China’s Foreign Policy Research Institutes: Influence on Decision-Making and the 5th Generation Communist Party Leadership

By Michael Morrison

Abstract—As the Chinese Communist Party prepares for a major leadership transition, China’s foreign policy think tanks are poised to contribute to the conceptualization and propagation of major foreign policy initiatives. This article examines the degree to which Party and State leaders look to think tanks for analysis, and how think tanks can be used as a window into Chinese decision-making. China’s foreign policy think tanks attempt to exert influence in a variety of ways, and clear examples of previous influence over major foreign policies can be seen during the Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao administrations. Future predictions are less precise.

Introduction

As China prepares for a transition to the Fifth Generation of Communist Party leadership in the fall of 2012, foreign analysts continue to seek any window possible into the murky decision-making processes of Chinese political elites. China’s foreign relations have grown increasingly complex in the thirty-plus years since the beginning of Deng Xiaoping’s “opening up” policies, and Fifth Generation leaders will face the greatest foreign policy challenges of any other time in Chinese history. Many foreign analysts look to China’s think tanks as a window into the minds of China’s leaders, a way to predict the policies and issues that those leaders might rely upon to help craft their approach to the outside world.

Michael Morrison is a Foundation for Defense of Democracies 2012 National Security Fellow, and works as a consultant in Washington DC. Morrison recently completed an MA in International Policy and Practice from the Elliott School of International Affairs at The George Washington University. He is fluent in Mandarin Chinese, and has lived and worked throughout East and Southeast Asia.
Foreign policy in China—like domestic and economic policy—was traditionally formed by centralized rule by fiat. But the decision-making process has become more sophisticated since the Deng Xiaoping era, much like China’s domestic politics, economy, and global worldview have matured in kind. The foreign policy mechanism in place today is increasingly diverse, and appears to be changing to resemble that of Western powers that draw upon a wide range of actors to inform and influence decision makers. Yet the Chinese foreign policy apparatus still differs from the American system primarily in that it remains insular and opaque, making it difficult for outside observers to conduct an informed analysis of the current policy debates and the structure that influences them.

The diversity of voices influencing Chinese foreign policy has grown from official state and Communist Party bodies to include universities, the press, regular internet users, and think tanks. Known in China as policy research institutes, think tanks have flourished in China since the 1990s when President Jiang Zemin encouraged their reach and influence. Foreign policy think tanks in particular caught the attention of international scholars at the time, and a brief period of increased scrutiny regarding the scope and reach of Chinese think tanks followed. Over the past ten years, there has been little continued analysis of the role of think tanks although they have grown more complex and sophisticated. This article will examine the influence that Chinese think tanks have exerted on foreign policy decisions in the past, and attempt to determine what role they will play in the future.

China’s 18th Party Congress will be held in the fall of 2012, and new actors will take over foreign policy decisions. A look at think tanks in China may provide insight into how the next generation of Chinese leadership will make those decisions. Predicting Chinese senior leadership succession is an inexact science, and attempting to assess the influence of various elements of the political structure in China is even more subjective. There are indicators, though, that may provide some insight into how think tanks have influenced foreign policy in the past, and can perhaps be used to form an estimation of future influence.

**Think Tank Functions and Sources of Influence**

Contrary to western practice, Chinese think tanks exist within a government bureaucratic structure, and do not enjoy true independence from government oversight. This affects the quality of research and analysis, as think tank scholars depend on the patronage and attention of senior policy makers for influence. In contrast to the western function of policy or political advocacy, Chinese think tanks are structured based on the Soviet system, and conduct strategic thought and policy planning for individual state ministries or communist party organs. There are smaller think tanks associated with universities, but they still depend on the Chinese government in part for funding and license to operate.

Think tanks interact with senior policy makers primarily through written reports on specific topics and personal consultations with senior leaders. Their chief products are “internal reports” (neibu), which fall into a range of classifications for internal or external
dissemination.³ Select reports are converted into articles for public consumption in monographs or periodical journals. Neibu reports draw on information from a wide range of sources, including diplomatic cables, informal meetings between diplomats and foreign leaders, and in some cases classified intelligence reporting and discussions with foreign academics and policy makers. Reports make policy recommendations that are forwarded through official channels to decision makers, who may or may not read them.⁴ Feedback on written reports to think tank analysts is inconsistent, and it is viewed as a mark of distinction to be informed that a report reached or influenced a certain policy maker. Because of the proliferation of think tanks over the past decade, there is now a flood of papers that reaches the desks of senior leaders, and it is up to individual secretaries to sort through the submissions and determine which reports are sufficiently interesting to a particular leader’s agenda and forward them for reading. The secretary becomes the most important gatekeeper, often determining which voices will be granted an audience.⁵

Think tank scholars contribute to state ministry or party small group policy meetings (xiaozu) where they present formal briefings on a specific policy issue that are sometimes accompanied by a written paper. Occasionally a question and answer session follows a formal presentation, in which a more informal flow of information allows analysts to discuss issues directly with policy makers. In recent years, there has been an increase in policy recommendations coming from high-profile individuals that are not necessarily tied directly to a think tank. Because of the rise of what one academic calls “policy entrepreneurs”—former politicians, business leaders, and academics—the relative influence of think tanks may be on the decline as their voice competes for influence with politically connected individuals with better access to decision makers. Communist Party Central Politburo study sessions have increasingly invited individual contributors to present in recent years to discuss important policy questions.⁶

Think tank scholars also participate in conferences with other academics and publish articles in publicly available journals. It is unlikely that journal articles themselves have much effect on decision makers’ opinions, as they are unlikely to be read by senior leaders. Some journal articles are reported to be unclassified versions of neibu reports, but there is no way to determine which ones have been read by leaders of any consequence. Journal articles are an effective way for outside analysts to monitor the topics that make up the foreign policy debates at any given time, but they are usually not a very good indicator of which conversations policy makers are engaged in. It is difficult to tell which topics are leading the discussion and which are parroting themes and concepts already put forth in other venues such as official conferences or internal government study sessions without direct knowledge of the inner workings of those events.⁷

**Sources of Influence**

The influence that a think tank is able to bring to bear on policy makers is entirely contingent upon gaining access to those policy makers, and drawing attention to the right issues and concepts. This access can be in person, such as interaction in “small group” (xiaozu) discussion sessions or personal consultations with policy makers, or
it can take the form of having a paper make it to the desk of the right decision maker. Think tanks derive their influence from three sources of access: bureaucratic position, personal connections, and issue-specific knowledge or experience.

**Bureaucratic position.** Every think tank has some form of government sponsorship and reports to an organ of either the State Council or the Communist Party, advising senior bureaucrats on policy planning and strategic thinking. A think tank’s position within a bureaucratic organization is the most direct line of influence, and is the one most easily assessed by foreigners. Every state ministry has its own think tank that informs senior policy makers and helps drive the internal policy debate.

Even if a think tank holds particular sway within its own state or party organ, its influence on foreign policy writ large is entirely dependent on that government body’s influence. For example, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ China Institute of International Studies is considered very influential within that body, but the Ministry of Foreign Affairs itself is considered by some to be irrelevant—important decisions are more likely made in the Communist Party Foreign Affairs Leading Small Group or the Politburo. In other cases, separate think tanks within the same bureaucracy have different levels of influence based on other factors such as personal connections or political patronage. For example, under the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) General Staff Department, the China Institute for International Strategic Studies holds much more influence than the China Foundation for International and Strategic Studies and appears to receive higher priority attention from senior military leaders. Despite its widely recognized ties to the PLA’s intelligence department, the China Foundation for International and Strategic Studies claims to be an independent non-profit research foundation, which may explain its limited role in influencing senior PLA leadership. This is a misnomer, though, as there are no truly independent think tanks—each one is in some way subordinate to Chinese government control, either through funding, bureaucratic organization, or influence and personal connections of senior research staff.

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It has long been reported that think tanks suffer from “stove-piping,” with analysis occurring in relative isolation and results communicated solely within the institute’s own bureaucratic chain of command. This is a significant constraint on the quality of analysis, but there has been a trend toward greater lateral communication with other scholars, although this still falls short of what most would consider true collaboration. State ministries will invite representatives from various think tanks together for issue-specific study sessions or limited-scope conferences, but the results are then held completely within that orga-
nization’s walls. Joint articles or collaborative research between think tank scholars is still a rarity, although this, too, is changing.\textsuperscript{12}

\textbf{Personal connections.} Personal connections between senior researchers and government bureaucrats are more difficult to evaluate than institutional position, but may play a greater role in think tanks’ influence on the policy process if those links are substantial. Personal connections are formed in a number of ways, usually through familial relations, school ties, or government service in the same geographic area. Former President Jiang Zemin maintained longstanding ties to the “Shanghai clique” of Shanghai-based think tanks due to his tenure as Mayor and Party Secretary of that city. Similarly, current Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi’s brother, Yang Jimian, is the director of the Shanghai Institute for International Studies, which some attribute to the degree of influence that body has on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.\textsuperscript{13}

Personal influence may be overemphasized by foreign analysts, though, or at least on the decline: while Jiang Zemin was known to reach outside of established channels for foreign policy advice, Hu Jintao has shown a greater preference to work with existing bureaucratic structures, possibly due to lesser comfort with foreign policy in general, a stronger existing policy-making structure, or Hu’s personal leadership style.\textsuperscript{14}

A defining characteristic of US think tanks and their role in advising the government is the “revolving door” system, wherein scholars move back and forth between academic roles and government posts, usually as administrations change. China’s think tanks have begun to appoint retired senior government and Party officials in recent years, partly as a result of age rules that force retirement at senior ranks. Former Vice Premier Zeng Peiyan now serves as chairman of the China Center for International Economic Exchanges—China’s first “super think tank”—PLA Deputy Chief of Staff Xiong Guangkai went to the China Institute for International Strategic Studies after his retirement, and Central Party School Vice President Zheng Bijian headed the China Reform Forum, the Communist Party’s premier policy research institute.\textsuperscript{15} Zheng Bijian had worked with Hu Jintao when he headed the elite Central Party School and maintained a strong relationship with Hu after he became the General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party. When Zheng left the China Reform Forum in 2007, the institute lost quite a bit of influence with the central government.\textsuperscript{16} This falls short of a revolving door system per se, as there is no real back and forth movement between government and academic positions, but the shared experience of government service and academic leadership roles provides a direct line of communication to government and party organizations.

\textbf{Knowledge and expertise.} The relative influence of some think tanks over others cannot always be attributed to position or connections, and depends on the substance of analysis

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that is produced. As a bureau of China’s civilian intelligence service, the Ministry of State Security, the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations historically had a monopoly on information, which lent it a great competitive advantage over other think tanks. At one time, it held the largest library of foreign books in China, had exclusive access to classified intelligence reporting, and was one of the few entities regularly allowed to interact with foreigners. The advent of internet access and a proliferation of think tanks in the 1990s eroded this competitive advantage, as more researchers easily gained access to information without having to travel abroad. Open source information, especially in regards to the United States, is usually vast in scope compared to the small amount of information that is classified, and open access through the internet greatly diminished the value of secret intelligence.

Some think tanks hold deep expertise in a particular area, which lends them a degree of authority over institutions with a more general charter. For example, Fudan University’s Center for American Studies and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences’ Institute of American Studies are both well regarded as the experts on US-China relations due to a tradition of in-depth study and regular interaction with US scholars and policy makers. More think tank scholars are returning to China from advanced study abroad than in the past, creating a professional cadre of academics who have in-depth experience of foreign issues. Claiming first-hand access to foreign policy makers lends a degree of credibility that, rightly or not, gains influence for the Chinese academic.

Prior Influence on Major Foreign Policies

Some highly-connected and influential think tanks have served as advisors for senior Chinese leaders, and have been instrumental in forming some of the most significant foreign policies.

Former President Jiang Zemin was known to rely on an inner circle of academics from his time as Mayor and Party Chief in Shanghai, frequently reaching across traditional bureaucratic boundary lines to do so. Jiang, along with Prime Minister Zhu Rongji, lacked significant foreign policy experience and chose to rely on the advice of specialists. Jiang graduated from Shanghai Jiaotong University and made many academic contacts in Shanghai as he rose through the ranks of the Communist Party. When Jiang moved to Beijing, he brought Fudan University Law School dean, Wang Huning, along as his personal assistant before appointing him director of the Communist Party Central Committee Policy Research Office, responsible for coordinating research and advice, and drafting major policy decisions. Along with Wang Huning, former Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences and Central Party School scholar Li Jinru is credited with contributing to Jiang’s seminal “Three Represents” theory in 2002. Three Represents was a major break from the previous conceptualization of the Communist Party as the vanguard of the working class to representing the interests and continued economic, cultural, and political development of China’s population as a whole.

Hu Jintao continued to follow Jiang’s example of leveraging think tanks in advising foreign policy, but was more content to work within the constraints of the system in place. Before ascending to the Politburo, Hu served as the president of the Central
Party School from 1993-2002, when he worked to make it into a leading think tank. Central Party School Vice President Zheng Bijian and Institute of International Strategic Studies director Wang Jisi are credited with developing the “Peaceful Rise” theory that dominated Chinese foreign policy in the mid-2000s. Zheng conceived the Peaceful Rise theory as a guiding principle for China’s strategic emergence onto a complicated global stage, to communicate explicitly to the world that China did not pose a threat to Asia or the international community, but merely was continuing its twenty-five-year trajectory of development and opening up. The policy immediately gained widespread acceptance, and was used by Premier Wen Jiabao in a 2003 speech at Harvard University and by Hu Jintao at the Politburo 10th Study Session. Acceptance of the theory was echoed in academic circles as well, with fifty-one academic journal articles using it in 2003 after Zheng’s Bo’ao Forum speech that debuted the phrase, and over 1,500 in 2004. These major foreign policy themes originated in high-level think tanks and were subsequently adopted by foreign policy elites and senior leadership. “Three Represents” and “Peaceful Rise” are the strongest cases for think tanks’ influence on foreign policy formulation. Later iterations of the “Peaceful Rise” such as “Peaceful Development” and “Harmonious World” are believed to have been created in consultations between outside advisors and senior leaders, but information on the origins of the concepts is less clear.

5th Generation Leadership, the 18th Party Congress, and Chinese Think Tanks

In the fall, the Chinese Communist Party’s 18th Party Congress will convene and promote a “5th Generation” of Party leadership as current leaders reach mandatory retirement age. It is expected that of the nine current Politburo Standing Committee members, seven will be replaced due to mandatory retirement. Similarly, seven of eight State Council and seven of ten Central Military Commission members will also retire, in addition to hundreds of provincial and ministerial leaders throughout the country. This is a generational transfer of power, which is occurring at a time when China is attempting to manage the most complex set of issues it has ever faced, both domestically and abroad. Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang are expected to assume the role of President and Premier, respectively. Xi, like Hu Jintao before him, served as President of the Central Party School and appears not to have much foreign policy experience. Not much is known of Xi’s personal leadership style, but it is believed that he has close and longstanding ties to the PLA. For his part, Li Keqiang recently gave the keynote address at the Second Global Think Tank Summit organized by the China Center for International Economic Exchanges in November 2011. Li congratulated the think tank community on important work conducted on the global economic crisis and praised the work of think tanks in not only advising governments, but also contributing to human survival and development, and global and regional security.
Although specific examples of Xi or Li’s interactions with think tanks are rare, there are several indicators that hint at the role think tanks might play for 5th Generation Leaders. First, the think tank system as a whole has solidified its role in the foreign policy process, with a well-established tradition of advising senior policy makers since the 1990s. The voice of think tanks may continue to be diluted, though, by the increasing role played by other nonofficial foreign policy actors such as university academics, media foreign policy pundits, the internet “blogosphere” and others.30

Second, Xi Jinping’s background at the Central Party School (CPS) could be a positive indicator of his disposition to leverage the advice of think tanks. The CPS serves a primary function of ideological indoctrination for state Party cadres, as well as those from municipal and provincial governments, but is also an incubator for the Communist Party’s most influential policies and ideas. Reportedly all of the preparation work for the 14th, 15th, 16th, and 17th Party Congresses came from the CPS.31 Xi’s military relationships may fare well for the Academy of Military Sciences and certain think tanks, but may sideline civilian institutes affiliated with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of State Security. The “Shanghai clique” that enjoyed so much patronage from Jiang Zemin may regain some of the influence that has been lost over the past decade if Xi relies on connections made during his time in Shanghai and neighboring Zhejiang Province during the 2000s.32 It is also rumored that Xi Jinping’s siblings either already run or are in the process of establishing think tanks, including a “999” Institute (meant to replicate the Chinese term for longevity).33 The intended role of these think tanks is currently unknown, and they may only serve as a vehicle to direct business connections and prestige to Xi’s family.

Conclusion

Think tanks have played an increasingly important role in the formulation of Chinese foreign policy, particularly since the mid-1990s when Jiang Zemin showed his reliance on them for important foreign policy advice. They have evolved since the days when they mainly served to echo and endorse the policies of senior leaders into a system capable of more sophisticated, informed analysis and true policy advocacy. Yet think tanks in China still depend on government and party bureaucracy, and do not operate independently the way those in the West do. Their growing role in foreign policymaking is offset by the diversification of foreign policy voices in China, which has diminished the influence of think tanks in some cases and increased the quality of analysis through competition in others.

5th Generation party leaders seem poised to leverage think tanks at least as much as their predecessors in the Jiang and Hu eras. The domestic policy environment supports continued think tank development, and China’s complex external relations demand increasingly adept policy study and formation. Personal leadership styles are difficult to predict, and so little is publicly known about leaders like Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang that a loose estimate is the closest possible prediction. If they do choose to leverage the think tank system to support foreign policy-making, a robust, developed, intellectual infrastructure is available, and it would certainly be in their interests to employ it to its full capacity.
China watchers wanting to monitor the future foreign policy directions of China’s political elite would do well to watch and interact closely with Chinese think tanks. They are not a perfect optic into the decision cycles of senior leaders, as they are only one part of a complex decision-making process, but can provide some examples of budding policy ideas in their formative stages. The challenge for foreign analysts and scholars is to distinguish the policy ideas that will take hold in China’s upper echelons from those that are not leading the discussion.  

– Mark Redmond served as Lead Editor for this article.

NOTES

1 The literal term “think tank” is sometimes used in the Chinese literature (zhiku—智库, or zhinengku—知能库) but it is a loanword from English; “research institute” (yanjiu suo—研究所) is more commonly used.
2 The last comprehensive examination of China’s think tanks was surveyed in the November 2000 RAND publication China’s Think Tanks: Windows on a Changing China, edited by Murray Scot Tanner, which was further updated in the September 2002 China Quarterly (No.171). Both publications featured articles by a compilation of authors on various aspects of think tanks, and considered together probably best represented the state of knowledge outside of China about Chinese think tanks at the time. Occasional articles have been published since then but have not offered such a comprehensive examination.
5 Interview with a former PLA staff officer, October 2011; Interview with a US think tank scholar, November 2011.
7 Saunders, 55–56; Ross, 45; Interview with a U.S. think tank scholar, November 2011.
8 Interview with a US think tank academic, November 2011.
10 http://cfiss.org.cn/.
11 Jakobson, 38; Shambaugh, 13.
12 Interview with a US think tank academic, November 2011.
15 Cheng Li, 7.
18 Cheng Li, 4.
19 Alice Lyman Miller, “The Central Committee Departments under Hu Jintao,” China Leadership Monitor, No. 27 (Winter, 2009).
25 Bondiguel, 6.
28 Interview with a US think tank academic, November 2011; Interview with a former PLA staff officer, October 2011.
30 Jakobson, 25–46.
33 Interview with a former PLA staff officer, October 2011.