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Exploring Covert Diplomacy in Peace Negotiations

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Abstract

Armed groups seeking political or territorial change frequently challenge governments, leading to protracted armed conflicts. However, not all conflicts are resolved through decisive military victories. As a result, states have increasingly turned to secret negotiations as an alternative means of engagement. While secrecy can facilitate diplomatic flexibility, its effectiveness depends on the credibility of the government's commitment to cooperation. This study examines how the selection of government representatives in secret negotiations influences rebel group behavior and the likelihood of cooperation. Drawing on costly signaling theory and research on secrecy in diplomacy, this study argues that the level of government representation in secret negotiations serves as a key mechanism for signaling credibility. Specifically, high-level representatives function as costly signals, reassuring rebels of the government's seriousness and increasing the likelihood of cooperation. By contrast, low-level representatives provide strategic deniability but fail to generate trust, making negotiations less effective. This dynamic is particularly relevant in democratic settings, where governments face domestic audience costs if secret negotiations are exposed. To test these claims, the study employs a large-*N* quantitative analysis of secret negotiations between democratic governments and rebel groups. The findings indicate that secret negotiations led by high-level representatives significantly reduce rebel violence. In contrast, those conducted by low-level representatives fail to establish credibility and do not contribute to de-escalation. These results highlight the importance of credibility, the choice of representatives, and secrecy in conflict resolution, with implications for backchannel diplomacy and long-term cooperation outcomes.

Keywords

civil war; costly signaling; non-state armed groups; secret negotiations

1. Introduction

The prolonged conflict in Northern Ireland came to an end with the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. A key factor in this success was the inclusion of secret negotiations with the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA), which began under Edward Heath in the early 1970s and continued across successive administrations. Even Margaret Thatcher, despite her staunch public opposition to negotiating with the IRA, secretly authorized covert meetings with them in the early 1990s, as revealed in 1999 (Watt, 1999). These talks were instrumental in advancing the peace process, culminating in the IRA's 1994 ceasefire and the 1998 Good Friday Agreement (Moloney, 2002; Mumford, 2011; Powell, 2008; Taylor, 1997).

Parallel to the Northern Ireland peace process, Spain faced a similar challenge with ETA (Euskadi Ta Askatasuna), which escalated its violent activities during the country's transition to democracy in the 1970s. In response, the Spanish government intermittently held secret negotiations with ETA in an effort to reduce violence (Bew et al., 2009; Clark, 1990; Esser & Bridges, 2011; Whitfield, 2014). However, these talks were undermined by persistent mistrust and ineffective negotiation strategies, ultimately limiting their success.

These cases are part of a broader pattern where democracies engage in secret negotiations with nonstate armed groups (NAGs), often yielding mixed results (San-Akca, 2009). Examples include the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) and Israel's Oslo Accords in 1993 (Wanis-St. John, 2006) and the Colombian government's peace agreement with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) in 2016, facilitated by secret talks in Havana (Segura & Mechoulan, 2017). This study explores the factors influencing the outcomes of these covert engagements, shedding light on the role of secrecy in conflict resolution (broadly defined here to include elements of conflict management and the use of secret negotiations at any stage of the resolution process) within democratic contexts. Specifically, it argues that the selection of government representatives plays a crucial role in determining the success of these negotiations. It links secret negotiations to the larger process of forging peace through trust-building, particularly through the selection of representatives by the government, signaling legitimacy and credibility to the rebels. Secret negotiations play a critical role in shaping perceptions of credibility, where government representatives function as signals of commitment or strategic deniability.

This article first discusses the existing literature on secret negotiations in intrastate conflicts, then develops a theoretical framework grounded in signaling theory and costly signals to examine how government representative selection influences secret negotiations. The next section outlines the research design and methodological approach, followed by an empirical analysis using large-*N* quantitative data. Finally, the article concludes with a discussion of findings, policy implications, and avenues for future research.

2. The Role of Secrecy in Peace Negotiation Processes

The use of secrecy in democratic regimes has been the subject of much debate, with some arguing that it undermines the principles of democratic governance and limits the ability of citizens to hold their government accountable (Fenster, 2006; Haufler, 2010; Holmström, 1979; Scholtes, 2012). The debates about how much secrecy does not abuse democratic principles, whether secrecy threatens democracy (Sagar, 2007, 2013), whether "unconditional secrecy" is a requirement of democracy (Thompson, 1999), and how to prevent politicians from abusing power through secret policies (Colaresi, 2014) continue.

Recent research highlights the significance of secret negotiations on conflict outcomes as a vital precursor to formal talks, acting as a socializing platform for parties to interact confidentially (Dochartaigh, 2021; Doyle & Hegele, 2021; Pruitt, 2006, 2008). Building upon existing studies on interstate secret negotiations, scholars argue that these covert dialogues facilitate a shift from adversarial bargaining to cooperative problem-solving (Fisher, 1989, 2007; Kelman, 1997; Schiff, 2008). Secret negotiations are also crucial in overcoming deadlocks during official discussions, providing a trusting environment for open dialogue on sensitive matters, and enhancing the likelihood of reaching mutually beneficial agreements (Pruitt, 2006; Wanis-St. John, 2006). There is also a recent attempt to explore how and why back-channel negotiations are gendered (Corredor & Anderson, 2024). However, existing studies have yet to comprehensively explore how various methods of secret negotiations employed by democracies might influence the initiation of official talks and the resolution of deadlocks throughout the negotiation process.

Recent research by Doyle and Hegele (2021) focuses on secret talks that occur before official negotiations, referred to as pre-negotiation efforts. Once parties commence official negotiations, the emphasis on secret talks ends. One potential disadvantage of focusing solely on pre-negotiation backchannel communication and disregarding any subsequent secret talks during official negotiations is that it underestimates the impact of secret negotiations on the ongoing peace process and the conflict outcome. In some cases, secret negotiations continue to play a crucial role in shaping the outcome of the conflict, even after official negotiations have commenced. Therefore, the research misses essential factors contributing to resolving the conflict by limiting the analysis to pre-negotiation backchannel communication. Additionally, assuming that secret talks cease once official negotiations begin, the researcher may overlook the possibility that parties sometimes use secret negotiations to overcome deadlocks during official negotiations. Official negotiations may reach an impasse due to various reasons, such as intractable issues or rigid positions of the conflicting parties. In such situations, secret talks can help identify areas of common ground and explore potential solutions that can break the deadlock. In the case of the Israel–PLO conflict, secret negotiations took place parallel to unproductive official negotiations (Corbin, 1994; Savir, 2008; Wanis-St. John, 2006). While official negotiations struggled to progress, secret back-channel negotiations allowed the parties to engage in more candid and open discussions away from public scrutiny and political pressures. The official negotiations were conducted under the framework of the Madrid Conference, which began in 1991. The Madrid Conference aimed to facilitate peace talks between Israel and its neighboring Arab countries and Palestinian representatives. However, these official negotiations were marked by deep mistrust and limited progress. In contrast, the secret negotiations that led to the Oslo Accords were conducted discreetly in Norway and facilitated by Norwegian diplomats Mona Juul and Terje Rød-Larsen (Corbin, 1994). These secret talks provided an informal and confidential setting where Israeli and PLO representatives could build trust and explore potential solutions to the conflict without the pressures associated with the official negotiations. The success of secret negotiations in breaking the deadlock and leading to the Oslo Accords highlighted the importance of having parallel communication channels in complex negotiations (Wanis-St. John,-2011).

A key gap in the research lies in understanding how states conduct secret negotiations. Putnam and Carcasson (1997), in their analysis of the Oslo talks between the Israeli government and the PLO, underscored the central role of trust-building in the success of secret negotiations. They argued that trust was cultivated through representatives who could assert their authority, demonstrating their ability to negotiate on their governing bodies' behalf and influence decision-making. Without such legitimacy, secret diplomatic channels would have

been ineffective, leading to insubstantial agreements. For negotiations to be meaningful, concessions and compromises had to be recognized as genuine commitments endorsed by actual decision-makers.

Building on this idea, this study examines the role of government representatives in secret negotiations, specifically focusing on democratic governments engaging with rebel groups. It explores how the strategic selection of representatives influences the rebels' commitment to the negotiation process and, ultimately, the outcomes of these talks. The core hypothesis suggests that the credibility and authority of negotiators directly affect the rebels' willingness to engage constructively, leading to more productive negotiations and a higher likelihood of reducing violence. When governments assign representatives with recognized authority and legitimacy, they send a strong signal of commitment, increasing the likelihood of meaningful dialogue and concessions.

Furthermore, the role of secret negotiations extends beyond direct interactions between warring parties. Ignoring these covert engagements risks an incomplete understanding of how conflict resolution mechanisms, such as mediation, arbitration, and third-party interventions, function in practice. Secret negotiations likely shape the broader trajectory of conflict resolution efforts, influencing when and how formal peace processes emerge. While much of the research on civil wars focuses on external interventions, whether economic, military, or diplomatic, and their impact on belligerents' preferences, far less attention has been given to how warring parties negotiate in secret and how these covert interactions shape the course of violent conflicts.

2.1. Theoretical Framework

Establishing cooperation in secret negotiations requires overcoming fundamental challenges of trust and credibility. When governments engage in covert diplomatic exchanges, adversaries must assess whether the other side is genuinely interested in cooperation or merely using negotiations as a tactical maneuver. Signaling theory provides a valuable framework for understanding how credibility is established in these interactions. Drawing on costly signaling theory (Fearon, 1994; Kydd, 2000) and research on secrecy in diplomacy (Yarhi-Milo, 2013), this study argues that the choice of government representatives in secret negotiations serves as a key mechanism of reassurance. Specifically, in secret negotiations between democratic governments and rebel groups, the costs associated with sending high-level representatives serve as a credible signal of the government's commitment to cooperation and peace.

Signaling theory suggests that actors in strategic interactions attempt to convey their intentions to the other party through signals. However, not all signals carry the same weight. If a signal is costless, an untrustworthy actor can easily mimic it, rendering it meaningless in distinguishing genuine cooperation from deception. Costly signals, by contrast, impose risks or costs on the sender, making them credible because only those who are truly committed to cooperation would be willing to bear those costs (Fearon, 1994; Morrow, 1999). Kydd (2000) develops this idea further in his theory of reassurance, arguing that trust can be built when actors send signals that separate the "trustworthy" from the "untrustworthy." According to Kydd, trust is conceived as a belief that the other side is likely to be trustworthy and will, therefore, want to reciprocate cooperation rather than exploit it (Kydd, 2000, p. 326). Trustworthy actors, who prefer to reciprocate cooperation, are willing to send costly signals because they seek stability in the long run. Untrustworthy actors, who would exploit cooperation if given the chance, avoid sending costly signals because doing so would expose them to risks they are unwilling to take.

While much of the literature on costly signaling has focused on public interactions, secrecy can also function as a costly signal under certain conditions (Banks, 1991; Farrell & Gibbons, 1989). Yarhi-Milo (2013) argues that secret diplomacy itself can serve as a reassurance mechanism because engaging in covert negotiations entails political and reputational risks. If secret negotiations are exposed, governments, particularly democratic ones, may face domestic backlash, opposition scrutiny, or diplomatic fallout. The very fact that a government is willing to engage in secret diplomacy, knowing that exposure carries costs, can, therefore, enhance the credibility of its cooperative intentions. However, this study contends that secrecy alone is not inherently costly, as governments may rely on plausible deniability to avoid taking responsibility for a leak. Therefore, in secret negotiations, a costly signal refers to any action that imposes significant costs or risks on the sender in the event of a leak, particularly one where the sender cannot easily deny their involvement in the negotiation process. In secret negotiations, what minimizes plausible deniability is the involvement of high-level representatives in the negotiation. This is because once senior officials are engaged, the government cannot easily escape the political and reputational costs that come with their participation, making it evident to the rebels that the government's commitment to the negotiations is genuine and serious.

Democratic governments carefully calculate the risks and benefits of engaging in secret negotiations, particularly regarding political exposure and deniability. The costs associated with a leak for democratic governments involve political and reputational risks, as exposure can lead to domestic backlash, loss of legitimacy, and potential political instability. These risks become particularly significant when high-level representatives are involved in the negotiations, as the exposure of senior officials makes it more difficult for the government to deny its involvement. One of the least costly ways for a government to initiate secret talks is by deploying low-level representatives, as their involvement carries minimal political risk. If negotiations are leaked, governments can easily deny official engagement, attributing the talks to unauthorized actions or informal channels. Rebels, however, are well aware of this strategic ambiguity. They recognize that low-level representatives do not necessarily reflect the government's true intentions or level of commitment. In contrast, when a democratic government chooses to send high-level representatives, the nature of secrecy fundamentally changes; it becomes a costly signal. High-ranking officials have clear political visibility, making it far more difficult for the government to deny its involvement if the talks are exposed. This raises the stakes of secrecy, as leaks could result in domestic political backlash, diplomatic repercussions, or pressure from opposition groups and the public. Understanding this risk, rebels interpret the presence of high-level representatives as a strong indicator of the government's genuine commitment to negotiations. By taking on these political risks, democratic governments credibly signal their willingness to engage in serious bargaining, making it more likely that rebels will perceive the process as legitimate and worth pursuing. High-level representation, by contrast, provides reassurance that the government is making a genuine effort to engage. This aligns with Kydd's (2000) argument that reassurance works best when it imposes costs on the sender, as only actors who genuinely seek cooperation would be willing to take on these risks. Just as costly signals in public diplomacy separate trustworthy actors from untrustworthy ones, high-level representatives in secret negotiations help distinguish serious commitments from strategic deception.

The choice of representatives interacts with domestic audience costs. Fearon (1994) argues that democratic leaders face unique constraints in foreign policy because their actions are subject to domestic scrutiny. If a democratic government publicly commits to a course of action and then reneges, it risks being punished by voters or political opponents. Yarhi-Milo (2013) refers to audience costs as the expected costs within secret negotiation contexts (p. 409). Following her approach, the cost is related to how leaders might anticipate

domestic backlash for pursuing covert foreign policy actions, especially when an adversary or a third party exposes these actions. The expected cost level in this study depends on representative selection: If a government engages in covert talks with rebels and those talks are exposed, the level of representatives involved affects the extent to which the government is held accountable. If low-level representatives were involved, the government could downplay the significance of the talks and avoid political repercussions. However, if high-level representatives were engaged, exposure raises the political stakes, making it more costly for the government to abandon the negotiation process. Therefore, the presence of senior officials makes it more difficult for the government to defect from its commitments, reinforcing the credibility of its cooperative intentions for the rebels. In the context of the Basque conflict, the firm stance of former Spanish Prime Minister Aznar against negotiating with terrorists was widely perceived as a strong electoral advantage for his party (Tremlett, 2004). Consequently, Aznar's decision to negotiate secretly with the Basque separatist group ETA the following year represented a significant political gamble (Wood, 2006).

In the worst-case scenario, secret negotiations with the enemy in pursuit of peace can cost leaders' lives, as it did with Yitzhak Rabin and Anwar Sadat. Yitzhak Rabin, the Prime Minister of Israel, was assassinated in 1995 by a Jewish extremist who opposed Rabin's peace initiatives with the Palestinians. Rabin had signed the Oslo Accords with the PLO, which included secret negotiations and concessions on both sides. Anwar Sadat, the President of Egypt, was assassinated in 1981 by Islamic extremists who opposed Sadat's peace treaty with Israel. The peace treaty was signed in 1979 and included secret negotiations between Egypt and Israel. In both cases, the leaders' efforts to negotiate peace with their enemies were seen as a betrayal by some within their own country, particularly those who opposed making concessions to the other side

2.1.1. Effects of Representatives on the Process of Secret Negotiations

Whether a government dispatches a high- or low-level representative affects how secret negotiations unfold. This study argues that the government representatives matter in building trust with the rebels. Trust-building is a complex and delicate process that requires consistent effort and demonstration of goodwill from the government side so that rebels cease violence. The trust and credibility of the government are vital in establishing a lasting commitment to the peace process in secret negotiations. Governments often demand the cessation of violence by rebel groups as a prerequisite for further talks, both in secret and eventually in public. This demand for a cessation of violence has been evident in various cases, such as the UK government's insistence on the Provisional IRA's renouncement of violence in confidential meetings, the Indian government's discussions on a ceasefire with the NSCN-IM, and the Spanish government's requirement for ETA to declare a ceasefire before engaging in secret negotiations. However, rebel groups face challenges in deciding to declare and uphold a ceasefire, as doing so carries the risk of losing support from followers who expect continued pursuit of their goals. The long-term commitment of rebel groups to a ceasefire depends on their trust in the government's willingness to address grievances and accommodate their demands. While rebel groups may make promises and publicly declare ceasefires during secret negotiations, the actual adherence to these commitments varies. In the case of Spain, the government's hesitation to send high-level officials resulted in anger and distrust among ETA leadership, leading to a breakdown in maintaining the ceasefire and sporadic acts of violence.

The involvement of low-level participants in secret negotiations can also hinder the decision-making process and prolong the negotiation timeline. One of the primary challenges of secret negotiations is the potential

for communication distortions. Secret negotiations often rely on intermediaries and complex communication chains, increasing the likelihood that critical information may be misinterpreted or altered as it passes through various channels (Dochartaigh, 2011; Pruitt, 2008). These distortions can lead to misaligned expectations, misunderstandings, or even unintended escalations in conflict.

The case studies illustrate how the involvement of low-level participants in secret negotiations results in limited decision-making authority, causing the process to last longer. In a specific instance, the Portuguese colonial authority in Angola utilized timber merchants as intermediaries in their interactions with an envoy representing UNITA's leader. However, upon the authority's report to Lisbon, it became evident that further engagement was required to address the uncertainties and ambiguities arising from the meeting between the Portuguese timber merchants and the group's envoy:

> The loggers' statements left a lot of questions unanswered and many obscure points. This is why the president of the Group dismissed them and told them that in due time they would be convened for another meeting through the DGS [General Directorate of Security], and they would be given more instructions to pursue the contacts. (Minter, 1988, p. 47)

These back-and-forth interactions contributed to a prolonged conflict process and increased mistrust on the rebel side. As a result, the leader of the group felt compelled to address a letter to a higher authority, expressing frustration with the lack of progress in previous correspondence and seeking to engage with decision-makers who possessed the necessary authority (Minter, 1988). The involvement of low-level participants and the need for multiple rounds of discussions prolonged the negotiation process, hindered effective communication, and heightened mistrust. The case illustrates the importance of having representatives with sufficient decision-making authority involved in secret negotiations to facilitate more efficient and productive dialogue.

In another instance, the direct involvement of the Colombian President in a meeting with the leader of the FARC played a pivotal role in restarting peace negotiations. Recognizing the significant power held by the FARC at that time, the President's presence demonstrated a genuine commitment to finding a peaceful resolution (Dudley, 2004; Kline, 2007). This high-level engagement signaled a renewed effort to rebuild trust and engage in substantive discussions, representing a readiness to explore potential avenues for resolving the conflict.

Rebel groups occasionally declare ceasefires; however, these declarations often hold symbolic value as the rebels continue to engage in acts of violence. In this regard, this study underscores the significance of evaluating the success of secret negotiations based on the rebels' dedication to ending violence during the negotiation process, which requires upholding the ceasefires they declare. Such commitment holds the potential to pave the way for establishing lasting peace agreements. The evaluation process involves monitoring the occurrence of violent incidents or attacks attributed to the rebel group and assessing whether there is a significant decrease in such occurrences.

The effectiveness of a ceasefire by rebel groups is closely linked to the level of trust they have in the government, and this trust is influenced by the selection of government representatives in secret talks. Trust plays a pivotal role in the decision-making process of rebel groups regarding the cessation of violence, as they seek assurance that the government will honor its commitments and engage in genuine negotiations.

To demonstrate its seriousness and commitment to resolving the conflict, the governments are expected to choose high-level representatives who possess credibility and the ability to follow through on agreements. This selection sends a strong message to the rebel groups about the government's determination to achieve a peaceful resolution. Therefore, this article's main hypothesis is the following:

> Secret negotiations are more likely to reduce the level of violence caused by the rebel groups if governments choose to send high-level representatives to these negotiations.

The hypotheses suggest that to reduce violence effectively, the involvement of high-level government representatives in secret negotiations is crucial. It is argued that the presence of authoritative representatives signals seriousness and enhances the commitment of rebel groups to the negotiation process. Low-level engagements are likely to signal a lack of seriousness, which in turn decreases the level of trust rebels have in the government in question. This was evident in the case of the IRA, which declared two ceasefires following secret negotiations in 1972. However, rather than leading to a decrease in violence, this period witnessed the highest level of violence throughout the Troubles. This outcome is attributed to the IRA's skepticism and lack of trust in the British government (Moloney, 2002; Mumford, 2011).

While secrecy allows for flexibility in diplomatic interactions, it does not inherently guarantee trust. Instead, the credibility of secret negotiations depends on the costs that governments are willing to bear. High-level representation functions as a costly signal of reassurance by raising the risks associated with exposure, increasing domestic accountability, and signaling a stronger commitment to cooperation. This theoretical framework sets the stage for the empirical analysis that follows, examining how variations in government representation in secret negotiations influence cooperation outcomes.

3. Research Design

In this study, secret negotiation refers to the covert diplomatic engagement process between conflicting parties to resolve their dispute. This process includes various forms of secret communication, such as letters, phone calls, and in-person meetings, which are all coded as secret contacts in the empirical dataset. I define a secret contact as a contact, manifesting as a meeting, phone call, or letter, between a rebel group and the state it targets, which occurs without public notice, to resolve the conflict between the parties. Secrecy pertains to the act of concealing the existence, presence, or occurrence of contact with the domestic public. The term "contact" is employed to denote various forms of communication between a state and an NAG, including message delivery, even in the absence of the involved parties' physical presence. It should be noted that the government must approve all such contacts, either prior to or following the communication, and any initiatives or contacts initiated by individuals acting in a private capacity will be excluded from this study. This definition ensures that the analysis focuses solely on official, government-sanctioned contacts between a state and an NAG. For instance, on one occasion, a former British General engaged in an unofficial dialogue with an IRA army council member. After contacting him through a phone call, he told the secretary of state that the IRA was willing to negotiate, and the secretary of state asked him to withdraw from any further contacts (Whitelaw, 1989). I excluded this initiative since it was not approved by the government in the first place. Examples of government approval directly extracted from the sources include:

> The first secret talks with the IRA came when opposition leader Harold Wilson, with the permission of Prime Minister Edward Heath [then prime minister of the UK], attended a meeting with the leadership of the IRA while on a visit to Dublin in March 1972. (Mumford, 2011, p. 634)

> In conditions of utmost secrecy, Zapatero [then prime minister of Spain] authorized initial meetings between Jesus Eguiguren and ETA, facilitated by the HD Centre, in June and July 2005. (Whitfield, 2014, p. 150)

Governments acknowledged some secret contacts at later stages, while others came to light through media leaks and were approved by the government.

In the dataset, secret contacts have been excluded if their existence is acknowledged, despite the specific details regarding their date and location remaining undisclosed. For instance, the dataset does not include the following news report about a meeting between the Colombian government and the FARC as an example of a secret meeting:

> Members of the Peace Commission had said that the Commission and leaders of guerrilla groups, including the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the 19th April Movement (M-19), would meet next week, at a time and place which had been determined but which would be kept *secret*, according to Emisoras Caracol Network (Bogota). The public would be informed about the meeting only after it had been held and journalists would not be permitted to attend. ("Colombian peace efforts," 1984)

Despite the fact that the public is unaware of the time and location of the aforementioned meeting, it is not categorized as a secret meeting in this study since its existence was publicized prior to the event. The authorities maintained secrecy regarding the date and location of the meeting for security reasons. The Colombian government's secret negotiations with the FARC, starting in September 2012 in Havana, Cuba, which lasted until negotiators declared a final agreement on August 24, 2016, are excluded since the government made the process public before the secret meetings. Nonetheless, what is incorporated into the dataset with respect to FARC and Colombia is that the secret contacts took place in Cuba from 24 February 2012 until the government's announcement date of 28 August 2012. The same applies to the talks with the National Liberation Army (ELN) in Colombia. On June 10, 2014, the president disclosed that the negotiations were ongoing and would proceed in secret, making the negotiations known to the public on this date. Therefore, the subsequent secret meetings are not included in the dataset. Prior to the announcement date, the dataset contains information about 95 secret contacts with the ELN commencing from 1982.

Scholars often use the terms back-channel communication or negotiation to denote the discreet communication between the respective parties. Pruitt (2008, p. 37) defines back-channel communication as "a secret communication between the leadership of opposing groups (including organizations and nations) that is designed to foster settlement of a conflict between them." Similar to Pruitt (2008), Wanis-St. John (2011) uses the term back-channel negotiations and defines it as "secret, official negotiations among the parties to a dispute that supplement or replace open, existing front channel negotiations" (p. 4). His definition covers secret negotiations that supplement or replace ongoing open negotiations; therefore, he excludes secret negotiations without any open negotiations. He explores the peace process between Israel and the PLO, which simultaneously included open and back-channel negotiations.

Pruitt (2006) and Wanis-St. John (2011) have also contributed to the development of a typology for back-channel negotiations. Following Pruitt's classification, back-channel negotiations can be categorized into two types: direct and indirect. Direct back-channel negotiations encompass communication between parties that occurs without the presence of intermediaries. Conversely, indirect back-channel negotiations necessitate the inclusion of at least one intermediary within the communication chain. Wanis-St. John (2011) expands upon Pruitt's (2006) typology of back-channel negotiations, incorporating the consideration of both open and secret negotiations. Wanis-St. John (2011, p. 14) delineates five distinct types of back-channel negotiations: (a) secret pre-negotiations, either direct or through a third party, aimed at assessing the feasibility of negotiations; (b) direct secret negotiations in the absence of concurrent open activities; (c) mediated secret negotiations without parallel open activities; (d) intermittent and sequential utilization of open and secret negotiation channels, either direct or via a third party; and (e) secret negotiations conducted concurrently with open negotiations, involving direct communication, third-party mediation, or both. This typology extends Pruitt's (2006) framework by accounting for the presence of open negotiations and the various communication modalities inherent in back-channel negotiations. In the present study, the term "secret contact" is utilized to encompass the concept of back-channel negotiation described in existing scholarly literature while offering a broader perspective that covers a more extensive range of cases involving covert negotiations.

It is also worth noting that secret contacts differ from Track II diplomacy in key ways. Track II involves informal efforts by non-state actors, such as academics, experts, or civil society groups, to foster dialogue and explore conflict solutions outside official channels (Fisher, 1997; Montville, 1993). In contrast, secret contacts are initiated by government representatives or authorized intermediaries and are conducted covertly, not publicly.

3.1. Dataset

I compiled a panel dataset on secret contacts between 56 randomly selected NAGs and their target states to test the hypothesis from 1970 to 2015. The unit of analysis is the dyad-year, with one observation per year for each dyad (e.g., the UK government and PIRA). I rely on the Uppsala Conflict Data Program/Peace Research Institute Oslo (UCDP/PRIO) dyadic dataset to identify the universe of dyads (Pettersson et al., 2019). The pre-negotiation dataset by Doyle and Hegele (2021), which relies on the *Yearbook of Peace Processes* (1997–present), is the only dataset closely aligned with this study. However, the *Yearbook's* lack of transparency regarding data sources, acknowledged by Doyle and Hegele themselves, raises concerns about its reliability. The dataset focuses solely on secret talks before official negotiations and is limited to 2005–2015, excluding insights into later negotiation phases or long-term trends. Given these constraints, a new dataset was necessary to comprehensively explore secret contacts, incident counts, and ceasefire declarations.

3.1.1. Why Does This Study Focus on Dyads of Democratic States and Nonstate Armed Groups?

Democratic governments often encounter significant difficulties in publicly acknowledging their involvement in negotiations with rebel groups, especially when these groups persist in perpetrating acts of violence that result in the loss of innocent lives. In November 1993, John Major declared his strong aversion to engaging in talks with the Provisional IRA and Mr. Adams. Unknown to the public, he secretly corresponded with Martin McGuinness simultaneously. In March 1993, while this confidential communication was ongoing, the IRA carried out a devastating bombing, killing two innocent children in Warrington. Had Major's secret talks

with the IRA been exposed, there would have been overwhelming pressure to halt them immediately and call for his resignation after the attack. This, then, could have made it nearly impossible to persuade the IRA to declare the crucial ceasefire in 1994 (Powell, 2014). As Spector (1998, p. 44) pointed out earlier, in circumstances where the enemy is "villainized," informal talks give a chance to the leaders to villainize and negotiate at the same time. The incumbents may continue their rhetoric of never talking to the antagonists in public while discussing terms of a possible agreement with them in secret. Case studies indicate that secret negotiations have become increasingly common in democratic states as a preliminary step to official talks (Cohen, 1997; Fisher, 1989; Gewurz, 2000; Pantev, 2000; Schiff, 2008; Stein, 1989a, 1989b; Tomlin, 1989; Zartman, 1989), as a parallel discussion to official talks (Wanis-St. John, 2006), or as a backup when official talks fail (Borger & Dehghan, 2013; Mohammed & Hafezi, 2013). This study focuses on democracies precisely because secrecy in diplomatic negotiations apparently contradicts the norm of transparency that democracies typically uphold. While it would not be surprising to see autocratic governments engaging in secret negotiations, the intriguing aspect is that despite their commitment to transparency, democracies participate in such discreet engagements. This enigmatic puzzle forms the basis for the investigation into the outcomes of secret negotiations between democratic states and rebel groups, with a particular emphasis on understanding the factors that contribute to variations in negotiation outcomes.

Research indicates that democracies exhibit a slower and less lethal response in the use of force compared to non-democracies (Bueno de Mesquita & Siverson, 1995; Gartner & Segura, 1998; Gartner et al., 1997; Russett, 1993). They also tend to engage in longer internal wars and do not achieve victory through repression (Arreguín-Toft, 2005; Caverley, 2010; Colaresi & Carey, 2008; Cunningham et al., 2009; Gleditsch et al., 2009; Karol & Miguel, 2007; Merom, 2003).

One key factor that sets democracies apart from other types of governments in handling war and crisis is the influence of public opinion. Scholars have suggested that public opinion plays a significant role in shaping democratic decision-making during conflicts (Baum & Potter, 2015; Fearon, 1994; Gelpi, 2017). In contrast, autocracies may employ indiscriminate violence against rebel groups and often rely on repression to achieve victory (Davenport & Armstrong, 2004). The case of Argentina's "Dirty War" exemplifies a repressive regime under military dictatorship, where leftist armed groups such as the Montoneros and the ERP were targeted, leading to widespread human rights abuses and forced exile. However, during Argentina's brief period as a democracy in the 1970s, it was the police force, not the military, that primarily focused on maintaining security and combating armed groups. In a democracy, the level of repression witnessed during Argentina's "Dirty War" would be highly unlikely and contradictory to democratic principles. Democracies are characterized by institutions that uphold human rights, establish checks and balances on state power, and prioritize peaceful conflict resolution. Moreover, democratic leaders are often constrained by the need to mobilize public support for decisions related to national security, which discourages conflicts resulting in civilian casualties and high political costs (Bueno de Mesquita & Siverson, 1995).

3.1.2. Dependent Variable

The dependent variable is the total number of incidents caused by rebel groups. This study uses the Terrorism in Armed Conflict (TAC) dataset (Fortna et al., 2022), which links rebel organizations from the UCDP/PRIO dataset to events recorded in the Global Terrorism Database for the period 1970–2016 (START, 2016). The analysis focuses on the total count of incidents from the TAC dataset. The focus on terrorist

attacks in this study is deliberate, as these attacks typically have an immediate political purpose and serve to communicate strategic messages about the rebels' intentions (Crenshaw, 2011). These acts are especially significant because they are often designed to shape public perception and influence political outcomes, making them highly responsive to the trust and credibility dynamics generated by covert negotiations. By examining terrorist incidents, the study captures a specific form of violence that is directly shaped by the signals sent during secret diplomatic exchanges, which are not always present in other forms of conflict.

3.1.3. Independent Variable

I created a binary variable based on whether a secret contact included a high-level representative from the government side. High-level representatives refer to the president, prime minister, minister, and military personnel. Based on the analysis of 56 cases, I identified a pattern in which governments first send intelligence officers to meet with rebel groups to lay the groundwork for the eventual attendance of government officials. These initial meetings, which served as a preparatory stage and involved only intelligence officers, were not included in the analysis. Instead, I focused on meetings where government officials participated.

3.1.4. Control Variables

The analysis controls for several factors influencing rebel capacity for violence, including territorial conflict (Pettersson et al., 2019); political wing, ethnonationalist categorization, and external support (San-Akca, 2016); centralized command (Cunningham et al., 2013); democracy score (Coppedge, 2023); mediation (DeRouen et al., 2011), ceasefire declaration, and its lagged value (Clayton et al., 2022). The ceasefire datasets start coding in 1989; therefore, for the dyads where conflict began before 1989, I collected information based on the criteria outlined in the ceasefire dataset's codebook. In territorial conflicts, reaching a compromise becomes more challenging, and rebel groups with territorial claims may be more prone to violent attacks (Mitchell, 1999; Zartman, 1989). When rebel groups have territorial claims, governments might adopt a more cautious approach when selecting representatives for secret negotiations. The heightened potential for violent actions from rebel groups with territorial claims could lead governments to prioritize representatives with a certain authority level. Additionally, considering the insights of Lax and Sebenius (1986), if belligerents have a history of intense and highly contentious conflicts, they are likely to seek detachment from ongoing clandestine discussions. The existence of a political party also creates an opportunity for democratic states, in case of a leak of secret contacts, to defend themselves by stating they never talked to the NAG but to an officially recognized political party. Given these dynamics, it becomes important to consider the influence of a rebel group's political wing on the selection of representatives by a government. It is also crucial to control whether a rebel group had a clear centralized command chain structure, as it could have affected their commitment to a ceasefire. A centralized command structure tends to provide greater coherence, coordination, and control over the group's actions, making it potentially more conducive to keeping promises given in the secret talks. The presence of mediation in a given year is another important factor that might affect the rebels' violence level.

3.2. Statistical Model

I used a fixed-effect Poisson regression model, which is well-suited for panel data analysis when the dependent variable involves count data (the negative binomial regression model, which only supports conditional fixed effects, was not applied). Panel data involves observing the same entities over multiple periods. Poisson regression can accommodate time-varying covariates and time-fixed effects to control for time-specific and entity-specific influences. I conducted a Hausman test to compare fixed and random effects, and the outcome recommended using fixed effects.

One potential concern in investigating the relationship between secret contact (with or without a high-level representative) and the count of incidents is the possibility that secret contact might be influenced by, or occur concurrently with, changes in the incident count. This temporal relationship raises apprehensions about endogeneity, where the direction of causality becomes unclear. To address this concern, I incorporated the lagged variable of the incident count in the analysis. By introducing the lagged incident count, the goal was to account for the time sequence between secret contact and the count of incidents.

3.3. Data Sources

The data for this article has been meticulously gathered from a wide range of sources, including books, book chapters, scholarly articles, declassified materials, investigative journalism studies, personal memoirs of participants, and interviews conducted by academic experts specializing in the subject. The source of each secret contact has been carefully recorded and cited in the dataset for transparency purposes.

4. Results and Analysis

This section presents the findings from the Poisson regression models assessing the impact of high-level government representatives in secret negotiations on the likelihood of violent incidents perpetrated by rebel groups. The subsequent analysis tests the hypothesis that secret contacts are more likely to decrease rebel violence when high-level government representatives are involved. By including high-level government representatives in the secret contact process, it is anticipated that the government can establish stronger trust and credibility, which may lead to more positive outcomes in reducing rebel violence.

Table 1 displays the results for two models, estimating the number of incidents as the dependent variable. Model (1) provides the baseline results, while Model (2) includes additional controls to ensure robustness.

The findings indicate that the presence of high-level government representatives in secret negotiations significantly reduces rebel violence. In Model (1), the expected number of incidents decreases by approximately 17.6% when a high-level representative is involved, while in Model (2), this reduction increases to 22.5% after accounting for additional controls. These results highlight the critical role of credibility and trust-building in conflict resolution. The presence of senior negotiators likely signals a strong governmental commitment, fostering a more constructive bargaining environment and encouraging rebel groups to reduce violence. Conversely, negotiations conducted by lower-level representatives may lack the authority and credibility necessary to establish trust, leading to continued violent activity. By controlling for the autocorrelation in violence (number of Incidents $_{t-1}$), the models ensure that the observed reduction in

Table 1. Poisson regression results of the number of incidents by rebel groups.

	Model (1)	Model (2)
Variables	Incidents	Incidents
Number of incidents $_{t-1}$	0.00866***	0.00802***
	(0.000112)	(0.000114)
High-level representative	−0.193***	−0.256***
	(0.0213)	(0.0220)
Ceasefire		−0.0572***
		(0.0185)
Ceasefire $_{t-1}$		0.0728***
		(0.0188)
Incompatibility		0.0292
		(0.103)
External support		0.685***
		(0.0655)
Ethnonational		−0.116
		(0.159)
Central command		0.420
		(0.342)
Democracy score		1.716***
		(0.0731)
Mediation		−0.145***
		(0.0229)
Observations	1,226	1,112
Number of dyads	56	56

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses; *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

rebel incidents is not simply due to pre-existing trends in violence. Even after accounting for this persistence, the effect of high-level representatives remains strongly negative and statistically significant. To ensure robustness, I re-ran the analysis with two alternative specifications: one using only the lagged dependent variable and the other using only fixed effects, confirming the statistical significance of high-level representatives at the 1% level and ruling out pre-existing trends or specification issues.

The analysis indicates that the declaration of a ceasefire significantly impacts rebel violence, implying that ceasefires during the current timeframe correlate with a reduction in rebel activities. Conversely, the lagged ceasefire variable unexpectedly correlates positively with rebel violence. This may suggest that temporary tactical pauses or ceasefires could provoke an increase in violence shortly after their conclusion, as parties might utilize the pause to reorganize or plan for subsequent confrontations. This observation suggests that ceasefires may not consistently offer enduring resolutions and could lead to a resurgence of hostilities once the ceasefire period ends. As expected, external support is highly significant and positively associated with rebel violence. This result underscores the role of external actors in prolonging and intensifying conflicts, as support from foreign states or transnational networks provides rebel groups with the resources necessary to sustain violence. This finding is consistent with existing research that highlights the destabilizing effect of external sponsorship on conflict resolution (Aydin & Regan, 2012; Cunningham, 2010; Heger & Salehyan, 2007). One of the most critical factors influencing the level of rebel violence could be the presence of mediation efforts in a

given year. Despite including mediation as a control variable, the effect of high-level representatives remains negative, statistically significant, and substantial.

These findings support the hypothesis that government representatives are crucial in reducing rebel violence, as high-level negotiators enhance credibility and commitment in secret negotiations. Several limitations should be noted for this study. First, the dataset is constrained to secret contacts between democratic governments and rebel groups from 1970 to 2015. While this scope captures a wide range of cases, it excludes non-democratic contexts, limiting the generalizability of the findings to autocracies or hybrid regimes. The focus on democracies reflects the unique tension between transparency and secrecy but may overlook dynamics present in other political systems. However, this should not deter scholars from studying secrecy as a critical aspect of conflict resolution, as it offers unique insights into the informal and often decisive mechanisms that drive peace processes. Future research should explore whether high-level representation functions as a costly signal in non-democratic settings. This study uses terrorist incidents as the main outcome variable. Considering other types of violent attacks will broaden the explanation's scope and provide a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics at play.

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the effectiveness of secret negotiations depends on their confidentiality and the credibility of the government representatives involved. The findings reveal that high-level representatives serve as costly signals of commitment, reducing rebel violence, while low-level representatives fuel distrust and prolong conflict. These results highlight the critical role of representative selection in shaping the success of covert diplomacy. The analysis further underscores why rebels often perceive low-level representatives as a strategic deception rather than a genuine commitment to cooperation. When governments use deniable representatives, rebels frequently suspect ulterior motives, such as efforts to weaken their unity, incite internal divisions, or gather intelligence against them. This distrust undermines the negotiation process, leading to continued hostilities. Conversely, high-level representatives bring authority and decision-making power to negotiations, reinforcing credibility and fostering cooperation. Their involvement signals that the government is invested in resolving the problem, increasing the likelihood of violence reduction.

Participation in secret negotiations is also inherently risky for rebel leaders. Public exposure of their involvement can lead to internal power struggles, fractionalization, and targeted assassinations, further diminishing trust in government intentions. Despite these risks, the presence of high-ranking officials can counterbalance rebel skepticism, signaling that negotiations are more than just tactical maneuvers. These findings reinforce the importance of strategic representative selection in overcoming barriers to cooperation.

While appointing high-level representatives enhances credibility, governments must balance other strategic considerations, including domestic political constraints, exposure risks, and the conflict's evolving demands. Future research should explore how these dynamics vary across different conflict settings and whether high-level engagement fosters short-term de-escalation and long-term cooperation. In particular, extending this study to non-democratic settings would provide valuable insights into whether authoritarian regimes employ similar strategic considerations in selecting negotiators and how their approaches influence rebel commitment and negotiation outcomes. Understanding these differences could enhance broader conflict resolution theories and the role of secret negotiations in diverse political contexts. As secret negotiations

continue to shape modern conflict resolution strategies, understanding the role of credibility in backchannel diplomacy remains more critical than ever.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Data Availability

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the author upon reasonable request.

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