

CHINA'S EFFORTS TO REFORM ITS THINK TANKS

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Executive Summary

1. President Xi Jinping has called for a revamp of China's think tanks at the third plenary session of the 18th Communist Party of China Central Committee in November 2013 and the sixth meeting of the Party's Central Leading Group for Comprehensively Deepening Reforms in October 2014.
2. Chinese think tanks are generally perceived as justifying official thinking and policies of the Party and government. The call for reforms is driven by the need for think tanks to provide more objective inputs to the Party and government to make informed decisions that affect the people.
3. The reforms also aim to have think tanks that better reflect the views and concerns of a more complex and diverse Chinese society to enable the Party and government to address pressing social issues and challenges that have become more prominent.
4. There are four distinct groups among the current pool of about 2,500 Chinese think tanks: governmental think tanks, government supported or sponsored think tanks, research institutes of institutions of higher learning and non-governmental or public think tanks.
5. Ninety-five per cent of these think tanks have some sort of official affiliation to the Party, government or the People's Liberation Army. The rest are relatively independent college and university think tanks and non-governmental or public think tanks.
6. Since 2008, a number of non-governmental think tanks have emerged as a result of the official emphasis on maintaining stability due to rising social concerns in the aftermath of the international financial crisis. There is also a trend of college and university think tanks being formed.
7. The reforms would need to strike a balance between welcoming public participation and coming up with objective assessments after considering various factors.

8. There is also a need to strengthen the various components of the works of think tanks such as theoretical study, empirical research and recommendations which would require China to refer to and adapt from international best practices. There is an additional need to facilitate the entry of young talents (and their exposure to public policy making) and better deploy the talents of seniors.
9. The stated goal is to have a revamped group of think tanks by end 2020, a tight deadline that may see think tanks rushing to assume trappings of what is expected of them rather than engaging in genuine substantive changes.
10. It will also be a difficult decision to decide which think tanks from among the existing pool of nearly 2,500 are suitable to form the so called 50-100 high-standard think tanks.
11. The reforms will take time to materialise, during which China's think tanks will continue to diversify and integrate. The outcome will likely be a mixture of think tanks with different strengths, with some focusing on strategic research, some on specialised developmental topics and some on evolving social issues.