

Inquiry into funding for public research into foreign policy issues

Written questions on notice for the Lowy Institute

A witness at our first hearing (Trent Hagland) mentioned that the Lowy Institute has a very robust peer review process. Can you tell us about this?

First of all, the Institute has a rigorous *research commissioning process*. Our Research Committee, comprising our senior researchers and chaired by our Director of Research, meets regularly to consider proposals from both Institute researchers and external researchers. The Committee discusses the merits of each proposal, how it can be improved, and whether to approve it. Through this process, the Institute decides which issues we wish to address in the form of long-form research, which authors we will commission, and where we will invest our resources.

At the other end of the pipeline, all Institute-branded research undergoes a robust *editing and peer review process*. At least two independent peer reviewers are consulted for every paper, and the Institute supervises the author's incorporation of the reviewers' feedback into their work. The Institute selects reviewers on the basis of their expertise, reputation, independence, and ability to provide critical feedback. The author is not informed of the identity of the reviewers. The Institute also draws on the expertise of our scholars – both resident and nonresident – when assessing papers for publication. All Institute long-form research is signed off by the Director of Research and the Executive Director.

Finally, for particularly large and important data-driven projects, for example the Asia Power Index and the Pacific Aid Map, we sometimes apply additional fact-checking and red-teaming processes.

What is your reaction to perceptions that foreign policy think tanks are pro-status quo (regardless of which party is in power)?

I can only speak for the Lowy Institute. Unlike many of the institutions engaged in Australia's foreign policy debate, the Institute was not created by government, but by private philanthropy. We are independent of government. The Institute is governed by a highly distinguished and independent Board. We receive our funding from a diverse range of sources. The Institute is home to many different opinions, but

the advocate of none. We have a longstanding practice of not adopting house positions and allowing researchers to speak and publish in their own names. We conduct a rigorous research-commissioning process in which all senior Institute researchers participate. We insist on independent peer reviews of our published research.

There are many examples of Lowy Institute researchers critiquing the government of the day. For example, Richard McGregor criticised the manner in which the Morrison Government called for an international inquiry into the origins of the coronavirus pandemic. Alex Oliver has critiqued government funding of DFAT over a long period. Hervé Lemahieu has criticised long-term Australian aid cuts to developing Asian economies and called on the Government to ‘step up’ in Southeast Asia, alongside its heavy focus on the Pacific. The world-renowned Lowy Institute Poll, now in its seventeenth year, has often been uncomfortable reading for the government of the day.

What measures do you take to ensure the independence, and perception of independence, of your research?

I have mentioned the Institute’s independence from government, the role of our distinguished Board and our robust editorial processes.

Our diversity of funding sources is another important pillar of our independence: we receive funding from business, government, foundations, book and ticket sales as well as the Lowy family. We require appropriate clauses regarding our research independence be inserted in our grant funding agreements. Where we conduct commissioned research, we require that our findings and conclusions are independently determined and that the funding source is acknowledged upon publication.

The idea that scholars speak and publish in their own name, which is embedded deep in the Institute’s DNA, is another guarantor of our independence. We do not seek to push one particular ideology or worldview. We actively encourage intellectual diversity. No one can say that Institute researchers speak with one voice; rather, there is a genuine range of views. For example, on Australia’s relations with China, there are differences of opinion between Institute scholars such as Richard McGregor, Natasha Kassam, Peter Cai and John Edwards. On the issue of America’s staying power in Asia, Sam Roggeveen is bearish and I am bullish.

Do you take any measures to avoid politicisation of your work?

Over nearly two decades, the Institute has established a reputation for being authoritative, balanced and non-partisan. We focus on international policy, not domestic politics. We see the Institute as a national resource and we make our platforms and researchers available to all sides of politics.

We have hosted prime ministers, foreign ministers, treasurers, opposition leaders and shadow ministers from both sides of politics. Researchers provide briefings to politicians of all stripes, as well as proactively seeking their views on particular research projects.

We strive for balance with our international guests too. For example, we have hosted the national security advisers to both Presidents George W. Bush and Joe Biden: Steve Hadley and Jake Sullivan. On my podcast *The Director's Chair*, I have hosted a number of figures from President Biden's administration as well as President Donald Trump's deputy national security adviser Matt Pottinger.

Some consider that think tanks focus too much on commentary rather than original research. What is your view?

Both research and commentary are important, but the Lowy Institute is a research-led institution. We publish 25-30 major peer-reviewed publications per annum. In addition to that, we publish several major evidence-based indices and digital features to help improve the understanding of key issues, including the Asia Power Index, the Pacific Aid Map and the Global Diplomacy Index. These products produce invaluable and original data which help to inform national and international debates. The Lowy Institute Poll is the most authoritative tracking poll on Australians' views on the world.

We also encourage our researchers to publish their views in leading international newspapers and journals and to appear in leading broadcast media. This is an essential part of deepening the public debate. We have guidelines to help researchers strike the right balance between producing high-quality original research and commentary in leading domestic and international mastheads. These form part of staff performance measures.

How can foreign policy research be used to shed light on foreign interference?

We decide on research topics according to our judgments about the important issues of the moment. Some of these are long-running issues; others are more topical. In the past few years, one of the issues on which we have focused is the question of foreign interference, particularly with respect to China.

For example, we are currently completing a significant research project on Chinese-Australian community organisations and their connections with the CCP. This follows a major survey of Australians of Chinese heritage, led by Natasha Kassam and Jennifer Hsu, which probed Chinese-Australians' views on Australia-China relations, attitudes to China, sources of news and concern about Chinese influence in Australia.