

The Rise and fall of the Australian Agricultural Visa: An Analysis of Labor Migration Policies in the Context of Regional Geopolitics

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Abstract

This article examines how domestic political dynamics and regional geopolitical considerations influenced the rise and fall of Australia's short-lived Agricultural Visa (AAV) program aimed at recruiting workers from ASEAN countries. Employing a qualitative case study approach and drawing on neoliberal economic theory, securitization theory, and complex interdependence theory, the analysis reveals key tensions. The AAV's genesis reflected neoliberal narratives of filling labor shortages, but its demise exemplified concerns over worker exploitation and adverse impacts on local labor standards. The visa also became entangled in Australia's strategic rivalry with China in the Pacific, with labor migration becoming a securitized issue. Crucially, the case exposes challenges of policy coherence, as actions in the security domain strained Australia's ASEAN relationships. The findings underscore the need for holistic approaches balancing economic needs, worker rights, regional diplomacy, and evolving security dynamics when crafting labor migration policies amidst complex global interdependencies. The AAV's failure serves as a cautionary tale about piecemeal, politically expedient migration strategies disconnected from on-the-ground realities.

Keywords: Australia Agricultural Visa; Australia; Labor Migration.

INTRODUCTION

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, Australia's agricultural sector faced unprecedented challenges. Border closures and travel restrictions severely disrupted the flow of seasonal workers, exacerbating pre-existing labor shortages in an industry heavily reliant on migrant labor (Dufty et al., 2019). In response to these challenges, the Australian Coalition government introduced the Australian Agricultural Visa (AAV) program on 12 April 2022. This initiative aimed to address workforce shortages by building upon existing labor mobility schemes, particularly the Pacific Australia Labor Mobility (PALM) program, and extending the recruitment base to include the ten member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) (DFAT, 2022a).

However, the trajectory of the AAV took an unexpected turn. Following a change in government after the May 2022 federal election, the incoming Labor administration cancelled the visa scheme in July 2022. The new government pivoted away from ASEAN, redirecting its focus back to the Pacific Islands as the primary source of agricultural workers.

This abrupt policy shift raises critical questions about the interplay between domestic political dynamics and regional geopolitical considerations in shaping labor migration policies. Specifically, this article seeks to answer: How did domestic political dynamics and regional geopolitical considerations influence the rise and fall of the Australian Agricultural Visa program, and what does this reveal about the challenges of crafting labor migration policies in the Indo-Pacific region?

The significance of this question lies in its potential to illuminate the complex, often competing factors that shape contemporary labor migration policies. In an era of increasing global interdependence, such policies are no longer solely domestic issues but are deeply intertwined with regional diplomacy, economic interdependence, and geopolitical rivalries (Castles, 2004). The case of the AAV provides a revelatory lens through which to examine these dynamics, particularly in the context of Australia's delicate balancing act between its economic needs, its historical ties with Pacific Island nations, and its growing economic engagement with Southeast Asia.

To unpack these complexities, this article employs a tripartite theoretical framework. First, neoliberal economic theory helps explain the market-driven rationale behind the AAV, viewing it as a response to the agricultural sector's demand for labor in a globalized economy (Harvey, 2007). Second, securitization theory, as advanced by the Copenhagen School of International Relations, elucidates how labor migration issues can be framed as security concerns, particularly in the context of Australia's strategic competition with China in the Pacific (Buzan et al., 1998). Third, complex interdependence theory, provides a framework for understanding how multiple channels of interaction—economic, diplomatic, and social—between Australia and its regional neighbors shaped the AAV's trajectory (Keohane & Nye, 2012).

The article proceeds as follows. First, a literature review situates the AAV within broader debates on guest worker programs globally, labor migration patterns in the Asia-Pacific, and Australia's historical labor migration policies. The theoretical framework is then elaborated, demonstrating how each theory illuminates different aspects of the AAV case. The methodology section justifies the use of a qualitative case study approach, document analysis, and comparative analysis. The case study itself provides a detailed narrative of the AAV's genesis, design, international responses, and ultimate cancellation. The analysis section applies the theoretical framework to understand the domestic political factors, regional geopolitical considerations, labor rights concerns, and policy implementation failures that shaped the AAV's fate. The conclusion synthesizes key findings, discusses policy implications for crafting more coherent and ethically grounded labor migration strategies, and suggests avenues for future research.

By dissecting the rise and fall of the AAV, this article contributes to our understanding of the challenges inherent in formulating labor migration policies that must simultaneously respond to domestic economic pressures, uphold labor rights, and navigate complex regional geopolitics. As such, it offers valuable insights not only for Australian policymakers but for all states grappling with the multifaceted challenges of managing labor migration in an increasingly interconnected yet geopolitically tense world.

The proliferation of guest worker programs in advanced economies has spurred a rich body of research examining their economic rationales, social impacts, and ethical implications. These programs, designed to fill labor shortages in low-skill sectors like agriculture, construction, and domestic work, are often touted by proponents as a "triple win"—benefiting host countries, origin countries, and migrants themselves (Ruhs, 2013). However, empirical studies have consistently challenged this optimistic narrative.

In the United States, research on the H-2A visa for agricultural workers has revealed systemic issues. Farmworker Justice documented widespread abuses, including wage theft, hazardous working conditions, and substandard housing (Farmworker Justice, 2011). These findings are echoed by Bauer and Stewart, who argue that the program's structure, which ties workers to specific employers, creates conditions ripe for exploitation (Bauer & Stewart, 2013). Similarly, studies of guest worker programs in

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Europe and the Gulf states have highlighted problems of social exclusion, lack of labor mobility, and the suppression of workers' rights (Castles, 2006; Malit & Naufal, 2016).

A key debate in the literature centers on whether such programs inherently undermine local labor standards. Critics like Ruhs and Anderson argue that by creating a class of workers with fewer rights, guest worker programs exert downward pressure on wages and conditions for all low-skill workers (Ruhs & Anderson, 2010). Conversely, proponents like Clemens contend that when properly regulated, these programs can meet labor needs without adverse effects, pointing to Canada's Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program as a model (Clemens, 2011).

These literatures provide a critical lens for evaluating the AAV. It suggests that beyond economic rationales, any analysis must consider the program's potential for worker exploitation and its impact on Australia's domestic labor standards.

The Asia-Pacific region presents a dynamic and complex landscape of labor migration, characterized by significant intra-regional flows, and predominantly from less developed to more developed economies (Hugo, 2014). Scholars have identified several key trends relevant to the AAV case.

First, Southeast Asia has emerged as a major source of low-skill labor. Countries like Indonesia, Vietnam, and the Philippines have actively promoted overseas employment as a development strategy, leading to concerns about "brain drain" and social costs in origin communities (Kaur, 2010; Yeoh, 2020). Malaysia's experience, as analyzed by Kanapathy, offers insights into the dilemmas faced by countries that are both senders and receivers of migrant labor (Kanapathy, 2008).

Second, the role of China in reshaping regional labor dynamics. China's growing economic engagement in the Pacific Islands, including infrastructure projects that employ Chinese labor (Dosch & Hensengerth, 2005). This approach has implications for traditional labor-receiving countries like Australia. This economic dimension intersects with geopolitical analyses on the "new Pacific diplomacy," which suggests that Pacific nations are leveraging competition between China and traditional partners to assert their interests (Wesley-Smith & Porter, 2010).

Third, the governance of labor migration in the region. Australia's PALM scheme, noting its development co-benefits but also critiquing its limited pathways to permanency for workers (Ball & Beacroft, 2014). In contrast, Curtain argue that seasonal worker programs, when well-designed, can be a "win-win" for Australia and Pacific nations (Curtain et al., 2019).

This regional literature underscores the need to view the AAV not in isolation, but as part of a complex web of economic interdependencies, geopolitical rivalries, and evolving governance frameworks for labor mobility.

Australia's approach to labor migration, particularly in the agricultural sector, has been marked by significant policy shifts reflecting changing economic needs and political pressures. Australia's immigration policies have evolved from the discriminatory "White Australia" policy to a more skills-focused and diverse intake, with implications for seasonal labor (Collins, 1988; Jupp, 2002).

The agriculture sector's reliance on migrant labor is well-documented. Productivity Commission reports highlight chronic labor shortages, exacerbated by the declining interest of local workers in farm work. In response, successive governments have experimented with various policy mechanisms (Productivity Commission, 2016; 2021). The introduction of the "backpacker tax" and working holiday visas as de facto farm labor policies, arguing they led to exploitation and undercut the development of more sustainable labor solutions (Hay & Howes, 2021).

The introduction of the PALM scheme (formerly the Seasonal Worker Programme) in 2012 marked a significant shift. Initial assessments by the World Bank were positive, noting benefits for both Australian farmers and Pacific workers (Doyle & Howes, 2015). However, later studies revealed instances of worker exploitation, prompting debates about the adequacy of oversight mechanisms (Kelly, 2021). These concerns echo broader critiques by scholars, who argue that Australia's temporary migration programs often prioritize economic interests over worker welfare and regional diplomacy (Mares, 2016).

This review reveals significant gaps in the literature. While there is ample research on the pitfalls of guest worker programs globally and the complexities of regional labor migration, there has been little scholarly examination of how these factors intersect in the specific case of the AAV. Moreover, the rapid policy shifts around the AAV offer a rare opportunity to study in real-time how changes in domestic politics can radically alter labor migration strategies.

In conclusion, this review establishes that the AAV case intersects with critical debates in migration studies: the ethics and efficacy of guest worker programs, the changing dynamics of labor flows in the Asia-Pacific, and the tensions in Australia's migration policy between economic demands, worker rights, and regional relationships. By examining the AAV through these lenses, this article aims to contribute not only to understanding this specific policy failure but to broader theories of how labor migration policies are shaped in an era of complex regional interdependencies.

RESEARCH METHODS

This article employs a qualitative research design, combining a single case study approach with document analysis and elements of comparative analysis. This methodological triangulation enhances the depth and reliability of our findings.

Qualitative Case Study

The heart of our methodology is an in-depth case study of the Australian Agricultural Visa (AAV). Case studies are particularly appropriate for "how" and "why" questions about contemporary events over which the researcher has little control. The AAV represents what Yin terms a "revelatory case"—its short lifespan and abrupt policy reversal offer rare insights into the real-time interplay of economic, political, and geopolitical factors in shaping labor migration policies (Yin, 2018).

Moreover, case studies allow for "thick description" that captures the complexity of a phenomenon in its context. This is crucial for our study, as understanding the AAV requires grasping the nuances of Australia's domestic politics, its regional relationships, and global debates on guest worker programs (Stake, 1995).

Critics might argue that single case studies limit generalizability (Flyvbjerg, 2006). However, our theoretical framework allows for "analytical generalization" (Yin, 2018), where findings contribute to refining and expanding theories that can be tested in other contexts.

Document Analysis

Given the recency of the AAV and the sensitivity of migration policies, primary data collection (e.g., interviews with policymakers) was not feasible. Instead, we rely on document analysis, a systematic procedure for reviewing and evaluating documents (Bowen, 2009).

Following Bowen's guidelines, we subjected these documents to content analysis, coding for themes aligned with our theoretical framework (e.g., "market demands,"

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"securitization language," "multi-channel diplomacy"). To mitigate bias and ensure credibility, we triangulated sources, particularly cross-referencing government claims with media investigations and stakeholder critiques (Bowen, 2009).

Comparative Elements

While centered on the AAV, our analysis incorporates comparative elements to enrich understanding. First, we compare responses to the AAV across ASEAN countries (Vietnam's engagement vs. Malaysia's hesitancy), illuminating how complex interdependence plays out differently across the region.

Second, we juxtapose the AAV with Australia's PALM scheme. This comparison, akin to Przeworski and Teune's "most similar systems" design (Przeworski & Teune, 1970), allows us to isolate the effect of source country selection (ASEAN vs. Pacific) on policy outcomes, given similar economic rationales and administrative structures.

Lastly, we draw selective comparisons with international guest worker programs (U.S. H-2A, Gulf kafala systems) to contextualize the AAV within global patterns of exploitation and policy failure, enhancing the external validity of our findings.

In conclusion, our methodology—a qualitative case study enriched by rigorous document analysis and strategic comparisons—is well-suited to unravel the complex factors behind the AAV's trajectory. By grounding empirical analysis in a robust theoretical framework, we aim to produce findings that are not only descriptively rich but also analytically potent, contributing to broader debates on the governance of international labor migration.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Genesis of the AAV

The Australian Agricultural Visa (AAV) emerged in a context of acute labor shortages in Australia's agricultural sector. The Productivity Commission reported that farmers were facing unprecedented difficulties in sourcing labor, a situation exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Productivity Commission, 2021). Border closures and travel restrictions severely disrupted the flow of seasonal workers, including those under the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme and working holidaymakers (DAFF, 2022).

In response to these challenges, the National Farmers' Federation (NFF) intensified its lobbying efforts. The NFF argued that labor shortages were leading to crops rotting in fields and significant financial losses for farmers (NFF, 2021). Their advocacy aligned with neoliberal arguments for market-responsive labor policies (Harvey, 2007).

The Coalition government, led by Prime Minister Scott Morrison, was receptive to these arguments. On April 12, 2022, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) announced the AAV, describing it as a "long-term, reliable workforce for Australia's agricultural sector" (DFAT, 2022a). This move was consistent with the Coalition's historically pro-business stance and its preference for sector-specific migration solutions (Jupp, 2002).

Policy Design and Target Countries

The AAV was designed to complement existing programs, particularly the PALM scheme. However, a key distinguishing feature was its target: the ten member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). This geographic focus represented a significant shift in Australia's agricultural labor sourcing strategy.

According to DFAT, the AAV would initially allow up to 10,000 workers from ASEAN countries to work in Australian agriculture, forestry, and fisheries sectors for up to three years (DFAT, 2022a). The visa's design included pathways to permanent residency, a feature absent in most guest worker programs (Ruhs, 2013). This aspect could be interpreted as an attempt to make the AAV more attractive to potential workers and to address criticisms of temporary migration schemes as exploitative (Mares, 2016).

The decision to target ASEAN countries was multifaceted. Economically, it aligned with neoliberal principles of expanding labor markets (Stiglitz, 2002). Diplomatically, it could be seen as a move to deepen Australia's engagement with Southeast Asia, a region of growing economic and strategic importance (Wesley-Smith & Porter, 2010).

International Responses

Responses from ASEAN countries varied, reflecting the complex interdependencies in the region (Keohane & Nye, 2012). Vietnam emerged as the most enthusiastic participant. On March 1, 2024, Australia and Vietnam signed implementation arrangements for the AAV, allowing up to 1,000 Vietnamese workers to come to Australia in 2024 (DFAT, 2022b). This quick engagement aligns with Vietnam's broader strategy of promoting overseas employment as a development tool (Yeoh, 2020).

In contrast, other ASEAN responses were more muted. Indonesia, despite a history of sending labor abroad, showed little interest (Coordinating Ministry for Economic Affairs, 2022). Malaysia, as reported by Channel News Asia, expressed skepticism, with officials citing concerns over "brain drain" – a perspective that complicates the neoliberal view of labor migration as purely beneficial (Channel News Asia, 2021; Kanapathy, 2008).

This reaction underscores the geopolitical dimensions of labor migration in the region, where economic policies intersect with issues of influence and alliance (Wesley-Smith & Porter, 2010).

Domestic Political Dynamics

On the domestic front, the AAV faced significant opposition from labor unions and the Australian Labor Party (ALP), revealing deep-seated divisions over the issue of temporary labor migration. The Australian Workers' Union (AWU) was among the most vocal critics, voicing concerns that extended beyond the traditional issues of worker rights and labor standards (AWU, 2021).

The AWU argued that the AAV represented a strategic misstep that could undermine Australia's longstanding relationships and influence in the Pacific region. By pivoting towards Southeast Asia as a source of agricultural labor, critics within the union contended that the policy threatened to disrupt existing labor mobility arrangements with Pacific Island nations. This disruption, they warned, could inadvertently aid China's efforts to expand its economic and diplomatic footprint in a region historically within Australia's sphere of influence.

The AWU's critique reflected a broader securitization of the labor migration debate. Rather than framing the AAV as a purely economic policy response to sector-specific labor shortages, the union's objections elevated the issue to one of national security and geopolitical strategy. This securitizing move effectively recast a visa program ostensibly aimed at addressing domestic labor needs as a potential threat to Australia's regional interests and strategic positioning vis-à-vis China.

The ALP, then in opposition, echoed these concerns. Labor parliamentarians criticized the AAV not only on traditional grounds of potential worker exploitation and adverse impacts on local labor markets but also through the lens of regional diplomacy

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and strategic competition. They argued that the policy's implementation was deeply flawed, failing to deliver the promised agricultural workers while simultaneously straining Australia's ties with Pacific Island nations – relationships that Labor viewed as crucial to counterbalancing China's growing influence in the region.

This multi-pronged critique from the Labor opposition and union allies highlighted the complex interplay of domestic politics, labor rights advocacy, and evolving geopolitical dynamics that shaped the AAV's trajectory. The policy's perceived shortcomings extended beyond the economic rationales that initially underpinned it, becoming entangled in broader debates over Australia's regional strategic posture and its management of great power rivalries in the Pacific.

By securitizing the AAV and framing it as a potential boon to China's regional ambitions, the Labor opposition and union voices effectively repositioned the visa scheme as a geopolitical liability – one that could no longer be justified solely on economic grounds. This rhetorical shift and the corresponding political pressure it exerted set the stage for the policy's eventual reversal following the 2022 federal election.

Policy Reversal and Aftermath

The May 2022 federal election marked a turning point. The incoming Labor government, led by Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, swiftly cancelled the AAV in July 2022. The announcement came and then to other ASEAN nations, signaling a shift in policy (The Star, 2022).

Prime Minister Albanese was unequivocal in his assessment. In February 2023, he described the AAV as a "complete failure," stating, "Imagine making an announcement and nothing happens" (Sky News Australia, 2022). This scathing critique underscored not just policy disagreement but a fundamental failure in policy implementation.

The Labor government's alternative was to refocus on the Pacific, particularly through the PALM scheme. This pivot can be interpreted through the lens of securitization theory as an effort to counter perceived Chinese influence in the region (Dosch & Hensengerth, 2005). However, it also aligns with Labor's historically closer ties with Pacific Island nations and unions' concerns about worker exploitation (Mares, 2016).

In conclusion, the rise and fall of the AAV encapsulates the multifaceted challenges of crafting labor migration policies in a region marked by complex economic interdependencies, geopolitical rivalries, and evolving domestic political landscapes. Its trajectory from a market-driven solution to a geopolitical liability offers a rich case study for understanding these dynamics.

Analysis

Domestic Political Factors

The AAV's fate was significantly shaped by Australia's domestic political landscape. Through a neoliberal lens, the visa's introduction under the Coalition government can be seen as a response to market forces—specifically, the agricultural sector's demand for labor (Harvey, 2007). The National Farmers' Federation's lobbying efforts exemplify what Stiglitz terms "cognitive capture," where policymakers adopt the worldview of the industries they regulate (Stiglitz, 2002).

However, the Labor Party and unions offered a counter-narrative that problematizes this neoliberal approach. Their concerns about worker exploitation echo critiques by scholars like Preibisch, who argue that guest worker programs often prioritize employer interests over worker rights (Preibisch, 2010). The AWU's assertion that the

AAV would "undermine job security and conditions for local workers" (AWU, 2021) aligns with Ruhs and Anderson's argument that such programs can exert downward pressure on domestic labor standards (Ruh & Anderson, 2010).

Interestingly, both parties invoked geopolitical concerns, but through different lenses. The Coalition's targeting of ASEAN countries can be seen as an economic diversification strategy, consistent with neoliberal principles of market expansion (Massey et al., 1993). In contrast, the Labor Party and unions "securitized" the issue (Buzan et al., 1998), framing the AAV as a threat to Australia's Pacific relationships and, by extension, its regional security interests.

This securitization move was crucial. As Wæver argues, once an issue is securitized, it moves out of the realm of normal politics into that of emergency measures. The Labor government's swift cancellation of the AAV, even before it became fully operational, exemplifies this dynamic (Wæver, 1995).

Regional Geopolitical Considerations

The geopolitical dimensions of the AAV are best understood through the lenses of securitization and complex interdependence theories. Australia's pivot from ASEAN to the Pacific can be seen as a response to what Wesley-Smith and Porter call the "new Pacific diplomacy," where Pacific nations leverage great power competition to their advantage.

The securitization of the AAV is framed in the visa as a "threat" to existing labor arrangements. Such language elevates labor migration from a purely economic issue to one of national security and regional influence. This aligns with argument that even economic engagements in the region are increasingly viewed through a geopolitical lens, particularly vis-à-vis China's growing presence.

However, complex interdependence theory cautions against viewing these dynamics solely in security terms. The varied ASEAN responses to the AAV highlight the "absence of hierarchy among issues." For Vietnam, economic considerations (overseas employment as development) trumped any geopolitical concerns. Malaysia's brain drain worries demonstrate how domestic social issues intersect with international labor policies. Indonesia's tepid response suggests a balancing of multiple interests.

This complexity challenges simplistic narratives. The Labor government's claim that the AAV "failed Australian farmers" overlooks the fact that no policy exists in a vacuum. The AAV's failure was not just administrative but a result of underestimating the geopolitical ripple effects of what seemed a purely domestic economic policy.

Labor Rights and Worker Exploitation

A critical lens on the AAV reveals how neoliberal labor policies can undermine worker rights and diplomatic relations. The visa's design, tying workers to specific employers, mirrors aspects of the U.S. H-2A program that link to systemic exploitation. The absence of any AAV workers entering Australia before its cancellation suggests implementation failures, but it may have also prevented potential abuses.

The Labor Party and unions' opposition on these grounds is consistent with a global trend of increased scrutiny on guest worker programs. That such programs often create a "price of rights" dilemma, where increased labor rights reduce economic benefits for both host and sender countries. The AAV's inclusion of pathways to permanent residency was perhaps an attempt to navigate this dilemma, but its cancellation suggests that the trade-off was politically untenable.

Moreover, the debate highlights how worker exploitation can become a geopolitical issue. The AWU's linkage of worker rights with Australia's Pacific relationships

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exemplifies the "diplomacy of migration." Poor treatment of migrant workers can strain bilateral relations, especially in a region where labor mobility is increasingly part of development strategies.

Policy Incoherence and Implementation Failures

The AAV's trajectory reveals significant policy incoherence and implementation failures. Through the lens of complex interdependence, we can see how the visa scheme struggled to manage multiple, non-hierarchical issues: economic needs, worker rights, Pacific relations, and geopolitical concerns.

The fact that, as PM Albanese put it, "nothing happens" after the policy announcement (Sky News Australia, 2022) suggests a failure to anticipate or manage these intersecting issues. This aligns with critiques that migration policies often fail because they treat migration as a discrete issue rather than part of broader social transformations.

The swift policy reversal also highlights the challenges of policy continuity in democracies. Australian immigration policies have often shifted with changes in government. The AAV's fate suggests that when policies are crafted without broad stakeholder consensus—across party lines, with unions, and with regional partners—they remain vulnerable to political winds.

In conclusion, the rise and fall of the AAV offers a revelatory case study in the complexities of crafting labor migration policies in an era of complex regional interdependencies. It demonstrates how economic rationales can be overshadowed by geopolitical concerns, how worker rights can become diplomatic issues, and how policy incoherence can lead to rapid reversals. For policymakers and scholars of international relations, the AAV serves as a cautionary tale about the need for holistic, multi-stakeholder approaches to migration governance.

The Geopolitics of Labor: China, Australia, and the Pacific

The AAV's trajectory illuminates the growing entanglement of labor migration with geopolitical rivalry, particularly Australia's strategic competition with China in the Pacific. This dynamic is best understood through a synthesis of securitization theory and complex interdependence theory.

The assertion that the AAV would "increase China's influence in the region" is a classic securitizing move. It reframes a labor policy as a national security issue, echoing broader narratives of China's "debt-trap diplomacy" and infrastructure projects in the Indo-Pacific. This securitization was effective once an issue enters the security domain, it justifies extraordinary measures—in this case, the abrupt cancellation of a visa program.

However, complex interdependence theory cautions against such single-issue framings. States are connected by multiple channels, and the salience of issues can vary across these channels. For Pacific nations, labor mobility is not just a security issue but a critical development strategy. That remittances from schemes like PALM are a significant source of income. Thus, Australia's pivot back to the Pacific can be seen as a multi-channel strategy: addressing security concerns while also strengthening economic ties.

Yet, this pivot also reveals the challenges of managing complex interdependencies. Australia's abrupt cancellation of the AAV strained relations with ASEAN countries, particularly Vietnam, which had already signed an MoU (DFAT, 2022b). This underscores that actions in one channel (security) can have unintended

consequences in another (diplomacy), potentially undermining Australia's broader regional engagement strategy.

The Political Economy of Agricultural Labor

The AAV case also illuminates the tensions inherent in the political economy of agricultural labor. Neoliberal theory helps explain the genesis of the visa: faced with labor shortages, the agricultural sector lobbied for a market solution—access to a larger, more flexible labor pool. This aligns with the "flexibilization" of agricultural work, where employers seek to adjust their workforce rapidly in response to market conditions.

However, the Labor Party and unions' opposition reveals the social and political limits of this neoliberal logic. Their concerns echo a vast literature on the exploitation of guest workers. The fact that no workers entered Australia under the AAV before its cancellation might have been a bureaucratic failure, but it also prevented the "race to the bottom" in labor standards.

Moreover, the AAV debate highlights how labor issues intersect with geopolitics in ways that neoliberal theory often overlooks. The AWU's linking of worker rights with regional influence challenges the neoliberal separation of economic and political spheres. It suggests that in an era of complex interdependence, the externalities of labor policies—worker exploitation, strained diplomatic relations—can overshadow their intended economic benefits.

Policy Learning and Adaptation

Finally, the AAV's trajectory offers insights into policy learning and adaptation in the field of migration governance. The swift reversal of the AAV reflects "crisis of migration control"—the persistent gap between policy goals and outcomes in migration management.

However, rather than a simple policy failure, the AAV case suggests a process of adaptive learning. The Labor government's decision to refocus on the PALM scheme indicates an recognition of the "historical continuities" in Australian migration policy—namely, the longstanding ties with Pacific nations. This pivot can be seen as an attempt to craft a more coherent policy that aligns economic needs (agricultural labor) with geopolitical goals (Pacific engagement) and social concerns (avoiding worker exploitation).

Yet, questions remain about the effectiveness of this learning. The implementation of PALM arrangements with Vietnam in 2024 (DFAT, 2022b) suggests that economic imperatives can still override geopolitical considerations. This underscores an argument that in complex interdependence, policy coherence requires managing multiple, often competing issues simultaneously.

In sum, the AAV case reveals the multifaceted challenges of crafting labor migration policies in an era of complex regional interdependencies. It shows how economic rationales can be overshadowed by geopolitical concerns, how worker rights can become diplomatic issues, and how policy learning is an ongoing, often messy process. For scholars and policymakers, it underscores the need for a holistic, theoretically-informed approach to migration governance that can navigate the choppy waters of market demands, social justice, and geopolitical rivalry.

CONCLUSION

This article has examined the rise and fall of the Australian Agricultural Visa (AAV) through the lenses of neoliberal economics, securitization theory, and complex interdependence theory. The analysis reveals several key findings that contribute to our

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understanding of labor migration policies in the contemporary Asia-Pacific region. In conclusion, the rise and fall of the Australian Agricultural Visa offers a microcosm of the challenges facing policymakers in an era of complex global interdependencies. It reveals how labor migration policies are shaped not just by economic imperatives, but by a web of domestic political pressures, regional geopolitical considerations, and evolving norms around worker rights. For scholars of international relations and migration studies, the AAV case underscores the need for theoretically-informed, empirically-grounded research that can navigate these complexities. For policymakers, it serves as a cautionary tale about the pitfalls of piecemeal, politically expedient approaches to migration governance. In an interconnected world, crafting effective labor migration policies requires a delicate balance of economic pragmatism, ethical consideration, and diplomatic finesse. The AAV's legacy is a call for such a balanced, farsighted approach.

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