



GNSI DECISION BRIEF

A Covert Competition and a Competition Over Covert Action

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warfare where states and non-state actors campaign to assure or
coerce states or other groups through indirect, non-attributable,
or asymmetric activities, either as the primary approach or in
concert with conventional warfare [emphasis added]."^{xii} This
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vjg"Twuukcp"kp l wgppeg"kp" Yguvgtg"Gwtqrg"dg{qpf"vjg"rqkp"y jgtg" the Russian troops had reached” and therefore “thought that we ought to have some facility for covert operations.” However, he admitted, “[i]t did not work out at all the way I had conceived it....We had thought that this would be a facility which could be used when and if an occasion arose when it might be needed,” adding that he assumed that “[t]here might be years when we wouldn’t have to do anything like this.”^{xxviii} In the face of the immediate threat posed by Soviet covert action, Kennan had perhaps forgotten his own advice in the conclusion to the Long Telegram:

ōHkpcnn{." y g" o wuv" jcxg"eqwtc i g"cpf"ugnh/eqpŁfgpeg"vq"enkpi"vq" our own methods and conceptions of human society. After all, the greatest danger that can befall us in coping with this problem of Soviet communism, is that we shall allow ourselves to become like those with whom we are coping.”^{xxix}

As the United States prepares for the covert competition ahead, it should heed Kennan’s counsel.

Decision Points

- Which organization should take the lead in covert action? Should the DOD be the primary organization for conducting military, including paramilitary, covert action while the CIA have primary responsibility for political and economic covert action?

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- How can policymakers ensure effective oversight of covert action, especially given its controversial history?
- How can the U.S. government avoid overusing or over-relying on covert action? How should policymakers incorporate covert action into broader American grand strategy and statecraft?

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ⁱ [The National Security Act of 1947](#). 78th Cong., 1st sess., July 26, 1947.

ⁱⁱ There is some debate over congressional intent to delegate covert action to the CIA. For an argument in favor of the CIA's implied legislative authority to conduct covert action, see Clark Clifford with Richard Holbrooke, *Counsel to the President: A Memoir* (New York: Random House, 1991), 169-70. For an argument against, see [Document 241](#). Memorandum from the General Counsel of the Central Intelligence Agency (Houston) to Director of Central Intelligence Hillenkoetter, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1945-1950, Emergence of the Intelligence Establishment*.

ⁱⁱⁱ [Document 269](#)

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