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## **POPULISM, WORLD POLITICS AND FOREIGN POLICY IN 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY: AN APPRAISAL**

### **Abstract**

The rise of populism in the global West is undoubtedly one of the defining features of current world politics. In a globalized world where the line between national and international has become blurred, the impact of domestic politics can be felt on foreign policy as well. Whether it is the decision to have stricter immigration laws or to reduce financial contribution to international organizations, states' populist policies have far-reaching implications in international relations. From Brexit to the United States' withdrawal from the Paris climate change agreement, the western countries' isolationist approach to global politics had been happening at the same time as the rise of populism. In this backdrop, the article argues that populism and world politics have a bi-directional relationship where one influences the other. To evaluate that argument, the article uses a qualitative method and examines how the rise of populism is impacting foreign policy and how populism is interacting with current world politics. It finds that global changes can cause the rise of populism. Conversely, populism has amplified the chances of drastic foreign policy actions, as leaders increasingly emphasize domestic constituencies' mindset in foreign policy. Coupled with the gradual withdrawal of major powers from world politics and increased protectionism, this signals a changing world towards more uncertain times.

**Keywords:** Populism, Foreign Policy, Global Politics

### **1. Introduction**

Rising populism is undoubtedly one of the most noteworthy trends of the recent decade of international politics. According to one study, around the world, the number of populist parties in power has seen a remarkable five-fold increase between 1990 and 2018.<sup>1</sup> Notably, the rise of right-wing populist parties all over

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Europe and the election of Donald J. Trump in the United States (US) have brought populism to the centre of academic attention. Simultaneously, the anti-globalization and anti-immigration sentiment that the most populist right-wing parties have been brewing also raised the question about how these populist parties would impact international relations. Donald Trump's decisions to withdraw from many of the established global agendas such as the Paris Climate Deal, the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP); Brexit in Britain, and the election of Boris Johnson have further solidified those questions as more populist leaders came to power. At one time, four of the largest democracies in the world: Brazil, Indonesia, India and the US were all governed by politicians who can be labelled as populist.<sup>2</sup>

Though populism has existed in history in some form or other for a long time, there have not been many studies regarding how they impact the international order.<sup>3</sup> There are several reasons why this is the case. While populist parties existed in the past, they have never been deemed as influential as they are now. In recent times, the world has witnessed a large number of populist parties/leaders in power or considered being politically influential in national (and subsequently international) politics emerging in the countries that have a larger influence in international politics.<sup>4</sup> The second reason is that it is difficult to distinguish a populist foreign policy. Populism is always laced with other ideologies such as nationalism.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, any foreign policy claimed to be populist can be countered as part of another more dominant ideology. Thirdly and related, populism is not a homogeneous ideology; instead, it has significant variation within it. The ideas of a left-wing populist party/leader vary significantly from that of the right-wing ideology.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, the study of populism as a whole has significant challenges. Lastly, it cannot be declared that studies of populism and foreign policy do not exist; instead, they tend to focus on individual countries or regimes. What had been missing in academia (until recently) was a systematic study of populism, foreign policy, and world politics in general.<sup>7</sup>

Against that backdrop, this article attempts to add to the increasing literature in recent times that has been aimed at linking populism and foreign policy with global order. It argues that the rise of populism has a symbiotic/bi-directional

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<sup>1</sup> Jordan Kyle and Limor Gultchin, "Populists in Power around the World," Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, accessed June 24, 2021, <https://institute.global/sites/default/files/articles/Populists-in-Power-Around-the-World-.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Erikur Bergmann, *Neo-Nationalism* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 130.

<sup>3</sup> Frank A. Stengel, David B. MacDonald and Dirk Nabers, "Analyzing the Nexus Between Populism and International Relations," in *Populism and World Politics: Exploring Inter- and Transnational Dimensions*, ed. Frank A. Stengel, David B. MacDonald and Dirk Nabers (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 2.

<sup>4</sup> Kyle and Gultchin, "Populists in Power around the World."

<sup>5</sup> Benjamin Moffitt, *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation* (Redwood City, California: Stanford University Press, 2016), 20-36.

<sup>6</sup> Angelos Chrysogelos, "Populism in Foreign Policy," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 1.

<sup>7</sup> *The Oxford Handbook of Populism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

relationship with world politics. While domestic populism reacts to world politics, the rise of populist leaders influences foreign policy and world politics in return. To assess that argument, it looks into the following questions: what is populism? How does it impact the foreign policy of a country? How is populism interacting with current world politics? It examines the recent trends of populism and foreign policy decision-making around the world, focusing not only on the United States, Europe but also on Latin America and India. Other countries are also examined when deemed necessary. It employs a qualitative method, relying on existing literature such as books, journals, newspaper articles, and empirical examples.

The article is divided into five major sections, including the introduction and conclusion. The second section defines populism. The third section deals with populism and its relation to foreign policy. The fourth section deals with populism and world politics. The fifth section concludes the article.

## 2. Populism: What It Means

Populism, although considered as one of the most crucial buzzwords in the political spectrum of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, is not a recent phenomenon. In the first place, it applied to radical groups or movements based in the American mid-west that reached their peak during the closing of the last century.

Secondly, there was a reference in the literature to an early revolutionary socialist movement among Russian intellectuals of the same period, who claimed that both the democratic revolution and the general spiritual reconstruction of the Russian people could and should come only from the peasant population, “the people.” An exponent of this rank came to be called a “*Narodnik*”- from the Russian *Narod* – “people.” English-speaking historians interested in this aspect of Russian history translated the word “populist” into “*Narodnik*”.<sup>8</sup>

The concept “populism” can be discussed from different perspectives. The first is to see populism from an ideological viewpoint. Here, populism can be defined as “an ideology which pits virtuous and homogeneous people against a set of elites and dangerous others who are together depicted as depriving (or attempting to deprive) the sovereign people of their rights, values, prosperity, identity and voice.”<sup>9</sup> Therefore, populism is an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite.” Here, it argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people.”<sup>10</sup> Scholars such as Canovan and Mudde theorize that populism is a thin centred ideology that attaches itself to other

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<sup>8</sup> J B Allcock, “Populism: A Brief Biography,” *Sociology* 5, no. 3 (1971): 371-387.

<sup>9</sup> D Albertazzi, and D McDonnell, “Introduction: The Sceptre and the Spectre,” in *Twenty First Century Populism*, eds. D Albertazzi, and D McDonnell (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), 1–11.

<sup>10</sup> Cas Mudde, “The Populist Zeitgeist,” *Government and Opposition* 39, no. 4 (2004): 543.

“thick” or “thin” host ideologies such as liberalism, socialism, and nationalism.<sup>11</sup> Paris Aslanidis argues that populism is not a full-blown ideology—it is a particular approach to politics as opposed to a fully developed ideology like socialism or liberalism.<sup>12</sup>

A second approach towards studying populism is examining it through a discursive frame/approach, proposed by Ernesto Laclau<sup>13</sup> and Paris Aslanidis. Aslanidis believes that frame analysis should be used to study populism, as it is more suitable to understand both discursive elements and cognitive features of it. Thorsten Wojczewski<sup>14</sup> also adopts a similar notion, saying that discursive strategy links different frustrated social demands together and constructs a collective identity which is the core of populism. Wojczewski believes that a discursive approach puts more emphasis on understanding the construction of sociopolitical categories such as “the people.” Therefore, according to him, populism can be viewed through the poststructuralist approaches of international relations theory, which focuses on how the state builds ideas of “self” vs “others”.

Thirdly, populism can be understood as a form of political strategy/tactic used to gain power, any politician who uses them can be considered as a populist. There are three core requirements to fit in this criterion: (i) they appeal to the people, championing their cause against the despised elite; (ii) populists also use crises or manufacture them to justify the call to revolt; (iii) they use inflammatory language to shock the establishments and prove their credential as one of the people.<sup>15</sup> Because populist leaders make big promises to shake up society, they tend to bump up quickly against democratic checks and balances, particularly the courts and the media that are designed to limit what governments can do.<sup>16</sup> This notion has been demonstrated by the example of populist leaders such as Donald Trump, who have called the media the enemy of people and questioned the legitimacy of the US elections.<sup>17</sup> Those big reforms proposed by them eventually degenerate into a politics of grievance, and they continue to blame the “other” for the nation’s problems.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> M Caiani and D della porta, “The Elitist Populism of The Extreme Right: A Frame Analysis of Extreme Right-Wing Discourses in Italy and Germany,” *Acta Politica* 46, no. 2 (2011):180–202.; Mudde, “The Populist Zeitgeist.”

<sup>12</sup> Paris Aslanidis, “Is Populism an Ideology? A Refutation and a New Perspective,” *Political Studies* 64, no. 1S, (2016): 88–104.

<sup>13</sup> Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, (London: Verso, 2005).

<sup>14</sup> Thorsten Wojczewski, “Populism, Hindu Nationalism, and Foreign Policy in India: The Politics of Representing the People,” *International Studies Review* 22, no. 3 (2019): 396–422.

<sup>15</sup> Benjamin Moffitt and Simon Tormey, “Rethinking Populism: Politics, Mediatization and Political Style,” *Political Studies* 62, no. 2 (2014): 390.

<sup>16</sup> Moffitt and Tormey, “Rethinking Populism: Politics, Mediatization and Political Style,” 391.

<sup>17</sup> “New York Times tells Trump: Don't call reporters enemies of the people,” BBC, updated July 29, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-44999364>

<sup>18</sup> Matthew Green and John Kenneth White, “Populism in the United States,” in *Populism Around the World: A Comparative Perspective*, ed. Daniel Stockemer (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2019), 118.



Populism is a worldview which populist parties/leaders and their supporters believe in. It is a monist ideology that means that the key categories, such as “people” and “elite” are not plural, rather homogenous. So, the core argument here is that people are all the same; they all have the same interests and values. Similarly, the elite is not plural; all the elites are identical while they act as if they are from different parties and have different ideologies. They are all the same, and more importantly, they are corrupt. The main distinction between the corrupt elite and the populist leader/party is moral. So, having power or money does not disqualify a populist leader as long as s/he has the correct values. This explains why someone like Donald Trump and Silvio Berlusconi, who are among the wealthiest people in their country, can still claim to be the representatives of the people. The argument here is that despite their wealth, they are one of them like they are one of the people because they are of “pure” values.

Because populist leaders often attack media and formal democratic institutions, populism is thought to be the opposite of pluralism or liberalism, both of which value dissents and differences of opinion and emphasize on institutions and laws that protect minority rights against the majority will.<sup>19</sup> Populism equates the majority will or majority verdict with the popular will. The popular will is defined by a moral crusade where the opposition is often called immoral or malevolent. It is suspicious of dissent and anyone in opposition to populist leaders’ actions are called the “enemy of people.”<sup>20</sup>

Another aspect of populism is it can go in the leftist or rightist direction depending on the context. In the developing world, because so much of the population is poor or have less property, it goes in the leftist direction mostly. Hugo Chavez’s foreign policy of Venezuela is the most recent example of such foreign policy. But, a lot of Latin American examples of populism have been viewed as leftist in content.<sup>21</sup> In wealthier countries, where the size of the poor in the population is small, the populism that emerges goes in the right-wing direction. Of course, Bernie Sanders is an exception.

The concept of populism is so vast that scholars often choose to focus attention on one or more specific features of populism while neglecting others. Some of these features include leadership, ideology, discourse and symbolic patterns, mass mobilization capacity, style, etc.<sup>22</sup> Brett Meyer<sup>23</sup>, for example, draws

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<sup>19</sup> Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs, “The Rise of Populism,” YouTube, accessed October 27, 2022, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AGiCL\\_Laqlw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AGiCL_Laqlw)

<sup>20</sup> Moffitt, *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation*.

<sup>21</sup> Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs, “The Rise of Populism.”

<sup>22</sup> Takis S Pappas, *Populism and Liberal Democracy: A Comparative and Theoretical Analysis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 21.

<sup>23</sup> Brett Meyer, “Populists in Power: Perils and Prospects in 2021,” Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, accessed November 23, 2021, <https://institute.global/policy/populists-power-perils-and-prospects-2021>

a distinction between three subcategories of populism based on who the “true people” and “outsiders” are. They are:

a) *Cultural populism*: This type of populism claims that the people of a country are the native members of the nation-state, and “outsiders” pose a threat to them by not sharing similar values. The outsiders can include immigrants, minorities, and cosmopolitan elites.

b) *Socio-economic populism*: The “people” are the hard-working members of the working class; “outsiders” are the big businesses, capital owners and international financial institutions. This sub-category of populism is mostly associated with a left-wing economic ideology.

c) *Anti-establishment populism*: in this view, the “true people” are hard-working commoners who are victims of a state run by special interests. “Outsiders” are elites who are served through special interests (often empowered by a former regime). Meyer states that in the current times, cultural populist has gained popularity all over the world.

**Table 1: Types of Populism**

Type of Populism	True people	Others	Core Issues
Cultural Populism	native members of the nation-state	immigrants, criminals, ethnic and religious minorities, and cosmopolitan elites	religious traditionalism, law and order, anti-immigration positions and national sovereignty
Socio-economic Populism	honest, hard-working members of the working class	the big businesses, capital owners and international financial institutions	a left-wing economic ideology, though the specific policy agenda varies across contexts
Anti-establishment Populism	hard-working victims of a state	the elites empowered by a former regime	corruption, democratic reform and transparency

Source: Compiled by the authors based on Meyer

To summarize, while populism has been around for many centuries in millennia, there is something about the contemporary form of populism, which is quite distinct. It is a thin-centred ideology that leaches itself to other ideologies. It can also be viewed through a discursive frame that focusses on elements of

populism such as the construction of collective identity, or simply as a political tactic. For this article, populism is seen as a thin-centred ideology that transcends the left-right political spectrum. The essential element of populism is what it stands against, and what it stands against is an establishment that has been hated. Populism is when people resort to stereotypes to promote a particular point of view. Populists fabricate crises to justify the call for revolution. Populists resort to offensive language to scare governments and show a politician's credibility as one of the individuals. The direction populism takes depends typically on the national context.

### 3. Impact on Foreign Policy

Before venturing into populism and its impact on foreign policy, it is essential to point out some key issues. Many scholars who have already worked on the topic of populism and foreign policy have agreed that it does not have a homogenous impact. The populist parties in various countries do not act similarly; instead, they vary from one another in significant ways.<sup>24</sup> Several scholars have examined the link between the two. Plagemann and Destradi state that populism has an impact on the foreign policy decision making of India, but does not echo the anti-internationalism that another right-wing ideology seems to have.<sup>25</sup> They claim in another study that populist foreign policy does not follow a single pattern, and thus it, in turn, makes the world more unpredictable.<sup>26</sup> In their article, Verbeek and Zaslove also have three broad claims relating to populism and foreign policy. These are: international relations can have a major impact on domestic politics and in turn the rise and strength of populism across time and countries; populist parties do not pursue identical foreign policies, rather, the variation of their preferences can be understood via the specific ideology populism attaches itself to; and the third being that populism may impact the foreign policies of states, thus affecting the relations between nations.<sup>27</sup>

Populist parties tend to follow the dominant ideology of their host party. This can be exemplified by the various populist parties in power, such as Donald Trump's decision to pull out from the Paris Treaty reflects the Republican Party's long term climate denialism. Hugo Chavez's hate for America is a part of Latin American left-wing parties' long tradition of anti-Americanism. The Modi government, on the other hand, did not change its foreign policy significantly since party Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Congress do not have many significant

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<sup>24</sup> Chryssogelos, "Populism in Foreign Policy," 2.

<sup>25</sup> Johannes Plagemann and Sandra Destradi, "Populism and Foreign Policy: The Case of India," 283–301.

<sup>26</sup> Sandra Destradi and Johannes Plagemann, "Populism and International Relations: (Un)predictability, Personalisation, and the Reinforcement of Existing Trends in World Politics," *Review of International Studies* 45, no. 5 (2019): 711-730.

<sup>27</sup> Bertjan Verbeek and Andrej Zaslove, "Populism and Foreign policy," in *Oxford Handbook of Populism*, (eds.) Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser, Paul Taggart, Paulina Ochoa Espejo and Pierre Ostiguy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 489.

clashing points when it comes to international politics. Therefore, the impact of populism can be hard to follow at times

Nonetheless, this does not imply that populism and foreign policy are not related at all. In the globalized world, the contrast between the domestic and the foreign has become less clear; the domestic events spill over into the international context, while international events affect domestic affairs.<sup>28</sup> This statement is also true in the case of populism. The article hence examines the relationship between populism and foreign policy in two aspects. One, the impact of populism in the foreign policy decision-making process; and two, the effect of domestic populist politics on foreign policy.

In the first aspect, the article seeks to examine whether there is any impact of populist leaders/parties' styles on how foreign policy decisions are made. Plagemann and Destradi argue that populist personalization may provide foreign governments incentives to establish a personal rapport on the leadership level, making foreign policy unpredictable and uncertain. Secondly, populist parties' need for centralization may create bottlenecks and eventually crowd out issues, making populist foreign policy less comprehensive and consistent.<sup>29</sup> In reality, the Trump foreign policy echoes some of the issues raised. The world leaders had tried to develop personal relationships with Trump and wanted to impress him. The president often tweeted crucial foreign policy decisions on his Twitter bypassing his administration.<sup>30</sup> Narendra Modi has also been known to develop personal relationships with other world leaders.

Nevertheless, there is not enough evidence to suggest that leaders' personal relationships have dictated major foreign policy decisions in populist regimes. Left-wing populist leaders such as Hugo Chavez and Nicolás Maduro also have a personalized foreign policy and leadership cult. Still, they are also known to be dictators, which is a strong explanation for that phenomenon. On the other hand, it has been argued that globally, there has been a rise of personalized foreign policy, regardless of the type of regime in power.<sup>31</sup>

Regarding the impact of domestic politics on foreign policy, though populist leaders follow their host ideology's existing foreign policy, the foreign policy actions are more amplified. Populist party leaders see foreign policy as a tool for forwarding their domestic agenda. Foreign policy is viewed as a powerful tool for populist mobilization, offering an opportunity for creating a popular identity and staging

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<sup>28</sup> Verbeek and Zaslove, "Populism and Foreign Policy," 489.

<sup>29</sup> Johannes Plagemann and Sandra Destradi, "Populism and Foreign Policy: The Case of India," *Foreign Policy Analysis* 15, no. 2 (April 2019): 283–301, <https://doi.org/10.1093/fpa/ory010>

<sup>30</sup> Shamila N Chaudhary, "Why the State Department Is Worried about Donald Trump and His Tweets," *Politico Magazine*, accessed January 23, 2021, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/12/donald-trump-state-department-tweets-worried-214538>.

<sup>31</sup> Andrea Kendall-Taylor, Erica Frantz and Joseph Wright, "The Global Rise of Personalized Politics: It's Not Just Dictators Anymore," *The Washington Quarterly* 40, no.1 (2017): 7-19.

themselves as “true” representatives of “the people”.<sup>32</sup> More often, populist leaders take dramatic actions to fulfill their promises to their domestic constituency. Since they tend to over-prioritize domestic politics and show a proclivity for “undiplomatic” diplomacy, the governing populist parties complicate the process of consensus-seeking and compromise-building.<sup>33</sup> Trump’s decision to start a trade war with China or withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership have both been considered undiplomatic. These actions are arguably more drastic than those of any of his predecessors and they showed his voters that he was indeed committed to protecting America’s economy. Similarly, Trump’s Muslim ban was another example of dramatic foreign policy action, where President Donald justified the ban by saying “I think Islam hates us.”<sup>34</sup> Though Narendra Modi’s “neighbourhood first policy” is a continuation of India’s long term foreign policy objectives, going as far to invite a large number of heads of the states to his inauguration or his mammoth numbers of foreign visits are strong declarations for India’s more active role in global politics. Diaspora politics, which have become a core component of Modi’s foreign policy,<sup>35</sup> is part of BJP’s Hindu nationalism agenda. However, the vast rallies Modi holds overseas have a certain intensity and flare compared to the traditional foreign policy pursued by his predecessor BJP Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee.

Another relevant impact of populism in the foreign policy in recent times is the media value attached to the foreign policy actions as populist leaders take action, which creates a certain buzz among their supporters. This is especially true in the age of social media, when charismatic leaders lead many of the populist parties in power with a love of showmanship and media hype. Examples of such actions can be Chavez publicly insulting President Bush<sup>36</sup> or Trump engaging in a summit-level meeting with North Korea that created more hype than the long-term results produced by them.<sup>37</sup>

Therefore, even though populism may not impact the foreign policy’s content, it surely can result in a simplification and emotionalization of foreign policy for maximum impact. Populism and foreign policy have a complex relationship. Populist parties have followed the trend of new, more personalized foreign policy decision making. Populism affects foreign policy based on which

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<sup>32</sup> Wojczewski, “Populism, Hindu Nationalism, and Foreign Policy in India: The Politics of Representing ‘the People.’”

<sup>33</sup> David Cadier, “How Populism Spills Over into Foreign Policy,” Carnegie Europe, accessed November 23, 2021, <https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/78102>.

<sup>34</sup> Eirikur Bergmann, *Conspiracy & Populism: The Politics of Misinformation* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), viii.

<sup>35</sup> Plagemann and Destradi, “Populism and foreign policy: the case of India,” 292.

<sup>36</sup> “Mr Bush you are a donkey” and other memorable Chavez moments,” Euronews, March 6, 2013, <https://www.euronews.com/2013/03/06/xyz-hugo-chavez-the-political-showman>.

<sup>37</sup> Uri Friedman, “Inside the Collapse of Trump’s Korea Policy,” *The Atlantic*, December 19, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2019/12/donald-trump-kim-jong-un-north-korea-diplomacy-denuclearization/603748/>.

ideology it is attached to. Thus, a left-wing populist party's foreign policy does not have a similarity to right-wing foreign policy. However, populism does increase the possibility of a dramatic foreign policy action since populist leaders have an attraction for showmanship and see foreign policy as a tool for securing faith from the domestic constituency.

#### 4. Populism and World Politics

As discussed in the previous section, populism has an impact on foreign policy. Consequently, there will also be a relation between populism and world politics. To understand this relationship between populism and world politics, the article examines both the impact of world politics on populism and the impact of populism on world politics. In the recent times, cultural populism has been prevalent, so the article mostly focuses on that type of populism.

The first aspect is the impact of world politics on the growth of populism. Scholars have argued that contemporary populism is a distinctive reaction to the social dislocations of globalization.<sup>38</sup> Populist leaders often use international events as a source of their political growth. Populism is based on creating the idea of "us" vs "them". The populist leaders claim to fight enemies operating from the shadows, both at home and abroad.<sup>39</sup> Globalization has further reinforced this idea of the enemy from shadows, since national identity is seen to be under threat because of immigration, globalization and terrorism.<sup>40</sup> Erikur Bergmann has identified the International Financial Crisis of 2008 and the European Refugee Crisis of 2015 as some of the triggering factors of the new rise of populism.<sup>41</sup>

Within the European context, it has been argued that radical right-wing parties interested in populism enjoyed a growth spurt in the early 1990s, which coincided with three major international transformations: the end of the Cold War, the advent of globalization, and the intensification of the European integration process.<sup>42</sup> On the other hand, Mações goes as far as to argue that "populism is a direct result of significant shifts in the global distribution of power. Namely, it is a reaction to the loss of power by a formerly hegemonic West."<sup>43</sup> He says that populists promise to return their citizens to a world in which Europe might feel

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<sup>38</sup> Vedi R. Hadiz and Angelos Chrysogelos, "Populism in World Politics: A Comparative Cross-Regional Perspective," *International Political Science Review* 38, no. 4 (2017): 399–411

<sup>39</sup> David Cadier, "How Populism Spills Over into Foreign Policy," Carnegie Europe, accessed 23 November 2021, <https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/78102>

<sup>40</sup> Rosa Balfour et al., *The Troublemakers: The Populist Challenge to Foreign Policy*, (Brussels: European Policy Centre, 2016).

<sup>41</sup> Bergmann, *Neo-Nationalism*, 131.

<sup>42</sup> Bergmann, *Neo-Nationalism*, 131.

<sup>43</sup> Bruno Mações, "The Secret Sources of Populism," *Foreign Policy*, June 18, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/06/18/the-new-political-influencers/>



protected from external influences while still being able to exert power over everyone else to gain popularity.<sup>44</sup>

A prime example of populist leaders using international events to gain support in the domestic domain is Brexit. In 2016, “Vote Leave” campaign was initiated “take back control” of Britain’s sovereignty, saying Brussels’ bureaucratic beasts were undermining it. During the Brexit referendum campaign, Nigel Farage, Leader of UK Independence Party (UKIP), said: “European law is supreme. The European court of justice overrules Britain’s parliament and its courts.”<sup>45</sup> Farage had a televised debate on the Liberal Democrat Nick Clegg, someone who vehemently supported remaining in the European Union (EU). They debated the pros and cons of the European Union and Farage was seen to have won with a poll suggesting 69 per cent of those watched.<sup>46</sup> The government had promised in 2010 to reduce immigration to the tens of thousands. However, at the end of 2015, the migration figures were nowhere near the promised number but rather 330,000. Farage capitalized on this and made many arguments about immigration, trying to persuade people and vote to leave and support his party. Farage aggressively campaigned, which ultimately led Britain to vote to leave the EU in the Brexit referendum. Alternatively, this example also shows how populism can influence foreign policy decisions of a state directly.

Conversely, in order to understand the impact world politics has on populism, it is important to understand the existing world order. Currently, the world is described as a liberal international order that has been explained by scholars as an “open and rule-based international order” which is “enshrined in institutions such as the United Nations and norms such as multilateralism.”<sup>47</sup> The order promotes, dually, the sovereignty of states; and economic liberalism, political liberalism, and a belief that states can cooperate, in other words, multilateralism.<sup>48</sup> The world order has been dominated by the ideas of “open markets, international institutions, cooperative security democratic community, progressive change, collective problem solving, shared sovereignty, the rule of law.”<sup>49</sup> For the most part, authoritarian regimes such as that of China and Russia have been considered as a threat to the liberal international order because of their seeming indifference to

<sup>44</sup> Mações, “The Secret Sources of Populism.”

<sup>45</sup> “What led to Brexit: Start here,” YouTube Video, Al Jazeera, November 10, 2019, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=30pn4CaS2\\_M](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=30pn4CaS2_M)

<sup>46</sup> “Farage v Clegg: UKIP leader triumphs in second televised debate,” *The Guardian*, updated April 3, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2014/apr/02/nigel-farage-triumphs-over-nick-clegg-second-debate>

<sup>47</sup> G. John Ikenberry, “The Future of the Liberal World Order,” *Foreign Affairs* (May/June, 2011): 56.

<sup>48</sup> Hans Kundnani, “What is the Liberal International Order?,” *The German Marshall Fund of the United States Policy Essay*, no. 17 (2017): 1.

<sup>49</sup> G. John Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 2.

international laws and regulations.<sup>50</sup> The annexation of Crimea by Russia or the conflict over the South China Sea and rejection of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) verdict by China are seen as anomalies to the western vision.

But with the increasing rise of right-wing populism in the western countries, the liberal order is witnessing a new type of shift. The populist idea of distrust in formal institutions has crossed national borders, towards international institutions.<sup>51</sup> Generally, the right-wing populist parties that are gaining prominence in the western countries are opposed to globalization, and the free movement of goods, services, and jobs as right-wing populism promote national interests at the expense of multinational organizations. Moreover, they are against both immigration and foreign ownership of domestic assets.<sup>52</sup> Therefore, the major components of liberal order faces question of legitimacy from the right-wing populist parties and their supporters.

Already the world is witnessing the impacts of populism on world politics. One of the most visible impacts of populism on international events is Brexit, where the right-wing populist leaders of Britain were successful in mobilizing public support against the “enemy” that is the EU. Even though euro skepticism was present before, it has been argued that widespread support for Brexit was a mixture of nationalist sentiment and anti-elitist attitudes against Brussels.<sup>53</sup> The Brexit incident has brought forward the rising issue of euro skepticism in Europe. According to a European Parliament poll, one-third of people across Europe want to leave the EU.<sup>54</sup> On this note, it is also worth mentioning that as of 2016, there were at least 15 populist parties across Europe that advocated a referendum to leave or just advocated leaving the EU.<sup>55</sup> Therefore, it will not be far-fetched to state that rising right-wing populism is posing a threat to liberal international organizations like the EU. The US’ fund-halt from the WHO and withdrawal from the Paris Climate agreement are also some examples.

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<sup>50</sup> Drew Cottle, Angela Keys and Thomas Costigan, “Contemporary Challenges to the US-led Liberal International Order from the United States and the Rising Powers of China and Russia,” *Rising Powers Quarterly* 1, no.1, (2019): 57-75.

<sup>51</sup> Vedi R Hadiz and Angelos Chrysogelos, “Populism in World Politics: A Comparative Cross-Regional Perspective,” *International Political Science Review* 38, no. 4, (2017): 399–411

<sup>52</sup> Mariam Isa, “The Populist Threat to Growth,” *Fin24*, November 21, 2018, <https://www.fin24.com/Finweek/Business-and-economy/the-populist-threat-to-growth-20181121>.

<sup>53</sup> Evgeniia Iakhnis, Brian Rathbun, Jason Reifler and Thomas J Scott, “Populist Referendum: Was ‘Brexit’ an expression of nativist and anti-elitist sentiment?,” *Research and Politics*, (April-June 2018): 1–7.

<sup>54</sup> “Eurobarometer,” European Parliament, accessed June 23, 2021, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/at-your-service/files/be-heard/eurobarometer/2019/closer-to-the-citizens-closer-to-the-ballot/report/en-eurobarometer-2019.pdf>.

<sup>55</sup> The Economist, “How Brexit is changing the EU,” *YouTube*, accessed April 12, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9bLLc8Z2Dng>.

Right-wing populism can work as an opposing force to the neoliberal global economic order on the economic front. To appease the fears linked to globalization and potential changes to people's jobs and well-being,<sup>56</sup> populist leaders in power have taken several protectionist moves through the governments. For instance, the US-China Trade War can be worth mentioning which was started by President Donald Trump for his populist ideology that was estimated to cut "global trade flows to 4.2 per cent for 2016, and 4 per cent for 2019."<sup>57</sup> Trump had also withdrawn from the TPP, the largest trade deal, calling it a potential disaster for the US<sup>58</sup> It is important to note that withdrawing from the TPP was one of the campaign promises of Donald Trump.<sup>59</sup> The United States had witnessed demonstrations against the Trans-Pacific Partnership deal across the country for several years and hundreds of thousands of grassroots activists had been campaigning against this treaty for a couple of years.<sup>60</sup> However, in a global context, TPP was more than a trade deal; it was an issue of leadership in the region. The US was going to tie the economies around the Pacific to the United States. Withdrawal from the deal in that sense had also signalled the United States' unwillingness to continue to lead its region.

A major debate has emerged among scholars on what extent the global economy is being affected by the populist leaders, their protectionism and trade wars. Although populist economic policies can bring some short-term benefits, it will damage exports, employment opportunities, and overall economic growth in the long term. Even before pandemic, the global economy was already slowing down due to the trade war between the US and China. The populist leaders' dramatic actions have created several escalations in the security arena as well. President Trump's Twitter battle with North Korea and Iran, the sudden killing of Iranian General, or India's 2019 Balakot airstrike on Pakistani territory has all created uneasiness and tension in bilateral relations and overall international politics.

Overall, the populist party/leaders' approaches towards foreign policy in recent times have been mostly laden with protectionist, anti-multilateralism, and domestic crowd-pleasing decisions. Coupled with the populist leaders' attraction towards dramatic flair and insistence on conducting foreign policy in "non-traditional", world politics became more unpredictable and uncertain. It is

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<sup>56</sup> Jordi Bacaria, "Populism and Its Impact on Multilateral Institutions and Economic Trade," *CIDOB Report*, April 2017, accessed March 14, 2020, [https://www.cidob.org/en/articulos/cidob\\_report/n1\\_1/populism\\_and\\_its\\_impact\\_on\\_multilateral\\_institutions\\_and\\_economic\\_trade](https://www.cidob.org/en/articulos/cidob_report/n1_1/populism_and_its_impact_on_multilateral_institutions_and_economic_trade),

<sup>57</sup> Bacaria, "Populism and Its Impact on Multilateral Institutions and Economic Trade."

<sup>58</sup> "Trump Withdraws US from TPP deal," *YouTube, Al Jazeera*, updated January 24, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F81srJ4rLYA>.

<sup>59</sup> "Trump's campaign promises-has he delivered on them?," *BBC News*, December 24, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-37982000>.

<sup>60</sup> "The TPP Wasn't Killed by Donald Trump - Our Protests Worked," *The Guardian*, updated November 28, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/nov/28/tpp-protests-mass-opposition-worked-trump-presidency>.

interesting to observe that their claims over some of the biggest and emerging powers in world politics had more ramifications for world politics than the overall rise of populism around the world. The seeming withdrawal of the United States from active world politics and Europe's trouble with its problems (both can be linked with populism in one way or another), created a vacuum in world politics. While China is slowly trying to have a more active role in world politics, its efforts have been hampered by its economy taking a hit from both the Trade War and COVID-19 pandemic. After his election, President Biden put the US back in the global politics; but for some time, the world politics was clouded by uncertainty.

As the COVID-19 pandemic crushed the world, it is also exposing many of the flaws of the existing global system. Many scholars are predicting that the post-pandemic world will be more protectionist and anti-globalization.<sup>61</sup> Unlike Donald Trump, most leaders have taken the pandemic seriously,<sup>62</sup> and have taken action to prevent it. This, however, does not mean that the pandemic will not have any impact. As more people are drawn into poverty due to the economic fallout from the pandemic, the fight will further intensify between "us v. them." Populist leaders in general have a trend of having longer ruling period. Out of 32 countries that have had populist leaders, only four of them were one-term leaders.<sup>63</sup> The populist leaders can take advantage of this division created due to the pandemic to further strengthen their position.

## 6. Conclusion

The rising popularity of populist parties in the western countries and their increased influence of state power have led to a significant discussion in the world about their impact on foreign policy and international politics. While their populism itself is not a new phenomenon, the study of populism and international relations in a holistic manner is being done only in recent years. As a thin-centered ideology that attaches itself to other ideologies such as nationalism, the study of populism and foreign policy is challenging for several reasons. This article has tried to find what populism is, its relationship with foreign policy and international politics, and its impact on the existing world order.

In terms of foreign policy decisions making, populist parties/leaders seem to follow the host ideology that populism is attached to. Thus, a left-wing populist party's foreign policy varies significantly, from the foreign policy to a right-wing populist party. Foreign policy decision making has also become more personalized.

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<sup>61</sup> Philippe Legrain, "The Coronavirus is killing Globalization as we know it," *Foreign Policy*, March 12, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/03/12/coronavirus-killing-globalization-nationalism-protectionism-trump/>.

<sup>62</sup> Brett Meyer, "Pandemic Populism: An Analysis of Populist Leaders' Responses to Covid-19," Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, accessed November 30, 2020, <https://institute.global/policy/pandemic-populism-analysis-populist-leaders-responses-covid-19>.

<sup>63</sup> Meyer, "Populists in Power: Perils and Prospects in 2021."

Populist leaders see foreign policy as a tool to advance their agenda and emphasize domestic constituency's satisfaction. This creates complexity for the traditional foreign policy process. Additionally, populism increases the chance of a country taking dramatic foreign policy actions that are drastic in nature since populist leaders have an attraction for showmanship and media-hype.

Populism and international politics have a bi-directional relationship. Global events impact the growing populism within the state, while populism can also have an impact on international events. Many scholars have linked the rise of globalization for the height of the populism. Increased immigration, free movement of goods and services create both economic anxiety and fear of losing national identity in people. This fear is cultivated by populist leaders. The concept of elites also transcends borders, as many international organizations are portrayed by the populist leaders as an elite who have unnecessary control over their nations.

On the other hand, world politics is also witnessing the impact of populism. The liberal world order is facing a new challenge due to the rise of populism, particularly in countries that have been fundamental in upholding the system. The right-wing populism, which is currently rising worldwide, embodies the values of protectionism, anti-immigration, and anti-multilateralism; all of which are core to values in the liberal world order. Withdrawal from TPP, constant criticism of international organizations such as the UN and Brexit are all examples of how populist leaders are changing their position towards the existing world order. While it cannot be said that the rise of populism has changed the structure of world politics remarkably, these trends will certainly have an impact in coming years. While the world faces a global pandemic that threatens the human well-being and world economy, the rise of populism divided the world leaders more than ever, and international politics went through an era of uncertainty.