

In the shadow of the state: Think tanks and foreign policy in Latin America

Federico Merke

Universidad de San Andrés

Gino Pauselli

Universidad de San Andrés

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the role of think tanks as members of civil society in Latin America. Our goal is to present an initial conceptualization and measurement of the role think tanks play in the foreign policy sub-subsystem. We focus on three of the most influential think tanks in the region: CARI (Argentina), CEBRI (Brazil), and COMEXI (Mexico). This paper suggests that the state's characteristics and the character of its civil society determine the type and strength of its think tanks. This paper also considers the challenges that think tanks face in Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico more generally by comparing each chosen think tank's board, public activities, presence in local media and social media, and publications. We conclude that there have yet to be significant incentives and resources available for think tanks in Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico to grow and, thus, Latin American think tanks' activities typically follow their governments' agendas.

Keywords

Latin America, think tanks, foreign policy, Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, CARI, CEBRI, COMEXI

Over the past 10 years, there has been a rapid growth of interest in the role of civil society in Latin America. The growing diversity of scholarship on civil society has included greater study of think tanks in Latin America, even if, thus far, that scholarly attention has yielded rather limited results. The existence of modern think tanks in the region is a more recent phenomenon than civil society itself,

Corresponding author:

Gino Pauselli, Universidad de San Andrés, Vito Dumas 248, Victoria, Buenos Aires, Argentina.

Email: gpauselli@udesa.edu.ar

and the very concept of the “think tank” (hardly translatable into Spanish or Portuguese) is still contested. Moreover, the study of think tanks remains dominated by historical experiences in North America and Great Britain. It follows that much of the conceptual and empirical discussion of the role that think tanks play in modern open societies mirrors the experience of rich developed countries with vibrant civil societies. What’s more, although the study of think tanks in Latin America has attracted scholarly attention, when it comes to think tanks *and* Latin American global affairs we are still very much in uncharted territory. In sum, little is known about these think tanks and the ways they seek to shape foreign policy.

The aim of this article is to explore how think tanks try to shape foreign policy in Latin America and to evaluate the convergence between their agendas and Latin American governments’ foreign policy priorities. To do so, we examine the experiences of three think tanks—the Argentine Council for International Relations (CARI), the Brazilian Center of International Relations (CEBRI), and the Mexican Council of International Affairs (COMEXI)—between 2003 and 2013. According to the Global Go To Think Tank Index, these organizations are the most important centres in Latin America.¹ They also represent the three most economically and politically important countries in the region.

The rest of the article will proceed as follows. The first section briefly revisits the literature regarding think tanks and foreign policy, and offers an alternative conceptualization to understand the Latin American experience. The second section examines CARI, CEBRI, and COMEXI in terms of their (1) boards’ composition, (2) public activities, (3) media presence, (4) social media presence, and (5) publications. The final section offers an overall analysis of the role think tanks play in foreign policy in the three countries under consideration. Given the lack of previous research on think tanks in the region, this article does not apply any particular theory or make any particular causal claim. Instead, it provides an initial conceptualization with which to consider foreign affairs in Latin America and presents some preliminary observations about the think tanks’ functionality.

Think tanks and foreign policy in national settings

International relations (IR) scholars have been increasingly interested in improving our understanding of the role of domestic politics in shaping foreign policy. This trend has followed predictable theoretical lines. Whereas realists have focused on elite perceptions and domestic state structures, liberals have emphasized the impact of regime type and the formation of preferences at the societal level.² Constructivists, in turn, have paid closer attention to the role that ideas and

1. James G. McGann, “2013 Global Go To Think Tank Index Report,” 22 January 2014, <http://gotothinktank.com/dev1/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/GoToReport2013.pdf> (accessed 8 June 2015).
2. Andrew Moravcsik, “Taking preferences seriously: A liberal theory of international politics,” *International Organization* 51, no. 4 (autumn 1997): 513–553.

social identities may play in foreign policy.³ All in all, the debate has opened up the discussion to understand foreign policy as an arena in which different actors struggle to forward their interests, put forth their ideas, or simply influence public decisions.

In this intellectual context within the IR discipline, a growing interest has developed in examining the role of think tanks in shaping foreign policy. That is to say, foreign policy relies on information, ideas, and knowledge about the world, and think tanks are crucial actors in that marketplace of ideas. They constitute transmission belts that bridge the world of political ideas by providing public policy research, analysis, and advice to governments and political parties.⁴ In doing so, they help governments understand the issues and make informed policy choices. Briefly put, think tanks offer the expertise and long-range vision that government officials lack or have no time to develop. Thus, there is ample reason to examine their impact on foreign policy.

Beyond these observations, however, there remains a lively discussion about the type of think tanks that exist, their market strategies, and their ability to influence policies.⁵ Some think tanks are “universities without students”; others are committed advocates of sorts; and still others opt for a more open, pluralist policy forum to draw together experts to reach informed, long-term agreement on critical, strategic policies and processes. While they use different strategies, think tanks share the objectives of influence and prestige in the public space. To a significant extent, think tanks survive when they successfully channel vested interests, ideas, or values from society to governments. Paraphrasing Robert Cox’s now famous dictum, think tanks are always *for* someone and *for* some purpose.⁶

There is now a rich and diverse literature that considers the influence of think tanks on public policy.⁷ For the purposes of this paper, we shall summarize some of the most pertinent observations and findings. First, the discussion of how to estimate their influence in public policy is still contested terrain. Certainly, think tanks are influential actors. Howard Wiarda has called them “as influential as political parties, interest groups, and other major institutions.”⁸ They “set the policy agenda

3. Thomas Risse, Stephen C. Ropp, and Kathryn Sikkink, *The Power of Human Rights: International Norms and Domestic Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Michael Zürn and Jeffrey T. Checkel, “Getting socialized to build bridges: Constructivism and rationalism, Europe and the nation-state,” *International Organization* 59, no. 4 (October 2005): 1045–1079; Brian Greenhill, “The company you keep: International socialization and the diffusion of human rights norms,” *International Studies Quarterly* 54, no. 1 (March 2010): 127–145.
4. James G. McGann, *Think Tanks and Policy Advice in the US: Academics, Advisors and Advocates* (New York: Routledge, 2007)
5. James G. McGann, “Think tanks and policy advice in the US,” August 2005, http://www.kas.de/wf/doc/kas_7042-1522-1-30.pdf?050810140439 (accessed 8 June 2015).
6. Robert Cox, “Social forces, state and world orders: Beyond international relations theory,” in Roberto Keohane, ed., *Neorealism and Its Critics* (New York: Columbia University, 1986), 204–254.
7. Howard Wiarda, *Think Tanks and Foreign Policy: The Foreign Policy Research Institute and Presidential Politics* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2010).
8. *Ibid.*, 29.

and define the issues.”⁹ When Eliza Patterson and Jakobine Janucek studied the Brookings Institute and the Heritage Foundation, they found that both institutions were effecting policy change.¹⁰ Kubilay Yado Arin considered the influence of think tanks on US foreign policy between 1992 and 2008 and concluded that think tanks had become significant actors in US policy-making. Moreover, rather than merely reacting to government policy, some had even developed their own policy agendas.¹¹ We now know that US think tanks affected the debate on NATO enlargement,¹² and that the Heritage Foundation influenced the debate on missile defence.¹³ How much they shaped these debates, however, remains unclear. “Influence,” explains Wiarda, “is often subtle, quiet, cumulative, unseen.”¹⁴ It is also “murky, hard to untangle, sometimes indirect or second-hand.”¹⁵ As a result, while it is clear that think tanks exert influence, we have yet to establish transparent metrics that might measure their impact objectively.

A number of scholars have tried to bridge the gap between concept formation and measurement, and big data analysis has enabled them to analyze a mix of structured and unstructured online data. In a recent study, for example, Julia Clark and David Roodman¹⁶ developed an index of the public profiles of think tanks. The authors estimated an institution’s engagement with its home government’s public agenda using its rate of citations in both traditional and new media, as well as in academia. Donald Abelson has also encouraged the tracking of think tanks’ media exposure.¹⁷ Kathleen McNutt and Gregory Marchildon have estimated the impact of think tanks’ web-based popularity and policy relevance.¹⁸ Medina Iborra and David Guttormsen¹⁹ studied the visibility and activity of UK foreign affairs think tanks, and concluded that these two factors could “capture a consistent picture of the channels to exercise influence in the field of promotion and

9. Ibid., 30.

10. Eliza Patterson and Jakobine Janucek, “Think-tanks and their influence in the trade policy agenda: The Brookings Institution and the Heritage Foundation, and the debate of the WTO standstill,” 10 March 2010, <http://archive.atlantic-community.org/app/webroot/files/articlepdf/JANUCEK-ThinkTanksWritingSample.pdf> (accessed 8 June 2015).
11. Kubilay Yado Arin, *Think Tanks: The Brain Trusts of US Foreign Policy* (Gräefelfing: Springer VS, 2014).
12. Ronald D. Asmus, “Having impact: Think tanks and the NATO enlargement debate,” *U.S. Foreign Policy Agenda* 7, no. 3 (November 2002): 29–30.
13. Baker Spring, “The Heritage Foundation: Influencing the debate on missile defense,” *U.S. Foreign Policy Agenda* 7, no. 3 (November 2002): 32–34.
14. Wiarda, *Think Tanks and Foreign Policy*, 40.
15. Ibid., 41.
16. Julia Clark and David Roodman, “Measuring think tank performance: An index of public profile,” *CGD Policy Paper* 025 (Washington, DC: Center for Global Development, 2013).
17. Donald Abelson, “Is anybody listening? Assessing the influence of think tanks,” in Adolfo Garcé and Gerardo Uña, eds., *Think Tanks and Public Policies in Latin America* (Fundación Siena and CIPPEC: Buenos Aires, 2010), 11–33.
18. Kathleen McNutt and Gregory Marchildon, “Think tanks and the Web: Measuring visibility and influence,” *Canadian Public Policy* 35, no. 2 (June 2009): 219–236.
19. Iván Medina Iborra and David S.A. Guttormsen, “Visibility and activity: Foreign affairs think tanks in the United Kingdom,” *Political Perspectives* 7, no. 1 (2013): 46–74.

creation of ideas.”²⁰ These types of studies, which employ increasingly robust research designs, offer promising avenues for future research.

We must also note that most of the research on think tanks has focused primarily on the so-called Anglosphere. This bias has two direct consequences. Most obvious is the lack of systemic knowledge about think tanks in regions beyond the Western core. Think tanks are growing in other regions and yet we still know little about their functionality, funding strategies, and the impact they may have on public policy. Moreover, most of the existing literature assumes the existence of a polity that enables non-state actors to actually shape politics. In other words, most of the think tank scholarship is focused on what Douglass North, John Wells, and Barry Weingast call “open access orders,”²¹ or open societies that have experienced a significant degree of economic and political development. In such societies, the primacy of the rule of law and access to independent economic and political organizations sustains economic and political competition. This competition generates a “large and varied set of organizations that act as primary agents of creative destruction,” and “forms the basis for the existence of an active civil society, featuring many groups that can mobilize politically when they fear that their interests are being threatened.”²²

The problem with this assumption when it comes to foreign policy research is that most states in post-colonial regions contain only “limited access orders.” Surely, some states outside the Western core are more developed than others, and there is a wide range of development within any given category. Yet social dynamics in limited access orders are fundamentally different. For instance, “political elites divide up control of the economy, each getting some share of the rents.” For North and his colleagues, adequate stability of rent “requires limiting access and competition.”²³ Limited access orders are typically made up of state-controlled industries, patron–client networks, and privileged limited access to organizational forums supported by the state itself. It follows that limited access orders “have interlocking public and private networks of organizations.”²⁴ This interpretation, contestable though it surely is, nevertheless highlights a number of important points in our more general analytical understanding of think tanks.

To begin, we suggest that the nature and strength of think tanks in limited access orders may differ from those of think tanks located in countries with open access orders. Think tanks do not exist in a political vacuum but are part of the very fabric of society. Therefore, if we want to understand the role think tanks play, we should first examine the type of state in which think tanks function, that is, the location of

20. Ibid., 62.

21. Douglass North, John Joseph Wallis, and Barry Weingast, *Violence and Social Orders* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

22. Douglass North, John Joseph Wallis, and Barry Weingast, “Violence and the rise of open-access orders,” *Journal of Democracy* 20, no. 1 (2009): 63.

23. Douglass North, John Joseph Wallis, Steven Webb, and Barry Weingast, “Limited access orders in the developing world: A new approach to the problems of development,” *Policy Research Working Paper* 4359 (World Bank, 2007): 1.

24. Ibid., 11.

the state on the open/limited access order spectrum. Simply put, the type of state and the character of its civil society determine the type, autonomy, and strength of think tanks. Consider the US, for example. Any cursory inspection of US history reveals the development of weak political institutions alongside the growth of a strong and highly organized civil society. The domestic structure in the US, therefore, comes closer to the society-dominated type. In this context, the state is more open to pressures from societal interest groups. Policy networks exhibit multiple points of access to policy-making, numerous veto points, and a flexible range of coalition-building processes.

The Latin American case points in another direction. States in this region exhibit more centralized political institutions, are better able to resist social demands, and generally possess a higher degree of autonomy vis-à-vis society. In this setting, therefore, heads of government have always enjoyed a wide margin of manoeuvre to conduct foreign affairs.²⁵ That flexibility has typically reduced the number of entry points to shape foreign policy from the outside. With notable exceptions, legislatures and civil society have therefore played minor roles in foreign policy.²⁶ Certainly their roles have been growing over the last decade or so, but they are still far from becoming focal points in the decision-making process. Private lobby groups in foreign affairs therefore tend to put forward their demands before presidents and foreign ministers directly, rather than working through think tanks. This history helps explain why foreign policy think tanks in Latin America are a relatively recent phenomenon. In 1978 there was only one think tank exclusively devoted to foreign affairs in the region: CARI. In 1993 there were three, and today there are 10 such think tanks in 10 Latin American countries.²⁷

This is, of course, a very broad picture, and we realize that Latin America is too extensive a region to generalize. Yet we suggest that these features are particularly relevant in understanding the cases of Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico. All three countries have exhibited a long tradition of presidential leadership in designing and implementing foreign policy. Much like the US, these countries are also federal countries, and thus states (or provinces) are important *loci* of power.²⁸ Yet, for a variety of reasons, foreign policy is hardly an issue for governors.²⁹ Some might

25. Andrés Malamud, "Presidential diplomacy and the institutional underpinnings of MERCOSUR: An empirical examination," *Latin American Research Review* 40, no. 1 (2005): 138–164.
26. Janina Onuki, Amâncio de Oliveira, and Pedro Feliú, "Political parties, foreign policy and ideology: Argentina and Chile in comparative perspective," *Brazilian Political Science Review* 3, no. 2 (2009): 127–154.
27. Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, Mexico, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay, and Venezuela have foreign policy think tanks.
28. Leticia Pinheiro, "Autores y actores de la política exterior brasileña," *Foreign Affairs Latinoamérica* 9, no. 2 (2009): 14–24; Mónica Salomón and Carmen Nunes, "A ação externa dos governos subnacionais no Brasil: Os casos de Rio Grande do Sul e de Porto Alegre. Um estudo comparativo de dois tipos de atores mistos," *Contexto Internacional* 29, no. 1 (2007): 99–147.
29. Governors can (and indeed do) conclude international agreements with foreign actors, but they are constitutionally forbidden to alter foreign policy or national interests with those powers. See Eduardo Iglesias, Valeria Iglesias, and Graciela Zubełzú, *Las provincias argentinas en el escenario internacional. Desafíos y obstáculos de un sistema federal* (Buenos Aires: Programa de Naciones Unidas para el Desarrollo, 2008).

consider Brazil exceptional, but Argentina and Mexico do not have (federal) industrial-military complexes that demand expensive grand strategies.

In addition, these three countries have developed a cadre of professional diplomats who function as gatekeepers of the national interest. Argentina is probably the country in which presidential leadership in foreign policy is exercised with the fewest restraints. Its foreign service training institute was established in 1963, providing the ministry with highly qualified diplomats, none of whom reached the position of foreign minister. Argentine presidents have therefore relied more on loyal politicians than on expert diplomats. Mexico's case may look similar, yet for 70 years the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) left a permanent imprint on the role parties can play in foreign policy-making, often overruling the foreign ministry or even shaping its preferences. Mexico's Instituto Matías Romero was founded in 1974, and since then it has nurtured the highest echelons of the foreign ministry. In the case of Brazil, the situation looks different. For most of its modern history, Itamaraty (as the foreign ministry is called) has deployed a powerful set of resources to capture the diplomatic imagination of Brazil, thus defining the national interest with a considerable level of autonomy vis-à-vis the presidency.³⁰ In sum, for various reasons, the policy network in Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico seems to be dominated by the state and the presidency, particularly when it comes to foreign policy.

But are the three countries alike? Mexico has traditionally pursued a low-key foreign policy. Much of its agenda has been centred on the challenge of cohabitation with the US and, secondarily, on strengthening relations with Latin America. Decision-making power has typically been delegated to a small number of actors: the president, the secretary of foreign affairs, and a small circle of politicians, intellectuals, and diplomats flocking around the PRI Party. In the last 15 years or so, however, the situation has begun to change. The US continues to be the central concern of Mexico's foreign agenda, but a pool of new actors and themes has certainly broadened the traditional list of priorities to include China, human rights, climate change, peacekeeping, migration, drugs, democracy, and UN reform. Although these transformations may suggest a more open space in which think tanks may grow, more time is needed for society to adapt to them. For many years Mexico, with its state-led society and inward-looking agenda, has punched beneath its weight in the international system—a scenario that has obviously not created the necessary incentives for foreign affairs think tanks to flourish.

Further south, for most of its history, Brazil has been construed as a “gentle giant of limitless potential,” always in search of formal international recognition.³¹

30. While Itamaraty's dominance in foreign policy-making has been declining, this does not mean that Brazil's ministry of foreign relations has become impotent; rather, it has had to accommodate these new dynamics and has seen its relative influence wane. See Jeffrey W. Cason and Timothy J. Power, “Presidentialization, pluralization, and the rollback of Itamaraty: Explaining change in Brazilian foreign policy making in the Cardoso-Lula era,” *International Political Science Review* 30, no. 2 (2009): 117–140. We thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.

31. Jean Daudelin, “Coming of age? Recent scholarship on Brazilian foreign policy,” *Latin American Research Review* 48, no. 2 (2013): 204–217.

Hence, that search for autonomy has included consistent efforts to further Brazilian independence from the Western core. Finally, foreign policy in Brazil “always had a strongly developmentalist component.”³² For a number of decades, then, the ideologies of national autonomy and development have constituted Brazil’s understanding of its place in the world. This ideology has served as a narrative by which to draw together, albeit uncomfortably, Brazil’s left and right wings. As a result, unlike Mexico, Brazil has recurrently punched above its weight in the world. Moreover, in the last 15 years or so, democratic stability and sound macroeconomic fundamentals have allowed Brazil to develop a more assertive diplomatic identity. With this track record, one would expect a much more enthused society ready to offer intellectual and research insights into foreign policy circles. Yet, Brazil’s foreign policy has remained the cottage industry of sophisticated diplomatic elites who have long enjoyed a monopoly on defining the national interest.

Argentina’s foreign policy is more difficult to capture in a single paragraph. The country has alternatively punched beneath and above its weight and has regularly struggled to attain a balance between domestic and international responsibilities.³³ There are surely a number of reasons to explain this, but its secular decline, both global and regional, is probably the main structural driver of its twists and turns in the last 30 years. More than in Brazil or Mexico, foreign policy in Argentina has been an instrument of domestic politics. The Argentine congress has had a rather marginal role in foreign policy-making. The work of foreign policy commissions has tended to be highly symbolic and has rarely extended beyond formal statements. This approach has reinforced the autonomy of the presidency in designing and executing foreign policy, and has reduced the entry points for lobby groups and think tanks. Moreover, the collapse of Argentina’s party system has only increased the parochial view of Argentine political elites, and there remains a considerable attention deficit in foreign affairs.

If these observations are sound, foreign policy think tanks in all three countries face a number of challenges. First, think tanks must deal with a foreign policy circle that is still quite restricted to the presidency and either the foreign ministry (as in Brazil) or the ruling party (as in Mexico). Second, they need to make additional efforts to capture the attention of the media, to engage in intellectual circles, and to reach the corporate business community—none of which, for many reasons, feel committed to advancing a foreign policy agenda.³⁴ Third, given the lack of varied constituencies, think tanks have fewer funding options, which means that their working agendas are more the result of government actions than of societal demands. In the extreme case, when the state becomes a think tank’s principal patron, the majority of the organization’s scholarship on questions of foreign policy simply comes to reflect state and regime interests. In such an incentive

32. Regina Soares de Lima and Mônica Hirst, “Brazil as an intermediate state and regional power: Action, choice and responsibilities,” *International Affairs* 82, no. 1 (January 2006): 22.

33. Roberto Russell, ed., *Argentina 1910–2010: Balance de un siglo* (Buenos Aires: Taurus, 2006).

34. For a different view on the commitment of corporate business to the advancement of foreign policy agendas, see Pedro Henrique Pedreira Campos, *Estranhas Catedrais: as empreiteiras brasileiras e a ditadura civil-militar, 1964–1988* (Niterói: Editora da UFF, 2014).

structure, think tanks feel more compelled to develop a forward view than to critically examine past and present foreign policies. In sum, the think tanks analyzed here work in the shadow of the state.

Three cases: CARI, CEBRI, and COMEXI

In light of these observations, this section examines in more detail the functioning of CARI, CEBRI, and COMEXI by exploring in a comparative manner their board compositions, scholarly programs, traditional media presence, social media presence, and publications.

Board composition

The *Consejo Argentino para las Relaciones Internacionales* (CARI) is a non-partisan, non-profit organization. Established in 1978 by the former foreign minister Carlos Manuel Muñiz, CARI aims to examine global challenges and the road that Argentina must take in order to face them. CARI offers a venue for local actors, public and private, to meet and discuss global affairs from an Argentine standpoint. Among the founding members was a select group of diplomats, military officers, politicians, and businesspeople with close connections to the state bureaucracy. Today, CARI's board comprises state officials, businesspeople, scholars, politicians, and diplomats in more or less equal parts. The educational background of its members, however, favours legal studies (75 percent). Lastly, it is worth mentioning that CARI's current president, Adalberto Rodriguez Giavarini, and two members of its board have been foreign ministers, while another member was once the deputy minister.

Brazil's foreign policy elite took another 20 years to open the first think tank in the country entirely devoted to foreign affairs. The *Centro Brasileiro de Relações Internacionais* (CEBRI), founded in 1998, is also a non-partisan, non-profit organization which aims to further national debate on global affairs and to reach foreign policy decision-makers. At its inception, CEBRI's membership consisted of diplomats, businesspeople, and scholars. At present, the organization's board still mostly (80 percent) comprises individuals from those three groups. Unlike CARI, the educational background of the CEBRI board leans more toward economics, engineering, and sociology. Similar to CARI, however, the board includes former ministers or vice-ministers of foreign affairs, including Fernando Henrique Cardoso and Luis Felipe Lampreia. CEBRI was established during the Cardoso years (1995–2002) and has always been considered a more *tucano*³⁵ organization (today's board includes no state officials). Yet CEBRI has struggled to position itself as a focal point to openly discuss foreign affairs in a non-partisan manner.

Mexico's experience is even more recent, with the *Consejo Mexicano de Asuntos Internacionales* (COMEXI) established in 2002 by a leading diplomat, Andrés Rozental. COMEXI's role is similar to that of CARI and CEBRI. The difference is

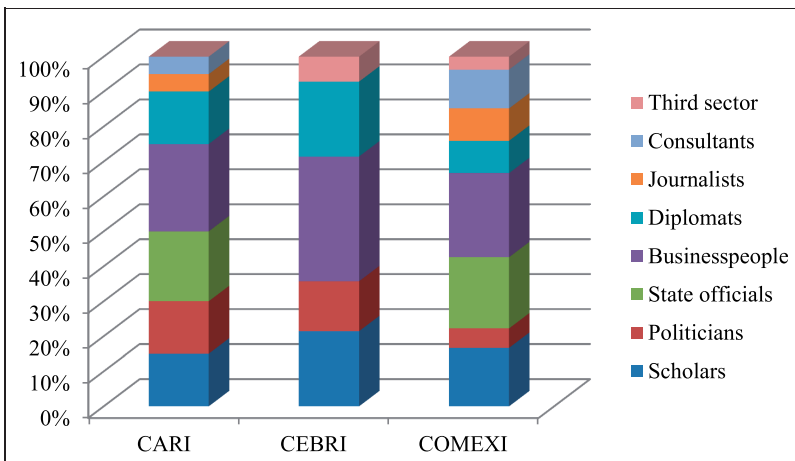
35. Brazil's Social Democracy Party members are known as *Tucano*.

that the Mexican think tank makes its commitment to effect change in foreign policy more explicit. In addition, COMEXI seems to have a more explicit connection to the corporate sector. Indeed, it was initially sponsored by Mittal Steel and TELMEX. Unlike CEBRI, but like CARI, COMEXI includes state officials among its current board (roughly 30 percent). It also hosts a number of businesspeople and scholars. Almost half of the board has been educated in IR or political science, while economists and lawyers represent around one-third of its members. Finally, COMEXI's board also includes former ministers and vice-ministers of foreign affairs, including Fernando Solana, Andrés Rozental, Rosario Green, and Bernardo Sepúlveda Amor.

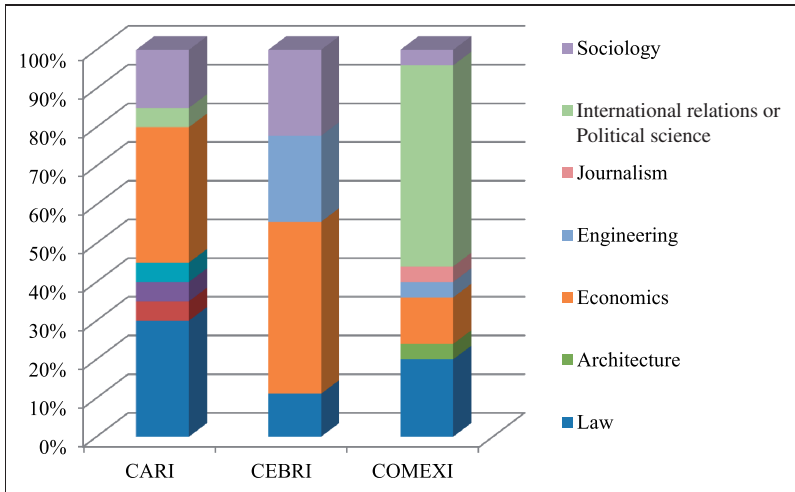
Academic programs

We used the CARI, CEBRI, and COMEXI websites to determine that the three think tanks organized 1423 public events between 2003 and 2013. CARI was by far the most active, having hosted 901 events over the 11 years (or 88 per year). CEBRI organized 170 events between 2004 and 2011 (21 per year), and COMEXI ran 352 events between 2005 and 2012 (44 per year). Most of these events are lectures (59 percent of CARI's activities; 63 percent of CEBRI's; and 81 percent of COMEXI's), the majority of which covered national foreign policy, economics, and security. Other events dealt with pressing issues of the day. CARI, for instance, has organized events relating to art, culture, education, and science and technology. COMEXI pays closer attention to migration, an issue hardly examined by CEBRI, which prefers to focus on regional integration and the environment.

In terms of geographical coverage, Latin America is the only region that accounts for more than 29 percent of the activities organized by the three think tanks. As expected, the US is the next most important region for CEBRI and COMEXI (20.7 percent and 26.3 percent), but only sixth for CARI (5.3 percent).



Graph 1. Board's composition by profession.



Graph 2. Board's composition by academic background.

CARI instead devotes a significant amount of attention to East and Central Asia (17.8 percent), the Middle East (16.2 percent), and Western Europe (15.8 percent). Western Europe is the third most important region in CEBRI's and COMEXI's activities (13 percent and 12.5 percent, respectively), followed by East and Central Asia (10.9 percent and 12.5 percent, respectively). Eastern Europe, the Polar regions, and the Pacific Islands are the least studied regions overall: on average, they are represented in 3 percent or less of the events.

In summary, CARI, CEBRI, and COMEXI are more *lecture-intensive* than *research-intensive* think tanks. In other words, their open venues are more important than any of the views that they might themselves put forward. Their scholarly agendas seem to follow global events (mainly in the economic and security sectors), but each think tank also examines issues closer to its home country's national foreign policy concerns. Finally, geography matters: all three institutions consider Latin America to be a priority in their programs, and two place the US a close second.

Media presence (traditional)

To analyze media exposure, we examined news articles from two major newspapers from each country in which CARI, CEBRI, and COMEXI were mentioned.³⁶

36. The newspapers considered were *Clarín* and *La Nación* in Argentina, *Folha* and *O Estado de S. Paulo* in Brazil, and *El Universal* and *La Prensa* in Mexico. We classified 543 news articles published between 2002 and 2014. We selected the two most important newspapers from each country based on the size of their readership and their websites' capability to search news by keywords. For further reading on major newspapers in the region, see Pablo J. Boczkowski and Eugenia Mitchellstein, *The News Gap: When the Information Preferences of the Media and the Public Diverge* (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2013), 1–22.

From 2002 to 2014, CARI appeared most often in local media, but its performance has been declining since 2008. In 2002, CARI appeared in Argentina's two largest newspapers 33 times while CEBRI appeared in 11 news articles and COMEXI in none. In 2013 CARI appeared in only six news stories, while CEBRI was referred to 14 times and COMEXI 24.

CARI is typically mentioned in discussions of the Malvinas/Falkland Islands. It also appears when the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR), the US, or China are in the news, as well as in stories on terrorism. CEBRI's image in the local media is quite different. It is more often associated with discussions of Argentina, Venezuela, the Free Trade Area of the Americas, the World Trade Organization (the Doha Round in particular), and the G-20. In other words, the focus is almost exclusively economic. COMEXI's experience is similar. Most news articles about it are related to bilateral relations with the US and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Nonetheless, the visit of Juan Manuel Santos, president of Colombia, was responsible for a surge of mentions in the local media. Recently, the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) negotiations also generated references to COMEXI. Most of the relevant articles appeared in the politics, economics, or opinion sections. Of the three think tanks, only COMEXI seems eager to target newspaper opinion pages. CARI and CEBRI prefer not to publish articles signed by their members.

Yet there is more to it. When analyzing think tanks' presence in the print media, it is important to look at *how* the institution is mentioned. For this purpose, we classified each think tank's mentions into five categories.³⁷ Our system revealed that the centres have different media profiles. CARI's presence in *La Nación* and *Clarín* is mainly as a venue for events (49.7 percent). Brazilian newspapers cite CEBRI most often when they mention or interview one of its members (46.6 percent). COMEXI's profile is in between. Although every media appearance can be seen as an attempt to influence the public agenda, we suggest that opinion articles are better placed to express a point of view and thus to put pressure on decision-makers. In this context, COMEXI's members have published significantly more opinion articles in local media outlets (24.5 percent of mentions), while CEBRI and CARI do not use this resource to the same extent.³⁸

If our figures are correct, media exposure in these three think tanks varies. Our first hypothesis is that presence in local media is mainly a function of a think tank's level of activity. In other words, the more activities it carries out, the more media presence it will have. To test this hypothesis, we used a fixed-effects model, with the number of hits (by month) as the dependent variable and the number of events per month as the independent variable. The fixed-effects model treats variables' quantities as if they are non-random.

37. A think tank could be mentioned in a news article as (a) a forum where an event was or would be held; (b) an institutional organizer of a past or future activity; (c) the institutional home of a member who was him or herself mentioned; (d) the institution whose activity or work was being presented or discussed; or (e) the institutional home of the article's author.

38. The equivalent numbers for CEBRI and CARI are 9.9 percent and 1 percent, respectively.

We included three control variables in order to account for other variables' effects not considered in our explanation. The first one is the number of mentions the country had in the *New York Times*. The second controls for media exposure by indicating the absence or presence of a G-20 summit (using the values 0 and 1, respectively). Finally, we control for whether or not the country occupied a chair in the UN Security Council as a non-permanent member. These variables account for increased levels of media attention the country might have which could influence the level of exposure of a think tank devoted to international affairs. We used four basic models. The first model examines the statistical relationships between all of the media appearances and events from the three institutions. The remaining three models are specific to each think tank's hits in the media and public events.

The results of our statistical analysis show that public events are positively correlated with the number of hits in media, especially in the cases of CEBRI and COMEXI.³⁹ According to our data, every public activity held by CEBRI increases the likelihood of being mentioned in local media by 0.21, and, in the case of COMEXI, by 0.15. CARI's presence in media increases by 0.05 with every additional public event, although the statistical relationship is not as strong in this case. In other words, for each public activity held by CEBRI, there exists a 21 percent greater chance that the organization will be mentioned in a local newspaper. These chances are 15 percent for COMEXI and 5 percent for CARI.

It is also worth noting that a country's membership in the UN Security Council or its attendance at a G-20 summit negatively affects the probability of its local foreign affairs think tank being mentioned in the media. The negative relationship may be an indicator that G-20 and especially UN Security Council activities are not widely covered by local media, whereas other issues that resonate more at home might catch the attention of newspapers.

Social media strategies

Over the last decade, think tanks have begun to rely on social media platforms to share information, disseminate their work, and generate discussion. For example, the Council on Foreign Relations and Chatham House created their Twitter accounts in November 2008 and May 2009, respectively. CEBRI followed suit in June 2009, COMEXI in September 2009, and CARI in October 2010. COMEXI created a Facebook page in April 2010, CEBRI in January 2012, and CARI in April 2012. CARI uses Twitter and Facebook to announce activities and a YouTube channel to broadcast public events live. CEBRI also uses Twitter and Facebook to announce events and YouTube to share records of public activities and interviews. COMEXI uses Twitter and Facebook to share information about Mexico in the international media, as well as to promote or publish analyses and photographs of public events. It uses its YouTube channel to share interviews and records of public events, among other things.

39. See Appendix for more detail.

CARI and CEBRI seem to have had more success with Facebook than with Twitter, having received 2699 and 5471 “likes,” respectively. In contrast, their Twitter accounts have 1173 and 2337 followers, respectively. For COMEXI, Twitter is a more important social media platform. It has 10,773 followers, while its Facebook page has 3840 “likes.” Videos on the think tanks’ YouTube channels have been viewed thousands of times (CEBRI’s 22,596, CARI’s 42,242, and COMEXI’s 160,058). All three think tanks have between 300 and 400 subscribers to their YouTube channels.⁴⁰

We do not have a metric by which to assess these figures. If we simply count likes (from Facebook), followers (from Twitter), and views (from YouTube), COMEXI seems to be the most successful of the three institutions. Indeed, COMEXI uses social media as a way to engage with users interested in international affairs; CARI and CEBRI both use social media to announce upcoming events.

Publications

Think tank publications can also influence the public agenda. The three think tanks in this study have published several books and reports over the last 10 years. CARI has been by far the most prolific, having released 17 publications since 2003, while CEBRI has produced eight and COMEXI five. CARI’s publications have examined, among other topics, the Malvinas/Falkland Islands, Argentina’s relations with Brazil, sub-national international relations, and various elements of history. CEBRI’s projects have focused on MERCOSUR and Brazil’s foreign policy. COMEXI has published mostly on Mexican foreign policy, China, and migration. The think tanks’ publications have been cited, however rarely, in academic journals and books. CARI’s publications, for example, were cited 1.65 times per publication; CEBRI’s were cited, on average, twice per publication; and COMEXI’s almost three times per publication (2.88). These low rates of citation suggest that these publications are likely read seriously by a limited number of experts and state officials.⁴¹

Conclusions

Given the scarcity of knowledge about foreign policy think tanks in Latin America, this article has largely avoided the question of whether or not think tanks shape foreign policy, and has focused instead on how they work, while also evaluating the convergence between their agendas and the government’s foreign policy priorities. In this context, the main argument has been built on a set of interrelated claims.

40. Followers, “likes,” views, and subscribers are as of 24 February 2015.

41. We relied on A.W. Harzing, *Publish or Perish*, 2007, available from <http://www.harzing.com/pop.htm> (accessed 8 June 2015). *Publish or Perish* is a software program that retrieves and analyzes academic citations. As a point of reference, Council on Foreign Relations reports have averaged 28.8 citations (per publication) since 2003. Chatham House (United Kingdom) publications, of which there are more than 650, have received on average 6.64 citations per publication. The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute’s scholarship (Sweden) has been cited at a rate of 9.88 citations per publication.

First, the literature on think tanks is heavily oriented toward organizations housed in open access orders. Second, we must rethink the role that think tanks play as a function of state–society relations. Third, the incentives and resources available for Latin American—and specifically Argentinean, Brazilian, and Mexican—think tanks to grow have, to date, been marginal.

From this analysis, we draw a number of conclusions. First, since CARI, CEBRI, and COMEXI were created by former ministers or vice-ministers of foreign affairs, and members of their boards have also occupied positions in other ministries, all three think tanks have relied on support from state officials, retired diplomats, politicians, military officers, and businesspeople. They were created, and continue to function, in the shadow of the state. This conclusion does not imply that they lack independence vis-à-vis the state, but such reliance could impose restrictions on what can be done and said. In this light, CARI, CEBRI, and COMEXI tend to avoid explicit criticism of current or past policy, and prefer to present forward-looking views on the most pressing international issues.

Second, all three think tanks focus their activities on the national foreign policy agenda of their home country. Simply put, they follow the government’s lead and consequently fall short of thinking “outside the box.” On a related note, the composition of each organization’s board also seems to shape each think tank’s policy agenda. Lawyers at CARI, for instance, have typically been overrepresented at the board table, and it hardly appears coincidental that the council has been more open to discussing problems related to international law, whether that be the case of the Malvinas/Falkland Islands, or questions of international security or human rights. Economists and engineers dominate CEBRI’s board, which in turn seems to reflect a long-standing concern of Brazilian elites with national development and international trade. This pattern is consistent with our initial observation about the role that executives play in foreign policy and the rather small number of constituent groups interested in this topic.

Finally, CARI, CEBRI, and COMEXI struggle to gain the attention of the press. Certainly, the three think tanks become more salient when they hold events; however, they do not appear in the news more often when their home countries attend significant meetings (e.g., the G-20) or assume important commitments (e.g., a non-permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council). According to our analysis, these results reflect not only an “attention deficit” in foreign policy, but also the idea that the ability of these councils to enlighten public opinion and stakeholders is limited. The result is therefore a “low equilibrium”: low demand from the public to the press and low demand from the press to the councils.

Surely, more research on think tanks and foreign policy in the region will contribute to filling the knowledge gaps of the present study. There are at least four avenues to explore. Further investigation is needed to evaluate the qualitative and quantitative impact of foreign affairs think tanks in Latin America. Systemic data on the institutions’ sources of funding is also needed to better understand each think tank’s degree of freedom and flexibility. Content analysis of think tanks’ public activities and media attention could help us understand how the work of

these organizations is related to their exposure in the media. Finally, informal and private channels of influence (e.g., private meetings) might yield a different perspective on the influence of think tanks on the public agenda and decision-making, a perspective that has not been yet properly studied.

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Author Biographies

Federico Merke is a professor of international relations and the director of undergraduate studies in political science and international relations at San Andrés University, Argentina. He is also a researcher at the National Council for Scientific Research (CONICET) and an associate of the Latin American Programme at IDEAS, the London School of Economics.

Gino Pauselli is a research and teaching assistant at the San Andrés University.

Appendix

Media presence and public events.

	(1) All	(2) CARI	(3) CEBRI	(4) COMEXI
Public events	0.0528* (0.053)	0.0346 (0.345)	0.210** (0.031)	0.146** (0.030)
G-20 Summit	-0.332 (0.353)	-0.802 (0.216)	0.0291 (0.963)	-0.0943 (0.858)
UN Security Council membership	-0.508*** (0.007)	-0.669* (0.055)	-0.634** (0.028)	-0.156 (0.617)
International media attention	-0.00381 (0.778)	-0.0564* (0.095)	-0.00947 (0.626)	0.0135 (0.460)
_cons	1.150*** (0.000)	2.304*** (0.000)	0.636* (0.068)	-0.217 (0.665)
N	300	132	72	96

p-values in parentheses.

*p < 0.1, **p < 0.05, ***p < 0.01.