

Australia's Border Security Dilemma: Climate Migration and Operation Sovereign Borders

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Climate Change and Migration

The phenomenon of climate change symbolises one of the most pressing issues of the 21st century (Tavares Da Costa et al., 2023). The resulting conditions of food and water scarcity, physical unsafety, and economic repression have contributed to growing patterns of human displacement and migration (Chesler, 2024; Tavares Da Costa et al., 2023). The alarming changes in the global sociopolitical landscape have compelled governments around the world to integrate climate change and environmental displacement in their security agendas, expanding military roles into border control operations (Chesler, 2024). The military involvement is particularly evident in the strategies national security organisations adopt to respond to the upsurge of “climate refugees” and manage border control

operations (McDonald, 2025; Parker, 2022). Such securitisation of borders prioritises national sovereignty and frames asylum seekers as a security threat (Hodge, 2015).

This security-focused agenda reflects Australian aggressive migration policy known as “Operation Sovereign Borders”, aimed at preventing maritime arrivals of asylum seekers (ASRC, 2013). Operation Sovereign Borders (OSB) was established in 2013 by Prime Minister Tony Abbott as a military-led border security operation (Hodge, 2015; Huynh, 2023). OSB’s missions have combined boat turnbacks, offshore processing on locations such as Nauru and Manus Island, and granting temporary visas to ensure that the incoming asylum seekers are denied permanent residence in Australia (ASRC, 2013; Huynh, 2023). To justify its policy, the government adopted a framing strategy that used the language of war and depicted asylum seekers as enemies (Hodge, 2015).

This policy intersects with the environmental crisis in the Indo-Pacific region, where the increasing rates of natural disasters and rising sea levels are displacing island populations (Parker, 2020). As climate change forces people to leave the region, larger numbers of people are seeking a new home in Australia. However, Australia’s rigorous border security suggests that the emerging flows of environmental refugees could face similar deterrence measures rather than access to asylum.

Competing Perspectives on Operation Sovereign Borders

Proponents of Operation Sovereign Borders could argue the policy achieved significant strategic effectiveness. The military-led operation was able to systematically address the issue of unauthorised maritime arrivals (Huynh, 2023; Wood, 2026). After a rapid surge of illegal arrivals in 2012, the implementation of the policy effectively reduced the illegal vessel crossings (Huynh, 2023). Some sources report that only a single vessel reached Australia in 2014, while none were reported for nearly a decade after (Wood, 2026). This total reduction presumably required fewer coastal defence forces to be actively deployed in monitoring missions, which resulted in more vital military resources and reduced operational defence costs (Huynh, 2023). Additionally, it would be possible to argue that such rigid enforcement of border security destroys the economic market for transnational human-smuggling networks, as it deters refugees from undertaking dangerous sea voyages that would probably not result in the desired asylum (Huynh, 2023). While over 1200 people drowned between 2008 and 2013 when turnbacks were inactive, there were no recorded drownings in the years after introducing the policy (Wood, 2026). Similarly, this deterrence is believed to promote equity between asylum seekers, as it stops wealthier individuals who can afford people smugglers from jumping ahead of less wealthy refugees who lack the financial means to pay for illegal transits (Huynh, 2023). Moreover, rigorous border control is argued to preserve domestic social cohesion, as it enhances public faith

in the government's immigration policies and prevents populist political extremism observed in less regulated European countries (Huynh, 2023). Such an effect of a stricter policy is particularly evident in shifting public attitude toward migration. While 78 percent of Australians in 2010 expressed extreme anxiety in regard to unauthorised boat arrivals, the proportion perceiving asylum seekers as a critical election issue halved by 2022 (Wood, 2026). According to Ipsos surveys, domestic sentiment softened so significantly that 57 percent of Australians now believe refugees make a positive contribution, three in four support a global right to asylum, and the country has successfully accepted three times as many legal asylum claims in 2023 than it did in 2013 (Wood, 2026).

On the other hand, critics of the operation oppose the effectiveness claims while also questioning the morality of the policy. Opponents argue that actions aimed at protecting national sovereignty must also respect international law and human rights (Huynh, 2023). Under the 1951 Refugee Convention, states cannot penalise asylum seekers on the basis of their mode of entry. However, OSB institutionalised a framework that treated vulnerable individuals as guilty suspects (Amnesty International, 2021; Hodge, 2015). Australian authorities also violated the international principle of non-refoulement, which prohibits transferring individuals to another jurisdiction where they would be at risk of human rights violations (Amnesty International, 2021). To clarify, by collectively expelling individuals at sea without executing individual vulnerability assessments, the authorities did not attempt to determine whether individual circumstances put asylum seekers at risk in another country, thereby possibly returning them to countries where their human rights would be abused. Amnesty International (2021) also documented breaches of the Smuggling Protocol, noting that Australian officials subjected asylum seekers to unlawful detention, denied them medical care, and forced them to endure degrading conditions. Between 2012 and 2021, the average time spent in immigration detention reached a record of 627 days, leading to severe psychological trauma and several deaths (Huynh, 2023).

Additionally, it is argued that the preoccupation with a resource-intensive maritime deterrence might divert vital resources away from other emerging national security threats and sociopolitical developments (Huynh, 2023). OSB also does not resolve the drivers of environmental displacement, but rather shifts the migration burden onto neighbouring nations (Wood, 2026). By redirecting asylum seekers to other countries, the policy has degraded international relations and undermined regional cooperation, as the Indonesian government repeatedly stated that Australian navy turnbacks and subsequent maritime boundary violations are a breach of its national sovereignty (ASRC, 2013; Huynh, 2023).

Conclusion

Australia's Operation Sovereign Borders demonstrates clear contradictions in regard to the morality and effectiveness of climate securitisation. While the military-led operation successfully prevented the arrivals of illegal vessels and asylum seekers, thereby reducing maritime mortalities, it did so by sacrificing international law, human rights, and regional cooperation. As climate change continues to degrade environmental stability across the Indo-Pacific, the number of vulnerable displaced populations will grow. The question remains whether this policy will prove sustainable in managing international migration, whose complex nature presumably requires a wider global cooperation instead of an isolationist policy purely centred on border securitisation.

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