

Think Tanks and the Transnationalization of Foreign Policy

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We live in turbulent times where the only constant is change, where the unthinkable has become a dark reality, and where the line between domestic and international politics is increasingly blurred. The promise and peril of globalization has transformed how we view international relations and has opened the policy-making process to a new set of actors, agendas, and outcomes. International relations was once the exclusive domain of diplomats, bureaucrats, and states. But today's policy-makers must consider a diverse set of international actors when formulating foreign policy that includes organizations such as CNN, al-Jazeera, the International Campaign to Ban Landmines, Greenpeace, Deutsche Bank, Al-Qaeda, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). While these actors were not born of globalization, they have been empowered by it. Consider the simple fact that in 1950 there were only fifty nation states and a limited number of intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations operating in the world and one begins to understand the complexity and unique challenges policy-makers face when trying to fashion an effective foreign policy. The challenges for U.S. policy-makers are even more daunting given America's superpower status, global commitments, and the range of transnational actors and issues it must confront on a daily basis.

In this increasingly complex, interdependent, and information-rich world, governments and individual policy-makers face the common problem of how best to bring expert knowledge to bear in governmental decision-making. Policy-makers need basic information about the world and the societies they govern, how current policies are working, possible alternatives, and their likely costs and consequences.

For policy-makers in many countries, it is not a lack of information that politicians and government officials are confronted with but an avalanche of information and paper. Indeed, policy-makers are frequently besieged by more information than they can possibly use: complaints from constituents, reports from international agencies or civil society organizations, advice from bureaucrats, position papers from lobbyists and interest groups, and exposés of the problems of current government programs in the popular or elite media. The problem is that this information can be unsystematic, unreliable, and/or tainted by the interests of those who are disseminating it. Some information may be so technical that generalist policy-makers cannot understand or use it. Some information may be politically,

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financially, or administratively impractical, or may work against the interests of the policy-makers who must make decisions based on information that they often feel is less than adequate. Other information may not be useful because it differs too radically from the worldview or ideology of those receiving it. In developing and transitional countries, on the other hand, the basic data needed to make informed decisions often does not exist and must be collected and analyzed and put into a form that is usable by parliamentarians and bureaucrats.

In politics, information no longer translates into power unless it is in the right form at the right time. Governments and policy-makers are often moved to seize the moment because the right social and political forces are in alignment or because a crisis compels them to take action. In either case, they often move quickly and make decisions based on the information available, which does not always lead to the most informed policy. In short, policy-makers and others interested in the policy-making process require information that is timely, understandable, reliable, accessible, and useful.

There are many potential sources for this information, including government agencies, university-based scholars, research centers, for-profit consulting firms, and international agencies. But in countries around the world, politicians and bureaucrats alike have increasingly turned to a specialized group of institutions to serve their needs. Independent public policy research and analysis organizations, commonly known as “think tanks,” have filled policy-makers’ insatiable need for information and systematic analysis that is policy relevant. This information imperative led to the creation of the first think tanks—the Royal Institute for International Affairs (1920), the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (1910), the Kiel Institute for World Economics (1914), and the Brookings Institution (1916)—in the early part of the 20th century, and it continues to be the primary force behind the proliferation of public policy research organizations today. The international civil society movement has also helped to stimulate interest in think tanks as an alternative source of information on issues of international, national, and local concern and as potential critics of the policies of national governments and international organizations that can speak with an objective voice independent of both government and the business community.²

For most of the 20th century, independent public policy think tanks that performed research and provided advice on public policy were an organizational phenomenon found primarily in the United States, with a much smaller number in Canada and Western Europe. Although think tanks had existed in Japan for some time, they generally lacked independence, having close ties to government min-

² See James G. McGann and Kent R. Weaver, eds. *Think Tanks and Civil Societies: Catalysts for Ideas and Action* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publications, 2000); see also Jeffrey Telgarsky and Makiko Ueno, “Introduction: Think Tanks and a Changing Japan,” in *Think Tanks in a Democratic Society: An Alternative Voice*, ed. Telgarsky and Ueno (Washington, DC: The Urban Institute, 1996), 3.

istries or corporations.³ However, in the recent past there has been a veritable proliferation of think tanks around the world that began in the 1980s as a result of the forces of globalization, the end of the Cold War, and the emergence of transnational problems. Two-thirds of all the think tanks that exist today were established after 1970, and over half were established after 1980.

The impact of globalization on the think tank movement is most evident in regions such as Africa, Eastern Europe, Central Asia, and parts of Southeast Asia, where there was a concerted effort by the international community to support the creation of independent public policy research organizations. A recent survey conducted by the Foreign Policy Research Institute's Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program underscores the significance of this effort and documents the fact that most of the think tanks in these regions have been established in the last ten years. Today, there are over 4,500 of these institutions around the world. Many of the more established think tanks, having been created during the Cold War, are focused on international affairs, security studies, and foreign policy.

Think tanks exist in almost every country that has more than a few million inhabitants and at least a modicum of intellectual freedom. For most of the last century, the vast majority of think tanks were found in the United States, but now for the first time the number of think tanks worldwide exceeds the number in the U.S.⁴ Think tanks now operate in a variety of political systems, engage in a range of policy-related activities, and constitute a diverse set of institutions that have varied organizational forms. And while all think tanks perform the same basic function—i.e., to bring knowledge and expertise to bear on the policy-making process—not all think tanks have the same degree of financial, intellectual, and legal independence. The challenge facing all think tanks is how to achieve and sustain full independence so that they are free to speak “truth to power.”⁵

Taking into consideration the comparative differences in political systems and civil societies, I have developed the following categories that attempt to capture the full range of think tanks that can be found around the world today. In the United States you can find every variety of public policy organization, while the rest of the world tends to have think tanks of a more limited scope and variety. Think tanks outside the United States fall into three main categories—university-affiliated, government-affiliated, and political party-affiliated—and tend not to enjoy the same degree of autonomy that their American counterparts do.

Regardless of their structure, think tanks have become a permanent part of the political landscape, so much so that they are now an integral part of the policy

³ Telgarsky and Ueno, “Introduction,” 2.

⁴ According to recent data collected by the FPRI Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program there are over 4,500 think tanks worldwide, approximately 1,500 of which are found in the United States.

⁵ Aaron Wildavsky, *Speaking Truth to Power: The Art and Craft of Policy Analysis* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1979).

process in many countries. Think tanks of various sorts have performed many different functions, including:

- Carrying out research and analysis on policy problems;
- Providing advice on immediate policy concerns;
- Evaluating government programs;
- Interpreting policies for electronic and print media, thus facilitating public understanding of and support for policy initiatives;
- Facilitating the construction of “issue networks” that involve a diverse set of policy actors who come together on an ad hoc basis around a particular policy issue or problem;
- Providing a supply of key personnel to government.

While the emergence of think tanks has not always been viewed by the political establishment as an unalloyed good, think tanks have nonetheless had more positive than negative influence on the policy process. This is particularly evident in many developing and transitional countries where think tanks have served as a catalyst for change that has helped transform the political landscape and create a vibrant civil society.

While historical and political traditions in other regions of the world differ significantly from those of the United States, and while every country has its own specific set of policy problems and needs, some useful lessons can be distilled from the U.S. experience. The origins of think tank culture in the United States are bound up in America’s progressive-era traditions of corporate philanthropy, the sharp distinction between the legislative and executive branches of government, weak political parties, the public commitment to openness and independence, and the inclination of the public and their elected officials to trust the private sector to interface with and provide assistance to government. These factors combined to present very few barriers to policy analysts, ideologues, and entrepreneurs who wanted to enter the marketplace of ideas and contribute to the policy-making process. Finally, think tanks have grown in prominence because there is a perception that think tanks can often do what government bureaucracies cannot.

Specifically, think tanks are thought to be:

- More effectively future-oriented than government research functionaries, who work in an environment where efforts at creative disruption are rarely rewarded;
- More likely to generate reconfigured policy agendas, while bureaucracies thrive on the security-maximizing environment of standard operating procedures;

- Better able to facilitate collaboration among separate groups of researchers for a common purpose because they have no permanent vested interest in any one domain.

Furthermore, they aid the intellectual synthesis that comes from breaking down bureaucratic barriers because they are:

- Better able than government agencies to disseminate relevant policy research within government and externally to policy elites, the media, and the public;
- Better suited to deal with the cross-cutting nature of global policy issues;
- Better able to convene and engage stakeholders in the policy-making process;
- Better able to “telescope” the policy process, shortening the distance from data collection to knowledge/policy creation;
- Better able to conceive the means of implementation than government bureaucracies, which may be internally segmented by department and area of specialization.

Despite the efforts of some scholars and policy-makers to question the potential transferability of U.S.-style independent think tanks to other regions and countries of the world, many policy-makers and civil society groups from around the globe have sought to create truly independent, free-standing think tanks to help their governments. So while the transferability of the Brookings Institution, RAND Corporation, or Heritage Foundation model to other countries and political cultures may be debated, the need and desire to replicate the independence and influence these institutions enjoy is unchallenged.

The transnationalization of the think tank movement has often been encouraged and funded by the international donor community and private foundations in the United States, Europe, and Japan. Along with the international flow of funds has come an internationalization of think tank staff. Programs like those run by the Brookings Institution, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, the National Institute for Research Advancement, the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, the German Marshall Fund, the Atlas Economic Research Foundation, and other organizations provide opportunities for staff from think tanks and universities in developing and transitional economies to come and consult with their peers so that they can exchange information and ideas about international issues and learn about best practices for how to create and sustain an independent public policy organization.

Think tanks in the United States have also been actively engaged in exporting their scholars, brands of policy analysis, and organizational structures to other countries. The Urban Institute, the Heritage Foundation, the Foreign Policy Research Institute, and the Hudson Institute have actively promoted their approach to policy analysis to groups in Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe, and the former Soviet Union. The Urban Institute, the Carnegie Endowment, and the Heritage Foundation have even gone so far as to establish overseas affiliates.

Advances in information systems and telecommunications have greatly expanded the scope and impact of collaboration between institutions and scholars. Bilateral and multilateral exchanges are taking place every day as technological advances allow think tank staff to communicate and operate more effectively across international borders. The Internet enables think tanks around the world to connect with each other in a way that was inconceivable just a few years ago. Global forums, conferences, and debates now take place regularly on the World Wide Web. Collaborative research projects involving researchers from twenty or more countries are now commonplace. Recently, institutions such as the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace's Global Policy Program, the World Bank's Global Development Network, the United Nation's Global Public Policy Network, and the Foreign Policy Research Institute's Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program have created partnerships with think tanks around the world in an effort to create global networks that will analyze global issues, attempt to shape foreign policies, and influence the programs and priorities of international institutions. In addition, an equal number of regional networks have been organized in Europe (Transition Policy Network, Trans European Policy Studies Association network, and the Partnership for Peace network), Asia (Association of Southeast Asian Nations Institute of Strategic and International Studies network), Africa (African Capacity Building Foundation network), and Latin America (Atlas Foundation network) to achieve similar objectives.

The proliferation of public policy research organizations over the last two decades has been nothing less than explosive. Not only have these organizations increased in number, but the scope and impact of their work has expanded dramatically. Still, the potential of think tanks to support and sustain democratic governments and civil societies around the world is far from exhausted. The challenge for the new millennium is to harness the vast reservoir of knowledge, information, and associational energy that exist in public policy research organizations in every region of the world. It is essential that the U.S. State Department and other international agencies of the U.S. government take immediate steps to work with, and through, think tanks to help develop and sustain a global network of policy institutes that will span physical, political, and disciplinary boundaries in the pursuit of solutions to some of the emerging and enduring policy problems of our time.