

# APPROACHES TO TRANSPARENCY IN ARMS CONTROL AND VERIFICATION<sup>1</sup>- A CANADIAN VIEW OF CHINESE PERSPECTIVES

Robert E. Bedeski, Ph.D.  
Professor, Department of Political  
University of Victoria

## INTRODUCTION

While culture is often used as a blanket term to avoid more specific analysis, it is critical to understand some of the cultural and historical experiences of China for appreciation of their views on arms control - specifically transparency and verification. First, the terms in English are mostly mutually exclusive – verification is an *active* process, looking for evidence to substantiate certain claims. It is an activity that coincides with Western institutions of legal and scientific processes. ‘Transparency’ is a *passive* quality which implies the reduction or removal of distortions or opaqueness. This neat categorization has less presence in the Chinese language, and it lacks the legal antecedents and supports for verification. In Chinese, for example, transparency is translated as *tou-ming*, two distinct ideographs: *tou* an active verb, and *ming*, an adjective meaning ‘bright’ or ‘clear’. Thus, the Chinese term denotes a more interventionist quality than does the English.

Traditionally Chinese society was cellular and clan/family based – the empire was a relatively distant burden to most of the population. The modern sovereign nation-state, which developed in Western Europe from the Renaissance, has only successfully been transplanted to China in the twentieth century, and with persistent turmoil and violence. Nor has China experienced many of the benefits of formal contract/legal institutions until recently. The result has been that the present leadership – and only since 1979 – is the first generation in the twentieth century to be fully comfortable with integration with the norms of international society. Therefore, it is premature to expect that China will adapt rapidly and painlessly to the dominant norms of modern nation-state behavior. Moreover, what has been termed the ‘globalization’ of the world, is usually seen as ‘Western hegemonization’ of the world.

Third, China’s success and survival from the first empire in 221 BC through to the present has been structured by authoritarian and even totalitarian institutions – which are secretive by their nature. Indeed, a philosophical system of agrarian totalitarianism was devised by Chinese thinkers since the fifth century BC, and this Legalist philosophy became a basis of their civil administration through the empire’s more than two millennia. Sunzi, the famous military writer, described espionage and secrecy as crucial to state survival. Since 1949, Chinese Communism imitated the Soviet model and made the protection of state secrets its highest priority. While economic reforms have proceeded far faster than expected since 1979, there has been very little in the way of political reform. This thick residue of traditional authoritarianism, the legacy of Communism, a sense of national vulnerability to the industrial West, innate cultural conservatism, and a military establishment reluctant to abandon its shrouds of secrecy,

combine to inhibit any latent spirit of cooperation in transparency and verification from the Chinese side.

Although China is able to participate in processes of transparency and verification, the prevalent view is that transparency is only possible between states of equal power; otherwise, the weaker are at a disadvantage in revealing their weakness. This would mean that transparency operates successfully only in very narrow contexts. Obstacles to widening transparency no doubt occur between China and stronger states, which presumably could take advantage of fuller knowledge of Chinese capabilities and intentions. Nor does China's experience with smaller states give them much confidence. North Korea and Vietnam moved from the Chinese to the Soviet orbit (less so in the case of Pyongyang), and were transformed from strategic assets to liabilities. Thus, a foundation of trust would seem to be absent.

Nevertheless, China has engaged the CIS and India in several Confidence and Security Building Measure (CSBM) agreements, indicating that a rough degree of military parity will allow limited transparency and verification – although progress with India has been slow. India's nuclear tests reinforced Chinese suspicions of Indian ambitions to maintain strategic parity, if not surpass China, and also threatened Pakistan, an ally of China.

It can be argued that Chinese reluctance to increase transparency only fuels suspicions about its intentions – if there is nothing to hide, why fear openness? Moreover, China's nuclear and missile programs, allegations of spying, violations of human rights, and other 'threats' seem to validate the 'anti-China' lobby's claims of a new hegemonic power.<sup>1</sup> From the Chinese perspective, however, the situation may be said to resemble two adversaries – one armed with a pistol and the other with a knife, and the former (the West) demanding the other (China) throw away the knife as a sign of peaceful intentions. U.S. plans to move ahead with TMD, and possibly share technology with Japan and Taiwan, are seen as further attempts to intimidate China.<sup>2</sup>

The bottom line is that Sino-American engagement is too new and recent to move toward mutual Arms Control and Verification except in fairly formal ways. Arms control and verification negotiations and treaties emerged from rough equivalence of mutually assured destruction – a condition missing from the Sino-American relation.

The Chinese feel they have little to gain and much to lose with transparency. For them, modern history began in the 1840s with defeat by the British in the Opium Wars. Subsequent interactions until 1949 generally penalized them, and the Communist revolution – for all its violence and suffering – produced a state capable of standing up to the West. They still are convinced of their vulnerability, and regard the secrecy of information about their capabilities a valuable commodity crucial for their survival as a nation. Should the West have even more accurate information, and perhaps learn the extent of Chinese weakness, it will be impossible plausibly to bluff enemies or secessionists (for example, Taiwan or Tibet). China regards secrecy to be an essential element of statecraft, and will not modify it simply to mollify critics, or to surrender it for

access to more sophisticated Western technology. In demanding hundreds of millions of US dollars for a peek at a suspected nuclear site, the North Koreans expressed a fundamental attitude shared by the Chinese – that information is an expensive commodity which can be bought and sold if the price is high enough, but more general systemic knowledge, which depends on interior lines of communication, will probably remain beyond the scope of agreed verification.

The nature of the Chinese curtain of secrecy became apparent to the author in the early 1980s, while he was conducting research on local elections. In each district, he asked to see an electoral map and each time was told it was '*bufangbian*' (not convenient) or a couple of times, '*neibu*' (restricted). At first it appeared that the local governments were hyper-secretive, but later it seemed that the information needed was not available in any structured form. Voting districts were probably allocated informally, and the author's hosts may have been more embarrassed than secretive over the request. In dealing with the military, the transparency issue will also be a combination of strategic prudence, paranoia and embarrassment for the Chinese. It is probable that the neat tables and charts prepared for staff and foreigners have only a rough correspondence to the reality of men and weapons. Civilian control of the military is not an established pattern to the same extent as it is in the West, and the Chinese leadership itself might even welcome a higher degree of transparency to its own purview.

## **THE END OF THE COLD WAR**

Through much of the twentieth century, nations have engaged in a multiplicity of war-related activities – arms buildups, espionage, development of weapons technology, civil defense, as well as war itself. Anxieties over these preparations and hidden intentions inevitably led to counter activities and often erupted into armed conflict, defeating some nations and bankrupting others. Millions of lives and trillions of dollars expended in these decades of conflict have been the consequences of arms races and wars.

After both World Wars, international actors tried to limit arms, but national jealousies and hostilities prevented success of any magnitude. In the past several decades, hope has increased with a strong United Nations, the willingness of the U.S. and the former Soviet Union to negotiate meaningful arms control agreements, and more recently, the Sino-Russian CSBM agreements have demonstrated a direction for gradual and cumulative CSBM design and implementation. The question today is whether or not nations can resolve their differences and move toward greater trust that will enable them to reduce weapons development and deployment. The most promising direction is building trust between potential rivals – but trust requires verification.

CSBMs may be most effective between states of similar levels of economic and technological development, since there is greater possibility of possession of a common pool of weapons and surveillance technology. It is likely that China may be unwilling to

negotiate full CSBMs with the U.S. because of asymmetrical transparency. In addition, as a relatively recent modern sovereign nation-state, China is reluctant to compromise its sovereignty and open its military establishment to surveillance by an international community still suspicious of Chinese intentions. Mutual trust cannot be created overnight.

### **WHAT IS TRANSPARENCY?**

According to Alan Crawford, transparency has two meanings:<sup>3</sup>

- In its wider use, it refers to ‘the degree of availability within a country of information on matters related to security’ – or openness.
- More narrowly, it refers to ‘specifically agreed measures for systematic exchange of accurate information about military matters.’

Greater availability of timely and accurate information can have positive benefits for international peace and security. Whether there are specific inter-governmental agreements, and how the information is acquired, is not as important as availability to other governments and the general public. In addition, transparency is not necessarily nor exclusively a voluntary function agreed upon by government. It may be achieved through governmental unilateral action, or by third party actions. Liberal democratic states are generally more comfortable than authoritarian systems with this notion of transparency. Western constitutional governments - based on a tradition of rule by law, accountable through elections, with free party competition, representative government, a free press, and various checks and balances on government power – certainly have provisions for secrecy, but increasingly find it difficult to justify the restriction of access to information .

Authoritarian governments, on the other hand, generally have much broader definitions of national security and state secrets, and recognize far fewer legal restrictions on exercising state power over citizens. Moreover, authoritarian systems treat information as a valuable commodity which can be a threat to the system if available to dissenters and opponents. Even minor pieces of information may be treated as state secrets: during the Soviet period, accurate city street maps were not available, since this was viewed as valuable information to any potential invader. An open-ended definition of state secrets is also useful to control a sullen population and to harass or prosecute dissenters.

It is in the imbalance between democratic and authoritarian habits of information control that differing notions of transparency emerge. A system of government which guards its secrets so closely from its citizens will guard them even more tightly from potential enemies and even allies who may potentially ally with the enemy. Thus, transparency is

not merely a technical problem, but one which derives from the nature of the political system.

The narrower definition emphasizes measures based on government agreements, based on governmental intent to share information, ‘while providing greater control about the nature and extent of the information made available. It also involves a reciprocal exchange of information.’ As Crawford indicates, inter-governmental transparency is a positive cooperative measure demonstrating ‘a willingness to cooperate on international peace and security.’ While this seems to raise all transparency measures to a common value level, this is far from the actual case.

This is illustrated by considering a single hypothetical transparency measure, which we will term  $TM_1$ .  $TM_1$  represents an initial transparency measure in a series -  $TM_1 \dots TM_n$  and thus is presumably more valuable than any  $TM_{1+n}$  because it creates a precedent and breakthrough, and is most difficult to achieve. For a democratic system, accustomed to openness, the threshold  $TM_1$  holds relatively few surprises. The authoritarian state, on the other hand, will probably see  $TM_1$  as a challenge to its control and information system. The authoritarian government, therefore, will place a much higher value on  $TM_1$  because it sees an additional cost added to acceptance – it is not only surrendering some control and access over specific information, but may be establishing a precedent for openness within its own system. So it is not entirely correct to consider even a narrow  $TM_1$  as reciprocal, when agreed to by different types of political systems. The authoritarian system will invariably see the measure as more intrusive than will the democratic system.

In the case of a totalitarian system, such as North Korea, the value of  $TM_1$  will be even higher. The North Korean demand for hundreds of millions of US dollars for an inspection of a suspected site probably represents the true value assessed on a  $TM_1$  by a state that is extremely secretive as well as financially bankrupt.

This same argument will be true in a variety of non-Western political systems as well – whether democratic or authoritarian. It is generally the advanced, Western countries that take the initiative in advocating CSBMs and transparency with non-Western states. Most of the non-West was subjected to Western colonialism prior to 1945, and remains suspicious of any demands that they give up their recent and precious sovereignty – even to an international body like the UN.  $TM_1$  represents a challenge of interference – a threat which is perceived to risk some loss of autonomy and surrender of control to technologically stronger, economically wealthier, and militarily more powerful Western states. For an industrializing state such as China,  $TM_1$  is no mere trade off, but potentially a surrender of part of its sovereignty.

It is important to understand transparency as part of the process of CSBMs, and as behavioral and attitudinal transformation but an economics approach could also shed light. Information is a type of commodity, and information about security is a very

valuable commodity. Transparency is the process of giving away or trading this commodity, and facilitating CSBMs requires establishing a fair price of  $TM_1 \dots TM_n$ . Unlike an economic market commodity, however, supply and demand of  $TM_1 \dots TM_n$  have at least four special characteristics:

1. Willingness to supply  $TM_1 \dots TM_n$  depends on the openness of the political system.
2. The price demanded for  $TM_2$  depends on what uses the 'buyer' made of  $TM_1$ , or, the price of  $TM_{n+1}$  depends on whether the 'buyer' used any  $TM_n$  to devalue the price of  $TM_{n+1}$ . That is, disclosure of or access to previously secret information could enable the 'buyer' further access to secrets without cost, or at a cost below that anticipated by the 'seller'.<sup>4</sup>
3. Buyers and sellers do not operate in a free and open market. Governments are monopolists of security information, and have the power severely to punish anybody who violates this monopoly. Governments, however, may choose to distribute the information freely for their own purposes.
4. Habits, culture and foreign policy will influence transparency measures - Sino-Russian CSBM agreements have undoubtedly been facilitated by the commonality of the Communist state structures of the past, while Sino-Indian cooperative agreements are more difficult to expand because of very different socio-political structures and foreign policy.

### **AN ASIAN APPROACH TO CSBMS**

There are differences between North American/Western European approaches to CSBMs and transparency.<sup>5</sup> A Council for Security Cooperation in Asia Pacific (CSCAP) Working Group emphasized the importance of regional confidence building measures as an 'effective mechanism' to promote peace and security regionally, defining them as including measures that address, prevent, or resolve uncertainties among states, including both military and political elements. If there is an Asian approach to these measures, it is that informal structures and personal relationships are preferred over formal structures, and the principle of non-interference is a major value, at least according to the Working Group.

Nevertheless, the CSCAP Working Group saw the need to expand transparency measures, which can provide convenient and low-risk methods to promote confidence in preparation for more ambitious programs in the future. In general, reassurance, trust, and confidence can be enhanced with greater transparency in military doctrine, capabilities, and intentions.

Quoting from the CSCAP summary,

A wide variety of military transparency measures exist. These include direct military to military contacts, visits by military delegations, military personnel exchange programs, intelligence exchange, prior notification of military exercises, the opening of military exercises to international observers, greater openness regarding military budgets and defense planning and procurement, and the preparation of defense white papers or policy papers. Many have been, or could easily be initiated unilaterally or pursued on a bilateral or broader basis.

The development both of minimum standards of openness and of common definitions or uniform outlines for defense policy white papers, arms registries, statements of defense expenditures, and other transparency measures would enhance military transparency efforts. Both governmental and non-governmental organizations should also encourage and facilitate informed public debate on security issues.<sup>6</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS

As Ann Florini writes,

Advocates of well-established norms such as corporate privacy and national sovereignty want to hide information from prying eyes, while promoters of transparency tout it as the solution to everything from international financial crises to arms races and street crime...we are seeing now ...a rapidly evolving shift of consensus... For nation-states, the shift is occurring between old ideas of sovereignty, which allowed states to keep the world out of their domestic matters, and a new standard that they must explain their actions to the world.<sup>7</sup>

In this perspective, China and Canada represent nearly two opposite ends of a continuum starting with near-total secrecy and ending at near-total transparency in matters of state. While dialogue has started, it must be recognized that culture, historical experience, and security deficits determine much of the content. Even if the arguments in favor of transparency prevail, China – as well as the rest of the world – watches the application and results of processes such as inspection and verification. Concepts have far more meaning in their implementation than in argument. When the U.S. included CIA operatives in the UNSCOM inspection teams in Iraq, it was following a pragmatic and perhaps unavoidable mode of behavior – few qualified experts exist outside the espionage community. Nevertheless, it demonstrated a certain hollowness to claims of neutral transparency – the line between espionage and UN inspections was publicly crossed, and although it is unlikely that any well-informed diplomat or government official was

genuinely surprised, the action will be used by anti-transparency advocates in defense of their position.

Canada advocates transparency, and China opposes it – or at least is extremely cautious in cooperating unless some vital interests are served. As a nation advocating arms control and verification, disarmament, and transparency, we can continue to engage the Chinese in this dialogue, but we should not expect easy or rapid progress in convincing them of the correctness of our position (and the flaws in their position). This dialogue should occur at levels of Track One and Track Two.

Information technology is changing the nature of knowledge and information. Satellites, Internet, online publishing, photocopiers, cyberwarfare, distance education and other new technologies are revolutionizing not only the global economy, but military science. Secrecy will always be with us in some form, and transparency will continue to be subject to competing claims and negotiations in the arms control and verification process. What I have attempted in this paper is to demonstrate that Canada and China have very different perceptions of transparency, and that one way of establishing a common ground is to understand both the cultural contexts and the implicit ‘pricing mechanism’ for information that is linked to the nature of the political system.

## Notes

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1 See for example, Steven W. Mosher, *Hegemon: China's plan to dominate Asia and the world*, (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2000), in which he sees hegemony as part of Chinese statecraft from earlier times.

2 “What is especially serious is that the US and Japan have stepped up cooperative research and development of TMD systems and have given consideration to the inclusion of Taiwan.” Ding Shichuan, “Macro Observations of US Strategy and Tactics of Interference in the Question of Taiwan,” *International Strategic Studies* 4:58 (October 2000):24.

3 Alan Crawford, “Transparency and the Nuclear Proliferation, Arms Control and Disarmament (NACD) Process.” Paper presented at the Canada-China Seminar on Asia Pacific Multilateralism and Cooperative Security, (30 January 1997).

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4 William Buckley Jr. tells of an interview he once had with Casper Weinberger, Secretary of Defense for President Ronald Reagan: Asked why the U.S. did not share missile research with the Soviet Union, as a means of deflecting their criticism of U.S. departure from the 1972 ABM Treaty requirements, Weinberger essentially said the following: "Suppose there are 26 parts to the development of an effective missile defense, the first being the mere concept of it, the 26th the finishing touch on the guidance system. Now these stages are not accosted sequentially, not in government-style emergency programs. In some situations, he said, you cannot go to work on Problem #8 without first solving Problem #7, which dictates the design of #8...Now, if we were to proffer our solutions to problems #2-#18, assuming our research and testing had however eccentrically ended us up with those solutions, it could happen that the Soviet Union had already cracked #19-#26. The result of our openhandedness could theoretically be to complete the problem for the Soviet Union before we had done it for ourselves. So we were not about to risk handing Moscow a defense against our own deterrent system." *National Review* (22 February, 1999):27.

5 *CSCAP Memorandum No. 2*, (no publication data listed).

6 *Ibid.*, 4.

7 Ann Florini, "The End of Secrecy," *Foreign Policy* 50:63 (Summer 1998):50.