

Interview with Academician Lu Dadao: Insights and Recommendations on Strengthening Think Tank Development (Postprint)

Authors: Lu Dadao

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Abstract

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Full Text

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Bulletin: The “Decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on Several Major Issues Concerning Comprehensively Deepening Reforms,” adopted at the Third Plenary Session of the 18th CPC Central Committee, explicitly proposed strengthening the construction of new-type think tanks with Chinese characteristics and establishing a sound decision-making consultation system. This marked the first time the concept of “think tank” appeared in a Central Committee document. On October 27, 2014, the sixth meeting of the Central Leading Group for Comprehensively Deepening Reforms reviewed and approved the “Opinions on Strengthening the Construction of New-Type Think Tanks with Chinese Characteristics,” emphasizing the focused development of a batch of high-end think tanks with significant domestic and international influence. Currently, the state attaches great importance to think tank construction. The Academic Divisions of the Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS) have long played a substantial role in national decision-making consultation. As a CAS academician and an important scientist in the Academic Divisions, what is your understanding of the significance of “strengthening the construction of new-type think tanks with Chinese characteristics”?

Lu Dadao: My understanding of the background and significance of the central leadership’s emphasis on strengthening China’s think tank construction remains

quite superficial. From the perspective of the nation's overall situation, I believe this may represent an inevitable requirement for reforming China's political system. Specifically, there are likely three aspects to consider.

First, China's socio-economic development is advancing toward becoming a world power and a strong nation. The enormous scale of socio-economic activity and increasingly complex and important international relations continuously generate changes and new situations for the nation's sustainable development. Both domestic and foreign strategies, policies, and various measures need to respond scientifically and promptly in terms of maintaining continuity, making adjustments, implementing major changes, or formulating anew. As the country grows larger and faces more significant domestic and international issues concerning national development, security, and social progress, the complexity of problems and decision-making risks have increased unprecedentedly.

Second, the widespread implementation of term limits for leaders makes it particularly important to understand actual conditions in a timely, accurate, comprehensive, and historical manner through recommendations from various think tanks.

Third, while national administrative departments each have their own responsibilities, departmental segmentation remains prominent. Yet the formulation and implementation of a series of important policies and guidelines produce comprehensive impacts. Although comprehensive coordination bodies exist at all levels (such as development and reform commissions at various levels), sectoral segmentation remains severe, and within each "sector," there is often "one pen" and "one mouthpiece." Departments will not say "no" to their own work, nor are they willing to say "no." In reality, they are not permitted to truly expose serious problems in their own work. In past practice, the drawbacks brought about by this systemic segmentation have been widespread. Phenomena where certain fields have caused enormous impacts and waste to the national economy and social development due to decision-making and action biases, without receiving forward-looking warnings or timely corrections, are not uncommon.

Under these circumstances, how can high-level government decision-making be made timely and accurate? The role of think tank scholars as a "third party" becomes very necessary and important, as they may transcend certain institutional barriers. These new developments have created both objective needs and conditions for various types of strategic consultation research and think tank construction. Consultation institutions outside government departments certainly have great room for development and are indispensable for building a modern, powerful nation. The decision-making mechanisms for U.S. national development and security undoubtedly offer rich experiences for reference, and the operation and important roles of various think tanks are also worthy of our consideration. This may be one of the reasons why China's national leaders today attach importance to think tank construction.

All rising powers in the world have fully demonstrated the enormous value and

credibility of their ideological culture and science and technology, influencing the entire world. China is at a moment of creating a century of national fortune, with continuously developing economic strength and gradually growing military power, demonstrating the Chinese nation's strong creativity. However, simultaneously, several problems and even crises encountered in our domestic and foreign development are quite severe. As China's political, economic, scientific and technological, and defense capabilities strengthen, we are also more able and need to promote China's values and ideological culture to the world, gradually achieving the deserved important position worldwide. In this process, national think tank strength is indispensable, especially high-end think tanks, which will play important roles in national decision-making and social mobilization, becoming an important platform and tool for elaborating China's global concepts and strategies, as well as the intellectual foundation for China as a world power to participate in global governance.

Bulletin: What does the “Chinese characteristics” of so-called “new-type think tanks with Chinese characteristics” entail? How do they differ from and relate to think tanks in the usual sense?

Lu Dadao: Think tanks, or “idea banks,” are institutions that study issues concerning socio-economic and scientific-technological development, diplomatic and military security, government management and social stability needed for national development and government decision-making, and propose decision-making analysis and recommendations. Their main function is to help government decision-makers make timely and accurate responses to major domestic and international issues and formulate corresponding guidelines and policies.

In the United States, there are many think tanks or think tank-like organizations. One category appears under the name of various foundations, a considerable portion of which are consulting and research institutions established by donors to influence high-level government decision-making to serve their own interests. Some think tank institutions are even tools for a few financial oligarchs and elites to promote plutocracy. However, as is well known, for a long time, reports, commentaries, predictions, and recommendations from various U.S. think tank organizations have had important impacts on government decision-making and public opinion.

So-called national high-end think tanks are, of course, institutions at the national level that have assembled a group of multidisciplinary experts and scholars (former diplomats, bankers, investors, scientists) to research strategic issues primarily involving national security, socio-economics, scientific and technological development, international geopolitics, political and economic system reform, major ecological issues and resources and environment, judgment and early warning of possible national crises, and countermeasures, and to present these research results to high-level government in various forms as analysis and recommendations, or release them directly to society. Any country, especially a major power with significant influence in today's world, attaches extreme importance to decisions concerning its national development and security, which

must be made through multiple levels and complex, repeated procedures. It can be said that for any government and corresponding institution in today's world to make scientific decisions, it must have a democratic process; otherwise, scientific decision-making is impossible.

General Secretary Xi Jinping emphasized that “from the strategic height of promoting scientific and democratic decision-making, advancing the modernization of the national governance system and governance capabilities, and enhancing national soft power, we must effectively grasp the construction of new-type think tanks with Chinese characteristics as a major and urgent task. We must uphold the Party's leadership, grasp the correct orientation, fully reflect Chinese characteristics, Chinese style, and Chinese demeanor; uphold the scientific spirit and encourage bold exploration; uphold the focus on the overall situation and serve central work; uphold reform and innovation and standardized development. We must coordinate the development of Party and government departments, academies of social sciences, Party schools and administrative institutes, universities, the military, science and technology and enterprises, and social think tanks to form a think tank system with clear positioning, distinctive features, moderate scale, and rational layout, focusing on building a batch of high-end think tanks with greater influence and international impact, and emphasizing the construction of specialized think tanks.” From this, we can fully understand the importance of national high-end think tanks.

What is a “new-type think tank with Chinese characteristics”? My understanding of “Chinese characteristics” is strategic research and consultation based on China's national conditions. What are “national conditions”? National conditions refer to a country's relatively stable, overall objective situation and characteristics. This objective situation and characteristics include the most basic and primary driving factors and limiting factors that determine the country's economic development, thus often determining the basic characteristics and general outline of national development. Recognizing national conditions is the objective foundation for formulating correct development strategies and the fundamental basis for determining appropriate development goals and effective development policies. Current national conditions certainly include the political system stipulated by the Constitution and the stage of development the country is in.

Why is it necessary to leverage the role of various think tanks in the management of a large country like ours? Some people say: Hasn't the central leadership already “conducted in-depth research” on current issues? Haven't formal decisions already been made? Then what opinions do we need to offer? Since the central leadership has already decided, they must have conducted detailed research without any problems, so do we still need to repeat the research? Perhaps due to these doubts and concerns, for a long time, no one has discussed or dared to discuss policies and guidelines still being implemented, because such decisions are always considered correct.

Take the Belt and Road Initiative as an example. I believe that when the top

leader made this international initiative, it was primarily based on China's position in the world today and the comparison of various global political, economic, and military forces, without needing to understand all the specific aspects mentioned above. The National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Ministry of Commerce may also know these specific situations and problems, but perhaps only in a fragmented manner. Therefore, it remains necessary for scholars to comprehensively propose these from a research perspective. The implementation of this strategy also requires a set of guidelines, more policies, and more measures to ensure, which need to be studied. Even if these are all in place, new situations and problems will emerge. I believe we should not underestimate the current central leadership's philosophy of widely listening to all parties and different voices for scientific and democratic decision-making. If no different opinions are offered on implemented policies and guidelines at any time, where would each new central decision come from?

Think tank researchers and staff need to have an independent spirit of observation and analysis. For policies and guidelines being implemented or being formulated and about to be introduced, think tank personnel should proactively provide background analysis, necessary data, and information. They must promptly and clearly express their views on problems emerging in practice or signs of problems. In some cases, high-level government leaders are also conducting investigations, and there may even be different views among high-level leaders themselves. At such times, think tank work carries a certain political sensitivity. However, I believe one point can be insisted upon: for issues where decisions have not yet been made, as long as there is sufficient basis, opinions or suggestions should still be expressed. I believe that almost all think tank reports that have played important roles have "yes/no" viewpoints. It can even be said that they must say "no." Because for guidelines, policies, and measures that did not exist before, proposing them is also saying "no."

"Acting according to the leader's facial expressions" is a negative evaluation of Chinese think tank work by some external media and individuals. For a long time, there has been public reflection that information reported upward through various levels of government is mostly "second-hand information" that has been strictly filtered; leaders and think tank personnel in lower-level government institutions must act according to the leader's facial expressions. In practice, there are indeed some unsatisfactory situations. For example, think tank personnel dare not clearly write negative problems in the implementation of existing policies and guidelines into their reports; higher-level leaders readily criticize subordinates for inaccurate information or improper conclusions in materials reported by lower-level institutions. All these have caused the malady of "reporting good news but not bad news" to become widespread. Imagine what kind of harm tolerating this situation would bring to a world power like ours? In some fields, important policies and guidelines have shown serious negative tendencies in implementation, even harming social and national economic development. Therefore, this type of think tank report needs to be "critical" rather than "laudatory." Reflecting such problems is politically sensitive at the time,

meaning it may contradict the views of high-level leaders or may “tarnish” the work of the Party and government. Does this type of consultation work objectively exist? Is it needed? What kind of philosophy and political wisdom are needed to do it? I believe today’s high-level leaders understand these situations. Under the circumstances where China’s high-level leaders attach importance to think tank construction and think tanks play an increasingly important role, the overall environment for doing various think tank consultation work will be better, though the requirements will also be higher. To do various consultation research work well, think tank research and consultation reports must be scientific and forward-looking. For major issues concerning national development and security, they should provide profound and accurate analysis and early warnings. To become a high-end think tank with domestic and international influence that makes real contributions to national decision-making, one cannot engage in “Monday morning quarterbacking.”

Bulletin: Since its establishment in 1949, the Chinese Academy of Sciences has done much work in national decision-making consultation. In 2015, CAS explicitly included “taking the lead in building a national high-level science and technology think tank” in its new-era development guidelines. In December 2015, it was also selected as one of the first 25 national high-end think tank construction pilot units and among the 10 central directly-affiliated national-level think tanks. Regarding specific construction, what suggestions do you have for CAS to better play its role as a national-level think tank?

Lu Dadao: CAS has long played an important role in national decision-making consultation, with numerous consultation reports formally submitted to the State Council and relevant departments each year, effectively supporting many major government decisions. Strengthening CAS’s think tank construction is one of the important ways to develop China’s scientific research undertakings and make greater contributions to the nation and society in the new era. According to higher-level requirements, CAS think tank construction may face several relatively important aspects: positioning, direction, characteristics, operation, and talent.

First, regarding positioning. My consideration is that the democratization of national decision-making will be a long-term major trend and an indispensable link to ensure China’s smooth rise. Against this background, CAS think tank construction needs to take a long-term perspective, aiming to occupy the upper tier of the national think tank group.

Second, direction and nature. Should CAS’s think tanks and consultation institutions bear the title of “science and technology”? In other words, should CAS think tank construction strictly follow departmental and field divisions? This is the same issue as whether think tank institutions at Tsinghua University, Peking University, and other universities should be named with “education.” In the future, many departments will have think tanks. If each department only handles consultation on affairs and policies related to its own industry and field, they can obtain political security of “it is my department’s affair.” However,

comprehensive decision-making issues or major professional issues must consider multiple factors and possible outcomes in the decision-making process. Who will offer suggestions on these?

It should be said that almost all major issues facing national development today have comprehensive characteristics. According to departmental divisions, many things may be difficult to assign to a specific department. If think tanks are built according to departmental “divisions,” wouldn’t many comprehensive issues for central high-level decision-making lack a broad foundation? Of course, in the long-term development process, think tanks will gradually form their own characteristics and field advantages.

What is “science and technology (strategy) consultation”? Does it mean that consultation workers are only scientific and technological personnel? Or does it emphasize that only national science and technology development issues are studied and consulted? There are two specific issues here: First, if think tanks only include scientific and technological personnel, then experienced diplomats, economic experts, veteran military experts, and retired government leaders would all be excluded. Second, does it mean no consultation research is conducted on issues outside the science and technology field? Here, if the consultation research objects are only “science and technology” fields, there are also problems. If each department only does its own field consultation—universities under the Ministry of Education only do education strategy consultation research, foreign affairs and foreign trade only do their own consultation—then what are think tanks for?

Third, regarding the issue of “political tendency.” Whether consultation reports have problematic “political tendency” is something think tank personnel must constantly guard against and cannot misjudge. However, being responsible to higher-level leaders and being responsible to the nation sometimes require careful weighing and cannot be avoided. Additionally, when analyzing certain tendencies or problems, judgments may “strengthen” or “weaken” these tendencies, and cannot be exactly on the center line or balance point. CAS think tank consultation reports should have clear and accurate expressions on consultation field issues, with tendency. They cannot pursue “lukewarm” “safe and sound” approaches.

Fourth, the talent issue. Building a powerful and influential think tank institution depends on talent strength. However, the cultivation of strategic consultation talent and personnel structure is a process of selection and cultivation over a relatively long time and should not be constrained by speed. It is essential to have a group of young and middle-aged talents with broad knowledge structures and enterprising spirit in think tank institutions. Experienced veteran scholars and leaders with broad vision, such as retired science and technology leaders, former diplomats, economic and trade experts, and economic and engineering experts, should also be valued, selected, and employed. Most of these professional talents have worked in important domestic and foreign affairs fields for long periods and accumulated rich experience. Most of them understand very

well the path China has taken over the past decades, and some experts also have relatively profound understanding of today's global power comparison and changes in the global geopolitical pattern.

In short, the common requirement for think tank talent is: having a strong sense of responsibility for national development and security and a strong desire to do consultation work well, and liking to engage in this work. I believe the latter point is the most important.

Bulletin: Could you elaborate on the “most important” point you just mentioned—the talent issue?

Lu Dadao: Our scientists must not only be scientists but also “strategic thinkers,” becoming strategic thinkers in their scientific fields to effectively support major national strategies in those fields and play the proper role of a science and technology think tank.

What is a “strategic thinker”? In contemporary times, scholars who can be called “strategic thinkers” should be comprehensive talents with considerable comprehensive knowledge and historical knowledge, who are good at examining and analyzing today's major domestic and international issues from a high-level overall perspective and a comprehensive viewpoint, and can more accurately grasp the basic trends of major domestic and international events. Their scientific judgments and early warnings about future major trends are often proven forward-looking by subsequent developments. These senior experts have the ability to integrate natural and social sciences and are called senior think tank talents.

We know that there are no specialized majors or educational institutions specifically for cultivating strategic thinkers in the world. However, in different periods in major countries like China and the United States, batches of strategic thinkers have emerged in academic, political, and economic circles. Strategic thinkers certainly have their own key fields, disciplines, and specialties. However, when they analyze and understand highly comprehensive issues, they are not confined to their original specialties but stand at a more comprehensive height, using more comprehensive knowledge for judgment according to the actual needs of analyzing and solving problems, and can better grasp developments at the macro level. In CAS's history, there have indeed been quite a few strategic thinkers.

China today already has a large number of scientists, but due to various constraints, including the guidance of publications, evaluation of achievements, and constraints from ideas of “international frontier” and “world-class,” as well as the management system segmentation between social and natural sciences, the output of strategic thinkers is not large. In CAS, natural scientists are all very busy and feel it is unnecessary to spend energy on in-depth understanding and thinking about the country's economic development, social development, and world political and economic patterns. Under these circumstances, think tank construction may face talent constraints. China needs to call for “strategic thinkers,” and CAS also needs to call for “strategic thinkers.”

Interviewee Biography

Lu Dadao was elected as an Academician of the Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS) in 2003 and serves as a Professor at the Institute of Geographic Sciences and Natural Resources Research, CAS. He is a renowned economic geographer who has long engaged in research on economic geography and territorial development and regional development issues. He organized the academic summary of China's industrial layout and industrial geography, initially establishing the theoretical system of China's industrial geography. In the mid-1980s, he proposed the "pole-axis system" theory, which has been widely cited and respected in academic circles. He participated in or organized the formulation and strategic research of multiple national and regional plans, including the "National Territorial Master Plan" and the "Economic Development Plan for the Bohai Rim Region." He proposed China's "T-shaped" spatial structure strategy, which takes the coastal zone and the Yangtze River belt as the primary axes for China's territorial development and economic layout in the coming decades, and this strategy was adopted by the state. In recent years, he has conducted extensive empirical and theoretical research on China's regional development, regional disparities, and large-scale regional sustainable development. E-mail: ludd@igsnr.ac.cn

Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.

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