

Think Tanks In Singapore's Political Life

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Abstract: Think tanks are considered part of the technocratic elite and exist outside of the formal political system, yet they exert political influence from this external position in various countries [1]. In Singapore, think tanks were established shortly after the country gained independence. A distinctive feature of Singaporean think tanks is their close connection with the Government. Their research orientation focuses on strategies and policy directions, with a strong emphasis on data and evidence. As a result, Singaporean think tanks have played influential roles in policy research and formulation, in government advisory activities, in technological innovation and advancement, and especially in international relations and diplomacy.

Keywords: Think tanks, technocratic elite, Singapore politics.

I. INTRODUCTION

In the immediate aftermath of its independence, Singapore faced a range of domestic challenges, including economic stagnation, housing shortages, and social instability. The country's leadership chose to step back and approach these issues from a broader, strategic perspective. Recognizing Singapore's status as a small state within Southeast Asia, they emphasized the need for a *refined sensitivity* to the region's complex dynamics in order to anticipate both risks and opportunities. In this context, regional awareness was deemed just as critical as resolving the nation's pressing internal issues. As a result, think tanks gradually began to emerge not by replicating foreign models wholesale, but by adapting global experiences to Singapore's unique context. These institutions developed distinctive characteristics and have since played a vital role in supporting the country's development and policy formulation.

II. CONTENT

A. The Concept of Think Tanks

Think tanks organizations that provide policy advice have long been embedded in the political life of many nations. At their core, they are composed of intellectuals and expert advisers who work alongside those in positions of political authority. In the West especially, political consultation has deep historical roots, often beginning with distinguished tutors entrusted with preparing young princes for leadership. Aristotle tutored the young Alexander the Great; Gerbert of Aurillac mentored both the future Holy Roman Emperor, Otto III and the King of France, Robert Capet; Thomas Hobbes played a central role in the education of the Prince of Wales, who later became King Charles II; and Cardinal Mazarin personally oversaw the grooming of Louis XIV. In modern history, Rexford G. Tugwell claimed that he and other members of the Brains Trust helped transform Franklin D. Roosevelt—from a man with relatively simplistic thinking into a formidable and intellectually equipped presidential candidate. Similarly, Walter Heller, as a member of the Council of Economic Advisers, provided John F. Kennedy with a grounding in Keynesian economics. These intellectuals were not merely private tutors to monarchs or presidents; they often served as professionals embedded within the administrative machinery of government. Armed with essential skills such as writing and arithmetic, they contributed to increasingly complex governance structures in both ancient and medieval times. Their roles included serving as court historians, record-keepers, or treasury officials—forming the rudimentary advisory bodies that supplied rulers with the critical information needed for sound decision-making.

As part of the scientific elite, members of think tanks expert advisory groups wield considerable political influence. The term “think tank” originally emerged as a military expression during World War II, referring to a secure location where strategies and operational plans were formulated. By the 1950s, it had been adopted to describe contract research institutions, such as the RAND Corporation, which was established by the U.S. military in the post-war period. By the

1960s, “think tank” had entered mainstream usage to denote organizations engaged in policy-related research and strategic planning. Since their inception, the concept of think tanks has been interpreted in diverse ways by scholars and policymakers across the world, reflecting the variety of institutional models, functions, and political contexts in which they operate.

According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), think tanks are defined as “organizations that are regularly engaged in research and advocacy on any issue related to public policy. They serve as a bridge between knowledge and power in modern democracies.”[2]. Think tanks are institutions dedicated to public policy research, producing studies, analyses, and evidence-based recommendations on both domestic and international issues. Through their work, they enable policymakers and the public to make more informed and rational decisions in the realm of public policy. These organizations may be affiliated with larger institutions or operate independently, and they are often structured as permanent entities. Typically, think tanks function as intermediaries between academic scholarship and policymaking, as well as between governments and civil society. They contribute to the public good by serving as independent voices, translating both applied and fundamental research into accessible, credible, and comprehensible insights for decision-makers and the general public.

In its broadest definition, “think tank is a group or organization engaged in research aimed at finding solutions to specific issues in the areas of politics, economics, society, or technology.”[3]

The proliferation of think tanks has occurred in a context marked by increasingly complex economies and public administrations, rising levels of education among citizens, and a growing demand for sophisticated scientific information. As a result, governments have increasingly relied on expert advisory groups to gather and synthesize relevant knowledge.

Moreover, in line with the trend of public sector reform in many countries where state apparatuses are becoming more streamlined certain policy research functions have been shifted to the non-state sector. In this regard, think tanks have emerged as key actors assuming these responsibilities.

Think tanks are composed of individuals such as former national leaders, United Nations officials, senior politicians, current or former government officials, diplomats, scientists, economists, and business leaders. These individuals are typically action-oriented in their thinking, rather than focused on acquiring extensive theoretical knowledge or constructing academic frameworks. While the functions of think tanks may differ, they share a common objective: to analyze and influence public policy within specific contexts, thereby narrowing the gap between knowledge and power. Policymakers often lack the time to conduct in-depth research on the issues upon which they must base and evaluate policy decisions. Without the input of think tanks, such decisions may be made without sufficient understanding. What policymakers need is not only basic information about the world and the societies they govern, but also relevant, practical, and reliable information communicated in a way that is accessible and not excessively technical or academic in nature. Think tanks are therefore expected to fulfill this need by providing systematic, policy-relevant analysis and insight. As Nelson Rockefeller who served as Special Assistant for Foreign Policy to President Dwight D. Eisenhower during the 1950s once remarked to a group of scholars convened to discuss the country’s long-term international objectives: "I didn’t bring you gentlemen here to tell me how to run things in Washington. That’s my job. Your job is to tell me what is right." [4]

B. The Emergence, Characteristics, and Influence of Think Tanks in Singapore’s Political Life

1. The Formation of Think Tanks in Singapore

Immediately after gaining independence in 1965, Singapore was confronted with a range of domestic challenges, including high unemployment, acute housing shortages, and a stagnant economy. The urgent priorities at the time included building homes and schools, eradicating slums, generating employment, and fostering a sense of national identity. Despite these pressing concerns, Singapore’s founding leaders made a conscious decision to step back from day-to-day issues and reflect on the nation’s broader strategic position. Recognizing the importance of regional understanding, they chose to invest both resources and talent in the creation of a research institute devoted to the study of Southeast Asia.

Singapore recognized that its destiny was closely intertwined with the broader Southeast Asian region. War was not a distant memory at that time, the Vietnam War was still ongoing, and Southeast Asia remained a region marked by instability and turbulence. Singapore itself had only recently separated from Malaysia, with tensions still fresh. Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew remarked: “Our founding fathers were deeply aware that, in order to survive in a harsh environment, a small and newly independent nation must acquire a deep understanding of the region. Because small countries do not shape world events world events shape us”[5]. According to Dr. Goh Keng Swee, Singapore needed to quickly develop “a refined sensitivity” to the region’s complex issues in order to foresee potential challenges and opportunities. In this sense, understanding the regional context was just as vital as confronting the domestic challenges facing the newly independent nation.

However, this “refined sensitivity” was, at the time, notably absent in Singapore. In the Cabinet paper proposing the establishment of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS), Dr. Goh candidly noted: “We know more about Melbourne than Medan, more about the English Channel than the Sunda Strait!”[6]. Dr. Goh also emphasized that such regional expertise needed to be developed outside of the government [7]. Policy and intelligence officers, he argued, were too entrenched in the day-to-day demands of governance to be able to study regional dynamics from a long-term, detached perspective. By creating an institute that functioned independently from the government, it would be possible to engage distinguished scholars and researchers capable of cultivating deep, specialized knowledge. These experts could then provide the government with independent insights alternative perspectives through which to interpret the same issues already being addressed by public officials.

Especially as the Cold War drew to a close, it ushered in a period of strategic uncertainty. The collapse of the Soviet Union created a power vacuum in the international order, while several emerging Asian powers began competing to assert their strategic influence. Meanwhile, the United States showed signs of retrenchment, seeking to scale back its global commitments. It was not until the Obama Administration that the "Pivot to Asia-Pacific" policy was formally articulated. At the same time, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) faced growing challenges to its internal cohesion, particularly with the expansion of its membership. In parallel, a range of non-traditional threats began to surface such as transboundary haze and pandemics triggered by livestock pollution and zoonotic disease transmission. By 1997, the prospect of a continent-wide economic contagion became a reality, as the Asian Financial Crisis ravaged several regional currencies and severely disrupted manufacturing economies due to a massive exodus of investors.

Therefore, it became essential for a group of experts to shine a light forward identifying strategic trends that could potentially affect Singapore. In many ways, the responsibility of analyzing and anticipating long-term threats became indispensable, especially as both major powers and the broader international community struggled to exert control over an increasingly fluid global order. As a small, open, and inherently vulnerable economy, Singapore could safeguard its interests only by striving to understand the negative and conflicting trends brought about by globalization.

Within this context and based on the recognition of how vital regional insight and awareness of global trends were to the nation’s survival Singapore began establishing think tanks. The Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) was founded as an autonomous organization under an Act of Parliament in 1968 [8]. The Singapore Institute of International Affairs (SIIA) followed in 1988.

2. Characteristics of Think Tanks in Singapore

2.1. *Close Alignment with the Government*

Think tanks in Singapore maintain close and institutionalized ties with the government. This proximity plays a significant role in positioning them as an “extension of the administrative apparatus”[9]. Many function as quasi-governmental entities or operate under the purview of specific ministries, such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or the Ministry of Defence. For instance, the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) is affiliated with the National University of Singapore (NUS) but regularly contributes to the formulation of public policy.

Although legally constituted as independent organizations, most think tanks in Singapore maintain strong institutional connections to both NUS and the government. These links are reinforced by the presence of directors with prior or current experience in public administration or political parties, as well as government representatives serving on their boards of directors.

2.2. *Focus on Strategic Research and Policy Orientation*

Singaporean think tanks prioritize research in practical and strategic domains, including national security, economic policy, foreign affairs, and social development.

The Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS), established in 1968 under an Act of Parliament, is one of Singapore’s oldest and most prestigious think tanks. It has functioned as a key regional institution and research hub for scholars and experts focusing on Southeast Asia, particularly during a time when expertise and human resources in this area were still developing. ISEAS has long been recognized as a leading authority on Southeast Asian affairs. Consequently, it has consistently attracted prominent scholars from both within the region and internationally through its research initiatives, academic conferences, and public speaker engagements.

In addition to ISEAS, several other think tanks in Singapore concentrate on regional and international affairs. The Singapore Institute of International Affairs (SIIA), founded by scholars from the National University of Singapore (NUS), is a member of the ASEAN Institutes of Strategic and International Studies (ASEAN-ISIS) policy advisory network. The Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) serves as a policy think tank committed to promoting good governance in Singapore through research and strategic policy dialogue. Operating as an independent research center within the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at NUS, IPS focuses on both domestic developments and foreign affairs. It employs an interdisciplinary analytical framework, with a strong emphasis on long-term strategic thinking.

The Institute of East Asian Philosophies (IEAP) was established in 1983 to support Singapore's national Confucianism campaign. Founded at the National University of Singapore (NUS), the institute invited a team of foreign scholars to help define and interpret Confucianism for the Singaporean public. After the discontinuation of the Confucianism campaign, the institute was renamed the Institute of East Asian Political Economy (IEAPE) in the 1990s, and its mandate was broadened to encompass social and political issues in China, as well as regional developments. The Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies (IDSS) is the most recent think tank to be established in Singapore. Founded in July 1996 as a research and teaching institute within Nanyang Technological University (NTU), its scope has expanded to include regional security issues. Although not a member of the ASEAN Institutes of Strategic and International Studies (ASEAN-ISIS), IDSS participates in the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP) as Singapore's representative branch.

2.3. Strong Emphasis on Data and Evidence

Prior to establishing its own think tanks, Singapore examined several prominent international models, including Chatham House in the United Kingdom; the Council on Foreign Relations and the RAND Corporation in the United States; as well as leading universities with strong Southeast Asian studies programs such as Yale, Cornell, and Berkeley.

Through discussions with these institutions, Dr. Goh Keng Swee quickly recognized that the proposed Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) would have to be fundamentally different—a unique entity designed to address Singapore's specific needs. He observed: "A RAND-style think tank could only be created in a continental superpower, and that is not within our feasible vision. However, we can still learn some lessons from RAND's working methods, recruitment practices, and its emphasis on high-quality personnel." Dr. Goh also noted that Chatham House and the Council on Foreign Relations were not appropriate models either, as they focused exclusively on contemporary events. What Singapore needed, he argued, was: "Research on issues that may not have immediate value in policymaking, but are essential for the development of comprehensive expertise."

Dr. Goh's pragmatism and clarity of mission played a pivotal role in shaping the research agenda not only of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) but also of other think tanks in Singapore. By maintaining a pragmatic approach, the research priorities and capabilities of Singaporean think tanks evolved in response to shifts in the regional and international political landscape, offering policy recommendations grounded in empirical data, surveys, and academic research.

Think tanks particularly the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) and the Asia Competitiveness Institute (ACI) have expanded the space for public discourse by publishing studies based on social surveys and quantitative analyses. These outputs have prompted government agencies to be more attuned to societal feedback and to examine policy decisions with greater scrutiny prior to implementation. A notable example is IPS's research on population ageing, which informed adjustments by the Ministry of Health to Singapore's social welfare policies, including enhancements in long-term care services for the elderly.

2.4 High Level of Expertise

A key characteristic of Singaporean think tanks is their close affiliation with leading academic institutions, notably the National University of Singapore (NUS) and Nanyang Technological University (NTU). This structure contrasts with the model in the United States, where think tanks such as the Brookings Institution or the Heritage Foundation operate as fully independent entities. In Singapore, most think tanks are state-affiliated, yet they continue to uphold a commitment to objectivity and evidence-based research.

These think tanks often draw on the intellectual capital of faculty members, doctoral researchers, and domain experts across diverse fields including economics, political science, environmental studies, and technology. For example, the Asia Competitiveness Institute (ACI) brings together economists and business scholars to study issues of national competitiveness. Similarly, the Singapore Institute of International Affairs (SIIA) invites former diplomats and international relations experts to contribute to policy reports and high-level roundtable discussions.

3. The Influence of Think Tanks in Singapore's Political Life

"Singapore is an excellent example of the progress made in building a diverse group of world-class think tanks" [10]. The country's remarkable progress in national development over a relatively short timeframe can be largely attributed to its strategic investments in human capital, intellectual resources, and institutional infrastructure. These deliberate and forward-looking policy choices have enabled Singapore to position itself as both a regional and global hub for policy innovation.

Think tanks in Singapore play a pivotal role in shaping public policy, promoting economic development, and formulating national strategies. Operating as independent or semi-autonomous research institutions, they provide expert analysis, policy recommendations, and innovative solutions for both the public and private sectors. The technocratic elite within these think tanks and academic institutions generally comprises: i) Professors and leading researchers from premier institutions such as the National University of Singapore (NUS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), and Singapore Management University (SMU); ii) Experts affiliated with strategic research institutes such as the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), and the ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute; iii) Individuals appointed by the government to advisory councils responsible for decision-making in economic, social, and technological domains. Singapore adheres to a model of Knowledge-Based Governance, wherein political decisions are grounded in scientific research rather than public opinion or electoral competition. The government actively recruits, supports, and collaborates with researchers, thereby fostering strong institutional linkages between academia and the state. Prominent research institutes particularly IPS and RSIS frequently produce strategic reports that are directly utilized by the government, thus exerting considerable influence on the policymaking process.

This influence is manifested in several key areas, as outlined below:

3.1. Influence of Think Tanks on Policy Research and Development

Think tanks contribute significantly to the development of public policy by conducting in-depth, data-driven research. They examine current issues, identify emerging challenges, and analyze global trends to generate insights that assist the government in making informed and strategic decisions.

For example, Singapore's globalization and international integration have brought about substantial benefits such as increased investment, access to global talent, and knowledge transfer. However, these dynamics have also exposed the nation to foreign ideologies that could potentially threaten its social cohesion and prosperity. This concern became a tangible reality following the terrorist attacks carried out by Al-Qaeda in the United States on September 11, 2001.

Even within Singapore, a number of persistent terror plots targeting both citizens and foreigners have been uncovered and thwarted since 2002. Preventing these threats has required strong collaboration with regional and international partners across ASEAN, the Asia-Pacific, and the United States.

In particular, in March 2001, the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) launched the Political Islam Programme, aimed at studying the rise of religious movements originating from the Arab world and their increasingly complex influence on the multi-religious societies of Southeast Asia. The region's ethnic and religious diversity, though a defining feature of life in Southeast Asia, can be readily exploited by external actors seeking to foment sectarian violence.

By 2005, the Political Islam Programme had been replaced by the Contemporary Islam Programme. In reality, following the events of September 11, scholarly research into political Islam and particularly its more extreme manifestations expanded significantly.

Institutions such as the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (ICPVTR) and the Centre of Excellence for National Security (CENS) have played vital roles in supporting Singapore's strategic responses to the threats posed by Islamic extremism and terrorism, both within the region and in connection with global networks.

3.2. Influence of Think Tanks in Advising the Government

The Singaporean government frequently consults think tanks as policy advisors, leveraging their research to inform and refine public decision-making. These institutions offer evidence-based recommendations on a wide range of issues, including social welfare, economic development, and regional security. Their independent and rigorous analyses help policymakers remain well-informed and ensure that policy formulation is grounded in robust empirical research.

The Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) was founded in 1988 as an independent think tank dedicated to public policy research and development in Singapore. In 2008, it became an autonomous research centre within the Lee Kuan Yew School of

Public Policy at the National University of Singapore (NUS). Today, IPS continues to play a key role in analyzing public policy, fostering dialogue among thought leaders, and disseminating its findings to a broader audience. The institute conducts research on critical national issues across diverse domains and regularly gauges public attitudes and aspirations through perception surveys [11]

The Energy Studies Institute (ESI) focuses on research related to energy policy and climate change. In 2021, its assessment report on Singapore's green energy transition roadmap was cited as a reference in the government's "Green Plan 2030". ESI contributes to policymaking by providing data on carbon reduction potential, conducting cost-benefit scenario analyses, and helping to shape technology choices and policy frameworks that support investment in renewable energy.

The Asia Competitiveness Institute (ACI), housed within the NUS Business School, conducts research on national and corporate competitiveness. Its report, "Southeast Asia Competitiveness Outlook," has been utilized by Singapore's Ministry of Trade and Industry (MTI) to refine policies aimed at attracting investment, enhancing domestic production capacity, and sustaining Singapore's role as a regional economic hub.

3.3. The Influence of Think Tanks on Innovation and Technological Advancement

Research institutions in Singapore are at the forefront of innovation, technology, and digital transformation studies. Through close collaboration with industry and government stakeholders, these think tanks play a critical role in advancing the nation's Smart Nation initiatives and enhancing Singapore's overall technological competitiveness. Their research commonly focuses on emerging domains such as artificial intelligence (AI), blockchain, financial technology (fintech), and smart cities.

3.4. The Influence of Think Tanks on International Relations and Diplomacy

Despite its small size, Singapore holds considerable strategic significance. Singaporean think tanks frequently collaborate with international partners and organizations to generate insights on foreign policy, international relations, and global trends. These institutions play a crucial role in enhancing Singapore's diplomatic engagement and reinforcing its position on the global stage.

Singapore Institute of International Affairs (SIIA): As one of Asia's leading independent think tanks, the SIIA has played an active role in the ASEAN Institutes of Strategic and International Studies (ASEAN-ISIS) network since 1988. Through this affiliation, the SIIA regularly convenes "Track 2 diplomacy" forums, which bring together diplomats, international experts, and regional officials. These platforms provide opportunities for the SIIA to articulate Singapore's perspectives while gaining valuable insights into policy trends and developments in neighboring countries. This engagement contributes to shaping Singapore's official foreign policy and fosters trust-building with its ASEAN partners.

S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS): An international research institute affiliated with Nanyang Technological University (NTU), RSIS regularly convenes dialogues on defense and security, regional cooperation, and maritime security. Its reports and analytical papers have been cited by Singapore's Ministry of Defence and Ministry of Foreign Affairs as reference materials in regional security forums and bilateral negotiations.

Through their involvement in "Track 2 diplomacy", both the Singapore Institute of International Affairs (SIIA) and the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) contribute to shaping Singapore's international outlook and reinforcing its central role within ASEAN. Notably, RSIS's report on maritime security in the South China Sea has been cited by Singapore's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Defence in dialogues with ASEAN and China, influencing the nation's strategic approach to upholding freedom of navigation.

III. CONCLUSION

Since their establishment, Singapore's think tanks have consistently played an integral role in the nation's development. Serving as a crucial bridge between academic research and public policymaking, they strive to uphold transparency and maintain an evidence-based approach. Institutions such as the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), Energy Studies Institute (ESI), Asia Competitiveness Institute (ACI), Singapore Institute of International Affairs (SIIA), and the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) have made significant contributions through research, analysis, and policy advisory in domains including economics, social development, national security, and foreign affairs.

While most of these think tanks are state-affiliated or embedded within public universities thus limiting their capacity for direct policy criticism compared to Western counterparts they nonetheless foster constructive discourse through public

seminars, policy dialogues, and Track 2 diplomacy platforms. These initiatives facilitate stakeholder engagement and promote multidimensional policy deliberation. The strong institutional commitment to evidence-based policymaking has positioned Singapore's think tanks as pivotal actors in the country's governance ecosystem, helping to sustain its regional stability and global competitiveness.

In the future, if Singaporean think tanks are able to strengthen their independent resources and expand their research scope to include issues such as democracy, human rights, and social development, they will contribute to fostering a more diverse political environment, while still maintaining their credibility in advising the government on policy matters. Looking ahead, if Singaporean think tanks are able to enhance their independent funding sources and broaden their research agenda to encompass topics such as democracy, human rights, and social development, they will be better positioned to contribute to a more pluralistic political environment. At the same time, they can continue to maintain their credibility and relevance as trusted advisors to the government on critical policy issues.

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