3 Policy-making processes of Chinese foreign policy

The role of policy communities and think tanks

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The policy-making process of Chinese foreign policy has primarily involved three governing actors: the Party, the government and the military. Instead of examining these institutional actors, this chapter will focus on the role of policy communities and their impact on the making of Chinese foreign policy. Peter Haas and his associates published a group of articles in 1992 in *International Organization* on ‘knowledge, power, and international policy co-ordination’. Haas specifically raised the concept of an ‘epistemic community’, referring to a ‘network of professionals with recognized expertise and competence in a particular domain and an authoritative claim to policy-relevant knowledge within that domain or issue-area’ (Haas 1992). These professional networks, also known as policy communities, become influential because of the nature and complexity of the issues involved. Think tanks are an important part of these policy communities. As in Western societies, policy communities and think tanks in China have exerted increasing influences on the direction of foreign policy, although there are noticeable limitations (Brookings Panel 2008).

In July 2009 a three-day think tank summit was held in Beijing, primarily focusing on solutions to tackle the financial crisis. In attendance were Li Keqiang, China’s Vice Premier; Romano Prodi, former President of the European Commission and former Prime Minister of Italy; and Henry Kissinger, former Secretary of State of the USA, among others. China’s newly established ‘super think tank’—the Center for International Economic Exchanges, headed by retired Vice Premier Zeng Peiyan, sponsored this summit (People’s Daily 2009a). Against this background, the following studies will examine the impact of policy communities and think tanks on Chinese foreign policy.

Institutions

It is only natural that, in recent times, attention has moved to the link between Chinese foreign policy and China’s domestic environment as the country continues to undertake profound reform, and the rise of China becomes a focus of world attention. A few studies have examined general influences of Chinese think tanks in the Chinese policy process (Zhu and Teng 2006; Zhu, X. 2009). However, this paper focuses primarily on foreign policy dimensions.

In China, the most well-known think tanks working on foreign policy issues are research institutes under various government agencies. In 2006 the Chinese government revealed the top 10 think tanks in China (Zhang, Y.X. 2006). From a survey conducted in the West in 2008, there are six China-based institutions among the top 25 think tanks in Asia (McGann 2009a; 2009b). Building on this, we can list some of the think tanks in China that are most influential in foreign policy issues. Here are some of the most well-known examples:
Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS)
China Institute of International Studies (CIIS)
China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR)
Shanghai Institute for International Studies (SIIS)
Chinese Academy of Military Sciences of the People’s Liberation Army (CAMS)
China Institute for International Strategic Studies (CIISS)

CASS, directly under China’s State Council, is the largest and most comprehensive government think tank in China. A number of research institutes under CASS deal specifically with international affairs and foreign policy issues, as clearly indicated by their institutional names, such as American Studies, European Studies, Japanese Studies, Asia-Pacific Studies, Russian, East European and Central Asian Studies, West Asian and African Studies World Politics and Economic Studies, Latin American Studies, China’s Borderland History and Geography Research, etc. CIIS falls under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and contributes directly to policy analyses on current affairs. CICIR, a Ministry of National Security-affiliated think tank, is known for its size of research staff, broad topics of research, and internal channels of policy recommendation.

The Shanghai-based SIIS has served as an alternative and flexible window for Beijing’s foreign policy establishment. In addition, two military think tanks, CAMS and CIISS, are under the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), specializing in strategic and security issues. All these institutions have had a relatively long history, playing an important role in various policy areas. There are also new think tanks, such as the above-mentioned Center for International Economic Exchanges, but many of them tend to concentrate on economic policies.

The study of Chinese think tanks

Let us now conduct a brief review of previous studies in this regard. An early example is He Li’s (2002) ‘The Role of Think Tanks in Chinese Foreign Policy’, where detailed analyses were conducted on the historical development and structures of Chinese think tanks. Another example comes from the September 2002 issue of China Quarterly, which was dedicated in large part to the study of China’s think tanks. Much discussion involved foreign policy issues. In this issue, Murray Scot Tanner (2002) examined the evolving think tank system in China by first using the case of China’s growing commercialization, which spawned a new generation of think tanks. He argued that generational change was evident in China’s previously unstudied network of public security think tanks. These institutes, according to Tanner, were at the forefront of importing and incorporating more sophisticated crime-fighting tactics and less class-based theories of social unrest.

David Shambaugh (2002) argues that, over the past two decades, China’s foreign policy think tanks have come to play increasingly important roles in Chinese foreign policy-making and intelligence analysis. He provides a detailed analysis on the think tanks’ structure and processes by offering historical perspectives on the evolution of this community. Shambaugh further argues that these think tanks often offer important indications of broader policy debates and competition between institutions and their staff. Bonnie Glaser and Philip Saunders (2002) focus their research on civilian foreign policy research institutes and their increasing influence. They argue that a more pluralistic and competitive policy environment has given analysts at think tanks more influence, but has also created new competition from analysts and authors working outside the traditional research institutions.
Bates Gill and James Mulvenon bring their research focus onto the national research community in Beijing by arguing that this community is dominated by think tanks and other research organizations affiliated with specific governmental institutions (Gill and Mulvenon 2002). Furthermore, they point out that the PLA maintains its own set of internal and affiliated research bodies, performing a variety of intelligence, exchange and research functions. Barry Naughton (2002) examines economic think tanks in China. He states that, although these think tanks are all government sponsored, they offer important alternatives to the policies and advice available within the formal governmental bureaucracy. However, he notes that some independent think tanks have emerged, together with the increasing network of policy advisers to China’s leaders. Sometimes these policy advisers play a more important role than think tanks.

Alastair Iain Johnston (2004) conducted a careful study of Chinese middle-class attitudes towards international affairs. Although not directly related to think tanks, the general argument of this article and the development of civil society in China is relevant to the subject matter of this paper. There are also increasing numbers of PhD dissertations and Master’s theses focusing on this subject, some of which have recently been turned into books or journal articles. For example, a dissertation-turned-book entitled, *Chinese Foreign Policy Think Tanks and China’s Policy Towards Japan*, has provided a detailed study updating the evolution of China’s think tanks and their relations with Chinese foreign policy. The author has also attempted to bring the study into a broader theoretical framework that will integrate recent developments in the conceptualization of Chinese foreign policy (see Liao 2006).

The importance of think tanks in Chinese foreign policy and other decision-making processes has also drawn attention from scholars in China. The internet journal, *China’s Strategy*, co-published by the CSIS and the Chinese Media Net, Inc., is an example of the attention given to Chinese think tanks. In the first issue published in January 2004 (an issue that was originally available on www1.chinesenewsnet.com/gb/index.html, but which no longer seems to be accessible), the journal contributed a special section entitled, ‘Decision-making mechanisms under the fourth generation of Chinese leadership’. In this issue, all articles were written by Chinese scholars in China, making it a good complement to the above-mentioned *China Quarterly* collection. Zhong Nanyuan published his analysis of the current status of Chinese think tanks and their relations with the new Hu Jintao-Wen Jiabao leadership. Ding Dajun examined the participation of intellectuals in the decision-making process. Zou Lan studied the influence of think tanks on finance, the environment and public crisis management. Zhang Wei focused his research on economic policies. Hong Xiaohu researched new mechanisms of defence policy-making. As for foreign policy decision-making systems, Sun Zhe analysed their evolution characteristics under the new leadership.

**Changes and continuities**

Major changes in Chinese politics and foreign policy occurred between the eras of Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping. Deng’s reform and openness policy fundamentally redirected China’s development both domestically and internationally. The era of Jiang Zemin and the current leadership of Hu Jintao can be seen as a continuation of the Deng era in terms of general direction, yet these new leaders do have their own characteristics. It is, therefore, necessary for us to examine changes and continuities between these different eras.

In a 1992 article entitled ‘Domestic Factors of Chinese Foreign Policy: From Vertical to Horizontal Authoritarianism’ (see Zhao, Q. 1992), this author characterized the changing process of foreign policy in China as that from Mao’s era of vertical authoritarianism
(i.e. one-person domination) to Deng’s era of horizontal authoritarianism (i.e. collective decision-making). This article also pointed out that, although they demonstrated increasing importance, intellectuals had not yet become an independent entity in China’s political life; they had gained more freedom to discuss policy issues internally, but externally, or publicly, they were required to support official party lines. Think tanks had a fairly high degree of freedom to conduct internal discussions on a variety of issues, but it was difficult, if not impossible, for research institutes to voice dissenting points of view openly. A scholar who was allowed to discuss foreign policy issues in public was expected to explain and validate only the official party lines.

As time passes, the scope and degree of participation by think tanks and policy communities have enlarged in the post-Deng era, as leaders have vowed to continue Deng’s reform and openness policies. Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao encouraged think tanks and policy communities to participate in the policy-making process in a variety of ways. The most salient participation was in economic policy-making. In analysing the development from the era of Deng to the post-Deng era under the leadership of Jiang and Hu, one will see increasing interactions between the leadership and policy communities.

Channels between the centre and the periphery

The following analysis will focus on the relationship between the leaders, known as the centre, and the think tanks, forming a part of the periphery of the policy community. In Sun Zhe’s paper on decision-making in Chinese foreign policy mentioned earlier, he divided the process into internal and external circles. In this article, I would like to define internal circles, or the centre, as that which includes key policy-making individuals and organizations in the Party and the government. The external circles, to which I will refer as the periphery, include the news media, universities, think tanks, etc. The key development under Jiang and Hu is the increasingly active and multi-layered channels between the centre and the periphery. I have developed a notion of seven channels between these two bodies, as discussed below.

Channel 1: consultations with policy-makers

In recent years, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and government organizations have begun to make systemic consultations with think tanks and policy communities on specific policy issues, including foreign policy. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, for example, has its own mini-circles for consultation over policy issues, the most interesting and noticeable of these being a system of invited lectures by think tank and policy community scholars for the CCP politburo. Recent examples are the lectures on international relations and foreign policy issues given by invited scholars Qin Yaqing (of the Foreign Affairs College) and Zhang Yuyan (from the Academy of Social Sciences) to the leaders of the politburo. These kinds of interactions provide opportunities for scholars to exercise direct influence on the opinions of leaders. It is, nevertheless, a fairly rare occasion for intellectuals to do so and one cannot expect too much in terms of policy impact.

In addition to the above-mentioned lectures, there are also issue-oriented debates and discussions among policy communities and between intellectuals and policy-makers. In order to ensure this kind of policy debate, a proper political and intellectual atmosphere is necessary. It is impossible, for example, for such policy debate to occur during a totally closed period, such as the Cultural Revolution. Deng Xiaoping’s reform and openness initiatives, beginning in 1978, opened the door to the possibility for such policy debate. The changing atmosphere
was first evident in respect of internal economic policies, particularly in the debate over command versus market economies. It gradually extended to the foreign policy field. Gilbert Rozman (1987), for example, has made a detailed record of such debates on the nature of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and the relationship between China and the USSR during the 1978–85 period (Rozman 1987). This kind of debate has flourished more and more since the 1990s.

One case in point is the debate on China’s entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the issue of globalization. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, prior to China’s accession in December 2001 to the WTO, there were heated discussions and debates on the pros and cons of the issue (Misra 2003). In his field research in Beijing, Banning Garrett (2001) investigated these internal deliberations within Chinese think tanks and Chinese leaders’ dialogues with them, which provided some useful input into China’s policy toward the WTO.

Channel 2: internal reports via government channels

As mentioned earlier, under some government agencies, there are a number of official think tanks that may also deal with foreign policy issues. Another type of official think tank is zhengfu canshi-shi, meaning governmental consulting division. This kind of canshi-shi exists at both the central and provincial levels. At the national level, there is a State Council–supervised canshi-shi, with 35 consultants. At the provincial or city levels, there are 41 governmental consulting divisions with more than 1,000 consultants (Ji 2004).

A traditional way for think tanks to exert their influence has been through internal reports to leaders. Leading foreign policy organizations and agencies such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of State Security and military organizations all have their own research institutes. There are long-established channels through which scholars may submit research papers, policy analyses and recommendations to various levels of policy-makers, including, from time to time, the leaders. These policy recommendations can sometimes be bold, without ideological constraints. One such example is a suggestion in 2008 from researchers in the Party Central School that the CCP should speed up political reform in order to cope with the rapid development of Chinese society (Buckley 2008).

Bonnie Glaser and Phillip Saunders (2002, 608–614) describe four different types of influence exerted by think tank scholars. First, some scholars may have ‘positional influence’, whereby they utilize their key positions in the government, such as within CICIR and CIIS. Second, those who possess expert knowledge in regional or technical matters are able to exert what is referred to as ‘expertise influence’. The third type, ‘personal influence’, is enjoyed by those individuals who are closely related to high-level government officials. For example, Yang Jiemian, Deputy Director of SIIS, has considerable access to policy-makers through his elder brother, Yang Jiechi, the Chinese Ambassador to the USA and a former Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs. The fourth source of influence is called ‘experiential influence’, which is held by those people who have accumulated valuable knowledge through extensive experience living and studying abroad.

I would like to add a fifth source of influence: retired veteran diplomats. These retired government officials not only accumulated enormous first-hand knowledge abroad, but, perhaps more importantly, they also have extensive personal networks within the foreign policy apparatus. This is true not only because human networks have always been important in Chinese society, but also because China’s foreign policy apparatus is relatively exclusive and segregated. These retired officials in many cases still serve as advisers to the foreign ministry or work in some semi-official governmental institutions, such as the Chinese People’s Association.
for Foreign Affairs. Qian Qichen, China’s former Minister of Foreign Affairs and Vice Premier, was believed to continue to have enormous influence on foreign policy issues several years after his total retirement from the government and the Party. Therefore, the degree of influence of think tanks may depend on the sources of influence that individuals possess.

**Channel 3: conferences and public policy debates**

Another important channel for policy communities and scholars to convey their opinions is conferences and public policy debates. Although these conferences and debates may not necessarily have a direct impact on policy-makers, they do carry weight in influencing public opinion. The relatively recent practice of discussion and debate of current international affairs in the Chinese news media, including that on the China Central Television (CCTV) network and in major newspapers, is a good example of such public dialogue. In general, the degree of freedom for this kind of debate depends on the degree of sensitivity. For example, there are few public discussions of the North Korean nuclear crisis (and even though some exist, the debaters may get into trouble—see below). But there are quite a few lively debates regarding US military actions in Iraq—one can hear both pros and cons in a true crossfire of opinions.

Research institutes affiliated with universities and various governmental agencies are the likely host for policy-oriented conferences. CASS has a number of policy experts who frequently participate in internal conferences for policy deliberation. Researchers from the Institute of American Studies and the Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies are also good examples in this regard. These activities present excellent opportunities for researchers to voice differing opinions. There are also public policy debates arranged by news media.

Professors and research fellows from leading universities, such as Beijing, Qinghua, Renmin and Fudan, are the main participants in these internationally oriented conferences and debates. Increasingly, these scholars are invited to present their analyses on foreign policy at international conferences, on television programmes, in radio discussions and in newspapers and popular magazines. For example, Qinghua University’s Yan Xuetong and Chu Shulong are frequent commentators on CCTV programmes. Beijing University’s Jia Qingguo and Renmin University’s Jin Canrong are often quoted in various media. Although necessarily they are quite visible in the public eye, these academic scholars in general do not necessarily have direct access to policy-makers and therefore have little influence on policy-makers in Beijing. However, individually a few of them may have various influences, depending on their personal networks and connections, as discussed earlier.

An influential, policy-oriented journal entitled *Zhanlue yu Guangli* (Strategy and Management), established in 1993, is affiliated with the Strategy and Management Research Society, a think tank headed by former Vice Premier Gu Mu. This journal often makes bold policy suggestions as a test balloon for taking new directions (Rutwich 2004). For example, in 2002 and 2003, the journal published two articles regarding China’s Japan policy—one by Ma Licheng of the People’s Daily and the other by Shi Yinhong of Renmin University. Ma and Shi strongly advocated a ‘foreign policy revolution’ that would re prioritize the direction of Chinese foreign policy in terms of China-Japan relations. Both articles emphasized the necessity of placing strategic interests above considerations of historical legacies in the Chinese government’s deliberations concerning Japan. Although these articles received strong criticism from some circles of Chinese society and became quite controversial, they nevertheless did produce some ‘new thinking’ in China’s Japan policy, as the authors had advocated.
However, disaster struck the outspoken journal in September 2004 after it published an even more controversial article on North Korea. The article, written by the Chinese economist Wang Zhongwen, was entitled ‘A New Viewpoint to Examine the North Korea Issue and the Northeast Asian Situation’ and appeared in the journal’s July/August 2004 issue. Wang criticized North Korea’s nuclear policy and the country’s leader, Kim Jong Il, for ‘practicing ultra-leftist politics and political persecution in order to maintain dynastic rule’. The author further suggested that Chinese foreign policy should be readjusted according to new developments in North Korea and in the Asia-Pacific region. The issue was immediately recalled and banned, and the journal itself was ordered closed (Tkacik 2004). This episode highlights how sensitive foreign policy-related discussions in open forums can be in Beijing’s political circle. It is nevertheless remarkable that such an article was even published, especially when viewed in the light of China’s censorship practices one or two decades ago, not to mention during the Cultural Revolution. Generally speaking, policy communities now have greater freedom in voicing differing opinions and analyses on foreign policy issues (albeit not without risk), and today’s scholars appear much more active than those in previous decades (Leonard 2008, 144).

**Channel 4: policy NGOs**

Although non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are still a new concept in China, they are quickly being utilized by the Chinese government to conduct foreign policy activities. At the same time, there are some attempts to set up non-governmental think tanks. A few government organizations have managed to transform into semi-official or NGO status (Zhu and Xue 2007). To be sure, many NGOs are not truly independent of governmental control. However, they sometimes appear to have much greater freedom and flexibility to conduct policy research and foreign policy related activities.

A clear example is the common practice of so-called ‘channel II diplomacy’. This refers to the activities of retired government officials, scholars and think tank members who actively participate in all kinds of forums, meetings and other activities with their foreign counterparts. These activities are designed to facilitate exchange on sensitive issues, such as arms control and the issue of Taiwan, that may not be easily conducted by official diplomats. Channel II diplomacy is also utilized for public relations. To encourage and co-ordinate these kinds of activities, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs established a new public diplomacy division in early 2004. Assistant Minister of Foreign Affairs Shen Guofang announced in March 2004 that the new Division of Public Diplomacy was established to co-ordinate the dissemination of information and to influence public opinion.

A few foreign policy-oriented organizations have also been established. One well-known organization is the China Reform Forum (CRF). Founded in 1994, the forum was registered as an NGO at the Beijing Municipal Government Associations Office. Its founding chairman, Mr. Zheng Bijian, is the former Executive Vice President of the Central Party School, and the organization includes a large number of scholars, policy community members and current and retired government officials as its advisers and executive members. CRF has organized many academic conferences and has set up exchange relations with more than 20 countries including the USA, France, the United Kingdom, Germany, the Netherlands, Russia, Japan, South Korea and Singapore. Its influence is on the rise, both domestically and internationally. CRF has also actively participated in discussions on the direction of Chinese foreign policy, such as the creation of the much-debated and eye-catching concept of China’s ‘peaceful rise’ (see Glaser and Medeiros 2007). This development has further
demonstrated the strong desire for policy-makers in China to integrate into the world’s scholarly and policy-making community.

**Channel 5: outside-system (tizhiwai) discussions**

Most of the channels mentioned above can be regarded more or less as government-sponsored activities. One must, however, also pay close attention to tizhiwai channels, meaning outside-system discussions that may from time to time be beyond government control. This has been particularly true during the first decade of the 2000s in the new information age. As the control over public information has loosened, there have been a variety of ways for scholars to voice their opinions, which are not always aligned with the opinions of the Party. Many of these opinions meet with the popular mood, reflecting a strong nationalistic tendency. One example is a best-selling book published in Beijing in 1996 entitled, *A China That Can Say No*, which reflected strong anti-American sentiment (Song, Zhang and Qiao 1996). Thirteen years later, in 2009, the same group of authors published another best-seller, *Unhappy China*, advocating China’s leadership role in the post-financial crisis era with strong nationalistic sentiment (Song, X. *et al.* 2009). These ideas are in sharp contrast to *tao guang yang hui* (to hide your capacity and to keep a low profile), the mainstream thinking of Chinese foreign policy, discussed in Cabestan’s chapter in this collection.

In the age of the internet, it is difficult, if not impossible, for any government to control its citizens’ access to information. In the era of Mao, and even at the beginning of the Deng era, the Chinese government had tight control over the news media. The gatekeeper for this control was the Propaganda Department of the CCP. In the internet age, however, this control has been greatly challenged and largely broken. In early 2004, a Beijing University Associate Professor, Jiao Guobiao, posted an article on the internet entitled, ‘*Taofa Zhongxuanbu* (Denounce the Propaganda Department)’. This article advocated a need for greater freedom for the news media from control by the Party and the government. It drew broad attention and provoked heated discussion on the internet about information control in China. It is, therefore, a recent practice for scholars and policy community members to look at internet discussion debates to ascertain the popular mood.

Internet discussion has drawn close attention from the central leadership. The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, for example, has set up a pop-up within its Chinese-language website asking for opinions of intellectuals and other ordinary citizens. Internet users can e-mail their opinions to the ministry and can conduct discussions in the chat-room and can even ‘chat’ with senior foreign affairs officials regularly (Gries 2004, 134).

It has almost become a pattern that, whenever there is a dramatic and sometimes controversial international incident that involves China, there will be heated discussion about the event on the internet. This happened in 1999 with the war in Kosovo and the subsequent embassy-bombing incidents in which NATO-led bombers attacked the Chinese embassy in Belgrade. In a detailed survey on the attitudes of Beijing students after the embassy bombing, Dingxin Zhao demonstrated that there was an apparent ‘rise of popular anti-USA nationalism in China’ (Zhao, D. 2002). Discussions can become more heated when the issue involves nationalism, as demonstrated by internet discussions regarding the territory dispute between China and Japan over the Diaoyu Islands.

Although the number of Chinese citizens with access to the internet is still a tiny portion of the entire Chinese population, and it is difficult to represent fully the popular mood, internet discussion nevertheless plays an influential role in two ways. First, the government may have to take publicly-expressed opinions into consideration when making critical decisions,
such as which country to work with on the high-speed railway project between Beijing and Shanghai. The issue of with whom to partner (Japan or Europe) not only provoked heated debates among related government agencies and policy communities, but also became a controversial topic in public opinion. Second, internet discussion plays a deterrent role, in that it prevents scholars and policy community members in public appearances from making conciliatory gestures on controversial issues. Some scholars even feel deterred from making rational analyses when they are interviewed publicly, fearing a negative response later on the internet. Since there is another paper in this present volume concentrating on the function of the internet and the news media, I will not give a more detailed analysis in this regard.

Channel 6: overseas scholars

Another important source for policy communities’ influence on Chinese foreign policy is from overseas scholars. Previously, this kind of influence was exercised by a few prominent individuals. Several Chinese-American Nobel Prize winners were invited to return to China to provide advice to leaders on a variety of issues, including foreign policy issues, but this kind of practice remains limited and lacks a systematic arrangement.

Since the 1980s large numbers of scholars and students have studied abroad. Many of them have now become professors and scholars in advanced industrialized countries, particularly in the USA and Japan. A large portion of these scholars are focused on science and technology, but there are a small portion of them concentrating on the social sciences and humanities, including foreign policy and international relations. These scholars have organized themselves into academic exchange and professional networking organizations. A few have even begun to play a consultative role on foreign policy issues.

One such example is the Global Forum of Chinese Political Scientists (http://globalforum.homestead.com). It was established in 1999 by Chinese scholars in the USA, China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Japan. In addition to regular academic activities, such as sponsoring panels for annual meetings of the American Political Science Association, it has a practice of carrying out annual and semi-annual conferences, workshops and mini-roundtables not only to discuss academic issues, but also to hold policy-oriented dialogues and debates. This group has had activities in Washington, DC, Hong Kong, Beijing, Shanghai and Tokyo. It has also established a number of partnerships with leading Chinese institutions, such as the China Reform Forum and the Shanghai Institute of International Studies.

From 2002 to 2005 the Global Forum and the China Reform Forum co-sponsored annual meetings in Beijing on a variety of crucial issues in relation to Chinese foreign policy, including US-China relations, US foreign policy, the issue of Taiwan, Sino-Japanese relations, the North Korean nuclear crisis and community-building in East Asia. Since 2006, the forum has co-sponsored annual conferences in Beijing with the Taiwan Affairs Office under the State Council. Through these kinds of activities, overseas scholars have had the opportunity to conduct extensive discussions in both Beijing and Shanghai with their academic counterparts from such institutions as Beijing University, Qinghua University, Fudan University, Renmin University, CASS, CICIR, CIIS, the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, and National Defence University, among others.

In addition, Global Forum delegations have also had opportunities to engage in dialogue with policy-makers in Beijing’s foreign policy apparatus. Over the years, they have visited the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and met with Vice Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Li Zhaoxing (who later became Minister of Foreign Affairs), Zhou Wenzhong, Zhang Yesui and He Yafei. At the State Council’s Taiwan Affairs office, they had extensive discussions with Deputy
Ministers, Zhou Mingwei, Wang Zaixi, Wang Fuqing, Sun Yafu and Ye Kedong, over the years. They also visited the Central Party School and the National Defence University. In 2003, at the National Defence University, they had the chance to hold discussions with more than a dozen officers of the Institute of Strategic Studies. In 2008 the group had a lengthy roundtable meeting with General Xiong Guangkai, PLA’s Former Deputy Chief of Staff. In all these meetings, they had detailed exchanges of ideas, analysis and discussions over policies related to foreign affairs, national defence and political development. This new pattern of dialogue and systematic visits may produce a considerable effect on Chinese decision makers’ understanding of external affairs and improve policy-making processes. However, at this early stage of this sort of engagement, the influence from overseas scholars remains limited and relatively unnoticed.

**Channel 7: Highly specialized professional community**

As think tanks and policy communities in the field of international relations and foreign policy studies have further developed, three types of policy-oriented epistemic communities have also emerged. The first type is the policy-oriented community that concentrates on issues in a specific policy area, such as arms control, missile defence, human rights, the WTO, etc. In their study on Chinese military-related think tanks and research institutions, for example, Bates Gill and James Mulvenon argued that there are considerable developments as well as an expansion of exchange programmes with foreign countries and research on military issues. Those think tanks and institutions include the National Defence University, CISS, the Centre for Peace and Development, China Defence, Science and Technology Information Centre, the Foundation for International Strategic Studies, and the academy of military sciences (Gill and Mulvenon 2002). These issue-oriented think tanks and organizations have developed extensive internal and external networking and have become a policy community.

The second type of epistemic community is made up of regional or country-oriented research institutes and/or scholars. In China, there are a large number of research institutes with scholars concentrating on a specific region or country, such as the USA, Europe, Japan, the Middle East, Southeast Asia, Africa and Latin America. Internal networking within each area study is also well developed.

The third type of epistemic community is connected to foreign research institutes and scholars. A few internationally-oriented think tanks, both governmental and non-governmental, have well-developed connections with their counterparts abroad. The best examples in this regard are the CIIS, CICIR, CRF and SIIS.

The Chinese foreign policy apparatus has varying degrees of contact with each of these epistemic communities and, through these channels, is able to obtain expert opinions from different angles, perspectives and backgrounds, which will in turn improve policy-making deliberations. These widely established networks have also allowed policy-makers to reach out for policy consultation and input, but, at the same time, the development of these policy communities is uneven and therefore their function and impact is also varied.

**Reasons for change**

The above analysis has demonstrated enormous changes and development in terms of the greater role played by think tanks and policy communities in the foreign policy-making process in China. The fundamental changes took place between the era of Mao and the era of Deng, as illuminated in my 1992 *Annals* article mentioned earlier. Chinese society in
more recent eras—specifically the eras of Jiang and Hu—has continued to undergo significant changes. The seven channels between the centre and the periphery in terms of policy input have demonstrated this change. There are three reasons for these changes in the role of think tanks and policy communities.

The first is the development of civil society in China. Frank Schwartz and Susan Pharr (2003) in their edited volume conduct excellent analyses on the state of civil society in Japan. In his definition of the term ‘civil society’, Schwartz (2003) emphasized the following important elements: a nation state, cultural dispositions, a market economy, associations and a public sphere (among others). In borrowing this analysis of Japan, we can see clearly how the recent developments in China have created a foundation for the growth of civil society. As mentioned earlier, Alastair Iain Johnston recently argued that the attitude of China’s growing middle class toward international affairs has moved to ‘a greater level of nascent liberalism’ (Johnston 2004), which has in turn had an impact on Chinese foreign policy. The blossoming of a market economy and increasing room for private citizens in both the economic and even the political environment in the past two or three decades has created a new atmosphere.

Think tanks and policy communities can in turn utilize this public sphere (including such mechanisms as the news media and the internet) to advance their opinions. After a detailed study on the relationship between popular nationalism and Chinese foreign policy, Peter Gries argues that ‘popular nationalists are not just influencing domestic politics; they are also beginning to influence the making of Chinese foreign policy’ (Gries 2004, 116–134). The difference therefore between the Jiang-Hu era and the Deng era is that policy communities now have greater freedom in voicing their dissenting opinions on foreign policy issues in terms of scope and degree (although noticeable limitations remain).

The second factor behind these changes is greater demand for policy input. China’s external relations have expanded rapidly as China has further integrated into the world community. Foreign policy issues are no longer limited to political, security and strategic issues, but also include other dimensions such as culture, economics, human rights, international organizations, and so on. These issues require broader participation, and the bureaucrats’ capacity alone will not be enough. In this spirit, the ministry responsible for foreign affairs and other government agencies have gradually established formal and informal consultation systems with think tanks and policy communities.

According to Peter Haas, there are four functions for epistemic communities to play. First, they will be able to elucidate the cause-and-effect relationships and provide advice about the likely results of various courses of action. Second, they can shed light on the nature of complex inter-linkages between issues. Third, they can help define the self-interest of a state or factions within it. Last, they can help formulate policies, and, in some cases, ‘decision makers will seek advice to gain information which will justify or legitimize a policy that they may wish to pursue for political ends’ (Haas 1992, 15). Indeed, epistemic communities in China, including think tanks, have performed these kinds of functions in the policy formulation process.

The third reason for the increasing role of think tanks and policy communities in the foreign policy-making process is the growing professionalism in the foreign policy apparatus. As a former Chinese diplomat told American researchers, ‘it used to be easy to be a Chinese diplomat. You just memorized the two phrases that defined the current policy and repeated them over and over. It’s much harder now. You have to know about everything’ (Glaser and Saunders 2002, 597). Diplomats and researchers alike have all increased their level of education. Many of them have experience studying abroad. Some of them even
have MA and PhD degrees from the USA, Japan and Europe. Furthermore, through intensive interactions with counterparts in the West, Chinese diplomats have greatly shortened their learning curve and have become increasingly professional. Think tanks and policy communities are even more professional in their research activities and policy input. With this enhanced quality and quantity, it is natural that their voices are more frequently heard by leaders of the foreign policy apparatus.

Future directions

I would like to use the metaphor of a half-glass of water to describe the impact of think tanks and policy communities on foreign policy. The glass is half full in that there has been a noticeably increasing influence of think tanks in foreign policy communities, but at the same time we have to notice the half-empty part. There are still limitations in terms of policy inputs. This is particularly true when comparing China with Western countries, or comparing China with other East Asian societies that have been deeply influenced by the West, such as Japan, South Korea and Taiwan. One major difference is the degree to which official lines of foreign policy can be openly criticized or challenged. We understand that, for example, President George W. Bush faced enormous domestic criticism regarding the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Japanese and South Korean leaders have also been openly challenged regarding their decisions to send troops to Iraq. These kinds of true policy debates over key foreign policy decisions are still not imaginable in current Chinese society, despite the significant progress that has been made.

One other limitation is in terms of personnel exchanges between think tanks and governmental agencies. It is a common practice in the West and in Japan for scholars and policy community members to have opportunities to serve in the government and, when regimes change, for these government officials to be transferred to think tanks to do policy research. This kind of practice is still rare in Chinese society, if not completely absent.

When dealing with the increasing influence of think tanks and policy communities on Chinese foreign policy, the Chinese government clearly has to calculate the advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, more policy input from think tanks and policy communities will increase the quality of decision-making. It may also provide bargaining chips when acting in the international community. On the other hand, as an authoritarian society, the CCP has been careful to protect its monopoly of power when making major decisions, including foreign policy decisions. With this kind of cost-benefit analysis, there will be inevitable ups and downs in terms of the government’s control over intellectual life. The degree of policy communities’ participation in foreign policy formation will correspond to the degree of party-state control over society.

In examining the impact of think tanks and policy communities on Chinese foreign policy, I analysed seven policy input channels. These policy mechanisms include consultations with policy-makers, internal reports, conferences and public policy debates, policy NGOs, outside-system discussions, overseas scholars, and the epistemic community. One may develop even more models and channels to characterize policy input for China’s think tanks and policy communities, but the above-mentioned seven channels represent the main bodies for policy input. The recent developments in the participation of think tanks and policy communities in the foreign policy-making process in Beijing represent great progress, but at the same time there are also severe limitations. I call this phenomenon ‘limited interaction between the centre and the periphery’. The limitation comes largely from two sources.
First, the nature of Chinese society is not completely open, and society remains authoritarian in nature, meaning it lacks a proper environment for true policy debate, particularly on sensitive issues. Second, think tanks and policy communities by and large have peripheral status and rarely have the chance to function in the inner circle on account of the lack of personnel exchanges between policy-making organs and intellectual institutions. One may anticipate that, as civil society continues to develop in China, there will be further demand for policy input and increasing professionalism in both governmental agencies and think tanks. It is likely that this will push scholars and policy communities to assume even greater functions in the years to come.