

## **The Think Tanks as new channels of influence under Globalization: a definitional Analysis**

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### **Abstract:**

In a world of interdependent interests, actors and agendas, both internally and externally, the power of ideas that shapes the line of action among states and individuals, and more importantly, major powers with longterm strategies worldwide, is still debated as a new and significant factor for global peaceful interaction, added to other tools of power and influence under our era of globalization. Accordingly, an extensive analysis of such actors at the level of structure and role is widely required in the field of security, strategy and international relations, especially with regard to the policy making process of states and even international organizations in several fields of action.

Keywords: think tanks, globalization, influence, policy making, actors.

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### **Introduction:**

As the world is becoming more complex and vulnerable to all sorts of challenge, domestic, regional and global, politically, economically, ideologically, militarily and strategically, as stated by scholars of international relations, information, knowledge and sciences are seen as assets for influencing the course of political events, for states and international organizations, thus, many researchers keep trying to understand the role of some bodies that try to bridge the gap between knowledge and policy, called think tanks, metaphorically speaking.

It is argued that think tanks serve as a significant catalyst for ideas and policies, in which policymaking in states is highly influenced alongside other traditional factors; military power, economic viability and so on. Furthermore, the multiform challenges of global security facing the world; extreme poverty, climate change, water scarcity, pandemics, pollution, conflicts and terrorism, organized crime, the proliferation of nuclear weapons push us to prefer these research establishments as they have the ability to set policy agendas, grant guidelines to policy makers and officials of several departments of the state on how to tackle the intertwined problems in politics, economy, environment, development, defense, not to mention their power of predicting the policy processes based on the information observed on the ground. Besides, experts refer to the new information and communication technologies (NICT) that revolutionized the state-centric glossary; sovereignty, independence, diplomacy, intervention, protection, so the traditional definition of the policy making is no longer effective under the current circumstances, and more particularly with the rapid spread of these think tanks all over the world, not only in the West; USA and Europe.

To conceptualize these organization at the functional and goal levels, it is highly wise to assume that it is difficult to give a precise and comprehensive definition of a think tank, like many concepts in social sciences, for the vagueness of the lexical meaning in relation to the elements involved in the phenomenon itself: what are think tanks, what they are for, who masters them inside the state services, which roles played and actions displayed by those in charge?

Based on the forgoing, our research paper seeks to deal with this subject at a definition level; as we try to delve into the details of the conceptualization itself, paying attention on how such important concepts in the area of policy making in political sciences are approached and well defined. It will lead us to ask the following question, in this research paper:

**Under a complex and interdependent world of accelerating events, thorny issues and evolving vulnerabilities at all levels, what are think tanks for, and how they can be defined in a concise and precise ways so that it can be sound to present a comprehensive and suitable definition?**

Our research paper will tackle the topic of the abstract in a concise way, as it is divided into two points:

**1/ Think Tanks: a conceptual framework**

**2/ The main tasks of think tanks under globalization: are they state auxiliaries?**

**1/ Think Tanks: a conceptual framework:**

It is commonly agreed that the scholarly field of political sciences deals with the core concepts with utmost preciseness, as they pertain to a highly specialized language, in which a hasty interpretation by researchers may lead them to misleading conceptualization and unjustified statements of analysis. Thus, scholars need to pay attention to how concepts are defined and approached in treating a given topic in political sciences, out of epistemological soundness.

In international relations, as a field of inquiry and an arena of various interactions, there have been a significant number of actors shaping the dynamics of international politics, in addition to internal political processes that cannot be ignored while we try to analyze the policy making strategy within states, however, some actors are misconceived by researchers due to the interchangeable uses of their roles and activities, at different levels, especially when it comes to a close relationship between politics and knowledge<sup>1</sup>; like some organizations that act independently from official governments, but help them in policy direction and consultation, namely think tanks, these bodies, embodiments of the participation of scientists and elite men of knowledge, sparked a heated debate on their role in decision-making in public policies of nation states and strategic orientations internationally.

In this paper, we are going to start with the conceptual clarification section, especially since the epistemological obligation needs to define terms and concepts clearly, concisely and exhaustively in order to avoid flaw judgments and erroneous analysis of phenomena in social sciences in general, and political sciences in particular. First of all, think tanks, as its name suggests, is a **metaphorical** description of some organizations that affect the state policies through investment in knowledge ‘research’, certainly, it is a metaphor as it simplifies the

meaning through analogy: **think** = knowledge/science, and **tanks** = organizations, institutes, foundations that represent the group of researchers and men of knowledge, also, this figurative formulation allows to encourage the understanding of the structure and the role of these actors in policy formulation and direction. it is translated into Arabic in different ways; some put it as مراكز التفكير while others say مراكز الأبحاث والدراسات, and during world war two, the expression ‘**Brain Boxes**’ was used in American slang to refer to rooms where strategists discussed the war planning.<sup>2</sup>

It is worth mentioning they are given various descriptions, but all are entirely designed to present a specific meaning which helps us to embrace an operational definition, noting that political science scholars assume that there is no agreed-upon definition. Some refer to them as Laboratories of ideas<sup>3</sup>, others call them bridges between knowledge and power, while others depict them as Elite, not to mention that they are even described as Scientific Decision Makers, out of rich concepts creation, which we praise all of them as useful expressions that help understand their missions through the knowledge/science criteria.

There are a lot of definitions of think tanks in political field, like many concepts deserving attention, each one of them articulates an idea about how they are structured, and why they are established and how effective is their role in policy making, at internal and external levels. However, scholars can find it ambiguous to deal with each definition singly, rather, it would be better, as they think, to deal with the main points of these organizations; their structure, tools, financial basis and the field of influence. Generally speaking, it is preferred to treat this topic in this section from two sides:

**The structural side:**

since think tanks are created by some individuals and are positioned in a specified place to influence the policy units in the state. They are research institutes or organizations employed to solve complex problems or predict or plan future developments, as in military, political, or social areas. Some scholars categorized them within civil society elite<sup>4</sup>, as they designed for policy advice and analysis production to policymakers and public.

**The functional side:**

as they are created to have impact on state policies (formulation and implementation) especially as their relations are deliberately directed at some networks (the public) and the government officials. They are brokers of policy knowledge and incubators of new ideas; they channel knowledge between scholars, policymakers and civil society.

This indicative table can portray the main attributes of think tanks, as follows:

<b>Think Tanks labels</b>	Budget	Wealth/ financing source
Laboratories of ideas/ group of experts	Political influence	Raison <i>d'être</i> (their creation for what?)
bridges between knowledge and power	knowledge	Educational background of their members

Elite/ Decision Makers	Scientific	Social networks	The Public
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It goes without saying that every political system needs the ability to be nurtured with knowledge, particularly under the globalization that brings us closed to the new information and communication technologies (ICTs), which create the best condition for these actors ‘think tanks’ to get involved positively in new areas of political and economic development policies, all around the world, that is why they gain global influence and become much debated.

Donald Abelson identified some criteria for the think tanks at academic level<sup>5</sup>, which is generally agreed upon by different scholars in this field, as follows:

**\*An independent organization**

**\*The general interest**

**\*A permanent research Team**

**\*The production of innovative proposals and prospective public policy**

**\*A non-profit organization**

by some definitions, this makes the think tank a policy actor, like Brookings Institute, Heritage Foundation, Chatham House, Rand Corporation, this term was coined in 1960s to refer to “the institutes of international affairs, institutions where academic experts, official and non-official practitioners and others with an interest in foreign policy could come together, focus on immediate and long-term international issues, suggest potential ways of handling these, and attempt to steer governmental policies and influence public opinion”<sup>6</sup>

According to Merriam Webster Dictionary, “Think Tank is an institute, corporation, or group organized to study a particular subject ‘such as a policy issue or a scientific problem and provide information, ideas and advice”.

Pautz defines them as” non-governmental, non-profit, independent of governmental interests and societal other interests”<sup>7</sup>

Stone refers to the diversity of organizations which intermediate specialized knowledge civil society and the state, positioning them as bridges between knowledge and power (elites) to bring them closer to public interest.<sup>8</sup>

**2/ The main tasks of think tanks under globalization: are they state auxiliaries?**

Needless to say that the state is a unitary actor according to realist theorists, it faces the outside world as an integrated unit. A common assumption among realists is that the government speaks with one voice for the state as a whole. However, in a globalized world faced with complex relations and interactions that breed more challenges for both governments and peoples, at different levels, the state has changed and its political, social and strategic organization gave rise to other players inside it; and it turns more than necessary to shift the thinking about the influence of the state as an actor, theoretically speaking, it is no more shaped and seen through realist lenses, rather, it is a non-unitary actor, in which many units, players, forces and influencers can formulate its public and foreign policies. Additionally, the falling ties between

the internal/external in the world environment, with the impact of globalization, information, telecommunications, technological revolution, scholars are paying more attention to the emergence of new players that work closely within, with and for governments in decision making and policy implementation.

The discussion about what these think tanks are for starts with ascertaining that such academic players, so to speak, as they are fully invested in knowledge, represent a new chapter of interaction within states, they are engaged in a so-called war of ideas, a reference to the confrontation among states in a highly competitive world, defending their ideology (beliefs, values, culture and history) as exemplified by the hawks in the white house under the neo-cons led by George Walker Bush after he came to power and invaded Iraq in 2003, they used think tanks to defend their ideology of preventive war and a new American century in which the US interest of sole supremacy must remain unquestioned.

Assuredly, the power of ideas is much appreciated by new thinkers in international relations and public policy, because it is conceived a long missing element of power which is ignored by realists, it is significantly related to the soft power, which is promoted by neo-liberalists like Joseph Nye, due to the role of the non-physical factors in shaping the major events in the world politics, especially after the end of the cold war, as opposed to the military force, which is the hard power, traditionally assumed to be the main reason of state policies, internally and abroad. In this context, Robert O'Keohane and Joseph Nye made it clear, in their seminal book "Transnational Relations and World Politics" that the international society is not made of the coexistence of states having specific and homogenous interests, rather, it is the sum of relations among peoples, ideas and organizations, beyond the inter-state borders, it is not international, but transnational (relations between individuals and public opinions).<sup>9</sup>

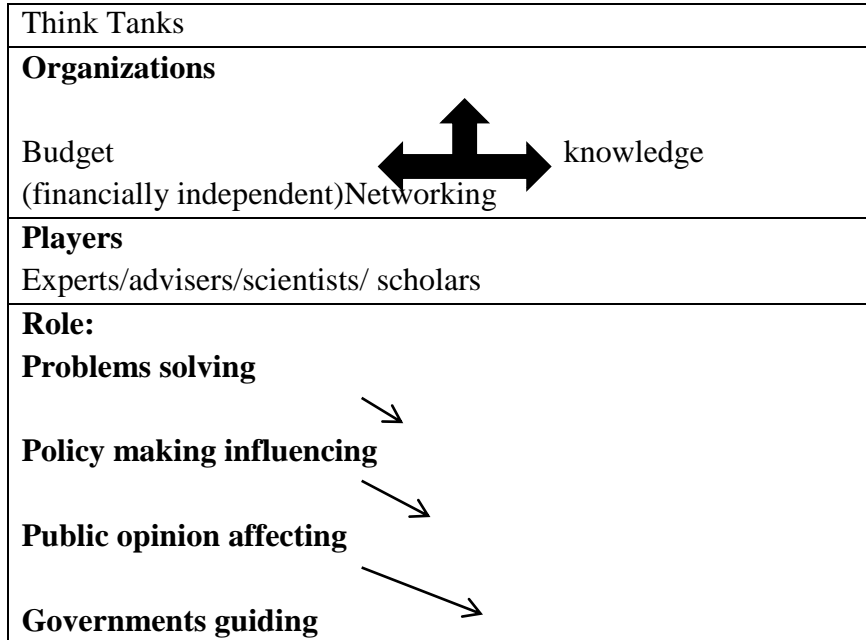
Furthermore, the literature on think tanks can be linked to the making of policy internally and externally, as this later is seen as a human process in which the role of ideas, values, perceptions, knowledge cannot be ignored. Based on that, many scholars of public policy in America emphasizes that the government leader seeks to exercise influence on the public and the government positively, in order to solve the several economic and social problems, and help to strengthen the state policy implementation effectively. The philosopher August Comte said that "ideas govern and disrupt the world, that is to say that the entire social mechanism is built on opinion", besides, a myriad of actors can shape the policy directly and indirectly, as Joseph Frankel put it in his book "The Making of Foreign Policy, as follows:

"social scientists, economists, lawyers and other experts who can play a substantial role in the policy making process, even if they remain distinct from the formal decision-makers and the administrators, they exercise specialized skills, as most of them work in universities and research institutes, while their works tend to be integrated in the decision-making process"<sup>10</sup>

In this regard, and for a good analysis of this part of our research paper, we can rely on a definition of International Relations Dictionary, as it portrays these think tanks at functional level:

“Think tank, a term used to describe an institution or group of advisers involved in solving difficult, multidisciplinary, long-range problems the solution to which often affect public policy.”<sup>11</sup>

It is quite convenient to schematize what has been mentioned before concisely:



Against the backdrop of what has been said about the place of these think tanks in making public and foreign policies, their genuine roles, influence and benefits for the governments/public spheres, we can divide up their missions and their implications for states, into few points, as follows:

**1/ problem-solving service:**as problem solvers, like other mechanisms used to tackle the government’s social and economic ills, these think tanks are said to be developing their activities and exercising their powerful influence either directly through the revolving door (connection with important political figures) or indirectly, through publications, meetings and seminars.

**2/public policy-shaping:**in principle these think tanks are created to focus on influencing the political process, either directly or indirectly, with the weight of ideas related to public policies which they promote along with their audiences “the public”.

**3/ prestige and reputation:**based on the rich and long experience of think tanks in the western world, especially in security and defense sectors, there is a need to talk about the moral and value aspects of the spreading growth of these research institutes all around the world, they are an opportunity for countries to be highly ranked, proudly recognized and eminently categorized in the forum of nations, because knowledge doesn’t produce only money through business mentality, on the contrary, a good image is given to the country that is managed by the involvement of such thin tanks with innovation and science in their agendas.

**4/ government-public mediation:**sincethe community is evolving through a constant interaction between the ruler and the ruled, academics representing think tanks, can provide reports, papers and roadmaps relevant to the multiple challenge of the government, especially under the

globalization and the information flow, which do foster the relationship between those in power and the large popular majority, through a positive channeling culture.

**5/ developmental actors:** as producers of research, the elite of the community, think tanks have a key role to play in making a greater contribution to development debates, strategies and outcomes, not only in the developed world; America, EU, Canada, but also in Africa and Latin America, for example, the Institute of Economic Affairs in Ghana played an essential role in helping to strengthen democracy and economic prosperity by organizing forums, debates and workshops in this context.

**6/ innovative civil society creators:** think tanks as policy advice institutions help to deliver analysis ‘different sectors’ to policy makers and the wider public in order to influence the way decisions are made and services are provided, and as they hold high positions, with sources of wealth and knowledge, they can be a bridge with the authorities in charge of dealing with many social, economic, political, media and technological matters.

**Conclusion:**

The present paper has discussed, from a conceptual side, the growing importance of think tanks in political sciences, especially since the 1960s and 1970s when they proved rich and actively influential in America and beyond. They are generally approached as laboratories of knowledge that governments can instrumentalize to help deal with the several problems in managing its domestic and foreign affairs alike. In fact, the conceptual framework of this topic is more than important before delving into the details of how these organizations work, like different concepts in social sciences, think tanks sparked a debate among scholars and practitioners of political sciences, because they are influencing the public and political life, in terms of their ties with government officials and public space. In addition to its image in the democratic states for their dependence on knowledge, and its involvement in a war of ideas, so to speak.

Furthermore, with the involvement of such actors of knowledge in policy making and implementation, government leaders grow aware that the black box cannot be singly representing heads of state and official accessories; ministers and public servants, on the contrary, with the advent of the technological revolution coupled with the accelerating waves of the globalization since 1970s and 1980s, scholars in political science turned to be convincingly reassured about the weight of knowledge in solving the development and social problems (poverty, social injustice, population growth, climate change, food scarcity, technological transfer, healthcare and education) all around the world, and especially in the less developed countries ‘LDCs’.

So long as leaders face considerable challenges in policy-making, with the increased impact of technological wave of information, and the pressing calls for governance and transparency at the governance level, think tanks as incubators of knowledge and actors of knowledge, are required to get involved as members of consultation, cooperation and coordination with governments, as appropriate, whether in domestic policy or foreign and defense affairs, as it is the case in the developed world, where a participatory approach of policy making is widely recognized.

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