

Think Tanks and Policy Advice in Countries in Transition

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Think tanks are often viewed as a critical link between elaboration of policies and their implementation. Think tanks represent a vital component of successes of policies directed towards harmonization of existing practices with contemporary paradigms of good governance and economic management. As such, development agencies – such as the Asian Development Bank Institute (ADBI) – regard think tanks as critical organisations for assisting government in economic transition.

This paper is structured into four parts:

- The first section provides an overview of think tank development over the last century around the world. Asian think tank evolution is assessed in this international context.
- The second part assesses the social and political environment for the provision of policy analysis and expertise, and the manner in which national institutional settings shape the character of a think tank industry as well as the prospects for policy influence. The discussion focuses primarily on think tanks in Southeast Asia, with some reference to Northeast Asian contexts.
- The third section assesses how the forces of globalisation and regionalisation have brought new pressures for national policy communities and promoted the transnationalisation of think tank activity. Globalisation has implications for the future effectiveness of Vietnamese think tanks.
- The fourth section returns to questions as to how think tanks manage their organisations for policy relevance. Some questions regarding ‘best international practices’ of think tank management and approaches to “bridging research and policy” are addressed.

In general, the institutional development of Vietnamese policy analysis has been state directed. This path of development is one that is increasingly out of step with international standards for genuine policy research and advice (see the studies by Boucher, 2004; Braun, 2004; Stone & Denham 2004). The prospect for the transfer of western style independent think tanks to Viet Nam is limited given that the civil society foundations are not present. Instead, think tanks are likely to remain in the orbit of the state albeit with increasing prompting from international donors for organisational reforms and policy engagement.

1. ‘Think Tanks’: Definitions, Development and Diversification

1.1. Definitions.

The word ‘think tank’ stems from the RAND Corporation, which operated as a closed and secure environment for US strategic thinking after World War II. The term entered popular usage in the 1960s to describe a group of specialists who undertake intensive study of important policy issues. UNDP (2003: 6) defines think tanks as follows:

... organizations engaged on a regular basis in research and advocacy on any matter related to public policy. They are the bridge between knowledge and power in modern democracies” (UNDP, 2003: 6)

The idea of think tanks connecting researchers and decision makers resonates throughout the mission statements of numerous organisations. For instance, in Singapore, Chairman of the Board of Governors of the Institute of Policy Studies argues that “IPS must act as a bridge – to be close to, but not part of the government”.¹ Similarly, the Tokyo based NIRA which produces a world survey of think tanks² argues that the

¹ Hsuan Owyang, <http://www.istana.gov.sg/sp-030719.html>

² NIRA’s World Directory of Think Tanks: <http://www.nira.go.jp/ice/nwdtt/index.html>

key function of think tank is: “to bridge policy ideas and knowledge with other researchers and institutions, and sometimes with people having different backgrounds or ideologies”.

The Anglo-American tradition regards think tanks as relatively autonomous organizations with separate legal identity that engage in the analysis of policy issues independently of government, political parties and pressure groups. Elsewhere, the think tank tradition can be different (Stone & Denham, 2004). In Asian countries such as Japan, South Korea and Taipei, China think tanks are often found inside corporations. Chinese think tanks are government-sponsored and their scholars often work in patron-client relations with political leaders. Many institutes in South East Asia are semi-independent and often have close interaction with government, or with individual political figures.

The notion that a think tank requires independence from the state in order to be 'free-thinking' is an Anglo-American norm that does not translate well into other political cultures. Increasingly, therefore, 'think tank' is conceived in terms of a policy research *function* and a set of analytic or policy advisory practices, rather than a specific legal *organizational structure* as a non-governmental, non-partisan or independent civil society entity.

1.2. A Century of Think Tank Development

Prior to World War Two, think tanks were predominantly an Anglo-American phenomenon. Since then they have spread throughout the world. Around a thousand operate in the USA. European liberal democracies such as the United Kingdom and Germany host at least 100 each. Most other countries have less than fifty think tanks. The world wide total lies in the vicinity of 3,000 (McGann & Weaver, 2000). Overall think tanks have seen strong growth, but others have shrunk or closed as a consequence of financial insecurity, inadequate leadership or, occasionally, closure by state authorities.

At least four waves can be discerned in the pattern of think tank growth around the world. The first generation prior to world war two; the second wave in the OECD countries; the world-wide think tank boom from the late 1970s; and the transnationalisation of think tanks in the new millennium.

The first stage of think tank development until the World War Two saw a number of institutes established in Western Europe or the United States. First generation think-tanks were responses to practical problems spawned by urbanization, industrialisation and economic growth early in the 20th century. Well known American institutes include the Brookings Institution and the Russell Sage Foundation. In the UK, they include the Fabian Society, the National Institute for Social and Economic Research (NIESR) and Chatham House.

The period after world war two saw a more extensive second wave of development throughout Europe but such growth was largely limited to liberal democracies. In the USA, the New Deal and the Great Society period were a boom-time for ideational actors; the most notable being the Urban Institute. The period was marked by the proliferation of foreign policy institutes, centres for the study of security and development studies institutes, in an era defined by the Cold War, superpower rivalries and the emergence of Third World issues.

Since the 1970s, there has been a third wave with the proliferation of think tanks across the globe. The heightened activity of think tanks is related to periods of economic and political instability or fundamental change such as the demise of the Soviet Union and democratisation in Latin America and parts of Asia. The rise of the so-called 'New Right' think tanks also illustrates how policy uncertainties provide a window of opportunity for these institutes to help execute the paradigm shift away from Keynesian policy making to what is regarded in other parts of the world as elements of the Washington Consensus. That is, privatisation, financial liberalisation and deregulation.

As would be expected, western-style independent think tanks in Russia, Central and Eastern Europe appeared only after 1989. Examples include the Gdansk Institute and the Center for Social and Economic Research, both

in Poland, the Market Institute in Lithuania, the Adam Smith Institute in Warsaw and the Economic Institute in Hungary. As relatively young organisations, with limited resources, these social and economic policy institutes are often over-stretched in their policy focus on the problems of transition (Quigley 1997: 86-87).

Some analysts are now arguing that there is a fourth wave. This phase is qualitatively different in that it is not marked by the spread of think tank types of organisation. Instead, this phase is characterised by new modes of interaction that are propelled by the forces of globalisation and regionalisation (see section 3).

1.3. Diversification and Specialisation

Today, the think tank industry is very diverse. Many hybrid forms of think tank have emerged. They vary considerably in size, structure, policy ambit and political significance. Some organizations at least aspire to function on a 'non-partisan' or 'non-ideological' basis and claim to adopt a 'scientific' or technical approach to social and economic problems. These tend to be the older mainstream institutes. In Asia they include the Thailand Development Research Institute (TDRI)³ or the Korea Development Institute (KDI)⁴. Some think tanks are 'academic' in style, focused on research, geared to university interests and in building the knowledge base of society. Other organizations are overtly partisan or ideologically motivated. Many institutes are routinely engaged in advocacy and the marketing of ideas whether in simplified policy relevant form or in sound bites for the media. This trend is most apparent in Europe and North America but neo-liberal bodies like the Atlas Foundation are sponsoring the spread of free market economic institutes into countries such as Viet Nam.⁵

Specialization is a more contemporary development with environmental think tanks (e.g. the Thailand Environment Institute)⁶, economic policy think tanks (e.g. the Malaysian Institute for Economic Research)⁷ or regionally focused think tanks such as the Institute for South East Asian Studies (ISEAS)⁸ in Singapore. Technological advancements have also seen the rise of the 'virtual tank'. However, it is in those nations with strong civil societies and pluralistic political cultures that think tank diversification and specialisation is most apparent. Yet, the adversarial and ideological style of the American think tank industry has been fuelled by a wealthy philanthropic sector creating a 'battle of ideas' that some regard as negative feature of pluralism.

There is no 'international benchmark' for how many think tanks are necessary for a country, how large they should be or how they should cooperate amongst themselves or with other institutions such as universities. Nevertheless, it is apparent that the most well known think tanks in the world tend to be the larger mature institutes with stable sources of funding that secure a resident research staff (usually 20 or more researchers). There are at least five types of think tank:

1. Independent civil society think tanks established as non-profit organisations;
2. Policy research institutes located in or affiliated with a university;
3. Governmentally created or state sponsored think tank;
4. Corporate created or business affiliated think tank;

³ TDRI: <http://www.info.tdri.or.th/>

⁴ KDI: http://www.kdi.re.kr/kdi_eng/main.jsp

⁵ http://www.atlasusa.org/highlight_archive/2004/fall2004/fall%202004.1.html

⁶ TEI: <http://www.tei.or.th/>

⁷ MIER: <http://www.mier.org.my/>

⁸ ISEAS: <http://www.iseas.edu.sg/>

5. Political party (or candidate) think tank.

A broad brush claim is that civil society think tanks tend to be smaller than state sponsored or corporate think tanks as they are more dependent on philanthropy and contract research. University based think tanks are also often smaller, partly because they can draw upon expertise in other parts of the university. However, for reasons outlined in Section 2., there are a host of legal, political and economic reasons peculiar to the history and institutional make-up of a nation as to why there is no one best model or trajectory for think tank development.

1.4. *The 'Asian' Think Tank Story*

Just as it is a conundrum to define 'Asia' so it is the case to seek an 'Asian think tank tradition'. Accordingly, this analysis does not intend to uncover the 'general' pattern of think tank development in Asia; it would be an erroneous exercise. Nevertheless, there are notable differences in the evolutionary trajectory of think tanks in Asia from experience in North America and Europe.

Think tanks emerged in a number of Asian countries in the post-World War Two era. This includes well-known organisations such as the Japan Institute of International Affairs (established 1959) or the Singaporean Institute of International Affairs (SIIA, 1962)⁹. A number of institutes created in the 1960s and 1970s were modelled after the Royal Institute of International Affairs in the UK or American think tanks (Sandhu, 1991: 3). For example, SIIA, ISEAS, and the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)¹⁰ in Jakarta. During the 1990s, there has been a conscious effort to draw upon the American tradition of think tanks. The Ford Foundation provided core support for the establishment of TDRI in Thailand. During the 1990s, some entrepreneurs sought to export the US model and modify it to suit the Japanese cultural and institutional context (see Telgarsky & Ueno, 1996: 3-4).

The number of think tanks in Southeast Asian countries is small but growing. The population of Northeast Asian institutes is greater. In particular, with a few exceptions, the first Asian think tanks were not established until the 1960s, while the boom in Asian think tank numbers started in the 1990s. This is a later frame of development than in the West where the proliferation was experienced from the 1960s. Consequently, the degree of think tank diversity and specialisation is less pronounced.

In most Southeast Asian countries, the first generation of think tanks were elite, establishment bodies. Often they were set up directly within government, for example, LIPI in Indonesia.¹¹ The Philippine Institute of Development Studies (PIDS) is another economic think tank established by government decree in 1977 a non-stock, nonprofit government corporation.¹² In other words, the first generation of institutes was closely tied to the state. Their primary purpose was to provide information and act as a sounding board for government. Think tanks lacked independence from the state, to the extent that some observers claim that these bodies are 'state-directed' (Jayasuriya, 1994). Their importance to the state lies in their capacity to amplify messages that come from the top-down to the rest of society. As one observer has stated, Asian think tanks tend to be "regime enhancing" rather than "regime critical" (Yamamoto & Hubbard, 1995: 45).

⁹ <http://www.siiainline.org/>

¹⁰ CSIS: <http://www.csis.or.id/>

¹¹ Lembaga Ilmu Pengetahuan Indonesia: <http://www.lipi.go.id/>

¹² PIDS: <http://www.pids.gov.ph/>

1.5. Viet Nam in an International Context

In some degree, the Vietnamese situation parallels the experiences of other socialist systems. Institutes were totally state supported, firmly entrenched in the bureaucratic structure and designed to provide intellectual and analytic support to the state. Broadly speaking, the Soviet model (replicated with local variations through Central and Eastern Europe) constructed three different levels of research institute overseen by Communist Party structures. Those under the tutelage of the Academies of Science were afforded the greatest degree of intellectual autonomy. Secondly, there were institutes attached to particular ministries, albeit exercising little influence over the policy process. And third, there were institutes tied to the Soviet Communist Party (CPSU) dealing with broader ideological and political questions. In all three types, ideological constraints severely restricted the spectrum of policy analysis while censorship restricted the research agenda. There was only one 'client' for research; the monopolistic state. Opportunities for substantive policy impact could be dependent on the political patronage of a leading political figure. On the other hand, conservative opposition to 'innovative thinking' could lead to the emasculation of an institute, or the political ostracism of individual *instituteniki*. Greatest intellectual freedom was perhaps to be found in Hungary and least so in the German Democratic Republic. *Glasnost*, *perestroika* and the *novoe politicheskoe mishlenie* set in play values and norms that were articulated by reformist think tanks and which contributed to the internal fracturing of the politico-ideological complex (for a full discussion see Sandle, 2004).

The collapse of the Soviet Union has had dramatic implications for the state sponsored policy research conglomerate. In stark terms, the state sector has withered. There has been a haemorrhage of talented researchers into the new private sector (or alternative employment) and at the same time, massive cut-backs in funding for the state institutions in deteriorating economic conditions with a concomitant deterioration in status for researchers. There has also been 'privatisation' of some former state research institutions or 'spin-off' institutes created from the old bodies. The monopoly of expertise has given away to increased competition and fragmentation.

Western style think tanks emerged in large numbers and many have prospered. The challenges of transition to build viable economic and political systems in the wake of communism and the increased complexity of governance created real opportunities for young policy entrepreneurs in the new think tanks. There are, however, serious questions of sustainability and a culture of dependency on foreign funds, made all the more apparent when donors turned their attention to the Middle East and the war on terrorism after 9/11. Too quickly western analysts have equated the rapid development of independent think tanks with teleological assumptions of 'transition' towards democratic institutions, pluralism, healthy civil societies, market competition, liberalism, privatisation and consumerism. Instead, the communist legacy persists in the organisational structures, values and research ethos of old institutes alongside the transition think tanks.

By contrast, in the People's Republic of China the Academies of Sciences have been more resilient, due largely to the continuing grip on power of the Chinese Communist Party. Chinese think tanks maintain close patron-client relations with political leaders and operate within a closed policy context. Composed of 'establishment intellectuals' who help shape the legitimacy of political authority, Chinese think tanks:

...have no intention of challenging or replacing the regime, but want to maintain the existing structures of political authority by persuading the state to change itself and thus help the political leadership overcome its difficulties (Shai, 2004: 143).

Furthermore, the emergence of societally-based think tanks has been very limited. The continuing strong top-down political control of the party-state has precluded the development (and impact) of independent policy research.

Are there any lessons from Soviet and Chinese experience for Viet Nam? The analytical weakness of the Soviet bureaucracy as a result of practices that rewarded loyalty and obedience, conservatism and conformity forced the leadership to solicit expertise from reform minded institutes and independent experts. Rapid industrialisation, urbanisation and resultant policy problems, alongside the pressures of globalisation, might prompt Vietnamese leaders to look outside the state for policy advice should in-house policy analysis be deemed inadequate or irrelevant. However, if Chinese experience provides a guide, there is unlikely to be a flowering of Western style policy institutes or a political culture of critique developing in the next decade.

If Vietnamese political leaders were to look for lessons in the mode of operation of Southeast Asian think tanks, then it would be to cultivate an 'arms length' and more independent relationship with the state. The mechanisms for achieving this outcome – such as corporatisation – would entail a difficult adjustment. The alternative would be to sponsor autonomous new institutes composed of 'establishment intellectuals'.

2. The Socio-Political Environment for Policy Research Institutions

The proliferation of think tanks worldwide can be explained as a response to increasing demand for policy research. Much of this demand could be said to originate within government or ruling parties. Bureaucracies have been unable to expand sufficiently to develop the necessary analytical base for decision-makers. Alternatively, civil servants do not have the skills or training or adequate resources. Indeed, a certain form of expertise may be required only on an ad hoc basis or only for a few years. Think tanks can be used to fill some of the gaps. As Wu Rong-i, a president of TIER in Taipei, China¹³ noted, "government needs good advice to help solve problems, but it can't afford to hire hordes of experts in different fields. Think tanks are an efficient and affordable solution" (Hwang, 1996: 19).

However, while the utility of these organisations is frequently recognised, there is often reluctance for governments to pay fully for it. Increasingly, international organisations and international NGOs advocating the utility of enhanced policy analytic capacity for contemporary governance and/or democratisation have provided development assistance.

The uneven spread of think tank development across political systems appears to be a consequence of factors such as the extent of foundation support, legal structures, the political situation, civil society development, and the tax environment. However, the character of demand helps to explain why *different kinds* of think tanks have emerged throughout Asia. For example, in Malaysia and Indonesia the Islamic tradition and revival has led to a demand for an Islamic perspective on many policy issues. The following factors are outlined in brief to indicate how context shapes prospects for the development of think tanks as well as the routes for policy influence.

The Political Architecture and Regime Type: The structure of political systems in Asia vary considerably in their institutional arrangements and political culture. However, it does not appear that federal systems such as can be found in Malaysia (or in Australia) necessarily provide more opportunities for the establishment of think tanks than the unitary systems such as Singapore, Japan or Brunei. The differences between presidential and parliamentary cultures do not appear to present significant differences in the opportunities. Centralisation of policy making and political functions and concentration of power is a strong feature of governments in the region.

Bureaucratic structures and styles differ markedly among all countries. In most of the countries discussed here, bureaucracies are very strong and often retain a monopoly on policy advice. The strength of bureaucracies has implications for the structure and operation of think tanks. It is not unusual for think tanks to be created by governments as an extra-bureaucratic arm of government. This is the case for both the Institute for Strategic

¹³ Taipei, China Institute of Economic Research: <http://www.tier.org.tw/english.htm>

and International Studies (ISIS)¹⁴ and Institut Kefahaman Islam Malaysia (IKIM)¹⁵ in Malaysia, although both are constituted as autonomous organisations not dissimilar to PIDS. In short, most Southeast Asian think tanks have some form of bureaucratic entrée or official patronage.

Democratisation. Opportunities for genuine political liberalisation and democratic reform are apparent but nonetheless, have been inhibited by a number of factors specific to each Southeast Asian country. In Indonesia, for example, important elements of the bourgeoisie are Chinese (as in Malaysia) and have been proscribed from playing a prominent political role in the interests of ethnic stability. Additionally, an interventionist state is still largely necessary for creating conditions for profitable capital accumulation. Thailand is often portrayed as an example of the forces of democratisation, particularly when General Suchinda's regime was overthrown in 1994. Rather than any liberalisation or democratisation in a representative sense, what has emerged is a system of electoralism or parliamentarism as an institutional framework for contending groups of businessmen, notables and political entrepreneurs (Robison, 1995: 18). While the political regimes of Southeast Asia are changing and incorporating democratic features, the military and bureaucratic strata of these states are responding to new social forces – growing middle classes, new sectors of capital power, NGOs – it does not entail that these forces will lead to liberal democracy. Instead, democratisation serves the purposes of elite transition and is a state-led process rather than one dependent on the strength of civil society or the middle classes.

Civil society development is a recent dynamic in a number of Asian countries but this dynamic is not one with which Western liberal democrats are familiar leading to pluralistic societies of competitive groups communicating their preferences through fair and free elections, an independent media and political activism. Rather, the processes of change remain illiberal in many societies, as evinced by the internal security act in Malaysia, the 'soft authoritarianism' of Singapore, etc. The boundaries between the state, the market and civil society are blurred to such an extent that it is difficult for interests to develop autonomously within civil society. Civil society is a domain where the state intervenes and manages. It is more likely to be the case that think tanks, and NGOs in general, are organised and funded by the state. Rather than a confrontational relationship, NGOs tend to work in partnership with the state.

Laws regarding non-governmental or non-profit organisations can often be very restrictive. In parts of Asia, the rights of citizens to organise, lobby and protest -- such as by contributing to the establishment of an alternative think tanks -- cannot be taken for granted. Such organisations where they exist often cannot afford to challenge state prerogatives. Indeed, it can be very difficult for new organisations to acquire credibility and recognition in societies where political subservience is ingrained or where oppositionary bodies are viewed with hostility. In Singapore, the Societies Act of 12967 is seen by some outside observers as instrument for "blunting political opposition" and challenges to the authority of the PAP dominated state (Rodan, 1996: 100).

Political parties and party competition often do not have as long a tradition in Asia as in Europe or North America. Indeed, some governments of the region have adopted repressive tactics to prevent the emergence of oppositionary political parties. In Indonesia, until recent years, the alternative parties were managed and restricted by the authoritarian regime under Suharto to such an extent that they were not permitted to be active other than around election time. Consequently, there were neither the same opportunities for think tanks to interact with political parties in the same way that many of their Western counterparts do, nor sufficient demand from these emasculated parties to generate partisan institutes.

Philanthropy: The role of business, community foundations and private benefactors in providing financial and other resources is crucial in many countries. Private think tanks cannot survive on project income alone but

¹⁴ ISIS: <http://www.isis.org.my/>

¹⁵ IKIM: <http://www.ikim.gov.my/>

require grants and gifts that will help promote the longevity of the organisation. Corporate philanthropy has grown within the region but little information is as yet available.¹⁶ Corporate philanthropy in Japan such as through the One Percent Club and the Council for Better Corporate Citizenship (both at the initiative of the Keidanren) has been particularly noticeable and partly the consequence of Japanese direct investment in other countries (Yamamoto & Hubbard, 1995: 51).

Business Independence and Interest Representation: The strength of the state and/or the character of state-business relations can shape the demand for think tank services and products. In the case of Hong Kong because of the state-embedded nature of business interests, the need for establishment of the independent business funded think tanks has been dampened. By contrast, in Taipei, China, internal competition among rival factions and forces within the KMT state, and later on competition between the KMT and DPP camps – intermingling with their respective business supporters – helped create an environment for the emergence of think tanks.

In Malaysia, MIER is the most business-oriented think tank. It actively provides information for business and Bank Negara is its prime benefactor. It responds to requests from business to organise forums for closed policy discussion. At times, it operates similar to a consultancy. Think tanks in a number of the Northeast Asian countries have been useful in providing analysis on foreign markets for companies seeking to enter new markets or expand their operations overseas. In general, however, corporate creation of think tanks and consumption of their products is less pronounced in Southeast Asia compared to Northeast Asia. There is a closer relationship with government, bureaucracy or political leaders than with the corporate sector.

Regime Support and Legitimation: The intelligentsia is an important source of legitimation for many regimes of the region. They provide theoretical justification for government policies, a necessary component in the legitimation process. Intellectuals and experts are required to give substance and coherence to the ideas articulated by political leaders. Institutes act as a government research centre where politicians and bureaucrats rely upon it for reports, briefings and drafting speeches. As a consequence, the fortunes of an institute can be dependent on the continuing grip on power of existing leaders. This is especially the case in Malaysia and Indonesia where a number of think tanks have been closely identified with certain regimes or political figures.

Policy Training needs of the State: Universities with strong disciplinary foundations are often not well structured to provide multi-disciplinary degrees in the policy sciences and there can sometimes be academic resistance to applied or vocational studies. University-based think tanks are well placed to provide degree courses. Other think tanks can provide short term executive courses for civil servants in methodology, ethics or latest industry standards. The Ho Chi Minh National Political Academy (HCMNPA) of the Vietnamese Communist Party and the Asia Pacific School of Economics and Government (APSEG)¹⁷ in Australia have joined to conduct a project on public policy research and teaching. ADBI has similar aspirations with the Japan Fund for Public Policy Training. More generally, the Singaporean government policy of establishing the city-state as a “global education hub” is highly indicative of regional competitive pressures to create ‘knowledge based economies’ (Olds, 2005) and, I would add, ‘evidence based policy making’.

The Symbolic Function of Think Tanks: The growth of a think tank community also performs a symbolic role representing national advancement in political, economic and educational development. In the words of one British think tank director, think tanks are “an essential attribute of an advanced society with liberal/democratic aspirations” (Chipman, 1987: 5). They serve other symbolic roles. IKIM in Malaysia is a powerful symbol of the Mahathir Government’s commitment to Islamic values and principles. IKIM was government sponsored to

¹⁶ Asia Pacific Philanthropy Consortium (APPC): <http://www.asianphilanthropy.org/index.html>

¹⁷ APSEG: <http://apseg.anu.edu.au/default.php>

promote within Malaysia and project internationally a moderate and tolerant form of Islam and an alternative to Islamic fundamentalism. ISEAS, established in 1968 in a relatively hostile environment for young Singaporean nation, played an important role signifying not “a threat oriented think tank but a respected research institution “in tune with the region”” (Reid, 2003: 10).

International Demand and Funding. Bilateral aid agencies such as USAID and NORAD, international organisations such as the World Bank and UNDP, and philanthropic foundations such as Ford Foundation and Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, have taken great interest in think tanks over the past decade. The support think tanks with research funding for the country-specific analyses they need. However, think tanks are also regarded as vehicles for capacity building for policy analysis. ADBI is not unlike other international organisations, the experts and official staff of which require like-minded counterparts in-country with whom they can effectively interact.

Indeed, the leaders of economically powerful nations of Asia sometimes face the exhortations of Westerners that it is their "duty" in the post Cold War era of multi-polarity to establish non-governmental policy research institutions to address significant international issues. Robert McNamara's pronouncements on the absence of an independent think tank sector in Japan are exemplary.

Japan needs to create and nurture a cadre of researchers and nonprofit organizations that will focus on ... global problems ... (and) should be prepared to contribute in this way ... as a Great Power with enormous economic and technological resources it has a duty to do so (1996: 142).

Such statements are also illustrative of growing global pressures upon think tanks.

3. Globalisation and the Transnationalisation of Think Tanks

It is clear that think tanks have been affected by globalisation. For one thing, the process has transformed their research agendas. Institutes have been pushed to look beyond primarily national matters to address global issues and **trans-border policy problems** concerning the environment, security, trade, refugees and human rights. In tandem with the globalization of research agendas has been the global dissemination of think tank research via the Internet. Many think tank researchers have been important commentators on globalization. As noted by one Vice President of the World Bank, think tanks play an important role in interpreting legal, financial and administrative codes of the international governance architecture. He states:

WTO rules and regulations are, of course, complex. So the first thing is to understand the rules and the regulations; As I have seen, the government and think-tanks in Viet Nam have put a lot of efforts into understanding these. But you need to understand how they impact the Vietnamese economy too: what sector will benefit, what sector will be opened to competitions (Ian Goldin, *Saigon Times*, 19th November 2003)¹⁸

For Viet Nam, this means scaling up capacity in key ministries of trade and finance not only in economic policy analysis but also in international law.

Regionalisation could be a stronger dynamic than globalisation. In regional fora, think tanks target regional groupings such as Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) or Mercosur. The European Union (EU) clearly acts as a policy magnet for think tanks (Ullrich, 2004). The policy challenges of transition have prompted a proliferation of institutes in Central and Eastern Europe necessitating formation of regional networks by UNDP and the Open Society Institute. A more recent dynamic relates to global cities and the manner in which rapid

¹⁸ http://www.VietNamtrade.org/news_archive.cfm?pubid=8E04DEC5-7B72-47D0-9462-D605031153B0

industrialisation and urbanisation has created 'micro-regional' demand for policy research. Think tanks cluster in high concentration in global cities such as Shanghai, Singapore, New York and Sydney.

The creation of ASEAN in 1967 has generated a regional source of demand for policy analysis. Of relevance here, the ASEAN secretariat lacks sufficient strength and staff to conduct policy research and advisory functions. In short, there is a policy analysis vacuum in the formal structures. The influential role of think tanks in Southeast Asian security and economic co-operation has long been recognized in the work of ASEAN-ISIS (Morrison & Evans, 1995). Viet Nam has been involved with ASEAN-ISIS since 1995 via the Institute for International Relations. The Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace¹⁹ is also a member.

A second feature of the transnationalisation of think tanks is the use of these organizations as an unofficial means for states to project their interests abroad. American foundations and USAID (as well as other development agencies like the World Bank) have '**exported**' the **American think tank model** to Central Europe, Asia, the Middle East and North Africa. The 'think tank' model has become an object of development policy and an organizational tool both to build capacity in policy making and to promote civil society in an American or western likeness. Transplantation does not always work.

On a more prosaic level, think tanks regularly provide a public platform for visiting dignitaries and other international events. Somewhat behind the scenes, think tanks have become venues for informal diplomacy. The ASEAN-ISIS institutes have been particularly effective with their 'summitry' in the security domain, and notwithstanding the dent to regional economic co-operation in the wake of the Asian financial crisis, the institutes have been important actors in keeping regional policy discussions alive and informed.

Third, independent think tanks are global in the sense of being one group of actors in **global civil society**. Think tanks interact with social movements and NGOs in coalitions of policy advocates to provide expertise on various policy questions. More importantly, think tanks have established their own transnational networks. PASOS – the Open Society Foundation network of policy institutes in Central and Eastern Europe – is a regional network. Global ThinkNet, convened by the Japan Center for International Exchange²⁰, hosts meetings of think tank directors and senior scholars. Through the 1990s, the Tokyo Club²¹, which is convened by Nomura Research Institute (NRI) in Japan, drew together analysts from Brookings, Chatham House, Institut für Wirtschaftsforschung, NRI and the Institut Francais des Relations Internationales. The Global Development Network is an extensive federal network primarily of economic research institutes.²² These are at the elite, mainstream and conservative end of global civil society. These networks provide an infrastructure for global dialogue and research collaboration, but institutes remain committed to the nation-state where they are legally constituted.

Fourth, think tanks are also involved in cross-national processes of **policy transfer**, where they go beyond detached policy analysis to advocate and spread certain policy ideas and practices (Ladi, 2005). For instance, think tanks have been vehicles for the spread of policies as diverse as privatization, anti-corruption strategies and constitutional reform. That is, the transfer of ideas as well as programs. On the first score, the ideas and concepts of the 'new public administration' have been transmitted to developing and transition countries by international organisations like the EU, OECD and regional Banks in partnership with think tanks and professional associations. Local think tanks play a role of interpretation, synthesis and adaptation of

¹⁹ CICP: <http://www.cicp.org.kh/default.htm>

²⁰ JCIE Global ThinkNet: <http://www.jcie.or.jp/thinknet/>

²¹ Tokyo Club Foundation for Global Studies: <http://www.tcf.or.jp/events/20000127-28.html>

²² GDN: www.gdnet.org

'international lessons' to fit the national context and legal requirements. On the second score, an increasingly important development is the inclusion of think tank expertise in semi-official global policy partnerships collectively convened by business, NGOs, international organizations and governments as partnerships to deliver *global public goods* (Reinicke, 1999-2000).

What does the transnationalisation of think tanks mean for Viet Nam? While there are many pressing policy problems of local and national concern, Vietnamese think tanks cannot afford to ignore the regional and global domains of policy debate. National sovereignty is being eroded and new modes of policy authority are emerging with regional and global governance. In other parts of world, think tanks find it necessary – indeed are compelled – to address new arenas of decision making beyond the nation-state and to become involved in transnational networks and public-private global partnerships. A global 'marketplace of ideas' is taking shape but it is one where North American and European think tanks dominate.

The advantages of global and regional interactions is the considerable scope for building policy analytic capacity that comes with international experience and the opportunities to become well-versed with 'best practice' in policy analysis. The reason think tanks in other countries invest in participation in global policy debates – sending staff to conferences and meetings, becoming partners in international research projects – is because it is an indirect means to resources: funding, data, expertise and patronage. The global domain is where policy institutes are seen and recognised by donors whether those donors are international organisations, governments or iNGOs. The disadvantage is that international networking is expensive, time-consuming and detracts from other organisational activities. Nevertheless, the ability of Vietnamese think tanks to actively participate within global and regional policy forums – to be 'plugged in' – signifies the degree to which they have built capacity for policy dialogue and have met international standards. As such, international recognition – such as invitations to present at conferences, research grants, etc – can be considered as one criteria to evaluate how well Vietnamese think tanks are performing.

4. Best Practices of Effective Think Tanks

The criteria of effectiveness differ from one policy context to another, and in relation to the mode of evaluation required by primary funding agencies. For instance, many American think tanks adopt as just one indicator of their 'success', the amount of column inches of newspaper reportage they receive. By contrast, a foundation may require other indicators of the impact of policy research they fund by asking for evidence that a think tank has 'engaged with stakeholders'. However, there is also much that can be done with the internal management that contributes to think tank quality. Accordingly, this section first draws up the eight management principles for think tanks developed by Raymond Struyk for think tanks in the transition societies of Central and Eastern Europe (Struyk, 2002). It is followed by some comments about the elusiveness of policy influence with government.

4.1. Management Challenges for Transition State Think Tanks

Improving organisational management is as important as raising analytical capacities. Good management and good governance is crucial to the effectiveness of policy institutes. A flawed administrative structure cannot be offset by strong political directives or substituted by the dynamic charismatic leadership of an individual director.

In brief, (and using my own nomenclature) the eight principles developed by Struyk (2002) for the "maturing" post-communist think tanks are:

1. Motivating staff for improved productivity and retention;
2. Ensuring standards through quality control;
3. Innovation and organisational renewal
4. Appointing research managers

5. Corporate governance
6. Mode of research provision and product
7. Financial integrity
8. Bridging research and policy

- 4.1.1 **Motivating staff:** Staff motivation problems (disinterest, low productivity) impact negatively on think tank operations. Think staff in non-profit civil society think tanks are usually differently motivated to those in the state sector. People attracted to civil society think tanks often want ‘to make a difference’ and are inspired by the particular mission of the organisation. By contrast, a state sector think tank generally offers security of employment and a relatively direct link to government. Working conditions, facilities (computer, internet, access to data, etc) and interesting work content help in attracting and retaining capable analytic staff. Equally important in creating conditions for higher productivity and innovation from researchers are: (i) recognition of individual achievements and their authorship of reports; (ii) clear career grades and opportunities for development; (iii) competitive salaries, compensation and rewards. This entails transparent procedures for performance evaluation and promotion, as well as planning for staff training and professional development. Staff need to keep abreast of international disciplinary debates and methods via courses or conference participation. Encourage staff to **publish** in Vietnamese and in appropriate circumstances in another international language. Another unavoidable requirement that Vietnamese think tanks will face in the future – sooner or later – is the real necessity of staff to **fund-raise and win research grants**. This takes time, practice, perseverance and a ‘thick skin’ for when applications are unsuccessful.
- 4.1.2 **Quality Control:** It is essential to pay scrupulous attention to quality of think tank products and services. Usually, the best means is to hire and retain highly qualified researchers; that is, **staff with PhDs** and policy experience to ensure that advice is reputable and relevant. The standard approach in world’s leading institutes to ensure quality is **peer review**. Best practice is that: “analysis should be factually correct, logically consistent, methodologically sound, grounded in current and historical literature, objective, and written in a way that will be useful to the primary audience” (Struyk, 2002: 65). The conclusions of research and analysis should not be pre-determined. Peer review methods are diverse and can be undertaken internally via in-house seminars, by the think tank research director and/or management team; and externally, via blind refereeing in scientific journals or use of commissioned reviewers. Other matters of quality that make a big difference to funders include: meeting deadlines; effective presentation of results, and practicality of advice and recommendations. RAND has produced internal guidelines of its corporate conceptions of high quality research which can be regarded as an international benchmark (see Appendix 1).
- 4.1.3 **Organisational Innovation:** Civil society think tanks are under constant competitive pressure to innovate, renew their work program and develop both new products and new clients. Think tanks supported by the state – either as a unit within a Ministry or a non departmental public body – need their organisational antennae more attuned to political and bureaucratic agendas. Re-evaluating a think tank’s mission statement, developing new work programmes, seeking new clients and diversifying research agendas requires **strategic planning**. For Vietnamese think tanks, work for donors and national government provides regular and familiar work of policy development, legislative drafting, empirical background studies, program evaluation, etc. Developing new clients in the business sector – such as with banks or foreign companies – presents challenges of diversification of think tank research agendas and products. These clients have different expectations about the kind of research, the speed with which it is delivered and confidentiality of the results. However, the rewards of developing new private sector clients with consultancy contracts include broadening the researcher’s experience, improved efficiency and heightened public profile.

- 4.1.4 **Strong Team Leaders:** These go by various titles such as department heads or division managers as the ‘middle management’ of medium to large think tanks. It is the responsibility of senior management – usually the Director – to appoint team leaders to coordinate project work and its marketing, ensure productivity and a positive work environment. In theory, selection of these managers ‘should’ be done on the basis of the candidate having (i) **experience and substantive knowledge** of the specific policy field and project; (ii) their **interpersonal skills** as a leader and mentor; (iii) their initiative and sensitivity to client needs; (iv) organisational and management skills; (v) technical sophistication and credentials (PhD.); and (vi) their intellectual creativity. Such attributes are often intangible but contribute to the ‘buzz’, creativeness and dynamism of the research process. The productivity of the entire institute depends on the success of these team leaders. Appointment on the basis of seniority alone, patronage and favouritism, or personal and political connections cultivates a hierarchical environment of directed research and unproductive behaviours. According to Struyk, authoritarian leadership styles persist in the knowledge industries of Asia when international experience has shown that consultative, participatory research processes are more productive (2002: 137; 146).
- 4.1.5 **Boards and Governance:** External oversight from highly reputed members in a board of trustees strengthens the governance of an institute as well as its image with external audiences in the foundation world, with business and among international organisations. For governmental institutes, there may no board of trustees in place. Administration, including the hiring and firing of institute directors, is handled by senior bureaucrats in accordance to civil service codes. Instead, an ‘advisory council’ or ‘scientific panel’ may perform some roles of oversight – depending on how frequently it convenes. Similarly, policy institutes based inside universities (such as my own – CPS) may have an academic advisory body, with financial and other administration functions dealt with elsewhere in the echelons of the university. For independent institutes, the board is the essential decision making body to ensure accountability (that is, that the organisation’s resources are properly expended without waste on excessively expensive offices, travel, salaries or activities) and to ensure that the institute maintains its public role. The more mature, academically secure and financial stable an institute, the more that management can be left to institute directors, and the big questions of vision and strategy in the hands of the board. A frequent reality is that boards are dysfunctional: they ‘micro-manage’, they are reactive rather than strategic visionaries; they are distracted by day-to-day management problems instead of setting long term targets, or they become dormant. The most effective advisory boards are small and of diverse composition incorporating a range of experience to aid strategic development of an institute. An independent board of trustees may not be politically feasible for governmental think tanks in Viet Nam. Nevertheless, **advisory committees** of eminent scholars or practitioners from institutions outside the ministry (such as based in universities or in private bodies) as well as from overseas contribute to the **prestige** of an organisation.
- 4.1.6 **Structuring Research Staff** around ‘stars’ or ‘teams’. There are a number of different models around the world. Some think tanks are noted for the ‘high-flyer’ researchers who often work solo on their own projects with only the assistance of research assistants. The product is usually published under the ‘star’s’ name. This model is one dominant pattern in North America and Western Europe. By contrast, large scale projects, program evaluations etc. that involves field work, statistical analysis or other original data collection often require team work. Commissioned research is often done on a team basis. A further consideration is the balance of full time residential and part-time contract staff and associate researchers. Due to the vicissitudes of funding, many transition state think tanks rely on a core of full time residential staff but draw in associate researchers on a project basis. Generally, there are high fixed costs with maintaining a large number of residential research staff. Such arrangements are usually found in state-supported institutes – as in Viet Nam – or older mainstream think tanks with sizeable endowments. Where competitive pressures impel independent institutes to evaluate continuously the balance of staff among resident, contract and ‘distinguished visitor’ types, there is little incentive or flexibility to do so in state-funded governmental institutes.

- 4.1.7 **Financial Management.** For institutes with the security of state funding or a large endowment, financial accountability is an internally driven process. However, to the extent that Vietnamese institutes seek external research funding from business, international donors or becomes partners in international research projects, then it will be necessary to meet the accounting and auditing standards of the donor. This means that an institute must know its own real costs (direct and indirect) and have the technical capacity for financial accountability.
- 4.1.8 **Communication and dissemination of results.** Too often the research process ends with the completion of a written document that ends up gathering dust on the bookshelf. Little thought is given to the mechanisms of how to communicate research results to those who would find the information useful, and little consideration is given to packaging the research in different formats so as to have better impact and visibility in policy circles. Research results need to be timely, comprehensible and written in an engaging style. Too often research is ignored because it is presented in a jargon ridden, dry scientific manner. International funders of research are now demanding that strategies for communication or engagement with ‘user groups’ be built into the research process. Instead of reviewing the voluminous literature on ‘**bridging research and policy**’, there are organisations with excellent web-sites providing practical advice on communications strategies.
- RAPID – research and policy in development. www.odi.org.uk/rapid
 - IDRC – international development research council.
 - GDN – global development network. www.gdnet.org/,
- ‘Knowledge utilisation’ requires budgetary allocation for dissemination and staff training on communication techniques such as how to write policy memos or work with the media. The methods of communication are diverse, but are an essential ingredient in research being heard and becoming influential. In the words of MIER in Malaysia, “think tanks... need to not only think but also talk’.

These management principles developed by Struyk (2002) do not represent a fool-proof toolkit or instruction manual. Instead, there are strategic choices to be made by institutes as to how to structure their organisation to best fit their socio-political context and policy niche.

4.2. *Image and Reputation: The Reality and Rhetoric of Policy Influence*

There is a need for realism in planning for policy impact. The routes of access and strategies of influence will vary according to historical and institutional context of a country, and the degree to which a think tank is an ‘insider’ or an ‘outsider’ to policy communities and power holders. Moreover, a distinction needs to be made between the wider societal implications of ‘research relevance’ and the more concise idea of ‘policy influence of research’.

Research may have no impact on decision-makers. This does not mean it is of no utility or interest. Other stakeholders – the media, international organisations present in Viet Nam, the business sector, etc – may wish to be informed of research results. They may not be the target audience for the research product – that is, government decision makers – but these institutions can provide an indirect route of influence.

A nascent population of private sector institutes or research oriented NGOs could represent competitive pressure on governmental think tanks in the future. At the same time, new opportunities are likely to be afforded as well. NGO research capacity represents opportunity for collaboration and partnership. Should political leaders choose to solicit policy research outside the government or Party structures, these leaders will still need advisors inside government to help interpret and balance such results and absorb the research. In short, there is considerable potential for symbiotic relationships.

Another factor of importance is that “policy influence” means different things to different sets of individuals and institutions. Donors may want to see ‘evidence’ of the impact of think tanks in policy developments. This may mean developing a range of indicators of ‘influence’ or ‘policy relevance’:

1. Politico-Bureaucratic
 - impact on legislation; drafting of bills; writing speeches
 - appointment of institute staff to official committees
 - political patrons and connections
 - international organisation patronage and co-option of think tank staff
2. Societal
 - media recognition and coverage
 - number of commissioned research projects from business
 - stakeholder engagement and participatory research
 - network membership and affiliations
3. Organisational
 - Publication record
 - Qualifications and experience of staff
 - Policy training capacity
 - External funds raised
 - Content, navigability and sophistication of web-site

However, indicators often do not capture the more invisible features of influence that may occur through ‘corridor lobbying’ and professional contacts built over time that develop into relationships of trust allowing ‘insider’ access to policy communities. Patron-client relationships typical of the Chinese system, and the ‘revolving door’ phenomenon of the movement of individuals between government and think tank in Singapore, entail a more intangible and indirect route of influence.

An oft forgotten factor of influence is that think tanks produce human capital. This is not only the university-based institutes involved in providing public policy/management degrees. It is also the policy training and ‘on-the-job’ experience within think tanks that provide individuals with the bureaucratic skills and political contacts to advance a career in government or ‘international development’.

Others suggest that policy influence is more long term, atmospheric and subtle. That is, where the culture of debate is altered, or how the ruling ideas and values of a society are fashioned. However, it is beyond the scope of this paper to delve into social science debates about the long term ‘enlightenment’ functions of research and analysis (see Weiss, 1992) other than to conclude with a famous quote of John Maynard Keynes:

The ideas of economists and political philosophers (...) are more powerful than is commonly understood. Indeed the world is ruled by little else. Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influences, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist. Madmen in authority, who hear voices in the air, are distilling their frenzy from some academic scribbler of a few years back. I am sure that the power of vested interests is vastly exaggerated compared with the gradual encroachment of ideas (...) soon or late, it is ideas, not vested interests, which are dangerous for good or evil (Keynes 1936: 383-4)

Finally, there is the inevitable anxiety and vexed questions about “independence”. To many Western observers, Asian think tanks are considered to have an unhealthy close relationship with government. Given perceptions that they “serve to toe the official line”, even *The Straits Times* has asked the question: “Can Asian Asian Think Tanks Think?” (Rekhi, 2002).

Independence must be assessed on more than one criteria whilst recognising that calls for independence can sometimes conflict with and contradict calls for policy relevance. Dimensions of independence can include:

1. Political independence from vested interests
2. Legal independence
3. Financial independence
4. Scholarly autonomy and ‘freedom of research’

A western think tank may trumpet its status as a non-profit organisation with no affiliations to political party or business interests. Yet, funding dependence on one client – such as a government department – will raise questions about freedom to set research agendas and subtle forms of self-censorship in ensuring the delivery of desired research results. In the end, perfect and complete independence is neither possible nor desirable for organisations such as think tanks. Instead, independence, autonomy and scholarly freedom is based on strong professional norms, (institutional) relationships open to scrutiny and tolerant but vigilant political cultures.

Appendix 1. RAND Standards for High Quality Research

The standards were codified at RAND as a description of the quality standards for all RAND research. They are also the set of principles by which RAND research divisions and programs shape their individual quality assurance processes.

General Standards

- The problem should be well formulated;
- The research approach should be well designed and well executed;
- The data and assumptions should be sound;
- The findings should be useful and advance knowledge;
- The implications and recommendations should follow logically from the findings and be explained thoroughly;
- The documentation should be accurate, understandable, cogent and temperate in tone;
- The research should demonstrate understanding of previous related studies;
- The research should be relevant to the client and other stakeholders;
- The research should be objective, independent and balanced.

The additional standards below describe special qualities of studies that RAND uses to define its institutional legacy and reserved to describe its most outstanding research work.

Special Standards

- The research is comprehensive and integrative;
- The research is innovative;
- The research is enduring.

The motto of RAND is: *Objective Analysis. Effective Solutions.*

RAND's web-site can be found at: www.rand.org

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