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Trends. National Security Policy and Toleration for Ambiguity: Israel, Northern Ireland, North Korea, and the World

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One of many dichotomies comprising the development, implementation, and evaluation of security policies is that between clarity and ambiguity. Clarity suggests the need for well-defined, clear-cut, easily understood, and easily observable policies. Ambiguity suggests the converse.

Some political commentators have castigated the Oslo Accords between the Palestinian National Authority and the Israeli Government for its teleological clarity--an endpoint with milestones concerning a final settlement. Yet one could effectively castigate the same accords for ambiguity in not operationalizing what is meant by, for example, Palestinian commitment in fighting terrorism.

Some political commentators have supported the Good Friday agreement among political entities in Northern Ireland for its ambiguity in not mandating a final settlement but merely a next step comprising a new assembly within Northern Ireland and new arrangements among the Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland, and the United Kingdom. Yet some participants are demanding an immediate endpoint--dismantling the arms and arms caches of the Irish Republican Army.

Some political commentators have attacked the secrecy with which the North Korean Government develops and implements its security policies. Yet one could make a strong case that secrecy maximizes the number of possibilities attributed to overt actions--such as possibly constructing an underground nuclear weapons facility or test launching a missile. This maximization, especially entailing worst case scenario development and contingency planning on the part of the one remaining superpower and proximal governments, seems to have allowed the North Korean Government to win more chips than its hand might otherwise warrant, e.g., aid exemplified in oil, nuclear reactors, food, and medicine.

What to make of the above discourse? The notion of clarity or ambiguity almost always being a superior style of security policy is probably--if not outmoded--an inaccurate one. More accurate would be the notion of different degrees of clarity and ambiguity within, between, and among policies for specific situations, participants, and observers. The latter notion is more complex than it might seem given communications theories' predictions about the sender communicating clarity, the receiver perceiving ambiguity, and the observer perceiving some mixture. So, too, cross-cultural difficulties, zeitgeists, and the social and historical transformations of meaning muddy the waters. Unfortunately, the abstract notions of clarity and ambiguity break down on close inspection of their real-world referents. And opportunities for even momentary attenuations of political violence and its threat may break down as well. (See Coudroglou, A. (1996). Violence as a social mutation. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 66, 323-328; Durrheim, K., & Foster, D. (1997). Tolerance of ambiguity as a content specific construct. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 22, 741-750; Houran, J. (1998). Preliminary study of tolerance of ambiguity of individuals reporting paranormal experiences. *Psychological Reports*, 82, 183-187; Hudley, C., & Friday, J. (1996). Attributional bias and reactive aggression. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 12, 75-81; Zhang, Q. (1998). Fuzziness--vagueness--generality--ambiguity. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 29, 13-31.) (Keywords: Israel, National Security Policy, Northern Ireland, North Korea, Palestinian National Authority.)