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Issue Brief

Soft Power: The Role of Think Tanks

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April 11, 2016

In a globalised world characterised by increasingly complex relations and interactions, a world that generates an environment of risks and opportunities, the model of the nation state has changed and political governance has opened the door to other socio-political players, like think tanks. Unlike parliaments, universities and state bureaucracies, think tanks are a relatively recent phenomenon in the policy landscape. But in the past few decades, their growth has been nothing short of explosive. Think tanks are emerging, at an exponential rate, into the debate on and design of public policies in all areas: health, education, culture, law, economics, security, defence, environment, natural resources, energy and international relations, to name a few. They influence decision making at both national and international levels and are an additional resource for the political management of states.

Modern nation states are confronted with a more complicated international environment. To meet the resultant challenges, policy-makers are in need of think tanks more than ever before. These think tanks exist as a team and could provide high quality advice on policy initiatives, so that the policy makers have an additional source of advice and input in addition to their individual advisers, aides and staff. This is what explains the growth in the number of think tanks and their influence in most countries. Think tanks now are becoming an increasingly significant actor in the modern national governance. They are becoming an important factor in international competition, have an irreplaceable role in international relations and are important carriers of national soft power.

Soft power has become part of the process of a renewed and global diplomatic exercise directed at the entire population and no longer simply at the elite.

As mentioned previously, think tanks are a soft power instrument and represent an alternative for a state to be able to develop its leadership at the international level. It has been proven that American, German and French think tanks have managed to export themselves beyond their national borders using on site offices and teams. For example The United States and its think tanks can be found in Brussels, Ankara, Berlin, Paris, Bucharest, Warsaw, Tunis, Cambridge, London and Doha, running the global intellectual arena. The Hanns Seidel Foundation is another example. Think tanks with a physical presence abroad, act (through their experts) as intellectual embassies when defining standards – economic, cultural, political, legal – by integrating working groups into the bodies of supranational institutions. The phenomenon of the internationalisation of think tanks opens possibilities for international and global leadership and for the production of global thinking along with creating global “hubs” or capitals of thought.

A more recent example is that of China. The Chinese government has tried to promote China's soft power through think tanks. President Xi Jinping has said on several occasions, that think tanks are a vital element of a nation's soft power and are an important part of advancing the modernisation of any nation's governance and ability.

Pakistan also needs to promote its think tanks. In this regard, some suggestions are being made below.

- Think tanks should be given the opportunity to play a greater role in the formulation of public policy. As discussed earlier, think tanks have played an increasingly important role in modernising and developing national governance in various countries. Pakistani think tanks can play a similar role. Pakistan can particularly benefit from national think tanks' expertise on foreign policy issues. They have the means, the expertise and the channels to be able to provide solid policy advice.
- Since soft power is a comparatively recent phenomenon in Pakistan. Think tanks in the country should undertake comprehensive research to help the country fully utilise its soft power. They are equipped with the right kinds of resources to act as the best platform and the best launch pad. Think tanks should organise conferences both nationally and internationally. Moreover, they should invite other think tanks from around the globe to partake in these events.
- As academia is a powerful medium of communication around the globe, it can be used to highlight and showcase a country's soft power potential at a global level. Think tanks can publish articles of renowned authors, promoting the country's soft power. Organising book launches are a great way to highlight a country's soft image; showcasing documentaries is another.
- Exchange programmes, particularly cultural and academic exchanges, also are important means available for Pakistan to showcase its image. Facilitating such exchange programmes are a great way to project the soft image of a country because academics are a country's intellectual ambassadors.

The Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad is a prime example of how think tanks can play a significant role in promoting Pakistan's soft power. The ISSI has tried to project soft power in a number of ways. It has a distinguished scholars platform and an ambassadors platform. Moreover, it also organises book launches and hosts international conferences with global think tanks and donors.

However, there is still a long way to go. Pakistani think tanks need a lot more to do in order to be more efficient, effective and persuasive.