

## A Post-Print Study of the Think Tank Functions of the Council on Foreign Relations from a Knowledge Perspective

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### Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] This study examines the think tank functions of the Council on Foreign Relations to analyze the knowledge products and services of premier international think tanks, summarize the pathways through which think tanks exert influence via knowledge products, and provide references for the development of new-type think tanks in China. [Method/Process] A case study methodology was employed, with data collected primarily through literature and website investigations, supplemented by authoritative international think tank ranking reports, to investigate the knowledge products and influence of the Council on Foreign Relations. [Results/Conclusion] Knowledge products constitute the foundational source of think tank influence; knowledge production, publication, and service represent essential components of think tank functionality.

### Full Text

#### Preamble

**Leveraging the International Political Landscape with Excellent Knowledge Production: A Study on the Think Tank Function of the Council on Foreign Relations from a Knowledge Perspective**

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### Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] By examining the think tank function of the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), this paper analyzes the knowledge products and

services of a top-tier international think tank, summarizes the pathways through which think tanks exert influence via knowledge products, and provides references for the construction of new-type think tanks in China.

**[Method/Process]** This study adopts a case study approach, primarily collecting data through literature review and website investigation, while also consulting authoritative international think tank ranking reports to examine CFR's knowledge products and their influence.

**[Result/Conclusion]** Think tank knowledge products constitute the fundamental source of think tank influence. Knowledge production, knowledge publishing, and knowledge service are essential components of think tank functions.

**Keywords:** Council on Foreign Relations; think tank; knowledge product; international politics; Global Go To Think Tank Index Report

**Classification Number:** C931.5

## 1 Research Background and Problem Statement

The year 2016 has passed but remains memorable as a year of frequent “black swan events,” with the U.S. presidential election standing out for its intense process and surprising outcome. Although the election results have long been settled, the new president's unique business background and unconventional style continue to challenge many established orders. Yet whether it was Trump—“inexperienced in politics” and “playing by his own rules”—or Hillary Clinton, “the first female presidential candidate in U.S. history,” along with numerous other strong contenders in both parties' primaries, all met with the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) and its President Richard Haass during their campaigns to discuss U.S. foreign policy and related issues.

This detail offers a glimpse into CFR's status within U.S. political circles, particularly among decision-makers. CFR's current President Richard Haass previously served as Special Assistant to President George H.W. Bush and held multiple positions at the U.S. Department of State and Department of Defense. He has also worked at several think tanks including the Brookings Institution, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, and International Institute for Strategic Studies, while serving as a Professor of Public Policy at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government. His career exemplifies the “revolving door” mechanism of talent between think tanks and government. As early as the 2008 U.S. presidential election, Haass provided foreign policy advice to both Republicans and Democrats. Following Trump's victory in 2016, Haass candidly stated on behalf of CFR that Trump had introduced uncertainty into America's global role, and that the world under Trump was entering an “era of disorderly decline.” Haass also argued that the U.S. needed to abandon “protectionism” and “anti-immigrant and anti-refugee” sentiments, sending a clear warning about Trump's policies [1][2].

CFR's willingness to “challenge” the incumbent U.S. president's policies reflects

its enduring influence. Since its establishment in 1921, CFR has been an authoritative institution advising on U.S. foreign policy, even being called America's "invisible government," "school for statesmen," "real State Department," and "engine of foreign policy." *Newsweek* has referred to it as the power establishment of U.S. foreign policy. Daniel Estulin wrote in his book that "CFR is the core organization closest to the ruling body in the United States," and President Roosevelt's family recalled in memoirs that "most of the ideas, proposals, and methods that benefited America under Roosevelt were carefully crafted for him by CFR" [3][4]. CFR's influence permeates the U.S. government so deeply that it is often difficult to distinguish which plans belong to CFR and which belong to the government [5]. The vast majority of senior officials and even presidents in successive U.S. administrations (regardless of party) have been CFR members.

demonstrates CFR's involvement in or direct promotion of major U.S. and global foreign policy decisions since its founding. Throughout nearly a century of international changes, CFR's shadow looms behind many important events.

#### **Table 1 Important Foreign Affairs Decisions Since CFR's Establishment**

**1920s:** Planned the Kellogg-Briand Pact (Paris Peace Pact) and strategized the establishment of post-World War I international order.

**1940s:** Provided wartime foreign policy and strategy to the U.S. government; preemptively designed post-war U.S.-led economic globalization and proposals for establishing the United Nations, International Monetary Fund, and World Bank.

**Late 1940s to Early Cold War:** Designed the Marshall Plan for Europe; proposed the "containment strategy" toward the Soviet Union, shaping U.S. Cold War policy.

**1950s:** Proposed U.S. policy toward Southeast Asia, pushing America into the Vietnam War.

**1960s-1970s:** Advocated U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam; promoted U.S. engagement with China and improved Sino-U.S. relations.

**1990s:** Proposed "global economic integration"; introduced the "Clash of Civilizations" theory.

**21st Century:** Proposed the "G2" theory of U.S.-China co-governance; influenced decision-making on the Afghanistan and Iraq wars.

CFR is not a government organization but rather a representative of American think tanks. U.S. think tanks are considered the "fifth power" in the American political ecosystem, following the legislature, executive, judiciary, and news media, playing a unique role and function. James McGann, an expert on U.S. think tanks, points out that think tanks serve as a "bridge between knowledge and policy" [6]. From this perspective, reviewing current research on CFR reveals that scholars have primarily focused on the think tank's policy influence from the perspective of international politics and international relations, while paying less attention—from the perspective of knowledge and information dissemination—to the direct source of think tank influence: namely, think tank

knowledge output and information products.

Therefore, this paper adopts a knowledge perspective, viewing the essence of think tanks as a bridge and converter between “knowledge” and “power.” Based on analyzing CFR’ s policy impact, it focuses on the knowledge attributes and functions of this think tank, tracing the source of its influence. This paper primarily addresses the following questions: As a world-class think tank, what are the knowledge products of the U.S. Council on Foreign Relations? How are these knowledge products produced and quality-controlled? How are they disseminated and promoted? How do they influence U.S. foreign policy? Based on this analysis, the paper summarizes experiences to provide references for China’ s new-type think tank construction.

In January 2017, the University of Pennsylvania’ s Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program (TTCSP) released the authoritative think tank ranking report—the *2016 Global Go To Think Tank Index Report* [7]. In this report’ s comprehensive ranking of top global think tanks, CFR ranked 10th, following other American institutions including the Brookings Institution, Center for Strategic and International Studies, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, RAND Corporation, and Wilson Center. Additionally, CFR ranked in the top 10 in multiple individual categories (see ).

Compared with other top U.S. think tanks like RAND, CFR possesses distinctive characteristics. Noted think tank researchers Donald Abelson and James McGann have categorized the developmental stages and types of American think tanks [8]. Synthesizing their perspectives, U.S. think tanks can be divided into four major categories (see ).

Established in 1921, CFR represents early American think tanks. The first generation of U.S. think tanks primarily received funding from foundations while emphasizing political independence, neutrality, and academic autonomy, refraining from partisan interest struggles—a distinctive feature that persists today. Although CFR President Richard Haass provides foreign policy advice to both Republicans and Democrats in each election, he has never publicly endorsed any candidate, based on CFR’ s non-partisan stance.

### **Table 3 Major Generations and Forms of U.S. Think Tanks**

**First Generation (Early 20th Century to WWII):** Policy Research Think Tanks— “University without students”

Representative (Founding Year): Council on Foreign Relations (1921)

**Second Generation (Post-WWII to Early 1960s):** Government Contractors

Representative: RAND Corporation (1946)

**Third Generation (1970s-1980s):** Advocacy Think Tanks

Representative: Heritage Foundation (1973)

**Fourth Generation (1990s-Present):** Legacy-Based Think Tanks

Representative: Center for American Progress (1982)

CFR's unique role in U.S. foreign policy has generated a substantial body of specialized research. Influential American works include *Imperial Brain Trust: The Council on Foreign Relations and United States Foreign Policy* by Laurence Shoup and William Minter [9], *The Shadows of Power: The Council on Foreign Relations and the American Decline* by James Perloff [10], and *The Wise Men of Foreign Affairs: The History of the Council on Foreign Relations* by Robert D. Schulzinger [11]. Most academic research examines CFR's role in U.S. foreign strategic planning and implementation from international relations and political science perspectives, exploring the relationship between think tanks and U.S. foreign policy. In Chinese scholarship, Jin Longyun systematically studied CFR's history, current status, functions, and role in U.S. foreign policy, analyzing its important roles in different stages of American history [12]. Li Lianguang and Gao Shichao specifically examined CFR's influence on U.S. Vietnam War decision-making [13][14]. Wang Juanjiao interpreted CFR's research on China issues in the 1960s [15]. Because CFR itself publishes extensive research findings and materials, it has become a reference footnote for many international relations and historical studies. Against the backdrop of building new-type think tanks with Chinese characteristics, increasing research has focused on experiences from top U.S. think tanks like CFR, but such studies often suffer from high content repetition, mostly offering simple introductions to think tank history and current status while lacking theoretical foundation and new analytical perspectives.

### 3 Theoretical Foundation and Analytical Framework

This study first introduces relevant theoretical achievements from current think tank research. Specialized think tank studies exhibit multidimensional perspectives (such as policy environment, governance structure, operational model, impact evaluation), among which the knowledge perspective is foundational. This perspective views think tanks as knowledge collectives. Many scholars have discussed the unique knowledge attributes of think tanks: they are typical representatives of knowledge production in applied contexts [16]; their products are knowledge and ideas [17]; their essence is information processing and knowledge organization [18]; and they serve as bridges between knowledge and policy [6].

Xu Xiaohu argues that the fundamental role of think tanks lies in processing existing data and information to produce public knowledge and policies according to needs [18]. This paper posits that think tanks are knowledge conversion devices whose operational mechanisms consist of three stages: knowledge input, knowledge processing, and knowledge output. Based on existing research, this paper refines and integrates these stages.

**(1) Knowledge Input-Processing Stage:** He Defang, Qiao Xiaodong, Zeng Jianxun, and others have proposed the FAST4Wisdom service concept of “factual data + specialized tools + expert wisdom” for scientific and technical in-

telligence work under new technological conditions [19-21]. Li Yang, Li Gang, Zhang Jianian, and others have proposed a basic research paradigm of “data resources + tool methods + expert wisdom” for think tank intelligence functions, constructing a think tank capability system and operational mechanism model based on intelligence flow [22]. Data resources and tool methods primarily belong to front-end configurations, while expert wisdom is key to the mid-stage knowledge processing phase. These elements collectively constitute the knowledge input-processing stage.

**(2) Knowledge Processing-Output Stage:** Donald Abelson notes that think tanks are primarily engaged in the development and promotion of ideas, attaching the same importance to product marketing as the private sector. However, while corporations measure success by profit margins, think tanks measure success by their influence on public opinion and policymakers’ orientations [23]. This paper argues that whether think tanks output ideas, proposals, or policy recommendations, their essence is knowledge products. The core of the knowledge output stage is to enhance the value of think tank knowledge products in the marketplace of ideas and policies through multiple strategies, thereby increasing their influence.

Johan Galtung divides social structure into three layers—decision-making core, center, and periphery—based on the relationship between social strata and policy decisions. Correspondingly, some scholars categorize think tank knowledge product influence into decision-making influence, elite influence, and mass influence [8]. Think tanks employ different strategies and approaches to exert influence on different levels and audiences.

Synthesizing these perspectives, this paper proposes an analytical framework for think tank functions from a knowledge perspective, as shown in [Figure 1: see original paper]. According to think tanks’ knowledge workflow, their functions can be divided into three stages: **Knowledge Input Configuration Stage:** This stage primarily involves configuring data and information resources, expert resources, and methodological tools according to task requirements at the front end of the knowledge production process. Both information content resources and expert human resources are not limited to internal think tank sources but may come from the public domain, government agencies, or commercial institutions, combined according to the think tank’ s research tasks and project objectives to form a project-based knowledge production platform. **Knowledge Processing Configuration Stage:** This stage’ s work is mainly conducted within the think tank institution, integrating the think tank’ s existing knowledge base with knowledge increments to generate new knowledge. **Knowledge Dissemination Configuration Stage:** This stage involves effectively promoting and socially deploying think tank knowledge products, representing a social knowledge allocation behavior based on the think tank.

## 4 Case Study of the Council on Foreign Relations

In the *2016 Global Go To Think Tank Index Report*, CFR ranked in the top 10 in multiple special achievement categories including “Best Think Tank with Internet Presence,” “Best Think Tank for Media Relations,” and “Think Tank with Most Significant Impact on Public Policy” [7], reflecting its advantages in think tank knowledge dissemination methods and effectiveness. Therefore, this case study section focuses on CFR’s knowledge product dissemination and configuration processes.

### 4.1 Content of CFR’s Knowledge Products

Many top U.S. think tanks have their own exclusive publications, such as *Foreign Policy* from the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, *Brookings Review* from the Brookings Institution, and *Washington Quarterly* from the Center for Strategic and International Studies. Among these, the most influential is CFR’s *Foreign Affairs* magazine.

*Foreign Affairs* is globally recognized as the most important international politics journal and serves as CFR’s brand and flagship publication. It is said that to understand the direction of U.S. foreign policy in the coming year, one need only read the current year’s *Foreign Affairs* [3]. The magazine and CFR were born together and maintain close ties: *Foreign Affairs* was launched in September 1922, the year after CFR’s establishment, and has served as CFR’s public opinion platform for nearly a century, earning CFR reputation in diplomatic and international circles.

Beyond its flagship product, CFR’s knowledge products include various books, reports, papers, memoranda, testimonies, websites, videos, audio, podcasts, media columns, media interviews, blog posts, and more [4], forming a multimedia, diversified, and multi-level knowledge product matrix that widely disseminates the think tank’s research findings.

In addition to these tangible knowledge products, CFR also functions as an information exchange and dissemination platform, providing various information services that effectively shape the think tank’s soft power. These services include hosting lectures, forums, salons, seminars, as well as personal contacts and establishing private connections.

### 4.2 Editorial Publication and Operation of *Foreign Affairs*

In CFR’s mission statement on its official website, it describes itself as an independent, non-partisan organization, think tank, and publisher dedicated to providing resources for members, government officials, business leaders, journalists, educators and students, civic and religious leaders, and other citizens interested in foreign affairs, helping them better understand the world and U.S. foreign policy toward other nations [25]. Notably, this description emphasizes CFR’s role as a “publisher” on par with its identity as a “think tank.” In other

official statements, CFR frequently stresses its goal of becoming a “reliable source of information” for users. This emphasis on information dissemination and publishing functions is rare among other think tanks.

Here, we focus specifically on CFR’s publishing function and its representative publication—*Foreign Affairs* magazine. Using this journal as a sample, we analyze the production, editing, and quality control of think tank publications.

### **(1) Publication and Distribution of *Foreign Affairs***

*Foreign Affairs*, also formerly translated as *Foreign Affairs Quarterly*, was founded in 1922 as a quarterly journal published in January, April, July, and October. In 1993, it became a bimonthly, and the name *Foreign Affairs* gradually gained acceptance [26]. In today’s online environment, *Foreign Affairs* has evolved beyond a print magazine into a media platform centered on the print journal but integrating websites, mobile applications, social media, and offline events. On the *Foreign Affairs* website, users can subscribe to customized content such as “Today’s Foreign Affairs,” “This Week’s Foreign Affairs,” “Books and Reviews,” and “Academic Bulletin,” or browse articles, collections, reviews, interviews, videos, maps, photo albums, and charts.

### **(2) Positioning and Stance of *Foreign Affairs***

*Foreign Affairs* positions itself on its official website as “the premier forum for serious discussion of American foreign policy and global affairs.” In its inaugural issue in 1922, the journal described its main philosophy, which has guided its editorial practice for nearly a century. This philosophy can be summarized as: inclusive and accommodating of diverse viewpoints; covering broad topics including history and economics, not just politics; targeting authors and readers from various countries but prioritizing American interests and readers; guiding American public opinion [27].

In the early 1970s, *Foreign Affairs* changed its founding mission statement from “guiding” American public opinion to “informing” it [26], emphasizing the provision of multiple perspectives to the public. The journal does not expect readers to agree with all viewpoints expressed but rather aims to equip them with rich and adequate information to make their own judgments and decisions.

Thus, *Foreign Affairs* upholds CFR’s objective and neutral style. This “neutrality” does not mean “having no viewpoints or providing no viewpoints.” On the contrary, *Foreign Affairs*’s “objectivity” lies in fully presenting various distinct and even conflicting perspectives, ensuring readers have comprehensive knowledge of different viewpoints on foreign affairs.

### **(3) Layout and Genre of *Foreign Affairs***

Based on this positioning, *Foreign Affairs* considers not only professionalism but also accessibility and readability for non-professionals and the general public in its layout and genre design.

The main article types in current *Foreign Affairs* issues are shown in . Although positioned as a forum for serious discussion of foreign affairs, the journal does

not mean to be obscure or elitist. Instead, it pursues academic and professional quality while meeting the reading needs of general readers, thereby truly building a bridge between policymakers, experts, and the public. This approach enables the think tank to foster public discussion, publish and discover viewpoints, gather public opinion, influence decision-making, and provide public education. This distinction between think tank journals and academic journals merits consideration and reference for Chinese think tanks and academic publications.

#### (4) Manuscript Solicitation and Editing of *Foreign Affairs*

*Foreign Affairs* obtains manuscripts through two primary channels: editorial solicitation and author submission, with the former accounting for the majority of articles in each issue [26], thereby ensuring quality and authority.

**Editorial Solicitation and Quality Control:** *Foreign Affairs* editors are responsible for planning themes for each issue based on international developments and inviting relevant experts and decision-makers to contribute. The journal does not use anonymous peer review like academic journals; instead, the editorial board decides whether to accept manuscripts. In its early years, the editors gifted the publication to influential figures worldwide to establish connections while attracting these prominent individuals to publish in the journal [26]. *Foreign Affairs*' second editor-in-chief, Hamilton Armstrong, managed the magazine for 44 years (1928-1972) and was the first American journalist to interview Hitler. Under his leadership, the journal's authority attracted statesmen and top experts to contribute, including Federal German Chancellor Adenauer, British Prime Minister Attlee, Soviet leader Khrushchev, Yugoslav leader Tito, Egyptian leader Nasser, and Cambodian Prince Sihanouk [3].

**Author Submission and Quality Control:** *Foreign Affairs* also accepts author submissions. All manuscripts require authors to provide current and past position descriptions, recent publications, and relevant biographical information. *Foreign Affairs* editors do not provide fact-checking; authors are responsible for the authenticity and accuracy of their articles and must cite sources for all references. For author submissions, *Foreign Affairs* employs a rolling review and acceptance process rather than adhering to a fixed editorial schedule [28], which facilitates timely publication of new arguments and helps discover and cultivate talented individuals with unique perspectives.

### 4.3 Impact of CFR's Knowledge Products

CFR has influenced global political processes through exceptional knowledge production. From the CFR and *Foreign Affairs* case, we can see that think tank knowledge products (especially think tank publications) are the fundamental source of think tank influence.

Many important concepts, theories, and ideas familiar to us today were first published in *Foreign Affairs* and other CFR publications. Many renowned statesmen, thinkers, and strategists became famous through a single article in *Foreign*

*Affairs*. Many significant events we have witnessed were directly driven by CFR publications. For example:

- In July 1947, George Kennan published “The Sources of Soviet Conduct” under the pseudonym “X” in *Foreign Affairs*, proposing the “containment” policy toward the Soviet Union that set the tone for U.S. Cold War strategy for half a century. Kennan became known as the “father of containment.”
- In July 1953, J. Robert Oppenheimer, “father of the atomic bomb” and leader of the Manhattan Project, published “Atomic Weapons and American Policy” in *Foreign Affairs*, proposing the theory of nuclear deterrence. The concept of “mutually assured destruction” helped ensure that the U.S. and Soviet Union acted with caution during the most dangerous moments of the Cold War, preventing nuclear war.
- In the 1950s-60s, Henry Kissinger published 12 articles in *Foreign Affairs* before entering government service as National Security Advisor [3], which established his reputation.
- Beginning in the 1960s, *Foreign Affairs* published numerous articles on China, and CFR published many monographs and research reports on China, such as the *United States and China in World Affairs* series, some of which became bestsellers. These publications enhanced American understanding of China from top to bottom, laying the public opinion foundation and policy orientation for improved Sino-U.S. relations. CFR’s contribution to the normalization of Sino-U.S. diplomatic relations was invaluable [3].
- In the 1990s, Samuel Huntington first introduced the “Clash of Civilizations” in the Summer 1993 issue of *Foreign Affairs*, sparking debate that continues today, with many of its arguments being validated in subsequent international political transformations and historical developments.

## 5 Conclusions and Implications

This paper has examined the knowledge production function of think tanks, analyzing the case of the U.S. Council on Foreign Relations and its *Foreign Affairs* publication. Based on this case, it analyzed the content, production, dissemination effects, and quality assurance of think tank knowledge products. This paper argues that think tank knowledge products are the fundamental source of think tank influence. Traditionally, think tank knowledge products mainly included books, journals, and research reports. American think tanks such as CFR, Brookings Institution, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, and Heritage Foundation all have their own exclusive publications. In the multimedia, new media, and rich media environment, think tank knowledge products also include websites, audio, video, podcasts, social media, and other formats. Top-tier think tanks have now formed systematic knowledge product matrices that can provide targeted services for different user types and application sce-

narios. For example, think tank books can target the general public, journals primarily target peer experts, and think tank briefings mainly target decision-makers.

Through analyzing the CFR and *Foreign Affairs* case, this paper concludes that knowledge production, knowledge publishing, and knowledge service are essential components of think tank functions. This offers important implications for China' s new-type think tank construction and the editing and publishing of think tank media:

First, for think tank construction and operation, Chinese think tanks should emphasize high-quality knowledge output and supply, with the key being the creation of excellent knowledge products. Given China' s publishing management system, Chinese think tanks cannot become quasi-publishing institutions like their American counterparts, but they can consider achieving deep cooperation and coordination with publishing houses, magazines, and journal editorial departments to jointly plan and set professional topics, organize targeted research, and open up the entire process from topic selection and research implementation to results publication. This would improve all functional stages from knowledge input and processing to knowledge dissemination, maximizing the impact and social benefits of think tank research rather than letting results sit on shelves, wasting social resources.

Second, for think tank evaluation and quality management, evaluation institutions and management agencies should emphasize the design of quality standards and evaluation indicators for think tank knowledge products. Currently, China' s classification and identification of think tank knowledge products remain relatively general, lacking corresponding quality standards, thus requiring refinement and optimization of relevant indicators. Quality control should also be implemented to ensure high standards throughout the entire knowledge production process. Additionally, we must emphasize long-term evaluation of think tank knowledge output. The CFR case demonstrates that the effectiveness of many think tank research results does not manifest in the short term but rather shows tremendous impact decades later as policies are implemented.

Finally, for the editing and publishing of think tank media, *Foreign Affairs* offers many valuable lessons. These include establishing connections with first-rate experts in professional fields, cultivating high-level author groups, enriching article genres and column settings, achieving balance between professional knowledge and popularization, and emphasizing agenda-setting and public discussion.

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