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## **The Securitisation of Migration**

**JCSP 47**

### **Exercise Solo Flight**

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**The Securitisation of Migration**

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## THE SECURITISATION OF MIGRATION

In 1960, there were an estimated 75 million international migrants in the world. However by the start of 2022, this number had risen to approximately 281 million people, or 3.6% of the global population – of whom 26.4 million were classified as refugees.<sup>1</sup> There are many reasons for this increase; conflict, natural disaster, famine, disease, poverty, social networking, increased communications and travel options, civil unrest, and of course natural global population increase. Whilst more recently COVID-19 and the associated travel restrictions that came with it “radically altered mobility around the world...becoming a truly seismic global event, testing the resilience of countries, communities, systems and sectors,”<sup>2</sup> even with the pandemic event, migration is still rising.

However, although “most liberal democracies are now multicultural, and this is widely regarded as a source of cultural richness”<sup>3</sup>, the concept of the securitisation of migration, where movement of people, and explicitly refugee movements, are classed as a security issue rather than a humanitarian one, has continued to gain momentum within sovereign states – in particular since the onset of COVID-19. This has led to the creation and enforcement of security policies by developed nations related to migration and people movements, whereby immigration is demonised, and thus an environment is established where immigration and security are seen as being inherently linked – creating moral and ethical issues. This paper will first seek first to define migration, including involuntary and voluntary migration, and examine the recent history of migration in the modern world. It will then seek to explain why sovereign states have come to view people movements as such a threat to sovereign security, on both a physical and cultural level, and how this has led to the humanitarian aspect of migration, in particular in relation to refugees, being either overlooked or blatantly disregarded in the name of ‘national security’. Ultimately, it will

<sup>1</sup> International Organisation for Migration. *World Migration Report 2022*. Geneva, 2022. Pg: 3-4.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. Pg: 2.

<sup>3</sup> Miller, David. “Immigration: A Case for Limits”, in Cohen, Andrew, and Wellman, Christopher, *Contemporary Debates in Applied Ethics*, Blackwell Publishing. United States, 2005. Pg: 201.

show that whilst the securitisation of people movements is not morally or ethically

appropriate, it has proven to be politically necessary for many sovereign state governments in order to maintain popular support from their domestic populations.

To understand how and why the securitisation of migration has occurred, it is critical to first understand the complexity of migration and how it can be defined. “Population movement, or the phenomenon of migration, is as old as humanity itself, and has played a crucial role in shaping the world as we know it.”<sup>4</sup> Indeed humans have been travelling freely throughout the world since the dawn of civilisation, most predominately moving from poorer to richer areas. In its simplest form, migration can be defined as “population redistribution...a process of simultaneous diversification and interconnection that brings people from different cultural, religious and ethnic backgrounds together into the same neighbourhoods, and that directs familial and cultural links criss-crossing the globe.”<sup>5</sup> However the advent of dynasties, empires, and eventually sovereign states with defined and indeed protected borders has brought with it labels for those persons who seek to cross such borders in the modern world. Today, “all international migration can be divided into two categories: involuntary or forced (also called refugee movements), and voluntary or free (also called economic migration) on the basis of the motivation behind migration.”<sup>6</sup> And whilst refugee movements obviously relate to persons attempting to escape their country of origin for humanitarian purposes, economic migration is more complex. Indeed voluntary migrants can be further sub-defined as being either legal permanent, legal temporary, or illegal migrants.<sup>7</sup>

Of course migration has not always been viewed in such a way. Indeed from a historical perspective, liberalists have always been extremely protective of people’s ‘right to move’, free from political interference.<sup>8</sup> Right up until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, population

<sup>4</sup> Bali, Sita. “Population Movements”, in Williams, Paul, *Security Studies: An Introduction, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition*, Routledge. London and New York 2008. Pg: 521.

<sup>5</sup> Hanson, Marianne, Tow, William. *International Relations in the New Century: An Australian Perspective*, Oxford University Press. Melbourne 2001. Pg: 118-119.

<sup>6</sup> Bali, Sita. “Population Movements”, in Williams, Paul, *Security Studies: An Introduction...*Pg: 523

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. Pg: 523-524.

size was considered to be a fundamental factor when measuring a state’s relative strength, and was the basis of a number of developed countries’ post World War Two immigration

programs.<sup>9</sup> However when the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was established in 1950, predominately to aid with the resettlement of tens of millions of people displaced as a result of the Second World War, the underlying principle of state sovereignty remained fundamental. Indeed the 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees, and the 1967 Protocol on the Status of Refugees both specifically stated that the underlying foundations of state sovereignty guaranteed that a signatory state would always retain the right to take “provisional measures which it considered to be essential to the national security in the case of a particular person.”<sup>10</sup> Essentially, states did “not want to be encumbered by people who just wanted to make a better life for themselves without the fuss of going through the migration application process, or people who could be criminals or security threats masquerading as refugees.”<sup>11</sup> Thus this concession meant that whilst the Convention and its follow up Protocol obligated signatory states to assist and accept genuine refugees, states not only retained the ability to ‘veto’ a particular person’s claim for refugee status or asylum on the basis of national security concerns, but they also retained the right to determine whether or not someone was a legitimate refugee.

Regardless, during the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century global migration continued to increase. And as a result of this, so too did underlying tones from conservative state governments who began to view migration as being a physical and cultural sovereignty threat. However it was not until the September 11 terrorist attacks that the concept of migration securitisation was entrenched. Indeed “by any measure, the atrocity of 11 September 2001 was an extraordinary event...first in terms of the US response to the attack and second in terms of the attack's impact upon the larger international system.”<sup>12</sup> In the aftermath of

<sup>8</sup> Summers, John, Woodward, Dennis. Parkin, Andrew. *Government, Politics, Power and Policy in Australia: 7<sup>th</sup> Edition*, Longman Press. NSW, 2002. Pg: 308.

<sup>9</sup> Hanson, Marianne, Tow, William. *International Relations in the New Century*...Pg: 118.

<sup>10</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. *Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees*. United Nations, Geneva 2010. Pg: 18.

<sup>11</sup> Davies, Sara. “Migration and Refugees”, in Devetak, Richard, Burke, Anthony, George, Jim, “*An Introduction to International Relations: Australian Perspective*”, Cambridge University Press. Cambridge 2007. Pg: 354.

the attacks, sovereign states across the globe rapidly tightened their borders. Foreign migrants who had once been welcomed into sovereign states were now seen as being outsiders and a security threat. Indeed to many conservatist commentators, the September

11 attacks were direct evidence that the way of life for people in Western countries was fundamentally under attack, and that the world was witnessing the beginning of “an emerging civilisation struggle between the West and Islam.”<sup>13</sup> These messages had the effect of fuelling the domestic populations fear of foreigners or indeed anyone ‘different’ within sovereign states. Thus from a migration point of view, migrants and in particular refugees were suddenly demonised and treated as security threats, despite the fact that their only crime was a will to better their lives or to escape persecution.

In the two decades since the September 11 attacks, the world has continued to be defined by growing unrest and tension. Major conflicts in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria and the Ukraine, countless more localised conflicts, skyrocketing inflation and violence and reduced standard of living in South America, the Arab Spring and the rise and fall of Islamic State (IS) in the Middle East, ongoing African epidemics of disease, poverty, famine, etc have all contributed to increased migration. In 2015 alone for example, at a time when the physical territory under IS control was at its peak, an estimated 65.3 million people fled their home countries.<sup>14</sup> Whilst there is no doubt many of these people were legitimate refugees, many sovereign states not only actively viewed some of these people as a genuine physical security threat, but were also wary of putting a strain on their own welfare and population support systems. As such, in the same two-decade period, most sovereign states began to securitize their national boundaries in order to control and even prohibit certain types of migrants.<sup>15</sup> Migration was no longer viewed simply through the lens of economics or humanitarianism, but more so through the security lens. Thus today, “it is now widely accepted in many Western states that the public policy process should explicitly treat

<sup>12</sup> Cox, Michael. *Paradigm Shifts and 9/11: International Relations After the Twin Towers*, *Security Dialogue* 33(2). United States, 2002.

<sup>13</sup> Heywood, Andrew. *Global Politics*, Palgrave Macmillan. New York 2011. Pg: 47.

<sup>14</sup> Purkayastha, Bandana. “Migration, migrants, and human security”, *Current Sociology*, Issue 66, Number 2. 2018. Pg: 168.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. Pg: 175.

immigration and security as intertwined and bring security forces to bear on matters of control and management of population movement.”<sup>16</sup>

However physical security, including both protecting borders from would-be terrorists posing as migrants, and protecting the state's welfare and social systems from being overrun by mass migration, is only one dimension of the reason why people movements have been securitised. The other dimension that is just as important to understand is the largely perceived, as opposed to actual, threat to a sovereign state's culture that mass migration, particularly refugee movements bring – a concept which has been fuelled by sovereign state governments largely for domestic political purposes. “The conceptual link between immigration and social vices such as crime, disease, and moral contamination gripped the public mind long before the present era and has continually shaped immigration policies and border control measures.”<sup>17</sup> Consequently in the past two decades where sovereign states have sought to strengthen their physical borders, they have also simultaneously and increasingly exaggerated or embellished claims that all migrants are criminals or terrorists, or that the migrants will take locals jobs, be a drain on welfare, etc in order to feed on domestic xenophobic fears in order to win votes and advance their political positioning. Indeed for governments of sovereign states seeking to restrict migration, the cultural threat aspect goes to the heart of what it means to be a citizen. Citizenship is “an equal status, which means not only that each citizen should enjoy a formally equal set of rights, but also that the state should seek to ensure that these rights are equally protected and equally able to be exercised.”<sup>18</sup> Thus when migrants move to a new sovereign state and establish cultural enclaves, surrounding themselves with others from a similar background and at least from a perceptive point of view not immediately assimilating with their population and culture of their adopted state, it creates both real and perceived cultural tension. From a nationalist

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<sup>16</sup> Bali, Sita. “Population Movements”, in Williams, Paul, *Security Studies: An Introduction...* Pg: 523

<sup>17</sup> Koser, Khalid. “Introduction: International Migration and Global Governance”, *Global Governance*, Vol. 16, No. 3. 2010. Pg: 301-302.

<sup>18</sup> Miller, David. “Immigrants, Nations and Citizenship”, *Journal of Political Philosophy*, Volume 16. 2008. Pg: 200-201.

point of view, the ‘citizen contract’ is being broken by the migrants perceived refusal to assimilate, and thus this breeds resentment and fear. Indeed “where the nation state is built on ethnic grounds, the refugee or migrant is imagined as a threat to its dominant ethnicity, language or culture.”<sup>19</sup>

A good case study that highlights both the physical and perceived cultural threats and demonstrates the complete securitisation of migration by a sovereign state for both foreign and domestic political purposes is the *MV Tampa* incident, which occurred off the coast of Australia in August 2001. In the years prior, increasing numbers of asylum seekers had been paying people smugglers large amounts of money to ferry them 500km across the Indian Ocean from Indonesia to the Australian territory of Christmas Island. Once ashore, the migrants would claim asylum and the resettlement processes for the migrants as confirmed refugees would commence. And whilst the growing number of rickety boats making this hazardous journey did gain some domestic press attention, in particular from more conservative sections of the Australian media, in general terms the majority of Australians were largely oblivious to this migration route. However on the morning of the 26<sup>th</sup> of August 2001, when one such boat carrying 438 asylum seekers foundered in international waters, the cargo ship the *MV Tampa* responded to a distress call from the sinking boat, rescuing all of the passengers. Ordered by his freighter company to unload the rescued migrants in Jakarta, Captain Arne Rinnan set course for Indonesia. However shortly after he did so a group of five asylum seekers attended the bridge of the ship and aggressively demanded he change course for Christmas Island, stating they had 'nothing to lose.' Wishing to avoid a potential violent confrontation at sea, Captain Rinnan agreed and set sail for the Australian territory.<sup>20</sup>

What followed was an unprecedented standoff which changed the nature of Australia's border security policies forever. Upon approaching Australian waters the ship was denied

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<sup>19</sup> Haddad, Emma. "Refugee protection: a clash of values", *International Journal of Human Rights*, Vol. 7, No. 3. 2003. Pg: 11.

<sup>20</sup> Burke, Jason, Brace, Matthew, Jordan, Sandra. "All Australia can offer is Guano Island", *The Guardian*. Australia, 3<sup>rd</sup> September 2001.

entry, with the Australian government informing Captain Rinnan that if he tried to offload the migrants on Christmas Island he would be prosecuted as a people smuggler.<sup>21</sup> After three days, and with the asylum seekers growing increasingly restless, Captain Rinnan lost patience and attempted to dock the ship. This prompted the Australian government to



deploy special forces troops on to the *MV Tampa* and to take control of the ship, an event that played out in front of the international media. This action was met with universal condemnation from the UNHCR and other human rights and refugee advocacy groups around the globe. In response however, Australian Prime Minister John Howard stated “I believe it is in Australia’s national interest that we draw a line on what is increasingly becoming an uncontrollable number of illegal arrivals in this country.”<sup>22</sup> Eventually the Australian government passed legislation which not only annexed Christmas Island and a number of other remote islands north of Australia from being in Australia’s migration zone, but also gave the Australian government extensive powers to refuse entry to refugees arriving by sea. Of note, the legislation was backdated to have come into effect two and a half hours *prior* to the *MV Tampa* entering Australian waters.<sup>23</sup> With the exception of a small number of migrants that the New Zealand government accepted, the rest of the asylum seekers on board the *MV Tampa* were eventually transported to the tiny Pacific Island of Nauru, after the Australian government struck deals with both Nauru and Papua New Guinea to establish offshore detention centres in those countries, specifically to house asylum seekers intercepted trying to reach Australia by boat. This policy was dubbed ‘The Pacific Solution.’

The *MV Tampa* affair was significant in terms of a turning point in the securitisation of migration for two main reasons. Firstly, the incident starkly highlighted the issue that the Convention and its follow up Protocol were mere obligations for signatory states: they were not legally binding. Thus when the Australian government broke its obligation by refusing to accept the refugees from the *MV Tampa*, all the UNHCR could do was lodge its strong

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<sup>21</sup> Marr, David, Wilkinson, Marian. *Dark Victory*, Allen and Unwin. Australia, 2003. Pg: 31.

<sup>22</sup> Doherty, Ben. “The Tampa Affair 20 years on: the ship that capsized Australia’s refugee policy”, *The Guardian*. Australia, 22<sup>nd</sup> August 2021.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*.

objections, as Australia’s stance was in line with the letter of international refugee law, despite it not being in the spirit of it.<sup>24</sup> Indeed the Australian government’s response reinforced the standpoint that “the power to admit or exclude ‘aliens’ is inherent in sovereignty and essential in any political community.”<sup>25</sup> And although “the term refugee

is associated with fleeing and a lack of choice, it is also associated with an imposition on the receiving state,”<sup>26</sup> thus the incident also reinforced the clause in the Convention and Protocol that states retained the right to determine who was classified as being a refugee.

Secondly, the *MV Tampa* affair highlighted how powerful a tool the securitisation of migration can be to domestic governments. In the aftermath of the *MV Tampa* incident the Australian federal election was called, and Prime Minister Howard openly campaigned using border protection as a key platform, famously stating “We will decide who comes to this country and under what circumstances.”<sup>27</sup> This rhetoric proved popular with the Australian population – John Howard was returned to power and most exit polls concluded that most voters supported Howard’s stance, as the asylum seekers were widely perceived as ‘queue jumpers.’ And this perception was enduring – indeed in 2007 when the Labor party came to power and dismantled ‘The Pacific Solution’, labelling it ‘inhumane’, the decision was so deeply unpopular with the domestic Australian population they were forced to reinstate it. Thus successive governments have continued to demonise asylum seekers in order to maintain domestic support. Indeed after *MV Tampa*, “migration became an issue of ‘border protection’ and ‘threats to national security.’ Those arriving by boat were no longer ‘asylum seekers’ but ‘illegals’. Ministers would publicly allege asylum seekers ‘could be murderers, could be terrorists,’ and that ‘whole villages’ were coming to Australia in uncontrollable ‘floods’. And the immigration and customs departments became the Australian Border Force.”<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Loescher, Gil. *Beyond Charity: International Cooperation and Global Refugee Crisis*, Oxford University Press. United Kingdom 1993. Pg: 139.

<sup>25</sup> Carens, Joseph. “Aliens and Citizens: The Case for Open Borders”, *The Review of Politics*, Volume 49. 1987. Pg: 251.

<sup>26</sup> Davies, Sara. “Migration and Refugees”, in Devetak, Richard, Burke, Anthony, George, Jim, “*An Introduction to International Relations...* Pg: 352.

<sup>27</sup> Marr, David, Wilkinson, Marian, *Dark Victory...* Pg 277.

<sup>28</sup> Doherty, Ben. “The Tampa Affair 20 years on: the ship that capsized Australia’s refugee policy”...

However Australia was by no means alone in terms of its nationalistic domestic approach to migrants. Even today “Australia’s system is not severe in the sense that it is no more or less stringent than other developed states.”<sup>29</sup> Indeed in the past 20 years large numbers of sovereign governments have increasingly used xenophobic undertones about migrants to

create fear within the state population and shore up domestic political support. The explosion of social media and other rapid forms of communication, in addition to the advent of the '24-hour news cycle' have only served to increase the impact of these coerced attitudes, which have been further fanned by conservative groups. According to the UN, between 2014 and 2022 campaigns of disinformation about migrants increased by 250%<sup>30</sup>, and “a study of almost 7.5 million tweets during the refugee crisis of 2015–2016 identified a surge in far-right activity whereby refugees were framed in xenophobic terms and presented as a threat to Europe’s security, economy and culture.”<sup>31</sup> COVID-19 has also had a profound impact on migrants and their attitudes towards them. Indeed migrants have often erroneously become targets for xenophobic racism – especially those of Asian descent during COVID-19 – regardless of facts and evidence.”<sup>32</sup> Thus sovereign state governments increasingly used the pandemic “as a further excuse to increase the securitisation of migration.”<sup>33</sup>

There are of course legitimate security concerns in relation to migration. There have been many confirmed cases of terrorists posing as migrants attempting to enter sovereign states with the intent of harming innocent or succeeding in harming members of the population. That security risk is very real. Further, genuine migrants need food, water, shelter and protection; all of which require funding and resourcing and coordination. Thus it does make sense to have a system of screening and vetting in place when it comes to migration. Historically however, even if sovereign states put in place restrictions attempting to stem the flow of grants, people who are forced from their homes and become genuine refugees,

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but face barriers in seeking sanctuary within sovereign states, will still seek out irregular

<sup>29</sup> Davies, Sara. “Migration and Refugees”, in Devetak, Richard, Burke, Anthony, George, Jim, “*An Introduction to International Relations...* Pg: 358.

<sup>30</sup> International Organisation for Migration. *World Migration Report 2022...* Pg: 221.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. Pg: 154.

<sup>33</sup> Yayboke, Erol. *Rethinking Migration Is a Security Imperative - Just Not How You Might Think*. CSIS Centre for Strategic & International Studies. 23 Februarv 2021.

pathways to obtain it.<sup>34</sup> This however only serves to encourage and strengthen the sophisticated and organised networks of people smugglers. Today, the worldwide people smuggling business is estimated to be valued at \$6.75 billion per year.<sup>35</sup> This industry takes

advantage of people's desperation, often charging would be migrants their life savings without providing any guarantees. Many of these people end up in forced labour or worse situations than what they left in their country of origin. Indeed many of them ultimately perish whilst undertaking dangerous journeys on the back of the promise of a better life. As such it does make sense for sovereign states to put in place policies to protect both their own domestic populations against physical and perceived cultural threats, and the migrants themselves from the people smuggling businesses. However this can be done without demonising the migrants themselves. The European Union (EU) for example has recently worked hard to support member states in developing border management models that combine their traditional migration and asylum policies, remove the division of people being labelled as either 'legal' or 'illegal', and use a wholistic approach to border management including incorporating bureaucrats, private companies, and non-government organisations into their systems to better support the state and the migrants themselves simultaneously.<sup>36</sup> However despite the fact that there are legitimate reasons for security policies around migration, these are largely process driven – they do not excuse the continued demonisation of the migrants themselves. By continuing to target would be migrants, it makes them more inclined to seek out non-traditional methods of migration.

Thus whilst the securitisation of people movements does have some legitimacy and necessity, sovereign states ultimately have a moral obligation to address the humanitarian aspects of migration as opposed to just the security ones. Recent history however has proven that it is almost a political necessity now for sovereign state governments to continue xenophobic rhetoric towards migration in order to maintain popular support from their domestic populations.

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<sup>34</sup> Yayboke, Erol. *Rethinking Migration Is a Security Imperative - Just Not How You Might Think...*

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Benam, Cigdem. "Emergence of a Big Brother in Europe: Border Control and Securitization of

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