

Think tanks in East and Southeast Asia

Bringing politics back into the picture

December 2010

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Acknowledgements

The research greatly benefited from peer review inputs from: Denden Alicias from the Institute of Popular Democracy in the Philippines and Arnaldo Pellini, Research Fellow in ODI's RAPID programme. With thanks also to Caroline Cassidy for editing and finalising the report.

Executive summary

Think tanks across the developed and developing world have received considerable attention in recent times with western donors investing in developing country think tanks on a large scale. For instance, five major donors have together committed US\$ 110 million to the Think Tank Initiative until 2014. Nevertheless, think tanks are still traditionally seen as a mainly Anglo-American phenomenon, emerging across the developing world in the last few decades. In addition, analyses of think tanks in developing countries have been mainly historical and apolitical. We took inspiration from the book 'Think Tanks and Political Parties in Latin America' by Mendizabal and Sample (2009), which challenged the existing approach to both the research of think tanks and the debate over their definition, to understand think tanks in East and Southeast Asia, placing their origins and development firmly within their political context, both nationally and regionally.

We present two factors influencing the politics of East Asia – the politics of power and the politics of production. Using these factors as a lens through which to view politics we identify three key political threads: nationalism; the extent of pluralism or liberalisation; and the concentration of power. We see that these political threads have shaped the origin and development of think tanks in three ways: 1) their location relative to the bureaucracy 2) their thematic focus and 3) the political interests they represent.

Firstly, early think tanks in the region held strong links with the state and carried out their tasks as an arm of the bureaucracy. Many of them were established by governments to contribute towards key policy tasks. Public-private or semi-independent think tanks emerged in some countries, which retained one foot in the public and another in the private sphere. Think tanks were often established by private corporations and financial institutions to assist their operations and advance economic development, while others (more recently) became non-governmental think tanks working on social issues, rights and justice.

Secondly, think tanks emerged to contribute to national economic development. Technocratic, economic-oriented think tanks surfaced to provide plans, and policy solutions. Owing to the dominance of the state bureaucracy in policy-making, the initial generation of East Asian think tanks were often located within the bureaucracy. As reforms opened the region up, think tanks began to cluster around the corporate and financial sector with emphasis on market-based agendas. Security think tanks also emerged to facilitate the deliberation of pressing security threats that endangered the growth trajectory of the nation. And growth was critical since it safeguarded the sovereignty and stability of infant nations.

Thirdly, many think tanks were created as instruments to legitimise and consolidate existing regimes or leaders – as well as the developmental state narrative. Legitimacy is a critical commodity since most regimes are held accountable based on their ability to spur growth and not their democratic credentials. Hence the legitimacy of the economic agenda also partially rested on the ability of think tanks to disseminate governmental agendas and obtain public support. More than any other factor, there was a political impetus underpinning the efforts of think tanks as this did not only determine their establishment, but also their subsequent nature, focus and arguably their influence. Yet, we find inadequate attention being given towards understanding them with reference to their respective contexts.

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Without recognising the centrality of politics in establishing and driving think tanks, we will not be able to effectively conceptualise think tanks or measure their ability in achieving pro-poor outcomes. Only such an approach will provide an adept understanding of think tanks and offer a more grounded approach to assess their performance.

1. Introduction

Think tanks are seen to occupy an important role within development policy processes. They are receiving significant attention and investment as donor countries and organisations believe that public policy is enhanced if it is informed by research-based evidence. We can safely trace the proliferation of think tanks across the world – from Latin America to the Balkans across the Middle East and towards East Asia. They are not an Anglo-American phenomenon nor are they all primarily situated in national policy spaces. In fact, different patterns of think tank development can be identified. However, systematic accounts that can adequately describe the historical development of think tanks in developing regions are scarce. Consequently, western conceptualisations have reigned throughout the literature of think tanks and have obscured their nature and character in other parts of the globe.

Several western scholars have explored various ways of defining and classifying think tanks ranging from their politico-institutional location (for example those which are independent, civil society, party-affiliated or embedded within the state) to the emphasis they place on research, policy advice and advocacy roles. R Kent Weaver calls them 'universities without students', 'contract research organizations', and 'advocacy tanks' (Weaver, 1989:565). Andrew Rich defines them as 'independent, non-interest based, non-profit organizations that produce and principally rely on expertise and ideas to obtain support and to influence the policy process' (Rich, 2004:11). Diane Stone identifies them as 'non-profit organizations engaged in the analysis of public policy issues independent of government, political parties, and interest groups (Stone, 1996:16).' And James McGann classifies them as entities that are 'independent or affiliated institutions that are permanent bodies and dedicated to public policy research, analysis and engagement' (McGann, 2007).

This last definition has tended to be accepted as mainstream. According to this definition, think tanks are primarily found in the United States and the United Kingdom. Entities such as the Russell Sage Foundation (1907), the Bureau of Municipal Research (1907), the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (1914), the Brookings Institution (1916), the Royal Institute of International Affairs (1920) are identified within the literature as some of the earliest manifestations of think tanks (Rich, 2004:34 and Stone, 2004:3). A much smaller number of think tanks are found in Canada, Australasia and Western Europe and since the 1970s there has been a proliferation of think tanks across the globe, especially the developing world.

Enrique Mendizabal and Adolfo Garcé, in their studies on the relationship between think tanks and political parties in Latin America, described think tanks more broadly by focusing on the various functions that they perform (Mendizabal and Sample (eds) 2009). They concur with Carlos Acuña (2009) that the main function of think tanks is to promote evidence-based policies, but they also add Orazio Bellettini's and Melania Carrión's suggestion that their functions may also include legitimising policies or ideologies, providing a safe space for ideas or debate, developing future cadres of policy-makers and politicians and even channelling funds to political parties or movements. For the purposes of this effort, think tanks are conceptualised along these lines and therefore include independent civil society think tanks, policy research institutes, corporate think tanks, governmental think tanks, university research centres, and other organisations whose main function is the promotion of evidence-based policies, but that may also carry out any of the other functions described above. As a result, think tanks in developing countries are a much older phenomenon. For example, in Latin

America, groups of intellectuals came together to discuss and publish newspapers and journals to inform the political struggle for independence in the 18th and 19th century (ibid).

Not only are think tanks narrowly defined, but analyses of them are few in number (see McGann and Weaver, 2000; Stone et al. 1998; Stone, 2004) and mostly inadequate. Some analyses (McGann and Weaver 2000; Smith 1991) have focused on understanding think tanks from an organisational perspective to draw out their origins, functions and presence within policy processes. Employing such a method rendered similar results across regions despite salient differences between political systems. Another approach (Stone and Denham, 2004¹) focused on understanding think tanks in much broader terms by identifying and analysing them as actors enshrined with the authority to advance certain ideas and policies at specific policy-making junctures (for example, addressing the role of think tanks in the proclamation of a new policy). We attempt to employ another method – a critical one – by locating think tanks with reference to their context and comprehending them through the lens of the politics that govern their environment.

If formulating effective policy is a matter of politics, then the ability of think tanks to inform policy is equally political. And if donors expect think tanks to effectively contribute in this manner, they should also be aware of the politics underpinning their existence. Examining the political aspect also enables us to overcome the shortcomings of mainstream methods used to comprehend think tanks: the failure to recognise the centrality of the politics which is critical in determining the nature and character of think tanks.

This paper recognises that the establishment and management of think tanks are not mechanical processes but largely political enterprises that are definitively shaped by the prevailing institutions, structures, paradigms, practices, ideas and actors (Mendizabal and Sample (eds) 2009). In this paper, we attempt to shed light on the politics by taking stock of the journey of think tanks in East and Southeast Asia. More specifically, think tanks are explored in the backdrop of the developmental state experience that has epitomised East and Southeast Asian governance and growth over the past few decades.

To illustrate the linkages between the think tank and the developmental state experiences, we employ a framework which identifies two key dimensions: the Politics of Production and Politics of Power. The former deals with the approach taken by the state to organise the mode of production in order to spur economic growth: that is the balance between a market-oriented agenda and a state-led approach.² The latter relates to the nature of the power structure within any political setting: whether power is concentrated in the hands of few or dispersed among an array of actors. We use this two dimensional framework to identify key political trends across the region. We then demonstrate that the establishment of think tanks and their

¹ Most of the chapters within the 2004 volume by Prof Diane Stone situated think tanks within a broader context, attempting to enquire about think tanks with respect to policy processes and role of ideas within policymaking. Much emphasis was given towards understanding why certain ideas and discourses matter at given times owing to political coalitions and power relations at bay (Stone, 2004:2).

² The choices presented above do not merely represent a zero sum game where one is undertaken at the expense of the other. As the literature itself signifies, many nations were pragmatic and allowed for a heavy statist approach to coexist with an agenda that gave importance to markets and the gradual development of a robust private sector. In certain instances, where communist strongholds prevailed, like in China and Vietnam, the choice proved to be an afterthought given the ideological inclinations that these states adhered towards. However, as the East Asian model evolved it internalised neoliberal tenets being propagated from the West and this concurrently shifted modes of economic organisation, in some nations, towards a market away from the bureaucratic systems.

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subsequent nature and character are primarily determined by the politics governing their contexts

More importantly, we find that think tanks in East and Southeast Asia, unlike in Latin America where think tanks and their functions emerged and developed out of the political struggles of the independence and republican processes, were established as a part of a broader political system in which they were mandated to play very specific roles. As a consequence of this difference, their current nature (functions, location, degree of independence and influence) are different.

In order to illustrate the role of politics in the evolution of think tanks, the paper is organised as follows: Section two will discuss how existing literature defines think tanks. The third section proposes a two dimensional framework to assess the political context and consequently identifies three key trends. Based on these political trends, the fourth section identifies the origins and evolution of think tanks across the East Asia region. Section five critiques the orthodox approach to assessing think tanks and its inability to address politics. The final section briefly elaborates on an alternative account of East Asian think tanks, one that is more representative of regional realities.

2. Politics in East and Southeast Asia

This section describes key political trends in the region. As we have mentioned, we do this in the context of the developmental state experience that has epitomised East and Southeast Asian governance and growth over the past few decades. Charting a version of the developmental state is no mean feat. Several accounts have enriched the literature (see Johnson, 1982, Amsden, 1989, Wade, 1990, Leftwich, 1995, Woo-Cumings, 1999, Kohli, 2004, Doner, Richie and Slater, 2005). Among these definitions, Adrian Leftwich's is perhaps more relevant to our case due to the importance given to the politics underpinning the course pursued by Asian states. He describes developmental states as '...those states characterised by successful economic performances due to the presence of institutional structures that are developmentally driven and their developmental agenda and visions that are politically driven' (Leftwich, 2008:12). The politics³ underpinning development processes in these contexts was extremely robust and essentially drove the Asian economic miracle and, in the process, spilled over to the institutional context.

2.1 A two dimensional framework

In order to understand the politics of East Asia, we identify two factors through which to do this:

1. The politics of production⁴: Here we are directly concerned with the approach that developmental states choose to organise the means of production and increase the material standing of the state. Two approaches attain prominence at their extremes: a market-oriented agenda or state-led industrialisation project. Subsequent policies and institutions that follow are closely intertwined with the aim to ensure that each particular mode of production is advanced and protected.
2. The politics of power⁵: Here we are interested in understanding how prevailing power dynamics and relationships within society influence the politics, the institutions and policies established.

Breaking this down further we identify two extreme scenarios: where power is concentrated in the hands of a leader or a party or where it is dispersed amongst an array of societal actors.

³ We refer to politics as the mechanism that facilitates the process of making binding decisions for any community, group, society, country. Human beings by nature require such a vehicle and such decisions inherently deal with the conflict-laden process of resource distribution – how resources are used, produced and allocated (Leftwich, 2008:5). Politics is therefore best understood as a process that is inclusive of all the activities involved in making basic decisions on managing the resources at hand – whether physical, human or material. And wherever this happens, politics is pervasive.

⁴ Rooted in Marx's Historical Materialist approach, which advances that any analysis of the world we inhabit must be grounded within an understanding of the ways in which humans organize the production of their material lives. This materialist conception of history emanates from classic texts such as *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (Marx 1859).

⁵ Grounded in the Neo-Gramscian school of thought; Gramsci argues that the legitimacy and strength of the ruling elites is not anchored exclusively on the coercive apparatus of the state but is also diffused and situated within the plethora of institutions and relationships within civil society (Gill, 2003:51). The Neo-Gramscian version also dovetails with the Neo-Marxist conceptualization of power that argues that political establishments create institutions in order to maintain hegemonic control.

Using these two factors to assess politics in the region highlights two key issues relevant to the developmental states in East and Southeast Asia: 1) the role of nationalism; 2) the extent of liberalisation or pluralism: the relative openness or closure of the political system to participation of various groups (including the private sector); and 3) the concentration of power and the balance of power among socio-political actors. We look at these three issues in turn as well as their evolution over time.

2.2 The role of nationalism

The politics driving the developmental agenda had much to do with the role of nationalism. In the 1950s and 1960s, in the context of state building and reconstruction, with many countries in the region ravaged by war, nationalism was particularly pronounced. Hostility reigned as nations constantly battled internal and external threats and fierce nationalistic tendencies emerged which drove nations to protect their shores vigorously. The Cold War context only served to intensify fears of instability within the region. Economic growth and development assumed paramount importance. This provided authoritarian governments with political legitimacy. Security was also pivotal in safeguarding the process of development from external threats (Woo-Cumings, 1999:12).

The Japanese (pre-1945), for example, were immensely fearful of the Western threat; South Korea was threatened by its northern neighbour; multi-religious Singapore existed between Malaysia and Indonesia; China owned more than a fair share of territorial disputes at its borders; and other nations (Malaysia and Thailand, for example) possessed ethnically diverse populations that increased the chances of an insurgency (Leftwich, 2008:12). A nationalism that bred economic mobilisation and growth became a force to counter the region's existential threat. Diplomacy, dialogue and exchange were seen as necessary to help resolve tensions between neighbouring countries as well as present a collective front to confront and deter threats from other regions. The emergence of democratic systems of governance across many parts of the region may have diminished the role of nationalism in providing legitimacy of rule in some states, but in others – Hun Sen's Cambodia and Thaksin's Thailand – nationalism remains the driving force of their development agenda despite democracy and multi-party politics.

2.3 The extent of pluralism

Another political variable of the developmental state was the extent of pluralism or liberalisation and by implication the nature of state institutions. Most developmental states within the region initiated vast industrialisation projects spearheaded by a dominant statist hand. Almost all of the developmental states were united by the presence of strong bureaucratic systems. These bureaucracies played a major role in leading this transformative process and implementing the necessary policies required for economic growth. At the onset, few vested private interests existed and this gave way to a predominantly state-led economic policy formulation.

The economic policies that powered the successes of the region were underpinned by a strong institutional infrastructure driven by a strict set of rules to govern the economy and advance strategic national interests (Leftwich, 2008:13).

Some economies, such as Japan and South Korea, which led the region in terms of economic growth and development⁶, were the first countries to selectively adopt neoliberal policies and approaches and thus liberalise parts of their economy. At the same time, emerging Asian capitalism was bolstered by increasing intra-regional economic relations that was largely stagnant during the cold war. The institution of the Plaza Accord in 1985, for instance, generated a flood of investment flows from developed to developing economies in East Asia. The advent of intricate investment patterns also generated spill-over effects, augmenting the already established export sectors (Stubbs, 2002:445). From the 1980s, China sought rapid economic reform and integration with an ever more complex world. After the silence and subsequent contraction of political and economic space following the Tiananmen Square Massacre, it was Deng Xiaoping's South China Tour Speeches in 1992, which saw a gradual reopening of political space coinciding with the ushering in of a socialist-oriented market economy. Similarly, the Communist Party of Vietnam initiated the Doi Moi economic reforms in 1986.

With an increasingly important role seen for the private sector, over time many bureaucracies across the region have actively cultivated links with the private sector and provided them with an environment conducive for economic growth. There were different manifestations of this trend across the region. For example, Zaibatsus were established in Japan. These government supported private entities actively cooperated with the government in the areas of industrial policy and innovation and were at the heart of Japanese industrialisation pre and post World War II (Lim, 1999:89). Chaebols⁷ in South Korea, arguably inspired by Zaibatsus, followed in the 1980s (Woo-Cumings, 1999:15). They all shared a mutual and unyielding commitment to growth and mounted a fierce effort to set about achieving this objective at all costs.

2.4 The concentration of power

In almost all countries in the region – South Korea, Japan, China, Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam – there has been at some point in time (and in some cases there still is) a substantial concentration of political power at the hands of the ruling regime or the leader at the helm and subsequent control of political space and thought. For example, China and Vietnam possess a strong Communist Party led regime; the Liberal Democratic Party ruled for nearly three straight decades in Japan; Singapore and Taiwan have also been largely dominated by a single party; and Indonesia and the Philippines had strong dictatorial regimes (Leftwich, 2008:12).

Individuals, as well as political parties, have played critical roles in the region: Mahathir Mohamad's reign in Malaysia drove the country from economic heights to political lows; Suharto built a strong centralised militaristic government over his three decade reign in Indonesia; Lee Kuan Yew was seldom apologetic over the repressive methods of governance as the People's Action Party governed Singapore for an extended period. Whether ruled by a party

⁶ Flying Geese model - Under this model, as the lead goose (Japan) industrialised, it imparted unprofitable and outdated industries to neighbouring economies that were themselves industrialising. The continued influx of investment and technology in turn caused these peripheral economies to transfer the same industries to other states that can perform the tasks more cost effectively.

⁷ *Chaebols* or industrial conglomerates have been leading actors in the transformation of South Korea from an agrarian to an industrial economy. Broadly, they have been government supported private entities that actively cooperated with the government in the areas of industrial policy and innovation (Lim, 1999:89).

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or an individual, deference to authority has been ingrained within the region. Nevertheless the concentration of power has to varying extents and in different ways, become more diffuse across economies and societies in many, but not all countries in the region.

Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand and Cambodia underwent anti-dictatorship struggles throughout the 1980s and 1990s and now have fledgling although not consolidated multi-party democracies. In Korea and Taiwan, a multi-party representative democracy emerged in the 1990s – arguably a process managed more by the state than its people. This period across the region saw a flourishing of civil society organisations (many of which had been limited to underground activities during the 1970s and 1980s), with international donors and agencies often playing a key role in financing and in the development of research priorities.

Although the Communist Party hold sway in China, as suggested above, the 1980s saw the government seeking rapid economic reform and integration with an increasingly complex world, relaxing its control over political thinking, with Chinese intellectuals attaining growing autonomy (Tanner, 2002). While China may not be seen as intellectually 'open' a society as some democracies in the region, the Chinese policy-making arena is open to experimentation and is more receptive to debate than is usually assumed. Further, Chinese intellectuals argue that China in the 2000s is implementing a different form of democracy by promoting the use of public consultations, expert meetings and surveys to inform decision-making (Leonard, 2008). Moreover, decentralisation of power to varying extents has created demand for local level technocratic and policy advice.

We now turn our attention to how the political trends we have outlined have influenced the origin and development of think tanks in the region and what they do.

3. The origins and development of think tanks

As discussed earlier, we argue that the three overlapping strands of the evolving political context (nationalism; the extent of pluralism or liberalisation; and the concentration of power) have shaped think tanks in three ways: 1) their location relative to the bureaucracy and the market, 2) their thematic focus and 3) the political interests they represent. We argue that most think tanks that initially emerged in the region were essentially manifestations of their countries' developmental state and the regional dynamics that emerged between them. At first glance, the centralisation of knowledge, power and resources meant that think tanks were an arm of the bureaucracy and/or had strong links with it. Moreover, the fierce nationalistic thread informed the establishment of regional security think tanks. Furthermore, the goal of rapid economic growth led most countries in the region to set up think tanks to provide technocratic economically oriented advice and solutions. And the widely witnessed concentration of power in the hands of a regime or a leader resulted in a number of highly politicized, ideological and even loyal think tanks devoted towards advancing narrow agendas.

However, changes in political contexts including democratic transitions across several countries in the region in the 1980s and 1990s (not including Japan which made its democratic transition in the 1950s) have promoted the emergence of private or non-governmental think tanks as part of a flourishing civil society often working on previously neglected social issues, while the devolution of power to local levels led to the emergence of decentralised think tanks supporting the work of 'local' policy-makers. We discuss these in the following sub-sections and illustrate this analysis by drawing on examples of think tanks from different types of the development state in East Asia. We have attempted to take examples from three types of state: those characterised by one-party states (China and Vietnam); those we see as 'quasi-democratic' (many of which have undergone anti-dictatorship struggles in the 1980s and 1990s) – Indonesia, Thailand, Cambodia, the Philippines, Singapore and Malaysia; and those that are those considered to be democratic – South Korea, Taiwan and Japan.

3.1 Location

The first modern think tanks in the region held strong links with the state and carried out their tasks as an arm of the bureaucracy. Many of them were directly and explicitly established by governments to contribute to salient policy tasks. Public-private or semi-independent think tanks emerged in some countries, retaining one foot in the public and another in the private sphere. They were not completely independent of the government, but certain operations were conducted in a more or less autonomous manner. Funding and leadership usually rested in the hands of the state, leading to a 'revolving door' type process for both their leaders and staff. Some countries saw the emergence of private or non-governmental think tanks, often established by private corporations and financial institutions to assist their operations and advance the cause for economic growth. Respect for education and academic research within Asian culture resulted in many think tanks being situated within universities. Table 1 presents examples from various economies:

Table 1: Types of think tank by location

Types of think tank by location	Countries and when think tanks emerged	Examples
Ministry affiliated research institutes: These think tanks served more as analytical bodies within government agencies.	China, Vietnam, South Korea, Taiwan (1950s/60s)	
Large national academies: These enjoyed more independence than think tanks affiliated to line ministries and had more scope to shape their own research agendas	South Korea (1960s) China	Korean Development Institute and the Korean Institute of Science and Technology, Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS)
State-affiliated think tanks, which were institutionally more distant from the bureaucracy	China (1980s)	Development Research Centre (DRC)
On-campus policy research organisations, research institutes set up in China's colleges and universities by returned overseas scholars as well as civilian/private think tanks. Although reliant on government funding and support, think tanks and think tank experts in China were able to expressing different viewpoints different from those of government	China (1990s)	Peking University
Think tanks within public-private entities such as Zaibatsus (Japan) and Chaebols (Korea)	Japan (1970s) South Korea (1980s)	Daewoo
Profit-making research institutions in large financial institutions and banks to develop and enhance corporate and financial strategies.	Japan (1980s)	Asahi Bank Research Institute
Independent non-governmental think tanks (which emerged with the democratic transition)	South Korea and Taiwan (1990s)	Awakening Foundation (Taiwan)
State funded political party-affiliated think tanks	Korea and Taiwan (1990s)	Youido Institute (Korea)

3.2 Thematic focus

3.2.1 Economic think tanks

As states targeted rapid economic growth and development, think tanks rose from within the government system or emerged closely affiliated with the bureaucracies that reigned in the tasks of planning and implementing the process of economic reform. Research and analysis were urgently required to enable the bureaucracy to make sound decisions and harness the strong foundation laid by the state. The demand for technical expertise was (and still is) high, as industrial and trade policies needed to be planned and implemented effectively. This, in turn, raised demand for the development of new centres and created a generation of technocrats. Furthermore, the shift in the governing economic ideology (embracing neoliberal policies) also had an impact on think tanks. Those that were more attuned to promoting markets and the private sector began to appear as a new type of think tank, often finding a home within corporations and financial institutions.

For example, across states such as Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand the consolidation of democracy in the 1980s and 1990s saw the emergence of independent think tanks working on, once neglected, social issues such as poverty, social protection and pro-poor growth. The need to understand the socio-economic impact of the Asian financial crisis in the late 1990s, for instance, gave birth to SMERU Research Institute in Indonesia. Indonesia has also seen the creation of a diverse range of civil society organisations, including think tanks as well as human rights and civil liberties organisations – often with think tank ‘functions’. In South Korea and Taiwan, democratisation saw the emergence of civil society organisations and advocacy think tanks often working on non-economic and security issues, such as the People’s Solidarity for Participatory Democracy (PSPD) and the Citizen’s Coalition for Economic Justice (CCEJ) in South Korea and the Awakening Foundation in Taiwan focussed on generating policy options on an array of social, political and cultural rights issues, including income distribution, labour rights, women’s rights and environmental protection. Despite the recent proliferation of ‘non-economic and non-security’ focussed think tanks across the region, we do not elaborate on these in this paper. Table 2 below, provides some examples of economic think tanks across the region:

Table 2: Economic think tanks

Country	Examples
China (1980s)	Economic Research Centre (ERC), Technical Economic Research Centre (TERC), the Development Research Centre (DRC), and the Rural Development Centre (RDRC) The China Development Institute (CDI).
Vietnam	The Central Institute for Economic Management (CIEM) ⁸ is a national institute under the authority of the Ministry of Planning and Investment of Vietnam.
Malaysia	Centre for Policy Research (CPR). The Malaysian Institute of Economic Research ⁹ (MIER) was established reflecting growing links between ruling regime and the private sector.
Indonesia	Institute for Economic and Social Research (LPEM) ¹⁰ is based at the

⁸ Central Institute for Economic Management – www.ciem.org.vn

⁹ Malaysian Institute of Economic Research - www.mier.org.my

	University of Indonesia and works in cooperation with other parties, both government and private, domestic and foreign. The Indonesian Institute of Sciences (ISS) was established in the 1970s set up along the lines of the Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS).
South Korea	<p>Korean Development Institute¹¹ (KDI) established in 1971, was founded by the government to 'provide a rigorous academic perspective' on the economic policy issues associated with industrialisation and development.</p> <p>Think tanks emerged with the Chaebols – the alliance that united the government, bureaucracy and private sector in the quest for growth. The government mandated that all Chaebols establish research institutes to advance the process of growth. The five biggest Chaebols – Hyundai, Samsung, Daewoo, LG, and Sunkyung all followed suit and established institutes in the 1980s.</p>
Taiwan	Taiwan Institute of Economic Research ¹² (TIER) established 1976 to 'actively engage in research on domestic and foreign macroeconomics and industrial economics in order to provide consultations to the government and enterprises to promote Taiwan's economic development.'
Japan	<p>Several think tanks emerged which were extensions of government ministries or the private sector: Mitsubishi Research Institute, Japan Research Institute, Nikko Research Centre, Hitachi Research Institute, International Development Centre of Japan, and National Institute for Research Advancement (Ueno, 2004:165).</p> <p>Second generation of Japanese think tanks in the 1980s focused on corporate and financial strategies to assist the private sector and most were situated under the control of financial institutions. Notable ones were the Long Term Credit Bank Institute, SRIC Corporation, Asahi Bank Research Institute, Sakura Institute of Research, Daiwa Research Institute, Dentsu Institute for Human Studies and Nippon Life Insurance Research Institute (Ueno, 2004:166).</p>

3.2.2 Geopolitical and security focussed think tanks

Another key regional development was the establishment of think tanks focussed on safeguarding and defending economic growth and development. There was a pressing need to possess the intellectual capacity to manage and alleviate regional and national security issues and to ensure the continuity of the economic projects that were in motion. Hence, think tanks devoted to regional and security affairs bloomed across the region to inform states on the threats that affected them both collectively and individually. For instance, think tanks played a key role in the formation of a new regional multi-lateral security association, as well as providing input to debates concerning the Asian Free Trade Area (AFTA). Regionalisation has been a key dynamic behind think tank interaction. Stone (2000) points out the intensity of

¹⁰ Lempaga Penyelidikan Ekonomi dan Masyarakat (LPEM) – www.lpem.org

¹¹ Korea Development Institute – www.kdi.re.kr/kdi_eng/main.jsp

¹² Taiwan Institute of Economic Research <http://english.tier.org.tw/>

regional networking among think tanks through arrangements for 'second track diplomacy' such as ASEAN ISIS (Institutes of Strategic and International Studies) and CSCAP (Council for Security Co-operation in the Asia-Pacific), which represent venues for policy discussion on security issues. Stone (ibid) argues that ASEAN-ISIS is one of the most sophisticated and politically influential, informal arrangements connecting institutes, university centres and official actors in Southeast Asia. Think tanks have thus often had extensive involvement in informal diplomacy with involvement in this network giving them a high level of political access. Some examples of security and regionally/internationally focussed think tanks are presented in table 3 below:

Table 3: Geopolitical and security focussed think tanks

Country	Examples
China	Shanghai Institutes for International Studies (SIIS) ¹³ was created in 1960 to undertake research on developments in international affairs. It mainly studies the United States, Japan, Europe, Russia and the Asia-Pacific region, focusing on relations among major powers and China's periphery.
Vietnam	The Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences (VASS) houses a number of foreign policy and regional institutes including the Institute for Southeast Asian studies and the Institute for American studies.
Singapore	Singaporean Institute of International Affairs (SIIA) ¹⁴ was created in 1961, driven by the need to conduct research and policy analysis in international affairs. The mandate of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies ¹⁵ (ISEAS), established in 1968 is to promote regional security and stability. Its creation was closely tied to the birth of the ASEAN in 1967, itself created to serve as regional security mechanism for Southeast Asian nations (Ling, 2000:413).
Malaysia	The Institute of Strategic and International Studies ¹⁶ (ISIS) was established in 1983 and quickly assumed the role of the Malaysian representative dedicated towards promoting research and thinking on regional security affairs. An important focus of the ISIS is research on promoting confidence building measures within Southeast Asia (Stone, 2000:387).
The Philippines	The Institute of Strategic and Development Studies ¹⁷ (ISDS) was created in 1991 by a group of academics from the University of the Philippines. It was established to fill the Filipino void at the regional security dialogues and contribute towards international and regional peace and stability through cooperative research, advocacy, discussion and debate.
Indonesia	The Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) ¹⁸ dominated the Indonesian think tank scene after its establishment in 1971. It undertakes research in economics, politics and social change, and international relations. In the larger Asia-Pacific region, CSIS is actively involved with regional and international networks of 'track-two' (interactions between private citizens or

¹³ Shanghai Institute for International Studies - <http://www.siis.org.cn/>

¹⁴ Singapore Institute of International Affairs - www.siiionline.org

¹⁵ Institute of South East Asian Studies - www.iseas.edu.sg

¹⁶ Institute of Strategic and International Studies - www.isis.org.my

¹⁷ Institute of Strategic and Development Studies - <http://www.isdsphilippines.org/>

¹⁸ Centre for Strategic and International Studies - <http://www.csis.or.id/>

	groups of people within a country, or from different countries who are outside the formal governmental power structures (Diamond and McDonald) ¹⁹ institutions and think tanks that interact to promote regional security cooperation.
Thailand	The Institute for Security and International Studies ²⁰ (ISIS), housed at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok.
South Korea	Korea Institute for Defence Analyses (KIDA), Institute for Foreign Affairs and National Security (IFANS), and Korean Institute for National Unification (Kinu). Several other defence institutes were launched at universities: The Institute for Far Eastern Studies (IFES) at Kyungnam University, East-West Research Center at Yonsei University, and the Center for International Studies at Seoul National University (Choi, 2000:243-45).
Taiwan	The Institute of International Relations (IIR) was established in 1953 to provide analysis to governmental ministries on salient international issues and Chinese affairs (Ueno, 2000:238). Since 1975, it has been housed at the National Chengchi (Politics) University, from where it receives its funding.

3.2.3 Political interests

Many think tanks in East Asia clearly reflect the power dynamics and relationships of the political setting in which they were established.²¹ In countries where institutions are rather weak and power is concentrated in the hands of a few powerful individuals or political parties, think tanks quickly formed to legitimise and advance the agendas of those in power²² enabling political elites to solidify their control over the state. Strong authoritarian leaders seldom shied away from creating institutes and centres that legitimised their rule in the eyes of their citizens. Regimes also followed suit. In countries where there were antagonistic divisions between political factions or parties think tanks emerged as a way for these political forces to spread their word, further develop their ideologies and policy manifestos, and compete in a more technically focused arena. Even where ethnic and religious divisions prevailed, organisations that focused on a narrow agenda or catering to a certain base emerged. The message from the region seemed clear: think tanks served quite effectively as instruments to advance and legitimise the reign of a leader or regime in power. Examples are plenty within the region.

¹⁹ . It is also important to denote that this definition is rather expansive and could quite easily serve as an umbrella term that ties in business conferences, socio-cultural exchanges, etc and tag them as Track Two processes (Diamond and McDonald, 1996:1).

²⁰ Institute for Security and International Studies - <http://www.isisthailand.polsci.chula.ac.th/>

²¹ Closely dovetails with ODI/IDEA's study on Latin American Think Tanks and Political Parties. (Mendizabal and Sample (eds), 2009)

²² And using this tool, it would be fair to hypothesise that in pluralist societies characterized by free thinking and open exchange of ideas and where power would be dispersed among an array of actors, think tanks would be more innovative in terms of their ideas and expertise and more courageous in terms of their outlook and activism. However, the latter seldom found home within the East Asian region.

However, the emergence of multi-party democracy across some parts of the region gave way to the advent of non-governmental think tanks, often funded through a combination of international donors and the state and private sector, and representing the interests of fledgling citizens and their rights. Since the late 1990s, among the fledgling democracies in the region, such as Cambodia, Philippines, Indonesia and Thailand, bilateral aid agencies such as USAID and NORAD, international organisations such as the World Bank and the UNDP and philanthropic foundations such as the Ford Foundation and Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, have all taken great interest in think tanks. Donors have thus had considerable influence on think tank agendas and their strategies for influence. For instance, the Institute for Economic Studies Research and Development (IESRD) in Indonesia had to alter its academic focus when its donor, a German Foundation, was restructured and stopped core support. Table 4 below describes how shifting power centres have led to the development of think tanks, over time, in different national settings.

Table 4: The political interests of think tanks

Countries	Political interests	Examples
China	To maintain hegemonic control over the population, consolidate vested interests and strengthen positions of leaders within and outside government.	Arms of ministries (since the 1950s) The Economic Research Centre (ERC) and Technical Economic Research Centre (TERC) (since the 1980s).
	To understand social effects of rapid, economic reform.	Some think tanks are involved in experimental forms of democracy, leading public consultations, expert meetings and undertaking surveys, facilitating knowledge transmission from the grassroots up to the regional and national decision making structures (Leonard, 2008), since the 2000s.
Malaysia	To support the regime's national economic project.	The Centre for Policy Research (CPR) was established as a research centre at the University of Science in 1974. Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) was created by the president as a mechanism that allowed him to circumvent the power of the bureaucracy and have more impact on policy matters.
	To promote a political agenda wrapped within an Islamic framework.	Institute of Islamic Understanding (IKIM) ²³ was established in 1992 by Mahathir.
	To solidify the ruler's base with Malaysia's youth, but also appease the people, dissuade fundamentalist thought and	The Institut Kajian Dasar (IKD) was co-opted by Mahathir. It focuses on social policy; specifically education and youth affairs and is geared towards ensuring

²³ IKIM: Institut Kefahaman Islam –www.ikim.gov.my

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	firmly consolidate the Mahathir regime.	that youth receive training to become good citizens. The IKD itself functions as a hybrid entity being part think tank, part academic institution and part youth activist group.
Indonesia	To legitimise President Suharto's neoliberal economic project.	Center for Strategic and International Studies ²⁴ (CSIS) – promoted market-led, policy-making.
	To support President Habibie's policy agenda (Suharto's successor) and advocate for Muslim Interests (and offset the domination of CSIS by Christian intellectuals).	Centre for Information and Development Studies (CIDES) – placed much emphasis on promoting non-orthodox, nationalist economic policies at odds with the technocrats on the role of markets and market-led policy-making.
	To represent the interests of civil society and citizens.	The fall of Suharto regime and the consequent emergence of democratic institutions fragmented the policy process and opened up spaces for parliamentarians as well as civil society voices to be heard. As a result, Indonesia has seen the creation of a diverse range of civil society organisations, including think tanks as well as human rights and civil liberty organisations with think tank functions.
Singapore	To refine existing policy proposals to make them more amenable for implementation and act as a space to convene actors from government, business, academia and the larger community to generate innovative ideas on relevant issues.	Institute of Policy Studies (IPS)
Japan	To support government's economic policy and national growth and development, not to provide alternatives or oppose government policies (Ueno, 1996:229).	National Institute for Research Advancement ²⁵ (NIRA)
South Korea	To provide research and advice to devolved levels of governance.	Seoul Development Institute (SDI), the Incheon Development institute (IDI) and the Daegu-Gyeongbuk Development Institute (DGI)
South Korea and Taiwan	To represent the interest of citizens and develop policy options on an array of social,	People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy (PSPD) and Citizen's Coalition for Economic Justice (CCEJ) in South

²⁴ CSIS: Centre for Strategic and International Studies - <http://www.csis.or.id>

²⁵ National Institute for Research Advancement – www.nira.or.jp

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	economic, political and cultural rights issues, including income distribution, labour rights, women's rights and environmental protection.	Korea The Awakening Foundation in Taiwan
	To support political parties to develop policy proposal and oversee government.	The Youido Institute and the Progressive Politics Institute in South Korea

This section has shown how political trends influenced the origin and development of think tanks across the region. Based on this analysis, the next section critiques the orthodox approach to assessing think tanks.

4. Critiquing the orthodoxy

Locating think tanks within their political environment enriches our understanding of their origin and development and reveals their basic nature, enshrined functions, and their potential influence within different political contexts. The study of think tanks and political parties in Latin America (Mendizabal and Sample (eds), 2009), from which this study follows, challenged the existing approach to both the research of think tanks and the debate over their definition. As we have seen, think tanks are political actors, and understanding the politics of a country or region would lead to a more coherent and accurate understanding of think tanks across the developing world. Measuring the effectiveness of think tanks in achieving developmental objectives – a key donor priority – is further enhanced, provided that general political parameters are taken into account. This is something that prevailing think tank accounts overwhelmingly fail to address. Why do they refrain from doing so?

Although earlier think tank characterisations might fit many entities in the West, extending their applicability towards other regions has been rather problematic. Firstly, the orthodox approach assumes the politics of the context is the same across boundaries. It becomes an abstract factor that does not enter the sphere of analysis and is removed from it. As a result, existing institutional arrangements, means of production, systems of governance, power relations among different groups, ethnic cleavages, ideological and religious orientations, that are all part and parcel of nations, are swiftly eliminated from the picture. Subsequently, these analyses comprehend think tanks through their own prism, independent of the environment from which they emerge and function.

Secondly, the approach is not historically grounded; it fails to grasp that institutions that emerge within national and regional contexts are intricately tied to their historical paths of development. Such an approach would be akin towards understanding individuals without paying any attention to their lineage. Coherent accounts of think tank development that spell out their nature and character would result from an approach that situates them within the politics of their context.

4.1 'Development' think tanks of East Asia - an alternate account

The underlying message is that think tanks are clearly political products of their time (Mendizabal, 2009 in Mendizabal and Sample (eds), 2009). From the preceding analysis, we can safely infer that think tanks in East Asia clearly emerged out of and evolved in conjunction with their respective political environments. And they possess features that challenge many of the propositions put forth by prevailing think tank accounts. The think tank journey within East Asia clearly points to a dramatically different version of think tanks than that of the orthodox accounts. This paper hence suggests some dimensions that must be taken into account in the development of a working definition or when attempting to describe think tanks in the region.

4.1.1 Location

Given the narrative, we can identify a number of think tank locations. Firstly, there are a set of think tanks that visibly hold strong links with the state and carry out their tasks as an arm of the bureaucracy. Many of them were directly and explicitly established by governments to

contribute towards salient policy tasks at hand. Some of these think tanks are on a longer institutional 'leash' than others. Secondly, some are public-private think tanks or semi-independent think tanks and retain one foot in the public and another in the private sphere. They are not completely independent of the government, but certain operations are conducted in a more or less autonomous manner. Funding and leadership usually rest in the hands of the state leading to a 'revolving door' type process for both their leaders and staff. Respect for education and academic research within Asian culture resulted in many think tanks being situated within universities. Private think tanks located within corporations and financial institutions have emerged to improve performance. With increased plurality accompanying the transition to democracy in many countries across the regions, and power shifting from individuals and regimes to a range of domestic, regional and global actors, new think tanks emerged to target regional organisations and audiences; to represent the interest of citizens (often funded by foreign entities); to support political parties in developing policy options and overseeing government; and to provide policy advice and support to devolved levels of governance.

4.1.2 Functions

The functions or roles that think tanks have are related to their location. However, it is important to note that functions evolve as policy processes become more relaxed and open. Most Asian think tanks were essentially 'establishment bodies' working to transmit expertise and intellect through various means upwards through the decision-making system. Given the prevalence of elitist policy processes and closed policy contexts across the region, most early institutes operated with a clear mandate of research or advocacy and worked to advance the prevailing agenda. Think tanks in this sense functioned as 'policy defenders' that worked towards legitimising the preferred path chosen by the state, or the ruling individual or regime. This role also served their self interest by preserving their financial resources and increasing their visibility and possibly influence within the political system. Think tanks were not always 'catalysts' for ideas and action for change; their functions and operations were invariably shaped by the political actors and discourses governing their context.

4.1.3 Independence

Independence is a rare commodity as far as think tanks in East Asia are concerned.²⁶ Historically, most have derived financial and intellectual support and mandate from the state or the private sector, which naturally curbed their ability to offer fresh ideas that departed from the mainstream. Narrow policy contexts unavoidably shaped not only the space given to think tanks, but also their agenda and activism and as a consequence, most of these think tanks, as many academics have pointed out, are 'state directed.'²⁷ Therefore, unlike the importance given to it in Western debates, historically speaking, independence has not been particularly salient in the Asian context. It is an asset when the existing political system allows for policy engagement and exchange to occur between different political actors. In this case, think tanks might find it advantageous to do so. However, since the state has generally speaking, dominated politics and policy-making in most of the East Asian region with a 'strong

²⁶ A careful reading of Andrew Rich's historical account of think tanks in the United States would confirm that independence is, at best, relative.

²⁷ Please refer to Jayasuriya, K. (1994) 'Singapore: The Politics of Regional Definition', *The Pacific Review*, 7(4) 411-420.

first', think tanks deviating from the governing consensus could see a reduction in their space for manoeuvre and even risk their survival. Nevertheless, the spread of democratic institutions across some countries in the region, but also the need for more innovative policy options, has seen the emergence of think tanks more distant from the bureaucracy and even private non-governmental think tanks as part of a growing civil society.

4.1.4 Influence

The question of think tank influence has always remained problematic due to the difficulties that exist in being able to measure it. Diane Stone argues that identifying cases of direct think tank influence is an exercise fraught with difficulty (Stone, 2004, 2005). Yet, influence remains an issue that cannot be sidestepped. In the Asian scenario, we need to look for more precise and nuanced meanings of influence: both the process and its outcomes. And that means we need to understand think tanks against the backdrop of a larger developmental state narrative. Influence is also determined by the positioning of think tanks within a particular narrative, their proximity to elites, their presence in policy processes, and their utility towards promoting larger projects. Within this narrative, further research could lead towards a sharpening of scenarios, illustrating and refuting the influence of think tanks. Additionally, such an approach would also generate better methods for measuring think tanks.

5. Conclusion - bringing politics back

This paper argues that insufficient attention has been paid to understanding think tanks through a political lens. We do so here in order to analyse the origins and think tanks in East and Southeast Asia. We presented two factors influencing the politics of East Asia – the politics of power and the politics of production. Using these factors as a lens through which to view politics we identify three key political threads: nationalism; the extent of pluralism or liberalisation; and the concentration of power. We see that these political threads have shaped the origin and development of think tanks in three ways: 1) their location relative to the bureaucracy 2) their thematic focus and 3) the political interests they represent.

Firstly, early think tanks in the region held strong links with the state and carried out their tasks as an arm of the bureaucracy. Many of them were directly and explicitly established by governments to contribute towards salient policy tasks. Public-private or semi-independent think tanks emerged in some countries, which retained one foot in the public and another in the private sphere. Think tanks were often established by private corporations and financial institutions to assist their operations and advance the cause for economic growth, while others (more recently) became non-governmental think tanks working on social issues, rights and justice.

Secondly, think tanks emerged and contributed towards national, economic projects unveiled by these developmental states albeit in different capacities. Technocratic, economic-oriented think tanks surfaced to assist the process of economic development in varying capacities to support and implement the governing agenda. Owing to the dominance of state bureaucracy in policy-making, the initial generation of East Asian think tanks were closely located in and around this bureaucracy. As reforms opened the region up, think tanks began to cluster around the corporate and financial sector with emphasis given towards market based agendas. However, the overarching objective was clear: economic growth. Security think tanks also emerged to facilitate the deliberation of pressing security threats that endangered the growth trajectory of the nation. And growth was critical since it safeguarded the sovereignty and stability of infant nations.

Thirdly, the power dynamics and relationships within countries reproduced themselves through think tanks. Many were created as instruments to legitimise and consolidate existing regimes or leaders, as well as the developmental state narrative. Legitimacy is a critical commodity since most regimes are held accountable based on their ability to spur growth and not their democratic credentials. Hence, the legitimacy of the economic agenda also partially rested on the ability of think tanks to disseminate governmental agendas and obtain public support. More than any other factor, there was a political impetus underpinning the efforts of think tanks as this did not only determine their establishment, but also their subsequent nature, focus and arguably their influence. Yet, we find inadequate attention being given towards understanding them with reference to their respective contexts.

The need to employ such an approach is further amplified when focusing on think tanks that emerge within developmental contexts. Poverty reduction and pro-poor policy outcomes are contingent on how 'developmental' institutions are and their ability to build coalitions across society to implement policies aimed at promoting economic growth. The potential for research along this avenue is promising given the differences that developing contexts exhibit. And the

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increasing amount of attention being given to think tanks to facilitate developmental outcomes augurs well for enabling more research to occur. Yet without recognising the centrality of politics in establishing and driving think tanks, we will not be able to effectively conceptualise think tanks or measure their ability in achieving pro-poor outcomes. Only such an approach will provide an adept understanding of think tanks and offer a more grounded approach to assess their performance.

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