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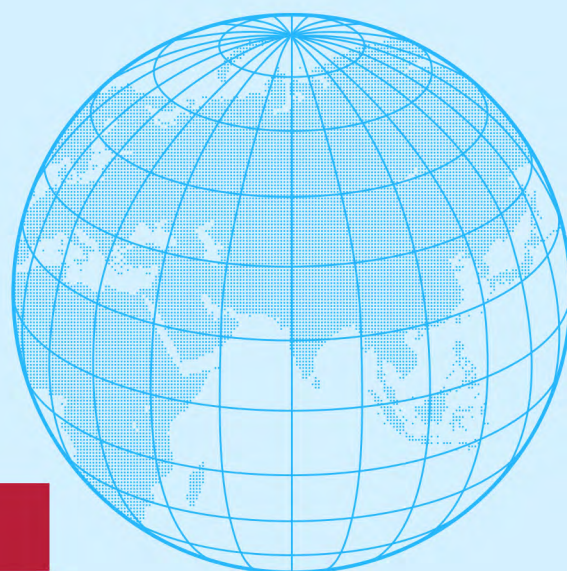
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Chinese Think Tanks in the Xi Jinping Era and Implications for Indian Engagement

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CSEP RESEARCH

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Designed by Umesh Kumar

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Abbreviations

ARF	ASEAN Regional Forum	G20	Group of Twenty
BRICS	Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa	GASS	Guangdong Academy of Social Sciences
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative	GDI	Global Development Initiative
CAIFC	China Association for International Friendly Contacts	GGTTI	Global Go To Think Tank Index
CASS	Chinese Academy of Social Sciences	GSI	Global Security Initiative
CCG	Center for China and Globalization	HNIWW	Hainan Institute for World Watch
CCCS	Centre for Contemporary China Studies	ICS	Institute of Chinese Studies, New Delhi
CCIEE	China Center for International Economic Exchanges	ICWA	Indian Council for World Affairs
CCCWS	China Center for Contemporary World Studies	IDCPC	International Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China
CFAU	China Foreign Affairs University	ISAS	Institute of South Asian Studies
CFIS	China Foundation for International Studies	LAC	Line of Actual Control
CICA	Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia	MEA	Ministry of External Affairs (India)
CICIR	China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations	MFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs (China)
CIIS	China Institute of International Studies	MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
CLGCDR	Central Leading Group for Comprehensively Deepening Reforms	MP-IDSA	Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses
CNKI	China National Knowledge Infrastructure	NDRC	National Development and Reform Commission
CPC	Communist Party of China	NMF	National Maritime Foundation
CPCCC	CPC Central Committee	NTTTCC	New Type Think Tanks with Chinese Characteristics
CPIFA	Chinese People's Institute of Foreign Affairs	NUS	National University of Singapore
CPPCC	Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference	ORF	Observer Research Foundation
CSAS	Center for South Asian Studies	PRC	People's Republic of China
CSEP	Centre for Social and Economic Progress	SAARC	South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation
CSCAP	Council for Security and Co-operation in the Asia Pacific	SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organisation
CSCLF	China Soong Ching Ling Foundation	SIIS	Shanghai Institutes for International Studies
CTTI	China Think Tank Index	SISU	Shanghai International Studies University
CTTREC	China Think Tank Research and Evaluation Centre	SOE	State-Owned Enterprise
DRC	State Council Development Research Centre	TTCSP	Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program
ESCIR	Ecosystem Study Commission for International Rivers	US	United States
		VIF	Vivekananda International Foundation
		WMD	Weapons of Mass Destruction
		WRI	World Resources Institute
		YASS	Yunnan Academy of Social Sciences

Abstract

This paper examines the rapid proliferation of think tanks in China under Xi Jinping, a phenomenon often referred to as “think tank fever”, and discusses the implications for Indian engagement strategies. While think tanks globally serve as policy advisors and knowledge producers, their expansion in an increasingly centralised and ideologically stringent Chinese political landscape presents a paradox. The study explores the historical evolution, classification, and functions of think tanks in China, emphasising their role in policy consultation, ideological reinforcement, and public diplomacy. By analysing official policies, institutional frameworks, and the Communist Party of China's (CPC) strategic push

for “New Type Think Tanks with Chinese Characteristics (NTTCC),” the paper argues that think tanks are being institutionalised as controlled spaces for expert consultation and to increase regime legitimacy abroad. Based on this analysis and interviews with Indian and Chinese policy experts and retired officials, the paper concludes with a preliminary survey of India–China think tank exchanges since the 2000s and assesses their potential for fostering dialogue despite structural and ideological constraints. The paper contributes to a broader understanding of the role think tanks play in knowledge production in China and their utility in shaping bilateral relations with reference to India.

Executive Summary

This paper examines the evolution of Chinese think tank ecosystem under Xi Jinping and the implications for India's engagement with them. While think tanks are often seen as intermediaries between knowledge production and policymaking, their roles in China are shaped by the logic of an authoritarian one-party state. The rapid growth of the sector in the past decade, even referred to as “think tank fever,” highlights not only a demand for expert consultation but also the strategic intent of the Communist Party of China to strengthen its governance capacity, consolidate ideological control, and expand China's global soft power.

By analysing official policy documents, institutional frameworks, and the experience of India–China think tank exchanges since the 2000s, the study argues that under Xi Jinping, think tanks have been deliberately institutionalised as controlled but vibrant spaces for expertise. They simultaneously serve as channels of Track II diplomacy, platforms of public diplomacy, and vehicles of regime legitimacy. For India, understanding this duality is essential to navigating asymmetries in bilateral think tank engagement and leveraging them strategically.

Rise of Chinese Think Tanks

China has witnessed an extraordinary expansion in its think tank sector over the past decade. In 2012, the Global Go to Think Tank Index (GDTTI) reported 429 think tanks in China; by 2022, the China Think Tank Directory listed 1,928 active institutions, second only to the United States (US). This rapid increase has been labelled a “great leap of think tanks.”

The growth has been driven by structural demand as well as deliberate state action. Xi Jinping's 2015 directive, *Opinions on Strengthening New-Type Think Tanks with Chinese Characteristics*, called for creating “influential and internationally prestigious” think tanks that would serve the party and government in scientific decision-making and strengthen China's voice abroad. This reflects a shift away from the earlier reform era when think tanks, though never fully independent, had relatively more flexibility. Xi has framed think tanks as central to two strategic goals: (a) modernisation of national governance by providing intellectual support to address China's complex domestic challenges, and (b) soft power projection (i.e., “telling the China story well”) through Track 1.5 and Track II diplomacy and international exchanges.

Dual Dilemmas of the Party-State

The paper highlights two enduring dilemmas that have motivated the Chinese state's policy on think tanks.

1. Technocratic Innovation vs Authoritarian Control

The Chinese party-state needs specialised expertise to bolster China's rapid economic and social transformation. Yet, there are political risks to autonomous intellectual activity. Think tanks could potentially be controlled spaces where expert advice is solicited but kept within acceptable ideological boundaries.

2. Plurality of Voices vs Unified National Narrative

A diverse and expanding think tank sector naturally generates multiple perspectives. But the CPC insists on maintaining narrative control, especially in foreign policy and ideological domains. Institutionalisation, administrative affiliation, and Propaganda Department oversight are aimed at ensuring that a multiplicity of actors does not undermine unity of narrative.

Functions and Limitations of Chinese Think Tanks

Chinese think tanks today perform a range of functions:

- **Policy Advisory:** Supplying internal reports (*neican*) and expert input to Party and government leaders and providing technical expertise on governance challenges in areas such as public finance, energy, environment, and urban planning.
- **Theoretical Innovation:** Contributing to CPC ideological frameworks, such as the “China Dream” and “Xi Jinping Thought.”
- **Public Diplomacy:** Hosting international conferences, think tank forums, and publishing English-language reports to shape foreign perceptions.
- **Social Services:** Relaying government policies in an accessible language to the public.

Despite these functions, structural constraints remain. These include dependence on the state for funding, ambiguous legal status, ability to attract talent, credibility gaps, and more focus on convening than research.

India–China Think Tank Engagements: Past and Present

Regular think tank exchanges between India and China began in the early 2000s and grew in scale through the 2010s. Indian institutions such as the Institute of Chinese Studies (ICS), Indian Council for World Affairs (ICWA), Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (MP-IDSA), and Observer Research Foundation (ORF) have hosted delegations from leading Chinese institutions like the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), Shanghai Institutes for International Studies (SIIS), and the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR). The establishment of the India–China Think Tank Forum in 2015 under government auspices marked a peak in institutionalisation, with four forums held between 2016 and 2019. Exchanges declined sharply after the 2020 Galwan clashes, compounded by pandemic restrictions. However, since late 2024, as bilateral ties tentatively stabilise, think tank engagements are resuming.

Key Features of Engagements

Institutional Actors: Exchanges are dominated by government-, academy-, and university-affiliated Chinese think tanks (e.g., CICIR, State Council Development Research Centre (DRC), CASS, SIIS), with occasional participation from Party schools, NGOs, provincial governments, and media platforms.

Patterns of Engagement: From 2006–2019, there were regular exchanges, peaking around leadership transitions and high-level visits, with the India–China Think Tank Forum (2016–2019) institutionalising dialogue. Engagement declined sharply after the 2020 Galwan clashes but has cautiously resumed since late 2024.

Delegations and Themes: Delegations include senior scholars, area studies experts, and officials, discussing bilateral politics, regional/global geopolitics, border issues, energy, and governance.

The study identifies several implications of these dynamics for India's policy community:

1. Strategic Value of Engagements

- Even if Chinese delegates present set narratives, exchanges provide Indian participants with insights into party-state priorities and intellectual currents in China.

- They serve as signalling channels, especially when official relations are tense.

2. Challenges of Asymmetry

- Indian think tanks' diversity, while intellectually valuable, can appear fragmented in dialogues.
- Chinese think tanks often benefit from greater resources, government linkages, and research capacity compared to their Indian counterparts.

3. Opportunities for India

- *Strengthen Domestic Think Tank Capacity*
 - Invest in area studies, language training, and specialised expertise on China.
 - Institutionalise record-keeping and coordination among Indian think tanks engaging with Chinese counterparts.
 - Build convening capacity to host regular, well-documented exchanges.
- *Pursue Strategic Engagement*
 - Engage Chinese think tanks with realistic expectations, recognising both their value as information channels and their limitations as extensions of the party-state.
 - Use dialogues to signal Indian concerns, gather perspectives, and cultivate long-term networks.
- *Leverage Multilateralism and Partnerships*
 - Expand India–China exchanges into multi-lateral platforms such as Brazil, Russia India, China and South Africa (BRICS), Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), and Group of Twenty (G20)-linked forums.
 - Collaborate with international think tanks from the US, Europe, Japan, and Southeast Asia to triangulate insights on China.
- *Diversify Engagement Beyond Capitals*
 - Facilitate exchanges with provincial and university-based think tanks in China to capture regional perspectives.
 - Encourage reciprocal exposure of Indian scholars to local Chinese institutions.

Conclusion

Chinese think tanks in the Xi era are both products and instruments of authoritarian governance, simultaneously providing controlled intellectual input at home and projecting China's narrative abroad. For India, engaging with them requires neither naïve optimism nor outright dismissal, but a nuanced strategy that combines critical understanding with pragmatic dialogue.

Strengthening India's own think tank ecosystem is crucial to addressing asymmetries. By building institutional resilience and fostering creative approaches to engagement, Indian think tanks can manage relations with Chinese counterparts more effectively and contribute to the China studies ecosystem in India.

1. Introduction

There has been an exponential increase in the number of think tanks in China in the recent decade to the extent of being called the “great leap of think tanks” (Wang & Hu, 2017). According to the 2012 GGTTI report,¹ there were 429 modern think tanks in China. This number rose to 1,413 in the 2020 GGTTI Report, the second highest in the world (McGann, 2021), increasing further to 1,928 active ones in 2022, according to The China Think Tank Directory 2022 (中国智库名录 *zhongguo zhiku minglu*). Similarly, the number of Chinese-language research articles related to think tanks has increased from 1,896 between 2003 and 2013 to 20,061 between 2014 and 2023 (China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI); Xue, 2014).

The rise of think tanks in China’s reform era has been attributed to: (a) the end of strongman politics and the emergence of collective leadership such that officials seek increased legitimacy for their policies through the support of think tanks; (b) the need for more professional expertise in a complex economy that is interconnected to the rest of the world; and (c) the emergence of new interest groups like private businesses who seek to influence policy in their favour (Li, 2009).

However, since coming to power in 2012, Xi Jinping has centralised authority and moved to eliminate all forms of opposition, often through the means of anti-corruption campaigns and legal institutional mechanisms. He has also promoted party building and emphasised correct ideological orientation,² which involves adherence to Xi Jinping Thought.³ Such political tightening has negatively affected academic freedom⁴ and also impacted policy innovation by local bureaucrats, who prefer to not undertake risky endeavours.

In this context, this paper probes why, despite reversal of the context that enabled the rise of modern think tanks, China is witnessing the so-called “think tank fever” (Xue, 2014). This paper does so by tracing the

policy changes introduced under Xi Jinping’s regime. It further argues that the implications of these policy changes are not only domestic but also international.

Policy relevance: This study, however, does not only map think tank ecosystem in China but also assesses implications for India. Explaining the rise of Chinese think tanks under Xi Jinping, and their role in the Chinese political, policy, and research ecosystem, assumes relevance as India reviews its China policy. After five years of unusually limited, sometimes even hostile relations since the 2020 military confrontation along the disputed boundary in Galwan, there are prospects for re-engagement. Think tanks can play an important role in Track II diplomacy and facilitating people-to-people ties in various arenas, ranging from foreign policy to scientific research. Chinese Ambassador to India, Xu Feihong, for instance, following Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi’s visit to New Delhi (August 2025), specifically called for the resumption and increase of exchanges between think tanks and universities after a period of suspension since 2020.⁵ Given this—and past think tank engagements and dialogues between the two countries—what role should Indian think tanks now play with their Chinese counterparts? This paper offers initial insights on the possible futures of India–China think tank exchanges, as well as an agenda for future research.

Methodology: Empirical data for this study was collected from primary and secondary sources. The author conducted a survey of literature on think tanks in China, relying on both English and Chinese language sources. Primary sources included open-source official policy documents like Opinions on Strengthening the Construction of New-Type Think Tanks with Chinese Characteristics (hereafter Opinions), central and provincial government laws on social organisations, think tank websites, and their publications. This was triangulated with site visits to a think tank in Beijing and several in Delhi and 14 semi-struc-

¹ GGTTI report is an annual publication by the University of Pennsylvania’s Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program (TTCSP) that ranks think tanks globally based on various criteria.

² For instance, the Patriotic Education Law, 2023 (based on the 2019 Guidelines for “patriotic education”) mandates ideological education indoctrination party cadres, general public and in people’s groups and mass organisations (Dotson, 2023).

³ Xi Jinping’s Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era refers to the official political ideology of the CPC guiding domestic politics and international relations.

⁴ For example, Professor Xu Zhangrun of Tsinghua University who has been critical of the Xi regime was placed under close surveillance and has been kept incommunicado since 2020. <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/viral-alarm-when-fury-overcomes-fear/>

⁵ <https://x.com/sidhant/status/1958542477901639716?s=48>

tured interviews with think tankers and former officials in China and India. The paper also includes insights gained during two China-focused research workshops organised in Bangalore as part of the Network of Advanced Study of China of the Takshashila Institution. However, given the vastness of China and India, the diversity of think tanks, and the limitations of accessibility, the analysis is based on a limited sample of major think tanks in the two countries.

Research context: This paper adds to the literature on authoritarian polities and para-diplomatic engagement with them. While think tanks are a global phenomenon, there is limited understanding of think tanks in the non-Western context. Further, in policy circles outside China, it is commonly assumed that think tanks in China merely legitimise government policy and pursue the diktats of a monolithic state. However, as one can see in the Chinese literature (Hu, 2016; Wang, 2015; Xue, 2014)⁶ on think tanks, it is a developing industry, the study of which can inform us about the micro-changes that are occurring within the authoritarian context.

Moreover, think tanks present the space where the party, state, and civil society interact. Though China remains a one-party state, there is a presence of interest groups pursuing their particular agenda. Even as limitations on political pluralism persist, think tanks offer a glimpse of interactions between different stakeholders.

Third, access to the Chinese political system has always been rather limited, and restrictions have only intensified post-pandemic. In such a situation, think tanks, with their public-facing nature, fill the crucial gap between the public and officials domestically on the one hand and between China and the rest of the world on the other. While examining the latter aspect, for example, Zimmerman (2016) argues that Chinese think tanks have been essential to creating a discursive space in Asia. Regional policies are shaped in think tanks, and there is knowledge dissemination on special policy domains. This role as “unofficial diplomats” (Grunberg & Stec, 2024) can in some instances play an important role: this could have been the case after official bilateral relations between India and China went downhill after the 2020-armed clashes.

2. Think Tanks in China: Repurposing the Old

The immense diversity of think tanks across different geographical contexts has made the task of assigning fixed characteristics and a definition to them a difficult exercise. Think tanks in the Western context have been labelled as “brain trusts,” “policy institutes,” “knowledge brokers,” “the fifth estate,” and “marketplace of ideas,” among others (Anderson et al., 2017; McGann, 2016; Stone, 2015). Think tanks differ in size, financial resources, ideological orientation, functions, research programmes, and their target audience (Abelson, 2014). For instance, they can be private and not-for-profit, or housed within another institution like a university department. They could be government-funded or have close financial ties with political parties. They can have a non-partisan research orientation or a partisan and ideological advocacy agenda.

Accordingly, there are contrasting assessments of think tanks across ideological spectrums. Pluralists consider think tanks to be competing for the attention of elected officials in the marketplace of ideas (McGann, 2016). They have also been argued to be an important component of a thriving civil society (Stone, 2017). While some scholars consider think tanks to be contributing to the democratic process by promoting debate and critical evaluation, others like Smith (1991) argue that expert analysis by limiting policy to the elite domain poses a threat to democracy. Neo-Marxists and elite theorists consider them to be policy-planning organisations for the capitalists or the ruling class (Fischer, 1991). McGann (2016) argues that there are certain basic conditions needed for a relatively independent functioning of think tanks. These include laws protecting civil society, the ability to raise funds from domestic and independent sources, and adherence to basic principles of scientific research.

This definitional ambiguity becomes more pronounced in the Chinese context because of a dissimilar conceptualisation of terms like autonomy or civil society from the West (Hasmath, 2023; Menegazzi, 2016; Zhu, 2013). While comparisons between Western and Chinese think tanks are the subject of a growing literature in Chinese scholarship, comparisons with other non-Western countries like India are sparse (Jing, 2016; Xu, 2010; Zhu, 2014).

⁶ A search on think tank literature on the CNKI portal shows that “think tanks construction” or 智库建设 (*zhiku jianshe*) is the most common keyword.

In the literature on China, think tanks or 思想智库 (*sixiang zhiku*) are not seen as an entirely novel concept. Despite the lack of uniform terminology, “scholar-officials” (士大夫 *shi dafu*), political advisors, and public intellectuals have long been part of Chinese political tradition (Goldman & Gu, 2004). For example, the Confucian intellectuals in imperial China defined the moral norms and ideologies to legitimise the regime and had a multifaceted relationship with emperors, ministers, and government officials.

More recently, in the Republican era and early decades of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), China’s intellectuals were at the forefront of political revolutions. They often bore the brunt of the worst repressions, for instance during the Cultural Revolution, when political “redness” was given priority over technical expertise in officialdom (Cheek, 2016; Goldman, 1981). The limited number of research institutes that existed were modelled after the Soviet Union and were closely associated with and controlled by state bureaucracies. They provided policy analysis and could be considered “internal brains” or *neinao* (Wang & Hu, 2017; Zhou, 2023).

The reform years under Deng Xiaoping and his successors, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, witnessed the rise of policy experts and technocrats, albeit with major setbacks for liberal-minded thinkers in the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square incident. In the reform period, leaders have relied on external actors to assist in the goals of economic development and modernisation, as well as to lead ideological and propaganda work (Li, 2009).⁷ Hence, modern think tanks have inherited a rich intellectual tradition of not only supporting the development of the state but also phases of fierce criticism of the existing regime and its policies.

Under Xi Jinping, think tanks have been tasked with the modernisation of national governance and providing intellectual support for the realisation of the Chinese dream of rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.

As under previous regimes, any policy measures from the party-state must tackle the dilemma of soliciting research and intellectual inputs that promote state development while also keeping tight control over competing political ideologies and social strata. This paper argues that the current approach to think tanks is part of systematic, comprehensive reforms⁸ that are being implemented under Xi Jinping to increase the ideological and political control of the CPC in all sections of Chinese polity, society, and economy. Like in other sectors in China’s governance system, focus from the top leadership can bring both advantages and greater scrutiny. It could also lead to over-responsiveness from lower officials, leading to a rise in quantity without a corresponding increase in quality.

Second, under Xi Jinping, China has veered away from the policy of “hide your capabilities and bide your time,” Deng Xiaoping’s dictum towards international relations. China is now the second-largest economy in the world and in the last decade has been more aggressively competing with the West in setting normative and governance standards. Think tanks have been described both in Chinese official policy and literature as symbols of national power and prestige, and the ability to project it globally (Opinions; Zhou & Da, 2023). The dilemma, akin to the one described above, is how to maximise the reach of the “China story” while minimising the divergent voices emerging from a multiplicity of actors.

The next section describes the policy changes introduced under the Xi Jinping regime and how they seek to deal with the “dual dilemmas” described earlier. It will elucidate the official conception of New-Type Think Tanks with Chinese Characteristics (中国特色新型智库 *zhongguo tese xinxing zhiku*) in the Xi Jinping era. The terms “new” and “Chinese characteristics” are the defining features of Xi Jinping Thought, where “new” seeks to highlight a break or difference from the past and “Chinese” signifies that the replication of Western ideas is undesirable.

⁷ Prominent examples of such experts include Wang Huning, Wu Jinglian, Li Junru, Zheng Bijian, Wang Jisi, etc.

⁸ “The 10 key tasks for the reform of the cultural system have been carried out in an all-round way, and important progress and phased results have been achieved.” See https://web.archive.org/web/20240118104934/https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2016-07/31/content_5096233.htm

3. Think Tanks for a “New” Era

In 2015, the CPC Central Committee (CPCCC) and the State Council jointly issued the “Opinions on strengthening think tanks with Chinese characteristics” (关于加强中国特色新型智库建设的意见

guanyu jiaqiang zhongguo tese xinxing zhiku jianshe de yijian).⁹ It aimed to set up influential and internationally prestigious think tanks by 2020 that would promote scientific and democratic decision-making at home and be ambassadors of China’s soft power abroad.

Table 1: Timeline of the Recent Developments in the Think Tank Sector in China

Year	Development
Early 2000s	Initial push for development of think tanks came from foreign returnees, who often provided expert consultation to the government.
2004	CPCCC issued “Guiding Opinion on Further Promoting the Development of Philosophy and Social Sciences” which underscored that government should actively hear suggestions from external philosophers and social scientists.
2007	Report of the 17th CPC National Congress made first mention of the term think tanks and their role in scientific decision-making.
2009	Formation of Center for International Economic Exchanges (CCIEE) ¹⁰ by Zeng Peiyan, registered with the Ministry of Civil Affairs and operating under the guidance of the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC).
2012	Report of the 18th CPC National Congress supports role of think tanks in scientific and democratic decision-making.
2012	Newly appointed General Secretary of CPC, Xi Jinping, speaks about the importance of quality think tanks for robust decision-making and consultation at the Central Economic Work Conference.
2012	Development and Research Council makes an internal research report titled “Suggestion on Accelerating Construction of Policy Consultation Think Tanks in New Age in China.”
2013	Xi puts forth the concept of NTTTCC.
2013	Third Plenum of the 18th CPCCC passes a resolution for strengthening the construction of NTTTCC.
2014	6th Meeting of the Central Leading Group for Comprehensively Deepening Reforms (CLG-CDR) approved the scheme for developing NTTTCC.
2015	CPCCC and the State Council promulgated the “The Opinions on Strengthening the Construction of New-Type Think Tanks with Chinese Characteristics.”
2015	Shortlisting and reviewing of pilot think tanks by the Central Propaganda Department.
2015	18th Meeting of the CLGCDR approved the “National Top Think Tank Pilot Programme.”

Source: Compiled by author from various sources (Li, 2009; Wang, 2021; Zhu, 2017).

⁹ An opinion or *yijian* issued by the CPCCC and the State Council is a high-level policy guidance document that outlines principles, goals, and directions on major issues of governance. While not legally binding like a law, it carries strong political authority and serves as the blueprint for subsequent detailed regulations, plans, and implementation measures by ministries and local governments.

¹⁰ CCIEE <http://english.cciee.org.cn/>

According to the Opinions (2015), the new type of think tank is a “non-profit research and consulting institution with strategic issues and public policy as the main object.” Their purpose is “*serving the party and government’s* scientific, democratic and law-based decision-making.” To improve institutionalisation, the document also calls for certain basic standards like abiding by national laws and regulations, a long-term and distinctive research area, professional full-time researchers, a sustainable source of funding, a sound governance system, and conditions for international exchange. According to the Opinions, the primary functions of think tanks are to provide advisory on policy (咨政建言 *zèzhèng jiànyán*), theoretical innovation (理论创新 *lǐlùn chuāngxīn*), public opinion guidance (舆论引导 *yúlùn yīndǎo*), social services (社会服务 *shèhuì fúwù*), and public diplomacy (公共外交 *gōnggòng wàijiāo*).

A distinctive feature of think tanks in China is the system of registration with the Ministry of Civil Affairs and an administrative affiliation, i.e., all think tanks have a supervising body which plays an important role in determining the agenda and influence of the think tank. Apart from the non-governmental think tanks, all semi-official and university think tanks have a rank that is determined by the administrative rank of the supervising unit. Unlike the more flexible system in the past, *de jure*, there are greater requirements of supervision and administrative approvals for the functioning of think tanks, with stricter and formalised measures of evaluation (see footnotes 12–16 for various legal provisions on registrations). Different categories of think tanks can be identified from the Opinions document and list of institutions in the China Top Think Tank Pilot Project. These are tabulated below:

Table 2: Type of Think Tank Based on Administrative Affiliations and Examples

S. No.	Type of Think-tank	Examples
1	Government	Development Research Centre of the State Council China Institute of International Studies (CIIS) under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA)
2	Academy of Social Sciences	Chinese Academy of Social Sciences Chinese Academy of Engineering
3	Party school	Central Party School Chinese Academy of Governance
4	Military	Academy of Military Sciences National Defense University
5	Scientific research institution	Tianjin Research Institute of Economic Development China Aerospace Engineering Science and Technology Development Strategy Research Institute
6	University	National School of Development, Peking University Institute for Contemporary China Studies, Tsinghua University
7	Enterprise and social organisation	Economics & Technology Research Institute, China National Petroleum Corporation China Development Institute (China-Shenzhen)
8	Corporate	AliResearch Tencent Research Institute
9	Media	Yicai Research Institute Guangzhou Daily Data and Digitalisation Research Institute

Source: Compiled by author based on CTTI Report (2018) and Opinions (2015).

According to the 2018 China Think Tank Index (CTTI) Report,¹¹ university-affiliated think tanks were the most numerous, accounting for 61 per cent of the total examined (441), followed by party and government affiliated (69), Academy of Social Sciences affiliated (51), Party School affiliated (48), and social think tanks (36).

The official classification of new types of think tanks in China is broad and includes many kinds of ideological and policy research organisations, with widely varying resources and modes of functioning, and has received criticism. Scholars like Jia Xijin (2016) contend that “officially-run” research institutes like the Development and Research Centre (DRC) under the State Council cannot play the role of real think tanks. She reserves that title for university-affiliated but independent research institutes and non-governmental and non-enterprise units.

Zhu (2013, 2019) has argued that in China’s political system, because of the close administrative linkages and intertwining networks that social organisations have with the party-state, Western parameters of independence hold little relevance. Further, any definition of think tanks should exclude official research institutes housed within government agencies. Their responsibilities are to draft important policies, release information, and initiate policy research, and hence they have no autonomy over what research to undertake and when.

Zhu classifies think tanks into two categories. The first category is semi-official think tanks¹² (事业单位 *shiye danwei*) like the DRC, CASS, SIIS, etc., which are legal entities founded by the government as supervising units (业务主管单位 *yewu zhuguan danwei*) or affiliated units (挂靠单位 *guakao dan-*

wei). The second category is composed of civilian think tanks, which includes enterprise think tanks¹³ like for-profit consulting institutions (企业单位 *qiye danwei*), civilian non-profit institution legal entities¹⁴ (民办非企业单位 *minban fei qiye danwei*), and university-run research institutes. Non-governmental think tanks can also exist as non-governmental organisation legal entities¹⁵ (社会团体法人 *shehui tuanti faren*) and foundations¹⁶ (基金会 *ji jin hui*).

However, the Opinions document only provided broad guidelines for the development of think tanks. In order to create uniformity, the CLGCDR subsequently formulated the Think Tank Pilot Programme, providing a specific management structure for the selected model think tanks.¹⁷ Among the 29 think tanks selected for the national high-end think tanks pilot project in 2021, 9 were comprehensive research institutions directly under the CPCCC, the State Council, and the Central Military Commission; 17 were specialised think tanks affiliated with universities and research institutions; one was a research institution affiliated with a major state-owned enterprise (SOE); and two were non-governmental think tanks (Yang et al., 2023).

Notably, this pilot programme put the Propaganda Department of the CPCCC (中共中央宣传部 *zhonggong zhongyang xuanchuan bu*) rather than the Central Policy Research Office as the key agency in charge. The Central Propaganda Department is responsible for organising, coordinating, and managing publicity work via press, radio, television, and other industries in China and abroad to ensure the dissemination of the CPC’s ideology and “correct” information. This chain of command is telling of the importance given to ensuring a favourable and unified narrative from think tanks.

¹¹ The CTTI report is a product of the CTTI programme conceived and managed by the China Think Tank Research and Evaluation Centre (CTTREC) at Nanjing University, led by Professor Li Gang.

¹² Based on the Provisional Regulations on Registration of Public Institutions, 1998, the public institution think tanks specialise in policy research and are legal entities who “have been approved to register for State Council Institute staffing management agencies” (Zhu, 2013). Interim Provisions on the Registration of Public Institutions, 1998: gwyb199827.pdf (www.gov.cn).

¹³ They must have obtained legal recognition under relevant laws like Company Registration Regulations of the PRC, 1994.

¹⁴ Such institutes must also register with the Ministry of Civil Affairs under the State Council or the Department for Civil Affairs at the appropriate level. Regulations on the Registration and Administration of Private non-enterprise units: https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/202203/content_3338119.htm, Some Opinions regarding healthy development of social think tanks: https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2017-05/04/content_5190935.htm

¹⁵ Regulations on the Registration and Administration of Social Organisations: https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/202203/content_3338120.htm, <https://www.chinalawtranslate.com/en/regulations-on-the-registration-and-management-of-social-organizations-draft-for-solicitation-of-comments/>

¹⁶ Regulations on the administration of foundations https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/202203/content_3338284.htm

¹⁷ For more information, see “Take reform and innovation as the driving force to further promote the construction of national high-end think tanks” https://web.archive.org/web/20151213034106/http://www.gov.cn/guowuyuan/vom/2015-12/03/content_5019432.htm; Management Measures for National High-end Think Tanks (Trial) <https://ghc.cumt.edu.cn/47/de/c21167a608222/page.htm>

Table 3: Institutional Arrangements Under the Think Tank Pilot Programme (2015)

Organisation	Task
Leading Group for the National Philosophy and Social Science Programme ¹⁸	Macro guidance for think tank development
Top Think Tank Council (has members from ministries and think tank representatives)	Formulate top think tank criteria and evaluate the performance of think tanks
Central Propaganda Department	General work
National Social Science Planning Office	Daily work and communication, internal progress reporting
Secretary Division of Think Tank Council	Secretarial coordination

Source: Zhu (2017) and compiled by author.

Most think tanks rely on either direct funding from the government or private trustees or funders, for instance, China Center for Economic Research (CCER) at Peking University received its seed fund from the Ford Foundation. (Jia, 2016; Personal Communication 1, November 10, 2024). Even in the latter case, they look to secure research project funds from central or local governments. The National Social Science Foundation under the National Planning Office on Philosophy and Social Science is also an important source of funds for think tanks. However, despite being part of a common state-driven process, party and government think tanks enjoy dominance over non-government ones, both in access to government funding and in influencing policy.

There are multiple channels for think tanks to gain a voice in the policy process. Their preferred channel has been argued to be an outcome of their administrative linkages (Li, 2022; Li, 2017; Zhu, 2011). First, semi-official and official think tanks like CASS and DRC regularly provide internal reports on specific topics (Fan, 2014). These reports (内参 *neican*) are circulated amongst leaders at different levels¹⁹ who then provide commentaries and instructions (批示 *pishi*) on such reports (Yang et al., 2023). Second, experts also contribute to policy through government-funded research projects (Tsai & Lin, 2021). The government sponsors short- and long-term research, for instance, by submissions under a call for projects under the National Social Science Research Fund.

Third, scholars are invited to attend government meetings in an institutionalised manner. For instance, the Politburo Collective Study Sessions (中共中央政治局集体学习 *zhonggong zhongyang zhengzhi ju zhiti xuexi*),²⁰ which started under Hu Jintao in 2002, have witnessed regular participation of experts from think tanks and universities (Gore, 2020; Li, 2017). Experts and scholars provide input on topics like artificial intelligence, agroecconomics, party building, defence, and military modernisation, among others. However, as Gore (2020) shows, under Xi Jinping, rather than merely being a consultative process, these sessions have become a platform for pushing his policy agenda and shoring up personal authority.

Fourth, in a revolving door system, prominent scholars at think tanks have been incorporated directly into the government. For instance, Wang Qishan, who was a rural economist at CASS, went on to serve as China's vice president. Conversely, retired officials start their own think tanks or become associated with one. For example, former vice premier Zeng Peiyan founded the "super think tank," CCIEE, which operates under the NDRC, and He Yafei, former Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs and former Deputy Director of the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office of the State Council, sits on the advisory council of the non-government think tank, Center for China and Globalization (CCG). Finally, beyond documented channels, researchers also use their personal ties (*guanxi*) and academic prestige to counsel top authorities through unconventional means.

¹⁸ National Office of Philosophy and Social Sciences, see <http://www.nopss.gov.cn/>

¹⁹ Ideological and Theoretical Internal Reference (思想理论内参 *sixiang lilun neican*) for Politburo members, members of the Secretariat, the General Office of the Central Committee, and the General Office of the State Council; Attached Sheets of Domestic News Proofs (国内动态清样附页 *guonei dongtai qingyang fuye*) for Politburo members; Domestic News Proofs (国内动态清样 *guonei dongtai qingyang*) and International Reference Proofs (国际参考清样 *guoji cankao qingyang*) for Ministers and Provincial chiefs; Internal Reference (内部参考 *neibu cankao*) for prefecture and department level leaders; Selected Internal Reference (内参选编 *nei can xuanbian*) weekly publication and is circulated among county and military regiment level leaders (Li, 2017).

²⁰ The information about the Politburo collective study sessions is released in written and video format here: <https://www.12371.cn/special/lnzzjttxx/>

Non-governmental think tanks lack direct access to the government and bureaucracy and often exercise what is referred to by Zhu (2009) as “social elite influence” or “public influence.” They indirectly participate in policymaking by reaching out to university professors, elites with social capital, public intellectuals, and business entrepreneurs via publications in journals and magazines, or to the wider public via social media and user-friendly web interfaces. Big data analysis (Zhu, 2016) shows their extensive social media influence in the form of user engagement, number of reads, likes, and comments on platforms like Weibo and Weixin. Non-governmental think tanks like the Center for China and Globalization also have significant organising and convening capacity. They host diplomats, global leaders, businesspersons, and academics in funded conferences in China and adjacent to major international events. In a personal conversation, the staff at CCG prided themselves as the first pitstop for foreign diplomats in Chaoyang, Beijing’s diplomatic enclave and business district (Personal Communication 1, November 10, 2024). This allows for relatively open discussions, where diverse views on all aspects are collected, compiled in reports, and sent to higher authorities via relevant channels.

Beyond direct policy advisory, think tank experts and scholars also advance theoretical innovation for the enhanced legitimacy of the Party. On this front, former Fudan University law professor Wang Huning’s contribution to the “Theory of Three Represents”, and former Party School Vice President Zheng Bijian’s input on the “Peaceful Rise of China,” are prominent examples. Wang Huning, who under Xi Jinping has risen to the position of the Chairman of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC),²¹ is widely credited as the brains behind the “China Dream of the Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation” and “Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era.”

Think tanks have become crucial components in China’s public diplomacy efforts and soft power

outreach, particularly since the early 2000s (Abb, 2014; Kollner et al., 2018). The need for think tank exchanges to increase people-to-people interaction has even been mentioned in Xi Jinping’s speeches abroad.²² The regime’s keenness on promoting think tanks for Track II diplomacy can be gauged from the fact that there is a think tank component associated with all of the major Chinese initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI),²³ Global Development Initiative (GDI),²⁴ Global Security Initiative (GSI), and with multilateral organisations like the SCO,²⁵ BRICS,²⁶ G20 etc. (Wang, 2018). International conferences like the China Development Forum²⁷ and the Boao Forum for Asia Annual Conference, where think tanks participate extensively secure the participation of top Chinese and foreign leaders, foreign think tanks, businesspersons, and academics. They create a platform for airing the Chinese perspective on national and global issues and gathering global opinions.

Think tanks offer a window into the ongoing intellectual discussions on various topics in China to foreign observers despite the mandate of “telling the China story well”.²⁸ Many think tanks publish various kinds of reports, newsletters, and online blogs in English (many of them are good-quality translations from Chinese of the original content) that are accessible all over the world. The content on these platforms is quite distinct from party documents in its style and presentation and attracts an international readership because of the reputation of the scholars or the organisation itself.

However, despite their rapidly growing importance, several think tankers and academics note that think tanks in China, particularly non-governmental institutions, continue to suffer from insufficient independence, unclear legal status, poor funding structures, inaccessibility to government data, weak international credibility, and talent shortage (Hu, 2016; He & Jia, 2023a, 2023b, 2023c; Li & Song, 2022; Qu et al., 2023; Wang & Miao, 2023; Personal Communications).

²¹ CPPCC is a political advisory body and a component of the “united front” system. It traditionally consists of delegates from the CPC and its people’s organisations, eight legally permitted political parties, as well as nominally independent members.

²² Xi Jinping’s signed article in Vietnamese media: <http://jhsjk.people.cn/article/40136710>

²³ Initiative of Promoting International Think Tank Cooperation for BRI https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202310/P020231020384765592518.pdf

²⁴ For more information, see https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202310/P020230620670430885509.pdf (mfa.gov.cn).

²⁵ For more information, see <https://eng.sectsc.org/20220907/Sixth-Taihe-Civilisations-Forum--911820.html>

²⁶ For more information, see http://brics2022.mfa.gov.cn/eng/zdhzlyhjz/others/202209/t20220930_10775642.html

²⁷ Sponsored by the DRC <https://en.cdf.org.cn/cdf2023en/index.htm>

²⁸ See Telling China’s Story Well. (2021, April 16). *China Media Project*. https://chinamediaproject.org/the_ccp_dictionary/telling-chinas-story-well/

4. Solving Dual Dilemmas

The rise of think tanks in China is a result of both structural and intentional factors. The policy changes under Xi Jinping are aimed at resolving the dual dilemmas facing the Chinese party-state of maintaining technocratic innovation alongside political authoritarianism and a unified narrative amidst a multiplicity of voices, as described in the first section. While these dilemmas pre-date Xi Jinping's leadership, their scope and extent have evolved and even intensified, invoking responses that are different from the past. This section elucidates further on this argument.

Not unlike in the case of many developed countries, the increase in think tanks' numbers and stature can be attributed to China's economic rise. Rapid economic growth and simultaneous societal transformation have also led to domestic governance challenges. Historically, in many countries around the world, the need for independent think tanks has emerged in periods of social change (Jia, 2016). For instance, in the US, the different waves of think tank development coincided with the Great Depression, World Wars I and II, and the rise of neo-liberal politics. In China, as the economy has rapidly grown, challenges to development and governance have also multiplied, as in the fields of energy, climate change, air pollution, financial flows, and trade. This has led to officials seeking external expert consultations, often from Western-educated elites based at specialised think tanks.

Since the 1980s, individual Chinese scholars as well as think tanks have played a role in policy formulation and reforms for economic development. The perception that experts with official backgrounds never criticise policies implemented by the government is disputable. Zhu (2013) notes research by Ge Yanfeng at the DRC who, during Hu Jintao's term, publicly deemed the national reform on the medical healthcare system as unsuccessful; instead of being marginalised, he continued to participate in collective learning sessions of the Politburo.

However, since Xi Jinping came to power as the top leader, he has undertaken extensive reforms targeted towards rebuilding party institutions and extending the CPC's ideological control over all segments of the polity and society. In a reversal of the period of

political reforms since the 1980s, which called for greater separation of the party and government and professional expertise, one of the objectives of the Top Think Tanks Programme is to extend the ideological control of the Party (坚持正确政治方向 *jian-dai zhengque zhengzhi fangxiang*). In this top-down mechanism, the party-state is to assign key research agendas and tasks to think tanks while giving them a free hand in selecting other research topics. Further, most think tanks are expected to focus on a few specific areas, rather than taking a broad curriculum, to achieve clear positioning (定位明晰 *ding wei ming xi*), distinctive features (特色鲜明 *tese yangming*), and reasonable layout (布局合理 *buju heli*). Several notable think tanks have borne the brunt of this increased control, particularly those with more liberal social and economic agendas. For example, the Unirule Institute of Economics was banned in 2019 by the Bureau of Civil Affairs and penalised for being "unregistered and unauthorised".²⁹ Thus, in the present context of greater ideological conformity, in order to put forth ideas of reform and indirectly critique existing policies, think tankers often frame their research and commentary using the present and past "official formulations" of the Party and its leaders (Personal Communication 1, November 10, 2024).

On the international stage, China's phenomenal rise and dominant position as an exporter has amplified its goal to be a major stakeholder in setting norms and rules of global governance at international institutions. Despite ongoing geopolitical competition, US think tanks are seen in China as models for successfully pursuing public diplomacy and Track II dialogues, contributing to the US position as the global hegemon in the post-World War II era (He & Jia, 2023). Similarly, China's think tanks are expected to facilitate the outreach of Chinese perspectives and voices to a variety of actors, often in a language that is more amenable to an external audience. For instance, while naming the BRI, it was a proposal from the CCG that led to the word "strategy" being replaced with "initiative." The foreign-retained scholars of the organisation submitted a policy brief to Zhao Gaolin (head of the Belt and Road Leading Small Group) who then approved the proposal in 2017 (He, 2018).

However, the expansion of the think tank sector is not merely structural. It is also a result of an intentional push from the top leadership, due to think tanks' utility for enhancing state capacity. The Chinese state under the CPC has regularly deployed social organ-

²⁹ Statement on the banning of Unirule Institute of Economics: <http://english.unirule.cloud/highlights/2019-08-27/1150.html>

isations and movements to stimulate public engagement and contribute to governance.

First, the prominence and development of think tanks is also a function of the interest shown by individual leaders. In the case of China, Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang were the “patron saints” of a group of liberal-minded intellectuals affiliated with Party think tanks (Li, 2009). In the 1990s, Jiang Zemin cultivated close ties with researchers from Shanghai-based institutes like Fudan University, SASS, and SIIS. Subsequently, Hu Jintao, as its president, turned the Central Party School into a prominent think tank (Li, 2022). Furthermore, the Hu era is widely acknowledged as a more liberal phase in Chinese politics, creating conditions for the rise of different schools of thought and the establishment of many reputed think tanks. Xi Jinping, via several pronouncements as well as official documents and policies, has given the think tank sector a major push. By incorporating think tank construction as a national strategy and providing funding, he has brought think tanks into focus nationally and provincially. This has led to an exponential increase in their number but not necessarily their quality, a phenomenon which has been called the “great leap of think tanks” (Wang & Hu, 2017).

Second, in a political context which lacks a free media, think tanks are seen as vital sources of information gathering and dissemination. The authoritarian leadership is constantly faced with the information problem, i.e., its inability to accurately assess the level of popular discontent it faces from society. Apart from repressive measures and surveillance for the involuntary extraction of information, authoritarian regimes also create mechanisms for people to voluntarily engage and transmit information (Dimitrov, 2023). Particularly under Xi Jinping, the anti-corruption crackdown on both “tigers” and “flies” and stringent requirements of ideological correctness have resulted in adverse impact on the productivity and innovation among local bureaucrats. The fast-emerging network of think tanks in China could provide an alternative space (albeit a controlled one) for policy consultations and innovation. The strategy of developing think tanks as a space for promoting “democratic decision-making” is not new, but in line with longstanding CPC strategies of controlled spaces for policy experimentation. However, under Xi Jinping, to strengthen the reach of Xi’s authority and the party line, the new policies focus on the regularisation and institutionalisation of the think tank sector.

The current policy towards think tanks can be explained as a process of institutionalisation that allows the party-state to reap the benefits of expert advice and simultaneously exercise more administrative oversight and monitoring over think tanks. By skilfully mobilising citizen participation in regulated spaces, an authoritarian regime can increase its legitimacy, domestically and internationally. Going beyond bureaucratic channels, by utilising social actors, the state can also augment its infrastructural power to implement routine policy (Ekiert & Perry, 2020). However, with several challenges like lack of clear funding channels, limited capacity to attract young talent, inadequate reach to decision-makers, and political control, as well as a sparse network beyond major cities, think tanks are still a developing sector in China.

5. India–China Think Tank Engagements: Experience and Future Prospects

Given the distinct policy context and state-dominated think tank ecosystem in China, how can Indian think tanks effectively engage in Track II diplomacy and other academic exchanges with Chinese institutes? How has the centralisation of power and narrative control under Xi Jinping impacted this exchange? In view of the ongoing thaw in bilateral relations, there is now a renewed debate in Indian policy circles about the nature, scope, and utility of Track II engagements with China via think tanks. This section surveys India–China think tank engagements to offer preliminary insights into these questions and explores the potential for future exchanges.

India–China bilateral relations faced major tensions after the 2020 Galwan border clash. Trade imbalance, geopolitical contestations in the region and disputes on shared natural resources are other structural challenges that have negatively impacted the relationship. In this context, both official and Track II channels of communication became restrained or were altogether interrupted. However, since late 2024, there has been a move towards normalisation in ties. The joint statement from Indian Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri’s visit to China in January 2025 called for facilitating “people to people exchanges, including media and think-tank interactions” (Ministry of External Affairs [MEA], 2025). This has been followed by several high-level visits, the resumption of direct flights, issuance of visas to Chinese nationals, and other measures to improve relations.

This paper documents think tank exchange and joint activities in the past using data survey and stakeholder interviews. The author surveyed the annual reports of major think tanks that have regular interaction with Chinese institutions—ICS, ICWA, MP-IDSA—and tabulated their exchanges between 2006 and May 2024. This information is supplemented with insights from semi-structured interviews with Indian delegates and individual scholars, conducted between January and August 2025. The respondents included former diplomats, think tankers, and academics who convened and attended multiple exchanges with Chinese institutions, both in China and India. The author also visited Center for China and Globalization in Beijing in November 2024 and held discussions with academics at Tsinghua and Peking Universities.

5.1 The Experience So Far

India–China Track II and research engagements between think tanks have been shaped by both the state of bilateral relations and the institutional developments in policy ecosystems in India and China. In recent decades, think tanks like the ICS and ICWA have had a sustained exchange under Memorandum of Understanding (MoUs) with Chinese institutions since the early 2000s. For instance, in 2006–2007, ICS hosted delegations from CASS, SIIS, and the China Association for International Friendly Contacts (CAIFC), among others. ICS has also hosted scholars from South Asian and India Studies centres at universities in Shanghai, Yunnan, and Sichuan. ICWA similarly has hosted delegations and scholars from CICIR, Chinese People's Institute of Foreign Affairs (CPIFA), International Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (IDCPC), and China Foreign Affairs University (CFAU). Other major Indian think tanks like Vivekananda International Foundation (VIF), ORF, National Maritime Foundation (NMF), and MP-IDSA have had exchanges, primarily with CICIR.

Types of Institutions

Three types of think tanks predominate in exchanges with Indian institutions: government-affiliated like CICIR and DRC, academy-affiliated like CASS, YASS, and Guangdong Academy of Social Sciences (GASS), and university-affiliated like SIIS and China Center for South Asian Studies, Sichuan University. CICIR is a leading international relations think tank widely considered to be under the Ministry of State Security (which is China's primary intelligence-gathering organ). It is influential in shaping thinking on foreign policy in the state and Party leadership. DRC, which is a public institution under the State Council of China, recommends policies on economic and social development to the Central Committee of the CPC. CASS is a massive, ministry-level research institute for all social sciences disciplines with more than 4,200 staff and significant political heft.

Less frequent are visits from Party-affiliated (Central Party School) and non-governmental institutions (Pangoal Institution). Notably, ICS has hosted delegations from provincial governments (Yunnan, Sichuan, etc.), media platforms (Guangzhou Daily, People's Daily), research departments of universities, and the NDRC, among others. ICWA holds regular dialogues with its MoU partners like SIIS and the CPIFA as well as university delegations. Conversely, Indian delegates have visited China for bilateral exchanges as well as multilateral platforms like CSCAP,³⁰ ARF,³¹ SCO Forum meeting, Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA) Think Tank Forum, BRICS Think Tank Forum, Russia–India–China Forum, etc.

When it comes to regional classification, there is significant representation of institutions from major cities like Beijing and Shanghai (where prominent think tanks are often based) and southern provinces like Sichuan, Yunnan, and Guangdong, which have closer ties and interests in South Asia and host several key South Asian studies centres in universities and research institutes.

³⁰ CSCAP. <https://www.cscap.org/index.php?page=about-us>

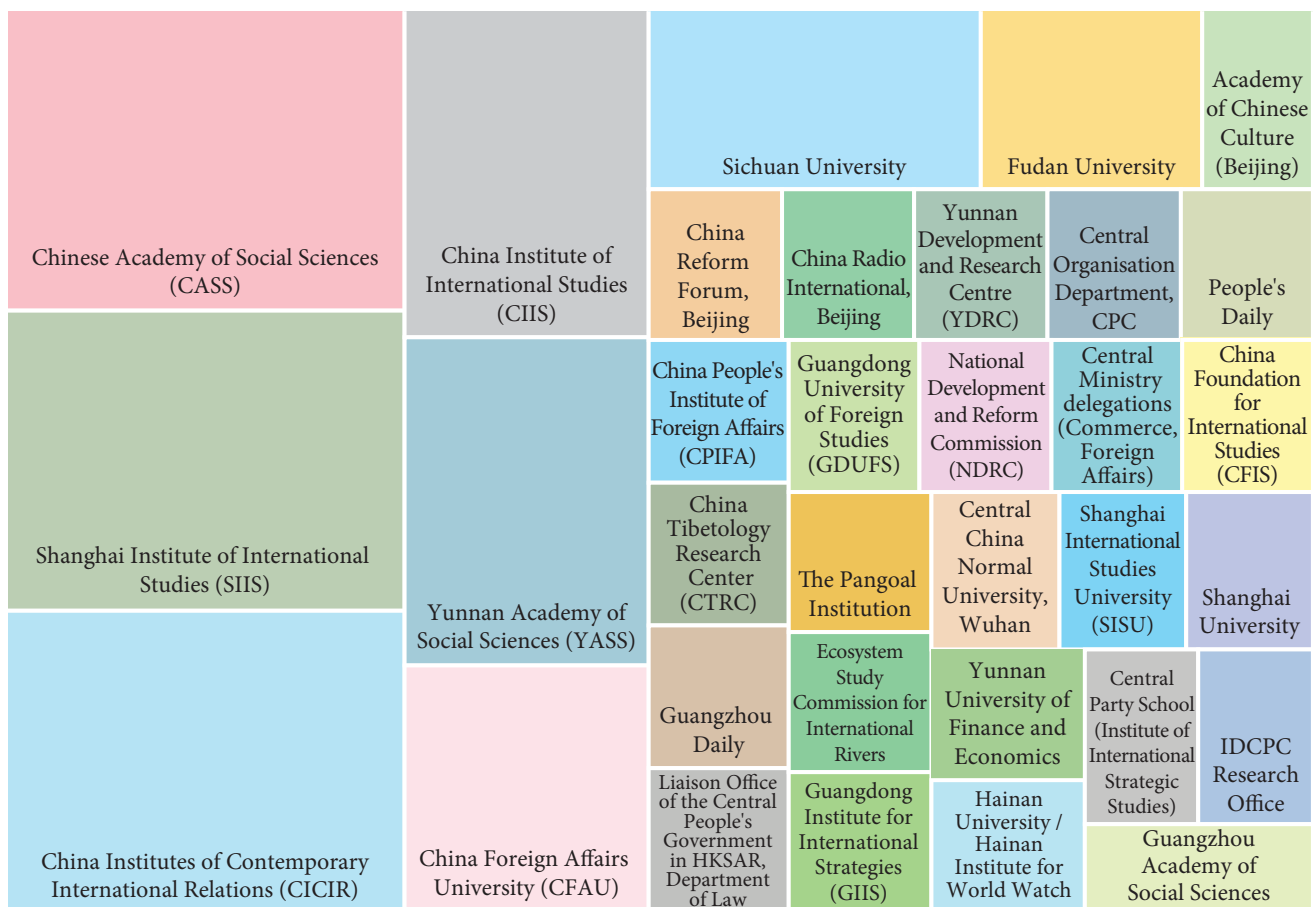
³¹ ARF. <https://aseanregionalforum.asean.org/about-arf/>

Table 4: Sample of Think Tank Exchanges Surveyed (Complete List in Appendix)

S. No.	Name of Institutions/ Event	Participants	Agenda	Year
1.	Council for Security and Co-operation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP) Study Group on Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) & Asean Regional Forum (ARF) ISM Nuclear Disarmament in Beijing, China	ICWA at CSCAP, ARF	Multilateral Meeting on Weapons proliferation, nuclear disarmament	2009
2.	Interaction with Chinese Editors/Journalists in New Delhi, India	ICWA	Dialogue and Media engagement	2010
3.	Visit of Premier Wen Jiabao in New Delhi, India	ICWA, Chinese Embassy	High-Level Visit	2010
4.	Beijing University and ICS	Wei Liming, Head of the Department of Afro-Asian Languages	Delivered a talk on “Tagore’s Impact on China”	2011
5.	Yunnan Academy of Social Sciences (YASS) and ICE		MoU Renewal	2011
6.	CFAU, Beijing and ICS	Delegation headed by Professor Zhao Jinjun	Dialogue on the theme of “China South Asia Relations”	2011
7.	Meeting with the IDCPC, China	ICWA, Ai Ping, Vice Minister IDCPC	Political Dialogue/ CPC Party Diplomacy	2011
8.	Interaction with CICIR scholars at ICWA in New Delhi, India	ICWA, CICIR delegation led by its Vice President Mr Ji Zhiye	Academic Dialogue on India–China bilateral and regional perspectives	2011
9.	China Foundation for International Studies (CFIS), Beijing and MFA and CASS and ICS	–	Institutional Visit	2012
10.	CFAU, Beijing and ICS	Headed by Mr Feng Zhongping	Regional cooperation (the development of South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), India’s East Asian Policy), economic cooperation (how to improve the bilateral economic cooperation and strengthen the coordination in multilateral economic institutions, such as G20 and BRICS)	2012
11.	Hainan Institute for World Watch (HNIWW) and NMF	NMF delegation visited Sanya	Bilateral Dialogue—China and India: Exploring Convergences in Asia	2014
12.	Visit of Delegation and discussion at Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA)	China Institute of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR), three-member delegation	India’s foreign policy post-2014 elections, China–South Asia regional dynamics, Afghanistan post-US withdrawal	2014
13.	HNIWW Foundation	HNIWW delegation visited New Delhi, India	India and China: Constructing Peaceful and Stable Maritime Order in the Indo-Pacific	2015
14.	IDSA-CICIR Bilateral Dialogue	Four-member delegation from CICIR led by Dr Li Li	–	2015
15.	Delegation to IDSA	Embassy of the Republic of China, led by Charge D’ Affairs Mr Liu Jinsong	China and the Future of South China Sea	2016
16.	SIIS Delegation Visit	Three-member delegation led by President Chen Dongxiao	China–India relations, multilateral cooperation, and other pressing regional and global security issues	2017
17.	Chinese Institute of Contemporary International Relation, Beijing (CICIR) and VIF	CICIR Delegation led by Hu Shisheng, Special Assistant to the President of CICIR, hosted by VIF in Delhi	The need to restore peace and tranquillity along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) to normalise India–China relations, emphasising the importance of dialogue between think tanks to enhance mutual understanding	2023
18.	Center for South Asian Studies (CSAS), Shandong University, China and ORF	Professor Huo Wenle hosted by ORF	Talk/ Interaction	2024

Source: Compiled by Author (full tables in Appendix A).

Figure 1: Tree Map of Institutions making up Chinese Delegations to ICS



Source: Annual Reports of ICS (2006–2020).

Frequency

Data from ICS Annual Reports shows an average of five Chinese delegation visits every year between 2006 and 2019. The years with greater activity (for e.g., 2016 with 11 exchanges or 2013 with seven visits) coincided with significant state-level visits or domestic political events like leadership transitions. Further, on Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to China in 2015, the two sides signed an MoU on establishing an India–China Think Tank Forum.³² It led to the formation of a bilateral platform with the purpose of institutionalising exchanges between the think tank communities in the two countries. This forum was to create an “enabling framework for a wide cross section of think tanks to deliberate on issues of significance and mutual interest” which would feed into policy recommendations for governments (MEA, 2016). Subsequently, four such forums were organised between 2016 and 2019, alternately in India and China.

In 2020, there was a sharp decline in exchanges, which could be attributed to bilateral tensions in the aftermath of the Galwan border clashes. This time period also coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the latter is an insufficient explanation for limited contact, as there was increased media and Track II outreach from China at this time. While some virtual exchanges were held, for example between MP-IDSA and Sichuan University, border closures and visa restrictions also put a hold on in-person exchanges in 2021 and 2022. Since 2023, exchanges have resumed on a smaller scale and with less frequency. For example, a Shanghai International Studies University (SISU) delegation visited ICS in 2024, and a VIF delegation visited China in January 2025. Track II exchanges between India and China are also being facilitated by institutions in Singapore and the UK, sometimes even in third locations like Dubai (Personal Communication 5, March 18, 2025).

³² List of agreements signed during PM Modi's visit to China in 2015; MoU was signed between the MEA and CASS.

Table 5: India–China Think Tank Forums

S. No.	Name	Organising Institutions	Agenda	Year
1.	1st India–China Think Tanks Forum- New Delhi	ICS, ICWA, and CASS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Towards a closer India–China Developmental Partnership. • Major country relations between India and China. • Strengthening India–China strategic communication. • Promoting economic ties. • Deepening people to people cooperation. • Regional economic and security architecture. 	2016
2.	2nd India–China Think Tanks Forum- Beijing, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen	ICS, ICWA, and CASS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Indo Chinese cooperation on global economic governance. • How India and China can steer global financial markets. 	2017
3.	3rd India–China Think Tanks Forum, New Delhi	ICWA and CASS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Civilisation Connect towards an Asian century. • Bilateral regional and global issues of mutual interest. • Strategic communication and strategic reality. • State of global economy and positioning of India and China Social development and challenges facing both countries. • Linking people through culture and literature. 	2018
4.	4th India–China Think Tanks Forum, Beijing	ICWA and CASS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • India–China Relationship in the Asian Century. • Building closer developmental partnership between India and China. • Development strategies and experiences in India and China. • Communication and mutual learning between Indian and Chinese civilisations. 	2019

Source: Compiled by author from various sources.

Composition of Delegation and Topics of Discussion

In terms of the composition of Chinese delegations examined in the survey, they comprise senior scholars including party secretaries, university chancellors, and institute directors, as well as junior researchers. Some delegations are also accompanied by MFA officials and a translator. Many of the visitors are affiliated with area studies centres with regional specialisation in South Asia, or subject specialisation (economics, governance, urban affairs, renewable energy, etc.). There are repeated visits from area specialists like Hu Shisheng (CICIR) and Li Li (Tsinghua University), which is beneficial towards cultivating long-term, interpersonal relations between institutions and scholars.

The topics of discussions include domestic Indian politics, regional and global geopolitics, India–China bilateral relations, resolution of the border issue, cooperation between local governments, energy policy, and urban management. Often, delegation visits are organised around major events like a change in government or Party congresses and to promote specific projects like the BRI. CSCAP and ARF meetings that the ICWA participates in involve study group discussions on issues like energy security, countering the proliferation of WMDs, nuclear disarmament, and cybersecurity. However, according to some Indian delegates, Chinese participants would often narrate a strict party or state perspective, leading to doubts over the utility of such exchanges (Personal Communication 2, February 10, 2025). This will be discussed further in the next section.

Table 6: Comparing Think Tank Ecosystems in China and India

Criteria	India	China
Political Context	Democratic	Single Party State
Institutionalisation of think tanks	Low	High
Research autonomy	Moderate to High	Moderate to Low
Administrative linkages	Limited to None	High and multiple
Established channels of communication with policy makers	Limited to developing	Multiple: formal and informal
Funding	Limited government, largely private fundraising, philanthropies	Largely government, limited private fundraising and philanthropies

Source: Based on author's analysis of literature and interviews.

5.2 Reimagining Engagement

The Indian and Chinese think tank ecosystems are not only divergent owing to different political systems but also in terms of their mandate, institutional linkages with government, and capacities. This has led to a diversity of opinions among Indian scholars and think tankers on the outcomes and even the utility of Track II exchange between India and China. Based on interviews with Chinese and Indian academics and think tankers, this section outlines these differences and presents some ideas about how these differences can be navigated and even leveraged.

Divergent Political Systems and Role of Think Tanks

In China, think tanks primarily function as policy support arms of the party-state. Their role is closely tied to serving government priorities rather than pursuing fully independent agendas.

In India, even though there are think tanks affiliated with ministries like the Centre for Contemporary China Studies (CCCS) or MP-IDS, think tanks are comparatively autonomous and often define their own research agendas based on various criteria like the research expertise of scholars, availability of funding, etc. During exchanges, these different roles and levels of autonomy often lead to a uniformity of voice from the Chinese delegates, echoing official positions on various issues. Indian voices, on the other hand, are varied and representative of different vantage points (Personal Communication 3, February 11, 2025).

One view amongst Indian interviewees is that because of the lack of autonomy of Chinese institutions, they simply repeat government views without any novel opinions, making meaningful dialogue difficult. For these reasons, it is believed that the

Chinese side benefits more from such initiatives as they fulfil the primary motive of knowledge gathering through diverse perspectives (notably CICIR, the think tank which interacts most frequently, is affiliated with the Ministry of State Security). One former Indian official also argued that the stringent Chinese national security laws with their wide scope had a chilling effect even on foreign nationals (Personal Communication 2, February 10, 2025). On the other hand, scholars experienced more open conversations in one-on-one or smaller, semi-formal, and informal settings, and found value in building trusted professional networks over time (Personal Communication 7, March 24, 2025 and Personal Communication 9, August 20, 2025).

Institutional Arrangements and Linkages

China's think tank ecosystem is highly institutionalised with administrative linkages to the state. As a result, policy research is embedded in a state-led process, creating a systematic relay of expert input to decision-makers. Chinese think tanks, particularly the government-affiliated ones, also have the benefit of strong institutional memory and a strong culture of record-keeping (Personal Communication 8, August 18, 2025). India too has a mix of established personal networks between think tanks and policymakers and regulatory frameworks, for e.g., in the case of funding, but think tanks remain largely autonomous of the government. While creating the advantage of unbiased and innovative research, the lack of clear institutionalised channels limits the ability of Indian think tanks to relay field observations and expert advice to policymakers. The formation of China focused think tank, Centre for Contemporary China Studies, housed within the MEA could lead to positive results on this front.

One interviewee also noted that the small size of MEA bureaucracy makes it difficult to absorb inputs from the community (Personal Communication 6, March 20, 2025). Furthermore, apart from a few government-affiliated ones, think tanks in India often do not have a system for record-keeping and often face resource constraints when it comes to convening capacity (Personal Communication 8, August 18, 2025). Greater collaboration and communication between Indian think tanks engaging with the Chinese, and regular exchange of field notes could augment capacity. Another strategy could be engaging with international China-focused think tanks, for instance in Japan, the US, and Europe, to gather more frank opinions that Chinese scholars may share on India-related issues.

In contrast to the perspective of the limited strategic utility of engaging with Chinese think tanks presented above, there is an alternative view, prevalent among interviewees both in India and China alike, that Track II exchanges in the past offered a vital mode of communication, especially when official state-to-state relations were strained. In this perspective, since there are clear administrative linkages between Chinese think tanks and the government, they may serve as a channel for signalling official perspectives. From a strategic viewpoint, the variety of Indian opinions as well as their lack of access to the MEA's official thinking means that Chinese delegates must contend with a maze of distinct ideas from different scholars and experts, ultimately building an ambiguous picture of Indian thinking (Personal Communication 3, February 11, 2025).

Research Specialisation and Expertise

The Chinese think tank ecosystem shows a relatively higher degree of differentiation and specialisation, with distinct institutions focusing on specific thematic or regional issues. Further, there are specialised institutes on different regions, for instance CICIR's South Asia-focused research centre, and issue areas like the economy, governance, and renewable energy. However, in the view of one interviewee who directs an Indian think tank, because of mutually limited specialisation on each other, discussions between Chinese and Indian think tanks tend to remain rather surface-level on broad political and strategic affairs (Personal Communication 6, March 3, 2025). There is hence a need for capacity building, particularly in language and area studies, if Indian participants are to be able to better navigate Chinese official speak and presentational revelry (Personal Communication 7, March 24, 2025). Sector-specific Chinese think tanks or Chinese branches of international

think tanks, for example in the case of climate and energy, urbanisation, and trade, have deep domestic expertise, as well as independently sourced data that can be of immense value for researchers in India. For instance, at a recently held workshop co-hosted by ISAS, National University of Singapore (NUS), and CSEP, Chinese scholars from institutes like the Beijing branch of World Resources Institute and Tsinghua University gave crucial insights on pathways for climate and energy cooperation between India and China.

Further, one interviewee noted that think tank exchanges with China not only make known government priorities and perspectives but also nuanced differences between institutions, and are crucial to understanding the scholarly and policy community in China. Reading between the lines requires a thorough understanding of the institutional background of the visiting institutions as well as of the domestic political and economic context of China (Personal Communication 4, February 17, 2025). Facilitating regular educational field trips to China for Indian Sinologists could be a positive step in this direction. Another possible way to expand the range of views from China would be to increase exchange beyond Beijing and Delhi to other regional institutions in provinces. Similarly, India-China think tank exchanges in third countries or on multilateral platforms like BRICS could build familiarity and improve interpersonal communications and space for informal conversations on the sidelines.

This section offered a preliminary analysis of the past experience of engaging with Chinese think tanks. A better understanding of the policy context that Chinese institutions operate in can help Indian think tanks tailor methods and levels of engagement. India's developing ecosystem offers space for creative solutions to navigate relations with Chinese think tanks that often have the advantage of greater resources and established networks with the state. Past research on India's think tank ecosystem has recognised shortcomings like poor research quality, absence of feedback channels, limited specialisation, low impact of research, and inadequate funding sources, but also the rapid evolution and development of the sector (Mattoo & Medcalf, 2015; Jaishankar, 2016; Goyal & Saguin, 2019; Khan & Köllner, 2021; Pant & Mishra, 2025). As findings from this study show, these structural challenges also affect India-China think tank engagement and necessitate both short-term and long-term solutions, some of which are suggested above.

Building on the findings presented in the two parts of this paper, future research could explore major

Chinese institutions like CASS and CICIR in greater depth, in terms of their organisational setup, funding, external outreach, and even quality of research over periods of different regimes. While this paper examined the role of think tanks in Track II diplomacy, deeper dive can also be made into assessing their role in policymaking in specific sectors like governance, the economy, and emerging technologies. Further research could also examine the outcomes of think tank engagements between India and China and draw comparisons with Chinese think tanks' exchanges in other countries.

6. Conclusion

The trajectory of Chinese think tanks under Xi Jinping reflects both continuity with historical traditions and the emergence of new political imperatives. While the concept of intellectual advisors and policy intermediaries has long been embedded in China's governance culture, the past decade has seen their repurposing into instruments aligned with the centralisation of authority and the ideological consolidation of the party-state. The official call for constructing new type of think tanks represents an intentional attempt to institutionalise controlled spaces for expert input while simultaneously ensuring ideological conformity. This dual process is aimed at shaping think tanks to serve as bridges between technocratic expertise and authoritarian rule, addressing governance challenges at home and enhancing China's soft power abroad.

At the same time, this study demonstrates that the proliferation of Chinese think tanks cannot be seen merely as an organic outcome of structural demand for expertise. Rather, it is the result of a deliberate top-down policy, where think tanks are mobilised as state-led mechanisms of knowledge production, ideological diffusion, and public diplomacy. The sector has grown dramatically in scale, yet its quality and autonomy remain uneven. Structural dilemmas persist on how to harness intellectual innovation while curbing dissent, and how to expand China's global narrative without encouraging uncontrollable plurality. Xi's strategy has been to institutionalise these tensions, channelling them into regulated but visibly vibrant think tank ecosystems.

These domestic policy dynamics in China have significant policy implications for India. The survey of past exchanges indicates that India-China think tank engagement has mirrored the broader bilateral relationship, expanding in periods of rapprochement and contracting during times of tension, such as

after the Galwan clashes of 2020. While the resumption of exchanges in 2024–2025 points to renewed opportunities, the differences in institutional context remain stark. Chinese think tanks operate with strong administrative linkages, predictable channels to policymakers, and substantial state resources. Indian think tanks, by contrast, operate in a more pluralistic environment with greater autonomy but have weaker institutionalisation, limited resources, and sporadic access to official decision-making. These asymmetries shape the outcomes of dialogues, often leaving Indian participants grappling with scripted narratives from their Chinese counterparts while offering China access to a diverse range of Indian perspectives.

Nevertheless, dismissing such exchanges as one-sided would overlook their strategic value. Even tightly controlled dialogues provide Indian participants with insights into the party-state's priorities, discursive framing, and evolving intellectual currents within China. They also create space, however limited, for signalling Indian concerns and perspectives to an influential segment of China's policy community. Track II dialogues thus function as both signalling mechanisms and learning exercises for sharing governance and developmental experiences, which is particularly important at moments when state-to-state relations are strained.

Looking ahead, Indian engagement with Chinese think tanks should balance realism with creativity. Recognising the constraints of the Chinese system, Indian institutions can strengthen their own capacity by fostering greater coordination, improving record-keeping, investing in area studies and language expertise, and engaging Chinese scholars through multilateral and third-country platforms. Collaborating with international partners who also study China could help triangulate insights and mitigate the limitations of bilateral exchanges. In the long term, building an ecosystem that is institutionally robust, professionally specialised, and intellectually confident will allow Indian think tanks to navigate asymmetries with China.

Ultimately, this paper has argued that Chinese think tanks are both a reflection of and a response to the dilemmas of authoritarian governance in a globalising world. For India, engaging them requires not naïve optimism nor outright dismissal, but a strategic approach that combines a critical understanding of their political role with the pragmatic pursuit of dialogue. In doing so, Indian think tanks can contribute to sustaining channels of communication, enhancing knowledge of China, and positioning themselves as credible voices in shaping India's China policy.

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Appendix A

Table A1: Chinese Delegations Hosted by Institute of Chinese Studies, New Delhi

S. No.	Name of the Institutions/Event	Head of Delegation/Participants	Type of Exchange/Agenda	Year
1.	Institute of Economy, Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, China	Professor Quan Heng	Lecture on “China’s Economy and Reform Today”	2006
2.	CASS, Beijing, China	Mr Tan Xiuying (Director and Deputy Editor-in-Chief)	Institutional Visit	2006
3.	China Radio International, Beijing, China	Mr Huang Tao (Reporter Editor), Mr Niu Weidong (Chief Correspondent), Mr Jiang Aimin (Director)	Media Exchange	2006
4.	Yunnan Provincial Delegation (Provincial Governor, Director-General Yunnan Development Research Centre, Foreign Affairs Office, Education Department, Municipal People’s Friendship Association with Foreign Countries, and other commercial representatives)	Led by Provincial Governor, H.E. Mr Xu Rongkai	Delegation Visit	2006
5.	Delegation from Inner Mongolia	Mayor, Hothot city, CTO, Inner Mongolia JiaNiu Sci-Tech Inc.	Delegation Visit	2007
6.	Shanghai Institute for International Studies	Ambassador Zhao Gancheng, Senior Fellow, Director	Institutional Visit	2007
7.	China Association for International Friendly Contacts (CAIFC, Department of Asian Affairs, Center for Peace & Development Studies	Led by Mr Sun Jingtao, Assistant President	Institutional Visit	2007
8.	China Institute of contemporary International Relations, Beijing	Led by Hu Shisheng	Institutional Visit	2007
9.	Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, Shanghai	Led by Professor Wang Dehua	Institutional Visit	2007
10.	Bureau of Organisation, Central Organisation Department, and Communist Party of China	Zhang Guolong, Deputy Director General	Delegation Visit	2007
11.	CASS, Beijing	Liu Xiu Lian and Fan Xinyu	Institutional Visit	2007
12.	Guangzhou Daily Group	Liao Jie Hua	Institutional Visit	2008
13.	YASS, PRC	Associate Professor, Guo Suiyan, Institute for South Asian Studies	Institutional Visit	2008
14.	Sun-Yatsen University, China.	He, Gaochao, Department of Political Science	Institutional Visit	2008
15.	People’s Daily	Ren Yan, Chief Correspondent	Media Exchange	2008
16.	CASS, Beijing	Wang Ming Ming, Institute of World Economics and Politics	Institutional Visit	2008
17.	Shanghai Institute of International Studies	Delegation led by Professor Yang Jiewang	Institutional Visit	2009
18.	CICIR	Delegation led by Mr Tao Jian	Institutional Visit	2009

S. No.	Name of the Institutions/Event	Head of Delegation/Participants	Type of Exchange/Agenda	Year
19.	China People's Institute of Foreign Policy	Delegation led by Ambassador Cai Jinbiao, Vice-President	Institutional Visit	2010
20.	MFA, Department of Policy and Planning	Delegation led by Wang Ying Fang Senior Advisor, Foreign Advisory Group of the MFA	Institutional Visit	2010
21.	Advanced Institute for Contemporary China Studies, Baptist University Hong Kong	Led by the Director, Professor Victor SIT and the Chairman of China Fortune Foundation Limited (CFF)	Institutional Visit	2010
22.	Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences	Pan Shiwei, Professor and Secretary of the CPC Committee	Institutional Visit	2010
23.	Beijing University	Wei Liming, Head of the Department of Afro-Asian Languages	Delivered a talk on "Tagore's Impact on China"	2011
24.	YASS		MoU Renewal	2011
25.	CFAU, Beijing	Delegation headed by Professor Zhao Jinjun	Dialogue on the theme of "China South Asia Relations"	2011
26.	China Foundation for International Studies (CFIS), Beijing and MFA and CASS		Institutional Visit	2012
27.	CFAU, Beijing	Headed by Mr Feng Zhongping	Regional cooperation (the development of SAARC, India's East Asian Policy), economic cooperation (how to improve the bilateral economic cooperation and strengthen the coordination in multilateral economic institutions, such as G20 and BRICS)	2012
28.	China Institutes for Contemporary International Relations (CICIR) Beijing		New Chinese leadership and its neighbourhood foreign policy priorities	2012
29.	CPIFA, China	Headed by H.E. Mr Lu Shumin	Institutional Visit	2012
30.	China Tibetology Research Center (CTRC)	Professor Dramdul, Vice Director-General	Institutional Visit	2013
31.	Academy of Chinese Culture, Beijing, PRC	Led by Professor Zhang Feng, the institution's Vice-President,	Developments in Indian politics, economy, culture and religion	2013
32.	Guangzhou Association of Social Science Societies, Guangzhou Municipal Committee of the CPC, Media and Publication Houses	Led by Zhou Deping, Administrative Vice Secretary-General of Guangzhou Municipal Committee of the CPC	Maritime Silk Road and other issues related to Chinese studies in India and possibilities of future cooperation with the Chinese academic institutes like the CASS.	2013

S. No.	Name of the Institutions/Event	Head of Delegation/Participants	Type of Exchange/Agenda	Year
33.	Liaison Office of the Central People's Government in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, Department of Law	Led by Mr Feng Wei, Director of the Department of Law.	Indian national election systems and presidential elections, election systems of city mayor and councillors of New Delhi, and the relations between the central authority and local governments.	2013
34.	Guangdong University of Foreign Studies (GDUFS)	Led by Professor Xu Guobin, Vice President of GDUFS.	MoU signed between the ICS and the Guangdong Research Institute for International Strategies (GRIIS), GDUFS.	2013
35.	NDRC, Ministry of Commerce, MFA, National Energy Administration, Embassy of the PRC, New Delhi	Led by Ms Lin Dajian, Deputy Director General of International Cooperation Department	Delegation Visit	2013
36.	Yunnan Development and Research Centre (YDRC) of the People's Government of Yunnan, YASS, Yunnan Department of Commerce, Kunming CNS Xingsuo Cultural Communication Company	Led by Mr Kong Can, Vice Director, YRDC.	Delegation Visit	2013
37.	CIIS	Dr Lan Jianxue, Associate Research Fellow	Delivered a talk titled Identifying Common Ground for Sino Indian Cooperation.	2013
38.	CICIR, Institute of South and Southeast Asian and Oceanian Studies, Bay of Bengal Rim Unit	Led by Li Li, Deputy Director	Discuss the post-election scenario in India, what shifts were likely to come about in the Sino-Indian bilateral relations after the formation of NDA government and key international issues; other institutions present- IDSA, ISS, VIF, CII, MEA, and CPR.	2014
39.	Multiple Institutions (CICIR, SISU, Sichuan University, Fudan University, IDCPC, India Nepal Division, Asian Bureau, SIS PKU, SIIS, Shanghai	Led by Li Li, Deputy Director, Institute of South and Southeast Asian and Oceanian Studies, CICIR	India China Relations, resolution of border dispute, cooperation on global agendas.	2014
40.	CIIS	Led by Guo Xianggang, Senior Research Fellow	Eliciting responses on One Belt One Road Initiative.	2014
41.	Guangzhou Daily	Li Xing, Wang Xiaoyan, and Wang Yuehua	Historical links between India and China with reference to Maritime Silk Route.	2014
42.	Provincial People's Government of Sichuan, China- Office of Foreign and Overseas Chinese Affairs	Led by Cai Jing (Director General)	Delegation Visit	2015

S. No.	Name of the Institutions/Event	Head of Delegation/Participants	Type of Exchange/Agenda	Year
43.	CICIR- Institute of American Studies, Institute of South & Southeast Asian and Oceanian Studies, Institute of World Economic Studies	Led by Dr Li Li, Associate Research Fellow	Institutional Visit	2015
44.	People's Government of Yunnan Province, China- Department of Commerce, Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Information Technology Division, Foreign Affairs and Commerce Bureau	Led by Ma Yongfu, Deputy Director General, Department of Commerce of Yunnan Province	Delegation Visit	2015
45.	Sichuan University, Phoenix TV, Hainan Tropical Ocean University Sichuan University Guangzhou Academy of Social Science		Delegation Visit and Media Exchange	2016
46.	China Center for International Economic Exchanges and Strategic Research Department	Led by Ms Chen Wenling, Chief Economist at CCIEE, Former Director of the State Council Research Office	Institutional Visit	2016
47.	CICIR	Led by Professor Ji Zhiye, President, CICIR, also included Hu Shisheng, Director, South and Southeast Asian Studies and Oceania Studies, CICIR	Institutional Visit	2016
48.	The Pangoal Institution	Led by Yi Peng, President, The Pangoal Institution	Institutional Visit	2016
49.	YASS - ISAS, Bangladesh Studies	Led by Professor Yang Zhengquan, Vice President	Institutional Visit	2016
50.	Ecosystem Study Commission for International Rivers (ESCIR)	Led by Gu Hongbin, Director, ESCIR Zhang Muzi, Specialist in Renewable Energy Policy, Zhou Shichun, Sustainable Hydropower Development and Assessment	Institutional Visit	2016
51.	Sichuan University – ISAS, Centre for Tibetan Studies	Led by Professor Luo Zhongshu, CPC SCU Committee Executive Deputy Secretary	Institutional Visit	2016
52.	Guangdong Institute for International Strategies-Centre for Pacific Island Studies, MFA	Led by Sui Guangjun, Party Secretary of Guangzhou University of Foreign Studies	Institutional Visit	2016
53.	Central China Normal University, Wuhan	Chancellor, Director International Office	Signing of MoU	2016
54.	Shanghai Institute for International Studies (SIIS)	Led by Cheng Dongxiao, President, SIIS	Institutional Visit	2016
55.	ISAS, Sichuan University	Led by Professor Yang Wenwu, Deputy Director	Institutional Visit	2016
56.	CIIS, Department of Policy and Planning, MFA	Led by Dong Manyuan, Vice President, CIIS	Delegation Visit	2017
57.	Foreign Affairs Office, Government of Yunnan, Yunnan International Expositions Bureau, Investment Promotion and Cooperation Bureau of Dali Prefecture, Department of Commerce	Led by Deputy Director General of the Foreign Affairs Office		2017
58.	SISU- Centre for Indian Studies	Led by Wu Yongnian, Director of the Centre	Institutional Visit	2017

S. No.	Name of the Institutions/Event	Head of Delegation/Participants	Type of Exchange/Agenda	Year
59.	CICIR	Led by Yuan Peng, Vice President, CICIR, Hu Shisheng, Director, Institute of South and Southeast Asian and Oceanian Studies, CICIR	Institutional Visit to discuss India China relations under the light of the Xi-Modi informal meet in Wuhan, discuss developments in the Korean Peninsula after the Trump-Kim Summit in Singapore, and the domestic developments in India.	2018
60.	CASS, Beijing	Led by Wang Yanzhong, Director	Institutional Visit to study the developing or recent opinions among Indians regarding the Xi Jinping initiated China's One Belt, One Road(BRI) and the other is to study India's minority policies.	2018
61.	CSAS, Fudan University, China Reform Forum, Beijing, IIS Fudan University Shanghai University Yunnan University of Finance and Economics (Research Institute for Indian Ocean Economies) Center for Comparative Research of Urban Governance, Fudan University Center for South Asia-West China Development and Cooperation Studies, Sichuan University YASS, Kunming CASS South Asia Program, National Institute of International Strategy SIIS	Led by Professor Zhang Jiadong, Director, CSAS	Delegation Visit	2018
62.	HNIWW, Haikou. CIIS, Beijing; Hainan University	Led by Professor Chen Weishu, Chairman, Academy for World Watch	Delegation Visit	2018
63.	CICIR- ISAS, Institute of Maritime Studies	Led by Fu Mengji, Vice President	Institutional Visit to discuss India-China Cooperation and Connectivity: Maritime Dimension and Debate on Indo-Pacific, Future trends for India China relations.	2019

S. No.	Name of the Institutions/Event	Head of Delegation/Participants	Type of Exchange/Agenda	Year
64.	National Development and Reform Commission- Academy for Macroeconomic Research (Institute of Special Planning and Regional Economy, Institute for International Economic research, Special Planning and Regional Economy, Comprehensive transportation and Institute for Market and Price, Department of Research Planning and Management)	Led by Gao Guoli, Director	Delegation Visit	2019
65.	Institute of International Strategic Studies, Central Party School of CPC	Led by Professor Liu Jianfei, Director	Institutional Visit	2019
66.	Research office of the IDCPC, China Council for BRICS Think tank Cooperation	Led by Dong Weihua, Deputy Director General, Research Office, IDCPC	Institutional Visit to discuss the role of BRICS, India–China Relations and US’ Indo-Pacific Strategy.	2020
67.	Shanghai Institute of International Studies	Led by Professor Chen Dongxiao, President, SIIS,	Institutional visit to India–China relations.	2024

Source: ICS Annual Reports.

Table A2: Selected Exchanges with NMF, VIF, and ORF

S. No.	Name of the Institutions	Participants	Type/ Agenda	Year
1.	HNIWW and NMF	NMF delegation visited Sanya	Bilateral Dialogue - China and India: Exploring Convergences in Asia	2014
2.	HNIWW and NMF	HNIWW delegation visited New Delhi, India	India and China: Constructing Peaceful and Stable Maritime Order in the Indo-Pacific	2015
3.	CSAP, Shandong University, China and ORF	Professor Huo Wenle hosted by ORF	Talk/ Interaction	
4.	Chinese Institute of Contemporary International Relation, Beijing (CICIR) and Vivekananda International Foundation (VIF)	CICIR Delegation led by Hu Shisheng, Special Assistant to the President of CICIR, hosted by VIF in Delhi	The need to restore peace and tranquillity along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) to normalise India–China relations, emphasising the importance of dialogue between think tanks to enhance mutual understanding.	2023
5.	CICIR and VIF	VIF Delegation meets Hu Shi Sheng, Director & MD Wang Hai Xia, CICIR in Beijing	–	2018
6.	Interaction with a Visiting Chinese Delegation	Delegation led by Ambassador Yang Yanyi and VIF	US-China Trade Frictions	2019
7.	Interaction with a Chinese delegation from the International Department of Communist Party of China (IDCPC)	VIF and Delegation led by Mr. Dong Weihua, Deputy Director General of Research Office of International Department of CPC, Vice Secretary General of China Council for BRICS Think Tank Cooperation (CCBTC)	–	2020
8.	VIF Delegation visited Beijing and Sichuan	CICIR and IDCPC		2025

Source: Websites of ORF, VIF and NMF.

Table A3: Exchanges with Indian Council for World Affairs

S. No.	Event	Organisers / Participants	Remarks (Agenda/Topic)	Type of Exchange	Year
1.	CSCAP Study Group Meeting on Energy Security Meeting in Beijing, China	CSCAP	Energy security discussions	Multilateral Meeting	2008
2.	Speech by Yang Jiechi, Minister of Foreign Affairs, China in New Delhi	ICS, Chinese Embassy, ICWA	Strategic partnership between China and India	Public Speech	2008
3.	3rd ARF Expert and Eminent Persons Meeting in Beijing, China	ARF	Expert-level dialogue on regional security	Multilateral Meeting	2008
4.	CSCAP Study Group on WMD & ARF ISM Nuclear Disarmament in Beijing, China	CSCAP, ARF	Weapons proliferation, nuclear disarmament	Multilateral Meeting	2009
5.	Interaction with Chinese Editors/Journalists in New Delhi, India	ICWA	Media engagement	Dialogue	2010
6.	Visit of Premier Wen Jiabao in New Delhi, India			High-Level Visit	2010
7.	Meeting with Ai Ping, Vice Minister of the International Department of the CPC, China	IDCPC, ICWA	CPC Party Diplomacy	Political Dialogue	2011
8.	Interaction with CICIR scholars in New Delhi, India	ICWA, CICIR	India–China bilateral and regional perspectives; led by its Vice President Ji Zhiye	Academic Dialogue	2011
9.	CSCAP Study Group Meeting on Naval Enhancement in Qingdao, China	CSCAP	Maritime and naval cooperation	Multilateral Meeting	2011
10.	Seminar by Professor Su Hao in New Delhi, India	CFAU, Beijing (CFAU)	“Emerging Political Architecture in Asia”	Seminar	2011
11.	Visit by CFAU in New Delhi, India	CFAU delegation led by Ambassador Zhao Jinjun	Diplomatic education exchange	Delegation Visit	2011
12.	International Conference in Beijing, China	China Center for Contemporary World Studies (CCCWS)	The Contemporary World Multilateral Dialogue: The Changing World and China in Development	International Conference	2012
13.	China Core Group Meetings in New Delhi, India				2012
14.	Address by the H. E. Mr Li Keqiang, Premier of the State Council of the PRC in New Delhi, India	Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry FICCI, MEA		High-Level Address	2013
15.	ICWA Dialogue with Chinese Peoples Institute of Foreign Affairs (CPIFA) & SIIS in Beijing and Shanghai, China	ICWA, CPIFA, SIIS	Institutional dialogues and MoU signing	Bilateral Dialogue	2013
16.	ARF-ISG CBM & PD Meeting in Beijing, China	ARF	Confidence-building measures and preventive diplomacy	Multilateral Meeting	2013

S. No.	Event	Organisers / Participants	Remarks (Agenda/Topic)	Type of Exchange	Year
17.	ARF Workshop in Beijing, China	ARF	Cybersecurity challenges and cooperation	Workshop	2013
18.	40th CSCAP Steering Committee & 9th General Conference in Beijing, China	CSCAP	Strategic coordination	Conference	2013
19.	Address by Xi Jinping in New Delhi, India			Presidential Visit/Speech	2014
20.	Seminar on the 60th Anniversary of Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence in Beijing, China	CPIFA, ICWA, CEAS, JNU		Seminar	2014
21.	India–China Track II Dialogue (ICWA-CPIFA) in New Delhi, India	ICWA, CPIFA	Informal diplomatic engagement	Track II Dialogue	2014
22.	Interaction with CIIS delegation in New Delhi, India	CIIS	Think tank collaboration	Academic Exchange	2014
23.	CSCAP Study Group on Regional Security Architecture in Beijing, China	CSCAP	Regional Security architecture	Study Group	2014
24.	1st Young Scholars Workshop in Beijing, China	NA	Asia Pacific	Workshop	2014
25.	India–China Academic Dialogue in New Delhi, India	ICWA, SIIS		Dialogue	2015
26.	China–India Friendship Roundtable in Beijing, China	Soong Ching Ling Foundation	Expect future from tradition: China–India friendly exchanges and mutual learning	Roundtable	2015
27.	2nd CSCAP SG on Energy Security in Beijing, China	CSCAP	Energy security in Asia	Study Group	2015
28.	2nd Young Scholars Workshop in Beijing, China	Unspecified	Early-career scholar development	Workshop	2015
29.	Meeting with CICIR scholars in Beijing, China	CICIR, led by Professor Ji Zhiye		Think Tank Exchange	2016
30.	Dialogue with the Chinese People’s Institute of Foreign Affairs (CPIFA) And Shanghai Institute for International Studies (SIIS) in China	ICWA, SIIS, CPIFA	MoU Partners	Dialogue	2016
31.	1st India–China Think Tanks Forum in New Delhi, India	MEA, CASS	Toward a Closer Developmental Partnership	Think Tank Forum	2016
32.	2nd CSCAP SG on Marine Environment Protection in Qingdao, China	CSCAP	Marine and environmental cooperation	Study Group	2016
33.	3rd Young Scholars Workshop in Qingdao, China	Unspecified	Training and academic exchange	Workshop	2016
34.	Luncheon Meeting with China Reform Forum in New Delhi, India	China Reform Forum	Reform dialogue	Informal Meeting	2016
35.	2nd India–China Think Tanks Forum in Beijing, China	MEA, CASS	Strategic Cooperation and Development Partnership	Think Tank Forum	2017
36.	ICWA-CSCLF Roundtable in New Delhi, India	ICWA, China Soong Ching Ling Foundation (CSCLF)	Soft diplomacy and cooperation	Roundtable	2017

S. No.	Event	Organisers / Participants	Remarks (Agenda/Topic)	Type of Exchange	Year
37.	1st BRICS Think Tanks Forum in Shanghai, China	Fudan University	Pragmatic cooperation in BRICS	Forum	2017
38.	BRICS Think Tanks Forum in Beijing, China	CASS, University of International Relations, UIR	The Coordination Between BRICS Development Strategies: The Way to Common Prosperity	Forum	2017
39.	BRICS Think Tanks Forum in Fuzhou, China	International Department, Central Committee of Communist Party of China		Forum	2017
40.	3rd India–China Think Tanks Forum in New Delhi, India	ICWA, CASS	“Civilization Connect toward an Asian Century”	Think Tank Forum	2018
41.	5th ICWA-CPIFA Bilateral Dialogue in Beijing, China	ICWA, CPIFA	Bilateral institutional exchange	Bilateral Dialogue	2018
42.	Talk by Professor Yan Xuetong in New Delhi, India	Tsinghua University	“Emerging Bilateralism in Globalization”	Academic Lecture	2018
43.	14th SCO Forum Meeting in Beijing, China		Multilateral regional cooperation	Forum	2019
44.	4th India–China Think Tanks Forum in multiple cities, China	ICWA, CASS	Continued think tank dialogue	Think Tank Forum	2019
45.	5th Young Scholars Workshop in Beijing, China		Youth diplomacy	Workshop	2019
46.	6th ICWA-CPIFA Dialogue in New Delhi, India	ICWA, CPIFA	Strategic dialogue	Bilateral Dialogue	2019
47.	7th ICWA-CPIFA Dialogue (Virtual)	ICWA, CPIFA	Virtual policy consultation	Bilateral Dialogue (Virtual)	2021
48.	8th ICWA-CPIFA Dialogue (Virtual)	ICWA, CPIFA	Virtual institutional dialogue	Bilateral Dialogue (Virtual)	2022
49.	10th CICA Think Tank Forum	SIIS	Sustainable Security in Asia in a Period of Turbulence and Transformation: Challenges and Vision	Think Tank Forum (Virtual)	2022

Source: ICWA Annual Reports.

Table A4: List of Select Exchanges - MP IDSA

S. No.	Event	Chinese Institution/Delegation	Discussion Topics	Year
1.	Round table discussion	China Institute of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR), headed by VP Feng Zhongping; members: Hu Shisheng, Han Liqun	Leadership transition in China, China's relations with ASEAN & South Asia, South China Sea, US rebalancing, Afghanistan	2012
2.	Track II bilateral dialogue	China Institute of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR), led by Dr Yang Mingjie (Vice President)	Global governance, economic development, military cooperation	2013
3.	Visit of Delegation and discussion	China Institute of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR), three-member delegation	India's foreign policy post-2014 elections, China–South Asia regional dynamics, Afghanistan post-US withdrawal	2014
4.	IDSA-CICIR Bilateral Dialogue	Four-member delegation from CICIR led by Dr Li Li	–	2015
5.	Delegation visit to IDSA	Embassy of the Republic of China, led by Charge D' Affairs Mr Liu Jinsong	China and the Future of South China Sea”	2016
6.	SIIS Delegation Visit	Three-member delegation led by President Chen Dongxiao, President	China–India relations, multilateral cooperation, and other pressing regional and global security issues	2017
7.	IDSA-CICIR Bilateral Dialogue	CICIR Delegation led by Yuan Peng, Vice President	India China Relations, Prospects of economic Cooperation, regional security situations, major powers	2018
8.	IDSA delegation visited China and held meetings	CIIS and Chinese MFA	Exchange of views between scholars and senior officials	2019
9.	SIIS Delegation Interacts with IDSA Scholars	Delegation from the Shanghai Institute for International Studies (SIIS), Shanghai, China, led by President SIIS, Professor Chen Dongxiao	–	2019
10.	SIIS Delegation (Virtual)	Led by Chen Dongxiao, President and Senior Fellow, SIIS	The Future of China–India Relations, trade and economic ties, regional and global security architecture	2021
11.	4th High Level Track II Dialogue (Virtual)	MP-IDSA and Sichuan University	Bilateral relations	2021
12.	SIIS Delegation visited IDSA	Delegation led by Professor Chen Dongxiao	Regular Bilateral Dialogue on global and regional strategic issues	2024
13.	6th India-China High Level Dialogue at Sichuan University	Indian delegation led by Amb Sujan Chinoy and Chinese delegation led by Mr. Dai Bingguo	High Level Track II dialogue	2025

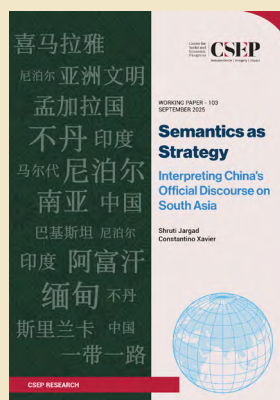
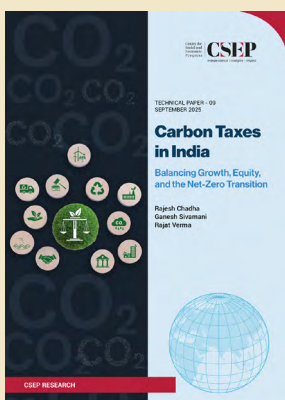
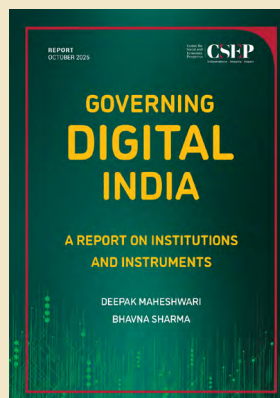
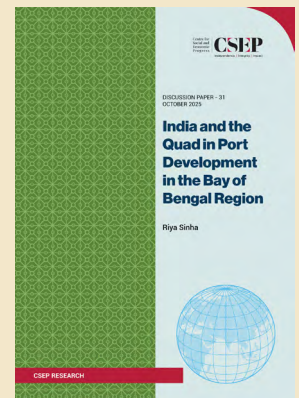
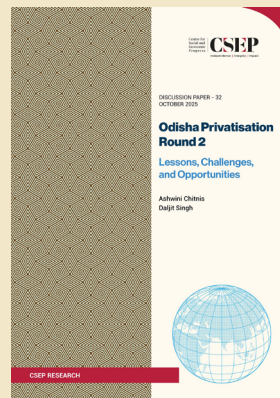
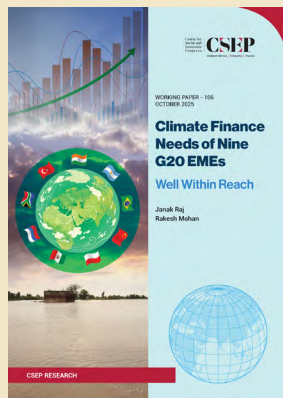
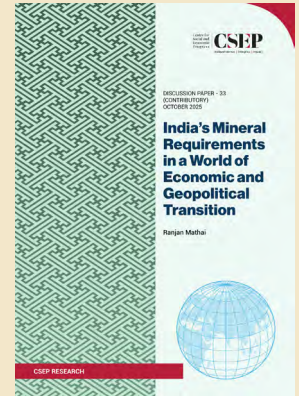
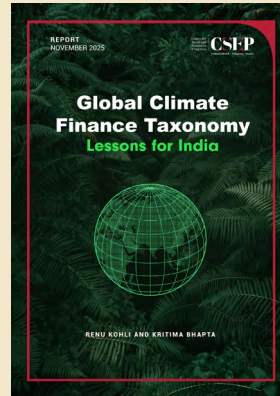
Source: IDSA Website.

About the author



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