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Foreign Policy Think Tanks in Times of Crisis

How Do They See Themselves and Their Relevance? Contributions to the Debate since 2017

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The cracks in the international order that politics and scientific policy advice have been confronted with for several years have widened further as a result of the corona pandemic and its consequences. The outcome of the 2016 Brexit referendum and US President Donald Trump's erratic administration between 2017 and 2021 have already called into question long-held foreign policy assumptions concerning ever-advancing globalisation and rule-based multilateralism. Unsettled by these developments, which go hand in hand with growing populism and the spread of "fake truths", foreign policy think tanks have begun to discuss what effects these will have on scientific policy advice. Relevant contributions to the debate in recent years are presented below, revolving around key questions such as these: Given the increasingly polarised political environment, what are the challenges scientific policy advice is now facing and how should think tanks position themselves vis-à-vis the public and politics? And how can they maintain their independence and scientific integrity in these uncertain times?

As early as 2016, British politician Michael Gove provocatively proclaimed during the Brexit campaign that, "People in this country have had enough of experts". A selection of headlines in the international press also illustrates the direction the debate about science, expertise and think tanks has taken in recent years: "Die irritierten Experten" [The irritated experts] (Süddeutsche Zeitung, 2017); "Are think tanks doomed?" (Politico, 2017); "Can think tanks survive a post-fact world?" (The Economist, 2019) — and referring to the COVID-19 pandemic, "There's no such thing as just 'following the science' — coronavirus advice is political" (The Guardian, 2020).

Think tanks, which offer independent and scientific expertise in the field of foreign policy, advise governments and parliaments or political decision-makers by means of relevant, multidisciplinary, application-oriented and fact-based analyses, whether in publications, briefings or other formats. The work of such think tanks should support politicians gain a better understanding of international relations and make informed decisions on foreign and security policy issues (for further

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definitions see *Lars Brozus* and *Hanns Maull* 2017, in recommended reading). On both sides of the Atlantic, foreign policy think tanks have come to play a greater role in public debates for a number of reasons. The main drivers of this development are growing political polarisation in Western democracies, the emergence of conspiracy theories and "post-factual" truths in political discourse, and growing scepticism among some parts of the population about elites, in general. As a result, the relationship between politicians and political advisors is also changing and is increasingly characterised by mistrust. Other factors include a growing number of non-scientific actors in an increasingly competitive "knowledge market" and, since 2020, the corona pandemic which has been a shock for politics and societies worldwide. Established foreign policy institutes have also been affected by these developments, among them think tanks with an Anglo-Saxon background that were instrumental in providing scientific policy advice on international relations after the First World War, such as Chatham House in the United Kingdom and the Council on Foreign Relations in the United States. Within the field of foreign policy think tanks, there has been a series of discussions over the past few years which, given the multitude of uncertainties in international politics, centred on their own relevance and role, and their own future.

In the following, relevant contributions from European and Anglo-Saxon foreign policy think tanks are discussed, each of which depicts a particular angle on the debate. The selection includes speeches at conferences (available as audio or text files), publications in scientific journals and opinion pieces, e.g. in blog format, beginning in 2017, i.e. after the Brexit referendum and the inauguration of US President Trump. The contributions differ in format and length, but overall they reflect the multifaceted discussion at and among foreign policy think tanks.

Current Challenges for the Work of Think Tanks

At the beginning of 2021, the Transparency Register of the European Parliament and the European Commission listed 583 entities that categorised themselves as "Think tanks and research institutions" (as of 10 March 2021). The knowledge market, which offers political advice to governments and parliaments, is not only shaped by think tanks but also by many non-scientific actors, such as banks and consultants.

In 2019, *Thomas Gomart* noted a fundamental change to this "marketplace of ideas" in a special publication marking the 40th anniversary of the French Institute of International Relations (Ifri). He sees the driving force behind changes in the work of think tanks coming less from technological innovations, such as big data, and more from the relationship between think tanks and their main contact groups — politics, business, media and academia. According to Gomart, citing Daniel Drezner and Tom Nichols, two American professors in the field of international relations, this can be explained by three trends in the Western world: the loss of public confidence in authorities and expertise, a polarisation of the political landscape and the staggering rise in economic and social inequalities. The result is that think tanks compete with other "opinion leaders" in the same market, such as political movements, consultants and the media. According to Gomart, this environment is characterised by a relativism that only allows the "truth" to be considered a social construct, which promotes the spread of conspiracy theories and the manipulation of information ("fake news"). The marketplace of ideas is further polarised by economic factors, since financial resources are distributed unevenly, which tends to favour the more established think tanks with greater international impact. Another factor contributing to the polarisation of this marketplace is the fact that authoritarian regimes specifically set up and promote their own think tanks, while their counterparts in democracies all too

often receive less financial support from "their" governments. In this context, Gomart also sees the rise of China as a major challenge for foreign policy think tanks. Beijing has invested enormous sums in creating such institutes in recent years and has also recruited foreign experts for this purpose. The intention is for these institutions to be able to compete on the international stage and particularly with US think tanks. However, the demands of internationalisation are countered by the growing efforts of the Chinese leadership to further strengthen its own ideological control in the face of "dangerous" Western ideas.

In an article in International Affairs from 2018, *Robin Niblett*, the Director of Chatham House, named three key challenges that think tanks face today. Firstly, new communications technology has changed the way politics is made and legitimised. In a world with an abundance of news and opinions, analyses from think tanks seemingly receive less attention if they do not focus on current developments. The strength of a think tank to process larger contexts through extensive research is no longer sufficiently relevant for their target group. Secondly, think tanks face a public environment that is characterised by growing distrust of a globalisation that the think tanks themselves have rarely been critical of in recent decades. Niblett sees the Brexit referendum and Trump's election victory in 2016 as symptoms of scepticism about so-called elites who had been advocates of such globalisation. These events occurred contrary to established "internationalist" expert opinions. In the US and UK, there was a surge in political opinion that challenged the decades-old consensus of the basic features of the Western liberal, rule-based world order — that is, the previous working basis of Western foreign policy think tanks. According to Niblett, think tanks now find themselves much more confronted by the social effects of globalised politics in their own countries that are connected to questions of social participation, cultural identity and the actual material benefits of globalisation. Thirdly, Niblett points out the reputational risks to think tanks that stem from their particular funding models and that they apply to both publicly and privately funded institutes. Rather, think tanks run the risk of being less critical and innovative if their donors represent institutions (and thus their values) that advocate the status quo of international relations. In addition, think tanks might be perceived as being compromised in the light of increasing investments by foreign governments, private companies and foundations in foreign policy institutes — especially those based in Washington, Brussels and London — in order to strengthen their own "soft power".

At a panel discussion in 2019 on the 100th anniversary of the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), its President *Richard N. Haass* spoke about the challenges facing think tanks in the field of international relations, given how their roles are now changing. It is difficult for think tanks nowadays to continue to be heard by the foreign policy elite and at the same time to expand their public outreach in the context of an observable "popularisation" of debates and foreign policymaking. The problem with many think tanks is that they limit their own research work and the recruitment of new staff in view of prevailing basic assumptions about the international order. Before certain recommendations could be drafted and represented externally, think tankers would have to question those first-order issues in the field of foreign policy — for example that NATO or free trade "are all good things" — and constantly explain them in order to gain greater acceptance from their target group. According to Haass, researchers at think tanks are all too often intellectually committed. They have had to tow a certain line in order to be able to publish, which has further politicised the debate on international relations. This has meant that think tanks are less able to hold their own in an unregulated competition of opinions, as is largely the case on the internet.

In 2017, *Rosa Balfour*, a Senior Transatlantic Fellow at the German Marshall Fund of

the US, also dealt with the reputational risks think tanks are exposed to as a result of their funding models. As she explains in a Strategic Update for the IDEAS think tank of the London School of Economics (LSE), the field of foreign policy is no longer the "elite's business" operating independently of domestic policy considerations. The clearest example can be seen in migration-related issues. Given the current prevalence of fake news and populism, the question of where individual think tanks get their funding has become more politically charged. Funding channels that are perceived to be opaque can quickly cast doubt on the integrity of a think tank. Furthermore, Balfour also sees increased competition in the "market for ideas", where universities set up think tank units that are increasingly trying to attract the attention of political customers. It is, however, their non-scientific competitors who are benefitting most from this erosion of the legitimacy of the "establishment" in politics and science. This creates an environment in which arguments are deliberately used that do not necessarily have to be based on facts. Since, according to Balfour, think tanks do not have their own political-societal "constituency" that could provide them with a basic legitimacy, they run the risk of being defenceless against criticism from the populist side. They present think tanks as closed echo chambers that help ensure that politics remains a purely elite matter.

Forward Strategies for Think Tanks in Times of Crisis

In the debate about the challenges think tanks must now face, it is also important to consider the longer-term future of the industry. Above all, this includes suggestions as to how the tense relationship between them towards the public and politics can be improved, how think tanks should change internally and how they can maintain their (scientific) independence and integrity.

In an article for the journal Internationale Politik from 2017, *Sarah Brockmeier* (from the Berlin-based Global Public Policy Institute) and *Heiko Nitzschke* (in charge of research at the Policy Planning Staff of the Federal Foreign Office, with his private opinion) focus on improved communication and the external impact of political advice as possible solution strategies. Accordingly, contact with ordinary citizens can, in principle, help think tanks achieve their goals in a difficult political and social environment and experts should move away from the "echo chambers" that are perceived as closed shops. The paper argues that the general public, whose interest in foreign policy is increasing according to surveys, should be viewed more as a separate target group for think tank work. There could be added value for scientific policy advice if real conflicts of interests in foreign policy and normative dissent on international issues were debated in public discussions. In the end, the conclusions from these exchanges might be different from those in established foreign policy circles. In addition to using simpler and clearer language, the authors also suggest bringing foreign policy discussion formats out of the capitals and to experiment with new ways of disseminating their research products. Brockmeier and Nitzschke conclude that if the role of think tanks were no longer just that of "opinion makers", but also increasingly that of "facilitators" of necessary debates in society, they would have to scrutinise their own task profiles more closely which could ultimately lead to a higher level of acceptance of their work in the society.

Other contributions focus on the question of how think tanks can reposition themselves in terms of their staff policy, organisational structures and external communication. In 2018, at an event organised by the Brussels-based think tank Bruegel, *Shada Islam*, then Director for Europe and Geopolitics at Friends of Europe in Brussels, called for think tanks to convey their scientific expertise in a more comprehensible and persuasive way, in order to make themselves heard above the din of their competition. In particular, social media should not be left to those

who seek to influence the public and political sphere with untrue claims and illiberal narratives. Think tanks ought to seek out and employ more diverse staff in order to be more responsive to their environment.

In the LSE article mentioned above, Rosa Balfour also calls for more innovation and ethnic, gender and social diversity among think tankers and for better career opportunities for younger colleagues. At the same time, think tanks should innovate their research methodologies to find more collaborative and interdisciplinary approaches. They should also expand their target groups to better grasp socially relevant developments and include them in their own work.

Other authors focus their attentions on discussions between think tanks and policy-makers. In an article for the "Policy Perspectives" series from April 2020, Oliver Thränert, head of the think tank at the Center for Security Studies at ETH Zurich, writes that the corona crisis has highlighted the need for think tankers to improve their relationships with politicians. Although think tanks themselves are not democratically legitimised, democratically legitimised decision-making processes in politics require science-based, interdisciplinary advice. In order for think tanks to be able to meet this responsibility during the pandemic and beyond, a greater mix of government and think tank personnel is needed, as has traditionally been the case in the US ("revolving-door culture"), explains Thränert. Experts could thus gain more experience on both sides, and think tanks could in turn pass on their knowledge to the ministries in a more targeted manner. Thränert advocates making scientific policy advice more relevant in a number of ways: through more contact with political processes, more practice-oriented training for think tankers, policy-oriented advice formats and a strengthening of the interdisciplinarity between natural, social and political sciences. For example, the proportion of natural scientists providing policy advice is still too low. He suggests that, especially during the ongoing pandemic, think tanks gave the impression that they were only able to react to a limited extent and were therefore only of limited help to policy-makers.

In an opinion piece from September 2020, Lars Brozus, Senior Fellow at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP) in Berlin, warns of the possible drawbacks of a solution strategy that mainly relies on intensified exchanges between think tanks, society and the political sector. He believes that proposals such as those to strengthen contact with ordinary citizens or to establish a European "revolving-door culture" appear to be out of date, given the current polarisation. After all, the corona crisis did not increase acceptance of scientific policy advice either. Brozus refers to the situation in the US, where the independence of scientific expertise is called into questioned in political arguments and that scientific positions are deliberately hijacked in order to win the opinion battle ("weaponising science"). With this in mind, think tanks should make sure that they are clear about their own political role. On the one hand, they would have to guarantee transparency, also in terms of their own funding, to adhere to rigid standards of quality management and create multi-perspectivity in research questions. On the other hand, they should also be aware of their own shortcomings; these include "(apparent) failures" as well as "actual errors", which should be dealt with openly. The author concludes that by keeping an appropriate distance from politics and through self-enlightenment political hijacking could be prevented and their own independence, credibility and relevance could thus be maintained.

At the aforementioned CFR panel debate in 2019, Richard N. Haass also argued the case for think tanks to keep their distance from political processes. He said they should do more conceptual research and policy advice, and not just focus on the "day-to-day" affairs. According to Haass, government business is determined too much by current developments for analyses from think tanks to be adequately included in decision-making processes. Think tanks

should think long term in order to reach the next generation of political leaders. This way, they could have greater influence on the future of foreign policy debates.

In a discussion paper from September 2020, Fabian Zuleeg, Chief Executive at the European Policy Centre (EPC) in Brussels, calls for an ethical framework for think tanks. If think tanks want to continue to directly influence democratically legitimised decision-making processes, they would have to develop the claim to follow a clearly defined set of ethical principles. Zuleeg sees unethical think tanks that use their work manipulatively for political purposes as a threat to democratic processes in general. Since abusive or unethical behaviour by a competitor has so far been difficult to detect and cannot be punished, an ethical framework is needed which provides think tanks with guidelines they can adhere to. In contrast to traditional academic research, policy advice, through think tanks and non-academic research institutes, had no uniform definition and no standards for ethical rules that have an inherent normative force. According to the author, think tanks that act ethically must meet the principles of independence, of a multi-stakeholder approach, of transparency and good governance. According to Zuleeg, such a framework should be developed jointly and from the bottom up; it could be supported by financial incentives from a possible "European Alliance of Independent Think Tanks". Those guilty of unethical behaviour could be excluded from the alliance. The negative financial impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on think tanks could make such an alliance all the more urgent.

Outlook

All the contributions presented and discussed here — among them short speeches, opinions pieces or more comprehensive journal articles — address the polarisation and politicisation of the scientific-political discourse and the distrust that parts of society have for elites in science and politics. When it comes to the question of what think tanks can do to deal with this difficult overall situation, a number of very different approaches become visible. They range from recommendations to intensify discussions with social and political stakeholders to appeals for policy advice to rather keep its distance. However, what all these comments have in common is that they strive to find solutions that put the credibility and relevance of scientific policy advice by think tanks in times of polarisation on a more solid or broader footing. The main focus is on maintaining scientific independence and transparency, also with regard to their funding, and being open to diversity and innovative research.

However, it is also worth mentioning what the articles under discussion fail to mention. They all assume that foreign policy think tanks are, today, confronted by a difficult or deteriorating (foreign) political landscape. However, the contributions do not elaborate on the standards that can be applied to the state of international relations, how the degree of difficulty of the think tank's work can be determined on this basis, and where a more in-depth discussion of the current challenges could begin. One of the reasons for this might be, among other things, a feeling of discomfort for think tankers at having to disclose their own ideological principles and expectations (personal or institutional) and having them put up for discussion.

Nevertheless, foreign policy think tanks must assume that the framework conditions in international relations will continue to change. Exercises in "strategic foresight" (SWP Comment 51/2020) can help them and policy-makers be better prepared for "conceivable surprises". In principle, think tanks in the difficult field of foreign policy should not only keep one eye on *how* they should respond to the next crisis, but also on *what* scientific policy advice should and can actually achieve during such periods and beyond. Should it be aimed primarily at political decision-makers only? Should foreign policy continue to be an "elite's business"? Or, rather, should think tanks

make an effort to "popularise" foreign policy debates by expanding their target group? Are they still perceived as relevant actors in an already overcrowded knowledge market? It is not easy to give uniform answers to these questions due to the heterogeneity of the landscape of foreign policy think tanks and the multitude of different organisational and funding models. The debates within and between policy advising research institutes should, however, focus on questions of their own legitimacy and scientific integrity.

In-depth reviews and stocktaking of the think tank scene might help answer the above questions. This is the direction taken in a study by *Christoph Bertram*, former director of SWP, and *Christiane Hoffmann* from the magazine Der Spiegel, published in September 2020 on the German think tank landscape in foreign and security policy. Approaches to improve the work of scientific policy advice, for example with new theoretical models (e.g. in Science and Technology Studies, as *Felix Schenuit* outlined in an SWP working paper from 2017), can also usefully complement the debate in foreign policy think tanks.

Publications Discussed

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Recommended Reading

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