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Australia's Refugee/Asylum Seeker Geopolitics in Asia: The Role of Incentives

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ABSTRACT

Australia is a destination state for refugees and exhibits behaviours in the 21st century that are worth observing. Australia has a complex problem related to the influx of refugees/asylum seekers via IMAs (Irregular Maritime Arrivals). The majority of refugees/asylum seekers via IMAs originate from countries in Asia. Australia has implemented various strategies to reduce the number of IMAs, including mobilising national resources and utilising international relations. This paper will explain Australia's refugee/asylum seeker geopolitics strategies in several Asian countries through incentive instruments integrating political economy and international relations. The findings from the Australian case study demonstrate that incentives serve multiple roles namely supporting strategic interests, approaching and exercising influence, lubricating bilateral and multilateral cooperation, broadening avenues for demand, and shaping the decisions and behaviour of other actors. This research employs a qualitative approach, utilising both primary and secondary data.

Keywords: Asia, Australia, Geopolitics, Incentive, Refugee.

INTRODUCTION

"*I had inherited many political headaches, most particularly the three issues on which I had described the government as losing its way: the resources super profits tax, carbon pricing and asylum-seekers* (Gillard, 2014)"

Not all destination states are willing to accept refugees, especially those arriving through irregular ways or non-quota schemes; Australia is a prime illustration. Australia, widely renowned as a refugee sanctuary in the 20th century due to its low population, has attempted to alter this image in the 21st century (Richards, 2008). Although Australia acceded to the 1951 Convention in 1954 and its 1967 Protocol in 1973, its 21st-century behaviour has been in stark contradiction to the international refugee regime principles (Bailey, 2002). The most powerful marker of this reluctance to accept maritime refugees, often termed IMAs (Irregular Maritime Arrivals), was the 2001 Tampa affair, in which Howard's policy intercepted a Norwegian cargo vessel to prevent the disembarkation of 438 refugees at Christmas Island (Ann Martin, 2024).

At least three international maritime laws justified Captain Rinnan's decision in rescuing the 438 refugees who were in peril of drowning: SOLAS (the International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea) of 1974, SAR (the International Convention on Search and Rescue) of 1979, and UNCLOS (the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea) of 1982. These three international laws mandate the provision of assistance to individuals in distress

at sea (Papanicolopulu, 2016). Australia, however, framed this incident not from a humanitarian perspective, but as an attempted territorial breach by a foreign vessel under the guise of asserting its sovereignty. The political undertones of the event were palpable by using military means, as the government excessively and disproportionately steered the narrative, framing the unarmed refugees in a vulnerable condition as a threat to national sovereignty. The Tampa incident increased PM Howard's popularity and electability, helping him win the November 2001 election, which occurred during a time when the public increasingly demanded strong border protection after 9/11 (Briskman & Mason, 2015).

In the aftermath of the event, New Zealand accepted 150 refugees from the Tampa vessel, while the remainder were sent to Nauru. Following the establishment of an offshore detention centre on Nauru in September 2001, Manus Island in Papua New Guinea was also opened as a site for detention and processing in October 2001**.** The 2001 Tampa incident fundamentally shifted Australia's refugee geopolitical landscape by involving third countries as solution providers to the Australia problems in what became known as the Pacific Solution**.** The use of a third country for this purpose represented a novel approach to Australia's refugee geopolitics policy. Previously, mandatory detention was introduced in 1992, but all such detentions were confined to Australian territory (Holly, 2020).

Besides New Zealand, the solution provider for the Tampa incident in 2001 was Nauru, which became an offshore detention and processing centre. In return, Australia provided initial assistance worth AUD 10 million, packaged as development aid. This amount was considered substantial for Nauru at the time, since Australia's aid to Nauru over the previous 10 years had totalled AUD 28 million, or an average of AUD 2.8 million per year. In 2002, there were 1,155 refugees/asylum seekers detained in Nauru (Philips, 2012). In 2002, Australian aid increased to USD 19 million, and in 2007, it further reached USD 29.4 million (Ausaid, 2007). The Tampa incident was a blessing in disguise for Nauru and changed the pattern as well as the motive of Australian aid to Nauru. After the Tampa incident, Nauru became a recipient state of Australia.

The next state that helped Australia following the incident, alongside New Zealand and Nauru, was PNG, which provided Manus Island as a processing centre. Legally, PNG's position is solid since it acceded to the 1951 Convention in 1986. Australia views New Zealand and PNG as its younger brothers. Australia considers itself responsible for development in PNG due to its historical proximity, membership in the Commonwealth, and defence aspects, as well as its identity as the predominantly Christian nation guarding Christendom outside Europe, particularly in the Pacific zone, despite differences in race. The Tampa incident occurred at the same time as the Bougainville peace agreement on August 30, 2001, in which Australia was also involved (Firth, 2011). PNG is the largest recipient of foreign aid from Australia, which has been ongoing for many years. In 2002, after the opening of Manus Island as a processing centre, Australian aid amounted to USD 297.7 million, equivalent to 25% of PNG's GDP (May, 2022). Manus Island as a processing centre was closed twice: first, as a consequence of Rudd's policy in 2008, and second, due to the PNG's internal dynamics in 2016, when the Supreme Court ruled that the processing centre violated the 1975 constitution. After Manus reopened in 2012 during the Gillard term, Australia agreed to finance an AUD 500 million infrastructure project in PNG as part of the asylum deal (BBC, 2013). This event demonstrated that incentives for refugee/asylum seeker issues were wrapped up in development aid packages.

The use of a third country for this purpose represented a novel approach to Australia's refugee geopolitics policy. Previously, mandatory detention was introduced in 1992, but all such detentions were confined to Australian territory (Holly, 2020). This research explains Australia's refugee/asylum seeker geopolitics strategies in several Asian countries through incentive instruments. Previous works have explained how Australia uses the Bali Process multilateral forum to securitise the issue of people smuggling (Curley & Vandyk, 2016). Australia also funds several immigration projects in Indonesia through the IOM (Hirsch & Doig, 2018; Kneebone, 2017; Nethery et al., 2013). However, these works have not explained Australia's refugee/asylum seeker geopolitics in Asia through incentive instruments. This research aims to fill the gap. This paper is structured as follows: first, it discusses the concept of refugee geopolitics; second, it presents the concept of incentives; third, it describes IMAs in numbers; and fourth, it explains the role of incentives.

This research employs a qualitative approach to explain empirical phenomena. The study collected primary and secondary data from reliable sources. The qualitative approach utilised in this research involves the use of case study. Case study has several distinctive features, namely the ability to comprehensively explain complex phenomena, discover patterns, reformulate theories/concepts, and develop the abstraction of empirical phenomena (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Data analysis involved several phases, including categorisation, reduction, condensation, and interpretation of the data (Flick, 2014).

Refugee Geopolitics

The intersection of geopolitics and refugee issues is typically examined through several key facets. This includes analysing how conflicts and wars trigger refugee flows that impact specific states or regions (Chtouris & Miller,

2017; Elinder et al., 2023; Moorthy & Brathwaite, 2019), as well as how both state and non-state actors' behaviour (Alexander Betts, 2011; Hirsch, 2017; Loescher, 2017) subsequently responds to these population movements. The field of refugee geopolitics also encompasses the protection and the spatial organisation of refugee camps (Khan & Sackeyfio, 2021; Ramadan, 2013; Umek et al., 2019), shelters (Romola, 2014), or detention centres (Nethery et al., 2013), along with the distribution of humanitarian aid (Tayeh, 2022), such as overcoming geographical blockages or barriers. Furthermore, it addresses the political security such as the externalisation (Casas-Cortes et al., 2016; Dastyari et al., 2023), which is the use of other geographically selected countries to contain refugees. It also addresses the geographical clustering of refugees based on their country of origin, identity, or other salient factors (Adeeko & Treanor, 2022; Oztürk & Ayalp, 2022). It explains the fate of refugees that living in limbo in particular geographical locations, for instance in a transit state (Missbach, 2015). Refugee geopolitics is also explored as a discourse shaped by distinct ideologies. For instance, feminist geopolitics incorporates both material and non-material facts to contextualise refugee issues (Espiritu & Duong, 2018; Hyndman, 2010), while phenomenology utilises the lived, first-person experiences of refugees to amplify their own narrations (Aldiabat et al., 2021; Bartholomew et al., 2015).

The term "refugee geopolitics" in this article denotes the intricate conduct and multifaceted responses that a destination state exhibits when confronted with the influx of refugees, particularly in the irregular way. This scope of response extends far beyond the mere mobilisation of domestic resources to contain or deter refugees from their mainland as manifested in strict border control, encompassing instead the proactive engagement with other states or non-state actors to solicit their assistance in managing these complex challenges.

Incentives

In the realm of international political economy within International Relations discipline, the emergence of the concept of aid politics in the 20th century is marked by the observable phenomenon of the Marshall Plan, a programme run by the United States for post-World War II Western European nations. Morgenthau (1962) argued that bribery is one type of foreign aid as state's economic power to achieve its national interests. Knorr (1973) characterised foreign aid as a pseudo-gift, expecting something in return. Sogge (2015) stated that aid serves as a tactical tool in the strategic interest. Donors help themselves by deploying aid to gain or steer their preferential outcomes in multiple areas. However, Keohane (1984) contended that foreign aid is mutually beneficial, not solely for the donor state.

In its development trajectory, the study of foreign aid came with technocratic limitations that made it narrower in scope. Lancaster (2006) defines foreign aid as a transfer from one government to another, to a non-governmental organisation, or to an international organisation, with at least a 25% grant component. It excludes military aid, intelligence-related expenses, funds for combating international crime, bribes or tributes for solely diplomatic or political purposes, and private philanthropic contributions. Veen (2011) offers seven frames to aid policy namely security, power/influence, wealth/economic self-interest, enlightened self-interest, reputation/self-affirmation, obligation/duty, and humanitarianism.

In this inquiry, we develop and apply the concept "incentives" instead of foreign aid. Incentives are more flexible in nature compared to foreign aid. It provides a broader and more flexible term than the technical limitations of foreign aid. Incentives can be an umbrella term for all the giving that expects something in return. In a simple general definition, an incentive is something given from one actor (state or non-state) to another actor (state or non-state) to achieve a specific purpose. Incentives encompass all the kinds/types of aid, support, gifts, assistance, or bribes to run the actor's/donor's agenda. Thus, foreign aid is one of the incentives. Incentives can be in the form of cash, in-kind, assistance, or any kind of support that is given to any targeted actor, whether state or non-state, for specific goals and purposes. Moreover, incentives have the ability to alter/shape behaviour and mobilise change in the short or long run. Incentive is an integral part of a soft approach or "carrot" and has a persuasive power despite using a hard approach or "stick" based on fear to shaping an actor's behaviour.

The notion of incentives in this paper differs from the IPT (Incentive Policy Transfer) concept developed by Nethery & Gordyn (2014). Nethery & Gordyn modified the IPT based on the concept of policy transfer (Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000; Evans, 2004). Incentives in this study do not necessarily lead to policy issued by the targeted actors but can be anything that in the endgame benefits the donor. We will demonstrate this when incentives are given to non-state actors, particularly refugees and smugglers.

IMAs in Number

Before discussing Australia's approach by using incentives, we point out that the strategies implemented by Australia are efficacious, as evidenced by the declining number of IMAs. The influx of refugees from the IMAs constitutes a politically significant electoral issue in Australia, potentially influencing the ruling party and the prime minister's standing (Fenna & Manwaring, 2021). This matter may compromise the stability of the ruling party's electoral votes and the prime minister's position, as it is viewed as a deficiency in safeguarding Australia's territorial

sovereignty (Gillard, 2014). Furthermore, in the 21st century, we found a pattern that restrictive policies proliferate under the Liberal party in power and are eased during the Labour administration. After Howard, the most restrictive policy emerged during Abbott's administration, and the government was able to reduce the IMA numbers significantly. Meanwhile, the most lenient policy occurred when Rudd and Gillard were in power, resulting in a sharp increase in the IMA numbers.

Table 1. Statistics of boat arrivals from 2000 to 2024

Year	Number of boats	Number of people
2000	51	2.939
2001	43	5.516
2002	1	1
2003	1	53
2004	1	15
2005	4	11
2006	6	60
2007	5	148
2008	7	161
2009	60	2.726
2010	134	6.555
2011	69	4.565
2012	278	17.202
2013	300	20.587
2014	12	450
2015	11	217
2016	6	51
2017	3	60
2018	2	24
2019	3	33
2020	1	6
2021	0	0
2022	7	199
2023	4	74
2024	16	260

Source: (RCOA, 2025)

Based on the data, following the 2001 Tampa incident, Howard's strict border control decreased the count of IMAs from 5,516 in 2001 to 60 people in 2006. The number of IMAs increased significantly when Rudd and Gillard were in government. When Rudd took office as prime minister, there were 148 people who came through the IMA, and this number increased sharply to 6,555 by the end of his term in 2010. When Gillard served as prime minister from 2010 to 2013, the number of arrivals reached its peak, surpassing 20,000 people in 2013. When Abbott was in power from 2013 to 2015, the most significant decline in IMA numbers occurred, to 217 people. Prime ministers who succeeded Abbott inherited the legacy of his system, resulting in IMA numbers that never again surpassed 300 people.

Some of Howard's policies aimed at reducing the number of IMAs included introducing the TPV (Temporary Protection Visa) and a people smuggling bill in 1999, which increased penalties for people smuggling from 2 to 10 years imprisonment; creating offshore detention in the Pacific Solution, conducting a military-led maritime operation named Relex from 2001 to 2006; and removing certain areas, such as Christmas, Cocos, Ashmore, and Cartier Islands, from Australia's migration zone (Crock & Ghezelbash, 2010). Among Rudd's perceived moderating policies that led to the surge in IMAs were ending the Pacific Solution, abolishing TPVs, and discontinuing military-led maritime operations. Although Gillard reactivated the Pacific Solution due to a lack of alternatives after lobbying efforts, the number of IMAs continued to soar. Abbott extended Howard's trend of stricter border controls with the involvement of the military in OSB (Operation Sovereign Borders), the introduction of the MPA (Maritime Powers Act) with detention powers at sea, reactivating TPV, and creating the super-body ABF (Australian Border Force), merging customs and immigration (Minns et al., 2018). PM Albanese attempts to balance strict border control with immigration system reforms. Thus, Abbott's system proved beneficial to subsequent prime ministers.

The Role of incentives: Australia's Context

Australia's strategy to reduce the number of IMAs encompasses the mobilisation of domestic resources and the involvement of various actors, including both state and non-state entities. Deterrence instruments integrate a

range of measures, including border tightening, augmented law enforcement, heavy sanctions on smugglers, enacting TPV visas, and military-led maritime operations. Additionally, it incorporates offshore processing centres, resettlement in other countries, and the abilities of other nations to control the movement of refugees in respective states (Carr, 2016). Therefore, Australia implements a combination of territorial and extraterritorial strategies.

Furthermore, Australia not only pursues bilateral but also multilateral cooperation in the Bali Process forum as a means for Australia to securitise/construct discourse on threats as well as burden and responsibility sharing (Curley & Vandyk, 2016). The establishment of the Bali Process in February 2002 cannot be separated from the events of Tampa in 2001. A clear pattern emerges showing that as border control becomes more restrictive or conservative, the idea of liberal burden sharing is increasingly promoted to other nations. The issue emphasised in the Bali Process is people smuggling. The discourse construction strategy in the Bali Process shifts the right of refugees to seek asylum as a matter of human smuggling. Australia seeks to suppress the activities of smugglers, thereby isolating the movement of refugees from entering Australian territory.

Another interesting point regarding Australia's political manoeuvers is its approach to Cambodia as a resettlement of refugees from Australia's offshore detention centres. The regional scenario includes Cambodia as a resettlement option. The idea is to resettle refugees from the offshore processing centre anywhere except Australia. The move is also a realisation of PM Abbott's political promise to "stop the boats, you will not make Australia home" on the OSB. Bishop led a lobbying effort in Cambodia during her visit on February 22, 2014, which was part of her ASEAN tour. Bishop also activated the MoU between Australia and Cambodia which was signed in March 2002 on Mutual Cooperation in Combating Irregular Migration, People Smuggling, and Trafficking. Legally, Cambodia is a destination country since it acceded to the 1951 Convention in 1992 and issued Regulation No. 224 on the procedure for recognition as a refugee. Furthermore, the lobbying in Cambodia was successful, with the MoU on the resettlement of refugees from Australian detention signed in July 2014. In return, Australia provided USD 40 million in aid over four years (Knackstredt, 2015). This brought the total aid to Cambodia to USD 90 million in 2015 (DFAT, 2015). The output was a reciprocal situation in which Cambodia needed money and Australia had money to offer.

This triggered protests from many humanitarian groups, both domestic and international actors, as well as the UNHCR, due to Cambodia's track record of corruption, economic condition, human rights violations, and long history of a culture of violence. Prior to that, in December 2009, the Cambodian government also had a track record of repatriating 20 Uighur asylum seekers back to China, and two days after the repatriation, China signed 14 deals worth USD 850 million with Cambodia (Reuters, 2009). UNHCR responded to the Australia and Cambodia cooperation as a disturbing precedent of responsibility shifting (Harrington, 2015). Unlike most humanitarian groups, the IOM, historically founded by donor countries, maintains its support for Australia's political moves. Mekonnen, IOM chief of mission in Cambodia, stated, "IOM's involvement will be in the best interest of vulnerable refugees who voluntarily choose to settle in Cambodia" (IOM, 2015). This provides evidence that UNHCR's level of interdependence is higher than IOM's and emphasises that since its inception in the 20th century until the 21st century, IOM has behaved in the same way, as a donor country servant (Moretti, 2020; Pécoud, 2018).

From when the MoU was signed until 2017, only seven refugees from Nauru detention were sent to Cambodia. If the policy is considered using simple math, it seems to have failed by exchanging seven people for USD 40 million in aid. However, if it goes beyond that, the policy is not entirely a failure. For example, Cambodia is used as a deterrent for refugees/asylum seekers, especially those who will enter through the IMA route, as it will have a deterrent effect on refugees who have risked their lives at sea, spent months to years in detention, and then been rumoured to be resettled in Cambodia. After the MoU was heard in Nauru, six refugees attempted to commit suicide, and others suffered from severe stress (Pye, 2014).

Another important state to be analysed is Sri Lanka. In the endgame, Sri Lanka functioned to block refugees in their country of origin. Although it is also a refugee-producing country, Afghanistan's geographical factors make it impossible for Australia or even coalition forces to implement a refugee containment policy. Afghanistan, which has a long border and prolonged security problems, makes it unrealistic for Australia to contain refugees, unlike the island nation of Sri Lanka, which has that possibility. Afghanistan is being functioned to accept refugees back by creating several pull factors such as improved security, political change, economic progress, infrastructure and housing development like Aliceghan (Watkins, 2017). Therefore, Sri Lanka's geographical features influenced Australia's political decision to offer various incentives and treatment that successfully contained refugees.

After the civil war between the government and the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) escalated, culminating in a government victory in 2009, a significant influx of refugees from Sri Lanka, particularly Tamils, entered Australian territory, especially those arriving via the Indian Ocean. Some of these refugees were former LTTE combatants, which heightened apprehensions within the Australian government. Although there was an MoU between Australia and Sri Lanka in 2009 aimed at combating people smuggling, meaningful cooperation and practical implementation did not commence until Abbott assumed power in 2013. The joint working group

between the two states generated tactical cooperation, although previously there had been indications that the Australian government blamed the Sri Lankan government. The Sri Lankan government, especially its military, made impactful recommendations to Australia. Sri Lanka recognised an opportunity to seek assistance beyond what China provided, which later turned out to have a detrimental impact on the Sri Lankan economy. The allocation of Australian aid, which had been scattered, was then refocused on the law enforcement and military in the form of military equipment, intelligence cooperation, capacity building, training, strengthening of jurisdiction, and campaigns targeting potential refugees who planned to use irregular channels. Aid to Sri Lanka increased from USD 25 million in 2012 to USD 42 million in 2014 (Knackstredt, 2015).

After Prime Minister Abbott's visited to Sri Lanka in November 2013 for the CHOGM (Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting), assistance was provided in the form of two Bay-class patrol boats to the Sri Lankan navy, along with fuel and military training. The two vessels docked in Colombo in April and June 2014, which became a game changer in intercepting boats carrying refugees through irregular channels. This was also attributed to the enhancement of monitoring technology, including transponders and detection systems. Australia, possessed of a surplus of defence equipment, modifies its retired warships for strategic purposes. Moreover, this collaboration is advantageous for Australia, as during sea interdictions, the intercepted vessels and refugees are transferred to the Sri Lankan navy. This was exemplified in November 2014, when Australian marine patrols pushed back a boat carrying 37 refugees from Sri Lanka near Indonesian waters and handed them over to the Sri Lankan navy (Pedley, 2014). Therefore, the momentum of providing incentives, both in kind and otherwise, and Abbott's restrictive policies proved to reduce the number of IMAs from Sri Lanka.

The most strategically political decision related to geography is Indonesia. Indonesia serves as a buffer state for numerous refugees and asylum seekers entering Australia. Indonesia gained significant importance to Australia, especially following the Tampa incident in 2001, due to the fact that most smuggling operations utilise routes that pass through it. However, smuggling is a traditional means for refugees to reach their destination because they lack official travel documents, face unfavourable conditions for normal procedures, and have immediate life-saving needs. Although Indonesia did not accede to the 1951 Convention or the 1967 Protocol, it has historically shown good faith in dealing with refugees, with the example of the peak of Indochinese refugees in the 1970s–1990s. Indonesia's behaviour remains consistent to the present day. This generosity in the refugee issue geopolitically benefits Australia by containing and preventing refugees in Indonesia from migrating onwards. As of the end of 2023, there were 12,295 registered refugees stuck in Indonesia (UNHCR, 2024). Indonesia is illustrated as an open prison for refugees who have been living in limbo for years in a transit state (Missbach, 2021).

The significance of Indonesia in Australia's bilateral relations is evident in the 21st century; whenever a relationship declines, Australia takes the initiative to approach Indonesia first to restore it. In 1999, Indonesia terminated the security cooperation agreement with Australia that had been signed in 1995. This decision was made in response to Australia's intervention regarding Timor-Leste's independence and its decision to grant asylum to refugees from Timor-Leste. In 2000, Australia approached Indonesia and initiated the RCA (Regional Cooperation Agreement), funded by Australia through IOM and UNHCR, to manage and process refugees/asylum seekers, including voluntary return (Hirsch & Doig, 2018).

After the Tampa incident, Australia approached Indonesia to co-chair a multilateral forum on people smuggling known as the Bali Process. The arrival of PM Howard in early February 2002 sparked a significant reaction from both the Indonesian Parliament and the public, leading to demonstrations in several cities. At that time, PM Howard donated AUD 1 million to the government of DKI Jakarta, which had been devastated by floods. Moreover, Howard's wave of protest at that time did not halt the plan; instead, Australia and Indonesia became co-chair of the Bali Process forum, which was inaugurated in Bali at the end of February 2002 (Curley & Vandyk, 2016). The involvement of Indonesia as co-chairs of this forum is crucial to ensure that Australia is not perceived as the sole actor in shaping the discourse on people smuggling as a shared burden and responsibility.

It is in Australia's interest to construct this issue as a shared concern. Stopping smuggling vessels will disrupt the movement of refugees and asylum seekers along the IMA route to Australia. Australia is shifting the issue of the rights of refugees or people on the boats to the problem of boat owner/crew or the smuggling business chain. Furthermore, the strengthening of immigration laws and other regulations that further restrain refugees from moving further in the endgame favours Australia. The Bali Process can be interpreted as a space for issue securitisation, strategic communication, norm/principle setter, capacity upgrading, and multilateral strengthening for bilaterals. Some of Australia's bilateral agreements with states evidence this fact by incorporating Bali Process provisions into their agreement clauses. Australia funds the majority of the Bali Process expenditure. From 2002 to 2016, Australia has funded the IOM USD 7.27 million to facilitate the Bali Process (Hirsch & Doig, 2018).

The Australian government provided assistance after the 2002 Bali bombing, totalling USD 10 million over four years for capacity building to combat terrorism. Additionally, USD 10.5 million was allocated for enhancing the capacity of Sanglah Hospital, which was credited for treating many victims of the bombing. In 2004, President Megawati inaugurated JLEC (Jakarta Centre for Law Enforcement Cooperation) for training law enforcement and

other officials on human smuggling, maritime crime, drugs, and terrorism issues. Australia funded the centre with AUD 36.8 million for five years (Missbach, 2015). Following the Aceh Tsunami in December 2004, the Australian government provided AUD 1 billion in humanitarian aid over five years in a post-disaster recovery and reconstruction scheme (Gov.au, 2005).

Such incentives, including foreign aid, served to widen the avenues of Australia's subsequent requests. In 2005, Australia recognized the potential to strengthen security cooperation with Indonesia following President Yudhoyono's election and offered a joint declaration on a comprehensive partnership. The lobbying had already begun, with Foreign Ministers Downer and Wirajuda discussing Australia's request for a new bilateral security agreement during President Yudhoyono's inauguration. Australia intended this agreement to replace the 1995 security agreement, which had terminated in 1999. The joint declaration served as the foundation for the signing of the Lombok Treaty in November 2006.

The Lombok Treaty bilateral agreement is crucial for Australia, as it establishes a foundation for extensive cooperation activities or programmes addressing both traditional and non-traditional security issues. These initiatives engage related stakeholders from both states. Under the umbrella of the Lombok Treaty, further cooperation emerged, including defence collaboration in 2009 between the ADF (Australian Defence Force) and the TNI (Tentara Nasional Indonesia). This was subsequently followed by joint naval patrol activities aimed at preventing people smuggling, such as Operation Shearwater in 2013 and 2017. In 2010, Australia supplied patrol boats and surveillance aircraft worth USD 25 million (Dastyari & Hirsch, 2019). In 2018, an arrangement for Maritime Security Cooperation was established between the ABF (Australian Border Force) and Bakamla (Indonesian Coast Guard), leading to a joint patrol known as Operation Gannet. These joint patrols tend to send a strong symbolic message to smugglers, demonstrating that the two countries are collaborating to combat people smuggling, rather than the actual interdiction of smuggling vessels. Morever, the Lombok Treaty was renewed by signing the DCA (Defence Cooperation Agreement) on August 29, 2024, in Magelang. President Prabowo's commitment to strengthening security and defence, especially regarding combating people smuggling, is advantageous for Australia.

Australia has also taken steps to enhance Indonesian immigration. In 2007, the MCIIP (Management and Care of Irregular Immigrant Project) was initiated as the first project aimed at renovating and increasing the capacity of two detention centres located in Jakarta and Tanjung Pinang. The Tanjung Pinang detention centre, which initially held between 100 and 400 people, was capable of accommodating 600 persons after renovations. Australian funding for the project was directed through IOM, which received USD 16.6 million for the MCIIP in 2010 and USD 17.8 million for the years 2011-2012 (Kneebone, 2017; Nethery et al., 2013).

The role of incentives to widen Australia's avenues of requests was also evident in 2009. The Rudd government, overwhelmed by the surge in IMA, phoned President Yudhoyono to intercept the Jaya Lestari 5 vessel carrying Sri Lankan Tamil refugees/asylum seekers en route to Australia. The Indonesian Navy intercepted the ship, and on October 9, 2009, the refugees/asylum seekers were taken to Australian-funded rudenim (immigration detention centres) in Tanjung Pinang and Medan. Moreover, on October 18, 2009, Australia was requesting permission to dock the customs ship Oceanic Viking for one month in the Riau Islands, as 78 detained Sri Lankan refugees/asylum seekers refused to disembark (Missbach, 2015). This event also became a headline for the Rudd government for its perceived weakness in negotiating with refugees/asylum seekers.

Australia seldom asks for Indonesia's help on other issues, except for those concerning refugees and asylum seekers linked to maritime security, borders, or people smuggling, as these are electoral matters in Australia, particularly regarding arrivals through the IMAs. Australia channels the majority of its funding on the issue of asylum seekers/refugees to IOM rather than UNHCR or both the Indonesian national and local governments that host these refugees/asylum seekers, so that the Indonesian government, particularly local government, has less benefit from Australian aid. In addition to its main humanitarian task, IOM also monitors the movement of refugees and asylum seekers while serving as a political broker/middleman for Australia's interests by connecting with both state and non-state actors in Indonesia. The funding from Australia enables IOM to operate in Indonesia, making it one of the largest project sites globally. Furthermore, IOM provides cash-based assistance for refugees to survive in Indonesia. IOM also assists repatriation; from 2000 to 2016, there were 5,200 people repatriated, mostly from Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran (Lamb, 2018). From 2001 to 2016, Australia provided USD 238 million to the IOM, 95% of which was allocated to border control and irregular migration projects, including funding for several immigration detention centres in Indonesia, with a small percentage being spent on disaster management. In 2016, Australia funded USD 40 million of USD 49 million operational expenditure for IOM Indonesia (Hirsch & Doig, 2018; Morse, 2019).

The contradiction lies in the fact that these refugee/asylum seekers as electoral issues (Fenna & Manwaring, 2021) are limited to incentives while being broadened to various developmental aid in Indonesia, which does not have any electoral impact in Australia. Australia's foreign aid in Indonesia is broadening to various development issues, such as gender emancipation, sustainable development, good governance, education, and infrastructure. In

Australia, party votes and prime ministerial stability are influenced not by developmental issues in Indonesia but rather by the issue of IMAs of refugees and asylum seekers, whose primary geographical route passes through Indonesia. From 2000 to 2013, 22.750 people reached Australia irregularly primarily from Indonesia (Dastyari & Hirsch, 2019). The broadening of aid is interpreted as maintaining good bilateral relations and targeting other strategic interests, such as the economy or public diplomacy, by embracing as many Indonesians as possible particularly future stakeholders, who in turn have a positive preference for Australia. The data below evidences that the highest Australian ODA, exceeding USD 540–USD 600 million, occurred when Abbott implemented the "stop the boats" policy, which is related to IMAs matters rather than other issues like sustainable development or gender emancipation.

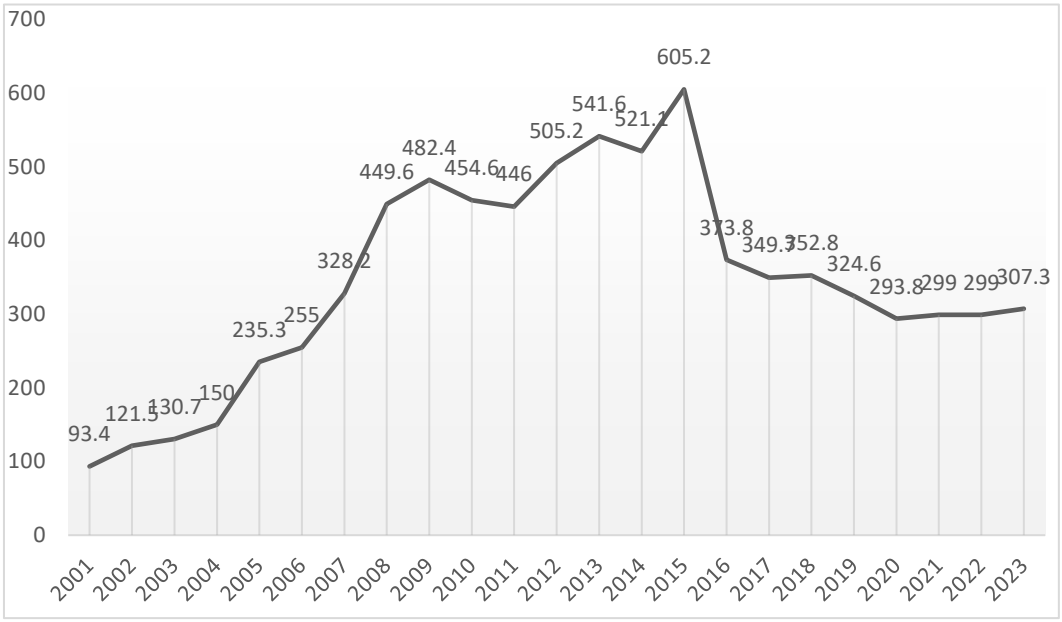

Figure 1. Amount of Australia's ODA to Indonesia, 2001–2023 (in USD million).
Source (DFAT, 2024).

However, the Indonesian government does not entirely agree with Australia's policies. Relations between Indonesia and Australia declined when Australia tapped the phones of several Indonesian leaders, including President Yudhoyono, during Rudd's term. Abbott then came to restore relations, particularly because he wanted to implement the OSB; his policies further damaged those relations. During the implementation of the OSB, the Indonesian government repeatedly protested against territorial violations by Australian maritime patrols, but these protests were ignored. Australia was well aware that expelling ships and refugees back to Indonesian waters would have no further implications beyond mere protests. No state in the world is willing to go to war to defend refugees or deteriorate bilateral relations on low politics issue, especially those who are not its citizens, with the exception of Jewish refugees. Bishop said, "we are not asking for Indonesia's permission, we're asking for their understanding" (Mcadam, 2013). Minister Natalegawa also disagreed with Abbott's idea of an Australian boat buyback program, which would purchase boats suspected of being used for smuggling, and village watches program, which would offer bounty to communities that leak information related to smuggling (Laughland, 2013). Despite this disagreement, Indonesia maintains a predominantly cooperative with Australia.

In 2014, the Australian government issued a policy to no longer accept refugees registered in UNHCR Indonesia as of July 1, 2014 (Evershed, 2014). This policy has further stuck refugees in Indonesia for years, as those moving to the eastern Indian Ocean zone primarily aim for Australia as their final destination. However, these refugees normatively would argue that they came to Indonesia seeking a safe transit country and hoped to be referred to developed destination states by the UNHCR. In fact, only 1% of refugees worldwide are resettled (Arar et al., 2025) which means that refugees collide very competitively, for example, by moving to the eastern Indian Ocean to be accepted by Germany, the US, or France. The geographical movement of refugees also indicates which destination country they want to go to. Living in limbo in Indonesia provides few alternatives, or in technical terms, durable solutions for refugees, namely returning to their country of origin if they do not want to stay longer in the transit country. Refugees who are stuck in Indonesia, demotivated to continue their journey to Australia, or choose to return to their country of origin are in the endgame benefiting Australia.

Incentives do not always target state and non-state actors such as international organisations, NGOs, and so on, but also, in this context, refugees and smugglers. Moreover, incentives do not always result in policies or regulations but can lead to changes in decisions in a short period of time. Incentives for refugees and smugglers

are known as cash for return. Refugees are offered cash to persuade them to return to their country of origin or to a place of resettlement apart from Australia. Smugglers are given cash to halt their journey to Australian territory, and to return the refugees to Indonesia or wherever the ship originated. Consequently, the refugees are prevented from ever reaching the Australian mainland.

Cash for return shows that the term "voluntary repatriation" is sometimes not entirely voluntary, as there are bribes involved. This phenomenon was exemplified in 2003, when 34 Afghan refugees accepted an incentive package of USD 2,000 per person or USD 10,000 per family to be "voluntarily" repatriated to Afghanistan (TheAge, 2003). In 2017, the Australian Border Force (ABF) offered AUD 25,000 per person to refugees on Manus Island who opted to be repatriated to Myanmar or Bangladesh. In June 2015, the Australian maritime patrol gave USD 30,000 to the crew of a boat to return 65 refugees to Indonesian waters. This boat later docked on Rote Island (Topsfield, 2015). This contradicts Australia's normative narration of providing disincentives to break the people-smuggling chain, which it has consistently promoted in various forums. In practice, however, it provides incentives to smugglers, who thus receive two sources of income simultaneously: from the refugees using their services and from Australia. As a result, the fate of these refugees is like a game of ping-pong, hit from two sides simultaneously.

When Incentive Does Not Work?

The question of when incentives fail to work is critical for understanding the limitations of this concept's applicability. The previous explanation indicates that incentives are applicable when there is economic asymmetry between donors and recipients, specifically when the economic power of donors is higher than or, at the very least, equal to that of recipients. Incentives lubricate cooperation, programme implementation, and future requests. However, incentives are inapplicable when the economic level of the donor is lower than that of the recipient. This phenomenon was evident in the case of cooperation between Australia and the United States in 2016. Since incentives fail to work, Australia employed the strategy it had initially pursued with Malaysia, namely a people swap, in this case a refugee swap with the US. The use of the word "refugee" is emphasised because those who can be exchanged are people who have been recognised as refugees.

The US is a non-signatory to the 1951 Convention but has acceded to the 1967 Protocol. The US is a favourite destination country and historically has been a state of immigrants *par excellence*, like Australia, Canada, and New Zealand. In November 2016, President Obama and PM Turnbull agreed on a bilateral agreement on refugee resettlement. The US committed to resettle 1,250 refugees from Australian detention centres in Nauru and Manus; in exchange, Australia accepted refugees from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras from US detention centres. Prior to the signing of the agreement, Prime Minister Turnbull had revealed plans during a speech at the UN General Assembly in September 2016 that Australia would accept 18,750 refugees from Central America until 2019 (Anderson, 2016). Refugees from these three countries have always been a concern for the US because they come from the most violent triangle countries in Latin America (Ardalan, 2025). The basic idea behind the refugee swap from Australia's point of view is that refugees in detention in Nauru and Manus who arrived via the IMA route will be placed anywhere except Australia. Therefore, Australia is willing to take the risk of accepting refugees from Central America who did not arrive in Australia via the IMA route, and there is also an element of identity, which is the fact that refugees from Latin America are fellow Christians.

In January 2017, President Trump phoned PM Turnbull specifically to discuss the refugee issue in the agreement. President Trump opposed the agreement made during the Obama administration, describing it as a terrible deal. President Trump was apprehensive about projecting a weak image to the public and harboured concerns that the acceptance of refugees could potentially trigger trouble in the US. President Trump was well aware that the issue was very important for the Australian electoral votes, but it would not benefit the US. Turnbull attempted to persuade President Trump that the detained refugees posed no threat due to years of monitoring and the number of refugees resettled in compliance with the United States's favour (Washingtonpost, 2017). Although President Trump disagreed, the agreement was still implemented. The implementation of the agreement was realised, with 1,101 refugees from Australia resettled in the US between 2017 and 2023, while refugees from Central America gradually arrived in Australia (Kaldor, 2024)

CONCLUSION

The findings from the Australian case study demonstrate that incentives play significant roles in supporting strategic interests, approaching and exercising influence, lubricating bilateral and multilateral cooperation, widening the way for incidental requests in the future, and shaping the behaviour or decisions of other actors in line with specific objectives that benefit the donor. Australia utilises incentive power to alter the behaviour of other actors in line with its interests. Aid packages do not have to be directly aimed at containing refugees/asylum seekers in their respective countries but can be packaged as developmental aid. Incentives are applicable when there is an

economic asymmetry between the donor and the recipient. If the recipient actor has greater economic power and capacity than the donor, incentives will not work. By nature, incentives benefit both parties reciprocally, although not in equal percentages. If incentives are inapplicable, the actors involved seek other strategies, which in this case is Australia's refugee swap. This strategy can also be called barter, an ancient method and practice in human civilisation.

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