

# Think Tank Participation in Discerning Security Issues: The US Experience

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The field I have been asked to cover in this presentation is great and my chances of doing it justice small. I can claim at least to have looked from both sides at the issue: as a civil servant and as a worker in a self-styled “think and action tank”; as a security policy maker working with American friends in Europe, and as an analyst looking back on Europe from New York. However, I am beginning to suspect that the longer I spend in the United States the less confident I shall be about understanding that remarkable country. You are perhaps lucky to have caught me at the stage of ignorance when I am still willing to make some assertions, and at least there will be plenty of chance for the better qualified speakers in this session, and yourselves, to correct them.

Let me start with some issues of definition. When we think of public/private sector interaction in the security policy spheres, we can no longer afford to limit the issue to the role of the traditional think-tanks. The analytical institute, whether inside or outside a university, national or international, is only one of many types of NGO with a stake in this game. Also very important are the campaigning organizations - with wide mandates like Amnesty International or a focused one like the anti-land-mine groups - and the active charities and volunteer organizations who have come so much to the fore lately in crisis management and reconstruction. And if we must step back to take a broader view of the influences on public decision makers, we must recognize that the strongest players are not often NGOs in the narrower sense but

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parliaments and other representative or civic institutions; lobbyists from the corporate and social sector; or the controllers and users of written, spoken and electronic media.

I would argue, further, that the circumstances of the post-Cold War world have tended to improve the odds of all these other non-traditional players influencing policy outcomes, at the expense of the traditional think-tank. Parliaments –real Parliaments– are more numerous because of the spread of democracy, and their grip on defence budgets and security actions is tightening; whether because of a more critical examination of defence needs in the era of the “peace dividend”; or the crisis of popular confidence affecting many contemporary governments; or the increasingly *legislative* nature of the international agenda which goes with the spread of integrative and globalizing processes. The corporate sector is becoming not only cleverer at lobbying –and in the case of the shrinking defence sector perhaps more desperately motivated to do so– but also cleverer at *thinking*, due to its own increasing grasp of the need for forward planning and free-wheeling analysis in a fast-changing global environment. Single-issue lobby groups like those on landmines which ruthlessly focus their efforts and use hyper-modern advertising techniques have produced faster and cleaner impacts, at least in the West, than any traditional arms control analysis. Finally, we are all too familiar with the omniscience that is claimed and the total access demanded by today’s news media, although as I shall argue later the policy-shaping qualities of information proffered are not always in direct relation to its quality. We should certainly not overlook the novel opportunities both for channeling information and propagating policy messages that are offered (in the security policy field like any other) by the electronic World Wide Web.

During the Cold War, think-tanks and other independent analysts enjoyed many comparative advantages. They possessed scarce information and the leisure to process it, they spoke directly into the ear of governments who could translate thought directly into action, and their representatives traveled across borders where sometimes diplomats, let alone businessmen or tourists, could go. In today’s more complex policy game they have the same basic choices as anyone deprived of a monopoly –to become more *competitive*, and/or to learn to influence the *other players* in the market as well as their ultimate customers. How well are they in fact surviving in this market, in the special and especially important case of the United States?

In hopes of giving some spurious scientific quality to my answer I thought I would offer you this *simple model* (first slide) for estimating the policy *impact* of any actor trying to influence an outcome over which he/she it has no direct control. It defines impact as the product of three terms: the quality of the input offered; success in defining the right targets to aim it at, and in hitting them; and the receptiveness of the targets themselves. To explain a little further: I see quality of input as covering not just the truth, novelty or intelligence of the ideas offered but also their *user-friendliness* –which demands inter alia an understanding of the environment, the limits and the timetables

within which decision makers operate— and their *digestibility*, which in a situation of permanent information overload has something to do with the clarity and leverage of language used. A further issue is whether the provider chooses to offer ideas alone, or also makes recommendations on process itself. The choice of *targets* is now quite a complex one because it covers not just national governments but international entities, and also the immediate players—parliaments, the corporate sector, public opinion—whose knock-on effect on governments might be greater than anything the initial provider of ideas could achieve directly. Clearly, each of these targets will need to be addressed by a different set of means and with different styles of language. Finally, the best-targeted ideas will be for naught if they fall upon stony ground: and thus *receptiveness* of the decision-makers is probably the most important of all the factors here—with the major exception of situations where your policy recommendation is actually to overthrow the government. If there is to be any interplay at all between public and private, public officials must want (or at least recognize that they need) a second opinion; must show some discrimination in what outputs they accept; and must have leeway in their opening process to incorporate them. This last might not be possible for a number of reasons: limitations of time and resources, self-imposed legal constitutional restraints, or the fact that the real decision rests not with them but with some other country, multinational or supranational entity.

I will offer a few comments on each of these factors in the US context; and I trust that those who paid my ticket here will understand why I dwell more at certain times on problems than successes. The US is our leader not just in defence terms, but in the sense of experiencing certain features of political and economical evolution ahead of most of its Allies. If we are, in some respects, seeing our own future here it is important to seek an honest view of whether it works.

I will start from the back end of the model with the question of *security actions and actors*. Here is a map of the world (second slide), taken from Penguin Books' excellent new edition of the 'State of War and Peace Atlas'. It shows security crises and potential crises of the 1990's where independent mediations or dispute resolution has made a significant difference. Out of the 70 successes identified, no less than 26 are attributed to the United States. Yet when we look at these detail, it becomes clear that they are not NGO successes at all. The mediation was certainly independent in the sense that the US was a non-involved and generally unbiased party, but it was actually carried out by serving officials, former Presidents, Senators and Congressmen. On occasions when ex-officials or non-officials took a genuinely independent initiative to intervene overseas, they were not backed by the Administration and they did not succeed. The explicit or implicit application of US national leverage was clearly what did the trick and I see a distinct difference here, at least in degree, from the Cold War years when back-channel operators from the NGO field or from business played a so much

greater role. I will leave others to speculate on the reasons, but in passing it is interesting to note that there is a something of a shortage of independently active, global organizations centred on US soil –no ICRC, Amnesty or Médecins sans Frontières– nor does the US host any regular international think-fests. Today's US contribution is typified by Dayton, not Davos.

It would be wrong to conclude that US-based think-tanks and other NGOs have played no part in security process. Some, like my own institute, have a very interventionist attitude to process but carry out their activities largely in Eurasia. Others have discreetly hosted meetings and other contacts between warring groups and recent adversaries who may find it easier to talk to one another on US soil. But with all due respect (and self-respect) one cannot say that these NGOs are *central* to the US's external policy-making. And that is in striking contrast to developments on the US's domestic front, where volunteerism has become all the rage in tackling social issues seen for sixty years previously as among the highest preserves of the government. Last month's Philadelphia Summit on youth action, headed as it was by the former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Colin Powell, brought out this external/internal dichotomy rather neatly. Again I will leave it to better-trained analysts to consider whether this is the post-modern state emerging, or an advanced stage in the life-span of great powers as predicted earlier by Paul Kennedy.

If we take one step back to the formulation of policy rather than its enactment, the US security-policy establish looks - at least to this outsider - rather impermeable at many times and on many issues. US advances in freedom of information would seem to point the other way. But they are offset by the complexity and unpredictability of the inter-agency process, the large number of individuals involved and the obscurity of lines of authority, which combine to make it notoriously difficult even for embassies to get their message across unless they dive pretty far into the melee themselves. The Presidential executive has a relatively strong grip on the policy process, including the political appointment of individuals, down to what other countries would consider relatively humble levels in the bureaucracy. The bureaucrats themselves have to operate within bounds set by the powers of Senate and the House of Representatives, by the limits on popular tolerance of which I shall say more later, and also by resources. In the richest country in the world, appropriations for diplomacy (and to a lesser extent for defence policy making) have been cut very short for several years now and it can be genuinely difficult for officials to find either the money or time for meetings with governmental opposite members, let alone for unofficial conferences and NGOs. The general atmosphere of work pressure and information overload makes it an act of some self-sacrifice to seek second opinions at all, and those who do, are often tempted to revisit just a few sources whom they trust to make inputs in a supportive or at least user-friendly way. A busy official's decision on which incoming phone-call to accept is thus at risk of replacing the

free play of the intellectual market. I hasten to add that the second Clinton Administration has shown a growing awareness of these issues and that Secretary Albright has a strong record herself as a proponent of open diplomacy. For understandable reasons, however, it looks as if any new resources available will be directed first and foremost to the outward flow of foreign policy information to the American people.

Again, this does not exclude independent inputs altogether but it has tended to guide them into certain niches of time and space. NGOs of all kinds can make an impact in the early stages of discourse and definition on a new policy issue, especially if they catch the ear of new leaders coming into government. They can guide government quite directly if they work on direct mandate from it, with access to inside information, as RAND has done for instance on a number of enlargement-related studies. The very system of political appointment means that individuals with NGO background can move into and out of policy-making jobs quite freely by European standards, although there is bound to be an issue about how much of their independence remains once inside the machine. The scope for impact also varies from one policy domain to another; thus the “hard core” of security-policy issues are tougher for outsiders to penetrate –in part because they are conducted in a multi-national setting and at such a high tempo– than the design of policies for individual geographic areas. On the development of new US strategies towards (for example) Africa and China the terms of the debate among decision-makers and free analysts seem to be reasonably in synch. The obvious snag is that such differences in the *mode* of policy-making may aggravate risks of incoherence between the treatment of individuals regions and, in general, between the geographical and functional components of US diplomacy. Finally, NGOs can find a niche in partnership with government if they offer demonstrably useful services at the level of policy process and implementation –like the hosting of informal meetings and informal dialogues mentioned above or the provision of very specific and short-term advice. This is clearly easiest for bodies in or near Washington who can home in whenever the need arrives, and it works only when an NGO ready to come a long way out of the ivory tower finds officials in a good mood to meet it half-way.

Two brief examples may be taken as a test of this analysis. The idea of NATO enlargement first gathered steam in the US among non-governmental elites, and independent thinkers coined many of the catch-words still used today for justifying it. After the Clinton Administration and NATO as a whole became formally committed to this policy, there was a much-publicized backlash from US analysts fearing damage both to relationships with and within Russia, and to NATO itself. At that stage, although the Administration did adapt its policies to seal off some areas of special vulnerability, it handled the critics basically as part of the problem to be solved - listening rather to those (again, like RAND) who took the enlargement premise as given and offered remedies for its side-effects. The critics for their part have maintained purity and force

of argument at the cost of failing to notice a great part of what NATO is actually doing about enlargement and dodging the issue of what its abandonment would do for Euro-Atlantic relations at this stage. I may hazard an advance guess that is not they who will decide the outcome of ratification votes on the Hill. In my second example, the incoming Clinton Administration set itself apart from the Bush Administration by adopting the view of former Yugoslavia developed in think-tanks and in particular the moral supremacy of the moral cause. From 1994 onwards as intra-Alliance tensions proliferated and US diplomacy got more drawn in on the ground –perhaps especially after the Contact Group was formed– Washington’s policy became by degrees both more pragmatic and more inward-turning, culminating in the Dayton Agreement which has generally been viewed as a return to classic great power diplomacy, not least because nothing faintly resembling an NGO was present. (NGOs and multilateral organizations have of course been drawn into the Dayton implementation process, but relations between them and the main US players have not been conspicuously smooth).

A short word now about what I defined earlier as intermediate players - the House of Representatives and the Senate, media and public opinion. US think-tanks have not shifted strategy *en masse* to focus on influencing these influencers, and it is not difficult to imagine why. With each election Congress has fewer members with international experience (some 20% of them now carry passports) and the pressures upon them to represent local interests rather than policy opinion or even Party orthodoxy are growing all the time. Half at least of their week is spent in their home states and when they are in Washington it is the sectoral and social lobbies, not the think-tanks, who are battering down their doors. The best start strategy for merchants of ideas is generally agreed to be to aim at congressional staffers, but even they are hard to get at and especially for thinkers working outside Washington. In any case, as we saw with last month’s vote on the Chemical Weapons Convention, the bargaining which really shapes decisions on the Hill is done in terms ranging much wider than –and sometimes far away from– the policy merits of an individual issue.

US public opinion at large has been shown by opinion polls to have a low basic level of interest in foreign affairs and low threshold for information overload. It is sometimes also depicted as inherently or even hostile to the non-American world, and unwilling to make large or at least sustained efforts on outsiders’ behalf. This is way too simple because American public sympathy can demonstrably still be stirred by generous causes, especially if personalized in some way, and US soldiers did after all go out to Bosnia and stay there. Sustainability is more of a real issue and it must also be said that America as a nation seems better at giving than receiving, when it comes to ideas, influence or advice. This is perfectly natural for a super-power: as a character on “Star Trek” once said, “It’s hard to be a team player when you’re omnipotent”. For purposes of the present analysis it does, however, obviously limit absorptiveness to

independent ideas; and the one-way trade syndrome can be diagnosed even in some US academics who write about Euro-Atlantic institutions with references limited to US sources, the “Financial Times” and “The Economist”.

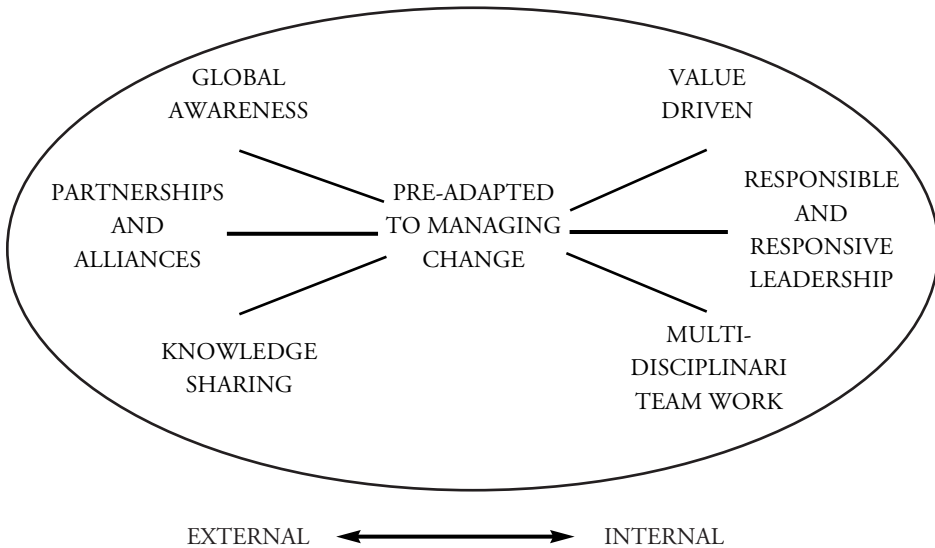
The case of the US corporate sector, at least in my limited experience, is interestingly different. They do by definition know about imports as well as exports and they have been highly exposed to—in many cases are leading—the famous processes of economic “globalization”. Information and ideas about the outside world are part of their currency and they are still ready to spend considerable resources on what might be called “cross-over” activities with the sphere of security analysis: either by commissioning and participating in forward-looking studies, or by making things happen in the actual security world. George Soros might be cited as representing the philanthropic end of this spectrum of involvement, and the research and political activities of the defence sales complex as a rather different dimension of it. Where traditional security think-tanks fit in is not yet so clear, because not many of them have consciously set out to meet the present-day needs of US industry and commerce. They must face real obstacles in the often ultra-rapid and personalized style of corporate decision-making as well as the self-confidence of private sector leaders who have hundreds of staff in foreign countries, can see foreign Presidents for their asking and are hard to persuade that they need a second expert opinion. There are solutions to this challenge but they will demand forms of partnership quite different from the traditional expert “consultancy” or the accustomed methods of academic interaction with government.

This brings us full circle to the first part of my equation: the usefulness and user-friendliness of what independent thinkers can offer. One clear truth is that if they wish to lead the thinking of governments, parliaments and CEOs, or even just tread helpfully at their sides, they cannot afford to fall behind them in terms of adaptation to the new world environment. Decision-makers live in an increasingly complex world of mixed national and international competence, confusion of the line between foreign and domestic affairs, new burden-sharing across traditional public/private boundaries, and new approaches to problem-solving cross functional divides. They exchange information in new fast ways and they have a whole new set of headaches about information management. Their element is change, and if NGOs do not themselves handle change well and help others to handle it, they risk being hit by globalization like the asteroid hit the dinosaurs—that is, not a quick death but lingering extinction in a cold and dark financial climate.

As to the solutions, let me take you through this diagram (third slide) adapted from the book ‘The Organization of the Future’ published by the Drucker Foundation last year. It is a prescription designed for modern organizations generally but it could fit a policy think-tank as well as any. Having *values* and an end in view is necessary for constancy in change, and for relevance in a time when information without pay-off has become a drug on the market. *Wide vision* is needed to match the global exposures

and interactions of real-world actors, and to see even further than they do to the neglected States and neglected issues of next year's headlines. Efficient acquisition and sharing of data, and target-sensitive packaging of information outputs, should go without saying. Just as important, and probably as difficult, is the breaking down of *functional divisions* within existing institutes and the creation of new *partnerships* between and beyond them to boost both their substantive reach and capacity for networking and influence. Each NGO must make its own call on whether to go one stage further and explore the niches open to those who will and can involve themselves *in process*: and it would probably not be healthy if every *thinking* institution were to decide the same way. However, it is suggestive that so many grants made nowadays by the major philanthropic foundations have been assigned to NGOs carrying out hands-on mediation and crisis prevention work. In sum, and in the competitive US environment above all, some kind of *strategy for change* must now be seen as the *sine qua non* for any independent think-tank's survival. After all, Mr. Chairman: how can a private institution claim to offer superior wisdom for the NATO debate if it has not itself embarked on the moral equivalent of Partnership for Peace, enlargement or opening towards Russia?

**SURVIVAL TRAITS  
FOR ORGANIZATIONS IN THE GLOBAL AGE**





# IMPACT ?

VALUE OF  
INPUT  
(INCLUDING  
USER-  
FRIENDLINESS,  
TIMELINESS)

**X**

TIFYING AND  
REACHING  
PROPER  
TARGETS

**X**

RECEPTIVENESS  
OF TARGETS