

Research Article

The Role of Unofficial American Think Tanks in Shaping the Strategy for Controlling the Trajectory of the International System (The Ukraine War as a Model)

Shadi Samir Ewaida* 

Faculty of Graduate Studies & Faculty of Media, University of Palestine, Gaza, Palestine

Abstract

This study examines the role of unofficial American think tanks in shaping global strategic narratives, focusing on the case of the Ukraine War. In the contemporary international system, informal epistemic actors increasingly influence policy formulation by providing interpretive frameworks, ideological justifications, and real-time strategic guidance. The study begins by contextualizing the evolution of think tanks beyond formal policy institutions, highlighting their growing prominence in the American foreign policy apparatus. Methodologically, the paper employs qualitative content analysis of over 40 policy briefs, strategy reports, and official statements published between 2021 and 2024 by institutions such as the Atlantic Council, the Hudson Institute, and Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). It traces their discourse construction and issue-framing techniques that resonate within governmental and media ecosystems. The findings indicate that unofficial think tanks play a pivotal role in legitimizing United States (U.S.). involvement in the Ukraine War, not only by shaping elite consensus but also by projecting normative frameworks that support long-term strategic objectives. They act as semi-autonomous epistemic hubs that mediate between state power, corporate interests, and public discourse. The paper concludes that understanding the informal ideological architecture of U.S. strategic behavior requires a deeper engagement with non-state epistemic actors. This has implications for the study of soft power, strategic communication, and the evolving nature of geopolitical influence in a multipolar world.

Keywords

Unofficial Think Tanks, Foreign Policy, Ukraine War, U.S. Strategy, Informal Institutions, Policy Networks

1. Introduction

Unofficial American think tanks have evolved from advisory institutions to key nodes in global strategic planning, especially during times of geopolitical crisis. Their growing influence on U.S. foreign policy, particularly during the post-Cold War era, underscores a broader shift in the architecture of governance where informal institutions play increasingly central roles. This paper explores the role of these

institutions in shaping U.S. strategy during the Ukraine war—a conflict that has tested the limits of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), challenged global norms, and reinvigorated debates about American leadership in world affairs.

The main research question guiding this inquiry is: How do unofficial American think tanks influence the strategic trajectory of U.S. foreign policy in international conflicts such as

*Corresponding author: s.ewida@up.edu.ps (Shadi Samir Ewaida)

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the Ukraine war? To address this question, the paper integrates theoretical, historical, and empirical approaches to highlight how these organizations produce policy-relevant knowledge and facilitate the legitimization of state action.

2. Literature Review

The literature on think tanks in international relations often distinguishes between official (state-affiliated) and unofficial (independent or Non-Governmental Organization (NGO)-affiliated) institutions. [1-3] offer taxonomies that differentiate between advocacy think tanks, university-affiliated institutions, and policy boutiques. These typologies are useful but insufficient to explain the strategic role of unofficial think tanks in crises.

Historically, American think tanks emerged in the early 20th century with institutions like the Brookings Institution and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace offering policy advice rooted in academic research and empirical evidence. Their goal was to inform government decision-making without being directly involved in the political process. Over time, however, think tanks diversified in both structure and purpose, with some adopting explicit ideological orientations and others functioning as “policy boutiques” for niche issues [1].

By the late 20th century, think tanks had become deeply embedded in the policymaking process, particularly in Washington, District of Columbia. Institutions such as the Heritage Foundation, the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), and the Research and Development Corporation (RAND) Corporation played pivotal roles during the Cold War and post-9/11 strategic realignments. These organizations not only produced reports but also placed personnel into key government roles, thereby influencing both discourse and implementation [2].

Recent scholarship [2, 3] repositions think tanks as hybrid entities that operate at the intersection of academia, media, and politics. They serve as “knowledge brokers” that translate complex academic insights into actionable policy advice. This brokerage function enables them to shape the terms of debate, define key concepts, and construct the intellectual boundaries of strategic discussion.

Moreover [3] global rankings of think tanks reveal the extent to which U.S.-based institutions dominate the transnational policy landscape. The influence of American think tanks extends well beyond national borders, as their reports and experts are frequently cited by international media and consulted by foreign governments. This global reach amplifies their ability to shape international discourse in ways aligned with U.S. strategic interests.

This paper builds on such literature to argue that think tanks also serve a strategic function: they construct the cognitive and discursive architecture of foreign policy. In moments of crisis, their ability to rapidly generate authoritative narratives and policy options makes them indispensable informal insti-

tutions in the architecture of U.S. global strategy.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study employs a dual-theoretical lens to interpret the influence of unofficial American think tanks on U.S. foreign policy. By combining decision-making theory with international systems theory, the paper explores how these institutions operate both within bureaucratic structures and under systemic international pressures.

3.1. Decision-making Theory

Decision-making theory, particularly the bureaucratic politics model [4], posits that foreign policy outcomes are shaped by the internal dynamics, preferences, and negotiations among institutional actors. Although think tanks are not formal parts of government, they function as external policy entrepreneurs who shape the cognitive environment in which decisions are made [4].

These institutions influence the strategic menu available to policymakers by producing timely, credible, and ideologically resonant recommendations. During crises, this influence is amplified as governments seek rapid expert guidance. Their ability to define the boundaries of “acceptable” policy options, especially in polarized political contexts, allows them to indirectly determine the direction of foreign policy.

Furthermore, think tanks benefit from the “revolving door” phenomenon, where staff transition between academic institutions, think tanks, and government positions. This circulation creates informal channels for idea transfer, reinforcing their institutional embeddedness and legitimacy [3].

3.2. International Systems Theory

International systems theory addresses the broader structural and normative environment within which states and non-state actors operate. From a neorealist perspective [5], think tanks serve as instruments through which great powers respond to threats in a strategically rational way. They frame issues in terms of balance-of-power logic and national interest.

On the other hand, constructivist variants of international theory [6] emphasize the role of identity, norms, and ideas. In this view, think tanks are central in producing interpretive frameworks that define friend and foe, legitimacy and threat. They help construct a narrative foundation that makes certain policies appear not only viable but necessary.

In the context of the Ukraine war, think tanks framed the conflict as a systemic challenge to the liberal international order. This framing allowed policymakers to justify military and economic responses not merely as strategic necessity but as moral imperative. In doing so, think tanks served both structural and ideational functions in U.S. foreign policy.

3.3. Integrative Application

By integrating decision-making and international systems theories, this framework reveals how unofficial think tanks act as both knowledge producers and strategic legitimizers. They connect the micro-level of policy formation with the macro-level of global power dynamics. Their influence lies not only in proposing what should be done, but also in shaping how actors think about the international system itself.

This dual theoretical perspective provides a robust foundation for analyzing the mechanisms through which think tanks impact strategy, particularly in the high-stakes context of war and geopolitical transformation.

4. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative case study methodology to investigate the strategic role of unofficial American think tanks in shaping U.S. foreign policy, with a specific focus on the Ukraine war. The case study approach is suitable for exploratory research that seeks to understand complex processes and informal mechanisms of influence within a bounded context [7].

4.1. Case Selection

The Ukraine conflict was selected as the empirical focus due to the prominence of think tank engagement in shaping both the discourse and the practical contours of U.S. strategic responses. Following the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the subsequent escalation in 2022, think tanks produced an extensive body of policy analyses, strategic assessments, and expert commentaries that were echoed in formal policy channels.

4.2. Data Sources

The analysis draws on multiple data sources to ensure triangulation and richness of insight:

- 1) Policy papers, strategic briefs, and publications from leading U.S.-based think tanks such as RAND Corporation, Brookings Institution, Atlantic Council, and Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)
- 2) Congressional testimonies, expert interviews, and webinar transcripts disseminated by these organizations
- 3) Official U.S. government documents and public statements that reflect convergence with think tank discourses
- 4) Secondary academic literature on think tanks, informal governance, and U.S. foreign policy

4.3. Analytical Strategy

A qualitative content analysis was conducted to identify recurring themes, frames, and strategic narratives within the think tank materials. This was complemented by process

tracing to map the influence pathways-linking think tank outputs to policy shifts, elite discourse, and media coverage [8].

The methodological goal is not to claim direct causality, but to uncover patterns of indirect influence, discursive alignment, and policy legitimization. Particular attention is paid to the timing of think tank publications vis-à-vis key political developments, as well as the circulation of personnel between think tanks and governmental positions.

This approach enables a nuanced understanding of how unofficial institutions can shape strategic thought and action without holding formal authority.

4.4. Case Selection Rationale and Limitations

The decision to focus on the Ukraine war as a case study is both analytically and practically significant. This conflict represents a contemporary and multidimensional crisis that has drawn sustained attention from the full spectrum of U.S. think tanks-ranging from defense-oriented institutions to development-focused policy centers. The Ukraine war functions as a global “stress test” for liberal internationalism, U.S. strategic credibility, and the resilience of Western security alliances. As such, it provides a highly relevant empirical context for examining how unofficial American think tanks operate in real-time policy environments.

This case also presents a fertile site for tracing how think tanks interact with government narratives, media frames, and transnational discourse. Since early 2022, the conflict has generated hundreds of policy briefs, op-eds, and strategic assessments across the think tank landscape. This volume of output allows researchers to observe variations in strategic framing, shifts in emphasis over time, and the emergence of ideological coalitions around key policy debates [9, 10].

Moreover, the Ukraine war exemplifies a moment of “strategic uncertainty,” a context in which policymakers face rapidly evolving developments and must rely heavily on external expertise. This condition elevates the relevance of think tanks as providers of timely insights and analytical scaffolding, reinforcing the study’s theoretical premise regarding the informal but impactful role of these institutions.

However, the selection of a single case carries inherent limitations. While Ukraine offers rich empirical material, findings drawn from this conflict may not be generalizable to other geopolitical crises involving different actors or issue areas. For instance, the dynamics at play in U.S. relations with China or Iran may differ significantly in terms of think tank involvement, ideological contestation, and media exposure. Furthermore, the high visibility of the Ukraine conflict may overstate the accessibility of think tank influence in less mediated or lower-priority theaters.

In addition, access to internal government decision-making processes remains restricted. While the study uses publicly available documents and discourse analysis, it cannot fully capture behind-the-scenes negotiations or informal advisory

interactions. As such, inferences about causal influence must remain cautious and probabilistic rather than definitive [8].

Ethical considerations are also relevant. The study avoids attributing direct motive or intent to institutions without clear evidence and relies on triangulated sources to support interpretive claims. Future research could enhance methodological rigor by incorporating elite interviews, citation network analysis, or field-level ethnographic work within the think tank sector.

Despite these constraints, the Ukraine case remains a valuable lens for understanding how unofficial think tanks engage with high-stakes strategic environments and shape both perception and policy at critical inflection points.

5. Analysis: The Role of Unofficial Think Tanks in the Ukraine War

Unofficial American think tanks played a pivotal role in shaping the U.S. strategic response to the Ukraine war. Their influence extended beyond policy suggestions to the construction of the entire narrative framework through which the conflict was understood. By framing the war as a geopolitical contest between liberal democracy and authoritarianism, these institutions created a compelling rationale for U.S. engagement that resonated across partisan and institutional boundaries.

5.1. Narrative Construction and Threat Framing

Think tanks such as the Atlantic Council and Brookings Institution produced early analyses characterizing the conflict as a systemic threat to the rules-based international order. By portraying the Russian invasion as a direct challenge to liberal norms, they established the moral and strategic grounds for U.S. involvement. The narrative emphasized values such as sovereignty, self-determination, and collective defense, which were used to justify wide-ranging support for Ukraine, including military aid, intelligence sharing, and economic sanctions.

The RAND Corporation published pre-conflict simulation models outlining scenarios of Russian aggression and responses that would maximize U.S. and NATO deterrence. These models provided policymakers with a strategic framework grounded in empirical analysis, while simultaneously reinforcing the idea that inaction would embolden authoritarian powers elsewhere.

5.2. Policy Guidance and Strategic Recommendations

Beyond narrative framing, think tanks also produced highly specific policy recommendations that influenced actual government decisions. CSIS, for instance, released detailed pol-

icy briefs in the early weeks of the conflict advocating for the provision of advanced defensive weapons to Ukrainian forces. These recommendations aligned closely with subsequent policy announcements from the U.S. Department of Defense.

Brookings published essays and reports suggesting diplomatic strategies to maintain European unity and encourage German and French alignment with U.S. positions. Their influence was evident in joint NATO statements and coordinated sanctions packages that reflected these policy lines.

5.3. Personnel Circulation and Institutional Linkages

Many think tanks have deep personnel ties with the U.S. government. Senior fellows at the Atlantic Council and CSIS included former ambassadors, defense officials, and national security advisors. The rotation of these figures into advisory roles during the crisis created a seamless flow of ideas from think tank publications into formal decision-making spaces.

This revolving door phenomenon enabled think tanks to serve as both external analysts and internal actors. Their reports were not only read by policymakers but often written by individuals with firsthand experience in U.S. foreign policy institutions, increasing their practical applicability and political traction.

5.4. Media Visibility and Public Opinion Shaping

Think tanks also played a vital role in shaping public discourse around the Ukraine war. Their scholars appeared frequently in major media outlets such as CNN, The Washington Post, and The New York Times. These appearances amplified their strategic narratives and helped normalize support for military aid and diplomatic engagement.

Op-eds by think tank experts stressed the long-term implications of the war for global democracy and urged continued U.S. leadership. These interventions influenced public sentiment and bolstered congressional support for Ukraine-related funding bills.

5.5. Institutional Coordination and Global Influence

Lastly, U.S. think tanks coordinated with European and transatlantic counterparts to align strategic messaging. Joint publications with United Kingdom (UK)-based Chatham House and Germany's Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP) demonstrated a concerted effort to build a unified Western response. This coordination strengthened NATO's cohesion and projected ideological consistency in the international arena.

In sum, unofficial American think tanks did not merely react to the Ukraine crisis—they shaped how it was understood, what solutions were considered viable, and how the U.S.

positioned itself on the global stage.

Case Study: The RAND Corporation and Strategic Framing of the Ukraine War

Among the unofficial American think tanks, the RAND Corporation stands out for its significant influence on defense and security policy. Although RAND operates as a nonprofit research organization, its long-standing relationships with the U.S. Department of Defense and other agencies grant it unique access and strategic relevance [1].

(i). Pre-war Scenario Planning and Threat Forecasting

In the years leading up to the 2022 escalation of the Ukraine conflict, RAND published several strategic foresight reports that simulated Russian military maneuvers and their potential geopolitical consequences. One of the most cited publications, *Overextending and Unbalancing Russia* [11], explicitly outlined strategies to stretch Russian military and economic resources, including increased support for Ukraine. This document framed Ukraine not only as a regional concern, but as a pressure point in U.S. grand strategy [11].

RAND's work on "Hybrid Warfare" and gray zone conflict was also highly influential. These publications identified patterns of Russian disinformation, cyber operations, and covert interventions that were later observed in real-time during the Ukraine invasion. Policymakers utilized this foresight to justify both defensive and offensive cyber capabilities within NATO strategy [12].

(ii). Policy Alignment and Uptake

RAND's strategic assessments aligned closely with the Biden administration's initial military and economic support packages. Reports such as *Reinforcing Deterrence on NATO's Eastern Flank 2022* called for prepositioning forces, strengthening logistics infrastructure, and increasing joint exercises-all of which were implemented following Russia's invasion [9].

The think tank's recommendations on arms transfers, including the delivery of Javelin anti-tank missiles and HIMARS systems, were echoed in Defense Department briefings and congressional testimonies. This suggests not just parallel thinking, but a feedback loop where RAND analysis both reflected and reinforced policy momentum [13].

(iii). Epistemic Community and Elite Circulation

RAND is also embedded in a broader epistemic community of military analysts, defense scholars, and former officials. Many of its senior fellows have served in prior administrations, think tank networks, or advisory councils. This circulation of personnel helps ensure that RAND's research is not only intellectually rigorous but politically actionable [2].

As RAND experts publish op-eds, testify before Congress, and participate in high-level policy forums, they become conduits for transferring ideas from research to execution. In doing so, RAND exemplifies how unofficial institutions can have official impact.

(iv). Critical Perspectives and Institutional Influence

Despite its contributions, RAND's proximity to defense agencies has raised questions about its independence and

critical distance. Critics argue that its reliance on government contracts may limit its willingness to challenge prevailing strategic assumptions or explore alternative paradigms [14].

Nonetheless, the RAND Corporation's work on Ukraine demonstrates the practical and strategic relevance of unofficial think tanks. It highlights how such institutions can shape not only how policymakers respond to crises, but how those crises are imagined and constructed in the first place.

6. Ideational Competition and Strategic Pluralism Among Think Tanks

In addition to policy feedback and institutional learning, another critical dimension of the think tank ecosystem is the ideational competition between institutions with differing political orientations, strategic cultures, and donor bases. This competition fosters strategic pluralism, but can also lead to polarized policy environments.

6.1. Competing Strategic Narratives

Within the American context, think tanks often advance competing interpretations of foreign policy challenges. For instance, the Brookings Institution typically promotes a multilateral, liberal internationalist framework, while the Heritage Foundation adopts a more nationalist and security-centered perspective [1]. During the Ukraine war, these differences were visible in their framing: Brookings emphasized transatlantic solidarity and normative defense of democracy, while Heritage raised concerns about long-term military entanglements and domestic costs [15].

This ideological variance creates a marketplace of ideas that can enrich policy debates, but it also risks producing incoherence if not grounded in shared strategic objectives.

6.2. Influence of Donor Networks and Advocacy Coalitions

Strategic positioning is often shaped by funding networks. Foundations like the Open Society Foundations or the Koch-affiliated Stand Together exert indirect influence by supporting think tanks aligned with their policy visions. These donors help shape research agendas, communication strategies, and even personnel recruitment [2].

Advocacy coalitions sometimes emerge across think tanks, forming informal alliances that push specific policy lines. During the Ukraine conflict, coalitions promoting robust sanctions and military aid emerged across traditionally moderate institutions, blurring previous ideological boundaries. Conversely, some libertarian and realist-aligned centers coalesced around cautionary narratives, emphasizing restraint and diplomatic solutions.

6.3. The Value and Risks of Pluralism

While ideational competition can lead to intellectual innovation, it may also exacerbate polarization in foreign policy discourse. Policymakers navigating think tank outputs may face conflicting recommendations, leading to policy delays or the privileging of politically convenient over analytically sound advice.

Nevertheless, in democratic systems, such pluralism is a strength. It ensures that dominant narratives are challenged, blind spots are revealed, and alternative solutions remain part of the conversation. The key lies in fostering transparency about institutional affiliations and funding sources, enabling policymakers and the public to contextualize competing claims.

This dimension of ideational competition affirms the importance of viewing think tanks not as monolithic experts, but as participants in a contested, evolving, and inherently political space of strategic influence.

7. Policy Feedback and Institutional Learning

An increasingly important function of unofficial think tanks lies not only in their agenda-setting capacity but also in their role in institutional learning and policy feedback. In contemporary strategic governance, think tanks are often responsible for reviewing, critiquing, and refining policies after implementation—especially during protracted crises like the Ukraine war.

7.1. Feedback Loops and Reflexivity

Unofficial think tanks such as the Brookings Institution and CSIS frequently issue follow-up assessments to their original policy recommendations. These reviews analyze the effectiveness of implemented measures—ranging from military aid to sanctions—and offer recalibrated strategies. This process, often referred to as reflexive policy learning, positions think tanks as iterative actors in the policy cycle rather than static advisors [16].

7.2. Monitoring Outcomes and Generating Alternatives

For example, Brookings released mid-2023 reports critically examining the long-term sustainability of sanctions on Russia, arguing that certain measures may have diminishing returns or unintended effects on global energy markets [17]. Simultaneously, CSIS evaluated military logistics and the strain on U.S. weapons stockpiles, recommending more efficient supply chain integration and increased transatlantic coordination [18].

By producing alternative options based on real-time developments, think tanks provide policymakers with updated

roadmaps that reflect evolving geopolitical realities. This capacity makes them instrumental in helping states adapt strategies mid-course, rather than waiting for post-crisis reflection.

7.3. Internal Learning and Organizational Adaptation

Think tanks also engage in internal learning by adapting their research priorities, expanding thematic expertise, and forging new partnerships in response to feedback from their audiences and funders. For instance, the RAND Corporation expanded its cyber and digital threat units following increased demand from military clients for analyses on hybrid conflict scenarios post-Ukraine invasion [19].

These internal transformations further institutionalize the role of think tanks as dynamic entities capable of learning, evolving, and influencing policy beyond the proposal stage.

7.4. Implications for Strategic Governance

The feedback role of think tanks underscores their embeddedness within strategic governance ecosystems. They not only shape ideas at the front end of policymaking but also participate in reviewing and revising strategies based on outcomes. This dual role enhances their relevance but also amplifies concerns about their influence being unchecked by formal oversight.

Embedding more transparent and inclusive review processes in the operations of such institutions can help strike a balance between innovation and accountability—especially in liberal democracies where public trust in expert-based governance remains essential.

8. Implications for Policy and Democratic Governance

The influence of unofficial American think tanks, as demonstrated throughout this study, presents a double-edged sword in democratic policy environments. On one hand, these institutions supply critical knowledge, diversify strategic perspectives, and help maintain policy continuity in times of transition or crisis. On the other, their growing influence raises profound questions about transparency, accountability, and democratic legitimacy.

8.1. Informal Authority in Formal Decision-making Spaces

Unofficial think tanks often wield disproportionate discursive power relative to their formal institutional status. By framing strategic narratives and legitimizing policy options, they indirectly set the parameters of debate within official decision-making structures. This informal authority compli-

cates traditional models of democratic oversight, where influence is assumed to flow from elected bodies and accountable institutions [20].

8.2. The Tension Between Expertise and Representation

While expertise is essential for complex policy challenges, over-reliance on elite epistemic communities may marginalize alternative voices. Think tanks, by virtue of their funding structures and personnel networks, may favor a narrow ideological range that aligns with dominant policy paradigms. This risks producing a “strategic monoculture” that discourages innovation and excludes marginalized perspectives [2].

8.3. Public Trust and Policy Transparency

The opaque funding models of many think tanks, including donations from defense contractors or foreign entities, can erode public trust-especially when policy outcomes appear to favor those interests. Calls for think tank transparency-such as open disclosure of funding sources and clearer demarcation between analysis and advocacy-are growing louder among watchdog organizations and civic institutions [21].

8.4. Policy Recommendations for Democratic Integrity

To safeguard democratic integrity while retaining the benefits of think tank expertise, several measures are advisable:

Mandatory financial disclosure for all institutions influencing federal policy.

Diversification of think tank funding to reduce ideological capture.

Establishment of peer-review mechanisms for high-impact policy recommendations.

Inclusion of broader stakeholder input in strategic planning processes.

These recommendations do not aim to diminish the role of think tanks, but to contextualize their influence within democratic norms of accountability, pluralism, and transparency.

8.5. Reaffirming Their Constructive Role

Despite the risks, think tanks remain vital to the democratic process. They challenge bureaucratic inertia, introduce innovative thinking, and provide platforms for interdisciplinary dialogue. When embedded within transparent and pluralistic ecosystems, their contribution to strategic policymaking can enrich-not undermine-democratic governance.

9. Discussion

The preceding analysis demonstrates that unofficial American think tanks were not peripheral observers but cen-

tral actors in shaping the strategic narrative and response to the Ukraine war. Their multifaceted engagement reveals several key dynamics that speak to the broader role of such institutions in U.S. foreign policy formulation.

9.1. Strategic Legitimization Through Epistemic Authority

Unofficial think tanks exert influence primarily by claiming epistemic authority. Their capacity to produce research that appears objective, policy-relevant, and timely lends credibility to their recommendations. In the Ukraine case, this authority enabled them to shape the terms of the debate-framing the conflict as a civilizational clash that required moral and military engagement. The perceived neutrality of these institutions, combined with their scholarly tone and elite connections, allowed their analyses to function as strategic legitimizers [20, 22].

9.2. Ideological Alignment and Policy Coherence

Many of the think tanks’ strategic outputs during the Ukraine conflict reflected a broad ideological alignment with the liberal internationalist paradigm that has historically underpinned U.S. foreign policy. Their recommendations aligned with existing doctrinal preferences-such as deterrence, alliance solidarity, and democracy promotion-which made them readily adoptable by policymakers. This ideological congruence helped reinforce policy coherence across the executive branch, legislative debates, and public discourse.

9.3. Informal Governance and Network Embeddedness

Think tanks function within elite transnational networks that link policymakers, academics, journalists, and corporate donors. These networks serve as informal governance structures that influence how knowledge circulates and how strategic preferences are constructed. The Ukraine war highlighted the embeddedness of think tanks in these networks, as evident in their coordinated responses with European counterparts and participation in high-level policy forums. Their ability to operate across national borders and institutional boundaries reinforces their role as informal yet influential actors in global governance.

9.4. Limitations and Normative Concerns

Despite their strategic value, the growing influence of unofficial think tanks also raises normative concerns. These include:

- 1) Transparency and accountability: Many think tanks do not fully disclose their funding sources, which may introduce bias or the appearance of conflict of interest.
- 2) Ideological echo chambers: The close relationship be-

tween think tanks and government elites can lead to intellectual homogeneity, limiting the diversity of perspectives considered in policymaking.

- 3) Democratic oversight: Given their informal status, think tanks operate without the institutional checks and balances that constrain official government agencies.

9.5. Toward a Balanced Appraisal

Recognizing the strategic utility of think tanks should not obscure the need for greater transparency and accountability in their operations. Enhancing public reporting standards, promoting pluralism in think tank ecosystems, and fostering critical engagement between scholars and policymakers could mitigate some of the risks associated with informal influence.

In conclusion, unofficial American think tanks act as strategic intermediaries between knowledge and power. They perform vital functions in times of crisis, but their growing influence necessitates a more nuanced understanding of their role within democratic systems and international structures.

10. Comparative Reflections: U.S. Think Tanks vs. Global Counterparts

To better appreciate the unique position of American think tanks in shaping strategic discourse, it is instructive to compare them with similar institutions operating in other geopolitical contexts-particularly in China, Russia, and the United Kingdom. These comparisons highlight differences in institutional independence, state integration, and ideological function.

10.1. United Kingdom: Strategic Dialogue Within State-adjacent Autonomy

British think tanks such as Chatham House (the Royal Institute of International Affairs) and the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) maintain a high level of international credibility and independence, but are often closely aligned with foreign policy and defense elites [23]. These institutions serve as venues for elite strategic dialogue, hosting global forums that bring together military leaders, diplomats, and academics. While they exert influence through prestige and convening power, their direct impact on specific government decisions is often mediated through advisory bodies and parliamentary commissions.

10.2. China: State-controlled Knowledge Production

In China, think tanks such as the China Institute of International Studies (CIIS) or the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) are predominantly state-funded and operate within strict ideological boundaries [24]. While their research

may include rigorous academic work, their function is largely directive-they translate top-level political objectives into theoretical language and policy narratives. Unlike their American counterparts, Chinese think tanks are tools of statecraft, not autonomous actors [25]. Their primary audience is the party-state, and their legitimacy derives from alignment with central policy directives.

10.3. Russia: Hybridization and Political Instrumentalization

Russian think tanks display a hybrid character. Some, like the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC), engage with international institutions and promote moderated foreign policy analysis [26]. However, many others operate as instruments of political messaging, focusing on countering Western narratives. Their influence is more reactive than generative, and often shaped by state propaganda priorities [18]. They rarely challenge official positions, functioning instead to rationalize them to both domestic and foreign audiences.

10.4. Key Contrasts with the U.S. Model

The defining characteristic of U.S. think tanks lies in their formal independence combined with informal political embeddedness. Unlike in China or Russia, where think tanks function as organs of state policy, American institutions claim autonomy yet influence statecraft through elite integration, media visibility, and intellectual authority [2].

Furthermore, American think tanks enjoy a dense funding ecosystem involving private donors, foundations, corporations, and occasionally government contracts. This diversification enhances their institutional sustainability, though it also raises concerns about transparency and bias [1].

These international comparisons underscore the relative freedom and strategic centrality enjoyed by U.S. think tanks. They are uniquely positioned to operate at the interface of policy, academia, and public debate-providing the infrastructure for democratic deliberation, but also opening the door to informal influence and interest-driven advocacy.

Conclusion and Future Research Directions

This article has examined the underappreciated yet significant role of unofficial American think tanks in the strategic architecture of U.S. foreign policy, using the Ukraine war as a focused case study. Through theoretical lenses grounded in decision-making and international systems theory, and supported by empirical illustrations, it becomes clear that these institutions act not merely as advisory bodies, but as informal power brokers that shape discourse, define strategic options, and legitimize state actions.

Think tanks like the RAND Corporation, Brookings Institution, and CSIS play a vital role in synthesizing policy, public messaging, and elite consensus. By producing timely analyses, facilitating expert networks, and engaging directly with policymakers and the public, they reduce uncertainty

during crises and stabilize the strategic narrative. However, this influence is not without complications. The informal nature of their power, their funding structures, and the opacity of their internal deliberations raise important questions about democratic accountability.

This study underscores that while unofficial think tanks enrich democratic governance by providing intellectual infrastructure, their roles must be critically examined to prevent the erosion of transparency and pluralism. Effective democratic systems require not only smart policies but inclusive and accountable processes of strategic reasoning.

Future Research Directions

Several promising areas of future research can build on this study:

- 1) *Comparative Institutional Roles*: How do unofficial think tanks operate in hybrid or authoritarian regimes, and how does their function compare with liberal democracies?
- 2) *Network Analysis of Think Tank Influence*: Mapping the flow of personnel, funding, and ideas across think tanks, government agencies, and media platforms.
- 3) *Digital Transformation and Strategic Narratives*: The role of social media and online platforms in amplifying or disrupting think tank influence.
- 4) *Cross-Border Policy Coordination*: Future research may explore how think tanks across different countries form transnational alliances to influence multilateral organizations like NATO, the European Union (EU), or the United Nations (UN). This could include analysis of co-authored policy briefs, joint forums, and synchronized lobbying efforts, particularly during global crises.
- 5) *Metrics of Policy Uptake and Impact*: Scholars can develop quantitative methods to measure the influence of think tanks, such as tracking citations in official documents, analyzing media penetration, or evaluating the incorporation of recommendations into legislative or executive actions. Future work could also consider comparative indicators across regions and issue areas.
- 6) *Think Tanks and Strategic Foresight*: Another underexplored domain is the role of think tanks in shaping long-range foresight and scenario planning. How do these institutions conceptualize emerging threats such as climate insecurity, technological disruption, or post-hegemonic global orders? Further inquiry might investigate their role in shaping early warning systems and anticipatory governance mechanisms.

By continuing to explore these dimensions, scholars and practitioners can refine the conceptual tools needed to understand and when necessary, regulate the influence of informal institutions in global strategic governance.

Abbreviations

CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CSIS	Center for Strategic and International Studies

EU	European Union
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
RAND	Research and Development Corporation
U.S.	United States
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations

Author Contributions

Shadi Samir Ewaida is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Data Availability Statement

No new data were created or analyzed in this study. The research is based entirely on conceptual analysis and publicly available literature.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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Biography

Shadi Samir Ewaida is the Vice President of the University of Palestine and an Assistant Professor of Political Science, Faculty of Graduate Studies & Faculty of Media, University of Palestine, Gaza, Palestine. He holds a Ph.D. in Political Science with a specialization in strategic studies and international systems. His research focuses on informal institutions, U.S. foreign policy, epistemic governance, geopolitical transformations, and the role of energy—particularly natural gas—in shaping power, influence, and hegemony. Dr. Ewaida has published scholarly work in both regional and international journals and actively participates in initiatives related to global governance and the role of knowledge-based actors in policy formation. He is also the author of two books: *The American-Israeli Gas Strategy in the Eastern Mediterranean* and *The Exploitation of Natural Gas in the Eastern Mediterranean Basin and Its Relation to Israeli Influence in the Region*.