

# The case to strengthen Indian think tanks

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Think tanks help bridge the gap between the world of ideas and action and are equipped to generate policy-oriented research and inform policy decisions.

As the Manmohan Singh government begins its second innings, India faces a host of security and foreign policy challenges. These include internal strife, terrorism, proxy wars, a disturbed neighbourhood, the threat of conventional war in the shadow of nuclear weapons, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and piracy on the high seas. There are also issues concerning relations with the great powers, the rise of China, and the global recession, to name just a few. There is a growing expectation that India will play a proactive role in the emerging world order as a key player in rising Asia. Does India have the intellectual tools to meet these challenges?

This issue was debated at a recent workshop, not in 'rising' India, but in Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy. It sought to answer the question: 'Can Indian think tanks and research institutions cope with the rising demand for foreign and security policy research?' The answer was an emphatic 'No.'

This should be a cause for worry to our policy establishment and concerned citizens. Universities focus on teaching and basic research. It is the think tanks that help bridge the gap between the world of ideas and action. They are better equipped to generate policy-oriented research and to inform policy decisions.

It is difficult to claim that think tanks change policy, as political leaders receive inputs from many sources. But good policy research offers independent analysis, critical assessments, alternative perspectives, new insights and sometimes innovative ideas. Effective think tanks can help in more informed decision-making, agenda-setting, sensitising the public, briefing lawmakers and testing new ideas. They can interpret issues, events and policies for the media and thus improve public understanding of foreign and security policy issues. They serve as a constructive forum for the exchange of ideas. They can help develop "issues networks." They are a potential source of expert personnel for the government, the legislatures and the media. And they can challenge the conventional wisdom of the establishment.

Think tanks exert greater influence in countries like the United States where key decision-makers move in and out of the government along with the President. Washington alone has some 350 think tanks. They are often termed "governments-in-

waiting.” President Barack Obama chose John Podesta, who headed the Centre for American Progress, as his transition chief. George Bush often relied on the ‘neo-cons’ of the American Enterprise Institute. Bill Clinton tapped policy advice from the Brookings Institution. American scholar James McGann estimates that there are nearly 5,500 think tanks in the world. North America alone has 1,872 (34.25 per cent), Western Europe 1,208 (22.1 per cent) and Asia 653 (11.95 per cent).

Compared to India, China has done much better in developing the domain of International Studies (IS). Universities such as Tsinghua, Fudan and Beijing run vibrant centres of IS teaching and research. Teaching of foreign languages has been encouraged and important IS classics have been translated from English into Mandarin. Efforts are under way to develop a Chinese school of international studies.

There is a growing demand from foreign scholars, government delegations, parliamentarians, mediapersons and businessmen for information on Indian perspectives on a range of issues. This is a natural consequence of India’s growing international profile.

One lament about the 2009 Lok Sabha elections was that the campaign was “issue-less,” bereft of a policy agenda or big ideas, particularly in the realm of strategic affairs. For a democratic country facing major challenges, informed debate and consensus on vital national interests are crucial. Think tanks can play an important role in this context by highlighting key issues, proposing alternatives and sensitising relevant constituencies and politicians.

But India’s IS and strategic affairs think tanks are sandwiched between a university system in crisis and an indifferent policy establishment. They suffer from both demand and supply constraints. There is hardly any demand for their output, either because it is not regarded as relevant or because key officials believe they already know what is there to know. On the other hand, think tanks are handicapped by the lack of talented young researchers trained in IS and strategic affairs. Unlike policy research in economics, IS research does not offer attractive career prospects in India and among multilateral institutions abroad. Therefore it has few takers.

The state of IS studies in Indian universities is dismal owing to the neglect of theory, research methodology and language skills; poor infrastructure; indifferent teaching, and absence of incentives for good performance. A country of India’s size, with 150 university departments teaching IS, does not have a professional association of IS specialists. It is rarely that articles from India find a place in the top IS journals of the world.

The policy establishment also complains of a supply constraint, not so much in terms of quantity of research output as its quality. Even government-supported think tanks work mostly on their own, setting their own research agenda. The researchers have hardly

any access to key officials. In the absence of data from Ministries such as External Affairs and Defence, and archaic information policies, the research findings of think tanks are rarely “grounded in reality.” There is no system to declassify even half-a-century-old archives.

To give an impetus to policy research in IS, the government will need to take some initiatives. First, reforms in universities as recommended by the National Knowledge Commission need to be implemented. Second, the government should ensure systematically a closer interface between think tanks and Ministries such as External Affairs, Defence and Home. Such interaction will improve the policy focus of their work and enhance quality through feedback.

Third, think tank analysts should be deputed to Indian missions in key countries for a year or two to hone their language skills and deepen their domain knowledge. Fourth, the long-pending recommendation to set up a National Defence University (NDU) needs to be fast-tracked. It will take years for a new university to make an impact, and with the acute shortage of talented researchers, the NDU will have to draw heavily on the existing think tanks’ human resources.

In order to ensure results in the near-term, greater attention needs to be given to develop the existing government-sponsored think tanks into world-class institutions. This will require strong government support for institution-building and reforms, capacity-building of researchers through language training, field trips and appropriate personnel policies. Changes in governance structures will also be needed to ensure speedier decision-making.

Finally, India’s globalising corporates with their expanding businesses and investments abroad need to pay greater attention to IS. Some of the best known think tanks in the West were promoted by visionary business leaders.

India faces daunting security challenges. These are likely to grow in the years to come. The support of sound policy research will be crucial to craft wise policies to meet them.

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