

Policy think tanks and China policymaking in the United States

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The end of the Cold War gave rise to two decades of America's confident assertion of its role as an 'indispensable nation'. However, in recent years, there has been a resurgent 'declinist' discourse that insists the era of American primacy is drawing to a close. This pessimistic outlook has only intensified as the Global Financial Crisis becomes more protracted, as the United States (US) withdraws from Iraq and Afghanistan, and as America's fiscal health continues to deteriorate. The US, declinists assert, is economically stagnant, strategically overstretched, and politically dead-locked.¹ American declinism may have been a chronic feature of American public discourse dating back to at least the 'Sputnik moment' of the late 1950s and continually displayed through the popularity of treatises such as *Japan as Number One* and *The Rise and Fall of Great Powers* in the 1970s and 1980s. However, there are growing fears that 'this time it's real', as one scholar recently exclaimed.²

¹ See, for example, F Zakaria, *The post-American world*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York, 2008; K Mahhubani, *The new Asian hemisphere: the irresistible shift of global power to the East*, PublicAffairs, New York, 2008. For a recent barometer of American international relations scholars and foreign policymakers' outlooks on the future of Chinese and American global influence, see P Avey et al. '[The ivory tower survey: how IR scholars see the world](#)', *Foreign Policy* website, Jan/Feb 2012, accessed 1 April 2013.

² This quotation comes from C Layne, 'This time it's real: the end of unipolarity and the *Pax Americana*'. *International Studies Quarterly*, 56(1), 2013, pp. 203. For expressions of declinist sentiments throughout the postwar era, see E Vogel, *Japan as number one: lessons for America*, Harvard University Press, Boston, 1979; and P Kennedy, *The rise and fall of the great powers: economic change and military conflict from 1500 to 2000*, Vintage Books, New York, 1987. Similar sentiments survived even in the unambiguously unipolar era of the early 1990s. See C Krauthammer, 'The unipolar moment: America and the world'. *Foreign Affairs*, 70(1)1, 1990/91, pp. 23-33; and C Layne, 'The unipolar illusion: why new great powers will rise'. *International Security*, 17(4), 1993, pp. 5—51.

Accompanying with this evident acceleration of America's relative geopolitical decline has been China's growing ascendancy. Between 1979 and 2010, China has sustained an average annual economic growth of 9.95 per cent—a rate unrivalled among the major economies.³ Since the onset of its 'reform and opening' era, Beijing has been transforming its once underdeveloped command economy into a dynamic capitalist economic model underpinned by a large state-owned sector—even though there remain concerns that China's largely investment-driven economic growth will inevitably slow down once it encounters the 'middle income trap'.⁴ Meanwhile, Beijing's expansive military modernisation program and its yearning for more international influence have caused many in the US and elsewhere to view China's growing offshore power projection capability with alarm.⁵

Witnessing China's remarkable growth and being cognisant of America's need to reassess its security priorities, the Obama administration has adopted a so-called 'pivot to Asia' strategy (later also called 'rebalancing'). The strategy is a deliberate shift of its security assets and diplomatic attention away from the Middle East and Central Asia, which had been its primary strategic preoccupation over the last decade, and instead moves them towards the Asia-Pacific region.⁶ This recalibration has been undertaken in main part due to the need to respond to China's growing power and influence, which continues to pose questions about America's long-term staying power and the credibility of its political commitment to its allies and friends in the region. Taking note of the fact that the George W. Bush administration's second term was characterised by frequent no-shows or cancellations at key regional forums such as the US-ASEAN (Association of Southeastern Asian Nations) summit and ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the Obama administration took a visibly different approach. In July 2009, early into the tenure of

³ [World Bank website](#), accessed 1 May 2013.

⁴ For a comprehensive treatment of this issue, see World Bank, '[China 2030: building a modern, harmonious, and creative high-income society](#)', World Bank website, accessed 1 March 2013.

⁵ See, for example, M Beckley, 'China's century: why America's edge will endure', *International Security*, 36(3), 2011/12, pp. 41—78; A Friedberg, 'Bucking Beijing: an alternative US China policy', *Foreign Affairs*, 91(5), 2012, pp. 48—58; H White, *The China choice: why America should share power*, Black, Collingwood, 2012; D Shambaugh, 'A new China requires a new US strategy', *Current History*, 109(728), 2010, pp. 219—26.

⁶ J Logan, 'China, America, and the pivot to Asia', *Policy Analysis*, 717, 2013, p.1.

Obama's first Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, she declared to her Asian audience in the plainest terms possible while visiting Thailand that 'the United States is back'. She supplemented this promise with an announcement of US intention to sign the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, which commits signatories to peaceful resolution of disputes.⁷

As one of America's key strategic allies in the Asia-Pacific region, Australia is facing a dual strategic challenge. First, after anchoring its security strategy on its alliance with the US for most of the post-war period, the Australian Government has to assess whether the unambiguous relative decline of the US's material power will lead to changes in the long-term reliability of the US's security commitment. Second, Australia needs to develop a long-term assessment of whether its present approach to decoupling its security and economic interests—having China as its single largest trading partner while having the US as its security guarantor—will remain sustainable in the future. This is because the rapid closure of the gap in Chinese and American power and their increasingly overlapping interests may plausibly lead to a more intense geopolitical rivalry between the two superpowers.

To assess the credibility of American staying power in the region and to gauge the risks of Sino-American conflict in the future, Australia needs to develop a more robust understanding of the policy-making process behind America's policy towards China. While information about contemporary foreign policy deliberations and high-level political exchanges may remain behind closed doors, policy think tanks, which are often financed in large part by charitable donations and the financing and influence of which consequently thrive on public engagement, are an ideal window into an otherwise often closed policy process. In this sense, an analysis of the policy influence of American policy think tanks can help Australian policymakers and scholars make sense of America's policy thinking towards China and the Asia-Pacific more generally.

⁷ Associated Press (AP), '[U.S. 'is back' is \[sic\] Asia, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declares](#)', *New York Daily News* website, 21 July 2009, accessed 1 March 2013.

The paper will thus appraise the role that American think tanks play in influencing US policy towards China. It will be divided into four sections. First, it will assess the US political context for foreign policy making and analyse US think tanks' three primary policy functions: as a 'reservoir', an 'agent', and a 'medium'. Second, it will use the Obama administration's pivot to Asia strategy as an example to illustrate how think tanks and their various intellectual affiliates have influenced thinking over this strategy. Third, the paper will provide a brief comparative assessment of Australia's own China policymaking environment and demonstrate a potential case of Australian think tank intellectuals influencing the Australian Government's own thinking towards China. Lastly, the paper will conclude by drawing some recommendations for Australia's own engagement with both China and the US China policy communities.

1. The three faces of think tanks: reservoir, agent, and medium

The US political system is particularly open to the input of ideas and policy suggestions from outside the formal policy making process. The US political system empowers not only individual policymakers but more importantly non-government intellectuals to compete for and gain influence over policymaking in two important ways.

First, experts from outside government are well-positioned to generate significant 'noise' in the hope of capturing the attention of policymakers. For example, the US legislative system allows non-government experts to share their technical expertise by giving Congressional testimonies as well as helping to draft legislative bills for Congressional representatives and senators (especially as part of a lobby group). The executive branch's agencies may also outsource government research contracts and consultancies to non-government experts. The resultant reports then serve as important resources for informing the policymakers. Similarly, intellectuals are in a position to influence policymakers through osmosis. Policymakers often subscribe to publications produced by non-government experts that summarise what the latter sees as important developments of the

day. Some examples include ‘The World This Week’ issued by the Council on Foreign Relations and ‘Asia Today’, from the Center for Strategic and International Studies. On top of this, the saturated US media environment also provides ample opportunities for analysts to shape the society’s and policy world’s perception of issues through media punditry, op-eds, and policy commentaries. Scholars can also interact in person with policymakers when they appear at policy salons hosted by think tanks which enjoy close relationships with the government.

Second, beyond seeking to influence policymakers, the American political system also allows non-government experts to become policymakers themselves. For example, in contrast to Australia’s political system, America’s presidential system allows an enormous number of political appointees in the upper echelons of the executive branch.⁸ Particularly relevant to China policy is the appointment of experts to agencies such as the National Security Council, Department of State, Department of Defense, Department of Commerce, the Treasury, Office of the US Trade Representative, and the intelligence community. In the same vein, Washington’s tradition of ‘revolving doors’, in which analysts rotate in and out of government and intelligentsia depending on the electoral fortunes of their political party, further strengthens the ability of these experts to become part of the policymaking process.

Within this political system, think tanks in the American foreign policy world play three critical roles: as a ‘reservoir’ of policy expertise, an ‘agent’ for policy advocacy, and a ‘medium’ for the US policy world to interact with both domestic actors and foreign governments.

The think tank as reservoir

First, American think tanks constitute a reservoir of innovative policy ideas and independent expertise that the government can draw on. Leading think tanks frequently

⁸ For example, the US President alone can appoint about 3,500 full-time and part-time officials. See A Kamen, '[Senators seek to slash number of presidential appointees](#)', *The Washington Post*, 8 March 2010, accessed 10 May 2013.

produce their own independent policy assessments. Often chaired by senior former officials, these reports have the potential to significantly shape the national discourse. For example, the 2007 report by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) on ‘smart power’ was co-chaired by Joseph Nye, the leading academic pioneer on ‘soft power’ and a close advisor to then presidential candidate Hillary Clinton, and by a leading Republican ‘Asia hand’, former Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage.⁹ Among its commissioners was then Senator Chuck Hagel, the current US Secretary of Defense. The ‘smart power’ report later shaped Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s foreign policy agenda and formed the center piece of both her senate confirmation hearing for the position of State Secretary in January 2009 and in her farewell speech in January 2013.¹⁰ Yet another example is the Project 2049 Institute, which has strong ties to Armitage International, the consultancy headed by Richard Armitage. The Institute’s 2011 report first drew attention to the risks of Chinese cyber-attacks against American Government assets and identified the People’s Liberation Army’s (PLA) Unit 61398.¹¹ This would later develop into a significant controversy and agenda item in 2013, with the US Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel openly accusing China of conducting ‘cyber intrusions’ against the US at the Shangri-La Dialogue, a multilateral forum attended by defence ministers organised by the British think tank International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS).¹²

Furthermore, as is already evident, think tanks are often endowed with strong government connections, which facilitates both informal access to policymakers and helps them produce research that is more ‘actionable’ and readily consumable than those coming from the traditional academe. A prominent example is the RAND Corporation, which

⁹ CSIS Commission on Smart Power, [A smarter, more secure America](#), Center for Strategic and International Studies, accessed 1 April 2013.

¹⁰ See *New York Times*, [‘Transcript: Senate confirmation hearing: Hillary Clinton’](#), *New York Times* website, 13 January 2009, accessed 1 April 2013; and *Columbia Broadcasting Service (CBS) News*, [‘In farewell speech, Clinton calls for “smart power” on global stage’](#), *CBS News*, 31 January 2013, accessed 1 April 2013.

¹¹ M Stokes, J Lin, and R Hsiao, [‘The Chinese People’s Liberation Army signals intelligence and cyber reconnaissance infrastructure’](#), Project 2049 Institute website, 11 November, 2011, accessed 15 April 2013.

¹² See D Sanger et al, [‘Chinese army unit is seen as tied to hacking against U.S.’](#), *New York Times*, 18 February 2013, accessed 15 April 2013; *British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC)*, [‘Chuck Hagel accuses China over ‘cyber intrusions’](#)’, *BBC* website, 1 June 2013, accessed 2 June 2013.

began as a research project of the US Army and remains a Federally Funded Research and Development Center (FFRDC) contracted by the US Department of Defense to perform long-term research.¹³ Additionally, the East-West Center in Hawaii is a research think tank established by the US Congress in 1960 and which serves as a critical research resource, particularly to the US Pacific Command based in Hawaii.¹⁴ More generally, leading US think tanks tend to be presided by former senior officials which guarantees greater access to, and appreciation of the needs of, government leaders. As Table 1 below shows, a quick survey of the top six US think tanks as ranked by the University of Pennsylvania's study confirms this trend.¹⁵

Table 1

Think tank	Current president	Highest formal position in government
Brookings Institution	Strobe Talbott	US Deputy Secretary of State (1994-2001)
Carnegie Endowment for International Peace	Jessica Mathews	Deputy to the Undersecretary of State for Democracy and Global Affairs (1993-1994)
Center for Strategic and International Studies	John J. Hamre	US Deputy Secretary of Defense (1997-2000)
Council on Foreign Relations	Richard N. Haas	Director of Policy Planning, US Department of State (2001-2003)
Rand Corporation	Michael D. Rich	N/A
Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars	Jane Harman	US Representative for California (1993-1999, 2001-2011)

¹³ [‘Frequently asked questions’](#), RAND, accessed 10 May 2013.

¹⁴ [‘Mission and organization’](#), East-West Center, accessed 10 May 2013.

¹⁵ J McGann, [‘2012 global go to think tank report and policy advice’](#), Think Tanks and Civil Society Program, Philadelphia, 2012, p. 45, accessed 10 March 2013.

Think tanks also serve as a reservoir of fresh policy ideas, as both a provocateur and a watchdog. Foreign policy bureaucracies in governments may at times find it challenging to develop policy ideas that deviate significantly from the existing trajectory. This can be owing to a variety of factors including intellectual inertia, bureaucratic territory considerations, sub-optimal organisational structure (for example, arbitrary separation of functional and regional expertise), or a simple lack of human power and capacity to be devoted to long-term planning. In contrast, their supposed political independence and non-partisan nature, in theory, may better enable them to develop new policy ideas or identify niches that bigger foreign policy bureaucracies may not. Moreover, think tanks are also positioned to provide ‘Team B analysis’, that is, to play ‘devil’s advocate’ to constructively compete with government assessments, especially from a vantage point that is arguably less shielded from media scrutiny and public engagement.

The think tank as agent

While ideally by virtue of their tax-exempt status, think tanks should serve as non-partisan research entities contributing to the public good, in recent decades there has been a marked shift towards partisan advocacy over objective analysis. The foregoing discussion about think tank leadership being staffed by experienced public servants and political leaders, in this sense, can bring political access at the expense of independence. The aforementioned phenomenon of ‘revolving doors’, in which political leaders routinely rotate between positions in government, think tanks, and sometimes industry or academia, contributes to this dynamic. Think tanks are often called unofficial ‘governments-in-waiting’ for the party out of power. When their preferred political party is out of power, some senior policy professionals may work as think tank researchers to sustain policy engagement and political momentum. As Tevi Troy puts it:

Some serve as governments-in-waiting for the party out of power, providing professional perches for former officials who hope to be back in office when their party next takes control of the White House or Congress. Some serve as training grounds for young

activists. Some serve as unofficial public-relations and rapid-response teams for one of the political parties—providing instant critiques of the opposition's ideas and public arguments in defense of favored policies.¹⁶

In this sense, rather than performing objective analysis to the policy world, think tanks may act as political players themselves and pursue policies that align with their own political vision or that of their preferred political party. This serves to blur the distinction between some think tanks and lobby groups.

An example of such an ‘advocacy-oriented’ think tank is the Project for a New American Century, which was founded in 1997 by leading neoconservative thinkers William Kristol and Robert Kagan, among others. Its founding ‘Statement of principles’ espoused a muscular vision of US primacy in the post-Cold War global environment and calls for significant increase in defense spending and ‘challenge regimes hostile to our interests and values’. These principles were subsequently developed into calls for regime change in Iraq.¹⁷ Among the signatories to the “Statement of Principles” were many who would soon become senior officials in the Bush administration, including Vice President Dick Cheney, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, Deputy National Security Advisor Scooter Libby, and US Ambassador to Afghanistan, Iraq, and the United Nations, Zalmay Khalilzad.

The think tank as medium

American think tanks also perform as important channels through which important track ‘1.5 dialogues’ take place and where both American and foreign leaders make important policy announcements to either influence or gauge public perception. As opposed to track 1 dialogue (government-to-government) and track 2 dialogue (civil society-to-civil society), the non-government nature of these think tanks and their strong government ties

¹⁶ T Troy, ‘Devaluing the think tank’, *National Affairs*, 10, winter 2012, p. 75.

¹⁷ Project for the New American Century (PNAC), ‘[Statement of principles](#)’, PNAC website, accessed 10 April 2013; see also PNAC, ‘[Letter to President Clinton on Iraq](#)’, PNAC website, accessed 10 April 2013.

make them ideal candidates to host ‘track 1.5 dialogues’, which bring governments and civil societies together.

Think tanks are known to host track 2 and de facto track 1.5 dialogues between governments and researchers from multiple countries through both formal and informal settings. Formally, the IISS hosts the Shangri-La Dialogue which is attended by defense ministers, military chiefs, and non-government leaders. The East-West Institute and others coordinate the ‘Sanya Initiative’, which brings together retired generals from the US and China to conduct low-profile private exchanges and reinforce military-to-military transparency and confidence-building.¹⁸

Informally, think tanks also often host nominally educational ‘executive training’ programs that bring foreign officials to the United States for exchanges with US officials and scholars. The Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), for example, hosts executive training programs for Taiwan and Japan, which bring senior and mid-level military officers and civilian officials to the US to receive ‘exposure to key experts and policy makers in the US defense and policy communities’.¹⁹ Nominally educational in nature, such programs are especially useful to states facing limited international recognition or the formal interaction of which with senior US officials on US soil would otherwise be overly politically sensitive. In a somewhat similar vein, university research centres-cum-think tanks such as Harvard University’s Kennedy School of Government’s ‘New world fellows’ program brings senior government-sponsored Chinese officials to receive executive training and/or conduct ‘research’ at Harvard University during between one and four weeks of residency.²⁰ Notable alumni of the program include Li Yuanchao (Class of 2002), China’s current Vice President and Deputy Chairman of the

¹⁸ See M Brzezinski and M Fung, ‘[The China list](#)’, *New York Times*, 30 October 2009, accessed 10 April 2013; R Hallow, ‘[Republican fear exchange program put national security at risk](#)’, *Washington Times*, 19 April 2012, accessed 10 April 2013.

¹⁹ ‘[Executive training program](#)’, Center for Strategic and International Studies, accessed 10 April 2013.

²⁰ Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation, ‘[New world fellows](#)’, Harvard University, accessed 30 January 2013; see also W Dobson and J William, ‘[The East is crimson](#)’, *Slate*, 23 May 2012, accessed 30 January 2013.

Chinese Communist Party Central Committee's Small Leading Groups on Foreign Affairs and National Security.²¹

Moreover, US think tanks further serve as a potential avenue for foreign governments to influence US policy thinking through sponsoring think tank research. CSIS, for example, has at least five fully-fledged regional research programs devoted to Asian policy research. While understandably think tanks should ideally maintain intellectual independence, pragmatically, at least part of their research agenda (if not the direction of their analysis) will be shaped by funding concerns. Executive education constitutes an important revenue stream. In addition, applying for research grants from both American and foreign charitable foundations is often conditional on having a particular research focus. Not all charitable foundations are entirely politically neutral. The CSIS Korea Chair, for example, conducts a research initiative on the Korean Unification sponsored by the Korea Foundation, which is established by the South Korean National Assembly and is affiliated with the Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs (although it is formally an independent body).²²

Think tanks further serve as policy salons where political leaders, officials, researchers, and journalists gather to share their proposed policies and test the waters. In doing so, it provides a forum for exchanging ideas and knowledge between important stakeholders in the policy-making process, and facilitates the identification and construction of policy-specific coalitions that can push policy through. Recent Australian political leaders and public intellectuals who have spoken at the CSIS include the former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, former Foreign Minister Bob Carr, Hugh White of the Australian National University and Australian Strategic Policy Institute, and Rory Medcalf of the Lowy Institute for International Policy. Lowy has had an additional ongoing CSIS-Lowy Dialogue with CSIS's Asia-oriented research programs since June 2008.²³ Before each major overseas trip by the US President or the Secretary of State, leading think tanks

²¹, ['Ranked just beneath the seven standing committee members, Li Yuanchao is expected to become Vice President and to assist Xi Jinping in managing foreign affairs'](#) (排名僅次於七常委 將助習近平處理外事 李源潮料任國家副主席), *Sing Tao Daily* (星島日報), 6 March 2013, accessed 20 April 2013.

²² ['Korean unification'](#), Center for Strategic and International Studies, accessed 30 April 2013.

²³ ['CSIS/Lowy dialogue'](#), Center for Strategic and International Studies, accessed 20 April 2013.

often conduct widely reported pre-departure press briefings attended by senior officials and commentators that outline their assessment of what are or what should be the key objectives for each leg of the itinerary.

2. Obama's pivot to Asia

The Obama administration's 'pivot to Asia' is a carefully calibrated attempt to preventively curtail China's growing influence in the Asia-Pacific region. This involves reallocations of its military assets towards Asia and reinvigorating its political relations with Asian allies and partners, including Australia, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and Southeast Asian states.²⁴

Challenged by China's increasingly assertive stance in its dispute with several Southeast Asian states over the South China Sea, the US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton publicly showed support for Southeast Asians at the 2010 ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) meeting in Vietnam. During the summit, Clinton declared that the South China Sea 'is pivotal to regional stability'. Therefore, she added, 'the United States has a national interest in freedom of navigation, open access to Asia's maritime commons and respect for international law in the South China Sea' and that Washington encourages 'a collaborative diplomatic process by all claimants for resolving the various territorial disputes without coercion'.²⁵

Besides directly rebuking China's aspirations over the South China Sea, Clinton sought to shore up the credibility of US strategic commitment to the Asia-Pacific region by

²⁴ Though it should be noted that there are different interpretations of the pivot. Noboru Yamaguchi, for example, argues that pivot 'is fundamentally a demobilization from a wartime posture rather than a mere geographic change in US policy priorities'. See N Yamaguchi, 'A Japanese perspective on U.S. rebalancing toward the Asia-Pacific region', *Asia Policy*, 15, p.7.

²⁵ E Yujuico, '[The real story behind the South China Sea dispute](#)', *LSE Ideas* website, accessed 20 April 2013; *Bloomberg*, '[Clinton signals U.S. role in China territorial disputes after ASEAN talks](#)', *Bloomberg* website, 23 July 2010, accessed 20 April 2013.

proclaiming in her November 2011 *Foreign Policy* magazine article that the twenty-first century will remain ‘America’s Pacific Century’.²⁶ Taking note of doubts about America’s staying power, Clinton calls for an active, ‘forward-deployed’ regional diplomacy and highlighted six key actions:

1. strengthening the US bilateral security alliances
2. deepening its working relationships with emerging powers, including with China
3. engaging with regional multilateral institutions
4. expanding trade and investment
5. forging a broad-based military presence
6. advancing democracy and human rights

This more robust strategy has been supplemented by Clinton’s 2009 upgrading of the existing Senior Dialogue and Strategic Economic Dialogue into the regular US-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue, led by successive US Secretaries of State and Secretaries of the Treasury as well as Chinese Vice Premiers and State Councillors.

Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta outlined more concrete objectives for America’s pivot during his remarks at the 2012 Shangri-La Dialogue where he declared that by 2020, 60 per cent of America’s bi-oceanic naval power will be moved to the Pacific, including six aircraft carriers in the region. He also reaffirmed Clinton’s call that the South China Sea disputes should be resolved diplomatically rather than through coercion and stated that the US had made those views ‘clear to China and to other countries in the region’.²⁷

Several important developments have followed the declaration of the pivot strategy. US President Barack Obama announced during his November 2011 trip to Australia a plan to

²⁶ H Clinton (United States Secretary of State), '[America's Pacific century](#)', *Foreign Policy*, November 2011, accessed 10 February 2013.

²⁷ L Panetta (United States Secretary of Defense), '[Shangri-La Security Dialogue: as delivered by Secretary of Defense Leon E. Panetta, Shangri-La Hotel, Singapore, Saturday, June 02, 2012](#)', United States Department of Defense website, accessed 1 March 2013.

send 2,500 US marines to Darwin, Northern Territory, for training by 2016–17.²⁸ With Japan, the American leadership’s public show of support has emboldened Tokyo to take the initiative on managing its disputes with China. The Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has openly called for the formation of ‘Asia’s Democratic Security Diamond’, inviting not only India but also two extra-regional powers (Britain and France) to play a collective role in strengthening Asia’s security. This arrangement would have the explicit aim of preventing the East and South China Seas becoming ‘Lake Beijing’.²⁹ On the Korean Peninsula, South Korea and the US have delayed the agreed date for the return of wartime operational control (OPCON) of allied forces to South Korea, from 2009-2012 to 2015, allowing the two forces more time to improve their interoperability.³⁰ In addition, the Congress has been increasingly open and frequent in its calls for the US Government to sell the advanced F16 C/D jet fighters as well as more advanced naval weaponries to Taiwan – weapons that Taipei has been requesting for over half a decade.³¹

The US has also made inroads in deepening its engagement with Southeast Asian nations. It inaugurated its first ‘2+2’ ministerial meeting with the Philippines in 2012. It began its first deployment of its Littoral Combat Ships to Singapore in April 2013.³² Washington has also effectively re-engaged Myanmar. In 2012, it appointed its first Ambassador to Myanmar in 22 years and President Obama received Myanmar’s President Thein Sein at the White House in May 2013.

²⁸ P Coorey, [‘Obama to send marines to Darwin’](#), *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 November 2011, accessed 10 March 2013.

²⁹ S Abe (Japanese Prime Minister), [‘Asia’s democratic security diamond’](#), *Project Syndicate*, 27 December 2012, accessed 10 March 2013.

³⁰ K Ousley, 2010, [‘Wartime operational control’](#). *SAIS U.S.-Korea Yearbook*, accessed 10 May 2001; see also E Kim, [‘S. Korea, U.S. agrees to stronger deterrence against N. Korea’](#), *Yonhap*, 8 May 2013, accessed 10 May 2013.

³¹ For example, in 2012, the US House Resolution 4310 (112th), which approves the National Defense Authorization Act for the Fiscal Year 2013, includes a section on sale of aircraft to Taiwan. It calls on the US President to ‘take steps to address Taiwan’s shortfall in fighter aircraft, whether through the sale of F-16 C/D aircraft or other aircraft of similar capability, as may be necessary to enable Taiwan to maintain a sufficient self-defense capability.’ See Govtrack.us, [‘H.R. 4310 \(112th\): National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2013’](#), Govtrack.us website, accessed 17 June 2013; see also *Voice of America*, [‘American Congressman complains that Taiwan seems numb towards the military threat from China’](#) (美議員抱怨台灣似對中國軍事威脅反應漠然), *Voice of America Chinese* website, 11 February 2013, accessed 17 June 2013.

³² A Carter (United States Deputy Secretary of Defense), [‘The US Defense Rebalance to Asia \(Speech delivered at the Center for Strategic and International Studies by US Deputy Secretary of Defense Ashton B. Carter on April 8, 2013\)’](#), United States Department of Defense website, accessed 10 May 2013.

On the economic front, the US has emphasised the priority of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), which currently excludes China, as its preferred vehicle for regional economic integration. The TPP is seen by some as a potential counter-weight to the China-ASEAN Free Trade Area and China's growing role at the centre of regional economic integration.³³

It should be noted that the Obama administration's two primary 'Asia hands' during this period first-term both came directly from US think tanks. Jeffrey Bader, the Senior Director for Asian Affairs on the National Security Council (NSC), was the Director of the John L. Thornton China Center at the Brookings Institution prior to joining the White House, while Kurt Campbell, the Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, was a founding CEO at the Center for a New American Century (CNAS) and, prior to that, a Senior Vice President for Asia at CSIS.

As the Senior Director for Asia on the NSC, Bader was reportedly instrumental in shaping the Obama administration's early conciliatory stance towards Beijing.³⁴ This was manifested not only in Obama's initially deferential attitude towards China during the 2009 United Nations Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen, but even more clearly during Obama's first trip to China in November 2009. Bader was reportedly the key author of the US-China Joint Statement issued at the end of the China trip.³⁵ The Statement espouses that 'respecting each other's *core interests* is extremely important to ensure steady progress in US-China relations' (emphasis added). Moreover, the US breaks past conventions in stating that its one China policy is guided by the principles of the three US-China joint communiqués without simultaneously highlighting the importance of its commitment under its domestic Taiwan Relations Act.³⁶

³³ See, for example, S Das, '[The Trans-Pacific Partnership as a tool to contain China: myth or reality?](#)', *ISEAS perspective*, 31, 2013, accessed 20 June 2013; W Yuan, '[The Trans-Pacific Partnership and China's corresponding strategies](#)', *Freeman Briefing*, June 2012, accessed 20 June 2013,

³⁴ M Landler, '[Obama's journey to tougher tack on a rising China](#)', *New York Times*, 20 September 2012, accessed 20 February 2013.

³⁵ G Sheridan, '[US loses its focus on Asia](#)', *The Australian*, 9 February 2013, accessed 10 May 2013.

³⁶ The White House, '[US-China joint statement](#)', The White House website, accessed 10 May 2013.

If Bader was the main advocate for a conciliatory engagement policy towards China, then Kurt Campbell was arguably the primary architect of the more robust ‘pivot’ to Asia policy within the Obama administration. Campbell has argued that ‘the Chinese respect strength, determination and strategy’.³⁷ Three months after leaving as the founding Chief Executive Officer of CNAS to serve in the Obama administration, CNAS published a research report entitled *China’s arrival: a strategic framework for a global relationship* which outlined CNAS’s position on Sino-American relations.³⁸ The concluding chapter of the report foreshadowed the pivot when it argued that Beijing ‘[r]ecognise that over the long run, the *United States does not want China to achieve its full national potential and will take measures to inhibit China’s success*’ (emphasis added).³⁹ CNAS also supplied additional senior level officials to the Obama administration, including Michele Flournoy, CNAS’ founding President and Obama’s Undersecretary of Defense for Policy, as well as Nirav Patel, a Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs under Kurt Campbell.

3. Australian think tanks

This section draws mainly on insights from the author’s interviews conducted for this research project. In comparison with the US policymaking context, Australian think tanks operate under two sets of important constraints: smaller size and more limited ‘revolving door’ opportunities. The relatively smaller charitable foundations sector in the Australian research environment has meant that it is more challenging financially for Australian think tanks both individually and as a sector to develop a critical mass necessary to shape public discourse to the same extent as their American counterparts. Their smaller size also makes it more challenging to specialise.⁴⁰ There are cases in which the government provides initial seed funding to set up de facto think tanks affiliated with academic

³⁷ ‘[Obama’s journey to tougher tack on a rising China](#)’, op. cit.

³⁸ Center for a New American Security, ‘[China’s arrival: a strategic framework for a global relationship](#)’, Center for a New American Security website, accessed 20 February 2013.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 162.

⁴⁰ Author’s interview at Australian Parliament House, Number 2, February 2013.

institutions.⁴¹ However, in lieu of continued subsequent funding, such think tanks may often have to assume training and teaching obligations to ensure sustained income streams and continued operations.⁴²

The second factor identified by numerous interviewees is the more limited ‘revolving door’ opportunities for Australian think tank researchers. American career researchers in the US system may have a greater opportunity to join working and even senior ranks of government as a political appointee, while the sheer number of think tanks and policy schools, have more positions available for those leaving the government. In the Westminster system of parliamentary democracy, opportunities for political appointments, including ambassadorial appointments for non-career diplomats, are comparatively rare.⁴³

However, researchers affiliated with think tanks do have a role to play in Australia’s thinking about China. For example, in both an article published in March 2012 and in a fully-developed policy briefing in June 2012, Linda Jakobson of the Lowy Institute for International Policy warned that Australia’s close relations with the US could potentially engender a serious crisis in its relations with China, in part due to a lack of familiarity and political trust between leaders on both sides.⁴⁴ Jakobson recommended that ‘Australia should pursue an annual strategic and economic dialogue with China at the Cabinet Minister level’ to pursue confidence-building and improve communication between Australia and China.⁴⁵

It would appear that the former Australian Foreign Minister Bob Carr was receptive to the message, as he too began to call for the establishment of regular dialogues between

⁴¹ Note that this phenomenon is not uncommon among smaller US think tanks or even during the early phases of now potent think tanks. For example, the CSIS began as a research centre within Georgetown University, while the now independent World Policy Institute was initially housed within the New School University.

⁴² Author’s interview at Australian National University, April 2013.

⁴³ Author’s interview at Australian Parliament House, Numbers 1 and 3, February 2013.

⁴⁴ L Jakobson, ‘Carr’s chance to rally China interest’, *The Australian*, 22 March 2012, p.8; L

Jakobson, ‘[Australia-China ties: in search of political trust](#)’, *Policy Brief*, accessed 10 March 2013.

⁴⁵ *ibid.*, p. 1.

Australia and China, preferably at the prime ministerial and presidential level from mid-2012.⁴⁶

In April 2013, Australia and China announced a new ‘strategic partnership’ and established an annual formal dialogue between each other’s Prime Ministers, Foreign Ministers, Treasurers, and Trade Ministers. This is a rare arrangement that only three other countries (Britain, Germany, and Russia) have with China.⁴⁷ The Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade’s 2013 Issues Paper on China strategy boasted this development and vowed to further expand dialogue mechanisms to additional layers of political and strategic engagement.⁴⁸

4. Conclusion and recommendation

This paper has argued that American think tanks have played a significant role in influencing America’s attitude and policy towards China. Theoretically, the US foreign policy making context allows think tanks to play important functions: as a ‘reservoir’ of policy expertise and alternative analysis, as an ‘agent’ for political advocacy, and as a ‘medium’ for intellectual and political exchanges. By examining the career trajectories of two primary China hands of the Obama administration as well many contemporary think tank leaders, it is clear that American think tanks leave a significant imprint on the administration’s attitude towards China. A closer examination of the activity and publication of US think tanks thus provide an effective window into understanding and possibly foretelling the administration’s policy towards China.

⁴⁶ See, for example, P Wen, ‘[Carr calls for closer ties with Chinese](#)’, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 May 2012, accessed 11 April 2013; ‘[Editorial: Carr’s steady hand should advance our Chinese ties](#)’, *The Australian*, 9 October 2012, accessed 11 April 2013.

⁴⁷ *The Australian*, ‘[China deal the cornerstone of Julia Gillard’s Asian Century](#)’, *The Australian* website, 10 April 2013, accessed 11 April 2013. It should be noted that Linda Jakobson personally commented on this development on the day of the announcement. See L Jakobson, ‘[Australia-China strategic partnership: two years of fits and starts](#)’, *The Interpreter* weblog, 10 April 2013, accessed 1 May 2013.

⁴⁸ Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), ‘Towards 2025: Australia’s China strategy in the Asian Century issues paper’, DFAT, Canberra, April 2013.

Looking to the future, there are two concrete steps that the Australian Government could take to both improve its engagement with China and the American policy community. First, to better engage and influence through osmosis the thinking of prospective Chinese leaders, the Australian Government should consider expanding support for short-term exchange programs and executive training programs with the Chinese Government. The foregoing discussion about Harvard University's executive training program is one example. An arguably even more interesting example is Singapore's Nanyang Technological University (NTU). Since 1992, the NTU has trained over 13,000 Chinese officials, the majority of which were officials at the mayoral and bureau director level.⁴⁹ This initiative was borrowed by the National University of Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy in 2010 as it began to offer full-fledged Master programs in public administration and management.⁵⁰ Perhaps it is no coincidence that in recent years there has been a surge in Chinese interests in studying the 'Singapore model' of combining economic dynamism, effective service delivery, and a single party-dominant political system. *The Study Times*, an official newspaper read by Chinese officials and published by the Chinese Communist Party's Central Party School, which reportedly mentioned the desirability of the Singaporean Model three times within the span of a few months.⁵¹ Meanwhile, the state-owned China Central Television, a well-established bellwether of government thinking, has reportedly been filming a 10-episode documentary series on the 'Singaporean model'.⁵²

In recent years Australia has implemented a number of programs of a similar nature. For example, the Australia and New Zealand School of Government (ANZSOG) piloted a

⁴⁹ *Xinhua News Agency*, '[American media reports that Nanyang Technological University has become the Chinese Communist Party's "offshore party school"](#)' (美媒报道南洋理工大学成中共“海外党校”), *Xinhua News Agency* website, 17 December 2012, accessed 10 April 2013.

⁵⁰ *China Business News*, '[Officials' overseas training: from Singapore to Harvard](#)' (官员海外培训: 从新加坡到哈佛), *Sohu* website, November 2012, accessed 20 April 2013.

⁵¹ *Xinhua News Agency*, '[Russia media reports that the Chinese Communist Party is very interested in the Singaporean model](#)' (俄媒: 中共对新加坡模式兴趣浓厚), *Xinhua News Agency* website, 25 January 2013, accessed 20 April 2013.

⁵² *ibid*; see also W Cai, '[How can Xi Jinping borrow from the Singaporean model?](#)' (习近平如何借鉴新加坡模式?), *Duowei*, 5 January 2013, accessed 20 April 2013.

‘China Advanced Leadership Program’ (CALP) with the Chinese Communist Party’s Organization Department in 2011. The program is tailored for Chinese party leaders such as ‘Vice-Ministers, City Mayors, Party Secretaries and Directors-General from both provincial and central government’. Following the successful pilot the program has been renewed for a three year period from 2012 to 2014. The Australian Defence College also has ongoing multinational training and exchange programs with senior military officers from Australia, New Zealand, China, Malaysia, and other countries, often at colonel and brigadier levels, which serve the dual purposes of training and military confidence-building.⁵³

To further fulfill the dual objectives of developing potential soft power leverage over China and of following Canberra’s own ‘Asian Century’ initiative to cultivate Asian literacy, the Australian Government should consider expanding the scope of such exchange programs. One option is to broaden the CALP to include not only serving Chinese public servants and party secretaries, but also promising future elites from other CCP-affiliate organs and state-owned enterprises. The Chinese Communist Youth League (CYL), for example, is widely recognised for producing former general secretaries including Hu Yaobang (1982–1987) and Hu Jintao (2002–2012), as well as the current Premier Li Keqiang, and numerous other senior Politburo members past and present. Similarly, China’s state-owned enterprises are part of a Chinese version of revolving doors. The heads of China’s leading state owned enterprises are often de facto ministerial or vice-ministerial level positions within the party hierarchy, and they often move onto cabinet or provincial governor level positions in the government after their postings in the state-owned enterprises. By including promising leaders from these influential organisations in the existing exchange programs, the Australian Government will be able to develop a more well-rounded understanding of and relationship with other pivotal players of China’s politico-economic system.

Secondly, to improve Australia’s engagement with American think tanks, it should consider promoting additional linkages with them. Take for example, CSIS, which has

⁵³ Author’s interview at the Australian Defence College, June 2013.

one of the strongest regional research programs among American think tanks. It has fully-fledged research programs devoted exclusively to China as well as middle powers such as Japan, Korea, Indonesia, and India (Australia shares a less-developed Pacific Partners ‘Initiative’ with New Zealand and other Pacific Island states). Australia should undertake measures to increase the profile of Australian and Oceanic regional specialists in the US. For example, it can create more research grants, exchange programs, and other incentives to make financially sustainable the creation of ongoing Australian research programs rather than ad hoc research initiatives. By creating a ‘Oceania Chair’, the Australian Government could improve the visibility of Australian issues within the US foreign policy community, as well as encouraging a framework of policy formulation that makes Australian issues and Australian-American issues its priorities. These Australia-specific research programs will then become the preferred partners of, and career and financing options for, Australian officials working in the US as well as for American experts on Australia. They will help organise Australia-specific roundtables, press conferences, and other typical think tank activities, which will in turn magnify the effectiveness of outreach by Australian diplomatic corps, policymakers, and scholars to the American Government and society.

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