

16 Scientific policy advice and foreign policymaking – Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), the German Institute for International and Security Affairs

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SWP is an independent scientific institute that conducts policy-oriented research on the basis of which it then advises the German Parliament (the Bundestag) and the federal government on foreign and security policy issues. The analyses and publications produced by SWP researchers and their participation in national and international debates on key issues help to shape positions in their respective domains. SWP's primary goals are to translate scientific knowledge to the needs of policymakers and to undertake original scientific research. The latter is often more *applied* than *basic*, even though contributions to the body of theory in international relations have been, and will be made. In order to be successful, the institute has to fulfil a double function; to respond to the needs and interests of policymakers and to stay involved in the global high-level discourse on international relations with other academics, think tankers and practitioners.

SWP is different in several ways from other federally financed scientific agencies in Germany, especially those that work for or mainly with one particular ministry¹ and which have an official advisory or even operative function regulated by law.² Different from many other policy fields, advice in the foreign policy realm is not so much sought for the formulation of legal texts or the evaluation of procedures and proposals, as rather for background information and interpretation, for strategy discussions and for exchanges with foreign actors, often in second-track formats. Other than in the United States, where foreign policy think tanks have a much longer tradition, there is a much stricter distinction in Germany between the *world* of politics and that of scientific policy advice: while

¹ One example would be the German Development Institute, Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE), which has a special relationship with the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development.

² One example here is the Robert Koch Institute (RKI) that works as a federal health authority under the auspices of the Federal Ministry of Health.

think tanks in Washington often appear like administrations-in-waiting, and scholars from think tanks tend to move into government positions when a new administration takes over,³ such career crossovers are rather unusual in Germany. The rule is still that scientific policy advisers work with any government, and that civil servants and diplomats stay on, or only change position within the administration, after a change of government.

SWP is not exclusively working for or being consulted by one particular ministry. It regards parliament with both opposition and government parliamentary groups as well as the federal government as its prime partners. Openness to both government and opposition is of particular importance to preserve the independence of an organisation that draws 90 per cent of its funding from the federal budget.⁴

In fact, SWP defines its independence in three dimensions: First, it is politically independent, or non-partisan. All parliamentary groups are represented on the SWP Board (Stiftungsrat); and members of all parties in the Bundestag are invited to seek the advice of the institute and are supplied with SWP products. Second, SWP designs its own research agenda, it is not commissioned with specific studies and does not do *research on demand* (Auftragsforschung). The institute is always prepared though to respond to requests for briefings, brainstorming for policymakers and officials in its fields of expertise, and occasionally bids for public tenders by government ministries or other official agencies that want to fund particular studies. Third, and this should go without saying for an institution that holds academic standards high, SWP is independent with regard to the results of its research: It happens that studies in their results and recommendations are not to the liking of a particular government ministry, or stand in contrast to the position of the government. Government officials and politicians have accepted that independence makes part of the quality of SWP's expertise, that a politicisation of research and policy advice may seem useful for a policymaker in the short run, but undermines the quality and legitimacy of scientific or science-based research in the long run. The German Council of Science and Humanities (Wissenschaftsrat) has also underlined that the 'autonomy' of SWP has helped the institute to develop 'a convincing scientific profile as basis for good policy counselling' (Wissenschaftsrat 2006: 47). Corporations have sometimes more difficulties to understand

³ It is noteworthy, to give but one example, that twenty-eight scholars from the Brookings Institution entered the Obama Administration in the first nine months of its existence, quite a number of them as ambassadors (including the UN and the NATO ambassador) or assistant secretaries.

⁴ The budget line for SWP is part of the budget of the Chancellor's office.

and accept that SWP, in contrast to consultancies, does not do *research on demand*. The private sector is used to buying outside knowledge and expertise according to their concrete needs, and does not, in Germany, have much of a tradition of funding independent political thinking. This may explain, to some degree, why the 'independence' of think tanks is being defined somewhat differently in Germany and in the United States: US think tanks often consider themselves as independent because they do not depend on government funding. In Germany, public funding of an institution is rather seen as an element of independence, provided direct political interference is excluded by institutional means. There are exceptions on both sides: The US Institute of Peace, for example, in some respects a good US comparison to SWP, is funded by Congress.

Function and form

Quality (for SWP as for other science-based advisory institutions) has to be defined in terms of both epistemic and political robustness, i.e. with respect to academic standards as well as to the needs of the institute's main clients and partners.⁵ Quality criteria are therefore not necessarily identical to those of universities or purely academic institutions but fulfil the same purpose – namely to set standards in order to guarantee academic quality and originality. Let us here leave aside that some criteria that are increasingly being used for academic rankings in universities, such as the amount of external funds gathered, the number of Ph.D. dissertations awarded, or the number of articles published in refereed journals, have themselves come under more critical scrutiny recently.

The main difference between the output of a university and that of a think tank may be the consumer – and the relevance-orientation of the latter: the entire SWP *product*, consisting of books and papers, conferences and workshops, briefings and background discussions, need to be policy-relevant. It should help policymakers to improve their knowledge on international affairs and to take decisions. But what are the functions a foreign policy think tank needs to fulfil to be seen as relevant and thus be accepted as a partner by policymakers and government officials? These are, of course, determined by or within a particular context, and might differ from country to country, but, from a German perspective, one can identify essentially five functions (see, in more detail, Perthes 2007).

⁵ See the introductory chapter by Justus Lentsch and Peter Weingart.

First, interpretation and clarification: this is a demand particularly of parliamentarians who do not always feel well-informed by the administration. The expertise of SWP researchers is based on their own empirical analysis of a particular foreign and security issue or a region. Therein, the institute's capacity differs from journalistic know-how in that it is not event-oriented or an ad-hoc analysis but derives from in-depth theory-led research over a long period of time. Ideally, researchers also follow a multi-disciplinary approach: the complexity of many issues in the field of international relations calls for a different perspective which exceeds set categories of international law and history, culture and religion.

Second, strategic advice, or the development of practical ideas for a long-term perspective that goes beyond day-to-day politics: this is what government ministers and officials are primarily interested in. The comparative advantage of a scientific institution – as opposed to a consultancy firm – is ideally the solid theoretical and empirical base of such advice. Some ideas might be discharged as unrealistic and vanish from the political agenda for the time being – only to come back a few months or even years later. At the same time, scientific policy advisers may need to educate policymakers about the limits of scientific knowledge. Scientific advice is necessarily often based on hypotheses, and our knowledge about the concurrence of different trends and actors' behaviour is often unsecured. Good scientific policy advice will not hide this, but rather raise the awareness for uncertainties and unexpected events as one of the realities which not only foreign and security policymakers have to cope with.

Third, testing of ideas: it is important to recognise that officials and politicians often have substantial knowledge and do develop their own ideas and strategies. Researchers should see themselves as *sparring partners* of decision-makers who can discuss and intellectually test such ideas before they have to stand the practical test of national and international realities.

Fourth, an early-warning function to identify possible mistakes and unwanted developments: consequently, an institution that provides scientific policy advice must be able to develop its own methodological set of instruments, such as scenario techniques. At best, political advice or interactive policy workshops based on such forms of research can help to prevent things from going wrong in a particular policy field; or at least help policymakers be better prepared for unwelcome contingencies.

Fifth, a think tank should be and provide a location for the open and rational exchange of ideas: it should be a place where confidentiality is guaranteed and where the barrier between parties and agencies, and ideally, also between different countries and nationalities does not matter for reflections about what is necessary, useful and doable.

The market of policy advice

Even though SWP is funded by the German government, and is one of the largest and most established players on the scene, it is aware of its changing environment. In Germany and elsewhere, new actors – such as privately funded foundations and new small think tanks – are forging their way onto what has become a market for policy advice. The number of think tanks and policy institutes has increased over the last decade, including some smaller national and some much better funded international outfits that have become active in Berlin. Most of these are *non-partisan*, but still have clear political agendas. With other resources, and usually much higher interest in media coverage, these institutions are competing for the same clientele and they are sometimes both partners and competitors to a think tank like SWP, not so much for funds, but certainly for the time and attention of decision-makers.

As SWP does not organise any public events with media coverage, it sees its own comparative advantage on this market in the quality and reliability of its product. SWP papers need to fulfil the functions outlined above, as they have to be accepted both in the academic community and in the political class. They need to be scientifically viable, reliable and readable too – a fact often ignored in university publications. Researchers at SWP need to know that they have customers with little time, and that they have to provide them with relevant, sound and reliable information, and must not bore them.

SWP has been evaluated by the German Council of Science and Humanities (Wissenschaftsrat 2006: 47) and has also commissioned evaluations of its work by independent consultants at irregular intervals. As the SWP product is rather specific, the institute tries to secure quality mainly through in-house procedures and designs. To start with, SWP commits its scholars and researchers to a *Code for Keeping Good Scientific Practice*⁶ which demands, among other things, such general scientific principles as working *lege artis*, to document all results of one's research and keep primary data, to be critical with one's own results, not to ignore unwished research results (unerwünschte Ergebnisse). It also rules that 'originality and quality' have priority over quantity as criteria for performance evaluation and promotions.

⁶ Grundsätze zur Sicherung guter wissenschaftlicher Praxis und über den Umgang mit Vorwürfen wissenschaftlichen Fehlverhaltens, Anlage zur Allgemeinen Verfahrensordnung, 9 September 2003.

Organisational measures to secure originality and quality

To guarantee the quality of research, studies and other scholarly products to be published under the SWP logo undergo a multi-level in-house discussion and peer review process: while a short paper or comment will often be triggered by events, more deep-going studies and research papers should fit into a bi-annual research framework (*Orientierungsrahmen*) which in itself is the product of an analytical discussion involving all research divisions.⁷ After getting the initial go-ahead by the head of the respective research division and the Director and his deputies (*Institutsleitung*), a researcher or group of researchers working on a new project would generally present the research design, including the guiding theoretical assumptions and methodology, basic theses, work plan, and a statement on the relevance of the project to the *Forscherforum*, a bi-weekly meeting with up to sixty of SWP's academic staff, for a collegial discussion which can lead to major revisions of the original design. Researchers are further encouraged to present their work to their research division while progressing on it. Once a paper is finalised, it is critically reviewed by a peer, a researcher from another of SWP's eight research divisions. The reviewer comments on the scientific validity and political relevance, the soundness of the argument, structure of the text, and factual points, probably gives some advice on how to improve the manuscript, and finally makes a recommendation to the Director about whether or not the text should be published. The author(s) may comment on the review, or rework their manuscript; following that, the head of the research division also looks at the manuscript, adds his or her own comment and recommendation, and hands it on to the Director. The Director or one of his deputies then also reviews the text, accepts or rejects it in principle, usually writing a comment of up to several pages, often asking for some or more work on the text and to view the manuscript another time before allowing it to be copy edited and published. For short, topical papers (published as *SWP-Aktuell*, or *SWP Comments*), there is a somewhat shortened procedure. For research papers (*Studien*), however, this review and reworking process is diligently applied, and it can be time consuming. There is obviously a trade-off here between speed and quality: some papers could be on the market earlier, if quality standards were less rigorously applied. The decision for a somewhat lengthy process, which authors occasionally find invasive and cumbersome, has been made with an eye on one of the main criteria

⁷ The *Orientierungsrahmen* is available to the public through the SWP homepage, at www.swp-berlin.org/common/get_document.php?asset_id=5584.

for the acceptance of SWP products among policymakers, namely their reliability. SWP can simply not afford to ruin its reputation as a non-partisan, reliable source of high-quality policy-oriented analysis. Here, one sloppy paper can do more damage than the failure not to publish a timely paper on a particular subject that policymakers want to discuss at a given moment. SWP researchers, at any rate, should be able to give verbal advice when policymakers become interested in a specific issue.

External evaluation

As indicated above, SWP and its work were externally evaluated by the German Council of Science and Humanities (Wissenschaftsrat) in 2005 as part of the Council's overall evaluation of governmental research agencies.⁸ SWP has occasionally commissioned consultants to evaluate particular parts of its activity (such as the library and information services), and conducted surveys asking particular SWP focus groups to give feedback on the quality of publications or events. With particular regard to the scholarly value or epistemic robustness of its work, SWP also relies on its Research Advisory Board (Forschungsbeirat), a group of twelve university professors which, as is the case in other institutions, take upon themselves to give their good advice particularly on overall research planning. Meeting twice a year, the Advisory Board takes a close look at one or two research divisions or programmes at each meeting.

Given the policy- and relevance-oriented task of SWP, some of the quantifiable standards which science organisations or universities tend to use in performance evaluations of their staff have been seen as being difficult to apply to SWP's research work. While, to give just one example, SWP scholars quite often publish in refereed journals, the idea that *refereed* automatically means high quality is not shared by the directors and the Supervisory Board – not only because the growing number of *refereed* journals seems to indicate that a real inflationary development is at work here: a numerical increase that at the same time denotes a decrease in value. Rather than relying on the number of articles published in *refereed* journals of divergent quality, SWP has developed its own list of *relevant* journals – periodicals that are of particular value for discussion in the so-called strategic community or for international debates in particular policy fields.⁹

⁸ On the German Council of Science and Humanities, see chapter by Andreas Strucke in this book (Chapter 9).

⁹ It may be more difficult, for example, to publish a piece in *Survival* (London) which is non-refereed but is managed by a quite selective editorial committee, than in a number of journals that may be refereed but may also be read by a very limited community.

Quality is eventually, without any formal procedures or clear criteria being available here, something which policymakers and government officials as the main clients of SWP, the media, or the general public judge upon. As a rule, SWP research papers are published and posted on the SWP homepage, sometimes being critically discussed in the media or in internet forums. SWP tries to hold account about how often its experts and expertise are quoted, researchers are invited to speak to parliamentary groups or committees, invited to briefings or conferences; it also holds account of the numbers of parliamentarians or officials that join workshops and other meetings at SWP. A researcher, who is invited once, and only once, to address the working group of a parliamentary group, may need to improve his or her performance. For the political robustness of the institute's work, the time and attention that policymakers devote to SWP and its scholars is not a bad measure. Think tanks like SWP should self-critically watch developments in that respect, lest budget cuts at some point provide a much harsher statement on the relevance that policymakers attribute to their advice.

Independence and closeness

Scientific policy advice always faces a special dilemma. On the one hand, to be accepted as a constructive partner to policymakers, there needs to be trust and confidence. This requires a certain closeness to the people in charge. Only by being in touch with decision-makers in the administration and in parliament can an effective transfer of information be guaranteed. On the other hand, there is a need to keep a certain professional distance to remain independent. Only then does scientific policy advice maintain the liberty to confront decision-makers with ideas and recommendations that might seem new and unorthodox to them. Such a minimal distance is also useful on epistemological grounds: too much closeness always carries the risk of group think. Once policymakers and scientific policy advisers laud one another as 'great minds that think alike' there could be a real problem. There is always a risk of conformity, where advisers simply follow the policymakers' lead and only serve to legitimise policies in an intelligent way. Even this kind of policy advice fulfils a certain task, but it does not attain an early-warning function or that of a critical sparring partner.

Finally, scientific policy advice should and must not for its own benefit and importance make things more dramatic than they are.¹⁰ Confronted

¹⁰ The dilemma for individual researchers is that alarmism helps to increase media appearances while circumspection may look boring to media producers. See Schneekener 2006.

with the large number of international challenges – ranging from terrorism to climate change, energy issues and failing states to poverty, the return of geopolitical competition and the integration of emerging powers into the system of global governance – the need for sound, independent scientific policy advice and well-trained and qualified experts in this field will increase in any case.

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