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Weapons of the Weak? South–South Migration and Power Politics in the Philippines–GCC Corridor

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How do labor migrants serve as instruments of leverage against countries of destination across the Global South? Although international studies scholars are paying increasing attention to the interplay between power politics and cross-border mobility, scant work exists on the intricacies of South–South migration. This article expands research on migration interdependence by examining the range of strategies available to countries of origin, and the factors that determine their success. The argument put forth is two-fold. First, weaker countries of origin can use two sets of strategies to coerce stronger countries of destination, namely “restriction,” the curbing of the outflow of labor migrants, or “repatriation,” the forced return of labor migrants. Second, target countries’ degree of compliance is determined by their migration interdependence vulnerability, with repatriation being more potent than restriction. We test this empirically by drawing on a variety of primary and secondary sources as we examine how the Philippines successfully coerced the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait between 2014 and 2021. Selected within a least likely research design, the two cases demonstrate how a weaker country of origin may use labor migration as a successful instrument of leverage against two stronger countries of destination. Overall, the article adds a missing component to existing theorization of migration interdependence, enhances existing understandings of cross-border mobility and power politics, and provides original insights into overlooked processes of South–South migration.

¿Cómo sirven los migrantes laborales como instrumentos de presión contra los países de destino en el sur global? A pesar de que los especialistas en estudios internacionales prestan cada vez más atención a la interacción entre las políticas de poder y la movilidad transfronteriza, apenas existen trabajos sobre los entresijos de la migración Sur-Sur. En este artículo se amplía la investigación sobre la interdependencia migratoria analizando las diversas estrategias de que disponen los países de origen y los factores que determinan su eficacia. El argumento planteado tiene un doble enfoque. Por una parte, los países de origen más vulnerables pueden utilizar dos tipos de estrategias para coaccionar a los países de destino más poderosos, en concreto, la “restricción,” es decir, el freno a la salida de inmigrantes en busca de trabajo; o la “repatriación,” es decir, el retorno forzoso de los inmigrantes en busca de trabajo. Por otra parte, el grado de cumplimiento de los países de destino depende de su vulnerabilidad de interdependencia migratoria, siendo la repatriación más eficaz que la restricción. Para comprobar esto, nos basamos en diversas fuentes primarias y secundarias y analizamos el modo en que Filipinas logró coaccionar a los Emiratos Árabes Unidos y a Kuwait entre 2014 y 2021. En los dos casos, seleccionados en el marco de un diseño de investigación poco probable, se demuestra cómo un país de origen más vulnerable puede utilizar la migración por motivos de trabajo como instrumento de influencia contra dos países de destino más poderosos. En general, en este artículo se incorpora un componente que faltaba a la teorización existente sobre la interdependencia de las migraciones, se mejora la comprensión actual de la movilidad transfronteriza y la política de poder, y se aportan ideas originales sobre los procesos de migración Sur-Sur que se han dejado de lado.

Comment les migrants du travail servent-ils d’instruments de levier contre les pays de destination dans les pays du sud? Bien que les chercheurs en études internationales accordent une attention croissante à l’interaction entre politiques de pouvoir et mobilité transfrontalière, peu de travaux existent sur les intricacies entre migrations sud-sud. Cet article étend la recherche sur l’interdépendance migratoire en examinant l’éventail des stratégies à disposition des pays d’origine et les facteurs qui déterminent la réussite de ces stratégies. L’argument avancé a un double enjeu. D’une part, les pays d’origine plus faibles peuvent employer deux ensembles de stratégies pour exercer une coercition sur les pays de destination plus forts, à savoir des stratégies de « restriction » consistant en une limitation de l’exode des migrants du travail, ou des stratégies de « rapatriement » consistant en un retour forcé des migrants du travail. Et d’autre part, le degré de conformité des pays cibles dépend de leur vulnérabilité à l’interdépendance migratoire, le rapatriement étant une stratégie plus puissante que la restriction. Nous mettons cet argument à l’épreuve de manière empirique en nous appuyant sur diverses sources primaires et secondaires en examinant la manière dont les Philippines ont réussi à exercer une coercition sur les Émirats arabes unis et le Koweït entre 2014 et 2021. Choisis dans le cadre d’un modèle de recherche du cas le moins probable, les deux cas montrent comment un pays d’origine plus faible peut utiliser la migration du travail comme un instrument de levier efficace contre deux pays de destination plus forts. Globalement, cet article ajoute une composante manquante à la théorisation existante de l’interdépendance migratoire, améliore les compréhensions existantes de la mobilité transfrontalière et des politiques de pouvoir et offre des renseignements originaux sur les processus négligés de migration sud-sud.

Introduction

Mainstream work in international relations has yet to place states of the Global South at the forefront of analysis

(Acharya 2014; Vieira 2016; Tickner and Smith 2020). With the possible exception of research on “emerging powers” (Schirm 2010; Stuenkel 2017), realist approaches, in

particular, expect the periphery to mainly serve as an area of contestation by core states. This is mirrored in the literature on the international politics of migration, which approaches Global North states as central agents of policy-making and norm production (for critiques, see [Arcarazo and Freier 2015](#); [Freier, Micinski, and Tsourapas 2021](#)). Even as analyses of non-Western states' migration policy-making are put forth over the last few years, international studies scholars continue to approach cross-border mobility mainly as a South–North phenomenon, neglecting the fact that most migration flows occur within, rather than from, the Global South (cf. [Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2020](#); [Sadiq and Tsourapas 2021](#)). At the same time, the literature tends to portray countries of origin in the Global South as relatively weaker states to be coerced, co-opted, or exploited by stronger Western countries of destination, via a range of material and non-material payoffs (cf. [Laube 2019](#)). The only exception comes from research on select refugee host states, like Turkey or Libya, which appear able to push their own interests forth in an aggressive manner ([Paoletti 2011](#); [Müftüler-Baç 2020](#)). To what extent does this understanding of asymmetric interstate relations mirror the empirical reality of contemporary migration diplomacy?

As scholars attempt to build a global theory of international relations by acknowledging the ability of non-Western states to exercise agency ([Acharya and Buzan 2019](#)), there appears a distinct opportunity to re-assess how Global South states operate in the realm of international migration. A particular focus on the intricacies of South–South migration diplomacy would allow for a more nuanced understanding of the interplay between power politics and migration across the non-West. Drawing cues from James C. Scott's celebrated work ([Scott 1985](#)), we argue that labor migration enables weak and peripheral countries of origin to act as purposeful agents in the international arena of South–South migration management. Such interstate coercion may take the form of “restriction,” i.e., the curbing of the outflow of labor migrants, or “repatriation,” i.e., the forced return of labor migrants. Countries of origin can arguably adopt successful repertoires of resistance by manipulating bilateral migration stock and flows via processes of restriction and repatriation, even when confronted with seemingly overwhelming asymmetries of power in the international system: by threatening to act against their interests in the short term, they are able to ensure stronger states' long-term cooperation.¹

When are states' strategies of restriction and/or repatriation successful? We draw on the concept of migration interdependence, namely “the reciprocal political economy effects produced by labor migration between sending and host states” ([Hollifield 2012](#); [Tsourapas 2018a](#), 383). A strategy's success depends on whether the host state is “vulnerable” to the political economy cost incurred by the sending state, namely if it is unable to absorb the incurred cost domestically and cannot procure the support of alternative sending states. As in the cases of sending states' vulnerability to migration interdependence ([Tsourapas 2018a](#)), we expect that repatriation is much more likely to change the behavior of the host state because of the higher costs involved. In effect, sending states that may be considered weak vis-à-vis stronger countries of destination appear able to act from a position of relative strength in the context of South–South labor migration. Ultimately, cross-border mobility and the manipulation of migration interdependence allow ostensi-

bly weaker countries of origin to extract concessions by powerful countries of destination.

We put this theory to the test via an examination of two case studies involving the use of Filipino migrants as a coercive mechanism by the Philippines against two powerful host states of the Global South, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Kuwait, between 2014 and 2022. In the first case, the Philippines employed a strategy of restriction by banning further emigration of Filipino domestic workers into the UAE; in the second case, the Philippines employed a strategy that involved a combination of restriction and repatriation by forcing Filipino domestic workers in Kuwait to return to the home country. In both cases, more powerful Arab countries of destination complied with the demands of the Philippines, despite it being a weaker country of origin. We demonstrate how the logic of migration interdependence can explain these outcomes: Filipino domestic workers are highly valued within the Kuwaiti and Emirati host-state contexts, a fact that hindered governmental attempts at replacing these migrant groups and rendered both host states vulnerable to the Philippines' attempts at severing bilateral migration interdependence. Overall, by demonstrating how a weaker Southeast Asian state was able to coerce two stronger Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, we offer a more nuanced understanding of South–South migration diplomacy and the role of labor migration in contemporary power relations outside the West.

The article is structured as follows: an initial examination of relevant research on migration, power politics, and interstate relations reveals a gap in terms of understanding how countries of origin may use labor migrants as an instrument of leverage. We follow with a discussion of how international relations work on interdependence might shed additional light on this phenomenon, while also identifying how research on migration interdependence may consider sending states' coercive practices. We proceed to discuss the article's methodology, paying particular attention to data collection and our case selection strategy. In the article's main body, the two case studies are examined in detail, which confirms our expectations that migration interdependence allows a more accurate understanding of migration and coercion in international relations. We conclude with a note on how this framework of analysis may be further expanded in the future, thereby shedding much needed light on the international politics of South–South migration.

Literature Review

Despite a long-standing scholarly investigation of states' involvement with migratory processes, there has yet to be a sustained examination of how labor migration features in interstate bargaining and power politics ([Kolbe 2021](#)). One possible explanation is that, in contrast to forced displacement, matters of emigration and immigration were treated as “low” rather than “high” politics issue within the realist and neorealist tradition ([Zolberg 1999](#)). An alternative explanation refers to the traditional disciplinary focus on the politics of immigration, rather than emigration, which hindered the development of a holistic framework of labor migration and interstate relations between countries of origin and destination ([Natter 2018](#); [Adamson and Tsourapas 2020](#)). This gap may also be attributed to the historical evolution of labor immigration in the post–World War II context: initial recruitment of foreign labor across Western host states on both sides of the Atlantic was driven by economics and expected to be a temporary phenomenon ([Hollifield 1992](#)). Once labor immigrants settled permanently in

¹The article does not differentiate between the terms “sending state” and “country of origin,” or between “host state” and “country of destination.”

Europe and North America (see, for example, the evolution of Turkish guestworkers in Germany, in [Arkilic 2020](#)), political scientists approached this phenomenon via the lens of immigration, citizenship, or diaspora studies rather than labor migration.

That is not to say that the interaction between cross-border mobility and international relations has not been explored.² A vibrant research agenda has emerged detailing how forced displacement features in states' power politics, particularly in Western contexts. Thus, a wide literature exists on European and North American countries' use of means to prevent asylum seekers from reaching their territory ([FitzGerald 2019](#); [Laube 2019](#)). Yet, this research agenda paints a rather unclear picture of the rationale behind, and the strategies adopted by, states of the Global South. Only recently have refugee studies scholars analyzed how they engage in interstate bargaining for sustainable solutions to forced migration management ([Betts 2021](#)), how foreign and domestic policy concerns shape refugee host states' responses ([Norman 2020](#); [Abdelaaty 2021](#); [Micinski 2021](#)), how international organizations and "refugee rentier states" are diplomatically implicated in these processes of "refugee commodification" ([Tsourapas 2019](#); [Freier, Micinski, and Tsourapas 2021](#)), or how non-Western countries act as "proxy implementers of restrictive migration policies inspired by potential destination states" ([Pastore and Roman 2020](#)), frequently within contexts of "entangled security" ([Adamson and Greenhill 2021](#)). Importantly, the extent to which labor migrants, rather than refugees, might serve as instruments of leverage has yet to emerge as a separate field of inquiry within international relations.

One line of research has suggested that attempts at leverage should be examined via the prism of "suasion games," in which a small state might threaten to act irrationally in order to increase its negotiating position ([Martin 1992](#)), although scholars have not examined such forms of game theory beyond the context of the global refugee regime ([Betts 2008](#); [Hollifield 2012](#)). As academics demonstrate increasing interest in the international politics of cross-border mobility over the last decade ([Jackson, Sørensen, and Møller 2019](#); [Kent 2021](#)), an emerging agenda of "migration diplomacy" offers a framework of examining sending, transit, and host states' tactics in terms of zero- and positive-sum foreign policymaking ([Adamson and Tsourapas 2019](#)), or issue-linkage strategies ([Tsourapas and Zartaloudis 2021](#)). While this framework encourages more nuanced understandings of international bargaining regarding the management of cross-border mobility ([Fernández-Molina and Hernando De Larramendi 2020](#); [Geddes and Maru 2020](#)), few insights exist on how coercion operates. If, as this line of work suggests, labor emigrants may be used as an instrument of power politics in interstate relations, how do countries of origin attempt to influence the behavior of countries of destination? Importantly, which factors determine the success of such coercive attempts?

The Middle East and North Africa region offers fruitful opportunities for research and analysis of migration and power politics ([Mencütek 2018](#); [Fakhoury 2021](#); [İşleyen 2021](#)). By expanding Keohane and Nye's work on complex interdependence ([Keohane and Nye 1987](#)), [Tsourapas \(2018a\)](#) demonstrates how the political economy effects of labor migration produce "migration interdependence."

He focuses on a key sending state in the Middle East, Egypt, in order to identify how Egyptian reliance on emigration as a source of economic remittances and an outlet for domestic unemployment was instrumentalized by two weaker host states, namely Libya and Jordan. He identifies two types of strategies—"restriction" and "displacement"—employed by Libya and Jordan against Egyptian workers within their borders, effectively coercing Egypt into specific policy changes. With a distinct focus on strategies adopted by countries of destination, [Tsourapas](#) highlighted how labor migration might make seemingly more powerful migrant-sending states vulnerable to coercion by weaker migrant-host states. Yet, relevant work has yet to examine the extent to which countries of origin might also use labor migration as an instrument of leverage and issue linkage. How might the framework on migration interdependence allow us to understand sending-state coercion? Under what conditions would seemingly more powerful migrant-host states become vulnerable to coercion by weaker migrant-sending states?

Host-State Migration Interdependence and Sending-State Coercive Strategies

Migration interdependence is defined as "the reciprocal political economy effects arising from cross-border flows of people between a sending and host state" ([Tsourapas 2018a](#), 385). Similar to host states' attempts at employing their position for coercive purposes against a sending state, we argue in this article that sending states may also leverage their position against a host state. Taking inspiration from [Hirschman's](#) work on foreign trade and national power ([Albert O. Hirschman 1945](#)), we argue that a sending state can do so in two ways: either by reducing a host state's migration interdependence through "restriction" or by severing it completely through "repatriation." Restriction refers to a sending state's policy of curbing the outflow of labor migrants out of the country via a range of emigration-related policies. It corresponds to [Hirschman's](#) "threat of severance," given that migration interdependence is not severed, and corresponds to [Tsourapas'](#) use of the same concept in terms of host-state strategies. For instance, in 2015, Cuba announced that it was re-instating limits on medical doctors leaving the country for the United States (these had been lifted only in 2013), as part of long-standing bilateral negotiations that aimed to force Washington into shifting its labor immigration policies ([Trotta 2015](#)). A strategy of repatriation is more severe and leads to sending-state strategies of recalling all labor migrants within a target host state. This corresponds to [Hirschman's](#) expectations of an "actual interruption of external economic relations" with a host state. A recent example would be the 2017–2021 Qatar diplomatic crisis. Once Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain cut diplomatic ties on June 7, 2017, the three countries gave their respective nationals working in Qatar a one- to two-week period to return home, while Qatari companies scrambled for alternative immigrant labor ([Ulrichsen 2020](#)).

When would these two mechanisms of coercive migration diplomacy be successful in producing host-state compliance? Building on [Tsourapas \(2018a\)](#), we utilize the concepts of "sensitivity" and "vulnerability," first introduced by [Keohane and Nye](#). For them, "the vulnerability dimension of interdependence rests on the relative availability and costliness of the alternatives that various actors face," and "can be measured only by the costliness of making effective adjustments to a changed environment over a

²In fact, one could point to the flourishing work on transnationalism and diaspora politics; for recent examples, see [Baser and Halperin \(2019\)](#), [Canzutti \(2019\)](#), [Mahieu \(2019\)](#), [Liu \(2020\)](#), and [Craven \(2021\)](#); for an overview, see [Koinova and Tsourapas \(2018\)](#).

Table 1. Host-state compliance to sending-state coercive strategies

		<i>Host-state migration interdependence vulnerability</i>	
		<i>No</i>	<i>Yes</i>
Type of sending-state strategy	Restriction	Compliance unlikely	Compliance somewhat likely
	Repatriation	Compliance unlikely	Compliance very likely

period of time” (Keohane and Nye 1987, 13). Thus, a key condition must be satisfied for the host state to become vulnerable to a sending-state strategy: the host state needs to be unable to procure alternatives to the restriction or repatriation of a sending state’s migrant community working within its borders. It should be noted that migration interdependence vulnerability needs to be measured differently for countries of origin and destination: whereas the political economy effects of migration interdependence for countries of origin are measured based on the number of migrants abroad and the respective amounts of remittances they send home (Tsourapas 2018a), these concepts are not necessarily relevant in the context of countries of destination. Instead, we draw on Keohane and Nye in order to propose that host states’ migration interdependence vulnerability be measured in terms of the numerical dominance of a specific migrant group within a specific sector of its economy. For example, if a hypothetical country X’s construction sector is staffed by migrants from country Y (75 percent) and country Z (25 percent), it is logical to assume that country X is exhibiting migration interdependence vulnerability toward country Y.

How likely are countries of destination to comply with coercive actions by countries of origin that manipulate relations of migration interdependence? As per the literature’s expectations, a host state that is vulnerable to migration interdependence is more likely to comply to a sending state’s actions than one that is not; by definition, the latter will not incur significant domestic political economy costs. Thus, host-state compliance is unlikely if the host state does not demonstrate migration interdependence vulnerability. As identified above, a country of origin has two types of coercive strategies that it may employ—restriction and repatriation. When a vulnerable host state is faced with sending-state coercion via restriction, its compliance is only somewhat likely, as the strategy is merely a threat to sever migration interdependence. However, when a vulnerable host state is faced with host-state coercion via repatriation, or an actual “severance” of interdependence, it is very likely to comply given the high political economy costs involved. These trade-offs are graphically demonstrated in Table 1.

Methodology

We employ case-study methodology and draw on within-case analysis via process tracing in order to understand a sending state’s use of coercion against host states (Bennett and Checkel 2015; Gerring 2016). The focus of the paper is on the Philippines, a major country of origin in the Global South (Battistella 1999; Carlos 2002; Alcidi 2003). The Philippines is one of the top 10 emigration states globally, with over 5 million Filipinos working abroad in 2019. It constitutes the world’s fourth receiver of migrant remittances (following India, China, and Mexico) receiving \$33.83 billion in 2018 (McAuliffe, Khadria, and Bauloz 2019, 36). We focus on two key Arab host states of immi-

grant labor, Kuwait and the UAE. As members of the powerful GCC states, Kuwait and the UAE are oil-producing states that are typically portrayed as “rule makers” in the field of Global South migration politics. The *Kafala* sponsorship system, in place for decades, ensures the impossibility of citizenship for migrant workers in the two states and enables a continuing process of their exploitation at the hand of Gulf citizens (a wide literature on this exists; see Lori 2019; Thiollet 2019). In terms of the interaction between migration and politics, the relationship between GCC states and countries of origin is invariably approached as asymmetric, highlighting the power disparities with poorer Arab and non-Arab countries of origin. The latter are forced to yield to the demands of GCC host states, given their dependence on remittances and the importance of such migration flows for domestic political economy purposes (Fargues 2013; Tsourapas 2018b). Not surprisingly, the two states’ economies are significantly stronger than the Philippines: in terms of GDP per capita (in current US\$, 2019), Saudi Arabia is estimated at \$23,139.80 and the UAE at \$43,103.34, while the Philippines GDP per capita stands at only \$3,485.34 (World Bank 2019).

We examine two cases of sending–host state interdependence manipulation by the country of origin (in the Philippines–UAE and Philippines–Kuwait dyads). In the first case, the Filipino government employed a strategy of restriction in order to coerce the UAE into concrete policy shifts that involved stronger legal protection for Filipino workers within the countries of destination. In the second case, the Philippines adopted a strategy of restriction and repatriation against Kuwait. In both cases, the Philippines’ strategies bore results: both Kuwait and the UAE complied with the Philippines demands (in the UAE case, following a protracted process of interstate bargaining). We treat two cases as “least likely” ones, given the fact that existing research would not expect any of the two countries of destination to succumb to the Philippines’ coercive strategies: for one, the Filipino economy is not only considerably weaker than the Saudi and Emirati ones, but also heavily reliant on migrant remittances. This suggests a strategy of restricting Filipino migration abroad would be seen as contrary to the country’s national interest and, thus, would not be perceived as credible. At the same time, a possible expectation that the Philippines exploited the two host states’ dependence on Filipino migration is also incorrect: according to the latest data, Filipino workers only constitute 8.49 percent of the migrant labor force in the UAE and 11 percent in Kuwait (GLMM 2014; see Tables 2 and 3). Finally, it is also unlikely that Kuwait and the UAE shifted their policy following international pressure; the two countries share a long history of human rights abuses against migrant populations and a lack of interest in amending such practices in the face of global criticism (Meijer, Sater, and Babar 2020).

In terms of data collection for this article, it is true that researchers conducting fieldwork in the context of Global South migration face a range of challenges, particularly when these involve non-democratic states (on this,

Table 2. Migrant workers in the UAE, by nationality

<i>Nationality</i>	<i>Total estimate</i>
India	5,592,657
Bangladesh	686,166
Pakistan	1,199,211
Egypt	407,533
Philippines	518,595
Indonesia	83,560
Nepal	298,080
Sri Lanka	302,908
Total	6,110,530

Source: Gulf Labour Markets, Migration, and Population. Data refer to 2013–2014.

Table 3. Migrant workers in Kuwait, by nationality

<i>Nationality</i>	<i>Total estimate</i>
India	224,118
Bangladesh	122,246
Pakistan	81,497
Egypt	488,985
Philippines	224,118
Indonesia	20,374
Nepal	101,872
Sri Lanka	244,492
Total	2,037,436

Source: Gulf Labour Markets, Migration, and Population. Data refer to 2013–2014.

see Tsourapas 2018b; Belloni 2019). The lack of access to key elites in Kuwait and the UAE led us to a different data collection strategy as we sought to identify all relevant information regarding the two labor migration crises that involved Filipino migrants by drawing from media coverage, policy reports, and governmental declarations and statements. We also relied on official information released by the Filipino government in each of the two cases. The fact that the Philippines sought to publicize events in each of the two cases led to wide coverage of the events themselves, as well as relevant actors' rationale, which we were able to identify using publicly available data in English and Arabic.

Sending States' Manipulation of Migration Interdependence in the Middle East

Philippines—United Arab Emirates (2014–2021)

After formalizing diplomatic ties with the UAE in 1980, the Philippines facilitated the export of household service workers (HSWs) from the 1990s onward in response to the host state's efforts to increase Emirati female participation in the domestic labor market (on Emirati migration policymaking, see Lori 2019; Malit and Tsourapas 2021). Diplomatic tensions arose in June 2014, when the UAE ordered the Filipino embassy and consulates to cease contract verification processes prior to issuing visas for overseas Filipino workers (OFWs). Contract verifications constitute an important measure that the Philippines employs to prevent trafficking and abuse of OFWs by their prospective employers across the Gulf. The Filipino government immediately raised concerns, arguing that the absence of such verifications left Filipino workers abroad with insufficient protection. With the UAE refusing to amend its policy, the Philippines introduced a strategy of restriction: the

Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA) refused to process documented domestic workers bound for UAE if their contracts had not been verified by the Philippines labor attaché. The former Philippine labor secretary, Rosalinda Baldoz, encapsulated the sending state's response:

The suspension of the verification of contracts of household service workers by the UAE is unfortunate. In this instance, [the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration—POEA] will stop the processing of HSWs contracts for the UAE ... I have directed the POEA to do the same with contracts of HSWs intending to work in the UAE that are not verified. I am concerned that without the requisite verification, HSWs who will travel to UAE will be vulnerable to human trafficking, which we must avoid at all cost. ([Republic of the Philippines 2014](#))

In response to the new UAE policy, the Philippines adopted a strategy of restriction with a clear end goal: “we already have a bilateral agreement with UAE on general types of workers in 2007,” POEA chief Hans Leo Cacdac declared. “But we need a specific protocol on the protection of domestic workers.” He continued to state that

Of course, the UAE has its own authority to implement their own laws. The UAE government believes that they have the jurisdiction since the employment is there. But we also have our own laws that we must impose since the workers come from our territory. ([Santos 2014](#))

The Filipino sending state's policy of restriction was accompanied by a direct demand for a specific policy shift in the Emirati host state's labor regulations. This created a protracted period of bilateral antagonism with both sides refusing to yield any ground. By June 1, 2014, the Philippines stopped processing contracts altogether, leading to a sharp decline in the number of Filipino domestic workers into the UAE. The bilateral conflict only came to an end in March 2021, when the UAE government conceded to the enforcement of six specific bilateral labor provisions, which led the Philippines to agree to sign a bilateral diplomatic agreement lifting its restriction policy on the recruitment of Filipina domestic workers to the UAE. In response to a sending state's strategy of manipulating migration interdependence via restriction, a more powerful host state shifted its initial strategy in order to restore levels of bilateral migration flows to the *status quo ante*.

It is worth noting that the Emirati concessions offered to the Philippines in 2021 went far and above the sending state's initial demands for an HSW protection protocol: the UAE government agreed, in principle, to allow domestic workers to keep their passport, forbidding local employers from holding on to them; Filipino migrants would now have one full day of rest per week, as well as the legal opportunity to open bank accounts under their own name in order to secure proper payment of their salaries. The Philippines Labor Secretary, Silvestre Bello, praised the new agreement as “a milestone” in his country's attempt to protect OFWs ([Ullah 2021](#)). While critical voices of state policymaking are not made public across Emirati media, the general agreement is that the Philippines were the clear winners in this bilateral negotiation. As UAE-based lawyer focusing on Filipino migration, Barney Almazar, argued:

We have been wanting a system that does not lead to the exploitation of the marginalised sectors of the society. The primordial concern is the safety and

wellbeing of our HSWs, the most vulnerable sector of the OFWs. However, once the HSW has been deployed, the Philippine government has to rely on the host country for the protection of its citizens. With the facilitation of labour being limited through authorised channels, both UAE and Philippines governments are ensured to know who is working where, and that the rights of the HSWs are upheld. (*Gulf News 2021*)

Why would an ostensibly richer and more powerful host state yield to the demands of a weaker sending state? The paper's migration interdependence framework can explain this puzzle. The Philippines' strategy of restriction led to serious disruptions along the Philippines–UAE migration corridor, such as the rise of black-market recruitment for domestic workers and the overflow of runaway domestic workers within embassy shelters. In turn, this created major economic problems for the UAE, which exhibited significant sectoral migration interdependence vulnerability in its HSW sector: intermediary migration industries suffered, notably local recruitment and placement agencies in the UAE, such as the Tadbeer Centers, given that they modeled their core business interests around domestic work supply from the Philippines (*Malit and Tsourapas 2021*). While Filipino workers only comprise 8.49 percent of the total migrant population in the UAE (see *Table 2*), they dominate the domestic work sector. This renders any attempt to replace them difficult, thereby increasing the sending state's leverage. A number of studies have identified the Emiratis' reliance on domestic workers: a 2014 National Research Foundation study of 600 Emiratis identified that 93 percent employ at least one domestic worker, with the average being 3.2 workers per household; a 2011 Knowledge and Human Development Authority study corroborated these findings, revealing that 94 percent of 23,851 Emirati families surveyed in Dubai employed domestic workers (*Gulf News 2014*).

At the same time, local demand for Filipino HSWs remained high across the UAE, with little appetite to recruit non-Filipina HSWs: despite Emirati efforts to recruit African HSWs from Kenya, Uganda, and Nigeria in order to undercut the Philippines' negotiating power, the strong domestic preference and demand for Filipina domestic workers led to critical shortages for UAE-based employers. Filipinas have become vital for the UAE labor market, due to their perceived work ethic, cleanliness, and multitasking abilities, leading to strong domestic preference for this migrant group (*Mabasa 2021*). A degree of cultural dependence on Filipina domestic workers is also well established, given the fact that most Emirati families have relied on their services for years, or even decades prior to the Filipino government's ban (*Sabban 2020; Parreñas and Silvey 2021*), what has been termed "khadama dependency syndrome" (*Malit, Al Awad, and Alexander 2018*). In fact, Emirati elites involved in regulating the domestic labor market were, themselves, familiar with Filipina HSWs within their family units: it is not incidental that a flourishing black market for the recruitment of Filipina domestic workers developed since 2014 across the UAE, with reports of HSWs being brought into the country as "tourists" rather than "recruited workers" to meet high local demand.

The UAE's migration interdependence vulnerability to Filipina HSWs explains the significant concessions that the powerful Emirati state offered in response to the restriction strategy of the Philippines, which is an ostensibly weaker state. The UAE government introduced a series of comprehensive legal, institutional, and policy reforms to address

rights-related concerns in the UAE domestic work sector. For instance, Federal Law No. 10 (Domestic Work Law) officially sets out the rights of migrant domestic workers in the country, while the government has also established twenty-four Tadbeer Centers across the country to control the recruitment regulations and fees linked to the local domestic market. The UAE has even prioritized the domestic work sector under the Abu Dhabi Dialogue's agenda by commissioning series of policy studies and seminars to educate senior officials about the future demand for domestic work in the Gulf region. More recently, in September 2019, the Philippine and the UAE states additionally signed a bilateral agreement that aims to address human trafficking problems between the Philippines and UAE migration corridors, specifically addressing trafficking issues related to migrant domestic work. As per the article's theorization, the bargaining power of the UAE was extremely limited. Although the use of repatriation would have arguably strengthened the position of the sending state even further and might have led the UAE to concede diplomatically much earlier than 2021, the Philippines' use of restriction succeeded in shifting the host state's initial policy.

Philippines—Kuwait (2018)

In 1979, the Philippine state formally developed official diplomatic ties with the Kuwaiti state and systematically exported migrant domestic workers to Kuwait in response to massive domestic work shortage in the state (on Kuwait's migration policymaking, see *Russell and Al-Ramadhan 1994; Shah 2011*). In January 2018, news broke of seven deaths of OFWs in Kuwait. The most gruesome one was that of Joanna Demafelis, who was found frozen in her employers' apartment more than a year after she was reported missing (*BBC News 2018a*). This incident sparked intense reactions in the Philippines, and the Department of Labor and Employment immediately stopped the processing and issuance of overseas employment certificates, in response. As in the case of the UAE, the Filipino government effectively implemented a strategy of restriction that sought to force Kuwait into action: "we have lost about four Filipino women in the last few months," Filipino President Rodrigo Duterte declared. "It's always in Kuwait. My advice is, we talk to them, state the truth and just tell them that it's not acceptable anymore." Foreign Affairs Secretary Alan Cayetano declared that the country was considering a total ban, as per the request of Duterte. "I'm expecting a good response from the ambassador but of course we have to see the response translate into action, meaning protection of our OFWs," Cayetano declared (*CNN Philippines 2018*).

Regardless of the major economic benefits that domestic workers' employment and remittance contributions provide for the Filipino economy, with about 260,000 domestic workers working in Kuwait, the sending state upheld the labor deployment ban for several months. The ban continued despite a strong appeal from the Kuwaiti government and organized business interests that placed additional pressure on the Filipino government to immediately reopen the domestic work market. Kuwait's response to the Philippines' restriction policy was akin to the Emirates' attempt at diversification: on February 13, 2018, Kuwait authorized Al Durra Recruitment Company, the state-owned recruitment agency, to identify migrant workers from Indonesia, Vietnam, Bangladesh, and Nepal (*Kuwait News Agency 2018*). By April 3, 2018, General Talal Al-Maarifi, Head of the country's General Department of Residency Affairs, told AFP that Kuwait would be recruiting Ethiopian domestic

workers instead of Filipino ones: “we aim to open the door to the recruitment of Ethiopian workers to fill the deficit of domestic servants and reduce prices” (AFP 2018).

Kuwaiti intransigence in taking action to protect Filipino workers in the country led the Philippines to escalate their response by shifting to a strategy of repatriation: on April 21, news broke that staff of the Philippine embassy in Kuwait City helped OFWs flee the homes of their employers without the knowledge of local authorities. Interestingly, these clandestine operations were made public after Philippine officials posted videos of diplomatic vehicles being used to transport the domestic workers to the airport (Gulf News 2018). The Philippines’ adoption of a repatriation strategy prompted a range of diplomatic protests but, as per this paper’s argumentation, also forced the Kuwaiti state into action. The protracted negotiations between Kuwait and the Philippines over the development of a new policy framework for Filipino workers’ protection ended once the adoption of a repatriation strategy led to a swift response from Kuwait: following the repatriation of Filipino OFWs, a visiting Kuwaiti delegation was dispatched to Manila in order to address the growing diplomatic crisis between the two countries.

On May 11, 2018, the two parties reached an agreement, namely the “Agreement on the Employment of Domestic Workers between Philippines and Kuwait.” The ambitious document afforded a range of new rights to OFWs in Kuwait, including the right for workers to keep their passports and mobile phones, which have been routinely confiscated by Kuwaiti employers, as well as guaranteed food, housing, clothing, and health insurance. At the same time, Kuwait agreed to employment contracts being renewed only with approval from Philippine officials, while a new, 24/7 hotline for distressed Filipinos would be activated and a special police unit would be created to respond to complaints (BBC News 2018b). In a joint press conference with the Philippine Foreign Secretary Alan Peter Cayetano, Foreign Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al Sabah acknowledged, “[a] short time ago we signed an agreement between the two countries on the employment of domestic workers,” highlighting the critical diplomatic urgency to jointly address the crises between states (Al Arabiya 2018). Duterte ordered the deployment ban to be fully lifted on May 16, 2018, effectively putting an end to this bilateral crisis.

What explains Kuwait’s shift from intransigence to cooperation, particularly regarding the ambitious codification of additional labor rights and protection measures for Filipino OFWs? It can arguably best be understood via an analysis of migration interdependence between the Philippines and Kuwait in the specific sector of domestic work. Filipino workers constitute only 11 percent of Kuwait’s migrant labor force (see Table 3), but that does not reflect Kuwait’s sectoral migration interdependence vulnerability. Kuwait, a country of 1.3 million citizens, currently employs more than 660,000 domestic workers, essentially representing one domestic worker for every two Kuwaiti citizens (International Labour Organization 2015). As in the case of the UAE, a range of racial stereotypes present in Kuwaiti society have led to Filipinos being highly valued than domestic workers of other nationalities: an ILO study has identified how Kuwaiti employers are particularly drawn to Filipinos’ perceived work ethic: “it depends on the nationality [of domestic workers] whether they are allowed to go out. Filipinos are different to Ethiopians,” one interviewee declared. “Filipinos are okay to go out. Ethiopians are thin, and if they leave this may cause problems. They live in our houses.” (International Labour Organization 2015).

Thus, Kuwait’s migration interdependence vulnerability within the domestic work sector suggests that it was likely to succumb to the Philippines’ coercive strategies. Initial Kuwaiti attempts to address this vulnerability—via the publicized diversification of Kuwait’s domestic worker population from a range of other countries—did not yield results for two reasons: first, processes of domestic workers’ recruitment are lengthy, particularly if they involve countries of origin that have yet to develop the complex mechanisms of cooperation with countries of destination that are required. Thus, once the Philippines shifted to a strategy of repatriation, the sheer demand for domestic workers within Kuwait meant that the government faced intense domestic pressures to succumb to the Philippines’ demands. Second, even if the host state was able to recruit thousands of non-Filipino domestic workers within a short amount of time, local attitudes suggest that non-Filipinos would not be as valued by Kuwaitis. In the context of a society that normalized the importance of domestic work and has produced hierarchies of preferability in terms of domestic workers’ nationality, the attempt to fully replace Filipinos with Ethiopians would not be a credible solution.

Understanding Sectoral Migration Interdependence in the Philippines–GCC Corridor

The previous sections provided an in-depth examination of how a weaker sending state, the Philippines, was able to coerce two stronger host states, the UAE and Kuwait, into distinct policy shifts by employing strategies of restriction and/or repatriation of Filipino migrants. The Philippines–GCC corridor is characterized by asymmetric power and interests, given that powerful host states have little obligation to protect immigrant populations within their territory. Yet, as highlighted above, sectoral migration interdependence created the basis for issue linkage in bilateral bargaining by providing distinct incentives for the stronger actor to cooperate. The shifts in Emirati and Kuwaiti policymaking were due to pressure placed upon the two states by a weaker state, which employed tactical issue linkage to exploit migration interdependence vulnerability. In such contexts, repatriation is more likely to yield results than restriction—as is evident by Kuwait’s shift response in April 2018 compared to the drawn-out process of interstate negotiations in the Emirati case. Before concluding, it is important to examine the extent to which alternative explanations might allow for more convincing explanations of Kuwaiti and Emirati policy responses.

One could argue that the two host states would be implementing such policy shifts regardless of the Philippines’ actions, thereby constituting cases of mere correlation rather than causation. This is unconvincing for several reasons: first, GCC states have been historically reluctant to amend their long-standing *Kafala* laws and to enshrine stronger legal protections for their migrant populations. This has been well established in the relevant literature that highlights not merely the incompatibility between strong human rights laws and the authoritarian political contexts of the GCC states but the security risks that such shifts would produce considering the Gulf states’ demographic imbalances. At the same time, it bears noting that the policy shifts implemented in the two cases above refer to Filipino domestic workers, specifically. They do not seek to amend the broader legal framework of labor migration into Kuwait or the UAE, thereby undermining the argument that these changes occurred regardless of bilateral tensions with the Philippines.

Another possible explanation suggests that the GCC states are particularly vulnerable to coercion from sending states. Their dependence on migrant workers across their national economies leaves them open to such attempts at leverage when bilateral relations sour. This is true to some extent: the GCC states have been engaging in a long-term process of reducing their dependence on migrant workers via processes of labor force nationalization. Yet, there is scant empirical evidence of successful attempts at interstate leverage in the absence of migration interdependence vulnerability: Indonesia's May 2015 imposition of a deployment ban following the execution of two domestic workers in Saudi Arabia, for instance, did not lead to any favorable policy changes for Indonesians across the GCC (Whitemann 2015). Similarly, the 2017 Saudi and UAE embargo on allowing their citizens to be employed in Qatar, as briefly discussed above, failed to produce any distinct policy shift in the target state. Thus, the argument that GCC states are particularly dependent on labor migration is accurate but does not allow for a full understanding of how migrants may constitute tools in bilateral power politics.

Conclusion

This article theorizes on an underexamined issue in international studies, namely the use of labor emigrants as an instrument of coercive pressure across the Global South. For a range of reasons, weaker countries of origin are not expected to engage in successful coercive tactics against stronger countries of destination. Taking inspiration from the growing literature on global migration and power politics, we expanded the concept of migration interdependence, which has yet to be employed as a theoretical lens in understanding sending-state coercion. Building on previous work across different disciplines, including international relations, international political economy, and security and migration studies, we argue that sending states have two policy options at their disposal in order to coerce host states: “restriction” and “repatriation.” Putting the framework to the tests in the case of the Philippines–GCC migration corridor, we examined how these instruments become particularly potent in the context of host states that, albeit being more powerful, remain vulnerable to migration interdependence. In particular, we examined how the Philippines was able to coerce Kuwait and the UAE into specific policy shifts involving additional protection for their domestic worker populations via tactical issue linkage that overcame structural power asymmetries.

The article points to the continuing importance of examining the interplay between power politics and cross-border mobility beyond European and North American contexts, while also beginning to unpack the concept of the “Global South” in migration studies in ways that offer fruitful avenues of future research (Missbach and Phillips 2020; Anderson 2021; Ewers et al. 2021; Zanker 2021). Only in Southeast Asia, for instance, a closer examination of major migration corridors sheds important light on key processes of sending states' migration diplomacy strategies: Thailand supported Taiwan's 1992 bid to join the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade reportedly in exchange for greater shares in Taiwan's labor quota (Chung 2020). Back in 2003, the Philippines introduced a temporary ban on domestic worker migration to Hong Kong in response to the host state's decision to impose a monthly levy on domestic workers that sought to raise revenue in the wake of the SARS epidemic (Liang 2016). Transnational labor migration between the Philippines and Singapore also frequently influences, and is influenced by, bilateral relations between host and

sending countries (Yeoh, Huang, and Gonzalez 1999). Another key sending state in the region, Myanmar, employed a strategy of restriction by refusing to officially recognize labor outflows to Thailand before 2010, in response to the host state's support of ethnic armed groups along the Myanmar–Thai border. Similarly, in 2016, Myanmar banned emigrant workers from seeking employment in Malaysia due to the Malaysian Prime Minister describing the crackdown on the Rohingya people as a “genocide” (Khemaniythathai 2021).

In this article, we also aim to unpack the international politics of labor migration in the Middle East by moving beyond the stereotype of the omnipotent Arab oil-producing country of destination. Our research has highlighted the extent to which GCC states are subject to coercive tactics by weaker states adept at the manipulation of migration interdependence. Similarly, recent work reveals, for instance, the extent to which non-state actors are involved in transnational migration to the Gulf, both at the sending-state level (Babar 2021) and at the host-state level (Malit and Tsurapas 2021). At the same time, formal and informal institutions, migrant networks, transnational practices, and the demands of global capital challenge the centrality of the Arab state in managing migration (Vora 2018; Baumann 2019). In their scramble for a sustainable, post-oil future, GCC governments draw on the interaction of migration and education policies in order to construct knowledge-based economies (Fargues 2018), akin to the role of Arab migration in the educational development of the Gulf during the twentieth century (Tsurapas 2016; Al-Rashoud 2019). In all this, the importance of power politics in understanding labor migration remains relevant as ever, given GCC states' shifting concerns—be they domestic (Beaugrand 2020), regional (Awad and Aziz 2017; Jureidini 2019), or global (Thiollet 2016).

We point to several points of interest to scholars and practitioners of international studies. For one, we demonstrate how a focus on labor migration allows for a more nuanced understanding of global affairs: labor emigrants may be employed as leverage by countries of origin, which nuances existing approaches that tend to focus on the management of refugees or labor immigrants. We also highlight how migration interdependence sheds nuanced light on power asymmetries between countries of origin and destination: countries of origin across the Global South are not necessarily “rule takers” that are duly forced into submission by weaker countries of destination. In fact, as the Philippines case studies highlighted, they can develop assertive foreign policy strategies that successfully capitalize on their relative strengths vis-à-vis other states. More broadly, we have aimed to demonstrate the empirical and analytical richness that a scholarly shift beyond analyses of South–North migration politics would offer. Beyond amending problematic approaches based on past-era Eurocentric understandings of mobility, an emphasis on South–South relations would allow for a much more nuanced and complete understanding of international relations.

Finally, we believe that this article's theorization has relevance for understanding the complex challenges involved in managing mobility: it identifies how the concept of migration interdependence can offer a complete analysis of the interplay between countries of origin and destination on a global scale. The case studies laid out here can be expanded via broader analyses of coercive strategies of countries of origin and destination, alike. At the same time, we offer a way forward for analyzing the international politics of the Global South via the analytical lens of cross-border mobility, which sheds nuanced light on a diverse range of processes, including foreign policy, interstate bargaining, and power

relations. Beyond this, we believe that this article makes progress in terms of unpacking the Global South as a concept, which remains a valuable analytical category but risks becoming overburdened in recent years. By demonstrating the complexity and empirical diversity of the Global South's engagement with cross-border mobility, we point to future research that can draw valuable insights from the non-West for theory building as we move toward a global perspective of migration politics.

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