SPECIAL ROUNDTABLE

Bridging the Gap Between the Academic and Policy Worlds

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Bridging the Gap with Market-driven Knowledge: The Launching of Asia Policy

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This Roundtable brings together a stimulating collection of essays from five experts—Kenneth Lieberthal, Emily Goldman, Robert Sutter, Ezra Vogel, and Celeste Wallander. Drawing on his or her own unique combination of policy and academic experience, each participant presents personal insights into how to integrate the fruits of academic research more effectively into the policymaking process. This essay summarizes the main findings offered up by the Roundtable panelists and draws implications for how Asia Policy can best help bridge the gap between the worlds of academia and policymaking.

Challenges to Bridging the Gap

One clear insight to emerge from the Roundtable is that academic research findings are seldom translated directly into policy action. The policymaking process is determined by the interplay of a wide array of factors—e.g., the numerous policy priorities that compete for a fixed number of policy resources, the logistics of coordinating different bureaucracies, the time pressure involved in responding to events, the impact of partisan and electoral politics, and the personalities of the individuals involved in the policymaking process. Information—be it academic or otherwise—is simply one of many determinants of policymaking. Moreover, what may appear as an opportunity for scholarly input may sometimes simply be efforts by policymakers to gather support for a predetermined policy direction, to collect sound bites for a speech, or to create the appearance of interest in soliciting policy advice.

Despite limited opportunity for scholarly research findings to impact policy, there still exists a crucial need for such academic input. First, there are indeed many instances when policymakers require, and actively seek, scholarly advice on policy issues. As Kenneth Lieberthal and other participants in this Roundtable point out, policymakers are overloaded with information. What makes scholars so uniquely positioned to offer “value-added” analysis of the data is that they possess a wide array of key qualities: a broad and deep

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understanding not only of general political phenomena but also often of a specific region, country, or issue; methodological training that aids in extracting lessons from the exploration of ideas and historical events; the freedom to pursue ideas that might challenge the existing frameworks within which policymakers are compelled to work; and often the language training that can facilitate a more nuanced understanding of events.

Despite the clear need for the input of academic research into policy-making, a host of factors intervene to impede efforts to bridge this gap. The Roundtable participants collectively touch upon many of these problems:

- the increasingly disciplinary-based demands of a career in academia, which act as strong disincentives for younger scholars to produce policy analysis
- that scholars interested in policy analysis can sometimes be unclear regarding what type of information policymakers need, how such information should be packaged, or when decisionmakers require such input
- that policymakers tend to be dismissive of the “academic dressing”—abstract theories, citations, and academic terminology—characteristic of much scholarly research
- the lack of venues and other opportunities for interaction between academics and policymakers.

Asia Policy as Bridge-builder

The goal then for Asia Policy is to take creative advantage of journal processes, content, and format to help overcome the above barriers to bridge-building. There are a number of strategies that the journal can utilize in order to act as a bridge for the fruitful exchange between academia and policymaking circles on policy issues related to the Asia-Pacific. This section will outline several of these strategies.

Presenting select, yet unbiased, information ~ Ezra Vogel notes that information overload makes policymakers feel that they are “drinking from a fire hose.” The goal then for the journal is to become a more specialized “drinking fountain.” But how can the journal stake claim to being a reliable source for the most important information? The Platonic approach to enlightened thought is to listen to the select few capable of producing knowledge (epistememe) rather than opinion (doxa); Aristotle, however, warned of the dangers of only heeding the advice of a chosen minority, arguing that a state’s rulers
must instead draw from a “marketplace of ideas” and take into account various opinions of different groups of citizens.\(^1\) The journal’s approach is to focus on a value-added strategy that combines these two schools of thought.

Asia Policy is a marketplace of ideas in the sense that the journal is open to all submissions regardless of the background of the author, the methodological approach of the research, or the political implications of the argument. In order to identify from this pool of submissions the research that is best at producing knowledge, as opposed to mere opinion, the journal will employ a review process in which articles are subject to critique from fellow experts.\(^2\) Asia Policy’s peer-review mechanism is a strict “triple-blind” anonymous process: not only are author and reviewer unaware of each other’s identity, but the Editor and Editorial Board also do not know the authorship of submitted articles under review. This anonymity is achieved by requiring all incoming submissions to be sent to <submissions@nbr.org>, whereupon editorial staff will assign all submissions an anonymous reference number before forwarding the paper to the Editor. This process of complete anonymity reinforces the journal’s role as a neutral arbiter within the marketplace of ideas. Asia Policy will devote at least half of the space of every issue to publishing these peer-reviewed essays (including research notes). The remainder of the journal space will be comprised of various other formats, such as roundtables and debates, that highlight different views held by a variety of academic, policy, media, business, and other experts on issues related to Asia-Pacific policy.

**Overcoming disciplinary disincentives** ~ The high academic bar set by Asia Policy’s review process means that articles published in the journal meet the peer-review criteria so important in the “publish or perish” tenure system under which disciplinary-focused scholars labor. Scholars thus have an incentive to draw policy implications from their research and seek to publish policy-relevant arguments. Moreover, by targeting today’s graduate students, Asia Policy can join forces with other organizations in helping to train a new generation of policy-interested social scientists. In addition, the journal’s open submissions process will allow Asia Policy to choose the best of all such policy-related research for publication.

**Producing policy-relevant and policymaker-accessible research** ~ Although social science scholarship—whether theoretical, case-specific, or empirically

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2 The review process includes input from academics, specialists within the policymaking community, and those whose experience straddles both worlds.
focused theoretical analysis—can be policy relevant, Emily Goldman and others note that scholars are more accustomed to producing general propositions linking broad classes of empirical phenomena than using their research to draw policy-relevant implications. Ezra Vogel also points out that academics have traditionally not been trained to compress their thinking and express ideas in a precise and concise way. The journal has devised a number of strategies that can help overcome such problems and ensure that the academic research is written in a policy-relevant and policy-accessible format:

- By including input from those with experience in policymaking and policy analysis, the journal’s peer review process helps to ensure that the author directly addresses the concerns of the policymaking community.

- A one-page Executive Summary—required for all submissions—succinctly lays out the topic, main argument, policy implications, and organization of each article. Such one-pagers allow busy policymakers and staff to quickly grasp the main points of the research, yet maintain confidence that the peer-reviewed article following the Executive Summary provides strong support for these one-page bulleted conclusions.

- The journal’s review and editing process can ensure a concise introduction, a clear article structure, and non-jargonistic writing. In the months and years ahead, Asia Policy’s editing department will work closely with authors, reviewers, and readers to further develop this “policymaker-friendly” article style and format.

Building an extensive network of experts  ~ Celeste Wallander and other participants in this Roundtable emphasize the importance of building up a network of relationships that link experts within and across academic and policy communities. The academic experts who comprise the journal’s Editorial Board (many of who also have solid policy experience) are Asia Policy’s baseline in this endeavor. Adding to this network are both the authors who submit their work to Asia Policy and the reviewers whose participation in the review process constitutes an important, although anonymous, exchange of ideas.

Moreover, the journal’s other formats—such as roundtables and debates—allow for the direct exchange of ideas among academics, policymakers, and those whose experience straddles both worlds. These additional formats are excellent vehicles to perform what Goldman identifies as an important function: allowing policymakers to personally frame the parameters of de-
bate—whether by shaping the agenda, informing the research process, or providing direct feedback. As such, these supplementary formats are the perfect complement to the peer-reviewed academic research section of the journal that allows scholars their turn to take the initiative in “bridging the gap.”

The journal’s readers—many of whom will hopefully be motivated to quote the article, build on the research contained within (either by supporting or critiquing the scholarship) in their own publications, or get in touch personally with the various authors—will also constitute a crucial, ever-widening ring of contacts.

Robert Sutter’s contribution to this Roundtable nicely sums up the value of Asia Policy as a potential bridge for networking: as the journal becomes a trusted venue for introductions and initial sharing of ideas, policymakers and their staff—who often prefer to deal with things in person—can begin to identify academics for later follow-up when the need for policy input arises; for their part, academics seeking to influence policy can use their work in Asia Policy as a first step in making the necessary personal connections that will allow for carefully tailored forays into direct policy advising. The goal then for the Editorial Department and Editorial Board is thus to make careful and creative use of the journal’s format, processes, and content to make Asia Policy the foremost venue for drawing policy-relevant knowledge from the marketplace of ideas.