

ARTICLES

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COMPLEMENTING THE FOREIGN POLICY ESTABLISHMENT

The Rise of Think-Tanks in India

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Suhasini Haidar in her recent commentary (South Block in the Shade) in *The Hindu* has highlighted an interesting foreign policy phenomenon in India – the rise of think-tanks. Though she sees it as a factor in checking the Indian Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) from being “India’s primary interlocutor for the world,” many working on foreign policy have been asking for an effective role by the think-tanks with quality inputs to the Establishment.

For a long time, the Indian political establishment across the board has viewed independent think-tanks in the country primarily from a negative perspective – as being foreign funded (thereby implying that they follow a different agenda than that of the government). Though the different ministries (especially the Indian Ministry of Defence (MoD) and the MEA) and different wings of the Indian armed forces have – directly or indirectly – supported their own, these think-tanks did not have a negative tag in the governmental corridors.

Do independent think-tanks such as the India Foundation (IF) and Vivekananda International Foundation (VIF) challenge the role of the South Block? Or do they signify, along with few others such as the Observer Research Foundation (ORF) and Gateway House (GH) – the rise of think-tanks that are much needed and timely? And do they not help the state in today’s world of having “speciality” independent institutions?

Unfortunately, those who criticise the VIF and the IF view them primarily based on who is funding them, and whom they are close with inside the Indian establishment. Such a perspective is not drastically different from the previous governmental perspective that those think-tanks funded by foreign foundations are essentially bad. Why should the background of the funders come to the forefront, instead of the work of these think-tanks and more importantly, their utility?

From the US to Japan, there are think-tanks funded and supported by the rightist, economic, environmental, and liberal foundations and lobbies. In India, think-tanks like the ORF, GH, The Energy and Resources Institute (TERI) etc – have all been supported by business houses. Especially in a country where there is no governmental support for independent think-tanking, institutions will have to be dependent on sources – domestic and external. Of course, the government supports institutions such as the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA), Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA) etc.; but they cannot be called completely “independent.”

The issue here is not about who is funding but instead what value they bring in for the larger foreign policy establishment; and more importantly, their effectiveness in reaching out to the world. True, the MEA has to remain “India’s primary interlocutor for the world.” Has it not been the case since independence? Despite that, there has been repeated emphasis that given the contemporary need and the vastness of global interactions, India would need additional power to help the MEA carry forward.

Let us face the facts. Given the bureaucratic tangle and the need for paper work within and with the Indian Ministry of Finance (MoF), independent think-tanks are much better placed to take forward a few multilateral dialogues. In fact, the MEA has already been doing the same via ICWA, IDSA, Research and Information System for Developing Countries (RIS), ORF etc. Perhaps the MEA realises the need and has in fact already opened its gates in different ways.

And this presents a huge opportunity for the think-tank environment in India. Today, the situation for independent think-tanks is sharply different from those initial days in the 1990s when visionaries like RK Mishra and PR Chari established think-tanks like the ORF and Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies (IPCS) respectively – independent from the government. From funding to hiring quality researchers – it was not an easy task for these pioneers then. Today, the situation is substantially different.

Global think-tanks such as the Brookings Institution and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (CEIP) have established a chapter in India. All three wings of the Indian armed forces – the army, navy and air force – have been supporting their own: the Centre for Land and Warfare Studies (CLAWS), the National Maritime Foundation (NMF) and the

Centre for Air Power Studies (CAPS) respectively, in addition to the Centre for Joint Warfare Studies (CENJOWS). Additionally, TERI and Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations (ICRIER) have their own focus on issues relating to environment and economy. There is competition and at the same time cooperation among them. There is already an initiative amongst the leading think-tanks in New Delhi to have a dialogue amongst themselves, so that they could make useful contributions to India's foreign policy decision-making, and also take forward some of the larger external objectives of the country.

Perhaps this is a new beginning. Let us not try to vilify them by looking at who is funding whom. They have a useful role to play and will be extremely helpful to the foreign policy establishment. Let us not see and pursue foreign policy as some sole entity's prerogative. There has to be a collective push, and with the right imagination and strategy, the think-tanks will be able to help the Indian Prime Minister's Office (PMO) and the MEA by being independent.

In fact, the PMO, the MEA and other related institutions should take a conscious effort to take this process even further. Though the number of think-tanks have witnessed a phenomenal increase in the last ten years, a majority of them are located in New Delhi. A huge country such as India, with substantial issues all over its land and maritime territories, also needs regional think-tanks based in Chennai, Kolkata, Guwahati, Mumbai and Jammu. There are a few in these cities, but have serious problems with funding and outreach. Given India's regional matrix and the role played by the states, it is imperative to have successful regional think-tanks.

Second, it is also imperative to invest in think-tanks focusing on non-foreign policy issues. Science, environment, trade, maritime issues etc are specialised areas that demand focused attention. For example, the National Institute of Advanced Studies (NIAS) in Bengaluru (with whom this author is associated) has a specialised focus on science but is least aligned with the foreign policy establishment in India.

Finally, if think-tanks have to have maximum impact on decision-making, they have to substantially improve their inputs. Organising conferences, dialogues and hosting dignitaries from outside cannot be their primary functions. There have to be "quality" inputs, which are "actionable." While "research" has to be the bedrock of these institutions, they should have "policy" relevance, otherwise there would not be a big difference between a PhD and policy research reports.

There is a new dawn of independent think-tanks in India. It would not have happened without the South Block and the PMO making a conscious decision to open up. The latter should not expect the former to be their second fiddle. Let them remain independent and yet be integrated within their own space.

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