Migrantising Diplomacy

https://www.e-ir.info/2025/02/21/migrantising-diplomacy/

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Since the 2000s, migration and asylum seem to have pervaded diplomatic discourses and actions. In 2023, in its foreign policy statement, the European Union emphasised the "growing relevance of migration" and the "militarisation of borders and instrumentalisation of migration", as well as the "increased complexity of migration governance". But migration diplomacy is often mistaken for a response of states to the globalisation of mobility or the pursuit of strategic interests while in fact, it offers paths to question the foundations of statehood, violence and the international order. On the one hand, it is defined as the use of migration for non-migratory diplomatic purposes. States and their representatives, as well as non-state actors (migrant networks, non-governmental and humanitarian organisations, businesses, transnational mafias) use migrants and refugees, immigration, emigration or diasporas to strengthen or destabilise a country or political actors, and to obtain material, economic or symbolic advantages from diplomatic partners. On the other hand, migration diplomacy refers to the use of diplomatic instruments to control different types of mobility (immigration, emigration, asylum, exile) from a distance. The levers of bilateral, multilateral and sectoral diplomacy, such as development aid or trade policy, military or cultural policy, and public or private diplomacy are thus used to regulate the geography and volume of migratory flows in the short or long term.

Controlling migration and migrants can therefore be either a means or an end of diplomacy. More often than not, migration is both a means and an end and is deployed at different levels using different formal and informal instruments. Migration diplomacy therefore offers a critical framework for rethinking the tensions between control and sovereignty, cooperation and conflict, domination and resistance, and the link between domestic and foreign policy.

Genealogies of migration diplomacy: Diasporic state building and free circulation

The term "migration diplomacy" seems to have only appeared in the early 2000s in connection with restrictive immigration control policies in Europe and North America, the "wall around the West" (Andreas & Snyder, 2000). In these contexts, the expression is generally used incidentally, in brackets or inverted commas. However, the first definitions found come from elsewhere: they are rooted on the diplomatic history of African and Middle Eastern countries, where migration is perceived not only as a threat, but also and above all as a symbolic, strategic and economic resource. The notion was later framed in a global perspective (Adamson & Tsourapas, 2019) but early studies invite to decentre an overly western gaze on migration diplomacy.

A definition emerged in 2007 to describe the history of negotiations between the Eritrean guerrilla parties and neighbouring Arab countries concerning the reception of Eritrean refugees (Thiollet, 2007). Securing asylum or immigration for Eritreans was both a goal for Eritrean guerilla parties and an instrument in support of the war against Ethiopia. Arab neighbours were asked for political and financial support. Eritrean refugee diasporas acted as a channel of influence in the Arab world, and as a rear base providing financial support for the struggle. The Eritrean case, similar to other cases like Kurdish, Tamul, or Palestinian transnational activism, demonstrates the entanglement of protection and diplomatic leveraging emigration, exile and diasporas. Both of which are central to the process of forming a new independent state.

The same pattern of diplomacy involving refugee diasporas in support of a state or the creation of a state can be found in the Kurdish, Palestinian and Armenian cases and in the widely studied case of the Jewish diaspora. The analytical framework of Eritrean 'migration diplomacy' is used for more general analyses (Wihtol de Wenden, 2009).

It forms part of the numerous works on the public diplomacy of sending countries towards their diasporas, known as 'diaspora diplomacy' or 'attention policies' in French-language research. India, Croatia (Ragazzi, 2010), Turkey and the Philippines directly and indirectly govern their citizens – migrants and refugees alike – beyond their borders, in particular to secure the financial transfers that are essential to their economies.

Of course, migration diplomacy also concerns destination countries, both in Western and non-Western contexts. It describes for instance the diplomacy of the Gulf monarchies, major countries of labour immigration but also of informal asylum, that an extension of the initial definition is proposed (Thiollet, 2011). In the 1960s and 1970s, the Gulf countries welcomed migrants and refugees from neighbouring Arab countries, not only to meet the needs of a labour-intensive market, but also to strengthen regional integration within the Arab world. Migration is therefore both an end and a means of Gulf states' diplomacy. However, the monarchies operate informally, with no explicit agreements or negotiations until the late 1990s. Migration policies were selective and discretionary. The monarchies, which are not signatories to the 1951 Convention, have adopted quasi-asylum policies for Palestinian exiles since the 1950s, for Eritreans in the 1960s and 1970s, for Syrian exiles in 2011, and for Sudanese in 2022 (Lysa, 2023).

In post-colonial Africa, states used migration and asylum similarly to promote regional integration, but the institutionalised the diplomacy of asylum and circulation through the 1969 OAU Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa and the 2018 Protocol to the Treaty Establishing the African Economic Community on the Free Movement of Persons, the Right of Residence and the Right of Establishment. Similar diplomatic efforts in favour of free movement can be observed in Asia and Latin America (Novick et al., 2010), and in Europe with the creation of the Schengen area, although they are hardly ever analysed as part of the development of migration diplomacy.

While often associated with contemporary Western restrictive policies, migration diplomacy in fact has its foundations in non-Western contexts in which immigration and asylum are not seen as a threat to be contained (Tolay, 2022), but as a tool for state formation, linked to wars of independence, and a tool for regional cooperation and integration. It is nourished by complex transnational relations in which public and private actors interact and is embodied in formal and informal practices. From the end of the 1990s, under the influence of a security and selective turn in European migration policies, the conversation on migration diplomacy focused on restrictions on migration and border control rather than on the organisation of free movement. Symptomatically, Libya and Morocco, which up until the late 1990s defended a pan-African or Arab-African migration diplomacy, are becoming trapped by policies imposed by their European partners (Benjelloun, 2019).

Migration as an end: The 'migrantisation' of diplomacy

From the 1990s onwards, as a result of increased political polarisation of domestic public spheres, we observe what I call the 'migrantisation' of diplomacy. Mobility becomes an explicit foreign policy issue and border control is being outsourced. Governments are deploying specific policies on migration or exile outside their own borders, and, at the same time, migration is inviting itself into different sectors of their foreign policies (economic, academic, cultural, military diplomacy, etc.). In the European Union (EU), combined negotiations, or issue linkage, becomes binding with the Seville Summit in 2002. The EU increasingly includes immigration control in all its agreements with third countries, whatever their purpose. For example, cooperation agreements on trade or security between Europe and the countries of the Sahel or West Africa – which would previously have been negotiated without reference to migration issues – are now conditional on the readmission of expelled migrants and, more generally, on cooperation to achieve European immigration control objectives (Conte & Cortinovis, 2018; Lavenex, 2023).

Migrantisationmainly affects development aid policies (Breda et al., 2024). The development aid provided by EU countries includes policies on the movement of citizens from partner countries (mobility for study or work), and the readmission of illegal immigrants from these countries (Micinski, 2022). In 2015, at the Valletta Summit, an EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa was set up with a budget of five billion euros. The summit, entirely devoted to migration in the context of the 2015 political crisis surrounding the reception of Syrian exiles, gave equal priority to economic development, conflict prevention and the fight against illegal immigration. As a consequence, the humanitarian and development policies in the regions concerned was re-branded and marginaly migrationised, even

if the substance of programs and actors involved did not entirely change (Raty & Shilhav, 2020; Thiollet & Jaulin, 2022). However, beyond superficial changes, the Valetta submit led the EU to reopen diplomatic channels with genocidal leaders or dictators like the Sudanese, Libyan, and Eritrean presidents, reshaping the EU geopolitical spaces in Africa (Zardo, 2020).

Alongside this bilateral and regional diplomacy, multilateral policy and transnational activism have also developed, involving States, UN and non-UN international organisations and other non-governmental players. In addition to specialised multilateral players (the UNHCR, the IOM, and NGOs such as the Danish Refugee Council or religious networks), other organisations such as the World Bank are tending to include migration at the heart of their programmes. Migration thus gained a place in the 2030 Agenda on sustainable development in 2015. Specific programmes, regulations, new organisations and platforms are emerging, including the two Global Pacts on Migration and Asylum in 2018. However, these dynamics remain subject to the interests of governments, particularly in the most powerful destination countries.

Migration as a means: Power relations, two-level games and weaponisation

Migration diplomacy is best known as a power-game between foreign policy partners (Tsourapas, 2017) driven by diverse economic, strategic and symbolic interests. It often incorporates relations of power inherited from colonisation. The post-colonial migratory corridors between France and the Maghreb countries, between Italy and Libya, between Spain and Morocco around Ceuta and Melilla, and historically asymmetrical relations such as those between Mexico and the United States are arenas where Western states try to impose their objectives of controlling emigration or importing labour on their partners (El Qadim, 2015). But migration diplomacy also goes leverage to governments in countries of origin and transit to negotiate with countries of destination: this is the case for M. Gaddafi's Libya, for R.T Erdogan in Turkey, for Morocco and Tunisia, which negotiate not only development aid and visas for their nationals in exchange for readmission agreements, but also political support for some of their geopolitical positions or domestic policies. Thus, when France and Spain seek to secure Morocco's support in controlling migration to Europe, their migration objectives weigh on their positions regarding contested Moroccan sovereignty over the Western Sahara.

Migration diplomacy enables political actors to acquire or regain international political stature. Muammar Gaddafi re-established diplomatic relations with Italy and then Europe at the end of the 1990s. Omar El Beshir, while under warrant from the International Criminal Court, became acceptable again thanks to the Khartoum process launched in 2014 to manage migrations from the Horn of Africa. In Europe, talk of tougher borders and externalisation of migration control is a source of popularity, media coverage and electoral success. Adopting positions on migration diplomacy gives local or national politicians and parties an "international stature", often to the detriment of the actual effectiveness of the policies, their cost, or their compliance with the law. In Great Britain, Conservative Prime Minister Richi Sunak pushed through a notoriously unworkable and costly agreement with Rwanda in 2024, accompanied by intense media coverage, partly to revive a theme that had fuelled the pro-Brexit camp, and to compensate for a loss of legitimacy linked to the negative consequences of Brexit by "migrantising" his policy. Populist parties in Europe which traditionally focused on domestic issues are taking an interest in migration diplomacy to gain political capital on the regal grounds of foreign policy.

Migration diplomacy is therefore a two-level game entailing power games across the domestic and international spheres. But the most striking debates concern the use of migration as a geopolitical weapon in emerging "hybrid wars". Russia and Belarus, for example, have been channelling asylum seekers or structuring emigration channels from the Middle East to Poland, Estonia, Lithuania, and Finland since 2019 with the aim of destabilising European member states and fragmenting the EU. This kind of weaponisationis nothing new: in the early 2000s, Kelly Greenhill showed how Fidel Castro encouraged Cubans to leave for Florida during the "balseros crisis" of 1994 (Greenhill, 2002) in a post-Cold War context. The United States and the countries of Western Europe also used the reception of Russian and Hungarian dissidents and Vietnamese refugees during the Cold War, both in their ideological confrontation with the Soviet Union and for the needs of their labour markets.

The warlike use of mobility is even older. It relates to demographic engineering policies during conflicts. After the

conquest of Cyprus in 1571, the Ottoman state organised the deportation of families from Anatolia to populate and secure the island. After the Russo-Turkish War (1877-1878) and during the Balkan Wars (1912-1913), around a million Muslims were expelled or fled from Bulgaria, Greece and Serbia by the Russian Empire and resettled by the Ottoman Empire in Anatolia, often by displacing the local non-Muslim populations. Echoing the aphorism of socio-historian Charles Tilly, waging war and controlling in and out migration are central factors in the formation and transformation of states (Adamson & Greenhill, 2024; Thiollet, 2022).

Even if the metaphor of the "migratory weapon", introduced in the early 2000s by Kelly Greenhill, is open to criticism, the links between war, violence and migration are subject of new interpretations in collective perceptions and policies. It is no longer just war that is the cause of emigration or exile as in the case of Ukraine or Syria, but immigrants or exiles who are warriors or used as weapons in hybrid war (Bank et al., 2017). These entangled understandings are deployed mainly through discourses and in public diplomacy. Russia and Turkey are using the threat of mass migration against the EU, mostly to scare public opinions polarised by migration and diversity issues. The EU in turn is deploying armies at its borders and beyond. The militarisation of borders is intended to containrefugees. This "war on migrants" is not just metaphorical: the EU "makes" or "lets die" shipwrecked people in the Mediterranean Sea and around the Canary Islands or in Libyan prisons because they are "migrants". These deaths serve a macabre public diplomacy: they are supposed to deterother candidates for exile or migration, as in a cold war against immigration and asylum. While the actuality of the threat and the efficacy of deterrence or containment strategies is questioned (Clemens & Postel, 2018), is the discourses and policy effect of such discourses in EU public opinion and governments policies is real.

The militarisation of migration diplomacy invites us to reflect on the triptych of war, diplomacy and migration: does migration diplomacy, like all diplomacy, serve to wage war? to prevent war? which war are we talking about? cold or hot war? offensive or defensive?

Reflecting upon the contribution of migration diplomacy to international relations

The study of migration and diasporas has considerably enriched the theory of international relations, particularly in the field of security and transnational relations. It has enabled internationalists to renew security studies (Bank et al., 2017). The notion of securitisation, forged to understand the rise of security discourses and policies around migration, applies to other areas of diplomacy and international politics, such as health and the environment. Attention to migration and the practices of migrants has also accompanied the transnational turn in international relations (Schiller et al., 1992). It has led to a re-examination of the role of non-state actors, while illustrating the resilience of states and state sovereignty in global politics (Lacroix & Thiollet, 2023).

The notion of migration diplomacy remains a niche subject within international relations and diplomatic studies in general, in both English and French. It deserves closer attention from specialists in diplomacy and international relations for six main reasons, which are linked to its genealogies. Firstly, migration diplomacy forces us to decentralise our analysis away from the countries of the North, restrictive policies and immigration flows. Secondly, it shows that the legal dichotomies between migrants and refugees and the categories of diplomatic action are constantly being redefined according to the geopolitical and economic interests of actors, whether state or non-state. Thirdly, migration diplomacy requires a multi-scalar and multi-actor approach to diplomatic analysis: it operationalises the links between domestic and foreign policy, the interactions between local, national and international levels and between different types of actors. At local level, actors such as diasporas, municipalities and bureaucratic intermediaries play a crucial role in the implementation of migration policies. These local dynamics influence bilateral and multilateral relations, linking global processes and local realities. Fourthly, migration diplomacy refines our understanding of the types of diplomacy (public or private, formal or informal, explicit or implicit) and the specific instruments or issue linkagesbetween trade, health, culture, aid, etc. and migration.

Finally, migration diplomacy invites us to rethink the link between war, violence and diplomacy. It does so not only with regards to the strategic use of migrants, refuges and migration, but also in the analysis of migratory vulnerabilities produced by public discourse and political polarisation on issues of identity and diversity in host countries.

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