The European Refugee Crisis and China's Responses

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I. European refugee crisis: a global problem

There have always been refugees, but what we are witnessing today is the biggest wave of refugees since the Second World War.

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 65.6 million people around the world have been displaced from home, including 22.5 million refugees. The top three refugee-producing countries are Syria (5.5 million), Afghanistan (2.5 million), and South Sudan (1.4 million), and the top hosting countries include Turkey (2.9 million), Pakistan (1.4 million), Lebanon (1 million), Iran (979,000), Uganda (941,000) and Ethiopia (792,000). ¹

Of all the displaced, 30% are hosted in Africa; the rest are in the Middle East and North Africa (26%), Europe (17%), the Americas (16%) and Asia-Pacific (11%).²

In 2015, sea arrivals of refugees in Europe saw a four-fold increase from the 2014 figure to roughly 1.02 million. While this dropped to about 360,000 in 2016, the number of the dead and missing increased from 3,771 in 2015 to 5,096. By June 21, 2017, Mediterranean Sea arrivals totaled 82,897.

The Dublin Regulation fails to cope with such mass influx of refugees.

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Before the unprecedented influx of refugees in 2015, the EU migrant policy was based on the framework of the Dublin Regulation, effective since 1997. Its main rule is that asylum seekers are obliged to register in the first EU country they enter, and if they travel to other EU states, these states are allowed to deport them back to their country of entry. However, as is shown in the 2015 crisis, such system can easily be overwhelmed with a flow of refugees in the millions.

In the second half of 2015, Germany and some other EU countries opened their doors to refugees not long before finding themselves overburdened. Then the EU-Turkey Statement came to the rescue in March 2016. Admittedly, the Statement is by no means a panacea for the crisis, but it has—at least temporarily—assuaged the disorder and chaos the EU asylum system experienced, and brought much-needed respite for the EU to develop and implement more effective refugee policies.

The EU received 1.256 million and 1.204 million refugee applications in 2015 and 2016 respectively, more than doubling the 2014 figure of 563,000. In 2015 and 2016, the largest number of asylum applications came from Syrians, Afghans and Iraqis; Germany received the most applications in the EU, followed by Italy, France, Greece, Austria and the UK in 2016. It also had the highest applicant-domestic population ratio (8,789 per 1 million population), followed by Greece, Austria, Malta, Luxembourg and Cyprus.⁷

Migrants and refugees arrive via three primary routes: the eastern Mediterranean route, from Turkey to Greek islands in the Aegean Sea, and then to mainland Greece and other European countries; the central Mediterranean route, from North Africa to Italy; and the western route, from North Africa to Spain. The year 2015 witnessed a dramatic increase in arrivals via the eastern route.

On March 20, 2016, the EU-Turkey Statement came into effect, in an attempt to stem the refugee influx into Europe. Under the deal, all the irregular immigrants crossing from Turkey into Greece will be sent back to Turkey, Turkey is expected to take necessary measures to prevent further refugee inflows, and the EU is to financially support Turkey to help migrants.

While reducing the eastern route arrivals, this agreement also drives up the number of the central route travelers. In 2016 alone, over 180,000 refugees and immigrants from North Africa illegally entered Europe from North Africa. That was partly why German Chancellor Angela Merkel visited Egypt and Tunisia in March 2017—to persuade the two countries into agreements on stemming refugee flows similar to the EU-Turkey Statement.

II. POLITICAL IMPACTS OF THE REFUGEE CRISIS ON EUROPE

The mass migration wave in 2015 has profoundly altered the political landscape across Europe. Its implications are felt by, among others, the EU troika—Britain, France and Germany.

On June 23, 2016, the Brexit referendum ended up in an unexpected swing: the UK voted to exit the EU by a final vote of 51.89% to 48.11%. On March 29, 2017, the country officially launched the Brexit process.

No reference to immigration appeared on the ballot paper, but politicians believe that the Brexit vote represented a desire to "take back control" of the country's borders and deter unwanted migration. This idea is nothing new. Back in 1995, two-thirds of Britons already wanted to cut net migration to Europe. Following the vote, British Prime Minister Theresa May pledged to bring annual net migration down from about 300,000 to below 100,000—even at the risk of tax hikes and slower economic growth. Immigrants to the UK mainly come from European countries, with only a small number of refugees from outside Europe. Even so, as made clear by the referendum outcome and the British government's posture, the idea of hosting refugees still met with wide skepticism or even outright rejection.

Germany was eulogized for its temporary open door policy, which resulted in an intake of about 1.2 million refugees in 2015 and 2016. Some Germans welcomed refugees as a solution to labor shortages. However, that was until the sexual assaults in Cologne and the Berlin Christmas attack. The incidents dampened Germany's welcome, but did not reverse the liberal refugee policy. After the attacks, Merkel promised that the large influx of refugees

as seen in the late summer of 2015 cannot and should not repeat itself. This is her response to the charges of "loss of control" from critics within and out of her own party.⁹

The refugee crisis has also shaken French politics. This is evident in the 2017 French presidential election, particularly with the strong surge of support for Marina Le Pen, Front National's far-right leader. In the second run-off of the election on May 7, Emmanuel Macron, former Minister of Economy and head of the independent political movement "En Marche" (On the Move), gained a 66.10% to 33.90% victory against Marina Le Pen. This came as they knocked traditional political parties out of the race in the first round of voting on April 23, where Macron topped with 24.01% of votes and Le Pen followed on 21.30%—the best result of the Front National so far, up by 3.4% from the 2012 score of 17.9%.

Le Pen is known for her hardline position on migration. She advocates slashing illegal immigrants through measures including withdrawing from the border-free Schengen area, and abolishing laws that offer illegal immigrants paths to French citizenship. Even for legal immigrants, she still proposes to curb their influx and deny their entitlement to social welfare on the same terms as nationals.

Macron takes a completely different stance on immigration. He supports Merkel's flexible migration policies, arguing that France can shelter more refugees and that taking in refugees will have a positive economic impact. ¹⁰ However, he also notes the need to tighten border control, speed up the asylum claim assessment, and deport all the unqualified asylum-seekers. A day after his presidential inauguration on May 14, Macron visited Germany. In the meeting with Angela Merkel, he pledged France's support for Germany's responses to the refugee crisis and cooperation on refugee policies.

The visit came shortly after Merkel's Christian Democracy Coalition (CDU) won the regional state election of the North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) on May 14. The NRW is Germany's most populous state and home to about a fifth of the total voters. This makes the election result a strong indicator for September's General Election, Merkel is highly likely to clinch her fourth term as Chancellor, a post she has held since November 2005. Under such

circumstance, her refugee policy will remain largely unchanged.

III. THE CONTROVERSIAL EU-TURKEY AGREEMENT

The turning point in this refugee crisis is arguably the EU-Turkey Agreement, which came into effect on March 20, 2016.

The conflict in Syria has driven more than 5 million people to neighboring countries such as Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon. Turkey, among others, becomes the key to the European refugee crisis due to its proximity to Europe. With such knowledge, the country uses the 2.9 million Syrian refugees it hosts as a bargaining chip against the EU.

Since November 2015, it has become increasingly clear that the EU intended to offer Turkey financial aid in return for strengthened border control. The plan was put into practice as the two sides reached an agreement on March 18, 2016, after rounds of negotiations and two EU-Turkey summits. According to the agreement, the EU should provide 3 billion euros to help refugees in Turkey; Turkey's accession negotiations should be rebooted before July 2016; Turkish citizens enjoy visa-free travel in the Schengen zone; all ineligible asylum seekers crossing from Turkey to the Greek islands as of 20 March 2016 should be returned to Turkey; and for every Syrian being returned to Turkey, another Syrian should be resettled to the EU from Turkey directly (with priority to those who have not previously entered or tried to enter the EU irregularly), with an upper limit of 72,000.

Under the agreement, Greece began to deport illegal migrants to Turkey starting from April 4, 2017. The crackdown led to a significant decrease in the numbers of arrivals from Turkey. However, it also drew heavy criticism worldwide. Critics fear that the deal may force determined migrants on other more dangerous routes, such as the Mediterranean central route from North Africa into Italy. UNHCR also dealt a blow, claiming that it was not a party to the EU-Turkey deal, nor would it be involved in returns or detention. The agency was joined by other prominent non-governmental human rights organizations, including the Médecins Sans Frontières (MSFs), International Rescue Committee (IRC),

and Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC). They also declared that they would not help implement the agreement because such collective expulsion violated international laws. Amnesty International went further by calling it "crazy" and described March 18, 2016 as a "dark day" for the Refugee Convention, for Europe and for humanity.

Turkey was also accused of playing a deep game on the refugee issue, conniving at smuggling to ease its pressure, while sending a large number of refugees to Europe as a way to extort economic and political concessions.

On March 16, 2017, Dimitris Avramopoulos, European Commissioner for Migration, Home Affairs and Citizenship, Carmelo Abela, Interior Minister of Malta, and Yiannis Mouzalas, Immigration Policy Minister of Greece, visited the refugee camps in Lesbos, Greece to inspect the progress that has been made one year into the agreement.

Avramopoulos said, "Proof of the successful implementation of the Statement is the comparison with the situation that existed last year, when roughly 10,000 migrants a day crossed the Aegean instead of an average of 40-50 a day. The losses of life have declined sharply." ¹¹

According to the Greek police, after the Balkans routes to central Europe were closed and the EU-Turkey agreement came into effect, about 62,000 refugees stayed in Greece, and some 3,500 of them were hosted on Lesbos. ¹² Under the agreement, new arrivals were only allowed to stay on the Aegean island until their asylum claims were processed; if their claims were rejected, they would be deported back to Turkey. However, the application process usually takes months, leaving refugee reception facilities on many Greek islands overburdened.

The complicated application process in Greece also contributed to deteriorating mental health of asylum seekers, as they were trapped on the island in a state of prolonged uncertainty.

IV. Trump's immigration pledges unfulfilled

The biggest "black swan" event since the refugee crisis was

arguably the victory of Donald Trump in the US presidential election. With little experience in government, he unexpectedly defeated the most promising candidate Hillary Clinton and became president-elect on November 8, 2016. This is in part thanks to his appealing anti-immigration sentiments.

Trump's signature immigration slogan is to build a wall on the US-Mexico border to stem the flow of illegal Mexican immigrants and make Mexico pay for it. His proposals also include revising the birthright citizenship policy to exclude US-born children of undocumented immigrants, passing the bills known as "Kate's Law" ¹³ to impose harsher sentences on deportees who re-enter, strengthening the US-Mexico border control with barriers and increased border patrols, deporting illegal immigrants on a large scale, strictly restricting Muslims entering US and stopping admission for Syrian refugees.

So far, Trump has issued two executive orders for immigration ban. The first one was signed on January 27, 2017 to bar people from seven designated countries (Iraq, Iran, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen), which was followed by the second one on March 6, where Iraq was removed from the list. The orders have not taken effect because they were ruled against in several district and federal appeals courts. But this may be changed by the decision of the Supreme Court on June 26, 2017. 14

As of May 26, the number of refugees the US has admitted during the 2017 fiscal year totaled 45,732, and is expected to reach 70,000 by the end of the 2018 fiscal year on September 30. Although this is below the 849.94 million in FY2016, such record still makes it impossible to achieve Trump's goal of lowering the ceiling of refugee admission from 110,000 to 50,000. ¹⁵ In April, Ivanka Trump, Trump's daughter and advisor, said in her visit to Germany that the US might admit more Syrian refugees, and described the solution as "not going to be enough in and of itself." ¹⁶

As is suggested by the current US immigration policy, Trump's personal political ideas have not been completely followed. This is likely the case for the rest of his presidency.

It is true that the US has not played a leading role in addressing the refugee crisis. However, it would be unfair to denounce the country as a bystander.

In fact, apart from admitting about 70,000 refugees every year, the US has been committed to helping refugees indirectly, providing funds to such multilateral organizations as UNHCR and WFP and refugee-hosting countries including Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon.

However, the country is indeed cautious about taking in Syrian refugees. From the breakout of the Syria conflict in 2011 to January 2016, it received fewer than 3,000 Syrian refugees. Obama's promise to admit more Syrian refugees was met with strong resistance at home. In a statement issued on December 7, 2015, Trump called for a "total and complete shutdown" of the country's borders to Muslims, until the problem of terrorism was under control. Similar rhetoric was also heard in his campaign rallies, where he suggested that the US should close the door to refugees altogether. Thirty governors also rejected to host Syrian refugees in their states.

Obama repeatedly expressed his support for Angela Merkel's leading role in resolving the European refugee crisis. In his last state visit to Germany in late April 2016, Obama praised Merkel for standing "on the right side of history" in handling the crisis. The US also agreed to send NATO fleets to the Aegean Sea for migrant crisis relief.

However, the US influence in dealing with the crisis falls significantly below its great power status and expectation from its European allies. Michael Ignatieff, Edward R. Murrow Professor at the Harvard Kennedy School, and other American scholars maintain that the country should assume leadership in refugee settlement. In doing so, it can (1) demonstrate that refugee resettlement will not necessarily endanger national security; (2) send a powerful message to counter jihadi extremists' portrayal of America's anti-immigration; (3) support European allies against resurgent anti-immigrant and anti-American populism and (4) support and stabilize Middle Eastern front line states (i.e. Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon).

Specific measures they propose include helping UNHCR repatriate refugees from front line states, increasing US assistance to UNHCR and World Food Program (WFP) to improve conditions in refugee camps in front line states and using all US leverage with

Iran, Saudi Arabia and Russia to negotiate a cease-fire in Syria that would permit the eventual return of refugees.

David Miliband, President of the International Salvation Council (ISC) and former Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs in Britain, also notes that the US has a proud history of hosting more than half of the world's refugees. With such experience in refugee admission and resettlement, the country should play a greater role in addressing the refugee crisis.

Since the US policies for the Middle East and North Africa have contributed heavily to the conflicts that are producing millions of refugees, it is imperative that apart from helping with refugee resettlement, the US should also change its policies to restore peace and stability in those war-torn areas. However, the uncertainty of Trump's current foreign policy makes it impossible to address the roots of the refugee crisis.

V. Development of the refugee crisis and China's responses

The scale and complexity of the European refugee crisis makes it "mission impossible" to tackle the issue from its root. Nonetheless, the sharp decline of refugee arrivals in Europe suggests that the crisis has somewhat been managed within the EU. Here are some trends worth noticing.

First, the focus of the EU's response will shift from humanitarian relief The scale and complexity of the European refugee crisis makes it "mission impossible" to tackle the issue from its root.

to documented settlement and restricted repatriation. Back in 2015 when millions of refugees streamed in, the EU countries did not—neither did they have the time and energy to—closely vet every asylum seeker. Their goal was to ensure that those arrivals had access to basic humanitarian support. Since 2016, the EU has gradually gained control over the situation, ramping up political and legal efforts to reduce the flow of refugees to a manageable level. Meanwhile, it has also increased the financial and personnel support to such front-line countries as Greece for strengthened border

control.

Second, the EU-Turkey refugee bargain will continue unabated. The EU-Turkey agreement on refugees is far from perfect, but it does help control the refugee influx into Europe. Under the agreement, the EU pledges billions of euros in aid to Turkey and grants Turkish citizens visa-free travel through most of Europe. However, progress has been slow towards meeting these commitments, and Turkey constantly uses the crisis to extract concessions from the EU.

In general, the EU and Turkey need each other in addressing the refugee issue. The EU seeks Turkey's cooperation to reduce refugee flows, while Turkey wants the EU to take a flexible stand on issues such as negotiation regarding the country's accession into the union. Theoretically, Turkey will no longer allow such influx of refugees to Europe as it did in 2015, but there is always the possibility.

Third, there is still a long way to go to stop the refugee crisis from the root. None of the current EU measures addresses the roots of the crisis—the ongoing conflicts and wars in the Middle East and North Africa. These problems are well beyond the EU's ability to cope with single-handedly and require joint efforts from major countries such as the US, China and Russia. Considering the complicated nature of the conflicts as well as diverged calculations and purposes of parties involved, there is slight possibility of restoring regional peace in the near future, and this means that the roots of the refugee crisis will remain unfixed.

China is no stranger to the refugee issue. During the World War II, Shanghai offered a safe haven for around 30,000 Jewish refugees, and the Shanghai-based Jacquinot Safe Zone established by foreigners protected at least 300,000 Chinese from Japanese attacks.

China has always paid close attention to refugee issue as its role on the globe increased daily. President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Keqiang have spoken on multiple occasions about the roots of and solutions to the crisisas well as China's responses.

On January 18, 2017, President Xi Jinping delivered the speech "Work Together to Build a Community of Shared Future for Mankind" at the UN Office in Geneva. He noted, "The number of refugees has hit a record high since the end of the Second World

War. While tackling the crisis, we should also get to its roots. Why would anyone want to be displaced if they have a home to return to? UNHCR and the International Organization for Migration should act as the coordinator to mobilize the whole world to respond effectively to the refugee crisis. China has decided to provide an additional 200 million yuan of humanitarian assistance for refugees and the displaced of Syria. As terrorism and refugee crises are closely linked to geopolitical conflicts, resolving conflicts provides the fundamental solution to such problems. Parties directly involved should return to the negotiating table, and other parties should work to facilitate talks for peace, and we should all respect the role the UN plays as the main channel for mediation." ¹⁷

On September 19, 2016, Premier Li Keqiang also addressed a high-level summit for refugees and migrants at the 71st Session of the UN General Assembly at the UN Headquarters in New York, specifying the Chinese government's stance on tackling the refugee crisis. Highlights of his speech are as follows.

First, refugee and migrant problem affects regional stability and global peace and development. This makes it as much a regional issue as a global challenge that no country can stay immune to. Therefore, the international community must respond proactively.

Second, the issue is a humanitarian challenge that tests our conscience. The international community should help refugees with friendliness and care and encourage them to pursue a new life of hope. Apart from the refugee crisis in Europe, it is also necessary not to lose sight of the conflicts in Syria, Afghanistan, Somalia and South Sudan that have produced such a large number of refugees in the first place.

Third, the resolution of such problem required global cooperation. The priority is to raise funds and prepare resources for basic relief supplies. It is also necessary to tailor efforts in policy development, financial allocation, and social security to the specific needs of refugees. The legal refugee admission channels should be broadened, and efforts should be stepped up to crack down on smuggling, human trafficking and terrorism.

Fourth, cooperation from refugee-producing countries is also important. Wars, conflicts, and poverty are the main causes of displacement, and the solution is coordinated and inclusive growth that reduces imbalance in global development.

Li Keqiang also pledged extra help from China, including offering additional humanitarian refugee aid to relevant countries and international organizations, funding developing countries' refugee settlement efforts through the China-UN Peace and Development Fund, and exploring possible cooperation with relevant international agencies and developing countries on the refugee issue.¹⁸

To honor the commitment, during the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation held in May 2017, the Chinese government signed aid agreements with international organizations such as the WFP, the UN International Organization for Migration, the United Nations Children's Fund and UNHCR.

Judging from the current situation, such move is in line with China's national interests.

To begin with, it contributes to strengthen relations with the EU, especially with Germany, and consequently shifts the landscape of global relations to China's strategic interests. In Germany, which has anchored the refugee settlement effort in the EU, the victory of Merkel's party in the recent state election suggests that for all the doubts from home and abroad, the opendoor refugee policy is still well received and endorsed by the majority in Germany. The presidential election result in France also proves that a liberal refugee policy will remain the mainstream in the EU countries for quite some time.

By contrast, Britain and America adopt a more conservative and negative attitude towards refugee admission, making them vulnerable to political and moral accusations at home and abroad. In his recent trip to Europe, Trump suggested America's reluctance to fulfill its obligation to defend Europe and curb climate change. The posture has disappointed and alienated the Europe, and created an opportunity for China to step up and become a major partner the EU badly needs to address these global challenges. This makes the development of the EU-China cooperation almost a sure thing. To this end, helping address the EU's immediate concern of refugee crisis offers a good chance to consolidate the EU-China relations

and enhance their cooperation to China's interests.

China's participation in handling the refugee crisis is also conducive to creating a favorable geographical environment for the B&R Initiative. Since the Middle East and North Africa have an important role to play under the B&R Initiative, it is necessary to help them address the refugee crisis and achieve peace and stability, as part of the effort to expand the coverage of the B&R Initiative to Europe.

China is suggested to take a dual approach to the refugee problem, providing refugee relief and humanitarian assistance, while addressing the roots of displacement by promoting peace in the Middle East together with the EU, the US, Russia and the Middle East countries.

The crisis also offers an opportunity for China to improve its capability of managing religious and ethnic minority affairs. The vast majority of refugees to Europe are Muslims, and many of them are educated, deep-pocketed users of social media that have considerable influence on public opinions. This means that proper engagement will allow China wider support in the Muslim world, consequently undermine the support for religious extremism within and outside China and promoting the prosperity and stability of areas populated by Muslim ethnic groups.

Proper participation will enable China to improve its management on ethnic and religious affairs and undermine the support for religious extremism within and outside China.

During this refugee crisis, Pope Francis of the Catholic Church and Ecumenical Patriarch of the Orthodox Church visited the refugee-hosting island of Lesbos together. This move suggests that the two churches can set aside their disputes out of shared concerns for refugees and the Islamic extremism.

With 1.25 billion and 250 million members respectively, the Catholic and Orthodox Churches can play a powerful role in global affairs, and may even come to China's aid. Engaging with them in the refugee issue offers an opportunity to better understand the

development of Christianity in China, which in turn helps eliminate the extremist breeding ground and improves China's capability of addressing religious affairs.

Finally, such participation offers experience in addressing refugee issues. Although the Middle East and North Africa refugees are not a source of immediate concerns to China, it is noticeable that destabilizing factors are on the rise in surrounding areas, especially in the Korean Peninsula and Myanmar. Under extreme circumstances, China may become refugee destination or transit country. That is why it is necessary to help address the refugee crisis and learn from such experience to prepare for the future.

China can contribute in a variety of ways, including funding such multilateral relief agencies as UNHCR, participating in and organizing multilateral conferences on migration, strengthening its support for relevant international NGOs, and admitting an appropriate number of refugees. Some of these actions are already under way.

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¹⁰ "Macron: 'L' arrivée de réfugiés est une opportunité économique.' " Lefi garo.fr. Retrieved, 2017-02-01. Last accessed July 31, 2017.

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- ¹³ The bill is named after 32-year old Kathryn Steinle, who was shot and killed in San Francisco in 2015 by Juan Francisco Lopez-Sanchez, an illegal immigrant who had been deported from the US five times and reentered illegally. See http://www.chinanews.com/gj/2017/06-29/8264336.shtml. Last accessed July 31, 2017.
- ¹⁴ The Supreme Court rules that parts of Trump's travel ban could be enforced and agreed to hear arguments in the case in October. See: Per Curiam, Supreme Court of the United States, June 26, 2017,582 U.S.-(2017), https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/16pdf/16-1436_l6hc.pdf, Last accessed June 29, 2017.
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