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RAND: How Think Tanks Interact with the Military

Michael D. Rich

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RAND: HOW THINK TANKS INTERACT WITH THE MILITARY

*By Michael D. Rich
Executive Vice President, RAND*



Think tanks that work with defense and intelligence agencies once focused exclusively on regional and functional topics, but these organizations are now also being called upon to help the military address the new challenge of terrorism and homeland security, says RAND Executive Vice President Michael D. Rich. RAND researchers, who have been studying terrorism for more than 30 years, are now helping decision-makers develop a comprehensive analytical approach to defending against terrorist attacks and, at the same time, they are doing an increasing amount of research on other issues for governments around the world.

From the beginnings of the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD), think tanks have worked closely with both the civilian and military leadership on a wide range of issues, from new technologies to military planning and operations, to help better protect American interests from ever-evolving threats.

Like the DOD civilian leadership, the uniformed military services require high-quality, objective research on geopolitical trends and the implications of different foreign policy options. Among other things, such research is necessary for realistic scenarios to guide planning and program evaluations, and to develop an understanding of probable constraints on operational flexibility.

To their credit, the military services and the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) have used and nurtured a large array of sources for that research, ranging from small institutes, such as the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) and the Lexington Institute, funded primarily with corporate or individual donations, to larger policy research organizations such as the Institute for Defense Analyses under contract to the DOD. The oldest and largest of these research organizations is RAND, which was established with private capital as a non-profit corporation in 1948. About half of RAND's current work deals with national defense

while the rest deals with a wide range of domestic policy issues.

RAND operates three DOD-sponsored, federally funded research and development centers (FFRDCs). FFRDCs are research programs operated by private non-profit (non-commercial) organizations under long-term contracts. They develop and maintain essential expertise and capabilities important to their sponsors and operate in the public interest, free from real or perceived conflicts of interest.

RAND's creation enabled the Air Force to retain and extend the considerable civilian scientific contributions during World War II. As part of a larger program of research on air power at RAND, the Air Force seeded the development of a path-breaking analytical effort aimed at understanding the Soviet Union. Some of RAND's research addressed the development of Soviet strategy, doctrine, and military systems. The Air Force also requested analyses of the Soviet economy, foreign policy, science and technology programs, among many other topics.

RAND's pioneering work was so new that it required the translation of large amounts of fundamental Soviet writings and the creation or refinement of numerous analytical methods that became standard throughout the research community, including the

interviewing of emigres whose distrust of government officials made them otherwise inaccessible.

Soon the Air Force, and then the Office of the Secretary of Defense, turned to RAND for research on China, Eastern Europe, Japan, Southeast Asia, the Middle East, Latin America, and Western Europe. Although smaller in scale than the analyses of the Soviet Union, these studies also provided the Air Force — and through RAND’s widely-disseminated published reports, the rest of the U.S. government and the public — with an independent body of research on a broad range of topics. These included economic strength, military capabilities, insurgencies, hegemonic intentions, and leadership succession possibilities in many nations and regions around the world.

Over time, RAND developed complementary lines of research for the Army, as well as for other federal clients such as the intelligence community. And the DOD steadily increased the number and diversity of its external sources of research, also using others in the growing world of “think tanks” such as the Council on Foreign Relations, the American Enterprise Institute, and the Brookings Institution.

RAND’s federally funded research and development centers have a special role in helping to meet the research and analysis needs of their DOD sponsors. The FFRDCs are: Project AIR FORCE; the Army’s Arroyo Center; and the National Defense Research Institute (NDRI), which primarily serves the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the Joint Staff, and the defense agencies. Each of these centers conducts a broad, integrated program of research that addresses emerging security needs and their implications for the sponsoring organizations; the development of new strategies, doctrines, tactics, and concepts of operations; the application of new technologies; and issues related to logistics, manpower, training, personnel, health care, and systems acquisition.

For each FFRDC, RAND commits to developing and maintaining a set of specified “core capabilities.” This is all done with close familiarity with the

structure, doctrine, operations, and personalities of the sponsoring organizations. Indeed, one of the strengths of FFRDCs, whether operated by RAND or other non-profit entities, is their stability and long-term, strategic, and close-in relationship with their military or OSD sponsors.

The research agenda-setting process is an iterative one that begins with the development of a long-term research plan that is revised annually. Continuous discussions between RAND research leaders and general officers or civilians of comparable rank enable RAND to develop an annual research program of individual studies, which is then approved by a high-level advisory board. In the case of Project AIR FORCE and the Arroyo Center, the advisory boards are chaired by the services’ vice chiefs of staff; in the case of NDRI, the chair is the principal deputy under secretary of defense for acquisition, technology, and logistics. Individual studies are typically commissioned by one or more senior officers or officials, who help shape the scope, phasing, and timetable of the research — providing comments, suggestions, and critiques along the way.

As an example, one such study was a multi-year Project AIR FORCE study on Chinese defense modernization and its implications for the Air Force. Although it was developed against the backdrop of extensive interactions between RAND and the senior Air Force leadership, the specific contours of the study were worked out with then-Commander of the Pacific Air Forces, General Richard Myers, and Air Force Headquarters’ Deputy Chief of Staff for Air and Space Operations, Lieutenant General John Jumper (now Air Force Chief of Staff). Both officers, as well as their successors, were active participants during the course of the analyses. The research team reached out to numerous others including experienced members of the Foreign Service and specialists in academia.

Once the study objectives were agreed upon, RAND assembled a disparate team of researchers under the leadership of Zalmay Khalilzad, a former senior official in both the Departments of State and Defense who was then at RAND. Khalilzad is now a member

of the National Security Council staff and also Presidential Envoy to Afghanistan. In addition to China specialists, there were other regional specialists, as well as experts in defense strategy, air power, intelligence, and economics.

The team was augmented by several Air Force officers serving at RAND as federal executive fellows. During the course of the research, the study team reviewed work in progress with an advisory group composed of a wide variety of current and former senior federal officials in both Democratic and Republican administrations, including former national security adviser Brent Scowcroft and three former secretaries of defense: Harold Brown, Frank Carlucci, and William Perry.

This project produced numerous interim briefings to senior Air Force officers and other DOD officials, and written products, as well as a final report and derivative issue paper that were published and circulated widely. In a manner that characterizes much of the research of FFRDCs, the project involved close and continuing interaction with the Air Force at all levels. Most important, the work was of practical value to the Air Force senior leadership and was widely read and used elsewhere in the U.S. government and in the region.

Every RAND product undergoes a rigorous quality assurance process and this report was no exception. In addition to internal peer reviews, the manuscript was reviewed before publication by I. Lewis Libby, a former principal deputy secretary of defense and State Department official, and David Shambaugh, professor of political science and international relations and director of the China Policy Program at The George Washington University.

This study is one of several done by RAND's FFRDCs during the past few years that have examined issues at the heart of U.S.-China relations. Other FFRDC studies at RAND during the same period examined critical problems involving such nations as North Korea, Indonesia, India, Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Turkey, and Colombia. Each of these studies drew on the same RAND strengths as

the study on China: a multi-disciplinary team of researchers, extensive contacts overseas, and close working relationships with the military sponsor.

The work in and on individual countries has enabled RAND to carry out detailed analyses of security issues on a regional level in East Asia, South Asia, the Middle East, and the Persian Gulf. In fact RAND is doing an increasing amount of work for governments around the world. The pattern of detailed country studies and broader regional analyses has been especially effective in work on Europe. RAND has a substantial presence in Europe, with three offices and research programs in both defense and non-defense fields. A series of analyses of conventional arms control using advanced combat models, and of the related question of limits on air power, had substantial influence on the U.S. position and ultimately on the resulting Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty. Moreover, much of the early thinking about the rationale for alternative paths toward NATO expansion was done at RAND and other think tanks.

Think tanks are now called upon to contribute to a new challenge: the emergence of terrorism as a worldwide threat and of homeland security as a national priority of the highest order. RAND researchers have been studying terrorism for more than 30 years, and are today helping the United States government develop a comprehensive analytical approach to defend against terrorist attacks. Bigger bombs, better guns, and new weapons systems alone are not enough to defeat terrorists, who operate far from traditional battlefields. We also need a better understanding of who terrorists are, how they operate, what motivates them, and what can be done to stop them from expanding their ranks. And we need a better understanding of our nation's vulnerabilities and how to reduce those vulnerabilities. RAND's research and analysis is playing an important role in helping to improve government policy and decision-making in these vital areas.

Since the attacks on America on September 11, 2001, the RAND FFRDCs — like those of the other

FFRDCs operated by other institutions, such as the Center for Naval Analyses, that regularly assist the DOD — have been called upon by their sponsors to modify their research agendas. The legacy of past work and resulting capabilities, coupled with the flexibility of the institutional arrangements and close working relationships between sponsors and researchers, operators, and analysts, have equipped the FFRDCs for these new dimensions in the nexus of foreign policy and defense planning.

The “old” issues haven’t gone away, of course. They have simply been joined and complicated by the more recent ones. RAND’s experts on a broad range of national security issues have been helping America’s armed forces defend the nation for more than 50 years, dealing both with threats that are now part of history and with threats that will be on tomorrow’s front pages. ©

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