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Three ways of looking at a think tank kerfuffle

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The Atlantic Council is going through some turmoil. What does it mean?

Ten days ago, the Atlantic Council's Emma Ashford and Mathew Burrows published a policy brief arguing that U.S. foreign policy toward Russia should not prioritize human rights concerns at the expense of other strategic goals.

That is in and of itself not a big deal — think tank fellows write memos all the time. What was a big deal was how other Atlantic Council fellows reacted to it.

Last week, 22 of them released a brief statement asserting that Ashford and Burrows's article "misses the mark" because it is "premised on a false assumption that human rights and national interests are wholly separate and that US policy toward Russia was and remains driven by human rights concerns principally." One of the signatories penned an additional response that was longer than their original policy brief. A bunch of them anonymously criticized Ashford and Burrows to Politico's Daniel Lippman.

To say this behavior is unusual would be an understatement. I have been affiliated with some think tanks, written for others and even written about how think tanks operate at some length. One does not normally see either on-the-record or anonymous rebukes of fellow fellows unless there is a scandal of some kind. This is particularly true given the caliber of analysts like Ashford and Burrows, both of whom any reader of Spoiler Alerts should take seriously.

Why all the hubbub over one policy brief? There are three ways to look at this, and all of them contain some measure of the truth. In ascending order of cynicism:

1) It's about the policy, stupid. Ashford and Burrows's thesis is straightforward: Whatever concerns one has about human rights in Russia, there are other equities in the bilateral relationship and more sanctions will accomplish little. "Russian behavior on human rights is deplorable, but the United States has other salient interests pertaining to Russia. Nuclear and strategic stability talks to shore up arms control or effectively deter Russian interference in US elections are more important than imposing largely symbolic sanctions because of human rights abuses."

Making a case for a less bellicose policy toward Moscow in 2021 is a bit outside the zone of public opinion right now, but hardly outside the appropriate contours of foreign policy debate. In an ideal marketplace of ideas, think tanks should be reservoirs of contrarian points of view to

prompt policy debate — particularly as a new administration’s national security strategy comes into focus.

Still, I can see why the other Atlantic Council fellows got so riled up. Eurasian policy analysts went four long years of having the worst of both worlds: an administration that did not care a whit about human rights but nonetheless managed to worsen relations with Russia on multiple fronts. It is undeniably true that Russian foreign policy is often grounded in its domestic policy — a fact that even hardheaded realist George F. Kennan pointed out back in the day. Even if one thinks that sanctions are an overused ideal policy instrument, there are hardheaded reasons to be worried about Russian kleptocracy and Vladimir Putin’s multiple violations of international norms.

This question falls under the “reasonable people can disagree” category. So why did so many Atlantic Council fellows disagree so unreasonably? Well ...

2) It’s about the money, stupid. Burrows is the director of the Atlantic Council’s New American Engagement Initiative, which was funded by the Charles Koch Institute. As Politico’s Nahal Toosi reported last year, CKI is generally interested in advocating for a foreign policy grounded in restraint, and “the funds are being dispensed amid growing public exhaustion in the United States with American military action overseas.” It has also funded the Quincy Institute, for example.

Lippman’s story is shot through with nasty anonymous insinuations and quotes from Atlantic Council fellows about the alleged taint of Koch money. One implied that Ashford and Burrows were responsible for “a shoddy work product influenced by a \$4.5 million donation.” Another said, “The general view at the Atlantic Council is to send them back to the Cato Institute where they came from.” A third suggested that Koch operated like “a Trojan Horse” and that the Atlantic Council should have refused the money.

That last suggestion is drenched with unintentional irony given who else the Atlantic Council has accepted money from over the past decade. But this points to a deeper anxiety among foreign policy think tanks.

Over the past decade, federal government and traditional philanthropic funding for think tanks has tapered off. Other sources — such as foreign governments and multinational corporations — create their own ethical conundrums. Koch money has attracted criticisms ranging from leftist to populist. Compared with foreign governments or corporations, however, the Charles Koch Institute is aboveboard.

This leaves those who want to emphasize, say, Russian human rights in need of rival sources of finance. Any perception that the distribution of foundation dollars is tilting away from liberal internationalism is going to trigger some understandable anxiety among those advocating for a liberal internationalist approach to U.S. foreign policy.

Still, this kind of anxiety usually stays in the background. What pushed it to the foreground? Well ...

3) It’s about the turf, stupid. Think tanks are like any bureaucracy. Wait, that’s not true — think tanks are much worse because they have the trappings of ordinary bureaucracies and the feudalism that comes with scholarly autonomy.

So it was this section from Lippman's story that stood out:

The unusual public feud reflects, to some extent, a fight over turf at the think tank. Most of the people who signed the statement are affiliated with the Atlantic Council's Eurasia Center, headed up by Herbst, a former U.S. ambassador to Ukraine and Uzbekistan. One person at the Atlantic Council said that the center has traditionally taken the lead on reports and articles about Russia, including often reviewing any Russia-related products that come out from other parts of the think tank.

That did not happen in this case and so colleagues felt the need to publicly refute the article. Kempe and others said this was the first time such a dispute at the think tank has played out so publicly in recent memory.

Ashford and Burrows might have saved themselves some grief by at least circulating a draft of their policy brief to some of the Russian and Eurasian experts for feedback. Unfortunately, as a result they confronted the perfect storm of discord, poverty and envy among their colleagues.

That does not mean they deserve the grief they have received. Hopefully, that will be a lesson the 22 signatories will process after some of them sounded like high school mean girls in their quotes to Lippman.