrecy may “play along” (or not). I develop a new logic for secrecy based escalation dynamics, arguing multiple states – even adversaries – may tacitly coordinate in using secrecy to quietly create a “back stage” in which security competitions can take place devoid of external pressures for conflict escalation.

Overall, the project makes the case that there is theoretical and empirical promise in studying the “private lives” of states. Scholars have frequently overlooked or defined away the secret forms of their chosen topics whether it is cooperative agreements, trade negotiations, coercive threats or foreign aid relationships. Theoretically, the IR discipline knows far more about why states act publicly than why they resort to secrecy. While the
research challenges in studying secrecy are serious, they are far from insurmountable when carefully done and theoretically motivated. The empirical evidence I harness to understand secret interventions during the Spanish Civil War, Korean War, and Afghanistan war shows it is possible to do rigorous and theoretically-informed research on such topics. Demonstrating this for scholars interested in this and other topics is an initial contribution of the project.

The project offers important contributions to scholarly, policy, and normative debates as well. For IR scholars, the project shows the existence and importance of a gap between facts “on the ground” and the wider perceptions of them. States are shown to be clever manipulators of information and interpretation; they individually and jointly manage “impressions” to pursue their policy goals while evading legal obligations and political censure. In fact, their reliance on secrecy and what I term “tacit collusion” can jointly create a kind of “back stage,” fully or partially shielded from the scrutiny of other states and domestic publics in which power politics often unfolds. The twist is that this somewhat ominous narrative has a silver lining. States often use this covert realm to preserve pathways for “saving face,” both their own and those of others. The harsh glare of publicity tends to invest events with larger reputational and other stake. Leaders know this and, when they fear its consequences, use secrecy to avoid it.

The project offers important lessons for policymakers. Interest in secrecy in foreign policy has surged since the terror attacks of September 11th and government responses to
them. Controversies over concealed torture, drone strikes, and covert anti-terror raids have been joined by reports of covert cyber attacks and clandestine meddling in the Libyan and Syrian civil wars. The unauthorized disclosure of reams of classified documents by the advocacy group WikiLeaks has raised new questions about governments’ ability to use secrecy at all. Paradoxically, these trends have been seen as harbingers of both the golden age of secrecy in world politics and the death of it.³ To these debates the project offers several useful insights. A straightforward contribution is to show how leaders have used secrecy to manipulate external scrutiny and avoid hard-to-control escalation pressure. The project also suggests leaks are far from the end of the story for secrecy and foreign policy. By describing and theorizing the interesting politics of “open secrets,” including the unique political power of acknowledgement, the project suggests to policymakers and transparency advocates alike that a more leaky ship of state may still sail.

Lastly, the project raises new questions about normative debates regarding secrecy and democratic accountability. A genuine dilemma exists in seeking both a well-informed electorate and the benefits of secrecy in foreign policy. One contribution of the project is to complicate this normative dilemma. Existing scholarly research on secrecy tells us that states use secrecy to generate surprise against an adversary or to allow democratic leaders to pursue unpopular foreign policy without punishment. These stories offer

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simple responses to the normative dilemma: to most observers, surprising an adversary is an unalloyed “good” while duping a domestic public for unpopular policies an unalloyed “bad.” The escalation logic I develop is more complicated. My theory suggests that one effect of secrecy is to allow leaders to protect themselves from domestic constituents who demand hard-line, escalatory policies. President Harry Truman feared publicizing the Soviet combat role in the Korean War would enrage anti-communist hawks and force his hand, risking World War III. Leaders in a sense may be using secrecy to protect domestic constituents “from themselves,” a dangerously paternalistic line of reasoning. How do we assess this normatively? Is this a worthwhile rationale for exempting leaders from democratic accountability? If so, under what circumstances? The rationale for secrecy I describe both sheds new light on and complicates the normative dilemma.

The remainder of this chapter previews the main conceptual and theoretical points of the project and summarizes the chapters that follow.

*The Public and Private Lives of States*

International politics can be a very public drama or a very private affair. Historically, treaties have been dramatic public relations events or closely kept state secrets. Trade agreements and peace deals are often a hybrid: initial meetings and ceremonial signatures take place before the snap of cameras while horse-trading takes place along isolated hallways and in secluded “green rooms.” Despite considerable variation, IR scholars know far more about the public dramas than the private side of international
politics. This is true both theoretically and empirically. Many influential theories in recent years – including democratic peace theory, audience cost theory, and name-and-shame dynamics in international norms – feature logics for publicity in international affairs. Moreover, the very data IR scholars analyze tends to overlook secrecy. Publicly known and acknowledged events and actions are simply easier to study, leading many scholars to define away covert forms of their subject of study. For example, the frequently used quantitative dataset “Militarized Interstate Disputes” only includes as observations those threats or uses of force that are public and officially acknowledged.

That states use secrecy at all is somewhat puzzling, in part because it is so rarely studied and theorized. Publicity provides many benefits to states. Publicity can help make promises politically binding and therefore more credible. Adoption of multilateral treaties help states makes a clear commitment to environmental action or human rights protection. Publicity may also help leaders with their domestic political challenges. A publicized international security crisis can stimulate nationalism and “rally-around-the-flag” effects, consolidate leader support, and marginalize opposition. Publicity helps create and maintain an “international society” with norms and rules that overcome anarchy. Publicly defending normative principles helps clarify their meaning and generate shared expectations. Naming-and-shaming efforts can lead deviants to comply with international law. Uncertainty is one of the central problems of anarchy that IR scholars of all theoretical stripes have addressed; publicity, quite naturally, is an attractive mechanism to overcome it.
Yet the layperson and the scholar alike intuitively sense that publicity is frequent rejected in favor of “private diplomacy,” secret communication, ambiguity, espionage, and covert operations. Despite Woodrow Wilson’s exhortation for “open covenants of peace, openly arrived at,” secrecy has been an important tool across historical eras ranging from 19th century diplomacy among monarchs, balance of power competition among Cold War adversaries, and the post-9/11 war on terrorism. In the security realm in particular, carefully concealed weapons programs and capabilities, mutual defense pacts, military aid programs, even assassination attempts have existed since the birth of the modern state system. Secrecy’s historical significance is hard to doubt. Secret treaties contributed to the escalation of World War I. Secret defense programs helped Germany begin and the United States end World War II. Cold War battles in Korea and Vietnam were shaped by covert military assistance, clandestine incursions, and even secret combat participation.

Why do states use secrecy to conduct diplomacy or conceal policy actions? Why abstain from publicity? Why might other states react to secret activity by themselves covering it up and ignoring it? What is going on in the substratum of state interactions which take place below the publicly visible, “stage-managed” surface of world politics?

Theorizing Secrecy

Secrecy is generally the intentional attempt by any actor(s) to withhold information from one or more targets. In world politics, the primary practitioners of secrecy are states.
This project uses a state-centric definition: “the intentional concealment of information regarding decisions, communications, or foreign policy actions by a state or states.”

Targets of secrecy in international affairs may be states (allies, adversaries, third parties, members, non-members, etc.), non-state actors (non-governmental organizations, international organizations, etc.), and members of a domestic polity (rival political institutions, the public, specific interest groups, etc.). This definition of secrecy shows it is both intentional and goal-oriented. Secrecy is not merely the absence of publicity or knowledge; it is an active attempt to prevent a target or targets from accessing knowledge. It is not habitual in a strict sense; secrecy must be actively maintained.

From its wide range of applications, I simplify the domains in which secrecy is used to three. States may use secrecy to exclude one or more audiences from observing their communications (i.e. messages between states and within the state), to conceal information gathering on other states (i.e. various espionage techniques), and to conceal concrete policy actions intended to manipulate other states (i.e. covert influence attempts or “covert action”). Most studies of secrecy, deception, and “private” forms of state action have focused on isolated decisions and specific messages, such as a threat communicated to an adversary privately. One contribution of the project is to provide more sustained attention to the third area – covert influence attempts – where secrecy is used over time to conceal activities that can leave a physical trace.

A second conceptual building block of the project is to take seriously the effectiveness of secrecy in practice. As the drone program demonstrates, disclosures are common. These
compromise a state’s ability to keep certain targets “in the dark.” Disclosures can generate suspicion or, in the extreme, provide complete transparency about the secret’s content. Rather than a simple “secret” or “public” dichotomy, secrecy in practice and over time frequently exists in a “grey area” of partial knowledge. This grey area has been overlooked in IR scholarship in general and on secrecy in particular. Yet even open secrets seem to matter. Examples from everyday life – family secrets suspected but ignored, for example – suggest open secrets still influence relationships, social structure, even psychological health. One contribution of the project, then, is to introduce a spectrum-based conceptualization of secrecy and to theoretically explore the significance of various forms of “open secrecy.”

With some conceptual pieces on the table, the question naturally shifts to why states use secrecy. While generally under-studied, prior IR scholarship on private diplomacy, secrecy, and deception offers three basic rationales. The most well-known logic for states to undertake policy action secretly is to generate strategic and military surprise against an adversary. Concealment allows a state to keep an adversary in the dark and avoids counter-measures. War strategists like Clausewitz highlight the key role of tactical surprise while Realists have long argued states have strong incentives to conceal capabilities to avoid counter-measures. A second logic for secrecy is in diplomatic negotiations. Scholars have found that leaders sometimes use secrecy to conceal their own negotiating bottom line (i.e. “reservation point”) and to provide a negotiation setting more hospitable to compromise (i.e. “private bargaining”). Lastly, secrecy can be used to
deal with domestic politics and difficult “two-level games.” A desire to insulate a leader from domestic punishment can lead to the use of secrecy in everything from free trade policy to regime change attempts. In the domain of international security, an especially prevalent view is that democratic leaders specifically use secrecy to overcome dovish domestic sentiment when the leadership prefers more bellicose policies.

Although these logics are intuitive and capture the rationale for secrecy in some circumstances, they have a number of important weaknesses which this project addresses. Existing scholarship has largely focused on concealment of discrete decisions or short-term policy actions. Even studies of long-term secret bargains, as in the missile trade that ended the Cuban Missile Crisis, focus on the rationale for initial secrecy rather than its maintenance over time. Open secrets and leakage over time have been largely overlooked. Secrecy is also commonly characterized as a unilateral decision with explanations for its use that are monadic in nature. Less attention has been devoted to shared motives for secrecy and the joint production of a “backstage.” Lastly, existing scholarship often treats secrecy as a tool used by a predetermined set of actors within a well-defined problem or policy structure. Formal models that stipulate the number of actors, their role, and the reputational and other stakes of an event are the most obvious example of this. This project reverses this logic. Instead, I show how secrecy is used to manipulate which actors are thought to be involved, the structure of a situation, and the reputational stakes at play.
I develop a theoretical perspective on the role of secrecy in IR which I call the impression management approach. The impression management framework has four basic principles. First, secrecy is an important tool that individual actors use to establish and maintain consistent, socially acceptable “impressions.” Second, impressions are not managed alone. Other actors often join in maintaining a consistent impression of others, including through the reactive use of secrecy. Third, secrets are often leaky, especially over time, but still do work. Situations in which a secret’s contents are suspected or even mutually known – two kinds of “open secrecy” – are common but may still preserve prior impressions. Even suspected or known secrets allow the secret-holder and observers to pretend “as if,” preserving prior impressions, roles, and routines. Fourth, individuals and groups seek to maintain the impressions they have made, including through the use of secrecy, in order to avoid several negative consequences that flow from a “loss of face.” Unsuccessful impression management leads to humiliation, reputational damage, new social and legal roles, and potentially conflict.

These principles are distilled from a variety of literatures, many from outside political science. I draw heavily on the insights of Erving Goffman whose work gives a surprisingly important role to secrecy, ambiguity, and deniability. Goffman and other “impression management” scholarship translates well to international politics. Adapting its insights suggests the following: individual states use secrecy to safeguard socially desirable “impressions”; other states often join in impression management including
through the use of reactive secrecy; states will frequently find themselves in situations of “open secrecy” but, even when secrets leak, may find them useful; and, states act to safeguard their own and others’ impressions to avoid humiliation, reputational damage, new legal and social roles that risk conflict, and hostility.

Theory, Part 2: Impression Management in Intervention Scenarios

I adapt these general theoretical propositions to the specific domain of military interventions. Doing so allows me to generate empirically tractable and testable expectations. These allow me to investigate the plausibility of my theory and assess its distinctiveness and “value added.”

Outside military interventions are the involvement of a non-local regional or global power in an ongoing military conflict. It can take the form of lethal military assistance or participation in air, naval, and/or ground combat. Secrecy can be involved in such scenarios in two ways. The intervention itself may be secret (i.e. “covert”). In addition, secrecy may be used by other states that detect covert intervention. A form of “tacit collusion” is possible in which multiple states join in maintaining the fiction that outside meddling is not taking place.

Existing theories of secrecy suggest leaders covertly intervene to surprise an adversary or to avoid punishment from dovish domestic constituents. These rationales may well be present, but they make little sense of tacit collusion, the use of secrecy over time, or the
maintenance of ostensible secrecy as leaks emerge. In contrast, the impression management approach suggests secrecy is driven by a desire to manipulate perceptions to avoid conflict escalation. Secrecy helps the initial acting state – the intervener – to preserve a socially acceptable impression of being “non-involved,” “non-belligerent,” or “neutral.” This impression is linked, in turn, to the larger definition of the conflict in which they intervene, i.e. whether it is localized or a venue for regional or great power combat. Other states may join in safeguarding the “face” of the intervening state by tactfully ignoring their covert involvement and helping produce a perception of the conflict as localized and low-stakes. Impressions can be preserved if all states pretend “as if” no change has taken place. All of this face-work through secrecy preserves opportunities for face-saving restraint. By avoiding publicity, intervening states and witnessing states can avoid clarifying that a security challenge has been made and a commitment to a local ally has been forged. The prestige and reputation stakes are lower on both sides, reducing pressure for hard line policies from external audiences like allies, future adversaries, and domestic constituents.

The current civil war in Syria illustrates the contrasts among theories of secrecy. Since 2011, Syria’s central government has used brutal military force to suppress a coalition of rebel groups. Many regional and global powers have interests in the war’s outcome including Israel, Iran, the United States, Europe, and Russia. The Syrian civil war has also threatened to spill into neighboring territory. Intervention-type activity by a number
of outside states has been reported in major media, much of it in covert or ambiguous forms. This begs the question: What role is secrecy playing in Syria?

One answer may simply be tactical surprise. Outside governments meddling in the conflict may prefer covert methods to keep adversaries in the dark and maximize tactical surprise. Alternatively, covert forms may be preferred so that leaders of meddling states are spared domestic punishment by anti-intervention domestic constituents. My theory directs attention to the dangers of conflict escalation and how leaders may use secrecy to manage outside perceptions and minimize escalation pressure. It suggests multiple states, including adversaries, may be jointly embracing covert methods and tacit collusion to create a “back stage” area in which a less risky struggle for influence can take place. It would expect that reports of covert activity will emerge over time but that ambiguity and a collective attempt to act “as if” the civil war had not internationalized may limit pressure on all sides for hard-line actions. States may even tacitly collude, detecting covert activity of others but choosing not to publicize it for fear of creating a crisis and ratcheting up pressure for an expanded war.

**Empirical Analysis: An Overview**

I demonstrate key concepts and test theories in three empirical chapters. These chapters focus on three different wars that together feature over a dozen cases of publicity/secrecy.

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I evaluate the overt and covert interventions of the United States, China, and the Soviet Union in the Korean War in the early 1950s, as well as cases of “tacit collusion.” I analyze the complex politics of secrecy and denial in the Spanish Civil War in the late 1930s when covert interventions by Italy, Germany, and the Soviet Union threatened to burst a civil conflict into a second Great War. Lastly, I uncover the rationale for covert and overt interventions – and often tacit collusion – by the American and Soviet governments in Afghanistan in the 1980s.

My empirical analysis focuses on two goals. One is illustrating new concepts in action, such as covert intervention, open secrecy, and tacit collusion. The second is testing the explanatory “value added” of an escalation-based logic. To maximize theory testing leverage, I selected conflicts which host multiple cases nested within the same war and which exhibit variation among states and within a single state’s intervention. My theoretical testing recognizes that existing logics and my own are not mutual exclusive. Instead, I focus on assessing the relative importance of different motives for secrecy to judge whether most of the explanatory “action” lies with my own theory or others. More details on the research design are described in Chapter 4.

Chapter Summaries

The eight chapters begin with an analysis of historical continuity and change in how secrecy has been used in world politics. Chapter 2 introduces three forms of secrecy and identifies historical roots and modern innovations among them. The historical lens is
drawn broadly; the chapter discusses everything from Italian Renaissance spy rings to satellite surveillance. I find substantial continuity in uses of secrecy for the purpose of concealing intra- and inter-state communications, in some forms of espionage, and in the concealment of military maneuvers for tactical surprise. But I also identify substantial changes in the technology of communication and espionage, in the bureaucratization of secrecy, and in secret use of military force. The chapter concludes by specifying several political and technological factors that may have led to the third change. I conclude that new covert ways of using force may have arisen after World War I in reaction to new ideas and law about use of force, new technology, and new domestic political institutions.

In Chapter 3, I develop my theoretical approach to secrecy in world politics in two basic moves. I begin by introducing the impression management approach and its four basic principles. The theory draws on literatures from within and outside political science, in particular insights about impressions, face, and face-saving in Erving Goffman’s overlooked research on secrecy in everyday life. The second part adapts insights from impression management to understand why states use secrecy in military intervention scenarios. I argue leaders use secrecy to preserve face-saving opportunities for restraint on both sides. Publicized and acknowledged interventions clarify the new status of the intervening state, the nature of a challenge and commitment, and the overall redefinition of the conflict. This triggers dynamics in external audiences which tend to trap leaders into hostile reactions and an escalating spiral of conflict. To avoid this, intervening and witnessing states alike may use secrecy and tacit collusion to lower the stakes of the
conflict. In short, secrecy is a tool used by leaders to engage in security competition but minimize external escalation pressures.

Chapter 4 describes the project’s research design. I describe the purpose of my empirical analysis, describe the rationale for using a qualitative comparative approach, and explain the high theoretical leverage of the three conflicts I selected. I develop empirically testable hypotheses for my own theory and the existing “surprise” and “domestic doves” theories. The chapter concludes by discussing practical questions of data sources and how I reach judgments using evidence.

I present the first case study, military interventions in the Korean War from 1950-1953, in Chapter 5. The Korean War hosted two forms of well-known military intervention: American-led intervention by the United Nations on behalf of the South Koreans and, in late 1950, Chinese intervention on behalf of the North Koreans. However, new documents and interviews show a third intervention also occurred. Soviet pilots flew Soviet aircraft in combat missions from bases in Manchuria and North Korea from 1950-1953. Soviet and American pilots had regular combat encounters during this period and both sides knew who was doing the shooting yet neither publicized it. The chapter mines the three external interventions (U.S., China, Soviet Union) in the war for evidence about the considerations that led to both secrecy and publicity choices. I find strong evidence in favor of the theory. The initial intervention by the United States was done overtly in part because American leaders did not initially fear escalation and found the publicity
benefits of a visible demonstration of resolve more important. The elements of 
covetness used in China’s intervention and the careful secrecy used in the Soviet 
intervention were both motivated by a desire to limit and localize the war. The 
Americans chose to downplay China’s initial involvement and conceal the Soviet role to 
control conflict escalation pressure as well.

In Chapter 6, I analyze external intervention in the Spanish Civil War from 1936-1939. 
Even today, the war’s name belies the foreign involvement of German, Italian, and Soviet 
military personnel. These three states participated in combat for nearly the entire war. 
Importantly, the interventions featured interesting variation between and within each 
intervening state. German and Soviet military participation, largely confined to the air, 
was carefully concealed by both states. Stalin never admitted an active Soviet military 
role; Hitler only revealed the German “Condor Legion” after the British and French made 
clear they would not join the war at the infamous Munich Conference in late 1938. The 
desire to avoid the premature eruption of a European war, with Britain and France 
aligned against them, motivated both Hitler and Stalin to use covert means. The Italian 
intervention, on the other hand, was both comprehensive and comparatively overt. 
Mussolini used the four divisions of Italians deployed in his “Corpo Truppe Volontarie” 
as propaganda for Fascist martial prowess. Yet he carefully maintained deniability at sea. 
The difference, I argue, reflects different escalation risks for the ground and naval 
components. Finally, a description of the tacit collusion in concealing, ignoring, and
denying intervention by escalation-averse British and French leaders concludes the chapter.

In Chapter 7, I describe the role of escalation in American and Soviet decisions in Afghanistan from 1979-1988. This conflict is useful for theory testing for two structural reasons: (1) it offers a case in which a Western democratic state covertly intervenes, and (2) the increasingly accessible American documentary records offers a unique opportunity to examine debates within a covertly intervening state at a fine level of detail. The brazen, overt Soviet intervention in Afghanistan sent shockwaves among Western allies and immediately derailed détente. One part of the response was a quiet American program to provide covert military assistance to Afghan tribal leaders. The chapter first analyzes why Soviet leaders chose an overt intervention after initially intervening covertly and why American leaders responded covertly. As the American covert aid program expanded under the Reagan Administration, a bureaucratic battle erupted within the U.S. government over the wisdom of providing American-made weapons that would end any pretense of “deniability.” I show that opponents of providing these Stinger missiles to Afghan rebels argued that overt aid would force the Soviets to lash out to save face. However, Gorbachev’s signals in late 1985 and early 1986 convinced these pessimists that escalation dangers were relatively low led them to endorse arming rebels with American-made Stingers.
I conclude with a discussion of larger implications in Chapter 8. The chapter evaluates the implications of the theory and empirics of the project for IR scholars in general and secrecy scholars in particular. The chapter also reviews implications for policymakers and for the normative dilemma in democracy between public accountability and secrecy in foreign policy. The analysis also reflects on the historical trends identified in Chapter 2, new technological trends that seemingly make secrecy both more difficult and easier, and how secrecy will likely be used in the future.
Chapter 1 References


Chapter 2: Secrecy’s Continuity and Change in International Affairs

Today, secrecy is a basic tool of modern states in the international system. For communicating in confidence with their own diplomats abroad, nearly all states possess at least a rudimentary legal and organizational infrastructure to conceal information. For espionage purposes, most states build intelligence bureaucracies that clandestinely acquire classified information on local or global security threats. Many states also possess military and/or intelligence units capable of covert foreign actions, ranging from hostage rescue missions to economic sabotage to aid for terrorist groups. Across a range of regime types and regions and relative power rankings, the ability to use secrecy in some form or another is “standard equipment” in modern statehood.

It is easy to take this state of affairs for granted. Yet states’ convergence on a “secrecy capability,” and its particular modern forms, raise a number of interesting questions for scholars of IR. Are the forms and uses of secrecy today a distinctly modern phenomenon? To what extent did states in the 19th or even 15th centuries possess similar secrecy capabilities? In what respects have state secrecy practices remained the same or changed over the “longue duree”? If there has been change, why? In short, what forms has secrecy taken over time and what explains the emergence of new secrecy practices?
This chapter provides an overview of the historical antecedents of modern secrecy in international affairs. I describe both continuity and change. In terms of continuity, I trace the origins of contemporary secrecy practices which have remained qualitatively constant across hundreds of years. From the “double diplomacy” of the Medici family in Renaissance Italy to the notorious “cabinet noir” envelope openers of Tsarist Russia, the chapter shows that several of the most important modern secrecy practices have deep historical roots. Understanding this historical continuity across eras provides important context for studies of secrecy’s modern incarnations and provides useful hints about some of the long-standing functions secrecy has served.

With this continuity as a foundation, the chapter pivots to describing change. I identify modern forms of secrecy which appear to be qualitatively new developments. I highlight three of the most important changes: qualitatively new methods of interstate surveillance, the bureaucratization of secrecy, and the rise of secret means of using military force. Each of these changes constitutes a distinctly modern form of secrecy in international affairs. For example, technological developments such as satellite surveillance have transformed how states observe one another. Rather than focusing exclusively on message interception and physical human spying, as they had for centuries, modern leaders can now draw on technologies which allow for passive and non-human surveillance of physical space. Similarly, the larger process of administrative bureaucratization did not leave secrecy untouched. The rise of a permanent peacetime
secrecy apparatus – represented by the modern Western intelligence bureaucracy – ushered in a quantitative explosion in the amount of secrecy. Lastly, the modern period features a range of secret methods of using force. While contemporary headlines are dominated by stories of covert drone strikes and cyber attacks, states only began experimenting with complex methods of secretly using force in the 20th century. This experimentation has grown into a suite of tools which offer limited but consequential ways for states to use military force without visibility and political acknowledgement. This, in turn, has created a new substratum of security competition: below the overt realm of publicized threats and declared war, modern states often pursue their security interests covertly as well.

This chapter serves several purposes in the overall project. It introduces an important conceptual distinction about the varieties of secrecy in IR. It identifies what is novel and what is age-old about modern uses of secrecy. Conventional wisdom is that secrecy is as old as the city-states of ancient Greece; I show this conventional wisdom deserves qualification. Third, the chapter helps motivate my project’s specific focus on covert military intervention. The review shows that secret methods of combat participation that I analyze are a relatively modern state practice. One might then wonder: Why did such a new use for secrecy emerge when it did, around the turn of the 20th century? The chapter concludes with reflections on historical changes that led states to develop cover methods of using military force when they did.
Three Forms of Secrecy

To organize the historical analysis, I first distinguish between three broad areas in which secrecy has been used. I then review their historical lineage and the nature of changes over time.

1. Diplomatic communications: concealing messages between states and within the state

The most straightforward domain in which secrecy is used is in diplomatic communications. Whether face-to-face or at a distance, states often have reasons to restrict access to the content of their interlocutions. Examples of secrecy in diplomatic communications include private bilateral consultations during a head of state visit, secure telegrams coordinating allied military strategy prior to war, and the use of “backroom” private negotiation venues in multilateral trade meetings. States also use secrecy to create confidentiality in their internal diplomatic communications. Dispatches from ambassadors abroad, for example, are sent through secure channels so that news and judgments can be shared with leaders back home in confidence. Thus, one common domain for secrecy is in inter- and intra-state communication.

The utility of secrecy in this domain has been noted by practitioners of diplomacy and IR scholars. One classic analysis of diplomacy, for example, observes that publicity can scuttle the give-and-take necessary for diplomatic deal-making because “if the concession offered is divulged before the public are aware of the corresponding concession to be
received, extreme agitation may follow and the negotiation may have to be abandoned.”

Some recent IR scholarship has built on this intuition.

2. Espionage: concealing information gathering on other states

The second domain in which secrecy is most commonly used is to enable information gathering. Often operating in an anarchic, uncertain, and information-depleted environment, states seek to gather information on the capabilities and intentions of adversaries and allies alike. Espionage is the art and science of gathering such information clandestinely. These techniques include intercepting and decoding encrypted messages, using human assets (i.e. spies) to observe and/or acquire information, and using advanced technology for visual or acoustic monitoring (i.e. American U-2 reconnaissance flights over Soviet territory during the Cold War). Espionage can target foreign adversaries, specific individuals, industries or firms, and even allies.

Secrecy plays an important role in generating and preserving pathways for monitoring other actors. When intercepting and decrypting the diplomatic messages of other states, for example, secrecy helps avoid giving notice to the actor being monitored. If the actor being monitored alters an encryption technique, this channel for information may be lost. In short, secrecy helps preserve methods of access which could otherwise be shut down.

Espionage as a state practice has not been studied in IR as such, but the role of secrecy

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5 Nicolson, The Evolution of Diplomacy, 104.
6 For example, Stasavage, “Open-Door or Closed-Door?”. See also the review of current secrecy theory in Chapters 1 and 3.
and evolving tactics of espionage are an important subject of interest for scholars of intelligence studies.  

3. **Covert action**: concealing policy actions intended to manipulate other states

The first two categories are strictly informational: secrecy is used to securely share information among/within states or to clandestinely acquire information about other states. However, secrecy is also used to enable concrete policy actions that manipulate other states. The most obvious example is surprise military operations. Arab states launching a surprise attack on Israel in 1973 used secrecy to conceal war planning and the physical movement of military assets in the preparation of the attack. Israel, on the other hand, used secrecy to conceal an aerial strike against nuclear reactors in Saddam Hussein’s Iraq. States may also use secrecy to more subtly manipulate domestic politics within other states. An early success for a young Central Intelligence Agency was successfully channeling secret financial aid to political parties opposing communist candidates in post-WWII Italian elections. In short, states sometimes use secrecy to conceal “influence attempts.”

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7 The main scholarly journals for the “intelligence studies” field are *Intelligence and National Security*, *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence*, *CIA Studies in Intelligence*, and *Cryptologia*.
8 Anderson, “The Security Dilemma and Covert Action,” 404; Johnson distinguishes between secrecy used in acts of manipulation (i.e. covert action) and secrecy used for espionage (i.e. intelligence operations) by noting that the latter only involves “activities necessary for the collection and interpretation of information.” Johnson, “Bricks and Mortar for a Theory of Intelligence,” 2, 12.
10 Reiter, “Preventive Attacks Against Nuclear Programs and the ‘Success’ at Osiraq.”
12 On the concept of statecraft as “influence attempts” drawn from the economic domain, see Baldwin, *Economic Statecraft*, 30.
Secrecy used in the service of influence attempts during war are among the most well known forms of secrecy in world politics. Military strategists since Sun Tzu have urged leaders to use concealment and surprise for maximum military performance. In liberal democracy, secrecy for this purpose has been an oft-cited exception to the rule of public accountability. In these scenarios, secrecy keeps an enemy in the dark about military plans avoiding counter-measures and helping to create maximum battlefield advantage. Not surprisingly, this well-known use of secrecy has received perhaps the most attention from IR scholars.

Secrecy used for other kinds of influence attempts, however, is less well known and much less frequently analyzed. As noted, secrecy can conceal aid to political parties or opposition factions within other states. Secrecy may also facilitate an assassination attempt or cover up a state’s role in organizing a coup. Secrecy can also conceal isolated uses of military force during peacetime, as in the case of early covert American drone attacks.

13 Even a staunch opponent of secrecy during constitutional debates in the United States, Patrick Henry, cited the merit of an exception for military surprise. “Such transactions as relate to military operations or affairs of great consequence, the immediate promulgation of which might defeat the interests of the community, I would not wish to be published, till the end which required their secrecy should have been effected. But to cover with the veil of secrecy the common routine of business, is an abomination in the eyes of every intelligent man, and every friend to his country.” Quoted in Hoffman, Governmental Secrecy and the Founding Fathers, 35–6.

14 For example, Axelrod, “The Rational Timing of Surprise”. See also the review of secrecy theories in Chapters 1 and 3.

15 See discussion of the varieties of “covert action” in Anderson, “The Security Dilemma and Covert Action”; the absence of research on these other forms of secrecy is noted by Gleditsch in her review of civil war research, noting that “[s]tates often intervene in more indirect ways in disputes in other states, for example through covert support to one of the parties… Such indirect support seems at least as important as direct intervention in ongoing civil wars but has received little attention in existing work.” Gleditsch, “Transnational Dimensions of Civil War”; exceptions of studies that analyze secret influence attempts of various kinds include Downes and Lilley, “Overt Peace, Covert War?”; Sagan and Suri, “The Madman Nuclear Alert”; O’Rourke, “Why Do States Conduct Covert Regime Change?”. 
strikes in Pakistan. Each involves an influence attempt in which leaders, for some reason, desire to avoid public evidence and acknowledgement of their involvement.

Historical Context: Continuity and Change

Judgments regarding the history of secrecy uses in world politics are prone to one of two errors. On the one hand, scholars may too quickly assume continuity. Perhaps drawing on examples of jealously guarded secrets in the courts of kings or military surprise in ancient warfare, one is tempted to conclude leaders have used secrecy to do many things from time immemorial. Secrecy uses today, in this view, are merely the refinement of centuries-old practices. On the other hand, scholars focusing on specific countries or secrecy tactics can too quickly assume novelty. In the field of intelligence studies, for example, one scholar criticizes researchers of American clandestine intelligence for “assum[ing] their topics are new or unique and ignore the historical and historiographical context” despite the fact that “[f]ew techniques of intelligence have been newly minted since 1945.”

Careful analysis of historical secrecy practices allows us to push beyond both extremes to fairly appraise modern innovations and the deep historical continuities of different secrecy practices in international relations.

I review the historical continuity which links modern secrecy practices to the past as well as identifying three qualitative innovations.

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16 Ferris also sees both continuity and change as when he notes “the size and structure of intelligence services have changed in revolutionary ways since that time.” Ferris, “Coming in from the Cold War,” 99.
Continuity

Many of the most common applications of secrecy in modern statecraft have deep historical roots.

Diplomatic Communications

Leaders of city-states, religious empires, and secular sovereign states have long relied on concealment techniques to securely engage in internal and interstate communication.

While the number of concealed messages and methods of concealment have changed—hundreds of thousands of leaked secret diplomatic messages in “WikiLeaks” dramatically demonstrating quantitative increase and modern methods of concealment—the basic purpose links political actors across historical eras.

Scholars of diplomacy cite the innovations and conventions of the Italian Renaissance diplomacy in the 15th century as the “birthright of the modern system of diplomacy.”

Leading historians of Renaissance foreign relations note that the innovation of permanent embassies and ambassadors-in-residence created new demands for coded communications to leaders at home. In addition, a permanent presence made it easier for resident ambassadors to discuss matters with their hosts in quiet, private channels. As

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18 The basic routine for communicating intelligence from permanent ambassadors to the royal court in the Renaissance diplomatic style included secrecy of dispatches. Mattingly notes that “it had been standard procedure since the last quarter of the fifteenth century to put compromising dispatches in cipher.” Mattingly, Renaissance Diplomacy, 214.
examples, Venice regularly relied on secret diplomatic communications beginning in 1480 and secret negotiations between Florence and Venice were used to end the War of Ferrara in the early 1480s.\footnote{Mallett, “Italian Renaissance Diplomacy,” 65–6, 70; on the emergence of sovereign states under monarchy and how personalist “court-based” rule added to the pressure on ambassadors to communicate privately in diplomatic correspondence, see Hamilton and Langhorne, The Practice of Diplomacy, 65.}

The other influential period in early modern Europe was the French diplomatic conventions during the reign of Louis XIV. The French style “served as the model for the rest of Europe” and prominently featured the use of secrecy.\footnote{Colson, “The Ambassador Between Light and Shade,” 182.} One recent assessment of the most influential diplomatic theorists of the period found secrecy was among the most commonly mentioned tools for effective diplomacy.\footnote{Ibid., 183–5.} Colson notes that secrecy “constituted the routine paradigm of political activity and therefore of negotiation as a political instrument in the conduct of international affairs” which “protected the Prince’s private affairs from the eyes of third parties – including his very own people.”\footnote{Ibid., 185.} Two innovations helped. The French creation of a *cabinet noir*, or “black chamber,” to cipher and decipher diplomatic messages was eventually modeled in foreign ministries throughout Europe. In addition, the development of invisible ink and early cryptography (i.e. code-based communication) brought new methods of concealing message contents. In terms of secrecy’s use for concealing diplomatic correspondence and negotiations, the
period of Habsburg hegemony bridging the Italian Renaissance and the reign of Louis XIV was no exception.23

As some absolutist rulers began to surrender power to cabinets and parliaments in the 18th and 19th centuries, the use of secrecy in correspondence and negotiations evolved but was no less important.24 One evolution was the emergence of new forms of diplomacy including face-to-face interactions among sovereigns and public declarations, supplementing traditional “private” diplomatic communication among states.25 Despite this new layer of publicity, private diplomacy prior to public announcements was common and secrecy for correspondence between diplomats and their home offices continued. Many of the most famous diplomats of this era were known for their reliance on secrecy.26

Despite the outcry over secret agreements before World War I and Woodrow Wilson’s famous call for “open covenants, openly arrived at,” the use of secrecy for diplomatic correspondence and negotiations remained standard practice in the 20th century. Secrecy

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23 Carter, *The Secret Diplomacy of the Habsburgs, 1598–1625*; Philip II of Spain’s rule in the mid-16th century was similarly characterized by frequent secrecy in diplomatic communication. Normal procedure for messages about foreign policy for the royal heads of all three major powers at the time used ciphers and codes. Mattingly, *Renaissance Diplomacy*, 194–6.


25 For an analysis of the role of this public side of diplomacy in preventing and limiting war in the Concert of Europe system, see Mitzen, “Reading Habermas in Anarchy”; Mitzen, *Power in Concert: The 19th Century Origins of Global Governance*.

26 On Metternich’s heavy reliance on, and bargaining advantage from, ciphering and deciphering diplomatic correspondence during the negotiations in Vienna, see Hamilton and Langhorne, *The Practice of Diplomacy*, 127–8; on Castlereagh’s reliance on secrecy as the head British representative at the Congress of Vienna and top diplomat until 1822, see Temperley, “British Secret Diplomacy from Canning to Grey,” 3.
in communications between a home office and its diplomatic representatives has never been the target of calls for Wilson-style “open diplomacy.” For interstate communications, the open diplomacy movement led to expectations of additional public deliberations (i.e. in the forums of the League of Nations and later United Nations) and public elaboration of interstate agreements.\(^{27}\) The effect, then, was not replacement but addition of a public element of diplomacy.\(^ {28}\) As two leading diplomatic historians note, key reforms like the League of Nations ended up “supplementing rather than supplanting the work of professional diplomacy.”\(^ {29}\) Secrecy’s continual role alongside a public diplomacy was facilitated by very different lessons learned after World War II: calls for “open diplomacy” were virtually non-existent in the late 1940s and 1950s.\(^ {30}\) The Cold War and its aftermath have continued to feature encrypted communications within states and private diplomacy in everything from trade agreement to peace negotiations. Even the symbols of open multilateral diplomacy – global conventions often with non-governmental organizations participating – feature quiet parallel sideline negotiations.\(^ {31}\)

\(^{27}\) On the publicity innovations of the League forums, see Grigorescu, “The Accountability of Intergovernmental Organizations: New Developments or Cyclical Trends?” 24–5; on the privacy built into League and similar forums, however, see Carson and Thompson, “Opacity by Design: International Organizations and the Suppression of Information.”

\(^{28}\) The chief British advocate of openness after the war tempered his demands for publicity noting that he was not recommending “diplomatists should carry on their conversations in public squares, any more … [than] the novelist invites his readers to follow the unravelling of the plot while he is engaged upon it.” E.D. Moral quoted in Hamilton and Langhorne, The Practice of Diplomacy, 143.

\(^{29}\) Ibid., 175.

\(^{30}\) Ibid., 196.

\(^{31}\) See, for example, criticism of the “green room negotiation” phenomenon in world trade negotiations, in which a small group of powerful states negotiate key issues before opening up the process to others. Blackhurst and Hartridge, “Improve the Capacity of WTO Institutions to Fulfil Their Mandate”; Carson and Thompson, “Opacity by Design: International Organizations and the Suppression of Information,” 12–13.
One recent review of the evolution of diplomatic negotiations notes that “[c]orridor work, therefore, remains an essential element of bargaining.”

Espionage

Deep historical roots also exist in the use of secrecy for information acquisition. Despite technological evolution, the general practice of using secrecy to enable acquisition of information about foreign states has been a consistent component of statecraft. The use of secrecy to permit clandestine intelligence acquisition by human sources – i.e. spies – existed in all the major diplomatic systems since the Italian Renaissance. One of the first resident ambassadors in Milan in the 1440s, for example, relied on a secret spy network in his host country to gather extensive political intelligence. Reminiscent of Cold War “spy vs. spy” tales, embassies engaged in a cat-and-mouse game of ciphering and deciphering from the 15th through 17th centuries as part of the normal “embassy routine.” Thus, two primary methods of clandestine intelligence acquisition – communication intercepts, often referred to today as “signals intelligence” or “sigint,” and spies, human intelligence or “humint” – have roots at least as far back as Renaissance Italy.

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33 As Nickles notes in his study of changes in diplomacy brought about by telegraphy, “[a]ll forms of communication lend themselves in varying degrees to the practice of deception.” Nickles, Under the Wire, 29.
34 Mattingly, Renaissance Diplomacy, 65.
35 “All secretaries of state employed expert decipherers, and all knew that no cipher simple enough to be written rapidly and deciphered accurately could remain unbreakable when present in the bulk usual in long dispatches.” Ibid., 215.
The French model, dominant by the time of the negotiations of the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713, continued these practices and included the earliest steps toward a dedicated administrative apparatus for espionage. The use of secret methods to intercept, decipher, and analyze secret communications by foreign diplomats was given a boost with the creation of various cabinet noir, first in France and soon after in the other major European powers in the 17th century. These “black chambers” secretly unsealed, recorded, and decoded the contents of incoming and outgoing postal messages to gather information on intentions and plans of other leaders. In addition to these communication intercepts, spy networks were common as well. Like Italian-era espionage, however, spy networks were often redundant, strongly based on personal ties, and impermanent. The French system under Louis XIV, for example, included spy networks based out of the foreign ministry, war ministry, and marine ministry with little coordination and frequent rivalry. British espionage in the 17th and 18th centuries was similar, with “the absence, with the exception of the deciphering office, of any espionage institutions or establishment.” Successes were not impossible despite the ad hoc nature of these attempts. A recent review of British intercepts shows they successfully cracked the codes of over a dozen European states in the 1730s.

36 “[E]ach great European power would attempt to read the correspondence of its rivals by creating cabinets noirs.” Colson, “The Ambassador Between Light and Shade,” 190.
38 “[T]he French had not just one spy system but several” which created such confusion in the early 1700s that France was secretly conducting four separate and uncoordinated negotiations simultaneously with The Netherlands.” Rule, “Gathering Intelligence in the Age of Louis XIV,” 740.
39 Black, “British Intelligence and the Mid Eighteenth Century Crisis,” 223.
40 “[I]n the 1730s it was able to decipher the codes of most European states, including Portugal, Spain, Naples, Sardinia, France, the United Provinces, Saxony, the Palatinate, Bavaria, Austria, Prussia, Denmark, Sweden and Russia.” Ibid., 213.
The Napoleonic Wars of the early 19th century featured continued use of secrecy for information acquisition among all the major powers in Europe. As part of its campaign to defeat Napoleon, England created an extensive network of non-military spies in European capitals. As noted previously, Metternich used political intelligence clandestinely acquired through the Austrian Secret Cipher Chancellery and his own network of spies to obtain some of the best intelligence during negotiations surrounding the Congress of Vienna. In the second half of the 19th century, Tsarist Russia’s highly effective cabinet noir joined the French as the two most feared espionage offices among foreign diplomats. Later in the 19th century, the advent of telegraphy in the 1860s created new challenges and opportunities for clandestine communication intercepts.

During the period spanning the Franco-Prussian War of 1870 and World War I, most states converged on a permanent, integrated, bureaucratized system for espionage. The Franco-Prussian War’s aftermath led both France and Germany to build more permanent peacetime espionage capabilities. The British followed in 1909 in the wake of spy and

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41 “During the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, the British government had established a complex network of intelligence collectors on the European continent.” Davies, “Integration of Strategic and Operational Intelligence During the Peninsular War,” 202.
43 Andrew, “Codebreaking and Signals Intelligence,” 2.
44 Nickles, Under the Wire, 163–5.
45 On the impact of the Franco Prussian War on French creation of a secret service for communication and human espionage, see the sources reviewed in Cornick and Morris, The French Secret Services, 19; on the German post-war effort including the first schools for espionage, see Speier, “Treachery in War,” 260.
invasion scares in reaction to rising German power.46 Other states followed suit prior to or during World War I, so that “[b]y the First World War the armed services, police forces, and foreign ministries in most major and some minor states, acting largely on their own initiative, had developed their own intelligence department.”47

Today, intelligence departments are a regular feature of modern statehood worldwide. Recent Western news accounts about the Libyan and Syrian civil wars of 2011-2013 suggest even relative minor powers like Jordan, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar possess sophisticated espionage operations and bureaucracies.48 While important changes have taken place – the bureaucratization of intelligence gathering and new techniques of espionage described below – the use of secrecy to clandestinely acquire information shows substantial continuity from Italian Renaissance to modern statecraft.

**Covert influence attempts**

Lastly, beyond the use of secrecy for secure communications and clandestine information gathering, deep roots also exist for the use of secrecy in some types of influence attempts. There is a clear lineage for the use of secrecy for two kinds of influence attempts: military operations using surprise and foreign regime change efforts.

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46 British leaders were “especially concerned about the challenge of an aggressive, ambitious, imperial Germany” Jeffery, *The Secret History of MI6*, 3–4; on the role played by spy and war scares regarding Germany, see Boghardt, *Spies of the Kaiser*, 4–6.
47 Andrew, “Governments and Secret Services,” 170.
48 Chivers and Schmitt, “Arms Airlift to Syrian Rebels Expands, With C.I.A. Aid”; Dehghanpisheh, “Elite Iranian Unit’s Commander Says His Forces Are in Syria.”
Secrecy has long been used in military operations. Classic military strategists like Sun Tzu and Clausewitz and many others have long counseled leaders on the importance of generating battlefield surprise through deception.49 Secrecy used for surprise attacks in the Peloponnesian Wars of ancient Greece is described by Thucydides.50 Philip II’s attempt to destroy the English navy with the Spanish Armada in 1588 was thwarted in part due to poorly executed secrecy.51 Writing about the 20th century, a scholar of military surprise notes that “[o]f the major wars in Europe, Asia, and the Middle East that have reshaped the international balance of power over the past several decades, most began with sudden attacks.”52

Less well known – but also with historical roots – are attempts to covertly change the regime of neighbors and enemies. While “covert regime change” is commonly associated with Cold War intrigue, clandestine assassination attempts and secret foreign assistance to domestic political opposition groups have a long history.53 Secret assassination, for example, has roots in ancient Rome. One scholar’s analysis of late antiquity Rome notes that the public pomp and circumstance of diplomacy was paired with “[a]nother, clandestine, face of late Roman diplomacy…namely the abduction or assassination of problematic foreign rulers, a practice largely overlooked in modern

50 Roismann, *The General Demosthenes and His Use of Military Surprise*.
51 Jensen, “The Spanish Armada.”
53 On the modern incarnation, see O’Rourke, “Why Do States Conduct Covert Regime Change?”. 
scholarship.” \(^{54}\) While the normative legitimacy of foreign assassination has evolved over time, the use of secrecy to do so has been common for centuries. \(^{55}\)

In addition to assassination, states have sought to manipulate domestic politics in foreign states through concealed aid to opposition groups. During the monarchical-religious rivalries of the 18\(^{th}\) century, for example, English espionage captured clear evidence of covert foreign support for Jacobite opposition groups attempting to restore the House of Stuart. \(^{56}\) Another example is concealed aid programs to anti-colonial groups fighting against a rival. Secret aid to anti-imperial groups was sent from France to the American revolutionaries in the late 18\(^{th}\) century and from Great Britain to factions in occupied Prussia in the early 19\(^{th}\) century. \(^{57}\) Before and during World War I, Germany covertly aided Indian opposition groups seeking independence from the United Kingdom while

\(^{54}\) “During the second half of the fourth and the early fifth century, the imperial government had made a number of clandestine attempts to neutralize troublesome foreign rulers, many of them successful.” Lee, “Abduction and Assassination,” 4–5.

\(^{55}\) On the emergence of a norm against open assassination, see Thomas, “Norms and Security” Note that Thomas’s historical review does not clearly distinguish between covert and overt assassination. Thomas’s review does mention several periods in which assassination through clandestine means is recommended. See 107-111.

\(^{56}\) Black, “British Intelligence and the Mid Eighteenth Century Crisis,” 214–5; Black later describes that “British, French and Russian diplomats in Sweden, British, French, Austrian and Prussian diplomats in Russia, and British and French envoys at The Hague all played a very active role, subsidising politicians and seeking to provoke changes in government” (221).

\(^{57}\) On the French program, Herring describes “[t]he French government through what would now be called a covert operation provided limited, clandestine aid to the rebels. It set up a fictitious trading company…and loaned it funds to purchase military supplies from government warehouses to sell the Americans on credit.” Herring, From Colony to Superpower, 18; on British aid to Prussian factions seeking to overthrow the regime collaborating with Napoleon, Johnston notes that “[t]here can also be little doubt that the Foreign Office subsidized covert action against Napoleon.” Johnston, “British Espionage and Prussian Politics in the Age of Napoleon,” 238.
the British quietly helped organize Arab resistance to Ottoman rule in the Middle East. 58

A distinctly modern version of this – covert political aid to opposition parties in democratic systems – was one of the first successful secret influence attempts by the new American Central Intelligence Agency. Secret aid to anti-communist Italian parties in 1948 helped ensure a Western-friendly victory and helped demonstrate the viability of American covert operations. 59

To summarize, many uses of secrecy have deep historical roots. Continuity exists in the use of secrecy to conceal diplomatic communications, information gathering, regime change attempts, and surprise military operations. Alongside this continuity, however, have been important innovations in how secrecy is used. I now describe three important changes which distinguish its modern form.

Change

Despite the interesting degree of commonality in how states use secrecy across the longue duree, its modern form includes three unique features distinguishing it from previous eras. Techniques of communication concealment and espionage have been revolutionized by technological change. Second, secrecy for communication, espionage, and influence attempts has become bureaucratized. Third, states have expanded the kinds

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58 On German covert aid to India, see Fraser, “Germany and Indian Revolution, 1914-18”; on British covert aid in the Ottoman Middle East Satia, Spies in Arabia.

59 “The CIA financed campaign posters, ads, leaflets, media plants, and rallies. Results exceeded expectations – [Christian Democrat Alcide] de Gasperi obtained an overwhelming majority in parliament, gaining against both left and right.” Prados, Safe for Democracy, 40.
of influence attempts which secrecy is used to conceal. In particular, only since World War I have states developed new ways of covertly using force outside a state of mutually acknowledged warfare.

Change #1: Technological revolutions in communication and espionage

For centuries, the means of concealing messages and the techniques of clandestinely acquiring information were largely static. For communication concealment, hand-written or typed letters delivered by couriers or through cross-border postal hubs was the method of diplomatic communication. The use of ciphers, codes, and other techniques to conceal message contents by leaders of 15th century Italian city-states were largely in use, with greater sophistication, by leaders during the Napoleonic Wars in the early 19th century. Espionage focused on communication intercepts and deciphering, quietly conducted in the cabinet noir of various European powers, was similar.

These techniques were transformed by technological change beginning in the 19th century. Consider telegraphy. While much faster across borders, communication “over the wire,” for example, created new vulnerabilities. Telegrams passed through wires which were laid by governments. Wires could be tapped and messages heard (though, if effectively encrypted, perhaps not understood) with much greater ease than physically interdicting a letter carrier and carefully extracting a letter’s sealed contents. Development of radio, telephony, the internet, and cellular telephones has created additional domains where new techniques of concealment must be developed while, at
the same time, new opportunities for espionage are created. Beyond communications, technological change has also opened new pathways for clandestine observation in foreign countries. Human spying has been supplemented with new “technical means” of espionage including aerial reconnaissance (i.e. territory overflights, satellite observation), seismic monitoring, nuclear radiation detection, and cyber hacking. These expand the available data sources for clandestine observation and often can make visible what was previously invisible. Properly integrated and triangulated, they allow modern intelligence bureaucracies to generate much more complete images of foreign government capabilities and plans than was possible in previous centuries.

To be clear, technological innovations have not changed the basic character of secrecy’s purpose. A common lineage of private communication and clandestine information acquisition can be traced from today’s encrypted emails and satellite images to the ciphers and spies of the Italian Renaissance. Yet as one historical review notes, despite continuity in intelligence with previous eras, “the size and structure of intelligence services have changed in revolutionary ways.”

Change #2: Bureaucratization of secrecy

The second important change is therefore the bureaucratization of secrecy. This is most notable in the area of espionage. Ad hoc intelligence gathering was the dominant tendency prior to the 19th century. Leaders of city-states and monarchs developed highly

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60 Ferris, “Coming in from the Cold War,” 99.
personalist and impermanent spy networks. Changes in leadership or the end of a crisis or war often led to the dissolution of networks; reporting by spies was also done either in person or through a very small chain of reporting (i.e. informant message passed to foreign secretary who reports to the sovereign). Even the *cabinet noir*, offices dedicated to intercepting foreign communications and in existence as early as the 17th century, was run by a very small number of staff. The personalist rule of monarchs contributed to the absence of bureaucratization. Highly influential French diplomatists of the reign of Louis XIV, for example, described foreign policy information as the private property of the “prince” and cautioned their colleagues to shrink the number of staff capable of handling such property to as few as two: one interpreter and one scribe/secretary.  

While bureaucracy had already arrived elsewhere in the British state, its espionage infrastructure was episodic and inconsistent as late as the 1850s. The contrast between British intelligence at the outset of the Crimean War and British intelligence today dramatically illustrates the uniquely modern character of bureaucratized espionage. On the brink of war with Russia in 1854, the head of the British expeditionary force found almost no existing intelligence and no clandestine espionage capability on the Crimean Peninsula and Russian forces in the region. Before standing up an improvised secret intelligence department, the commander was forced to rely on travelogues, amateur volunteers, and conjecture to plan his maneuvers. Responsibility for gathering intelligence in this area before the war was not the responsibility of a desk office or

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division of British MI-6, as it is today. With no centralized intelligence unit in the War Office in London, the responsibility, along with many other duties, lay with a single British representative to the Turkish Army. He, in turn, relied solely on reports from the Turkish high command. Displeasure with this ad hoc intelligence played an important role in the creation of the earliest British intelligence section, specifically “the sudden discovery of a serious shortage of maps at the beginning of the Crimean War.”

Thus, the first dedicated national bureaus for espionage and intelligence analysis appeared in the mid- and late-19th century. The Austrian and French were early innovators, creating bureaus in the 1860s and 1870s. The first dedicated espionage service in the United Kingdom did not appear until 1909. A Japanese service was established in the 1930s while a permanent American capability did not appear until the creation of the Central Intelligence Agency in 1947. Slowly but steadily since the 1860s, the intelligence capabilities of states evolved from personalist spy networks and small offices of quiet letter opening to sophisticated and often sprawling administrative arms of the state “by a process of creeping bureaucratic growth.”

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62 Harris, *British Military Intelligence in the Crimean War 1854-1856*.  
63 Andrew, “Governments and Secret Services,” 169.  
64 Kahn, “Intelligence Studies on the Continent,” 259–262.  
65 This official history notes further that the new service “did not emerge from a complete intelligence vacuum. For centuries, British governments had covertly gathered information on an ad hoc basis.” Jeffery, *The Secret History of MI6*, ix.  
67 Andrew, “Governments and Secret Services,” 169; on the bureaucratization of French espionage in the late 19th century, see Kahn, “Intelligence Studies on the Continent,” 259.
largely ad hoc now takes place in permanent, professionalized, foreign-focused, integrated bureaucracies.

*Change #3: The rise of covert uses of force*

The third and final change has been the expansion in the kinds of influence attempts states use secrecy to conceal. Influence attempts go beyond communication and information gathering; as already noted, some have clear historical precedents. Modern covert regime change operations, for example, have roots in clandestine assassination attempts of Italian city-states and cross-border monarchical meddling of the 17th century. Concealment of military operations during war has an even more obvious historical legacy; military surprise during battle using secrecy may be as old as organized warfare itself.

Today, states use secrecy to conceal other kinds of influence attempts. One particular kind of influence attempt – the use of deadly force in all scenarios besides mutually recognized war – is a particularly significant innovation. Consider the following examples.

- In the late 1910s and 1920, American and British officials concealed and misrepresented the extent of military liaison with anti-Bolshevik Whites, including combat by their expeditionary units, fighting in the Russian Civil War.
- In the 1930s, multiple states concealed the participation of military personnel and whole military units in the Spanish Civil War. The official position of these states
was “non-intervention” despite German, Italian, and Soviet personnel directly participating in combat operations. The Soviet Union also quietly provided a “volunteer” group of fighter planes, bombers, and pilots to the Kuomintang fighting the occupying Japanese.

- In the 1940s, the United States concealed their provision of port protection and airlifting to the Kuomintang early in the Chinese Civil War.
- In the 1950s, the Soviet Union concealed participation of Russian pilots in the air defense of North Korea during the Korean War; the United States detected but did not publicize the Soviet presence.
- In the 1950s, the United States concealed the provision of military logistical support, including both equipment and pilots, in the failed French defense of Dien Bien Phu.
- In the 1960s, the Chinese and Soviet governments concealed the provision of military advisors to North Vietnam as well as their covert roles as military engineers and in air defense.
- Allegations of similar events in the 1970s and 1980s include Soviet covert combat participation in two wars in the Middle East, American covert bombing of Laos and Cambodia during the Vietnam War, and Cuban and South African participation in the Angola civil war.

To this list can be added contemporary examples, though a reliance on open sources requires some caution. Israel is alleged to have quietly bombed a Syrian nuclear facility
in 2007. As noted above, the United States and Israel are alleged to have designed a covert cyber attack on the Iranian uranium enrichment program in 2009/2010. Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) was alleged to have covertly resourced, planned, and directed ostensible “guerillas” to seize territory in Kashmir, leading to the Kargil War in 1999. American covert drone strikes outside zones of active military combat since 2001 in Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia were concealed and denied for the better part of a decade; the government only recently acknowledged the existence of some strikes. Possible covert uses of force against Georgia prior to the Russia-Georgia War in 2008 are hinted at in leaked American diplomatic cables. The “Quds Force” is suspected to be a covert wing of Iran’s Revolutionary Guard that engages in government-authorized but covert terrorist attacks. Reflecting the growing use of clandestine actions in the Defense Department, American covert raids against terror-related militia in East Africa were reported in 2006 though not confirmed by official sources.

The unifying feature of both historical and more recent cases is use of coercive force by a state outside mutually recognized war. This activity takes several forms. In one scenario, a state that is not a declared war participant uses military force either within an ongoing conflict (i.e. Germany in Spain, 1930s) or in territory considered at peace (i.e. American drone strikes in Pakistan, 2000s). Alternatively, a state that is a declared

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68 Makovsky, “The Silent Strike.”
69 Tellis, Fair, and Medby, Limited Conflicts Under the Nuclear Umbrella.
70 Mazzetti, Worth, and Shane, “Secret Assault on Terrorism Widens on Two Continents.”
71 Lake, “Russia Waged Covert War on Georgia Starting in ’04.”
72 Vick, “Spy Fail.”
military participant may be using military force outside the recognized combat zone. American bombing of Laos and Cambodia during the Vietnam War illustrates this phenomenon, as do covert sabotage and harassment operations by Soviet leaders against Pakistan (Afghanistan occupation, 1980s) and American leaders against the Chinese mainland (Korean War, 1950s). Figure 1 shows where leaders may consider using force covertly.

![Diagram showing the use of force within and outside recognized combat areas for both recognized combatants and non-participants.]

**Where is force used?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recognized combatant</th>
<th>Within recognized combat area</th>
<th>Outside recognized combat area</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overt uses of force</td>
<td>Covert use of force (US bombing Laos during Vietnam War)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Covert use of force (Soviet pilots in North Korea)</td>
<td>Covert use of force (US drone strikes in Yemen)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1. Mapping a new state practice: covert uses of force

The novelty of covert uses of force practice lies not in secret uses of military force per se but *where* force is used and *by whom*. The age-old use of secrecy during war uses secrecy *operationally*, i.e. to conceal how military assets are being used. The state’s status as a war participant is well-known and force is used in a recognized combat zone.
In contrast, the modern technique uses secrecy to conceal the very identity of the sponsor and where force is being used. Deceiving outside audiences about who is using force is the goal; operational deception about how military assets are being used may also be involved but is not the core issue. In the language of American law, these covert operations are “so planned and executed that any US Government responsibility for them is not evident to unauthorized persons and that if uncovered the US Government can plausibly disclaim any responsibility for them.”

As these cases show, a wide range of states have developed the capability to use military force secretly. This application of secrecy is a distinctly modern phenomenon. Prior to the 20th century, there is little evidence city-states, monarchies, and other heads of state engaged in this kind of secrecy. The universal convention was for the sovereign to use force with visible official identification (since the 1600s, national uniforms) and an official acknowledgement of a state of war (i.e. a declaration of war). Isolated incidents of unauthorized violence took place from time to time, of course. Yet centrally administered and intentionally concealed uses of force were not a common feature; my own research has found no clear example prior to the 20th century.

75 On uniforms, see Parker, The Military Revolution, 71, 153; on war declarations, see Fazal, “Why States No Longer Declare War.”
76 The one exception is perhaps clandestine assassination plots but I consider these qualitatively different then the uses of force described above given that such operations targeted specific individuals and have often been treated in international law as distinct from war. Targeted covert drone strikes, however, do seem to be a modern form of assassination.
The closest cousins are cases in which states disingenuously used mercenaries and privateers. Though relatively rare today, mercenaries – soldiers fighting for pay in foreign armies – was a common practice prior to the 19th century.77 Importantly, a sovereign’s citizens fighting as mercenaries for another army was not seen as an act of war; a state’s neutral, noninvolved status was not implicated.78 One anecdote from early modern Europe shows sovereign politics did influence mercenary availability. Mattingly describes a close alliance between the Swiss cantons and France in the 1520s which included allowing Swiss soldiers to be hired as mercenaries in the French army. After France waged war against Italian city-states, the Swiss maintained official neutrality. Swiss mercenaries were under the command of French generals yet allowing their citizens to fight, given large political dimension with the French relationship, was seen suspiciously by some in Italy.79 Similarly, privateers were in some senses mercenaries at sea. During war, monarchs could authorize merchant ships to seize cargo aboard other ships to aid in shutting down an enemy’s sea-based trade. It was therefore a kind of non-state violence authorized by sovereign governments.80 Privateers were authorized by the monarch to keep profits but were never considered part of a royal navy nor put under the operational control of state officials. Yet some monarchs used privateers during peacetime to wage what was, in effect, low-level undeclared naval warfare. Harassment of Spain by English and French privateers in the New World, with the blessing of their

77 On the changing use of mercenaries over time, see Avant, “From Mercenary to Citizen Armies.”
79 Mattingly notes that “no one cared to contradict” neutrality claims because “wars with the Swiss did not pay.” Mattingly, Renaissance Diplomacy, 150.
80 Thomson, Mercenaries, Pirates, and Sovereigns, 22–3.
sovereigns, was common without a declared war.\textsuperscript{81} States participating in the Paris Declaration of 1856 agreed to cease commissioning privateers, effectively abolishing the practice.\textsuperscript{82}

Despite some similarity, such profit-tinged, pseudo-warfare does not seem to constitute the same kind of covert uses of force. Even the disingenuous political motives of some uses of mercenaries and privateering were qualitatively different. Privateers seized cargo rather than destroying shipping.\textsuperscript{83} The actions of both mercenaries and privateers were distant, uncoordinated and never under political control. Participation was voluntary rather than conscripted or commanded. Financial incentives rather than political goals motivated participants.

As the examples listed earlier show, the emergence of centrally administered covert uses of force coincides with the end of World War I. As one historian of American covert intervention in the Russian Civil War by Wilson observes, “the era of total war and unprecedented public involvement in foreign relations brought not only the withering of the old aristocratic statecraft but also the seedtime for modern methods of covert action.”\textsuperscript{84} Since then, diverse states varying in regime characteristics, power levels, neighborhoods, and other features have developed the ability to clandestinely use force that vary. Such a capability is no small feat; after all, secretly signing a treaty requires

\textsuperscript{81} Ibid., 23–5, 75.
\textsuperscript{82} Ibid., 71, 76.
\textsuperscript{83} Ibid., 22.
\textsuperscript{84} Foglesong, \textit{America’s Secret War Against Bolshevism}, 3.
vastly less effort than secretly using force. The emergence of a suite of covert methods is a modern innovation in how force is used, occupying a middle space between inaction and traditional overt acts of war.

I turn now to describing the key historical factors which prompted these changes in how states use secrecy. Two of the changes -- new espionage techniques and bureaucratization -- have relatively straightforward explanations. After quickly reviewing these, I focus on why states developed covert ways of using force and why that development occurred when it did.

Why Change?

The factors leading to the first two changes, proliferation of espionage techniques and bureaucratization, are relatively straightforward. As previously described, new techniques of espionage have created qualitative changes in how states can clandestinely gather information on one another. These are quite obviously a function of new technology, specifically technological changes beginning in the mid-19th century. Two areas of technological innovation led to substantial innovations in how secrecy was used. New media for long-distance communication, such as telegraphy, created new challenges for concealing messages and demanded new techniques for their interception. In addition, new methods of long-distance observation, such as satellite surveillance, created new information sources beyond human (i.e. spies) and communication intercepts. These new observation technologies created new opportunities for clandestine information
gathering but also prompted counter-responses: for example, placing entire nuclear facilities underground to avoid aerial observation. Technology plays the main role as agent of change in this area.

Emergence of permanent and professionalized intelligence bureaucracies can be traced to two important factors. A necessary condition was the development of bureaucracy in other government functions. The bureaucratization of secrecy was a manifestation of the larger process of state formation. The bureaucratization of different government functions was progressive rather than simultaneous: financial bureaucratization (i.e. the “tax state”) in England began in the 13th and accelerated in the 16th century; a permanent ministry for foreign relations was not established until the 1790s; an intelligence bureaucracy not until the end of the 19th century. The timing of bureaucratization in specific states seems to be related to geopolitical threat. The “early adopters” of foreign-directed espionage bureaucracies, for example, were France and the newly unified Germany in the 1870s and 1880s. In contrast, England did not create a permanent peacetime intelligence bureaucracy until the Anglo-German rivalry in the 1900s threatened to draw it into continental hostilities.

The historical factors leading to the third change, the rise of covert methods of using of force, were more complex. I see a role for ideational, technological, and domestic

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institutional changes in triggering great powers, and eventually even minor regional powers, to experiment with ways of using force clandestinely. Interestingly, these processes feature somewhat counter-intuitive relationships between technology, norms, and secrecy. I return to these themes when reflecting on the future of secrecy in world politics in the final chapter.

Ideational changes in the international system around World War I seen to be one reason states developed new ways of using force. New ideas about the appropriateness and legality of using force, as well as who deserved the protections of sovereignty, were most important. To illustrate the basic idea, consider an analogy: black market economies. Black markets – zones in which economic actors exchange goods that are prohibited in a clandestine or undetectable manner – develop when formal or informal prohibitions of certain economic activity exist. Without powerful ideas or laws that deem some kind of economic exchange inappropriate (i.e. narcotics), actors will exchange them openly rather than in the black market. New government prohibitions, expressing a shared belief among at least some actors about inappropriate economic exchange, lead a subset of the regulated population to shift their exchanges to less visible spaces. Thus, new ideas enshrined in formal or informal regulation can lead some actors to shift to new practices in less visible spaces.

New ideas, often expressed in international law innovations, created a black market in uses of force in world politics. The rise of covert methods of using force were, in many
ways, adaptations to new normative regulations on war that threatened to prohibit practices that had previously been considered normal and legitimate. Actors being regulated by these new ideas did not simply choose between “compliance” and “non-compliance.” Many reacted to new normative-legal regulation by developing new forms of behavior that circumvented regulation by operating in a kind of “black market.”86 One study of the decline of declarations of war argues, for example, that “just as increasingly binding trade rules may lead states to opt out of, or take detours around, trade agreements, greater legalization in the realm of jus in bello creates incentives for states to try to exempt themselves from the laws of war.”87

The new ideas that helped produced these adaptations after World War I were two-fold. The first cluster of ideas was about the use of force. The use of force other than for self-defense – often referred to as “aggression” – was normatively and institutionally condemned in the global architecture created after World War I. “Aggression” was a novel legal concept: prior to the condemnation of Germany and aggressive war, international law had only attempted to regulated activity within war rather than judging the justness of the war itself.88 The United Nations, which condemned the invasion of

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86 Israel’s development of a middle category between non-nuclear and nuclear power – the ambiguous and unacknowledged nuclear state – was a reaction to new norms and institutions in the late 1960s prohibiting nuclear proliferation. For a discussion of this innovation and its impact on the larger norm of non-proliferation, see Carson, “The Publicity Dilemma and Norm Emergence: The Case of Israeli Nuclear Opacity.”


88 On the novelty of a prohibition on use of force as “aggression,” and the importance of WWI and Germany for this concept’s articulation, see Schmitt, The Nomos of the Earth in the International Law of Jus Publicum Europaeum, 259–280.
South Korea by North Korea as “aggression” in 1950, picked up where the League of Nations had left off in prohibiting aggressive use of force.\textsuperscript{89} Though aggressive uses of military force were ignored as much as punished, as when the League tolerated Italy’s invasion of Ethiopia in the 1930s, any leader considering “aggression” confronted a new cultural-legal environment. A second cluster of ideas were about which areas of the world deserved the status of full sovereignty. The post-World War I order christened universalism. Whereas international law had long treated European great powers differently than other states, Wilsonian calls for “self-determination” carried significant appeal and were enshrined in the new rules of the game.\textsuperscript{90} Such calls were more than rhetoric as shown by the “mandates” system. While past postwar orders redistributed territory among the victors to achieve a “balance,” the orders after both World Wars I and II held the colonial territory of defeated states as “mandate” or “trustee” territory with eventual independence.

Combined, the ideational and legal environment in which states operated after World War I was profoundly transformed. Like a drug cartel facing new prohibitions on their trade, states considering the open and acknowledged use of military force in what would come to be called the “Third World” faced a qualitatively different set of ideas, rules, and institutions. Using force before these changes was, in essence, an unregulated market. New ideas and institutions after World War I created new incentives – both material and

\textsuperscript{89} For more on this case, see Chapter 4.
\textsuperscript{90} The League reflected a transition to universalism and away from “European vs. non-European” distinctions in international law; see Schmitt, \textit{The Nomos of the Earth in the International Law of Jus Publicum Europaeum}, 227–258.
moral – for states to obfuscate their role in potentially “aggressive” acts of war. Just as in black markets, some actors responded with innovation and circumvention. One kind of innovation was to find ways to use military force to shape local military outcomes without detection and with plausible deniability.

In addition to ideas, technological changes also influenced why new covert methods of using force were developed around World War I. Technological change had two effects: the destructiveness of modern industrial war created a new sense of escalation’s danger while new military technology created new opportunities for clandestinely using force. The former created an additional motive for selectivity in overt uses of force; the latter provided new means for making uses of force covert.

On the one hand, the Great War’s terrible destructiveness dealt a serious blow to prior eras of tight alliances and declared wars. The infamous trench warfare in northern France came to symbolize how the industrial revolution had made war an order of magnitude more deadly. An entire generation of political leaders was socialized with a new view of the horrors of war. Technological change rendered symbols of warfare from previous eras – famous courage cavalry charges and the like – into anachronism. Covert ways of using force held a special appeal to avoid the mass mobilization, alliance invocations, and declared wars of August 1914.
On the other hand, the Great War’s final battles showcased new military technologies that made the covert use of force in future theaters much more feasible. The feasibility of using force covertly prior to 1914 was limited due to the dominance of ground combat. Concealing who is participating in ground combat is not easy. Because ground combat involves face-to-face contact between opposing armies and often lacks barriers to reporters and civilians accessing the area of battle, the presence of a state’s personnel in battle is exceedingly difficult to conceal over time.91 World War I heralded the advent of important alternatives: mechanized ground combat (i.e. tanks), air combat, and submarine warfare. Concealing the origins of both equipment and crews of submarines, aircraft, and tanks is qualitatively easier than ground troops. Equipment can be relabeled; operators are often physically impossible to see; capture by the enemy is much less common. Not surprisingly, early adopters of covert methods utilized carefully concealed naval, aerial, and mechanized means. This makes clear an important technological lesson regarding secrecy: while the traditional narrative is that technological change threatens secrecy by creating more ways to expose covert activity, technological change can also create improved opportunities for secretly using force. As I discuss in the conclusion chapter, technological change today is creating new ways for states to use force without attribution in unmanned aerial vehicles (i.e. drones) and cyber warfare.

91 The frequent shifting of front lines and regular capture of prisoners of war on both sides also makes effectively concealing a country’s infantry role very hard to sustain over time.
Domestic institutional changes accelerated by World War I were a final impetus for states to develop ways to use force covertly. The victory of the democratic allies over the more autocratic Central Powers in World War I led to the expansion of the franchise and deepening of democratic control in the established democracies. Somewhat paradoxically, the rise of democracy became a powerful force for retreating to secret spaces despite the incompatibility of such practices with genuine political accountability.

The injection of popular opinion and generalist principles of conduct (vs. power politics) into international relations – quickly critiqued by Realist scholars like E.H. Carr – created new reasons for democratic and non-democratic leaders alike to experiment with covert methods of using force. For autocratic leaders, more and more states – both possible adversaries and potential allies – were democratic and their leaders potentially constrained by shared power and domestic political sentiment. In such an environment, courting democratic allies and avoiding provoking potential democratic adversaries made concealed and/or plausibly deniable uses of force potentially attractive. For democratic leaders, secret methods of using force were attractive for additional reasons. Using force openly risked contradicting principles which many believed public sentiment favored. Using force quietly, in contrast, lowered the risk of a perceived contradiction. Wilson’s covert intervention in the Russian Civil War is a dramatic demonstration: the most vocal advocate for openness in international affairs was, at the same time, using an embryonic method of covert intervention. As one historian describes, “[c]onstrained by a declared commitment to the principle of self-determination and hemmed by idealistic and later
isolationist popular sentiments, Wilson and his advisors pursued methods of assisting anti-Bolshevik forces that evaded public scrutiny and avoided the need for congressional appropriations. Secrecy’s appeal also grew for autocratic and democratic leaders alike in this new environment. Leaders atop democratic structures were vulnerable to hawkish domestic episodes; swings in public opinion in favor of war were perceived to have impacted decision-making of the British in the Crimean War and the Americans in the Spanish-American War. Even autocratic leaders were dealing with potential allies or adversaries whose ability to manage war decisions and war escalation pressure was degraded from the days of monarchical control.

Why did new covert methods of using force develop, and why did they develop around World War I? These innovations reflected changes in ideas, technology, and domestic institutions. The combined effect was an international environment with more heavy normative regulation, with wars more destructive, with combat spaces more complex, and with leaders more vulnerable to domestic constraints.

Conclusion

This chapter provides historical context to the larger study of secrecy practices in international politics. I identify three basic domains in which states use secrecy: to conceal diplomatic communications, to conceal information gathering exercises, and to conceal “influence attempts” against other actors. Within these categories, there are

92 Foglesong, America’s Secret War Against Bolshevism, 5.
many historical roots connecting contemporary world politics and the distant past. Ciphers, cabinet noir, and ancient surprise tactics all demonstrate that states have engaged in deception and secrecy for centuries in ways which are largely unchanged. Yet three important innovations distinguish modern secrecy beyond these continuities: new technological methods of engaging in espionage, bureaucratization of secrecy, and the rise of covert methods of using force.

This review helps motivate the larger project. In the analysis that follows, I focus on one of the three changes I identify in this chapter: covert military interventions, including covert uses of military force. I build a theoretical argument that shows how leaders get involved in local conflicts secretly in order to manage the perceptions of outside actors to reduce the likelihood of a cycle of conflict escalation. This chapter describes the uniqueness and timing of the phenomenon under study. It also begins to sketch some important scope conditions of the theory. I return to these themes in the conclusion. In the meantime, the three changes I identify in this chapter that led states to develop new covert ways of using force – ideational, technological, and domestic political – help frame the escalation-focused theory I develop in the next chapter.
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Chapter 3: Theory

International politics can be a very public drama or a very private affair. Treaties can be the basis of dramatic public relations campaigns or jealously guarded state secrets. Trade negotiations which can be the site of widely reported political posturing and social movement activism or discreetly sequestered in remote venues. Similarly, the use of military force can be an explosively visible display producing “shock and awe” or a carefully concealed special operations raid into an allied state’s territory. In short, there is a considerable amount of variation in the publicity or privacy of state policy in a range of important IR outcomes.

Despite this variation, International Relations (IR) scholars know far more about the public than the private lives of states. This is true both theoretically and empirically. Many of the most influential theories in the discipline prominently feature logics for publicity in international affairs. In the rationalist tradition, models of coercive bargaining and commitment problems, including costly signaling and audience cost theory, often cite publicity as a critical way to credibly demonstrate resolve or create binding commitments. Constructivist theories of deliberation, representational power,
and the importance of “naming and shaming” for norms provide additional rationales for publicity.

This relative emphasis on public forms of state behavior creates a kind of “publicity bias.” Even when scholars are not theorizing publicity per se, an empirical form of the publicity bias can influence judgments. Publicly known and acknowledged events and actions are simply easier to study, leading many scholars to overlook or define away more ambiguous covert events. This influences the selection of “observations” and “cases” for both qualitative and quantitative scholarship. One representative qualitative study of military interventions, for example, mentions a covert form but elects to “limit the universe of cases to overt military interventions and exclude covert operations” by defining her unit of analysis as any “overt, short-term deployment of at least one thousand combat-ready ground troops across international boundaries.”¹ Similarly, many of the most widely used quantitative datasets in the discipline employ coding rules which exclude anything other than public and officially acknowledged actions. The oft-cited Militarized Interstate Dispute dataset, for example, defines a militarized incident as “an overt action taken by the official military forces or government representatives of a state.”² A check of this dataset’s coding of now-known covert militarized activity reveals important bias: entire combat units and events are either misleading coded or entirely

¹ Saunders, Leaders at War, 11.
² The definition continues noting “[w]hen regular forces are disguised as non-regular forces, operate with or command non-regular forces, or engage in covert operations, their actions are excluded unless and until further militarized incidents involving official forces take place, or when the targeted state responds—militarily or diplomatically—to the act in question.” Jones, Bremer, and Singer, “Militarized Interstate Disputes, 1816–1992,” 169–170.
ignored. The empirical form of the publicity bias has resulted in many theories of coercive threats, trade agreements, and other state activity developed without taking the “private” forms of their unit of analysis into account.

Why do states use secrecy to conduct diplomacy or conceal policy actions? Why abstain from publicity? Why might other states react to secret activity by themselves covering it up and ignoring it? What is going on in the substratum of state interactions which take place below the publicly visible, “stage-managed” surface of world politics?

This chapter presents a theoretical framework for understanding what secrecy does and why states use it, both individually and collectively. I first define the concept of secrecy, review the varieties of secrecy I introduced in Chapter 2, and assess the state of existing International Relations scholarship on the issue. The exposition of my own theory then proceeds in two steps. I describe an alternative theoretical approach emphasizing how states use secrecy as part of their effort to shape the wider perception of themselves and specific events. I refer to this as the “impression management approach.” I then tailor this theoretical approach to the specific empirical domain of outside military interventions, showing how “intervening” and “witnessing” states may use secrecy to

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For example, the Soviet air combat role in the Korean War is not coded (Soviets are not a participant) and the actions of a 50,000-strong Italian infantry deployment in the Spanish Civil War are coded as “raids.” The problem is compounded when the underlying data is not updated but the historical record is increasingly filled out. For example, while the modern documentary record of the Vietnam War now confirms an active but unacknowledged combat role by Chinese artillery units from 1965-1968, the only Chinese role noted in the MID dataset is a public threat to intervene.
manipulate how local conflicts are perceived to avoid crises, keep stakes low, and avoid hard-to-control escalation of hostilities.

Secrecy: Conceptual Analysis

An important first step in improving the study of secrecy in world politics is a careful definition of the central concept and specification of its relation to other important concepts in the field of International Relations. My definition builds on one from the legal field. Kim Lane Scheppele’s study of legal secrets defines a secret as “a piece of information that is intentionally withheld by one or more social actor(s) from one or more other social actor(s).” In the context of world politics, the primary though not exclusive practitioners of secrecy are states. Thus, I define secrecy in state-centric terms as “the intentional concealment of information regarding decisions, communications, or foreign policy actions by a state or states.” This definition highlights two important components of the concept: intentionality and strategic foresight. Secrecy is the intentional generation of ignorance and/or uncertainty in other actors through practices which limit access to information. Maintaining secrecy requires effort; secrets are not accidental. In addition and related to intentionality, the definition suggests the use of secrecy in political or social contexts is goal-directed. Some subjectively perceived rationale must motivate

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a person or organization to exert the effort required to manipulate what is observable using knowledge “as a social resource in the achievement of particular goals.”

Another important characteristic of secrecy noted in the definition is the importance of identifying the target or targets of secrecy. Depending on how different audiences are linked, secrecy may allow its user to selectively exclude some audiences while revealing to others. To be clear, selectivity can be limited. Sometimes exposure to one audience inherently exposes the act or decision to other audiences: for example, parading a new missile before a domestic public will be observable to foreign governments including adversaries. Selectivity can work in other scenarios. In world politics, leaders routinely expose decisions and actions to some states (say, allies) but not others (say, adversaries); they may also exclude foreign and domestic publics. The roster of potential “targets” for secrecy in world politics includes all or some subset of states (allies, adversaries, third parties, members, non-members, etc.), all or some subset of non-state actors (transnational non-governmental organizations, international organizations, the foreign press) and all or some subset of a domestic polity (rival political institutions, the public, specific interest groups).

Several additional conceptual points regarding a state-specific conceptualization of secrecy in the context of international politics are important to highlight.

\footnote{Ibid., 14; on the organizational effort required for large organizations to create and maintain secrets, see Geser, “Towards an Interaction Theory of Organizational Actors.”}
As noted in Chapter 2, states use secrecy in three main forms. States may use secrecy to exclude one more audiences from observing their communications (i.e. messages between states and within the state), information gathering on other states (i.e. various espionage techniques), and policy actions intended to manipulate other states (i.e. covert influence attempts or “covert action”).

In addition, secrecy attempts vary in their practical effectiveness. Disclosures – whether unauthorized or accidental – often compromises state attempts to conceal communications, information gathering, and policy actions. Allies or other knowledgeable states, for example, may disclose details of a new policy decision. Disgruntled members of a leader’s cabinet or the state bureaucracy may intentionally leak information about programs with which they disagree. Classified reports may be mistakenly posted on websites and diligent media reporting may discover evidence of spy rings.

Taking the practical side of secrecy seriously requires moving beyond a secret/public dichotomy. Secrecy in practice and over time is rarely “black” and “white.” Disclosures vary in their effects: some only provide the basis for suspicion about the existence of a decision to some select audience; others provide certain proof of a secret communication to all relevant audiences. Some expose the simple existence of a policy action but leave key details “in the dark.” Significant ambiguity about some or all of a particular
communication or policy action can remain for years even after isolated disclosures puncture the veil of secrecy.\(^6\) Thus, a sizeable “grey area” exists between perfectly concealed and perfectly known state activity. This grey area has been largely overlooked in IR scholarship yet seems to have potentially important social and political consequences. Hints of the potential utility in studying cases of “open secrecy” – facts suspected but not known with certainty or acknowledged publicly – come from everyday life. The terminal illness of a loved one may be a carefully concealed fact but one which becomes increasingly suspected over time. Only after impending death is known with certainty and acknowledged among hospital staff and family do routines change and new roles emerge as they adopt a kind of “dying ritual.”\(^7\) Suspected but unconfirmed sexual orientation may influence family and friend relationships as well.\(^8\) These examples also “open secrecy” can vary for different audiences: terminal illness or sexual orientation may be known certainly by some close intimates but only suspected by co-workers, for example. Figure 2 illustrates a spectrum conceptualization of secrecy which accommodates varieties of awareness that any given audience may hold.

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\(^6\) For example, memoirs and other leaks created suspicion that Hitler and Stalin had a secret protocol to divide up Eastern Europe in the Soviet-German defense pact before World War II but it was not disclosed until decades later. See Wertsch, “Blank Spots in Collective Memory.”

\(^7\) See the “suspicion awareness” stage and its transition to “open awareness” described below and originally in Glaser and Strauss, *Awareness of Dying*, 53–60, 80–89.

\(^8\) Ponse, “Secrecy in the Lesbian World.”
Figure 2. Dichotomy vs. spectrum: alternative conceptualizations of secrecy

How does secrecy relate to similar concepts in world politics? The two closest cognates to secrecy are lying and deception. Lying and secrecy are components of the larger category of deception, i.e. “words or conduct intended to induce false beliefs in others.” Secrecy involves the denial of information only; lying involves the positive act of offering a false proposition as well. Strictly speaking, secrecy only involves concealment. Yet the distinction is easily over-drawn. Lying usually must include secrecy: the liar must state a false proposition and conceal contrary evidence. Otherwise the audience will not be convinced of what is false. In addition, states pair secrecy with a public narrative that runs in the opposite direction. For example, a 19th century monarch did not merely conceal an alliance with another state. It also maintained a public posture.

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9 On secrecy versus lying in world politics, see also Mearsheimer, Why Leaders Lie, 16–7.
11 Lying is a “statement, verbal or non-verbal, of a proposition that the speaker believes to be false, but that the speaker intends the audience to take as a proposition the speaker believes to be true.” See ibid., 394–5.
as if an alliance did not exist which included words and behavior that constitute “lying.”

This overlap is illustrated in scholarship as well: propositions about deception, starting as far back as Jervis’s insights about signals and indices, include a central role for concealment.\(^{12}\)

Two other concepts are also related but with important differences. Secrecy plays a role in the formal theoretic concept of “private information.” Private information refers to a situation in which some aspect of the world that is is revealed to one actor prior to acting but not to others; this generates information asymmetry.\(^{13}\) The aspect of the world asymmetrically revealed might be an actor’s preferences (extent of territorial expansion) or resolve (willingness to persevere despite costs), qualities of the players (i.e. military capabilities) or the outside world (i.e. probability of an economic shock). While intentional concealment may produce such private information, it is by no means necessary.\(^{14}\) One reason is that models typically specify private information by assumption rather than explain it. Nothing in the definition or use of the concept of “private information” requires that this information be private due to intentional concealment. Private information may exist because something is unknowable (i.e.

\(^{12}\) Jervis, *The Logic of Images in International Relations*; for a more recent example in which Roosevelt’s effort to deceive a reluctant American public to join World War II includes using secrecy, see Schuessler, “The Deception Dividend.”

\(^{13}\) Drawn from the discussion of incomplete information games and private information in Myerson, *Game Theory*, 67.

\(^{14}\) For an analysis of the role of secrecy in private information games, such as a used car salesman concealing the true quality of a vehicle (Akerlof lemon problem), see Scheppele, *Legal Secrets*, chap. 2, 3.
likelihood of a future economic crash) or because the cost of accessing information varies between actors.\textsuperscript{15}

Secrecy is also related to uncertainty. The regular use of secrecy by state and non-state actors is one reason the anarchic international system contains significant uncertainty, which realists often view as a cause of war and neoliberal institutionalists view as a reason to build international institutions.\textsuperscript{16} Reducing uncertainty, including that which is produced by secrecy, has been often portrayed as a tonic for the ailments of conflict and non-cooperation. Yet secrecy is not the sole source of uncertainty in the international system.\textsuperscript{17} One critical source of realist-based distrust is uncertainty regarding the future intentions of leaders not yet in power. This is information which no one in the system possesses or could hypothetically reveal. Similarly, institutions may address uncertainty regarding environmental shocks, future economic performance, or the ambiguity of rules; none necessarily involve intentional concealment.\textsuperscript{18}

\textit{State of the Literature}

\textsuperscript{15} For formal models analyzing where private information comes from, including secrecy practices, see Meirowitz and Sartori, “Strategic Uncertainty as a Cause of War”; Slantchev, “Feigning Weakness.”
\textsuperscript{16} Secrecy contributes to the “contradictory expectations of the likely duration and outcome of the war” cited in Blainey, \textit{The Causes of War}, 293–4; state secrecy’s role in producing uncertainty that requires institutional solutions is noted in passing by Keohane’s original exposition of neoliberal institutionalism. “The significance of asymmetrical information and quality uncertainty in theories of market failure therefore calls attention to the importance not only of international regimes but also of variations in the degree of closure of different states’ decisionmaking processes. Some governments maintain secrecy much more zealously than others.” Keohane, \textit{After Hegemony}, 94–5.
\textsuperscript{17} Copeland, “The Constructivist Challenge to Structural Realism.”
\textsuperscript{18} On institutions and the varieties of uncertainty, see Koremenos, “Contracting Around International Uncertainty.”
While secrecy, deception, and lying are undertheorized and often overlooked empirically, exceptions do exist. What logics for secrecy by individual states or groups of states have been developed? How has secrecy been conceptualized in existing research? Three main motivations for secrecy have been identified across a diverse set of empirical domains.

The earliest IR scholarship on secrecy and deception emerged from the security domain and identifies a logic for secrecy based on the importance of strategic and military surprise. A wide range of foreign policies may benefit from the element of surprise. Concealment can allow a state to keep its adversary in the dark about a decision or policy which prevents the adoption of counter-measures. Concealing an alliance may prevent rivals from courting new allies in a counter-coalition. After all, a basic Clausewitzian principle of effective war performance is the element of surprise. Realist theories of war have long argued wars start because, prior to war, states disagree on the relative balance of capabilities. This pre-war disagreement may be because concealing capabilities gives a battlefield advantage should war start (i.e. new weapons systems, new battlefield tactics, and so on).

In the specific context of war, formal theoretic scholarship in IR has modeled the strategic logic of generating deception in order to

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20 On the importance of surprise in modern war, see Betts, “Surprise Despite Warning”; Betts, Surprise Attack.

21 Blainey, The Causes of War; Fearon, “Rationalist Explanations for War”; the same point is made more recently in Mearsheimer, Why Leaders Lie.
surprise an adversary; several recent contributions refine insights first suggested by Robert Axelrod in the 1970s.\textsuperscript{22}

In addition to surprising potential adversaries, scholars have argued states may use secrecy to facilitate effective diplomatic negotiation. Effective bargaining often involves bluffing: that is, making initial offers and only gradually relinquishing concessions. This requires concealment of a state’s bottom line (“reservation point”) and is one rationale for secrecy related to diplomatic negotiations. In addition to maximizing any individual state’s share of the pie, secluded settings (“private bargaining”) may help facilitate compromise. Making demands and finding compromise may be influenced by whether the give-and-take of bargaining is public or behind closed doors. Drawing on economist models of “reservation points” and debates among political theorists on secret/public constitutional bargaining, this research suggests states use secrecy in their communications and face-to-face bargaining to get good deals and to avoid publicity-induced stalemate.\textsuperscript{23}

Lastly, other scholars have pointed to the way secrecy protects vulnerable leaders from domestic political punishment for unpopular decisions and policies. Reflecting the

\textsuperscript{22} Axelrod, “The Rational Timing of Surprise”; Fearon, “Rationalist Explanations for War”; Meirowitz and Sartori, “Strategic Uncertainty as a Cause of War”; Slantchev, “Feigning Weakness.”

common intuition that secrecy in foreign policy protects leaders from embarrassment at home, these scholars argue leaders may conceal decisions, communications, or policy actions which are unpopular with an important domestic constituent. In the security domain, an especially prevalent view is that leaders use secrecy when pursuing war-related policies but facing a dovish domestic constituency. To avoid the punishment of domestic groups opposed to military force, states may issue threats privately, engage in regime change covertly, or mobilize their militaries in an unobservable fashion. Critics of the democratic peace thesis, for example, have argued that leaders avoid typical anti-war domestic constraints by using covert methods against other democracies.

Existing secrecy-related scholarship exhibits several qualities which distinguish it from the approach I develop. It has largely focused on concealment of discrete decisions and communications rather than covert influence attempts over time. In the tripartite conceptualization I developed in Chapter 2, much more attention has been paid to secrecy

24 For the general motive of secrecy to address “internal threat,” see Gibbs, “Secrecy and International Relations”; on leaders pursuing free trade with an anti-trade domestic problem, see Magee, Brock, and Young, Black Hole Tariffs and Endogenous Policy Theory; Kono, “Optimal Obfuscation”; on leaders pursuing compromise in diplomatic negotiations facing anti-concession domestic public, see Putnam, “Diplomacy and Domestic Politics,” 445; Brown and Marcum, “Avoiding Audience Costs”; on leaders seeking to back down from a threat but facing domestic punishment, see Baum, “Going Private.”


26 Forsythe, “Democracy, War, and Covert Action”; Russett, Grasping the Democratic Peace, 120–4; Downes and Lilley, “Overt Peace, Covert War?”.
of communication (#1) than information gathering and policy actions (#2 and #3). Because of this focus, existing research has rarely analyzed uses of secrecy over time. A recent study of surprise in the Korean War only analyzed the Chinese use of secrecy when initially entering the war; other uses of secrecy and elements of plausible deniability were ignored. Even scholarship on long-term secret bargains can narrow the focus to the short-term by analyzing the initial act of concealment rather than its maintenance over time. One important consequence of discrete, short-term cases is that it encourages a conceptualization of secrecy/publicity as dichotomous. The practical side of concealment over time, and rationales for retaining secrecy despite disclosure over time (i.e. “open secrecy”), has been largely overlooked empirically and theoretically.

Second, secrecy is commonly characterized as a unilateral decision and the explanations for secrecy use a monadic approach. In most analysis, secrecy is chosen by a single leader or state about a specific act (i.e. the setting for trade negotiations; issuing a threat). Less common is analysis of interdependence in secrecy. To be fair, a unilateral/monadic view makes sense of cases where state communications or actions are truly independent. For example, Sagan and Suri analyze a nuclear weapons mobilization action that Nixon undertook secretly which was undetected even by allies hosting American military

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28 Slantchev, “Feigning Weakness.”
29 This is the case in the analysis of the secret missile swap to end the Cuban Missile Crisis described in Brown and Marcum, “Avoiding Audience Costs.”
bases. However, this scenario is empirically quite rare. Concealed communications among states, as in negotiating secret peace deals or basing agreements, require other states—allies, adversaries, and often both—to maintain secrecy as well. Complex covert operations also often rely on other states and may be detected by third parties or adversaries. In most situations, secrecy and the maintenance of ignorance/ambiguity requires multiple states to preserve it. By treating secrecy as encompassing one or at most two states, existing theories have emphasized motivations that have a “monadic” (or, at best, “dyadic”) quality. These have a difficult time making sense of larger joint secrecy. As I describe below, military intervention scenarios sometimes feature “tacit collusion” among adversaries and other third parties which may suggest a shared rationale for secrecy.

Third and finally, existing scholarship treats secrecy as a tool used by a predetermined set of actors within a well-defined problem or policy structure. Formal models illustrate this most clearly because their situational structure is stipulated by explicit assumption. A formal model which analyzes private and public threats, for example, stipulates the reputational stakes of a conflict by assumption. If the model features repeated interactions, this builds a “reputation” component because concessions by State A now influence the likelihood of demands on State A later. The number of relevant actors and their roles (in coercive bargaining models a “challenger” and “defender,” for example)

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are stipulated as well. Formal models notoriously only analyze two actors and the status and identity of those actors are common knowledge among the players. As I describe below, an alternative view of secrecy sees it as a tool states use to manipulate how these very features of the situation are perceived by outside audiences (i.e. which actors are involved, how they are acting, and the reputational and other stakes at hand).

Impression Management: An Alternative Approach

This section develops the core principles of an alternative approach to understanding how secrecy works and why states use it. The principles are distilled from a variety of literatures, many from outside political science. The most important influence is the sociological research on perceptions and social interactions by Erving Goffman. His work gives a surprisingly important role for secrecy, ambiguity, and deniability in the interactions of everyday life. I make the theoretical wager that these insights, properly adapted to the unique circumstances of an anarchic international system, shed useful light on information control and diplomacy in world politics. Beyond Goffman, I draw on a range of other sources including studies of secrecy and related phenomena by scholars in law, social psychology, anthropology, and philosophy. From these sources I draw several key lessons. These constitute four basic principles of what I call an impression

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32 This tendency of formal models to use a dyadic setup may also contribute to the absence of theories about the use of secrecy by more than two states. Formal models also tend to assume unilateral control over information; whether or not a “private” threat issued by State A remains concealed is up to State A and State A alone.

33 A point about how secrecy can alter the definition of the situation rather than serve as a resource within a fixed situation is made in Bellman, “The Paradox of Secrecy,” 12–7.
management approach to secrecy. I first describe these principles and then assess their implications for international politics.

1) Secrecy is an important tool in the individual’s protection of consistent and socially acceptable impressions

One core insight of Goffman and other scholars of secrecy is that actors use information concealment and revelation to produce consistent, context-appropriate impressions of themselves. Note that this is a monadic claim. This insight is based on the viewpoint of a single actor (a human; a firm; a state) engaging in social-political interactions over time. For the moment, I bracket the actions of others.

A surprisingly heavy explanatory load in Goffman’s analysis of everyday social interactions is carried by secrecy. Goffman’s basic “dramaturgical” metaphor is well-known. As presented in his most well-known work, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman argues that social interactions are akin to a performer on a stage presenting a carefully managed image (“impression”) of him/herself. Less familiar is the role secrecy plays in such performances. As Goffman puts it, “a basic problem for many performances, then, is that of information control” and the ability to consistently perform in accordance with a given impression depends on the willingness “to conceal action

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34 As one reviewer summarizes: “a Goffmanesque world, keeping her cool, using her considerable repertoire of tricks to maintain her control, constantly and consciously scanning, calculating, performing--but all the time concealing, and thus seeming to preserve, whatever it is she feels to be her self behind self-defined mental, material and spatial barriers. She plays the system whilst maintaining her sense of personal aloofness and distance from it.” Dawe, “The Underworld-view of Erving Goffman,” 253, footnote 7.
which is inconsistent with these standards.” Subsequent works, especially his books on stigmas and face and face-saving, highlight the importance of concealment in social performances. For individuals who hold a socially stigmatized attribute (e.g. alcoholic addiction; physical deformity; stutter), Goffman argues that concealment can be critical to maintaining a carefully constructed public identity that is not based on the stigma (i.e. “passing”). Using deception and ambiguous words/actions can help avoid face threats and, should they arise, preserve face-saving routes of escape.

Others arrived at this basic insight drawing on or independent of Goffman. One insightful analysis of social interactions and sexual orientation draws on Goffman in describing secrecy in the “lesbian world.” Ponse’s interviews showed that judicious use of secrecy (and selective disclosure) allowed individuals in her study to carefully manage their identity and relationships in various audiences. Social psychologists, most notably Barry Schlenker, developed a research program under the mantle of “impression management” based on Goffman’s insights about the link between information control.

35 On secrecy and performance, Goffman cites examples of secrecy regarding activities at home (junk food eating, “adult” magazines) and at work (petty theft) to maintain consistent and appropriate social impressions. See specifically Goffman, The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life, 88, 104–105, 141–145; quotes on 141.
36 Goffman, Stigma; Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity; Goffman, Interaction Ritual; Essays on Face-to-Face Behaviour.
37 “[W]hen his differentness is not immediately apparent…the issue is not that of managing tension generated during social contacts, but rather that of managing information about his failing. To display or not to display; to tell or not to tell; to let on or not to let on; to lie or not to lie; and in each case, to who, how, when, and where.” See Goffman, Stigma; Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity, 42 and 2-3, 135-139, and chap. 2.
38 Goffman, Interaction Ritual; Essays on Face-to-Face Behaviour, 16–9.
39 Ponse describes how clothing and other appearance choices “can be used as ‘protective coloration’ to conceal or reveal information about the self.” Secrecy’s role in concealing sexual orientation for family, friends, or workplace is noted as well. Ponse, “Secrecy in the Lesbian World,” 241; 237, 249–250.
and social acceptance. Impression management in psychology posits that the psychological motive for individual is preservation of social acceptance through careful management of their perceived images or identities rather than internal ("intrapsychic") motivations. To do this, individuals manipulate what is visible/invisible to generate and maintain consistent impressions. Such impressions "actively construct, maintain, and protect their social environments." Secrecy plays an important role in these impression management techniques and has been the specific focus of several studies from this school. Using examples like hidden daily diaries and visible signs of pregnancy, Sissela Bok’s comprehensive review of secrecy in society and law notes the critical role secrecy can play as individuals manage their perceived social impressions and roles. Kim Lane Schepple’s review of American law and secrecy notes that for confidentiality protections in patient-psychiatrist relationships, “the motivation behind the private secret consists in the construction and preservation of an internal and/or selectively shared symbolic life.”

One unifying theme among these works is that some information has more personal and social significance than others. Disclosure of some information influences the perceived identity or role of a person, organization, or other actor. Disclosure of sexual orientation

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41 Schlenker and Pontari, “The Strategic Control of Information,” 225.
information, for example, transforms the identity of the individual (from “closeted” to “openly gay”). Disclosure may also influence the relationships and micro-social structures in which an individual is situated, or what Schlenker refers to as the individual’s “social environments.” Other employees and the larger organization in the workplace of an openly gay employee may be altered when that secret is revealed. Revealing other kinds of information merely changes strategic opportunities. The identity of individual actors and the overall social environment in which they operate is not meaningfully altered. The more transformative disclosures suggest other rationales for secrecy may exist beyond information-as-strategy.

Thus, a second common theme in this work is that most actors most of the time are what might be called “impression conservationists.” Individuals seek to create and groom a socially desirable image. Once a certain impression is established (or, for Goffman, a certain “line,” “face,” or “virtual identity”), individuals protect that impression by concealing “discrepant” words, actions, and events.\(^45\)

2) The “jointness hypothesis”: secrecy, individual impressions, and the structure of the situation are joint productions

The second principle draws on the important role played by other actors. The last section bracketed the reaction of others. This second principle places them front and center. The

work of Goffman and others highlight the role of interdependence in impression management in several related ways.

This principle has two basic formulations. In the first form, the jointness hypothesis states that the production and maintenance of secrecy itself often requires explicit or tacit cooperation of multiple actors. Secrets are rarely “unilateral”: as in the sexual orientation example, family members or professional colleagues may join in protecting and maintaining a secret over time. When suspicion arises, a state of tenuous ambiguity may also depend on a collective refusal to confirm suspicions and acknowledge the sexual orientation of the protected person. The second form of the jointness hypothesis is more general: the impressions of individuals, events, and social situations are maintained by multiple actors. This is a claim beyond secrecy. It is a claim that social identities and very structure of specific social interactions are not “given.” Instead, stable identities, roles, relationships, and social encounters are the product of effortful performances by those participating. The original dramaturgical metaphor illustrates this point well. For actors to remain “actors” and a situation defined as a “theater performance” to remain so defined, several groups must jointly (if tacitly) cooperate. The teamwork of actors on a stage is obvious. Yet audience members must also arrive, keep their seats, refrain from loud words, and engage in subtle acts of attentiveness and ignoring.

Goffman argues secrecy plays a key role in a variety of “team” performances. He shows multiple actors maintaining a secret and constructing a stable impression. Collective
exercises by everything from theater troupes to funeral parlor staff require the judicious use of secrecy to maintain appropriate and consistent impressions.46 Such secrecy requires the collaboration of each team-member to safeguard the overall impression from impression-discrepant words and actions.47 Some contexts involve several “teams” carefully managing secrets. The dying rituals described by Glaser and Strauss, for example, involve teamwork by the nursing staff caring as well as family members. Both nurses and family may judiciously withhold information about a terminal prognosis for days or weeks to create a situation of “closed awareness,” i.e. patient ignorance.48

A broader insight is that, beyond secrecy itself, social actors often cooperate in protecting individual impressions and the larger definition of the situation. Goffman notes that a key lesson from the dramaturgical metaphor is the interdependence between performers, audience, and theater staff. Each is required to play a particular role in producing the impression of a theatrical performance.49 Goffman devotes special attention to this insight in his work on face, face threats, and the techniques of face-saving. Consistent

46 On collective vs. individual secrets, see Bok, *Secrets*, 102–5; on “serial” secrets and the role of third parties in protecting them, see Scheppele, *Legal Secrets*, 16.
47 “A basic problem for many performances, then, is that of information control; the audience must not acquire destructive information about the situation that is being defined for them. In other words, a team must be able to keep its secrets and have it secrets kept.” See Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, 141; see also 88, 104–105; one review provides the example of a funeral parlor in which the staff cooperate in using concealment and tact to provide re-used props and a setting for grief. Manning, *Erving Goffman and Modern Sociology*, 42–4.
49 Goffman notes that “the audience contributes in a significant way to the maintenance of a show by exercising tact or protective practices on behalf of the performers.” The audience stays away from the “back stage” area. If a performer slips, the audience “may tactfully “not see” the slip or readily accept the excuse that is offered for it...[to] help sustain the quite false impression that they have not absorbed the meaning of what has happened.”Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, 234; 231.
with the first principle, individuals safeguard their own face by establishing a “line” and maintaining it throughout a social interaction. Yet Goffman is also careful to point out that, in addition to their own efforts, an individual’s face is safeguarded by others as well.

What Goffman observed was that stable social situations required tacit cooperation among all actors involved to protect the face of each and avoid disruptive events. As one review explains, Goffman’s view of face work describes a kind of “general conspiracy to save face so that social situations can also be saved: loss of face at a party, business luncheon, or even casual meeting undermines the entire event. The desire to save the face of others leads to tactful behavior, the desire to save our own leads us to monitor our actions carefully.”

Goffman refers to the way actors safeguard the impressions or face of others as “tact, savoir-faire, diplomacy, or social skill.”

The implications of the jointness hypothesis can be summarized as follows. Secrets usually involve more than one actor. The production and maintenance of such secrets requires joint action by multiple actors in either explicit or tacit coordination. Beyond secrecy specifically, impressions of specific actors may be safeguarded by other actors who have the ability to engage in face-saving tactics including tactfully ignoring

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51 Discussing maneuvers useful for protecting the face of others, he argues “[t]he person shows respect and politeness…. He employs discretion; he leaves unstated fact that might implicitly or explicitly contradict and embarrass the positive claims made by others. He employs circumlocutions and exceptions, phrasing his replies with careful ambiguity so that the others’ face is preserved even if their welfare is not.” See ibid., 16–17.
52 “Since each participant in an undertaking is concerned, albeit for differing reasons, with saving his own face and the face of the others, then tacit cooperation will naturally arise so that participants together can attain their shared but differently motivated goals,” ibid., 29.
discrepancies. The overall social structure is therefore actively maintained by each actor as they conserve their own and others’ impressions which, in aggregate, define the nature of a given situation.

3) **Open secrets are common.** *They can maintain a stable social situation and have important consequences*

As noted, existing studies of secrecy rarely examine its practical application over time. The impression management approach takes the reverse approach. The third principle emphasizes the way secrecy can easily slip into a state of partial or complete “open secrecy” and why that matters. Open secrecy is any situation in which a group or groups initially targeted either suspect or know the content of the secret. This may be due to “leaky” secrecy or the inadvertent exposure of some details. Goffman and others argue even open secrets can serve the purpose of preserving impressions and the prior definition of a social situation.

The phenomenon of an “open secret” reflects a conceptualization of secrecy that is beyond a dichotomy between “public” and “private” (see the spectrum in Figure 2 above). The grey area in between the two extremes is where various forms of open secrecy lay. Two conceptually distinct forms of open secrecy exist.\(^{55}\) One involves

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\(^{55}\) This distinction draws on the four “awareness contexts” described by Glaser and Strauss. The first is “closed awareness” and corresponds to completely effective secrecy. The fourth is “open awareness” and refers to the traditional state of publicly acknowledged facts. The second (“suspicion awareness”) and third (“mutual pretense”) are two forms of open secrecy. They are distinguished by suspicion vs. certainty. Glaser and Strauss, *Awareness of Dying*, chap. 3–6.
suspicion only. Over time, evidence or second-hand reports disclosing the possibility of a secret decision or action(s) can become available to particular audiences. This evidence may be incomplete; its interpretation may be ambiguous; its sources may lack complete credibility. Yet allegations and hints may be enough to make a given audience suspect the secret’s content with some measure of uncertainty.\(^56\)

The second form of open secrecy is the most extreme: certainty and common knowledge. In this scenario, evidence disclosing the secret’s content is so visible and sharp that one or more original secrecy targets believe it with full certainty. Over time, the secret-keeper and target may come to believe both sides know, that both know the other knows, and so on. Though the content of the secret is common knowledge, actors may continue to pretend “as if” the secret were operative.\(^57\) Because the initial act is concealed, other actors have the opportunity to refuse to acknowledge the secret’s contents and act as if nothing has changed. The result is a state of mutual pretense: actors know what is being ostensibly concealed but do not acknowledge it. As one scholar notes, “mutual pretense, or the open secret” is a situation in which there is “common knowledge but tacit collusion [takes place] to act as if the contrary of the proposition were true.”\(^58\)

Dying rituals and sexual orientation illustrate both forms of open secrecy. For example, open secrecy with suspicion can raise when a patient, seeing signs of crumbling health or

\(^{56}\) Ibid., 53–62.
\(^{57}\) Ibid., 64–7; 71–4.
overhearing hallway conversations, begins to suspect terminal illness. Similarly, a child may suspect a parent’s sexual orientation through hints or ambiguous evidence. Though the secret’s integrity begins to weaken, suspicion and the refusal of those present to acknowledge a change may allow prior behavior and routines to continue. The suspicious patient may not demand treatment as a dying patient; nursing staff and family may continue their normal routines; a suspicious son or daughter may not choose to confront the parent and the parent may not confess, thus maintaining the prior relationship, routines, and family structure. Over time, a state of fully open secrecy (i.e. with certainty and common knowledge) may come to pass. A patient may grow to believe with certainty in their terminal prognosis, nursing staff and family may come to believe with full certainty that the patient knows, and so on. A child may be certain of the sexual orientation of their parent, the parent presumes their child knows, and so on. Even when certainty and common knowledge prevail, however, the participants may or may not openly acknowledge the secret’s contents. If they do not acknowledge it, they may continue to act “as if” the fact were not true.  

Glaser and Strauss provide a four-part scheme that nicely captures the uniqueness of the two forms of open secrecy, summarized in Table 1. 

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59 “The situation that involves a terminal patient is much more like a masquerade party, where one masked actor plays carefully to another as long as they are together, and the total drama actually emerges from their joint creative effort.” They continue that “each party to the ritual pretense shares responsibility for maintaining it.” Glaser and Strauss, Awareness of Dying, 71, 74; “[b]oth audience and gay actor cooperate to maintain a particular definition of the situation and both parties tacitly agree not to make what is implicit, explicit by direct reference to it... Making the violation obvious, by naming it or pointing it out, would of course force acknowledgement of the pretense.” Ponce, “Secrecy in the Lesbian World,” 245.  

60 Glaser and Strauss, Awareness of Dying, chap. 3–6.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Awareness context</th>
<th>State of knowledge</th>
<th>State of acknowledgment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Closed awareness</td>
<td>Secret effectively withheld from target(s). No suspicion. Ignorance.</td>
<td>No acknowledgement. Pretending “as if”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suspected awareness</td>
<td>Secrecy effectiveness compromised. Target(s) suspect secret contents with some amount of uncertainty. No common knowledge.</td>
<td>No acknowledgement. Pretending “as if”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mutual pretense</td>
<td>Secrecy effectiveness entirely compromised. Target(s) believe secret contents with full certainty and common knowledge.</td>
<td>No acknowledgement. Pretending “as if”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open awareness</td>
<td>Secrecy effectiveness entirely compromised. Target(s) believe secret contents with full certainty and common knowledge.</td>
<td>Mutual acknowledgement</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Glaser and Strauss’s “awareness contexts”

Preservation of the prior impressions therefore requires two components: an initial attempt at secrecy and, as exposure grows, the tacit coordination to behave “as if” by both secret-keeper and observers. Uncertainty may play a role in preserving prior impressions in suspicion-based open secrecy. In this scenario, the secret’s contents are not known with certainty and higher orders of knowledge (i.e. belief that others know the secret’s contents) are absent. For example, a child suspecting a parent’s sexual orientation may not believe the parent knows they are suspicious or that other family members suspect it. Uncertainty and the absence of higher orders of beliefs can be enough to stop suspecting audiences from openly stating their beliefs and changing their
actions. Kuran gives the example of doubts about the legitimacy of Eastern European communist governments near the end of the Cold War. Many unsatisfied citizen suspected their communist party’s claims were hollow but did not know others suspected it as well. This let the social order survive for much longer than it would have otherwise. Once large public protests revealed to all citizens that suspicions were widely shared, common knowledge of “dangerous thinking” was established, doubts were expressed, and the political order quickly crumbled.\textsuperscript{61}

It is important to note that both forms of open secrecy suggest an independent power of acknowledgement. The Oxford English Dictionary defines acknowledgement as an act to “accept or admit the existence or truth of” a proposition. Knowledge, on the other hand, is defined as “the possession of information about something.”\textsuperscript{62} Acknowledgement therefore includes action along with possession of information; it implies a positive step by an actor or actors that admits the truth of a proposition. The significance of this difference is noted by philosopher Stanley Cavell in the simple observation that to acknowledge one is late for a doctor’s appointment is not the same as the patient and doctor knowing someone is tardy.\textsuperscript{63} This “acknowledgement goes beyond knowledge”

\textsuperscript{61} Kuran, Private Truths, Public Lies, 9–20; on the way public cultural events and ceremonies create common knowledge, see Chwe, Rational Ritual.
\textsuperscript{62} I will refer to the absence of this positive act as “non-acknowledgement” and “denial” interchangeably. It is important to note that “denial” usually connotes an active refusal of the validity of a proposition (i.e. reacting to an accusation by stating “we did not fire that missile”) whereas I often use it with the more passive connotation of refusing to affirm the validity of a proposition (i.e. stating that “this is a civil war” when the facts on the ground suggest an interstate war).
\textsuperscript{63} See a similar distinction made more recently by philosopher Thomas Nagel quoted in Molesworth, “Knowledge Versus Acknowledgment,” 917–918.
and constitutes a positive, expressive action affirming the validity of a claim or fact. If actors jointly withhold visible acknowledgement of a widely suspected or fully open secret, previous impressions and definition of the situation can remain.

Open secrecy and acknowledgment play a key role in the familiar fable “The Emperor’s New Clothes.” The fable tells the story of an emperor who proudly wears a new set of imperial robes allegedly invisible to unworthy onlookers. Despite being dressed in “clothing” he cannot see, the emperor strides confidently before loyal subjects in a royal procession; nearly all the subjects are too surprised and scared to speak up. Interestingly, known discrepancies between the ostensible definition of the situation (a parade praising the emperor) and the actions of the emperor do not disrupt the royal procession’s social structure described in the fable. The audience, though plainly seeing an emperor with no clothes, “plays along” and reproduces deference and hierarchy. This collaboration ends only when a child cries innocently “but the emperor wears no clothes!” The child’s statement is the first public acknowledgement of what all had known but chosen to ignore. The significance of the child’s statement is that it cracks the tacit collusion between audience and emperor, transforming the situation away from hierarchy and

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64 Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?* 257; Cavell also gives the example of witnessing pain in another person, saying “it is not enough that I know (am certain) that you suffer – I must do or reveal something (whatever can be done). In a word, I must acknowledge it” (263). On the distinction between acknowledgement and apologies, see Lind, *Sorry States*, 16–17; O’Neill, *Honor, Symbols, and War*, 183–187.
65 On the important role public and official statements, Cohen notes that private knowledge “has to be officially confirmed and enter into the public discourse, if it is to be acknowledged.” On Cohen, *States of Denial*, 13.
deference. Despite calling attention to a fact which all in the crowd knew— that the clothing was fake— public acknowledgement ends a charade which had allowed the crowd to behave in a way that maintained the accoutrements of imperial authority.67

Pretending “as if” involves a collective refusal to acknowledge a suspected or known fact. Tacit but joint coordination to pretend “as if” can have important effects on how participants and outside observers treat a social situation. Scholars of denial in everyday life and in atrocity-scarred societies have found that groups can pretend “as if” a widely known event has not happened for long periods of time.68 Goffman describes how individual impressions and the larger social situation can survive discrepant events provided a) there is some room for deniability of the event, and b) observers refuse to acknowledge it.

Tact in regard to face-work often relies for its operation on a tacit agreement to do business through the language of hint—the language of innuendo, ambiguities, well-placed pauses, carefully worded jokes, and so on. The rule regarding this unofficial kind of communication is that the sender ought not to act as if he had officially conveyed the message he has hinted at, while the recipients have the right and obligation to act as if they have not officially received the message contained in the hint. Hinted communication, then, is deniable communication; it need not be faced up to. It provides a means by which the person can be warned

67 “The child’s words are disruptive— not for having leveled the difference between ruler and ruled, but for endangering the formal process by which it is accomplished without being openly acknowledged. While the public outside the text [i.e. the reader] applauds the boy’s act of disenchantment, the community inside is fractured and diminished. The rogue weavers disappear from the story, the townspeople are deflated, and the chamberlains are left holding invisible robes. ...The people are traumatized not by the realization that the cloth is invisible but by the public acknowledgement that they have subscribed to its visibility.” Robbins, “The Emperor’s New Critique,” 668–669.
68 Zerubavel notes that “[p]retending not to notice certain things often helps us save others’ face, and dropping such pretense can make our interactions with them considerably awkward.” See Zerubavel, The Elephant in the Room, 16; Cohen observes that “[t]here is a subterranean level at which everyone knows what is happening, but the surface is a permanent ‘as if’ discourse.” On Cohen, States of Denial, 64.
that this current line or the current situation is leading to loss of face, without this warning itself becoming an incident.⁶⁹

To summarize, taking the practical side of secrets over time makes clear that open secrecy is common but may still serve the function of preserving impressions and prior social structures. Due to uncertainty and non-acknowledgement, open secrets may still have important impacts on small groups or whole institutions. If this preservation effect is to hold, two elements are needed: the continued pretense of secrecy by the secret holder and the continued refusal to acknowledge by observers. Yet the child’s cry in the fable demonstrates that open secrecy’s preservation effects are vulnerable to disruption. One or more actors may disrupt the charade and change the social dynamic, as when the pageantry of the emperor’s parade was transformed into embarrassment. This raises the issue of disruption which is the fourth and final principle.

4) Impression management failures constitute important threats to individual actors and the larger social order

What happens when impressions are contradicted? What if discrepant events cannot be or are not tactfully ignored? The fourth principle captures the ideas of Goffman and others about the consequences of impression management breakdowns. These consequences articulate the basic reasons why individuals and collectives act to preserve prior impressions, including through the use of secrecy.

Many of the consequences of an impression management breakdown will be context-specific. For example, Glaser and Strauss describe that a transition to open awareness about a patient’s terminal illness creates new ethical questions about “rights to die” and invokes new scripts about “how to die.” Goffman describes the breakdown of informal conversations in places like dinner parties or in elevators. The relevance of these specific consequences to politics or the international system is not clear. Using the impression management approach therefore requires being attentive to the unique dynamics of a specific empirical context.

Yet these context-specific consequences of change hold common themes that are more broadly applicable. One set of consequences are specific to the individual or group whose impression is threatened. Goffman describes that such a scenario can bring the individual or group “immediate humiliation and sometimes permanent loss of reputation.” Hostility or even violence is a possible result when face-saving proves impossible. He notes that an observer may protect the impression of another “because he wants to avoid the hostility that may be directed toward him if they lose their face.” Glaser and Strauss’s analysis of the terminally ill hospital patient points to other consequences. As mentioned, a situation in which the dying process is known and acknowledged injects new ethical and role concerns for the patient. This state raises new role-related questions for the patient who consciously or unconsciously adopts a dying

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71 Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, 59; see also embarrassment and humiliation on 212.

style (i.e. resigned, angry, fearful, etc.). Though they do not mention it specifically, one might add possible legal consequences such as “end of life decisions.” For the individual, then, the breakdown of impression management can create new roles, generate humiliation, damage reputation, and raise new legal issues.

There are other consequences for the larger group or system as well. Goffman describes ripple effects in which “a false impression maintained by an individual in any one of his routines may be a threat to the whole relationship or role of which the routine is only one part.”\(^{74}\) Ponse describes a discrepant event for someone concealing sexual orientation will create a larger “disruptive breach of social expectations” which impacts others.\(^{75}\) As noted above, the open acknowledgement of homosexuality can change relationships and organizations as well. New roles and possible ethical or legal obligations can be created for others. Goffman notes that a breakdown in a team’s secrecy may reshuffle the social situation such that “previous and expected interplay between the teams is suddenly forced aside and a new drama forcibly takes place.”\(^{76}\)

New roles and obligations for all involved can generate new kinds of conflict that ignorance or mutual pretense had previously avoided. As Glaser and Strauss’s analysis of the dying context describes,

\(^{74}\) Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, 64.
\(^{75}\) Ponse, “Secrecy in the Lesbian World,” 245.
‘facing’ an impending death means that the patient will be judged, and will judge himself [sic], according to certain standards of proper conduct… The patient may wish to die in certain ways: without pain, for instance, with dignity, or perhaps in private. At the same time, the staff has its own ideas about the way patients ought to die, involving not merely the physical aspects of dying, but also its moral and stylistic aspects. Much of the consequent interaction depends on the initial congruence of their respective ideas, as well as on the congruence that may develop before the patient's death occurs. But the existence of open awareness about terminality makes this confrontation of persons possible, and so makes important the discrepancy between their ideas on how to die.77

Summary

To review, the impression management approach includes four basic principles. Secrecy is an important tool that individuals use to protect consistent and socially acceptable “impressions” or “face.” Yet they do not act alone: secrecy itself and impressions in general are joint productions in which other observers play an active role. Evaluating secrecy in practice and over time suggests that a state of suspected or known secrecy – that is, two forms of “open secrecy” – is common. Yet even open secrecy has important social consequences if the secret-holder and observers pretend “as if,” preserving prior impressions, roles, and routines. Individuals and groups are generally motivated to preserve impressions already made, including through the use of secrecy, to avoid the consequences of impression management failure. Such consequences may include humiliation, reputational damage, new social and legal roles, conflict, and hostility.

How do these principles translate to international politics? What lessons do they hold? The first principle suggests individual states use secrecy to safeguard socially acceptable

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77 Glaser and Strauss, *Awareness of Dying*, 82, 80.
impressions. The second suggests states often share the duty of concealment with other states. It also suggests impressions and the overall definition of a social situation are influenced by the joint action of states. The third principle suggests that over time states will find themselves in situations of “open secrecy.” Even in such states, existing impressions and social structures can be preserved if both secret-holder and observers act “as if.” These three principles together suggest the importance of analyzing how perceptions are manipulated and images groomed. Instead of being fixed or clearly specified, a complex process of impression management (i.e. information revelation vs. concealment; acknowledgement vs. pretending “as if”) shapes how states and events are perceived. The fourth principle suggests impression breakdowns can have important consequences. States may experience acute humiliation, significant reputational damage, and react with hostility. New legal and social roles may be invoked which can create new conflicts among relevant participants. That historians regularly use the rhetoric of “face” and “face-saving” makes the relevance of these insights even more plausible.

78 Israel’s nuclear weapon status illustrates the distinction between, and political relevance of, both knowledge and acknowledgement in world politics. Israel’s military nuclear program has been shrouded in secrecy since its inception but, over time, has become a well-known international fact. Yet secrecy has permitted Israel to avoid acknowledging their arsenal, thereby permitting other states to themselves tactfully ignore it. Cohen, Israel and the Bomb; Cohen, The Worst-Kept Secret; on the way this helped preserve the emergent norm of non-proliferation, see Carson, “The Publicity Dilemma and Norm Emergence: The Case of Israeli Nuclear Opacity.”

79 More on these consequences appears in the next section on escalation pressure.

80 Two examples from prominent histories of World War I and the Cold War demonstrate. “A German military mission sent in 1913 to reorganize the Turkish Army caused such furious Russian resentment that only concerted effort by the Powers to provide a face-saving device prevented the affair from becoming that ‘damned foolish thing: in the Balkans’ a year before Sarajevo.” Tuchman, The Guns of August, 162; “Just as the agreement on Eastern Europe allowed the Americans to save face while tacitly acknowledging Soviet control, so the Far Eastern accord allowed the Russian a token role in the occupation of Japan without in fact impairing American authority.” Gaddis, The United States and the Origins of the Cold War, 281.
Several of these claims have echoes in, and draw support from, extant IR scholarship. Several forms of tacit behavior between states which bear resemblance to “tacit collusion” have been noted by others. In addition, other scholars adapting Goffman’s ideas to international politics have highlighted the importance of avoiding impression-discrepant events, how social structure can be preserved despite individuals acting insincerely, and the distance states have from their assigned “roles.” States pretending “as if” are maintaining public rhetoric and policy postures despite increasingly open secrets. The political power of pretending “as if” therefore finds support in studies of the discursive power states hold (i.e. framing, “representational” or “rhetorical” power).

Secrecy and Military Interventions: A Theory of Escalation Avoidance

Drawing on these principles, this section adapts the impression management approach to understand how secrecy is used in military intervention scenarios.

Military interventions and secrecy

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81 On tacit cooperation with informal and unwritten agreements, see Lipson, “Why Are Some International Agreements Informal?” 599–600; on tacit rules of competition among adversaries, see George, Managing U.S.-Soviet Rivalry, chap. 12; on tacit bargaining, see Schelling, Arms and Influence, 131–141; Downs and Rocke, “Tacit Bargaining and Arms Control.”
84 Focusing on a specific empirical domain like military intervention allows me to show how the admittedly abstract lessons of impression management “translate” to the practice of world politics. It also allows me to generate empirically tractable and testable expectations. Lastly, it enables me to derive specific expectations from existing secrecy theories to help assess the distinctiveness and “value added” of an impression management approach.
I define “outside military intervention” as the involvement of a non-local regional or global power in an ongoing military conflict. Involvement can take one of two forms: 1) provision of lethal military assistance to one or more belligerents; or, 2) participation in air, naval, and ground combat activity. This definition is consistent with existing literatures on third party interventions in civil and interstate wars, though some limit “intervention” to cases of combat action only. Lethal aid or combat participation can take place overtly or covertly. However, reflecting the “publicity bias” I described at the opening of this chapter, existing studies of military intervention have noted but not analyzed the covert form of intervention.

Secrecy may play two roles in intervention scenarios. Most obviously, the intervention itself may be secret. Less obvious is the role secrecy can play in what I refer to as “tacit collusion.” If a covert intervention takes place, other states often detect the covert intervention over time. They may react to deceptive meddling with publicity. Alternatively, they may react by “diplomatically downplaying” the meddling activity. I describe these two roles for secrecy in turn.

Interventions can be overt or covert. Conceptually, overtness includes visible assistance and official diplomatic acknowledgement. Overt aid is given visibly. The aid relationship is announced publicly by the outside state; the particular kind of lethal

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85 See, for example, Regan, “Conditions of Successful Third-Party Intervention in Intrastate Conflicts”; Corbetta and Dixon, “Danger Beyond Dyads”; Gleditsch, “Transnational Dimensions of Civil War”; Saunders, Leaders at War.
assistance may be of any form including weaponry which carries a state’s signature (i.e. sophisticated weaponry only manufactured by the intervening power). Overt combat participation includes official diplomatic publicity of a state’s participation in the conflict, traditionally in the form of a declaration of war. It also involves use of military assets with official state markings (i.e. uniforms for ground forces; markings on planes or naval vessels). Covert state behavior of any kind is officially authorized state activity beyond domestic territorial borders in which the acting state’s role is intended to be neither visible nor publicly acknowledged. The key element of covert state behavior is ambiguity regarding state authorship. The covert method of providing lethal aid would abstain from publicizing the aid (i.e. no diplomatic acknowledgement) and would only provide weaponry whose presence on the battlefield would not disclose their origin. The covert method of combat participation may include a variety of tactics including sending “false flag” military units (i.e. personnel and equipment with markings of another state) or sending military units re-labeled as private or volunteer forces. Figure 3 illustrates the four basic possible forms of intervention.

86 While the concept travels beyond the American context, this definition is based on the U.S. government’s legal definition: “the role of the United States Government is not intended to be apparent or acknowledged publicly.” Quoted in Anderson, “The Security Dilemma and Covert Action.”
87 Thus, the concealment of the practical details of the operation is less central than the concealment of the state’s official role in the operation.
88 To clarify how combat participation can take place clandestinely, consider the following tactics. An outside state can intervene in a local conflict by taking their publicly acknowledged personnel and diverting them to combat purposes. “Military advisors” might be diverted to perform combat tasks, for example. An outside state may masquerade as a different state by relabeling its personnel and equipment with the physical appearance of another state’s military. This is the “false flag” approach. States may also masquerade their forces as non-state actors, stripping equipment and personnel official markings to appear as private citizens or volunteers. Lastly, some weapons can be used without a clear “signature.” Submarines can sink surface ships without surfacing and showing a national flag and drones can strike over
Figure 3. Varieties of intervention

Reactions of other states to a covert form of intervention can draw on publicity or secrecy. On the one hand, states that detect a covert intervention ("witnessing states") may choose to publicize it. Publicity involves official government statements identifying the intervening state as involved in aid or combat. It includes official acknowledgement of reported events as constituting involvement or intervention. It may include the witnessing state providing fresh evidence of involvement. Alternatively, witnessing states may use the reverse response of "tacit collusion." Witnessing states may not publicly identify the intervening state as involved in aid or combat. They may not
officially acknowledge reported events as constituting involvement or intervention. They
do not publicize any classified evidence they possess of covert aid or combat involvement.

The extant theories of secrecy described above offer two initial rationales for covertness in an intervention. The first is strategic and tactical surprise. As noted, war strategists and many Realist theories of war have argued states conceal capabilities and operational war maneuvers to generate surprise against an adversary. This suggests an outside power may conceal lethal aid or combat units to avoid counter-measures by the adversary and create a temporary battlefield advantage. The second rationale current literature offers focuses on domestic politics. As described above, research on private threats, covert regime change, and democratic peace theory suggest war-averse publics drive democratic leaders to conceal war-related activity.\(^{89}\) This suggests a clear logic for covert intervention: the outside power may conceal lethal aid or combat units to avoid domestic political punishment by constituents who oppose intervention.\(^{90}\)

For many scenarios, there are a few reasons these logics for covertness in an intervention may be incomplete or even misleading. Neither offers a clear logic for secrecy by witnessing states. Their rationales for concealment are monadic. An adversary conceals

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\(^{89}\) See citations in the literature review above.

\(^{90}\) The literature review included a third motivation for secrecy in existing scholarship regarding secrecy’s effect on effective diplomatic negotiation. For the military interventions scenarios, this cluster of research does not offer a clear logic for the use of secrecy by intervening states or witnessing states. I therefore do not include it as a comparison point.
intervention to surprise its adversary. Why would this adversary cover it up? A vulnerable leader conceals their intervention to avoid dovish domestic punishment. Why would other states, especially neutral or adversarial states, cover it up? These explanations also have trouble with some aspects of intervening state behavior. Moreover, surprise’s benefits are fleeting. Once a covertly intervening state springs their trap on the adversary, why continue using secrecy? The surprise rationale does not provide a clear logic for the intervening state to retain covertness over time. In addition, the domestic rationale does not provide a clear logic if the intervening state is an insular autocrat or faces a domestic constituency that is in favor of intervention. Lastly, neither explanation provides a rationale for retaining covertness once an intervention becomes suspected or fully transparent “open secret.” Surprise benefits and domestic insulation seemingly erode as soon as the secret’s contents are known by the relevant targets.

**Impression management and escalation avoidance: an overview**

The impression management approach provides a different view of what secrecy does in intervention scenarios and, therefore, why both intervening and witnessing states are motivated to use it. The impression management approach provides a rationale for collective secrecy. It offers a rationale for the intervening state to retain covertness long after its initial entry. It offers a rationale for democratic and autocratic interveners to use covertness. Impression management also makes sense of “open secrecy”: groups of states may have overlapping interests in pretending “as if” interventions have not taken place.
The four principles can be adapted to the military intervention context as follows. Secrecy helps the initial acting state – the intervener – to preserve a socially acceptable impression. The specific impression they seek to preserve is the diplomatic status of being “non-involved,” “non-belligerent,” or “neutral.” This impression is linked, in turn, to the larger definition of the conflict in which they intervene, i.e. whether it is seen as localized or a venue for regional or great power combat. The second principle suggests this impression management does not take place in a vacuum. Other states may have strong incentives to help safeguard the “face” of a covertly intervening state. By preserving the impression of non-involvement, the larger conflict remains perceived as localized and low-stakes. The third principle suggests the importance of analyzing secrecy over time. Covert interventions will tend to become suspected or known over time. However, impressions can be preserved if all states pretend “as if” no change has taken place by refusing to acknowledge it.

The fourth principle sheds light on why states may collectively act to preserve the impressions of individual states as non-involved and the overall conflict as “localized.” As noted, impression management insights suggest known and acknowledged discrepancies lead to humiliation, hostility, reputational damage, and new role conflicts. These consequences take the specific form of “escalation dangers” in military

intervention scenarios. Outside powers taking active sides in local conflicts raises the key question: will other outside powers counter-intervene? Will the local conflict become a global crisis or even global war? Overt interventions create an unambiguous breaking point: the prior impression of the intervening state as uninvolved is dispelled; the perception of the conflict as “local” is similarly threatened. This shift raises new reputational questions, threatens humiliation of other states, and generates new role conflicts. All of these forces combine to make further conflict escalation more likely by trapping reacting states into harsh replies and intervening states into a “win or else” mentality.

Secrecy avoids these dangers and, knowing this, can be an attractive tool for intervening and witnessing states alike. Secret interventions avoid providing clear evidence of involvement. Secret interventions, even if detected or leaky, preserve space for all sides to pretend “as if” non-involvement and localization continue. Echoing Goffman’s ideas about “tact” in everyday interactions, states detecting a covert intervention may react by ignoring, concealing, and otherwise downplaying the covert involvement of an outside power. By avoiding a new classification of the intervening state (i.e. as intervener, belligerent) and the conflict itself (i.e. as internationalized), states avoid triggering legal, reputational, and other dynamics which tend to make escalation harder to resist. The remainder of the chapter puts flesh on the bones of these ideas.

*Escalation dangers: why leaders seek control*
Escalation generally refers to the intensification of hostilities between adversaries. Studies of escalation traditionally distinguish between two main forms. One is escalation in means, or the tools of exercising coercive power. A crisis escalates when two adversaries advance from verbal threats to displays of force. A war escalates when adversaries use a weapon of mass destruction rather than mere conventional weapons. The second form of escalation is in scope: expansion of the geography and/or number of participants in combat. A crisis escalates when a local dispute draws in allies or other major powers, when conflict moves to new geographic areas, new state territory, or when third parties previously uninvolved join in. My discussion will focus on the escalation-as-scope; however, the ideas about impression management and escalation below apply to escalation in means as well.92

Specific levels and varieties of escalation depend on context.93 Idiosyncratic geographical features can become salient thresholds which define whether conflict is limited or not, as can particular kinds of weapons or targets.94 Escalation often comes in sequential stages. Take a loose sketch of World War I: a dispute between two sides first escalates to a regional then global crisis; crisis escalates to military mobilization; mobilization escalates to initial uses of force in a specific local theater; soon after additional states join in and expand the ranks of participants and territory under conflict.95 Each step up the ladder of escalation is itself a kind of “escalation.” But, short of total

92 On the means vs. scope distinction, see Smoke, War: Controlling Escalation, 14.
93 Ibid., 5.
94 Schelling, Arms and Influence, 164; Smoke, War: Controlling Escalation, 15–7.
95 On sequential escalation, see Smoke, War: Controlling Escalation, 27–9.
global war, the shadow of higher thresholds can influence leaders. Put differently, each increment of escalation may be considered independently and sequentially. Thus, “escalation concerns” may influence leaders at multiple points and in multiple forms in the same conflict.

Political leaders often seek to control the pace, scope and intensity of crises and war. This concern has been especially acute after World War I, which many believed was a product of unintended escalation. Technology has also made controlling crises and war more urgent: industrial and atomic technology have made any conflict potentially destructive and dangerous. Modern leaders also face the forces of nationalism and, in democracies, mass public opinion. Both create new vulnerabilities to domestic criticism that can make war initiation and escalation very attractive. As Chapter 2 describes, several macro-historical changes have made conflict escalation more deadly and reduced centralized political control over war-related decisions.

What factors influence whether wars escalate? Knowing the answer to this, and how leaders answer this, helps shed light on what tools are used to avoid escalation and secrecy’s specific role. Scholars and practitioners have identified factors influencing escalation in two places. Escalation dynamics are in part a product of the communication process between adversaries. Communication between adversaries (i.e.

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96 Sallagar notes that “each increment in the level of violence is considered separately.” Sallagar, The Road to Total War, 174.
98 Osgood, Limited War, 67–8.
the “dyad”) is where most prior research on escalation has focused (vs. dynamics outside the dyad). Despite vehement disagreements between deterrence and spiral model advocates, both models see escalation of crises to war as a function of credible communication and uncertainty among two adversaries. Other scholars, focusing on how war can be limited once begun, analyze ways two adversaries can credibly communicate restraint to one another during conflict. Tacit communication through credible signs of restraint – i.e. not bombing territory which is clearly within range of air power – can reassure the adversary of limited goals and an embrace of limited means.

Less focus has been placed on the reactions of allies, neutral third parties, other potential adversaries, and domestic publics. Intuitively, however, we know decisions to escalate in means or geographic scope may factor in the reaction of outside audiences (i.e. beyond the dyad). Public crises and conflict unfold on a kind of diplomatic stage. Both sides make choices under the watchful gaze of present and future allies, other adversaries, and domestic constituents. These audiences may be forces of restraint but may also be sources of pressure to “act tough.” For example, a crisis or conflict may be seen by allies as a critical test of their partner’s reliability. Restraint on both sides can become increasingly difficult if leaders believe it will jeopardize alliance relationships in the

99 Deterrence theorists argued that failure by one side to credibly show its ability and willingness to punish aggression may lead to escalation and recommended ways to generate credible signs of strength. Escalation happens here due to a deterrence failure. Spiral model advocates argued the reverse (escalation happens when both sides act overly aggressive) but it too focused on uncertainty and misperception between adversaries. See the summary of both sides in Jervis, Perception and Misperception in International Politics, chap. 3.
100 Schelling, Arms and Influence, 131–5.
future and invite future aggression. “Domino theory” thinking – a belief that failure to
defend an ally in a present crisis will lead to widespread defection thereafter – is one
famous example of this logic.\footnote{Snyder usefully points out that domino-style thinking was not an American anomaly, writing that
“[m]ost imperial strategists defending far-flung commitments have feared falling dominoes, and most rising
challengers have anticipated bandwagon effects.” Jervis and Snyder, Dominoes and Bandwagons, 3.}

In the extreme, such concerns can be overwhelming and leave leaders feeling they can be
left escalating with a “forced hand” or “boxed in.” Compared to the dyadic
communication dynamic, there is an important difference. If escalation is solely a
function of communication between adversaries, savvy leaders can exercise reasonable
control by carefully sending credible signals of resolve or restraint. However, if
escalation is also a function of how outside audiences react, leader control can be
significantly diluted. Citing “fear of triggering an escalation spiral that will be difficult to
bring under control,” George describes why some leaders are reluctant to rely on
deterrence signaling to limit war.\footnote{George, Managing U.S.-Soviet Rivalry, 391.}
Smoke describes a common image of escalation
among leaders in which certain events may end up “setting off a chain reaction.”\footnote{Smoke, War: Controlling Escalation, 29.}
Posen’s study of inadvertent escalation emphasizes that, rather than perfect control,
leaders face “escalatory pressures despite the desires of American or Soviet
policymakers…driving decision-makers toward decisions they neither intend nor wish to
make.”\footnote{Posen, “Inadvertent Nuclear War?” 28.}
Lastly, in his study of escalation to strategic air bombing in World War II,
Sallagar’s concludes “escalation can happen without being really willed - the result of
circumstances that drive a leader to a course of action whose consequences he either does not foresee or disregards because of pressures arising from the war or inherent in his own personality.”

Leaders often articulate a sense that they only imperfectly control over whether crises or wars escalate. Kennedy expressed the fear of an absence of control in reference to the Cuban Missile Crisis, saying that “a time may come when this knot is tied so tight that the person who tied it is no longer capable of untying it.” Tetlock describes how American leaders during the Cold War held differing theories of conflict escalation, many of whom saw significant dangers of unintended escalation. Sallagar’s study of World War II finds widespread concern over controlling escalation in the weapons and targets used among British leaders (though he finds this concern absent in Nazi Germany). Schelling himself – whose ideas on coercive bargaining and limited war were influential in American political decision-making – cautioned that unwanted escalation may result from a “process in which both sides get more and more deeply involved.”

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105 Sallagar, *The Road to Total War*, 152.
107 Tetlock, “Policy-Makers’ Images of International Conflict.”
108 Sallagar, *The Road to Total War*, 137–9.
Of course, not all leaders in all circumstances fear escalation or perceive imperfect control over events. Risk-tolerant, revisionist states might even invite it. Yet Hitler’s behavior in the mid-1930s is instructive: even radically revisionist leaders may desire to control the pace and location of conflict escalation to avoid a catastrophic early conflict. Thus, tools which help manage escalation risks can be appealing to leaders in several different contexts.

**Secrecy, acknowledgement, and manipulating escalation pressure**

For leaders seeking to minimize escalation risks, secrecy is especially well-suited for addressing the various pressures that emanate from outside audiences. Secrecy works by preserving opportunities for face-saving restraint. Secrecy on both sides – as covert intervention and as tacit collusion – keeps the fact of an intervention unknown or ambiguous to outside audiences. As a result, leaders can manipulate perceptions of the nature of a conflict and its stakes. Ignorance and ambiguity among these audiences frees leaders from pro-escalation pressure that might otherwise limit their ability to use restraint.

The basic intuition of the argument, and its effectiveness even under conditions of open secrecy, is mentioned in a rare open source analysis of “the logic of covert action” by two American policy scholars.

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110 On such revisionist states, see Schweller, “Bandwagoning for Profit”; on using the threat of escalation for bargaining advantage, see Schelling, The Strategy of Conflict; Schelling, Arms and Influence.

111 On Hitler’s use of covert techniques to avoid premature war escalation during his intervention in the Spanish Civil War, see Chapter 5
There are only two legitimate reasons for carrying out an operation covertly rather than overtly. One is when open knowledge of U.S. responsibility would make an operation infeasible. …The other valid reason for carrying out an operation covertly is to avoid retaliation or to control the potential for escalation. The fact that covertness is sometimes no more than a fig leaf does not necessarily alter the fact that it is a useful fig leaf. In the 1950s, for example, the Soviet government knew that the CIA was supporting resistance fighters in the Ukraine, since Soviet intelligence had penetrated most of the groups. Similarly, the Soviet leadership knew that the United States was supporting the Afghan mujaheddin in the 1980s. If U.S. leaders had admitted responsibility, Soviet leaders would have felt it necessary to retaliate, as was the case when President Eisenhower owned up to U-2 overflights in 1960.\(^\text{112}\)

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*Connecting escalation concerns and impression management*

The connection between these points and impression management is straightforward. How leaders use secrecy to address outside conflict escalation pressure and its parallel with insights from Goffman and others is suggested in two surprisingly similar formulations. As quoted before, Goffman notes that “[t]he rule regarding this unofficial kind of communication is that the sender ought not to act as if he had officially conveyed the message he has hinted at, while the recipients have the right and obligation to act as if they have not officially received the message contained in the hint. Hinted communication, then, is deniable communication; it need not be faced up to.”\(^\text{113}\) Schelling uses very similar logic to describe why overt rather than covert involvement can help adversaries use tact to avoid conflict escalation. He describes two hypothetical scenarios. In one, “infantryman in Soviet and American uniforms, organized in regular units and

\(^{112}\) Berkowitz and Goodman, “The Logic of Covert Action.”

behaving in accordance with authority, started shooting at each other.” The result of this overt encounter is, not surprisingly, a high risk of escalation to general war. The second scenario involves deadly exchanges in which Soviet personnel are ostensibly serving in non-combat roles but covertly participating in anti-aircraft roles. He argues that “[m]any thresholds can become ambiguous, especially if pains are taken to make them so. Any Russians at the SAM [surface-to-air missile] sites were not, presumably, ‘at war’ or even officially ‘in’ it; their presence was more supposed than verified; their participation in the shooting, if any, could be denied by the Soviet Union to reduce the embarrassment to both sides.”114 Schelling’s hypothetical suggests secrecy and the absence of political acknowledgement can allow both sides to avoid facing up to discrepant events which would otherwise create powerful pressures for escalation.

What are the specific mechanisms which drive escalation and which secrecy avoids and publicity triggers? Terms like “face” and “prestige” show the potential relevance of impression management insights but leave room for clarification. What does “loss of face” refer to in the context of international politics? Whose “prestige” is at stake and why does it matter? What follows describes several specific dynamics I see as captured by concepts like “face-saving.”115 It is not meant to be an exhaustive description of what

114 Schelling, Arms and Influence, 158, 160fn17.
115 For one author’s effort to distinguish face, prestige, honor, and reputation, see O’Neill, Honor, Symbols, and War; my own view is that these concepts overlap conceptually and empirically far more than O’Neill admits.
face or prestige mean in world politics. The purpose is to clarify ambiguous terms, show how they relate to familiar concepts in IR (i.e. literatures on reputation), and identify additional places to look for evidence in the empirical sections. Also note that I will usually refer to a single “intervening state” in the discussion that follows for purposes of simplicity. The intuition applies to local conflicts which experience more than one as well.

Leaders may employ secrecy because they believe publicity clarifies to outside audiences whether an intervention is a challenge and a commitment. A well-known and officially acknowledged intervention represents a relatively clear and unambiguous security challenge to regional neighbors and great powers with interest in the local conflict. As O’Neill notes, challenges are highly dependent on interpretation. Visible and acknowledged action clarifies challenges while ambiguous and unacknowledged action leaves room for interpretation. O’Neill argues, in turn, that such perceptions determine the difficulty of ignoring a challenge. When a challenge leaves no room for interpretation, leaders are more constrained in reactions and harsh responses are more likely. Publicity of a covert intervention by other states can clarify the nature of the challenge to outside audiences. “Naming and shaming” the covertly intervening state

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116 For example, some authors argue publicity links a policy to the prestige of individual leaders and results in emotional reactions which tend to deepen a commitment. Though I do not analyze psychological or emotional dimensions, these are consistent with the overall argument.


118 O’Neill uses the example of Israel’s nuclear status. “Keeping its nuclear status off the record may lessen the pressure on surrounding countries to respond in kind. The adversaries are not fooled, of course – they know the objective facts – but whether a certain situation constitutes a forceful challenge is about something other than objective facts.” Ibid., 125–6.
frames the event as a security threat and a symbolic threat to regional or international order.  

At the same time, a publicized and officially acknowledged intervention represents a clear and unambiguous commitment to a local ally and its success in the local conflict. Aid and combat participation by an outside power on behalf of a local ally a symbolic demonstration of support. Publicly “owning” the intervention is a clear commitment to success. Reviewing the dangers of becoming caught between breaking a commitment and deepening one’s actions to win (i.e. “commitment trap”), Sagan argues that a commitment can “acquire a substantial life of its own, taking on significance as a symbolic demonstration of a country's dedication to principles, security interests, or other considerations removed from the situation with which the commitment is concerned.”

Publicity of a covert intervention by other states can create a clear commitment on behalf of the intervener. Secrecy and ambiguity help hedge against the possibility that an outside power has made a symbolically important commitment.

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119 Ibid., 112–3.
121 The perception of a commitment may arise even when an intervening state does not intend it. Schelling describes several perceived American commitments which were not consciously generated. The adversary can influence this, as when Schelling notes that “[i]f we always treat China as though it is a Soviet California, we tend to make it so....We thus oblige them to react in China, or in North Vietnam or wherever it may be, and in effect give them precisely the commitment that is worth so much to them in deterring the West. If we make it clear that we believe they are obliged to react to an intrusion in Hungary as though we were in the streets of Moscow, then they are obliged.” Schelling, Arms and Influence, 51–2, 60.
Clear challenges make harsh responses by other states hard to avoid. Clear commitments make restraint and withdrawal by the intervening state hard. One reason is that clear challenges and commitments raise the reputational stakes. An intervening state with clear commitment to an ally and its victory in the local conflict will find stalemate or failure much more humiliating. With their role unambiguous and their commitment clear, intervening states may find themselves without a face-saving way of withdrawing. Leaders may fear restraint, compromise, or withdrawal will lead its other allies or potential allies to doubt its commitment to mutual defense. This can lead intervening states to “throw good money after bad” and deepen their role making crisis and conflict escalation more likely. As Smoke’s historical review of escalation dynamics finds, “the steps decision-makers take to protect their investment tend to have the effect of increasing the investment, and thereby increasing the necessity of protecting it further.”

A different reputational problem is generated for states reacting to an overt intervention. Appeasement is the bogeyman for these states. Facing a clear “challenge,” other great powers and neutral third party states will find inaction much more difficult. Under the

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122 On the link between publicity, secrecy, and reputational stakes, see Lipson, “Why Are Some International Agreements Informal?” especially 508–9; on the “definitional phase” early in a conflict in which perceptions establish expectations and shape reputational stakes, see Smoke, War: Controlling Escalation, 297.

123 Sallagar notes that “it is not easy for any leader to retreat from an unsuccessful project in the middle of a war. The United States, too, has had great difficulty in finding an acceptable alternative to the bombing of North Vietnam.” Sallagar, The Road to Total War, 152.

124 Sallagar continues arguing this led both British and German leaders to double down and escalate in World War II. In neither case could the British, about to be joined by the American bomber force, have seriously considered abandoning their huge investment in the bombing offensive as an alternative to further escalation. To do so would have been an admission of failure that the British could no more afford at this stage of the war than Hitler could have admitted a retreat from SEA LION.” Ibid., 160.

spotlight, leaders are more likely to believe that anything short of reprisals or counter-intervention will create a reputation for appeasing aggression and risk challenges by other adversaries in the future.\textsuperscript{126} If a reacting state has an alliance or “friendly” relationship with a local combatant or neighboring state, an alliance reliability dimension may add to the reputational pressure for reprisal.\textsuperscript{127}

In short, reputational stakes are perception-based and strongly influenced by publicity and clarity of challenge/commitment. Escalation averse leaders choosing an intervention form may select plausibly deniable methods to avoid these reputational traps. Reacting states may echo this caution if they too desire to reduce escalation risks. Thus, states on both sides may share a desire to create a firewall between a local conflict and reputations.

These reputational dynamics are exacerbated by two other effects of publicity in intervention scenarios. One effect is on domestic politics. Publicized interventions that are clear challenges and clear commitments can awaken strong domestic political pressures that may force leaders into staying the course (intervener) and harsh replies (outside states reacting to intervention). For the intervening state, a publicized presence and clear commitment can mobilize their own domestic constituents. If leaders desire to

\textsuperscript{126} Fear of creating a reputation for low resolve led American leaders to use highly visible responses in Korea, Vietnam, Iraq, and elsewhere, as described in Mercer, \textit{Reputation and International Politics}, 2–5; Fearon also notes this scenario, writing that “[i]f cutting a deal in one dispute would lead other states to conclude the leader’s costs for using force are high, then the leader might choose a costly war rather than suffer the depredations that might follow from making concessions.” Fearon, “Rationalist Explanations for War,” 400.

\textsuperscript{127} See the concept of entrapment in Snyder, \textit{Alliance Politics}.  

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keep their open options for compromise, retreat, or withdrawal, avoiding peak domestic mobilization may be valuable. Domestic politics may simply magnify the reputational dimension if domestic constituents back hard line policies on the basis of reputational concerns (i.e. opposition politicians accusing a leader of dangers to national reputation from withdrawal or appeasement). However, hawkish demands can be made citing other concerns as well, including racial or ideological arguments largely independent of reputations for resolve or alliance reliability. For states reacting to an intervention, a publicized event that is a clear challenge can activate domestic constituents and force their hand towards escalation.\textsuperscript{128} Mobilized domestic constituents can be powerful forces for using force especially in democratic states, as several research areas have noted.\textsuperscript{129} Kurizaki argues states may use private threats during crises in order to remove domestic audience constraints from an adversary (and thereby lower their costs for backing down).\textsuperscript{130} Note also that this domestic dynamic is the reverse of the “dovish domestic constituents” theory of secrecy I described in existing literature. Rather than using

\textsuperscript{128} Sallagar cautioned American audiences that “[a]lthough Soviet leaders presumably would not deliberately set out to provoke American hostility if they were interested in preventing escalation, they might not be aware of the likely effect of their actions upon American public opinion in an already highly charged situation. Also, they could easily underestimate the role that public opinion can play in a democracy by generating pressures that the leaders may find impossible to resist.” Sallagar, \textit{The Road to Total War}, 171.
\textsuperscript{129} Oft-cited examples of democratic public opinion driving leaders to war include the Crimean War and Spanish-American War. Kennan, \textit{American Diplomacy}, 9–10, 65–6, 72–3; Osgood, \textit{Limited War}, chap. 2; Smoke, \textit{War: Controlling Escalation}, 190–3; Sallagar notes that American leaders “need to arouse public opinion in order to assure themselves of the support needed for effective prosecution of the war...Yet they cannot allow this feeling to turn into a crusading fervor, lest people demand a war to the finish in which the objective would be unconditional surrender or extermination of the enemy society.” Sallagar, \textit{The Road to Total War}, 170.
\textsuperscript{130} Kurizaki, “Efficient Secrecy.”
secrecy in response to anti-war domestic pressure, my theory shows the fear of pro-war escalation pressure can cause leaders to use secrecy.

International legal ramifications are another factor triggered by overt, acknowledged interventions. This can exacerbate reputational stakes. One common challenge in localizing conflict is the danger of escalation due to alliances, mutual protection pacts, and other binding defense agreements as many concluded from the sequence leading to World War I.\textsuperscript{131} Public interventions can create clear contact between a local conflict and defense agreements of both the intervening state and reacting states by clarifying the intervention’s character as a commitment and challenge. Secret, unacknowledged involvement, in contrast, keeps the involvement of outside powers in an interpretive “grey area.” The applicability of legal defense agreements is therefore less clear.\textsuperscript{132} Visible and acknowledged interventions also have clear contact with international law regarding use of force. As Chapter 2 describes, normative and international legal changes since World War I have outlawed “aggression.” What constitutes aggression, however, is a continual source of debate. By clarifying the nature of a state’s involvement, publicity makes the conflict event a clearer test of legal prohibitions against aggression. Secrecy and ambiguity, on the other hand, avoid producing a widespread

\textsuperscript{131} Blainey, \textit{The Causes of War}, 228–242.

\textsuperscript{132} To be fair, state behavior regarding alliances is not mechanical; anarchy and the absence of a higher authority capable of forcing legal compliance provides states with a choice of whether to fulfill any peacetime promises even if an overt, publicized intervention clearly invokes a treaty. However, practical and strategic considerations make alliances “pseudo-binding” in that failure to fulfill the terms of an agreement in the face of a clear threat to one’s ally has long-term implications for the confidence of other current allies and the credibility of future alliance commitments. See Miller, “Hypotheses on Reputation.”
perception that specific events are germane to legal agreements and international law.\textsuperscript{133}

Concerns about legal precedence can create their own normative and reputational motivations for upholding alliances and punishing aggression, both of which tend to spiraling escalation harder to avoid.\textsuperscript{134}

Together, these dynamics can often provide a powerful rationale for escalation-averse leaders to utilize secrecy. Publicity clarifies the nature of the intervention and its status as a challenge and commitment. This raises reputational stakes for both intervening states and those who must react. These reputational dynamics are exacerbated when publicity mobilizes domestic audiences and when various legal ramifications are perceived as relevant. Combined, these dynamics create powerful external pressure against restraint on both sides of the conflict. Leaders may foresee one or several of these scenarios and use secrecy and non-acknowledgement to create a firewall around the local event. This can preserve pathways for face-saving restraint. In contrast to current explanations, the target of secrecy and non-acknowledgement is not an adversary or dovish domestic public. Current and potential allies, future adversaries, and hawkish domestic constituents are the primary target. Table 2 summarizes the differences leaders may anticipate when selecting publicity or secrecy in intervention scenarios.

\textsuperscript{133} Lipson, “Why Are Some International Agreements Informal?”; Carson, “The Publicity Dilemma and Norm Emergence: The Case of Israeli Nuclear Opacity.”

\textsuperscript{134} Kier and Mercer, “Setting Precedents in Anarchy.”
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Publicity</th>
<th>&quot;Challenge&quot;</th>
<th>&quot;Commitment&quot;</th>
<th>Reputational stakes</th>
<th>Domestic mobilization</th>
<th>Law-related implications</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Clear challenge</td>
<td>Clear commitment to local ally,</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High and hawkish</td>
<td>German (defense treaties and international</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>victory</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;aggression&quot; law)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secrecy and/or tacit</td>
<td>Unclear: unknown or ambiguous</td>
<td>Unclear: unknown or tentative</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low and indeterminate</td>
<td>Germaneness uncertain: unknown or ambiguous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>collusion</td>
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Table 2. Escalation pressure sources and publicity’s dangers

For purposes of simplicity, this exposition has focused on a single intervening state and the reactions of a limited number of others. In practice, however, local conflicts can host several interventions, in part because a common reaction to outside intervention is to counter-intervene. Scenarios with multiple interventions therefore may feature several layers of secrecy and a variety of kinds of intervention. One specific implication of this approach is that escalation-averse leaders may prefer to counter-intervene in covert means. This may help break an action-reaction cycle and keep the crisis or conflict relatively localized.\footnote{See discussion of action-reaction cycles and the way less-than-public methods of reprisal can avoid escalation in Smoke, \textit{War: Controlling Escalation}, 249–50, 273, 278–81.} Overall, the theory suggests that the greater the escalation risks, the fewer overt interventions and the more tacit collusion will take place.
These mechanisms display the core principles of the impression management approach. States use secrecy and deniable forms of action to preserve face-saving opportunities for restraint. Secrecy helps maintain an impression of non-involvement to avoid the dangers of humiliation, reputation damage, and role conflicts. Other states may join in protecting that impression and the overall perception of the nature of the conflict. Such concerns may drive the use of secrecy and tacit collusion even in a state of open secrecy. States’ collective refusal to acknowledge the covert presence of outside powers (i.e. “mutual pretense”) can still minimize the reputational, domestic political, and legal dimensions of a conflict. With these tools, states are, in a sense, creating a “back stage” in which competition can take place out of the limelight. Secrecy, ambiguity, and non-acknowledgement are used to manipulate outside perceptions and make restraint in crisis and war easier.

Conclusion

This chapter presents a theoretical framework for understanding what secrecy does and why states use it, both individually and collectively. After describing four basic principles of an “impression management approach,” I develop a theory of secrecy in military intervention scenarios focused on avoiding crises and minimizing escalation risks. Leaders use secrecy to preserve face-saving opportunities for restraint on both sides. Publicized and acknowledged interventions clarify the new status of the intervening state, the nature of a challenge and commitment, and the overall redefinition of the conflict. This triggers dynamics in external audiences which tend to trap leaders
into hostile reactions and an escalating spiral of conflict. To avoid this, intervening and witnessing states may use secrecy and tacit collusion to lower the stakes of the conflict. Secrecy is a tool used by leaders to engage in security competition but minimize external escalation pressures.\footnote{A slightly different but supportive view is that states using a covert form to intervene are sending a costly signal of restraint to their adversary. See the discussion of communication in the adversary dyad above for how this may also address escalation concerns. One weakness of this explanation is that it does not provide an obvious rationale for tacit collusion by an adversary who receives this signal of restraint. In any event, my empirical analysis is careful to identify evidence that the external audience logic is operating (i.e. evidence of leaders citing “face” and “prestige” concerns). See the hypotheses on causal mechanisms in Chapter 4.}

To be fair, this logic for secrecy does not hold in all scenarios and at all times. Escalation-averse leaders may ultimately elect not to intervene at all. Moreover, some leaders cultivate crises; escalation may be even invited. However, outside powers often have sufficient interest in a local conflict to consider involvement. Understanding how leaders who are so situated and desire to control escalation can use secrecy (and the expectation that other states may reciprocate) helps us understand an important empirical phenomenon overlooked and misunderstood to date. Note also that the theory does not argue secrecy is the main reason conflict escalation does not take place in limited wars. Secrecy is simply one of several tools leaders can use in the hopes of addressing escalation risks. Anticipated escalation dangers are the rationale for the use of secrecy. I theorize why states use secrecy, not whether secrecy once used is the most important reason for escalation avoidance.
In general, the theory holds two important lessons regarding interactions in the international system. Recalling the points in Chapter 2, the impression management approach suggests innovations in secrecy have had the effect of re-creating a “back stage.” Technological and political change shines an increasingly broad and bright light on international affairs. An important effect of this spotlight, this chapter argues, is the more frequent investment of reputational, prestige, legal, and other potentially escalatory considerations into specific events. Crises and “litmus tests” are more frequent and, in some ways, more dangerous. The creation of spaces where states can engage in power politics outside this spotlight may be a reaction to these changes. States are, in essence, using innovative secrecy tactics and tacit collusion to create a “back stage” in which face and other concerns are less endangered.

The theory also highlights the general gap between “reality” and “perceptions.” Covert interventions, and tacit collusion by states witnessing them, exploits and perpetuates a gap between what happens on the ground in international politics, what is known, and how it is interpreted. As the empirical analysis that follows makes clear, well-known wars and other events include significant covert interactions which, when peeled back and systematically analyzed, add a fresh set of observations to the traditional narrative. This makes a compelling case for investigating and understanding the covert realm.
Chapter 3 References


Chapter 4: Research Design

How does the project empirically evaluate these ideas about secrecy? The empirical analysis in this project, and thus the research design I select, serves two purposes.¹ First, empirical analysis is used to illustrate the key new concepts I introduce in the project. Unlike a research project on balance of power or free trade agreements, some of the basic moving parts of this project must be described as well as theorized. There is considerable “fresh territory”: concepts like open secrecy and tacit collusion describe phenomena that have been largely overlooked in IR scholarship to date. Due to the nature of secrecy, even the covert state activities themselves are not well known, precisely defined, or easily identifiable. One function of the empirical analysis is therefore to put flesh on these conceptual bones, answering questions like: “What does tacit collusion look like?” and “What are the varieties of covert military intervention?”

The second purpose of the empirical analysis is to rigorously evaluate the explanatory power of my own and other theories for why states use secrecy. When reading the empirics, the goal is not just to show to the reader what tactic collusion and covert intervention look like; I also want lead the reader through a careful analysis of what

¹ On the importance of defining the research objective, and its impact on case selection, see George and Bennett, Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences, 74–9; Levy, “Case Studies.”
considerations lead states to the secrecy-related choices they make. This theory testing uses empirical material to evaluate the relative explanatory power of my own and other theories of secrecy. To be clear, I do not consider different “logics of secrecy” as mutually exclusive; any given instance of secrecy may be motivated by several purposes and those purposes can change over time. Careful empirical analysis using techniques I describe below can identify the predominant consideration(s) driving state choices about secrecy. Theory-driven empirical analysis can also help evaluate the plausibility of specific causal mechanisms I identify: for example, the hypothesis that leaders using secrecy do so to avoid creating prestige or reputation traps that tend to make restraint on either side difficult. Ideally, the empirical analysis will show my theory and its causal mechanisms add significantly to the understanding of secrecy choices in historically important cases that have relevance for contemporary world politics.

I selected a qualitative empirical approach for the project, using comparative case studies of secrecy choices in military intervention scenarios across space and time. A comparative case study design is especially appropriate given the two-fold purpose of my empirical analysis. Choosing depth over breadth allows me to present rich qualitative details; this allows me to focus on fine-grained details that illustrate what new concepts look like in practice. The comparative structure also helps show similarity across context and over time substantiating my premise that covert intervention, tacit collusion, and open secrecy are conceptually coherent and recurrent phenomena worth investigating. A comparative case study design is also appropriate for theory testing. One reason is
practicality: the nature of secrecy does not lend itself well to cross-national large-\( n \)
quantitative analysis. Inconsistently available documentation and large time investments are required to demonstrate the basic descriptive facts of a given case; a large-\( n \) data gathering exercise was judged infeasible early in my research. Yet practicalities are only one consideration. Only a comparative case study design allows me to answer the specific theoretical question of interest, i.e. the considerations that led specific leaders of specific states in historically important cases to make secrecy choices (or not). The qualitative approach enables me to focus on using primary materials which are essential to penetrating debates about policy choices that were not public at the time. In addition, a qualitative design is especially helpful for investigating causal mechanisms. It allows me to not only identify a role for conflict escalation in debates about secrecy but also the specific reason(s) leaders believe publicity endangers escalation control.  

The remainder of this section explains the specific research design choices I made and why. First I derive a set of hypotheses which stipulate a set of observable implications of my own and other secrecy logics. I then identify the universe of cases, explain my reasons for selecting the specific conflicts I analyze, and describe the methods of inference I use to gain maximum theoretical leverage from each case. I conclude by

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2 On advantages of qualitative case studies for concept development and variable innovation, see Collier, Seawright, and Brady, “Critiques, Responses, and Trade-Offs,” 202–9; Gerring, “What Is a Case Study and What Is It Good For?” 347; George and Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*, 111; on their advantages for assessing motivations and perceptions, see Gerring, “What Is a Case Study and What Is It Good For?” 348; on advantages for causal mechanism identification, see McKeown, “Case Studies and the Statistical Worldview”; George and Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*, 21–2.
discussing practical issues of my empirical analysis: sources of data, coding, and weighing evidence.

Hypotheses

Based on the prior literature review and theoretical exposition, this section presents a set of observable differences between three basic logics for secrecy. Tailoring these logics to military intervention scenarios yields quite a number of differences which can help adjudicate relative explanatory importance. Hypotheses about the intervening state are presented first followed by the witnessing state.

The core hypotheses relate to the intervening state’s choice of a secret or public form of intervention. Table 3 lists three basic questions I ask of each case of intervention.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Label</th>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Hypothetical Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Covert choice</td>
<td>What considerations caused a state to select a covert intervention rather than overt?</td>
<td>Great Power A opts against providing publicly acknowledged weaponry to its local ally. Instead, A clandestinely supplies weapons of foreign origin. Why not overt?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overt choice</td>
<td>What considerations caused a state to select an overt intervention rather than covert?</td>
<td>Great Power A provides openly acknowledged weaponry and ground troops to a local ally throughout a conflict. Why not covert?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Targets</td>
<td>Who is cited – domestic, adversary, third party states – when debating form of intervention?</td>
<td>Great Power A decides to aid a local ally. Whose knowledge and perceptions appear most important when choosing the form of aid?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Core questions for intervention cases

The answers to these questions differ for the three theoretical explanations on which I focus. For example, a surprise-based logic for secrecy would predict that Great Power A’s choice to covertly intervene is based on the desire to keep the adversary in the dark to
create temporary battlefield advantages for the local ally. An escalation-based logic, on the other hand, would predict different targets and a different rationale for choosing secrecy. For purposes of clarity, I list the hypotheses related to Table 3.

**Surprise Hypothesis:** States selecting covert interventions will target adversaries and cite the need for tactical military surprise. States will select overt interventions if no meaningful opportunity for surprise exists.

**Domestic Doves Hypothesis:** States selecting covert interventions will target domestic constituents and cite danger of punishment by anti-intervention domestic actors. States will select overt interventions if they are domestically unconstrained or domestic constituents favor intervention.

**Escalation Hypothesis:** States selecting covert interventions will target either third parties or domestic constituents. They will cite the danger of hard-to-control escalation. If domestic constituents are targeted, the danger of hawkish domestic actors will be cited. States will select overt interventions if escalation risks are seen as low.

In addition to these core questions, I pose a set of additional questions about the intervening state. Answers to these questions will also vary depending on the different secrecy logics. This second set of questions draws on the unique theory-testing opportunities created when multiple states intervene in the same conflict, when a single state changes its intervention form over time, and when single state uses a “mixed” form of intervention. Table 4 lists a second set of questions about the intervening state which I consider in each empirical chapter.

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3 On the importance of creatively generating observable implications from theories to improve the value of a given case study, see Campbell, “‘Degrees of Freedom’ and the Case Study”; King, Keohane, and Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry*, 225.

4 Comparing cases by posing the same theory-driven questions to each case has been called “structured, focused comparison” by some; see George and Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*. 
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Label</th>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Hypothetical Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Same conflict, different interventions</td>
<td>Why do different states in the same conflict select different intervention forms?</td>
<td>Great Powers A and B secretly provide anti-aircraft artillery equipment and crews to their local ally. Great Power C openly offers a division of troops to its local ally. Why this variation?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Covert-to-overt transition</td>
<td>What considerations caused a covertly intervening state to transition to an overt form?</td>
<td>Great Power A initially provides covert naval protection for vulnerable ports of a local ally. One year later, A offers publicly visible and acknowledged naval protection. Why this change?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overt-to-covert transition</td>
<td>What considerations caused an overtly intervening state to transition to a covert form?</td>
<td>Great Power A had been overtly offering weaponry to a local ally for one year. Then A decides to end its open aid relationship but continues to provide limited assistance in a clandestine manner. Why this change?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed intervention</td>
<td>What considerations caused a state to intervene overtly with some elements and covertly with others?</td>
<td>Great Power A offers overtly acknowledged combat troops to a local ally. It also provides coastal protection with its navy but does so in a clandestine, plausibly deniable manner. Why intervene covertly with some elements and overtly with others?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4. Additional questions for intervention cases

The answers to these questions differ for the three secrecy logics. For example, the domestic doves logic would predict a state to use a mixed intervention form only if a specific kind of intervention – say, putting “boots on the ground” rather than using air power – was domestically controversial. This basic logic produces the following hypotheses.

*Surprise Hypotheses:* Because surprise benefits are uniform, different states in the same conflict should not vary in their form of intervention. States should transition from covert to overt when opportunities for surprise are exhausted. States should not transition from overt to covert because the element of surprise is lost once overtness is used. Individual states should use mixed interventions only when surprise is specific to a particular way of using force (i.e. only at sea but not on land).

*Domestic Doves Hypotheses:* Different forms of intervention by different states in the same conflict should occur only if there are differences in domestic constraints and

---

5 “Surprise is uniform” refers to two ideas. First, surprise benefits are only available early in an intervention and are typically available in at least some form to any state. Therefore, if one state finds surprise benefits early in their intervention, so should other states. Second, surprise generally depends on geography and state of technology considerations which are structural and static for any given conflict. Therefore, different intervening states should face the same “surprise potential” and choose the same intervention form accordingly.
sentiment among the intervening states.\textsuperscript{6} Individual states should transition from covert to overt when domestic anti-intervention forces weaken. States should transition from overt to covert when domestic anti-intervention forces strengthen. States should use mixed interventions only when domestic constituents view particular forms of intervention (i.e. ground vs. naval) differently.

**Escalation Hypotheses:** Different forms of intervention by different states in the same conflict should occur if there are differences in escalation risks among intervening states.\textsuperscript{7} Individual states should transition from covert to overt when they learn that escalation dangers are lower than previously believed. States should transition from overt to covert when they learn that escalation dangers are higher than previously believed. States should use mixed interventions only when there are differing escalation dangers for particular forms of intervention (i.e. ground vs. naval).

One important potential contribution of the theory is expanding the scope of analysis to include the reaction of other states to secrecy. A key insight of the impression management approach I develop is that other states may “play along” with the fiction of non-intervention under the right circumstances. Table 5 lists a set of questions specifically regarding witnessing state reactions.\textsuperscript{8}

\textsuperscript{6} Put another way, this theory expects different intervention forms in the same conflict only if intervening states have different structural domestic constraints (i.e. one democracy, one autocracy) and have different domestic views about intervention (i.e. one nationalistic constituency, one war-averse constituency).

\textsuperscript{7} While the theory does not require a specific rationale, this variation can take a “realist” or “psychological” form, or both. Intervening states may have differences in their material vulnerability in the event of escalation. A neighbor intervening in a local conflict may have much more serious vulnerability if the conflict escalates than a state intervening from across an ocean. Intervening states may also have differences in their escalation sensitivity. Some leaders may be risk tolerant and others may be risk averse.

\textsuperscript{8} The category of “witnessing states” is extremely large; in the abstract it includes all states in the international system besides the intervening state. For tractability purposes, my empirical analysis often focuses on the specific kind of witnessing state, adversaries, whose tacit collusion is most puzzling. The theoretical insight is more general and future research will offer opportunities to investigate reactions of the larger pool of witnessing states.
### Table 5. Questions for witnessing state cases

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Label</th>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Hypothetical Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Detection</td>
<td>How commonly do witnessing states detect covert interventions?</td>
<td>Great Power A covertly aids its local ally. How frequently do witnessing states, especially adversaries, detect this aid? When?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>likelihood</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tacit</td>
<td>Why do witnessing states that detect covert intervention tacitly collude?</td>
<td>Adversary B detects Great Power A’s secret provision of anti-aircraft artillery and crews to a local ally. Adversary B chooses not to publicize this information and publicly maintains a position that A has not intervened. Why not publicize?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>collusion</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Publicity</td>
<td>Why do witnessing states that detect covert intervention publicize it?</td>
<td>Adversary B detects Great Power A’s secret provision of lethal weaponry to a local ally. Adversary B publicizes this information and accuses A of intervention in the conflict. Why publicize?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Once again, the answers to these questions differ for the three different explanations for secrecy. The contrast in expectations of these theories is especially stark for witnessing state reactions.

*Surprise Hypothesis:* Because the goal is surprise, witnessing states including adversaries should rarely detect covert interventions. When detection takes place, there is no prediction for how witnessing states should react.

*Domestic Doves Hypothesis:* Because the target is exclusively domestic for this logic, there is no theoretically derivable prediction about the likelihood of detection by other states or their behavior once detected.

*Escalation Hypothesis:* Because the target is not the adversary, detection of covert interventions including the adversary should be relatively common. When detection takes place, witnessing states will tacitly collude if the escalation dangers of the local conflict are deemed high. Witnessing states should publicize the covert intervention if they deem escalation dangers to be low.

Based on the well-known benefits of publicity cited in Chapter 1, I include an additional hypothesis which captures the powerful intuition that witnessing states should “go public” and name-and-shame an outside state covertly intervening in a local conflict.
Witnessing State Publicity Hypothesis: When detection takes place, witnessing states will publicize the covert intervention in order to boost domestic and third party opposition to the intervention and defend sovereignty and use-of-force norms.

Lastly, one benefit of careful qualitative analysis is the possibility of finding evidence for specific causal mechanisms. What does that evidence look like? Table 6 describes the kinds of causal mechanism evidence I look for in each case.⁹

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Logic</th>
<th>Causal Mechanism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Surprise</td>
<td>Secrecy advocates should argue that visible forms of aid will give warning to the adversary and prompt counter-measures that will thwart the intervention’s effectiveness. They may argue that surprise is especially important given the local balance of forces. They should discuss the importance of a temporary tactical advantage for the local ally’s performance in the war.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic doves</td>
<td>Secrecy advocates may argue that key domestic constituents are opposed to intervention. They may argue that domestic audiences are attuned to the local conflict and therefore politically threatening. They may cite political problems or threats to the political base of a leader. They should argue secrecy avoids this.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Escalation (intervening state)</td>
<td>Secrecy advocates may argue a public intervention makes restraint harder for one or both sides. They may say visible aid would raise the reputational stakes of the conflict making restraint or withdrawal later very costly. They may say overt aid will engage the prestige of other third parties making their counter-intervention more likely. They may say a public role means any combat encounters with outside powers will be a crisis from which both cannot back down.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Escalation (witnessing state)</td>
<td>Tacit collusion advocates may argue publicity of the intervention makes restraint harder for one or both sides. They may explain that publicity creates intolerable reputational damage if the covertly intervening state must use restraint or withdrawal later. They may explain publicity will engage the prestige of other third parties making counter-intervention more likely. They may argue publicity will mean any combat encounters with outside powers will be a crisis from which both cannot back down. They may cite the danger of domestic constituents demanding reprisals or even war. They should argue secrecy avoids this.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6. Causal mechanism evidence for each theory

Universe of case, case selection, and strategies of inference

With these hypotheses in mind, it is important to specify which cases I chose, why, and what techniques I use to gain maximum leverage for my descriptive and theory-testing goals. It is important to note that the language of “case” has to be used carefully; a

⁹ On deriving expectations about mechanisms from theories to improve the value of case studies, see Hall, “Aligning Ontology and Methodology in Comparative Politics.”
conflict is not a case. A single event (i.e. war) may include several cases (i.e. multiple threats). Similarly, more than one state may intervene in a local conflict creating multiple cases within a single conflict. The number of cases will further expand if a single state transitions from covert to overt intervention (one covert intervention, one overt intervention, \( n = 2 \)) or if a witnessing state detects and publicizes a covert intervention (one intervention, one publicity decision, \( n = 2 \)).

The universe of cases for the project is *all civil and interstate conflicts in which at least one external military power intervenes militarily.* As I define above, external intervention involves an outside state delivering lethal military assistance or providing military units for combat-related duties to one side in an ongoing conflict. Examples range from the very local and relatively obscure, such as Egypt’s intervention in the Yemeni civil war in the 1960s, to the very large and well-known, such as the Western intervention in Libya’s civil war in 2011. Intervention in the form of lethal aid or military units by outside powers can be provided openly or clandestinely. Recall also that any conflict with at least one covert intervention may include a second set of cases if one or more states detect it.

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11 On defining the universe of cases and reason for sampling specific cases, see Collier, “Translating Quantitative Methods for Qualitative Researchers.”
12 “External” is defined temporally and spatially. Temporally, external refers to any combatant that joins in after an initial conflict is in progress. Spatially, external often refers to states outside the region but not necessarily. A state can engage in an external intervention inside its neighbor if there is an ongoing civil war, for example.
Why did I choose my cases over other possibilities? One important constraint was evidence availability. Many smaller interventions, such as the various interventions in the civil wars of Mozambique and Zaire in the 1970s, may lack extensive documentary records. Even where reliable documentation exists, language and archive access is a second constraint. For example, documents on the various Cuban interventions in Angola and Latin America during the Cold War will not be available for some time barring major change in Havana. Even where archives are open and documents hypothetically available, my own language limitations were an important consideration in ruling out some cases, such as the numerous French interventions in West Africa.

I chose to focus on three conflicts from the remaining possibilities. I strove to strike a balance among four key goals when selecting these conflicts and the cases within them: historical/political importance, documentary richness, “high leverage” inferential features, and generalizability.

1. **Historical and political importance.** The universe of conflicts with external interventions features many cases with very modest impact on regional and international political dynamics. I looked for cases which had significant consequences for the systemic or regional balance of power as well as the evolution of norms, international law, and international organization. Another consideration was to include cases that shared features with contemporary events to help demonstrate potential applicability. The parallels between the Spanish
Civil War and recent civil wars such as Libya, for example, were one consideration which led me to select that conflict.

2. *Documentary opportunism.* Even within the subset of cases that have accessible documentary records, there are substantial differences in the quality and quantity of documents. My case selection of Afghanistan and the Korean War was done in part due to my awareness of an unusually accessible documentary record for multiple states. A robust documentary record on at least one participant was important to gain access to internal beliefs and deliberations about secrecy/publicity; these conflicts feature fairly robust records on both sides creating much more clarity. One danger in using practical considerations to select cases is possible bias: selection of cases based on document availability could create a “biased sample” that is more likely to support my explanation. I see no plausible reason why this is a likely result but many of the inferential strategies I cite below guard against this possibility as well.\(^\text{13}\)

3. *High leverage inferential features.* The third goal was to choose cases that allowed for the most rigorous forms of theory testing given my comparative case study design. Cases are especially high leverage if they are “most-” or “least-likely” for a given explanation, if they feature interesting variation over time, and if they jointly “hold constant” important features of a situation which might otherwise influence the observed outcome. One strategy I used was to focus on

\(^{13}\) The core question about bias is whether there is a plausible reason to suspect that the accessibility of documents is related to the rationale for secrecy. If so, using accessible documents would put a thumb on the scales of theory testing. I see no reason to suspect documentation about covert interventions motivated by surprise, for example, to be less subject to release than those motivated by escalation concerns.
nested comparisons, or sets of cases nested within a single larger conflict. Nested cases hold many potentially important variables “constant.” For example, the differences among the three interventions in the Korean War are despite each state facing a uniform balance of power, regional political dynamics, and military technology. A second strategy was choosing “least-likely” cases for my explanation. For example, I chose one conflict (Afghanistan) in which an escalation risk-based logic was unlikely because the external powers had over forty years of interaction experience and no direct combat contact. Finding evidence in favor of the theory would therefore provide especially strong evidence compared to cases with more hospitable initial conditions. My third strategy was to choose cases with significant “within-case” variation, i.e. interventions that evolve from cover to overt or which feature a mix of covert and overt element. Tracking what considerations led the same leaders to eschew and embrace secrecy at different points offers particularly useful theory-testing evidence that supplements the cross-state comparisons.  

4. **Generalizability.** Picking cases solely to maximize the precision of theory testing (i.e. internal validity) can trade off with the ability to evaluate whether theory “travels” (i.e. external validity). The fourth goal was to select a set of conflicts

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14 On selecting cases which can be compared holding important variables constant, see Lijphart, “Comparative Politics and the Comparative Method”; Gerring, *Case Study Research*, 131–139; on least likely and most likely cases, see George and Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*, 120–3; Gerring, *Case Study Research*, 115–122; on within-case variation and evaluating the timing of change to test theory, see Mahoney, “Strategies of Causal Assessment in Comparative Historical Analysis”; Collier, “Understanding Process Tracing”; on the importance of having cases of “public” as well as “secret” (i.e. variation on the dependent variable), see Geddes, “How the Cases You Choose Affect the Answers You Get.”
which subjected the theory to tests across historical eras. Building on the foundation case of the Korean War, I chose a set of cases from prior to the Cold War to guard against the possibility that any findings were unique to bipolarity or a system with nuclear weapons (i.e. Spanish Civil War). Faced with two cases already sixty years in the rearview mirror, I chose a final set of cases closer to contemporary politics. The Afghanistan war helped demonstrate similar dynamics held as recently as the mid-1980s.\footnote{Selecting a case from any more recent creates serious document availability problems due to declassification law and lagging implementation. Relying on interviews as an alternative was a temptation but one I ultimately was not comfortable with for theory testing purposes. I hope to pursue this approach to a more recent case, such as the Syrian civil war, in future research.} The Afghanistan case also helped show the plausibility that the theory applies to conflicts with low global escalation risks (but high regional escalation risks) and which feature lethal aid rather than combat participation.

Based on these selection principles, I settled on three conflicts which include a number of specific cases of publicity/secrecy choices. Each conflict has unique features which I discuss at greater length in the individual chapters. However, it is worth noting that each empirical chapter serves a somewhat different purpose in the overall research design. The Korean War hosts my “paradigmatic” cases, especially the American-Soviet behavior with respect to Soviet air combat participation. The Spanish Civil War conflict hosts a set of cases that show the theory’s relevance outside the Cold War and in the absence of the shadow of nuclear escalation. The Afghanistan conflict hosts cases which show the theory’s applicability in scenarios with regional rather than global escalation.
risks and with aid rather than combat participation as the form of intervention. The complete roster of cases across chapters is listed in Table 7.16

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conflict</th>
<th>Case</th>
<th>Outcome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Korean War</td>
<td>Soviet role in N.K. invasion</td>
<td>Covert</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Western reaction to Soviet role</td>
<td>Tacit collusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Western intervention</td>
<td>Overt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chinese intervention (1)</td>
<td>Covert</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Western reaction to China (1)</td>
<td>Tacit collusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chinese intervention (2)</td>
<td>Overt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Western reaction to China (2)</td>
<td>Publicity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Soviet intervention</td>
<td>Covert</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>U.S. reaction to Soviet</td>
<td>Tacit collusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish Civil War</td>
<td>Italian intervention (1)</td>
<td>Covert</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>German intervention</td>
<td>Covert</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Soviet intervention</td>
<td>Covert</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Italian intervention (2)</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Italian intervention (3)</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Italian intervention (4)</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>U.K./France reaction to all</td>
<td>Tacit collusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Afghanistan conflict</td>
<td>Soviet intervention</td>
<td>Covert</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>American reaction</td>
<td>Tacit collusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Soviet invasion/occupation</td>
<td>Overt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>American reaction</td>
<td>Publicity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>American intervention (1)</td>
<td>Covert</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>American intervention (2)</td>
<td>Overt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Soviet reaction to both</td>
<td>Publicity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7. Cases and outcomes

Data sources and coding details

I conclude with a brief discussion on data sources and coding. My data sources include primary and secondary historical materials on each of the three conflicts. Whenever

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16 Each time a state alters its intervention form, a new case is created because a new choice for publicity or secrecy is made. See, for example, “Chinese intervention (1)” vs. “(2)” in the table. On new observations based on change over time, see Gerring, “What Is a Case Study and What Is It Good For?”. 

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possible, I base claims on primary evidence because of the unique role such material plays in evaluating why states chose policies which were often secret. Primary materials came in two basic forms. One is published primary materials collected and, if necessary translated, by governments and non-governmental research institutions.\(^\text{17}\) The second is from original archival research. I specifically used the two National Archives locations in College Park, Maryland and in downtown Washington, D.C., to gather declassified material from the U.S. State Department and other agencies. When primary sources were unavailable or impractical, I relied on the most recent and reliable historian research on the cases.\(^\text{18}\)

The outcome of interest is secrecy/publicity choices by states. How I classified different cases requires some explanation. Publicity choices are straightforward. Overt interventions and publicity decision by witnessing states were identified through their official public statements as well as news reports of official sources alleging intervention activity. Identifying covert intervention was also quite straightforward. All the cases of covert intervention in this study are confirmed by both primary documents and secondary sources. Allegations of covert intervention are surprisingly common; thus, my standard was to use covert interventions which, over time, have a sufficient documentary record to

\(^{17}\) For older material (i.e. pre-1980), declassified government sources are often published in official declassified compendiums, such as the *Foreign Relations of the United States* and *Documents on British Foreign Policy* series. Documents on Hitler-era Germany are also available in English in the *Documents on German Foreign Policy* series. Other primary sources come from research centers and scholars, such as the translated Soviet archival material available through the National Security Archive and Wilson Center in Washington, D.C.

\(^{18}\) Each empirical chapter’s research included a review of the historiographical state of the art to identify the most recent and reliable historian research.
assess their existence and many of their details. Identifying tacit collusion was the least
straightforward. Tacit collusion is a concept I develop to describe a set of practices; it is
not necessarily a technique in the minds of decision-makers as such. Based on the
definition I provide above, tacit collusion is the conscious political decision to abstain
from publicizing detected evidence of covert intervention and the maintenance of an
official public posture that the intervening state is not involved in the conflict. I searched
primary and secondary sources to ensure that a) detection took place; b) detection was
shared throughout the government rather than an isolated corner of the intelligence
services; and c) the state’s behavior after detection included retaining classified
information and maintaining a public posture that the detected state was not involved.

Given the main theoretical question (“Why do states use secrecy?”), the other main
coding challenge is to identify why a state chose secrecy/publicity. My strategy was to
take the most direct approach. First, I assessed the reason-giving by decision-makers
using the best material available. Then I judged the relative influence of different
articulated reasons about the pros and cons of secrecy/publicity. The relative influence of
certain considerations is judged based on the frequency of citation, the level within the
government a consideration was voiced, and the breadth of its citation by relevant players
in the decision.\footnote{I rely on corroboration and triangulation using multiple primary sources where possible to show that a consideration was repeatedly cited by different actors at different times. This is one reason my empirical chapters include rather extensive direct quoting at times.} Important evidence is also contained in what these debates do not
discuss. A decision to intervene covertly in which no major participant is known to have
mentioned surprise considerations is an important reason to doubt the explanatory
relevance of the surprise logic.\textsuperscript{20} I therefore make conclusions like “x consideration
played a key role in y decision” and to acknowledge the presence of multiple reasons
when necessary.\textsuperscript{21} This process allows for falsifiability as well. My theory is denied
support when I observe secrecy choices by intervening or witnessing states and yet
conflict escalation and external audience reactions are not mentioned or frequently invoked.

\textsuperscript{20} Two possible critiques could arise from this discussion. First, the adage “absence of evidence is not
evidence of absence” provides reason to be cautious regarding the conclusion. Yet part of the reason this
adage is compelling is because the \textit{public} documentary record is often censored; thus absence of evidence
may simply be evidence of a need to dig deeper before making any conclusions. If formerly classified
documents lack any mention of x issue, then the caution based on this adage’s appeal is substantially
reduced. Second, one might wonder whether explicitly stated reasons are the only factors which influence
a state’s choices including for secrecy/publicity. One could envision unarticulated reasons, deeply
internalized cultural beliefs, or emotional states as influencing a state choice for secrecy. I am still
considering ways to address this potential weakness; at this stage in the project, my main defense is that I
believe reasons that are articulated behind closed doors during internal debates on policy selection to be
important even if other unarticulated dynamics are important as well.

\textsuperscript{21} This kind of claim stops short of saying x was the only consideration that was important or its impact
100\% certain.
Chapter 4 References

Campbell, David. “‘Degrees of Freedom’ and the Case Study.” *Comparative Political Studies* 8, no. 2 (July 1975): 178–193.


Chapter 5: The Korean War

The Korean War is an important case to analyze for both historical and theoretical reasons. The war was a critical stimulus for the creation of full-blown superpower rivalry and an enduring reference point in that rivalry. In the United States, the mobilization of personnel and materiel necessary to fight a stalemated land war in Asia put tremendous pressure on the Truman Administration and Congress to reverse post-World War II demobilization.\(^1\) Indeed, the resource and organizational foundations for a new “national security state” were laid as a result of the demands of the Korean War, including emergency economic price controls, a selective service system, a concrete commitments to station troops in Europe under the North Atlantic Treaty, and drastic increases in defense spending.\(^2\) Historians agree that Truman’s approval of the containment blueprint “NSC-68” was heavily influenced by his view that the Soviet-ordered invasion signaled an appetite for territorial aggression. At home, selling the need for a robust defense establishment with an internationalist mission became far easier as American and Chinese involvement in the war deepened.\(^3\)

\(^1\) Jervis, “The Impact of the Korean War on the Cold War”; Casey, Selling the Korean War; Stueck, The Korean War: An International History. Jervis (584-8) also reviews whether other events could have stimulated such a convergence in threat perception and concludes the Korean War was uniquely critical. \(^2\) Hogan, A Cross of Iron; Jervis, “The Impact of the Korean War on the Cold War,” 578–84. \(^3\) Casey, “Selling NSC-68.”
In addition, the course of events in the Korean War – threats unheeded, escalation provoked in some ways and avoided in others – left lasting memories for leaders later in the Cold War. Both sides of the Cold War learned one critical lesson: war could be limited. American and Soviet abstention in using atomic weapons and their ostensible success in avoiding direct combat convinced many that future competition could take place below general war.\(^4\) The lessons of the Korean War became part of a common stock of tacit knowledge for American foreign policy elite: as Yuen Foong Khong documents, policy arguments about threat credibility, appeasement, and escalation risks in the Vietnam War were expressed through analogical reasoning using the Korean War.\(^5\) For example, Vice President Humphrey cited the Korean War in a memo to then-President Johnson using to illustrate the links between overt/covert forms of intervention and prestige-driven escalation in the Vietnam War.

Politically, people think of North Vietnam and North Korea. They recall all the ‘lessons’ of 1950–53 …[W]e should distinguish carefully between those military actions necessary to reach our political goal of a negotiated settlement, and those likely to provoke open Chinese military intervention. We should not underestimate the likelihood of Chinese intervention and repeat the mistake of the Korean War. If we begin to bomb further north in Vietnam, the likelihood is great of an encounter with the Chinese Air Force operating from sanctuary bases across the border. Once the Chinese Air Force is involved, Peking's full prestige will be involved as she cannot afford to permit her Air Force to be destroyed. To do so would undermine, if not end, her role as a great power in Asia. Confrontation with the Chinese Air Force can easily lead to massive retaliation by the Chinese in South Vietnam.\(^6\)

\(^6\) “Memorandum from Vice President Humphrey to President Johnson, February 17, 1965”. The memo expressed Humphrey’s reservations about an expanding American commitment in Vietnam based on the domestic and international political implications.
In terms of theoretical value, the Korean War is a high-leverage case for analyzing secrecy dynamics in war situations. It offers many more observations than a single “case.” Because the war expanded in the number of external participants in three distinct stages – with first American, then Chinese, and then Soviet combat participation – the Korean War actually features a series of nested intervention and collusion decisions. By carefully pulling apart the decisions at each notch in the expansion of the war, I am able to gain significant overall leverage on the question of motives within a single conflict. Second, a robust primary documentary record now exists for important phases of the internal decision-making processes on all three sides. On the American side, declassification of records as part of the Foreign Relations of the United States series and a wave of new work by diplomatic and military historians provide a relatively comprehensive record. I supplemented these published sources with my own archival research at the National Archives in Washington, D.C. On the Chinese and Soviet side, the availability of select archival sources to scholars since the end of the Cold War has greatly expanded the depth of knowledge about decisions by Mao and Stalin. Basing my theory testing on this rich historical record provides the rare opportunity to directly evaluate motives for secrecy, tacit collusion, and publicity.

**Background and Synopsis**

The political meanings and implications of Korean War were complex: it was, simultaneously, a civil war for control of a peninsula among its politically divided
occupants and an internationalized struggle for the upper hand between the forces of socialist revolution and political-economic liberalism. The war took place on a peninsula of critical strategic importance with borders along Chinese and Soviet territory, a narrow strait separating it from Japan, and ample space from which any decisively victorious side could project power in East Asia.

That Korea was divided at all was a consequence of forces largely beyond the Koreans themselves. Following decades of Japanese occupation, the peninsula was split into a North and South Korea along the 38\textsuperscript{th} parallel by Soviet-American agreement as they rapidly recovered territory from the crumbling Japanese Empire. The United States and Soviet Union installed sympathetic leaders to govern their respective halves of the peninsula. Syngman Rhee in the American-allied South and Kim Il Sung in the Soviet-allied North quickly moved to consolidate their power against internal dissent. While the great powers had intended the division to be temporary, the initial signs of rivalry between the U.S. and Soviets combined with brutal power consolidation campaigns by Rhee and Kim to doom the prospects of peaceful reunification. The 1948 Berlin Crisis, the Soviet detonation of its first atomic weapon, and the victory of Chinese Communists over the Kuomintang Nationalists in neighboring China only heightened the stakes on the Korean peninsula.

\footnote{The historiography of the war has included significant debate over the relative importance of civil vs. international factors. For representative works of either side, see, respectively, Cumings, \textit{The Origins of the Korean War, Vol. 2: The Roaring of the Cataract}; Stueck, \textit{The Korean War: An International History}.}
In coordination with allies Stalin and Mao, Kim Il Sung’s North Korea launched a surprise attack into South Korea on June 25, 1950. After verifying the initiation of a coordinated attack in the following forty-eight hours, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) passed a resolution demanding the end of hostilities and the assistance of member states to restore the pre-war status quo. President Truman ordered immediate assistance to South Korea from General Douglas MacArthur’s Far Eastern command, based in occupied Tokyo, and had authorized the use of air, naval, and U.S. combat troops based in Japan within four days of the attack. Despite these swift responses, North Korea had substantial tactical momentum: a mere two weeks after the initial invasion, Seoul had collapsed and swaths of South Korean territory were under North Korean control. Meanwhile, a multinational, U.N.-blessed military command had begun finalizing a coordinated defensive perimeter in the southern portion of the peninsula under MacArthur. Increasingly extended supply lines for the North and a greater ability to leverage air and naval dominance by the U.S./U.N. side reversed the momentum of the Korean People’s Army (KPA). By early August 1950, KPA and U.S./U.N. forces had settled into entrenched positions along the outskirts of Pusan, a port city on the southeastern tip of the peninsula.

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8 The existence, sequence, and extent of consultation with Stalin and Mao have been the subject of significant attention by historians of the Korean War. New evidence since the end of the Cold War shows significant prior consultation took place at the initiative of the North Koreans and some presence of Soviet advisors in planning and executing the invasion. For a recent review of the state of debate, see Matray, “Korea’s War at 60.”

9 The resolution was not vetoed by the Soviet Union due to a pre-existing boycott of the Council; the Chinese Communists did not veto because China’s seat had not yet been transferred from the Nationalists.
On September 15, a daring amphibious landing engineered by General MacArthur turned the tides of the war. The stunningly successful Inchon landing on the west coast of the peninsula placed U.S./U.N. forces a short distance from Seoul and North Korea’s long supply lines. The KPA scrambled in retreat as it faced threats from both the north and south. A critical policy decision then confronted the U.S. and its allies: where should the advancing U.S./U.N. forces stop? Despite resistance from many allies, and in the face of ambiguous but well-circulated Chinese threats should the parallel be crossed, MacArthur received approval to enter North Korea by the first week in October. At the same time, Mao, the Chinese Politburo, and Stalin were finalizing decisions on the nature and timing of the large-scale introduction of Chinese troops into the war. Battlefield events in mid-October did nothing to reduce the urgency of their deliberations: the capital of North Korea, Pyongyang, was captured by South Korean and U.S. Eight Army troops on October 19. To forestall the seemingly imminent collapse of its ally, Mao ordered 260,000 members of China’s 13th Army Corps stationed across the international border at the Yalu River in Manchuria into North Korea. The troops were relabeled “Chinese People’s Volunteers” (CPV) and carefully, secretly moved south. By mid-November, the stage was set for their own surprise attack.

Unaware of the magnitude of China’s entry and brimming with confidence, General MacArthur launched a “Home by Christmas” offensive to the Yalu River on November

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10 For details on the number, timing, and manner of China’s infiltration of northern North Korea, see Zhang, Mao’s Military Romanticism, 86–95.
25th. The very next day, Mao issued final directions for a massive surprise counter-offensive. As part of his own offensive, MacArthur had separated his forces into two advancing columns; Chinese and KPA units deftly invited the columns to advance, splitting them while counter-attacking and quickly reversing U.S./U.N. momentum. The North Korean and Chinese counter-offensive expelled U.S./U.N. forces from Pyongyang and even Seoul by the New Year of 1951.

Despite dramatic shifts in territorial control, the basic battlefield contours of the conflict were settled by the end of February 1951. Eight months after the initial North Korean invasion, the United States and its allies retained control of Seoul and points south while China and North Korea, amply supplied with Soviet equipment and ammunition, retained control of Pyongyang and points north. Two years stretched on as armistice talks lurched forward before a final deal was struck in 1953. During those two years, the rough stalemate near the 38th parallel remained even as MacArthur was very publicly rebuked and replaced by Truman, Eisenhower succeeded Truman, and Stalin died. The final result of the armistice – failed unification and the creation of a separate, sovereign communist North and capitalist Korea along a mid-peninsula demilitarized zone – remains the political status quo today.

I evaluate two central research questions in the remainder of the chapter for each of three “pivotal moments.” First, what motivates an intervening state to employ overt or covert methods in their intervention? Second, what motivates witnessing adversaries to either
publicize or collude in concealing/denying the intervention activity? As developed elsewhere, likely answers focus on the role of military surprise, domestic political scrutiny, and anticipated likelihood of war escalation. For my theory, the key considerations are the balance between “publicity benefits” and the escalation-dampening benefits of diplomatic downplaying. The first pivotal moment is the mid-1950 invasion by North Korea and subsequent American overt intervention under the auspices of the United Nations. The second pivotal moment features the deployment of troops in combat roles by China in late 1950. The third and final pivotal moment is the decision by the Soviet Union to deploy combat-participating pilots over North Korea in late 1950.

An important consideration in operationalizing an escalation-based explanation is identifying the specific escalation scenarios that were salient to leaders involved in the conflict. Escalation exists in many forms (i.e. horizontal, vertical) and critically depends on idiosyncratic features of wars such as geographical features, border locations, and what form of military weaponry is available.11 Figure 4 summarizes a set of coherent, distinct escalation scenarios which influenced decision-makers on both sides of the conflict.

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11 See, for example, discussion in Smoke, War: Controlling Escalation, 249–251.
Figure 4. Forms of escalation in the Korean War

The red lines indicate the forms of geographic escalation that were most politically important. They also show how even as a conflict creeps up the “staircase” of escalation (i.e. from the second to the third stair), leaders may still find secrecy and deniability useful to avoid ever higher forms (i.e. from the third stair to higher thresholds). Early in the conflict, for example, Western leaders tailored policy to avoid any Chinese combat role in Korea. Once a Chinese presence was detected, Western leaders adapted policy to keep the Chinese role limited rather than “full.” Even after China was fully engaged, Stalin kept his intervention covert to avoid the highest form of escalation (i.e. U.S.-Soviet) and Western leaders chose covert means of harassing the Chinese mainland rather than overt bombing. Throughout the conflict, the shadow cast by the top stairs in the
escalation staircase – full war on the Chinese mainland or a general U.S.-Soviet war – influenced leaders on both sides.

*Western Overt Intervention: Choosing a Public Confrontation (July 1950)*

The invasion of the South by Kim Il Sung’s Korean People’s Army propelled the peninsula onto the international stage and into three years of devastating warfare. The invasion marked the opening of an interstate war which naturally forced Korea’s immediate neighbors and more distant major powers to decide on how to react: stay out in a posture of neutrality, intervene in a covert manner, or opt for an overt intervention. Days after the invasion, the United States and its Western allies decided to publicly intervene under United Nations auspices on behalf of South Korea. Two key findings emerge from this section. First, Western leaders chose an overt form of intervention despite the risks of escalation due to their view that strong publicity benefits would be reaped by a public, United Nations-anchored response. Second, escalation concerns did produce some collusion-type behavior. Fears of provoking escalation to a general war with the Soviet Union caused Western leaders to conceal and ignore their certain belief that the Soviet Union ordered and managed the invasion.

American decision-makers, who possessed the only military assets in the region capable of responding to the invasion, played a central role in commitment decisions in the first

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12 The Soviet Union, a close ally of North Korea, was not present to veto the resolution due to its boycott of the Security Council.
two weeks. Within five days, Truman approved unrestricted use of air and naval assets and General Douglas MacArthur’s requested redeployment of ground troops from Japan to protect the crucial Korean port city of Pusan.

While escalation risks did not lead American leaders to reject a public confrontation, they were important consideration for American and, as the United Nations process caught up, allied leaders. The foremost danger of an overt intervention on behalf of South Korea was a Soviet reply elsewhere, potentially touching off a spiral of reprisals and even World War III. The State Department’s top advisor to General MacArthur in Japan, for example, cabled Secretary Acheson stating that U.S. intervention on behalf of South Korea “risks Russian counter moves.”

American leaders generally did not believe this scenario to be likely for one important reason: Soviet behavior already seemed to show a lack of interest in “the big one.” The widely shared view in the American government in June and July 1950 was that Stalin’s choice to have North Korea act ostensibly on its own – to indirectly manage rather than intervene; to keep the official Soviet description of the war as Korean – showed this crisis

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13 The leading American role continued throughout the conflict due to its exclusive control of the chain of command in the ostensibly “United Nations Command” and its lead representation of the West in armistice negotiations.

14 The sequence of these decisions is described in detail in Millett, The War for Korea, 1950-1951, 114–127; some original documentation on the decisions is available in “Memorandum of Conversation by Ambassador Jessup, June 26, 1950.”

15 “Telegram from William Sebald to Secretary of State, 25 June 1950”. However, the cable concludes intervention was better than inaction because failure to intervene “would start [a] disastrous chain of events leading most probably to world war.”
was not a pretext for a Soviet-led global war. For example, the American ambassador in Moscow interpreted Stalin’s decision to use indirect force, rather than overtly direct the invasion, as a sign that the Soviet Union was “not prepared to risk the possibility of global war.”16 The Korean War historian Allan Millett concludes that throughout the first month, “[t]he weight of official opinion in Washington tilted to the belief that the Soviet Union did not seek a global conflict or even a wider war in Asia.”17 In short, the escalation risks were deemed low at this early stage because the likelihood of Soviet reprisals in Europe was low. Western leaders felt a deliberate escalation to U.S.-Soviet war was unlikely and thus an overt intervention’s other benefits, described below, took precedence.

An overt, publicized intervention on behalf of South Korea held significant operational and publicity benefits. Operationally, an overt intervention would permit fast resupply and maximum combat support for South Korea. A less visible response would have required more a limited form of support including measures to keep the Western role deniable. North Korea’s initial invasion was spectacularly successful and included seizing Seoul in the first two weeks; thus timing and speed were important considerations.

16 “Telegram from Kirk to Secretary of State, June 26, 1950”; see similar statements in “Telegram from Kirk to Secretary of State, June 25, 1950”; “Telegram from Kirk to Secretary of State, June 27, 1950.”
Other publicity benefits existed as well. A public intervention would allow Western leaders to symbolically demonstrate toughness against aggression. One specific benefit was that an overt intervention channeled through the United Nations could shore up the credibility of an as-yet unproven institution. The importance for the United Nations and the parallels between the Korea situation and failures to intervene by the League of Nations inaction was cited widely in deliberations in June and July 1950. On the American side, Truman and the State Department bureaucracy early and often emphasized the importance of branding any U.S. military intervention with the U.N. label.¹⁸ Allies shared the view that the invasion was a critical test. The U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, Warren Austin, reported that delegations from Australia, Sweden, and Italy specifically mentioned the importance of a firm response for the health of the United Nations itself.¹⁹ Indeed, many foreign policy observers believed the very fate of the organization was at stake: an early State Department intelligence analysis warned that “hope that the UN might become an effective international organization will have been virtually destroyed” if the organization did not successfully deal with the Korean crisis.²⁰ Thus, overt intervention carried important operational and publicity benefits which, when combined with a low perceived likelihood of escalation, carried the day.

¹⁸ Casey, Selling the Korean War, 27, 30.
¹⁹ “Telegram from Austin to Secretary of State, June 26, 1950.”
²⁰ “An Intelligence Estimate Prepared by the Estimates Group, Office of Intelligence Research, Department of State, June 25, 1950.”
Escalation dangers were further mitigated because Western leaders saw a way to use diplomatic tact to mitigate risks. This tact was a form of tacit collusion specifically about the Soviet role in the invasion. One the one hand, leaders in Western capitals privately widely shared the belief that Stalin carefully conceived, ordered, and directed the North Korean invasion. The first post-invasion memo from the U.S. ambassador in Moscow judged the “Kremlin’s Korean adventure” as a “clear-cut Soviet challenge” which the Russians hoped would “advance boundaries [of the] Soviet empire without [the] actual use [of] Soviet military forces.” 21 There were even concrete signs of a Soviet role in advising the invasion early in the conflict. A July 1950 joint situation report from the Army’s intelligence bureau, for example, describes eyewitness reports of a Soviet colonel in Pyongyang and suspicious looking “non-Asiatic” officers in Soviet-supplied tanks. 22

On the other hand, the public description of the Soviet role was very different and was an intentional effort to avoid escalation. No official public statement by an American or British leader in the first months of the Korean War stipulated a Russian role in formulating, ordering, and directing the invasion. Such forbearance was motivated by the desire to avoid reputation engagement and overheating domestic war sentiment. The American ambassador in Moscow argued that publicly charging Stalin with directing the invasion “might make it difficult for the Soviets to disassociate themselves from the

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21 “Telegram from Kirk to Secretary of State, June 25, 1950.”
22 “Joint Morning Sitrep No. 6, July 4, 1950.”
North Koreans in the face of successful free world counter-action.” 23  Truman repeatedly urged his cabinet advisors and State Department public information officers early in the war to avoid direct accusations of a Soviet role due to “the fear that the domestic mood might suddenly overheat.”24  The British Foreign Office joined other allies in cautioning against publicly tying the invasion to the Soviet Union through a U.N. resolution deeming the Soviet Union rather than North Korea the “aggressor.”  London’s United Nations delegation was described as having no doubt that the Russians directed the attack but believing it “might be advantageous not to lay [the] attack at [the] door of [the] Russians in [the] hope that if [the] South Koreans proved strong enough to defend themselves, the Russians might conceivably ditch [the] North Koreans since [the] Russians had not committed their own prestige publicly.” 25  Paul Nitze, State Department Policy Planning Staff director, recommended against publicly holding the Soviet government responsible for the invasion because “we definitely do not wish to see Soviet forces involved in this as it would complicate our military tasks and it could lead to a general conflict which we have no desire to see and for which we are distinctly not militarily prepared.” 26

23 “Telegram from Kirk to Secretary of State, June 26, 1950”; the American ambassador in Paris similarly argued that “[w]e all know, of course, that the Kremlin has set in motion and is directing the Korean operation, but as long as it is not so publicly cited, it would be easier for the Soviets privately to restrain the North Koreans.” “Telegram from Bruce to Secretary of State, June 26, 1950.”
24 This caution in rhetoric was in stark contrast to rhetoric exaggerating the Soviet threat used by Truman less than a year earlier when building support for the Truman Doctrine. For the contrast and specific examples of restraint regarding the Soviet role, see Casey, Selling the Korean War, 29–39.
25 The Swedish and Dutch delegations felt similarly regarding naming the Soviet Union. Other allies felt differently: the Australian and Argentine representatives, for example, were reported as advocating “it time to call things by their right names” by specifying the Soviets as the source of aggression. “Telegram from Austin to Secretary of State, June 26, 1950.”
26 Nitze to Acheson, July 23, 1950, quoted in full in Casey, Selling the Korean War, 31.
To summarize, the risks of escalation to a global war in June and July 1950 were not believed to be severe because of observable Soviet restraint allowing the operational and publicity attractions of an overt intervention to win out. Even so, this early stage shows early signs of Western sensitivity to the links between publicity, prestige/reputation, and escalation. Western leaders engaged in limited tacit collusion, actively joining in an adversary’s narrative of non-involvement that they themselves did not believe.

_Chinese Intervention and the Western Response (Nov-Dec 1950)_

China’s intervention in the Korean War in the autumn of 1950 provides evidence of the importance of political deniability and adversary collusion in managing conflict escalation. The introduction of what is now estimated at 400,000 Chinese troops into northern North Korea was done secretly and deniably. Mao carefully concealed the flow of personnel and material over the Yalu River, China did not adopt an official policy of intervention or declare a state of war, and Mao and Stalin both insisted the soldiers be portrayed as unorganized “volunteer” units. Meanwhile, as the leading states in the United Nations coalition detected a new combat troop presence in the theater, they initially reacted with diplomatic collusion in order to leave China a face-saving way to avoid full-scale intervention. Despite complete certainty that China’s operation was centrally planned and operated, United States and British officials refused to change their military rules of engagement in Korea, publicly described Chinese troops as uncoordinated volunteers, and avoided publicly condemning China in venues like the
United Nations Security Council. After China launched a massive surprise offensive, however, Western allies ended all collusion and publicly condemned China for centrally-planned aggression. Yet even as the conflict was redefined as a direct Chinese-U.N. war, U.S. policymakers opted for covert methods of military retaliation on the Chinese mainland to help localize the new war to the Korean peninsula.

The Chinese intervention phase of the Korean War has several theoretically important features which distinguish it from other “cases” within Korea and in other chapters. First, effective secrecy does less work in containing escalation; partially open secrecy paired with a form of diplomatic deniability play a central role. I find clear evidence that China and the Soviet Union employed strategies of deniability – specifically, describing Chinese infantry as “volunteers” rather than part of an official intervention – in order to minimize escalation. I also find clear evidence adversaries seeking to limit escalation themselves seized on and echoed this pretense of voluntarism. A jointly produced impression of less-than-official war was designed to prevent war escalation. Second, the interaction of different logics of secrecy are on display. The Chinese intervention includes an important instance of surprise-motivated secrecy in China’s second counter-offensive in late November 1950. A side-effect of this surprise-driven secrecy was greater room for China to use a narrative of “volunteers”; this helped it contain escalation risks that would accompany a declared war. Third, the documentary record on the “witness” reactions is very robust and considerations of war escalation and publicity
benefits are explicitly discussed. Thus, this section spends considerable time reviewing the reaction of these two key adversary witnesses.

China’s deployment of combat troops in late October 1950 shifted the locus of momentum and radically altered the course of the war. That China intervened with troops at all came as a surprise to most observers in the West. In Washington, much of Truman’s cabinet was joined by the American intelligence community and MacArthur in assessing the likelihood of a large-scale, overt intervention as low.\textsuperscript{27} Yet historians now know that Mao, Zhou Enlai, and the Chinese Politburo implemented contingency plans for an intervention as early as North Korea’s initial invasion.\textsuperscript{28} In fact, debates on intervention in Beijing shifted to questions of “when” rather than “if” as soon as the North Korean offensive sputtered to a standstill around Pusan.\textsuperscript{29} In retrospect, China had significant defensive motives for intervening which were underappreciated by many Western observers at the time, including profound distrust of the West after their support for Kuomintang Nationalists during and after the Chinese Civil War, an acute military vulnerability due to non-existent air and naval capabilities, and, should the North Korean

\textsuperscript{27} The intelligence failure was a serious blow to the young Central Intelligence Agency; a self-assessment by its historical staff five years later attempted to identify what went wrong. See “Historical Staff Study, October 17, 1955.”

\textsuperscript{28} Jian, \textit{China’s Road to the Korean War}, 143. The U.S. and U.K. were aware of China’s redeployment of troops and supplies to Manchuria early on; they merely believed those troops would not actually be used.

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 147–9, 152, 154.
army collapse, the nightmare scenario of a long-term American military presence in Japan and on its Manchurian border.\textsuperscript{30}

As a result of improved availability of Chinese- and Soviet-origin documents, historians now know much more about the manner of China’s intervention and its motivations. China’s overall decision to deploy the Manchuria-based Northern Border Defense Army over the Yalu River was made during the first two weeks of October 1950. At the time, South Korean and U.S./U.N. troops had recently crossed the 38\textsuperscript{th} parallel dividing North and South, bounding toward Pyongyang.\textsuperscript{31} Mao’s original plan was to gradually and quietly amass his forces in North Korea to perform a sequenced defensive/offensive operation: first, a defensive maneuver using the newly christened “Chinese People’s Volunteers” would bolster North Korea’s defensive line and halt the U.N. Command’s momentum; second, the winter would be spent quietly sending troops and material for an offensive in spring 1951.\textsuperscript{32}

However, Mao’s approach was altered as the rate of advance for the U.S./U.N. offensive accelerated. Advance South Korean units came in direct contact with Chinese troops deploying in the earliest waves as early as October 25, surprising Mao and his advisors.

\textsuperscript{30} Zhang, \textit{Mao’s Military Romanticism}; additional motives cited by historians include Mao’s desire to use the war to speed political and economic consolidation at home. See Jian, \textit{China’s Road to the Korean War}, 193–194.

\textsuperscript{31} The description that follows is based on timelines first described in Zhang, \textit{Deterrence and Strategic Culture}, 98–100; Jian, \textit{China’s Road to the Korean War}, 171–182; 200–205; Zhang, \textit{Mao’s Military Romanticism}, 92–106.

\textsuperscript{32} Zhang, \textit{Deterrence and Strategic Culture}, 99; Zhang, \textit{Mao’s Military Romanticism}; Jian, \textit{China’s Road to the Korean War}, 202, 205.
In consultation with the general in command, Peng Dehuai, Mao quickly updated the plan: an immediate, limited counter-offensive to push the adversary’s point of furthest advance south followed by a full-scale counter-offensive during, rather than after, the winter. This initial counter-offensive, cloaked in secrecy, triggered clashes with U.S./U.N. troops in the first days of November. On the American side, interrogation of captured Chinese soldiers quickly revealed a new presence and was reported back to United Nations command by the U.S. ambassador and General MacArthur. In only a few days of intense fighting, the quiet and limited Chinese counter-offensive successfully repelled U.S./U.N. units to establish a defensive line near the Chongchon River. Mao ordered Peng to cease the counter-offensive. The bulk of November was spent in hiatus as material and personnel for the Chinese People’s Volunteers secretly and steadily swelled and Western allies scrambled to make sense of the unacknowledged and apparently limited Chinese presence. China launched a second massive, surprise counter-offensive on November 25th which would reverse the course of the war and return the northern half of the peninsula to communist control.

China used a covert method in intervening in the Korean War, utilizing effective secrecy (concealed goals, personnel, and material) and plausible deniability (voluntarism narrative). Mao carefully instructed his staff to abstain from publicly discussing the

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33 The first reports from the field of captured Chinese nationals were communicated by the embassy to the State Department in telegrams dated October 29th and 30th. By November 6, Army intelligence estimated China had deployed 27,000 troops to North Korea. “Telegram from Drumright to Secretary of State, October 30, 1950”; “Telegram from Drumright to Secretary of State, November 1, 1950”; “Telegram from Drumright to Secretary of State, November 6, 1950.”
deployment of the border army. The troop movements across the river were famously restricted to concealed respites and night marches, a significant operational sacrifice to preserve secrecy. Soldiers in the first wave were also given the raw materials of political deniability: Korean People’s Army uniforms were handed out and instructed to describe themselves as ethnically Korean volunteers.\(^{34}\) Mao’s preference for a covert form of military intervention was driven by a desire to generate battlefield surprise.\(^{35}\) Recognizing the technological inferiority of his forces in light of the assets available to the U.N. Command, Mao believed his troops would best perform if drawing on the principles of surprise used in guerilla-style tactics during the Chinese Civil War.\(^{36}\) China was decisively successful in generating surprise in both the first and second counter-offensives. MacArthur had planned to successfully route the North Koreans and unify the peninsula by force by Christmas. Instead, the Chinese used surprise to halt their advance and then again to throw them back hundreds of miles south.

While generation of tactical surprise motivated the use of secrecy, Mao addressed dangers of political expansion of the war (i.e. attacks on Chinese mainland or a Sino-Soviet war with United Nations coalition) in another way: voluntarism. Both Stalin and Mao feared such an outcome for domestic and political-strategic reasons. Evidence of this concern on Mao’s part is contained in a revealing telegram to Stalin negotiating the

\(^{34}\) On Chinese secrecy and deniability in the initial deployment, see Zhang, *Deterrence and Strategic Culture*, 100; Jian, *China’s Road to the Korean War*, 208–9; Zhang, *Mao’s Military Romanticism*, 93–4, 99.

\(^{35}\) My analysis of the relevant evidence regarding Mao’s motives in concealing China’s true military strength therefore agrees with the basic characterization in Slantchev, “Feigning Weakness.”

terms of China’s entry into the war. Bearing in mind the Chinese Civil War had ended a mere two years prior, it is not surprising to see Mao explicitly identify his worst possible outcome: a stalemate on the peninsula, a declared war with the United States, American air strikes on the Chinese coast, and a possible counter-revolution.

[S]ince Chinese troops will fight American troops in Korea (although we will use the name of the Chinese Volunteers), we must be prepared for an American declaration of war on China. We must be prepared for the possible bombardments by American air forces of many Chinese cities and industrial bases…We consider that the most unfavorable situation would be that the Chinese forces fail to destroy American troops in large numbers in Korea, thus resulting in a stalemate, and that, at the same time, the United States openly declares war on China, which would be detrimental to China’s economic reconstruction already under way and would cause dissatisfaction among the national bourgeoisie and some other sectors of the people (who are absolutely afraid of war).  

Stalin greatly feared escalation beyond the peninsula. His cautious focus on winning but localizing the war from start to finish has been noted widely by Cold War historians. William Stueck notes that rhetoric aside, Stalin felt “a deep sense of insecurity” relative to the United States stemming from atomic, air, and naval inferiority as well as a substantial deficit in military-industrial strength if both sides were mobilized. A third world war over Korea – far from the coveted European theater and well before post-war recovery was complete – would be a massive and destructive mistake in Stalin’s view. The initial invasion by North Korea was approved by a reluctant Stalin who feared the

37 Jian, China’s Road to the Korean War, 176, quoting from a telegram in a set of Mao’s papers released by the Beijing Central Press of Historical Documents in 1989.
38 Stueck, The Korean War: An International History, 44.
39 "Stalin, however, was neither ready nor willing to bring on a direct military confrontation with the United States. ...The fate of Korea, while related to the security concerns of the Soviet Union, did not affect the most vital Soviet interests." Jian, China’s Road to the Korean War, 161.
risk of escalation to general war with the United States. Moreover, at the brink of committing his troops, fears of an escalation to U.S.-Soviet war caused Stalin to refuse air cover for Mao’s soldiers, potentially exposing them to withering aerial attacks by American bombers. Khrushchev himself argued that Stalin was so afraid of a direct war with the United States that he would have permitted the destruction of North Korea rather than deploy Soviet troops. American intelligence at the time made a similar judgment that Stalin feared escalation more than the loss of Korea.

The use of “volunteer” language was one method both China and the Soviet Union favored to minimize the risk of such an escalation. The description of a state’s expeditionary forces as “volunteers,” as described elsewhere, generates some level of political deniability by ostensibly severing centralized control and official state policy from combat on the ground. By consistently employing the volunteer vernacular, Mao and Stalin hoped to cultivate an impression of diplomatic distance between central authority and the use of deadly force against South Korean, American, and other troops. The key goal, it now appears, was to avoid prompting a transition to open, declared war.

As a matter of international law, avoiding public acknowledgement of political control

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41 Jian notes that many point to Stalin’s initial hesitation to provide air cover, despite the Sino-Soviet mutual defense pact, as the seed for the later Sino-Soviet split. Jian, *China’s Road to the Korean War*, 197, 204.
43 See the Central Intelligence Agency memo “Threat of Soviet Intervention in Korea” summarizing the perceived costs/benefits from early October 1950. “Memorandum by the Central Intelligence Agency, November 12, 1950.”
over Chinese soldiers spared China from functionally declaring war on Western countries.

Though only the pretense of voluntarism was present, the practical effect of avoiding a declaration of war of its own, or prompting such a declaration from adversaries, was important. A state of declared war was much more likely to invite conflict escalation beyond the Korean peninsula in two distinct ways.

First, a state of declared war between China and Western states lowered the political barriers to China’s adversaries using military force in Manchuria or China’s nearby coastal cities as part of the response to its intervention. The historian Chen Jian, noting Mao’s hope for an intervention in Korea without a war on his home territory, describes the logic for using the “volunteers” moniker as a method of escalation control. His review of the original documentary record concludes Mao and other members of the CCP believed that “[b]y calling Chinese troops in Korea volunteers, they would be able to better convince the Chinese people of the moral justification of the intervention, while at the same time alleging that Chinese troops were organized on an unofficial basis, thus reducing the risk of a formal war with the United States and other Western countries.”

Shu Guang Zhang cites cables between Mao and the Chinese military in early October in which Mao explicitly orders a change in the name of the Northeast Border Defense Army to the Chinese People’s Volunteers. Zhang concludes the motive was a belief that

44 Jian, China’s Road to the Korean War, 187.
Chinese leadership “could control the political risks of a general war” by avoiding “the appearance of declaring war against the United States.” Presumably believing an “army” implied central authorization and direction, Mao went so far as to limit any public reference to the Chinese soldiers as limited to “volunteers” and not a “Volunteer Army” in a cable to his commanding general Peng Dehuai. William Stueck’s review of similar material likewise concludes Mao chose the label “in the hope this would reduce prospects for a U.S. declaration of war against the PRC.”

Equally important, whether hostilities between China and Western states were conducted under the terms of a declared war had critical implications for the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance. Signed with fanfare only six months before the Korean War began, the February 1950 treaty obligated either side to use all means at its disposal to militarily assist the other if it were attacked by and in a state of war with an ally of Japan. Stalin and Mao appear to have been motivated to adopt the volunteerism narrative by precisely this concern. Jian summarizes a cable from Stalin to Mao indicating that “[a]s Stalin was unwilling to risk a confrontation with the United States, he considered a ‘more acceptable form of assistance to be assistance by people’s”

45 Zhang, *Deterrence and Strategic Culture*, 108.
46 Ibid., 109.
48 The relevant portion of the treaty reads: “in the event of one of the Contracting Parties being attacked by Japan or any state allied with her and thus being involved in a state of war, the other Contracting Party shall immediately render military and other assistance by all means at its disposal.” Goncharov et al. carefully compare the text to other treaties signed by the Soviet Union with allies at this time and show that the ally of Japan both sides had in mind was the United States. Goncharov, Lewis, and Xue, *Uncertain Partners*, 117–118.
volunteers.” Citing both Soviet and Chinese sources, as well as a Chinese-language publication describing the origin of the name “Chinese People’s Volunteers,” the historians Sergei Goncharov, John Lewis, and Xue Litai tie together the naming of the army, the status of the war as declared or not, Soviet participation, and escalation to World War III.

It appears, for example, that like Zhou and Stalin, Mao was acutely aware of the importance of avoiding a formal declaration of war. Ever since the creation of the NFF [Northeast Frontier Force] on July 13, Mao had fretted about the name of the force to be sent to Korea. He resisted calling it the People’s Liberation Army because this would make the Chinese expeditionary troops official and could be interpreted as tantamount to the formal declaration that he sought to avoid. Such a declaration would trigger the provisions under the Sino-Soviet alliance that required the Soviet Union to render China assistance ‘by all means at its disposal.’ Direct Soviet involvement in the conflict, Mao believed, would carry the potential for touching off a third world war. With all this in mind, he first had the idea of referring to the men as ‘support troops’ but in the end accepted the recommendation to call them ‘volunteers.”

Far from a question of legal technicalities, significant political consequences would flow from appearing to trigger the terms of the alliance, whatever Moscow’s response. While the Soviet Union could have declined to fulfill its obligation for assistance in a “state of war,” refusal to come to the aid of a large, important, and recently christened ally would have seriously jeopardized Soviet alliance credibility. Moreover, a declared state of war and refusal to fulfill its duty would have deeply wounded the credibility of the Sino-

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49 Jian, China’s Road to the Korean War, 171; See also Stueck, The Korean War: An International History, 98.
50 Goncharov, Lewis, and Xue, Uncertain Partners, 175. According to Goncharov et al., the shift from “supporters” to “volunteers” came at the suggestion of a high-level advisor that believed supporters still implied central direction (339).
51 On risks of abandonment and reputation for fulfilling alliance commitments, see Snyder, Alliance Politics; Miller, “Hypotheses on Reputation.”
Soviet alliance in the eyes of the adversaries it was meant to deter. On the other hand, fulfilling its obligation to provide aid, even if kept short of “all means at its disposal,” would have put the United States and Soviet Union in open conflict. Thus, the volunteerism narrative allowed an elegant if strained compromise: Chinese “volunteers” with Soviet material support could enter the theater and stiffen North Korea’s defense while avoiding an open Chinese intervention which, in turn, reduced the chances any state viewed the Korean War as a test case of the alliance. By lowering the stakes in this manner, Mao and Stalin hoped to avoid creating a dilemma that would generate substantially higher pressure to escalate to general war. At an official diplomatic level, China and the Soviet Union maintained the “volunteers” language throughout the war.52

Western reaction

The adversary reaction to China’s intervention differed significantly before and after the late November counter-offensive. In the four weeks prior to the counter-offensive, the leading states in the U.N. coalition carefully chose actions and official diplomatic rhetoric to reinforce the prior definition of the conflict. Their attempt to diplomatically downplay the appearance of Chinese nationals in Korea constituted an important example of witnessing adversaries engaging in a kind of tacit collusion to avoid a transformation of a conflict’s definition and therefore minimize escalation risks. Their objective was

52 Official diplomacy was warped in interesting ways by the policy of non-acknowledged intervention. Ceasefire negotiations in late 1950 and early 1951 started with an obligation for foreign troops to leave the peninsula; consistent with the volunteerism narrative, China’s obligation was phrased as assuming responsibility for removal of Chinese volunteers. Stueck, *The Korean War: An International History*, 155, 157; “Telegram from Henderson to Secretary of State, January 24, 1951.”
escalation control; specifically, they hoped to keep China’s role limited and prevent a large Soviet involvement. However, after China’s massive, well-organized counter-offensive eliminated the possibility of preventing full-scale Chinese involvement, the balance of incentives changed. American and British leaders made an about-face and used unilateral and multilateral channels to publicize China’s official and “aggressive” intervention in the conflict. This solidified a reclassification of the conflict on the peninsula as internationalized on both sides. I review the two stages of Western response in turn.

In the first stage, American and British officials led a coordinated campaign to prevent premature conflict escalation during the critical, sensitive four week period between initial battlefield contact with Chinese soldiers in late October and China’s massive November 25th counter-offensive. The documentary record shows a disciplined and intentional campaign to conceal the organized combat presence of Chinese and publicly echo the Sino-Soviet volunteerism narrative. This was achieved by omitting references to centralized Chinese control of their troops, eschewing condemnation of China in the United Nations Security Council, treating Chinese soldiers on the battlefield as if they were North Korean, preserving the prior strategy of unification by force, and explicitly noting that China was not responsible for military units in North Korea. That a campaign to buy diplomatic time by pretending China had not intervened was used is underscored

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53 Intelligence reports of Chinese nationals began trickling into Washington offices in the last days of October and MacArthur himself alerted his superiors to a new but limited Chinese role on November 4th.
by the American Secretary of State’s exasperated reaction to the brazen nature of China’s late November counter-offensive. Dean Acheson complained to his British counterpart that the new offensive had made it “impossible to pretend that this is not an openly aggressive move by the Peiping regime.”

One reason Western adversaries reacted cautiously to what they saw as a limited covert Chinese intervention was because they expected it. Based on the declassified record, we now know a covert form of intervention by China was actually foreseen weeks before any Chinese nationals were encountered. A mid-October 1950 intelligence report from the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) two weeks before first contact noted that an open Chinese intervention was unlikely whereas “continued covert aid would offer most of the advantages of overt intervention, while avoiding its risks and disadvantages” enabling China to “[a]void further antagonizing of the UN and reduce [the] risk of war with the US.” The possibility that China might intervene with a fig leaf of deniability was deemed a most likely scenario by many in the State Department. One summary of discussions there in mid-October argued “intervention, if it occurs, will be a) limited in amount and b) nominally covert instead of overt” to avoid a “clash head-on” with the United Nations and coalition members.

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54 “Telegram from Acheson to Embassy in London, November 28, 1950.”
55 “Memorandum by the Central Intelligence Agency, November 12, 1950.”
56 “Memorandum from Matthews to Burns, October 19, 1950.”

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Given these expectations, leaders in Washington D.C. and elsewhere quickly interpreted early reports of captured Chinese soldiers as evidence of a limited, covert intervention strategy. Diplomats and foreign policy advisors were certainly not deceived that such troops were volunteers. The earliest intelligence reports from the American embassy and General MacArthur, as early as November 1, concluded Chinese soldiers were fighting in Chinese-only, re-constituted regular military units.\textsuperscript{57} The first post-contact U.S. National Intelligence Estimate on November 8 referred to both intentionality and battlefield control. It urged clarification of the “scale and purpose of Chinese Communist intervention,” referred to Chinese and Soviet “violent propaganda” and its citation of “the ‘will of the Chinese people’ (rather than the government) to supply ‘people’s volunteers’,” and concluded elements of the Fourth Field Army were being reassembled into a “regular Chinese Communist division.”\textsuperscript{58} Yet many American observers thought the pretense of volunteerism retained by China signaled a desire keep the war limited. An early State Department analysis cited “some effort to disguise the intervention, if only nominally” as evidence that the new Chinese role in Korea was not part of a new, Soviet-led campaign for general war with the West.\textsuperscript{59} An intelligence report from the top American diplomat in Hong Kong cautioned that the Chinese could still be restrained because they “have avoided committing selves publicly to total war by referring to Chinese Communists troops as ‘volunteers’” while the American ambassador in Moscow

\textsuperscript{57} “Telegram from Drumright to Secretary of State, November 1, 1950”; “Memorandum from Clubb to Rusk, November 1, 1950.”

\textsuperscript{58} See the National Intelligence Estimate on Chinese intervention in “Memorandum by the Central Intelligence Agency, November 12, 1950”; Millett, \textit{The War for Korea, 1950-1951}, 313.

\textsuperscript{59} “Memorandum from Clubb to Rusk, November 4, 1950.”
noted that the volunteerism story “misleads no one” but “in [the] realm of international
relations it retains significance and CPG [China] has not chosen to go beyond this.  

A policy to diplomatically downplay China’s role proceeded on two tracks: military and
diplomatic. On the military track, “business as usual” continued despite the entry of a
new state’s infantry. One component of this was treating Chinese soldiers under the
same rules of engagement as North Korean. Well before China entered the theater,
American officials anticipated a potential covert or unofficial entry of Chinese forces.
They issued military instructions to the United Nations command stating that the general
in the field (MacArthur) should behave as if a Chinese intervention had not occurred if
their combat participants were posing as unofficial or North Korean (contrasting “overt
use of Chinese Communist forces in Korea” and “unidentified and unannounced Soviet
or Chinese Communist forces…fighting under the North Korean banner”). This
resulted in one important element of tacit collusion after a Chinese presence was
detected: by not issuing new rules of engagement, MacArthur’s superiors in Washington
allowed him to continue fighting on the ground as if a new, major power had not entered
the war. At the tactical military level, nothing changed besides the presence of stiffer
defensive resistance from better equipped and more numerous opposing military units.

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60 “Telegram from Wilkinson to Secretary of State, November 9, 1950”; “Telegram from Kirk to Secretary
of State, November 14, 1950.”

61 “Memorandum by the State Department for National Security Council, August 30, 1950.”
Two other decision areas contributed to a military “business as usual” reaction to China’s entry. First, no military action against Chinese-relevant targets was taken outside Korea proper. Fearing an escalating series of reprisals, political leaders ignored field commanders’ pleas for authority to bomb the Chinese side of the Yalu River despite intelligence suggesting a continued flow of personnel and material. Strategic bombing of industrial centers in Chinese Manchuria was similarly ruled out for fear of dealing a fatal blow to allied unity and the “expansion of the area of armed conflict.” A second component was retaining the same overall arc of military strategy. Since late October, MacArthur had planned a final offensive to extend gains already made in North Korea and reunify the peninsula by force. While substantial debate about whether to alter this plan in light of China’s entry occurred in the Truman Administration in mid-November, ultimately the offensive was approved.

At the diplomatic level, British and American leaders agreed to a highly restrained approach to handling China’s presence. These discussions reveal the first logic for a cautious reaction: avoiding the commitment of Chinese prestige to the Korean cause further than the Chinese themselves wanted it and therefore making a quiet withdrawal

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62 Western strategic weakness, should war escalate, was a key reason for this fear of escalation: “There would seem to be time to stabilize and await further developments, in a situation where the Chinese Communists have thus far publicly done no more than call for volunteer aid to Korea, before reaching decisions on matters of major political and military importance. Premature conclusions here might lead us to exactly the move that the USSR desire that we make. It is clear that any action which would result in an enlargement of the scope of the present hostilities, it [sic] in the present circumstances would very possibly bring about a further enlargement, by the action of the USSR, to the distinct disadvantage of ourselves and our friends. We are in no posture now to resist Soviet arms in either Japan or Germany.” “Memorandum from Clubb to Rusk, November 7, 1950.”

less costly. This echoed the logic used by Western leaders as they downplayed the Soviet role in North Korea’s initial invasion. An early note from the British Foreign Secretary which reached the State Department on November 4 argued that publicizing China’s role in the Security Council “might make it more, rather than less, difficult for the Chinese to climb down and avoid open commitment” and the allies’ goal should be to avoid “forcing the Chinese into a position from which they cannot withdraw.” He concluded: “I would have thought there was everything to be said for ignoring limited Chinese intervention.” Secretary of State Acheson’s communication back to London concurred that citing China at the United Nations for aggression in Korea risked a wider war and instead the allies should “do everything we can not to spread the hostilities.” The American ambassador in Moscow similarly suggested a “delicate handling” of China’s intervention at the United Nations, especially considering the Sino-Soviet Treaty. He urged Acheson to “keep open a way out” for the Soviet Union despite the fact that “we…are not in [the] dark as to who is pulling [the] strings behind [the] scenes.”

Implementing this strategy involved careful diplomatic statements at the United Nations and steering other parts of the American government and media. Acheson’s instructions to his representative noted that “[w]e must be careful that our political posture [does] not run substantially ahead of the situation on the ground in such a way as to commit us to heavy involvement in Asia which we should try to avoid. Just as we pretended Moscow

64 “Telegram from Bevin (UK) to Department of State, November 3, 1950.”
65 “Telegram from Acheson to Embassy in London, November 6, 1950.”
66 “Telegram from Kirk to Secretary of State, November 8, 1950.”
was not committing aggression in N[orth] K[orea] so it may be necessary for us not to overplay the new factor of Chi[nese] intervention in N[orth] K[orea] until our combined political-military interests require that action.\textsuperscript{67} In practice, this meant the United States and others phrased United Nations resolutions to avoid citation of centralized Chinese control or aggression. For example, a draft resolution on November 10 referenced China but included no reference to centralized control or aggression and instead called upon states to “prevent their nationals or individuals or units of their armed forces from giving assistance to North Korean forces.”\textsuperscript{68} Furthermore, an internal State Department memo on the need to “reduce the risk of hostilities spreading from Korea” by preserving a path for China to withdraw provides evidence of behind-the-scenes engagement with the media. It recommended engaging the in-theater military command and wire services press to exercise restraint and voluntary censorship to avoid “irresponsible and provocative statements…which might further increase the tension.”\textsuperscript{69}

Domestic politics provided an important additional logic for diplomatic caution for the Truman Administration in particular. As Steven Casey’s recent study of military mobilization and domestic politics during the Korean War conclusively demonstrates, Truman and many of his advisors consistently used a cautious diplomatic approach to avoid overheating domestic public opinion during the early phases of the war. The administration struggled with the dilemma of stoking public support for the war without

\textsuperscript{67} “Telegram from Acheson to US Mission to UN, November 13, 1950.”
\textsuperscript{68} “Text of Draft UNSC Resolution S/1894, November 10, 1950.”
\textsuperscript{69} “Memorandum from Merchant to Rusk, November 16, 1950.”
provoking reckless demands for direct strikes on China or the Soviet Union. The possibility was not remote: though public sentiment became substantially dovish at the end of the war, public opinion during 1950-1951 was consistently hawkish. The administration’s reflex was to facilitate localization of the conflict by limiting their rhetoric to minimize rally-round-the-flag dynamics and reduce public and legislative demands for hasty escalation. Casey concludes that “[b]ecause Truman and his advisers were so keen to stop the fighting spilling out of the Korean peninsula, they had faced obvious constraints on what they could say and do. Not wanting to provoke the Soviets or inflame domestic opinion, they had…invariably shied away from ratcheting up the rhetoric.”70

Unknown to American and British planners, the Chinese were in the process of secretly organizing a vastly larger intervention. On November 25th, a surprise Chinese counter-offensive began; the possibility of limiting China’s involvement was thereby eliminated. In the weeks after, Western leaders described China’s role in Korea publicly as “brazen,” “open,” and “aggressive” in both unilateral American statements and, eventually, a United Nations General Assembly resolution. On the ground, MacArthur reacted to the offensive by sending a cable which famously declared: “We face an entirely new war.”71

70 Casey, *Selling the Korean War*, 122. On hawkish public opinion outpacing the Truman Administration in late 1950 and early 1951, see 35-6, 75-7, 84, 100, 109-111. On the administration’s intentional strategy to prevent overheating public opinion and its influence on everything from opting against seeking Congressional authorization to minimalist presidential addresses, see 30-3, 34-9, 71-2, 89, 215.

71 MacArthur also stated that “[n]o pretext of minor support under the guise of volunteerism or other subterfuge now has the slightest validity.” “Telegram from MacArthur to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, November 28, 1950.”
Three major foreign policy addresses in the week following the offensive by President Truman, Secretary Acheson, and the American United Nations representative marked the end of pretending China had not intervened. Truman declared that China had launched a premeditated act of aggression that was “naked, deliberate, and unprovoked”; Acheson declared it “brazen aggression” in which “the cloak of pretense had been thrown off”; Warren Austin’s speech at the United Nations deemed China’s behavior an act of aggression and explicitly questioned their volunteer narrative.\textsuperscript{72} The two men driving the cautious Washington approach earlier in the war, Truman and Acheson, had shifted their views: “[T]he international situation was truly perilous. In sharp contrast to the summer, neither Truman nor Acheson was willing to mask this fact from the public.”\textsuperscript{73} China’s surprise counter-offensive also crystallized other states’ support for a formal designation of Chinese aggression through the United Nations.\textsuperscript{74} While even the most hawkish states had preferred not to cite China as an aggressor in a new resolution before the offensive, negotiations on a resolution proceeded at full speed in December 1950 and January 1951.\textsuperscript{75}

\textsuperscript{72} On Truman’s speech, see description in Casey, \textit{Selling the Korean War}, 130; a summary of Acheson’s remarks and the location of the original text, see U.S. Department of State, \textit{FRUS, 1950, Vol VII}, 1259; a description of Austin’s remarks are in ibid., 1241.

\textsuperscript{73} Casey, \textit{Selling the Korean War}, 131.

\textsuperscript{74} A determination of aggression is part of the core duties of the Security Council (Article 39: “The Security Council shall determine the existence of any threat to the peace, breach of the peace, or act of aggression and shall make recommendations, or decide what measures shall be taken in accordance with Articles 41 and 42, to maintain or restore international peace and security”). The China aggression resolution was passed in the General Assembly rather than the Security Council due to the return of the Soviet Union (and its veto power) to the latter. This placed the resolution in a legal grey area; however, its utility as a concrete expression of the views of those states who voted in favor of it was undiluted.

\textsuperscript{75} The actual vote did not take place until February 1. For allied concerns about an aggression resolution expanding the war and diverting defensive capabilities from Europe, see “Telegram from Austin to
The incentives for publicly naming and condemning China’s intervention after November 25, rather than attempt to minimize and ignore it, were influenced by publicity benefits. The health of the United Nations once again played a role. Advocates of a U.N. resolution on Chinese aggression in the U.S. State Department found success in lobbying European allies to support it by reminding them of recent history: unacknowledged and unpunished aggression by Italy and Japan had played a key role in destroying the League of Nations.76 Given the central role aggression played in the security component of the United Nations Charter, advocates argued the relevance of the institution would be dealt a serious blow if Chinese aggression were ignored.77 On the American side, domestic politics that had earlier driven caution now motivated rhetorical honesty. China’s massive counter-offensive caused Truman and his cabinet to proceed with implementing a large-scale American military mobilization to support a Cold War strategy of global containment.78 Acheson and Truman used public speeches in December 1950 and January 1951 to build domestic support for a range of measures linked to the recently approved National Security Council Report 68 (NSC-68) including defense commitments to Europe and large, long-term increases in defense spending. Stoking hawkish opinion,

77 On the perceived link between the fate of the United Nations and the China resolution, see Casey, Selling the Korean War, 211–3.
78 “Yet what had seemed like a good idea on 27 November suddenly appeared hopelessly out of date 24 hours later, when Washington finally got word of the massive Chinese intervention in Korea...Truman moved swiftly to discard the NSC-68 timetable that had so recently been worked out. Thus, rather than wait for the new Congress to convene, within days the president successfully prevailed upon the lame-duck session to appropriate an additional $18 billion, taking the total defense spending for the year to $42 billion.” Casey, “Selling NSC-68,” 684.
though still at risk of “overheating” and forcing an expanded Korean War, was now useful for a new and costly domestic priority.  

Despite publicizing China’s role within the Korean peninsula, evidence of the use of secrecy to prevent escalation beyond the peninsula comes in two forms. First, rather than open a second “front” within China, the Truman Administration opted against authorizing United Nations Command to use air strikes or a naval blockade to attack China directly. Instead, efforts to exert pressure on China from places outside the Korean peninsula proper were limited to secret means, i.e. covert operations. In early February 1951, Truman approved two CIA covert operations intended to foster domestic instability and draw Chinese soldiers and resources out of the Korean theater. In one project, the CIA received authorization and funds to use secret, deniable assets to support Chinese Nationalist holdouts in Burma. In the second, the CIA received approval to secretly organize guerilla raids on the Chinese homeland by anti-communist holdouts on islands near the Chinese coast.

Second, the Truman Administration reassured domestic and international audiences that despite the clash of their armies in Korea, a state of declared war between the United States and China did not exist. This legal designation helped buttress restraint against direct strikes on Chinese territory. In the weeks after China’s surprise offensive, Truman

79 On link to mobilization and administration’s more aggressive rhetoric, Casey, Selling the Korean War, 174–8, 188–9; See also Casey, “Selling NSC-68.”
reassured dovish allies (i.e. British PM Atlee) and domestic audiences: (1) the United States was not currently in a state of declared war with China; and (2) use of force against Chinese territory would not take place without a declaration of war. 81 This position reflected the administration’s desire to localize the conflict by keeping the use of force strictly within the peninsula-specific authorization set by the United Nations. It also reinforced the larger impression that neither side in the conflict – Chinese or American – considered a state of open and declared war to exist. 82 Mutual pretense thus helped Truman and his advisors resist domestic conservative pressure for additional stages of escalation.

To summarize this section, China’s evolving intervention and the Western response show support for an escalation-based logic for secrecy but also illustrates the complimentary role of surprise. China’s covert form of intervention was largely driven by a desire to achieve tactical surprise, consistent with Mao’s beliefs that the operational benefits of surprise were critical to compensating for China’s technological inferiority. Yet secrecy and deniability played a key role in limiting the conflict from reaching higher steps on the staircase of escalation. China used the fiction of “voluntarism” to allow its adversary space to construe combat with China in Korea as something short of a declared war. This helped minimize the germaneness of a treaty of mutual support with the Soviet Union

81 One article reported that Atlee urged Truman “to avoid formal war with Red China at all costs. He will present the view…that such a conflict might lead to World War III.” Folliard, “Attlee to See President On Tuesday.”

82 Reporting at the time noted that “Truman said today that this country probably would not bomb Communist China without a formal declaration of war by Congress.” See Leviero, “Truman Rules Out China Bombing Now.”
whose ink was barely dry. Furthermore, the Western reaction to China’s limited covert intervention in October demonstrates clear examples of collusive deception used to contain the conflict. Moreover, even after China’s full entry into the war in late November, Western leaders abstained from overt bombing of the Chinese mainland and instead used covert subversion tools. Both were used to help keep the war from escalating to a full-scale war on Chinese soil and/or with the Soviet Union. Evidence of the causal mechanisms of the theory – sensitivity to reputational considerations and hawkish domestic reactions – is also present.

Soviet Intervention and the American Response

From November 1950 to the end of the conflict in 1953, the Soviet Union covertly deployed a total of between 40,000 and 70,000 servicemen in air combat, anti-aircraft, and support roles to Manchuria and northern North Korea. At their peak in 1951-1952, around 26,000 Russian servicemen served in twelve divisions as fighter pilots, anti-aircraft artillery operators, and aviation technicians.83 As one of the leading researchers on the Soviet role plainly concludes, “Russians took part in every major air battle from late 1950 until spring 1953.”84 This section presents evidence from original archival research on the issue of Soviet participation and reviews the nature and motives of a secret Soviet role as well as the American reaction.

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Although concealment of Soviet air participation required important limitations in how force was used, their role was anything but cosmetic. Soviet pilots flew as many as ninety percent of flights by mid-1952.\(^{85}\) Russian sources claim Soviet pilots shot down between 1,100 and 1,300 American aircraft and put Soviet pilot losses at over one hundred.\(^{86}\) At the strategic level, improved air performance due to more experienced Soviet pilots led American air commanders to avoid flying missions during the day and in northwest North Korea in the important spring 1951 Chinese campaigns.\(^{87}\)

While Soviet advisors were covertly inside North Korea since the initial invasion, Stalin agreed to a combat role with great reluctance and only after repeated requests and persistent lobbying by Mao and foreign minister Zhou Enlai.\(^{88}\) The first requests for Soviet air cover came from North Korea itself in late summer of 1950.\(^{89}\) Stalin declined these requests. Even as China’s ground entry was being negotiated, Stalin hesitated to place Russian pilots in a combat role. Cables between Mao and Enlai in early October 1950 show delicate Sino-Soviet negotiations over Soviet air cover for Chinese ground

\(^{85}\) "Letter from Ganey to Lemay, June 20, 1952."
\(^{87}\) Zhang, Red Wings over the Yalu, 123–126.
\(^{88}\) On the presence of Soviet advisors in North Korea to plan the invasion, and the restrictions Stalin placed on proximity to the frontlines, see Weathersby, “The Soviet Role in the Early Phase of the Korean War: New Documentary Evidence,” 434.
troops. Yet Stalin hesitated in late October causing Mao to delay entry for a week. Eventually, Mao and his colleagues approved entry without a final word. To their surprise, Stalin deployed a fighter regiment for protection of Manchuria within ten days of China’s crossing the Yalu.

Overall, the Soviet air role can be divided into three basic phases. The initial deployment provided limited air protection for the Yalu River border area. The commander in charge of Soviet forces at this stage was Lieutenant General Ivan Belov. Primary evidence of the Soviet role in this early phase from November 1950 has been located in the form of battlefield reports and a grateful telegram from Mao to Stalin on Soviet air performance.

The second phase of the Soviet air role, stretching from a spring 1951 Chinese offensive through early 1952, featured additional Soviet air divisions featuring experienced World War II-era pilots. A cable from Stalin to Mao in March 1951 references the need for additional fighter divisions “in view of the forthcoming major operations” which will

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91 A translated telegram from Stalin in July 1950 indicates “[w]e consider it correct to concentrate immediately 9 Chinese divisions on the Chinese-Korean border for volunteers’ actions in North Korea in the event of the enemy’s crossing the 38th parallel. We will do our best to provide the air cover for these units.” See “Ciphered Telegram from Stalin to Zhou Enlai via Roshchin, July 5, 1950.”
92 Zhang, Red Wings over the Yalu, 61, 87.
93 “Ciphered Telegram from Zakharov to Fyn Si (Stalin), November 2 1950”; Weathersby, “The Soviet Role in the Early Phase of the Korean War: New Documentary Evidence”; in Mao’s translated words: “I express gratitude to the Soviet pilots for the heroism and effort they have displayed in battle...I fully agree with your proposal to reinforce Belov’s aviation force by an additional delivery of MIG-15 planes to China in two lots, numbering 120 (one hundred twenty) pieces and to create a command apparatus for the air corps.” “Ciphered Telegram from Mao to Stalin via Zakharov, November 15, 1950.”
require “the largest possible aviation force at the front.” This second phase represented the peak of Soviet commitment and featured significant improvements against American pilots. Lastly, a third phase stretching from early 1952 to the armistice in 1953 was less successful as rotations reduced the number of highly experienced Soviet pilots, increasing numbers of trained Chinese pilots took part, and U.S./U.N. air tactics adapted.

The Soviet intervention is a clear case of covert combat participation. Stalin was only willing to deploy Soviet personnel if plausible deniability could be preserved. Before deploying pilots, he insisted Soviet advisors in North Korea avoid detection by forbidding their presence on front lines and instructing them to use journalist cover stories if captured. To further guard against face-to-face encounters with Western forces, Stalin refused Soviet personnel any role in prisoner of war interrogations. Once Russian pilots were deployed, Stalin gave strict orders to appear as North Korean or Chinese personnel and to avoid apprehension by the enemy. Planes flown by Soviet pilots bore the markings of North Korea or China. Soviet pilots wore Chinese-style uniforms and were assigned pseudonyms. Bombing and strafing operations were disallowed and flying deep behind enemy lines strictly forbidden. Most challenging,

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94 “Telegram from Stalin to Mao or Zhou Enlai via Zakharov, March 15, 1951.”
Soviet pilots were instructed to conduct intense aerial dog fights while only communicating with a set of memorized Chinese words. A Soviet veteran of the Korean War, still flummoxed by this obviously impractical order, told American journalists years later that “[i]t worked until the first real fight in the air, when we forgot not only our Chinese commands but Russian words too -- except for dirty language.”

Why use deception? Existing explanations

What drove Stalin to accept the numerous restrictions and hurdles necessary for a covert form of intervention? What purpose was deception intended to serve? Existing logics for deception have important limitations in this case. The use of deception to avoid dovish domestic political punishment is least plausible. Domestic constraints were practically non-existent during this period in the Soviet Union. As a result of brutal power consolidation campaigns, victory in World War II, and his firm grip on power in the Communist Party, Stalin was simply without political rivals in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

A tactical surprise motive is more plausible. Stalin may have hoped deception would slow the reactions of American theater commanders to the introduction of a more formidable aerial opponent. Yet surprise seems very unlikely. Soviet primary documentation suggests Stalin and his military advisors were well aware their American counter-parts would quickly detect a Soviet combat presence. In fact, Stalin was warned

100 Quoted in Stanglin and Cary, “Secrets of the Korean War.”
by his top defense advisor before deploying a fighter regiment that enemy
communication intercepts would detect the use of the Russian language over radios. The
advisor cautioned Stalin that “we consider it necessary to report that our pilots’ work in
the skies over Pyongyang will inevitably be discovered by the U.S. troops right after the
first air combat, because all the control and command over the combat in the air will be
conducted by our pilots in the Russian language.”  Even without this evidence of
foresight, surprise seems unlikely for two other reasons. Stalin like anticipated that
American pilots and their commanders would notice and adapt to differences in air tactics
and combat proficiency even without direct evidence of Russians behind the controls. In
addition, the continued use of deception through the end of the war – long after any initial
element of surprise may have been useful – strongly points to an alternative motive.

*Soviet deception to manage escalation dangers*

A desire to keep the war limited by avoiding the engagement of external audiences that
could force escalation was the most important factor driving covertness. Stalin’s
strategic priority in the late 1940s and early 1950s was to consolidate Soviet influence
while advancing Soviet interests without engendering an early militarized confrontation
with the West. Stalin acted as a limited revisionist: in Eastern Europe and in the North
Korean invasion itself, Stalin used largely indirect methods for building Soviet control in
what Stalin saw as his sphere of influence. The strategic priority was to end the

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101 “Telegram from Vasilevsky to Stalin, September 23, 1950.”
American atomic monopoly, recover from the severe dislocations created by World War II, and pursue long-term parity in resources and conventional forces.

Other decisions during the Korean War suggest Stalin’s caution was influencing related secrecy decisions. The visibility of Soviet non-combat advisors, for example, was carefully managed via restrictions on their physical location. Even in private diplomatic overtures by the United States, Soviet leaders carefully hewed to a diplomatic position of non-interference and non-involvement in North Korean military operations. Distancing the Soviet state from the war in this way, prior to any combat role, is clear evidence he was willing to tolerate inconveniences to avoid incidents that could spread the conflict. Moreover, Stalin’s reaction to the near-collapse of the North Korean army after the Inchon landing focused on supporting his ally while minimizing escalation. Though collapse was seen as a disaster, Stalin eschewed a direct Soviet intervention in favor of lobbying Mao to deploy Chinese ground forces.\(^{102}\) Stalin also insisted Chinese forces be labeled “volunteers” rather than the official army of China. As historian Chen Jian describes, “Stalin was unwilling to risk a confrontation with the United States…he considered a ‘more acceptable form of assistance to be assistance by people’s volunteers.’”\(^{103}\) Khrushchev later wrote that “Stalin was so fearful of a direct Soviet-U.S. clash in Korea that he preferred North Korea’s extinction to the use of his own troops on

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\(^{102}\) Jian, *China’s Road to the Korean War*, 161.  
\(^{103}\) Ibid., 171.
the peninsula.”104 Soviet reactions to American combat “incidents” such as accidental overflights or even bombings within Soviet territory were either ignored or protested through private diplomatic channels.105

The composite picture is a leader acutely sensitive to escalatory dangers and attentive to the importance of publicity in generating pressures for it. Historians of the Korean War and Sino-Soviet diplomacy have attributed escalation concerns to Stalin’s preference for deception. One analysis of Sino-Soviet diplomacy at the time, based on Chinese and Soviet documentation, concludes that “[f]earing the conflict might escalate into a full-blown war between the Soviet Union and the United States, Moscow placed security restrictions on Soviet pilots in an effort to conceal their participation in the Korean conflict.”106 A Soviet specialist echoes the sentiment that even though Stalin “eventually did send Soviet military forces to Korea,” his use of the covert form was critical given that he “continued to be extremely reluctant to risk direct confrontation with the United States.”107 An historian that has looked specifically at the covert Soviet air role, Jon Halliday, similarly concludes fear of a hard-to-control escalation process with the Americans drove Stalin to use covertness. Based on interviews with Soviet Korean War

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105 For example, Shen describes that “[o]n 8 October, two US fighter planes intruded into the territorial air space of the Soviet coastal area, flew at a low altitude, and strafed a Soviet military airport about 100 kilometers from the border, causing the destruction of seven planes. Not only did the Soviets fail to react militarily; they even remained silent when their diplomatic protest was rejected.” Shen, “China and the Dispatch of the Soviet Air Force,” 225.
106 Zhang, Red Wings over the Yalu, 139.
veterans soon after the end of the Cold War, Halliday concludes Stalin’s decision-making about the timing and form of intervention was based on minimizing the risks of escalation to direct conflict with the Americans.\textsuperscript{108}

Stalin appeared to be aware of the possibility of unintentional or miscalculation-based escalation. A message from Stalin to both Kim and Mao in early October 1950 specifically references the possibility that, although the Americans did not want a global war, escalation could take place due to prestige considerations. The message was sent during early negotiations between the three allies over China’s potential deployment of “volunteer” divisions. Stalin makes the case in favor of the deployment, downplaying the risk of American attacks on Chinese homeland (“the USA, as the Korean events showed, is not ready at present for a big war”). He then notes one possible reason for caution: he reassures Mao that “[o]f course, I took into account also [the possibility] that the USA, despite its unreadiness for a big war, could still be drawn into a big war out of prestige, which, in turn, would drag China into the war, and along with this draw into the war the USSR, which is bound with China by the Mutual Assistance Pact.”\textsuperscript{109} Stalin was therefore attentive to the risk of escalation which neither side wanted due to reputational or prestige considerations.\textsuperscript{110}

\textsuperscript{109} The archival source is a letter to Kim Il Sung which includes the cable from Stalin to Mao. The language in brackets (i.e. “[considerations of]”) appears in the original translated version. “Letter from Stalin to Kim Il Sung via Shytkov, October 8, 1950.”
\textsuperscript{110} Stalin’s note dismisses the danger of world war with the USA and concludes China should send its ground forces. Weathersby contextualizes the message’s oddly cavalier attitude towards escalation, noting
American detection: Who knew what, when?

Though not immediately apparent to the American side, the presence of thousands of Soviet personnel in active combat roles was detected and the information widely distributed within the American government within by early 1951. Based on a variety of primary documentary sources, this section describes what United States military and civilian leaders knew, with what level of certainty, and when they knew it. The evidence establishes that American and Soviet pilots waged a “de facto war,” concealed but understood by both adversaries as such, for much of the war.

I present the evidence in two steps. First, I analyze the chronological question: When did American intelligence detect an active Soviet combat presence and with what level of detail and confidence? Afterwards, I analyze the question of information circulation: How widespread was this information shared within the U.S. government?

The earliest signs of a possible Soviet combat presence actually predate the deployment of pilots (early July 1950) and, with increasing specificity and reliability, arrived in November and December 1950. Early fragments of intelligence arrived in several forms including reports from military units in the field and the yield from signals intercepts. As cited above, a July joint situation report from the Army’s intelligence bureau reports on a

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Soviet colonel in command of North Korean air defense in Pyongyang and suspicious looking “non-Asiatic” officers in Soviet-supplied tanks. An Air Force daily report from mid-November 1950 describes an American bomber crew’s encounter with MIG-15 jets flown out of a Soviet air base in Vladivostok and describes it as “the first sighting of enemy jet activity in the northeast sector of Korea.” Daily CIA summaries in late December describe swelling shipments of aircraft from Soviet bases into Chinese Manchuria. Yet Soviet the specific issue of whether Soviet pilots were flying flights was not confidently established. A message to President Truman in mid-December 1950 summarizing intelligence on these Soviet shipments cautions that “[t]he message does not permit the conclusion that Soviet pilots are flying the planes.”

The expanded Soviet aerial role for the spring offensive in 1951 brought additional evidence. Daily CIA intelligence summaries in April and May 1951 include reports that jets flown near the Sino-Korean border “were flown by the Chinese Communist Air Force (and possibly by Soviet pilots)” and detect evidence of the transfer of Soviet pilots to airfields in northern North Korea. An August 6th Special Estimate combined CIA, State, Army, Navy, and Air Force sources and concluded that “Soviet assistance to Communist forces in Korea to date has consisted of advisory, technical, and logistical support and limited participation of antiaircraft personnel and possibly other specialized

111 “Joint Morning Sitrep No. 6, July 4, 1950.”
112 “Summary of the Air Situation in Korea, November 16, 1950.”
113 “Situation Summary, December 22, 1950”; “Situation Summary, December 20, 1950.”
114 “Memorandum from Lay to Truman, December 8, 1950.”
115 “Daily Digest, April 20, 1951”; “Daily Digest, May 11, 1951.”
Soviet combat troops.” A CIA daily intelligence report in mid-August 1951 summarized signals intercepts from April and May and demonstrates the level of detail at even this early stage.

Preliminary analysis of radio-telephone traffic intercepted during the period 19 May - 16 July suggests that two regiments of a Soviet 9th Air Army fighter division have been operating in the Manchuria-Korea border area. Previous information has indicated direct Soviet participation in the expansion of enemy air operations since Chinese entry into the Korean war. All pilots and ground operators heard on the ground-controlled intercept network have been Russian, and communications procedures have shown 9th Air Army characteristics. Chinese Communist flight reports have referred to "allied" and "Soviet" aircraft, as distinguished from "Chinese" aircraft, and have named Russian flight-leaders.

Even more detailed estimates of the Soviet combat role were being issued by the end of 1951. A Special Article analysis by CIA on “The Soviet Role in the Korean War” from mid-December 1951 reports “upwards of 15,000 Russians were physically involved in the Korean War” in a variety of roles and specifically that “Russian personnel pilot about 150 Jet interceptor and 25 long-range conventional fighter aircraft in almost daily and nightly combat missions in the air defense of northwestern Korea.” By the summer of 1952, a composite National Intelligence Estimate concludes “a de facto air war exists over North Korea between the UN and the USSR.” A rare document from the National Security Agency estimates the proportion of flights flown by Russian, Chinese, or North Korean pilots. Based on signals intercepts, the assessment concludes the Soviet role was not only prominent but dominant: “[o]f the total flights referred to by these nets during

116 “Special Estimate, August 6, 1951.”
117 “Daily Digest (SS), August 14, 1951.”
118 “Special Article, December 19, 1951.”
119 “National Intelligence Estimate, July 30, 1952.”
the period, 90% were made by pilots flying aircraft whose call numbers equated to ‘allied’ (Russian) units and were vectored and controlled by Russian speaking operators of stations of the Russian language GCI [Ground Controlled Intercept] net.”

While precise estimates of the Soviet combat role were being generated inside the government, official public statements attributed the resulting enemy improvements in the air war to China. For example, the Air Force Chief of Staff, General Hoyt Vandenberg, stated in November 1951 that almost overnight "Communist China has become one of the major air powers of the world.”

Yet how widely was this information shared? It is possible the Soviet role was only known at the tactical level. This documentary record demonstrates the Soviet air combat role was widely known within the government. One reason this is the case: we now know with confidence that the raw intelligence on Soviet pilots was folded into widely distributed national intelligence products like Special and National Intelligence Estimates. The White House’s National Security Council staff and all other key foreign policy offices were consumers of such products making it highly unlikely top cabinet officers were unaware. Another scholar’s archival research in National Security Council records found isolated memos from the end of the Korean War mentioning Soviet combat participation. These documents state that “up to 20,000 Soviet troops were in Korea”

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120 “Ganey to Lemay.”
121 On his underplaying the Soviet role for public consumption, see Zhang, *Red Wings over the Yalu*, 133.
including Soviets flying MIG-15s and anti-aircraft artillery crews. The president was similarly not “in the dark.” President Truman appears to have taken a specific interest in the Soviet role, as one might expect. An aforementioned memo forwarded intelligence on the Soviet role to Truman in December 1950. While the intelligence at the time did not conclusively show Soviet pilots were flying the planes, the document provides a paper trail showing that intelligence analysis was being passed onto the president on this issue even six months into the war.

There is even evidence that later national security officials and presidents were aware of the secret of Soviet involvement and that the main lesson was that covert intervention made escalation less likely. A Vietnam War-era memo from Walt Rostow to President Johnson dismisses the possibility of escalation after bombing by saying that “the Soviet reaction will continue to be addressed to the problem imposed on Hanoi by us; that is, they might introduce Soviet pilots as they did in the Korean War; they might bring ground-to-ground missiles into North Viet Nam with the object of attacking our vessels at sea and our airfields in the Danang area. I do not believe that the continuation of attacks at about the level we have been conducting them in the Hanoi-Haiphong area will lead to pressure on Berlin or a general war with the Soviet Union.” The memo is evidence that

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123 “Memorandum from Rostow to President Johnson, May 6, 1967.”
the Korean War was an important formative moment in the creation of a covert method of competition useful for managing escalation throughout the Cold War.\textsuperscript{124}

Wide circulation shows the failure to publicize was not the result of neglect, oversight, or the decision of a rogue office. Yet the question remains: Why conceal this information? I turn now to the strategic considerations which drove an American reaction of “tacit collusion.”

\textit{Tacit collusion: limiting war by manipulating information and acknowledgement}

Evidence of covert Soviet advisory and combat roles in the Korean War presented American decision-makers with a dilemma. On the one hand, publicizing such information could yield substantial propaganda benefits. Throughout the war, the Soviet Union had publicly claimed no involvement and described the invasion as a defensive response to South Korean provocations.\textsuperscript{125} Publicizing American intelligence showing a Russian role would win significant propaganda points. Early in the war, Secretary of State Acheson initially advocated naming and shaming the Soviets for their advisory role in order to damage their global prestige and public image. In his words, “[p]rompt and explicit exposure of Sov[iet] responsibility for clear-cut case of aggression sh[oul]d go

\textsuperscript{124} On the broader phenomenon of covert competition and escalation management, see Carson, “Secrecy, Denial, and Escalation Management in the Korean War”; the general use of the Korean War as a reference point in Vietnam-era decision-making is described further in Khong, \textit{Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965}.

\textsuperscript{125} Even in mid-1951, the Soviets were still denying any Soviet presence in China, as noted by the American ambassador (“With the USSR continuing to adhere to its public policy of non-intervention (most recently indicated in the dramatic, if wholly mendacious, TASS denial on April 7 of the presence of any Soviet troops in Manchuria.”) “Telegram Kirk to State, April 25, 1951.”
far, appropriately played by Western propaganda, to destroy [the] effectiveness of [their] peace offensive.”

Instead, the American side consistently downplayed the Soviet advisory role and concealed their combat role. Existing logics for deception offer little guidance on why an adversary would demonstrate such forbearance. Deception used for surprise provides no obvious explanation for why the adversary, after detecting deception, would play along with the fiction of non-involvement. Deception used to insulate an intervening state’s leader from dovish domestic sentiment does not provide a motive for the adversary to play along either. Even if Stalin were vulnerable to constituents with dovish preferences – which is clearly unrealistic given the nature of the Soviet regime at the time – this domestic dynamic would seem to make publicity and embarrassment more attractive to American leaders. Such tacit collusion – that is, joint production of a façade of non-involvement even by an adversary – is indeed a deeply puzzling phenomenon.

Tacitly coordinating with an adversary to deceive outside audiences is less puzzling if both sides share overlapping interests in avoiding a generalized war. As the theory describes, the adversary detecting a covert intervention may share an interest in keeping outside audiences in the dark. If both sides conceal it and continue official public rhetoric of non-involvement, pressure to escalate based on external audiences and symbolic meaning can be avoided.

126 “Telegram from Acheson to Embassy in Moscow, June 26, 1950.”
This basic logic appears to have animated U.S. decision-making about the Soviet role.
First, cable traffic and internal memos make clear that American leaders both feared
escalation and did not believe they could fully control it. They believed escalation of the
Korean War could come about even if neither leader wanted it. An early cable to
Secretary of State Acheson from the American ambassador in Moscow, for example,
interprets Stalin’s use of a proxy as a sign he has “thus far avoided direct Soviet
implication in [the] Korean situation” because he is “not yet ready to embark on World
War III.” Yet Ambassador Alan Kirk then cautions Acheson to tread carefully because
“we have always believed and reported that war with Soviets may occur through
international developments which maneuver Soviets and/or US into position where war
[is] inescapable.” 127 Fears of unintended escalation were codified in a National Security
Council policy document on principles of policy in the Korean War. The formerly
classified document, NSC 73/4, stipulated that U.S. policy was based on the principle that
“[g]lobal war could come in one of three ways: (a) Soviet design; (b) by a progression of
developments growing out of the present situation; or (c) by a miscalculation on the part
of either the United States or the USSR.”128

One reason American leaders were prepared to “play along” with the fiction of Soviet
non-involvement was that a covert Soviet entry was anticipated. Well before a combat

127 “Telegram from Kirk to Secretary of State, June 27, 1950.”
128 “Report by the National Security Council (73/4), August 25, 1950.”
role was detected, an August 1950 State Department memorandum argued “Soviet or Chinese communist forces might be organized elements of the regular Soviet or Chinese Communist armies fighting under their own banners, or they might masquerade as North Korean forces fighting as an integral part of the North Korean Army.”

A National Intelligence Estimate in November 1950 concluded any Soviet combat role would take the form of “actual participation without identification” rather than open participation. When signs of covert pilot activity were detected, American leaders did not react with surprise. A National Intelligence Estimate concluded that Soviet fear of escalation would prevent them from abandoning plausible deniability, stating that “[w]e do not believe the USSR will be willing to accept the grave risk of global war which such a commitment would entail.”

Anticipating the likelihood of a covert Soviet combat role, American policy planners debated what to do should limited covert conflict take place. In both abstract policy debates and the concrete rules of engagement, leaders chose to ignore the Soviet presence in order to avoid hard-to-control escalation. In fact, the key components of this policy were already in place before American intelligence had concluded Soviet pilots were in the air.

129 “Draft Memorandum by State Department Prepared for the National Security Council, August 30, 1950.”
130 “National Intelligence Estimate, November 27, 1950,” 1.
Some of the clearest evidence of the role of escalation fears in motivating tacit collusion comes from high-level discussions in the State Department early in the war. Two strands of debate in the fall of 1950 are especially relevant: whether to publicize the Soviet advisory role in the initial North Korean invasion and how to handle the political and legal complications of a “declared” war. Both show policymakers highly attuned to the way reckless publicity could activate domestic and international pressure that would unravel limits on the conflict.

In the first month after North Korea’s invasion, controlling escalation dangers was the main concern cited by Secretary of State Acheson’s top policy planning advisor, Paul Nitze. Nitze recommended against publicizing the Soviet role even though American foreign policy leaders were certain Moscow ordered, directed, and controlled Kim. Nitze feared the Administration publicizing the Soviet advisory role would create a dangerous reputational trap of its own making. In one memo to Acheson, Nitze describes how publicity would place American leaders on the horns of a dilemma: with the Soviet role “outed,” leaders would have to choose between directly retaliating against the Soviet Union, risking a tit-for-tat cycle and general war, or doing nothing, sending a dangerous signal of appeasement.

Should the U.S. officially denounce the Soviet government as responsible for the aggression, it would be very difficult to avoid the logical consequences of such a position, i.e. branding the Soviet Union as the aggressor through U.N. action. Other steps, such as breaking diplomatic relations, etc., would be almost inescapable once the direct accusation was made. Failure to take these steps
which would logically flow from any official position would be a very serious indication of fear of the Soviet Union.\textsuperscript{132}

Acheson and Truman followed precisely this recommendation, strategically abstaining from publicly associating the Soviet Union with the North Korean invasion.\textsuperscript{133} They seemed to believe tacit collusion avoided the horns of this reputation dilemma. Denying outside audiences the informational basis and interpretive cue to classify the war as direct Soviet aggression avoided making the conflict a referendum on American willingness to stand up to Soviet – not just North Korean proxy – aggression. The reactions of future allies and other possible American adversaries likely made these outside groups the target of deception, though domestic constituents eager to directly confront Moscow played a role too (as described below). The logic for collusion regarding advisors applied only more to a Soviet \textit{combat} role since this would only magnify the dilemma: if publicly known and acknowledged, American leaders faced an even stronger test of their willingness to confront the Soviets for shooting down American planes.

Top American advisors saw an additional benefit of “playing along”: preventing a reputational dilemma for the Soviets themselves. American decision-makers were concerned about how their own publicity regarding Soviet involvement would create a new and potentially dangerous prestige problem. Publicity by the Americans “might

\textsuperscript{132} Emphasis added. “Memorandum from Nitze to Acheson, July 23, 1950.”

\textsuperscript{133} One scholar notes that “it was clearly prudent to avoid overtly taunting Stalin—and, as many officials quickly grasped, a presidential statement publicly blaming the Soviets for the Korean invasion could easily prove to be a very serious provocation indeed.” Casey, \textit{Selling the Korean War}, 30–31.
make it difficult for the Soviets to disassociate themselves from the North Koreans.” If they named and shamed, American leaders would “be ourselves so committing the Soviet [Union] that they will find it difficult to save their face.” Even though they were certain Stalin had engineered the invasion, “in this particular case, as a matter of pragmatic tactics, we believe it essential so to refrain from committing a major power capable of precipitating a world war that it will not be embarrassed by what otherwise would be a moral if not a political retreat.” Tacit collusion kept the door open to Soviet restraint.

These ideas were echoed in a related debate early in the war on how to handle the act of declaring war, given the possibility of contact with Soviet combat units. An August 1950 discussion in the State Department’s Policy Planning Staff included Nitze and the first director of Policy Planning, Sovietologist George Kennan. In these debates, American leaders chose a policy which distinguished between Soviet covert and overt combat units, influenced strongly by Kennan’s ideas about the danger of creating irresistible escalation pressures. On the hand, overt and publicized entry by the Soviet Union was to be treated as an act of war. Immediate mobilization and consultation with allies, along with seeking a United Nations resolution publicly designating Moscow an “aggressor,” were the recommendations. Kennan recommended this basic course of action in a memo in late June 1950, though he was careful to stipulate it required that combat was with Russian units “using the uniforms or insignia of the Soviet Union.” In contrast, “playing along”

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134 “Telegram from Kirk to Secretary of State, June 26, 1950.”
135 “Telegram from Douglas to Secretary of State, June 27, 1950.”
was the policy recommended if Soviet units were covertly deployed. Six weeks later, Kennan joined with Nitze in arguing that, as long as U.S.-Soviet combat in Korea was covert, the war should remain undeclared as a way to avoid generalization of hostilities. An August memo summarizing their views notes that the Soviets would not declare war so any declaration would have to come from the American side. However, the memo argued “[e]xtensive hostilities can be carried on by the United States without a formal declaration of a state of war.” The memo concludes waging limited, unacknowledged combat with Soviet units would help prevent a generalization of the war.

[W]e should use the device of recognition of a state of war only as a final resort. We should not thus generalize hostilities and restrict our freedom of action unless the Soviet Union affronts us in such manner that no other course is possible, or unless we decide that a generalization of hostilities is in our National interest. We should leave ourselves free to take limited military action against Soviet forces without a declaration, if this seems advisable.

The logic cited in these private debates echoes points made in Kennan’s other assessments of Soviet decision-making. In his famous article in *Foreign Affairs* on the sources of Soviet conduct, Kennan cautioned against indelicate diplomatic treatment of Moscow, arguing that

[w]hile the Kremlin is basically flexible in its reaction to political realities, it is by no means unamenable to considerations of prestige. Like almost any other government, it can be placed by tactless and threatening gestures in a position where it cannot afford to yield even though this might be dictated by its sense of realism… [D]emands on Russian policy should be put forward in such a manner

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136 A cover note indicates the memo “embodies suggestions made by George Kennan and he concurs in the conclusions and recommendations.” “Memorandum from Savage to Nitze, August 3, 1950.”

137 Ibid., 2–3.
as to leave the way open for a compliance not too detrimental to Russian prestige.\textsuperscript{138}

Clear traces of these abstract policy debates are found in the combat rules of engagement issued to the theater commander, General Douglas MacArthur. These rules of military engagement were debated and approved by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, National Security Council and the President. Instructions issued to General MacArthur in August and September 1950 explicitly distinguished between covertly and overtly deployed Soviet forces and provided different instructions for each. MacArthur was instructed to immediately halt offensive operations and consult with Washington if publicly acknowledged Soviet combat units entered the war. He was instructed to treat covertly deployed Soviet combat units as if they were North Korean.

In a National Security Council (NSC) senior staff meeting in late August 1950 participants agreed that “if the participation of Soviet or Chinese Communist forces should not be announced by their governments, such forces should be treated as if they were North Korean and might be fired upon without restriction.”\textsuperscript{139} The rules of engagement subsequently approved by the NSC therefore instructed MacArthur that “[b]ombing operations north of the 38\textsuperscript{th} parallel should not be discontinued merely because the presence of Soviet or Chinese communist troops is detected in a target area” and that “[i]n the event of an attempt to employ Soviet or Chinese Communist units

\textsuperscript{138} Kennan, “The Sources of Soviet Conduct.”

\textsuperscript{139} “Memorandum of Conversation by Walter McConaughy, August 25, 1950.”
covertly south of [the 38th parallel], the United Nations Commander should continue the action as long as he believes his forces capable of successful resistance.” In contrast, the instructions stated that an overt Soviet combat presence required the theater commander to immediately consult Washington and prepare for general war.140

Deception on one side aided tact and restraint on the other. A State Department memo from February 1951 on bombing policy illustrates. The memo discusses whether the U.S. should bomb airfields within China against if a new aerial offensive were launched by the enemy. In a revealing analytical move, the memo notes that the ambiguity of any Soviet air role removes the question of bombing Soviet airfields too. In the writer’s formulation, “[f]or the purpose of this memorandum, it is assumed that any air power used, by the Chinese Communists will not be so readily identifiable as Soviet as to raise the question of bombing Soviet bases, at least until after a decision is taken about action against Chinese bases.”141

There is even evidence that some American policymakers were aware that tacit collusion was not only advisable but had historical precedent. A cable from the American ambassador in Moscow, for example, compares unacknowledged combat with covert Chinese or Soviet units to past examples. He finds precedents for both covert interventions and great power tacit collusion.

We here cannot forget [the] situation which existed between Soviet and Japanese Governments in mid-thirties when actual hostilities were engaged in along Amur River but without an open declaration of war. Also in [the] Spanish Civil War there were German and Italian military units engaged but their presence overlooked or winked at by other great powers. Similarly, we have had recent experience in Greece where Maejos [Markos] guerrillas were equipped with many weapons coming from foreign sources and frontiers were opened to give sanctuary to Andartes. It seems a pattern has developed in such matters.  

Finally, domestic politics did play a role in motivating deception but does so in exactly the opposite manner predicted by the domestic doves logic. Rather than a democratic leader using deception to overcome war-averse public sentiment, leader used deception, in part, to avoid hawkish domestic sentiment creating hard-to-resist pressure for war escalation. Publicity of a Soviet role risked overheating domestic hawkish opinion, forcing leaders into direct retaliatory measures that would risk a generalized war. Historian Jon Halliday reports interview-based findings that top American officials specifically feared publicizing the Soviet air combat role would unleash domestic demands for retribution that could spark a general war. Paul Nitze recounted that a key consideration driving the American cover-up of Soviet combat participation was that “the public would expect us to do something about it and the last thing we wanted was for the war to spread to more serious conflict with the Soviets.” Halliday also interviewed Eisenhower’s attorney general and close advisor Herbert Brownell who stated that “[w]e

142 “Telegram from Kirk to Secretary of State, November 7, 1950.”
had to keep that under the carpet. If that had ever gotten out, there would have been
tremendous pressure to have a war with Russia.”\textsuperscript{144}

\textit{Conclusion}

The external military interventions in the Korean War exhibit significant variation and
bear substantial support for an impression management based escalation logic for
secrecy. Clear evidence of a kind of “joint impression management” to steer perceptions
of the conflict as limited comes in two important areas. One is on the part of intervening
states. Escalation considerations played a key role in the Soviet choice to covertly
intervene and the Soviet-Chinese decision to label Chinese troops “volunteers.”
Moreover, American leaders refused to engage in an overt expansion of the use of force
to China’s mainland, instead relying on plausibly deniable covert subversion. Leaders on
both sides appeared to appreciate the dangers of unintended escalation spirals and the link
between publicity and the perception of reputational and legal stakes in the eyes of
outside audiences. The second area of support comes in clear evidence of tacit collusion,
i.e. use of secrecy and denials, motivated by a similar desire to keep the conflict limited.
Early in the conflict, the West echoed the Soviet narrative of non-involvement in the
initial invasion to help relieve the prestige-related pressures Stalin might face to retaliate
for the West’s overt intervention. Later, Western leaders echoed the volunteerism
narrative regarding Chinese troops in the hopes of avoiding a full-scale Chinese
intervention. Most importantly, the United States carefully concealed its intelligence that

\textsuperscript{144} Ibid.
Soviet pilots flew missions in the skies of North Korea for much of the conflict. All represent puzzling cases of adversaries “playing along” which are made more understandable by a theory of how leaders handle escalation dynamics through impression management.

The role of surprise and dovish domestic punishment, on the other hand, appears secondary. With the important exception of the use of secrecy by China in its large counter-offensive in late November 1950, surprise played only a small role. Fear of domestic political punishment did not seem to play a role in motivating Chinese or Soviet secrecy. There is evidence part of China’s motive for using the “volunteer narrative” was to boost domestic unity and enthusiasm for the regime but it is unclear whether this was simply opportunistic. Domestic politics does play an important role in American decisions to tacitly collude but in the opposite form expected by existing theory. Hawkish rather than dovish domestic sentiment led Truman and his advisors to use tacit collusion and covert methods of attacking the Chinese mainland.

Finally, the case helps shed light on why states choose overt, public interventions. The initial Western intervention, for example, took place because leaders saw important operational and publicity benefits and perceived relatively low escalation risks. Even when overt intervention is chosen, however, we see evidence of the role of secrecy and denialism. Western leaders paired their overt intervention with “escalation safeguards” that relied on secrecy and denialism. Similarly, the Chinese allowed their role in North
Korea to become visible only after settling on a diplomatic technique – the volunteerism narrative – which they believed would avoid a formal declaration of war by the adversary and limit the perceived relevance of the Sino-Soviet mutual defense treaty. Thus, understanding the escalation dynamics that often lead states to use covert tools also sheds important light on cases of public intervention as well.
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*Secondary Sources*


Chapter 6: Spanish Civil War

The Spanish Civil War is an important case for both historical and theoretical reasons. The war for control of the Spanish state was waged by the incumbent Popular Front government ("Republicans") and a coalition of rebelling groups led by Spanish military officers ("Nationalists"). The war began with a military coup in July 1936 and concluded when the Francisco Franco’s Nationalists seized power in March 1939. At its conclusion, Spain was transformed from a fragile left-leaning republic to a right-aligned dictatorship, geostrategic alignments critical to the coming world war had been solidified, and the first signs of a transformation in how modern war would be fought had appeared on the battlefield.

The Spanish Civil War is historically significant for at least two important reasons. On the military plane, the war hosted the first sustained, symmetric combat since World War I and became a venue for experimentation and innovation in modern warfare. It was, in many ways, a proving ground. A range of technologies and tactics, most importantly involving the use of armor and air power, were first applied. Though such tactics saw some use at the end of World War I, it was only with the Spanish Civil War that European powers used second- and third-generation tanks, fighter planes, and bombers
on a large scale. Indeed, the first combat airlift in history opened the war when Italy and Germany covertly transported thousands of rebel-aligned troops across the Mediterranean from Spanish Morocco. In addition, the brutality of the war included the first attempts at coercion through civilian-targeted aerial bombing. This shocked the conscience of many observers; Picasso’s painting *Guernica* portraying the bombing of a Spanish town of the same name gained immediate worldwide fame in 1937 for this reason. Integration of tanks into infantry units and coordinated air and ground maneuvers – not all of which were successful – were the basis of substantial tactical innovation. Finally, the Spanish Civil War was host to an unprecedented level of combat participation by authentic foreign volunteers, most famously in the International Brigades.¹

Yet the war’s deepest historical significance was on the diplomatic plane. The Spanish Civil War attracted substantial official and unofficial foreign involvement on both sides of the conflict and represented the most profound challenge to European peace since World War I. It altered the trajectory of diplomatic alignments which, in turn, influenced the timing and form of the world war that would soon follow. From 1936 to 1938, the war was the most important issue in global diplomacy. Because it was perceived as a microcosm of the global ideological contest between communism, fascism, and liberal democracy, the Spanish Civil War captured popular attention, attracted meddling of outside powers, and challenged states to limit a dangerous civil conflict from spilling

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over into general war. At the beginning of the war, Italy was considering alignments with Britain or Germany. Stalin hoped for a “collective security” alliance with the British and French to contain a rising Germany. At war’s end, Italy had coordinated military intervention with Germany for three years and announced a “Rome-Berlin” axis. Disagreements over Soviet aid during the war had driven a wedge between Stalin and the British and French, helping lead Stalin and Hitler to secret talks for a marriage of convenience. In short, the Spanish Civil War solidified and fortified the fascist alliance, disrupted diplomatic coordination in containing a rising Nazi Germany, and laid the foundation for key alignments of World War II.2

Theoretically, the Spanish Civil War is a good case for evaluating the politics of secrecy and publicity in outside military interventions. As in the case of the Korean War, the Spanish Civil War offers more theory-relevant observations than a “single case” due to the presence of multiple external interventions.3 Careful evaluation of each component of foreign involvement in the Spanish Civil War provides substantially more leverage on my hypotheses than a single intervention. Moreover, the war features witnessing states, specifically Britain and France, who did not intervene but possessed detailed intelligence on the interventions of other states. This allows me to evaluate hypotheses on witnessing states collusion. The war has a few unique qualities compared to the other cases. In the

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2 On the importance of the Spanish Civil War to World War II alignments and the timing of the war, see Payne, Franco and Hitler, 25, 42 and Chapter 3 generally; Coverdale, Italian Intervention in the Spanish Civil War, 405; Whealey, Hitler and Spain.

larger research design, the Spanish Civil War includes important within-case variation over time which permits evaluation of several secondary hypotheses about transitions to and away from covertness. In addition, the war allows me to evaluate theories outside the unique Cold War context of bipolarity and nuclear weaponry.

*Background, Synopsis, and Analytic Framework*

The precariousness of holding power in Spain in 1936 was underscored by the fate of preceding governments in the decades prior to the Spanish Civil War. After the overthrow of the Spanish monarchy in 1868, the seat of government in Madrid had been the target of numerous internal regime changes. Early attempts to replace divine right with a liberal constitutional republic (First Spanish Republic) in 1873 were foiled by regionalism and lack of support among traditional centers of power; the monarchy was quickly restored. The growth of the working class and trade unions in the early 1900s further divided the country leading, in the 1920s, to worker-led strikes which led to the creation of a Second Spanish Republic. By 1936, a leftist coalition of socialists, communists, and anarchists had won power at the polls. Common themes in these back-and-forth struggles for power in Spain included disagreement over regional autonomy (Catalan, Basque, etc.), coalitions of the left (trade unions, communists, republicans, anarchists) and right (military, church, royalists, and fascists), and occasional political interventions by military officers. The July 1936 military coup was, in an important sense, the latest installment in a decades-long struggle for power between right and left.
The violence which followed the July 1936 coup, however, was on a vastly larger scale than that which had followed previous power transitions. The coup cleft Spanish territory and its military in two. The armed forces were divided. Those officers participating in the coup secured the support of troops below them, as with General Franco’s Army of Africa in Spanish Morocco. Yet others did not defect, leaving the Republican government with nearly half the men under arms. The incumbent Republican government also retained the loyalty of much of the navy and air force though it lost much of the admiralty/officer corps. The loyalty of Spanish cities broke in different directions too. Most traditionally conservative cities and those garrisoned by coup-supportive generals ended up in the Nationalist camp while many others, including Madrid and Barcelona, remained Republican.

4 Well over half of Spain’s officers joined the Nationalist cause including all those with experience in the combat-tested Army of Africa. Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War*, 315–6.
5 On the balance of forces on both sides immediately after the coup, see ibid., 315–319.
Despite fairly equal divisions of land and armed forces, the war consistently unfolded in favor of the rebels. The Nationalists steadily accumulated battlefield victories, shrinking Republican-held territory to the point of eventual collapse. Once the coup-aligned Spanish Army of Africa had been transported across the Mediterranean from Spanish Morocco into southern Spain, Nationalist offensives seized cities in the south like Badajoz which closed the border to Republican-friendly Portugal and united the northern and southern rebel armies. This momentum carried the southern rebel army under General Francisco Franco to the outskirts of Madrid by the end of 1936. Yet the
Republican defense held there and in early 1937 the Nationalists were forced to turn attention to a new offensive in the far north. Successes there led to control of the Austurias region including cities like Bilbao. The Nationalists then renewed their offensive in the center of the country in the spring of 1938 with a rapid push to the eastern coast north of Valencia. A final Nationalist offensive on Barcelona and the rest of Catalonia was completed in February 1939 leading to the negotiated surrender of all Republican territory in March of that year.

Though ostensibly an internal conflict, foreign involvement profoundly influenced the course of the Spanish Civil War. The most influential foreign roles took one of three forms: unofficial foreign volunteer combat participation, foreign military aid, and foreign military combat participation. The rebels were supported by covert military aid and combat participation by the Italian and German governments. The Republicans were supported by covert military aid and combat participation by the Soviet Union as well as multinational brigades of volunteers. The impact of this assistance was profound on both sides. On the one hand, Madrid was held in 1936 largely due to foreign support. A timely and sizable influx of top-line Soviet armor, aircraft, and crews to operate them combined with volunteer “International Brigades” to stiffen Republican resistance. This bought Republicans time and kept a foot in the door of victory. On the other hand, aircraft and crews from Germany and Italy established air superiority by mid-1937. Their use was closely coordinated with Nationalist military leaders in relentless bombing in the north and east. Foreign aerial support thus gave the rebel forces a critical battlefield
advantage from 1937-1939. In addition, Italian naval activity in the Mediterranean Sea was essential to slowing the pace and size of Soviet military aid. Table 8 summarizes foreign combat participation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Ally</th>
<th>Total number of participants</th>
<th>Combat participant roles</th>
<th>Intervention form</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>Nationalists</td>
<td>73,000</td>
<td>Combat infantry, artillery with operators, tanks with tank crews, aircraft with pilots, submarines with naval crews (1936-1939 for all)</td>
<td>Various</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>Nationalists</td>
<td>17,000</td>
<td>Aircraft with pilots (1936-1939), submarines with naval crews (1936 only)</td>
<td>Covert</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soviet Union</td>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>1,200</td>
<td>Artillery with operators, tanks with tank crews, aircraft with pilots (1936-1938 only for all)</td>
<td>Covert</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8. Foreign combat participation in the Spanish Civil War

In the empirical analysis that follows, I review the interventions of each of these three states and present evidence on a number of theory-relevant questions. I investigate why each of these states began with cautiously covert interventions early in the war, why the Italian intervention became increasingly overt as the war progressed, and why the German intervention did not. I also investigate the reaction of witnessing states, specifically Britain and France, and explain why they chose not to publicize known combat participation by Italy, Germany, and the Soviet Union.

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6 France engaged in passive intervention by periodically opening its border to the flow of aid and volunteers from outside Spain. With no government-run covert or overt combat participation, they are not included here.
7 Figures on Germany, Italy, and Soviet Union from (respectively) Thomas, The Spanish Civil War; Coverdale, Italian Intervention in the Spanish Civil War; Kowalsky, Stalin and the Spanish Civil War.
8 This excludes military personnel serving as advisors and in non-combat roles like maintenance.
Outside involvement in the Spanish Civil War and the diplomatic blocs this led to raised the constant threat of a wider European war. For the purposes of theory evaluation, it is important to operationalize the specific scenarios for “war escalation” in the case of the Spanish Civil War. Figure 6 presents the basic escalation steps. Three scenarios of increasing destructiveness were relevant to state calculations: (1) escalation within the Iberian peninsula; (2) escalation beyond the Iberian Peninsula short of pan-European war; and (3) escalation to a general European war. As I show below, several leaders resorted to secrecy specifically to avoid highest levels of escalation but harnessed publicity at lower levels.

Figure 6. Forms of escalation in the Spanish Civil War
Lastly, the Spanish Civil War allows analysis of secondary hypotheses which other chapters do not. The secrecy used in Italy’s intervention, in particular, varied both over time and between specific elements (i.e. ground, naval, air). This raises important questions. What prompts a state to shift away from secrecy over time? What prompts it to use more secrecy in some elements than others? I derive specific hypotheses about these questions and present them in Table 9 below. I evaluate these and the primary hypotheses to assess the relative importance of surprise, domestic insulation, and escalation below.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>When a state shifts from an initially <strong>covert</strong> intervention to a more <strong>overt</strong> form...</th>
<th>...states do so in light of new evidence and corresponding beliefs that the risks of escalation are lower than previously believed.</th>
<th>Why does Italy shift its general intervention form from highly covert to increasingly overt in 1936? Escalation: Italy does so because it sees new evidence that the risk of escalation is lower than previously believed. Surprise: Italy does so because it believes there is no longer value in tactical or strategic surprise. Domestic dove: Italy does so because it sees new evidence that the risk of domestic political punishment is lower than previously believed.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>...states do so in light of new beliefs that there is no longer value in tactical or strategic surprise.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>...states do so in light of new evidence and corresponding beliefs that the risks of domestic political punishment are lower than previously believed.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>When a state shifts from an initially <strong>overt</strong> intervention to a more <strong>covert</strong> form...</th>
<th>...states do so in light of new evidence and corresponding beliefs that the risks of escalation are higher.</th>
<th>Why does Italy shift its naval intervention form from overt to more covert in 1937? Escalation: Italy does so because it sees new evidence that the risk of escalation is higher than previously believed. Surprise: Italy does so because it believes there is new value in tactical or strategic surprise. Domestic dove: Italy does so because it sees new evidence that the risk of domestic political punishment is higher than previously believed.</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>...states do so in light of new beliefs in the high value of tactical or strategic surprise.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>...states do so in light of new evidence and corresponding beliefs that the risks of domestic political punishment are higher.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>When a state engages in a mixed form of intervention (i.e. air, ground, naval)...</th>
<th>...states will make those elements with higher escalation dangers more covert and those with lower escalation dangers more overt.</th>
<th>Why does Italy consistently use more covert precautions with its naval intervention compared to the overtness of its ground troops? Escalation: Italy does so because it sees relatively higher escalation dangers in overt naval intervention versus overt land intervention. Surprise: Italy does so because it sees the highest surprise value in naval operations versus land operations. Domestic dove: Italy does so because it sees the highest danger of political punishment from naval intervention versus land intervention.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>...states will make those elements with highest surprise value more covert and those with lowest surprise value more overt.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>...states will make covert the most domestically controversial elements and make overt the least controversial elements.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 9. Secondary hypotheses with Spanish Civil War examples
I organize what follows by intervening and witnessing state. I first review the covert combat participation of Germany and the Soviet Union. These two states are paired based on their intervention similarity: without exception, both adhered to a strictly covert intervention method throughout the war. I then review the important case of Italy. Italian intervention featured variation in covertness over time and among different intervention elements. After these descriptive sections, I turn to explanation. I present evidence why German, Soviet, and Italian leaders selected the forms of intervention they did. Lastly, I review the reactions to these interventions by the two most important witnessing states, the United Kingdom and France. I describe the nature of their response, presenting evidence of collusive activity throughout much of the war and the motives for it. I specifically highlight the important role of international institutions, most importantly the Non-Intervention Committee, in sustaining a definition of the conflict as civil rather than internationalized.

Consistent Concealment: German and Soviet Intervention

Two of the three outside states which participated in combat during the Spanish Civil War chose to build and retain careful secrecy throughout the war. The government-

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9 Unlike the Korean War, intervention decisions of all three major actors were taken more or less simultaneously. Thus, a chronologically organized review would be substantially less clear.

10 In general, the evidence used in this chapter is based on the work of leading historians of the Spanish Civil War. Where possible, I use evidence from primary documents used by historians to substantiate my claims. Importantly, fresh primary documentation on the Italian and Soviet interventions made available since the 1990s has prompted new historian analyses of the extent of, and logic behind, such interventions. For the Soviet Union, Kowalsky (552) notes that “new accessibility of these sources now permits a fuller accounting of the role of the Soviet Union’s active military participants in the war.” There are few translated Italian primary sources available. Recently opened archival sources in Italian are summarized in Sullivan, “Fascist Italy’s Military Involvement in the Spanish Civil War”; Soviet primary documents are not translated but Kowalsky’s recent study provides more than enough detail on the Soviet intervention.
sponsored, organized and managed combat interventions of Germany, on behalf of the Nationalist rebels, and the Soviet Union, on behalf of the incumbent Republican government, were ambiguous throughout the war. The curtain on German combat participation was parted in 1939 when the war’s conclusion was foregone and after the Munich Conference had demonstrated the lengths the British and French would go to avoid a European war. The curtain on Soviet combat participation lingered long after the war; official documentation and figures have only become available since the end of the Cold War a half century later.

The centerpiece of Germany’s covert combat participation was an air expeditionary force called the Condor Legion.\textsuperscript{11} In October 1936, at the request of rebellion leader General Francisco Franco, Adolph Hitler approved creation of a legion of German airmen for secret deployment to Spain on behalf of the Nationalists. Franco’s need to outsource an air force was acute: the majority of the Spanish Air Force had stayed loyal to the incumbent government and evidence of substantial Soviet military aid to the Republican side was mounting. The Condor Legion, managed out of the German Air Ministry by a new and secret Special Staff section (“W”), was to be a full-service 5,000 person unit including bombing, fighter, reconnaissance, antiaircraft artillery, and maintenance capabilities.\textsuperscript{12} The unit remained under German command but was used in close

\textsuperscript{11} Proctor describes a small unit of separately organized German tank operators (“Drohne group”) but I omit discussion due to the small size of the contingent Proctor, \textit{Hitler’s Luftwaffe in the Spanish Civil War}, 60.

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 3–4; Thomas, \textit{The Spanish Civil War}, 344.
coordination with Spanish Nationalist military planners.\textsuperscript{13} The initial shipment of aircraft, related equipment, and personnel began in early November and the first combat missions were flown in the battles near Madrid later that month in 1936. The Condor Legion remained in Spain until the war concluded in spring of 1939. By the time it was withdrawn, 17,000 German soldiers and pilots had been deployed and participated in most major battles of the war.

Air superiority and tactical bombing provided by this Condor Legion had a profound impact on the course of the war. Overall, Germany’s air expeditionary force, together with a similar Italian unit, were responsible for Nationalist air superiority beginning in spring of 1937. In fact, after Germany began sending state-of-the-art second-generation bombers in March 1937, the Nationalists possessed dominant air power.\textsuperscript{14} Moreover, Condor Legion bombing played a critical role in each of the Nationalist offensives after 1936, including the Basque/Asturias campaign in the north in 1937, the drive east to the Mediterranean (“Aragon Offensive”) in 1938, and the final offensive in Catalonia in 1938/1939.\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{13} Whealey, \textit{Hitler and Spain}, 49.
\textsuperscript{14} On the turning point in air superiority in favor of the Nationalists, see Thomas, \textit{The Spanish Civil War}, 694.
\textsuperscript{15} On the dominance of Condor Legion bombing during the campaigns in the north and northeast (“air power had proved repeatedly to be the deciding factor” on 142), see Proctor, \textit{Hitler’s Luftwaffe in the Spanish Civil War}, 119–143.
The German government went to great lengths to minimize the visibility of the unit and strongly refuted all public allegations of German personnel in Spain. A range of measures to ensure “strict secrecy on German military activities in Spain” were adopted imposing sacrifices both trivial and substantial. Condor Legion personnel were assembled in Germany under false pretenses, transported in civilian clothing, and stowed below deck; upon arrival, they were issued alternative uniforms with Spanish-type insignia. Once in theater, Condor Legion personnel were housed in special trains which moved from battlefront to battlefront, minimizing on-the-ground interaction with Spanish nationals and journalists. German personnel were not permitted to appear within Spain in German uniforms for fear of being recognized. Hitler reduced the standard rotation cycle in and out of theater to reduce the number of personnel involved in the program and thus the risk of security leaks. The German government gave no publicity to the successes or failures of the Legion as such during the war. Indeed, much of the logistics were unknown even within the German government. The first wave of German aid and personnel were kept so secret that Germany’s economic and foreign ministries were kept in the dark for several months.

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16 Germany also refuted accusations of Germany military aid, yet the level of knowledge regarding supplies (versus combat personnel) was higher. When discussing questions of intervention visibility, here as elsewhere it is important to recall the distinction between aid and combat participation.
17 Whealey, *Hitler and Spain*, 56.
20 Ibid., 377.
21 Whealey, *Hitler and Spain*, 56.
22 Ibid.
Covertness required Germany carefully conceal its bilateral consultations with Italy on Spain-related matters. Secret bilateral consultations to establish strategy and coordinate aid to the Nationalists were held each month from August 1936 to January 1937. During these consultations, Italy and Germany agreed they should avoid “open involvement” in the conflict, the scope of the war needed to be contained, and that both should react with vehement denials at any accusations of meddling in Spain.\textsuperscript{24}

Before examining the form of intervention, it is important to consider why Hitler and his advisors wanted to intervene in Spain at all? The motivation for German involvement remains a somewhat unsettled point of debate among historians.\textsuperscript{25} Yet most agree that, at minimum, Hitler’s goals were three-fold: (1) prevent the rise of an ideological and geostrategic adversary which would likely result if a radicalized Republican government won the war; (2) reap the geostrategic and economic benefits of a new ally should the Nationalists win; and, (3) generally accelerate the unraveling of the interwar order. The timing of Hitler’s decision to intervene substantiates the role of geopolitical considerations: intelligence indicating the Soviet Union had initiated a major aid

\textsuperscript{24} Regarding their combat participation, Thomas notes that Italy and Germany described their personnel “as if they were genuine volunteers – even to each other” on ibid., 562; on Italy-Germany secret coordination, see also Frank, Jr., “Naval Operations in the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939,” 34; Proctor, \textit{Hitler’s Luftwaffe in the Spanish Civil War}, 36.

\textsuperscript{25} Alongside geostrategic and ideological rationales for siding with the fascist-supported Nationalist military generals, historians have debated whether the eventual military training and economic benefits accrued by Germany constituted part of the rationale for its original entry into the war. For a critique of this argument, see Payne, \textit{Franco and Hitler}, 35.
program for the Republicans in October 1936 was a critical factor prompting Germany’s own commitment to the Nationalist side.26

The Soviet intervention resembled Germany’s in many ways. Even before Stalin committed Soviet personnel and equipment to Spain, the Soviet Union was involved through a number of channels.27 Through the Moscow-directed Communist International (Comintern), the Soviet Union indirectly raised and distributed non-lethal aid for the Republican side, recruited and organized left-leaning foreign volunteers to serve in International Brigades in support of the Republicans, and worked with the communists within the Republican left coalition to elevate their influence inside the Spanish government. Thus, there were Russian and East European communists present in Spain before any decision intervene militarily. Yet with the Nationalists accumulating victories in the early battles of July and August 1936, Stalin and the Soviet Politburo were forced to consider whether deeper involvement was necessary to avoid a Republican collapse.

Stalin embraced an active military role. By October, the first wave of Soviet tanks, aircraft, and operating crews had secretly arrived in Spain and within weeks would alter the course of the war. By the end of the war, over 3,000 military personnel transported to

and from the Soviet Union in sixty elaborately concealed long-haul shipments would serve in the war.\textsuperscript{28}

The program committing cutting-edge Soviet equipment and personnel to the Spanish Republicans was debated and approved in mid-September 1936. After two weeks of consideration, Stalin and the Politburo approved “Operation X,” a plan to clandestinely provide military armaments, most importantly the newest models of Soviet aircraft, tanks, and the crews to handle them.\textsuperscript{29} The program was run out of “Section X,” a special secret subgroup within the NKVD, the Soviet Union’s intelligence service.\textsuperscript{30}

While Comintern activities were often overt, the equipment and personnel provided under Operation X were “carried out under the highest level of secrecy.”\textsuperscript{31} Like the German program, Stalin insisted the transport and in-country visibility of Soviet military officers, airmen, and tank crews be kept extremely limited. Transport involved a number oflogistically challenging concealment measures: within the Soviet Union, shipments of military equipment to port was done under false cover; loading equipment at ports was done under the supervision of intelligence officials inside heavily guarded harbors; elaborate disinformation plans for each shipment were developed to help provide false cover while at sea; the ships themselves had names altered, hulls repainted, foreign flags

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 153.
\textsuperscript{29} Kowalsky, \textit{Stalin and the Spanish Civil War}, 496; Payne, \textit{The Spanish Civil War, The Soviet Union, and Communism}, 141.
\textsuperscript{30} Kowalsky, \textit{Stalin and the Spanish Civil War}, 459.
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 463.
provided, and forged manifests; and the shipping crews were given false pretenses and
clothing. Concealment of the personnel included a number of important measures:
recruiting and selection of personnel was carefully conducted under strict confidentiality
by the Soviet Defense Commissariat; personnel were transported under civilian or other
false pretenses; and, each person was given a pseudonym and corresponding papers.
Once in the theater, Soviet personnel were carefully managed to avoid capture. Those
not directly involved in combat were required to stay out of artillery range to avoid
capture.32 Any Soviet personnel captured were to be declared volunteers and their
official status disavowed.33 Within the Soviet Union, officially-sanctioned press reports
did not describe any Soviet combat role despite devoting ample space to extolling the
virtues of communist solidarity in the Spanish Civil War. For example, the first
successful bombing by Soviet pilots in late October 1936 was described by Pravda as
victories by “Republican” air force squadrons of the Spanish government.34 This secrecy
was maintained for decades as official information on and acknowledgement of the
intervention did not come until only recently.

Like the German covert combat role, the primary focus and substantive impact of Soviet
personnel was in the air. Though its impact was temporary, Soviet pilots in fighter and
bomber groups flying in Spain changed the course of the war in the fall of 1936 through

32 Thomas, The Spanish Civil War, 430.
34 Kowalsky, Stalin and the Spanish Civil War, 658.
early 1937.\footnote{Throughout the late fall of 1936 and into early 1937, the balance of air power weighed heavily in the Republic’s favor}; see ibid., 661.

The arrival of Soviet equipment and pilots established Republican air superiority in the crucial months of October and November as the Nationalist offensive approached Madrid. Soviet pilots played a key role in the two most significant losses for the Nationalists: the first battle for Madrid (October-November 1936) and the battle for Guadalajara (March 1937). The influx of hundreds of skilled Soviet pilots enabled bombing campaigns during these two battles halting Nationalist momentum in the south.\footnote{Ibid., 660–661; Payne, The Spanish Civil War, The Soviet Union, and Communism, 155.}

Yet when Nationalist-allied forces began wrestling back air superiority in the spring of 1937, Stalin opted against fresh shipments to restore Republican air superiority. He declined for a number of reasons: long supply lines from Russian ports, aggressive Italian naval interdiction in the Mediterranean Sea, the depletion of the Republic’s finances, and the continued need to participate in non-intervention diplomacy.\footnote{The invasion of China by Japan, closer to the Soviet border, also played an important role in Stalin’s thinking. See Kowalsky, Stalin and the Spanish Civil War, 521–522, 783–784; Payne, The Spanish Civil War, The Soviet Union, and Communism, 240–241, 266.}

Moreover, Spanish pilots trained in the Soviet Union were becoming available to fly on their own and were beginning to replace Soviet pilots in May 1937.\footnote{Thomas, The Spanish Civil War, 658.} As a result, the shift in the air in favor of the Nationalists held through the end of the war. Beyond air power, Soviet tanks and tank crews provided a less dramatic but important boost in combat effectiveness in the Madrid and Guadalajara campaigns but were eventually over-

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item[35] Throughout the late fall of 1936 and into early 1937, the balance of air power weighed heavily in the Republic’s favor; see ibid., 661.
\item[36] Ibid., 660–661; Payne, The Spanish Civil War, The Soviet Union, and Communism, 155.
\item[37] The invasion of China by Japan, closer to the Soviet border, also played an important role in Stalin’s thinking. See Kowalsky, Stalin and the Spanish Civil War, 521–522, 783–784; Payne, The Spanish Civil War, The Soviet Union, and Communism, 240–241, 266.
\item[38] Thomas, The Spanish Civil War, 658.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
matched by foreign-supplied counter-measures. The net effect of all Soviet covert combat participation and its larger military aid program was to significantly postpone the defeat of the Republicans.39

Before evaluating the form of his intervention, it is important to consider what motivated Stalin to intervene in the first place. The Soviet decision to provide military aid took place in mid-September when Franco’s Army of Africa was rapidly advancing north from Seville threatening to end the war within months of the initial rebellion. The leftist Spanish Republican government was reeling from these defeats and at risk of collapsing. Geopolitics motivated Stalin to consider Soviet combat participation to prevent the defeat of a friendly government and its replacement with a much more hostile fascist government.40 While the Republican side included communists, pure ideological solidarity was secondary to the larger geopolitical consequences of the war’s outcome. Diversion and vulnerability were an especially important consideration. By putting hostile powers (Germany and Spain) on both sides of France, a fascist-allied Spain would greatly reduce the risks of a German invasion of the Soviet Union.41 Stalin also saw intervention as a way to place a victorious Republican government in his strategic debt as well as channel the coalition government towards Soviet-friendly communism and away from competing factions.42

40 Ibid., 144–145, 295; Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War*, 326.
41 Stalin considered rising Germany the primary danger in 1936 despite later joining forces with Hitler in the Soviet-German mutual defense pact of 1939.
**Variation over Time and Space: Italian Intervention in Spain**

Italy’s intervention in the Spanish Civil War offers a striking contrast to the carefully concealed combat participation by Germany and the Soviet Union. The Italian intervention was generally much more overt and well-known despite Mussolini’s use of the language of “volunteers.” Whereas the presence of a combat role for the Soviets and Germans was sometimes suspected, Italian ground troops were widely reported in the international press as early as 1937. Yet the Italian intervention is especially interesting because it began covert before becoming more public and Mussolini chose to use a higher degree of concealment in his naval intervention than in the ground campaign.

The scale of Italy’s combat participation was the largest of any foreign power and substantially larger than that of Germany and the Soviet Union. Italy sent to the Nationalists in Spain equipment and personnel for artillery, tank, aircraft, naval interdiction, and infantry missions. Italian-only units with thousands of troops fought on the front lines in critical battles for Malaga, Guadalajara, Santander, Valencia, Barcelona, and Madrid. After the Nationalists finally took Madrid in 1939, over 18,000 members of Italy’s expeditionary ground, the Corpo Truppe Volontarie (Corps of Volunteer Troops; “CTV”), led a victory parade through the streets of the capital. Italian-piloted aircraft in the Aviazione Legionaria (Legionary Air Force) played major roles throughout the war as well. Italian naval crews operated submarines patrolling the Spanish coast and wider Mediterranean for shipments of military supplies headed toward Republican ports.
throughout the war. Official statistics now declassified state that over 72,000 officers and troops were deployed to participate in ground campaigns, over 5,000 fought in the air, and at its height thirty-six submarines participated in interdiction missions.\footnote{For overviews, see Coverdale, \textit{Italian Intervention in the Spanish Civil War}, 396; Sullivan, “Fascist Italy’s Military Involvement in the Spanish Civil War.”}

One must describe the form of Italy’s intervention carefully. Like Germany and the Soviet Union, Italy participated in the activities of the Non-Intervention Committee throughout most of the war. It also maintained an official position that any Italians in Spain were volunteers. Yet, in practice, other states and news-following foreign publics knew Italy officially authorized and centrally organized a ground combat role. Because of the sheer size of the expeditionary force and its prominent place in key offensives, even a thread of ambiguity was lost. The deployment of thousands of Italians from both the fascist militias and the regular army was quickly detected by foreign governments and press. Importantly, though, Italy’s role in the air and at sea was much less visible. Italian aircraft could be identified by state intelligence and members of the media but the identity of their crews was never clear. Submarines conducting interdiction missions were inherently difficult to observe; the national identity of their crews was virtually impossible to verify directly. As described below, Mussolini used submarines rather than his fleet’s surface warships precisely to preserve plausible deniability at sea.
Leaving the form of intervention aside for a moment, why did Italy intervene in the Spanish Civil War at all? The initial motive for intervention appears geopolitical. A victorious and radicalized Spanish Republican government would create a more dangerous adversary in the western Mediterranean.\(^{44}\) The converse was true: a Nationalist victory with substantial Italian aid offered diplomatic and strategic opportunity for a new ally. In either case, Mussolini was keen to shape the outcome because he hoped to revise the European status quo in the Mediterranean in favor of Italy; a fascist ally in Spain specifically offered access to naval bases on Majorca and Gibraltar.\(^{45}\) The well-known role of Spanish fascist militia (i.e. the Falange, formed in the early 1930s) in the Nationalist cause further elevated the stakes. The fascist connection generated a perception in Italy and abroad that the fate of the Spanish rebellion and the promise of the larger political movement of fascism were linked. Finally, Mussolini saw Spain as the natural venue for demonstrating fascist military superiority with victory in Ethiopia complete in 1935. Bringing glory to Italy and the larger cause of fascism, in fact, was the key distinguishing factor which led Mussolini to value publicity for his intervention while German and Soviet interventions were kept quiet.

Italy’s initial role in the civil war was conducted with great secrecy. Days after the Spanish generals revolted in July 1936, Italy received a request from Nationalists

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\(^{44}\) Coverdale, *Italian Intervention in the Spanish Civil War*, 79–81.

\(^{45}\) Ibid., 8–10; Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War*, 340.
representatives to ferry General Franco’s Army of Africa from the Spanish protectorate of Morocco to the Iberian Peninsula. The Nationalists needed an airlift because much of the Spanish naval fleet had remained loyal to the Republic. With no meaningful naval capability, the rebel’s most effective fighting force was stuck on the wrong side of the western Mediterranean. Mussolini agreed to aid the rebels through a covert airlift mission in which Italian planes and pilots masqueraded as private sector actors. Converted Italian bombers were repainted, Italian pilots recruited by the Italian air force chief of staff wore Spanish Foreign Legion uniforms, and false papers for the crew were prepared to complete the cover story. The first Italian transport aircraft arrived at the end of July 1936 and, along with a covert detachment of German transport planes, ferried a total of 13,000 soldiers into Seville, Spain.

Despite Italy’s precautions, its role was exposed even at this early stage when two of the twelve Italian planes were forced to land in French Morocco due to insufficient fuel. French authorities arrested the crewmembers and, after discovering discrepancies in their documentation, publicized Italy’s active attempt to aid a rebellion against a seated Spanish government. Italy denied the claim. Thus, other states and publics strongly suspected some kind of active military role by Italy as early as July 1936.

46 Coverdale, Italian Intervention in the Spanish Civil War, 3–4, 69–74.
47 Proctor, Hitler’s Luftwaffe in the Spanish Civil War, 31.
48 Coverdale, Italian Intervention in the Spanish Civil War, 4; Thomas, The Spanish Civil War, 350.
It was not long before Mussolini deepened Italy’s commitment to the Nationalist cause. In September, two months after the airlift, intelligence indicating large shipments of Soviet aid to the Republic reached Mussolini. Soviet involvement threatened to turn the tables on the Nationalists. Despite continuing an official position of non-intervention, Mussolini deepened Italy’s role in Spain. Shipments of bombers, fighters, machine guns, hand grenades, and bombs left Italy for the Spanish coast in early September 1936. Italy crossed the threshold to combat participation when Mussolini approved a shipment of equipment deemed too sophisticated for untrained Spanish Nationalists to use (i.e. radios, tanks); personnel for their operation was therefore included and integrated into Spanish combat units. ⁴⁹

The critical decision to deploy Italian infantry under the command of Italian generals in Spain was reached in December 1936, in large part due to successful Republican resistance at Madrid. Importantly, Mussolini and his advisors were aware of the political and diplomatic significance of a visible form of ground intervention. Two different models were considered. In one version, Italy would send Franco only genuine volunteers from Italian Fascist militia (“Black Shirts,” technically not active regular army soldiers) to be integrated into the Spanish ranks. In a second version, Italy would send complete divisions of either Black Shirts or Italian regular infantry that would be autonomously organized and under Italian command. Mussolini chose both. By mid-December, three thousand Black Shirts to be integrated into Nationalist forces arrived in

Spain. The following week, Mussolini added the second option and, by late December 1936, three shipments of autonomously commanded soldiers were on their way to Spain. With more shipments over the following month, Italian military personnel in Spain swelled to 49,000 by February 1937 including an entire division of active-duty soldiers from the Italian royal army.

Italy’s ground combat participation was all but overt. Few concealment measures were taken. While soldiers in the initial shipments in December 1936 were instructed to wear civilian clothes en route to Spain, no precautions were made once in-country. International news reported the arrival of a few thousand Italian Black Shirts as early as January 5, 1937. Later shipments which arrived in January and February were similarly transparent. Uniform changes reflected the more overt status of the intervention: whereas the personnel used in the July 1936 airlift were given Spanish Foreign Legion uniforms, later waves of ground forces were given distinctive CTV uniforms. The overtness of Italy’s ground role reached its climax in early 1937. Hungry for battlefield victories showcasing the glory of Italian fascism, Mussolini insisted Franco place autonomously organized Italians in lead positions in offensives on Malaga (January) in the south and Guadalajara (March). While the publicity he sought backfired when Italians/Nationalists lost at Guadalajara, Mussolini and the Rome-controlled Italian press

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50 Ibid., 168.
51 These were organized into three Black Shirt divisions and one royal army division. Details in ibid., 175–176, 182–183, 212.
52 Ibid., 170.
53 Thomas, The Spanish Civil War, 566.
54 Ibid., 576; Coverdale, Italian Intervention in the Spanish Civil War, 207–210, 212–250.
showered Italian “volunteers” with praise after victory in the battle for Santander in August 1937. Italy’s CTV continued to play a visible and important role in the decisive battles for Catalonia in 1938 and 1939, concluding with the very public act of joining in victory parades in Madrid at the war’s conclusion.

However, one element of deniability was maintained: a “volunteer narrative.” Upon the arrival of the first waves of Italian infantry in Spain in January 1937, historian John F. Coverdale notes that “[n]o effort was made to hide the fact that Italian troops were pouring into Spain in increasing numbers, although [Italian Foreign Minister Galeazzo] Ciano did try to maintain the fiction that they were volunteers for whom the government was not responsible.” With so many soldiers in Spain, by February 1937 the Italian press acknowledged “volunteers” in the ranks of Franco’s army but “official intervention in Spain was systematically denied.”

The utility of Italy’s volunteer narrative was that it allowed it and other states in the Non-Intervention Committee to maintain the charade of Italian non-involvement. Confronted with news reports of Italians in Spain, Italy’s representative replied brusquely that they hoped “no Italian volunteers would leave Spanish soil until Franco’s victory was

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57 Ibid., 204.
assured.”58 The volunteer narrative was employed even when describing the glory of Italy-enabled victories. Italian news reports of the “great victory” by Italians/Nationalists at Santander in August 1937 described Italy’s troops at the lead of the offensive as “two divisions of Italian volunteers…in fraternal and comradely collaboration with Franco’s National forces.”59

In contrast with the publicity Italy gave its infantry divisions in Spain, its naval activity was unpublicized and meaningful concealment was a consistent concern. Italian naval activity did not lack for ambition or strategic importance. For most of the two year period between October 1936 and October 1938, dozens of Italian submarines with Italian crews patrolled the coast of Spain attempting to sink Spanish Republican naval vessels and any ships carrying foreign military aid. These patrols decisively influenced the course of the war as the Nationalists went from a severe disadvantage in naval capabilities to hegemony near its coastline. The threat to shipping deterred the Soviet Union from using the vastly more efficient Mediterranean shipping route. This sharply reduced the rate of foreign military supplies reaching the Republic and was, as one historian concludes, “crucial to Franco’s victory.”60

The Italian naval intervention can be divided into three phases. In the first covert phase, Mussolini agreed to clandestinely provide six Italian submarines to the Nationalists to

58 Ibid., 301.
59 Ibid., 283.
60 Sullivan, “Fascist Italy’s Military Involvement in the Spanish Civil War,” 713.
help thwart Soviet shipments by policing Spain’s territorial waters. The submarines were under the command of Italian naval officers with Italian crews. Between October 1936 and when this first phase ended in February 1937, a total of twenty-four Italian submarines patrolled Spanish territorial waters sinking several merchant vessels as well as severely damaging a Republican destroyer. Knowledge that submarines could sink Republican vessels intimidated the government, causing them to keep Republican destroyers and cruisers in protected ports and squandering a numerical advantage.

In contrast to the ground campaign, the Italian role at sea was kept carefully covert. Mussolini steadfastly denied Nationalist requests for surface ships, either under Italian or Spanish control, out of a desire to avoid making Italy’s role at sea too easy to detect. Submarines are unique in their ability to allow small-scale uses of force at sea without identification. Mussolini also had Italian submarines physically altered by painting over distinguishing lettering before dispatch. Each submarine was required to raise the Spanish Nationalist flag rather than the Italian if forced to surface in view of the coast or other ships. A Spanish liaison officer on board was instructed to pose as commanding officer of the vessel during any encounter. The rules of engagement required Italian submarines to abstain from firing on suspicion or at any convoy; submarine commanders

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62 Ibid., 37.
63 Coverdale, Italian Intervention in the Spanish Civil War, 180.
64 As one historian notes, “the obvious impossibility of providing large surface ships without being detected led Rome to refuse the request for destroyers”; see ibid., 117.
65 Smoke, War: Controlling Escalation, Appendix C.
were required to positively identify each vessel. Moreover, ships could only be attacked in Spanish territorial waters and not on high seas.\(^6^6\)

In time, however, Italy’s naval role became far more visible during a tumultuous and short-lived four week initiative in late summer 1937. Based on intelligence that new shipments of Soviet military aid were set to leave Russian ports, Franco requested a much more aggressive naval interdiction campaign. While still refusing to consider the use of large surface ships, Mussolini agreed to immediately deploy fifteen submarines throughout the Mediterranean and create a naval barrier in the narrow Straits of Sicily with Italian cruisers.\(^6^7\) Mussolini also relaxed the rules of engagement to permit Italian vessels to fire on a wider range of ships under a broader set of circumstances.\(^6^8\) The campaign began on August 10 and lasted until September 4, 1937. In this four week period, Italian interdiction prompted much outcry as it sank merchant ships from Spain, Russia, the United Kingdom, Greece, France, and Denmark, among others.\(^6^9\) Anger about the danger of shipping in the Mediterranean reached a climax when the British destroyer *HMS Havock* was hit with a torpedo. British and French leaders immediately convened a conference in Nyon, Switzerland which resulted in agreement that British and French warships would patrol the Mediterranean with the right to attack any suspicious

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\(^6^6\) On the variety of concealment measures, see Frank, Jr., “Naval Operations in the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939,” 34; Coverdale, *Italian Intervention in the Spanish Civil War*, 180.

\(^6^7\) Coverdale, *Italian Intervention in the Spanish Civil War*, 307–308.

\(^6^8\) The instructions were to target all Republican warships, all Republican or Soviet merchant ships, all ships no matter the flag moving at night within three miles of Spanish territorial waters, and all merchant ships no matter the country of origin escorted by Republican convoy. Frank, Jr., “Naval Operations in the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939,” 42.

submarine. Faced with coordinated multilateral action against their interdiction, the Italian Foreign Minister suspended the naval campaign days later.

The third and final phase of Italy’s naval involvement in the Spanish Civil War followed. Mussolini replaced the aggressive interdiction strategy with the most covert, deniable Italian naval participation of the war. Italy chose to simply transfer ships to the Spanish Nationalists; several Italian surface ships were sent with altered the silhouettes to avoid disclosing their source. In addition, Mussolini agreed to deploy four Italian submarines under genuine Spanish control but with Italian crews to again patrol the Spanish coast. Mussolini stipulated such strict rules of engagement that the submarines only made three attacks in five months. In February 1938, the submarines returned to Italy and the Italian participation in the naval theater of the Spanish Civil War came to an end.71

*Explaining Intervention Form: Germans, Soviets, and Italians in Spain*

Foreign involvement in the Spanish Civil War varied significantly. Table 10 lists the relevant questions to be evaluated in this section.

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Different theories of concealment suggest different answers. The surprise logic suggests German and Soviet concealment was driven by the desire to deceive their adversaries for surprise-enabled battlefield advantage. Publicity for Italy’s ground units would be expected if there was no more need for military surprise while comparatively greater secrecy at sea would be likely if Italy believed there was greater utility for surprise in that domain. The domestic insulation logic for concealment would suggest concealment by Germany and the Soviet Union was due to the fear that harsh domestic political punishment would accompany an overt intervention. Italian publicity would be explained by the absence of such punishment and relatively greater secrecy at sea might be due to greater domestic hostility to sea-based intervention. An escalation-driven logic of secrecy would expect German and Soviet concealment if both were concerned by the possibility of their intervention expanding the local conflict to a wider war. Italian publicity for infantry units would be expected if it held a comparatively lower assessment of the risk of escalation. Relatively greater secrecy for Italy’s role at sea would be
expected if Italy viewed greater escalation dangers in an unambiguous naval rather than ground role.

Two larger features of the war worth noting were relevant to all three intervening states. One was non-intervention diplomacy. An international agreement and ad hoc committee (i.e. the Non-Intervention Committee) were created in August 1936 to facilitate localization of the civil war in Spain. Germany, Italy, and the Soviet Union each made a public commitment to not intervene. Another is the widely understood risk of the civil war prompting a continental European war. There was “passionate interest” on both sides of the internal war for Spain and many “saw the Spanish war as a microcosm of European discontents” whether one was moved to vanquish the specter of fascism, communism, or liberal democracy. Hints of early and multi-dimensional military aid by outside powers only magnified concerns. Such fears had merit. Several military incidents demonstrate the serious risk of conflict escalation. As mentioned earlier, an Italian submarine nearly sank a British destroyer in 1937. Soviet tanks manned by Soviet crews fought Italian tanks manned by Italian crews early and often in the ground campaign. A Republican bomber secretly flown by Russian pilots accidentally struck a German battleship participating in non-intervention patrols and killed over thirty German sailors. Hitler immediately authorized reprisals and German warships shelled a Republican-held coastal city killing nineteen. This constituted the only officially-

72 Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War*, 593.
sanctioned, public use of German military force during the war. The documentary record now shows the Republican bombers were piloted by Russians. Had this been common knowledge and officially sanctioned, it may have been a powerful cause for widening the conflict.  

German and Soviet intervention

This potential for unwanted war escalation was not lost on the participants. For Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia especially, the possibility that their involvement would embroil them in a widening and costly European war was an important concern. Timing was critical: while these two leaders would hurtle Europe into just such a continental war with invasions in late 1939, neither desired that war in 1936 and 1937. Though they aided opposite sides in the civil war, Hitler and Stalin shared similar logics for intervention and caution regarding escalation. As the leading historian of the Spanish Civil War concludes, while Italian desires to limit escalation were less clear, “Germany and Russia shared a disinclination to risk a general war breaking out over Spain.”

Hitler sought to limit the expansion of the Spanish war because he did not believe Germany was ready for major war with a likely coalition of France, Britain, and the Soviet Union in 1936 or 1937. The decade of the 1930s was a period of patient rearmament and grand strategic planning for Germany. Hitler was acutely aware that

74 Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War*, 665.
75 Ibid., 915.
restoring Germany’s industrial and military capability for modern war would take time. Indeed, German arrangements for major war were far from settled when the Spanish Civil War broke out. In August and September 1936, Hitler had yet to occupy coveted land in Central Europe. None of the alliances with those who would end up as his critical wartime allies – Italy, Japan, and the Soviet Union – existed. He faced substantial gaps in military capabilities especially vis-à-vis Britain’s Royal Navy. As a result, “[d]uring the first year and a half of the civil war, Hitler subordinated his ambitions for German military action to his prime diplomatic aim of manipulating the other Great Powers because he was not yet ready for a showdown with France.”

The desire to avoid premature escalation with France on land and the United Kingdom at sea drove Germany to adopt less visible forms of intervention. Several examples demonstrate the central role escalation played. Internal German debates about providing German infantry units, for example, offer one window into the importance of escalation in considering intervention form. In December 1936 and January 1937, the Italians pressed Germany in secret meetings to expand their combat role in Spain beyond the Condor Legion. To improve the Nationalists’ performance, Mussolini proposed Germany send a division of combat troops. Germany’s top commander in Spain also requested infantry units. The subsequent debates between Hitler and his advisors regarding the consequences of a more overt German presence are revealing. Fear that the

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76 Compared to the British, the German navy believed they “just did not have enough firepower”; see Whealey, *Hitler and Spain*, 111.

77 Ibid., 109.
diplomatic fallout would align key powers against Germany and embroil it in a losing European war was the main reason Germany rejected sending troops. Key advisors warned a more overt use of German troops would “unnecessarily provoke Great Britain and France” and “create needless international tension.” The international complications were feared “too severe” especially in light of the German view that “France would react far more violently to the presence of Germans than to the presence of Italians in Spain…Germany could not justify the risks involved in provoking the French to such a degree.” One advisor from the foreign ministry invoked the memory of Napoleon’s brazen deployment of French troops to Spain during a 19th century Spanish uprising. The invasion of Spain provoked the British so severely that it sent an expeditionary force to fight Napoleon. Citing this historical example of a widening war, the advisor argued German divisions “would incur the same odium as the French had gathered in Spain in 1808.” Importantly, no mention is made of domestic political concerns or the considerations of tactical or strategic surprise in these debates.

Considerations which led Germany to reject intervention at sea also illustrate the importance of escalation. Naval intervention carried unique risks: given that the waters around Spain were also a primary route for shipping in the Mediterranean, an overt German naval role placed its ships on a collision course with other European powers. Especially after non-intervention naval patrols were initiated by France and Britain, naval

78 Coverdale, Italian Intervention in the Spanish Civil War, 163, 173.
79 Ibid., 173; Goering advised Hitler that troops “might precipitate difficult international problems” Proctor, Hitler’s Luftwaffe in the Spanish Civil War, 18.
80 Thomas, The Spanish Civil War, 552.
missions risked encounters with the navies of the two major powers not yet involved in the civil war. A naval clash with the powerful British fleet was both most likely and, in the event of a larger war, most worrisome to both Italy and Germany.\textsuperscript{81}

Despite these risks, Hitler approved the clandestine deployment of two German submarines to patrol the Spanish coast in November 1936. Germany took significant measures to reduce the risk of positive identification of its submarines including painting out distinctive markings, exclusively surfacing at night, flying false flag if encountered, and swearing the German crews to secrecy.\textsuperscript{82} Even with these measures, Hitler canceled the expedition less than a month later. Why? While Italy’s willingness to perform these dangerous missions was one important consideration, the risk of war escalation with the British was equally important. Naval advisors “preferred to remove the German Navy from clandestine naval war and its risks” citing the possibility that revelation of Germany’s role would prompt “unwanted complications or commitments” at a time of peak European crisis. Hitler resisted Mussolini’s requests for a continued naval role citing “uncontrolled complications” and a German desire to “avoid the risks of an escalation in intervention.”\textsuperscript{83} New war plans being drafted by the German Navy modeled possible scenarios leading to a European war against Britain and France; the scenarios included the potential for the Spanish Civil War to descend into a continental conflict due

\textsuperscript{81} The secrecy of submarine deployments was primarily driven by a desire to shape the Spanish war outcome “without provoking Britain into a forceful reaction.”Frank, Jr., “Politico-Military Deception at Sea in the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939,” 96.
\textsuperscript{82} Ibid., 98.
\textsuperscript{83} Frank, Jr., “Naval Operations in the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939,” 36.
to a “provoked incident.”\textsuperscript{84} Again, domestic politics or considerations of surprise did not feature in the decision.

A third domain showing the importance of escalation concerns in visibility decisions is use restrictions placed on those assets Germany did covertly deploy. In the clandestine airlift of the Nationalist Army of Africa by Germany and Italy, Hitler issued strict orders prohibiting German crews from flying combat missions.\textsuperscript{85} After later approving German aerial combat roles and deploying the Condor Legion, the German High Command issued instructions that no German aircraft fly within fifty kilometers of the French border.\textsuperscript{86} This and other Condor Legion restrictions on the reckless bombing of major Spanish cities were specifically designed to minimize the risk of entry by France or the United Kingdom.\textsuperscript{87} A leading historian of German air power in the Spanish Civil War concludes such restrictions were an early example of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century tradition of tailoring air power to avoid war escalation.\textsuperscript{88} The restrictions had a clear political character suggesting the role of operational surprise in the use of German forces was less important than limiting the risk of a major incident.

\textsuperscript{84} Whealey, \textit{Hitler and Spain}, 111.
\textsuperscript{85} Proctor, \textit{Hitler’s Luftwaffe in the Spanish Civil War}, 21.
\textsuperscript{86} Corum, “The Luftwaffe and the Coalition Air War in Spain, 1936-1939,” 72.
\textsuperscript{87} Thomas, \textit{The Spanish Civil War}, 781; Proctor, \textit{Hitler’s Luftwaffe in the Spanish Civil War}, 207.
\textsuperscript{88} “As a limited war, the Spanish War bears a close resemblance to the Korean and Vietnam wars, including ‘Wars by Proxy’ and the use of foreign ‘volunteers’ and ‘advisors’... The High Command was also concerned about provoking French intervention on the side of the Spanish Loyalists (Republicans) and thereby starting a general European war – a war the Wehrmacht was not ready to fight in 1937 and 1938. Throughout the conflict in Spain, the General Staff monitored the political situation, careful not to commit so much to the Spanish intervention as to bring France into the conflict.”Corum, “The Luftwaffe and the Coalition Air War in Spain, 1936-1939,” 68, 70.
Finally, the importance of escalation concerns is clearly suggested by the timing of Germany’s unusually overt activity at the end of the war. My theory predicts shifts from covert to more overt forms of intervention after leaders reassess the risk and severity of escalation. Several scholars have noted precisely this phenomenon in Germany’s perceptions and behavior at the end of the Spanish Civil War. Specifically, the Munich Conference in September 1938 (permitting Hitler to annex the Sudetenland) was a clear signal that France and the United Kingdom would avoid European war at all costs. Yet Franco’s Nationalists had not yet taken Barcelona or Madrid. In late 1938 and after Munich, Hitler dramatically increased German military aid which “gave Franco the margin of victory and enabled him to break the stalemate that had arisen.”

Hitler’s willingness to bear additional risks of a visible breach of non-intervention “was the consequence of the German sense that, after Munich, nothing which they did in the Spanish war would cause Britain and France to go to war.” Even more significantly, Germany chose to publicize the Condor Legion. Upon the Nationalists victory in March 1939, members of the Condor Legion were proudly marched through the streets of Madrid and upon arrival in Hamburg, Germany. The timing suggests a prior escalation

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89 “After Munich no one any longer seriously feared that complications in Spain might lead to a general European war.” In Coverdale, Italian Intervention in the Spanish Civil War, 368.
90 Ibid., 374.
91 Thomas further explains that “[t]he German government knew by late 1938 that the fears which she had entertained earlier of a spread of the war in Spain into ‘a European conflagration’ were groundless, however flagrant a breach she might commit of the Non-Intervention Pact. For, after the Munich settlement, it seemed that Britain (and France) would never go to war over a European issue.” Thomas, The Spanish Civil War, 828.
92 Proctor, Hitler’s Luftwaffe in the Spanish Civil War, 248–9.
constraint had been lifted in the eyes of German leaders. In contrast, the merits of surprise and the winds of domestic political sentiment appear unrelated to both.

Stalin too sought to limit the potential for a wider war. Despite later joining forces with Hitler in the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, Stalin’s primary geostrategic focus in late 1936 was courting the liberal Western European powers against a rising Nazi Germany. Stalin’s concept of “collective security” directed towards containing Germany necessitated good relations with the United Kingdom and France. Stalin’s desire to avoid alarming Britain and France is reflected in his careful, cautious engagement with the Spanish communists. If there was a larger European war, Stalin believed it far better that the Soviet Union remain uninvolved. In considering intervention in Spain in September 1936, Stalin was faced with a strategic dilemma. On the one hand, the Republican military was suffering a string of defeats and a Nationalist victory threatened to further empower fascism in Europe. On the other hand, provision of military aid to the Republicans would violate the Western-sponsored non-intervention initiative and risk alienation. Stalin therefore approached the question of whether and how to intervene with “crablike caution.”

The solution to the dilemma was to publicly subscribe to the Western initiative for non-intervention and secretly provide military aid and personnel to the Spanish Republicans.

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94 Ibid., 326–327.
Importantly, this implies that rather than directing concealment at adversaries, “[t]he emphasis on utmost secrecy in Operation X was designed to disguise or hide it as much as possible from the Western countries.” Based on a review of the primary documents during the decision process, the most thorough study of Soviet intervention in Spain concludes that “Stalin took precautions to ensure that the entire aid operation would be carried out in strict secrecy” so that Stalin was assured that “Soviet involvement in Spain would not have adverse economic or diplomatic effects on the USSR.”

As one historian concludes, “[s]upport for the Spanish Republic would take a stand against fascism, while public denial and extreme secrecy might avoid alienating Britain and France.” Even if Soviet aid came to be discovered, Stalin that hoped that in light of Soviet denials “France and Britain would not be inhibited from embracing collective security with Moscow.”

Several later decisions further illustrate the prominent role of escalation concerns in Soviet intervention decisions. Like Hitler, Stalin considered but rejected proposals to send a division of Red Army troops to fight on behalf of the Republic, agreeing with top military commanders that it would be “too difficult and too risky.” In addition, once he was committed to intervening, Stalin was especially careful to minimize the probability Soviet military personnel were taken prisoner by Nationalist forces. Stalin therefore

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required all advisors not in combat roles to stay out of artillery range, carefully withdrew all personnel before the collapse of Republican forces, and engaged in highly sensitive prisoner swaps in return for captured German and Italian personnel.\textsuperscript{100} This emphasis on “no capture” is one kind of concealment especially common when the factors driving visibility are diplomacy-related rather than military surprise or domestic politics. Exposure of a captured Soviet prisoner would do little damage to the Soviet Union’s ability to generate tactical surprise in the future and presumably would not meaningfully threaten Stalin domestically. Rather, what would be compromised was the overall political narrative that Soviet Russia was not involved (important for other geopolitical reasons).\textsuperscript{101}

One other window into Soviet escalation concerns is the Soviet reaction to the mistaken bombing of the German battleship Deutschland. As described before, the mistaken bombing was by ostensibly Republican aircraft but, in fact, piloted by covertly deployed Soviet pilots. After Germany shelled Republican-held Spanish coastline in retaliation, top Spanish Republican advisors debated how they should respond. With proposals for a

\textsuperscript{100} On avoiding artillery range, see Thomas, The Spanish Civil War, 430; on prisoner exchanges Payne, The Spanish Civil War, The Soviet Union, and Communism, 160; in general, “Moscow took meticulous care to evacuate its entire contingent before the end of the war and ensure that very few Soviet participants fell into Nationalist hands” and word that two pilots had been captured was treated with “the most serious attention”Kowalsky, Stalin and the Spanish Civil War, 549.

\textsuperscript{101} This is in contrast with concealment of other types of information that is more clearly related operational effectiveness and the element of surprise. For example, the Soviet Union worked very hard to conceal the location and identity of Soviet ships carrying military aid to avoid being interdicted by naval patrols. This kind of information has more obvious links to operational effectiveness generated by the element of surprise at sea (some Soviet secrecy was intended so that “German and Italian spies operating in Istanbul and the Bosphorus could not provide pro-Nationalist patrols off Spanish waters with precise descriptions of departing Soviet vessels.”) See Kowalsky, Stalin and the Spanish Civil War, 471.
Spanish retaliation against all German ships in the Mediterranean on the table, they consulted their allies in Moscow. Recognizing the danger of a hard-to-control escalation scenario prompted by Russian error, the Soviets replied they had “no desire for world war” and cautioned the Spanish to ignore Germany’s shelling.\footnote{102 Thomas, \textit{The Spanish Civil War}, 666.}

Overall, the specter of general war seems to have motivated both Stalin and Hitler to use covert methods of intervention to provide some support to their ally while avoiding most actions which risked escalation. As one historian concludes, “Stalin had followed a policy similar to that of Hitler: prevention of his protégés defeat, without ensuring their victory; for to ensure a republican victory would have meant a commitment on a scale which would have risked general war.”\footnote{103 Ibid., 915.}

\textit{Italian intervention}

Italy’s combat role differed significantly and its wide scope and variation provide theoretically useful opportunities for comparisons. These include between Italian overtness and German/Soviet covertness generally, Italian initial covertness on land and its later overt troop deployments, Italian overtness on land and covertness at sea, and Italian reversion to covertness after a brief period of relatively overt naval intervention.
One unique consideration cited by all historians of Mussolini’s role in the Spanish Civil War was glory. The desire by Mussolini to showcase the martial superiority of Italian Fascism created strong incentives for publicity. With the war in Abyssinia over earlier in 1936, a visible Italian role in the Spanish Civil War was the best opportunity to win on a battlefield. Considerations of glory in Italian intervention choices necessitated a more visible form. This much is clear from what is known of high-level discussions between the leaders of Italy and Spanish Nationalists on the use of Italian ground forces. To enable visible Italian contributions to battlefield victories, Mussolini insisted that Franco place autonomously organized and commanded CTV units at the front lines of Nationalist offensives in December 1936. Such measures ensured that “the glory of [autonomous Italian units] exploits would be reflected directly on Italy, on Fascism” and Mussolini himself.104 Mussolini similarly insisted “all Italians would act together” in the March 1937 Nationalist attack on Guadalajara “so that the victory to be gained would redound to the Italian credit.”105 Similar requests were made in 1938 as well.106

The role of glory in Italian decision-making helps explain several important contrasts in intervention form. First, the relative importance of glory-related publicity benefits explains why Italy was willing to engage in a more overt role than the more cautious German and Soviet interventions. As my theory predicts, states with high valuation for publicity benefits will tend to choose an overt form of intervention despite escalation

104 Coverdale, Italian Intervention in the Spanish Civil War, 169.
105 Thomas, The Spanish Civil War, 579.
106 Ibid., 746.
risks. Showcasing the combat effectiveness of the German air force and Soviet pilots was far less important to their leaders.

Second, the role of glory explains Italy’s quick transition from a secret to a publicized role in the Spanish ground war. The initial sacrifices for secrecy in the airlift were abandoned only months later with the deployment of all-Italian militia and army infantry units. Mussolini’s decision in favor of the latter was made with the goal of placing the requisite men and material in Spain to permit a meaningful role in battles for important Spanish cities. While an early interest in avoiding evidence of Italian meddling drove Mussolini to adopt the same kinds of airlift secrecy as Germany, the allure of glory helps explain the divergent paths the two states took thereafter.

While importance of Italian glory explains the especially powerful draw of publicity for Mussolini, new information about the likelihood of escalation – i.e. learning – appears to explain the timing of Italy’s transition away from secrecy. Embracing a public role despite dangers of escalation was made easier by new information that the British were unlikely to wage war in reaction to Italian military meddling within Spain in late 1936. Mussolini’s decision to send Italian troops was made during the same month (December 1936) that Italian and British representatives were negotiating a “Gentlemen’s Agreement” to improve relations. Despite news reports of thousands of Italian troops, the discussions and final agreement included no mention of Italy’s intervention. British leaders were content with Italian reassurance it would not revise the territorial status quo,
a message Italy’s leaders interpreted as tacit toleration of their military aid and personnel in Spain.\textsuperscript{107} Thus, “[n]o effort was made to hide the fact that Italian troops were pouring into Spain in increasing numbers” because technically “sending troops to Spain could not be said to be a violation of the terms of the agreement.”\textsuperscript{108} With the perceived likelihood of British intervention revised downward and the allure of glory-based publicity benefits, Mussolini changed the character of the intervention to overt.

Third, the role of glory helps explain differences in the visibility of different components of Italy’s forces. Glory was intimately tied to infantry, in Mussolini’s eyes, whereas successes in the air and at sea were not. This created a unique pull towards overtiness in the use of the CTV that was absent in the use of other Italian military assets. The special importance of visible infantry was on display in Italian/Nationalist negotiations over the role of Italian air and ground forces in offensives on the northern city of Bilbao in mid-1937. The critical question was which county’s infantry would be the “tip of the spear,” thereby claiming symbolic credit for breaking Republican lines and securing victory. The Spanish Nationalist generals strongly preferred victories in what was a civil war be Spanish-won, so they designated Italian units a minor supporting role. Yet with no real air force, the Nationalists relied heavily on Italian air forces and so made full use of Italian aviation. In the battle that followed, Italian pilots (along with the German Condor Legion) flew some 2,800 hours and dropped over 100,000 kilograms of bombs in support

\textsuperscript{107} The agreement stipulated that “the present territories of Spain shall in all circumstances remain intact and unmodified”; see Coverdale, \textit{Italian Intervention in the Spanish Civil War}, 200.

\textsuperscript{108} Ibid., 200–201.
of the Nationalist attack; the Italian CTV infantry played almost no role. Despite this critical and successful role in the air, Mussolini found little propaganda value in the attack and Italian generals redoubled efforts to specifically win a leading role for Italian infantry. They were successful; later phases of the offensive featured Italian infantry and their victories were heralded in the Italian press as demonstrations of “a great Italian victory.”

The timing of Italian shifts in visibility at sea is a final area of evidence regarding the importance of escalation. As described before, Italian naval intervention was generally less overt but did experience a four week period of relative overtness during the “summer of piracy” in 1937. Initially, new information that the risks of escalation were low aided Italy’s move towards a more brazen and overt naval role in August. Subsequent information that the risks of escalation were much higher prompted Italy to return to a more covert form. In short, changes in Italian perceptions of escalation risks explain both the transition towards openness and back towards concealment.

The move towards a more visible, open naval intervention was initially prompted by operational necessity. To successfully interdict the reported Soviet shipments of military aid in August 1937, Italy required a major expansion in the number of ships and relaxed rules of engagement. These changes would result in a more visible form of naval involvement. One important reason Mussolini permitted this more visible naval role was

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109 Ibid., 279–282.
new evidence of British unwillingness to go to war with Italy. At the time Mussolini approved expanded interdiction, British leaders were attempting to court Mussolini to sign a second bilateral agreement on outstanding issues. Mussolini likely interpreted Chamberlain’s eagerness to negotiate, despite a recent spate of public speeches taunting the West and praising Italy’s role in Spain, as a sign of British unwillingness to stand up to him. A leading historian of Italy’s role argues “[Mussolini] may have seen no real cost to Italy in further alienating the British by attacking shipping on the high seas…he may have been convinced that British passivity and ineffectiveness were so great that he could fly in the face of their interests without doing any serious or irreparable harm.”\(^{110}\) This mirrors how n earlier a sign of British tolerance (i.e. the Gentlemen’s Agreement) encouraged Mussolini’s overt deployment of troops to Spain.

The move back towards a more covert naval intervention came after one of the strongest displays of resolve by the United Kingdom and France. After four weeks of near-daily torpedo attacks on private shipping and the accidental attack on a British destroyer, British and French leaders called the Nyon Conference to safeguard shipping in the Mediterranean. The resulting agreement authorized British and French patrols with the right to use force against any unknown submarine. It was, as one historian judges, “the most forceful resistance to Axis moves of the entire prewar period” and surprised Mussolini with its seriousness. The interdiction campaign was immediately canceled and

\(^{110}\) Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War*, 311.
Mussolini subsequently switched to “a quieter operation.”¹¹¹ Their willingness to risk a direct conflict drove Italy’s naval intervention back into secrecy. The contrast with British and French tolerance of Italy’s ground intervention is stark and powerfully suggests variation in escalation risks for different elements of Italy’s intervention explain difference in their visibility. As one historian concludes,

[Mussolini] could not miss the fact that when Italian troops entered Santander on 26 August with all the propaganda trappings of a liberation, the world raised no protest, but the naval actions at the same time brought the threat of a massive international naval reaction. Franco was clamoring for more troops, aircraft, and equipment for the land war, and so Mussolini ordered a major escalation in the levels of his men and material to Spain. But when Franco also called for the transfer of two more submarines to the Spanish flag, Mussolini refused.¹¹²

Instead, Mussolini offered “an approach to clandestine submarine warfare less dangerous and extensive.”¹¹³

**Witness State Tacit Collusion: British and French Reactions**

In domestic, bilateral, and multilateral settings, the British and French governments consistently engaged in tacitly collusive behavior. As two of the most important diplomatic players in Europe and the military capabilities and geographic proximity to join the conflict, decisions by the British and French governments were the most significant factors determining the war’s scale. Time and again, British representatives especially downplayed the significance of evidence of foreign involvement reported in

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¹¹² Frank, Jr., “Naval Operations in the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939,” 44.
¹¹³ Ibid.
newspapers or alleged by other states. Non-intervention diplomacy demonstrates the central role of the two countries in spearheading efforts to contain the conflict: the impetus for the initial Non-Intervention Agreement lay in Paris and London while the meetings of the Non-Intervention Committee were staffed and led by the British Foreign Office. British tacit acceptance of limited but undeclared involvement by Germany, Italy, and the Soviet Union was a component of its larger strategy of minimizing British adversaries through appeasement during the 1930s.

There is little question avoiding a second devastating continental war so soon after World War I drove nearly all aspects of British foreign policy in the interwar period, especially in its approach to the Spanish Civil War. In private discussions with France in the days immediately following the Spanish coup, British leaders quietly warned France that Britain would remain neutral and uninvolved should France choose to provide military aid or intervene in the conflict.\footnote{Edwards, \textit{The British Government and the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939}, 16–7.} The British cabinet had quickly concluded the aim of British policy was to remain “aloof from the conflict,” avoid the civil war from “consolidating opposed and conflicting ideological blocs,” and thereby “prevent it from growing into a European war.”\footnote{Coverdale, \textit{Italian Intervention in the Spanish Civil War}, 92–3.} The policy of carefully avoiding involvement in another European war held widespread support in British foreign policy elite.\footnote{Even the opposition agreed: “no politician in England thought that the country should involve herself on one side or another in the conflict.” See Thomas, \textit{The Spanish Civil War}, 331.}
Yet characterizing its policy as aloof misleads: beyond simply staying out, British leaders, especially Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden and Prime Ministers Stanley Baldwin and Neville Chamberlain, used vigorous diplomacy to actively facilitate containment of the conflict. Building and maintaining the widespread perception that the civil war remained civil – that is, intervention by outside powers had not taken place – was the centerpiece of this strategy. In the wake of controversy from the crashed Italian aircraft sent to airlift the Army of Africa, London and Paris led the initiative to persuade all potential meddling states to publicly declare an official policy of non-intervention. This resulted in a Non-Intervention Agreement signed by all relevant powers in August 1936 and the creation of a Non-Intervention Council to supervise compliance. Pledging states agreed not to provide military aid or participate in the conflict. The British hoped the declarations and regular diplomatic meetings in the Council would deter intervention, diffuse disputes, and prevent descent into an internationalized war.

As already described, Italy, Germany, and the Soviet Union quickly violated their pledges. British and French intelligence quickly detected shipments of foreign military aid at sea and on-the-ground presence inside Spain. To maintain the pretense of non-intervention and avoid the breakdown in the diplomatic machinery of the Non-Intervention Council, time and again the British and French worked to maintain this pretense in the face of accusations and evidence to the contrary. Thus, intervening states and non-intervention champions shared an interest in falsification. Examples of the
resulting tacit collusion by the British stewards of non-intervention can be found in a number of domains: domestically, bilaterally, and in multilateral institutions.

Domestically, British leaders actively misled regarding the extent of their knowledge of foreign combat participation in Spain. In response to questions in the House of Commons in November 1936, Eden denied that Germany and Italy were the most egregious violators of non-intervention despite British intelligence reports to the cabinet which said otherwise. His reply was therefore “less a statement of objective fact than a sign of his willingness to overlook” Italian transgressions. Again in questioning before Parliament in April 1937, Eden denied the British Cabinet had exact information about the presence of Italian divisions despite widespread public news reporting of their presence for six months.\(^\text{117}\)

Bilaterally, British leaders both pressured France to ignore non-intervention violations and even secretly exchanged information with Spanish Nationalist admirals to avoid crisis-inducing incidents at sea. Pressure on the French to tolerate intervention was first applied in the days after the coup, as already noted, when British leaders made clear France would be on its own if it intervened. Pressure on French leaders also followed a particularly egregious public acknowledgement of Italian volunteers fighting in Spain by Mussolini. The cabinet in Paris believed a telegram from Mussolini publicly praising brave Italian volunteers was an “open admission” that Italy was violating its non-

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\(^{117}\) Ibid., 602.
intervention pledge and thereby constituted a public challenge. Eden threw cold water on
French hints of escalation by persuading France to ignore the statement. Information
exchanges between Royal Navy and Nationalist naval commanders quietly took place to
avoid incidents at sea that threatened to escalate into an international crisis. Eden’s
memoirs describe information exchanges in 1938 with the commander of the Nationalist
fleet disclosing the location of Italian-supplied submarines in order to avoid sinking
British shipping and thus limiting the possibility of a crisis-inducing incident. The
Royal Navy, in turn, shared information with the Nationalist navy on the location of all
British and British-flagged shipping to further avoid incidents. All this occurred while
the British government was publicly portraying ignorance about the identity of
interdicting submarines.

By far the most frequent venue for tacit collusion was a multilateral institution: the Non-
Intervention Committee (NIC). Most historians and even many of its contemporary
participants viewed the British goal in creating the NIC to preserve an appearance of non-
intervention rather than actually enforcing it. One reflection of this was repeated acts of
ignoring. As one historian describes it, “neither Great Britain nor France wished to
pursue seriously any charges of intervention in Spain, no matter how well founded.”
One example is from as early as October 1936. British and French intelligence detected a
major Italian military presence on the Spanish island of Majorca in clear and substantial

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119 Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War*, 774.
121 Coverdale, *Italian Intervention in the Spanish Civil War*, 97.
violation of the Non-Intervention Agreement. Yet rather than raise the issue with the NIC, the foreign office informed France that it would not pursue the matter given Italian assurances that its military presence was not permanent. Left alone to challenge the Italians, “the French never raised the question.”122 In another example in March 1937, British and French leaders chose not to support action in the NIC against Italy despite having evidence of organized, autonomous Italian infantry. The Italians claimed they were “volunteers,” the Germans exercised “tact,” and the threat to the non-intervention pretense was averted.123 In still another example, Britain’s success in dissuading France from punishing Mussolini after his public telegram (see previous paragraph) included persuading them not to pursue a complaint in the NIC.124 A final example is the general use of the discourse of “volunteers” in NIC-based proposals to remove foreign troops in 1937 and 1938. While genuine volunteers in the International Brigades were present, so were the autonomously organized and commanded Italian infantry (and many suspected German and Soviet military personnel). Still, repeated British-led attempts to agree on a method for reducing foreign combat involvement were conducted in terms of Italy and others removing “volunteers.”125

Collusion by the British perhaps reached its highest point in the mutual pretense on display during the Italy’s four week flurry of naval interdiction in August and September

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122 Ibid., 149.
123 Thomas, The Spanish Civil War, 586.
124 The British feared this would cause the collapse of the NIC itself. Edwards, The British Government and the Spanish Civil War, 1936–1939, 120, 122.
125 Thomas, The Spanish Civil War, 563–4, 726, 774–5, 810, 825.
1937 (“summer of piracy”). Royal Navy intelligence detected the role of Italian submarines and surface torpedo boats in the almost daily attacks on Mediterranean shipping. British intelligence specifically used visual evidence, radio intelligence, and code breaking to positively identify Italy’s role.\textsuperscript{126} Two private warnings to Italy to cease attacks against British shipping in August demonstrate the level of awareness and deceit. Publicly, however, the British and French would not name Italy. At the resulting international conference on Mediterranean shipping in Nyon, Switzerland, British and French diplomats insisted participants authorize patrols to fire on any “unknown submarines” engaging in “piracy” rather than more accurate formulations like “Italians submarines” engaging in “submarine warfare.”\textsuperscript{127} The goal in not naming Italy was three-fold: reduce the risk Italy reacted violently to patrols, preserve ambiguity in the event of an incident at sea during the patrols, and make it possible for Italy to themselves join in the patrols (ironically, patrolling for activity of its own navy). In practice, Italy canceled its interdiction campaign, no major incident at sea occurred, and Italy joined in the patrols.\textsuperscript{128}

Lastly, diplomacy at the League of Nations featured attempts by British and French leaders to steer diplomacy away from confirming factual claims and acknowledging foreign intervention in Spain. The earliest discussion of Spain and foreign involvement

\textsuperscript{126} Frank 1990 104
\textsuperscript{127} Edwards, \textit{The British Government and the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939}, 118; “The British government carefully refrained from accusing Italy of these outrages even though it had full knowledge of Italian responsibility”; see Frank, Jr., “Naval Operations in the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939,” 83.
\textsuperscript{128} Coverdale, \textit{Italian Intervention in the Spanish Civil War}, 314–5.
were prompted by an appeal by the Spanish Republican government in December 1936. Fearing a heated debate with accusations and counter-accusations of foreign meddling, the British and French foreign ministers refused to attend. Soviet representatives expecting to be the target of accusations also refused to attend. The result was an innocuous resolution calling for mediation.129 A similar session considering Spanish complaints of Italian intervention took place in May 1937. In an attempt to “keep the discussion in a low key so as not to drive the Germans or Italy from impatience out,” British and French statements hyped the progress being made in preventing foreign aid and volunteers into Spain. Serious censure was avoided.130 Again in September 1937, British Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin extolled the virtues of the NIC in the face of complaints about intervention, claiming a leaky dam was “better than no dam at all.”131 The League’s political committee did approve a resolution on foreign involvement in Spain but Britain’s representative on the committee successfully “persuaded the committee to omit any denunciation of Germany and Italy.”132

In the broader project of this dissertation, the use of international institutions to shape and steer the classification of a war and its participants is especially important in this case.133 British and French attempts to avoid confirmation of specific incidents and the broader acknowledgement of foreign intervention at the Non-Intervention Committee, the Nyon

129 Ibid., 197–8.
130 Thomas, The Spanish Civil War, 663.
131 Ibid., 722.
132 Ibid.
133 International institutions play a similar role in the Korean War case; see discussion of debates about which country to label an “aggressor” in Chapter 3.
Conference, and League of Nations were a critical component of their overall effort to limit the war. The uniquely important role of institutions in politically classifying events and actors has been noted by other scholars. In the domestic context, state institutions define categories and apply criteria resulting in determinations of everything from eligibility for health insurance, designations of food safety risk, legal “protected class” status in civil rights, and more. These institutional classifications, in turn, affect access to economic, security, and symbolic resources.\(^{134}\) A parallel phenomenon in which international organizations act as classification agents has also been noted. Citing examples such as United Nations organizations determining refugee status of groups and individuals, Barnett and Finnemore show a unique role of such institutions is creating and applying socially and politically important categories.\(^{135}\) Thus, the judgments of international institutions regarding intervention activity carried particularly strong social and political power because of their stronger legitimacy that reflects collective participation, plurality of opinion, and procedural fairness.\(^{136}\)

To conclude, British and French desires to limit the escalatory potential of the Spanish Civil War led to consistent efforts to ignore, conceal, and deny the presence of a foreign combat role. Domestic statements and bilateral measures show a clear attempt to preserve ambiguity and avoid specific allegations, especially regarding Italy’s role.

Diplomacy at the key multilateral institutions of the period – the ad hoc Non-Intervention


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Committee and the League of Nations – was consistently steered away from topics and judgments which would better reflect the reality on the ground. In all of this, the initial use of covert intervention – or at least the trappings of voluntarism by Italy – was an important prerequisite. As one historian concludes, even partial deception in the Spanish Civil War served a larger political function of facilitating measures which reflected shared interest in avoiding incidents and acknowledgment of intervention.

Deception is an uncertain business. Nowhere is this more true than in circumstances in where it has political as well as military significance… Politically, deception that is only partially revealed may still serve to allow plausible denial, which may add a degree of flexibility in diplomacy. Britain deemed such false but plausible denials by its antagonists useful in its non-intervention and Nyon policies.\textsuperscript{137}

\textit{Conclusion}

With three interventions with variation in visibility between and within intervening states, the Spanish Civil War offers more theory-relevant observations than a traditional “single case.” Fears of prompting reciprocal intervention or retaliation drove German and Soviet leaders away from an overt, publicized combat role in Spain. While the value of demonstrating Italian glory lured Mussolini into choosing a more overt, publicized path, differences between Italy’s ground and naval role demonstrate the importance of escalation concerns in explaining variation in visibility. British and French reactions to these interventions, meanwhile, constitute striking instances of “adversary collusion.” Especially within the main multilateral institutions of the era, British and French leaders

\textsuperscript{137} Frank, Jr., “Politico-Military Deception at Sea in the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939,” 107.
actively prevented confirmation and acknowledgement of foreign intervention using concealment, denial, and tactical ignoring. For each actor, concerns about the onset and timing of escalation influenced the use of secrecy and publicity.

In the larger research design of the dissertation, the Spanish Civil War serves an important function. The theory illustration and testing in Chapter 3 demonstrated states may engage in a kind of “joint impression management” to prevent conflict escalation. Secrecy and tactful non-acknowledgement keep the stakes of conflict low and avoid igniting hard-to-control escalation pressures. Yet an important objection to the generalizability of this finding naturally arises: does this dynamic apply outside the unique context of nuclear weapons and the bipolar Cold War? The Spanish Civil War provides important evidence that these potential scope conditions may not be as powerful as they appear at first glance. Atomic weaponry did not exist; the system was not bipolar; with the exception of the Soviet Union, the states involved differed from the Cold War. Yet intervening states carefully managed the visibility of their intervention activity in light of the risk of war escalation while observing states detecting such interventions tacitly colluded. One reason the same dynamic may have held in the 1930s and 1950s is the presence in many leaders of a qualitatively similar fear of full-scale war. With or without atomic weapons, the horrors of continental and global war in 1936 may not have been qualitatively different than the horrors in 1950 given the memory of the Great War. What about a leader, like Adolph Hitler, that did not fear escalation like Eden or Chamberlain? Hitler sought to foster and take advantage of a continental war; yet he
was driven to use secrecy and deniability to steer the *timing* of escalation. Bipolarity and atomic weapons seem fundamentally unnecessary to a logic for covert intervention based on delaying (if not altogether avoiding) the timing of war escalation.
Chapter 6 References


Chapter 7: Afghanistan, 1979-1986

During the 1980s, Afghanistan was host to an especially intense competition among the two most important external powers of the era, the United States and Soviet Union. For much of the Cold War, Afghanistan was non-aligned, receiving economic aid from both American and Soviet patrons though with a tilt towards its Russian neighbor. A coup in 1978 empowered the Afghan communist party and Soviet leaders quickly embraced a new and more vocally pro-Soviet ally. In reaction to factional intrigue, a coup, and an insurgency, Soviet leaders covertly and then overtly intervened to stabilize the country 1979. The United States responded with an ambitious covert assistance program to Afghan rebels which lasted from 1979 until after the Soviet withdrawal in 1988. During nine years of occupation, the Soviets maintained an occupation force of over 75,000 combat troops with 600,000 military personnel spending time in the country at least once. Soviet leaders also provided thousands of civilian, intelligence, and military advisors, lost 13,000 dead and over 40,000 wounded, and spent over 10 billion rubles.¹

During the period under study, Afghanistan includes several cases of covert and overt intervention as well as witnessing state reaction that help shed light on the politics of

secrecy. Less well known than the invasion, for example, is the covert Soviet deployment of military personnel and equipment for regime and airfield protection in mid-1979. American embassy personnel and intelligence assets detected this covert intervention but chose not to publicize it. In addition, American aid consisted of an important covert-to-overt transition that generates additional opportunities for theory testing. After an extensive and heated debate, the Reagan Administration approved sending American-made Stinger missiles to select Afghan rebel groups. The Stinger missile decision was highly symbolic because it was not a plausibly deniable lethal weapon. Analyzing why American leaders resisted for years but then endorsed an overt form of military aid can shed light on the factors which influence secrecy and publicity decisions in intervention scenarios. Table 11 lists the relevant cases I review in this chapter.
These cases are important to study for historical and theoretical reasons. Afghanistan during this period had an outsized impact on international politics. While the Soviet Union was widely believed to be at the height of its power and ambition when it invaded Afghanistan in December 1979, it was crumbling from within as it withdrew in May 1988. The experiment with superpower accommodation and restraint – détente – was fatally wounded after the Soviet invasion and American response. By generating domestic popular dissatisfaction, ending the economic fruits of détente, and draining resources from domestic demands, Afghanistan played an important role in advancing
what would become an abrupt end to the Cold War.² Beyond Cold War high politics, the
invasion revolutionized regional American relationships with several states. Pakistani
and American leaders bridged their disagreements over nuclear weapons and forged a
close relationship as part of the covert aid network initiated in 1979. Closer relations,
including sensitive intelligence cooperation between the U.S. and China, were a product
of Afghanistan.³ Within Afghanistan, the Soviet occupation and covert aid program had
a devastating impact on the local social and political environment. Soviet advisors led
with a heavy hand and the Soviet Army’s use of brutal military tactics alienated most
tribal leaders and average civilians. At the same time, the American aid program fueled
the rise of multiple warlords. The central government was hollowed out at the same time
as centrifugal forces outside the capital were artificially swollen with resources. Not
surprisingly, the period after Soviet withdrawal descended into civil war and ultimately
created a sanctuary for al Qaeda and Osama Bin Laden.⁴

The Afghanistan conflict is also significant for the purposes of theory testing. Within my
overall research design, the Afghanistan cases include two unique features: 1) a focus on
aid rather than combat participation; and, 2) a large-scale covert intervention by a
democratic rather than autocratic external power. The first feature allows me to assess
the generalizability of a theory that has been assessed up to this point in cases of

² On the impact on détente, Garthoff describes the Afghanistan invasion as “sharply dividing the previous
decade of détente…from the ensuing years of containment and confrontation.” Garthoff, Detente and
Confrontation, 922.
³ Brzezinski, Power and Principle, 133, 144, 424–5; Garthoff, Detente and Confrontation, 1063–5.
⁴ On the connection between the occupation, covert aid network, and the rise of terrorist organizations in
Afghanistan, see Coll, Ghost Wars.
interstate conflict with external combat participation. Escalation dangers are more acute when multiple external interventions create combat encounters; this is the Korean War scenario. Therefore, if escalation concerns play an important role in secrecy/publicity decisions when the intervention only involves aid, this suggests the theory has broader applicability to state choices about secrecy/publicity when intervention is limited to equipment and weaponry. The second feature, a democratic covert intervention, allows for especially fine-grained analysis of an intervening state’s choices. In the other conflicts I review, democracies play the role of “witnessing states” and covert interventions have been conducted by autocratic states. Yet we know democracies like the United States, United Kingdom, and Israel regularly engage in covert operations.  

The Afghanistan conflict allows me to closely analysis one such case of democratic covert intervention. I draw on an especially robust documentary record to analyze American decisions at the outset of the aid program as well as their decision to provide overt aid in the form of Stinger missiles.

Lastly, the Afghanistan conflict features cases that are “hard tests” of the theory. Escalation risks and uncertainty about conflict spirals should be lowest in Afghanistan. Afghanistan was never seen as a central battleground of the Cold War. At no time during the Soviet occupation was there a plausible scenario for direct combat between the outside intervening powers. It contrasts with local conflicts in which great powers

\footnote{See Chapter 2 for discussion of the way states of all regime types have converged in developing covert means of using force.}
compete over geostrategically important territory, as was the case in Korea and Spain. In addition, Soviet-American competition in Afghanistan took place after forty years of Cold War competition in the periphery. Uncertainty about escalation dangers would seemingly be at its lowest point after so many occasions for the two rivals to learn. If escalation concerns still play an important role in secrecy and publicity decisions despite years of “learning on the job,” this is especially strong support for the basic applicability of the theory.

One important finding from this chapter is that “escalation” should be understood broadly. While fears of escalation to a world war were remote, the same basic concern – avoiding a hard-to-control crises spiral – was present in two less extreme forms. One was the danger of ruining détente. A key finding is that the desire to avoid precipitating a crisis that would jeopardize the fruits of superpower cooperation led both Soviet and American leaders to use secrecy early in the Afghanistan conflict. Both sides understood publicized intervention-type activity would create a crisis which could trap the adversaries in a cycle of confrontational replies. Such a cycle would likely fall short of a global war for Europe or Asia but the benefits of détente for both sides would quickly perish. The second salient form of escalation was regional rather than global. Another key finding is that American leaders carefully avoided an overt form of intervention to avoid provoking a regional crisis and expansion of the war. Specifically, American leaders believed an overt aid program would necessitate Soviet retaliation against Pakistan, the conduit for American weaponry. Cross-border incursions into Pakistan
risked spreading the conflict and would place American leaders in a difficult dilemma vis-à-vis Pakistan’s defense. Figure 7 shows the most salient forms of escalation in the context of the Afghanistan conflict.

![Figure 7. Forms of escalation in the Afghanistan war](image)

An important implication of this chapter, then, is that the theory offers important insights into how adversaries compete even when the risk of global conflict escalation is fairly remote. Covertness may be a method of managing “escalation” understood as delicate cooperative projects between adversaries or regionalization of a local conflict.
The rest of the chapter is structured as follows. I first describe and assess the Soviet covert intervention in mid-1979 as well as the American response of tacit collusion. In the second section, I analyze why Soviet leaders endorsed an overt intervention with their invasion in late December 1979 as well as the immediate American response to it. The third section focuses on the American covert aid program, analyzing why leaders initially opted against providing overt aid and maintained that choice through 1985. I also review the Soviet response of publicity. The final section analyzes the Stinger missile debate within the U.S. government from 1985-1986. I assess why leaders adopted an overt posture and why it took place in 1986 rather than at other points in time. I conclude with reflections on the significance of the findings and ideas for future research.

*Soviet Covert Intervention and the American Reaction (mid-1979)*

Six months before the invasion in late December 1979, a Soviet intervention in Afghanistan with combat troops began in a covert form. After an especially threatening uprising in western Afghanistan in March 1979, the Soviet Politburo reviewed its Afghanistan policy and approved the covert deployment of several units of Russian combat troops. These units performed a range of functions, including providing base security to a strategically important airfield near Kabul, protecting Soviet personnel in Kabul, flying air transport flights to move Afghan Army units to areas in rebellion, and, in some reports, flying aerial combat missions. Even as local conditions failed to improve, Soviet leaders repeatedly refused the requests of Afghanistan’s co-leaders – Nur Muhammad Taraki and Hafizullah Amin – for expanded military personnel in more
visible operational roles in the summer and fall of 1979. This section reviews the Russian covert intervention in Afghanistan and the rationale for opting against an overt intervention.

Pockets of unrest had spread in the Afghan countryside throughout the winter of 1978-1979 in reaction to communist land reforms, secularization efforts, and socialist education initiatives which threatened local ways of life. In March 1979, the “Herat uprising” in the third largest city in the country elevated this simmering unrest to a visible boil. In conjunction with local rebel guerrillas and townspeople, most of an Afghan Army division defected and turned their weapons against regime loyalists. Four days of brutal fighting left hundreds of Afghans and dozens of Soviet advisors and their families dead. Control of Herat was wrested from the rebellion only after loyal military units from elsewhere in Afghanistan arrived, enabled by Soviet consultations and transport aid.

The Herat uprising prompted urgent requests from Taraki to Moscow for direct military intervention. Over the phone and in person, Taraki urged Soviet leaders to deploy a division or more of combat troops. When Soviet leaders balked, he suggested sending Soviet troops with equipment in Afghan markings, Afghan uniforms, and using personnel from Central Asian Soviet republics. He was especially keen to have trained Soviet

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6 Garthoff, Detente and Confrontation, 990.
7 Ibid., 991; Westad, “Prelude to Invasion,” 57–8; Coll, Ghost Wars, 39–40.
8 Garthoff, Detente and Confrontation, 991–4; Westad, “Prelude to Invasion,” 57; “Meeting of Kosygin, Gromyko, Ustinov, and Ponomarev with Taraki in Moscow, March 20, 1979.”
personnel, or at worst Vietnamese or Cuban personnel, to operate sophisticated Soviet tanks and helicopters. Over several days during the Herat uprising, the Soviet leadership debated the competence of its ally and the risks of an intervention. Ultimately, the Politburo refused to provide Soviet military units and instead expedited shipments of equipment and promised assistance in any future uprisings. Key Soviet leaders like KGB chief Yuri Andropov and Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko cautioned that a rash deployment of Soviet troops would end in a bloody fight against Afghan civilians and international outcry.

This initial caution did not last long. A larger Politburo review of its Afghanistan policy was completed in late June. Soviet leaders approved two modest covert military deployments to Afghanistan. One Soviet airborne battalion (600 men) was to be flown to protect Bagram Air Force Base, the primary airfield supplying Kabul and a critical air link enabling Soviet leaders to airlift equipment on short notice. The unit was to be deployed wearing “aviation-technical maintenance uniforms” to disguise their purpose. A second contingent of KGB special forces personnel (125-150 men) were to be deployed to Kabul to provide security for Soviet personnel in case of emergency. They

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9 See the exchange about helicopter crews from the Soviet Union, Cuba, or North Vietnam in “Meeting of Kosygin, Gromyko, Ustinov, and Ponomarev with Taraki in Moscow, March 20, 1979.”
11 Mendelson, Changing Course, 47; Garthoff, Detente and Confrontation, 998; “Top Secret Excerpt from CC CPSU Politburo Minutes, June 29, 1979.”
were instructed to wear civilian dress and pose as support staff to the embassy. These units arrived in country in early July and were the first dedicated military units tasked with performing combat-related functions in Afghanistan.

Even as Moscow crossed this important threshold, it continued to carefully tailor the visibility of its direct involvement in the country. New requests by Taraki and Amin for Soviet helicopter crews to fly combat missions were refused in July. Their request to quietly swap Afghan military personnel manning anti-aircraft artillery around Kabul with better trained and politically reliable Russian personnel was refused in August. A request for an overt deployment of two Soviet divisions was similarly declined.

Back in Kabul, sharing power was proving more and more difficult for both Taraki and Amin. The simmering rivalry between their rival factions of the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) peaked in September 1979. Taraki loyalists unsuccessfully attempted to assassinate Amin. Amin activated loyal factions of the Afghan military in response, cracked down on opponents, and seized the mantle of power. Within two weeks, Taraki was dead on execution orders from Amin. Soviet leaders played no clear role in Amin’s assumption of power. In fact, leaders in Moscow including Brezhnev

13 Garthoff, Detente and Confrontation, 1002; the Soviets also had hundreds of civilian and military advisors playing an active role in Afghan technical administration in years prior. On the Soviet advisory presence, see Kalinovsky, The Blind Leading the Blind: Soviet Advisors, Counter-Insurgency and Nation-Building in Afghanistan.
14 Gibbs, “Reassessing Soviet Motives for Invading Afghanistan,” 252; Mendelson, Changing Course, 47–9; Westad, “Prelude to Invasion,” 60.
were shocked and unnerved as they had begun favoring and courting Taraki over Amin.\footnote{Garthoff, \textit{Detente and Confrontation}, 1004–6.}

Amin’s rise to power fundamentally altered Soviet decision-making. Soviet discomfort and distrust of Amin was demonstrated by Moscow taking quiet but immediate steps to locate a successor to replace him.\footnote{The leader in exile who was later installed after the invasion, Babrak Karmal, was relocated from Czechoslovakia to Moscow on Oct 10; Amin had Taraki executed on Oct 9. Ibid., 1009–1010.}

Yet Soviet leaders were careful to give no outward signals to Amin of their dissatisfaction; they maintained generous financial aid and kept covert military assets in the roles they had approved in June. A post-Amin Politburo policy review provides further confirmation of the details of Moscow’s covert military personnel. The policy review authorizes Soviet “subunits” to continue their existing missions, mentioning a parachute battalion (presumably those at Bagram), fixed-wing and helicopter transport squadrons, and a security detachment (presumably those in Kabul).\footnote{“Excerpt from Minutes of CC CPSU Politburo, October 31, 1979”; as the order appears in Lyakhovskiy, “[t]he 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.”Lyakhovskiy, \textit{Inside the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan and the Seizure of Kabul, December 1979}, 10.}

Additional deployments appear to have been added as well. Another KGB special forces unit was likely sent to protect Amin in late November.\footnote{Described (but no other mention) in Garthoff, \textit{Detente and Confrontation}, 1010.} Finally, two additional battalions were deployed to Bagram Air Force Base along with several other “subunits” in early
December, bringing the total Soviet combat personnel at the base to 2,500, according to one estimate.19

The covert phase of Soviet intervention was brought to a close in late December when a Soviet airlift brought the leading edge of an invasion and occupation force of 75,000 on December 25. Prior to the invasion, Soviet leaders coped with an ally experiencing a growing insurgency by clandestinely deploying military personnel to aid in providing regime security and internal power projection.

Explaining Soviet covertness

Why did the Soviets carefully minimize the visibility of their military footprint inside Afghanistan? What motivated them to choose a secret form of intervention? Other components of Soviet aid to Afghanistan were highly publicized. Moscow gave Amin, Taraki, and the PDPA a very public embrace when it assumed power in 1978, including economic aid and extensive advising. Yet military personnel aiding the emerging counterinsurgency efforts were concealed.

This section reviews the factors motivating Soviet covert intervention in light of the predictions of my own theory and other logics for secrecy. I rely on available translated primary evidence as well as analysis by Soviet specialists with access to Russian archival

materials and/or interviews. Though the documentary record is far from complete, the available evidence offers qualified support for a perception manipulation, escalation-based theory. Soviet secrecy was driven, in part, by a desire to avoid trapping both sides into a crisis which would likely end détente and its strategic and economic benefits. When “escalation” is understood as the creation of a major diplomatic-security crisis, Soviet concern for the external repercussions following a highly visible Soviet intervention provides support for the theory.

Soviet leaders were clearly concerned about the larger diplomatic consequences of an overt military deployment. Soviet Prime Minister Kosygin and Taraki engaged in a revealing exchange at the height of the Herat uprising in March 1979 for which a transcript is available and translated.\(^{20}\) In reaction to Taraki’s proposal to have Soviet equipment and personnel airlifted to Kabul and deployed to Herat under the guise of the Afghan Army, Kosygin replies that “it will not be possible to conceal this. Two hours later the whole world will know about this. Everyone will begin to shout that the Soviet Union’s intervention in Afghanistan has begun.” This response is revealing in two ways. First, it shows a top-level Soviet leader is expressing concern about the feasibility of maintaining secrecy vis-à-vis the wider international community rather than his domestic constituents or the American adversary. Second, the specific reaction of concern is vocal criticism of what would appear to be a Soviet military intervention.

\(^{20}\)“Top Secret Transcript of Telephone Conversation Between A. Kosygin and Taraki, March 18, 1979.”
The specific concern was likely that Soviet leaders would be seen as responsible for crippling détente. Records from Politburo debates during the Herat uprising in March were available to some Soviet specialists in the early years after the Cold War and their reports provide the clearest window into considerations influencing Soviet thinking about intervention. Soviet Foreign Minister Gromyko, for example, criticized the proposal for an overt Soviet intervention saying “all that we have done in recent years with such effort in terms of a détente in international tensions, arms reductions, and much more – all that would be thrown back.”

Prime Minister Kosygin similarly opposed the overt use of Soviet troops due to the crisis in relations with the West it would likely prompt, arguing that it “would immediately arouse the international community and would invite sharply unfavorable multipronged consequences.” Gromyko specifically reviewed international law and cautioned that a Soviet overt troop deployment would be quickly labeled an act of “aggression.”

Avoiding a crisis in relations with its primary adversary, the United States, and the wider Western world clearly played an important role in staying the hand of advocates for overt intervention. Sarah Mendelson’s interviews in the early 1990s with members of the Soviet General Staff that had opposed an overt intervention also mention the crisis in relations with the West as a key concern, noting that the opposition of military generals

21 Gromyko’s statement to Politburo, quoted in Garthoff, *Detente and Confrontation*, 993.
22 “Meeting of Kosygin, Gromyko, Ustinov, and Ponomarev with Taraki in Moscow, March 20, 1979.”
23 “According to the UN Charter a country can appeal for assistance, and we could send troops, in case it is subject to external aggression. Afghanistan has not been subject to any aggression. This is its internal affair, a revolutionary internal conflict...Thus our army if it enters Afghanistan will be an aggressor.” Gromyko’s statement to Politburo, quoted in Garthoff, *Detente and Confrontation*, 993.
was because “the international consequences of the intervention included the worsening of relations with the United States.”

This evidence provides a clear rationale for the decision two months later to provide a limited, incremental, secret intervention: such a deployment did not risk detection by the wider international community, as noted by Kosygin, and could therefore avoid provoking a crisis.

What about other logics for secrecy in interventions? In the evidence that is available, there is no sign that surprise-type considerations played a role in decision regarding Soviet intervention. Instead, the visibility (or not) of Soviet troops was framed as a political rather than operational military matter.

Soviet leaders may have chosen a covert form to avoid punishment by domestic constituents opposed to intervention. Yet evidence of this consideration is also absent from the primary and secondary materials. The obvious reason is that the only domestic audience which could sanction Soviet leaders – other members of the Politburo – was part of the decision-making process. A covert intervention could not keep this domestic audience “in the dark.”

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24 Mendelson, *Changing Course*, 56.
25 The one important exception is in Soviet covert deployments immediately prior to the invasion in mid-December. A key component of the invasion was the removal of Amin by surprise. Secrecy was used to surprise their own ally; some advanced forces were sent to scout the invasion, coup, and occupation operation apparently without Amin’s awareness. Lyakhovskiy describes these noting that Soviet leaders hoped to “[c]ontinue to work actively with Amin and overall with the current leadership of the PDPA and the DRA, not giving Amin grounds to believe that we don’t trust him and don’t wish to deal with him.” Lyakhovskiy, *Inside the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan and the Seizure of Kabul, December 1979*, 10.
26 The wider domestic public in the Soviet Union was not a consideration during these deliberations and, even after choosing an overt invasion, the Soviet role in Afghanistan was largely unknown at home for several years due to routine Soviet censorship. As one analyst concludes, “public opinion does not appear to have played a role in Soviet decision making” even after Gorbachev-era reporting took place. For analysis of the level of public awareness and the existence of only a trickle of reporting in underground opposition newspapers as late as 1981, see Kalinovsky, *Long Goodbye*, 45–6.
The evidence in favor of an escalation-based logic is qualified in two important ways. First, for much of 1979, the overt form of intervention appeared to Soviet leaders somewhat premature at the early stages of the rebellion. Gromyko and Kosygin also argued Afghanistan was not ready for a socialist revolution meaning Soviet forces would be supporting an unstable regime against its own people. Due to local security conditions, they argued a political rather than military solution was the most promising.\(^{27}\)

Thus, a limited and low-profile military presence rather than an overt intervention was seen as more prudent in the spring of 1979. Second, Soviet concerns about international reactions to an overt intervention included more than crisis escalation scenarios. While Soviet leaders specifically cited the risk of unraveling détente with an overt intervention, Soviet concern about being branded an “aggressor” was likely also driven by a desire not to jeopardize its image in the “periphery” as the international ally of popular revolutions. Yet even this consideration can be interpreted as generally supportive of the impression management approach. Leaders here would be using secrecy to avoid contradictions in the narrative they tell about themselves and to avoid violations of international law. Strictly speaking, however, the evidence of Soviet fears regarding international reactions I review below is not “clean” support for an escalation-based rationale for secrecy.

\(^{27}\) The political solution focused on building a more inclusive Afghan government which did not alienate (often religious) local political institutions and had wider appeal in the rural countryside.
To conclude, what we can gather from Soviet decision-making prior to their December invasion provides moderate support for the theory that secrecy in intervention scenarios is used to manage escalation dangers with an adversary. The evidence in favor of an adversary escalation logic is qualified by the fact that other international consequences played a role in Soviet debates as did local security considerations. It is also important to note that the documentary record is not rich enough to speak to the causal mechanisms; I cannot find discussions which show signs that leaders were trying to avoid raising reputational stakes or putting the United States or themselves in a prestige-based trap.

Witness reaction: American detection and tacit collusion

Did American intelligence detect this covert Soviet involvement? What was the government response? In many ways, detecting an active Soviet military presence, rather than mere advisors, would constitute a golden public relations opportunity for the United States. Publicizing this information would allow the U.S. to disprove the narrative of a capable communist Afghan government and dispel the myth of Soviet non-involvement.

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28 It is important to note the evidence I use refers to the initial March decision against any form of intervention. Evidence from debates in late June that authorized the covert deployment to Bagram Air Force Base is not as abundant. The theoretical inference I am making is the following: if escalation concerns played an important role in Soviet leaders rejecting any intervention in March, then escalation concerns likely also played a role in their selection of a covert rather than overt form of intervention in late June and in the fall.

29 That is, the available Soviet records do not provide evidence in favor or against the causal mechanisms I highlight, such as: 1) Soviet leader were aware that publicly intervening would deprive the adversary of the opportunity to ignore the intervention, raise the reputational stakes of the situation, and make retaliation unavoidable, or its corollary 2) Soviet leaders chose a covert method not to deceive the Americans but to avoid alerting third party states and publics so that American leaders would find restraint easier.
American intelligence did, in fact, detect the Soviet covert combat units in Afghanistan. In fact, a large interagency intelligence analysis in late September 1979 included extensive details on the Soviet covert battalion at Bagram, Soviet helicopter crews, and more. Yet the Carter Administration chose not to publicize this information. The American reaction constitutes a classic case of tacit collusion. As in other cases of an adversary’s tacit collusion, this forbearance is puzzling. This section describes the degree and timing of American detection, the debate within the Carter Administration about what to do with that intelligence, and evidence that a desire to preserve détente and avoid trapping the Soviets into a larger intervention motivated tacit collusion.

American embassy reports and intelligence analysis both concluded a substantial covert Soviet military presence existed in Afghanistan no later than September 1979. However, suspicions and hints of a covert Soviet presence started well before. The available declassified embassy cables, intelligence analysis, and NSC documentation provide an intriguing timeline. The earliest available reports of suspected covert military units appear in embassy reports in May and June. For example, a May 8 cable from the Moscow embassy summarizes a conversation with a Pakistani diplomat in which they allege Soviet pilots were flying helicopters to suppress an uprising in Jalalabad.30 A July

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30 “Cable from Embassy Kabul to Secretary of State, May 8, 1979.”
cable similarly reports on helicopter crews arriving in Afghanistan.\textsuperscript{31} By early September, embassy cables were reporting the Bagram airborne battalion as well.\textsuperscript{32}

Isolated reports had crystallized into a surprisingly accurate description of covert Soviet military intervention no later than September 1979. An especially important milestone for any intelligence conclusion is the production of a consensus interagency assessment. Just such a report on Afghanistan, entitled “Soviet Options in Afghanistan,” was completed in late September. The report described that “the Soviets increased the numbers and expanded the counterinsurgency role there of what now are at least 2,500 of their military personnel.” It alleged the Soviets had allowed helicopter and tank crews to operate advanced Soviet equipment and described the Soviet airborne battalion at Bagram Air Force Base. It also recognized the likelihood of underestimation, noting that incremental covert deployment of small battalion-sized units “could be accomplished without immediate detection.”\textsuperscript{33} At roughly the same time, field reports from the Kabul embassy were becoming far more precise about the covert Soviet military presence. The top American diplomat in Kabul, Bruce Amstutz, sent cables on October 1\textsuperscript{st} and 3\textsuperscript{rd} to State Department headquarters and other embassies describing a conservative estimate of 4,200 Soviet combat personnel in Afghanistan, including 600 guarding Bagram airfield, 500-1000 armored corps vehicle operators at a tank base near Kabul, and a number of

\textsuperscript{31} “Cable from Embassy Kabul to Secretary of State, July 18, 1979.”
\textsuperscript{32} Garthoff, \textit{Detente and Confrontation}, 1002.
\textsuperscript{33} “Interagency Intelligence Memorandum (CIA), September 28, 1979,” 2, 6, 14–5.
advisors with actual operational roles. Amstutz’s cables are especially important for two reasons. He is careful to define what he means by “Soviet combat troops.” In addition, his analysis draws on multiple intelligence sources: he reports his assessment is based on the “best information currently available to US, including data confirmed by other sensitive USG sources.” Amstutz’s estimate therefore offers a window into other intelligence sources outside the embassy rumor mill.

How well known was this information within the government? It is important to establish intelligence was not trapped in isolated embassy cables; this helps establish that the witnessing state’s government was confronted with a choice of whether to publicize or not. Even with an incomplete primary document record, it is clear in the Afghanistan case that information on the covert Soviet combat role in Afghanistan was available throughout the foreign policy bureaucracy. The interagency intelligence analysis I previously described was widely circulated; its importance is specifically noted in a retrospective CIA review of intelligence warnings from 1980. A National Security Council report on the “Soviet Position in the Third World” in August mentions a known Soviet combat role as well. The National Security Advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, took a special interest in the issue in late September and memos document his requests for

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34 “Cable from J. Bruce Amstutz to U.S. Department of State, October 1, 1979”; “Cable from J. Bruce Amstutz to U.S. Department of State, October 3, 1979.”
35 Amstutz includes four groups: clearly distinct Soviet military units providing internal defense of fixed positions, Soviet combat specialists such as armored vehicle operators, clandestine Soviet personnel with clear Slavic features providing some kind of security function in Kabul, and Soviet technicians doing anything more than advising.
36 “Interagency Intelligence Memorandum, October 1980.”
37 “National Security Council Paper, August 1979.”
clarification about just what the Soviets were covertly doing in Afghanistan.\textsuperscript{38} Equally revealing is the warning sent by the top American intelligence leader, the Director of Central Intelligence. Stanfield Turner circulated a warning to top-level cabinet members and the president in mid-September that a Soviet invasion was a strong possibility, in part because Soviet combat units were probably already in-country.\textsuperscript{39}

Despite having accurate intelligence from multiple sources about their top adversary’s covert military meddling, American leaders elected not to “go public” with this information. In fact, the question of publicity was the subject of active bureaucratic debate from October to mid-December. Carter’s foreign policy team was split: while the National Security Council staff urged publicizing the Soviet meddling in Afghanistan, other departments opposed it for two months. American detection of Soviet military mobilization along the border with Afghanistan – a clear sign of a pending invasion – broke the logjam in the Carter Administration that had blocked publicity of the data. The first newspaper report of a Soviet combat presence in Afghanistan, based on information provided by the State Department in a background briefing for reporters, came on December 22.\textsuperscript{40} Until this briefing, not even unauthorized disclosures appeared in major Western news reporting.\textsuperscript{41}

\textsuperscript{38} “Memorandum from Thomas Thornton to Zbigniew Brzezinski, September 17, 1979.”
\textsuperscript{39} “Memorandum from Stanfield Turner for the National Security Council, September 14, 1979.”
\textsuperscript{40} Burt, “U.S. Voices Concern Repeatedly to Moscow Over Afghan Buildup.”
\textsuperscript{41} A search in New York Times and Washington Post archives confirms no allegations of a Soviet combat presence were made in major American presses – even allegations based on anonymous government sources – until late December.
The chief advocate of publicity was National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski. Brzezinski’s memoirs and declassified documents show a coordinated effort to win approval for a “name and shame” campaign based on Soviet meddling in Afghanistan.42 His National Security Council staff produced a kind of “blueprint” for embarrassing an adversary, including a range of measures which could be taken in the event of an expanded intervention.43 Yet as Brzezinski himself describes, this initiative was stalled by more cautious players, most importantly the State Department, for several months.44 Brzezinski’s requests for public statements from the State Department and International Communications Agency in early October had no tangible results.45 Once signs of a looming Soviet invasion were clear, however, State Department opposition relented and Brzezinski won approval for a publicity campaign in a December 17 White House meeting.46 This led to a conscious decision to publicize data on the Soviet military

42 The initiative is described in Brzezinski, Power and Principle, 429; Garthoff, Detente and Confrontation, 1052–3; primary material showing the initiative is in “Memorandum from Thomas Thornton to David Aaron, October 2, 1979”; “Memorandum from Thomas Thornton to Zbigniew Brzezinski, September 17, 1979”; “Memorandum from Zbigniew Brzezinski to Director of the International Communications Agency, October 4, 1979”; “Memorandum from Zbigniew Brzezinski to Cyrus R. Vance, October 4, 1979.”
43 It describes diplomatic consultations with regional countries and allies; requests to those states to publicly express concern or condemnation; publicity via Voice of America; press backgrounders; and statements of condemnation at international forums like the United Nations. “Memorandum from Thomas Thornton to David Aaron, October 2, 1979.”
44 Brzezinski notes that “the State Department [was] still reluctant to press the matter” and that “[a]s late as mid-December, a senior State Department official, Under Secretary David Newsom, objected to a proposed press backgrounder on the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, prepared by the NSC, on the grounds that this might be seen by the Soviets as U.S. meddling in Afghanistani affairs.” Brzezinski, Power and Principle, 428.
45 Garthoff, Detente and Confrontation, 1052–3.
46 Brzezinski describes the vote in favor of publicity being reached “with considerable opposition from the State Department.” Brzezinski, Power and Principle, 428.
buildup on Afghanistan’s borders and the introduction of new military units into Afghanistan from December 19-26.\textsuperscript{47}

This tacit collusion stands in stark contrast to an almost identical scenario handled very differently by the Carter Administration earlier in 1979. American intelligence assets detected a possible new and covertly deployed Soviet military unit in Cuba in mid-1979. The Administration debated and initially agreed to downplay the intelligence by keeping it internal and privately discussing it with the Soviets. Yet word of a new “Soviet brigade” in Cuba quickly leaked to members of Congress and the press. The leaks created an immediate crisis for the Carter Administration and U.S.-Soviet relations. Conservatives in Congress seized an opportunity to use the issue to lambast the administration for American weakness; several explicitly linked their vote on SALT II to Soviet removal of any new combat troops in Cuba. Trapped by highly attentive domestic and international audiences and in the harsh glare of the spotlight, the Carter Administration chose a firm stand with Moscow. The Cuba experience shows that publicity decisions in adversary relationships are fraught with potential for crisis escalation; whereas successful collusion may have kept the incident off the “front pages,” leaks created publicity which made a major crisis in superpower relations almost impossible to avoid.\textsuperscript{48}

\textsuperscript{47} Garthoff, \textit{Detente and Confrontation}, 1053-4.
\textsuperscript{48} Duffy, “Crisis Mangling and the Cuban Brigade.”
As the Cuba incident demonstrates, publicity can create two reinforcing problems. On the one hand, it traps the publicizing state (the United States) into a confrontational strategy by activating hard-line domestic constituencies and a crisis which foreign governments may use to assess credibility and reputation. On the other hand, publicity traps the intervening adversary (i.e. the Soviet Union) into taking their own confrontational position by turning tactful restraint into a display of humiliating accommodation. This is a recipe for uncompromising positions and stalemate; not surprisingly, both sides found themselves unable to defuse the crisis in Cuba once publicity was introduced.49

Hints of this logic in the Afghanistan scenario are present though the admittedly incomplete primary documentation limits how confident our judgment can be. American intelligence analysis and embassy reporting predicted the Soviets would intervene covertly rather than overtly in order to avoid trapping themselves into a deep – and potentially dangerous – commitment.50 This prediction, developed in the aforementioned interagency analysis of Soviet options in Afghanistan, shows an American appreciation for the Soviet desire to avoid trapping itself into a hard-line policy. The report described the Soviets keeping the Afghanistan regime at arm’s length in order to make a tactical

49 Interestingly, the U.S. had long known and tolerated Soviet military brigades in Cuba that were believed to be performing an advisory role for the Cuban military. This demonstrates the essentially contingent nature of the crisis: the raw material components (a Soviet military presence inside an ally) had been present since the Kennedy Administration.

50 Their most likely intervention was predicted to be “on the smallest and least conspicuous scale.” “Interagency Intelligence Memorandum (CIA), September 28, 1979,” 3.
retreat (i.e. abandoning it) less costly.\footnote{“Moscow’s unwillingness to acknowledge the Afghan regime publicly as a Communist government has suggested that the Soviets have wished to leave open a line of propaganda retreat in case the Khalqis collapse.” Ibid., 15.} It predicted the Soviets would keep any additional intervention covert to avoid creating an open-ended commitment (which would lead to “military and political difficulties” should they wish to withdraw) and deeper Soviet reputational investment ("increase their own stake").\footnote{“The Soviets are probably well aware of the open-ended military and political difficulties that could flow if such limited intervention were allowed to grow into a larger and more visible commitment...[it will] increase their own stake.” Ibid., 3, 17.} American publicity would unravel this cautionary approach and awareness of this may have motivated the opponents of Brzezinski’s publicity initiative. The idea that American rhetoric could deepen the Soviet commitment was actually cited by Brzezinski’s staff as a reason to make the allegations. Referring to the Soviet role in the assassination of Taraki by Amin, one memo argues an American publicity campaign could link the Soviets and turn the coup into a kind of albatross. “Whatever the Soviet role in this, they should be made to look as if they had a hand in the operation. Taraki was something of a Lenin figure and had a degree of foreign respect. Amin is the Stalin of the drama and the Soviets should have him hung prominently around their necks.”\footnote{“Memorandum from Thomas Thornton to Zbigniew Brzezinski, September 17, 1979,” 2.}

In addition, Brzezinski describes the State Department’s opposition to publicity as focused on détente. He argues that State Department leaders below Secretary Vance stalled the publicity proposal “on the grounds that this might be seen by the Soviets as

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\begin{itemize}
  \item \footnote{“Moscow’s unwillingness to acknowledge the Afghan regime publicly as a Communist government has suggested that the Soviets have wished to leave open a line of propaganda retreat in case the Khalqis collapse.” Ibid., 15.}
  \item \footnote{“The Soviets are probably well aware of the open-ended military and political difficulties that could flow if such limited intervention were allowed to grow into a larger and more visible commitment...[it will] increase their own stake.” Ibid., 3, 17.}
  \item \footnote{“Memorandum from Thomas Thornton to Zbigniew Brzezinski, September 17, 1979,” 2.}
\end{itemize}
U.S. meddling in Afghanistani affairs.”54 This is consistent with the general bureaucratic alignment in the latter Carter years in which the State Department protected the fruits of détente while Brzezinski advocated a more confrontational approach. In short, the desire to avoid a second “Cuban brigade” crisis in Afghanistan – American publicity of clandestine Soviet military units creating a crisis that leads to hard-liner activation and reputational posturing – seems to have played an important role in the State Department resisting name-and-shame tactics. Both sides – Soviet and American – appeared to safeguard détente through mutual concealment of potentially crisis-inducing events.

*Soviet Overt Intervention and the American Reaction (Dec 1979 - Jan 1980)*

In the early morning hours of Christmas day in 1979, the first of many Soviet airlifts landed in and around Kabul. They brought the leading edge of an overt invasion force. Over the next week, thousands of Soviet military personnel entered Afghanistan through the air and over the Amu Darya River dividing Afghanistan and the southern Uzbek republic of the Soviet Union. Over 250 flights in three days brought 7,700 troops and their weaponry to Kabul alone. At its conclusion in January, the total invasion force of four-plus divisions placed 80,000 Soviet boots on the ground in all major urban areas in Afghanistan. Soviet troops faced no resistance upon entry: as one historian notes, there were “more Soviet casualties from road accidents than from combat” during the invasion.55

55 On road accidents vs. combat, see Garthoff, *Detente and Confrontation*, 1020.
Since the assassination of Taraki in September, top Soviet elites in the Politburo had grown increasingly pessimistic about the ability of Amin to govern with political reach beyond the capital. Amin’s reliability as a Cold War ally was also increasingly in doubt. Soviet intelligence found clear evidence Amin had met with American representatives behind closed doors and, in other meetings, had criticized Soviet policy. The nightmare scenario was betrayal in which Amin expelled Soviet advisors and embraced the United States, as Sadat had done in Egypt in 1972. Thus, while Moscow attempted to find a political solution in the spring, more drastic actions were increasingly appealing by the fall. Defense Minister Dmitriy Ustinov and other top Soviet leaders increasingly began considering a forcible coup and large-scale, overt military deployment to stabilize a new regime.

The Soviet decision to overtly intervene was adopted quickly, quietly, and with an unusually small amount of Politburo or policy expert input. Soviet Defense Minister Ustinov and KGB head Andropov, members of the Politburo committee on Afghanistan policy, were the primary advocates. Ustinov had instructed a pair of his top generals to investigate contingency plans for a limited occupation force in the first week of December. Along with Andropov, Ustinov lobbied and convinced the increasingly frail General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev on December 8. Ustinov called up reservists and increased readiness of the divisions needed for an invasion on December 10. Finally, formal Politburo approval was approved under highly unusual and secretive
circumstances on December 12. Rather than after a full Politburo debate and vote, written authorization for the invasion was given in a secluded room with no typists or aids and written on a hand-written note filled with oblique language (Afghanistan was simply “A”). Only the signatures of Ustinov, Andropov, foreign minister Andrei Gromyko, Politburo secretary Andrei Kirilenko, and the unsteady hand of Brezhnev appeared on the authorization.

In Kabul, Amin welcomed the intervention as a sign Moscow had finally relented to his requests for combat deployments. Soviet leaders had carefully concealed their growing disillusionment with Amin and alerted Amin of the impending arrival. But on December 27, two days after the first units arrived in Kabul, a clandestine brigade of KGB special forces seized Amin’s palace and executed him. A coordinated message on Radio Kabul announced the arrival of a former PDPA leader, Babrak Karmal, to lead the country after Amin bloody rule.56

Thus began a Soviet occupation which would not end until mid-1988. The contrast with the carefully limited and concealed military presence earlier that year was striking. This transition from covert to overt intervention presents an important opportunity for theory testing. Different explanations for why leaders use secrecy suggest different reasons for its abandonment. Moreover, larger structural features (i.e. balance of power, alliances,

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56 Karmal was in exile in Czechoslovakia since soon after the 1978 revolution but had been in Moscow for weeks prior to the invasion.
and state of technology) and even personalities (i.e. Soviet top leadership cadre) are held constant between the two decisions. The question, therefore, is: what factors motivated Soviet leaders to reject a public intervention initially and endorse it later? From their perspective, what changed between June and December?

*Explaining the covert-to-overt transition*

The small group of Soviet leaders that authorized the Afghanistan invasion did so in light of several new considerations. One key consideration which made an overt intervention attractive in later 1979 was lower perceived escalation risks. Specifically, prior damage to détente during the summer and fall of 1979 removed an important obstacle that had prevented overt involvement in earlier 1979.

The Soviet view of escalation dangers shifted markedly between March and December. In March, a superpower crisis that spoiled détente had been a primary reason key Politburo members opposed overt intervention. Yet by December, the fruits of détente were already in peril. Two specific Western decisions in the arms control domain – one in summer 1979, one in early December 1979 – were interpreted by Soviet leaders as signs that the West was no longer serious about détente.

The first blow to détente came in Washington. In part due to the publicity debacle in the Cuba brigade incident, the Senate declined to consider the Carter Administration’s submission of the SALT II treaty for ratification in the summer of 1979. This was seen
by some in Moscow as “heralding a turn away from détente on the part of the United States.”

Arms control in general and SALT II in particular were the symbolic crown of détente and, for the Soviets, one of the most important reasons they were willing to participate. Yet an even clearer link between détente’s declining prospects and the swing in favor of an overt Afghanistan intervention can be found. In early December 1979, NATO approved the deployment of highly controversial Pershing II medium-range ballistic missiles and ground-launched cruise missiles. These missile systems would significantly improve NATO’s strategic capability, create new threats to Moscow, and had been opposed by many on ground that a new arms race would erupt. Combined with SALT II, these Western arms control decisions “removed the concerns of some Politburo-members over the effects a Soviet intervention might have on détente.”

The former deputy director of the Soviet Defense Ministry, who subsequently reviewed many primary materials unavailable to Western scholars, specifically links the Pershing II decision to the Afghanistan invasion vote, saying it “became the last drop tipping the scales in favor of the deployment of troops... after the NATO decision to station medium-range missiles in Europe aimed at the USSR there was nothing to lose.”

Another difference between the June and December decisions on intervention was the decision-making structure. In December, an ad hoc “mini-Politburo” authorized an overt

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59 Lyakhovskiy, Inside the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan and the Seizure of Kabul, December 1979, 20–1 simple timing magnified the impact of Pershing II developments on the Afghanistan vote.
intervention. The decision circle was pulled extremely tight: instead of before the full seated Politburo, the decision on December 12 took place in a secluded room, without typists, with improvised and euphemistic language. The decision circle was not much wider than the advocates of overt intervention, Defense Minister Ustinov and KGB Chief Andropov. These two intentionally excluded skeptical colleagues to make adoption more likely. Importantly, the exclusion of specific individuals and the rest of the Politburo in general helped screen out consideration of escalation-related downsides to overtness. For example, Prime Minister Kosygin, who had opposed overt intervention in March on the grounds that it “would immediately arouse the international community and would invite sharply unfavorable multipronged consequences,” was not present. The control over the agenda of Ustinov and Andropov was aided by the fact that Brezhnev was in increasingly frail health and Foreign Minister Gromyko was susceptible to pressure.

The diminishing benefits of détente and exclusion of more détente-friendly votes therefore helps explain why Soviet leaders endorsed an overt intervention in December. Yet the international ramifications were not the only consideration that led to this decision. The urgency of the local security environment – specifically, Amin’s

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60 On the leadership role of Ustinov and Andropov, see Westad, “Concerning the Situation in ‘A’: New Russian Evidence on the Soviet Intervention in Afghanistan,” 130; Kalinovsky describes them as having “dominated Soviet foreign policymaking.” Kalinovsky, “Decision-Making and the Soviet War in Afghanistan”; in theorizing the intervention decision, Mendelson emphasizes the way in which “the decision making process was exceedingly centralized”; for her detailed analysis of the exclusion of regional expertise and policy advice, see Mendelson, Changing Course, 54-62.

61 On Brezhnev’s health and the Afghanistan decision, see Mendelson, Changing Course, 55; Gromyko was an opponent of overt intervention in March, as cited in the previous section. On his switch to supporting it and his susceptibility to being pressured, see Westad, “Concerning the Situation in ‘A’: New Russian Evidence on the Soviet Intervention in Afghanistan,” 130.
September coup and subsequent actions – played a critical role in boosting support for some kind of overt intervention. Politburo meetings in September, October, and November show repeated frustration with Amin along two specific lines: his demonstrated unwillingness to share power and his dangerous diplomatic openings to the United States. On the one hand, Amin’s purges and repression failed to heed Soviet advice to broaden his political base. On the other hand, Soviet intelligence in Afghanistan detected at least one closed-door meeting between Amin and the United States in the fall. Soviet leaders saw Amin as exploring a more “balanced policy” and, in other meetings, had blamed his Moscow patrons for policy mistakes. Given that Afghanistan shared a long border with the southern Soviet republics, a possible turn towards the West – most nightmarishly, expulsion of Soviet advisors and a full embrace of Americans just as Anwar Sadat had done in Egypt – had profound security implications. Amin’s actions made the local security situation more urgent than it had been in June while the solutions to the Amin problem seemed increasingly to require large-scale military action.

62 See the transcripts of the Politburo meeting on 29 November in Lyakhovskiy, *Inside the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan and the Seizure of Kabul, December 1979*, 9.
63 “Recently there have been noted signs of the fact that the new leadership of Afghanistan intends to conduct a more ‘balanced policy’ in relation to the Western powers. It is known, in particular, that representatives of the USA, on the basis of their contacts with the Afghans, are coming to a conclusion about the possibility of a change in the political line of Afghanistan in a direction which is pleasing to Washington.” In ibid., 9–11.
Thus, three changes from June 1979 appear to have led to an overt intervention in December: greater urgency based on the local security environment, fewer dangers from a superpower crisis, and an altered decision-making environment which excluded more cautionary voices. These considerations provide important but attenuated support for the theory. A shift in escalation dangers between March and December, specifically Western decisions on arms control which signaled the decline of détente, track very closely with increasing support for a coup and overt occupation. This was further encouraged at the point of decision by a restricted circle of deliberation which excluded voices who had previously opposed the intervention in part due to détente concerns. However, support for the theory is only moderate because of the important role played by the Soviet perception of an urgent local security problem. At least as important as the absence of international blowback was that Soviet leaders saw an overt form of intervention as necessary for a durable local solution in Afghanistan. Thus, international responses, including provoking a crisis that would unravel détente, were not the only consideration determining intervention form.

*A witnessing state rejects tacit collusion and embraces publicity*

The American government’s reaction to the Soviet invasion provides an unusually revealing window into the reactions of witnessing adversaries. Once the Soviet invasion was detected, the U.S. quickly launched a coordinated campaign to publicly shame and punish the Soviet Union for a “brazen” act of aggression. Publicity in reaction to publicity is not surprising; after all, an overt invasion did not provide the U.S. and other
states with informational and interpretive space to downplay the event. But the process leading to the American reaction is even more useful for the purposes of theory testing. Fine-grained evidence from the frustrated deliberations in late December 1979 and early January 1980 show several of the key causal mechanism of the theory at work.

To summarize, the American response shows an adversary initially inclined to tacitly collude, denied the opportunity to do so, and quickly embracing a full-throttle publicity campaign. On the first day of the invasion, the nature of Soviet military movements was not clear. Still keen to minimize damage to détente, American leaders considered an initial “tacit collusion” approach. This would not last long as signs of a full scale occupation force poured in. American leaders reacted with frustration and a sense of betrayal, complaining that Soviet leaders had violated rules of restraint and removed any room for diplomatic maneuver. Support quickly converged on a public name-and-shame approach, in part because invasion was a clear reputational test necessitating a visible hard-line response.

Before the assassination of Amin on December 27, internal deliberations included discussion of whether to react with a kind of tacit collusion. The early signs of Soviet military airlifts were detected but ambiguous; many thought such movements were simple resupply missions for the existing covert presence. Thus, a December 26 National Security Council meeting explicitly discussed whether to publicize national intelligence or to allow news of the activity “to reach the media on its own and maintain our current
The latter option was chosen for the time being. Part of retaining the “current public posture” included a debate over what to call the new Soviet action. While the more hawkish Brzezinski urged the label of “invasion,” others argued against it.  

Though short-lived, this initial American reaction is more evidence that witnessing states actively consider both informational and interpretive responses and that they consider tactfully ignoring such actions. However, events in Afghanistan quickly overtook these decisions. The Soviet government acknowledged its own military presence (though it claimed it had been “invited”) and their role in removing Amin was obvious to all observers. Support for a “name-and-shame” reaction quickly coalesced within the Carter Administration. Their strategy involved officials making public statements (including a presidential address), notes to allies and regional governments, and initiating a public condemnation of the Soviets at the United Nations. Further evidence of prior tacit collusion is provided by the decision to publicize formerly classified information on Soviet military visits to Afghanistan. This information had been in American hands for months but, during the covert period of Soviet involvement, had been kept secret.

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67 The information previously kept internal includes “the visit of political commissar Yepishev (?) to Afghanistan last spring, followed by the visit of Marshal Povlovsky last summer with a full team of staff planners. This would be complemented with detail on how the invasion was planned and executed.” “Memorandum from Jerry Schecter to Zbigniew Brzezinski, January 14, 1980,” 2.
In embracing publicity after the invasion, several specific points of evidence help corroborate the theory’s specific concepts and causal mechanisms. Three specific dynamics are especially clear in this case and worth highlighting:

1. *How publicity strategies work for a democracy.* The available documentation shows high-level White House debates about when, where, and how to publicize. As already noted, this publicity strategy included circulation of intelligence that had been available but kept classified for months. Staffers draw up lists of possible data points to emphasize in public statements (“various themes which need to be documented and elaborated on in order to stress the basic policy points that the President has made”).

A three-prong publicity strategy was developed involving press backgrounders to journalists, diplomatic consultations with allies and other governments, and statements at international forums. One memo describes organizing a “background” press gathering in which a CIA white paper on the Soviet presence in Afghanistan is provided to help shape news coverage. The contrast with a witnessing state engaging in tacit collusion is striking: rather than take these steps, the witnessing state preserves its previous public posture and keeps intelligence on the adversary’s activities classified. A colluding witness does not engage journalists with press-friendly intelligence documents,

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68 “Memorandum from Jerry Schecter to Zbigniew Brzezinski, January 14, 1980.”
69 “Memorandum from Thomas Thornton to David Aaron, October 2, 1979.”
70 “The CIA is preparing a briefing on Saturday morning for about ten journalists on the Soviet consolidation of the invasion of Afghanistan” “Memorandum from Jerry Schecter to Zbigniew Brzezinski, January 30, 1980,” 1.
does not urge its allies to castigate the adversary, and does not pursue censuring resolutions at international organizations.

2. *Voicing frustration with the lack of opportunity to downplay.* As the precise nature of the Soviet intervention became clear, internal memos document palpable frustration with way the overt invasion seemed to box the Carter Administration into an aggressive response. The overt invasion was seen as an “outrageous and unprecedented” in which the “speciousness and bald-faced arrogance of the Soviet action can hardly be exaggerated.”

A memo from Brzezinski to the president notes that because the invasion “will have been so naked” in the eyes of domestic audiences, SALT II was possibly damaged irreparably and the Administration may be “attacked by both the Right and the Left.”

In stark contrast to how the covert Soviet presence could be concealed and ignored, an NSC staff memo argues “[w]e have no real option of downplaying the significance of the Soviet action. We need a clear, sharp and unequivocal response, which should be given full play by all our communications media.”

The overt act therefore removed the informational and interpretive space for the adversary to tacitly collude and instead demanded a forceful and visible reply. These reactions show that mutual covertness/secrecy appears to have been a kind

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72 “Memorandum from Zbigniew Brzezinski to the President, December 26, 1979,” 2.
73 “Memorandum from Marshall Brement for Zbigniew Brzezinski and David Aaron, December 27, 1979,” 1.
of “tacit bargain” to avoid crises and escalation which the Soviet invasion breached.

3. Caught in the prestige trap: the role of reputational considerations in necessitating harsh responses. The reasons cited by American policymakers in favor of visible and hard-line punishment of Soviet actions shows the activation of a kind of “prestige trap” and the importance of reputational considerations in spiraling up a crisis. Memos reacting to the overt intervention repeatedly reference the way Afghanistan had become a test, that it was a precedent-setting event, that perceptions of a strong response were key, and that American and Western reputations were on the line. Several audiences and reputations were noted by policymakers. Brzezinski argued other vulnerable states would watch the American response as a test, noting “[i]f 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.”74 An NSC memo worried about allies, arguing that “[a]ny failure to respond adequately on our part would be perceived as glaring weakness by our Allies, by the non-aligned, and especially in the Persian Gulf.”75 A State Department intelligence analysis argued the Soviets themselves were watching, arguing “it is extremely probable that the USSR will weigh the success of its intervention in Afghanistan against the ultimate

74 “Memorandum from Zbigniew Brzezinski to the President, January 2, 1980.”
75 “Memorandum from Marshall Brement for Zbigniew Brzezinski and David Aaron, December 27, 1979,” 1.
consequences and, if the balance sheet is favorable, the Soviets may well conclude that the discrete use of their military power is a tool which should be more frequently employed.”

In response to these considerations, support quickly converged on strong retaliatory measures ranging from abandonment of détente to cancelation of Olympic attendance to grain sanctions and arms control countermeasures. The publicity of the Soviet intervention required a very visible and public response: as one NSC staffer noted, “[i]t is therefore imperative that we not only act to counter what the Soviets have done in Afghanistan, but that we are perceived as having done so.”

While an unseen or ambiguous Soviet presence earlier in 1979 could be met with tacit collusion and crisis avoidance, the invasion raised the reputational and prestige stakes and created maximum pressure for public condemnation and retaliation. Comparing the American response to covert Soviet combat participation in Korea is revealing. In that case, the Truman Administration used tacit collusion as a way to avoid building a stronger Soviet commitment to its local proxy and to avoid creating irresistible reputation-based pressure on American leaders to reply with force. In Afghanistan, Soviet leaders denied that opportunity to the Carter Administration when it elected to overtly intervene. In contrast with Korea, American leaders found themselves under the heavy hand of prestige and reputation considerations as they chose how to react. They

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76 “Memorandum from Matthews, December 29, 1979,” 5.
77 “Memorandum from Marshall Brement for Zbigniew Brzezinski and David Aaron, December 27, 1979,” 1.
even cited the views of allies, other states, and domestic political forces as they chose a strong retaliation which deepened the crisis.

*American Covert Military Aid to Afghan rebels (1979-1985)*

Along with their public speeches, press backgrounders, and visible retaliation, American leaders also initiated a covert military intervention. Within days of the Soviet airlifts, President Jimmy Carter quietly authorized the secret provision of weapons and related assistance to Afghan insurgent groups. The $30 million CIA-led covert aid program in 1979 would grow to $250 million per year by 1985, “eventually coming to consume the vast majority of its covert action budget.”

The program relied on a local administrator and collaborator, Pakistan, and was conducted in coordination with other covert aid providers such as Egypt, China, and Saudi Arabia. The American covert aid program would become “the largest CIA military support operation since Vietnam” and play a critical role in enabling a loose coalition of Afghan rebel commanders to force Soviet withdrawal in 1988.

The core question for present purposes is: Why provide assistance covertly? With détente shattered and large incentives to visibly punish its adversary, why did leaders choose a covert form? Surprise and anti-intervention domestic politics were not major factors in the decision. American leaders did not expect to surprise the Soviets; indeed,

78 Kuperman, “The Stinger Missile and U.S. Intervention in Afghanistan,” 223; over 80% of the CIA’s annual expenditures for covert operations according to one source cited in Woodward and Babcock, “U.S. Covert Aid to Afghans on the Rise,” A1.

Moscow had been publicly accusing the U.S. and Pakistan of aiding the mujahedin before their invasion. Nor did American leaders fear a public assistance program would be unpopular; their primary domestic concern was appearing too weak rather than too aggressive in challenging the Soviets. Instead, the dominant concern throughout the life of the American aid program was how to avoid provoking the Soviets into regional retaliation against Pakistan and a possible crisis and conflict which could result.

I divide my analysis of the American aid program in two sections. First I describe and assess the covert aid program up through 1985. In the section that follows, I pick up the story in 1985 as American leaders debated providing a specific weapon system – the shoulder-fired Stinger missile system – which would transform the program into an overt intervention. In both phases, I show the importance of fears about Soviet retaliation against Pakistan in shaping the form and volume of aid.

_Help kill Russians: American covert intervention (1979-1985)_

The first covert American assistance to rebelling factions in Afghanistan preceded the Soviet invasion but was not lethal in nature. After the Herat uprising in March 1979, the CIA led an interagency review of Afghanistan policy which resulted in the first presidential “finding” authorizing covert American assistance, funneled through Pakistan and provided to Afghan rebels, in July 1979. The CIA was limited to providing medical

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supplies and radios rather than weaponry. But, with the Soviet invasion five months later, the calculus shifted. As part of a suite of retaliatory measures, President Carter quietly approved the provision of covert lethal assistance, including Soviet-origin rifles and remote-propelled grenades acquired from former Soviet allies like Egypt. The first shipments of rifles arrived in Afghanistan in mid-January 1980.

The covert aid program relied on a complex network of suppliers that required the explicit collaboration of several states. Egypt and China provided Soviet-made weaponry, satisfying the covert principle of “plausible deniability” by enabling the U.S. to supply weapons without the “fingerprints” of made-in-the-USA equipment. Saudi Arabia helped finance the operation with an agreement to match American aid dollar for dollar. Yet no partner was as important as Pakistan. From 1979-1988, Pakistan was the lynchpin of the covert aid program as it provided the lead role in providing training to rebels, choosing recipients, and physically transporting weapons. Pakistan’s bordering territories, the Northwest Frontier provinces, served as both refugee and insurgent sanctuary. Pakistan therefore faced unique dangers: it shared a long border with the local civil war, it had historically adversarial relations with the Soviet Union, and it lived in perpetual fear of an existential war with its rival and Soviet ally, India. As this multinational effort shows, the Soviet occupation created a kind of witch’s brew of

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81 Ibid., 146; Cogan, “Partners in Time,” 76.
82 Coll, Ghost Wars, 58–9.
83 Cogan, “Partners in Time,” 76.
84 For overviews of the supply chain, see Lundberg, Politics of a Covert Action: The US, the ‘Mujahideen’, and the Stinger Missile; Coll, Ghost Wars.
clandestine activity. The Soviet occupation threatened multiple states creating support for a covert aid network that would require collaboration. The result was a multi-state deception effort over almost a decade.\(^{85}\) Most of the details of this covert supply chain remained secret throughout the program.\(^{86}\) Importantly, the example of this covert aid network shows another way in which secrecy and ambiguity are often jointly produced. Instead of a set of autonomous decisions, these states explicitly coordinated their programs through private intelligence liaison relationships and political meetings.

The Reagan Administration inherited the covert aid program when it took office in January 1981. In the first few years, the Reagan foreign policy team, including Director of Central Intelligence William Casey, did not greatly expand the size and scope of the program compared to its Carter-era origins.\(^{87}\) The program continued providing strictly delimited military and logistical assistance at a comparable annual level ($60 million) even as late as 1983. The quality and variety of weaponry improved marginally by 1983 as it grew to include bazookas, mortars, grenade launchers, and mines of Soviet origin.\(^{88}\)

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\(^{85}\) The initial willingness to start up the effort required “a whole bunch of nations agreeing not to plead guilty to what they were all going to do.” Lundberg, *Politics of a Covert Action: The US, the “Mujahideen”, and the Stinger Missile*, 8.

\(^{86}\) “Secrecy shrouded the logistics pipeline,” according to Coll, “In CIA’s Covert Afghan War, Where to Draw the Line Was Key”; the role of specific states in the covert aid network was especially sensitive; for example, “the extent of China’s role has been one of the secret war’s most closely guarded secrets.” Coll, “Anatomy of a Victory.”


\(^{88}\) Scott, *Deciding to Intervene*, 50.
The relatively static nature of the covert aid program was soon upended. Two unusual personalities – one of which inspired the 2007 film *Charlie Wilson’s War* – helped thrust the CIA’s aid program into an entirely new dimension. The first was intelligence director William Casey. A series of meetings between Casey and Pakistan’s President Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq in 1982 raised the profile of the covert aid program within the CIA. With Zia’s help, Casey saw in Afghanistan a rare opportunity to challenge the Soviets in their own backyard and a way to block a possible Soviet thrust into the oil-rich Middle East. Casey’s conversion to the cause laid the groundwork in the executive branch for a much larger expansion of the aid program in 1984 and 1985. At the same time, Representative Charles Wilson (D-Texas) exerted unusually effective legislative pressure for more and better aid. After visits to Pakistan in 1981 and 1982, Charlie Wilson embraced the cause of Afghan freedom fighters. He urged legislative colleagues and cautious CIA officers to embrace Afghanistan as an opportunity to help brave rebels kill Russians. Wilson used his position on key budget committees to quietly increase the size of the program three times in 1984. Congressional allocation for the 1985 fiscal year further swelled the program. Together, these funding increases quadrupled the size of the program compared to 1983 to $250 million annually.\(^{89}\)

Casey initiated a high-level interagency policy review in mid-1984 in light of the rising tide of resources from Congress. The overall policy parameters had remained the same

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\(^{89}\) On Wilson’s role in the reprogramming of DOD appropriations for the CIA Afghanistan program, see Scott, *Deciding to Intervene*; Lundberg, *Politics of a Covert Action: The US, the “Mujahideen”, and the Stinger Missile*, 19; Coll, *Ghost Wars*, 103; on the program swelling to $250 million, see Lundberg, *Politics of a Covert Action: The US, the “Mujahideen”, and the Stinger Missile*, 21.
since Carter’s initial authorization of lethal aid in December 1979. The policy goals had focused on making the Soviet occupation costly and preventing an outright Soviet success. Casey’s goal was to increase the ambition of the program and expand the range and sophistication of weaponry. After a period of review, the rest of the Reagan Administration endorsed this shift with National Security Decision Directive 166 (NSDD-166) in March 1985.\textsuperscript{90} It authorized more sophisticated weaponry (i.e. plastic explosives and high-powered sniper rifles) and advanced American intelligence. The policy goal shifted from harassment to forcing a Soviet withdrawal. Despite these changes, NSDD-166 stopped short of an important threshold: providing American-made weaponry. Such weaponry was perceived as crossing the threshold from a covert relationship to an overt one since weaponry which was of ambiguous origin kept the U.S. role legally and practically deniable.\textsuperscript{91}

\textit{Explaining secret aid: Why American aid was covert}

Why intervene covertly rather than overtly? With significant publicity benefits from visibly challenging the Soviet invasion, the quiet American path appears puzzling.

Existing explanations suggest two possible reasons for choosing secrecy: concealment to generate tactical or strategic surprise against the Soviet adversary or concealment to avoid anti-interventionist punishment from domestic constituents. Neither finds much


\textsuperscript{91} The Stinger missile system, debated in latter 1985 and early 1986, crossed this threshold. I review this in the next section.
evidentiary support in this case. Regarding surprise, the Soviets were well aware of the American aid program from 1979 onwards and American leaders knew it. A memoir from one former program participant concludes that the Soviets were “undoubtedly aware that outside aid was coming to the rebels” even prior to the invasion.\(^92\) An American embassy cable from Kabul reports Soviet newspapers citing American media accounts of possible covert aid as early as August of 1981.\(^93\) An internal CIA assessment by Robert Gates in 1984 noted that Soviet leaders had a history of using American media accounts about the covert aid program to learn about new details and future plans.\(^94\) Even the finer details of the program were understood to be an “open secret” vis-à-vis Moscow. Policymakers debating whether to provide the Stinger missile, for example, presumed it would be quickly discovered in the field and counter-measures would be taken within days.\(^95\) Secrecy to insulate leaders from anti-intervention punishment from domestic audiences is also unlikely. Providing some form of lethal aid to Afghan rebels was uniquely and consistently supported by Republican and Democratic elites from 1979 onwards and found “virtually unanimous agreement” in both the Carter and Reagan administrations.\(^96\) In fact, the role of domestic politics was actually the reverse: leaders

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\(^93\) “Cable from Embassy Moscow to U.S. Department of State, August 3, 1981.”
\(^94\) Gates remarks in passing about “significant increases in aid to the insurgents that are projected for the next year or so, increases that the Soviets are likely to learn about through leaks as they did the $50 million increase earlier this year.” “Memorandum from Robert Gates to Director Soviet Analysis, October 17, 1984,” 449–450.
\(^95\) Two former participants note that the Soviet “40th Army headquarters began closely documenting the effectiveness of the new American missile, noting how many rebel groups were being equipped with Stingers, how many had been fired, and how many Soviet or DRA aircraft had been struck.” Bearden and Risen, *The Main Enemy*, 252.
\(^96\) Rodman notes “consistent bipartisan support in Congress” Rodman, *More Precious Than Peace*, 217; on unanimous agreement see Scott, *Deciding to Intervene*, 40.
choosing intervention form were pressured by outside domestic constituents for more aggressive forms of aid rather than less. Afghanistan therefore demonstrates that domestic audiences can be forces in favor of intervention and confrontation.

The main findings are strongly supportive of the theory. Concerns about Soviet retaliation against Pakistan were the dominant concern influencing American choices about the initial form of aid as well as alterations of the program along the way. Specifically, American leaders feared exasperated and prestige-threatened Soviet leaders would double down on their Afghanistan adventure by lashing out at Pakistan to destroy the insurgency. While world war was unlikely, American leaders saw several pathways for regional conflict in such a scenario: the collapse of the Pakistani government, an opportunistic military attack by India, and/or a direct militarized dispute between Pakistan and the Soviet Union. Covertness was a response to these scenarios. American leaders believed Soviet leaders would tolerate low-level covert assistance from Pakistan, China, and the United States. Overt lethal aid, however, was likely to provoke a severe reaction as Soviet leaders responded to a public program to help kill Soviet soldiers. American leaders feared this could spiral out of control. Uncontrollable escalation was an important consideration. Both American and Soviet leaders believed a

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97 Escalation to a general U.S.-Soviet war was not completely discounted. A Soviet-Pakistani confrontation was especially dangerous due to the existence of the 1959 U.S.-Pakistan Agreement of Cooperation which, while somewhat vague on details, seemed to obligate American officials to protect Pakistan.
crisis over Afghanistan could be difficult to control, especially given their reliance on local allies and the tense state of superpower relations.\textsuperscript{98}

The evidence of the impact of regional escalation concerns on the covertness decision is especially strong in this case for several reasons. Multiple forms of evidence point to the same dynamic. Memoirs, interviews with former policymakers, secondary accounts by regional and Cold War specialists, and primary documents all highlight the danger of Soviet retaliation against Pakistan. While judgments about motives are notoriously difficult, multiple sources converging on a similar narrative provide high confidence. A more subtle sign is the way a widely used metaphor about escalation dynamics in Afghanistan became a kind of policy mantra.\textsuperscript{99} Pakistan’s president repeatedly invoked a “boiling pot” metaphor to describe his preferred strategy in Afghanistan to American interlocutors. Zia argued moderate forms of aid to Afghan rebels could keep the heat on Moscow but more extreme forms of aid, especially overt Western weaponry, should be avoided to so that the pot did not “boil over.” Zia’s metaphor of a boiling pot became shorthand for managing the risk of Soviet retaliation for American policymakers and is

\textsuperscript{98} On the American side, a former CIA Afghanistan officer later wrote that Pakistan’s behavior was especially hard to anticipate and thus defusing a regional crisis could be difficult for American leaders once it was off and running (“we were not too sure of Zia’s control over the situation”); Cogan, “Partners in Time,” 80; on the Soviet side, a former CIA station chief in Pakistan described how he was told by a KGB counterpart that “South Asia had a way of getting mired all by itself” and that the “old South Asian bugaboo – miscalculation and overreaction – could always pop up.” Bearden and Risen, \textit{The Main Enemy}, 269.

\textsuperscript{99} The metaphor of “boiling water” became Zia’s “Afghan policy mantra” in which the goal was to irritate and undermine the Soviets but not “provoke them to massively escalate the level and intensity of their commitment” or “retaliate against Pakistan.” Lundberg, \textit{Politics of a Covert Action: The US, the “Mujahideen”, and the Stinger Missile}, 13; Coll also notes that hardly a meeting went by without Zia using the metaphor of hot water that doesn’t boil over; Coll, \textit{Ghost Wars}, 70.
noted in almost all secondary accounts. Its creation and circulation provides a subtle but meaningful sign that escalation considerations were especially relevant and consistent.

The danger of Soviet retaliation against Pakistan played a key role in shaping the initial choice to give aid covertly. An embassy cable from mid-1978 – over a year prior to the first lethal assistance from the U.S. was approved – worried that Pakistan’s own early covert assistance could lead to Soviet retaliation in the form of separatism and destabilization within Pakistan. \(^{100}\) A memo from a staff member of the National Security Council in September 1979 – two months before the invasion – noted that any covert aid should be supplied carefully lest it “evoke a more direct Soviet threat to Pakistan.” \(^{101}\) Only weeks after lethal aid was approved, CIA analysis in January 1980 cautioned that covert aid by the U.S., Pakistan and China could provoke the Soviets to retaliate against Pakistan by supporting tribal separatism. \(^{102}\)

As the program matured, similar concerns about provoking Soviet retaliation shaped debates about whether and how to expand the program. The possibility of Soviet retaliation was the top concern during meetings between American and Pakistani intelligence officials in 1982 and 1983. Coll reports that in meetings during this period,

\(^{100}\) See description of Soviets playing their Pashtunistan or Baluchistan cards in “Cable from Embassy Kabul to Secretary of State, June 13, 1978,” 4.

\(^{101}\) “Memorandum from Thomas Thornton to Zbigniew Brzezinski, September 24, 1979,” 2; see also Gates, From the Shadows, 145; Coll notes that debates in mid-1979 about possible covert aid featured concerns that the Soviet retaliation may follow if “they saw an American hand in their Afghan cauldron.” Coll, Ghost Wars, 43.

“[t]he core questions they discussed were almost always the same: How much CIA weaponry for the Afghan rebels would Moscow tolerate? How much would Zia tolerate?” Coll’s sources told him that hardly a meeting went by without Zia invoking the metaphor of the pot “boiling over” to caution against aid that was too aggressive. As American and Pakistani leaders debated expansion in the volume and quality of weaponry, the Soviet reaction was paramount. Uncertainty about whether new weapons such as bazookas or mines could be delivered “without prompting Soviet retaliation against Pakistan” were frequently cited during even modest changes in 1981 and 1982.

One declassified intelligence analysis by the CIA in 1982 is especially revealing. Entitled “Pakistan: Tough Choices on Afghanistan,” the report offers a window into American perceptions of the delicate balance required by U.S. and Pakistani leaders. The report noted that Pakistan’s participation in the covert aid program “risks greater Soviet pressure that could threaten Pakistan’s security and stability.” The report described several ways Soviet leaders could retaliate. Soviet KGB officers were known to have extensive links with Pashtun and Baloch separatist groups. One scenario was for Moscow to encourage rebellion, undermine support for Zia’s regime, and possibly splinter Pakistan. In addition, Soviet military raids across the Pakistani border risked possible clashes with Pakistan’s air force or army units and a military crisis. Lastly,

103 Coll, Ghost Wars, 65.
104 Ibid., 70.
105 Coll notes discussions of the risk of Soviet retaliation against Pakistan and Pakistan’s fears as a key issue in earliest expansions of the program ibid., 59; the quote is from Scott describing debates over expanding aid in 1982; Scott, Deciding to Intervene, 51.
106 “An Intelligence Assessment, July 1982.”
Soviet-Indian coordination risked “Islamabad’s worst nightmare”: an Indian war to establish hegemony over Pakistan, supported by Soviet intelligence and weaponry, which would “dismember Pakistan into ethnically based vassal states in Pashtunistan, Baluchistan, Sind and the Punjab.”

Concern about Soviet retaliation against Pakistan in response to foreign support for the insurgency was the subject of consistent intelligence monitoring and high level political consultations. As early as January 1980, American and Pakistani bilateral meetings reviewed the extent of Soviet cross-border raids and bombings. As the aid program expanded and Soviet cross-border activity grew more dangerous, the top talking point in one secretary-level consultation was about possible Soviet-Pakistani clashes in the border area. Intelligence analysis by the CIA also carefully monitored the frequency and extent of subversive Soviet actions that were seen as retaliation for the covert aid program.

Domestic politics and alliance issues exacerbated the escalatory dangers of these retaliation scenarios. The same 1982 CIA report on Pakistan concluded that visible Soviet retaliation for Pakistan’s role in the covert aid program would have to be met with strength by Pakistan or there would be “severe political consequences for any

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108 Zia mentions Soviet troop incursions into Pakistan in hot pursuit as early as January 1980. “Cable from Embassy Islamabad to Department of State, President Zia ul-Haq’s Press Conference, January 15.”
government in Islamabad” and, for Zia specifically, would “endanger his regime.”\textsuperscript{110} It also concluded that U.S.-Pakistani security commitments meant a Pakistani-Soviet clash could create a difficult alliance dilemma for American leaders. If Soviet retaliation led to a clash with Pakistan, U.S. leaders would be forced to choose between supporting its security commitment to Pakistan (risking escalation to direct U.S.-Soviet conflict) and abandoning Pakistan (jeopardizing its reputation for alliance reliability). The CIA report specifically argued that states in the Middle East threatened by the Soviet invasion were especially watchful of American responses to Soviet retaliation. Failure to uphold the security commitment to Pakistan might “shake their confidence in the credibility of US commitments.”\textsuperscript{111} These dynamics echo the theory’s causal mechanisms: domestic politics and alliance reputation issues triggered by publicity can exacerbate escalation pressure making a spiral harder to avoid.

Calibration of aid policy to avoid Soviet retaliation and a possible conflict spiral was an important concern during the expansions in the program in 1984 and 1985. In the interagency debates that resulted in NSDD-166, several specific proposals were rejected on the grounds that they would provoke Soviet retaliation and a possible conflict spiral. A proposal to provide sniper rifles for purposes of assassinating Soviet military leaders was rejected for fear of Soviet retaliation.\textsuperscript{112} A proposal to drop supplies via American C-130 transport flights over Afghanistan was also rejected because it risked a direct

\textsuperscript{110} “An Intelligence Assessment, July 1982,” 7.
\textsuperscript{111} Ibid., 10.
\textsuperscript{112} Coll reports that sniper rifles were provided but without the intelligence necessary to allow targeting of Soviet officers for assassination. Coll, “In CIA’s Covert Afghan War, Where to Draw the Line Was Key.”
American-Soviet incident that could escalate.\textsuperscript{113} Moreover, CIA intelligence analysis in 1984 and 1985 continued to show concern for Soviet retaliatory actions against Pakistan. One reported increased Soviet cross-border raids and interpreted them as punishment for earlier expansions in the covert aid program.\textsuperscript{114} A five year assessment of Soviet occupation policy assessed the risk of an outright invasion of Pakistan very low but warned that Soviet leaders could double down within Afghanistan and expand the war into parts of Pakistan if rebel groups threatened the Soviet presence in Kabul itself.\textsuperscript{115}

Regional escalation concerns therefore influenced U.S. decisions across the life of the covert aid program. From the earliest discussions of covert aid in 1978 to the large policy expansion in 1985, Soviet retaliation against Pakistan and a possible regional crisis featured prominently in decisions large and small. American leaders chose a clandestine approach to help reduce the pressure on Soviet leaders to retaliate; such retaliation, they feared, risked a regional crisis and possible conflict escalation. Keeping the multinational supply chain secret, or at least plausibly deniable, reduced the degree to which Soviet leaders felt their prestige was at stake and their sphere of influence under siege. Similar reputational and prestige factors were in play for American and Pakistani leaders as well. Both Reagan and Zia would face powerful domestic and reputational pressures for escalation if a publicized crisis broke out. Covertness was therefore part of a set of “ad hoc ground rules for escalation control” which “fall short of rules of engagement” but

\textsuperscript{113} Coll, \textit{Ghost Wars}, 128.
\textsuperscript{114} “Special National Intelligence Assessment, March 1985,” 3.
\textsuperscript{115} “An Intelligence Assessment, May 1985,” 19.
which leaders used to prevent the military occupation in Afghanistan from turning into a larger regional or even global crisis.  

The covert aid program in 1984 and 1985 also demonstrates the importance of deniability rather than ignorance in choosing covert forms of intervention. While effective secrecy and meaningful ambiguity existed early in the program, leaks and press reports had become relatively common in 1984 and 1985. Despite the U.S. role being common knowledge for multiple audiences, U.S. leaders continued to refuse to provide aid that was “overt,” i.e. exclusively American-made. Why? Even though the general program was an “open secret” to all, American leaders believed a veneer of deniability kept political space for Soviet leaders to tolerate rather than retaliate. Covertness allowed U.S. and Pakistan officials the ability to continue officially denying a role in the insurgency killing Soviet soldiers. It provided a prestige buffer in which both sides had the space to abstain from dramatic retaliation.  

As Berkowitz and Goodman argue,  

[t]here are only two legitimate reasons for carrying out an operation covertly rather than overtly. One is when open knowledge of U.S. responsibility would make an operation infeasible. …The other valid reason for carrying out an operation covertly is to avoid retaliation or to control the potential for escalation. The fact that covertness is sometimes no more than a fig leaf does not necessarily alter the fact that it is a useful fig leaf. In the 1950s, for example, the Soviet government knew that the CIA was supporting resistance fighters in the Ukraine, since Soviet intelligence had penetrated most of the groups. Similarly, the Soviet leadership knew that the United States was supporting the Afghan mujaheddin in  

117 As a contemporary writer observed, “[t]hese programs are covert in name only. The Administration appears to want to retain that fig leaf partly for reasons of international etiquette and law and partly to give itself room to maneuver on the amount of commitment.” Gelb, “The Doctrine/Un-Doctrine of Covert/Overt Aid.”
the 1980s. If U.S. leaders had admitted responsibility, Soviet leaders would have felt it necessary to retaliate, as was the case when President Eisenhower owned up to U-2 overflights in 1960.¹¹⁸

Deniability helped avoid a situation in which “an aggrieved enemy moved to recover prestige and redress its injury” through retaliatory actions.¹¹⁹ Coll explains how the focus shifted from effective secrecy to managing Soviet reactions when noting

by 1985 the Soviet leadership had already learned the outlines of the CIA’s Afghan program from the press reports, captured fighters, intercepted communications, and KGB-supervised espionage operations carried out among the rebels. Even the American public knew the outlines of Langley’s work from newspaper stories and television documentaries. Increasingly, as the CIA and its gung-ho adversaries argued over the introduction of more sophisticated weapons, the issue was not whether the existence of an American covert supply line could be kept secret but whether the supply of precision American arms would provoke the Soviets into raiding Pakistan or retaliating against Americans.¹²⁰

Soviet naming and shaming: Rejecting tacit collusion

Moscow’s reaction to the covert aid network led by the United States was the opposite of tacit collusion. On a regular basis, Soviet leaders publicly accused the United States, United Kingdom, Pakistan, Egypt, Iran, and China of external meddling on behalf of Afghan rebels. This is in stark contrast to the tacit collusion we see in other cases of covert intervention. Rather than responding to an adversary’s quieter form of intervention by tactfully ignoring it, Soviet leaders purposefully cited an American hand in the insurgency even before their initial invasion in 1979.

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¹¹⁸ Berkowitz and Goodman, “The Logic of Covert Action.”
¹¹⁹ Lundberg, Politics of a Covert Action: The US, the ‘Mujahideen’, and the Stinger Missile, 9.
¹²⁰ Coll, Ghost Wars, 129–130.
Well before the invasion, Soviet leaders cited external assistance to explain why rebellions against Afghanistan’s communist leaders were erupting. American aid was specifically named. A March 1979 CIA memo considering whether to initiate a covert aid program noted that “Soviet media were accusing the United States, Pakistan, and Egypt of supporting the insurgents.” In April 1979 Gates notes that Soviet leaders reacted to challenges in Afghanistan by “stepping up accusations that the United States and China were instigating the rebellion.” Embassy cables from Kabul reported Soviet media accusations of American, British, and Pakistani aid to Afghan insurgents in spring 1979. After the invasion, such accusations continued. Brezhnev’s speeches in the year following the invasion cited “external aggression” against the people of Afghanistan who, without Soviet help, would be on the brink of the “claws of imperialism” which would result in an “imperialist military beachhead on the southern border of our country.”

The first American media report claiming a covert military aid program was immediately echoed in a Pravda publication in August 1981. When Egypt’s President Anwar Sadat publicly acknowledged his country’s participation in a covert aid network for Afghan rebels, Soviet newspapers reported the accusation as confirmation of an American hand in supporting the rebellion. As Mendelson summarizes, “[s]oon after the intervention and throughout the early 1980s, aggressive images of U.S. imperialism were a core part

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121 Described in Gates, From the Shadows, 144.
122 Ibid., 132.
123 “Cable from J. Bruce Amstutz to U.S. Department of State, March 20, 1979”; “Cable from Peter Constable to U.S. Department of State, May 24, 1979.”
124 Mendelson, Changing Course, 61.
125 “Cable from Embassy Moscow to U.S. Department of State, August 3, 1981.”
126 “Cable from Embassy Moscow to U.S. Department of State, September 24, 1981.”
of the leadership’s justification of the intervention. The events in Afghanistan were presented as the result of an undeclared war waged by external forces on the southern border of the Soviet Union, thus necessitating a defensive escalation of involvement.**\(^{127}\)

Why did Soviet leaders react to covert aid from outside states with publicity rather than tacit collusion? The question is difficult to answer beyond speculation. The documentary record available for Soviet decisions on Afghanistan focuses on the invasion rather than how they reacted to external assistance. Furthermore, other scholars and specialists have not asked this specific question of the Afghanistan conflict. The contrast with the American side is striking: while I can find documents from debates specifically about whether and how to publicize the Soviet presence in Afghanistan, there is simply no available documentation on the Soviet side.

I can only build plausible reasoning based on circumstantial evidence. The content of Soviet public accusations provides some clue. Soviet accusations of American and other foreign aid to rebels was used to help rationalize the initial rebellion in early 1979, the Soviet invasion in late 1979, and continued rebellion after invasion throughout the 1980s. Citing external aid helped explain why a supposedly popular communist coup was being resisted by force of arms and why a Soviet occupation was legal and warranted. As noted above, Soviet leaders debating overt troop deployments in 1979 understood that other states would view the action as an invasion if it were only in response to a civil

\(^{127}\) Mendelson, *Changing Course*, 60.
disturbance. Accusations of foreign meddling helped blunt the criticism that Soviet occupying forces were engaging in aggression.

In short, Soviet leaders may have seen the propaganda value of publicity overwhelmed any escalation downsides. The existence and seriousness of escalation concerns is difficult to assess without access to more internal deliberations. Thus, it is hard to know if Soviet leaders perceived any escalation danger in publicizing the American covert aid program. For example, the salient “escalation danger” that motivated Soviet secrecy in mid-1979 was détente. After the invasion, such benefits were no longer at stake and thus escalation dangers of any kind may not have been seen as relevant. Until further research on this question is possible, my ability to understand why Soviet leaders chose publicity in this case is limited.

_Crossing the Covert Line: The Stinger Missile Decision (1985-1986)_

The nature of the American aid program changed in March 1986. After a lengthy interagency debate, the Reagan Administration approved provision of Stinger antiaircraft missiles. The Stinger missile system was a cutting-edge, shoulder-fired missile system developed for the American military by General Dynamics. The technology was sensitive: it was first produced only in 1983 and, as of the debates in late 1985, had only been shared with select NATO allies. The Stinger was considered a potential game-changing capability in the mountains of Afghanistan because it promised to potentially
end the threat of helicopter-led counterinsurgency. Since 1984, Soviet leaders had relied heavily on helicopter gunships for raids against Afghan rebel groups and seen substantially improved outcomes over other tactics. Non-American surface-to-air missile systems to counter the helicopters provided in response had proved ineffective.

The Stinger proponents argued it would alter the balance of capabilities on the ground by enabling rebel groups to shoot down Soviet helicopters. Yet the significance of the Stinger missile decision transcended operational questions. Unlike the dozens of weapon decisions earlier in the program, the Stinger missile held strong symbolic meaning. The Stinger missile would legally and politically end all pretenses of American covertness. The Stinger carried with it an American “signature”: its introduction into the battlefield was an unequivocal statement that U.S. leaders were involved in the Afghan civil war because no other state produced the weapon, it was not present on the arms black market, and any third party who had the weapon had acquired it from the United States.

Though the general contours of the American covert aid program in Afghanistan were common knowledge, the U.S. had long resisted providing weapons which were uniquely American-made. The Stinger system carried with it the “symbolism of a major U.S. political commitment – embodied in crossing the ‘plausible deniability’ threshold.”

American leaders knew that approval of the Stinger system meant the “[c]overt would be

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128 Lundberg, Politics of a Covert Action: The US, the “Mujahideen”, and the Stinger Missile, 29.
129 Another way of putting it: Stinger missiles were not “battlefield credible” in the sense of being credibly sourced from somewhere other than an official act of the United States government. Cogan, “Partners in Time,” 81.
130 Rodman, More Precious Than Peace, 340.
overt.”  Pakistan and the Soviet Union both viewed its symbolism as unique. Avoiding American weapons had been a “constantly reiterated Pakistani theme, at all levels of government” and Pakistan’s Zia was “very, very worried about introducing at that time blatant, undeniable evidence of superpower involvement and rivalry into the subcontinent.” The Soviets had issued specific private warnings about the Stinger and reacted to its introduction by describing it as a “qualitatively new stage in Washington’s interference in the internal affairs” of Afghanistan.

Ultimately the Stinger missile was approved. Why did American leaders choose to cross an “overtness threshold” they had long avoided? Why did they do so in 1986 rather than earlier in the war? I will assess both the decision and its timing.

To do so, I trace the internal policy debate to identify what considerations changed from the initial refusals in early 1985 to approval in early 1986. The main finding strongly supports an escalation-based logic for secrecy. Specifically, I find changes in Soviet leadership, rhetoric, and policy in late 1985 and early 1986 sent signals of restraint to American policymakers. These signals were received: these new Soviet gestures convinced individuals and bureaucracies initially opposed to the Stinger missile that retaliation was unlikely. Specifically, Gorbachev’s rise to General Secretary and his appointment of Eduard Shevardnadze to Foreign Minister led to shifts in tone and

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131 The program “could no longer be thought of as a covert action in the traditional sense.” Lundberg, Politics of a Covert Action: The US, the “Mujahideen”, and the Stinger Missile, 2, 36.
132 Ibid., 39–40.
133 Allison, “The Superpowers and Southwest Asia,” 179.
substance which convinced key opponents within the American government that the Soviets would not retaliate against Pakistan or otherwise widen the war. The State Department and Secretary George Shultz play an especially important role in this narrative. Shultz was an early believer that Gorbachev heralded a new Soviet foreign policy of restraint. He and his top advisors became convinced the Soviets wanted out of, rather than expansion in, their Afghanistan occupation. This belief pushed them from skepticism to support. As one former participant in the debates describes it, “thus the balance in State was tipped, and with it the balance in the government.”

In short, new beliefs about lower escalation risks shifted the internal political balance from opposition to support for the Stinger missile. These over-time observations provide especially fine-grained evidence that perceived escalation risks play a vital role in covert/overt intervention choices.

*From opposition to endorsement: Stinger missile debate (1985-6)*

The Stinger missile debate began only two months after the president authorized a more aggressive aid strategy with the signing of NSDD-166 in March 1985. After a trip to Pakistan in April/May 1985, two Defense Department civilian leaders, Fred Ikle and Michael Pillsbury, returned to Washington with an agenda. Ikle and Pillsbury believed several hundred Stinger missile systems in the hands of Afghan rebels could eliminate

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any chance of Soviet success and ultimately drive Moscow out of Afghanistan. They initiated a working-level review of the issue in late May 1985.

Their initial attempt to win adoption of the Stinger missile through the interagency process failed. Ikle and Pillsbury did find allies in some places in the foreign policy bureaucracy. Several National Security Council staffers supported it as did the Deputy Director of Operations at CIA, Clair George. Congressional leaders on intelligence committees, specifically Representative Charlie Wilson and Senator Orrin Hatch (R-Utah), also favored the Stinger missile. However, the bulk of the executive branch opposed it when Ikle and Pillsbury first tabled it in May 1985. The primary opponents included the bulk of the CIA operations directorate, the State Department, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff. At this early stage, these opponents constituted a formidable road-block to approval.

Despite the initial resistance, Ikle, Pillsbury, and their legislative allies patiently built the case for the Stinger missile system in the rest of 1985 and early 1986. Three trips to the region helped advance the process. In June 1985, a delegation joined Senator Hatch on a trip to Pakistan in which Zia requested Stinger missiles for Pakistan’s own use in case of extreme Soviet incursions. This proposal cracked open the door by showing the Pakistanis were willing to consider the Stinger missile system as part of their delicate

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135 On these early steps and profiles of the proponents/opponents, see Shultz, Turmoil and Triumph; Scott, Deciding to Intervene; Kuperman, “The Stinger Missile and U.S. Intervention in Afghanistan”; Lundberg, Politics of a Covert Action: The US, the “Mujahideen”, and the Stinger Missile.
game with the Soviets in Afghanistan. Still, Pakistan had not yet signaled a willingness to arm Afghan rebels with U.S.-made missiles. The second trip was a delegation of Defense and State Department officials in September 1985 which convinced several important leaders of the battlefield utility of the Stinger and low likelihood of Soviet retaliation. A third trip to the region in January 1986, again with Senator Hatch in the lead, secured Chinese consent to the provision of Stingers and, most importantly, obtained a formal request from the previously reluctant Pakistani president. With support secured from these covert aid partners, Ikle and Pillsbury re-introduced the Stinger issue in December 1985. After several rounds of interagency debate, the Stinger was approved by the White House National Security Planning Group in mid-March 1986. Pakistani training on using the Stinger took place in summer 1986 and the missiles first appeared in the battlefield in September 1986.

Why was sophisticated American weaponry refused from the beginning of the covert aid program but then endorsed in 1986? The key change appears to be in the perceived likelihood of regional conflict escalation. This “learning” took place at exactly the appropriate time, that is, after the initial rejection of Stingers in early 1985 and before the final vote in early 1986. Early in 1985, the risk of Soviet retaliation and potential regional escalation appeared realistic and dangerous to CIA and State Department skeptics, just as it had throughout the program’s life since 1979. Yet by March of 1986, the likelihood of a wider regional conflict from Soviet retaliation had been substantially
reduced in the eyes of these same opponents. I demonstrate each of these elements in turn.

The initial failure to win approval was largely due to opposition from working-level CIA and State Department staff at all levels. Their opposition was based on the belief that the Stinger would prompt Soviet retaliation and a possible spiral of hostilities. The CIA had been tracking Soviet cross-border raids and subversion in Pakistan since 1980. Not surprisingly, the Stinger missile was greeted by many of the officers closest to the aid program with profound skepticism. Operations directorate staff believed providing the Stinger “would risk provoking retaliation from the Soviets against host country Pakistan – and such an attack could plausibly escalate to World War III.”\(^ {136}\) They were adamant that plausible deniability be preserved lest the U.S. run “the risk of Soviet counter-escalation.”\(^ {137}\) The CIA station chief in Islamabad recalled that Pakistan’s fear of more dangerous Soviet incursions into their territory “was the predominant overriding concern” that drove CIA working-level opposition to the Stinger. At the State Department, regional experts worried the Stinger “might provoke the Soviets into retaliation against Pakistan directly” and would create a superpower crisis that would undermine the diplomatic efforts to secure Soviet withdrawal through the United Nations.\(^ {138}\) Missile proponents’ reflections also cited escalation concerns. One proponent of providing the missiles complained afterwards that before critical mass was reached, “everyone else at


Langley and in Foggy Bottom was convinced that if pushed too far, the Soviets might overreact and strike back at Pakistan.”\textsuperscript{139} Ikle, the primary advocate in the interagency process for providing missiles, admitted in an interview that “[o]ne of the things I always worried about was the possibility of escalation on the Soviet side, coming into Pakistan, and what we would do about it.”\textsuperscript{140}

Though these concerns blocked the first push for Stingers, changing views in late 1985 and early 1986 coincided with growth in support for the missiles. Several ex-participants have cited the importance of new beliefs about lower escalation-related dangers for swinging opponents in favor of the Stinger missile. Charles Cogan, one of the chief CIA operations managers for South Asia, argues that American opponents of the Stinger missile initially invoked fears of a pot boiling over and regional conflict escalation. Over time, however, “it gradually became apparent… that our concerns about a Soviet intervention in Pakistan were also exaggerated.”\textsuperscript{141} One scholar’s interview with the Stinger’s chief advocate, Fred Ikle, yielded similar conclusions. Kuperman describes Ikle as saying that the most important reason skeptics eventually came on board the Stinger missile proposal was that “some U.S. officials perceived the Soviets were ‘tired of the war,’ so the Red Army was unlikely to increase its commitment of troops sufficiently to invade Pakistan.”\textsuperscript{142} A similar phenomenon is cited by the top Pakistani diplomat on

\textsuperscript{139} Bearden and Risen, \textit{The Main Enemy}, 215.
\textsuperscript{140} Interview reviewed by Lundberg, \textit{Politics of a Covert Action: The US, the “Mujahideen”, and the Stinger Missile}, 42.
\textsuperscript{141} Cogan, “Partners in Time,” 80.
\textsuperscript{142} Kuperman, “The Stinger Missile and U.S. Intervention in Afghanistan,” 227.
Afghanistan policy, Riaz Mohammad Khan, who explained why Pakistan changed its
position from opposition to support for the American-made Stinger missiles. As
Lundberg summarizes,

[w]hat may have helped sway the Pakistani leader was a small but critical
measure his military used to calculate Soviet intentions. The Soviets, they
assumed, would be unable to take the war into Pakistan on a systematic basis
without increasing troop strength in Afghanistan to at least 200,000. By late
1985, notes Riaz, ‘we had seen for one and a half years that the Soviets have not
really increased their strength. So probably they were not going to heighten their
engagement.’ The risk seemed manageable.143

But why did these views change? When Cogan states that a lower risk of Soviet
retaliatiion “gradually became apparent,” we might wonder: When did that belief become
apparent and in response to what specific developments? Similarly, at what point did
opponents of the Stinger missile conclude that the Soviets were “tired of the war” and
what was the basis of that judgment?

Answers to these questions show an even more precise link between specific escalation-
related learning events and the swing of specific opponents to favoring the Stinger.
Soviet leadership changes and credible signs of an interest in withdrawal from November
1985 to February 1986 were the stimulus that led many American observers to reconsider
Soviet intentions in foreign relations overall and Afghanistan in particular. These
changes specifically led to new beliefs about the likelihood of Soviet retaliation and
regional escalation risks in Afghanistan. Those beliefs can be identified in specific

143 Lundberg, Politics of a Covert Action: The US, the “Mujahideen”, and the Stinger Missile, 58.
individuals who had opposed the Stinger in the past, namely high-level opponents at the State Department, and whose endorsement was critical to creating a coalition of Stinger supporters inside the U.S. government.

Most government and non-government observers of the Soviet Union were given pause by possible tectonic shifts in Soviet leadership in late 1985 and early 1986. After the death of three “old guard” leaders in four years, a much younger Mikhail Gorbachev was elected General Secretary in March 1985. One of his first actions was to appoint a new foreign minister, Eduard Shevardnedze. Both men were seen as potential sources of major change in Soviet policy; yet decades of competition and the unraveling of détente made even “doves” cautious. After detecting subtle but significant rhetorical shifts, the Reagan Administration’s foreign policy cabinet and advisors began regular meetings to assess the credibility and significance of new Soviet policy across a range of domains.\(^{144}\) At the working level, State Department officers and CIA analysts scrutinized Gorbachev’s positions and debated the significance of his gestures in analysis of Afghanistan policy.\(^{145}\) In general, American and other Western foreign policy elites carefully scrutinized the words and actions of Gorbachev and Shevardnedze throughout the rest of 1985 and early 1986.

\(^{144}\) Gates, *From the Shadows*, 340–1, 376–7.

\(^{145}\) “Special National Intelligence Assessment, March 1985”; “An Intelligence Assessment, May 1985.”
While much of Soviet policy remained the same, signs of greater interest in foreign policy moderation and domestic reform accumulated and, even to skeptics, “did seem to signal a genuine change of direction in Soviet foreign policy.” On Afghanistan specifically, Gorbachev and Shevardnedze sent subtle but significant signals in late 1985 and early 1986 which seemed to indicate Soviet interest in moderation and even withdrawal. Memoirs, recollections, and secondary studies have highlighted three events from August 1985 to February 1986 which, in the aggregate, shifted the perception of many within the American government about Soviet intentions in Afghanistan.

- **August 1985: Concessions at the United Nations and a shift in tone.** The first hints of a shift in Soviet policy on Afghanistan under Gorbachev and Shevardnedze came in the late summer. Diplomatic negotiations through the United Nations for a mutually agreeable Afghan governing coalition and withdrawal of foreign (i.e. Soviet) troops had been slowly advancing since 1982. In the August 1985 round, Soviet representatives made two important concessions (agreeing to permit a timetable for withdrawal and to act as a guarantor of any agreement). In addition, Secretary of State Shultz had his first encounter with Shevardnedze in early August in Helsinki. He and his team reported they were “struck by the new Soviet Foreign Minister’s different tone and approach.”

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146 Gates, *From the Shadows*, 341.
147 Gates describes the Helsinki meeting on ibid.
Together, these constituted some of the first high-level and meaningful signs of a possible shift in Soviet intentions generally and in Afghanistan specifically.

- **November 1985: Gorbachev hints at shift to Reagan at first meeting in Geneva.**

  The first face-to-face meeting between the new General Secretary and President Reagan took place at a head of state summit in Geneva in November 1985. The meeting included discussions on a range of topics and the overall tone was positive. On Afghanistan, Gorbachev’s statements seemed to include hints about more serious interest in withdrawal. Gorbachev discussed withdrawal of Soviet troops as part of a general political settlement in which the Americans could potentially help, suggesting some interest in receiving assistance in withdrawal. As the detailed account in Shultz’s memoirs notes, “I thought I saw the beginning of an opening… [in] Gorbachev’s lightly veiled hint about pulling out of Afghanistan.” The signal was subtle, though, as Shultz admits that “no one else picked up on this” including Reagan. Yet, as I describe below, planting a seed of perceived policy change in Shultz alone had important consequences for the Stinger debate.

- **February 1986: The “bleeding wound” speech.** The third sign of a shift in Soviet policy on Afghanistan came in Gorbachev’s address to the 27th Party Congress in February 1986. Held every five years, a Soviet party congress was a public review of policy and the health of the communist party. It was the first under Gorbachev and his speech was widely scrutinized as an opportunity to gain

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greater clarity about his intentions. On Afghanistan, Gorbachev used unusual language that described the situation as a “bleeding wound” due to foreign supported insurgents and expressed hope that the Soviet Union could withdraw “in the nearest future.” The reference was seen by many as a sign that Gorbachev differed from previous leadership in his level of seriousness about withdrawal. Though not directly related to Afghanistan policy, the appearance of dramatic domestic reforms at the same time helped consolidate views that Gorbachev was a new kind of Soviet leader. As Robert Gates (then Deputy Director of Central Intelligence and a skeptic about Gorbachev’s intentions) notes in his memoirs, domestic reforms in early 1986 “were at such odds with the Soviet past that they could not be ignored.”

These three events in late 1985 and early 1986 caused many within the American government to adopt new beliefs about Soviet foreign and domestic policy under Gorbachev. The hints about withdrawal in Afghanistan had particular impact on those in the State Department and appear to have helped change the views of key State Department leaders that had previously opposed the Stinger missile. As one former

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149 One clarifying point should be made on the distinction between withdrawal and retaliation risk. Recall that the relevant judgment for present purposes is whether observers believed Gorbachev and Shevardnedze were equally or less likely to retaliate against Pakistan and potentially create a wider regional crisis and war. Hints of more serious interest in Soviet withdrawal – a far more radical proposition than simply abstaining from retaliation – were therefore useful indicators of an interest in moderation in Afghanistan in general even if many were still skeptical that the Soviets would withdraw soon. As it turned out, Gorbachev had great difficulty in finding a face-saving way of withdrawing; despite these hints in late 1985, the first divisions did not leave Afghanistan until over two years later. On the difficulty in finding a face-saving way to withdraw and the delay that created, see Kalinovsky, “Decision-Making and the Soviet War in Afghanistan.”

150 Gates, From the Shadows, 376.
participant argues, the swing from opposition to support at State was decisive. Rodman remembers that “[w]hat decided the issue was the vigorous entry of the State Department on the pro-Stinger side.”\textsuperscript{151} The change in the State Department began when its top intelligence analyst, Morton Abramowitz, became an advocate. On a September 1985 trip to Pakistan, Abramowitz came to two important conclusions: the Stinger missile could make a decisive impact on the battlefield and the risk of Soviet retaliation had been greatly exaggerated. Abramowitz believed that Soviet toleration of other aid demonstrated their willingness to tolerate even an overt American-made Stinger missile. He also believed that Gorbachev was a new leader who might be willing to change policy: as Abramowitz stated in one interview afterwards, “I didn’t know whether he wanted to change policy or not, but he was new. He was not committed to the policy. He hadn’t underwritten it, so it might be changed.”\textsuperscript{152} Abramowitz returned to Washington an advocate for the Stingers. He proceeded to lobby others within the State Department including Secretary Shultz. Shultz, who had “discerned in Gorbachev’s rhetoric and proposals much more potential for fundamental change in Soviet direction” than other analysts in the government, was quickly brought to favor the Stingers.\textsuperscript{153} Shultz’s conversion was critical. As one review describes, “Shultz’s decision…led to vigorous support by the State Department for the introduction of the missile, which broke the

\textsuperscript{151} Rodman, \textit{More Precious Than Peace}, 338.
\textsuperscript{152} In an interview with Lundberg, \textit{Politics of a Covert Action: The US, the “Mujahideen”, and the Stinger Missile}, 45.
\textsuperscript{153} Gates, \textit{From the Shadows}, 378.
The link between Gorbachev, retaliation risks, and the adoption of the Stinger is echoed by Abramowitz himself. As Kuperman describes,

[T]he Stinger decision was a reaction to Gorbachev’s ascension to power... According to Mort Abramowitz, however, Gorbachev was the key. The administration’s assessment of the new general secretary as a moderate, not personally committed to the war, led it to conclude that escalating the war would compel withdrawal rather than counter-escalation. “If it had been another Stalin, you might have thought about it differently,” he explains.

To summarize, leadership changes and diplomatic hints from the Soviet Union in late 1985 and early 1986 convinced opponents of the Stinger that retaliation and a wider war were unlikely. Learning over time led to reduced perceived escalation risks which led specific opponents in the State Department to endorse overt aid they had opposed before. The timing of these changes tracks very closely with shifts in support for the Stinger missile; the coalition for support grew in late 1985 and early 1986 and the vote in favor was in March 1986. Rather than considerations of strategic surprise or domestic politics, the pivot point for the form of American intervention in Afghanistan was the danger of escalation vs. the promise of more advanced weaponry. This provides strong support to the theory that how a state intervenes is strongly influenced by adversary reactions and escalation risks.

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154 Scott, Deciding to Intervene, 61.
155 Kuperman, “The Stinger Missile and U.S. Intervention in Afghanistan,” 243. Kuperman notes that this interpretation is not shared by Fred Ikle, the Pentagon advocate for the Stinger. Kuperman cites his interview with Ikle in which Ikle argues that Gorbachev’s rise was coincidental since the missile was already under consideration before Gorbachev took power. On closer scrutiny, the views of Ikle and Abramowitz are actually perfectly consistent: the Stinger proposal preceded Gorbachev but his rise helped convince skeptics enabling the missile proposal to be approved.
156 One additional concern which motivated opposition to the Stinger in the Joint Chiefs of Staff was the risk of technology leakage. The JCS feared the Soviets would quickly acquire a Stinger missile system which would allow counter-measures and copycat attempts to advance more quickly. This concern was
Conclusion

The Afghanistan conflict hosted a number of cases of intervention and witnessing state reactions. Both the Soviet Union and American interventions graduated from covert to overt forms over time. These cases permit especially useful instances of within-case variation. The findings provide strong support for the theory. Fears of a crisis in superpower relations influenced Soviet decisions in favor of covert forms of involvement in mid-1979 while the loss of détente benefits facilitated their overt intervention in December. Fears of regional retaliation and conflict escalation led American leaders to choose and maintain a covert aid program to Afghan rebels through 1985. New beliefs about lower risks of escalation following a leadership change in the Soviet Union led opponents of overt aid to relent. For the witnessing state side, the apparent tacit collusion by American leaders during the covert Soviet combat activity contrasts with the very public accusations made by Soviet leaders regarding American intervention. The tacit collusion by American leaders appears to have been influenced by concerns for limiting the Soviet prestige commitment and avoiding a détente-threatening superpower crisis.

Analysis of the Soviet name-and-shame reaction awaits the availability of better sources.

In the overall research design, these provide strong support for the theory and its generalizability. As noted, the Afghanistan conflict is something of a “hard test” of the

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overcome in February 1986 after it was discovered that the designs of the Stinger had been given by a Greek spy to the Soviets as early as 1984. See discussion in Rodman, More Precious Than Peace, 338–9; Lundberg, Politics of a Covert Action: The US, the “Mujahideen”, and the Stinger Missile, 60.
theory, given that one side’s intervention was limited to aid and the local conflict was in an area of limited geostrategic value. The Afghanistan war also hosted a democratic covert intervention which permitted a uniquely transparent window into intervention-related decision-making. A final quality of the Afghanistan case that has not been mentioned is that it included cases that were “out-of-sample.” When I selected the Afghanistan conflict, I was unaware of the covert Soviet intervention which preceded the invasion. I was also unaware of the degree to which American leaders detected that covert intervention and publicized it. These cases were therefore “out of sample”: their inclusion in my research design was accidental and entirely independent of the original development of my explanation. Yet the findings were supportive of the theory: Soviet covert intervention and the American tacit collusion were both strongly influenced by fears of a superpower crisis and the loss of détente. Support in these places is especially encouraging since the theory’s predictions for why these outcomes are observed are a kind of “novel prediction.”

Greater confidence in the generalizability of the theory is a key contribution of this chapter. Many contemporary local conflicts – such as the Syrian civil war – involve covert aid provision but may not include covert combat participation. Contemporary local conflicts also have much less likelihood of escalation to global war with the end of bipolarity. One might wonder whether my theory has applicability in this modern context. The Afghanistan cases suggest that scenarios involving aid rather than combat participation and without a global escalation dimension still involve escalation risks that
influence secrecy and publicity choices. The Syrian civil war, for example, may involve
much more covert involvement than is publicly acknowledged precisely to prevent
regional escalation due to rivalry between regional (rather than global) rivals.

One way to conceptualize the politics of secrecy and publicity in Afghanistan is with the
metaphor of a firewall. Covertness was used to cordon the spread of the conflict beyond
Afghanistan for much of the conflict. After the Soviet invasion, a coalition of states
joined to support the local resistance forces but used covert forms. Even the Soviet
reaction to this covert aid network involved covertness: rather than an overt incursion
into Pakistan or China, Soviet leaders engaged in covert and limited cross-border
subversion and raids against Pakistan. Thus, the belt surrounding Afghanistan hosted
competition by outside powers but leaders used covertness to safeguard against this
covert level of competition spreading to larger geopolitical relationships and higher levels
of hostility.

It is important to note the limitations of the present analysis and the promise of future
research. As noted above, Saudi Arabia, China and Egypt played important roles in the
covert aid supply network. These constitute additional cases of covert intervention which
hold promise for additional theory testing. There are also other “witnessing states” –
such as the British – whose diplomatic reaction to Soviet intervention and the American-
led covert aid program may provide additional evidence of tacit collusion. While space
and documentary availability did not permit their inclusion, these additional cases are promising areas for future research.
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Chapter 8: Conclusion

Recent news headlines strongly suggest secrecy in world affairs is hardly a thing of the past. Regular reports just in 2013 of drones strikes and covert meddling in the Syrian civil war seem to demonstrate that, despite profound changes in information and communication since the end of the Cold War, covert security competition is alive and well. In contrast, my foregoing empirical analysis has been historical, focusing on cases of covertness and tacit collusion as far back as the 1930s. Yet the similarity between Nazi covert involvement in Spain in 1936, American covert aid in Afghanistan in the 1980s, and possible Russian, Israeli, Iranian, and American covert involvement in Syria today is striking. In light of what is similar and what is different today as well as in the future, what do this project’s concepts, theoretical infrastructure, and historical analysis suggest about world politics? In addition, what implications for and contributions to the wider study of International Relations (IR) does the project offer?

This concluding chapter serves two purposes. First, it is an opportunity to assess what this project suggests about the present and future of secrecy in international politics. I specifically assess technological change and what my empirical and theoretical generalizations imply about the future of secrecy. After this, I reflect on this project’s
implications for IR scholars, current policy controversies, and the normative dilemma secrecy poses for informed democratic consent. A summary of the findings from preceding chapters is not repeated and may be found in the dissertation’s introduction (Chapter 1).

Before exploring these topics, it is worth recalling a few earlier observations about the state of International Relations (IR) scholarship. Recent IR theory has spent considerable time developing the virtues of publicity from a wide range of theoretical perspectives. Rationalist formal theorists, for example, have shown the utility of making threats public rather than private in order to tie one’s hands. Constructivist norm theorists have shown the utility of publicizing norm-violating behavior to trigger “naming-and-shaming” that tends to accelerate overall norm adoption. While publicity does indeed represent an important tool for creating credible threats and encouraging norm adoption, the dangers of publicity – and, therefore, the attractiveness of generating and operating within unobservable spaces for states – have received much less attention. The theoretical “publicity bias” can even make secrecy appear downright puzzling, as when states intentionally issue non-binding threats behind closed doors. Why eschew the virtues of a public threat? One goal of the project has been to help provide more balance in empirical and theoretical analysis.

At the same time, the work IR scholars have done on secrecy paints too simple of a picture. The two primary logics for eschewing publicity’s virtues and operating quietly
are straightforward and intuitive. Security scholars, citing insecure leaders operating in self-help anarchy, have shown that secrecy may be so prevalent because it enables tactical and strategic surprise of adversaries. Whether concealing a military vulnerability or operational plans for a surprise attack, states eschew the virtues of publicity to gain advantage over rivals and protect themselves. Scholars of domestic politics rightly point to a second basic logic for concealment: lodged in two-level games, a leader can use secrecy to achieve a foreign policy goal without censure by domestic constituents. Often this argument takes the form of circumventing “domestic doves”: hawkish leaders use secrecy to use military force while avoiding dovish domestic punishment. While usefully articulating two basic logics for secrecy, these scholars have overlooked more complex rationales for its use. They have largely ignored leaky secrets and all-too-common states of ambiguous “open secrecy.” And they have largely overlooked the logics or rationales for secrecy that different states – even adversaries – may share. The project therefore has sought to explore these dimensions and complicate the story about why and how states use secrecy.

Technology Change: Secrecy in a Post-WikiLeaks Future?

Technological change appears to be changing what states can do secretly. Whether diplomacy is being fundamentally changed due to the rise of the internet, cloud computing, paperless bureaucracy, and social media has triggered a vigorous debate among foreign policy analysts and practitioners. One common view of the “post-

157 For sources on these points, see discussion in Chapter 1 and relevant footnotes.
WikiLeak’s future is that diplomacy and state conduct will be increasingly transparent. A leading diplomatic historian, Robert Schulzinger, argued that “[i]f it were possible to identify a single word to characterize the American value most esteemed worldwide in the post-Cold War era, that word would be transparency.”¹⁵⁸ Google’s Eric Schmidt and Jared Cohen portray the future of world politics in the pages of Foreign Affairs as one in which “people communicate within and across borders, forming virtual communities that empower citizens at the expense of governments” due to the “advent and power of connection technologies.”¹⁵⁹ A recent working group report by government and national security experts captures the zeitgeist in its title: “No More Secrets: National Security Strategies for a Transparent World.”¹⁶⁰ Anecdotes from the recent past lend credence to the thesis. The top secret American raid on Osama Bin Laden’s compound in Pakistan conducted decades ago may have been a long-held secret; instead, it was inadvertently live-tweeted by a nearby resident.¹⁶¹ A single incursion by Libyan forces into Tunisia during the Libyan Civil War in 2011 was reported by a correspondent on the scene.¹⁶²

Let us suppose for a moment that this narrative is more or less accurate. In light of the findings of this project, how might international politics operate differently with states denied the space to act in secret? One obvious change my project suggests is greater

¹⁵⁸ Schulzinger, “Presidential Address.”
¹⁵⁹ Schmidt and Cohen, “The Digital Disruption.”
¹⁶¹ “Man Inadvertently Live Tweets Osama Bin Laden Raid.”
¹⁶² “Libyan Fighters Stray Across Tunisian Border.”
volatility in adversary relationships and stronger pressures for conflict escalation. A key theme from the case studies is that leaders use secrecy to manipulate knowledge and the state of political acknowledgement as a means to localize conflict. In practice, this seems to have worked as intended. For example, Soviet and American leaders kept external audiences in the dark about their aerial combat in the Korean War. Had third party states and domestic constituents known of American-Soviet direct combat, their reactions may have forced leaders on either side to escalate. A truly transparent world politics would deny leaders the ability to duck “backstage” to keep reputational and prestige stakes low and domestic demands for escalation limited. Conflicts that might otherwise be localized will be harder to keep contained as reputational threats are more frequent and clearer, prestige links between local actors and great powers more clearly engaged, and nationalistic and hawkish pressure from domestic constituents harder to withstand.

However, caution is due before giving this interpretation too much weight. Why? It fails to consider how states might adapt to a world of true transparency. Without the capacity to act covertly, states might revise their approaches entirely. Imagine Nazi leaders considering intervention in the Spanish Civil War in a counterfactually transparent environment without recourse to covert options. Hitler and his advisors would face a very different choice. A public intervention risked counter-intervention by British and French leaders in 1936 and 1937, potentially causing a continent-wide European war before Hitler’s Germany had properly rearmed. Without a covert option, Nazi leaders may have simply opted against intervention in the first place. Thus, states may create and
use the covert “backstage” option in a way that resembles a moral hazard: leaders adopt more risky behavior (meddling in local conflicts covertly) precisely because they know secrecy and possible tacit collusion of other states means they can escape the primary danger (escalation). If states are denied the “covert” option and must choose between public options and inaction, leaders may simply avoid such activity altogether.

A larger problem with this line of reasoning is with the initial premise. The vision of a “truly transparent world politics” is simply incomplete. This vision overlooks how technological change is also creating new ways for states to act covertly insulated from social media, cell phones, and other “connection technologies.” These visions also ignore a key lesson from the historical review in Chapter 2. State leaders adapt to new public scrutiny by creating new spaces of invisibility and ambiguity. I explain these two points in turn.

First, technological development does not have a uniform effect of increased transparency and lost secrecy. Indeed, technological change tends to create new military domains in which secrecy, ambiguity, and plausible deniability can operate anew. This is true historically, as described in Chapter 2. The rise of covert methods of using military force was enabled by the invention of flight and submersibles at sea. Military force used through air power or submarines could be done with near perfect ambiguity about the state sponsor. Ground forces engage in combat at close proximity and an adversary’s soldiers are routinely taken prisoner in the back-and-forth of ground battles. Moreover,
logistic movements and ground combat itself often takes place amidst an observant civilian population, including journalists. This makes effective concealment extremely difficult as both adversary and outsiders are quickly alerted to the nationality of an intervening power. In contrast, airfields are operated behind the front lines, in relative isolation from civilian populations, and with maintenance and pilot crews who may never interact with adversary, civilians, or journalists. The same holds for submarines and their crews. Thus, the turn of the 20th century hosted technological change that enabled states to first develop ways of using force in a local conflict without disclosing their participation.

Technological change today is creating new opportunities for the secret exercise of military power in at least three areas: autonomous military platforms (i.e. drones), cyber warfare, and space. Drones often lack national markings, are flown from great distances, and fire missiles of ambiguous character. They are therefore capable of conducting strikes whose sponsor can only be presumed. Though unconfirmed, official documents from the WikiLeaks cache show clear evidence that Yemeni leaders permitted American drone strikes only because Yemen’s leaders could publicly claim the strikes as their own military actions.\textsuperscript{163} Cyber warfare represents an entirely novel domain of military competition in which attribution is especially difficult.\textsuperscript{164} “Strikes” in cyber space often leave highly ambiguous signatures of physical origin. Even when physical origin can be

\textsuperscript{163} Shane, “U.S. Helps Yemen Defy Al Qaeda.”
\textsuperscript{164} As Singer and Schachtman note, “in the cyber realm you may not know who attacked you - or even when and if you were attacked.” Singer and Shachtman, “The Wrong War”; see also the discussion of cyber attacks, attribution, ambiguity, and escalation dynamics in Libicki, \textit{Crisis and Escalation in Cyberspace}.  

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established, the connection to an official act of state (vs. hackers or industrial espionage) can be impossible to establish. Hackers don’t wear uniforms. Without something like a national uniform – a heuristic that allows for acts of violence to be attributed to state decisions – militarized engagements in cyber space appears to lack the clarity of the classical battlefield. Space is a third domain in which possibilities for covert uses of force may emerge over time. During the Cold War, the identity of a sponsor of hostile action was fairly clear due to simple deduction: only two states, the American and Soviet governments, were capable. This monopoly has already ended with European and Chinese crews in space. Space lacks an intermingled civilian population and independent journalistic scrutiny making the state sponsor of any hostile act in orbit nearly impossible to verify.

In all three of these domains, technological change has already and will continue to provide avenues for states to engage in security competitions secretly, without attribution, and with plausible deniability. Thus, while some technological changes are shining a brighter and more comprehensive light on battle-related state conduct, other technological changes create new domains in which covert action is easier. Trends further into the future – that is, domains of military competition not yet discovered – will likely continue the evolution and counter-evolution process.

The other problem with the transparency narrative is that it ignores widely reported activity by a range of states – including several new users of covert tools, such as Iran –
that suggest fresh rounds of covert competition. These new covert competitions are taking place despite the internet, social media, and the threat of future WikiLeaks-style disclosures. The Middle East is host to a number of governments outside the ranks of “great power” who have been reported as regularly using secrecy to engage in regional power competition. Israel, for example, has reportedly engaged in a number of air strikes and assassination attempts using plausible deniability. It relies on covertness to accomplish quick surprise actions while also giving political space to the targets and other states in the region to react with restraint.165 Iran, in turn, has relied on plausibly deniable terror attacks and other covert operations. Iran appears to use this clandestine style at least in part to minimize the pressure on its enemies to retaliate and to avoid censure by third party states.166 This demonstrates an important point. Although covert competition is most commonly associated with the cloak-and-dagger intrigues of the Cold War, covert tools can be useful to regional powers as well as great ones.

The United States, meanwhile, has doubled down on both covert intelligence operations and new clandestine activities by its military services.167 A high-level strategic report by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, for example, sets “a high-order vision of how the future force will operate” and argues for the importance of improved “capabilities and

166 Kulish and Rudoren, “Murky Plots and Attacks Tied to Shadow War of Iran and Israel”; see also Colin Kahl’s description of Iran’s covert Quds Force in Kahl and Waltz, “Iran and the Bomb.”
167 Sanger, Confront and Conceal.
capacities for covert and clandestine operations” despite a more transparent operational environment.

The future increasingly will require the ability to employ military power in ways that minimize political repercussions -- something that will be very difficult to do overtly because of the transparency of the future operating environment. In many cases, it may be desirable to act preemptively before a developing situation reaches a level of crisis requiring the overt deployment of a large joint force. In some cases, partner nations may welcome U.S. military assistance but may not be able politically to acknowledge that assistance. In still other cases, it may be in U.S. interests to act militarily even though overt action is politically unacceptable. Hence, a joint force with improved capability and capacity to operate covertly and clandestinely will be a more flexible and effective instrument of policy.168

To conclude, technological revolutions in information and communication have shrunk the space in which some covert state activities can take place. At the same time, however, technological change has created new domains in which covert acts of hostility can take place in secret and without attribution. The lessons of history show that states react to greater scrutiny and stricter international rules of conduct by creating new ways to act covertly. Old players like the United States and new players like Iran appear to be doubling down on the use of covert methods of engaging in security competition. The project’s main finding about why states use secrecy – to manage impressions, control reputational and other stakes, and deal with conflict escalation pressures – sheds important light on why states will likely continue to develop and refine tactics for covert

168 Mullen, *Capstone Concept for Joint Operations*. 

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activity. While some older tactics used in the 1930s or 1950s may be infeasible, new technology is opening up additional domains.

**Implications and Contributions**

*Implications for policy challenges and debates*

The project holds a number of important lessons for contemporary policy challenges. Take, for example, civil wars or localized interstate conflicts today like Libya (2011) and Syria (2011-present). Overall, the project makes clear the importance of carefully distinguishing between different forms of external involvement, including clandestine and overt military aid, clandestine combat participation, entry of “volunteer” militia or other military units, and overt military entry into combat. Outside powers considering involvement select from clandestine as well as publicly acknowledged methods of involvement. Moreover, the impression management approach makes clear that a significant gap between the facts “on the ground” and the image of the conflict may open up when escalation dangers are present. The theory and empirical findings show that, under certain conditions, outside states will tend to shift their attempts to influence the local conflict to the covert realm, only selectively (if at all) revealing the covert activity of other states. The publicly known and acknowledged status of the conflict may be at significant odds with reality on the ground. Existing IR research on third party involvement in conflicts, in contrast, has little to say about this “backstage” realm of covert competition due to its focus on officially acknowledged entry by outside powers.
Consider the Syrian civil war. Extant civil war studies have not theorized covert intervention while extant secrecy research implies covertness is driven by a desire to insulate leaders from domestic opposition to intervention or the to generate tactical surprising. My theory, in contrast, suggests leaders select covertness and tacit collusion to manage regional or even global escalation dangers. In particular, a plausibly deniable intervention avoids triggering several dynamics that make restraint on both sides more difficult, including clearly engaging reputations for resolve and ally support, clearly linking prestige of oneself and other outside powers to a local belligerent, and triggering hawkish domestic demands within one’s own state (i.e. rally-around-the-flag nationalism). As noted in Chapter 1, news reports of covert involvement in Syria by outside actors like Iran, Qatar, the United States, and Israel have appeared in 2012 and 2013. If true, the local combatants in the Syria’s conflict – notably, a conflict still being described as a “civil war” – are accompanied by a covert stratum in which military aid and even personnel of outside powers attempt to influence the outcome. While secrecy by outside powers certainly may include a domestic anti-intervention rationale (for example, anti-intervention sentiment in the United States), the larger collective use of secrecy may be evidence of a shared concern with escalation. Indeed, most if not all outside states involved in Syria have an interest in a) shaping the local conflict without b) creating a publicly galvanizing crisis and widening war.

169 The effective secrecy of this stratum is not perfect; the scattered reporting on covert activity shows that the existence of some states’ involvement is at least partially an “open secret.”
Now consider the contrast with the Libyan civil war. Unlike Syria, the local conflict in Libya held very few regional or global escalation dangers. Qaddafi’s regime was geographically isolated, lacked a regional or global great power sponsor, and the conflict itself did not feature a transnational (i.e. in Syria, co-religionist) ideological dimension. Larger powers considering intervention on behalf of Libyan rebels faced a very different set of escalation-related considerations. Consistent with the theory’s predictions, a collective embrace of overt intervention took place. The symbolic benefits of an overt intervention – for example, demonstrating NATO’s military capability in an ostensible exercise of the “responsibility to protect” humanitarian doctrine – carried the day given the absence of escalation danger from Western intervention. While escalation dynamics are far from the only factor in debates about intervention in Libya and Syria, limiting war seems to have an important role to play in explaining covert and overt choices.

The project has other policy implications as well. One is better understanding of the politics of “open secrets.” For example, debate in recent years over the American drone program, long a kind of “open secret,” makes little sense at first glance. Yet many have noted that covertness, even if “leaky,” helped Pakistan’s leaders deal with local anti-American sentiment. Similarly, Israel’s ostensibly secret nuclear arsenal has long been suspected but, over time, one of the “worst-kept secrets” in international security.\(^\text{170}\) Its status as an “open secret” escapes the logics of publicity (as it is not fully public) and secrecy (as it is not actually deceiving other leaders). Even after its arsenals came to be a

presumptive fact among other leaders, Israel’s unacknowledged nuclear status has created political space for other states and international organizations to ignore it and leaders of local rivals to abstain from their own crash nuclear programs. Open secrets and mutual pretense exist elsewhere in international politics; Iranian control over Hezbollah terror attacks is an open secret and there is mutual pretense that Taiwan is not an independent state in several ways. By theorizing the independent political value of ambiguity and non-acknowledgement, the project sheds important light on why these open secrets first emerged and why they may remain. At a more general level, the project’s insights about open secrecy suggest that even if the conduct of states is harder to keep secret in the future, there may still be value in covert activity.

*Implications for IR theory*

The project makes a number of theoretical contributions to the study of international politics. One contribution is conceptual. The project introduces two novel concepts. Most IR scholars generally, and existing research in particular, implicitly conceptualize secrecy and publicity as a dichotomy rather than a spectrum. The result has been systematically overlooking cases of “open secrecy” and the unique political dynamics which might surround them. Drawing on Goffman and other social theorists, my theory sheds light on why ostensible but known secrets can preserve the structure of social situations in ways which all actors may prefer. In addition, I introduce a second important concept: tacit collusion. Tacit collusion refers to a set of state behaviors in reaction to an initial act of secrecy in which other states join in perpetuating an inaccurate
image or impression. Tacit collusion is a puzzling phenomenon in part because our
tuition and existing research on secrecy are usually monadic in structure. In contrast,
the theory I develop explicitly incorporates a shared rationale coordinating in creating
clandestine spaces and artificial appearances. My research design analyzes cases of tacit
collusion and my empirical analysis identifies interesting examples of it in the context of
external military interventions. Both of these concepts – open secrets and tacit collusion
– can be used to aid in understanding other empirical domains.

For scholars of secrecy in particular, an important contribution of the project is to put
these new concepts to use with a novel theoretical approach. I develop impression
management arguments based on four basic principles. They stipulate that states use
secrecy to safeguard their impressions or “face,” how other states may react by joining in
preserving somewhat artificial impressions (i.e. exercising “tact”), and how even open
secrets may not derail this collective effort to avoid potentially dangerous disruptions. In
contrast to theories of secrecy that focus on concealment of specific operational or policy
details, my theory emphasizes secrecy regarding facts about the overall definition or
structure of a situation. While extant logics for secrecy about surprise and domestic
dovish sentiment capture important components of the story, the research design and
empirical analysis make a strong case that much of the “action” in military intervention
scenarios involves impression management to avoid conflict escalation.
The findings of the project will be of interest to scholars beyond secrecy. International security scholars may find the specific causal mechanism for conflict escalation of interest. I show leaders attentive to engaging outside audiences whose reactions influence the reputational, prestige, and domestic political stakes of a local conflict; secrecy and deniability help deal with these dynamic. Most security scholars, following Schelling’s path-breaking original work, view escalation as a function of communication between two adversaries (specifically, credible communication of both resolve and restraint) rather than considering audiences beyond that dyad. My theory draws on a richer account of what leads to conflict escalation and how leaders so motivated try to avoid them.

Another implication of the project is that states, specifically adversaries, have much more power to manipulate whether crises exist in the first place than is typically recognized. The traditional analysis of crisis diplomacy begins with a crisis and evaluates activity afterwards. The crisis is taken as given; crises happen when incidents happen. Yet a key implication of the case studies is that covert competition is common and tacit collusion a fairly regular response. The raw materials for crises – the incidents – are fairly common, as they were when German airmen flew missions in Spain and Soviet pilots in Korea. The crisis, however, depends on how other states react. Publicizing and framing covert activity converts that raw material into a political crisis. This is powerfully demonstrated in a classified National Security Agency report that was accidentally released on spy plane incidents during the Cold War. The report describes thirteen occasions between
1950 and 1964 in which the Soviet Union shot down American surveillance aircraft (including that flown by Francis Gary Powers in May 1960).\footnote{Peterson, “Maybe You Had to Be There: The SIGINT on Thirteen Soviet Shootdowns of U.S. Reconnaissance Aircraft.”} Yet only the May 1960 event was publicized by the Soviets. The large majority of incidents in which deceptive activity by the U.S. was detected by its Soviet adversary were ignored rather than publicized. Crises could have happened; leaders chose not to allow them.

Other contributions will be of interest to IR scholars beyond security as well. Take research on the significance of regime type in explaining outcomes in everything from free trade to legal compliance to international threat-making. Scholars of IR have frequently treated the more transparent domestic politics in democracies – that is, the absence of secrecy, deception, and other information manipulation in the domestic realm – as a safe assumption on which to build theories of democratic advantage. However, the empirical findings of this project throw this assumption into question. I provide clear evidence of democracies engaging in active deception of their domestic audiences in the Spanish Civil War and Korean War conflicts, covering up known covert interventions by other states. In the Afghanistan conflict, a democracy actively deceived its domestic audience about a covert military aid network it helped build including clandestine cooperation from controversial states like China and Pakistan. This provides prima facie evidence that some forms of domestic deception happen in high-stakes war-related scenarios in a democracy. Beyond demonstrating that such deception happens in
democracies, my theory provides one well-developed rationale for why and under what conditions democratic leaders resort to its use.

Another finding has implications for scholars of international norms and international legal compliance. Recall the finding in Chapter 2 that leaders developed covert methods of using force in part to circumvent the international legal prohibition on “aggression” after World War I. New legal rules caused leaders to experiment with new ways to engage in newly prohibited behavior. This finding has an important implication for studies of international compliance and norms. First, it suggests the importance of studying how states adapt to new norms and laws. Innovative policy practices may be developed that circumvent them. Ignoring secrecy and covertness can lead to the mistaken impression that states either comply or abrogate. In addition, covert circumvention implies a more pessimistic and provocative story about norms and the growth of international law and culture. Rather than new rules and thicker culture gradually extinguishing “bad behaviors,” they may merely push it underground. Hence the analogy to black markets mentioned in Chapter 2. Taking the covert realm seriously shows that new international rules may also lead states to create zones in which they can clandestinely engage in prohibited behavior. This insight has been acknowledged in passing and is quite intuitive when framed as such. Theories of norm development and international legal compliance, however, have rarely systematically addressed it.
A handful of other implications are of note as well. The project demonstrates ambiguity is not necessarily an unintentional outcome or a systemic constant. States’ intentional use of effective secrecy or open secrecy can lead to ambiguity about the involvement of an outside state in a local conflict; this may be doing important political work and represent an intended outcome. Many theories take a reverse approach explaining how states overcome the downsides of pre-existing ambiguity. In addition, the project provides balance with existing theories of publicity’s virtues. For example, the theory suggests a downside to the “civilizing force of hypocrisy,” or the resort to generalized rather than self-interested reason-giving in public forums. Based on the insights from Chapter 3, forums which encourage states to publicly take positions based on generalized reasons may also tend to more clearly engage reputations, link prestige, and mobilize domestic constituents in a way that makes conflict limitation more difficult. The reason-giving by Western leaders in their public intervention on behalf of South Korea in 1950, for example, was filled with references to the generalized principles of collective security. Yet this raised the reputational stakes for Western states to fight to victory and, by being overt, raised the reputational damage to North Korea and its allies for giving in. Reputational concerns triggered by publicity can therefore have both positive and potentially negative effects. This echoes a common complaint by some Realists, such as George Kennan, who lament the tendency for American leaders to publicly justify foreign policy in generalized ideological terms rather than selfish national interest. This

tendency, he argued, can engage patriotic passions in ways that make limited aims and restraint more difficult.\textsuperscript{173}

**Implications for the normative dilemma**

The new findings from this project also speak to an old debate about secrecy and democratic accountability. The normative dilemma of foreign policy secrecy is that a well-informed electorate and the benefits of secrecy are often incompatible.\textsuperscript{174} But what are the benefits of secrecy in foreign policy conduct? After all, the existence and seriousness of this dilemma hinge on the putative sacrifices that secrecy-free foreign policy would entail. Thus, theories that explicate logics for secrecy – why leaders, including democratic ones, retreat to private and clandestine spaces – help us understand the specific nature of the dilemma as well as possible solutions.\textsuperscript{175}

Existing scholarly research on secrecy tells us that states use secrecy to generate surprise against an adversary or to allow democratic leaders to pursue unpopular foreign policy without punishment. These secrecy logics imply a fairly simple normative dilemma. For surprise, most observers see defeating an adversary as an unalloyed “good.” The solution is a balance that makes public all foreign policy decisions and actions except those

\textsuperscript{174} In Thompson’s formulation, “this basic dilemma of accountability: democracy requires publicity, but some democratic policies require secrecy.” Thompson, “Democratic Secrecy,” 182; see also Gutmann and Thompson, *Democracy and Disagreement*; Chambers, “Behind Closed Doors.”
\textsuperscript{175} On solutions such as after-the-fact publicity or publicity about the fact of secrets rather than their contents (“second-order”), see Bok, *Secrets*; Thompson, “Democratic Secrecy”; Colaresi, “A Boom with Review.”

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needed for surprise during wartime. For duping a domestic public, most observers see this as an unalloyed “bad” that compromises the basic purpose of liberal democracy. The appropriate balance in light of this logic for secrecy would seemingly be to avoid such uses of secrecy altogether.

This project describes a third logic with more complicated implications for the normative dilemma. My theory suggests that the absence of secrecy may force leaders into security competition in which outside audiences – including domestic constituents like the public – make hard-to-resist demands against compromise and in favor of policy actions which risk conflict escalation. Especially important in the industrial and nuclear eras, leaders need a zone of covert competition to safeguard themselves from pressures that can make limiting war difficult. How do we assess this dynamic and its implications for the normative dilemma? Because conflict escalation has a negative connotation, the theory seems an obvious defense of some forms of secrecy. In the interest of controlling conflict escalation, one might forgive democratic leaders who have deceived their domestic constituents about spy planes lost in Soviet territory, Nazi involvement in a civil war in Spain, or the presence of Soviet or Chinese military units inside North Korea or North Vietnam.

Yet there are two important reasons to question this implication. First, one might categorize the kind of information being concealed as particularly deserving of public disclosure. The concealed information in surprising an adversary, for example, is related
to operational military details, such as the landing site and date of D-Day. This information has little higher-order significance and ignorance of it seems to only deprive an audience of knowledge about tactical operations. The concealed information studied in this project, in contrast, includes information about the basic nature of a conflict and the categories or roles of outside states (i.e. “belligerent” or “neutral”). Facts about operational details may be less normatively important than facts about the overall structure or definition of the situation. There may be special caution warranted before permitting secrecy for the latter given that such basic definitional issues are essential to even the most general kind of democratic oversight. Second, justifying secrecy based, in part, on the expectation of a hawkish reaction in domestic public opinion is essentially a request to “save the people from themselves.” Secrecy justified by the need to surprise an adversary, in contrast, keeps the domestic public in the dark based on a threat from outside the democratic community. The former may be a qualitatively more dangerous precedent to set.

One additional implication of the project is on our understanding of the relationship between leaks and the normative dilemma. In a democracy, leaky secrets seem, at first glance, to ameliorate the normative dilemma.Leaks provide at least some information to an otherwise ignorant domestic electorate. Perhaps leaky secrets are a kind of practical compromise: states can get some benefit from not officially engaging in 

activity while their domestic electorate learns the gist of 

from leaks and therefore can express opinions, deliberate, and exercise some form of oversight. However, this ignores a
critical dynamic: open secrets require non-acknowledgement. This doubles back to threaten democratic oversight.

Even when secrets are leaky, officials must ritually avoid acknowledging the contents of the secret to maintain deniability. This project describes some examples, as when a covertly acting state refuses to acknowledge what may be increasingly obvious due to leaking. This ritual non-acknowledgement can have important implications for the possibility of meaningful democratic oversight and therefore the acuteness of the normative dilemma. For example, Israel’s policy of nuclear ambiguity has produced an important tradeoff at the domestic level. A nuclear weapons policy which would otherwise be openly debated has become taboo precisely because open discussion ends official deniability of the arsenal. Ritual non-acknowledgement means members of the executive cannot go on the record in media interviews or public statements about Israel’s nuclear arsenal; legislative hearings and other means of public oversight are similarly impossible because the arsenal is treated as a state secret. The leading scholar on Israel’s nuclear ambiguity, Avner Cohen, has praised the strategic value of ambiguity but lamented the way official secrecy and non-acknowledgement have completely eroded Israeli democratic oversight of their nuclear program, weapons posture, and use policy.\(^{176}\) This suggests a general dynamic: even open secrets can fail to be the basis for meaningful democratic oversight because of the impact of official non-acknowledgement.

\(^{176}\) Cohen, \textit{The Worst-Kept Secret}. 
The recent controversy over drone policy in the United States shows precisely this dynamic at play. For several years, the Obama Administration routinely leaked details of drone strikes unofficially but, at an official level, would not acknowledge the use of lethal drone strikes and the policies which governed it. Even after the Administration publicly acknowledged the existence of the program and disclosed some portions of use policy, its status as clandestine has in the past and present avoided Congressional hearings on the policy, altered how the media covers the story, and avoided the need for full disclosure by the executive branch.\(^{177}\) Thus, while leaks can inject greater knowledge and prompt demands for disclosure, stubborn refusal to acknowledge a policy can prevent the deliberative mechanisms (i.e. legislative hearings and well-informed media reports) necessary for genuine oversight.

Chapter 8 References


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For primary sources, see individual chapter lists of references.

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