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The Geo-Politics of International Migration

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ABOUT US

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The Intergovernmental Conference to Adopt the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration was held in Marrakesh on December 10-11, 2018. Source: UN Blogs

A United Nations Summit for Refugees and Migrants was held on September 19, 2016 in New York which saw the launching of a two-year process to develop a Global Compact for Migration. Source: ANS

Former US President Barrack Obama announced executive actions on the U.S. immigration policy in 2014. Source: NPR

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Abstract

The concept of 'Geopolitics' is all about strategic analysis. Meant to be an analysis between International relations theories and geopolitical theories, it's essentially the exploring of relationships and interactions between States or Countries, Civilizations, Peoples, and Economics. In this context the geopolitics of international migration must have two essential elements:

One: That International migration must be seen as a global issue, and

Two: Such an issue must not only be economically imperative but politically vital.

Migration means mobility and people on the move traverse geopolitical terrain, thereby they become both the narrative as also the result of such mobility. The link between migration and geopolitics is thus obvious. Moreover, all international migrants are from some state and move to another. This makes them susceptible to the laws and rules of different countries and dependant on the geopolitics of the time and region.

Back in 2016, 193 members of the UN general assembly unanimously adopted a non-binding political declaration, the New York declaration for refugees and migrants, pledging to uphold the rights of refugees and migrants, help them resettle and ensure they had access to education and jobs. This 'New York Declaration on Large Movements of Refugees and Migrants' saw the launching of a two-year process to develop a Global Compact on Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration, or as it is better known, 'the Global Compact for Migration'. It resulted in the final adoption of this Global Compact in December 2018 at Marrakesh.

While increasing volumes of research have focused on the actual and potential contributions of migrant communities to sustainable development or poverty reduction in their countries of origin, the

findings have not been systematically translated into policy change. This needs to be looked at by all Governments.

Just as the free movement of goods and services and capital are seen to foster global economic growth and prosperity, the free movement of people will be a major driver of the global economy in this century. In fact, it is the one missing link in the global economy that we refer to as 'globalization'. It's a geopolitical reality and the world is beginning to view it as such.

The Geo-Politics of International Migration

by

Dr A. Didar Singh

Introduction

For hundreds of years it were the 'Global-Tailwinds' that carried goods, persons and ideas across the seven seas. They resulted in organised and sustained international trade and its corollary - migration. Today we refer to 'global tailwinds' as being the economic or political forces that may develop and start from any corner of the globe but have a global impact. That is Globalization. Migration has always been the other side of this coin of globalisation. In previous eras, population movements have taken place side by side with the development of contacts and flows between different societies and cultures. In this respect, the present situation is paradoxical, because in a world which is more interconnected than ever, in which financial and trade flows have been liberalized, the mobility of persons runs up against severe barriers which restrict it.¹

The Politics of Geo-Politics and Migration:

Geopolitics is a discourse of world politics dealing with the geographical dimensions of power and competition between states². This competition is the politics.

Migration means mobility and people on the move traverse geopolitical terrain, thereby they become both the narrative as also the result of such mobility. The link between migration and geopolitics is thus obvious. Moreover, all international migrants are from some state and move to another. This makes them susceptible

¹ Singh (2012) Lecture at Jindal Univ.

² Tuathail quoted in Heyer, Celia, Global Migration- A Geopolitical Approach, 2017 @ <https://www.socialnet.de/materialien>

to the laws and rules of different countries and dependant on the geopolitics of the time and region.

Geopolitical theory is also a very seductive concept. In a sense it could be a crutch to understand all issues that are global. However, there is a catch here. There is politics in geo-politics. That is obvious but needs to be stated upfront so that we can view migration in the context here of development and not just as a play of geopolitics.

The concept of '*Geopolitics*' is all about strategic analysis. Meant to be an analysis between International relations theories and geopolitical theories, it's essentially the exploring of relationships and interactions between States or Countries, Civilizations, Peoples, and Economics. In this context the geopolitics of international migration must have two essential elements:

One: That International migration must be seen as a global issue, and

Two: Such an issue must not only be economically imperative but politically vital.

This brief will seek to roll this concept out.

Migration on the Global Stage

As Kalm (2008) vividly brought out, only a very few ideas of the last couple of decades have been as 'pervasive' as the notion of 'globalization'. Though this term does come from processes that are of much earlier origin, it has become increasingly widespread as commentators struggle with words to characterize the world following the end of the Cold War³ and now match this with the anti-globalisation trends. The concept transcends nation states and is in many ways is an expression that recognises both the market

³ Kalm S. (2008) Mobility, Migration Control and Geopolitical Imaginations. In: Petersson B., Tyler K. (eds) Majority Cultures and the Everyday Politics of Ethnic Difference. Palgrave Macmillan, London.

economy and capitalism but within it encompasses several trends including that of mobility or migration.



The Intergovernmental Conference to Adopt the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration was held in Marrakesh on December 10-11, 2018. Source: UN Blogs

Mobility is a fundamental element of human freedom as it entails the freedom to seek opportunities to improve living standards, and health and education outcomes, and/or to live in safer, more responsive communities. Migration thus is a fundamental human activity. Both for individuals and groups. It is a vital component of developing human capital, and also a powerful driver of social change. While there is clearly no single explanation for why people decide to migrate, authors cite economic, societal and policy factors as the major drivers of migration (Castles & Miller 2009: 30). Today, some 245 million⁴ people live outside their country of birth which accounts for 3 percent of humanity. Migration has increased from 93 million in 1960 to 244 million in 2016 (European Political Strategy Centre, 2017).

⁴ IOM estimated in 2015 that total migrants were 1 billion of which 224 million were international migrants and some 740 million were internal migrants.

As the Rand Research has brought out⁵, Over the past few years, the overall share of migrants compared to the global population has remained relatively steady, resulting in a consistent rise in the number of international migrants. This trend is likely to continue resulting in the number of migrants likely to reach 300 million in 2030. Among international migrants, over 75% move to a country with a higher level of human development than their country of origin (UNDP 2009) and their impact is perceived as high especially vis a vis jobs, as research has shown that over the past decade 'new immigrants accounted for 70% of the increase in the labour force in Europe, and 47% in the US' (OECD 2012e).

For twenty years now, Europeans have been encouraged to view migration as the epitome of globalisation, the triumph of global economic drive over territorial order (Parkes, 2015). This developed world view has now been replaced by migration as a competitive geopolitical issue where border control is important, as is using migration as a geo-strategic tool.

Migration at the UN

Several developing countries and NGOs have attempted to bring 'migration' before the UN but the only response they got was the setting up of GFMD – the Global Forum on Migration and Development.⁶ The High-Level Dialogue on Migration and Development (HLD) held on 14-15 September 2006 during the UN General Assembly, while reflecting the progressive acknowledgement of the limits of a strictly national approach to migration questions at a global level, flagged the need for an open and transparent dialogue on migration and development, that would promote practical, evidence-based outcomes and

⁵ Kobzar, Hellgren, Hoorens, Khodyakov and Yaqub, *Evolving patterns and impacts of migration: Global societal trends to 2030- Thematic report 4*, 2015, RAND Corporation, Cambridge, UK

⁶ The idea of creating a global consultative forum on Migration and Development was proposed by Mr. Kofi Annan, former Secretary-General of the United Nations (UN), at the first High-Level Dialogue on International Migration and Development (HLD) held on 14-15 September 2006 during the UN General Assembly.

cooperation between governments as well as non-government stakeholders. From this idea, the GFMD was born, hosting its first Summit meeting in 2007 under the direction of the first GFMD Chair, Belgium. Subsequently annual meetings have taken place in the Philippines, Greece, Switzerland, Bangladesh, Morocco etc. including in them, academia, NGOs, trade unions, the private sector, migrants and diaspora representatives as well as local authorities.



A United Nations Summit for Refugees and Migrants was held on September 19, 2016 in New York which saw the launching of a two-year process to develop a Global Compact for Migration. Source: ANS

GFMD got set up but the issue of mobility still didn't get centre stage till recently - particularly post the refugee and migration crisis that hit Europe some 4 years ago⁷. Suddenly the developed world had a large number of migrants at their doorstep! They thus turned to the United Nations - for after all it is the one forum where geopolitics meets the prevalent structure of global governance. The UN is also the place where all members agreed to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 2030 as global targets.⁸ Though not

⁷ In 2015, some 4000 refugees/migrants drowned in the Mediterranean Sea as they tried to reach Europe in inflatable boats. (Source: Rosling, H., Factfulness, 2018, Hodder & Stoughton, London)

⁸ The 2030 Agenda does explicitly refer to migration, and recognises the economic value of migrants: migrant workers are expressly considered in SDG 8 on economic growth and decent work; issues of trafficking noted as part of SDG 16 on peaceful societies; SDG 10 calls for a reduction in the transaction costs of remittances; and migrant status is mentioned in SDG 17 as a factor for disaggregation during review and follow up (Table 1). Finally, Target 10.7 – the cornerstone of migration in the 2030 Agenda – calls for the facilitation of 'safe,

specifically taken up, migration does find reference in several of the SDGs – 8, 10, 16 and 17.

Back in 2016, 193 members of the UN general assembly unanimously adopted a non-binding political declaration, the New York declaration for refugees and migrants, pledging to uphold the rights of refugees and migrants, help them resettle and ensure they had access to education and jobs. This 'New York Declaration on Large Movements of Refugees and Migrants' saw the launching of a two-year process to develop a Global Compact on Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration, or as it is better known, 'the Global Compact for Migration'.

This initiative had the enthusiastic backing of the then US President, Obama and was embraced by UN Secretary General Guterres as one of his major challenges for 2018. The aim was to publish a global compact by the following year in time for adoption by the UN general assembly the next September. Very much a global requirement and eagerly awaited, especially by sending countries.



Former US President Barack Obama announced executive actions on the U.S. immigration policy in 2014. Source: NPR

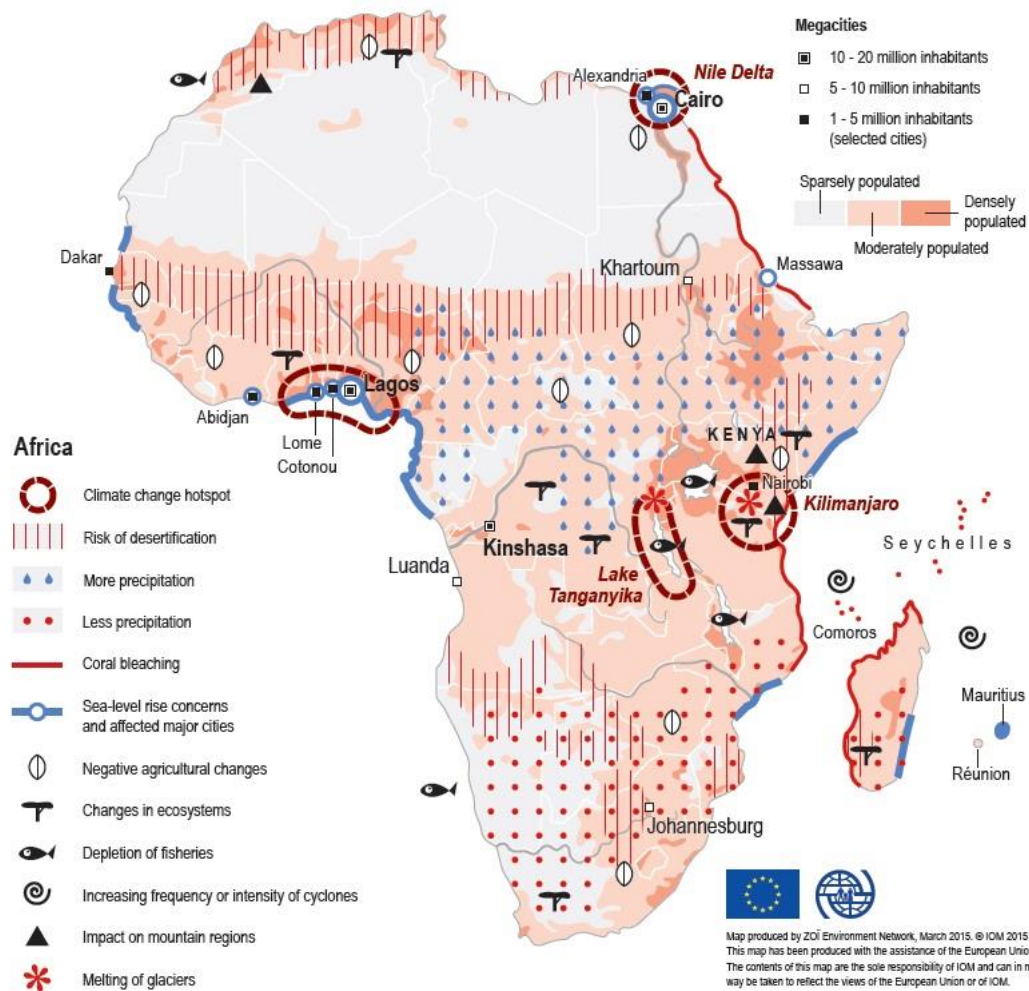
regular and responsible migration' and the implementation of 'well-managed migration policies'. Foresti, M and Hagen-Zanker, J., 2018, Migration and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, at <https://www.odi.org/publications/10913-migration-and-2030-agenda-sustainable-development>

Different Types of Migration

Migration is seen as divided into being irregular and orderly, i.e. Illegal or based on and within rules. There are in fact two different types of migration: what you could call “discretionary” and “non-discretionary” migration. Non-discretionary refers to the fact that there are certain forms of even legal migration over which governments do not have much discretionary authority. Amongst the reasons is that governments have signed international treaties committing them to do certain things. One example is the treaty of Rome in the European Union, which gives EU workers the right of free movement within the EU. Another is the Geneva Convention for handling requests for asylum. A third example is the US H1B Visa which comes from the commitment under GATS that the US gave at WTO. Discretionary of course is when countries decide who they will allow in. The Global Compact was expected to find guidelines for ‘managing’ migration.

In early December 2017, the US walked out of the negotiations deeming it *inconsistent* with its policies and projecting immigration as a sovereignty issue. This invariably led to the question whether that objective itself was off the table? Would there be enough countries that continue to back this compact on migration?

The issue after all, has been on and off the global table for years and it looked like finally there was some ‘movement’ on it. The reality is that the issue of mobility is here to stay. Globalisation demands it. So do corporates. It brings the best of human resource from around the world to ensure sustainability and competitiveness for the economy.



Factors like climate change and desertification may also lead to migration. Source: Environmental Migration Portal

Migration seen as a predominantly border control issue

And yet migration continues to be seen through the filter of border control and internal security. This may suit political positions of domestic protectionism but continues to be a short-term response to the larger demands of the 21st century knowledge economy. Many countries don't get it – mainly because they don't want to. Many do, because they have to. That is the reality of migration.

Interestingly, on December 6, 2017 at Puerto Vallarta, Mexico concluded the three-day global stocktaking conference on the 'global compact'. This was very well attended by the balance 192 countries (other than the US). From the thematic sessions and the deliberations in Puerto Vallarta, the major issues involved in the Compact emerged more clearly, both on points of consensus and points of contention.

After due negotiations under the umbrella of the United Nations, the draft agreement was brought before the Intergovernmental Conference to Adopt the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, held from 10–11 December 2018 at Marrakesh, Morocco. The compact was approved by the 164 nations that attended. Several backed out – besides the US, so did Hungary, Austria, Poland, the Czech Republic, Croatia and Bulgaria, Slovenia, Australia, Switzerland and Israel. A view has emerged that these 10 or so countries backing off doesn't really matter – on the migration stage. They will ultimately be compelled to accept human resource mobility if they too want to remain competitive. The important point was that the rest of the countries had accepted the Global Compact.

The Global Compact for Migration aims to improve how migration is managed via a set of 23 specific objectives, ranging from the collection of adequate data to ensuring that all migrants have proof of legal identity, establishing coordinated efforts on missing migrants, and strengthening the transnational response to the smuggling and trafficking of migrants. An important and largely overlooked element of the compact is that it is not only designed to enhance cooperation among state actors but a major innovative feature in this agreement is that it encourages cooperation with a range of other players such as local authorities, civil society and the private sector.

Many national and regional issues need to be addressed

Migration is not just topical but a reality for many parts of the globe. There are of course many national and regional issues that need to be addressed. For example, in the South and South East Asian countries, many are not exclusive sending or receiving countries. For these countries, ethical recruitment and reducing the vulnerabilities in the migration cycle are high on the agenda. Similarly, mutual recognition of skills and harmonisation of standards are also important issues. The second and extremely important development is the interest and participation of the private sector in regional fora such as the Global Forum on Migration and Development's (GFMD) Business Mechanism, the Colombo Process⁹ meetings and the Abu Dhabi dialogue¹⁰. This is important because it is only with the involvement of the private sector in migration policy that we can move forward on these priorities that have been identified. Without the private sector at the high table of migration, little can be achieved.

The question on everybody's lips (especially the Media) is whether this global compact is in fact global? Now that several countries have backed out, does it have global consensus? Let us remember that in any case this is a non-binding agreement. It's more of a signal of a 21st century reality. Migration is and will continue to happen. And, as research shows, it's not really South to North, but both North-North and South-South¹¹.

⁹ The Colombo Process is a Regional Consultative Process on the management of overseas employment and contractual labour for countries of origins in Asia. According to best estimates, over 2.5 million Asian workers leave their countries every year under contract to work abroad – mostly to the Gulf. @ <https://www.colomboprocess.org/>

¹⁰ The Abu Dhabi Dialogue (ADD) was established in 2008 as a forum for dialogue and cooperation between Asian countries of labour origin and destination. The ADD consists of the twelve Member States of the Colombo Process (CP), namely Afghanistan, Bangladesh, China, India, Indonesia, Nepal, Pakistan, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Vietnam; and six Gulf countries of destination: Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi

¹¹ That Migration takes place mostly in South to North direction is a myth. Data in recent World Migration Reports indicates that around 60 percent of all global migration takes place within the developed world and 40 percent South to South.

Migration and Development

While global migration rates have remained relatively stable over the past half a century, the political salience of migration has strongly increased. For origin societies, the departure of people raises concern about the 'brain drain' on the one hand, but it also creates the hope that the money and knowledge migrants gather abroad can foster human and economic development.

As Kathleen Newland (2019), has argued: Governments, development specialists, and others have rediscovered the connections between migration and development, yet this has not translated into policy guidance, both in sending and receiving countries. Quite obviously, geopolitics and local agenda come into play. It is now increasingly acknowledged that the Diaspora have an active role to play in the development process of their countries of origin. Not only as a source of funds, through remittances but they are also a rich resource of skills and know-how. Several studies have shown the Diaspora as agents of change in their countries of origin.

Conclusions

Human resource mobility is an essential feature of today's globalised world where integrated world markets, networks and technologies are all contributing to the increasing movement of labour, students, professionals and families. The migrants of today are the Diaspora of tomorrow - and those of yesteryears, that of today.¹² That there is a link between Diaspora and development and that it's a relationship that needs to be nurtured for mutual benefit.

Today, with the impact of globalisation there have been profound changes in the composition of local, regional and national cultural practices. The changing traditional attitude, the arrival of new diasporic communities and the corresponding emergence of new subjectivities, indicates that Diaspora has taken on a new

¹² Singh, A. Didar, 2012, Working with the Diaspora for Development – Policy Perspectives from India, India-EU Project Working Paper 2012/02.

dimension. Diasporic groups, capable of maintaining and investing in social, economic and political networks that span the globe, are of increasing relevance and interest to policy makers in home countries as well as host countries. In the last few decades, with increased networking, Diaspora has become an important determinant of foreign policy making. It is influencing the foreign policy of countries of origin as well as the countries of settlement. As a component of transnational networks, it is seen to be a foreign policy or economic asset, which the home government is eager to exploit. It is working as a non- state actor and is seen as a phenomenon that cannot be ignored. This paradigm shift has led to a new perspective in dealing with the Diaspora (Singh, 2012¹³).

Governance mechanisms are simultaneously becoming hyper-local and extra-national, 'exemplifying strategies of 'remote control' (for example, to prevent 'undesirable' migrants reaching EU Member States) and 'internal controls' (to eject them afterwards). As a strategy, destination countries try to manage migration flows closer to their sources, as far away as possible from their own territory. This practice of externalizing borders doesn't always work. To 'manage' migration its always better to address the sources for which of course long-term development efforts are required. Another factor of geopolitics is that the various migration routes are also accompanied by different lengths of stay and commitment to migrants' receiving countries. Expert interviews suggest that only half of international migrants are long distance economic or settler-type migrants. Some types of migration are intended to be temporary – such as student migration and circular migration, in which migrants move back and forth between their home and host countries. Geopolitics must therefore address each type of migration separately.

While increasing volumes of research have focused on the actual and potential contributions of migrant communities to sustainable development or poverty reduction in their countries of origin, the

¹³ Ibid

findings have not been systematically translated into policy change. One result is that little coherence is to be found between the development and migration policies of governments in countries of destination and origin—a reality that papers such as this seek to address.

It is time that labour mobility and the free movement of natural persons be seen as a necessary corollary to the global cooperation on trade and development. Just as the free movement of goods and services and capital are seen to foster global economic growth and prosperity, the free movement of people will be a major driver of the global economy in this century. In fact, it is the one missing link in the global economy that we refer to as 'globalization'. It's a geopolitical reality and the world is beginning to view it as such.

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