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Secrecy in International Relations and Foreign Policy

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Abstract

Scholarship on the politics of secrecy in international relations and foreign policy has experienced tremendous growth in recent years. This article begins by providing an overview of this literature, analyzing the conditions under which leaders opt for secrecy in both economic and security domains. These motivations differ greatly depending on whether the presumed audience from which a leader keeps a secret is domestic, international, or corporate in nature. Next, it considers methodological innovations and challenges, particularly in the measurement of secrecy. Finally, it reflects on the lessons learned and discusses some exciting questions that scholars could explore in future research. As a burgeoning field within international relations, the study of secrecy offers a variety of promising and potentially fruitful directions.

INTRODUCTION

Much scholarship in international relations rests on the presumption that transparency in politics is desirable. Existing theories explain how it can remedy corruption and favoritism, promote a rule-based order, advance policies that are in the public interest, demonstrate resolve, avoid costly conflict, and increase the legitimacy of domestic and international bodies. Indeed, transparency is often regarded as somewhat of a cure-all.

In his classic work, Keohane (1984, 1998) emphasizes international organizations' (IOs') abilities to facilitate cooperation by sharing information about other states' behavior and thus mitigating uncertainty about their future intentions. Indeed, difficulty monitoring state behavior is commonly thought to pose a significant barrier to cooperation (e.g., Morrow 1994). In the context of environmental cooperation, Mitchell (1994) argues that international regimes are most successful when others can easily observe compliance with international norms and laws, such as when a regime does not rely on self-reporting. Similarly, as part of their managerial theory of cooperation, Chayes & Chayes (1995) argue that transparency bolsters such compliance by facilitating coordination, reassuring actors of others' compliance, and deterring potential defectors. Transparency allows states to feel confident that violators will be punished, so that following the rules does not lead others to cheat or take advantage of them (Finnemore & Sikkink 1998). Moreover, Buchanan & Keohane (2006) argue that outside actors require transparency to hold IOs accountable, since these actors must be aware of IOs' actions in order to administer consequences and ensure these institutions' continued legitimacy. Other research reflects these ideas in specific domains; for instance, Johns & Pelc (2014) note that third-party participation in World Trade Organization (WTO) disputes can accord greater legitimacy to agreements that disputants reach.

Moreover, information provision can reduce costly conflict. A central premise of the crisis bargaining literature is that since an actor's resolve is their private information, they can misrepresent it to obtain concessions from their opponents (for a book-length treatment of resolve, see Kertzer 2016). Often such actors rely on various forms of publicity, such as domestic audience costs, in order to provide a reliable signal of their resolve (Fearon 1994, 1995). Thus, information provision can tie states' hands and allow countries to credibly commit to many policies, which can prevent hold-up problems, encourage reciprocity, permit states to develop reputations for compliance, send signals of resolve, and allow states to coordinate punishments (Keohane 1984, Davis 2012, Carnegie 2015; though see, e.g., Lord 2012, Colaresi 2014). In keeping with these arguments, the trend in international politics has been toward greater transparency (Tallberg et al. 2013). IOs have opened up their proceedings and decisions to outside observers, while domestic declassification and leaks have led states to reveal many long-held secrets.

However, this literature raises questions about why secrecy in international relations arose and persists in many areas. If transparency is so valuable, why are many records, proceedings, and outcomes kept hidden from domestic publics, other states, and market actors? Relatedly, what is the effect of this secrecy on international politics? A wave of new scholarship has postulated many interesting answers to these questions. Moreover, testing these theories has been facilitated by recent empirical advances that have opened up the study of secrecy to scholars, allowing for deeper and more nuanced examinations of long-standing questions.

In reviewing this literature, I focus on secrecy in international relations and foreign affairs. Since this is a broad topic, I narrow the scope by considering secrecy in an international context. I thus consider domestic motivations for secrecy, but only as it relates to secrecy at the international level. I follow Carson (2020, p. 5) in defining secrecy as the "intentional concealment of information from one or more audiences." Secrecy can be thought of as falling on a continuum based on the effort it takes to keep a secret, ranging from a simple lack of transparency to the adoption of secrecy infrastructure, such as encryption, classification, or penalties for sharing information.

Secret actions could include, for example, propaganda, political operations, economic actions, and paramilitary actions, while secret information could include covert agreements signed between states or the secretive monitoring of those agreements.[1] Secrecy can take several different forms, including open secrecy (where the facts are known but not openly acknowledged; Perina 2014), quasi-secrecy (where official secrecy is combined with "leaks, selective disclosure, and de facto public awareness"; Banka & Quinn 2018), obfuscation (where information is made obscure or unclear; Kono 2006), or deception (where information is deliberately misrepresented; Mearsheimer 2013, Schuessler 2015).

The logic governing the use of secrecy—and the empirical predictions that follow—differs widely depending on who a secret is kept from. I therefore organize the review by grouping leaders' reasons for choosing secrecy into three categories on the basis of the audience they seek to leave in the dark: domestic publics, other countries, or market actors. When the audience is a domestic public, leaders' motivations for doing so include their desire to enact unpopular policies, prevent escalation, reach bargains, send signals, and avoid destabilization. When leaders keep secrets from other states, it is often part of an attempt to achieve a tactical advantage, preserve norms, or protect security. Finally, when the audience is composed of market actors, leaders are typically motivated by their desire to protect trade and investment. I consider each logic in turn. I then discuss the challenges of and advances in studying this topic from an empirical perspective, after which I suggest promising directions for future research.

SECRETS FROM DOMESTIC PUBLICS

A popular strand of literature on secrecy in international relations argues that states use secrecy when their domestic publics would disagree with their actions. Using this basic insight, this body of research identifies many interesting conditions under which states opt for secrecy. These include states' desire to enact unpopular policies, prevent escalation, reach bargains, send signals, and avoid destabilization.

Enact Unpopular Policies

A common expectation about when leaders choose to keep secrets from domestic audiences is that they do so to avoid the backlash that can result when the public does not approve of a leader's actions or policies. While some scholars have argued that such secrecy is necessary to circumvent public opinion in order to conduct good foreign policy (Morgenthau 1948, Krasner 1978), others believe that governments use it to act in their own interests (Downs 1967). Either way, these scholars argue that governments use secrecy to manipulate public opinion to create approval for policies that would otherwise not attract domestic support. For example, leaders may secretly push adversaries to attack first to justify a war (Reiter 2012). Acting in secret may allow leaders to maintain plausible deniability even if the action is leaked, or to blame other states for it (O'Rourke 2018). Or leaders may act overtly but keep key pieces of information from the public because they know how unpopular the policy would be if the public fully understood it (Desch 2002, Schuessler 2010).

Using these insights, scholars in this area have analyzed the venue states choose for covert action, variation by regime type or divided government, logics for threats versus assurances, and whether leaders may choose to tie their hands to prevent covert action. Regarding the venue,

[1]Covert intervention "features an external power providing. . .aid in a way that conceals its role and does not feature official acknowledgment" (Carson 2020, p. 6).

while covert actions may take many forms, the bulk of existing research focuses on covert military operations. However, an important exception is a paper by Dreher et al. (2018), which introduces IOs as a way to maintain secrecy, arguing that states like the United States channel foreign aid through these organizations when the public is opposed, thus making IOs do their "dirty work." Otherwise, the United States gives aid bilaterally in a relatively transparent fashion. This theory builds and extends previous work that has shown that the United States makes secret deals through IOs, though this work has not theorized when leaders choose covert versus overt policies to the same extent (Dreher & Jensen 2007; Vreeland 2011; Dreher et al. 2008, 2009; Vreeland & Dreher 2014).

Scholars have also theorized about whether these domestic constraints vary by regime type. Some scholars, for example, argue that leaders may more easily avoid audience costs in nondemocracies, while others argue that leaders can hide information and actions just as easily in democracies (Downes 2009, Brown & Marcum 2011). Autocratic leaders may even be more accountable than democratic leaders because they have smaller coalitions that can more easily monitor and sanction them, preventing their use of secrecy (Brown & Marcum 2011).

Some recent research has focused on audience costs in democracies specifically. The democratic peace literature has shown that domestic audiences in democracies do not approve of military intervention in other democracies (Doyle 1986, Russett 1994, Tomz & Weeks 2013). However, this raises an important question for the covert sphere: Does the prevalence of covert actions by democracies against other democracies undercut the idea of a norm of democratic peace? While some scholars argue that this is the case (Forsythe 1992, James & Mitchell 1995, Reiter & Stam 2002, Kim 2005, Downes & Lilley 2010, O'Rourke 2018), others argue that covert actions against fellow democracies actually constitute evidence in favor of the democratic peace. For example, Russett (1994) hypothesizes that leaders rely on covert action against democracies in order to avoid backlash that would result due to violations of this norm. He finds evidence for this argument using a variety of US-based case studies. Poznansky (2015), in contrast, argues that covert action is not necessarily inconsistent with the democratic peace because democratic states target fellow democracies with covert force when they expect them to backslide into dictatorship—thus treating them as authoritarian in the present.

Smith (2019) shifts the focus from variation based on regime type to variation based on divisions between branches of government. Focusing on Congress in particular, Smith points out that even when policies are conducted covertly, Congress can still investigate them, and leaders still risk backlash that results from leaks. Thus, this theory predicts that whether a leader chooses a covert operation does not depend on whether they face opposition from Congress. Indeed, the statistical analysis suggests that there is no effect of divided government on whether leaders choose covert operations.

Other researchers move away from examining audience costs that arise from actions taken to harm or challenge other states, instead examining the costs that arise from assurances. For example, McManus & Yarhi-Milo (2017) ask why states support other states—whether to deter harm or to provide reassurances—using secrecy. They argue that domestic publics in democracies dislike supporting autocracies because doing so is hypocritical; thus, democracies like the United States assist autocracies secretly. They demonstrate that democracies are more likely to receive overt methods of support from the United States.

The insight that leaders select covert actions when some segments of the public would disapprove raises the question of when leaders might enact reforms to tie their own hands, preventing themselves from taking actions contrary to the public's interest. (Of course, the public may not be a unitary actor. Some may benefit and some may lose from any given action; thus, approval may differ among individuals.) Spaniel & Poznansky (2018) argue that such reforms could hold leaders

accountable to the public but that leaders hesitate to undertake them since doing so limits their autonomy. They argue that if the cost of revealing covert activities—whether through leaks or whistleblowers—is high due to opprobrium among the domestic public, the media, and Congress, executives credibly commit to reforms. They demonstrate this argument using a formal model in conjunction with a Cold War case study.

Prevent Escalation

Another reason that leaders may choose to hide their actions from the domestic public is to prevent unwanted escalation. Scholars ranging from von Clausewitz (1956) to Schelling (1966) to George & Smoke (1974) have recognized the challenge of tamping down escalation during war, particularly due to the difficulties of providing accurate, credible information about capabilities and goals. Recent scholarship extends these observations to theorize when leaders thus choose secrecy during conflict. For example, Kurizaki (2007) argues that leaders choose to act in private when the escalatory effects of public threats are greater than the positive information effects of doing so. Kurizaki's paper extends the idea of audience costs by adding audience costs on the part of the target to the theoretical framework. It then shows that secrecy expands the range of bargaining outcomes using a formal model and pairing it with a historical case study.

Moreover, Carson (2020) draws from literature in sociology and psychology to introduce a new theory of secrecy, arguing that leaders may not only choose secrecy but also collude with their adversaries to limit escalation. They may fear domestic pressure to escalate a conflict or to support an ally and therefore opt for limited war, which requires each side to avoid exploiting the other side's restraint and to behave within certain parameters. Secrecy thus allows for "challenge minimization" and "commitment dilution." Evidence of such tacit collusion is demonstrated in fascinating case studies covering five major conflicts from the twentieth century (some of which also appears in Carson 2015). Ultimately, Carson argues that collusion is especially likely when the cost or risk of escalation is high, which depends on military technology, domestic vulnerability, major power involvement, and alliances. In addition to the new theoretical framework, Carson's (2020) book provides a useful model of how scholars may draw on outside disciplines like sociology and psychology to think about secrecy.[2]

Reach Bargains

Another strand of literature argues that secrecy is important for cooperation because in order to achieve a deal actors must link multiple issues to make the bargaining space large enough. Indeed, many studies have shown that issue linkage effectively induces cooperation (Davis 2004, Poast 2012). However, if total transparency exists in the negotiations, domestic publics can mobilize against each point individually and bring down the deal before the deal as a whole is shown to be beneficial (Koremenos et al. 2001). Since treaties are negotiated between states but also must be sold to domestic audiences, secrecy allows states to play these constituencies off of one another. If the deal is negotiated in secret, each party can then return home and declare that they secured a favorable outcome (Stasavage 2004, Busch & Reinhardt 2006, Johns & Pelc 2016).

This point is developed more fully by Stasavage (2004), who develops a formal model that compares outcomes of negotiations in which the public does and does not observe negotiations

[2]Note that Carson (2020) also provides a distinct logic for interstate secrecy, though I do not discuss it in that section of the review to avoid duplication.

between the representatives of two countries. Stasavage shows that while transparency can incentivize even biased representatives to match public preferences, it can also induce representatives to posture by claiming "uncompromising" positions that appeal to the public. In effect, such posturing makes compromise and successful cooperation less likely.

This logic is evident in several specific applications. For example, Meunier (2005) shows that during the Kennedy Round of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (1964–1967), negotiators from the European Community maintained an uncompromising bargaining position largely due to leaks of the strict mandates they were given. Similarly, Busch & Reinhardt (2006) argue that including third parties in WTO cases can prompt posturing by the disputants due to incentives to signal to third parties that they are committed bargainers. They find that third-party participation reduces the chances of early settlements and increases the odds of official panel rulings.[3] Hafner-Burton & Victor (2016) also find that keeping International Centre for Settlement of Investment Disputes (ICSID) results secret can reduce public posturing and thus cut down on bargaining breakdowns.

Countries therefore often choose private bargaining fora (Vreeland 2003, Kurizaki 2007) or secret mediation (Ramirez 2018). These venues reduce the number of interests that must be reconciled. For example, treaties are typically kept secret until the entire document has been negotiated, after which country representatives can return home and demand either an approval or a rejection of the entire deal.

However, maintaining such secrecy is not always possible. Castle & Pelc (2019) examine the consequences of making secret information public via leaks, arguing that leaks allow domestic audiences to mobilize to get their preferred policy. Leaks are therefore strategic, with leakers attempting to mobilize domestic audiences. However, leaks of incomplete information often occur, robbing the government of the chance to complete a deal. The authors find that a given treaty gets more negative coverage when leaked than when released officially. Their paper uses new data on 120 leaks of trade agreements and finds that these leaks are mostly defensive in nature—such that leakers attempt to scale back the extent of commitments being made—and occur in unsettled areas of the law.

Other scholars extend this logic to ask about the distributional consequences of private versus public bargaining. Returning to the WTO, for example, Johns & Pelc (2014) argue that complainants lose from third-party participation since these parties insist that private gains from early settlements be shared, while defendants benefit because transparency reduces future legal challenges and challenges to discriminatory arrangements reached in private negotiations. Similarly, Kucik & Pelc (2016) find that the bargaining outcome is skewed toward the complainant in private bargaining, though third parties help make the outcome less discriminatory. This remains an open area for future research, particularly in settings outside of trade.

Send Signals

Much of the literature on secrecy in international relations assumes that domestic opposition to a given policy is bad for the leader and, thus, the leader acts covertly. In the covert domain, it is presumed, the leader is constrained in terms of signaling because they can back down or reverse course without facing audience costs. Audience costs are generally the mechanism holding leaders to their words and ensuring credibility (Fearon 1994, Smith 1998, Schultz 2001, Tarar & Leventoğlu 2013). Without these costs, leaders have incentives to misrepresent or lie and thus face credibility problems.

[3] Bown (2005) also suggests that greater transparency would invite more lobbying by private interests.

This literature has been challenged by research that argues against the importance of audience costs in the public sphere (Snyder & Borghard 2011, Downes & Sechser 2012, Trachtenberg 2012), implying that a leader's credibility does not differ greatly between the two arenas. However, another recent strand of literature challenges these ideas, hypothesizing that audience costs matter in both spheres because the threat of these costs in the covert realm can tie a leader's hands (Yarhi-Milo 2013b). Thus, states can use the covert realm to signal to other states due to the threat of revelation to domestic audiences.

For example, Yarhi-Milo (2013b) asks when a state gives secret reassurances and argues that it does so if the domestic public is opposed. This opposition can result from an acrimonious history, different ideologies, fear of the adversary, or aversion to the secrecy itself. Assurances then become credible because the adversary can reveal the assurance if the bargain is not kept. Or the assurance can be autonomously leaked, but if a state makes an assurance despite this possibility, it conveys their strong desire to cooperate and willingness to take the risk. Yarhi-Milo (2013b) uses case studies from the United States and Israel to demonstrate the argument's plausibility.

Even if leaks are not realistic, leaders still may make credible threats in the private sphere because they value their reputation in the eyes of other states that observe whether they follow through on these actions. As shown formally, bluffing may therefore prevent a state from achieving its aims in future interactions and can hinder its ability to communicate (Guisinger & Smith 2002; Sartori 2002, 2013; Kurizaki 2007; Ramsay 2011). Moreover, as Carson & Yarhi-Milo (2017) observe, covert actions are not typically totally secret; instead, they are often observed by states such as adversaries with intelligence capabilities and allies who are needed as partners. Thus, covert actions can signal resolve due to the necessary sunk costs, counterescalation risks, and domestic political risks inherent in these actions. In effect, whether a leader opts for using the covert or overt realm depends on their constraints.

Moreover, rather than focus on leaders' intent to signal in the covert sphere, Yarhi-Milo (2013a) asks how these signals are received. Building on literature showing that signals are frequently misperceived (Jervis 1976), Yarhi-Milo argues that how leaders interpret covert information depends on their prior beliefs about adversaries' hawkishness, beliefs about the link between behavior and characteristics, and personal interactions. In contrast, intelligence bureaucracies shape their beliefs on the basis of the other states' military capabilities.

These studies rely primarily on case study methods, in part due to the difficulty of collecting systematic data on covert interactions. However, Katagiri & Min (2019) provide an innovative statistical test of whether private versus public signals are more effective by assembling 18,000 documents from the Berlin Crisis. These data include both kinds of signals from the Soviet Union and East Germany to the United States and allow them to code the United States's evaluation of their threat level. They find that while neither type of signal had much of an impact on threat perceptions, private statements were more focused and thus more effective. They argue that because private statements can be targeted to a particular audience, they are perceived as being more credible.

Avoid Destabilization

A final reason to prefer secrecy to revealing information that the public opposes is that the information can spark violence. Consider the case of election monitoring, where monitors are charged with reporting on the fairness of elections. While monitors obtain their authority from accurately assessing election interference, doing so can potentially have adverse consequences. In particular, if these monitors reveal that the winning party committed fraud, and thereby inform the losing party that its candidate was actually more popular than the official vote total would suggest, people may mobilize. Such a revelation can create a focal point and lead people to update their priors on

the leader's legitimacy. However, protests may turn violent, or may remain peaceful but be met with violence (von Borzyskowski 2019a,b) or blowback more generally (Levin 2016).

Kelley (2009) uses this insight to argue that election monitors may sometimes endorse fraudulent elections even though doing so can jeopardize their credibility in the future, legitimize illegitimate leaders, and hinder opposition groups. While she tests a number of hypotheses, the most relevant for this article is that monitors do so when they worry about destabilizing other countries or encouraging violent instability if they reveal misconduct. Kelley (2009) examines whether preelection violence is predictive of endorsements by monitoring organizations, finding evidence consistent with the theory.

Leaders themselves may also avoid sharing information with international monitors due to concerns about destabilization, though this effect may vary by regime type. For example, Hollyer et al. (2015) argue that keeping economic information secret from the IOs that collect it—including the International Monetary Fund (IMF), International Labour Organization, and World Bank—can help autocracies maintain control. Since transparency can give everyone access to the same information, it can mitigate coordination problems and help the public undermine unpopular autocrats. Transparency can thus produce destabilizing protests by generating "shared expectations about the likely success of mass mobilization" (p. 764).[4] However, Hollyer et al. (2018) find the opposite to be the case in democracies. Public disclosures of economic data are found to be stabilizing in those cases, as they help ensure that poorly performing leaders can be effectively sanctioned at the ballot box. This reduces the need to resort to extralegal means of removing a poorly performing leader.

The idea that monitors and states may not reveal information if doing so would lead to violence could also be extended to other areas. For example, fears of destabilizing the Middle East may have led the United States to keep Israel's nuclear weapons a secret (Cohen 2013). Similarly, it might be the case that revealing human rights violations would spur protests, or highlighting violations of a peace agreement could lead to a resumption of a violent conflict. If violence is a potential effect of revealing cheating or violations of agreements in many domains, then it also may be the case that monitors choose secrecy to avoid such outcomes. However, fears of destabilization may pertain only in certain domains, such as those in which illegitimate behavior is hidden, like election fraud, versus legitimate behavior, such as negotiations. This remains a direction for future work.

SECRETS FROM OTHER STATES

Another key audience that scholars have considered when theorizing about when leaders choose covert versus overt conduct is other states. These can include allies, adversaries, or the target of a given operation. When the audience in question is a group of states rather than individuals, new predictions emerge. In particular, scholars have theorized that secrecy in foreign policy can yield tactical advantages, preserve international norms, or protect a state's security.

Tactical Advantage

Keeping secrets from the target of a covert operation can have several tactical advantages, which have long been recognized in the literature (e.g., Axelrod 1979, Betts 2010). First, the intervenor

[4]Hollyer et al. (2019) also address the puzzle of why some autocrats publicize economic data despite these destabilizing effects, arguing that it can defuse interelite challenges since rival elites recognize that infighting would make mass mobilization likelier to succeed.

can avoid blame if the operation fails, often passing the fault to partners in the operation or simply denying involvement. Covert operations can thus diminish the likelihood of retaliation since the target may not know who to blame (O'Rourke 2018), as often occurs, for example, in the realm of cyber security (Gartzke & Lindsay 2015).

Second, the element of surprise can help an intervention succeed, which may incentivize leaders to opt for secrecy. Indeed, states gain clear tactical advantages from maintaining uncertainty about their capabilities, even if doing so can lead to war (Meirowitz & Sartori 2008). When strong states maintain such secrecy, they can then surprise their opponents during war when those states believe they are weak (Slantchev 2010). Moreover, the benefits gleaned from conducting a covert operation may be greater when the operation is conducted against certain types of countries. In particular, attacking a democracy publicly can lead to greater retaliation since democracies face larger selectorates. In contrast, covert operations against these regimes may lead to a bargain if the operation is not detected (O'Rourke 2018).

However, it is important to note that secrecy often carries tactical drawbacks as well. Leaders inform fewer policy makers about a secret operation, reducing the advice and input provided. Furthermore, sophisticated weaponry may be eschewed and operations may be scaled back to avoid detection (O'Rourke 2018).

Preserve Norms

Normative concerns can lead leaders to hide violations of international laws and norms whose revelation could otherwise undermine a normative consensus. For example, Poznansky (2019, 2020) theorizes that whether an action is kept secret varies by its legality. If a particular action is not legal, this theory argues that revealing such a violation leads to hypocrisy costs and credibility issues among allies and client states. More specifically, the argument is that leaders act overtly when they have a legal exemption to justify their action under the nonintervention principle. To demonstrate the plausibility of the argument, Poznansky (2020) uses four in-depth case studies.

In other recent research, Carnegie & Carson (2018, 2019b) draw from a large literature in criminology and psychology to argue that enforcers of international regimes use secrecy strategically to avoid revealing violations of norms and rules that could destabilize the regime. Such revelations have the potential to create pessimism and perceptions of threat by other states, leading to further violations. Looking specifically at the nuclear regime, they show that when a norm is fragile and a violation would create negative externalities for other states, enforcers often hide violations to stabilize the regime. The argument is tested using a medium-*n* analysis, with a case study for each case of nuclear secrecy. Moreover, these insights build on the formal model shown by Kydd (2006), which demonstrates that when an enforcer favors a single defection over a mutual defection, it may obfuscate the original defection to prevent further violations from occurring.

IOs, too, may avoid revealing information in order to preserve norms. For example, scholars have argued that the WTO uses judicial economy—where it fails to issue a ruling—on highly controversial issues. Withholding information about whether the WTO considers a firm's or state's action to be permissible could thus be viewed as a form of secrecy. The WTO may do so because it fears that states will observe such a controversial ruling and conclude that the WTO no longer represents their interests, and they thus will not comply with its rules. Third-party states may warn the WTO that issuing a ruling could erode the normative consensus underpinning the institution, and the WTO may heed their warning in order to preserve the system (Busch & Pelc 2010). Courts like the WTO, the European Court of Justice, and other international bodies may also adjust the ambiguity of their rulings, or the manner in which they are presented, in order to maintain norms (Garrett et al. 1998, Busch & Pelc 2019).

While this body of work has provided a variety of interesting insights, a potential issue is that it often conflates the concepts of norms and laws. In light of recent work showing important distinctions between the two concepts (Búzás 2017), scholars could productively extend these studies to consider how their frameworks apply to each. For example, Poznansky (2019) discusses why violations of international law could entail greater hypocrisy and credibility costs than violations of norms.

Protect Security

States might also hide information to protect their security interests. Some information is sensitive, so that sharing it can have harmful consequences for the discloser. Even if a state would benefit from providing information for other reasons, it might choose to withhold it simply because of its sensitivity. For example, revealing elements of a state's sources and methods or its national defense plans and capabilities to rivals can be highly risky (for a discussion on the history of this topic see, e.g., Colaresi 2014). This logic has a long history and is considered "by far, the most widely accepted explanation for government information policy" (Gibbs 1995, p. 214).

Recent literature has further developed this reasoning and tested its implications. For example, Carnegie & Carson (2019a, 2020) investigate the consequences of secrecy for international cooperation and also address when secrecy occurs in IOs. They theorize that states tend to keep sensitive compliance-related information secret, including intelligence information that could reveal sources and methods and thereby damage a state's national security if it were revealed. For this reason, only states with very close personal ties and strong reputations tend to share intelligence with one another (Brown & Farrington 2017). States cannot simply provide their conclusions about other states' compliance with norms and laws, because they have incentives to misrepresent their information and/or may reach the wrong conclusions (Walsh 2009, Jervis 2010, Rovner 2011, Yarhi-Milo 2013a, Brown et al. 2019). However, Carnegie & Carson (2019a, 2020) show that when IOs including the International Atomic Energy Agency, International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, and International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda can protect sensitive information, information sharing increases, along with cooperation in nuclear enforcement and war crime prosecutions. Yet they also argue that information is a source of power and that informed states thus tend to reveal incriminating evidence about their adversaries but not their allies (though this selective sharing could make criticism of allies even more effective when it occurs; Dai 2002, Terman & Voeten 2018).

Coe & Vaynman (2020) use the idea of sensitive information to examine why more arms control agreements do not exist. They answer that states need monitoring in order to reach such an agreement but not so much monitoring that it jeopardizes their safety. Disclosing such information is sensitive, as it can reveal military capabilities to other states. They demonstrate their argument using three case studies from the United States and United Kingdom alongside a formal model.

Moreover, and related to the above discussion regarding tactical advantage, Lindsey (2015) and Slantchev (2010) show that states often keep their military strength a secret since it can cause other states to take countermeasures. States may thus have to choose between revealing their strength as a signaling device or secrecy (Rittenhouse Green & Long 2016, Merrell & Abrahams 2019). States may even avoid revealing their military basing negotiations (Brown 2014a,b) or their alliances to avoid questions of commitment or potential betrayal and maintain "portfolio consistency" (Kuo 2019). They may also hide their true capabilities due to concerns about status on the international stage (Carnegie & Dolan 2020). This research might be productively extended to ask whether information sensitivity varies by regime type or other factors so as to examine differences in leaders' potential to keep such secrets.

SECRETS FROM MARKET ACTORS

Market actors represent a third group of actors whose potential negative reactions may cause leaders to choose covert actions. This group has been less theorized about in the literature and thus represents a potentially fruitful avenue for future work. Existing scholarship in this vein tends to focus on secrets that are intended to protect trade and investment, though future work could usefully examine other areas of economic activity.

In particular, this literature argues that leaders may choose to keep secrets from market actors when revealing information could stymie trade, investment, and other economic activity. Negative economic information, information about domestic instability, or information about poor governance could all spook investors. Countries may decline to sign bilateral investment treaties (BITs) or trade agreements with states that cannot be trusted as economic partners.

One strand of scholarship in this area looks at policies regarding investment. For example, Rosendorff & Shin (2012) show that states sign BITs when they seek a more transparent domestic regime, which would allow them to better protect property rights and thus attract more investment. Transparency is necessary to convince investors that their investments will not be expropriated. Since leaders may be blocked domestically from implementing reforms in this area, they can sign BITs, a domain over which they have more discretion. Leaders thus opt for more open policy decisions and processes to reap the resulting economic benefits. Such reforms may be more costly for certain kinds of regimes; therefore, the effects may vary depending on regime type (Rosendorff & Shin 2015).

Hafner-Burton et al. (2016) and Hafner-Burton & Victor (2016) also focus on international investment but shift to examining secrecy in investment disputes. Disputants can choose how much information to reveal about their case in investment arbitration at ICSID, and these papers argue that they often choose not to reveal it when investors (and also publics) will react negatively to the information. In particular, investors may not trust host governments if they possess a reputation for treating investors poorly. Hafner-Burton and colleagues test the argument's observable implications statistically, showing that parties tend to keep dispute outcomes secret when they involve long-lived assets and governments have a history of losses.

In addition to considering how investment patterns respond to secrecy versus transparency in international relations, recent research has considered how trade patterns respond. For example, Kelley (2009) argues that election monitors are less likely to reveal electoral misconduct if doing so would disrupt trade flows. Moreover, Brutger (2017) shows that firms act as the audience when it comes to states' decisions regarding when to sound the alarm on trade violations or to keep these violations private knowledge. Additionally, Berger et al. (2013) demonstrate that increased political influence arising from covert US interventions led to greater market share for US products. However, these kinds of activities could erode trust and influence preferences over trade partners (Carnegie & Gaikwad 2018).

Rodrik (1995) points to incomplete information as a source of protectionist trade policies. He argues that a model like that of Grossman & Helpman (1994) implies that industry lobbying leads to free trade, because lobbying influence is proportional to industry output, which should be greatest for exporting, comparative-advantage industries. Rodrik proposes that a lack of transparency in trade policy making may explain why this is not the case in reality. For example, Magee et al. (1989) cite "optimal obfuscation" as a source of trade restrictions, with politicians pursuing indirect protectionist policies that reward protectionist interests but are not clearly observed by consumers. Kono (2006) contends that democracies are likely to pursue optimal obfuscation by liberalizing highly salient and transparent trade policies like tariff rates, while maintaining less obvious trade barriers like nontariff barriers to appease protectionist lobbies. The effects of nontariff barriers on trade are complex and are not publicized by the government, so they are more difficult to observe.

Carnegie & Carson (2020) analyze sensitive firm information as a source of secrecy. In particular, they argue that states often refrain from sharing sensitive economic information such as contract details that could provide an advantage to market competitors.[5] However, this information can be important for adjudicating trade and investment disputes. They demonstrate that properly designed IOs, such as the WTO and ICSID, can ameliorate this problem by receiving and protecting sensitive information. They assess their hypotheses using new data on specific pieces of information shared—along with information withheld—from these institutions, including new measures of redactions in publicly released panel reports. They show that key reforms designed to safeguard sensitive information increased the provision of this information and boosted trade and foreign direct investment, especially in areas where sensitive information is particularly common.

Leaders may also choose not to maintain secrecy in order to support the economy using monetary policy (Broz & Frieden 2008). Leaders can choose a fixed versus pegged exchange rate, where a fixed exchange rate is often viewed as a more transparent commitment to limit inflation. Firms may observe these choices and lobby governments for their preferred policies. Less secretive fixed exchange rates are typically thought to increase trade and investment (Simmons 1997), so that market actors could be a key driver of this choice.[6]

MEASUREMENT/EMPIRICAL STRATEGIES

A significant challenge in the study of secrecy in international relations is how to measure secret information. After all, if leaders choose not to reveal information, how can scholars observe it? Many scholars have therefore relied on evidence of secrecy as shown in fascinating archival documents, compiling interesting case studies and often coupling them with formal models. However, there is also value in developing systematic data to test theories more generally; thus, I review some recent approaches here.

One method scholars have begun to use is the divergence between official versus open-source reporting of data such as foreign aid. For example, some scholars use aid that is officially reported by a given government and the actual amount of that aid, where the difference is considered secret. Open-source methods can allow scholars to better measure financial flows like foreign aid that are given covertly. Foreign aid provided by Western states is documented by reports to the OECD's Creditor Reporting System though these states give some aid covertly as well. However, other large donors, including China, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Cuba, Venezuela, and Iran, do not report their aid flows. Scholars have had a difficult time answering basic questions about such aid as a result. AidData has attempted to rectify this problem with a new method called Tracking Underreported Financial Flows, which uses a variety of open-source information. However, concerns have arisen that the news reports from which it draws could be biased or incomplete (Xu & Carey 2014).

[5]A related strand of literature shows that sensitive information can be leaked to favored market actors to provide them with an advantage over competitors (Dube et al. 2011).

[6]Much of this literature has focused on domestic causes of information revelation, such as regime type. For instance, Broz (2002) argues that more secretive governments such as autocracies may opt for transparent monetary policy instruments because central bank independence does not suffice in these countries. However, transparent systems can simply use central bank independence to credibly commit to limit inflation because political interference is observed and punished by the public. Other scholars argue that the number of veto players in the government matters (Keefer & Stasavage 2002), among other domestic factors. Other interesting research has examined the determinants and consequences of central bank transparency (e.g., Stasavage 2003, Eijffinger & Geraats 2006, Dincer & Eichengreen 2007, Crowe & Meade 2008), which may depend on regime type and the depth of financial markets. Central bank independence may be a means to reduce market surprise about monetary policy changes (Dincer & Eichengreen 2013).

Yet recent studies using "ground-truth" exercises—methods that verify the data using fieldwork and in-person interviews—suggest that open source methods such as those used by AidData are largely reliable (Muchapondwa et al. 2016).

A similar method relies on gaps between what is officially reported—or reported initially—and some measure of a particular policy or compliance level. For example, Kelley (2009) uses the difference between the initial assessments of election fairness by election monitors and the assessments contained in the longer reports that they release subsequently. Alternatively, scholars may use the GDP per capita numbers that the World Bank releases initially and compare them with the values as they are corrected later (Kerner et al. 2017).

A particularly innovative measure along these lines is that of Hollyer et al. (2014), who use economic data disclosures to IOs as a measure of transparency. This measure is based on the proportion of economic statistics reported to the World Bank's World Development Indicators data set that are missing. More missing data is assumed to be the result of a government's conscious decision to limit transparency. In contrast, Stone (2008) uses the level of missingness in an IMF data set as a measure of state capacity. Stone argues that such missing data likely indicates that governments are unable, rather than unwilling, to provide such information. However, Hollyer et al. (2014) argue that the two conceptions are not mutually exclusive; they consider both the willingness and the ability of a government to release information to be necessary, though not sufficient, aspects of transparency. In particular, they believe that better-resourced governments with more competent bureaucracies are more likely to be transparent, as are governments that value information disclosure. From an outsider's perspective, the motivation may not matter; in either case, a lower level of information may be accessed.[7]

Alternatively, some authors focus on mentions of states reporting sensitive information although its content is excluded. For example, Carnegie & Carson (2020) count redactions in WTO and ICSID panel reports as an indicator of whether sensitive information was revealed. Similarly, Carnegie & Carson (2020) and Hafner-Burton & Victor (2016) use the percentage of arbitration cases in which the results were not disclosed. Secrecy provisions in treaties or IOs could be coded as evidence that secrecy is used in such cases (Carnegie & Carson 2020). Redactions found in archival documents can also indicate secrecy, which can be analyzed using archival methods and Freedom of Information Act requests. Moreover, the digitization of archival materials can unearth new insights and allow new data sets to be compiled (Trachtenberg 2009).

Other data sets use information that was formerly secret but was later revealed. For example, Castle & Pelc (2019) catalog all trade agreements that were leaked, while Bas & Schub (2016) and Kuo (2019) use secret alliance pacts and O'Rourke (2019) constructs a new data set of US-supported covert regime change during the Cold War. It is also possible to assume that some policies are more secretive than others; for instance, McManus & Yarhi-Milo (2017) code which types of foreign policies are usually conducted covertly, Kucik & Pelc (2016) document instances of private versus public bargaining at the WTO, and Broz & Frieden (2008) exploit the difference between fixed versus pegged exchange rates. Data on specific cases can also be assembled, as in Katagiri & Min's (2019) use of 18,000 documents from the Berlin Crisis to code each private and public signal, or Brown & Marcum's (2011) use of the percent of open versus closed concessions that were made during the Cuban Missile Crisis negotiations. Finally, still other scholars use investor knowledge to detect secret activities such as illegal arms trading (DellaVigna & La Ferrara 2010), corruption, and conflicts of interest (Luechinger & Moser 2014).

[7]A related method is also presented by Islam (2006), who uses the speed with which data are reported to the IMF as well as differences in countries' freedom of information laws.

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Scholarship on secrecy in international relations represents an exciting area for future work. As this is an emerging and developing domain, many interesting questions have been investigated but many fascinating puzzles remain. I briefly lay out some ideas for future research, though this by no means represents an exhaustive list.

First, many of the theories of secrecy reviewed previously rely on untested assumptions about the public's views of certain actions, and of secrecy itself. Yet we know little about how the public actually thinks about these issues. Future research could do more to test the domestic conditions and beliefs that these theories assume. While Myrick (2019) presents an interesting survey experiment that suggests that democratic publics weakly prefer transparency to secrecy, there is more to learn in this area. For example, to what extent and under what conditions does secrecy erode legitimacy in international relations? When does secrecy lead to perceptions of bias? Moreover, the public is not a unitary actor; some people may benefit while others lose from secrecy, raising the questions of who supports secrecy and why. In addition, more could be done to better understand the consequences and causes of leaks, expanding on the research by Castle & Pelc (2019).

Second, future work could examine the impact of new technologies on existing theories of secrecy. For example, cyber, drone, and other technologies raise issues of information security (Kreps 2016, Fuhrmann & Horowitz 2017, Poznansky & Perkoski 2018). Do these new technologies cause secrets to lose value faster over time? Do leaders shift the methods by which they keep secrets, or the kinds of secrets they keep (Carson 2018, Joseph & Poznansky 2018)? If so, does this imply a shorter time frame for the need of secrecy and more immediate retrospective oversight action? If it is less feasible to keep secrets, what are the consequences for the normative-based international order?

Third, future research could move beyond secrecy per se to investigate closely related concepts such as obfuscation, ambiguity, open secrets, quasi-secrecy (e.g., Banka & Quinn 2018), misinformation, evasion (Búzás 2017), and deception. How do these concepts relate to secrecy? Secrecy is one of several policy tools; when do states choose secrecy versus others among these options (Morse & Pratt 2019)? Policy tools are rarely considered together (though recent exceptions include Carnegie 2015 and Milner & Tingley 2015). When do leaders pick secrecy to achieve their goals versus other methods of doing so? When do they hide nuclear programs versus maintain the norm through other channels? When do they choose secrecy for one audience while revealing information to another, thereby practicing audience segregation (Yarhi-Milo 2018)?

Moreover, this body of work begs the question of how such secrecy shapes global governance. Factors that cause states to embrace secrecy can filter up to the international level, and international bodies may lose access to critical state-based information. How do international actors respond to a lack of information provision? Carnegie & Clark (2020) argue that IOs fight back against secrecy by sharing information with one another. Doing so can reduce their reliance on a particular information supplier, strengthening global networks. However, IOs likely pursue other strategies as well, which we know little about.

The current state of the literature raises several generalizability concerns as well. For example, a large bulk of the evidence cited is US based and often consists of case studies from the Cold War. This is for good reason; the United States has a wealth of declassified documents and archival materials relative to other countries, and due to its preponderance of power, it is important to understand. However, this focus raises clear generalizability questions. Most obvious is whether existing theories hold in the same way in other countries and time periods. Do leaders in other countries bargain in the same manner? Do publics think about secrecy in the same way? Do developing countries adopt different strategies when dealing with major powers? Is secrecy

a weapon of the powerful because other states' secrets are more readily discovered by powerful states' intelligence bureaucracies? A related generalizability point is that much of the literature focuses on security considerations; do these same theories apply when states decide whether to use economic tools secretly? Finally, much of the literature considers secrecy between adversaries; when is secrecy used among friendly states?

This review has also focused on leaders' incentives to maintain secrecy. However, an interesting direction for future work would be to examine when other actors in international politics divulge information, such as international bureaucrats, nongovernmental organizations, or corporations. For example, Mitchell (1998) asks why regime bureaucrats sometimes refrain from publishing information on the compliance or noncompliance of relevant parties, differentiating between effectiveness-oriented and compliance-oriented systems. Mitchell argues that effectiveness-oriented regimes tend to have less intrusive monitoring systems, while compliance-oriented ones insist on greater information collection and dissemination. However, other scholars have shown that bureaucrats have additional motivations such as career advancement, national concerns, and prestige, and looking at the implications of these considerations for the revelation of sensitive information may yield interesting hypotheses.

Moreover, in keeping with the rise in interest and fascinating work being done in political psychology (McDermott 2004, Kertzer & Tingley 2018), more explicit linkages between a leader's penchant for keeping secrets and their psychological traits constitutes a promising direction. Which kinds of leaders prefer to conduct policies in secret? For example, as part of a broader theory, Yarhi-Milo (2018) argues that high self-monitors prefer to signal publicly. However, more in-depth analysis of these kinds of connections represents an interesting path forward.

Finally, much of the research in this domain is confined to a single issue area. Future work could productively analyze secrecy across different arenas. For example, secrecy could be thought of as a continuum ranging from a lack of transparency to the hiding of information. How does the level of secrecy vary across domains, and what is the impact on the action's perceived legitimacy? How do normative concerns vary across domains? A theme in the literature reviewed above is a trade-off between efficiency (Bjola & Murray 2016) and legitimacy: Does this trade-off exist in all domains? Do people perceive the costs and benefits differently depending on the issue area? While scholarship in this area has made many exciting advances, there is much left to explore.

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