The Foreign Policy of Irregular Migration Governance

State Security and Migrants' Insecurity in Italy and Australia

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Irregular migration is one of the most momentous phenomena of the 21st century. While it is a life-changing process for migrants themselves, it also entails a number of significant challenges for destination countries and their local populations. Consequently, irregular migration is now a heavily debated and polarising issue in most receiving states. However, the multiple perspectives on this phenomenon are rarely assessed together, and states' role in shaping national and international responses remains understudied, which hinders a comprehensive understanding of irregular migration governance.

To address this issue, this innovative book investigates irregular migration by concurrently analysing the viewpoints of migrants, states, and their local populations. To that end, it builds on multidisciplinary insights from international relations, migration studies, political science, and other disciplines, and adopts Italy and Australia as two highly relevant yet rarely compared case studies, with a focus on their migratory foreign policies. In arguing for a multidisciplinary and holistic interpretation of irregular migration, it sheds new light on an influential and permanent feature of our times through key theory, security, and policy implications, as well as with relevant proposals. It also provides an assessment of unfolding trends, novel insights, and potential future outlooks based on the latest data and published research.

This book is therefore a valuable resource for academics, migration and security professionals, policymakers, diplomats, journalists, and students.

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Its preliminary findings have been discussed in migration seminars at the Complutense University of Madrid (2024), the FIERI Institute (2024), and the King's College London (2023), as well as in political science and international relations conferences such as APSA in Australia (2023), SISP in Italy (2023), and ISA (2023).

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1 The foreign policy of irregular migration governance

An overview

The growing significance of irregular migration in the 21st century

Irregular migration is one of the most momentous phenomena of the 21st century, and a truly global phenomenon since the end of the past one (Düvell 2006). One the one hand, it is far from being a novel issue, as the unauthorised movement of people across formal boundaries has been taking place for decades. In recent times, major global turning points such as the end of the Cold War and the ensuing globalisation decisively contributed to a new era of transnational migration (Triandafyllidou 2018). On the other, consequential developments such as technological advancements, conflicts, environmental disasters, diverging economic and demographic growth trends, and significant sociocultural and political transformations – many of which are still unfolding – have made it possible for (or forcefully spurred) people to migrate more often and farther than before (Koser 2007). Indeed, around 20 years ago, approximately 2.8% of the global population comprised migrants, whereas today that figure has risen to 3.5%. While the change might seem minimal, it attests that more than a quarter of a billion people have left their homes in search of a better life (de Haas *et al.* 2020).[1] According to United Nations (UN) estimates, about a third of them are not "regular migrants", as that number comprises internally displaced persons (IDPs) and/or stateless persons, refugees, and other categories that do not fall under the definition of regular migration (IOM 2022, p. 4).

Out of this large figure, an unspecified number of people are irregular migrants, whose very definition is riddled with difficulties, as partially explained by the challenges behind estimating their number. Even so, an institutional interpretation is provided by International Organization for Migration (IOM), which defines them as people migrating "outside the laws, regulations, or international agreements governing the entry into or exit from the state of origin, transit or destination" (IOM 2024). As accurately argued in the literature, attempting to quantify the number of irregular migrants is extremely difficult for a variety of reasons – definitions vary, their status may

change over time, some migrants may get "regularised" through amnesties, different types of "irregularity", incomplete data, among the many – but existing estimates range between 15–20% (Ambrosini and Hajer 2023) and 10–50% of all migrants worldwide (Koser 2010). Today, this would roughly amount to either 30–40 or 25–100+ million people globally. Even after discarding exaggerated figures, these remain substantial numbers, which bear considerable implications for migrants themselves but also for states and international organisations (IOs).[2]

Beginning with migrants' perspectives, irregular migration is inherently dangerous due to its very nature: if people cannot migrate in conventional ways, they will have to try to reach their destination by crossing conflict-afflicted or disaster-stricken zones and inhospitable areas. The complex reasons that led them to migrate in the first place – see Chapters 2 and 6 for related theoretical reviews – further aggravate their human *in*security (UNDP 1994) before, during, and often after the migration process.[3] Despite some efforts in receiving countries to divert the attention from this thorny issue – what Bleiker *et al.* (2013) have described as "dehumanisation", a tendency of the Australian media not to display images of migrants themselves – the perilous and often tragic journeys that irregular migrants undertake are far from being unknown to the general public. The high risks that irregular migration entails cannot but highlight how dire migrants' conditions – and how strong their will – are if they are prepared to accept those risks.

However, states too have reasons for concern when facing large and prolonged flows of irregular migration. Among the several, there are economic, logistical, sociopolitical, and security factors affecting why they seek to curb inward flows (see Abbondanza 2023a and Chapters 2–7). The difficult reception of irregular migrants in so-called "Global North" countries is routinely exploited by populist and anti-immigration parties, and in recent years the resulting political divisions within the European Union (EU) threatened the latter's very cohesion (Ambrosini 2018, p. 93). This complex issue is now a lightning rod for oft-confused socioeconomic grievances, and it is frequently associated with far-right politics and extremism. While there are obviously other factors at play, the (mis)management of substantial irregular flows contributes to further polarising receiving societies, which in turn renders them even less capable to cooperate in addressing this momentous challenge. To complicate things more, this situation is strategically exploited by revisionist states – Russia above all – both in terms of facilitating irregular flows and interfering with destination countries' political debates and elections, with the goal of destabilising an already-fragile international order (see Agenzia Nova 2023).

IOs are additional components of this equation, albeit less influential ones. While the role of IOs has been fundamental in promoting the human rights of migrants through the international law (see IOM 2000), their ability to ensure that these rights are respected is feeble and is progressively eroding due to

several ongoing developments, including the so-called crisis of democracy, the parallel rise of global nationalism, an ensuing emphasis on national sovereignty, and states' consequent desire to limit the portion of sovereignty they would have to relinquish for IOs like the UN to work effectively. This also applies to influential members of the "liberal order" such as Italy and Australia (see Dastyari and Hirsch 2019). Moreover, IOs such as the EU and the Bali Process are now converging on restrictive approaches to irregular migration governance – through "fencing" (border controls), "gatekeeping" (visa restrictions), externalisation, and potentially others – a substantial point that is explored several times in this volume. In essence, irregular migration is not a transient phenomenon as it was thought to be after the end of the Cold War, but a permanent feature of the 21st century, so much that de Haas *et al.* (2020) famously named ours as "the age of migration". Consequently, it increasingly affects all parties involved, chiefly migrants themselves, but also states and IOs.

The need for new research

Against this complex backdrop, academic investigations and research-based analyses are necessary to assess a sensitive phenomenon of global proportions and ramifications. This is further supported by public opinions' tendency to form their preferences based on their *perception* of this transnational issue, rather than through reliable information provided by experts (whose dissemination strategies can be ineffective or even counterproductive, see Dennison 2022). Starting from these considerations, this book aims to contribute to an open and ongoing debate carried out by many – academics, policymakers, and professionals from diverse fields – through an in-depth analysis of select understudied aspects bearing significant implications. This gap in the literature is represented by the foreign policy components of irregular migration governance, affecting migrants, states, and their local populations alike, of which Italy and Australia are two emblematic case studies. Destination countries' local populations, in particular, are part of the book's research scope – along with migrants and states – on account of their influence on both receiving societies and, indirectly, destination countries' migratory foreign policies (see Chapter 2). In other words, the novelty in this perspective lies in three specific elements: (i) the under-examined nature of the foreign policy elements of irregular migration policies; (ii) the concurrent focus on migrants, states, and their local populations (it is usually the former); and (iii) the examination of two highly relevant case studies that are seldom analysed jointly.

In terms of foreign policy significance, and despite the importance of irregular migration for global politics, studies jointly incorporating disciplinary insights from international relations (IR), security studies, and migration studies are scant, as traditionally only the latter has examined this phenomenon consistently, though rarely from other disciplines' viewpoints. To wit, IR and security implications of states' policies are under-examined, despite ensuing

from considerable foreign policy measures. These are explored multiple times in this volume and comprise, among many others, externalisation and offshore processing policies.[4] To be sure, there are several valuable studies exploring at least partially such issues, including those of Finotelli and Ponzo (2023), Ambrosini and Hajer (2023), Cusumano and Riddervold (2023), Wihtol de Wenden (2023), Abbondanza (2023b), Ceccorulli *et al.* (2022), Zotti and Fassi (2020), Geddes *et al.* (2019), Adamson and Tsourapas (2019), Bello (2017), Çetin (2015), Carvalho (2013), and Bloch and Chimienti (2013).[5] These are carefully conducted and often illuminating publications shedding light on the many intersections between the external and internal dimensions of irregular migration governance. Still, the paucity of works on the implications of this phenomenon *specifically* for the IR and security studies disciplines warrants new, broader, and multidisciplinary scholarly endeavours. This book thus builds on the existing scholarship to bridge cognate disciplines in a novel manner through theoretical and analytical eclecticism (Sil and Katzenstein 2010).

Second, the high level of specialisation in contemporary social sciences has produced an inevitable compartmentalisation of knowledge, whose contours are traced by disciplines and sub-disciplines. It is therefore unsurprising that migrants' and states' perspectives are rarely analysed together (see Lazaridis 2016, Brettel and Hollifield 2015, and Koser 2005 for rare exceptions). While this is easily understandable, it is also not helpful when attempting to provide a comprehensive understanding of the implications for all parties involved (for a rare attempt in this direction, see the seminal article by Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013). In the light of this, this volume seeks to transcend the inevitable dichotomy that has traditionally permeated debates on irregular migration and aims to fulfil this ambitious goal through both theoretical and empirical insights. The goal of assessing both migrants' and states' perspectives (with insights into their local populations as well) is pursued in the hope to boost a holistic approach to what is an extremely complex matter.

Third, it is useful to employ appropriate case studies in order to pursue this. Italy and Australia are not only highly relevant (well-known and controversial policies for more than two decades), but they have seldom been investigated together (see below), which supports this volume's novelty. Notwithstanding geographical, geopolitical, supranational, constitutional, and "numerical" differences that ought to be acknowledged (see the related discussions in Chapters 3 and 5), Rome and Canberra remain two major yet understudied frontrunners (from a comparative perspective) in terms of irregular migration governance. More specifically, the ongoing "refugee crisis" continues to firmly involve Italy in a variety of ways, and Rome continues its attempts to "manage" the world's busiest maritime migratory route. Conversely, although Australia's externalisation policies have attracted much attention since 2001 – as well as numerous criticisms – they have gone progressively unnoticed due to its virtually non-existent irregular flows in the past ten years. Despite the minuscule number of arrivals, Canberra continues to implement

its very restrictive outsourcing policies, which remain under-examined in their most recent years. Moreover, large surveys show that the majority of people in both countries support the deportation of irregular migrants and migrants residing illegally in their countries (Pew Research Center 2019).

In this case, too, there are valuable studies that represent a solid point of departure concerning the two countries – in particular, those by Abbondanza (2023a), Dastyari and Hirsch (2019), Scarpello (2019), Ghezelbash *et al.* (2018), Little and Vaughan-Williams (2017), Armillei and Mansouri (2017), Mussi and Tan (2017), and Glynn (2016). Even so, the latest book-length research adopting Italy and Australia as migratory case studies dates back to 2016 – so much has happened since then – a recent one explores many understudied aspects of bilateral relations (Abbondanza and Battiston 2023), but not irregular migration governance specifically, and no publication has a distinct emphasis on the foreign policy aspects of the two countries' irregular migration governance. These elements make the adoption of Italy and Australia directly germane to this book's goals.

This book

Against this backdrop, this volume aims to contribute to the extant literature by placing emphasis on the understudied foreign policy components of irregular migration governance, pursuing a holistic approach which considers both states' and migrants' perspectives (with complementary insights into destination countries' local populations), and adopting Italy and Australia as case studies. In doing so, it draws on the contemporary scholarships pertaining to relevant disciplines such as IR, security studies, and migration studies, as well as on other auxiliary social sciences. It thus considers theoretical explanations concerning states, their local populations, and the migrants themselves. Lastly, this research investigates the multiple security, policy, and theory implications of the above, prior to presenting conclusive remarks relating to current and potential future trends. With the book's definite focus outlined, it is appropriate to specify that some related elements are not considered here, including the role of visa policies and those of non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Far from dismissing them, this volume acknowledges the necessity to explore them with dedicated analyses, rather than simply being mentioned. Such relevant aspects of the irregular migration continuum are therefore left for future research.

Methodology

From a methodological standpoint, the several goals of this book call for a careful combination of three complementary approaches. Like most research endeavours (whether openly acknowledged or not), the whole book makes use of the literature review research method (Snyder 2019), which allows to

systematically scrutinise the extant scholarship in order to collect appropriate evidence from relevant disciplines. Second, the comparative component of this volume's empirical effort, focusing on Italy and Australia, is supported by the comparative case study (CCS) method (see Bartlett and Vavrus 2016), which is applied in Chapter 3 to both endogenous and exogenous factors shaping the two countries' migratory foreign policy. The concurrent use of these approaches – far from being new – therefore aims to pursue the book's goals through established social sciences methodologies, whose complementary nature is widely acknowledged in the methodological literature (see Onwuegbuzie *et al.* 2012).

Thirdly, to fulfil its IR goals, it also employs foreign policy analysis (FPA), a versatile and well-rooted approach emphasising the intersection between domestic elements, international context, and ensuing foreign policy (Kaarbo *et al.* 2013; Carlsnaes 1992). More specifically, FPA comprises six theoretical traits: multifactoriality (as opposed to monocausality), multilevel (all levels of analysis are considered), multidisciplinarity, conceptual integration, a focus on key human agents (policymakers), as well as other key agents (Hudson and Day 2019). In essence, this method allows to qualitatively assess numerous elements that promote a stronger theoretical understanding of the foreign policy making decision process, including domestic factors, international ones, and consequent foreign policies. Consequently, this book therefore makes use of its broad theoretical scope, with particular reference to the Italian-Australian comparative analysis outlined in Chapter 3.

From a definitional viewpoint, while acknowledging that asylum seekers and irregular migrants are not synonyms, this volume employs a "neutral" terminology which is traditionally adopted by both UN agencies and seminal publications (see IOM 2024, McAuliffe and Koser 2017, and Castles *et al.* 2012, among the many). Consequently, it utilises "irregular migrants", "irregular maritime arrivals" (IMAs), "asylum seekers", "undocumented migrants", "seaborne migrants", and "*sans paper*" interchangeably. Other definitions such as "illegal migrants" or "clandestine migrants" are intentionally avoided, as human beings are never truly "illegal", thanks to universal rights and the international law, and given the negative, crime-related implications of those terms. Moreover, it is important to underline that this volume inevitably deals with *mixed* flows, that is, comprising asylum seekers and other types of migrants, including economic migrants (Ferreira 2022). As interpretations of irregularity are never straightforward (see Triandafyllidou 2023), this book pursues a "definitional lowest common denominator" and thus utilises "irregular migration" in its broadest understanding, to refer to all those who cross an international border without authorisation. Further, an effort has been made to rely chiefly on primary (official) and secondary sources, as well as on sources in English, Italian, and other languages, therefore supporting the goals of this research through a multiplicity of sources. On occasion, when official or academic sources are not available, tertiary

sources from reliable outlets are employed. Lastly, all the volume's main findings are summarised at the end of each section with a dedicated table. This is done with a view to concisely outline the key elements of this investigation in a simple and immediate manner.

The book's structure

This book comprises seven chapters, each with its own bibliography. This introductory chapter (Chapter 1) contextualises the significance of irregular migration, introduces the literature gaps that this research seeks to address, outlines the disciplines it utilises and contributes to, and states its goals, theoretical-methodological approach, and structure. Chapter 2 presents the volume's eclectic theoretical framework, centred on insights concerning migrants (the rich corpus of migration theories, completed by the concept of human security), destination countries' local populations (explanations for the wariness of asylum seekers), and states (the most relevant IR theories). Chapter 3 provides an in-depth analysis of Rome's and Canberra's irregular migration foreign policies, from 2000 to 2024 inclusive. It explores the differences and similarities between the two countries' approaches – emphasising a growing convergence towards restrictive foreign policies – as well as the domestic and international contexts. Chapter 4 investigates the security implications of such policies for migrants and states, arguing that the former are becoming increasingly dangerous, while the latter are frustrated in the present context. In doing so, it shows that migrants' security decreases as states' security increases.

Chapter 5 focuses on the resulting policy implications, specifically policy gaps, alternatives (partially akin to "migration regimes"), and conundrums, while also shedding light on the potential external validity of the book's findings. It also recounts the policy history – and advances its own revisited understanding – of the offshore processing of asylum claims, arguing it ought to be rethought in a lawful, humanitarian, cooperative, and non-predatory manner. Chapter 6 examines the theoretical implications of the book's findings, underscoring the usefulness of lenses focusing on migrants, states, or the latter's populations, while showing the limits of compartmentalisation when attempting to reach a broader understanding of irregular migration, therefore warranting the need for eclectic and transdisciplinary approaches. Lastly, the concluding chapter (Chapter 7) serves as a summary of the volume's aims, means, and findings, along with three thematic discussions centred on current trends, new perspectives, and potential future outlooks. In conclusion, this volume seeks to contribute to the extant scholarships by providing a novel and interdisciplinary research on a topical phenomenon, which, at present, remains little-studied with reference to the many parties involved in it (migrants, states, and their local populations), its foreign policy components, and Italy and Australia as highly relevant case studies.

Notes

1 This increase is stronger than global population growth rates, albeit only moderately.
2 Among the many, those that directly or indirectly attempt to address irregular migration are the UN (including IOM, UNDP, UNHCR), the EU, ASEAN, the Bali Process, the African Union, and the OECD. See Chapter 7.
3 The human security concept was developed in 1994 by the UN Development Programme and comprises seven facets: economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community, and political security.
4 Externalisation is an umbrella term comprising all agreements seeking to curb irregular flows with the involvement of a third country, and offshore processing policies are more specific agreements entailing the extraterritorial assessment of migrants' asylum requests. Italy and Australia currently resort to both policy types.
5 This is obviously not meant to be a comprehensive list of studies investigating the IR implications of irregular migration governance.

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2 A theoretical framework for irregular migration

Migrants', states', and local populations' perspectives

Introduction

Theoretical explanations concerning why and how some people decide to migrate through irregular routes, why this phenomenon is difficult to accept in destination countries, and why and how most states strive to limit irregular flows, abound. However, as often happens, there is no universally shared consensus on such theories, or even on the way they are organised and approached in disciplines such as migration studies, international relations, and other social sciences. Convincing arguments on the inadequacy of both conceptual and theoretical tools concerning irregular migration have been voiced for around half a century (see Portes 1978, by way of example), and indeed contemporary irregular migration scholars agree on the convoluted state of related theorising.

Among the many cases in point, to quote Massey *et al*. (1993, p. 432): "At present, there is no single, coherent theory of international migration, only a fragmented set of theories that have developed largely in isolation from one another, sometimes but not always segmented by disciplinary boundaries". Castles *et al*. (2012, p. 118) make it clear that there's such an abundance of specific theories that "the causes of irregular migration […] are manifold and cannot be dealt with exhaustively here" ("here" being a volume chapter). van Liempt *et al*. (2023, p. 1) attest that they "do not intend to convey the illusion of a homogenized discourse around and on irregular migration". More to the point, in the words of Cvajner and Sciortino (2010, pp. 390–391): "for decades, researchers have complained that a thick fog surrounds the whole topic and that debates on the issue quickly became dialogues among the deaf".

In short, it is safe to say that while there is no shortage of theoretical endeavours on this topic – as shown in the remainder of this chapter – many of them remain circumscribed within specific areas of study. As hinted at, these are the study of what spurs people to migrate through irregular pathways, the study of why people in destination countries often fail to accept them in their societies, and the study of what states do when they attempt to manage irregular flows. In other words, there is no paucity of theories on these significant

points, but rather a compartmentalisation of knowledge that hinders a broader understanding of them. As Arango (2004, p. 15) persuasively put it: "Migration is too diverse and multifaceted to be explained by a single theory".

Against this backdrop, this does not aim to produce yet another theory, but it does seek to provide a wide-scoped, multidisciplinary, and holistic theoretical spectrum drawing on what already exists. The rationale is, in this case, that a novel "compendium" of the multiple and diverse literatures may be a useful tool not only for academics but also for migration professionals, journalists, and students alike, as well as those with a specific interest in Italy or Australia. While this chapter certainly makes no pretence to comprehensiveness – an entire book on this would scarcely suffice – it aims to concisely engage with some of the leading theories concerning the multiple relevant viewpoints. More specifically, theories centred on migrants have been dealt with frequently within migration studies, but a joint assessment of migrants', states', and local populations' perspectives is still missing, hence the reason for this chapter and the novelty about its theoretical endeavour. Consequently, the next section reviews theories centred on migrants' perspectives, whereas the following ones focus on the viewpoints of local populations in destination countries and states themselves. Whenever possible, examples referring to Italy and Australia are included to link such theories to the book's case studies.

Theories focusing on migrants' perspectives

Theoretical efforts centred on the individual level – migrants themselves – are numerous and have progressively improved their accuracy. A careful assessment of this rich corpus allows to broadly divide them into five categories (functionalist, structuralist, transnationalist, perceptionist, and hybridist), which are by no means hard and fast but rather aim to support a more direct understanding of them (see Table 2.1). The first group comprises *functionalist* theories, which view migration as an optimisation strategy derived from a cost-benefit analysis on the migrants' part. Among major notions, the "push-pull model" (PPM) has been an important component of migration studies for a long time, whose original contours can be traced back to Ravenstein's (1885) 19th-century works. According to this view, migration is analysed as a linear process, driven by unfavourable conditions in the country of origin (push factors) and favourable circumstances in the country of destination (pull factors), which may be affected by obstacles and personal characteristics (Lee 1966). However useful as a preliminary starting point, its limited conceptual scope has long been acknowledged by migration scholars (see Petersen 1958).

Migration systems theory (MST) is partially relatable to this, although it expands its scope. First introduced by Mabogunje (1970) to understand rural-urban migration, it has been considerably developed since then. Through a combination of broader approaches including world systems

theory, migration economics, social capital theory, and labour market theory, MST contextualises international migration within global exchanges of goods, capital, and people, which are affected by geographical factors, regional/global disparities, multilateralism, and the continuous evolution of world systems. Since these exchanges occur in an integrated global system, significant changes in any of its components – wars or disasters, new opportunities, etc. – have repercussions on the whole system (Massey *et al.* 1993). By way of example, given that irregular flows towards Italy are also spurred by wars, persecution, and natural disasters in many African and Asian countries, as well as by economic reasons, it is evident how the interconnectedness of the world's regions shapes irregular flows themselves.

Further reinforcing this functionalist strand, migration network theory (MNT) pays attention to the interpersonal networks shared between potential migrants in origin countries and former migrants in destination countries. In this case, prospective migrants use social, cultural, religious, and/or emotional linkages (family, friends, partners, etc.) that represent a potential path to their hoped destination. MNT sees this as a self-reinforcing mechanism, since once a migrant community is established in a destination country, the risks for new migrants gradually reduce, supporting the growth of said migrant community, therefore further facilitating future network-based migration (Massey *et al.* 1993). This share parts of its rationale with cumulative causation theory (CCT). Among the many examples, Laukova *et al.* (2022) show how effective this mechanism has been in attracting new migrants in Australia's rural areas over the years. Another related theory is differentiation theory (DT), which originally stems from sociology. Once applied to migration studies, it interprets migration as one of the components of modern global society, one based on numerous parallel subsystems, each with their own norms which, at times, produce counterintuitive outcomes (Cvajner and Sciortino 2010).

A second group of theorists, on the other hand, has focused on structural phenomena that were not (fully) accounted for in earlier research, whose theoretical output may therefore be labelled as *structuralist*. They re-examined migration theories in the light of a rapidly changing world, characterised by the gradual collapse of the Soviet Union, incipient globalisation, and other international developments. They reviewed rising global inequalities, restrictive immigration policies, new foreign labour exploitation in destination countries, the liberalisation of socialist states, and the formation of new countries, as well as the mounting "refugee crisis" in developing regions as issues affecting changing patterns of international migration which would soon affect destination countries (Zolberg 1989). Though different in their intellectual origin, long-studied explanations such as conflict theory, dependency theory, critical globalisation theory, and dual labour market theory also focus on structural (inequality) approaches.

A third category revolves around transnational transformations burgeoning with the end of the Cold War and the beginning of globalisation. Within this

transnationalist branch, Basch, Glick Schiller, and Blanc shed light on global sociopolitical and economic transformations that were previously neglected. In their words: "By building transnational social networks, economic alliances and political ideologies, [migrants] are able to cross the geographic and cultural boundaries of both their countries of origin and of settlement" (Basch *et al.* 1993). Similarly, Castles's (2010, p. 1565) seminal article provocatively argued that "a general theory of migration is neither possible nor desirable" and drew on social transformation theory to advance new explanatory mechanisms. He stressed the significance of new technologies in favouring international migration, then utilised complexity, interconnectedness, variability, contextuality and mediations of global change to interpret international social transformations, prior to adopting southern European countries like Italy as relevant destination countries. Further refining this transnational shift, Black *et al.* (2011) assessed economic, political, demographic, social (including technology), and environmental factors that jointly shape migration patterns. The recent notion of environmental asylum seekers, in particular, is gradually gaining traction, as symbolically attested by the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (2020).

A fourth group of scholars has paid particular attention to migrants' distinctive psychological attributes, desires, aspirations, and agency. This *perceptionist* approach was examined, among other examples, in a seminal introductory article to a special issue, in which Carling and Collins (2018) intersected aspiration, desire, and drivers of migration, and concluded that the first two cannot be ignored when trying to explain the latter. One clear illustration of this is provided by asylum seekers who attempt to reach Australia from Western, Central, and Southeast Asia notwithstanding the extremely long and perilous journey and the slim chances they have of settling there (Abbondanza 2023). Other leading scholars produced a theoretical synthesis stemming from both conventional and psychological insights. Castles *et al.* highlighted four key elements behind irregular migration, while also mentioning other facilitating elements. They assessed laws and regulations in destination countries, neoliberal globalisation, migrants' agency, and the mechanisms of the so-called "migration industry". Among additional causes behind irregular migration, they mention the sudden change of borders, the escape from war or persecution, or new laws which impact on their status (Castles *et al.* 2012). With reference to migrants' agency, their resistance to migratory power dynamics is also a significant element (see Gazzotti *et al.* 2023).

Lastly, recent efforts further refined the difficult interpretation of this highly complex phenomenon, often by combining existing approaches and thereby creating what could be called a *hybridist* category. The "push-pull plus model" (PPM+) considers both conventional and more modern explanatory drivers concerning migratory flows. These are predisposing, proximate, precipitating, and mediating (including technology) drivers, translating into economics, politics, the environment, geography, and human insecurity in the country of origin, as well as better living conditions elsewhere, sudden

negative events in origin countries, ease or otherwise of the migration process itself, and migrants' agency. Once assessed jointly, Van Hear *et al.* (2018) argue that an increasingly precise image of why people migrate – whether regularly or not – can be obtained. While such authors originally utilised Afghan and Somali movements as case studies, their analysis could arguably be applied to migrants heading to Italy and Australia from a number of countries.[1]

In a similar vein, other experts have sought to hybridise and harmonise both established and socio-psychological drivers of irregular migration. In their recent monograph, Ambrosini and Hajer (2023) underscore six specific elements: labour markets, globalisation and human mobility, institutional production of illegality, liberal constraints, difficulties and costs of removals, and immigrants' own agency and their ethnic networks. Ottonelli and Torresi (2023) add to this complex theoretical debate by probing into the (non) voluntariness of the migration process, which is impacted by four conditions, namely non-coercion, sufficiency, exit options (or lack thereof), and information. They convincingly argue that these elements bear significant normative and moral implications. Other migration theorists have provided complementary explanations, such as Echeverría (2020), who listed criteria pertaining not only to macro-structural dimensions such as social demand for unskilled labour, migration regimes, and political systems in destination countries, but also micro-structural ones including migrants' own networks. Comparably, van Liempt *et al*. (2023) stress the need to go beyond straightforward structure-agency explanations, and add decolonial and critical perspectives to the more conventional approaches outlined earlier. Moreover, in a recent article that has already become a seminal study, de Haas (2021) builds on earlier concepts to devise an aspirations-capabilities framework (ACF). He introduces it as a "meta-conceptual" effort aimed to analyse migration through the dual prism of aspirations (migrants' preferences and desires) and capabilities (migrants' freedom and ability to choose where to live). While the author referred to Moroccan irregular flows to France, the Netherlands, and Spain, the usefulness of this framework could equally be applied to other destination countries such as Italy and Australia.

Lastly, the human security (HS) notion could arguably fall under the hybridist umbrella too, as implicitly addresses several aforementioned theories. One the one hand, HS effectively summarises the conditions without which people may decide to migrate: "freedom from fear" and "freedom from want". On the other, it outlines seven specific facets of HS which, when missing, could prompt the decision to leave one's place despite the many perils that irregular migration entails. These are economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community, and political security (UN Development Programme 1994). For the purposes of this chapter, they represent a transdisciplinary spectrum of not only what may spur people to migrate through irregular channels but also a long-term condition that affects migrants in transit as well as in destination countries such as Italy and Australia.

Table 2.1 Some of the main theories focusing on migrants' own perspectives

Theoretical category	Theories
Functionalist	Migration as migrants' optimisation strategy. PPM, MST, MNT, and DT
Structuralist	Assessment of structural international phenomena previously unaccounted for (end of the Cold War, globalisation, etc.)
Transnationalist	Recent transnational transformations (social, political, economic, technological, environmental, etc.)
Perceptionist	Migrants' perspectives, previously neglected. Aspirations, desires, and agency
Hybridist	Combination of existing and/or new approaches. PPM+, ACF, HS, (non)voluntariness, and others

Theories focusing on destination countries' populations

Adding to the book's novel theoretical framework, destination countries' local populations and their perspectives are explored here. Their difficult reception of irregular migrants has been the object of numerous studies through time, yet related theoretical explanations do not enjoy the same level of systematic attention as other theoretical branches. The importance of local population's perspectives, for the purposes of this book, not only relates to the impact they have on migrants once (if) they reach a "Global North" country, but is also due to the indirect influence the public opinion exerts on governments in liberal democracies (i.e. often, destination countries). To wit, while there is no direct link between public opinion and foreign policy outcomes (see Baum and Potter 2008 for a useful review), 21st-century populist politics is widely known to exploit the electorate's fears (Rico *et al.* 2017, among the many), with irregular migration ranking high in this respect. Consequently, the viewpoint of local residents in destination countries is significant, yet it has seldom been analysed in conjunction with migrants' and states' perspectives, partly because of disciplinary boundaries. This is a scholarly shortcoming that this chapter seeks to rectify through a concise survey of several theories that can be grouped into four broad and often overlapping categories: resources, groupism, psychology, and perceptions (see Table 2.2).

The first set of theoretical explanations concerns a perceived limit in terms of available *resources*, broadly understood, which therefore are not to be shared with new people coming from abroad. A relevant, well-rooted social-psychological theory is relative deprivation theory (RDT), first conceptualised in 1949 by a group of scholars and later refined by Runciman (1966), among the others. In the words of Walker and Pettigrew (1984, p. 302), relative deprivation may be described as such: "persons may feel deprived of some desirable

thing relative to their own past, another person, persons, group, ideal, or some other social category". In this context, the perception that another group of people (asylum seekers) receives a "special" treatment can be viewed as unfair and may lead to xenophobic attitudes. Among the numerous examples in European countries, Italy too witnesses frequent debates concerning the amount of public money that is spent to host asylum seekers (around 40 euros a day for each migrant's reception, and only 3 euros as daily "pocket money"). The incorrect assumption that the total sum is given directly to each migrant every day is not infrequent, and it resonates negatively with those Italians who are unemployed or have precarious jobs (Rizzo 2014).

Another theory intersecting both resources and groupism is realistic conflict theory (RCT). First named by Campbell (1965), it builds on earlier social experiments such as the 1954 "Robbers Cave experiment". The basic assumption of RCT is that competition over insufficient resources (which include money, power, services, and social status elements) results in antagonistic attitudes between different groups. Moreover, further studies have demonstrated that even when there is no explicit antagonism between different ethnic groups, hostility may flare up over resources as soon as hostility is perceived (see Jackson 1993 for an exhaustive review), which bears significant consequences for the study of irregular migrants in destination countries. In one of dozens of examples, many Australians at one time believed in messages and emails, claiming that refugees settled in the country were receiving a "special treatment", consisting in higher benefits compared to local social security recipients. These "fake news" became so widespread that Phillips (2015) wrote a "debunking" research paper later published by the Australian Parliament.

A second group of theories pertains to what is here defined as *groupism*, which may lead to competition and antagonism between distinct groups, thus highlighting the sense of "otherness". Social identity theory (SIT), merging Tajfel's cumulative work on social perceptions and resulting prejudices and conflicts (Tajfel 1974, for example), is one such lens. Closely related to self-categorisation theory (SCT), it posits that "Group membership is meaningful to individuals, conferring social identity […] Group membership in itself, regardless of its context or meaning, is sufficient to encourage members to, for example, discriminate against out-group members" (Jenkins 2008, p. 112). The implications of SIT and related theories are evident in the context of asylum seekers in destination countries. Out of numerous examples of social discrimination being twisted into racism, Every and Augoustinos (2007) recall how false information in Australia towards the beginning of the 2000s – when irregular maritime arrivals rose – led to xenophobic discussions about "alien cultures" and asylum seekers being a threat to Australia's.

Ethnic competition theory (ECT) combines elements of both SIT and RCT, as it straddles perceived resource scarcity and groupism in its rationale.

A degeneration of both, it emphasises the racial and ethnic component in the creation of the "other", which found to be inferior in a variety of ways. In the words of Scheepers *et al.* (2002, p. 17), "people living in individual competitive conditions perceive ethnic out-groups as a threat, and that this in turn reinforces ethnic exclusionism […] particularly the presence of non-EU citizens". As ECT is one of the many outcomes of a collective xenophobia, examples abound. At the same time, there have been a number of studies empirically attesting its validity with quantitative methods, including one by Abbondanza and Bailo (2018), which found that the electoral success of xeno-phobic Italian party Lega Nord may be explained with the growing presence of Muslim foreign population in Northern Italy.

The third category of theories outlined in this chapter revolves around *psy-chology* to explain the rejection of asylum seekers by local residents. Among the several, defended neighbourhood theory (DNT), which was spearheaded by Suttles (1972), stands out. To quote Kadowaki (2019), "defensive pro-cesses can promote neighborhood stability, but may also result in the social exclusion of perceived outsiders including their own neighbors". In other words, DNT interprets one's physical and social surroundings as a "neigh-bourhood" with distinct features which, when facing people of different socio-cultural background, may need to be "defended", verbally, politically, or even physically. Australian far-right populist politician, Pauline Hanson, provides a telling illustration of this through her desire to "defend 'white' nations against the decadence of coloured immigration", as recalled by Kelly (2002, p. 3). Another related lens is that of modernisation losers theory (MLT), which draws on relevant psychological insights to explicate why certain groups oppose the presence of asylum seekers and, more in general, any substan-tial social change. First conceptualised by Betz (1994), it posits that people who cannot cope with the fast pace of existing and unfolding social changes are more likely to oppose them, and sustained flows of new asylum seekers are one such change. Indeed, scholars have long associated the success of far-right politics with anti-immigration sentiments, which appeals more effec-tively to people with socio-economic and therefore psychological grievances (see Golder 2016 for a useful review). The relatively rapid societal change that immigration has created in the Italian society, for example, is often cited as one of the most visible and therefore controversial aspects of migration debates in the country (Ambrosini 2017).

A fourth group of theoretical explanations behind the difficult reception of irregular migrants in destination countries stems from the local population's *perceptions*, which directly affect their attitude towards new migrants. In this case, criminology and security studies, rather than sociology and psychology, provide relevant insights. Wickes and Sydes (2017, p. 11) underscore the role of fears and inaccurate perceptions concerning the immigrant-crime nexus in destination countries, writing that "this perceived association also leads to increased social anxiety and higher reports of disorder in neighbourhoods

where immigrants live". The common perception that immigration inevitably leads to higher crime rates (and potentially terrorist activities) is also explored by Segrave and Milivojevic (2015), who show how this affects responses not only within the state (public opinion) but also by states themselves. A recent report is emblematic of this condition, as it looks at the comparably higher number of criminal offences committed by asylum seekers released by detention centres in mainland Australia (The Daily Telegraph 2022). While the data are correct, the report omitted to specify that, in the majority of cases, asylum seekers tend to commit crimes only when they cannot work legally.

More to the point on perceptions among local residents in destination countries, several political science studies provide additional insights. With a quantitative analysis of data concerning 200 European regions, Stockemer (2016) concluded that citizens' perceptions about migrants are the element that most strongly correlates with radical right-wing (i.e. xenophobic) political support. Moreover, and in addition to the previously mentioned study by Abbondanza and Bailo with Northern Italy as a case study, Martinez i Coma and Smith (2018, p. 271) write that "as in other countries, Australian citizens' attitudes to immigrant numbers are partly driven by a combination of sociotropic economic considerations and perceptions of the socio-cultural impact of immigrants". In essence, it is safe to argue that (mis)perceptions are a strong driver of enmity towards irregular migrants in destination countries. With this said, it is appropriate to restate that the four theoretical categories outlined in this section share many elements between them (overlaps), hence the necessity to view them collectively.

Table 2.2 Some of the main theories explaining the wariness of people in destination countries concerning asylum seekers

Theoretical category	Theories
Resources	Perceived limit in available resources leads to conflict. RDT and RCT
Groupism	A new, different group induces antagonism in a settled group. SIT and ECT
Psychology	Specific psychological mechanisms shape the local residents' resistance towards new arrivals. DNT and MLT
Perceptions	Fears and partially or wholly inaccurate perceptions shape people's reaction to new arrivals. Migration-crime nexus and migration-terror nexus, plus broader misperceptions

Theories focusing on the state

While the first two sections of this theoretical chapter have delved into migrants' and local populations' perspectives, the remainder of it will look at theories pertaining to states themselves. This is done with a view to exploring

the foreign policy components of irregular migration governance, thereby addressing the book's goal to assess this complex phenomenon in a holistic manner. More specifically, realist, liberalist, constructivist, critical, and complementary insights are employed (see Table 2.3). Although it must be acknowledged from the onset that this theoretical review is not meant to be exhaustive (dozens of volumes specifically attempt as much), a brief overview of the main notions ought to suffice to highlight their relevance to this book's purposes. As with the previous sections, pertinent Italian and Australian examples are adopted whenever possible, so as to link theoretical explanations with state policies that have been either attempted or fully implemented.

The first theory is also the oldest, that is the *realist* school of thought. While its origins date back to approximately two and a half millennia ago (Thucydides and Sun Tzu), its genealogy needs not concern us here. The realist school – comprising classical realism, neorealism, and neoclassical realism – has been advanced by a number of leading scholars, including Morgenthau, Carr, Wight, Waltz, Walt, and Mearsheimer, among the many. Its key tenets revolve around state-centrism, the anarchy of the international system, egoism, and power politics (see Donnelly 2000 for a well-known review). Consequently, realism prioritises the role of the state, border protection (the international system is anarchic and unstable), material capabilities (mostly hard power as a combination of economic and military capabilities), and the status quo (to counteract anarchy and instability).

The consequences of this school of thought for this book's purposes are as profound. States seek to defend their borders from what they regard as exogenous threats, and prolonged and sustained flows of irregular migration are often perceived as such (the controversial migration-crime and migration-terrorism nexus, socio-economic concerns, etc.). As a result, "bare" externalisation policies (i.e. without lawful mechanisms of offshore processing)[2] fall squarely under the realist tradition, as they derive from prioritised border protection even when this clashes with the international humanitarian law, the latter being generally supported by international institutions and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Examples abound especially (but not only) in destination countries, many of which share similar foreign policies seeking to halt – or curb, more realistically – irregular flows (see Chapters 4 and 5). As per Italy and Australia, while they have temporarily pursued inclusive and humanitarian approaches (see below), both of them currently implement restrictive policies based on strengthened border control and externalisation (Italy with Libya, Tunisia, Niger, and, at the time of writing, most likely with Albania too; Australia with Sri Lanka and Nauru, formerly with Papua New Guinea and Cambodia),[3] which are supported by political, financial, and military means (Abbondanza 2023; Dastyari and Hirsch 2019; and Glynn 2016). These significant issues are more comprehensively dealt with in Chapter 3.

The second theoretical stream centred around the state is *liberalism*, which is the second-oldest IR paradigm and a comprehensive alternative to realism. First developed in the 17th century, its almost four centuries of intellectual history are clearly outside the scope of this work. As one of the pillars of IR theory, it comprises many different branches – including idealism, classical liberalism, and neoliberalism[4] – and has been promoted by numerous leading scholars such as Keohane and Nye, among numerous contemporary ones. Liberalism is concerned with the potential of international cooperation, the rejection of power politics and anarchy as the unavoidable drivers of international relations, the importance of international institutions, and the significance of the international law and its defence (see Keohane 2012). The international law, in particular, is remarkably significant in contemporary global affairs, as it draws the line that distinguishes what states might (not) be prepared to do in their international engagement.

The above notions have been very influential in the post-Cold War world and bear special meanings where irregular migration governance is concerned. Broadly speaking, whenever states address irregular flows with lawful and humanitarian goals, they pursue a liberalist agenda. This stems from respecting international provisions and from attempting to behave as "good international citizens" (see Shapcott 2020). While examples are not as common as with the previous discussion, they do exist. Among the several, both Italy (2013–2016) and Australia (2008–2010) have had inclusive foreign policies in their irregular migration governance. Italy ceased its externalisation policy in 2013 after a series of tragic shipwrecks and strove to save hundreds of thousands of migrants which would have otherwise died at sea (Abbondanza 2017). Australia too dismantled its "Pacific Solution" in 2008 and contributed to rescue tens of thousands of seaborne asylum seekers (see Carr 2016). Although these two policy swings were praised by national and international NGOs and agencies, both states eventually reverted to externalisation in their foreign policy (the only remnant of international cooperation being bi/multilateral deals). This was due to the large and continuous flows they were experiencing, as well as because transit countries (and fellow EU members, in the case of Italy) did not succeed in stemming or sharing them effectively. Chapter 3 more extensively addresses these developments. Additionally, lawful mechanisms of asylum claims' offshore processing – one such proposal is included in Chapter 5 – may also arguably fall in the "liberalist" category, on the basis of the large international cooperation behind them.

The third and most recent of the "paradigmatic theories" of international relations is *constructivism*, which developed from the 1980s. With Onuf (1989) conventionally credited with coining the term itself, other scholars have later refined and extended constructivist boundaries in IR, including (but not limited to) Wendt, Katzenstein, Finnemore, and Wæver. The conceptual point of departure of constructivism is that global affairs work according to humans' social constructs, which shape most human activities. Relatedly, the

constructivist school of thought sees ideas, identities, cultures, and norms as substantial components of the IR realm, which is not influenced solely by the existing state of affairs but also by how people (including policymakers) interpret their political surroundings and decide to act upon their interpretation. While this paradigm cannot explain the whole spectrum of international affairs by itself, its disciplinary influence is nevertheless remarkable (see Hopf 1998).

The theoretical premises of constructivism are extremely important for a thorough understanding of irregular migration governance. One of constructivism's main theoretical outputs is securitisation theory (ST). It refers to the process whereby state or international actors can transform a conventional subject into a security issue through "speech acts" which eventually reverberate through media systems and the public opinion (Wæver 1989), with irregular migration long being the object of such a process. In terms of real-world examples, the majority of destination countries have increasingly securitised irregular migration throughout the years, and both Australia (Vogl 2015) and Italy (Bello 2021) are prominent examples of this. Intuitively, it was the very securitisation of seaborne undocumented migration that allowed Canberra and Rome to utilise their restrictive foreign policies with electoral support. As mentioned earlier, this type of foreign policy comprises externalising agreements, repatriation deals, funds to transit countries, the use of the navy and other branches of the armed forces to bolster border security, military missions in third countries, and other elements.

A fourth theoretical strand, which comprises *critical security studies* (CSS) and *feminist security studies* (FSS), is openly critical of realism, liberalism, and, partially, constructivism too. CSS is a transdisciplinary approach to security encompassing feminist, queer, neo-Gramscian, neo-Marxist, post-structuralist, and postcolonial perspectives. Developed systematically since the 1990s, it has been advanced by scholars such as Krause, Williams, and Booth. In the words of Malik (2021, p. 41), it criticises "the narrow focus imposed by traditional military and state-centric ideas of security". Relatedly, FSS builds on decades of feminist political battles and owes much to scholars such as Cohn, Enloe, Tickner, and Sylvester, to name just a few. To quote Stokes (2021, p. 43), FSS "argues for a broader definition of security that, at the least, includes consideration of women's experiences, roles, and perceptions of war and state security".

The implications of these critical approaches are important for a broader understanding of states' responses to irregular migration and their criticisms. One the one hand, CSS rejects the dominant role of states in security discussions, as they ignore the (in)security of migrants themselves. Accordingly, Lindley (2014) dissects migration crises affecting Italy, among other nations, by utilising examples such as the Albanian mass migration of the 1990s and the current seaborne flows through the central Mediterranean route, which are interpreted by shifting away from a solely state-centric perspective. FSS, on the other hand, focuses on women's perspectives rather than on more

"general" individual ones. Lobasz (2009, p. 319) aptly describes this when she recounts that FSS "highlight the destructive role that sexist and racist stereotypes play in constructing the category of trafficking victims". Moreover, she also stresses how "white refugee women" are more likely to be accepted in destination countries like Italy or Australia compared to non-white ones.

Lastly, the literature provides several *complementary* approaches deriving from different perspectives, which are too numerous to be reviewed here in their entirety. One exemplifying analysis is made by Boswell who, in her seminal article, shed light on states' under-examined internal obligations, focusing in particular on their "functional imperatives" – security and legitimacy notably being two of them – to explain how states' responses to migratory flows are shaped. (Boswell 2007). According to Natter (2023), the ambiguity of "tailored" state responses can be explained with the notion of adhocracy applied to migration. Boucher and Gest (2018, p. 58) further contribute to this complex endeavour by reminding us that "states have exerted increasing effort to control human movement". They then adopt colonial legacies, population ageing, natural resource wealth, economic freedom, welfare state generosity, and political ideologies to explain this process in destination countries. Destination countries' restrictive policies, the most common ones in recent years, then firmly settle domestically due to path dependence, a pillar of social sciences' theories attesting that past policy choices influence and constrain current and future ones (Page 2006). From an IR perspective, Adamson and Tsourapas (2019) apply traditional disciplinary concepts such as (non)zero-sum rationales, absolute and relative gains, and national interest and soft power to better describe states' migration diplomacy.

Additional understandings of such mechanisms are provided by security studies and criminology. Among several studies, Pickering and Weber (2014) link security and migration studies by arguing that states implementing externalisation (such as Australia and Italy) seek to deter both traffickers and prospective asylum seekers. The nexus between state security and irregular migration is further exemplified by states themselves. By way of example, Australia endorsed the controversial migration-terrorism nexus – and therefore contributed to securitising irregular migration – with its 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper (Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2017, p. 33), and Italy endorsed it first with its 2015 Defence While Paper (Italian Government 2015, para 44). Moreover, recent Europol reports show that, although the likelihood of asylum seekers committing terrorist activities is extremely slim, it is never equal to zero, as five out of ten completed attacks in the European Union in 2020 were conducted by irregular migrants,[5] and more than a dozen undocumented migrants were arrested on terrorism charges in the European Union in 2021 (Europol 2022). In both case studies, the national security perspective appears remarkably influential in debates around irregular migration governance, and, whether rightly or not, it has been instrumental in the implementation of their externalisation measures.

Table 2.3 Some of the main theories on state behaviour when addressing irregular migration

Theoretical category	Theoretical implications
Realism	Enhanced border protection against perceived threats (migration-crime and migration-terrorism nexus, socio-economic issues, etc.). Exclusive foreign policy consisting of externalisation and other measures.
Liberalism	Cooperative approaches stemming from international humanitarian law and good international citizenship. Inclusive foreign policy consisting of national search and rescue operations and refugee intake programmes.
Constructivism	Since security is socially constructed, security threats can be "created" through securitisation. Irregular migration is often securitised and is frequently viewed as a potential threat. In turn, this supports exclusive foreign policies.
CSS and FSS	State-centric viewpoints are rejected. The focus is on individuals and women instead. Restrictive migratory foreign policies are stigmatised, and the study of migrants' insecurity is promoted.
Complementary approaches	States' responses are due to numerous endogenous and exogenous factors. Path dependence shows how they settle firmly domestically. Adhocracy may explain states' intentional ambiguity. The migration-terrorism nexus is acknowledged by Italian and Australian official documents and is strengthened by the arrest of asylum seekers on terrorism charges.

Conclusion

This chapter has reviewed the main theories pertaining to irregular migration, with a holistic approach comprising viewpoints that are seldom (if at all) analysed together. These are migrants', states', and their local populations' perspectives. While making to pretence to comprehensiveness, this was done with a view to provide a novel and functional guide not only for scholars but also for policymakers, migration professionals, journalists, and students, as well as those with a special interest in Italian and/ or Australian foreign and migration policy. Consequently, this innovative theoretical endeavour allows for some considerations that are here outlined. First, theories centred on migrants themselves are multifarious and therefore emblematic of the numerous viewpoints at play. For example, functionalist theories are pragmatic in their conceptualisation, yet they also exhibit analytical limitations. A theoretically eclectic approach enables a broader and deeper understanding of the reasons behind people's decisions to migrate without valid visas, despite the enormous risks. Consequently, a joint assessment of functionalist, structuralist, transnationalist, perceptionist, and

hybridist theories provides a more accurate evaluation of this highly complex phenomenon.

Second, the perspectives of local populations in destination countries may pose a less intricate theoretical challenge. To wit, while theoretical explanations of people's wariness of asylum seekers also stem from different viewpoints – sociological and psychological – they originate from more proximate perspectives. Nonetheless, in this case too, a concurrent assessment of theories referring to resources, groupism, psychology, and perception facilitates a more comprehensive understanding of why irregular migration is often perceived as a risk in destination countries. Third, theories pivoting around states provide a rationale behind the foreign policy of irregular migration governance, be it inclusive or exclusive. Realist perspective are usually linked to the latter, while liberalist ones are associated to the former. At the same time, constructivism explains some of the mechanisms of such policies, while critical, feminist, security, and complementary approaches provide much-needed nuance to what is an intricate foreign policy formulation process. Lastly, the numerous examples that have been included help to link these conceptual and theoretical notions to real-world illustrations related to the book's two case studies.

In essence, what emerges from this innovative analysis is the complexity and the diversity of the theoretical literature revolving around irregular migration, which is widely thought to be afflicted by compartmentalisation and by scholarly efforts that often do not "talk to each other". To attempt to overcome this situation, this chapter has explicitly supported the use of theoretical eclecticism, not only between theories pertaining to the same field (intradisciplinarity) but also between cognate ones, such as those stemming from migrants', local populations', and states' perspectives (multidisciplinarity). An ancillary implication is that through theoretical eclecticism (more explicitly employed in Chapter 6) it is possible to pursue a more comprehensive analysis of the foreign policy of irregular migration governance, a quest warranted by the sheer number of perspectives, goals, and actors within this phenomenon. Starting from these premises, Chapter 3 analyses the Italian and Australian cases, thanks to these useful theoretical grounds.

Notes

1 For a comparative analysis on this, including migrants' countries of origin, see Glynn (2016).
2 For the difference between the two, please refer to the earlier explanatory footnote in Chapter 1.
3 Among current policies, Italy's agreement with Albania and Australia's agreement with Nauru involve the offshore processing of migrants' asylum requests.
4 It is important to underscore that "neoliberalism" in international relations is different from its homonymous notion in economics.
5 It is important to note that these migrants did not reach Europe via seaborne routes.

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3 Italy's and Australia's foreign policy on irregular migration

2000–2024

Introduction

As mentioned in Chapter 1, Italy and Australia represent two telling case studies with which to explore contemporary irregular migration governance. This is due to five reasons, namely their dual status as liberal democracies and well-known destination countries; their implementation of both restrictive (mostly) and non-restrictive (rarely) migratory foreign policy measures; the substantial implications of such measures for migrants themselves, the two states, and the regions they pertain to; the fact that Italy and Australia have seldom been analysed together; and, lastly, the potential insights concerning comparable destination countries stemming from this comparative analysis. Starting from such premises, this chapter probes into Rome's and Canberra's irregular migration governance from 2000 to 2024 inclusive, prior to assessing similarities and differences. Following the broad principles of foreign policy analysis (FPA), it briefly mentions domestic (type of government) and regional/international (number of irregular maritime arrivals [IMAs]) elements in order to better interpret the two countries' resulting foreign policy on irregular migration.

Italy's foreign policy on irregular migration

A migrant-receiving country since the second half of the 1970s, Italy unhurriedly addressed the growing reality of irregular migration in the 1980s through two approaches that are still detectable in current attempts to manage this phenomenon, among the many newer ones (see Table 3.1). These are stronger penalties for those benefitting from irregular migration and occasional amnesties for undocumented migrants already in Italy (Abbondanza 2017), with significant gender-related implications (Bonizzoni 2017). Following a short-lived centre-left government (2nd Amato administration, 2000–2001) at the onset of the 21st century, the concurrent emergence of specific elements – an increase in IMAs (see Figure 3.1), the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the subsequent focus on national security, and the presence of a conservative

government, among the others – led to a marked change in the country's irregular migration policies.[1]

In 2001, Silvio Berlusconi became prime minister (2nd Berlusconi administration, 2001–2005) by heading a coalition of conservative parties that had won the elections with, among other things, an anti-immigration campaign (Colombo and Sciortino 2003). Internationally, regional developments kept IMAs at somewhat sustained levels (almost 27,000 in 2000, more than 20,000 in 2001). To attempt to address this phenomenon, the government managed to approve the "Bossi-Fini law". While, paradoxically, it also allowed for the largest amnesty for irregular workers in Italy's recent history (almost 650,000 people), it framed irregular migrants in an abrasive way (Zincone 2006) and authorised the use of specific foreign policy tools to stem their arrival. In particular, it entailed the deployment of navy vessels to intercept migrants' boats; it authorised the shipboard assessment of asylum claims as well as pushback manoeuvres ("respingimenti"); it struck an agreement with Libya whereby Italy's former colony sought to prevented migrants from reaching Italy; it strengthened the use of deportation; and it cemented Italy's cooperation with Frontex (the EU border security agency) from 2004 onwards. While its large amnesty led to what Geddes (2008) termed a "democratic gap" between electoral rhetoric and domestic reality, the second and third (2005–2006) Berlusconi governments paved the way for the country's increasingly restrictive irregular migration foreign policy from then on.

Following the 2006 elections, progressive politician Romano Prodi became prime minister (2nd Prodi administration, 2006–2008) and led the winning centre-left coalition. Domestically, this had been possible, among other things, by promising to reform the country's immigration law and policies – still struggling due to sustained migratory flows (see Finotelli and Sciortino 2009) – to reduce irregular flows while strengthening migratory legal channels (Padovano 2021). Regionally, the number of IMAs kept above the 20,000 per year threshold during the two-year tenure of the Prodi administration (Giovannetti 2018). Accordingly, the government conceived a new migratory law that was intended to replace the existing one, named "Amato-Ferrero law". One the one hand, the latter provided for incremental rights for migrants who had reached legally and strengthened legal pathways. On the other, it maintained the extant foreign policy framework for irregular migration (Caputo 2007) comprising navy deployments, pushback manoeuvres, the externalisation agreement with Libya, and cooperation with Frontex. The Amato-Ferrero law was never fully approved since Prodi lost a confidence vote in 2008 and resigned, yet the bill would have maintained the country's restrictive migratory foreign policy, had it been approved.

The next government took charge as a result of a snap election, with Berlusconi once again leading a conservative coalition (4th Berlusconi administration, 2008–2011). The international context provided the necessary

elements for the new government to substantially reform country's irregular migration foreign policy. At the European level, Italy ratified the EU Treaty of Lisbon in 2008, which, among other things, prompted tougher immigration policies, though Rome went much further and criminalised irregular migration the following year (Rosina 2022). Regionally, IMAs rose noticeably and reached a peak of almost 37,000 in 2008. These elements favoured the government's "revolution" in terms of irregular migration governance: a comprehensive partnership with Libya through a treaty-level agreement. The latter, apart from conciliating decades of strained relations with its former colony, included a series of foreign policy measures aimed at stemming irregular flows directed to Italy. The new restrictive approach entailed strengthened navy deployments in the Mediterranean (with pushback manoeuvres) and, with article no. 19 of the Italy-Libya agreement, tougher externalisation in Libya, in whose camps migrants' human rights were routinely violated (Dastyari and Hirsch 2019). Although Italy's "Mediterranean Solution" proved to be numerically effective (from 36,961 IMAs in 2008 to 4,406 IMAs in 2010), it was heavily criticised both domestically and internationally since it avoided Rome's international humanitarian law obligations. In foreign policy terms, the implications of this highly restrictive new approach were significant since, in the words of Marfleet and Cetti (2013, p. 233), "the Italian border had, in effect, been moved to Libya".

Due to Berlusconi's resignation amid the European sovereign debt crisis, Mario Monti consequently formed a new technocratic government (Monti administration, 2011–2013). The regional context was remarkably challenging not only because of Europe's economic turmoil but also due to the consequences of the "Arab Spring", which had considerably destabilised the Middle East and Northern Africa (MENA) region and had rendered *de facto* void Italy's Libyan agreement. With IMAs reaching a new record figure of almost 63,000 in 2011 (Giovannetti 2018), the Monti government reached a new deal with Libya's National Transitional Council (NTC), which mirrored the previous 2008 treaty, including its strict foreign policy measures (Molnár 2019). Accordingly, the stern externalisation approach and the navy deployments resumed, and the number of seaborne asylum seekers unevenly decreased (around 13,000 in 2012 and 43,300 in 2013). Pushback manoeuvres were the only "exception", as they were ruled illegal by the European Court of Human Rights in 2012 (European Court of Human Rights 2012). Italy's renewed foreign policy on irregular migration, this time implemented by a technocratic government, managed to cement this approach, thanks to a broader political support, including the main centre-left party (*Partito Democratico*).

After the 2013 elections, a new grand coalition/national unity government was formed, headed by centre-left politician Enrico Letta (Letta administration, 2013–2014). Regionally, a series of shipwrecks in the Mediterranean impacted on Europe's and Italy's public opinion and political

system, including the 3 October 2013 shipwreck, one of the deadliest in recent history. Additionally, Rome attempted to "force the EU's hand" with its new regional policy (Abbondanza 2023a). After numerous calls for immediate action to save lives at sea, Prime Minister Letta ceased the country's existing irregular migration governance and launched a fixed-term unilateral search and rescue mission named *Mare Nostrum* (Latin for "our sea") (Baldwin-Edwards and Lutterbeck 2019). Operating in both international and Libyan waters to rescue as many people as possible and counteract people smugglers, *Mare Nostrum* used both Italy's navy and coast guards, while also cooperating with the Frontex. In just one year (October 2013–2014), the Italian mission rescued and brought to Italy more than 170,000 people, many of whom would have drowned in the world's deadliest sea route (the "Central Mediterranean route") otherwise. The Letta government therefore utilised the country's extensive military-logistical capabilities for diametrically opposite goals compared to previous governments and was thus praised by numerous agencies and organisations, including the United Nations (IOM 2014).

After Letta's resignation, progressive politician Matteo Renzi became Italy's new prime minister (Renzi administration, 2014–2016), thanks to the political support of centre-left and centrist parties. From both an international and a regional perspective, agencies and organisations continued to praise Italy's humanitarian effort, although in operational terms Rome was virtually alone in coping with the world's busiest and deadliest maritime migration route (UNHCR 2014). In the words of Baldwin-Edwards and Lutterbeck (2019, p. 2249):

> Having failed in 2014 to replace the Italian Mare Nostrum Operation with an appropriate EU policy […] it took a series of mass drownings and a tragedy of nearly 700 people perishing in a ship off the coast of Lampedusa on 19 April 2015 for the EU to act.

Rome pressured Brussels through both political and diplomatic means to obtain an EU mission that would continue what *Mare Nostrum* – ceased after its first year – had done. The result was the launch of two new EU missions headed by Italy and headquartered in Rome, namely Operation Triton and EUNAVFOR Med (Operation Sophia), although long-awaited measures such as the amendment of the Dublin III regulation[2] and the implementation of EU relocation quotas never saw the light (Barbulescu 2017). Nevertheless, those two missions contributed to the rescuing and transfer of about 154,000 people in 2015 and 181,000 people in 2016, an all-time high in recent Italian history (Giovannetti 2018). The Renzi government therefore continued Italy's praised humanitarian effort through specific foreign policy means such as political and diplomatic pressure and the command of the Eurpean Union's two new missions.

Progressive politician Paolo Gentiloni (Gentiloni administration, 2016–2018) succeeded Renzi as prime minister following the latter's resignation. Regionally, IMAs were at their strongest level to date (more than 180,000 in 2016) and were favoured by instability and unliveable conditions throughout the MENA region. At the EU level, long-requested plans to address Dublin III and relocation quotas failed, and, with Italy hosting large numbers of asylum seekers and no equitable European burden-sharing, the government decided to halt the country's humanitarian approach. To revert to its restrictive migratory foreign policy (while Operation Themis replaced Operation Triton), it reached a new agreement with the Libyan Government of National Accord (GNA) in 2016. It included all the previous foreign policy measures – externalisation and navy deployments – plus the provision of Italian patrol vessels to the Libyan coast guard to strengthen the latter's interception capability (Di Filippo and Palm 2018). Additionally, Rome launched a new military mission in Niger ("MISIN", with a potential engagement area in Mauritania, Nigeria, and Benin) to further stem migrants' flows (Ceccorulli and Coticchia 2020). Numerically, Italy's strengthened irregular migration governance proved to be effective (around 117,000 IMAs in 2017 and 23,000 in 2018) and enjoyed bipartisan political support, although it was also criticised by human rights advocates. The Gentiloni government therefore reintroduced and reinforced the country's strict migratory foreign policy, after the previous humanitarian approach was deemed unsustainable in the long term.

The 2018 elections completely reformed Italy's parliament and led to the country's first populist government (1st Conte administration, 2018–2019). The latter was led by Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte – affiliated with populist party Five Star Movement (M5S) – and supported by a coalition comprising the M5S and regionalist far-right and populist party Lega. The regional context favoured Italy's goals of stemming IMAs, which had reached their lowest level since 2011 (around 11,500 in 2019). The government also introduced the "Security decrees", which included tougher measures on irregular migrants already in Italy and penalised non-governmental organisations (NGOs) operating in the Mediterranean (Pusterla 2021) and maintained the country's foreign policy on irregular migration. Consequently, the restrictive approach already in place in Libya, Niger, and the Mediterranean was kept, and the externalisation agreement with Libya was renewed for three more years (Ceccorulli *et al.* 2023). The ensuing 2nd Conte administration (2019–2021) was supported by a coalition of M5S and the centre-left. It partially eased the provisions of the "Security decrees" and favoured the European Union's new EUNAVFOR Med/Operation Irini which replaced EUNAVFOR Med/Operation Sophia. However, in the context of IMAs rising again (around 34,000 in 2020 and 67,000 in 2021) Rome did not alter the existing irregular migration governance framework. The Conte governments thus strengthened the country's restrictive migratory foreign policy, which, once again, enjoyed bipartisan political support.

Following Conte's resignation, former President of the European Central Bank Mario Draghi was sworn in as Italy's new prime minister (Draghi administration, 2021–2022). Compared to the Monti government, Italy's new technocratic administration enjoyed a steadier political and public support, thanks to the latter's expansive policies (Garzia and Karremans 2021). Regionally, the deteriorating Libyan civil war and the ongoing instability throughout the MENA region led to a continued increase in IMAs (around 67,000 in 2021 and 105,000 in 2022; Italian Ministry of the Interior 2024). Amid Russia's new invasion of Ukraine, Draghi fostered a more resilient European energy and security policy, with a view to extend this approach to irregular migration as well, whose importance for the country's foreign policy was outlined in Italy's new Mediterranean Strategy (Italian Ministry of Defence 2022). Meanwhile, the government maintained the country's existing externalisation framework – in contrast with the inclusive approach towards Ukrainians fleeing war – thus keeping navy deployments in the Mediterranean, externalisation in Libya, and the MISIN military mission in Niger (Ceccorulli 2023). Draghi resigned after the M5S withdrew its parliamentary support and consequently could not work towards a stronger European approach to irregular migration as intended. After his resignation, under a caretaker administration, the Italy-Libya agreement automatically renewed for three more years. During his tenure, Draghi therefore continued to implement the country's strict foreign policy measures concerning seaborne asylum seekers.

The year 2022 was distinguished by snap elections that led to the first female prime minister (Giorgia Meloni) and the first far-right government in Italy's post-war history (Meloni administration, 2022–ongoing).[3] International observers were worried by a G7 nation having such a government, but foreign (and migratory) policy continuity soon emerged (Echeverría and Finotelli 2024). Regionally, the southern Mediterranean displayed growing instability which spurred increasing flows of seaborne asylum seekers, with Tunisia replacing Libya as the main country of departure (from around 105,000 IMAs in 2022 to 158,000 in 2023; see Italian Ministry of the Interior 2024). New shipwrecks spurred the government to pressure the European Union for a stronger multilateral approach to this phenomenon, in sharp contrast with the naval blockade promised during the electoral campaign. Moreover, and despite the stern rhetoric and tough external policies, the Meloni government also authorised the entry of more than 450,000 foreign workers in the country for the 2023–2025 period (see Italian Ministry of Labour 2023), a figure which is remarkably similar to the estimates of irregular migrants currently residing in Italy.[4]

Rome then approved new decrees limiting NGOs' activities and introducing tougher penalties for people smugglers (Alagna and Cusumano 2023). It also brokered a new EU deal with Tunisia bringing faster repatriations, externalisation, and the interception of migrants' boats off the Tunisian coast

(Barana and Okyay 2023), and spearheaded a new EU deal with Egypt with comparable goals (Werr 2024). In the same period, Italy was appointed force commander of a new EU mission in Niger, EUMPM Niger. Shortly afterwards, the government unveiled a new *offshore processing* agreement with Albania, the first deal of this type reached by an EU country.[5] On the one hand, the European Union has informally given its consent to this new policy (although legal doubts persist; see Celoria and De Leo 2024); on the other, the Albanian constitutional court has authorised it after temporarily suspending it. Lastly, Italy has also unveiled its "Mattei Plan", an ambitious national "pivot to Africa" pursuing multi-layered cooperation – including irregular migration governance – with a potential initial budget of 5.5 billion euros, but no funds currently allocated. While, at the time of writing (May 2024), these new developments have not resulted in a steady decrease in the number of IMAs (see Figure 3.1), the Meloni government has so far resorted to a variety of old and new foreign policy tools in attempting to manage irregular migration (from political pressure to new externalisation and offshore processing agreements), all of which are restrictive in their nature.

Figure 3.1 IMAs in Italy between January 2000 and April 2024 inclusive, totalling more than 1.35 million. Arrivals in the first four months of 2024 are lower than those in January–April 2023 but higher than those in January–April 2022.

Source: Official data collated by the author.

Table 3.1 Italy's irregular migration governance from 2000 to May 2024, with a focus on foreign policy measures

Specific foreign policy measures	Irregular migration governance type	Type of government	Prime Minister (government no.)
Navy deployed in the Med., pushback manoeuvres, coop. with Libya, increased no. of deportations, Frontex since 2004	Restrictive	Conservative	Berlusconi (2nd)
Navy deployed in the Med., pushback manoeuvres, coop. with Libya, increased no. of deportations	Restrictive	Conservative	Berlusconi (3rd)
Navy deployed in the Med., pushback manoeuvres, coop. with Libya, increased no. of deportations (Amato-Ferrero bill never approved)	Restrictive	Progressive	Prodi (2nd)
Lisbon Treaty, Italy-Libya externalisation agreement, pushback manoeuvres, navy deployed in the Med.	Restrictive	Conservative	Berlusconi (4th)
Externalisation treaty with Libyan NTC, pushback manoeuvres until 2012 (ECHR), navy deployed in the Med.	Restrictive	Technocratic	Monti
Termination of previous migratory foreign policy, *Mare Nostrum* mission in the Med. with navy and coast guard vessels	Non-restrictive	Grand coalition	Letta
Termination of *Mare Nostrum*, political pressure in the European Union, command of Op. Triton and EUNAVFOR Med – Op. Sophia, frustration over EU relocation quotas	Non-restrictive	Progressive	Renzi
Externalisation agreement with Libya's GNA, navy deployed in the Med., Italian patrol vessels to Libyan coast guard, new military mission in Niger, Op. Themis replaces Op. Triton	Restrictive	Progressive	Gentiloni
Externalisation agreement with Libya renewed, military mission in Niger, navy deployed in the Med., "security decrees" curbing NGOs in the Med.	Restrictive	Populist (right-leaning)	Conte (1st)

(*Continued*)

Table 3.1 (Continued)

Specific foreign policy measures	Irregular migration governance type	Type of government	Prime Minister (government no.)
Externalisation agreement with Libya renewed, military mission in Niger, navy deployed in the Med., "security decrees" curbing NGOs in the Med., Op. Irini replaces Op. Sophia	Restrictive	Populist (left-leaning)	Conte (2nd)
Navy deployed in the Med., military mission in Niger, externalisation agreement with Libya automatically renewed during caretaker government	Restrictive	Technocratic	Draghi
Externalisation agreement with Libya, navy deployed in the Med., Italian and EU military missions in Niger, EU externalisation agreement with Tunisia and Egypt, new offshore processing deal with Albania, Mattei Plan, decrees curbing NGOs	Restrictive	Right-wing	Meloni

Australia's foreign policy on irregular migration

Due to a series of reasons, mostly (although not only) of a geographical nature, irregular migration has affected and continues to affect Australia in a different manner compared to Italy. To begin with, the largest number of irregular migrants in Australia's territories started as regular migrants (i.e. with a regular visa) and then overstayed their allowed time ("overstayers"), thus acquiring the "irregular" status that is the focus of this book (see Crock *et al*. 2006). Second, for evident geographical reasons, Australia does not experience irregular border crossings via land. Third, this phenomenon has a vastly different scale compared to the one concerning Italy (the Australian peak in IMAs would be considered an unexpected low in Italy). Even so, Canberra implemented irregular migration policies that are very similar to Rome's (Abbondanza 2023b). More to the point, Australia continues to enact such policies despite the negligible number of IMAs it has received in the past 10 years and irrespective of the type of government in power.[6] As a result, the country's irregular migration governance is a significant case study and allows for an interesting and pertinent comparative analysis with Italy's (see Table 3.2).

A country with a long and controversial history of immigration policies, Australia has enforced mandatory detention for undocumented asylum seekers

since the 1992 Labor government led by Paul Keating. However, the country's irregular migration governance has been expanded and hardened by the subsequent prime minister, John Howard, who has been in power from 1996 to 2007 by leading a series of Coalition governments. Focusing on this volume's timeframe, the last few months of the 2nd Howard ministry (1998–2001) and the following 3rd (2001–2004) and 4th (2004–2007) Howard ministries represent a watershed moment in Australia's migratory foreign policy history. Regionally, Australia established the Bali Process, a forum to address irregular migration with regional partners, co-chaired by Indonesia. Concurrently, IMAs rose (from 200 in 1998 to 2,929 in 2000; Refugee Council of Australia 2024) which prompted the government's introduction of temporary protection visas instead of permanent statuses for refugees. The "Tampa affair", unfoldig in August 2001, initiated the country's momentous policy shift. *Tampa*, a Norwegian freighter, rescued 433 migrants in international waters and asked permission to enter Australian waters, which was refused. Emphasising international humanitarian law, the freighter decided to proceed anyway, spurring Canberra to deploy the Special Air Service Regiment (SASR) special forces to take control of the ship and triggering a diplomatic dispute with Norway (Mares 2002). The government then approved the "Border Protection Bill" to strengthen its border control powers (making it retroactive so that it covered the SASR deployment) and struck temporary offshore processing agreements with Nauru and New Zealand to host *Tampa*'s asylum seekers. These substantial foreign policy measures came to represent the template of Australia's future irregular migration governance.

The 3rd Howard ministry took charge in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States – Australia's only ally and security guarantor – which had favoured Howard and his national security-driven electoral campaign (Betts 2002). Concurrently, regional unauthorised arrivals slightly rose to 5,516 in 2001. In September 2001, the government enacted three foreign policy measures that were eventually labelled the "Pacific Solution" (Pérez 2003). First, Canberra deployed its navy to international waters to intercept and repel migrants' boats (mostly from transit country Indonesia) through pushback manoeuvres (between 2001 and 2003, in a comparable fashion to Italy's manoeuvres). This was done under the aegis of Operation Relex, managed by the Australian Defence Force (ADF). Second, it entailed offshore processing agreements with Nauru and Papua New Guinea's Manus Island. The policy also extended to Christmas Island, an Australian external territory. Third, the Pacific Solution involved the territorial excision of thousands of islands from Australia's migration zone, later extended to the whole of the Australian territories (Vogl 2015). This was done with the dual goal of deterring prospective migrants while not granting asylum rights to seaborne asylum seekers reaching Australia. These stern foreign policy measures – protracted throughout the 4th Howard ministry – attracted vigorous criticism domestically and internationally, yet were implemented with bipartisan (Coalition and Labor) support.

After this long Coalition tenure, Labor leader Kevin Rudd won the 2007 elections and became the first progressive Australian prime minister in 11

years (1st Rudd ministry, 2007–2010). Rudd took power after an electoral campaign centred around, among other things, reinstating Australia's middle power and good international citizen credentials, which were at odds with restrictive irregular migration policies (Pert 2014). Consequently, the Rudd government dismantled the Pacific Solution along with its migratory foreign policy framework, abolished temporary protection visas, and introduced legal counselling for asylum seekers who reached Australia (although asylum processing times remained unvaried). This significant policy shift coordinated with Operation Resolute, which had replaced Operation Relex in 2006. Praised by national and international agencies and organisations such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (2008), Australia's new non-restrictive approach to seaborne migration nevertheless had noticeable regional implications, since IMAs increased from 140 in 2007 to 6,555 in 2010. Rudd's popularity, however, progressively decreased due to a variety of factors,[7] and he eventually lost both the prime ministership and the Labor party leadership to fellow Labor politician Julia Gillard.

As a result of this leadership spill, Julia Gillard became the first female leader of the Labor party and the first female prime minister in Australia (1st Gillard ministry, 2010). Around two months later, Gillard won the 2010 elections and was therefore confirmed as prime minister (2nd Gillard ministry, 2010–2013). Under her tenure, Canberra provisionally left the country's irregular migration governance as it was, although two regional developments soon spurred a drastic change in terms of migratory foreign policy. Irregular arrivals remained relatively high (555 in 2010 and 4,565 in 2011; Refugee Council of Australia 2024), and a tragic shipwreck in December 2010 led senior members of the majority to call for a different approach to seaborne migration. The government initially sought an offshore processing agreement with Timor-Leste – which never eventuated – and then reached an agreement with Malaysia after the 4th Bali Process conference (Ubayasiri 2023). The latter involved a reciprocal migrants' transfer between the two countries. The so-called "Malaysian Solution" was, however, deemed invalid by the Australian High Court on account of legal and humanitarian uncertainties (Malaysia was not a signatory party to the 1951 Refugee Convention). With IMAs increasing (17,204 in 2012) and public support decreasing, Canberra decided to restart the previous offshore processing policy with both Nauru and Manus Island in 2012 (Wanna 2013). This policy U-turn coordinated with Operation Resolute as the ADF's military contribution to the broad externalisation approach. Drawing criticism from legal and human rights circles, Australia's "new" and restrictive foreign policy on irregular migration nevertheless enjoyed bipartisan political support.

A new leadership spill within the Labor party resulted in the return of Rudd as both party leader and Australian prime minister (2nd Rudd ministry, 2013). Domestically, he attempted to contrast the Coalition's advantage in public polls, while witnessing a deteriorating regional migratory context,

distinguished by 20,587 unauthorised arrivals in 2013, the highest number since 1976. To address this, the Rudd government pursued a diametrically opposite policy to that adopted in 2007 and reached a new offshore processing agreement with Papua New Guinea. Under what was labelled as the "PNG Solution", Australia shifted the security rhetoric from migrants to traffickers and cemented its foreign policy framework concerning irregular migration (Cameron 2013). It therefore expanded offshore processing centres in Nauru and Manus Island, and deployed ADF assets to the north under the command of Operation Resolute. As already happened under the 2nd Gillard administration, the 2nd Rudd government too received criticism nationally and internationally, yet was able to enact the country's stern irregular migration governance with bipartisan support.

Despite the Labor party's efforts, conservative politician Tony Abbott won the 2013 elections and led a new Coalition government (Abbott administration, 2013–2015). Outspoken about tougher measures for irregular migration, Abbott abundantly resorted to foreign policy and security measures to address it. First, the government introduced Operation Sovereign Borders (OSB), which strengthened the existing externalisation and offshore processing approach (Chambers 2015), incorporated Operation Resolute, adopted a "zero tolerance" approach, involved the "no way" media campaign attempting to dissuade prospective migrants in origin and transit countries, labelled them as "illegal maritime arrivals", and entailed the assessment of asylum claims at sea. Second, it reintroduced temporary protection visas. Third, it authorised the resuming of pushback manoeuvres, thus forcefully "returning" some migrants' boats to Indonesia, a country that had not signed the Refugee Convention. Fourth, it struck a new offshore processing agreement with Cambodia, which was soon deemed a failure due to its high costs (around 50 million dollars) and the two-digit number of migrants that the Cambodian centre eventually hosted (Wanna 2015). Despite the latter issue, Australia's expanded foreign policy framework for irregular migration proved to be effective numerically (450 IMAs in 2014 and 238 in 2015; see Refugee Council of Australia 2024), while continuing to attract criticism from international agencies and organisations (domestically it enjoyed bipartisan support).

A new leadership spill, this time within the Coalition, resulted in entrepreneur and moderate conservative Malcolm Turnbull to replace Abbott as Australia's prime minister (1st Turnbull administration, 2015–2016). The regional context continued to favour Australia's efforts to limit unregulated maritime migration, as attested by the very low number of IMAs (51 in 2016). Turnbull later won the 2016 elections, thus starting the 2nd Turnbull ministry (2016–2018). Australia's foreign policy on irregular migration displayed both elements of continuity and novelty under this administration. One the one hand, OSB and Canberra's broader externalisation approach continued as before (60 IMAs in 2017 and 24 in 2018). On the other, the Manus Island

processing centre started ceasing its activities, following the PNG Supreme Court's ruling that it was breaching the country's constitution (Grewcock 2017). Moreover, Australia eventually managed to reach a resettlement and asylum seekers' swap agreement with the United States, which was concluded in 2016 during the Obama presidency and was finally implemented in 2017 during the Trump presidency, albeit with many political obstacles given Trump's reticence (Higgins 2022). Much like all previous governments since Gillard's, Canberra implemented its stern irregular migration policies with bipartisan political support, despite the many concerns voiced by international humanitarian organisations.

The fragmentation of Australia's governmental stability – comparable to Italy's – continued with another leadership spill within the Coalition, which saw conservative politician Scott Morrison taking Turnbull's place as prime minister (1st Morrison administration, 2018–2019). The geopolitical situation to Australia's north continued to assist the latter's endeavour to stop maritime migration (24 IMAs in 2018). The Morrison government stressed foreign policy continuity, though facing a few new developments. While the whole-of-government externalisation effort and OSB continued their activities, the Nauru processing centre progressively ceased its activities between 2018 and 2019, on account of diminishing numbers of asylum seekers hosted (also due to Australia's agreement with the United States). Moreover, in February 2019, the government was defeated in the parliament, and thus, the "Medevac Bill" – which gave more power to doctors in authorising the medical evacuation of detained asylum seekers – was approved (then repealed in December; see Gillespie 2023). In response to this, the government reopened the Christmas Island processing centre. Shortly afterwards, Morrison won the 2019 elections and started the 2nd Morrison ministry (2019–2022). The latter faced the COVID-19 pandemic which, from the specific perspective of unauthorised arrivals, indirectly helped to reach even lower number of IMAs (6 in 2020 and 0 in 2021; see Australian Border Force 2024). In 2021, the Manus Island centre finally closed, while the Nauru one reopened (Huynh 2023). Following the same path of previous governments, the Morrison administrations drew criticism internationally for their restrictive irregular migration policies but enjoyed bipartisan support.

The Labor party then won the 2022 elections after nine years of Coalition governments, with progressive politician Anthony Albanese as party leader and prime minister (Albanese ministry, 2022-ongoing).[8] Regionally, seaborne asylum seekers' numbers remained very low, if slightly increasing (199 in 2022, 74 in 2023, and 49 in the first four months of 2024; Australian Border Force 2024; see Figure 3.2). As with all governments since Gillard's, the Albanese administration maintained the extant migratory foreign policy framework comprising externalisation and offshore processing in Nauru and Christmas Island and navy deployments under OSB, in addition to several
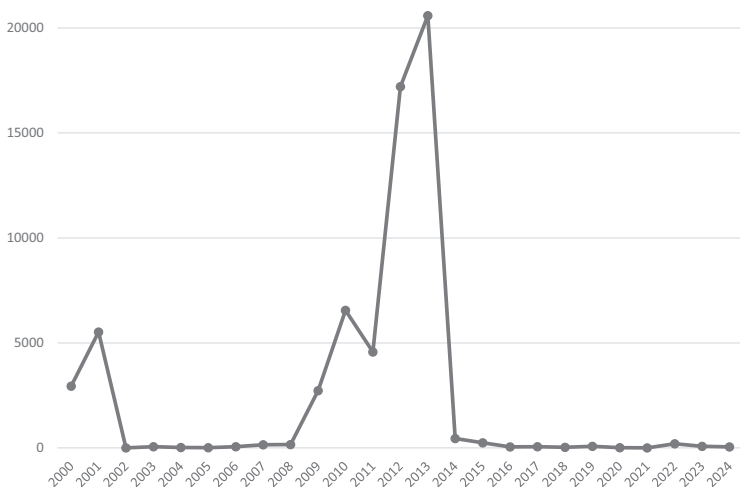
Figure 3.2 IMAs in Australia between January 2000 and April 2024 inclusive, totalling
          just below 62,000.

Source: Official data collated by the author.

bilateral agreements for the return of asylum seekers departing from select
countries (including Vietnam), although it also re-abolished temporary pro-
tection visas.

Additionally, Canberra decided to partially address the unfolding economic-
humanitarian crisis in Sri Lanka, which led to an increase in asylum seekers. It
provided 50 million dollars in financial aid to Colombo to address the human-
itarian crisis, which however also comprised a new externalisation agree-
ment with Sri Lanka, whereby the latter agrees to stem outbound migrants'
flows directed to Australia. This policy includes the provision of 4,000 GPS
trackers to Sri Lankan fishing boats (which might host prospective asylum
seekers) and routine cooperation with the Sri Lankan navy. Further, Aus-
tralia's foreign policy framework for irregular migration continues to enact
an almost "traditional" measure, that is, the shipboard assessment of asylum
claims for those who manage to leave Sri Lankan (or Indonesian) waters, a
procedure whose legality is still debated (see Senanayake *et al*. 2023). Lastly,
Australia's High Court has ruled migrants' indefinite detention unlawful in
November 2023, a decision Canberra obviously had to acknowledge (Human
Rights Law Centre 2023). The Albanese government's irregular migration
governance continues to receive bipartisan support as well as international
criticisms, on account of migrants' conditions in its offshore processing
centres.

Table 3.2 Australia's irregular migration governance from 2000 to May 2024, with a focus on foreign policy measures

Specific foreign policy measures	Irregular migration governance type	Type of government	Prime Minister (government no.)
Permission denied to *Tampa*, SASR deployment, diplomatic dispute with Norway, "Border Protection Bill", temporary protection visas introduced, provisional agreement with Nauru and New Zealand	Restrictive	Conservative	Howard (2nd)
Pacific Solution: navy deployments; offshore processing in Nauru, Manus Island, and Christmas Island; pushback manoeuvres 2001–2003; Operation Relex; territorial excision from migration zone. Establishment of Bali Process	Restrictive	Conservative	Howard (3rd)
Pacific Solution: navy deployments; offshore processing in Nauru, Manus Island, and Christmas Island; pushback manoeuvres 2001–2003; Operation Relex (Operation Resolute from 2006); territorial excision from migration zone	Restrictive	Conservative	Howard (4th)
Dismantlement of Pacific Solution, Operation Resolute with no pushback manoeuvres, abolishment of temporary protection visas	Non-restrictive	Progressive	Rudd (1st)
Operation Resolute with no pushback manoeuvres	Non-restrictive	Progressive	Gillard (1st)
Externalisation and offshore processing attempts with Timor-Leste and Malaysia (unsuccessful), reopening of Nauru and Manus Island, updated engagement of Operation Resolute	Restrictive	Progressive	Gillard (2nd)
PNG Solution: navy deployments, offshore processing in Nauru e Manus Island (both centres expanded)	Restrictive	Progressive	Rudd (2nd)

(*Continued*)

Table 3.2 (Continued)

Specific foreign policy measures	Irregular migration governance type	Type of government	Prime Minister (government no.)
OSB, at-sea asylum claims' assessment, pushback manoeuvres reintroduced, offshore processing in Nauru and Manus Island, temporary protection visas reintroduced, offshore processing agreement with Cambodia	Restrictive	Conservative	Abbott
OSB, at-sea asylum claims' assessment, pushback manoeuvres, offshore processing in Nauru and Manus Island	Restrictive	Conservative	Turnbull (1st)
OSB, at-sea asylum claims' assessment, pushback manoeuvres, offshore processing in Nauru and Manus Island, Manus Island centre progressively closed, migrants' deal with the United States	Restrictive	Conservative	Turnbull (2nd)
OSB, at-sea asylum claims' assessment, pushback manoeuvres, offshore processing in Nauru and Manus Island, Nauru centre progressively closed, "Medevac Bill" approved and then repealed, Christmas Island centre reopened	Restrictive	Conservative	Morrison (1st)
OSB, at-sea asylum claims' assessment, pushback manoeuvres, offshore processing in Manus Island and Christmas Island, Manus Island centre closed, Nauru centre reopened	Restrictive	Conservative	Morrison (2nd)
OSB, at-sea asylum claims' assessment, abolishment of temporary protection visas, pushback manoeuvres, offshore processing in Nauru and Christmas Island, new externalisation agreement with Sri Lanka	Restrictive	Progressive	Albanese

A comparative assessment

The research findings that have been outlined so far, conducted by following the guidelines of both the comparative case study (CCS) and FPA methods – taking into account both international and domestic factors to better interpret the resulting foreign policy – allow for a series of comparative considerations. First, in foreign policy terms, a growing convergence stands out. In particular, as shown in Tables 3.1 and 3.2, military missions in international waters and/or third countries; naval deployments; pushback manoeuvres (at different points in time); externalisation and/or offshore processing agreements; military, logistical, and financial support to transit countries; territorial excisions (Australia); cooperation with relevant regional institutions and fora (the European Union and the Bali Process, for example); regional plans (Italy's "Mattei Plan"); and others.

Second, from a security perspective, the analysis of these 23 years points at two increasing and diverging trends: destination countries like Italy and Australia have progressively focused on border security, which has implied a growing *insecurity* for migrants. To wit, the more Rome and Canberra focused on stopping or at least stemming seaborne flows of asylum seekers, the more the latter found themselves in life-threatening situations either in migrants' camps (currently in Libya, Tunisia, and Niger in the case of Italy; in Christmas Island, Nauru, Manus Island, and Cambodia, at different points in time, in Australia's case) or at sea.

A third, inevitable perspective is centred on the policy implications of the two countries' foreign policy on irregular migration, some of which are partially revisited in the following chapters. To begin with, and despite the many striking similarities in terms of foreign policy measures, Italy and Australia display two opposite policy outcomes, the latter with negligible seaborne arrivals since 10 years ago and the former with very significant flows in the same period (see Figure 5.1). While this is due to geographical, geopolitical, supranational, constitutional, and "numerical" factors (see the "efficacy gaps" in Chapter 5), the contrast between official objectives and reality in Italy shows a gap that is not found in the Australian case. This raises questions of both moral and practical value: is it tenable for destination countries like Italy and Australia to continue to implement externalisation policies that lead to human rights violations? Conversely, is it possible to further stem seaborne flows in an effective yet humane manner? The answers to these policy conundrums may be of interest to countries in comparable conditions, which could potentially spur new debates over potential policy alternatives for the future.

Fourth, there are some significant theoretical considerations to be made, in the light of these two case studies. How can migrants' own perspectives – such as those addressed by functionalist, transnationalist, or other theoretical approaches – complement state-centric viewpoints? On the other hand,

what role do theories focusing on the local population in destination countries have in explaining Italy's and Australia's responses? More to the point, can states' own perspectives be reconciled with migrants'? This book – and Chapter 6 more specifically – argues that theoretical eclecticism is a solid and necessary point of departure to answer these and other similar questions. Consequently, both the above issues and the many other elements that have not been mentioned here can benefit from the Italian and Australian case studies, as well as from relevant security, policy, and theoretical considerations that are provided in the following chapters.

Notes

1 This chapter describes Italian governments as conservative or centre-right, right-wing, progressive or centre-left, grand coalition (national unity government), technocratic (government of 'non-political experts'), or populist.
2 The Dublin III regulation states that the responsibility for addressing immediate migration emergencies falls on the closest country, as do all the procedures for seaborne asylum seekers.
3 Meloni is the incumbent prime minister as of May 2024.
4 While this number is somewhat stable over time, Italy's several amnesties have regularised hundreds of thousands of irregular workers (partially comprising irregular migrants) in this book's timeframe.
5 This new proposed policy officially entails the transportation of up to 36,000 asylum seekers per year from Italy to Albania over a renewable period of five years (women and vulnerable groups are excluded) and two to three new processing centres to be built in Albania with Italian funds and operating under Italian law. As of May 2024, however, doubts still linger on the policy's actual timeline as well as on the numbers of migrants it will eventually affect.
6 This chapter labels Australian governments as "Coalition" (or conservative) and "Labor" (or progressive).
7 The literature identifies the rise in IMAs, the abandonment of the "carbon tax", the proposed resource super profit tax, a "confrontational" China speech, the abandonment of the first iteration of the Quad, and the presence of Tony Abbott as opposition leader (see Marr 2010).
8 Albanese is the incumbent prime minister as of May 2024.

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4 The security implications of irregular migration

State security, migrants' insecurity

Introduction

This book has so far engaged with three distinct yet interrelated themes, namely the growing nexus between foreign policy and irregular migration governance (and the usefulness of Italy and Australia as case studies), the broad and complex theoretical frameworks at our disposal (including their counterproductive compartmentalisation), and the two countries' foreign policy on irregular migration in the past quarter of a century or so (with their many similarities and few but significant differences). Inevitably, this leads to a series of related implications, which are examined in three distinct chapters. This chapter in particular deals with the security implications of the above, thus focusing on both state security (which includes their local populations' anxieties) and migrants' (in)security. Gauging these two viewpoints, which are seldom analysed together, represents an innovative contribution that this chapter, and the book more in general, seeks to make to irregular migration studies, international relations, and security studies. Given the breadth of related security implications, which could arguably be explored with several dedicated volumes, this chapter does not make pretence to comprehensiveness, rather it seeks to provide a concise, joint overview of migrants' and states' perspectives with a view to contribute to a more holistic approach to the irregular migration phenomenon.

Irregular migration and migrants' insecurity

As mentioned several times, the irregular migration phenomenon inherently paves the way for multifarious security implications for both migrants themselves and the states which experience this phenomenon. Beginning with the former, the very nature of *irregular* migration – involving the unauthorised crossing of a state border (IOM 2024a) – implies a risk for whoever chooses (or is forced to choose) this path. While regular migration is obviously not exempt from security risks (potential exploitation, non-voluntariness of migration, etc.), irregular migration encompasses those same perils but also entails

many other ones. People who migrate without a permit to cross a border do not have the possibility to travel legally, which heightens the journey's inherent risks. Further, people who have to migrate without a permit are more likely to come from areas where their own security is already jeopardised. More to the point, this rarely happens within the "Global North" and, unsurprisingly, occurs much more frequently in the "Global South", which further magnifies the insecurity background of prospective and actual migrants (see Table 4.1).

It ought to be emphasised that such risks do not exist "solely" during the migration process itself, but are the likely backdrop of asylum seekers' lives before migrating – wholly or partially – and will continue to impact on their lives even once (if) their journey ends in a destination country. In particular, migrants' lives are challenging even if they reach their country of destination under refugee status, with subsidiary protection, or in any other authorised manner. To use Desiderio's (2016, p. 1) words:

> Compared with other migrants, those fleeing war, political instability, or natural disaster are less able to plan or choose their destination […] The effects of psychological trauma and discrimination […] may stymie efforts to resume work. Shelters and social housing are often located away from the best job and training opportunities. Even where asylum seekers and refugees are allowed to work, opaque regulations and the extra burden on employers to comply with them can create a chilling effect.

This condition is, intuitively, even more taxing in the case of irregular migrants. Out of many possible examples, McAuliffe (2017) conducted a large survey among irregular maritime arrivals in Australia (Afghan, Iranian, Pakistani, Sri Lankan, and other nationals), and highlighted a number of aspects. These include the extreme difficulty of the journey to Australia, which exerted a heavy toll on their psycho-physical health once they reached their destination; the continuing challenges they faced in Australia, also due to the necessity to know the English language; and the varying degrees of strain they experienced depending on their nationality, gender, and other socio-demographic characteristics.

With this acknowledged, it is possible to return to the "central phase" of the irregular migration process, the dangerous journey itself. To rejoin a relevant lens discussed in Chapter 2, human security (HS) and its seven facets are a useful concept with which to assess this multiplicity of risks (see UNDP 1994; see also Fontana 2022 for a relevant analysis adopting the European Union as a case study). *Economic insecurity* is often an intrinsic point of departure for those who seek better lives elsewhere (though local middle classes show a marked propensity to emigrate too), but even more so for asylum seekers and irregular migrants more in general, since their journeys imply the presence of people smugglers at some point along the path, which requires substantial amounts of money and might lead to being indebted to cruel individuals and organisations.[1] By way of example, a recent UN report shows that the cost

of crossing the Mediterranean to reach Italy is more than 4,000 US dollars per person, excluding the costs of reaching Mediterranean shores themselves (UNHCR 2023). To reach Australia from Sri Lanka, on the other hand, every migrant needs around 3,500 Australian dollars (Mara 2023).

Moreover, the routes taken by human traffickers are perilous, may take weeks if not more to be completed, and therefore strain migrants' *food security*, which means that they often lack access to healthy and varied food – or even basic food – for a prolonged time. Likewise, large parts of the journey may involve exposure to polluted areas or environments and unclear water sources, thus affecting migrants' *environmental security*. Inevitably, these conditions eventually exert a negative impact on people's *health security*. Indeed, a specific report by the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control confirms that those who do reach Europe are screened for numerous diseases they might have contracted during their voyage or pathologies that may have been worsened by it (ECDC 2015).

Furthering the HS insights into irregular migration, people who have to resort to people smugglers – and those who do so willingly (see Triandafyllidou 2017 on migrants' agency) – are at high risk of *personal insecurity*. Potential beatings, rapes, physical or psychological tortures, and even indiscriminate homicides are not uncommon, for example, in refugee camps in Libya and Tunisia (for those attempting to reach Italy) and, to a lesser extent and at different points in time, in Nauru and Manus Island (part of Australia's externalisation policy). More broadly, these are well-known hazards of this complex phenomenon (Loutan *et al*. 1999). Consequently, the latter also endangers people's *political security* – that is, their right to live in an environment that respects their basic human and civil rights – throughout the irregular migration continuum (which partially includes their experiences in destination countries as well). Last, irregular migration fragments people's social, cultural, ethnic, and religious traditions and connections with people with whom these are shared, thus threatening *community security*. At the same time, those traditions and connections, if defended, may be part of migrants' broader, transnational network (see Stock 2023).

Complementing the above, it is important to reiterate a self-evident reality, that is, the disproportionate risk for women, children, and minority groups. In Schrover's (2023, p. 27) words:

> Over time, the emphasis has shifted from "women" to "gender", and more recently to "intersectionality", which draws attention to the intersection between categories of identity and power such as gender, class, race/ethnicity, religion, age, (dis)ability, sexuality, education/skill/occupation, skin color, life cycle, legal status, residence rights and nationality/citizenship.

Inevitably, the inherent and grave risks of irregular migration – for both majority and minority groups of migrants – may lead to death, including at the border of destination countries (Cuttitta and Last 2020). A UN-supported

initiative, the Missing Migrants Project, has been monitoring the death of peo-
ple during the migration process since 2014 and has counted around 65,000
deaths since 2014, as of May 2024. Of these, very few are close to Australia
due to both geographic and regional geopolitical reasons, while the largest
share is at Italy's doorstep, the Mediterranean, where almost 30,000 people
have lost their lives in around 10 years (IOM 2024b).

Moreover, the implications of countries' increasingly restrictive irregular
migration policies affect different migrants in a different way. To employ the
book's two case studies once more, asylum seekers and irregular migrants
attempting to reach Italy and the rest of Europe are obviously impacted in
a negative manner by Italy's (and the European Union's) border security
measures, since these entail externalisation, at-sea interception of migrants'
boats, and other initiatives. However, migrants headed towards Italy have
run severe risks even when Rome was not implementing its tough policies.
To wit, while migrants were not confined in refugee (detention) camps dur-
ing the Letta and Renzi governments (2013–2016), many of them still had
to cross hundreds of kilometres to reach the southern Mediterranean (in
terms of nationality, the majority declared to come from sub-Saharan Africa
at the time; see UNHCR 2017),[2] and then had to start a sea journey – often
organised by human traffickers – in the hope of being rescued by the Italian
navy, the Italian coastguard, or a non-governmental organisation (NGO)
vessel. A similar condition can be found in the Australian case. To be sure,
migrants' whole HS spectrum worsens as Canberra's irregular migration
governance tightens, much like Italian case. Even so, when Australian poli-
cies temporarily became non-restrictive during the 1st Rudd and 1st Gillard
governments (2008–2010), seaborne migrants still had to face a dangerous
journey across both land and sea (mostly from Western and South Asia;
see Australian Parliament 2016) to reach Australia's northern shores.[3] In
essence, the safety of all undocumented maritime migrants (broadly under-
stood, hence the use of the HS lens) is endangered throughout the irregular
migration continuum, even in the rare cases in which destination countries
implement non-restrictive policies.

Table 4.1 Migrants' (in)security where irregular migration is concerned

Migrants' (in)security
Impossibility of travelling legally; country of origin where security is likely jeopardised; often from "Global South", which magnifies precarious background.
Migrants face multiple challenges even when they reach their destination country. Without any authorisation or protection (irregular migration), these challenges are amplified.
Human security is strongly and negatively affected throughout the irregular migration continuum.
"Fragile" and minority groups are at even higher risk.
Different types of migrants are affected in different ways by states' restrictive policies.

Irregular migration and state security

The previous discussion on migrants' (in)security across the whole irregular migration process is a stark reality that ought to be never avoided when exploring this phenomenon. It also provides an essential context for matters of state security (partially including local populations' perspectives) arising from the opposite side of the migratory spectrum. Out of many relevant elements, this chapter focuses on seven for reasons of parsimony and analytical clarity (Table 4.2). To begin with, one of the key components of state sovereignty is the right and authority to exert *border control*, including national security and foreign policy measures tackling potential dangers in terms of goods' and people's movement (Sobrino Heredia 2022). Irregular migration is particularly relevant in this case, as it challenges destination countries' ability (at times even their willingness) to exercise this authority, while further complicating the broader context due to international humanitarian law provisions, which may collide with domestic (law enforcement) and foreign policy goals. To quote a seminal article by Koser (2010, p. 189):

> it is argued that states have a sovereign right to control who crosses their borders, and that irregular migrants threaten sovereignty by undermining this control. It thus follows that a fundamental way to reassert full sovereignty is to stop irregular migration.

Additionally, states have to consider concerns related to the (un)sustainability of inward flows of irregular migrants over time. In the words of McAuliffe and Koser (2017a, p. 2), they consider the "considerable human, financial, diplomatic, physical/capital, technological, intelligence, operational and other resources" that are required to attempt to govern this phenomenon, in addition to substantial humanitarian concerns. Moreover, challenging regional environments may heighten the perceived necessity to adopt a foreign policy stressing national interests (for Australia's difficult strategic environment, for example, see Abbondanza and Wilkins 2022). All of this complicates states' border policy formulation, due to the multiplicity of concerns that pressures them.

Second, the potential risk of *terrorism* has shaped debates in destination countries for many years. This is the "migration-terrorism nexus", whose conceptual and analytical validity remains under scrutiny (see the review by Helbling and Meierrieks 2022, for example). On this point, official EU data may help to better delineate this matter' contours. As mentioned in Chapter 2, five out of ten completed terrorist attacks in the European Union in 2020 were conducted by irregular migrants,[4] more than a dozen undocumented migrants were arrested on terrorism charges in the European Union in 2021 (Europol 2022), and terrorists infiltrating irregular migration pathways remain a serious concern (Europol 2023). While these are

actual threats to states' security, they are minuscule when compared to the size of irregular flows headed towards Europe (both terrestrial and maritime), which ought to be taken into account when addressing related policy formulation. Nevertheless, both Italy and Australia have officially – albeit implicitly – endorsed the migration-terrorism nexus for almost ten years now (see Abbondanza 2023a). Rome has done so through its 2015 Defence White Paper (Italian Government 2015, para 44) and Canberra with its 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper (Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2017, p. 33).

A third point can be made with reference to *crime*, which is often associated with the presence of large numbers of irregular migrants. The broader "immigration-crime nexus" is still widely debated, although most empirical evidence attests that there is no positive relationship between the presence of regular immigrants and the number of committed crimes, quite the contrary, in fact (see Pickering and Ham 2017, among the many). However, the evidence also suggests that irregular migrants do commit more crimes than both regular migrants and the native population. Among the many reasons, the impossibility to work legally, states' increasingly tough policies on irregular residents, and their subsequent marginalisation are sound explanations for this condition (Bell 2019). Consequently, and unsurprisingly, people in countries experiencing flows of undocumented migrants mostly support stern measures concerning them. According to a large poll conducted by Pew (2019), 50% of Italians support the deportation of migrants residing illegally in their country (39% against it), and 61% of Australians are in favour (34% against it). Overall, the perceptions that local populations in destination countries have about crime and migrants, especially those with irregular status, tend to shape their opinions on this matter and, at least partially, impact on the related policy formulation process.

Moreover, there are additional matters that contribute to heighten these security anxieties. These are *socio-economic* in nature and focus on the consequences of large and somewhat "sudden" flows of irregular migrants into host societies with noticeably different sociocultural backgrounds. This may strain receiving states' welcoming capabilities in a variety of manners, including housing and accommodation, (informal) job opportunities, access to healthcare and other social benefits, and others (Sabates-Wheeler 2009). Further, the likely impossibility of irregular migrants to integrate with the same ease as regular migrants might lead to ghetto-like communities, which strengthen the vicious circle of exclusion, perceived competition with the local population, and, potentially, illegal activities for subsistence (see Koser 2016). On top of this, migrants with particularly-traumatising experiences (see Heikkurinen 2019), as well as combat experience from conflict zones, might pose an additional societal risk unless properly addressed, which in turn is difficult on account of both

the unlikelihood of those migrants declaring such conditions and the existing strain in public health services. Such risks are invariably worsened by migrants' irregular status.

The above considerations inevitably lead to the adoption of another theoretical tool explored in Chapter 2, namely *securitisation* (along with the resulting, restrictive migratory foreign policy). Starting as a top-down communicative process that labels something or someone as a security threat (see Balzacq 2010 and McDonald 2008, out of numerous seminal publications on this), securitisation entails political, policy, and security instruments in order to address the newly identified threat. Italy and Australia make no exception in this respect. Investigating the former, Bello (2021, p. 58) writes that "Some of the policies enacted by different governments have actually entailed discriminatory practices, generating a spiralling of the securitization of migration and its related migration-crime nexus", an approach that is increasingly facilitated by the European Union (Panebianco 2022; Caballero Vélez and Krapivnitskaya 2020). With reference to Australia, Curley and Vandyk (2017, p. 44) conclude that "an effective regional response to migrant smuggling […] has been undermined by the securitised nature of Australian political debate relating to irregular migration, as manifested in its bilateral offshore processing and resettlement agreements". Intuitively, the presence of very few but real security concerns, along with the public opinion's general support for restrictive measures, favours (and in part is a product of) the securitisation of irregular migration in these two countries.

A practical consequence of securitising irregular migration – not only the migrants themselves but the human traffickers too – has been the attempt to resort to *deterrence*. As a core international strategy in the second half of the 20th century (the Cold War) and in the 21st century (increased volatility), deterrence is a deeply studied strategic and military concept whose vast literature cannot be recounted here (among the numerous studies, see Jervis 1979 and Snyder 1961). In a broad sense, deterrence seeks to alter the cost-benefit analysis of an opponent to increase one's own advantage, a logic that has been applied to irregular migration governance as well. On the one hand, convincing prospective migrants that the risks are greater than the potential benefits, that the former keep getting higher, and that the latter are minimal, if any. On the other, deterrence logics stress that inflexible punishments await people smugglers. Indeed, the irregular migration foreign policies of this book's case studies are a telling illustration of the importance of deterrence in their formulation – although with mixed evidence as to their effectiveness (see Campesi 2018, for example) – as attested by scholars examining Italy (Rosina 2022; Triandafyllidou and Ambrosini 2011, among the many) and Australia (Pickering and Weber 2014; Richardson 2010, again among the many).[5]

This bring us to the seventh and last point considered here – the increasing *militarisation* of irregular migration governance (see Kinacioglu 2023), which

is a cumulative by-product of the conditions that have been discussed so far. As shown in Chapter 3, this process started to unfold more markedly at the onset of the 21st century, with post-Cold War US unipolarity fading, a series of terrorist attacks hitting "Global North" countries, and a number of conservative governments being elected as a result of national security-focused campaigns. Once more, Italy and Australia are two highly representative case studies. Among the various military measures they adopted within their specific foreign policies, the most relevant ones for this debate are the now-permanent deployment of navy vessels in international waters to intercept boats carrying asylum seekers and human traffickers (in both cases); the provision of military and/or technical support to the coast guards of transit countries, such as patrol boats and training (in Italy's case) and GPS systems (in Australia's case); pushback manoeuvres (Italy until 2012, Australia to this day); the establishment of related military missions (including the two Italian and Italian-led EU military missions in Niger and Australia's Operation Sovereign Borders); and others.

In addition to the above, other facilitating factors comprise unwavering political bipartisanship (in Italy since 2016 with the Gentiloni government and in Australia since 2010 with the 2nd Gillard government), path dependence (as per the discussion in Chapter 2), electoral considerations (public opinions becoming increasingly wary of seaborne asylum seekers; see Pew 2019), supranational (EU) pressures to toughen border control in the case of Italy, a converging narrative (Kinacioglu 2023), and a growing consensus among destination countries on the necessity to adopt/maintain strict policies to address this phenomenon (such as Italy, France, Denmark, Spain, and the United Kingdom in Europe; see Abbondanza 2023b, Finotelli and Ponzo 2023, Ceccorulli *et al.* 2020, and Carvalho 2013; and Australia, Israel, South Africa, and the US outside of Europe; see McAuliffe and Koser 2017b and Bloch and Chimienti 2013). Consequently, the growing militarisation within the two countries' irregular migration foreign policy should not surprise neither casual nor expert observers.

Table 4.2 State security where irregular migration is concerned

State security

Sovereignty, border control, and national security prerogatives

Migration-terrorism nexus, a debated notion implicitly endorsed by several destination countries, including Italy and Australia

Immigration-crime nexus, disproven for regular migrants, often confirmed for irregular migrants (although states directly contribute to this condition)

Social and economic concerns due to large and sustained flows of irregular migrants

As a result, states securitise irregular migration

Consequently, states seek to deter prospective migrants and human traffickers (with debated effectiveness)

States therefore increasingly resort to militarised foreign policies

Conclusion

This chapter jointly considered both state security and the resulting migrants' insecurity where irregular migration is concerned. Beginning with the latter, it has delved into the very nature of irregular migration itself, prior to employing the seven facets of the HS lens to explore migrants' vulnerabilities throughout this process. Next, it shed light on destination states' (and their local populations') concerns, thus emphasising the analytical contribution that this volume aims to make. Specifically, among the many, it considered sovereignty, border control, and national security prerogatives; the "migration-terrorism nexus"; the "immigration-crime nexus" (both with many caveats); socioeconomic concerns; and states' consequent securitisation, deterrence, and militarisation (foreign policy) measures aimed at irregular migration. As can be seen, there is an inverse relationship between states' and migrants' security: when the former is bolstered, the latter is lessened. This is attested by the extant literature and is supported by decades of empirical evidence, at least with the current forms of externalisation. Whether there are alternatives to this approach, and what kind of advantages and limitations they may have, is the focus of the following chapter, which starts from these security considerations to provide more policy-oriented insights instead.

Notes

1 Although smugglers can also be former migrants, this does not necessarily alleviate the harshness of their activity.
2 Regional instability, multiple flashpoints, and different crises have partially changed the nationality profiles of migrants headed towards Italy. According to official data on the year 2023, there has been a strong increase in asylum seekers from Northern Africa – mainly Tunisia and Egypt – and South Asia, mainly from Bangladesh and Pakistan. See Italian Ministry of the Interior 2024.
3 Operation Sovereign Borders has classified information concerning maritime asylum seekers since 2013 (see White 2018), although few attempts from Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia in general continue to occur.
4 Who did not, however, reach Europe via *seaborne* routes.
5 See Chapter 5 for discussion of why Italian and Australian deterrence strategies have different outcomes.

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5 The policy implications of irregular migration

Gaps, alternatives, extraterritorial processing reconsidered, conundrums, and external validity

Introduction

Stemming from the volumes' findings, three sets of implications clearly emerge. The first refers to security concerns affecting both migrants and destination countries (Chapter 4), while this chapter delves into the policy-related implications of irregular migration, with relevant examples from the book's two case studies. More specifically, out of the many possible viewpoints, it sheds light on policy gaps, policy alternatives, a revisited policy alternative, policy conundrums, and the potential external validity of some of this book's findings, respectively outlined in five distinct sections. Consequently, the exploration of these five themes requires a longer investigation compared to the previous chapter's two standpoints. As with other components of this book's research, the concurrent analysis of multiple points of view strives to strengthen the overall analysis and seeks to provide a useful contribution to the disciplinary literatures of irregular migration studies, international relations, and security studies.

Irregular migration and policy gaps

Broadly speaking, states' irregular migration governance has been the object of numerous studies, too many to be recounted here. However, in terms of their "policy continuum" (from policy formulation to policy assessment), scholarly contributions are less abundant and benefit from the analytical framework offered by Czaika's and de Haas' (2017) seminal article. The latter identified three types of gaps that are germane to this research – namely discursive gaps, implementation gaps, and efficacy gaps – which this chapter endorses and adopts in order to better assess the policy implications of what has been discussed in this book so far (see Table 5.1).

Starting with discursive gaps, defined as "the discrepancy between public discourses and policies on paper" (Czaika and de Haas 2017, p. 896), Italy and Australia display a certain degree of consistency in their migratory

foreign policies – especially given their continuity – although the Italian case is more complex due to the much higher number of asylum seekers involved and the electoral promises that are consequently more difficult to fulfil. Out of the several possible examples, instances of discursive gaps can be found in Prime Minister Meloni's declarations in 2022 (and multiple times before), at the height of the electoral campaign, when she promised a naval blockade to stop seaborne migrants. Prodded by experts and the opposition once officially in power, she clarified that her interpretation of a naval blockade entailed a different approach compared to the legal meaning of this action[1] and underlined that the European Union already envisaged it back in 2017. A fact-checking analysis later disproved this statement (Pagella Politica 2022) and, at the time of writing (May 2024), no naval blockade is being implemented, regardless of the interpretation of this term (although the EU Commission has not ruled out new measures to stem maritime flows; see Nielsen 2023).

Australia, on the other hand, displays even more consistency in its irregular migration-related foreign policy, although discursive gaps are not lacking. Then Prime Minister Rudd, for example, said in December 2008 that his government had "ended the inhumane, unfair and wasteful Pacific solution" (Australian Government 2008). While he did thoroughly reform the country's policies in this respect, it ought to be emphasised that some aspects of the Pacific Solution were actually maintained, including the detention centre in Christmas Island, the territorial excisions from Australia's migration zone, and the lengthy assessment times for migrants' asylum requests (see Crock 2010, for example).

Second, Czaika and de Haas (2017, p. 896) define implementation gaps as "the disparity between policies on paper and their implemented policies". Italy's irregular migration governance, in particular its foreign policy measures, officially operate under international law provisions (Italian Government 2017). However, on account of the continuous violations of migrants' human rights as a result of such measures, many observers call on the difference between what these policies guarantee on paper and what they entail in reality (see Tranchina 2023). In Australia's case, too, there are numerous instances in which the government implemented its well-known restrictive policies while emphasising their compliance with international humanitarian law, although the stark reality is very different (see Law Council of Australia 2024). As the extant literature on externalisation attests – often mentioned throughout this book – similar concerns are raised every time a destination country implements comparably restrictive policies.

Third, Czaika and de Haas explore efficacy gaps, which they define "the extent to which implemented policies affect migration" (2017, p. 896). Here, the impact of the two countries' irregular migration governance is more difficult to assess due to a variety of factors. These include

geographical reasons (Italy's strong proximity to a number of transit countries); the regional strategic landscape (more favourable in Australia's case and much more volatile in Italy's); the presence of a supranational entity (the European Union) which limits its member states' foreign policy autonomy in certain areas and the lack of a comparable organisation with reference to Australia; Italy's constitutional obligation to protect migrants' lives (article no. 10) and Australia's unique status as the only liberal democracy without a Bill of Rights; and, lastly, the colossal difference in terms of maritime arrivals between Italy (approximately 1.4 million people) and Australia (around 62,000) in little less than a quarter of a century (Abbondanza 2023a; see Figure 5.1). Having outlined these considerations, Rome has been able to partially curb what would have been even greater flows of seaborne asylum seekers (see de Haas *et al*. 2019 for a relevant conceptual framework), yet the promise of halting the majority of them has been plainly frustrated (Caponio and Cappiali 2020). Conversely, the above reasons have allowed Canberra to experience arrivals' numbers that are much more in line with the "stop the boats" mantra, although at similar reputational costs (Austin and Fozdar 2018). Due to the complexity of this global phenomenon, similar considerations can inevitably be made in a variety of comparable cases.
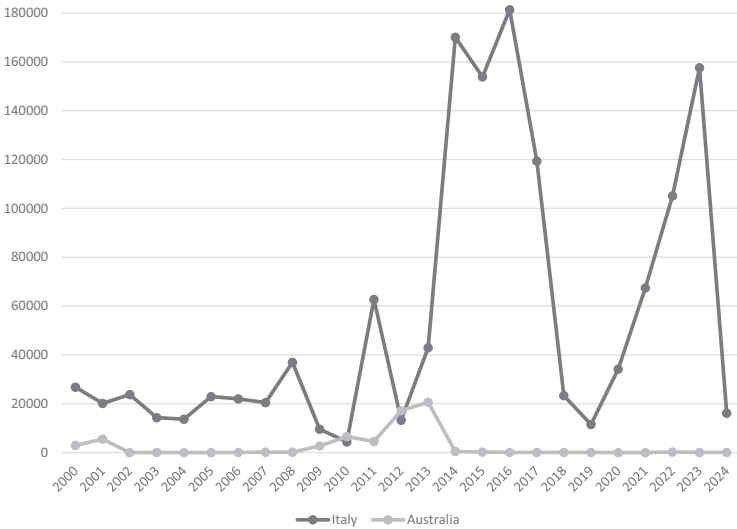

Figure 5.1 The different magnitude of seaborne migratory flows to Italy and Australia across time (both up to April 2024).

Source: Official data collated by the author.

Table 5.1 Policy gaps within irregular migration governance

Policy gap	Italy and Australia
Discursive gaps	Broad consistency between public discourses and migratory foreign policies on paper, with few noticeable exceptions in both countries
Implementation gaps	In both countries, noticeable discrepancy between nominal compliance with international law provisions and actual policies
Efficacy gaps	Higher efficacy in the Australian case, due to several key differences

Irregular migration and policy alternatives

A second consideration impacting on migrants, states, and regional/international organisations is the type of irregular migration-related foreign policy that affected states implement, whether willingly or not. As can be seen, such an endeavour is partially akin to the concept of "migration regime", which requires a brief clarification. "Migration regimes" are a now-prevalent notion within migration studies, and as such they have been the object of insightful investigations focusing on both conceptual clarity (still somewhat inadequate) and related shortcomings (a predominant focus on the "Global North" and analytical ambiguity, chiefly), as well as on its real-world implications through numerous case studies (see Boucher and Gest 2018, Pott *et al.* 2018, and Comte 2017, among key recent examples). On account of migration regimes' close connection with the discipline of migration studies, and in the light of the multidisciplinary approach pursued in this chapter – building upon not only migration studies but also international relations and security – it is appropriate to note that this section adopts a conceptually broader (albeit more generic, as a consequence) "policy alternative" lens.

An overview of such foreign policy alternatives arguably helps to better grasp the multiplicity of potential paths that states and organisations can pursue, as well as the implications for all parties involved. For reasons of analytical clarity, this chapter groups them into six categories: (1) *de facto* open borders, (2) *de jure* open borders, (3) *de jure* closed borders, (4) regional solutions with destination countries, (5) regional solutions with transit countries, and (6) legal pathways. As can be seen with even a cursory look, there are overlaps between some of them, yet their compartmentalisation can be useful to investigate them (see Table 5.2). A seventh foreign policy alternative, centred on a revisited understanding of asylum claims' extraterritorial processing, has not been implemented yet in this form – unlike the previous six – and is therefore discussed separately.

To start with, some countries may decide to adopt strict policies, although they may also lack the necessary capabilities to enforce them. This renders

their borders *de facto* open, as migrants are often able to cross them despite the nominal prohibition to do so. Because of the elements involved in this condition – steady flows of unauthorised migrants and their actual ability to enter into a state without major obstacles – this often happens with transit countries and/or as a result of a humanitarian crisis. Sadly, examples abound and the case of Lebanon is an apt illustration of this. As a result of the Syrian crisis, Lebanon has the highest number of asylum seekers per square kilometre globally, despite its tougher border measures since 2015 (Janmyr 2017). With about 1.5 million asylum seekers in Lebanon, there is one asylum seeker every 3.7 Lebanese. Somewhat comparable cases can be found as a result of the Venezuelan crisis, the Ukrainian crisis, Afghanistan's crisis, and others (see UNHCR 2024), all of which have displaced millions of people who had no other choice but to flee to neighbouring countries regardless of the latter's border closure policies.

A second policy option is that of borders that are officially open due to a political and legal process. This can happen in a variety of situations and in different types of states, from transit to destination countries (albeit the latter scenario is much rarer). Transit countries may decide to have a clear open border policy for a variety of reasons, including humanitarian concerns, likely inability to halt flows of displaced people regardless of political decisions, or even financial advantages if they have ongoing agreements with destination countries. Destination countries too can occasionally decide to adopt *de jure* open borders to irregular flows, as this book's case studies have done at different points in time: Italy between 2013 and 2016 (Letta and Renzi governments) and Australia between 2008 and 2010 (1st Rudd and 1st Gillard administrations). While they eventually – and, so far, permanently – reverted to restrictive foreign policies, the two countries' oppositions at the time praised the other country's opposite policy. In Italy, the populist/regionalist right-wing party *Lega Nord* has often talked about the "Australian model" (Lega Lombarda 2015), while Australia's Green party openly praised Italy's (temporary) humanitarian approach (Australian Greens 2015).

Third, countries may determine that *de jure* closed borders is the most appropriate path. While there are noticeable overlaps with other policy categories – including that of *de facto* open borders as well as some regional solutions – this is a policy option that states adopt frequently, be them transit or destination countries. To clarify, having stern border control policies does not necessarily lead to a halt in unauthorised crossings or arrivals; indeed, in most countries, this never occurs. This happens with both transit countries and destination countries. To wit, European countries like Italy, France, Spain, the United Kingdom, Denmark, and others, as well as the European Union itself, have implemented externalisation policies for prolonged periods of time (see Fontana and Rosina 2024; Finotelli and Ponzo 2023; Ceccorulli *et al.* 2021; Carvalho 2013), yet, notwithstanding their *de jure* closed borders and despite their substantial capabilities and means, they have not witnessed

anything close to a zeroing of unauthorised arrivals. The same can be argued with regard to the United States, Canada, and Israel, to name but a few (see McAuliffe and Koser 2017a; Bloch and Chimienti 2013), with the only potential exception being Australia, as per the reasons mentioned earlier.

A further foreign policy alternative, which could operate jointly with either restrictive or non-restrictive border polices, is that of regional solutions with destination countries. This fourth pathway has been pursued several times and offers both "successful" and unsuccessful examples. The former category could include the recent US-Canada joint irregular migration governance (US Department of Homeland Security 2023), the equally recent US-Canada-Spain trilateral with similar goals (Spanish Government 2024), and, potentially, the provisions of the new EU Pact on Migration and Asylum (which is discussed later in this chapter). Among partially or wholly unsuccessful cases, the troubled Australia-US agreement – eventually concluded in 2017 after having temporarily strained relations between the two allies (see Huynh 2023) – and the first (failed) attempt to introduce EU relocation quotas stand out.

A fifth foreign policy alternative concerns regional solutions with transit countries. These are likely pursued by destination countries attempting to curb unauthorised migration through their maritime and/or land borders. This option mostly entails externalisation policies – often mere responsibility-shifting – and therefore shows significant overlaps with the third policy alternative (*de jure* closed borders). Here, too, illustrations abound. Among the many (others are mentioned in the following sections), the external dimension of EU migratory and asylum policies involving dozens of African and Asian nations (Longo and Fontana 2022); Italy's externalisation policies with Libya, Tunisia, Niger, and Albania (see Chapter 3); Australia's externalisation policies involving Sri Lanka, Nauru, Papua New Guinea, and Cambodia (at different points in time; see Chapter 3); and the difficult attempts made by the Bali Process (Kneebone 2014) are all suitable illustrations.

Sixth, destination countries have the possibility to provide legal pathways for prospective migrants who would otherwise pursue irregular pathways. Since the irregularity of a migrant's status is the product of a political and legal process comprising "fencing" (border controls), "gatekeeping" (visa restrictions), and other measures (Düvell 2011), it follows that the nature of this condition can be remedied by regularising it. Legal pathways have been the object of numerous studies – too many to be recounted here – yet one research effectively encapsulates the main highlights of this research branch. Specifically, the authors argue that enhanced regional mobility regimes, bilateral mobility schemes, sponsorship schemes, humanitarian corridors, as well as temporary migration partnerships, skills and mobility partnerships, and human development visa scheme could reinforce legal pathways while discouraging irregular migration (Triandafyllidou *et al.* 2019). Indeed, despite the numerous challenges, there are some implementation examples, including unfolding EU measures (European Commission 2024a).

A brief assessment of the policy alternatives

In the light of the several irregular migration-related foreign policy alternatives that have been explored so far, it is possible to assess their implications for both migrants and states (see Table 5.2). The first category focused on states that adopt nominally strict policies but lack the capability to enforce them, thus making them *de facto* open borders cases. From migrants' viewpoint, states' inability to control their borders in their entirety means the possibility to avoid externalisation and/or offshore processing policies, which often entail brutal and illegal treatments in their current forms. However, such fragile state systems usually also imply the impossibility (and/or unwillingness) to ensure the respect of migrants' rights, including the possibility of employment and safe housing. Consequently, states with *de facto* open borders (for several key examples, see UNHCR 2024) implicitly push irregular migrants elsewhere as they rarely offer acceptable long-term living conditions for them. More to the point, this condition is equally unsatisfactory for states themselves as their migratory and security goals are frustrated as a consequence of their incapacity to fully implement them.

Second, states resolving to officially open their borders to irregular seaborne flows create very different types of repercussions. For migrants, their journey remains a dangerous and traumatising experience, although the last stage of it does not entail yet another obstacle in the form of heavily patrolled borders or territorial waters. On the other hand, destination countries with *de jure* open borders might eventually experience logistical, economic, security, and political (electoral) challenges if such a posture is protracted for a long time. Out of several examples, the Italian case, at the forefront of what has been dubbed the "European refugee crisis", offers relevant insights into such challenges, including decreasing public support for inclusive policies and the total costs for its (temporarily) inclusive policy, which reached three billion euros a year in 2017 (Villa *et al.* 2018). For these and other reasons, destination countries' open border policies are increasingly rare in the 21st century and will arguably become even rarer in the future (see Chapter 7).

The third category that has been discussed is *de jure* closed borders, a policy option that is progressively becoming the norm among "Global North" destination countries, one with partial overlaps with *de facto* open borders and some regional solutions. This particular policy alternative has virtually opposite consequences compared to the previous one, as it heightens migrants' insecurity while attempting to reinforce states' security. To wit, migrants who have completed large parts of a perilous journey almost arrive at their final destination, without being able to actually reach it. Not only does this thwart their goals, but it often condemns them to live into migrants' "centres" (often prison-like structures) where their rights are violated and from which it is also difficult to escape. Numerous examples of asylum seekers in Nauru and Manus Island, due to Australia's "indefinite detention" principle (abolished

in 2023), stand out until recently (Gleeson 2016). With reference to the states enacting such policies, they are rarely able to satisfy their objective of zeroing arrivals (Australia being the only likely illustration of this), as in most cases they can only curb them, which plainly frustrates their migratory, societal, deterrence, and security goals. For very different reasons, therefore, this path is unsatisfactory for both migrants and (in most cases) states as well.

Next, two types of regional solutions highlight advantages and limitations when only partial forms of international cooperation are achieved. One the one hand, regional solutions *between destination countries* usually entail agreements to jointly manage irregular flows and/or the exchange/relocation of migrants. This can be beneficial to migrants who are already there and, to a lesser extent, to those who are not but may still enjoy smaller related benefits in their current country of residence (local development projects, etc.). Concurrently, this is also advantageous for states, as cooperation between them could increase solidarity, policy convergence (and therefore effectiveness), burden-sharing, and a more equitable (and possibly more humane) treatment of the relatively few asylum seekers that are impacted by this form of cooperation. The main issue, from a state's viewpoint, is reaching this level of cooperation, whose difficulty derives from the responsibility-shifting that most destination countries engage into (see Thielemann 2018 for a discussion about the European Union's troubled relocation quotas). On the other hand, regional solutions *with transit countries* often equate with externalisation policies, thus displaying the same concerns that have been described with reference to *de jure* closed borders. To reiterate, these are an emphasis of national security at the detriment of migrants' security (see Lazaridis 2016). In essence, both these options attest the varying degrees of effectiveness of partial forms of regional/international cooperation, while also highlighting the pitfalls of selective cooperation in lieu of broader and more ambitious (trans) regional plans.

The last among existing migratory foreign policy alternatives that is explored here focuses on legal pathways. These can build upon existing frameworks of annual "migrant quotas" that most developed states already adopt, with the additional benefit of more specifically targeting irregular flows to partially regularise them. From migrants' perspectives, those who might have attempted to reach those countries without authorisation are able to do so legally, which reduces the multifarious risks inherent in dangerous journeys and the subsequent difficulties in creating a new life without the necessary legal instruments to do so. As per the states, legal pathways allow them to receive workers that are needed in their economy, especially in countries where agricultural, manufacturing, and/or aged care jobs exceed local workers in those fields (Newland and Riester 2022).

Despite these clear advantages for both migrants and states, however, legal pathways display some important limitations. Chiefly, as they only address a consequence of irregular migration (the will or need to migrate), they are not

Table 5.2 Some irregular migration-related foreign policy alternatives

Migratory policy alternative	Assessment
De facto open borders	Undesirable for migrants in the mid- and long-terms, unsatisfactory for states
De jure open borders	Desirable for migrants, eventually unsustainable for states
De jure closed borders	Dangerous for migrants, unsatisfactory for states
Regional solutions with destination countries	Potentially beneficial to both migrants and states, although they only partially address the migratory phenomenon
Regional solutions with transit countries	Dangerous for migrants, unsatisfactory for states
Legal pathways	Beneficial to both migrants and states, although with significant limitations if implemented alone

able to deal with the multi-layered set of reasons that spur people to migrate in the first place. They do ameliorate the conditions of numerous migrants, as large destination countries can host many of them (e.g. Italy has authorised more than 450,000 entries just for the 2023–2025 period, a figure curiously similar to the estimates of irregular residents in the country; see Italian Ministry of Labour 2023). Yet, the nature of irregular flows does not necessarily satisfy the specific requests of each labour market (including the exploitative habits of their "informal economies"; see King and DeBono 2013), which eventually results in the protraction of restrictive policies targeting those migrants whose background is not deemed necessary.

Moreover, the necessity to carefully screen prospective foreign workers is important in the light of the potential post-traumatic stress disorder, combat experience, and radicalisation that select groups from conflict zones might display, which can be further worsened by the status of being an irregular migrant (Heikkurinen 2019). Additionally, while the current demand for foreign workers could equate with or even surpass the number of prospective migrants, this may not be the case in the future if more people in absolute terms migrate and thus further strain destination countries' hosting capabilities. Lastly, it is imperative to systematically counter the exploitation of what initially are fragile groups of newly arrived migrants by criminal organisations. In essence, legal pathways are a beneficial instrument for both migrants and states, but their mid- and long-term limitations preclude their use as the *only* policy alternative to be implemented.

The offshore processing of asylum claims, revisited

As mentioned, there is an additional migratory foreign policy alternative which, under very specific circumstances, may potentially address the irregular migration phenomenon effectively and humanely. Since this potential

course of action has not been implemented before in this specific form, it is discussed separately. It is here proposed as a broad point of departure for further debates rather than a structured policy proposal – this ought to be stated from the onset – while (if) the international community searches for better, more sustainable, and more comprehensive policies for all parties involved. In essence, the proposal here introduced revolves around a revisited mechanism of offshore processing of asylum claims, respecting humanitarian and legal requirements and improving previous (partially comparable) plans with complementary policies, including external monitoring and management, reinforced legal pathways, and several others, as discussed below.

Prior to a discussion of this proposal, however, a brief preamble is necessary. The offshore processing of migrants' asylum claims, sometimes termed outsourced, external, or extraterritorial processing of asylum claims, is far from being a new idea in the foreign policy of irregular migration. The first modern proposal was advanced in 1986 by Denmark, which recommended the creation of UN-administered centres in third countries where asylum applications were to be assessed. Five years later, the United States began the actual offshore processing of Haitian (and later Cuban) migrants in Guantanamo Bay, a policy which lasted until 1995 (the United States had been intercepting and making shipboard asylum claims' assessment since 1981; see Miranda 1995). In 1993, the Netherlands made a comparable proposal to Denmark's, and the latter restated this idea in 2001, during its presidency of the Council of the European Union (Léonard and Kaunert 2016). As abundantly discussed in this book, Australia then became the archetypal country for the implementation of asylum claims' offshore processing in 2001, with, at different points in time, Nauru, Papua New Guinea, and Cambodia as partner states (see Chapter 3), and the United States implemented offshore processing with Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador between 2019 and 2021.

Europe then sought to replicate the US and Australian "models" several times: the United Kingdom proposed the creation of EU-administered "transit processing centres" in 2003 (backed by Denmark and the Netherlands); Germany and Italy revived the stillborn plan with proposals from their interior ministers Schily and Pisanu in 2004 (Afeef 2006); and the European Union attempted to reach agreements with North African countries in the same years. Other EU members subsequently proposed similar policies, including Hungary and Austria in 2016 and France in 2017. Australia then briefly discussed a more cooperative and humanitarian approach to offshore processing in 2017, but nevertheless continued with its stern policy (Australian Labor Party 2017). Moreover, among the several proposals discussed in Brussels, the European Union pursued offshore processing through "disembarkation centres" (sometimes termed "hotspots in Africa") to be jointly set up with UNHCR and IOM, although no African state accepted this proposal at the time (European Parliament 2019). Italy recently became the first EU country to implement the extraterritorial processing of asylum claims outside of

the European Union with its new agreement with Albania (see Chapter 3), and Germany is considering this approach's feasibility at the time of writing (Angenendt *et al*. 2024). In essence, it is safe to argue that this type of migratory foreign policy is far from new, to such an extent that two main foreign policy subtypes can be detected: (a) asylum seekers are halted in or transferred to a third country where they apply for asylum under the laws *of the destination country*; and (b) asylum seekers are halted in or transferred to a third country where they *may* apply for asylum under the laws *of the transit country* (either with or without an explicit provision concerning this).

Despite not being a new kind of policy, the former foreign policy category ("subtype a") is here revisited and expanded upon in the light of two key elements. First, as shown in the remainder of this book, externalisation is becoming increasingly common among destination countries and international institutions (see Collyer 2023). Indeed, current examples – with a number of inevitable differences – include Italy, Spain, France, the United Kingdom, Denmark, the European Union, Australia, the United States, Canada, South Africa, and Israel (see the related discussions in Chapters 4 and 5). Moreover, the few but prominent examples of what happens when destination countries adopt an open border policy (logistical and economic challenges, electoral downturns, etc.; see the 1st Rudd government in Australia as a case in point) have taught bitter lessons to policymakers. In the words of Afeef (2006, p. 27), restrictive policies "are here to stay". If they are indeed here to stay, as seems to be the case, advocating their removal may be morally just, but is also unrealistic, and shared efforts might be put to better use if they are aimed at improving this undeniable externalisation trend. On top of this, offshore processing is a controversial and potentially dangerous option also because far-right political parties are exploiting this trend to propose vague extraterritorial processing options, with no clear legal and human rights safeguards (see Liboreiro 2024, by way of example). Given the growing electoral weight of such political forces, the approval of lawful, multipartisan, and research-based policies could prevent harsher (and probably illegal) alternatives.

Second, given the very nature of undocumented migration – comprising *mixed* flows – it may arguable that the current flows of irregular migrants, both substantial and sustained through time, could be threatening the international asylum regime. Using the latest EU data as a case in point, out of 430,600 return decisions for the year 2023, only 19% of them (83,400) actually eventuated, which means that 81% of all people who were issued a return decision (almost 350,000 individuals) remained in the European Union (European Commission 2024b). While it is obvious that not all people who were issued a return decision reached Europe through irregular pathways,[2] it is arguable that the impossibility to safely and effectively return migrants who are denied refugee status or subsidiary protection undermines the basis of the asylum regime. More specifically, its functioning (if the alternative to refugee status or subsidiary protection is not enforced) and credibility (as public opinions' support for asylum regimes

is linked to the latter's capacity to distinguish between those who are in need of protection and those who are not; see de Haas 2023, p. 365). Conversely, this emphasises the exploitability of the asylum regime for political purposes by populist, far-right, and/or xenophobic parties due to widespread but incorrect assumptions about asylum seekers (see Mancini *et al*. 2020).

In short, a stronger defence of the asylum regime could warrant a more definite demarcation, in practice, between those who have the right to receive international protection and those who do not (see Horwood 2015). This could entail a future approach that respects migrants' human rights and is concurrently sustainable for (extra)European countries and institutions. Instead of yet another iteration of "fortress Europe" (Talani 2012) or "fortress Australia" (Leroy 2023), to name just two relevant examples, it could potentially build on Sciortino's (2017) interpretation of the European Union as a "kind monster". The latter paradoxically promotes international humanitarian rights while making them difficult to reach for migrants, and thus urgently needs to be improved by guaranteeing migrants' rights, by effectively sharing this challenge between member states, and by pragmatically cooperating with transit countries. Even so, this cannot occur at the detriment of the right to seek asylum safely, as currently happens due to existing forms of externalisation that do not offer the possibility to lodge asylum claims in transit countries and, therefore, prompt asylum seekers to reach destination countries (where asylum *can* be claimed) through extremely dangerous voyages.

Against this backdrop, it is arguably time to acknowledge this condition and attempt to improve externalisation as much as possible through the international law and research-based evidence. Specifically, as advanced by this chapter, with the aim to (1) defend the asylum regime and migrants' rights (new safe centres in host countries replacing the current prison-like structures; shorter journeys to lodge asylum claims, legal advice, reasonable processing times for both asylum and subsidiary protection, and expanded, fair, and sustainable voluntary return policies); (2) strive to reach "positive" international relations (non-predatory, mutually beneficial agreements with host countries, mindful of neo-colonial risks); (3) devise international procedures to ensure a fair and legally sound process (IOM and EU management, regular revision and improvement mechanisms); (4) bolster complementary initiatives (legal pathways, humanitarian corridors, bilateral-regional mobility programmes, sponsorships, temporary migration partnerships, development programmes, etc.); (5) strengthen a shared approach between destination countries (equitable distribution of refugees and people with subsidiary protection, new staff, expanding readmission agreements according to IOM guidelines, shared efforts to monitor common borders and return migrants who have not qualified for international protection, new funds allocated to the above points); and (6) make use of expert advice from different fields (human rights, international law, migration policy, international relations, economics, and other areas, including from both origin and transit countries).

A brief assessment

The above interpretation of a new offshore processing mechanism integrates the "conventional" elements of extraterritorial processing with a number of complementary approaches, as outlined with the Australian illustration below, with the goal of addressing the many flaws displayed by the few comparable policies that exist. Key differences with Canberra's offshore processing, for example, include the rejection of the indefinite detention principle (finally abolished in Australia in 2023), viable pathways for voluntary returns, fixed limits for processing times, frequent medical and psychological check-ups to ensure the well-being of migrants awaiting their application's decision, free (institutional) legal counsel to asylum seekers, the lack of private contractors supervising facilities in host countries, stronger humanitarian and legal pathways, transparent management and monitoring by international institutions, a more comprehensive partnership with host and origin countries, and others. To that end, this revisited foreign policy measure on irregular migration considers the three main levels of analysis: individual (migrants), national (origin, transit/host, and destination countries), and international (supra-/international institutions).

In addition to these potential advantages, given its sheer complexity, it also exhibits several key challenges. These are political (difficult international political agreements, domestic political opposition), logistical (new buildings, physical transfer of migrants, feasibility of more numerous readmission agreements, etc.), financial (huge costs, opposition from fiscal rigour advocates), administrative (bureaucratic coordination between participating actors, the possibility that case officers may "bend" procedures to limit the number of successful procedures; see Sorgoni 2019), legal (legal feasibility considering the Refugee Convention, the Convention against Torture, the European Convention on Human Rights, and potential lawsuits), security (origin and transit countries' political instability, their leveraging power against destination countries and IOs, reinforced border controls to prevent unauthorised arrivals avoiding extraterritorial screening), and neocolonialism (former colony status of several transit and origin countries, exploited by revisionist states who benefit from global divisions, including Russia and China) issues. Additionally, there is a matter of untimeliness, as the 2020s are affected by the "crisis of democracy", stagnation in many "Global North" countries, polarised societies, mis/disinformation, mistrust in international organisations, anti-scientific attitudes, and others (see Belin and De Maio 2020), which render ambitious reforms more unlikely.

To support a clearer picture, the niche literature on asylum claims' extraterritorial processing provides additional advantages and limitations. Among the several authors, Miranda (1995) endorsed the establishment of such mechanisms, arguing that they would address asylum seekers' human rights, yet also referred to several legal and political hurdles. Noll (2003) focused

instead on legal, practical, and financial issues, in addition to those pertaining to specific groups, protection levels, detention, collective expulsions, and discriminations. Koser (2005) cautioned against the UK proposal of transit processing centres, though arguing that regional protection areas, closer to origin countries, may be a longer-term option. Afeef (2006) advanced the idea that some offshore processing policies did improve migrants' rights, compared to situations in which they could not lodge asylum, yet she cautioned against simplistic generalisations.

Garlick (2015) then revisited this option, arguing that several changes within EU legislation and the steady flows of asylum seekers warrant a reconsideration of extraterritorial processing, albeit only if it explicitly satisfies legal obligations (both international and European, including non-refoulement). Léonard and Kaunert (2016) listed the reduction of migrants' dangerous journeys, the financial drawback for human traffickers, the closeness of offshore centres to migrants' own countries, and a potential EU-wide plan as advantages, but also mentioned legal, procedural, moral, and practical issues. Pastore (2017, p. 24) defined it as an attractive but problematic approach and argued that a "rigorous scrutiny on the respect for the fundamental rights" of migrants, albeit difficult to achieve, would be a necessary prerequisite for a lawful and effective implementation of extraterritorial processing. Mc Namara (2018) focused on legal and procedural challenges (including different asylum standards), as well as on likely security issues for UNHCR and IOM personnel. More recently, Rauch (2022) supported the adoption of "lawful" offshore processing, while Angenendt *et al*. (2024) focused on legal, human rights, and practical obstacles.

As mentioned earlier, international institutions too have explored this policy alternative. Apart from the aforementioned earlier discussions, the European Commission (2018) published a feasibility study of three migratory foreign policy alternatives – two of which comprised offshore processing – and concluded that "scenario 2", entailing the extraterritorial processing for migrants found *outside* of the European Union, is feasible with UNHCR and IOM involvement. Also in 2018, the United Nations approved the non-binding Global Compact on Migration, which includes 23 objectives. Of these, objectives no. 10, 11, and 23 are particularly relevant, with the latter including lawful and mutually beneficial international partnerships to develop "solutions to migration policy issues" (UNGA 2019, p. 33).

Three years later, the UNHCR (2021) delved into the differences between international law-avoiding externalisation practices, which contravene both the Refugee Convention and the Global Compact on Refugees (among others), and extraterritorial processing that is undertaken according to international standards, which is deemed lawful instead. A few months ago, the European Parliament adopted the new Pact on Migration and Asylum, which provides for strengthened border control, revised asylum procedures, shared responsibilities, and new international partnerships, which could address

the procedural doubts (and potential distortions) of extraterritorial processing that were highlighted in previous years. While not explicitly suggesting offshore processing, the new screening procedures' package states that migrants' screening can take place "at or in proximity to the external borders", thus implicitly allowing for processing centres outside of the EU territory (European Commission 2020a, art. 6, para 1). Last, among several possible examples, the European Parliament recently published an official briefing analysing this migratory foreign policy, and, while it argued that it is highly problematic, it also listed the steps the European Union should undertake to make it lawful (Leclerc *et al*. 2024).

To summarise, the idea of extraterritorial processing is far from new, it has recently been readvanced multiple times despite lukewarm support (or opposition) during older European discussions, and, in principle, its implementation is feasible, provided that it openly satisfies legal and humanitarian obligations (often eschewed in previous proposals) and overcomes the many political, economic, and logistical obstacles (see Table 5.3). More on this point, the European Commission's (2018) feasibility study deemed "scenario 3" (extraterritorial processing of *all* asylum seekers) feasible only in case of (1) common asylum system, courts, and appeal structure; (2) equitable redistribution of refugees; and (3) institutional reforms and financial resources. Arguably, these requirements are now at least partially satisfied by the new EU Pact of Migration and Asylum and the many related changes the EU is undertaking (although moral and legal doubts still linger over "anomalous zones"; see Campesi 2021). Further, extra-European countries like the United States and Australia have implemented or still are implementing it (albeit in narrower forms with oft-criticised human rights violations), and both the European Union and several of its member states are considering, have proposed or are enacting (Italy, potentially the United Kingdom and Denmark) comparable plans.

In essence, a relatively broad consensus might be found among major destination countries on a new offshore processing of asylum claims, one that not only is formally bound to the respect of international obligations and is managed by UNHCR, IOM, and possibly the European Union, but is also strengthened by several complementary measures, including stronger legal pathways, humanitarian corridors, development partnerships, and others, as mentioned earlier. On this note, 15 EU members, led by Denmark and also comprising Italy, have formally proposed the extraterritorial processing of asylum claims – which includes asylum seekers rescued *outside* of EU territory – to the European Commission on 15 May 2024 (Danish Ministry of Immigration and Integration 2024). Their proposal cites Italy's agreement with Albania as a model to follow, includes several measures discussed in this chapter, and is likely to renew the European debate on offshore processing (hopefully on fairer, humanitarian, and legal grounds, given the controversy that vague and harmful proposals generally spark).

Table 5.3 Advantages and issues of the revised extraterritorial processing of asylum claims outlined in this volume

Advantages	Issues
Right to asylum where it is currently absent; reduced length of migrants' journeys; international management; humanitarian and psyco-medical safeguards; fixed limits for processing times; legal advice; lack of private contractors as supervisors; reinforced legal pathways; improved voluntary return procedures; broader and fair readmission agreements; regular revision and improvement mechanisms; reinforced international and mutually beneficial cooperation	Substantial political, logistical, financial, administrative, legal, security, and neocolonialism challenges, plus "untimeliness" of complex reforms amid major global problems

In addition to the two key elements that have been mentioned earlier – i.e. the increasing use of "bare" externalisation which effectively suppresses the right to asylum and the many challenges that irregular migration is currently posing to the asylum regime – the above discussion might therefore warrant a reconsideration of offshore processing. This would aim to prevent otherwise dangerous plans advanced by populist politics and to secure the asylum regime for the future, provided that it addresses the many caveats that have been discussed. It is understood that this policy would not halt irregular migration flows – a senseless goal – but it would at least offer a fair and impartially supervised alternative to the policy inertia (more often, policy brutality) witnessed so far. Given the difficulty in implementing it in its entirety, a pilot project could represent a viable first step in this direction. On account of the obligation to fully respect humanitarian safeguards, the notion of "safe third country" outlined by the EU Asylum Procedures Directive, included in the asylum-related measures of the new EU Pact on Migration and Asylum (European Commission 2020b, art. 8, para 5), may provide a list of countries to negotiate a potential pilot project. In conclusion, this chapter's proposal of a revisited and improved form of extraterritorial processing of asylum claims aims to contribute to ongoing discussions – often impaired by the lack of research-based analyses – and hopes to advance them in a way that not only acknowledges states' agendas and imperatives (Boswell 2007) but also rejects the idea that state security *inevitably* leads to migrants' insecurity (Lazaridis 2016).

Policy conundrums

This chapter has so far dealt with three large sets of policy-related implications, namely policy gaps, policy alternatives, and a revisitation of asylum

claims' offshore processing. The multitude of empirical data that have been provided, along with the numerous examples – often pertaining to the volume's two case studies – pave the way for a fourth group of policy-related considerations. These are described as "policy conundrums" and are concisely addressed here in a Socratic manner, thus presenting broad, open-ended questions that are warranted by the difficult state of things. Both the Italian and Australian case studies, whose foreign policy on irregular migration is emblematic of what most destination countries (would) do, offer a wealth of instances in which policy conundrums have occurred across a timespan of around a quarter of a century. As argued elsewhere, they are represented by "the conflicted choice between a moral imperative (saving lives and ensuring migrants' human rights) and national interest, which instead favours national security and electoral considerations" (Abbondanza 2023a, p. 105).

This dyadic approach seems to have dominated institutional, expert, and public debates since irregular migration has become the momentous and permanent phenomenon we know now. The first path, the "moral imperative", is rooted in the choice (and the international law obligation) to save lives above over any other consideration. When – rarely – destination countries like Italy (between 2013 and 2016) and Australia (between 2008 and 2010) decided to pursue this, they were lauded by national and international observers and agencies defending human rights (see IOM 2014 and UNHCR 2008). Those foreign policy swings allowed Rome and Canberra to save tens of thousands of lives at sea while offering a safe place for migrants to lodge their asylum claims. However, this form of humanitarianism found its limits in two specific elements: the lack of similar humanitarian approaches in proximate destination countries that could share their efforts and the lack of implementation of any viable alternative within a reasonable time span. With time, this led to the rise of xenophobic sentiments, which were bolstered by socio-economic grievances (especially in Europe, where the aftermath of the global financial crisis went on for years) that were exploited by populist and conservative political parties (see Hugo and Napitupulu 2016, out of the many examples). Logistical, economic, and electoral considerations eventually resulted in the termination of these non-restrictive policies, to the reinstatement (often, the hardening) of previous, restrictive migratory foreign policies, which entail migrants' human rights violations (in the case of both Italy's and Australia's externalisation policies) and their deaths at sea (especially in the Mediterranean; see IOM 2024).

The question that therefore arises is: can humanitarian approaches be viable long-term policies, if they are implemented by just one or few destination countries in a particular region? After all, the previous chapter's insights into migrants' insecurity outlined the stark reality of the latter's dangerous conditions throughout the irregular migration continuum. If non-restrictive approaches – what this chapter defined *de jure* open borders – are condemned to be terminated in a matter of a few years due to a variety of challenges

that are not addressed property, possibly only to cement subsequent restrictive approaches threatening migrants' security, are they desirable pathways to pursue *without* other countries adopting the same model and *without* broader, long-term alternatives? As much as humanitarian concerns would naturally eschew this debate, as their guiding priority is saving people's lives, it is arguably imperative to engage in such discussions due to the fact that, ultimately, migrants themselves are the ones who pay for the likely collapse of unilateral open border policies. Undoubtedly, these are thorny considerations, yet they are warranted by the recent and often inhumane history of irregular migration governance.

On the other side of the metaphorical barricade, states have progressively hardened their migratory foreign policies (see van der Velde and van Naerssen 2016, out of the many possible examples), either mostly unilaterally (the Australian case) or regionally (such as Italy with growing EU enthusiasm for externalisation). To implement those policies, Rome and Canberra have resorted to a growing array of foreign policy measures, partially supported by the local populations' wariness of irregular migration. These include military missions in international waters and/or third countries; naval deployments; pushback manoeuvres (at different points in time); externalisation and/or offshore processing agreements; military, logistical, and financial support to transit countries; territorial excisions (Australia); cooperation with relevant regional institutions and fora (the European Union and the Bali Process, for example); regional plans (Italy's "Mattei Plan"); and others (see Chapter 3).

One the one hand, as discussed earlier, destination countries do have some tangible concerns with regard to sovereignty, security, socio-economic, logistical, and political issues arising from the attempt to "manage" large and protracted flows of irregular migration (see Chapter 4). To quote McAuliffe and Koser again (2017b, p. 2), these entail "considerable human, financial, diplomatic, physical/capital, technological, intelligence, operational and other resources", from states' viewpoint. On the other hand, however, the answer that states have chosen to address these concerns is externalisation involving transit countries, whose current form simply implies responsibility-shifting onto states that, for a variety of reasons, do not ensure migrants' basic human rights and/or right to asylum (see the previous section's proposal).

To return to this book's case studies, Italy (and the European Union) implicitly allows human rights violations in "refugee camps" located in Libya, Tunisia, and Niger (potentially Egypt too through the new EU deal), and Australia, despite the minuscule nature of its flows compared to Italy, partially does the same in Nauru and previously in Manus Island and Cambodia (Dastyari and Hirsch 2019). In an opposite fashion compared to the previous considerations, a different question arises here: how long can states implement inhumane and often illegal policies for? And, as a corollary, how much does this condition affect the international standing of states that otherwise champion the international law and the rules-based order, to such an extent

that Italy is considered one of the nine potential "saviours" of the liberal world order (Daalder and Lindsay 2018) and Australia is labelled a "good international citizen" (Abbondanza 2021)?

The viewpoints that have been outlined above (migrants, states, and their local populations) and the related policy conundrums – (i) are open border policies desirable, given that they are likely to last for a small time span and are usually followed by sterner policies? and (ii) how long can states implement inhumane policies for? – inevitably lead to another question, which could be phrased as: (iii) what can be done? Unsurprisingly, this book does not and cannot offer a univocal and explicit answer. Rather, taking stock of the extant literature and as a result of the analysis it provides through this volume, it can simply offer some relevant points of consideration (see Table 5.4).

First, there needs to be a broader recognition that irregular migration is a permanent feature of the 21st century. As a result, "policy patches" (emergency foreign policy measures) do not work adequately. Second, policymakers ought to give more weight to the advices of experts, not merely to fulfil a written requirement but to see that the most viable proposals are studied in detail and, if practicable, implemented. To that end, it would be desirable to engage with migration, international law, and international relations experts from all regions involved, at the very least. Third, the recent history of irregular migration governance provides a wealth of insights into best and worst practices. A thorough assessment of what is preferable (and what is not) and what works (and what does not) is essential. Fourth, in a chaotically multipolar 21st century, it would be absurd to think that one state, however capable, could have a *decisive* impact on sustained irregular migration flows. A multilateral approach is evidently necessary. In particular, the increasing nexus between irregular migration governance and foreign policy measures not only is a key component of this discussion but also exemplifies successes and, more frequently, failures of countries' unilateral actions.

Fifth, as argued previously, externalisation seems to be unavoidable in the future, which warrants efforts to radically alter it as per the previous section's updated understanding of extraterritorial processing, so that it does not address only the concerns of states and their populations, but it also ensures migrants' human and civil rights. Additionally, it ought to be implemented concurrently with other long-term measures with broader goals. Sixth, and consequently, all actors across the irregular migration continuum – migrants, countries of origin, transit, and destination, local populations, international organisations – ought to be involved in a respectful, mutually satisfactory, and non-predatory manner. Seventh, to that end, the related policy discussion outlined in the previous section, as well as the partially comparable debates that have been mentioned, could be a useful point of departure. Eighth, it is important to acknowledge that the hypothetical best case scenario, in which the above actually eventuates, requires years to be properly planned and executed, given the colossal challenges it would face. It follows that if the

Table 5.4 Embryonic considerations pertaining to the two policy conundrums addressed here

1	Irregular migration is a permanent phenomenon: emergency foreign policy measures are inadequate.
2	Multiregional experts' advice, particularly from migration studies, international law, and international relations, needs to have more weight in policy planning.
3	A systematic assessment of best and worst practices is necessary.
4	Unilateral policies have limited impact; multilateral efforts are required.
5	Externalisation is now unavoidable, so it should be radically improved to ensure the respect of migrants' rights and the international law.
6	All actors across the irregular migration continuum need to be involved.
7	Lawful and improved offshore processing plans could be a useful point of departure.
8	Given the many challenges, pilot projects should be planned as early as possible.

international community does not begin soon with the planning of a pilot project, the policy conundrums outlined earlier in this chapter will continue to dictate the debate on irregular migration governance for years to come. Lastly, as per the book's two case studies, they successfully and increasingly cooperate in numerous fields, although, somewhat surprisingly, not in terms of irregular migration-related foreign policy insights (see Abbondanza 2023b).

External validity

In the light of the several policy-related considerations outlined in both Chapter 4 and this chapter, it is possible to assess whether select findings of this research are applicable to other comparable destination countries (see Table 5.5). As can be seen below, they rely on a state-centric viewpoint in this particular instance, given that this section deals with the potential external applicability to other comparable states. Out of the many, the volume's findings that may be useful for the possibility of external validity could be recapitulated as follows: (1) states pursue different goals depending on the domestic and international context, resulting in either non-restrictive or restrictive foreign policies on irregular migration, although the latter are undoubtedly rooting; (2) due to both electoral opportunism and real – though small – security risks, seaborne irregular migration and migrants are now extensively securitised; (3) the more states bolster their border security, the more undocumented migrants face insecurity under existing policies; and (4) related foreign policy measures have become increasingly similar and significant in states' attempts to "govern" this phenomenon.

In terms of potential external applicability, the European context certainly comes to mind first. Supranationally, despite occasional divergences between the European Union and its member states in previous years, the European Union has progressively expanded its external actions directed at managing

irregular migration (Fontana and Rosina 2024). This growing externalisation trend can be seen in destination countries as well. In no particular order, and among the various examples, Spain initially limited itself to adopting EU directives, while in more recent years it has concluded externalisation agreements with a dozen of origin and transit countries in Africa (Gabrielli 2023). France displays a somewhat different path on account of its earlier influence over EU procedures, which at times resulted into divergent policies, yet the gradual pathway to externalisation is undoubtable, as evidenced by the agreements with Senegal, Cape Verde, and Tunisia (Uemura 2018). The United Kingdom, although "favoured" by its geographical position in terms of arrivals' numbers, also engages in substantial efforts to curb inbound irregular migration flows through extra-regional policies including training, capacity building, and externalisation, including a currently unrealised agreement with Rwanda (Ostrand 2023). Moreover, comparable attempts can be found in Denmark's traditional migratory foreign policy too (Lemberg-Pedersen *et al.* 2021).

Complementing the above, there are several non-European cases that are relevant to this discussion. The United States has experienced unauthorised border crossings for decades now, and in time it has concluded a growing number of agreements externalising its border control and related efforts to curb irregular migration with, for example, Mexico, Haiti, Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador (see the earlier policy proposal section). Albeit smaller in numbers, Canada too has received steady flows of asylum seekers, mostly transiting from the United States, which has been partially addressed with a recent agreement between the two countries (Paquet and Schertzer 2020). South Africa, on the other hand, does not resort to externalisation in itself due to related constitutional limitations, although it indirectly seeks to discourage inward flows of asylum seekers through some of the lengthiest procedures and toughest conditions for migrants who do reach the country (Schockaert *et al*. 2020). Additionally, Israel represents a more "conventional" destination country utilising externalisation since 2013–2014, specifically through agreements with Uganda and Rwanda (Bar-Tuvia 2018).

While this list of countries is not meant to be exhaustive, it does show that virtually all wealthy destination states (at least relative to their immediate region) increasingly adopt strict migratory foreign policies, thus following the same broad approach implemented by Italy and Australia. Even when this is not the case, they enact otherwise restrictive policies that have – or are intended to have – extraterritorial impact. While often there are no perfectly linear processes to that end, the common trend towards sterner approaches is evident. More to the point, the latter inevitably entail the growing use of specific foreign policy tools in the form of bilateral agreements, military missions or deployments, and others, as epitomised by the Italian and Australian cases (see Chapter 3). This is therefore akin to what Kinacioglu (2023) has recently defined the "militarized governance

Table 5.5 Potential countries and institutions to which select findings of this book could be applied, in addition to the two case studies

Comparable destination countries	Potential external validity
European ones, including Spain, France, the United Kingdom, and Denmark (the European Union too as an international institution)	Yes, due to comparable goals and similar foreign policy on irregular migration (high degree of comparability)
Non-European ones, including the United States, Canada, South Africa, and Israel	Yes, due to comparable goals and similar foreign policy on irregular migration

of migration in the Mediterranean". Further, these procedures obviously imply a previous securitisation of irregular migration (Tsoukala 2016), all of which results in greater insecurity for unauthorised migrants as state/border security is bolstered (Lazaridis 2016).

While more research is necessary to corroborate the comparability between these and other destination countries more systematically, these similarities may render this book's findings useful for future comparisons. In particular, the lessons from the Italian and Australian cases provide significant insights into the partial ineffectiveness and (il)legality of externalisation models that are currently implemented, considerations that bear direct implications for comparable destination countries adopting similar approaches. After all, Finotelli and Ponzo (2023) convincingly argue against the case for "national models" of irregular migration policies, on account of the growing convergence towards similarly restrictive policies (the European Union being a telling example). Moreover, this book's and other analyses of "improved" extraterritorial processing proposals are of direct interest to most of the aforementioned states, as shown in the relevant section, which makes them highly relevant to this effort. To that end, both this chapter and this volume hope to make a useful contribution to the understudied nexus between irregular migration governance and related foreign policy measures, with a number of countries potentially affected by such considerations.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored a number of policy-related insights, resulting from an in-depth analysis of irregular migration foreign policies, with a focus on Italy and Australia. Utilising the extant literature as a necessary and valuable point of departure, it has shed light on five distinct elements. First, policy gaps: specifically discursive gaps (not many), implementation gaps (more significant, as there is a discrepancy between nominal compliance with international law provisions and actual policies), and efficacy gaps (more pronounced in Italy's case, due to a variety of reasons). Second, it has analysed

the main policy alternatives (a policy grouping partially similar to the notion of migration regimes), namely *de facto* open borders, *de jure* open borders, *de jure* closed borders, regional solution with destination countries, regional solutions with destination countries, and legal pathways.

Third, it has revisited the idea of asylum claims' extraterritorial processing, advancing that it would be a fairer alternative to existing and arguably illegal externalisation measures. Fourth, it has outlined two significant policy conundrums (Are open border policies desirable in the long term? How long can states implement inhumane policies for?), along with a number of considerations stemming from this chapter. Fifth, it has argued for the potential external validity of some of this chapter's findings with regard to comparable destination countries, both inside and outside Europe, many of which witness similar phenomena and often adopt equivalent domestic and foreign policy measures. With this chapter's policy-related insights in mind, and supported by the previous chapter's security elements, the next one reconsiders a few key theoretical points.

Notes

1 In broad terms, it could be defined as a military operation preventing inbound or outbound maritime movement from or to enemies' ports and/or coasts.
2 The top-5 nationalities for 2023 return decisions are Morocco, Algeria, Afghanistan, Syria, and Turkey.

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6 The theoretical implications of irregular migration

The need for eclectic approaches

Introduction

This volume has so far engaged with two sets of implications resulting from the analysis of the Italian and Australian case studies, namely security and policy-related implications. In the light of the numerous points of reflection offered by the previous chapters, it is therefore possible to assess the theoretical implications deriving from the elements that have been considered so far. To wit, this chapter does not pursue theory testing, which is "particularly difficult in the social sciences, given the imprecise nature of the theoretical concepts, inadequate tools to measure them, and the presence of many unaccounted factors that can also influence the phenomenon of interest" (Bhattacherjee 2012, p. 5). Consequently, rather than performing theory testing as commonly understood in experimental settings, it revisits the theories outlined in Chapter 2 in a broad and discursive manner, assessing them with real-world Italian and Australian examples and gauging their limitations and level of complementarity with other theories. Following the below brief introduction to theoretical eclecticism, the next sections focus on migrant-centred theories (Table 6.1), theories addressing the concerns of local populations in destination countries (Table 6.2), and state-centred frameworks (Table 6.3). At the end of each section, the usefulness of a holistic approach, particularly when analysing sensitive and multi-actor phenomena such as irregular migration, is emphasised while consequently stressing the need for theoretical eclecticism.

Theoretical eclecticism

As numerous branches of scholarly research became more systematic in their activities, new and more specific theories were developed and refined. The progressive increase in the number of theoretical efforts eventually led to a plethora of theories in each discipline and subdiscipline, supported by the inevitable specialisation (and compartmentalisation) of each of them. In time, scholars acknowledged the limit of discipline-specific endeavours, favoured both intradisciplinarity and multidisciplinarity, and argued for the

simultaneous consideration of different theories for a more comprehensive understanding of a particular phenomenon. While understandably criticised when it is pursued without a well-defined theoretical basis, theoretical eclecticism is therefore far from being a new development in many disciplines across the social sciences (see Sil 2000, among many others). Within the latter, the field of migration studies has long employed this flexible approach (Brettel and Hollifield 2015 or de Haas 2021, by way of example), although research adopting theoretical lenses specifically pertaining to migration studies, international relations (IR), and security studies – what this volume strives to do – is much rarer. Starting from these premises, the following sections re-assess the three aforementioned sets of theories, following this book's call for a theoretically eclectic approach when assessing a global and complex phenomenon such as irregular migration.

Migrant-centred theories

As mentioned in Chapter 2, older assumptions about "linear" migration processes, encapsulated in the push-pull model (PPM), are too simplistic and have long been recognised as such. However, more complex interpretations, such as migration systems theory (MST), acknowledge the complexity of this phenomenon and the interconnectedness of all countries and regions affected by it (Massey *et al*. 1993). In the light of this greater complexity, transregional elements including natural disasters, drought, progressive desertification, and others are considered concurrently with state-specific unfavourable conditions such as malnutrition, conflicts, persecution of minority groups, political oppression, war, and others. The repercussions of the above are highly relevant to the nature of irregular migration flows towards both Italy and Australia. As recalled in Chapter 4, migrants attempting to reach Italy mostly originate from sub-Saharan Africa (UNHCR 2017) and, more recently, Northern Africa and South Asia (Italian Ministry of the Interior 2024), and those hoping to reach Australia are chiefly from Western and South Asia (Australian Parliament 2016). In both cases, migrants' origin countries and their regions are affected by serious domestic and regional issues, prompting them to search for better living conditions elsewhere. MST therefore helps to provide a "bird's eye view" of the irregular flows that Rome and Canberra have witnessed for many years, notwithstanding its necessary lack of analysis at the micro level.

Nuancing the above, another theory pertaining to the "functionalist" strand is migration network theory (MNT), which sheds light on how migrants may strengthen their decision to head for a specific destination country also based on the presence of social, cultural, religious, and/or emotional linkages there (Massey *et al*. 1993). While this is not always a straightforward process, as per differentiation theory's (DT) subsystems (see Cvajner and Sciortino 2010), these linkages represent a real bridge between origin and destination states. In particular, communication through phone calls, SMS messages,

messaging applications, and social media (where internet is available) is a significant component in migrant's decisions to head to Italy and the rest of Europe, regardless of the veracity of information that is passed on (Sanchez *et al*. 2018). The importance of local networks of people with similar backgrounds is also found in the Australian case (Laukova *et al*. 2022). MNT thus offers valuable insights into irregular migration, though circumscribed to the transnational social (and technological) mechanisms that influence migrants' decisions concerning their potential destination country.

Next, "structuralist" explanations including conflict theory, dependency theory, critical globalisation theory, dual labour market theory, and others assess the influence of structural changes in a world that evolves at a much quicker pace compared to previous decades, which inevitably affect migration processes by augmenting migratory pressures for destination countries (Zolberg 1989). For instance, Okyay *et al*. (2023) write about "how structural drivers operate in informing migration, shedding some light on the interaction between socio-economic and political-security factors" where undocumented migration towards Italy and the rest of Europe is concerned. Similarly, Clark (2019, p. 112) showed that the decision to move *sans papier* to Australia is often shaped by "structural factors that limit forced migrants' choices and shape their transit experience". Indeed, Glynn (2016, p. 32) talks about the importance that "structural differences and diverging economic models have on these types of migration flows", in his volume on Italy and Australia. In essence, structuralist explanations are useful in gauging the impact of specific meso- and macro-level factors, although they cannot provide a "full picture" by themselves.

A third strand concerns "transnationalist" theories that survey post-Cold War and globalisation-generated changes strongly influencing migratory patterns. Out of the many recent social, political, and economic transformations – including social and human networks, new technologies, and environmental drivers – are key to this approach (see Black *et al*. 2011 and Castles 2010, among the others). Further, in a relatable analysis focusing on Australia, Mansouri (2023) includes transnational environmental factors among the more "traditional" state-based causes (civil wars, persecutions, poverty) that may spur people to migrate. Similarly, to use Panebianco's and Cannata's (2024, p. 72), words "[…] climate, environmental and security challenges resulting from global trends" influence migratory movements and affect southern European countries like Italy. Doubtlessly, transnational developments such as the above ones play a substantial role in shaping current (and future) irregular flows, although, much like other meso- and global-level approaches, they necessarily eschew micro-level viewpoints.

Chapter 2 then introduced "perceptionist" theories, which shed light on migrants' underexplored viewpoints, such as their psychological attitudes, desires, ambitions, agency, and goals, bearing a strong influence over migrants' decision-making processes (Castles *et al*., 2012; Carling and Collins 2018).

This can be seen, among many possible examples, in migrants' determination in trying to reach "Global North" countries like Italy and Australia, despite the perilous journey that lies ahead (Abbondanza 2023a). More to the point, Ottonelli and Torresi (2022, p. 7) write:

> Like in the wider sociological debate on structure vs agency, also in the context of migration studies we find different and nuanced positions on the respective roles that social structures and individual agency play in determining people's behaviour and salient social patterns in different contexts.

Even though psychological considerations inevitably lack insights from "the big picture", their implications are significant as they reinstate the individual level of analysis in irregular migration theoretical discourses.

Additional approaches fall into what Chapter 2 dubbed "hybridist" theories. These seek to synthesise and harmonise different lenses that already exist. As such, they include the push-pull plus model (PPM+, see Van Hear *et al.* 2018); frameworks comprising structural, transnationalist, and perceptionist factors (Ambrosini and Hajer 2023); both macro- and micro-structural aspects (Echeverría 2020); decolonial perspectives (van Liempt *et al.* 2023); the aspirations-capabilities framework (ACF; see de Haas 2021); and the older but still relevant human security lens (UN Development Programme 1994). Neocolonialism concerns, out of the diverse insights listed above, remain understudied where foreign policies on irregular migration are concerned. Italy and Australia are two telling examples of this (Armillei and Mansouri 2017), due to the fact that the two countries' former colonies or administered territories (Libya in Italy's case, and Nauru and Papua New Guinea in Australia's case) are now part of Rome's and Canberra's externalisation policies. Consequently, this larger and heterogeneous group of theoretical efforts benefits irregular migration's theorising, as it seeks to combine multiple valuable viewpoints into a more homogeneous body of literature.

A twofold consideration emerges from this brief theoretical assessment of migrant-centred theories. One the one hand, this specific and rich corpus of irregular migration theories displays decades-long developing patterns that have allowed scholars to progressively refine their understanding of migrants' perspectives. On the other, it is also clear that each theory, due to conventional compartmentalisation processes, cannot provide a unified theoretical overview of the irregular migration continuum. While this may not be an issue in itself, it does preclude a more holistic understanding of migrants' own standpoints. To that end, the attempt of "hybridist" migration theorists provides the most comprehensive effort in that respect. Additionally, this volume in general, and this chapter more specifically, argues for the need to look at the numerous irregular migration theories concurrently, in order to harness the complementarity of theoretical frameworks that focus on either the micro, the meso, or the macro level. The emphasis on theoretical eclecticism, rather

Table 6.1 The complementarity of migrant-centred theories, favouring theoretical eclecticism

Theoretical category	Theoretical focus	Theoretical complementarity
Functionalist	Meso and macro levels	With micro level
Structuralist	Macro level	With micro and meso levels
Transnationalist	Meso and macro levels	With micro level
Perceptionist	Micro level	With meso and macro levels
Hybridist	Micro, meso, and macro levels	With other theories focusing on micro, meso, and macro levels

than creating yet another theoretical effort, may eventually support analytical eclecticism, thus favouring foreign policy-building processes that consider the evident multiplicity of viewpoints (see Sil and Katzenstein 2010). With this said, other viewpoints exist, transcending the focus on migrants that has been the object of this section. These are assessed in the next two sections.

Theories focusing on destination countries' local populations

As discussed in Chapter 2, although destination countries' citizens cannot directly affect their country's foreign policy, they still influence how their societies react to new flows of asylum seekers. This is especially true given that destination countries are almost invariably liberal democracies, where, in other words, the public opinion plays a role in the political realm. Out of the several extant lenses – which are very rarely applied to foreign policy investigations such as the one offered here – this volume has selected approximately a dozen, which were then divided into four conceptual categories ("resources", "groupism", "psychology", and "perceptions").

Beginning with the first one, theories falling into the "resources" category, such as relative deprivation theory (RDT; Walker and Pettigrew 1984) and realistic conflict theory (RCT; Jackson 1993), emphasise a perceived limit in available resources – broadly understood – which may lead to conflictual behaviours towards new groups of people, in this case irregular migrants. For instance, like elsewhere, Italy's welfare system includes different kinds of financial, health, education, and housing assistance for people in need, and the fact that refugees can access them has often been the object of criticism by those who argue that Italians should have priority access to these measures. This is also spurred by a number of "fake news" involving benefits allegedly granted to refugees, which lead to a desire for restrictive policies (Mancini *et al.* 2020), to such an extent that Italy's UNHCR branch released a fact-checking report (UNHCR 2024). Similarly, Australia has witnessed protests concerning benefits granted to refugees, ranging from housing measures (Reuters 2016) to the country's welfare system as a whole, albeit to a lesser

degree given the much smaller numbers compared to Italy. Consequently, the above theories do contribute to explain the resistance of local populations to new flows of asylum seekers, although their specific focus on resources inevitably neglects other triggering mechanisms.

The second set of theories outlined in Chapter 2 revolved around "groupism". Drawing on sociological insights, theories such as social identity theory (SIT), self-categorisation theory (SCT), and ethnic competition theory (ECT) trace the antagonism that new and different groups induce in a somewhat homogeneous setting (Bennet and Sani 2003). This, in turn, potentially leads to social and ethnic exclusionism directed at undocumented migrants, and instances of discrimination based on social and/or racial discrimination abound in most destination countries. In Italy, this phenomenon is distinctly felt due to the country's prolonged high migratory pressure, and it negatively affects the newest and most vulnerable members of the society (Obasuyi 2023). Australia, too, has a long and complex national history involving socio-racial exclusionism, and, while today it is a highly multicultural society, examples of refugees' marginalisation are not lacking (SBS News 2023). Groupism-based frameworks therefore provide useful explanations concerning why certain types of exclusionism take place in destination countries, although their specific theoretical perimeter overlooks additional insights into other processes.

The third theoretical framework, falling into the "psychology" category, helps to broaden the analytical spectrum. Defended neighbourhood theory (DNT) and modernisation losers theory (MLT), among others, explicate why and how local residents come to reject newcomers like irregular migrants, especially if from markedly different sociocultural backgrounds, due to more extensive fears, frustrations, and anxieties that find partial catharsis through the expression of strong xenophobic feelings (Abbondanza and Bailo 2018). Indeed, the rationale of both DNT and MLT is validated in both this volume's case studies. In Italy, cases of xenophobia risen as a result of the aforementioned fears involving asylum seekers have been growing for around two decades (Melotti 2007), and a similar situation can be found in Australia, where refugees of African descent, by way of example, are disproportionately affected by discrimination (OHCHR 2022). Psychology-based theories thus provide a sound explanation of local residents' aversion to the hosting of new irregular migrants, even though they cannot fully elucidate these strong attitudes by themselves.

A fourth group of theoretical explanations for the wariness of asylum seekers in destination countries is centred on "perceptions", with partial overlaps with the other lenses discussed so far. Drawing on criminology and security studies, notions such as the migration-crime nexus and the migration-terrorism nexus, plus broader (mis)perceptions, help to shed light on why and how irregular migration is associated with an increased likelihood of crime, terrorism, and other negative sociocultural events (Lazaridis 2016). In this case,

Table 6.2 The theoretical focus and complementarity of theories centred on local populations in destination countries

Theoretical category	Theoretical focus	Theoretical complementarity
Resources	Perceived limit in available resources, causing hostility towards irregular migrants	With other sociological, psychological, and perception-related insights
Groupism	Antagonism triggered by new and socioculturally different groups	With other sociological, psychological, and perception-related insights
Psychology	Broader fears and frustrations that find partial catharsis through strong xenophobic feelings	With other sociological and perception-related insights
Perceptions	(Mis)perceptions leading to irregular migration being associated with negative social issues	With other sociological and psychological insights

too, real-world illustrations are not lacking. In Italy, like in other comparable destination countries, "the debate on the social exclusion of young people in multicultural communities […] is often reduced to a discussion about the possibility that they might turn towards extremist movements" (Della Sala 2005).[1] In Australia, on the other hand, irregular migrants have been directly associated with terrorism by a few conservative politicians for a long time (see Klocker and Dunn 2003). It is therefore evident that fears driven by insecurity (mis)perceptions are a powerful driver of anti-immigration sentiments in destination countries, although they are obviously not the sole factors at play behind xenophobia.

As can be seen, the four lenses briefly re-discussed above are all valuable in attempting to shed light on anti-immigration sentiments among local residents, ranging from wariness to discrimination and physical confrontations. While each of them provides a significant contribution, they all have natural limitations which are inevitably dictated by the specific focus they pursue. In other words, while their value as single theoretical strands is appreciable, their combined use holds a much greater potential for a broader and deeper awareness of why and how local residents in countries like Italy and Australia wish irregular migration to halt or diminish, as attested by large international polls (Pew Research Center 2019). Theoretical eclecticism therefore stands out once again as the appropriate approach to gain more comprehensive insights into these complex issues, to be obtained not only by concurrently assessing cognate theories within the same subfield (intradisciplinarity) but also by simultaneously considering complementary analyses undertaken in different disciplines (such as IR, security studies, and migration studies, as well as

on other auxiliary social sciences). Against this backdrop, the next section re-inspects IR theories in the light of what has been discussed so far.

State-centred theories

The third theoretical block engaged with by this book pivots on IR theories, thus mostly focusing on the role of states and/or its criticism. However crucial, migrant-focused perspectives do not take into account the role of states, understood here are the destination countries, which is substantial as they design and implement specific policies directly affecting thousands of migrants, transit countries, and parts of their surrounding regions alike. Starting from these premises, and highlighting the paucity of scholarly works concurrently adopting lenses from migration studies, IR, and security studies (a subdiscipline of IR), this section seeks to bolster the volume's broad and holistic approach by revisiting theories that provide complementary insights into the study of irregular migration and its governance.

Beginning with realism, it has offered predominantly state-centred understandings of global affairs for, broadly speaking, millennia. (neo)Realism's preoccupation with national interest and the state's protection against perceived external threats (see Waltz 1979, among the many) can be easily detected in destination countries' restrictive responses to irregular migration. For instance, Italy seeks to bolster border security and prevent seaborne asylum seekers from reaching its shores through a variety of foreign policy means, including navy deployments and externalisation agreements with Libya, Niger, Tunisia, and Albania, therefore prioritising national interest over humanitarian concerns (Abbondanza 2023b). Australia pursues a very similar path – albeit with much smaller migratory flows – as it addresses this phenomenon with a military mission and offshore and externalisation policies currently involving Nauru and Sri Lanka (Pronk 2024), formerly Papua New Guinea and Cambodia. Realism's state-centrism is therefore markedly useful in reinstating destination countries' standpoints in irregular migration analyses, although its analytical perimeter inevitably neglects other aspects shaping states' approaches to irregular migration governance.

The second paradigmatic theory is (neo)liberalism, which displays a more optimistic and cooperative worldview instead (Nye and Keohane 1977, among the many). Within this discussion, liberalism can be noticed whenever states and/or international organisations cooperate to address this phenomenon and adhere to the international law. While instances are rarer than (realist) exclusive policies, inclusive measures have stood out. Recalling the comparative analysis in Chapter 3, Italy implemented highly praised inclusive and life-saving policies between 2013 and 2016, operating in both international waters and other countries' search and rescue zones (Panebianco 2016). Australia followed a similar path between 2008 and 2010, when it ceased its previous controversial policy preventing maritime asylum seekers from reaching its

shores (Karlsen 2010). While both countries then reverted to (more) restrictive policies, those years embody the application of liberalist principles to irregular migration governance. Even so, as can be seen by the short lifespan of such inclusive approaches, liberalism alone cannot explain why and how states decide to address this complex phenomenon. Moreover, it could also be argued that lawful and non-predatory proposals centred on "improved" extraterritorial processing could equally fall in the liberalist category, due to their cooperative and international law-abiding rationales.

The third IR paradigm, constructivism, is also the most recent one, and it developed as a criticism of previous approaches. Constructivism's most relevant contribution to the irregular migration governance debate is likely securitisation theory (ST), the process whereby an issue or a group of people are deemed a security risk, and, as a result, they are progressively addressed as such (McDonald 2008). Unsurprisingly, both Rome and Canberra have officially securitised irregular migration for many years. Italy has done so with its 2015 Defence White Paper (Italian Government 2015) and Australia with its 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper (Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2017), both of which directly label irregular migratory flows as potential security risks. The role of a state's "perceptions" therefore does help to understand why and how destination countries pursue one policy direction instead of another. Even so, constructivism's lack of scholarly interest in more conventional (realist and liberalist) rationales necessarily limits its theoretical (and thus analytical) perimeter.

Fourth, several other lenses further elucidate aspects that are generally neglected by more mainstream approaches. One the one hand, there are feminist and critical security studies, significant subfields within both IR and security studies that reject state-centric viewpoints, focus on individuals' and/or women's standpoints, and stigmatise restrictive foreign policies on irregular migration (Peoples and Vaughan-Williams 2021, by way of example). On the other, there are several complementary theories, offered by migration studies, criminology, and social sciences in general that too refine more traditional approaches through path dependence, adhocracy, functional imperatives, deterrence, and others. These have been outlined in Chapter 2, along with several examples pertaining to Italy and Australia. This heterogeneous group of theoretical lenses is remarkably useful in complementing conventional approaches, although it represents a point of departure rather than a fully autonomous theoretical strand, on account of its exclusive focus on specific aspects of the irregular migration process.

In essence, the theoretical approaches revisited so far invariably display significant advantages for a careful analysis of states' foreign policies on irregular migration, with particular reference to state-centric viewpoints and their criticisms. Inevitably, however, they all dismiss elements and standpoints falling out of their theoretical perimeter, either because they are the main object of their scholarly criticism or due to a focus on specific aspects.

Table 6.3 The theoretical differences and complementarity of IR lenses

Theoretical category	Theoretical focus	Theoretical complementarity
(Neo)realism	Egoism, amorality, anarchy, state-centrism, survival, national security, rationalism, and power politics	With internationalist, constructivist, interpretivist, and critical theories
(Neo)liberalism	International cooperation, international institutions, the international law, and defence of both the latter and the status quo	With realist, constructivist, interpretivist, and critical theories
Constructivism	Ideas, ideologies, cultures, norms, perceptions, and interpretations	With realist, internationalist, interpretivist, and more critical theories
Complementary approaches	Rejection of state-centrism, individuals' and/or women's standpoints, additional migratory and criminological perspectives	With realist, internationalist, constructivist, and less critical theories

Whatever the reason, state-centric theories too would benefit from a broader conceptual endeavour, much like the two other theoretical blocs re-assessed in this chapter. In other words, theoretical eclecticism could help to provide a holistic, more comprehensive, and therefore more effective manner of approaching the study of irregular migration and its governance, since each lens holds advantages and limitations that may very well compensate for other lenses' strengths and weaknesses. To that end, this chapter's (and this volume's more broadly) effort to concurrently assess diverse yet often complementary approaches, within the IR study of irregular migration, can hopefully contribute to this endeavour.

Conclusion

This chapter sought to reappraise the book's theoretical framework outlined in Chapter 2 (see Table 6.4), in the light of the insights pertaining to the volume's Italian and Australian case studies, as well as due to the comprehensive and holistic approach advocated here, with a view to better understand the theoretical elements behind the formulation of irregular migration foreign policies. To that end, it has briefly introduced theoretical eclecticism, prior to revisiting migrant-centred theories, theories addressing concerns of the local populations in destination countries, and state-centred lenses. Its key finding is twofold: one the one hand, the usefulness of existing frameworks provided by different disciplines, and, on the other, the inevitable limitations in their delimited scopes and the consequent level of

Table 6.4 The three theoretical blocks relevant to irregular migration governance and their complementarity

Theoretical group	Theoretical focus	Theoretical complementarity
Migrant-centred theories	Migrants and mechanisms favouring migration	With theories focusing on destination countries' local populations and state-centred theories
Theories focusing on the local populations in destination countries	Concerns, anxieties, and (mis)perceptions of local residents in destination countries	With migrant-centred and state-centred theories
State-centred theories	States and their foreign policies, the international system, their interpretations of global phenomena, and complementary and/or critical approaches	With theories focusing on destination countries' local populations and migrant-centred theories

complementarity stemming from this. Consequently, it is possible to argue not only for intradisciplinary eclecticism – that is, considering multiple relevant theories within a specific discipline – but also for multidisciplinary eclecticism – that is, the simultaneous utilisation of different theories pertaining to different disciplines.

After all, migrant-centred theories focus on both migrants' viewpoints and on other mechanisms favouring migration; theories addressing destination countries' local populations explore the concerns of the latter; and IR lenses favour state-centric, internationalist, foreign policy-related, or otherwise complementary theories. In other words, each of them focuses on vital elements of the irregular migration process, and, as a result, the exclusion of one or more of them from a related research cannot lead to a comprehensive understanding of all the components of this complex phenomenon. To a certain extent, this book's investigation of an "improved" offshore processing of asylum claims, outlined in Chapter 5, makes use of analytical eclecticism (real-world foreign policies considering migrants, states, and their local populations) which openly benefits from a theoretically eclectic approach. While compartmentalisation and discipline-specific endeavours are obviously necessary in modern research, a broader effort is instrumental in strengthening theoretical efforts as well as improving policy designs and implementations. To that end, this books seeks to offer a novel and functional guide for both scholars and policymakers.

Note

1 Translation from Italian to English made by the author.

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7 Irregular migration governance in the 21st century

Current trends, new insights, and future outlooks

Introduction

This volume has engaged with a number of conceptual, theoretical, and empirical elements that revolve around the irregular migration process. On account of the complexity of this international phenomenon – a permanent feature of the 21st century – it has pursued an innovative, holistic approach concurrently considering migrants' viewpoints, the concerns of destination countries' local populations, and the role of the states (with a focus on their foreign policy), as well as select complementary insights into transit countries, international institutions, and global developments (see Figure 7.1). As a result of this multidisciplinary endeavour, seldom found within the relevant disciplines of migration studies, security studies, and international relations (IR), it has emphasised the importance of a broader, more comprehensive effort to portray irregular migration in its entirety, as such merging migrants' perspectives to those of destination countries or international organisations resorting to externalisation. Starting from these premises, this seventh and last chapter provides a threefold contribution to this debate. First, it outlines the unfolding trends that have been traced by this book. Second, it assesses the volume's novel theoretical and empirical insights into irregular migration. Third, it explores select potential future outlooks, prior to presenting the final conclusions.

Current trends in irregular migration

Among a number of other elements, this book has explored the phenomenon of irregular migration in the past few years (see Table 7.1). Relatedly, it is important to acknowledge that several consequential events have affected the number of people who crossed a border without the required authorisation. These include the COVID-19 pandemic, Russia's new invasion of Ukraine, the latest iteration of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and others, which add to pre-existing international political, economic, environmental, economic,
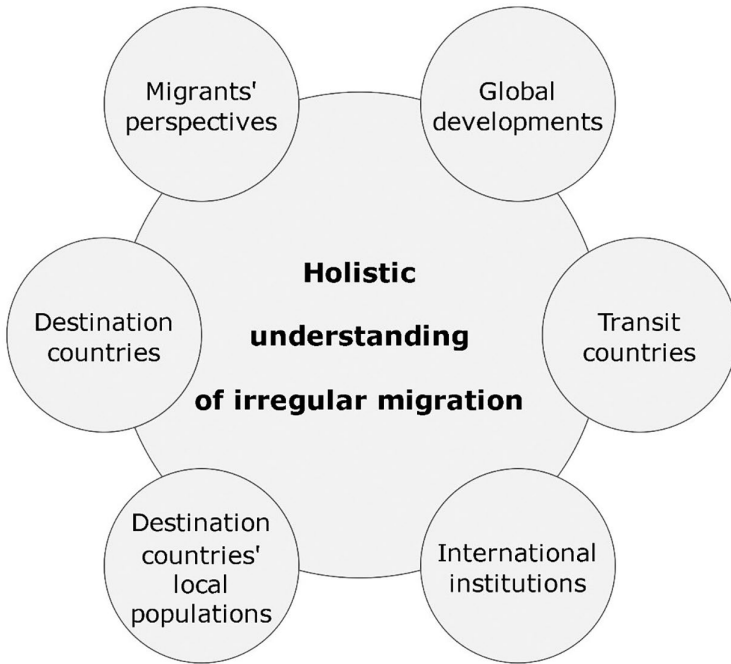
Figure 7.1 A holistic approach for a comprehensive understanding of the irregular migration phenomenon. This book has focused on the roles of migrants, states, and their local populations.

and humanitarian crises (see UNHCR 2024 for a relevant list). Moreover, the exponential progress – and increased availability – of technological communication means indirectly favour irregular migration itself. As attested by the latest UN World Migration Report (IOM 2022, pp. 5–6):

> Digital technology is becoming increasingly crucial throughout migration. People are able to gather information and advice in real time during migration journeys, an issue that has raised interest and, at times, concern. The use of apps to share information and connect geographically dispersed groups has raised valid questions concerning the extent to which digital technology has been used to support irregular migration, as well as to enable migrants to avoid abusive and exploitative migrant smugglers and human traffickers.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, the proportion of international migrants out of the global population – 2.8% around 20 years ago and 3.5% today – is growing

more rapidly than the global population itself (albeit not by a large extent; see de Haas *et al.* 2020). This equates to approximately 280 million people in total, a third of which is comprised of "non-regular migrants" (around 90 million people): internally displaced persons (IDPs) and/or stateless persons, refugees, economic migrants, and other categories (IOM 2022). In turn, recent estimates place the likely number of irregular migrants either between 30 and 40 (Ambrosini and Hajer 2023) or between 25 and 100 million individuals globally (Koser 2010).[1] Indeed, to use a European case in point, Frontex (2024) recently attested that irregular arrivals in the European Union are at the highest level since 2016 (almost 400,000 in 2023), with the Central Mediterranean Route accounting for more than two-fifths of all irregular arrivals. This context is hardly surprising, as outlined by the latest International Migration Outlook (OECD 2023, p. 82):

> 2022–23 was also marked by increased migration pressure in key origin and transit countries, driven by the lifting of pandemic travel restrictions, multiple and protracted refugee situations and escalation of geopolitical conflict. This has resulted in record high levels of displacement globally, as well as a sharp increase in irregular arrivals.

In essence, this means that there are more people who seek to leave their country and more people who migrate through irregular channels, in absolute terms, compared to the recent past. In turn, and as a result of this, there are more migrants who undertake challenging and dangerous journeys, which leaves them vulnerable to the possibility of getting caught by transit countries' authorities, thus potentially ending up in migrants' camps (mostly prison-like structures) where they do not know what awaits them next. While the numerical increase in irregular migration implies a higher number of migrants who do reach their destinations, it also leads many of them to experience life-threatening situations and, also, death (more than 63,000 people have lost their lives while migrating in the past 10 years; see IOM 2024).

Relatedly, although this volume's analytical focus was not on transit countries, it has provided a few relevant insights into them, which may be useful in tracing two interrelated trends. On the one hand, transit countries too persist in treating irregular migrants as an unwanted burden. The latter are hardly tolerated by public authorities, which often violate migrants' basic rights, not only due to the costs that are associated with hosting them (paradoxically, given their treatment) but also due to deep-rooted racial prejudices, such as those faced by sub-Saharan Africans in Northern African states, or Middle Eastern and South Asian migrants in Turkey (see Hannoum 2021, for example). On the other, transit countries that are included in destination countries' migratory foreign policies (externalisation and/or extraterritorial processing) economically benefit from them and are acutely aware of their leveraging power. To such an extent that some exploit this condition

to obtain additional political and/or financial advantages (Niemann and Zaun 2023), including Morocco with Spain, Tunisia and Libya with Italy, and Turkey and Tunisia (in the future, potentially Egypt too) with the European Union. These two broad trends can arguably be expected to continue in the near future, as the irregular migration phenomenon remains a structural feature of the 21st century and destination countries appear to converge on restrictive policies.

A subsequent point for reflection concerns destination countries' local populations, whose viewpoints are rarely taken into account in migration studies and IR. Here, too, two elements stand out and offer insights into what is likely a growing trend. To begin with, irregular migration is a highly politicised and polarising issue in most destination countries' societies, often linked to xenophobic (populist and/or far-right) politics (Mudde 2019), which in turn further undermines societal cohesion if an alternative path is not found. Moreover, a growing number of people wish this phenomenon to be halted (Pew Research Center 2019), which is also due to anxieties (and misperceptions) concerning potential risks associated with it. In essence, whether rightly or wrongly, irregular migration has been securitised (the Italian and the Australian case studies exemplify this), with de-securitisation being a challenging and non-linear condition to achieve (Bello 2022). In essence, given destination countries' likely protraction of current policies, irregular flows will continue to partially escape them and foster often incorrect anxieties in local populations, all of which contributes to the probable spiralling of securitisation in the future.

Lastly, this volume has delved into destination countries' perspectives – specifically Italy and Australia – with a focus on their irregular migration-related foreign policies. As shown in Chapter 3, Rome and Canberra have occasionally implemented non-restrictive policies out of humanitarian concerns and political pressures: the former in 2013–2016 and the latter in 2008–2010. However, they subsequently reverted to restrictive policies which they later hardened. Italy currently has different types of externalisation agreements with Libya, Niger, Tunisia, and Albania, and Australia with Nauru and Sri Lanka (previously with Papua New Guinea and Cambodia) (Abbondanza 2023a). Their foreign policy measures reflect this and are retraced in the following section. Further, relevant international organisations like the European Union and the Bali Process have progressively accepted and promoted states' restrictive policies over time. The European Union, in particular, combines new internal and external *cooperative* measures with *tougher* approaches towards irregular migrants, as outlined in its new Pact on Migration and Asylum (European Commission 2024a). The convergence of both destination countries and relevant institutions towards externalisation and other related approaches therefore seems to highlight their irregular migration foreign policies for the foreseeable future.

Table 7.1 Select trends in irregular migration

Perspective	Trends
World	Protraction of ongoing crises, growing international volatility, demographic growth, enabling role of technology. All favour (irregular) migration
Migrants	More migrants in absolute terms. More people who succeed, but also more people who get caught in transit countries or lose their lives
Transit countries	Continued mistreatment of migrants as their number will likely increase. Stronger leverage over destination countries
Local populations in destination countries	Continuing politicisation, leading to less accurate perceptions, more polarised societies, and spiralling securitisation
Destination countries	Increasing use of restrictive policies, along with comparable use of foreign policy measures
International institutions	Growing convergence on restrictive measures

Novel insights into irregular migration

In addition to the above, this volume has also shed some light on "novel insights" into irregular migration (see Table 7.2). Such an endeavour benefitted from a holistic approach, thus building on both theoretical and analytical eclecticism applied not only to irregular migration governance but also to its specific foreign policy measures. Beginning with theoretical findings and their related implications, the volume's multidisciplinary outlook combined lenses from migration studies, IR, security studies, and other social sciences, as outlined in Chapter 2. In it, the key theories traditionally employed when exploring irregular migration (migration studies) were juxtaposed with two additional layers which are seldom (if at all) considered jointly, namely the viewpoints of states/destination countries (IR) and those of their local populations (with insights from several other social sciences). Chapter 6 then revisited this innovative theoretical framework in the light of the many elements analysed up to that moment.

Its key findings are that migrant-centred theories remain the bedrock of this endeavour, and that, since they each focus on a particular component of it, they ought to be assessed simultaneously to produce a broader picture. However, they also (and inevitably) portray only one perspective, however crucial, which that can be remedied by looking at theories focusing on destination countries' local populations. This understudied subfield – comprising insights from sociology, anthropology, psychology, and criminology –reveals the many anxieties and (mis)perceptions within receiving societies, which are significant given the indirect influence they might have in liberal democracies. Even so, this perspective too lacks the ability to provide a comprehensive

image, which can be partially addressed by paying attention to those very states that implement foreign policies on irregular migration. While state-centric viewpoints are obviously predominant in IR and security studies, they are not where irregular migration is concerned, especially when combined with the other two perspectives. This can therefore clarify the "why and how" of the migratory foreign policy formulation process, including implications for states' international reputation (see Abbondanza 2021, for example), although it lacks insights from the subnational and individual perspective. A broader, holistic, and thus theoretically eclectic approach (Sil 2000) – rather than yet another theory – is this book's consequent answer to calls for greater theoretical efforts concerning the study of irregular migration. To that end, it takes stock of three standpoints – migrants, destination countries, and their local populations, some of which may be unknown to interested researchers due to disciplinary compartmentalisation – to foster a multidisciplinary study of irregular migration governance and its related foreign policy.

Another perspective pursued in this book revolves around the security concerns that irregular migration entails, once again through a novel and multidisciplinary standpoint assessing both migrants' and states' security-related views. The former has understandably attracted the highest level of scholarly attention and attests the multifarious (and often tragic) challenges that migrants who cross borders *sans papier* endure (see Loutan *et al*. 1999, by way of example). Still, a comprehensive understanding of security-related issues cannot be complete without the states' viewpoints, understood here as destination countries and their local populations. Here, incorrect assumptions of irregular migration being invariably associated with high security risks, as well as the few security risks that do exist (see Sobrino Heredia 2022), shed light on the reticence of destination countries in implementing non-restrictive external measures, although other factors are at play. Further, Chapter 4 emphasised that the two viewpoints are inextricably intertwined, since strengthened state security generally leads to increased migrants' insecurity, whereas greater levels of migrants' security do not necessarily imply national security risks. In essence, these two lenses are hardly separable in the effort to provide a comprehensive understanding of irregular migration and its foreign policy governance. Alongside theoretical eclecticism, as a result, analytical eclecticism (Sil and Katzenstein 2010) is required for a better-rooted analysis of all the implications of this complex transnational phenomenon.

Along with theoretical and security findings, this volume has explored the policy implications of irregular migration in Chapter 5, as such investigating policy gaps, alternatives (partially akin to "migration regimes"), and conundrums, as well as the potential external validity of its findings and a revisited form of offshore processing. Policy alternatives, in particular, were grouped into six categories (with partial overlaps) with a view to provide a functional compendium of existing external policies related to irregular migration. Additionally, and while the international community searches for better policies for all parties involved, it reconsidered asylum claims' extraterritorial processing,

updating the current debate to the latest developments and assessing its potential advantages – including the potential to secure the international asylum regime – and key issues. In doing so, it argued that although it could be feasible and a consensus on its implementation might be rooting, it will have to explicitly respect numerous requirements to be lawful and ameliorate the current, growing, and unjust externalisation measures. Starting from these premises, the volume explicitly avoided simplistic answers to the two "policy conundrums" it has outlined,[2] but rather offered select points of consideration deriving from both the existing body of literature and this volume's findings. In terms of policy-related findings, it also assessed the partial similarities shared by most destination countries,[3] and thus argued that this book's case studies and their related findings – what works, what does not, and what ought to be improved – might serve as a useful point of departure for comparable scholarly analyses concerning them.

Lastly, this research employed Italy and Australia as highly relevant case studies for an investigation of irregular migration governance, with an emphasis on their foreign policy measures. Against the backdrop of rare comparative efforts focused on the two states (Abbondanza 2023a; Dastyari and Hirsch 2019; Glynn 2016, among the few examples; see Chapter 1), and prompted by the lack of a book-length research assessing their migratory foreign policies, this volume has delved into these elements. Theoretically, it has shown that IR theories help to at least partially explain the rationale behind their restrictive policies (both realism and constructivism's securitisation) as well as their rarer non-restrictive measures (liberalism), while critical, feminist, and complementary perspectives further nuance this effort.

With reference to the foreign policy measures that Italy and Australia have adopted, a matter of particular interest to this monograph, they are remarkably similar and well established. These include military missions in international waters and/or third countries; naval deployments; pushback manoeuvres (at different points in time); externalisation and/or offshore processing agreements; military, logistical, and financial support to transit countries; territorial excisions (Australia); cooperation with relevant regional institutions and fora (the European Union and the Bali Process, for example); new regional plans (Italy's "Mattei Plan"); and others (see Chapter 3). In terms of security implications, this book has underscored the now-rooted securitisation of irregular migration in both Italy and Australia, as well as their socio-economic, crime, and terrorism concerns, including some major erroneous assumptions. Moreover, novel policy-related perspectives trace Italy's and Australia's discursive, implementation, and efficacy gaps, the latter of which reveal the higher "effectiveness" of Australian policies, due to several key differences. The "policy conundrums" that have been previously mentioned, additionally, apply perfectly to those two countries. Last, all of these findings are found to be at least partially applicable to a number of comparable destination states, which inevitably calls for further research in the light of the novel arguments that have been advanced.

Table 7.2 Novel insights into irregular migration as per the book's findings

Perspective	Novel insights
Theory	Traditional migration studies theories can be complemented by lenses focusing on destination countries' local populations and IR. Intradisciplinary and multidisciplinary theoretical eclecticism promotes a comprehensive understanding of irregular migration
Security	Although migrants' views clearly remain the most pressing ones, migrants' and states' perspectives ought to be considered concurrently. Currently, state security implies migrants' insecurity
Policy	Policy gaps, alternatives, and conundrums are multifarious. A revisited extraterritorial processing of asylum claims is also advanced, while acknowledging its numerous requirements. Potential external validity of these insights
Italy and Australia	Numerous findings that are relevant in terms of theory, security, and policy. Growing convergence of migratory foreign policy measures. Useful contribution to bilateral comparative studies, irregular migration governance, and the two countries' foreign policy. Bilateral cooperation in many fields but not in irregular migration governance

Potential future outlooks

The third and last section of this concluding chapter is concerned with potential outlooks for the future, starting from both the recent past and the current landscape, in order to discuss (i) unlikely developments, (ii) probable developments, and (iii) desirable developments (see Table 7.3). Far from attempting to "predict the future" in the common and generic sense, this effort stems from the research-based analyses that have been outlined so far, and thus builds on a numerically limited but solid niche of literature within IR which is concerned with realistic, evidence-based forecasting (see Tetlock *et al*. 2024 and O'Neil 2011, by way of example). Prior to this, however, a brief preamble is necessary. The current state of international affairs, riddled with numerous traditional and non-traditional security challenges, is unlikely to improve in the coming years. Rather, simply by protracting current trends in the future, it is arguably going to get more strategically challenging. Consequently, other elements will exert a significant impact on people globally, albeit with a disproportionally stronger impact on more fragile regions and groups. Among the several, the growing unpredictability and force of climate change-related events stand out (IOM 2023a), even though apocalyptic tones ought to be avoided on account of people's "huge resilience in coping with scarcity and environmental threats" (de Haas 2023, p. 346). Additionally, demographic factors will also continue to influence existing and future emigration phenomena, especially if we consider that some of the world's higher birth rates occur in what already are countries of origin (Fargues 2007). In essence, these and other trends pave the way for

a maintenance of existing levels of irregular migration (at the very least), if not for stronger flows (in absolute terms) in the near future.

Starting from these challenging premises, it is possible to begin with "unlikely developments", that is, events that contradict past and current trends, which may still take place in the future, although improbably. Among the many, for example, destination countries' societies could progressively exhibit a more favourable view of asylum seekers. Alternatively, a marked reduction in origin countries' birth rates could occur, therefore lessening future emigration phenomena, which is theoretically possible in the short-medium term. However, demography reminds us decreased birth rates usually happen with higher levels of economic development (Birdsall *et al.* 2001), a process which takes decades to cement. From transit countries' viewpoint, one or more may decide to implement more humane policies when hosting asylum seekers, although this would not necessarily advance their "national interest" in a straightforward manner and would undoubtedly be tied to specific larger funds provided by destination countries with which they have an agreement, which is also not likely.

A more realistic development, among unlikely ones, is the possibility that one or more destination countries cease their current restrictive policies. This would not be the first time, as Italy did so between 2013 and 2016 and Australia between 2008 and 2010 (Glynn 2016), to use this book's case studies. However, the unlikelihood of this foreign policy reversal is due to (i) history lessons, as non-restrictive policies have posed a number of diverse challenges to destination states; (ii) electoral reasons, as governments who enacted non-restrictive policies did not have a long lifespan – though other factors were obviously at play – and since open borders are invariably exploited politically by populist and/or far-right parties; (iii) path dependence and the securitisation of irregular migration, two powerful forces which inhibit sudden policy changes of this type (see Chapter 2); (iv) the role of the public opinion in destination countries, which is wary of irregular migration; (v) a growing convergence of goals and means between destination countries and relevant international organisations (including the Bali Process and, particularly, the European Union); and (vi) a likely toughening of existing migratory foreign policy frameworks, in case irregular migration strengthens in the future.

In terms of "probable developments", these partially ensue from the above discussion on account of a logical elimination process, since what is not impossible or unlikely may then be probable. For instance, as origin countries continue to develop, so will their emigration (including irregular flows), which is positively associated with economic development levels (see de Haas 2023). Another hypothetical continuation of ongoing trends – a likely condition as per the preamble to this section – would see destination countries protracting their current foreign policies centred on externalisation, "fencing", and "gatekeeping", also with growing support from artificial intelligence (AI). In other words, if irregular migration flows remain at least as high as they are today (if not higher), and if no ambitious regional plan is designed and successfully

implemented, then restrictive measures are likely to remain the backdrop of irregular migration governance in the near future. In this respect, the afore-mentioned convergence of both destination countries and international institu-tions (also through the new EU agreement with Egypt and the new EU Pact on Migration and Asylum; see European Commission 2024a) seems to validate this unsurprising outlook for the future. In this respect, it is important to note that the European Union's new Pact might also pose unwanted challenges to "frontline" destination countries like Italy (Barana 2024).

Moreover, not only there is a growing consensus within the "Global North" on the above, but prominent states are developing *new* externalisation policies. Among the several, Italy with Albania; Australia, to a lesser extent, with Sri Lanka; and both the United Kingdom and Denmark potentially with Rwanda. In essence, without a significant change in the other components of this complex and sensitive "equation", the approach of destination coun-tries will likely remain the same (see Humphrey 2013 for a related point made more than 10 years ago), with the possibility of further expanding their externalisation agreements. This, in turn, would heighten both the undoubt-able violation of migrants' human rights and destination countries' strategic dependence on transit states.

Lastly, and in line with this volume's holistic approach, there is a hypothet-ical third scenario. This could potentially produce a transnational approach to what is, after all, a transnational phenomenon. These "desirable develop-ments" are, chiefly, broad and multilateral forms of cooperation aiming to address this shared challenge in a shared manner. To that end, this book's revisited form of asylum claims' extraterritorial processing – a cooperative, lawful, and non-predatory effort introduced in Chapter 5 – as well as the par-tially comparable proposals advanced by few institutions and scholars, could serve as a functional point of departure. However, as already discussed, such an ambitious plan faces a number of substantial obstacles in legal, political, logistical, (geo)economic, geopolitical, and security terms. The possibility of testing it through a well-thought pilot project in a "safe third country" may support the feasibility of this complex idea.

Table 7.3 Potential future outlooks concerning irregular migration

Category	Potential outlook
Unlikely	One or more destination countries cease their restrictive policies, as it did happen in the past. Currently unlikely for at least six reasons
Probable	Without significant changes, destination countries will continue to resort to "fencing", "gatekeeping", and externalisation; potentially expanding them
Desirable	A lawful and thoroughly revisited plan for the offshore processing of asylum claims in a "safe third country". Very difficult to achieve, it could begin as a pilot project

Conclusions

Irregular migration is one of the most momentous, sensitive, and polarising phenomena of the 21st century. Far from being a new element in the political sphere, it has increasingly become a constant feature of both domestic politics (especially, though not only, in destination countries) and IR. From an international institutionalist viewpoint, these developments have obviously not gone unnoticed, and although international organisations are often criticised on account of their apparent (or partial) ineffectiveness in this area (see Georgi 2010), they are progressively incorporating human mobility and irregular migration in their key pillars of interest. Consequently, the significance of migration in general – and asylum seeking more specifically – for 21st-century world politics has been acknowledged by all the main international organisations.

One the one hand, and from a mostly "Global North perspective", the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (2023, p. 12) acknowledges that "In reaction to record numbers of asylum seekers, increasing exits from origin countries and movements through transit countries, several OECD countries have introduced stricter asylum and border policies and reduced quotas for resettlement". On the other, some organisations are explicitly calling for a cooperative approach in attempting to govern this complex phenomenon. For example, the African Union (2023, p. 13) has recently published a document on its "guiding principles", in which it calls "on all African states to establish common standards for the protection of the human and peoples' rights of all migrants, without prejudice to […] refugees". The United Nations has also published a document in which it underscores the significance of irregular migration for current political debates, while also similarly arguing that "The international community as a whole must cooperate to address the challenges and offer benefits for migrants, refugees, IDPs, host communities, origin and destination countries alike" (UNDP 2020, p. 13).

Other institutions display a growing convergence on a "dual approach" instead, stressing the need to counter irregular migration while ensuring the respect of migrants' rights (at least on paper). The European Union, under the von der Leyen Commission, has launched a new Pact on Migration and Asylum, which pursues this twofold goal: "from more efficient border management with screening people arriving irregularly, to streamlined processing of asylum applications. […] Inherent in the Pact are several safeguards to protect the fundamental rights of migrants" (European Commission 2024b, p. 1). To that end, the Pact may also have opened the door to EU-sanctioned extraterritorial processing of asylum claims (see Chapter 5). The Bali Process (2022, p. 1) too has released a specific document in recent months, in which it underscores that "The need to bolster regional and international collaboration when addressing irregular maritime challenges is essential to combat transnational

criminal networks and to respond to related humanitarian challenges, adopting a holistic position".

Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) (2021, pp. 1–4) also explicitly acknowledged both the security and the humanitarian challenges of irregular migration, and recently published a regional plan which introduces "a comprehensive regional approach to prevent, suppress, and punish trafficking in persons", while also "taking into account the need to respect human rights, child and gender-sensitive issues". Relatedly, while attending Italy's inaugural International Conference on Development and Migration, IOM Director General Amy Pope recently "emphasized the need to strengthen measures to prevent and curb irregular migration flows while preventing loss of life, particularly in the Mediterranean" (IOM 2023b). In essence, while all these regional and international organisations explicitly mention migrants' human rights – they could not do otherwise, as they are enshrined in the international law – they also increasingly mention the will to tackle irregular migration. In other words, the convergence on stricter policies is becoming a mainstream approach at the global level (the European Union's growing externalisation deals are a telling example), an unfolding development that has been noted multiple times in this volume.

Against this background, and noting the paucity of book-length investigations explicitly combining the viewpoints of the numerous parties involved, this book has sought to provide a useful contribution by tackling this lacuna in the relevant disciplines. Following an introduction to the complexity of this subject and a review of the extant literature, it has outlined the volume's goal of approaching this complex issue in a holistic manner, therefore considering the multiplicity of relevant standpoints, thanks to a markedly multidisciplinary approach comprising migration studies, IR, security studies, and other auxiliary social sciences. Next, it has explored the theoretical, security, and policy implications of irregular migration – including a revised foreign policy proposal – with a focus on Italy and Australia as two highly relevant case studies that are rarely analysed together. Lastly, it has probed into some of its main findings, which has allowed a final discussion on current trends, new perspectives, and potential future outlooks. As stated at the onset in Chapter 1, the book's specific focus that has just been mentioned has precluded the consideration of some related elements, including the role of visa policies and those of non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Far from dismissing such significant components of the irregular migration continuum, this volume acknowledges the importance of exploring them with dedicated analyses, rather than simply mentioning them due to mere tokenism.

The book's main findings – pertaining to the theory, security, and policy spheres – aim to make a useful scholarly contribution benefitting debates from the different disciplinary perspectives that have been engaged here, along with non-academic debates in which policymakers, diplomats, migration

specialists, journalists, students, and other professionals are involved. Moreover, this book had a particular emphasis on destination states and their migratory foreign policy, with Italy and Australia as relevant case studies that successfully cooperate in many significant fields, yet, somewhat surprisingly, not on irregular migration governance (see Abbondanza 2023b). In essence, this research has provided a number of insights into the sheer complexity of this phenomenon. The latter ought to be approached from a multiplicity of viewpoints not only in order to fully understand it but also with the goal of better harnessing the diverse concerns and therefore responses that are called for by the many actors that are involved in it, all of which are embedded in our "age of migration".

Even so, those who are engaged in studying irregular migration should forget that behind those policies and the numbers that are associated with their design and implementation, there are human lives at stake. The protraction of restrictive policies in their current form neither respects their basic human rights nor is satisfactory for states' publicly declared goals (deterring people smugglers, curbing irregular flows, and substantially increasing repatriations). A comprehensive reassessment of existing approaches is therefore necessary, especially in the light of a likely strengthening, in absolute terms, of this phenomenon in the coming years. This is due to a number of reasons, including growing demographic pressures, the rise of new middle classes in origin countries, conflicts, environmental disasters, and new technological developments. As a result, research-informed policy discussions and proposals are an instrumental component of this objective. To that end, this volume hopes to have made a worthwhile contribution to this pressing debate, along with the numerous other works that comprise the existing scholarly literatures.

Notes

1 As mentioned in Chapter 1, the very definition of "irregular migrant" is neither straightforward nor fixed, as migrants may change their status over time. Moreover, irregular migrants can get "regularised" in destination countries through national amnesties, which further affects these estimates.
2 Are permanent open-border policies desirable? How long can states implement inhumane policies for?
3 In addition to the book's two case studies, the non-comprehensive list of countries discussed in Chapters 4 and 5 comprised the EU, Spain, France, the UK, Denmark, the US, Canada, South Africa, and Israel.

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