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Strengthening Partnerships to Counter Non-Traditional Security Threats in the Indo-Pacific

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Introduction

Ashift in the notion of 'security' since the end of the Cold War resulted in the accommodation of non-military—thereby, 'non-traditional'—threats to security. Non-Traditional Security (NTS) comprises a gamut of human security concerns such as climate change, shortage of food and resources such as energy, infectious diseases, natural disasters, transnational crime, human and drug trafficking, and mass migration. This is what analysts refer to as the human security-development nexus. These NTS areas have typically fallen outside the purview of discussions on more "immediate" threats to national security such as, for instance, territorial encroachment. Addressing these challenges also often calls for the involvement of transnational actors.

Cover: The manufacture and trafficking of illegal drugs is among the non-traditional security threats in Southeast Asia. In the cover photo, a Thai border police officer stands on guard as his peers destroy an opium poppies field on a mountain in Chiang Mai, northern Thailand. (Photo by Pongmanat Tasiri/SOPA Images/LightRocket via Getty Images)

Table 1:
Common Characteristics of Non-Traditional Security

Non-traditional security focuses on non-military threats with these common characteristics:
• The threats are transnational in nature with regards to their origins and effects.
• They do not stem from competition between states or shifts in the balance of power, but are often defined in political and socioeconomic terms.
• Non-traditional security issues such as resource scarcity and irregular migration[a] cause societal and political instability and therefore become threats to security.
• Other threats like climate change are often caused by human-induced disturbances to the fragile balance of nature; they have dire consequences to both states and societies which are often difficult to reverse or repair.
• National solutions are often inadequate; these threats require regional and multilateral cooperation.
• The referent of security is no longer just the state (on issues of state sovereignty or territorial integrity), but also the people (survival, well-being, dignity) both at individual and societal levels.

Source: Caballero-Anthony, M. (ed.). 2016.[1]

This report explores how cooperation on non-traditional security threats can act as a catalyst for building stronger partnerships in the Indo-Pacific region. It looks at two distinct but interrelated segments. First, it identifies the key issues affecting countries in South Asia and Southeast Asia, as well as Small Island Countries in Oceania. Second, it analyses how cooperation platforms like the Quad, ASEAN-Regional Forum, Blue Dot Network, and the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) can mitigate NTS issues and provide new opportunities for states in terms of better security governance and cooperation among different players in the region.

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a   'Irregular migration' is the movement of persons to a new place of residence or transit that takes place outside the regulatory norms of the sending, transit, and receiving countries. Changes in national laws and policies can turn regular migration into irregular migration, and vice-versa. The status of migrants can change during their journey and stay in the country of transit/destination, which makes it difficult to have a comprehensive picture of irregular migration and the profiles of irregular migrants. The terms "irregular", "undocumented" and "unauthorised" are often used interchangeably.

Non-Traditional Security Issues: An Overview

Table 2.
Non-Traditional Security Issues: South Asia, Southeast Asia, and Oceania

SUB- REGIONS	NON-TRADITIONAL SECURITY ISSUES
South Asia	• Threats to human security caused by forced displacement of people, particularly the Rohingyas from Myanmar. • Transnational terrorism and criminal activity • Natural and environmental disasters, climate change, food insecurity, and disease outbreaks—which all can influence access to basic human rights.
Southeast Asia	• Illegal drug trading cartel operating across the countries bordering the Golden Triangle.[b] • Natural disasters, health-related exigencies such as the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic (along with inadequate healthcare service and infrastructure and poor sanitation), illegal migration, marine pollution, excessive extraction of natural resources like water, timber, and fisheries.
Oceania	• Climate change and its consequences: rising sea levels and temperatures, changing rainfall patterns, increasing frequency and intensity of extreme weather events like tropical cyclones and floods, destruction of coral reefs. • Overexploitation of natural resources, limited domestic markets, and lack of access to export markets. • Drug and human trafficking, and piracy.

Source: Authors' own

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b   'Golden Triangle' covers the rural mountains of Myanmar, Laos, and Thailand. It is Southeast Asia's main opium-producing region and one of the oldest narcotics supply routes to Europe and North America.

South Asia

The South Asian region has been experiencing a succession of crises brought about by natural disasters. In 2004, for example, a massive tsunami, followed by earthquakes caused devastation on littorals of the Indian Ocean. A few years later, in 2007, Cyclone Sidr hit Sri Lanka, India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Bangladesh, and in its wake left a catastrophe. In 2020, Cyclone Amphan led to the displacement of nearly 5 million people across Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, and Bhutan; it was among the world's greatest number of displacements caused by a natural disaster.[2] These disasters result in economic losses and massive casualties. Often the impacts are made more severe by inadequate early warning systems and ineffective post-disaster responses.

In recent years, too, countries in the region have been facing growing NTS threats related to climate change. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) predicts that rising sea levels would have calamitous effects in low lying areas of the region.[3] The glacial recession being witnessed in the Himalayas, for example, can pose a severe threat to river systems.

Moreover, the incidence of climate change-induced migration is growing. In a 2018 report, the World Bank predicted that over 140 million people will be migrating from their own countries by 2050 due to the climate change.[4] Climate change-induced migration not only heightens tensions and inequalities but also has ramifications on access to essential services such as education and healthcare. Bangladesh, for example, has become a hotspot for this phenomenon. Compounding the challenges for Bangladesh is the influx of displaced Rohingya from Myanmar. According to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), of the 1 million displaced Rohingyas and asylum seekers in various neighbouring countries, 860,000 of them are in Bangladesh alone.[c,5]

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c   Other destination countries for displaced Rohingyas are Malaysia (101,000), India (18,000), Indonesia (550), and Thailand (100).

In this regard, a wide range of migration measures can be considered including mainstreaming migration into national development initiatives; synergising frameworks on migration and humanitarian assistance; and developing comprehensive humanitarian response training programs for local stakeholders. Other strategies can include enhancing public-private partnerships; ensuring the involvement of civil society groups; and empowering migrants and diaspora communities.

Southeast Asia

Southeast Asia continues to be a hotspot for the illegal drugs cartel that operates across the Golden Triangle, considered the world's second-largest drug-producing area and leading producer of opium.

The UN estimates that poppy cultivation in Myanmar has tripled since 2006 and today covers 150,000 acres (60,703 hectares) of land.[6] Despite a degree of economic growth in Myanmar, the peripheral regions remain untouched by development projects and therefore activities like poppy cultivation have continued to thrive. While the UN has attempted interventions by introducing crop substitution in Myanmar, as well as in Laos, the issue of drug trafficking has only grown at a rapid rate, posing challenges for other nations as well.

Vietnam, for instance, which has among the world's most stringent drug laws is a transit hub for heroin and methamphetamine.[7] Countries like China, Korea, and Japan, along with ASEAN countries are witnessing a shift towards the use of Amphetamine type stimulants (ATS) (as opposed to heroin) that are smuggled and trafficked from the borders of the Golden Triangle.[8]

Just like in South Asia, the countries of Southeast Asia—especially the Philippines, Indonesia, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam—are experiencing the various threats related to climate change.[9] The UN predicts that the risk of floods and droughts, for example, will only increase for Southeast Asia in the next 10 years, leading to economic losses worth 3 percent of GDP for the Philippines; 2 percent for Laos; and over 1.5 percent for Cambodia.

Other threats are equally stark: forest cover in Indonesia has dropped from 65.4 percent in 1990 to 50.2 percent in 2013 due to overexploitation of palm oil;[10] plastic waste from some SEA countries (along with China) account for a massive half of all plastic waste in the world's oceans; and countries like Indonesia and the Philippines are perennially threatened by disasters caused by earthquakes, given their location in the Pacific Ring of Fire.

Small Island Countries

Although greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions from small islands[d] remain low, the threats of global warming to these islands, in particular sea-level rise, cannot be underestimated.[11] These states also experience transnational crime, natural disasters, and illegal and unsustainable exploitation of resources. They often have limited resources to combat the threats, and therefore would need the help of multilateral partnerships.

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d   Small Island Developing Countries in Oceania and the Western Indian Ocean

Collaborating on Non-Traditional Security Issues: Current Platforms

There is no dearth in partnerships designed for strengthening conventional security. However, the imperative is to expand the scope of existing mechanisms to include the mitigation of NTS threats, as well as to create altogether new cooperation frameworks.

Table 3:
Meetings of Multilateral and Minilateral groupings on NTS in the Indo-Pacific (2016-2021)

MEETINGS	YEAR
13th Australian Vietnam Human Rights Dialogue meeting	2016
Asia-Europe Meeting: 11th Summit held in Mongolia	2016
5th Australia-Laos Human Rights Dialogue Meeting	2017
20th Anniversary of BIMSTEC marked several high-level meetings	2017-18
Annual Conference of the Consortium of non-traditional Security in Asia (NTS-Asia)	2019
16th ASEAN Regional Forum Inter-Sessional Meeting on Counter-Terrorism and Transnational Crime	2019
Informal Meeting of SAARC foreign ministers to combat cross border terrorism	2019
74th session of UNGA attended by high level meetings including Climate Action Summit, Leaders Dialogue on Strategic Response to Terrorist and Violent Extremist Narratives.	2019
Conference on Sustaining Support for Rohingya Refugee Response	2020
Tripartite meeting between Bangladesh, Myanmar and China	2020
Video conference meeting of SAARC leaders on combating COVID-19	2020
BIMSTEC Conference on Combating Drug Trafficking	2020
Glasgow Climate Change Conference (UNFCC COP-26)	2020
US-Israel-UAE trilateral meeting on security and climate issues	2020
Australia-France-India trilateral ministerial meeting	2021
Australia-Japan-India trilateral ministerial meeting	2021
21st IORA Council of Ministerial Meeting	2021

Source: Authors' own

Institutional Frameworks

a. ASEAN

Over the years, the ASEAN'S framework for regional security has been continuously put to test by NTS challenges. These include the Asian economic crisis of 1997, the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) outbreak in 2002-2003, the bird flu epidemic in 2007, and most recently, the Covid-19 pandemic that started in 2020.

ASEAN has instituted a number of mechanisms to deal with the various challenges. For example, the ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response (AADMER) serves as the policy backbone for the member states to enhance their collective efforts in reducing disaster risks and responding to disasters in the region. The ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), meanwhile, is where members discuss current security issues and develop cooperative measures to enhance peace and security in the region through appropriate policy formulations.[12] For its part, the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC) has paved the way for the states to conduct security cooperation and pursue political alignment.[13]

The ASEAN Plan of Action Against Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, outlines specific action plans within the boundaries of ASEAN member states' domestic laws and policies, as well as relevant international obligations. The aim is to address regional challenges common to all member states.

In early 2020, the ASEAN member states responded to the Covid-19 pandemic by issuing a Movement Restriction Order (MRO) and launching information-sharing.

ASEAN also works with other countries on different platforms. For example, it set up the ASEAN Plus Three (APT) initiative with China, Japan, and South Korea. The bloc also works with India in the ASEAN Regional Forum Disaster Relief Exercise. Indeed, India aspires to build close ties with the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management.[14] Amidst the Covid-19 pandemic,

India has also expressed willingness to work with ASEAN in the production of generic drugs and medical technologies.

b. Blue Dot Network

The US and its allies introduced the Blue Dot Network (BDN) in 2019 to promote infrastructure development. In collaboration with countries like Australia, Japan, and India, the BDN stresses on the sustainability of infrastructure projects.[15] A BDN certification signifies that an infrastructure project is aiming to be sustainable. The Blue Dot Marketplace could help countries achieve sustainable infrastructure by identifying potential impacts on food security, disasters, and health.[16] A key BDN agreement covers a project dealing with 'smart cities' in the ASEAN countries.

c. Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA)

The Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) aims to strengthen regional cooperation and sustainable development in the region through its 23 member states and 10 dialogue partners.[17] The group aims to address the many traditional and non-traditional safety and security challenges facing the countries in the region, including piracy, armed robberies at sea, terrorism, human trafficking, undocumented migration, and trafficking of wildlife, drugs, and weapons. There are also crimes in the fisheries sector such as IUU fishing, degradation of ocean health, and unlawful exploitation of marine resources. The challenges of global warming compound these issues further.

In January 2021, the first IORA Expert Group Meeting on Disaster Risk Management was held to set a roadmap for the establishment of the IORA Working Group on Disaster Risk Management (WGDRM).[d] Member states also finalised the IORA Guidelines for HADR operation in the Indian Ocean. The IORA should strengthen cooperation to combat non-traditional security threats in the Indian Ocean region, building on the proposal in the IORA Action Plan to set up a permanent Working Group on Maritime Safety and Security.

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e   Disaster Risk Management is one of IORA's focus areas, actively being chaired by India through the provision of policy-related training and HADR exercises. See: Chen, Alistair D.B. Cook and Christopher. "Disaster Governance in the Asia Pacific: Future Pathways for South and South East Asia." Policy Report, August 2021. https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/PR210816_Disaster-Governance-in-the-Asia-Pacific_Future-Pathways-for-South-and-Southeast-Asia.pdf.

d. BIMSTEC

BIMSTEC—comprising Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Thailand—have identified the fight against terrorism and organised international crime as one of the most important prerequisites for sustainable growth and for maintaining peace in the region. In 2009, the group adopted the "BIMSTEC Convention on Cooperation in Combating International Terrorism, Transnational Organised Crime and Illicit Drug Trafficking".[18] Containing 15 articles, the convention serves as a confidence-building measure for the member states, subject to their domestic laws and regulations, to cooperate in combating international terrorism; transnational organised crime; and illicit trafficking in narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances, including their precursor chemicals.

The agreement, however, does not mention human trafficking and undocumented migration. The national security advisers (NSAs) of the BIMSTEC member states have been holding annual meetings, but the countries are still in the process of ratifying the mechanism for their cooperation.[19] The NSAs will then draw up measures for cooperation and coordination in law enforcement, intelligence, and security. This can help boost the capacity building of the security apparatus and enable information-sharing in real-time. In disaster management, BIMSTEC can facilitate cooperation in terms of capacity-building through sharing of knowledge and technical know-how, framing standard operating procedures, creating a disaster response force, and allocating funds for it.

Minilateral Forums

a. The Quad

The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (or Quad) is a strategic security dialogue between the US, India, Japan, and Australia that is envisioned to draw on the complementarities of interests with partners in working to ensure prosperity within the Indo-Pacific region. A broader Quad agenda that covers cooperation in non-military areas such as critical technologies and materials, reliable supply chains, infrastructure, Artificial Intelligence (AI), Quantum computing, cyber issues, Covid response, vaccine production, and climate change can include selected ASEAN countries on issue-based cooperation.

> Forums exist for strengthening conventional security; the imperative is to expand their scope to include the mitigation of NTS threats.

The Quad is also working on developing a robust architecture for disaster management and capacity-building within the Indo-Pacific. While vaccine diplomacy plays a big role within this network, more can be achieved in terms of other NTS concerns.[20]

b. India-Japan-Australia Trilateral

The geostrategic space in the Indo-Pacific can be the perfect point for India, Japan, and Australia to build cooperation and promote a rules-based order in the region.

The three countries are committed to providing one another, and their neighbouring states, with HADR. Furthermore, Japan and India have undertaken joint exercises focusing on HADR operations. The Covid-19 pandemic has also served as an opportunity for the countries to work on scientific development and research capacity by sharing medical supplies and HADR operations for the overall development of the trilateral.

Another challenge is IUU fishing, which has only intensified due to consumer demand and is threatening to worsen the scarcity of these resources; there are also the threats of maritime crimes such as piracy, trafficking, and smuggling; forced labour; and irregular maritime arrivals.[21] All of them being home to large fishing communities, India, Japan, and Australia should expand their reach by working together through the IORA, as well as other targeted platforms such as the Indian Ocean Tuna Commission (IOTC).

Conclusion

The emergence of trilateral, minilateral, and multilateral groupings, as well as growing bilateral synergy among like-minded nations are key developments shaping the new regional order. At the same time, strategic choices designed according to national interests and objectives will continue to characterise the Indo-Pacific region.

Countries in the region should pursue regional strategies and action plans that will address the various non-traditional security threats that they face. Both state and non-state actors could build on existing regional frameworks and initiatives and create more targeted plans of action.

Function-based cooperation that focuses on the achievement of tangible and measurable goals is quickly becoming a preferred mode of cooperation in addition to the traditional format of partnerships based on either economic or security imperatives. Minilateral platforms that have come into existence in the Indo-Pacific over the last few years are orienting their partnerships in the function-based cooperation structure. For progress in areas of non-traditional security, this can be a beneficial approach. ORF

Annex

*This report is drawn from the points made by the participants at ORF's conference – "**Strategic High Tide in the Indo-Pacific: Economics, Ecology, and Security**" – in particular, during discussions on the first day of the conference on 9 November 2021 (Business Session on **Geopolitics and Security**). The webinar was chaired by Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury, Senior Fellow of ORF Kolkata.*

Speakers

- **Dhruva Jaishankar,** Executive Director, Observer Research Foundation, America

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- **Satu Limaye**, Vice President & Director, East West Center, US

- **Shruti Pandalai,** Associate Fellow, Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi

- **Daisuke Kawai,** Research Fellow Indo-Pacific Affairs, The Japan Institute of International Affairs, Japan

- **Akriti Vasudeva,** Research Analyst with the South Asia Program at the Stimson Center and Editor-at-large at *South Asian Voices,* US

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21 From October 2013, the Australian Government has instructed staff and contractors to refer to people arriving by boat as "illegal maritime arrivals". See: "Recent changes in Australian Refugee Policies", 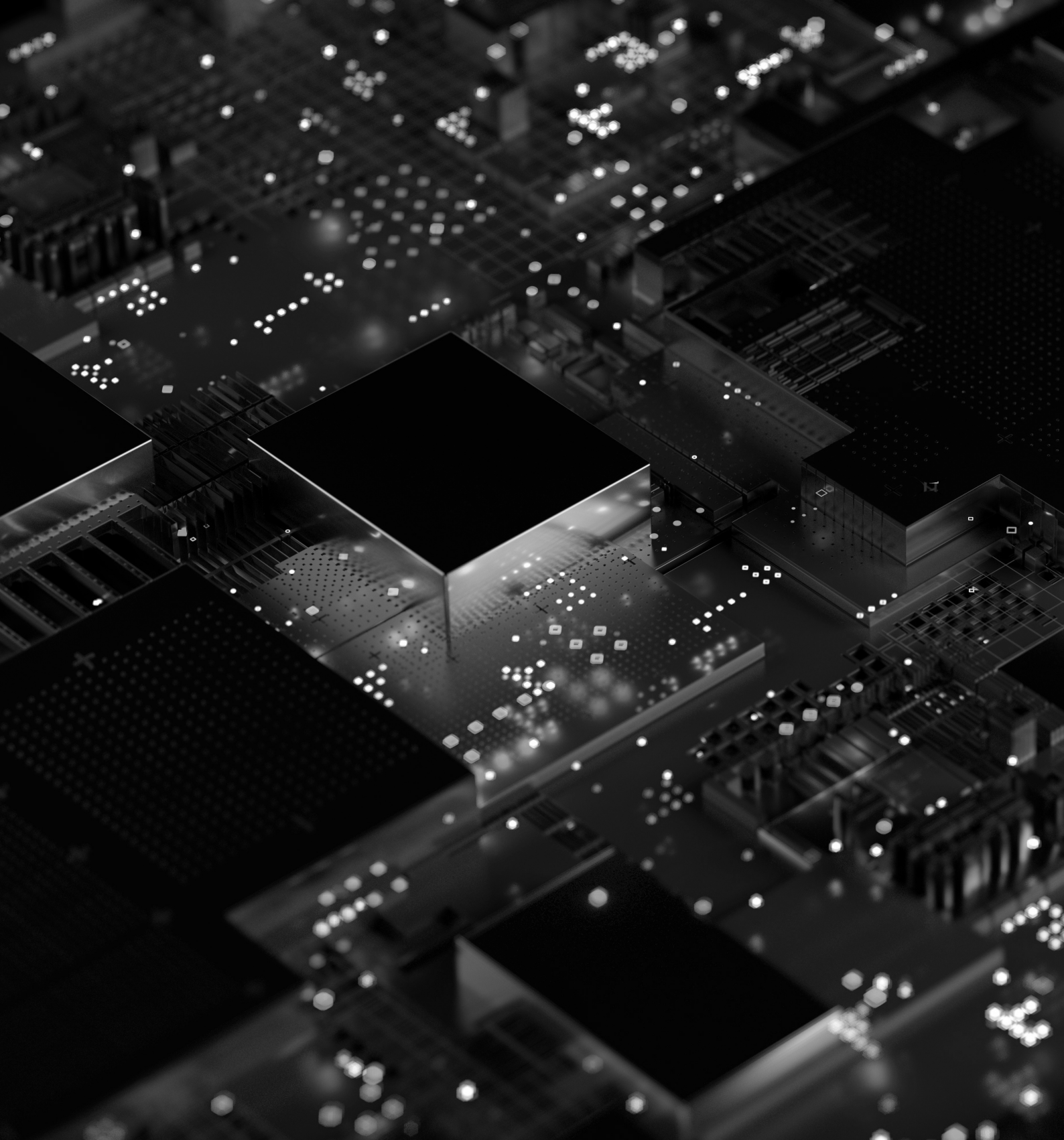*Refugee Council of Australia*, March 1, 2021, https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/recent-changes-australian-refugee-policy/10/

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