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## The Impact of Institutions on Foreign Policy Think Tanks in France and Denmark

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### ABSTRACT

Even though France is an active player on the world stage, its foreign and security think tank milieu is smaller than that of similar powers, most notably the United Kingdom. Comparing French think tanks with those in Denmark illustrates how French institutional structures constrain think tank activities. France's political tradition of centralisation, its non-academic civil service education, and separation of academia and administration create an environment in which think tanks are underfunded and walk a fine line between an over-controlling administration and a suspicious academia. Some French think tanks perform well in spite of these structures, which indicates that they could flourish and compete at the highest international level if given better structural conditions.

### KEYWORDS

Think tanks; France; Denmark; foreign policy; institutions

Even though France is an active player on the world stage, with one of the most active militaries in the world, an independent nuclear arsenal, and a permanent seat on the UN Security Council, the French foreign and security policy think tank environment is still dwarfed by that of most comparable powers.<sup>1</sup> Think tanks serve a multiplicity of purposes – providing policy advice, developing new ideas, engaging with civil society, and undertaking track 1.5 and 2 diplomacy<sup>2</sup> – and it is therefore puzzling that France has yet to develop a richer milieu for external expertise.

The dominating explanation seems to be that the domestic structures of French society inhibit French think tanks. For instance, in her impressive study of the characteristics of French think tanks, Lucile Desmoulins argues that think tanks “face many historical, cultural, and institutional constraints”, but she does not analyse to what extent these restrictions

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<sup>1</sup>This article uses James G. McGann's definition of think tanks as “public-policy research analysis and engagement organizations that generate policy-oriented research, analysis, and advice on domestic and international issues, thereby enabling policy-makers and the public to make informed decisions about public policy” (McGann, *Global Think Tank Index*, 6). This broad definition includes institutions that do not officially label themselves think tanks, such as government and university policy research institutions. We focus specifically on think tanks that work with foreign and security policy, that is the interaction between states and foreign actors, and the factors and dynamics, such as internal stability, related to this interaction. This definition does not include development policy, which focuses more on the creation of economic growth and institutions within fragile states, and does not examine the implications for the interaction between states. For a discussion of whether French institutions can be designated as think tanks, see Fieschi and Gaffrey, *French Think Tanks*.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*; Petric, *Democracy at Large*.

are caused by deeply ingrained features of French society or whether contingent government policies play a role.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, her analysis does not outline how pervasive institutional effects are on French think tanks' ability to operate. In that sense, her study is representative of the broader literature on French think tanks that tends to ascribe the deficiencies of the French think tank environment to domestic societal institutions by pointing to the correlation of said features and the alleged weakness of French foreign and security think tanks.<sup>4</sup>

The present study builds upon the existing literature, but it attempts to provide a more detailed understanding of the causal mechanisms through which institutional structures affect think tanks and the limitations of institutional explanations. It specifically examines how and to what extent institutional structures in France (academic, administrative, and political institutions) inhibit French foreign and security policy think tanks. Unlike large parts of the existing literature that are often based on individual case studies, we examine this question through a comparative case study of France and Denmark. The article focuses on the French foreign and security think tank environment and brings in Denmark to help analyse the French case.

Choosing Denmark as a comparative case might seem surprising, especially as the two countries differ in size and relative influence in the world. However, the Danish and French think tank environments are similar in many ways, with the one exception of the overall institutional structures. This makes it possible to conduct a comparative analysis using the institutional structure as the only variable. First, Denmark and France have a tradition of close cooperation between think tanks and government and of government funding of think tanks. This similarity sets them apart from their American and English counterparts, for instance, many of which depend on private endowments.<sup>5</sup> Second, like France, Denmark is a non-English speaking country. English is the international *lingua franca* for foreign and security think tanks, which gives institutions from the Anglosphere an advantage. By comparing two non-English speaking countries, we are able to diminish the effect of language on think tank performance. Third, like France, Denmark is a militarily active country and French and Danish think tanks are therefore likely to focus on similar policy issues. Finally, Danish institutional structures (political, academic and administrative) differ from those found in France, so comparing the two countries enables us to pinpoint how different institutional structures create different think tank environments. Denmark thus illustrates what the French think tank environment could look like if certain institutional structures were slightly different.

Several elements of the structure of French society seem to restrict the growth of foreign and security policy think tanks. France's political tradition of centralisation, its non-academic civil service education, and the separation of academia and the administration create an environment in which think tanks are underfunded, struggling to maintain political independence, relatively isolated from the public administration and academia, and striving to be recognised as sources of relevant knowledge. However, institutional structures do not tell the whole story. Some of the differences between France and Denmark are not caused by deep-seated societal institutions, but rather by the current legal setup, which can be changed more easily. Furthermore, some French think tanks actually perform quite well, if one takes the conditions under which they operate into account. This suggests that they could flourish and compete at the highest international level if given better structural conditions.

<sup>3</sup>Desmoulin, "French Public Policy Research Institutions".

<sup>4</sup>See for instance, Fieschi and Gaffrey, *French Think Tanks*; Williams, *Why don't the French do Think Tanks?*

<sup>5</sup>Campbell and Pedersen, *National Origins of Policy Ideas*, 211.

Our argument progresses in three steps. First, we open by defining institutional structures and outlining how they can influence think tank performance. Second, after briefly presenting the main foreign policy think tanks in France and Denmark, we use this framework to show how French and Danish institutional factors differ and how the French political, academic, and administrative institutions inhibit French think tanks' ability to produce high quality, independent research and how Danish institutions enhance it. The final section discusses the limits of structural explanations by highlighting how some French think tanks have outperformed some of their Danish counterparts, even though the latter enjoy better structural conditions.

## Understanding the relationships between think tanks and their institutional context

Think tanks exist at the interface between state institutions and civil society. They interact with state institutions, which they seek to advise on policy issues, but they are also dependent to varying degrees upon public funding. At the same time, think tanks serve as repositories of civil societies' preferences and debates, as they shape, animate, and sometimes help formulate civil society's concerns. Partisan think tanks stimulate such debates with an explicit political agenda, but research (or non-partisan) think tanks also have an important role in providing independent expertise to public discussions. Because of their position at the juncture between state power and civil society, think tanks' institutional designs are shaped by the wider socio-political context in which they operate, namely their home country's political, academic, and administrative institutions.

In accordance with March and Olsen, we understand institutions as being

rules and practices which are socially constructed, publicly known, anticipated, and accepted ... [that] define basic rights and duties, shape or regulate how advantages, burdens, and life-chances are allocated in society, and create authority to settle issues and resolve conflicts.<sup>6</sup>

Institutions consist of cultural expectations as well as formal rules that together shape the structure in which think tanks operate. Think tanks exist within an environment of institutions that rewards and punishes certain types of behaviour and thus structures their freedom of manoeuvre.

In the following, we analyse the institutions surrounding Danish and French foreign and security policy think tanks. We argue that think-tankers are constrained by academic, administrative, and political institutions. First, academic institutions (the organisation and rules of employment of universities) may enable or constrain think-tankers by allowing them alternative employment or by providing partners for collaborative projects. For instance, as we shall argue further ahead, the theoretically-oriented social science tradition in France isolates think tanks from the academic sphere and makes employment at a think tank a more insecure and inflexible career path. The Danish social science tradition is relatively more empirically-minded and allows for a comparatively smoother flow between universities and think tanks.

Second, administrative institutions (the bureaucratic culture and organisation of the civil service) may support the development of think tanks if the bureaucracy demands their products and permits a free osmosis of employees going to and from think tanks. In

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<sup>6</sup>March and Olsen, *Elaborating the New Institutionalism*, 7. See also by the same authors, *The New Institutionalism*.

this case, we argue that French think tanks are constrained by civil servants' relative lack of interest in their expertise and a closed administrative hierarchy that values seniority and experience over academic skills. Though the Danish civil service is also relatively closed, it is comparatively more open to think tank knowledge and the employment of academics.

Finally, political institutions (the political culture and constitutional arrangement of the state) can protect think tanks if countervailing forces (such as parliament, public opinion, or the judiciary) are able to restrain the power of the government and civil service to put pressure on think tanks. As we show later, the Danish parliament and general public view foreign and security policy think tanks as crucial checks on government power, in a way that is not found in France, and Danish political institutions can stimulate the legislature and public opinion to resist sanctions by the government and civil service.

In the next section, we analyse how these institutional structures affect three specific characteristics of the two think tank environments taken into consideration: size and political independence, personnel flows, and appreciation of think tank expertise. These characteristics and the institutional structures that affect them are not discrete and separate, but rather have a dialectical relationship to one another. For instance, the facts that French think tanks are relatively small and to a large extent dependent on government funding mean that the public does not view them as important checks on government power, which in turn means that it is easier for the government to control them. In our analysis, we are aware of these feedback effects between institutional structure and think tank environment, but we focus specifically on analysing how the former affects the latter.

The impact of institutional structures is not total and analysts should avoid the pitfall of structural determinism. Instead, think tanks have agency in the sense that they can maximise their performance within the institutional structure in which they find themselves.<sup>7</sup> Whether they manage to do so depends on factors within the organisation, such as leadership and organisational structure. Having outlined how institutional structures affect French foreign and security think tanks, we therefore use the University of Pennsylvania's think tank ranking to estimate the impact of individual think tank agency and the limits of institutional structure in comparing the performance of French and Danish institutions.

### **Structure matters: how political, academic and administrative institutions influence think tanks**

In this section, we examine how institutional structures affect foreign and security think tanks in France and Denmark. We focus specifically on the *Institut Français des Relations Internationales* (IFRI, French Institute of International Relations), *Institut de Relations Internationales et Stratégiques* (IRIS, Institute of International and Strategic Relations), and *Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique* (FRS, Foundation for Strategic Research) in France and the *Dansk Institut for Internationale Studier* (DIIS, Danish Institute for International Studies) and *Center for Militære Studier* (CMS, Centre for Military Studies) in Denmark. We exclude the French *Institut de Recherche Stratégique de l'Ecole Militaire* (IRSEM, Institute for Strategic Research of the Military Academy), the in-house think tank of the Ministry of

<sup>7</sup>This concept of institutional structure can be seen as closely related to Giddens' theory of structuration, which emphasises that agents can influence the structure of society through their actions (Giddens, *The Constitution of Society*; Barley and Tolbert, "Institutionalization and Structuration"; Mouritsen, "Rationality, Institutions and Decision Making"). Although we believe that think tanks can influence the structure in which they operate, we do not analyse this 'structuration effect' in this article.

**Table 1.** Foreign and security think tanks in Denmark and France (as at June 2016).

	Country	Established	Number of full-time researchers	Policy focus
IFRI	France	1979*	28	Broad (foreign policy, security, economics)
IRIS	France	1991	11	Broad (foreign policy, security, energy and environment)
FRS	France	1998*	21	Narrow (defence and security)
DIIS	Denmark	2003*	47**	Broad (foreign policy, security, development)
CMS	Denmark	2010*	8	Narrow (defence and security)

\*Based on previously existing institutions; \*\*Of which 36 work on foreign and security matters.

Defence (MOD) because of its institutional location, which makes it an outlier in terms of funding structure and institutional affiliation, as well as French offices of international think tanks, such as the Paris branches of the European Council on Foreign Relations and the German Marshall Fund. IFRI, IRIS and DIIS are comparable institutions of roughly similar size with a broad policy focus and flagship publications (*Politique Étrangère* and *Ramses* for IFRI, *La Revue Internationale et Stratégique* and *L'Année Stratégique* for IRIS, and the *Danish Foreign Policy Yearbook* for DIIS). Similarly, though of different size, FRS and CMS are comparable institutions as they both focus narrowly on defence and security issues.

The impact of institutional structures can be illustrated by examining three characteristics of a well-functioning think tank environment: size and political independence, the education and job-market circulation of think-tankers, and the appreciation of think tank knowledge.

### **Size and political independence**

Independence from political pressure from the government, parliament or civil service is one of the preconditions for a well-functioning think tank environment and this largely depends on the concentration and size of institutions, the political culture and constitutional system, and the funding structure. The first glaring difference between the Danish and French environments is that the former is significantly larger and more concentrated in a few institutions. Overall, Denmark has 44 permanent think-tankers who focus on foreign affairs and security policy, while France has 60, which means that a small power with a population of less than 6 million sustains, in absolute terms, more than two-thirds as many researchers as a nuclear power with a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council and a population of more than 66 million. The Danish think tank environment is concentrated in very few institutions, the relatively large DIIS and the small CMS, while the French environment consists of several larger and smaller institutions.

Second, the overall political culture and the constitutional system are crucial factors that have to be taken into account. The Danish political system concentrates power in the executive branch, but parliament and public opinion play an independent role as checks on government power. Denmark has a tradition of political consensus, where centrist minority governments replace one another, while a supposedly apolitical civil service ensures continuity. Think tanks have come to be seen as a source of new ideas and programs and as a check on the government.<sup>8</sup> Parliament and public opinion can be used as allies by think tanks in helping to restrict ministries' control over them. For instance, in 2015 the government

<sup>8</sup>Campbell and Pedersen, *National Origins of Policy Ideas*, 176–8; Toft, *Den Danske Tænkertankanalyse 2015*.



suggested that DIIS should be moved from Copenhagen to Aarhus, Denmark's second-largest city, as part of a push to create more public employment in the countryside. The move met fierce resistance from DIIS, which argued that severing its day-to-day contact with the ministries in Copenhagen would diminish its ability to conduct policy-relevant research. A fierce public debate ensued, in which several prominent voices including nine former foreign ministers from both sides of the aisle came out against the move, and convinced a majority in parliament to reject the plan.<sup>9</sup>

France, on the other hand, heir to a political tradition of Jacobinism, has missed the full liberalisation of its system of government over the past two centuries, and remains an exception among Western powers with its unusually hypertrophied executive, and its characteristic defiance of the legislative powers and civil society at large.<sup>10</sup> The constitution of the Fifth Republic and its adjustments over time have created a 'semi-presidential' regime in which the president is the real head of the executive but is not accountable to the parliament and the government is nominally accountable to the parliament but is in practice accountable to the president. Furthermore, the nuclearisation of French defence policy has also had an effect on the political regime itself by cementing the role of the French president. Because he commands the nuclear forces, the French president is, literally, the embodiment of French deterrence, which further reinforces the presidential nature of the Fifth Republic. It is no surprise that the French regime has been called a "nuclear monarchy".<sup>11</sup> Moreover, sociologically, career politicians very often have a background as civil servants, which reinforces the influence of the executive branch in the policy process.

Third, the two countries have different funding structures for foreign and security think tanks. Government funding is the main source of income of the two Danish think tanks, with DIIS receiving 69 percent of its funding from this source, while CMS gets 96 percent of its income from the Ministry of Defence.<sup>12</sup> In comparison, in France, IFRI receives 50 percent of its budget from research contracts and industry funding, 30 percent from public subventions and 20 percent from private subscription.<sup>13</sup> The important difference, however, is not the amount of funding, but how it is allocated. In France, parliament does not vote on budget allocations to think tanks: these are simply executive decisions made by the MoD and/or the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA). French think tanks largely depend on winning short-term projects from the ministries or the European Union. Think tanks have long criticised this funding structure, as it makes them too dependent upon short-term public contracts. It is common in France for entities from the MoD or MFA to issue a call for proposals on a specific research topic, and make the think tanks compete for funding on this pre-defined subject. Researchers may criticise the way the question is framed,<sup>14</sup> but are forced to produce a report on the administration's terms since the survival of a research programme (or sometimes their own jobs) depends on obtaining funding from

<sup>9</sup>Ni eksudenrigsministre: Drop udskældt udflytning". *Ritzau*, 29 February 2016; Hvidt and Lauridsen, "Høringsvar"; Hvidt, "Input til Besvarelse af URU-spørgsmål"; Pihl-Andersen, A., "Udskældt Udflytning må Droppes", *Jyllandsposten*, 26 April 2016.

<sup>10</sup>Rousselier, *La Force de Gouverner*; Rosanvallon, *L'État en France*, and *Le Modèle Politique Français*; Waechter, "Le Jacobinisme"; Chatriot, "The political history of administration".

<sup>11</sup>Cohen, *La Monarchie Nucléaire*; François, *Le Régime Politique*; Teyssier, *Histoire Politique*.

<sup>12</sup>CMS, *Årsrapport 2015*, 14; DIIS, *Årsrapport 2015*, 12.

<sup>13</sup>Figures available on the IFRI website, <https://www.ifri.org/en>

<sup>14</sup>Desmoulin, "Profits symboliques et identité(s)".

the administration (or sometimes private industries). Thus, the administration can also select and control the type of research conducted.

Danish think tanks, by contrast, are guaranteed government funding through parliamentary agreements. Almost all funding is given as an annual lump sum, for some parts of which the think tanks have to provide a project portfolio that is then developed through a negotiation with the ministries. The civil service can control which projects the think tanks work on, but the decision to maintain funding is ultimately held by parliament. For instance, DIIS has its own separate place in the Danish national budget, which outlines its base funding each year (54 percent of DIIS income in 2015).<sup>15</sup> A majority in parliament decides how much funding DIIS and CMS will receive from the Ministry of Defence in the following five years as part of the defence agreement, which outlines all general spending priorities for the ministry for a five-year period.

As the civil service does not decide which institution gets to conduct every single project, it is more difficult to use project allocation to punish or reward think tanks. Thus, the main threat for think tanks is not a reduction in projects, but rather wholesale defunding or similarly large alterations in institutional structure. Nevertheless, these would require support from parliament and public opinion. Instead, the Danish civil service has leverage through two other channels. First, through the project portfolio mentioned above, the ministries can decide which projects to sponsor, even though the think tanks have a say in this matter as well and there is a limit as to how far the ministries can go in this negotiation without losing legitimacy. If the ministries decide to request only projects that are entirely uncontroversial, the think tanks can activate parliament and the public to put pressure on the ministries. Second, the ministries can use their informal influence to try to get parliament to sanction the think tanks. For instance, ministries can recommend that politicians defund a specific think tank. The think tank would then have to get actively involved to persuade the politicians to save it. Taken together, the two mechanisms limit think tanks' criticism of the government. The ministries and parliament remain crucial stakeholders and think tanks know that there are red lines that they should avoid crossing.

In fact, Danish think tanks are not entirely immune from government sanctions. At times it has been possible for the government to find parliamentary support for reforms that arguably curbed the ability of think tanks to oppose it. For instance, in 2002, the government, supported by a majority in parliament, substantially reduced the number of publicly funded advisory boards and think tanks. The reform was meant to curb the tendency of smaller institutions to go beyond the limits of purely scientific advice and to offer political opinions in the guise of independent estimates which, the government argued, polluted public discourse, eroded the value of independent expertise and wasted resources.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, members of the opposition criticised the government for using the opportunity to close institutions that were critical of its agenda. One of these, for instance, was the Danish Centre for Human Rights. The centre was eventually not closed, but was merged with other institutions to become part of DIIS in 2003, only to become an independent institution again in 2011.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup>DIIS, *Årsrapport 2015*, 12.

<sup>16</sup>Anders Fogh Rasmussen, *Nytårstale 2002*, [http://stm.dk/\\_p\\_7354.html](http://stm.dk/_p_7354.html)

<sup>17</sup>Klaus Slavensky, *Hvidbog: Debatten om Det Danske Center for Menneskerettigheder*.



## Education and circulation

Bridging the gap with the policy world is one of the main challenges facing modern think tanks. In spite of some similarities (institutions in both countries host military officers as a way of bridging the gap), French and Danish think tanks differ in the education and circulation of their researchers. French think tanks typically hire former civil servants as researchers, who then stay in the think tank world, while Danish institutions prefer hiring researchers with PhDs, who then, in some cases, move back and forth between the civil service and academia. Only 43 percent of French think tank researchers have a PhD, compared to 86 percent in Denmark.<sup>18</sup>

These differences in the composition of personnel reflect both the academic and the administrative institutions of the two countries. French academia is notoriously reluctant to welcome the type of research being produced by think-tankers, for several reasons. First, unlike in Denmark, where international relations is held in relatively high regard within political science and where international relations scholars largely view themselves as part of a larger Anglo-American discipline, international relations has never managed to establish itself as a field of research among mainstream French political scientists.<sup>19</sup> Many French scholars either simply deny the existence of the discipline or deny the scientific value of international (American-led) research, although the situation seems to be improving.<sup>20</sup> The few who do study international relations follow international debates, but engage only rarely with them,<sup>21</sup> as is demonstrated by the small number of scholars attending International Studies Association (ISA) conferences or publishing in international journals, even though younger generations of French academics are now much more eager to be connected with the international academic community. Therefore, policy-oriented research in international affairs and security issues is not well received in French academia, as think-tankers and academics simply do not speak the same language.

At the same time, the French administrative system is disconnected from the academic world. Because of the *Grandes Écoles* system, in which civil servants receive specialised training removed from the traditional university system (and are thus rarely exposed to international relations theories<sup>22</sup>), think-tankers must speak the language of civil servants if their publications are to be of interest to ministries. As such, the procedural rules of the French think tank system biases recruitment towards a specific type of profile: someone able to speak the language of the administration while still being perceived as a credible researcher. Lucile Desmoulins illustrates how French think-tankers adopt rites of interaction (vocabulary, clothing, phrasing of issues, etc.) similar to those of the administration in order to establish their credibility (which often means someone with a background as a civil servant).<sup>23</sup> In the Danish context, on the other hand, a PhD is considered a sign not only of research quality, but also of independence and impartiality. Therefore, it becomes important for think tanks to hire researchers with PhDs, so that their research cannot be exposed to the accusation of political partiality.

<sup>18</sup>Data compiled by the authors.

<sup>19</sup>Battistella, "La France"; Constantin, "Les relations internationales".

<sup>20</sup>Chillaud, "IR in France"; Breitenbach, *International Relations in France*.

<sup>21</sup>Cornut and Battistella, "Des RI Françaises en Émergence?"

<sup>22</sup>Charillon, "Les RI, Science Royale?"

<sup>23</sup>Desmoulins, "Profits symboliques et identité(s)".

These differences have implications for the type of research that is produced. Even when they produce policy-relevant research, Danish think-tankers are connected to developments in the academic fields of international relations and security studies, something which is much less the case in France. Looking at the references of the average policy report, the difference is staggering. A Danish report will usually reference major books or journals in the relevant academic field (in addition to other sources), while a French report will almost exclusively reference other think tank reports or press clippings.<sup>24</sup> Danish think-tankers also contribute to scholarly production through regular publications in academic outlets, thus demonstrating that policy relevance and academic research are not mutually exclusive. The situation is much more rigid in France, as think-tankers are caught between a rock and a hard place. On the one hand, academia does not consider their work as scholarly in nature (even if they hold PhD degrees).<sup>25</sup> On the other, and as elaborated in the next section, civil servants tend to consider them as potential threats to their expertise and power positions.

Differences in academic and administrative institutions also affect the career paths available to think-tankers. Although it is not a frequent occurrence, Danish think-tankers sometimes move to and from positions in universities and the public sector. The standardisation of academic backgrounds provided by the fact that most Danish think-tankers hold PhDs facilitates this transition. For example, one think-tanker was recently appointed full professor at the University of Kent after a career at DIIS, the former head of the Department of Political Science at the University of Southern Denmark used to work for the predecessor of CMS and now heads the Institute for Military Operations at the Royal Danish Defence College, and the former director of CMS was made head of office in the Ministry of Defence, only to transition back to the University of Copenhagen and become head of the Department of Political Science. Denmark's academic tradition facilitates this circulation. As long as they produce both fundamental and policy-oriented research, Danish think-tankers can move to either standard academic positions or positions in the Danish ministries.

Instead, it is difficult for French think-tankers to find jobs in the administration, although exceptions can be found. The civil service in France is protected by very strict recruitment procedures because becoming a *fonctionnaire* (after passing the appropriate test), guarantees life-time employment. Think-tankers, hired on temporary contracts, would not be able to have a career in the administration unless they became *fonctionnaires* themselves. But in so

<sup>24</sup>The authors have compared the bibliographies of similar research outputs (30 to 40 page reports) for the two Danish and the three French think tanks under study from 2013 to 2016. Those reports are significant because they constitute the heart of the think tank research effort, being of a longer format than policy briefs or comments to the press. In that format, DIIS and CMS have an average of 140 references, of which an average of 47 are peer-reviewed scientific articles and book chapters/books published by university presses. The rest are composed of press clippings, official documents or reports from other think tanks. This means that more than one-third of the references of a typical Danish think tank report are academic. FRS, IFRI and IRIS have an average of 95 references, of which 14 are academic (one-sixth). The IFRI collection *Focus Stratégique* stands out in this regard, with a share of academic references similar to Danish reports. This collection increases the average for French reports, as several French reports had no academic references whatsoever.

<sup>25</sup>In France, PhD holders cannot apply directly for academic positions, and must first be certified by a national commission composed of senior tenured academics (*Conseil National des Universités*, CNU). The CNU effectively acts as a pre-selection mechanism and regulates on a national scale the minimum requirements for application for an academic job. Every year, the annual report of the CNU political science section (which also deals with international relations) emphasizes the need for quality peer-reviewed publications and insertion in academic networks through teaching and participation in academic conferences in order to be certified. Think-tank publications and connections are not considered academic in nature by the CNU and do not count towards potential certification.

doing, they could well be assigned to positions outside of their area of expertise.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, potential career paths in academia are blocked due to the lack of consideration among academic circles for think tank productions described earlier. In an academic market in which personal relations and socialisation within appropriate circles still matter strongly for hiring decisions,<sup>27</sup> leaving academia for a job in a think tank is almost certainly a one-way ticket. At the moment, *none* of the full professors in political science working on international relations in France began their career in a think tank.

Though one should not glorify the Danish system, where transfer between the civil administration, think tanks, and the academy is possible, the contrast to the rigidity of the French system is stark. This weakness of the French system has recently been identified by a report commissioned by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which recommends introducing a system where diplomats can spend a few years in a think tank, and think-tankers can work for a couple of years in the administration.<sup>28</sup>

### ***Appreciation of think tank expertise***

The very product of think tanks – policy-relevant knowledge – is held in different regard in the two countries. The difference can be seen in the way politicians and civil servants challenge it. Whereas French policymakers sometimes challenge the very expertise of foreign and security think-tankers, arguing that they do not know the substance of the issues, Danish policymakers rarely, if ever, dispute the knowledge of foreign and security think-tankers and, if anything, they argue that experts' opinions are at times coloured by their personal political views.

As previously discussed, the French political system is built around a strong executive power, which creates an administration convinced of its own expert knowledge and a political class dominated by former civil servants.<sup>29</sup> According to a high-level civil servant working on a project related to the Common Security and Defence Policy: “We don’t need think-tanks working on CSDP: the administration already knows everything that is happening in this area and has the expertise it needs.”<sup>30</sup> This is not meant to indicate that *all* French civil servants are reluctant towards external expertise, but that this feeling is sufficiently widespread to shape relations between the administration and think tanks.

Therefore, external criticism of political decisions can be construed as lacking informed knowledge. To give just a few recent examples, when France launched the ‘Sangaris’ Operation in the Central African Republic, defence experts warned that the few troops deployed could be just enough to further polarise the parties to the conflict, but insufficient to conduct robust peace-enforcement.<sup>31</sup> They were derided at the time by the Minister of

<sup>26</sup>For example, the director of Human Resources of the French MFA once recounted at a conference (attended by one of the authors) that she had never considered how she could employ diplomats who had obtained PhD degrees before entering the diplomatic service: for her, their expertise in a specific topic (measured by their PhD) was simply irrelevant to the job assignment.

<sup>27</sup>Musselin, *Le Marché des Universitaires*; Lacroix and Maheu, *Les Grandes Universités de Recherche*.

<sup>28</sup>Saint-Geours, *Rapport sur les Think-Tank Français*.

<sup>29</sup>Bourdieu, *La Noblesse d'Etat*; Rouban, *La Fonction Publique*, and “Les Hauts Fonctionnaires”; Eymeri, *La Fabrique des Énarques*; Joly, *Formation des Élités*.

<sup>30</sup>Interview with one of the authors, December 2013, Paris. This statement is consistent with others made in multiple interviews conducted within the French public service, and with sociological studies of the French administration (*Ibid.*)

<sup>31</sup>Desportes, “À moins de 5000 Hommes”.

Defence Jean-Yves le Drian as “self-proclaimed so-called experts” who, unlike the Minister, “did not talk to the generals as [he] did”.<sup>32</sup> When defence specialist Elie Tenenbaum (from IFRI) published a well researched but critical assessment of the ‘Sentinelle’ Operation (deployment of military troops on French territory to prevent terrorist attacks),<sup>33</sup> members of the cabinet of the Minister of Defence publicly criticised the author for lacking in-depth knowledge of the operation on several occasions.<sup>34</sup> When experts called for a reform of the French intelligence system in the wake of the terrorist attacks that hit France in 2015 and 2016,<sup>35</sup> the French Minister of the Interior declared that unless “one has been a member of a SWAT team”, one should refrain from commenting on counter-terrorism policies.<sup>36</sup>

By contrast, in Denmark, think tank expertise is held in relatively high regard. Danish think tanks can be placed in three categories, depending on the extent to which the public regards them as politically neutral: mainly neutral, semi-neutral, and partisan. A few think tanks are considered to be almost completely neutral and their criticism of the government carries much weight in public discourse. This is, for instance, the case of *The Economic Council*, a group of independent university economists (colloquially known as ‘the wise men’) funded by the Ministry of Economic Affairs, who run their own calculations of the state of the Danish economy and who are often critical of government estimates.<sup>37</sup>

On the other extreme, some government think tanks are regarded by some mainstream political actors as veiled political forces whose advice and publications are not based on objective analysis. They often face calls for defunding or other institutional sanctions or reforms. For instance, as mentioned before, rightwing politicians have disputed the neutrality of the Danish Centre for Human Rights and pushed in vain for its defunding.<sup>38</sup> Similarly, in 2011, a leading rightwing politician criticised a prominent university EU expert for making statements that he argued reflected her personal political views rather than scientific assessments, triggering a widespread debate about the limits between expertise and politics.<sup>39</sup>

The Danish foreign and security think tanks are seen to fall in the middle of the spectrum between neutrality and veiled partisanship (semi-neutral). This can be illustrated by looking at how often they have been challenged by major political actors. In general, critique of the foreign and security think tanks is rare and limited. There have been only minor episodes where leading voices have questioned the neutrality of foreign and security experts.<sup>40</sup> In these cases, however, politicians have not questioned the value of think tanks in society or the knowledge of think tankers. Instead they have criticised their political neutrality. None of the incidents have led to a serious push to defund Danish foreign and security think tanks.

<sup>32</sup>Interview with Jean-Yves le Drian, *Europe 1*, 26 February 2014, <http://www.europe1.fr/international/le-drian-en-centrafrique-tout-n-est-pas-regle-1812543>

<sup>33</sup>Tenenbaum, “La Sentinelle Égarée?”

<sup>34</sup>One of the authors personally observed the phenomenon in four different instances, and multiple confidential interviews conducted in Paris in April–June 2016 confirmed that negative comments were publicly made on numerous occasions.

<sup>35</sup>Quatremer *et al.*, “Les Filets Percés du Renseignement”.

<sup>36</sup>Cazeneuve, “Speech to the Syndicat des Commissaires”.

<sup>37</sup>Campbell and Pedersen, *National Origins of Policy Ideas*, 181–3; Toft, *Den Danske Tænk tanksanalyse 2015*, 14.

<sup>38</sup>Faber, K. and C. Flemming, “Herre Bider Hund”, *Politiken*, 20 January 2002.

<sup>39</sup>Holtze, L., “Chef Støtter Professor i Strid med Søren Pind”, *Kristeligt Dagblad*, 15 June 2011.

<sup>40</sup>See for instance, Kaae, M. and T. Vibjerg, “Messerschmidt Forsøger at Presse Ekspert til at Tie”, *Jyllandsposten*, 19 August 2014.

**Table 2.** IFRI and DIIS in the University of Pennsylvania's ranking of think tanks.

	IFRI	DIIS
Annual income	€ 6.5 million	€ 6.5 million
General think tanks	16	37
Defence and security	32	46
Foreign policy	9	47
Development	104	8
Energy and resource policy	Not ranked	39
Environment policy	Not ranked	43
International economics	54	Not ranked

## Agency and performance

Political, academic and administrative institutions are clearly important for conducting independent and relevant policy research. The French system with its tradition of centralisation of power in the executive, non-academic civil service education, and a clear separation between the academy and the administration has been shown to affect the activities of think tanks. However, one should not fall into the trap of reducing think tank effectiveness to a matter of institutional structure alone. For all the restrictions that curb their ability to function, including a lack of resources, some French think tanks have attained international recognition. Agency matters, so to speak, and factors of agency, such as organisational composition, available human resources, and quality of management, may allow think tanks to achieve impressive results in spite of an obstructive environment.

Think tank effectiveness is, of course, quite elusive and difficult to measure, but the University of Pennsylvania ranking gives an indication of how well institutions perform relative to one another.<sup>41</sup> Many think tanks highlight their ranking as a sign of their effectiveness, which means that it is considered a somewhat legitimate measure of think tank performance. For instance, both IFRI and DIIS emphasized their 2015 results as indicators of successful performance.<sup>42</sup> The ranking shows that IFRI performs as well, if not better, than DIIS, regardless of the structural constraints outlined above. As Table 2 indicates, IFRI outranked DIIS in several categories, including the general think tank ranking, foreign policy, and defence and security policy. DIIS only came out on top in one category (development policy), where the gap between the two institutions (96 places) is quite significant.

The University of Pennsylvania ranking is, however, too blunt an instrument to provide an exact ranking of the two think tanks. It is difficult to determine whether DIIS' top placement in the development category outweighs its relatively poor performance in other categories, such as foreign policy and defence and security. Furthermore, as the table also shows, each think tank prioritises some policy areas that are not covered by the other party (with DIIS ranked in energy, resources and environment policy and IFRI ranked in international economics), which makes it difficult to gauge the value of these rankings compared to other categories. However, based on the fact that IFRI is ranked significantly better in the general think tank category, it seems safe to say that IFRI performs at a comparative, if not better, level than DIIS, in spite of having worse structural conditions.

<sup>41</sup>McGann, *Global Think Tank Index*.

<sup>42</sup>DIIS, *Et af verdens førende forskningsinstitutter*, <https://www.diis.dk/nyheder/diis-placeret-verdens-foerende-forskningsinstitutter-taenketanke> and *Årsrapport 2015*, 10; IFRI press communiqué, "En 2015, l'IFRI classé parmi les 20 think-tanks les plus influents du monde", 2 February 2016, <https://www.ifri.org/fr/espace-media/communiqués/2015-lifri-classe-parmi-20-think-tanks-plus-influents-monde>

Before ascribing the difference to agency factors, it is worth considering whether France's international status gives IFRI a head start over DIIS that could explain the difference between them. One could imagine that France's international status as a major European state with nuclear weapons and a seat on the UN Security Council makes it a more interesting international partner and perhaps boosts its status in the University of Pennsylvania index. However, there is reason to believe that the impact of this is limited. If France's global status mattered for think tank performance, one would think that all French think tanks would experience enhanced performance. Yet, this is not the case, as CMS ranks within the top twenty defence and security think tanks in the world (19<sup>th</sup>), almost twenty places higher than the much larger FRS (37<sup>th</sup>).

We can highlight several initiatives that may explain IFRI's relative success. First, IFRI has been careful to avoid any scandals and has hired 'senior advisors', often with long and distinguished careers in the public service, to serve as public figures for the institution and reference points for the administration. Second, it has organised high-profile international policy events such as the World Policy Forum, an easily identifiable landmark event comparable in size and profile to the Global Strategic Review organised by the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) in London. Thus it competes on a global scale with important English-speaking think tanks. Third, IFRI has made a conscious move to emulate the policies of the most successful global think tanks, including hiring young researchers with PhDs (in order to guarantee their scientific credibility with foreign partners). Finally, the president and the director of IFRI have theorised the role of think tanks in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and have critically reflected on the qualities necessary for a successful think tank.<sup>43</sup> IFRI's good performance shows that, though political, academic, and administrative institutions shape the environment in which think tanks operate, agency factors, including organisational composition, available human resources, and quality of management, also matter.

## Conclusion

When comparing the French and Danish foreign and security think tank environments, it becomes evident that French political, academic and administrative institutions strongly affect foreign and security policy think tanks' independence, the way in which they gain resources and how they create knowledge that is respected in the public domain. In the Danish system, while greater public funding is available, political pressure is more limited, think tank employees can move more freely to and from careers in the public administration and academia, and think tank knowledge is held in relatively high esteem.

However, institutional structures do not provide the whole story. Some French foreign and security think tanks are able to achieve better results than their Danish counterparts, in spite of operating under more difficult conditions. The comparison between IFRI and DIIS indicates that French think tanks have an unfulfilled potential, which could allow them to compete at the highest global level if given better conditions.

Our study highlights that releasing this potential is not simply a matter of better organisation, human resources, and management (agency factors), but that changing French institutional structures would also contribute to this end. Of course, several of the institutional factors highlighted in this study are difficult to change through political reform. For instance,

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<sup>43</sup>De Montbrial and Gomart, "Think-Tanks à la Française".



even the most dedicated government effort would struggle to change the French academic tradition or political system. However, our study also identified a few factors that can be altered more easily. Recent proposals to increase the exchange of employees between think tanks and the civil service could strengthen think tank employment in France. The Danish case suggests that moving control of think tank funding from the executive to parliament strengthens the independence of think tanks. Furthermore, this effect can be enhanced if funding is changed from a project-to-project basis to significant lump-sum funding. The Danish case also illustrates that such reforms do not completely sever the government and public administration's control of think tanks so government officials do not need to fear that renegade think tanks will provide unfounded and unfair criticism. Strengthening French foreign and security think tanks is therefore possible through incremental institutional incentives, which should simultaneously aim at augmenting the circulation of think-tankers within the administration and strengthening their academic credentials. The Danish case shows that, far from being mutually exclusive, these two objectives ultimately create a virtuous circle for the administration, academia, and think tanks themselves.

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