

# The Future of Think Tanks

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## **Bassma Kodmani**

We will talk about the role of think tanks, their uncertainties and their future. Any leader of a think tank wonders each day about what they must do to preserve its credibility, independence and influence. Do you think that we, the think tank community, are doing something; and also, what? And if a think tank's role is to make international questions intelligible and to recommend a certain number of directions for political decision-making, my first question would be the following: how explain to politicians that it is in their interest to work with think tanks? This is an even more important question now that we are dealing with political leaders for whom the world of think tanks is not presumably of crucial interest...

## ***Who listens to think tanks?***

### **Robin Niblett**

What Bruno Le Maire said this morning, quoting Xi Jinping, who noted that the Europeans had taken three centuries to build what the Chinese built in forty years, particularly struck me.

The most difficult thing is to think about the future of think tanks. We are now experiencing a proliferation of think tanks around the world (more than 1,000 in the United States and more than 500 in China...), which seem to be experiencing a golden age. They seem necessary because we are in a turbulent world. And yet, the paradox is that we are uncertain of our credibility in our role. Normally, our main public is governments and governing elites in the private and public sectors. We are making forecasts and the most objective analyses possible; we are trying to give advice, which is sometimes difficult because we are not

elected – but we can also sometimes say what others cannot say... Governments are now, doubtless, paying less attention to what we are saying because they live in a media world where the news dominates every moment (see the example of Brexit).

How can we prove the importance of think tanks to governments today? We need to show that we are in contact with spheres that the government does not necessarily reach. We could also communicate via the media. But the public also looks at us in a somewhat skeptical manner, as a number of us are seen as managers of globalization, illustrating the positive sides of it without seeing the dangers. Hence, the public's skepticism can be combined with a lack of government attention. We can naturally assert ourselves by renewing major themes of the international debate, by developing multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary studies, by involving more individuals, NGOs, and various partners.

Another challenge is more philosophical, and it mainly involves the United States and China. As think tankers, we have traditionally supported the development of international law, multilateralism, international cooperation, all of which seem essential to us in an interdependent world. But we know that some international actors – and among our allies – are driving European think tanks towards the logic of power, and criticize multilateralism. As for China, it claims to support multilateralism, but has a system of governance that is clearly against it. What worries me is that, between China and the United States, it is not only politicians who are trapped, but also the think tanks.

### **Daniela Schwarzer**

The topic nowadays is strategic competition between the great powers: China, United States, Russia, while we wonder where Europe is. What I have seen in recent years – and not just since Trump's election – is that the element of uncertainty has become increasingly significant for those that we seek to advise, and particularly policy-makers. What changed everything is the annexation of Crimea: we then discovered that our security order was challenged and we found ourselves faced with a power that could no longer be controlled. It is probably at this time that the need arose for think tanks and policy-makers to think about all possible scenarios.

With Trump's election and the uncertainty it has generated within the Transatlantic Alliance – although in Germany we remain very rooted in the transatlantic relationship within the European Union – new methodological thinking has emerged that potentially changes our interaction with

the decision-makers. A part of our work now consists in understanding what is going on around us, in a quickly changing context. Working as a group is now very useful, for both think tankers and decision-makers. We can hardly present a finished result anymore, but we can incorporate into the very thinking even those who, in the end, will make the decisions. They will then incorporate our work into their proposed solutions.

Second point: our security environment has changed completely. When we are dealing with security or defense in a think tank today, we must take a very long view of things, and we can no longer rely on specialists in military matters. As a think tank working on defense matters among other things, we have a long history at DGAP (German Council on Foreign Relations) of discussion with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the intelligence services, the Ministry of Defense and Parliament. However, we must now have a broad approach and understand that the threats come from the very heart of our societies. We must therefore work more closely with the stakeholders, who are often the targets of these attacks, or are used for destructive effects in our societies.

The third point that I wish to raise is that of the radicalization and polarization of the debate. The United States is a prime example of this. We can see an increase in debates where the protagonists no longer speak to each other. As think tanks, on the other hand, we want to talk to everyone and for the results of our work to be known to all. The boundary between facts and opinions has become very blurred. A number of people claim that think tanks produce fake news, whereas we strive to produce arguments based on solid data.

It's a major challenge to know how to position yourself in a context where our very purpose is challenged by some policy-makers, media or society. The quality of our work must therefore be further improved: if we present results that are not perhaps as sound as we would like, the attacks will increase. Quality control and communication (with those who are naturally interested in our work and those who are not) are therefore vital. Our work is to seek dialog with those who don't naturally listen to us; even if it cannot always be successful, it must continue. Therefore, the work of think tanks has changed considerably in recent years.

The significant question remains of funding. We can see the situation in Europe changing around us and it is diverse. Some governments are cutting research funding, which fortunately is not the case for Germany. However, think tanks' independence is a more important subject than

ever. And the importance of public authorities' financial support for our work is a key element.

### ***A new context for the work of think tanks***

#### **Thomas Gomart**

Think tanks work together: at Daniela and Nathalie's initiative, with Robin, the four of us cosigned a joint letter last May, following the US decision to withdraw from the JCPOA [Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action; the Iran deal]. This reflected our concern, as directors of European think tanks, about having an impact of a political nature.

Think tanks are now a real business sector: there are around 7,000 in the world, so it is a small industry, with its methods and difficulties. The common characteristic of all think tanks – although the term covers very different realities – is that they claim to present expertise at a time when the concept of expertise is openly questioned by some political forces. The concept of mediation is challenged and new forms of gullibility or of the valuing of ignorance are appearing in politics, which inevitably is destabilizing for our organizations.

We must also try to understand the historical context in which we find ourselves. When we try to reconstruct the foundation of think tanks, we encounter the consequences of US intervention in Europe, the handover of power from Britain to the US, attempts to establish collective security with the LoN [League of Nations], the Soviet experience, and the rise of Nazism. It was in this historical context that think tanks were invented, both in the United Kingdom and the United States.

The background to the establishment of Ifri, for example, is very specific, and largely explains how we operate. Therefore, we must try to see if we share a similar understanding of the current context, which can be described quickly in five major characteristics.

The first is the rise in power of China; the second is the change of course by the United States (very unexpected in its scope); the third is the democratic doubt now coursing across Europe; the fourth is the development of political Islamism; the fifth is the very high tension between current environmental damage and the spread of information technology.

#### *Rise in Chinese power and polarization of the marketplace of ideas*

This leads me to emphasize the two most important challenges, in my opinion. The first is China's rising power and its consequences for Chinese think tanks as a whole. Here, we have the emergence of actors, who

are also partners, with whom we must constantly interact. Of course, this raises questions about the nature and role of Chinese think tanks. I remember that a number of them were founded by Deng Xiaoping and have significantly contributed to intellectual discussion between the United States and China and to China's opening-up phase. The question is whether Chinese think tanks today, as controlled by the Chinese authorities – I quote President Xi Jinping: "the think tanks must be led by the Chinese Communist Party and follow the right line" – can maintain the same type of relationship with their usual partners. In other words, a major topic for us is the dichotomy between authoritarian and democratic regimes and its consequences for think tanks. We must pay attention to the type of manipulation that we can be subject to and keep the dialog open.

The second great challenge concerns the polarization of the marketplace of ideas. We now have a widely expanding marketplace of ideas, encompassing universities, consulting companies, the media, political parties to some extent, and the world of think tanks. On the one side, we have an expanding marketplace of ideas and, on the other, a world of think tanks that is perhaps stagnating. We are in a situation where, increasingly, expertise (the intellectual) is giving way to opinion leaders, and where media impact is valued first and foremost. As for us, our purpose is to always move between the political, economic and media spheres, and the academic sphere where we come from.

All this leads us to two comments. First, we must prepare to manage this dichotomy between authoritarian and democratic think tanks. I am noticing a kind of overinvestment by authoritarian regimes – particularly in China – in their think tanks, unlike a certain disinvestment by democratic societies in theirs. The second crucial point: we must work on, keeping two words in mind: "usefulness" – for useful research in the public arena – and "objectivity" – which we must always work towards.

### **Bassma Kodmani**

Thomas Bagger, to what extent does the work performed by think tanks seem useful to you?

### ***Think tanks in the information society***

#### **Thomas Bagger**

If I consider the future of think tanks from the perspective of a position close to the presidency of my country, the first evidence is that it has

become difficult nowadays to advise policy-makers, because of the complexity of the phenomena surrounding us, because of the acceleration of global competition, and also the challenge of what I call the *policy window* – the open or closed window of policies on new ideas. Political processes are becoming faster; policy-makers do not always look for the most reasonable solution, they are above all guided by the need to maintain their majorities. It is true that, for 40 years, governing has become increasingly difficult. If it is difficult to advise from within a ministry, it is doubtlessly even more so from outside.

Of course, there is a future for think tanks in an increasingly complex, rapidly changing world; in the first instance, because officials lack the intellectual capacity to maintain the necessary expertise. Outside expertise is therefore necessary. In this context, some think tanks are going in new directions; some use social media to be more competitive in capturing public and political attention, which produces a lot of noise and few ideas. Others surround themselves with lobbies. These options are not the right ones.

The challenge is to rediscover the curiosity, capacity and will to think about and rethink things. We have certainly missed something in seeking to understand what surrounds us. We like to present ourselves as open to the world, but are we really curious about understanding what has been behind China's success for 40 years and what explains Trump's success? In a ministry, there are never enough ideas... A good think tank is first of all, in a given context, an institution that provides the "oxygen" and stimulation to the bureaucracy.

### **Bassma Kodmani**

I remember your phrase "capturing the market of attention". The landscape has profoundly changed with the increase in social media. The latter has a direct impact on the behavior of politicians, who are far more concerned than previously about what will be said about what they do. Can think tanks therefore be part of the medium and long term? Or should they rather "be short-termist"? Do they run the risk of being marginalized compared to the direct relationship with the citizen through social media? Politicians no longer look to think tanks to justify their actions.

On the other hand, is it a priority for you to maintain the independence of your organizations, so that they can ask any question, carry out any study likely to disturb a partner country, any politicians or companies? Is

it realistic to seek total independence? Or, on the other hand, should we seek to be part of a national or European network of influence?

### **Robin Niblett**

Should we “be short-termist”? I sincerely hope not. Our organizations are not very large: the largest in Europe have between 100 and 150 people; in the United States, the largest think tanks can have up to 250 or 300 people. Therefore, we should be agile, clearly identify our missions, values, and objectives that cannot be done in the short term.

It is essential to focus on our added value. Governments are not the only objectives we target, even if we are not powerful enough to say that we want to reach the general public. Internationally, we can be followed outside of governmental circles. I am thinking of business leaders, forced to “think globally” and who may disagree with governments; of NGOs, which have different outlooks; of city mayors – urbanization has changed the political environment and they should also be our intermediaries. Going beyond this, many youngsters want to be involved and decide on their future.

A part of our role is to push politicians to face facts: for example, on climate change, an issue whose tackling depends on international cooperation and therefore on governments’ decision.

### ***Different audiences but common values***

#### **Daniela Schwarzer**

Much has been said about how think tanks could advise policy-makers. But the business world is increasingly important; we receive funding from companies, and we also listen to what they are saying and their international needs. In January, we organized a major forum for business people on the future of Europe in Berlin, with very interesting panel discussions on migration, European identity, social aspects, etc. And it was fascinating to see that the companies had things to say on all these subjects, as certainties are now being challenged in Europe.

Are we targeting the general public? We have members who, of course, are very interested in international politics and take the initiatives in debates with local and regional partners: universities, newspapers, etc. We need to seek ways to mobilize this network to widen the debate. A third of our 3,000 members are under 35 years. It is a vast resource.

As for independence, it is a key objective for a think tank in a liberal-democratic society. Our funding is mixed, so we are not dependent on a

single source. Our independence should guarantee us the freedom to give up some funding – to ensure that our researchers do not orient their work according to the expectations of those funding them.

It is crucial to ensure the intellectual independence of those working in think tanks. This means that we also ensure the protection of our researchers, who may be subject to pressure by entities who do not like their work. We have a duty to train young researchers and to give them the courage to enter into debates that may sometimes be very harsh.

### **Thomas Bagger**

Nowadays, we must put not only the thinking, but also the geopolitical ulterior motives of all the member states of the European Union on the table. The think tanks can do what neither politicians nor authorities can: create a space producing both clarity and trust. It's a good program for the Franco-German partnership; the assertion of a European culture – to take the President of the Republic's idea – cannot be decreed.

### **Thomas Gomart**

I would like to emphasize that differences in political and administrative culture between the United Kingdom, Germany and France explain the differences in our approaches to the role of think tanks. In the French case, we have a state that has historically had its own body of expertise, and for which outside expertise is not natural. And here, one of Ifri's biggest successes has therefore been to find a critical distance from the public authorities.

My second point: we constantly claim our independence. This is achieved through the plurality of the stakeholders. However, this also involves considerable responsibility. And from this perspective, I would rather situate think tanks in an international relationship focusing on the power mechanisms, rather than the systematic criticism of these powers. Nowadays, there is a fairly deep dividing line between think tanks and academia.

My last point: the danger of immediacy, of the temptation of the *tweet*, of the forum that hits the target. We restrain ourselves every day, because we know that we can have an immediate impact *and* very quickly lose our credibility. We must resist this temptation and “curate the content”.