NORTHEAST ASIA
DEFENSE
TRANSPARENCY
PROJECT

Defense Transparency: Seeking a Definition for a Paradoxical Concept

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Summary

Most people believe that transparency improves governance, by improving trust in relations between governments and their people as well as with other governments. The devil, as always, is in the details. The paradox of transparency is that the metaphor conveys unproblematic revelation of true information, yet in practice the provision of believable, relevant information takes a lot of institutional and political work to achieve. Transparency in international security is more problematic because relationships between the information, its referent, and context of interpretation can be especially complex considering the multiple channels of information competing for attention and authority. This brief proposes a definition of "defense transparency" that takes these complexities into account, drawing on a pragmatic notion of communication between particular information sources, messages, and receivers, the normative goal of which is to enhance collective security.

Most people rightly believe that transparency improves governance, by improving trust in relations between governments and their people as well as between other governments. "Sunlight is said to be the best of disinfectants" as Justice Louis Brandeis (1913) famously put it. More recently Ann Florini has championed "Regulation by revelation," whereby greater openness and accountability measures promote responsible behavior by government and corporate officials alike (Florini 1998, 2007). International relations scholar Stephen Van Evera (1999) states that "Anything that makes the world more transparent will reduce the risk of war." Jim Fearon (1995) has argued that imperfect information can sometimes lead states to war when both would be better off with a peaceful bargain; better transparency would thus seem to promote peace, as Van Evera expects.

Many international organizations are thus founded on the idea of improving efficiency and cooperation through the exchange of reliable information (Keohane 1982; Lindley 2007; Grigorescu 2003); for example, the IMF and WTO seek greater openness in fiscal affairs of member states; the OSCE seeks to improve trust between the militaries of Eastern and Western Europe through a wide range of Confidence and Security Building Measures (CSBM). Demands for greater transparency regularly feature in the diplomatic interactions of states which harbor some degree of mistrust, most recently visible between the United States and China.

The devil, as always, is in the details. The link between democracy and transparency is often asserted, but one cross-national study found that perceptions of transparency had more to do with telecommunications infrastructure and a free press than regime type (Rellya and Sabharwal 2009). The linkages between transparency requirements and accountability are often assumed but not spelled out, which opens the door for unintended consequences and gaming of the reporting metrics (Gupta 2008; Garsten and De Montoya 2008). More information by itself does not improve trust and can even undermine it. Kristin Lord (2006) discusses a number of scenarios in which information from unauthorized sources has undermined diplomacy, prematurely narrowed

bargaining ranges, exacerbated misperceptions, or revealed hostile intent that made war more likely.

Transparency in international security is especially problematic because relationships between the information, its referent, and context of interpretation can be especially complex considering the multiple channels of information (intelligence, media, official statements, domestic lobbies, and so on) competing for attention and authority (Finel and Lord 1999, 2002).

The idea of transparency seems straightforward enough: the transparent entity has nothing to hide, just as a transparent pane of glass reveals everything about an object on the other side. The problems with the metaphor emerge as soon as we consider a picture of the object posted on an opaque pane, or a textual description of it: how are these indirect representations transparent? The paradox of transparency is that the metaphor conveys unproblematic revelation of true information, and yet in practice it takes a lot of institutional and political work to achieve a credible and relevant relationship between the audience of the information and whatever the information is about. As Jacqueline Best writes regarding global economic indicators,

> The word transparency carries with it a powerful array of moral and political associations: honesty, guilelessness, and openness. Transparency has a democratic ring to it. It speaks to our suspicions about the secrecy of bankers and claims a moral right to know what they are doing with our money. Yet the language of transparency is somewhat deceptive, for while the word suggests a lack of mediation—simply opening certain areas to the gaze of the international community—achieving transparency in fact requires considerable active intervention. (2003: 142)

To put it bluntly, transparency is anything but transparent.

For the problem of defense transparency, as mentioned above, it is not enough to look for more information. It needs to be the right information in the right context if it is to have the effects that Van

Evera and Fearon lead us to expect. A definition of transparency needs to carefully specify what we mean by the right information in the right context.

Teo Chee Hean, speaking as Minister of Defense for Singapore, nicely captured some of the complexity inherent in the idea of defense transparency by distinguishing three different types: 1) true information about military capabilities; 2) reliable information about a state's plans and intentions to use those capabilities for defensive or revisionist purposes; and 3) and ongoing process of interaction and confidence-building measures to enhance trust in the information provided about capabilities and intentions and to improve mutual intelligibility to reduce the potential for misperception (Teo 2009). Here, defense transparency is a matter of information about military capabilities that exist now and in the near future; information about future intentions to employ them under certain conditions; and a process of ongoing interpretation and informational exchange to normatively reinforce that the exchange is for the sake of peace. This takes us some distance from the deceptively simple concept of transparency as unproblematic information to something more complex, here involving learning about military manpower and hardware in space, the software for its use in time, and the ongoing process of interpretation of both in an effort to promote peaceful coexistence. Information about capabilities and intentions alone without the normative commitment to enhancing collective security through its revelation does not accord with the way "transparency" is used in practice.

We can take this further by filling out the richness—and difficulty of achieving—the concept of defense transparency in practice. To do so, we should ground the idea of defense transparency in a pragmatic concept of information (Austin 1962, Searle 1969). Information is always produced and interpreted in a specific context, not just transferred unproblematically. Communication of transparent defense information is an ongoing relationship between particular information sources, messages, and receivers, the normative goal of which is to enhance collective security. The following definition of defense transparency emerged from a University of California Institute on Global Conflict and Cooperation conference on 28 April 2011:

> Defense transparency is an ongoing process through which a state credibly transmits timely, relevant, and sufficient information about its military power, activities, and intentions to enable other states to assess the consistency of this information with declared strategic interests and institutional obligations, to thereby reduce the risks of misperception and miscalculation, and through this process to build mutual trust.

The formulation above is admittedly complicated, but as we found throughout the discussion, so is the concept. This definition helps to constrain the overly broad and confusing concept of "information" which pervades international relations, and which can sometimes have undesirable results at odds with the pacific connotations of transparency. It emphasizes specific content and uses of information in security affairs, thus defense transparency, as well as the interpretive and normative aspects which are foundational for international strategic interaction. Below I will step through and explain each of the elements (in *italics*) in this rather dense definition.

TRANSPARENCY AS PROCESS

Transparency is an ongoing *process* of interaction and interpretation between actors, not just the availability of raw data at a single time. Context and history are critical to developing trust and harmonizing understandings of information provided. As a process, transparency includes exchanges, conferences, joint exercises, and other confidence-building measures, not just reports and websites. It is a process of coordination among the various actors' behavior over time in order to render the future more stable, predictable, and welfare enhancing for all. Transparency is informational activity to facilitate mutual orientation.

THE SOURCE OF INFORMATION

A *state* is engaged in the active *transmission* of information about its own power. The intentions of the state in deliberately engaging in a process

of transparency are important. While information is available from non-state sources like international organizations and media, the overwhelming focus of discussion throughout the conference was on measures that official state organs could themselves take to disclose information—such as defense white papers—or at least to manage consistency with these other sources.

The transmission must be *credible*, which means that signals are costly to fake or falsify, so they are more easily believed. This leaves open a wide range of mechanisms to produce credibility, ranging from domestic electoral or other constraints, third-party monitoring, and costly material measures to "tie hands" or give up threatening capabilities. Credibility is important for consistency assessment, risk reduction, and building trust, as discussed below. The technology of transmission is also important, for modern social media ("TGIF" as Kang Choi put it for Twitter, Google, iPhone, Facebook) can either provide useful timely information, or inject noise, rumor, and confusion into the process, which undermines the credibility of a signal.

Timely, relevant, sufficient describe the sort of information desired, regardless of its content. Information is *timely*, so that it bears on emerging crises and potential areas for misunderstanding. Timeliness may also include an explicit statement of "no change in previous reporting" to indicate that there has at least been a review of priors. Defense transparency is a coordinating process basically directed toward achieving stability and predictability over time for a set of actors prone to producing instability and uncertainty for one another.

Information is *relevant* to its subject matter—military power and intentions—rather than a superficial gloss or ambiguous reference. This word is a little bit redundant given the requirement for credibility, but at least acknowledges that there is yet another gap between how something is reported and what is reported.

Information is *sufficient* for the purpose of assessment and risk reduction. This condition acknowledges that transparency allows states to maintain confidentiality about the technical details of weapon systems, military tactics, and some types of policy deliberation. States still have secrets, but not secrets so great as to produce gross miscalculation at the strategic level. Sufficiency is in the eye of the beholder, since it is used for the process of assessment and trust building. The process of transparency should include discussion on what sort of information is required and what is reasonably held in confidence.

THE MESSAGE CONVEYED BY THE SOURCE

The focus on *military power* emphasizes that the capabilities of interest include the entire socio-industrial complex which generates military force: manpower, organization, doctrine, force disposition, civil-military relations, procurement and logistics, and so on. Military power as used here is broader than just uniformed military organizations, for it also includes relations to civilian intelligence activity, internal security forces, defense industry, and national security decision-making. It is important to retain the idea of military here, however, rather than the vaguer defense, in order to signal that the information at stake essentially concerns hard power.

Activities concern exercises, deployments, and combat activities, as well as the diplomatic and battlespace control measures used to coordinate them: accident reporting, hotlines, demilitarized zones, and so on.

Intentions are notoriously hard to measure and subject to change, but in this context include declared policies known about the source state defense plans, priorities, and threat assessments. Whereas power and activity concern the present state of the world, intentions concern future power and activity and the state's plans to get from here to there.

THE RECEPTION OF AND REACTION TO THE INFORMATION

The information will *enable other states* to coordinate their assessments and behavior. The target of information is other states in a strategic interaction with the transmitting state. There are of course other audiences of this information, both domestic and international non-state, and these play important roles for credibility. Because it has an enabling role, transparency is an active con-

cept for both the producer and the consumer of the information. Objective metrics can certainly play an enabling role, but it is important to recognize that such metrics only work in a broader context of intersubjective interpretation and ongoing interaction.

Audience states assess the information's *consistency with declared strategic interests* and *institutional obligations*. States actively use the information provided in their own assessment process, which involves interpreting the fit between capabilities, activities, and intentions with what a state says it is interested in doing or worried about. Again, this emphasizes the subjective aspect of transparency, and the importance for interaction to facilitate that assessment.

Note that this assessment is not going to be possible unless the assessing state possesses credible (and timely, relevant, sufficient) information about both sides of the equation: capabilities and policies on one hand, and strategic goals and legal obligations on the other. Insofar as a major role of domestic and international institutions is to monitor and enforce compliance with the rules of the game (treaty compliance, interpretation of UN-CLOS, inspection regimes, and so on), this monitoring aspect of transparency with respect to legal agreements and obligations seems important.

The normative end of transparency is *risk* management. The major risks here are *misperception* of capabilities and intentions, which means thinking the world right now is something other than it is, and *miscalculation* of one's own plans, which means receiving a nasty surprise due to avoidable future mismatches between expectations and reality. Note that this emphasis on risk management is not necessarily directed toward friendly ends. It makes the relative balance of power clearer, which can facilitate effective coercive bargaining and aggressive deterrence as well as trust-building.

Trust building is another normative end, which emphasizes the positive aspects of transparency, whereas risk management seems to emphasize avoiding negative outcomes. This may be slightly redundant, since trust is actually a form of risk management that implies a stability of expectations for the future. Yet the idea of trust also underscores the *process*-based nature of defense transparency at the beginning of the definition. Furthermore, the concept of *mutual* trust underscores the give-and-take of the process, whereas the consistency-assessment and risk-management clauses fall more clearly on the side of the audience's reception of the transmitted information. The inclusion of trust in this definition emphasizes that the intention of information provision and the intended result is to improve relations, lower the probability of exploitation or damage, and generally promote a more pacific environment. Without this idea, the definition would be consistent with the clarification of the military balance for coercive purposes.

CONCLUSION

There remain a few items not addressed in this definition. The only actors mentioned specifically are states. This is kept deliberately ambiguous, as it might mean official organs of government, or the more abstract concatenation of government and people.

This definition doesn't explicitly address domestic uses of defense transparency for enhancing internal accountability and legitimacy. Domestic actors are also making assessments and building trust (or not); it is critical for other audience states to understand these multiple domestic (or regional) audiences.

Furthermore, the technological and institutional medium of transmission is not mentioned directly. Clearly globalization and Internet connectivity both facilitates and complicates transparency.

Likewise, the definition of source doesn't make distinctions between completely public or more discrete state-to-state private information transmissions. The latter might be completely credible, maybe even more so because it is private. It certainly does not differentiate unilateral sources of information gathering, namely intelligence or diplomatic demarche. A state's private intelligence clearly plays an important role in assessing the consistency of any information provided through transparency measures.

In the final analysis, transparency is anything but a transparent concept. The profound tension between the pleasing clarity connoted by the term

and the contentious ambiguity in its implementation is sure to be a source of ongoing tension, controversy, and politicization in any real exchange of information. Little wonder, then, that transparency becomes a politicized concept. Nowhere recently is this more apparent than in U.S.–China relations, where the United States regularly says that it cannot trust China without greater transparency, but China then replies that it cannot be transparent without greater trust in the United States. Both of these accusations play on the apparent simplicity of the transparency concept, when it is hardly simple at all.

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