

NORTHEAST ASIA DEFENSE TRANSPARENCY INDEX 2020-21

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SUMMARY

Growing distrust in East Asia, especially in the security arena, is increasingly critical as new and long-standing hotspots—including the Taiwan strait, Korean peninsula, East China Sea, and South China Sea—become more volatile. The need for confidence-building measures is clear, and a central tool of confidence building is defense transparency.

The Defense Transparency Index (DTI), a project of the University of California's Institute on Global Conflict and Cooperation, ranks six countries on their efforts to promote transparency in defense and national security, including the People's Republic of China, Japan, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), the Republic of Korea, and the major external powers most involved in the region—the United States and Russia.

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Key Takeaways

- ◆ The average score for 2020–21 was 0.541, up 6 percent from 2018–19, representing a modest increase in transparency.
- ◆ Improved scores were driven primarily by adjustments in routine practices, for example, China’s publication in 2019 of its defense white paper, and South Korea’s resumption of timely reporting to the UN. Though positive, these actions are not emblematic of fundamental reform.
- ◆ Japan retained its first place ranking in 2020-21. The United States and South Korea maintained their close second and third place positions.
- ◆ A decade of DTI reports shows an overall decline in defense transparency between 2012-18, with modest improvements in the past two years. The three liberal democracies—the United States, Japan, and South Korea—have consistently higher levels of openness; there is less transparency among Russia and China, though Russia has made improvements in recent years; and North Korea consistently ranks last.

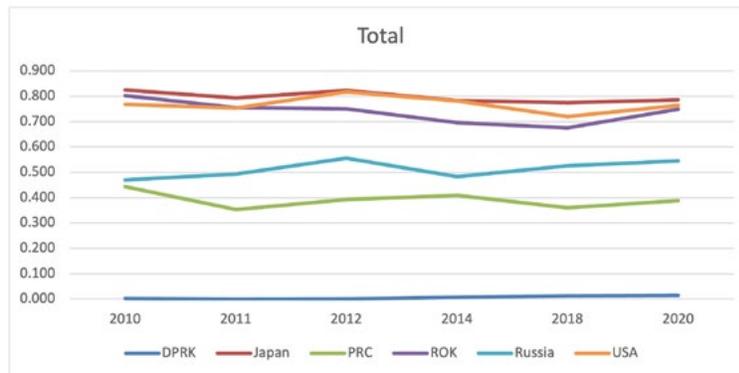
Trends in Defense Transparency

While the 2018-19 Index showed a significant decrease in overall transparency, the 2020-21 Index provides room for cautious optimism as scores have increased overall. There were no changes in country rank, however, and Japan still holds the top position. Little change was seen in areas controlled by formal legal institutions: budget transparency, legislative oversight, and media access. In other areas, however, there was significant change. Cybersecurity, for example, is an area in which consistent expansion in transparency has been observed over the past ten years.

Table. Country Scores and Rank, 2020-21 versus 2018-19.

	2020-21 Total	2018-19 Total	2020-21 Rank	2018-19 Rank	Change in Rank
Japan	0.786	0.763	1	1	↔
United States	0.763	0.717	2	2	↔
ROK	0.749	0.663	3	3	↔
Russia	0.545	0.500	4	4	↔
PRC	0.388	0.342	5	5	↔
DPRK	0.002	0.002	6	6	↔
Overall Regional Score	0.541	0.498	–	–	

Since the Index was established in 2013, the countries ranked have been slow to increase transparency. The clearest pattern is a consistent higher level of openness among the three liberal democracies—the United States, Japan, and South Korea—compared to the three non-democratic states. While Russia began the decade in a position virtually identical to the People’s Republic of China, the two states have diverged as Russia has exhibited a higher level of transparency. North Korea has consistently been the worst performer.



The Bottom Line

Defense transparency has improved modestly since the 2018-19 DTI, which is reason for optimism. Moreover, the Biden administration’s stated commitment to transparency—at least in the domestic context—may bode well for continued high levels of transparency by the United States. Nonetheless, several areas of concern remain. The U.S.-Russian relationship continues to be strained and Sino-American relations remain at their lowest point in half a century. Japanese-Korean relations, likewise, continue to pose a challenge, and the North Korean nuclear program remains an unsolved problem for all parties. The growing pressure among powers to compete will likely remain high for the foreseeable future, and may incline countries towards secrecy, which would be a blow to efforts to reduce the likelihood of conflict in Northeast Asia—and beyond.

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