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June 4, 2012

Remarks at the G20 Foreign Policy Think Tank Summit

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On June 4, 2012, RAND president and chief executive officer Michael Rich participated in the G20 Foreign Policy Think Tank Summit, held at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, June 3–5, 2012. Rich presented at a panel titled “Think Tank Presidents Panel: Meeting the Challenges and Seizing the Opportunities in a Changing World Order.” Rich and the three other panelists—presidents of organizations based in South Korea, Poland, and Turkey—were asked to speak about what they considered to be the major organizational and policy challenges facing their countries and organizations.

It’s a pleasure to be here and to be speaking among such a distinguished panel of my peers.

The RAND Corporation is a complex organization. With 1,700 people in ten offices in five countries, we work across dozens of public policy areas and are partners to hundreds of government agencies, businesses, foundations, and other organizations trying to make better decisions for their constituents. Despite this complexity, RAND’s purpose—the motivation behind our work, and the reason I’m so proud to lead this institution—couldn’t be simpler. RAND’s work is about helping individuals, communities, and nations become safer, healthier, more secure, and more prosperous.

To address the questions posed to the panelists this morning, I’d like to do three things: (1) tell you a little about RAND, how we started, and where we are today; (2) describe some of the organizational challenges I see ahead for us; and (3) outline some of the policy challenges where I think RAND has an opportunity to have considerable impact. I will leave a lot unsaid, but I hope I’ll say enough to stimulate a fruitful discussion.

RAND was established at the end of World War II. A top U.S. military leader recognized the tremendous innovations that civilian scientists had developed as part of the war effort and was searching for a way for those efforts to continue during peacetime. His solution was to form an organization that would be separate from the government but would help senior government officials and military officers anticipate and tackle especially big and complex challenges—particularly those that were still “over the horizon” and not yet widely recognized or appreciated as challenges.

He called this initiative “Project RAND”—which is not an acronym, but rather a contraction of the phrase “research and development,” or possibly an attempt to sound out the initials R&D. Project RAND was set up far away from the White House, Congress, and the Pentagon—in southern California. It employed engineers, mathematicians, political scientists, psychologists, and more, in order to break the molds of conventional wisdom and to think broadly, but at the same time to bring the rigors of scientific inquiry to bear on policy issues.

In the early years, we focused exclusively on U.S. national security issues. Our reputation as a leading resource in that area continues to this day. But in the 1960s, we expanded our research agenda and began studying social and economic issues as well, including education, poverty, health, and justice. Today, RAND has one of the broadest research agendas of any think tank, and many people are surprised to learn that our largest research division is focused on issues of health and health care.

Over the years, RAND has made seminal contributions to policy debates and to society:

- The first careful evaluation of a world-circling spaceship, 11 years before Sputnik.
- A technique for maintaining communications in the event of a nuclear attack that later became known as “packet switching” and facilitated the creation of the Internet.
- The world’s first database of terrorist incidents, allowing governments to observe trends in targeting and tactics in order to develop prevention and response strategies.
- The first detailed analyses of such disparate phenomena as
 - the crushing financial burdens of the Soviet empire
 - the pros and cons of NATO expansion
 - career criminals and recidivist behavior
 - precision-guided armaments
 - the economic consequences of obesity
 - the dangers of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan
 - the promise of effective drug prevention and treatment programs
 - the extent and complexity of psychological and cognitive injuries from combat.
- Last, but certainly not least, many of the tools and methodologies that form the very foundation of the field of policy analysis, and that are used by other think tanks, by government analysts, and in universities around the world, were created at RAND: Systems analysis, dynamic and linear programming, the Delphi technique, game theory, techniques for measuring the appropriateness and quality of delivered health care—each of these was created or elaborated on by RAND researchers who needed a better way to diagnose a problem or propose a solution . . . and so they invented one.

And certainly, these are just a few examples among many.

I mention this history because it underscores several themes that I think are important to understanding RAND’s view about the role of a think tank and policy research institution: the value that an independent, objective perspective can bring to government policymakers and the general public, and the innovations for public policy that can emerge from intellectual freedom and scientific inquiry.

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This leads me to a discussion of some of the organizational challenges I see ahead for us at RAND. I’d like to discuss two.

First is the increasing demand in the policy community for rapid answers to what are essentially long-term problems. Diagnosing the root of a complex policy problem; observing trends; designing, evaluating, and proposing solutions; monitoring their effectiveness; innovating and experimenting—all of this takes time. But the typically short time horizon of government officials, aided and even compressed by the 24/7 news cycle, threatens to leave sustained analytic inquiry on matters of long-term importance in the dust. The risk for an organization such as RAND is that careful, rigorous analysis will increasingly be seen as taking too long to produce, with resulting pressure to deliver incomplete or shallow analysis, or even opinions and snap judgments. An organization like

RAND can't ignore or wish away the frenetic pace that surrounds policymaking today, but we must constantly seek a fine balance between responding swiftly and nimbly to urgent problems of the day, while at the same time staying committed to the "long view" so that we can continue to produce the benefits that come from careful, analytic inquiry.

The second challenge I see ahead for RAND is a policymaking community and a public that are increasingly divided by partisan interests and ideological outlooks. RAND is, and has always been, politically neutral. We are strictly nonpartisan when we do our research and analysis, and we are strictly bipartisan when we disseminate our work in the United States. If we could be said to subscribe to any ideology, it would simply be that sound public policy starts with a rigorous and objective review of the facts and should be based on hard-wrought evidence of "what works." I like to think that one of RAND's greatest accomplishments over more than six decades has been our ability to analyze the most sensitive issues of the day, call the shots as we see them, and in the end avoid getting a reputation for being either liberal or conservative, left-leaning or right-leaning, Democratic or Republican. We have delighted and infuriated them all by being straight shooters. But the increasing polarization of public discourse and decisionmaking in America may mean that there's less and less interest in RAND's unique brand of objective analysis. What happens when policymakers are less interested in finding out what works, and more interested in cherry-picking data or commissioning studies to support a predetermined course of action?

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I want to conclude by making some final remarks about some of the major policy challenges I see ahead for society—challenges that, in my judgment, every think tank must step up to.

First, let me note that the actual question put to the panelists is "What are the major policy challenges facing your country?" And I'm listed on the agenda for this conference as representing the United States. But we don't think of ourselves at RAND as a U.S. think tank. Our staff includes individuals from more than 50 countries, many of whom are multilingual—speaking and working in Spanish, Chinese, Arabic, and Russian, just to name a few. We do project work for an increasingly global roster of government agencies, firms, and organizations, not just for U.S.-based entities. Moreover, our offices outside of the United States have enabled us to recruit local talent and train them in the methods and techniques of policy analysis. Altogether, what this means is that whether working from one of RAND's ten office locations or on the ground in communities throughout the world, RAND staff are studying policy issues that affect the lives of people in nearly every part of the globe.

I make this point because I think the major policy challenges facing society today demand a breadth of perspective that extends beyond the borders of where we are incorporated or where our headquarters offices sit. So, here are some challenges that will face think tanks everywhere, not just in the United States.

Challenge number 1: The global economic crisis. Governments the world over—that provide vital services to individuals, families, businesses, and communities—are struggling to do more with less. RAND has a long history of helping clients design and implement

policies and processes that reduce and avoid costs. We have to prepare to do more of this. Because all G-20 countries have to take a leadership role in finding the domestic and international policies that can lead to sustainable, broadly based growth, I expect that each of the think tanks we represent will need to play this role.

Challenge number 2: Stabilization and reconstruction. When states and communities are devastated by destruction—whether man-made or caused by nature—there are political, humanitarian, economic, military, and other responses essential to recovery and forging a path toward prosperity. Consider the growing list of asymmetric threats that G20 countries face: terrorism, cyber attacks, the dangers posed by ungoverned places, and on and on. Each can cause destruction, disruption, and dislocation. Or, consider the earthquakes in Haiti and Japan, the devastation in the United States after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, the Indonesian tsunami, and the communities engaged in or emerging from conflict in Africa, Iraq, and Afghanistan. We must continue to identify and test the surest paths to recovery, in each instance incorporating the vital factors of cultural and historical context. In the United States, this requires that RAND work with clients and actors in both the public and private sectors, with civil agencies and the armed services, with government at all levels, and with numerous nongovernment and international organizations. I'm hopeful that RAND's decades-long work on nation-building and emerging expertise in helping build resilient communities will be helpful with this ongoing challenge.

Finally, challenge number 3: If I had a slide show for you, this slide would be blank or maybe just have a question mark. As members of the think tank community, we must always be thinking of the next big policy challenge, the one not yet on the current agenda. Staying ahead of the curve, anticipating trends, spotting the next crisis, and helping to avert it before it happens—this is a unique role we can play. It's what RAND was originally formed to do nearly 65 years ago and what I believe we must all continuously strive to do today.