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Brendan Rittenhouse Green and Austin Long. "Conceal or Reveal? Managing Clandestine Military Capabilities in Peacetime Competition." *International Security* 44:3 (winter 2019/20): 48–83.

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B rendan Rittenhouse Green and Austin Long dispute what they regard as conventional wisdom about the benefits and drawbacks of disclosing clandestine weapons, sensors, or associated hardware or software. Past international relations scholarship, contend Green and Long, dwelt to excess on the tradeoffs between concealing and revealing elements of military power during times of crisis or war, when political and military leaders issue threats to use force or actually order the sword drawn for battle. In such cases secrecy is at a premium lest the armed forces forfeit some combat advantage to a watchful, adaptive foe. The balance between political and military interests tilts toward concealment. Hence the conventional wisdom among scholars who study intelligence and national security[1]

But the balance may tilt the other way in this incipient age of great-power strategic competition. The coauthors point out that the political gains from selectively disclosing information about one's armed prowess may outweigh the penalties incurred in strictly military terms. After all, strategic competition is about swaying opinion among multiple audiences, from domestic constituents to hostile leaders to friends and allies. Successful competitors maintain their own alliances and partnerships, recruit new allies and partners, and degrade or break rival contestants' alliances and partnerships. If revealing military information helps mold opinion in one's favor, it may be worth running the risk of compromising one's military advantages should armed strife come. Flourishing some impressive military implements projects an image of strength and could advance the project of building and breaking coalitions. After all, people and societies side with likely winners and edge away from likely losers. The successful competitor portrays itself as a winner.

This adds up to a compelling brief for practitioners of statecraft: *never say never and never say always* in strategic affairs. Much depends on circumstances. Now, if I had to quibble with the article—and I suppose I do, since this *is* a review—I might offer a few gentle critiques. First, linguistic precision matters. Like many if not most Pentagon insiders, the coauthors use the term "capability" interchangeably with "hardware" or some other synonym for military gadgetry. They list one hypothetical capability, namely a "tank with a new, more powerful main gun" (51). Yet the Pentagon itself defines *capability* not as a widget but as "the ability to complete a task or execute a course of action under specified

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[1] The coauthors pay particular attention to James D. Fearon, "Rationalist Explanations for War," *International Organization* 49:3 (Summer 1995): 379-414.

conditions and level of performance."[2] Capability, then, refers to the ability to do something, not the tool one does it with. A tank is not a capability.

Or take another example. An amphibious-warfare ship, to pick a definition at random from the *DOD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, is not a capability; it is a "combatant ship having organic capability to embark, land, and support landing forces in amphibious operations…"[3] The ship is a hunk of metal; the ability to embark, land, and support troops along foreign seacoasts is the capability. Differentiating between capability and the physical instruments of military might could help practitioners navigate the tradeoffs cataloged by Green and Long. Strategic leaders might choose to disclose *just enough* about some weapon—say, a long-range anti-ship missile along with its affiliated sensors and fire-control system—to convince influential audiences that their armed forces have the *capability* to strike at enemy shipping with precision from X hundred miles away.

The idea would be to reveal the capability while concealing crucial technical data about the combat system, and thus conserving military advantage. A strategic competitor would reap the political benefits from the capability and the military benefits from secrecy. The trick would be to gauge just what to divulge about weaponry without giving away too much. Concealing or revealing, then, is not an either/or proposition.

Second, Green and Long might have added that there are practical downsides to keeping weapons programs super-secret. What they call a "hidden doomsday machine" (50)—a weapons system kept utterly covert—is prone to underperform in action if its wielder never gets to practice using it under realistic combat conditions. It could prove altogether inert. A century ago Rear Admiral Bradley Fiske noted that only an expert user can wring maximum value out of a fighting machine, enabling hardware to fulfill its design characteristics.[4] An inexpert or inexperienced user compromises the performance of a piece of kit, no matter how ingenious its design and manufacture and diligent its upkeep. Concealment, then, is not an unalloyed good even in times of crisis or war, and even in strictly military terms.

Third, strategic theory has much to offer on this subject. During the late Cold War, for example, the strategist Edward Luttwak wrote that naval commanders and their political masters should calculate fleet movements to cast a "shadow" across strategic deliberations in foreign, in particular hostile, capitals.[5] Again, strategic competition is a war of impressions. Competing against the Soviet Union meant impressing important audiences with the U.S. Navy's fighting prowess relative to that of the Soviet Navy. If a display of fleet strength convinced Soviet leaders that the U.S. Navy would get its way in action in, say, the Mediterranean Sea, then Moscow would be cowed. Washington would 'win' that virtual showdown in the middle sea by persuading others it would have won an actual battle.

Casting Luttwak's dark shadow is far from easy. Ambiguity pervades estimates of military and naval power even among specialists, and not every observer of strategic competition is a specialist. Even so, every observer who is able to influence the political outcome of an encounter forms an opinion that counts all the same. Luttwak points out that Soviet naval design heaped missiles, guns, and antennae onto the upper decks of warships, readily within view. Soviet warships *looked* invincible—they exuded "sex appeal," in his words. By contrast, U.S. naval design stored missiles in silos embedded

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[2] U.S. Department of Defense, *DOD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, June 2020), 2.

[3] U.S. Department of Defense, *DOD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, 18.

[4] Bradley A. Fiske, *The Navy as a Fighting Machine* (1916; repr., Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1988), 174.

[5] Edward N. Luttwak, *The Political Uses of Sea Power* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1974), 11.

within ship hulls, out of view.[6] The latter technology was far superior, but it came at a political cost. Namely, American ships *looked* unimpressive even though they outclassed their rivals by indices that matter in action

The Soviet Navy, then, might win a battle of perceptions by overawing observers, even though it would probably lose a real battle on the high seas. Nor are specialists immune to misperception. The nature of high-tech armaments, sensors, and computers makes it inevitable. Luttwak depicts advanced military systems as "black boxes" in peacetime.[7] To take a current example, China's navy has constructed a family of impressive-looking guided-missile destroyers over the past two decades. They resemble American destroyers of similar make, and Chinese specialists sometimes even tout them as "China Aegis" to drive the comparison home.[8]

But is it an apt comparison? Have Chinese shipbuilders and weapons engineers really staged a leap to technological parity with warships that have represented the state of the art in U.S. naval strategy since the 1980s and have undergone constant upgrades since? Maybe, maybe not. It is hard to peek inside China's black boxes in peacetime. Hence the difficulty of compiling a conclusive intelligence estimate of the People's Liberation Army Navy or any other armed force. Like Moscow during the late Cold War, Beijing derives political benefit from its shiny new naval fleet while remaining coquettish about whether the fleet is battleworthy by American standards. Chinese Communist leaders reveal the capability to wage high-seas war while withholding technical specifics. This is sound practice.

Fourth, it is worth merging ideas from strategic theory with those from international-relations theory to yield insight into the realm of deterrence (and coercion, and reassurance). Prussian military sage Carl von Clausewitz defines strength as a product of force and will.[9] While he does not pay homage to Clausewitz, former National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger defines deterrence as a product of multiplying capability by will by belief—*belief* referring to whether an antagonist believes in our capability and willpower.[10] Combining the formulas makes it appear that deterrence is a product of the United States' strength and the antagonist's perceptions of it. Making an opponent a believer in its strength, and in its resolve to use it to stymie the opponent's aims, deters by Clausewitzian and Kissingerian standards. The same goes for coercing an opponent into doing something its leadership would prefer not to. It also applies when trying to reassure allies or partners that the United States can and will keep its commitments to them. Friendly leaders will remain within the U.S. circle if they take heart in its capability and resolve.

There is more to using military power in peacetime than concealing or revealing. Determining what to hide and what to display is a subset of the art of deception. Classic studies of deception by Barton Whaley, which channel an older tradition reaching back to antiquity, are worth pondering when exploring the problems Green and Long pose.[11]

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[6] Luttwak, *Political Uses of Sea Power*, 43.

[7] Luttwak, *Political Uses of Sea Power*, 41-43.

[8] James R. Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara, "The Influence of Mahan upon China's Maritime Strategy," *Comparative Strategy* 24 (2005): 23–51.

[9] Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans., ed. Peter Paret and Michael Howard (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 77.

[10] Henry A. Kissinger, *The Necessity for Choice: Prospects of American Foreign Policy* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1960), 12.

[11] See for instance Barton Whaley, "Toward a General Theory of Deception," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 5:1 (1982): 178-192.

And last, the coauthors apply their ideas to U.S. strategic anti-submarine warfare (ASW) during the Cold War but remain rather diffident about drawing out the enduring significance from what they say.[12] Green and Long trace how submarine and anti-submarine warfare evolved during the Cold War, compelling decisionmakers in the United States and Soviet Union to periodically reevaluate what to reveal and what to conceal. The Soviet ballistic-missile submarine fleet was an enigma to the West. Early in the contest, short missile ranges forced Soviet skippers to venture fairly close to U.S. shores to hold targets at risk. They were venturesome. As missile technology improved, however, Soviet boats took to operating closer to home—even as technology empowered them to roam farther throughout the world's oceans and seas. Why? Because Western ASW technology and methods were improving as well. Cruising within 'bastions' close to home let the submarine fleet shelter under cover from shore-based aircraft and missiles along with the surface fleet. Technological progress let the Soviets indulge their longstanding preference for defense.

Tracking trends in secrecy and disclosure is worthwhile and helps the coauthors prove that there are upsides as well as downsides to secrecy during long-term strategic competition. Yet the late Colin Gray, one of the modern-day deans of strategic thought, was fond of asking students of strategy *so what?* when they ran across some historic battle, gee-whiz technology, or strategic or operational choice during their studies.[13] To answer Gray's challenge, Green and Long should follow up with a companion essay on strategic ASW today, when a second nuclear age—an age when doomsday weaponry and delivery systems are increasingly commonplace—is upon the strategic community and academe.[14] What should U.S. decisionmakers keep clandestine or disclose in an age when Russia is refreshing its submarine force, China is deploying its first serious nuclear-powered ballistic-missile submarine fleet, and North Korea is experimenting with undersea nuclear forces of its own?

The coauthors deliver on their promise to add texture to political and strategic decisionmaking. For that practitioners have much to thank them. Read the whole thing.

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[12] Brendan Rittenhouse Green and Austin Long, "Conceal or Reveal? Managing Clandestine Military Capabilities in Peacetime Competition," *International Security* 44:3 (Winter 2019/20): 64-82.

[13] David J. Lonsdale, "Colin S. Gray: A Reminiscence," *War on the Rocks*, 22 June 2020, https://warontherocks.com/2020/06/colin-s-gray-a-reminiscence/.

[14] See, for instance, Paul Bracken, *The Second Nuclear Age: Strategy, Danger, and the New Power Politics* (New York: St. Martin's, 2013).