Froilan Malit Jr.: A National Security Turn? Stepwise Migration of Skilled Labour and National Security Dilemmas in the Gulf.

A National Security Turn?

Stepwise Migration of Skilled Labour and National Security Dilemmas in the Gulf

Froilan Malit Jr

Executive Summary

Following the post-COVID-19 period (2020–present), most Gulf states have increasingly intensified efforts to liberalise domestic migration management processes – particularly for skilled labour migration – through tactical reforms such as long-term legal residency pathways (i.e., UAE's Golden Visa, Saudi Arabia's Premium Residency) and self-sponsorship (i.e., freelancing visas, digital nomad visas). Yet, despite such tactical labour migration policy reforms, Gulf states continue to face challenges in attracting and retaining skilled migrant populations, which are central to long-term economic diversification and national security planning.

This policy report argues that the stepwise migration of highly skilled migrant workers from the Gulf to Europe, North America, and beyond increasingly constitutes a national security dilemma and undermines the human capital foundations and labour supply of economic diversification strategies, therefore impacting the evolving social contract that underpins state service delivery, competitiveness, and regime objectives in the Gulf. Drawing on a comparative analysis of Saudi Arabia and the UAE – which collectively host at least 70% of the region's temporary labour migrants, including skilled migrant talent – the policy report traces how stepwise migration is being reframed from a labour market management problem to an economic security concern with strategic implications for national security governance and planning.

More specifically, it focuses on Gulf healthcare as a case study to underscore why retention is not simply a workforce issue. When high-skilled migration dependence is structurally rooted and turnover is high, states tend to swiftly translate stepwise migration into national service capacity risks, higher replacement costs, and institutional resiliency challenges that can become politically salient in Gulf rentier systems where public service provision is linked to the prevailing social bargain between regimes and citizens. Using current policy analyses, semi-structured interviews, and fieldwork observations, the report emphasises the following key findings: First, the Gulf states' reformist turns reveal growing intra-Gulf and external competition for skilled migrant labour and an emerging 'security framing' of human capital losses. Second, stepwise migration pressures in the Gulf are particularly evident in critical sectors (e.g., healthcare, AI), where the projected imbalances and retention constraints exacerbate governance risks. Last, socio-legal reforms (i.e., labour mobility, visas/residency, and social policy liberalisation) are