Towards a Comparative Analysis of International Affairs Think Tanks

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Abstract

Think tanks can be defined as organizations whose main mission is to inform and to influence public policies on the basis of research and analysis. Such organizations exist in all world regions but come in various stripes and colours, reflecting both exogenous factors – the particular contexts they are operating in – and endogenous factors – the specifics of the particular organizations. A significant number of think tanks across the globe focus on international affairs. Such international affairs think (IATTs) tanks play a multitude of roles, e.g., they may provide opportunities for interactions and discussions among professionals; inform and help to legitimise the foreign policies of individual states; engage in informal diplomacy; nurture next-generation scholars and practitioners of international affairs. This paper first charts the existing literature on think tanks in general. It then elaborates on the variety of roles played by IATTs. It finally focusses on three approaches to explaining the configurations of think tank fields within and across nations to see whether and how they can guide a planned mapping of the topography of IATTs in the six established democracies and liberal market economies in the Indo-Pacific region, i.e. Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Australia, New Zealand, and India.

Introduction

The study of think tanks has experienced a substantial boost in the past twenty years. Research on think tanks has been said to have developed since the mid-1990s from ‘cottage-industry’ status to ‘maturity’ (Stone 2004: 1). Yet, maturity does not necessarily equal systematic knowledge accumulation. As Jasper Dahl Kelstrup has rightly noted, ‘[t]he study of think tanks has developed unsystematically with theoretical and empirical contributions expanding in different directions.” (Kelstrup n.d.: 1, 2) Moreover, the vast majority of empirically-oriented studies continues to

1 This paper draws and builds in some parts on Koellner (2011, 2013).
focus on think tanks in the United States or, at most, on think tanks in North America and Europe. The resulting spatial bias severely limits our understanding of think tanks as a global phenomenon. Given that many think tanks these days operate in and out of various parts of what might be called the Indo-Pacific, more empirical work is required to better grasp the development and particular configurations of think tank fields in this vast maritime region, which is effectively composed of four world regions linked to each other in many ways, viz. Northeast Asia, Southeast Asia, Australasia, and South Asia. This paper draft presents a first step in the direction of analysing the variety of think tanks in the Indo-Pacific operating in a particular think tank domain, viz. international affairs. The paper is structured as follows: I first discuss the existing literature on think tanks. I then elaborate on the variety of roles played by International Affairs Think Tanks (IATTs). Finally, I discern and discuss three theory-guided approaches – a rational choice, a sociological, and a political economy one – for explaining the development and configurations of think tanks within and across nations. I do so with the aim in mind of mapping in future research the topography of IATTs in the six established democracies and liberal market economies in the Indo-Pacific, i.e. Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Australia, New Zealand and India.

Thinking About (the Variety of) Think Tanks

Though they constitute the ‘most intangible aspect of political life’ (Stone 1996: 1), ideas undoubtedly matter in politics² – or, for that matter, in corporate affairs. But of course not every relevant idea gets reflected in public or corporate policy. Ideas need to be articulated and represented in coordinative and communicative discourses among policy makers and between policymakers and the public (cf. Schmidt 2008). Arguably, ideas stand a better chance of making an impact in such discourses if they are diffused and channelled by means of an organisational infrastructure. Think tanks, especially well-placed and well-resourced ones, can provide such an organisational infrastructure (cf. Stone 1996: 1, 2004: 15; Ladi 2011a, 2011b).³ In term of the demand for think-tank input, Kent Weaver and James McGann (2000: 1) have pointed to the need for expertise in governmental decision making: Both in ‘information poor and information rich societies’, they suggest, policy-relevant

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² The recent volume edited by Béland and Cox (2011) showcases a number of perspectives on and approaches to exploring the links between ideas and politics.

³ On think tanks as part of discourse coalitions see Pautz (2011: 427-430).
information is needed that is ‘understandable, reliable, accessible, and useful’ (ibid: 2). Think tanks may provide policy guidance by contributing to various stages of the policymaking cycle, from the agenda-setting phase to the evaluation of policy implementation. In the United States, which hosts the biggest think-tank scene in the world, think tanks have, *inter alia*, served as sources of basic research and advice, evaluators of policy proposals and government programmes, as hubs in issue networks and for the exchange of ideas, as interpreters of policies and current affairs for the media, and also as suppliers of personnel (think tanks as ‘government in exile’ or ‘holding tanks’) (Weaver and McGann 2000: 5-6, see also Weaver 1989: 568-570, Abelson 2014: 131-132). In somewhat idealised terms, think tanks have thus frequently been conceived as bridges between the academic and the policy-making world. A perhaps more apt conceptualisation has been provided by Tom Medvetz, who conceives think tanks as ‘boundary organisations’ operating in between the spheres of academia, politics, business and media. Think tankers act as intermediaries between these spheres by playing, in diverging intensity and to varying degrees, roles as scholars, policy aides, policy entrepreneurs and media specialists (see Medvetz 2008, 2012a, 2012b).

While think tanks can potentially serve as sources of policy ideas and innovation, it needs to be empirically assessed whether or to what degree this potential is fulfilled in specific cases. As Diane Stone (2004: 14) suggests, think tanks may sometimes merely serve as symbols ‘of intellectual authority that can be used to support entrenched policy prejudices and political causes.’ Stella Ladi (2011b) even argues that the symbolic function of think tanks, i.e. providing knowledge to legitimize and strengthen extant policy positions, may well be more important than think tanks’ role in terms of providing effective solutions to emerging policy problems.

On a different level, with respect to the dynamics of think tank development, it is worth noting that think tanks in various national settings usually undergo a process of transformation in the course of time. Witness for example the rapid rise of advocacy-oriented and ideologically inclined think tanks in the United States over the past

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4 See most recently Abelson (2014: 12). For a critique of this conception see Ladi (2011b: 211-212).
thirty-odd years, which has led concerned observers to bemoan that such think tanks have ‘become part of the intellectual echo chambers of our politics, rather than providing alternative sources of policy analysis and intellectual innovation.’ (Troy 2012: 176) Still, many continue to see the think-tank scene in the US as an expression of a vibrant civil society, worthy of emulation elsewhere.

While, historically, some prominent US (and UK) think tanks have indeed served as role models for policy research institutes in other countries, the actual roles played by think tanks in various settings depend very much on the particular historical, political, economic and social constellations that characterise these settings, i.e. exogenous factors, as well as on the resources and capabilities of the think tanks in question, i.e. endogenous factors (see also below). The two sets of factors can be intertwined when exogenous factors bear on the resources and capabilities that think tanks develop. While think tanks have prospered in particular in the US and the UK (see e.g. Abelson 2014, Medvetz 2012a), such organisations have not remained an ‘Anglo-Saxon’ phenomenon. A recent global survey counted in 2013 over 6,800 think tanks operating in 182 countries (McGann 2014). While this count is probably too high (see Koellner 2013), most scholars would agree that the countries with the most think tanks are, probably even in this order, the United States, China, the United Kingdom, India, and Germany (McGann 2014: 34).

Think tanks thus constitute an institutional species which has come to inhabit an increasing number of countries, in which they operate in specific political, cultural, legal and other environments. While most think tanks are still firmly rooted in their national contexts and cater mainly to domestic audiences, accelerated globalization since the 1990s, abetted by vast advances in international communications, has certainly affected think tanks, which, among other things, have expanded their transnational activities, e.g. in terms of collaborative linkages and the dissemination of research output and policy briefings (see Stone 2005: 70-78).

Given the sheer number and worldwide existence of think tanks, it is perhaps not surprising that such institutions have attracted increasing academic interest, especially since the 1990s. Most of the existing literature has focused on think tanks in the US. This is hardly surprising in view of the fact that the US boasts the largest
number of think tanks and provides a particular hospitable terrain for their operation
given the particular institutional configuration of the national political system and its
concomitant decision-making processes plus a long tradition of philanthropy
benefiting non-profit organisations including think tanks (see e.g. Weaver 1989: 570-
limited number of studies have also compared think tanks operating in different
national settings. Such studies have either explicitly compared thinks tanks in the US
with their ‘siblings’ in the UK (e.g. Stone 1996), Germany (Braml 2004)\(^5\) or Canada
(Abelson 2009) or, in a very few cases, have provided overviews of the development
and situation of think tanks in an assorted number of countries (e.g. McGann and
Weaver 2000; McGann with Johnson 2005; Stone and Denham 2004).

This multi-country, cross-regional literature demonstrates the considerable diversity
of think tanks operating within the same or across different national settings. *Inter
alia*, think tanks diverge in terms of organizational structure, modes of operation,
audience or market, and means of support (see also below). A number of attempts
have been made to classify think tanks in terms of generic types. For example, Stone
(2005: 48) distinguishes five types of think tanks based on their primary institutional
affiliation or linkage, namely:

- independent civil society think tanks established as non-profit organizations,
- policy research institutes located in or affiliated with a university,
- governmentally created or state-sponsored think tanks,
- corporate-created or business-affiliated think tanks, and
- political party (or candidate) think tanks.

But even think tanks belonging to one such type come in various stripes and colours.
Reflecting the particular contexts they are operating in and the specifics of the
particular organizations, think tanks within and across nations

- differ in size;
- operate on a stand-alone basis or are linked to government ministries,
  foundations, universities, political parties, etc.;

\(^5\) See also Pautz (2010) for a comparison of think tanks in Germany and the UK.
• employ, in varying proportions, staff with different kinds of primary expertise (researchers, PR specialists, former government officials, etc.);
• specialize on given topics or use a broader but still delimited focus;
• receive different types of financing, including public funding, private-sector donations, membership fees, and contract funding for specific projects;
• aim to inform or influence public policy by engaging in different types of activities (e.g., such as publishing policy papers and briefs; organizing and participating in policy-relevant forums and networks; providing assessments, testimonials and recommendations in various kinds of meetings with parliamentary and executive policy makers; appearing in the media; and supplying personnel through short-term secondments or on a more long-term basis, for example, after changes in government).

In a broader vein, existing analyses of think tanks have shown that there is “no one best model or trajectory for think tank development” (Stone 2005: 50; Weaver 1989: 576; Weaver/McGann 2000: 32) and that the “U.S. experience with think tanks may not be readily transferable to other settings” (Weaver 1989: 577).

The more recent literature on think tanks also suggests that earlier definitions of think tanks, which had often been conceived with the (sometimes idealised) situation in the US in mind, needed to be reconsidered. For example, the widespread premise that think tanks need to be ‘autonomous’ or ‘independent’ to be considered think tanks (see e.g. Weaver 1989: 563; Rich 2004: 11) has been challenged in both empirical and conceptual terms, with scholars pointing, among other things, to countervailing historical evidence in the US (Medvetz 2012a: 32), statist development strategies and concurrent think tank trajectories in some parts of Europe, Asia and elsewhere (see e.g. Denham/Stone 2005 and Nachiappan et al. 2010), and to the arbitrariness and vagueness of independence and/or autonomy as definitional criteria (Medvetz 2012a: 31-33; Koellner 2013: 2). Independence and autonomy are not the only definitional elements that might better be dropped. The equally widespread tenet that think tanks need to be public-policy oriented or indeed always non-profit oriented to qualify as genuine think tanks also deserves to be discarded on empirical grounds, as we find in a number of countries organisations that particularly cater for the needs of the corporate sector and are profit-oriented but otherwise are fairly similar in operation as
their public-policy oriented counterparts. For the purpose of this paper, I thus define think tanks parsimoniously as organizations seeking to inform or influence public policies or corporate affairs on the basis of in-house or network-based research and analysis.

The Roles of Think Tanks in International Affairs
Considerable diversity also exists with respect to the roles that think tanks play in international affairs. By “international affairs” I here broadly refer to cross-national relations, exchanges, and interactions, as well as to the foreign policy of individual nation-states. While the particular roles played by think tanks in international affairs differ in specific national (or regional) contexts – and sometimes even from think tank to think tank within such contexts –, it is however possible to identify some generic roles that think tanks can play with respect to international affairs. In the following, following in the footsteps and building on the pioneering work of Richard Higgott and Diane Stone (Higgott/Stone 1994: 24-29), I suggest eleven such generic roles.

First, think tanks can provide (sometimes regularized) opportunities for interactions and discussions among scholars, politicians, bureaucrats, media representatives and businesspeople. This “salon function” of think tanks can help to establish and foster national, bilateral, regional and/or transnational networks or even communities of people working on one level or another in international affairs. Think tanks can serve in this respect as institutional bridges linking different kind of professionals who share an interest in international affairs and can contribute to establishing “person-based pipelines” not only within national foreign policy communities but also across national borders. In some national or regional contexts, think tanks’ salon function might even be more important than their policy input as the salon function cannot be assumed by other, sometimes (oftentimes?) more important actors providing policy input, such as national bureaucracies.

Second, think tanks can create, inform and (re-)shape public opinion regarding international affairs, including foreign policy. Think tanks can directly “create” public opinion in this area by commissioning and organizing relevant opinion polls, and they can also inform and even (re-)shape public opinion by contributing to relevant

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6 For a similar conclusion, but for different reasons, see Pautz (2011: 421-422).
discourses by means of traditional media interventions (interviews, op-eds) or social media interventions (in particular blogs).

Third, think tanks can transfer and disseminate knowledge on international affairs to a more general public. They can do so by means of public forums, publications addressed to a broader audience, and by engaging in “research brokerage” – that is, by making relevant academic findings and assessments available in ways that non-academics can understand.

Fourth, think tanks can contribute to raising awareness about and/or help to understand (emerging) international affairs and global issues by addressing them in different formats including publications, various kinds of forums, and media interventions. Besides putting such affairs and issues on the radar, think tanks can also contribute to setting relevant national and cross-national agendas – or they can at least assist in doing so.

Fifth, think tanks can engage in informal diplomacy activities by organizing or participating in semi-official track 1.5 or more autonomous track 2 processes. The functions of think tanks that are more or less part of the foreign policy apparatus of individual governments range from finding out how much room there is for formal diplomatic activities to signalling impending policy shifts and receiving relevant signals from the other side. More generally, think tanks engaged in informal diplomacy can help to establish people-based pipelines, which can be especially important when formal diplomatic relations do not (yet) exist on a bilateral level. (As for example, in US and Japanese relations with North Korea or in the case of Taiwan’s relations with much of the world.)

Sixth, and turning to the public policy-oriented roles of think tanks, such organizations can function as sounding boards for policy-makers by providing informed “second opinions.” While policy-makers, perhaps more often than not, have formed opinions or assessments concerning certain international affairs issues, they sometimes also like to hear what relevant experts have to say with respect to a certain issue or with respect to evaluating policy options – especially if the issues concerned are complex and the policy options involve high risks and/or costs.
Seventh, think tanks can also directly impact specific foreign policy decisions or the general strategic discourse in a given national context through (regularized) interactions with policy-makers or commissioned policy advice. This “consultancy function” of think tanks probably comes closest to the popular understanding and some existing definitions of think tanks. For many think tanks, opportunities to directly impact foreign and other public policies may, however, be quite scarce.

Eighth, especially but certainly not only think tanks in (semi-)authoritarian regime contexts can help to legitimize existing (or emerging) official foreign policy positions of the state concerned. Thus, rather than informing or evaluating specific internationally oriented public policies, think tanks in such instances play the role of “intellectual cheerleader” for their respective governments by endorsing relevant policies or policy decisions and by providing rationales for them from a seemingly neutral perspective.

Ninth, individual think tanks sometimes also play a self-chosen role in terms of exporting – or at least trying to export – specific agendas to other countries. Relevant agendas are, as a rule, conviction- or ideology-driven and include the spread of democracy or “free” markets, as well as assisting like-minded organizations in other countries like political parties, associations and unions. Endowed with sufficient funding and/or personnel, they might also help to set up other relevant think tanks in other countries.

Tenth, think tanks can also contribute to establishing International Relations and Strategic Studies as fields of studies in individual countries. They can do so by publishing relevant journals, by employing staff members who later assume relevant professorships, and by offering fellowships to researchers from within and outside the country in question. For example, the establishment of Strategic Studies in Japan, where “strategy” was considered a sort of taboo word in academia after World War II, would probably have not taken place if it had not been for the nurturing role played by a few Japanese think tanks focusing on international affairs.
This finally leads to the eleventh role that think tanks can play in international affairs: they can help to nurture next-generation international affairs practitioners and scholars, for example by running diplomatic academies and various training programs related to international affairs, by offering internships, by staff members teaching at universities and other institutions of higher education, and by formally supervising Ph.D. students and mentoring younger scholars.

As should be evident but may be worth emphasizing: Probably no think tank focusing on international affairs will play all of the above roles all of time. The particular roles – and mixture thereof – played by think tanks focussing on international affairs or other public (or corporate) affairs, will differ from setting to setting, from organisation to organisation, and also across time, reflecting both exogenous and endogenous factors outside and within such organisations.

Towards a Comparative Analysis of Think Tank Configurations

As noted above, a sizeable literature exists by now on the development and activities of think tanks. Yet, only limited progress has been made in terms of generating and systematically applying theoretical frameworks that help to account for the development and configuration of think tanks within and/or across different (national, regional etc.) settings. The existing literature provides however some discussion of environmental parameters affecting the development of think tanks and their opportunities to influence policymaking processes in different settings.7

7 Trying to determine the ‘best environment’ for think tanks, McGann with Johnson (2005) examined the impact of a host of environmental conditions on the number of think tanks in 126 countries. They however come up with only few robust findings due to the problematic operationalization of some variables, data problems, and flaws in the overall research design, which does not systemically link the large-N regression analysis with the 20 national case studies presented in their book. A few more methodologically sophisticated analyses have been carried out to trace the policy impact of (mostly) North American think tanks on selected policy areas (see e.g. Rich 2004; Abelson 2006, 2009), but the analytical frameworks employed in these studies might not be universally applicable and, more importantly, due to their very focus on
Reflecting the neo-institutional bent of much recent political science literature, one of the most prominent discussions on how environmental parameters affect think tanks concerns the effects of the institutional traits of political systems on the qualitative (in terms of structure and activities) and quantitative development of think tanks as well as on their opportunities to affect policymaking. Weaver and McGann (2000: 13), for example argue that the ‘structure and operations of political institutions are clearly a critical determinant of the level of activity and type of think tanks in a given country.’ With respect to the United States, Weaver (1989: 570) argues that think tanks there are more numerous and ‘probably’ also more influential than in other western democracies ‘because of a number of unusual features of the American political system, notably the division of powers between the president and Congress, weak and relatively non-ideological parties, and permeability of administrative elites.’ The particular institutional setting of the US political system at the federal level thus provides for numerous opportunities for political entrepreneurs and think tanks to leave their mark on policymaking.

While core institutional parameters of political systems (e.g. parliamentary vs. presidential systems, unitary vs. federal systems, the type of electoral systems in place and their impact on the institutionalisation of political parties and party systems) can indeed facilitate or constrain think tank development and also their opportunities to influence policymaking, they do no determine them. Arguing otherwise, would ignore the possibilities of individual agents endowed with the necessary leadership qualities to overcome or at least ‘stretch institutional constraints’ (see Samuels 2003: 5-7). This insight is also very much in line with recent research on the effects of institutional parameters, most notably electoral systems, on political outcomes, which emphasizes that while formal political institutions do affect relevant outcomes, they hardly ever do so in a uniform, law-like manner (see Klingemann 2009; Moser and Scheiner 2012; Bowler and Donovan 2013).
Institutional features of political systems thus constitute only an intervening factor – if an important one – with respect to think tank development and activities. Numerous other potentially relevant factors have been mentioned in the literature on think tanks. Stone has presented one of the most comprehensive overviews of socio-political factors shaping the environment in which think tanks operate. At the most general level, she notes that the “uneven spread of think tank development across political systems appears to be a consequence of factors such as the extent of foundation support, legal structures, the political situation, civil society development, and the tax environment” (Stone 2005: 58, see also McGann and Weaver 2000). But that is not all. Elsewhere, Stone (2004: 6) herself references further environmental parameters that affect the development and activities of think tanks, arguing that “constitutional changes and government reform, the intensity of political debate and opposition, the attitudes of political leaders and the political culture of a society open and close opportunities for think tanks and policy entrepreneurs.”

Is it possible to inject greater analytical clarity into this fuzzy picture of potentially relevant factors shaping think tank development and operations in different contexts? Can we thus go beyond the ‘laundry lists’ of potentially relevant factors mentioned in the growing, yet curiously under-theorized literature on think tanks across the globe? Three different theory-guided approaches for doing so will be highlighted in the following.

A first, rational-choice informed approach distinguishes between demand-oriented factors (pull factors) and supply-oriented factors (push factors) that shape the development of think tanks and their activities in different national settings. With respect to established democracies in particular, Jongryn Mo (2005) has proposed that think tank output can be understood as a good, for which there are suppliers (think tanks and other actors) and consumers (policy-makers). Incentives affect the supply of and demand for think tank services. With respect to the demand side, Mo notes that “if policy outcomes are not important to politicians’ interests, they do not have much demand for policy research. For example, if policy is not an important determinant of electoral outcome in a democracy, politicians whose main interest is winning elections would not seek policy advice or research.” On the demand side, it is thus argued that incentives emanating from particular electoral systems can
stimulate or constrain policymakers’ demands for think tank services. In addition, the “demand for policy research by political leaders also depends on the degree to which they favour the policy-based rather than politics-based style of governance” (Mo 2005: 176). As Stone (2005: 58) adds in more general terms, the particular character of demand “helps to explain why different kinds of think tanks have emerged” in different national settings.

With respect to the supply side, the rational choice approach asks about the suppliers of policy-related research and guidance in a particular setting. Apart from think tanks, other relevant actors in this regard may include national bureaucracies and non-governmental organizations and groups such as universities and individual academics, research-oriented NGOs, and even international organizations. And, as Mo (2005: 178) notes, “traditionally, it is the bureaucrats who are the main sources of policy advice to political leaders.” Stone (2005: 60) seconds that “bureaucracies often retain a monopoly on policy advice. The strength of bureaucracies has implications for the structure and operation of think tanks.” Thus, demand for think tank services is likely to be higher when the bureaucracy cannot meet relevant demand or when the bureaucracy is not (or no longer) trusted by policymakers as a source of research-based policy guidance.

Apart from competition among suppliers of policy research and guidance, a host of institutional and non-institutional factors stimulate or constrain the supply of policy input and other activities offered by think tanks. Again from an economic perspective, relevant supply-side variables determining the cost of inputs and their efficient use include the availability of capital (namely, research funding) and labour (namely, well-trained researchers). Such factors in turn depend on the amount and kind of existing funding sources (government money, foundations, individual philanthropy) and the attractiveness of careers in policy research (in and of itself and as a gateway to positions in government and academia). A final set of factors that provides incentives or disincentives for the supply of policy research and guidance by think tanks relates to existing legal frameworks providing a) barriers to and/or support for either the establishment and operation of such think tanks or access to information, important for conceiving policy-relevant input and guidance.
The charm of this first theory-guided approach to explaining think tank configurations lies in its focus on just two basic explanatory factors or vectors, i.e. demand and supply, which can help to bring some order in the range of potentially relevant factors. The price paid is, of course, that the intricacies of historical trajectories of think tank development as well as the socially embedded character of think tanks gets short shrift. But then the approach has the clear advantage of facilitating cross-national analyses of think tank landscapes. What is however fairly problematic is the particular, somewhat reductionist focus on electoral systems (and the incentive structures provided by them) in the demand-side of the analytical framework provided. Other less polity-oriented political factors that can play on demand generation, such as the role of the state in pursuing developmental goals, are ignored. Moreover, as noted above, comparative research on the effects of electoral systems on political phenomena such as party systems or voting behaviour suggests that the effects of electoral systems are far from linear and do not operate irrespective of context. It thus seems far-fetched to believe that the incentives of particular electoral systems determine or at least substantively shape the think tank configurations in individual settings. Moreover, a focus on electoral systems makes it difficult, if not impossible to account for changes in national think tank-field configurations over time in the absence of electoral system change. (How can the above-mentioned evolution of the US think tank scene be explained when there was no change in electoral systems and connected incentive structures?)

A second, sociological approach to explaining and understanding the configuration of think tank ensembles has been pioneered by Tom Medvetz. As mentioned above, Medvetz conceptualises think tanks as hybrid organizations operating in between, or at the “interstices” of, the fields of academic knowledge production, politics, business, and media. While think tanks need to be close to and tap into these four fields – which supply them with authority, funding, and access to opinion and to decision makers –, they also need to keep a certain distance in order to guard their specific identity as think tanks (Medvetz 2008, 2012a, 2012b). Operating as a think tank thus requires careful balancing acts. According to this perspective, analyses of think tank configurations (as well as their historical development) need to trace how think tanks in a particular, national or other, setting (have come to) relate to and interact with relevant actors in these four fields and also how competition with other think tanks in
a particular setting (have come to) shape think tank strategies (see Medvetz 2012a: chapter 1, 2012b for details). Perhaps needless to say that such relationships and interactions play out differently across space and time. Overall, this second theory-guided approach does provide substantial analytical value-added but seems more suited to tracing and mapping particular think tank configurations in individual contexts rather than being amenable for the kind of comparative, cross-national analyses that we have in mind.

A third, political economy-centred approach to explaining the configuration of think tanks explicitly takes such a cross-national perspective. Eschewing the language of think tanks altogether, but still drawing on the relevant literature, John Campbell and Ove Pedersen focus on what they term ‘knowledge regimes’. Such regimes are conceptualised as the ‘organizational and institutional machinery that generates data, research, policy recommendations, and other ideas that influence public debate and policymaking.’ (Campbell/Pedersen 2014: 3) Campbell and Pedersen seek to ‘map the topography of knowledge regimes in different political economies’ and to explain ‘how different institutional forms of political economies affect how knowledge regimes are organized and operate.’ (Campbell/Pedersen 2011: 188) They argue that ‘the institutional configuration of a country’s knowledge regime reflects and is largely determined by its surrounding political-economic institutions.’ (ibid.: 171). More specifically, they suggest that ‘the manner in which [competition and conflict over ideas] is handled and whether it produces winners and losers or compromise and consensus depend on the institutional configuration of the political economy in question.’ (ibid.: 169) They also note that knowledge regimes change over time, being affected by technological changes as well as changes in the underlying policy-making regime (e.g. a new administration) or production regime (e.g. a prolonged recession). (ibid.: 188, 189).

To analytically guide their topographical endeavour, Campbell and Pedersen (2011: 171, 172) first distinguish four main types of knowledge-producing organizations in most knowledge regimes, viz.

1) **academic style scholarly research units**, staffed with scholars, professional researchers, and analysts, often with joint university appointments;
2) *advocacy research units*, which tend to be privately funded and are politically and ideologically partisan;

3) *party research units*, which are closely associated with political parties and provide a source of expert advice and analysis for party members; and finally

4) *state research units*, either directly affiliated with specific government departments and ministries or created on an ad hoc basis to advise government on a specific matter.

They then delineate four ideal types of political economies that are differently configured in institutional terms, i.e. with respect to norms and procedures shaping the character of market intervention by the state and with respect to the basic character of state’s structure. (Real world representative examples suggested by Campbell and Pedersen in parentheses.):

1) Liberal market economy with a decentralized, open state (US).
2) Liberal market economy with a centralized, closed state (UK, also Australia).
3) Coordinated market economy with a decentralized, open state (Germany, also Netherlands).
4) Coordinated market economy with a centralized, closed state (France, also Japan). (Campbell/Pedersen 2011: 172-186). ⁸

What makes the theoretically guided approach taken by Campbell and Pedersen particularly attractive for future empirical comparative analyses of the configuration of think tanks focusing on international affairs (or other public policy domains) in established democracies with market economies, is that they offer some testable propositions. In concrete terms, Campbell and Pedersen (2011: 186-187) hypothesize that – and I more or less, quote them directly:

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⁸ While Campbell and Pedersen acknowledge that hybrid manifestations of political economies exist in the ‘real world’, they remain silent on state-guided market economies in (semi-)autocracies, such as China and Russia, where, of course, also many think tanks operate.
In liberal market economies with decentralized, open states, the concomitant ‘market-oriented knowledge regime’ will be characterized by many privately funded scholarly and advocacy research units, some state research units, and no party research units to speak of.

Knowledge regimes in liberal market economies with centralized, closed states will have fewer scholarly and advocacy research units. These will be supported by a mixture of public and private funds. The importance of competitive marketplace of ideas will be tempered by the significant role that state research units play, particularly within the well-established civil service. (Campbell and Pedersen term this a ‘politically tempered knowledge regime’.)

Coordinated market economies with decentralized, open states will have a moderate-sized set of research units in civil society, dominated primarily by scholarly research units rather advocacy research units. These organizations will be heavily dependent on public funding. There will also be an important array of party research units and a reasonable number of state research units. (‘consensus-oriented knowledge regime’)

Coordinated market economies with centralized, closed states will have few advocacy or party research units. There will be more publicly funded scholarly research units and state research units of various sorts. (‘statist technocratic knowledge regime’)

The political economy-oriented approach to explaining the variety of knowledge regimes provides a useful theoretical starting point for examining the configurations of international affairs think tank in different national settings. A number of questions will however need to be addressed to ascertain the analytical power of this framework. The first question concerns the particular (policy) domain or area that we are interested in, i.e. international affairs. Is there something special about this domain that makes it different from other policy domains that think tanks are engaged in, e.g. economic, social or environmental policy affairs? At first view, the degree of insulation of international affairs (unlike, say, defence affairs) seems not higher than in other policy domains, suggesting that international affairs constitutes no obvious exception to the rule. This needs, of course, to be ascertained.
A second question is to which ideal types the countries we are interested in conform to (most). As mentioned, Campbell and Pedersen see Japan belonging to the group of coordinated market economies with centralised, closed states (CMECCS) and Australia belonging to group of liberal market economy with centralised, closed states (LMECCS). At least the latter assessment may be questioned given the federal character of Australia’s state structure. Again at first view, South Korea and Taiwan also belong to the group of CMECCS while New Zealand clearly also belongs the group of LMECCS. India presents a harder case: The Indian Union has federal state structure but whether the economic liberalisation drive of India since the late 1980s means that it should be placed among the liberal market economies needs to be discussed.

The New Zealand case beckons a third question, viz. whether country size constitutes an important parameter. Campbell and Pedersen remain silent on this issue but it is a relevant one, given the fact that, at best, only eight thinks operate in and out of New Zealand, of which only two or so focus on international affairs. Future research will help us to better assess the analytical value-added, possible scope conditions, and the unavoidable limitations of the political economy-approach in terms of explaining in comparative, cross-regional terms the diversity of (international affairs) think tank configurations.

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