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POLITICS

Foreign Powers Buy Influence at Think Tanks

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WASHINGTON — The agreement signed last year by the Norway Ministry of Foreign Affairs was explicit: For \$5 million, Norway's partner in Washington would push top officials at the White House, at the Treasury Department and in Congress to double spending on a United States foreign aid program.

But the recipient of the cash was not one of the many Beltway lobbying firms that work every year on behalf of foreign governments.

It was the Center for Global Development, a nonprofit research organization, or think tank, one of many such groups in Washington that lawmakers, government officials and the news media have long relied on to provide independent policy analysis and scholarship.

More than a dozen prominent Washington research groups have received tens of millions of dollars from foreign governments in recent years while pushing United States government officials to adopt policies that often reflect the donors' priorities, an investigation by The New York Times has found.

The money is increasingly transforming the once-staid think-tank world into a muscular arm of foreign governments' lobbying in Washington. And it has set off

troubling questions about intellectual freedom: Some scholars say they have been pressured to reach conclusions friendly to the government financing the research.

The think tanks do not disclose the terms of the agreements they have reached with foreign governments. And they have not registered with the United States government as representatives of the donor countries, an omission that appears, in some cases, to be a violation of federal law, according to several legal specialists who examined the agreements at the request of The Times.

As a result, policy makers who rely on think tanks are often unaware of the role of foreign governments in funding the research.

Joseph Sandler, a lawyer and expert on the statute that governs Americans lobbying for foreign governments, said the arrangements between the countries and think tanks “opened a whole new window into an aspect of the influence-buying in Washington that has not previously been exposed.”

“It is particularly egregious because with a law firm or lobbying firm, you expect them to be an advocate,” Mr. Sandler added. “Think tanks have this patina of academic neutrality and objectivity, and that is being compromised.”

The arrangements involve Washington’s most influential think tanks, including the Brookings Institution, the Center for Strategic and International Studies, and the Atlantic Council. Each is a major recipient of overseas funds, producing policy papers, hosting forums and organizing private briefings for senior United States government officials that typically align with the foreign governments’ agendas.

Most of the money comes from countries in Europe, the Middle East and elsewhere in Asia, particularly the oil-producing nations of the United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Norway, and takes many forms. The United Arab Emirates, a major supporter of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, quietly provided a donation of more than \$1 million to help build the center’s gleaming new glass and steel headquarters not far from the White House. Qatar, the small but wealthy Middle East nation, agreed last year to make a \$14.8 million, four-year donation to Brookings, which has helped fund a Brookings affiliate in Qatar and a project on United States relations with the Islamic world.

Some scholars say the donations have led to implicit agreements that the research groups would refrain from criticizing the donor governments.

“If a member of Congress is using the Brookings reports, they should be aware — they are not getting the full story,” said Saleem Ali, who served as a visiting fellow at the Brookings Doha Center in Qatar and who said he had been told during his job interview that he could not take positions critical of the Qatari government in papers. “They may not be getting a false story, but they are not getting the full story.”

In interviews, top executives at the think tanks strongly defended the arrangements, saying the money never compromised the integrity of their organizations’ research. Where their scholars’ views overlapped with those of donors, they said, was coincidence.

“Our business is to influence policy with scholarly, independent research, based on objective criteria, and to be policy-relevant, we need to engage policy makers,” said Martin S. Indyk, vice president and director of the Foreign Policy Program at Brookings, one of the oldest and most prestigious think tanks in Washington.

“Our currency is our credibility,” said Frederick Kempe, chief executive of the Atlantic Council, a fast-growing research center that focuses mainly on international affairs and has accepted donations from at least 25 countries since 2008. “Most of the governments that come to us, they understand we are not lobbyists. We are a different entity, and they work with us for totally different purposes.”

In their contracts and internal documents, however, foreign governments are often explicit about what they expect from the research groups they finance.

“In Washington, it is difficult for a small country to gain access to powerful politicians, bureaucrats and experts,” states an internal report commissioned by the Norwegian Foreign Affairs Ministry assessing its grant making. “Funding powerful think tanks is one way to gain such access, and some think tanks in Washington are openly conveying that they can service only those foreign governments that provide funding.”

The think tanks' reliance on funds from overseas is driven, in part, by intensifying competition within the field: The number of policy groups has multiplied in recent years, while research grants from the United States government have dwindled.

Foreign officials describe these relationships as pivotal to winning influence on the cluttered Washington stage, where hundreds of nations jockey for attention from the United States government. The arrangements vary: Some countries work directly with think tanks, drawing contracts that define the scope and direction of research. Others donate money to the think tanks, and then pay teams of lobbyists and public relations consultants to push the think tanks to promote the country's agenda.

"Japan is not necessarily the most interesting subject around the world," said Masato Otaka, a spokesman for the Japanese Embassy, when asked why Japan donates heavily to American research groups. "We've been experiencing some slower growth in the economy. I think our presence is less felt than before."

The scope of foreign financing for American think tanks is difficult to determine. But since 2011, at least 64 foreign governments, state-controlled entities or government officials have contributed to a group of 28 major United States-based research organizations, according to disclosures by the institutions and government documents. What little information the organizations volunteer about their donors, along with public records and lobbying reports filed with American officials by foreign representatives, indicates a minimum of \$92 million in contributions or commitments from overseas government interests over the last four years. The total is certainly more.

After questions from The Times, some of the research groups agreed to provide limited additional information about their relationships with countries overseas. Among them was the Center for Strategic and International Studies, whose research agenda focuses mostly on foreign policy; it agreed last month to release a list of 13 foreign government donors, from Germany to China, though the organization declined to disclose details of its contracts with those nations or actual donation amounts.

In an interview, John J. Hamre, president and chief executive of the center, acknowledged that the organization's scholars at times advocate causes with the

Obama administration and Congress on the topics that donor governments have funded them to study. But Mr. Hamre stressed that he did not view it as lobbying — and said his group is most certainly not a foreign agent.

“I don’t represent anybody,” Mr. Hamre, a former deputy secretary of defense, said. “I never go into the government to say, ‘I really want to talk to you about Morocco or about United Arab Emirates or Japan.’ I have conversations about these places all the time with everybody, and I am never there representing them as a lobbyist to their interests.”

Several legal experts who reviewed the documents, however, said the tightening relationships between United States think tanks and their overseas sponsors could violate the Foreign Agents Registration Act, the 1938 federal law that sought to combat a Nazi propaganda campaign in the United States. The law requires groups that are paid by foreign governments with the intention of influencing public policy to register as “foreign agents” with the Justice Department.

“I am surprised, quite frankly, at how explicit the relationship is between money paid, papers published and policy makers and politicians influenced,” said Amos Jones, a Washington lawyer who has specialized in the foreign agents act, after reviewing transactions between the Norway government and Brookings, the Center for Global Development and other groups.

At least one of the research groups conceded that it may in fact be violating the federal law.

“Yikes,” said Todd Moss, the chief operating officer at the Center for Global Development, after being shown dozens of pages of emails between his organization and the government of Norway, which detail how his group would lobby the White House and Congress on behalf of the Norway government. “We will absolutely seek counsel on this.”

Parallels With Lobbying

The line between scholarly research and lobbying can sometimes be hard to discern.

Last year, Japan began an effort to persuade American officials to accelerate negotiations over a free-trade agreement known as the Trans-Pacific Partnership, one of Japan's top priorities. The country already had lobbyists on retainer, from the Washington firm of Akin Gump, but decided to embark on a broader campaign.

Akin Gump lobbyists approached several influential members of Congress and their staffs, including aides to Representative Charles Boustany Jr., Republican of Louisiana, and Representative Dave Reichert, Republican of Washington, seeking help in establishing a congressional caucus devoted to the partnership, lobbying records show. After those discussions, in October 2013, the lawmakers established just such a group, the Friends of the Trans-Pacific Partnership.

To bolster the new group's credibility, Japanese officials sought validation from outside the halls of Congress. Within weeks, they received it from the Center for Strategic and International Studies, to which Japan has been a longtime donor. The center will not say how much money the government has given — or for what exactly — but an examination of its relationship with a state-funded entity called the Japan External Trade Organization provides a glimpse.

In the past four years, the organization has given the center at least \$1.1 million for “research and consulting” to promote trade and direct investment between Japan and the United States. The center also houses visiting scholars from within the Japanese government, including Hiroshi Waguri, an executive in the Ministry of Defense, as well as Shinichi Isobe, an executive from the trade organization.

In early December, the center held an event featuring Mr. Boustany and Mr. Reichert, who spoke about the importance of the trade agreement and the steps they were taking to pressure the White House to complete it. In addition, at a Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing later that month, Matthew P. Goodman, a scholar at the center, testified in favor of the agreement, his language driving home the very message Japan's lobbyists and their congressional allies were seeking to convey.

The agreement was critical to “success not only for the administration's regional economic policy but arguably for the entire Asia rebalancing strategy,” Mr. Goodman said.

Mr. Hamre, the center's president, acknowledged that his organization's researchers were pushing for the trade deal (it remains pending). But he said their advocacy was rooted in a belief that the agreement was good for the United States economy and the country's standing in Asia.

Andrew Schwartz, a spokesman for the center, said that language in the agreements the organization signs with foreign governments gives its scholars final say over the policy positions they take — although he acknowledged those provisions have not been included in all such documents.

“We have to respect their academic and intellectual independence,” Mr. Otaka, the Japanese Embassy spokesman, said in a separate interview. But one Japanese diplomat, who asked not to be named as he was not authorized to discuss the matter, said the country expected favorable treatment in return for donations to think tanks.

“If we put actual money in, we want to have a good result for that money — as it is an investment,” he said.

Qatar and the United Arab Emirates — two nations that host large United States military bases and view a continued American military presence as central to their own national security — have been especially aggressive in their giving to think tanks. The two Persian Gulf monarchies are also engaged in a battle with each other to shape Western opinion, with Qatar arguing that Muslim Brotherhood-style political Islam is the Arab world's best hope for democracy, and the United Arab Emirates seeking to persuade United States policy makers that the Brotherhood is a dangerous threat to the region's stability.

The United Arab Emirates, which has become a major supporter of the Center for Strategic and International Studies over the past decade, turned to the think tank in 2007 after an uproar in Congress about the nation's plan to purchase control of terminals in several United States ports. After lawmakers questioned whether the purchase would be a national security threat to the United States, and the deal was scuttled, the oil-rich nation sought to remake its image in Washington, Mr. Hamre said.

The nation paid the research organization to sponsor a lecture series “to examine the strategic importance” of the gulf region and “identify opportunities for constructive U.S. engagement.” It also paid the center to organize annual trips to the gulf region during which dozens of national security experts from the United States would get private briefings from government officials there.

These and other events gave the United Arab Emirates’ senior diplomats an important platform to press their case. At a round table in Washington in March 2013, Yousef Al Otaiba, the ambassador to the United States, pressed Gen. Martin E. Dempsey, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, about whether the United States would remain committed to his country given budget reductions in Washington.

Mr. Dempsey’s reply was quickly posted on the Facebook page of the United Arab Emirates Embassy: The country, he assured Mr. Al Otaiba and others in the crowd, was one of America’s “most credible and capable allies, especially in the gulf region.”

Access to Power

Small countries are finding that they can gain big clout by teaming up with American research organizations. Perhaps the best example is Norway.

As one of the world’s top oil producers, a member of NATO and a player in peace negotiations in spots around the globe, Norway has an interest in a broad range of United States policies.

The country has committed at least \$24 million to an array of Washington think tanks over the past four years, according to a tally by The Times, transforming these nonprofits into a powerful but largely hidden arm of the Norway Foreign Affairs Ministry. Documents obtained under that country’s unusually broad open records laws reveal that American research groups, after receiving money from Norway, have advocated in Washington for enhancing Norway’s role in NATO, promoted its plans to expand oil drilling in the Arctic and pushed its climate change agenda.

Norway paid the Center for Global Development, for example, to persuade the United States government to spend more money on combating global warming by

slowing the clearing of forests in countries like Indonesia, according to a 2013 project document describing work by the center and a consulting company called Climate Advisers.

Norway is a major funder of forest protection efforts around the world. But while many environmentalists applaud the country's lobbying for forest protection, some have attacked the programs as self-interested: Slowing deforestation could buy more time for Norway's oil companies to continue selling fossil fuels on the global market even as Norway and other countries push for new carbon reduction policies. Oilwatch International, an environmental advocacy group, calls forest protection a "scheme whereby polluters use forests and land as supposed sponges for their pollution."

Kare R. Aas, Norway's ambassador to the United States, rejected this criticism as ridiculous. As a country whose territory extends into the Arctic, he said, Norway would be among the nations most affected by global warming.

"We want to maintain sustainable living conditions in the North," Mr. Aas said.

But Norway's agreement imposed very specific demands on the Center for Global Development. The research organization, in return for Norway's money, was not simply asked to publish reports on combating climate change. The project documents ask the think tank to persuade Washington officials to double United States spending on global forest protection efforts to \$500 million a year.

"Target group: U.S. policy makers," a progress report reads.

The grant is already paying dividends. The center, crediting the Norwegian government's funding, helped arrange a November 2013 meeting with Treasury Department officials. Scholars there also succeeded in having language from their Norway-funded research included in a deforestation report prepared by a White House advisory commission, according to an April progress report.

Norway has also funded Arctic research at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, at a time when the country was seeking to expand its oil drilling in the Arctic region.

Mr. Hamre, of the center, said he was invited to Norway about five years ago and given a presentation on the Arctic Circle, known in Norway as the “High North.”

“What the hell is the High North?” he said in an interview, recalling that he was not familiar with the topic until then.

But Norway’s government soon began sending checks to the center for a research program on Arctic policy. By 2009, after the new Norway-supported Arctic program was up and running, it brought Norway officials together with a key member of Congress to discuss the country’s “energy aspirations for the region.”

In a March 2013 report, scholars from the center urged the Obama administration to increase its military presence in the Arctic Circle, to protect energy exploration efforts there and to increase the passage of cargo ships through the region — the exact moves Norway has been advocating.

The Brookings Institution, which also accepted grants from Norway, has sought to help the country gain access to American officials, documents show. One Brookings senior fellow, Bruce Jones, offered in 2010 to reach out to State Department officials to help arrange a meeting with a senior Norway official, according to a government email. The Norway official wished to discuss his country’s role as a “middle power” and vital partner of the United States.

Brookings organized another event in April 2013, in which one of Norway’s top officials on Arctic issues was seated next to the State Department’s senior official on the topic and reiterated the country’s priorities for expanding oil exploration in the Arctic.

William J. Antholis, the managing director at Brookings, said that if his scholars help Norway pursue its foreign policy agenda in Washington, it is only because their rigorous, independent research led them to this position. “The scholars are their own agents,” he said. “They are not agents of these foreign governments.”

But three lawyers who specialize in the law governing Americans’ activities on behalf of foreign governments said that the Center for Global Development and Brookings, in particular, appeared to have taken actions that merited registration as

foreign agents of Norway. The activities by the Center for Strategic and International Studies and the Atlantic Council, they added, at least raised questions.

“The Department of Justice needs to be looking at this,” said Joshua Rosenstein, a lawyer at Sandler Reiff.

Ona Dosunmu, Brookings’s general counsel, examining the same documents, said she remained convinced that was a misreading of the law.

Norway, at least, is grateful for the work Brookings has done. During a speech at Brookings in June, Norway’s foreign minister, Borge Brende, noted that his country’s relationship with the think tank “has been mutually beneficial for moving a lot of important topics.” Just before the speech, in fact, Norway signed an agreement to contribute an additional \$4 million to the group.

Limits on Scholars

The tens of millions in donations from foreign interests come with certain expectations, researchers at the organizations said in interviews. Sometimes the foreign donors move aggressively to stifle views contrary to their own.

Michele Dunne served for nearly two decades as a specialist in Middle Eastern affairs at the State Department, including stints in Cairo and Jerusalem, and on the White House National Security Council. In 2011, she was a natural choice to become the founding director of the Atlantic Council’s Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East, named after the former prime minister of Lebanon, who was assassinated in 2005.

The center was created with a generous donation from Bahaa Hariri, his eldest son, and with the support of the rest of the Hariri family, which has remained active in politics and business in the Middle East. Another son of the former prime minister served as Lebanon’s prime minister from 2009 to 2011.

But by the summer of 2013, when Egypt’s military forcibly removed the country’s democratically elected president, Mohamed Morsi, Ms. Dunne soon realized there were limits to her independence. After she signed a petition and testified before a Senate Foreign Relations Committee urging the United States to

suspend military aid to Egypt, calling Mr. Morsi's ouster a "military coup," Bahaa Hariri called the Atlantic Council to complain, executives with direct knowledge of the events said.

Ms. Dunne declined to comment on the matter. But four months after the call, Ms. Dunne left the Atlantic Council.

In an interview, Mr. Kempe said he had never taken any action on behalf of Mr. Hariri to try to modify positions that Ms. Dunne or her colleagues took. Ms. Dunne left, he said, in part because she wanted to focus on research, not managing others, as she was doing at the Atlantic Council.

"Differences she may have had with colleagues, management or donors on Middle Eastern issues — inevitable in such a fraught environment where opinions vary widely — don't touch our fierce defense of individual experts' intellectual independence," Mr. Kempe said.

Ms. Dunne was replaced by Francis J. Ricciardone Jr., who served as United States ambassador to Egypt during the rule of Hosni Mubarak, the longtime Egyptian military and political leader forced out of power at the beginning of the Arab Spring. Mr. Ricciardone, a career foreign service officer, had earlier been criticized by conservatives and human rights activists for being too deferential to the Mubarak government.

Scholars at other Washington think tanks, who were granted anonymity to detail confidential internal discussions, described similar experiences that had a chilling effect on their research and ability to make public statements that might offend current or future foreign sponsors. At Brookings, for example, a donor with apparent ties to the Turkish government suspended its support after a scholar there made critical statements about the country, sending a message, one scholar there said.

"It is the self-censorship that really affects us over time," the scholar said. "But the fund-raising environment is very difficult at the moment, and Brookings keeps growing and it has to support itself."

The sensitivities are especially important when it comes to the Qatari government — the single biggest foreign donor to Brookings.

Brookings executives cited strict internal policies that they said ensure their scholars' work is "not influenced by the views of our funders," in Qatar or in Washington. They also pointed to several reports published at the Brookings Doha Center in recent years that, for example, questioned the Qatari government's efforts to revamp its education system or criticized the role it has played in supporting militants in Syria.

But in 2012, when a revised agreement was signed between Brookings and the Qatari government, the Qatar Ministry of Foreign Affairs itself praised the agreement on its website, announcing that "the center will assume its role in reflecting the bright image of Qatar in the international media, especially the American ones." Brookings officials also acknowledged that they have regular meetings with Qatari government officials about the center's activities and budget, and that the former Qatar prime minister sits on the center's advisory board.

Mr. Ali, who served as one of the first visiting fellows at the Brookings Doha Center after it opened in 2009, said such a policy, though unwritten, was clear.

"There was a no-go zone when it came to criticizing the Qatari government," said Mr. Ali, who is now a professor at the University of Queensland in Australia. "It was unsettling for the academics there. But it was the price we had to pay."

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