

# CURRENT HISTORY

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*“[M]obility and migration interact with other factors in ways that are symptomatic of how states and societies are increasingly connected.”*

## Global Security Entanglement and the Mobility Paradox

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**W**e live in a highly interconnected, globally entangled world, but continue to think in national terms. Paradoxically, at a time when many governments are retrenching and attempting to deglobalize, the most significant challenges facing the world are more global and border-busting than ever.

The COVID-19 pandemic provides a striking illustration of this trend. No event in recent history more clearly qualifies as a global security event, with over 4.8 million people around the world having died from the virus, and more than 237 million having been infected, as of October 2021. In the United States alone, more people died from COVID-19 in the first 20 months of the pandemic than died fighting in World War I, World War II, Korea, Vietnam, Iraq, Libya, and Afghanistan combined.

COVID-19 spread so quickly and widely in large part due to the scale, scope, and speed of international mobility today. The virus jumped from Wuhan, China, to the rest of the world via cross-border travel and exchange. Our entangled, interconnected world, with its integrated supply chains and constant cross-border flows of money, goods, people, and services, may proffer a myriad of benefits and virtues, but it is also exceptionally vulnerable to cross-border security threats such as pandemics. As many public health experts have already observed, it is surprising that we have not

witnessed a modern global pandemic on this scale before now, and this one is unlikely to be the last.

Despite the staggering human costs associated with COVID-19, levels of international cooperation to combat this global threat have remained relatively low, and responses have been overwhelmingly state-centric. Immediate government responses relied heavily on border closings, export bans, and attempts to reconfigure global supply chains.

At the same time, global vaccination programs have been stalled by the rise of “vaccine nationalism,” pharmaceutical protectionism, and the proliferation of international scapegoating—such as the United States and China each casting blame on the other for the outbreak of the virus. Yet public health experts from the Center for Global Development estimate that it would cost just \$50–70 billion to vaccinate everyone still unvaccinated globally. This relatively modest investment would likely radically reduce the further spread and mutation of the virus and protect the majority of the vaccinated against the most serious forms of the disease.

### MANAGING MOBILITY

The COVID-19 pandemic is emblematic of the larger patterns and dynamics of the global security environment. Whereas the world is increasingly connected by a multiplicity of transportation links, communications technologies, social media, global popular culture, trade, and finance, these complex interconnections exist side by side with structurally driven, national forms of competition and conflict. Moreover, the third wave of globalization that shaped so much of recent history produced not only connections between different

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parts of the planet, but also tighter linkages between an array of disparate issue areas.

These background conditions create hybrid dynamics that can be characterized as a form of *global security entanglement*—in which both national and international security are deeply intertwined, and domestic and international politics can likewise become interconnected and entangled. In this context, interconnectedness can be leveraged by individual state and nonstate actors to their own advantage. But it also creates collective vulnerabilities, trans-local security entanglements, and blowback effects that are often underappreciated or even ignored in traditional state-centric approaches to security. Confronting and managing the challenges of an entangled global security environment will require an enhanced understanding of such complexities.

As evidenced by the pandemic, these dynamics can be seen particularly in the management of migration and mobility, which connect people across borders, but also create vulnerabilities. The political scientist James F. Hollifield has referred to the contradictory effects of migration as the “liberal paradox.” On the one hand, liberalism flourishes on the basis of open exchange and the free circulation of goods, ideas, and people. On the other hand, this same mobility and circulation creates challenges and vulnerabilities for political institutions and rights-based frameworks that are still largely closed and territorial, bringing mobility management to the fore as a key issue facing states. The pandemic has placed this contradiction in sharp relief: the need to limit movement in order to protect public health has simultaneously led to disruptions in global supply chains, trade, and transport, creating stark trade-offs between different elements of security that are difficult to reconcile.

Yet the dilemmas governments have faced with regard to mobility during the pandemic are only more visible versions of the everyday challenges of managing mobility in a globally entangled world. Migration and mobility cut through and connect a number of different areas of entangled security—from pandemics to climate change, and from conflict and military engagement to contemporary challenges confronting democracies in the form of internal polarization and external threats. Moreover, migration itself is commonly weaponized or

used as a tool of leverage by states in more classical or coercive forms of interstate bargaining and diplomacy. This brings together the same dual dynamics of global interconnection and interstate competition in ways that make the management of migration a “wicked problem,” one that is so complex that it does not have a clear, definitive solution.

The combination of interconnectedness and competition adds another layer of complexity to collective action problems. Attempts at autarkic “national” solutions are insufficient, but so are existing mechanisms of global governance, since they are based on an assumption of a world of discrete, legally defined nation-states, rather than recognition of cross-border security entanglement.

### POST-9/11 BLOWBACK

The complex, mobility-related dynamics of security entanglement are also in evidence in the unintended consequences and blowback effects of the post-9/11 wars and conflicts that made up the US-led Global War on Terror. The staggering rise in forced migration and refugee flows since 2001 cannot be separated from the series of military interventions that took place across the Middle East and beyond during this period.

The Costs of War Project estimates that approximately 38 million people (and possibly millions more) have been displaced in the post-9/11 wars fought by the United States and its allies—more than the number displaced by any other war or natural or man-made disaster since the start of the twentieth century, with the exception only of World War II. An estimated 80 percent of the people who arrived in Europe by boat during the height of the 2015–16 migration “crisis” were originally from war-torn Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria.

Foreign-imposed regime changes have fundamentally altered the countries subject to these interventions as well as other states in the region and beyond. The 2011 NATO-led intervention in Libya helped destabilize the country and the broader region. It also hastened Libya’s ongoing transformation into a migration transit state and hub for Europe-bound migrant smuggling.

Similarly, the departure of the United States from Afghanistan twenty years after deposing the Taliban has created ongoing migration challenges not only for Afghanistan’s immediate neighbors,

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but also for states farther afield. One such country is Turkey, which was already the leading refugee host in the world, having taken in some 3.6 million Syrians since the start of the conflict in their neighboring country in 2011. The recent uptick in the number of Afghan refugees has increased domestic tensions over migration and hastened the construction of a wall on Turkey's eastern border with Iran, while further boosting migration anxieties throughout eastern and western Europe.

Rather than treating these NATO-led interventions and the 2015–16 refugee “crisis” as separate events, an entangled security perspective provides a lens for seeing how they are deeply interconnected. Military interventions in the Middle East, Central Asia, and North Africa not only had devastating effects for populations on the ground, but also had blowback and security effects in Europe. The rapid rise in conflict-induced migration hastened the militarization of Europe's external borders, spurring the further development of the European Union's FRONTEX border agency and intensifying the EU's extension and externalization of migration control beyond its borders. All this deepened Europe's security entanglement with its neighbors.

Demographic trends leading to a greying and shrinking European population mean that most European countries would benefit from a larger supply of skilled and unskilled labor. Yet over the past decade, the politics surrounding migration has been defined by a rise in anti-immigrant sentiment and nativist populism within Europe as well as in other parts of the globe. Although the United Kingdom's 2016 vote to leave the EU was spurred by a number of factors, including an aversion to the effects of the EU's freedom of movement policies, anti-EU politicians were quick to instrumentalize the 2015–16 “crisis” in their arguments for Brexit. Though one cannot necessarily draw a straight and solid line between NATO-led military interventions, the European migration “crisis,” and the rise of populism in Europe and elsewhere, these events are deeply intertwined and cannot be understood in isolation from one another.

## **COLD WAR BLOWBACK IN THE AMERICAS**

Similar blowback effects can be seen in North America, where migration-related entangled security dynamics are endemic and embedded in both “high” and “low” political issues. Many of these dynamics have their origins in, or were

exacerbated by, the long history of US involvement in Latin America. The ongoing emergency on the US southern border, for instance, is in no small part a result of the United States' own policies in the region—particularly the extensive and sustained US involvement in Central America during the Cold War. El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras—the three countries that make up the so-called Northern Triangle—have been the source of much of the migration to the US southern border since 2014. This is not a coincidence.

The United States was behind a 1954 military coup in Guatemala and strongly backed the government from the 1960s to the 1990s. During this period, the Guatemalan military waged a campaign that killed an estimated 200,000 of the country's indigenous people. Much of the migration from Guatemala comes from the highlands—an area that is inhabited by indigenous groups and has been subject to land grabs by current or former military officers with connections to organized crime.

In Honduras, the Obama administration turned a blind eye to a 2009 coup and even worked to prevent its reversal, while continuing to supply aid to the new government. This further militarized the Honduran police force, leading to even greater internal insecurity.

The United States was also deeply involved in El Salvador's 12-year-long civil war. Throughout the 1980s, widespread human rights abuses and extrajudicial killings by US-backed and -funded government troops, right-wing paramilitaries, and death squads, which were battling left-leaning, Soviet-backed Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front rebel forces, drove tens of thousands of Salvadoran civilians to flee to the United States. Some ended up in Los Angeles and formed gangs, including Barrio 18 and the now-infamous Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13), as a means of protecting their kinsman from other gangs in the area. Over time, Barrio 18 and MS-13 grew stronger and more violent, driving up murder rates in parts of Los Angeles and prompting US authorities to deport many gang members back to Central America.

Rather than solve the problem, mass deportations intensified it. Once back in Central America, the gangs were often reconstituted and even increased in size and reach. Barrio 18 and MS-13 now have members—and control territory—not only in Los Angeles and El Salvador, but also in Honduras, Guatemala, Mexico, and other parts of

the United States and Canada. These and other organizations have formed alliances with some gangs and engaged in violent rivalries with others.

Coming full circle with the civil war that first inspired flight, the combination of poverty, dysfunctional politics, and gang-driven violence directed against civilians—which has produced some of the highest murder rates in the world—has again impelled many civilians to flee north to the United States. They seek refugee status in a bid to protect themselves and their families.

In April 2021, US Vice President Kamala Harris announced \$310 million in additional humanitarian aid for Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador—part of an estimated \$4 billion in assistance for the region under the Biden administration's plan to address migration issues. In this respect, the United States seems to be following the EU's example of using foreign aid to try to stem migration. Over the past two decades, an array of countries in North Africa and the Horn of Africa have collectively and individually received billions of euros of aid in exchange for helping to stanch, reverse, or forestall northward migrations to Europe. Here, too, attempts to prevent migration through tighter border controls, outsourcing, and heightened enforcement can often exacerbate the very security risks that they are intended to address.

Tighter border controls in both the United States and Europe have driven up the costs of irregular migration. This in turn has increased the debts of unsuccessful border-crossers, generating still greater incentives to reach the richer countries of the global North in the hope of securing employment that will provide the means to pay off the human traffickers who arranged their journeys.

Migration-related aid packages designed to improve conditions on the ground in countries of origin can paradoxically make outflows more likely. This is the case if a government receiving aid is illiberal and uses financial assistance to strengthen its grip on power and increase its repressive capabilities. Such counterproductive outcomes can be compounded if these infusions of financial assistance are viewed by their recipients as a kind of *carte blanche* for domestic oppression and other human rights abuses. This

was a common phenomenon among authoritarian regimes during the Cold War.

## PERVERSE INCENTIVES AND LEVERAGE

The same entangled dynamics also create perverse incentives that may lead states to use migration as a form of leverage in their diplomatic engagements and interactions with other states. Both states and nonstate actors can take advantage of others' concerns about migration and strategically use migration as an instrument to gain concessions or positive inducements.

The 2016 deal between the EU and Turkey—in which Turkey was able to secure 6 billion euros in aid, promises of visa-free travel, and a resuscitation of its EU accession talks in exchange for tighter migration controls—is one prominent example of this common dynamic. Another came in May 2021, when Morocco opened its border with the Spanish enclave of Ceuta in a bid to punish and coerce the Spanish government over its direct and indirect support for the Polisario Front, an insurgent group locked in a long-term separatist conflict with Morocco. Turkey took a similar action in February 2020 when it permitted thousands of migrants to head to its borders with Greece. Aimed at securing NATO support for Turkey's intervention in Syria, this move came close to provoking a military confrontation with Greece.

More recently, starting in mid-2021, Belarus opened its borders and attempted to weaponize migration in retaliation for EU-imposed sanctions and Brussels' vocal criticism of Alexander Lukashenko's regime. The migrants that Belarus is allowing to cross into neighboring states come from as far afield as West Africa and southwestern Asia. As of this writing, tensions are heating up along Belarus' borders with its neighbors, especially NATO members Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland.

Liberal democracies tend to be particularly, but not uniquely, vulnerable to this unconventional brand of coercion, since they can find themselves trapped between conflicting imperatives with regard to displaced people. On the one hand, these states generally have made normative and legal commitments to protect those fleeing violence and persecution. On the other, they often face internal political pressures around migration, with the

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control of borders increasingly viewed as a polarizing symbolic issue.

States cannot simultaneously respond to both of these imperatives. Thus they have increasing incentives to concede to demands made by actors using the instrumentalization of migration as a form of coercive diplomacy—be it for political, economic, or military aims. This in turn makes the strategy of weaponizing migration appear more geopolitically efficacious.

The result is that liberal states themselves increasingly resort to more and more illiberal methods and strategies to repel potential migrants and other border-crossers. This further undermines their legitimacy and identity as liberal states, leaving them exposed to charges of hypocrisy at home and abroad. Such charges are often leveled by international rivals and states trying to deflect criticism of their own illiberal actions and policies.

## TRANSNATIONAL REPRESSION

The entanglement of liberal and illiberal dynamics with mobility issues can also be seen in how states such as China, Russia, and Turkey have increasingly taken an interest in “their” emigrants and diasporas, attempting to control them through transnational strategies that involve long-distance forms of repression.

International migration has facilitated citizens’ mobility into and out of autocratic states. At the same time, new information and communications technologies have led to the globalization of many aspects of domestic politics, and the rise of diaspora politics. Diasporic activism operates largely outside the jurisdiction of the state of origin, and has therefore often been assumed to be a space of opportunity for political opposition movements and groups, where they can operate without interference from homeland state authorities.

Yet the transnationalization of politics has also been accompanied by the transnationalization of family ties, social relations, and social networks, which perversely has provided an additional source of leverage for states to engage in transnational repression. New forms of digital surveillance—such as monitoring of social media accounts and private communications like text messages—allow authoritarian states to quickly identify the ties between activists abroad and family members and acquaintances back home. Whereas actors in the diaspora may be outside the direct reach of a repressive state, friends and

relatives in their home country can still become targets of coercion by proxy. This strategy has been employed by China to harass and intimidate Uighur activists in Europe and North America. It has also been used by states such as Egypt and Turkey against the families of journalists or dissidents whom they wish to silence.

Governments can also “go global” in their use of strategies of repression by directly targeting dissidents, activists, and regime opponents abroad. Harassment, surveillance, enactment of mobility restrictions, or even more serious instances of kidnapping, physical attack, or assassination are all tactics that states have used to target political exiles abroad.

The 2018 assassination of the Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in Istanbul stands out, but there are other examples. Russia has attempted to poison numerous political exiles in the UK; Turkey has been accused of assassinating three Kurdish activists in Paris; and Rwanda has targeted diaspora members in several countries across Africa and beyond since 2014. As outlined in two recent Freedom House reports, autocratic states often tap into institutions set up for other purposes, such as INTERPOL’s Red Notice—a system that effectively acts as an international arrest warrant for law enforcement agencies—to target political opposition leaders or even personal enemies.

As autocracies develop new means of exercising power over populations abroad, their use of transnational strategies poses a number of complex security challenges for policymakers in democratic states, as well as for human rights actors and international legal understandings of refuge, asylum, and protection. Existing international protection regimes operate according to state-centric assumptions, in which state sovereignty is identified with territoriality, and national borders are assumed to demarcate legal jurisdictions in ways that offer refuge and asylum to persecuted individuals fleeing authoritarian states. Yet the crossing of national borders does not mean that individual dissidents and exiles—or entire groups living outside a state’s territorial boundaries, such as international students, labor migrants, or ordinary diaspora members—are necessarily free from the influence of state actors in their homelands.

The use of various techniques of transnational repression presents a more complicated blurring of how authoritarian practices “at home” relate to diaspora politics “abroad.” This development comes, moreover, at a time when global norms

of asylum and protection are also under threat and are subject to manipulation and instrumentalization. In a highly interconnected world, it may be necessary to radically rethink the broader implications of the rise of authoritarian practices that transcend state borders. In addition to potentially posing direct and targeted security threats to some exiled populations, the spatial and legal complexities of such practices create long-term challenges for liberal states and liberal institutions. Whereas practices of transnational repression are not entirely new—and were also present during the Cold War—the new global media environment has created a shared virtual space in which liberal and illiberal states do not operate in wholly separate spheres, but rather are increasingly entangled.

### COMPOUNDED PRESSURES

The complex ways in which mobility, geopolitics, illiberalism, and security are entangled with other issues create additional challenges in deciding how to address large-scale collective security threats such as pandemics and climate change, which former United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan referred to as “problems without passports.” Such problems are compounded at a time when migration and mobility are particularly contentious issues subject to increased politicization and instrumentalization. For example, with arrivals at the US southern border at record levels, and immigration remaining a hot-button issue in American politics, the Biden administration has extended the Trump administration’s use of Title 42, a rarely employed clause in public health law, to prevent asylum seekers from entering from Mexico during the pandemic.

A similar strategy has been used across the EU: states have invoked public health concerns as a reason for restricting entry, shifting their anti-migration discourses about criminality and terrorism to a focus on controlling the pandemic. Countries such as Italy and Malta declared their ports of entry unsafe for migrant disembarkation, and several countries and regions across Europe have denied COVID-19 vaccinations to irregular migrants lacking documentation. Moreover, as Amnesty International documented in its 2021 Annual Report, governments around the world have been escalating various forms of domestic repression

and mobility restrictions, sometimes instrumentalizing the pandemic as a means of silencing critics.

National-level responses, such as lockdowns, travel bans, and border closures, have been comparatively effective in some places at keeping community transmission rates relatively low. As new variants and breakthrough cases of infection have emerged, however, governments around the world are shifting from trying to fully eliminate the virus with policies of restricted mobility and travel bans to strategies of risk management, living with and adapting to COVID-19. New Zealand, whose geographic position and stringent policies directed at disease eradication shielded it from the worst effects of COVID-19, was long heralded as a pandemic success story. But even its government had to concede in October 2021 that it could not fully vanquish the virus and instead adopted new policies of accelerated vaccination, virus control, and containment.

The challenges of dealing with the mobility paradox highlighted by the pandemic can be seen in the economic effects of national policy responses, such as global supply-chain disruptions leading to

inflation, assembly-line shutdowns, and shortages of goods. In October 2021, the *New York Times* reported that 13 percent of world cargo capacity was subject to pandemic-related shipping delays, while US manufacturers needed an unpre-

cedented 92 days on average to assemble the requisite parts and raw materials to produce their wares. Even as COVID-19 case numbers and death tolls ebb and flow, such disruptions continue, adversely affecting economies, health care systems, and food distribution in the world’s wealthiest and poorest countries alike, albeit more acutely in the developing world.

Meanwhile, the focus on the pandemic has necessitated sidelining other public health problems, which are also inherently trans-border phenomena. The World Health Organization (WHO) has warned that disruptions to antiretroviral therapy due to COVID-19 could lead to more than 500,000 additional deaths from HIV/AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa and the further spread of that disease, both within the region and beyond. In April 2021, the WHO likewise reported that fully 90 percent of countries responding to a survey about the effects of COVID-19 had experienced disruptions to

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essential health services and immunization programs, though the magnitude of the disruptions was lower than it had been during the first year of the pandemic. The potential direct and indirect security implications of such disruptions are manifold.

Similar challenges can be seen in efforts to collectively address climate change—which the Biden administration’s government-wide Climate Adaptation Plans, released in October 2021, identify as an urgent and rapidly growing threat to national and international security. UN Secretary-General António Guterres has highlighted climate change as a key factor accelerating all other drivers of forced displacement. This is because climate change can arguably act as a “threat multiplier,” exacerbating preexisting risks and generating new ones, such as food and water insecurity and competition over resources. These risks in turn can contribute to internal conflicts and compound people’s extant vulnerabilities to displacement. Internal conflicts can spill over into neighboring states, which can drive the displaced outside their regions of origin and complicate political, economic, and social dynamics in the regions and states to which they flee.

It has been argued that competition over water and intra-communal grievances made worse by sustained drought and food insecurity helped create “ripe” conditions that made Syria’s civil war more likely. In a study published in 2015 in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, researchers claimed that water shortages in the Fertile Crescent (of Syria, Iraq, and Turkey) killed livestock, drove up food prices, and forced some 1.5 million rural residents to the outskirts of Syria’s already-packed cities. This happened as Syria was already coping with an influx of refugees from the Iraq war—compounding existing domestic problems such as corruption, repressive leadership, inequality, and high population growth.

Others have disputed these findings, however. In an article in *Political Geography*, researchers said they had found no clear and reliable evidence that climate change was a factor in the onset of

Syria’s civil war. Less debatable are the following facts: environmental changes are already catalyzing population displacement and migration in some parts of the world; climate change is increasingly viewed as a human, national, and international security issue; and climate change is deeply entangled with other security dynamics.

## PROBLEMS WITHOUT PASSPORTS

Reckoning with the dilemmas of global security entanglement is a necessary step in confronting the myriad policy challenges that will threaten human lives and well-being in the coming decades, from pandemics and climate change to violent conflict, state repression, and global authoritarianism. In all these areas, mobility and migration interact with other factors in ways that are symptomatic of how states and societies are increasingly connected.

The implications of these dynamics are several. First, it is clear that states cannot simply go it alone—problems without passports cannot be solved at the national level, and their effects cannot be stopped at borders or by erecting fences and walls. Second, greater understanding is required of the complicated knock-on and blowback effects that global actions taken in one area can have on others—such as the effects of military conflicts and interventions on what have been labeled subsequently as migration “crises.”

Finally, it is critical that both states and non-state actors identify effective ways to address entangled security challenges that do not come at the expense of the world’s most vulnerable populations, including those whose own security is dependent on the ability to move and cross borders. Failing to do so will in many cases simply backfire and lead to bigger, still more wicked problems.

The complicated, entangled nature of global security suggests that we are genuinely in this together. To paraphrase Cicero, entangled security means that there is no trade-off to be made between what is just and what is expedient—that which is just is also expedient. ■