Indian Think Tanks and their Influence on Foreign Policy

Stuti Bhatnagar (University of Adelaide)

Paper Abstract

The process of framing foreign policy involves the engagement of a vast number of actors. Crucial players in this process are Think Tanks - public-policy research analysis organizations that generate policy-oriented research. While there is a long history of engagement with and analyses of think tanks in the Western world, the focus on think tanks in India and their influence on foreign policy is an area that has received limited attention. Perceived as a regional and an emerging global power, India’s involvement in global and regional policy debates on issues of peace and security, environment, regional cooperation, international trade and its preference for equity in international political and economic spheres has increased in recent years. The engagement with new issues of foreign policy requires an increase in knowledge and expertise – a service provided by the growing numbers of think tanks in India contributing to the policy discourse. The following paper will highlight the growing relevance of think tanks in India as important agents in the creation of foreign policy discourses and will also bring to light some of the theoretical and analytical frameworks adopted in studying the influence of think tanks in India.

Introduction

Think Tanks or policy research organizations as they are often called are an important component of the policy-making apparatus. In the United States and Europe, there has been a long history of think tanks as visible and relevant actors in formulating policy. Think tanks have collaborated with formal governmental machinery and often as a branch of the government like in Germany where political parties have established their own think tanks for policy advice and expertise. Whatever the formal structure, there has been space in western democracies for these policy-making alternatives. Some of them have played a crucial role in the imagining of the western conceptions of democracy and liberalism as highlighted by noteworthy researchers like Donald Abelson and Inderjeet Parmar.1 In Asia, there has been significant research on the role of think tanks in creating institutionalized regional cooperation mechanisms for instance in the case of the ASEAN. In India, however, think tanks have only recently emerged as an important element of policy making and advocacy. Political discourse in India and particularly the engagement with and study of foreign policy discourse has only recently developed as a relevant field of study with distinct

differences regarding their influence and relevance to the policy-making arena. Due to India’s post-colonial developing country orientation, policy making and policy research have been framed through the terms of economic development and planning and the specific focus on developing a viable foreign policy strategy through the introduction of new ideas and discourses is a relatively recent development.

This paper will highlight the growth and development of foreign policy think tanks in India and their gradual acceptance as a relevant actor in policy-making. It will examine the trajectory of policy research in India, looking particularly at the development of foreign policy discourses. The paper adopts the analytical framework provided by the discursive institutionalist approach and will discuss contemporary Indian think tanks as discursive actors/agents crucial for the introduction of new ideas and narratives to India’s foreign policy.

**Think tanks and foreign policy**

First used as military jargon to describe a safe place where plans and strategies could be discussed, the definition and understanding of think tanks and their relevance to the policy process have evolved substantially. Independent policy research institutes – better known as think tanks – have become increasingly visible policy actors. Some experts have argued that such organizations play a very limited role in generating ideas for foreign policy and have an even limited resonance in the actual decision making process. Some believe that often such organizations are just “talking shops” or the vocation of retired policymakers and military-men having little or no influence in the actual conducts of governments. While sceptics have raised concerns about their relevance, the history of think tanks in Europe and the United States has been an old one. There has been extensive research and engagement with the role of notable think tanks like the Brookings Institution, MacArthur Foundation etc. in American foreign policy. Their European counterparts like Chatham House, Fabian society etc. have been equally significant players in foreign policy formulation. There is a whole body of work which reflects on the growing influence of think tanks on foreign policy analysis and conduct. Noteworthy work has been carried out by James McGann at the Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program at the University of Pennsylvania with a focus on developing a

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3 For the purpose of this study I would be using the following general definition; “Think tanks are public-policy research analysis and engagement organizations that generate policy-oriented research, analysis, and advice on domestic and international issues, which enable policymakers and the public to make informed decisions about public policy issues. These institutions often act as a bridge between the academic and policy making communities and between states and civil society, serving in the public interest as independent voices that translate applied and basic research into a language and form that is understandable, reliable and accessible for policymakers and the public.” – James McGann, *2012 Global Go To Think tanks report and Policy Advice*, University of Pennsylvania: 2013.


comprehensive assessment tool for evaluating a think tank’s impact, used to rank think tanks across the world.

**Theoretical Traditions and Analytical Frameworks:**

The subject of think tanks has enjoyed some attention in the theoretical IR domain in the past. Whether it was the dismissal by the realists or the liberal view that regarded think tanks as secondary subjects to the preferences of the state, there has been a tradition to analyse the role of think tanks as agents for policy-making. Constructivists and Neo-Gramcians have focused on the role of think tanks in bridging the concepts of knowledge and policy and thus as crucial actors in the generation of ideas and their subsequent adoption into formal policy frameworks. The study of think tanks has brought ideas back into focus; studies concerning the influence of ideas on politics have enjoyed a revival in recent years with a renewed interest in how, and in what ways, ideas matter. Taking the debate into the arena of discourses, approaches like post-structuralism and the specific concepts of interpretive communities emphasize on the advantages of discourse analysis to observe the processes by which new ideas are created, moulded, elaborated and disseminated. Emphasising the importance of think tanks as knowledge communities and the knowledge-policy nexus, Diane Stone highlights that think tanks have often provided the neutral territory outside the architecture of the state for the conduct of informal diplomacy. Such networking entails unofficial activities involving academics and intellectuals, journalists, business elites and others as well as government officials and political leaders ‘acting in their private capacity’. Stone talks of the ASEAN-ISIS network as a successful case-study of interpretive communities contributing to the political understanding about the possible benefits of cooperation. Other studies have also looked at the creation of normative understanding of think tanks.

**Discursive Institutionalism**

Taking a cue from those that elaborate on the advantages of discourse analysis, this paper will reflect on the particular approach provided by the Discursive Institutionalists. The fourth new institutionalism, Discursive Institutionalism (DI) “sets ideas and discourse in an institutional context. Discourse addresses explicitly the representation of ideas (how agents say what they are thinking of doing) and the discursive interactions through which actors generate and communicate ideas (to whom they say it) within given institutional contexts (where and when they say it).”

Moving beyond a simplistic look at the content of ideas, DI explores the interactive processes by which ideas are conveyed. It fills the gaps in literature and looks at how non-state actors interact with state structures and convey ideas – thereby focusing not just on structure but on

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agency in policy making. According to Schmidt, the discursive interactions may involve policy actors in “coordinative discourse” or “communicative discourse”. “The coordinative discourse consists of individuals and groups at the centre of policy construction (civil servants, elected officials, experts and others) while the communicative discourse consists of individuals and groups involved in the presentation, deliberation and legitimation of political ideas to the general public (leaders, social activists, think tanks etc.)”8 Think tanks in India frequently participate in both types of discourse as coordinating with political elites and also communicating the discourse to the general public. Also important here is to note the relevance of think tanks as policy actors by the introduction of new ideas as well as the political spaces think tanks create (for instance in the form of track 2 dialogues between India and Pakistan).

While DI offers a middle ground between discourse and institutional analysis, it has often been criticised for its overemphasis on ideas.9 Critics have also pointed out that many policy areas may not have as clear sets of ideas that can shape a policy. However, DI is not merely an analysis of ideas but looks at the institutional structure of policy making too. Also identified as a problem is the missing emphasis on interests and the notion that actors in politics have interests that they fulfil through political processes. It is argued that while causal linkages between ideas and policy are difficult to identify, the linkages between interests and policy are more readily demonstrable.10 However the literature on DI responds to these concerns and using a cognitive lens agrees that “one cannot distinguish interests from ideas”11 and often ideas are used to justify interests.

DI has only recently been applied to the study of think tanks12 and it is very new to the literature on Indian foreign policy – studies often overlook the political processes that translate ideas into institutions – thus a focus on DI will be very useful here. Research on the discursive practices involved in the formulation and conduct of Indian foreign policy are limited – studying the coordinative and communicative processes in the creation of discourse in the Indian context and situating think tanks within that is thus an interesting field of study. Applying Discursive Institutionalism to the Indian context would assist in understanding the role of think tanks as political actors, importance of discourse and discursive space in India and the link between think tank promotion of ideas and institutional change.

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7 Ibid
Think tanks and Indian foreign Policy

As stated by Pratap Bhanu Mehta – foreign policy and concomitant strategic thinking is so often the product of so many contradictory pulls and pressures. This is particularly true in the case of India, where the gap between aspiration and ability, and deeply contentious domestic politics, make the articulation of long term objectives an extremely tricky business...India’s policy has been characterized by an absence of grand strategy. Another important and pertinent question that remains unanswered and absent from academia is the impact of think tanks on Indian foreign policy. Though it is agreeably a tough task to judge the efficacy of think tanks to the policy making arena - Why some think tanks succeed in affecting policy changes and why some are unable to be active participants in foreign policy formulation is a question that needs some attention.

However before going into details of the involvement of think tanks in India’s contemporary foreign policy making environment, it is important to look at the history and traditions with regards to foreign policy formulation in India. As highlighted earlier, there has been an absence of grand strategy theorising in India. Very often analysts have attributed this lack of planning to Nehruvian ideology – i.e. Nehru dominated thinking on Indian foreign policy and thereby institutions providing advice and expertise on foreign policy were not encouraged or strengthened. In the post Nehruvian era, the government did encourage some state funding for research on foreign policy issues, however the focus remained limited to area studies without espousing for a viable Indian foreign policy strategy. An interest in providing funding and support to independent research organizations was sparked by the economic liberalisation project launched by the Indian government in the early 1990s. The growing interest in India’s economic model, and India’s economic and political engagement with regional and international players, stimulated a demand for expertise on issues of foreign and security policy.

Without the widespread and rigorous knowledge base that comes from having a rich gamut of institutions, the preparedness and quality of our engagement with the outside world is very thin. Referring to Marshall Bouton’s “soft infrastructure” of foreign policy, Mehta identifies two components – the first is the capacity within government itself and the second aspect is a robust, serious and deep culture of academics, think tanks and a vibrant university system. Thus, a study of think tanks is an essential element in an analysis of foreign policy discourses developing in India – an important player on the world stage.

There have been studies that have highlighted the growth of policy-research institutions in India, however for much of their history, their influence has remained limited to an advisory

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14PratapBhanu Mehta, “Not so credible India,” Indian Express, April 24, 2008
capacity and limited to some very small issue areas. Think tanks in India work on the periphery of the political process and have historically enjoyed little political authority. Some of the notable think tanks in India dealing with foreign policy are Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA) – established in 1965; Centre for Policy Research (CPR) – established in 1973; Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) – established in 1980; The Energy Research Institute (TERI) – established in 1974; Observer Research Foundation (ORF) – established in 1990. More recent names include the Delhi Policy Group (DPG), The Institute for Peace and Conflict Studies (IPCS) and the Vivekananda International Foundation (VIF). While some of the recent think tanks have managed to get funding from national and international private donors and organizations, most think tanks in India are heavily reliant on government funding and support and hence are unable to be autonomous in nature. The influence of the government on the ideology and influence of the think tanks is also quite debatable in India.

However, over the years, the numbers of think tanks have mushroomed. This is also a reflection of India’s changing position in the international arena. With liberalisation and increased interest of international agencies in policy research, civil society and advocacy groups have also taken the initiative to form their own institutions. The engagement with new issues of foreign policy requires an increase in knowledge and expertise – a service provided by these growing numbers of think tanks. Weaver and Stares suggest that the nature of representative government is also changing. With the rise of many political parties, and formation of coalition governments, the nature of democratic process is becoming fractured. As a result, the demand for alternative policy advice is growing. In addition, civil society is increasingly becoming active; demanding greater transparency and accountability in the functioning of the government. This has further increased the demand for imaginative and impartial sources of policy advice. The response has been in terms of more policy research organisations and more research based advocacy groups.

Think tanks in India focus on a variety of issues ranging from social and political policy, issues of the environment – water security, environmental pollution, climate change, changes in the educational structure, political participation etc. They have increased their networks both domestically and internationally. Many of the bigger names now receive substantial


16This is in no way a complete list of think tanks in India, but rather just a representative sample.

17For instance think tanks like IDSA are funded primarily by the Ministry of Defence thereby raising questions about the independent nature of its research programs. In addition, new names like the Vivekenanda International Foundation (VIF) face allegations regarding their allegiance to Hindu nationalist groups like the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS) known to be a key ally of the current government at the center.


foreign financial contributions thereby reducing their dependence on government funding. The Indian government has also supported the growth of such organizations by relaxing rules regarding international partnerships and the receipt of foreign contribution. They have also invited the expertise of some of these organizations in grappling with the complex needs of foreign policy making. For instance, the Observer Research Foundation (ORF) one of the leading think tanks has been closely involved with BRICS since its formation. As the designated Indian Track II coordinator for BRICS and member of the BRICS Think Tanks Council, ORF has provided knowledge inputs and helped to strengthen research collaboration with the other nodal BRICS coordinating institutions in the member countries. ORF hosted the BRICS Academic Forums in 2009 and 2012 and helped in the drafting of a Long Term Vision for BRICS along with several relevant research publications. It coordinates with the other Track II partners to inform the wider research community and key stakeholders on the relevance, significance and expected output from BRICS.  

In a recent survey released in January 2014, five Indian think tanks featured on the list of top 150 worldwide. At rank 50 is Centre for Civil Society (CCS), at 102 is Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA), at 107 is The Energy and Resources Institute (TERI) followed by Observer Research Foundation (ORF) at 114 and Development Alternatives (DA) at 140. Think tanks in India create political space for discourse to be developed and are significant for the introduction of new ideas. Even within India, there are differences in the level of influence that think tanks in India wield in creating alternative discourses; however there is a general recognition that the growing numbers of Indian think tanks strengthen India’s strategic discourse and thus increase the quality and effectiveness of the policymaking process.

Case Study:

Research on the tumultuous relationship between India and Pakistan has been a subject of interest in the Indian think tanks; however scholarship is limited on the specific skills that think tanks in India bring to the table with regards to peace with Pakistan. While think tanks have actively engaged with the various issues pertaining to the conflict and have been active participants in the track II dialogue between India and Pakistan, how and to what extent think tanks make inroads into policy is unclear but an issue worth examining. Given that “India’s foreign policy think tanks lack sufficient access to the information, expertise and resources required to conduct world class, policy relevant scholarship exacerbated by the official secrets act, closed archives and the tight lipped bureaucratic culture of the MEA (and other government agencies)” how then do they contribute to the field of peacebuilding and policy making.

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20 The ORF BRICS Compilation, New Delhi: Observer Research Foundation, 2013
22 Daniel Markey, “Developing India’s Foreign Policy “Software”, Asia Policy, Number 9, July 2009, pg. 80
Perceived to be a crucial concern for India’s foreign policy, the conflict with Pakistan and the subsequent attempts at peacebuilding has also brought the think tank community into focus. The India-Pakistan conflict features as a major focus in the research programmes adopted by most think tanks in India. Policy research emphasis in think tanks also mirrors some of the recurring trends that the formal structures of government in India are concerned with. Research is focussed on “traditional security” issues such as; status of territorial borders; the influence of the military in Pakistan and its implications for stable peace; ceasefire violations; status of Kashmir; support to terrorist networks in Pakistan and its implications for Indian security. In addition, policy discourse emerging from think tanks also focuses on “non-traditional security” concerns like the need to continue dialogue; focus on confidence-building measures (CBMs) including facilitating people to people contact, improving trade relations, facilitating trust building and reducing prejudices.

Think tanks have supported and critically engaged with the composite dialogue process initiated by the two governments in 2004. “As a mechanism for conflict management/resolution, it was unprecedented. From India’s perspective it reflected the decision to move from tactics and brinkmanship towards a decisive strategy of productive engagement with Pakistan”23 on eight different subjects – peace and security including CBMs, Jammu & Kashmir; Siachen; Tulbul Navigation project; the Sir Creek marshland; terrorism and drug trafficking; economic and commercial cooperation; and promotion of friendly exchanges. India and Pakistan made significant progress in their bilateral relations and a number of significant agreements were signed during this period, for instance, “Agreement on the Prohibition of Attack Against Nuclear Installations and Facilities ratified in 1992; Formal Ceasefire along the International Border as also the Actual Ground Position Line – brought into effect at midnight of 25 November 2003; Delhi-Lahore bus service started in 1999; the Samjhauta Express, which runs between Delhi and Lahore”24 and the Joint Anti-Terrorism Mechanism set up in 2006 although it has come under question after the 2008 Mumbai terrorist attacks. However, as has become common for Indo-Pak relations, it “continues to follow the pattern of dialogue-disruption-dialogue”25, the formal dialogue process was suspended several times and decisions on most of the issues continue to remain pending and under contention. In the most recent case, foreign secretary talks were suspended after India objected to the interaction between the High Commissioner of Pakistan and some separatist leaders from Indian Kashmir.

In addition to the formal process of dialogue, the initiation of the Composite Dialogue also saw a spurt in several multi-track initiatives, bringing in the involvement of the civil society from the two nations. The prominent track-2 initiatives between India and Pakistan include the Balusa Group, Ottawa Dialogue, The Chaophraya Dialogues, Pugwash Conferences and

24 Samarjit Ghosh, “Two Decades of Indo-Pak CBMs: A Critique from India” IPCS Issue Brief, 132, September 2009, pg. 1, 2
the workshops organized by the different think tanks both in India and Pakistan often making think tanks on both sides of the border an important actor in such dialogue forums. Recognising the relevance of think tanks to the dialogue process, “in 2008 India and Pakistan signed an agreement facilitating regular contact between state run think tanks, Institute of Defence Studies and Analyses (New Delhi) and Institute of Strategic Studies (ISS).” While this seems to convey that think tanks have a measure of recognition as important actors in the peacebuilding process, the role that they play in shaping and articulating policy continues to be under scrutiny. However, it is to the credit of the think tanks in the two countries that the process of dialogue continues even though formal mechanisms come to a halt. The track 2 dialogue processes set forth by the Ottawa Dialogue process as well as other initiatives have continued while formal relations between India and Pakistan remain strained.

Another aspect of this engagement is the support of international agencies in facilitating the role of think tanks in the peacebuilding process. In contrast to some think tanks that have been supported by the Indian government, research in most of the new think tanks is funded by several international agencies like the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), the Ford Foundation, the Ploughshares Fund, the Pugwash group, Brookings etc. While India is strictly averse to the involvement of third parties, what then are the motivations of these groups to facilitate policy discourse through Indian think tanks and what are some of the benefits and challenges of funding through these groups are some crucial questions that need to be examined.

Analysts have varying views on the relevance of think tanks on formal processes of foreign policy. “According to Leslie Gelb (former President of Council on Foreign Relations) – how much influence think tanks wield is difficult as it tends to be highly episodic, arbitrary and difficult to predict.” However, there are ways in which the efficacy of think tanks can be examined. Using the framework of DI, it is possible to ascertain the comparatively under-researched question of how ideas are moved across political space in India and translated into political action and specific policies with relevance to Indo- Pak peacebuilding.

The discursive processes help explain why certain ideas succeed and others fail because of the ways in which they are projected to whom and where. Such an approach would be relevant in analysing Indian think tanks and assessing their success and shortcomings in the foreign policy formulation process. Discursive institutionalism would also help to further understand the steps involved in the generation of new ideas and policy frameworks. The arrows of discursive interaction often appear to go from top down. Policy elites generate ideas, which political elites then communicate to the public. There is extensive literature on how elites shape mass public opinion by establishing the terms of the discourse and by framing the issues for the mass media and thereby for the mass public. It would be an

26 Samarjit Ghosh, “Two Decades of Indo-Pak CBMs: A Critique from India” IPCS Issue Brief, 132, September 2009, pg. 2
27 Organizations like Ford Foundation, MacArthur Foundation, USIP, IDRC- Canada etc. fund projects of prominent think tanks such as Centre for Policy Research (CPR), Observer Research Foundation (ORF), Delhi Policy Group (DPG), Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies (IPCS) among others.
28 Abelson (2014), pg. 142
interesting analysis to see if policy making in India follows this path or there is a possible bottom up process of knowledge and idea generation beginning with the civil society and its active engagement both with grassroots actors and the policy making elites – an idea that had some resonance in the impetus given to renewing people to people contact between two sides of Kashmir – a landmark peace move between India and Pakistan, supported by divided families and civil society on both sides of the Kashmir valley.  

Efforts are also being made to renew trade relations with Pakistan both in Kashmir and in the Punjab region.

Another aspect of Discursive Institutionalism that can be applied in this context is the difference in discourses of simple polities and compound polities as well as difference in the discourse practices as coordinative and communicative discourse. Using DI and its role in explaining policy stasis and policy obstructionism as highlighted by Mat Hope, new insights can be gained about why certain policy initiatives and new ideas and narratives are not created because the discursive practices involved are discouraging. Applying this to the Indian and Pakistan example – India could be categorised as a compound polity where according to Schmidt the communicative discourse is often weaker than the coordinative discourse and thus there is a tendency of lack of coordination between various departments on policy issues, also instances wherein no particular institution assumes responsibility for the creation of new discourses, particularly with reference to peacebuilding. In addition, Pakistan could be considered as a simple polity, although compound institutions exists, the army remains predominant in decision making, thereby not-enabling civil society and other institutions to come up with new narratives on peacebuilding.

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29 The Srinagar–Muzaffarabad Bus is a passenger bus service connecting Srinagar, the capital of the Indian-administered state of Jammu and Kashmir with Muzaffarabad, the capital of the Pakistan-administered territory of Azad Kashmir across the Line of Control (LoC), the boundary line denoting rival areas of control in the disputed region of Kashmir, but which is not an official international border. The bus is of symbolic importance to the efforts of the two nations' governments to foster peaceful and friendly relations.