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Navigating the Discord: Assessing Civil-Military Relations Theory in Public Transparency Debate

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Abstract

Indonesia's government has faced significant criticism for its lack of transparency regarding defense and military expenditures. In early 2024, this issue garnered peak public attention when Prabowo Subianto, a key figure in Indonesia's military activities, defended the non-transparent approach as vital for securing regional strategic interests. This stance conflicts with the principles of liberal democracy, which prioritize public needs and aspirations. After reviewing existing literature, this paper finds that the Civil-Military Relations (CMR) theory has not yet been applied to assess the issue of military transparency at a domestic level. This study examines whether CMR theory can serve as an analytical framework for the discord between public demands for transparency towards military organizations. The findings suggest that while CMR theory is relevant to the relationship between civil and military and its justification for public demands for military transparency, the normative framework itself is inconsistent. Resonating with the existing literature, this paper also finds that this CMR is yet to be integrated with the corridor of political science and, thus best studied for practical and strategic needs; hence explains the requirement to assess more contextual and nuanced variables.

Keywords: *Civil-Military Relations, Democracy, Transparency, International Relations*

Introduction

Indonesia has approved an official 20% increase in its defense spending budget. The significant growth from \$20.75 billion to \$25 billion aims to modernize Indonesia's military capacity and actively respond to geopolitical concerns in the Indo-Pacific in 2024 and beyond (Suroyo et al., 2023). Since then, if not earlier, public discord has been growing over whether Indonesia should disclose the details of military procurements to the public. This concern was highlighted during Indonesia's latest presidential debate when a candidate stated that "there shouldn't be any public disclosure regarding national military and defense spending for reasons of national strategy" (Nugroho in CNBC, 2024). This affirmation received national attention, prompting Indonesia's Minister of Defense, Prabowo Subianto, to emphasize the importance of limited transparency.

Many criticisms were redirected at Prabowo during the debate, suggesting that he was reluctant to explain any information related to national military spending and purchases, indicating an unwillingness to bring transparency to the public, which is a constitutional right. Countering this narrative, Prabowo argued that they have complied with disclosure requirements through the House of Representatives of the

Republic of Indonesia (DPR RI) and other key national and private stakeholders, albeit with limited details regarding military purchases and expenditures (CNN, 2024).

Despite the advocacy and justification efforts, the position of limited public disclosure regarding national military and defense spending by the Ministry of Defense is believed to be in accord with Indonesia's national law and regulation, particularly Article 14 of the 2008 Public Transparency of Information Act (BPK RI, n.d.). This regulation states that a government body does not have to disclose detailed information if such disclosure could result in geopolitical losses or imminent threats to national security. Beyond this legal justification, the rhetoric that "national security" should be treated with serious secrecy was stressed by the Minister of Defense after the debate, with a closing statement implying that information disclosure on military spending and purchases is a "sacred" matter, not meant for public discussion and access (Kompas, 2024).

Assuming these personal statements reflect the genuine position of Indonesia and its Ministry of Defense (MoD) as both a rational state actor and stakeholder, such occurrences in the sphere of international affairs are certainly not unprecedented and likely not the last. This recurring

phenomenon highlights a puzzling gap when viewed through the framework of liberal-democracy discourse.

In a paper discussing the system of liberal democracy and its impact on a state's defense industry and decision-making, Brauner cites Rosh's work on Third World militarization. Rosh implies that the required level of transparency in the political process regarding 'resource extraction and allocation' can limit or burden a country's economy. Consequently, a democratic leader will prioritize public needs, which can be summarized as public disclosure and social spending (Brauner, p.410). Rosh hypothesizes that democratic leaders who adopt a governmental system based on the rule of law will ensure public disclosure regarding any political process—including military spending and defense budgets—can be openly discussed by elected representatives. This creates an open platform for the people to provide alternative solutions to political decisions made by the central government. For further justification, Brauner cites Hewitt, who argues that liberal democracy is a political ideology manifesting public aspirations and demonstrating public desires (Hewitt, 1992).

This paper will analyze the normative perspective of military

transparency regarding its activities and expenditures, focusing on public needs through the lens of Civil-Military Relations (CMR) theory. Rather than merely discussing a right-or-wrong dichotomy to impose political constraints on individuals or parties at both domestic and international levels, this paper will theoretically investigate whether states that adopt liberal democracy as their ideology, emphasizing public aspirations, might sometimes choose to withhold information about military spending and defense budgets from their representatives.

The research question formulated is whether Civil-Military Relations (CMR) theory can serve as an analytical framework for examining the discord between public demands for transparency and military organizations. The structure of this paper is as follows: First, it will review existing literature relevant to liberal democracy and public transparency regarding military activity and expenditure. Next, it will explore both International Relations (IR) theoretical debates and CMR theory to provide a general discourse on the concept of transparency at both the international and domestic levels.

There are relevant discords in existing literature relevant to transparency and military expenditures. Most papers adopt a contextual and practical approach,

using case studies to provide specific answers and to some degree, a strategic one.

Literature Review

The first literature is concerning the military operations within the territory of Ukraine that has been increasing for the past decade (Nate et al., 2023). Their data transparency, relevant with military activity and specifically expenditure, has been an integral concept to publish for their allies in Europe. This research aims to monitor the openness and transparency of the defense industry, and to assist the visualization of its military expenditure dynamics for future research purposes. Nine separate indicators of transparency index were taken from a thorough assessment of previous literature and studies. This research also utilizes a quantitative approach with a binary form, scale, to estimate the final value of its index. The findings are that Ukraine's index of transparency has increased, thus growing from average to be above average in recent years. The paper, however, stressed that the finding is limited, both by access and the drastic changes happening during the war. Further research is recommended.

The second literature's main object is concerning the paradox of military transparency (Lindsay, 2011). While it suggests the simple revelation of true information, achieving credible and

relevant transparency requires significant institutional and political effort, in international security, this is further complicated by complex relationships between information, its context, and multiple competing information sources, making clear and trustworthy transparency particularly challenging.

The paper uses a less common approach to analyze the paradox of transparency by drawing the connection between information sources, communication methods or messages, and the information's receivers. This research implies that various approaches are required to achieve genuine information about the international and domestic levels of military expenditure.

The research puzzle on this third this research lies on the concern to balance transparency and accountability in the defense sector within a democratic framework, given the unique challenges posed by the military's monopoly on force, the need for strategic long-term planning, and the intricate civil-military relations, particularly regarding resource allocation and operational oversight (van Eekelen, 2009). This involves determining how to ensure effective oversight and trust between political leaders and the military without micromanagement, while also accommodating defense management's

unique financial and operational requirements.

This research analyzes civil-military relations, particularly the balance of trust and accountability between political leaders and the military. It examines the dynamics of strategic planning, resource allocation, and operational oversight in defense, taking from a thorough assessment of previous literature and studies. This research also utilizes a quantitative approach with practices, along with a comparative analysis of civil-military relations in different democratic contexts. This research imposes the dimension of US Law to provide and facilitate the framework of thought on addressing the relation between military transparency and civil rights.

The article, therefore, is nuanced and context-based on US domestic policy, with regard to the DoD or Parliament's perspective towards US Defense Policy. This paper also adds unique variables, namely corruption, that add more complexity to the transparency of US military expenditures.

The next paper is focusing on why China maintains a low transparency level in its military affairs, despite the theoretical expectation that this increases the likelihood of conflict (Mastro, 2016).

Specifically, the research seeks to

understand the rationale behind Beijing's decision to exacerbate the asymmetric information problem and examines the conditions under which this stance might change. The "vulnerability hypothesis" explores this, which suggests that rising powers like China reject military transparency due to perceived strategic vulnerabilities. The study evaluates Chinese strategic thinking and its implications for power transition theory and US-China military relations.

The approach or research method used appears to be qualitative analysis, thus using the vulnerability hypothesis as the theory that needs to be tested. The author then evaluates over 100 authoritative Chinese sources to identify patterns and threads of Chinese strategic thinking regarding military transparency.

This involves examining the content of these sources to draw conclusions and offer an explanation for China's stance on military transparency. This paper explores Beijing's perspective and, therefore, objectively justifies its position regarding its disclosed maneuver and strategic movement, specifically from the United States. In conclusion, the Vulnerability Hypothesis is an alternative to assess a state actor's behavior toward something that is commonly outside of the common norm of international security (transparency).

The last paper's research problem revolves around the conceptualization and understanding of transparency in International Relations (McCarthy & Fluck, 2016). Despite its significance in global politics and its promotion by various actors across different issue areas, there is ambiguity and inconsistency in defining what transparency entails. This lack of clarity leads to tension between different theoretical commitments within the field of International Relations. The article aims to address this problem by examining the three primary understandings of transparency and their implications for the broader theoretical frameworks in the field. Specifically, it explores the tension between conceptualizing transparency as a property of information and understanding it as a social practice rooted in shared cognitive capacities and epistemic frameworks.

The paper utilizes conceptual analysis to explore different interpretations of transparency in International Relations. It evaluates three primary understandings: transparency as information, as a social practice rooted in shared cognitive capacities and epistemic frameworks, and potentially other perspectives. Sociological theories and concepts are implied in the analysis, particularly in discussing the tension between these conceptualizations

and emphasizing the importance of a broader sociological context. Concepts like dialogue and shared cognitive capacities are highlighted, indicating engagement with sociological and cognitive theories to understand transparency in global governance.

The author argues that conceptualizing transparency solely as a property of information, particularly within rationalist scholarship, is problematic. This argument is based on identifying an unarticulated set of sociological assumptions underlying this understanding of transparency. The author suggests that this narrow conceptualization of transparency may obscure our ability to recognize transparent practices in global governance. Instead, the author proposes understanding transparency as dialogue, emphasizing its nature as a social practice rooted in shared cognitive capacities and epistemic frameworks. This argument is supported by the analysis conducted, which suggests that a broader sociological perspective provides a firmer analytical ground for examining transparency in International Relations. Therefore, the author's argument is centered on the need to expand the conceptualization of transparency beyond a mere property of information and to consider its social and dialogical aspects within a broader

sociological framework.

First, we need to address that there is substantial existing literature that attempts to unveil both the practical and theoretical enigmas surrounding a state's decision to fully, partially, or completely disclose its military activities and expenditures. The five taxonomies identified are considered more relevant and significant for establishing a better logical foundation for this research. The findings can be summarized as follows.

First, existing literature often utilizes contextual approaches when discussing a state actor's transparency regarding military expenditure, offering practical answers from practical standpoints. For instance, a paper suggests that China's lack of transparency about its military expenditure, placement, and activities in the Pacific is a rational and strategic decision in response to increasing U.S. influence in the region (Mastro, 2016). The author believes that the research paper's tenets are strictly contextual to Beijing's strategic policy. This is explicitly indicated by her argument, which implies that thorough research is needed to understand Beijing's foreign policy and strategic decisions regarding U.S. presence in the Pacific. Furthermore, she stresses that future research demonstrating the vulnerability hypothesis theory should also

assess the empirical validity within different international phenomena to determine when states should be transparent about their military activities and expenditures.

Additionally, it is argued that further observation of existing variables is required to validate whether the vulnerability hypothesis can assess the reasons behind a state's decisions regarding military transparency. For example, research on Ukraine's military transparency has produced a different outcome. Paradoxically, Ukraine's military transparency has improved from average to above average, even though Kyiv shares similar concerns about the Kremlin as Beijing does about Washington in the Pacific (Nate et al., 2023). This paper hypothesizes that strategic policy-based variables vary significantly in the discourse on military transparency regarding expenditure, activity, and movement.

Second, to determine if there is any theoretical justification for whether a state should or should not disclose its military activities, we need to address the logical framework behind this decision. Some existing literature, mentioned in the table above, discusses this issue more theoretically, focusing on theories and concepts common in law and social-political science studies. While not

necessarily prescribing transparency in military activities and expenditures, Lindsay's paper emphasizes its importance for collective security with allies. Lindsay suggests that scholars and practitioners should critically evaluate how military disclosure information is issued (Lindsay, 2011). A thorough debate and understanding of multilayered concepts are necessary, namely: (1) the method of communication, (2) the messages, and (3) the receivers. The author posits that while transparency aims to build trust, it can be politicized, rendering the goal meaningless. Greater transparency from Beijing to Washington, for example, might not build trust but shift power dynamics in international politics.

Further studies delve into varied interpretations of transparency within International Relations (IR) theory, identifying three main conceptualizations: transparency-as-disclosure, transparency-as-dialogue, and transparency-as-information (McCarthy & Fluck, 2016). Each approach emphasizes different aspects of communication and information-sharing among political actors, all underscoring the importance of transparency for stability and cooperation. Transparency-as-disclosure focuses on revealing information to promote trust and cooperation through openness.

Transparency-as-dialogue emphasizes mutual recognition and understanding among actors, fostering deeper engagement beyond mere disclosure. Transparency-as-information highlights the dissemination of factual data to enable informed decision-making. Despite their differences, all three approaches recognize the central role of communication and publicness in transparent social relations. The excerpt suggests using transparency-as-information and transparency-as-disclosure as qualifiers, promoting nuanced analysis and interdisciplinary dialogue within IR theory.

Based on the simple taxonomic explanations above, which autonomously divide practical and theoretical discussions regarding a state's military transparency in activities and expenditures, the focus remains on elite decision-making levels. This paper argues that existing literature addresses international constraints for collective security from both theoretical and practical perspectives (McCarthy & Fluck, 2016; van Eekelen, 2009; Lindsay, 2011) and conflicts (Nate et al., 2023; Mastro, 2016). There remains an academic gap concerning the discord between military transparency and public needs. To address this, this paper proposes using Civil-Military Relations (CMR) theory to assess whether it can adequately analyze the relationship between civilians and the

military, especially when the government justifies withholding military activities and expenditures from the public.

IR Theoretical Framework: Regarding Transparency

A study from an International Relations standpoint regards the transparency and secrecy of state actors' activities as a direct result of political security concerns. As commonly agreed, especially among realist scholars, world politics revolves around an anarchical conception (Donnelly, 2015). Robert Jervis (1978) offered the conception of a security dilemma as a counterpoint. The security dilemma occurs when states' actions to enhance their security provoke others to respond similarly. In relation, one of Gibbs' (1995) approaches to understanding secrecy shows that external threats remain a major factor for states to hinder publicity, especially in the security domain. Government officials must keep information secret from foreign threats to maintain and improve their security capabilities.

Further development of this logic reveals that states may face a choice between revealing their strength to signal intentions or maintaining secrecy. They might avoid disclosing military negotiations or alliances to prevent

questions about commitment or potential betrayal, thereby preserving a consistent track record. Additionally, states may hide or over exaggerate their true capabilities due to concerns about their status on the international stage (Carnegie, 2021).

Heide and Villeneuve (2021) emphasize the necessity of security concerns in democratic societies through three frames: elite governance, effectiveness, and threat. In a democratic context, transparency is mandatory for running the government, but concerns exist within such a framework. Some policies might not be effective or efficient if information were publicly disclosed. This rationale for secrecy is within the effectiveness frame. In a similar situation, the elite governance frame concerns too much disclosure by government officials or elites might hinder good democratic values, as public opinion could overwhelm their decision-making, preserving the tyranny of the majority. The threat frame concerns the perception of the world as a violent place, where political structures serve as a safe zone for individuals' security. The perception that the state can guarantee protection against external threats justifies the state's right to protect national security interests, including maintaining secrecy against foreign threats.

In conclusion, political security concerns fundamentally shape the interplay between transparency and secrecy in state activities. The realist perspective underscores the anarchical nature of international politics, where states prioritize their security without a central authority. As articulated by Jervis, the security dilemma illustrates the paradox where measures taken by one state to enhance security can trigger similar responses from others, potentially leading to heightened tensions. Secrecy, as argued by Gibbs, is often a strategic response to external threats, allowing states to protect sensitive information crucial for maintaining their security capabilities. States must navigate the delicate balance between signaling their intentions and preserving strategic advantages, often opting for secrecy to avoid compromising their commitments or revealing vulnerabilities.

In democratic contexts, the necessity for secrecy is further complicated by the principles of transparency and public accountability. As Heide and Villeneuve highlight, while transparency is essential for democratic governance, there are scenarios where too much disclosure can impede policy effectiveness and decision-making. The perceived violent nature of the international arena reinforces the state's

role in safeguarding national security, legitimizing the need for secrecy.

Retrospecting what IR theoretical perspectives perceive concerning the issue of a state's military transparency towards international audiences, such discourses are still deemed inadequate to use as an analytical lens for a more grounded, domestic level. In the domain of international politics, secrecy can be regarded as the ultimate tool to achieve a state's strategic goal (Napoleon Bonaparte in Mastro, 2016, p.67), or as an unimportant variable since states should always prepare for the worst possible outcome of any condition—a rational response since a state can never guarantee another's intentions, regardless of the level of communication given to establish trust (Mearsheimer, 2014). In the opposing perspective, transparency is now seen as an inevitable outcome of globalization and international institutions (Keohane, 1984). Therefore, its effect can improve the assessment of a threat and manifest into a better strategic decision, moving away from confrontation towards a more peaceful manner (Lindley, 2007). However, these elementary yet underlying theoretical frameworks still require further exploration if the puzzle concerns a state's transparency towards its public audiences. Therefore, this paper will also seek the main tenets taken from Civil-

Military Relations (CMR) theory to find the parallel concord between civil and military elements, especially in the debate regarding their public transparency.

CMR In Liberal Democracy: Is it Adequate?

The basic definition of Civil-Military Relations (CMR) emphasizes the authority relationship between civil society and its various governmental bodies with military organizations (Pion-Berlin & Dudley, 2020). From a different perspective, Florence Gaub offers an alternative view on addressing CMR through two distinctive approaches (Gaub, 2016). First, CMR theory formally stresses the core logic that civilians control the military. However, informally, the military can always potentially overthrow its civilian leaders. In theory, civilian leaders act as the principal in this relationship, with the military serving as the agent: civilians establish the military for their needs, provide funding and personnel, and set its strategic direction. However, this relationship's asymmetry is undermined because the armed forces possess weapons and maintain a monopoly on collective violence. Ironically, the institution designed to protect a political entity inherently has the latent power to threaten and destroy it.

Secondly, due to the inherent tension in the relationship, both the military and civilians prefer to maintain some distance from each other. The military resents civilian interference, while civilians aim to limit military influence over politics. However, excessive distance hinders the common objective of defending the country. National defense is a shared responsibility that requires cooperation—not just control—in strategic, organizational, operational, and social domains. To conclude from the definitions provided by these scholars, Civil-Military Relations theory is a set of perspectives on a relationship—or rather, a serious responsibility—that must be addressed by both civil society and military organizations.

Yet, after a thorough comparison of much of the existing literature on this theory, the definition is still not revealing enough to display a universal framework as the logical framework. Risa Brooks identified this concern in 2019, stressing that even though there has been much groundbreaking research and development using this perspective as an analytical lens, much of its research is still divided by various spectrums and determinant factors, namely “subdisciplines by independent and dependent variables; by regional focus; and by regime type analyzed” (Brooks, 2019).

The same concern was addressed in an article titled "Civil-Military Relations: What Does It Mean?" written by Dempsey, where he contemplated that the basic term of CMR has become progressively more challenging in the 21st century since the practicality of the term does not exist and progresses in a state of vacuum (Dempsey, 2021).

Since Civil-Military Relations (CMR) covers various technical levels and the entire relationship between Civil Society and Military Organization, it appears to be a vast topic, posing challenges in simplification and comprehension (Feaver, 1999). The underlying problem stems from the theory's presentation of a paradox: the military institution, created to protect society, possesses enough power to threaten that same society potentially. This arises from delegating responsibilities in civilized communities, where individuals rely on institutions for societal protection. The paradox lies in balancing two critical yet potentially conflicting needs: ensuring the military's monopoly to win wars and protecting the polity while preventing it from becoming a threat. The military's existence is justified by the need to defend against or deter external threats, akin to an airbag ready for a crash. It must be adequately equipped to meet these threats; otherwise, a weakened military could invite

aggression or provide a false sense of security, leading to disastrous outcomes in conflict. Thus, the challenge is maintaining a sufficiently robust military force to ensure security without endangering the polity it is meant to protect—a nearly impossible task for the civilian side.

The elaborated paradox extends to the extent that a military institution should also provide a secure environment for its polity from adversaries, as Feaver puts it, to "conduct its affairs so as not to destroy or prey on the society it is intended to protect." To achieve this 'secure place' for its polity, the military must be assertive, and even coercive, with any state actor, institution, or society. Ultimately, the concern lies in the parallel connection between military institutions and public society, which seem to possess different power distribution levels.

To mitigate these limitations, an approach from the standpoint of liberal democracy is assumed to be adequate, where society occupies the top hierarchy of a country's authority. Assuming a state has already transitioned to a more democratic state, meaning it has neutralized any potential disruption to its democratization process and redefined the military as the servant of the public (Barany, 2012 & Karl, 1990), Feaver agrees with Dahl, who argues that within a democratic system, public

society will always be at the apex of the political pyramid regardless of their competency.

“Civilian competence in the general sense extends even beyond their competence in a particular sense; that is, civilians are morally and politically competent to make the decisions even if they do not possess the relevant technical competence in the form of expertise”. (Dahl, 1985)

By quoting Dahl's statement, Faever suggests that civilians, despite lacking technical expertise in specific areas, have the moral and political authority to make decisions.

This "general competence" means that civilians are entrusted with decision-making power because they represent the broader moral and political values of society. In other words, while civilians may not have the specialized knowledge or skills (technical competence) required for certain decisions, their role in a democratic society gives them the legitimacy to make those decisions. This is because their decisions are expected to reflect the will and interests of the people, ensuring that governance aligns with democratic principles and values.

Summary

The Civil-Military Relations (CMR) theory examines the dynamics between civilian government institutions and the military, focusing on how civilian leaders maintain control over the military while ensuring its effectiveness and political neutrality. The theory addresses the balance between military strength and civilian oversight, emphasizing the need for a professional, subordinate military that aligns with national interests.

This paper finds that while the Civil-Military Relations (CMR) theory is relevant to analyzing the military-to-civil society with public transparency as the underlying concern, it remains somewhat limited and not adequate enough to provide a universal, normative logical framework. It needs more academic discourse alongside the tenets and principles of liberal democracy which put civilians at the top of the authority hierarchy, with the military serving the public's interests. But in reality, much of the previous literature is more concerned about the struggle for power between each civil society and the military organization, instead of addressing each other's responsibility to establish a strong, united body of a government.

This paper would also like to conclude that CMR-related research is best suited for more specific, strategic needs that put more additional variables into detail.

With many existing works of literature regarding CMR being more regional-tied, contextually driven research, analyzing study-case research is believed to be less of an effort. Assessing the type of regimes, the level of maturity of the adopted political ideologies, the constitutions, and the public perception would establish a greater understanding of the relationship model between civil society and a military body.

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