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G20 Foreign Policy Think Tank Summit: Summit Report


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From the international conference *Global Challenges, Increasing Responsibilities: G20 Foreign Policy Think Tank Summit*.

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G20 Foreign Policy Think Tank Summit: Summit Report

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From the international conference *Global Challenges, Increasing Responsibilities: G20 Foreign Policy Think Tank Summit*.

Global Challenges, Increasing Responsibilities
G20 Foreign Policy Think Tank Summit
An International Conference
3-5 June 2012

Summit Report

International Relations Program, University of Pennsylvania

Christopher Doherty, Jonathan Diamond, Jillian Rafferty, and Jay Friedel

G20 Think Tank Summit Examines the Role of the G20 & Policy Advice in an Emerging Multi-Polar World

Now is a time of uncertainty. Some crises hold the gaze of global media—Syrians face atrocities every day and Iranian nuclear ambitions remain unclear. Other crises fly at no less a rapid pace under the radar—War Lords in Chad, ongoing conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and enslaved Yemeni child soldiers; Mexican drug cartels continue to kill civilians at will; and the Horn of Africa remains a hotbed for chaos and terrorism.

Governments don't have all the answers. Indeed, it was governments who failed to anticipate the economic collapse of 2008, and it is governments who today have failed to solve the Eurozone crisis. Where, then, will we find the answers? Think tanks aspire to fill this resulting void. It was in this spirit and context that over forty think tank (TT) directors, presidents, and senior fellows convened for the inaugural [G20 Foreign Policy Think Tanks Summit](#) in Philadelphia on the campus of the University of Pennsylvania.¹ The conference was groundbreaking in its scope and depth—TTs from every G20 country were invited; many of these countries were represented by multiple organizations. Across six sessions, four roundtable discussions, and two days, participants aimed to better understand the changing role of think tanks in a group of states with growing relevance in international affairs. Participants parlayed a variety of special, substantive foreign policy challenges such as Responsibility to Protect (R2P) and humanitarian and security crises in Africa and the Middle East. The conference also dealt with organizational matters ranging from the institutional intricacies of TTs around the globe to the role of TTs in the G20 and beyond.



Moisés Naím, senior associate in the International Economics Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, delivers the keynote address

¹ For a full list of conference participants and institutions, click [here](#)



Paul Salem, director of the Carnegie Middle East Center, contributes to a roundtable discussion

In order to promote the freest of dialogues and to invite all involved to leave politics at the door, the conference was held under the Chatham House Rule. The purpose of this Summit Report is to adhere to that Rule while providing a synopsis of the ideas discussed and highlighting the recurrent themes of the conference. After a section discussing the foreign policy challenges faced by TTs, this report will go on to detail the role of TTs and the conference conversations surrounding their various operating challenges. Upon concluding, this report will also synthesize the conference into a series of recommendations as the TT community moves forward in these uncertain times.

Global Challenges, Increasing Responsibilities

Participants were eager to capitalize on the unique opportunity the conference presented to them and discuss key foreign policy challenges facing their nations. Topics of discussion ranged from issues specific to the G20 to broader security threats such as non-state actors. The following sections outline some of the recurring themes throughout that portion of the conference.

Role of the G20

The G20, which contains the world's twenty largest economies, was established with the mandate of serving as a forum for reform and regulation of the international financial system. Conference participants were divided about the effectiveness of the G20 in dealing with international economic reform. For this reason, participants were conflicted about extending the G20's mandate further to include additional issues, such as security. While some participants viewed the G20 as a Western creation that fails to accurately reflect the global political and economic system, others felt that the existence of the G20 was important because it serves not only as an alternative to the UN or regional intergovernmental organizations, but also as a more diverse and representative forum than the G8. These specifics aside, all participants agreed that the G20 is a useful forum for discussion and debate, and that TTs should strive to inform the G20 Summits by providing relevant research on its current focus (i.e., economic stability and growth) and emerging role as an informal global forum with a potentially broader agenda. Participants also expressed optimism about the future because the G20 includes a mixture of both established and rising powers, which reflects the emerging multipolar nature of the international system. The G20 could serve as an important trust-building institution, which is essential given the level of multilateral action that will occur in the coming years.



Celso Castro, director of CPDOC at FGV, and Ambassador Hemant Krishan Singh, chair in India-US Policy Studies with the Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations, chat over Sunday night's opening dinner

American Declinism

The apparent decline of the United States was a major topic throughout the conference proceedings. Although participants seemed to agree that the theme of American declinism has been overdramatized, they also conceded that the United States' relative power has in fact lessened. Whether this lessening of relative US power was due to a decline of the West or a rise of the East is highly contested and yet to be determined. Nonetheless, participants all observed a transition from US global hegemony to an increasingly multipolar system. If this trend continues, the United States may still be able to initiate the international agenda, but it will increasingly have to negotiate and seek compromise with allies and adversaries in the global arena. Thus, participants predicted that an increase in multilateralism will accompany the emerging multipolar system, with traditional institutions, like the UN and IMF, newer institutions, such as the G20, and regional bodies working together on issues with international consequences.

Emerging Powers within the G20

Participants all agreed that the emerging powers, particularly the BRICS countries, have the economic capacity associated with being major global players; however, none of these countries has asserted the political willpower and assumed the international leadership role that is required of a great power. In order for the world to take on major challenges, such as climate change, the contribution and participation of the emerging powers is necessary. However, a prevailing viewpoint throughout the conference was that thus far, the emerging powers appear much more interested in the benefits of great power status than the associated responsibility or costs.

Regionalism

Given the criticism of the UN and the G20 as being Western-dominated organizations, conference participants speculated that regional organizations could serve as a viable alternative. In fact, many participants agreed that the future of the international system was likely to see much more cooperation on the regional level. This, in combination with existing international cooperation via major intergovernmental organizations (IGOs), is likely to create a diversity of multilateral action in the future. Because at their current state most regional organizations are not strong enough to successfully implement policy on their own, the role of the UN and other major IGOs could evolve to working with the regional organizations by helping them implement agreed upon solutions.



Paul-Simon Handy, director of research at the Institute for Security Studies, converses with Thomas Gomart, deputy director for strategic development and director of the Russia/NIS Centre with the French Institute for International Relations

G20 Think Tank Executives Examine the State of Policy Advice in a Time of Transition

What are think tanks, and what do they do?

While there is no absolute agreement on a definition of a TT, this conference reflected a consensus that ultimately, TTs are knowledge-brokers. One participant suggested that while there is a good deal of diversity within the TT community, all TTs are public policy institutions that research, analyze, and engage, aiming to provide advice on key domestic and foreign policy issues for policymakers and the public. Whereas governments need to make decisions on matters foreign, domestic, economic, and everything in between, TTs provide specialized knowledge. At times, this knowledge is generated from research that TTs conduct themselves. Indeed, there exists a thriving community of journals and other publications whose purpose is to publish the findings of TTs and other experts so as to contribute to a global dialogue and debate. However, TTs are not immune to the fast paced nature of policy-making; the non-stop media forces governments to demand answers faster than ever before, and TTs are challenged with keeping pace. Providing rigorous research would be impossible without the work done at academic institutions. However, the annals of academia are more accustomed to long, detailed reports. This is their luxury, but it is not conducive to prompt policy-making. As such, when TTs aren't generating their own research, they are synthesizing the research of institutions like universities into a digestible form that politicians can understand and act on.



Marcin Zaborowski, director of the Polish Institute of International Affairs, Carlos Ivan Simonsen Leal, president of FGV, Michael Rich, president and CEO of RAND Corporation, and Oh-Seok Hyun, president of the Korea Development Institute, participate in the presidents' panel



Steven Bennett, vice president and COO of the Brookings Institution, and Huang Ping, director of the American Studies Institute at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, sit alongside Claudia Calvin, executive director of COMEXI, as she speaks about her organization's pursuit of excellence, independence, and influence

The marketplace of ideas also abides by the laws of supply and demand. TTs, however, don't exclusively react to the demands of policy-makers (e.g., providing reports and testimony at the behest of legislators and legislative bodies). Their unique position as experts allows them to also play a role in agenda-setting, thus contributing to the supply of ideas. Some issues, for any number of reasons, just aren't politically viable priorities for elected officials (e.g., water security, human mobility challenges, etc.). As knowledge-brokers, TTs are free to ignore some of the rules of politics to highlight controversial issues that policy-makers would prefer to avoid. Sometimes this means providing a neutral forum for dialogue. Still other times, this means following the Steve Jobs model of demand: providing a product (i.e., policy issue) that government didn't even know it needed.

And, just like in any marketplace, there is ever-increasing competition for the government's attention. Lawyers, consulting firms, advocacy groups and other TTs challenge any individual TT to continually prove to policy-makers why they are relevant and why their product is the best that's out there.

Excellence, Independence, and Influence

The conference encapsulated the TT mandate in three intertwined ideas: excellence, independence, and influence. Here too, these ideas are for want of clear definitions with regards to TTs. While all organizations arguably strive for excellence and influence, the question of independence met with many different answers from the participants. Some insisted that independence hinged on the various funding sources of a TT. Others retort that the independence of research and reporting is more directly related to the personnel on staff and the views espoused by them. These views reflect more than just a difference of opinion. After all, as the world is globalizing and nations like Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS) start to emerge as major world players, so too do various interpretations of what it means to be an independent TT (or, even more broadly, what a TT should be). The different definitions of independence notwithstanding, all participants agreed that adhering to standards of independence and rigorous research were essential priorities for ensuring the reliability and relevance of their products and analysis and maintaining their reputations as centers of excellence.



Brigadier General Rumel Dahiya, deputy director general with the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, listens during a roundtable discussion



Taba Özhan, president of the Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research, Dmitri Trenin, director of the Carnegie Moscow Center, and Paul Salem, director of the Carnegie Middle East Center, react to a panel presentation

Whether it's conducting research, publishing journals for mass consumption, or consulting with policy-makers, TTs strive for excellence in all that they do. Throughout the conference, the participants conveyed their sense of responsibility to serve the policy-making process, and to serve well. This responsibility is always there, but it is even more pressing at turbulent times such as these. The combined real-world impact in the conference room was not lost on the participants—they know all too well that their work does not reside in the realm of the theoretical. A number of the participants pointed out that in both good times and bad TTs are tasked with providing analysis and advice to policy-makers and the public with the goal of improving the lives of people in virtually every country in the world²

The goal of excellence is highly connected with the goal of influence. Any potential solutions found are worthless if TTs can't influence policy-makers. Granted, this influence isn't always direct. For example, by influencing the people of a representative government (through social media, publications, etc.), TTs can indirectly influence the representatives of those constituents. On this point, the participants felt a sense of urgency. As competition for the attention of government increases, the participants worried about staying relevant. After all, it's all well and good for a group of TT leaders to know that they are important, but how

² There are now over 6500 think tanks in 183 countries

can they convey that to policy-makers? The question isn't one of absolute terms; it's one of opportunity cost. Every minute a legislator spends reading a report from one organization is a minute he spends not consulting with a representative of another group. And that assumes, of course, that TTs can even persuade policy-makers to take the time away from governing and other obligations. Influence, therefore, is paramount to the life of TTs.

Challenges Facing G20 Think Tanks

One of the purposes of this conference was to serve as a learning opportunity. As the days progressed, one of the clearest lessons learned was that no matter where in the world a given TT operates, they face similar challenges to those of their worldwide counterparts. This section summarizes those shared challenges that were most pressing in the eyes of the participants.

Independence and Funding: A Delicate Balance

Funding is critical for the vitality of a TT. However, contemporary TTs face a dilemma in regards to the sources of their funding. Some believe that in order to maintain intellectual honesty, objectivity, and independence, it is essential that funding come from the private sector. On the other hand, a TT can be publicly funded, meaning the government provides financial support, which in turn fits a different interpretation of independence. A possible alternative is a mixed model of funding—a TT should not rely completely on either private or public funding, because it is never certain which type of funding will be available in the future given unpredictable economic and budget crises.

Time and Budget Constraints

The 21st century's 24/7 news cycle poses a unique problem for TTs. Not only is the rate of change increasing, but the heightened role of old and new media also increases our awareness of that change. Accordingly, donors and governments demand answers from TTs faster than ever. The concern is, however, that a shorter timeframe for research will be associated with a decline in the overall quality of the research. While TTs understand that their research depends upon funding from donors, it is imperative that they are able to communicate to their donors the importance of adequate degrees of freedom in setting research priorities and the time required to conduct in-depth, evidence based research. The goal is twofold: to have the necessary bridge funding so think tanks can conduct research on issues that require attention but have not come into focus for policymakers and donors; and to provide sufficient core funding to enable TTs to conduct research on emerging and enduring policy issues.



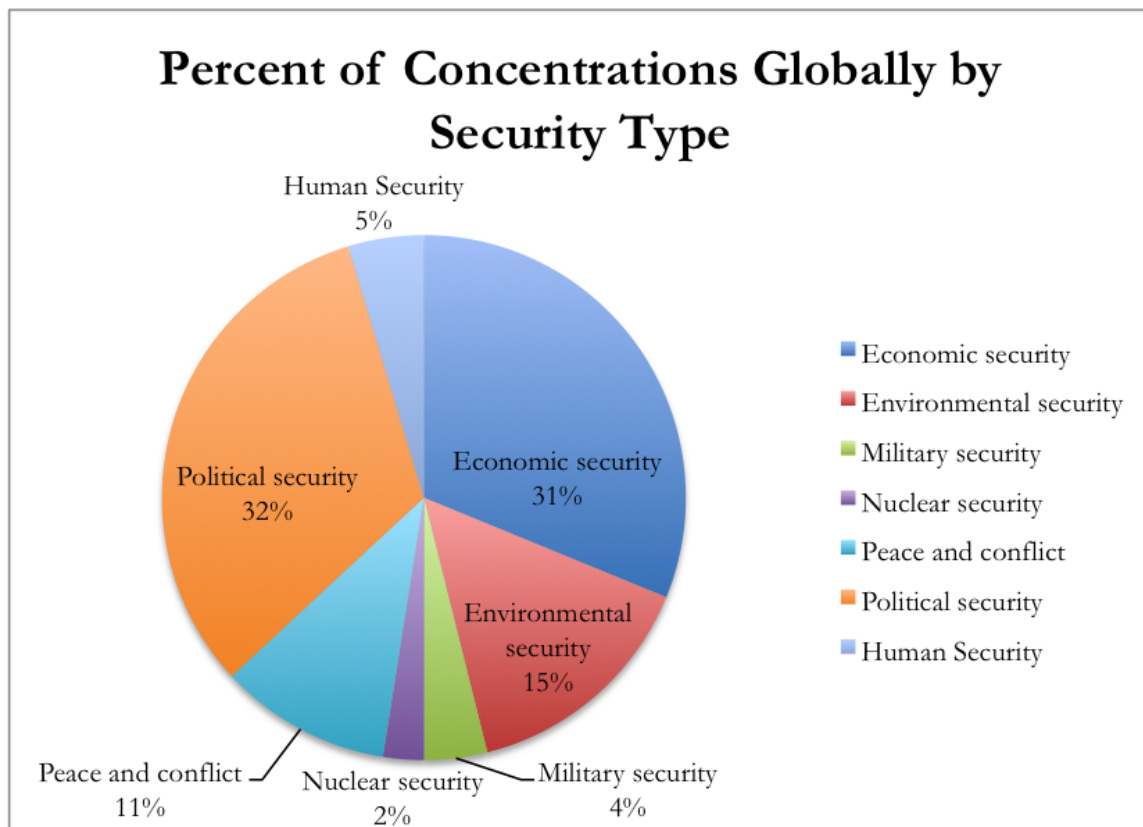
Participants share thoughts in a roundtable discussion

Increased Competition

Filling this demand for quick, digestible answers is a range of private consultancies, law firms, and new for-profit TTs. Traditional TTs—which undertake deep, long-range analysis of complex issues—must present a unified image and distinguish themselves from their rising competitors. There remains, however, something to be learned from the competition: if TTs are to stay relevant in a time of greater economic constraints, then they will need to strike a careful balance between rapid dissemination and deep, high-quality analysis. The burden of achieving this balance falls on the researchers, who must be consistently innovative in their approaches, as well as possess deep, specialized knowledge.

Transition to Non-Traditional Security Studies

TTs in the 21st century also face a major challenge in regards to the subject of the research that they conduct. Specifically, there has been a major transition to concentrating on research topics of non-traditional foci. TTs historically devoted the vast majority of their time and resources to traditional security studies (i.e., nuclear and military). Today, however, there is a multitude of other interconnected and evermore complicated issues that require the attention of TTs (see chart, below). Within the field of security and international affairs, TTs now also focus on non-traditional issues such as economic security, environmental security, and non-state actors.



Source: McGann, Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program, 2012

New Audiences, New Leaders

TTs need to find innovative ways to connect with the new generation and essentially market themselves, in the hope of spreading of their ideas. However, many TTs suggested that they don't have the technological, financial and human resources that would enable them to reach a wider audience. Several participants stated that the national media in their counties do not cover international affairs. Thus, their target audience may not recognize the immediate relevance or value of the research being conducted by TTs. One way to overcome this obstacle is to use social media and create a strong online presence.

Related to the issue of a new audience is the problem of recruiting and retaining the next generation of TT researchers and executives. Most university graduates are either ill-prepared to work in a TT or simply not interested. Participants unanimously agreed that one solution to this problem is to put more effort into youth outreach efforts (e.g., internship programs), in order to better communicate both the benefits of working at a TT as well as the legitimacy of TT research as a career path. Additionally, TTs can attempt to better communicate to universities what specific skills are necessary for success in the TT environment so that there is less of a learning curve for new researchers.

Trans-national Issues, Ideas, and Institutions

The rapid expansion of transnational issues forces contemporary TTs to no longer view their research from a singular, national lens. They need to not only look at issues of national concern, but also those that impact the greater world, such as proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, implications of climate change and R2P. As one participant put it, "The days of armchair analysis are over. Scholars must be in country and on-the-ground in order to provide meaningful analysis." Others suggested that in order to be



Michael O'Hanlon, senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, engages the participants during a panel session

an internationally oriented TT dealing with such questions, it is essential to have a commitment to create global operations akin to for-profit multi-national corporations. This would allow the TTs to recruit local talent, with the relevant area and language skills. Other participants, however, believe that it is possible to approach international issues from within the traditional, domestic TT structure by hiring experts with specialized knowledge and supporting joint research and scholar exchanges. Nonetheless, the participants converged on the premise that in order to deal with international issues of both domestic and global concern, it is imperative that TTs hire experts who possess a deep knowledge of the relevant region or issue.

Conclusion

The inaugural G20 Foreign Policy Think Tanks Summit was an ideal forum for this discussion of the role of TTs in this time of uncertainty and beyond. The group applauded the work of the [Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program](#) and the essential support of the [Getúlio Vargas Foundation](#); all of the conference participants felt a great sense of excitement for more summits like this one. Currently, there is much behind-the-scenes discussion to build on the excellent foundation laid by the conference.

Participants of the G20 Foreign Policy Think Tanks Summit are eager to make real-world impact from the value added by the conference's dialogue and debate. Be it in the form of innovative fundraising, increased public awareness, inspiring new research, or improved advising strategies, those involved in this conference hope to use this newfound network of TTs across the globe to better serve their governments and the world.

To that end, a number of the participants expressed the importance of TTs' continuing the tradition of long-range thinking and providing policy-oriented research, especially in times of crisis and transition. By tackling the issues that politicians are hesitant to address, TTs play an essential role in agenda-setting and policy making. TTs should above all aim to frame issues in novel ways, to shape new paradigms, and to force the world to consider big questions. Considered in isolation, the challenges of migration patterns, food security, and ethnic conflict might not appear to be global concerns. But it's thanks to innovating think tanking that the three have come to coalesce into a broader security concern. We may not now see how women's issues in Latin America relate to debates over the application of R2P to Libya and Syria, but with newfound ways of thinking, we may arrive at a clearer picture of the connections between seemingly disparate problems. TTs' capacity for long-range, big-picture thinking is their greatest asset and should be cultivated over more small-scale, transitory concerns moving forward.

For the time being, however, the authors of this report use the following section to synthesize the ten most salient recommendations for all TTs—not just those in attendance—moving forward. True progress from this conference can only be realized if TTs from around the world start reaping the rewards for their participation and heed the advice of the following recommendations.



Charles Kupchan, professor of International Affairs at Georgetown University, addresses the participants in the Furness Fine Arts Building during dinner

Recommendations

1. In order to best ensure your organization's independence and long-term stability, seek to have a diverse funding base from both public and private sources.
2. Invest in youth outreach programs and sponsor internships to get the best and brightest university students interested in the TT business.
3. Use various forms of social media to engage and educate the public, expand influence, and better communicate with the news media.
4. We should coordinate more TT meetings, like this inaugural summit, in conjunction with G20 activities to better poise ourselves to influence that group of policymakers.
5. Keep current on the works of other leading TTs in your field. Be they journals, periodicals, or online publications of research, staying clued in to the findings of your fellow think tankers will keep the community advancing the global discussion and avoid re-hash.
6. Focus research on innovative, substantive issues that will seriously impact the world in the future, rather than looking into the trendy topic of the moment.
7. Work on streamlining interactions with policymakers and better understanding the political milieu to ensure that ideas and policies are thoroughly vetted and received.
8. Increase your activity in the institutional network of TTs worldwide through some sort of joint platform for publishing and disseminating joint articles, papers, and research.
9. Work on a universal peer review system for TTs to elevate the bar for consistency and excellence.
10. In order to achieve innovative think tanking, constantly be on the lookout for new ways of framing public policy problems. By drawing newfound connections previously unseen, we can help policymakers craft ideal solutions to real problems facing real people.

The inaugural [G20 Foreign Policy Think Tanks Summit](#) was sponsored by the [Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program](#) and the [International Relations Department at the University of Pennsylvania](#). It was made possible by the generous support and help of the [Getúlio Vargas Foundation](#). Thanks also to our gracious hosts at the [Annenberg School for Communication](#) and the [Furness Fine Arts Building](#).



Paul-Simon Handy responds to one of the conference sessions



Participants take in the final roundtable discussion



Michael O'Hanlon engages other participants during his panel



Claudia Calvin and Ambassador Fernando Petrella converse before Monday's dinner



Keith Burnet engages Marcin Zaborowski on Monday evening



Jacques deLisle and Yibai Li chat in the Furness Fine Arts Building



Melissa Conley Tyler, Michael Rich, and Partha Mukhopadhyay admire the Afro-Brazilian art in the [Arthur Ross Gallery](#)



Ambassador Fernando Petrella and Thomas Gomart converse during a break from the conference sessions



Brigadier General Rumel Dahiya and James G. McGann react to the final conference session



Paul-Simon Handy and Partha Mukhopadhyay exchange contact information between conference sessions



G20 Foreign Policy Think Tank Summit



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