**ORIGINAL ARTICLE**

# Migration as International Relations

A. K. M. Ahsan Ullah

Faculty of Arts and Social Science, University of Brunei Darussalam, Bandar Seri Begawan, Brunei Darussalam

**ABSTRACT**

This article examines the transformation of migration from a domestic policy matter to a transnational concern with far-reaching global implications. Drawing on theoretical perspectives, such as realism, liberal institutionalism, constructivism and critical theories, the article explores how migration reshapes power dynamics, challenges traditional notions of sovereignty and influences international cooperation. The analysis highlights key debates in migration–international relations (IR) scholarship, focusing on the securitization of migration, the role of diasporas in diplomacy and the interplay between migration and global governance frameworks, such as the 1951 Refugee Convention and the Global Compact for Migration. By situating migration within historical and contemporary contexts, the article underscores its centrality to evolving international norms and state behaviour. This argues that migration is not merely a movement of people but a politically charged process integral to shaping global political order, requiring interdisciplinary approaches to address its complexities effectively.

## 1 | Introduction

Migration has emerged as one of the most significant and contested arenas in international relations (IR), embodying the intricate interplay of security, politics, economics, diplomacy and human rights. Nowhere is this more evident than in the European Union's (EU's) migration policies, which must manage the precarious balancing act of safeguarding borders, fulfilling humanitarian obligations, addressing labour market demands and maintaining diplomatic ties with countries of origin, transit and destination. With over 280 million international migrants globally (International Organization for Migration [IOM] 2022), migration has transcended the confines of domestic policy, evolving into a cornerstone of global political discourse. The Syrian refugee crisis serves as a case in point, reshaping EU migration frameworks, straining international alliances and sparking global debates on equitable responsibility-sharing (Ullah 2018). This crisis underscores that migration is no longer a peripheral issue but a pivotal force shaping the contours of global politics.

The movement of people across borders significantly reshapes bilateral and multilateral relations, disrupts entrenched notions of state sovereignty and challenges the capacity of governments to manage governance and control effectively (Castles and Miller 2009). A striking example is the influx of Venezuelan migrants into neighbouring Colombia and Brazil, which catalysed regional agreements under the Quito Process. This scenario demonstrates how cross-border migration not only strains state capacities but also necessitates diplomatic and cooperative frameworks that transcend traditional paradigms of sovereignty. In interconnected world, migration emerges as both a catalyst for international collaboration and a flashpoint for geopolitical tension (Betts 2011).

For instance, the 2016 EU–Turkey migration deal exemplifies the intricate nexus between migration and diplomacy. Under this agreement, Turkey committed to stemming irregular migrant flows into Europe in exchange for financial aid, visa liberalization for Turkish citizens and the revival of negotiations on EU membership. This arrangement underscores how migration

management is intertwined with broader diplomatic priorities, including trade agreements, aid packages and geopolitical negotiations. This implies that states bargain for strategic advantages by leveraging migration policies as tools of diplomacy.

I argue that migration both profoundly influences and is shaped by IR—reshaping state behaviour, challenging traditional notions of sovereignty and fostering multilateral cooperation. Its intersections with critical domains, such as security, economics and diplomacy, are unmistakable (Ullah 2024). The centrality of migration in global politics is reflected in landmark international frameworks such as the 1951 Refugee Convention, its 1967 Protocol and the more recent Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration (United Nations [UN] 2018). Moreover, migration crises exacerbated by climate change further highlight the intricate interplay between migration and international security, humanitarian aid and global governance (Buzan et al. 1998). As environmental factors increasingly displace communities, migration becomes not just a humanitarian challenge but a geopolitical reality.

## 1.1 | Migration as a Critical Aspect of IR

This article delves into the transformation of migration from a predominantly domestic concern to a transnational phenomenon with far-reaching global ramifications. By critically examining the role of migration within the field of IR, it interrogates how and why migration has ascended to prominence in international policy and political discourse. The analysis highlights how migration reshapes power dynamics among states, redefines international norms and influences state behaviour within global forums, thus situating migration at the heart of contemporary IR debates (Hollifield 2004).

Guiding this inquiry are pivotal questions: How have theoretical perspectives within IR engaged with migration as a policy challenge? What are the key debates surrounding migration's impact on global security, economic relations and diplomacy? In addition, is the intersection of migration and IR a recent construct, or does it have deeper historical roots? These questions provide a foundation for understanding the embeddedness of migration within the IR framework (Geddes and Scholten 2016).

The study adopts a critical review methodology, synthesizing academic discourse on migration and IR. It draws on theoretical lenses, such as realism, liberal institutionalism, constructivism and critical theories to elucidate migration's evolving role in IR scholarship. Historical trajectories, from colonial labour migration to contemporary refugee crises, are examined to contextualize the development of migration governance frameworks (Faist 2019). To enrich this theoretical analysis, policy documents from international organizations, including the IOM, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the UN, are integrated.

Ultimately, this article argues that migration is not a peripheral issue in IR but a central force that shapes and is shaped by global political structures, evolving legal norms and strategic state priorities. Far from being a mere backdrop, migration has become a key determinant of international cooperation and contestation,

underscoring its intrinsic role in shaping the modern world order (Betts and Loescher 2011).

## 2 | Conceptual Foundations

Migration, broadly defined as the movement of individuals across and within national borders, has emerged as one of the defining phenomena of the modern era. Castles et al. (2014) aptly characterize migration as 'an intrinsic part of social transformation processes', underscoring its capacity to reshape political, economic and cultural landscapes globally. Far from being a mere social process, migration is a politically charged and strategically managed phenomenon, deeply embedded in the frameworks of IR and central to contemporary geopolitical discourse.

Within the IR paradigm, migration intersects with critical domains such as security, diplomacy, economics and human rights. Realist scholars often conceptualize migration as a security concern, focusing on its implications for state sovereignty, border control and potential threats arising from irregular migration and terrorism (Buzan et al. 1998). The transnational flow of people, particularly in cases of forced migration, disrupts the Westphalian notion of state sovereignty by challenging state-centric frameworks. For instance, the Rohingya refugee crisis underscores how migration disrupts traditional notions of sovereignty. Myanmar's systematic persecution of the Rohingya triggered a mass exodus into Bangladesh, overwhelming its resources and generating regional tensions (Ullah 2011 2016). This crisis not only exposed the limits of Myanmar's sovereign framework but also necessitated multilateral cooperation involving the UN, ASEAN and international NGOs to address the humanitarian and political fallout, highlighting the interplay between state autonomy and global governance (Sudheer and Banerjee 2021).

Economically, migration is a cornerstone of global labour markets and development, facilitating the establishment of transnational labour regimes often centred around global cities (Sassen 1998). Migration enables labour mobility and remittance flows that bolster economies, particularly in the Global South, while simultaneously reshaping the structure of global capitalism. From a liberal IR perspective, migration fosters international cooperation, as exemplified by bilateral and multilateral agreements like the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration (UN 2018).

Migration also serves as a tool of soft power, with diasporas acting as cultural ambassadors who strengthen bilateral relations and enhance diplomatic ties. The increasing prevalence of migration-related treaties, such as the 1951 Refugee Convention and subsequent protocols, signals its evolving role in global governance structures. Betts (2011) highlights how refugee governance has become an integral component of the international political order, necessitating state collaboration that transcends traditional sovereignty. As Betts and Collier (2017a, 2017b) argue, the growing complexity of migration governance reflects its centrality to international cooperation and its transformative impact on the global political landscape.

The conceptual diagram (Figure 1) illustrates mutual influences between migration and IR and six key domains: geopolitics,
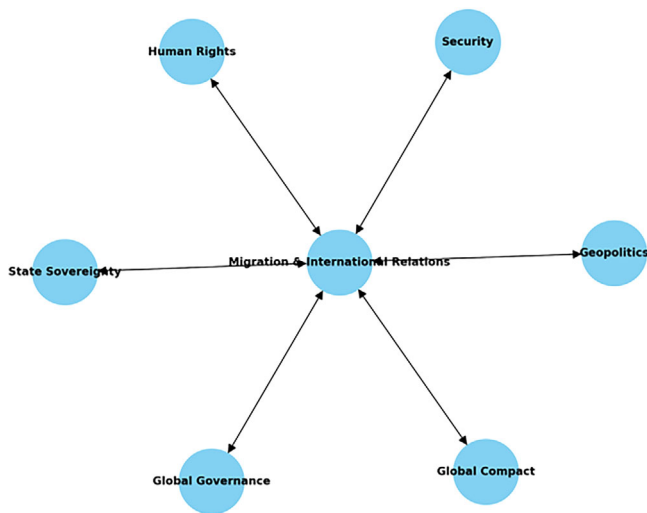
**FIGURE 1** | Migration and international relations framework.

global governance, state sovereignty, security, human rights and global compact. Each bidirectional arrow indicates that these domains both shape and are shaped by migration dynamics in IR. Although the article highlights how states respond to public fears about migration, it is also crucial to recognize that such fears are often not organic but *strategically constructed and weaponized* by states themselves. Critical security scholars (Bigo 2002; Huysmans 2000) have illustrated how governments and political elites instrumentalize the discourse of a migrant 'invasion' to legitimize restrictive migration policies and strengthen the securitization of borders. This phenomenon is particularly visible in populist regimes, where the portrayal of migrants as threats to national identity or economic security becomes a means to consolidate political power and deflect attention from domestic governance failures (Wodak 2015). Thus, the politics of fear serves both as a justification for enhanced surveillance and as a tool to rally nationalist sentiments, reinforcing a security-first paradigm in migration governance.

## 2.1 | Human Mobility ↔ State Sovereignty

### 2.1.1 | Migration to Sovereignty

The movement of people across borders, particularly in large-scale scenarios such as refugee inflows or irregular migration, strikes at the heart of traditional notions of state sovereignty. The distinction between regular and irregular migration is often presented as natural or objective, yet it is largely a *product of political and legal constructions*. Restrictive visa regimes, exclusionary asylum procedures and inflexible labour quotas generate irregularity by limiting legal pathways for mobility (De Genova 2002; Squire 2011). This paradoxically undermines the very security objectives such policies aim to achieve by pushing migrants into clandestine channels and informal economies. Moreover, irregularization not only exposes migrants to heightened vulnerability and exploitation but also fuels the narratives that further justify securitization, creating a self-reinforcing cycle. Recognizing the *governance-induced nature of irregularity* is essential to understanding how security logics can become counterproductive, producing the

very instability and disorder they claim to prevent (Cvajner and Sciortino 2010).

Governments are compelled to juggle competing priorities: safeguarding territorial integrity, maintaining demographic balance and addressing public apprehensions over migration. For example, mass refugee arrivals often overburden state resources, igniting debates on stricter border controls and resource allocation (Weiner 1995). The challenge is as much about the symbolism of sovereignty as it is about practical governance, with migration exposing the fragility of state boundaries and the limits of unilateral control.

### 2.1.2 | Sovereignty to Migration

Conversely, state sovereignty actively shapes migration policies, manifesting in visa restrictions, the erection of border walls and deportation practices. These measures are often framed as necessary to uphold national security but, more often than not, sideline human rights considerations (Bigo 2002). In this dynamic, sovereignty becomes a double-edged sword: a tool to enforce control but also a point of contention in the global debate over human mobility.

## 2.2 | Human Mobility ↔ Global Cooperation

### 2.2.1 | Migration to Cooperation

The inherently transnational nature of migration necessitates collaboration among states, particularly in addressing challenges such as refugee resettlement, human trafficking and labour migration. For instance, the Syrian refugee crisis compelled the EU, UNHCR and neighbouring countries to coordinate asylum processes and humanitarian aid efforts, exemplifying the symbiotic relationship between migration and international cooperation (Betts 2011). Migration thus serves as both a test and a catalyst for global solidarity.

### 2.2.2 | Cooperation to Migration

International cooperative frameworks, such as the Global Compact for Migration (GCM), aim to standardize migration governance (Figure 1). Arrows indicate causality versus mutual influence, and dashed lines indicate weaker or indirect links. These agreements promote safe, orderly and regular migration but also reflect the geopolitical power dynamics at play. Some states resist shared responsibility, viewing cooperation as a threat to national interests rather than a pathway to collective benefit (Koser 2007). As such, cooperation is often a precarious balance between idealism and realpolitik. Although the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM) represents a landmark in international migration governance, it has also attracted criticism for its selective treatment of migrants' rights and its geopolitical implications. Scholars such as Elspeth Guild have pointed out that the GCM subtly reinforces a hierarchy among migrants—prioritizing regular over irregular migration and treating economic migration and forced displacement through disjointed frameworks (Guild 2018). One contentious issue is the

compact's ambiguous stance on family reunification, which in some regional interpretations has led to restrictive interpretations and scaling back of this right. Moreover, the GCM places increasing responsibility on countries of origin for reintegration and return management, often without adequately addressing the asymmetrical power dynamics between destination and origin states. These critiques are vital to understanding how the GCM reflects not only aspirations for cooperation but also the politics of containment and externalization (Bhattacharya 2020).

## 2.3 | Human Mobility ↔ Geopolitics

### 2.3.1 | Migration to Geopolitics

Migration flows frequently reshape geopolitical landscapes, forging new alliances or exacerbating rivalries. The influx of Ukrainian refugees, for example, has influenced EU policies, spotlighting the challenges of resource allocation and border management while straining relations with neighbouring states (Geddes 2018). Migration thus becomes a litmus test for geopolitical cohesion and resilience.

### 2.3.2 | Geopolitics to Migration

Conversely, geopolitical instability—be it wars, economic crises or regional conflicts—remains a dominant driver of forced migration. Middle Eastern conflicts, for instance, have triggered mass refugee flows to Europe, forcing states to recalibrate policies and resources (Kirby 2020). Geopolitics, therefore, not only shapes migration patterns but also dictates the urgency and scope of policy responses.

## 2.4 | Migration Governance ↔ State Sovereignty

### 2.4.1 | Governance to Sovereignty

International migration governance, such as UNHCR's refugee resettlement frameworks, imposes obligations on states, challenging their autonomy. The principle of non-refoulement, for instance, restricts states from returning refugees to unsafe conditions, thereby testing the limits of sovereignty in favour of humanitarian obligations (UNHCR 2002).

### 2.4.2 | Sovereignty to Governance

Sovereignty, in turn, determines how migration governance is enacted. States like Malaysia and Thailand prioritize national security and border control, often at the expense of compliance with international norms. This tension illustrates the struggle to balance sovereignty with global governance expectations (Human Rights Watch 2021). Figure 2 illustrates the conceptual link between migration and IR, showing that migration influences IR directly and indirectly. In turn, IR shapes key dimensions, such as state behaviour, national sovereignty and the degree of multilateral cooperation among states.
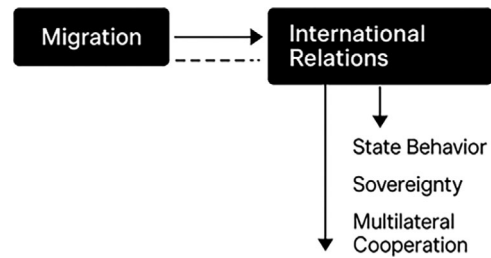


**FIGURE 2** | Conceptual link: migration and IR. *Source:* Ullah 2024.

## 2.5 | Migration Governance ↔ Human Rights

### 2.5.1 | Governance to Human Rights

Effective migration governance acts as a safeguard for the human rights of migrants, ensuring access to asylum, healthcare and education. The European Court of Human Rights has played a pivotal role in cases where migration policies infringed upon fundamental rights, emphasizing the importance of governance in upholding legal protections (Betts and Collier 2017b).

### 2.5.2 | Human Rights to Governance

Human rights frameworks play a foundational role in informing and shaping migration governance structures by establishing normative standards that transcend national sovereignty. The 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol serve as cornerstones of international refugee protection, enshrining the principle of non-refoulement and obligating signatory states to provide asylum and safeguard basic rights for individuals fleeing persecution (Edwards 2010). These instruments not only delineate the legal responsibilities of states but also influence the development of national asylum systems, judicial decisions and policy frameworks. Beyond refugee law, broader human rights treaties—such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Convention on the Rights of Migrant Workers—further extend protections to all migrants, regardless of status, reinforcing norms related to non-discrimination, due process and access to social services. Together, these frameworks compel states to align domestic migration laws with evolving international standards, creating a dynamic interplay between sovereignty, rights and global governance.

## 2.6 | Migration Impacts ↔ Geopolitics

### 2.6.1 | Impacts to Geopolitics

Migration's economic and social impacts often reverberate through geopolitical relations. Diaspora communities, such as the Indian diaspora in the United States, influence bilateral ties through trade advocacy, cultural exchange and political lobbying (Koser 2007). Migration thus becomes a conduit for soft power and diplomacy.

### 2.6.2 | Geopolitics to Impacts

Geopolitical conditions shape migration outcomes, with restrictive policies in Western countries leading to precarious conditions for migrants. For example, detention centres and unsafe migration routes illustrate how geopolitical priorities can directly affect migrant well-being (Bigo 2002).

## 2.7 | Migration Impacts ↔ Global Cooperation

### 2.7.1 | Impacts to Cooperation

Migration-driven economic benefits, such as remittances, incentivize global cooperation. Initiatives like the UN's Sustainable Development Goals recognize the developmental potential of migration and encourage partnerships to harness its benefits (Castles et al. 2014). Migration thus becomes a shared resource in global governance.

### 2.7.2 | Cooperation to Impacts

International agreements influence migration outcomes by creating standardized practices, such as labour mobility pacts or resettlement programs. ASEAN's agreements on migrant workers, for example, aim to improve working conditions while fostering regional integration (ASEAN 2012). These efforts exemplify how cooperation can shape positive migration impacts. Although remittances are often celebrated for their developmental impact—such as improving household income, health and education—they may also entrench economic dependency and exacerbate existing inequalities. As de Haas (2010) argues, remittance flows can mask the structural drivers of underdevelopment by enabling states to sidestep deeper reforms, relying instead on diaspora income as an economic buffer. Similarly, Ambrosius et al. (2020) demonstrate how reliance on remittances may widen intra-household inequalities and reduce state incentives for public investment in welfare systems. Thus, although remittances contribute to international cooperation and economic stability, they may also reinforce uneven power relations and delay transformative change in origin countries.

## 2.8 | Migration Governance ↔ Geopolitics

### 2.8.1 | Governance to Geopolitics

Migration governance often becomes entangled with geopolitical strategies. The EU–Turkey migration deal, for instance, reshaped relations between Europe and the Middle East by linking migration management to financial aid and diplomatic negotiations (Geddes 2018).

### 2.8.2 | Geopolitics to Governance

Geopolitical considerations frequently dictate migration governance. National security concerns, for instance, lead states to block international agreements or design restrictive policies to align with strategic interests (Weiner 1995). Governance, in this context, reflects the interplay of power and pragmatism.

## 3 | Migration as IR: Key Debates

The migration–IR interplay has sparked two dominant debates: migration as a sovereign issue versus a global governance challenge and the role of migration in shaping foreign policy, international cooperation and transnational relations. Migration is increasingly recognized as a pivotal issue within IR, intersecting with global security, governance and political economy.

## 3.1 | Security and Migration

Migration has long been framed as a security concern within IR, with scholars emphasizing its implications for state sovereignty and societal stability. Barry Buzan's seminal work on security studies highlights migration as a source of societal insecurity, where identity politics and cultural threats emerge as significant concerns (Buzan 1991). His concept of 'societal security' underscores how migration challenges social cohesion, particularly in host societies grappling with fears of cultural erosion. This insight shifts traditional state-centric security paradigms by focusing on identity-based insecurities, arguing that societal fears can profoundly influence state behaviour and global politics.

Similarly, Alexander Betts situates refugees as central actors in IR, analysing how forced migration impacts regional stability and global governance. Betts (2013) critiques the inadequacies of existing international refugee regimes, emphasizing their fragmented nature and inability to manage large-scale displacement effectively. His work illustrates that refugee flows are not solely humanitarian challenges but geopolitical phenomena that shape regional alliances and influence power dynamics.

## 3.2 | Migration Governance and Policy

Migration governance has emerged as a critical arena within global politics, involving states, international organizations and transnational actors. The 2015 European migration crisis epitomized the significance of governance frameworks, as actors like the UNHCR coordinated refugee assistance, the EU reformed Schengen border policies and NGOs such as Médecins Sans Frontières provided humanitarian aid while states negotiated asylum policies and burden-sharing mechanisms (Betts and Collier 2017b). Stephen Castles's foundational contributions reveal migration governance as deeply political, reflecting the competing interests of sending and receiving states. Castles (2004) argues that migration regimes are embedded within historical inequalities and power asymmetries, highlighting the structural barriers to equitable international cooperation.

James Hollifield's 'migration state' theory conceptualizes migration as a dual issue of foreign policy and domestic politics. Hollifield (2000) posits that states face a 'liberal paradox', balancing economic benefits from migration with political demands for sovereignty and border control. This framework captures the complex interplay between domestic pressures and IR,

particularly within liberal democracies where economic openness conflicts with public fears of migration (Ullah 2018). This is crucial to understanding the intersection between migration governance and IR. He posits that modern states must reconcile a 'liberal paradox': the tension between economic openness to migration and political pressures for restriction and control. This paradox reflects a core dilemma in liberal democracies, where market demands for labour often clash with nationalist sentiments and securitized public discourse. In this context, migration becomes both a domestic and international issue, compelling states to manage it through foreign policy, bilateral agreements and international institutions. Hollifield's framework underscores that migration governance is no longer merely reactive or administrative—it has become a strategic function of the state, embedded in foreign policy, economic planning and international cooperation. As the article argues, migration functions as a critical component of IR, not only reshaping state behaviour but also compelling states to reconfigure their sovereignty and engage in multilateral governance frameworks like the GCM. Thus, the 'migration state' encapsulates the evolving nature of the state in a globalized world, where mobility governance is central to diplomatic, economic and security agendas.

### 3.3 | Political Economy of Migration

The political economy of migration examines how global capitalism and labour markets influence migration flows. Saskia Sassen's work on global cities and transnational migration provides a critical lens, illustrating how urban centres like London and New York become nodes in global migration networks. Sassen (2001) argues that the globalization of capital has created dual labour markets, where highly skilled professionals coexist with low-wage migrant labourers. Her analysis connects migration patterns to economic restructuring, showing how global cities function as hubs of transnational economic activity.

Thomas Faist expands on this by focusing on the migration-development nexus. Faist (2000) critiques neoliberal migration policies that promote remittances as development tools while ignoring structural inequalities that drive forced migration. He emphasizes the transnational ties migrants maintain, highlighting how remittances and diaspora networks shape global political economies. Faist demonstrates the interconnectedness of migration, development and economic dependency, providing a comprehensive understanding of the political economy of migration.

### 3.4 | Migration as a Sovereign Issue vs. Global Governance Challenge

The tension between state sovereignty and global governance is a central theme in IR's migration discourse. Realist scholars argue that migration policies are inherently tied to national security and sovereignty, as states defend their territorial integrity against irregular migration (Hollifield 1992). This perspective was evident during Europe's 2015 refugee crisis, where many states prioritized border fortification over humanitarian commitments (Geddes and Scholten 2016).

Conversely, liberal–institutionalist perspectives advocate for shared global responsibility, emphasizing multilateral solutions. International organizations such as the UNHCR and IOM have institutionalized migration governance, creating frameworks that transcend state sovereignty. Betts (2011) argues that such collective responses to migration crises better serve global stability, suggesting that sovereignty is increasingly renegotiated in a multilateral context.

Migration policies also serve as tools of foreign policy, advancing geopolitical interests. For instance, migration agreements, such as labour and visa policies, are used strategically to foster international cooperation. Adamson and Tsourapas (2019) highlight how diasporas influence bilateral relations, exemplified by the Indian diaspora's advocacy for stronger US–India ties and economic development. This includes their role in securing policies like the US-India Civil Nuclear Agreement (2008) and contributing to India's economic growth through remittances, which reached over $111 billion in 2023. Faist (2010) underscores how transnational networks reshape state-diaspora relations, further reinforcing the role of migration in global diplomacy. The scholarship of Buzan, Betts, Castles, Hollifield, Sassen, Geddes, Ullah, et al. 2020 and Faist collectively underscores the multifaceted role of migration within IR. From security and governance to political economy, migration has emerged as a global process that challenges traditional IR paradigms.

## 4 | Historical Evolution of Migration in IR

### 4.1 | Pre-Cold War Era: Migration in Colonial and Imperial Contexts

Migration has also been a defining element of global politics, shaping state policies and IR throughout history. Far from being a modern phenomenon, migration has woven itself into the fabric of diplomatic negotiations, economic systems and geopolitical strategies (Ullah 2014). For example, the mass displacement caused by conflicts in the Great Lakes region, particularly during the 1994 Rwandan genocide, underscored the capacity of migration to influence both state policies and IR. Neighbouring countries such as Tanzania and Uganda adapted their refugee policies to manage the influx of displaced persons, whereas international organizations like the UNHCR and regional frameworks like the OAU Refugee Convention facilitated cooperation and diplomatic efforts to address the crisis (Betts 2011).

Although contemporary migration studies often frame migration within the context of modern crises, its strategic role in international diplomacy, economic development and political negotiations is deeply rooted in history. Migration as an international phenomenon predates the modern state system, emerging from colonial expansion, imperial conquest and forced migration. During the colonial era, migration was the lifeblood of empire-building, driven by economic and strategic ambitions. European powers orchestrated large-scale forced migrations, such as the transatlantic slave trade, which relocated millions of Africans as enslaved labourers to the Americas, fundamentally shaping the political economies of the Atlantic world (Eltis and Richardson 2010).

Similarly, the colonial orchestration of indentured labour migration illustrates how economic imperatives fuelled the mobility of people under exploitative systems. After the abolition of slavery in 1834, the British Empire turned to indentured labour to sustain plantation economies. Between 1834 and 1920, over 1.2 million Indian labourers migrated to British colonies, such as Mauritius, Fiji, Trinidad and Tobago and Guyana, under contracts promising wages, housing and return passage after a fixed term—promises often manipulated to entrench workers in exploitative conditions (Northrup 1995). This orchestrated labour mobility not only fulfilled colonial economic needs but also laid the groundwork for transnational diasporic communities that continue to influence global politics today. Likewise, Chinese labourers were transported to North America and Southeast Asia under similar exploitative regimes, reinforcing the role of migration in the global economic order. Such flows were regulated through colonial legal frameworks designed to expand imperial interests rather than protect human rights.

## 4.2 | Migration Governance Through Treaties and Bilateral Agreements

Before the advent of modern international law, migration governance occurred through bilateral treaties and agreements. In the 19th century, treaties regulating migration often focused on controlling labour flows to meet economic demands. For example, the Anglo-Japanese Treaty of 1894 sought to regulate Japanese migration to British territories while guaranteeing reciprocal rights for British nationals in Japan (Shimazu 1998). Similarly, the US–China Burlingame Treaty of 1868 encouraged Chinese immigration to the United States to fulfil labour shortages, particularly during the construction of the transcontinental railroad. However, the liberal terms of such agreements were often short-lived, as exclusionary policies like the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 reversed earlier openness, revealing the volatility of migration governance driven by shifting economic and political pressures (Torpey 2000).

From the transatlantic slave trade to indentured labour systems and bilateral treaties, migration has been both a driver and a reflection of global political transformations. Its enduring role in shaping state policies, fostering international cooperation and driving economic development underscores its significance within IR. The historical lens reveals that migration has always been more than the movement of people—it is a cornerstone of global governance, economic systems and geopolitical strategies. Although the Compact is often hailed as a normative breakthrough, it arguably continues a trend of managing migration in ways that prioritize state sovereignty and control. As Tazzioli (2020) and Elspeth Guild argue, the GCM's approach does not overcome—but rather adapts to—the longstanding bifurcation between 'deserving' and 'undeserving' migrants. It institutionalizes a regulatory framework that reinforces the regular/irregular distinction, often used to justify differentiated access to rights and protections. By calling for stronger return and readmission agreements, the Compact echoes earlier bilateral deals that externalize migration control to origin and transit countries, reflecting a neo-Westphalian logic of delegation and deterrence. These continuities reveal that even as the GCM aspires to holistic governance, it is shaped by entrenched power asymmetries and

securitized policy preferences that have characterized migration agreements since the Cold War.

## 5 | Post-Cold War to Contemporary Period

### 5.1 | Refugee Crises, Asylum Policies and Globalization

The post-Cold War era heralded a sea change in migration governance, catalysed by the collapse of the bipolar world order and subsequent geopolitical realignments. Refugee crises became a defining feature of the international landscape, particularly in the aftermath of conflicts in the Balkans, Rwanda and the Middle East. The mass displacement caused by the Yugoslav Wars spurred the creation of temporary protection regimes in Europe, illustrating the fraught interplay between humanitarian imperatives and security policies (Betts 2011). This era underscored the dual nature of migration as both a moral and strategic challenge within IR.

The end of the Cold War also triggered significant shifts in asylum-seeking and irregular migration. Western states, which had previously embraced refugees from Communist regimes, adopted increasingly restrictive measures, prioritizing securitization and border fortification. The securitization of migration, as highlighted in IR theories emphasizing state sovereignty, reframed migration as a core national security issue (Buzan et al. 1998). Concurrently, globalization intensified international migration through economic liberalization and technological advancements. Transnational migration networks expanded, fuelled by interdependent labour markets and economic disparities, whereas global remittances linked migration to development narratives within IR (Faist 2000). Although the right to asylum is enshrined in international law, recent border management practices—particularly in the EU—have created de facto limitations that sidestep legal obligations under the guise of sovereignty and security. The Hotspot approach, implemented at the EU's external borders (notably in Greece and Italy), exemplifies how frontline states process asylum claims rapidly under immense pressure, often resulting in reduced procedural guarantees and limited access to appeal mechanisms (Tazzioli 2020). These measures are part of a broader strategy of *preemptive containment* that discourages asylum claims through spatial segregation and bureaucratic bottlenecks. As Bloch and Schuster (2005) highlight, such mechanisms not only compromise the spirit of the 1951 Refugee Convention but also contribute to a climate of deterrence and delegitimization of refugee rights. These developments complicate the assertion that asylum universally limits sovereignty; instead, they reveal how sovereignty is actively reasserted through selective compliance and legal grey zones.

### 5.2 | Migration-Related International Agreements

Migration-related international agreements have embedded migration firmly within the broader architecture of IR, which established norms, standards and institutional mechanisms that foster intergovernmental cooperation, reflecting the shared responsibilities of states in managing migration. The 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol remain the cornerstones of

**TABLE 1** | Connections between migration and international relations.

| Migration components | Connections | International relations components |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Human mobility and flows | Refugee crises affecting bilateral/multilateral relations | Global and regional cooperation |
| Migration governance | Border policies influencing sovereignty debates | State sovereignty and security |
| Impacts of migration (social) | Diasporas influencing homeland policies | Geopolitics and diplomacy |
| Impacts of migration (economic) | Remittances strengthening economic ties | International economic relations |
| Impacts of migration (political) | Migrants as agents of cultural and political diplomacy | Geopolitics and diplomacy |
| Refugee protection and resettlement | Role of UNHCR shaping international norms | Human rights and international norms |

Abbreviation: UNHCR, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.
*Source:* Ullah (2024).

international refugee law, defining the legal status of refugees and the obligations of states to protect them. Regional agreements, such as the ECOWAS Protocol on Free Movement of Persons in West Africa, promote economic and social integration by facilitating the mobility of citizens across member states.

Bilateral labour agreements, such as the Germany–Turkey Labor Recruitment Agreement (1961) and the Canada–Philippines agreement on temporary foreign workers, further underscore the interdependence of states in addressing labour market demands and managing cross-border mobility. These agreements not only facilitate economic partnerships but also serve as instruments of diplomacy, reflecting how migration policies are leveraged to advance geopolitical objectives (Ullah and Kumpoh 2018).

The adoption of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (2018) marked a watershed moment in migration governance. As the first intergovernmental agreement on international migration, the Compact balances respect for state sovereignty with a commitment to fostering international cooperation (Table 1). It emphasizes the importance of reducing the risks faced by migrants, managing borders effectively and harnessing migration for sustainable development (UN 2018).

## 5.3 | Regional Agreements

Regional frameworks further illustrate how migration governance intersects with IR. The Schengen Agreement (1985) in Europe facilitates the free movement of people by abolishing internal border controls, whereas the Dublin Regulation establishes mechanisms for determining responsibility in asylum processing, ensuring efficiency and discouraging 'asylum shopping'. In West Africa, the ECOWAS Protocol on Free Movement of Persons (1979) exemplifies how migration governance can promote labour mobility and regional economic integration.

In Southeast Asia, the ASEAN Agreement on the Movement of Natural Persons (2012) supports the temporary movement of skilled labour across member states, aligning with regional economic integration efforts. Similarly, the Bali Process in the Asia-Pacific addresses irregular migration, human trafficking and refugee protection through collaborative regional initiatives.

In South America, the Mercosur Residence Agreement (2002) facilitates intra-regional migration, allowing citizens of Mercosur member states to live and work across borders with minimal bureaucratic requirements.

## 5.4 | Bilateral Agreements

Bilateral agreements have played a pivotal role in migration governance, exemplifying the close link between labour mobility and diplomatic relations. The US-Mexico Bracero Program (1942–1964) addressed labour shortages in the US agricultural sector, enabling temporary migration under regulated conditions. Similarly, the Germany–Turkey Labor Recruitment Agreement (1961) allowed Turkish workers to migrate to Germany as guest workers during its post-war economic boom.

More contemporary agreements, such as the Canada–Philippines agreement on temporary foreign workers, facilitate the regulated migration of Filipino workers to Canada, particularly in healthcare and service sectors. These bilateral frameworks underscore how migration governance reflects evolving labour market needs while also shaping transnational relations. From colonial forced migration and labour treaties to modern refugee regimes and global compacts (Table 1), migration remains a dynamic and contested arena within IR.

The governance of migration serves as a bellwether for broader trends in IR, from the securitization of borders to the liberalization of economies. By fostering diplomatic dialogue, mitigating conflict and advancing economic partnerships, migration governance encapsulates the multifaceted role of migration in shaping diplomacy, security strategies and global political economy. As migration continues to be both a driver and a consequence of globalization, its centrality to IR is firmly established, offering fertile ground for scholarly inquiry and policy innovation.

## 6 | Theoretical Frameworks

This section employs four major IR theoretical frameworks—realism, liberal institutionalism, critical/postcolonial theory and constructivism—to unravel the interplay between migration and

international politics (Figure 1). Each framework illuminates distinct dimensions of how states conceptualize, manage and respond to migration in an increasingly interconnected global arena.

## 6.1 | Realist Approaches

Realist theory in IR, with its emphasis on state sovereignty, power struggles and national security, frames migration as a potential threat to state stability (Waltz 1979). From this perspective, migration is often seen as a destabilizing force, disrupting economic security, political stability and social cohesion. Realist scholars argue that states adopt restrictive migration policies and prioritize border control to safeguard sovereignty and ensure national security (Buzan et al. 1998).

Realists view migration as a zero-sum game: The uncontrolled movement of people erodes state authority. Refugee inflows, for instance, are perceived as destabilizing, given their capacity to strain host-state resources and introduce conflict spillovers from originating regions (Betts 2013). The Syrian refugee crisis exemplifies this dynamic, where securitization discourses have dominated migration policy debates across Europe (Huysmans 2000).

The US–Mexico border is a textbook case of realist-driven migration policy. The post-9/11 era saw intensified border militarization, reflecting concerns over irregular migration framed as a security threat (Andreas 2009). Similarly, the EU's external border policies, including FRONTEX operations, underscore the realist logic of containment and defence, prioritizing sovereignty over humanitarian obligations (Geddes 2003).

## 6.2 | Liberal and Institutional Approaches

Liberal and institutionalist theories, in contrast, position migration within frameworks of international cooperation and institutional governance. These perspectives argue that states can manage migration through multilateral agreements and shared norms (Keohane 1984). International organizations like the UNHCR and the IOM exemplify liberal approaches, facilitating burden-sharing, humanitarian aid and normative frameworks like the Global Compact on Refugees (Betts 2011). Migration, in this context, is not inherently problematic but rather a dynamic driver of economic development, fostering labour mobility, remittances and human capital flows (Castles and Miller 2009). For example, the Schengen Agreement within the EU illustrates how liberal approaches prioritize regional economic integration and labour mobility over restrictive border controls, demonstrating the potential of cooperative migration governance.

Although liberal and institutionalist theories emphasize the promise of cooperation and shared responsibility, real-world migration practices often reflect selective engagement and conditionality. The EU's migration partnerships with third countries exemplify this contradiction. Under the 'more-for-more' approach of the 2015 EU Action Plan on Return (COM 2015/453 final), aid and development incentives are tied to a country's effectiveness in controlling migration flows. This creates a dynamic where cooperation is less about shared governance and more about strategic delegation of border enforcement. As Lavenex and Uçarer (2019) point out, such externalization practices risk reinforcing authoritarian practices in partner states while undermining the humanitarian values espoused by liberal–institutional frameworks. Therefore, liberal approaches must be critically assessed for the ways they reproduce hierarchies and shift migration control responsibilities to the Global South under the guise of partnership.

The notion of 'shared responsibility' under liberal–institutionalist paradigms warrants further contextualization. For instance, the EU's New Pact on Migration and Asylum redefines solidarity not only as equitable distribution of asylum seekers but also as *flexible solidarity*—allowing states to choose between hosting refugees or financing returns. As Carrera and Geddes (2021) note, this undermines the original spirit of burden-sharing by institutionalizing opt-outs and shifting responsibility through financial mechanisms. The principle of 'responsibility' becomes transactional, not normative. Hence, although liberal theories emphasize global cooperation, institutional practices often reflect strategic pragmatism and selective solidarity, calling into question the universality and equality of so-called shared migration governance.

## 6.3 | Critical and Postcolonial Perspectives

Critical and postcolonial theories delve into the structural inequalities and historical legacies underpinning migration flows. These approaches challenge state-centric frameworks, arguing that migration governance reflects enduring power asymmetries rooted in colonial histories (Sassen 1999).

Migration flows from the Global South to the Global North often mirror colonial dependencies. For instance, migration from Africa and South Asia to Europe can be traced back to imperial histories, where colonial powers established economic structures that persist in shaping contemporary migration (De Genova 2002; Fanon 1963). Diasporas, in turn, become pivotal actors in reconfiguring state identities and international diplomacy. India's engagement with its diaspora, particularly through initiatives like the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas, highlights how postcolonial states leverage transnational networks to enhance foreign policy influence (Faist 2000). Moreover, migration reshapes national narratives, challenging cultural boundaries and forcing states to renegotiate their identities in a postcolonial world (Hall 1997).

## 6.4 | Constructivist Approaches

Constructivist theory emphasizes the social construction of state interests, identities and norms, offering a lens through which migration can be understood as a process that shapes and is shaped by states' identities (Wendt 1999). Migration is a site where states project narratives of inclusion or exclusion, reflecting socially constructed ideas of belonging and sovereignty. For example, Germany's 'Willkommenskultur' during the 2015 refugee crisis exemplified a constructed narrative of humanitarian leadership, which was subsequently recalibrated in response to domestic political pressures (Boswell 2007). Conversely, populist rhetoric in Hungary and the United States has framed

migrants as existential threats, constructing them as 'others' incompatible with national identity (Kinnvall 2004). Constructivists argue that these narratives are not static but are shaped by global norms, domestic discourses and international reputations (Checkel 1998). Migration, thus, becomes a platform for states to negotiate their international image, balancing humanitarian ideals with domestic imperatives.

## 6.5 | Postcolonial and Feminist Approach

Here, I integrate postcolonial and feminist perspectives to highlight how power hierarchies rooted in historical colonization and gendered labour divisions shape global migration regimes. Postcolonial theory reveals how contemporary North-South migration patterns replicate imperial logics, with migration governance mechanisms often reinforcing dependency and subordination (Sassen 1999; de genova 2002). Simultaneously, feminist scholarship (Parreñas 2001; Piper 2008) sheds light on the gendered dimensions of migration, especially in care and domestic labour sectors, where migrant women navigate transnational inequalities. These perspectives expand the article's core argument by emphasizing that migration is not merely a function of state interest but is embedded in intersecting systems of race, gender and postcolonial power.

Each theoretical framework offers unique insights into the complex nexus between migration and IR. Realist theories underscore the centrality of sovereignty and security, framing migration as a challenge to state stability. Liberal and institutionalist approaches highlight the potential of cooperation and multilateral governance to address migration's challenges while harnessing its economic benefits. Critical and postcolonial perspectives expose the deep-rooted inequalities shaping migration flows, emphasizing the historical and structural dimensions of global mobility. Constructivist theories, meanwhile, illuminate the role of identity and narratives in shaping state responses to migration. The postcolonial and feminist approaches in IR critique dominant power structures by highlighting how global mobility and migration governance are shaped by historical inequalities, gendered hierarchies and the legacy of colonial rule.

## 7 | Evidence of Migration in IR

This section examines the critical intersection of migration and IR, illustrating how migration has profoundly shaped diplomacy and global state interactions. By anchoring these developments in IR theories—realism, liberalism and constructivism—it underscores the multifaceted impact of migration on state behaviour, cooperation and sovereignty. Through case studies from Asia and the West, this analysis delves into how migration policies, diaspora engagement, refugee management and labour agreements have become essential tools in the diplomatic arsenal of modern states.

## 7.1 | Migration and Bilateral Agreements: The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and South Asia

Labour migration plays a pivotal role in shaping bilateral relations between South Asia and GCC countries, reflecting realist paradigms of state-centric interests. Labour-exporting states like Bangladesh, India and the Philippines prioritize economic development, whereas labour-importing GCC countries address domestic labour shortages. These agreements, often framed through Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs), regulate recruitment processes, worker rights and remittance flows (Rahman 2017). For instance, Bangladesh's 2015 labour agreement with Saudi Arabia marked the reopening of its labour market after a 7-year hiatus, emphasizing transactional diplomacy driven by mutual economic interests (Khan and Harroff-Tavel 2016).

However, liberal institutionalism also comes into play, as international bodies such as the International Labour Organization (ILO) mediate these agreements to ensure labour rights and ethical recruitment practices. This duality demonstrates how migration serves as a bridge between realist state interests and liberal commitments to multilateral cooperation.

### 7.1.1 | The EU and Migration Diplomacy

The EU's response to the 2015 refugee crisis epitomizes the interplay of IR theories in migration diplomacy. The EU–Turkey deal exemplifies realism, as the EU sought to secure its borders through externalization, and liberalism, as financial aid and visa-free travel incentives facilitated negotiations (Lavenex 2018). Migration became a bargaining chip in broader geopolitical discussions, with Turkey leveraging the agreement to further its strategic interests, threatening to 'open the gates' when its demands were unmet (Tol 2019).

### 7.1.2 | Diaspora Engagement and India's Soft Power

India's diaspora diplomacy highlights how constructivist perspectives inform migration-driven IR. India's diaspora of over 18 million, supported by initiatives like the Ministry of External Affairs' diaspora division, has become a linchpin of its global outreach (Varadarajan 2010). Events such as the 'Howdy, Modi!' rally in 2019 exemplify how cultural identity and shared historical narratives enhance bilateral ties with host nations, particularly the United States. Diaspora networks also bolster economic relations, as seen through Indian–American contributions to remittances and tech investments, showcasing migration as an instrument of soft power (Nye 2004).

### 7.1.3 | China's Migration and Belt and Road Diplomacy

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) demonstrates how migration can be wielded as a tool for expanding geopolitical influence. Chinese migrant workers underpin the labour force for BRI infrastructure projects, fostering bilateral partnerships across Asia, Africa and Europe. This approach blends realism, as it extends Chinese economic and strategic dominance, with constructivism, as narratives of mutual development and cooperation are deployed to strengthen relationships (Rolland 2017). However, resistance in Southeast Asia, driven by anti-Chinese sentiment and economic fears, underscores the complex reception of migration diplomacy (Callahan 2016).

### 7.1.4 | Refugee Diplomacy: The Syrian Crisis and European Responses

The Syrian refugee crisis provides a lens to explore migration's role in humanitarian diplomacy. Realist perspectives explain European states' initial reluctance to accept refugees due to concerns over national security and social cohesion. For instance, Hungary and Poland rejected EU quotas, prioritizing sovereignty over collective responsibility (Lavenex and Uçarer 2019). By contrast, Germany's liberal approach under Chancellor Angela Merkel emphasized humanitarian obligations, influenced by historical memory and moral responsibility, aligning with constructivist principles (Habermas 2015). This case underscores the tension between domestic sovereignty and international humanitarian commitments.

### 7.1.5 | Rohingya Refugee Crisis and South Asian Diplomacy

The Rohingya crisis demonstrates how forced migration complicates regional diplomacy. Following Myanmar's military crackdown in 2017, over 1 million Rohingya refugees fled to Bangladesh, creating a profound humanitarian crisis (Alam 2018). Although Bangladesh's hosting of refugees reflects liberal ideals of international cooperation, Myanmar's refusal to acknowledge responsibility aligns with realist notions of state sovereignty. Efforts by the UN and ASEAN to mediate repatriation reflect the limits of multilateral diplomacy in the face of entrenched national interests (Sarker 2020).

### 7.1.6 | Securitization and US–Mexico Migration Politics

The securitization of migration is evident in US–Mexico relations. Under the Trump administration, migration from Central America was framed as a national security threat, leading to stringent border policies like the 'Remain in Mexico' program (Jones and Johnson 2018). Realist theories explain these measures as efforts to defend sovereignty, whereas the Biden administration's shift towards regional cooperation highlights a liberal approach to managing migration through aid and partnerships (Bergmann and Finnemore 2021).

Remittances have become a critical lifeline for economies, such as Nepal, the Philippines and Bangladesh, contributing significantly to GDP and poverty reduction (World Bank 2023). Conversely, destination countries benefit from migrant labour in low-wage sectors while experiencing political backlash and labour market segmentation (Castles et al. 2014). This duality is illustrated through cases like the GCC–South Asia labour corridor and EU migration governance, offering a more nuanced understanding of the developmental and political consequences of migration policies.

## 8 | Emerging Trends and Future Directions

Contemporary migration dynamics illuminate critical emerging trends, including climate-induced migration, digital migration governance and the surge of nationalist populism. These developments underscore migration's transcendence of national boundaries, demanding a recalibration of traditional IR frameworks to address this complex, global phenomenon.

### 8.1 | Climate-Induced Migration and Its Geopolitical Implications

Climate change has appeared as a powerful driver of migration, reshaping the geopolitical landscape and testing traditional IR paradigms. Environmental degradation, rising sea levels and extreme weather events compel millions to migrate, both within and across borders, challenging state-centric theories that prioritize sovereignty and territorial control. Instead, climate migration calls for more human-centric approaches that address security and transnational cooperation (Betts 2013; McLeman 2014). For instance, the displacement of Pacific Islanders due to rising sea levels highlights the inadequacy of realist frameworks, shifting focus from territorial integrity to human security.

The geopolitical repercussions of climate-induced migration are as diverse as they are profound. On one hand, migration from climate-vulnerable regions exacerbates interstate tensions, particularly when destination countries are already grappling with political or economic instability. The Sahel region, for example, has witnessed significant displacement linked to climate change, intensifying resource conflicts and regional insecurity (Brown 2015). On the other hand, climate migration influences international environmental diplomacy, as vulnerable states demand robust frameworks for climate justice and adaptation funding (Farbotko and Lazrus 2012).

Despite these urgent challenges, international legal frameworks lag behind. The 1951 Refugee Convention fails to recognize climate-induced migrants as refugees, leaving millions without legal protections (Docherty and Giannini 2009). This glaring gap underscores the need for interdisciplinary scholarship that bridges environmental studies and IR, advocating for reimagined approaches to sovereignty, shared responsibility and human rights in governing climate migration.

### 8.2 | Digital Migration Governance and Technological Surveillance

The digitalization of migration governance has fundamentally transformed state responses to migration, amplifying both opportunities and risks. Advanced technologies, such as biometric databases, artificial intelligence (AI) and surveillance systems, are increasingly deployed to manage migration flows and bolster border security (Broeders and Dijstelbloem 2016). Although these innovations promise enhanced efficiency, they raise critical concerns about privacy, human rights and global inequalities in technological access.

Biometric identification systems, including the EU's Eurodac and the US Department of Homeland Security's Automated Biometric Identification System, exemplify the expanding role of technology in migration control (Amoore 2006). Although these systems enhance tracking capabilities, they exacerbate power asymmetries between the Global North and South, where disparities in

technological infrastructure and data privacy protections persist (González-Fuster 2014). The privatization of migration management raises ethical questions about corporate responsibility, profit-driven motives and the potential exploitation of migrant data (Molnar 2019).

Digital technologies also risk deepening exclusionary practices by marginalizing migrants who lack access to digital tools. This 'digital divide' reinforces global hierarchies, particularly disadvantaging those from underprivileged regions (van der Ploeg 2012). Although digital governance systems offer efficiency, their reliance on surveillance technologies underscores the precarious balance between state power and individual rights in migration management. The marginalized communities—such as undocumented migrants, stateless populations and climate-displaced groups—are often excluded from state-centric analyses. These perspectives reveal how migration governance is frequently experienced as exclusionary and coercive, particularly in contexts where migrants lack legal recognition or face racialized surveillance. Moreover, although international cooperation frameworks such as the GCM emphasize shared responsibility, their effectiveness remains constrained by the rise of nationalist populism and the uneven willingness of states to uphold global norms. The political instrumentalization of migration by populist regimes illustrates the fragility of multilateralism in the face of domestic political agendas. Simultaneously, the economic dimensions of migration—including wage differentials, labour exploitation and remittance dependencies—underscore the structural inequalities embedded in global labour markets. A more holistic understanding of migration in IR thus demands not only state-level analysis but also attention to subaltern agency, resistance practices and the economic logics that drive mobility under uneven conditions of development.

Biometrics, AI-powered risk profiling and digital border systems are transforming how states assert sovereignty while raising concerns about human rights and data privacy (Broeders and Dijstelbloem 2016; Amoore 2006). For example, the EU's Eurodac database and the US DHS biometric programs exemplify how surveillance infrastructure reinforces control while potentially exacerbating inequality and exclusion. This technological turn in migration governance reaffirms the article's central thesis that migration is increasingly central to state power and international regulation, extending into digital and algorithmic terrains.

## 8.3 | Migration and Rising Nationalist Populism

The ascent of nationalist populism has intensified anti-migration rhetoric, reshaping global migration governance. Populist leaders increasingly frame migration as a threat to national identity, economic stability and social cohesion, exploiting migration-related anxieties for political gain (Wodak 2015; Mudde 2019). This wave of populism has fuelled restrictive migration policies, with states retreating from multilateral frameworks (Betts and Collier 2017b). Harsh border control measures, such as the construction of walls and expansion of detention facilities in Europe and the United States, reflect this shift from migration as a global governance issue to one framed through the lens of national security (Farris and de Genova 2012).

Populist narratives significantly influence public opinion, fostering xenophobia and anti-immigrant sentiments. The media plays a pivotal role in amplifying these discourses through sensationalist reporting that constructs migration crises and perpetuates fearmongering (de Haas et al. 2020). The international community's fragmented response to refugee crises, such as Syria's displacement and the ongoing fallout from Russia's invasion of Ukraine, exemplifies how nationalist populism undermines collective responsibility and global migration governance.

Emerging migration trends—climate-induced displacement, digital governance and nationalist populism—underscore migration's central role in IR. Climate migration emphasizes human security and cooperation, digital tools raise concerns over surveillance and inequality, and populism undermines multilateralism by prioritizing domestic politics. These dynamics highlight migration as a transformative force reshaping geopolitics, state policies and global governance, demanding innovative and equitable collective action in the IR discourse.

Several actionable recommendations emerge from the intersection of migration and IR. First, states should invest in regional migration compacts that prioritize shared responsibility, particularly for managing refugee flows and labour migration, modelled after frameworks like the EU–Turkey deal or the Mercosur Residence Agreement. Second, migration diplomacy should be institutionalized through dedicated intergovernmental liaison offices that integrate diasporic engagement into bilateral and multilateral negotiations. Third, incorporating climate-induced migration into international legal frameworks—through amendments to the 1951 Refugee Convention or a standalone climate displacement protocol—would ensure protections for the growing number of environmentally displaced persons. Finally, migration governance systems must be made more transparent and equitable by incorporating civil society and migrant-led organizations into policy dialogues at both national and global levels. These recommendations build on the theoretical foundations of liberal institutionalism and constructivism, reinforcing the central argument that migration is a dynamic force shaping contemporary IR and that its governance requires cooperative, inclusive and forward-looking strategies.

Drawing on examples from South and Southeast Asia, including returnee cooperatives in Nepal and Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong, the article highlights how migrants mobilize through legal advocacy, digital storytelling and labour unions. These actions constitute what McCann (1994) terms 'legal mobilization' and what Isin and Ruppert (2015) describe as 'acts of digital citizenship', where migrants shift from subjects of policy to agents of change. This perspective disrupts top-down views of migration governance and centres lived experiences in shaping IR dynamics. The article reaffirms its framing of migration as a relational process embedded in global structures of inequality and cooperation. By including these additional theoretical, empirical and practical dimensions, the article contributes a multidimensional view of migration as both shaped by and constitutive of IR.

## 9 | Conclusion

This article has demonstrated that migration is not merely a social or economic phenomenon but a core dimension of IR,

intricately woven into the fabric of global politics, diplomacy and governance. By reframing migration through the lens of IR, this study advances a novel perspective that situates the multidimensional impacts of migration within foundational IR theories, such as realism, liberalism, constructivism and critical theory. This paradigm shift challenges state-centric frameworks that prioritize sovereignty and security, instead emphasizing migration's role as a catalyst for transnational cooperation, identity construction and global governance.

The distinctiveness of this work lies in its exploration of how migration transcends disciplinary silos to reconfigure power dynamics, redefine international norms and influence state behaviour within multilateral forums. In contrast to traditional analyses that often marginalize migration as a peripheral issue, this study underscores its centrality in shaping both bilateral and multilateral relations. For instance, it highlights how migration policies, such as the EU–Turkey deal, serve as instruments of diplomacy, whereas diasporas function as unofficial diplomats, forging transnational connections and influencing foreign policy agendas. Moreover, migration-related agreements like the GCM reflect the institutionalization of migration governance within the international system, signalling a pivotal shift in how states and international organizations engage with this global challenge.

The implications of framing migration as a cornerstone of IR are profound. In an era defined by climate change, geopolitical instability and escalating displacement, migration compels a reexamination of traditional IR theories. For example, climate-induced migration exposes the inadequacies of realist frameworks that focus narrowly on territorial sovereignty and national security. Instead, such phenomena necessitate a turn towards constructivist and liberal paradigms that prioritize human security, shared responsibility and multilateral cooperation. Similarly, the rise of digital migration governance and the securitization of borders illuminate how states navigate the complexities of migration within a rapidly evolving global order, employing advanced technologies to balance control with global mobility.

This article contributes to the growing body of scholarship that positions migration at the heart of IR, offering both theoretical insights and empirical evidence to demonstrate its transformative influence. By bridging migration studies and IR, it provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the interplay between human mobility and global political structures. This underscores the urgent need for interdisciplinary approaches and cooperative strategies to address contemporary migration challenges. Migration, as argued, is not merely a phenomenon to be managed but a force reshaping the contours of IR, demanding innovative thinking and collective action in an increasingly interconnected world.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

## Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

## References

Adamson, F. B., and G. Tsourapas. 2019. "Migration Diplomacy in World Politics." *International Studies Perspectives* 20, no. 2: 113–132. https://doi.org/10.1093/isp/eky015.

Alam, M. A. 2018. "The Rohingya Crisis and Regional Security in South Asia." *Security Studies Review* 6, no. 2: 112–134.

Ambrosius, C., B. Fritz, and U. Stiegler. 2020. "Remittances." In *The Routledge Handbook to the Political Economy and Governance of the Americas*, edited by O. Kaltmeier, A. Tittor, D. Hawkins, and E. Rohland, 199–204. Routledge.

Amoore, L. 2006. "Biometric Borders: Governing Mobilities in the War on Terror." *Political Geography* 25, no. 3: 336–351. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2006.02.001.

Andreas, P. 2009. *Border Games: Policing the US-Mexico Divide*. Cornell University Press.

ASEAN. 2012. *Declaration on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Migrant Workers*. https://asean.org/asean-declaration-on-the-protection-and-promotion-of-the-rights-of-migrant-workers/.

Bergmann, J., and M. Finnemore. 2021. "Migration Management in the Americas: Security and Diplomacy." *Journal of International Affairs* 73, no. 1: 45–66.

Betts, A. 2011. *Global Migration Governance*. Oxford University Press.

Betts, A. 2013. *Survival Migration: Failed Governance and the Crisis of Displacement*. Cornell University Press.

Betts, A., and P. Collier. 2017a. *Refuge: Transforming a Broken Refugee System*. Penguin Books.

Betts, A., and P. Collier. 2017b. *Refuge: Rethinking Refugee Policy in a Changing World*. Oxford University Press.

Betts, A., and G. Loescher. 2011. *Refugees in International Relations*. Oxford University Press.

Bhattacharya, S. 2020. "Countering China: India's Pacific Predicament." *Stosunki Międzynarodowe—International Relations* 56, no. 2: 21–38. https://www.irjournal.pl/Author-Subhadeep-Bhattacharya/176271.

Bigo, D. 2002. "Security and Immigration: Toward a Critique of the Governmentality of Unease." *Alternatives* 27, no. 1: 63–92. https://doi.org/10.1177/030437540202700103.

Bloch, A., and L. Schuster. 2005. "At the Extremes of Exclusion: Deportation, Detention and Dispersal." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 28, no. 3: 491–512. https://doi.org/10.1080/0141987042000337858.

Boswell, C. 2007. *Migration, Security and Legitimacy: State Governance and the Limits of Liberalism*. Routledge.

Broeders, D., and H. Dijstelbloem. 2016. "The Datafication of Mobility and Migration Management." *Ethics and Information Technology* 18, no. 1: 3–7.

Brown, O. 2015. "Climate Change and Forced Migration: Observations, Projections, and Implications." *Global Environmental Change* 21, no. S1: S3–S11.

Buzan, B. 1991. *People, States, and Fear: An Agenda for International Security Studies in the Post-Cold War Era*. Lynne Rienner Publishers.

Buzan, B., O. Waever, and J. de Wilde. 1998. *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*. Lynne Rienner Publishers.

Callahan, W. A. 2016. "China's Belt and Road: Soft Power and Global Influence." *International Studies Quarterly* 60, no. 3: 432–450.

Carrera, S., and A. Geddes. 2021. *The EU Pact on Migration and Asylum in Light of the United Nations Global Compact on Refugees: International Experiences on Containment and Mobility and Their Impacts on Trust and Rights*. European University Institute. https://hdl.handle.net/1814/70600.

Castles, S. 2004. "Migration, Citizenship, and the Global Agenda: Global Governance and Migration Policies." *International Migration Review* 38, no. 3: 837–864.

Castles, S., H. de Haas, and M. J. Miller. 2014. *The Age of Migration: International Population Movements in the Modern World*. 5th ed. Palgrave Macmillan.

Castles, S., and D. Ozkul. 2014. "Circular Migration: Triple Win, or a New Label for Temporary Migration?," In *Global and Asian Perspectives on International Migration*, edited by G. Battistella, 27–49. Springer.

Castles, S., and M. J. Miller. 2009. *The Age of Migration: International Population Movements in the Modern World*. 4th ed. Palgrave Macmillan.

Checkel, J. T. 1998. "The Constructivist Turn in International Relations Theory." *World Politics* 50, no. 2: 324–348.

Cvajner, M., and G. Sciortino. 2010. "A Tale of Networks and Policies: Prolegomena to an Analysis of Irregular Migration Careers and Their Development." *Population, Space and Place* 16, no. 3: 213–225. https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.589.

de Genova, N. 2002. "Migration and Race in Postcolonial Europe." *Social Text* 20, no. 3: 71–89.

de Haas, H. 2010. "Migration and Development: A Theoretical Perspective." *International Migration Review* 44, no. 1: 227–264. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-7379.2009.00804.x.

de Haas, H., S. Castles, and M. J. Miller. 2020. *The Age of Migration: International Population Movements in the Modern World*. 6th ed. Palgrave Macmillan.

Docherty, B., and T. Giannini. 2009. "Confronting a Rising Tide: A Proposal for a Convention on Climate Change Refugees." *Harvard Environmental Law Review* 33, no. 2: 349–403.

Edwards, A. 2010. "Transitioning Gender: Feminist Engagement With International Refugee Law and Policy 1950–2010." *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 29, no. 2: 21–45.

Eltis, D., and D. Richardson. 2010. *Atlas of the Transatlantic Slave Trade*. Yale University Press.

Faist, T. 2000. *The Volume and Dynamics of International Migration and Transnational Social Spaces*. Oxford University Press.

Faist, T. 2010. *Transnational Migration*. Polity Press.

Faist, T. 2019. "Contested Externalisation: Responses to Global Inequalities." *CMS* 7: 45. https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-019-0158-y.

Fanon, F. 1963. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Grove Press.

Farbotko, C., and H. Lazrus. 2012. "The First Climate Refugees? Contesting Global Narratives of Climate Change in Tuvalu." *Global Environmental Change* 22, no. 2: 382–390.

Farris, S. R., and N. de Genova. 2012. "Borders, Migrants, and States." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 41, no. 1: 213–229.

Geddes, A. 2003. *The Politics of Migration and Immigration in Europe*. SAGE Publications.

Geddes, A., and P. Scholten. 2016. *The Politics of Migration and Immigration in Europe*. 2nd ed. SAGE Publications.

Geddes, A. 2018. *The Politics of Migration and Immigration in Europe*. 2nd ed. SAGE Publications.

González-Fuster, G. 2014. *The Emergence of Personal Data Protection as a Fundamental Right of the EU*. Springer.

Guild, E. 2018. "The Internal Aspects of External Borders." In *Dimensions of Europeanization*, edited by R. Adler-Nissen, 54–71. Routledge.

Habermas, J. 2015. "The Refugee Crisis and European Values." *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 41, no. 4–5: 323–333.

Hall, S. 1997. *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. SAGE Publications.

Hollifield, J. F. 1992. "Migration and International Relations: Cooperation and Control in the European Community." *International Migration Review* 26, no. 2: 568–595.

Hollifield, J. F. 2000. "Migration and the 'Liberal Paradox': Rights, Restrictions, and Redress in Liberal Democracies." *International Migration Review* 34, no. 4: 885–912.

Hollifield, J. F. 2004. "The Emerging Migration State." *International Migration Review* 38, no. 3: 885–912.

Human Rights Watch. 2021. *"We Can't See the Sun": Malaysia's Arbitrary Detention of Migrants and Refugees*. https://www.hrw.org/report/2024/03/05/we-cant-see-sun/malaysias-arbitrary-detention-migrants-and-refugees.

Human Rights Watch. 2024, Maret 5. "We Can't See the Sun": Malaysia's Arbitrary Detention of Migrants and Refugees. https://www.hrw.org/report/2024/03/05/we-cant-see-sun/malaysias-arbitrary-detention-migrants-and-refugees.

Huysmans, J. 2000. "The European Union and the Securitization of Migration." *Journal of Common Market Studies* 38, no. 5: 751–777.

International Organization for Migration (IOM). 2022. *World Migration Report 2022*. IOM.

Isin, E., and E. Ruppert. 2015. *Being Digital Citizens*. Rowman & Littlefield International.

Jones, R., and C. Johnson. 2018. "Border Walls and Migration Securitization in the United States." *Geopolitics* 23, no. 2: 198–214.

Keohane, R. O. 1984. *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy*. Princeton University Press.

Khan, M. R., and H. Harroff-Tavel. 2016. "Labor Migration in the GCC: Bilateral Agreements and Challenges." *Migration Policy Review* 24, no. 1: 89–102.

Kinnvall, C. 2004. "Globalization and Religious Nationalism." *Political Psychology* 25, no. 5: 741–767.

Kirby, P. 2020. "Rape as a Weapon of War: Understanding Gender-Based Violence in Conflict." *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 22, no. 4: 489–509.

Koser, K. 2007. *International Migration: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press.

Lavenex, S. 2018. "'Failing Forward' towards Which Europe? Organized Hypocrisy in the Common European Asylum System." *Journal of Common Market Studies* 56, no. 5: 1195–1212. https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.12739.

Lavenex, S., and E. M. Uçarer. 2019. "Migration Diplomacy and EU-Turkey Relations." *European Journal of International Relations* 25, no. 4: 567–588.

McCann, M. W. 1994. *Rights at Work: Pay Equity Reform and the Politics of Legal Mobilization*. University of Chicago Press.

McLeman, R. A. 2014. *Climate and Human Migration: Past Experiences, Future Challenges*. Cambridge University Press.

Molnar, P. 2019. "Technology on the Margins: AI and the Global Refugee Crisis." *Migration Studies* 7, no. 3: 408–426.

Mudde, C. 2019. *The Far Right Today*. Polity Press.

Northrup, D. 1995. *Indentured Labor in the Age of Imperialism, 1834–1922*. Cambridge University Press.

Nye, J. S. 2004. *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. PublicAffairs.

Parreñas, R. S. 2001. "Mothering From a Distance: Emotions, Gender, and Intergenerational Relations in Filipino Transnational Families." *Feminist Studies* 27, no. 2: 361–390. https://doi.org/10.2307/3178765.

Piper, N. 2008. "Feminisation of Migration and the Social Dimensions of Development: The Asian Case." *Third World Quarterly* 29, no. 7: 1287–1303. http://www.jstor.org/stable/20455110.

Rahman, M. M. 2017. "Labor Migration From South Asia to the GCC: A Realist Perspective." *Global Migration Journal* 15, no. 1: 210–230.

Rolland, N. 2017. "China's Belt and Road Initiative and Global Migration Governance." *Asian Affairs Review* 49, no. 2: 165–189.

Sarker, M. R. 2020. "Rohingya Repatriation and Diplomatic Challenges." *Journal of International Relations* 15, no. 2: 132–153.

Sassen, S. 1998. *Globalization and Its Discontents: Essays on the New Mobility of People and Money*. New Press.

Sassen, S. 1999. *Guests and Aliens*. New Press.

Sassen, S. 2001. *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo*. Princeton University Press.

Shimazu, N. 1998. *Japan, Race, and Equality: The Racial Equality Proposal of 1919*. Routledge.

Squire, V. 2011. *The Contested Politics of Mobility: Borderzones and Irregularity*. Routledge.

Sudheer, N., and D. Banerjee. 2021. "The Rohingya Refugees: A Conceptual Framework of Their Psychosocial Adversities, Cultural Idioms of Distress, and Social Suffering." *Global Mental Health* 8: e46. https://doi.org/10.1017/gmh.2021.43.

Tazzioli, M. 2020. "Digital Multiplicities and Singularities: (in)Visibility and Data Circuits." In *Digital Multiplicities and Singularities*, 73–100. SAGE Publications, Inc. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781526492920.n4.

Tol, G. 2019. "Turkey's Migration Leverage in EU Relations." *International Affairs* 95, no. 2: 123–143.

Torpey, J. 2000. *The Invention of the Passport: Surveillance, Citizenship, and the State*. Cambridge University Press.

Ullah, AKM Ahsan. 2011. "Rohingya Refugee to Bangladesh: Historical Exclusions and Contemporary Marginalization." *Journal of Immigrant and Refugee studies* 9, no. 2: 139–168.

Ullah, AKM Ahsan. 2014. *Refugee Politics in the Middle East and North Africa: Human Rights, Safety and Identity*. Palgrave McMillan.

Ullah, AKM Ahsan. 2016. "Rohingya Crisis in Myanmar: Seeking Justice for the "Stateless"." *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice* 32, no. 3: 285–301. https://doi.org/10.1177/1043986216660811.

Ullah, AKM Ahsan. 2018. "Conflicts and Displacements in Syria: Exploring Life Trajectories of Separated Refugee Minors." *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies* 12, no. 2: 207–224. https://doi.org/10.1080/25765949.2018.1485922.

Ullah, AKM Ahsan, and A. A. Kumpoh. 2018. "Are Borders the Reflection of International Relations? Southeast Asian Borders in Perspective." *Journal of Asian Security, and International Affairs* 5, no. 3: 295–318.

Ullah, AKM Ahsan, H. H. Noor, H. A. Siti Mazidah, and C. Diotima. 2020. "Migration and Security: Implications for Minority Migrant Groups." *India Quarterly: a Journal of International Affairs* 76, no. 1: 136–153.

Ullah, AKM Ahsan. 2024. "Emergence of Qatar in Diplomacy in a Complex World: Balancing Soft Power in Regional Affairs." *World Affairs* 188, no. 1: 1–13. https://doi.org/10.1002/waf2.12051.

UNHCR. 2002. *Guidelines on International Protection No. 2: "Membership of a Particular Social Group" Within the Context of Article 1A(2) of the 1951 Convention and/or its 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees (HCR/GIP/02/02)*. https://www.unhcr.org/media/guidelines-international-protection-no-2-membership-particular-social-group-within-context.

United Nations. 2018. *Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration*. https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/66956.

van der Ploeg, I. 2012. "Biometrics and the Body as Information: Normative Issues of the Socio-Technical Coding of the Body." In *Routledge Handbook of Surveillance Studies*, 176–183. Routledge.

Varadarajan, L. 2010. "India's Diaspora Diplomacy and Global Influence." *World Affairs Journal* 173, no. 3: 45–59.

Waltz, K. 1979. *Theory of International Politics*. Addison-Wesley.

Weiner, M. 1995. *The Global Migration Crisis: Challenges to States and to Human Rights*. HarperCollins College Publishers.

Wendt, A. 1999. *Social Theory of International Politics*. Cambridge University Press.

Wodak, R. 2015. *The Politics of Fear: What Right-Wing Populist Discourses Mean*. SAGE Publications.

World Bank. 2023. World Development Report 2023: Migrants, Refugees, and Societies. https://www.worldbank.org/en/publication/wdr2023.