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A Realist Approach to Forced Migration and Human Displacement

How do liberal democracies balance the need for security with their commitment to protecting the human rights of refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants? How can states coordinate migration governance while navigating asymmetries in interests and power? Decisions that address national security can seemingly come at the cost of protecting the rights of the tired, the poor, and the huddled masses. At the same time, liberal democracies must also consider the different calculi of unilateral action and multilateral cooperation.

This policy brief defines the liberal paradox in immigration and refugee policy and explains how the United States and other liberal democracies confront the dilemmas of forced displacement with respect to the competing interests of security, culture, economy, and rights. It provides recommendations on ways to improve international and regional cooperation and to address the challenges in the management of forced migration and human displacement.

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THE LIBERAL PARADOX

If liberal states trample upon civil and human rights and shirk their humanitarian responsibilities, they risk undermining the social contract, feeding the fires of nationalism and populism, and destabilizing entire regions. Likewise, if states lose control of their borders and migration becomes a chaotic rush through a partially open door, this can undermine the rule of law and weaken the social contract. The author calls this tension a liberal paradox¹, which pits the need for economic openness and humanitarian largesse against the need for legal closure to safeguard the institutions of sovereignty and citizenship. In a world of nation-states, open borders are a non-starter, and leaders must guard against moral hazard²—the danger of inadvertently encouraging migrants to leave their countries and take long journeys at great risk to themselves, in hopes of gaining asylum and being allowed to stay and to settle.

While Europe and North America face the challenge of managing large numbers of asylum seekers and determining their status on a case-by-case basis, it is important to note that, prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, 86 percent of forced migrants have taken refuge in low-income countries in the southern hemisphere where the ability of states to host refugee populations is limited, and the liberal paradox does not always apply. Understanding the dynamics of displacement and forced migration in the ‘global south’ (the root causes) is essential for explaining the dilemmas of migration governance in the ‘global north.’

DILEMMAS OF IMMIGRATION CONTROL

It is in this context that four factors drive migration policy making—security, cultural and ideational concerns, economic interests, and rights. National

security, along with the institutions governing sovereignty and citizenship, competes with economics and rights in a multi-dimensional and multi-level political game.

In ‘normal’ times, the migration debate in the US and other liberal democracies focuses on markets (numbers) and rights (status) and the trade-offs required to manage this interplay. How many immigrants should a nation admit and with what skills? Should migrants be temporary (guest) workers, should displaced people be granted temporary protection, and should unauthorized migrants be allowed to settle and get onto a ‘path to citizenship?’ Yet, as pressing as markets and rights may be, cultural concerns also come strongly into play. Questions about ethnic characteristics and integration are politically more salient today in liberal societies than markets and rights. In times of war, pandemics, and drug smuggling, the dynamic of markets and rights gives way to culture, security, and public health concerns. Finding compromise in the policy game is therefore more complicated and the liberal paradox more acute.

MIGRATION AND MULTILATERALISM

The domestic tradeoffs involved in migration governance are made more complex because migration control has important foreign policy implications. The movement of people affects international relations and security (and vice versa) in myriad ways. The European Union and three successive US administrations—Obama, Trump, and Biden—learned that it is impossible for a state to manage international migration unilaterally simply by sealing or closing its border. International cooperation is required, and this often entails externalization of border controls.

Human displacement—driven by events ranging from the war in Ukraine to conflicts in the crescent



of instability from West Africa through the Middle East to South Asia—moved migration to the top of the geopolitical agenda. Human displacement is a problem of national and international security. International organizations, such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, or UNHCR, and the International Organization for Migration, or IOM, have come under increasing pressure to help states manage forced migration and displacement. The migration policymaking game is now more than ever a global game and the game varies from region to region.

Nevertheless, migration governance often is unilateral and done on an ad hoc basis. The payoff from international cooperation to manage migration can be negative, and opportunities for defection from a global migration regime are numerous. The possibilities for monitoring, enforcing, or developing some core principles of non-discrimination, as in the World Trade Organization, or WTO, are minimal, and there is little or no reciprocity. Thus, states have a strong incentive to free ride on other states' efforts, and international migration of all types poses a challenge for individual states, as well as for regional integration processes like the European Union, North America Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA is now United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement), Mercosur, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, as well for the international community.

The Prisoner's Dilemma³—whereby two actors' rational strategy to maximize individual payoffs through cooperation creates a worse outcome than some other possible outcome that would be better for both actors—helps us to understand why international cooperation to manage migration is so difficult. In the absence of trust and enforcement mechanisms to punish defections from international migration regimes, states give into a temptation to act unilaterally, and migration

is increasingly 'weaponized' in geo-politics.

As in other areas, such as trade and finance, international cooperation to manage migration is more likely if interactions among states occur repeatedly with the same partners. In this situation—commonly known as the iterated Prisoner's Dilemma—actors find their best interest in cooperation if future payoffs are valued highly enough. This is the so-called "shadow of the future"⁴ and it forms the basis for cooperation in world politics. In this way, the likelihood of cooperation is increased through deepening economic interdependence, building international and regional institutions, and protecting human rights. International institutions, bilateral and multilateral agreements, help states to promote cooperation by creating the expectation of repeated interactions across time and with multiple partners, defining norms, providing information about activities of other states, and creating linkages across policy dimensions.

THE LOGIC OF MIGRATION GOVERNANCE: FINDING A 'WIN SET'

As the iterated Prisoner's Dilemma suggests, one of the principal effects of economic interdependence is to lead states to cooperate to pursue global public goods⁵, like stable exchange rates, free trade, and safe, orderly and legal migration. The two ways in which states can overcome collective action problems in the absence of a multilateral process for migration management that builds trust and reciprocity, and thereby helps to overcome asymmetries of wealth and power, include: (1) the centralization of regulatory power and pooling of sovereignty, as in the EU, and (2) suasion and "tactical issue linkage."

We have seen an example of the first strategy at the regional level in Europe; however, it is much



more difficult to centralize control of migration in the Americas or Asia where the asymmetry of interests, wealth, and power is much greater, and levels of political and economic development vary tremendously from one state to another. Still, the regional option—multilateralism for a relevant group of states where migration governance can be defined as a club good⁶—is one way to overcome collective action problems and to begin a process of centralization of regulatory authority.

International economic regimes have a long gestation period, beginning as bilateral or regional agreements. It is unlikely, however, that an international migration regime could be built following the genesis of international organizations such as WTO, International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank, which provide a certain level of multilateral governance for trade, money, finance, and development. In the area of migration governance, it is difficult to fulfil the prerequisites of multilateralism: indivisibility, generalized principles of conduct, and diffuse reciprocity. The norm of non-discrimination does not exist, and there are no mechanisms for punishing free

riders or resolving disputes in global migration governance.

With the asymmetry of interests and power between migration-receiving and migration-sending countries, suasion, including financial incentives, is the only viable short-term strategy for overcoming collective action problems for migration control, especially at the regional level. This game follows several steps. The first step is to develop a dominant strategy, which can be accomplished only by the most powerful states, sometimes using international organizations to persuade or coerce smaller and weaker states. From the standpoint of receiving countries, the orderly movement of people, defined in terms of the rule of law and respect for borders and state sovereignty, should be the principal objective.

From the standpoint of the sending countries, protection of nationals, migration for development, taking advantage of remittances and brain gain or circular migration, should be the guiding principles of multilateral and regional migration regimes. The second step is to persuade other states to accept the dominant strategy. This necessitates tactical



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issue linkage, which involves identifying issues and interests not necessarily related to migration and using these to leverage, compel or coerce states to accept the dominant strategy. This is, in effect, an “international logroll.”

Such tactics will have only the appearance of multilateralism, at least initially. Tactical issue linkage is central in negotiations between the United States and Mexico over border control, and the flow of asylum seekers from Central and Latin America and beyond⁷. Likewise, migration management figures prominently in negotiations between the European Union and neighbouring states, especially new accession states of Rumania and Bulgaria, other EU candidate countries in the Western Balkans, and Turkey.

The third step for developed countries is to institutionalize this process. The long-term benefits of such a strategy for migrant-receiving countries are obvious. *It will be less costly to build a multilateral and regional migration regime than to fight every step of the way with every sending state, relying only on unilateral or bilateral agreements.*

Multilateral processes may entail some short-term loss of control and sovereignty in exchange for long-term stability and orderly migration based on the rule of law. The payoff for migrant-sending states is greater freedom of movement and protection for their nationals, greater foreign reserves and a more favourable balance of payments, increased prospects for return and circular migration, and increases in technology transfers. Thus, suasion affords potentially a “win-win-win” for sending and receiving countries and for the migrants themselves.

BACK TO THE FUTURE: BEGGAR-THY-NEIGHBOUR POLICIES

Changes in the international system since the

end of the Cold War have altered the migration governance game in several ways. First, it has made beggar-thy-neighbour policies and defection easier. States have had more incentives to close their borders and to free ride by not cooperating with neighbouring states in the making of migration and refugee policies.

Second, the new configurations of interests and power in the post-Cold War world make it more difficult to pursue a multilateral strategy for managing international migration. In receiving countries, internationalist coalitions of the left and the right have broken apart, no anti-communist glue to hold them together. Increasing polarization and politicization over immigration and refugee issues have led to a resurgent nationalism and reactionary populism in the US, UK, and elsewhere. Promoting policies that are reminiscent of the protectionism and nativism of the interwar period is, in effect, taking us back to the future.

The time horizons of governments in Western democracies are much shorter because of changes in domestic and international politics since the end of the Cold War. The terrorist attacks of the 2000s and 2010s exacerbated the security dynamic in migration governance. Migration and mobility came to be perceived by many political actors as a threat to public order.

If the United States and the European Union turn away from international cooperation to manage migration and refugee flows, such defections will alter the equilibrium outcome of the policy game, making migration costlier in political terms to all states and to the international community. The economically virtuous process of increased exchange and human mobility will be reversed, and humanitarian crises will lead to greater instability. As in the areas of trade and finance, international cooperation on migration depends on how the more powerful liberal states manage migration, whether they will pursue an aggressive



strategy of international cooperation, or revert to unilateralism, hardening borders, and embracing beggar-thy-neighbour policies.

To avoid a domestic political backlash against immigration, liberal states must take the short-term political heat for long-term stability and economic gain, much as Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany did in the face of the 2015-2016 'refugee crisis' in Europe. To build a consensus for liberal immigration and refugee policies, however, borders must be secured and migration must be orderly and legal.

PROSPECTS FOR MIGRATION, MOBILITY, AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

The populist and nativist backlash against migration, building over decades in the major receiving countries, together with the Covid-19 pandemic led many states to close their borders in 2020, severely curtailing migration and mobility. If the political and cultural backlash persists and border crises lead to further closure of societies and to more nationalism, the international system is likely to descend into greater anarchy, disorder, and war.

Human and economic development will suffer and global inequalities⁸ will rise. Nationalism has surged to the fore, setting the stage for more conflict, as new power blocs emerge, and multilateralism and international cooperation recede. It is too early to say with certainty whether these developments in world politics will lead to the 'end of liberalism'.⁹

Clearly, however, the international liberal order is under stress, democracies are turning inward, and erstwhile open, liberal societies are closing. Yet, rising levels of human displacement—associated with conflict, poverty, deprivation, and climate change—require a response from the international

community, and leadership by the wealthy states of the global north. To say that my neighbor's house is on fire, but this is not my responsibility is a recipe for disaster.

Migration is a fundamental feature of the interdependent world¹⁰ in which we live. Will the increase in migration be a virtuous or a vicious cycle? When properly managed, migration can lead to greater openness, wealth, and human development.

Can powerful states find ways to manage migration for human development, while securing migrant rights and remaining attentive to various forms of human displacement? Perhaps, migration management requires a truly global migration regime under the auspices of the United Nations, following the outline of the Global Compacts for Migration and Refugees¹¹. Though non-binding, the compacts provide frameworks for improving international cooperation in managing migration and in finding solutions for refugees who will otherwise be confined to protracted displacement and camps.

Prospects for building a system of global migration governance are dim. The asymmetry of interests between the north and south remains too great. Politics in the global north have taken a decidedly illiberal turn. For this reason alone, we must make the best of the international legal framework and organizations that currently exist. A global refugee regime exists that should be able to address displacement in and from Afghanistan, Syria, Venezuela, Ukraine, Middle East, and myriad other countries. The pressing issue for the international community is how to strengthen this regime so that it functions more effectively when there are multiple humanitarian crises with so many displaced people and few immediate prospects for durable solutions.



RECOMMENDATIONS

1. In regulating migration and mobility, governments must be cognizant not only of the economic dimensions of migration, but they must also be attentive to the rights of migrants. Otherwise, they risk greater political instability, and they may undermine national and international security. For these reasons, it is **vital to revamp and strengthen domestic, regional, and international coalitions to protect the human rights of migrants and refugees and to provide for legal and orderly migration**. Not only states, but the migrants and refugees themselves can play a key role in building political support for dealing with humanitarian crises and protracted refugee situations.
2. The most powerful liberal states must take a leadership position, providing protection, and pursuing strategies for regional and international cooperation in the management of the humanitarian crises. Therefore, **proper migration management—respect for human dignity and the rights of migrants and refugees—is key to reducing global inequalities and to promoting human and economic development**. This may involve suasion and tactical linkage of issues relating to trade, foreign direct investment, official development assistance, and military assistance to achieve greater cooperation.
3. In the absence of a fully institutionalized, multilateral regime for migration, **states must support existing regimes— UNHCR, IOM, International Labor Organization, and similar organizations—with greater financial and logistical resources**.
4. **Regional cooperation is key to dealing with ongoing humanitarian crises**. Migration management can be defined as a club good at the regional level. Cooperation such as what we have seen between EU states responding to the massive displacement of Ukrainians is needed around the globe, especially in the Americas.
5. Protracted refugee situations **require enough resources and regional and international cooperation to accelerate the integration of refugees in the host countries, provide for resettlement, and where possible, voluntary repatriation with dignity**.



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