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The construction of China's national interest: between top-down rule and societal ideas

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7 Think tank analysts' ideas, domestic structures, and the official construction of China's national interest

In recent years, the PRC experienced a remarkable enthusiasm for the development of think tanks, which is commonly referred to as “think tank fever” (智库热) (Li 2017; Qi 2018; Yang 2018). Strongly promoted and heavily endorsed by Xi Jinping and his government, the trend has been accompanied by heavy criticism (C. Li 2017). Wang Simin and Qu Yilin (2016), for instance, describe Chinese think tanks as “thanks without thinkers” (有库无智) (2016). Huang Yanzhong (2015) equals the trend with the Great Leap Forward, describing it as wasting a devastating amount of resources (2015). At the same time, observers point out that the relationship between think tanks and the state is complicated and deserves close scrutiny (Li 2017).

By examining the Chinese government's strategy for strengthening think tanks and its effect on them as a change in domestic structures, this chapter assesses how domestic structures facilitate and constrain think tank staffers' influence on the official construction of China's national interest. First, I provide quantitative and qualitative evidence for the conditions under which think tank analysts influence the official construction of China's national interest. Similar to the assessment of scholars' influence on the official construction of China's national interest in the previous chapter, I show that think tanks' proximity to the state and the state's openness to their input facilitate and constrain think tank analysts' influence on the official construction of China's national interest. When think tanks are close to the state and the state is open to societal input, in the language of the family road trip metaphor, when they sit in the driver's seat, their staff has the most influence on the official construction of China's national interest. When think tanks are distant from the state and the state is not open to their input, metaphorically speaking, when they are in the trunk, they have the least influence on the official construction of China's national interest. Finally, when think tanks are close to the state and when the state is not open to their input, that is when they sit in the co-driver's seat, and when think tanks are distant from the state and the state

is open to their input, when they sit in the back, think tank analysts somewhat influence the official construction of China's national interest.

7.1 Quantitative evidence for the conditions under which think tank analysts influence the official construction of China's national interest

For ideas put forward by think tank analysts to influence the official construction of China's national interest, shifts in policy substance must first appear in think tanks' contributions to foreign policy debates and then in official foreign policy statements. In addition, there must be evidence of close links between the policy shifts as they appear in official foreign policy statements and think tanks' contributions to foreign policy debates, as discussed in Chapter 4. Based on my hypotheses deduced from the theoretical argument, I expect that the highest number of policy shifts is influenced when think tanks are close to the state and when the state is open to their input and that the lowest number of policy shifts is influenced when think tanks are distant from the state and when the state is not open to their input.

In 85 instances, analysts working at Chinese think tanks influenced policy shifts related to the official construction of China's national interest. Contrary to my expectations, most policy shifts were influenced when the state was open to think tanks' input and when think tanks were distant from the state (35 percent). In line with my expectations, when the state was not open to input from think tanks and when think tanks were distant from the state, think tank analysts influenced the smallest number of policy shifts (19 percent). For think tanks close to the state, the state's openness to their input hardly affected their ability to influence the official construction of China's national interest. When the state was open to their input, think tanks close to the state influenced 22 percent of policy shifts, compared to 23 percent when it was not open to their input. Table 7.1 summarizes the quantitative evidence for the conditions under which think tank analysts influenced the official construction of China's national interest.

Table 7.1: Quantitative evidence for the conditions under which think tank analysts influence the official construction of China’s national interest

		Think tanks’ proximity to the state	
		close	distant
The state’s openness to input from think tanks	Open	<i>In the driver’s seat</i> Most influence expected 22% of policy shifts influenced	<i>In the backseat</i> Some influence expected 35% of policy shifts influenced
	Closed	<i>In the co-driver’s seat</i> Some influence expected 23% of policy shifts influenced	<i>In the trunk</i> Least influence expected 19% of policy shifts influenced

The quantitative evidence shows that for think tanks, differences between the four conditions under which they influence the official construction of China’s national interest are not very pronounced. In particular, for think tanks close to the state, there are hardly any differences based on the state’s openness to their input. Since the variation was much more pronounced for scholars (see Chapter 6), differences between think tank analysts and scholars become immediately apparent. This provides evidence for the expected differences between the two groups introduced in Chapter 1 and shows that it made sense to analyze their respective influence on the official construction of the national interest separately from each other. The next chapter will discuss comparisons between scholars and think tank analysts. The remainder of this chapter will focus on think tanks.

Examining the shifts in policy substance influenced by think tank analysts provides quantitative evidence for the conditions under which think tanks influence the official construction of China’s national interest. However, as discussed in Chapter 4 and reiterated in the previous chapter, there are clear limits to such a frequentist understanding when examining societal actors’ influence on the official construction of China’s national interest. I, therefore, bolster my claims by providing qualitative evidence for the conditions under which think tank staffers influence the official construction of China’s national interest in the next section.

7.2 Qualitative evidence for the conditions under which think tank analysts influence the official construction of China's national interest

When think tanks were close to the state, and the state was open to their input, metaphorically speaking, when they were in the driver's seat, experts at think tanks pushed the Chinese government towards a stronger role in international rule-making by explaining why this was necessary. Two years before the Chinese government described itself as playing a more proactive role in international rule-making, Zhang Yuyan from the Institute of World Economics and Politics (IWEPP) at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences argues that China is increasingly under pressure from international rules (Yuyan (张宇燕) Zhang 2013). Similarly, a year before the policy shift appeared in official statements, Lin Limin (2014) argues that the post-cold war international system advocated a Western-dominated international system and associated international rules (L. (林利民) Lin 2014). Hence, both experts show that it is in China's interest to play a stronger role in developing international rules. Relatedly, experts at think tanks also influenced calls for global governance reform. Three years before the Chinese government openly called for global governance reform, He Fan, Feng Weijiang, and Xu Jin (2013) from IWEPP describe China's goals in this area in detail (F. (何帆) He, Feng, and Xu 2013). Think tank experts indirectly influenced the Chinese government by voicing a more pronounced take on multilateralism by describing other actors' behavior. Two years before the Chinese government put forward a more pronounced take on multilateralism, Wang Yuzhu (2013) describes the U.S. stance on the issue (Yuzhu (王玉主) Wang 2013). Jin Ling (2013) argues that the EU's willingness to construct multilateral mechanisms has declined significantly (L. (金玲) Jin 2013).

Under the same conditions, when think tanks were close to the state, and the state was open to their input, experts at think tanks influenced two shifts in policy substance related to *control the region*. First, seven years before the Chinese government described itself as more involved in regional cooperation, Lang Ping (2012) provides a first overview of the issue. This could be

interpreted as an attempt to bring the issue to the table. The author explains that regional trade agreements are commonly described as regional economic integration (Lang 2012). Second, three years before the Chinese government increasingly expressed its perspective on regional integration, Wang Shida (2014) zooms in on a regional conflict detailing the security situation in Pakistan (S. (王世达) Wang 2014). Since the solution to such regional conflicts is a prerequisite for regional integration, this article explaining how the Chinese government could go about it could be seen as one step towards developing a more pronounced perspective on regional integration.

When think tanks were close to the state, and the state was not open to their input, that is, when they were in the co-driver's seat, experts at think tanks influenced the policy shift in which the community of shared destiny replaced the concept of a community of shared interests. One contribution characterizes the "community of shared interests" as something that needs to be built. A year before the Chinese government replaced the "community of shared interests" with the "community of shared future", Li Wei (2013) describes the core of a country's international strategy as building a new "community of interests". He specifies that this "community of interests" was a new international structure based on political pluralism, economic globalization, respect for different peoples, religions, and cultures, and non-threat of force (W. (李伟) Li 2013). Two other contributions see "the community of shared interest" as evolving in the background. A year before the Chinese government replaced "community of shared interests" with "community of shared destiny", a China Institute for International Studies (CIIS) report argues that in today's multipolar world with economic globalization, cultural diversification, and social informatization, many interdependent "communities of interest" have been formed (Liu 2013). Shortly before the Chinese government replaced the "community of shared interests" with the "community of shared future", Jin Canrong and Zhao Yuanliang (2014) argue that because of the increasingly close trade and investment relationship between the U.S. and China, there is already a community of interest between the two countries (C. (金灿荣) Jin and Zhao 2014).

When think tanks were distant from the state, and the state was open to their input, when they were in the back seat, experts at think tanks influenced the Chinese government's rethinking of international partnerships. Experts analyze other states' approaches to partnerships in several contributions, especially the idea of forming global partnerships. These analyses form the backdrop of China catching up in this area of international politics. Two years before the Chinese government started to redefine partnerships in international politics, Li Xushi (2015) analyzes developments in the U.S.-Japanese alliance and observes a shift from security cooperation to global partnership. He finds that they were simultaneously promoting their strategic alignment in economics, diplomacy, and non-traditional security and that their focus remained on the Asia-Pacific (Xushi (李秀石) Li 2015). Experts also describe other countries' approaches to forming partnerships. For example, Yu Jun mentions that the U.S. and India formed a "global partnership" in 2015. He describes India and Japan as having formed a "global partnership" at the beginning of the 21st century but argues that the implementation had been sluggish (2015). In a report analyzing the "asymmetric triangle" between China, India, and the U.S., Cao Dejun (2015) argues that since 2000, India-US relations have gone through three stages of development from "new partnership" to "strategic partnership" and then to "global partnership" (2015). The description of partnerships between China's competitors forms the backdrop of the Chinese government rethinking its approach to international partnerships.

When think tanks were distant from the state and the state was open to their input, when they were in the back seat, two experts prepared the Chinese government to play a stronger role in international rule-setting by showcasing what India was doing in this realm and providing the rationale for increased engagement. Two years before the Chinese government started to describe itself as playing a stronger role in setting international rules, Li Wei (2013) observes that India seeks to change international rules through cooperation with international organizations to create a framework for international mechanisms that meet its interests (2013). At the same time, Song Lilei and Cai Liang (2013) argue that Western powers still dominated the international system and that

the vast majority of its rules were based on Western values and reflected the will and interest of these countries to a considerable extent (2013).

When think tanks were close to the state, and the state was not open to their input, when they were in the trunk, experts working at think tanks influenced the policy shift that described the Chinese government as briefly advancing economic cooperation in the region. A year before this shift in policy substance appeared in Xi Jinping's speech at the CICA Summit, Feng Yujun (2014) describes factors that would undermine China's efforts in regional economic cooperation (2014). Examining potentially adverse factors is crucial in developing the government's position. Hence, there are important links between the article and the policy shift. Shortly before the Chinese government advanced economic cooperation in the region, Tang Guoqiang and Wang Zhengyu (2014) argue that TPP's exclusion of China and RCEP's exclusion of the U.S. were detrimental to regional economic cooperation in the Asia-Pacific. They further pose that, at present, Asia-Pacific regional economic cooperation focuses on dealing with the relationship between the two paths, TPP and RCEP. This required a correct understanding of the advantages and disadvantages of the two paths and their underlying mechanisms to find the direction of Asia-Pacific regional economic cooperation development (2014). Hence, the article weighs in on the debate of the policy issues and has strong links to the policy shift.

Under the same conditions, experts at think tanks still exerted some influence over the policy shift that described how the community of shared future replaced the community of shared interests. Two years before the shift in official foreign policy statements, experts observe communities of interest between China and Japan and between the U.S. and China. Wu Jinan (2012) argues that China and Japan have made great progress in exchanges in various fields. According to the author, they had already become a mature "community of interests" (2012). Zhang Chun (2012) claims that the U.S. and China had so many common interests that their relationship had moved from a "stakeholder" relationship to a "community of interests" characterized by joint decision-making (2012). However, experts also go beyond describing communities of interest and say that

the Chinese government should establish such communities. Two years before the shift in policy substance, experts begin ascribing the concept of “community of interests” to Western countries and argue that the Chinese government should put forward something more encompassing. Specifically, Zhang Chun (2012) argues that cultivating and strengthening a sense of common destiny and advocating a more ambitious “community of human destiny” that goes beyond the “community of interests” advocated by the West should be a key goal of Chinese foreign policy. He adds that it is necessary to construct a theory of international crisis response with Chinese characteristics around the frequent occurrence of systemic crises, especially to oppose the “community of interest” and “coalitions of volunteers” approach dominated by the West (2012). A year before the Chinese government replaced the “community of shared interests” with the “community of shared future”, Cai Penghong (2013) argues that the goal of China’s neighborhood policy was to build a community of interests around itself. He further claims that China advocates constructing a community of interests and does not need to adhere to existing forms of regional cooperation (2013). Shortly before the Chinese government replaced the “community of shared interests” with the “community of shared future”, Cheng Guoping (2014) describes the Chinese government’s approach in the region as creating a “community of destiny” and a “community of interest” (2014).

Similarly, when think tanks were distant from the state, and the state was not open to their input, when they were in the trunk, experts working at think tanks still influenced two policy shifts related to *control the region*, albeit in minor ways. In 2014, Wang Falong applies the Chinese government’s security concept to the conflict between India and Pakistan and argues how it could help solve it (2014). Ye Zicheng and Du Peng (2012) mention regional economic cooperation related to the policy shift that describes the Chinese government as advancing regional economic cooperation (2012). However, regional economic cooperation is just listed as one policy field among many, and there are no direct links to the policy shift in question.

Under all four theorized conditions, Chinese experts at think tanks influenced policy shifts related to the Chinese government's ambitions for global governance. When experts were close to the state and when the state was open to their input, experts influenced the Chinese government's more proactive role in international rule-making and its calls for governance reform. Experts exerted considerable influence on these issue areas closely related to the Chinese government's high ambitions for global governance. Regardless of whether think tanks were close to or distant from the state, think tank experts influenced the policy shift that described the Chinese government as replacing the "community of shared interests" with the "community of shared destiny" even when the state was less open to input from think tanks.

7.3 Changes in domestic structures and their effects on think tanks

This section describes changes in domestic structures and what these changes meant for Chinese think tanks. After 2015, the Chinese state signaled that it was more open to input from think tanks. In a policy document issued in January 2015, the Chinese government put forward that the role of think tanks in decision-making, including regarding international issues, should be strengthened. This policy change was accompanied by increased funding provided by the state and supported by broader changes in the political environment, all supposed to enhance the importance of think tanks in policy-making.

Through the "The Opinions on Strengthening the Construction of New-Type Think Tanks with Chinese Characteristics" (关于加强中国特色新型智库建设的意见 (hereafter, the Opinions)) jointly issued by the General Offices of the CCP Central Committee and the State Council on January 20, 2015, the Chinese state signaled to think tankers that it was more open to their suggestions. In this document, the Chinese government outlined how it intended to enhance think tankers' roles in decision-making on domestic and international issues. It described three roles for think tanks: First, support the party's and government's decision-making; second,

contribute to the modernization of the national governance system and governance capacity; third, act as carriers of Chinese soft power by establishing a positive image of socialist China, promote Chinese culture and values and making China's voice heard on the international stage (General Office of the CCP Central Committee and State Council Information Office (SCIO) 2015).

In the literature, the document is widely claimed to have accelerated the development of Chinese think tanks. Qi Dongtao (2018), for instance, interprets the document as a reflection of Xi's enthusiasm for developing think tanks (2018, 33), which brought about a "golden age for think tank development in China" (2018, 42). Similarly, Jiang Jiaying and Yan Yilong (2019) describe a "golden era in which a wide variety of Chinese think tanks will voice a diverse set of opinions, all to strengthen the country's two brains: the internal brain, in their understanding, the party's leadership, and the external brain, there the new type of think tanks (2019, 40).

The Opinions contain several instructions for how policy-makers should enhance think tanks' involvement in decision-making. Implementing these instructions will change the rules, norms, and procedures that determine interactions between experts and the state. According to the 2015 document, government institutions should regularly release information on their decision-making needs and guide think tanks to conduct policy research, decision-making assessment, and policy interpretation. Besides, government institutions like the Central Foreign Affairs Office are encouraged to strengthen communication with think tanks and take their research results seriously. The document also discusses "improving the system of collecting opinions on major decisions". Critical elements discussed are holding hearings and seminars, listening widely to think tanks' views and suggestions, exploring decision-making departments to respond to think tank advice, and promoting positive interactions between government decision-making and think tank recommendations (General Office of the CCP Central Committee and State Council Information Office (SCIO) 2015).

These effects are particularly pronounced for the think tanks that were selected as "national high-end pilot think tanks" (国家高端智库), a crucial step in the implementation of the

Opinions.²⁸ In the first round in November 2015, 25 institutions were selected. In the second round, in March 2020, five more were added.²⁹ Most relevant for this project, Hayward (2018) observes that “their uncensored reports will be transmitted directly to the top leadership, receiving special priority within the relevant bureaus” (2018, 34). She further argues that “this is designed to diversify and accelerate the channels of expertise into central policy-making” (2018, 34).

The second area from which one could infer changes in the state’s openness towards think tanks is changes in the amount of funding it provides for these organizations. This is particularly important because many Chinese think tanks receive most of their budget directly from the Chinese state. However, Chinese think tanks’ financial operations are highly opaque. Only about a third of all think tanks disclose such information (Xiong, Xiaoxiao (熊晓晓), Shi, Yunyan (施云燕), and Ren, Fujun (任福君) 2021). Hence, it is impossible to examine changes in the amount of funding the state provides to think tanks over time. However, Hayward (2018) mentions that think tanks’ funds have increased recently (2018). In addition, the selection of high-end think tanks came with the announcement of an extra fund for these institutions. Hence, the state’s funding to think tanks can be expected to have increased.

The third area from which one can infer changes in the state’s openness towards input from think tanks is changes in the broader policy environment. In the communiqué of the Third Plenum of the 18th Central Committee in November 2013, the word “think tank” (智库) appeared for the first time in a CCP central-level document (Anh 2022, 287). At the sixth meeting of the powerful Central Leading Small Group on Comprehensively Deepening Reform in 2014, Xi Jinping identified constructing a new type of think tanks as an important and urgent task (Anh 2022). Most authoritatively, the report to the 19th Party Congress in 2017 reiterated strengthening the construction of a new type of think tank with Chinese characteristics, further highlighting how much importance the Chinese leadership attributes to it. Another indicator of changes in the policy

²⁸ <http://news.163.com/15/1203/21/B9UKB40J00014SEH.html> [last accessed 07.09.2022, 13:13]

²⁹ For details, see (Anh 2022).

environment is the renewed emphasis on meetings between Xi and experts in the party-state media. In June 2020, a meeting was held with leading medical experts on fighting Covid-19. In addition, he held a seminar for preparing the 14th Five-Year Plan only two months later. Both these meetings were reported extensively in the Chinese party-state media, signaling to other Chinese think tankers that the leadership valued their input (Anh 2022).

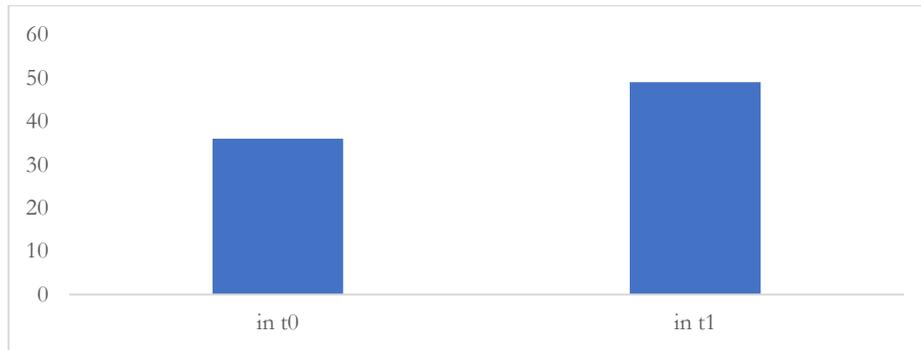
To sum up, the policy document on think tanks' role in policy-making issued in early 2015 and its subsequent implementation demonstrated the Chinese state's increased openness towards input from think tanks by publicly recognizing their importance, giving them more access to the decision-making process, and by attempting to streamline the channels through which expertise gets fed into policy-making.

7.4 The impact of changes in domestic structures on think tank analysts' ability to influence the official construction of China's national interest

In the following section, I assess how these changes in domestic structures impacted think tanks' ability to influence the official construction of China's national interest. For this, I first compare the number of policy shifts they influenced before and after the changes in domestic structures described in the previous section. Then I examine in-detail effects on the conditions under which scholars influence the official construction of China's national interest.

I identified 85 instances in which a think tank analyst influenced a policy shift in the official construction of China's national interest. There were differences in the number of policy shifts influenced by think tanks, depending on whether the think tanker published the contribution before or after the change in domestic structures. 42 percent appeared of influenced policy shifts appeared before the change in domestic structures, compared to 58 percent that appeared after the change in domestic structures. Both time frames stretch across four years; t0 covers 2010 – 2014, and t1 covers 2015 – 2019. Hence, when the state was more open to input from think tanks, think tank analysts influenced more shifts in policy substance.

Figure 7.1: Number of policy shifts influenced by think tank analysts before and after the change in domestic structures



For think tanks, the change in domestic structures meant that the state became more open to their input. This change in domestic structures affected their abilities to influence the official construction of China's national interest differently depending on their proximity to the state, as Table 7.1 illustrates. For think tanks close to the state, the change in domestic structures did not affect their abilities to influence the official construction of China's national interest. Metaphorically speaking, one could say, their move from the co-driver's seat to the driver's seat did not affect their influence on the road trip. In contrast, the abilities of think tanks distant from the state to influence the official construction of China's national interest increased significantly when the state was more open to their input. The metaphor illustrates that think tanks distant from the state move from the trunk to the back seat, hence gaining more influence on the official construction of China's national interest.

7.5 Conclusions

In this chapter, I demonstrated that the state became more open to think tank input over time. This change in domestic structures facilitated think tanks' influence on the official construction of China's national interest when think tanks were distant from the state. The empirical analysis also revealed that when think tanks were close to the state, the state's openness did not affect their influence on the official construction of China's national interest. In addition, I provided detailed

evidence of think tanks influencing shifts in policy substance regarding China's ambitions for leadership in global governance and its role in the region across all four conditions under which societal actors can influence the construction of China's national interest.

In the next chapter, I present the dissertation's conclusions. After summarizing findings about the direct impact of societal actors on foreign policy in authoritarian states, I emphasize the importance of considering how domestic structures condition social actors' influence on the official construction of the national interest. Then, I detail the differences between scholars and think tanks to substantiate these claims. Before addressing the limitations of the analysis, I discuss its implications for understanding China under Xi Jinping and the foreign policy of other authoritarian states. Lastly, I outline how future inquiries about China and other authoritarian states could build upon the analysis and findings of this dissertation.