



Transparency as an Instrument of National Security

By MAJ Wu Yiheng

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ABSTRACT

In this essay, the author first describes the concept of national security and how it is typically achieved before attempting to shed light on the concept of Transparency. Next, viewing Transparency as an instrument, he identifies the mechanisms underpinning its effects and discusses its value and viability in facilitating national security—How does Transparency help achieve national security? When should it be used and what are the associated risks and limitations? Lastly, the author discusses how Transparency, as a condition of future global politics, will also shape future pursuits of national security and the associated challenges.

Keywords: International Relations; Strategy; Diplomacy; National Security; Transparency

INTRODUCTION

National security is the principal agenda of states. Governments (or powerful elites) are the *de jure* (or *de facto*) agents that provide or pursue national security. Without security, or more specifically, when under existential threats, there would be no capacity—and it would be foolish—to pursue other national interests, less those required for survival.¹ When survival is at stake, leaders will strategise and exploit all sources of national power to secure the state's ability to continue existing, be it through negotiation, coercion, or violent force (i.e., militarily).

Transparency has gained prominence throughout the 20th century and is touted as an instrument that can help states secure peace. However, transparency is complex: it is not simply a 'tool' awaiting use; its effects contingent on a multitude of factors; but transparency also represents a dynamically different arena for International Relations (IR) in the 21st century. The author argues that transparency, as an instrument of national security, is a double-edged sword that needs to be used with care. However, transparency cannot be 'sheathed' and will gain increasing relevance affecting how national security is achieved, upend traditional understanding of who 'does' national security (e.g., Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) vs. states), and fundamentally influence the concept of national security itself.

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WHAT IS NATIONAL SECURITY?

National security concerns the protection or preservation of cherished values, against threat or damage; and traditionally, for states, these values are sovereignty and prosperity.² However, these values are not universally shared nor immutable. Values can be desired in different degrees and forms depending on the social, cultural, political, and historical context of individual states. For instance, sovereignty for one state can mean the right to maintain territorial integrity against potential aggressors, but for another state, it can represent the right to reclaim 'lost territories' from its neighbours. To be clear, the determination of a state's cherished values goes beyond that which is espoused

(i.e., what is said for rhetoric effect), but must also be demonstrable in action and resolve, which implies that a state ‘behaves’ consistently, over the long-term, to promote, preserve, or protect the values it advocates. It follows that consistency, clarity, and credibility (or absence of ambiguity and/or contradiction) in a state’s policies and actions are key towards an accurate analysis of what national security means for that state. In other words, the question, ‘What is national security for State X?’ is best answered empirically rather than explained or predicted by theory.

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Sources of threat to national security can be external (e.g., foreign hostile state); internal (e.g., political insurgency); or systemic/global (e.g., natural disasters or climate change). Threats do not always manifest objectively (i.e., foreign states declaring hostile intent) and even when they do, they may not be recognised timely, to provide sufficient reaction time to prepare for, respond, and overcome threats. Therefore, states necessarily rely on subjective assessments—the fear or anticipation of threat—to stay ahead. Consequently, national security policies are based on both objective and subjective appraisals of the strategic context. Moreover, as absolute security is unattainable, security is always specified in terms of *subjective* degrees.³ The pursuit of national security also helps legitimise the processes of state formation and maintenance. Without providing ‘security’, the legitimacy of the state will come under increasing scrutiny.⁴ Put together, this means that national security is a complex problem and its solution requires a delicate balance factoring multiple actors, each with differing agendas and attitudes (i.e., between states and

between a state and its diverse citizen population). Critically, this situates national security within the context of IR and domestic politics simultaneously. Although questions concerning national security is best answered empirically, unpacking this complex problem through a discussion of its theoretical underpinnings can improve understanding and help identify potential levers and/or best practices.

Three schools of theory dominate the IR literature: Realism, Liberalism, and Constructivism—these will be discussed in turn, but the author argues that Transparency commonly serves the pursuit of national security, regardless of theory.⁵

Realism is underscored by the balance of power between states, within an anarchic, international system.⁶ Under the lens of realism, national security is scoped narrowly, focusing primarily on military security against adversarial states. The theory predicts that inter-state conflicts arise as a result of imbalances in power and the key phenomenon that perpetuates conflict is the ‘security dilemma’: where actions by one state to enhance its security is perceived as threatening by an opponent state, which then responds in kind to secure its interests, which in turn prompts the original state to seek more security.⁷ This vicious cycle of escalation, left unchecked, culminates in war, and represents a failure to achieve national security, at least for the defeated party. Uncertainty in other states’ capabilities and intentions prompts military planners and policymakers to adopt conservative and ‘worst-case’ thinking to avoid strategic shock/surprise—this approach is what enables the security dilemma to occur.⁸ To reduce uncertainty, arms control and non-threatening defence have been advanced as possible solutions to reduce the risk of conflict and war.⁹ It is beyond the author’s scope to discuss these concepts in detail, but broadly, he highlights that they entail disclosing military capabilities, the intended use of such capabilities, and an openness to independent monitoring and verification. In other words, a state can enhance its security without triggering a security dilemma by reducing uncertainty, or reassuring, other states of its peaceful intentions. To do so, a state needs to be transparent.

Liberalism posits that anarchy in a realist international system, and by extension threat perceptions, can be managed through the establishment of regional and/or international institutions to focus on co-operation instead.¹⁰ Specifically, inter-state tension is avoided through the promotion of trust and shared understanding of intentions between institution members.¹¹ Butfooy draws on the example of the relationship between the United States (US)-Australia and Australia-New Zealand, where despite a stark military power imbalance (i.e., potential for conflict predicted by Realism), there is an absence of threat perceptions between these dyads.¹² Nonetheless, the relevance is that for institutions to function effectively to collectively achieve national security, member states need to be transparent and honest with one another.

Constructivism is discussed here not as a challenge to how Realism or Liberalism theoretical frameworks inform pursuits of national security. Within Constructivism, national interests or cherished values to be secured are socially constructed.¹³ The challenge then is how governments and leaders accurately set the national (security) agenda and communicate these as policies to garner domestic support from the population

(in a democracy), or to minimise opposition/insurgencies (in an authoritarian regime). Therein, transparency (or opacity) in elite decision-making plays an integral role in achieving national security domestically.¹⁴

As foreshadowed, regardless of theoretical underpinnings, transparency is commonly involved in the pursuit of national security regardless of how national security is defined, and the (geo-political) context it is situated within. Understanding the concept of transparency, its drivers, its purported effects and associated risks and limitations, is therefore key to effectively exploit it as an instrument of national security.

WHAT IS TRANSPARENCY AND WHAT DRIVES IT

The concept of Transparency 'is anything but transparent.'¹⁵ It is complex and is under-researched in the field of IR, and definitions of Transparency vary depending on the researchers' methodology.¹⁶ These can be simple and intuitive—Florini defines transparency as the opposite of secrecy—but trades conceptual clarity for descriptive/explanatory power, and therefore limits the practical application of theory.¹⁷



US and Australian Defence and Foreign Affairs ministers at the AUSMIN summit in Sydney, June 2017.

While most scholars agree that transparency relates to the availability (quantity) of information, their definitions differ about the quality of said information. For instance, Finel and Lord defines transparency independently of how information is interpreted by recipients, while Lindley's definition assumes that transparent information is accurate.¹⁸ McCarthy & Fluck summarises the extant definitions into three broad categories: (1) transparency-as-disclosure – information is released to the public in a one-way transmission; (2) transparency-as-information – information is exchanged between states to signal intentions; and (3) transparency-as-dialogue.¹⁹ The transparency-as-dialogue definition uniquely includes commitment towards two-way dialogue between actors, over and above the transmission and/or availability of information.²⁰ This definition is adopted within this essay as the author argues that no fruitful discussion of transparency can proceed without considering the parties involved.

Total transparency of a state or society is neither desirable nor achievable.²¹ More intuitively, total transparency would require suppressing basic human rights to privacy. Some secrets are best kept private, especially if it concerns shame or core vulnerabilities. By logic, a condition of total transparency warrants the existence of universal truths, which can be confidently concluded to not (yet) exist for all issues and phenomena. So how much transparency is optimal? Lindley argues that 'Transparency operates best in a 'Goldilocks' zone defined by few information competitors, and balanced with some bias, misperception, and incomplete information.'²² In other words, the relationship between transparency and conflict resolution—its ability to help achieve national security—is non-linear: too much or too little transparency can paradoxically increase the risk of conflicts.²³

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At the same time, Transparency is also promoted as an ideal, as McCarthy and Fluck describe, 'Transparency is portrayed as both necessary and increasingly possible within a globalising, information-centric international system', where it is suggested that more transparency in the international system means more accountability, legitimacy, and peace (stability); conversely, a lack of transparency increases the likelihood of conflicts and jeopardises national security.²⁴ Independent of agency and rational choice (i.e., whether one wants to, or should be transparent or not), scholars have observed that Transparency is an increasingly inevitable condition that, enabled by technology, will erode the state's monopoly on information.²⁵ Control over the transmission and/or access of information will be increasingly challenging.²⁶ Whether such claims should be believed represents the central issue when discussing the value of transparency—does transparency serve or sabotage national security? The unsatisfactory and broad answer is that it depends.

THE EFFECTS OF TRANSPARENCY ON 'TRADITIONAL' SECURITY

Within this section, a narrow conception of national security—equated with military security—is applied to better illustrate which factors determine the effects of transparency and why Gray asserts that war in the 21st century will be inevitable, arguing that the future will always resemble (not repeat) history.²⁷ He adds that '...war is not controllable by international law, by ethics, by disarmament and arms control... by the creation of grand institutions, by [a] global security community, by the spread of democracy, or by [the] growing obsolescence in the political utility of [war] itself. However...war is eminently controllable...by seemingly simple and even mundane factors as: its cost, by policy, by strategy, by power balanced...in the interest of civilised order, by fear and by culture.'²⁸

How then can transparency aid us in forestalling, perhaps even disproving, Gray's prophecy? If institutions, security communities, and the spread of democracy cannot control wars, does that represent the obsolescence of transparency? The author argues that it

ironically increases the relevance of transparency; specifically, the more comprehensive form of transparency-as-dialogue. From a liberalism lens, Gray's assertion seemingly dismisses all instruments that promises to promote or secure peace. Yet, delving deeper, the essence of mutual trust and understanding, and a co-operative (as opposed to competitive) approach to achieving security remains. These directly parallels Gray's 'simple and mundane factors' that can control wars.²⁹ Importantly, these factors (unique to each state) need to be communicated and commonly understood by other states. A necessary pre-requisite then, is commitment by states to engage in open and iterative dialogue (i.e., transparency-as-dialogue) to clarify intentions, allay fear and doubts, and over time, build trust. The desired effect of transparency-as-dialogue then, is the shared understanding that (1) states agree on common values that can be collectively secured or advanced; (2) no party harbours aggressive intentions; and (3) there exists 'rules' or established norms to resolve conflict.³⁰ In summary, transparency can help states avoid war—thereby achieving military and national security—because it promotes common recognition that states involved prefer the status quo (i.e., preservation of peace) and do not insist on pursuing mutually exclusive goals.³¹

What about instances where states whose interests and values are fundamentally at odds? For example, if a state indeed harbours aggressive intentions. Similarly, what if there is an asymmetry in the degree of transparency between states? In general, such situations renders transparency irrelevant or even harmful, and the outcomes would more likely align with realist theories of power-balance. If the relationship between two states is characterised by historical distrust and animosity, more amounts or sources of information—even if some of these convey genuine efforts to seek peaceful solutions—is likely to be filtered or interpreted in a way to fit existing (negative) mental models about the adversary's intent.³² This can then lead to a potential security dilemma. Breakdowns in dialogue and diplomacy between transparent and non-transparent states can similarly be expected as these efforts will likely be characterised by scepticism and perceived unfairness.³³ Transparency-as-dialogue is ineffective under such situations because an expressed commitment to iterative dialogue by one party may not be reciprocated (at least in the short-term). Therefore, the increased availability of information, absent the opportunity to clarify doubts through dialogue, simply provides more 'ammo' to be (mis)interpreted to justify self-serving actions, which exacerbates tension, competition and conflict.



Russian President Dmitry Medvedev addresses the 64th session of the UN General Assembly on 24th September, 2009.

The scenarios highlighted above examined the effects of transparency contingent on inter-state relationships—whether they are co-operative or competitive. A third contingency arises through increased transparency as a condition. To elaborate, improved communications technology and enhanced global interconnectivity means that states are no longer the single trusted source of information.³⁴ In addition to official diplomatic exchanges, recipient states may also receive conflicting or contradictory information through open sources (e.g., policy statements intended for domestic audience consumption) or through an intermediary, such as news media, which may be biased in their reporting.³⁵ Also, there is a tacit expectation that equipped with more information, decision-makers should be able to formulate sound policies more quickly. Yet, the sheer volume of information is equally likely to overwhelm and paralyse decision-making.³⁶ Put together, too much transparency can jeopardise the pursuit of national security because of rushed or incomplete policy formulation, and/or a lack of coherence in signalling the state's intentions.

Transparency as an instrument of national security needs to be 'just right' to achieve desired effects. It is not a panacea to resolve or avoid

conflicts.³⁷ As an inevitable condition within IR, transparency's value toward national security will increase in the long-term. As Gray predicted, a reliance on military hard power alone will likely result in yet 'another bloody century'.³⁸ Concomitantly, the complexities of transparency will introduce new challenges for states to manage, by influence rather than control, their signalling of resolve and intent, in a clear, consistent, credible and co-operative fashion.³⁹

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DOES TRANSPARENCY ONLY SERVE, OR DOES IT SHAPE NATIONAL SECURITY?

Beyond its utility as an instrument of national security, Transparency is also argued to dynamically shape the future of global politics.⁴⁰ Domestically, increased transparency on elite decision-making implies that governments will increasingly be scrutinised and held accountable.⁴¹ This represents a re-distribution of



Pekka Haavisto, Minister for International Development of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs in Finland, at the first World NGO Day in Helsinki in 2014

power from the state to the public: where NGOs and interest groups will gain increasing voice and leverage on setting the national security agenda and what values should be protected and at what cost.⁴² Such broadening of the security agenda introduces added challenges for state authorities, which find themselves having to delicately balance between public sentiment (i.e., continued political support) and pursuing a coherent long-term grand strategy.⁴³ Relating back to IR and the pursuit of common security objectives, this demonstrates the potential disutility of increased Transparency. States may be constrained in communicating 'true' intentions and resolve not because of the desire to gain an advantage, but because of potential domestic backlash. Therefore, while transparency is argued to be valuable and viable, it does not replace private, diplomatic back channels that may instead help achieve a more mutually desired outcome.⁴⁴ Under certain circumstances, secrecy or opacity can better serve the achievement of national security.

CONCLUSION

Transparency is instrumental towards the achievement of national security, regardless of how security is defined. It is, however, complex, and its effects contingent on a multitude of factors. The main mechanism underpinning the effects of transparency is the reduction of uncertainty over other state's intentions, and the promotion of shared norms and understanding. Critically, transparency cannot simply involve disclosing more information. Efforts must be made to ensure that information is transmitted coherently (from a trusted and designated source), and correctly interpreted—through iterative dialogue—by intended recipient states. Over time, consistency and credibility is established to enhance trust and co-operation. Transparency as a condition of global politics will also result in the re-distribution of power from the state to the public and introduce new challenges for future pursuits of national security. As promising as transparency is purported to help secure peace, it is not a panacea and it must be used in conjunction with all other available instruments to best achieve peace and security.

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MAJ Wu Yiheng graduated from the University of Western Australia with a Bachelor of Arts (Honours) in Psychology. MAJ Wu is a helicopter pilot by vocation and is trained on the Super Puma and H225M. He previously served as OC 'C' of 125 Squadron, and graduated from the 52nd Command and Staff Course from the Goh Keng Swee Command and Staff College in 2021. He is currently on a staff posting as SO(Heli) in Air Plans Department.