

# Is Geopolitical Fragmentation Impacting Global Migration Patterns?



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## Abstract

Will the changing geopolitical landscape affect migration flows and if so, how? This largely underexplored question is the topic of this policy brief. Below we explore the relationship between geopolitical fragmentation between countries and bilateral international migration flows. Our core finding is that an increase in geopolitical distance by one standard deviation is associated with a 10% decrease in bilateral migration. This effect is nonlinear, with greater impacts observed among geopolitically close countries. We find this pattern using estimates of global bilateral migration flows and geopolitical alignment. Our findings suggest that geopolitical fragmentation could lead to economically significant changes in migration patterns, particularly for regions heavily reliant on migrant labor. This work is part of our ongoing research on [\(de\)globalization](#).

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## Introduction: Migration in the New Geopolitical Landscape

Geopolitical fragmentation has become a defining feature of the global economic landscape, influencing international flows between countries. There has been growing research regarding the flow of goods (see e.g. Attinasi et al. 2025, Cevik 2024,) and of capital (e.g. 2024, IMF 2023). Though, the impact of fragmentation on migration has remained unexplored thus far. This brief summarizes new evidence addressing this gap. Concretely, we are examining how geopolitical distance between countries – measured by differences in foreign policy preferences – affects bilateral migration flows.

But why should there be a relation at all? Do people really care about the foreign policy focus of the country of destination? To be very clear – while foreign policy preferences seem unlikely to shape migration *motives* – the mechanism we have in mind is very different. It is the *facilitation channel* not the motivation channel that likely is influenced by geopolitical distance. As countries grow geopolitically distant, the complexity and thus the cost of migration likely increase. This hypothesis assumes that geopolitical alignment facilitates migration through stronger economic connections, institutional cooperation, and cultural exchange, thereby facilitating transit (reducing the cost of migration) as well as successful integration (increasing the pay-off to migration). Conversely, geopolitical divergence creates barriers to migration, such as visa restrictions, economic sanctions, and social tensions. This then leads to a decline in migration flows. Our analysis provides empirical evidence supporting this hypothesis and highlights the economic implications of geopolitical fragmentation on migration patterns.

## Geopolitical Distance is Associated with Migration Flows

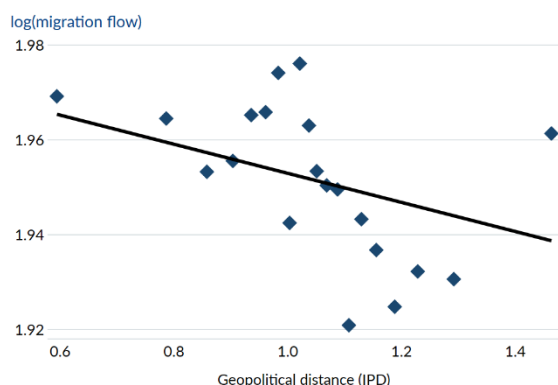
Our theoretical foundation is based in migration gravity models. This class of models posits that migration flows between countries are influenced by factors such as economic disparities, cultural similarities, and geographical distance. The gravity model, originally developed to explain trade flows, has been adapted to study migration patterns, with the premise that migration flows are positively correlated with economic size and negatively correlated with distance and other barriers to movement.

In the context of geopolitical fragmentation, we extend the gravity model to incorporate a measure of geopolitical distance. The Ideal Point Distance (IPD), developed by Bailey et al. (2017), is based on UN General Assembly voting patterns and provides a robust indicator of foreign policy alignment between countries. It has been used to study the impact of geopolitical distance on trade (e.g. Abeliński and Mayrhuber 2025) and capital flows (e.g. IMF 2023, Abeliński et al. 2025) before. This measure captures the differences in foreign policy preferences between countries, with higher values indicating greater geopolitical distance. It allows us to quantify the extent to which countries are aligned or divergent in their geopolitical stances and to econometrically relate it to migration flows.

In addition to the geopolitical distance measure, we use a global data set on estimated bilateral migration flows, sourced from Abel (2019) and Abel and Cohen (2019). It covers approximately 200 countries and the period of 1990 to 2020, having estimates for every 5<sup>th</sup> year.

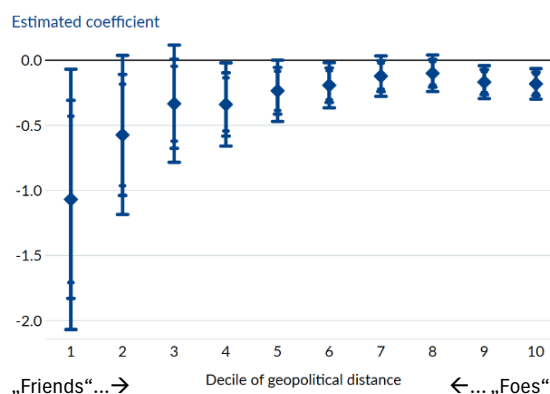
Based on this data, we estimate gravity models of global bilateral migration, using Poisson pseudo-maximum-likelihood (PPML) estimators with a full set of fixed effects, i.e. origin-year, destination-year, and origin-destination fixed effects.

**Chart 1. Increased geopolitical distance lowers migration**



Note: Binned scatter plot, controlled for origin-time, destination-time and origin-destination fixed effects. Linear fit based on full underlying data.

**Chart 2. Changes in geopolitical distances matter most for “friends”**



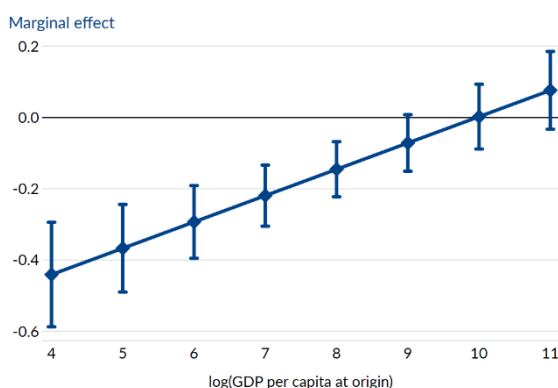
Note: Estimates obtained using PPML, controlling for origin-time, destination-time and origin-destination fixed effects. Whiskers indicate 90%/95%/99% confidence levels.

The empirical results support our hypothesis that increases in geopolitical distance are associated with significant reductions in migration flows. Specifically, an increase in geopolitical distance by one unit is associated with a decrease in bilateral migration by 13%. A drop in IPD by one unit is, for example, roughly equivalent to the drop in IPD between China and US observed between the mid-1990s and the mid-2010s. Put differently, an increase by one standard deviation is linked to a 10% decrease in bilateral migration. This effect is nonlinear, with greater impacts observed among countries that are geopolitically close.

## GDP per Capita Levels in Home and Host Countries affect the Impact of IDP

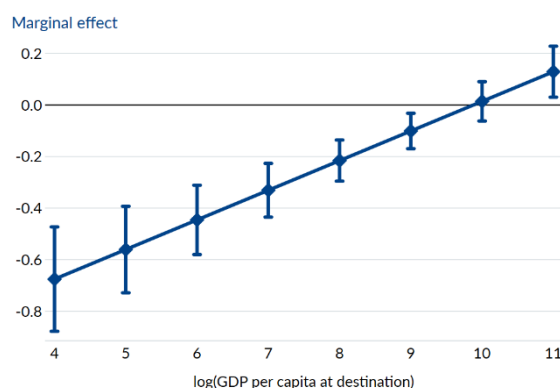
Let us note that cultural similarities, such as shared language or religion, can mitigate the negative impact of geopolitical distance on migration. These cultural ties facilitate the integration of migrants into destination countries, reducing the barriers to movement. Policies that promote cultural integration, such as language training and cultural exchange initiatives, can help sustain migration flows in the face of geopolitical fragmentation.

**Chart 3. Estimated effects of geopolitical distance on migration by GDP per capita at origin**



Note: Estimates obtained using PPML, controlling for origin-time, destination-time and origin-destination fixed effects. Spikes indicate 95% confidence intervals.

**Chart 4. Estimated effects of geopolitical distance on migration by GDP per capita at destination**



Particularly interesting, however, is the economic tangent of our findings. We investigated whether the impact of geopolitical distance on migration flows changes with the level of GDP per capita in the origin and in the destination country of the migrants. Doing this shows that the lower the GDP at both origin and destination countries, the stronger (more negative) the estimated relationship between fragmentation and migration. This is in line with our hypothesis, as the presumable increase in the cost of migration induced by higher geopolitical fragmentation matters more if the expected return to migration is low (as when migrating to a low-income country) or when the migrants faced low GDP per capita in their home countries (and thus a tighter budget).

## The Different Regional Policy Implications of a Changing Migration Landscape

The economic implications of geopolitical fragmentation on migration are profound and multifaceted. Reduced migration flows can lead to labor shortages in destination countries, particularly in sectors reliant on migrant workers. This could exacerbate existing labor market imbalances and slow economic growth. For instance, industries such as agriculture, construction, and healthcare, which heavily depend on migrant labor, may face significant challenges in meeting their labor demands. This again would have ripple on effects on inflation and thereby monetary policy.

To investigate a possible impact of fragmentation on the EU we looked at changes in predicted migration flows that our gravity estimations suggest in response to a change in IPD. As the estimated coefficients must not be interpreted as implying a causal effect, this is merely for illustrative purposes. It is not a forecast or fully fledged simulation under general equilibrium conditions.

For the analysis, we rely on an allocation of countries into one of three geopolitical blocs, a western (United States-centric) bloc, an eastern (China-centric) bloc and a neutral bloc of nonaligned countries, following Attinasi et al. (2025). We then consider two different scenarios, a mild and a severe fragmentation scenario and assume that our geopolitical distance measure IPD increases by either one (i.e. mild scenario) or three (i.e. severe scenario) country-pair-specific standard deviations in countries that do not belong to the same bloc. The results of this exercise suggest that migration into the EU could decrease by 4% in the mild or by 11% in the severe scenario.

Conversely, this might also have significant implications for the origin countries particularly for regions such as South Asia, Western Asia, and Sub-Saharan Africa. Taking a positive view at least the economic development in these regions could profit from increased labor supply as immigration to the EU from these regions could decline by up to 20% in severe fragmentation scenarios according to our estimates.

## Conclusion: Embracing a New Era of Migration Governance

Do we see dynamics that are known as *friend-shoring* when trade or capital flows are concerned, i.e. higher flows among geopolitical friends than among geopolitical foes, also in global migration dynamics? Our hypothesis is that geopolitical fragmentation between two countries increases the cost of migrating between them – and thus that fragmentation is associated with lower migration. We bring this hypothesis to the data and estimate gravity models of migration.

Our results suggest that increases in the geopolitical distance between two countries are associated with lower migration between them. The estimated effect is nonlinear and higher for geopolitical friends than for geopolitical foes: Fragmentation among allies seems to reduce migration more than a (further) fragmentation among country-pairs that are already distant in terms of geopolitics. Furthermore, the estimated coefficient is higher when either the source or the destination country has a comparably low GDP per capita. This corresponds to our initial hypothesis that geopolitical fragmentation affects the cost to migration and that this is affecting migration decisions.

As the geopolitical landscape is changing and migration is a topic featuring prominently on policy agendas worldwide, assessing the link between the two not only broadens knowledge on the implications of geopolitical changes in general, but also provides important information on expected changes in migration dynamics that can feed into policy considerations. This analysis suggests that migration is not merely driven by income and labor market opportunities of migrants, as is often argued, but also relates to shifts in geopolitical relations between countries.

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