



ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The Role of Foreign Policy in Shaping the Refugee Policies of Asian States

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 19-09-2025

Accepted 26-07-2026

Published 06-10-2026

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to assess the extent to which foreign policy shapes the refugee policies of Asian states and to understand the nature and complexity of the causal relation between the two. As refugee studies have traditionally been analysed through the lenses of international law, national security, etc., this study aims to examine the extent to which this understanding can be further enriched through the lens of foreign policy. This is crucial as the issue of refugees and statelessness remains an ongoing concern in Asia. The method of qualitative-theoretical analysis is utilised to examine the foreign policy motivations behind the refugee policies of different Asian states. This is combined with the Most Different Systems Design (MDSD) variant of Ancker and Levy (2008) as an empirical research method of comparative politics to select and test the case studies. This paper's significant finding reveals a correlation between the two variables of this study while acknowledging the relevance of other variables. The analysis contributes towards an alternative framework to look at the approach of Asian states to refugee issues, i.e., Asian states make strategic and geopolitical calculations while acting on refugee issues instead of playing a passive role in burden-sharing. This also goes beyond the Eurocentric narrative, wherein the Global South is considered incapacitated in dealing with refugee crises. Evidence from the findings of this paper also contributes to understanding how Asian states have taken action to protect refugees and how humanitarianism and national security may not necessarily be antithetical to each other. Rather, foreign policy through this paper becomes the mediating variable between refugee-related humanitarian concerns and national security.

Keywords: Refugees; Statelessness; Most Different Systems Design; Eurocentrism; Global South

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INTRODUCTION

With the ongoing conflicts, political instability and increase in statelessness among the people of the Global South, it is pertinent to understand the issue of refugee protection from additional vantage points. For instance, the issue of refugees is mainly seen as a security problem in the Asian region¹. Foreign policy is less often seen as a lens through which states make decisions regarding refugees²⁻⁴. While some studies have reviewed foreign policy and its impact on asylum policies, they are more aligned towards European and American experiences^{5, 6}. A detailed study of state actors in Asia in this domain can contribute to an independent Global South perspective for analysing refugee flows⁷. Apart from the security dimension, much of the academic scholarship has analysed refugee situations

from the standpoint of international law and through a doctrinal lens⁸. However, adding a dimension of states' foreign policy decisions can enrich the analysis and possibly help explain why Asian states have diverged from international refugee regimes.

To fulfil the above aim, the research article is structured as follows: firstly, it describes the notion of refugee crises, the relevance of this issue to Global South states, and how the Global South bears a disproportionate burden of managing refugees vis-à-vis the Global North. Secondly, it describes the methods used in the analysis. Thirdly, it identifies scholars' various theoretical approaches to explain state responses to refugee crises. Further, it explains how Asian states have responded to and managed refugee flows and how their approach differs from the West's. Consequently,



the article presents five case studies from Asia to demonstrate how the foreign policies of different Asian states interplay with their refugee policies. For instance, the case studies of (a) China (vis-à-vis the North Korean defectors), (b) Japan's aid diplomacy, (c) Thailand's refugee camps, (d) Indonesia's cooperation with Australia for refugees, and (e) Malaysia's use of weaponised migration have been assessed. This will be followed by the results of this study, followed by the discussion wherein the significant contributions, implications for the field, and challenges in analysis are explained. The paper concludes by mentioning the causal relation between the two variables (foreign policy as an independent variable and refugee policies of Asian states as a dependent variable) emerging from this study.

Foreign Policy as a Distinct Analytical Anchor

Historically, foreign policy has been analysed as a distinct and independent variable influencing the outcomes of refugee-related policies. This process began as early as the United States of America's (USA) acceptance of Chinese refugees between 1860 and 1870⁹. There is continuity in this dynamic of approaching refugee issues through the lens of geopolitics, especially since the Cold War, due to the geopolitical value that refugees held in the foreign policy of the United States of America (USA)¹⁰. This is because during the Cold War, a refugee was described as an individual fleeing the Communist regime of the erstwhile Soviet Union or from West Asia, and this mattered in the ideological battle between capitalism and communism¹⁰. As a result, most of the refugees who sought asylum in the USA in the 1980s were from Cuba and Vietnam, even though the definition of a refugee has evolved over time through international legal protection regimes¹⁰. While the USA is only one example, other states such as Sweden and Germany have also hosted refugees for gaining geopolitical value, and the causal relation between foreign policy and refugee policy still matters because of the large amount of refugee flows that have occurred since the Cold War and due to the ongoing refugee crises in both the Global North and Global South¹⁰. Foreign interventions by external powers into post-colonial states, as a key foreign policy instrument, have also strengthened the causal link between foreign policy and the resulting displacement and refugee flows that these interventions have created over the years¹⁰.

Further, scholarly studies demonstrate that states admit refugees from rival states to a greater extent, especially when the ethnicity of a particular refugee and asylum-seeking population is similar to that of the host community¹¹. This itself differentiates foreign policy as an independent variable distinct from other factors such as security, economic, and domestic political considerations

because the refugee policy decisions in many instances depend on the nature of relations between the host state and the country/state of origin of refugees and asylum-seekers¹¹. The different motivations and foreign policy goals behind making a particular refugee policy decision reflect the distinctiveness of foreign policy as an independent variable in this paper. For instance, the admission of refugees by a host state is also considered an acknowledgement by the host state that a particular country/state of origin has triggered human rights violations leading to the displacement of certain groups of people¹². This helps the host adversary to delegitimise a particular state¹². Further, enhancing regional manoeuvre and influence is another foreign policy goal, reflected in refugee policy decisions and distinguishing it from security considerations. For instance, a host state may target deportations to weaken a given state's capacity².

The Concept of 'Refugee Crises' and Its Relevance to the Global South

Refugee crises primarily result from conflict (natural or human-made) that leads to large-scale population movements and displacement across state borders in search of refuge^{13, 14}. They seek to protect themselves from persecution, armed conflict, violence and other harms, triggering a humanitarian crisis that requires the attention and assistance from the international community^{14, 15}. This aligns with Kaldor's 'new war' thesis, wherein it is argued that in present times, wars are better understood as violence directed against civilian non-combatants^{16, 17}.

Scholars like Astri Suhrke (1998) argue that, owing to a lack of legal compliance, some states evade their obligations towards refugees, especially those from the Global North, because the states of the Global South are geographically close to conflict zones¹⁸. Therefore, there is a disproportionate burden on the Global South states to deal with the refugees, and collective burden-sharing does not prevail¹⁹. For example, according to recent UN data from the end of 2025, 73% of the 36.8 million refugees are hosted by middle- and low-income states²⁰. Further, scholars from the Third World Approaches to International Law (TWAIL), such as Chimni (1998)²¹, criticise the West's Cold War tactics as the refugees from the Global South face restrictive asylum policies, resulting in a 'non-entree regime', which implies a deliberate blocking of refugees from the Global South. Moreover, the 1951 Refugee Convention's narrow definition of refugees has been criticised for being insufficiently inclusive in global South contexts such as post-colonialism, structural adjustment programmes, and the adverse impacts of climate change²¹. Likewise, the works of Makau Mutua (2001), E. Tendayi Achiume (2019), Fareda Banda (2024),



etc., highlight themes related to the impact of colonialism on the Global South and the racial treatment of refugees and migrants from post-colonial states^{22, 24}. For instance, Makua Mutua criticises the international human rights regime encompassing the United Nations (UN) system, international non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and Western states for giving birth to a 'savages-victims-saviors' nexus²². This three-dimensional idea represents how the 'civilising mission' of the West justifies its paternalistic approach towards the Global South. Further, Mutua criticises how the West does not account for historical injustices emanating from racism, war and colonisation, all of which have played a significant role in the displacement of the people of the Global South²².

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This research article is based on a qualitative-theoretical analysis that extends theories of international relations in the context of refugee studies to explain state responses to refugee situations, including a few subsets of realism and constructivism. This analysis combines the case study method to balance theory with context-specific analysis. The small-N case studies of the Asia-Pacific states are chosen in this paper based on the selection criteria of the Most Different Systems Design (MDSD) of comparative politics based on Anckar and Levy's (2008) variant of this model^{25, 26, 85}.

This variant of the Most Different Systems Design (MDSD) has been employed in this paper because even though the chosen states have different contexts in terms of different political regimes (e.g. China vis-à-vis Japan), international legal commitments (whether they are signatories to international conventions related to refugees), economic variations (in terms of level of development), etc., their foreign policy emerges as a common causal factor in the analysis of their refugee policies, as this paper will demonstrate. Another crucial reason for choosing this variant of the methodological model is that every case study reveals a causal relation between foreign policy and refugee policy, where the former takes precedence over the latter. The different dispositions of the case studies of Asian states still lead to the same outcome: their refugee policy decisions (dependent variable) are the result of their foreign policy considerations (independent variable). While this paper argues that foreign policy independence is a major driver of refugee policy decisions, it does not discount other important variables, such as domestic politics and security considerations. The paper aims to shed light on the nuanced causal relationship between foreign policy and refugee policy.

THEORETICAL REGISTERS FOR UNDERSTANDING STATE RESPONSE TO REFUGEE CRISES

While no single theory of international relations can alone explain the causal relation between foreign policy and refugee-related decision-making among Asian states, this paper employs two theoretical layers to identify which are applicable and well-suited to the causal link between foreign policy and refugee policy decisions. These include (a) realist theory in international relations, along with one of its subsets, namely the theory of weaponised migration, and (b) constructivism in its two forms, as explained subsequently. Though these two broad theories are distinct analytical registers, they facilitate the most different system design model employed in this paper in terms of the constant causal relation reflected in the study, i.e., how refugee policy is shaped by the foreign policy of Asian states. Additionally, seeing the case studies on a spectrum of realism and constructivism will be helpful because this paper utilised both the theories and their variants through a continuum instead of treating the two as complete opposites. This understanding is drawn from the works of Barkin^{27, 28} on 'realist-constructivism' where he has directly applied this logic between realism and constructivism. Even the results table will depict how these two theories are simultaneously applicable in some case studies.

The Realist Aversion Towards Refugee Protection

The refugee crisis is considered a non-ideal problem in realism, an approach that accommodates the practical constraints of states, such as geopolitical priorities, security concerns, and economic scarcity²⁹. This is where the need to analyse state decisions through non-ideal theory arises, as conditions in the real world are not ideal²⁹. In the Asian context, the Bali Process on People Smuggling, Trafficking in Persons and Related Transnational Crime is such an example^{30, 31}.

Since realist theorists believe in the supremacy of national interest, even if a state takes a policy decision in favour of refugees, realists would apply Mearsheimer's theory to argue that a state policy in favour of refugees is adopted only if it aligns with its overall geopolitical calculus⁸⁶. Some reasons are cited by scholars about why realist dynamics are averse to humanitarian intervention in refugee domains: According to Barry Posen (1993), the ethnic conflicts and civil wars that lead to refugee flows are akin to a realist 'security dilemma' because of the fear of anarchy, competition for security, state fragility, etc.³².

From a realist perspective, states prefer national security over the principle of non-refoulement⁸⁷. While, non-refoulement refers to the international obligation of states, i.e., as per Article 33 (1) of the 1951 Refugee Convention,



no state party can expel or return a refugee to a state where their life or freedom may be in danger based on 'race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion'³³, realists would instead support border control through militarisation and repatriation³⁴. The case study of China and North Korean defectors, later in the discussion, will reveal how China chose its national security and foreign policy priorities over giving legal recognition to refugees.

Another approach within realism is that of 'weaponised migration', as advanced by Kelly M. Greenhill. According to this approach, refugee crises may be used or created to secure political, military, or economic concessions from a target state³⁵. The way to achieve this has been described as 'Coercive Engineered Migration' (CEM), which refers to the deliberate threat or creation of refugee flows³⁵. An example is how Libya's Muammar Gaddafi coerced the European Union into providing financial and political support³⁵. Another example is Uganda, where the then-President Idi Amin expelled about 50,000 individuals of Asian origin in an attempt to pressure the United Kingdom to continue military support¹⁷.

The Constructivist Strands

The first constructivist strand is Acharya's 'norm subsidiarity', which refers to how local actors create norms to deflect the influence of powerful actors while preserving their own autonomy³⁶. This is relevant here as the Southeast Asian states have asserted their independent foreign policy stance as one of the crucial strategies to counter the hegemony of European states and the United States of America (USA) because of the historical interventions done by the West through colonialism and Cold War politics³⁷. Though in contemporary times, many Southeast Asian states have developed distinct political systems and varying levels of economic development, the strategic autonomy they seek to maintain through the 'ASEAN Way' is a major tenet of their foreign policy³⁸. The 'ASEAN Way' refers to a model of intergovernmental engagement among its member states, based on informal, consensus-based, and non-adversarial negotiations³⁹. Therefore, this paper argues that this approach towards refugee policies is an outcome of their foreign policy goal of maintaining regional autonomy.

However, it is necessary to mention another constructivist strand employed, which concerns how states protect refugees to reflect a positive image of themselves in international forums, because not all states are deflecting the influence of international actors or great powers. Therefore, states may contribute to humanitarian responses for refugee protection to have greater legitimacy internationally among other states and international

organisations⁴⁰. This counterbalances the realist explanation and supports state responsibility for refugee protection, as it is seen as a way to gain diplomatic currency and soft power⁴¹. Following the same principles, scholars argue that Germany adopted an open-door policy toward refugees during the 2015 European refugee crisis, aiming to portray itself as a champion of human rights^{42, 43}.

THE ASIAN APPROACH TO REFUGEE CRISES

There is a marked contrast in how Asian states have dealt with the refugee situation. Some scholars describe their approach as 'pragmatic' rather than a Western-driven version of human rights and refugee rights discourse, with the following key characteristics.

Ratification Status of Asian States to International Treaties

While the West has a better ratification record (for instance, all European states are signatories to the Refugee Convention)⁴⁴, most Asian states have not ratified conventions such as the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol because of the Eurocentric leanings of the regime and their exclusion from its drafting⁴⁴. Many Asian states felt that international refugee law was drafted to suit the realities of post-World War Europe rather than the refugee crises prevalent in Asia. Additionally, they feared the erosion of sovereignty by acceding to international refugee norms⁴⁵.

Scholars describe how international refugee law is also applied ad hoc to meet the demands of maintaining sovereignty, border control, and national security⁴⁶. For example, in Southeast Asia, only Cambodia, the Philippines, and Timor-Leste have signed the 1951 Refugee Convention; most Southeast Asian states reserve the discretion to accept or reject asylum seekers without binding international legal obligations. Therefore, state responses to refugee management are more crisis-driven (for example, the Rohingya refugee crisis), and policies may differ depending on geopolitical considerations. The non-signatory status also gives them greater flexibility in deciding refugee matters⁴⁷.

The Asian "Migration Regime Complex"

The Asian states have a "migration regime complex", which refers to the multiple levels of governance structures (both formal and informal) that govern refugee flows in the absence of a common regional convention⁴⁸. This includes global standards set by institutions like the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the International



Labour Organisation (ILO), etc.⁴⁹, transregional frameworks such as the ones established by the Colombo Process, Abu Dhabi Dialogue, etc., regional cooperation frameworks like the Association for Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), etc., sub-regional consultative processes like the Asia-Pacific Consultations on Refugees, Displaced Persons and Migrants, Bali Process and Manila Process, ad hoc forums and meetings such as the Jakarta Declaration, and bilateral cooperation through MoUs, treaties, joint statements, etc.⁵⁰.

Another feature of this system is an emphasis on temporary protection for refugees rather than permanent settlement or naturalisation. Instead of granting refugees legal status, many Asian states have adopted temporary protection measures. For example, even though countries like Malaysia and Thailand have classified refugees as 'illegal immigrants', their presence is tolerated for temporary periods. Thailand adopted the 'Thai-Open Door Policy' for the period 1979-1980 to provide temporary asylum to Cambodian refugees, only with the expectation that they would resettle or repatriate. At the same time, the Philippines facilitates third-party settlement for refugees while allowing them to temporarily stay in the state⁸⁸.

Preference for Regional Solutions and Regional Security Concerns Over International Cooperation

There is also a preference for regional and bilateral solutions over recourse to international, UN-led frameworks. For example, regarding regional cohesion, the ASEAN member states respect the principle of non-interference in the affairs of other ASEAN member states⁴⁵. However, the issue of refugees is still relevant to the region owing to the overwhelming presence of refugees. For instance, the Asia-Pacific region has over 7 million refugees, per the UNHCR's Report, 'UNHCR Projected Global Resettlement Needs 2025'¹⁹.

Further, the traditional security concerns and terrorism have caused bilateral frictions in the ties of the member states, thus making cooperation difficult among the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) members. Therefore, none of the SAARC member states has signed the Refugee Convention (except Afghanistan). Even though foreign policy practitioners and scholars emphasise the preference for regional solutions, regional cooperation on refugee issues has remained elusive within the SAARC framework⁵¹.

Refugee Status Determination through Alternative Tools

Asian states that did not sign the Refugee Convention have formulated their own policies for the determination of the status of refugees. The states that fall under this category

are Hong Kong, India, and Taiwan⁵². In India, refugees originating from neighbouring areas are managed by the Ministry of Home Affairs. Refugee Status Determination (RSD) of those from areas other than neighbouring states is conducted by the UNHCR-India⁵³. The government of Hong Kong screens refugees and their non-refoulement claims through a Unified Screening Mechanism (USM), which the UNHCR previously did⁵⁴. Taiwan is another example; it is neither a party to the Refugee Convention nor a member of the UN⁵⁵.

Preference for Encampment Policies

The government of Bangladesh designated the Cox Bazaar area for Rohingya refugee camps, which host over 929,800 refugees as of UNHCR data 2025. Nepal hosted Bhutanese refugees in camps during the 1990s. Other examples include the Jalozi camp in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa region of Pakistan, Tibetan refugees in India, etc.⁵⁶.

Consideration of Economic Costs

Another factor in the pragmatic approach is the consideration of the economic costs of hosting refugee populations. The refugees are not primarily considered a human rights issue, but they are managed through economic bargaining. The extent of development of the specific Asian state is also cited as a factor in determining how the refugees will be managed⁵⁷. This will be further elaborated in the case studies below.

While the above approaches adopted by Asian states allow them flexibility and autonomy in dealing with refugees, these policy decisions do not operate in isolation; the foreign policy imperatives of these states also shape their refugee policies. The following case studies will further illustrate this point. The following states are chosen such that the varied geographic, cultural, economic and political dispositions can be factored in and the methodology of the most different systems design can be employed.

THE CASE STUDIES

Case Study 1: China's Approach towards North Korean Defectors & Tibetan Refugees in India

The People's Republic of China (a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention) has a preference for repatriating the North Korean defectors over non-refoulement. Scholarly literature has identified an interplay among geopolitical, security, and economic components, as reflected in this approach. The disintegration of the Soviet Union destabilised North Korea's economy, which was heavily dependent on aid from the former Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China (PRC). The Famine in North Korea affected bilateral ties between the two states during the 1990s. The North Korean government failed to prevent



hunger and starvation-induced deaths. As a result, those who defected from the government began entering China secretly. It responded by bypassing its obligations as a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention and treated the North Korean defectors as illegal economic migrants instead of recognising them as refugees. This was followed by the tightening of borders and border militarisation across the Chinese border⁵⁸.

Thus, by deporting them, it wanted to secure its geopolitical and security interests, as the region, being a theatre of Cold War politics, had the USA's troops stationed in South Korea. Through its realist ambitions, China secured some geographical distance from the USA and South Korea through North Korea, whose political stability was essential for Beijing⁵⁹. Moreover, the Sino-North Korean Mutual Aid and Cooperation Treaty (1961) was already in existence⁵⁸.

However, an analysis of China's refugee policy is incomplete without mentioning the geopolitical rivalry it has had with India, as the Indian intake of Tibetan refugees and the establishment of the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) at Dharamshala, India, have impacted the foreign and refugee policies of both states. India has balanced humanitarian obligations with strategic interests and regional security concerns, and its foreign policy has been an important tool in shaping decisions on refugees⁶⁰. This is particularly evident in how it has utilised its foreign policy approach of 'strategic ambiguity' to create space for manoeuvre and flexibility in refugee decisions⁶¹. Although not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention and its Optional Protocol, India has supported refugees on a case-by-case basis for a long time. An example of its sustained support is its support for Tibetan refugees and the government-in-exile of the Dalai Lama. This policy is considered an extension of India's foreign policy to manage its strategic relations with China⁶¹.

Case Study 2: Japan's Aid Diplomacy

Even though Japan is a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, its asylum policy has been described as restrictive. It prefers providing financial aid for global efforts to protect refugees by investing in programmes of agencies like the UNHCR. This preference for contributing financial assistance instead of accepting refugees domestically is described as a dichotomy and a diplomatic decision rather than a humanitarian one⁶². It is also considered a 'liberal democratic paradox', paralleling Chimni's criticism of the West's 'non-entrée' regimes. For instance, only twenty applicants out of 19,626 were granted refugee status in 2017⁶³.

While many factors influence this policy, the scope of this paper aims to emphasise the reflection of Japan's diplomatic interests in its refugee policy. Firstly, Japan posits itself as a humanitarian country while maintaining its influence in regions like West Asia by providing financial aid. This helps promote its goodwill and soft power internationally. To avoid international criticism for its restrictive asylum policies, Japan announced the acceptance of Syrian refugees as students during the G7 Summit in 2016⁸⁹. It introduced the Japanese Initiative for the Future of Syrian Refugees (JISR) in 2017, welcomed Syrian refugees as students from Jordan and Lebanon on a temporary three-year scholarship, and gave them the option to either return to Syria or get absorbed in the Japanese labour market, ensuring that they are contributors to the domestic economy and not a financial burden on the government. This policy is reflective of both neoliberal humanitarianism and a geopolitical calculus: this helps Japan maintain harmonious ties with Arab states like Lebanon and Jordan, which is essential for Japan to respond to its energy security needs and maintain positive relations with its Western allies; it contributes towards post-war reconstruction by producing skilled Syrian professionals without getting involved in Syria politically⁶⁴. Secondly, its diplomatic ties with Southeast Asian states also influence its refugee policy. The main principle adopted by Japan in this context is how it has accepted refugees from strategically important states in this region. For example, as a Western ally during the Cold War, Japan accepted refugees from Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam during the Indochinese refugee crisis⁶². Further, apart from humanitarian goals, Japan's economic and diplomatic interests in Myanmar have driven its refugee resettlement programmes for refugees from Myanmar. Owing to its strong ties with Myanmar and the presence of Chinese geopolitical influence in the region, Japan avoids criticising Myanmar for its human rights violations, especially in the case of Rohingya refugees⁶⁴.

However, the Ukrainian War 2022 was exceptional in that Japan accepted Ukrainian arrivals by giving them temporary residence and work permits. It established the Liaison and Coordination Council for Ukrainian Evacuee Issues in 2022. This is considered a break from its historically restrictive asylum policies. The scholarly explanation for Japan's exceptional move comes from 'ontological security' (coined by R.D. Laing and developed by Anthony Giddens), i.e., a state's requirement to maintain its identity at the international level⁶⁵.

Case Study 3: Refugee Camps in Thailand

During the Cold War, Thailand actively intervened in the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia. To support the anti-Vietnamese rebellion, Thailand used Cambodian refugee



camps strategically by militarising them and diverting international aid to fund the insurgency against Vietnam. Most of the refugee camps became controlled by militants and guerrillas by the late 1980s^{3, 66}

Further, Thailand, along with ASEAN, projected the exodus of Cambodian refugees as an example of the perils of communism. Other ways of diplomatic manoeuvring included the lack of formal recognition of Cambodians as refugees to limit the involvement of the UN. The refugee camps located on the Thai-Cambodian border served as a human buffer, as any attack by Vietnam was treated as an attack on innocent civilians living in camps and as an invasion of Thailand. Therefore, the refugee camps served as a humanitarian initiative and a strategic tool⁶⁷.

The Indochinese refugee crisis is another instance in which Thailand utilised a refugee crisis for diplomatic leverage. The Thai government applied a policy of “humane deterrence”, wherein refugees who came from Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam were kept in harsh conditions to deter further influx of refugees into its territory. Even though international organisations were allowed to give humanitarian assistance to the refugees inside Thailand, the Thai government maintained its strategic interest and pressured Western states to resettle them¹⁸.

Case Study 4: Indonesia, Regional Migration Governance and Cooperation with Australia

Historically, it has hosted the Vietnamese refugees during the Indochinese refugee crisis (1975-1995) and coordinated its responses with the UNHCR⁶⁸. However, the non-signatory status of Indonesia in terms of the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol helps Indonesia to manage refugee flows in its own strategic favour, which paves the way for helping it balance humanitarian obligations with national interest. Indonesia also leverages its position in ASEAN to be a key player in Southeast Asia's regional governance of refugee flows⁶⁹. As a regional player, Indonesia played an influential role in the Bali Process on People Smuggling, Trafficking in Persons, and Related Transnational Crime, which it co-chairs with Australia; it primarily helps Indonesia shape regional refugee governance. It also plays a key role in ASEAN's Political-Security Community, which securitises refugee issues⁷⁰.

Indonesia has utilised refugee flows as a diplomatic bargaining chip, especially with Western states. For example, as Indonesia is a transit state for refugees (from states like Afghanistan, Iraq and Sri Lanka) who attempt to reach Australia, the Australian government has assisted the Indonesian government with financial aid for stronger border control, refugee management needs and anti-smuggling operations. Therefore, while Indonesia gets

financial support for managing refugees, this also allows it to maintain its autonomy over matters of refugee policies⁷⁰.

While some scholars have called Indonesia a major regional player in refugee matters, another set of scholars has explained the diplomatic cooperation between Indonesia and Australia on the issue of refugee management through another theoretical framework. Scholars explain their ties through “incentivised policy transfer”, which counters the concepts of global ‘burden-sharing,’ ‘burden-shifting,’ and ‘cross-issue persuasion.’ Global ‘burden-sharing’ calls for equitable sharing of responsibility for refugees through financial burden sharing (where economically powerful states can assist the weaker ones), people sharing (where states decide to share refugees among them), and policy sharing (where states harmonise and coordinate over their asylum policies across a region). In contrast to burden sharing, Australia is offloading refugees onto Indonesia, while Indonesia does not have a permanent framework for refugee protection⁷¹.

So far as ‘burden-shifting’ is concerned, it occurs when a state transfers the responsibility to protect refugees to another state. While Australia's policy of Pacific Solution sent asylum-seekers to Papua New Guinea and Nauru, the cooperation between Indonesia and Australia, which is based more on diplomatic calculations, cannot be directly explained through burden-shifting, as burden-shifting involves coercion. At the same time, Indonesia has voluntarily adopted policies to cooperate with Australia on refugee flow management⁷¹.

‘Cross-issue persuasion’ happens when weaker states (e.g., Indonesia) gain from powerful states (e.g., Australia) by cooperating in different spheres. Therefore, it is argued that the concept of Incentivised Policy Transfer better explains the cooperation between Indonesia and Australia as a) unlike burden-sharing, it leads to balance of power, b) unlike burden-shifting, Indonesia has voluntarily accepted Australia's cooperation and assistance which is done for the sake of national and strategic interests and not out of coercion and c) unlike cross-issue persuasion, scholars argue that through initiatives like the Bali Process and Lombok Treaty, Australia is dominant in shaping the regional asylum policies⁷¹.

Case Study 5: Malaysia and Its Response to the Rohingya Refugee Crisis within the ASEAN Framework

Even as a non-signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, Malaysia is hosting around 200,260 refugees and asylum-seekers as per UNHCR records of 2025. Out of these, the majority of refugees and asylum-seekers have originated from Myanmar, and others come from states like Afghanistan, Pakistan, Syria, Yemen, etc.⁷². Scholarly



literature has revealed constructivist accounts of Malaysia's handling of refugee crises. For example, Malaysia has supported diplomatic endeavours in the case of ASEAN's engagement with Myanmar during the Rohingya refugee crisis. This was done to comply with the commitments Malaysia has made in favour of regional peace within the framework of ASEAN. Scholars have described this approach as 'constructive engagement'⁷³.

The constructivist view is that even though Malaysia has a solidarity with Rohingya refugees, it has managed to balance its criticism of Myanmar's government through these indirect diplomatic engagements and dialogues. Moreover, it is argued that it has complied with ASEAN's policy of non-interference through these steps⁷⁴. Scholars also describe this as the 'quiet diplomacy' of Malaysia and ASEAN member states⁷⁵. ASEAN, by definition, is not a military bloc but a sub-regional alliance aimed at achieving collective goals of regional stability and peace, economic development and maintaining sovereignty. Therefore, Malaysia operated within this framework in responding to the Rohingya refugee crisis. Viewing this from a constructivist and realist lens, it highlights how it prioritised its foreign policy preference of regional peace rather than confrontation with Myanmar⁷⁶.

RESULTS

The main findings of this paper have been summarised in [Table 1](#) for the states chosen. Based on scholarly literature and state practices, the summary of findings depicts the relationship between foreign policy and refugee policy decisions of different Asian states. The applicable theories mentioned below are depicted as a bridge between the two variables.

DISCUSSION

Key Contributions

The findings of this paper have enriched the assessment of refugee-related issues. Firstly, traditional studies explored refugee issues through legal-doctrinal analysis, wherein state compliance and non-compliance with international human rights obligations take precedence. In Asia, the doctrinal analysis of refugee issues focuses more on the gaps in state practice vis-à-vis the states' human rights obligations set by international refugee regimes (e.g. the 1951 Refugee Convention, etc.)⁴⁵.

Though such a lens is an important area of analysis and critique, this paper enriches the understanding of why Asian states diverge from adhering to international norms of refugee rights. Even though traditional studies have cited Eurocentrism as a significant reason for the lack of norm internalisation and norm diffusion in Asia regarding international refugee law, the incorporation of foreign

policy as a significant factor in refugee contexts helps enrich the discussion. The paper has identified specific patterns across Asia in terms of refugee decision-making. For example, concepts about migration diplomacy, Asian migration complex, weaponised migration, etc., help identify common patterns among these states.

Secondly, the traditional studies had flagged the global south, including the Asian states, as outliers and incapable of implementing the international refugee norms. The reasons cited for this were post-colonial instability, low development of the economy and political institutions, lack of political will, etc.⁷⁷. Other reasons cited were 'Asian exceptionalism' and cultural pluralism. However, this paper contributed by building on the perspective that the divergences of Asian states from the Western model of refugee and human rights are not necessarily attributed to incapacity or cultural pluralism. Instead, many Asian states consciously function as rational actors in making trade-offs and bargains while dealing with refugees⁵².

Thirdly, the findings of this paper contribute towards transcending this dichotomy between the state's humanitarian obligations vis-à-vis its national interest, which has a dominant narrative in traditional studies. This is revealed in the many Asian states that have protected refugees in return for strategic, geopolitical, and economic gains. This also conveys that protection for refugees may not necessarily be a humanitarian pursuit among some Asian states. The paper discusses some examples, such as outsourcing refugees to third-party states⁷⁸.

Implications

The findings of this paper have crucial implications for academic scholarship. Firstly, it contributes towards the line of reasoning that treats refugee policy as a subset of states' foreign policy⁷⁹. Various examples already serve as evidence of state practice consistent with this reasoning. Secondly, the causal relation between foreign policy and refugee policy in the context of Asian states becomes dynamic. The refugee policy is not only influenced by foreign policy considerations; foreign policy is also affected by the refugee policies of other Asian states. For example, while the paper analysed the People's Republic of China's approach towards North Korean defectors, it is essential to understand that these mechanisms do not operate in isolation. India's foreign policy, which is considered to be a competitor of China in the geopolitical sphere, also affects the Chinese foreign policy. This was seen in how the arrival of Tibetan refugees to India has historically affected the geopolitical rivalry between India and China⁸⁰.

Another important implication is that this paper contributes to an interdisciplinary study of refugees by engaging with foreign policy while also acknowledging



other factors, such as states' international legal commitments and national security. For example, recent studies have flagged the potential risks of isolating refugee studies from other disciplines. These risks include 'institutional gatekeeping', limiting the scope of learning to

'path dependencies' and 'cross-regime perspectives', as well as the risk of disconnection from current developments in parallel fields. These claims are supported by eminent scholars in the field, including Goodwin-Gill, Hamlin, Benhabib, Chimni, and others⁸¹.

Table 1

Case	Foreign Policy Goal	Theory Applied	Refugee Policy Decision
China	Maintaining influence over the Korean Peninsula vis-à-vis South Korea and the USA.	Neorealism	- North Korean defectors are recognised as 'economic migrants' instead of refugees. - Border control through militarisation and repatriation. - China's foreign policy is affected by India's admission of Tibetan refugees, counterbalancing China.
Japan	- Promoting a positive self-image aligned with humanitarianism. - Geopolitical interests in West Asia.	- Constructivism - Realism	- Providing financial aid instead of direct involvement. - Temporary sponsorship of Syrian refugee students. - Low settlement rates or grant of asylum for refugees within the state.
Thailand	- Align with the Western bloc during the Cold War. - Balance of power with Vietnam aligned with the erstwhile Soviet Union. - Maintaining the regional influence of ASEAN to avoid international involvement. - Deter a massive influx of refugees into the state territory.	- Realist 'security dilemma' - Offensive realism	- Militarisation of Cambodian refugee camps during the Cold War, and creating a buffer zone against Vietnam. - Protection and legal/ formal recognition for Cambodians as refugees. - Humane deterrence policy.
Indonesia	- Balancing humanitarian obligations towards refugees and migrants with national interest. - Maintaining influence within ASEAN and the Southeast Asian region in the context of migration and refugee governance.	- Realism and neoclassical realism. - Hegemonic stability (region-wise).	- Coordinating its responses to refugee situations with the UNHCR while remaining a non-signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol. - Maintaining influence in regional initiatives. - Cooperation with Australia for better border control, financial aid and regional autonomy through cross-issue persuasion.
Malaysia	- Regional stability among ASEAN member states. - Balance criticism for Myanmar's actions against the Rohingyas to maintain regional cohesion within the framework of ASEAN. - Preference for peaceful negotiations instead of direct military confrontation.	- Constructivism - Realism	- Supporting back-channels of diplomacy with Myanmar, as initiated by ASEAN. - Hosting refugees from Myanmar even when Malaysia is not a party to the 1951 Refugee Convention. - Preference for the non-interference principle of ASEAN in the internal matters of Myanmar.

Limitations/Challenges of the Study

While common patterns have emerged in the decision-making of Asian states, an important challenge in comparing them lies in understanding causality. Foreign policy may not be a standalone variable, as it is affected by factors such as national security, economic interests, cultural dispositions, political developments, and civil society⁸². Therefore, it is difficult to determine the extent to which foreign policy remains an independent variable in the analysis.

Secondly, the dynamics of foreign policy aspects such as geopolitics keep shifting (Japan's foreign policy outlook since the Ukraine war, China's stance on Afghan refugees, etc.) across the different sub-regions of Asia, making it challenging to locate all the case studies within a common temporal framework for analysis. This makes it challenging to conduct a longitudinal study across the different Asian states from their respective sub-regions (East Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia, and West Asia)⁸³.

Thirdly, there is a risk of overemphasis on the experiences of a few states over the others owing to the level of documentation and primary data availability. For instance, some states in Asia have relatively lower representation in the analysis than states where primary data and statistics documentation is better (India, Japan, etc.). The UNHCR's portal on Refugee Data Finder has flagged these concerns while describing limitations owing to thin data reporting by states⁵⁶.

Fourthly, the lack of a regional convention for refugee protection in Asia limits this region's comparison to other regions with regional arrangements, such as the European and African Union, where such institutional frameworks exist. For example, the EU has a Common European Asylum System (CEAS), and the African Union has its own Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa. The absence of such a region-wide institutional quotient limits the scope of drawing comparative inference. This causes challenges in understanding how and why Asian states have a different approach than other regions, such as European states. Further, the lack of regional conventions and regional courts for refugees in Asia limits the scope of investigating the regional level of analysis (ASEAN exists as a sub-regional institutional framework), such that broader conclusions can be drawn about Asia as a whole⁸⁴. Therefore, this requires theoretical-methodological triangulation to draw cross-regional inferences as attempted in this paper.

CONCLUSION

The main findings of this study suggest the influential role of foreign policy (independent variable) in influencing

refugee decision-making of Asian states (dependent variable). The theories and concepts used act as a bridge in establishing a causal relation between these two variables. This is significant as it highlights how the issue of refugee crises is as relevant to the Asian region as it is for Europe or other regions of the world. It also presents how the Asian states have developed unique ways to deal with refugee-related matters. Based on the causal relationship between these two variables, further study is needed to examine the extent to which the policy decisions of state actors in Asia have effectively mitigated refugee crises. For example, one such area of analysis is conceptualised as 'strategic humanitarianism' wherein the long-term impact of such refugee policy outcomes is measured, especially if the population of refugees in the host state keeps increasing⁴.

Moreover, by highlighting refugee policy as an instrument for state actors in international affairs, the study becomes relevant in the changing dynamics of the current world order, wherein the voices of the Global South states are emerging, and alternative frameworks to deal with crises, conflict, tariff wars, etc., are needed. It needs to be further studied where the refugee matters figure in Global South states' changing foreign policy approaches, where the thrust on alternative multilateral forums is getting stronger.

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