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## American Covert Action and Diplomacy after 9/11

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### ABSTRACT

The relationship between American diplomats and intelligence officers has always been complex. The focus of American foreign policy and national security on counterterrorism efforts in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks further shaped the dynamic between diplomats and intelligence officers in the field as well as their respective roles. The tension between diplomacy and covert action as policy-implementing tools was largely resolved to the benefit of the latter. Consequently, a new *status quo* emerged. Intelligence officers took a leading role in policy-implementation efforts through covert action, whilst the role of diplomats in the field evolved in line with counterterrorism-driven foreign policy and national security needs. This analysis introduces a new typology of diplomats in the twenty-first century, contrasting the multifaceted diplomatic activists, who advanced counterterrorism-driven diplomacy, against the traditionalists seeing this new diplomacy as bellicose and against American national interests.

American covert action and diplomacy have both played a prominent role in the War on Terror since the 11 September 2001 – 9/11 terrorist attacks. Yet, when commentators discuss these two policy tools, diplomacy is something honourable and praised, whilst covert action is kept secret in the hope it never becomes public – and even in the hope it gets abolished.<sup>1</sup> Bureaucratic rivalry between the State Department and the Central Intelligence Agency [CIA], and the pendulum of covert action support and criticism, additionally fostered the perception that covert action endangered diplomatic missions and damaged American foreign policy.<sup>2</sup> On the surface, the two policy tools seemingly appear decidedly juxtaposed. Yet, diplomacy and covert action are closer than the initial appearances suggest and have ‘certain affinities’.<sup>3</sup>

Post-9/11 scholarly literature generally examines covert action in terms of relations between the CIA and Pentagon, more specifically Special Operations Forces, the United States Cyber Command, and the National Security Agency [NSA]. This reflects American government emphasis on national security objectives – commonly the domain of the military, the post-9/11 focus on paramilitary operations, and the developments in cyberspace.<sup>4</sup> Limited

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existing scholarship about the relationship between the CIA and State Department after 9/11 tends to focus on bureaucratic haggling between the two institutions.<sup>5</sup> Currently no scholarship exists examining this post-9/11 dynamic in the field, in active combat zones, with both institutions charged with implementing policy goals – the State Department through diplomacy and CIA through covert action.

Therefore, this analysis advances post-9/11 scholarship related to covert action and American foreign policy in two ways. First, post-9/11 foreign policy tension between diplomacy and covert action was largely resolved to the benefit of the latter. Because of counterterrorism-driven foreign policy and national security needs, American presidents became heavily reliant on a more agile and adaptable CIA. Consequently, a new *status quo* emerged. Whilst clandestine officers not only went on diplomatic missions, in itself not a new phenomenon, but took a leading role in counterterrorism efforts through covert action,<sup>6</sup> the role of diplomats in the field evolved in line with a more counterterrorism-driven foreign policy. Thus, this exegesis introduces a new typology of diplomats in the twenty-first century, contrasting multifaceted *diplomatic activists*, who advanced counterterrorism-driven diplomacy, against *traditionalists* seeing this new diplomacy as bellicose and against American national interests. The focus is on American ambassadors who served in embassies in active combat zones including Afghanistan and Iraq, in Pakistan due to its proximity to Afghanistan and importance to counterterrorism efforts, and in Syria and Libya as the crises there developed, rather than on all diplomats working in these embassies. The primary reason for this narrow selection is that ambassadors are the key decision-makers in diplomatic posts who can influence the propitiousness of covert action.

At this point, secrecy and the relative contemporaneousness of some of these operations prevents examining this relationship from a holistic perspective. Nevertheless, by examining memoirs written by former intelligence officers, policy-makers, diplomats, and military personnel engaged in covert action-related activities and diplomacy – at various levels of their respective organisations – publicly available government records, foreign affairs oral histories, media reports and scholarly literature, a more comprehensive picture of the dynamic in the field emerges

Legitimation of diplomacy as a policy tool to gather information, inform foreign policy-making, and implement that policy dates to the 1648 Peace of Westphalia. Although certain intelligence activities, including those associated with covert action, such as sabotage, spreading disinformation, and assassinations, arose even earlier, intelligence as a separate institution is a comparatively novel, tacitly recognised concept. In pre-modern institutions, diplomacy and covert action and intelligence gathering were the responsibility of the same people.<sup>7</sup> Until the first part of the nineteenth century, a common view held that diplomats did spying and recruited secret agents.<sup>8</sup> Although the

1961 Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations and the 1963 Vienna Convention on Consular Relations contributed to clarifying roles of diplomats and spies, the line between the two occasionally remains blurred.

Both diplomacy and covert action are policy-implementing tools that American presidents have at their disposal and have used consistently to implement foreign policy and national security objectives. Diplomacy chiefly secures foreign policy goals through communication but also from 'gathering information, clarifying intentions, and engendering goodwill'.<sup>9</sup> Whilst covert action represents an active function of intelligence, one that implements rather than informs policy, it also links intrinsically to other intelligence elements – collection, analysis, dissemination, liaison, and counterintelligence.<sup>10</sup> In America, the United States Code, Title 50 codifies the legal definition for covert action as 'an activity or activities of the United States Government to influence political, economic, or military conditions abroad, where it is intended that the role of the United States Government will not be apparent or acknowledged publicly'.<sup>11</sup> Three particular features of covert action receive key emphasis: influencing, covert action occurs abroad, and deniability of the activity by the sponsor. Thus, in the most simplistic terms, the function of covert action is secretly influencing foreign state and non-state actors, conditions, and events virtually and/or in the physical domain whilst concealing sponsorship.

Diplomacy is a key ingredient in international relations. Nevertheless, although the events of 9/11 also created opportunities for the diplomats to pursue 'imaginative and hard-nosed diplomacy', American military and intelligence organisations took the helm in implementing foreign policy in the pursuit of counterterrorism objectives.<sup>12</sup> The shift of policy focus contributed to national security becoming the token rationale for almost everything Washington was doing, which also affected the CIA's role.<sup>13</sup> Whilst State was busy proposing tough diplomacy, leveraging the weight of post-9/11 opinion to help deter the leaders of Syria and Libya and using the 9/11 events as 'antidote' to fatigue for containing Iraq, the CIA produced the initial conceptual plan for the War on Terror.<sup>14</sup> This was contrary to all aspects related to the role of intelligence organisations in policy-making. President George W. Bush gave the CIA a lead role in implementing the new policy objectives and expanded its covert authorities.<sup>15</sup> The 9/11 events changed the *status quo*.

During an interview in 2013, John Negroponte, a former ambassador and director of National Intelligence, referred to diplomats as overt intelligence collectors. He explained that when diplomats report on political or economic matters, they collect intelligence and information overtly rather than clandestinely, and therein lies the difference between intelligence and diplomatic operations.<sup>16</sup> Yet, there is more to the work of diplomats than Negroponte implied. The argument that the roles of ambassadors and clandestine officers

evolved in the aftermath of 9/11 – contributing at times to the blurring of lines of their respective responsibilities – is not without merit or implausible. After all, there are certain affinities between diplomacy and covert action as defined in Title 50.

Since the creation of modern intelligence bureaucracies, not only has covert action supplemented foreign policy but, when the CIA began covert action in the late 1940s, the State Department argued that it wanted ‘specific knowledge of the objectives of every operation and also of the procedures and methods employed in all cases where those procedures and methods involve political decisions’.<sup>17</sup> In the early 1990s and 2000s, and even afterwards, certain policy-makers and pundits proposed that the CIA should be abolished and its responsibilities, including covert activities other than paramilitary operations, transferred to the State Department.<sup>18</sup> That department also maintains the Bureau of Intelligence and Research, a member of the United States intelligence community, whose primary mission is to ‘harness intelligence to serve U.S. diplomacy’ but which is also the ‘coordination point’ for covert action.<sup>19</sup>

Distinguishing secret diplomacy from presidentially approved covert action can be an arduous task.<sup>20</sup> An often-referenced example of this challenge is the situation of the American ambassador to Croatia, Peter Galbraith, in the early 1990s. He participated in facilitating the transfer of weapons from Iran to the Bosniaks in Bosnia and Herzegovina during a United Nations-imposed weapons embargo. Although subsequent Congressional investigations were inconclusive and never officially determined the weapons transfer constituted official covert action, they highlighted ‘how easily officials can come close to the line between traditional diplomacy and covert action’.<sup>21</sup> From the theoretical perspective, and from a covert action accountability and oversight perspective, this task became possibly even more complex after 9/11 with the broad presidential finding issued by Bush.<sup>22</sup> On 17 September 2001, he signed the Memorandum of Notification, reportedly ‘the most comprehensive, most ambitious, most aggressive, and most risky’ of all presidential findings or Notifications authorising lethal action.<sup>23</sup> According to John Rizzo, a career CIA lawyer involved in drafting the Notification, one paragraph ‘authorized the capture and detention of Al Qaeda terrorists, another authorized taking lethal action against them’, although the means and methods to accomplish these tasks were not specified.<sup>24</sup>

Thus, it is not difficult to imagine how American ambassadors might have engaged in both traditional and non-traditional diplomatic efforts to implement policy objectives outlined in the National Security Presidential Directive 9 on defeating the terrorist threat to the United States that called for ‘employing all instruments of national power and influence’ to combat terrorism.<sup>25</sup> Likewise, it is also not a long stretch to imagine how intelligence officers might

have engaged in a host of activities, including clandestine diplomacy, a scarcely researched concept, to help implement the objectives set out in the presidential finding.<sup>26</sup>

Covert action methods have historically been associated with the provision of arms and training, proxy warfare, regime overthrows, and assassinations. A great majority of activities described in early documents fell under one category of covert action – paramilitary operations.<sup>27</sup> It was indicative of the post-Second World War and early Cold War challenges. Yet, covert action is not always kinetic; at times, it is also about communicating, persuading, influencing, and seeking partnerships.<sup>28</sup> Scholars generally group covert action activities into four broad and often overlapping categories. In addition to paramilitary operations, there are propaganda activities – grey, of questionable origin with doubtful veracity, and black, their origin attributed to the target of the deception – and political and economic operations.<sup>29</sup> Some scholars also include coups and sabotage, which may include information warfare – say, utilising deep fake videos<sup>30</sup> or fake social media accounts to spread disinformation – and computer network operations like planting computer malware as additional covert action categories.<sup>31</sup> However, these latter activities may be the culmination of political or economic activities or propaganda.

After the 9/11 attacks, paramilitary operations became a key covert action category on which policy-makers relied.<sup>32</sup> Although not a new phenomenon as the CIA and Special Operations Forces had collaborated previously, the line between special operations and paramilitary covert action conducted by the CIA became almost indiscernible after 9/11.<sup>33</sup> Additionally, Washington became reliant on Unmanned Aerial Vehicles [UAV] operated by both the CIA and Pentagon, in and outside of active combat zones, not only to track but also strike terrorists. Targeting non-combatants outside of active combat zones caused a significant political and diplomatic backlash against the United States government and portrayed host countries like Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia as helpless and subservient to the United States.<sup>34</sup> For instance, the Bureau of Investigate Journalism reported a minimum of 424 confirmed UAV strikes between June 2004 and May 2016 in Pakistan, whilst the minimum of confirmed strikes in Afghanistan stood at 13,072 for the period between January 2015 and March 2020 alone.<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, the Barack Obama Administration significantly increased the use of UAVs in and outside of active combat zones, whilst Leon Panetta, a former director of the CIA, even hailed this weapon as ‘the only game in town in terms of confronting and trying to disrupt the al-Qaeda leadership’.<sup>36</sup>

Along with the desire to pursue al-Qaeda and affiliated entities in the aftermath of 9/11, scientific developments enabled the Americans to conduct – somewhat – secret wars elsewhere using technology. Although the United States was at a receiving end of some of these technology-driven activities, the intelligence community, including the CIA and NSA, has also engaged in



some of these activities both offensively and defensively.<sup>37</sup> Although not officially defined by the United States government, information warfare is ‘typically conceptualized as the use and management of information to pursue a competitive advantage, including offensive and defensive efforts’, where targets can range from states to private corporations to general populations. Thus, it is also a form of political warfare.<sup>38</sup> Computer network operations are a sub-component of information warfare and generally include disrupting and attacking hostile computer networks, defending domestic military and other friendly cyberspace, and penetrating and exploiting hostile cyberspace.<sup>39</sup> For instance, Operation ‘Olympic Games’, a CIA-NSA-conducted covert action, sabotaged Iran’s nuclear enrichment facility with digital malware, known as *Stuxnet* once it escaped into the digital wild, potentially delaying Tehran’s nuclear enrichment project.<sup>40</sup> Nevertheless, whilst covert action may appear a perfect tool for conducting information warfare and computer network operations, the nature of the post-9/11 conflict that involves both state and non-state actors in and outside of active combat zones requires the use of methods and tools beyond covert action and outside covert action domestic legal constraints.<sup>41</sup>

In addition to UAV strikes and more sophisticated information warfare and computer network operations, three additional methods, often referred to as covert action, emerged in the post 9-/11 era; all have had a negative impact on the American diplomatic standing.<sup>42</sup> They include the use of enhanced interrogation techniques at so-called CIA ‘black sites’, renditions, and extraterritorial detentions of suspected terrorists. However, torture – enhanced interrogation techniques in legal jargon – implies a clandestine effort to collect potentially useful information rather than covert action. That means that the tactical activity itself – the operation to retrieve information relying on enhanced interrogation techniques – required secrecy, not the sponsor of the activity. Theoretically, however, the presidential finding authorising covert action signed by Bush after 9/11 encapsulated enhanced interrogation techniques, although not referring to these techniques specifically.<sup>43</sup> Similarly, renditions and extraterritorial detentions were also included as part of the broader covert action programme in support of counterterrorism, although the two were not a novelty or a post-9/11 phenomenon. The Ronald Reagan Administration used renditions<sup>44</sup>, and as early as 1995, the CIA chief of station and the ambassador to Egypt together proposed the rendition programme to Egypt.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, renditions occurred in the Balkans to capture persons indicted for war crimes and deliver them to The Hague for trial.<sup>46</sup>

Finally, when exploring how the role of clandestine officers in the field evolved in the post-9/11 era, the development of clandestine diplomacy emerged as, potentially, a form of covert action. One may not think intuitively of any form of diplomacy as covert action, particularly since the creation of modern intelligence bureaucracies and certainly not in peacetime. However,



notwithstanding that traditional diplomatic activities are excepted from the definition of covert action, the post-9/11 intrusive nature of America's foreign policy and pre-emptive national security approach, combined with the technological developments and growth of polyilateralism in particular,<sup>47</sup> required the use of methods outside of formal, traditional approaches.<sup>48</sup> Clandestine diplomacy represents this method. Described as 'secret and deniable discussions with adversaries', intelligence services conduct clandestine diplomacy that is most useful in instances 'where the adversary is engaged in armed attacks and/or terrorist activities'.<sup>49</sup> More recent views indicate a symmetry between covert action and clandestine diplomacy that sees clandestine diplomacy 'fold in' as a form of covert action.<sup>50</sup> However, whether clandestine diplomacy is a form of covert action essentially depends on the same factors pertinent to other covert action methods – does it influence adversaries abroad, is it deniable, and is it sanctioned through a presidential finding. If these factors are not present, clandestine diplomacy is just another track two diplomatic method.<sup>51</sup>

Secret deniable discussions are not limited to interactions between states nor are they a post-9/11 phenomenon. For instance, in 1969, a CIA clandestine officer, Robert Ames, cultivated a backchannel relationship – sanctioned by his superiors as well as Henry Kissinger, President Richard Nixon's national security advisor – with Ali Hassan Salameh, the Palestine Liberation Organisation leader's, Yasser Arafat's, intelligence officer and bodyguard. Washington had no other channels open with this group at the time.<sup>52</sup> However, the rise of non-state actors affecting security necessitated the use of clandestine officers in diplomatic efforts traditionally the domain of trained diplomats. In the months preceding 9/11, the CIA chief of station in Islamabad, Robert Grenier, established contact with senior Taliban representatives attempting to persuade them to stand up against Mullah Omar, the leader of the Taliban and Afghanistan, and expel Osama bin Laden and his group, al-Qaeda, from the country. Grenier argued in favour of an integrated United States policy approach to encourage fissure amongst the Taliban and 'foment a tribal uprising' against al-Qaeda. On his advice, and separate counsel from the CIA's Counter-Terrorism Centre arguing for support of the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan, the CIA sent a covert action proposal to the National Security Council shortly before 9/11.<sup>53</sup> Backing Grenier's efforts, the ambassador to Pakistan, William B. Milam, cabled the State Department 'seeking support for rewards that could be offered to the Taliban in return for bin Laden's expulsion'.<sup>54</sup> However, neither State nor the CIA appear to have fully supported this plan.

Grenier's continued overtures after 9/11 to sow discord amongst the Taliban did not receive official sanction; CIA headquarters perceived them as meddling with policy, although the White House was eventually made aware of them. Nevertheless, although there might not have been an explicit

'go negotiate with the Taliban' order based on the broad Memorandum of Notification issued by Bush following 9/11 and operational direction by the higher echelons of the CIA, it is difficult not to see Grenier's activities as clandestine diplomacy.<sup>55</sup> Chiefs of station receive orders and objectives to achieve by CIA headquarters, but they have flexibility, and usually headquarters defers to them to decide how to implement the objectives in the field.<sup>56</sup> Furthermore, in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, Washington unlikely relished appearing to negotiate with the Taliban; yet had the negotiations succeeded, it is difficult to imagine that Washington would not have taken advantage of them rather than go to war. Therefore, theoretically, all three requirements, exercising influence over a foreign entity, deniability, and the presidential finding, were present in this instance.

Additional examples of clandestine diplomacy also include a number of different clandestine officers working with two Afghan politicians, Hamid Karzai and Gul Agha Shirzai, and the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan after 9/11. Whilst it could be argued that these clandestine officers' primary objective was to deliver their Afghan *protégés* safely to Kabul to set up a new government, memoirs written by the participants in these operations suggest their roles also included providing policy advice to their respective charges, that is, influencing them.<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, their actions were the result of the broad presidential finding and deniable. In his account, Grenier described how the CIA team leader and Karzai's escort, Greg Vogle, advised Karzai to focus on leading the 'Pashtun uprising against the Taliban' rather than travel to Bonn to attend the conference on Afghanistan. Grenier also recounted how both he and Vogle 'managed', for lack of a better word, Karzai with respect to Gul Agha's desire to be nominated governor. He subsequently reflected on this conversation, having misgivings about the 'arbitrariness', legitimacy, and precedence of such actions.<sup>58</sup> These clandestine officers developed a certain level of affinity for their respective charges and, perhaps, even some form of bond due to their shared comradeship. Vogle, for instance, had two assignments as CIA chief of station in Kabul to manage the American relationship with Karzai, whose behaviour towards the United States was becoming more erratic.<sup>59</sup> Thus, in some respects, the role of these clandestine officers mirrored the role senior diplomats have in embassies as they develop relationships and build networks with key political figures in host countries.

The nature and complexity of conflicts in the post-9/11 environment required the use of a variety of conflict resolution methods and sources. This included the need for what Marc Grossman, a former United States special envoy for Afghanistan and Pakistan, described as 'rough-riding diplomats', who did more than observe and report: 'people who were going to go to the hardest places and do the hardest things'.<sup>60</sup> The greater involvement of ambassadors in military missions, clandestine intelligence activities, and covert action in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Libya, and Syria in many respects

epitomised this approach. These diplomats, at times referred to as ‘frontline’ diplomats, appear rarely as instrumental in the overall process of policy- and decision-making due to their distance from Washington’s halls of power. Yet, frontline diplomats are ‘constitutive of international politics’<sup>61</sup>; they are responsible for policy in the country where they are deployed and seen as having ‘an advantage over the people in Washington’.<sup>62</sup>

Looking at active combat zones that include Afghanistan, Iraq, and Pakistan – due to its proximity to Afghanistan and importance in counterterrorism efforts – and Syria and Libya as crises developed in these two countries, two categories of ambassadors are distinguishable: ‘diplomatic activists’ and ‘traditionalists’. Of course, ambassadorial actions supported counterterrorism-driven American foreign policy objectives and national security needs, although few, if any, of these ambassadors fully endorsed their government’s policy approach to counterterrorism, particularly after the invasion of Iraq. In fact, many ambassadors objected to the policy approach in the countries where they served.<sup>63</sup> Some eventually either retired or resigned in protest. This was congruent with the larger policy debate in Washington about the direction of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and, more broadly, American foreign policy objectives and national security needs. Nevertheless, not unlike CIA chiefs of station mentioned above, ambassadors also have a certain level of independence in implementing policy objectives and not all approached their mission in the same way.

In the diplomatic activists’ category, two sub-categories of ambassadors exist: ‘trouble-shooters’ and ‘administrators’ based on their respective approaches to policy implementation and level of engagement. Of the two sub-categories, trouble-shooters stood out for engaging most energetically. Technocratic administrators, on the other hand, pursued administrative objectives to make United States embassies more responsive to policy-maker demands and better adapted to the post-conflict and conflict environment. Conversely, traditionalists were keen to go back to the roots of traditional diplomacy and retake the reins from the United States military and intelligence organisations although, as shown below, they did not necessarily engage in the same manner.

Ambassadors as diplomatic activists deployed to some of the hottest trouble spots where they worked closely and generally well with their host government, intelligence officers, and United States military representatives, even when they vehemently opposed the American foreign policy approach. Trouble-shooters actively participated in decisions related to covert action and clandestine intelligence activities and, as no official diplomatic approach to counterterrorism existed,<sup>64</sup> in many respects they developed their own methods of diplomacy. They cultivated relationships with key individuals in the theatre of operations, co-ordinating their efforts. This course potentially made them more effective compared to the adversarial and obstinate

traditionalists whose diffuse efforts contributed to key theatre teams working independently of each other, thus duplicating efforts, competing, and wasting resources. Ambassadors including Ryan Crocker – a self-professed ‘crisis junkie’,<sup>65</sup> Robert Ford, J. Christopher Stevens, Anne Patterson, Karl Eikenberry, and James Jeffrey could all be described as trouble-shooters. Their ambassadorships reflected the tumultuous, post- or just pre-conflict atmospheres, each as far removed as possible from the normal course of embassy business. They guided and at times actively participated in decisions related to covert action, including facilitating UAV strikes as well as special operations and clandestine intelligence activities.

During his posting in Afghanistan, Crocker became ‘deeply involved in the continuing military struggle’, at times negotiating with different Afghan warlords to help calm tensions and secure concessions for the United States military and CIA.<sup>66</sup> Somewhat of a rare occurrence in diplomatic circles, he also called for a more aggressive stance against the key Taliban allies in Pakistan, the Haqqani network.<sup>67</sup> In Iraq, Crocker and General David Petraeus, the military commander, developed a new model to co-operate, support each other, and present a more unified voice rather than work around and against each other, initially the case between ambassadors and leading military figures. Petraeus consulted Crocker prior to conducting controversial night-time raids to capture or kill insurgents, and the two would approach host country representatives, as well as the policy-makers in Washington, with a unified message.<sup>68</sup> During his ambassadorship to Pakistan from 2004 to 2007, Crocker and Kevin Hulbert, the CIA chief of station, also developed a very close working relationship, reportedly talking multiple times a day for two years and meeting with top Pakistani officials to discuss UAV strikes in Pakistan’s territory.<sup>69</sup>

Similarly, Patterson, the ambassador to Pakistan from 2007 to 2010, worked closely with intelligence officers in reviewing targets and plans for UAV strikes and briefing Pakistani officials about the ‘strike policy’.<sup>70</sup> The view that Patterson was ‘an aggressive diplomat’ who ‘won praise from the CIA for her unflinching support for drone strikes in the tribal area’<sup>71</sup> appears perhaps slightly unbalanced. Whilst essentially supporting UAV strikes, she also argued that the notion that unilaterally targeting al-Qaeda in Pakistan would help drive them out of Pakistan’s ungoverned regions was ‘illusory’ and undermined American policy objectives in the region.<sup>72</sup> Ultimately, Patterson did exactly what she was supposed to do, balancing covert action and special operation activities with counterterrorism-driven foreign policy objectives, American national security needs, and a very temperamental host country whose national interests diverged from the American ones.

In Syria, Ford repeatedly risked his life to meet with the Syrian rebels, signalled American support for their attempts to overthrow the Syrian government, and subsequently lobbied the CIA for help to arm moderate Syrian

rebels.<sup>73</sup> Stevens was equally passionate about Libya, slipping into the country on a Greek cargo vessel to connect with the Libyan rebels in 2011. He was also Washington's best source of intelligence during the time when even the CIA had no sources in the area.<sup>74</sup> Ford and Stevens' efforts mimic those of covertly influencing political outcomes, arming the rebels, and facilitating regime changes – activities long the CIA Directorate of Operations' purview. However, as the wars in the Middle East continued, both ambassadors struggled to support Washington's foreign policy approach. Killed in Libya in September 2012, Stevens opposed the war in Iraq and refused deployment there; Ford decided to leave the Foreign Service in 2014 because of the policy approach to Syria.<sup>75</sup> Both ambassadors obviously saw the decline in the two countries for which they had a clear affinity and were willing to risk their lives to help prevent Syria and Libya falling into the abyss of never-ending wars.

Eikenberry worked closely with the CIA chiefs of station in Kabul – Vogle and, subsequently, Chris Wood – to help persuade Islamabad's Inter-Services Intelligence to take action against the Taliban hiding in Pakistan.<sup>76</sup> However, Eikenberry, a retired lieutenant general, also served as commander of American and Coalition forces in Afghanistan from 2005 to 2007. This experience gave him perhaps a unique perspective of the dynamic amongst the three key United States agencies – State Department, CIA and Pentagon – in Afghanistan and the friction amongst them about implementing policy objectives. His military bearing, attitude, and policy implementation approach also made him somewhat unpopular with the host government, but also with the CIA and his former Pentagon colleagues.<sup>77</sup> He was vocal about his concerns that American foreign policy was becoming militarised, which would have future political and security consequences for the American society<sup>78</sup>; thus, he could also fit in the same category as the traditionalists.

Jeffrey was the deputy head, *chargé d'affaires*, and subsequently ambassador at the American mission in Baghdad at two pivotal times: 2004 to 2005, after the Coalition Provisional Authority ceased to exist and as insurgency flared up in Iraq; and 2010 to 2012, as American military forces were withdrawing from Iraq.<sup>79</sup> The nature of the objectives for which Jeffrey was responsible during the troop withdrawal also places him in the administrators' category, particularly during the latter period. However, as both *chargé d'affaires* and ambassador, he was actively involved with developments in the Iraqi government. After troublesome 2010 elections in Iraq and reportedly known for his blunt approach,<sup>80</sup> Jeffrey had little choice but to negotiate troop withdrawal with the egotistical and divisive Iran-supported Iraqi prime minister, Nouri al-Maliki, determined on absolute rule, quashing any dissent.<sup>81</sup> Jeffrey even attempted to delay 'the formation of the new government' to explore alternatives that did not include Maliki.<sup>82</sup> Additionally, unlike his predecessor, Christopher Hill, for instance, Jeffrey recognised that an effective relationship with the military was critical for an embassy situated in a hostile environment. Together with

his military counterpart, General Lloyd Austin, he led the transition process exhibiting 'extraordinary cooperation and collaboration'.<sup>83</sup> The political minister-counsellor in Baghdad, Marc Sievers, referred to their relationship as the 'closest civil-military relationship' he had ever seen.<sup>84</sup>

By comparison, skilled in and focused on managing the transition process in post-conflict societies, the administrators appear to have had less of an interventionist role. Negroponte and other ambassadors in this sub-category, Robert Finn and Ronald Neumann, for instance, generally engaged in appeasing relevant parties in host countries, nation building, and bartering with Washington. Accordingly, their roles had a somewhat limited impact on the overarching counterterrorism strategy; and the need to compete for resources and attention from Washington because of ambiguous policy objectives in Afghanistan and Iraq generally drove their respective approaches.<sup>85</sup>

In Iraq, both the State Department and Pentagon played a more dominant role. Negroponte's posting was of short duration, less than a year from June 2004 to March 2005, as he became the first director of National Intelligence. Shortly before taking his post in Iraq, the story about the human rights violations at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq broke out damaging the American reputation and diplomatic standing.<sup>86</sup> As the first American ambassador to Iraq after the invasion, Negroponte mostly focused on facilitating the building of Iraqi forces, establishing a reciprocal relationship with the United States military commander, General George Casey, and helping set up the Embassy presence around Iraq to make it look more like a 'Foreign Service operation'.<sup>87</sup> Negroponte and Casey facilitated the establishment of the Red Cell, comprising 'embassy officials, military officers, and intelligence experts' but also several British diplomats and officers, to help 'generate a big-picture report' about guiding Iraq to elections and subsequently 'full and lasting sovereignty'.<sup>88</sup> Despite the chasm between the Pentagon and State Department at an institutional level about the Iraq mission, the situation on the ground was amicable thanks in large measure to Negroponte and Casey. According to Negroponte, he also had had an 'excellent' relationship with the two CIA chiefs of station posted in Baghdad, who reported to him.<sup>89</sup> He was also a proponent of 'CIA-led electoral interference' in Iraq, a plan eventually abandoned, and viewed enhanced interrogation techniques as perhaps not worth the political price and controversy but 'probably' lifesaving.<sup>90</sup>

Describing himself as a 'shepherd managing his sheep', Finn was in Afghanistan for three short months between October 2002 and January 2003, shortly after the invasion when American foreign policy was unclear in many respects.<sup>91</sup> As the first American ambassador to Afghanistan in over 20 years, his primary objective was setting up the United States Embassy and helping establish the Afghan government; during Finn's tenure, the CIA made policy-implementing decisions based on counterterrorism-driven objectives.<sup>92</sup> Similarly, Neumann, who was initially in Iraq with the



Coalition Provisional Authority and took over the ambassadorship in Kabul from Afghan-born Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad from 2005 until 2007, spent a great majority of his time pleading with Washington for more funds and troops to help counter the growing insurgency.<sup>93</sup> His close relationship with Crocker in Pakistan helped foster an agreement for an ‘intensified intelligence effort’ between the two countries to target the Taliban.<sup>94</sup> However, his primary mission remained nation building in hopes it would help curb the insurgency’s growth.

The traditionalists and diplomatic activists appear as juxtaposed in many respects. Perceived as contrarians and antagonists, some of the ambassadors in the traditionalist category were unable to work with other parties in host countries for one reason or another. They generally wanted to go back to the roots of traditional diplomacy and retake the reins from the United States military and CIA. Others actively engaged in drafting constitutions and influencing host country government personnel changes that although perhaps an unorthodox diplomatic approach certainly was traditional. In 1993, whether rightly or erroneously, the argument was made that Arabists – Middle East specialists – at the State Department had a stronger propensity for *localitis*, a trait reportedly more common amongst Arabists because they ‘not only take on the cause of the Arabs, but also the Arabs’ “tendency for self-delusion”.<sup>95</sup> ‘*Localitis*, a resident mission’s adoption of the host state’s point of view’, was a term first associated with British political agents in the Middle East during the First World War.<sup>96</sup> Initially, Khalilzad’s role as ambassador to Afghanistan, and subsequently Iraq, and his policy implementation approach appeared similar to that of diplomatic activists. In July 2001, as the National Security Council senior director for Southwest Asia and the Middle East, Khalilzad proposed that creating ‘Radio Free Afghanistan’, not unlike the CIA-run ‘Radio Free Europe’ during the Cold War, could help persuade the Taliban to expel bin Laden and al-Qaeda.<sup>97</sup> As ambassador at Kabul from 2004 to 2005, he wanted to create ‘a mission-oriented culture and a high operating tempo’ rather than the traditional watch and report diplomatic culture.<sup>98</sup> His memoir is rich with stories that would ordinarily contribute to placing him in the trouble-shooters sub-category. However, in reality, Khalilzad should find a place in the traditionalist category of ambassadors.

In his memoir, Khalilzad also makes statements that appear somewhat antagonistic towards the CIA. He explains how, although the CIA asked for aid from the Northern Alliance in tracking down bin Laden, ‘they refused to provide military assistance needed to carry out the mission’, placing the responsibility with CIA despite the multifaceted pre-9/11 policy complexities related to its efforts against bin Laden and al-Qaeda.<sup>99</sup> Even after 9/11, but before posted to Afghanistan, Khalilzad thought that Bush was ‘influenced by the prevailing wisdom of the CIA’, telling him, ‘the CIA’s narrative was not quite right’.<sup>100</sup> Afghanistan, he told Bush, had a monarchy and Zahir Shah’s



government had achieved 'relative progress and stability'.<sup>101</sup> Khalilzad also used his heritage and intimate knowledge of Afghanistan and the Middle East more broadly in his approach to implement American policy objectives.<sup>102</sup> In Afghanistan, the extent of his involvement and behaviour at its first *Loya Jirga* – a 'great council' – led to accusations by certain Pashtun delegates that he was acting as a 'British viceroy'.<sup>103</sup> Karzai even believed that Khalilzad would run as a candidate in the 2009 Afghan presidential elections, although this devolved simply from Karzai's paranoia spurred by rumours that Washington wanted to replace him as president.<sup>104</sup> During his posting in Afghanistan, Khalilzad's negative view of Pakistan due its persistent meddling in Afghanistan seeped into his dealings with the ambassador at Islamabad, Nancy Jo Powell. Their tense relationship also contributed to discord between the CIA stations in Kabul and Islamabad over the same issue.<sup>105</sup>

Similarly, in Iraq, Khalilzad's role was viewed 'more like that of a viceroy or an imperial high commissioner' than a diplomat.<sup>106</sup> He faced accusations of playing 'the Shia, Sunnis, and Kurds off against each other through a series of horse-trades during the constitutional negotiations'.<sup>107</sup> Nevertheless, an Iraqi newspaper welcomed his appointment as finally someone with 'Eastern features and Eastern blood' who understood the Iraqis compared to his predecessor, Negroponte, whom the Iraqis appear to have viewed as an extension of the CIA.<sup>108</sup> Khalilzad's role is significant from the diplomatic perspective, yet he was somewhat of an outlier compared to other ambassadors during this period. Although his diplomatic credentials are indisputable, in a region where tribal and sectarian identity and ancestry often drive loyalties and politics, it is worth examining further how his postings to Afghanistan and Iraq shaped the United States policy approach.

Other ambassadors in the traditionalist category, for instance Hill and Cameron Munter, Patterson's successor, were not necessarily interested in pursuing the same level of engagement in implementing policy objectives like Khalilzad or, indeed, ambassadors in the diplomatic activist category. Hill's perception was that the Pentagon and State Department needed to respect and learn from each other, but soldiers do not need to become diplomats and diplomats need not become soldiers.<sup>109</sup> During his ambassadorship to Iraq between 2009 and 2010, Hill preferred the traditional approach to diplomacy where the military and intelligence organisations had a minimal role in political engineering. A novice to the Middle East politics, he was perceived as an outsider who rarely engaged with the Iraqis. In his memoir, Hill referred to Iraq as 'bloody Iraq' and 'the badlands, the borderlands of Shia and Sunni, of Arabs and Kurds, of Arabs and Persians' that was unlikely to ever be described as '*e pluribus unum*'.<sup>110</sup> In a world where embassies were engaged in fighting wars, he wanted to create a normal – observe-and-report – one.<sup>111</sup>

A British political advisor to the United States and Coalition Forces commander in Iraq at the time, Emma Sky expressed her unequivocal dislike of Hill explaining, 'it was frightening how a person could so poison a place'.<sup>112</sup> According to Sky, he shunned both host country representatives and other diplomats and ostracised Ford, an experienced Arabist and deputy chief of mission who worked very closely with Hills's predecessor, Crocker.<sup>113</sup> However, perhaps most significantly, Hill created a toxic environment during one of the key times as the United States military was planning to withdraw from Iraq.<sup>114</sup>

Munter, who replaced Ford in Baghdad before his transfer to Pakistan, had similar challenges working with the CIA, clashing repeatedly with the chief of station in Islamabad, Mark Kelton, over UAV strikes in Pakistan. Munter claimed the CIA had 'lost perspective' and was 'running the world's most expensive artillery system', whilst the Agency viewed him as 'soft' on Pakistan.<sup>115</sup> Nevertheless, he urged a more selective process, rather than completely banning the use of UAVs, also arguing that ambassadors should be able to sign off on UAV strikes and block them if necessary.<sup>116</sup> Instead, by way of compromise, Munter received the ability to say 'no' to a UAV strike, passing the issue back to Washington where the secretary of state and CIA director had to justify their respective positions *vis-à-vis* a particular strike.<sup>117</sup>

Covert action links to broader foreign policy and national security objectives under control of the Executive Office. It is not an independent policy tool. Its impact, limits, and utility needs examination as part of a broader system in which pursuing policy objectives is a multidisciplinary process. Although the link between American diplomacy and covert action has always existed, affinities between the two evolved further after the 9/11 attacks. The Bush Administration's response was to expand national security presidential powers and rely heavily on covert action and special operations to pursue foreign policy and national security objectives. However, the diplomats also had a very important role in implementing the new policy objectives, particularly as the initial shock wore off, combat operations became focused on counterinsurgency, and Washington involved itself in nation building in two extremely volatile regions.

Although both ambassadors and intelligence officers have a certain level of independence in how to achieve specific goals assigned to them, it is likely that the collaborative efforts and evolution of their respective roles also reflected the post-9/11 situation in which they found themselves. Clandestine diplomacy conducted by clandestine officers expanded. Some ambassadors engaged in facilitating covert action and other intelligence activities and contributing in the most engaged manner possible; others saw foreign policy militarised and argued that the Pentagon and CIA should refrain from political engineering. Whilst this particular angle of the interrelationship between diplomacy and covert action remains under-examined in scholarly literature, there is much to learn from it.

Evidently, some American ambassadors were more willing to accept their government's counterterrorism-driven approach to foreign policy. They worked closely with intelligence officers to achieve policy objectives by various means including covert ones. Crocker and Ford, for instance, recognised the benefit of a co-ordinated approach in tackling the new counterterrorism-focused policy objectives. On the other side, clandestine officers such as Grenier recognised how helpful ambassadors could be if CIA activities were discovered and believed Milam when he said, 'if you want me with you at the crash landing, make sure I'm with you at the take-off'.<sup>118</sup> Yet, other ambassadors, including Hill, Munter, and even Eikenberry, struggled to accept the growing roles of the Pentagon and CIA in implementing, but also driving, foreign policy objectives. Thus, examining this connexion between diplomats and intelligence officers in the field, as well as their respective roles, can help improve knowledge about the evolution of covert action in the post-9/11 era but also awareness about the broader relationship between the CIA and State Department. This analysis demonstrates that the collaboration between three key American institutions – the State Department, CIA, and Pentagon – in the field is pivotal for the implementation of American national security and foreign policy objectives.

## Notes

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6. In this analysis, the term ‘intelligence officer’ is used when referring broadly to all Agency personnel other than intelligence analysts. The term ‘clandestine officers’ is used specifically when referring to the CIA Directorate of Operations, now National Clandestine Service, personnel.
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9. Geoff R. Berridge, *Diplomacy: Theory and Practice*, 5th ed. (Basingstoke, NY, 2015), Google Play edition, 18.
10. See James E. Baker, “Covert Action: United States Law in Substance, Process, and Practice,” in *The Oxford Handbook of National Security Intelligence*, ed. Loch K. Johnson (Oxford, 2010), 590; and William Daugherty, *Executive Secrets: Covert Action and the Presidency* (Lexington, KY, 2004), Chapter 1.
11. United States Code, “Title 50: War and National Defense,” Section 3093: Presidential Approval and Reporting of Covert Actions, <https://uscode.house.gov/browse/prelim@title50/chapter44/subchapter3&edition=prelim>.
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13. Dana Priest and William Arkin, *Top Secret America* (NY, 2011), iPad edition, 28; and Dana Priest, “CIA Holds Terror Suspects in Secret Prisons,” *Washington Post*, 2 November 2, 2005.
14. Burns, *Back Channel*, 378–79; Robert L. Grenier, *88 Days to Kandahar: A CIA Diary* (NY, 2015), 6–7; and Woodward, *Bush at War*, Chapter 6.
15. John Rizzo, *Company Man* (NY, 2014), iPad edition, 446.
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17. “Memorandum of Conversation and Understanding” (FRUS 1945–1950: Emergence of the Intelligence Establishment, Document 298, August 6, 1948), <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1945-50Intel/d298>.
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*Endowment for International Peace*, December 20, 2005, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2005/12/20/case-for-abolishing-cia-pub-17846>; and Codevilla, “Abolish CIA & FISA.”

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23. Rizzo, *Company Man*, 446. Memoranda of Notification amend or expand previous presidential findings.
24. *Ibid.*, 446, 475.
25. George W. Bush, “National Security Presidential Directive 9: Defeating the Terrorist Threat to the United States,” October 25, 2001, <https://fas.org/irp/offdocs/nspd/nspd-9.pdf>.
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30. Superficially imposing one person's face onto another person's face in videos. Arthur Nelson and James Andrew Lewis, "Trust Your Eyes? Deepfakes Policy Brief," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, October 23, 2019, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/trust-your-eyes-deepfakes-policy-brief>.
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## Notes on contributor

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