



BCIS Research Agenda 2026-2029

Final Working draft, March 2026

1. INTRODUCTION

To maintain coherence between both BCIS teaching and research, and to identify a niche in the ecosystem of International Relations education and knowledge production, the BCIS governing bodies have identified a framework that would guide the centre's teaching and research work.

- Explore commonalities in challenges faced by small states in a volatile global context and study south-south perspectives in confronting these challenges.
- Critically understand and creatively challenge the dominant worldviews that influence the discourses of international relations.
- Analyse the changing dynamics of global power relations and the vulnerabilities they create for the Global South.

(ED's Narrative Report Jan-March 2025, presented to the BCIS Council of Management on 27th March 2025)Not

Note that the BCIS understands the Global South as a geo-historical political concept encapsulating the historical experiences (e.g. colonialism), aspirations, challenges, frustrations and dynamisms of the low- and middle-income countries and their people.

The framework will create a niche for BCIS in the wider ecosystem of International Relations teaching in Sri Lanka. It will encourage our students, our lecturers, our staff, our governing body members and our public constituencies, to become familiar with new, challenging trends in the global conversations around international relations by strengthening our capacity to re-examine some of the well-worn concepts of international relations theory, engage with Global South perspectives and alternatives, decolonise our epistemological leanings, vary our pedagogical practice and create a dynamic, critical international relations community. The modules of our certificate and diploma courses are being revised, where possible, along these lines. This paper presents a draft concept note to refocus the BCIS Research Agenda with similar objectives.

2. RESEARCH CONTEXT

We are at a point globally where the conventional Realist concepts of International Relations predominantly defined through the vantage point of the state—state-centrism, anarchy, national interest, security, and power politics— and liberal frameworks on global/ regional institutions and cooperation, are playing out in ways that increasingly disregard established international norms, interests of the Global South countries, and are losing their resonance in a context where technology, the climate crisis and other predicted and unpredicted anthropogenic factors, are influencing the practice of democracy, diplomacy, state relations, and peoples' lives and livelihoods.

3. RESEARCH AGENDA

Our research agenda aims to generate theories, thinking, and action that go beyond state-centric international relations discourse and are particularly relevant to small developing countries and island states in the Global South.

We will create a space for Sri Lankan scholars (and those in other small developing countries) to produce work that emphasises the challenges faced by small states in the Global South, critiques hegemonic worldviews and hierarchies, and exposes the vulnerabilities of countries like Sri Lanka to global power dynamics. In particular, it will centre the lived realities of the myriad of actors – the peasant farmers, women, fishers, pastoralists, indigenous people, students, working people, victims of genocides, migrants, refugees and citizens of small states – who are at the margins of the state system or who are invisibilised by the mainstream international relations discourse.

We will build on past research efforts, as well as on more recent conversations on democracy and democratisation, digitisation, the international political economy, security, gender, and the environment that have taken place in the last two years.

We will particularly address issues relating to:

- The international political economy
- Environment and climate change
- Digitalisation
- Democracy Studies
- Migration
- International institutions and the undermining of multilateralism
- Security

Emergency and Unforeseen Developments

The BCIS will also seek to incorporate **Emergency and Unforeseen Developments** into its Research Agenda recognising the ongoing changes in global politics and the acute crises affecting the international order and small states. The contemporary international context is characterised by heightened volatility, including more assertive unilateralism, intensified great-power competition, and rapid shifts in global economic and security alignments. These dynamics can generate urgent policy and public-information needs in Sri Lanka and the wider region.

It is proposed that a rapid-response mechanism to these developments is needed to address by significant international events with implications for Sri Lanka and small states (e.g., major shifts in trade/finance regimes, security escalations, political unrest or climate disasters). In response the BCIS will aim to

- develop short policy briefs (2-4 pages), public explainers, moderated dialogues/webinars, and rapid expert roundtables.
- expedite peer review by at least one subject-matter reviewer (internal or external) prior to publication.
- constitute a small "Rapid Response Review Group" (to be constituted by the Research Team and approved by the Chair) to validate triggers, outputs, and timelines.

Cross-cutting themes

Three areas were identified as cross cutting:

International law and human rights

International law and human rights are essential analytical lenses that cut across the agenda, including for labour rights, economic and climate justice, AI governance, and democratic accountability. Initially listed as a standalone theme, it was agreed it should be embedded across priority areas to strengthen analytical rigour and relevance.

Citizens' movements and civic agency

Citizens' movements and civic agency is also crosscutting, intersecting with democracy studies, economic governance, climate action, and accountability. The BCIS Research Agenda will incorporate these perspectives where analytically relevant.

Humanistic dimensions within political economy

Similarly, the political economy work will incorporate humanistic dimensions, including gendered impacts, the social consequences of debt and austerity, and the lived experiences of communities affected by economic and environmental shocks.

4. THE BCIS RESEARCH AGENDA'S OUTPUT PATHWAYS

The research agenda will comprise three output pathways. As an institution we will seek to use our research outputs for:

Academic contribution: producing research outputs suitable for scholarly debate, publication, and sustained knowledge-building. **Policy influence and advocacy:** providing evidence-based inputs to decision-makers, public institutions, and diplomatic or multilateral actors.

Public awareness and engagement: creating accessible outputs that strengthen public understanding and informed debate.

5. GOVERNANCE, POSITIONING AND INSTITUTIONAL ALIGNMENT OF THE BCIS RESEARCH AGENDA

The BCIS will proactively convene public dialogue on contemporary issues, leveraging its three operational arms, research, education and public engagement, based on a structured discussion with audiences, interlocutors, and safeguards to preserve the BCIS' credibility as a statutory institution.

There can be diverging views about how the BCIS can or should manage perceived political alignment. The analytical framework that informs our research and education content emphasises the need to foreground marginalised voices and Global South perspectives. A policy of institutional positioning is required to address reputational and statutory constraints.

It is also important to bridge the gap between the research themes and education programmes, so as to deliberately integrate research outputs into teaching modules.

6. RESOURCING AND PARTNERSHIP APPROACH

Delivery of the research agenda can happen in multiple ways. Research output can be delivered through in-house expertise, or pursued through partnerships, or commissioned contributions. The latter is particularly relevant for urgent topics where in-house capability is limited or for topics with low priority.

The Research Agenda can be implemented through:

- In-house research led and produced by the BCIS research team, with external peer review as needed.
- Partnerships and joint outputs with universities, think tanks, or specialist practitioners, including co-hosted events and co-authored publications.
- Commissioned research such as targeted briefs or chapters authored externally under BCIS editorial oversight and quality standards.

7. THEMES PRIORITISED FOR 2026

In 2026, the BCIS Research Agenda has identified a Priority set of themes, see table below¹.

Priority area (2026)	Rationale (as agreed in session)
International political economy (IPE)	High urgency and strong institutional relevance; feasible with existing expertise; links directly to debt, development finance, and small-state agency.
Environment and climate change	High urgency and impact; supports both public engagement and policy-relevant analysis, including adaptation and climate finance concerns for small states.
Democracy studies	High urgency Mainly focuses on Democracy and challenges it faces in South Asia. It also looks at other countries in the world and democratic crisis of it.
Digitalisation	High urgency; intersects with governance, labour markets, AI regulation, and climate-related technologies.
International institutions and the undermining of multilateralism	High urgency; supports analysis of institutional legitimacy, reform, and alternatives from small-state perspectives.

Additional themes, migration, and security, remain within the broader BCIS research agenda but are recognised that lower 2026 feasibility may require sequencing these topics across 2026-2027 or addressing them through partnerships and commissioned contributions.

7.1 International Political Economy (With special attention to International Financial Institutions, Development and Trade)

¹ The Priority set of themes based on criteria of currency, relevance and expertise was agreed at a facilitated work shop held on with the research team and the Academic Affairs Board. The two external members of the BCIS Research Committee were also present.

Small developing countries, with their small economies, dependence on external markets, the US dollar, foreign direct investment, and foreign debt, are structurally disadvantaged, as they lack the power to determine the terms of engagement with the international political-economic landscape. These structural disadvantages have been intensifying in recent years amid pandemics, geopolitical crises and climate change. The widespread debt crises that developing countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America are undergoing, and the unequal trade relations they face, weaken their national economies gradually and also erode political sovereignty and the space for democratic governance.

BCIS recognises International Political Economy (IPE) as a critical thematic framework that aligns with the three guiding principles shaping the BCIS research agenda. The ability of the IPE to critically interrogate the material foundations of the modern international system, including the norms, rules and institutions, while historicising the presence of the small developing states in colonial/ neocolonial processes, is essential for challenging traditional International Relations perspectives.

BCIS research specifically focuses on how the international economic and financial architecture establishes new hierarchies in the international system, the formation of a New International Economic Order, southern alliances against debt, and how global ideas on development seep into national development discourses. We also pay attention to how Global South states adapt, contest, or capitulate to the global economic processes driven by the IFIs, multinational companies, trade and development agencies, and big powers, both global and regional. In addition, research will explore how international economic and financial architecture affect the vulnerable and marginalised communities within Sri Lanka and compound effects of climate change.

Key 2026 Outputs

Key Output: <i>topic</i>, format	Output pathway: policy influence/advocacy; public awareness and engagement; academic contribution	Partnerships. reviewers
<i>IFIs and Small State Agency</i> Monograph, Workshop, Commentaries	Public awareness and engagement, Academic contribution	C P Chandrasekar, Eric Touissant IDEAS, CADTM
<i>Feminist Foreign and Economic Policy</i> , Commentary	Academic contribution, policy advocacy and public awareness	
<i>Creditor interests dictating the right to development</i> , Commentary, workshop/ public discussion	public awareness and engagement	Feminist Collective for Economic Justice, IDEAs network, CADTM

7.2 Environment and Climate change: Investigating Climate Change within the framework of International Relations

The issue of climate change within the field of international relations highlights how environmental challenges are no longer isolated scientific issues, but core drivers of global governance, power dynamics, economy and security. As rising temperatures, extreme weather events and resource scarcity increasingly shape migration patterns, economic stability and geopolitical tensions, informed global citizens and policy makers have to be better equipped to advocate for cooperative action rather than fragmented responses.

Climate change increasingly shapes human security through its impacts on livelihoods, health, food and water availability, displacement and socio-political stability. Modern technological innovations impact on climate change and play a decisive role in accelerating as well as mitigating environmental challenges. Digitalisation, artificial intelligence, renewable energy systems and climate-smart technologies increasingly influence global governance, environmental resilience and economic competitiveness.

The BCIS research agenda approaches climate impacts as shared threats requiring joint solutions that transcend borders. Although global mechanisms such as UNFCCC and the Paris Agreement have succeeded in institutionalising climate diplomacy and fostering dialogue, their effectiveness in mitigating the negative impacts on small developing countries in the global south has been limited. The BCIS research agenda will aim at understanding the efficacy of these international frameworks to ensure climate justice for people of the global south, taking into account the conflicts that are being created in the light of diminishing resources. Building on work already done in this area², the research agenda will look at alternative, global south perspectives on climate solutions and charter the development of climate activism.

The BCIS can expand its scope to investigating areas such as climate finance and equity, environmental norms and international law, security implications of climate change, climate change and maritime security and the geopolitics of renewable energy.

Key 2026 Outputs

Key Output: <i>topic</i> , format	Output pathway: policy influence/advocacy; public awareness and engagement 'academic contribution	Partnerships. reviewers
<i>Impact of Data Centres on the Environment: Will it Undermine Climate Change Mitigation Efforts –</i> Commentary	Public Awareness, Academic Contribution	
<i>Carbon Diplomacy</i>	Academic Engagement	

² B.A.I.Maheshi Jayewardana (forthcoming) *International Frameworks in Climate Change Mitigation, Climate Activism and its impacts on Climate Policy in the Global South*. BCIS Research Monograph 2025

Commentary		
<i>Disrupting Global Climate Agenda: Questioning the Logic Behind Trump's Climate Policy Decisions</i> Commentary	Academic Engagement	
<i>Leveraging China's Technical Expertise in Tianjin Port for Colombo Port Development: Analysing Strategic Partnerships in Digital Era.</i> Working Paper-Monograph (ESS 2024 Paper)	Academic Engagement	
Book Publication on Climate Change	Academic Engagement	University of Lahore (Waiting for response)
<i>Climate Finance as a Soft Power Tool: Study Focused on China's Green Investments in Developing Countries</i> Working paper -Journal Article - Strategic Futures of the Indo-Pacific Journal - Journal of the Indo-Pacific Studies Center (IPSC)	Academic Engagement	
Public Discussion on Ocean Governance	Public Awareness	
ESS 2026 – IR in an Age of Climate Crisis	Public Awareness Academic Contribution	

7.3 Digitalisation/International Relations in the Digital Age

Digitalisation has become a defining feature of 21st-century international relations, reshaping diplomacy, governance, development, and global power relations. Yet mainstream IR discourses continue to treat digitalisation as a technical or economic shift, overlooking its geopolitical and structural dimensions. These narratives – predominantly shaped by Western experiences – marginalise the realities of the Global South and obscure how digital systems

generate new hierarchies and dependencies. For many Small Developing Countries (SDCs), digital pathways are shaped by colonial legacies, unequal technological partnerships, *and* limited regulatory capacity, resulting in a global digital hierarchy that sidelines SDC perspectives and agency.

BCIS recognises ‘Digitalisation/IR in the Digital Age’ as a critical thematic framework that aligns with the three guiding principles of the BCIS Research Agenda. It allows for the examination of common challenges faced by small states – such as technological dependence, cyber vulnerabilities and regulatory asymmetries. It provides a foundation for critiquing dominant worldviews that present digital transformation as universal or externally determined. And it offers a lens through which to analyse shifting global power dynamics, especially the pressures placed on SDCs by major power competition in the digital sphere. At present, BCIS’s work primarily focuses on digital geopolitics, examining how strategic rivalry shapes the choices and vulnerabilities of small states.

Given the accelerating pace of global digital transformation, BCIS must now broaden this thematic area by engaging with key global trends that directly affect SDCs and intersect with the research agenda’s principles:

- Securitisation of cyberspace
 - Digital sovereignty and global governance (+ International institutions)
 - South–South digital cooperation
 - Rights, privacy and ethics
 - Digital inclusivity, sustainability and future development pathways
- (areas to cover are not solely limited to these)*

Engaging these conversations enables BCIS to deepen its focus on questions of power, justice and autonomy in the digital age. By analysing how major power rivalry, global standards and transnational technologies shape the strategic space available to SDCs, BCIS can contribute to a more grounded understanding of digital sovereignty, national security and foreign policy behaviour. Through this work, BCIS positions digitalisation as a central dimension of contemporary international relations and foregrounds the agency of the Global South in shaping equitable and contextually relevant digital futures.

Key 2026 Outputs

Key Output: topic, format	Output pathway: policy influence/advocacy; public awareness and engagement, academic contribution	Partnerships. reviewers
<i>State-led crack down on social media & tech giants</i> (working title) Commentary –	Academic engagement	
Bytes & Borders – The Global South & the Digital	Academic engagement	

Order (<i>Panel Discussion</i>) - <i>currently postponed</i>	Public awareness & engagement	
<i>India's AI Summit: Building a new tech sphere of influence (Working Title)</i> - Commentary	Academic engagement	
<i>Digital Dependency (working title)</i> - Monograph	Academic engagement	
ESS 24 Paper (<i>Geopolitical Implications of the Digital Silk Road</i>) – Conference Paper	Academic engagement	

7.4 International Institutions and undermining of Multilateralism

The BCIS research agenda will explore whether there is an insidious dismantling of the multilateral system as an alliance of countries pursuing a common goal based on the principles of inclusivity, equality and cooperation and with the aim of fostering a more peaceful, prosperous and sustainable world. The Global South countries have advocated long for comprehensive reforms in multilateral institutions such as the UN, WTO, IMF and World Bank in order to rid their colonial roots and to incorporate interests of the Global South. The governing frameworks of key multilateral institutions, for example, the UN Security Council and the board of directors in the international financial institutions, are dominated by the Global North and violate the principle of sovereign equality. Moves to diminish the influence of UNCTAD and replace it with WTO, the defunding of UNESCO after it recognised the State of Palestine, the withdrawal of powerful nations from the Paris Agreement and the Istanbul Convention, the disregard of the outcomes of the International Court of Justice – all point to the dismantling of the conventional multilateral systems against the interests of Global South states.

BCIS research will examine allegations of inequality and discrimination by the Global South in mainstream multilateralism, the growth of alternative multilateral spaces including the historic Non-Aligned Movement and the push for a New International Economic Order, as well as more recent movements to “delink” global south economies through degrowth, de-dollarisation, and norm engineering from the Global South countries or the alternative social movements such as La Via Campesina (an autonomous movement of peasant organisations defending peasant life, and advocating for the paradigm of ‘food sovereignty’), or new state alignments such as the Alliance of Sahel States (Burkina Faso, Niger and Mali) breaking away from ECOWAS, or the growth of BRICS.

Key 2026 Outputs

Key Output: topic, format	Output pathway: policy influence/advocacy; public awareness and	Partnerships. reviewers

	engagement’academic contribution	
<p><i>18th BRICS annual summit with the theme “Building for Resilience, Innovation, Cooperation, and Sustainability”</i></p> <p>Public Discussion on BRICS</p>	Public Awareness	
<p><i>Multilateralism in Crisis (working title)</i></p> <p>Commentary, Panel Discussion</p>	Academic contribution, public awareness	

7.5 Democracy Studies

The BCIS expects to continue its engagement with the process of democracy and democratisation by addressing the challenges faced by South Asian countries and other small states in multiple ways.

We recognise that developing countries in South Asia and elsewhere are vulnerable geopolitically. Great-power competition pressures these states to align with powerful actors, often prioritizing security and strategic interests over democratic values, and disregarding democratic stability or the interests of the people. Global powers do not hesitate to support states and leaders who are inclined to protect global interests, and this undermines democratic accountability and political autonomy of developing countries. The great power impact is influenced by the changing politics of the global north, the growth of the far-right, and the emergence of soft-authoritarianism are other challenges democracy is experiencing today.

The practice of democracy in developing states and the freedom to form and implement national policies are equally constrained by the economic dependence on loans, foreign aid and global markets. Economic crises, structural adjustment programmes, and debt burdens can force governments to adopt undemocratic measures and weaken public trust in democratic institutions. Financial dependence may also create a lack of autonomy in foreign policies, which enables the interference of external actors in domestic political spaces.

The lack of political independence makes it harder to ensure transparency, enforce the rule of law, and resist corruption. It erodes public participation, restricts people’s interests and allows democratic backsliding.

The BCIS research agenda will use a cross-country comparative perspective to understand these challenges. The recent political trend of peoples’ uprisings against prevailing undemocratic political regimes that has happened across South Asia in Sri Lanka,

Bangladesh and most recently in Nepal, provides the opportunity for analysis of how citizens have reclaimed democratic spaces and how corruption free, inclusive governance can be put into place. The peoples' uprisings also illustrate how new methods of political mobilisation, mainly digital platforms, have been used to disseminate information and reduce information asymmetry.

Key 2026 Outputs

Key Output: topic, format	Output pathway: policy influence/advocacy; public awareness and engagement/academic contribution	Partnerships. reviewers
<i>People's Uprisings in and their Impact on Changing Geo-political Landscape in South Asia</i> Monograph (work in progress)	Academic Contribution and Public Awareness	-
<i>"Democratic Transitions in South Asia: Nepal and Bangladesh in Comparative Perspective"</i> Webinar	Public Awareness	-
<i>Geo-Political Changes in South Asia and Re-visiting Modi's Neighbourhood First Policy</i> Commentary	Academic Contribution and Public Awareness	-

8. NON-PRIORITY THEMES FOR 2026

8.1 Migration

Migration is a significant component of international relations, affecting global politics, security, the development of international policies and frameworks, and national policies in countries receiving migrants and in countries that are the source of migrants. People have

always moved across borders, but today migration includes a wide range of movements, including voluntary migration for better opportunities or forced migration due to conflict, discrimination or environmental issues.

The BCIS research agenda aims to look at migration governance, and will attempt to deconstruct the power asymmetries that exist between countries and decolonise how migration is perceived, researched and incorporated into policy. It will interrogate concepts such as securitisation, criminalisation, including the criminalisation of solidarity towards migrants, the fronting of migration and the increasingly common practice of border externalisation. International agreements like the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM), a non-binding agreement promoted by the United Nations and adopted in 2018 in Marrakesh, illustrate how migration governance is driven by the needs of the Global North. They are based on the interests, needs and fears of the countries of the Global North, which desperately need migrants to satisfy their demographic or labour needs, but refuse to accept this fact, and instead create “legal universal rules” to discourage and criminalise migration. We will commit to focus our research on migration and international relations on developing a multifaceted, complex and multidimensional picture of migration dynamics, that is grounded in the sources and views from the margins, the agency of migrants and theories from the Global South. We will interrogate the many skewed migration tropes that are perpetuated through visual and written narratives from the Global North, often presenting migrants as refugees on boats, caravans crossing borders, or as welfare magnets, reinforcing the stereotype of migrants as a problem and contributing to harmful narratives that can lead to discriminatory actions and policies..

8.2 Security

Despite the proliferation of ideas on Non-Traditional Security and efforts to de-centre the security focus from the locus of the Nation-State, hard power, military alliances, and surveillance continue to dominate the imaginations of security studies. People at the political, social and economic margins, such as the low-income people, women, youth, minority communities, and indigenous people, nurture ideas on security radically different from those conceived through state-centric lens. Threats of land-grabbing, displacement due to development activities, environmental degradation, ecological collapse, and ensuing human-animal conflicts, hunger, and pandemics pose existential threats not only to humans, but also to other living species, at the brink of a planetary crisis.

The approach of the BCIS research agenda will be to focus on both traditional and Non-Traditional Security and situate its thematic work on a broadened understand of security

Revised by the ED and the Research team, February 2026.

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