

Singapore think-tank among world's top 50

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FOR the first time, a Singapore think-tank has made it into the ranks of the top 50 think-tanks in the world.

The S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) is No. 48 on a list compiled by a top university in the United States.

The Global Go-To Think Tanks Report, put together each year by the University of Pennsylvania, is based on how a group of international experts ranks think-tanks, according to criteria such as the organisation's media reputation, overall output, and ability to create positive change and affect policy. The 2011 report is its fifth edition.

RSIS dean Barry Desker sees the new position as a reflection of the institute's growing international standing.

'RSIS staff increasingly publish in international peer-reviewed journals as well as contribute to debates on emerging regional and global issues,' he told The Straits Times.

The think-tank specialises in research in security issues, including conflict and non-traditional security. Since 2010, it has held the annual Singapore Global Dialogue, which brings together top policy and academic leaders to discuss strategic global issues.

Besides RSIS, five other Asian institutes are on the list. They are from China, India, Indonesia and Japan. Topping the list is Britain's Royal Institute of International Affairs' Chatham House, which analyses international affairs.

US think-tanks are excluded as their international prominence may distort the rankings. They have their own list.

The report also ranks think-tanks according to regions.

Four of Singapore's think-tanks made it to the list of Top 25 in Asia. These are: Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) (in 9th), RSIS (10th), Singapore Institute of International Affairs (SIIA) (14th), and Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (21st).

The good showing indicates that 'a vibrant think-tank community is emerging' in Singapore, said Mr Desker.

'One of the great strengths possessed by our think-tanks is that we recruit Singaporeans as well as experts from around the globe. Most Asian think-tanks are restricted to nationals from that country.'

The report also ranks think-tanks by subject areas and SIIA featured in three - for science and technology, transparency and good governance, and impact on public policy. It is the first time a Singapore think-tank has got on these lists.

Said its chairman Simon Tay: 'We are humbled but happy. As the smallest think-tank in Singapore, we are forced to be enterprising. I would also credit our success to Singapore's reputation as a thoughtful, rational place.'

IPS director Janadas Devan notes that the rankings show the influence of think-tanks here but thinks there is potential for them to play a bigger role in the country.

'The most important measure is whether we can clarify thinking on policy and how useful we are to the various stakeholders,' he said.

'Think-tanks can provide different views and policy possibilities. For example, IPS can gather and provide more data on the qualitative aspects of life, to complement policymakers' hard data.'