Think Tanks: Their Development, Global Diversity and Roles in International Affairs

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The London-based Royal United Services Institute, one of the oldest continuously existing think tanks in the world, is celebrating the 180th anniversary of its founding this year. Other British and American think tanks with a focus on international affairs have been popping up for the past hundred years or so and have strong global reputations.

Analysis

Think tanks have not remained a British or American phenomenon. Rather, thousands of think tanks have been founded in many other parts of the world. Still, the term "think tank" has remained ambiguous, reflecting the substantial diversity of think tanks' functions and forms.

■ While many definitions of think tanks emphasize the public policy focus of such organizations, the particular roles that think tanks actually play – either individually or as a group within a given context – need to be determined empirically. The same holds true for the supposedly positive role think tanks play in civil society.

■ The substantial diversity of think tanks around the globe reflects external parameters such as the general character and dynamics of the political regimes as well as the institutional specifics of the political systems under which think tanks operate, the particular "demand" for their services in different contexts, the availability of funding, the importance of other "suppliers" of policy-relevant knowledge, as well as the initiative and leadership of individual think tank-based policy entrepreneurs.

■ Think tanks can play a multitude of roles in international affairs – for example, they can provide opportunities for interactions and discussions among professionals within and across national borders; raise awareness and help set relevant agendas; inform and defend the foreign policies of individual states; engage in informal diplomacy; and nurture next-generation scholars and practitioners of international affairs.

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Why Think Tanks Matter

Though widely used, the term "think tank" has essentially remained a "slippery" or "ambiguous" one (Stone 1996: 17, 27; Weaver and McGann 2000: 4-5). Reflecting the substantial diversity in the forms they take and the roles they assume within and across different national and transnational contexts, there simply is no consensus as to what constitutes a think tank. Still, at the core of most definitions of think tanks is their role with respect to informing public policy. For example, Suzuki (2006: 1) parsimoniously defines a think tank as an "organization that conducts public policy research." A recent, more elaborate – and demanding – definition put forward by McGann (2011: 13) postulates that "think tanks are public policy research, analysis and engagement institutions that generate policy-oriented research, analysis and advice on domestic and international issues that enable both policy makers and the public at large to make informed decisions about public policy issues."

Do think tanks deserve public and scholarly attention as well as scrutiny? We think so for a number of reasons. First, think tanks can serve as institutional links between ideas, knowledge and public policy. Diane Stone (1996: 1) has noted that while ideas constitute the "most intangible aspect of political life," they undoubtedly matter in politics. Usually, however – efforts of individuals notwithstanding – ideas need to be embedded in and diffused by means of an organizational infrastructure to be able to impact national and international politics. Think tanks can provide that organizational infrastructure. Looking at the public policy role of think tanks from the perspective of national executives, Kent Weaver and James McGann have pointed to the need for expertise in governmental decision-making: In both "information poor and information rich societies," they suggest, policy-relevant information is needed that is "understandable, reliable, accessible, and useful" (Weaver and McGann 2000: 2). Alongside bureaucracies and academia, think tanks can also be a source for such information. Ideal-typically, think tanks thus serve as a "bridge between knowledge and power" (Stone 2005: 40-41).

In principle, think tanks can provide policy guidance by contributing to various stages of the policy-making cycle, from the agenda-setting phase to the evaluation of policy implementation. Whether they in fact do so is a matter for empirical investigation. At least in the U.S. context, think tanks have functioned with respect to policy-making and the broader policy-making system as sources of basic research and advice, evaluators of policy proposals and government programs, as "facilitators of issue networks and the exchange of ideas," as interpreters of policies and current affairs for the media, and also as suppliers of personnel (Weaver/McGann 2000: 5-6; Weaver 1989: 568-570). Yet, as Stone (2004: 14) cautions, think tanks are in some cases simply "symbolic of intellectual authority that can be used to support entrenched policy prejudices and political causes."

Apart from their potential role in policy-making, there is also another empirical if not normative reason why think tanks are of academic and public interest. Especially in the burgeoning literature on democratic transitions and consolidation, think tanks have often been portrayed as an important element of civil society (Weaver/McGann 2000) or have even been regarded as a "tool for democracy" (Suzuki 2006: 1). McGann (2011: 14) has recently gone as far as to suggest that the existence of think tanks "contributes to the creation of a robust civil society. In turn, the existence of a robust civil society strengthens the existence of think tanks, creating a 'virtuous cycle' of consolidation." The underlying logic of this is simple – and thus prone to simplification: a vibrant civil society contributes to a functioning democracy, and think tanks are a crucial part of civil societies. Therefore, think tanks contribute to or even foster democracy and can, at times, also play vital roles in the transition to democracy. Such assumptions – especially popular in the 1990s, the heyday of euphoria about a new dawn of worldwide democratization – have been increasingly questioned by empirical studies. These studies point out that civil society organizations in different national contexts do not necessarily serve as a bulwark against autocracy or as crystallization points for democratization movements but may also reflect overall regime structures and dynamics and thus actually be regime-sustaining rather than regime-challenging (e.g. Jamal 2009). Still, think tanks can in principle promote civic participation in public affairs and thus can contribute to pluralism and "help to restrain the monopolisation of politics" (Suzuki 2006: 1). Whether this is the case in specific contexts is again a matter for empirical investigation.

Think Tank Development: U.K. and U.S.-based Exemplars and Global Diversity

Think tanks are not a new phenomenon in national polities and international relations. In fact, the origins of individual think tanks in the United States and the United Kingdom can be traced back to the early years of the twentieth century, which saw the founding of institutions such as the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (1910), the Brookings Institution (1916) and the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR, 1921) in the U.S., and the Royal Institute of International Affairs (also known as Chatham House, 1920) in the U.K. In particular, CFR and Chatham House served as inspirations, if not institutional blueprints, for a number of international affairs think tanks set up in Europe and elsewhere from the 1930s onward. During World War II, these institutes, which are today considered part of the venerable "old guard" of international affairs think tanks (Higgott and Stone 1994: 17-19), got "drafted" into government service in the context of the Allied war effort.

The post-World War II period saw a burst of think tank operations of varying scale and scope, with some new institutes specializing in narrowly defined policy niches, and others in broad areas with public policy relevance. In the U.S., some of the biggest think tanks such as the Rand Corporation and the Hudson Institute emerged and began to thrive in the Cold War environment, with close links to the Pentagon and the defense establishment at large. The 1970s and 1980s then witnessed the emergence of more ideologically and marketing-oriented institutions, in particular in the U.S., where, among others, the conservative Heritage Foundation soon made its presence felt on the national policy-making scene (Rich 2004: 41-73). But think tanks did not remain an American or British phenomenon, but rather came to constitute an institutional species that has adapted to the environments of an increasing number of countries with their specific political, cultural and legal cultures. While most think tanks are firmly rooted in their national contexts and cater mainly to domestic audiences, accelerated globalization since the 1990s, abetted by vast advances in international communications, has also affected think tanks, which have expanded their transnational activities, for instance in terms of collaborative linkages and the dissemination of research output and policy briefings (Stone 2005: 70-78). A 2010 international survey counted over 6,480 think tanks operating in 169 countries, including two in (post-)totalitarian North Korea! (McGann 2011).

Given the large number and worldwide existence of institutions loosely labeled "think tanks," it is perhaps not surprising that they have attracted increasing academic interest, especially since the 1990s. Most of the literature has focused on think tanks in the U.S. This is hardly surprising in view of the fact that a large number of think tanks operate in the United States, a country that provides a particularly hospitable terrain for their operation given the institutional configuration of the national political system and its concomitant decision-making processes, the permeability of government institutions, and last but not least the long tradition of philanthropy that has benefited non-profit organizations including think tanks (Weaver 1989: 570-571; Stone 1996: 40-42). Yet, the literature also points out the considerable diversity of think tanks operating within the same or across different national settings. Think tanks around the world diverge in terms of organizational structure, modes of operation, audience or market, and means of support (McGann 2011: 15; Stone 2004: 2-5, 2005: 45-46).

Various attempts have been made to classify think tanks in terms of generic types. For example, Stone (2005: 48) distinguishes five types of think tanks based on their primary institutional affiliation or linkage, namely:

- independent civil society think tanks established as non-profit organizations,
- policy research institutes located in or affiliated with a university,
- governmentally created or state-sponsored think tanks,
- corporate-created or business-affiliated think tanks, and
- political party (or candidate) think tanks.

Comparative analyses of think tanks have shown that there is "no one best model or trajectory for think tank development" (Stone 2005: 50; Weaver 1989: 576; Weaver and McGann 2000: 32) and that the "U.S. experience with think tanks may not be readily transferable to other settings" (Weaver 1989: 577).

Why Are Think Tanks Around the Globe So Diverse?

There is a sizeable literature on the development of think tanks and their role in policy-making, in particular with reference to the U.S., but also, if more limited in size, with respect to a number of other national and regional settings. Yet, little progress has been made so far in establishing coherent, universally applicable frameworks for explaining either the overall development or the operational profile – in terms of activities pursued and roles played – of think tanks in different settings. However, the literature provides some discussion of environmental parameters impinging on the development of think tanks and their opportunities to influence policy-making processes in different settings. One of the most prominent discussions concerns the effects of institutional variance of political systems on

- the qualitative and quantitative development of think tanks and
- their opportunities to affect policy-making.

Weaver and McGann (2000: 13) note that the "structure and operations of political institutions are clearly a critical determinant of the level of activity and type of think tanks in a given country." More specifically, Weaver (1989: 570) argues that think tanks are more numerous and "probably" also more influential in the U.S. than in other Western democracies "because of a number of unusual features of the American political system, notably the division of powers between the president and Congress, weak and relatively non-ideological parties, and permeability of administrative elites." This specific institutional setting provides numerous opportunities for political entrepreneurs and think tanks to leave their mark on policy-making.

Still, there is no substantial evidence that parliamentary political systems provide policy entrepreneurs with insurmountable institutional barriers. Stone (2004: 6) notes that "parliamentary systems involve greater centralization of legislative power and accountability, supposedly allowing for greater control over policy and exclusion of external policy actors" and also more disciplined parties. Yet, she also suggests that the "differences between presidential and parliamentary cultures do not appear to present significant differences in opportunities" for think tank-based policy

entrepreneurs (Stone 2005: 60). In the absence of systematic and comprehensive testing of these issues, it might thus be suggested that while core institutional parameters of political systems (e.g. parliamentary vs. presidential and unitarian vs. federal systems of government, etc.) can facilitate or constrain think tank development and their opportunities to influence policy-making, they do not determine them. Arguing otherwise would ignore the abilities of individual agents endowed with the necessary leadership qualities to overcome or at least "stretch institutional constraints" (Samuels 2003: 5-7).

Institutional features of political systems thus constitute only an intervening factor – if an important one – with respect to think tank development and activities. Numerous other potentially relevant factors have been mentioned in the literature on think tanks. Stone has presented one of the most comprehensive overviews of sociopolitical factors shaping the environment in which think tanks operate. At the most general level, she notes that the "uneven spread of think tank development across political systems appears to be a consequence of factors such as the extent of foundation support, legal structures, the political situation, civil society development, and the tax environment" (Stone 2005: 58). Elsewhere, Stone (2004: 6) herself references further environmental parameters that affect the development and activities of think tanks, arguing that "constitutional changes and government reform, the intensity of political debate and opposition, the attitudes of political leaders and the political culture of a society open and close opportunities for think tanks and policy entrepreneurs."

It might be possible to inject greater analytical clarity into this fuzzy picture of potentially relevant factors by distinguishing between demand-oriented factors (pull factors) and supply-oriented factors (push factors) that can shape the development of think tanks and their activities in different national settings. With respect to established democracies in particular, the simple market-analogy based model suggested by Jongryn Mo seems useful in this regard. Mo (2005) proposes that think tank output can be understood as a good, for which there are suppliers (think tanks and other actors) and consumers (policy makers). Incentives affect the supply of and demand for think tank services. With respect to the demand side, it has been argued that incentives emanating from particular electoral systems can stimulate or

constrain policy makers' demands for think thank services. In addition, the "demand for policy research by political leaders also depends on the degree to which they favor the policy-based rather than politics-based style of governance" (Mo 2005: 176). As Stone (2005: 58) suggests in more general terms, the particular character of demand "helps to explain why different kinds of think tanks have emerged" in different national settings.

Looking at the supply side, it is first important to ask who, in a specific context, supplies policy-related research and guidance. Apart from think tanks, other relevant actors in this regard may include national bureaucracies, individual academics, research-oriented NGOs, and even international organizations. And, as Mo (2005: 178) notes, "traditionally, it is the bureaucrats who are the main sources of policy advice to political leaders." Stone (2005: 60) seconds that "bureaucracies often retain a monopoly on policy advice. The strength of bureaucracies has implications for the structure and operation of think tanks." Thus, demand for think tank services is likely to be higher when the bureaucracy cannot meet relevant demand or when the bureaucracy is not trusted by policy makers as a source of research-based policy guidance. Apart from competition among suppliers of policy research and guidance, there is also a host of institutional and non-institutional factors, which stimulate or constrain the supply of policy input and other activities offered by think tanks. Relevant supply-side variables determining the cost of inputs and their efficient use include the availability of capital (research funding) and labor (well-trained researchers). Such factors in turn depend on the amount and kind of existing funding sources (government money, foundations, individual philanthropy) and the attractiveness of careers in policy research (in and of itself and as a gateway to positions in government and academia). A final set of factors that provides incentives or disincentives for the supply of policy research and guidance by think tanks relates to existing legal frameworks providing a) barriers to and/or support for either the establishment and operation of such think tanks or access to information, important for conceiving policy-relevant input and guidance.

The Roles of Think Tanks in International Affairs

The considerable diversity of think tanks around the globe is also reflected in the kinds of roles that think tanks can play in international affairs. By "international affairs" we mean both international and cross-national relations, exchanges, and interactions, as well as the foreign policy of individual nation-states. While the particular roles played by think tanks in international affairs will differ in specific national (or regional) contexts – and perhaps even from think tank to think tank within such contexts – it is still possible to identify some generic roles that think tanks can play with respect to international affairs. In the following, we suggest eleven such generic roles (see also Higgott and Stone 1994: 24-29).

First, think tanks can provide (sometimes regularized) opportunities for interactions and discussions among scholars, politicians, bureaucrats, media representatives and businesspeople. This might be called the "salon function" of think tanks, which can help to build national, bilateral, regional and/or transnational networks or even communities of people working on one level or another in international affairs. Think tanks can serve in this respect as institutional bridges linking different kinds of professionals who share an interest in international affairs and can contribute to establishing "person-based pipelines" not only within national foreign policy communities but also across national borders. In some national or regional contexts, the think tanks' salon function might even be more important than their policy input as this particular function cannot be assumed by other (and perhaps more important) actors providing policy input, such as bureaucracies.

Second, think tanks can establish, inform and (re-)shape public opinion regarding international affairs, including foreign policy. Think tanks can directly "establish" public opinion in this area by commissioning and organizing relevant opinion polls, and they can also inform and even (re-)shape public opinion by contributing to relevant discourses by means of traditional media interventions (interviews, op-eds) or more modern ones (blogs and other social media tools). Third, think tanks can transfer and disseminate knowledge on international affairs to a more general public. They can do so by means of public forums, publications addressed to a broader audience and by engaging in "research brokerage" – that is, making relevant

academic findings and assessments available in ways that non-academics can understand. Fourth, think tanks can contribute to raising awareness about and/or help people understand (emerging) international affairs and global issues by addressing those issues in different formats including publications, various kinds of forums, and media interventions. Besides putting such affairs and issues on the radar, think tanks can also contribute to setting relevant national and cross-national agendas – or they can at least assist in doing so.

Fifth, think tanks can engage in informal diplomacy activities by organizing or participating in semi-official track 1.5 or more autonomous track 2 processes. The functions of think tanks that are more or less part of the foreign policy apparatus of individual governments range from determining how much room there is for formal diplomatic maneuvers to signaling impending policy shifts and "sniffing out" relevant shifts on the other side. More generally, think tanks engaged in informal diplomacy can help to establish people-based pipelines, which can be especially important when formal diplomatic relations do not (yet) exist on a bilateral level.

Sixth, and turning to the public policy-oriented roles of think tanks, such organizations can be sounding boards for policy makers by providing informed "second opinions." While policy makers, perhaps more often than not, have formed opinions or assessments concerning certain issues, they sometimes also like to hear what relevant experts have to say about a certain issue or with respect to evaluating policy options – especially if the issues concerned are complex and the policy options involve high risks and/or costs. Seventh, think tanks can also directly impact specific foreign policy decisions or the general strategic discourse in a given national context through (regularized) interactions with policy makers or commissioned policy advice. This "consultancy function" of think tanks probably comes closest to the popular understanding and as we have seen above, common definitions of think tanks. For many think tanks, opportunities to directly impact foreign and other public policies may, however, be quite scarce.

Eighth, it has to be noted that especially (but not only) in (semi-)authoritarian regime contexts, think tanks can help legitimize existing (or emerging) official foreign policy positions of the state concerned. Thus, rather than informing or evaluating specific internationally oriented public policies, think tanks in such instances play only the role of "intellectual cheerleader" for their respective governments by uncritically endorsing relevant policies or policy decisions and providing rationales for them from a seemingly neutral perspective. Ninth, we can note that individual think tanks sometimes also play a self-chosen role in terms of exporting – or at least trying to export – specific agendas to other countries. Relevant agendas are, as a rule, conviction- or ideology-driven and include the spread of democracy or "free" markets, as well as assisting like-minded organizations in other countries like political parties, associations and unions. Endowed with sufficient funding and/ or personnel, they might also help to set up other relevant think tanks in foreign settings.

Tenth, think tanks can also contribute to establishing International Relations and Strategic Studies as fields of studies in individual countries. They can achieve this by publishing relevant journals, by employing staff members who later assume relevant professorships, and by offering fellowships to researchers from within and outside the country. For example, the establishment of Strategic Studies in Japan, where "strategy" was considered a sort of taboo word in academia after World War II, would probably have not taken place if it had not been for the nurturing role played by a few Japanese think tanks focusing on international affairs. This finally leads to the eleventh role that think tanks can play in international affairs: They can help nurture next-generation international affairs practitioners and scholars, for example by running diplomatic academies and various training programs related to international affairs, by offering internships, by staff members teaching at universities and other institutions of higher education, and by formally supervising Ph.D. students and mentoring younger scholars.

As should already be evident but is perhaps worth re-emphasizing: Perhaps no think tank focusing on or engaged in international affairs will play all of the roles sketched out above all of the time. The particular roles – and mixture thereof – played by think tanks will differ from setting to setting, from organization to organization, and also across time. Think tanks, regardless of whether they are concerned with foreign policy or other public policies, are characterized by tremendous diversity with respect to the forms and functions they assume. In spite of this – or perhaps because of this – they are bound to arouse continued academic and public interest, and rightly so.

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■ **Related GIGA Research**

As a research institute with think tank functions, the GIGA is interested in and contributes to discussions and reflections about think tanks. More specifically, Patrick Köllner is currently working on a research project comparing the institutional development of international affairs think tanks in Japan and the Republic of Korea. Within the context of the Hamburg International Graduate School for the Study of Regional Powers, Pascal Abb is focusing in his ongoing Ph.D. project on the development and roles of foreign policy think tanks in the People's Republic of China.

■ **Related GIGA Publications**

Basedau, Matthias, and Patrick Köllner (2007), Area Studies, Comparative Area Studies, and the Study of Politics: Context, Substance, and Methodological Challenges, in: *Zeitschrift für Vergleichende Politikwissenschaft*, 1, 1, 105-124.

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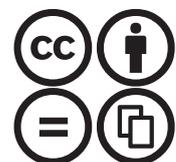
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