

### Foreign Policy Think Tanks in India: New Actors, Divergent Profiles

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## Foreign Policy Think Tanks in India: New Actors, Divergent Profiles

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Seemingly paradoxically, over the past few years, India has seen a greater centralisation of foreign policy decision-making and the simultaneous rise of new foreign policy think tanks. Traditionally marginalised, India's foreign policy think tank sector has gained in visibility and vibrancy due to new demand in the wake of India's expanding international stakes.

- Foreign policy think tanks created in India after 2009 are more active and visible in the public sphere than their predecessors. This is partly because they have more funding and increased access to information due to a more supportive government and a more open Ministry of External Affairs (MEA).
- The new think tanks' greater visibility reflects a more intensive engagement with the government. Importantly, these think tanks have developed networks and set up new platforms to promote dialogue, including high-profile international conferences, bilateral and multilateral exchanges, and closed-door networking events.
- However, the growth of foreign policy think tanks in India has been mostly constrained to two distinct types: those which are close to Indian businesses and/or connected to foreign think tanks (and which tend to promote a liberal worldview) and those which are close to the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in ideological and personnel terms (and which have contributed to mainstream nationalist ideology in foreign policy and are dependent on their close links to the current government for their influence).

### Policy Implications

*Due to their expanding roles and particular connections, a number of Indian foreign policy think tanks have become important players to watch and engage with. There is, however, substantial variance within the Indian foreign policy think tank sector when it comes to quality of research, roles performed, and relations with the government. European policymakers and other stakeholders need to be aware of the diversity in the changing landscape of foreign policy think tanks in India if they wish to engage in the most functional and effective way with these organisations.*



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## Putting Indian Think Tanks in Context

Under Narendra Modi, India's prime minister since 2014, foreign-policy making has undergone an important evolution, adding to longer-term trends. Seemingly paradoxically, India has seen both a greater centralisation of foreign policy decision-making and the simultaneous rise of new foreign policy think tanks. While traditionally marginalised, India's foreign policy think tank sector has gained in visibility and vibrancy due to new demand and India's expanding international stakes.

Examining Indian foreign policy think tanks is timely and important. As part of the recent growth of such organisations Asia-wide, the number of think tanks in India has more than tripled from 121 in 2008 to 444 in 2017 (McGann 2008–2018). According to the data collected by McGann and his collaborators, in 2017 India had the third-largest number of think tanks after the United States (1,872) and China (512). This delayed wave of think tank expansion follows the surge in think tanks that occurred in Europe and the US during the 1980s and the 1990s. The number of Indian think tanks focused on foreign policy has also increased substantially, and their earlier image as marginalised political actors corresponds less and less to the reality on the ground. Though we need to handle these think tank rankings with caution due to conceptual and methodological problems (see Köllner 2013), it is noteworthy that some Indian think tanks have ranked relatively high in them, indicating a substantial degree of international visibility. For instance, in McGann's recent 2018 report the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA) was ranked 28th among top non-US think tanks worldwide, while the Observer Research Foundation (ORF) was ranked 35th.

The term "foreign policy think tanks" here denotes think tanks that focus either on international affairs or on defence and security issues. The term "think tank" is conceptually ambiguous and vague, and definitions thereof differ. Köllner (2013: 2) considers think tanks to be "organizations whose main mission is to inform or influence public policies (and in some cases also corporate affairs) on the basis of research and analysis provided by in-house and affiliated staff." Researchers have drawn several typologies that distinguish between research and advocacy think tanks; partisan and independent think tanks; and publicly financed, privately financed, and for-profit think tanks. Such distinctions highlight that think tanks' orientation and sources of funding are key criteria of differentiation. Indeed, it is important to remember that, despite their often-professed public purpose orientation, think tanks are organisations that are guided by interests and depend on particular sources of funding (see Ladi 2011). Consequently, although often presented as bridges between power and knowledge, think tanks are arguably a "manifestation of the knowledge/power nexus" and may help to serve the interests of dominant elites (Stone 2007: 276).

Understanding the evolution and diversity of Indian foreign policy think tanks today can help us to assess trends in Indian foreign policy and to identify (emerging) political dynamics in New Delhi. In the following we examine the profiles of the new foreign policy think tanks and how they differ from older organisations in terms of access to funding and information. We then clarify how these organisations engage with stakeholders, notably the Indian government, and what their respective roles are. Next, we focus on the political orientation of these think tanks in the domestic context before presenting our policy recommendations.

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## New Foreign Policy Think Tanks

Unlike their economic affairs counterparts, Indian international affairs and security and defence think tanks have traditionally faced a number of difficulties which have curtailed their significance: a lack of funding (partly due to a lack of investment of the state and a lack of alternative sources); a lack of human resources and the dominance of retired civil servants in senior positions; and restricted access to information, hindering – with some notable exceptions – the production of relevant research and the formulation of timely policy recommendations. Since Jawaharlal Nehru's reign as India's first prime minister and minister of external affairs (1947–1964), foreign-policy making has largely remained the preserve of the prime minister, while the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) has traditionally been in charge of policy implementation. Thus, with the exception of a very few high-profile think tank leaders and public intellectuals, think tanks and other external providers of policy advice have not been influential in shaping Indian foreign policy (Markey 2009; Mattoo and Medcalf 2015).

The landscape of foreign policy think tanks began to evolve in the first decade of the twenty-first century, when active and retired high-ranking military leaders started to establish specialist think tanks to produce knowledge on defence-related topics. In 2001–2002, Air Commodore Jasjit Singh created the Centre for Air Power Studies, staffed with retired top brass and ambassadors. In 2004 Lieutenant General Vijay Oberoi, a former vice chief of army staff, set up the Centre for Land Warfare Studies (CLAWS) to promote strategic thinking and new ideas in this security domain. In 2005 then defence minister Pranab Mukherjee launched the National Maritime Foundation (NMF), which seeks to enhance dialogue on maritime issues, formulate policy advice, mould public opinion, and influence the national security elite on issues involving India's maritime security interests. These think tanks organise numerous events annually in their respective fields, with the NMF being particularly active in this regard.

Towards the end of the first decade of the new millennium, other new foreign policy think tanks with a broader focus emerged and became active and visible in the public sphere. First, the Vivekananda International Foundation (VIF) and the India Foundation (IF) were founded in 2009 by personalities close to the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) – the party of Prime Minister Modi. The VIF and the IF claim to be independent organisations, unlike the lesser known and openly Hindu nationalist Syama Prasad Mookerjee Research Foundation (SPMRF). Yet, both these organisations' members and programmes closely align with the BJP's. Second, the Brookings Institution India Center was created in 2013, and the Carnegie Center India was opened in 2016. They are international centres of the prominent US think tanks the Brookings Institution and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, but they are legally independent and their founding members are mostly Indian. Third, several think tanks developed through business initiatives have emerged or been recently set up. Although founded in 1990 as a Reliance Industries initiative, ORF has become particularly prominent in the past few years. The Aspen Institute India was created in 2004 through the collaboration of the US-based Aspen Institute and the Confederation of Indian Industries (CII). In 2006 it was renamed the Ananta Aspen Centre, which claims independence and has an Indian board and receives Indian funding. Outside Delhi, the Mumbai-based

Gateway House: Indian Council on Global Relations was founded in 2011. Its founding members include prominent companies such as the Mahindra Group, Suzlon Energy, and TVS Motor Company. The size and means of these think tanks vary greatly. ORF is the largest organisation and one of the most well funded, having received INR 322 million in domestic and foreign contributions in 2017, with 57 per cent of this funding coming from Reliance Industries (see Table 1).

As indicated by the above-mentioned rankings, some of these think tanks have become more visible internationally. This is partly because they have developed effective communication techniques involving the Internet, social media, and international networks. More fundamentally, these think tanks have become visible because they are less constrained by the hurdles faced by older think tanks.

Name	Year of establishment	Current head and personal background	Funding sources and budget (latest available year)
Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA)	1943	Nalim Suri (director general), former envoy to China and the UK / M.H. Ansari (president), vice president of India	Central government, 2017/18: INR 146.6 million
Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA)	1965	Jayant Prasad (director general), former ambassador to Nepal and Afghanistan	Ministry of Defence, n.a.
Centre for Policy Research (CPR)	1973	Yamini Aiyar (president and chief executive), expert on social policy and development and daughter of former diplomat and politician Mani Shankar Aiyar	Indian Council for Social Science Research, other grants, 2016/17: INR 253.7 million
Observer Research Foundation (ORF)	1990	Sunjoy Joshi (chairman), former senior civil servant, former joint secretary of the Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas / Samir Saran (vice president), former vice president of Corporate Affairs at Reliance Industries Ltd.	Domestic and foreign contributions, 2017: INR 322 million
Centre for Air Power Studies (CAPS)	2001	Air Marshal Vinod Patney, Ret. (director)	n.a.
Centre for Land Warfare Studies (CLAWS)	2004	Lt. Gen. Balraj Singh Nagal (director), commander-in-chief of the Strategic Forces Command	n.a.
National Maritime Foundation (NMF)	2005	Vice Admiral Pradeep Chauhan (director)	n.a.
Ananta Aspen Centre	2006	Kiran Pasricha (director), former deputy director general of the Confederation of Indian Industry	n.a.
India Foundation (IF)	2009	Various directors, including ministers of the current government	n.a.

**Table 1**  
**India's Foreign Policy Think Tanks**

*Sources: Institutes' websites, annual reports, newspapers.*

Name	Year of establishment	Current head and personal background	Funding sources and budget (latest available year)
Gateway House: Indian Council on Global Relations	2009	Manjeet Kripalani (executive director), former India Bureau chief of <i>Businessweek</i> magazine	n.a.
Vivekananda International Foundation (VIF)	2009	Arvind Gupta (director), Indian foreign service officer, former deputy national security adviser and secretary, former director of IDSA / Ajit Doval (founder), current national security advisor	Donations, 2016/17: INR 35.6 million
Brookings India	2013	Vikram Singh Mehta (executive chairman), former senior civil servant, former chairman of the Shell Group of Companies in India / Harsha Vardhana Singh (executive director), former deputy director general of the World Trade Organization	Foreign and domestic grants, 2016/17: INR 39.6 million
Carnegie India	2016	C. Raja Mohan (director), leading strategic thinker and analyst of India's foreign policy	Donations and grants, n.a.
Syama Prasad Mookerjee Research Foundation (SPMRF)	n.a.	Anirban Ganguly (director), member of the BJP Policy Research Department and former research fellow at the VIF	n.a.

## More Funding and Better Access to Information

The new think tanks have more funding, as well as more diverse sources thereof, and increased access to information due to a more supportive government and the fact the MEA has become more open to external expertise.

On the one hand, powerful Indian businesses have become increasingly interested in India's foreign policy. In the context of economic liberalisation and globalisation, economic and political issues have been increasingly interlinked. Additionally, India's emergence as a rising power has increased India's stakes internationally. Accordingly, corporations have been increasingly involved in funding think tanks since the 1990s.

On the other hand, the Modi government's attitude of active engagement vis-à-vis selected think tanks has partly lowered the barriers to access to information for these organisations. In June 2014 Prime Minister Modi indicated his openness to fresh thinking, arguing that "the input of intellectual think tanks" should be substantially enhanced for a better policy framework (PIB 2014). Think tanks were thus officially recognised as sources of policy advice or, at least, as providers of relevant expertise. In practice, some organisations have come to enjoy better access

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to information. In parallel, the MEA has also become increasingly open to external expertise. Foreign Secretary S. Jaishankar announced in 2015 that the Policy Planning and Research Division of the MEA would look to employ external experts; the government subsequently advertised the possibility of three-year stints at the MEA (see Jha 2015; Sen 2015). In October 2017 the MEA also put a call out for consultants fluent in Chinese for a new MEA think tank that would help to formulate policies concerning China (Mitra 2017).

The MEA's growing interest in working with think tanks, as promoted by S. Jaishankar, has led the ministry to collaborate with select organisations through, for example, organising events and providing funding. For instance, around 4 per cent of ORF's total funding for 2017 came from MEA grants. ORF is very well connected with the MEA, partly through its work with former ambassadors. The MEA's change of attitude is, to a degree, explained by the growing needs of the overstretched Indian Foreign Service (see Markey 2009). In a context of increasing policy complexity and high workloads, the government has started to tap into the expertise and services that think tanks can provide. As C. Raja Mohan, the director of Carnegie India has noted, "given the complexity of policy, there's scope for outside people contributing to it" (Mohan 2016).

Nevertheless, MEA's opening up to outside sources of expertise and services remains limited. For instance, the new channels of communication between the MEA and some select think tanks are based on trust relations between individuals rather than on clearly demarcated institutionalised links between the MEA and these organisations. Moreover, funding is based on informal contacts as there is no official process to apply for MEA grants. While the current situation constitutes a clear improvement in terms of funding compared to earlier decades, the lack of formal funding options does not allow for open competition among foreign policy think tanks for financial government support.

## The Multiple Roles of Think Tanks

The greater presence and visibility of India's new foreign policy think tanks reflects their greater engagement with stakeholders, notably the government. Foreign policy think tanks across the globe can perform a multitude of roles (see Köllner 2011). In the Indian context we can distinguish at least four roles. First, some think tanks provide expertise and assistance for designing specific policies. ORF, for example, helped to devise India's BRICS policy.

Second, a number of think tanks provide platforms for political dialogue among foreign policy actors from India and abroad, such as governments, policymakers, the strategic community. In this respect, the VIF and the IF have played an increasingly important role by organising small exclusive gatherings and meetings with high-profile guests. In 2015 the *Economic Times* reported that the closed-door sessions hosted by the IF on Wednesdays had come to replace the Saturday Club meetings at the India International Centre as the "Delhi establishment's prime talk shop" (Tripathi 2015). The IF has also been involved in organising Prime Minister Modi's diaspora events during his visits abroad. Groups like ORF have also organised large annual conferences with the collaboration or participation of the MEA. The annual Raisina Dialogue in New Delhi, a joint MEA–ORF initiative established

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in 2016, serves to showcase India's regional ambitions and leadership and helps the government convey its perspectives to the world. The 2016 ORF annual report presents the event as "India's flagship conference engaging with geopolitics and geo-economics." The 2017 Raisina Dialogue was opened by Prime Minister Modi and involved 800 participants including many high-level guests and 120 speakers from 65 countries. The forum has been positioned as a South Asian complement, and even a potential alternative, to the annual high-level security conference in Singapore, the Shangri-La Dialogue.

Third, some think tanks have utilised and further expanded their networks for engaging in informal diplomacy. ORF, in particular, is greatly involved in Tracks 2 and 1.5 diplomacy, with the latter also involving government officials. The Aspen Institute India was also originally created to promote such dialogue with US partners. Its successor, the Ananta Aspen Centre, has organised Track 2 exchanges with partners in various countries, including Japan, Israel, Singapore, and China.

Fourth, in a context where the government carefully manages information, a few think tanks have become "platforms for the dissemination of information" by the government (Malhotra 2017). Modi's abolishment of the media advisor post in his office led to the creation of new channels for passing on relevant information to journalists. Think tanks close to the government have come to function as significant nodes of information exchange.

## The Blurring of Power and Ideas

The growth of foreign policy think tanks in India has been mostly limited to two distinct types of advocacy and research organisations: those close to Indian businesses and/or connected to foreign think tanks and those that are ideologically close to the ruling Hindu nationalist BJP and its related organisation, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). This evolution seems to denote the increasing power of Hindu nationalism and of business groups in India (rather than a general pluralisation of the landscape of think tanks) and has several implications regarding the level of autonomy and the roles of these think tanks.

The foreign policy think tanks that are close to Indian businesses and/or connected to foreign think tanks have contributed to the diversification of the Indian think-tank sector by promoting worldviews that tend to be in agreement with a liberal international order and by representing the interests of major corporate actors. These think tanks also place great emphasis on their high-quality expertise and new thinking. Carnegie India, for instance, appointed C. Raja Mohan – a prominent strategic thinker – as its founding director, while Brookings India selected the internationally renowned Dhruva Jaishankar to run its international affairs and security-related activities.

The think tanks that are ideologically close to the ruling Hindu nationalist BJP and its related RSS organisation have contributed to mainstream Hindu nationalist ideology in foreign policy. For instance, on its website (Indiafoundation.in), the IF presents itself as a "Foundation [that] believes in understanding contemporary India and its global context through a civilizational lens of a society on the forward move. [...] It seeks to articulate [an] Indian nationalistic perspective on issues." The IF has also established the Centre for the Study of Religion and Society, while the



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VIF has set up its Historical and Civilizational Studies programme. Both organisations have used new platforms to disseminate their ideas. For instance, the VIF has co-organised with partners in Japan and Myanmar the Samvad Civilisational Dialogue (Samvad.Vifindia.org), a global Hindu–Buddhist initiative based on a culturalist ideology and designed to “adopt principles of Asia’s age-old spiritual teachings of Hinduism and Buddhism to address modern-day issues threatening human civilization” (Vivekananda International Foundation 2017). Narendra Modi promoted the format after a meeting with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. The IF has held its Dharma-Dhamma Conference annually since 2012 to promote the idea of India’s interconnectedness with neighbouring countries, in particular in Southeast Asia, through Buddhism. By financing and cooperating with advocacy think tanks such as the IF and the VIF, the MEA has effectively contributed to mainstreaming the ideological tenets they share with the government, thus contributing to a substantial blurring of power and ideas (and their carriers).

This clouding also extends to lateral links between the IF and the VIF, on the one hand, and the government and the ruling party (in terms of leading personnel), on the other hand. For example, Ram Madhav, an IF director, serves as the BJP’s national general secretary and the RSS’s head of public relations. Another IF director, Shaurya Doval, is partner in a financial services company and the son of the current national security advisor, Ajit Doval, who himself founded the VIF. Meanwhile, IF directors Jayant Sinha and A.J. Akbar also serve as minister of state for civil aviation and minister of state for external affairs, respectively.

Moreover, there are also links in terms of leading personnel among India’s foreign policy think tanks. The current head of the SPMRF, Anirban Ganguly, used to work as a research fellow at the VIF and is also a member of the BJP’s Policy Research Department. The VIF’s current head, Arvind Gupta, served first as director general of the IDSA (2012–2014) and as deputy national security advisor under Modi until 2017. The former director of the CLAWS, Major General Dhruv C. Katoch, is now an IF director. Based on Modi’s government reshuffle in September 2017, these revolving-door and cross-linkage phenomena are likely to continue: Nirmala Sitharaman, an IF director, was promoted to defence minister, while her IF board colleague and the former railways minister, Suresh Prabhu, was named minister of commerce and industry. A closely knit elite network thus connects the realms of India’s foreign policy think tanks and the incumbent government, with powerful individuals serving as boundary spanners.

## Policy Impact and Funding Issues

Their proximity to power surely lends visibility and prominence to the newer Hindu nationalist think tanks. Yet, it is difficult to assess the extent to which these think tanks are truly influential as organisations and what forms and manifestations this influence might take. Certainly, think tank visibility does not equal policy impact (see Köllner 2013), and impact is also hard to measure. Recent years have clearly witnessed the rise of a number of new foreign policy think tanks in India; though, political access (sometimes even political office) and direct leverage are tied to particular individuals. This seems to confirm Mattoo and Medcalf’s (2015: 279) conclu-

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sion that “the story of Indian foreign policy is more about the influence of certain individuals rather than institutions.”

In this context there has been a contradictory trend towards more visible yet non-transparent politics. On the one hand, the introduction of new agendas, the creation of new high-profile platforms, and the engagement of the MEA with several think tanks have created an environment propitious for more open policy debates. On the other hand, the conspicuous lateral links between some of the high-profile new think tanks and the incumbent government – as well as between the think tanks themselves – reinforce not only the risk of uniformity and orthodoxy of and among the think tanks concerned but also the opacity of their operations.

We can also note that while some think tanks are today more at ease financially, the state has restricted funding for organisations such as think tanks in new ways. The National Democratic Alliance Government led by Modi has drastically curbed external funding for nongovernmental organisations (NGOs). The Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act (FCRA), which regulates the use of foreign funding for “organisations of a political nature,” was amended and made stricter by Parliament in 2016. Following this, the Home Ministry cancelled the licences of more than 20,000 Indian NGOs, notably human rights NGOs, which meant they were no longer eligible to receive foreign funding. This move, which appeared to target critical voices, was condemned by the United Nations. And *The Hindu*, a well-established newspaper, reported that the MEA cut funding to the Association of Asia Scholars and also discontinued its annual funding of INR 10 million to the Institute of Chinese Studies (ICS) in early 2017; it replaced this grant with a project-based funding model. Apparently, the ICS had not approved of the government’s stance on certain issues (Haidar and Bhattacharjee 2017a, 2017b).

## Players to Watch and Engage With

The world of Indian foreign policy think tanks has developed in new and interesting ways in recent years. In 2015 Indian journalist Prashant Jha noted the paradoxical combination of centralised power under the National Democratic Alliance Government led by Narendra Modi and a greater openness of the system to “outside inputs and engagements” (Jha 2015). Today, this is truer than ever. The government’s and the business sector’s new demand for expertise and organisational skills has provided a select number of think tanks with access to private and governmental funding and more information. This, in turn, has increased their visibility in the public sphere and enabled them to take up new outreach and advocacy roles in cooperation with the incumbent government.

Due to their expanding roles as event convenors and information disseminators and due to their particular connections to the incumbent government, a number of Indian foreign policy think tanks have become important players to watch and engage with. However, there is substantial variance within the Indian foreign policy think tank sector, since some organisations like the IF and the VIF are ideologically close to the government, while others – such as ORF, Brookings, and Carnegie – are closer to Indian businesses and subscribe to more liberal worldviews. As such, both groups represent particular vectors of influence on India’s foreign policy today.

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As part of a new style of foreign-policy making under Modi, the greater visibility and engagement of the new Indian foreign policy think tanks illustrate the government's desire to project messages and to further India's image at both the regional and global levels. India's growing international status and ambitions have enabled new actors to be more involved in the country's external affairs. However, the rise of new Indian foreign policy think tanks also exemplifies an ideological turn within the larger sphere of foreign-policy making, in which Hindu nationalist ideology has become more prominent.

The emergence and the multipronged activities of new foreign policy think tanks in India offer European policymakers and other stakeholders new opportunities to engage with the country's foreign policy establishment. Policymakers and other actors need, however, to be aware of the diversity of India's foreign policy think tank landscape in terms of ideological leanings, research capacities, and the convening power of the organisations involved in order to most effectively and functionally engage with the right kind of partners for the purpose at hand.

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## Related GIGA Research

GIGA's research on think tanks forms part of the work of the Ideas and Agency Research Team, which studies interconnections between ideas, processes, and agency in global politics. Relevant research has, inter alia, discussed conceptual issues and challenges to ranking think tanks, traced how ideas entrepreneurs in China and Japan impacted on the gestation of signature public policies, and examined the development and roles of think tanks in mainland China, Japan, and Taiwan as well as of foreign policy think tanks more broadly.

## Related GIGA Publications

Abb, Pascal (2015), China's Foreign Policy Think Tanks: Institutional Evolution and Changing Roles, in: *Journal of Contemporary China*, 24, 93, 531–553.

Abb, Pascal, and Patrick Köllner (2015), Foreign Policy Think Tanks in China and Japan: Characteristics, Current Profile, and the Case of Collective Self-Defense, in: *International Journal: Canada's Journal of Global Policy Analysis*, 70, 4, 593–612.

Abb, Pascal, and Alan Hao Yang (2018), The Impact of Democratization, Political Culture, and Diplomatic Isolation on Think Tank Development in Taiwan, in: *Pacific Affairs*, 91, 1 (in press).

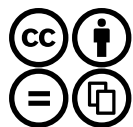
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