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Oct 18, 2017 by [Katarzyna Rybka-Iwanska](#)

## **5 Reasons Why Think Tanks Are Soft-Power Tools** <sup>[1]</sup>

I risk a thesis that, outside of the Anglo-Saxon world (especially its U.S. part), think tanks are not very deeply analyzed, particularly when it comes to their broad and diverse impact on foreign policy and diplomacy. This, in turn, has significant consequences on how soft power is perceived and exercised there.

There is only one global index of think tanks that gains the attention of the whole think-tank world as well as that of decision-making circles. This is the [Global Go To Think Tank Index Report](#), designed and published by a team headed by Professor James G. McGann at the University of Pennsylvania. On the other side of the pond, one can read U.K.-based *Prospect* magazine's annual [Think Tank Awards](#).

If we speak of authors tackling think tanks, the majority of first names that come to mind represent Anglo-Saxon institutions. Starting with the above-mentioned James G. McGann,

these authors include Donald E. Abelson (author of *A Capitol Idea*), Kent Weaver (from Georgetown University and the Brookings Institution), Diane Stone (from the University of Warwick and University of Canberra), James Smith (author of *The Idea Brokers*), Thomas Dye (Emeritus Professor, Florida State University) and G. William Domhoff (Distinguished Emeritus Professor, University of California).

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The obvious reason for this is the fact that the first think tanks were created in the U.K. (e.g. the Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies in 1831) and in the U.S. (e.g. the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in 1910 or the Hoover Institution in 1919). They have the longest history and tradition in the Anglo-Saxon sphere, and this is why the biggest agora of ideas is spread over the Atlantic Ocean. The more that interest in the think-tank community widens towards other regions like Southern, Central and Eastern Europe, the more meaning that expert circles will gain within the decision-making process and within public diplomacy. The process will be based more on expert analysis, and soft power fields will gain from think tanks' commentary in various media, as well as their publications.

I have had the pleasure of working with experts, researchers and think tanks (inside and outside of the diplomatic world) from the very beginning of my career and find them extremely significant when I think of the soft power of any country.

From my perspective, there are five reasons why think tanks matter for soft power and public diplomacy:

- 1. Think tanks provide analysis and advice, as well as rationale for decision-making.** External experts, in addition to foreign diplomats, are today the most frequent guests in many ministries of foreign affairs. They are consulted on a regular basis, whenever a major official visit is about to happen or a big foreign relations project is about to be launched. For instance, when Federica Mogherini, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign and Security Policy, and her team were working on the EU Global Strategy, think tanks and national ministries of foreign affairs organized expert seminars across Europe to provide Mogherini with additional expertise on such areas as conflict resolution, EU-NATO cooperation, human rights protection and climate change. Additionally, external experts provide well-tailored analyses on paper —sometimes reserved for the eyes of the administration only —and sometimes public, whenever it suits public diplomacy objectives.
- 2. Think tanks form a bridge between policymaking and academia.** They do not have the limitations of both: they can speak openly (no lines to take!), and they can provide research quite quickly (less methodological boundaries). What is even more important, especially from the public diplomacy perspective, is think tanks' contribution to the

international competition over the minds of the brightest students, scientists and researchers. Think tank representatives are quasi-ambassadors of their countries, particularly when they teach at universities, give guest lectures or take part in multidisciplinary and multinational research projects and post-graduate fellowships. Performing in classrooms at their very best, think tank representatives encourage students and professors to come to their countries and participate in seminars and research projects.

3. **Think tanks organize events where decision-makers can both test and broadcast their ideas.** If a leader wants to share ideas on international security, the annual Munich Security Conference or Shangri-La Dialogue is probably the best occasion to do so. If leaders want to address the economic challenges to their region or to the world, they often pick the annual World Economic Forum gathering in Davos (like Xi Jinping did last January).
4. **Think tanks are way ahead of administrations in getting close to business and technological circles.** They are agile - they respond to the technological revolution and can answer questions on, for instance, use of artificial intelligence in contemporary international relations much faster than traditional administrations. They produce joint business-technological-think tank reports, and they run such multidisciplinary projects, having their major role in mind as that of providing public policies with the best solutions to multi-layered problems. From a public diplomacy perspective, think tanks represent new kinds of bridges with technological firms that hardly respect national borders. Governments have to interact with them, and think tanks can play a role here in building linkages.
5. **Think tanks educate.** They do this through public reports, above-mentioned conferences, seminars, and podcasts, blogs and other methods of spreading news and knowledge about international relations. They teach not only students, but also broad groups of societies within and outside of their countries of residence. In the time of smartphones and social media, think tanks can be present with their opinions everywhere and all the time.

These times are not very easy for international relations —the field is complex, and there are no easy, black-and-white answers. The public is getting bored and disinterested in this multi-layered world, which is so heavily and indirectly explained by officials (especially diplomats). This is where think tanks are needed.

I am truly convinced that in the time of global rivalry over knowledge, expertise and R&D, the importance of think tanks will grow. Countries will compete over them: they will want global think tanks to establish offices in their cities; they will want international think tanks to run research projects on their political initiatives; they will want to host international think-tank gatherings on their soil; they will consult decisions and strategies with experts on a daily basis; they will participate in their seminars and podcasts.

Countries will do so if they want to stay in the race and run successful diplomacies.

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