

# Immigration in Foreign Policy

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## I. Introduction

Immigration has always been a pivotal component in shaping political systems and economic development. Now, it is no longer considered solely a domestic issue but a complex, transnational phenomenon that influences diplomatic relations and even international standards. Ranging from historical migration waves to modern displacement crises, patterns of immigration reflect broader forces such as war, economic inequality, and globalization. From the post-World War 2 era, immigration trends shifted significantly as nations adapted to new geopolitical standards and expanded global interconnectedness.

This rise of globalization in the late 20th and early 21st centuries accelerated cross-border mobility while being immersed in new social and political tensions. These developments have induced the evolving perceptions of immigrants worldwide, often shaping concerns over national security, current labor markets, and cultural identity. Exploring this immigration from a foreign policy perspective, it is possible to examine ongoing geopolitical tension rooted in migration and border policy changes. Interpreting immigration as both a humanitarian issue and a strategic policy concern allows for a comprehensive view of its critical role in influencing international relations today.

## II. History

America was built on the influx of immigrants under relatively open laws. Although the 1790 Naturalization Act limited citizenship to "free white persons," this did not necessarily apply to the British, Germans, and Irish, the three largest immigrant demographic groups at the time. But with the gradual compounding of anti-immigration acts, including President John Adams' Alien and Sedition Acts allowing the president to

deport non-citizens who seemed dangerous and requiring a 14-year residency in the country for citizenship, the U.S. built a stricter outlook on immigration.

With the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, stringent immigration laws continued, but this time with a renewed sense of economic anxiety and nativist sentiment. As a result of the California Gold Rush and the demand for railroad construction workers in the Western United States, Chinese immigrants poured into the country at an unprecedented level, often performing low-wage labor and perceived as economic competition by many American workers. The Chinese Exclusion Act was thus signed into law in 1882, stopping Chinese laborers from entering the country. It represented the first major law to ban an ethnic group from entry and served as the basis for the later Immigration Act of 1891, which federalized immigration by revoking states' control over the matter. The 1891 act also established the Office of the Superintendent of Immigration under the Treasury Department, which collected manifests, determined who was allowed in, and had general control over ports of entry. The office eventually became the Bureau of Immigration, then the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) before being abolished in 2003 where its functions were split between U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), and Customs and Border Protection (CBP).

The 20th century pushed further, beginning to limit immigration from European countries, America's "founding stock." The Immigration Act of 1917 banned immigration from most Asian countries, required an \$8 tax for entry, and required literacy tests for immigrants over 16. Though the act specifically targeted Asia, the literacy test effectively reduced unskilled labor from South and Eastern Europe. Interestingly, a year later, the restrictions were temporarily

waived for Mexicans to address wartime agricultural labor shortages, increasing Mexican immigration by 350%. In 1921, European restrictions became more formalized. On May 19, the Emergency Quota Act of 1921 established the first numerical restrictions on immigration, limiting the amount of immigration from the Eastern Hemisphere by accepting just 3% of that country's population recorded in the 1910 census. The law significantly decreased immigration, with a decrease of around 500,000 immigrants in the first year.

Just three years later, President Calvin Coolidge signed the most restrictive immigration law in U.S. history: The Immigration Act of 1924, also known as the Johnson-Reed Act. Quotas were changed to 2% of the 1890 census, essentially banning all immigration from Asia, and created the U.S. Border Patrol. Immigration from the outside world was capped at around 165,000 entries and had an 80% reduction compared to pre-WWI numbers.

Then, with the economic reconstruction of the post-WW2 era, immigration law underwent several liberal reforms. The Bracero Program, which lasted from 1942-1964, allowed Mexican workers to temporarily work in the U.S. The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1953 kept quotas but allowed Asian immigrants to obtain citizenship. The first true change came in 1965, with the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965. It removed nationality quotas entirely, ensured family reunification, and led to an increase in immigration from not only Asia and Africa but also South and Eastern Europe. Between 1970 and 2007, the foreign-born population grew from around 9.6M to 38M, mainly as a result of increased family reunification provisions.

In 1986, the Immigration Reform and Control Act was signed into law by President Ronald

Reagan. It was part of a deal between the Republicans and Democrats to give amnesty to 3 million undocumented immigrants in return for punishments for employers who hired them, as well as to increase border security. Though the amnesty was enacted, the latter part of the deal was not properly enforced until the presidencies of George W. Bush and Barack Obama. Four years later, President George HW Bush signed into law the Immigration Act of 1990, which created the modern H1-B visa system, increased the immigration cap to 675,000 per year, introduced the Diversity Visa Program (DVP), and created the Temporary Protected Status (TPS) program. President Bill Clinton then signed the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996, which increased border enforcement, interior enforcement, and penalties for undocumented immigrants; created expedited removal; mandated detention camps; and expanded the scope of deportable crimes.

The 21st century has also seen significant immigration legislation and debate. The USA PATRIOT Act, passed after 9/11, increased immigration screening, and the famous Obama-era law "Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals" passed in 2012 protected children brought to the country illegally. During his first term, Trump restricted immigration from Muslim countries and made efforts to build a border wall across the southern U.S. border. Under Joe Biden, immigration policy shifted in a different direction, notably through the termination of Title 42, a health policy enacted during the pandemic to stop migrants from crossing the border on public health grounds.

### III. Current Policy

The Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees  
Commonly known as the 1951 Refugee Convention, this was a United Nations multilateral treaty that defines who a refugee is and establishes the principle of

non-refoulement, which prohibits returning individuals to countries where they face persecution (United Nations, 1951/1967). It highlights the rights and responsibilities of parties involved. However, the Convention was built upon a mid-20th century understanding of displacement and does not reflect modern-day reasons and circumstances of refugees. In addition, the Convention faces limitations in enforcement as it depends on state compliance and cooperation.

#### The United Nations Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM)

This is the first comprehensive global framework addressing all forms of migration through 23 cooperative objectives (United Nations, 2018a). It operates as a non-binding agreement and encourages states to improve migration policies by enhancing migrant protections. However, the voluntary nature of this framework allows for some states to opt out or selectively adopt its provisions, limiting its overall impact and effectiveness.

#### Global Compact on Refugees (GCR)

This international agreement, which was prepared under the auspices of the United Nations, focuses specifically on refugee protection and responsibility-sharing among states (United Nations, 2018b). This agreement aims to ease pressure on host countries and expand access to resettlement. However, the GCR's tangibility is questionable as wealthier nations often contribute financially rather than increasing refugee admissions, which leaves states such as Turkey and Lebanon disproportionately burdened by high refugee admissions.

#### Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)

Through Article 14, the right to seek asylum is affirmed and sets a normative foundation for migration governance (United Nations, 1948). It has influenced various international treaties and shaped national constitutions

around the globe. However, due to cultural relativism and state preferences, implementation has varied significantly across countries.

#### The Schengen Agreement

This landmark 1985 treaty facilitates passport-free movement across 29 countries including non-European Union (EU) members like Switzerland, Norway, Iceland, and Liechtenstein (European Commission, 2020). However, this agreement has increased scrutinization of migration and reliance on external agreements with non-EU members to manage the inflow of migrants. Therefore, this has highlighted the tensions between openness within the region and restriction at its borders.

#### Dublin Regulation

The Dublin Regulation is an EU regulation which determines that asylum seekers must apply for protection in the first EU country they enter (European Commission, 2020). While the regulation was created with the intention to prevent "asylum shopping," it has caused a significant imbalance in state responsibilities by placing responsibility on border states such as Greece and Italy. As a result, this has started debates over reforming the Common European Asylum System.

#### European Employment Services (EURES)

The EURES facilitates the free movement of workers within the EU by connecting job seekers with employment opportunities across member states (European Commission, 2021). As a result, this service enhances economic efficiency by addressing labor shortages and workforce integration. However, this comes with certain limitations such as language barriers and economic disparities amongst member states.

#### Cartagena Declaration on Refugees

The Cartagena Declaration expands the definition of a refugee beyond the 1951 Convention to include individuals fleeing

generalized violence, foreign aggression, and human rights violations (UNHCR, 1984). This declaration has been widely adopted in the Latin American region by being integrated into national laws.

#### United States Immigration Policy

This is primarily governed by the Immigration and Nationality Act. It establishes a system centered on family reunification and employment-based visas (Migration Policy Institute, 2022). However, recent years have seen an increased emphasis on border enforcement and deterrence, including restrictions on asylum access and fluctuating refugee caps. This is due to the growing politicization of migration as anti-immigration rhetoric intensifies.

#### Canada Immigration Policy

The Canadian migration system operates under the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act, which emphasizes a point-based selection system, the Comprehensive Ranking System (CRS), prioritizing skilled migrants (Government of Canada, 2023). This system assigns a numerical value to “human capital” factors that correlate with higher lifetime earnings in the Canadian labor market. This includes age, educational attainment, and proficiency in English and French (IRCC, 2025). Canada's approach towards immigration is often viewed as well-managed but it has contributed to domestic challenges such as housing shortages due to rising immigration levels. To address this, the current policy emphasizes “in-Canada” transitions through Canadian Experience Class and has introduced stabilized permanent residency targets to align population growth with infrastructure capacity (IRCC, 2026; Pineau, 2026).

#### Gulf States and the Kafala System

Migration in Gulf states is largely governed by the Kafala System, which ties migrant workers' legal status to their employers (Amnesty International, 2022). While this system facilitates rapid labor importation, it

also restricts worker mobility and exposes workers to exploitation. Human rights violations relating to migrant workers remains a significant issue in the region.

## IV. Current Tensions

The intensification of the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) operations under the second Trump administration has generated significant friction across several bilateral relationships. Most visibly, the conduct of U.S. deportation flights, particularly the use of military aircraft and physical restraints on deportees, prompted immediate and forceful responses from Latin American governments. Colombia's President Gustavo Petro publicly condemned the flights as treating Colombian nationals “like criminals,” and briefly announced retaliatory tariff measures against the United States before a diplomatic agreement was reached (Pellish et al., 2025). Mexico, Venezuela, and Brazil similarly issued formal diplomatic protests, with Brazil's government summoning the U.S. chargé d'affaires to demand an explanation (The Guardian, 2025). These events show a decline: countries that have historically maintained cooperative relationships with the U.S. on trade and security are increasingly willing to openly contest Washington's immigration conduct, suggesting that the political cost of silence now outweighs the risk of confrontation.

Beyond individual protests, the ICE enforcement has begun to affect regional cooperation. Several Latin American governments have grown more reluctant to share intelligence and coordinate on border management, areas where U.S. partnerships have historically operated quietly and effectively, out of concern that cooperation will be perceived domestically as collusion in enforcement actions against their own citizens (Sutherland, 2025). Looking ahead, this erosion of operational trust may prove more consequential than any single

diplomatic protest: if the United States cannot rely on the cooperation of transit and source countries, its ability to manage migration flows through partnership rather than unilateral enforcement will be constrained.

On the question of displacement crises, recent migration events have exposed significant tensions within and between major powers. Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 triggered one of the largest displacement crises in modern European history. The burden of reception fell unevenly across EU member states, producing open disputes between Poland and Germany on one side, who absorbed the largest numbers, and several Central and Southern European states who resisted more formalized burden-sharing mechanisms ([United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2025](#)). The Afghan displacement crisis, meanwhile, has strained relationships between Western governments and hosts Pakistan and Iran, both of which pressed the U.S. and its allies to accelerate resettlement commitments made during the 2021 withdrawal with commitments remaining largely unfulfilled ([Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 2023](#)). Both crises show a recurring pattern: when displacement occurs at scale, the resulting tensions between states over responsibility and resources can be as diplomatically damaging as the crisis itself.

## V. Policy Challenges

Immigration intersects with a plethora of policy issues. Today, international migrants comprise 3.7 percent of the global population at 304 million, almost double the estimated 154 million in 1990 (Population Division of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2024). In the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, several sustainable development goals and their respective targets remain relevant to

the topic of migration including health workforce in developing countries, mobility of international students, human trafficking, labor migration, remittances, and legal identity ([United Nations Global Issues, n.d.](#)).

Undocumented immigration remains a hot topic issue for many international onlookers, most recently in the United States' national security focus on undocumented immigrants. So what are the problems in documentation in the current global political landscape? The UN SDG for 2030 includes target 16.9, which establishes a need for "legal identity for all, including birth registration by 2030." Legal identity here goes beyond civil registration or documentation, but also includes the fine-grained operationalizations utilized by respective states which could encompass legal rights such as due process and fair trial. Following this definition, legal identity policy strategies must address three varying migrant groups: first, migrant groups in foreign countries who require access to civil registration in the host country and the country of origin; second, vulnerable mobile populations including displaced persons and victims of trafficking for whom legal identity intersects with protection concerns and international humanitarian law; and third, irregular migrants for whom determining legal identity is linked to a specific country situation such as those fleeing from conflicts or disasters ([International Organization for Migration, 2021](#)).

Immigrants indubitably play a key role in the labor market. On the supply side, immigrants affect the number and composition in an economy, and on the demand side, migrants themselves purchase goods and services that increase demand. What kinds of impacts migrants may have are subject to variation based on the time, place, and conditions driving migration ([Vargas-Silva, Sumption, and Brindle, 2026](#)). For example, if migrants are driven by high wages towards a country, then they might offer more specialized services and skills, whereas if migrants are forced to flee, the composition of skill-specificity might vary greatly.

However, the exact consequences of immigration on policy preference, party composition, and constituent competition are still highly contested. David Rueda's insider-outsider labor market dualization theory draws on the premise that immigrants make up a large constituency of labor "outsiders" or those who have precarious employment, suggesting that left parties of OECD countries have incentives to cater to labor insiders at the expense of labor outsiders (Rueda, 2005). Dani Rodrik goes beyond labor market shocks to suggest that when globalization is felt in the form of immigration and refugees, it is easier for populist politicians to mobilize along these lines (Rodrik, 2018). Whether immigrants serve as scapegoats or act as their own mobilizing block, policy preferences are undoubtedly shaped in response to immigration. Thus, policymakers must navigate uncertain consequences to determine what the precise market and subsequent political implications of immigration might be.

Another central contemporary challenge in immigration policy is the balance of humanitarian obligation for migration and national security concerns. States are bound by international norms and frameworks developed by the UNHCR. However, states also face domestic pressures to maintain secure borders and improve assimilation. In the post-9/11 world, this often means battling a conflation of counterterrorism and more restrictive citizenship policies as migrant governance becomes an increasingly securitized issue. Within anti-terrorism measures, scholars have criticized the role of counterterrorism measures and what this means for citizens in a "suspect community" (O'Toole, Meer, DeHanas, Jones, & Modood, 2016; Pantazis & Pemberton, 2009), a term arising from the dual justice system after the 1974 British Prevention of Terrorism Act (Ylitalo-Jones, 2020). In the case of the UK and other liberal democracies, suspect communities typically

comprise groups containing immigrants, which subsequently risks a weakening of legal identity for immigrants.

## VI. Future Policy

Future policy addressing the root causes of migration should begin by looking at the policies governments have previously passed. In doing so, a distinction should also be made between the aid options that a country can offer. Not all aid is helpful to a country's development, and as Dambisa Moyo articulated in her book *Dead Aid*, traditional forms of government-government or government-third party monetary aid can often result in dependence rather than development. Given this, the first consideration of a potential solution should be to avoid giving out dead aid. Examples of dead aid can be seen as aid to assist in building infrastructure or even supplying long term health aid. Here, another distinction needs to be made between emergency health or disaster relief aid and long term aid that exists for so long the government feels no need or incentive to develop its own capabilities or compete with Western aid to provide that good or service to its people. Simply put, aid should not ever undermine or replace a state's ability to provide goods and services to its people, but instead provide a state with the tools needed to self develop.

Aid for developing countries, therefore, should follow a few guiding principles to avoid falling into dead aid.

First, aid should be specific in its goals and distribution. Aid given to large entities like governments or NGOs for a broad issue like employment support or education is easily mismanaged or siphoned off by corruption. The weaker statehood of most developing countries also could pose difficulties in ensuring that aid reaches those in need in a sustainable, timely, and symmetric manner. On the other hand, community-based initiatives like mobile courts or village

savings and loan associations have been shown to be effective at solving employment and social conflict problems. Specificity in aid has also shown effectiveness, while support for institutional processes have a limited impact on employment and livelihood issues, targeted support for youth through skill enhancement and market connections are more successful (Addressing the “Root Causes,” 2025).

Second, projects or aid ought to be sustainable even after foreign management of investment has left. Short term initiatives like providing cash for work have been documented to not work. Further, aid and institutions should be built in a manner where management belongs in or can be easily transferred to the hands of the country receiving aid.

Third, aid needs to be given in a holistic manner. Migration is not driven by a single cause, but by a variety of economic, political, and sociological factors that feed into each other and limit the effectiveness of solutions to other factors (Addressing the “Root Causes,” 2025). Job creation alone does not solve the economic burdens of a country, such as income inequality, corruption, and the gap between labour demand and supply. In many senses, there is often a ‘root cause’ to the root causes identified by government strategies. Progress is best supported by comprehensive approaches that reach the very basics of roadblocks to development (Vargas-Silva et al., 2023).

Our previous policies should be adjusted to align more with these principles. The 2021 Strategy for Addressing the Root Causes of Migration in Central America published by the Biden-Harris administration provided a great start and drew attention to the importance of addressing root causes with foreign policy. However, it was only in effect for about four years before the Trump administration discontinued it. Additionally, as the strategy focused on solving root causes like gang recruitment of youth and

high school dropout rates, it takes years before any impact is realized (U.S. STRATEGY for ADDRESSING the ROOT CAUSES of MIGRATION in CENTRAL AMERICA, 2021). This consequence of the strategy means that many may have associated the root causes strategy with the high migration numbers of Biden’s later years in office. The root causes strategy also did not have the holistic plan of action necessary to cover all of the factors that feed into migration. It reduces the issue of food insecurity, health, and education down to one bullet point, while going into detail on reforms for democratic governance and corruption (U.S. STRATEGY for ADDRESSING the ROOT CAUSES of MIGRATION in CENTRAL AMERICA, 2021). The strategy should be revised in a manner that can gain the bi-partisan support to last through multiple presidencies for long term use. To develop a more holistic approach to addressing root causes, the government should involve all relevant departments and agencies to contribute suggestions to the strategy in addition to the Department of Homeland Security.

The Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF), established by the European Union in 2015, was created to address the root causes of instability and forced displacement in the Sahel and Lake Chad, Horn of Africa, and Northern Africa. The numbers generated by the program showed effectiveness, with over 28 million people receiving increased access to basic social benefits. However, the EUTF is also no longer active, having ceased to accept new contracts in 2021 and implementation of old projects in 2025. The goals of the fund have since been incorporated into that of the Global Europe strategy. In addition to sustainability, the fund was also lacking in specificity that impacted its effectiveness. Audits of the program showed that the program lacked focus and often did not direct funding towards where need was most urgent and suffered from slow decision making (Special Report 17/2024: The EU Trust Fund for

Africa, 2024). While the goals of the EUTF continue to be implemented, the Global Europe strategy is even broader than the EUTF. The strategy partners with countries on all levels of the development spectrum, including extremely developed nations like China (Special Report 17/2024: The EU Trust Fund for Africa, 2024). The wide spectrum of countries that the strategy engages with could spread thin attention and strain resources. Future policies should remain geographically specific.

## VII. Conclusion

When examining the larger landscape of global immigration, society often overlooks its impact on the young generations. From the early restrictions of the Alien and Sedition Acts to consistent ICE enforcement, the perspective of both Americans and global citizens on immigration have fluctuated through the past centuries. Yet despite decades of debate, many countries continue to struggle to address the root causes of migration itself, often influenced by political priorities or moral beliefs.

Behind these policies, however, are millions of families, often with stories of hardships and the desire to experience a better world without the fear of social, political, or ethnic persecution. These children and families don't see the executive orders or country negotiations; they experience the headline adversity in their everyday lives.

With the current state of global immigration, vulnerable youths could be trapped in systems of limited education, poverty, and underlying segregation. As this generation of immigrants grows and attempts to integrate into society, they may encounter similar challenges. It is the world's duty to support these generations of immigrants in the midst of chaos and hate.