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Looking Beyond Delhi for New Ideas

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The building of NITI Aayog (National Institution for Transforming India Aayog) which replaced the 64-year old Planning Commission, in New Delhi on January 2, 2015. The private sector too can play an effective role in policy formulation through policy research organisations. File photo: Kamal Narang

*The changing role of governments at the Union and the States of India opens up potential for independent policy research institutions. In this article, **Tridivesh Singh Maini** points out the advantages that can accrue to governments by drawing upon the talent and resources available in the private sector. In addition, he points out, it is time for States to fund such institutions to nurture and develop policy studies.*

Recent years have witnessed the creation of a number of think tanks in India, many of them funded by the private sector – such as the Observer Research Foundation (ORF), Ananta Aspen and Gateway House Mumbai ¹, ORF

was ranked high in more than one category in the recent global think tank Index report 2015 [2](#) . It was ranked sixth in the China, India, Japan and Republic of Korea region, and 118th among think tanks in the U.S., and non-U.S.

There are those who oppose private funding, arguing that it results in pushing the agenda of large corporates rather than independent research. Yet, it would be pertinent to mention that key government funded think tanks, like the Institute of Defence Studies and Analysis (IDSA) (ranked seventh in the China, India, Japan and Republic of Korea region) and the Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA), have also attracted flak for being excessively bureaucratic and rigid in their worldview. This despite the efforts of these think tanks to hire talented researchers and keep themselves open to contrarian ideas and criticisms of government policy. Interestingly, think tanks cutting across nations face the charge of being agenda-driven, especially as their numbers increase. On the positive side, this growth can only lead to the spread of new ideas and debates. U.S.-based think tanks are beginning to have centres in India, among them Brookings India, which started in 2013, and Carnegie Endowment for International Peace which is shortly opening Carnegie India. One charge laid at the door of the Indian private sector is that with few exceptions it mostly tends to fund foreign think tanks [3](#) , [4](#) .

Since think tanks as an idea evolved largely in the U.S., it is but natural to draw lessons from there. Take for instance, the concept of 'revolving door', whereby a number of policy makers, including officials of the state department and political appointees, spend time in prominent think tanks. This enables closer interface between policy makers and academics, something which is felt to be lacking in India, and is often cited as one of the reasons for think tanks not receiving adequate funding [5](#) .

Yet, whether in the U.S. or India, a major concern is about the concentration of think tanks in and around national capitals. American foreign policy and economic discourse is thought to be dominated by the Washingtonian view despite a number of think tanks such as Rand (Santa Monica) and Hoover Institution (Stanford University) being located outside the beltway, i.e. Washington DC. Think tanks in Washington have number of advantages: they can build strong relationships not just with policy makers and academics, but also with journalists who cover national politics [6](#) .

In India too, most of the think tanks are in New Delhi, and the discourse on key economic and foreign policy issues is not always in sync with the rest of the country. The Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, has spoken about involving State governments in economic and foreign policy on the one hand [7](#) , and broadbasing policy initiatives by inviting inputs from outside the government on the other. At the book launch of *Getting India Back On Track -- an action agenda for reform* (edited by Bibek Debroy and others), on June 8, 2014, barely a month after he took charge as Prime Minister, Modi referred to the role of "the input of intellectual think tanks" for more effective policies [8](#) . Another indication of the importance of think tanks for the Modi dispensation is the positioning of Niti Aayog, which replaced the Planning Commission, as a think tank. Said a press release from the Prime Minister's office, 'NITI Aayog will emerge as a **think-tank** that will provide Governments at the central and State levels with relevant strategic and technical advice across the spectrum of key elements of policy'.

Interestingly, in China, despite the concentration of top think tanks in Shanghai and Beijing, there are also a number of such institutions outside Beijing, which have played an important role in Chinese foreign and economic policy. A major example of this is the One Belt One Road project (OBOR) project. Under the OBOR, which is a brainchild of Chinese President Xi Jinping, one part of the Silk Road Economic Belt will pass from China to Europe through Central Asia, while the other, the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, will improve China's connectivity with Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and Africa along vital sea lanes [9](#) .

Think tanks such as the Yunnan Academy have made a stellar contribution. The Yunnan Academy has built strong links with the Kolkata-based Centre for Studies in International Relations and Development, (CSIRD), and helped not just in strengthening the K2K (Kolkata-Kunming) dialogue but also in increasing understanding and awareness about the BCIM (Bangladesh, China, India, Myanmar) corridor. In 2015, a China-South Asia Think-Tank forum was also held at Kunming, where the OBOR was discussed specifically in the context of South Asia-China relations, and possible ways in which this could contribute towards enhancement of the same [10](#) . Significantly, in February 2016, an International Silk Road Think Tank Association was launched in Shenzhen, Guangzhou, which was attended by representatives from a number of foreign think tanks [11](#) .

What should India do?

While a handful of think tanks have come up outside New Delhi and others such as ORF are setting up regional centres, the vast majority of think tanks – both on foreign policy and economic issues – are located in New Delhi. Gateway House, which is doing some serious work which is located in Mumbai.

There are some exceptions. The Chennai-based The Hindu Centre for Politics and Public Policy (THCPPP) and The Takshashila Institution located in Bengaluru, have made some important interventions in domestic and foreign policy. There is need for widening the debate by setting up more think tanks outside New Delhi, especially in States which are economically relevant, or important in the context of India's foreign policy – especially States adjoining the Indian neighbourhood like West Bengal, Tripura, Meghalaya (Bangladesh) and Punjab, Rajasthan and Gujarat (Pakistan). The two Punjab Centre which is part of the Centre for Research in Rural and Industrial Development, (CRRID) a think-tank located in Chandigarh has already played a positive role in promoting linkages between scholars, businessmen, farmers and politicians from Indian and the Pakistani Punjab [12](#) , [13](#) .

Apart from the private sector, State governments too could invest more in think tanks. State governments can turn to such think tanks rather than always looking to New Delhi-based think tanks for policy proposals. More think tanks in States will also create a class of policy professionals who can be inducted laterally into State governments. Though the Indian Foreign Service (IFS) has taken the lead in inducting talent from outside [14](#) and other central services are likely to follow suit, State governments have by and large not thought of inducting talent from outside – there are some instances of academics/policy analysts being appointed to boards or committees in the States but these appointments are driven more by proximity to the State-level political leadership than by professional expertise. The only exception in this case is Jharkhand, which has recently begun the concept of inducting outsiders as advisors to government departments [15](#) .

In conclusion, it is important for Indian think tanks to adopt the best practices from international think tanks, especially from those in the U.S., and China. Indian think tanks should also spread outside New Delhi. With the role of State governments increasing in national politics and the economy, it is critical that constructive policy ideas emanate from there, and quality think tanks are essential for this to happen.

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