Policy Brief 2011-2

October 2011

NORTHEAST ASIA
DEFENSE
TRANSPARENCY
PROJECT

Harnessing the European Experience in Defense Transparency

Christian Le-Miere

Summary

Europe has pioneered and championed the cause of defense transparency, owing to the continent's turbulent history and a desire to avoid these mistakes again. Defense transparency has improved in Europe as a result of the roles played by private industry and media, as well as the consequences of conflict or collaboration between the governments on the continent. The conditions that have encouraged greater transparency in Europe are not entirely reflected in Asia, but steps are being taken to gradually improve defense transparency in the region.

INTRODUCTION

This policy brief examines the European experience of defense transparency and gauge its relevance to Asia-Pacific. Drawing on the last 60 years of European practice allows policymakers in the Asia-Pacific to consider the development of defense transparency in another region, and whether there are lessons to be learned in mimicking or avoiding certain aspects of Europe's experience.

Organizers of a recent conference on defense transparency defined the activity as:

> 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 interest and institutional obligations, to thereby reduce the risks of misperception and miscalculation, and through this process to build mutual trust.[1]

This comprehensive definition can, perhaps, be augmented by further classification of the concept of defense transparency. Specifically, a distinction can be drawn between public and private defense transparency. The first relates to information available to populations on defense and military matters, while the second may just be intergovernmental information sharing or cooperation that does not enter the public sphere. Further, defense transparency can be transmitted either through official or unofficial channels, the former referring to governmental or ministerial statements and publications, the latter referring to, usually, independent or state-run media.

Many of the insights of this policy brief derive not only from historical research, but also from my experience working for *The Military Balance,* an annual reference publication from the International Institute for Strategic Studies listing the military capabilities of every country in the world.[2] To gain our information, the Military Balance production team relies on a combination of open source analysis, first-hand research, an extensive network of academic, military, and journalistic contacts, and finally, communication with official government representatives. The latter is used largely as a form of verification, and any formal governmental submission undergoes an in-house analytical process to ensure its veracity and to marry the information with the team's best assessments.

As a result, *The Military Balance* is both a publication aiming to improve public defense transparency in a very specific area (that is, public information about military capabilities and organizations), while also relying on both official and unofficial transparency in defense matters.

MEDIA, INDUSTRY, AND GOVERNMENT

The work of the Military Balance team has been aided greatly by a vast improvement in unofficial public defense transparency over the past two decades, owing to the rapidly increasing number of sources of easily accessible and unofficial information that now exist. These are produced by think tanks, specialist media organizations, mainstream media, and, perhaps most importantly for the most opaque countries, enthusiasts. There have always been aircraft and boat spotters, but now they have their own blogs, web sites, and fora in which to discuss their findings. Technology has proliferated to such an extent that not only can pictures of the newly painted *Varyag* now be online and accessed from around the world within days, or handheld images of Ukrainian tanks on a Kenyan train en route to southern Sudan be circulated, but commercially available high-resolution satellite imagery has become affordable enough for private companies to make use of it and verify what would otherwise be hunches and guesswork.

The privatization of various defense industries and intensified defense industrial competition since the end of the Cold War has also helped

---

1. Workshop on Defense Transparency in Northeast Asia, University of California Institute on Global Conflict and Cooperation, La Jolla, April 2011.

2 *The Military Balance* is published by the International Institute for Strategic Studies, based in London. See <http://www.iiss.org/publications/military-balance/>.

in producing a wider variety of sources through which one can verify, analyze, and research defense information. Previously, state-run defense companies servicing largely national needs and Cold War client states with only one real choice of armament provider meant that there was no need or incentive to publicize information arms transfers. Now, defense companies may be answerable to their shareholders, and have to explain their performance through an exposition of their various projects, while large defense tenders are conducted in greater openness. The Indian Medium Multi-role Combat Aircraft program is one such example of a previous client state now holding an open, widely publicized competition for tenders.

In line with this increasing unofficial defense transparency, and perhaps as a reaction to it, there has also been a general trend of increasing official public defense transparency among a variety of countries, with a proliferation of more regular white papers and other ministerial publications, an explosion of freedom of information legislations since the 1980s, and an often more-informed media able to coax explanations from ministries of defense and other government departments. By releasing more information, governments are able to control information flows and manipulate perceptions to a far greater extent than if they simply allow unofficial sources to generate rumors and press stories. In this way, governmental defense transparency, in both Western and non-Western countries, may at times still be an attempt to obfuscate and obscure; to disguise, deceive, and mislead.

CONFRONTATION AND TRANSPARENCY IN EUROPE

Europe has been at the forefront of attempts to increase governmental transparency in defense and military matters, and two major drivers have been behind this trend: cooperation and confrontation.

For the latter, much defense transparency in Europe has its roots in the private transparency that came about as a result of the Cold War. The bipolar conflict forced the states of Europe and North America into an unprecedented collective defense organization, NATO, that brought militar-

ies together that only years before had been at war. Faced with a common perceived enemy, NATO states were encouraged to integrate their military doctrines, processes, and procedures, so they could work together more effectively. Hundreds of Standardization Agreements (STANAGs) were created, detailing the minutiae that would allow militaries to work together more easily. The use over time of STANAGS can even bring a certain element of commonality and perhaps even convergence in terms of military structures, organization, and equipment. Shared training implemented these standardizations at a practical level while a higher level of intelligence cooperation between NATO states institutionalized information sharing, particularly among 'core' NATO nations.

This, then, allowed NATO to forge an alliance that included a high level of interoperability between the various militaries that has reached its apotheosis in recent out-of-area NATO operations in Afghanistan and the former Yugoslavia. While the militaries are not fully integrated; access to sensitive intelligence networks is still restricted; and rivalries within the alliance, particularly between Greece and Turkey, suggest the limits of NATO transparency; overall the alliance has facilitated greater transparency among its members. It has even encouraged greater public defense transparency, as the standardization of defense expenditure information and the requirements for a certain level of defense spending as a proportion of GDP, has led to NATO since 1963 to publish an annual compendium of financial and personnel data.

The Cold War also encouraged private defense transparency between NATO and the Warsaw Pact. The 1975 Helsinki Final Act stemming from the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe laid the foundations for a series of parallel negotiations aiming to create confidence- and security-building measures (CSBMs) in the form of mutual information exchange and an arms control treaty.

The CSBMs resulted in the Vienna Document of 1999, which under the auspices of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe encourages states to annually share information on armed forces, military organization, manpower,

and major weapon and equipment systems. The countries also share information on their defense planning and budgets during the year. The Vienna Document information is shared privately among the militaries, although certain states, namely Finland and Croatia, publicize their submissions. But it has encouraged an unprecedented level of contact between NATO and former Soviet states, including those of Central Asia, encouraging visits to military bases as well as the sharing of information. The document also includes compliance and verification measures, first introduced in the Stockholm Document of 1987.

The 1990 Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) has reinforced this information sharing. By imposing a ceiling limit on deployed and active forces in the European theatre, the CFE required an intrusive monitoring and verification mechanism. An annual data exchange was reinforced by on-site inspections, challenge inspections, and on-site monitoring of destruction.

These two processes are far from perfect: they are limited in their geographical scope; they exclude naval vessels and naval infantry, which in its initial stages allowed the Soviets to claim a far lower number of troops as many were branded naval infantry or coastal defense; and there have been a number of compliance issues from various countries. The suspension of the CFE by Russia in 2007 also reflected the weakness of even a legally binding document. Nonetheless, the confrontation of the Cold War has encouraged and necessitated a far higher level of private (and to a lesser extent public) defense transparency within NATO states and between NATO and the former Soviet Union.

COOPERATIVE TRANSPARENCY

On the cooperative front, Europe has also seen a greater willingness to engage in defense transparency. Particularly since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War, European states have been far more relaxed about both private and public transparency. One of the most significant motives has been the integration of the European Union. As NATO has encouraged the standardization of many European and North American militaries, so the EU's desire to pursue a Common Security and Defense Policy, however moribund

that idea may be, has led to greater coordination among EU militaries. The Helsinki Headline Goal of 1999 mandated the creation of an EU Rapid Reaction Force, stood up in 2007. Joint operations, such as EUFOR Althea, EUFOR Chad, EUFOR DR Congo, and EUNAVFOR Atalanta, have reinforced the trend of European militaries working together, even if NATO remains the dominant military agency through which these states coordinate. The inclusion of European forces in other multinational military forces or missions, such as the Proliferation Security Initiative or international joint task force headquarters such as the Combined Maritime Forces in the Middle East, has bolstered this trend of European interoperability. The formation of the European Defense Agency in 2004 was part of a wider trend of cross-border defense and defense industrial cooperation between the states, with the EDA's members engaging in information-sharing activities through the requirements of the EU Military Staff.

Integration has also occurred on a bilateral level, framed by the trust and cooperation of the EU, with the November 2010 Franco-British agreement the latest development of the integration of European militaries.

At the same time, European integration has allowed for a harmonization of requirements and norms regarding financial reporting of military budgets, as well as governmental public defense transparency. This normative change appears to have been part of a wider post–Cold War consensus on the benefits of national transparency, with the initiation of the UN Register of Conventional Arms (UNROCA) in 1991 suggesting at least a rhetorical consensus that military transparency can be beneficial. European states have been among the most forthcoming with UNROCA, even though the number of Western European states submitting their annual reports to UNROCA has declined from a universal 26 in 2006 to 21 in 2010.

Of course this doesn't mean that the full range of defense priorities as viewed in national capitals will converge entirely. Nonetheless, European states have found many of their interests increasingly converging over recent decades, and therefore are viewing the duplication of military efforts as redundant. This is lowering boundaries between

the various national militaries and greatly enhancing private defense transparency, while national governments are increasingly communicating to their populations their defense policies, doctrines, and expenditures. The current financial straits that many states find themselves in is further encouraging candor in national budgets.

FROM EUROPE TO ASIA

Does the experience of Europe, emanating as it does from a unique history of conflict, tension, and ultimately union, hold any useful lessons for Northeast Asia?

The region lacks the levels of tension and deployments seen during the Cold War, but the Asia-Pacific has certainly not been without its share of conflict. The actions of the Japanese Imperial Army in the first half of the twentieth century, for instance, or the war and subsequent tension on the Korean Peninsula since the 1950s have ensured an enduring level of mistrust, which defense transparency could be used to alleviate.

As of yet, these situations have yet to lead to significant and lasting confidence-building measures. The Korean peninsula has seen waves of CSBMs, most recently undermined by the *Cheonan* sinking and Yongpyeong shelling in 2010. Sino-Japanese military-to-military relations remain nascent, with the first port visits by a warship only occurring in 2009–10, some 65 years after the end of World War II.

Nonetheless, latent regional tensions could lead to pressure for arms limitations treaties, particularly in areas of contention such as the South China Sea. There is also already some discussion of lasting confidence-building measures, with the guidelines on the Declaration on Conduct in the South China Sea agreed in July 2011 an example of the desire on the part of various Asian governments to institute greater military interaction and confidence. At the Shangri-La Dialogue in June 2011, Vietnam's Minister of Defense General Phung Quang Thanh highlighted the bilateral military hot lines set up with countries such as China and Cambodia as prime examples of the kind of interaction that builds confidence between the various militaries.

Asian governments remain far from the stage of declaring their military capabilities to each other, but incremental steps towards this goal, for instance by developing alert mechanisms and a code of conduct on military exercises, a key part of the Vienna Document, could build momentum towards a broader agreement.

In terms of cooperative steps toward transparency, there is no clear NATO alliance to encourage standardization of military methods and processes. ASEAN is entirely a political-economic grouping and forum, with no agreements on military collaboration. There are, however, the kinds of alliances that encourage transparency, with, in particular, the increasing interoperability of U.S. allies and their willingness to involve themselves in extra-regional operations thereby developing greater understanding of methodologies and capabilities. The admittedly nascent Shanghai Cooperation Organization suggests that some cross-border private defense transparency could already exist among those countries outside of the pro-U.S. axis that exists with countries such as Japan, South Korea, and Singapore.

Military exercises have also expanded in their participants and observers, with the annual Thai–U.S. COBRA GOLD exercises, for instance, involving personnel from Singapore, Japan, Malaysia, and South Korea in 2011. Observers regularly attend from countries such as Australia, Bangladesh, Brunei, Cambodia, China, India, Laos, Mongolia, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines, and Vietnam.

Asia also lacks the political transformation and harmonization process that took place in Western Europe in the post-war era, and Eastern Europe after the Cold War. A variety of governmental systems exist throughout the Asia-Pacific, which heightens mistrust and discourages transparency. There is, however, no inherent reason why the various governments would not embrace transparency, and regular white papers are slowly and obscurely increasing public transparency. China's 2010 defense white paper (actually released in 2011), for example, is indicative of a desire on the part of China's government to improve official public defense transparency, albeit in an iterative and slow process that has seen doctrinal issues

gain greater discussion but military capabilities receive short shrift in its publication. This process has been encouraged by greater interaction with other militaries, and regular criticism of China's lack of transparency, a policy that has borne some fruit.

What the future holds for Asian defense transparency and whether the European experience might prove useful relies to some extent on the development of the international security environment in the region. Without the same level of tension that existed during the Cold War, there may not be the impetus for states to overcome the high level of tension with the kinds of CSBMs that eventually led to the more over-arching Vienna Document of 1999. Equally, without the kind of post-tension collaborative atmosphere and harmonized governmental goals that existed in Europe after the Cold War, there will be little motivation to encourage public and private disclosures of military power and strategic intentions. The various maritime disputes of the region may provide the most likely areas for gains in transparency, particularly the South China Sea. Those policymakers wishing to encourage defense transparency in the region would do well to utilize such disputes and leverage existing multinational groupings, such as ASEAN, to encourage incremental military CSBMs, such as alerts of military exercises, collaborative search-and-rescue, and military hot lines, to build an interwoven network of military-to-military relations and interactions. However, consistent policy pressure from both within and without the region may be necessary to foster the environment conducive to continued military confidence-building measures and unilateral or multilateral defense transparency.

Christian LE-MIERE is research fellow for naval forces and maritime security at the International Institute for Strategic Studies. Before joining the institute, he was the editor of *Jane's Intelligence Review* and *Jane's Intelligence Weekly.*