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Convergence and Divergence in Policy Topics Among Think Tanks in China

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4 | Convergence and Divergence in Policy Topics among Think Tanks in China

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Disaggregating the influence of actors on policy advocacy in authoritarian regimes can be a tea-reading exercise. As discussed throughout the chapters of this book, understanding the policy-making process and the relationship among state, quasi-state and nonstate actors in authoritarian environments is not straightforward. Government and party deliberations are not made public, intricacies of feuding elites are abstruse, and it can be difficult to identify the inputs that cause policy output variances. This contrasts to liberal democratic contexts, where policy inputs are extensively recorded through interest group policy submissions, legislative debates, public opinion surveys, and state communiques.

The People's Republic of China is an exemplar case of this challenge. Information that scholars typically rely upon in making analytical assessments on foreign policy-making processes are subject to state constraints. New analytical techniques have circumvented some of these barriers (e.g., King, Pan, and Roberts 2017), but applications of these methods to Chinese foreign policy making remain in their infancy. This chapter bridges this gap by looking at a large corpus of publicly available data that was collected on foreign-policy-oriented think tanks during the early period of Xi Jinping's administration (2013–present).

Over the past two decades, think tanks have rapidly populated the policy entrepreneurial space: today China has the second largest number of think tanks globally, trailing only the United States (McGann 2015, 32). Originally serving as ideological legitimizers under Mao Zedong, China's think tanks today serve as pragmatic sources of policy research and technical expertise (see Shambaugh 2002). While research on China's think tanks was traditionally inhibited by a lack of access to empirical data, con-

temporary Chinese think tanks increasingly place their analyses, opinion pieces, and media interviews into the public domain to increase their profiles and reputations (Abb 2015). For the study of policy making in authoritarian settings, this provides a valuable opportunity to better understand the interest community that produces foreign policy thought in China and to shed new light on some potential domestic determinants of those policies. Akin to other chapters in this section, this further sheds light on the density and diversity of advocacy group systems under autocracy and how groups compete and cooperate in this ecology.

Methodologically, I collected and analyzed publicly available policy statements from foreign-affairs-oriented think tanks from 2014 through 2016. These think tanks represent different geographical locations and organizational types such as government (GOV), government-operated (GOTT), and university-affiliated (UATT) think tanks. I descriptively analyze (dis)similarities in the policy texts of these think tanks and leverage advanced analytical techniques from natural language processing, namely structural topic modeling, to explore temporal changes in policy topics and prevalence under the Xi Jinping administration (2013–present).

The study's findings suggests that there appears to be a trend toward convergence in policy content in the early years of the Xi Jinping administration; organizational type and the policy topic in question moderate this convergence. University-affiliated think tanks appear to position themselves more proximately to government think tanks. Further, the policy topics of sovereignty, regional politics, and the Chinese economy account for nearly half the content of the corpus; and think tanks are most responsive to events that concern sovereignty disputes, domestic governance, and social issues. In short, the findings represent novel evidence of divergence on less-critical foreign policy topics, and relative conformity on the foreign policy tenets that are considered crucial to China. Together, these findings add to the conversations throughout this book discussing tacit and overtly permissible policy topics under authoritarianism (see, e.g., chapters 3 and 5). Moreover, they help to descriptively map variance in foreign policy thought onto the institutional ecology in China. This is of acute interest to domestic and international actors who wish to engage with Chinese institutions that influence foreign policy making.

The chapter proceeds as follows. First, I define the concept of a think tank in the context of China and outline the categorization of think tanks as government, government-operated, and university-affiliated institutes. Then I outline arguments in the extant literature that might lead to expec-

tations of convergence or divergence in the content of think tanks' foreign policy thought. Third, I note the ways in which think tanks influence elite foreign policy thought in China. Although directly tracing the influence of think tanks on elites is outside the scope of this chapter, an empirical exploration of convergence and divergence in think tank thought provides a valuable descriptive contribution to the Chinese foreign policy literature. Fourth, I describe the policy texts collected from think tanks' websites, and present and discuss the results of the text analyses. Beyond the analysis of the early years of the Xi Jinping administration, the conclusion looks forward to the ways in which this landscape might evolve by way of Xi's proposed "new-type think tanks" within China's broader "new era."

Framework

China's unique institutional environment necessitates a refined contextual specificity with which to understand the concept of a "think tank." Zhu (2011, 669–70) describes think tanks in China as "organizations that research and consult on policy issues to influence the policy process . . . depending on internal and external factors." While the majority of this description accords with the definitions and basic roles of think tanks in Western contexts (see Rich 2005), the "internal and external factors" reference suggests a variance in the manner in which Chinese think tanks operate. Namely, Chinese think tanks do not necessarily act as an advocacy group in an overt fashion, nor do they operate as independent entities free from government oversight as in most Western contexts. Rather, they are embedded within a corporatist structure (see Hsu and Hasmath 2013). Moreover, think tanks share important similarities with other types of advocacy groups discussed in chapter 1 of this book. They can also differ on the dimension of "private status," insofar most of the think tanks discussed in this chapter have a close relationship with the government to some extent.

Originally inspired by the Soviet model, foreign-affairs-oriented research institutes in China were traditionally situated within a formal bureaucratic system, in which tasks flowed down the system and research "went up" in response (Glaser and Saunders 2002). As China's presence in international politics expanded, however, think tanks evolved into pragmatic sources for intelligence, policy consultation, and technical expertise (Abb 2015; Shambaugh 2002). Akin to their Western counterparts, Chi-

nese think tanks place emphasis on research and disseminate their views on public policy issues or, as Wiarda (2010, 30) puts it, "they seek not just to do abstract or 'pure' research on specific issues, but to influence the policy debate toward the think tanks' point of view and to put forth solutions to public policy problems." Their primary target audience is generally political elites in individual ministries and party-affiliated organizations, rather than ordinary citizens or civil society actors. Although Abb (2015, 531) points out that think tanks have increasingly bolstered their public profiles through media appearances and interactions, their dependence on the patronage and attention of political elites for influence places constraints on their research and analyses (Morrison 2012).

For analytical purposes, I disaggregate Chinese think tanks into three categories: government, government-operated, and university-affiliated. Government think tanks refer to those institutions within the Party Central Committee or the State Council, such as the Development Research Center of the State Council and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS). From a hierarchical standpoint, these government think tanks are at or above the ministerial level. The second category is government-operated think tanks (GOTTs) that are not, strictly speaking, part of the government organ, but operate within the government's bureaucratic structure and under the supervision of the government organs with which they are affiliated. The lack of independence from the government makes this category of think tanks similar to government-organized nongovernmental organizations (GONGOs), notably in terms of financial reliance and personnel administration (see Hasmath, Hildebrandt, and Hsu 2019; Hsu, Hildebrandt, and Hasmath 2016). Foreign-affairs-oriented GOTTs are under the ministries, ministerial-level commissions, and local governments, such as the China Institute of International Studies (CIIS), affiliated with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA); the China Institute of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR), affiliated with the Ministry of State Security (MSS); and the Shanghai Institute of International Relations (SIIR), under the Shanghai municipal government. The third and final category of think tanks are those attached to universities, such as the School of International Studies, Peking University or the Center for American Studies, Fudan University. These institutes' orientation in educating students and conducting academic research perhaps gives them greater intellectual autonomy. Whether or not these differences equate to similar or varying foreign policy topics of interest is of analytical curiosity.

The Role of the Domestic Context in Foreign Policy Making

Think tanks in China are situated within a domestic foreign policy context that has become more complex in the post-market-reform era. There have been fundamental changes in the structure of Chinese society, including the pluralization and diversification of social interests and increased social differentiation and stratification (Hasmath and Hsu 2009). As Lampton (2001, 27) aptly puts it, "the increasing number of individuals and organizations getting involved in making major decisions, the circle of those involved in consultation and subsequent policy implementation, and the space in which society and local systems can operate have all expanded."

Meanwhile, China's interactions with the world are no longer limited to the state level. Epistemic communities, which diffuse transnational groupings of like-minded individuals, are an example of one of the many nonstate channels for such an interaction (see Hasmath and Hsu 2014, 2020; Hsu and Hasmath 2017). Similarly, Fewsmith and Rosen (2001) assert that public opinion is able to establish a delimited space within which the Chinese leadership must operate. In response, the Chinese leadership has a tendency to rapidly absorb information to fashion decisions through various channels, including advocacy groups and think tanks. By coopting societal forces, the bureaucracy has become more specialized, and much of its added capacity has come in areas that permit China to better fit into the international organizations in which it now participates (Hasmath et al. 2019; Lampton 2001).

While China may not have a full-blown corporatist system, and there is healthy debate in the literature reinforcing this fact (see for example Gilley 2011), there are arguably corporatist elements at the national and subnational government levels that make such a framework uniquely suited for the chapter's analysis (see Hasmath 2020; Hsu and Hasmath 2013, 2014). Indeed, corporatism can help to explain the three types of think tanks' relative positions within China's institutional structure and why these organizations adopt certain modes of practice. The power of a small political elite still predominates, and the decision-making process, overall, lacks plurality. In other words, by no means is the state retreating from its control and influence over entities focused on dominant policy issues.

Consider Odom's (1992) criteria for evaluating the influence of organizations such as a think tank in the Western democratic context: (1) it must capture the core elements of the political system, (2) it must be comparative in nature, and (3) it must account for change. Similar to their counter-

parts in Western democracies, Chinese foreign affairs think tanks attempt to influence policy outcomes, but unlike their Western counterparts (see Grossman 2012; Grömping and Halpin 2021), this is achieved by providing consultation (and generally behind closed doors) rather than overtly shaping policy debates or lobbying decision-making bodies. Nor do foreign affairs think tanks challenge the predominant power of elite Party members; to openly and willing challenge the elites within the CCP is contra to the hidden rules for success in China's political environment and is paramount to organizational suicide in the domestic context. Suffice it to say that foreign affairs think tanks in China, operating within a corporatist bureaucratic institutional environment, are not overtly ambitious in their public claims for overt policy change.

To further this notion of corporatism as a significant process in the activities of Chinese foreign affairs think tanks—notably as a process in which the state controls their activities—it is useful to observe corporatism through a tacit sanctioning lens. As the Chinese state gradually loosened its grip on various sectors of society, there was a transformation from overt sanctioning to tacit sanctioning in state-society relations (Hsu and Hasmath 2014). Varying from the previous strategy of primarily relying on tools of coercion and propaganda to manage the economy and society during the prereform era, today the Chinese state has a tendency to "tacitly" provide space for new and hybrid forms of organizations such as GOTTs or UATTs to develop. Three main features are important in the understanding of the corporatist institutional framework under tacit sanctioning: "first, the state creates and maintains the relationship; second, select organizations and groups are granted the privilege to mediate interests on behalf of their constituents to the state; third, these organizations and groups must adhere to the [stated and hidden] rules and regulations established by the state" (Hsu and Hasmath 2014, 522).

Effectively, a think tank such as a GOTT or UATT are tacitly sanctioned to operate by the state on behalf of scholarly communities specialized in certain areas. Moreover, think tanks operate in a relatively singular institutional environment, whereby competing ideas do not lead to real contestation or much variation in institutional designs. To wit, GOTTs are similar to GONGOs in the sense that they are created, sponsored, and supervised by bureaucratic organizations. In fact, the organizational classification of GONGOs and GOTTs are similar since they are both considered public service units (*shi ye dan wei*). The 1988 Interim Regulations on the Management of Public Sector Units defines this entity as "organizations with the provision of social services in nature, established by the

governmental agencies or other organizations with state-owned assets, working for the public good in activities such as education, science and technology, culture and health" (OECD 2005, 9). Unlike most domains that GONGOs dominate, from poverty alleviation to the improvement of women's rights, foreign policy is confidential and is seen as part of the core national interest that can potentially threaten the CCP's regime stability. This echoes findings in earlier chapters that discuss permissible and deviant policy topics (see e.g., chapter 3). While those GONGOs primarily focusing on economic or social issues might be reorganized or licensed by the state, and enjoy certain levels of independence and autonomy, foreign-affairs-oriented GOTTs are generally created by the state and operate within the state structure.

Nevertheless, think tanks may have a liberating potential through their consultative channels, which would lead to theoretical expectations of policy topics divergence.

The emergence and growth of foreign affairs think tanks can be attributed to the collectivized decision making characterized by China's top elite leadership. Concurrently, the need for better intelligence about international affairs has resulted in foreign-affairs-oriented think tanks becoming more relevant and necessary than ever before. Today, think tanks are given better access to confidential documents and more leeway to report their research results directly through special channels to the top political elites (Hayward 2018; Xue, Zhu, and Han 2018). Newly opened consultative channels at lower levels have enriched the diversity of opinions reaching the top level. Some individuals and organizations may not formally become involved in foreign-policy-making process, but they are given broader, tacitly sanctioned space to act. Particularly, with the trend toward professionalization, the Chinese elite and subelite foreign policy makers tend to have a higher level of specialized knowledge. This leads to the expectation that there may be more variance in policy topics, especially among those that are not deemed to be core interests of the CCP.

Methodology

The above discussion suggests that the literature contains differing expectations about the extent to which China's foreign affairs think tanks exhibit variance in policy topics. I turn to natural language processing methods to gain empirical leverage on this question, analyzing (dis)similarities in the textual content produced by think tanks in China, the policy topics that

these think tanks discuss, and the ways in which text similarities and prevalence of these topics shift over time. Together, these analyses shed light on the convergence (or divergence) in policy topics and prevalence among China's foreign policy think tanks in the early years of the Xi Jinping administration. This is important for our understanding of the diversity of interest communities under authoritarianism.

I collected every policy-related text available on the websites of ten think tanks that conducted research relevant to the foreign affairs of China from 2014 through 2016. These think tanks were chosen based on their prominence and to include a mix of the three think tank types outlined above. The policy texts, originally in Mandarin Chinese and thereafter translated into English, are often short opinion pieces released by think tank scholars that provide commentary on current events and political developments. Some pieces are slightly longer reports or policy briefs. The corpus contains 1,872 documents with 1,944,030 total terms and 32,830 unique terms. Standard text preprocessing criteria were applied to the corpus, including stemming, tokenization, and the removal of punctuation, numbers, and stopwords. Table 4.1 presents the institutes in the sample, along with their abbreviations, mean tokens per document, mean types per document, and government (GOV), government-operated (GOTT), or university-affiliated (UATT) labels.[1]

The analysis hereafter proceeds in three steps. First, I calculate the cosine similarities between the texts for the different think tanks in the corpus in order to illustrate that useful variation exists in the corpus's textual content.[2] Second, I explore the topics that exist in the corpus to better understand the policy issues that are discussed, how those topics correlate, and how topic prevalence varies by think tank type.[3] Finally, I consider temporal variation, namely the extent to which topic prevalence varies over time, and whether think tanks display increased convergence in their textual content under the Xi Jinping administration.[4]

Results and Discussion

Figure 4.1 displays the cosine similarities between the different think tanks, calculated using all texts for that think tank in the corpus. The results suggest that SIIS, CIIS, CICIR, and CHI tend to display higher aggregate levels of text similarity. This result is noteworthy because all these institutes are GOTTs. Furthermore, useful variance exists. For example, the DRC and IWEP are both government-affiliated think tanks

TABLE 4.1. Corpus Summary Statistics

Name	Org. Code	Think Tank Type	Tokens (Mean)	Types (Mean)
Institute of American Studies, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences	IAS	GOV	4169	916
Institute of World Economics and Politics, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences	IWEP	GOV	877	298
Development Research Center of the State Council[1]	DRC	GOV	785	289
China Center for Contemporary World Studies	CCCWS	GOTT	2315	713
Charhar Institute[2]	CHI	GOTT	786	348
China Institutes for Contemporary International Relations	CICIR	GOTT	1549	533
China Institute of International Studies	CIIS	GOTT	2716	797
Shanghai Institutes for International Studies	SIIS	GOTT	1073	442
Center for American Studies, Fudan University	FD.CAS	UATT	1294	435
School of International Studies, Peking University	BD.SIS	UATT	1973	538

Notes:

GOV = Government Think Tanks; GOTT = Government-Operated Think Tanks; UATT = University-Affiliated Think Tanks. In the sample, think tanks outside of Beijing are in Shanghai, except for the Charhar Institute, which is in Hebei Province.

[1] The DRC is one of main the planning and evaluation organization for economic and social policy in China. While many of its activities are domestically oriented, it does produce foreign policy research looking at foreign economic relations and international social and economic development (cognizant DRC sections include: Euro-Asian Social Development Research Institute, Institute of World Development, and Asia-Africa Development Research Institute).

[2] Sometimes referred to as Chahar Society.

that research economic issues, but their texts display quite low levels of similarity.[5] Together, these results suggest that the think tanks show interesting variation in the content of their policy texts.

Next, I move beyond these broad similarities and delve into the policy topic content in the corpus. Table 4.2 presents the resultant topics from the STM, discriminating terms based on frequency (Freq.) and frequency and exclusivity (FREX), and the proportion of the corpus devoted to each topic. Labels are qualitatively assigned based on the terms and a reading of the terms in context. The model recovers a relatively coherent range of topics that one would expect to find in a corpus on Chinese foreign policy. I discuss the topics sequentially.

Figure 4.1. Cosine Similarity Measures Between Think Tanks *Note:* Cosine similarity scores calculated from the aggregate document-frequency matrix for each think tank. Higher scores (and darker shading) indicate that the think tank pair produces more similar texts. Table 4.1 lists the think tank labels.
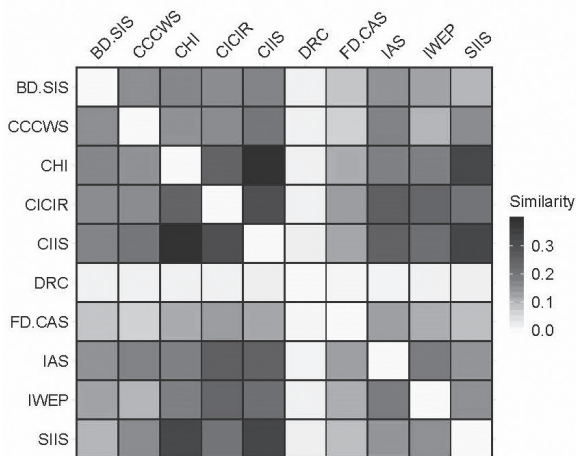
Topic 1 discusses European politics. Tensions in the region ("ukrain-") surface, as well as attention to the United Kingdom, which is likely a function of the June 2016 European Union referendum vote.

Topic 2 includes terms associated with international development ("trade," "invest-"), as well as regional initiatives, particularly the "One Belt, One Road" project. China's recent attention to Africa also appears under this topic.

Topic 3 engages regional politics, evident by terms such as "cooper-," "region," and "asia." Terms like "neighbor," "common," and "mutual" appear in this topic and are often present in Chinese diplomatic discourse. This topic received the most attention among the think tank community, making up 20 percent of the corpus.

Topic 4 looks at domestic governance. Terms that relate to civil society and social concerns such as "social," "peopl-," "work," "public," and "rural" are prevalent. Ji Dengkui, a political figure during the Cultural Revolution, also surface in this topic. Environmental concerns ("carbon," "emiss-") appear here as well. Indeed, a qualitative reading of the documents uncovered a surprising amount of domestic attention in the foreign policy texts.

Topic 5 is noteworthy since content relating to sovereignty and territorial disputes appears to constitute a distinct topic. Terms like "reef" and "island," as well as Vietnam—which continues to challenge China's territorial claims in the South China Sea—suggest that sovereignty and maritime disputes are issues on par with or exceeding the proportion of the corpus dedicated to an issue like European politics.

Topic 6 engages US politics and relations, with terms such as "american," "presid-," and "trump." Discussions of US relations also appear to link with issues regarding Taiwan ("strait").

Topic 7 relates to issues regarding the macroeconomy and economic relations. China's foreign policy appears to be discussed with domestic economic concerns in mind.

Finally, topic 8 covers issues related to regional and international security. In the case of the former, terms such as "korea," "japan," and "dprk" appear. In the case of the latter, terms such as "iran," "saudi," and "syria" are common.

Together, these topics illustrate a picture of a regional power rising on the global stage: domestic interests surrounding the economy, governance, and sovereignty issues receive the most attention, which undergird foreign policy concerns at the level of regional politics and security. Beyond the region, however, the policy texts also devote ample space to international issues, like China's turn to Africa, the "One Belt, One Road" initiative, and issues in Europe, the United States, and the Middle East.

With these topics in hand, I next assess correlations between topics, that is, the extent to which two topics tend to both occur in the same policy text. Figure 4.2 presents the pairwise correlations of topic occurrence. The largest correlations occur between the regional politics and sovereignty topics, regional politics and macroeconomy topics, and macroeconomy and sovereignty topics. In table 4.2, I found that these three topics together account for nearly half of the content in the corpus. The negative correlations here indicate that the policy texts approach these issues with especially focused attention. With these topics in hand, I next assess correlations between topics, that is, the extent to which two topics tend to both occur in the same policy text. Figure 4.2 presents the pairwise correlations of topic occurrence. The largest correlations occur between the regional politics and sovereignty topics, regional politics and macroeconomy topics, and macroeconomy and sovereignty topics. In table 4.2, I found that these three topics together account for nearly half of the content in the corpus. The negative correlations here indicate that the policy texts approach these issues with especially focused attention.

Figure 4.2 furthermore suggests that the policy documents exhibit interesting textual variation and that the STM recovers reasonable topical groupings at the aggregate level. Although these analyses establish the validity of the corpus, they say less about finer-grained variation in the prevalence of these topics according to different institutional types. Here I estimate differences in topical prevalence according to the three types of

TABLE 4.2. Identified Topics with Suggested Labels

Topic	Label	Discriminating Terms	Proportion
1	European Politics	Freq: state, countri, unit, polit, world, europ, european	.09
		FREX: german, british, britain, ukrain, germani, cameron, European	
2	Regional/International Development	Freq: trade, countri, econom, cooper, invest, develop, road	.13
		FREX: african, belt, india, silk, indian, road, africa	
3	Regional Politics	Freq: countri, develop, cooper, intern, secur, region, asia	.20
		FREX: diplomaci, mutual, summit, common, neighbor, concept, Asian	
4	Governance/Social Issues	Freq: govern, develop, system, peopl, social, work, public	.13
		FREX: rural, dengkui, internet, farmer, carbon, emiss, Tanzania	
5	Sovereignty/Territorial Disputes	Freq: state, unit, south, relat, sino, issu, countri	.12
		FREX: philippin, arbitr, reef, vietnam, island, tribun, sino	
6	US Politics/ Relations	Freq: polit, elect, parti, american, polici, presid, trump	.07
		FREX: trump, elect, strait, republican, cuba, voter, cyber	
7	Macroeconomy/ Economic Relations	Freq: economi, econom, growth, market, rate, global, finance	.17
		FREX: rate, monetari, growth, hike, debt, currenc, price	
8	Regional/International Security	Freq: nuclear, japan, militari, secur, korea, east, state	.09
		FREX: iran, saudi, dprk, arabia, nuclear, yemen, syria	

Note: "Freq." indicates words that are most frequent within a topic. "FREX" indicates words that are frequent and exclusive to the topic.
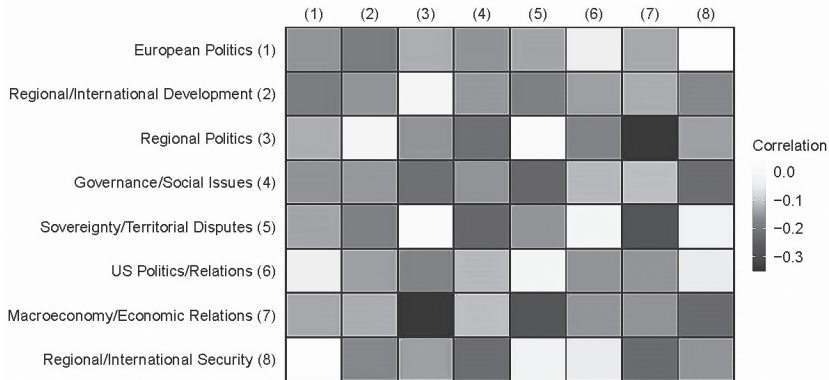
Figure 4.2. Pearson Correlations between Topics.
Note: Pearson correlations between topics. A more negative correlation (and darker shading) indicates a lack of topic co-occurence in the same document.
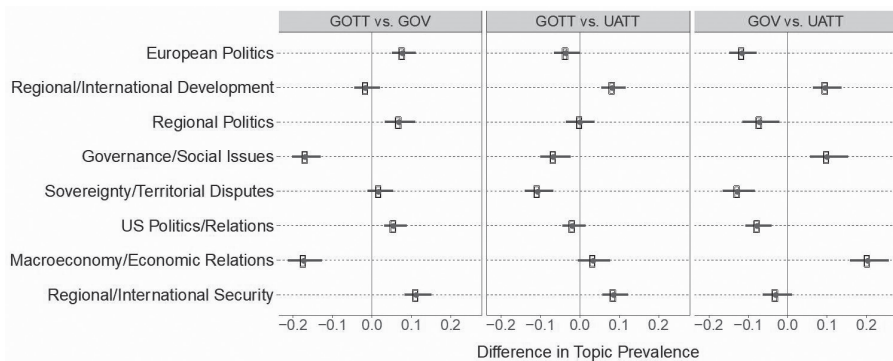

Figure 4.3. Differences in Topic Proportion by Think Tank Type
Note: Estimates further to the right indicate that the think tank type discusses a given topic with greater frequency.

think tanks outlined above: GOVs, GOTTs, and UATTs. Figure 4.3 presents the results, with coefficients further to the right indicating that the first type expends more attention to the topic than the type listed second.

The comparison of policy topics among Chinese foreign policy think tanks allows for inferences about patterns of competition and cooperation among this interest community; it also provides a useful static snapshot of foreign policy thought in the early years of the Xi Jinping administration. Specifically, it suggests that think tanks engage in niche seeking if and when the policy space is crowded by competitors, a behavior one can
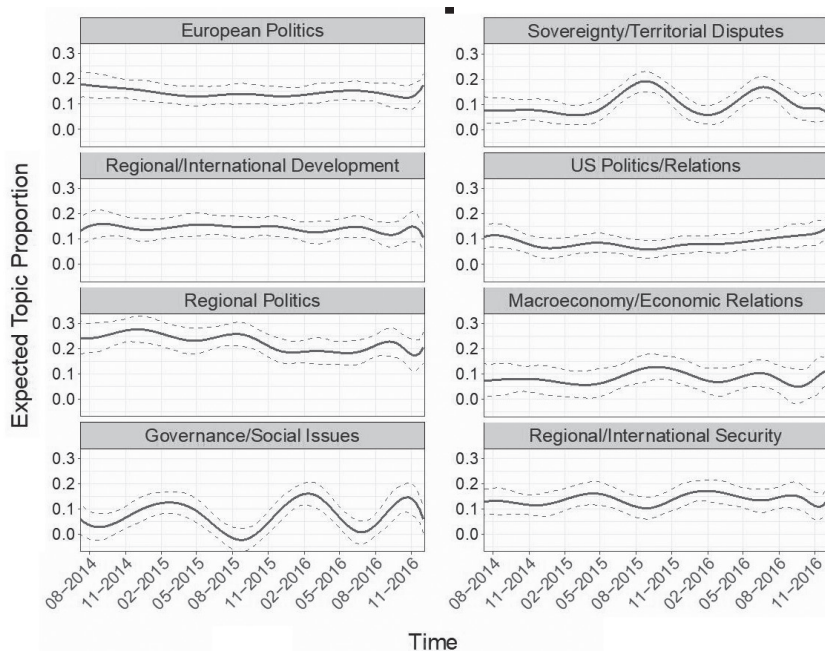
Figure 4.4. Changes in Topic Proportions over Time
Note: Changes in expected topic proportions over time. Higher values indicate that a greater proportion of the corpus is devoted to a given topic.

observe in democratic contexts. This happens, however, only in more "permissible" policy areas, whereas the more sensitive policy topics see convergence; here, think tanks do not aim to distinguish themselves from competitors but rather want to blend in.

In the final set of analyses, I examine the extent to which attention to these topics changes over time and whether think tanks converged in textual content similarity in their policy documents. Foremost, I consider how topic proportions change over time in order to identify the most sensitive and responsive policy issues. Figure 4.4 presents changes in expected topic proportions over time for each of the topics in the corpus. In general, there are greater variation in topic proportions for governance and social issues, sovereignty and territorial disputes, macroeconomic and economic relations issues, and regional and international security issues. In contrast, steadier attention is devoted to European politics, regional and international development, and US politics and relations.

Consider topic 5, sovereignty and territorial disputes. Two clear bumps

in policy attention occurred in September–October 2015 and July 2016. The former period was a tense time when Xi Jinping visited the White House in the United States. China's activities in the Spratlys was a priority topic for discussion when the US Navy conducted sailing operations close to the artificial islands, and the Hague's tribunal ruled that it had jurisdiction over the submissions filed by the Philippines against China related to its nine-dotted line claim. The latter period, July 2016, was the month of the actual ruling by the Hague tribunal regarding the case of the Philippines and China ("philippin-" and "tribun-" are terms that also appear in table 4.2 under topic 5, above). These variations over time suggest that the foreign policy research output of think tanks is quite responsive to pertinent events, particularly events that are relevant to China's core interests.

Finally, I consider changes in text (dis)similarities for topics over time as a way to assess potential convergence (or divergence) in textual content under the Xi Jinping administration. Figure 4.5 displays the results. An increase on the Y-axis associates with an increase in term similarity between the think tank types used to discuss each topic. Seemingly, a consistent trend emerges. On each policy topic, GOV-GOTT and GOV-UATT similarities increase through 2015, and then level out or decrease slightly through 2016. These results are broadly consistent with findings of (re-)centralization under Xi Jinping.

The starkest decreases during this period relate to the European politics and US politics topics, with university-affiliated think tanks expressing quite dissimilar topics relative to government think tanks. Surprisingly, UATT-GOTTs consistently decrease in similarity throughout the date range of the corpus. This result indicates that think tanks that are not government think tanks are perhaps carving out unique policy topics relative to each other. This result could emerge as a function of increased competition for resources and elite attention as discussed earlier. Here, to the extent that text similarities capture differences in policy topics, then GOTTs and UATTs may be attempting to stake out unique positions to garner attention. Taken together, these results add nuance to the debate surrounding (re-)centralization under the Xi administration from a foreign policy perspective.

Conclusion

This chapter considered the content of foreign policy texts produced by Chinese think tanks during the early period of Xi Jinping's administra-
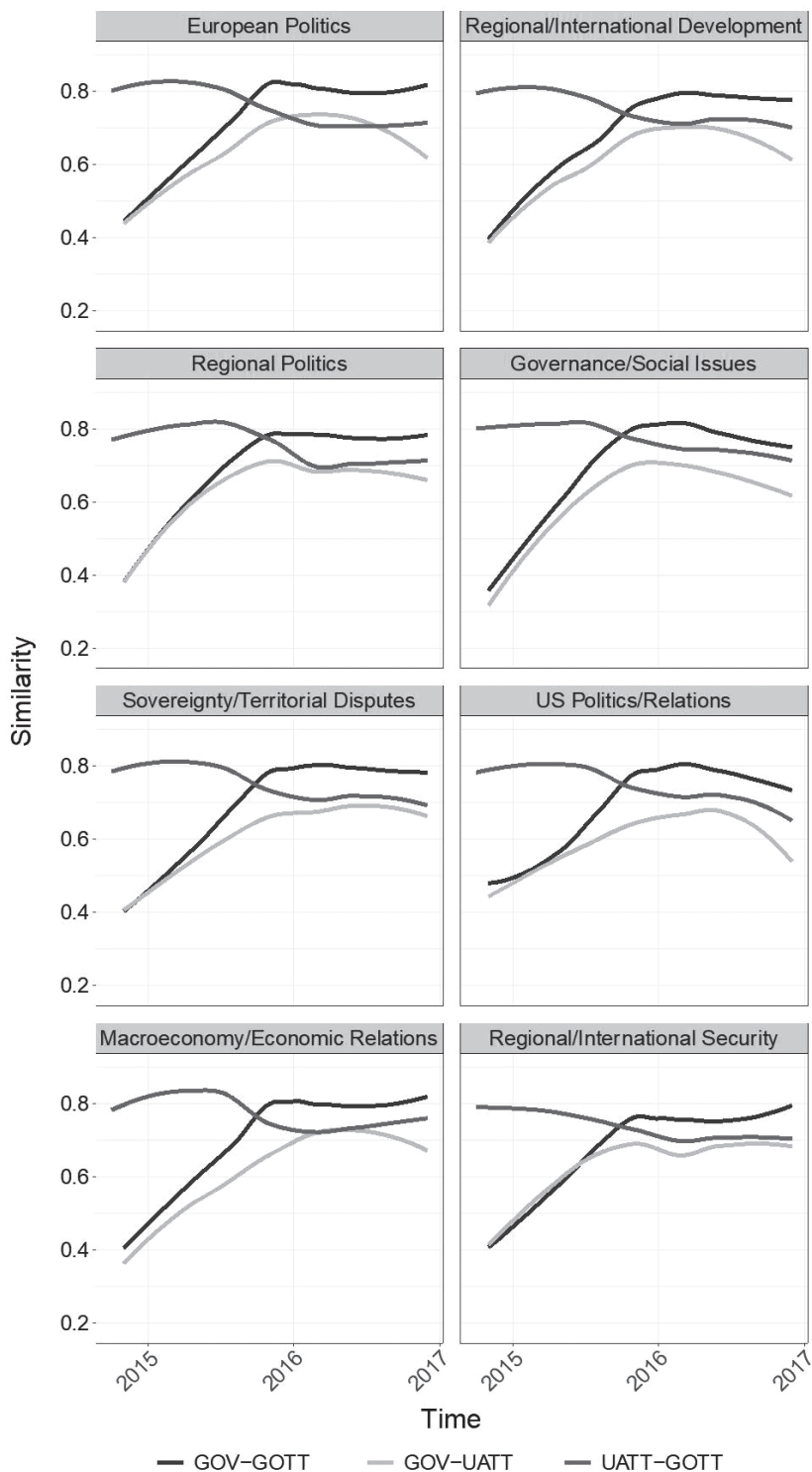
Figure 4.5. Topic-Term Similarity over Time
Note: Similarities in words used to describe different policy topics over time, with a fitted Loess curve to ease trend visualization. An increase on the *y*-axis indicates an increase in pairwise similarity in texts.

tion, including the correlations between different foreign policy topics and shifts in topic attention and words used to discuss those topics over time. Think tanks exhibited increasing similarity relative to the positions of government think tanks from 2014 through 2015, but more divergence is expressed during 2016. University-affiliated think tanks appear to position themselves proximately vis-à-vis government think tanks but to exhibit more textual differences relative to think tanks that are not directly government operated.

In addition, the policy topics of sovereignty, regional politics, and the Chinese economy account for nearly half of the content of the corpus, and think tanks are most responsive to events that concern sovereignty disputes, domestic governance, and social issues. These findings represent novel evidence of divergence on less-critical policy topics and relative conformity on the policy tenets relevant to China's core domestic and international interests. As discussed throughout this book, they suggest that there are tacit and overt permissible policy topics that think tank types undertake in an authoritarian institutional environment, while other policy topics are considered deviant or not permissible.

Overall, this speaks to the three cross-cutting factors affecting all stages of influence production under autocracy that are theorized in the conclusion of this book: access to policy making, information demands, and social control needs. Regarding the latter, this chapter suggests that policy red lines are key drivers of the diversity of interest communities, in that nonsensitive policy topics see more heterogeneity in groups' policy stances and frames. Consistent with theories from democratic contexts, such niche-seeking behavior may serve to distinguish advocacy groups in a crowded field. In contrast, sensitive topic areas are associated with less competition and stronger adherence to the government line, which ultimately reduces the diversity of policy information available from that group community. Policy red lines therefore increase the regime's information demands by narrowing societal channels for policy expertise in these areas.

The analysis presented in this chapter joins recent work that illustrates the ways in which text analytical methods can augment our current capacity to analyze the politics of authoritarian regimes. Textual data provide a high-resolution view of policy topics variation. The structural topic model recovers relatively coherent and reasonable policy content groupings and allows for inspection of variance across actor types. At the same time, there is room to further validate text analytic measures in the context of authoritarian politics. For example, the distinction between policy topics

(see, e.g., Laver, Benoit, and Garry 2003; Baturo, Dasandi, and Mikhaylov 2017) versus simple word similarities found in textual data might be blurrier in the context of Chinese foreign policy making, where measures to validate textual estimates (like roll call votes in the context of legislative politics) are less readily available.

Looking forward, as China's global role in political, economic, and military affairs expands, the Chinese government has encouraged a proliferation of think tanks. In fact, at the Third Plenum in 2013, Xi Jinping urged the creation of more think tanks—backed with significant capital (RMB100 million or ~US$13.91 million)—to improve decision making in policy formulation using "scientific decision making" (see Xue, Zhu, and Han 2018). The goal is to identify and approve fifty to one hundred "new type" think tanks by the early 2020s, which will receive special recognition by the CPC's Central Committee (see Hayward 2018). Three important considerations should be highlighted in this regard.

First, the underlying goal for Xi Jinping is to have a new wave of think tanks to support his viewpoints and policies, and possibly to temper the influence of think tanks backed by prominent political figures. For instance, Zeng Peiyan (former member of the Politburo of the CCP, and former vice premier of the PRC), Zeng Qinghong (former member of the Politburo Standing Committee, China's highest leadership council, top-ranked member of the Secretariat of the Central Committee, and former vice president of the PRC) and Jiang Zemin's (former president of the PRC) son Jiang Mianheng have either established or have been patrons of their own think tanks.

Second, an increased number of think tanks should not be interpreted as the government's relaxation of control over the ideological and intellectual domain and the political development of civil society. While many Western think tanks typically strive for independent and critical analysis, such goals are difficult to achieve in China when think tanks are generally called upon to support policy decisions already finalized or enacted by political elites.

Third, there are cautionary tales about overestimating think tanks' influence in the opaque and often ideologically driven Xi Jinping administration (see, e.g., Eaton and Hasmath 2021; Hasmath 2021; MacDonald and Hasmath 2018, 2020). In the current environment of increasing (re-)centralization and reduced appetite for risk by policy makers (see, e.g., Teets, Hasmath, and Lewis 2017; Teets and Hasmath 2020), one must be mindful that the influence of policy entrepreneurs is tacitly sanctioned by the state and can be removed at the state's request.

We are thus at a stage in contemporary China where "10,000 horses are all not muted," but neither are "a hundred flowers blossoming and a hundred schools of thoughts contending." The administrative relationship between think tanks and the government is the most important resource to help think tanks exert policy influence. Radical political views are discouraged through regulation, guidelines, and financial and material constraints. Their research agendas are not primarily driven by contemporary policy concerns, but rather by the needs of the Chinese elite political leadership. Chinese think tanks remain nested firmly within a hierarchical, centralized bureaucratic system, albeit operating in Xi Jinping's self-professed "new era."

NOTES

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1. "Type" refers to the number of distinct words in the corpus. "Token" refers to the total number of words in the corpus.

2. To assess the similarities between texts in the corpus, a cosine similarity is utilized, which is one of the most common measures in the natural language processing literature. Cosine similarity can be represented as $s(\mathbf{x},\mathbf{y}) = \mathbf{x} \cdot \mathbf{y} || \mathbf{x} || \cdot || \mathbf{y} ||$, where $\mathbf{x}$ and $\mathbf{y}$ are vectors of term frequencies, and the angle between the vectors provides a measure of similarity between the two texts (see Acree et al. 2016).

3. A structural topic modeling (STM)—implemented in the STM package in the R statistical computing environment—was employed (see Roberts et al. 2014; Roberts, Stewart, and Tingley 2017). The STM is an extension of the popular latent Dirichlet allocation (LDA) model (Blei 2012). In traditional LDA, topic mixing proportions or observed words are drawn from global priors. An attractive feature of the STM, however, is that it allows for the modeling of covariates that might affect topic prevalence and content. In this study, I expect prevalence to vary as a function of think tank type (GOV, GOTT, UATT), as well as other covariates like date (such as discussing a topic when the issue is prevalent in the news) and the organization itself (e.g., the Development Research Center of the State Council likely discusses economics more than other think tanks). Inclusion of these covariates helps to isolate the relationship between think tank type—our primary variable of theoretical interest—and topical output. The model presented contains prevalence as the outcome variable and the following predictors: think tank type (i.e., GOV, GOTT, or UATT), date (i.e., the day-month-year of text publication, estimated with a spline to control for nonlinearities), organization name (to control for individual think tank differences such as size and organizational mission), and a city indicator variable (represented by 1 if the think tank is in Beijing, and 0 otherwise).

4. To assess variance in topic prevalence, the STM model provides outputs to directly plot topic proportion over time. To assess textual (dis)similarities over time, I extract the three hundred most frequent and exclusive words for each topic in the STM. Then, for each month in the corpus, I extract these same words from the document-

frequency matrices for each think tank grouped by type. This provides a monthly sequence of vectors of word frequencies employed by different think tank types associated with each topic. I then calculate the cosine similarity between these vectors. If think tanks face increasing control from the CCP, one should observe an increase in similarity of topics over time and perhaps toward the positions of government think tanks.

  5. These differences could result in part from the DRC's focus on domestic macroeconomic issues and IWEP's focus on the international political economy.

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