

**BEHIND THE SCENE:
The Contributions of Think Tanks in U.S. Policy-Making**
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Abstract

Think tanks are policy research and analysis organizations that provide systematic analysis to enable them make informed and quality decisions about domestic and international policy related issues. Over the past century, US think tanks have been very influential in framing policy issues by providing timely analyses. In the last two decades, there is proliferation of think tank across the United States. This paper aims to chronicles and analyzes the evolution of think tanks phenomena. An effort has been made to explore the impact of these think tanks on policy process in the American politics.

Keywords: Think Tanks, United States, Policy making, research organizations

Introduction

The growing importance of policy research organization or think tanks has grown considerably in today's public policy environment. This paper is an attempt to examine the contribution of think tanks in setting the agenda for U.S. foreign policy. It should be highlighted that there are numerous moments in the history of U.S. foreign policy when these think tanks had played a significant role in giving new directions on issues of strategic importance for nearly a century.¹ But since they conduct much of their research outside the limelight, they have got relatively less attraction of media compared to other sources of U.S. policy. However, in spite of least appreciated, the role of think tanks in the formulation of

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U.S. foreign policy, is among the most important one.² In recent years, where, ‘think tanks phenomenon’ has become global, the US think tanks are distinguished from the rest operating around the world. US think tanks have the ability to influence and contribute both indirectly and directly to the foreign policy-making process. More importantly they have set their image such that policy-makers themselves turn to them for policy advice.³ There are five distinct ways in which US think tanks affect foreign policy-makers: 1) they generate original ideas and thus more options for policy, 2) they supply pool of experts to act as government functionaries, 3) they offer platform important discussions, 4) they educate citizens about the real world, and 5) they contribute to official efforts that aim to resolve conflicts. However, the most important task of these think tanks is to identify new and important issues early on that the U.S. will likely confront in the time ahead and also bring these issues into the knowledge of policy-makers.⁴

The History of U.S. Think Tanks

The first use of the term ‘think tank’ came during the Second World War to refer to a secure place where the military strategists could discuss the war strategy. Today this narrow connotation of the term is used to describe over 2,000 research organizations in US alone and approximately 2,500 similar other institutions around the globe engaged in policy analyses.⁵ While chronicling the history of U.S. foreign policy think tanks, it should be noted that there is a great diversity exists in the think tank community.

It was not until in early 1900s when the first such wave of policy organization or think tanks emerged in the United States wherein three research institutions had made their presence felt on the global arena in

the earlier part of twentieth century; these were, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (CEIP)⁶; the Hoover Institution on War, Revolution and Peace established by a former president Herbert Hoover in 1919; and also the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) created in 1921 that later become one of the leading think tank on world politics.⁷ Two other significant institutions, that are, Institute for Government Research (IGR) founded in 1916, which later became the Brookings Institution (1927)⁸, and the American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research (AEI) established in 1943⁹, that later gain significant attention on variety of foreign policy matters.

These think tanks that were created in the early 20th century applied scientific inquiry to a number of policy related issues. As Kent Weaver of Brookings Institution described it, functioning as “universities without students”¹⁰. Although, in the beginning these institutions very rarely provided policy advice to decision-makers, rather their prime objective was to educate and inform general public and policy-makers about the potential repercussions of opting for a particular course of action in foreign policy. They intentionally avoided to have been involved themselves directly in policy decision making process as to preserve their institutional independence as well intellectual integrity. However, soon after the WWII, the need for prudent and independent foreign policy advice and input became indispensable for U.S. policy-makers due to America’s greater role with global responsibilities as hegemonic-power in a bi-polar world. Policy-makers in the United States had a dire need of policy relevant information along with its systematic analysis that could enable them to develop rational national security policy.

For this purpose, the RAND Corporation was established in 1948¹¹ to protect and promote US interests abroad. RAND was first of its kind that purely financed by government and was aimed to address specific concerns of policy-makers. In the subsequent years, RAND would inspire the founding of several other government-sponsored think tanks that included; the Hudson Institute founded in 1961¹² and the Urban Institute established in 1968.¹³

In last three decades (from 1970s onwards) the so-called advocacy think tank has gained much of media exposure than its counterpart. They have introduced for the first time, marketing techniques for rendering their policy research and have changed the very role and nature of the think tank community. By contrast, in the early 20th century think tanks were disinclined to become entangled in policy discourse. Advocacy think-tanks that include, the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) founded by Admiral Arleigh Burke and David Abshire in 1962¹⁴; the Heritage Foundation established in 1973¹⁵, and the CATO Institute founded by Edward H. Crane in 1977¹⁶ have welcomed the opportunity to induce both the content and the direction, of American foreign policy. As the proliferation of think tanks was increased, they became more competitive. Resultantly, they have realized the significance to capture the focus and attention of the public and policy-makers through media.

The new ear in the history of think tanks begun to emerge in the foreign policy-making community referred as “legacy-based” including the Carter Center Founded in 1982 by former U.S. President Jimmy Carter based in Atlanta¹⁷ and the Nixon Center for Peace and Freedom established by President Richard Nixon based in Washington D.C,¹⁸ are institutions founded by former presidents meant to leave a enduring

legacy on domestic and foreign policies. They were able to produce publications, held seminars and conducted research on number of important policy related issues.

At the end of the 21st century, nearly 2,000 think tanks marked the American political backdrop¹⁹. They are diverse in scope and mandate and are situated at different locations. Institutions such as, the Washington, DC-based Institute for International Economics (IIE) founded in 1981 by Peter G. Peterson²⁰, the Inter-American Dialogue founded in 1982²¹, and the Washington Institute for Near East Policy established in 1985²², focused on particular areas or regions. While others, such as, the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), specifically worked in the realm of foreign policy. Only a small number of institutions, like Brookings, have had their own huge endowments and didn't rely heavily on official funding; by contrast, RAND, depends mostly on the funds from government and private clients; only a few such as the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) established by U.S. Congress in 1976²³, are entirely sponsored by government. In few cases, these institutions functioned as activist non-governmental organizations. The example of International Crisis Groups emerged in 1995, can be seen as such a type of organization. It has deployed a network of analysts in conflict regions worldwide; to act as a watchdog on grim political situations, and based on independent research gives recommendations to the international community to play their part for their peaceful resolution.

Typology of U.S. Think Tanks

“A think tank is an institute, organization, corporation, that conducts research and engages in advocacy in areas such as social policy, political strategy, science or technology, industrial or business policies, as well as military advice.”²⁴

These think tanks act as one of the important actors in especially in democratic system which believed in pluralistic, open and accountable process of decision-making.²⁵ Nonetheless, critics perceive them as producing a scholarship that serves the agenda of their sponsors.²⁶

Think tanks vary in size with staff ranging from few members to several hundred. Moreover, think tanks differ in terms of research area, output, political and ideological orientation, and institutional Independence.²⁷ (See also table 1.1 for illustration)

Table 1.1

	Academic Think Tanks	Contract Think Tanks	Advocacy Think Tanks
Funding	Diversified funding (Endowments, grants, organizations, private individuals etc.)	Primarily government contracts.	Constituents play large role.
Agenda Setting	Researchers play large role.	Government needs	Driven by ideology
Ideology	Attempt to be neutral source of ideas.	Attempt to be neutral source of ideas.	Liberal/Conservative

Academic Think Tanks

The academic think tanks generally engage academician who have an outstanding contribution in research and have publications in research journals. They don't need to teach instead their principal task is to work towards the promotion of a better understanding of significant socio-economic, as well as political issues that the societies are confronting with.²⁸ Academic think tanks are best known for its independent research based on meticulous standard. Generally these think tanks are sponsored by a variety of foundations and philanthropists. Usually they set their agendas internally where researchers have the lead role. Mostly their institutional makeup is in consonance with their stress on objective research. However, the rigour demanded in objective research at times

come odds in their efforts to impact policy.²⁹ Brookings Institution is a prime example of academic think tanks.

Contract Think Tanks

Contract think-tanks also appoint researchers with exceptional academic credentials. They accentuate on meticulous research to uphold the objectivity and trustworthiness of research.³⁰ However, they are mainly differentiated from the academic think tanks by their funding sources, principle client, agenda setting, and the outcome produced. They are mainly funded by government, and resultantly shaping their agenda.³¹ They usually produce comprehensive reports and present it to their funding sources avoiding its circulation to the public in the form of articles and books; however, these are often made publicly available online on their official websites.³² Since the agenda of these contract-based policy research organizations are generally set by policy makers who are usually their chief donors as well, hence they produce research that is policy relevant. This seems to be advantage, however it can create problems at times when the donors try to shape the outcomes and stop a research study that is conflicting with their own position. In such a case, the very objectivity & the outcomes of the research are hailed into question.³³ RAND & Urban Institute are the classic example of contact-based think-tanks.

Advocacy Think Tanks

The main focus of advocacy think tanks research is to provide with information on current issues that the policymakers need to know.³⁴ Unlike the academic or contract-based, advocacy think tanks attempt to disseminate their research to specific audiences instead of maintaining a more of an objective approach.³⁵ Their emphasis is on producing

research that is short term and could be distributed swiftly to policymakers as well as to the media. They mostly produce policy briefs that are short notes designed to influence the on-going policy discussion instead of looking into future scenarios that need long-term research. McGann and Weaver described advocacy think tanks in the following terms:

“Advocacy think tanks, while maintaining formal independence, are linked to particular ideological groupings or interests. They tend to view their role in the policy making process as winning the war of ideas rather than as a disinterested search for the best policies, and they are more often than not staffed by nonacademics who are less interested in basic research.”³⁶

Where such features of advocacy think tanks certainly provide them with the advantages to be more focused on promoting their own ideology, however, their research are often perceived as not being balanced & objective in its substance as compared to research produced the academic and contract-based think tanks.³⁷ In spite of that advocacy think tanks have a huge impact on the policy process and can be observed by the impact factor of their work over the last twenty years or so.³⁸ However, when it comes the influence and impact of advocacy think tanks the line between think tank and that of a lobbying organization become blurred. (See table 1.2 for illustration of the classification of think tanks)

Table 2.1

BEHIND THE SCENE:**THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF THINK TANKS IN U.S. POLICY-MAKING**

Mahmood Ahmad

	Funding	Agenda Setting	Ideological	Research
Academic Think Tanks	Diversified funding (endowments, grants, organizations, private individuals etc.)	Researchers play large role	Attempt to be neutral source of ideas.	Driven by Ideas; Long Term; Future Oriented; Purpose to supply social science expertise to policymakers.
Contract Think Tanks	Primarily government contracts	Government needs	Attempt to be neutral source of ideas.	Driven by Government Contractor Needs, Long Term, Future Oriented; Purpose to supply social science expertise to policymakers
Advocacy Think Tanks	Constituents play large role.	Driven by ideology	Liberal or conservative	Driven by Ideology; Short term focus; Purpose to supply social science expertise to policymakers; Ideologically driven research; Findings distributed for Constituents.
Party Think Tanks	Constituents play large role.	Driven by party needs	Democrat or Republican	Driven by party allegiance; Issue focus; Not concerned with supplying social science expertise to policymakers; Main purpose is to prove that what they believe is right; Often times staffed by former government officials and interest groups.

Strategies of U.S. Think Tanks

Think tanks are known for developing and promoting ideas, they allocate their considerable capital for marketing their research. However, think tanks calculate their accomplishment not by revenue generated (because they are registered as independent non-profit organizations) but by their influential status in shaping public opinion and policy making. And due to this character of think tanks they have become to more or less resemble lobbying, pressure and interest groups that compete for political

power and stature. In spite of some evident disparities between think tanks and other interest groups, the clear demarcation between the two often becomes very difficult.

The question of how Think Tanks function? In general, think tanks were formed well before the appearance of the Internet and for years they had followed the "one roof" model. The basic idea was initially aimed at bring scholars of diverse group together in one place, as to interact closely. One of the reasons for this initiative was of course the communication as the costs of communication from one place to other were very high, comparatively to current age. Generally, think tanks adopt variety of strategies to disseminate their research to policy-makers and the public.

There are five major benefits that Think tanks propose today. The greatest impact of a think tank is to generate new ideas that would change the mindset of U.S. decision-maker's perception of global politics and how he responds to it. Innovative insights can change the outset of national interests, offer blueprints for action, influence priorities ranking, muster political alliances, and transform the outlook of enduring institutions. However, to capture the attention of active policy-makers that are already occupied with information is not an easy task. For this purpose think tanks use various channels and marketing strategies that include, holding conferences and seminars for discussing wide range of issues; allowing their scholars for lectures at educational institutions, etc.; giving testimonies to legislative bodies; and disseminating their research through their websites and also other print and electronic media. Scholars of think tanks offer cogent assessments about the significant global challenges. US presidential campaigns are the most ideal occasion to influence the foreign policy agenda:

“It is during these times that presidential candidates solicit the advice of a vast number of intellectuals in order to establish policy positions on a host of domestic and foreign policy issues. Presidential candidates exchange ideas with policy experts and test them out on the campaign trail. It's like a national test-marketing strategy.”³⁹

In quite few circumstances, scholars of working at these think tanks are hired by the government or accept cabinet position and become engaged more openly in foreign policy-making process. Conversely, number of the policy-makers get positions in these think tanks and provide advice to the government. They give invitations to officials from the State Department, the National Security Council, the Department of Defense, the CIA, and other intelligence agencies for participation in their seminars and workshops; and also provide policy briefs and other related research to them related to exiting foreign policy.⁴⁰

More recently, scholars and journalists came to believe that think tanks are specifically an American phenomenon whereas those that are situated in or around capital area have the significant influence on decision-making as compared to those located in other parts of the country. However, these assumptions can be contested on the ground that, while the United States is no doubt is host to some of the leading think tanks worldwide, yet significant numbers of similar institutions now exist in most of the developed and developing countries including Canada, most of the European countries, Africa, and Australia and throughout Asia. They are sponsored by corporations and philanthropic foundations. Think tanks have now become a global phenomenon like other international organizations such as the World Bank and political parties.

The most prominent feature of U.S. think tanks, in particular, is the capability to influence directly or indirectly the policy-makers and also to capture their attention to willingly seek their advice. Due to this unique

feature of American think tanks scholars believe that they have “the greatest impact on shaping public policy”.⁴¹ To measure or assess the influence of think tanks and how they achieve policy influence, one has to recognize the different strategies that think tanks adopt to influence various stages of the policy-making process.

It is beyond any doubt that number of think tanks in the United States and elsewhere has increased and the tendency to influence the decision making process is on the rise. However, to measure the extent of their influence one must also look closely as how think tanks have shaped particular foreign policy debates in the past and to what extent their advices have been accommodated. This is the only way through which we can make well informed observations about their influence on the policy making process.

Although the role of think tanks and their contributions to American domestic and foreign policies have been acknowledged but the questions regarding the extent and in what specific ways still needs more robust research. Answers to these and other related questions will provide further insight of the role and value of these organizations in foreign policy-making process of United States.

Conclusion

The growth of think tanks over the last three decades has been explosive especially in the United States. These organizations have not only increased in number, but also the role and value of their contribution has expanded considerably not only in the United States but worldwide. However, think tanks outside United States tend to a more limited scope and verity. They are still far behind in terms of autonomy than their American counterparts. However, regardless of their outlook, and origin they are becoming an integral part of the policy process not only in the

United States but in many other countries around the world. The challenge for most of the countries today is to exploit the vast reservoir of knowledge that exists in these think tanks. The historical and political traditions of every region are significantly different and have its own specific set of policy needs and problems, however, some useful lessons can be learned from American experience.

Despite the fact that the some critics has questioned the practicability of replicating the U.S. think tanks' model to other part of the of the world, still the many of these independent think tanks cab be seen around the globe where they are helping their governments to think and plan with a vision. This proliferation of US style think tanks to other part of the world demonstrates that while the transferability of U.S. style of think tanks can be contested but the desire to replicate these institutions by other countries and their need for independent analyses remains unchallenged.

It may be emphasized that our thinking precedes action. Hence the emergence of think-tanks, & that too at such a large scale, should come as no surprise. What is needed, however, is that our thinking shouldn't be subservient to power politics. It shouldn't be slave to our racist/nationalistic sentiments & moorings. Instead we should try to transcend such divisive elements & be able to focus on the greater good of the humanity at large. Fact of the matter is that so long as these Think-Tanks are wedded to narrow outlook, they cannot promote international peace, harmony, & justice. We would expect that leading thinks-tanks around the world would pause for a moment & reassess their goals & objectives & re-examines their moral rectitude, besides their political preferences & national goals.

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