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Geopolitical Tensions and Migration

By Malte Becker* and Tobias Heidland**

Summary

In this paper, we examine the complex relationship between geopolitical tensions and migration, developing a framework to explore how these dynamics shape each other. We argue that geopolitical risks – such as wars, terrorism, and international disputes – are related in three ways to migration: Risks affecting the determinants of migration decisions, the reverse channel of migration influencing geopolitical risks, and the direct use of migration as a geopolitical tool. We then discuss the transmission channels and how country characteristics can affect the strength of effects. We highlight that geopolitical risks likely result in greater irregular migration and displacement in the long run and emphasize the importance of cross-country cooperation.

Zusammenfassung

Dieses Papier untersucht die komplexe Beziehung zwischen geopolitischen Spannungen und Migration. Wir entwickeln ein Framework, das die Wechselwirkungen zwischen den beiden Komponenten beschreibt und zeigen auf, dass geopolitische Risiken wie Kriege, Terrorismus und internationale Konflikte über drei Kanäle mit Migration verbunden sind: indem Geopolitische Risiken die Determinanten von Migrationsentscheidungen beeinflussen; indem Migration geopolitische Risiken beeinflusst; und indem Migration direkt als geopolitisches Instrument genutzt wird. Anschließend erörtern wir die möglichen Ausprägungen dieser Kanäle und diskutieren, inwieweit sie von verschiedenen Länder-Charakteristika abhängen. Wir argumentieren, dass geopolitische Risiken längerfristig mit hoher Wahrscheinlichkeit in mehr irregulärer Migration und Vertreibung mündet und betonen die Bedeutung länderübergreifender Kooperation.

JEL classification: F22, F51, O15

Keywords: Migration, Geopolitics, International Relations

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1. Introduction

Geopolitics and migration are major topics in the current political debate, but so far, there has been little systematic analysis of how the two interact. To fill this gap, we provide a conceptual framework to help understand the complex relationship.

Throughout the paper, we are going to think about geopolitical tensions in their manifestation as geopolitical risk, which Caldara and Iacoviello (2022) define as “the threat, realization, and escalation of adverse events associated with wars, terrorism, and any tensions among states and political actors that affect the peaceful course of international relations”. This broad definition highlights the many forms that geopolitical risk can take. It can range from isolated, one-time events over ongoing tensions all the way to violent conflict between countries, regions, or other political actors. Caldara and Iacoviello give several examples of episodes of high geopolitical risk in the past, including the Paris terrorist attacks, the North Korean crisis, the war in Ukraine, and the invasion of Libya.

Whether and where to migrate is one of the most important choices to make in life. People take a forward-looking perspective, which is informed by their past and current experiences, and closely linked to geopolitical tensions in two ways. First, geopolitical risk may affect different determinants of migration, for example, by leading to violent conflict and political instability, or by impacting the economic conditions in host and origin countries (Mayda 2010). Second, migration flows can influence geopolitical tensions. Migration can create links or tensions between host and origin countries, depending on the nature of the migration flows (Parson and Vézina 2018; Leblang and Peters 2020) and even be used deliberately as an instrument in geopolitics. Transit countries that can control migration flows may use them as a bargaining chip in international politics. In the following, we discuss different channels and discuss under which conditions geopolitical risk could increase migration.

2. The Effect on the Determinants of Migration

Geopolitical risk may affect migration by impacting the determinants of migration and the capabilities to migrate. Determinants are the reasons for migration, often simplified to push and pull factors (Mayda 2010). Capabilities are the ability to implement the migration plan (De Haas 2021). Examples of push factors are conflicts, political persecution, and absolute poverty. Often, whether a factor is a relevant determinant of migration does not only depend on its level in the origin or destination country, respectively. What matters are the differentials between both, as in the case of the vast difference in living conditions between origin and destination countries. Few people would migrate into a war zone unless the situation at home is even worse. Capabilities, by contrast, in-

clude aspects such as the availability of work visas, how risky a migration is, and the economic means to afford it. The distinction between aspirations and capabilities is crucial, especially during crises. Hit by negative shocks, many people only migrate within their country of origin because they lack the capabilities to go abroad. This can mean that high aspirations for international migration only result in rapid urbanization. It can also mean that, due to a lack of capabilities to migrate internationally legally, bad living conditions result in little international migration until people become willing to consider alternative types of coping strategies such as irregular migration (cf. the sudden influx of Syrian to the EU from 2013, see Böhme et al. 2020).

We broadly distinguish between the effects of geopolitical risk on the determinants of migration through the *security channel*, such as political instability or violent conflict, through the *economic channel*, for example, due to economic sanctions, and through the *policy channel*, such as visa restrictions. All three channels can operate in origin and destination countries, potentially affecting push, pull, and capabilities simultaneously.

2.1 The Security Channel

The security channel captures political instability and, in the worst case, violent conflict resulting from geopolitical tensions. Both political instability and violent conflict are strong predictors of out-migration, typically in the form of forced displacement and with short- to medium-term effects on flows (Boss et al. 2024). Generally, the vast majority of refugees remain in neighboring regions within or just outside the country of origin because they lack the means (and sometimes the will) to migrate far. As risks are particularly acute in low- and middle-income countries, these regions host the most displaced people (Devictor et al. 2021; Fransen and De Haas 2022). The second-order effects on the welfare of becoming forcibly displaced are, on average, extremely negative: Refugees face large reductions in consumption, physical capital, and human capital (Aygün et al. 2024; Fiala 2015; Ibáñez and Vélez 2008). Migration resulting from geopolitical tensions can thus have great distributional consequences even in the very long run (cf. Grosfeld and Zhuravskaya 2015; Bukowski 2019).

While predominantly affecting origin country outcomes, i.e., push factors, the security channel can also affect pull factors in destination countries. Security concerns arising from geopolitical tensions can lead to public backlash against immigrants (Alesina and Tabellini 2024), potentially making certain destination countries less attractive to immigrants. For example, different studies show that terrorist attacks can lead to more negative attitudes toward immigration inside and outside of affected countries (Helbling and Meierrieks 2022). These are examples of what can well be seen as a broader channel where tensions between

countries will affect the acceptance of migrants from certain countries, with repercussions for their integration prospects and, in turn, economic outcomes (Steinhardt 2018; Schilling and Stillman 2024) and future immigration (Friebel et al. 2013).

2.2 *The Economic Channel*

The economic channel describes the impact that geopolitical tensions have on delete economic outcomes. Geopolitical risk is associated with lower GDP growth, decreases in employment, and a higher probability of economic disaster (Caldara and Iacoviello 2022), all potential push factors. The economic effects can be deliberate when countries use sanctions, a common policy tool in times of geopolitical risk, or indirect as seen in the food price spike in the Middle East and large parts of Africa that followed Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent fall in grain and vegetable oil exports (Balma et al. 2024). These decrease financial flows and development aid, trade, and growth, with persistent and long-lasting effects on targeted countries' economy and living conditions (Morgan et al. 2023; Neuenkirch and Neumeier 2016). However, note that the economic effects of geopolitical risk can also create winners (Morgan et al. 2023), who become relatively more attractive destination countries. Financial flows and trade may be diverted to new partners, as was the case for sanctions on Russia. The sanctions created large increases in trade from the West with Turkey and several central Asian states, which then channel the sanctioned goods to Russia. It is unlikely that this concrete case has directly led to large measurable employment effects in the respective countries. However, economic spillovers within the country may lead to some Central Asian countries experiencing less outmigration.

In origin countries of migration, the net effects of economic shocks on outmigration are ambiguous. On the one hand, adverse economic shocks may decrease the opportunity cost of migration, pushing people to leave their homes; on the other, they may increase liquidity constraints to pay for costly migration, decreasing people's migration capabilities (Bazzi 2017). The same applies to positive economic shocks that can result from geopolitical risks, such as increases in development aid. These can decrease push factors in the short term but increase migration capabilities in the long term. The empirical literature finds evidence for both channels (Cai 2020; Clemens and Mendola 2024; Fuchs et al. 2023; Gröger and Zylberberg 2016; Kleemans and Magruder 2018). Which effect dominates may depend on many factors, for example, the nature and persistence of the income shock (Bazzi 2017) and where people are located in the income distribution (Clemens 2014).

In destination countries, geopolitical risk can lead to economic downturns, decreasing pull factors, such as the returns to migration (Mayda 2010; Ortega and Peri 2013). It is well-established that economic shocks at the destination strongly influence migration decisions (Gröger 2021; McKenzie et al. 2014), leading to an expected decrease in immigration. Again, the pull side of the economic channel can have second-order effects. Negative economic shocks in destination countries can decrease remittances, reducing households' migration capabilities and welfare in origin countries (Caballero et al. 2023; Yang 2008).

The importance of the economic channel will differ strongly depending on how closely affected countries are integrated into the world economy. Countries that are closely connected will be hit harder by economic and financial sanctions. More self-sufficient countries will be less vulnerable to adverse economic consequences originating abroad. However, closer economic integration may also have benefits such as allowing faster growth through trade (Frankel and Romer 1999). Moreover, migration costs matter for both the security and the economic channel. If migration costs are relatively low, geopolitical tensions can induce large migration flows, for example, during the war in Ukraine. High migration costs, for example, for people in North Korea, keep individuals from migrating despite catastrophic political and economic circumstances due to ongoing geopolitical tensions.

2.3 *The Policy Channel*

The policy channel describes migration-related policy changes that are caused by geopolitical tensions. This can happen when countries sanction opponents or reward allies (Stoffelen 2022). The most widely known case is visa restrictions, typically targeted at important political and economic actors, which can, however, also extend to the overall population and strongly limit migration capabilities in affected countries (Seyfi et al. 2023). On the other hand, countries may lift migration restrictions for allies in times of geopolitical tensions. New political partnerships are often accompanied by easing immigration policies. For example, during the earlier stages of the EU accession, prospective member countries benefit from easier immigration to the EU for their citizens. Note that the policy channel also affects migrants in transit countries. Migrants en route to another destination may become stuck there due to more restrictive migration policies (de Haas 2021) or may choose their routes based on changes in border management (Collyer et al. 2012). While the security and economic channels affect the reasons for migration as well as capabilities, the policy channel is restricted to the capabilities and does little to the underlying reasons for migration.

3. The Effects of Migration on Geopolitics

The effects of migration on geopolitics are ambiguous. On the one hand, migration can increase the economic interaction between origin and destination countries. Several studies have shown that migration increases bilateral trade and foreign direct investment (Bahar et al. 2022; Mayda et al. 2022; Parsons and Vézina 2018). Migration flows can also result in closer political ties, for example, through increases in development cooperation (Bermeo and Leblang 2015; Clemens and Postel 2018). Current examples include the EU, which, in an effort to reduce irregular migration to Europe, supported for years the unpopular government of Niger, an important transit hub through the Sahara (Weihe et al. 2021). In 2023 alone, Niger received over 40 million Euros from the EU (European Commission 2024). Similarly, interest in migration has led some countries to focus their ODA strategies more on the countries of origin of migrants, giving rise to policy packages such as the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (Akim and Heidland 2024) or the Root Causes Policy of Biden Administration (Whitehouse 2021).

On the other hand, migration can result in geopolitical tensions between countries. In the case of irregular migration, destination countries may hold origin or transit countries responsible, as happened when the Trump administration stopped most new foreign assistance from the US State Department and the US Agency for International Development to several Central American states, redirecting development assistance to other partner countries (US GAO 2021).

Immigration can also lead to a public backlash among voters, potentially resulting in political instability, for example, in the case of Brexit or the rise of right-wing parties in the European Union (Barone et al. 2016; Dustmann et al. 2019; Steinmayr 2021). A diaspora whose political views may, in parts, be strongly shaped by extreme views of origin-country leaders (or be perceived as such), take, for example, Erdogan or Putin, can add to the potentially negative effects of migration on geopolitics (Holland et al. 2024; Rozo and Vargas 2021).

Migration may also be used deliberately as a direct instrument in times of geopolitical tensions. The most widely reported recent example was the case of Belarus, where the state made deliberate attempts to bring Middle Eastern migrants to the borders of its European neighbors, especially Poland, to force irregular border crossings. These migrants were flown directly to Minsk and then left close to the border without major supplies, thus strongly encouraging them to cross into the EU. This affair should be viewed as a form of non-military pressure on the Western alliance supporting Ukraine by Belarus in the context of the Russian war on Ukraine. The move has led to Poland mostly suspending asylum in the country, thus creating fallout across the EU, which struggles with having a coordinated response to the tension between providing the global pub-

lic good of “refugee protection” and the political, social, and financial costs of doing so. With some countries in the block seizing to cooperate, internal solutions become less likely, and the EU’s ability to encourage other countries outside the block to also contribute to refugee protection decreases. The example shows that using migration as a geopolitical instrument can exert influence on different layers: domestic publics and their support for governments, common ground within alliances, and the ability to project power on other states. The effectiveness of migration as a geopolitical instrument can be increased by making migration a more salient issue in politics and society. The Belarussian example is a case in point. It was deliberately introduced at a time of great political turmoil in most Western countries around migration, some of which was facilitated by Russian campaigns on social media and bankrolling or otherwise encouraging anti-immigrant parties. Highly capable countries such as Russia thus have the power to increase the efficacy of their geopolitical use of migration.

In a less conflictual variant, origin and transit countries can use their control over immigrant populations as bargaining chips in international politics (Adamson and Tsourapas 2019). An example is the Khartoum Process, in which the EU, the African Union, and countries in the Horn of Africa cooperate politically. Countries along the migratory routes in the East and North-East of Africa, such as Egypt, can get support such as development funding and support for organizations that manage – i.e., typically limit – migration flows. These types of cooperations have also been in place between the EU and Turkey, where in exchange for support in hosting refugees from Syria, Turkey massively reduced outflows of irregular migrants to the EU and pledged to take back any irregular migrants picked up by Greek authorities after crossing from Turkey. Another important example for Europe and the United States is fighting the rooted causes of irregular migration. Policy packages such as the EU Trust Fund for Africa consist of development assistance projects that are meant to improve living conditions in migrants’ countries of origin, e.g., creating jobs or increasing economic resilience. In addition, these policy packages contain activities to strengthen institutions to improve their ability to limit movement. While most developing countries welcome funding to improve living conditions, they are critical of restrictions on movement. Thus, participating governments must carefully weigh the benefits and costs of certain types of activities for their support and survival. Consequently, such agreements are unstable because they can be ended whenever one side is disappointed about the benefits. This was, for example, the case with the EU-Turkey agreement.

Moreover, countries that are neither direct origin, destination, or transit countries have emerged as actors in the field of migration diplomacy. Rwanda and Albania, for example, have agreed to receive deportees and asylum seekers from the UK and Italy, respectively, in return for financial and political support. At the point of writing, the legality of such activities in EU countries is a major

hurdle for their more widespread adoption, but in the longer term, laws may be adjusted to enable such deals.

In summary, if irregular migration is an important political issue and destination countries want to reduce it, opportunities for countries that are not the main destinations arise to achieve geopolitical goals or to get support in other policy areas.

4. Determinants of the Strength of Effects on Migration

Based on the heterogeneity of geopolitical risk and the many ways in which it can impact migration, it becomes clear that potential effects are highly context-specific and depend on multiple factors. Not every form of geopolitical risk will have an impact on migration, and migration does not necessarily affect geopolitical risk.

The severity of geopolitical shocks, including the duration and regional extension, is a key determinant of the extent of migration. On average, migration flows can be expected to increase with the severity of geopolitical tensions. Over 60% of all refugees come from Syria, Venezuela, Ukraine, and Afghanistan (UNHCR 2024) – four countries that are experiencing intense periods of geopolitical tensions, amounting to economic crises and, mostly, violent conflict. Regionally and temporarily limited periods of geopolitical risk, such as the 2005 London bombings or the 2015 Paris terrorist attacks, will have little to no immediate effect on emigration, despite having the potential to affect attitudes towards immigrants and, thus, future immigration.

Here, it is important to keep in mind that the severity of geopolitical risk may differ for the parties involved. While the 9/11 terrorist attacks were a one-time event for the US, they led to the war in Afghanistan and amounted to immense migration flows that have contributed to Afghanistan being one of the most protracted refugee crises worldwide, spanning over 40 years to the Soviet invasion of the country.

The integration of countries with the rest of the world matters. In the case of extremely isolated or largely self-sufficient countries, geopolitical tensions are likely to have little effect on migration, especially if attempting to leave the country is severely punished, as in North Korea. This example shows that there are two elements to consider: the exposure to shocks and the migration costs. The reasons for differences in the level of integration vary. Geography and historical sources of integration matter. Distance increases migration costs in several ways. Among these is a travel distance and a lower likelihood of established migration networks. If migrants have friends, family members, or fellow citizens abroad, this reduces their migration cost, so *ceteris paribus* the response to a negative shock will be higher. But the reasons for integration go beyond geogra-

phy. Political and economic integration may have been facilitated by it, but it can have multiple historical reasons that will still affect the probability of spillovers of geopolitical risks and migration costs through channels such as more liberal migration policies discussed earlier.

Another important feature is the composition of a country's population as well as its living conditions. Typically, these are micro-level characteristics that determine the behavior of individuals or families and can result in completely different country-level dynamics if seen in aggregate. A younger population is more likely to be mobile. This affects both the attractiveness of migration and the capabilities to do so. Similarly, wealth differences are particularly important because they determine the ability to respond to shocks by migrating internationally. Hence, countries that have the same average GDP per capita may show very different responses depending on whether there is a large middle class that can react to shocks or whether most of the population is very poor and thus incapable of migrating internationally while only a small proportion is rich.

The exact effect of geopolitical risk on migration is thus, above all, an empirical question. Investigating causal effects, however, is challenging for multiple reasons. First, the relationship between geopolitical risks and migration is highly endogenous, as the three dimensions of our conceptual framework make clear, and the relationships will be moderated by factors such as the ones discussed above. Second, it is difficult to isolate specific periods or events of geopolitical risk. These typically involve several countries and crises that feed into each other without a clear before-after or treatment and control setting. Third, it is hard to isolate the specific mechanisms underlying a potential relationship between geopolitical risk and migration. As outlined before, periods of geopolitical risk have multiple dimensions and potential direct and second-order effects on push factors, pull factors, and migration capabilities.

The literature on the effects of economic and political sanctions may provide some inspiration for empirical analysis (Morgan et al. 2023). However, common quasi-experimental methods, such as instrumental variable approaches or difference-in-differences strategies, will be much harder to apply as geopolitical risk usually depends on multiple interdependent factors and is hard to pinpoint down to specific units and time periods.

5. Conclusion

Geopolitical risks and migration are two of the most important policy areas of our time. Geopolitical risks can cause migration. However, migration can also create benefits that reduce future risks. Since the relationships between the two variables runs both ways and channels may reinforce each other, there is no one-size-fits-all answer as to which mechanisms will have the largest effect in a

new context. Therefore, it is very hard to credibly predict the speed and size of migration responses to geopolitical shocks. Successful prediction becomes more likely if the use of migration as an instrument can be ruled out, policies remain fixed, and shorter-term migration flows are the only margin of interest. Any such attempt must be very clear regarding the specific type of geopolitical risk concerned.

However, while the short to medium-term effects are ambiguous, the most important long-term effect is simple: geopolitical risk can lead to violent conflict and economic downturns. Based on everything we know about migration, these will sooner or later increase global migration pressure. Policymakers who are fanning the flames of geopolitical tensions may thus also increase irregular migration and displacement. As most politicians want to reduce the latter two outcomes, preventing or resolving conflicts should have high priority. Migration that is orderly, i.e. managed via effective visa policy, will contribute to reducing the risk that migration will cause geopolitical tensions. When conflicts occur, cooperation between countries to reduce the fallout is key. One important area is providing refugee protection, a global public good. Another is humanitarian aid and support for longer-term recovery. Such cooperation can also reduce the risk that migration is misused as a geopolitical instrument since it decreases the probability that geopolitical rivals effectively target individual countries.

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