

Grey is the new black: covert action and implausible deniability

RORY CORMAC AND RICHARD J. ALDRICH*

Anxiety about ambiguous warfare and ‘hybridity’ is all the rage. But the rapidly proliferating literature on ‘grey’, ‘hybrid’ and ‘non-linear warfare’ is confused and references a bewildering range of military, political and economic developments associated with the changing nature of war over several decades.¹ The proliferation of terms emphasizes that conceptual clarity is in short supply, and this elasticity ultimately obscures more than it explains.² We argue that this lack of clarity turns upon the paradoxical nature of covert action. Covert action by definition seeks to change things and often leaves some sort of a trail. Although some have remarked on the varying degrees of exposure associated with hybrid warfare, little systematic analysis exists of the role of visibility and acknowledgement.³ We therefore seek to relocate the debate within a wide-ranging analysis of covert action which, on closer inspection, was often hardly covert at all. We unpack ideas surrounding secrecy to challenge assumptions about covert action and offer broader insights into contemporary interventionism.

For hundreds of years, states have sought to intervene in the affairs of others in a deniable manner. Since the professionalization of intelligence services in the aftermath of the Second World War, this behaviour has become known as covert action: commonly understood as activity to influence events in a plausibly deniable manner. Indeed, the concept of plausible deniability—some have gone as far as to call it a doctrine⁴—is central to understandings of covert action both academically and in practice. Yet plausible deniability has rarely been subjected

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¹ Typically, one recent text tells us that ‘the term “hybrid warfare” encompasses conventional warfare, irregular warfare, cyberwarfare, insurgency, criminality, economic blackmail, ethnic warfare, “lawfare,” and the application of low-cost but effective technologies to thwart high-cost technologically advanced forces’: Douglas Lovelace, ed., *Hybrid warfare and the gray zone threat* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. xi.

² If there is an emerging scholarly consensus, it focuses upon the rather simplistic observation that ambiguous warfare is not new. Scholars arguing this include Bettina Renz, ‘Russia and “hybrid warfare”’, *Contemporary Politics* 22: 3, 2016, pp. 283–300; Mark Galeotti, ‘Hybrid, ambiguous and non-linear? How new is Russia’s “new way of war”?’ *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 27: 2, 2016, pp. 282–301; Alexander Lanoszka, ‘Russian hybrid warfare and extended deterrence in eastern Europe’, *International Affairs* 92: 1, Jan. 2016, pp. 175–95.

³ Rod Thornton, ‘The changing nature of modern warfare: responding to Russian information warfare’, *RUSI Journal* 160: 4, 2015, pp. 40–48; Galeotti, ‘Hybrid, ambiguous and non-linear?’.

⁴ Thomas C. Ellington, ‘Won’t get fooled again: the paranoid style in the national security state’, *Government and Opposition* 38: 4, 2003, pp. 436–55.

to critical analysis.⁵ It has instead almost become received wisdom.⁶ In reality, plausible deniability barely existed even in its supposed heyday and certainly has little place in the twenty-first century.

The orthodox consensus assumes that states engage in covert action when they can plausibly deny sponsorship. The execution of the act itself may not necessarily be secret—assassinations, for example, involve someone visibly dying—but the sponsorship thereof is hidden both during and after the event. States must be able to deny involvement, and in a plausible or believable manner. This portrayal creates a conceptually neat but monodimensional understanding of covert action, in which secrecy is both binary and assumed. For some covert actions, it may well be the case that sponsorship remained secret from all except the sponsoring state. Indeed, certain operations undoubtedly have not yet surfaced for this very reason, and it is important to be aware of such ‘unknowns’ when discussing covert actions.

However, many covert actions are an open secret: implausibly deniable. The CIA’s failed attempt to overthrow Fidel Castro at the Bay of Pigs in 1961, together with large-scale paramilitary operations in Laos, Angola and Afghanistan, spring to mind as obvious examples where denials lacked plausibility. More recently, the Kremlin initially denied intervention in Ukraine in 2014 and still denies interference in the 2016 US presidential election. In both cases, the denials rang hollow. Yet these operations did not fall outside the boundaries of covert action; nor did their lack of secrecy necessarily constitute a failure of covert action (although in the case of the Bay of Pigs it clearly did). This observation problematizes the role of plausible deniability as integral to covert action. One might counter that the existence of hitherto unknown covert actions, which need not be denied, undermines this argument; however, given that many supposedly successful covert actions (encompassing both influence and paramilitary operations) lacked secrecy, there are certainly grounds to question assumptions surrounding plausible deniability in covert action.

To address this issue, we consider four questions: (1) What is plausible deniability and how does the concept hold up in practice? (2) What degrees of visibility and acknowledgement actually exist? (3) Why do leaders use covert action if some exposure is likely, and does it have coercive value? (4) How does implausible deniability in covert action connect to the recent debate over hybrid warfare? This article begins by considering orthodox conceptualizations of plausible deniability, and secret interventionism more broadly, within the existing literature. It then interrogates the role and reality of plausible deniability in covert action, offering a more complex conceptualization in the process. Finally, it develops a logic underpinning implausible deniability, recognizing the value of covert action both as a communicative tool and in creating and exploiting strategic ambiguity.

⁵ Discussions have hitherto focused on specific historic episodes or issues of US national security law: Klaas Voß, ‘Plausibly deniable: mercenaries in US covert interventions during the Cold War, 1964–1987’, *Cold War History* 16: 1, 2016, pp. 37–60; Jennifer D. Kibbe, ‘Conducting shadow wars’, *Journal of National Security Law and Policy* 5: 2, 2011, pp. 373–92; Marcus Eyth, ‘The CIA and covert operations: to disclose or not to disclose—that is the question’, *Brigham Young University Journal of Public Law* 17: 1, 2002, pp. 45–72.

⁶ For an exception see Gregory Treverton, *Covert action: the CIA and the limits of American intervention in the post-war world* (New York: Basic Books, 1987), pp. 10–11. He recognizes that covert action became increasingly overt in the 1980s.

In the course of this analysis, we advance three arguments. First, plausible deniability is surprisingly poorly conceptualized in both academic discourse and political practice. This generates a misleadingly simplistic view of the nature and effects of covert action as a form of state interaction. In reality, a spectrum of attribution and exposure exists since covert action has multiple audiences, both internal and external. Second, although cases of plausibly deniable covert action exist—including some which have yet to come to light—the concept has long been flimsy, especially regarding paramilitary operations. This is even more the case today, for changes in the nature of mass media and the proliferation of electronic whistleblowing have increased implausible deniability. Both these developments challenge state secrecy while blurring boundaries between overt and covert, public and private, even truth and fiction. Implausible deniability is also linked to the growth of special forces and private military actors which have further increased the grey space between secrecy and visibility.

Third, we argue that implausible deniability does not spell the end of covert action. Indeed, political leaders wish to have their cake and eat it, avoiding constitutional accountability for risky operations while harnessing the benefits of open secrecy. Implausible deniability allows them to communicate resolve, exploit ambiguity and even ‘hang tough’ by boasting about deploying special forces. As early as 1962, President Kennedy was astounded to find that his approval rating soared to 82 per cent in the wake of the Bay of Pigs fiasco simply because it made him look action-orientated.⁷ Ultimately, we advance a new understanding of covert action, moving away from the flawed idea of plausible deniability towards that of unacknowledged activity. Indeed, we suggest that much of the fashionable debate about the newness of hybrid war labours under a misapprehension. It revolves around the nature and prominence of covert action as much as any innovative operational means.

Conceptualizing plausible deniability

Taking their lead from US executive orders and legislative statutes, scholars have long referred to ‘plausible deniability’ when defining covert action. They have paid less attention to the phrase itself, interpreting ‘plausible deniability’ in myriad ways. Consequently, it lacks a clear conceptual grounding in the existing discourse. For some, it is simply an informal ‘buzzword’.⁸ For others, it amounts to a doctrine or ‘so-called doctrine’.⁹ For many, it is simply an ‘overarching objective’ tying covert operations together.¹⁰

⁷ David M. Barrett, *The CIA and Congress: the untold story from Truman to Kennedy* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2005) p. 450.

⁸ Eyth, ‘The CIA and covert operations’, p. 54.

⁹ See John A. Radsan, ‘An overt turn on covert action’, *St Louis University School of Law* 53: 485, 2009, p. 520; Loch Johnson, *National security intelligence* (Cambridge: Polity, 2017), p. 86. The Church Committee of 1975 saw it as a ‘so-called’ doctrine: see United States Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities, Senate (Washington DC, 20 Nov. 1975), vol. 2B, *Covert action as a vehicle for foreign policy implementation*, p. 11.

¹⁰ See Michael Joseph and Michael Poznansky, ‘Media technology, covert action, and the politics of exposure’, *Journal of Peace Research*, publ. online 16 Nov. 2017, DOI: 10.1177/0022343317731508, p. 3.

Some scholars see plausible deniability as functioning at the international level: to allow a state to deny involvement in a certain act. Others locate it at the domestic level: to allow senior officials—and ultimately the premier—to deny personal knowledge and instead punish so-called ‘rogue elephants’ for transgression if the covert action is discovered.¹¹ Gregory Treverton, who served on the first Senate Select Committee on Intelligence and penned the pioneering academic study of covert action in the late 1980s, links the two levels by noting that early covert action was designed to ‘enable the US government to argue plausibly that it, and failing that, at least the President, had not been involved’.¹²

The time-frame of plausible deniability is equally confused. Most definitions do not consider how long sponsorship should remain hidden after an operation in order for it to qualify as successful—or even to qualify as covert action at all.¹³ This is problematic, for it raises unanswered questions about the purpose of deniability, alongside when and why leaders admit involvement. It also risks blurring lines with deception and special military operations, where secrecy has an operational shelf-life.¹⁴ As a British cabinet secretary lamented after the Second World War, sponsorship of covert operations in peacetime had to remain deniable for far longer; deniability now necessitated going beyond the short-term wartime requirement of merely protecting agents.¹⁵

Some writers advance the improbable idea of ‘silent warfare’ or ‘secret armies’.¹⁶ More sophisticated attempts to discuss plausible deniability conflate visibility with acknowledgement. Johnson and Wirtz, for example, note that the role of the sponsor ‘is *neither* apparent *nor* publicly acknowledged’.¹⁷ This seems too idealistic and binary, for sponsorship can be apparent but not acknowledged. Perhaps this is redolent of the unrealistic expectations that some high-level policy-makers entertain when considering covert action. Either way, it all amounts to a rather vague term too often used casually. As Admiral John Poindexter, National Security Advisor to President Reagan, put it during the Iran–Contra hearings of 1987: plausible deniability is ‘simply a concept’ and ‘open to interpretation’.¹⁸

¹¹ For Radsan, a former CIA assistant counsel, the sense is largely domestic: plausible deniability hinges on restricted congressional notice, thereby allowing the president to deny knowledge. See Radsan, ‘An overt turn on covert action’, pp. 520–22. See also Johnson, *National security intelligence*, p. 86. Daugherty emphasizes the international, arguing that since Truman, presidents have sought to limit knowledge in order to ‘maintain plausible deniability of US government involvement in case of public exposure or compromise’: William Daugherty, *Executive secrets: covert action and the presidency* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2004), p. 93.

¹² Treverton, *Covert action*, p. 5.

¹³ Daugherty, for example, notes simply that the ‘covert aspect is that the sponsor ... remains hidden’. See *Executive secrets*, p. 13. Treverton notes that because of the inherent paradox of secret operations in an open society, covert actions eventually become public sooner or later. See *Covert action*, pp. 3–4.

¹⁴ On deception and the limited time-span of secrecy, see J. Bowyer-Bell, ‘Toward a theory of deception’, *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence* 16: 2, 2003, pp. 244–79.

¹⁵ Rory Cormac, *Disrupt and deny: spies, special forces, and the secret pursuit of British foreign policy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 14.

¹⁶ Abram N. Shulsky and Gary James Schmitt, *Silent warfare: understanding the world of intelligence* (Washington DC: Potomac, 2002); Mark Mazzetti, *The way of the knife: the CIA, a secret army, and a war at the ends of the earth* (New York: Penguin, 2014).

¹⁷ Loch Johnson and James Wirtz, ‘Covert action’, in Johnson and Wirtz, eds, *Intelligence: the secret world of spies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 225 (emphasis added).

¹⁸ James Schwartz, ‘Plausible deniability’, *Washington Post*, 22 July 1987.

This uncertainty is problematic, both analytically and practically. Domestically, it blurs accountability, the identity of actors and the constitutional implications. Internationally, it creates the misleading assumption that target states lack awareness of the hidden hand behind successful operations. As we shall see, covert action is multidimensional, with varying audiences and degrees of exposure. In many cases, the target is aware of the perpetrator—indeed, quite often the effectiveness of covert action depends on this awareness to achieve a degree of coercion that lies somewhere between diplomacy and conventional force. For example, when explaining the purpose of extensive Cold War covert actions against Indonesia, the CIA's Deputy Director for Plans, Frank Wisner, remarked: 'I think it's time we held [President] Sukarno's feet to the fire.'¹⁹

More broadly, much of the International Relations (IR) literature offers a simplistic view of secrecy. It does not treat covert action in a sophisticated manner, but takes plausible deniability at face value. It considers secrecy/transparency in a more or less binary manner, sees exposure as negative, and offers little consideration of the paradoxical nature of covert action—or indeed of covert action at all.²⁰ The vast literature on signalling, for example, has largely ignored the value of covert communication, focusing instead on public threat as a means of coercion or signalling resolve.²¹ A rare exception is Austin Carson's work on secrecy and non-escalation which, although limited to 'covert' warfare, recognizes that exposure is not dichotomous and that violent action conducted within the twilight world of quasi-secrecy can prevent escalation.²²

It is, of course, in paramilitary covert actions—or 'secret wars'—that plausible deniability has long been paper-thin. However, like hybrid warfare, covert action is also poorly integrated into the literature on proxy warfare. Writing on covert action does implicitly incorporate proxy wars, such as those in 1980s Afghanistan, under the banner of paramilitary operations, but does little to address the obviously implausible deniability of those covert actions. Conversely, much of the literature on proxy warfare, again like that on hybrid warfare, struggles with the idea of covert action. Authors have acknowledged a 'sponsor's dilemma', whereby it is difficult for those sponsoring proxies to do so openly for fear of breaching the principle of

¹⁹ Kenneth Conboy and James Morrison, *Feet to the fire: CIA covert action in Indonesia, 1957–1958* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1999).

²⁰ Covert action has only recently featured in the IR literature. Most recently, Joseph and Poznansky offer a sophisticated discussion of exposure costs but treat secrecy as more or less binary. See Joseph and Poznansky, 'Media technology, covert action, and the politics of exposure'. This is consistent with the few discussions of covert action in relation to democratic peace theory. See Alexander Downes and Mary L. Lilley, 'Overt peace, covert war? Covert intervention and the democratic peace', *Security Studies* 19: 2, 2010, pp. 266–306; Michael Poznansky, 'Stasis or decay? Reconciling covert war and the democratic peace', *International Studies Quarterly* 59: 4, 2015, pp. 815–26; Sebastian Rosato, 'The flawed logic of democratic peace theory', *American Political Science Review* 97: 4, 2003, pp. 585–602.

²¹ Most famously, see Thomas Schelling, *The strategy of conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960); for discussion of the literature, see Austin Carson and Keren Yarhi-Milo, 'Covert communication: the intelligibility and credibility of signaling in secret', *Security Studies* 26: 1, 2017, pp. 128–9.

²² See Austin Carson, 'Facing off and saving face: covert intervention and escalation management in the Korean War', *International Organization* 70: 1, 2016, pp. 103–31; also Carson and Yarhi-Milo, 'Covert communication', pp. 124–56.

non-interference.²³ Yet disagreement exists over the relationship between proxy warfare and covert action. Andrew Mumford argues that the two are distinct on the basis that covert action requires intelligence or special forces personnel on the ground in the target country, whereas proxy warfare is conducted more indirectly.²⁴ Others believe proxy warfare can be a (para)military form of covert action—nevertheless, all conceptualize exposure in binary terms.²⁵

Examination of the literature reveals two fault-lines, concerning respectively the target and the credibility of the deception. Both are important, but the literature offers one fairly consistent assumption: that covert action requires plausible deniability for an unspecified length of time which, in turn, requires secrecy from its target audience. We argue, by contrast, that not all covert actions are plausibly deniable and that exposure—if unacknowledged—is not necessarily counterproductive. Plausibility operates on a continuum. Action which is neither acknowledged nor apparent is plausibly deniable covert action. Despite this forming the orthodox view, many operations traditionally considered successful are actually apparent but not acknowledged: that is, implausibly deniable. The historical prevalence of this phenomenon is reinforced as archives of the former Soviet Bloc open up and scholars realize that many ‘secret’ western operations were in fact known to Soviet intelligence.²⁶ Ultimately, the complexity of plausible deniability should be embraced; otherwise, as demonstrated above, we are left with a misleading and impoverished concept.

The myth of plausible deniability

The concept of plausible deniability in its classic form is synonymous with American Cold War traditions. It can be traced back to NSC10/2, enunciated in 1948, a year after the creation of the CIA. In this document, the US National Security Council defined covert action as operations ‘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’.²⁷ After covert action to influence the Italian elections that same year, plausible deniability, as Treverton put it, became ‘dogma’.²⁸ NSC5412, issued in March 1954, used the same language as NSC10/2 and reaffirmed the importance of plausible deniability in larger anti-communist

²³ For an overview of the literature, see Vladimir Rauta, *A theory of distributional violence: an analysis of proxy wars in Africa, 1945–2011*, PhD diss., University of Nottingham, 2017.

²⁴ Andrew Mumford, *Proxy warfare* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), pp. 3–4.

²⁵ Geraint Hughes, *My enemy's enemy: proxy warfare in international politics* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2014), p. 5; Kevin O'Brien, ‘Surrogate agents: private military and security operators in an unstable world’, in M. Innes, ed., *Making sense of proxy wars: states, surrogates and the use of force* (Washington DC: Potomac, 2013), pp. 109–36.

²⁶ See Paul Maddrell, ‘What we have discovered about the Cold War is what we already knew: Julius Mader and the western secret services during the Cold War’, *Cold War History* 5: 2, 2005, pp. 235–58, and ‘British intelligence through the eyes of the Stasi: what the Stasi's records show about the operations of British intelligence in Cold War Germany’, *Intelligence and National Security* 27: 1, 2012, pp. 46–74. See also Raymond Garthoff, *Soviet leaders and intelligence: assessing the American adversary during the Cold War* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2015).

²⁷ Quoted in Treverton, *Covert action*, p. 36.

²⁸ Treverton, *Covert action*, p. 73.

covert actions.²⁹ Accordingly, the early Cold War era became known as the ‘the age of plausible deniability’.³⁰

Yet even at this early stage, the idea contained an element of self-delusion. The plausible deniability of the CIA’s most important Cold War covert actions was already questionable. The first book on the CIA, *The cloak and dollar war*, appeared as early as 1953 and offered a summary of its European covert action programme, including both failed attempts to roll back communism in eastern Europe and broader black propaganda operations. Indeed, even influence operations struggled to maintain plausible deniability and, at the height of the Cold War, critics regularly pointed to black radio stations operated by both sides, covert publications and outright forgeries.³¹ In retrospect, and challenging orthodox understandings of covert action, these operations were apparent but not acknowledged: implausibly deniable.

Exposure reached new heights with widespread press reporting of the preparations for the Bay of Pigs operation in 1961. Several mainstream American newspapers discussed CIA training of Cuban exiles in camps in Florida and Guatemala. Plausible deniability was increasingly a collective delusion.³² The following years saw presidential plausible deniability fade away when, in the aftermath of major inquiries into the CIA, Congress stipulated that the President should report all covert actions through what became known as a presidential ‘finding’.³³ Meanwhile, numerous Cold War covert actions, such as those in Cambodia and Angola, were widely described and publicly debated in real time.

During the following decade, the Reagan Doctrine elevated the importance of covert action, but also revelled in unsecrecy. Even on the election trail, Reagan promised the American public that he would ‘unleash’ the CIA. Delighted by the discomfort that the *mujahideen* were causing Soviet forces in Afghanistan, Reagan began to hint openly that America was aiding the resistance forces there. Senators even engaged in proxy-war tourism along the Afghan–Pakistan border.³⁴ The covert action in this theatre, known as ‘Operation Cyclone’, was implausibly deniable: decidedly apparent and, given the hints, barely unacknowledged.

During the 1980s and 1990s, American directives continued to make dogmatic references to plausible deniability, but these remained confused and at odds with reality. Executive Order 12333, issued by Reagan in 1981, reiterated the idea that covert actions, referred to as special activities, ‘are planned and executed so that the role of the United States Government is not apparent or acknowledged publicly’.³⁵ A decade later, the US Senate Select Committee on Intelligence used

²⁹ Daugherty, *Executive secrets*, p. 135.

³⁰ Radsan, ‘An overt turn on covert action’, p. 520.

³¹ Gordon Stewart, *The cloak and dollar war* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1953), pp. 29, 50.

³² Richard J. Aldrich, ‘American journalism and the landscape of secrecy: Tad Szulc, the CIA and Cuba’, *History* 100: 340, 2015, pp. 189–209.

³³ Daugherty calls it the ‘practical death’ of plausible deniability: *Executive secrets*, p. 94.

³⁴ Steve Coll, *Ghost wars: the secret history of the CIA, Afghanistan and Bin Laden* (New York: Penguin, 2004), p. 70.

³⁵ Executive Order 12333—United States intelligence activities, 4 Dec. 1981, <https://www.archives.gov/federal-register/codification/executive-order/12333.html> (accessible on 18 March 2018).

the same language, adding that the United States sought 'a form of plausible denial to the outside world'.³⁶ Officials, no less than academics, conflated secrecy with lack of acknowledgement by implying that plausible deniability involves action which is neither apparent nor acknowledged. These are two separate things; and covert action was, in fact, increasingly apparent, at times even a matter of display.

America has not been alone in this. Many states engaging in covert action make use of plausible deniability as an organizing idea, but have used it more flexibly.³⁷ Although codifying less than the United States,³⁸ the UK emphasized plausible deniability in the aftermath of the Second World War. By the mid-1960s, however, policy-makers had to distinguish between 'untraceable' and 'deniable' operations, when MI6 and special forces waged 'secret' wars in both Yemen and Indonesia, and denials rang hollow. Untraceable operations were those 'in which the hand of HMG [Her Majesty's Government] at best will not even be suspected and at worst cannot be proved'. These demonstrated traditional conceptualizations of covert action. Deniable operations were those in which 'if, in spite of the probability that HMG connived [in] its execution and in spite of some tenable arguable evidence that HMG was officially involved, HMG considers it politically feasible to deny complicity in public statements e.g. in the House of Commons or the United Nations'.³⁹ These, by contrast, were implausibly deniable. This formulation—perhaps because it was not for public consumption—offers a more realistic account of deniability. In contrast to American understandings, the UK distinguished secrecy or visibility from acknowledgement and opened the way towards implausible deniability. It is telling that the literature discussed in the previous section of this article is overwhelmingly American and does not take account of the nuances visible in the UK historical record.

Russia also conceptualizes plausible deniability along a continuum in a manner that emphasizes degrees of secrecy and acknowledgement. As in the West, Russian (and earlier Soviet) covert action is 'based on the principle of plausible deniability, where the result is to influence decision-making in a direction favourable or at least not harmful to the Kremlin'.⁴⁰ In practice, however, the old Soviet idea of 'active measures', its term for political warfare, was more complex than western equivalents. It offered a more holistic approach, adopted and implemented by a variety of institutions. Covert methods and actors overlapped with their overt counterparts, making them deliberately difficult to conceptualize and counter. This was particularly the case regarding propaganda, which drew on both covert and overt tools interchangeably and simultaneously.⁴¹ Now, Moscow's active

³⁶ S. Rep. No. 102–85 (1991), p. 43.

³⁷ See Len Scott, 'Secret intelligence, covert action and clandestine diplomacy', *Intelligence and National Security* 19: 2, 2004, p. 327; Neville Wylie, "'The importance of being honest": Switzerland, neutrality, and the problems of intelligence collection and liaison', *Intelligence and National Security* 21: 5, 2006, p. 785.

³⁸ Rory Cormac, 'Disruption and deniable interventionism: explaining the appeal of covert action and special forces in contemporary British policy', *International Relations* 31: 2, 2017, pp. 169–91.

³⁹ UK Joint Action Committee, 1964, quoted in Cormac, *Disrupt and deny*, pp. 170–71.

⁴⁰ Martin Kragh and Sebastian Asberg, 'Russia's strategy for influence through diplomacy and active measures: the Swedish case', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 40: 6, 2017, p. 6.

⁴¹ Jeffrey Richelson, *Sword and shield: Soviet intelligence and security apparatus* (New York: Ballinger, 1986), pp. 137, 146.

measures exploit the western commitment to pluralism and new forms of media to blur the line between secrecy and acknowledgement, truth and lie, fact and fiction.⁴²

The visibility of much covert action has increased in recent years, further eroding the utility of plausible deniability as traditionally understood. This trend is driven by wider factors within leaders' control, such as the remarkable rise of special forces and private military companies (PMCs) since 9/11. The majority of special forces activity requires high levels of skill but is not especially covert: this applies to activities such as raiding, forward air control, hostage rescue and security sector reform. But other core special forces activities, including what the Pentagon terms 'Activities Specified by the President or SecDef [Defense Secretary]', overlap with covert action. This latter kind of activity, which challenges the long-held US bureaucratic distinction between covert action and military special operations, was exemplified by a new style of counterterrorism adopted in Afghanistan and Iraq, fusing the rapid exploitation of intelligence gained from special forces raids with social network analysis. The information obtained thereby enabled further kinetic action on an almost industrial scale. The rise of special forces—operating in such numbers, in so many arenas, and in such close involvement with the intelligence services—makes plausible deniability difficult.⁴³

Likewise, PMCs, although not new, transformed themselves into global corporations following 9/11 and the ensuing surge in demand for security that governments alone could not meet.⁴⁴ Although originally perceived as conducting relatively mundane guard duties in Iraq and Afghanistan, PMCs soon expanded, hiring a number of senior CIA officers—to the extent that some regarded one company, Blackwater (now Xe/Academi), as 'an extension of the agency'.⁴⁵ PMCs allegedly became involved in CIA or Pentagon programmes to track and kill militants,⁴⁶ back-filled many traditional special forces roles in secondary locations such as Colombia,⁴⁷ and worked alongside special forces and intelligence officers in the emerging wars in Libya and Syria.⁴⁸ The rise of PMCs, operating in a grey zone between the public and the private, further complicates issues of deniability.

⁴² Peter Pomerantsev, *Nothing is true and everything is possible* (London: Faber, 2015).

⁴³ Richard H. Shultz, Jr, 'US counterterrorism operations during the Iraq War: a case study of Task Force 714', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 40: 10, 2017, pp. 809–37. See also Mark Urban, *Task Force Black* (London: Faber, 2013).

⁴⁴ For examples, see Christopher Kinsey, *Corporate soldiers and international security: the rise of private military* (London: Routledge, 2006); Rita Abrahamsen and Michael C. Williams, *Security beyond the state: private security in international politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Thomas Bruneau, *Patriots for profit: contractors and the military in US national security* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011).

⁴⁵ Erik Prince, *Civilian warriors: the inside story of Blackwater* (New York: Penguin, 2013), pp. 342–3.

⁴⁶ Mark Mazzetti and Dexter Filkins, 'Contractors tied to effort to track and kill militants', *New York Times*, 14 March 2010; James Risen and Mark Mazzetti, 'Blackwater guards tied to secret CIA raids', *New York Times*, 10 Dec. 2009. For two journalistic accounts, see Robert Young Pelton, *Licensed to kill: hired guns in the war on terror* (New York: Crown, 2006); Jeremy Scahill, *Blackwater: the rise of the world's most powerful mercenary army* (New York: Nationbooks, 2007).

⁴⁷ Gerald Schumacher, *A bloody business: America's war zone contractors and the occupation of Iraq* (St Paul, MN: Zenith, 2006), pp. 16–17.

⁴⁸ Richard Norton-Taylor and Chris Stephen, 'Libya: SAS veterans helping NATO identify Gaddafi targets in Misrata', *Guardian*, 1 June 2011.

Factors outside government decision-making processes also have an impact upon exposure; the most important is information and communications technology (ICT). Although active press reporting has always qualified the secrecy of military operations,⁴⁹ recent changes in ICT have amplified vulnerabilities for intelligence services and special forces alike. These include affordable, worldwide and real-time coverage; global internet access; and access to commercial mapping and space imagery systems.⁵⁰ ICT allows citizens to communicate, to collect evidence, and ultimately to compromise plausible deniability.⁵¹ Meanwhile, state secrecy—and plausible deniability—is further challenged by a globalized civil society, with increased contact between legions of investigative journalists, human rights lawyers and whistleblowers. Claims about the ‘end of secrecy’ have been overstated, and governments are fighting back hard against journalists and whistleblowers;⁵² Barack Obama’s White House prosecuted twice as many whistleblowers under the 1917 Espionage Act as all previous presidents combined.⁵³ Nevertheless, all of this has substantially challenged the ‘doctrine’ of plausible deniability—so much so that Dennis Blair, the US Director of National Intelligence in 2009–2010, dismissed it as a relic of the Cold War and irrelevant for twenty-first-century counterterrorism operations.⁵⁴

Changes in the media environment have important implications for understanding the nature of covert action; they go far beyond a mere diminution of secrecy and further demonstrate the spectrum of visibility and acknowledgement. Over the past 20 years we have seen a demassification—or fragmentation—of the media characterized not only by hundreds of new channels but also by informal reporting from bloggers. Meanwhile, military operations are increasingly accompanied by information operations in which claim competes with counterclaim to damage the credibility of any narrative.⁵⁵ This has important implications for understanding plausible deniability, for it highlights confusion rather than secrecy. Ample evidence pointed to Russian military involvement in Ukraine, for example, but western journalistic methodology caused mainstream news outlets to report respectfully the flat denials of Moscow and pick up some of the commentary by private Russian-owned news outlets and thousands of patriotic Russian online bloggers.⁵⁶ We must, of course, be wary of forgetting history here: the KGB advanced disinformation throughout the Cold War. It aimed not simply to defame the target, but to spread confusion which, in turn, would entice the

⁴⁹ James Randall, ‘The newspaper problem and its bearing upon military secrecy during the Civil War’, *American Historical Review* 23: 2, 1918, pp. 303–23.

⁵⁰ Chris Perkins and Martin Dodge, ‘Satellite imagery and the spectacle of secret spaces’, *Geoforum* 40: 4, 2009, pp. 546–60.

⁵¹ Joseph and Poznansky, ‘Media technology, covert action, and the politics of exposure’, p. 2.

⁵² Alasdair Roberts, ‘WikiLeaks: the illusion of transparency’, *International Review of Administrative Sciences* 78: 1, 2012, pp. 116–33; Mark Fenster, ‘The opacity of transparency’, *Iowa Law Review* 91: 885, 2005, pp. 885–949.

⁵³ Spencer Ackerman and Ed Pilkington, ‘Obama’s war on whistle-blowers leaves administration insiders unscathed’, *Guardian*, 16 March 2015.

⁵⁴ Quoted in Kibbe, ‘Conducting shadow wars’, p. 392.

⁵⁵ Paul Virilio, *Desert screen: war at the speed of light* (London: Athlone, 2002), p. 5.

⁵⁶ Keir Giles, *Russia’s ‘new’ tools for confronting the West: continuity and innovation in Moscow’s exercise of power*, research paper (London: Chatham House, 2016), pp. 37–40.

target to act in favour of Soviet interests.⁵⁷ Recent 'fake news' follows in this tradition, but allows sponsors to sow even more confusion, given the fragmentation and proliferation of new media channels. Changes in the media landscape have not only made it harder to verify information; they have also prompted policy-makers to embrace the idea of implausible deniability, as we suggest below.

Deniability is thus a nuanced concept. Existing versions of plausible deniability—inherent in orthodox understandings of covert action—do not fare well when applied to known historical examples; nor do they stand up in the current strategic environment. Embracing the complexity of deniability within covert action, as we do here, suggests that there must be a reason—beyond self-delusion—to explain why policy-makers returned to this option time and again. On the one hand, it does appear that the United States failed to think through the doctrine of secrecy in a particularly sophisticated manner. On the other hand, a more nuanced account of plausible deniability involving a spectrum of visibility and acknowledgement has important implications for understanding current and historical covert actions. It could be argued, for example, that early CIA operations in eastern Europe, visible to a particular audience, demonstrated resolve and kept the flame of hope alive among dissidents; that the Bay of Pigs operation, through its exposure, displayed dynamism to the American people; and that awareness of operations in Angola and Afghanistan conveyed key messages to audiences at home and abroad. We explore this aspect of the topic in detail in the next section.

Embracing implausible deniability

During the Cold War, as we have suggested, plausible deniability was in fact widely recognized as implausible. Covert actions involving 'secret armies' of as many as 40,000 people achieved only a pantomime secrecy. Nonetheless, leaders sometimes embrace, or even celebrate, implausible deniability. Costs of exposure should therefore not be taken at face value; they will not spell the end of covert action. On the contrary, implausible deniability has logic and political value. Special forces, covert action, and the modern transition of intelligence officers from gatherers to hunters,⁵⁸ allow politicians to signal resolution and resilience when they choose. Tony Blair caught this mood perfectly in 2006 while addressing a press conference. When journalists asked him about MI6 activities in Moscow, he quipped: 'We never comment on intelligence matters . . . except when we want to, obviously.'⁵⁹ His flippant aside disguises an important truth: that covert action as a grey activity can perform a wider range of functions than genuinely secret operations.

It is overly simplistic to think of covert action merely in terms of hidden sponsorship. In reality, covert action, as we have seen, involves multiple levels of exposure and multiple audiences. Allies, adversaries and domestic audiences may

⁵⁷ Herbert Romerstein, 'Disinformation as a KGB weapon in the Cold War', *Journal of Intelligence History* 1: 1, 2001, pp. 54–67.

⁵⁸ Charles Cogan, 'Hunters not gatherers: intelligence in the twenty-first century', *Intelligence and National Security* 19: 2, 2004, pp. 304–21.

⁵⁹ M. Oliver, 'Blair avoids questions over British spy ring', *Guardian*, 23 Jan. 2006.

well be aware that a state is engaging in operations, creating a unique form of dramatic irony. Covert action might even be thought of as a kind of secret theatre that can be used to communicate or create uncertainty.⁶⁰ Implausible deniability allows states to communicate resolve, while not escalating crises into open warfare.⁶¹ It conveys messages, picked up via counter-intelligence apparatuses, about intentions to other leaders.⁶² There are numerous examples of such behaviour in recent history. In the mid-1960s, Britain launched covert actions against Egyptian interests in Yemen and against Indonesia. Both cases were visible to the targets; indeed, President Nasser of Egypt even sent those heading the Yemen operation a Christmas card. It was not always successful, however. Communication within the Indonesian Army was so poor that SAS raids did not achieve the signalling or deterrence effects intended.⁶³ Like deception and deterrence, covert action has communicative value only if the target can both see and understand it.⁶⁴

In 1969, the United States used 'secret' bombing in Cambodia to signal resolve to local leaders. The following decade in Angola both superpowers employed covert aid primarily to signal resolve to local allies and each other, measuring commitment from observed changes in the magnitude of their opponent's aid. Likewise, western aid to the *mujahideen* in Afghanistan was intended to convey resolve.⁶⁵ Accordingly, Lord Carrington, the British Foreign Secretary, refused to deny that MI6 was sending arms to Afghanistan because doing so would 'remove an incentive on the Soviet Union to look for a political solution and lay ourselves open to domestic criticism for being unwilling to back our words with deeds'.⁶⁶ Britain therefore found itself in the seemingly odd position of unofficially hinting at more aggressive levels of covert action than were actually taking place.

Implausible deniability—or open secrecy—prevented escalation during the Cold War: parties had a shared interest in maintaining the fiction of secrecy in order to avoid pressure to escalate. Such 'tacit collusion' managed risk and offered a way out of tense situations⁶⁷—which was of considerable importance, given the nuclear dimension of the superpower standoff. However, as demonstrated above, a similar logic applied when using covert action against non-nuclear and non-aligned states. It still holds in the post-Cold War world, suggesting a lack of strategic transformation and the advisability of caution in calculating the role of nuclear weapons in determining the place of covert action within a state's grand strategy. In 2007, Israel launched a 'covert' strike on a suspected Syrian nuclear

⁶⁰ There are parallels with Augusto Baol's idea of 'invisible theatre': see M. M. Kohtes, 'Invisible theatre: reflections on an overlooked form', *New Theatre Quarterly* 9: 33, 1993, pp. 85–9.

⁶¹ See Carson, 'Facing off and saving face', pp. 103–31.

⁶² Carson and Yarhi-Milo, 'Covert communication', pp. 132, 133–4.

⁶³ On Yemen, see Clive Jones, *Britain and the Yemen Civil War, 1962–1965* (Brighton: Sussex University Press, 2004); on Indonesia, see Christopher Tuck, "'Cut the bonds which bind our hands': deniable operations during the confrontation with Indonesia', *British Journal of Military History* 77: 2, 2013, pp. 599–623, and 'The limits of covert action: SAS operations during "Confrontation", 1964–66', *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 27: 6, 2016, pp. 996–1018.

⁶⁴ Scott D. Sagan and Jeremi Suri, 'The Madman nuclear alert: secrecy, signaling, and safety in October 1969', *International Security* 27: 4, 2003, pp. 150–83.

⁶⁵ On these examples, see Carson and Yarhi-Milo, 'Covert communication', pp. 125, 126, 140, 153.

⁶⁶ FCO 37/2216, Fenn to Acland, 30 June 1980, National Archives, Kew.

⁶⁷ See Carson, 'Facing off and saving face', pp. 103–31.

reactor to demonstrate resolve to other nuclear proliferators in the region, namely Iran. Crucially, the deterrent value depended on Israeli denials being implausible.⁶⁸ More recently, building on Carson's work on non-escalation, Russian activity in Ukraine signals to the United States and its allies that while Moscow will pursue its interests, it will do so not through direct conflict, but through more limited means, thereby circumscribing the nature of competition.⁶⁹ More recently still, in February 2018, non-acknowledgement helped defuse a potential crisis when dozens of Russians died fighting US-backed forces in Syria.⁷⁰

Remarkably, secrecy and special forces have become a sort of performative spectacle. Premiers love to associate themselves with special forces because it makes them look tough. On 24 February 2013, Michelle Obama announced the winner of the Academy Award for Best Motion Picture of 2012 while surrounded by people in uniform. Two of the top contenders featured the CIA and covert action. The award went to *Argo*, with *Zero Dark Thirty* a close runner-up. Both films claimed to feature true stories and to be focused on narrating real events. Both received government support, including access to CIA and special forces officials, together with reams of specially declassified intelligence documents.⁷¹ With policy elites inside the Pentagon and the CIA treating elaborate secrecy as an ostentatious display of importance,⁷² the CIA and special forces are now celebrated in America as super-patriots, rather in the way that the KGB and its successors are praised as macho defenders of Russia.⁷³ Intelligence and special forces perform a Janus-like function, signalling resolve to domestic audiences, yet appeasing a war-weary public opposed to conventional 'boots on the ground' in difficult locations.

Performative posturing using intelligence and special forces creates ambiguity as much as it shows resolve. It proudly demonstrates the existence of these virile capabilities without specifying when and where they are being used. This twilight zone is useful: many states, in practice, have long preferred ambiguity over deniability. The CIA neither confirms nor denies its activities. Likewise, British ministers neither confirm nor deny intelligence and special forces activity, while Israel operates a deliberate 'policy of ambiguity'. As Alexandra Perina, Attorney Advisor to the State Department in 2013–2014, explained, denials recast the 'neither confirm nor deny' principle from a 'position of inscrutability which maintains factual neutrality to one imbued, if ever so slightly, with affirmation'.⁷⁴ Many covert actions, rather than being denied outright—and plausibly—as orthodoxy would have it, therefore instead turn on non-acknowledgement. Acknowledgement and denial exist at the ends of a continuum, not as binary absolutes.

⁶⁸ Carson and Yarhi-Milo, 'Covert communication', p. 133.

⁶⁹ Carson, 'Facing off and saving face', pp. 103–31.

⁷⁰ Austin Carson, 'Russia and the US just diffused a potential crisis in Syria—and showed us how to back away from a war', *Washington Post*, 20 Feb. 2018.

⁷¹ Timothy Melley, 'Covert spectacles and the contradictions of the democratic security state', *Storyworlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies* 6: 1, 2014, pp. 61–82. See also Liam Kennedy, 'The elusive enemy: *Zero Dark Thirty* and the American worldview', *Journal of American Studies* 51: 3, 2017, pp. 965–80.

⁷² Scott Horton, *Lords of secrecy: the national security elite and America's stealth warfare* (New York: Avalon, 2016).

⁷³ Valerie Sperling, *Sex, politics, and Putin: political legitimacy in Russia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

⁷⁴ Alexandra Perina, 'Black holes and open secrets: the impact of covert action on international law', *Columbia Journal of Transnational Law* 53: 3, 2015, p. 545.

Hybrid warfare forms a timely example of implausibly deniable operations creating exploitable ambiguity. The approach, developed in the United States but now associated with Russia,⁷⁵ combines political and military activity with covert action, especially influence operations. Its aim, according to one Russia specialist, is ‘to generate a situation where it is unclear whether a state of war exists—and if it does, who is a combatant and who is not’.⁷⁶ In short, it creates ambiguity. Russian activities in Ukraine, especially in the eastern Donbas region, form the most recent prominent example. Scholars have labelled them ‘implausibly’ deniable and compared them to Soviet operations against Poland in the 1920s: ‘sufficient to keep the wound bleeding but insufficient, thus far, to warrant massive retaliation’.⁷⁷

Intervention in Ukraine displayed many of the factors associated with twenty-first-century implausible deniability discussed above. Ultra-nationalist Russian agitators seem to have moved into Ukraine to intensify the local grievances of ethnic Russians and to create disturbances. The inevitable Ukrainian response was then used to justify the intervention of irregular forces consisting of pan-Slavic Russian ‘patriots’, privateers and mercenaries, supplied and advised by Russian intelligence services and special operations forces. Under Russian supervision, the rebel units focused on radio stations and communications facilities in an attempt to shape the narrative, seeking to frame events as a humanitarian crisis that could be blamed on Kiev. All the while, Moscow denied any involvement.⁷⁸

Moving beyond hybrid warfare to political influence operations, a former senior MI6 officer described Russian covert action targeting the 2016 US presidential election as equally ‘implausibly deniable’. This operation aimed to reduce the credibility of the American election system, using tried and tested practices that date from the Soviet era, yet are now more sophisticated, especially when combined with advances in communications technology, overt propaganda and attempts to work through institutions such as the OSCE or the UN.⁷⁹ The attack on a Russian military intelligence officer turned MI6 spy, Sergei Skripal, in England in February 2018, using Russian-made military grade nerve agents, also fits into this pattern. Here again, despite widespread accusations, the Kremlin denies sponsorship.

The ambiguity created by implausible deniability is useful for a variety of reasons. First, implausible deniability opens up a gap in the decision-making of cumbersome institutions like NATO that Russia can exploit. Russia is highly unlikely to expand into the Baltic states, so it is important not to overstate the case here, but the Kremlin certainly welcomes disunity within NATO, and the

⁷⁵ On the US origins, see Frank G. Hoffman and James N. Mattis, ‘Future warfare: the rise of hybrid wars’, *Naval Institute Proceedings* 132: 11, 2005, pp. 18–19; Frank G. Hoffman, *Conflict in the 21st century: the rise of hybrid wars* (Arlington, VA: Potomac Institute for Army Studies, 2007).

⁷⁶ Thornton, ‘The changing nature of modern warfare’, pp. 41–2.

⁷⁷ Jonathan Haslam, *Near and distant neighbours: a new history of Soviet intelligence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 278–9.

⁷⁸ Galeotti, ‘Hybrid, ambiguous, and non-linear?’, pp. 282–301; Andrew Monaghan, ‘The “war” in Russia’s hybrid warfare’, *Parameters* 45: 4, 2015, p. 65. It should be noted that Putin did eventually admit Russian involvement after the operations had ended, although he differentiated between regular soldiers and covert operatives. Thanks to Bettina Renz for pointing this out.

⁷⁹ Private information.

Baltic states do face a complex array of pressures from their east.⁸⁰ Exposure of Russian action, combined with non-acknowledgement of that action by Moscow, allows the Kremlin to test NATO responses and raise questions about the utility of Article 5—as demonstrated by cyber attacks and information operations against Estonia and Latvia over the past decade.⁸¹ Unacknowledged exposure blurs the lines between internal disorder and external intervention, state and non-state activity, making it difficult for the international community to differentiate between legitimate and illegitimate behaviour. Thomas Schelling's logic of 'salami slicing' also applies here. This is dangerous as, through small individual gains, it turns on testing the resolve of one's rival.⁸²

Second, ambiguity and implausible deniability allow the construction of powerful narratives. Knowledge of Russian activity—without acknowledgement—allows the Kremlin to cultivate an image of omnipotence. NATO, and western commentators more broadly, see Russian subversion behind every gooseberry bush and fear that Putin is already waging hybrid warfare against eastern Europe, if not the whole of NATO. As Bettina Renz puts it, 'the portrayal of Western weakness in the face of superior Russian "hybrid warfare" capabilities has played directly into Putin's hands'. The fear of hybrid warfare, as operating in permanent support of some supposedly clearly defined foreign policy goal, perpetuates the idea of a powerful Kremlin needing to be countered.⁸³ Ambiguity creates space for myths to emerge and allows fear to take hold. Non-acknowledged exposure is the crucial ingredient enabling this narrative. Western journalistic methodologies seem to struggle with the fragmented media and its implication for disinformation and so-called 'fake news'. Competing narratives and a gradual approach which blurs the line between legitimate and illegitimate action mean that by the time target states are in a position to retaliate or investigate, the damage has been done.⁸⁴ Yet some deniability—even in the face of growing evidence—remains important. Overt acknowledgement would invite condemnation, escalation and retaliation by the international community.⁸⁵

Meanwhile, unofficial narratives, enabled by implausible deniability, aimed at domestic audiences are also useful. Governments have a variety of tools at their disposal, including leaks and plants, by which to transfer knowledge into

⁸⁰ See Matthew Rojansky, 'Prepared testimony for US House Committee on Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Europe, Eurasia and Emerging Threats hearing on "US policy toward the Baltic states"', 22 March 2017, <http://docs.house.gov/meetings/FA/FA14/20170322/105756/HHRG-115-FA14-Wstate-RojanskyM-20170322.pdf> (accessible on 22 March 2018).

⁸¹ Nicholas Tsagourias, 'Cyber attacks, self defence, and the problem of attribution', *Journal of Conflict and Security Law* 17: 2, 2012, pp. 229–44.

⁸² Thomas Schelling, *Arms and influence* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1966), p. 66. Thanks to Michael Poznansky for pointing this out.

⁸³ Renz, 'Russia and "hybrid warfare"', p. 284.

⁸⁴ Britain's oversight body, the Intelligence and Security Committee, only announced investigation into Russian activity in late 2017: ISC, press release, 23 Nov. 2017, <http://isc.independent.gov.uk/news-archive/23november2017> (accessible on 22 March 2018). Likewise, Obama knew about Russian activities before the 2016 election but because of various political factors and swirling narratives felt unable to respond. See Emmarie Huetteman, 'Obama White House knew of Russian election hacking but delayed telling', *New York Times*, 21 June 2017.

⁸⁵ Thornton, 'The changing nature of modern warfare', p. 44.

the public domain without officially acknowledging something.⁸⁶ Recent CIA activities in Yemen underline this. Multiple press stories revealed the classified drone programme in a controlled way, largely as a result of information planted by unnamed US officials. The plants, probably authorized by the White House, kept the American people minimally informed and characterized the operations in a manner designed to boost support without compromising security. They also signalled respect for local sovereignty by noting Yemeni consent, without formally acknowledging Yemeni involvement and so technically not violating the pledge to keep it hidden. Domestic watchdog groups struggled to secure additional details about internal procedures, collateral damage estimates and legal viewpoints.⁸⁷ Ambiguity thus has value at the domestic as well as the international level.

Conclusions

Implausible deniability, even pantomime secrecy, are not new. Some of America's larger paramilitary Cold War covert actions were so ostentatious that they could barely be disguised at all. Despite official denials, audiences were well aware of the hidden hand and to whom it belonged. Now 'special activities' is a massive enterprise with both a public and a privatized face. America's Joint Special Operations Command boasts close to 100,000 personnel and its own Special Forces University located in Florida, together with an academic journal. Yet despite this panoply of activity, the United States does not seem to have thought through the doctrinal issue of unsecrecy. Some have criticized the expansion of special forces as the uncritical elevation of tactic to strategy, merely focused on an unending global game of 'whack-a-mole' that is not fully integrated into wider policy.⁸⁸

By contrast, others have devoted more thought to implausible deniability. The UK, as demonstrated above, historically differentiated between untraceable and deniable covert actions, while much current activity takes place within a deliberately broad framework, thereby circumventing the more rigid 'neither apparent nor acknowledged' approach of the United States. Russia has a longer tradition of thinking about unsecrecy. As Galeotti reminds us: 'From the tsars through the Bolsheviks, they have been accustomed to a style of warfare that embraces much more eagerly the irregular and the criminal, the spook and the provocateur, the activist and the fellow-traveller.'⁸⁹ During the Cold War, the Soviet Union used overt and covert propaganda simultaneously, and did so alongside subversion and other more overt forms of intervention. Likewise, the Kremlin recognized the positive gains to be derived from exposure (as opposed to acknowledgement). They deemed forgeries, a speciality of the KGB, successful even if exposed. If the Americans could convince a foreign leader that a particular document was a forgery, then, the Kremlin hoped, that forgery would serve to remind the leader

⁸⁶ Perina, 'Black holes and open secrets', p. 543.

⁸⁷ David Pozen, 'The leaky Leviathan: why the government condemns and condones unlawful disclosures of information', *Harvard Law Review* 127: 512, 2013, p. 560.

⁸⁸ Linda Robinson, 'The future of special operations: beyond kill and capture', *Foreign Affairs* 91: 6, 2012, pp. 110–12.

⁸⁹ Galeotti, 'Hybrid, ambiguous, and non-linear?', p. 296.

of similar American activities in the past—or simply create fear and uncertainty about the present.⁹⁰

This article has sought to problematize the concept of plausible deniability. We conclude that, in reality, covert action is less about plausible deniability and more about non-acknowledged intervention as performance. It is misleading to assume that successful covert action necessitates that the sponsoring hand remain hidden long after the act. Some scholars predict the demise of covert action, largely because increased exposure, caused by changes in the media and communications technology, erodes plausible deniability.⁹¹ But this view rests on an assumption, challenged here, that robust plausible deniability was a key part of Cold War operations. Covert action is broader than current conceptions of plausible deniability allow. There may well be cases of covert action yet to come to light which are plausibly deniable; but, even so, our key point still stands. A spectrum of visibility and deniability exists; the one constant is non-acknowledgement.

Building on this, we asked why, despite this lack of plausibility, leaders continue to use such actions, and how these developments connect to discussions about hybrid warfare. We conclude that implausible deniability does not spell the end of covert action. The grey zone between secrecy and exposure brings significant benefits. It has communicative value and allows states to demonstrate resolve without escalating to military conflict. In an era of new nationalism, it also injects calculated uncertainty into relations between states, creating fear abroad and yielding electoral dividends at home.⁹² This has clear relevance to debates about hybrid warfare, and we seek to put the intelligence literature into dialogue with strategic studies, suggesting not only that hybrid warfare is not especially new, but that understanding covert action is integral to understanding this wider form of interventionism. This is the future. It is not only Russia that is using implausible deniability as a way of acting with impunity. The Russians believe the Americans have done the same in the post-Soviet space. Meanwhile, the US military has also pointed to China and Iran as using similarly ambiguous approaches.⁹³

Yet there are potential costs and hazards. As two venerable national security lawyers have observed, practitioners can mask imperfect secrecy by generating a vast background noise about plots and conspiracies in order to create a surfeit of information. The problem for the adversary is trying to identify which ones are serious, since countering all contingencies is impossibly costly. But this, in turn, creates issues for the perpetrator regarding loss of control. Such ambiguity and swirl of rumour has the short-term tactical effect of lending an advantage, but in the longer term could increase tension and the general possibility of conflict.⁹⁴ Under conditions of implausible deniability, covert actions are less of a precision instrument and may have more unintended consequences.

⁹⁰ Richelson, *Sword and shield*, p. 139.

⁹¹ Joseph and Poznansky, 'Media technology, covert action, and the politics of exposure'; John Prados, 'The future of covert action', in L. Johnson, ed., *Handbook of Intelligence Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2007), pp. 289–90.

⁹² Perina, 'Black holes and open secrets', p. 519.

⁹³ United States Army Special Operations Command, *SOF support to political warfare*, white paper, 10 March 2015, repr. in Lovelace, ed., *Hybrid warfare and the gray zone threat*, pp. 159–200.

⁹⁴ Michael Reisman and James Baker, *Regulating covert action* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011), p. 14.

Writers from a post-colonial perspective have frequently commented that covert action has contributed to a 'paranoid style' in the domestic politics of the Middle East and South Asia.⁹⁵ One veteran privateer recalls that as the insurgency in Iraq gathered pace, rumours abounded that 'the CIA was flying in Afghan fighters and Saudi suicide bombers to punish the Iraqis and make them look bad to the outside world'. It was widely believed that the CIA had paid looters to steal hospital equipment which was being shipped to Israel.⁹⁶ Implausible deniability will only make this phenomenon worse, and the end result is blowback. Like illicit light weapons or computer viruses, covert actions are merely an instrument, but once released into the world they are hard to control. Their endless proliferation is not an unqualified good.

⁹⁵ Huma Yusuf, 'Conspiracy fever: the US, Pakistan and its media', *Survival* 53: 4, 2011, pp. 95–118; Humeira Iqtidar, 'Conspiracy theory as political imaginary: Blackwater in Pakistan', *Political Studies* 64: 1, 2016, pp. 200–15.

⁹⁶ James Ashcroft, *Making a killing: the explosive story of a hired gun in Iraq* (London: Virgin, 2006), pp. 206–207.