Transparency: The Stand Between Clear And Opaque

by **MAJ Goh Kiam Seng**

Abstract:

Living in an age where technology offers unprecedented access to real-time information within the tips of our fingers, the days of secrecy will soon be gone. The increasing transparency and rapidly emerging communications technology have made information superiority now a perishable commodity. Transparency has transformed into a prerequisite for governments to design a system of information disclosure—one that is accountable both to its people and to the international community. However, absolute transparency resulting in excessive openness can also lead to ramifications such as the reduced efficacy of the government to make decisions, especially on unpopular issues that may incur public scrutiny. To manage transparency effectively, nations must examine how information influences politics and affects internal and external stakeholders.

Keywords: Real Time Information; Transparency; Information Superiority; Perishable Commodity; Stakeholders

INTRODUCTION

The world is constantly changing. We live in an age where technology offers unprecedented access to real-time information within the tips of our fingers, across huge interconnected networks that span the entire globe. The days of secrecy will soon be forgotten, as we embrace globalised connectivity that makes the world so much smaller than before. Due to increasing transparency and rapidly emerging communications technology, information superiority, which was once a tenet of intelligence operations, is now a perishable commodity.

Governments today see the need for transparency, but employ different approaches in management to suit their national interests, which is largely based on their threat perception. Mark Fenster states

"Transparency is at once impossible and necessary", and elaborates the paradox. "It is impossible because when propounded in its strongest form, the concept of transparency relies upon an inappropriate model of information and communication to produce an inaccurate understanding of government information."[1] Regardless of whether his definition of accuracy is agreed upon globally, it is due to transparency that governments have designed a system of information disclosure: one that is accountable both to its people and to the international community.

Through careful deliberation of the information released by the governments to the public, it is possible to utilise transparency as an instrument to further their respective national interests. However, on the other end of the spectrum, absolute transparency resulting in excessive openness can also

lead to ramifications such as the reduced efficacy of the government to make decisions, especially on unpopular issues that may incur public scrutiny, for example, excessive spending on defence. Is it possible then, for governments to find harmony and strike a balance between a clear and opaque model of transparency? Going forward, how can nations make sure of transparency to answer their security concerns to meet their strategic intent of deterrence and diplomacy?

This essay aims to answer these key questions through firstly expanding the notion of transparency in the context of defence planning within the government structure and how it influences regional and international stakeholders. Secondly, the paper will explore ways to strengthen the national interests using transparency. Lastly, the paper will conclude with a glimpse into the future of transparency.

Through the establishment of a governance system to determine optimal information disclosure requirements, it is possible for states to achieve success at either end of the continuum.

DEFINING TRANSPARENCY

Transparency can be defined differently depending on the context as well as the field of study. Ball defines transparency using three metaphors: *"transparency as a public value embraced by society to counter corruption; transparency synonymous with open decision-making by governments and non-profits; and transparency as a complex tool of good governance in programs, policies, organisations, and nations."*[2] The context specified by Ball relates closely to that of liberal governance and how transparency enables closer relations between the state and the informed, deliberative public through close communication.

Florini's definition of transparency is closer to the context of this essay by explaining that it is the deliberate act of revealing secrets and that

Figure 1: United Nations Headquarters in New York

"transparency is a choice, encouraged by attitudes about what constitutes appropriate behaviour."[3] Instead of resigning itself to the intrusiveness brought forth by technology and surrendering to the information age, an element of volition and self-directed initiative is suggested. For example, specific national security interests concerning deterrence and diplomacy can be achieved through the deliberate shaping of external perceptions through the release of information.

By identifying the ideals of transparency and secrecy as opposite ends of a continuum, the notion of striking a harmonic balance can be further examined to maximise the best of both paradigms. Through the establishment of a governance system to determine optimal information disclosure requirements, it is possible for states to achieve success at either end of the continuum.

THE BENEFITS OF TRANSPARENCY

In perhaps one of the most frequently cited books in the literature on war, Blainey elaborates the importance of threat perception in the build up towards war. *"On the eve of each war at least one of the nations miscalculated its bargaining power. And in that sense every war is an accident."*[4] An example of how transparency supports deterrence by reducing ambiguity and uncertainty about adversaries' intent is the famous hotline established between Washington and Moscow during the Cold War in 1963. The aim was to prevent conflicts and crises via intergovernmental communications, especially in the aftermath of the Cuban missile crisis.

The publication of military capability, another important aspect of threat assessment and analysis carried out at the national level, can help to prevent any misinterpretations of actions such as excessive military spending or arms build-ups. By clarifying the absence of hostility with neither the intent nor capability to threaten other nations, the likelihood of war is greatly reduced. For example, the Non-nuclear Proliferation Treaty (NPT) is an international treaty designed to prevent the spread of nuclear weaponry and technology. Preventive countermeasures such as economic sanctions can thus be undertaken against identified countries with undeclared nuclear weapon development, one clear example being North Korea. With transparency as one of its desired outcomes, the United Nations (UN) seeks to ensure global stability via the prevention of unwarranted arms races that might escalate tension between states.

Through such measures, transparency has the ability to fuel a virtuous cycle at the international stage, where co-operative deeds are reciprocated and friendly relationships are reinforced. It is only logical, therefore to deduce that by reducing uncertainty through the use of transparency, the likelihood of miscalculation leading to war will decrease and as a result, international peace and security will be enhanced. However, this deduction is not empirically proven with factual data and transparency theorists have warned about the destructive potential of transparency if information is perceived inaccurately. One cannot make a direct correlation between transparency and truth. The two are neither mutually exclusive nor synonymous, simply due to the complexity of communication and the layers of barriers between the message sender and the recipient. Actual facts may conceal hidden agenda, with the intention to include propaganda material, or designed to advance a specific view or cause.

A DOUBLE EDGED SWORD

Despite the mentioned benefits, transparency is not an unmitigated good. The notion that it will

unconditionally prevent conflict cannot be further away from the truth. Through differing lenses, information about other nations may reveal conflicting interests along with shared ones. Information on military capabilities may expose vulnerabilities and encourage aggression by potentially hostile neighbours. In addition, the spotlight may also illuminate perceived aggression and hostility through seemingly benign actions, military or otherwise. When used as a propagandistic means to create widespread hatred and prejudice, for example the victimisation of certain minority groups, conflicts may break out as a result of increased tension and hostility. In such cases, greater transparency has the potential to exacerbate international relations with destructive results.

Indisputably, there is also an inherent probability that transparency can lead to misunderstanding. Even with full facts and information about the intent and military capabilities of governments fully transparent, it does not equate to perfect understanding between nations. Barriers to communication include, among varying layers of recipients: biases, cultural differences, expectations and prejudices, divergences in perspectives and viewpoints, etc. Positive interpretation of information can thus only be assumed in good faith, depending on past interactions and experiences.

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When doubts surface about an adversary's motivations or intent, a state may interpret its behaviour in a negative light, and react in a manner that might possibly increase tension between the two states. Misinterpretation or inaccurate estimates of relative military combat power will inadvertently lead to poor and counterproductive decisions. Arms races may possibly be ignited as a result, when an overly zealous adversary's military spending is reciprocated by equally nervous states. As a result, instead of a virtuous cycle, a vicious downward spiral of suspicion and insecurity is born. Although nations often enter wars willingly, it can be avoided completely, especially if the conflicts are a result of misperception or uncertainty about the motivations of other nations.

To wield the double-edged sword of transparency effectively, it is crucial to understand that even though embracing greater transparency can enhance peace if other states share similar security concerns, it can also worsen conflicts by magnifying aggression and hostility. By illuminating weaknesses of certain states and periods of vulnerability, stronger states can be alerted to take advantage of windows of opportunities and be engendered to take the first step towards war. Take the recent annexation of Crimea for example, where international laws were violated and the referendum viewed as illegal by many states. This paved the way for Crimea and the city of Sevastopol to unilaterally declare their independence from Ukraine. The regions then joined together as a single nation and requested to be ceded to the Russia Federation. This was only possible because of the vulnerability offered by the *Euromaidan*: a wave of demonstrations and civil unrest in Ukraine caused by protesters frustrated with the government's decisions over the European Union. With rioters occupying ministerial buildings and amidst an increasing death count, Russian President Vladimir Putin deployed troops to Ukraine in response to the crisis and had complete control over Crimea within a single day. In relation to the topic of transparency, the *Euromaidan* highlighted the lack of control of the government over the Ukrainian people and opened up

Figure 2: Clockwise from top left: A large EU flag is waved across Maidan on 27th November 2013, opposition activist popular singer Ruslana addresses the crowds on Maidan on 29th November 2013, Pro EU rally on Maidan, Euromaidan on European Square on 1st December, a tree decorated with flags and posters, crowds direct hose at militsiya, plinth of the toppled Lenin statue.

an opportunity for Russia to 'intervene' and further their own political interest. As a result, Ukraine lost part of their sovereign rights to a stronger and more powerful neighbour, one with perennial aggressive intentions. In this instance, the transparency afforded by Ukraine and Crimea was not self-directed, but rather exposed due to the demands of the public who were frustrated with their government's policies.

Therefore, we learn that a lack of strategic ambiguity, due to external demands and mounting pressure to be transparent, may encourage potential adversaries to take action. On the contrary, it can also encourage nations to take up more discrete and

yet pernicious ways of defending their sovereignty. Thus, the crux of transparency is that it should only seek to reduce and not eliminate uncertainty entirely. By providing the international community with up-to-date information regarding its intentions, military capabilities, it can enhance peace and security at the global stage.

A PARADOXICAL DILEMMA

Vegetius, a writer from the late Roman Empire, gave birth to the famous Latin quote *"Si vis pacem, para bellum"*, meaning *"If you want peace, prepare for war."*[5] Part of its fame is due to the fact that the statement is often viewed as a paradox, especially from the perspective of anti-war activists demanding for the disarmament of military organisations. Transparency offers the same paradoxical dilemma for nations, in the sense that the building and announcement of military strength may ironically lead to its own insecurity. When the motivation of a nation, that is increasing its defence budget significantly, cannot be determined, neighbouring states will respond though its own military expansion, even when both states do not hold any aggressive intentions. The situation is made worse when the confidence level between states drop and they start to treat each other like enemies, eventually completing a self-fulfilled prophecy towards aggression and war. The paradoxical dilemma, as it stands, is that the steps taken to

By correctly identifying the potential rivals and understanding their military capabilities and intent, they can then weigh the costs and benefits of direct confrontation, for example in certain scenarios (such as the Crimea incident). The use of violence may be attractive, especially when the costs of attacking are relatively low, compared to the rewards. Through this understanding, the use of transparency can then be made more effectively without fear of possible negative repercussions.

defend national interests may appear as a threat to the adversary, who may initiate an attack to defend its own interests.

To prevent being bound within this dilemma, states try to predict likely adversaries with aggressive intentions. By correctly identifying the potential rivals and understanding their military capabilities and intent, they can then weigh the costs and benefits of direct confrontation, for example in certain scenarios (such as the Crimea incident). The use of violence may be attractive, especially when the costs of attacking are relatively low compared to the rewards. Through this understanding, the use of transparency can then be made more effectively without fear of possible negative repercussions. This process of analysis is continuous due to the volatile nature of the geopolitical climate. There are many factors to consider, making it an extremely complex task to predict whether today's ally become tomorrow's enemy.

STANDARDISING TRANSPARENCY

Despite the ubiquitous agreement that the exchange of information on military capabilities will reduce the exaggeration of threats and the misinterpretations of intent or action, UN efforts to consolidate data have been mediocre at best. Back in 1981, with the establishment of the United Nations Instrument for Reporting Military Expenditures, the UN hoped to provide insight on military spending

patterns of countries. But, the original goal of facilitating the reduction of the world's biggest military budgets was abandoned before the report's template was completed. Even solely as a transparency measure aimed at confidence building among states, the initiative saw low participation rates due to its voluntary nature. In 2012, less than one third of the 193 UN members reported on their military expenditure.

Let us take a closer look at this discrepancy. Because there are no legally binding rules or guidelines relating to global transparency in defence policies, budgets, or the procurement and sales of arms, most governments still prefer to be discrete about information concerning defence spending and arms procurement. The reasons are simple: the more information hostile parties have,

the more it will facilitate their strategic planning. This includes military capabilities such as the order of battle which details the strength of the military and the technological capabilities in terms of projection capabilities and firepower.

Nonetheless, more and more international organisations and governments recognise that transparency is not only inevitable, but necessary to gain the moral high ground within the international community as it concerns having the right values. Thus, the trend has evolved to make use of transparency to shape the information battlefield. Lord eloquently concluded that *"transparency holds perils, but also promise."*[6] By mitigating its negative effects, it is possible to commit to transparency as a value that guides states and governments towards peace.

Soldiers from the Singapore Armed Forces and the United States Marine Corps working together in a joint assault as part of Exercise Valiant Mark.

Figure 3: Demonstration at Checkpoint Charlie in Berlin during Barack Obama's visit on 18th June, 2013.

USING TRANSPARENCY

There are various methods for nations to display greater transparency about its military capabilities, activities, and more importantly, their intentions. With the objectives of building confidence and reducing unnecessary security related tensions, various Confidence and Security Building Measures (CSBMs) have been developed. The means of delivery range from the conventional defence white paper, to the relatively new medium of social networking. For example, the publication of military related activities, initiatives and policies can now be found on official Facebook and Twitter accounts of defence organisations all over the world. Singapore is a prime example of this trend, judging how active and popular the Singapore Armed Forces' Cyberpioneer and Army Facebook pages are.

Common to all CSBMs, the central idea is to reduce misperceptions, suspicions and fears, by making military capabilities explicit as early as possible. Examples of providing information early before any alarm bells are set off include the notifications of large scale military exercises, troop movements and advanced weaponry tests such as long range projectiles and ballistic missiles. These activities can be further integrated with external stakeholders including potential adversaries via an expanded set of military-to-military contacts, including exercise observers and bilateral or multilateral exchanges. Through these CSBMs, states are able to build confidence and trust and collectively create a climate of political stability and confidence.

But true to the double-edged nature of transparency, CSBMs can be counterproductive if nations are bound by pre-existing mental models

of distrust and belligerence. Half-truths about the genuine purposes of capability and arms acquisitions may lead to suspicions and the subsequent break down of trust and confidence. Messages or announcements, sent at inappropriate times can intensify existing tensions by undermining the trust and efforts thus far to build up positive relationships. Hence, CSBMs can only be utilised to its maximum potential when all parties are aligned in their vision towards peace and stability.

Other than CSBMs, transparency, or in this case the lack thereof, can also be used as a justification towards offensive action. Through the packaging of information in specific ways, the illusion of new knowledge can be created. President George W. Bush stated in 2003 on the invasion of Iraq, *"A country that hides something is a country that is afraid of getting caught, and that was part of our calculation."[7]* With the Iraqi regime's lack of transparency and increasing intelligence sources claiming evidence of weapons of mass destruction, the United States (US) used the lack of transparency as a justification of the invasion to its citizens, by building on post 9/11 anxiety and the consequence of inaction.

In a contrasting example, strategic ambiguity can also be used to benefit even strong states as well. The US intentionally created the impression to Iraq prior to the 1991 Persian Gulf War that any usage of chemical or biological weapons would lead to nuclear retaliation, even though President Bush and his cabinet had previously agreed that this was not an option. The threat was a bluff, made credible through clever use of rhetorics and shaping the perceived intent through transparency. President Bush stated publicly on Cable News Network (CNN) that all options will be preserved, indirectly referring to the possible use of nuclear weapons against Iraq. Such tactics are risky and can be exposed if used repeatedly. North Korea's

most prominent bargaining chip is its continuous development and ultimately the use of nuclear weapons. But with no clear indicators of success from weapon testing amidst the openness of their nuclear ambitions, North Korea will find it difficult to achieve their strategic aims no matter how aggressive their publicity campaign becomes.

In summary, organisations have the ability to filter and manipulate existing information, or aggregate and present them in ways that fit a certain political direction. Through these designs, transparency has the potential to change public sentiment, include their priorities on how the nation must react to secure their interests.

FINDING THE BALANCE

Like most things in life, the key is to find that balance between the two ends of the continuum. More of an art than a science, this can be immensely difficult to accomplish and even harder to measure its success. Without a clear formula to analyse the costs and benefits of the release of information, analysts can only provide evaluations based on prior experiences and the framing of threat assessments. Inevitably, transparency boils down to the relationship between people and the impact of values and ideas on communication. It is the people, after all, that determine the response to information.

To strike an optimal balance and decide on what to make transparent, states must first consider the stakeholders involved and the impact of under or over disclosure. Domestic views are just as important as those from external parties. Take a case in point: Edward Snowden, a former employee in the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and contractor to the National Security Agency (NSA) in the US. Hailed as a hero by citizens and yet labelled a traitor by his

country, Snowden's whistle blowing episode has raised key concerns over the country's controversial global surveillance programmes. Americans value their information privacy and do not want the government spying on them, even in the name of national security. This incident greatly affected the image of the NSA, as well as the citizens' confidence in the US government. Other world leaders reportedly being monitored were not pleased as well and many demanded explanations. This obviously caused a strain in the US's relationship with many countries.

Balancing transparency is a complex issue as it deals with relationships over extended periods of time. Leadership figures change with time, along with threat perceptions and mental models of the global situation. The only way for nations to evaluate how well transparency is working for them, is to examine its relationships with other nations and how that friendship is being reciprocated.

THE FUTURE OF TRANSPARENCY

The future of transparency, although still uncertain at this point in time, looks brighter with the agreement of the Arms Trade Treaty signed in 2013. Although not yet active, it aims to establish a common international standard for the import, export, and transfer of conventional arms. As opposed to the United Nations Instrument for Reporting Military Expenditures in 1981, the UN encourages states to sign the treaty by stating that it will not interfere with domestic arms commerce or the right to bear arms in its member states; ban the export of any type of weapon; harm the legitimate right to self-defence; or undermine national arms regulation standards already in place.

CONCLUSION

Florini aptly summarised it for us: *"in this era of global integration, transparency is the only appropriate standard."*[8] In the modern era of transnational governance based on a system of global civilisation, there is no place left for secrecy. Transparency does not promise to deliver world peace and solve all security related problems. Unfortunately, it will not directly lead to better cooperation, tolerance, or democracy. However, transparency facilitates the better understanding between nations and thus reduces the chances of unnecessary violence leading to wars. To manage transparency effectively, nations must examine how information influences politics and affects internal and external stakeholders. By recognising the effects of transparency and integrating it into policy and decision making, it is possible to reach a harmonic balancing between being clear and opaque. 🌐

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