Migration diplomacy

Migration has undeniably taken centre stage in political discourse, not only as a domestic hot topic but also as a subject of intense international debate and diplomacy. Whilst domestically, many actors strategically politicise migration to bolster their voter base, internationally, migration is used by states in bilateral and multinational diplomatic negotiations as a tool to push their national migration or non-migration-related agendas.

Most recently, the EU announced a new multi-billion euro strategic partnership with Egypt and a multi-million euro agreement with Mauritania. Even more recently, on April 10th, the European Parliament passed the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum, which had been in the making for almost a decade. One of the four pillars of the Pact is "Embedding migration in international partnerships", which is described by the EU as "a new paradigm based on comprehensive partnerships with countries of origin and transit to the EU". In short: migration diplomacy. But migration diplomacy comes in many shapes and forms.

While, in most cases, the outcomes of migration diplomacy are rather negative for migrants themselves, there are some examples where states could exert power to realise better outcomes for the protection of migrants.

This article, therefore, offers a timely overview of the different ways in which states and blocs of states use migration in their diplomatic endeavours to achieve a variety of aims.

‘Destination’ states engaging in migration diplomacy with origin and transit countries to control and prevent irregular immigration

A common and well-known form of migration diplomacy involves high-resourced ‘destination’ countries using their diplomatic powers and resources to engage ‘transit’ and ‘origin’ countries, primarily in the Global South, to assist in controlling and curbing existing irregular migration towards their borders. This relationship is often transactional involving incentives to countries of origin or transit. These incentives could include access to trade markets, visas, investments, direct budgetary support, development funding or other forms of financial or non-financial support, but often include direct funding to migration management activities as well (e.g. through capacity building initiatives).

In exchange, the country of origin or transit is required to cooperate with preventing and controlling irregular

migration including the onward movement of migrants, for example by accepting or facilitating push/pullbacks, offshore processing, containment measures, strengthening border controls or increasing support to existing refugee and migrant populations as an incentive to remain put. Time and again, the outcomes of such migration diplomacy deals include bankrolling and legitimizing authoritarian regimes and, quite often, not even leading to the primary goal of destination states to significantly reduce numbers. Furthermore, the consequences for migrants themselves are usually overwhelmingly negative, limiting their freedom of movement, their ability to seek safety and prosperity in preferred destination countries and potentially leading to harsh and violent border measures.

Of note is the 2016 EU-Turkey deal. The deal aimed to address the sharp uptick of arrivals to Europe by placing responsibility on Türkiye to stem further movement of refugees and migrants into Europe. Under the deal, it was initially intended that those entering Europe irregularly from Türkiye through the Aegean Islands would be returned, and for every Syrian returned, the EU would accept one Syrian from Türkiye awaiting resettlement. Alongside billions of euros in funding, the EU offered Türkiye the opportunity to begin concession talks about visa-free travel into Europe, and eventual talks on EU membership, however, talks have remained stagnant. The effects of this controversial deal, alongside associated

containment measures, have been primarily negative for migrants, although Türkiye has managed to leverage billions in support for Syrian refugees within its borders. Through the deal, the EU has also resettled over 30,000 Syrians.

In terms of offshore processing, unfortunate examples include Australia's controversial establishment of detention centres in the resource-poor countries of Nauru and Manus Island, Papua New Guinea, in exchange for aid and development assistance. Under this system, once intercepted at sea, asylum seekers are forcibly transferred to Nauru or Manus Island and denied the opportunity to ever permanently settle in Australia – even if found to be owed protection – with resettlement to a third country or remaining in Nauru and PNG their only options. While this kind of offshoring has previously been an exceptional case and resulted in well-documented human rights violations, and adverse outcomes for migrants, Australia's approach has increasingly generated significant interest from other countries pursuing 'hard-line' migration management. One example is the United Kingdom, which eagerly seeks to implement a similar model, albeit unsuccessfully thus far, through the UK-Rwanda deal.

Addressing the 'root causes' of migration via aid and development funding to 'origin' states

Similar dynamics also underscore development funding

from ‘destination’ states to ‘origin’ countries, aimed at addressing the ‘root causes’ of migration by fostering greater economic opportunities and diverting people away from considering irregular journeys. This form of aid and development funding is usually conditional and while it may result in benefits for nationals of recipient countries when it leads to well-designed, effective and successful development initiatives, there are also many, well-documented flaws in both logic and implementation.

A prime example is the EU Trust Fund providing funding to the Sahel, the Horn of Africa and North Africa. However, it is important to highlight funding for border management is often integrated into these agreements, resulting in the lines between ‘externalisation’ and ‘root causes’ development funding being blurred. Indeed, a significant proportion of the EU Trust Fund allocation has not actually gone to development projects, but rather to migration and border management projects.

The carrot-and-stick approach

Accompanying both ‘externalisation’ and ‘root causes’ development funding is often a ‘carrot-and-stick approach’, whereby origin or transit states may face consequences, such as cuts in funding if they fail to cooperate with the terms of the agreement, or conversely, they may receive incentives, such as trade benefits, visa liberalisation, or other positive measures in exchange for cooperation. Returns agreements are a perfect example –

'origin' and 'transit' countries agree to accept the return of migrants deemed not to have a lawful right to remain in 'destination' countries, in exchange for a set number of legal migration pathways for the receiving state. While the 'carrot-and-stick' approach can be a powerful component of migration diplomacy, it is usually effective only when wielded against significantly lower-power states with limited geopolitical relevance to the destination state. When states can leverage countermoves, such as instrumentalising migration through the disengagement from security cooperation, border control, or the threat of allowing mass irregular movements, the 'stick' has limited force.

Having the upper hand: 'Origin' and 'transit' countries' instrumentalisation of migration

Lower-resource states (usually origin or transit states) often use migration dynamics to gain funds, legitimacy, political favours, etc. Paradoxically, "powerful" states often initially enter into a migration deal with a "weaker" party, or one at least perceived to be so, but only find themselves in a very uncomfortable negotiation position afterwards. Critics for example argue that the EU's focus on migration as a security threat and commitment to externalisation has not prevented irregular migration, but rather, has "bankrolled dictators" and handed considerable power and funding into the hands of neighbouring authoritarian regimes at the expense of

migrants themselves.

An example of the instrumentalisation of migration by transit and origin countries – in this case, in relation to the above-mentioned EU-Turkey deal – is President Erdogan in 2019 threatening to "open the gates" and allow migrants free movement into Europe. Migration was the tool to leverage a response, and behind Erdogan's threat was an intent to seek support from the EU to move ahead with repatriation and the establishment of 'safe zones' within Syria. Another example is the EU's agreement with Tunisia where 150 million euros of migration-related funds given to Tunisia last year allegedly ended up directly in the President's pockets. Migrants in Tunisia were also used as scapegoats by the President, with the resulting terrible outcomes for migrants. Violence was instigated against migrants, migrants were left for dead in the desert, and the result actually led to an increase in migration departures towards Europe. Or President al-Sisi of Egypt who has strategically utilised Egypt's efforts to accommodate refugees and support the management of irregular migration, to secure crucial foreign funding to alleviate Egypt's economic crisis. This has most recently culminated in an 8 billion euro 'strategic partnership' with the EU.

As such, migration diplomacy is not only an opportunity for high-resource destination states to exert their agendas. Migration dynamics can also be instrumentalised by origin and transit states to exert

influence and negotiate advantageous terms in their diplomatic relations. In essence, by engaging so actively in migration diplomacy, destination states have effectively left themselves vulnerable to blackmail by less powerful states who can instrumentalise migration, and easily attack their 'Achilles heel'.

Novel migration situations to achieve diplomatic gains

Along with instrumentalising existing migration dynamics, the *creation* of novel migration dynamics to exert diplomatic power is also a form of migration diplomacy. An obvious case in point is when the Belarusian President Lukashenko, in 2021, directed thousands of migrants towards the border with Lithuania, Latvia and Poland, Lukashenko aimed to retaliate against sanctions and criticism from the EU. This manoeuvre not only intensified tensions between the EU and Belarus but also left migrants in precarious and dangerous situations.

To exemplify the extent to which such instrumentalisation has made it to the top of the political agendas, the new EU Pact on Migration and Asylum which was just passed by the European Parliament, includes specific crisis protocols and action against instrumentalisation under pillar 1 (secure external borders). This was developed mainly in response to the Belarus situation. These protocols would allow for Member States to derogate from or restrict the rights of asylum seekers – including denying entry – in

situations perceived by a Member State as a crisis because a third country allows or facilitates the movement of asylum seekers towards the EU. This response to such instrumentalisation of migration shows how border security and prevention of migration continue to prevail over the rights and wellbeing of migrants and asylum seekers and does not bode well for similar situations in the future. But even though the result of instrumentalising migration is usually – and unsurprisingly - not positive for migrants, there are isolated examples where positive outcomes have been achieved.

Examples of migration diplomacy where the outcome can be positive for migrants

Between 2014-2022, in response to multiple instances of abuse against Filipino domestic workers, the Philippines leveraged the demand for its workers in negotiations with two higher-resource countries, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates, to advocate for improved rights. The Philippine government instituted a temporary migration ban to both countries, which though initially sparking concerns from rights groups regarding its potential negative effect on migrants, compelled Kuwait and UAE to engage in discussions around greater protection for Filipino migrant workers. Highlighting the potency of such diplomatic manoeuvres and the agency of origin countries in shaping migration policies, the Philippines successfully secured a range of rights including Filipino workers not

having to hand over their passports or mobile phones to Kuwaiti employers, as well as the possibility to open bank accounts in the UAE under their names.

The future of migration diplomacy - shifting power dynamics?

Right now, most destination states engage in migration diplomacy to reduce arrivals, and origin or transit states know they will receive incentives for playing along. However, the increasingly pressing labour shortages and ageing societies in many high-resource destination countries could potentially turn things upside down. In future migration diplomacy dynamics, destination countries might have to use their political and economic power rather to convince origin countries to send more migrants, instead of stopping them. While international competition for migrant workers already happens now, according to a recent study conducted by the Centre for Global Development, until 2050, the demand of workers in high and upper-middle income countries will dramatically increase. As a result, "traditional" destination countries might soon find themselves competing even more fiercely with each other to attract migrant workers.

What remains to be seen is whether origin countries will use their own migrants more as bargaining chips, putting their own economic gain and political interest ahead of the rights, wellbeing, and interests of their citizens abroad, or – as the Philippines did – use such a position to bargain

for better outcomes for their citizens abroad. If they will, those shifting power relations could have a positive impact and transform the predominantly negative migration diplomacy dynamics into a force for positive change for the working conditions and protection of migrants in destination countries.

A longer version of this article was first published on 11 April 2024 on the website of the Mixed Migration Centre.

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