



Asian think tanks face challenges even as they multiply

The number of think tanks in Asia has grown over the last decade and many have become prominent.

The 2017 *Global Go To Think Tank Index Report* records 1,676 think tanks in Asia as of December 2017, almost as many as the 1,872 in the United States, and gaining on the 2,045 that have set up in Europe. The report says there are about 8,000 think tanks globally.

James McGann, the creator and editor of the report and director of the Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program at the University of Pennsylvania, credited the growth of think tanks to Asia's economic progress, a better business environment, and policy makers' need for advice on critical issues.

The complex policy problems accompanying economic growth in Singapore, India, Japan, the People's Republic of China, and the Republic of Korea have sparked government interest in think tanks. Governments also look to think tanks to exert soft power.

Many countries, and certainly the PRC, have understood the importance of think tanks as an instrument for soft power.

China's President Xi Jinping sees think tanks as the principal instrument for modernization and reform and wants to work with those that demonstrate Chinese characteristics and can rival leading organizations in the United States and Europe.

Despite their rise in prominence, think tanks need to improve their profile, expertise, performance, and impact. Several areas can be improved. One is funding source.

One of their strengths, but also one weakness of think tanks in Asia and in most of the rest of the world outside Western Europe and North America, is that their principal primary funders are governments and secondly public and private international donors.

Where the funding comes from can be important to the assessment of intellectual credibility. Some countries have concerns if private or overseas donors exercise too much influence over the sponsorship of research for local think tanks. In Asia, many believe that only the government can be an independent and credible funding source for think tanks, McGann cites pros and cons.

There's nothing wrong with government funding. But to presume that a ministry or an administration is without bias or agenda or does not have subtle or direct influence any more or less than international or domestic donors, is to me unfair at best.

With government funding, a think tank gains access and raises the likelihood of its research being used. But there are also downsides, McGann said.

Governments and bureaucracies are large and tend to lumber along, are unable to be innovative, and do not always focus on the relevant issues; and these work against exclusively government-affiliated think tanks.

Government-supported think tanks also tend to produce less research, as has been the case in India and China.

But think tanks that don't rely on government funding tend to have a small budget and staff, and unreliable funding streams, making it hard to recruit and retain first-rate scholars. McGann says think tanks must be transparent about their funding.

We have been encouraging think tanks to be transparent. Who funds them? Do they have standards to ensure the quality, integrity, and independence of their research?

For instance, a think tank produces a study on a disaster and it critiques the subject industry or the supposed cause of that disaster; and the think tank's funder turns out to be a competitor of the industry that has contributed to the disaster. Even if its assessment and analysis are correct, that think tank's motives, analysis, and credibility come into question.

Think tanks must be autonomous and independent. A think tank needs to diversify its funding source, and one way to achieve this, McGann said, is through a legal regulatory framework that supports think tanks.

To be independent, a think tank needs a regulatory framework, a diverse funding source, and a range of supporters.

Finally, think tanks should commit to provide independent research and adhere to the principles of social science research.

Independence elicits trust in a period of information insecurity and rampant disinformation and misinformation and signifies an institution's credibility.

That was James McGann, speaking at the Asian Development Bank Institute, Tokyo. He is a senior lecturer of international studies at the Lauder Institute and director of the Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program at the University of Pennsylvania. He is also the creator and editor of the annual Global Go To Think Tank Index.

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