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## On the Constructive Interaction Between Think Tanks and Decision-Makers: Postprint

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### Abstract

The National Governance Research Institute of Huazhong University of Science and Technology was established in February 2014, a professional think tank founded after the Third Plenary Session of the 18th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, with the mission of “focusing on major issues and serving national strategies,” dedicated to contributing wisdom to “advancing the modernization of the national governance system and governance capability.” The Institute comprises the National Governance Theory and Comparative Research Center, National Governance System and Policy Research Center, National Governance Regulation and Evaluation System Research Center, Governance Information Collection and Big Data Processing Center, Government Decision Support System Research Center, and Hubei Regional Governance and Central China Development Research Center. It has over 30 full-time and part-time researchers and more than 10 foreign visiting researchers, with Professor Ouyang Kang, former Deputy Party Secretary of Huazhong University of Science and Technology and a renowned Chinese scholar, serving as its Director. In November 2014, it became a Key Research Base of Humanities and Social Sciences in Hubei Provincial Universities; in March 2016, it was designated as the Hubei Provincial Collaborative Innovation Center for National Governance; in December 2016, it was officially included in the CTTI (China Think Tank Index); and it is recognized as one of Hubei Province’s “Top Ten Reform Think Tanks” and “Top Ten New-Type Think Tanks.”

### Full Text

### Preamble

#### On the Positive Interaction Between Think Tanks and Decision-Makers

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The Institute of State Governance at Huazhong University of Science and Technology was established in February 2014, following the Third Plenary Session of the 18th CPC Central Committee. As a professional think tank with the mission of “focusing on major issues and serving national strategies,” it is dedicated to contributing wisdom toward “advancing the modernization of the national governance system and governance capabilities.” The institute comprises several research centers, including the Center for State Governance Theory and Comparative Studies, the Center for State Governance Systems and Policy Research, the Center for State Governance Regulation and Evaluation Systems, the Center for Governance Information Collection and Big Data Processing, the Center for Government Decision Support Systems, and the Center for Hubei Regional Governance and Central China Development. It employs over 30 full-time and part-time researchers, plus more than 10 foreign visiting scholars, with Professor Ouyang Kang—a renowned Chinese scholar and former Deputy Party Secretary of Huazhong University of Science and Technology—serving as its director. In November 2014, it became a key humanities and social sciences research base in Hubei Province; in March 2016, it was designated a Hubei Provincial Collaborative Innovation Center for State Governance; and by December 2016, it was officially included in the CTTI (China Think Tank Index). The institute is recognized as one of Hubei’s “Top Ten Reform Think Tanks” and “Top Ten New-Type Think Tanks.”

The Third Plenary Session of the 18th CPC Central Committee called for strengthening the construction of new-type think tanks with Chinese characteristics and establishing a sound decision-making consultation system. On October 27, 2014, the Central Leading Group for Comprehensively Deepening Reform adopted the “Opinions on Strengthening the Construction of New-Type Think Tanks with Chinese Characteristics.” President Xi Jinping has emphasized that effective governance requires concentrating wisdom from all quarters and mobilizing the broadest possible forces, with a focus on building several high-end think tanks that wield significant influence both domestically and internationally, while also valuing the development of specialized think tanks. In response to this call, think tanks at all levels have mushroomed across the country. According to the China Think Tank Index (CTTI) launched jointly by *Guangming Daily* and Nanjing University on December 17, 2016, the first batch alone included 489 think tanks, with numerous other institutions possessing think tank functions yet to be indexed. This demonstrates that China already boasts a considerable number of think tanks, but their influence remains to be enhanced. How can we fully leverage the functions of think tanks to strengthen their impact? The key, in our view, lies in clarifying the relationship between think tanks and decision-makers and fostering positive interaction between them.

## 1. Clarifying the Positioning of the Relationship Between Think Tanks and Decision-Makers

Think tanks exist to serve decision-making, and their relationship with decision-makers should be one of supply and demand—mutually dependent yet independent. Think tanks and decision-makers must not be homogeneous, nor should think tanks become appendages of decision-making bodies. Moreover, the function of think tanks is not to speculate about what decision-makers want to hear, but to research what they ought to hear; not to annotate the viewpoints and statements of decision-makers, but to influence their thinking, speech, and actions with scientifically sound perspectives. Therefore, compared to decision-makers, think tanks should stand higher, see farther, think deeper, and act more pragmatically.

Specifically, think tanks should maintain three types of relationships with decision-makers:

### 1.1 Think Tanks Should Be “Below” Decision-Makers

Being “below” means going down to the grassroots and immersing oneself in reality. Facts form the basis of decision-making, and investigation is the prerequisite for grasping facts. However, official research missions often become formalistic and superficial, while local officials frequently rush to cope with them, busy with performance. In contrast, think tank scholars’ research tends to be more “down-to-earth,” providing easier access to ordinary people’ s daily lives and enabling them to integrate with the broad masses. This allows them to authentically reflect local problems and genuinely understand the aspirations of the people. Once problems are correctly identified and the real needs of the masses are understood, think tanks can propose targeted policy recommendations that solve problems and meet public demands.

### 1.2 Think Tanks Should Be “Within” Decision-Makers

Being “within” means thinking from the decision-maker’s perspective and placing oneself in their position. While think tanks possess solid academic foundations and systematic theories, they often lack practical work experience. They may not understand how decision-makers actually make decisions, what decisions have already been made, or what decision-making support is needed. Consequently, they either fail to propose feasible suggestions or offer recommendations that are merely armchair theorizing and unrealistic. How can think tanks embed themselves within decision-making circles? An effective approach is to dispatch researchers to serve in decision-making departments at provincial, prefectural, municipal, county, and township levels, where they can observe or genuinely participate in decision-making processes, understand practical work, and master decision-making procedures. Simultaneously, channels should be actively expanded through political consultation proposals, people’ s congress motions, and advisory committee recommendations, enabling researchers to ful-

fill their functions in governance deliberation and accumulate practical decision-making experience. Through extensive participation in governance, researchers can grasp decision-making procedures and understand the needs of decision-makers, thereby proposing targeted and actionable policy recommendations.

### **1.3 Think Tanks Should Be “Above” Decision-Makers**

Being “above” means possessing a macro perspective and transcending the myopia of those directly involved. Although think tanks serve decision-makers, they must never degenerate into their vassals, much less become propaganda teams disseminating decision-makers’ existing ideas. Think tanks must maintain independence from decision-makers not only institutionally and mechanistically but also in terms of thought, concepts, vision, and methodology. They must transcend immediate, direct, utilitarian, and situational constraints to consider more macroscopic, long-term, comprehensive, and idealistic issues, offering innovative, strategic, holistic, and forward-looking policy recommendations.

## **2. Promoting Positive Interaction Between Think Tanks and Decision-Makers**

Unimpeded channels are the prerequisite for positive interaction between think tanks and decision-makers. Think tanks must promptly understand decision-makers’ needs, identify their problems, and provide required solutions, necessitating the establishment of barrier-free communication channels. Currently, most think tanks have not built such channels with decision-makers. They either rely on scholars’ personal connections or social influence to offer occasional, random advice to certain decision-making units or leaders, or they 闭门造车 (work behind closed doors) to produce internal briefs, leaving their productivity underutilized. Similarly, most decision-makers have not established effective communication mechanisms with think tanks, often commissioning research projects on an ad hoc basis and lacking reasonable evaluation and adoption mechanisms for think tank outputs. Although decision-makers at all levels have institutions similar to policy research offices, their primary function is to prepare materials for leaders’ speeches, making them hardly qualify as decision-making think tanks in the strict sense, let alone serve as bridges connecting think tanks with decision-makers. Only by constructing smooth communication channels can positive interaction become possible. Specifically, positive interaction includes the following dimensions:

### **2.1 “Problem” and “Problem-Solving”: Think Tanks Provide Solutions Through Investigation**

Like general research institutions, problem consciousness is fundamental to think tanks. Problems are the starting point of research, and problem-solving is its destination. While general research institutions focus on discovering and explaining problems, think tanks’ crucial task is to solve them. Where do problems

originate? First, from difficulties decision-makers encounter during the decision-making process—such as insufficient data, inaccurate facts, or unclear prospects that complicate decisions. Second, from major theoretical or practical issues concerning national welfare and people’ s livelihood. When facing problems, decision-makers should adeptly harness wisdom from all quarters, mobilize various forces, transform problems into research topics, commission relevant think tanks to conduct studies, and widely solicit solutions. Think tanks, in turn, should leverage their solid academic foundations, fact-based investigations, and far-sighted macro perspectives and strategic thinking to provide decision-makers with practical and feasible solutions.

## **2.2 “Foresight” and “Aftercare” : Think Tanks Help Decision-Makers Prevent Risks and Achieve Sustainable Development**

Under the current term system for leading cadres, decision-makers—especially those bearing decision-making responsibilities—often lack holistic understanding of a locality’ s history, present, and future. Compounded by misguided views on political achievements, many leaders focus solely on performance during their tenure while paying little attention to potential problems after leaving office. This inevitably leads to unsustainable development and may even cause severe waste or environmental damage due to short-sighted decisions. In contrast, think tank research teams are relatively stable, and their long-term research in specific fields or continuous tracking of certain decision-making bodies enables them to grasp development trends and make forward-looking judgments. Therefore, decision-makers need to establish long-term cooperation mechanisms with relevant think tanks, widely soliciting their opinions before making major decisions. By leveraging the stability of think tanks to compensate for the turnover of decision-makers, policy continuity can be ensured, decision-making risks and crises effectively avoided, and sustainable development achieved.

## **2.3 “Down-to-Earth”and “Looking at the Stars”: Think Tanks Influence Long-Term, Holistic, and Strategic Decision-Making**

If decision-makers are busy with practical matters— “down-to-earth” individuals—then think tanks should play the role of envisioning the future, of “looking at the stars.” Decision-makers, constantly occupied with immediate tasks at the forefront of decision-making, can easily forget why they started and lose their sense of direction. As “bystanders,” think tanks should strive to stand higher, see farther, and think deeper, offering more long-term, holistic, and strategic policy recommendations. Therefore, cooperation between decision-makers and think tanks should emphasize complementary advantages. Decision-makers can learn from think tank experts through “collective study sessions,” “decision-making consultations,” and “problem seminars,” while think tank researchers can offer policy advice through “decision-making proposals”and “policy advisory reports.” By building mechanisms for close ties and frequent interaction, both parties can jointly formulate and implement major decisions that are both realistic and

visionary.

Strengthening interaction in these three areas encourages decision-makers to value think tank recommendations and make scientific decisions based on them, thereby generating dependence on think tanks. Meanwhile, think tanks, in serving decision-makers, can produce numerous valuable recommendations that are often adopted and positively impact economic and social development, thereby stimulating their enthusiasm for serving decision-makers. This constitutes the positive interaction between think tanks and decision-makers.

*Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.*

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