



Migration Diplomacy in an Age of Transactionalism

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Executive Summary

A changing geopolitical risk environment has weakened international cooperation on migration. Overlapping crises have created new situations of mass displacement, yet concrete solutions remain out of reach. Fragility, conflict, and growing authoritarianism in some key countries of origin or transit—such as Egypt, El Salvador, Niger, and Tunisia—are impeding effective cooperation on migration issues. Smuggling networks have become more agile and sophisticated, using modern technologies and connecting with organized crime, which has added to the challenge of curbing irregular migration. And as public anxiety about migration rises, some states are instrumentalizing migration to gain leverage in bilateral negotiations or (in the case of more hostile states, such as Belarus and Russia) to destabilize destination countries.

Diplomacy is critical for addressing these new threats and persistent challenges related to irregular migration and returning those without the legal right to stay. Yet international cooperation is under immense strain. Humanitarian and development funding have been slashed, and more countries are turning away from multilateralism in favor of transactional bilateral dealmaking. Destination-country governments need to negotiate more of these bilateral deals just as the resources to incentivize cooperation and deter noncooperation are shrinking. This challenge is prompting many governments to explore a wider range of tools to bring partners to the table, including visa policy, sanctions, and tariffs and trade policy.

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As migration continues to drive political decision-making, migration policymakers are using more foreign policy tools that fall outside their traditional mandates. Governments are embedding migration into trade agreements and other forms of foreign policy and security cooperation, although that approach carries risks, particularly when migration objectives prove controversial or conflict with other foreign policy priorities. Governments are also using more coercive diplomatic tools such as sanctions and tariffs in migration negotiations, which can unlock cooperation in the short term but may damage working relationships in the long run.

Without common goals for cooperation or a commitment to shared benefits, however, the historical record shows that migration partnerships can quickly become brittle and ineffective. For example, Italy's checkered partnership with Tunisia underscores the risks of focusing too squarely on Italian migration priorities alone. The partnership has regularly fallen short on readmissions, and Tunisia has repeatedly instrumentalized migration flows to gain leverage in negotiations. As destination-country governments reveal their reliance on migration partnerships, the cost of dealmaking will continue to spiral upward.

Governments in destination countries should consider the following principles when revisiting their approaches to migration diplomacy:

- ▶ **Ensure that migration diplomacy delivers wins for both sides.** Even if coercive tools can achieve quick wins, addressing partner-country needs and offering incentives such as improved visa processing or additional labor mobility opportunities can support more durable cooperation.
- ▶ **Embed migration in foreign policy while considering strategic risks.** As diplomatic cooperation becomes more essential to migration management, governments should use foresight and scenario planning to prepare for geopolitical risks that could disrupt cooperation, including conflict, worsening authoritarian crackdowns, and even war, and diversify partnerships to help withstand shifting priorities.
- ▶ **Invest in stronger cross-government coordination** so that the risks and opportunities of melding migration with foreign policy are managed well, especially through practical coordination across departments and between the capital and embassies.
- ▶ **Engage with and reform the multilateral system** to leverage the local expertise and trusted brokering that international organizations provide, while also working through minilateral coalitions to amplify the impact of migration diplomacy tools.
- ▶ **Build stronger relationships with nonstate actors**, including private-sector actors such as social media companies and airlines, which operate across borders and play critical roles in tackling smuggling operations.
- ▶ **Balance short-term and long-term cooperation goals**, even as governments face intense pressure to deliver quick fixes by increasing pressure on partner countries.

While transactional approaches can yield short-term wins, a patchwork of quick fixes will fray over time. Identifying shared interests and opportunities for visible wins on both sides can help build a durable foundation for cooperation that can withstand changing political winds. More holistic partnerships, in which migration is just one component of broader cooperation, can create the capacity to respond to sophisticated and rapidly evolving migration and security threats as they emerge.

1 Introduction

Governments are facing new challenges in managing migration effectively. The number of disaster displacements, state-based conflicts, and active humanitarian emergencies peaked in 2024–25.¹ Geopolitical shifts are also increasing migration in unpredictable ways and disrupting cooperation in countries such as Libya and Niger. Meanwhile, smuggling operations are becoming more sophisticated and harder to counter as a result. Bad actors use new technologies skillfully for smuggling operations while

¹ Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, *GRID 2025: Global Report on Internal Displacement* (Geneva: Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2025); Siri Aas Rustad, “Conflict Trends: A Global Overview, 1946–2024” (PRIO paper, Peace Research Institute Oslo, Oslo, 2025); United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), *2025 Impact Report: Response to New Emergencies and Protracted Crises* (Geneva: UNHCR, 2026).

many government systems remain analog. At the same time, more state and nonstate actors instrumentalize or even weaponize migration flows for their own ends, contributing to instability and social unrest.

As these challenges grow, the fundamentals of migration diplomacy are also transforming. A shift away from multilateralism to bilateral engagements has brought a more transactional approach to dealmaking that combines incentives with more systematic use of punitive measures such as visa suspensions and sanctions. Destination-country governments increasingly recognize the need to embed migration into foreign policy, yet specific approaches are unclear, including how to build lasting partnerships, balance migration with trade and security priorities, and combine incentives effectively with punitive measures. The achievements of migration diplomacy have been uneven and, in some cases, have come at the expense of other foreign policy priorities and the long-term health of bilateral relationships. Meanwhile, recent geopolitical instability and deep foreign aid cuts are straining partnerships and raising questions about which countries are willing to work together to solve migration challenges and at what cost.

This report examines these new migration threats and challenges and how they are reshaping migration diplomacy. It analyzes how destination-country governments are using different foreign policy tools to pursue migration-related objectives, and the possible implications for building lasting cooperation on migration issues and balancing migration with other foreign policy priorities. The report sets out guiding principles for governments navigating this new era of migration diplomacy and seeking to balance short-term needs with long-term ambitions.

2 New Migration and Foreign Policy Challenges

Policymakers face intensifying migration and geopolitical pressures. Fragility and conflict are complicating cooperation with partner countries and preventing safe returns. Sophisticated criminal networks and hostile states are weaponizing migration as a tool of hybrid warfare, and geopolitical realignments are eroding the multilateral foundations underpinning much of recent migration diplomacy. Together, these dynamics make foreign policy and migration inextricably intertwined and make solutions to migration challenges more urgent and harder to achieve.

A. *Migration Cooperation amid Growing Instability*

Managing irregular migration and returns has always been difficult, but structural challenges have deepened in recent years. The landscape of conflict and displacement has shifted dramatically, with overlapping crises in Sudan, the Middle East, and Ukraine driving new displacement and placing safe return out of reach for now. In Sudan, the expanding conflict between the Sudanese Armed Forces and Rapid Support Forces has produced the world's largest displacement crisis at the time of writing. As of August 2026, 8.6 million people remained internally displaced, and nearly 4.7 million had fled at some point to neighboring countries over the last three years.² The escalation of hostilities in the Middle East has created

² Note that the estimates for cross-border displacement are cumulative since April 2023 and do not account for return movements to Sudan. See International Organization for Migration (IOM), “[Sudan Displacement and Return Snapshot: Update 8](#)” (Displacement Tracking Matrix, IOM Sudan, Port Sudan, August 18, 2026).

new forms of displacement—for example, one in five people in Lebanon was displaced in just two weeks in March 2026—and worsened conditions for the region’s 31 million forcibly displaced people and recent returnees, including Afghans and Syrians caught up in cross-border strikes in Iran and Lebanon.³ The war in Ukraine continues without a peace agreement and prevents many of the 4.4 million Ukrainians with temporary protection in Europe from returning home, even as that status is set to expire in 2028.⁴

This landscape of fragility and conflict also creates geopolitical and operational barriers to cooperation. Before the 2023 coup, Niger was a strong anti-smuggling partner but has since halted dialogue with European partners.⁵ Other countries, including Libya and Myanmar (also known as Burma), have fragmented governance or governments that control only parts of their territories, making cooperation questionable

This landscape of fragility and conflict also creates geopolitical and operational barriers to cooperation.

legally and difficult in practice. Syria also remains highly fragile, delaying decisions about how and when many Syrians can return and how to support reconstruction.⁶ Other key partners have become more authoritarian, including Egypt, El Salvador, and Tunisia. This complicates the implementation of

migration agreements when human rights violations occur or when deals include commitments on foreign investment and development assistance that depend on rule-of-law guarantees.

Returns, though not a new challenge, have reached a new level of political salience. Yet returns remain hardest precisely for the nationalities most often ordered to leave, whether because of noncooperation (e.g., Algeria, Guinea, Iran, and Pakistan), intermittent cooperation (e.g., Bangladesh, Mali, Senegal, and Tunisia), or conflict or other risks to fundamental rights (e.g., Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Somalia, and Syria).⁷ The fall of former Syrian president Bashar al-Assad led many countries hosting Syrians to question the timeline for possible returns, but ongoing fragility has paused mass return. Some returns to Afghanistan have begun for priority groups, including foreign nationals convicted of crimes in Germany, but the numbers remain very small amid serious civil-society concerns about potential human rights abuses under the Taliban. Thus, governments have begun exploring more creative approaches, such as “return hubs,” to circumvent these persistent bottlenecks.

3 UNHCR, “UNHCR Calls for Urgent Support in Lebanon as Humanitarian Catastrophe Looms” (UNHCR briefing note, 27 March 2026); UNHCR, “Middle East Situation: Emergency Update #22” (situation report, UNHCR, Geneva, August 2026).

4 Eurostat, “Beneficiaries of Temporary Protection at the End of the Month by Citizenship, Age and Sex - Monthly Data [migr_asytpsm],” accessed September 10, 2026.

5 Amanda Bisong, Leonie Jegen, and Harouna Mounkaila, “What Does the Regime Change in Niger Mean for Migration Cooperation with the EU?” (briefing note 168, European Centre for Development Policy Management, Maastricht, The Netherlands, 2023).

6 Samuel Davidoff-Gore and Susan Fratzke, *From Exile to Return: Rebuilding Lives and States after Conflict* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2026).

7 Stéphanie Pradier and Costica Dumbrava, “Data on Returns of Irregular Migrants” (briefing infographic, European Parliamentary Research Service, Brussels, November 2024); European Commission, “Report from the Commission to the Council: Assessment of Third Countries’ Level of Cooperation on Readmission in 2023” (COM [2024] 340 final, July 23, 2024).

B. *New Security Threats Linked to Migration*

A range of bad actors, from adversarial states to nonstate criminal and terrorist groups, are exploiting migration to create instability. This activity takes several forms:

- ▶ **States facilitating mass irregular migration:** One estimate finds that the “coercive engineering of migration” to extract concessions from destination-country governments has occurred more than 75 times since 1951, with the “coercing” actors achieving some of their goals in nearly three-quarters of cases.⁸ For example, Belarus and Russia weaponized migration flows to Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland in 2021 and to Finland in 2023, prompting responses at both the national and EU levels.⁹ Nicaragua expanded this playbook between 2023 and 2024 by allowing migrants from as far as Libya and Morocco to transit through its territory toward the United States.¹⁰ That approach created new smuggling markets for cartels and organized crime and contributed to broader security challenges across Central America and the Darién Gap.¹¹ Because these operations span multiple countries, stopping them requires more sophisticated cooperation.
- ▶ **State and criminal involvement in migrant smuggling:** Organized criminal groups, including drug-trafficking gangs and cartels, have entered the smuggling industry aggressively as profit margins for smuggling have grown.¹² Hostile states sometimes support these groups to destabilize destination countries.¹³ Bulgaria, for example, has claimed that Russian spies are involved in people smuggling

8 Kelly M. Greenhill, “Migration as a Weapon in Theory and in Practice,” *Military Review* (November–December 2016), 23–36. For updated data, see the forthcoming second edition of *Weapons of Mass Migration* by Kelly M. Greenhill.

9 Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland all passed states of emergency and/or laws that weaken access to asylum. See European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, “Countering the Instrumentalisation of Migrants and Refugees and Respecting Fundamental Rights” (FRA Position Paper 2/2025, European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, Vienna, February 2025). Another non-migration example of deteriorating relations was when the government of Lithuania announced in October 2025 that it was considering closing its borders with Belarus indefinitely in response to repeated incursions by weather balloons and drones from Belarus carrying smuggled cigarettes into Lithuanian airspace, characterizing these operations as “hybrid attacks.” See Ketrin Jochecová and Giedrė Pešėkytė, “Balloon-Smuggling Surge Prompts Lithuania to Permanently Shut Border with Belarus,” *Politico*, October 27, 2025. These developments also led to a new EU agreement to rapidly scale up support to affected EU Member States and allow them to weaken asylum procedures. See “Regulation (EU) 2024/1359 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 May 2024 Addressing Situations of Crisis and Force Majeure in the Field of Migration and Asylum and Amending Regulation (EU) 2021/1147,” *Official Journal of the European Union* 2024 L (May 22, 2024).

10 Wilfredo Miranda Aburto, “Ortega Regime Turns Nicaragua into Gateway for Irregular Migration to the United States,” *El País*, June 22, 2024.

11 Caitlyn Yates and Juan Pappier, “How the Treacherous Darien Gap Became a Migration Crossroads of the Americas,” *Migration Information Source*, September 20, 2023.

12 Matt Herbert, *The Challenge of Coordinating Border Management Assistance between Europe and the Maghreb* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2022); Europol, *The Changing DNA of Serious and Organised Crime* (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2025).

13 Despite weak supporting evidence, the Trump administration has argued that the Maduro regime in Venezuela had sponsored the Tren de Aragua gang as an “invading force” engaging in “mass illegal migration” to the United States. The administration used that argument to justify invoking the *Alien Enemies Act of 1798* for the first time in U.S. history (which grants it wartime powers to enforce immigration policies). At the time of writing, the courts have not allowed use of the act to justify deportations. But this attempt reflects a real, growing concern about hostile state involvement in smuggling and how this concern can be used—potentially without justification—to argue for specific migration policies. See Muzaffar Chishti and Colleen Putzel-Kavanaugh, “Tapping Ancient Wartime and Security Laws, Trump Administration Dramatically Expands Immigration Powers,” *Migration Information Source*, March 21, 2025; Emily Harding, “What’s Normal—and What’s Not—About ODNI’s Request to Revise the NIC’s Intelligence Assessment,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, May 23, 2025; Charlie Savage and Julian E. Barnes, “Intelligence Assessment Said to Contradict Trump on Venezuelan Gang,” *New York Times*, March 20, 2025.

into Europe.¹⁴ Russia's Africa Corps, formerly known as the Wagner Group, is also linked to smuggling networks across Africa and in Libya, threatening Europe and perpetuating instability in Libya and elsewhere in Africa.¹⁵ In 2024, a Europol operation targeted a criminal network that smuggled migrants from Iraq through Belarus and Russia toward Germany and the United Kingdom and found indications that the operation's profits funded terrorism.¹⁶

- **Bad actors using migration to destabilize domestic politics:** Election interference is one example, including widespread Russian disinformation campaigns during Moldova's 2025 parliamentary elections¹⁷ and the 2024 European Parliament elections.¹⁸ Russia has also been accused of recruiting migrants and refugees to commit crimes across Europe,¹⁹ and some governments have used their diaspora to try to interfere in other countries' domestic politics. The governments of Belarus and China, for example, have engaged in transnational repression²⁰ by persecuting dissidents and exiles abroad, including through spying and bounty offers targeting Chinese nationals in Australia²¹ and Canada.²²

The growing involvement of bad actors, including nonstate actors, is making migration challenges significantly harder to solve. Migrant smuggling, for example, is a lucrative industry, and the profits generated from it could be supporting other criminal activities and subversive political agendas in addition to creating challenges for border enforcement. Smuggling both exploits weak governance and exacerbates it, such as when illegal operations rely on bribing government officials to look the other way or when governments encourage smuggling and other disruptive activities as part of an agenda to instrumentalize migration.²³ At the same time, new technologies such as AI-generated content and highly convincing deepfakes are expanding outreach opportunities for smugglers and creating new channels

14 David Lynch, "Russian Spies 'Linked to People-Smuggling Gangs Destabilising Europe,'" *The Independent*, October 20, 2025.

15 Reuters, "Italy Blames Surge in Migration on Russia's Wagner Group," Reuters, March 13, 2023; Tarek Megerisi, "The Bear Who Came to Tea: Russia, Libya, and the Kremlin's Playbook for Fragile States," European Council on Foreign Relations, March 28, 2025.

16 Europol, "21 Arrested in Hit against Migrant Smuggling across the EU-Russian Border" (news release, April 25, 2024).

17 Oana Marocico, Seamus Mirodan, and Rowan Ings, "How Russian-Funded Fake News Network Aims to Disrupt Election in Europe: BBC Investigation," BBC, September 21, 2025; Sarah Rainsford and Paul Kirby, "Moldova's Pro-EU Party Wins Vote Mired in Claims of Russian Interference," BBC, September 29, 2025.

18 Christopher Nehring, *Russian Disinformation and the 2024 European Elections: Understanding Strategies, Actors, and Messages* (Sofia: Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2024); Alex Khomiakov, "How Russia Pushed Far-Right and Anti-Ukraine Agenda during European Elections," Insight News, September 9, 2024; Mark Scott and Laurens Cerulus, "Russian Groups Targeted EU Election with Fake News, Says European Commission," Politico, June 14, 2019.

19 Reports include a Ukrainian refugee recruited by Russia to set fire to an IKEA store in Lithuania, and a Russia-backed plot that used two Ukrainians to send incendiary parcels through Poland, aiming to explode them in Ukraine. See Andrew Higgins and Tomas Dapkus, "How a Ukrainian Teen Became a Suspected Foot Soldier for Russia," *New York Times*, April 10, 2025; Marian Chiriac, "Romania, Poland Thwart Alleged Russian-Linked Sabotage Plot," Balkan Insight, October 21, 2025.

20 Group of Seven, "G7 Leaders' Statement on Transnational Repression" (statement, Kananaskis, Alberta, Canada, June 17, 2025). Concern is also growing about foreign governments targeting researchers in critical security and technology fields and the need to regulate international students and researchers in those sectors. See National Counterintelligence and Security Center, "Safeguarding Academia: Protecting Fundamental Research, Intellectual Property, Critical Technologies, and the U.S. Research Ecosystem" (bulletin, U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence, Washington, DC, 2025).

21 In Australia, a Chinese national and Australian permanent resident worked with the Chinese government to gather intelligence on a Buddhist association in Canberra. See Grady Vaughan and Andrew Chubb, "Closing the Gaps in Australia's Approach to Transnational Repression," *The Interpreter*, October 10, 2025.

22 Hong Kong Police offered a bounty for information leading to the arrest of two Canadians, including a politician. See Privy Council Office Canada, "Transnational Repression Operation" (backgrounder, government of Canada, Ottawa, April 21, 2025).

23 United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime, "Getting to the Core of Migrant Smuggling Networks," accessed May 3, 2026; UNHCR Canada, "UNHCR's Grandi: Critical Funding Gap May Force Deeper Cuts to Refugee Aid," UNHCR, October 6, 2025; Matt Herbert, *A Moving Target: Trends in the Evolution of Human Smuggling* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, forthcoming).

for disinformation.²⁴ As bad actors exploit migration to advance their political agendas, addressing disinformation and other domestic threats increasingly requires a coordinated foreign policy approach.

C. *Geopolitical Challenges and Multilateral Fissures*

Governments' ability to respond to migration-related challenges is constrained even more by a broader geopolitical environment that is fracturing the foundations of international cooperation. As one participant in a 2025 Transatlantic Council on Migration roundtable observed, the "golden era of multilateralism has passed."²⁵ Migration diplomacy has felt that absence acutely because it has historically depended on multilateral institutions, shared frameworks, and coordinated burden-sharing.

The United States' break with multilateralism has been the most high-profile shift. In January 2026, the United States announced its withdrawal from numerous international organizations and conventions, including the Global Forum on Migration and Development.²⁶ It also withdrew support for the Global Compact for Migration and the Global Compact on Refugees and stepped back from the regional Los Angeles Declaration on Migration and Protection. In addition, the United States cut funding for international organizations such as the International Organization for Migration and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and fell into arrears on its payments, with major consequences for those organizations' budgets and operations. The United States also pursued deep cuts to international aid, including migration- and refugee-related programming, by eliminating a significant share of appropriated funds and contracts, proposing a much smaller aid budget for fiscal year 2026, and dismantling much of its overseas aid architecture by shuttering the U.S. Agency for International Development and reducing its civil service and diplomatic workforces.

Faced with populist resistance, budget shortfalls, and the need to reallocate funding toward security goals, other major donors—including France, Germany, and the United Kingdom—have also cut humanitarian and development funding, though generally on a smaller scale than the United States.²⁷ These cuts have major implications for migration- and displacement-related programming and for multilateral institutions such as the International Organization for Migration and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, whose operations and networks make them important implementing partners in migration cooperation.²⁸

These funding shifts are reshaping migration diplomacy at a time when displacement crises are emerging and worsening in Iran, Sudan, and elsewhere. Foreign aid cuts are also prompting some refugee-hosting countries to consider more restrictive asylum policies. For example, the Ugandan government warned that it would "review its open-door refugee policy" because deep aid cuts threatened basic food and services for its refugee population.²⁹ More frontline states may revisit their capacity to host refugees indefinitely or

24 Herbert, *A Moving Target*.

25 Participant comment at a meeting of the Transatlantic Council on Migration, an initiative of the Migration Policy Institute, on "International Cooperation on Migration in a New Era of Insecurity," Brussels, November 13–14, 2025.

26 The White House, "Withdrawing the United States from International Organizations, Conventions, and Treaties That Are Contrary to the Interests of the United States" (presidential memorandum, January 7, 2026).

27 See Kristin Laub et al., "The Budget Cuts Tracker," Donor Tracker, July 4, 2025.

28 Middle East Monitor, "UN Migration Agency Chief Sees Budget Cuts Worsening in 2026," updated March 25, 2025.

29 Franklin Draku, "Uganda on the Rocks as Refugee Aid Taps Run Dry," *Monitor*, April 3, 2025; UNHCR, "Nearly 2 Million Refugees at Risk as Uganda Emergency Funds Dwindle and Services Cut" (press release, August 4, 2025).

condition continued hosting on greater financial support from donor countries and concessions to help meet other foreign policy priorities. These situations could disrupt the international protection system and contribute to greater instability. Aid cuts may also destabilize fragile states, reducing their capacity to cooperate on migration issues. At the same time, destination-country governments are allocating more funds to defense spending and navigating an uncertain macroeconomic outlook, leaving fewer resources available for migration cooperation. As a result, some countries may focus scarce resources on their immediate regions or rely more heavily on diplomatic tools to support migration partnerships, such as visa policy.

Amid the U.S.-led weakening of multilateral frameworks and institutions, migration cooperation has shifted even more toward bilateral engagements with complex global power dynamics. For example, European governments now face migration negotiations with less aid capital and weaker multilateral backing, and without the coordinated weight of U.S. engagement. These factors potentially strengthen partner countries' ability to extract concessions tied to their own priorities or resist cooperation if favorable terms are not offered. Yet the shock of U.S. funding cuts and retrenchment has made other high-income destination countries bigger players on the global stage and positioned them as more reliable partners. If those countries coordinate their reduced resources, they could still exercise greater diplomatic influence with partner countries, especially those that depend heavily on European trade, aid, and mobility. This broad upheaval could give origin and transit countries greater leverage in negotiations and thus secure more concessions as destination countries seek reliable migration partnerships, even as both sides continue to face unpredictable global macroeconomic, foreign aid, and security trends.

3 The New Migration Diplomacy Toolbox

Governments have long sought effective partnerships to manage migration, with mixed success. Some migration partnerships are credited with reducing arrivals through enforcement and deterrents such as external processing and returns, including partnerships between the European Union and Turkey; Australia and Indonesia or Nauru; Mexico and the United States; and Morocco and Spain. Yet even these success stories have limitations. Morocco refuses to accept returns of third-country nationals and has suspended enforcement at times, leading to mass arrivals (see Box 3),³⁰ while Mexico-U.S. and Indonesia-Australia cooperation have encountered frequent obstacles.³¹ These agreements have also proved difficult to replicate. They form part of broader, long-term partnerships based on trust and shared interests, often because of geographic proximity and economic and cultural interdependence. And often, destination-country governments have negotiated them with middle-income countries that are more politically stable and thus have greater capacity to implement their terms. For example, efforts to replicate the EU-Turkey deal in the EU Migration Partnerships Framework—a 2016 plan targeting Ethiopia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, and Senegal—faced challenges because those countries were more politically fragile, much poorer, and

30 See also Federica Zardo and Chiara Loschi, "EU-Algeria (Non)cooperation on Migration: A Tale of Two Fortresses," *Mediterranean Politics* 27, no. 2 (2022): 148–69, about Algeria.

31 For example, Indonesian officials have complained about or investigated boat turnbacks; see Henry Sherrell, *The Central Role of Cooperation in Australia's Immigration Enforcement Strategy* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2022). And Mexico reassessed cooperation with the United States during a dispute with the first Trump administration over trade and migration issues; see Reuters, "Mexico Puts US Ties under Review as Trump Stirs New Tensions," *Voice of America*, April 9, 2018.

had migration flows that provided important outlets for unemployed youth.³² Building effective migration partnerships may require sustained investments to lay the groundwork for cooperation, whether to build migration management capacity or strengthen related education and training systems or public services.

Although the format and rhetoric may be shifting, destination-country governments still rely on partner countries to achieve migration goals. For example, even as the United States takes unprecedented unilateral steps on border and interior enforcement, it still relies on Mexico and other partners to achieve some enforcement and returns objectives. Rather than abandoning migration diplomacy, governments are getting more creative. Strategies include introducing tools such as sanctions and tariffs, revisiting old approaches to negative conditionality, suspending visas and aid for uncooperative partners, and finding new ways to embed migration goals in security or trade agreements. These approaches involve risks and trade-offs and often deepen existing practices rather than reinvent them, but they reflect a shift toward transactional and coercive measures.³³

A. *How Has Migration Diplomacy Evolved?*

As migration challenges have grown, governments have begun to turn away from global cooperation (and regional cooperation, in some cases) and toward more transactional bilateral deal-making, with migration increasingly embedded in broader foreign policy agreements. In some cases, such as in the Americas, this shift risks undoing years of progress in building comprehensive partnerships among states with very different resources and priorities. The Los Angeles Declaration, for example, helped keep issues such as integration and labor mobility on the agenda even as attention focused on smuggling and irregular movement.³⁴

However, governments have not given up on regional approaches entirely. The 2025 EU Pact for the Mediterranean, which identified security and migration management as one of three priorities, reflects one approach to layering regional and bilateral deals. But as bilateral agreements proliferate, embedding migration in other foreign policy issues can create new risks. Migration has appeared in some recent preferential trade agreements,³⁵ such as the 2025 UK-India Free Trade Agreement, and in some defense treaties (see Box 1),³⁶ though such arrangements remain unusual and are often limited in scope.³⁷ Countries

32 Elizabeth Collett and Aliyyah Ahad, *EU Migration Partnerships: A Work in Progress* (Brussels: Migration Policy Institute Europe, 2017).

33 In many ways, these approaches expand a longer-term trend. For example, the European Union already moved from the “more-for-more” incentives-based Global Approach on Migration and Mobility in 2011 to the Migration Partnership Framework in 2016 that endorsed positive and negative incentives for cooperation.

34 Andrew Selee, “[Translating Principles into Action: Countries Set New Agenda on the Los Angeles Declaration’s Second Anniversary](#)” (commentary, Migration Policy Institute, Washington, DC, May 2024).

35 Sandra Lavenex, Philipp Lutz, and Paula Hoffmeyer-Zlotnik, “[Migration Governance through Trade Agreements: Insights from the MITA Dataset](#),” *The Review of International Organizations* 19, no. 1 (2024): 147–73. Of these trade agreements, 30 percent include provisions to facilitate movement and 10 percent to strengthen migration, including 5 percent with provisions on readmission. Migration appears in recent trade agreements disproportionately: 20 percent of agreements struck in the 1960s through the 1980s include migration provisions, compared with 75 percent of agreements signed between 2010 and 2020.

36 For example, the UK-Germany agreement includes cooperation to tackle migrant smuggling and trafficking. See UK Government, “[UK-Germany Landmark Agreement to Help Smash Smuggling Gangs and Boost Defence Exports](#)” (press release, July 16, 2025).

37 Trade deals rarely include strong commitments on migration control, and those touching on the facilitation of mobility generally cover specific subsets of migrant workers, such as investors or care workers; still, the scale of migration opportunities covered by these agreements often dwarfs the number of people moving through legal migration pilot projects set up through other means. Rare exceptions include visa pathways in trade deals in North America and the Australia-India deal.

targeted for trade and security deals rarely overlap with countries targeted for migration enforcement agreements, though notable exceptions exist, such as the United States and Mexico.³⁸

BOX 1

Australian Cooperation with the Pacific: The Specter of Chinese Competition

The overlap between security and migration cooperation is evident in Australia's engagement in the Pacific. However, competition with China in the region could weaken Australia's migration cooperation. For example, Nauru announced in January 2024 that it was shifting diplomatic ties from Taiwan to China. Concerns about Chinese influence in Nauru could have weakened Australia's partnership with its key Pacific migration partner, which has hosted Australia's offshore processing center for more than two decades. Australia responded by striking a new defense agreement with Nauru to counterbalance China's influence. But if Australia could not count on Nauru as a security partner, this would have jeopardized an agreement reached in 2025 for Nauru to accept up to 354 detained noncitizens from Australia in exchange for payments that could reach up to AUD 2.5 billion over 30 years.

Yet migration has also been part of Australia's diplomatic solution to Chinese regional influence. The Australia-Tuvalu Falepili Union created a new permanent migration route for people from Tuvalu in exchange for security guarantees and climate funding. Migration provisions are not included in all security agreements in the Pacific, but migration has clearly become a tool of diplomatic bargaining in efforts to address China's regional influence. This points to a pressing need for greater coherence between migration and security policymaking to identify opportunities for mutual wins and manage potential conflicts.

Sources: Henry Sherrell, *The Central Role of Cooperation in Australia's Immigration Enforcement Strategy* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2022); Douglas Guilfoyle and Alex Green, "The Australia-Tuvalu Falepili Union Treaty: Security in the Face of Climate Change...and China?" *EJIL:Talk!*, *European Journal of International Law*, November 28, 2023; Meg Keen and Mihai Sora, "Nauru's Diplomatic Switch to China: The Rising Stakes in Pacific Geopolitics," *The Interpreter*, January 18, 2024; Nicole Hegarty, "Federal Government Inks \$400m Deal with Nauru to Resettle People Who Have 'No Legal Right to Stay in Australia,'" *ABC News*, August 29, 2025.

Migration objectives can sometimes conflict with trade or defense priorities or even imperil them. Migration diplomacy can put security cooperation at risk. For example, U.S. engagement with Colombia briefly broke down over Colombia's refusal to accept deportations (among other issues), jeopardizing cooperation with the U.S. government's closest partner in South America on Venezuela, drug trafficking, and other issues.³⁹ Migration provisions also delayed the UK-India free trade agreement and created political controversy because of misperceptions that the agreement created new pathways.⁴⁰

Foreign policy challenges can also disrupt migration cooperation. For example, during the 2023 coup in Niger, the junta expelled European diplomats and welcomed assistance from Russia and the former Wagner

38 For example, EU targets for free trade agreements include India, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, and the United Arab Emirates, none of which are key partners on migration enforcement, even if they offer important trade and labor mobility potential. Similarly, security cooperation between defense allies could be ripe for migration mainstreaming, but such strong defense deals are rarely struck with key transit countries, which may be authoritarian or unstable.

39 See Clare Ribando Seelke, *Colombia: Background and U.S. Relations* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2024).

40 Firstpost, "Explained: Why UK-India Trade Deal May Be a Flashpoint between Rishi Sunak and Suella Braverman," Firstpost, October 28, 2022. The controversy continued once the deal was signed because of a social security exemption provision for Indian workers, forcing the UK government to reassure the public that the deal did not expand migration pathways. Sachin Ravikumar and Andrew Macaskill, "UK Dismisses Idea That British Workers Being Sold Out in India Trade Deal," *Reuters*, May 7, 2025; Alex Forsyth, "UK Won't Relax Visa Rules for India, Starmer Says," *BBC*, October 8, 2025.

Group (now Africa Corps), effectively suspending cooperation with Europe on anti-smuggling efforts and migration management. Other examples are less straightforward. Cooperation between Morocco and Spain on border enforcement was interrupted when Spanish rhetoric on the disputed Western Sahara territory changed, for example, and in July 2026 drew attention following the arrival of 80,000 migrants (primarily from Morocco) in the Spanish territory of Ceuta (see Box 3). Meanwhile, criticism from governments in the Middle East over the European Union's perceived inaction regarding the conflict in Israel and Gaza complicated EU efforts to launch the ambitious regional Pact for the Mediterranean.⁴¹ Additionally, Panama, which had previously agreed to accept returns of third-country nationals from the United States, has complained about threats from the U.S. embassy to cancel the visas of Panamanian officials as part of a September 2025 policy targeting officials across Central America with links to the Chinese Communist Party.⁴²

Governments may also be able to leverage trade or defense partnerships to secure cooperation on migration, but linking these issues can put broader foreign policy objectives at risk.

Leveraging the full suite of foreign policy tools thus carries risks. Migration policymakers may find such efforts especially difficult because they often have limited experience working closely with military officials or trade negotiators within their own government, let alone navigating bilateral and multilateral engagement in those fields. Mutually beneficial opportunities may exist in which migration pathways can unlock security and

trade wins (for example, the U.S. Navy faces a shortage of 250,000 workers needed to meet submarine and shipbuilding demands over the next decade, which could potentially create a role for migrant workers).⁴³ Governments may also be able to leverage trade or defense partnerships to secure cooperation on migration, but linking these issues can put broader foreign policy objectives at risk.

B. What Are the Most Effective Tools in Migration Diplomacy?

The evolving context for migration diplomacy creates an urgent need to reassess and possibly strengthen the tools used to support or incentivize cooperation, including visa policy, foreign aid, tariffs, and sanctions. Governments need stronger deterrents against hostile states that seek to weaponize migration, but they must also account for the growing role of nonstate actors in migration and adapt their migration diplomacy strategies accordingly. For example, a growing number of private actors (e.g., certain transport carriers and recruiting agencies,⁴⁴ along with criminal gangs and cartels) are involved in smuggling and should also be

41 Richard Youngs, "The EU's Dead-on-Arrival Pact for the Mediterranean," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September 18, 2024.

42 Alma Solís, "Panama President Says U.S. Embassy Threatened to Cancel Visas over Ties to China," AP, October 16, 2025; Kanishka Singh, "US Says It Is Restricting Visas of Some Central American Nationals over China Ties," Reuters, September 4, 2025.

43 Ethan Gossrow, "US Navy Seeks to Hire 250,000 New Dockyard Workers in the Next 10 Years," Naval News, January 14, 2026. Immigrant workers and diaspora talent also play essential roles in critical security industries such as the Taiwan chip sector and in military recruitment across countries. See Karthik Tadepalli, "The Institute behind Taiwan's Chip Dominance," *Asterisk*, March 2026; Marian Faa, "Australia and Papua New Guinea to 'Totally Integrate' Military in Defence Treaty, Minister Says," ABC News, September 13, 2025; Adham Sahloul, "Migration Can Provide the Manpower for European Defense," *Foreign Policy*, February 13, 2026.

44 Quinn Kepes and Philip Hunter, *The Role of Recruitment Fees and Abusive and Fraudulent Practices of Recruitment Agencies in Trafficking in Persons* (Vienna: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2015).

targets for punitive measures. At the same time, states are expanding collaboration on migration issues with good-faith private actors, including social media companies, flight carriers, and employers.⁴⁵

As policymakers look for innovative solutions to manage migration and asylum, especially on issues where partner-country cooperation can be limited (returns, for example), interest is growing in tools that can help make progress where migration diplomacy has often stumbled. There has been particular interest in the following tools:

- **Visa policy.** Expanded access to visas and faster visa processing have long been incentives for partner countries seeking to help their nationals move safely and boost remittance receipts. For example, visa policy has been a powerful draw in negotiations between Europe and Morocco and Turkey, although in practice, visa liberalization has proved difficult to deliver in the case of Turkey and insufficient to secure politically sensitive agreements with Morocco.⁴⁶ Conversely, governments have used visa restrictions to deter noncompliance and punish bad actors. The United States canceled visas for officials and transport carriers when Nicaragua instrumentalized migration,⁴⁷ as well as fully or partially suspending visa issuance for nationals of countries deemed security risks,⁴⁸ while the European Union suspended its visa facilitation agreement with Russia and announced plans in late 2025 for an EU visa suspension mechanism that would suspend visas more quickly.⁴⁹ Such tools have achieved some success. For example, the European Union's 2021 threat of visa restrictions against Iraq helped weaken Iraq's cooperation with Belarus on migration weaponization, and a similar threat in 2022 improved Iraq's cooperation on returns.⁵⁰ Visa restrictions can be especially effective when the targeted country has close economic, political, or social ties with the implementing country,⁵¹ though success may not always be sustainable. For example, threats of visa restrictions improved Bangladesh's cooperation on returns only temporarily.⁵² In January 2026, the European Commission adopted its first Visa Strategy, which aims to strengthen the bloc's ability to use visas as leverage in migration cooperation.⁵³ In the past, achieving EU-wide coordination has proved difficult even with partner countries that consistently refuse to cooperate. This mixed record suggests that while visa suspensions might work in some cases,

45 Herbert, *A Moving Target*.

46 For example, Europe has tied visa facilitation to cooperation on readmissions to Morocco, while in 2025, Turkey—after long delays—received more favorable Schengen visa rules and conditions. In both cases, visa commitments were important parts of the initial deals but did not help secure a readmissions deal with Morocco (including of third-country nationals), while visa liberalization for Turkey was delayed for years because its accession talks had also stalled. See Delegation of the European Union to Turkey, “[More Favourable Visa Rules for Turkish Citizens Applying for Schengen Visas](#)” (news release, July 18, 2025).

47 U.S. Embassy in Nicaragua, “[Visa Restrictions on Executive of a Charter Flight Company Facilitating Irregular Migration to the U.S.](#)” (press release, June 13, 2024).

48 U.S. Department of State, “[Suspension of Visa Issuance to Foreign Nationals to Protect the Security of the United States](#)” (press release, February 2, 2026).

49 European Parliament, “[More Flexible Visa Suspension Mechanism](#)” (press release, October 7, 2025).

50 The European Union has considered similar efforts in Bangladesh, Ethiopia, The Gambia, and Senegal. See Council of the European Union, “[Presidency Discussion Paper on Visa Code Article 25a Exercise](#)” (discussion paper 17111/23, Brussels, January 9, 2024).

51 For example, U.S. visa restrictions on Guatemalan officials for antidemocratic actions may be more effective because many Guatemalans have families and financial investments in the United States. See Gilbert Guerra, *Domestic Debate, Global Strategy: Revisiting Immigration in U.S. Foreign Policy* (Washington, DC: Niskanen Center, 2025).

52 Council of the European Union, “[Presidency Discussion Paper on Visa Code Article 25a Exercise](#).”

53 The Visa Strategy proposes a revision of the Visa Code in 2026 to make it easier to use visa penalties (under Article 25a) along with proposing other restrictive visa measures for further consultation with Member States. European Commission, “[Commission Adopts a First-Ever EU Visa Strategy](#)” (press release, January 28, 2026).

and may be aided by greater coordination, accelerating visa processing through increased staffing or offering more generous visa conditions may be equally persuasive in other contexts.

- ▶ **Foreign aid.** Destination countries have used foreign aid as an incentive to broker migration and return agreements that partner countries might otherwise have little interest in pursuing. But as the urgency of these agreements grows, some governments are reconsidering negative conditionality, or ending development assistance in response to noncooperation. For example, the European Union's proposed budget for 2028–34 specifies that it could suspend funding for “serious shortcomings” on returns to partner countries.⁵⁴ But cutting foreign aid can worsen humanitarian emergencies affecting refugees, migrants, and vulnerable groups while undermining long-term efforts to support growth and global development. Negative conditionality has also produced mixed results. Delaying EU funding helped secure a readmission agreement with Ethiopia that increased return numbers, but only temporarily. By contrast, canceling a 50-million-euro vocational training project in Nigeria did not produce a similar agreement.⁵⁵ Given this track record, governments exploring negative conditionality could also look for opportunities to use foreign aid to encourage partners to support sustainable solutions, such as local integration and livelihoods for migrants and refugees. Such approaches may be more effective over the long term than using foreign aid to secure returns that are often temporary and limited in scale. The challenge becomes especially complicated in an environment of sharply reduced foreign aid budgets (see Section 2.C.), in which donors are forced to reprioritize and redirect scarce funding.
- ▶ **Tariffs and trade.** The threat of tariffs or the offer to lift them is a newer tool used primarily by the United States so far to compel cooperation on deportations and enforcement (at time of writing, a February 2026 ruling by the U.S. Supreme Court constrained the future use of tariffs, although related litigation is ongoing).⁵⁶ In 2019, during the first Trump administration, the U.S. government used tariff threats against Mexico,⁵⁷ and the second Trump administration has continued to use such threats both publicly (e.g., against Colombia)⁵⁸ and explicitly and implicitly in private diplomatic negotiations to strike numerous third-country return agreements and safe third-country deals (see Box 2). The European Union, meanwhile, adopted new trade regulations in 2026 that impose stricter conditions for cooperation on returns and readmissions as a requirement for receiving preferential tariffs.⁵⁹ Still, few countries other than the United States have the appetite or ability to use tariffs as a primary coercive tool for achieving returns, especially because their trade relationships with key partner countries are often much smaller. Even the U.S. weaponization of tariffs to achieve migration deals has trade-offs beyond the direct economic pain. Tariffs can erode trust with partner countries, reduce their

54 European Commission, “Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council Establishing Global Europe” (COM [2025] 551 final, July 16, 2025).

55 David Kipp, Nadine Knapp, and Amrei Meier, “Negative Sanctions and the EU’s External Migration Policy: ‘Less for Less’ Not Fit for Purpose” (commentary, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, Berlin, 2020).

56 Supreme Court of the United States, *Learning Resources, Inc. et al. vs. Trump, President of the United States, et al.*, No. 24-1287, 606 U.S. (2026), decided February 20, 2026.

57 Jill Colvin, Matthew Lee, and Luis Alonso Lugo, “Trump Suspends Plan to Place Tariffs on Mexican Goods,” PBS, June 7, 2019.

58 Al Jazeera, “Colombia Backs Down on Deportation Flights after Trump’s Tariff Threats,” Al Jazeera, January 26, 2025.

59 European Parliament, “Parliament Endorses Renewed EU Trade Instrument for Development” (press release, April 28, 2026).

dependence on the U.S. economy,⁶⁰ potentially strengthen their ties with alternative trading partners such as China, and ultimately weaken long-term U.S. leverage and economic power.

- **Sanctions.** Governments commonly use sanctions in response to the weaponization of migration, as the European Union did against Belarusian officials and transport carriers.⁶¹ But a newer approach is to broaden the scope of who can be targeted and what activities can be subject to sanctions, including greater attention to nonstate actors. A UK approach announced in 2025 freezes assets, bans travel, and restricts access to the UK financial system for people involved in smuggling, trafficking, and instrumentalization, including their “enablers, such as financiers and companies involved in the sale of small boat equipment.”⁶² The first round of UK sanctions targeted 25 entities globally,⁶³ while a second round targeted actors in the Western Balkans,⁶⁴ and a third round in May 2026 targeted networks recruiting migrants for the Russian war effort in Ukraine and supporting Russian drone production.⁶⁵ In July 2026, the European Commission also formally proposed a new sanctions regime targeting human trafficking, migrant smuggling, drugs and firearms trafficking, and money laundering that, at the time of writing, had gone to the Council of the European Union for review.⁶⁶ The use of sanctions against smuggling supply chains is nascent, but available evidence from sanctions targeting terrorists shows that global efforts, such as the UN Security Council Consolidated List, can effectively weaken nonterrorist entities that support terrorist organizations, including businesses and private organizations.⁶⁷ However, sanctions can be counterproductive if terrorist organizations use Western sanctions to amplify their anti-Western messages and attract recruits and funding from anti-Western actors. Used in nontargeted ways, sanctions also weaken state capacities and economies in ways that reduce enforcement and counterterrorism capacity and create deprivation or instability that can drive people to terrorism.⁶⁸ A full analysis of how these lessons apply to smuggling is beyond the scope of this report, but they suggest a need to start with highly targeted sanctions, consider their unintended consequences on wider smuggling ecosystems, and explore the potential for collective use of sanctions. Such cooperation could occur among destination countries, as endorsed in landmark G7 communiqués in June 2025 and June 2026,⁶⁹ the June 2026 communiqué was also endorsed by

60 Emanuel Kohscheen, Phurichai Rungcharoenkitkul, Dora Xia, and Fabrizio Zampolli, “Macroeconomic Impact of Tariffs and Policy Uncertainty” (bulletin no. 110, Bank for International Settlements, August 12, 2025); Clark Packard, “New Tariffs Will Push Countries Closer to China,” CATO Institute, July 10, 2025.

61 European Commission, “EU Proposes Blacklisting of Transport Operators Involved in Facilitating the Smuggling or Trafficking of People” (press release, November 22, 2021); European Council, “Belarus: EU Adopts 5th Package of Sanctions over Continued Human Rights Abuses and the Instrumentalization of Migrants” (press release, December 2, 2021).

62 UK Government, “UK Brings Forward World’s First Sanctions Regime to Smash the Gangs Responsible for Irregular Migration” (press release, July 22, 2025).

63 UK Government, “UK Sanctions Notorious People-Smuggling Gangs and Their Enablers in Global Crackdown” (press release, July 23, 2025).

64 UK Government, “UK Sanctions Gangs and Illicit Finance Network Propping Up People Smuggling Trade” (press release, October 22, 2025).

65 UK Government, “UK Cracks Down on Russia’s Exploitation of Vulnerable Migrants and Deadly Drone Capability” (press release, May 5, 2026).

66 European Commission, “Commission and High Representative Propose New Sanctions Regime to Counter Threats from Migrant Smuggling, Human Trafficking, and Other Forms of Organised Crime” (press release, July 8, 2026).

67 Antonio Quirós-Fons and Thomas Kruiper, “Missing Targets: Which Entities Are Affected by UN Counter-Terrorism Sanctions?” *Security Journal* 37 (2024): 618–37.

68 Navin A. Bapat and Menevis Cilizoglu, “Economic Sanctions and the Escalation of Terrorism,” *Journal of Global Security Studies* 8, no. 3 (2023).

69 Group of 7, “G7 Leaders’ Statement on Countering Migrant Smuggling” (statement, June 17, 2025); Presidency of France, “G7 Leaders’ Declaration on Tackling Migrant Smuggling” (statement, June 17, 2026).

Kenya and Korea, illustrating opportunities for wider cooperation along migration routes to sanction smugglers and gangs and support partner-country enforcement efforts.

BOX 2

U.S. Agreements on Third-Country Returns

As of July 2026, the United States had reached at least 35 agreements with partner countries to accept returns of third-country nationals. According to a Migration Policy Institute estimate, 15,000 third-country deportations occurred between January 20, 2025, and December 31, 2025. The agreements range from safe third-country agreements for asylum seekers, to “deportation bridge” agreements that allow countries to hold people while return negotiations with their origin country proceed, to incarceration agreements under which people are detained without access to protection. Many arrangements combine elements of these approaches.

The U.S. government secured these agreements through a variety of carrots and sticks, often at substantial cost for relatively small numbers of returns. Many partner countries rely heavily on trade with the United States. Costa Rica’s then-president Rodrigo Chaves cited potential economic costs as a reason to cooperate, while President Donald Trump publicly threatened Colombia with tariffs after it refused to accept deportation flights. The United States also lifted visa bans or restrictions for some countries, including Ghana and South Sudan, and provided direct financial support to others. Media reports indicated that the U.S. government withheld USD 30 million to a Cameroon-based office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees until the country signed a third-country return agreement.

Despite the focus on these agreements, Mexico has by far been the most important partner, accepting 13,000 of the 15,000 third-country deportations in 2025. But Mexico has accepted such returns for years, including, on paper, up to 30,000 returns per month during parts of the Biden administration (although actual removals never exceeded a few thousand in any month and were usually fewer). Thus, while credible tools for returning people—including to countries far from their countries of origin—may have value as a political signal, even a country with the unilateral power of the United States still relies on long-term, well-established partnerships to achieve most migration goals.

Other destination countries likely cannot replicate U.S. third-country return agreements. Many face legal barriers to such agreements or lack the same leverage over countries that rely less on their foreign aid, trade, or visa policies. Given the relatively small numbers returned to countries other than Mexico, the uncertain sustainability of these agreements, and the human rights risks posed by returns and detention in countries such as El Salvador, policymakers should weigh the benefits of these agreements against their immense financial and diplomatic costs.

Sources: Ariel G. Ruiz Soto, “U.S. Third-Country Deportation Agreements Are More about Fear than Numbers” (commentary, Migration Policy Institute, Washington, DC, March 2026); Refugees International and Human Rights First, “[Banished by Bargain: Third Country Deportation Watch](#),” accessed July 23, 2026; Hamed Aleaziz and Pranav Baskar, “[In Secret Deportation Deal, U.S. Leveraged Favors and Funds](#),” *The New York Times*, March 25, 2026; Camilo Montoya-Galvez, “[U.S. Broadens Search For Deportation Agreements, Striking Deals with Honduras and Uganda, Documents Show](#),” CBS News, August 21, 2025; Al Jazeera, “[Colombia Backs Down on Deportation Flights after Trump’s Tariff Threats](#),” Al Jazeera, January 26, 2025; Annie Correal and Pranav Baskar, “[How El Salvador Is Reaping Rewards from Trump’s Deportation Agenda](#),” *The New York Times*, July 10, 2025; Felicia Schwartz and Myah Ward, “[South Sudan Took 8 Migrants from the U.S. It Wants Something in Return](#),” Politico, July 30, 2025; Ariel G. Ruiz Soto, Doris Meissner, and Andrew Selee, “[Facing New Migration Realities: U.S.-Mexico Relations and Shared Interests](#)” (policy brief, Migration Policy Institute, Washington, DC, May 2025).

C. *How Might This New Migration Diplomacy Affect Long-Term Partner Country Collaboration?*

These new approaches to migration diplomacy have produced some wins in migration management, but the shift toward more transactional or coercive tools and approaches can be counterproductive for cooperation with partner countries. Italy's checkered history of cooperation with Tunisia is an example of cooperation centered on Italian migration priorities and incentivized by a mix of aid, capacity building, and preferential migration quotas that were later reduced as relations deteriorated.⁷⁰ Without common goals or a commitment to delivering benefits for both parties, the partnership underperformed, particularly on readmissions, and became fragile. Tunisia repeatedly instrumentalized bilateral migration flows as the two countries negotiated new agreements.⁷¹ A myopic focus on migration also risks overshadowing other items on the policy agenda for cooperation.

Without common goals or a commitment to delivering benefits for both parties, the partnership underperformed, particularly on readmissions, and became fragile.

As migration rises up the policy agenda for destination countries, partner countries gain leverage in negotiations. Cooperation does not occur in a vacuum. Partner countries are keenly aware of the going rate for partnerships with destination countries. For example, Niger's estimate that it would need 1 billion euros to curb irregular migration to Europe—approximately one-seventh of its GDP at the time—came less than two months after the EU-Turkey deal, which included up to 6 billion euros in aid for Syrian refugees in Turkey.⁷² Similarly, the EU-Turkey deal prompted officials in Jordan to seek a similar arrangement and preceded Kenya's threats to close its Dadaab refugee camp unless additional aid was provided.⁷³ More recently, after the EU-Tunisia deal was signed in July 2023, Mauritania called for more EU support comparable to what other countries along key migratory routes were offered. The result was a new EU-Mauritania partnership in 2024.⁷⁴ Egypt made similar demands as inflows from Sudan increased.⁷⁵ Such transactional approaches are evident even in longstanding partnerships such as that between Spain and Morocco (see Box 3).

As destination countries rely more on migration cooperation, they may quietly deprioritize rule-of-law objectives in negotiations. Many of Europe's key migration partners, such as Egypt, Rwanda, Tunisia, and Turkey, are illiberal states. In recent years, the European Union and its Member States have also shown a

70 Luca Lixi, *Beyond Transactional Deals: Building Lasting Migration Partnerships in the Mediterranean* (Brussels: Migration Policy Institute Europe, 2017).

71 Lixi, *Beyond Transactional Deals*.

72 Reuters, "Niger Tells Europe It Needs 1 billion Euros to Fight Illegal Migration," Reuters, May 3, 2016; European Council, "EU-Turkey Statement, 18 March 2016" (press release, March 18, 2016).

73 Luisa F. Freier, Nicolas R. Micinski, and Gerasimos Tsourapas, "Refugee Commodification: The Diffusion of Refugee Rent-Seeking in the Global South," *Third World Quarterly* 42, no. 11 (2011): 2747–66.

74 Council of the European Union, "Migratory Situation in Mauritania" (Note from the Presidency to the Working Party on External Aspects of Asylum and Migration 13049/23, Brussels, September 27, 2023).

75 Amina Ismail, Nafisa Eltahir, and Renee Maltezou, "Egypt's Crackdown Drives Sudanese Refugees on New Route to Libya and Beyond," Reuters, June 11, 2025.

growing willingness to engage on migration issues with fragile states facing well-documented security challenges and human rights violations, such as Afghanistan, Libya, and Somalia. Partnering with those governments can legitimize their activities.

BOX 3

Building Mutually Beneficial Partnerships: The Example of Spain and Morocco

Spain and Morocco's longstanding cooperation is often cited as an example of sustained collaboration on migration issues, despite periodic tensions. As Morocco became a transit and destination country in the early 2000s, its interests in border control aligned more closely with Spain's. Significant support for capacity building underpinned that cooperation, along with an approach that combined readmissions with other shared priorities, such as improving enforcement capacity and expanded legal pathways. Spain and the European Union subsequently helped Morocco build its capacity to manage migration, including through joint Spanish-Moroccan patrols, while expanding seasonal migration opportunities for Moroccan workers in Spain. Even so, migration flows are occasionally instrumentalized. For example, in 2021, Moroccan authorities stood by as more than 10,000 migrants entered the Spanish enclave of Ceuta after Spain admitted a leader of the Western Sahara independence movement for hospital treatment. Then in 2022, Spain expressed its support for Morocco's autonomy plan for Western Sahara, which Morocco first presented in 2007. Most recently, questions have been asked about the possible role of Moroccan authorities in facilitating the unauthorized arrival of some 80,000 migrants in the Spanish territory of Ceuta on July 30-31, 2026, although at the time of writing, leaked intelligence briefings and analysis have not been conclusive.

However, while such incidents can be disruptive, they have not derailed cooperation between Spain and Morocco, underscoring the ongoing incentives on both sides to maintain a productive working relationship. As more European countries and the European Union strengthen their migration cooperation with Morocco while also adjusting their foreign policy on Western Sahara, safeguarding the mutual interests and stability that underpin such partnerships will become even more difficult and critical.

Sources: Luca Lixi, *Beyond Transactional Deals: Building Lasting Migration Partnerships in the Mediterranean* (Brussels: Migration Policy Institute Europe, 2017); Tasnim Abderrahim, *Morocco: Irregular Migration Ebbs as Rabat Cracks Down on Human Smuggling* (Geneva: Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, 2023); Natasha Mellersh, "Belgium Backs Morocco's Western Sahara Plan amid New Return Deal," *InfoMigrants*, October 24, 2025; Reuters, "Spain's PM Sanchez Says No Evidence Morocco Orchestrated Ceuta Border Surge," *Reuters*, September 3, 2026; Inés Fernández-Pontes, "Spanish Police Point to Morocco's Role in Ceuta Crisis," *Euractiv*, September 2, 2026.

Building durable partnerships relies on shared interests and visible wins for both sides, which can create political space for governments to take more unpopular steps too. Some agenda items for destination countries, such as externalization or third-country agreements, are highly unpopular in partner countries and have sparked political unrest in Libya and Tunisia based on rumors alone.⁷⁶ While the sensitivity of these items may preclude formal cooperation in the near term, progress in other areas that provide clear benefits to partner countries can underscore the value of cooperation and potentially open the door to broader engagement in the future. However, migration partnerships have often failed to deliver promised additional mobility opportunities, which has been a key demand for partner countries. For example, although the EU-Turkey deal is cited as a relatively successful partnership, numerous elements were never implemented, including visa liberalization and progress on accession talks. Those unmet commitments continue to complicate engagement.

⁷⁶ Herbert, *A Moving Target*.

Labor pathways are one example of an underused tool in migration diplomacy that can provide mutual benefits. They offer legal migration opportunities for nationals of partner countries while helping destination countries address pressing labor shortages. In the Western Hemisphere, additional legal

As destination countries confront looming labor shortages, adding labor pathways or accelerated visa processing to the migration diplomacy toolbox could provide quick wins for both sides.

pathways have been a key demand for partner countries during negotiations on migration management and returns, including negotiations between the United States and Mexico (see Box 2). Expanding labor migration opportunities can help break impasses on more difficult topics, such as returns, by providing partner countries with a clear and visible win. Recent EU migration agreements have pointed to Talent Partnerships (a structured framework for cooperation on labor mobility with

partner countries) as a means of providing the win, although more work is needed to ensure that they deliver tangible gains for partner countries. As destination countries confront looming labor shortages, adding labor pathways or accelerated visa processing to the migration diplomacy toolbox could provide quick wins for both sides.

BOX 4

Rethinking Migration Diplomacy to Tackle the Ever-Evolving Smuggling Industry

As governments reconfigure migration cooperation priorities, they must also respond to a highly adaptive, tech-savvy, and increasingly professionalized smuggling industry. The era of ad hoc, part-time operators providing discrete border-crossing services has ended. In its place is a system that offers end-to-end, whole-route services; combines licit transport providers with illicit services to move people vast distances across regions; bribes both lower-level and senior officials; and operates mostly through a complex ecosystem of actors that allows smugglers to shift routes to avoid enforcement. As a result, arresting one leader does little to weaken the system.

This rapid innovation in the smuggling industry should be kept in mind as governments design migration diplomacy tools, lest they risk being constantly behind the next generation of threats. Adapting migration diplomacy to this environment requires attention to four areas:

- ▶ **Where:** The breadth of smuggling operations makes targeting a primary smuggling hub ineffective. Governments instead need to develop regional strategies that anticipate route diversion in response to enforcement and crack down on financing networks operating farther afield—for example, from Turkey and the United Arab Emirates in support of smuggling routes through the Horn of Africa to Europe.
- ▶ **How:** The sophistication of smuggling operations requires much closer collaboration among finance, military, intelligence, police, and foreign affairs agencies to deploy tools that target multiple parts of the smuggling ecosystem. Such cooperation is difficult enough within governments but even more difficult across governments.
- ▶ **With what tools and technology:** Smugglers already use encrypted communications and social media, but artificial intelligence may be the next frontier, helping smugglers overcome language

BOX 4 (cont.)**Rethinking Migration Diplomacy to Tackle the Ever-Evolving Smuggling Industry**

barriers when recruiting new clients, work in new countries, and automate customer service and route planning. Government responses are often too analog by contrast, slowed by logistics, regulation, and risk aversion.

- **With whom:** Smuggling now involves, among others, charter transport carriers (air, land, and sea), social media companies, manufacturing and technology industries, and often bribed border guards and intelligence officials. Governments will need to balance enforcement operations and coercive tools (such as sanctions) targeting nongovernment actors with efforts to convince them to cooperate voluntarily. They must also respect their roles in safeguarding privacy and data and avoid burdensome regulations that cannot adapt quickly to new intelligence and changing smuggling practices.

Despite the growing challenge, governments have several tools that can be highly effective against smuggling networks if deployed effectively and at scale. These include transit visa requirements and closing visa-free routes; sanctions to crack down on recruitment abuses, fraudulent travel packages, and deceptive job offers (especially in the platform economy) that channel migrants toward smugglers; and prosecution strategies that target both high-level organizers and the broader network of facilitators that enables large-scale operations.

Perhaps the most effective tool targets the smuggling business model directly: implementing legal migration systems that actually work. Smugglers sell convenience and speed as much as access. Their business model thrives where bureaucratic dysfunction exists: months-long waits for consular appointments, unclear visa processing, or labor market mismatches that leave employers unable to recruit and workers unable to access opportunities. While the political appetite for creating new pathways remains limited, and the evidence is unclear on how and when new pathways may displace demand for irregular routes, governments should consider steps that improve the accessibility of existing pathways. These steps could include prioritizing user experience through seamless visa processing, eliminating bottlenecks in consular appointments, improving labor matching that connects employers with workers efficiently, and providing transparent and predictable timelines. A legal migration system designed with migrants and employers as customers rather than supplicants would undermine smugglers more effectively than enforcement measures alone.

Source: Matt Herbert, *A Moving Target: Trends in the Evolution of Human Smuggling* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, forthcoming).

4 Conclusion: Principles for a New Approach to Migration Diplomacy

As new migration-related challenges emerge and traditional modes of engagement come under strain, governments have strong reasons to reassess their migration diplomacy toolboxes. Longstanding engagement approaches have suffered major setbacks, from drastic foreign aid cuts to retrenchment from free trade and economic cooperation, and they are unlikely to recover soon. As a result, there is a growing pull toward more transactional dealmaking in pursuit of the swift wins on migration that multilateralism has failed to deliver.

In one respect, more coercive tools offer a way to disrupt the status quo and experiment with innovative solutions to migration challenges that have long proved difficult to address, including reducing irregular arrivals and increasing returns. Traditional approaches have had only limited success, and both migration pressures and public backlash have intensified. In response, mainstream governments have become more willing to compromise on whom they partner with and under what conditions. For destination countries, the benefits of acting decisively and quickly to show that migration is under control have sometimes outweighed the risks of working with authoritarian governments, making uncomfortable compromises on other government priorities, and absorbing substantial financial costs.

However, the transactional dealmaking that can be useful and even strategic during emergencies is not always well suited to long-term challenges that extend beyond election cycles. Short-term gains should not overshadow the need for structural reforms and long-term partnerships grounded in trust, mutual interest, and mutual respect rather than coercion. Without addressing the vulnerabilities that bad actors have exploited so expertly, a patchwork of quick fixes will eventually unravel. That risk is especially acute in a context where power is shifting away from destination countries and, in some cases, away from states altogether.

In deploying their migration diplomacy toolkit, policymakers should consider the following:

1. Make migration diplomacy mutually beneficial, even when it is transactional.

Durable cooperation depends on embedding migration within broader political, economic, and security relationships that reflect the interests of both parties. Rather than ignoring power imbalances, policymakers should identify partnerships that adequately meet both countries' needs and allow both governments to demonstrate the benefits of cooperation to their publics and political bases. Even amid greater use of more coercive and transactional tools, governments still have access to often-underused incentives for cooperation, such as visa access and additional legal pathways. Governments have long been reluctant to put migration pathways on the negotiating table, especially at scale, but growing labor shortages and demographic asymmetries may create new opportunities to revisit labor mobility. Even in a difficult political environment, policymakers can prioritize key partner countries for skills investments and labor recruitment. Other tools, such as expedited visa processing, may be easier to deploy because they do not necessarily increase migration numbers and could be worth the resources needed to use them more systematically.

2. Embed migration in foreign policy, but do so strategically and with geopolitical foresight.

Governments increasingly recognize that migration cannot be managed through migration-specific channels alone. But embedding migration in foreign policy—including trade and security—carries risks for both diplomatic and migration agendas if done without a coherent strategy. Strategic foresight exercises that examine how different geopolitical scenarios could affect migration partnerships, combined with contingency planning for key partnerships and diversification of partners across regions, can help governments adapt to changing geopolitical positions instead of simply reacting to them.

3. Build stronger policy coherence.

A comprehensive approach to migration diplomacy requires alignment across government priorities and practical cooperation across policy portfolios. As migration rises up the foreign policy agenda, it can do so at the expense of other foreign policy priorities, especially when negotiations take a hard line with partner countries and potentially close the door to cooperation in other areas. While cross-government coordination has improved over the past decade, closer attention is needed to manage these risks and identify opportunities and potential trade-offs or vulnerabilities. On a practical level, closer coordination can allow immigration officials to establish priorities and align them with the work of foreign policy, trade, or development officials who may lead negotiations that involve immigration issues. This begins with migration policymakers strengthening their understanding of broader foreign policy objectives and improving coordination with foreign policy counterparts, both in capitals and in embassies abroad.

4. Engage strategically with a reformed multilateral system.

While multilateralism faces new and growing strains, multilateral institutions remain valuable when governments approach them as operational partners rather than solely normative bodies. These institutions offer local knowledge, cross-ministry networks, and political risk assessments that often exceed what embassies can provide. Integrating their expertise earlier in the process—before policy design rather than after it—could move them beyond a reactive role and enable them to advise on how to craft legally sound, practical agreements that meet both countries' needs. Such agreements are more likely to withstand judicial review and changes in government or public opinion. Like-minded governments working together with multilateral institutions can implement bolder and more innovative solutions, but making this work in practice may require difficult, long-term reforms of the multilateral system. Meanwhile, governments should also consider the power of coordinating their migration diplomacy tools. Coordination could strengthen positive incentives to invest collectively in workforce training in partner countries and provide pathways to multiple destinations, or by sharing visa processing systems across countries to achieve economies of scale. Coordination could also strengthen coercive tools by making visas restrictions and aid suspensions more consequential and maximizing the impact of sanctions by cutting smugglers and their partners off from financial systems across multiple jurisdictions. Such coordination is difficult—for example, EU Member States have long been skeptical of greater EU coordination on labor mobility—but it has significant potential to strengthen partner-country cooperation.

5. Consider opportunities and risks beyond governments.

Governments should also consider how to engage constructively with influential nonstate actors, including multinational corporations. For example, cooperation with airlines is critical for addressing hybrid smuggling operations, while cooperation with large employers and sector representatives is essential for addressing exploitative recruitment practices that leave migrants vulnerable, indebted, and, in some cases, victims of human trafficking. Conversely, governments must account for the growing role of nonstate criminal actors such as smugglers, organized crime, and insurgencies that seek to exploit migration for monetary or political gain. Responding effectively may require different tools, such as sanctions. By stress-testing migration diplomacy against its most difficult challenge—the adaptive, multinational, tech-enabled

smuggling ecosystem—governments can build a policy toolbox that is equally adaptive and best equipped to handle challenges posed by less agile state actors.

6. Balance long-term and short-term goals.

Shifting geopolitical winds and the high public salience of migration management are creating pressure for quick wins. However, governments should not neglect long-term partnerships that themselves can be a springboard for addressing rapidly emerging migration challenges. When arrivals from South America to the United States surged under the Biden administration, the U.S. government leaned on its existing partnership with Mexico to support enforcement efforts.⁷⁷ When a ruling by the High Court of Australia created a new group of migrants with criminal convictions who could not be detained or returned, the Australian government reached an agreement to transfer them to Nauru, its existing partner on external processing.⁷⁸ Even as governments pursue quick results through short-term agreements, they should not overlook investments and forms of engagement that can help cement more durable and productive working relationships. Regional cooperation may be another way to build these relationships, especially with countries outside key migration routes that are not priority partners currently but whose cooperation may be needed in the future.

Partnerships will always be crucial for effective migration management. To strengthen the migration diplomacy toolbox, governments must navigate potential trade-offs, make quick-fix deals without undermining long-term cooperation, adopt holistic approaches without politicizing other foreign policy domains, and work with fragile and authoritarian partners to manage migration and improve protection without legitimizing or funding human rights violations. Striking the balance between transactional agreements and long-term partnerships will remain a work in progress, even if the balance is shifting in a more transactional direction, but policymakers should keep the end goal in sight. Managing both longstanding and emerging migration challenges—from returns to smuggling and migration instrumentalization—requires building a network of strong migration partnerships. Investing now in long-term, holistic partnerships to build the goodwill and capacity needed to respond to new migration challenges—rather than one-sided agreements alone—is still the best option.

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⁷⁷ Ariel G. Ruiz Soto, Doris Meissner, and Andrew Selee, “Facing New Migration Realities: U.S.-Mexico Relations and Shared Interests” (policy brief, Migration Policy Institute, Washington, DC, May 2025).

⁷⁸ Kristy Needham, “Australia Passes Law to Speed Deportation of Noncitizens to Nauru,” Reuters, September 4, 2025.

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