

TRANSPARENCY CONFLICTS IN SINO-AMERICAN RELATIONS

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Abstract: In this essay, we approach the matter of international transparency from a cultural perspective: how the concept of transparency differs and overlaps in East and West and how differences and similarities reinforce mutual suspicions in contemporary Sino-American security affairs. We will explore the hidden pitfalls in the politics of military transparency in the Sino-American relations and argue that the Sino-American transparency dialogue has unexpectedly aggravated, rather than helped to reduce, the geopolitical rivalry between the two nations.

I. Introduction

In this essay, we will explore the hidden pitfalls in the politics of military transparency in the Sino-American relations and argue that the Sino-American transparency dialogue has unexpectedly aggravated, rather than helped to reduce, the geopolitical rivalry between the two nations. The transparency dialogue is meant to be the common ground through which the two nations work together, build mutual trust, allay suspicions, and establish official channels of military-to-military communications. But the common ground has so far proven to be an able breeder of misgivings, largely due to the different, but often unexamined, cultural, philosophical assumptions over the meanings of transparency. We approach the matter of international transparency from a cultural perspective: how the concept of transparency differs and overlaps in East and West and how the differences and similarities reinforce mutual suspicions in contemporary Sino-American security affairs. In the end, we will briefly comment on a broader lesson from our study and on what it means for the possibility of a global public reason.

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II. The Common Ground

Greater military transparency is supposed to abate mutual suspicions. By sharing with one another information about their military matters, countries cooperate to reduce the risk of conflict resulting from misunderstanding and miscalculation. Though the pace has been slow and at times fleeting, the United States (U.S.) and the People's Republic of China (P.R.C.) have been for some time engaged in a process of information sharing with this very purpose in mind.

From a historical perspective, both nations have a respective, relatively long history of transparency discourse. Both nations recognize the importance of transparency in public and international affairs, and have sufficient practical as well as ideological reasons to commit themselves to a general international transparency regime. Nevertheless, it is well understood on both sides that military transparency plays a dual function in international diplomacies. Transparency is a global value that is crucial for maintaining peace and stability and building mutual trust and cooperation between nations. Any particular transparency regime, however, may also be a forceful projection of power, by a dominant nation, over weaker adversaries. As things currently stand, transparency is part and parcel of the U.S.'s preponderance of power. The U.S. has sought for many decades to create a global surveillance network as part of its liberal hegemonic order that is at once legitimate in the eyes of many *and* fortifies America's preponderant power.¹

In particular, America's quest for a more transparent China, militarily-speaking, is motivated by the notion that, as an authoritarian country, China is considerably less forthcoming with details about its military matters – capabilities specifically – than is the U.S. (and other liberal democracies), which places the U.S. at a potential comparative disadvantage in the nascent rivalry between them. What the U.S. wants to know about China, this logic continues, is what China already generally knows about the U.S., since information flows copiously between the government and the people (and interested outsiders) in the U.S. From the U.S. perspective, the onus of openness is on China, since a more transparent China merely rebalances an acute information asymmetry. There is also this implicit understanding on the part of the U.S. that China's reticence

¹For more on this argument see James J. Marquardt, *Transparency and American Primacy in World Politics* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishers, 2011).

about U.S. transparency demands reflects China's strategic vulnerabilities that are the consequence of its relative military weakness. Indeed, one might reasonably argue that practices of secrecy are principally the function of China's strategic vulnerability and are commonly practiced by militarily weak countries in their relations with militarily strong competitors.

For China, on the other hand, it recognizes the value of transparency in international politics and has taken steps over the years to disclose more about its military matters in order to quell concerns others have about its ambitions. Yet China's leaders are suspicious of U.S.'s transparency initiatives. They reject America's contention that China's transparency practices are out of sync with global standards and criticize the alleged U.S. non-transparency on key issues that concern China. Chinese leaders interpret the U.S. criticism and its refusal to clarify its positions on key strategic issues, especially its purpose and attitude towards China, as part of an effort by the U.S. – and other countries in the region – to justify measures for the containment of China's power and for undermining China's good standing abroad.

The strategic significance of transparency plays itself out first and foremost in a competitive political realm. The U.S. is intent on drawing China into a transparency regime with American characteristics, and China rejects this model, as well as an American presence in East Asian security affairs generally. Also, China's resistance to America's overtures has had the effect of affirming the narrative among some in the U.S. of China as a rising power with revisionist ambitions. For its part, China, too, has a lot at stake in military transparency. It is counteracting the American narrative of it as a regional threat – or at least a potential one – by putting forth an alternative vision of East Asian security, which includes its own brand of transparency that both reflects the Chinese experience and is cognizant of and at least partially compliant with Western sensibilities.

We believe that the transparency dispute between the two nations is hardly an accident. The logic of the security dilemma accounts for the competitive nature of the Sino-American transparency dialogue, and yet there is more to this story than the tensions wrought by each country's quest to enhance its security in the anarchic international system. We believe that without a clear understanding of the complex transparency traditions of each country, an implementation of any particular transparency regime between China and the US will inevitably yield greater misunderstanding and thereby exacerbate, not smooth over, the geopolitical rivalry between these major powers.

III. American Transparency

The transparency dynamic between the U.S. and China plays itself out through each country's distinct experiences with public transparency. The meanings transparency has for each country show some similarities. The idea of transparency as disclosure on the part of government officials to the people is evident or at least conceptually appreciated in both countries, but the practice of transparency is institutionalized in the U.S. government to a degree unparalleled in China historically. Also, in each country transparency has a relationship to power – paradoxically, while transparency seeks to tame power it is also a manifestation of power relations in society. Inevitably, from the very beginning, the meanings of transparency have been warped by the morphological changes of power over time.

Historically, political power has undergone two major transformations: (1) the separation of power holder from power executor, and (2) the separation of account holder from power holder. The Chinese culture of power is largely developed under the spurs of the first separation, through contributions from seminal figures such as Sun Tzu and Han Fei Tzu, especially the latter's discussions on the importance of separating the authority of power from its operations and on why a power holder (prince) shall not execute power directly, but employ law (*fa*) and tactics (*shu*) to control and manage public officials as power executors. The Western concept of power, as is familiar to us, is largely developed under the spurs of the second separation and conceptualized mainly through the idea of social contract first expounded by Thomas Hobbes. The fundamental difference between the two cultural models lies in the fact that while the Hobbesian power assumes a conceptual framework where the people (power-enabler) realizes their sovereignty over their government (power-holder) through a non-historical, but no less real, contractual agreement, the Chinese power assumes a hierarchical asymmetry between different interested parties in a preconceptualized political reality.

Though himself not a democratic thinker, Hobbes has laid the foundation for the prevalence of the Benthamite model of democratic governance in the Western world of modernity. On fundamental issues such as the nature and origin of power, democratic thinkers such as John Locke, Jean Jacques Rousseau, Jeremy Bentham, and James Madison have basically followed the Hobbesian framework.

Hobbes does not assume power to be a given but chooses to conceptualize it on the rational ground of social contracting. For him, political power is unnatural, as there is no political power in the state of nature, and a device of social engineering, justified only under covenant. In a body politic, where power is conceived rather than given, people are able to pursue their lives peacefully, exactly because, according to Hobbes, the pervasive fear of the state of nature is rendered irrational by the legitimate, explicit violence of the state.²

The Western understanding of transparency has its philosophical roots in both Hobbes' search for the foundation of power and his sanction of state violence. While the search gives rise to a general hope for optimal social engineering, it is Hobbes' envisaging of a monstrous leviathan-state that has lent impetus to the Enlightenment idea of using publicity as an antidote to power.

According to Jürgen Habermas, publicity is the product of the emergence of the "bourgeois public sphere," the coming together of private people as a public to deliberate on matters of mutual interest and regulate the conduct of public authorities.³ In time, the bourgeois public sphere, mainly in the realm of letters, gave rise to a public sphere in the political realm and what is known as public opinion, a judgment derived through the exercise of reason about matters of state by competent men through personal reflection and public discussion, for the purpose of preventing the misuse of power by government officials. As such, through circulating information and promoting understanding, publicity becomes fundamental to representative government.

Jeremy Bentham expounds on the disciplinary role of public transparency, especially with regard to the legislative power. In his *An Essay on Political Tactics* (1791), Bentham defines publicity as a tactic that regulates a political assembly's "method of acting," directing it toward the greatest happiness of society. He refers to the people collectively as a "tribunal" whose scrutiny of the legislative chamber has the effect of keeping legislators honest and diligent in

²Our discussions here and in the next section are developed from a more detailed account of the transparency narratives in East and West from our previous work, Marquardt and Zhu (2014), "Gazing Eagle, Hiding Dragon: Transparency and the Sino-American Strategic Rivalry," in Chau, Kane, ed. *China and International Security: History, Strategy, and 21st-century Policy*, Santa Barbara, California, Praeger, 2014, vol. 1.

³See Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1992).

their pursuit of the common good. The intentions of legislators are numerous, but even men of impeccable character are tempted to abuse the power granted them by the people. Mistrust in those who exercise power is the foundation of the regime of publicity, and public opinion serves as a “superior force” that keeps in check the power of the legislature. “The eye of the public,” says Bentham, “makes the statesman virtuous.”⁴ Bentham’s application of his publicity principle is hardly limited to the workings of a legislature. In fact, surveillance as a form of publicity is found throughout Bentham’s work, especially his model of the *Panopticon*, or Inspection House.⁵

In American democracy, even though the United States Constitution does not explicitly provide for transparency of the national government, public transparency – or open government – is instead embedded in the Constitution’s system of checks and balances. In the views of James Madison, public transparency, to the extent information flows within the government and between the government and the people, is part and parcel of the checks-and-balances system – that is, the ebb and flow of power.⁶ Furthermore, transparency as publicity works in tandem with accountability, with public officials “called to account” for their actions and “held to account” for wrongdoing. According to Richard Mulgan, the “account-holder” (or the general public) has the right to investigate and scrutinize, and the “accountor” (or the public official) has the obligation to inform and explain his actions.⁷ Essential to accountability is the accountor’s recognition of the account-holder’s authority over him and his obligation to act in accordance with the account-holder’s “right to know.” Without this recognition, Mulgan cautions, accountability amounts to “grace-and-favor transparency.”⁸

⁴Cited in D. G. Gaonkar with Robert J. McCarthy, Jr., “Panopticism and Publicity: Bentham’s Quest for Transparency,” *Public Culture*, vol. 6, no. 3 (1994), p. 554.

⁵Jeremy Bentham, *Panopticon: or The Inspection-House, (with Postscript)*, edited in John Bowring, *The Works of Jeremy Bentham, Vol. 4*. (Edinburgh, Scotland: Simpkin, Marshall, and Company, 1843)

⁶See Peter M. Shane, *Madison’s Nightmare: How Executive Power Threatens American Democracy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), p. 7.

⁷Richard Mulgan, *Holding Power to Account: Accountability in Modern Democracies* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. 10.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 11.

Madison is a champion of popular sovereignty, especially in relation to the effective operation of government. He believes that an educated and informed citizenry is the foundation of popular government and has profound implications for open government because it implies that the people have a right to know what the government is doing and why, giving them an obligation to educate themselves so that they can effectively exercise that right.⁹ That in America today transparency is widely recognized as a core public value – to check and balance power *and* to foster deliberation – finds its inspiration in Madison’s republicanism.

In summary, transparency in America means an open sphere of public accountability enabled by the free flow of information and represents a conceptual as well as structural realization of people’s sovereignty over their government. Thus, transparency symbolizes a key constitutional power of the people on the one hand and functions on the other as the chief practical mechanism for people to divine and control the government’s intent and behavior. In other words, transparency in America should be understood first and foremost as a basic solution to the paradox of democracy, because the significance of open access to information is not just to root out corruption and dishonesty, as envisioned by Bentham, but also the wellspring of the people’s democratic rule over rulers. Transparency is a structure of power, and a right of the people as a whole, held against their government.

Such conceptual features of American transparency entail two pragmatic points that will be significant for our essay. First, since people should in the spirit of publicity distrust their government – à la Bentham, open information is the sole rational means for the people to gain access to the intent and purpose on the part of their government. One cannot rely on declarations and words alone in order to divine what is going on behind the doors, since voluntary disclosure on the part of the government should be distrusted as a matter of principle. Another way to say the same thing is that when one declares a thing openly but hides it at the same time, it would only mean trickery and deception. A declaration would be credible only if an outsider can forcefully, if necessary, see what lies inside. This means that transparency is, despite the common understanding of its being a free and

⁹See “James Madison to W. T. Barry,” August 4, 1822, in “The Founders’ Constitution,” Chapter 18, “Epilogue: Securing the Republic,” Document 35. Accessed on 2004/6/16. http://presspubs.uchicago.edu/founders/print_documents/v1ch18s35.html.

voluntary commitment on the part of a democratic power, an imposed obligation and *essentially compulsory* disclosure, justified by the sovereignty of the people. Put in a paradoxical but nevertheless precise way, the free and voluntary disclosure on the part of the government is presumed reliable and trustworthy only because of the imposed regime of publicity. The paradox is not obvious but substantial. It is part of the general nature of transparency itself. *Transparent* means both “visible” and “invisible.” A person can bump into a glass door because it is transparent and what lies behind the glass door is transparent, too. The paradoxical nature of transparency proves to be a seemingly infinite source of confusion in international diplomacy – when Americans demand voluntary disclosure on the part of the Chinese military, the Americans may forget that such disclosure is worthless in the eyes of the Chinese, as it would be to the Americans, too, without presuming a regime of publicity, and that such demand may naturally suggest to the Chinese ulterior motives on the part of the Americans.

Second, under a transparency regime, what is important is not necessarily people’s *actual* knowledge of the government behavior but their right to know it, which in turn represents a constitutional authority, people’s power over power. Thus, American transparency guarantees authority of the “weak” (citizens) over the powerful (government and officials) and privileges the right to knowledge over actual knowledge. The “authority of the weak” assumption is significant because, when applied internationally and beyond its democratic context, an American transparency demand may seem doubly illogical: America is neither “weak” nor has right to call on other countries to account for their actions. Instead, an American right to know may serve as an easy reminder of imperialism. When it comes to the secondary nature of actual knowledge, its significance lies in the postponing of the inevitable question of authenticity: for what is voluntarily revealed is untrustworthy. This is true to Americans, but especially true to the Chinese, thanks to the legacies of such strategic thinkers as Sun Tzu and Han Fei Tzu, especially the latter.

IV. Chinese Transparency

In contrast to the American experience, the Chinese understanding of transparency presumes a pre-conceptualized political reality of ancient China where the main relata of power are not government and people but prince and officialdom. Within such a context, the meaning of information flow is

fundamentally different from that in a modern democratic sphere of publicity. Instead of functioning as a check on official abuse, such free flow of public information actually tends to abet abuse. According to Han Fei Tzu, since it is human nature to *always* deceive one's superior (sometimes even through truths, according to Han), information flow within officialdom has little connection to reality and the open record of official conducts should be taken instead as general, apparent untruths.¹⁰

In his criticism of Guan Zhong 管仲, a famous advocate of governmental transparency,¹¹ Han Fei Tzu focuses on the fundamental unreliability of public information and the necessary gap between what is seen and unseen, especially when the situation involves disparity of power or conflict of interest. Han believes that Guan's effort to encourage open informational flow would only lead

¹⁰Han writes: "Sitting in court, an average man looks dignified. If one finds himself alone, however, even Zeng and Shi (famous sages) would be irreverent. Judging people according to their appearance is not the way to do things. Moreover, everyone has a reason to deceive a king. If a king evaluates officials according to public knowledge, it is inevitable that his subordinates will decorate truths in order to deceive him. 韩非子·难三第三十八：广廷严居，众人之所肃也；宴室独处，曾、史之所慢也。观人之所肃，非行情也。且君上者，臣下之所为饰也。好恶在所见，臣下之饰奸物以愚其君，必也。"

¹¹Writes Guan: When a ruler sees something good, the approval shall be documented in an official approbation. When he sees something bad, his disapproval should be documented in an official sanction. The effectiveness of reward and punishment will be obtained in (the transparency of) what is seen. [Thus,] people will not commit crimes even when they are not seen. If a ruler sees something good and does not render his approval in official approbation or sees something bad and does not render his disapproval in official sanction, the effectiveness of reward and punishment will be lost (in the non-transparency of) what is seen. In that case, it would be impossible to use what is seen to regulate what is unseen. 管子：权修第三：見其可也，喜之有徵。見其不可也，惡之有刑。賞罰信於其所見，雖其所不見，其敢為之乎？見其可也，喜之無徵；見其不可也，惡之無刑；賞罰不信於其所見，而求其所不見之為之化，不可得也。 See *Guan Zi Jiao Zhu*, ed. Ni Xiang Feng, Beijing: Zhong Hua Shu Ju, 管子校注，黎翔凤 撰，北京：中华书局，2004.

to more lies and half-truths.¹² Basically, Han's logic is forceful: within the presence of power or power disparity, any ostentatious display of information, whether it is in the form of a public statement or open conduct, should invite questioning by a wise observer regarding its truthfulness and underlying motive. When something is rendered visible or put on display, even if what is seen is true, it may be used to belie what is unseen.

Somewhat similar to Jeremy Bentham, Han believes that in order to create a truly transparent political realm, a prince should downplay the significance of public information but create a panopticon-like surveillance system and what is called *fa* (laws and regulations), an objective reward and punishment structure that minimizes the value of public information. Within such system, every official would have to assume that he is being secretly observed and dare not to harbor any self-interest beyond pursuing public good.¹³ In other words, for Han, transparency should not be transparency of information but that of motive.¹⁴

Not only should the motives of officials be rendered transparent through *fa* and *shu*, but the will of a prince should be made equally transparent, for the sake of rationalizing power as well as establishing the credibility of *fa*. According to Han, even though power may often be felt and indulged as nothing but arbitrariness, the private whim of a prince actually presents one of the gravest dangers to the prince and his power. A wise prince should officially publicize his

¹²Han writes: "Public transparency cannot be used to illuminate distant wickedness or detect what is hidden and obscure...If one builds a system on the foundation of varnished appearance, isn't that a mistake?" 韩非子·难三第三十八:明不能烛远奸,见隐微,而待之以观饰行,定赏罚,不亦弊乎? in *Han Feizi Ji Jie*, ed. Wang Xian Sheng, Beijing: Zhong Hua Shu Ju, 韩非子集解, (清)王先慎, 北京:中华书局, 1998:

¹³Han writes: "It is analogous to someone looking out from a dark room and observing everything outside in broad daylight: [A ruler] should hide what he likes and dislikes and inhabits in his empty heart. ...[It was as if] the superior person locked himself up in a room and looked out into the hall. Every inch of the ground would be clear to him, and everyone would observe his own proper place." Ibid, chapter 8, p. 48: 故去喜去恶,虚心以为道舍。上固闭内扃,从室视庭,咫尺已具,皆之其处

¹⁴Han calls the transparency of motive, *zhu ming* 主明 (the clairvoyance of prince) or *mingchaqiuha* 明察秋毫. Jeremy Bentham's panopticon has a similar shift towards the transparency of motive. Under surveillance, what is important is not an actual observer from above, but the thinking that there is an observer. It is an observer built into motive.

rules and standards and make his declared will his will. According to Han, *fa*, as “declared will,” not only serves as a rigid bulwark protecting the prince from himself but also, in a logic consistent with Han’s general thinking on publicity, masks the daily ebb and flow of his likes and dislikes and blocks the ways for other people to manipulate him. If a prince sticks to “the declared will,” disregarding subsequent changes of heart, his *fa* will be highly credible and his power will be stable. The officials will only look to *fa* for instructions and guidance, rather than try to influence him through ostentatious virtue and clever rhetoric. In a famous passage, Han describes a wise prince who puts to death both his official cook and wardrobe officer – the wardrobe officer, for his failing to cover the prince with a warm blanket when he fell asleep on a hunting trip; the cook, for having done so, thereby transgressing his duty in his attempt to flatter.

Although Han’s focus is *fa*, his logic applies to a wide range of issues including strategic negotiations between two parties. During negotiation, it is often hard, and not necessary, to know the other party’s actual needs and wants. Both sides are invested in a transparency of motives through declared documents. The gap between the revealed and true does not deter a negotiator but is rather assumed by him, because he knows that it is in the interest of the other party to stick to his words. Just as it is in the interest of a prince to stick to his declared will, one would have no credibility and lose any subsequent power to negotiate if he does not toe his publically declared line. What this means is that when two enemies come to the negotiation table, what one says or does or has spoken or done in the past is not as important as his public declaration of what he will do in the future. Even though the declaration of intent may not represent his original true intent, it will become his intent as long as he is rational. The logic is not remote for Americans either, for it hinges on the same kind of objective association between law and punishment – if law *says* so, it will be so.

Han’s thinking on transparency has left a deep impression on Chinese military and political thinking. In a word, transparency is both worthless and important, untrustworthy and bankable. It is worthless and untrustworthy because voluntary revelation is often concealment by the other means. It is important and bankable because it is where words shed their private character and take on an objective life of its own. Similar to Bentham, Han sees publicity as a form of discipline, against the private and the reckless irrational. With this understanding in mind, when the Chinese come to the negotiation table, even though they might be just as sincere as the Americans in seeking transparency, their expectation

might be quite different.

In today's China, two main phrases are used for transparency: *touming* 透明 and *kaichengbugong* 开诚布公. The meanings of the two, albeit equally translatable into the English word "transparent," diverge in subtle but significant ways. We might explain the difference in terms of their respective targets. If the target is information concerning past or ongoing operational details such as military budget numbers or the identity of a true decision-making authority, the applicable expression is *touming*, literally meaning "light passes through a medium and illuminates a hidden surface." *Kaichengbugong* 开诚布公 refers to the way of the gentleman (*junzi* 君子) and means "open, sincere and public." It emphasizes honor and moral self-discipline. In this regard, *kaichengbugong* reminds us of what Han emphasized as the transparency of motive, and that of one's declared intent and purpose, while *touming* either represents an imported concept, a translation of "transparency," or suggests something like moral naiveté (such as the transparent interest of a child) or depravity (such as a transparent dress). At the negotiation table, when the Chinese talk about transparency, what is on their mind is decidedly not the open access to information or voluntary disclosure of what one is or has been doing. The locus of their transparency, apropos *kaichengbugong*, is not the tactical and topological details of operation, but rather the global and strategic trustworthiness of one's words and actions. Once a promise is issued, proper behavior and conduct are expected to follow. Unlike the past-and-present oriented *touming*, *kaichengbugong* is a future-oriented transparency, attentive to possibilities and assured to be open, frank and declared, very much comparable to the gaze of law.

As such, in the Chinese mindset, the issue of transparency is not a question of the right to know. Nor are the Chinese people particularly interested in the truth values of publicly disseminated information from power. Instead, it is the binding force of a public declaration of intent that interests them. The issue of transparency for them is a matter of seeking rationality, or order and stability, through the chaos of the plethora of interests, for the sake of stabilizing power and relations between powers. What is wanted are *legalistic pledges and "words of honor."* In this regard, there is no logical relation, nor need there be, between the declared intent and operational details of the past and present. In contrast, the American transparency is built exactly on that relationship – people keep the right to know the details in order to grasp and keep in check the intent of government. Such subtle and often unnoticed expectations, psychological stalactites from the

slow precipitations of culture, prove to be difficult barriers in the Sino-American transparency dialogue.

V. The Sino-American Dialogue

The American narrative on China's transparency record, as found in statements of U.S. officials in recent years, are comprised of four interrelated claims. The first is the generic one that China needs to be more open and forthcoming about its military matters, and among the most commonly cited issues are annual budgets, doctrine, and China's military modernization. The most direct criticism of China came from a 2005 speech by Secretary Rumsfeld at the prestigious Chinese Academy of Military Science in which he questioned China's lack of candor about its defense spending and suggested that the actual figure is perhaps three times higher than official figures.¹⁵ Numerous high-ranking U.S. military officers have also expressed this same concern, and in testimony before Congress, one told legislators that China's transparency practices merely give the "illusion"¹⁶ of transparency.

The second American claim follows from the first. It says the lack of military transparency by China has the effect of raising tensions in East Asia because it compels the U.S. (and China's neighbors) to question China's stated peaceful intentions. As such, the divining of China's intentions has been described as the central purpose of U.S. calls for China to be more transparent. This attention to

¹⁵See Donna Miles, "Rumsfeld Urges More Transparency from Chinese Military," *American Forces Press Service*, October 20, 2005. Date Accessed: 2012/12/17. www.defense.gov/News/NewsArticle.aspx?ID=18026. Ironically, on that trip China granted Rumsfeld a "first-ever" visit by an American official to the headquarters of the PLA's Second Artillery Corps. See Chua Chin Hon, "China acts to lower rising US suspicion; Special tour of nuclear forces' HQ set up for a wary Rumsfeld," *The Straits Times (Singapore)*. Date Accessed: 2012/07/15. www.lexisnexis.com/hotttopics/lnacademic. China rejected the American request for Rumsfeld tour China's Western Hills nuclear weapons facility, however.

¹⁶David Lague, "China lets U.S. ship visit Hong Kong; Decision could ease tensions arising from rejected port calls," *The International Herald Tribune*, January 29, 2008. Date Accessed: 2012/07/15. www.lexisnexis.com/hotttopics/lnacademic.

China's intentions has been particularly conspicuous in moments of acute tension in the bilateral relationship. While travelling in the region in 2007, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice responded to China's surprise announcement that it had shot down one of its own weather satellites in low-earth orbit with a direct ascent missile as "a troubling symptom of military activities that are outsized for Beijing's [stated] interests."¹⁷ Soon thereafter, Vice President Richard Cheney at once criticized the truthfulness of China's defense expenditures and its intentions by describing China's double-digit increase in spending as "not consistent with China's stated goal of a 'peaceful rise.'"¹⁸ In 2008, moreover, Admiral Thomas Keating, the head of the U.S. Pacific Command, explicitly linked transparency with intentions: "We don't want just transparency, we want to understand [China's military] intentions. There's a big difference... That's a much more aggressive position for us to ask of them."¹⁹

A third claim of American officials is that China's secrecy works against transparency and heightens suspicions about China's strategic aims. The secrecy claim found considerable support among Bush-era American officials. American reports on the lack of progress between U.S. and Chinese government and military officials about re-starting military-to-military contacts in 2002 cited as a major stumbling block China's "intrinsic tendency toward secrecy."²⁰ Secrecy is attributed to the Chinese military's "heavy reliance on elements of surprise,"²¹ which these reports conclude would be jeopardized should China

¹⁷"China Says Anti Satellite Test Did Not Break Rules," Spacewar.com, February 12, 2007. Date Accessed: 2012/09/04.

¹⁸The White House, "Vice President's Remarks to the Australian-American Leadership Dialogue," February 23, 2007. Date Accessed: 2012/07/19.
http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2007/02/images/20070223_v022307db-0077w-515h.html.

¹⁹Richard Halloran, "China's military designs pressed." *The Washington Times*, February 16, 2008. Date Accessed: 2012/07/15. www.lexisnexis.com/hottopic/academic.

²⁰Richard Halloran, "Talks in Beijing a polite standoff; Military relations with U.S. on hold," *The Washington Times*, July 8, 2002. Date Accessed: 2012/07/15.
www.lexisnexis.com/hottopic/academic.

²¹Glenn Schloss, "General's chilly reception reflects changing Sino-US ties." *South China Morning Post* (Hong Kong), date. Date Accessed: 2012/07/15.

reveal detailed information to the U.S. about its military planning, tactics, and doctrine. Hence secrecy is, at least in part, born of strategic necessity – that is, the relative weakness of China’s military. Relatedly, U.S. officials refer to China’s “ingrained culture of secrecy, and little tradition of openness”²² as likewise problematic. This secrecy is surely evident in China’s one-party, authoritarian form of government, and the hierarchical structure of the Communist party. But it is also said to have deeper roots. A commentator on Rumsfeld’s 2005 trip to China observed that the defense secretary’s efforts to “lead... the Chinese toward greater transparency” must take into consideration China’s propensity towards secrecy, which is an “ingrained behavior that dates back to Sun Tzu.” China’s tradition of misrepresentation helps explain why the “notion of real ‘transparency’ has been and will always be an anathema to Chinese military leaders,”²³ who “adhere to a historical tradition that values strategic deception as a tool against potential adversaries...”²⁴ U.S. officials readily admit that secrecy and deception are integral to China’s plan to thwart the U.S. from asserting itself militarily in the event of a crisis over Taiwan or territorial claims in the South China Sea, for instance.²⁵

Finally, American officials draw a connection between the imperative of greater military transparency on China’s part and China’s internal political liberalization. In the same 2005 speech at the Chinese Military Academy during which he urged the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) to be more transparent,

www.lexisnexis.com/hottopics/lnacademic. See also Glenn Schloss, “Secrecy the trump card in China arsenal,” *South China Morning Post* (Hong Kong), date. Date Accessed: 2012/07/15. www.lexisnexis.com/hottopics/lnacademic.

²²Robert Marquand, “China’s secretive military,” *Christian Science Monitor* (Boston), October 18, 2005. Date Accessed: 2012/07/15. www.lexisnexis.com/hottopics/lnacademic.

²³“Rumsfeld scores big hits in China,” *The Straits Times* (Singapore), October 22, 2005. Date Accessed: 2012/07/15. www.lexisnexis.com/hottopics/lnacademic.

²⁴“Troubled partnership,” *The Washington Times*, October 15, 2006. Date Accessed: 2012/07/15. www.lexisnexis.com/hottopics/lnacademic.

²⁵See Tim Reid, “Military growth alarms Pentagon,” *The Times* (London). May 25, 2006. Date Accessed: 2012/07/15. www.lexisnexis.com/hottopics/lnacademic, and Thom Shanker, “Pentagon issues yearly warning on China,” *The International Herald Tribune*. May 24, 2006. Date Accessed: 2012/07/15. www.lexisnexis.com/hottopics/lnacademic.

Rumsfeld addressed China's lack of political openness. "Those of us in the United States and in other countries around the world, free countries, hope that the choices [the Chinese] make are choices toward a more open society, a more transparent society." Though he conceded "it's up to the People's Republic of China to make its decisions how it wants to arrange itself from a political and economic and a security standpoint," Rumsfeld cautioned that "the world will be watching"²⁶ – with one possible implication being that a more open and democratic China is a more trustworthy China.

Some American officials take exception to aspects of the American critique of China's military transparency record. Secretary of the Navy Ray Mabus, an Obama administration appointee, has downplayed and questioned popular wisdom about China's transparency record. "I am not sure any military is completely transparent. We get the information we need about China's military capacity. In many ways, [China has] not hidden what [it is] doing with [its] military. [But this thinking] is in the popular press almost every day."²⁷ Furthermore, though recent Department of Defense white papers have credited China with noteworthy albeit modest improvements in military transparency,²⁸ throughout the 2000s the general tone of these white papers affirm what many American officials have been saying for years: China needs to be more transparency about its military matters, China's lack of candor and military modernization raise reasonable suspicions about its intentions, and China's practice of secrecy is deep-rooted in the country's strategic culture. Hence China's reticence about transparency has the effect of increasing tensions and the risk of miscalculation and misunderstanding, which are principal causes of

²⁶Thom Shanker, "Rumsfeld takes a softer line in Beijing; But U.S. defense chief still calls for more military transparency," *International Herald Tribune*, October 19, 2005, p. 1.

²⁷Jonathan Pearlman, "China's military no threat: US," *The Age (Melbourne, Australia)*, January 30, 2010. Date Accessed: 2012/07/15. www.lexisnexis.com/hottopics/lnacademic.

²⁸China is credited, in recent years especially, with having made "modest, but incremental improvements" in the disclosure of information about its military matters, including budgeting, capabilities, and decision-making related to military modernization. See Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress. Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China, 2011*, p. 5. Date accessed: 2012/7/20. http://www.defense.gov/pubs/pdfs/2011_cmpr_final.pdf.

conflict between China and the U.S.²⁹

Though some Chinese officials concede China still has a ways to go, they maintain that China is communicating to the world its peaceful intentions and that the more serious problem is an American transparency agenda that seeks to contain and discipline China.

First, China challenges the U.S.'s approach to military transparency and offers an alternative to it. In what has emerged as a core component of official Chinese thinking on transparency, Chinese officials speak of transparency as being "relative."³⁰ At the annual Shangri-La security conference in Singapore, in 2007, for instance, Lieutenant-General Zhang Qinsheng, deputy chief of the PLA general staff, attributed disputes among countries about transparency to their different experiences. "Due to differences in history, culture, social system and ideology," he said, "countries naturally disagree on what transparency means, and how to achieve it."³¹ Chinese officials therefore express some frustration with the notion that the Anglo-American way of transparency – with its commitment to surveillance, the disclosure of detailed, technical information about military capabilities, and its claim that transparency necessarily improves mutual trust – is the only truly legitimate form transparency can take. So, in an interview on the eve of a high-level Chinese delegation's visit to Washington, D. C., in October 2009, Major General Qian Lihua, director of the Foreign Affairs Office of China's Defense Ministry, asserted that transparency of strategic intentions is more important than transparency of military capabilities, because reassurance is best expressed by what countries say about their intentions (and how their actions

²⁹Issued annually, since 2002, by the Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Military Power of the People's Republic of China* is an authoritative accounting by the Department of Defense of the Chinese military. Since 2010, the reports have been titled *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China*, perhaps to reflect the Obama administration's effort to soothe China's strongly negative reaction to the reports' contents. It is also worth noting that, under President Obama, the call for China to be more transparent has been, for the most part, decoupled from statements casting doubt on China's intentions.

³⁰Richard Halloran, "Military transparency: clearly, it's a problem," *South China Morning Post*, June 14, 2007. Date Accessed: 2012/07/13.
www.lexisnexis.com/hottopics/lnacademic.

³¹*Ibid.*

conform to what they say) as opposed to their disclosing details about capabilities specifically. Furthermore, Qian claimed transparency is based on mutual trust between countries and, contrary to the American view, is not the cause of it. In the absence of mutual trust, the routine disclosure of military information by China will never satisfy the demands of those who have little confidence in China's self-declared peaceful aims. Therefore, like any country, Qian and other military officials maintain that China will disclose information only to the extent that doing so does not jeopardize national security, which is a decision that China (and each and every other country) must make for itself – as opposed to one that is in response to the unyielding demands and unreasonable expectations of other countries (namely, the United States).³² It is on this point specifically that Chinese officials assert the importance of China protecting its sovereignty from outside interference in its internal affairs. Chinese officials also say China's commitment to transparency is beyond reproach. On this point, Zhang said, "China regards greater military transparency as an important means of improving the public's understanding of national defense and military construction, fostering greater understanding of China's defense policy among the people around the world, and promoting mutual trust and closer cooperation between the militaries in China and other countries."³³ He intimated that, just because China does not replicate the transparency practices and policies of the U.S. and others, it does not imply that it is no less committed to transparency.

Second, as a complement to this "experience-based" explanation for China's approach to military transparency, Chinese officials also speak of the transparency obligations of countries as a function of their relative military power. Meng Xiangqing, a research professor with the Strategy Research Institute of the Strategy Teaching and Research Department at the National Defense University in Beijing, says that "weak and strong countries" should have different transparency standards and approaches. Without mentioning the U.S. by name, he

³²For more on this see "Agency says China's more transparent army spending fails to silence criticism," *BBC Monitoring Asia Pacific - Political Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring*, September 9, 2008. Date Accessed: 2012/07/13.

www.lexisnexis.com/hottopics/lnacademic.

³³"Chinese defence official stakes out positions on military transparency," *BBC Monitoring Asia Pacific - Political Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring*, October 24, 2009. Date Accessed: 2012/07/13. www.lexisnexis.com/hottopics/lnacademic.

argues that powerful countries employ transparency to intimidate weaker countries, giving themselves the “means [to] showcas[e] their muscle in a saber-rattling way.” Weak countries, by contrast, should be subject to “[l]imited military transparency...for protecting themselves” from strong countries. Moreover, with countries standing at different stages of development – politically, economically, and militarily – and with weak countries facing problems that are far greater than those of strong ones, countries should “be committed to different military transparency obligations, and should not be subject to the uniform standards.”³⁴ Similarly, Wang Jinling, head of a China-based independent military think tank, has said, “Asking for Chinese military transparency is ridiculous. The American military is the general drillmaster for all modern armies. It’s like rich people asking poor people to compare treasures. The poor one has nothing to show, so he uses secrecy as an excuse not to play the game.”³⁵ This line of thinking – that strong countries like the U.S. employ transparency as a tool to dominate weak countries like China – is commonplace among China’s foreign policy elite.

Chinese officials do not speak with one voice about their assessment of China’s transparency record in relation to other countries. Some insist China is already transparent. For instance, one government official has asserted China’s Defense White Papers “surpass... those in many countries of the world in completeness and accuracy” and that the “openness and transparency of China’s national defense and army building” are evident in the “concrete measures” China has taken to share information with others and in the “peaceful intent” associated with them.³⁶ By contrast, others say China needs to do more, all around, to increase its transparency, but they insist that China will do so in a manner that is consistent

³⁴“Chinese armament experts explains significance of National Day parade,” BBC Monitoring Asia Pacific – Political Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, October 3, 2009. Date Accessed: 2012/06/30. www.lexisnexis.com/hottopics/lnacademic.

³⁵Peter Ford, “US, China militaries talk more: Does that make world safer?” *Christian Science Monitor*, October 28, 2009. Date Accessed: 2012/07/13. www.lexisnexis.com/hottopics/lnacademic.

³⁶“Political advisor rebuts Western media ‘hype’ of China’s defence spending,” *BBC Monitoring Asia Pacific - Political Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring*, March 12, 2010. Date Accessed: 2012/07/13. www.lexisnexis.com/hottopics/lnacademic.

with its national characteristics and national security situation. According to Yin Zhuo, a PLA major general, “I agree that we need to try to improve our transparency, but we don’t need to follow the standard of Western countries, especially the U.S.”³⁷

Third, as a testament to China’s commitment to transparency, Chinese officials have talked-up the wide variety of steps China has taken in recent years to open its military affairs to greater outside scrutiny, in ways that both conform to its own standards *and* are sensitive to the expectations of other countries. Since the early 2000s, China has courted worldwide media attention of its transparency initiatives. In 2004, the PLA hosted sixty foreign servicemen from sixteen countries to observe the single largest military exercise open to foreigners to that date.³⁸ In 2005, the Ministry of National Defense unveiled an online, searchable database on military procurement.³⁹ Shortly thereafter, China unveiled an ambitious plan for a multi-year strategic dialogue between high-ranking military and civilian government officials from the U.S. and China.⁴⁰ In 2006, China welcomed the U.S.S. Juneau to Jianjiang, a port city in the South China province of Guangdong, to participate in a joint search-and-rescue exercise between the U.S. Navy and the PLA’s naval forces. In 2006, the Chinese government issued “right to know” regulations for the release of government

³⁷Minnie Chan, “Smallest defence budget rise in 2 decades; 7.5pc increase in spending for armed forces surprises overseas commentators,” *South China Morning Post*, March 5, 2010. Date Accessed: 2012/07/13. www.lexisnexis.com/hottopics/lnacademic.

³⁸“Expert says Chinese military exercise shows army becoming more transparent,” *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts*, September 26, 2004. Date Accessed: 2012/07/13. www.lexisnexis.com/hottopics/lnacademic.

³⁹“China’s army to set up online procurement information network,” *BBC Monitoring Asia Pacific - Political Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring*, March 18, 2005. Date Accessed: 2012/07/13. www.lexisnexis.com/hottopics/lnacademic.

⁴⁰Ray Cheung, “Strategic dialogue offer takes shape; US to be tempted with transparent military exchanges,” *South China Morning Post*, April 6, 2005. Date Accessed: 2012/07/13. www.lexisnexis.com/hottopics/lnacademic.

information.⁴¹ Between 2006 and 2008, China took various steps to disclose information to domestic and foreign audiences about its military maneuvers and allow representatives of other countries to observe its military exercises on a more regular basis.⁴² After years of foot-dragging, in 2007 China agreed to the creation of a “hotline” agreement for the purposes of averting unintentional conflict between itself and the U.S.⁴³ Since 2008, the Ministry of National Defense has operated an official web site. The PLA has also shown off new military hardware, given international reporters access to a military base previously off-limits to foreigners, announced monthly press conferences and media briefings, and for the first time permitted a military official to attend a conference on improving Sino-American strategic dialogue. Progress in China’s transparency record has no single cause. For some, it is a result of China’s growing confidence in its military capabilities, and for others it is part of China’s strategy to advance a form of transparency that has Chinese characteristics – as an alternative to the U.S. model.

Fourth, Chinese officials have responded to U.S. criticism of China’s transparency record by trying to turn the tables on the U.S., calling into question both America’s commitment to meaningful security cooperation with China and the motives behind America’s calls for China to be more transparent on military matters. A most common criticism is that the U.S. suffers from a “Cold War

⁴¹“New Chinese rules balance public right to know against state secrets,” *BBC Monitoring Asia Pacific - Political Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring*, December 12, 2006. Date Accessed: 2012/07/13. www.lexisnexis.com/hottopics/lnacademic.

⁴²“Agency says China “pursues further opening-up” after Olympics,” *BBC Monitoring Asia Pacific - Political Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring*, September 26, 2008. Date Accessed: 2012/07/13. www.lexisnexis.com/hottopics/lnacademic. “Chinese official: Military exercise to reveal army's openness,” *BBC Monitoring Asia Pacific - Political Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring*, September 24, 2008. Date Accessed: 2012/07/13. www.lexisnexis.com/hottopics/lnacademic. “China's armed forces striving to enhance transparency,” *BBC Monitoring Asia Pacific - Political Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring*, December 30, 2006. Date Accessed: 2012/07/13. www.lexisnexis.com/hottopics/lnacademic.

⁴³Richard Halloran, “A China-US hotline for peace,” *South China Morning Post*, April 5, 2007. Date Accessed: 2012/07/19. www.lexisnexis.com/hottopics/lnacademic.

mentality” in its dealings with China, which has a negative effect on the bilateral relationship and the prospects for meaningful progress on military transparency. The main matter at issue is contrasting interpretations of China’s military modernization. China claims that modernization is necessary to enhance China’s defenses and does not pose a threat to its neighbors. The U.S. disagrees, arguing instead that China’s actions raise legitimate concerns about its strategic aims. Chinese officials leveled this charge fairly regularly after relations between the two countries plummeted in the aftermath of the April 2001 EP-3 incident. Though relations improved somewhat during President George W. Bush’s second term (2005 – 2009), the “Cold War mentality” charge continued, especially in relation to two annual events: the publication of the Defense Department’s annual survey of the Chinese military and security policy and the routine negative assessment by American officials of the Ministry of National Defense’s announcement of China’s increase in military spending for the upcoming year.⁴⁴ This charge continued after President Barack Obama entered the White House, when, in April 2009, Lieutenant General Ma Xiaotian, deputy chief of the People’s Liberation Army’s general staff, urged the countries of Southeast Asia to join China in forging a system of cooperative security.⁴⁵ In effect, according to China, driving U.S. transparency policy toward China is the false representation of China as threat, but China’s transparency practices make plain that China has nothing sinister to hide and poses no threat to its neighbors.⁴⁶

⁴⁴Kristine Kwok, “US criticised for its ‘cold-war mentality,’” *South China Morning Post*, March 7, 2008. Date Accessed: 2012/07/13. www.lexisnexis.com/hottopics/lnacademic. Geoffrey York, “Beijing gives its military a double-digit boost; Defence budget swells by more than 17 per cent one day after critical Pentagon report on transparency,” *The Globe and Mail* (Canada), March 5, 2008. Date Accessed: 2012/07/13. www.lexisnexis.com/hottopics/lnacademic.

⁴⁵Greg Torode, “A dangerous vanity,” *South China Morning Post*, November 10, 2009. Date Accessed: 2012/07/13. www.lexisnexis.com/hottopics/lnacademic. Greg Torode, “Abandon cold war mentality, top mainland general urges,” *South China Morning Post*, May 31, 2009. Date Accessed: 2012/07/13. www.lexisnexis.com/hottopics/lnacademic.

⁴⁶“Chinese military officials says war games to enhance ‘trust, transparency,’” *BBC Monitoring Asia Pacific - Political Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring*, September 27, 2005. Date Accessed: 2012/07/13. www.lexisnexis.com/hottopics/lnacademic.

Some Chinese officials assert that the U.S.'s transparency agenda with respect to China has nefarious purposes. The most strident comments came during the Bush years – specifically during Rumsfeld's tenure as Secretary of Defense. Following Rumsfeld's 2005 speech in which he lectured the Chinese about their lack of transparency and the true intentions of their military modernization, Gen. Wen Zhongren, political commissar of the Academy, said to a reporter for a Hong Kong newspaper that the U.S. wants information about China so that "it will be able to assess what the Chinese side is engaged in and how big its real strength is. In this way, it can then adopt the necessary measures and countermeasures. It is out of such motives that the US defense secretary keeps harping on the question of national defense budget and transparency."⁴⁷ Like others, this criticism has outlasted Rumsfeld's tenure. In August 2011, for instance, an unattributed article in the Chinese newspaper *Guangming Ribao* heralded China's goal of launching of its first-ever aircraft carrier and took exception to the U.S.'s concerns about this program. "Given China's frankness and transparency, whoever goes on about China's aircraft carrier has ulterior motives."⁴⁸ The Chinese also disagree with how the U.S. represents the link between transparency and mutual trust. Said Ni Lexiong, a Shanghai-based military expert, "[I]t is impossible to enhance military confidence without mutual political trust, with the U.S. being the key obstacle hindering China's military confidence building with other countries."⁴⁹ In effect, because the U.S.'s intentions towards China are suspect, China has little trust in the U.S., which has the effect of raising tensions and suspicions and derailing China's efforts to foster security cooperation with its neighbors.

In addition, some officials have sought to cast the U.S. narrative on China's transparency record as tawdry and therefore contemptible. After Cheney and

⁴⁷*Ibid.*

⁴⁸"China building aircraft carrier must not be 'reproached' by others – paper," *BBC Monitoring Asia Pacific - Political Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring*, August 19, 2011. Date Accessed: 2012/07/13. www.lexisnexis.com/hottopics/lnacademic.

⁴⁹Minnie Chang, "Military tries to ease 'China threat' fears: Defense white paper emphasizes confidence-building measures with other countries," *South China Morning Post*, April 1, 2011. Date Accessed: 2012/06/27. www.lexisnexis.com/hottopics/lnacademic.

Rice's remarks linking China's hike in defense spending and China's shooting down of a satellite in low-earth orbit, with China's lax transparency record, China's foreign ministry spokesman, Qin Gang, unleashed a decidedly undiplomatic verbal assault on the U.S., representing China as an innocent victim of a crime committed against it by America. One news source translated his comments this way: "If your neighbor is always peeping into your house at your door and crying, 'Why don't you open your door [and] show me what's inside?' How [would] you feel about it? Don't you think you should call the police?"⁵⁰ Other sources translated Qin's statement differently, but the gist of the critique remained unchanged. "If someone always tears through your clothes and even wants to lift open your underwear, saying, 'Let me see what is inside,' how would you feel?"⁵¹ Regardless of the translation one uses, Qin's verbal tongue-lashing reflects acute Chinese sensitivities about its national sovereignty and his lack of understanding of the logical relation, as explained earlier in this essay, between forceful access and reliability in the American understanding. For China, America's characterization of China as an overly secretive and untrustworthy country shows its aggressive ambitions against China.

Finally, there has been a shift in China away from hyper-defensiveness on the question of military transparency; some Chinese officials unapologetically affirm the importance of military secrecy for China's security. Shen Dingli, a security expert at Fudan University in Shanghai, has said, "[China has] to keep certain secrets in order to have a war-fighting capability," and that secrecy for this purpose is not at odds with China's goal of enhancing military transparency – just as America's secrets do not negate its interest in transparency.⁵²

⁵⁰"Foreign Ministry Spokesman Qin Gang's Regular Press Conference," Chinamission.be, March 1, 2007. Date Accessed: 2010/6/6.

big5/fmprc.gov.cn/gate/big5/www.chinamission.be/eng/zgwj/t300654.htm.

⁵¹Voice of America, "China Compares U.S. Criticism to a Nosy Neighbor," March 1, 2007. Date Accessed: 2012/07/19.

<http://www.voanews.com/content/a-13-2007-03-01-voa17/342350.html>.

⁵²David Lague, "A mystery in Beijing: Who runs the military?" *The International Herald Tribune*, June 23, 2007. Date Accessed: 2012/07/13.

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VI. Implications

There is very limited room in U.S.-China relations for a productive dialogue on military transparency. Transparency's prospects are seriously constrained by structural and experiential factors. We applaud the Obama administration's efforts to cool the rhetoric surrounding its calls for China to be more transparent; this is most evident in its tendency to decouple the Bush administration's all too common practice of linking China's mixed transparency record with provocative inferences questioning China's declared peaceful intentions. Yet recent developments in the South China Sea, which underscore the apparent re-orientation of the Chinese military outlook and China's apparent departure from its policy of "strategic ambiguity," underscore the determination of the U.S. and other countries to compel China to be more forthcoming about its ambitions in the region. We do not anticipate that America's calls for China to be more forthcoming about its military matters will drop out of the conduct of American diplomacy any time soon. Again, to the extent progress on transparency is possible, its prospects are likely to be improved when U.S. officials refrain from employing transparency as a cudgel against China. Yet we nevertheless maintain that the temptation to do just that is embedded in the Sino-American rivalry and therefore hard to avoid. Transparency is part and parcel of the competition for security and beholden to each country's different political experiences. We do not predict that all efforts to enhance military transparency between them are necessarily bound to fail. Indeed, it is clear to us that the U.S. and China each have a stake in greater transparency to the extent they seek to avoid military conflict. This greater transparency depends in no small measure on both sides recognizing and exercising the art of the possible.

If transparency is an example, we could not help raising an even broader question: is there a genuine common ground between drastically different nations? Some people hope that by focusing on the common ground or some core values independent of comprehensive doctrines we might be able to build a global public reason among a "society of peoples." We wonder, when it comes to international diplomacy, whether there is a principled way to mark the difference between a common ground and differences and whether it is a pure assumption that common grounds, as opposed to explicit disagreements, help communication and improve relations.

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