

Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation
Thematic Session on Think Tank Exchanges
China National Convention Center, Beijing, China
14 May 2017

Remarks of Dr. Dinusha Panditaratne, Executive Director LKI*

*See below for a lightly edited transcript of Dr. Panditaratne's remarks at the Belt and Road Forum, delivered at Session II of the Thematic Session on a "Silk Road of Openness, Inclusiveness and Mutual Learning."

Thank you Professor Huang. I know we are pressed for time and I will try to be brief. I have just a question to ask, and then I will propose a possible answer.

This session is on building the "Silk Road of Openness, Inclusiveness and Mutual Learning," and we have been talking so far about how that can be done, and especially, how think tanks do that. The question I want to ask is not so much the *how*, but the *who*: whom are we open to, whom do we include, and whom do we learn from?

Before suggesting an answer, I would like to cite the University of Pennsylvania's 2016 think tank report, the report that they release annually. This year's report released earlier this year described the "monumental failure" of think tanks, pollsters and pundits to accurately predict Brexit and the 2016 U.S. Presidential election. It referred to the fact that social movements have used disruptive technologies and made disruptive politics possible, and think tanks were not able to understand and respond to these new dynamics.

If I can extrapolate a possible answer to my question; of whom we should be including, whom we should be open to, and whom we should be learning from, what I take from the University of Pennsylvania report is that sometimes think tanks are – and I'm absolutely as guilty of this as anyone else – in our own echo chamber. We talk to other think tanks, talk to other experts, and talk to our own governments who fund us. The issue is: how much can we go out there and find out who are the potential disruptors? I really appreciated He Fan's suggestion as to the importance of field research. This is one way of addressing this issue; of making sure that we understand the possible challenges that we cannot see, to what is otherwise an incredible vision, with incredible potential.

I would like to add to the suggestion of field research, noting that pollsters doing field research were also unsuccessful during Brexit and the U.S. Presidential election. Polling and

research in itself may not be adequate, because people may want to give you answers that they think you want to hear. Field research has to take into account that human tendency. There was another good suggestion made earlier, by Sartaj Aziz, for this to be an annual event of think tank exchanges. Perhaps one way of addressing this issue of getting out of the echo chamber and confronting potential disruption is to make the event more open; more multi-disciplinary, and also multi-*age*, with lots more young people than what we see in this room, and trying to get to what they are thinking as the potential forces of change, and potential challenges to the Belt and Road. These are things that will help to realise the tremendous potential of the Belt and Road.

One further proposal as to what think tanks can do; we need to perhaps think of ways that partner countries can be co-investors of some kind, even if they do not have money to invest. Another speaker mentioned health and health diplomacy earlier in this session, which is a fantastic suggestion. Sri Lanka may be struggling to some extent economically, but we are a leader in malaria research. Last year, the WHO declared Sri Lanka malaria-free after many years of hard work. That knowledge is an example of how partner countries could possibly contribute to the Belt and Road, and which would also help fend off this feeling of, sometimes, it being a one-way street, and leading to further potential disruption.

Thank you very much.
