

Collusion between Think Tanks and the Military Industrial Complex

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In the first week of September 2021, Al Jazeera broadcast a documentary about 9/11 and the events thereafter. Based on concrete evidence, it highlighted the role played by multiple groups of individuals, who, for their vested interests, overstated the threats to the security of the United States. Following its release, media outlets around the world, started broadcasting news about corruption under U.S. patronage whose sole beneficiaries were either American/Western defense manufacturers, or certain Afghan suppliers who in unison pocketed more than two trillion dollars of taxpayers' money in the name of the 'War on Terror' (WoT) and reconstruction of Afghanistan.

In the coming days, more critical evidence is likely to emerge suggesting a nexus between decision-makers and America's Military Industrial Complex (MIC). Despite the initial hesitation, the Western media were forced to pick up sections from this documentary given the fear of losing their relevance and credibility in an increasingly informed world. Perhaps, they also finally understood that in the aftermath of 9/11, the scale of false information and propaganda momentum generated by them was huge enough to obscure and delude the best of minds, and so, they too were complicit in bringing misery to millions of people in Iraq, Libya, Afghanistan, and Syria, besides directly and indirectly impacting other countries around the world. After all, they had used multiple platforms to project their points of view, and their apparent harmony with arms manufacturers reinforced impressions of an all-encompassing collusion. Their real intent and modus operandi are likely to come under increasing international scrutiny, lest they once again turn the attention of the American public towards a hypothetical war against China.

While Al Jazeera briefly touched on the role of major broadcasting platforms and reputed newspapers with wide circulation, what it did not highlight was the crucial and decisive role played by the U.S. and Western think tanks in floating well-crafted conspiracy theories meant to promote the interests of a few powerful beneficiaries. As has been proven, the so-called WoT was never truly just an ideological war, as perceived by the Muslim world, but in reality, this fabricated war was largely meant to satiate the desires of politicians, arms manufacturers, contractors, bureaucrats, media persons, retired military personnel acting as advisors or experts, and the think tank community, who all benefited on account of the two-decade long war.

In order to critically examine the collusion between think tanks and the MIC, it is important to examine a few of the renowned U.S. think tanks and one UK-based think tank, which have established programs in national security and international affairs, and handle a critical mass of research projects on terrorism and homeland security. Historically, they have a proven record of substantial influence on policymakers, both in Washington and London. Post-9/11, their modus operandi gained momentum through testimonies recorded before committees, government-appointed commissions, and panels. They enhanced awareness of the public and concerned quarters on the 'desired' course of action through their websites, blogs, and media appearances.

Post-9/11, the focus of discussions in Washington was to identify the threats to the U.S. and its allies, and the motivation behind such acts of terrorism. However, irrespective of the background research, policy recommendations were consistently advocating for kinetic actions. While some of the think tanks openly supported research in modern technologies and their wider applications, others cleverly mentioned the necessity of overcoming threats posed by Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs), including biological weapons.


Right from the outset, the word 'Radical Islam' was frequently used by these 'renowned' think tanks without proper context. Political settlement of core issues like Palestine and Jammu & Kashmir were seldom discussed, whereas terrorism as a standalone phenomenon dominated the discourse. Thereafter, these institutes became hostage to their own flawed analyses and found it hard to change course. When reality dawned after more than a decade that their idea of forced democracy in occupied countries would not work, more than a million lives had already been lost in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, and adjoining territories. Even a cursory look at their initial studies and recommendations to U.S. policymakers demonstrate their inclination towards widening the scope of each conflict, thus assisting the MIC, a major beneficiary in the war on terrorism.

Let us start with the [RAND Corporation](#), which was created in 1948 by its original client, the U.S. Army Air Forces. It claim that it is a research organization that “develops solutions for public policy challenges to help make communities throughout the world safer.”

Just a week after the war, Bruce Hoffman, Vice President External Affairs and Director, RAND's Washington Office while testifying before a committee concluded his briefing by [stating](#) that “the struggle against terrorism is never-ending. Similarly, our search for solutions and new approaches must be continuous and unyielding, proportional to the threat posed by our adversaries in both innovation and determination.” He further added that new approaches require “time and resources.”

After his briefing, as proven by the decisions later, the committee members were quick to take the cue from phrases like *new approaches, solution, never-ending, and resources*, and made them the basis of their subsequent actions in WoT. During his second [briefing](#) on September 1, 2001, he concluded that “based on a firm appreciation of terrorism threats, both foreign and domestic, an *overarching strategy should now be developed* that ensures that the U.S. is capable of responding across the entire technological spectrum of potential adversarial attacks.” Any person familiar with military terminology would know the connotation of entire technological spectrum, which simply translates into developing newer state-of-the-art-technologies whose sole beneficiaries would be none other than defense manufacturers.

While so much has been written about the defective policy of raising a superficial Afghan army, a group of RAND researchers writing under the title '[Ungoverned Territories-A Unique Front in the War on Terrorism](#)' strongly advised the U.S.

The background of the image is a piece of marbled paper with a complex, organic pattern. The colors are primarily earthy, including shades of beige, tan, and brown, interspersed with patches of light blue, teal, and green. The pattern resembles natural stone or biological cells. A solid green rectangular box is centered on the page, containing white text.

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Department of Defense (DoD) about the “need to train foreign internal defense forces.” This advice, which turned into an actionable policy option, provided endless money-minting opportunities to defense manufacturers, logistics suppliers, military advisors (both serving and retired), and most likely, even decision-makers.

In yet another [study](#) entitled ‘Deterrence and Influence in Counterterrorism’, RAND scholars Paul K. Davis and Brian Michael Jenkins advised the U.S. to undertake not just military attacks but also engage in ‘political warfare’, as they foresaw WMDs in the control of terrorists. Small wonder then that the research was sponsored by the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency.

Similarly, Bruce R. Nardulli gave inciting and potentially-disastrous suggestions in a [study](#) prepared for the United States Army entitled ‘The Global War on Terrorism an Early Look at Implications for the Army’. He took a leaf out of counterterrorism efforts and elevated it to a higher level of ‘Offensive Counterterrorism (OCT)’ as if the indiscriminate use of force by the U.S. till then had not been sufficient enough to dampen its desire for further destruction. He advocated for “joint capability and responsiveness” which in a layperson’s terms relates to means, ability, and resources. He also called for “attacks on several sites and on a continuous basis”, which again translated into espousing the procurement of additional weapons and new army inductions. This study advised the U.S. Army to seize and neutralize WMDs whose presence in Iraq, for instance, was a figment of Washington’s imagination. And finally, the author let the cat out of the bag by advocating that “the Army must develop new combinations of combat power and responsiveness as part of a joint force undertaking.” Hence, such an incendiary recommendation flies in the face of its professed claim that RAND Corporation is a [research organization](#) that “develops solutions... to make communities throughout the world safer and more secure”.

The [Carnegie Endowment for International Peace](#) is a non-partisan international affairs think tank with centers in many world capitals. Carnegie scholars have not only made several presentations on Capitol Hill regarding the WoT but also initiated discussions on terror-related topics by bringing together scholars, members of Congress, and outside experts. A very controversial [op-ed](#) entitled ‘We Must Fight this War’, published by The Washington Post, on 11 September 2001 by one of its former Senior Associates, Dr. Robert Kagan, strongly proposed war. Thus, the clear message from Carnegie Endowment to U.S. policymakers was to accelerate the tempo of war, develop new weapons, and associated equipment.

The Center for Strategic and International Studies ([CSIS](#)), has made a name for itself for providing strategic insights on emerging world issues. After 9/11, CSIS established a Task Force on Terrorism comprising experts on terrorism including active duty and retired military officers, intelligence analysts, renowned economists, and former policymakers. Its main study recommended developing “High core operating competencies.” Similarly, Andrew Philip Hunter, Director, Defense-Industrial Initiatives Group and Senior Fellow, International Security Program, in a [report](#) entitled “The Change We Need: Making Defense More Future Proof through

Adaptable Systems” strongly supported “new technologies, flexible contracting mechanism and enhancing budgets.” All three things that he proposed were simply a marketing strategy. CSIS, thus, provided cues to U.S. lawmakers that helped them decide what position they should take on issues relating to the war. It can, thus, be safely deduced that funding incentives and dictated policy environments made these think tanks shift their strategies, something that seriously affected their role as agents of new ideas, change, and improvement.

The [Brookings Institution](#), established in 1916, is one of the oldest think tanks in the United States. Prior to 9/11, Brookings was involved in several projects relating to terrorist threats; it published two books on terrorism and WMDs, as well as numerous editorials on Islamic terror and nuclear weapons, which clearly demonstrated Brookings’ interest in, and focus on, terrorism-related research. Take for instance, Stephen Cohen’s book ‘The Idea of Pakistan’ which made preposterous claims about the future of Pakistan. Michael O’Hanlon is a Senior Fellow and Director of Research in Foreign Policy at Brookings, where he specializes in U.S. defense strategy, the use of military force, and U.S. national security policy. He presented future war scenarios to the Senate Committee which he discussed in his [book](#) ‘The Future of Land Warfare’. Besides other things, the author discussed “fissioning of Pakistan, Indo-Pakistani war, perhaps over a terrorist strike, with Kashmir providing the spark. Iranian use or threatened use of nuclear weapons against a neighbor, Russian invasion threat to the Baltic States, second Korean War, including possible Chinese involvement”. Finally, he made a pitch for a “million soldiers strong army” to fight on three fronts, simultaneously. It is because of scholars like Michael O’Hanlon that in its nearly 250 years of history, America has enjoyed only 16 years of peace, making it in the [words](#) of its own former President Jimmy Carter “the most warlike nation in the history of the world.” Brookings Institution, in other words, created a marketplace of ideas where politicians and bureaucrats went shopping for research and analysis that met their needs.

[The Henry Jackson Society](#) is a London-based think tank. Its current Associate Director Douglas Murray argued for the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq and prophesied victory. In 2006, he [asserted](#) in the Dutch Parliament that “conditions for Muslims in Europe must be made harder across the board”, to counter the threat posed by Islam to the West. The [Foreign Policy Research Institute](#) in its 2003 [study](#), ‘Responding to 9/11: Are Think Tanks Thinking Outside the Box?’, authored by Dr. James G. McGann, found that “after 9/11 neoconservative think-tanks like the Henry Jackson Society dominated the discourse on the causes of terrorism and the appropriate response to them on both sides of the Atlantic.” The vision of Henry Jackson Society which talks about its fight for principles to keep societies free is in stark contrast with the views of its mouthpiece, Douglas Murray.

In fact, an IFPRI study noted that “there has been a spike in the number of terrorism-related research, analysis, and public engagement activities at each of these institutions since 9/11, there appears to be a lack of financial resources and critical thinking to support and sustain a truly effective response to the events of 9/11.”

Even after the disastrous consequences of the Iraq War, Western think tanks with the exception of a very few, like the UK's Royal United Services Institute ([RUSI](#)), were still reluctant to accept the material consequences of faulty foreign policies like racism and financial exploitations of poor countries and instead kept their focus on the Islamic ideology and cleverly twisted it towards 'Jihadism' by taking help from the statements of al-Qaeda's leader Ayman al-Zawahiri. The former group ended up winning the war of ideas and resultantly, the focus remained on slandering Islamic ideology, instead of addressing genuine grievances.

Going back to the original argument that suggests a link between think tanks and the Military Industrial Complex, it would be a good exercise to look at the annual budgets of some of the most renowned think tanks in 2001. The Heritage Foundation was at the top with a massive budget of USD 335 million followed by RAND Corporation with an annual expenditure of USD 169 million. Even the relatively lesser looking amounts to the tune of USD 64.5 million for the Urban Institute, USD 30.2 million for Brookings, USD 20.8 million for Carnegie Endowment, and USD 16.9 million for CSIS, exceed the development budget of a small-scale city in the developing world. These exceptionally-high expenditures indicate the necessity of well-to-do donors who hold the power to grant the desired degree of latitude to these institutions in setting their research priorities.

In conclusion, it is important to note that renowned U.S. and Western think tanks largely failed to provide critical thinking to support and sustain a truly effective response to the events of 9/11. As a matter of fact, they found to be more focused on marketing strategies to target and influence a specific group defying their textbook role, which is to provide information and correct policy choices that are in the best interests of the world at large. Instead, they narrowed their research agendas in favor of powerful constituencies and donors. Politicians and bureaucrats with their predetermined agendas promoted a specific line of thinking, which was eagerly embraced by these think tanks to provide answers but not the best policy options. The abovementioned studies have been singled out so that the reader could see the pattern and linkages in a carefully-woven net with a broader base of decision-making actors. Traditionally, think tanks have played a constructive role in the policymaking process and have served as catalysts for ideas and actions which is in contrast to the inflammatory role played by most of them post-9/11. Binding these institutions with such a narrow and convoluted agenda will not only corrode them but also foster wrong foreign policy choices leading to a more unstable world than before.

Author

Air Marshal Shahid Akhtar Alvi (Retd) is an ex-fighter pilot who has a wide flying experience on multiple platforms including F-16. He is a graduate of the Turkish Staff College, Air War College, Pakistan and National Defense University. He held important assignments during his coveted career including as an air attaché in India, Command of a fighter base and regional Command. Prior to his appointment as Deputy Chief of the Air Staff (training), he was Director General Air Intelligence. Currently, he is Deputy President at CASS (Centre for Aerospace and Security Studies), Lahore. He can be contacted at casslhr.dypres@gmail.com

