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Postprint: A Study on the Communication Audi- ences and Content of Independent Defense Think Tanks in China

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Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] In response to the current situation where most independent defense think tanks in China are in their early operational stages, this study aims to clarify the role of communication affairs within their operations, particularly by systematically identifying the targets and content of communication, thereby fostering their healthy development.

[Method/Process] The methodology primarily involves summarizing and reflecting on the author's practical experience in managing communication affairs at an independent defense think tank, supplemented by observations of other defense think tanks.

[Results/Conclusion] Communication work plays a crucial role in the survival and development of independent defense think tanks during their formative stages, establishing a target system encompassing upward communication to users, parallel communication to the industry, downward communication to society, and future-oriented communication, along with corresponding content. As communication work evolves, it holds even broader prospects for enhancing think tank operations.

Full Text

Research on Communication Objects and Contents of Chinese Independent Defense Think Tanks

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Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] Most Chinese independent defense think tanks currently operate at an initial development stage. Clarifying the role of com-

munication services in their operations, particularly identifying communication objects and content, is essential for promoting their healthy development. **[Method/Process]** This paper synthesizes reflections based on the author's operational practices in communication services at an independent defense think tank and observations of other defense think tanks. **[Result/Conclusion]** Communication services play a crucial role in the survival and development of independent defense think tanks during their initial stage. A communication system has emerged comprising upward communication to clients, parallel communication to the research community, downward communication to society, and forward-looking communication to future audiences, each with corresponding content. As communication work evolves, it holds broad prospects for facilitating think tank operations.

Keywords: defense think tank; communication; open source intelligence; social media

Classification: G206

In recent years, President Xi Jinping has repeatedly emphasized the need to build new types of think tanks with Chinese characteristics. Against this backdrop of rapid think tank development, China has witnessed not only the emergence of many new think tanks but also restructuring and optimization among established ones. As think tank diversification and institutional reform progress, reshaping cognition of target audiences will become a new challenge, making communication increasingly vital for think tanks, particularly independent defense-oriented ones.

Independent defense think tanks, as defined by the author's institution, refer to those not affiliated with the military or government yet focusing primarily on defense research. Current examples include the China Strategic Culture Promotion Association, Knowfar Institute for Strategic and Defence Studies, Southern Defense Think Tank, and Shanghai Institute for National Defense Strategy. Military-affiliated institutions such as the Academy of Military Sciences and National Defense University, as well as think tanks focusing primarily on diplomacy, international relations, or economics, fall outside this paper's scope, though they may be referenced for comparative analysis.

As a uniquely Chinese think tank category, independent defense think tanks exhibit distinct value in communication practices and prospects, demonstrating a development pattern that learns from Western experience while maintaining Chinese characteristics.

On one hand, they adopt operational elements from renowned Western defense think tanks. Due to market-oriented operations, most prominent Western think tanks emphasize communication. For instance, the RAND Corporation, Brookings Institution, Royal Institute of International Affairs, and Carnegie Endowment for International Peace—all influential in defense research or having served defense roles—each employ a senior vice president dedicated to communication

and related affairs. This position typically ranks fourth or fifth in the leadership hierarchy, below only the president, research vice president, personnel vice president, and finance vice president, underscoring its importance. While the top two leaders' roles are self-evident, inappropriate management of personnel and finances by the third and fourth executives can damage an organization' s foundation. If the first four senior executives ensure a think tank' s survival, communication determines its influence and development. As Philip Truluck, former vice president of the Heritage Foundation, stated: "We spend as much money selling our ideas as we do researching them."

Similarly, Chinese non-governmental think tanks have recognized this priority. Cai Han, former secretary-general of the Charhar Institute, noted in an interview: "The top-ranked Brookings Institution in the U.S. dedicates one-third of its personnel and energy to developing influence...What we should learn most from foreign think tanks is how to expand influence through communication methods." On the other hand, within China' s national context, communication holds unique value for independent defense think tanks in achieving their development objectives. These think tanks generally target military and government decision-makers and functional departments, with some also serving defense enterprises. Their operational purpose mirrors that of military-affiliated think tanks: providing intellectual and knowledge products for decision-making bodies and functional agencies. However, as emerging entities in their initial development stage, independent defense think tanks lack funding, influence, talent, and brand recognition, limiting their mature user base. Consequently, communication work becomes critically important for promoting overall operations, winning markets, and building reputation.

Many think tanks pursue public voice. A *Phoenix Weekly* investigative report, "Mainland' s Emerging Think Tank Boom," quoted leaders of numerous civilian and university-affiliated think tanks acknowledging that "enhancing social influence can attract enterprise and government attention to some extent, compelling them to increase support for think tank development...Compared to institutional think tanks, our disadvantage is essentially lack of funding and government attention." However, communication extends far beyond simple public voice. Unlike some independent non-defense think tanks that aggressively pursue public influence, independent defense think tanks—given the specialized nature of defense affairs—must recognize that military decision-makers and functional departments are minimally influenced by public opinion during peacetime. Therefore, beyond maintaining a certain public presence, they should emphasize multi-dimensional, holistic, and long-term influence across the entire defense domain while shouldering social responsibility. This requires careful planning of communication content and objects according to think tank positioning and development, gradually exploring, adjusting, and refining to form a clear and comprehensive framework. Current communication content and objects for independent defense think tanks can be categorized into four main types, with Western defense think tanks' emphasis on "selling ideas" embedded within these categories.

1.1 Knowledge Related to Market Demand

The nature of defense and security research determines that its most important communication objects are decision-makers and functional departments within the military, defense industry, and government, as well as increasingly numerous enterprise users under the “going global” initiative. As entrepreneurial and emerging independent defense think tanks, they must demonstrate their research capabilities to potential users. One method is communicating relevant knowledge produced in specific demand areas. For example, under the “Belt and Road” initiative, concerns about overseas security risks have grown. Facing this potential research market, the Knowfar Institute for Strategic and Defence Studies initiated product pre-research in 2015, selecting Afghanistan as a sample for country-specific security risk assessment. Upon completing the preliminary assessment report, the institute convened the “Knowfar Defense Forum 2015—Belt and Road Security Risk Assessment Expert Seminar,” where it presented an unofficial release and content briefing of the *Afghanistan Security Risk Assessment Report*, garnering significant attention from participating representatives. Following the seminar, the institute promptly published a paper on Afghanistan security risk assessment in academic journals, attracting potential users and soon securing formal research contracts for overseas country-specific security risk assessments.

1.2 Critical Intelligence Products

Due to security and official recognition constraints, independent defense think tanks initially focus on foreign military issues as their entry point, delving deeply to avoid crossing red lines that would threaten their survival. From another perspective, China’s strategic planning interacts significantly with potential adversaries, requiring China’s defense research community to answer fundamental questions: Who is the adversary, what are they thinking, and what do they plan to do—essentially, what is their strategy? Beyond strategy, they must comprehensively understand adversary military situations at the operational and campaign levels. This constitutes the open-source intelligence work that defense think tanks must undertake, covering not only military intelligence but also military-technical intelligence. Recent publications such as the China Strategic Culture Promotion Association’s *U.S. Military Power Assessment Report* and *Japan Military Power Assessment Report*, along with Knowfar Institute’s series on “cyber warfare,” “AirSea Battle,” and the “Third Offset Strategy,” have become essential reading for industry professionals.

Domestic experts have also noted that leveraging intelligence’s foundational function in think tank research represents a universal pattern in global think tank development. Prominent Western think tanks, including the UK’s Institute of Development Studies, Germany’s Institute for International and Security Affairs, Sweden’s Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, and the U.S. Brookings Institution, have all established dedicated information and intelligence service systems.

2 Parallel Communication to the Industry: Content Focused on Intelligence Research and Professional Experience

Under the general trend of internet decentralization, social media enables think tanks and academia to disseminate publicly available research findings more rapidly. This not only helps researchers comprehensively grasp frontier developments in the field but also facilitates intellectual exchange and research validation, contributing to the formation of research norms.

A recent typical case in international relations scholarship illustrates this dynamic. In June 2015, Tsinghua University scholars Li Xiguang and Sun Lizhou published a lengthy article, “The Strategic Value and Security Situation of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor.” In July 2015, veteran retired diplomat Mao Siwei argued the article deviated too far from facts and was overly misleading, publishing rebuttals including “Refuting Li Xiguang and His Student’s Strategic Security Assessment of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor” and “Twelve Explanations on the Twelve Unreliabilities.” Both sides’ articles received extensive dissemination on social media, making this exchange a classic case that, against the backdrop of intense interest in the Belt and Road Initiative, has helped promote more grounded research in think tanks and academia.

2.1 Collaborative Establishment of Research Norms

Long Guoqiang, deputy director of the State Council Development Research Center, has noted that institutional think tanks suffer from “scattered, low-level redundant construction and fragmented research.” Military and defense think tanks face similar issues to varying degrees, and independent defense think tanks can take proactive measures in this regard.

2.1.1 Open-Source Intelligence Sharing Currently, whenever the U.S. military releases a major new report, at least twenty domestic institutions simultaneously translate it. Due to arbitrary classification and small-group mentality, redundant translation efforts waste substantial resources. In response, a research institute officially launched the “Foreign Military Defense Open-Source Intelligence Center” crowdfunding project in November 2015, aiming to promote open-source intelligence sharing in a non-profit manner to avoid massive redundant industry labor. This crowdfunding initiative has been welcomed and supported by numerous defense enterprises and is actively progressing.

2.1.2 Standardization of Military Terminology Translation In foundational open-source intelligence work, military terminology translation is critically important, as it determines whether foreign military understanding is correct and profound. In recent years, debates have arisen over translations ranging from new operational concepts like “cyber warfare” to core military terms like “enterprise.” However, the only currently available and effective military terminology standard is the *English-Chinese Military Terminology Dictio-*

nary published by the PLA Foreign Languages College in 2007. Nearly a decade old, this dictionary no longer meets industry needs. Consequently, a research institute is collaborating with the Academy of Military Sciences to rebuild a military terminology database from scratch, aiming to collaboratively establish an continuously updated translation standard for common industry use.

2.1.3 Reshaping Foreign Military Cognition The defense community has achieved much in foreign military research but also faces numerous problems. Some view the U.S. military as invincible, which is certainly not the case. For example, recent U.S. strategic intelligence failures include serious misjudgments about Russian military involvement in Syria. Others believe the U.S. military is not that capable. One author wrote that “the U.S. military is an old cucumber painted green, while Russia is an old cucumber not painted green”—a rather naive cognition representing an extreme case. Based on the author’s observations of domestic and international military research fields, some researchers habitually subjectively speculate about foreign militaries, imposing labels and characteristics, applying Chinese thinking to foreign situations, and producing conclusions that are neither here nor there with limited research value. Even more problematic, some advocate wholesale Westernization based on out-of-context interpretations without deeply understanding foreign military realities. For instance, many call for learning from U.S. military division-to-brigade reforms and adopting brigade-battalion structures without even knowing that U.S. brigades fall under division command—a rather absurd position. The most fundamental task in studying foreign militaries remains seeking truth from facts and returning to original sources to accurately represent foreign military realities.

2.2 Leading Research Priorities

In recent years, the U.S. has pursued its Asia-Pacific rebalancing strategy, generating intense research interest across various sectors. Within this framework, Australia has increasingly become an important player, bringing the U.S.-Japan-Australia military alliance to the surface. However, pre-research on this key point was clearly insufficient across the industry and academia at the time. The Knowfar Institute for Strategic and Defence Studies made strategic arrangements in this area, inviting Cameron Hawke, former advisor to then-Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott, to visit in 2015. The institute hosted the “Knowfar Defense Forum 2015—U.S.-Japan-Australia Military Cooperation and Asia-Pacific Rebalancing 2.0 Seminar,” producing a batch of academic outcomes and maintaining long-term research tracking on this issue, thereby continuously attracting attention from relevant departments and research communities.

2.3 Providing Research Materials to the Industry

Open-source intelligence must be provided not only to decision-makers and functional departments but also holds equal value for the research community. Beyond the aforementioned U.S. and Japanese military power assessment reports,

cyber warfare series, AirSea Battle series, and Third Offset Strategy series that have been widely welcomed, materials on the U.S. military's joint operational system—such as *The Development History of the U.S. Military's "Unified Command Plan" (1946-2012)*—and documents on Russian military New Look reforms have also been highly sought after against the backdrop of China's new military reforms.

2.4 Think Tank Construction Insights

China's current think tank construction is experiencing explosive growth with undeniable achievements but also obvious shortcomings. Some scholars have criticized that Chinese think tanks are in a "Great Leap Forward" state with numerous problems. Independent defense think tanks can offer corresponding understandings based on their own practices. Articles such as "Why Chinese Defense Think Tanks Cannot Enter Global Think Tank Rankings," "Revelations from U.S. Military Think Tanks," "A Comprehensive Observation of Chinese Defense Social Media," and "Why We Must Study the U.S. Military" contain valuable viewpoints, including the necessity of maintaining independent thinking, achieving self-sustaining financial capabilities, and building core competitiveness. Specifically, core competitiveness does not stem from abundant funding or signing retired politicians, adjunct professors, or senior retired officers, but rather from enhancing analytical methods and tools. Senior strategic researchers have repeatedly mentioned net assessment frameworks, wargaming, and data engineering as crucial yet long-neglected elements that have enabled Western defense think tanks' tremendous success.

3 Downward Communication to Society: Content Focused on Basic Facts and Logical Thinking Popularization

Public demand for defense information is substantial and enduring, spawning numerous defense information sources. Defense-related social media is currently highly developed, yet some defense self-media and military websites prioritize click rates and associated commercial interests and influence, employing inferior operational tactics. These include frequently posting extreme nationalist content; publishing commentary from scholars whose arguments cannot withstand scrutiny or are highly controversial; disseminating sensationalist, unverified information; and even fabricating rumors in the names of national and military leaders, well-known military scholars, foreign think tanks, and foreign leaders. A notorious recent rumor involved a supposed "RAND Corporation Report—China Will Become the World's Poorest Country by 2020," which triggered reposting and analytical commentary by numerous experts, professors, public intellectuals, and social celebrities, forcing RAND to issue multiple denials. Such information is difficult for the general public and even ordinary officers to verify, generating massive click rates and shares that can easily create adverse social impacts. Many domestic and international observers believe China's current nationalist sentiment is quite strong, with large segments of the populace displaying highly

irrational emotions regarding international issues involving Chinese interests—an outcome inseparable from such negative communication.

As professional think tank and academic personnel, it is necessary to conduct rational communication with the public based on authentic, objective research. However, the industry's absence in this area has drawn criticism. U.S. scholar Huang Yanzhong noted in “China’s Think Tank Great Leap Forward” that “the rising anti-intellectualism, nationalism, and populism further weaken Chinese think tanks’ credibility and effectiveness in policy formulation and international exchange. In 2013, despite lacking convincing evidence, a documentary allegedly produced by a Chinese military think tank warned political and military officials to guard against U.S. ideological infiltration and political subversion intentions. A recent article by a young blogger with only a junior high school education widely circulated on social media, exposing a supposed fifteen-year U.S. cultural cold war against China, accusing the U.S. of distorting Chinese history and even creating China’s food safety problems. Notably, not a single think tank expert stepped forward to refute such fantastic fallacies.” From a strategic communication perspective, while such documentaries and blog series may hold unique value for public opinion influence, their use by professionals and relevant departments for research analysis and decision-making would create serious problems. Therefore, defense think tanks have a long way to go and considerable potential to conduct in-depth popularization based on rigorous research for broad social audiences.

4.1 Communication to Future Decision-Makers: Strategic Thinking

In conversation with renowned U.S. strategist Thomas Barnett, the author recalls Barnett stating: “A strategist should focus on influencing mid-level officers, as they will become the U.S. military’s top commanders in the future.” Chinese defense think tanks should adopt the same approach, particularly as mobile social media enhances corresponding conditions. First, regarding potential user quantity, the PLA’s four general departments issued regulations in 2015 permitting military personnel to use smartphones under confidentiality requirements, suggesting significant expected growth in social media’s officer user base. Second, regarding potential user quality, future senior leaders will emerge from current mid-level leadership. Mid-level leaders who become senior leaders will demonstrate greater familiarity with and acceptance of social media accounts and their affiliated institutions they previously subscribed to, potentially creating enormous development opportunities for those institutions. For example, over half of the Knowfar Institute for Strategic and Defence Studies’ WeChat public account subscribers are mid-level PLA officers, including at least more than 30 senior officers at the major general level or above.

4.2 Communication to Future Researchers: Research Methodology

Prominent strategic scholar Lü Dehong observed in “Transforming Our Research” that “based on years of observing and contemplating exchanges between Chinese and developed countries’ strategic academic communities, we believe China’s strategic studies field exhibits these phenomena: emphasizing understanding over operation; introduction over creation; results over process; individuals over teams; qualitative over quantitative. For some time, a major problem in academic research has been excessive imagination and insufficient grounding. The root cause is cognition divorced from reality—research on our military 脱离我军实际, and research on foreign militaries 脱离外军实际. Detached from these two realities, numerous specious abstract viewpoints float in mid-air, touching neither heaven nor earth.” Lü Dehong’s critique is objective and accurate. Independent defense think tanks can develop their own responses and practices to these issues through practical experience. For instance, expert groups with deep understanding of U.S. military strategic planning generally consider RAND’s strategic assessment system (later upgraded to the Joint Integrated Contingency Model) and its framework of strategic assessment/net assessment, long-term trend analysis, multi-scenario analysis, wargaming, red team thinking exercises, and certain intelligence methodologies practiced by research institutes as important—indeed essential—methods in strategic and defense research.

During their development, independent defense think tanks can initially integrate expert resources from military academies, military institutions, national research organizations, national functional departments, enterprises, and international research communities through training and advanced seminars, ultimately establishing their own “Defense Academy” to disseminate effective and practical research methodologies centered on certain core concepts. This approach can likely foster a research culture and community with its own intellectual DNA throughout the defense field—precisely the long-term practice of renowned Western defense think tanks. Andrew Marshall, former director of the U.S. Department of Defense’s Office of Net Assessment, formally retired in his nineties, during which over ninety military and civilian analysts served under him. Beyond the Defense Department system, numerous personnel directly or indirectly engaged in net assessment research and promotion across the intelligence community, academia, defense think tanks, and among numerous experts. Marshall himself stated, “I think my greatest achievement has been the training and influence on the people who have come to this office.” His famous “disciple,” Andrew Krepinevich, director of the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments (CSBA), has recently published multiple research reports on the Third Offset Strategy. Additionally, RAND, where Marshall long served, established a visiting scholar system in its early years and founded the Pardee RAND Graduate School in 1970 to disseminate research methodologies. Whether naturally formed or deliberately designed, the application and promotion of defense research methodologies will foster the formation of relevant research networks,

offering extremely valuable lessons.

5 Conclusion

Currently, domestic independent defense think tanks have achieved considerable accomplishments. However, without dedicated government funding, they still lack policy, financial, and human resource support. Yet policies and markets do not fall from the sky—they are created through down-to-earth work. Each completed research project cultivates the market and incrementally influences policy, while each successful communication effort invisibly alters various audiences' perceptions of independent defense think tanks, laying psychological foundations for future development. Communication services play an extremely important role in the survival and development of think tanks during their initial stage and hold extremely broad prospects for the future.

It is worth emphasizing that the ability to provide differentiated, excellent research outcomes forms the foundation of communication. Without this foundation, communication is like cooking without rice—no matter how prestigious, such think tanks cannot replace military-affiliated think tanks nor justify their own existence.

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

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