

Think Tanks and Crisis: How can the Policy Research Community Help Cope with Major Crisis?

Panel: Plenary Session II (Grand Ballroom)

Date/Time: April 26, 2012 / 10:15-11:30

Organizing Institution: The Asan Institute for Policy Studies

Speakers: Simon Long, *The Economist*
Ellen Laipson, Stimson Center
Camille Grand, Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique
Jan-Olof Lind, Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI)
Edwin Feulner, The Heritage Foundation

Panel Short Summary

Amy Studdart, German Marshall Fund of the United States
Jeongsu Sinn, Korea University

It has long been the purview of think tanks to look at the long term trends which affect policy, bridging the gap between the drawn out rigor of academia and the day to day process of public policy making and news reporting. But the increasing number and impact of crises – from natural, humanitarian incidents like the March 2011 Tsunami in Japan to the ongoing Iranian nuclear crisis – has given rise to the idea of, as panelist Ellen Laipson from the Stimson Center described it, a ‘think-do tank’, which posits that think tanks should be using their expertise and networks to take on a more active role in crisis response. In his introduction to the panel, Simon Long, a columnist at *The Economist*, began with a daunting explanation of where the conversation about the role that think tanks can play is at: ‘it seems think tanks have a new task - saving the world’.

The role of the think-tanker, Ellen Laipson went on to explain, has traditionally been to observe and analyze the evolution of events and strategies over the longer term – not to formulate instant responses to events as they happen. When a humanitarian crisis of the proportions of the March 2011 Tsunami unfolds, they are neither equipped to keep up with the flow of information emerging about the incident, nor do they have immediate access to decision-makers in those moments. At best, they can play a role in either providing the public with the context behind the news, or in facilitating ‘lessons learnt’ conversations in the

aftermath for policy makers, NGOs and industry representatives (or, as Jan-Olof Lind of FOI put it, ‘lessons observed’). On the other hand, think tanks are significant in government thinking on geopolitical crises that play out over a longer period. On the Iran nuclear crisis for instance, Ellen Laipson was positive about the role that D.C. think tanks have played in policy making by contributing valuable analysis via non-proliferation and nuclear studies programs. In both the Fukushima and Iran Nuclear Crisis examples, think tanks have played the important role of bridging different actors such as international organizations, national governments, the private sector and civil society.

Camille Grand, from the French think tank FRS, suggested that one of the more useful ways in which think-tankers can help governments cope with major crises is by helping with ‘cold-planning’ exercises, common to the military but not the diplomatic corps of many countries, and especially the United States. Whereas the U.S. Secretary of State has been lambasted for her statements on containment strategies vis-à-vis, think tanks are not subject to the messages that considering various options send to the public and to international partners, and so are more able to plan for various contingencies, no matter how likely or desirable the outcomes are.

Edwin Feulner of the Heritage Foundation agreed that long term contingency planning was one of the best contributions that think tanks can make, citing a Heritage Foundation publication on contingency planning vis-à-vis North Korea which provides its audience – the U.S. congress – with a variety of options on North Korea policy across a spectrum of different scenarios. In his words, the question is ‘when a crisis hits, what ideas are lying around that can be dusted off and used to help?’

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