THINK TANKS IN THE UNITED STATES: A STUDY OF THEIR ROLE IN LEGITIMIZING AND MAINTAINING THE LIBERAL INTERNATIONAL ORDER

DOI: 10.61623/cpe.en.v2n3.a10
Submitted on: January 3, 2026. Accepted on: May 6, 2026.
ISSN: 3086-2434 | e-ISSN: 3086-3554.

Izabella Pereira Lemos[1]
Joan Lucena Candeias[2]
Isabela Gerbelli Garbin Ramanzini[3]

Abstract

Starting from the context of U.S. hegemonic ascent after World War II, this article examines how American Think Tanks (TTs) influence U.S. foreign policy and contribute to the legitimation and reproduction of the liberal international order. Grounded in constructivist and neo-Gramscian perspectives, the study adopts a qualitative, explanatory-interpretive approach, combining literature review and historical analysis from the interwar period to the War on Terror.

1 Master's student in International Relations at the Postgraduate Program in International Relations of the Federal University of Uberlândia (PPGRI – UFU), with research related to the thematic areas of International Politics and Human Rights, International Courts and Tribunals. Graduated in International Relations (2024) from the Institute of Economics and International Relations of the Federal University of Uberlândia (IERI–UFU), having conducted research through the National Institute of Science and Technology for Studies on the United States (INCT/INEU), in partnership with the Center for Studies and Research in Human Rights of the aforementioned university – NUPEDH. Her research interests lie in the area of Human Rights, focusing on the International Criminal Court and International Relations Theory. ORCID: 0000-0003-2068-2451.

2 Master's student in International Relations at the Graduate Program in International Relations of the Federal University of Uberlândia (PPGRI – UFU) with research related to the thematic areas of Political Economy and Political Science. Graduated in International Relations (2024) from the Institute of Economics and International Relations of the Federal University of Uberlândia (IERI–UFU). ORCID: 0009-0009-8779-4395.

3 Graduated in Law (2008) and International Relations (2007). Holds a master's degree in Social Sciences from the São Paulo State University Júlio de Mesquita Filho (UNESP), specializing in International Relations and Development (2010). PhD in International Relations (2014) from the Institute of International Relations at the University of São Paulo (USP). Professor of undergraduate and graduate studies in International Relations at the Federal University of Uberlândia, where she coordinates the Research and Studies Center on Human Rights (NUPEDH). Her research interests include: International Politics and Human Rights, International Human Rights Law, Inter-American Human Rights System, International Courts and Tribunals; Transitional Justice and Transnational Mobilization. She has previous experience in pro bono legal work in children's human rights. ORCID: 0000-0002-7056-021X.

It argues that Think Tanks operate as intermediary infrastructures of ideational power, linking knowledge production, elite networks, and decision-making processes. Their influence is expressed through mediation between political and intellectual elites, the technical validation of ideas, and the construction of interpretive frames that delimit legitimate alternatives in international politics. By articulating debates on hegemony, institutions, and knowledge production, the article shows that maintaining international order depends not only on material and institutional capacities, but also on the circulation and legitimation of ideas within the system.

Keywords: Think Tanks. United States Foreign Policy. Liberal International Order. Ideational Power. Knowledge Production.

THINK TANKS NOS ESTADOS UNIDOS: UM ESTUDO SOBRE SEU PAPEL NA LEGITIMAÇÃO E MANUTENÇÃO DA ORDEM INTERNACIONAL LIBERAL

Resumo

Partindo do contexto de ascensão hegemônica dos Estados Unidos no pós-Segunda Guerra Mundial, este artigo analisa como os *Think Tanks* (TTs) norte-americanos influenciam a política externa do país e contribuem para a legitimação e reprodução da ordem internacional liberal. Ancorada em perspectivas construtivista e neogramsciana, a pesquisa adota abordagem qualitativa explicativo-interpretativa, combinando revisão bibliográfica e análise histórica de casos do período entreguerras à Guerra ao Terror. Argumenta-se que os TTs atuam como infraestruturas intermediárias de poder ideacional, articulando produção de conhecimento, redes de elite e processos decisórios. Sua influência manifesta-se na mediação entre elites políticas e intelectuais, na validação técnica de ideias e na construção de enquadramentos que delimitam alternativas consideradas legítimas na política internacional. Ao articular hegemonia, instituições e produção de conhecimento, o artigo demonstra que a manutenção da ordem internacional depende não apenas de capacidades materiais e institucionais, mas também da circulação e legitimação de ideias no sistema.

Palavras-chave: Think Tanks. Política Externa dos Estados Unidos. Ordem Internacional Liberal. Poder ideacional. Produção de conhecimento.

LOS THINK TANKS EN ESTADOS UNIDOS: UN ESTUDIO DE SU PAPEL EN LA LEGITIMACIÓN Y EL MANTENIMIENTO DEL ORDEN LIBERAL INTERNACIONAL

Resumen

Partiendo del ascenso hegemónico de Estados Unidos tras la Segunda Guerra Mundial, este artículo analiza cómo los Think Tanks (TTs) influyen en la política exterior y contribuyen a la legitimación y reproducción del orden internacional liberal. Basado en perspectivas constructivista y neogramsciana, adopta un enfoque cualitativo explicativo-interpretativo, combinando revisión bibliográfica y análisis histórico desde el período de entreguerras hasta la Guerra contra el Terror. Se argumenta que los TTs actúan como infraestructuras intermedias de poder ideacional, articulando producción de conocimiento, redes de élite y toma de decisiones. Su influencia se manifiesta en la mediación entre élites políticas e intelectuales, la validación técnica de ideas y la construcción de marcos interpretativos que delimitan alternativas legítimas en la política internacional. El artículo demuestra que el orden internacional depende no solo de capacidades materiales e institucionales, sino también de la circulación y legitimación de ideas en el sistema.

Palabras clave: Think Tanks. Política exterior de Estados Unidos. Orden internacional liberal. Poder ideacional. Producción de conocimiento.

1. Introduction

The contemporary international order, consolidated in the aftermath of World War II, was profoundly shaped by the rise of the United States to the position of a hegemonic power and by the creation of a comprehensive set of institutions, regimes, and norms aimed at organizing international relations. This arrangement, frequently termed the Liberal International Order, combined American material leadership with multilateral institutionalization, the promotion of free markets, the diffusion of democratic regimes, and the construction of mechanisms for international cooperation (Ikenberry 2001). Beyond being a mere reflection of the distribution of power among States, this order has also depended on the production of normative consensuses and the legitimation of specific values and ideas capable of sustaining its continuity over time.

In this context, the role of actors situated at the interface between specialized knowledge and political decision-making gains relevance. Among them, American Think Tanks (TTs) stand out as research institutions that produce analyses, diagnoses, and recommendations aimed at public policy formulation and debate (Teixeira 2019).

The literature on the liberal international order has traditionally emphasized material, institutional, and strategic factors to explain its consolidation and permanence. In parallel, studies on TTs focus, to a certain extent, on their domestic influence or their role in the formulation of specific public policies. However, analyses that systematically connect these two fields of investigation, to examine how the production and circulation of specialized knowledge can contribute to the legitimation and reproduction of international orders, are still relatively scarce.

Faced with this gap, this article seeks to answer the following research question: *in what ways and through which mechanisms do American TTs influence United States foreign policy and contribute to the legitimation and reproduction of the Liberal International Order?* The starting hypothesis is that these institutes operate as intermediary infrastructures of ideational power, through which knowledge production, elite networks, and public policy formulation are interconnected. These infrastructures play a relevant role in the consolidation of narratives and diagnoses compatible with the prevailing international order.

Based on a constructivist and neo-Gramscian perspective, this article understands that international orders are not sustained by material capabilities alone. Knowledge structures, which are capable of shaping perceptions,

identities, and political preferences, also matter (Cox 1983; Strange 1987). From this perspective, TTs are not treated merely as technical providers of expertise, but as actors embedded in broader processes of legitimacy production and the ideational construction of hegemony.

As a methodology, the research adopts a qualitative approach, of an explanatory-interpretive nature, utilizing a hypothetico-deductive strategy. In this sense, the study combines a literature review on the Liberal International Order and TTs with documentary and historical analysis of illustrative episodes across different moments of contemporary international politics, such as the Anglo-American networks in the interwar period, the diffusion of ideational premises in the post-Cold War era, and the formulation of policies associated with the War on Terror. The analysis observes three main dimensions: the mechanisms of influence, the channels for the circulation of ideas, and the ideational effects associated with the legitimation of the international order.

In addition to systematizing the existing literature, this article contributes by proposing an interpretation of TTs as intermediary mechanisms of ideational power, responsible for articulating specialized knowledge and political action within hegemonic contexts. It is argued, therefore, that their influence occurs not only through direct advising to the government, but, above all, through the capacity to shape interpretive frames, legitimize diagnoses, and delimit horizons considered politically viable.

To demonstrate this argument, the article is organized into four sections. The first presents the theoretical foundations of the Liberal International Order. The second discusses the concept and typologies of TTs and their relationship with U.S. foreign policy. The third reconstructs the historical evolution of these institutions in the United States, and, finally, the fourth analyzes the mechanisms through which these actors contribute to the legitimation of the international order. The conclusion synthesizes the findings and discusses implications for the study of the relationships between knowledge, hegemony, and international governance.

2. From Hegemony to Legitimacy: Foundations of the Liberal International Order

To begin this study on the role of Think Tanks in maintaining the liberal international order, it is first necessary to understand what "order" actually means. Although "order" generally refers to organization or standardization, the concept is more complex within social life: regularity of behavior does not

necessarily signify political stability, as even war can involve methodical actions within a context of chaos. As argued by Hedley Bull (1977), order involves an arrangement oriented toward specific goals, embedded with values and political meaning; at the international level, it expresses itself through norms, rules, and institutions that enable coexistence and cooperation among States.

This is important because different theories of international relations offer distinct explanations for the formation and maintenance of international order. For realists, order stems from the distribution of power within the anarchic system and is organized fundamentally through the balance of power or hegemony. In the first case, stability results from balancing among States, either as an unintended effect of systemic pressures or through the formalization of rules of balance; in the second, a preponderant State uses its capacities to structure international relations, offering incentives or imposing constraints on others. Thus, the international order reflects the underlying configuration of power and tends to transform when this distribution shifts, generating conflicts and systemic rearrangements (Ikenberry 2001).

However, other approaches offer perspectives that counter this understanding and contribute to making analyses more sophisticated. The neoliberal institutionalist theoretical lens, for instance, is less concerned with power asymmetries among States and the resulting systemic restrictions on cooperation, and pays closer attention to international institutions and agreements capable of reducing uncertainties, lowering costs, and solving collective action problems. It is, therefore, a utilitarian view, in which institutions are explained in terms of the problems they solve, being capable of contributing to the ordering of the system (Ikenberry 2001).

Constructivist theories, on the other hand, conceive the relevance of institutions but understand that they are socially constructed, representing worldviews that interconnect and shape the strategic behavior of actors. They are seen, therefore, as comprehensive patterns of relationships that define and reproduce the interests and actions of individuals and groups within the system. This view, aligned with the perspective that institutions not only construct but also constrain power relations among States, allows us to understand that institutional structures influence how power is distributed among actors in the system, thereby being capable of influencing, maintaining, and legitimizing the international order (Ikenberry 2001).

From a neo-Gramscian perspective, hegemony goes beyond the "black box" of the State as an isolated unit and understands the international order as the result of the articulation between social, economic, and political structures that connect classes and societies on a global scale. This order is

sustained by a triad formed by material capabilities, ideas, and institutions, with the field of ideas being central to defining what is considered legitimate and desirable in power relations. Thus, transformations in the hegemonic order depend not only on material changes but, above all, on shifts in the principles and values that guide institutions and practices in the international system (Cox 1983; 1986).

This theoretical perspective allows us to study and understand how the current liberal international order emerged, developed, and sustained itself. According to G. John Ikenberry (2001), the post-war era created an asymmetrical distribution of power, placing the victorious State before three alternatives: to exercise direct domination based on its material capabilities, to relinquish its leading role in the international system, or to convert its superiority into a stable and lasting order. Historically, States tend to opt for the third path, seeking to shape the international order through the institutionalization of their principles, norms, and values. In this sense, institutions do not operate merely as mechanisms for cooperation, but as political instruments that organize and limit power, allowing the hegemonic State to structure the behavior of others while simultaneously signaling predictability and reducing fears of domination or abandonment.

After 1945, the United States chose to consolidate its hegemonic position through the construction and legitimation of a new institutionalized international order, leading, between 1944 and 1951, the creation of milestones such as the Bretton Woods Institutions, the United Nations, and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Faced with European devastation, they assumed the costs of reconstruction and integrated economies like Germany and Japan into the Western market system, articulating a liberal and internationalist vision based on free trade, democratic regimes, and collective security. Although marked by American predominance, this order was structured as a governance arrangement that combined hierarchy and power with rules, institutions, multilateral commitments, and the pursuit of legitimacy, fusing domination and consent under the logic of the rule of law (Ikenberry 2001).

In this way, even when faced with crises, the liberal international order has been capable of reinventing itself and maintaining its position over the years. Susan Strange (1987), in her text *The Persistent Myth of Lost Hegemony*, argues that the structural power exercised by a hegemony within an international order possesses four facets that can still be witnessed in the current order.

The first of these is *security power*, which is fundamental for hegemony. The US remains the most significant country in terms of security. The second face of structural power refers to the *production structure*, that is,

the control over goods, technology, and productive organization, a dimension in which the United States faced relevant challenges over time, such as the advancement of Japanese Toyotism in the 1970s, as well as the growth of the Soviet Union, Germany, and, more recently, China, without, however, losing its hegemony. Although the Chinese productive economy represents a significant challenge today, predominance on only one front, unaccompanied by an alternative proposal for an international order, may not be sufficient to replace the current order.

The third facet concerns the *financial structure*, which is the primary American differentiator today, marked by the almost unassailable centrality of the dollar. After the end of the dollar-gold parity in the 1970s, the dollar consolidated itself as the main vehicle for wealth concentration and international transactions, with the US central bank assuming a pivotal role in the global economy (Strange 1987).

Finally, the *knowledge structure* is also a relevant factor in maintaining the current order. The control of information, technology, the impact of ideas, and education is fundamental to the liberal order, and no other country comes close to the United States in this regard. The way they control intellectual property, research, and innovation worldwide, and how they influence international culture through language, is structural in the current international order (Strange 1987).

The argumentation surrounding this fourth facet presented by Strange (1987) dialogues directly with the hypothesis and objective of this study regarding the role of TTs in the legitimation and maintenance of the liberal international order. These institutes construct a knowledge elite network, frequently called upon by government spheres for public policy construction, which is capable of creating the spaces and boundaries that will delimit what is considered "thinkable thought." In plain terms, they determine what does or does not possess legitimacy in knowledge production and in the options for change available to policymakers, thus impacting the order through the construction of ideas and placing themselves as significant agents in its preservation and reinvention (Parmar and Yin 2021). Unlike approaches that understand TTs merely as providers of technical expertise, this article interprets them as components of the ideational infrastructure of contemporary hegemony.

3. Think Tanks as Actors in Political Knowledge Production

Think Tanks are research institutes that generate policy analyses and studies with the aim of advising and influencing public policy construction, including foreign policy, and public opinion. They are commonly funded by donations from private individuals and corporations or subsidized by government incentives. The central purpose of these institutes, implicit even in their creation and their self-narrative, is objectivity and independence (Teixeira 2019).

As pointed out by Tatiana Teixeira (2019, 177), "this promise, only ideally fulfilled, is anchored on the assumption that any research involving public policy must (and will) be conducted with objectivity, within parameters of rationality and neutrality, and for the common interest." However, this neutrality cannot be achieved due to the very nature, characteristics, and functioning of these institutions and their studies.

In the text entitled *The Changing World of Think Tanks*, published in 1989, Kent Weaver (1989) made a major contribution to the community of scholars on the subject, establishing a qualified typification regarding the structure and operation of TTs. Beyond an initial distinction already widely accepted among academics, which refers to TTs that are more research-oriented versus those that assign higher priority to advocacy engagement, it is also possible to distinguish them based on their funding methods or the target audience they seek to serve (Abelson 2006).

Weaver (1989) proposes three main types of TTs in the United States. The first corresponds to the so-called "universities without students", composed of researchers dedicated to producing in-depth studies without traditional academic obligations. Institutions like the Brookings Institution and the Hoover Institution fit this profile, funding themselves mostly through private resources and targeting their research at policymakers, even though they also dialogue with the academic community.

The second category encompasses *government contractors*, such as the RAND Corporation and the Urban Institute, whose primary client is the State. Although they produce technical analyses and maintain privileged access to federal agencies, their recommendations are not always adopted, and their legitimacy depends on a reputation of neutrality.

The third typology refers to *advocacy Think Tanks*, marked by a strong ideological orientation and strategic action to influence public policies and public debate. They prioritize short reports and media presence, in addition

to maintaining close links with Congress and the Executive. The Heritage Foundation is an emblematic example of this model, standing out for its direct engagement in the battle of ideas and the formulation of government agendas (Weaver 1989).

In *A Capitol Idea: Think Tanks and US Foreign Policy*, Donald Abelson (2006) expands Weaver's (1989) typology by adding two categories: vanity Think Tanks, created by candidates or supporters to formulate ideas and raise funds, such as United We Stand America, functioning as non-profit entities that facilitate donations with tax incentives; and Legacy Think Tanks, founded by former presidents or former government officials to maintain influence over public policies after leaving office, such as the Carter Center and the James A. Baker III Institute for Public Policy, frequently associated with presidential libraries.

These classifications have important limitations, as they perform a pedagogical exercise of simplifying a diffuse and complex reality. Several institutes may, for example, fit into more than one typification, and that would not be incorrect. Thus, as mentioned by Teixeira (2019), this difficulty in conceptual delimitation (considering the divergences among academics regarding these distinctions and classifications) undermines the very identity construction of TTs and causes them to experience a constant dilemma of demarcation, coexisting, competing for attention, and blending with other institutions, such as foundations, NGOs, interest groups, and universities. This opens loopholes for new organizations to emerge and position themselves classified under this umbrella term, thereby weakening the term's explanatory power, and increasingly using the term in a utilitarian and marketing-driven manner.

In any case, the aforementioned classifications prove useful for us to understand, even if succinctly, how TTs are structured and how their main models of action operate, keeping in view, in particular, their relationship with government decision-makers and the formulation of policies capable of influencing not only the domestic context but also the international context, within the context of the Liberal International Order.

In this sense, it is understood that the belief system into which TTs are embedded, regardless of their classifications and variations, defines their essence and their fundamental values. This system directly influences both the intellectual production of these institutions and the impact of this production on politics. Therefore, it is considered unfeasible for the knowledge produced by these institutes to be completely objective, since the researchers themselves are immersed in values associated with the identity of being American.

This is important because,

> American Think Tank experts frequently create new frames, concepts, and programs that spread, naturalize, and consolidate within the United States, only to then infiltrate major international organizations and the policies and guidelines they adopt for this or that country, in this or that area (Teixeira 2019, 178, our translation).

In this logic, TTs and their researchers occupy a privileged position, performing a role as representatives of the ideas they themselves develop and articulate. This role is significant because the creation of a concept can directly influence behaviors and actions, both within governments and between governments and international institutions (Teixeira 2019).

4. From Expertise to Influence: Historical Evolution of Think Tanks in the United States

a. *Origins and Institutionalization (1900–1945)*

According to the *2020 Global Go To Think Tank Index Report* (McGann, 2021), the US is the country with the largest number of TTs in the world, concentrating about 20% of all institutes scattered across all regions of the globe. Mapping the emergence of these institutions historically is an arduous task with little consensus among scholars. There are indications that independent institutions were already advising the government since the 19th century, such as the Franklin Institute, which conducted technical studies for the government as early as the 1830s. Even before that, since the 17th and 18th centuries, scholars maintained dialogue with public authorities, even without formal structures similar to current ones.

In the 19th century, the creation of associations like the American Social Science Association and civic entities like the Chicago Civic Federation and the National Civic Federation contributed to institutionalizing these bonds and reinforcing the appreciation of specialized knowledge in public policy formulation. These embryonic arrangements paved the way for the consolidation, in the 20th century, of more structured and influential TTs at the interface between academic production and government practice (Abelson 2006).

In the first half of the 20th century, then, several research institutions began to emerge in the United States, with five TTs standing out for significantly influencing domestic and foreign policy: the Russell Sage Foundation (1907), the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (1910), the Institute for

Government Research (1916), the Hoover Institution (1919), and the Council on Foreign Relations (1921). Each of these organizations was created with the goal of fostering an environment conducive to research on social, economic, and political issues (Abelson 2006).

While some prioritized the practical application of research for administrative and social reforms, as was the case with the Institute for Government Research, which gave rise to the Brookings Institution, others dedicated themselves to the promotion of international peace or the creation of spaces for debate on foreign policy, such as the Carnegie Endowment and the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR). Together, these institutions helped institutionalize the production of expertise as a central component of governance in the United States (Abelson 2006).

b. *Think Tanks and the State Post-1945*

After the end of World War II, the emergence of new types of TTs stood out, namely those composed of individuals and experts contracted by the U.S. government. Starting in 1946, the U.S. government began to play a role as a "benevolent donor" alongside philanthropic foundations and private groups, recognizing the benefits of funding private and university research and development centers. The RAND Corporation, an example of a TT created during this period, focuses on national security themes and utilizes systems analysis and game theory to advise the U.S. Armed Forces on how to protect the country during the nuclear era (Abelson 2006).

RAND, founded in 1948, initially received substantial government funding and, over time, expanded its research scope to include areas such as health, civil and criminal justice, science and technology, as well as environment and infrastructure. The Urban Institute, also established through government initiative in 1968 under president Lyndon Johnson's administration, is another relevant post-war TT, with a focus on domestic problems such as poverty and urban housing. In this sense, although TTs diversified, most remained dependent on government funding and strove to offer analyses and recommendations that could influence public policies across their various spheres (Abelson 2006).

c. *The Advocacy Turn (1970-90), Think Tanks, and Contemporary Politics*

There was a significant transition between the 1970s and 1990s in the role and function of TTs in the United States. During this period, many TTs began to move away from a focus purely dedicated to academic research and directed their efforts toward active political advocacy for their ideologies. After

World War II, TTs like the Brookings Institution and the Council on Foreign Relations continued to provide policy expertise, but the new generation of institutes that emerged after the 1970s had a greater focus on promoting specific ideological agendas. This change was driven by several factors, including the growth of the American bureaucracy, the need for more incisive policy analyses, and distrust toward established institutions (Abelson 2006).

TTs focused on defense issues, such as the Heritage Foundation and the American Enterprise Institute, stood out for their ability to influence policy through marketing strategies, ideological advocacy, and the mobilization of public opinion. Meanwhile, dependency on corporate and government funding also began to shape their operations and priorities (Abelson 2006). Additionally, the weakened role of political parties in the US allowed TTs to occupy a larger space in policy formulation, offering advice and analysis in an increasingly fragmented political arena. The emphasis began to shift from long-term academic research to the production of rapid, relevant analyses for policymakers, reflecting a change in what was expected of them in the American political dynamics compared to the previous period. In summary, this new generation of TTs became more involved in politics, utilizing their platforms to advocate for specific causes and shape public debate, a phenomenon that had a lasting impact on U.S. politics (Abelson 2006).

The latest generation of TTs, initiated around the 1980s, is marked by creations by former presidents and presidential candidates who seek, in the first case, to leave a lasting and still influential legacy even after the end of their term, and in the second case, to seek ways to equip themselves with information for the electoral period and legitimize their ideological proposal before the electorate. After their administrations, many former presidents, such as Jimmy Carter and Richard Nixon, founded institutions that reflect their political visions and interests (Abelson 2006).

The Carter Center, founded by Jimmy Carter in 1982, is dedicated to promoting human rights through research and influence on public policies, while the Nixon Center for Peace and Freedom, created by Richard Nixon in 1994, focuses on studies regarding security and defense. Both function similarly to other TTs, organizing conferences and publishing research, but their mandates are intimately linked to the interests of the former presidents (Abelson 2006). Furthermore, presidential candidates and members of Congress created or associated themselves with TTs to gain access to experts and circumvent campaign finance laws. For example, Bob Dole's Better America Foundation was heavily criticized for being used to promote his political positions and candidacies. These TTs emerged in a political environment where the search

for influence and historical legacy is a constant concern for former leaders and aspirants to public office (Abelson 2006).

In synthesis, the historical evolution of TTs in the United States accompanies the growing demand for expertise and professionalization of the mediation between knowledge and political decision-making. This trajectory is relevant to this article insofar as it contributes to understanding how these institutes accumulate authority, build networks, and become platforms for the circulation of ideas, which are central resources for the legitimation of narratives compatible with the Liberal International Order across different conjunctures.

5. Ideational Mechanisms for Legitimizing the Liberal International Order

As discussed previously, various types of TTs and philanthropic foundations influence, to some degree, the creation of public policies and the decision-making of different American governments. Generally, there is a consensus among scholars that TTs play a relevant role by providing expertise and analyses that impact government decisions, even though measuring this degree of influence effectively remains complex.

The present work understands, therefore, that this political influence exercised by TTs in Washington has an effect on the International System that goes beyond the creation and/or modification of public policies with an internal repercussion directed solely at U.S. citizens. Considering the hegemonic role played by the US in the Liberal International Order, when these institutes advise or are utilized by the U.S. government to legitimize a specific ideological perspective and/or foreign policy decision, they become, directly or indirectly, agents of the international order at the service of the US, impacting its relationship with other States and actors in the system.

To make this type of assertion, it is necessary to start from the principle that the international order today is governed by U.S. hegemonic power, and that, moreover, it was constituted, structured, and made viable through a complex network of institutions (whether multinational, regional, or bilateral, in the form of agreements, norms, and rules), mostly designed and idealized by the United States. However, this assumption would hold no validity if we started from a neoliberal functionalist theoretical perspective, a lens under which institutions fulfill only technical and utilitarian objectives. The argumentation proposed here only makes sense if we start from a

constructivist and neo-Gramscian perspective, considering that institutions are not only socially constructed and impact the creation and representation of collective identities, but also that cooperation between the State and domestic elite groups operates as a catalyst for the hegemonic expression of power.

As argued by John Ruggie (1998) in his text *What Makes the World Hang Together? Neo-utilitarianism and the Social Constructivist Challenge*, international institutions promote global order by consolidating shared norms that sustain the international system, and these same norms have the role of legitimizing the actions of international institutions and shaping the interests of States. This dialogues with neo-Gramscian perspectives when they understand that world orders are sustained by the relationship between material capabilities, ideas, and institutions (Cox 1983).

In this sense, although various factors of international politics in the post-war era were central to bringing about changes in U.S. foreign policy, internationalist elite groups (philanthropic foundations in a first moment, and subsequently TTs), in cooperation with the State, played a fundamental role in constructing the pre-conditions of U.S. globalism. They did so by mobilizing public opinion and elites, promoting intellectual bases, institutions, and networks that sustained the ideological premises of the order under construction, and creating and improving the State's knowledge and research capacities, thereby grounding the birth of international institutions in which they operated to disseminate and incorporate American values and interests (Parmar 2012).

Bearing this as a baseline, the contributions of authors who recognize the role of knowledge structures as one of the fundamental pillars for the maintenance of power and, consequently, of the prevailing political order are extremely pertinent to sustain our argument regarding the role of TTs in the International Order. Susan Strange (1989) contributes to this perspective and equips us with arguments to understand that American TTs play a relevant role in the order, especially when they legitimize themselves through a discourse of supposed neutrality and objectivity. She defines the *knowledge structure* as the system of production, dissemination, and control of information and ideas that shape global beliefs, values, and perceptions. This structure sustains other dimensions of power, providing legitimacy and normative orientation to political and economic decisions (Strange 1989).

In this sense, if these institutes are not neutral even within the domestic environment of the US, it is in the external scenario that this false neutrality becomes fully exposed. They are laden with history and ideologies, and are evidently socially and politically located within the international arena.

During the interwar period, the Royal Institute of International Affairs (Chatham House – CH) and the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) were conceived as branches of an Anglo-American project aimed at constructing a new international order, created at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919 and funded by major foundations such as Carnegie, Rockefeller, and Ford. By gathering experts who produced what was considered "useful knowledge" for policymakers and who influenced public opinion, both TTs played a central role in articulating the relationship between the United Kingdom and the United States before, during, and after World War II, operating both through networks of sociability and through study groups and direct insertion into government departments. Embedded in the Anglo-American *establishment*, they defended an order anchored on the primacy of the two powers and structured by institutions such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the United Nations, in addition to supporting the Marshall Plan and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization as instruments to contain Soviet expansion (Parmar and Yin 2021).

In the post-Cold War period, the Ford and Carnegie Foundations played fundamental roles in funding the research and publications that brought *democratic peace theory* into prominence within academia and disseminated its premises and conclusions to political parties. The theory that democratic countries do not go to war with one another grounded, among other policies, the speeches of then-U.S. president Ronald Reagan, emphasizing the peaceful characteristic of neoliberal U.S. foreign policy, and the formation in 1983 of the *National Endowment for Democracy* (NED), a private non-profit foundation funded mainly by the U.S. Congress to promote democracy around the world (Parmar 2013, Parmar and Yin 2021). Furthermore, the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at Harvard University, founded by the Carnegie and Ford foundations, published a series of articles for the development of democratic peace theory starting in 1996. This TT is composed of more than 100 scholars and members of government, the military, and private corporations, including the Secretary of Defense from Bill Clinton's administration, and the former Secretary of State from George W. Bush's government, among others (Parmar 2013, Parmar and Yin 2021).

Finally, Abelson (2009), in the chapter *What were they thinking? Think tanks, the Bush presidency and US foreign policy*, analyzes how conservative TTs in the United States, such as the Heritage Foundation and the Project for the New American Century (PNAC), played an active role in formulating foreign policy post-9/11, contributing to the ideological construction of the Bush Doctrine and the legitimation of the War on Terror, including the

interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq. Even before the attacks, the PNAC already advocated proposals such as preemptive strikes and military strengthening, while the Heritage Foundation influenced homeland security policies, such as the Patriot Act and the creation of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), utilizing its insertion in the media and political networks to impact public debate and decision-making.

The War on Terror, as articulated by these TTs, promoted the idea that global security depended on American hegemony, reinforcing unilateral norms and bilateral agreements in international politics. The justifications for military interventions weakened the perception of the role of multilateral institutions, such as the UN, and prioritized coalitions of willing interests led by the US (Abelson 2009). Despite defending the values of freedom and democracy, the military actions suggested by the TTs were widely viewed as contrary to these ideals, leading to criticisms regarding the coherence of the promoted liberal order. In this sense, the positioning of the institutes reinforced the perception of an international order centered on the strategic interests of the US, capable of creating tensions with allies and other global actors (Abelson 2009).

In addition, some authors understand that TTs play a relevant role within international organizations and forums, where they operate increasingly through transnational networks. Teixeira (2019, 179, our translation) argues that:

> a recent example of this Think Tanks-ideas-networks arrangement is identifiable (though not in its entire structure, nor in all agents involved in it) in the expansion of far-right ideas through South America and Europe.In this sense, corroborating the argument developed by Stone (2004a), it is possible to affirm that TTs contribute to the politicization of knowledge, facilitating and favoring, at the same time, the advancement of homogenization in how this knowledge is produced and disseminated, as well as in what is considered valid and legitimate.

In synthesis, the analysis indicates that TTs and philanthropic foundations operate as important vectors for the production, diffusion, and legitimation of ideas associated with U.S. strategic interests, projecting their effects beyond the domestic sphere and reaching the very configuration of the Liberal International Order. Through the circulation of specialized knowledge and the construction of interpretive frames, these actors can both reinforce core principles of the prevailing order, such as democracy, free markets, and

multilateralism, and contribute to legitimizing adjustments in American international action and normative redefinitions capable of preserving the hegemonic position of the United States within the international system.

Conclusion

This article sought to analyze in what ways and through which mechanisms American TTs influence United States foreign policy and contribute to the legitimation and reproduction of the Liberal International Order. Grounded in a constructivist and neo-Gramscian approach, it was argued that these institutes operate less as direct formulators of political decisions and more as mediators between knowledge production and the exercise of hegemonic power. The analysis indicated that their influence occurs mainly through three interrelated mechanisms: the mediation among political, economic, and intellectual elites; the technical and symbolic validation of political ideas and diagnoses; and the construction of interpretive frames that delimit alternatives perceived as legitimate in international politics.

In this sense, the article contributes to understanding TTs as intermediary infrastructures of ideational power, embedded within the knowledge structure that sustains the contemporary international order. By articulating literature on the liberal international order and studies on political knowledge production, this article suggests that the stability and continuity of hegemonic orders depend not only on material or institutional capacities, but also on the capacity to produce legitimacy through the circulation of ideas, narratives, and specialized expertise.

References

Abelson, Donald E. 2006. *A Capitol Idea: Think Tanks and US Foreign Policy*. Brookings Institution Press.

Abelson, Donald E. 2009. "What Were They Thinking? Think Tanks, the Bush Presidency and US Foreign Policy." In *New Directions in US Foreign Policy*, edited by Parmar, Inderjeet, Linda B. Miller and Mark Ledwidge, 92–105.

Abelson, Donald E. 2022. *Do Think Tanks Matter? Assessing the impact of public policy institutes*. McGill-Queen's University Press.

Abelson, Donald E, and Christine Carberry. 1997. "Policy Experts in Presidential Campaigns: A Model of Think Tank Recruitment." *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 27(4): 679–97.

Bull, Hedley. *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics*. 1995. 2. ed. Columbia University Press.

Cox, Robert W. 1983. Gramsci, Hegemony and International Relations: An Essay in Method. *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 12(2): 162–175. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/03058298830120020701.

Cox, Robert W. 1986. "Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory." In *Neorealism and Its Critics*, edited by Robert O. Keohane. Columbia University Press.

Ikenberry, G. John. 2001. *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars*. Princeton University Press.

Ikenberry, G. John. 2011. *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order*. Princeton University Press.

Mcgann, James G. 2021. "2020 Global Go To Think Tank Index Report." *Pen Librarias*, January 28. https://www.bruegel.org/sites/default/files/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/2020-Global-Go-To-Think-Tank-Index-Report-Bruegel.pdf. Acessed December 11, 2025.

Parmar, Inderjeet. 2012. "Foundation Networks and American Hegemony." *European Journal of American Studies* 7(7-1). https://doi.org/10.4000/ejas.9476. Accessed January 23, 2026.

Parmar, Inderjeet. 2013. "The 'Knowledge Politics' of Democratic Peace Theory." *International Politics* 50(2): 231–256, 2013. https://doi.org/10.1057/ip.2013.4 Accessed January 24, 2026.

Parmar, Inderjeet, and Sheng Yin. 2021. "American Foundations, Think Tanks and the Liberal International Order." In *Handbook on Think Tanks in Public Policy*, organized by Abelson, Donald E., Ben Mulroney, Stephen K. Hudson, and Charles J. Rastrick. Edward Elgar Publishing, 2021. ISBN 9781789901832.

Ruggie, John. 1998. "What Makes the World Hang Together? Neo-utilitarianism and the Social Constructivist Challenge." *International Organization* 52(4): 855-885.

Strange, S. 1987. "The Persistent Myth of Lost Hegemony." *International Organization* 41(4): 551–574.

Teixeira, Tatiana. 2019. "Think tanks e partidos políticos em tempos de Trump." *Perspectivas: Revista de Ciências Sociais* 54: 150-170.

Weaver, Kent. 1989. The "Changing World of Think Tanks." *Political Science and Politics, The Brookings Institution*.