

Transparency in international security

An input paper for the High-Level Panel on Global Public Goods

What's new? Multilateral mechanisms for sharing information on security matters – including military expenditures, exercises and the development of new weapons systems – appear to be stagnating. UN Member States contribute to the organization's mechanisms for recording military expenditures and conventional arms increasingly rarely. Post-Cold War mechanisms involving the U.S. and Russia, such as the Open Skies Treaty, have collapsed or are in a parlous state. Outside Europe, there are no robust regional frameworks for ensuring transparency.

Why does it matter? Advocates of collective security argue that “transparency in military matters – including defence policies, military spending and military capability – is generally considered an essential element for building trust and confidence between states.”¹ In the current uncertain international security environment, countries in most regions are increasing defense spending. Many are also developing or acquiring new military or dual-use technologies. The absence of robust security transparency mechanisms can contribute to mutual mistrust between states, regional arms races and strategic miscalculations by states.

Why is this an issue for the Panel? Given the dangers associated with a lack of transparency over security matters, there is a strong case that multilateral frameworks for increasing transparency are Global Public Goods (GPGs). Although states can acquire information on each other's capabilities through their intelligence activities – and non-governmental actors can now harvest an astonishing quantity of data from open-source satellite imagery, social media and other sources – international institutions are still uniquely placed to act as impartial sources of information on security matters. By collating and sharing information centrally – or facilitating regional transparency where this is more appropriate -- multilateral bodies provide a service that is of value to all states.

The decline of multilateral security transparency

The idea that multilateral bodies should promote transparency in international security matters (hereafter “security transparency”) can be traced to the League of Nations, which published both an *Armaments Yearbook* and statistical information on military expenditures, which “provided political and military leaders and the general public comparative tools to expose recent and long-term trends in stockpiling and trading of arms by individual nations.”²

The majority of current UN-based and non-UN-based transparency mechanisms are of more recent vintage. These include the United Nations Report on Military Expenditures (UNMILEX), launched in 1980, and the United Nations Register on Conventional Arms (UNROCA), which dates to 1991. The early 1990s also saw a surge of non-UN-based agreements aimed at increasing transparency between the former Cold War rivals, including The Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty (1990), Open Skies Treaty (1992) and other arrangements associated

¹ Simeon T. Wezeman and Pieter D. Wezeman, “Balancing transparency and national security,” SIPRI, 29 January 2014.

² David Lincove, “Data for peace: The League of Nations and disarmament,” *Peace and Change*, 43/4 (2018), 498-529.

with the Conference/Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE/OSCE). While there has been less innovation since then, the 2013 Arms Trade Treaty directs parties to report annually on “authorized and actual exports and imports of conventional arms.”³

Many of these mechanisms are now defunct or in disarray. The *SIPRI Yearbook 2021* offers a grim overview of the state of both UN-based security transparency mechanisms, meanwhile:

- “The level of participation in UNROCA has decreased drastically since reporting started in 1993”, with only 39 states submitting reports on their imports and exports of conventional arms to the Register in 2019, in contrast to over 100 in the early 2000s.⁴
- Similarly, only 43 states reported on their military expenditures to UNMILEX in 2019, and when the UN secretariat sent out a questionnaire asking how this mechanism can be improved, only 13 states replied.⁵
- While there is a higher rate of reporting under the ATT framework, 2020 saw the “lowest compliance rate of any year so far” as only 56 out of 97 fulfilled their obligations to send in reports (although COVID may have distracted many of them).⁶

Beyond the UN, the Trump administration withdrew from the Open Skies Treaty in 2020, and Russia followed suit in 2021. The run-up to the Ukrainian war saw Russia and Belarus refuse to fulfill OSCE-based transparency commitments, raising questions about the longer-term future of the organization. If the European security order is in crisis, SIPRI analysts note that the “only active regional [as opposed to UN] efforts that aim at multilateral transparency in armaments” were in Europe.⁷ There is no similar architecture for transparency elsewhere.

The rise of alternative forms of transparency – and their limitations

It should be noted that the failure and/or absence of *multilateral* security transparency mechanisms does not mean that there is no such transparency at all. Institutes such as SIPRI itself and IISS have always played an important part in collecting and disseminating information on security matters. Many countries that have failed to supply information to UNROCA and UNMILEX nonetheless publish respectable national summaries of their military spending and capabilities. In a striking shift, activists like Bellingcat have revealed a remarkable amount about states’ military and intelligence activities using open sources.

³ This is only meant to be an indicative/illustrative list of agreements, and this note does not explore frameworks on chemical, biological and nuclear weapons, but these are obviously also pertinent to the broader question of security transparency.

⁴ Pieter D. Wezeman and Simeon T. Wezeman, “International transparency in arms control and military expenditure as confidence building measures,” in Ian Davis (ed.), *SIPRI Yearbook 2021: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security* (OUP, 2021), 546.

⁵ Ibid, 549.

⁶ Andrea Edoardo Varisco, Giovanna Maletta and Lucile Robin, “The Arms Trade Treat,” in Davis, *SIPRI Yearbook 2021*, 557.

⁷ Wezeman and Wezeman, “International transparency,” 550.

Indeed, some analysts project that we are in fact entering a new “age of transparency” in which “the forces of technology are ushering in a new age of openness that would have been unthinkable just decades ago.”⁸ The U.S. and its allies embraced this trend in the run-up to the Ukrainian war this year, sharing an unprecedented amount of intelligence on Russia’s military preparations, both to (successfully) convince wavering Western countries that the threat was real and (unsuccessfully) to deter Russia from carrying through its operation.

It may, therefore, seem that we should not worry too much about the decline of multilateral transparency arrangements when other alternatives are available. But this argument has at least three flaws. Firstly, states will use disinformation and misinformation to try to confuse and discredit open source data on their activities. Data analysts are quite adept at spotting such techniques at present, but states will look for new technologies to sow confusion.

Secondly, while U.S. intelligence on events in Ukraine proved accurate, many states will worry about one power monopolizing and weaponizing security transparency, which it could use against other states in future. The U.S. and its allies have also not always been so accurate in their assessments (as the Afghan collapse showed) and will make mistakes again in future.

Finally, the act of sharing information through multilateral mechanisms – unlike unilateral releases of intelligence – is meant not only to increase transparency, but also create trust as a process. Where states are willing to exchange data, and especially when they are willing to allow other states or multilateral actors to test its veracity, they can prove their credibility and create the basis for security dialogues. The International Crisis Group has emphasized the importance of such processes in the case of the Persian Gulf, where military transparency has been sorely lacking. In a 2020 report on the region, Crisis Group recommended a phased approach to building trust, starting with the creation of military hotlines and (after further steps) culminating in gestures including “prior notification of troop movements and military exercises; [and] allowing adversaries to send military experts to observe such maneuvers.”⁹

There is thus still a case for promoting multilateral security transparency mechanisms that will enjoy widespread credibility and can facilitate confidence-building measures. This is especially the case because (i) as the data on the next page shows, military spending is rising in almost all regions, and states are liable to be nervous about how their rivals and neighbors are using these funds; and (ii) the spread of new battle-winning tools (such as drones) and new technologies (cyber-weapons, LAWS, etc.) will only increase uncertainty and distrust.

Options for the Panel

How can the Panel address the issue of security transparency? In conceptual terms, it might be useful for the panel to (i) articulate the advantages of maintaining and increasing transparency on military expenditure, capabilities and exercises and (ii) laying out why multilateral and cooperative approaches to transparency are potentially *global* goods for all UN members.

⁸ Sean P. Larkin, “The age of transparency: International relations without secrets,” *Foreign Affairs*, 95/3 (2016), 136.

⁹ International Crisis Group Middle East Report No. 212, *The Middle East Between Collective Security and Collective Breakdown* (Crisis Group, 2020), 14.

In terms of practical policy recommendations, it is necessary to be realistic about what the Panel can achieve. States are not going to share major secrets on their weapons programs through multilateral mechanisms, whatever the UN says. And it may be necessary to recognize that some existing UN and non-UN-based transparency tools are now moribund.

Nonetheless, the Panel could encourage steps to improve multilateral security transparency. Some initial thoughts on how to do this include:

- Encouraging the Secretary-General and the UN Office for Disarmament Affairs to engage member states on how to revise and streamline existing UN transparency arrangements to (i) increase their profile and salience; and (ii) improve reporting.¹⁰
- Appointing a Special Adviser -- or Advisory Panel -- on Transparency in Security Affairs within the UN system that could bring together military experts and thinkers on open source analysis to look at how the UN can collate and share security data better (this could also be wrapped into Our Common Agenda's proposal on foresight).
- Given the argument for building *regional* transparency mechanisms in cases such as the Persian Gulf, look at ways that the UN can offer advice and support to (i) bodies like the African Union and (ii) governments in under-institutionalized regions to develop transparency mechanisms as part of a broader push for regional security.

ANNEX: Military expenditures 2019-2020

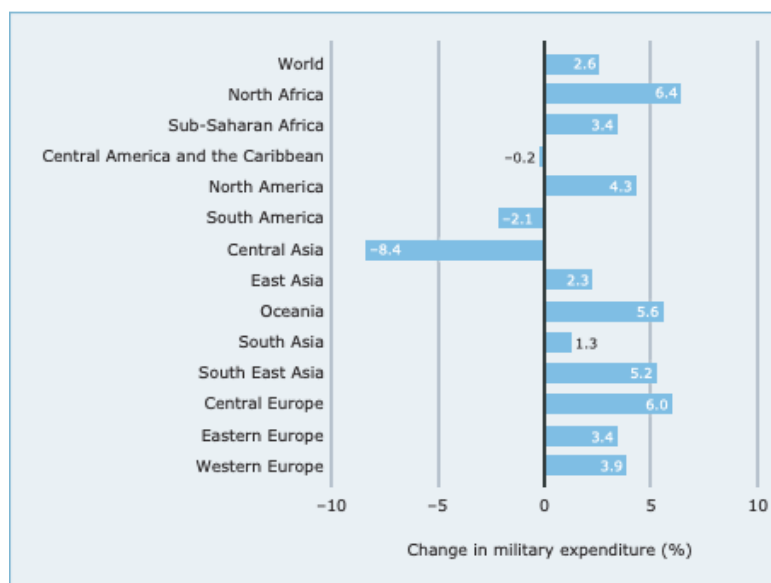


Figure 3. Changes in military expenditure, by subregion, 2019–20

Note: No estimate of change in military expenditure in the Middle East is given since data for 2015–20 is highly uncertain. However, a rough estimate for the Middle East is used to calculate the change in world spending.

Source: SIPRI Military Expenditure Database, Apr. 2021.

¹⁰ This cautious initial proposal may just repeat previous efforts to revive UNROCA and UNMILEX.