

## Pop-Up Case: Intelligence: Covert Action



### Background:

Covert action entails taking secret measures aimed at influencing political, economic, or military conditions abroad, all while concealing the U.S. role in those measures. This can include political or economic actions, propaganda campaigns, or funding and training paramilitary groups. Covert action allows a country to address national security concerns where other tools would be too risky but, if discovered, it can risk retaliation or public controversy. In this hypothetical scenario, the United States needs to decide if and how it should use covert action to address a national security threat.

First, cover the fundamentals of this foreign policy tool with World101's lesson, [What Is Intelligence?](#) Then, put these principles into practice with Model Diplomacy's hypothetical decision point below.

### Decision Point (*Hypothetical*):

Mypos, a longtime U.S. adversary controlled by a fascist dictatorship, has begun making military threats against its neighbors. Arondale, a close U.S. partner in the region, fears a Myposian takeover is imminent. Over the past year, the United States and its allies have been unable to halt Mypos's ambitions to destabilize and dominate the region. Although previous National Security Council (NSC) meetings have concluded that the option of war is off the table at this moment, the U.S. president would like to deliberate whether the United States should take alternative actions. Intelligence suggests that a small resistance movement in Mypos exists. However, with the country's fascist dictator gaining a following in countries surrounding Mypos, the U.S. president has convened an NSC meeting to decide if and how the United States should pursue covert action to minimize Mypos's control over the region.

#### NSC members should consider the following policy options:

- *Initiate a propaganda campaign that covertly disseminates anti-fascist messaging through the media in countries under or near Mypos's control.* Although this option could minimize the growing popularity of Mypos's fascist leader and does not risk collateral damage, the campaign would take time to unfold, leaving Arondale at risk of a takeover from Mypos.
- *Covertly influence Mypos's government through political and economic action, supporting the political opposition and initiatives against the country's leadership.* This option could help strengthen the opposition in the country and possibly shift Mypos's policies closer to U.S. interests. However, this option would not necessarily stop a Myposian takeover of Arondale.
- *Initiate a paramilitary operation, sending intelligence agents to conduct raids and covertly train and equip members of the Myposian opposition to remove Mypos's dictator from power.* This option could minimize anti-American and fascist influence in the region and the threat of Mypos taking over Arondale. However, it could destabilize the people and institutions of Mypos, create anti-American sentiment abroad, and could be unpopular if Americans found out. This option also requires the most personnel, funds, and resources.

### Additional Resources:

1. [Covert Action \(Belfer Center\)](#)
2. [When the CIA Interferes in Foreign Elections: A Modern-Day History of American Covert Action \(Foreign Affairs\)](#)
3. [The Appeal of Covert Action: Psychology and the Future of Irregular Warfare \(Modern War Institute\)](#)

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## Pop-Up Case Guidelines

Pop-up cases from Model Diplomacy are short case studies on current events that put students in the shoes of policymakers facing the most pressing issues in international relations. There are lots of ways to organize a discussion using a pop-up case. It is always helpful to think about your goals for the discussion and then to consider any time or participation constraints you could have. If you are teaching online and cannot discuss synchronously, consider a short writing assignment or using an online discussion board (see some excellent tips [here](#) and [here](#)). If you are teaching face-to-face or over videoconference and are looking for some inspiration, here are a few ideas:

### Gauge reaction:

If you want to show what students are thinking before diving into the discussion, here are two easy ways to do it. In one, often called “four corners,” assign each policy option to a corner of the room, and then ask students to stand in the corner associated with the policy option they support. In the other, if you want your students to think along a spectrum instead (e.g., interventionist-isolationist, unilateral-multilateral, more urgent–less urgent), put the ends of your spectrum at either end of your blackboard and have students stand along the board to indicate where along the spectrum they fall. With both approaches, everyone will sit down again with a sense of where they stand regarding the case. Use this knowledge to shape discussion—eliciting less popular opinions, challenging more popular ones, encouraging like-minded students to further develop their ideas, or having students who disagree discuss in small groups.

### Think-Pair-Share:

This exercise is particularly useful for groups where some students are hesitant. Ask everyone to spend a few minutes quietly gathering their thoughts and articulating them in a notebook (“think”), then have them turn to the person sitting next to them to compare notes (“pair”), and then have students report out to the whole group (“share”), knowing that everyone will have had time to think through something to say.

### Whiparound:

Ask students to briefly share their position one after the other without responding to each other. Typically, everyone speaks in the order they are sitting. This can be a way to see where everyone stands before launching into a discussion. If you expect a topic to be particularly contentious, you could have students listen to each other and then reflect in writing.



### Simple NSC simulation:

If you would like to simulate a simplified version of a more realistic policy debate, you can appoint yourself (or a randomly chosen student) president. Ask students to debate the policy options (or come up with new ones) and try to reach consensus on a recommendation to the president.

### NSC simulation with assigned opinions:

While assigning individual roles for a brief case study is complicated, you could assign opinions. For example, assign one-third of the class to be isolationist, one-third to favor a military response, and one-third to favor a diplomatic response. Let the groups caucus for a few minutes, then present their policy options and debate them, leaving the final decision up to you (or a student) as president.

*Note: In our experience, simulations are often most productive if students imagine they are advising a generic president rather than a specific one.*

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