

Migration: new ‘push’ and ‘pull’ dynamics

by Roderick Parkes

If global order is to be maintained, states must agree on who and what may cross national borders, and how. The EU and US have structured global relations around the liberal flow of trade and capital, and the restriction of migration. But the current spike in disorderly migration is allowing emerging powers – and migrants themselves – to challenge and change the global order.

Shocks to the global system

Historically, Western governments have restricted migration for reasons of state-building abroad. Trade and capital flows were thought to spread democracy since people demand a greater say in domestic politics as they grow richer. But were people to emigrate, democracy might never take root. Globalisation has therefore been based on the promise that, if people stay at home, prosperity and good governance will eventually come to them. The fact that people now have to flee upper-middle income countries like Libya or Iraq undermines this promise and the ideological basis of globalisation.

The current crisis is also challenging the way travel is conducted. Over the last 20 years,

Air travel has been the lifeblood of the global economy, keeping goods and investors moving. Until now, it has also kept levels of migration low. Workers from large developing economies are limited when it comes to international air travel, largely because their governments remain outside Open Skies agreements until their national carriers can compete. The US and the EU also fine those airlines found carrying illegal migrants and, thanks to a web of readmission agreements, Western countries can readily expel migrants. But people are now overcoming these barriers and crossing borders en masse by land and sea.

On the occasions when the EU and US have opened up migration channels, it has often been in pursuit of mutual interests with sending states. For example, EU members issue temporary visas to workers from Moldova and Georgia in a bid to overcome their own labour shortages without becoming a permanent drain on skilled labour in sending countries. But concepts such as ‘temporary migration’ and ‘brain circulation’ are now losing traction. Emerging powers view population matters from an increasingly zero-sum perspective: demography is a determinant of national development, and a source of comparative advantage.

'Weapons of mass migration'

When migration patterns and transit routes change in this way, countries can use migration as a threat to extract concessions from wealthy neighbours. In the past, Libya, North Korea, Cuba and Haiti have all threatened to open their borders and unleash waves of migrants if their demands for non-interference or the lifting of sanctions are not met. With global migration becoming more chaotic, the practice will become common – not least in response to the way the EU has itself leveraged labour market access to countries like Jordan and Tunisia in return for democratic reforms.

Emerging powers can use migration to exert influence beyond their borders in other ways, too. They employ diaspora populations to pursue national grievances, recruit refugees to fight in wars and use migration flows to foster instability. Some more belligerent governments have even hinted at using resident foreign citizens as human shields. Such tactics are partly a reaction to the way Western governments have used migration to spread soft (e.g. people-to-people contacts) and hard power (e.g. US sponsorship of 'refugee warriors' during the Cold War).

Finally, some emerging powers are using migration to enhance their demographic profiles and consolidate territory. For instance, China has transplanted Han Chinese across its Western plateau and prevented immigration from Central Asia, while Indonesia has used migration to ease overcrowding on the island of Java and disperse rural ethnic minorities. They are responding in part to the way the US uses other countries' demographic trends to promote democracy (the 'middle-class bulge' in Morocco and Tunisia) or address conflicts (the two-state solution).

'People power' reloaded

One in every 122 people today is either displaced, a refugee or an asylum-seeker. The sheer scale of human displacement has put into question the capacity of the existing state system to provide adequate protection to ethnic minorities. There are, for instance, discussions

now in the West about whether Syria needs to be divided up into smaller, more ethnically-homogenous units. But such speculation undermines the traditional Western idea that democratisation and human rights are all that is required to protect minorities in multi-ethnic states.

The current crisis also challenges the idea that settled populations will be secure and well off and that the world's nomads – including mi-

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grants and refugees – are more vulnerable. Data on migrant flows to Europe indicate that wealthy and well-educated Syrians have been the first to seek safety abroad, just as wealthy and educated Afghans and Somalis were the first to move in the early 2000s. It is the poor

who remain trapped at home and left to deal with problems like environmental degradation, conflict or national debt.

Syrian refugees are even proving capable of sustaining themselves without state help or a territorial base. International banks, supermarkets and telecommunications firms are all selling them services on the move. The ability of refugees to survive and maintain their identity across borders weakens the conceptual link between nationhood and territoriality. It may also strengthen the case in favour of 'mobile nations' such as North Africa's Tuareg – and the EU is already trying to engage more constructively with pastoralist communities in the Horn and West of Africa.

The new push and pull factors in action

For 25 years, the political dynamics behind migration flows have been rather simple. Migration was just a side-product of the world's political and economic integration. In the early 1990s, the world split neatly three ways: a developed liberal core (North America, the EU, Japan and Oceania); a vast periphery of catch-up economies (East Asia, Eastern Europe, Latin America, the Middle East and North Africa); and a handful of weak, failing states (Afghanistan, Somalia, Liberia). Blips in global development over the years made the Western core temporarily more attractive for migrants.



Analysts continue to view migration in this light. For instance, a typical diagram of migration routes to the EU will show a scattering of push zones in failing states (Syria, Iraq or Afghanistan) and a core Western pull zone (north-western Europe), and it will join these two areas with an arrow to show the smooth passage of migrants through transit areas (the catch-up economies of Turkey, Russia and the Western Balkans).

In reality, the push and pull dynamics have changed dramatically since 2008, when the US and EU were hit by economic crises and the idea of global integration took a serious knock. Push zones are now created by ambitious regional powers that propel migrants around in an active bid to challenge liberal order. In pull zones in the West, diaspora networks are increasingly important players. And, at each stage of their journey, migrants are buffeted by push and pull forces by transit states like Russia and Turkey.

Inside the push zones: Afghan refugees are a good example of how the new push dynamics work. Afghans currently comprise the second most numerous group coming to Europe: in August 2015 new arrivals to the EU numbered more than 20,000. Most people logically assume that these refugees are fleeing the violence of the resurgent Taleban. But in reality, many appear to be coming from Iran, an emerging regional power with a growing economy which has hosted them for many years.

Iran has an Afghan diaspora of around 1.4 million, over two-thirds of which are refugees and often lacking official papers. From early 2015, Teheran put these refugees in a state of limbo by refusing to say whether it would prolong their stay. The uncertainty prompted many Afghans to move on, up through Turkey to the EU. Teheran was primarily responding to domestic concerns about the cost of hosting refugees. But it seems the Iranian government was also signalling to neighbours its shift from soft to hard power by using the threat of onward flows in order to gain leverage over its rival Turkey.

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The salient point is this: refugees to the EU are not only coming from a scattering of failed states which are too weak to adopt Western liberalism or experiencing violent conflict. They are being propelled by a more fundamental reconstitution of regional order, often spurred by emerging powers like Iran with growing economies and ideological influence. That means that the ‘root causes’ of migration are far more complex than they used to be. The EU can no longer resolve them by channelling trade, aid and nation-building tools at an isolated set of weak states. Accordingly, a far more comprehensive response is required.

Inside the pull zones: at the other end of the equation are the pull factors in Europe’s receiving states. Traditionally Europe’s liberal political economy was what exerted the pull: those European states which offered generous asylum recognition rates and access to the labour market attracted most newcomers. But refugees are no longer magnetically drawn by these factors. The refugees’ choice of destination is instead mediated by the existence of diaspora communities and networks stretching back to their homelands. These networks affect the ways refugees enter the EU and which countries they head for.

At present, diaspora communities remain quite weak in many EU member states (for instance: the largest Afghan diaspora is in Germany, and at 125,000 it is twice the size of the next biggest). This leaves refugees at the mercy of people-smuggling mafias, which attract customers with their guarantees of employment opportunities or refugee recognition in Europe. But as diaspora communities take root, this pattern will change. Diasporas develop their own methods of integrating refugees into Europe’s labour market and local communities. They hold the people-smugglers to account and rate their reliability. And, if given the chance, they will work with European governments to sponsor refugees’ entry.

Put simply, migrants can no longer be assumed to be attracted primarily by Western liberalism. Many diaspora communities maintain

strong social networks to their homelands, without necessarily promoting Western liberal standards. They may also import ideological conflicts from their homelands into European societies in the absence of robust integration policies. So, while there are considerable benefits for EU governments in working with diaspora communities, there are potential drawbacks, too.

Across the 'spaces' in between: Afghan and Syrian refugees must traverse numerous countries or 'transit zones' to reach the EU. And yet Turkey, Russia and the Western Balkans are not neutral, empty spaces. They all exert a strong push and pull of their own on the migrant flows. Ankara appears, for example, to be trying to secure visa-free travel for Turks to the EU in return for containing the refugee problem.

For Ankara, the goal of deepening its links with Turkey's diaspora in Germany (1.7 million), France (460,000) the Netherlands (370,000) and elsewhere in Europe has been a key priority since at least 2008, when then Prime Minister Erdogan called the assimilation of Turks in Germany a 'crime against humanity'.

Meanwhile, Russia is said to be purposefully directing Syrian and Afghan refugees towards Finland, Norway and the Baltic states in order to undermine the cohesion of the EU and NATO. The volume of these refugee flows remains small, however, and what really seems to drive Moscow's management of migration flows is the opportunity to undermine Western normative power. The Russians complain that since the days of the Cold War, Western states have exploited refugee issues to embarrass Moscow. They allege that the West discredits its rivals by granting their citizens asylum and rewards its allies by categorising them as 'safe'.

As for Western Balkan governments, their management of the flows is defined by their own fears of demographic decline. The Balkan peace settlement took close account of ethnic balances across the region. As a result, no community wishes to be seen to lose their population for fear of losing political clout. But Balkan governments do not see the current migration flows as a means to boost their populations. Rather, they fear their young workers will leave the region: if the EU closes off channels for circular migration and ceases funding cross-border transport links, young Balkan workers will leave and not return.

A humanitarian response

The dynamic of migration flows has therefore changed, and Western states will probably need to change their humanitarianism to match. That is no very radical proposition. Already during the Cold War, the West turned refugee policy into a means to score points against the USSR, offering political asylum to dissidents from the East. When the Cold War ended, the West reinvented humanitarianism more fundamentally, turning it into a universal principle of international affairs.

In 1991, for example, with a refugee crisis brewing in the Gulf, the US created the doctrine of humanitarian intervention, reserving the right to act militarily against regimes which failed to recognise human rights. Western states also helped transform the UNHCR, the UN refugee agency, from a neutral body operating in a highly-politicised Cold-War environment into a more political and interventionist body performing apparently neutral tasks like spreading 'best practice'.

The West will now have to adapt its appeals to universalism. Refugees, as they flee, are organising themselves by ethnicity and their ability to pay their way, meaning only select groups gain safety. Resettlement schemes operated by Western states are criticised for cherry-picking refugees – 'high-skilled labour recruitment under a humanitarian label'. And in many cases, Middle Eastern countries house refugees on a unilateral basis, outside accepted norms.

Yet there is still space to create buy-in for a new, more geographically- and culturally-differentiated humanitarianism. A simple example: in the 1990s, African and Latin American countries established refugee-resettlement schemes in order to 'challenge the West's moral hegemony'. Benin, for instance, resettled polygamous families who could not find protection in the West. Given that today children are being born in Turkey to polygamous Syrian families, albeit on a very limited scale, that kind of scheme could now become relevant.

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