

Disruption and Deniable Interventionism: Explaining the Appeal of Covert Action and Special Forces in Contemporary British Policy

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The United Kingdom has long engaged in covert action. It continues to do so today. Owing to the secrecy involved, however, such activity has consistently been excluded from debates about Britain's global role, foreign and security policy, and military planning: an important lacuna given the controversy, risk, appeal, and frequency of covert action. Examining when, how, and why covert action is used, this article argues that contemporary covert action has emerged from, and is shaped by, a specific context. First, a gap exists between Britain's perceived global responsibilities and its actual capabilities; policy elites see covert action as able to resolve, or at least conceal, this. Second, intelligence agencies can shape events proactively, especially at the tactical level, whilst flexible preventative operations are deemed well-suited to the range of fluid threats currently faced. Third, existing Whitehall machinery makes covert action viable. However, current covert action is smaller scale and less provocative today than in the early Cold War; it revolves around "disruption" operations. Despite being absent from the accompanying debates, this role was recognised in the 2015 Strategic Defence and Security Review, which placed intelligence actors at the heart of British thinking.

Britain has long engaged in covert action; the interference in the affairs of another state or non-state actor in a detectable but plausibly deniable manner. The late 1940s saw operations to “liberate” Albania. In the 1950s, attention turned to ambitious attempts at regime change in Iran, Egypt and Syria. Over the following decade, covert action extended to supporting rebels in the Yemeni civil war and disrupting Indonesian forces during Confrontation. The 1970s saw a slight dip but did include covert action closer to home in Northern Ireland – as well as a continuation on distant shores, this time intervening in Oman. Under Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s, covert action increased with operations supporting the Afghan Mujahedeen against the Soviets. Another dip occurred in the 1990s, but the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS, or more commonly known as MI6) still sought to disrupt the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction covertly. This continued into the 2000s, alongside a renewed emphasis on propaganda and Special Forces as part of the so-called War on Terror.¹

Covert action has continued since 2010. Examples include activity against Muammar Gaddafi during the Libyan civil war, operations to disrupt the Iranian nuclear programme, cyber operations against terrorists and organised criminals, and efforts to discredit Argentina through circulating false propaganda and implanting computer viruses.² Meanwhile, David Cameron sanctioned the use of Special Forces in Libya, Iraq and Syria – and was keen to use them in Algeria and Mali too. Through official documents, whistleblowers, press reports, and interviews – and a rigorous methodological process of source triangulation – it is possible to move beyond the realms of speculation and uncover a surprising amount of detail on such activity.

Nonetheless, scholarship on covert action inevitably suffers, owing to intense secrecy, from greater epistemological fragility, or uncertainty around what we can and

cannot know, than studies of other means of policy execution. E.H. Carr famously wrote that history 'has been called an enormous jig-saw with a lot of missing parts';³ but when it comes to covert action, scholars have to deal with misleading, as well as plenty of missing, pieces whilst simultaneously lacking an overall picture to guide their efforts. It is a world, to use Donald Rumsfeld's famous, if clumsy, phrase, of known unknowns and unknown unknowns. Covert action scholarship, also suffers an evidence bias. Paramilitary-type special operations often receive the most press and parliamentary attention – unsurprising given that they are among the more tangible and dramatic forms of deniable interventionism. However, this bias belies a range of nebulous and more subtle covert action existing further below the radar.⁴

Importantly, such issues do not mean that covert action should automatically be excluded from academic inquiry. Far from it: the inherent controversy, frequency, risk, and appeal of covert action make it too important to ignore. Guided by the available evidence, this article perhaps inevitably focuses on paramilitary-type special operations – although it does discuss covert propaganda, technical, and influence operations in detail where possible. However, this should not be taken to imply that Special Forces activity necessarily outweighs less tangible operations.

Interrogating when, how, and why Britain has used covert action since 2010, this article argues that contemporary covert action has emerged from, and is shaped by, a specific context. After revealing British understandings for the first time,⁵ it highlights three areas – ideational, functional, and bureaucratic – that enable covert action to flourish. First, the United Kingdom seeks to maintain a global role – a powerful idea long driving foreign policy – but is constrained by economic, military, and political factors. This creates a gap between perceived responsibilities and actual capabilities (or a responsibility/capability

disconnect). Intelligence and Special Forces actors have long been seen as a useful means of resolving this divide between ideational constructions of the global role and the material reality of decline. As constraints increase, the disconnect remains in place today – leaving covert action an appealing option. However, with the (rare) exception of the Intelligence and Security Committee, senior politicians do not publicly refer to covert action. By identifying and unpacking their language, and the assumptions therein, discourse analysis of statements and documents can be useful in demonstrating this appeal. Key language, or textual markers, includes using intelligence actors to ‘disrupt’, ‘influence’, ‘project power’, etc.⁶

Second, and functionally, intelligence actors play an active role in international relations. Increasingly in confluence with Special Forces, they engage in disruptive action to prevent or “fix” threats. This is driven by the environment in which they are now operating, the threats they are facing, and moves towards ‘fusion’ or ‘jointery’ within British security planning. Third, the domestic bureaucratic environment is conducive to covert action: legislation permits such activity; fora exist to task and coordinate covert action; whilst questions remain over the strength of *ex post facto* oversight. This article highlights the relationship between internal and external, and ideational and material factors in British use of covert action.⁷

Importantly, it argues that contemporary trends in covert action consist of smaller scale, tactical, and disruptive operations. Available evidence suggests that covert action is not seeing a return to ambitious coups and regime change activity which, as a point of comparison, existed during the early Cold War and the era of decolonisation. British involvement in attempts (some more successful than others) to install new leaders in Albania, Iran, Egypt, Syria, Indonesia, and Oman is a thing of the past. In fact, sceptics

believe that the twenty-first century provides a less permissive environment for covert action altogether than during the Cold War.⁸ This article challenges such assumptions by arguing that, whilst the current environment may be less permissive for ambitious operations, it is actually more permissive for disruption and “fixing”. This article contends that, rightly or wrongly, policymakers are turning to the covert toolkit, especially at the tactical level, to meet contemporary security challenges.⁹ Indeed, rather than taking a normative stance by critiquing the effectiveness or legitimacy of covert action in detail, this article seeks to shed light on “a missing dimension” of British policy and explain its contemporary appeal sometimes regardless of debates over operational efficacy (which is notoriously difficult to judge) altogether.

Perhaps unsurprisingly given the surrounding secrecy, current debates about Britain’s foreign and defence policy have consistently overlooked the issue of covert action. This is important; for it means that an often controversial means of interventionism is going unacknowledged and facing little discussion from academics, commentators, and policymakers. Trends in recent defence literature acknowledge that flexibility is crucial in an uncertain international environment,¹⁰ that the defence community is moving towards “jointery” and integrated full-spectrum capabilities,¹¹ and that the 2010 Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) amounted to a missed opportunity to offer a coherent approach bringing ‘together ends, ways, and means.’¹² However, the literature stops short of considering the role of covert action – despite its clear relevance – within this. Debates around current British capabilities and policy, whilst acknowledging a ‘strategic deficit’ and the need for ‘other instruments of national power’, rarely consider deniable interventions;¹³ and this is despite the literature recognising the longstanding ‘predisposition of British defence officials to seek panaceas to age-old problems.’¹⁴

Special Forces have attracted some academic attention; with scholars recognising their growing role in countering contemporary – especially asymmetric or irregular – threats.¹⁵ Much of this, however, is disconnected from the aforementioned debates: it has been either from a specifically American perspective (which separates military special operations from covert action),¹⁶ or from a strategic studies perspective (which isolates Special Forces from intelligence, examining them instead in relation to conventional forces, and which focuses predominantly on their specific military value).¹⁷ Meanwhile, those writing about defence and decline overlook the potential of intelligence and Special Forces as a force multiplier.¹⁸

Building on such recent scholarship, this article adopts a holistic approach by considering the role of Special Forces and intelligence together and arguing that such fusion, consistent with British understandings of covert action, is seen by elites as a useful means of executing policy. This article resonates widely beyond intelligence scholars and speaks to broader debates surrounding contemporary foreign and defence policy, as well as Britain's global role.

Defining British Covert Action

Although the phrase is usually seen as an Americanism, British officials have used the term “covert action” since 1945.¹⁹ More recently, the Intelligence and Security Committee (ISC) has recognised both the importance of ‘covert action’ against terrorism and the need for SIS to strengthen its ‘covert action capability’.²⁰ Government Communications Headquarters, or GCHQ, Britain's signals intelligence agency, now talks of ‘online covert action’.²¹ Nonetheless, covert action is among the most secret of all state activities and no (available)

official British definition exists. The only one accessible is that used by the military: operations 'which are so planned and executed as to conceal the identity of, or permit plausible denial by, the sponsor. They differ from clandestine operations in that emphasis is placed on concealment of the identity of the sponsor rather than on concealment of the operation: ie disguised but not concealed.'²²

The closest Britain has to an American-style "such other functions and duties" statement is found in the 1994 Intelligence Services Act, which placed SIS and GCHQ on a statutory footing. It permitted SIS to engage in 'other tasks' outside of obtaining information. Unfortunately however, the UK lacks a clear conceptual framework beyond this. Since the Second World War, Whitehall's terminology has variously included special operations, special political action, counter-subversion, deniable action, and disruptive action. All of these were slightly different and reflect the broad spectrum of covert action. To complicate matters further, policymakers rarely speak of covert action directly, but refer instead to its component parts, means, or goals. Linguistic markers present in government discourse include disrupt, influence, prevent, shape, and discredit: i.e. when intelligence agencies affect change themselves. Tactics for deniable interventionism are many; and this article considers them together. Generally speaking, the British have long thought of covert action in two categories: propaganda (including both grey and black)²³ and operations (encompassing political, economic, and special). Compared to the Americans, the UK has traditionally placed far less focus on paramilitary activities.

The British approach has been comparatively decentralised. From the 1960s, SIS or 'other departments' took charge of 'deniable' operations, which amounted to those where 'in spite of the probability that H.M.G. connived its execution and in spite of some tenable arguable evidence that H.M.G. was officially involved, H.M.G. considers it politically feasible

to deny complicity in public statements.²⁴ “Other departments” was a reference to growing Ministry of Defence (which oversaw both Special Forces and deception) involvement in covert activity. Indeed, since the late 1950s, covert action has seen closer relations between the military and SIS. This, as we shall see, is still felt keenly today.

The American system has tried to define and strictly delineate covert action and Special Forces. A deniable operation is a covert action (requiring a presidential finding and notification of congressional oversight committees) when it does not take place in a military – or anticipated military – environment.²⁵ By contrast, the UK context, which is free from the thicket of rules and regulations engulfing Washington after myriad scandals over the past 60 years, allows policymakers to use national assets more freely as they see fit.²⁶ As a result, and given that SIS lacks a paramilitary capability and operates closely with the military, the line is particularly blurred. Back in the 1980s British understandings of Special Forces encompassed covert action,²⁷ and the Army today refers to ‘shaping operations [...] through covert action by special units.’²⁸ Combined with recent moves towards fusion of intelligence and Special Forces capabilities,²⁹ this article therefore considers both covert action and Special Forces together. Whilst acknowledging the conceptual differences, it is primarily focussed on deniable interventionism. Finally, and further illustrating decentralisation, GCHQ also now plays a large role in British covert action capabilities too. In the British tradition, covert action, given its breadth and decentralised nature, is understood by means rather than actor. The skills of these various actors form an increasingly appealing toolkit for policymakers, for reasons discussed in the next section.

The Ideational: Concealing the Responsibility/Capability Disconnect

Policy elites perceive Britain as a global player and intend to maintain global influence. The 2015 SDSR proudly and unambiguously stated: 'Our vision is for a **secure and prosperous United Kingdom, with global reach and influence.**'³⁰ And this was not a one off. Earlier in the year, Cameron defiantly stated: 'Anyone who feels that Britain is somehow shrinking its role in the world; that's not the case.'³¹ In 2014, 90 per cent of Members of Parliament approvingly agreed that Britain punches above its weight globally,³² whilst the 2010 National Security Strategy (NSS) proclaimed: 'We should be under no illusion that our national interest requires our continued full and active engagement in world affairs'.³³

In what perhaps can be termed UK exceptionalism, Britain has consistently sought to operate with a heightened sense of responsibility.³⁴ This, as Croft et al have pointed out, has long been an influential idea determining policy 'irrespective of resource constraints.'³⁵ The global role largely manifests itself in an ability to maintain international order, project influence, and promote British values overseas. The role is not lost on key allies. American government officials have implored the UK to continue its global role. In 2015, for example, Defense Secretary Ashton Carter argued that 'it would be a great loss to the world if [the UK] now took action that would indicate disengagement'.³⁶

As constructivist scholars have argued, the way in which policy elites perceived their obligations was vital to the way Britain constructed its policies.³⁷ However, Britain's ability to maintain a global role is severely hampered by various constraints, creating a gap between the perception or idea and the reality. The most prominent among these is perhaps economics. Indeed, the shadow of severe austerity has loomed heavily over recent security reviews.³⁸ The 2010 SDSR emphasised 'tough choices to bring the defence budget back to balance.'³⁹ Five years later, Michael Fallon, the Defence Secretary, warned the 2015 version 'will be, quite properly, aligned with the spending review because defence, to be

deliverable, has to be affordable.’⁴⁰ And the opening lines of David Cameron’s foreword did not disappoint: ‘Our national security depends on our economic security, and vice versa.’⁴¹ The 2015 autumn spending review involved a better-than-expected outcome for the Ministry of Defence, but by this point austerity had had a severe impact. As a result of five years of cuts, the House of Commons Defence Select Committee concluded that Cameron’s government had halved Britain’s fighting power since 2010.⁴² Similar problems have hampered traditional diplomacy too. Between 2010 and 2015, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office budget fell by 21%.⁴³

At the same time, the post 9/11 environment has made assertive, confident, and overt interventionism much more difficult. As the Chief of the Defence Staff argues, ‘there is no longer a simple distinction between war and peace. We are in a state of permanent engagement in a global competition.’⁴⁴ A great deal has been written about the changing nature of warfare and, given spatial constraints, it is impossible to discuss this in detail. Core themes, recognising its growing complexity, include blurring boundaries between public and private, local and global;⁴⁵ the rise of proxy warfare;⁴⁶ and the burdens of victory.⁴⁷ Each, as the Ministry of Defence recognises, has challenged Britain’s ability to project influence militarily.⁴⁸

Domestic political factors constrain the overt pursuit of global responsibilities too. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq severely dented public support for future interventions.⁴⁹ Even the then Defence Secretary, Philip Hammond, admitted in 2013 that the British public were war-weary and would support military action only in ‘extreme circumstances.’⁵⁰ Such antipathy has developed alongside greater public cynicism towards politicians. In March 2003 (before accusations of “dodgy” dossiers and “sexing up”), 63 per cent of people trusted Tony Blair on Iraq. By 2014, 54 per cent did ‘not trust’ Cameron *at all* when debating

whether Britain should take military action.⁵¹ Moreover, the majority of the public now believe that the UK should only take military action if the House of Commons votes to support it and politicians are ever less inclined to ignore public opinion 'after the Iraq experience weighed so heavily on the legacy of Tony Blair'.⁵² All of this creates a sharp constraint on overt interventionism as a means to maintain global influence, as demonstrated by Cameron's decision, in November 2015 before the Paris terrorist attacks, to back away from a proposed vote on airstrikes in Syria precisely because he feared losing.⁵³

Driven by the idea of Britain as a world power, political elites desire a global role with global responsibilities. However, economic, military, and political factors seriously constrain traditional interventionism. This creates a gap between ideational construct and material reality; between perceived responsibilities and actual capabilities. The responsibility/capability disconnect has not gone unnoticed. In 2014, the parliamentary Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy expressed scepticism that the central aim, to maintain a global role, could be achieved in light of spending cuts. It warned that 'even during the lifespan of the current NSS, the UK's international influence has fluctuated.'⁵⁴

This is not a new problem. Britain has long been in decline, yet desired a global role. Successive governments (of all colours) have continuously turned to intelligence and Special Forces to shape events and perpetuate the global role idea through smoke, mirrors, and fancy footwork. Examination of the declassified historical record offers voluminous examples of governments, from Clement Attlee onwards, resorting to covert action in these circumstances.⁵⁵ Despite its inherent risks, covert action, rightly or wrongly, has long been seen as a potential "silver bullet".⁵⁶ Judging the effectiveness of covert action is notoriously

difficult and lies beyond the scope of this article.⁵⁷ What is important here is that regardless of quantified success, or in spite of apparent failures and limitations, British governments have consistently turned to covert action – it often proved too tempting not to. Doing so is a consequence of legitimising the great power discourse.

Covert action can and does bypass economic constraints. Threats may be a constant in international relations but, as strategists such as Colin Gray argue, interventionism ‘is affected all the time by policy, strategy, and resource limitations.’⁵⁸ Like intelligence more broadly, covert action is a form of state power, analogous to economic or military power.⁵⁹ It can also be a force multiplier allowing the execution of policy using fewer resources, fewer “boots on the ground”, and with fewer casualties. That the current government believes this is demonstrated in two ways. First, despite deep cuts elsewhere, both intelligence and Special Forces actors have consistently enjoyed investment ‘to increase their effectiveness even further.’⁶⁰ George Osborne, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, has stated that British policy responses must adapt ‘as the nature of war, espionage and terrorism changes’, and that increased funding will allow intelligence to ‘help *disrupt* terrorist plots’.⁶¹ For example, as discussed in detail below, GCHQ, one of the main beneficiaries of increased funding, has established a programme to do just that. Second, demonstrating force multiplication, the 2015 SDSR explicitly argued that agile intelligence and Special Forces actors allow Britain to ‘project our power globally’ to help secure the ‘vision’ of worldwide influence.⁶² With neither Osborne nor the SDSR willing or able to explicitly refer to covert action, both cases offer textual markers alluding to covert action which, in times of austerity, offers an apparently cost-effective means of playing a global role. It forms part of a climate pushing Britain towards covert action regardless of effectiveness.

Covert action seemingly bypasses certain military constraints too. When intervention is unavoidable, the Ministry of Defence argues that 'actors will seek to distance themselves by use of proxy forces, cyber-attacks, as well as covert and clandestine methods.'⁶³ Other commentators have pointed to a potential 'globalisation of covert action'.⁶⁴ The UK is not immune from such approaches. As the Chief of Defence Staff put it, 'all the instruments of national power need constantly to be in play' for Britain to compete in the twenty-first century global environment.⁶⁵ The government has quietly recognised covert action as such an instrument of national power and highlighted the importance of 'investing in greater numbers of Special Forces' as well as using proxies.⁶⁶ This has been put into practice. For example, attempting to bypass the problems of using conventional force to defeat non-state actors and operating in more than one battlefield simultaneously, Cameron despatched Special Forces to Libya in December 2015 to tackle ISIS there, whilst air strikes simultaneously targeted Syria and Iraq.⁶⁷

That is not to say that covert action is a suitable alternative to large scale military intervention. Given military constraints, policymakers are increasingly keen merely to manage uncertainty, disorder, and insecurity. States, according to Christopher Coker, prefer to 'patch up, shore up or underpin' using 'a series of short-term measures.'⁶⁸ Indeed, the 'tectonic shifts in world politics' faced by the British government, particularly the Arab Spring and rise of ISIS, increased uncertainty and created a more flexible and pragmatic approach.⁶⁹ In such situations certain types of covert action, particularly at the tactical level, can be useful. As one instrument of national power, they can, if effectively deployed, work to disrupt and prevent threats from materialising and, as discussed in the next section, are perceived as able to obviate the later need for military intervention. As a result, military

leaders, traditionally sceptical of unconventional forces, especially in Britain, have begun to perceive apparent or potential benefits.⁷⁰

Politically too, covert action provides an apparently convenient means of sidestepping constraints; offering a potential panacea despite the inherent risks or limitations. Public support for intervention is often limited to intelligence and Special Forces personnel only;⁷¹ the public have a 'more robust attitude' to Special Forces casualties than regular soldiers;⁷² only a third of the public believe the use of Special Forces requires parliamentary approval;⁷³ and the 'dependency on internationally sanctioned mandates' is 'less than absolute' when using covert action.⁷⁴ As far back as Harold Wilson's premiership, the government backed away from parliamentary votes on the use of force in Vietnam – and relied on covert support for the Americans instead. Following suit, Cameron evaded a vote on ISIS in Syria until after the 2015 Paris attacks, but, according to the American National Security Agency, all the while looked 'to the UK security and intelligence agencies for recommended courses of action to influence the outcome in Syria', including 'online effects operations' through GCHQ – in other words, covert action.⁷⁵

At the international political level, political elites see covert action as bolstering the Anglo-American relationship. British defence and security capabilities are seemingly of diminishing value to US policymakers and an unequal but inevitable military partnership can no longer be assumed.⁷⁶ Intelligence is an exception in which British expertise can allow the government to punch above its weight. For example, the 2010 SDSR emphasised the need to 'enhance the vital intelligence contribution to the bilateral relationship' and prioritised 'focus on areas of comparative national advantage valued by key allies, especially the United States, such as our intelligence capabilities and highly capable elite forces'.⁷⁷ SIS, Special Forces, and GCHQ are three areas in which the British contribute to an increasingly unequal

alliance, and, just as Harold Macmillan attempted in the late 1950s, drive an element of interdependence into the relationship.

Covert action certainly has its weaknesses and limitations; not least including dangers of unintended consequences, mission creep, and exposure. Nonetheless, it forms a seductive means to resolve – or at least conceal – the responsibility/capability disconnect: to try to realise the ideational construct of a global role in the face of growing constraints. Military and political leaders, often at loggerheads, now agree on the benefits of flexible and deniable interventionism.⁷⁸ It is of little surprise therefore that successive defence reviews have sought to enhance Special Forces and intelligence capabilities,⁷⁹ for tasks, as we shall see in the next section, often involving disruption operations. Indeed, the 2015 SDSR strongly emphasised the preventative and disruptive role of intelligence and Special Forces throughout, placing it, as a force multiplier, at the heart of British thinking. Having established the ideational appeal or motivation, this article will now demonstrate the role covert action can potentially play and where it is deemed a useful alternative to overt interventionism.

The Functional: Disruption, Fusion and the Rise of the “Fixers”

Intelligence actors, alongside Special Forces, attempt to fix or disrupt potential threats. Scholars, such as Alastair Finlan, have long argued that changes in both the international environment and the British defence community have made the future bright for Special Forces, and that they will ‘continue to be the “force of choice” for swift and unorthodox state responses to perceived threats.’⁸⁰ Whilst true, this is only half the story. Charles Cogan, a former senior CIA officer turned scholar, has persuasively argued that ‘intelligence

operatives in the twenty-first century will become hunters not gatherers. They will not simply sit back and gather information that comes in, analyse it and then decide what to do about it.⁸¹

A desire to help fill the gap between perceived responsibilities and capabilities has, in part, driven this active turn; so too has the nature of the threats and the climate in which they are faced. Both have caused a preference for pragmatic and preventative disruptive action designed to counter threats and manage uncertainty at source – before they escalate into a serious problem. Indeed, the security establishment has long recognised the dangers of insecurity and risk, often at the expense of a ‘unified, hegemonic national interest’.⁸² Given that the ‘active management’ of risk involves averting speculative scenarios rather than attaining specific outcomes,⁸³ covert action potentially offers a means of anticipatory self-defence and action before proof of harm.⁸⁴ This is necessary, for example, in countering terrorism. Rather than ambitiously seeking to rebuild nations, it, if used wisely, offers a light footprint, obviates the burdens of victory, and disrupts hostile groups before they can attack. Like any means of policy execution, covert action also has limitations (both practically and in terms of democratic legitimacy) and must be properly managed and coordinated,⁸⁵ but the appeal in the current international climate remains strong.

Disruption is not especially new, but has been overlooked in academic literature and policy debates because of secrecy. In fact, SIS has increasingly engaged in disruptive activities since the end of the Cold War,⁸⁶ whilst the ISC has consistently recognised the virtues of such action.⁸⁷ Disruption, often involving a fusion of intelligence and operational functions, has been integral to British counter-terrorism since 9/11.⁸⁸ While many recognise the long-held role of Special Forces in flexible and direct action,⁸⁹ the Special Forces community has recently undergone a transformation towards flatter organisational

structures, towards influence (or less kinetic) operations, and, crucially, towards closer relations with intelligence actors.⁹⁰ This has been clearly demonstrated by recent organisational reforms. In 2007, E Squadron was established as a composite force of Special Air Service, Special Boat Service and Special Reconnaissance Regiment personnel operating at the disposal of SIS and the Director of Special Forces.⁹¹ More recently, the Treasury's 2015 Spending Review emphasised the importance of 'fusing' intelligence with military actors to 'disrupt' global threats,⁹² whilst a Joint Security Fund was created to coordinate funding.⁹³

It is of no surprise that British Special Forces, alongside SIS, adopted a central role in the so-called Global War on Terror and its aftermath, especially given the difficulties surrounding military or diplomatic responses to terrorism.⁹⁴ Such means are vital given 'the continued existence of a security environment that is dominated by irregular threats, transnational networks and sub-state groups.'⁹⁵ For example, Cameron has sanctioned a new 'proactive' Special Forces approach to ISIS, apparently giving Special Forces 'carte blanche' to launch raids inside Syria and Iraq,⁹⁶ alongside sending the SAS (and likely the SBS) to Libya to *disrupt* and *prevent* the emergence of a new ISIS headquarters there.⁹⁷ Alongside broader recognition of the disruptive role, the 2015 SDSR made it clear that Special Forces will 'act decisively' where appropriate.⁹⁸ Similarly, the SIS website clearly acknowledges the agency's involvement in *disrupting* terrorist threats overseas.⁹⁹

Here it is possible to move away from the aforementioned evidence bias in favour of Special Forces and examine propaganda, influence, and technical operations as well. There is more to British covert action than paramilitary activity and GCHQ disrupts terrorist targets too. In 2012, the ISC explicitly called for an increase in online disruption operations, which it defined as: 'Accessing the networks or systems of others to hamper their activities or

capabilities without detection (or at least without attribution)'.¹⁰⁰ Much contemporary activity revolves around technical sabotage and a range of tricks, which, as one insider put it, will never see the light of day.¹⁰¹ This is some of Britain's most secret activity – but it is possible to give clear examples: GCHQ has significantly disrupted Taleban operations in Afghanistan by blitzing mobile phones with text messages and calls every 10 seconds.¹⁰² Current disruption and technical sabotage techniques also involve sending viruses and Denial of Service attacks (known as ROLLING THUNDER and PREDATORS FACE), whilst ANGRY PIRATE is 'a tool that will permanently disable a target's account on their computer'. GCHQ is going on the offensive. Its staff talks of 'active covert internet operations', proactive means of accessing data, and using this 'to make something happen in the real or cyber world.'¹⁰³

GCHQ also engages in influence operations to disrupt and discredit targets. Policy elites see these as important: the ISC requested more 'information operations' – especially in the cyber realm;¹⁰⁴ the Ministry of Defence recognises that 'success in future conflict, especially against adaptive and agile adversaries, will require a shift away from kinetic to influence activity';¹⁰⁵ and the Chief of Defence Staff has pointed to a 'significant increase in the power of a potent narrative'.¹⁰⁶ Emphasising the need to win the battle for ideology, David Cameron has compared the fight against ISIS to the Cold War, itself a high point for covert action and underground battles over ideology, culture, and media.¹⁰⁷ Psychological operations, including unattributable propaganda, are therefore important.

With a long history of unattributable propaganda, revolving around the Information Research Department (IRD) between 1948 and 1977, the Foreign Office continues to support 'information operations' today.¹⁰⁸ Meanwhile, the Home Office created a Research, Information and Communications Unit in 2007 designed to 'generate challenge to terrorist

ideology and the claims made by terrorist groups'.¹⁰⁹ Although current propaganda activity is limited by a lack of clear message,¹¹⁰ some similarities seemingly exist with the IRD especially in its desire to discreetly 'directly challenge terrorist propaganda' and engage in a 'counter-narrative campaign'.¹¹¹

GCHQ, however, can discredit a target more covertly. For example, it recommends 'writing a blog purporting to be one of their victims.' Another capability, codenamed CHANGELING, involves the 'ability to spoof any email address and send email under that identity'. GCHQ can also change a target's photos on a social networking site – a move it boasts 'can take "paranoia" to a whole new level.' Other ways GCHQ can manipulate targets in order to disrupt or discredit include the 'ability to artificially increase traffic to a website' (GATEWAY), 'to inflate page views on websites' (SLIPSTREAM), and to 'change [the] outcome of online polls' (UNDERPASS).¹¹² As noted above, the American National Security Agency suggested that Cameron has long turned to these capabilities in Syria.¹¹³

Driven by the need for preventative action (or the 'active management' of risk), disruption extends beyond counter-terrorism to other contemporary threats too. As Richard Aldrich argues, a globalised world has forced governments to 'place their intelligence and security services in the front line against a range of elusive but troublesome opponents,' again leading to a proactive intelligence community.¹¹⁴ The proliferation of WMD, for example, requires preventative disruption, alongside a broader range of counter-proliferation measures including law enforcement and multilateral activity. SIS has had success at this. John Sawers, its former Chief, admitted that SIS ran a series of covert operations to 'slow down' Iranian development.¹¹⁵ Similarly, the Butler Review into Weapons of Mass Destruction hinted at SIS action to disrupt North Korean development in the 1990s.¹¹⁶ The same can be said for organised crime, against which GCHQ's false blogs

have been successful,¹¹⁷ as well as risks emanating from mass migration. Indeed, Cameron has tasked intelligence personnel with disrupting human trafficking networks in the Mediterranean.¹¹⁸ Again, this broadens our understanding of contemporary covert action beyond the constraints of the evidence bias allowing insight into other sensitive areas.

Like counter-terrorism, in all these cases the nature of the threat, rightly or wrongly, invites covert action. Objective assessments of efficacy are difficult, and covert action does have inherent weaknesses, but it is clear that policymakers are turning to such operations. On one hand, these threats are difficult to counter entirely overtly. On the other hand, they require preventative management. The aim is to disrupt or fix a potential threat before it reaches British shores, thereby quietly bypassing constraints against overt intervention and even preventing the responsibility/capability disconnect from arising in the first place. It is a potentially virtuous circle – and one which appeals to policymakers. Although it may yet prove ambitious, this was demonstrated in the 2015 SDSR which recognised that intelligence agencies are able to reduce ‘the likelihood of threats materialising’ through disruptive action.¹¹⁹

Whilst encouraging a more active intelligence approach, the diffuse and elusive nature of these threats simultaneously constrains larger more ambitious covert actions. Historically, British covert action focused on elites: on kings, generals, tribal chiefs, and opposition leaders. This is now out of date. As recent international events have highlighted and governments recognised, the UK operates in a networked world in which traditional political authority carries less agency than fifty years ago. In an era of mass communication, social movements, and grassroots change, there are more variables to control and it is far harder to affect manageable change.¹²⁰ Again therefore, the available evidence suggests that covert action is taking place at the tactical level and attempting to disrupt or prevent

threats rather than instigate regime change or engage in longer term activity. This applies not only to militaristic special operations, but to influence and technical operations too.

Having demonstrated why policymakers perceive covert action as appealing, this article will now argue that existing Whitehall structures enable covert action too.

The Bureaucratic: A Permissive Climate

Demonstrating the interplay between internal and external factors, Whitehall possesses a climate conducive for using intelligence and Special Forces actors to shape events. Increased political and legal scrutiny does not necessarily prevent operations. It may well curtail ambitious operations, but it has less impact on disruption or discrediting, which are less risky and provocative. This is because 'other tasks' are a legally avowed function of SIS and GCHQ,¹²¹ whilst Section Seven of the Intelligence and Security Act (known in the press as the "James Bond clause") protects intelligence officers from prosecution for otherwise illegal actions anywhere in the world, so long as they were signed off by the Secretary of State.¹²² Indeed, much to civil liberties campaigners' perpetual disappointment, the 1994 legislation was actually rather permissive. SIS and GCHQ now have less to fear from exposure and simply have to show that their covert operations were proportionate and had been properly ratified.¹²³ We have already seen myriad examples under the first Cameron government, including in March 2011 when William Hague, as Foreign Secretary, approved SIS's initial covert operation to aid the Libyan rebels. Even this public failure did not prevent subsequent covert action in that country;¹²⁴ again demonstrating how the climate outlined here is perhaps more important than objective or rational judgements of efficacy in pushing British policymakers towards covert action.

Covert action is permitted in the British system; and scrutiny does not equate to rejection. Most British covert action since 1945 has consistently been tied to the core executive – at the strategic level at the very least. Back in 1950, Clement Attlee and his Foreign Secretary, Ernest Bevin, authorised a pattern of covert action behind the Iron Curtain.¹²⁵ In the mid-1950s, Anthony Eden and Harold Macmillan authorised a general approach to covert action in the Middle East and Southeast Asia.¹²⁶ This remains the case today with David Cameron looking to intelligence actors to influence developments and supposedly giving Special Forces *carte blanche* against ISIS.¹²⁷

In 2010, Cameron created the National Security Council, further enhancing the permissive environment for covert action. It provides a mechanism to task, scrutinise, and coordinate such activity. It does so in three ways. First, the NSC sits at the heart of the Whitehall intelligence and security world. It drives the intelligence community's work and, symptomatic of the growing centrality of intelligence over recent decades, offers an unparalleled interaction with policy. It institutionalises regular contact between senior policymakers and the intelligence chiefs, thereby naturally offering a useful framework for the discussion of covert action. Iain Lobban, then head of GCHQ, believed that the NSC is 'one of the best things this government has done' because it 'takes the sentiment in the room and translates it into tasking for each organisation'.¹²⁸ Institutionalised contact between the core executive and the heads of SIS and GCHQ has resulted in the latter being asked to disrupt, sabotage, or "fix" a certain problem.¹²⁹ Two recent examples of this include Cameron's instruction to intelligence and Special Forces to hunt down so-called "Jihadi John",¹³⁰ and SIS's bungled attempt to make contact with Libyan rebels which the Foreign Secretary blamed on 'pressure from ministers' to do something.¹³¹

Second, there is historical precedent for this. The NSC machinery operates in a similar way to a string of earlier interdepartmental committees tasked with scrutinising and coordinating the role of covert action as part of broader (often anti-Communist or anti-nationalist) interventionism. These include the Official Committee on Communism Overseas (of the 1950s) and the Joint Action Committee (created in the 1960s).¹³² In all three cases, Cabinet Office machinery has provided a forum to set a framework for covert action and to task the intelligence agencies. Third, it is difficult to thrive in Whitehall's Darwinian jungle. In order to do so, government bodies constantly seek to remove constraints on their performance, the most prominent of which are budgetary and personnel cuts.¹³³ It is entirely predictable that in an era of austerity, SIS would appeal to the Prime Minister's desire for action; especially when operating in an environment where they are regularly in institutionalised contact. Closely attuned to policy needs and priorities, SIS now has a perfect forum for event-shaping operations.¹³⁴

Evidence of this is already emerging. The NSC has, for example, apparently approved a 'kill list' of individuals to be targeted 'as a last resort'.¹³⁵ Before then, covert action in Libya was overseen by the NSC machinery. This involved operations to develop the rebels' embryonic ground forces, including dispatching an advisory team and building up a longer-term train and equip project. The National Security Council's sub-committee on Libya met over sixty times during the conflict to consider both strategic and tactical matters and was accompanied by an official equivalent. Importantly, policymakers and intelligence chiefs debated the scope and possibilities of covert action around the NSC table. It provided a forum in which SIS, GCHQ, and Special Forces could be tasked.¹³⁶ Again however, it promoted tactical level, or short term, covert action, not least because real-time communications allow senior politicians to become more operationally involved.¹³⁷

Moreover, regarding Special Forces at least, ‘short-term operational requirements have tended to trump more long-term’ alternatives. A more ambitious scale leads to an increase in personnel – and a decrease in quality.¹³⁸ This inevitably prioritises the disruption and preventative operations outlined above.

At the same time, British review and oversight mechanisms are comparatively weak. The ISC has long been criticised for being founded as a statutory ‘committee of parliamentarians’ selected by, and reporting to, the Prime Minister rather than a parliamentary committee. Moreover, it traditionally had limited powers to acquire sensitive information, lacked adequate resources, and was initially seen as overly deferential to the intelligence agencies.¹³⁹ Perhaps most importantly regarding covert action, it was charged with examining policy, rather than operational or ‘individual cases’.¹⁴⁰ After all, covert action is not a policy. It is a means of executing policy. The 2013 Justice and Security Act strengthened the ISC by increasing its remit over operational matters, strengthening some of its powers, and extending parliamentary control. Despite this, its monopoly over intelligence and the narrowness of its membership still prevents wider parliamentary scrutiny and oversight, including by the Foreign Affairs Select Committee. This may be highly problematic from a normative or democratic perspective, but on a pragmatic level it increases the appeal of covert action to the executive.

Select committees still face ‘very real limits with regard to access to information and personnel from the agencies and from government.’¹⁴¹ In 2014, the Home Affairs Select Committee concluded that ‘We do not believe the current system of oversight is effective and we have concerns that the weak nature of that system has an impact upon the credibility of the agencies’ accountability, and to the credibility of Parliament itself.’ MPs have compared the British system unfavourably to its American counterpart in which

congressional committees are afforded 'latitude [...] by the executive' to question the work of intelligence agencies.¹⁴²

Aside from select committee statements, evidence of this weakness can be found in two other areas. First, ISC reports offer little discussion of covert action beyond an acknowledgement that it is undertaken. The only exception was a brief paragraph on the failure in Libya which merely blamed ministers for demanding quick action and praised SIS's ability to learn lessons.¹⁴³ Second, the Americans appreciated Britain's weak oversight system when considering the UK's value in the "special intelligence relationship".¹⁴⁴ This was, as the Snowden documents revealed, certainly the case regarding intelligence collection, but it has also extended to covert action. The CIA valued British assistance in the covert support to the Mujahedeen in the 1980s Afghan-Soviet war, for example. One reason was because British legal restrictions were looser, especially compared to the post-Watergate climate in which the CIA operated.¹⁴⁵ Similarly, the American system of authorising covert action is more rigid than the British. Under the 1991 Intelligence Authorisation Act, Congress must be informed through a written presidential finding. This is not the case in the UK. There is a difference between scrutiny and coordination on the one hand and *ex post facto* oversight on the other. The latter is comparatively weak, giving SIS room to manoeuvre; but the former is reasonably strong, thereby ensuring SIS operations are not "rogue elephants" and limited to disruptive operations less likely to escalate.

Conclusions

The United Kingdom engages in covert action. The available evidence suggests that this is generally of a pragmatic, small scale, and disruptive nature, taking place predominantly at

the tactical level. The context from which this is emerging is important in so far as it shapes and enables such covert action. The idea of a global role remains a key driver of British policy, but the execution of this is hamstrung by economic, political, and military constraints. This creates a gap between perceived responsibilities and capabilities; ideational construct and material reality. Despite potential weakness and limitations of covert action, successive governments have long seen it as a means of resolving this and, as constraints intensify, David Cameron is following suit.

At a functional level, current threats necessitate a preventative and flexible response designed to disrupt problems before they materialise. The past decade has witnessed a growing fusion between intelligence and Special Forces, as well as intelligence personnel working proactively and operationally in their own right. At the bureaucratic level, and demonstrating interplay between internal and external factors, the domestic machinery is conducive for such activity. SIS, GCHQ and Special Forces are permitted to engage in authorised operations overseas, the National Security Council presents a powerful forum in which to task intelligence agencies, whilst oversight is comparatively weak. These factors combined create an atmosphere permissive to small scale, less provocative covert action, including disruption and discrediting operations. The fluidity of the international environment and greater scrutiny act against longer-term more ambitious activity. Indeed, the 2015 SDSR consistently recognised the importance of intelligence in 'disrupting threats'.¹⁴⁶

Covert action forms a broad toolkit. This article has not intended to suggest that all forms will be applicable in every circumstance. It is not the case, for example, that online covert action will plug a military gap. Instead, this article has contested that covert action is seen as both allowing the maintenance of a global role with fewer resources and capabilities

and (theoretically) preventing future threats from materialising, thereby preventing the need to face such constraints in the first place. It is not necessarily arguing that covert action will successfully achieve this. Indeed, covert action is a risky means of executing policy and involves a range of limitations, from “blowback” to escalation, and must be properly managed, coordinated, and integrated into overt policies. This article merely argues that covert action forms an attractive instrument of national power and one which merits proper consideration.

The evidence is already beginning to mount. Taken together it is persuasive. But it is almost entirely absent from existing public debates. Acknowledgement in academia and by government that the UK engages in this sort of activity is only a first step. There are now debates to be had on the definitions and framework of British covert action, on effective scrutiny and authorisation processes, on effective oversight mechanisms, on the strengths, weaknesses, efficacy, and ethics of covert action, and on how it can best be used to counter international threats such as terrorism which feature so heavily in current policy.

¹ See Richard Aldrich, *The Hidden Hand: Britain, America, and Cold War Secret Intelligence*, (London: John Murry, 2001); Philip Davies, *MI6 and the Machinery of Spying* (London: Frank Cass, 2004).

² BBC, “UK Spied on Argentina”, (3 April 2015), <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-32172669>>

³ E.H. Carr, *What is History?* (London: Penguin, 1964), p.13.

⁴ For a discussion see Loch Johnson, ‘On Drawing a Bright Line for Covert Operations’, *The American Journal of International Law*, 86/2 (1992), pp.284-309.

⁵ Some attempts have been made to ascertain a British “way” in intelligence, but understandings of covert action are dominated by the American context. On the former see Michael Goodman, ‘The British Way in Intelligence’, in M. Grant (ed.) *The British Way in Cold Warfare: Intelligence, Diplomacy and the Bomb, 1945-1975*, (London: Continuum, 2009), pp.127-140. A rare, if brief, exception to the latter is Len Scott, ‘Secret Intelligence, Covert Action, and Clandestine Diplomacy,’ *Intelligence and National Security*, 19/2, (2004), pp.324-325.

⁶ For a discussion of discourse analysis and foreign policy see, Oliver Daddow, ‘Constructing a “Great” Role for Britain in an Age of Austerity: Interpreting Coalition Foreign Policy, 2010–2015’, *International Relations*, 29/3, (2015), pp.306-307.

⁷ This has long been recognised as a core part of British defence policy more broadly. See Stuart Croft et al, *Britain and Defence, 1945-2000: A Policy Re-evaluation*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), p.137.

⁸ John Prados, ‘The Future of Covert Action’ in L. Johnson (ed.) *Handbook of Intelligence Studies*, (New York: Routledge, 2007), pp.289-90.

⁹ In the interests of space limitation and theoretical parsimony, considerations of whether or not covert action is necessarily the most suitable, successful, or morally appropriate response to individual situations lie beyond the scope of this article. It limits its argument to that of policymakers increasingly turning to covert action.

¹⁰ See for example, Paul Cornish and Andrew Dorman, 'National Defence in the Age of Austerity', *International Affairs*, 85/4, (2009), p.739.

¹¹ See Robert Fry, 'Smart Power and the Strategic Deficit', *RUSI Journal*, 159/6, (2014), p.29; Michael Dunn et al, 'From Defence Reform to Defence Transformation,' *RUSI Journal*, 156/5, (2011), pp.14-19.

¹² See discussion in Mark Phillips, 'Policy-Making in Defence and Security', *RUSI Journal*, 157/1, (2012), p.28; Matt Cavanagh, 'Missed Opportunity: How Failures of Leadership Derailed the SDSR,' *RUSI Journal*, 156/5, (2011), pp.6-13; Andrew Dorman, 'Making 2+2=5: The 2010 Strategic Defence and Security Review', *Defense & Security Analysis*, 27/1, (2011), pp.77-87.

¹³ On security and foreign policy see Daddow, 'Constructing a "Great" Role for Britain in an Age of Austerity', p.309; Jamie Gaskarth, *British Foreign Policy*, (Cambridge: Polity, 2013); Justin Morris, 'How Great is Britain? Power, Responsibility, and Britain's Future Global Role', *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 13/3, (2011), pp.326-347; David McCourt, 'Has Britain Found its Role?', *Survival*, 56/2, (2014), pp.159-178. On defence policy see Trevor Taylor, 'The Limited Capacity of Management to Rescue UK Defence Policy', *International Affairs*, 88/2, (2012), pp.223-242; Fry, 'Smart Power and the Strategic Deficit'; Parliamentarians have also acknowledged a strategic deficit but not looked to deniable interventionism. See, The Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy, *The Next National Security: First Report of Session 2014-2015*, (London: The Stationery Office, 2015), <<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/jt201415/jtselect/jtnatsec/114/114.pdf>>.

¹⁴ Stuart Croft et al, *Britain and Defence*, p.137.

¹⁵ See Iver Johansen, 'Special Operations Forces – A Weapon of Choice for Future Operations?' in P. Norheim-Martinsen and T. Nyhamar (eds.), *International Military Operations in the 21st Century: Global Trends and the Future of Intervention*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), pp.116-136.

¹⁶ See for a recent example, John Prados, *The US Special Forces: What Everyone Needs to Know*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

¹⁷ See, Alastair Finlan, *Special Forces, Strategy and the War on Terror: Warfare by other Means*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008); James Kiras, *Special Operations and Strategy: From World War Two to the War on Terror*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006).

¹⁸ Michael Clarke and Michael Codner (eds.), *A Question of Security: The British Defence Review in an Age of Austerity*, (London: IB Tauris/RUSI, 2011); David Reynolds, *Britannia Overruled: British Policy and World Power in the Twentieth Century*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013); Stuart Croft et al, *Britain and Defence*; The Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy, *The Next National Security*.

¹⁹ For historical examples see Jeffery, *The Secret History of MI6* (NY: Penguin Press, 2010), p.606; The National Archives (TNA) CAB 134/3, 'The "Cold War" in the Far East', AC(O)(50)31, 19 July 1950; CAB 21/5379, 'Counter Subversion Committee: Terms of Reference and Operational Procedures', October 1963; PREM 13/268, Burke Trend to Harold Wilson, 13 March 1967.

²⁰ ISC, *Annual Report 2004-2005*, (London: Crown, 2005), para 20; ISC, *Annual Report 2007-2008*, (London: Crown, 2008), para 75; ISC, *Annual Report 2008-2009*, (London: Crown, 2009), para 69, 89.

²¹ GCHQ, 'Cyber Integration: The Art of the Possible', *SigDev Spy Conference*, (2012), powerpoint slides available via NBC News, *The Snowden Files: British Spies used Sex and "Dirty Tricks"*, (2014), <http://msnbcmedia.msn.com/i/msnbc/sections/news/snowden_cyber_offensive1_nbc_document.pdf>, accessed February 2014.

²² Army Field Manual Volume One, Combined Arms Operations, Part 10, Counter Insurgency Operations (Strategic and Operational Guidelines), Revised and Updated Version, (2007), Annex A, para 17.

²³ Grey propaganda is unattributable information with an unknown sponsor. It is often "true" but may have been selectively edited. Black propaganda is either unattributable or falsely purporting to come from a different sponsor, often to discredit the target. It can contain disinformation.

²⁴ Joint Action Committee, 'Directive to Special Operations', JA(64)3, October 1964, acquired via Freedom of Information Act.

²⁵ There is, however, still plenty of debate and turf wars about covert action and Special Forces in the American context. Andru Wall, 'Demystifying the Title 10-Title 50 Debate: Distinguishing Military Operations, Intelligence Activities and Covert Action', *Harvard Law School National Security Journal*, (2011): 85-142, p.85; Jennifer Kibbe, 'The Rise of the Shadow Warriors', *Foreign Affairs*, (2004) <<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2004-03-01/rise-shadow-warriors>>.

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- ²⁶ Thanks to one of the anonymous peer reviewers for this point.
- ²⁷ Quoted in Johansen, 'Special Operations Forces', p.99.
- ²⁸ Army Field Manual, para 36.
- ²⁹ Treasury, 'Spending Review and Autumn Statement 2015', (London: Crown, 2015), para.1.75; Mark Urban, 'Inside Story of the UK's Secret Mission to Beat Gaddafi', *BBC News*, (19 January 2012), <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-16573516>>.
- ³⁰ HMG, 'National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015: A Secure and Prosperous United Kingdom', (London: Crown, 2015), para 1.1 (emphasis in original).
- ³¹ David Cameron quoted in Michael Settle, 'Cameron insists Britain's global role is not shrinking in the face of a defence budget squeeze', *The Herald*, (11 March 2015), <http://www.heraldsotland.com/news/13205220.Cameron_insists_Britain_s_global_role_is_not_shrinking_in_the_face_of_a_defence_budget_squeeze/>.
- ³² Rebecca Writer Davies, 'What Role for Britain on the World Stage?', *Ipsos-Mori*, (29 January 2015), <<https://www.ipsos-mori.com/newsevents/blogs/thepoliticswire/1630/What-role-for-Britain-on-the-world-stage.aspx>>.
- ³³ HM Government, *A Strong Britain in an Age of Austerity: The National Security Strategy*, (London: Crown, 2010), <https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/61936/national-security-strategy.pdf>, p.4.
- ³⁴ Adrian Johnson, 'Introduction', in A. Johnson (ed.) *Wars in Peace: British Military Operations since 1991*, (London: RUSI, 2014), pp.2-3; Morris, 'How Great is Britain?', pp.326-347; see also Taylor, 'The Limited Capacity of Management to Rescue UK Defence Policy', pp.234-235.
- ³⁵ Stuart Croft et al, *Britain and Defence*, p.135.
- ³⁶ BBC, 'US defence secretary warns against UK armed forces cuts', *BBC News*, (1 June 2015), <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-32955231>>.
- ³⁷ Croft et al, *Britain and Defence*, p.136; Morris, 'How Great is Britain?', p.332-333.
- ³⁸ See Daddow, 'Constructing a "Great" Role for Britain in an Age of Austerity', pp.303-318.
- ³⁹ HM Government, *A Strong Britain in an Age of Austerity*, p.4.
- ⁴⁰ Michael Fallon, *Hansard*, cm.885, (8 June 2015), <<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201516/cmhansrd/cm150608/debtext/150608-0001.htm>>.
- ⁴¹ David Cameron, 'Foreword' to HMG, 'A Secure and Prosperous United Kingdom', p.6.
- ⁴² Air Chief Marshal Sir Michael Graydon et al, 'Here's an Election Idea: Why not Weaponize Defence?' *The Spectator*, (11 February 2015), <<http://blogs.spectator.co.uk/coffeehouse/2015/02/who-will-speak-for-defence-in-election-year/>>.
- ⁴³ LSE Diplomacy Commission, 'Investing for Influence', (2015), <<http://www.lse.ac.uk/IDEAS/publications/reports/pdf/LSE-IDEAS-Investing-for-Influence.pdf>>, p.17.
- ⁴⁴ General Sir Nicholas Houghton, 'Building a British military fit for future challenges rather than past conflicts', speech at Chatham House, (15 September 2015), <<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/building-a-british-military-fit-for-future-challenges-rather-than-past-conflicts>>. This point is redolent of broader debates about the changing nature of warfare. See for example, Rupert Smith, *The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World*, (London: Penguin, 2006).
- ⁴⁵ Mary Kaldor, *New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), pp.2-6.
- ⁴⁶ Andrew Mumford, *Proxy Warfare*, (Cambridge: Polity, 2013); Geraint Hughes, *My Enemy's Enemy: Proxy Warfare in International Politics*, (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2012).
- ⁴⁷ Christopher Coker, *War in an Age of Risk*, (Cambridge: Polity, 2009), p.84, 121.
- ⁴⁸ Ministry of Defence, Development, Concept and Doctrine Centre, 'Strategic Trend Programme: Global Strategic Trends – out to 2040', (2010), p.15, <https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/33717/GST4_v9_Feb10.pdf>.
- ⁴⁹ Joel Faulkner Rogers and Jonathan Eyal, 'Of Tails and Dogs: Public Support and Elite Opinion', in A. Johnson (ed.) *Wars in Peace: British Military Operations since 1991*, (London: RUSI, 2014), p.162, 170, 175-176, 178; See also Oliver Daddow and Pauline Schnapper, 'Liberal Intervention in the Foreign Policy Thinking of Tony Blair and David Cameron', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 26/2, (2013), pp.330-349; Rachael Gribble et al, 'British Public Opinion After a Decade of War: Attitudes to Iraq and Afghanistan', *Politics*, (2010) DOI:10.1111/1467-9256.12073, p.4, 6; Codner, 'The Two Towers', in A. Johnson (ed.) *Wars in Peace: British Military Operations since 1991*, (London: RUSI, 2014), p.79.
- ⁵⁰ Quoted in Gribble et al, 'British Public Opinion after a Decade of War', p.14.

- ⁵¹ Rogers and Eyal, 'Of Tails and Dogs', p.176; Joel Faulkner Rogers, 'Report on British attitudes to defence, security and the armed forces', *YouGov*, (25 October 2014), <<https://yougov.co.uk/news/2014/10/25/report-british-attitudes-defence-security-and-armed-forces/>>.
- ⁵² Rogers and Eyal, 'Of Tails and Dogs', p.182; Rogers, 'Report on British attitudes to defence, security and the armed forces'.
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- ⁵⁴ Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy, *The Next National Security*, p.11.
- ⁵⁵ On Attlee, for example, see TNA: CAB 21/2750, 'Proposed Activities Behind the Iron Curtain' (Third Revise), AC(O)(50)52, November 1950.
- ⁵⁶ Covert action of course is one means of resolving this paradox. Others include soft power. This, however, did not escape the cuts, with the BBC World Service greatly reduced. Michael Clarke, 'The Coalition and Foreign Affairs', in A. Seldon and M. Finn (eds.), *The Coalition Effect, 2010-2015*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p.352. See also Christopher Hill and Sarah Beadle, *The Art of Attraction: Soft Power and the UK's Role in the World* (London: British Academy, 2014), p.3.
- ⁵⁷ See this following discussions of the American experience: Herman Cohen et al, 'Who Lost Congo: The Consequences of Covert Action', *Foreign Affairs*, (2015); Ray Takeh, 'What Really Happened in Iran: The CIA, the Ouster of Mosaddeq, and the Restoration of the Shah', *Foreign Affairs*, (2014); Stephen Weissman, 'What Really Happened in Congo: The CIA, the Murder of Lumumba, and the Rise of Mobutu', *Foreign Affairs*, (2014); Jack Devine, 'What Really Happened in Chile: The CIA, the Coup Against Allende, and the Rise of Pinochet', *Foreign Affairs*, (2014).
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- ⁵⁹ Michael Herman, *Intelligence Power in Peace and War*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p.1.
- ⁶⁰ HMG, *Securing Britain in an Age of Uncertainty*, p.5; HM Treasury, *Spending Round 2013*, (London: Crown, 2013), <https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/209036/spending-round-2013-complete.pdf>, p.54; Treasury, *Summer Budget 2015*, (London: Crown, 2015), p.27; Treasury, 'Spending Review and Autumn Statement 2015', (London: Crown, 2015); HMG, 'A Secure and Prosperous United Kingdom', para. 4.45.
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- ⁶³ MoD, Development, Concept and Doctrine Centre, 'Strategic Trend Programme', p.15.
- ⁶⁴ See for example, Daniel Wagner, 'The Globalisation of Covert Action', *The World Post*, (9 September 2012), <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/daniel-wagner/globalization-of-covert-action_b_1869134.html>.
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- ⁶⁷ Bel Trew, 'ISIS Builds New Stronghold on the Mediterranean Coast', *The Times*, (2 December 2015), <<http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/news/world/middleeast/article4629427.ece>>.
- ⁶⁸ Coker, *War in an Age of Risk*, p.124. This point is redolent of broader debates about risk and insecurity beyond the scope of this article. See Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*, (London: SAGE, 1992); Yee-Kuang Heng, *War as Risk Management: Strategy and Conflict in an Age of Globalised Risks*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006).
- ⁶⁹ Clarke, 'The Coalition and Foreign Affairs', p.368.
- ⁷⁰ Matthew Johnson, 'The Growing Relevance of Special Operations Forces in U.S. Military Strategy', *Comparative Strategy*, 25/4, (2006), p.273.
- ⁷¹ Gribble et al, 'British Public Opinion after a Decade of War', p.14.
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- ⁷³ Rogers, 'Report on British attitudes to defence, security and the armed forces'.
- ⁷⁴ Johansen, 'Special Operations Forces', p.100.

- ⁷⁵ Quoted in Richard Aldrich and Rory Cormac, *The Black Door: Spies, Secret Intelligence, and British Prime Ministers*, (London: William Collins, 2016), p.477.
- ⁷⁶ Michael Clarke, 'Brothers in Arms: The British-American Alignment', in A. Johnson (ed.) *Wars in Peace: British Military Operations since 1991*, (London: RUSI, 2014); Graydon et al, 'Here's an Election Idea'.
- ⁷⁷ HM Government, *Securing Britain in an Age of Uncertainty*, p.60,13.
- ⁷⁸ See Johnson, 'The Growing Relevance of Special Operations', pp.273-296.
- ⁷⁹ Codner, 'The Two Towers', p.54.
- ⁸⁰ Finlan, *Special Forces*, p.139; see also Johansen, 'Special Operations Forces', p.97, which agrees that Special Forces are no longer a 'sideshow' to the conventional military.
- ⁸¹ Charles Cogan, 'Hunters not Gatherers: Intelligence in the Twenty-First Century', *Intelligence and National Security*, 19/2 (2004), p.317.
- ⁸² Heng, *War as Risk Management*, p.20, 26. See fn 57 for broader reading on the risk society debate; LSE Diplomacy Commission, 'Investing for Influence', p.9.
- ⁸³ Yee-Kuang Heng, 'The "Transformation of War" Debate', *International Relations*, 20/1, (2006): 69-91, p.72, 74.
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- ⁸⁶ Davies, *MI6*, p.298.
- ⁸⁷ ISC, *Annual Report 1998-1999*, (London: Crown, 1999), para 58; ISC, *Annual Report 2002-2003*, (London: Crown, 2003), para 67, 77.
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