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Driving Factors Behind Changes in Australia's Immigration Policy (2008–2013): A Case Study of Operation Sovereign Borders

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Abstract: The issue of asylum seekers and refugees has been a persistent challenge for Australia. Despite ratifying the 1951 Refugee Convention and actively participating in multilateral forums such as the Bali Process, Australia, under the Tony Abbott administration in 2013, implemented a controversial unilateral policy known as Operation Sovereign Borders (OSB). This policy emphasised a militaristic approach through "*turn-back boats*" operations, which appeared to contradict international norms and previous regional cooperation commitments. This thesis aims to analyze the factors driving this shift in Australia's foreign policy. This research employs a qualitative method utilising Charles William Kegley's Foreign Policy Analysis framework, which examines foreign policy decisions through four determinants: Feedback, Global Conditions, Internal Characteristics, and Actor Leadership. The findings indicate that the implementation of OSB resulted from the complex interaction of these four factors. First, the Feedback from the dismantling of the Pacific Solution (2008) triggered a surge in boat arrivals, creating a perception of policy failure. Second, Global Conditions, specifically the global trend of rising refugee numbers combined with Australia's isolated geostrategic position, facilitated maritime interception. Third, Internal Characteristics, including robust military capabilities, the economic burden of onshore processing, and the Coalition Party's electoral victory, provided domestic political legitimacy. Finally, Tony Abbott's Actor Leadership, characterised by conservative values that prioritised border sovereignty over normative international obligations, served as a primary catalyst. The study concludes that OSB is a manifestation of Australia's national security interests (*realpolitik*), overriding humanitarian approaches and multilateralism.

Keywords: Australia, Operation Sovereign Borders, Foreign Policy, Asylum Seekers, Foreign Policy Analysis.

INTRODUCTION

The issue of asylum seekers and refugees has long been a major concern for many countries around the world. This problem has become a global challenge that persists to this day. Various efforts have been undertaken, particularly by refugee-receiving countries, through policies designed to manage the flow of asylum seekers and refugees. Over time, their numbers

have increased significantly due to the escalation of armed conflicts in various countries, forcing individuals to flee their homelands suddenly for safety.

Based on UNHCR data in 2017, the number of individuals displaced due to persecution, conflict, and violence reached 2.9 million people, and this number rose drastically to 68.5 million people by the end of the same year. Specifically, the global refugee population reached 25.4 million, with 19.9 million under the protection of UNHCR, while 5.4 million were Palestinian refugees under the mandate of UNRWA. Additionally, there were 3.1 million asylum seekers and approximately 40 million internally displaced persons (*IDPs*). *IDPs* refer to individuals or groups forced to leave their homes due to armed conflict, widespread violence, human rights violations, natural disasters, or man-made disasters, without crossing an internationally recognised border.

To protect the rights of refugees, an international convention specifically regulating the status of refugees and asylum seekers was established, namely, the 1951 Refugee Convention. This convention defines refugees and outlines their rights and obligations. It also elaborates the responsibilities of receiving states in providing protection and fulfilling the basic rights of refugees and stateless individuals. The convention was held at the UN Office in Geneva from 2 to 25 July 1951. To date, 144 countries have signed and ratified the 1951 Convention. Australia signed and ratified the Convention on 22 January 1954. Australia has become one of the destinations for asylum seekers and refugees because it is a party to the 1951 Convention. Most asylum seekers migrate to Australia due to violence, persecution, and conflict in their home countries. Australia is considered capable of providing protection, leading many asylum seekers to seek refugee status and access to the same rights enjoyed by Australian citizens. Graph 1.1 shows that from early 2012 to mid-2013, there was an increase in the number of asylum seekers attempting to reach Australia by boat, exceeding 35,000 people between January 2012 and July 2013, with monthly arrivals surpassing 3,000 between March and July 2013.

There are two main methods used by asylum seekers to reach Australia. The first is through *air routes* using aeroplanes. In this case, they are required to have travel documents and visas issued by their home countries. Failure to meet these requirements results in deportation to the point of origin at the airline's expense. The second method is through *sea routes* using boats. Those choosing this route generally come from countries with strict travel restrictions, making it difficult or impossible to obtain official travel documents. During this period, entry through air routes remained limited. Although some individuals entered on tourist or student visas and later applied for asylum, the number was significantly lower than that of those arriving by sea. Data indicate that only 6,000 to 10,000 people per year applied for asylum after arriving by air. In 2012, most asylum seekers arriving by sea were from conflict-affected countries: Afghanistan (2,940), Sri Lanka (2,334), Iran (1,317), Pakistan (784), and Iraq (440). Indonesia served as a transit point before reaching Australia, considered a strategic route for irregular maritime travel. In 2010, 134 boats carrying 6,535 passengers arrived in Australia; in 2011, 69 boats carried 4,565 passengers; in 2012, 278 boats transported 17,202 passengers; and in 2013, 218 boats carried 15,182 passengers.

These figures show that the number of asylum seekers reaching Australia each year remained high. In response, then-Prime Minister Tony Abbott introduced a new policy prohibiting entry via irregular maritime routes using wooden boats, known as *Operation Sovereign Borders* (OSB). The Australian government stated that OSB aimed to prevent human smuggling and reduce the deaths of asylum seekers attempting the sea journey. Its implementation involved turning back vessels lacking proper travel documents. OSB sought to stop *Suspected Illegal Entry Vessels* (*SIEVs*).

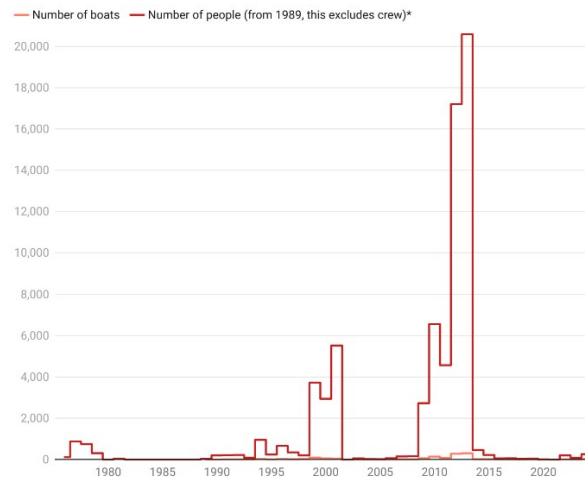


Figure 1: The annual number of boat arrivals and persons arriving in Australia.

Operation Sovereign Borders is a policy designed to halt maritime arrivals through a regional approach involving interventions in origin countries, transit countries, and maritime zones. The operation is coordinated by a joint-agency task force led by a three-star general. Its implementation consists of four main elements: a) The Disruption and Deterrence Taskforce, under the Australian Federal Police, working with origin and transit countries, especially Indonesia, to prevent irregular departures through intelligence operations, joint patrols, human smuggler arrests, and information campaigns. b) The Maritime Border Command, responsible for detecting and intercepting vessels approaching Australian waters, conducting air and sea patrols, and directing intercepted vessels back to departure points or to offshore detention facilities. c) Offshore Detention Operations, managed by the Department of Home Affairs, are responsible for handling individuals reaching offshore territories, placing them in detention centers such as Nauru or Manus Island during processing. d) Repatriation and Removal Operations, also under the Department of Home Affairs, manage temporary accommodation facilities and the process of removal or transfer to third countries.

The policy has drawn international criticism due to its confrontational nature and perceived disregard for the safety of asylum seekers travelling by sea. Indonesia expressed strong objections, stating that the policy negatively affected the country as a transit state. In May 2015, the Australian Navy ordered a boat to return to Indonesian waters and allegedly paid AUD 32,000 to ensure that the boat did not proceed to Australia. This bribery incident illustrated Australia's normative dilemma between respecting its obligations under international law, particularly the non-refoulement principle, and implementing deterrent measures inconsistent with transparent and standard procedures. Critics argue that Australia attempted to avoid its international responsibilities for refugee protection.

Indonesia was adversely affected, as turn-back operations forced asylum seekers to return with unclear status. Several countries, including Sweden, Norway, Canada, Fiji, France, Switzerland, and Germany, criticised Australia in UN forums for prioritising national security over humanitarian concerns, despite being a party to the 1951 Convention and the non-refoulement principle. OSB also strained Indonesia, which is not a signatory to the 1951 Convention and thus does not share equivalent obligations. Since the implementation of turnbacks, Indonesia has had to accommodate increasing numbers of rejected asylum seekers. According to UNHCR (2022), Indonesia hosted more than 13,700 refugees and asylum seekers, many of whom were affected by Australia's policy.

The shift from multilateral cooperation to unilateral action created tensions in bilateral relations, despite Australia's previous active support of multilateral frameworks such as the Bali Process. Data from BNPB (2023) show that migrant detention centres in Indonesia have

exceeded capacity, leaving thousands without adequate basic services. Indonesia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs reported that OSB burdened Indonesia's migration infrastructure and posed challenges to regional stability (Kementerian Luar Negeri RI, 2023). This shift highlights a puzzle: the inconsistency between Australia's stated commitment to multilateral cooperation and its unilateral implementation of OSB. This contradiction is crucial to examine in the context of Australia–Indonesia relations and regional migration governance.

This study aims to analyze Australia's policy shift toward asylum seekers through Operation Sovereign Borders and its impact on bilateral relations with Indonesia. Specifically, it seeks to understand how this shift reflects Australia's transition from multilateral cooperation to unilateral action in managing irregular migration in the Asia-Pacific region. This research explores factors driving the policy shift and its implications for regional stability and diplomatic dynamics. The study also examines how Australia's turn-back policy increases the burden on Indonesia as a transit country, leading to rising numbers of asylum seekers stranded in Indonesia. In doing so, it investigates how this unilateral policy affects Indonesia's migration governance and regional cooperative responses. The study contributes academically by analysing the relationship between immigration policy and international political dynamics, revealing contradictions between Australia's multilateral commitments and its domestic security-oriented practices. Practically, the study offers policy insights for Australia and Indonesia to develop more effective and sustainable approaches to asylum and refugee issues.

Given the complexity of Australia's policy decisions toward asylum seekers, particularly during the period leading up to and throughout the implementation of Operation Sovereign Borders, this research requires an analytical framework capable of explaining how external pressures, domestic political dynamics, and leadership choices interact in shaping foreign policy outcomes. To understand why Australia adopted increasingly deterrence-based measures and how these choices influenced its relations with neighboring countries such as Indonesia, it is essential to employ a foreign policy framework that captures both structural and agent-based determinants. For this reason, this study draws on Charles William Kegley's Foreign Policy Analysis model, which provides a comprehensive way to assess how global trends, internal characteristics, and political leadership jointly produce foreign policy decisions and generate feedback affecting subsequent policymaking processes.

Foreign policy refers to the actions, strategies, and methods pursued by a state toward other states or international actors to influence their goals and activities and ultimately achieve its own national interests (Sorensen, 2014). In this research, the analytical framework draws upon Charles William Kegley's concept of foreign policy as presented in *World Politics: Trend and Transformation*. Kegley conceptualizes foreign policy as an input–output process, where the formulation of policy is shaped by several inputs that ultimately produce an output, foreign policy, and subsequently generate feedback that influences future decision-making (Blanton, 2010). These inputs consist of global conditions, internal characteristics, and actor leadership, each of which plays a significant role in determining the direction and nature of a state's foreign policy.

According to Kegley, foreign policy is shaped by external pressures originating from global conditions. These conditions refer to international dynamics and events that affect a state's strategic choices, including what he calls global trends, issues such as global warming, terrorism, food insecurity, and nuclear weapons development. These global trends alter the broader international environment and often compel states to formulate policies in response to shifting circumstances. Another important aspect of global conditions is the distribution of power within the international system. The structure of polarity, whether unipolar, bipolar, or multipolar, affects states' foreign policy behaviour and their preferences for cooperation or alignment. For instance, in a unipolar system dominated by a single great power, states often exhibit tendencies toward military intervention or close alignment with the dominant power's

preferences (Blanton, 2010). Kegley also incorporates geostrategic factors into global conditions, noting that geography, natural resources, strategic location, and environmental features significantly shape a state's foreign policy options. States with advantageous geostrategic positions, such as the United States with its isolated geographic placement between Europe and Asia, are often able to pursue their foreign policy objectives with fewer external constraints and greater strategic autonomy.

In addition to global conditions, domestic or internal characteristics play a critical role in shaping foreign policy. Since foreign policy aims to secure national interests, internal factors such as military capability, economic capacity, and political structures directly influence policy choices. Military capability is particularly central, as states calculate their foreign policy strategies based on relative military strength, the availability of personnel, the sophistication of weaponry, and the allocated defence budget. These factors determine a state's ability to project power externally or respond to security threats. Economic conditions likewise affect foreign policy, with indicators such as industrial development, participation in international trade, and domestic prosperity shaping the state's capacity to engage internationally. Furthermore, the type of government influences how foreign policy is made and whose interests it reflects. Autocratic regimes allow leaders wide autonomy in determining policy outcomes, while democratic systems incorporate constraints from public opinion, political parties, and the media, all of which play a role in shaping the policy-making process (Blanton, 2010).

Beyond structural and systemic conditions, Kegley also emphasises the importance of actor leadership in foreign policy formulation. This refers to the individual political elites or state leaders responsible for making foreign policy decisions. While personal characteristics alone do not automatically determine policy outcomes, they become influential under certain conditions, particularly when leaders possess strong authority, legitimacy, or insulation from public pressures. Margaret G. Hermann's work further elaborates on this by identifying variables such as leaders' worldviews, political styles, motivations, foreign policy experience, and socialization into leadership roles, all of which can shape how they perceive issues and interpret strategic choices (Blanton, 2010). These individual-level traits interact with systemic and domestic factors, enabling leaders to influence policy directions when circumstances allow.

In Kegley's model, the foreign policy output, once implemented, generates feedback that loops back into the policy-making process. This feedback can alter the global, domestic, or leadership contexts that shape future policy decisions, creating a continuous and dynamic cycle of adjustment. This study applies Kegley's Foreign Policy Analysis framework by operationalizing the three determinants, global conditions, internal characteristics, and actor leadership, to examine how these factors shaped Australia's formulation of Operation Sovereign Borders (OSB) and how the policy's resulting feedback influenced subsequent foreign policy choices and Australia-Indonesia relations.

This tension between Australia's regional commitments, its unilateral border enforcement practices, and the resulting implications for Indonesia forms the core puzzle of this study, leading to the central research question: Why did Australia implement Operation Sovereign Borders (OSB) despite its existing commitments to multilateral cooperation on refugee and asylum-seeker issues?

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research approach with a deductive method in a single case study. Qualitative research aims to explore and understand various events, group behaviors, facts, or specific subjects, to build concepts that provide insights into social phenomena (Djamba & Neuman, 2002). Unlike quantitative research, qualitative research does not rely on statistical models to measure the intensity or accuracy of variables. Instead, it focuses on textual or narrative data rather than numerical data (Lamont, 2015). Lamont (2015)

identifies several primary data collection methods in qualitative research, particularly in international relations studies: (a) archival and document-based research, (b) media and secondary data collection, (c) internet-based research, and (d) interviews. The deductive approach starts from general theories or concepts and moves toward specific testing to understand particular phenomena. This method is often used to test hypotheses or ideas derived from existing theories (Bryman, 2016). Deductive research typically follows a systematic structure: (a) identifying relevant theories, (b) developing hypotheses linking theoretical elements, (c) collecting data to test the hypotheses, and (d) evaluating the results to determine whether the data support the hypotheses (Creswell, 2014). Deductive research is appropriate when a study has a strong conceptual framework and seeks to explain causal relationships between variables (Blaikie, 2010). In this research, the deductive approach is used to explain why Australia implemented Operation Sovereign Borders (OSB), which contrasts with its commitments under the 1951 Refugee Convention.

This study relies primarily on secondary data collected through desk and library research. The sources include official websites, publications, articles, reports, and online news relevant to the research topic. Key data sources include the Parliament of Australia, which provides reports on immigration issues, the Refugee Council of Australia for statistics on asylum-seeker arrivals, and other official sites related to OSB. Additionally, peer-reviewed journals, academic articles, and credible news sources are used to ensure the reliability and validity of data. To further strengthen data validity, triangulation and cross-checking techniques are applied by comparing information from multiple sources to ensure consistency and accuracy. Data analysis involves careful examination of verified and high-quality sources. The collected data are analyzed using relevant theories and concepts, allowing the researcher to explore relationships between variables, such as political factors and international legal considerations affecting Australian policy, including OSB. This method enables the researcher to answer the central research question: why did Australia implement OSB despite being a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention?

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the empirical findings of the study and interprets them through the lens of Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA). The analysis integrates historical data, policy feedback, global structural dynamics, domestic politics, and leadership agency to provide a comprehensive understanding of why Australia adopted Operation Sovereign Borders (OSB) in 2013. Citations are shown in APA placeholder format.

1. Policy Feedback and the Escalation of Irregular Maritime Arrivals

The findings show that OSB was strongly shaped by feedback from prior policy cycles, particularly the termination of the Pacific Solution in 2008. According to FPA, feedback occurs when the output of one policy alters the subsequent policymaking environment and becomes part of the next input (Kegley & Blanton, 2016). This mechanism was clearly observable in the Australian case.

After the Pacific Solution was dismantled, the number of irregular maritime arrivals (IMAs) increased sharply. The data demonstrate that arrivals rose from just 161 people in 2008 to 2,726 in 2009, and continued escalating in subsequent years. Policymakers and public officials interpreted this increase as a direct consequence of relaxing deterrence measures, reinforcing the narrative that a “softening” of policy had created strong pull factors for asylum seekers and smugglers (Phillips & Spinks, 2013; Refugee Council of Australia, 2014).

Table 1 Boat Arrivals in Australia, 2009–2012

Year	Number of Boats	Crew	Number of People (Exclude Crew)
2009	60	141	2726
2010	134	345	6555
2011	69	168	4566
2012	75	138	5459

Source: Parliamentary Library & Australian Customs

This interpretation, regardless of the extent to which it reflected the full complexity of global displacement dynamics, became a central justification for a new, stricter policy framework. The Labor government’s inability to stabilize arrivals between 2008 and 2013 further strengthened political arguments that a drastic shift was necessary (McAdam, 2015).

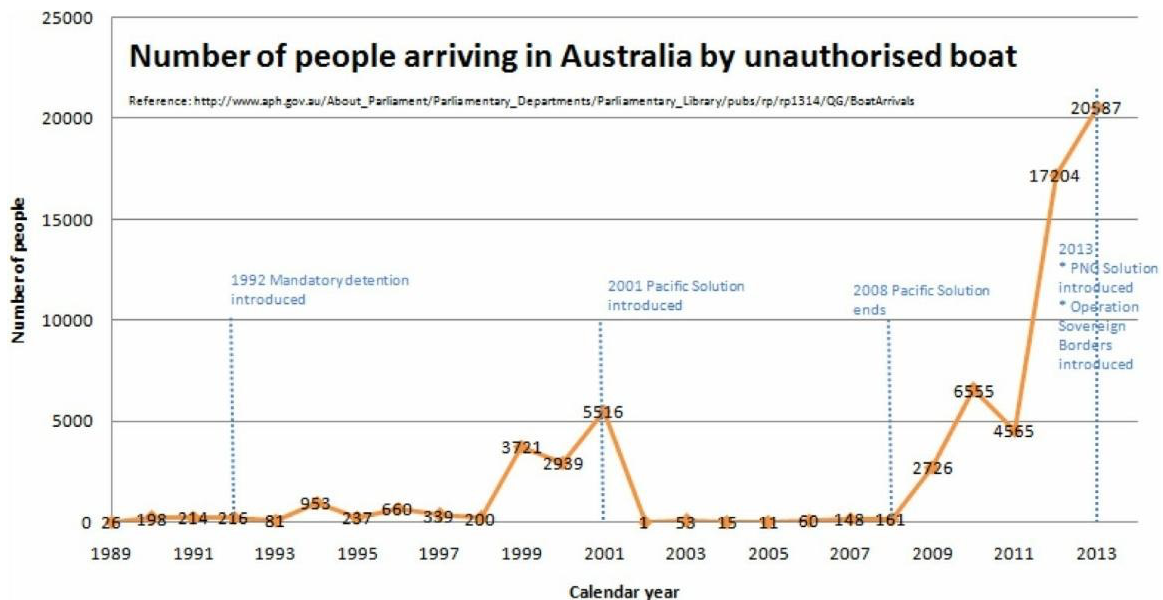
Thus, OSB emerged not as a spontaneous innovation but as a reactive correction to perceived failures of the previous policy regime. This supports the core FPA proposition that foreign policy decisions must be understood within sequences of earlier choices that structure later preferences (Hudson, 2014).

2. Global Conditions and Structural Pressures

a. Global Refugee Trends and Regional Smuggling Networks

The rise in global forced migration during the early 2010s, driven by the war in Afghanistan, the conflict in Sri Lanka, and instability in Iraq, played a central role in shaping Australia’s policy environment. These conflicts intensified refugee flows into Southeast Asia, where many asylum seekers used Indonesia and Malaysia as transit states (UNHCR, 2013).

From the perspective of Australian policymakers, the growing use of maritime routes, combined with the activities of smuggling networks, reframed humanitarian movement as a transnational security issue (Pickering & Ham, 2014). This securitized narrative was later central to the political discourse that justified OSB.



Grafik 1 Trend of Irregular Maritime Arrivals to Australia, 1989–2013. Source: Parliamentary Library of Australia (2014).

As observed in Figure 1, IMAs declined sharply during the Pacific Solution era (2001–2007), but surged again after the policy was abolished. The spike reached an unprecedented 20,587 arrivals in 2013, the largest in Australian history. Government reports described the

situation as a “border emergency” requiring an extraordinary response (Australian Customs, 2014).

The data indicate that decision-makers interpreted these trends not only as humanitarian pressure, but as a structural threat to border sovereignty. This aligns with FPA’s emphasis on how global stimuli become integrated into national perception filters and shape decisionmaking (Kegley & Blanton, 2016).

b. Multipolar Competition and Regional Influence

Although refugee flows were the most direct global driver, the broader strategic environment in the Pacific also influenced the formation of OSB. The Indo-Pacific region during the 2010s was characterized by rising multipolarity, with China increasing its economic presence in Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, and Fiji (Zhang, 2017).

Australian policymakers saw these shifts as potentially undermining their traditional role as the primary security provider in the Pacific (Wesley, 2015). Maintaining leadership required demonstrating continued capacity to manage regional stability, including migration flows that passed through Pacific transit states. This geopolitical backdrop strengthened Australia’s rationale for using offshore processing arrangements in Nauru and Papua New Guinea, which reinforced Australian influence and maintained regional dependencies.

c. Geostrategy and the Operational Feasibility of OSB

Australia’s geographic position was not merely a contextual factor, it was an active resource enabling the implementation of OSB. As an island continent with thousands of kilometers of coastline and substantial distance from the mainland to refugee-producing regions, Australia was uniquely positioned to externalize its border controls.



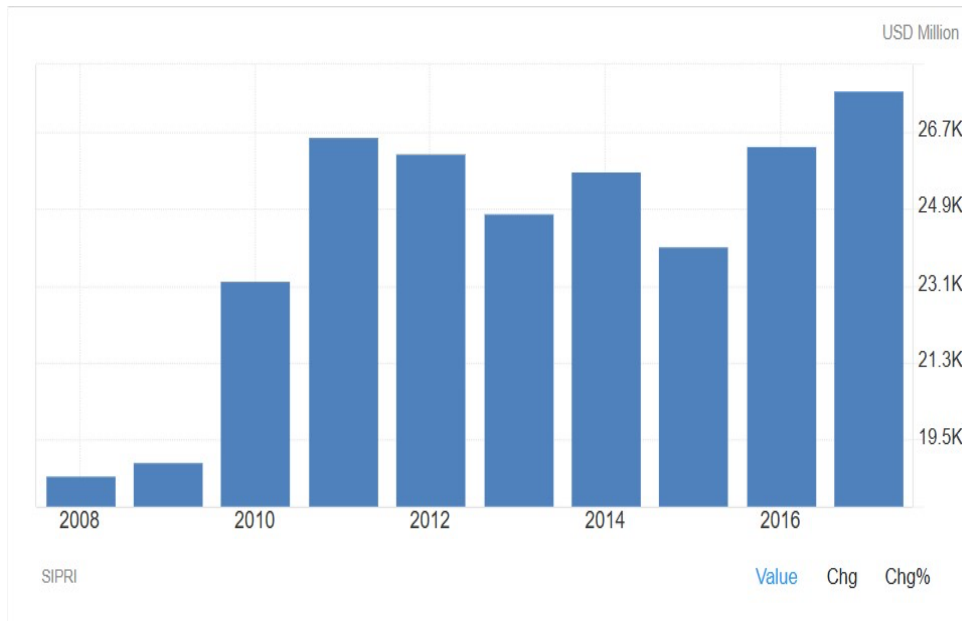
Figure 2 Map of Australia, accessed from <https://id.wikipedia.org/wiki/Portal:Australia/Peta>

This geographic isolation made turnback operations feasible and justified offshore processing: because arrivals had to transit via Indonesia or PNG, these states became logical partners in Australia’s spatial strategy of deterrence. This aligns with the FPA understanding that geography can shape strategic preferences and expand available policy tools (Dyson, 2016).

3. Domestic Political and Institutional Drivers

a. Military Capability as an Enabling Condition

The Royal Australian Navy (RAN) and the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) possessed the technological and logistical capacity to conduct sustained maritime interception operations. OSB required ongoing surveillance, rapid deployment, and substantial vessel capability, all of which were supported by a decade of military modernization.

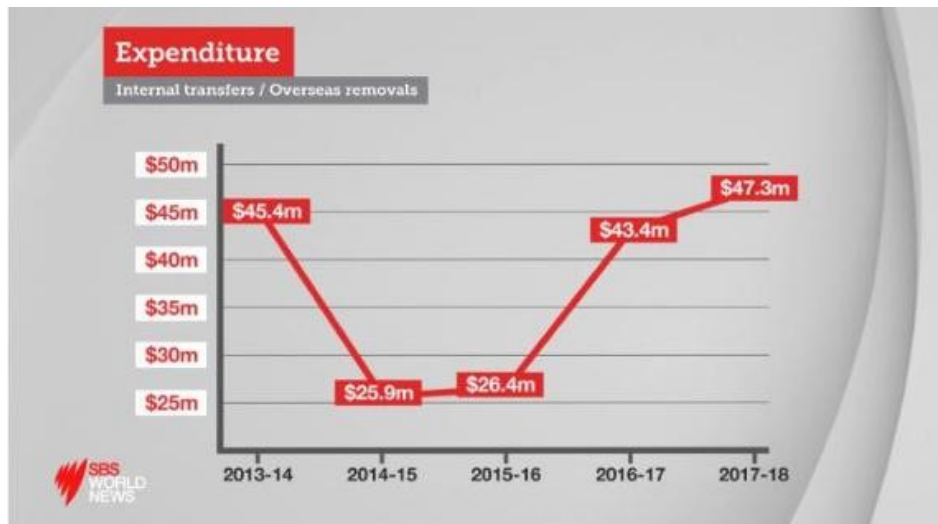


Grafik 2 Australian Military Expenditure, 2009–2018. Source: Trading Economics, [<https://tradingeconomics.com/australia/military-expenditure>]

Even though defense spending experienced fluctuations during this period, it remained sufficiently high to support large-scale operations (Department of Defence, 2019). This capability shaped policymakers’ confidence in adopting an overtly militarized border strategy, reflecting the FPA claim that states evaluate policy options through assessments of their material capacity (Kegley & Blanton, 2016).

b. Economic Pressures and the Cost Burden of Processing

The results also show that economic considerations influenced the design of OSB. Before 2013, the government spent billions annually on detention, health services, transport, and processing for IMAs (SBS News, 2014). As arrivals increased, these costs escalated significantly.



Grafik 3 Australian Expenditures on Asylum Seeker Management. Source SBSNews, diakses dari <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/exclusive-government-spent-78-million-transporting-asylum-seekers-last-year>

Political actors framed OSB as a way to reduce these expenses by preventing arrivals entirely, rather than processing them domestically. This “cost efficiency” argument was used repeatedly in parliamentary debates and media discourse, creating bipartisan pressure to adopt stronger deterrence (Parliamentary Library, 2014).

c. Public Opinion, Media Framing, and Electoral Incentives

Domestic political dynamics were central to OSB’s adoption. Public opinion polling from 2012–2013 showed growing anxiety about boat arrivals, with a majority of Australians supporting vessel turnbacks and offshore processing (Lowy Institute, 2014). Media coverage played a major role in shaping these perceptions. High-profile incidents, such as drownings at sea, overcrowded boats, and smuggling arrests, were widely publicized, contributing to a narrative of border crisis (Every & Augoustinos, 2007).

In the 2013 federal election, Tony Abbott and the Liberal–National Coalition capitalized on this sentiment by placing border security at the center of their campaign. The slogan “Stop the Boats” became one of the most successful political messages of the decade, framing OSB not only as a policy choice but as an electoral mandate (Kelly, 2014). These dynamics reflect FPA’s assertion that domestic actors, institutions, and political incentives shape foreign policy outcomes, even when the issue concerns external behavior (Hudson, 2014).

4. Leadership Agency: Tony Abbott as the Central Catalyst

While structural factors shaped the environment, leadership was pivotal in transforming these pressures into a militarized policy. Tony Abbott’s ideological orientation, political rhetoric, and personal decision-making were instrumental in shaping OSB’s final form.

Abbott’s long-standing ties to conservative politics and his admiration for John Howard’s Pacific Solution deeply influenced his interpretation of border challenges (Mares, 2016). Abbott repeatedly portrayed asylum seekers arriving by boat as a national security threat and emphasized the need for decisive action. His rhetoric, such as

“This is our country and we decide who comes here,”

closely echoed Howard’s earlier framing, reinforcing a continuity of securitization (Abbott, 2012; Howard, 2001).

A key figure supporting Abbott was Major General Jim Molan, whose expertise in military planning shaped OSB’s operational structure. Molan argued that uncontrolled migration could overstretch Australia’s demographic capacity and threaten social stability,

reinforcing the securitized narrative that legitimate asylum flows and smuggling networks must be addressed through coercive enforcement (Molan, 2016).

Under FPA, leadership acts as the bridge between structural conditions and policy output (Houghton, 2018). In the case of OSB, Abbott's leadership was decisive. Although external pressures mattered, the choice to militarize migration management and implement aggressive turnback operations reflected a subjective policy preference, not an inevitable structural outcome.

Overall, the findings indicate that the emergence of Operation Sovereign Borders was the outcome of a complex interaction between multiple layers of influence rather than a single dominant cause. Policy feedback from the dismantling of the Pacific Solution established a foundational perception within government that earlier approaches had failed, creating a sense of urgency to re-establish deterrence. This perception interacted with global refugee movements and shifting regional dynamics, which together reinforced the idea that Australia was facing growing external pressures that required a stronger and more coordinated response.

At the same time, Australia's geostrategic position and military capability made it practically feasible to design a maritime interdiction and offshore processing regime of the scale implemented under OSB. These material and geographic conditions shaped policymakers' sense of what options were realistically available and effective. Domestically, rising public concern over maritime arrivals, media amplification of border-related incidents, and the political salience of migration during the 2013 election made border control a highly charged electoral issue. This political climate provided both legitimacy and strong incentives for adopting a more assertive approach.

Finally, leadership played a decisive role in translating these pressures into a coherent policy outcome. Tony Abbott's interpretation of the situation, influenced by his ideological commitments and political strategy, was central in pushing for a militarized border operation. His framing of maritime arrivals as a security threat, supported by advisers such as Major General Jim Molan, converted structural challenges into a policy agenda that prioritized deterrence, secrecy, and enforcement.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that OSB cannot be understood simply as a reaction to rising refugee flows or domestic political pressures alone. It was shaped by the convergence of historical policy legacies, global structural conditions, operational capacities, public sentiment, and highly influential leadership decisions. In the context of Foreign Policy Analysis, OSB illustrates how foreign policy emerges from the simultaneous interplay of structural forces, institutional dynamics, and the subjective beliefs and choices of political leaders.

CONCLUSION

This research has unpacked the complex dynamics of Australian foreign policy through the case study of the 2013 implementation of Operation Sovereign Borders (OSB). Using Charles William Kegley's Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) framework, the study clarifies the fundamental reasons Australia adopted a unilateral and militarized approach despite its longstanding commitment to international multilateral norms. Based on the synthesis of data and the analysis of the key determinants, several crucial insights emerge.

The findings show that policy Feedback functioned as the primary causal determinant that shifted the direction of Australia's border policy. The abolition of the Pacific Solution in 2008 by the Labor government created what was widely interpreted as a "security gap." The data reveal a significant positive correlation between this policy reversal and the sharp rise in irregular maritime arrivals between 2009 and 2012. The inadequacy of the softer approach produced negative feedback in the form of a domestic political crisis, compelling the state to recalibrate its strategy toward a restrictive model. Thus, OSB should not be understood as an

entirely new initiative but rather as a reactive and corrective response to the perceived ineffectiveness of the previous policy framework.

Global Conditions provided the broader structural environment that enabled Australia's unilateral actions. Rising instability in asylum seekers' countries of origin, such as Afghanistan and Sri Lanka, was not interpreted through a purely humanitarian lens but was instead filtered through a process of securitization. Refugee flows were reconstructed discursively as threats to border sovereignty, thereby legitimizing the deployment of military instruments. At the same time, Australia's geostrategic position as an island continent offered natural strategic advantages. Its geographic isolation allowed the state to apply a form of "forward defense," intercepting boats at sea long before they reached the mainland, an option unavailable to states with open land borders. Regional hegemony further strengthened Australia's position. Amid increasing regional power polarization, Australia leveraged its economic and political asymmetries over Pacific Island states such as Nauru and Papua New Guinea. Their dependence enabled Australia to externalize its international obligations by establishing offshore processing centers, thereby consolidating its dominance in shaping regional migration governance.

Internal Characteristics provided both the capacity and legitimacy required for OSB's implementation. Economic rationality played a central role: the escalating cost of domestic asylum processing, which reached billions of dollars, became a powerful justification for adopting a more stringent approach. OSB was framed as a long-term budgetary efficiency measure, even though it required substantial initial military investment. Military capability served as another crucial enabler. The readiness and modernization of the Royal Australian Navy and Air Force provided the technical preconditions for enforcing maritime blockades effectively; without these capabilities, the doctrine of turning back boats would have remained merely rhetorical. Democratic dynamics were equally influential. The decisive victory of the Coalition in the 2013 federal election granted Tony Abbott's government strong political legitimacy to carry out its hardline campaign promises, supported by a polarized public shaped by persistent media narratives about an impending "boat invasion."

Leadership Agency ultimately functioned as the decisive variable that translated structural pressures into concrete policy action. Tony Abbott, shaped by conservative ideological commitments and a political vision aligned with his predecessor John Howard, played a pivotal role. His leadership was not simply reactive but actively shaped public discourse through the powerful "Stop the Boats" narrative. Abbott marked a paradigm shift from a diplomatic orientation to one that was more confrontational and outcome-driven, pursued in the name of national interest even at the expense of diplomatic friction with neighboring states such as Indonesia.

Taken together, the study concludes that Operation Sovereign Borders represents a clear manifestation of political realism within Australian foreign policy. When confronted with the dilemma between upholding international normative obligations, such as those embedded in the 1951 Refugee Convention, and responding to domestic security imperatives and political stability concerns, Australia consistently prioritized national interests through unilateral action.

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