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# Practical exploration of the think tank community in the context of political uncertainty

An analysis based on the OTT conference 2023 topic

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## Abstract

The world today is experiencing a major change unprecedented in a century, and the international political and security landscape is undergoing profound adjustments. Summarizing the measures taken by western think tanks to cope with the challenges of political uncertainty can provide reference for the healthy development of new type of Chinese think tanks.

This paper combs through the conference themes derived from global think tank research data and their corresponding reports as identified by the OTT Platform. It analyzes how think tanks, as a bridge between power and knowledge, can play the role of a spatial venue for discussing public policies and consulting on strategic issues, and carries out a research on the risks, challenges, and countermeasures in the context of political uncertainty.

In response to the challenges posed by global political uncertainty, more and more think tanks have begun to seek cooperation and exchange at the level of think tank networks, and have tried to reach a consensus with their think tank funders on agenda-setting, sources of funding, and narrative styles, in order to explore the construction of a think tank community that is trustworthy, sustainable, and interconnected.

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# 1. Introduction to the OTT Conference

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The On Think Tanks (OTT) Conference, hosted by the OTT Platform, provides an annual opportunity for think tank institutions, scholars, policy entrepreneurs and think tank sponsors from all over the world to exchange experiences, showcase research achievements, jointly devise solutions to address challenges, and establish or strengthen new and old partnerships <sup>[1]</sup>. Every year, in order to determine the theme of the annual OTT conference, the OTT Platform conducts statistical analysis and research on relevant data based on its proprietary open think tank directory. Since 2017, the OTT Platform has systematically promoted dialogue and exchange between think tanks in the northern and southern hemispheres. Therefore, an analysis of the yearly themes of OTT Conference is certain to provide representative information for understanding the hot issues currently being addressed by global think tanks.

## 1.1. Hot Topics and Changes in Think Tank Research

Between 2017 and 2023, four offline and four online OTT conferences were successfully held, providing valuable opportunities for the exchange of experiences and practices between think tanks through the best practices series and social media <sup>[2]</sup>. This article combs through the hot topics addressed by the think tanks on the OTT Platform from 2017 to 2023 based on the themes of the conferences over the years and the keywords. A keyword network diagram (Figure 1) is drawn according to the relevance of the keywords. As shown in Figure 1, keywords such as “developing countries” and “communications” hold central positions in the network diagram, indicating that the conference themes are highly focused on the development of think tanks in developing countries and efforts are made to facilitate dialogue between think tanks in the northern and southern hemispheres. Neuroscience, which is the latest conference topic in 2023, was proposed to complement the socio-emotional analysis in evidence-based decision-making. It is noticeable from Figure 1 that this particular topic exhibits relatively fewer associations with other topics.



**Table 1. Focal Points of the OTT Conference Themes From 2017 to 2023**

Year	Focal Points of the OTT Conference Themes
2017	The development and supporting of think tanks, agenda setting
2018	Enhancing the credibility, transparency and innovation ability of think tanks
2019	Issues on social movement, gender, and diversity
2020	Digital transformation, ethical issues, and quality of research under the influence of COVID-19 pandemic
2021	Restoration, enhancement, and transformation of influence after the COVID-19 pandemic
2022	Think-tanks' relationships with political parties, media, and the private sector
2023	Think-tank strategy, thinking, and public engagement within the context of political uncertainty

## 1.2. Highlights of the Conference Agenda

In 2023, the OTT Conference centered on “think tanks and political uncertainty”. Almost 20 detailed agendas were set, focusing on keynotes such as “The uncertain world today”, “New certainty - evidence and influence in a multipolar world”, “The importance of forward thinking in navigating political uncertainty”, “Strategies for think tanks in a shifting global geopolitical landscape”. Significant and in-depth discussions were engaged in on the subject of the opportunities and bottlenecks for the current hot topic - artificial intelligence (AI) technology in addressing political uncertainty challenges<sup>[3]</sup>.

The related agenda and topics were derived from the “Think Tank State of the Sector, 2022” on the OTT Platform. It revealed fundraising and the challenge of political uncertainty to be the primary factors hindering the global development of think tanks, accounting for 67% and 51% of the total multiple choice answers respectively. A more pessimistic outlook was forecast by think tanks in the Americas, including the United States, Canada, Latin America and the Caribbean, whereas African think tanks, on the contrary, held a more optimistic stance<sup>[4]</sup>. Other challenges identified include the reduction of organizational resilience, lack of communication and engagement, and the lasting impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, attitudes toward political uncertainty and fundraising challenges vary across different regions, with think tanks in Latin America and the Caribbean expressing pessimism, whereas those in the United States and Canada, as well as in Europe, while largely pessimistic, still anticipate growth by 53% and 63%, respectively<sup>[5]</sup>.

The diverse representation of attendees ensures that the theme analysis in this article holds a certain level of representativeness on a global think tank level. In the 2023 offline conference, there were a total of 102 participants, with 45 from developing

countries, and specific agendas were tailored for countries such as Peru and Uganda. The invitation of conference attendees and the agenda setting both highlighted the feature of enhancing collaboration and interaction between think tanks from the global North and South, as well as among Southern countries. The conference took the form of keynote speeches along with parallel sessions, allowing the attendees to have deep interaction and exchange with the speakers in either form. Moreover, extended periods for coffee breaks and lunch were arranged during different thematic sessions, allowing participants to engage in more informal interactions and relationship-building.

## 2. The Impact of Political Uncertainty on Global Think Tanks

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As can be found from Figure 1, “political uncertainty”, as the theme of the OTT Conference 2023, has significantly impacted and posed challenges for think tanks in areas such as political polarization, think tank credibility, and public discourse.

### 2.1. Types of Political Uncertainty

Political uncertainty is not equal to policy uncertainty. Although the two are literally similar, policy uncertainty is only one aspect of political uncertainty <sup>[6]</sup>. Political uncertainty can be defined from two perspectives: uncertainty about the stability of institutions and decision-makers, and uncertainty about the future direction of economic policies <sup>[7]</sup>.

According to the definition of political uncertainty, this uncertainty manifests in three main arenas: domestic political dynamics, market and economic conditions, and geopolitical relations between nations <sup>[6]</sup>. Firstly, domestic political dynamics uncertainty typically involves the stability of the regime, changes in policy and legislation, and fluctuations in public opinion. Such uncertainty could exert a profound impact on the domestic economic, social, and political environment. Secondly, political uncertainty may stem from changes in market and economic conditions, such as economic recessions and pandemic impacts, all of which can lead to instability in the political environment. This uncertainty could have an impact on the stock markets, foreign direct investment, exchange rates, international trade, oil prices and gold prices. Lastly, geopolitical changes between nations may also engender political uncertainty. For example, tense relations between nations, trade conflicts, and wars can all lead to political uncertainty. This uncertainty could significantly affect the global political landscape, international trade, energy prices, and more. The eruption of the “Russia-Ukraine conflict” in recent years is a prominent manifestation of political uncertainty, which has exerted significant impact on EU energy economic policies and the domestic political stability of Russia.

## 2.2. Challenges Posed by Uncertainty

The complexity of political uncertainty has presented multifaceted challenges to think tanks, not only changing their research subjects and paradigms, but also impacting the values and positioning of the think tanks themselves. The challenges arising from political uncertainty mainly include the effects brought about by market economic conditions and political polarization, specifically constraints on natural resources, political multi-polarity, and wealth disparity.

The constraints on natural resources are the most prominent. Goran Buldioski <sup>[8]</sup>, Acting Executive Director of the Open Society Foundations, suggests that limited resources are impacting policy research and formulation around the world in different ways. For instance, the sub-Saharan African region is grappling with drought, while affluent regions have to contend with issues of migration and agricultural changes. For think tanks, this means a shift from the neo-liberalism model in the past to a climate-sensitive analytical framework. However, think tanks are not policymakers and can only urge policymakers to consider the risks brought about by this uncertainty. Therefore, think tanks must incorporate the environment as a necessary element of reference within the corresponding policy analysis framework.

Then there is the pressing issue of political multi-polarity. In order to secure their funding, think tanks often make compromises to the political positions held by their sponsors. For example, think tanks in the United States might alter their analytical perspectives to bolster national identity, while simultaneously downplaying domestic criticisms to ensure the demands of domestic donors. What's more, the political multi-polarity further disrupts the delicate balance between the independence and politicization of think tanks. In fact, the best decision for think tanks may be to completely cut off the opportunity to obtain foreign funding. Looking at it from an optimistic perspective, multi-polarity preserves the diversity of think tanks, challenges the entrenched position of international financial institutions and neoliberal advocates, and expands the scope of research areas and policy choices. As geopolitics further influences domestic politics, experts in security, foreign policy, and geo-economics will become the focus of each discussion. Think tanks may become the "gatekeepers" of geopolitical discourse in domestic debates and specific political and social analyses.

Lastly, there is the issue of wealth disparity. Wealth disparity has exacerbated the negative effects of political multi-polarity, as think tanks must be cautious in order to become a driving force for capital to cater to specific political or elite interests. Over the past 40 years, global wealth and income inequality as well as wealth concentration have increased dramatically. This proportion is 70% in the United States, 75% in Russia, and 79% in Brazil <sup>[9]</sup>. Especially now that individuals can acquire entire social platforms or media, the public welfare attribute of think tanks may be abused, leading them to become tools within a larger ecosystem that protects wealth and influence <sup>[8]</sup>. Wealth disparity and concentration have brought about competition for discursive power. Therefore, in selecting sources of funding, think tanks should not only advocate evidence-based policy solutions or inclusive, open, and bold societal ideas, but also

further expand the community of ideas and values to achieve synchronization and consensus between donors and think tanks in setting the agenda.

In addition to the traditional challenges brought by political uncertainty, AI and neuroscience have brought new challenges to think tanks at the technological level, particularly the impact of false and wrong information and the excessive pursuit of data driving, which may result in the replacement of the established expert-driven research model. In terms of data representation, the public demands and debates of marginalized or special groups may be stifled due to the use of big data samples. However, AI doesn't necessarily spell doom for think tanks. Large language models can perform simple and tedious research tasks, leaving more complex design and policy formulation tasks to researchers. Yet, achieving this requires enhanced supervision and management and the provision of greater space for think tanks to innovate around emerging technologies, especially in the realm of political studies where tracking the latest developments in neuroscience is imperative.

The established evidence-based scientific research paradigm should not be abandoned; instead, integrating evidence-based research with affective science may yield new analytical perspectives. Different analytical perspectives will bring about novel narrative methods for think tanks. In the political and technological aspects in particular, think tanks need to consider integrating the technical means such as information technology and affective science into the workflow for assisting in policy formulation.

### **3. Reshaping of the International Think Tank Community Amid Political Uncertainty**

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As a kind of systematic risk, political uncertainty cannot be easily mitigated solely through enhancing the risk prevention capabilities of think tanks. In the face of political uncertainty, think tanks should not only adapt their research methods and technological approaches, but also seek cooperation opportunities to expand their research scope. Furthermore, think tanks should strengthen practical exchange and cooperation based on existing academic communities. For example, think tanks can explore joint fundraising efforts and strive for reaching agreements with donors in setting agendas, ensuring alignment between sponsors and think tanks in terms of research orientation and political advocacy. Nevertheless, as political uncertainties intensify along with the rise of populism and escalating geopolitical conflicts, the independence and public welfare attribute of think tanks face significant challenges. Given the current global political uncertainty, important questions are shifting into focus, especially on what role should think tanks should play, how think tanks should establish their operation models and funding sources, what measure should be taken to mobilize public engagement in political discussions, and how to facilitate collaboration among think tank alliances within the global geopolitical landscape.



### 3.1. Conflict Between Think Tank Operation Model and Their Independence

The independence of think tanks is closely related to their source of funding, which may influence the direction and results of their research. Therefore, maintaining the diversity and transparency of funding sources is an important way for think tanks to uphold their independence under conventional conditions. The operation model of a think tank depends not only on the funding sources, but also on its mission, positioning and organizational pattern. When discussing international think tanks, the operation model is often equated with the business model. Generally speaking, a think tank's agenda should align with its objectives and be intertwined with its business model and financing strategies. Think tanks with core funding can often have greater freedom to pursue their own interests, while those born out of horizontal contracts or consulting businesses tend to be more demand-oriented<sup>[10]</sup>. However, the consensus of Western democratic values is diminishing as a result of political polarization. Amid this series of political uncertainties, think tanks are beginning to question their independence and non-profit characteristics.

The cognitive dissonance between the concepts of think tanks and their functions has resulted in a gap between the operation model and the independence of think tanks. According to Diane Stone<sup>[11]</sup>, Chairman of Global Policy Studies at the European University Institute, think tanks exist at the intersection of academia and politics, increasingly finding their place within non-governmental organizations, and serving as bridges between the realm of thoughts and government departments. However, the boundary between academic and political communities is unstable, and the difference between think tanks and non-governmental organizations, professional associations and consulting institutions is not so obvious. Although the cognitive difference in understanding the concept of think tanks is not necessarily detrimental, an overemphasis on the functions of think tanks rather than their institutional attributes can lead to divergent perceptions of their operation model and independence<sup>[12]</sup>. How can roles and responsibilities of think tanks be defined? What implications would the transformation of non-profit think tanks into for-profit entities have? Does the shift towards profitability and having core funding enable think tanks to focus more on their mission without the need to achieving diversified funding sources?

It should be noted that the emergence of new right-wing think tanks in the United States represents a new model that explicitly defines partisan viewpoints and secures funding solely through supporting or enhancing their agenda<sup>[13]</sup>. This also explains why foreign think tank assessments often include evaluations of financial transparency. The names and affiliations of the trustees should be disclosed on the think tank website, and this is almost always the case. The absence of any such information is a warning signal that the think tank may be concealing its value orientation, suggesting potential issues in its social governance practices. For those trustees who are named, information about them can generally be found online. Similarly, think tanks should strive for diversity in their

organizational pattern. For instance, the board of directors should include individuals from corporate, academic, and media backgrounds, with a balance between conservatives and progressives, and embodying a diverse array of global and domestic experiences. Trustees should have a roughly similar level of accomplishment, rather than being dominated by one or two senior, tacit leaders. The presence of major donors at the board is also a signal that analysts may be under pressure on their analytical methods and conclusions. Understanding the sources of think tank funders is an effective way to comprehend where power lies within the organization, and attendees firmly believe that these sources should be disclosed on the think tank website. Detailed listings are necessary, beyond partial small funding, covering government contracts, foundation contributions, and individual or corporate contributions.

Co-funding is one of the ways for think tanks to secure operational support. Especially within the context of political uncertainty, this represents an attempt to solve the conflict between operation model and independence with community-based thinking. In addition, due to the similarities in research topics among some think tanks, redundant analyses and policy recommendations may arise. Furthermore, think tanks also require more communal practical experience, and the funding for think tanks is not limited to financial support but also includes inputs in the form of expertise, public resources, etc. Kristin Corbett, a knowledge translation project researcher at the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) <sup>[3]</sup>, highlighted, during the discussion, that the idea of the “independence” of think tanks seems to be an illusion. IDRC emphasizes the principle of optimal scale and coordination, suggesting that think tanks should not be obsessed with achieving the scale and speed of change, but should pay more attention to the influence of think tanks. This implies that think tanks need to adjust their pace and seek more coordination and cooperation across departments, disciplines, stakeholders and ideologies <sup>[14]</sup>. In today’s era of political uncertainty, the only certainty is that think tanks exist and operate in an uncertain world. Compared with other institutions, donors need to swiftly establish connections with trustworthy institutions in times of crisis. Such institutions should be able to acquire knowledge from a variety of sources and have the ability to comprehend and synthesize this knowledge. In terms of diversity, think tanks have the ability to make solutions more inclusive. This involves not only making the research process more inclusive, but also integrating the experiences of those who have been excluded from the realms of academic evidence and knowledge. Think tanks require a certain degree of lobbying and strategic communication abilities to carry out influential research, which is unlikely to be done by individuals independently, but necessitates collaborative efforts by professionals in a team setting. Regarding global think tank competition, more experts have suggested the establishment of a think tank network, believing that the voices of think tanks in the Southern Hemisphere should be listened to and understood.

## 3.2. The Role of Think Tanks in Depolarizing Public Discourse

In today's context of political uncertainty, the questions of whether think tanks should emphasize their political attributes and whether there is a conflict between the prominence of political attributes and the independence of think tanks have become a matter of particular concern for global think tanks. As a bridge between power and knowledge, think tanks are not required to pay particular emphasis on their political attributes or align themselves with a particular end of political power under the background of multi-polar political uncertainty. Think tanks are one of the players to collect public opinions and participate in policy formulation or public discourse. Christian Acemah<sup>[3]</sup>, Executive Director of Uganda National Academy of Sciences, emphasized during the parallel session themed "Experts' trustworthiness in a post-truth world" that the expert knowledge possessed by think tank members represents a form of power, therefore people are inclined to listen to their opinions and view their words as truth. However, this also means that think tank experts need to bear corresponding responsibilities when voicing their views. Without adequate mechanisms of accountability, such responsibilities become meaningless. Think tanks must ensure that experts are held accountable for their statements and actions. In addition to constraints on think tanks in public discourse, it is imperative for think tanks to enhance their own credibility in order to gain broader influence.

Shaping credibility requires think tanks to strengthen evidence-based research and engage in practical work in a manner of brand building. John Schwartz, Chairman of the Soapbox, media think tank road show platform, believes that credibility lies at the core of all effective communication, and this is especially true for think tanks<sup>[15]</sup>. The mission of think tanks is to transform evidence and ideas into social progress. The main way of achieving that objective is to exchange their research contents and debate around them, persuading those who can take action to act in an informed manner, and this requires credibility. The communication of think tanks should meet at least three criteria: evidence-based, brand awareness, and practical outcomes. Firstly, in the past decade, think tanks have been striving to engage a broader public in policy debates, and new digital tools and channels have provided the means for this, all of which have been positive developments. At the same time, the public tends to focus on increasingly condensed exchanges or contributions to public discourse, with less time dedicated to careful consideration of complete reports or evidence sets. This often results in improper report editing, inadequate fact-checking, lack of clarity or consistency, and ultimately, suboptimal presentation. Secondly, the brand of a think tank also associates with the field of knowledge and culture, and in certain cases, it serves as a declaration of legitimacy and credibility in a specific field. A crucial aspect of establishing the brand of a think tank involves creating a long-term framework for advancing arguments or positions. If a think tank's dissemination fails to fulfill these commitments, or is in an area where the public is not associated with the think tank brand, it will lack credibility. Lastly, practicality means that the public in the same field can easily use the outcomes

of think tank studies and research to advance their own research or arguments, or, more generally speaking, that the think tank becomes an institution that government departments can readily recall and use.

Goran Buldioski <sup>[16]</sup>, Acting Executive Director of the Open Society Foundations, introduced the concepts of “influencer” and “educator” to explain the role of think tanks in public discourse. “Influencer” mainly refers to “internet celebrities” or the members with great influence on social media. They have a large number of fans or followers, and can influence their audience’s acceptance of decisions or adoption of viewpoints through their own social media platforms. Such individuals are often employed by companies to mention or promote specific products or services in their social media posts, thereby influencing their fans or followers. “Educator” means members who impart knowledge, skills, and ideas through education, training, or research. In the public discourse, think tanks can choose both as influencers and educators. Denisse Rodriguez Olivari, a researcher from Peru, maintains that think tanks should be more willing to reach more audiences by playing the role of “influencer” <sup>[17]</sup>.

Regarding whether think tanks need to declare their political stance, Goran Buldioski <sup>[3]</sup> suggests that although it may be dangerous to openly state their political stance, this does not mean that think tanks should deliberately maintain ambiguity. He believes that organizations should be clear about whether they have a certain ideology or allow for pluralistic ideologies to exist. For example, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace is a place where both the Republicans and Democrats can come together for debates.

### 3.3. The Practice for Think Tank Community Under Geopolitics

Climate change, escalating polarization and the emergence of multi-modal artificial intelligence models have driven think tanks to break away from the traditional cooperation models and embrace more innovative and daring economic visions. Mariana Mazzucato, a professor at UCL Institute for Innovation and Public Purpose (IIPP), proposes a concept worthy of consideration called “mission economy” <sup>[8]</sup>, which describes a path to repair rather than terminate capitalism by restoring the main functions of the state and realigning economic priorities. Think tanks have the responsibility to put forward new economic and social visions, improve the manner of cooperation between the public and private sectors, engage in social governance as multifaceted entities, and share risks and achievements, instead of always providing advice and measures from a third-party perspective. Sophie Porschlegel, a senior policy analyst from the Belgian European Policy Center <sup>[18]</sup>, emphasizes that there are three key points in think tank cooperation, namely, goals, purposes, and directions, which should be in alignment, and also the value of governance should be clarified. Think tanks need the capacity and means to connect the public with ideas, emphasizing

the importance of collaborative efforts rather than being trapped in competition. She views open collaboration and paving the way for others as the key to establishing an effective think tank network.

The OTT Conference provides a classic case of interactions between African and European think tanks, shifting the original focus of their collaboration from protecting Europe from African “threats” to exploring alternative forms of interaction, such as reshaping the relationship between the two continents by addressing Europe’s pain points of raw materials and population. Olumide Abimbola <sup>[19]</sup>, Executive Director of the African Policy Research Institute (APRI), elaborates on how APRI influences policies by bridging Africa and Europe, emphasizing that the focus of think tanks is not to help Europe protect itself from the “threat” of Africa, but to promote cooperation between the two sides. APRI works with think tanks across Africa to find common research topics and projects. This approach, aimed at identifying and addressing challenges collaboratively, serves the public interest and promotes equitable treatment of research subjects, challenging the traditional North-South dualist approach. Abimbola underscores how this model prompts think tanks to reconsider their business models and organization forms, highlighting that their working methods emerge not from preconceived designs, but from the experiences of researchers and contemplation on effecting change. Similarly, think tanks may need to reflect on why they heavily prioritize development aid and overlook other forms of interaction, such as addressing European pain points, critical raw material issues, and population pressures, to reconstruct the Europe-Africa relationship.

## 4. Opportunities and Challenges for Chinese Think Tanks Amid International Political Uncertainty

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The think tank itself is a community organization of professional knowledge, and there is a positive interaction between its knowledge system and think tank practices. According to previous bibliometric studies, the Western (English as the written language) think tank research community has reached a certain scale, laying the foundation for the institutionalized development of think tank research <sup>[20]</sup>. Among them, the new type of think tanks with Chinese characteristics, as an important medium for the dissemination of ideas and theories, is an important driving force to promote the global dissemination of the concept of a community with a shared future for mankind. At the same time, the new type of think tanks with Chinese characteristics serve as an important bridge for major country diplomacy and a necessary approach to promoting public diplomacy <sup>[21]</sup>. In the face of international political uncertainties, they should fully draw on the experience of international think tank development, strengthen the construction of think tank networks and platforms, in order to better serve the construction of the think tank community.

## 4.1. New-Type Think Tank Community Construction and Core Capability Building

The Chinese characteristic new-type think tanks are a non-profit research and consulting organizations focusing on strategic issues and public policies, with the aim of serving the scientific, democratic and lawful decision-making of the Party and the government<sup>[22]</sup>. Its essence lies in being an integrated institution of “academics + policy consultation + practical application”<sup>[23]</sup>. The think tank is a professional and academic community of expertise. Internally, it is an integrated community consisting of the think tank management, experts, and administrative personnel; externally, it is a community consisting of the administrative departments, liaison departments, and experts and scholars focusing on think tank research involved in serving the scientific and democratic decision-making process of the Party and government. In addition to strengthening the identity and mission of the think tank, the construction of a new-type think tank community primarily involves incorporating various relevant departments in the decision-making process into the community development path and establishing an information channel between the think tank and government departments. For instance, policy debates in China should also be led by a professional policy community, whose members should include the staff agencies of the Party committee and the government, policy research think tanks, specialized committees of the National People’s Congress and the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference, non-governmental think tanks, media think tanks, and social think tanks, all of which possess professional policy research capabilities<sup>[24]</sup>. This is to fully leverage the role of think tanks as a bridge between power and knowledge.

The core capability building of the think tank community mainly focuses on value co-creation, namely, extensive consultation, joint construction, shared benefits, and transparency<sup>[25]</sup>. The development of think tanks has entered a phase of high-quality growth, and there is already a certain degree of saturation or redundancy in the relevant research fields think tanks are engaging in. Therefore, strengthening the construction of the think tank community can not only promote value co-creation, but also effectively drive innovation and resource sharing within the think tank community. In general, the development of the new-type think tank community needs to achieve the establishment of internal academic communities, the simultaneous development of external embedded policy communities, and the interconnection and sharing of resources within the community.

## 4.2. Reinforcement of Think Tanks as Informal Communication Channels

As informal channels of communication, think tanks can play an active role in understanding the needs of competent authorities and communicating public opinions, in addition to actively promoting public diplomacy between nations.

New diplomacy, also known as public diplomacy, refers to international relations in which citizens play a greater role. Under the old diplomatic policies, global decision-making was strictly within the purview of governments. New diplomacy can to some extent also be considered as public diplomacy<sup>[26]</sup>. Experts at the OTT Conference believe that, during the “Cold War”, think tanks were regarded as informal channels connecting various parties. Under the background of political uncertainty, it is time for think tanks to engage in new diplomacy, reinforcing the role of think tanks as informal channels of communication, thereby enabling think tanks to become platforms for debate and discussion beyond political contention. In modern times, the role of individual scholars has diminished, and think tanks have become an essential theoretical platform for maintaining and reinforcing discourse on the maritime field<sup>[26]</sup>. China has fully utilized the role of think tanks as informal channels of communication in areas such as maritime public diplomacy<sup>[27]</sup>, the framework of China-Africa cooperation<sup>[28]</sup>, and the building of a community with a shared future for mankind<sup>[29]</sup>. Through the specialized characteristics of think tanks and the provision of policy guidance, topic allocation, activity direction, or task assignment, think tanks have flexibly provided a significantly important multilateral platform for public diplomacy<sup>[27]</sup>.

The lack of information transmission channels will lead to the failure on the part of grassroots think tanks to timely and accurately grasp the key issues at the provincial and municipal levels. In addition to the topics assigned by the relevant departments, the think tank community can also enhance informal communication and relationship building within the community by organizing seminars similar to the OTT Conference. The competent authorities can guide the development and research direction of think tanks by setting the agenda for such meetings.

Moreover, think tanks should also strengthen communication and interaction with the public. This does not mean that think tank experts need to appear in the public media continuously, but that think tanks should narrate their insights in a suitable manner that aligns with the audience’s acceptance and understanding, thereby more closely reflecting the audience’s actual lives. The same also applies to the communication with other audiences. Furthermore, think tanks could strengthen the research on neuroscience, so as to better integrate their evidence-based capabilities with the emotional needs of the public, thus advancing the role of think tanks in conveying public sentiment.

### 4.3. Exploration of a Data-Driven Paradigm for Think Tank Construction

Evidence-based research with scientific basis as a reference is the basic paradigm of think tank decision-making consulting research. In China, the establishment of an evidence-based research system within think tanks is still in its early stages. Some scholars have begun to recognize the significance of evidence-based practice for the development of think tanks, suggesting that the evidence-guided practice serves as a

fundamental function in the establishment of think tanks<sup>[30]</sup> as well as a fundamental paradigm in think tank policy research<sup>[31]</sup>. The evidence-based approach not only establishes the central role of evidence in the research findings of think tanks but also represents an important feature which differentiates think tanks from traditional decision-making consulting. To a certain extent, this establishes the quality of think tank products<sup>[32]</sup>. Data-driven think tanks largely guide think tanks to make argumentation based on scientific evidence, representing an innovation in the traditional operation model of think tanks. This is evident in the transformation from an expert-driven research approach and the emphasis on think tank proprietary databases. What's more, data-driven think tanks enhance the information literacy requirements for researchers, completing the process of technological empowerment to a certain extent. However, according to the discussion in the OTT Conference, technology-driven approaches may lead think tanks to lean toward efficiency, and the selection of large samples may potentially overlook the individual demands of small sample groups. Therefore, think tanks need to perform the necessary review and quality control of the outcomes generated under data-driven approaches.

## 5. Conclusion

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The international political uncertainty represents a long-term political environment that think tanks will need to confront in the future. Whether it's the traditional uncertainties and challenges in politics and economics, or the potential organizational transformation and narrative methods brought about by emerging technologies, all signify that think tanks need to reassess their institutional role to address external trust crises and internal self-doubt. As facilitators of public discourse, think tanks should consistently uphold an open, inclusive, and professional stance to flexibly respond to the uncertainties in the future.



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