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# Out of sight, out of mind? The bipartisan Australian foreign policy on irregular migration

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## ABSTRACT

Australian foreign policy traditionally claims middle power and good international citizenship credentials, although it also resorts to unilateral actions due to its deep-rooted condition of ‘frightened country’. This article argues that the country’s irregular migration governance embodies this tension, and thus seeks to shed light on this increasingly-neglected aspect of Australian external engagement. Following a theoretical understanding of Australian foreign policy, it investigates the country’s irregular migration policies between 2000 and 2024. The article finds that there is a strong continuity in such policies irrespective of the type of government in power, supported by foreign policy bipartisanship, resulting in specific foreign policy tools to stem seaborne arrivals. These include military missions; territorial excisions from the migration zone; offshore processing and/or externalisation agreements with Nauru, Papua New Guinea, Cambodia, and Sri Lanka; pushback manoeuvres, and at-sea processing of asylum claims. Inevitably, such measures complicate Australia’s international status as they emphasise the uneasy coexistence of both the globalist middle power and the self-interested nation images in its foreign policy, therefore warranting new research on this under-examined condition.

## KEYWORDS

Asylum seekers; Australia; Australian foreign policy; bipartisanship; frightened country; good international citizen; irregular migration; middle power

## Introduction

The twenty-first-century global order is in flux, due to several processes that are unfolding at the same time, including the disorderly advent of multipolarity, China’s rise and revisionism, growing divisions within ‘liberal order’ countries, and both traditional and non-traditional security challenges across the globe (Jervis *et al.* 2023). The Indo-Pacific region encapsulates this complexity, as it embodies both the opportunities and the challenges of a rapidly-evolving international system (He and Li 2020; Medcalf 2022). Amidst these power shifts, Australia grapples with an enduring challenge since Federation: navigating its uneasy position between its leading ally (today, the United States) and the Indo-Pacific’s contrasting security landscape, which undermines its

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sense of security (Gyngell 2017). Far from being a new condition for Australian policy-makers, the country's 'liminality' (Higgott and Nossal 1997) can now be interpreted as an awkward regional posture, torn between its strategic and military pillars, revolving around the US security architecture, and its economic anchors, centred on east and southeast Asia instead (Abbondanza 2022).

Australia's international relations are further complicated by a second factor, an apparent dichotomy that can be found in the country's foreign policy attitudes. Scholars have long detected a tension in this respect, highlighting Canberra's multilateral and inclusive middle power identity and 'good international citizenship' on the one hand (Abbondanza 2021; Teo 2018; Wilkins 2017, among the many), and instances in which its foreign policy resulted from deep-rooted strategic fears on the other, as per the 'frightened country' thesis (Burke 2008; McMaster 2002; Renouf 1979; Wallis 2021). Such a 'conflicted' nature has been associated with a variety of policies, and irregular migration governance makes no exception. A transnational phenomenon of global proportions, irregular migration is a multi-faceted and inherently dangerous process for asylum seekers seeking dignified living conditions elsewhere (de Haas, Castles, and Miller 2020; International Organization for Migration 2022), as well as a challenging reality that destination countries struggle to address (Ambrosini and Hajer 2023; Dastyari, Nethery, and Hirsch 2023). Partially due to the aforementioned regional volatility, Southeast Asia continues to be a region of both origin and transit for Australia, by virtue of the latter's favourable socio-economic conditions and the relative feasibility of the voyage towards its coasts. Amidst this complex context, Australia's governance of irregular migration—based on externalised procedures and offshore centres—has drawn criticism for its highly-restrictive approach, prompting calls to respect international refugee and human rights law (among the many, see Crock 2019).

Consequently, Australia's irregular migration policies have been the object of many scholarly works, chiefly within the disciplines of migration studies (Stevens 2002), international law (Vogl 2015), human rights studies (Tazreiter 2017), policy studies (Matera, Tubakovic, and Murray 2023), criminology (Pickering and Weber 2014), and political science (Martinez i Coma and Smith 2018).<sup>1</sup> However, while these and other works provide a remarkable contribution to the study of Australia's controversial irregular migration governance, little has been said from a specific international relations (IR) perspective, that is focusing on Australia as a state and therefore on its specific (migration-related) foreign policy. To be sure, the extant literature offers some valuable insights, including those by Nethery and Gordyn (2014), Carr (2016), Maley (2016), Larking (2017), Mansouri (2023), and Abbondanza (2023), which are directly or indirectly related to the international relations discipline. Nevertheless, the IR and foreign policy components of Australia's irregular migration governance remain markedly under-examined, particularly if compared with migration, legal, or human rights studies, which have extensively explored this subject instead. This represents the first reason behind the necessity of new research, focusing on Australia and its migration-related foreign policy.

A second reason is due to the low level of attention that is paid to this issue if compared to the peak of irregular maritime arrivals from a decade ago, notwithstanding the maintenance of Canberra's restrictive policies.<sup>2</sup> To wit, despite a mere 463 asylum seekers intercepted in the past five years (from 2019 to June 2024 inclusive, see Australian Border Force 2024), Canberra persists with its severe irregular migration policy. The

latter entails a number of foreign policy tools often utilised by other comparable destination countries: navy vessels to intercept asylum seekers' boats, 'boat turnback' manoeuvres, at-sea asylum claims processing, territorial excision from the migration zone, return agreements, externalisation agreements (currently with Sri Lanka and Nauru, formerly with Papua New Guinea and Cambodia), military operations (such as Operation Sovereign Borders), international engagement with relevant forums (the Bali Process, for example), and an emphasis on sovereignty and security whenever Canberra's policies are questioned nationally or internationally (Price 2021).

As a result, the scholarly study of the country's irregular migration governance seems to follow the old adage 'out of sight out of mind'—since unauthorised migrants are rarely at the centre of media reports, as per the seminal account by Bleiker *et al.* (2013), and, with the few exceptions listed earlier, from the recent Australian IR literature as well—hence the title of this article. The latter highlights that the same foreign policy architecture remains in place in spite of the minuscule numbers of asylum seekers attempting to reach Australia, thanks to a remarkable foreign policy bipartisanship and path dependence (see Carr 2017). Both the under-examined foreign policy perspectives mentioned earlier, and the decreasing scholarly attention due to very few irregular arrivals, warrant a new investigation under these premises, and emphasise the contribution to the literature that this article seeks to make. Complementary aspects such as the role of pressure groups and the domestic policy formulation processes, however important, fall outside of the scope of this IR-focused research and are therefore left for future endeavours.

Consequently, this study aims to fill this scholarly lacuna by analysing Australia's irregular migration governance from 2000 (just before the inception of the 'Pacific Solution') to the present day (mid-2024), with an emphasis on its foreign policy (external measures) components. Such a goal could be tackled in a variety of ways, although some of them, however directly relevant, would require a much longer investigation to be dealt with appropriately, and are therefore not pursued here. To wit, the article does not focus on the country's visa policy for people seeking asylum onshore, nor on specific time frames or policies as case studies, as it seeks to provide a wide-scoped and up-to-date survey of Australian foreign policy on irregular migration, which is currently missing in the literature. Moreover, this article's investigation is centred on Australia, thus it does not aim to assess other countries' viewpoints on Canberra's policies. This is due to both reasons of space and the fact that the Australian case study in itself provides a wealth of insights into irregular migration governance, thanks to its controversial policies. These are implemented in the broader region, involve several partner countries, and entail a variety of foreign policy tools such as military deployments, politico-diplomatic agreements, and financial contributions, thus representing the international elements scrutinised here. Consequently, the article's argument—namely that Australia's international image is tarnished by its restrictive policies—can be pursued without a survey of regional countries' views, as Canberra's aforementioned credentials stem from IR theory and can therefore be assessed with theoretical investigations (see Pert 2014 and Abbondanza 2021 for comparable efforts).

To achieve this, it examines the above elements theoretically and empirically in two distinct sections, to present a nuanced view of Australia's international relations in the light of this specific aspect of its foreign policy. The article's overall argument is that Canberra's unwavering irregular migration governance is emblematic of the country's

ostensibly ‘conflicted’ international status mentioned earlier. These two seemingly-dichotomous facets have, nevertheless, uneasily coexisted for more than two decades, thus representing two pillars of its foreign policy which are not mutually-exclusive. Specifically, Australia is torn between its traditional middle power/good international citizen identity, and its equally-established sense of insecurity and strategic fears, what leading diplomats and scholars have defined ‘unreasoning fearfulness’ (Renouf 1979), ‘what to do with powerlessness’ (Wesley 2009, 327), and the ‘fear of abandonment’ (Gyngell 2017). Irregular migration policies evidently stem from this second, more security-oriented facet, as McMaster (2002, 279) wrote about ‘asylum-seekers and the insecurity of a nation’ (Australia) and Burke (2008, 11) recounted ‘fears of invasion in relation to asylum seekers’ exploited for electoral reasons.

From a methodological perspective, this research makes use of foreign policy analysis (FPA) as a long-established qualitative method to analyse case studies in international relations. FPA relies on six broad approaches, namely multifactorial, multilevel, multidisciplinary, integrative, agent-oriented, and actor-specific assessments of states’ policies (Hudson 2005). In other words, with a focus on states, it explores the nexus between domestic elements, regional/international context, and resulting foreign policy (Carlsnaes 1992; Hudson and Day 2019). This is particularly relevant since, in the words of Maley (2016, 670), ‘the politics of refugees has been toxically affected by domestic politics’. This methodological flexibility allows to capture the complexity of Australia’s irregular migration foreign policy, which makes the adoption of FPA germane to this article’s goals. From a definitional viewpoint, this article employs neutral descriptors such as ‘asylum seekers’, ‘seaborne migrants’, ‘irregular migrants’, ‘irregular maritime arrivals’ (IMAs), and ‘undocumented migrants’ interchangeably, which are conventionally utilised by scholars and international organisations (see Castles *et al.* 2012 and International Organization for Migration 2024, by way of example). Expressions such as ‘illegal migrants’ and ‘clandestine migrants’ are intentionally avoided since no human being is inherently ‘illegal’ thanks to international refugee and human rights law.

This article is structured as follows. Following this introduction, the theoretical debates pertaining to Australian foreign policy are presented, thus focusing on the notions of middle power, good international citizen, and frightened country. Next, the qualitative empirical analysis of Australia’s irregular migration governance from 2000 to June 2024 is undertaken, spanning across 23.5 years and 13 administrations. The following section assesses the theoretical and empirical implications for Australia’s international posture. Lastly, the conclusion summarises the article’s premises, aims, and findings, while calling for the need to continuously study the country’s irregular migration governance, irrespective of the number of asylum seekers Canberra intercepts. This research finds that there is a strong continuity in Australia’s strict foreign policy on irregular migration, supported by the country’s well-known foreign policy bipartisanship, which results in the longstanding use of specific foreign policy tools to stem seaborne arrivals. Consequently, despite the deep roots of the middle power idea in its political debates, Australia’s middle power and good international citizen credentials are tarnished, and the latter are found to uneasily coexist with security-oriented policies stemming from the ‘frightened country’ identity. The article ends with a call for further research on whether this represents yet another evolution of the middle power notion.

## A theoretical understanding of Australian foreign policy

Australian foreign and security policy has traditionally attracted a solid amount of scholarly attention, chiefly due to the country's peculiar socio-cultural, economic, and strategic characteristics, which often differ more or less explicitly from those of countries in its broader region (formerly the Asia-Pacific, currently the Indo-Pacific, see Patman, Köllner, and Kiglics 2021). Consequently, works on Australia's external relations abound (see Brooklyn, Jones, and Strating 2023; Gyngell and Wesley 2003; Patience 2018, among the many) and recounting all of them is neither possible nor necessary here. Instead, this article considers the three theoretical elements that are more closely related to both Australian foreign policy and its irregular migration governance. These are the middle power concept, the 'good international citizen' idea, and the notion of Australia as a 'frightened country' prioritising national interests due to strategic anxieties. While such conceptual notions cannot shape a country's international affairs by themselves, they traditionally represent influential drivers in Australian foreign policy and are thus outlined below.

Relatedly, the relationship between the country's foreign policy and its irregular migration governance requires a brief clarification. To quote the seminal book by Wittkopf, Jones, and Kegley (2008, 17), foreign policy involves 'the goals that the nation's officials seek to attain abroad, the values that give rise to those objectives, and the means or instruments used to pursue them'. According to this perspective, the initiatives that a state pursues to implement its migration policy abroad—military operations, international political agreements, specific visa or asylum measures, by way of example—are subsumed under the broader foreign policy category, a view that this article shares and adopts. Moreover, the Australian case stands out as its foreign policy on irregular migration does not stem from a single ministry, but rather from several ones—chiefly the Department of Home Affairs—which complicates Canberra's assessment of the international consequences of its policies (Maley 2016). As mentioned earlier, a survey of the theoretical concepts often associated with Australian foreign policy helps to better interpret these issues.

Starting with middle power theory, this established branch of IR theory has enjoyed a 'theoretical renaissance' since the end of the Cold War, after which second-tier states that were no longer pressured into bipolarity could expand the goals and means of their foreign policy. The middle power notion is a vast and continuously-evolving subject, one where—unsurprisingly, from an IR perspective—there is no universal consensus on what middle powers actually are or on the usefulness of this idea (Robertson and Carr 2023). This predicament is aptly shown by middle power scholars who stated that 'confusion reigns supreme' (Robertson 2017), and argued that middle power definitions need to be constantly updated in the light of an evolving global order (Abbondanza and Wilkins 2021). Even so, a review of the theoretical literature at least allows us to identify the three main definitional criteria that constitute the backbone of middle power theory, which are respectively associated with the three paradigmatic theories of IR.<sup>3</sup>

The 'positional' criterion (drawing on realism) is centred on material capabilities such as size of the economy, armed forces, and population (Ping 2005), and generally places middle powers between the 10th–11th and the 30th position in the vertical hierarchy resulting from those parameters. The 'behavioural' and 'normative' criteria (building



on liberalism), on the other hand, emphasise the international law-abiding, cooperative, and multilateral attitudes of these states, including participation in forums pertaining to irregular migration governance such as the Bali Process. This often produces a list of liberal democracies with ‘niche diplomacy’ and a proclivity for international cooperation (Cooper, Higgott, and Nossal 1993), such as Canada, Australia, the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden. Next, the ‘identity’ parameter (stemming from constructivism) highlights those states that self-identify with this concept, and therefore adopt a corresponding foreign policy (Teo 2022). Under this notion, middle powers include Canada, Australia, South Korea, and South Africa, among others. Unsurprisingly, Australia appears in all these different understandings of the middle power notion and is therefore defined as a ‘quintessential’, ‘archetypal’, and/or ‘traditional’ middle power (Wilkins 2014). Relatedly, all Australian prime ministers with the exception of John Howard (whose government attempted to popularise the ‘pivotal power’ label instead, see Evans 2019) have engaged with the middle power idea regardless of their political affiliation.<sup>4</sup>

The second theoretical facet that is often associated with Australian foreign policy is the notion of ‘good international citizenship’ (GIC). Revolving around the respect of international law, multilateralism, humanitarianism and idealism, a proactive international posture, and a congruous national identity (Abbondanza 2021), it is arguably intertwined with the behavioural/normative criteria of middle power theory, and it is therefore understandable that the two are often discussed together (see Youde and Slagter 2013). On the basis of possessing foreign policies that feature internationalist and progressivist goals and means, GIC has been linked to a number of states and organisations over time, including Denmark, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Canada, and, predictably, Australia as well (Dunne 2008). While explicit mentions by Australian prime ministers are rarer compared to those referring to the more popular middle power notion, observers have frequently associated good international citizenship with a number of aspects of Australian foreign policy, thus tracing linkages that date back decades. More specifically, Australia is generally considered a GIC due to its role in global diplomacy, international peacekeeping missions, regional leadership, foreign aid programmes, non-restrictive asylum seekers’ policies during select Labor governments, and its domestic social characteristics supporting this international image (Pert 2014).

The two concepts that have just been discussed are long established in the study of Australian foreign and security policy, and indeed refer to numerous instances in which Canberra has contributed to regional and international efforts multilaterally, cooperatively, and successfully. However, Australian foreign policy is complex and multifaceted, and displays several key characteristics that contrast with this image, which consequently prevent an uncompromising acceptance of its ‘ideal’ middle power and good international citizen credentials. This refers to situations in which Canberra has deviated from the principles of multilateralism, cooperation, and indisputable legality, either in its own region to unilaterally promote the country’s national interests at the detriment of others, or elsewhere to support the United States—at times against UN recommendations or international law principles. Whether due to security fears centred on Asia (Burke 2008; Renouf 1979), or due to strategic cost-benefit analyses that privileged an unwavering support of the US ally (Gyngell 2017), the ‘frightened country’ foreign policy involved the exertion of power politics that openly contrasts with the two aforementioned images. In this case, too examples abound, and observers often

mention Australia's involvement in military missions in Afghanistan and Iraq defying UN recommendations, Canberra's problematic contribution to climate change mitigation, the somewhat domineering attitude towards South Pacific nations, and—returning to the article's focus—the country's controversial irregular migration policies as examples (Abbondanza 2021).

Consequently, there are many scholars who have critically reviewed these diverse aspects of Australian foreign policy. To name just a few, Holland (2013, 63) argued that Australia resorted to justifications 'for moral intervention' to legitimise the 'war on terror'; and Gleeson (2016, 32) reviewed Australia's non-compliance with UN provisions concerning Iraq and Afghanistan and labelled it a 'lost opportunity'; although these examples of unwavering support to the United States may have favoured the 2016 'refugee deal' with Washington (Higgins 2022). With reference to foreign aid, whose levels and geographical scope narrowed considerably under Coalition governments, Corbett (2017, 209) highlighted the risk that it might be 'always be a hostage to political fortunes'. In terms of climate change mitigation (or lack thereof), Tangney (2019, 131) stressed that 'fossil fuel-intensive industries and their conservative allies have repeatedly blocked progress'. To reapproach this article's subject—irregular migration—criticisms abound. Sawyer, Abjorensen, and Larkin (2009, 66) labelled Australian policies 'the Western world's worst practice'; de Leeuw and van Wichelen (2019) argued that they represent Canberra's attempt to 'un-sign Geneva' (the Refugee Convention); and Larking (2017, 86) wrote that they 'undermine regional stability and the rule of law'. Inevitably, such views have also addressed the two 'positive' theoretical concepts previously discussed. Among the many, Warren (2019) criticised Australia's GIC credentials by writing it is 'a paradoxical player in which it adheres to its US alliance obligations while clinging to the waning vestiges of its position as a good global citizen'; Patience (2018) asked whether Australia is a middle power or rather an 'awkward partner'; and Wallis (2020) reviewed the risks of Australia's alliance with the US and argued it should start to prioritise a 'free and open middle power foreign policy' instead.

Understandably, these two seemingly-contrasting images—the middle power/good international citizen and the 'frightened' and thus national interest-driven actor—seem thoroughly incompatible. However, upon closer inspection of Australian foreign policy history, it appears that these two facets are not irreconcilable. As mentioned earlier, if Australian international relations stem from a deep-rooted sense of insecurity and the attempt to address 'powerlessness' (Wesley 2009), then it must follow that Canberra adopts a middle power and GIC foreign policy when it is in its interest to do so. Conversely, it resorts to unilateral or US-led actions when it perceives this is the best course of action to secure its interests. In other words, rather than being two mutually-exclusive interpretations, they represent two sides of the same coin and illustrate the complexity of Australian foreign policy. After all, countries' foreign policies and related national identities are never monolithic. By way of example, scholars such as Taylor (2020, 95) have argued that the country's approach to its broader region, the Indo-Pacific, provides a 'point of convergence' for two different Australian foreign policy traditions (middle power and US-dependent ally), while Lee (2024) finds a comparable coexistence in Australia's response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Starting from these theoretical premises, this article argues that irregular migration exemplifies this apparent dichotomy within Australian foreign policy. Consequently, it



seeks to shed light on its conceptual and practical complexities. This section has engaged with relevant theoretical elements, whereas the following one explores its empirical aspects. To qualitatively analyse Australian irregular migration governance from 2000 to June 2024, it briefly mentions the domestic (type of government)<sup>5</sup> and regional/international context (irregular arrivals) for each political administration, prior to highlighting the resulting foreign policy as per the broad principles of foreign policy analysis.

## Australian irregular migration governance 2000–2024

The largest national group of irregular migrants comprises people who mostly travelled to Australia by plane with a valid visa and then overstayed their time there, often referred to as ‘overstayers’ (Crock 2019). This condition, coupled with the fact that Australia does not experience unauthorised land crossing for obvious geographic reasons, explains this article’s focus on irregular *maritime* arrivals. While mandatory detention for undocumented asylum seekers was first introduced by Paul Keating’s Labor government in 1992 (Fleay and Briskman 2013), the scope of this policy was unprecedentedly expanded by conservative politician John Howard nine years later, that is at the onset of the time frame considered by this research.

Domestically, the new century began with a clear political continuity, as Howard had continuously been Prime Minister since 1996. During the 2nd Howard ministry (1998–2001), irregular maritime arrivals (IMAs) became an emerging international issue for Canberra, also due to the increase in IMAs after 1998 (from 200 in 1998 to 2,929 in 2000, see the official data collated by Refugee Council of Australia 2024). August 2001 represented a watershed moment in Australia’s migration governance and foreign policy, since Canberra refused permission to enter Australian waters for *Tampa*, a Norwegian freighter that had rescued 433 asylum seekers who were about to sink in international waters, near Australia’s Christmas Island. Following *Tampa*’s attempt to enter Australian waters, the Howard administration deployed the Special Air Service Regiment (SASR) who boarded the ship, thus cementing the unfolding diplomatic crisis with Norway, the latter stressing Australia’s international obligations (Mares 2002). Canberra proceeded with additional foreign policy tools, in the form of a temporary agreement with Nauru to host around two-thirds of those asylum seekers in exchange for funds, which became the blueprint for the country’s future policies in this area.

The subsequent federal elections were impacted by the 9/11 terrorist attacks on US soil, which steered political debates with national security concerns. Having won the elections (3rd Howard ministry, 2001–2004) with promises to prevent asylum seekers from reaching Australia, Howard implemented the controversial ‘Pacific Solution’ to address a growing regional phenomenon (5,516 IMAs in 2001) (Crock, Saul, and Dastyari 2006). It relied on three foreign policy pillars: (i) denying asylum seekers access to Australia with navy vessels, also performing ‘pushback’ operations in 2001–2003 under Operation Relex; (ii) escorting migrants to Nauru and Manus Island (Papua New Guinea) thanks to economic-logistical agreements with the two countries, in addition to Christmas Island; and (iii) excising thousands of islands (including Christmas Island) from Australia’s migration zone to avoid obligations not to turn back asylum seekers (Vogl 2015). Despite being effective in terms of IMAs (from 5,516 in 2001 to a yearly average of 64 between 2002–2008), and notwithstanding its rationale of ‘reducing deaths at sea’, the

new externalisation and offshore processing policy (supported by the establishment of the Bali Process in 2002) attracted criticism nationally—though it enjoyed bipartisan political support—and internationally throughout its seven years of implementation (McAdam and Chong 2019). For the purposes of this work, it is interesting to note that this policy was accompanied by the attempt to replace the ‘middle power’ descriptor with the ‘pivotal power’ one during all four Howard ministries (1996–2007), with the goal of reframing Australia as a country pursuing its national interest even at the expense of its international obligations (Cotton, Ravenhill, and John 2011). Conceptually, those years complicated Canberra’s image of a good international citizen (Maley 2016) and middle power, since the latter’s ‘normative-behavioural’ credentials were clearly not upheld by the Pacific Solution, and given that Canberra’s ‘identity’ as a middle power was intentionally discarded.

Australia’s next government was the first Labor administration after almost 12 years of Coalition leadership. Led by Kevin Rudd (1st Rudd Ministry, 2007–2010), the new government sought to revert Australia’s regional and international standing to its previous international law-abiding credentials, as shown by the government’s ‘new values’ on irregular migration’s detention (Australian Parliament 2008). With a regional context characterised by very low levels of seaborne arrivals (161 in 2008), Rudd kept its electoral promise and dismantled the Pacific Solution (Grewcock 2008). In foreign policy terms, apart from the abandonment of previous provisions, the Rudd government replaced Operation Relex with Operation Resolute, which continued to monitor the country’s northern exclusive economic zone. Unsurprisingly, this policy change produced opposite effects compared to the Pacific Solution: on the one hand it was praised by numerous international bodies such as the UNHCR (2008), on the other it was followed by a surge in IMAs (from 161 in 2008 to 6,555 in 2010; see Refugee Council of Australia 2024). Moreover, the Rudd administration proved to be antithetical to Howard’s in conceptual and definitional terms as well, since the ‘pivotal power’ descriptor was swiftly abandoned not only for the more traditional ‘middle power’ label, but also for the related ‘good international citizen’ role Australia was to readopt (see Rudd 2018). Consequently, the country’s ‘normative-behavioural’ and middle power ‘identity’ were reinstated. However, decreasing public and internal (Labor) support led to a leadership spill that replaced Rudd with Julia Gillard as the new Prime Minister (1st Gillard ministry, 2010), who did not alter the country’s foreign policy on irregular migration in this short time frame (less than three months).

Gillard won the 2010 elections shortly afterwards, therefore starting the 2nd Gillard ministry (2010–2013). From a regional perspective, flows of seaborne asylum seekers remained relatively high (6,555 in 2010, 4,565 in 2011), as highlighted by the conservative opposition at the time. Consequently, after a stillborn plan to resettle asylum seekers in Timor-Leste, Canberra sought and reached a new deal with Malaysian authorities (the ‘Malaysian Solution’) stemming from the 4th Bali Process conference. It consisted of a transfer of migrants between the two countries, whereby Australia would resettle 4,000 refugees from Malaysia, and the latter would host 800 asylum seekers from Australia. However, despite human rights’ insurance from Malaysian authorities, the proposed policy raised numerous doubts and presented juridical ambiguities, and was thus ruled invalid by Australia’s High Court (Pastore 2013). With IMAs continuing to rise (17,204 in 2012) and approval rates more increasingly favouring the Coalition, the government appointed an expert panel which recommended the reopening of both the Nauru and

the Manus Island centres (Australian Parliament 2012). Canberra swiftly reverted to its Howard-era externalisation approach through offshore processing, by reinforcing the whole-of-government foreign policy effort (including Operation Resolute) which enjoyed bipartisan support. Somewhat counterintuitively, from a theoretical viewpoint, this firm foreign policy change did not seek to challenge Australia's middle power tradition, as Gillard remained explicitly committed to an 'activist middle power diplomacy' (Cotton, Ravenhill, and John 2011). This paved the way for the peculiar condition that distinguished Australia since then: the uneasy coexistence of middle power activism on the one hand (thus satisfying middle power 'identity' credentials), and externalised offshore processing on the other (weakening 'normative-behavioural' principles instead).

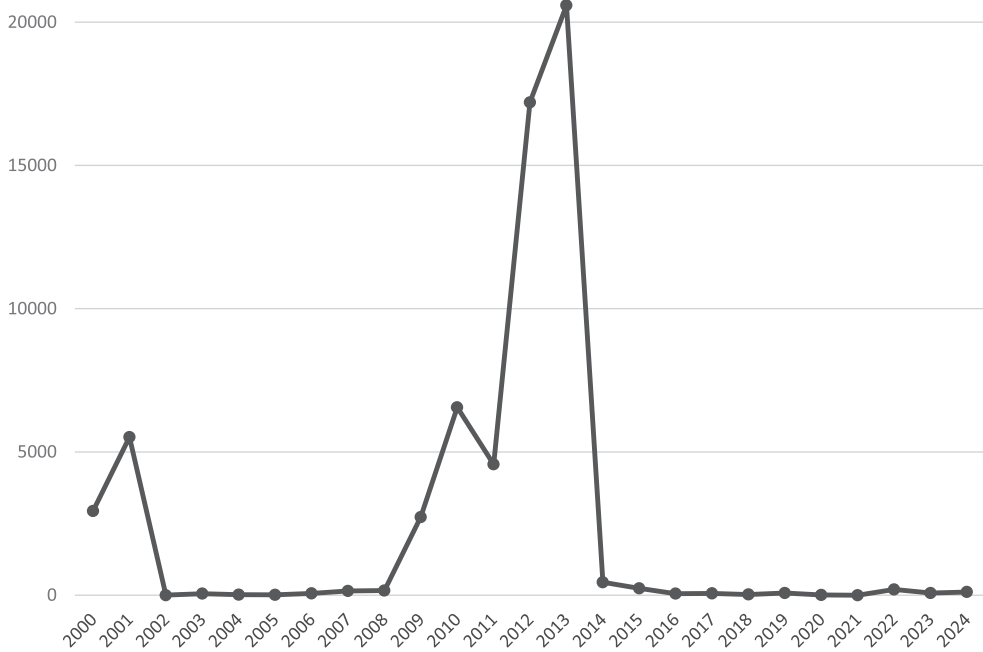
In June 2013 Rudd won a new Labor leadership spill, therefore starting the 2nd Rudd ministry (2013). Despite its very short lifespan (less than three months), and against a regional backdrop of growing migrants' flows (20,587 arrivals, the highest number since 1976; see Refugee Council of Australia 2024), the new government pursued diametrically opposed foreign policy means to manage irregular migration if compared to the 1st Rudd ministry, which led to the establishment of the 'PNG Solution'. The latter maintained the existing security architecture—externalised offshore processing through Operation Resolute with frigates, patrol vessels, and other assets from multiple agencies—and expanded detention facilities on Manus Island and Nauru. It also provided that even migrants who were deemed refugees could never be resettled in Australia (Salzer, Dalsgaard, and West 2020). The new iteration of Australia's foreign policy on irregular migration was approved with bipartisan support, with protests by the Greens and human rights advocates. As Teo (2018) notes, despite the initial divergence in terms of irregular migration policies, there is a clear continuity in the way that Rudd's and Gillard's second governments have explicitly engaged with the country's middle power 'identity'. This involved the same justification for the country's restrictive irregular migration governance, which complicated Canberra's 'normative-behavioural' credentials instead.

Conservative politician Tony Abbott (Abbott ministry, 2013–2015) won the subsequent federal elections after a campaign revolving around, among other issues, national and border security. With a regional context leading to a peak in IMAs (20,587 in 2013), Abbott further strengthened Australia's foreign policy tools concerning migration governance, chiefly through three new provisions. First, it introduced Operation Sovereign Borders (OSB), which reinforced the existing externalisation policy, adopted a 'zero tolerance' approach, assessed asylum claims at sea, labelled IMAs as 'illegal maritime arrivals', and incorporated Operation Resolute. Second, it reinstated 'turnback' procedures pushing back migrants' boats to Indonesia, a country that had (has) not signed the Refugee Convention (McDonald 2015). Third, it concluded a new offshore processing agreement with Cambodia, which turned out to be a costly option (around 50 million dollars) that was eventually chosen by a minuscule number of migrants (Wanna 2015). Even so, IMAs decreased to 217 in 2015. Despite the different political affiliation compared to the two previous prime ministers, Abbott too implemented (and strengthened) restrictive irregular migration governance with bipartisan support—thus continuing to tarnish the country's adherence to 'normative-behavioural' principles—while explicitly labelling Australia as a middle power and reinforcing its 'identity' as such (Australian Government 2014), therefore protracting the uneasy coexistence of these two elements within Australian foreign policy.

As a result of a leadership spill within the Coalition, Malcolm Turnbull became prime minister (1st and 2nd Turnbull ministries, 2015–2018). Regionally, irregular flows continued to decrease to the point that intercepted IMAs reached 51 in 2016, 60 in 2017, and 24 in 2018, the lowest number in 13 years (Refugee Council of Australia 2024). Supported by this favourable regional context, the Turnbull government's main initiatives in terms of irregular migration governance were twofold. On the one hand, at the Papua New Guinean government's request,<sup>6</sup> it progressively ceased activity at the Manus Island processing centre. On the other, it concluded a difficult asylum seekers' resettlement and exchange agreement with the United States, planned during the Obama presidency and then implemented with several complications during the Trump presidency. The remaining components of Australia's foreign policy on irregular migration, including the Nauru processing centre, the whole-of-government effort, and OSB, remained active with bipartisan support (McDougall 2018). As with all prime ministers since 2012, regardless of their political affiliation, Turnbull too attempted to reconcile the country's stern irregular migration policy—sitting uneasily with once-traditional 'normative' and 'behavioural' credentials—with explicit mentions of Australia's traditional middle power 'identity' and status (Australian Government 2017).

In the aftermath of a new leadership spill within the governing Coalition, Scott Morrison replaced Turnbull as prime minister (1st and 2nd Morrison ministries, 2018–2022). The broader regional context—and the COVID-19 pandemic—continued to favour Australia's no-entry efforts, with IMAs progressively decreasing until they reached the symbolic value of zero in 2021 (Refugee Council of Australia 2024). In February 2019, the government's defeat in the House of Representatives led to the temporary implementation of the *Home Affairs Legislation Amendment (Miscellaneous Measures) Act 2019*, better known as the 'Medevac Bill', which gave doctors a stronger role in the medical evaluation of the many mentally and/or physically ill asylum seekers in both Manus Island and Nauru (the Medevac Bill was repealed 10 months later). In terms of the government's changes to offshore processing, the Manus Island centre witnessed an uneven pathway to closure that was eventually completed in October 2021, the Nauru centre was closed in 2019 (although both centres continued to host migrants for several months) only to be reopened in September 2021, and the Christmas Island centre was reopened in February 2019 (Kelly 2021). Accordingly, OSB and the whole-of-government effort concerning irregular migration governance remained in use with bipartisan political support. Notwithstanding the continuation of Australia's restrictive foreign policy on irregular migration, along with the increasingly-problematic relation with weakened 'normative-behavioural' credentials, Morrison too partially fostered the country's middle power 'identity' by continuing to engage with the notion of Australia being a middle power making positive contributions to the international community (Australian Government 2019), therefore cementing an increasingly-rooted political tradition among Australian prime ministers.

Anthony Albanese won the 2022 federal elections, thus becoming the first Labor prime minister in nine years (Albanese ministry, 2022-ongoing). Australia's regional landscape remained advantageous to the country's irregular migration governance, as shown in Figure 1 (199 in 2022, 74 in 2023, 110 in the first six months of 2024; see Australian Border Force 2024). The slight increase in IMAs is due to Sri Lanka's economic and humanitarian crisis, which is spurring hundreds of people to seek better conditions abroad, including Australia. Canberra addressed this crisis in two ways: it upheld its strict no-



**Figure 1.** Australia’s irregular maritime arrivals between January 2000 and June 2024 inclusive (official data collated by the author).

entry policy with externalised offshore processing, and provided 50 million dollars in the form of aid to both ameliorate the humanitarian crisis and stem outbound asylum seekers’ flows. This externalisation policy also entails the cooperation of the Sri Lankan navy to this end, and the provision of 4,000 GPS trackers to local fishing boats, which might transfer migrants in the future. Moreover, Australia’s ‘Sri Lankan approach’—which enjoys bipartisan support and is still ongoing at the time of writing—also comprises the assessment of asylum seekers’ claims at sea, for those who are intercepted inside Australian waters (Senanayake, Geeth, and Doherty 2023). Lastly, Canberra will not be able to detain migrants without a time limit anymore, since migrants’ indefinite detention has been declared unlawful by the High Court (Human Rights Law Centre 2023). Against this complex backdrop, Albanese has maintained the customary habit of all prime ministers—since Gillard—who have defended Australia’s stern irregular migration’s foreign policy while concurrently reinvigorating the country’s middle power roots in public speeches (see Australian Government 2023). As before, this implies support of the country’s middle power ‘identity’ on the one hand, and disregard for deteriorated middle power ‘normative-behavioural’ principles on the other.

### Implications for Australia’s international posture

The discussions presented in the two previous sections allow for a number of considerations pertaining to both the theoretical and the empirical elements of Australia’s international standing (see Table 1). Starting with the latter, this article highlights three main practical implications. To begin with, a strong continuity in Australia’s strict foreign

**Table 1.** Overview of Australia's governments, their political affiliation, their approach to irregular migration governance, and their (dis)engagement with the middle power notion.

Prime minister (ministry no.)	Time frame	Political affiliation	Irregular migration policy	Engagement with middle power idea
Howard (2nd)	1998–2001	Coalition	Restrictive	No
Howard (3rd)	2001–2004	Coalition	Restrictive	No
Howard (4th)	2004–2007	Coalition	Restrictive	No
Rudd (1st)	2007–2010	Labor	Non-restrictive	Yes
Gillard (1st)	2010	Labor	Non-restrictive	Yes
Gillard (2nd)	2010–2013	Labor	Restrictive	Yes
Rudd (2nd)	2013	Labor	Restrictive	Yes
Abbott	2013–2015	Coalition	Restrictive	Yes
Turnbull (1st)	2015–2016	Coalition	Restrictive	Yes
Turnbull (2nd)	2016–2018	Coalition	Restrictive	Yes
Morrison (1st)	2018–2019	Coalition	Restrictive	Yes
Morrison (2nd)	2019–2022	Coalition	Restrictive	Yes
Albanese	2022–	Labor	Restrictive	Yes

policy on irregular migration stands out. Out of 13 administrations from 2000 to June 2024, 11 of them implemented restrictive foreign policy measures to prevent seaborne asylum seekers from reaching the Australian territory, the only exceptions being the 1st Rudd ministry and, due to its very short lifespan, the 1st Gillard ministry. Further, this foreign policy continuity has been enabled by a steady bipartisanship in Australia's political system. Apart from the two aforementioned exceptions, all governments (eight led by the Coalition, three by the Labor party) maintained and at times strengthened existing provisions concerning the offshore processing of asylum seekers and the country's broader externalisation approach. To be sure, there have been differences in terms of rhetoric and the adoption/abandonment of select policy components (temporary protection visas, for example), but these have not meaningfully altered the main foreign policy framework which is the focus of this research.

Relatedly, this continuity has cemented the use of specific foreign policy measures over the years. These are substantial and comprise: the broader whole-of-government externalisation effort; territorial excisions from Australia's migration zone; the provision of humanitarian, development, and/or logistical funds to third countries; offshore processing centres in Nauru, Papua New Guinea, Cambodia, and Christmas Island (at different points in time); return agreements; interception agreements with Sri Lanka; military operations such as Operation Sovereign Borders, Relex, and Resolute; navy deployments to intercept and repel migrants' boats (turnback manoeuvres); the ship-board assessment of migrants' asylum claims in international waters; and the concurrent engagement in relevant regional forums such as the Bali Process.

As per the other set of implications, while acknowledging that related conceptual elements cannot shape a country's foreign policy by themselves, the real-world developments and considerations outlined above nevertheless exert a significant influence over the theories and notions that traditionally frame Australian foreign and security policy. First, the middle power image (and its corollary good international citizenship notion) are deeply rooted in Australian debates (see Ungerer 2007). After all, as shown in this article, out of the seven prime ministers who have governed Australia from 2000 to the present day, six of them have explicitly engaged with the idea of Australia as a middle power throughout their tenure (the only exception was John Howard, who unsuccessfully



attempted to replace it with the ‘pivotal power’ label). More to the point, the direct engagement with the middle power notion was not a prerogative of Labor politicians, since all Coalition prime ministers with the exception of Howard embraced it as well.

Second, and despite the above, Australia’s credentials as a middle power and a good international citizen are tarnished by its irregular migration-related foreign policy. Notwithstanding the country’s positive engagement in other areas of international relations (from the support to free trade to the defence of freedom of navigation, among the many possible examples, see Brooklyn, Jones, and Strating 2023), Australia’s record in terms of irregular migration governance is controversial and seems unlikely to change in the near future. Moreover, the fact that both Nauru and Papua New Guinea are countries formerly administered by Australia raises concerns of postcolonial nature (see Salyer, Dalsgaard, and West 2020). Third, it may be the case that Australia’s complex engagement with the middle power idea has shifted in the twenty-first century as a result of a more challenging strategic landscape, including revisionism by rising powers in the Indo-Pacific, the US’ relative decline, terrorism, irregular migration, and others. These have altered Australia’s security environment, or at the very least its perception thereof, potentially heightening deep-rooted fears of strategic insecurity (the ‘frightened country’ condition) and hardening its foreign policy accordingly. While it is not within the scope of this article to dissect the changing nature of the middle power idea, the literature offers more than one insight into a potential conceptual shift of this adaptable term (see Abbondanza and Wilkins 2021; Efstathopoulos 2023; and Robertson and Carr 2023), all of which warrants future research on the evolving meanings of this notion for countries that actively adopt it.

In essence, the ostensibly-conflicted nature of Australian foreign policy, introduced at the beginning of this article, seems to emerge from this research as well. Torn between its middle power and good international citizenship credentials on the one hand, and its ‘frightened country’ foreign policy posture (stemming from strategic insecurity) on the other, Canberra operates under a definitional—and arguably identity—dichotomy that has captured little scholarly attention so far with reference to irregular migration governance. Following the broad principles of foreign policy analysis (FPA), accounting for select domestic and international factors influencing the country’s foreign policy, this research has shown that Australia’s irregular migration governance is not only relevant to this under-explored facet of Australian foreign policy but effectively embodies it. To return to the article’s initial assumption, the country’s defence of its stern irregular migration governance, and its concurrent promotion of its middle power status, are not mutually-exclusive as they could appear under a cursory look. Rather, they represent two sides of the same (Australian) coin for two substantial reasons: the large time frame behind this condition (virtually a quarter of a century), and the strong political bipartisanship supporting it.

## Conclusion

This article has pointed at the low levels of scholarly attention devoted to Australia’s foreign policy on irregular migration—especially in the international relations discipline, and particularly after the 2013 peak in arrivals—prior to attempting to address this gap in the literature through a dedicated investigation of the country’s irregular migration

governance from 2000 to June 2024 inclusive. Supported by a theoretical overview of three notions that are traditionally associated with Australian foreign policy, it has probed into the irregular migration policies of 13 Australian governments following the guidelines of foreign policy analysis. The article's findings—encapsulated by the six considerations that have just been discussed—hold value for both theoretical and empirical understandings of Australian foreign policy. On the one hand, a strong continuity in Australia's strict foreign policy on irregular migration stands out, supported by the country's well-known foreign policy bipartisanship, which results in the longstanding use of specific foreign policy tools to stem seaborne arrivals. On the other, and notwithstanding the prevalence of the middle power idea in the country's political debates, Australia's credentials as a middle power and a good international citizen are inevitably diminished. Nonetheless, a careful assessment seems to at least partially reconcile the two apparently-contrasting images—middle power and national interest-driven ('frightened') nation—given the long time frame in which they have coexisted and the bipartisanship behind them, thus adding to the few pieces of literature assessing the apparent dichotomies within the country's foreign policy (including Taylor 2020 and Lee 2024).

Whether this tension signals another evolution of the ever-changing middle power notion remains open to debates, since the multifarious challenges of the twenty-first century likely impact on Canberra's interpretation of its middle power status. Even so, the country's under-examined governance of irregular migration appears to effectively embody this uneasy condition, which warrants further research on a significant element of Australian foreign policy that is, however, increasingly taken for granted, and therefore shifting in the background of scholarly investigations. To that end, this research aims to offer a novel contribution to the extant literature in terms of both theoretical and foreign policy insights.

## Notes

1. Global research on this subject is, of course, too large to be recounted here. Similar considerations apply to other parts of this article that mention large parts of disciplinary literatures, which do not make any pretence to comprehensiveness due to space constraints.
2. For the purposes of this research, 'restrictive' policies are understood as attempting to prevent seaborne migrants from reaching the Australian territory, whereas 'non-restrictive' ones do not pursue this objective.
3. Apart from the positional, behavioural/normative, and identity criteria, the functional, systemic impact, and the now-defunct geographic criteria ought to be mentioned. See Abbondanza and Wilkins (2021) for a review of middle powers' definitional parameters.
4. Examples are included in the empirical section of this article.
5. Contemporary Australian governments are either led by the Coalition (conservative) or the Australian Labor Party (progressive).
6. In 2016, the PNG Supreme Court had declared that the processing centre was breaching the country's constitution.

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