

**IMPACT OF GEOPOLITICAL CRISIS ON POST-STUDY EMPLOYMENT
PROSPECTS AND MIGRATION INTENTIONS: A CONCEPTUAL REVIEW OF
INDIAN STUDENTS PURSUING HIGHER EDUCATION ABROAD**

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Abstract

Geopolitical tensions and global uncertainties have increasingly shaped the decisions of students who pursue higher education in other countries. Among the nationalities most prominently represented in global higher education, Indian students form a distinctively large and mobile cohort. This paper reviews existing scholarly literature, government policy reports, and recent developments in international education and immigration policy to examine how geopolitical crises influence post-study employment prospects and migration intentions among Indian students studying abroad. The review draws on conceptual frameworks from human capital theory, push–pull migration theory, and the theory of planned behaviour to interpret the relationship between geopolitical instability, shifting immigration policies, employment opportunities, and students' decisions about whether to remain in the host country, return to India, or relocate to a third country. The paper identifies that visa uncertainty, policy reversals, diplomatic tensions, and economic disruptions together create conditions of pronounced ambiguity for this student population. It concludes with policy recommendations for governments, universities, and students, arguing that transparent immigration pathways, institutional support systems, and stable bilateral agreements are essential to sustaining trust among internationally mobile students and maintaining the mutual benefits that international education provides to both sending and receiving countries.

Keywords: *geopolitical crises, Indian students abroad, post-study employment, migration intentions, international higher education, immigration policy, student mobility*

1. Introduction

1.1 Background: International Student Mobility in a Changing World

The movement of students across national borders for higher education has grown steadily over the past three decades. According to the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2023), more than six million students were enrolled outside their country of origin in 2022. This is three times increase since 2000. The reason for this could be the rising demand for higher quality education, prestige associated with pursuing degrees in reputed universities and anticipating higher monetary returns because of global placements. For students and their families, studying abroad has become both an educational investment and a migration strategy.

This expansion of student mobility has not occurred in a stable environment. Since 2016 in particular, a series of geopolitical shocks — including the Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom, significant immigration policy shifts in the United States under successive administrations, the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russia–Ukraine conflict, and growing diplomatic friction between major world powers — have introduced new uncertainties into international education systems. These developments have had practical consequences for students in terms of visa access, work permits, and long-term residency prospects.

1.2 Indian Students in Global Higher Education

India is currently the world's single largest source country for internationally mobile

students. According to the Institute of International Education (IIE, 2023), Indian students represented the largest foreign-student population in the United States in the 2022–23 academic year, surpassing Chinese students for the first time since 2009. In Canada, Australia, the United Kingdom, Germany, and New Zealand, Indian students also constitute one of the top three nationalities. According to estimates, more than 900,000 Indian students were enrolled in foreign universities in 2023, with numbers continuing to rise (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2023).

This rapid growth is driven by structural factors specific to India: a large and young population, intense competition for seats in elite domestic institutions such as the Indian Institutes of Technology and the Indian Institutes of Management, significant demand for postgraduate professional education, and strong aspirations for international careers and migration among educated middle-class families. Indian students tend to concentrate in fields such as engineering, computer science, business, and health sciences — disciplines that are well-positioned for employment in knowledge economies abroad (Khadria, 2018; Rajan & Bhagat, 2021).

1.3 The Role of Post-Study Employment in Migration Decisions

For the great majority of Indian students who study abroad, education seeds career ambition. Multiple studies have shown that post-study employment opportunities in the host country are among the most decisive factors in students' choice of study destination (Alberts & Hazen, 2005; Chirkov et al., 2021; Petzold & Peter, 2015). Access to post-study work visas, pathways to permanent residency, and the overall labour market climate of the host country are weighed carefully by prospective students and their families before committing to the significant financial investment that an overseas degree requires.

Geopolitical changes affect these calculations in important and sometimes unpredictable ways. When a government restricts work permits, reduces the intake of international students, or alters the criteria for permanent residency, the perceived value of a degree from that country is directly affected. Conversely, when a country expands post-study work entitlements — as the United Kingdom did when it reintroduced the Graduate Route visa in 2021 — applications from Indian students may increase substantially. Understanding how these policy shifts are shaped by broader geopolitical conditions is therefore central to understanding Indian student migration.

1.4 Research Question and Objectives

This paper addresses the following central question: How do geopolitical crises influence post-study employment prospects and migration intentions among Indian students pursuing higher education abroad? The specific objectives are:

- (a) to synthesise existing scholarly literature on international student mobility, geopolitical disruptions, and migration intentions;
- (b) to develop a conceptual framework that maps the relationships between geopolitical crises, immigration policy, employment opportunities, and migration outcomes;
- (c) to analyse how these processes work in the four main destination countries for Indian students namely the United States, Canada, United Kingdom and Australia
- (d) to draw out policy implications for governments, universities, and students themselves.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Trends in International Student Mobility

From the 1990s, there has been an exodus in movement of students from across the world

to the major universities in North America, Western Europe and Australia Faist (2014) calls such migration as 'transnational social spaces' — networks of relationships, resources, and aspirations that span national borders and do not dissolve upon graduation. According to Brooks and Waters (2011) 'many students engage in what they term 'strategic cosmopolitanism': they pursue degrees abroad not primarily for academic reasons but to accumulate cultural, social, and human capital that will serve their long-term career and migration goals'. 'This is particularly evident among Indian students, for whom a foreign degree often functions simultaneously as a qualification and as a stepping stone to permanent residency' (Bhatt & Bhatt, 2022).

The geographic distribution of international student flows has also shifted. While the United States long dominated as a destination, the post-2000 period saw diversification, with Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom growing their market shares considerably (OECD, 2023). Among Indian students specifically, Canada saw a dramatic increase through the 2010s, partly driven by its relatively accessible Post-Graduate Work Permit (PGWP) and comparatively transparent pathway to permanent residency under the Express Entry system (Bhattacharyya, 2020). These shifts demonstrate that Indian students are highly responsive to policy environments, which makes the impact of geopolitical change on their mobility particularly salient.

2.2 Geopolitical Crisis and Higher Education

'Turbulences in geopolitics cause changes in political decisions with respect to visa, work permits, personal safety and migration of students from one country' (Dang, 2020; Marginson, 2022). The US provides a classic example. From 2017 to 2021, series of policy changes to H-1B visa to restrict international students from moving to US saw a decline in applications forms for admission abroad as a scene of uncertainty was created; 'with Indian students among those most affected' (Bound et al., 2021; Kaushal, 2022).

The re-introduction of the Graduate Route visa in 2021 — allowing graduates to work for two years (three for doctoral graduates) without employer sponsorship — led to a significant rebound in Indian student applications to the United Kingdom (UKVI, 2023). This episode illustrates how geopolitical and policy pressures can be reversed, but also how damaging a period of uncertainty can be to institutional recruitment.

The COVID-19 pandemic, while not a traditional geopolitical crisis, functioned in many of the same ways: it disrupted visa processing, closed campuses, and forced students to make decisions under conditions of acute uncertainty.

2.3 Immigration Policies and Post-Study Work Opportunities

Post-study work rights have emerged as one of the most influential policy levers available to host country governments in attracting and retaining international students. Massey et al. (2018) argued that the availability of a clear pathway from student status to employment and eventually permanent residency is a key structural determinant of student destination choice, particularly for students from middle-income countries who view their education abroad as part of a longer migration strategy. For Indian students, this pathway is of particular importance given the competitive labour market in India for highly educated graduates and the significant wage differentials between India and destination countries.

In Canada, the PGWP allows international graduates to work for up to three years after graduation, and federal and provincial immigration programmes provide multiple pathways to permanent residency. In Australia, the Temporary Graduate Visa (subclass 485) allows graduates

to work for two to four years depending on their field of study. In the United Kingdom, the Graduate Route visa provides two years of open work rights following graduation. In the United States, OPT allows for twelve months of practical training, extendable by up to twenty-four additional months for graduates in STEM fields, with no direct pathway to permanent residency — a structural gap that creates significant uncertainty for Indian students given the decades-long backlogs in the H-1B and employment-based green card queues (Mehta & Ali, 2020).

These differences have real consequences for destination choice. Charlebois and Tremblay (2021) showed that awareness of post-study work rights significantly predicted students' stated preferences among competing destinations. More recently, Canada's announcement in 2024 that it would cap international student admissions and tighten PGWP eligibility led to immediate concern among prospective Indian students and was widely reported in Indian media as a policy reversal that would reduce Canada's attractiveness as a destination (Times of India, 2024).

2.4 Migration Intentions of International Students

Scholarship on the migration intentions of international students draws on several theoretical traditions. The theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen, 1991) suggests that intentions to stay or return are shaped by attitudes towards the behaviour, subjective norms (family and social expectations), and perceived behavioural control (practical ability to stay or return). Applied to international students, this framework highlights the role of both individual aspirations and structural constraints in shaping migration outcomes.

Push–pull theory, originally developed to explain rural-to-urban migration, has been extensively adapted to international student mobility (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). In this framework, students are 'pushed' towards studying abroad by conditions in their home country — competitive entrance exams, limited seats in prestigious institutions, and fewer opportunities for high-paying employment — and 'pulled' towards specific destinations by the availability of quality education, favourable work rights, and attractive living conditions. Geopolitical changes can alter both push and pull factors simultaneously: an economic crisis in India might increase push pressures, while a tightening of work visas in a destination country reduces pull factors.

Studies that directly examine the migration intentions of Indian students are relatively sparse but have grown in number in recent years. Rajan and Bhagat (2021) found that among surveyed Indian students in Canada, the majority expressed an intention to remain in Canada after graduation, with access to permanent residency cited as the primary motivation. Bhattacharyya (2020) found that visa uncertainty was the most commonly cited factor that might cause Indian students to reconsider their choice of Canada. Pandya and Mehta (2022) reported similar patterns in the United Kingdom post-Brexit context. Across these studies, the common theme is that migration intentions are highly sensitive to policy environments — specifically, the clarity, stability, and perceived fairness of immigration pathways.

3. Conceptual Framework

3.1 Framework Design and Theoretical Foundations

This paper proposes a conceptual framework to explain the chain of influence linking geopolitical crises to migration intentions among Indian students. The framework integrates insights from three theoretical traditions: human capital theory (Becker, 1964), which treats educational investment as a rational calculation of expected future returns; push–pull migration theory (Lee, 1966; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002), which explains destination choice as a function of

home-country push factors and host-country pull factors; and the theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen, 1991), which situates individual intentions within a broader context of perceived control, social norms, and attitudinal dispositions.

3.2 The Framework Diagram

Figure 1 below presents the conceptual framework in diagrammatic form. It depicts how geopolitical crises feed into immigration policy decisions, which in turn shape post-study employment opportunities, which ultimately condition migration intentions. Moderating factors influence the overall relationship, meaning that two students facing the same policy environment may arrive at different migration outcomes depending on their personal and social circumstances.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework — Geopolitical Crisis, Immigration Policy, Employment and Migration Intentions

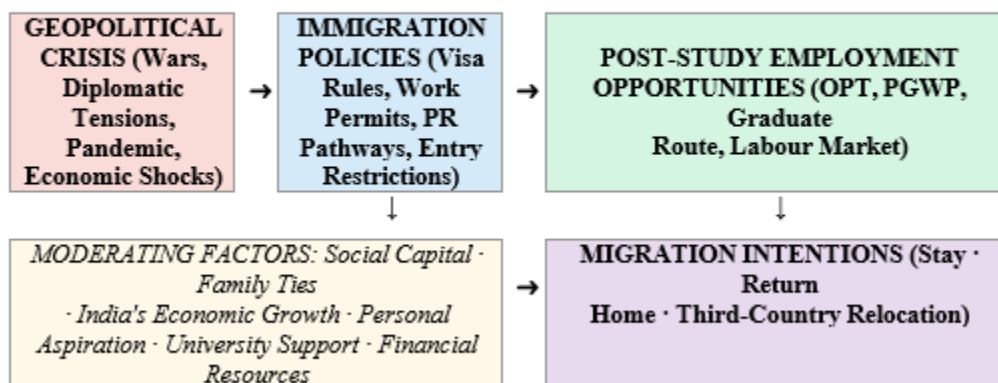


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework (Note: * = moderating factors operating across all relationships)

3.3 Explanation of Relationships

The relationship between geopolitical crises and immigration policies is characterised by political mediation: crisis do not automatically translate into policy changes, but they create political conditions — heightened concerns about national security, labour market competition, and social cohesion — that make restrictive immigration measures politically feasible or even electorally attractive. The resulting policy environment is therefore not simply a technical response to objective conditions but reflects the political economy of migration governance in the host country.

The relationship between immigration policies and employment opportunities is direct and regulatory: the legal frameworks governing work authorisation, employer sponsorship, and residency rights set the formal parameters within which students can seek employment. However, the perception of these opportunities — which is what actually shapes migration intentions at the individual level — may diverge from the formal policy reality. Students may overestimate or underestimate the difficulties they will face, depending on the quality of information available to them.

The relationship between employment opportunities and migration intentions is mediated

by a complex set of personal and social factors. A student who has strong family ties in India, or who comes from a background where return migration is normatively expected, may decide to return even when employment prospects abroad are favourable. Conversely, a student who belongs to a well-established diaspora community in the host country may be more willing to navigate uncertain policy environments because of the social support available to them. These variations underscore the importance of avoiding overly deterministic readings of the framework.

4. Tables and Statistical Overview

Table 1: Top Study Destinations for Indian Students — Key Features (2023)

Country	Est. Indian Students (2023)	Primary Visa/Work Permit	Post-Study Work Route
United States	~268,000	F-1 Student Visa	OPT (12–36 months)
United Kingdom	~143,000	Student Visa (Tier 4)	Graduate Route (2 years)
Canada	~319,000	Study Permit	PGWP (up to 3 years)
Australia	~122,000	Student Visa (Subclass 500)	Graduate Temporary Visa 485
Germany	~34,000	Student Residence Permit	18-month job seeker visa
New Zealand	~11,000	Student Visa	Post-study work up to 3 years

Sources: IIE (2023), IRCC (2023), UKVI (2023), Australian Department of Home Affairs (2023), DAAD (2023)

Figure 2: Estimated Indian Student Enrolments in Major Destination Countries, 2014–2024

Academic Year	USA	UK	Canada	Australia	Total (Approx.)
2014–15	132,888	64,000	25,000	18,000	239,888
2015–16	165,918	71,500	29,000	22,500	288,918
2016–17	186,267	84,500	34,000	27,000	331,767
2017–18	196,271	95,000	40,000	30,000	361,271
2018–19	202,014	118,000	52,000	38,000	410,014
2019–20	207,846	127,000	60,000	45,000	439,846
2020–21	167,582	92,000	38,000	22,000	319,582
2021–22	199,182	118,000	72,000	55,000	444,182

2022–23	268,923	143,000	319,000	122,000	852,923
2023–24	331,602*	150,000*	290,000*	130,000*	901,602*

Sources: IIE Open Doors Reports; IRCC Annual Reports; UKVI Statistics; ABS Australia; MEA India (2023).

**Provisional/estimated.*

Table 2: Geopolitical Events and Their Impact on Indian Student Mobility, 2016–2024

Geopolitical Event	Affected Country/Region	Impact on Indian Students	Policy Response
COVID-19 Pandemic (2020–2022)	Global	Campus closures, visa delays, online learning disruption	Temporary visa extensions, online study permissions
US Immigration Policy Shifts (2017–2021)	United States	OPT uncertainty, H-1B lottery restrictions	Court rulings, limited H-1B reforms
Brexit (2016–2021)	United Kingdom	Post-study work uncertainty, currency fluctuation	Graduate Route visa re-introduced 2021
Russia–Ukraine War (2022–present)	Eastern Europe, Global	Energy cost rise, economic uncertainty, policy caution	EU countries tightened non-EU visa scrutiny
Canada Immigration Cap (2024)	Canada	Study permit reductions, PGWP restrictions	New cap on international student intake
Australia PR Policy Tightening (2023–2024)	Australia	Reduced PR pathways, English test requirements	Skills in Demand Visa announced 2023

Sources: Compiled from policy reports, press releases, and scholarly literature cited in this review.

Table 3: Factors Influencing Migration Intentions of Indian Students Abroad

Factor	Category	Influence on Stay/Return Decision	Direction
Post-study work rights	Policy	Strong work rights increase intention to stay	Stay (+)
Visa restrictions	Policy	Tighter visa rules push students towards return/third country	Return (–)
Employment opportunities	Economic	Higher job prospects in host country increase retention	Stay (+)

Family ties in India	Social	Strong family obligations encourage return	Return (–)
Geopolitical instability	Political	Increases anxiety and uncertainty, may redirect to new countries	Redirect (±)
Quality of life	Social	Better living standards abroad promote long-term settlement	Stay (+)
India's economic growth	Economic	Rising opportunities at home attract return migration	Return (+)
Discrimination/racism	Social	Negative experiences may accelerate return decision	Return (–)

Sources: Synthesised from Rajan & Bhagat (2021), Bhattacharyya (2020), Pandya & Mehta (2022), Chirkov et al. (2021).

5. Discussion

5.1 Geopolitical Developments and Student Mobility Patterns

The evidence shows Indian students respond to geopolitical signals by redirecting destinations rather than withdrawing: when the United States signalled tougher skilled-immigration stances in 2017–2021, many shifted applications to the Canada — whose clear PR pathways and generous PGWP helped enrolments rise from under 80,000 in 2015 to over 300,000 by 2023 — and to Australia and the United Kingdom (Kaushal, 2022; Bound et al., 2021). Policy reversals have altered that picture: the IRCC’s 2024 caps and PGWP tightening, together with Australia’s late-2023 move to a Skills-in-Demand visa, have already introduced fresh uncertainty for prospective students (IRCC, 2024). Overall, recurring domestic-politics-driven policy change creates institutional uncertainty even when individual reforms aim to be economically rational.5.2 Geopolitical Conditions and Employment Prospects

Post-study job chances for students from India depend on three clear channels: formal rules, economic shocks, and social climate.

1. Formal rules — for example the H-1B visa in the United States — decide who may work. These rules can create long waits and employer-dependent careers for graduates (Mehta & Ali).
2. Economic shocks — such as the COVID-19 recession or the fallout from the Russia–Ukraine war — reduce hiring and tighten graduate labour markets.

3. Social climate — rising nationalism or anti-immigrant sentiment — can make it harder for internationally educated graduates to get jobs even when laws do not change.

In the United Kingdom, for example, Brexit and the pound's fall weakened returns to a UK degree, though the reintroduced Graduate Route visa later helped restore some opportunities.

5.3 Decisions to Stay, Return, or Relocate

Migration decisions among students from India are not simply about staying abroad or returning home. Many also consider options such as moving to a third country, continuing their studies elsewhere, or engaging in circular migration. The framework used in this paper therefore treats migration intention as a multi-outcome decision influenced by both structural conditions and personal circumstances.

Research on return migration shows that India's economic growth has made returning more attractive than in the past. The expansion of the technology sector, stronger capital markets, and improved urban living conditions have increased opportunities at home (Saxenian; Kapur). Even so, higher wages and lifestyle advantages in destinations such as Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom still encourage many graduates to remain abroad. In general, geopolitical instability in host countries increases the likelihood of return or relocation, while stable immigration policies encourage long-term settlement.

The COVID-19 also changed how students and families assess risk. During the crisis, international students faced visa uncertainty, financial stress, and limited social protection. As a result, students now pay closer attention to immigration policies and political stability when choosing study destinations (Choudaha; Healey).

6. Policy Implications

6.1 Recommendations for Host Country Governments

Host governments should treat immigration policy as public communication to students and families worldwide. Abrupt, inconsistent changes or hostile rhetoric damage a country's reputation and erode trust. Protect post-study work rights and residency pathways from arbitrary reversal: give ample notice to students already enrolled. Make processes clear and easy — faster visa processing, plain-language guidance on post-study options, and reachable help channels reduce uncertainty. Finally, pursue bilateral agreements with India to offer mutual assurances and avoid policies that are perceived as hostile.

6.2 Recommendations for Universities

Universities can soften the impact of geopolitical change on students from India by taking four practical steps:

- Provide strong immigration support: keep an up-to-date advisory service, track policy changes, help students understand options, and assist with career planning.
- Advocate and provide emergency aid: speak publicly for affected students and offer short-term financial or legal help when policies change.
- Build employer links: expand internships, placement partnerships, and employer engagement so students gain work experience and improve hireability.
- Support wellbeing and belonging: offer targeted counselling, peer networks, and cultural-adjustment programs that address anxiety about uncertain immigration futures.

6.3 Recommendations for Indian Students and Families

Treat destination choice as an ongoing decision, not a one-time choice. Stay updated from official government sites, reputable news, and trusted diaspora networks instead of relying only on agents. Consider less-famous institutions or countries that offer clearer work and residency routes. Diversify across destinations, schools, and fields to reduce risk. Build skills and networks that work both abroad and at home in India so you can adapt if plans change.

7. Conclusion

This paper shows in plain terms that geopolitical shocks shape Indian students' job chances and migration plans in complex, sometimes unpredictable ways. Evidence in the review finds students react strategically to policy signals — redirecting applications, weighing return, or choosing third countries — which makes them both adaptive and vulnerable. The framework links geopolitical events → immigration rules → labour opportunities → migration intentions, while recognising personal and social moderators. For governments, the takeaway is to signal stability, clarity, and fairness; for universities, to offer real support beyond recruitment; and for students and families, to stay informed, flexible, and risk-aware. Future work should test this framework with longitudinal, mixed-method studies that follow cohorts from enrolment to post-graduation outcomes.

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