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The Role of Think Tanks in Modern Governance—Remarks at the China Development Forum 2016

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The Role of Think Tanks in Modern Governance

RAND president and CEO Michael Rich gave the following remarks at the 2016 China Development Forum in Beijing on March 19, 2016. The China Development Forum is a high-profile international conference designed to promote engagement between senior Chinese policymakers and leading academics, foreign officials, and business leaders from throughout the world. The theme of the 2016 conference was "Engaging with the World for Common Prosperity," and Michael delivered remarks as part of a panel discussion featuring leaders of international think tanks.

I am delighted to be back at the China Development Forum and to be part of such a distinguished panel of think-tank leaders from China, Singapore, the U.K., and the U.S., including my friend and collaborator Robin Niblett of Chatham House.

From time to time, RAND has been called the "quintessential think tank," but we don't resemble any of the other organizations with that label. So, I thought I would spend a few moments telling you what RAND is, what we do, what roles we play for governments—and then close with some thoughts about the future.

RAND is an independent, nonprofit organization established nearly 70 years ago, thanks to efforts of the U.S. Air Force and the Ford Foundation. Our mission is to help improve policy and decisionmaking through research and analysis.

I am proud of the RAND mission because it is clear about means and ends. Research and analysis are the means; they are *what* RAND does, but they are not *why* RAND exists. Our ultimate objective is to help make people healthier, safer, more secure, and more prosperous.

What Makes RAND Unique

We are in a unique position to do that because the RAND Corporation is a one-of-a-kind blend of a think tank, a university, and a consultancy.

The vast majority of our more than 1,500 research projects are commissioned by senior officials in governments and international organizations around the world. Performing research and analysis directly for policymakers increases the likelihood that our findings and recommendations will lead to positive changes in people's lives.

But, to maximize the impact of our research and analysis, we must communicate our findings and recommendations well beyond those policymakers. So, RAND publishes over 700 reports and journal articles each year on a wide range of policy issues, as well more than 350 commentaries, a policy magazine, and the leading peer-reviewed academic journal in industrial economics.

And, on top of all of this, we operate the world's largest Ph.D. program in public policy, which is integrated into our research operations in multiple ways. This enables us to teach and export the RAND approach to policy research and analysis.

This is a powerful combination for carrying out our mission, because it melds the academic rigor and spirit of discovery and innovation of a university; the access, sharp client focus, and practicality of a consultancy; and the public engagement of a think tank.

How RAND Helps Governments

As a result, RAND has been able to help governments at all levels with

- primary data collection, including sophisticated surveys, extensive field work, and case studies;
- deep historical analysis, including the legal and regulatory basis for policy;
- extensive international benchmarking and performance measurement;
- sophisticated modeling and simulation, as well as gaming;
- policy formulation and program design;
- thorough program evaluation using the world's best multidisciplinary analysis, featuring quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods;
- independent cost assurance; and
- capacity building for clients in both formal informal settings, among other things.

Our research and analysis have made numerous contributions to improving governance in many countries. Let me give you a few examples. RAND projects have

- identified, measured, and drawn attention to unrecognized but looming problems, such as the mounting societal cost of dementia and the extent of psychological and cognitive injuries from combat;
- provided rigorous evidence of which programs are working and which ones are not;
- debunked policies that are popular but ineffective or too expensive, such as mandatory minimum sentences for crimes;
- enabled governments to make sound choices in the face of enormous political pressures, as when they have to decide which schools to close or make important source-selection decisions;
- helped governments tackle problems that cut across traditional bureaucratic jurisdictions, such as reducing the use of illicit drugs;
- produced new inventions (such as packet switching) and analytical techniques (such as game theory, dynamic, and, later, linear programming) that have been useful in both the public and private sectors.

Obstacles to Evidence-Based Policymaking

In my judgment, the challenges to and of governance are increasing, and thus I also believe that the potential value of independent research and analysis like the kind performed by the RAND Corporation is also increasing—but there are some worrisome countervailing trends. Let me mention two of the most important:

- First, analysis of complex, enduring policy problems requires careful research and documentation; at RAND, at least, peer review; and, often, testing and experimentation. This takes time. But people everywhere are consuming information in smaller and smaller quantities. Will decisionmakers of the future have the patience to wait for careful analysis?
- Second, the growing polarization in public discourse and governance makes objective research more vital than ever, but will officials of the future be open to evidence that may

challenge their ideological beliefs or partisan positions? As polarization leads increasingly to gridlock, can sound evidence still be converted into progress?

So, to summarize: RAND's role is to help ensure that the most important decisions—the ones affecting the most people's lives, the most public resources—are made with the best available evidence. That means

- the best data, even when we have to collect them;
- the best lessons from history;
- the best policy options based on the best ideas;
- the best analytical methods, even when we have to invent them;
- the best analysis;
- the best anticipation of implementation barriers; and so on.

It's a formula that the RAND Corporation has used to help policymakers and inform publics in fledgling democracies, mature democracies, monarchies, and countries with other forms of governance. Policymakers here in China have drawn on it as well, and I have drawn on those projects when I have spoken at Forums in past years.

But evidence-based policymaking is facing more and more obstacles, just when the magnitude and complexity of policy problems are increasing. Shining a light on the role of think tanks in governance at an influential conference like this is a helpful reminder of why that trend must be resisted and reversed.

Thank you again for the opportunity to participate in the China Development Forum.