
CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

NO OTHER REGION in the world has boasted more unprecedented growth in the past two decades than Asia, either economically or politically. This development cast the international spotlight on this region so strongly as to motivate Barack Obama's "pivot" to Asia, and, as many scholars have adopted, the twenty-first century has been named the Asian century. Against the backdrop of such immense growth, where do civil societies, policy, and epistemic communities in Asia stand in relation to those in other regions of the world?

One definitive trend that has converged in the region has been the increasing recognition of the importance of think tanks, or policy research institutes, as an integral source of policy ideas and innovation. This trend was, in part, necessitated by globalization, for no issue is truly domestic and even the most seemingly state-specific issue carries some international ramification. Thoughtful policymaking is important in an age in which Asian states are gaining importance in the international arena.

One crucial challenge among think tanks across the region is sorting out their role vis-à-vis the government. Many governments in the region have, over the last couple decades, transitioned from restricted democratic regimes to more open and democratic forms of government. It is for this reason that, in many cases, the government's hand is an inevitable presence in the structure and operation of policy actors and epistemic communities. In examining the relationship Asian

think tanks have with their respective governments, one must pay particular attention to the specific political culture.

Chinese think tanks, for instance, have been noted to have traces of the government's hand in almost every case; from the Western point of view, that may be described as lacking "independence." However, one must bear in mind that the immense presence of the state is deeply ingrained in the political culture of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and many other Asian countries. For this reason, the think tanks there follow the political tradition of acting in informal advisory roles built through personal connections. Thus, one could posit that think tanks in the PRC and in other Asian countries, despite their distance from their governments, are operating rather effectively in their specific political culture. Such a need to consider political context holds true for other states, such as in those in Southeast Asia, which vary widely in cultural, political, economic, and social development. For these reasons, an analysis that takes into account different political systems and cultural differences and different stages of organizational development is all the more important.

Another point of convergence among think tanks in Asia concerns funding. This concern is captured by three fundamental issues: how to mobilize the financial resources necessary to support think tanks, how to maintain independence when government grants and contracts are the primary source of funding, and how to develop new sources of funding. In the aftermath of the global economic crisis of 2008–09, funding has become increasingly scarce, and even where money is available—often from the government—the bureaucracy and the requirements to access it are often stringent. It is for this reason that diversification of funding sources is one of the most important objectives of think tanks in emerging economies. Diversification of funding sources has two major benefits to the recipient country: it provides a degree of financial stability and increased autonomy. A concern repeatedly raised among think tanks in Asia is the myopic focus on funding from government sources. Federal funding often applies to specific projects and thus fails to foster an environment in which an accumulating body of research can nurture an anthology of epistemic capital. In the absence of long-term continuity, think tanks are exposed to the uncertainties of regime changes, making it all the more difficult for them to serve their intended purpose of ideational pluralism in policymaking.

The governments in Asia have placed a strong emphasis on think tank development as a strategy for helping policymakers meet a range of complex policy issues facing their respective countries. The number of think tanks serving the government and the public is expanding in the region and their diversity is grow-

ing. There are now policy-oriented think tanks based at universities, in corporations, and in civic organizations, serving as bridges between the world of ideas and policy and between governments and the public. Singapore is an excellent example of the progress made in building a diverse group of world-class think tanks. These think tanks are supported and complemented by excellent schools of public policy, such as the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, and international affairs, such as the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies. They have come to be recognized around the world as centers of excellence. Singapore was able to achieve these dramatic results in a relatively short period of time by making strategic investments in people, ideas, and institutions. The strategic choices made by Singapore have enabled it to become a regional and global policy hub for policy innovation.

One area that displays the most possibility, and simultaneously the most challenge, is human capital. Insofar as think tanks serve a crucial role in policy-making, one might expect the field to be attractive to bright young researchers. However, funding remains an issue. Furthermore, in regions such as Southeast Asia, diversity, coupled with Southeast Asian countries' relatively recent introduction to democracy, reveals an epistemic community whose human capital is yet to grow in terms of access to resources and the actual practice of managing policy research institutes. For some time I have been exploring the role of networks of knowledge-based experts that constitute what are known as epistemic communities and the role think tanks play in analyzing and articulating the complex problems, framing the issues for public debate, and proposing specific policies and programs to governments and the public. It is for this reason that a region-wide collaboration among think tanks could be an immensely enriching tool in developing both the human capital and, more important, best practices for think tank research, management, and resource mobilization.

Asia is rapidly becoming the next economic powerhouse and is working toward increased regional stability while gaining influence abroad. To that effect, think tanks and civil society promise to contribute to the development and expansion of Asian countries. As policy analysis research and engagement organizations, think tanks can feel assured their expertise will remain essential to heads of state and economic leaders.

East Asian and South Asian countries have been at the forefront of the development of think tanks; however, the countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and other regions in Asia, such as Central Asia, have recently joined those regions in the growth in the number and diversity of research institutions. Although relatively new on the playing field and at a stage of development that is still embryonic, think tanks in Central Asia are quickly

gaining ground, producing research on topics of priority interest to all major Asian civil societies, including geopolitical rivalries, trade opportunities, and regional economic integration.

This book, produced by Dr. James G. McGann, the director of the Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program (TTCSP) at the University of Pennsylvania, the “think tanks’ think tank,” analyzes emerging trends among Asian think tanks, determines their current areas of expertise, and examines the fields in which Asian think tanks could improve and expand so as to provide more effective public policy advice. It follows a series of forums on the role of think tanks and civil society organizations (CSOs) in Asia in which the TTCSP participated and is intended to continue the discussion on Asian think tanks while providing recommendations to enhance the operations of research organizations.

Relying on seminal works and current scholarship on the role of Asian think tanks, this book synthesizes previous scholarship and adds value through updating and expanding the TTCSP’s annually produced database, which provides information on more than 7,500 think tanks throughout the world. The neoliberal discourse of Western political theory, which is closely related to the notion of “good governance,” serves as one of the seminal pillars of this research.¹ Because the concept of the think tank is a legacy of the Anglo-American wartime experience, its relevance to the nature, role, and typology of Asian think tanks in the twenty-first century may differ from the original conception. The divide between the West and the “other,”² manifesting specifically here in the characterization and function of Western think tanks versus Asian ones, is at the heart of a stream of publications being produced by scholars today.³ Their contributions reinforce the contemporaneity of the debate on think tanks in Asia and have sustained the research of this study.

East Asian and Central Asian think tanks have attracted particular attention from Western scholars and research institutions because of the ongoing debate over how to establish what the types of think tanks in Asia are and how they differ from the West given the current sociopolitical environment. Historically and culturally, East Asian research institutions have had strong links to the government through a top-down hierarchy, implying a more restrictive environment than the classic neoliberal model that advocates autonomy and independence. Furthermore, the lack of autonomy and independence has led to a lack of transparency and the concomitant influence of cronyism on the policymaking process. The current sociopolitical climate, therefore, imposes the necessity to rethink the operational model for think tanks in East Asian and Central Asian

countries. Similarly, think tanks are under tight governmental control in Southeast Asia, limiting the scope of their activities. Although most countries in the region have transitioned from restricted democratic regimes to more liberal forms of democratic government, the state, nevertheless, remains a powerful force intervening in think tanks' operations. Consequently, think tanks in Southeast Asia generally tend to focus their research on humanitarian and environmental issues, topics directly tied to the local habitat. This research has included a focus on income inequality, which they have identified as resulting from extreme poverty levels and enormous disparities in wealth distribution in the region, and environmental issues, which are the second major issue of think tanks' focus in the region. With increasingly violent weather causing devastating consequences for fragile populations in the area, think tanks have identified the necessity to call for effective solutions to offer protection to the local populations ravaged by typhoons, earthquakes, and other natural disasters.

In South Asia, the debate currently involves a discussion on "two-level embedded autonomy," referring to the dual influence of countries' internal institutions, and outside organizations and agencies. Both exogenous and endogenous forces heavily influence the role and activities of think tanks in the region. Consequently, South Asian think tanks experience significant limits in their dual embedded autonomy. Collaterally, their research often tends to limit itself to "hard-skills subjects" under a leadership that has been in place for decades. The slow-moving process of think tanks' role in policymaking and the limited scope of their research are areas in which potential for improvement is found.

The limitations that were experienced while conducting research on the role and impact of think tanks in Asia are the orientation and bias of the literature and the inaccessibility of certain sources due to a lack of transparency in certain Asian countries.⁴ Very often, the literature would not address the operational and functional strategy development of think tanks but, rather, methods to determine a common typology. However, the typology of think tanks varies tremendously from one country to another, depending on the type of affiliation, the source of funding, and the personnel employed by the think tank. The opacity of the policymaking system further leads think tanks to produce either biased information or incomplete research products. The lack of transparency prevents think tanks from acting as the link between policymakers and the public while putting in question their integrity and the quality of their work. Other limitations experienced were the lack of human resources and the time constraints imposed to produce a report that provides an overview on half of the globe.

In an increasingly complex, independent, and information-rich world, governments and individual policymakers face the common problem of bringing expert knowledge to bear in governmental decision making. In response, although initially behind the wave of globalization, the growth of public policy research organizations, or think tanks, over the last few decades has been nothing less than explosive. Not only have these organizations increased in number, but the scope and impact of their work has also expanded dramatically at the national, regional, and global levels. Twenty-five years ago, when the first global meeting of think tanks was organized, in Barcelona, Spain, many of my colleagues suggested that the term “think tank” did not travel well across borders. Today, though, the term has become an accepted transnational concept.⁵

Think tanks are institutions of research, analysis, and engagement that generate policy advice on domestic and international issues, enabling policymakers to make informed decisions, and bridging the gap between the government and the public at large. In simpler terms, think tanks serve as “go-to” institutions when experts on particular topics are needed to provide analysis or commentary on the breaking news of the day. These organizations are classified in one of the following categories: for profit (or corporate), autonomous and independent, quasi-independent, university affiliated, political party affiliated, quasi-governmental, or governmental (see table 1-1). However, a finer line gets drawn when separating internationally oriented think tanks with a domestic focus from those that are truly global or transnational.⁶

Primary reasons for the dramatic growth in think tanks around the world are democratization, globalization, and modernization. Democratization inspires demands for analysis and information independent of government influence. It also allows for a more open debate about government decision making, which is an environment in which think tanks thrive. In addition, think tanks can no longer be armchair analysts sitting in Brussels, Paris, or Washington; they must be in-country and on the ground covering the issues if they want to have credibility and influence over the major issues of the day. The growth in international actors and the pressures of globalization have led many think tanks to expand their operations globally. Both the International Crisis Group (ICG) and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (CEIP) cite the end of the Cold War and the emergence of U.S. supremacy as inspiration for going global. Others, such as the Brookings Institution and the German Marshall Fund, use modernization and advances in technology and communications to pragmatically globalize for added convenience.⁷

TABLE 1-1. Categories of Think Tank Affiliation

Affiliation category	Definition
Autonomous and independent	A policy research center with significant independence from any one interest group or donor, and autonomous from government in its operation and funding
Quasi-independent	A policy research center that is autonomous from government in operation and funding but is controlled by an interest group, donor, or contracting agency that provides most of the funding and has significant influence over the think tank's operations
University affiliated	A policy research center at a university
Political party affiliated	A policy research center formally affiliated with a political party
Government affiliated	A policy research center that is part of the structure of government
Quasi-governmental	A policy research center funded exclusively by government grants and contracts but not a part of the formal structure of government
Corporate	A for profit public policy research organization, either affiliated with a corporation or merely operating on a for profit basis

Source: James G. McGann, "2016 Global Think Tank Database Manual," Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program (2016).

Think tanks are not necessarily passive research organizations. In fact, some have taken quite an active role when it comes to lobbying for or articulating and implementing policy in distinct areas. They are contractors, trainers, and media outlets. The International Peace Institute, for example, trains military and civilian professionals in peacekeeping strategies. Furthermore, with the decline of foreign news bureaus, global think tanks like ICG and the Center for International Private Enterprise (CIPE) are increasingly becoming important and reliable international news sources. This is in sharp contrast to the days when think

tank scholars would sit in their “universities without students” and come up with great ideas, and policymakers would beat a path to their door to seek their advice.⁸

Think tanks will continue to gain in importance but only if they are able to innovate and adapt to an operating environment shaped by disruptive technologies and politics, where the velocity of information and policy flows keeps accelerating. In addition, if think tanks are to grow in number and influence around the world, some key obstacles need to be overcome. First, the lack of research institutions in developing countries needs to be addressed. Building up research institutions in those areas is actually an explicit goal of Brookings’ Africa Growth Initiative, which seeks to partner with many different African think tanks and organizations to address the issue. Global think tanks and policy networks will all increase in utility when expansion is encouraged, a framework for knowledge transfer is provided, and independent and effective management is cultivated in these areas. There are governments that try to create what is known as “phantom think tanks,” designed to appear nongovernmental when they are, in fact, arms of the government used to oppose legitimate civil society organizations.⁹ Funding also tends to exert direct or indirect influence over the research agenda of think tanks if they fail to put in place policies and procedures to safeguard the integrity and independence of the organization. So, to be truly independent, policy organizations need to have a wide variety and large number of donors so they are not beholden to government or narrow special interests.

Think tanks and policy networks at the national, regional, and global levels will be crucial in helping policymakers manage the “Four Mores” on a global scale: more issues, more actors, more competition, and more conflict. To do this, they need to master the “Four Rs”—rigor, relevance, reliability, and reach—on national, regional, and global levels. All think tanks face the need to balance academic-quality research with information that is understandable and accessible to policymakers and the public. This balance becomes even more critical on a larger scale. The surge and spread of global think tanks is exactly that attempt to keep up with globalization and distill avalanches of information down to manageable and understandable analyses. As different countries form more global networks and closer relationships with each other, the think tanks of the future that manage to address obstacles inherent in expansion will grow in both number and influence. They are also ideally suited to help respond to a new trend that could be described as policy tsunamis (economic, political, social, and health). These are issues and events that appear in one region and then sweep rapidly across the globe with increasing intensity and with devastating impact. The

economic crisis of 2008, the Arab Spring, and the outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) are examples of this new phenomenon. A global network of think tanks could track issues and events and try to understand them before they reach the crisis stage. This is the challenge we face. Ultimately, think tanks around the world must harness for the public good the vast reservoir of knowledge, information, and associational energy that exists in public policy research organizations in every region of the world.