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The Role of Think Tanks in Defining Security Issues and Agendas

by Peter Hayes

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I. Introduction

In a lecture at the Australian Defence College on "The Role Of Think Tanks In Defining Security Issues And Agendas" Nautilus Institute Executive Director Peter Hayes said, "Transnational Thinknets (TTNs) tend to be either highly effective by communicating across borders and behind the scenes; or speak truth to power without inhibition; and if they are not just maverick, but also provide top quality information and analysis, TTNs often run rings around many competing traditional think tanks in terms of timeliness, accuracy, insight (especially early warning of pending events, emerging issues, or anomalies in conventional perspectives) combined with connectivity to networked policymakers."

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Nautilus Institute. Readers should note that Nautilus seeks a diversity of views and opinions on contentious topics in order to identify common ground.

II. Essay by Peter Hayes

-"The Role of Think Tanks in Defining Security Issues and Agendas"
 by Peter Hayes

Think tanks come in many shapes, sizes, and flavors, depending upon function, political culture, leadership, and orientation. Their impact on foreign policy in a given country, therefore, is highly context-specific. In the United States, there is a long history of think tanks playing an important role in the formulation of foreign and security policy, both as insiders and an integral part of the national security state, and as outsiders banging on the door of the state to get their ideas incorporated into policy.

In section 1 of this presentation, I outline the generic types, roles and indicators of impact of think tanks. In section 2, I note some types of impact of think thanks on

US security and foreign policy and I present some case studies of both traditional think tanks, and the emerging transnational thinknets on US foreign policy that now compete with think tanks for the attention of policymakers. In the third section, I outline the debates about and critiques of think tanks. I conclude by describing the emerging "transnational thinknets" that represent their main competition.

1. TRADITIONAL THINK TANKS

The RAND corporation embodies the conventional image of a traditional think tank (hereafter TTT) wherein a bunch of pointy heads paid by the military sit in a secure room to solve hard security problems for the US Air Force. This image was distilled in the New Yorker cartoon last year that, as I remember it, showed a tank with a think-bubble projectile emerging from its cannon. Of course, the TTT universe is far more complex and nuanced than this image suggests.

1.1 Definition: The genesis of think tanks may be traced ultimately back to the role played by advisors to leaders over millennia in many different political cultures. TTTs address the age-old problem of how to organize and deliver knowledge in ways that support the pursuit and exercise of political power. Because there are many ways to advise leaders, and many ways to relate to knowledge to the formation and implementation of any public policy, so too the TTT must be defined more specifically than merely as purveyors of knowledge to publics or officials.

McGann and Weaver provide a useful functional definition of TTTs beyond the superficial descriptive statement that they provide public policy research, analysis and advice, are non-profit, and operate independently from governments and universities:

As civil society organizations think tanks play a number of critical roles, including: (1) playing a mediating function between the government and the public; (2) identifying, articulating, and evaluating current or emerging issues, problems or proposals; (3) transforming ideas and problems into policy issues; (4) serving as an informed and independent voice in policy debates; and (5) providing a constructive forum for the exchange of ideas and information between key stakeholders in the policy formulation process.[1]

A specific TTT may fulfill one function much more than the others, but arguably some element of all five roles must be present in each of the estimated 3-4000 TTTs that now exist on Earth. A particularly important dimension is their degree of autonomy from the state that is their primary constituency; thus, national TTTs may be more or less civilian, and more or less state-controlled. Often, this aspect of TTTs leads to the conclusion that TTTs are part of a growing third sector of civil society that provides independent (of the state and market) policy advice.

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[1] J. McGann, R. Kent Weaver, ed, *Think Tanks & Civil Societies,* Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick, 2000, p. 3

Whenever they address global public policy matters—and what important issues are not global in some way today?--TTTs must also be civilizing agents as well as civilian if they are to be part of *global* civil society that is defined by a shared commitment to universal values of peace, security, and sustainability.

Although McGann and Weaver don't notice it, this latter definitional element in an era of globalization suggests that many of the civilian "TTTs" that promote ethnocentric and xenophobic perspectives, and in some instances, unsustainable, violent and even genocidal public policies--including and perhaps especially many TTTs found in the leading industrial countries--are not part of global *civil* society— whatever else they may be. This recent normative emphasis on accountability of civil society is still debated hotly among political scientists and non-governmental practitioners. But it suggests that even domestically oriented TTTs cannot circumvent global norms due to the rapid increases in transparency in what transpires at national and sub-national levels when governments trample upon global values of sustainability and security. TTTs with iron fists can no more evade this accountability by ducking for domestic cover than military dictators.

1.2 **Think Tank Taxonomy:** The activities involved in fulfilling these functions boil down to a balance between research and analysis; advocacy drawing on existing research or analysis (or none at all in cases of ideologically-driven TTTs); evaluation of government programs including dissemination thereof; networking and exchange via workshops, seminars, and briefings; training and supplying personnel to staff state agencies; and interpreting policy issues to the mass media.

This catalogue leads McGann and Weaver to characterize TTTs as falling into four types, *academic, contract research, advocacy, and party-affiliated* TTTs. They qualify this breakdown by noting that TTTs reflect in various degrees the fragmentation, porosity, and openness of different political cultures to the contribution of TTTs.

To use less rigid metaphorical categories, in Washington DC one can easily find *revolving door* and *holding shelf* TTTs (where officials jostle for appointments in or wait out an incumbent Administration); and *lapdog* and *guidedog* TTTs that provide legitimating advice to contending policy currents or credibility to policymakers already committed to a particular policy line.

Less prevalent are more critical *greyhound* TTTs entered in the endless marathon for reform in Washington; even rarer are *bloodhound* TTTs that search out corruption and scandal to overturn the established powers. The least likely are *pitbull* TTTs that bite official hands that feed them and, as insurgents, are opposed to both elite consensus and the entrenched status quo. There are of course, cross-breeds or hybrid TTTs, often built around one creative individual or a retired senior official. Perhaps these should be called *poodle* TTTs although some call them vanity TTTs.

*1.3 **Theories of TTT Influence***: Political scientists view TTTs as either part of the political elite[2] or as one of many institutional interests competing for policymakers' attention in a pluralist framework. Neither approach helps us much in determining what kind or level of influence TTTs have on policy including foreign policy. As Abelson points out, who is at the table tells us little *per se* about which voice was influential; and some voices may be heard privately with great impact without any publicity while others transform public opinion without ever directly addressing a policy maker in a briefing room.

Thus, he suggests, we need a more nuanced understanding of what constitutes influence and how it is measured before we can specify how these different types of TTT work in any particular field such as foreign policy. Abelson suggests that influence should be tracked and measured by direct and indirect indicators at various points in the policy cycle as follows:

> *Issue articulation* (such are addressed to publics, intermediaries such as media, elites, governments, channeling policy currents, coalition formation, and aim to get issues onto the public agenda)
> *Policy formulation* (such as studies, evaluation, briefings, testimony, consultation, networking, iconic projects, demonstration effects)
> *Policy implementation* (such as contracting, advisory, media, supply of officials, training, database maintenance).[3]

However, measuring such influence is even harder than specifying what counts as influence. Some indicators that suggest influence might be exerted (leaving aside the counter-factual problem that arises when attempting to prove that a given TTT exerted influence in a specific instance) that have been suggested include:

> **Supply indicators:** Proximity, funding and staffing level, fraction of total donor resources in US, staffing levels, networks of key players

> **Demand indicators:** Media exposure, testimony, briefings, official appointments, perched officials, consultation by officials or departments/agencies, conducive or receptive political environment

> **Mission indicators:** Recommendations considered or adopted by policymakers; perceptions of users; network centrality;[4] advisory role to parties, candidates, transition teams, awards, publication in or citation of publications in academic journals, listserv and website dominance, adoption of contrarian positions (that is, opposed to official line), etc.

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[2] See J. A. Smith, *The Idea Brokers: Think Tanks and the Rise of the New Policy Elite,* Free Press, New York, 1991

[3] D. Abelson, *Do Think Tanks Matter? Assessing the Impact of Public Policy Institutes,*McGill-Queens University Press, Montreal, 2000; see also D. Stone and A. Denham, *Think Tank Traditions, Policy research and the politics of ideas,* Manchester University Press, 2004, p. 55.

[4] Readers can display dynamically constellations of interlinked TTTs by providing web site addresses to Touchgraph http://www.touchgraph.com/TGGoogleBrowser.html

In the United States, private philanthropy plays an important funding role in selecting which TTTs will exist, and which will be sent into dustbin for recycling. For donors that care about their TTT grantee performance, the issue of measuring impact is urgent. Absent systematic analysis of the TTT sector and specific position of any given TTT, one US private donor official how foundations rely on indirect indicators to judge TTT grantee impact:

> *Actual policy initiative/change/implementation is the most obvious indicator of impact. Research (case studies)and data on causality is always sorely lacking because funders tend to neglect such needs. So anecdotes, policymaker testimony, and circumstantial evidence are the common fallback in lieu of hard evidence. If one is skeptical about such claims and the value of such evidence, there are other ways to measure a program's relevance to the policy process and potential to shape outcomes…*
>
> - *Relationships/contacts with policymakers/implementers*
> - *Relationships with individuals (Board members etc.) with relationships with policymakers*
> - *Extent of/quality of circulation of research products*
> - *Uptake of products by policymakers (public references)*
> - *Uptake by other influential elites: editorial boards, columnists, media commentators*
> - *Uptake by political pressure groups and other civic actors*
> - *Cumulative media references to research products*
> - *Reflection of research products in policy statements and documents...conceptual and textual reflections etc.*[5]

2. US SECURITY/FOREIGN POLICY IMPACT: CASE STUDIES

To summarize the first section of this presentation, *four types* of TTTs (academic, contract research, advocacy, and party-affiliated) can play one or more of *five roles* (mediating between government and salient publics; articulating issues; formulating policy options; providing independent policy voices; offering constructive fora with key stakeholders) at one or more of *three phases of the policy cycle* (articulation, formulation and implementation of policy options).

A given TTT obviously chooses from many possible combinations of type, role, and policy cycle pressure point, and many possible indicators exist as to the impact achieved by that TTT. Scanning the array of TTTs described by NIRA or the materials written about or by them (at http://www.etown.edu/vl/research.html) is a good way to get a feel for this diversity in the TTT world.

2.1 Generalizations: In spite of this diversity, a few generalizations may be made with respect to US foreign policy impacts of the established TTTs. Most of the major DC-based TTTs such as Brookings, Carnegie Endowment, Cato

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[5] Private email message to Hayes from a senior foundation official.

Institute, American Enterprise Institute, and Heritage Institute, conduct *foreign policy research and analysis* (at quality and scope that ranges from less to more superficial in order of listing of exemplary TTTs). These TTTs all provide *extensive media and congressional material*, some more user-friendly than others (in reverse order in this listing).

All play a *networking role* and *build alignments and coalitions* that feed into policy currents that transect foreign policy executive agencies. Depending on who is in the White House, some *supply key policymakers and staff* who formulate and implement actual policy, and draw on TTTs to *display, trial, or implement policies*, at least in a supplementary manner. Other TTTs, such as RAND or Institute of Defense Analysis, work continuously on a *contract basis* with executive agencies and are largely insulated from the media and congressional dynamics of the electoral cycle, but also supply staff or policy input to key bureaucrats to work the policy cycle.

In general, these American TTTs have a competitive advantage in the *formation of public opinion* and the uptake by high level policy-makers of policy options in the marketplace (or battlefield) of ideas, but are less well-placed when it comes to implementation when they often find themselves outgunned and poorly informed relative to well-supported professionals working for the executive—unless the TTT has a unique informational or political asset that is essential to policy implementation.

A few work both sides of the street, playing a role in public opinion and media profiles of specific issues and policy options, but also serving in a contract or grant-based relationship to implement policy—a strategy that can endow a TTT with competitive advantage of other less-well positioned or endowed TTTs in the battle for donors.

Also, TTTs may have a competitive advantage over officials in the executive and legislative branches in relation to international agencies, allies, friends, and especially adversaries, where they have excellent access to leaders or may activate networks or public opinion in ways that out-maneuver flatfooted and large bureaucracies guided more by auto-pilot than by smart, well-informed decision-making by policymakers.

Two case studies are provided below of how TTTs have affected US foreign policy, one concerning the formulation of an innovative policy option by a major TTT, and one concerning the implementation of existing policy options by a minor TTT.

Case Study 1, Iraq: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (CEIP) is an established, liberal-mainstream TTT in Washington DC.   In the lead-up to and aftermath of the Iraq War, CEIP floated a trial balloon for an innovation in monitoring and inspection policy that would have used armed force to achieve access and transparency for arms control and disarmament purposes, but would not have entailed declaring war and occupation of Iraq.

Carnegie used all its considerable media, networking, and analytic resources to formulate and promote this policy option, both in the United States, at the UN Security Council, and in allied nations. CEIP succeeded in having this policy idea considered at many levels including in Washington itself both in the executive and legislative branch, in the media, at the United Nations, and in allied and friendly circles.[6]

Although ultimately the Bush Administration proceeded irregardless of this policy innovation that would have moved forward the international agenda of nuclear non-proliferation, avoided the domestic turmoil that is now embroiling US politics, and given the United States extra agility and degrees of freedom in pursuing the global war on terror, the attempt shows clearly that an alternative policy was realistic and the Iraq War was not inevitable.

2.2 Case Study 2, North Korea: Sometimes, TTTs have their greatest influence when it is least public. In dealing with a sensitive and dangerous foreign policy issue and adversary such as North Korea, non-public private back-channels were critically important in the Clinton and late G.W. Bush Administration, especially in crisis management. Carnegie Endowment, the Carter Center, Center for Strategic and International Studies, and others, played this networking and informational role at key moments in the nineties.

Conversely, some TTTs focused on the froth and bubble of issue articulation (in this instance, by recasting the DPRK into a devil-state incarnate) in Congress, the larger engaged public (not much), the media, and in key staffing appointments were able to recast the policy framework after G.W. Bush occupied the White House. Heritage was at this cutting edge between 2000 and 2004.

In our own case, Nautilus played a maverick role in maintaining cooperative and collaborative working relations with North Korean counterparts that not only spanned the Clinton and Bush Administrations, but also continued to inform the decision-making of senior security officials, including political appointees, within the executive agencies responsible for dealing with the North.

In one instance, Nautilus convened a workshop in Washington DC to outline the likely modality and sequencing of monitoring and inspection of the North's nuclear capacities, and demonstrated multiple case studies of what it has taken historically to obtain access and transparency in the DPRK in a number of governmental and non-governmental activities. These case studies were presented at the Next Steps workshop in Washington and laid the groundwork for Nautilus' staff continued working relationships with official policymakers. This set of working relationships, in turn, enabled Nautilus to organize regional workshops at which North Korean and other regional researchers met with American counterparts; and in one instance, to ensure in May 2004 the accurate communication and

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[6] See *Iraq: A New Approach,* at **http://www.ceip.org/files/publications/iraq/mathews.htm** and "Highlights of the Carnegie Endowment's Work on the WMD Crisis in Iraq Prior to the Iraq War" report to MacArthur Foundation, no date.

understanding in Pyongyang of the Bush White House's intentions to provide humanitarian assistance to the DPRK.[7]

As a further example, the construction in this process of detailed energy security data and analysis for each country, including the DPRK, and the exchange of this information between each country, has positioned the participants in a unique way with regard to formation of policy toward the DPRK as an outcome of the six party talks. As energy security cooperation emerges as the most important aspect of the incentive package to denuclearize the DPRK, these participants now have the ability to provide objective analysis to governments as to what the DPRK actually can absorb and needs, as against politically driven options such as the LWR choice adopted under the US-DPRK Agreed Framework.[8]

This analysis is now being used in capital cities to frame policy options; and drawing as it does from a common frame of reference and source material, all generated by this collaborative research group, an alignment of policy agendas is now emerging between the professionals in government on how to proceed. In addition, the same materials are being used by the UN Working Groups on DPRK Economic Reform (Stiglitz) and Energy (Martin, Republican, former Asst Sec of DOE) to frame DPRK policy options with the DPRK government itself.

In short, a high quality, multilateral collaborative scientific and technical research effort that is timely and properly communicated can have an enormous multiplier effect and impact on an otherwise intractable circumstance. Instead of being forced to cut knots, policymakers are offered ways to ease the tautness of the intertwined knots that make it so hard to solve the threat of WMD next-use posed by the Korean Peninsula.

3. KEY DEBATES

3.1 Standard Management Choices: The set of choices that face a TTT are well known. They include type, role, and policy orientation; and more practical choices related to fundraising strategies and tradeoffs, board philosophy (ranging from micro-management to policy governance), in-house staffing vs. ex-house contractors (higher cost and continuity for more capacity vs. lower cost, rapid expansion and contraction, and ability to assemble the right expertise for the problem), specialization (the habitual management consultant's advice) on greatest strength vs. wider angle lends (geographic and issue scope to allow comparisons and to identify multiple policy options that address multiple problems simultaneously and consistently).[9]

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[7] See the case studies of access and transparency in the DPRK presented at the January 27, 2003 US-DPRK Next Steps Workshop at: http://www.nautilus.org/archives/security/workshop/index.html

[8] See the reports of the Asian Energy Security Workshops at http://www.nautilus.org/archives/energy/eaef/futures.html

[9] A good example of standard management advice offered to US-based TTTs is found in R. Struyk, *Managing Think Tanks, A Practical Guide for Maturing Organizations*, on-line at http://www.urban.org/Template.cfm?Section=ByAuthor&NavMenuID=63&template=/TaggedContent/ViewPublication.cfm?PublicationID=7686

3.1 **Political Critique**: Many American analysts have argued that the TTT has been overwhelmed by concentrated application of funding by conservative donors in search of organizations that can advocate and implement ideologically driven policy options. Specifically, the argument is advanced that the extreme right in the United States has outgunned and outfunded a small number of highly effective think tanks that set out to "change mental maps" (Heritage) and to move the center of political gravity toward the right. The modality of funding (long term, concentrated, ideologically motivated) combined with mass marketing techniques to create a mobilized constituency on the right is said to have achieved this outcome (most analysis admit that liberal-progressive donors give away more money to more grantees than the right, but their short-term, project driven orientation reduces the effectiveness of this investment in political returns).[10] Thus, donors have choices in relation to TTTs; and TTTs have choices in how they communicate needs to donors both individually and as a sector.

3.2 Rise of Transnational Think Nets (TTNs): Some have argued that the era of traditional think tanks with buildings has passed and that of *virtual think tanks* or *transnational think nets* has come due to the emergence of the Internet combined with globalization including global public policy networks, single issue global social movements, diasporic networks, and transecting transnational networks.[11]

Arguably, TTNs responded to the shift in the policy informational environment associated with global dislocation[12]a task to which they are peculiarly suited in the era of the global Internet and access.

Nautilus Institute is a working example of a TTN in motion. We work with a set of *Information Axioms[13]* developed during the .com era and based on e-commerce as well as complex network theory developed by theorists such as those found at the Sante Fe Institute.[14]

Central to TTN strategies are the notions that *the information milieu* of the *global public sphere* is the critical domain for policy articulation and implementation,

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[10] M. Shuman, "Why do Progressive Foundations Give too Little to too Many?"
The Nation, 12 January 1998, on-line at http://www.tni.org/archives/shuman/nation.htm
NCRP**,** *Moving a Public Policy Agenda: The Strategic Philanthropy of Conservative Foundations* on-line at: http://www.mediatransparency.org/movement.htm
[11] For a profound insight into networks and global problem-solving, I recommend the writings of Tony of Union of International Associations and editor of Transnational Associations on-line at: http://laetusinpraesens.org/
[12] Francis Pisani and John Arquilla, Global Dislocations, Network Solutions
Nautilus Institute, March 7, 2004, on-line at: http://nautilus.org/gps/scenarios/GlobalDislocation-NetworksMarch6-043.PDF; Philip E. Agre, "The Dynamics of Policy in a Networked World," paper at Internet and International Systems: Information Technology and American Foreign Policy Decision-making Workshop
Nautilus Institute, San Francisco, December 10, 1999 http://www.nautilus.org/gps/info-policy/workshop/papers/agre.html
[13] See, *InfoAxioms Powerpoint*: http://www.nautilus.org/gps/info-policy/axioms/INFOAXIOMSLatestDec5-02.ppt

because it contains the *common knowledge* and *shared reference points* that are critical to successful negotiation in intractable conflicts. Relatedly, TTNs seek to identify natural affines that share *weak links*, that is, individuals and organizations that could be linked via an intermediary that they both trust in terms of reputation and credibility and who share information or an interest in common. Such affines could lead to organizational partnerships to address two problems with one solution, to share strategic tools that enable multiple solutions to be implemented simultaneously to multiple problems, and to transformations of state in the information milieu itself. Linking them also creates a solution to the "*small worlds*" problem in that a few "short cut" links between separated dense clusters of policymakers and analysts can ensure rapid dissemination of common knowledge on a global scale and across many barriers and borders.[15]

A form of TTN that is more akin to TTTs is the *Global Public Policy Network*, a phrase and type coined by former World Bank official Wolfgang Reneicke.[16] However, this approach is focused on single issues and even bureaucratic (often requiring a central hub/secretariat) although it does invite multi-sectoral participation.

In contrast, TTNs strive for multiple issue scope and to identify the common problems and solutions. A good example of the latter is *oneworld.org* at the level of organizational learning in relation to policy options and implementation in the fields of sustainability, security, and development. At the level of the information milieu, *opendemocracy.net* in Europe is a good example of a 10-global theme, vibrant learning site aimed at issue articulation with a policy edge. TTNs also strive to reflect the real diversity of perspective in their output, recognizing that learning comes from listening and reflecting the views of others, especially others who are alien from oneself in almost every respect. The best TTNs tend to be noisy and busy places and very dynamic (and veer into the blog world as a result).

TTTs and TTNs belong in the same box because they achieve similar outcomes from very different angles of approach; and because many TTTs are trying to compete with or even double as TTNs—with limited success in a few cases. However, the people behind TTNs generally do not aspire to power in the same way that those staffing TTTs (at least in Washington) do—if they have staff at all, they are not looking for official jobs, nor to build a reputation that can be translated into a political appointment. Indeed, many TTNs are started by individuals who are sickened by their person experience of the corrupting or debilitating effects on policy making that often comes with the exercise of official power.

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[14] *Kevin Bacon, the Small-World, and Why It All Matters*, http://www.santafe.edu/sfi/publications/Bulletins/bulletinFall99/workInProgress/smallWorld.html

[15] P. Hayes, W. Huntley, T. Savage, G. Wong The Impact of the Northeast Asian Peace and Security Network in US-DPRK Conflict Resolution, Nautilus Institute http://www.nautilus.org/gps/info-policy/workshop/papers/Napsnet_Cases.htm

[16] Wolfgang H. Reinecke, *Global Public Policy: Governing Without Government?* (Washington, DC: Brookings, 1998). Also, by the same author, "The Other World Wide Web: Global Public Policy Networks," *Foreign Policy* 117 (1999-2000): 44-57; see many related analyses at Global Public Policy Institute on-line at: http://www.globalpublicpolicy.net/ and the case studies at: http://www.gppi.net/index.php?page=cms&id=55

Consequently, TTNs tend to be either highly effective by communicating across borders and behind the scenes; or speak truth to power without inhibition; and if they are not just maverick, but also provide top quality information and analysis, TTNs often run rings around many competing TTTs in terms of timeliness, accuracy, insight (especially early warning of pending events, emerging issues, or anomalies in conventional perspectives) combined with *connectivity* to networked policymakers.

For this reason, smart policymakers, especially the younger ones who are Internet savvy, tend to pay attention to them as well as the TTTs whose product and style is usually predictable.[17]

III. Nautilus Invites Your Responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: bscott@nautilus.org. Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

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[17] J. Schneider, *Globalization and thinktanks: Security Policy Networks*, Prague, May 2003, on-line at: http://www.policy.hu/schneider/GlobalTTs.pdf