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Defense Contractor Funded Think Tanks Dominate Ukraine Debate

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Executive Summary

Think tanks in the United States are a go-to resource for media outlets seeking expert opinions on pressing public policy issues. But think tanks often have entrenched stances; a growing body of research has shown that their funders can influence their analysis and commentary. This influence can include censorship – both self-censorship and more direct censoring of work unfavorable to a funder – and outright pay-for-research agreements with funders. The result is an environment where the interests of the most generous funders can dominate think tank policy debates.

One such debate concerns the appropriate level of U.S. military involvement in the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Since Vladimir Putin’s illegal and disastrous decision to launch a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the United States has approved approximately \$48.7 billion in military spending.¹ Despite the very real risk that escalations could lead to direct U.S. military involvement in the war, few think tanks have critically scrutinized this record setting amount of U.S. military assistance.

Within the context of public debate about U.S. military involvement in the Ukraine war, this brief investigates Department of Defense (DoD) and DoD contractor funding of think tanks, those organizations advocacy efforts for policies that would benefit those funders, and the media’s predominant reliance on think tanks funded by the defense sector. The analysis finds that the vast majority of media mentions of think tanks in articles about U.S. arms and the Ukraine war are from think tanks whose funders profit from U.S. military spending, arms sales and, in many cases, directly from U.S. involvement in the Ukraine war. These think tanks also regularly offer support for public policy solutions that would financially benefit their funders without disclosing these apparent conflicts of interest. While this brief did not seek to establish a direct causality

¹ “U.S. Security Assistance to Ukraine,” Congressional Research Service, February 27, 2023, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF12040>.

between think-tank policy recommendations and their arms industry funding in the case of the Ukraine war, we find a clear correlation between the two. We also found that media outlets disproportionately rely on commentary from defense sector funded think tanks.

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The analysis offers a number of key findings.

First, of the 27 think tanks whose donors could be identified, 21 received funding from the defense sector (77 percent). Unfortunately, because donor disclosure is voluntary, we cannot determine the percentage of think tank funding that is derived from defense contractors.

Second, in articles related to U.S. military involvement in Ukraine media outlets have cited think tanks with financial backing from the defense industry 85 percent of the time, or seven times as often as think tanks that do not accept funding from Pentagon contractors.

Third, despite a general trend towards greater donor transparency at think tanks, nearly a third of the top U.S. foreign policy think tanks still do not provide the public with information about their funders.

Fourth, media outlets rarely identify conflicts of interest posed by experts they cite from defense industry funded think tanks in cases where they offer their opinions on policies that would benefit the defense industry.

These findings lead to several policy recommendations:

- Think tanks are not required to publicly disclose their donors and many choose not to, hiding their potential conflicts of interest from the public and policymakers. Congress should end the era of “dark money” think tanks by enacting legislation that requires think tanks to publicly disclose any funding they receive from the United States or foreign government agencies or firms that work for them.
- Think tanks should also adopt a professional standard of disclosing, within the publications themselves, any funding the think tank receives from entities that have a financial interest in the subject matter of the publication.
- Media outlets should, similarly, adopt a professional standard to report any conflicts of interest with sources discussing U.S. foreign policy. By not providing this information media outlets are deceiving their readers, listeners, or viewers. This information provides important context for evaluating expert commentary and is, arguably, as important as the commentary itself.

Introduction

Few Americans know what a think tank is or does, although they play a pivotal role in the U.S. political process.² Think tanks operate as something of a conduit between academia and the policymaking community, conducting research and opining on pressing policy issues, including everything from healthcare to climate change to U.S. foreign policy. Think tanks also work directly with policymakers in the executive branch and Congress. Their experts regularly testify before Congress and go on to serve in key positions in the executive branch. Former government officials in turn often go on to

² Tom Hashemi and Aidan Muller, “Forging the think tank narrative US,” *Cast From Clay*, March 21, 2018, <https://castfromclay.co.uk/big-picture/forging-the-think-tank-narrative-perceptions-usa/>.

work for think tanks, earning them the nickname of “holding tank” where former government officials await a change in party affiliation of Congress or the Presidency.³

Of most direct relevance to this brief is the fact that think tanks are a go-to source for media outlets seeking opinions on pressing policy issues. Think tank experts provide the comments and articles you read in prominent national media outlets. They’re the voices you hear providing commentary on NPR, podcasts, and even local radio stations. They’re the faces you see on CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC opining on the most pressing U.S. policy issues of the day. In short, think tanks are a key component of public debates about U.S. politics and policy.

But think tanks are often biased. Many now take stances that are decidedly ideological, even partisan, which are sometimes explicitly spelled out in their mission statements. Think tanks also rely on a powerful force that has the potential to influence their work: funding. The nation’s top think tanks raise tens of millions of dollars in revenue every year -- the Brookings Institution, for example, which has regularly been cited as the top think tank in the world,⁴ had operating revenues of more than \$94 million last year.⁵ These are enormous budgets for non-profit organizations, 97 percent of which have budgets below \$5 million, according to the National Council of Nonprofits.⁶

To fill these enormous coffers, think tanks rely on financial support from individuals, foundations, universities, philanthropic organizations, corporations and governments -- both foreign and domestic. Some of this funding can create conflicts of interest, wherein think tanks are funded by those with a financial stake in the policies they are

³ “The Revolving Door of Think Tanks,” Think Tank Watch, March 9, 2012, <http://www.thinktankwatch.com/2012/03/state-department-study-of-think-tanks.html>.

⁴ James G. McGann, “2020 Global Go To Think Tank Index Report,” University of Pennsylvania, January 28, 2021, https://repository.upenn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1019&context=think_tanks.

⁵ “2022 Annual Report,” The Brookings Institution, <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/2022-annual-report.pdf>.

⁶ “Nonprofits by the Numbers,” National Council of Nonprofits, <https://www.nonprofitimpactmatters.org/data/downloadable-charts/#:~:text=97%20percent%20of%20nonprofits%20have,%2Dbased%2C%20serving%20local%20needs>.

discussing. A growing field of research has documented how funding impacts the work of think tanks.

Perhaps the most well known investigations of think tank funding were a pair of New York Times exposés headlined “Foreign Powers Buy Influence at Think Tanks,” and “How Think Tanks Amplify Corporate America’s Influence.”⁷ The former documents the prevalence of foreign government donations to think tanks and showed how, at some think tanks, that funding appeared to bias the think tanks work in favor of those foreign funders. Similarly, the latter New York Times article exposed several instances where think tanks funded by the defense industry conducted research, and other activities that some might consider lobbying, to promote the interests of their funders. For example, the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), conducted work that “culminated with a report released in February 2014 that reflected the defense industry’s priorities,” according to the Times, and CSIS staff “initiated meetings with Defense Department officials and congressional staff to push for the recommendations.”⁸ At another think tank, The Hudson Institute, a defense contractor who funded a research project there was “given regular briefings on the research and the opportunity to suggest revisions to early drafts,” according to the Times.⁹

These articles, at least in part, helped to spark a growing field of research that seeks to investigate funder influence at think tanks. The consensus of this research is that, as one academic analysis explained, “Think tanks are vulnerable to conflicts of interest due to their sources of funding, face pressures to market research in a partisan and

⁷ Eric Lipton, Brooke Williams, and Nicholas Confessore. “Foreign Powers Buy Influence at Think Tanks,” *The New York Times*, September 6, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/07/us/politics/foreign-powers-buy-influence-at-think-tanks.html>; Eric Lipton and Brooke Williams, “How Think Tanks Amplify Corporate America’s Influence,” *The New York Times*, August 7, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/08/us/politics/think-tanks-research-and-corporate-lobbying.html>.

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ *ibid.*

results-oriented – rather than enlightened debate toward social welfare – fashion, and focus on gaining public and political attention through media visibility.”¹⁰

Some think tank funding research has focused explicitly on the impact that funding from the U.S. defense industry has on think tanks. A report I authored for the Center for International Policy identified more than \$1 billion in funding from the U.S. government and defense contractors going to the top think tanks in the United States.¹¹ A report by The Revolving Door Project investigated one of these think tanks, the Center for a New American Security (CNAS), and found “CNAS has made multiple policy recommendations that would directly benefit some of the think tank’s donors, including military contractors and foreign governments.”¹²

Another study, authored by Kjølv Egeland and Benoît Pelopidas of the Center for International Studies in Paris, identified rampant conflicts of interest in nuclear weapons policy analysis.¹³ The study authors interviewed grant managers and former and current employees at think tanks funded by the nuclear weapons industry, who offered candid explanations of how funding biased these organizations’ work. One former think tank analyst went so far as to say “what we were producing was not research, it was a kind of propaganda.”¹⁴

The Egeland and Pelopidas study also demonstrated the mechanisms through which funding influences think tank work, namely: outright censorship, self-censorship, and perspective filtering. While outright censorship – akin to the editing of reports by funders in the New York Times expose – was relatively rare, nearly all of the think tank

¹⁰ Timothy Beryl Bland, “Predators and Principles: Think Tank Influence, Media Visibility, and Political Partisanship,” Virginia Commonwealth University, 2020, <https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=7448&context=etd>.

¹¹ Ben Freeman, “U.S. Government and Defense Contractor Funding of America’s Top 50 Think Tanks,” The Center for International Policy, October 2020, https://3ba8a190-62da-4c98-86d2-893079d87083.usfiles.com/uqg/3ba8a1_c7e3bfc7723d4021b54cbc145ae3f5eb.pdf.

¹² Brett Heinz and Erica Jung, “The Military-Industrial-Think Tank Complex: Conflicts of Interest at the Center for a New American Security,” The Revolving Door Project, February 2021, <https://therevolvingdoorproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/2021-02-CNAS-Heinz-and-Jung.pdf>.

¹³ Kjølv Egeland and Benoît Pelopidas, “No such thing as a free donation? Research funding and conflicts of interest in nuclear weapons policy analysis,” *International Relations*, December 22, 2022, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/00471178221140000>.

¹⁴ *ibid.*

analysts interviewed by Egeland and Pelopidas reported engaging in self-censorship to avoid alienating funders. Perspective filtering then effectively serves to filter out the perspectives of experts who disagree with the biggest funders. As the authors explain, it is, “the systematic platforming or elevation of certain ways of viewing the world over others. Indeed, the most generous funders exercise significant influence on the evolution of the foreign policy marketplace of ideas by affecting which questions are asked and which expert milieus are enabled to thrive.”¹⁵

“Censorship becomes largely unnecessary when you only hire people who agree with the views of the censor...This helps to produce an artificial consensus: experts all seem to agree with one another only because most dissenting experts are excluded from the conversation,” explained Brett Heinz, co-author of the Revolving Door Project’s report on CNAS’s ties to the military industrial complex.¹⁶

While think tank experts might have myriad reasons for supporting increased U.S. military spending, some have an additional incentive: their employer is funded by military contractors profiting from the war.

This study aims to build upon these prior research efforts by analyzing think tank funding within the context of the debate about U.S. responses to the war in Ukraine. Russia’s illegal and disastrous invasion of Ukraine has dominated foreign policy debates for over a year and many think tanks have been some of the loudest champions for increasing U.S. military spending. While think tank experts might have myriad reasons for supporting increased U.S. military spending – not the least of which is protecting the Ukrainian people – some have an additional incentive: their employer is funded by military contractors profiting from the war. This offers an incentive for them to advocate for policies that benefit these firms. Through the mechanisms of donor censorship,

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ Ben Freeman, “New study reveals rampant conflicts of interest at think tanks,” *Responsible Statecraft*, January 11, 2023, <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2023/01/11/new-study-reveals-rampant-conflicts-of-interest-at-think-tanks/>.

self-censorship and perspective filtering identified in previous studies, the expectation here is that think tanks funded by the defense industry will be more likely to advocate for U.S. military solutions to the Ukraine war.

To analyze the impact of defense industry funding on the public debate about arming Ukraine, the remainder of this brief proceeds in four parts. The first section provides information on defense industry funding of the top rated U.S. foreign policy think tanks.

The following section analyzes these think tanks published articles and reports related to the war in Ukraine. The results of this analysis show that think tanks funded by the defense sector are much more likely to recommend policies that would be of financial benefit to the arms industry than are think tanks not funded by the defense industry.

The third section presents the results of an analysis of think tank media mentions related to U.S. military responses to the war in Ukraine. These results show that think tanks with more defense industry funding have an outsized presence in media related to arming Ukraine. This section also examines the content of these media mentions, with a specific focus on the top five most-mentioned think tanks. And, again, finds evidence that defense industry funded think tanks publicly advocate for policies that would benefit the defense industry.

The fourth section addresses a troubling lack of transparency on the part of many think tanks, which do not disclose their funders. Additionally, this section addresses the trend of media outlets citing scholars from think tanks – who do publicly disclose their defense industry funding – without disclosing this potential conflict of interest when those scholars offer support for policies that would benefit the defense industry. Finally, the brief concludes with recommendations that would improve transparency and trust in the think tank sector.

DoD and DoD contractor funding of the top foreign policy think tanks in the United States

This section provides an overview of defense industry funding of the top think tanks in the United States, offering a brief discussion of the prevalence of arms-maker money at some of the nation's leading think tanks. Previous research has shown that think tanks are awash in funding from the arms industry. An academic study focused on nuclear arms found that, of the world's top 40 foreign policy think tanks, 58 percent received funding "from companies involved in the production or maintenance of nuclear-weapon systems."¹⁷ The percentage was even higher at the most venerated think tanks, with eight of the top 10 think tanks in the world all reporting funding from nuclear-weapons makers or maintainers.

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A 2020 Center for International Policy report, "U.S. Government and Defense Contractor Funding of America's Top 50 Think Tanks," which I authored, found that 84 percent of the top U.S. think tanks accepted funding from defense contractors.¹⁸ The report also found widely divergent levels of donor transparency at the top think tanks in the United States, with 12 of the top 50 not disclosing any donor information. As discussed below, some think tanks still refuse to disclose their donors, or only disclose very limited donor information. To build upon these previous analyses, this brief provides an updated

¹⁷ Kjolv Egeland and Benoit Pelopidas, "No such thing as a free donation?"

¹⁸ Ben Freeman, "U.S. Government and defense contractor funding of America's top 50 think tanks," The Center for International Policy, October, 2020, https://3ba8a190-62da-4c98-86d2-893079d87083.usrfiles.com/ugd/3ba8a1_c7e3bfc7723d4021b54cbc145ae3f5eb.pdf.

accounting of defense contractor funding of the top foreign policy think tanks in the U.S.

¹⁹ Those think tanks are shown in Table 1 below.²⁰

To obtain information about the financial ties of these institutions to Pentagon contractors we took a three pronged approach. First, we sought out all publicly available information think tanks voluntarily provide about their funders. This information typically came from think tanks' annual reports and disclosures on their websites.

Second, given that think tanks are not required to publicly disclose any of their funders and many think tanks choose not to do so, we then sought out third-party sources of information about these think tanks' funding sources. This primarily consisted of credible investigative journalists reporting about these think tanks previously undisclosed funding sources.²¹ Finally, when neither of these methods yielded information about a think tanks' funding, the information was requested via email. In several cases – that are discussed in greater detail in the “Troubling Think Tank Transparency” section below – think tanks still opted to keep their funding sources secret.²²

For the 27 think tanks that we were able to obtain donor information from, we then evaluated whether any of their funding came from DoD contractors or the DoD itself.²³

¹⁹ The list of think tanks was obtained from the University of Pennsylvania's “2020 Global Go-To Think Tank Index Report” which, amongst other rankings, provides a list of the top “Foreign Policy and International Affairs,” think tanks in the world. James G. McGann, “2020 Global Go To Think Tank Index Report,” University of Pennsylvania, January 28, 2021, https://repository.upenn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1019&context=think_tanks.

²⁰ The Eurasia Group is ranked as a top foreign policy think tank in the University of Pennsylvania's “2020 Global Go-To Think Tank Index Report,” but it is actually a for-profit company, not a think tank. Thus it was excluded from this analysis.

²¹ For example, *The Intercept* obtained leaked emails from the UAE Ambassador to the United States, which showed the UAE had provided a previously undisclosed \$20 million donation to the Middle East Institute. Ryan Grim, “Gulf Government Gave Secret \$20 Million Gift To D.C. Think Tank,” *The Intercept*, August 9, 2017, <https://theintercept.com/2017/08/09/gulf-government-gave-secret-20-million-gift-to-d-c-think-tank/>. Additionally, while the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) does not publicly disclose its donors, at a public AEI event the moderator confirmed AEI receives funding from the defense sector.

²² Regardless of how donor information was obtained, our analysis focused on the most recent funding data available for each think tank.

²³ Specifically, we cross-checked all listed donors with the top 100 Department of Defense contractors in 2021, as tabulated by The Defense and Security Monitor: “Top 100 Defense Contractors 2021,” *The Defense and Security Monitor*, July 26, 2022, <https://dsm.forecastinternational.com/wordpress/2022/07/26/top-100-defense-contractors-2021/>.

Table 1 provides a list of these top foreign policy think tanks and indicates whether they received defense sector funding.

Table 1: Top ranked U.S. foreign policy think tanks and defense contractor funding²⁴

Think Tank Ranking	Think Tank Name	Defense Contractor Funding?
1	Brookings Institution	Yes
2	Carnegie Endowment for International Peace	Yes
3	Center for Strategic and International Studies	Yes
4	Wilson Center (Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars)	Yes
5	RAND Corporation	Yes
6	Atlantic Council	Yes
7	Council on Foreign Relations	Yes
8	Center for American Progress	Yes
9	Center for a New American Security	Yes
10	Hudson Institute	Yes
11	Heritage Foundation	No
12	Cato Institute	No
13	Hoover Institution	Not Disclosed
14	Human Rights Watch	No
15	Foreign Policy Research Institute	Yes
16	Chicago Council on Global Affairs	Yes
17	Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments	Yes
18	Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies	Not Disclosed
19	Asia Society Policy Institute	Yes
20	United States Institute of Peace	No
21	American Enterprise Institute	Yes
22	Belfer Center for Science and International Relations	Not Disclosed
23	Inter-American Dialogue	Yes
24	Stimson Center	Yes
25	Pacific Council on International Policy	Yes

²⁴ Think tanks are listed in order of their rankings in the University of Pennsylvania's, "2020 Global Go-To Think Tank Index Report."

26	Middle East Institute	Yes
27	Center for Transatlantic Relations	Not Disclosed
28	Newlines Institute for Strategy and Policy	No
29	Institute for Science and International Security	Yes
30	German Marshall Fund of the United States	Yes
31	Independent Institute	No
32	Global Security Institute	Not Disclosed
33	International Peace Institute	Not Disclosed

As Table 1 indicates, the vast majority of the top foreign policy think tanks in the United States are funded by the Pentagon or its contractors. Of the 27 think tanks where donor information was obtained, more than two-thirds (78 percent) received funding from the Pentagon or a Pentagon contractor. Among the top ten ranked foreign policy think tanks in the United States, this figure jumps to 100 percent.

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The extent of funding each of these top foreign policy think tanks receives from the defense industry varies considerably. Unfortunately, the precise amount of defense industry funding most think tanks receive cannot be determined, as think tanks are not required to disclose their funders and, even amongst those that do, many think tanks list donors without indicating the amount of donations and others just list donors in ranges (e.g., \$250,000 to \$499,999). We can, however, arrive at a conservative estimate of defense industry funding for some think tanks by taking the lower end of the ranges each defense contractor is listed in.

Using this imperfect and conservative measure, it becomes clear that many of the top rated foreign policy think tanks are awash in defense industry dollars. For example, the Center for Strategic and International Studies, the Atlantic Council, and the Center for a

New American Security all receive more than a million dollars annually from the defense sector.²⁵ As discussed below, the extent of reliance on defense industry funding appears to be correlated with these think tanks' support for policies that would benefit the defense industry.

The RAND Corporation works directly for U.S. national security agencies – including the Army, Air Force, Department of Homeland Security, and other defense organizations – which provide more than half of the think tanks revenue.²⁶ However, because of these close ties with national security agencies, RAND has adopted a policy to “not accept funds (i.e., project sponsorship or philanthropic support) from firms or segments of firms whose primary business is that of supplying equipment, materiel, or services to the U.S. Department of Defense.”²⁷

Defense industry funded think tanks offer support for U.S. military responses to the war in Ukraine

While the vast majority of the top foreign policy think tanks in the United States receive defense contractor funding, this may have little or no impact on these think tanks' work. After all, many think tanks publicly proclaim that they maintain strict standards of intellectual independence that insulates their scholars from donor influence.²⁸ On the other hand, previous research on think tank funding has repeatedly found that funders are able to influence think tank work through the mechanisms of censorship, self-censorship, and perspective filtering mentioned above. This section seeks to investigate this phenomenon in the context of the debate about increasing U.S. military

²⁵ This is based upon each think tanks most recently available donor information available here: “CNAS Supporters: Contributions from October 1, 2021 to September 30, 2022,” The Center for a New American Security, <https://www.cnas.org/support-cnas/cnas-supporters>; “Our Donors: Corporations,” The Center for Strategic and International Studies, <https://www.csis.org/about/financial-information/donors/corporations>; “2021 Honor Roll of Contributors,” The Atlantic Council, May 10, 2022, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/2021-annual-report-honor-roll-of-contributors/>.

²⁶ “How We’re Funded,” The RAND Corporation, April 11, 2022, <https://www.rand.org/about/how-we-are-funded.html>.

²⁷ “Frequently Asked Questions: What is an FFRDC?” The RAND Corporation. <https://www.rand.org/about/faq.html#what-is-an-ffrdc>.

²⁸ See, for example: “Intellectual Independence Policy,” The Atlantic Council, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/intellectual-independence-policy/>, and “Support CNAS,” Center for a New American Security, <https://www.cnas.org/support-cnas>.

spending as a result of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. In short, this analysis analyzing the content of the top ten think tanks (listed in Table 1) finds a pattern of Pentagon and Pentagon contractor funded think tanks offering greater support for U.S. military responses to the Ukraine war than think tanks without this military industry funding.

Content analysis of think tank publications

To investigate think tanks' public support for increasing U.S. military spending as a result of the war in Ukraine this section presents the results of an analysis of the top ranked foreign policy think tanks' 10 most recent publications related to the Ukraine war, prior to the one-year anniversary of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2023.

Think tanks with financial ties to the arms industry often support policies that would benefit the arms industry.

The results of this analysis demonstrate that think tanks with financial ties to the arms industry often support policies that would benefit the arms industry. Some of the articles from think tanks with defense industry funding were even similarly titled, like a CSIS article, "Aid to Ukraine: Much More than Tanks,"²⁹ and an Atlantic Council article, "Tanks are vital but Ukraine will need much more to defeat Putin's Russia."³⁰ AEI also published multiple articles supportive of further escalations in U.S. military weaponry provided to Ukraine. One piece, for example, argued that Ukraine receiving Western tanks may "presage the need for other advanced capabilities, whether longer-range missiles or fourth-generation fighter aircraft, in the months ahead."³¹ Another AEI

²⁹ Mark F. Cancian, "Aid to Ukraine: Much More than Tanks," The Center for Strategic and International Studies, February 2, 2023, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/aid-ukraine-much-more-tanks>.

³⁰ Jeffrey Crimino and Shelby Magid, "Tanks are vital but Ukraine will need much more to defeat Putin's Russia," Atlantic Council, January 25, 2023, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/tanks-are-vital-but-ukraine-will-need-much-more-to-defeat-putins-russia/>.

³¹ Hal Brands, "Ukraine and the contingency of global order," *Foreign Affairs*, February 14, 2023, <https://www.aei.org/op-eds/ukraine-and-the-contingency-of-global-order/>.

publication argued that Ukraine’s greatest vulnerability “pertains to the amount of assistance” it receives from the United States.³²

Other think tanks that received funding from the defense industry made similar arguments. The Brookings Institution, for example, published articles entitled “Arming Ukraine without crossing red lines” and the “The Long War in Ukraine,”³³ which argue that the United States can send tanks and other vehicles, missiles, and even aircraft without violating any red lines and raising the costs of escalation. A Wilson Center article, “Four Reasons Why Supporting Ukraine is a Good Investment”³⁴ takes this argument a step further and contends that military aid is critical not just to help Ukrainians, but to avoid global war, improve the U.S. image abroad, showcase the superiority of American security, and even protect LGBT rights. A report by the RAND Corporation, “How the Ukraine War Accelerates Defense Strategy”³⁵ takes this seemingly new version of Ronald Reagan’s famous “Peace through strength” argument a step further and says that fighting Russia through Ukraine improves America’s position against China as well. At a more functional level, a Council on Foreign Relations article, “The West is Sending Light Tanks to Ukraine. Will They Make a Difference?”³⁶ argues that sending light tanks and other armored vehicles to Ukraine could make a difference at all levels of warfare: operational, tactical, and strategic. The Center for a New American Security article, “The Surprising Success of U.S. Military Aid to Ukraine”³⁷ argues that a number of U.S. supplied weapons, including “howitzers, High Mobility

³² Giselle Donnelly, “Keep the new Russian offensive in perspective,” *The Bulwark*, February 16, 2023, <https://www.aei.org/op-eds/keep-the-new-russian-offensive-in-perspective/>.

³³ Stefen Pifer, “Arming Ukraine without crossing Russia’s red lines,” The Brookings Institution, April 6, 2023, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2023/04/06/arming-ukraine-without-crossing-russias-red-lines/>;

Ivo H. Daalder and James Goldgeier, “The Long War in Ukraine,” *Foreign Affairs*, January 9, 2023, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/long-war-ukraine-russia-protracted-conflict?mc_cid=f5e24abb7f&mc_eid=14971859d0.

³⁴ Vitaliy Syzov, “Four reasons why supporting Ukraine is a good investment,” The Wilson Center, January 11, 2023, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/four-reasons-why-supporting-ukraine-good-investment>.

³⁵ Jim Mitre, “How the Ukraine war accelerates the defense strategy,” *War on the Rocks*, March 21, 2023, <https://warontherocks.com/2023/03/how-the-ukraine-war-accelerates-the-defense-strategy/>.

³⁶ Timothy J. MacDonald, “The West is sending light tanks to Ukraine. Will They Make a Difference?” The Council on Foreign Relations, January 11, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/west-sending-light-tanks-ukraine-will-they-make-difference>.

³⁷ Polina Beliakova and Rachel Tecott Metz, “The Surprising Success of U.S. Military Aid to Ukraine,” *Foreign Affairs*, March 17, 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/war-security-assistance-lessons>.

Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS), anti-ship missiles, air-defense capabilities, and infantry fighting vehicles and tanks,” were all vital for Ukrainian success on the battlefield.

Much of the Hudson Institute’s publications related to Ukraine similarly called for U.S. military responses to the conflict. For example in “Ukraine Should Take Crimea from Russia”³⁸ a Hudson institute scholar declares that to retake Crimea, “All Kyiv needs is Western weapons and munitions. For the sake of stability – within and outside the region – let’s give Ukraine the tools it needs to get the job done now.” In “NATO’s New Opportunity: US Commitments in Europe after Russia’s War in Ukraine,” a Hudson scholar argues the U.S. should continue isolating Russia after the war is over and even “encourage Russia’s defense customers to consider new, more reliable suppliers for their militaries.”³⁹

Some of the articles published by these think tanks, particularly the Atlantic Council, were dismissive of diplomatic solutions to the conflict, arguing for a “rejection of any compromise with the Kremlin,” for example.⁴⁰ Another Atlantic Council article called for a marked increase in hostilities in the war, arguing that “Ukraine has the right of proportionate retaliation. This begins with a right to destroy critical infrastructure in Russia and plunge Moscow and other cities into darkness.”⁴¹

On the other hand, think tanks that received little or no funding from the arms industry published articles that had little resemblance to their defense industry funded peers. Much of the work of The Carnegie Endowment, which receives minimal defense industry funding compared to other top think tanks, focused on comparative politics and

³⁸ Luke Coffey, “Ukraine Should Take Crimea from Russia,” Hudson Institute, April 17, 2023, <https://www.hudson.org/ukraine-should-take-crimea-russia>.

³⁹ Peter Rough, “NATO’s New Opportunity: US Commitments in Europe after Russia’s War in Ukraine,” Hudson Institute, July 10, 2022, <https://www.hudson.org/foreign-policy/natos-new-opportunity-us-commitments-europe-after-russias-war-ukraine>.

⁴⁰ Mariia Zolkinal, “Ukrainians are united in rejection of any compromise with the Kremlin,” The Atlantic Council, February 6, 2023, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/ukrainians-are-united-in-rejection-of-any-compromise-with-the-kremlin/>.

⁴¹ Ira Straus, “Equity for Ukraine,” The Atlantic Council, January 16, 2023, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/equity-for-ukraine/>.

Russia's domestic institutions.⁴² Many of these pieces were expository rather than prescriptive. The few prescriptive pieces advocated for passing existing security obligations to Europe, thereby reducing U.S. military involvement.⁴³ The expository pieces covered the interplay between domestic institutions in Russia – political, economic, and religious. Interestingly, there were multiple pieces on how Russia's own invasion has increased rent-seeking from well-connected players, including low-level politicians,⁴⁴ oil companies,⁴⁵ and private mercenary groups.⁴⁶ There were also multiple pieces that focused on the conflicts between Church and State in both Ukraine⁴⁷ and Russia.⁴⁸ The remaining pieces focused less on the United States and more on in-depth analysis of the relations between Russia and other relevant parties, such as Ukraine,⁴⁹ Serbia,⁵⁰ and the former Soviet states.⁵¹

Think tanks that received little or no funding from the arms industry published articles that had little resemblance to their defense industry funded peers.

The Center for American Progress – whose only defense industry funder is the tech-giant Microsoft, which also receives hundreds of millions of dollars in DoD contracts every year – was also much more measured in its work on the Ukraine

⁴² "2022 Annual Report," The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, https://ceipfiles.s3.amazonaws.com/pdf/2022_AnnualReport_final.pdf.

⁴³ "Lessons from Russia's Invasion of Ukraine," Defense Priorities Symposium, February 13, 2023, <https://www.defensepriorities.org/symposium/lessons-from-russias-invasion-of-ukraine/#BacktotheTop>.

⁴⁴ Andrey Pertsev, "How the war in Ukraine is boosting Russian politicians' careers," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, January 25, 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/88874>.

⁴⁵ Sergey Vakulenko, "Double Win: How Russian oil companies defied sanctions and paid less tax," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, February 15, 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/89052>.

⁴⁶ Maxim Samorukov, "What the Wagner mercenaries' row reveals about Serbia's Relations with Russia," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, January 26, 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/88885>.

⁴⁷ Ksenia Luchenko, "Can the Ukrainian Orthodox Church survive the war with Russia?" Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, January 17, 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/88811>.

⁴⁸ Ksenia Luchenko, "Why the Russian orthodox church supports the war in Ukraine," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, January 31, 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/88916>.

⁴⁹ Konstantin Skorkin, "What the Return of Kremlin Ally Medvedchuk Means for the War in Ukraine," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, January 20, 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/88849>.

⁵⁰ Maxim Samorukov and Vuk Vuksanovic, "Untarnished by War: Why Russia's Soft Power Is So Resilient in Serbia," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, January 18, 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/88828/>.

⁵¹ Alexander Baunov, "Putin is launching an assault on the last vestiges of Soviet identity," *The Financial Times*, January 22, 2023, <https://www.ft.com/content/c24ebf22-9d81-4b2f-bb1b-0f880afdfcde>.

conflict.⁵² For example, the article “Why the United States Must Stay the Course on Ukraine” supported U.S. efforts in Ukraine, but did not support any particular kind of security assistance or defense product.⁵³ It also mentioned the need for greater defense spending and leadership from the European Union in the long run as opposed to a purely U.S.–led effort.

The Heritage Foundation has, historically, accepted defense contractor funding. In fact, a prior think tank funding report found that Heritage was one of the top think tank recipients of defense industry funding from 2014–18.⁵⁴ But a Heritage Foundation spokesperson explained via e–mail that the organization has now severed ties with the defense sector. According to Rob Bluey, Vice President of Communications for the Heritage Foundation, “This year, Heritage made the decision to refuse funding from the defense industry, which protects our ability to provide independent analysis without even the perception of influence on the part of any defense contractor.” The organization’s publications appear to reflect some of this independence. For example, the Heritage’s President has even publicly proclaimed a readiness to confront “well–connected defense contractors... in order to keep the nation both solvent and secure.”⁵⁵

The publications by Human Rights Watch – another think tank that does not accept funding from the U.S. military or its contractors – primarily documented war crimes by Russia with a special focus on the role that particular kinds of weapons can play in exacerbating said crimes.⁵⁶ The two pieces that focused exclusively on weapons,

⁵² “Spending by Prime Award: Microsoft,” USASpending.gov, <https://www.usaspending.gov/search/?hash=667855cedaab5366d55387801ff939c4>.

⁵³ Johan Hassel, Kate Donald, Laura Kilbury, and Sarnata Reynolds, “Why the United States must stay the course on Ukraine,” The Center for American Progress, February 22, 2023, <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/why-the-united-states-must-stay-the-course-on-ukraine/>.

⁵⁴ Ben Freeman, “U.S. Government and defense contractor funding of America’s top 50 think tanks,” The Center for International Policy, October 2020, https://3ba8a190-62da-4c98-86d2-893079d87083.usrfiles.com/ugd/3ba8a1_c7e3bfc7723d4021b54cbc145ae3f5eb.pdf.

⁵⁵ Kevin Roberts, “Getting Serious About Responsible Defense Spending,” *The American Conservative*, January 31, 2023, <https://www.theamericanconservative.com/getting-serious-about-responsible-defense-spending/>.

⁵⁶ Human Rights Watch is somewhat anomalous in this list of top foreign policy think tanks in that its mission is focused explicitly and solely on human rights, whereas many of the other top think tanks mentioned here have a

highlighted the use of landmines and cluster munitions as weapons that disproportionately kill civilians.⁵⁷ The remaining pieces reported on different war crimes by Russia, including kidnapping, torture, and attacks on energy grids, hospitals, and cultural sites.⁵⁸ The one piece that highlighted a response to the war crimes mentioned using multilateral organizations to pursue further investigations and use accountability mechanisms to inform the rest of the world.⁵⁹

Publications from think tanks with little or no funding from the Pentagon or Pentagon contractors typically stood in stark contrast to those funded by the defense industry in their emphasis on expository rather than prescriptive analysis, support for diplomatic solutions, and a focus on the impact of the war on different parts of society and the region.

In sum, publications from think tanks with little or no funding from the Pentagon or Pentagon contractors typically stood in stark contrast to those funded by the defense industry in their emphasis on expository rather than prescriptive analysis, support for

much wider gamut. This is at least part of the explanation for why none of the publications or media mentions of Human Rights Watch reviewed in this report address broader questions of arms to Ukraine.

⁵⁷ "Ukraine: Banned Landmines Harm Civilians," Human Rights Watch, January 31, 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/01/31/ukraine-banned-landmines-harm-civilians>; Ukraine: Apparent Cluster Munitions Hit Kherson," Human Rights Watch, December 13, 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/12/13/ukraine-apparent-cluster-munitions-hit-kherson>.

⁵⁸ "Russian Forces Forcibly Disappear Ukrainian Activist," Human Rights Watch, December 22, 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/12/22/russian-forces-forcibly-disappear-ukrainian-activist>; Aleks Lokhmutov, "Russian police are torturing anti-war activists," Human Rights Watch, October 20, 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/10/20/russian-police-are-torturing-anti-war-activists>; "Ukraine: Russian attacks on energy grid threaten civilians," Human Rights Watch, December 6, 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/12/06/ukraine-russian-attacks-energy-grid-threaten-civilians>; Kseniya Kvitka, "Doctor describes toll of attack on hospital in southern Ukraine," Human Rights Watch, December 19, 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/12/19/doctor-describes-toll-attack-hospital-southern-ukraine>; "Ukraine: Russians pillage Kherson cultural institutions," Human Rights Watch, December 20, 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/12/20/ukraine-russians-pillage-kherson-cultural-institutions>.

⁵⁹ "Ukraine: Russian invasion causing widespread suffering for civilians," Human Rights Watch, January 12, 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/01/12/ukraine-russian-invasion-causing-widespread-suffering-civilians>.

diplomatic solutions, and a focus on the impact of the war on different parts of society and the region.

These findings do not demonstrate funding is leading any individual scholar to adopt positions they might not otherwise have taken. The challenges of demonstrating any causal relationship in that regard are well beyond the scope of this analysis. The findings here show a correlation between funding and publications by think tank scholars, but do not necessarily establish causality.

However, if previous research on the impact of funding on think tank analyses is any indication, defense industry funding could be influencing think tank work through a combination of donor censorship, self-censorship, and perspective filtering, wherein scholars that are critical of defense industry donors are simply filtered out of top foreign policy think tanks.⁶⁰

Media mentions of the top U.S. foreign policy think tanks related to the Ukraine war

Media outlets rely upon an immense variety of sources, including current and former government officials, academics, industry experts, and many others. It is beyond the scope and objectives of this analysis to do a full accounting of all sources used by media outlets.⁶¹ The focus here is on one aspect of this wider universe of sources used in media – i.e., think tanks. Specifically, we ask the following questions: Are military contractor funded think tanks dominating the debate about appropriate U.S. military responses to the Ukraine war? And, is the media further magnifying their already dominant presence in the overall think tank space?

⁶⁰ See, for example: Brett Heinz and Erica Jung, “The Military-Industrial-Think Tank Complex” and Egeland and Pelopidas, “No such thing as a free donation?”

⁶¹ There is some evidence that think tank studies are more likely to be mentioned in media outlets than other sources, including academic studies. See for example:

Holly Yettick, “Media, Think Tanks, and Educational Research,” American Association of University Professors, May–June 2011,

https://www.aaup.org/article/media-think-tanks-and-educational-research#.Y_kkP-zMLrB.

To answer these questions we analyzed mentions of the think tanks listed in Table 1 in the The New York Times, Washington Post, and Wall Street Journal.⁶² To account for the fact that most of these think tanks do much more than foreign policy research – and are quoted quite liberally for it – we used Factiva to search each of these three media outlets from March 1, 2022 to January 31, 2023 for mentions of each of these think tanks alongside other keywords to focus just on media related to military responses to the war in Ukraine.⁶³

Table 2: Think Tank Media Mentions Related to U.S. Military Support for Ukraine (ranked by media mentions)

Think Tank	Total Media Mentions	Defense Contractor Funding?
Center for Strategic and International Studies	157	Yes
Atlantic Council	157	Yes
Human Rights Watch	118	No
Carnegie Endowment for International Peace	109	Yes
American Enterprise Institute	101	Yes
Council on Foreign Relations	88	Yes
German Marshall Fund of the United States	79	Yes
Brookings Institution	66	Yes
Foreign Policy Research Institute	58	Yes
RAND Corporation	53	Yes
Center for a New American Security	47	Yes
Chicago Council on Global Affairs	34	Yes
Stimson Center	31	Yes
Middle East Institute	23	Yes
Hudson Institute	19	Yes
Hoover Institution	17	Not Disclosed

⁶² These three outlets were chosen for their national reach, as well as their being the media outlets analyzed in prior analyses of think tank media visibility, including: Timothy Beryl Bland, “Predators and Principles.”

⁶³ Specifically, to be counted as a media mention in this analysis the article had to mention “Ukraine” or “Ukrainian” at least two times, and at least once in the first 500 words. The article also had to mention at least one of the following items: “Arms,” “Military assistance,” “Security assistance,” “Weapons,” “Munitions,” “Tanks,” “Aircraft,” “Bomb,” “Bombs,” “Bombing,” or “Air strikes.”

Heritage Foundation	14	No
Wilson Center (Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars)	13	Yes
Belfer Center for Science and International Relations	11	Not Disclosed
Institute for Science and International Security	9	Yes
Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies	8	Not Disclosed
Asia Society Policy Institute	8	Yes
Center for American Progress	7	Yes
Cato Institute	5	No
Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments	5	Yes
Newlines Institute for Strategy and Policy	5	No
United States Institute of Peace	3	No
Independent Institute	2	No
Inter-American Dialogue	0	Yes
Pacific Council on International Policy	0	Yes
Center for Transatlantic Relations	0	Not Disclosed
Global Security Institute	0	Not Disclosed
International Peace Institute	0	Not Disclosed

Table 2 provides the results of this analysis and shows that the vast majority of media mentions of think tanks in articles about the Ukraine war are from think tanks whose funders profit from U.S. military spending, arms sales, and, in many cases, directly from U.S. involvement in the Ukraine war. Of the 1,247 think tank media mentions that we tracked related to U.S. arms and the war in Ukraine, 1,064 (85 percent) were from think tanks that receive funding from the defense industry, and just 147 (12 percent) were from think tanks that do not receive defense industry support.⁶⁴ In other words, when citing think tanks, these media outlets were more than seven times as likely to cite a think tank with defense sector support as they were to cite a think tank without it.

⁶⁴ The remaining 36 media mentions were by think tanks whose funders could not be determined.



Media outlets were more than seven times as likely to cite a think tank with defense sector support as they were to cite a think tank without it.

Human Rights Watch is one of the few top think tanks in the United States that does not accept financial support from defense contractors; that is by design, because the organization's rules prohibit taking money from industries or individuals that they work on. "This is central to our reputation," as an organization that regularly exposes the harm caused by weapons in war, explained Arvind Ganesan, the Director of HRW's Economic Justice and Rights Division in an interview. Ganesan explained that HRW has policies and systems in place to avoid conflicts of interest and that the organization, "tries to be as diligent about how we raise our money, as we are about how we do our work."

As is discussed below, the content of media mentions of Human Rights Watch reflected this lack of arms-maker funding and was, instead, critical of human right abuses committed in the war, including those committed with U.S. made arms. Human Rights Watch was, however, an anomaly being the only top 15 most mentioned think tank that does not accept defense contractor funding.

The remainder of Table 2 is dominated by think tanks with substantial defense sector funding. The Atlantic Council and the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) tied for most media mentions at 157. Both think tanks are transparent about their funding, providing detailed publicly available lists of their donors, and both are heavily funded by the arms industry. CSIS's most recent publicly available information shows the think tank received at least \$2.2 million from Pentagon contractors last year.⁶⁵ Similarly, the Atlantic Council reported receiving at least \$1.3 million from the Pentagon and its contractors in 2021.⁶⁶ Both think tanks reported receiving hundreds of

⁶⁵ "About CSIS > Financial Information > Our Donors . Corporations," The Center for Strategic and International Studies, <https://www.csis.org/about/financial-information/donors/corporations>.

⁶⁶ "2021 Honor roll of contributors," The Atlantic Council, May 10, 2022, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/2021-annual-report-honor-roll-of-contributors/>.

thousands of dollars from Lockheed Martin and Raytheon, which have already been awarded billions of dollars in Pentagon contracts as a result of the war in Ukraine.⁶⁷

Content analysis of media mentions

Media mentions alone indicate that think tanks funded by the defense sector dominate public debate about U.S. responses to Ukraine. But a count of media mentions only tells part of the story and, critically, doesn't account for the content of think tank commentary in these media outlets.

This section analyzes the content of think tank media mentions to gauge the extent to which think tanks funded by the defense sector are arguing for increased U.S. military spending as a result of the Ukraine war. In short, the investigation found that think tanks with funding from the arms industry offer support for increasing U.S. military spending as a result of the Ukraine war and are, at times, dismissive of diplomatic solutions to the conflict.

Think tanks with funding from the arms industry offer support for increasing U.S. military spending as a result of the Ukraine war and are, at times, dismissive of diplomatic solutions to the conflict.

To gauge the tenor of think tanks' public commentary, we conducted a content analysis of media mentions for the top five most mentioned think tanks in Table 2. For the sake of making the scope manageable, this content analysis was limited to the last 10 media

⁶⁷ Jen Judson, "Raytheon wins \$1.2 billion surface-to-air missile order for Ukraine," *Defense News*, December 1, 2022, <https://www.defensenews.com/land/2022/12/01/raytheon-wins-12-billion-surface-to-air-missile-order-for-ukraine/#:~:text=WASHINGTON%20%E2%80%94%20The%20U.S.%20Army%20awarded, Missile%20System%20batteries%20for%20Ukraine>.

Jen Judson, "Lockheed gets HIMARS contract to replenish stock sent to Ukraine," *Defense News*, December 2, 2022, <https://www.defensenews.com/industry/2022/12/02/lockheed-gets-himars-contract-to-replenish-stock-sent-to-ukraine/>.

mentions for each think tank during the time period of this analysis, which ended on January 31, 2023.

Think tanks that receive substantial funding from military contractors are regularly mentioned in media outlets offering support for military solutions to the conflict. In the lead up to the U.S. decision to send Abrams tanks to Ukraine, for example, these think tanks were quick to offer their support for this uptick in U.S. military involvement. The President of AEI, for example, was cited in multiple Wall Street Journal articles, explaining that "Tanks and armored personnel carriers are essential," and agreeing to provide them will "let Ukraine know that it can afford to risk and expend more of its current arsenal of tanks in counteroffensive operations because it can count on getting replacements for them."⁶⁸ Similarly, a New York Times article explained "officials worry that American tanks would be seen as a sign of escalation by the United States," but a CSIS scholar dismissed these concerns, arguing that the United States has already given precision guided munitions and other advanced weapons which had already, "raised the escalatory roof."⁶⁹

These think tanks also offered considerable support for increasing U.S. military spending and production of artillery and munitions as a result of the war in Ukraine. A CSIS scholar, for example, told the New York Times that, "With the front line mostly stationary, artillery has become the most important combat arm."⁷⁰ The Washington Post cited a CSIS study that offers a variety of solutions to the problem of low U.S. munitions stockpiles as a result of the Ukraine war, nearly all necessitating increased

⁶⁸ Gordon Lubold and Michael R. Gordon, "U.S., allies fail to persuade Germany to allow tanks for Ukraine," *The Wall Street Journal*, January 20, 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-allies-step-up-ukraine-military-aid-as-german-hesitancy-over-tanks-threatens-rift-11674218187>; Michael R. Gordon, Gordon Lubold, and Bojan Pancevski, "U.S., Germany approve sending tanks to Ukraine," *The Wall Street Journal*, January 25, 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/germany-agrees-to-send-tanks-to-ukraine-11674643787>.

⁶⁹ Lara Jakes and Erika Solomon, "Why Tanks are Tripping Up the West," *The New York Times*, January 19, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/19/world/europe/tanks-ukraine-germany-us.html>.

⁷⁰ Eric, Schmitt, Adam Entous, Ronen Bergman, John Ismay, and Thomas Gibbons-Neff, "Pentagon Sends U.S. Arms Stored in Israel to Ukraine," *The New York Times*, January 17, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/17/us/politics/ukraine-israel-weapons.html>.

U.S. military spending.⁷¹ A subsequent CSIS study “Empty Bins in a Wartime Environment,” which similarly recommends a number of solutions to this problem that would significantly increase U.S. military spending, was widely cited in media outlets, including the Wall Street Journal.⁷² None of these articles or the report itself mentions CSIS funding from defense contractors who have already been awarded billions of dollars in contracts to arm Ukraine.⁷³ When asked why CSIS did not disclose this industry funding in the report, a spokesperson for CSIS explained that, “CSIS is an independent non-profit with a diverse funding base and the conclusions of our scholars are theirs alone,” and that “CSIS discloses our donors on our website. We also disclose funders of our research reports in the reports themselves. We do this because we believe our audience should know who supports our work.”⁷⁴ Yet, the spokesperson explained that this only applies to research with dedicated external funding and that donors are not disclosed in reports, like the one in question, that are undertaken with general support funding.

In some cases scholars from think tanks with defense industry backing were also arguing against diplomatic solutions to the conflict. For instance, an Atlantic Council scholar was quoted in the New York Times arguing that “The United States and European partners should not forestall the possibility, even likelihood, of more Ukrainian military success by insisting on a cease-fire in place or by assuming that it’s impossible for Ukraine to, for example, liberate the Donbas or even Crimea.”⁷⁵ An AEI scholar told the Washington Post that a statement by General Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint

⁷¹ Jason Willick, “Opinion: Why the U.S. must calculate a ‘solvency’ risk as it arms Ukraine,” *The Washington Post*, January 19, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/01/19/ukraine-risks-pentagon-military-supplies/>; Mark F. Cancian, “Rebuilding U.S. Inventories: Six Critical Systems,” The Center for Strategic and International Studies, January 9, 2023, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/rebuilding-us-inventories-six-critical-systems>.

⁷² Seth G. Jones, “Empty Bins in a Wartime Environment: The Challenge to the U.S. Defense Industrial Base,” The Center for Strategic and International Studies, January 23, 2023, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/empty-bins-wartime-environment-challenge-us-defense-industrial-base>; Gordon Lubold, “U.S. Weapons Industry Unprepared for a China Conflict, Report Says,” *The Wall Street Journal*, January 23, 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-weapons-industry-unprepared-for-a-china-conflict-report-says-11674479916>.

⁷³ Doug Cameron, “Why Ukraine Hasn’t Been a Boon to U.S. Defense Companies,” *The Wall Street Journal*, January 31, 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/why-ukraine-hasnt-been-a-boon-to-u-s-defense-companies-11675176026>.

⁷⁴ Private email communication with Alexander Kisling, the Vice President for Communications at CSIS.

⁷⁵ Peter Baker, “Top U.S. General Urges Diplomacy in Ukraine While Biden Advisers Resist,” *The New York Times*, November 10, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/10/us/politics/biden-ukraine-russia-diplomacy.html>.

Chiefs of Staff, that neither Ukraine nor Russia could achieve a full military victory was “unhelpful.”⁷⁶

The content of media mentions is markedly different for think tanks with little, or no, financial ties to the weapons industry. None of the media mentions of the Carnegie Endowment, which receives less than 1 percent of its annual funding from defense contractors, indicated support for increased U.S. defense spending or arms sales as a result of the Ukraine war.⁷⁷ Instead, the Carnegie Endowment provided more general commentary about the war. For example, the New York Times editorial board cited a Carnegie report which argues the Russian economy will face decades of stagnation as a result of the war,⁷⁸ and the Washington Post quoted a Carnegie expert on growing political tensions between Putin and the Russian elite.⁷⁹ One Carnegie scholar even offered a detailed accounting of the costs – both human and financial – of U.S. military conflicts.⁸⁰

The content of media mentions is markedly different for think tanks with little, or no, financial ties to the weapons industry.

Commentary from Human Rights Watch – which receives no funding from weapons-makers – was agnostic on the issue of providing U.S. military assistance to Ukraine. Instead the think tank exclusively focused on human rights abuses in the conflict. Many of these media mentions were related to a Human Rights Watch report on the Russian military using cluster munitions against civilians in Ukraine.⁸¹ “Residents

⁷⁶ Dan Lamothe, “Top U.S. general meets Ukrainian counterpart near edge of war zone,” *The Washington Post*, January 17, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2023/01/17/milley-zaluzhny-poland-ukraine-russia/>.

⁷⁷ “2022 Annual Report,” The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, https://ceipfiles.s3.amazonaws.com/pdf/2022_AnnualReport_final.pdf.

⁷⁸ New York Times Editorial Board, “A brutal new phase of Putin’s terrible war in Ukraine.” *The New York Times*, January 21, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/21/opinion/russia-ukraine.html>.

⁷⁹ Catherine Belton, “Putin, unaccustomed to losing, is increasingly isolated as war falters,” *The Washington Post*, December 30, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/12/30/putin-isolated-russia-ukraine-war/>.

⁸⁰ Stephen Wertheim, “World War III Begins With forgetting,” *The New York Times*, December 2, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/02/opinion/america-world-war-iii.html>.

⁸¹ “Ukraine: Apparent cluster munitions hit Kherson.” Human Rights Watch, December 13, 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/12/13/ukraine-apparent-cluster-munitions-hit-kherson>.

of Kherson survived eight months of Russian occupation, and are finally free from fear of torture, only to be subjected to new indiscriminate attacks, apparently including cluster munitions,” an HRW scholar told The Washington Post.⁸²

Lack of transparency at many think tanks and media outlets

As previously mentioned, a growing body of research has demonstrated the impact that funders can have on the work of think tanks. This has contributed to remarkably low levels of trust in think tanks.⁸³ All of these studies point to the need for donor transparency, as well as conflict of interest avoidance and disclosure, as Eli Clifton and I recommended in the Quincy Institute brief, “Restoring Trust in the Think Tank Sector.”⁸⁴

Unfortunately, many of the think tanks mentioned here have not heeded that advice; nor have media outlets taken steps to alert their readers to these easily identifiable conflicts of interest.

Nearly a third of the top foreign policy think tanks in the United States do not provide the public with donor information.

This analysis found that nearly a third (10 of 33) of the top foreign policy think tanks in the United States do not provide the public with donor information. This includes many of the think tanks that were cited most by media outlets in the analysis discussed above. The American Enterprise Institute, for example, does not publicly provide donor information and did not respond to multiple requests for comment about its defense

⁸² Rick Noack, Kelsey Ables, Victoria Bisset, and Adam Taylor, “Ukraine live briefing: \$1B in additional aid pledged at Paris conference; U.S. prepares to provide advanced Patriot system,” *The Washington Post*, December 13, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/12/13/russia-ukraine-war-latest-updates/>.

⁸³ Tom Hashemi and Aidan Muller, “Forging the think tank narrative US,” *Cast From Clay*, March 21, 2018, <https://castfromclay.co.uk/big-picture/forging-the-think-tank-narrative-perceptions-usa/>.

⁸⁴ Eli Clifton and Ben Freeman, “Restoring Trust in the Think Tank Sector,” *The Quincy Institute*, May 10, 2021, <https://quincyinst.org/report/restoring-trust-in-the-think-tank-sector/>.

industry ties, despite the Chairman of its Board of Directors, who has donated at least \$20 million to the organization, being the head of the Carlyle Group, which owns multiple U.S. military contractors.⁸⁵ AEI scholars have noted the organization’s defense industry funding at public events, however. For example, at an AEI event featuring panelists from Lockheed Martin and Northrop Grumman, the moderator explained that, “We’d be remiss if we didn’t mention that both Lockheed and Northrop provide philanthropic support to AEI. We are grateful for that support.”⁸⁶ Unfortunately, this information is still missing from the organization’s website.

Even some think tanks that do not accept defense industry funding also do not publicly disclose their donors. A spokesperson for the Cato Institute, for example, confirmed the organization does not accept defense industry funding and provided a copy of the think tank’s annual report that includes donor information.⁸⁷ However, the Cato Institute’s publicly available version of this annual report does not disclose this donor information.⁸⁸ Similarly, a spokesperson for Human Rights Watch provided a version of the organization’s annual report that includes donor information, but these 10 pages are omitted from the organization’s publicly available version of the annual report.⁸⁹

⁸⁵ Arthur C. Brooks, “American Enterprise Institute announces \$20 million gift from Daniel A. D’Aniello in support of free enterprise,” AEI, February 25, 2014, <https://www.aei.org/press/american-enterprise-institute-announces-20-million-gift-from-daniel-a-daniello-in-support-of-free-enterprise/>.

“Aerospace & Government Services Investment Portfolio,” The Carlyle Group, <https://www.carlyle.com/our-business/global-private-equity/aerospace%20&%20government%20services/portfolio>.

⁸⁶ “Joint All–Domain Command and Control: Bringing the DoD’s Innovative Command and Control to Life,” The American Enterprise Institute Event, April 19, 2022, <https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/220419-Bringing-the-DODs-innovative-command-control-to-life.pdf?x91208>.

⁸⁷ Private email exchange with Simone Shenny Berdahl, Associate Director, Broadcast Outreach at the Cato Institute.

⁸⁸ “Peace and Free Enterprise: Cato Institute 2021 Annual Report,” The Cato Institute, https://www.cato.org/sites/cato.org/files/2022-05/Annual_Report_2021_FINAL_WEB_Updated.pdf.

⁸⁹ “Annual Report 2022,” Human Rights Watch, https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/media_2023/03/HRW_Annual_Report_2022.pdf.

None of the media mentions analyzed here included disclosures of defense industry funding of these think tanks that were, at times, recommending policies that could financially benefit their funders.

The media outlets analyzed here also failed to provide their readers with any indication of the potential conflicts of interest posed by experts from defense industry backed think tanks commenting on the defense industry. In fact, none of the media mentions analyzed here included disclosures of defense industry funding of these think tanks that were, at times, recommending policies that could financially benefit their funders.

Perhaps the most glaring example of this was a CSIS study⁹⁰ that recommends creating a “strategic munitions reserve,” which would be a windfall for arms makers, that was cited in numerous media outlets including The Wall Street Journal, Bloomberg, and Defense News.⁹¹ None of these articles mentions the millions CSIS has received from the arms industry, including Lockheed Martin, who has already received hundreds of millions of dollars in Ukraine related contracts and whose CEO is even quoted in the CSIS report. Ultimately, this indicates a failure of judgment by leading media outlets reporting on vital issues of war and peace in Ukraine.

Recommendations

The analysis undertaken here points to a number of recommendations that would help to restore public trust in the think tank sector and the media. First, think tanks should publicly disclose their funders. Many of the think tanks contacted for this analysis mentioned the need for donor privacy, but that is a protection for individuals, not

⁹⁰ Seth G. Jones, “Empty Bins in a Wartime Environment.”

⁹¹ Vivienne Machi, “Eyes on Ukraine, NATO preps new ammo guidelines to boost production,” *Defense News*, February 13, 2023,

<https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2023/02/13/eyes-on-ukraine-nato-preps-new-ammo-guidelines-to-boost-production/>; Niall Ferguson, “The US ‘Domain Awareness Gap’ Goes Way Beyond Balloons,” *Bloomberg*, February 12, 2023,

<https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/features/2023-02-12/the-us-domain-awareness-gap-goes-way-beyond-chinese-balloons>.

companies. Donor privacy is especially irrelevant for firms—like many in the defense industry—who derive a majority of their income from government contracts. The fact that many “dark money” think tanks still refuse to disclose their donors creates an uneven playing field where transparent think tanks, like CSIS and the Atlantic Council, reveal all of their funders. Congress should enact legislation to rectify this imbalance and require think tanks to publicly disclose any funding they receive from the United States or foreign governments or firms that work for them.

Second, think tanks should also adopt a professional standard of disclosing, within the publications themselves, any funding the think tank receives from entities that have a financial interest in the subject matter of the publication. Many of the studies analyzed here included recommendations that would be of direct financial benefit to those think tanks’ funders. At the very least, readers of those studies, especially policymakers and journalists, should be made aware of these potential conflicts of interest.

Third, media outlets should, similarly, adopt a professional standard to report any conflicts of interest with sources discussing U.S. foreign policy. By not providing this information media outlets are deceiving their readers, listeners, or viewers. This information provides important context for evaluating expert commentary and is, arguably, as important as the commentary itself. Some media outlets, like CNBC, have been quick to identify these conflicts of interest and provide their readers with this information.⁹² All media outlets should follow suit and proactively disclose the potential conflicts of interest of the sources they’re citing.

⁹² Eli Clifton, “DC think tank addresses undisclosed conflicts of interest,” *Responsible Statecraft*, January 19, 2023, <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2023/01/19/dc-think-tank-addresses-undisclosed-conflicts-of-interest/>.

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