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Indian Think Tanks and India's Security Policy in the Indo-Pacific

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STUTI BHATNAGAR, MAY 20 2024

The Indo-Pacific has gained considerable eminence in strategic and geopolitical discourse and has essentially supplanted the term 'Asia-Pacific' to convey the regional views of many countries, and to broaden the scope for economic and security cooperation. The Indo-Pacific encompasses an expansive area that includes many sub-regions, including the eastern coast of Africa, the Indian Ocean Region, South East Asia, East Asia, Oceania, and the west coast of the US. It encapsulates the power shift towards Asia, and acknowledges the growing interconnectedness between developments in the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean. Its strategic construction places significant importance on India, and India is a key player in what some have called a newly defined "theatre of strategic competition". This has obviously been encouraged by, if not based, upon the competition and security concerns from China and its expanding economic, political and military engagements within the past decade.

In seeking to consolidate its strategic position within the Indo-Pacific, India has established 'issue-based' partnerships that will have a role in fostering regional order while preserving India's strategic autonomy. India's engagement in the Indo-Pacific is driven by a desire to find a balance between geopolitical competition with China and renewed partnerships with the West. India prefers multi-polarity and has intensified its foreign policy engagements at multilateral forums that include the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), Mekong-Ganga Cooperation, the Quadrilateral Dialogue (Quad), the East Asia Summit and the Forum for India Pacific Island Countries to name a few – groupings that aim to serve as a bridge between the sub-regions of the Indo-Pacific. Over the past decade, India has developed stronger economic and security cooperation with key powers including the United States, Japan, France and Australia and countries in the South-East Asian region. For India, the Indo-Pacific offers crucial pathways for better economic ties with regional partners and in promoting India as a significant investment destination. New security partnerships within the Indo-Pacific have also led to a renewed focus on conducting joint military trainings, military exercises to improve defence interoperability and to enhance domain awareness among Indo-Pacific powers with a proactive focus on maritime security – particularly in the Indian Ocean – a crucial area of interest for India.

While political leaders, diplomats and foreign policy bureaucracy have been relevant actors that have influenced India's security policy towards the Indo-Pacific, as Scott notes, "Indian think tanks have been a noticeable vehicle since 2011 in furthering Indo-Pacific terms of reference in Indian strategic discourse." Collectively, think tanks have provided traction to frameworks that have emphasised India's position within the Indo-Pacific from the mid to late 2000s onwards. They have highlighted India's security considerations in the Indian Ocean, drawing attention to the need for maritime diplomacy and to further develop India's maritime capabilities in partnership with other states in the region. Early emphasis on the Indian Ocean for instance, has been a steady focus of think tanks such as the National Maritime Foundation (NMF) affiliated with the Indian Navy. Other Indian think tanks such as the Research and Information System for Developing Countries instituted a programme on the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) before its inception in 1997. It has represented India as the nodal point in the IORA Academic Group (IORAG) and played a key role in steering IORAG activities during India's stint as Chair during 2011-12. With the current Indian government's focus on the Indo-Pacific, think tanks including the Observer Research Foundation (ORF), Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (MP-IDSA), Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA), India Foundation (IF) and others have been at the forefront of discussions.

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Through their research, think tanks have helped to magnify the prevalent narratives around the Indo-Pacific and have underscored India's strategic value within this framework. Think tank research and policy engagements have provided avenues for the discussion of key initiatives such as the strategic partnerships and the various defence exercises, trainings, and dialogues that India has developed with Indo-Pacific partner countries. Through their existing networks with government institutions such as the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), the Ministry of Defence (MoD) and the Prime Minister's Office, think tanks have been involved in multi-track dialogues and key government initiatives. Events organised by think tanks also provide a platform for multistakeholder participation and public debates on India's security policy in the Indo-Pacific.

While think tanks have been noticeable actors, as evident from their proactive research and public engagement with questions of India's security concerns in the Indo-Pacific, why should we care about think tanks? To answer this question, it is important to consider some crucial aspects about think tanks more generally and specifically about Indian think tanks. In terms of definitions, think tanks can be identified as actors, agents, or simply institutes narrowly focused on academic research. A generally accepted definition describes think tanks as organisations that are distinct from the government and whose objective is to provide advice on a diverse range of policy issues through the use of specialised knowledge and the activation of networks. Often referred to as civil society organisations or policy research institutes, definitions have also differed owing to the history of their development. For instance, while American definitions emphasise civil society background, European scholars define think tanks as practice-oriented and science-based organisations. The bridging role of think tanks has been a dominant theme in the academic literature with think tanks characterised as organisations that engage in research and advocacy on matters related to policy, acting as the bridge between knowledge and power or civil society and formal government organisations. When highlighting think tank role in promoting Indo-Pacific discourse in India, Scott for instance, refers to think tanks such as the ORF or NMF as "a semi-official bridge from outside government into government, and their Indo-Pacific conferences often include ministers, officials and diplomats."

The bridging role however has been challenged by Diane Stone due to the "dualism imposed in seeing science on one side of the bridge, and the state on the other, to address the complex relations between experts and public policy". Highlighting the symbiotic and interdependent relationship between knowledge and policy, Stone concludes that "think tanks are not bridges but a manifestation of the knowledge/power nexus". While think tanks promote policy ideas and offer a way for ideas to gain supporters and to inform the substantive foundation of policy debates, they are not benign creatures and exercise power and agency to fulfill their own organisational interests in the transactions of policy making.

Within South Asia, India has one of the oldest history of think tanks and with 612 think tanks it has the third largest number of think tanks in the world. While largely understood as informal or non-governmental policy actors, think tanks in India are better characterised as hybrid actors with noticeable linkages with formal policy making institutions. The funding patterns and the membership composition of these institutions also indicate proximity with government actors, significantly enhancing their relative ability to influence foreign policy. Think tank experts often come from similar professional backgrounds and have experienced common training methods. There is a history of government role in supporting these experts and institutionalising foreign policy think tanks in India. Indian think tanks are often dependent on government support for funding and/or are vulnerable to government control owing to the regulations regarding foreign funding. Questions could perhaps then be asked about their research autonomy or research independence.

Yet, the relationship between state and think tanks in India is not a linear one. On Indo-Pacific security for instance, think tanks have provided direct policy inputs regarding this new framing owing to their institutional linkages with the MEA and the PMO. As early as 2007-2008 for instance, think tanks such as the NMF have emphasised the Indo-Pacific in connection with maritime cooperation with Japan and competition with China. Think tank events and organised dialogues such as the prominent Raisina Dialogue, organised by the ORF annually in collaboration with the MEA have contributed significantly to public debate on security policy in the Indo-Pacific. Armed Forces think tanks that include the MP-IDSA, NMF, Centre for Land Warfare Studies (CLAWS) and Centre for Airpower Studies (CAPS), funded and supported by India's MoD and the Navy, Army and Air Force respectively have organised events, debates and taken a keen interest in military engagements as part of the Indo-Pacific. Indian policymakers in

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turn have used think tanks as a platform to promote and amplify policy narratives on India's Indo-Pacific engagements in the Quad or the Indian Ocean region. In addition to directly benefiting from government funding, Indian think tanks such as the Vivekananda International Foundation (VIF) and IF, that are ideologically affiliated with the ruling BJP, offer a prominent platform for amplifying the Modi government's defence and foreign policy preferences. Close ties to Ajit Doval, India's current National Security Advisor (a position that works in proximity with Modi and the Foreign Minister) and VIF's Founder Director has significantly enhanced the VIF and IF's sustained linkages with the foreign policy establishment in India.

While robust, think tank engagement needs to be viewed with caution. Simply focussing on ideas promoted by think tanks presents an incomplete picture – it is equally pertinent to investigate and highlight how embedded these think tanks are within the Indian foreign policy architecture – which has ramifications for the value and ability of their ideas to reach policy makers. Think tank research independence is reliant to a great deal on the support of formal institutions with amorphous lateral connections with government actors that improve their capability for policy influence but also raises questions about their ability for constructive criticism of government policy directions. Policy influence therefore needs to be understood within these constraints.

About the author:

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