Postprint: SWOT Analysis and Strategic Choices for Intelligence Agencies' Participation in Think Tank Development

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Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] Intelligence agencies possess inherent advantages and potential for think tank development, yet also exhibit certain limitations.

[Method/Process] To systematically analyze the timing and advantages/disadvantages of intelligence agencies' involvement in think tank construction, this study employs a SWOT analysis framework to comprehensively examine and align internal and external favorable and unfavorable factors, and proposes corresponding strategic options.

[Results/Conclusion] The author contends that SO and ST strategies constitute the optimal choice for intelligence agencies' current engagement in think tank construction.

Full Text

SWOT Analysis and Strategic Choices for Developing Think Tank Functions in China' s Intelligence Research Institutions

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Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] Intelligence research institutions in China possess innate conditions and potential for developing think tank functions, yet they also face inherent limitations. A comprehensive understanding of their strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats holds great significance for the construction of think tank oriented functions. **[Method/Process]** To systematically

analyze the timing, advantages, and disadvantages of intelligence institutions' participation in think tank construction, this paper employs the SWOT analytical framework to conduct a comprehensive examination and matching of internal and external factors, both positive and negative. [**Result/Conclusion**] The authors argue that SO (Strengths-Opportunities) and ST (Strengths-Threats) strategies represent the optimal choices for intelligence institutions' current engagement in think tank construction.

Keywords: intelligence institution; think tank; SWOT

Introduction

In China, the concept of "intelligence" is typically traced back to the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Period. The "espionage" mentioned in *The Art of War* essentially corresponds to modern intelligence, with spies regarded as "treasures of the sovereign."Although contemporary intelligence differs substantially from its historical origins, its function in serving decision-making remains unquestionable [**?**]. While think tanks and intelligence institutions exhibit clear differences in institutional nature, construction purpose, and research objects, they also demonstrate intersections and overlaps in institutional functions, research methods, and even research content. Think tank work inherently carries distinctive characteristics of intelligence work, as evidenced by the fact that many renowned think tanks maintain specialized information and intelligence service departments, full-time information coordination directors, and thematic databases [**?**].

Against this backdrop, what are the primary manifestations of the think tank functions currently performed by intelligence institutions? What deficiencies exist? What are the strengths and weaknesses of intelligence institutions seeking to join China' s think tank system? How can their capacity for decision-making consultation be strengthened? To address these questions, this paper conducts a systematic analysis using the SWOT framework.

1. Comparative Analysis of Service Functions Between Intelligence and Think Tanks

The three functions of intelligence can be summarized as: information infrastructure support, tactical intelligence services, and strategic intelligence services. The latter two share a progressive relationship without absolute boundaries. To better distinguish the functional differences between intelligence and think tanks, this paper begins by examining their service characteristics, highlighting two key points. First, intelligence is inseparable from "competition." Traditionally, intelligence has even been defined as information activities in wartime contexts (which, by extension, means "competition"), whereas public decision-making serves the public interest and, rationally speaking, involves no distinction between enemy and ally. Second, China' s intelligence services largely adhere to the notion that intelligence serves as the "eyes and ears" of

scientific research activities, deviating from or even denying its "advisor" and "think tank" functions [**?**]. In practice, intelligence work tends to focus on technical decision-making consultation and enterprise decision-making consultation, which cannot be fully equated with public policy decision-making consultation.

From the perspective of policymakers and policy experts, policy decisions must be meaningful both politically and technically. For a decision to be successfully legitimized, it must be scientifically packaged using analytical language, data, information, and simple empirical facts to ensure technical adequacy, necessity, and feasibility, while simultaneously weighing social acceptance and the maturity of social conditions to ensure an adequate "safety margin."This demonstrates that policy research (producing ideas) and consultation (producing countermeasures) involve highly complex considerations, constituting the core responsibilities of think tanks. Surrounding these duties, think tanks also perform functions including ideological propaganda, public opinion guidance, and building multiparty dialogue platforms, serving primarily policymakers while also engaging interest groups, voters, and media as important forces influencing policy formulation and implementation.

[Figure 1: see original paper]

2. SWOT Analysis of Intelligence Institutions'Participation in Think Tank Construction

SWOT analysis, also known as situational analysis, examines an organization' s strategic environment by categorizing factors into internal strengths, internal weaknesses, external opportunities, and external threats. Through systematic investigation, listing, and matrix arrangement, it facilitates pairwise matching and analysis of these factors to derive corresponding conclusions. This method is commonly used for organizational strategic decision-making and is widely applied in library and information science.

2.1 Strengths

2.1.1 Policy-Consulting Service Attributes and Prior Experience. The importance of strategic intelligence work has long been recognized among China' s scientific and technological intelligence institutions [**?**]. The term "strategy" in strategic intelligence originates from military contexts, typically referring to a commander' s military planning, with "farsightedness" as its essential characteristic. As the saying goes, "One who fails to plan for the whole cannot plan for a part; one who fails to plan for the long term cannot plan for the present." Over time, the field of strategic research has continuously expanded, encompassing national or regional economic and technological planning at the macro level, and strategic planning for institutions, enterprises, and groups at the micro level—all requiring strategic intelligence support. Strategic intelligence serves as a tool for leadership transformation and naturally carries policy-consulting characteristics.

2.1.2 Scientific and Technological Information Resource Advantages. China' s intelligence institutions fall into two typical categories. The first integrates library and information functions, possessing rich print and electronic data resources, such as the Documentation and Information Center of the Chinese Academy of Sciences and the Shanghai Institute of Scientific and Technical Information. The second comprises local science and technology information institutes subordinate to provincial science and technology departments, such as those in Guangdong, Hubei, and Heilongjiang—representing the majority of China' s intelligence institutions. These organizations bear responsibility for local S&T information resource construction and services, with their information resource advantages determined by their institutional nature and mission. Additionally, information institutions or departments directly under national ministries, central S&T enterprises, such as the Institute of Scientific and Technical Information of China, China Chemical Information Center, Beijing Aerospace Information Research Institute, and China Machinery Industry Information Research Institute, all possess unique S&T information resources including library collections, conference materials, special literature, and characteristic databases.

2.1.3 Information Collection and Processing Advantages. Complementing their rich S&T information resources, intelligence institutions maintain advantages in information collection and processing through advanced technologies and equipment, as well as experienced and skilled information collection and processing personnel.

2.1.4 Intelligence Analysis Advantages. Intelligence analysis, also known as intelligence research, represents the key link in value-added intelligence services. It involves reprocessing original information using specific methods and technologies to create new value-added intelligence products, which may take the form of ideas, suggestions, proposals, or reports. The "think tank" function of intelligence is primarily realized through intelligence analysis. This advantage manifests in two aspects: a complete intelligence analysis methodology system and modern intelligence analysis techniques and tools (see Figure 2 [Figure 2: see original paper]), as well as skilled intelligence analysts proficient in these methods and tools.

2.2 Weaknesses

2.2.1 Cognitive Bias and Insufficient Theoretical Preparation. China' s intelligence institutions primarily engage in S&T information services, limiting strategic intelligence to the S&T domain [**?**]. Their strategic intelligence products mainly focus on tracking S&T frontiers, analyzing development trends, and technology foresight, emphasizing technical scanning and analysis. However, technical consultation differs fundamentally from policy recommendations. Technical advice primarily predicts technology development trends from a professional technical perspective, whereas policy is far more complex. Politics is an art of compromise, requiring core values such as practical rationality, political compromise, and rule of law to maintain democratic equilibrium [**?**]. There-

fore, policy research and consultation demand comprehensive perspectives and relatively rational judgments that cannot be achieved through disciplinary or intelligence science backgrounds alone. They require enhanced understanding of public management, political science, sociology, economics, and other related theories to achieve theoretical integration and mutual complementarity between intelligence science and think tank research.

2.2.2 Insufficient Specialized In-Depth Data Resources. Despite certain information resource advantages, these are not absolute and manifest in two aspects. First, regarding internal resource construction, intelligence institutions' resources are primarily academic, broad but not deep, following traditional library approaches organized by disciplinary systems and mainly obtained through external purchases rather than unique internal accumulation—a situation prevalent among China' s intelligence institutions. Second, examining think tank information resource construction, world-renowned think tanks typically possess proprietary data, with many Western specialized think tanks originally established to address specific problems, thus adopting project-oriented information resource construction models [**?**]. This approach has enabled certain think tanks to achieve unique authority in specific resources.

2.2.3 Lack of Public Media and Mass Communication Experience. The mission and function of think tanks are often summarized as "policy consulting" and "public enlightenment," requiring them to serve as "connectors and translators between government decisions and social thought, as well as catalysts and mediators for various social demands and corresponding feedback" [**?**]. However, how to gain discourse power in the noisy public opinion arena and even become opinion leaders represents a clear weakness for China' s intelligence institutions. Since their establishment, Chinese intelligence institutions have primarily served as public welfare scientific research information service providers for government and innovation entities, without public communication responsibilities. Their intelligence products follow specialized delivery channels, and their institutional nature, service scope, and service objects have resulted in a lack of public relations experience, with virtually no participation in social opinion debates, opinion creation, or opinion leadership activities to increase exposure and influence—yet social influence constitutes a core competency for think tanks.

2.2.4 Lack of Market Competition Awareness and Experience. From an economic perspective, market economies are built upon various factor and product markets, with production factors including land, capital, labor, and knowledge. The factor market corresponding to knowledge is the marketplace of ideas, which must remain free from government regulation for democratic systems to function effectively [**?**]. While the ideas market differs significantly from commodity markets, they share the commonality that competition exists wherever markets operate. As an entity in the ideas market, think tanks require entrepreneurial and professional management talent. However, China' s S&T intelligence institutions, operating within the public welfare system, inevitably

lack competition awareness and market experience—a situation that has persisted [**?**] and intensified following the 2014 institutional reforms, when most were classified as Category I public institutions primarily supported by national or local finances, resulting in weak competitive consciousness.

2.2.5 Insufficient Public Decision-Making Consultation Experience. Consultation encompasses various categories, including decision-making consultation, management consultation, engineering consultation, and technical consultation. Decision-making consultation involves decision-makers seeking opinions from internal bodies (such as special agencies or advisors) and external forces (experts, scholars, industry professionals, or even the public) on decision-making issues, characterized by strategic and comprehensive considerations. Public decision-making consultation serves dual roles in the policy process as both "policy design"and "public interest expression,"whereas S&T intelligence services focus on "comparative analysis, judgment, concentration, and synthesis of intelligence information obtained from S&T literature and other sources, thereby producing research reports in the form of reviews or commentaries" [**?**], consistently revolving around "scientific problems" or "technical problems." The science advisory paradox reveals that "although almost no major national issue lacks some technical component or dimension, virtually no issue is determined solely or primarily by scientific or technical considerations alone" [**?**]. In this sense, intelligence products such as "international situation analysis," "S&T frontier scanning," and "technology assessment and early warning" merely track and predict S&T development trends from the perspective of S&T personnel, lacking "public interest expression" and failing to constitute genuine policy consultation reports.

2.3 Opportunities

2.3.1 Policy Environment. CNKI searches reveal that modern think tank concepts were introduced by Chinese scholars in the late 20th century. In 1981, several experts in international relations and intelligence published six articles introducing foreign think tanks, but development remained slow for decades. Since 2012, the central government has repeatedly emphasized the importance of building "new types of think tanks with Chinese characteristics." On November 15, 2013, the Decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on Some Major Issues Concerning Comprehensively Deepening Reforms explicitly called for "strengthening the construction of new types of think tanks with Chinese characteristics and establishing a sound decision-making consultation system." On January 20, 2015, the State Council further issued the guiding opinions on think tank construction—*Opinions on Strengthening the Construction of New Types of Think Tanks with Chinese Characteristics*—elevating think tank construction to a national strategic level. This policy impetus has greatly encouraged think tank research and practice, with intelligence scholars joining management, political science, and decision-making scholars as major forces in think tank research, and intelligence institutions serving as important partici-

pants in China' s S&T think tank construction.

2.3.2 Increasing Demand. The term "knowledge economy" has been widely used in China since the late 20th century, when the central government began advocating knowledge as an economic resource. Today, knowledge represents not only an economic resource but also a political resource. In an increasingly open information society, scientific decision-making requires support from information, knowledge, ideas, logic, and rationality, forcing previously closed bureaucratic systems to actively or passively listen to external voices while maintaining restraint and rationality amidst complex public opinions and demands. Political leaders cannot possibly master the details of specific scientific affairs or possess complete information, making elite organizations and groups with greater information and knowledge who are dedicated to public affairs natural favorites for government departments.

With rapid S&T development, science and technology' s importance in public affairs continues to grow, providing logical necessity for scientists with specialized knowledge to participate in politics. However, not all policy consultations require technical core roles from consulting organizations. In many cases, think tanks' core functions involve providing political leaders with core discourse and concepts, guiding and educating the public, or testing social reactions to clear obstacles before policy implementation, thereby ensuring policy legitimacy. This opens a window for intelligence institutions with rich information resources to enter China' s decision-making consultation system, while their institutional attributes and service experience also accumulate advantages for such involvement.

2.3.3 Audience Foundation. Technology has changed power distribution, and internet-based revolutions are launching humanity' s third industrial revolution. The rapid advancement of internet technology, particularly social media, has transformed lifestyles. The internet era represents unprecedented liberation from authority, centralization, and individuality, which inevitably influences democratic political operation and implementation models in rationalist political ecology [**?**]. Network society has witnessed political power shifts: organizational structures moving from hierarchical to flat, power structures from control-oriented to decentralized, and decision-making structures from vertical to interactive. The internet provides the most effective tools for global democratic development [**?**].

However, all things have dual aspects, as evidenced by the optimistic and pessimistic schools emerging from sociological research on cyber democracy. On one hand, cyber democracy breaks the information monopoly of "power centers" and encourages public participation in public affairs. On the other hand, network anonymity, virtuality, information overload, and regulatory difficulties contribute to increasingly serious anarchic states accompanying network popularization. While networks provide shortcuts for the masses, grassroots, vulnerable groups, and even minorities to participate in political life, they also pose severe challenges to democratic deliberation and cautious implementation.

Under these circumstances, an objective, neutral, and rational third party is urgently needed to balance public emotional demands and political practical rationality. From the perspective of genuine needs for think tanks from both government and citizens, networks have greatly expanded the scope and boundaries of "discourse circles," establishing a solid audience foundation for think tank survival and development.

2.3.4 Expert Consultation Dilemma Creates Space for Intelligence Institutions. Scientists primarily provide technical advice in consultations, but public decisions are far more complex than scientific or technical problem-solving, involving multiple stakeholder interests. The history of science-policy interaction has experienced a dilemma: scientists wish to maintain distance from politics to preserve independence, yet cannot resist the olive branches extended by politicians to gain more discourse power. Bruce Smith described this expert predicament as "consultants may abuse accessed information and internal government ideas to advance their own special or small-group interests, and even when S&T experts strive to appear disinterested, they are people with their own interests and weaknesses" [**?**].

Why does this predicament represent an opportunity for intelligence institutions? First, unlike scientists, intelligence experts do not conduct specific scientific research, making it easier for them to maintain objective and neutral positions in S&T policy consultation. Second, since unavoidable traps exist in the consultation game, increasing group diversity becomes a tool for mutual checks and balances, and intelligence institutions—considering their institutional nature and responsibilities—are well-suited to balance various relationships. Institutionally, China' s intelligence institutions are primarily public institutions under science and technology departments or academies, maintaining certain affiliations with research institutions and government while preserving some distance. Moreover, as public welfare service institutions, they have traditions of maintaining close contact with the public, which helps them adhere to "public interest" principles in decision-making consultation. Simultaneously, intelligence institutions can leverage their non-official status to interpret and publicize sensitive topics that news, publishing, radio, and television media cannot deeply explore.

2.4 Threats

2.4.1 Intense Competition Among Various Think Tanks. Following national policy issuance, think tanks have rapidly "heated up" in China, with official, semi-official, university, private, and media think tanks emerging like bamboo shoots after rain, actively attracting decision-maker and public attention. To quickly cultivate Chinese think tank brands, the central government launched the "National High-End Think Tank Construction Pilot" program, selecting the first batch of 25 pilot units to form the first "national think tank team," a move sufficient to rapidly push think tank competition to its climax.

2.4.2 Information Monopoly Issues. "Information monopoly has become a serious social problem accompanying information society development" [**?**], existing across political, economic, cultural, social, and S&T fields. Public policy, having public interest attributes, requires various data—especially public data—for policy research and consultation. Faced with information disclosure difficulties, insufficient data resources remain the norm for most think tanks without smooth official channels, greatly restricting think tank development.

2.4.3 Consultation Management System Construction Issues. Policy consultation involves risks, as expert roles in public decision-making have dual natures—"rationality enhancement" and "role dislocation" [**?**]—requiring strengthened management and regulation through laws, institutions, and ethics. Consultation management system construction is both thorny and difficult to balance, as evidenced by the difficult enactment and subsequent poor implementation of the U.S. Federal Advisory Committee Act, the first legislation on consultation systems [**?**]. China' s think tanks remain in early development stages, far from mature enough for legal regulation and guidance, which constrains healthy industry development.

[Figure 3: see original paper]

3. Best Expansion Strategies for Intelligence Institutions' Think Tank Construction

Based on SWOT analysis principles of prioritizing importance and urgency, pursuing benefits and avoiding harm, and focusing on the present while looking to the future, four strategies emerge: SO (Strengths-Opportunities) expansion strategy, ST (Strengths-Threats) diversified development strategy, WO (Weaknesses-Opportunities) transformation strategy, and WT (Weaknesses-Threats) defensive strategy.

The **SO expansion strategy** for intelligence institutions involves elevating tactical and strategic intelligence services in both breadth and depth. Vertically, this means breaking through technical analysis levels to incorporate considerations of technology' s impacts on society, economy, politics, and other dimensions. In depth, it means moving beyond front-end and auxiliary service levels such as information collection, processing, scanning, and final product compilation to deeply engage in the policy process and strengthen capacities in idea generation, countermeasure development, recommendation formulation, solution design, and voice amplification.

The **ST diversified development strategy** suggests that while leveraging internal strengths, intelligence institutions should strive to avoid or mitigate external threats by selectively developing think tank services alongside traditional services based on their own conditions.

The **WT defensive strategy** focuses on avoiding and defending against external threats. This strategy is currently inapplicable to intelligence institutions

because think tank competition is unavoidable, and solutions to information monopoly problems and consultation management system improvements are long-term processes that cannot be circumvented or postponed until conditions improve.

The **WO transformation strategy** advocates that intelligence institutions should fully utilize current opportunities while strengthening internal capabilities to ensure smooth construction of think tank functions.

As illustrated in Figure 4 [Figure 4: see original paper], the four strategies derived from SWOT analysis differ in emphasis depending on each intelligence institution' s objective conditions and micro-environment. However, overall, the authors contend that SO and ST strategies represent the best approaches for intelligence institutions to enter the think tank construction system during China' s current initial development stage, for the following reasons:

First, intelligence institutions possess innate advantages for developing think tank services, including prior cognition, theoretical foundations, and experience in playing "think tank" roles for decision-makers, complemented by professional intelligence analysis skills.

Second, from the perspective of external opportunities and institutional nature, the current macro environment reserves unique space for intelligence institutions to enter think tank construction. When official think tanks dominate and think tank independence remains difficult to guarantee, intelligence institutions' neither-too-close-nor-too-distant relationship with government departments, combined with their special identity as information service providers for scientific research rather than direct S&T research performers, creates the possibility for them to become relatively objective and independent policy "third parties" within the existing institutional environment.

Third, regarding internal weaknesses, deficiencies in theory, media experience, and public decision-making consultation experience do not constitute insurmountable barriers to entering the think tank field.

Fourth, considering current timing, China's think tanks remain in an exploratory stage where caution is appropriate. Meanwhile, intelligence institutions' existing services in information resource construction, platform building, rapid intelligence response, and technology assessment complement think tank construction and provide necessary conditions and experience. No intelligence institution can abandon its existing "assets" to achieve complete transformation.

[Figure 4: see original paper]

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