

Think tanks, rankings, the Brookings Institution, and the rise of non-Western think tanks

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After outlining the definition and functions of think tanks, we highlight the significant role played by McGann's Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program (TTCSP). For years, they published rankings of think tanks based on different criteria. Since the United States hosts the most important think tanks globally, we explore several prominent examples, with a particular focus on the Brookings Institution. Additionally, we note a recent and notable rise in the number and influence of think tanks across Asia.

Based on McGann's data, we conducted a bibliometric analysis exploring the relationship between a country's number of think tanks and its Gross Domestic Product (GDP). The results indicate a positive correlation, suggesting that economic capacity may support or incentivize the development of such organizations.

Finally, we focus on think tanks in the Global South, using the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS) as a case study to explore their growing relevance in shaping policy and research agendas in a developing context.

Keywords: *Think tanks, Policy institutes, Brookings institution, Bangladesh, GDP.*

1. Introduction: What is a think tank?

Scientists conduct their scientific activities in various settings such as universities, research institutes, government agencies, hospitals, patent offices, and company labs, among others. However, there is one category that is often overlooked in bibliometric studies, namely, think tanks.

This contribution focuses on exploring think tanks as the topic of interest. The concept of think tanks has often been characterized as “slippery,” mutable, or fuzzy in nature [1]. Think tanks are institutions dedicated to researching, analyzing, and engaging with public policy issues, both domestic and international. They play a crucial role in enabling policymakers and the public to make informed decisions, particularly about public policy [2]. Yet, nowadays, think tanks, sometimes referred to as policy institutes, are commonly defined in a broader sense, encompassing topics such as social policy, sustainability, and culture. In light of this, McGann has formulated the following definition [3]:

Think tanks are institutes that perform research, discovery, and advocacy concerning domestic and international topics such as political strategy, economics, military, technology, social policy, sustainability, and even culture

This definition clearly expands upon the basic definition mentioned earlier by including social policy, sustainability, and culture. Another important point to note is that think tanks are permanent bodies rather than ad-hoc commissions. A review of think tanks and their rankings can be found in [4].

Our article is an expanded version of a presentation made during Collnet 2023: 17th International Conference on Webometrics, Informetrics, and Scientometrics (WIS), held in Dhaka (Bangladesh), where it obtained the best paper award [5].

2. More on think tanks

Think tanks are entities, differing from universities, government agencies, lobbying firms, and advocacy groups, although they may maintain affiliations with any of these entities. Primarily serving as intermediaries between the academic and policymaking spheres, as well as facilitating connections between states and civil society, think tanks operate as independent voices in the public interest. They play a crucial role in translating both applied and basic research into a comprehensible, reliable, and accessible language [3, p.13]. While predominantly non-governmental organizations, some think tanks function as semi-autonomous entities within governments or have associations with political parties, businesses, or the military. McGann [3] categorizes think tanks into seven types: autonomous and independent, quasi-independent (autonomous from the government but controlled by an interest group), government-affiliated, quasi-governmental (exclusively funded by government grants but not part of the formal government structure), university-affiliated, political party-affiliated, and corporate/for-profit. Despite often receiving donations from wealthy individuals or organizations (see further for the case of the Brookings Institution), leading to perceptions of elitism, many think tanks also accept government grants.

Think tanks engage in the publication of reports, articles, studies, and even draft legislation related to policy or societal matters. These publications serve as resources for governments and interest groups, either directly or as sources of inspiration. In this manner,

think tanks contribute to raising awareness about issues of civic importance. Similar to universities, the quality of research conducted by different think tanks varies widely. Consequently, groups like the Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program (TTCSP) at the University of Pennsylvania (USA), under the leadership of James McGann, have endeavored to rank think tanks, a topic explored further below. We already note that all TTCSP reports published before 2020 (since 2008) can be found at: <https://guides.library.upenn.edu/publicpolicyresearchthinktanks>. This website also provides links to think tank guides at Yale University, UC Berkeley, Tulane University, Michigan State University, and the Harvard Kennedy School.

One of the reasons for the existence and growth in the number of think tanks is, according to [3], the need for timely and concise information and analysis that is “in the right form, in the right hands, at the right time.”

The TTCSP distinguishes between think tanks that specialize in one of the following categories, illustrating the variety among them: defense and national security, domestic economic policy, education policy, energy and resource policy, environmental policy, foreign policy and international affairs, domestic health, global health, international development, international economy, science and technology, social policy, water security, food security, and a special category related to transparency and good governance of the think tanks themselves.

It is clear that think tanks are an important player in the global market of ideas and often are part of social power structures. The importance of non-governmental think tanks is illustrated by the case of India, where the government tried to suspend the work of the Centre for Policy Research (CPR) known for its independent policy studies [6].

Due to their strategic role, think tanks, like other comparable institutes, have become targets for hackers seeking to exploit their valuable information. Consequently, these organizations must implement robust cybersecurity measures to safeguard against ransomware attacks and the unauthorized exfiltration of sensitive data. Given the global nature of the cybersecurity challenge, think tanks themselves often study cybersecurity as one of their research topics. This dual role, where think tanks are both potential targets and contributors to the discourse on cybersecurity, underscores the critical importance of fortifying their digital defenses to ensure the integrity and confidentiality of their research and analyses. As the landscape of cyber threats evolves, think tanks must continually adapt and enhance their cybersecurity protocols to maintain a resilient and secure environment in the face of emerging challenges, see e.g. [7].

3. Some specific country and regional information

In this section, we focus on the USA, mentioning also a few other countries and the rise of Asian think tanks. For details and information on other countries, we refer the reader to [3] and regional reports published by McGann and the Lauder Institute.

The oldest American think tank in the modern sense is the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, established in 1910. The Institute for Government Research, founded

in 1916, later merged with two other organizations to become the Brookings Institution. Other important American think tanks with international resonance are the RAND Corporation, the MITRE Corporation, the Institute for Defense Analyses, the Aerospace Corporation, and the MIT Lincoln Laboratory, among others. Also, the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine act as think tanks. The renowned Robert and Renée Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, in short, the Belfer Center, is a top think tank situated within the Harvard Kennedy School at Harvard University, illustrating the connection between top universities and top think tanks.

Another type of think tank is the group of Federally Funded Research and Development Centers (FFRDCs). The U.S. government funds, wholly or in part, activities at approximately 42 FFRDCs [8]. These FFRDCs encompass a diverse range of contractors, including federally owned laboratories, universities, and private companies. They integrate expertise from government, industry, and academia to address complex, long-term, primarily technical, challenges. The FFRDCs include the RAND Corporation, the MITRE Corporation, the Institute for Defense Analyses, the Aerospace Corporation, and the MIT Lincoln Laboratory, already mentioned above.

Brussels (Belgium) hosts most of the European Institutions; hence, a relatively large number of international think tanks are based there. Well-known think tanks are Bruegel, the Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS), Friends of Europe, and the Centre for the New Europe (CNE). Bruegel, the leading Brussels-based think tank, was founded in 2005 and has a governance and funding model based on memberships from member states of the European Union, international corporations, and other institutions. Finally, we note that the leading think tank in Bangladesh is the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS), situated in its capital, Dhaka.

4. Rankings

Since the output of think tanks is mainly thoughts and ideas, such as policy advice, and advice for economic development, they can be said to constitute soft power [9]. Hence, it is difficult to gauge and rank their importance. Yet, the Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program (TTCSP) at the University of Pennsylvania, led by James McGann, annually rated policy institutes worldwide in several categories and presents its findings in the Global Go-To Think Tanks rating index [3]. This institute maintains information on over 11,000 think tanks in a large, comprehensive database. TTCSP studies and assesses policy institutes mainly by consulting a large group of experts. In the latest report [3] it is mentioned that close to 4,000 individuals were consulted. However, mainly consulting a panel of experts involves an element of arbitrariness, and with no emphasis on quantitative data, it is no surprise that this method has been criticized (see e.g., the ranking of BIDS, discussed further on). We see here a parallel with university rankings as published by the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) and the Times Higher Education (THES), which have also been heavily criticized for methodological reasons. Note that, in China, if policy reports or suggestions of university-affiliated think tanks are adopted by government

officials, the government gives the think tanks a certificate of policy adoption. This exceptional situation provides direct and accurate evidence that think tanks can affect government decision-making [10]. In the latest TTCSP report (dated 2020) the Brookings Institution, Washington D.C. (USA) was ranked first as a center of excellence, followed by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (USA), Bruegel (Brussels, Belgium), and the Fundação Getúlio Vargas (FGV) (Brazil).

5. The rise of non-Western think tanks

The TTCSP subdivides the world into six regions: Asia, Europe, Middle East & North Africa, North America, South & Central America, and finally Sub-Saharan Africa. For the readers' information, we mention that Oceania is included in Asia, Russia is in Europe, Israel, Iran, and Türkiye are in the Middle East, Ethiopia is in Sub-Saharan Africa, and Mexico is in North America.

To illustrate the rise of non-Western think tanks, we apply two methods. First, we compare the percentage of countries in each region in the list of all so-called nominated think tanks in 2008 with all think tanks in the database in 2020. Just as a point of attention, we include the absolute numbers for 2020.

Table 1
Evolution of the percentages of think tanks in different regions (data from TTCSP)

Region	% in 2008	% in 2020	Absolute numbers in 2020
Asia	13	30	3,389
Europe	37	26	2,932
North America	26	21	2,397
South & Central America	10	11	1,179
Sub-Saharan Africa	9	6	679
Middle East & North Africa	5	5	599
Total			11,175

Table 1 shows the decline of Europe and to a lesser extent North America and the rise of Asia in terms of the number of think tanks. Also, Sub-Saharan Africa shows a huge relative decline. Note that percentages are rounded so that the total is not always equal to 100%

Table 2 shows similar percentages as in Table 1 but now for the “best”, non-USA think tanks. Concretely we have 56 institutes in 2008 and 153 in 2020. For this reason, we also show the percentages for the top 56 in 2020. Note that the ranking in [3] goes to 154, but there seems to be one American institution in the ranking.

Table 2
Information on the best-ranked institutions in different regions.

Region	% in 2008	% in 2020 (top 56)	% in 2020 (153)
Asia	11	23	28
Europe	77	52	39
North America	7	4	5
South & Central America	4	7	9
Sub-Saharan Africa	2	7	11
Middle East & North Africa	0	7	8

We recall that these rankings (Table 2) do not include the USA. McGann [11] notes that this is done because he felt that the USA would have a distorting effect on the results. Rankings for US institutions are given separately in [11]. Hence, in Table 2, North America is just Canada and Mexico. Note that here too, percentages are rounded so that the total is often not exactly the sum of the parts. Europe is the only region in 2020 with a larger percentage among the top 56 than among the total of 153, indicating a larger group of “better” think tanks. Yet, here the increase in Asian, Middle Eastern, and African think tanks is obvious.

In the next section, we focus on the leading think tank, namely the Brookings Institution.

6. Brookings Institution

The Brookings Institution is named after its founder and philanthropist Robert S. Brookings. Being a prominent think tank, it has produced numerous influential reports across various fields. While it is difficult to pinpoint the absolute “most influential” publications, we present here several programs that have had significant impact over the years.

6.1 Brookings programs

A. Brookings Papers on Economic Activity (BPEA) is a journal of macroeconomics published semiannually since 1970 by the Brookings Institution Press. Each issue of the journal comprises the proceedings of a conference held biannually by the Economic Studies program at the Brookings Institution in Washington, D.C. It features articles on current macroeconomic topics, often with policy implications. Its contents are covered by the WoS, Scopus, and Dimensions, among others.

B. The Hamilton Project Reports: The Hamilton Project is an economic policy initiative at the Brookings Institution, launched in April 2006. It produces and commissions policy proposals and analyses. These reports often propose pragmatic solutions to challenges like income inequality, labor market dynamics, and fiscal policy.

C. James A. Johnson Metro Monitor and Global Metro Monitor. Metro Monitor tracks the economic recovery and performance of the largest 100 metropolitan areas in the United States, while Global Metro Monitor works similarly, but on a global scale. These reports shed light on the shifting dynamics of urban economies in the context of globalization.

D. Brookings Institution Press Books: While not technical reports, the books and book series published by the Brookings Institution Press cover a wide range of topics, contributing to public discourse and policymaking debates. These books are authored by experts affiliated with Brookings and other institutions. In the Web of Science (WoS), we found the following Book Series: Brookings SSPA Series on Public Administration, James A. Johnson Metro Series, Innovative Governance in the 21st Century, Brookings Focus Book, and more.

E. Finally, we have what we may refer to as the Brookings Foreign Policy Studies. Brookings produces numerous reports and analyses on foreign policy issues, ranging from regional conflicts to international institutions and diplomacy. These reports often offer nuanced perspectives and policy recommendations on pressing global challenges.

6.2 Funding

The Brookings Institution received in recent times [12] funding (the examples refer to donations above 2 million dollars) from, among others: Arnold Ventures, BHP Foundation, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the Hutchins Family Foundation, JPMorgan Chase, Philip Knight, the LEGO Foundation, Microsoft Corporation, Dina and George Perry, the Rockefeller Foundation, David Rubenstein, the Embassy of the State of Qatar, and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

This list includes well-known philanthropists and their foundations, such as Bill & Melinda Gates and the Rockefeller Foundation, but there are also some surprises such as the LEGO Foundation and the State of Qatar.

Support of the LEGO Foundation may be dedicated, we guess, to a special program called “The Future of Children”, which is also the name of a journal. This program is a collaboration between the Brookings Institution and Princeton University, focusing on issues related to children and families. The reports produced under this initiative provide evidence-based policy recommendations on topics like early childhood education, child welfare, and health.

7. Think tanks and some bibliometric data

A simple query TS= (“Think tank*” OR “policy institute*”) in the WoS on January 28, 2024, yielded 2,895 results. As this is the result of a TS= (topic) search, the query delivers publications that deal with think tanks, not by think tanks or members of them. Most of these falls in the WoS category of Political Science (462 ones), followed by International Relations (224) and Public Administration (205). There were 41 documents in the category Information Science and Library Science. Here we found some bibliometric studies about Think Tanks, such as [13],[14],[15].

Two journals covered by the Web of Science (WoS), Scopus and Dimensions are related to the Brookings Institution: the Brookings Papers on Economic Activity (BPEA) (published by the Johns Hopkins University Press) and Future of Children (published by the Princeton University Press). Brookings Papers on Economic Activity has a JIF of 5.9 (2022) and belongs to the category of Economics (Q1). Future of Children has a JIF of 1.12 (2021) and belongs to three social sciences categories: Family Studies (Q4), Social Studies Interdisciplinary (Q3), and Health Policy and Services (Q4). We found 4,680 papers published in the BPEA, 1713 (37%) in the category of Economics, 1460 in the category of Political Science, 1059 in the category of International Relations, and 486 in the category of Public Administration. Other categories have fewer BPEA contributions.

Searching in the WoS for funding by the Brookings Institution (February 2024) found 170 cases. From 2009 on, there were, each year, small numbers (between 5 and 20) of articles written with the support of Brookings.

An investigation in the WoS (performed in January 2024) for the Brookings Institution (OO = Brookings Inst) found 4,808 documents, from which [16], a collaboration between investigators from Brookings and the World Bank, received 1862 citations (on January 28, 2024). Publications by Brookings are mainly classified in the WoS categories of Economics (1368), Political Science (1162), and International Relations (907). The oldest Brookings publications (in the WoS) date from 1966. S. Talbott is the most active Brookings researcher with 158 publications (again: in the WoS). Note though that the focus of think tanks is on reports, not academic articles or books. Such reports are usually considered grey literature. Hence, data derived from bibliographic databases such as the WoS can at best give a partial view of think tanks. What really counts for think tanks is their broader impact, besides, of course, their specific goals, such e.g. supporting the military.

8. GDP and number of think tanks in a country

It is well-known that there is a correlation between GDP per capita, the number of articles (per million inhabitants), and the number of patents (per million inhabitants), where oil-producing countries tended to be exceptions. For instance, [17], following Derek de Solla Price [18], found a linear correlation between GDP or GDP per capita and scientometrics indicators of countries, such as the number of published articles. Specifically, he found a significant Pearson correlation between GDP per capita and the number of journal papers per capita in 1979 ($r = 0.76$) for a set of 22 countries. As part of a data envelopment analysis [19] provided a table including GDP and number of publications in the Science Citation Index (1993 data) for 18 leading countries. These countries include the main countries of Western Europe and Scandinavia, to which the USA, Japan, Canada, and Australia were added (but not China). Using these data, they found a Pearson correlation between GDP and the number of articles of 0.91. Also, [20, Table 34.1] provides an example, using data for the year 1998. Other data providing a link between GDP, or GDP per capita, and scientific output can be found in [21]. Vinkler [22, Tables 8 and 9] found a correlation of 0.45 between GDP per capita and number of articles per capita for 14 European countries

to which the USA and Japan were added (data for the year 2000). This correlation is not significant, but using some more sophisticated scientometric indicators, Vinkler always obtained significant correlations.

We now check if a similar correlation also exists between GDP and the number of think tanks in the country. The next table (Table 3) shows the 44 countries with the most think tanks, where data come from TTCSP [3]. We made sure to include Australia and the same 44 countries ranked according to GDP in 2020, where data come from the World Bank – World Development Indicators, <https://databank.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD/1ff4a498/Popular-Indicators>. Not surprisingly we observe a rather high Spearman rank correlation of 0.67.

Table 3

Top 44 countries in terms of number of think tanks according to (McGann, 2021)

Country	Number of think tanks	Rank	GDP (2020) in billion dollars	Rank according to GDP
US	2203	1	21,060	1
China	1413	2	14,688	2
India	612	3	2,672	6
UK	515	4	2,698	5
Korea	412	5	1,644	10
France	275	6	2,647	7
Germany	266	7	3,888	4
Argentina	262	8	386	25
Brazil	190	9	1,476	12
Vietnam	180	10	347	29
Italy	153	11	1,897	8
Russia	143	12	1,493	11
Japan	137	13	5,056	3
Mexico	109	14	1,121	15
South Africa	102	15	338	30
Sweden	101	16	547	20
Spain	95	17	1,278	14
Switzerland	93	18	742	17
Ukraine	90	19.5	156	39
Colombia	90	19.5	270	31
Iran	87	21	240	34
Austria	86	22	435	22
Belgium	85	24	526	21

Contd...

Netherlands	85	24	910	16
Canada	85	24	1,656	9
Portugal	83	26	229	35
Bolivia	82	27	367	43
Chile	80	28	254	32
Israel	78	29	413	24
Poland	72	30	599	19
Kenya	64	31	101	40
Romania	58	32	251	33
Greece	57	33	188	37
Peru	55	34	202	36
Hungary	54	35	157	38
Turkiye	53	36	720	18
Denmark	52	37.5	355	28
Nigeria	52	37.5	432	23
Bosnia-Herzegovina	51	39	20	44
Egypt	47	40.5	384	26
Bulgaria	47	40.5	70	41
Bangladesh	46	42	374	27
Australia	45	43.5	1,330	13
Costa Rica	45	43.5	62	42

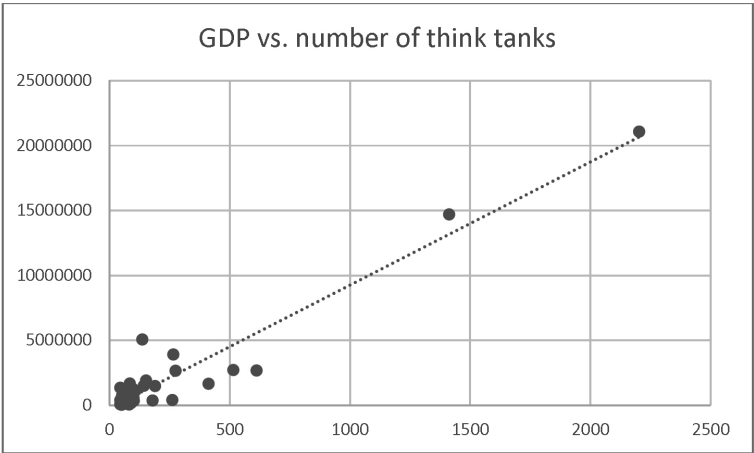


Figure 1
Number of think tanks (on the horizontal axis) versus GDP in billions of US\$ (vertical axis) for the year 2020.

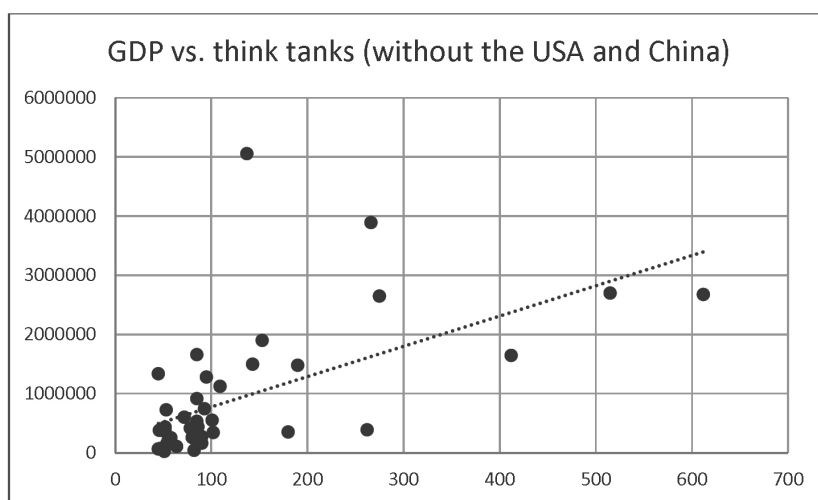


Figure 2

Figure 1 without the USA and China

We see that countries such as Argentina, Vietnam, Ukraine, and (South) Korea have more think tanks than expected based on their GDP, while Australia, Canada, Türkiye, and Japan have much less. Note that in the GDP column, we re-ranked the 44 countries occurring in the think tanks column (they are not the 44 countries with the highest GDP).

Surprisingly, the Pearson correlation between the number of think tanks and GDP is much higher and equal to 0.96, see Fig.1. Yet, this spurious linear relationship is due to the USA and China, which we considered to be outliers. Removing them yields a Pearson correlation of 0.58, see Fig.2. This value is significant at the 5% level (two-sided).

9. Bangladesh and BIDS

Bangladesh has many think tanks that are in the form of governmental, non-governmental, and corporate organizations. Among those mentioned in the ranking by TTCSP, we see the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS), the Bangladesh Institute of Law and International Affairs (BILIA), the Bangladesh Institute of Peace and Security Studies (BIPSS), the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), the International Growth Centre (IGC), Making Our Economy Right (MOER), the Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies (BILS), and Research and Policy Integration for Development (RAPID). Moreover, in 1986 Saleemul Huq, famous for his work on climate change, founded an independent think tank, the Bangladesh Centre for Advanced Studies (BCAS) to develop environmental policy and support sustainable development.

BIDS was established in June 1957 when it was named Pakistan Institute of Development Economics (PIDE), situated in Karachi (Pakistan). In January 1971, it was renamed Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies and shifted to Dhaka, the capital of the newly

independent country Bangladesh. Two other national-level research institutions: the Population Study Centre and the National Foundation for Research on Human Resource Development (NFRHRD) merged with BIDS in 1982 and 1983, respectively. BIDS publishes a peer-reviewed journal, entitled “Bangladesh Development Studies (BDS)”. This is an important outlet for the work of its scientists. Yet, also outsiders, such as scientists working for the World Bank publish regularly in this journal. A total of 874 publications of BIDS-affiliated authors can be found in the union of the Web of Science, Scopus, and Econlit [23].

Other formats of publications of BIDS researchers found in these databases include books (36), research monographs (23), research reports (189), occasional papers, public lectures (4), project report series (3), working paper series (23), and some book chapters. Now (March 2024) OpenAlex finds 1,136 BIDS publications.

Since its establishment BIDS has played a leading role in social science research on critical national and regional development issues. The Global Go To Think Tank Index (GGTTI) chose 174 organizations as top think tanks worldwide in 2020. The **Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS)** advanced to rank 94. It achieved 17th place in the region and ranked 1st in Bangladesh. Yet, surprisingly, GGTTI also has a list of top think tanks (non-US). In this list, BIDS is 114 of the 154. Probably, other experts “voted” for the two lists.

10. Conclusion

Think tanks play an important role in supporting national and international governments, the military, and civil institutions. They often form a bridge between the government and academia. Originating mainly from the West [24], nowadays Asia has more think tanks than Europe or America [3]. Moreover, most countries from the Global South have understood the role of think tanks and harbor think tanks within their borders, Bangladesh’s BIDS being an example.

As an open question, we suggest studying mentions of think tanks in all types of media in their own country as well as worldwide.

This contribution just offers a very incomplete introduction to the world of think tanks. We hope it will stimulate colleagues to start more in-depth investigations.

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