



POLICY PAPER

Research and advice in foreign and security policy

AN ANALYSIS OF THE GERMAN
THINK TANK LANDSCAPE

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The number of research institutions in Germany that seek in different ways to encourage reflection on the country's foreign and security policy interests and options has risen considerably since the start of the new millennium. In the autumn of 2019 we were commissioned by the Robert Bosch Stiftung and Stiftung Mercator to conduct a study that would give an overview of the situation, while at the same time making recommendations for the work of think tanks, their target groups and their funders. This policy paper summarizes the key points of the study.

I. Think tanks in the area of foreign and security policy in Germany

The study is the first of its kind to provide a detailed overview of the German think tank landscape in the area of foreign and security policy. All the institutes have in common a desire to exert influence through their products on politicians in the executive and parliament, on the expert foreign policy community, and on the media. Three types of institutes can be distinguished: academic research institutes with a primarily scholarly focus; policy institutes that specialize in giving political advice and shaping public opinion; and activists/do tanks that aim above all to provide forums for dialogue and define new topics, including in the foreign policy discourse. During the course of the study, 50 confidential interviews were conducted with representatives of the institutes themselves, of their target groups in politics and the media, and of their funding organizations, with a view to obtaining a picture of their areas of focus, the way they are evaluated by the target groups, and the objectives of the funders. A comparative analysis of the situation and developments of think tanks in Washington, London and Brussels was undertaken.

The following table lists the analysed institutes by type:

Academic research institutes

Arnold Bergstraesser Institute (ABI) for cultural scientific research at the University of Freiburg	Freiburg
Bonn International Center for Conversion (BICC)	Bonn
German Institute for Global and Area Studies (GIGA)	Hamburg
Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at the University of Hamburg	Hamburg
Institute for Security Policy at Kiel University	Kiel
Peace Research Institute Frankfurt (PRIF)	Frankfurt am Main
Centre for East European and International Studies (ZOIS)	Berlin

Policy institutes

Bertelsmann Stiftung	Gütersloh
CAP - Center for Applied Policy Research at the University of Munich	Munich
German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP)	Berlin
Global Public Policy Institute (GPPI)	Berlin
Institute for European Politics (IEP)	Berlin
Jacques Delors Centre	Berlin
Mercator Institute for China Studies (MERICS)	Berlin
Stiftung Neue Verantwortung	Berlin
German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP)	Berlin
Centre for European Reform (CER)	Berlin
European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR)	Berlin
European Stability Initiative (ESI)	Berlin
The German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF)	Berlin

Activists/do tanks

European Democracy Lab	Berlin
Polis180	Berlin
Das Progressive Zentrum	Berlin
Center for Liberal Modernity	Berlin

II. The era of the think tank

It is no coincidence that this study was initiated by the Robert Bosch Stiftung and Stiftung Mercator during a period of fundamental upheavals in Germany's international environment. The foundations upon which German foreign and security policy has been based hitherto are crumbling. Our security is under threat once again from traditional risks that we believed to have been overcome long ago, while new issues such as climate change, global epidemics and migration have emerged. Germany's foreign and security policy interests need to be re-considered and options drawn up for their political implementation. Unfortunately, political practitioners find nothing more difficult than questioning basic foreign policy lines that have long been successful. This makes independent institutions that have committed themselves to careful research all the more important. They can initiate the urgently needed rethinking of German foreign and security policy. This is the era of the think tank.

THINK TANKS IN GERMANY: IMPERFECT AND IN DEMAND

Like politicians, think tanks have a tendency to swim with the tide of public opinion, which could see them missing out on a valuable opportunity to make a real difference.

However, the assumption that their target group might therefore turn their backs on think tanks and seek information sources elsewhere instead has not proven to be the case so far. Almost without exception, interviews with ministry officials and parliamentarians confirm that neither Germany's government nor its parliament have any wish to do without the country's think tanks. Although their impact is not precisely measurable – we found at best very indirect indications that certain think tank recommendations led to political decisions – German politicians do want their products, even if they are often impatiently critical about them. This is also evidenced by the fact that the public sector supports some of these research institutions. Alongside the Federal Chancellery, the German Federal Foreign Office has also become a leading state funder.

Think tanks are unable on their own to ensure that German interests are adapted to the new international conditions, however; this would be expecting too much of them. Even if think tanks decide themselves whether and how they will seize the opportunities available to them in this “era of the think tank”, they will not succeed without the feedback of their target group and the supervision and support of their funders.

The most serious deficits of think tanks today are as follows: they are too distanced from the everyday business of politics; their ideas and products are too uniform; they shy away from controversy, and they have organizational shortcomings. Most think tanks in Germany do not gear themselves sufficiently to the needs of the target group. They often focus too much on the German perspective. They lack curiosity about and respect for dissenting opinions. Their social media presence is not on a par with that of many Anglo-Saxon think tanks.

Users of their services in ministries and parliament take insufficient advantage of the potential offered by think tanks when it comes to meeting their needs. Exchange with think tanks is accorded too little priority in their tight schedules. In many cases, they refrain from making suggestions themselves and giving critical feedback. Although some ministries are becoming more open to the idea of temporarily recruiting experts from think tanks, they too rarely send their own qualified staff to work as fellows at think tanks, which would otherwise foster the sharing of ideas and increase mutual understanding.

Funding organizations remain too fixated on familiar areas of thematic focus and traditional funding methods, and in so doing contribute to the uniformity of think tank products. Though they are able to influence the work of think tanks thanks to the latter's need for funding, they too rarely initiate and support spontaneous projects and alternative approaches and refrain from accompanying longer-term think tank projects with advice and suggestions. The practice of short-term project funding leads to thematic myopia in recipients.

Our recommendations are therefore aimed equally at think tanks, their target groups and their funding organizations..

III. Recommendations

Recommendations for think tanks: become more effective

- Give priority to the challenges of this turbulent period: focus particular attention on Germany's strategic partnerships with France and the USA, and on strategic "problem states" such as Russia or China; view the environment, health and migration as strategic challenges; make a conscious effort to include "hard" security policy issues such as nuclear proliferation, military policy, armament and arms control.
- Resist uniformity: do not shy away from criticizing official positions and take contrary opinions into account; assess the pros and cons; present analyses that give clear action options and recommendations; when recruiting staff, focus not only on professional qualifications, but also on intellectual originality and inquisitiveness; invite external "lateral thinkers" to work with you and criticize your work.
- Orient your work to the target group: thorough research remains the prerequisite if think tank analyses are to be highly-regarded and credible; if your advice is to have the desired impact, you need to appropriately convey your findings to the target group. Consequently: make optimal use of social media and give priority to this area; establish cross-think-tank training and further education workshops to improve skills in the use of social media and in moderation and presentation techniques; recruit fellows from government, politics, business and the media and take advantage of their specialist knowledge and familiarity with political processes.
- Increase international orientation: organize staff exchanges with international partner institutes; recruit international fellows; run joint projects with international partner institutes if such collaboration can lend particular weight to the result; together with other German think tanks, establish offices abroad in strategic partner countries following the example of Anglo-Saxon institutes; set up an international leadership programme to foster and interconnect young talents from think tanks, government and politics.

Recommendations for users in politics and government: give more feedback

- Communicate your own needs and criticism of think tank products.
- Point out “blind spots” in research and upcoming international problems.
- Promote and improve fellowships at think tanks.

Recommendations for funding organizations: suggest and supervise

- Give funding priority to those institutes that are ready to address Germany’s strategic challenges.
- Encourage think tanks also to embrace unpopular aspects of German foreign and security policy. Increasingly, these include security policy and military issues.
- Support personnel structure and development so that think tanks can recruit their staff more widely from the areas of politics, business, academia and the media, seeking out creative individuals and candidates with media capabilities.
- Rather than funding short-term projects, consider offering a five-year funding programme with a flexible budget; actively supervise longer-term projects.
- When calculating project budgets, factor in realistic overheads.
- Set up a special jointly-financed “social media” fund for think tanks.

We hope that these recommendations will help think tanks make the most of their opportunities.