



# A Preliminary Study of Southeast Asian Foreign Policy Think Thanks' Attitudes towards China

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# Introduction


- 2013, the document passed by the 3rd Plenum of the 18th Party Congress –stressed the role of think tanks. 2014, the leading small group on deepening reforms passed the document on constructing think tanks with Chinese characteristics.
- Strong push for think tank developments, think tank cooperation with countries, and studies of how foreign think tanks view China.

# Southeast Asian Think Tanks


- Main focus here: Foreign policy think tanks. Traditionally set up by government or has government-backing, not ideologically inclined, sometimes also work on issues not related to foreign policy.
- Think-tanks' influence on foreign policy: hard to measure and mostly non-direct. SEA think tanks tend not to play a major role in the stage of policy formulation, but more important in the role of providing support to policies that are already decided.

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- Still, SEA think-tanks matter in different ways: shaping the climate of opinion through commentaries and press interviews, participation in track-two meetings, close relationship with the strategic studies circles, and exercises of influence in providing facts and figures to the government.
  - Important think tank networks in SEA: ASEAN-ISIS, CSCAP, NEAT. Recently, China initiated NACT.


Country/Networks	ASEAN-ISIS	CSCAP	NEAT	NACT
China	-	CIIS	IAS-CFAU	IAS-CFAU
Brunei	BDIPSS	BDIPSS	BDIPSS	BDIPSS
Cambodia	CICP	CICP	ASEAN Secretariat in MFA	CICP
Indonesia	CSIS	CSIS	Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, UI	ASEAN Studies Center, GMU
Laos	IFA	-	IFA	IFA
Malaysia	ISIS-Malaysia	ISIS-Malaysia	ISIS-Malaysia	ISIS-Malaysia
Myanmar	MISIS	-	MISIS	-
Philippines	ISDS	ISDS	PIDS	FSI
Singapore	SIIA	RSIS, NTU	EAI, NUS	RSIS/EAI
Thailand	ISIS Thailand	ISIS Thailand	EACC	??
Vietnam	DAV	DAV	DAV	DAV


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- In this paper, I will discuss the main common characteristics of these SEA think tanks, not a detailed examination of the think tanks in each country.
  - First, most think tank analysts have a western education background, some receive their highest education credentials from local universities or Singapore, only one from China.

	North America	Britain	Europe	Aus/Nz	Singapore	Own Country	China	Others	Unclear
CICP	7	2	3	1	1	-	-	2	-
CSIS	5	2	2	5	2	5	1	-	1
ISIS Malaysia	1	9	2	5	2	5	-	-	1
PIDS	5	-	1	1	-	5	-	1	-
RSIS (Senior)	23	25	2	9	14	x	-	2	-
Total	41	38	10	16	19	15	1	5	2

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- Western education may not necessarily mean identification with western values, yet, it shapes certainly the learners' worldviews, structure of knowledge, ways of thinking, ways of analysis, patterns of interactions and communications, etc.
  - As a result, most SEA think-tankers share more commonalities in interacting with Western think tankers compared to interacting with China's.
  - Closer or more similar ways of looking at things between SEA and western.



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- Second, the importance of English. Most SEA think tankers communicate in English with each other and among themselves, and read English most of the time. To a certain extent, through English SEA think tanks share a similar world constructed in English with Western think tanks, to a certain degree an “epistemic community.”
  - Third, most SEA think tanks lack area specialists but have more generalists or issue specialists, an unbalanced development.

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- Fourth, the importance of Singapore. A large number of influential think tanks (RSIS, EAI, ISEAS, LKY School, etc.). Singapore's think tanks' output is larger than the sum of all nine SEA countries, quantitatively and qualitatively. Also the main higher education center for other SEA think tanks, and also the center for academic meetings and track-two meetings.
  - Ethnic Chinese but highly westernized society with English the dominant language.
  - A world between SEA and the West. Command influence. Discursive power of the Singapore think tanks cannot be underestimated.

# China-Skepticism: The Mainstream Attitude of SEA Think Tanks toward China

- Four possible attitudes: Pro-China, China Hand, China-Skepticism, Anti-China
- Very few of the two extremes (Pro-China and Anti-China).
- A few in the category of China Hand (EAI).
- Most are China-Skeptics. Differences between China-Skepticism and Anti-China: the former is more open, can accept China's explanations and reduce level of distrust.

# China's Policy Considerations

- SEA Think Tanks' "China-Skepticism" is structurally determined and will not change for a long time.
- China should continue to engage SEA think tanks, to interact and communicate, but also be mindful of the differences between the ways of interactions.
- Chinese not likely to replace English soon as the lingua franca of the world, but China can send think tankers with better command of English to overseas meetings.
- China can train more China Hands in the SEA Think Tanks –offering scholarships to young SEA think tankers.