

Think Tanks: Their Expected Role in the Current Crisis

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Policymakers today desperately need more wisdom and knowledge to overcome the current politico-economic paralyzes prevalent around the globe, ranging from security crises in the Middle East and on the Korean Peninsula to pervasive income inequality, and from pandemic dangers to global warming. Now is the time for every country to apply adroitly its past accumulated wisdom and knowledge in the real world. At the same time, every country has an educational opportunity to draw lessons from the current global crisis and share them with other countries. “There is no education like adversity,” said the British statesman Benjamin Disraeli in his novel *Endymion*. Amid the daunting adversity of current times, think tanks, along with other institutions of higher learning, are expected to play an important role for better governance.

This short essay tries to examine the role of think tanks in the current crisis by addressing the following questions: (1) What is a think tank? (2) How can we evaluate it? (3) What position do Japanese think tanks occupy in the world? and (4) How can Japanese think tanks make an effective contribution to better global and domestic governance?

Definition of a Think Tank

It is extremely difficult to reach a unanimous agreement on a clear and durable definition of a think tank. Both experts and laypersons can define the concept of a think tank in numerous ways. Here, I would like to offer a tentative definition to avoid confusion in this essay. A think tank is an organization whose functions are (1) to provide policy recommendations for decision-makers who may want to apply these recommendations in the real world, and (2) to nurture an intellectual community where individual participants — policymakers, corporate strategists, academics, journalists, and attentive citizens — can discuss global and local issues in a wide variety of fields, ranging from global security issues to local economic development obstacles, and from diplomatic relations to corporate strategies to enhance international competitiveness.

The current and widely accepted concept of a think tank is the one that has been long developed in the United States over the past century. Among US representative and leading think tanks are the Brookings Institution, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (CEIP), and the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), to name a few. No one would disagree that these organizations are the world’s representative and leading think tanks.

However, the tentative definition proposed above could lead people to assume that an organization is regarded as a think tank even if it does not call itself a think tank. People think that such international organizations as the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development can be regarded as think tanks. Actually, these organizations have provided insightful policy recommendations and opportunities to discuss a multitude of front-burner issues for better governance. In this way, when it comes to arguing the definition of a

think tank, we have to be careful not to overlook the existence and significance of think tanks in different guises. In postwar Japan, *bona fide* think tanks have long been the bureaucracy located mainly in Tokyo’s Kasumigaseki district, and the headquarters of the Mitsubishi *zaibatsu* (a Japanese conglomerate that comprises a myriad of companies including Mitsubishi Corporation, Mitsubishi Bank, Mitsubishi Heavy Industries, and so forth) located in Tokyo’s Marunouchi district. Accordingly, until the bubble burst in the early 1990s, I argued that Japan’s most prominent think tanks, though lacking in transparency, have been the “Kasumigaseki think tank” for the whole of Japan, and the “Marunouchi think tank” for Japanese industry.

The diversity and specialization in the research activities of think tanks also hinder us in acquiring a clear definition of a think tank. For example, the Washington-based Brookings Institution provides a wide variety of policy recommendations across almost all research areas for policymakers and experts not only in the US but also other countries, while Japan’s Health and Global Policy Institute (HGPI) specializes in the sophistication of health policies. Accordingly, the world’s think tanks collectively run the whole gamut of research activities either as comprehensive think tanks conducting all-encompassing policy research or as specialized think tanks focusing on specific fields.

Global Rankings of Think Tanks

I now want to address the issue of the number of think tanks in the world. The French scientist Jules Henri Poincaré refers in his *Science and Method* to Leo Tolstoy’s comment, in pointing to the absurdity of science for science’s sake, on the dubious value and significance of estimating the number of ladybugs in the world.

TABLE

Top 5 think tanks in the world

	First	Second	Third	Fourth	Fifth
Global ranking	Brookings Institution (US)	Chatham House (UK)	Council on Foreign Relations (US)	Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (US)	Center for Strategic and International Studies (US)
Ranking in Asia	Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (China)	Japan Institute of International Affairs (Japan)	Center for Strategic and International Studies (Indonesia)	Center for Policy Research (India)	Lowy Institute (Australia)
Public organizations	Congressional Research Service (US)	Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (Germany)	World Bank Institute (US)	Norsk Utenrikspolitisk Institutt (Norway)	Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies (UK)
University organizations	Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard (US)	Hoover Institute, Stanford (US)	Center for International Development, Harvard (US)	IDEAS, London School of Economics (UK)	Earth Institute, Columbia (US)
By Area of Research					
International affairs	Center for Strategic and International Studies (US)	Brookings Institution (US)	Council on Foreign Relations (US)	Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (US)	Chatham House (UK)
International development	Brookings Institution (US)	Center for Global Development (US)	Overseas Development Institute (UK)	Harvard Center for International Development (US)	Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (Germany)
Environment policy	Pew Center for Global Climate Change (US)	World Resources Institute (US)	Chatham House (UK)	Potsdam-Institut für Klimafolgenforschung (Germany)	Worldwatch Institute (US)
Health policy	Dept. of Health Policy and Management, Harvard (US)	Brookings Institution (US)	American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research (US)	RAND Corporation (US)	Urban Institute (US)
International economy	Peterson Institute for International Economics (US)	Brookings Institution (US)	Bruegel (Belgium)	Chatham House (UK)	Institut für Weltwirtschaft (Germany)
Domestic economy	Brookings Institution (US)	National Bureau of Economic Research (US)	Cato Institute (US)	Peterson Institute for International Economics (US)	Heritage Foundation (US)
Science & technology	Max-Planck-Gesellschaft (Germany)	RAND Corporation (US)	Bertelsmann Stiftung (Germany)	Consortium for Science, Policy and Outcomes (US)	Battelle Memorial Institute (US)
Social policy	Brookings Institution (US)	Cato Institute (US)	Max-Planck-Institut für Gesellschaftsforschung (MPIfG) (Germany)	Heritage Foundation (US)	Center for American Progress (US)
Transparency & governance	Transparency International (Germany)	Amnesty International (UK)	Freedom House (US)	Human Rights Watch (UK)	Brookings Institution (US)

Source: Author's arrangement based on evaluation presented in "The 2011 Global Go To Think Tanks Index Ranking," published by International Relations Program, University of Pennsylvania, January 2012

Given the ambiguous nature of the definition of a think tank, it would be difficult to estimate an accurate and meaningful number for think tanks, just as in the case of ladybugs. Every month, somewhere in the world, new think tanks are being established to meet emerging challenges, while others are being forced to disappear because of their organizational obsolescence or financial difficulties.

Despite the problems of estimating the number of think tanks in the world, the International Relations Program of the University of Pennsylvania has tried hard to overcome this difficulty and evaluate world think tanks. According to a survey report published in January 2012 ("The 2011 Global Go To Think Tank Index Ranking"), there are 6,545 think tanks in the world. The geographical distribution of think tanks shows that the US has the largest number (1,815), and is followed by China (425), India (292), the United Kingdom (286), Germany (194), France (176), Argentina (137), Russia (112), Japan (103), and Canada (97).

It should be noted that evaluating think tanks is not necessarily the equivalent of estimating the number of organizations, experts, and research papers. Likewise, we cannot judge the quality of a think tank merely by examining its physical infrastructure or financial resources. In principle, a proper evaluation of a think tank might be based on (1) the influential power of its recommendations on policymakers and public opinion, and (2) the quality of intellectual and innovative ideas in its recommendations.

For better or worse, academic disciplines have a common trait — relentlessly producing novel theories and evidence, and modifying or nullifying conventional wisdom, as suggested by the German social scientist Max Weber in his *Science as a Vocation*. This common trait makes us evaluate accurately neither the influence nor the quality of

any particular recommendation. Especially, practical social sciences including political science and economics are notoriously recondite, being replete with conflicting evidence, contradictory ideologies, and competing theories. Even in the fields of natural science and engineering that seem to be more scientifically rationalized, people have begun to realize the inevitability of progress that science cannot avoid; many scientific works have become obsolete after the emergence of revolutionary ideas, including Copernicus's theory of the universe and Einstein's theory of relativity. Having witnessed the disaster and tragedy of the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake, many people have started to doubt even more the infallibility of seismologists and nuclear engineers. For this reason, the influential power of a think tank or a specific recommendation is extremely difficult to evaluate. Similarly, experts also find it difficult to devise integrated policy recommendations; they tend to disagree with each other over policy and strategic prescriptions.

Furthermore, in general, applying wisdom and knowledge in the real world is a cumbersome task; applying the latter might be easier, while the former is more difficult — as the German-Swiss writer Herman Hesse says in his *Siddhartha*, "Knowledge can be conveyed but not wisdom." In other words, knowledge based on disciplines systematically distilled from past data and experiences can be to some extent applied by anybody; on the other hand, wisdom can be acquired and applied only by insightful policymakers.

Despite such evaluation-related problems, the University of Pennsylvania's program tries to grade the influential and intellectual power of think tanks worldwide (Table) by measuring their reputation among experts and journalists.

The Table shows that the top five think tanks in the world are the

Brookings Institution, Chatham House, the CFR, the CEIP, and the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). It suggests that Anglo-American organizations are predominant partly because of the overwhelming influence of Anglo-American economic and intellectual strength. In addition to their “real” influence, the predominance of the English language as the *lingua franca* for the business and academic communities further enhances the influence of Anglo-American think tanks.

According to the report, Asian think tanks are less visible in the global intellectual community. The top Asian think tank within Asia is the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), which is ranked 28th in the world. But, given the buoyancy of Asian economies, think tanks in the region are expected to play a larger role and become more influential in global policy considerations.

Undeniably, this report’s evaluation is respected for its exhaustive survey of world think tanks. But its evaluation should not be uncritically swallowed. In evaluating influence over policymakers and intellectual recognition among experts, one can raise the question of the appropriateness of a think tank as the unit of analysis. Generally speaking, the influence and intellectual power of an individual think tank researcher varies quite extensively. Accordingly, a more appropriate unit of analysis might be an individual researcher, not a think tank.

Japanese Think Tanks in a Global Perspective

Despite the limited scope of the evaluation, the report provides ample information for discussing the current situation surrounding Japanese think tanks. According to the report, there are four Japanese think tanks highly regarded in Asia: the Japan Institute of International Affairs (JIIA) (ranked 2nd in Asia), the Asian Forum Japan (AFJ) (12th), the National Institute for Defense Studies (NIDS) (13th), and the Institute for International Policy Studies (IIPS) (30th). In addition, in international affairs JIIA is ranked 43rd; on the environment, the Global Development Research Center (GDRC) is ranked 30th; on health policies, the HGPI is 15th; on international economic policies, the Institute of Developing Economies (IDE) is 23rd; and on domestic economic policies, the Research Institute of Economy, Trade and Industry (RIETI) is 27th.

The report also suggests a desired direction for efforts that should be made by Japanese think tanks in the future. First, the number of Japanese think tanks that receive global acclaim is disproportionately small compared to Japan’s economic weight. This survey result indicates the fact that the sheer size of the domestic economy has led to Japanese researchers becoming preoccupied with discussions conducted almost exclusively within Japan, and less engaged in discussions and exchanges of views with their foreign counterparts. In the age of globalization, Japanese researchers should actively take part in discussions in the international arena to widen their scope of research by learning about foreign research projects, and thereby gain a higher reputation outside Japan.

A second observation regarding the report’s evaluation is that

Japan’s advantages have not been duly recognized outside Japan. Currently, Japanese society is metamorphosing with the fastest pace of aging in the world. Japan’s think tanks engaging in elderly care, working conditions for the aged, and pension reform might deserve their evaluation if they disseminate their policy recommendations among their foreign counterparts, especially those in countries that are forecast to experience similar aging societies in the near future. According to the report’s rankings, in the field of international development there are no Japanese think tanks. In the postwar period, Japan has accumulated experience and knowledge in supporting emerging countries in their development of socio-economic infrastructure, including roads, bridges, school and hospitals. For this reason, Japanese experts have intellectual resources for better governance of socio-economic development. Therefore, we should regard with caution the fact that only one think tank in Japan receives worldwide acclaim in the field of the environment. At the same time, Japan’s energy efficiency has perhaps long been envied by other countries. With growing concerns about global warming, Japan’s energy conservation systems should be studied and emulated throughout the world.

A third response to the report’s evaluation is that there are two reasons why Japanese think tanks have not caught the attention of their overseas counterparts. First, as mentioned earlier, Japanese researchers as well as policymakers generally argue policy issues almost exclusively within Japan. Despite the relentless advancement of globalization, they have not actively participated in a worldwide exchange of views or presented their research analyses at overseas academic conferences.

According to the statistics published by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology in May 2012, the number of Japanese researchers who stay for at least one month at overseas institutions of higher learning has declined since 2000. In 2000, 7,674 researchers stayed overseas for at least one month; since then, the figure has gradually declined. The figure for 2010, the latest available, was 4,272. In the meantime, the number of foreign researchers who stay in Japan for at least one month has been stable; it has not risen despite deepening globalization of the world academic community. The figure for 2010 was 14,241, slightly higher than the previous record high of 13,878 in 2000. But the figures for the past decade have generally been below the level of 14,000.

Second, Japan’s long and turbulent politico-economic paralyzes have not generated academic curiosity and interest among foreign researchers. During the 1980s and early 1990s when Japan’s economic and technological strength was almost on a par with that of the US, foreign researchers tried enthusiastically to engage in research activities in Japan and collaboration with their Japanese counterparts. Today, their intellectual curiosity has shifted to rapidly rising China, and buoyant India and Indonesia. Under these circumstances, the rising numbers of Chinese and Indian researchers have overshadowed those of Japanese researchers in the international arena.

Future of Japanese Think Tanks

The Great East Japan Earthquake brought about a full realization of the significance of globalization and the need for coexistence — from the rest of the world Japan was offered generous support for disaster response and recovery, while the Fukushima nuclear disaster revealed the hard fact that radiation does not recognize national borders and causes unbearable and ineradicable anxiety on a global scale. Under these circumstances, Japanese think tanks are now elaborating novel approaches for better governance in both public and private domains, especially in such areas as (1) economic revitalization for an aging society, (2) disaster preparedness and crisis management, and (3) energy conservation and green technologies.

Amid the relentless advancement of globalization, Japanese think tanks are expected to move into high gear in three directions — global, multipolar, and interdisciplinary — and especially toward a neo-synthesis of such disciplines as political science and economics.

First, Japanese think tanks should act globally. The pressing challenges of population aging, crisis management, and energy and environment should not to be met solely by Japan. On this beautiful planet, we have to devise consistent policies and strategies for coexistence and co-prosperity. As the German philosopher Immanuel Kant states in his *Perpetual Peace*, human beings “cannot infinitely disperse and hence must finally tolerate the presence of each other. Originally, no one had more right than another to a particular part of the earth.” Accordingly, Japanese think tanks should actively commit themselves to laying a firm foundation for a globalized intellectual community, by cooperating with their overseas counterparts to devise practical approaches to international conflict resolutions and poverty reduction, as well as the aforementioned challenges.

Secondly, Japanese think tanks should act multilaterally. With the spectacular three-decade rise of China, the global distribution of power is now shifting away from the group of advanced countries: while the G7/G8 summits are on the wane, the G20 meetings, having emerged from obscurity, are now carrying an increasingly heavy weight in global politico-economic governance. Setting aside controversies over the status of US hegemony between declinists and conservative strategists, world politics may seek a new type of world order with the rise of emerging economies spearheaded by the BRICS — Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa. In the long run, this sea change will have a significant impact on the global distribution of intellectual strength, leading to a gradual fading of the century-long predominance of Anglo-American think tanks. In short, the world is now heading toward multipolarity without a viable intellectual backbone for multilateralism. Accordingly, think tank researchers will be plunged into even more complexity in trying to sort out recommendations for better governance.

Thirdly, they should look to interdisciplinary approaches. Amid this tectonic change in the global politico-economic landscape, Japan’s policymakers and strategists are currently facing up to the daunting task of developing approaches in various fields — (1) security and

diplomacy (e.g. strengthening the Japan-U.S. alliance, defusing tensions over territorial disputes with neighboring states, and redefining Japan’s role in global governance including poverty reduction and peacekeeping operations), (2) economy (e.g. revitalization of Japan’s economy with enhanced international competitiveness by promoting new technologies in such fields as information and communication, life science, and green energy, integrated reform of the social security and tax systems, and realignment of trade policies), and (3) energy and environment (e.g. advanced application of green technologies and nuclear safety engineering, and effective and efficient disaster management for a resilient society). Evidently, these issues facing Japan are closely intertwined internationally and academically, which should spur Japanese think tanks to work out recommendations from global, multilateral, and interdisciplinary perspectives.

To date, Japan’s think tanks, with very few exceptions, have been active merely within Japan. For this reason, despite the potential of their research capabilities, they have acquired a somewhat prosaic reputation in the international arena. At the same time, with very few exceptions, they have worked with their foreign counterparts not in a multilateral way, but in a bilateral way. Some have worked exclusively with their American counterparts, while others only with their Chinese or European counterparts. For this reason, policymakers and corporate strategists have found it difficult to acquire a bird’s-eye view regarding the current abysmal situation of an intertwined world. In addition to this growing complexity of geoeconomics, geopolitics is frustratingly becoming more labyrinthine. To date, Japan’s think tanks have long enjoyed themselves in a segregated ecosystem either in a political or economic arena; few people look to the harsh reality of politico-economic complexities. With an emerging Sino-American politico-economic rivalry, Japanese think tanks are losing the luxury to wallow in a stove-piping research environment. Based upon these observations, the Canon Institute for Global Studies (CIGS), to which I belong, tries to adopt an integrated approach — global, multilateral, and interdisciplinary.

No doubt such an approach encounters a mountain of research difficulties, including operational division of labor among researchers of diverse expertise and nationalities within the limits of time and financial resources. But without a sense of timing, however intellectually and practically superior, no recommendation would be of value to policymakers enthusiastically aiming to apply it in the real world at the time of the current crisis. Ancient China’s *Book of the Later Han* teaches that “Troubled times test a faithful minister as a storm puts strong grass to the test.” The current crisis is providing a testing time for Japanese think tanks, but also an opportunity for them to engage more thoughtfully on the world stage. **JS**

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