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Populism, conflict and war

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This article aims to contribute to a growing domain of research linking domestic and international aspects of populism. Stressing leadership performance and communicative style as key to defining populism, it discusses several aspects that turn populist leaderships into riskier for the international global order, among them populism's antagonistic character, emotional tonality and personalistic concentration of decision-making. The article analyzes the international impact of full-blown populist leaders, that is those populists who, once in power, have altered the constitutional and unwritten rules of the game and have dominated foreign policy in a personalistic way. It looks at the constellation of factors that allowed or precluded leaders such as Turkey's president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Israel's PM Benjamin Netanyahu, India's PM Narendra Modi, and Donald Trump in his second presidency to engage in international confrontations and wars. The text claims that, unless there are mitigating institutional, sociocultural or geopolitical factors, full-blown populists in power may turn confrontational not just at the nation-state level but also in their foreign policy praxis. Analysis leads to identifying in a preliminary way factors increasing the likelihood of conflictive international outcomes.

KEYWORDS

populism, emotional tonality, polarizing politics, transnational projection, war

Introduction: the global rise of populism

The Great Revolutions elevated the banners of equality, participation, and social justice to the core of modern political legitimation. After periods of violence and abuse of power, societies established procedural legitimation as basic to the political process. In the following centuries, modern constitutional democracies crystallized and created institutional mechanisms of responsive representation and vertical accountability that combined liberal and republican emphases. These political systems recognized citizen rights and separation of powers, and prescribed checks and balances deemed to regulate discretion in terms of abstract norms. Ideally, powerholders were expected to justify governmental decisions, and keep the citizens and their representatives informed, so that they could scrutinize state policies. Equally important—although downplayed in many works—was the concern of early modern constitutional democracy theorists such as the North American founding fathers with the role of the state in protecting honest working people from parasitic elites like 'crafty and indolent bankers' and those willing to retain aristocratic or oligarchic pretensions (Eisenstadt, 1978; Shklar, 1991; Kalyvas and Katznelson, 2008).

Unsurprisingly, modern constitutional democracies faced the constant rise of protest movements lifting the banners of the sovereign people and prompting the incorporation of protest symbols and demands, sometimes crystalizing into formally recognized rights. A process of expansion and contraction of the political realm became ingrained in constitutional democracies, which addressed inner tensions regarding the relative weight of representation and participation, or in other words, the modes of interaction between the people as 'sovereign' and its 'representatives'. Correlated with it, there have been various cycles of breakdown of democracies and several waves of populism, some bolstering democracy and others controlling it, for instance in Latin America where early democratizing and classical populist leaders have

been followed by both neoliberal and radical brands of populists (Roniger, 2013; De la Torre, 2019; Dalaqua, 2024).

The late 20th century global transitions from authoritarianism and the processes of political liberalization rekindled debates on civil society, depicting empowered citizens deliberating, shaping public opinion, and promoting their affairs autonomously in defense of justifiable demands (Cohen and Arato, 1992; Avritzer, 2002; Roniger, 2014). Soon, however, globalization, neoliberal deregulation and cyclical market crises resulted in worldwide deepening inequalities, which along with the migration and health crises, further reawakened criticisms of democratic representation and practice, and opened the way once again for massive anti-systemic protests and a rise of both left-wing and right-wing populism in many societies worldwide. Another major driving force for the global rise in populism, particularly evident in Europe and the USA, has been the backlash to mass migration perceived as undermining states' control over access to citizenship and the uproar against cultural ideas perceived as threatening the sense of collective identity of societies (Ruzza, 2019; McDonnell and Werner, 2020; Kubic, 2024). While left-wing populists have targeted the neoliberal system and its effects on income inequalities, right-wing populists have typically attacked the liberal international and regional regimes and cultural cosmopolitanism. Carlos de la Torre has characterized such reaction to cleavages mobilizing protest as "the populist politization of inequalities and differences" (De la Torre, 2019, pp. 145–215).

Conceptual and methodological considerations

Historically, populism has been rooted in the expansion of modern constitutional democracies and the failings of such political systems and the international liberal order to deal with socioeconomic crises and geopolitical challenges in a way that would implement their professed principles while satisfying people's quest for a meaningful existence grounded in some sense of transcendental foundation (Kubic, 2024, p. 1068 citing Kołakowski, 1989). When such gaps opened, populist politicians, parties and coalitions quickly pursued a 'politics of anti-politics', blaming self-serving elites and foreign interests for policy failures, in their search for building mass followings and legitimizing their standing and mounting power.

Unlike approaches that conceive populism as an ideology, as thin as it be, in order to construct a minimal definition of the phenomenon aimed at comparing mainly political parties (Mudde, 2004, 2017; Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017), I center attention on populism as a performing style of political organization, mass communication and mobilization of popular grievances and concerns (Moffitt, 2016; Weyland, 2017; Barr, 2019). Moreover, populism may be seen somehow as a praxis of antagonistic, mobilizational "flaunting the 'low,'" to use Pierre Ostiguy's definition (Ostiguy, 2017), conceptualizing it as a two-way relational political phenomenon and not merely a demagogic manipulation of the masses. In that sense, research pays attention not just to the tug-of-war between personalistic leaders and institutional checks-and-balances, but also to their building of strategic mobilization and communication channels with supporters, reacting to their grievances and activating in them a sense of sharing a sense of meaningful collective direction. Supporters are often energized by the leader's arguments of rightfulness, vindication

of victimhood and the rhetoric claiming to embody the interests and sense of purpose of entire sectors of society, even when the leader advances polarizing and sectarian policies.

Additionally, I do not consider that populism maintains an 'unorganized relationship to its support base', unlike in some popular conceptualizations. For instance, Kurt Weyland characterized populism at the intersection of personalism and an unorganized relationship to support bases, distinguishing it from other forms of personalism like clientelism—claimed to maintain firm informal ties with supporters—and from personalist party governments that establish stable organizational links with their political base (Weyland, 2017). In my view, as a performing style of political organization and mass communication, populist leaderships strive to construct stable organizational bases, albeit keeping them under personalistic control, which is often exercised by complex sets of advisers, brokers and collaborators delivering material and symbolic rewards to supporters, while punishing enemies and critics.

A major strategy of populists has been to draw a dividing line, creating a sort of binary opposition between 'the people' led by a leader—and associates, movements or parties—claiming to represent the people's interests and voice, while confronting a nebulous category of domestic and external 'others', such as the 'global elites', affecting the nation and its people.

Beyond this shared trait, research has stressed that while some cleavages prompting the support for populism have an interest-based leaning and others are more identity-related, both material and identitarian factors are intertwined and should be studied specifically from a territorially-focused perspective as they develop from local grievances to regional mobilization and onto national arenas, thus accounting for varied conditions of emergence of populism (Dunin-Wąsowicz and Gartzou-Katsouyanni, 2025; Dunin-Wąsowicz et al., 2025). In this text, I take another direction, exploring the international impact of full-blown populist leaders, that is, of populists who, once in power, have altered the constitutional and unwritten rules of the game and have dominated foreign policy in a personalistic way.

In recent years, this domain of study focusing on populist foreign policies has gathered momentum, bringing international relations to devote growing attention to the impact of populism in the global arena, both in terms of its drive, strategy, style, discourse or policy output (Chrysogelos, 2017; Wajner and Roniger, 2019; Wajner and Giurlando, 2024; Lacatus and Meibauer, 2025), albeit there is still indecision on whether populists in power are more belligerent than the non-populist predecessors (Destradi and Plagemann, 2019; Sofos, 2025). While claiming to defend national interest, contemporary populist leaderships have decoupled legitimation and delegitimation from their sole endorsement by citizens within a national territory, increasingly engaging regional and global publics through public diplomacy, interactive social media, cults of personality, and Diaspora gatherings, and sometimes, more radical confrontational policies.

In order to single out the constellation of factors that allow or preclude populist leaders to engage in international confrontations, the text follows four full-blown populist leaders who adopted combative styles of foreign policy, advanced international confrontations and some of them led their countries into waging war. Focusing on US Donald Trump's second presidency, Turkey's president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Israel's PM Benjamin Netanyahu and India's PM Narendra Modi, and their engagement in international confrontations and war, the text approaches leaders from varied

civilizational backgrounds yet sharing a centralizing style of decision-making that affects not just national politics but also the involvement of their countries in the international arena.

The leaders selected for detailed analysis are ‘full-blown populists’ rather than ‘light populists’, in the distinction made by [De la Torre \(2023, p. 179\)](#). As such, they did not simply politicize issues that other parties and leaders did not address, while remaining within the boundaries of constitutional democracies. Rather, as full-blown populists, these leaders have aimed to bring about regime change by altering the constitutional and unwritten rules of the game, centralizing decision-making as they set policy. In the international arena as much as in internal affairs, they have used political and communication strategies in a personalistic manner, adopting foreign policy decisions in a way that, when faced with complex geopolitical situations, led to the unraveling of international alliances, to economic confrontation and even to war. Analysis claims that, unless there are mitigating institutional, sociocultural or geopolitical factors, full-blown populists in power may turn confrontational not just at the nation-state level but also in their foreign policy praxis, with impacts, some of them bellicose, that have been disruptive of the liberal international order.

The next sections examine the populist praxis and polarization and its emotional tonality, moving then to a discussion of the impact of populism in international arena. Practices of international legitimization and delegitimization have been central for populist leaderships who have mobilized diverse grassroots groups not just domestically but also abroad in a search of legitimizing their leadership and their political projects transnationally, as examined for the cases of Latin American Pink Tide leftist movements, particularly Chavismo, and Euroalternativism, particularly the Democracy in Europe Movement 2025. Subsequently, the text moves into an analysis of the pugnacious international praxis of Donald Trump in his second presidency, Turkey’s president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Israel’s PM Benjamin Netanyahu and India’s PM Narendra Modi, based on secondary sources, and followed by a discussion of findings and conclusions.

Populist divisive praxis and polarization

While some populists may have had a democratizing effect on pre-existing elitist and authoritarian regimes, for instance by being a corrective for problems of exclusion and marginalization, populism in general has had a more mixed impact. Its political style of mass mobilization and its tendency to concentrate decision-making around leading figures has resulted in what [Levitsky and Loxton \(2019\)](#) have called ‘competitive authoritarianism’, or even shaped a punitive, ‘penal authoritarianism’ as that which characterized Rodrigo Duterte’s violent war on drugs in the Philippines ([Curato, 2016](#)) or the decades-long combination of ‘unaccountable authoritarian control’ by Yoweri Museveni and the National Resistance Movement party in Uganda ([Tapscott, 2021](#); [Lacatus and Meibauer, 2025](#)).

Populists’ majoritarian-participatory axis is often combined with concentrated lopsided power. Populist leaders may be tempted to eliminate checks-and-balances typical of liberal democratic systems, and reinforce executive predominance, eventually undermining the autonomy of regulatory bodies, the courts and media. In some cases,

they may use legal, security and fiscal state controls to foster institutional environments of civil uncertainty and deterrence. When those actions combine with a de-legitimation and demonization of independent voices, autonomous agencies and oppositions, the authoritarian physiognomy of populism becomes full-fledged authoritarianism, hampering the real exercise of institutional accountability and the sustainability of democratic citizenship, even as it maintains and sometimes even reinforces electoral formalities ([Sznajder et al., 2013](#), pp. 267–309; [Weyland, 2019](#), [Tapscott, 2021](#); [Peruzzotti, 2023](#)).

Both when aiming to amass strength and when reaching positions of power, populists have often stressed mass mobilization and participation in political movements and built coalitions working against elites portrayed as entrenched and self-serving, often nicknamed ‘the establishment’ or the ‘deep state’, as well as against external, global enemies. Those opposing the leader turn to be labeled ‘enemies of the people’ and as such, are subject to consequences—ranging from fines and exclusion to prison time or exile—for their lack of support for the populist constellation.

Once in the seats of power, populist leaderships have tended to embolden state regulation and ameliorate the autonomy of civil society, which under conditions of increased mobilization from above, precipitated internal and external confrontations for the sake of retaining power and domestic legitimacy. Paula Diehl has suggested that populism twists the mechanisms of democratic representation. Unlike in liberal democracies, where representatives must maintain a balance between their desire to make decisions on behalf of citizens and the expectation that they remain accountable, populist leaders may vacate the autonomy of civil society as they may try to concentrate decision-making in their persona and an inner circle of close collaborators. Moreover, populism tends to project a ‘mimetic’ relationship between the leader and her supporters, with the former expecting and the latter expected to bestow an almost unconditional trust in the leader’s wisdom ([Diehl, 2019](#)).

Key in populists’ performative styles has been to magnify hate and love, fear and euphoria, as communicative and mobilization strategies. These strategies facilitate the construction of the category of ‘the people’ in conflict with the ‘old elites’ and with real or imagined internal and external enemies.

Intense emotional tonality

Populist leaders and activists interact with different types of audiences, identify their sentiments, and ultimately aim to attract support to build a substantial base of followers. Claiming to be the legitimate voice of a society, populist figures generate deep emotions as they try to galvanize popular support. Passionate feelings like fear, anger, guilt, and hope work to generate a common sense of identity among audiences and thus embed legitimacy in highly affective bonds. Adding to Max Weber’s analysis of charismatic legitimacy as unique yet ephemeral ([Gerth and Wright Mills, 1958](#), pp. 52–55; [Kalberg, 2021](#), chapter 2), both anthropologists of emotions ([Lewis et al., 2010](#)) and international relations scholars ([Franck, 1990](#), pp. 91–95; [Adler, 2010](#); [Åhäll, 2018](#)) have registered the role of emotive expression in research on political legitimization. When studying populist movements from this perspective, research registers emotional tonality as central to populist strategies that color and give affective

density to specific claims and policies (Laclau, 2005, p. 111; Weyland, 2001; Drezner, 2017, esp. 30–39), a trend notable among populists (Moffitt, 2016; Skonieczny, 2018; Kinnvall, 2018).

Populists aim at developing a mutual connection of devotion and sacrifice in support of their image of being generous and heroic leaders bringing dignity to their followers, often depicting them as victimized by unaccountable elites, and the followers responding with an affective attachment and even cult of the leaders' persona (De la Torre, 2007, 2015). In the same tenor, Arato (2015) has called attention to populism as a disguised political theology with authoritarian consequences, whether intended or not. Indeed, some populist leaders have adopted an almost messianic liaison of mutual commitment and used inflammatory defiant speeches, nationalist slogans, slang, and mannerisms resounding with local audiences (Capriles, 2006; Zúquete, 2007; Drezner, 2017).

Populists' success has depended much on the emotional tonality of leadership and the leader's cult as a policy priority, exploiting his/her protagonist role in legitimizing political projects domestically and beyond. In the case of progressive left-wing populism in the Americas, despite occasionally successful overturns by the Kirchners, Ortega, Correa, Morales, and Maduro who were able to produce such committed relationships with diaspora, ethnic or political groups outside their countries, they fell well short of Hugo Chávez' capacity to perform empathetic resonance with international audiences. In the latter case, his defiant leadership was cherished partly due to his willingness to allocate resources to generate an effective and affective relationship to back up his decision to provide international aid as a token of transnational solidarity (Sagarzazu and Thies, 2019). Since Chávez's death in 2013, the progressive populist wave has lacked a similar impetus, despite efforts to eternalize the figure of the deceased leader, even bordering in the idea of 'Chávez's immortality' and reincarnation through the reenactment of his image and speeches during the commemoration of anniversaries of his death (Panizza, 2005, pp. 22–25).

The extrapolation of populist strategies onto the international arena

As global trade, finance, migration, terrorism, health and environmental crises have increasingly affected nation-states, domestic political forces have tended to build their standing also on the international and transnational arena, establishing or breaking alliances and modelling their domestic image in terms of transnational connections, and vice versa. As Daniel Wajner has indicated, this strategy has involved both right-wing and left-wing populists:

Members of the Visegrad club, which is led by Hungary's Viktor Orbán and Poland's Jarosław Kaczyński, broadcast to their respective constituencies' images in which they jointly challenge the European Union (EU). Much like right-wing European populists, including France's Marine Le Pen, Italy's Matteo Salvini and the Netherlands' Geert Wilders, left-wing European populists, such as Greece's Alexis Tsipras, Spain's Pablo Iglesias and France's Jean-Luc Mélenchon, have jointly expressed their alliance against domination by 'Brussels', 'Frankfurt' and 'Wall Street'. Venezuela's Nicolás Maduro and Nicaragua's Daniel Ortega recruited a transnational grassroots network to ensure the aesthetics of festive

mass mobilization at their rallies around Latin America, in opposition to unpopular, 'Yankee'-oriented regional frameworks. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte, Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan promoted large-scale receptions among their national diasporas in their pre-election travels abroad. Israel's former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu used images of himself with Trump, Putin and Modi in television commercials and on large posters to emphasize his electoral slogan: 'a league of his own' (Wajner, 2023, p. 422).

Increasingly, global and regional events impact the strategies of politicians and political parties within nations and local settings. Developments such as the 2008–09 global financial and debt crisis or the migration emergency that followed the 2011 'Arab Springs' became transnational drivers of populism not just in the Global South but also across Europe and the USA. The influx of migrants and refugees—as well as cultural divisive issues such as gender and sexuality debates—became soon connected to criticisms of European institutions and their limited problem-solving capacities, as in Central and East European countries (Dunin-Wąsowicz, 2016; Dunin-Wąsowicz et al., 2025). In the United States, globalized free trade policies and their effects on de-industrialization created wide material unease, soon intertwined with resentment to the 'woke culture'. Likewise, the Ukraine-Russian War (2022–25) forced a redrawing of political commitments, including those of populist leaderships and parties within Europe. In turn, given the polarization that populist leaders, parties and governments promote, the stakes they play for, and the passions they generate, they are objects of constant international scrutiny, particularly during moments of crisis. While several European right-wing political parties traditionally admired Putin's regime and had strong ties with Russia over a decade, since the war with Ukraine some of them shifted their positions to avoid being closely associated with the aggressor. Thus, Vox in Spain, Meloni's Fratelli d'Italia, Portugal's Chega and Sweden's Democrats have weakened their ties to the Kremlin and became critical of Russia's foreign policy. Still, others such as Austria's Freedom Party, Bulgaria's Revival Party, Freedom and Democracy in the Czech Republic and Victor Orbán's Fidesz party in Hungary remained pro-Russian, due to their geographic location and partly due to their animosity toward the policies and sanctions of the European Union. Poland's PiS is a case apart, since despite the similarity of its positions on gender and civil society to those of Putin, the historical memories of Russia as a threat to its territorial integrity prompted its support for Ukraine, granting refuge to about 1.5 million individuals fleeing their country (Gilles and Zankina, 2023; Bujdei-Tebeica, 2023).

But even in 'normal' times, practices of international legitimization and delegitimization—through meetings with other leaders and parties and with supportive intellectuals, unionists, students, and political elites—have been central for leaderships whose effective hold on power and claims of authoritative rule are grounded in popular support (Hurd, 2008, pp. 2–3). In parallel, populists have generated attempts at legitimization and delegitimization not just domestically, through the mobilization of diverse grassroots groups domestically, but also abroad, through their impact on the platforms and relative weight of parties in electoral politics. Take for instance the cases of Euroalternativism and the Leftist Latin American populisms. Both sought to legitimize their political projects transnationally.

Euroalternativism, particularly the Democracy in Europe Movement 2025 (DiEM25) launched by former Greek Finance Minister Yanis Varoufakis, was an attempt to construct a transnational leftist project to ‘democratize’ Europe against the Brussels’ unaccountable elites (De Cleen et al., 2019; Fanoulis and Guerra, 2020). Likewise, the rise of radical rightist parties in Europe can be attributed to the expansion of the European Union, with bureaucratic constitutionalism developing at the expense of the popular and promoting the emergence of political figures exploiting the anti-cosmopolitan sentiments of social sectors and seeking to stop and reverse the ‘denationalization’ of their societies. They tackled migration and crime or multiculturalism, issues unaddressed in a confrontational way by the parties in power, proposed radical solutions and presented themselves as political outsiders willing to get rid of the corrupt elite. They promoted the idea of fighting for a ‘Europe of the Europeans’ based on the core values of ‘European civilization’ and as such redrawing transnational alliances within Europe (Rovira Kaltwasser, 2015).

Likewise, the Latin American ‘Pink Tide’ populists made huge efforts and devoted resources to cultivate connections with transnational audiences through ceremonial gatherings and celebratory aesthetics, turning to festive mobilization of popular sectors as support basis. Political movements, student associations, ethno-religious groups, and other civil society organizations developed transnational and transcontinental ties, and organized joint events, helping to shape a common discourse of ‘grassroots networking.’ ‘Pink Tide’ populists promoted social activism all through Latin America, moving in parallel to the role assigned for constructing collective commitments as in the ‘Bolivarian Circles’ in Venezuela, the piqueteros in Argentina, and the coca-growers in Bolivia (Hawkins and Hansen, 2006; Roberts, 2006, esp. 141–143; Roberts, 2007; De la Torre, 2007; Spanakos, 2008). Based on mobilizing mass protest and a heterodox political steering by charismatic leaderships, the ‘Pink Tide’ leaders found common ground with social movements such as the Mexican Zapatistas and the Brazilian MST, the landless peasant movement. To expand their communication among both local and external audiences, Pink Tide leaders created new mass communication channels put to work at the service of their project, contributing to the dissemination of epic content and the mobilization of support. The desire to communicate directly with Latino audiences all through the region was highlighted since 2005 by Telesur, the Latin American television broadcast aimed to compete with the ‘Northern’ satellite channels from the US and Europe (Zúquete, 2008; Dinneen, 2012, esp. 45–46).

The promoted themes enabled progressive populists to influence public opinion beyond their borders, aimed at reaching a regional sense of commitment, support and political mobilization. Those transnational connections became evident during international meetings. During the Summit of the Americas, which took place in Mar del Plata in November 2005, Chavista supporters organized a ‘counter-summit’ with impressive demonstrations of popular support. Among them, a massive march involving popular icons, joined by multiple student associations, workers syndicates, and all kinds of gender, environmental, ethnic, human rights or social organizations from all around Latin America (Saguier, 2007). Impassioned speeches by the progressive populist leaders at the final event in the World Cup Stadium emboldened the resolution of tens of thousands attending the event. There, Hugo Chávez gave his famous speech calling to discard

a free trade agreement with the USA, while a powerful media campaign projected the popular struggle against it in terms of a colossus confrontation between two distinct hemispheric visions. By dominating like-minded audiences in the region, progressive populist governments succeeded in shaping the political agenda, confronting, and ultimately halting the advance of the free trade agreement (Wajner and Roniger, 2019; Roniger, 2022, pp. 181–203).

In the latter case, with the passing of time, several of the social groups whose rights were promoted transnationally in these demonstrations produced a sort of ‘identity boomerang,’ which increasingly criticized the gap between discourse and concrete policymaking. Disenchantment with those governments and the regional institutions they (re)assembled grew accordingly. This could be seen by the 2010s in the massive strikes and marches in several of these countries, primarily Venezuela and Nicaragua, where the governments opted to use violence and criminalize protest once they faced internal opposition. In other words, the tension between citizen expectations and systemic failings were reproduced and even exacerbated by the transnational outreach of that populist wave (Rodríguez, 2023; Amnesty International, 2024).

Exploring populist slide into international conflict and war

Populism has increasingly decoupled legitimation and delegitimization from its sole embedment within a national territory, projecting also strategies of transnational and international intervention. Populist figures contesting regional or global institutions have sought to develop supportive relationships with diasporas, ethnic or political groups outside the nation-state, as in the case of Chávez and the Left-wing populist leaders of the Chavista cycle or the DiEM25 discussed above.

The issue of sliding impact of populism onto international confrontations and war deserves particular attention, especially witnessing recent global or regional cases such as those of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey and Benjamin Netanyahu in Israel, Donald Trump’s second presidency in the United States, and Narendra Modi in India. Looking closer at these cases enables a first approximation to identifying the factors that led or mitigated the use of pugnacious interventions in regional and international arena. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey, Benjamin Netanyahu in Israel and Narendra Modi in India can be considered full-blown populist leaders in countries with respective regional prominence and who have embraced highly nationalistic agendas and adopted personalistic styles of decision-making, trends that could result in international confrontations and territorial wars.

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan

Being head of state of Turkey, first as prime minister for three terms since 2003 and as president since 2014, Erdoğan has increasingly moved to authoritarianism at home and a revisionist foreign policy abroad. Particularly following the 2013 Gezi Park protests and the failed coup of 2016, Erdoğan has promoted a national narrative of ‘martyrdom’ and used it to consolidate a presidential system that became increasingly authoritarian. Erdoğan and his Justice and

Development (AKP) party have centralized decision-making and repressed the opposition, invoking the idea of *milli irade* or national will as the source of their political authority, set against the claimed illegitimacy of the previous republican institutions (Sofos, 2025). He has jailed major opponents, including a 2025 move to detain his biggest rival, Istanbul Mayor Ekrem Imamoglu, a politician with equally wide popular appeal who could have contested Erdoğan's continuing hold on presidential power (Amnesty International, 2025). Domestically, his economic policies have been disastrous and short of fulfilling his supporters' expectations, due to lack of efficiency in managing the oil industry and enforcing building regulations, and a disastrous handling of inflation.

In parallel, Erdoğan increasingly moved away from European liberalism to embrace suspicion of multilateral institutions and a conspiratorial vision of international actors. Likewise, he projected a historical narrative linking present-day Turkey to his historical legacy, advancing the tropes of dispossession and restoration (Onar, 2009; Cagaptay, 2019; Yilmaz and Ertuk, 2021). Portraying the Ottoman Empire as a benevolent savior of Jews escaping Spain in 1492 and fleeing pogroms in late 19th-century Russia, he has equally negated any responsibility for the Ottoman colonial repressive past, including the Armenian genocide in the early 20th century. He characterizes his vision of 'A Great Turkey Once Again' as the hope of victimized Muslims, supporting groups and parties linked to the Muslim Brotherhood movement, seeing an opportunity in the Arab Spring of the early 2010s to encourage regime change in Egypt and other countries of the Middle East.

Asserting to be an alternative voice in the international arena, Erdoğan capitalized on the erosion of confidence in the liberal international order and institutions, including the UN Security Council. Speaking on behalf of 1.7 billion Muslims sidelined internationally, he has claimed to be committed to fighting injustices, defending the Palestinian cause, the Syrian cause, the Somali cause and the Afghan cause (Yilmaz and Morieson, 2022; Oner and Shehadeh, 2023). Accordingly, he has shifted from earlier multilateral peacemaking strategies to pursue a more bellicose regional policy, used to retain his image as a forceful political leader (Sofos, 2025).

In recent years, Turkey has threatened Greece over Cyprus, has clashed with Israel over the Gazan blockade, has attacked the Kurds in Syria and has sent troops into ongoing conflicts in Libya and Syria, launching operations against the Islamic State, the Syrian Democratic and Assad's forces, helping to bring down the Assad regime while supporting the fragile government of Ahmed al-Sharaa that replaced Bashar al-Assad and siding with Pakistan in its 2025 armed confrontation with India over Kashmir. While Erdoğan's policies in the Balkans and East Africa had some success, having established its largest overseas military base in Somalia and signing with that country a maritime security agreement, his attempts to control eastern Mediterranean and Middle Eastern geopolitics backfired (Cagaptay, 2020; Taş, 2022).

Benjamin Netanyahu

Bibi Netanyahu is the longest-serving head of state in Israel, serving first as prime minister in 1996–99 and then again from 2009 to the present with a short break in 2021–22. Using grandiloquent rhetoric and portraying himself as the defender of the nation and its

people in a hostile international environment, he has been adored by his supporters, who showed him devotion and granted him repeated electoral victories to rule at the head of successive coalitional governments (Leslie, 2017). Since his return to power in December 2022, Netanyahu has led a coalition of ultra-nationalist and religious parties that holds an absolute majority of parliamentary votes. Facing an ongoing trial on charges of breach of trust, bribery and fraud, he pursued a policy of judicial reform aimed at concentrating powers in the executive and increased legal pressure and control over civil servants and the media, policies which met with nationwide protests (IDI, 2025).

In spite of failing to prepare the country for various natural and human-made disasters, such as the October 2023 attack by Hamas on southern Israel and the abduction of several hundred Israeli citizens and soldiers to the Gaza strip, Netanyahu has refrained from assuming personal or institutional accountability. Instead, he has demonized opponents who criticized his handling and state policies, accusing them of joining forces with Israel's enemies. Following the October 2023 attack, Netanyahu had led a policy of forceful armed reprisal and intransigence in Gaza. Once the armed confrontation widened to include Hizballah in Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen and Iran, Israel produced successful counterattacks on Hizballah and on the nuclear program of Iran, a country threatening Israel's destruction, albeit at the price of the PM concentrating decision-making powers and constraining institutional checks-and-balances within Israel (Oren, 2025) and deteriorating Israel's country-image abroad. The massive attacks on the Gaza strip have continued, raising international criticism and condemnation for the hardship and massive loss of life in Gaza (ICJ, 2024; Harutyunyan, 2025). Ignoring the huge protests of civil society groups demanding that the PM should agree to Hamas' terms and achieve the release of fifty remaining living and dead hostages, Netanyahu has rejected those demands and has vowed to conduct war until reaching a complete victory over Hamas and the demilitarization of the Gaza strip. Consequently, Israel has remained in a situation of war for over year and a half in the Gaza strip, has occupied border positions in Lebanon and put pressure on the new Syrian government. Netanyahu also has managed to convince President Trump to join the attack on Iran's nuclear facilities and continues demanding that Iran agrees to sign an agreement on the dismantling of its nuclear program.

Narendra Modi

The Indian PM since 2014 and formerly chief minister of Gujarat from 2001, Modi has promoted a Hindu-centric national vision of the country, relying on the Bharatiya Janata party (BJP) and the right-wing Hindu Rashtriya Swayamsevak paramilitary organization. He has projected that vision downplaying the presence of Moslems and India's historical Islamic heritage, while letting political allies, local politicians and Hindu-nationalist organizations to turn that message into a tool of political mobilization and occasional repression of Moslems and marginalization of Christians and other minorities (Jaffrelot, 2017). Encouraging the crystallization of an ethno-religious Hindu identity instead of a liberal integrative identity of all its citizens generated intense emotions potentially leading to regional confrontations with Muslim-majority rival countries, especially Pakistan. From time to time, confrontations have exploded between

India and Pakistan over Kashmir. Most recently this happened in May 2025, when Modi led India to retaliate against Pakistan after three gunmen, two of them Pakistanis, killed 26 Indian tourists in Kashmir.

However, Modi's pragmatic approach has leaned toward advancing regional agreements, for instance with Bangladesh, also a Muslim country, and towards diversifying international alliances, for instance by improving diplomatic relations with both Israel and Iran, as well as the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Modi has also continued India's long-term aim of attaining global prominence, evident in India's continuing active participation in BRICS, the UN and the WTO. The fact that India faces not just Pakistan but also China as nuclear-armed neighbors, seem to have functioned in this case as a mitigating factor pushing restraint, preventing a more forceful projection of a confrontational approach in the international arena (Destradi et al., 2022).

Donald Trump

During the first 100 days of his second term in power, US President Trump issued a series of executive orders that created vast international reverberations. By mixing his pro-business vision, deregulatory policies and attacks on the US civil service and public media, with highly nationalistic and imperialistic rhetoric and statist forms of protectionism, he created a foreign policy uproar. At the time of writing these lines, Trump's policies have cracked down migration flows, temporarily plunged markets at home, and produced multiple global reverberations, especially after threatening to impose steep tariff policies on many countries, including fellow democracies and commercial partners such as Canada, Mexico, Australia and the EU and rivals such as China, policies similar to those adopted during his first presidency (Boucher and Thies, 2019). Trump's imperialistic rhetoric over Greenland and Canada backfired, while his retreat of support for international organizations poses an existential threat to the global international order (Dijkstra, 2025). His decisions upended global trade and forced the EU and other countries to reach tariff agreements; shifted the predicted outcome of elections in Canada, tilted the parliamentary elections in Australia; prompted European countries to recalibrate their defense policies; and brought Ukraine to sign with the US an agreement over the joint management of that country's reservoirs of rare minerals and gas deposits.

While in his second presidential campaign, Trump promised to be an antiwar president, since he assumed he has already led airstrikes on Somalia, Yemen and more recently Iran, and has vowed to conduct a 'war on terror' and drug-trafficking moved through Mexico, Venezuela and Central America (Petersen-Smith, 2025). His foreign interventionism is somehow mitigated by a preference for isolationism, for deals over wars, by the partial resilience of institutional checks-and-balances in the USA, and the president's hope of being awarded a Nobel Peace Prize. His preference shows in his continued yet ineffectual pressure on Russia and Ukraine and on Israel and the Hamas to reach an end to those wars; and his marking of a recent truce in a bloody border conflict between Thailand and Cambodia, reached under pressure from China and the US who threatened to impose heavy tariffs on both countries, celebrated as a personal achievement for global peace (CFR, 2025). Still, foreseeing a successful military intervention against Iran's military and nuclear facilities after Israel had destroyed Iran's air-defense system, Trump took a personal

decision against many of his advisers and MAGA supporters, sending US airplanes to join Israel in bombing those facilities during the Twelve-Day War of June 2025.

Discussion: populism and confrontational foreign policies

There is no intrinsic connection between populism, international confrontation and war. International armed confrontations can develop under various types of political configurations, including wars launched by liberal democracies pursuing pugnacious foreign policies. Moreover, not every populist leadership, party or movement will use international confrontations as part of its tool kit for gathering support, amassing power and keeping political primacy or for attaining a desired foreign outcome. The key research questions for students of the interplay of populism, international conflict and war are therefore first, under what conditions some populists make use of international confrontation and wars to sediment their political position. Second, what constellations of forces and variables may preclude or oppose the move of populist leaderships to target an external enemy for the proclaimed sake of defending the supposed integrity or sovereignty of a nation and its people.

Research is still needed to reach a fully-fledged answer to these questions. In a preliminary way, the broadest contextual conditions leading full-blown populist regional leaders to adopt confrontational international policies are: global multipolarity, the wide criticism of the international liberal order by populists accusing it of institutional unfairness, along with the receding hegemonic role of the US to intervene as systematic and effective international peace-makers. Such contextual global configuration promotes a structure of openings and possibilities, which has led these full-blown regional populist leaders to engage in confrontational regional strategies. Still, this only identifies a most general background, and research should trace the set of specific variables leading, mitigating or precluding actual confrontational policies in the international arena.

Among these specific variables, we should first consider that full-blown populists maintain and invigorate popular support by manufacturing enemies, polarizing public opinion, delegitimizing critics, and undermining the autonomy of institutional agencies. In an era of institutional distrust, misinformation and disinformation, tweets, fake news and AI manufactured videos, these leaders maintain their hold over major sectors of society by demonizing and repressing opponents and bolstering communication with their base of supporters and activists, convincing them of the need to disengage from liberal democratic institutionality. Playing their image of 'genuine' or 'authentic' leaders, populists depart from previous institutional norms and use all sorts of dramatic moves and even conspiratorial narratives to catalyze a sense of crisis, martyrdom and heroism in conducting the people towards victory and a brighter future. Also relevant is the impact of emotional tonality of populists' communication strategies and particularly of 'angry populists' (Drezner, 2017 pp. 30–39), whose Manichean discourse deepens situations of confrontation not just at the local and national levels but also internationally, a factor that can be found in all the cases analyzed above, irrespective of whether they resulted in war or not.

Second is the tendency of full-blown populist parties, movements and coalitions to grant their leadership great leeway as the latter

concentrates policy decision-making and to back those decisions. The effects of popular electoral and participatory support bolster the self-confidence of populist figures reaching power in their own wisdom to lead a nation, a factor that full-blown populists and their associates manipulate, especially as they actively promote decreasing trust in a system of institutional checks-and-balances. Furthermore, once international confrontations start, especially at wars, the very dynamics of nations rallying around their leaders are also usually reinforced. In situations of conflict, personal identities coalesce and agglutinate as part of collective identities. The multiple identities of individuals tend to be condensed under master identities in conflict, which become a flag of mobilization for those who find themselves on each side of the conflict.

Third and paradoxically, in the cases reviewed above, the sliding of populist confrontational style onto the international arena has been fueled by a paradoxical sense of vulnerability and martyrdom, along with assertiveness and heroism, represented in the leader as embodiment of the nation and its people. In the past, such explanation was advanced for the case of the USA after the 9–11 attacks which led to the armed interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, irrespective of populism (Todd, 2003; Mann, 2003), yet has been used recently by Trump claiming the need to be aggressive vis-à-vis the world countries that abused global trade affecting the US economy in unfair ways, and this seems true also of the contemporary populist leaders of Turkey and Israel.

Finally, a boost to adopting confrontational strategies also at the international sphere is provided by the weight of supremacist interpretations of civilizational narratives such as those of making 'America Great Again', the vision of a 'Great Turkey Once Again', the prospects of a 'Greater Israel', or the Hindu religious-national pride advanced by PM Narendra Modi, the Bharatiya Janata party and the right-wing Hindu Rashtriya Swayamsevak paramilitary organization in India.

Turkey under Erdoğan and Israel under Netanyahu exhibit a combination of sense of national vulnerability, pride and regional hegemonic aspirations, against shifting international environments. In Israel, those were rekindled by the Hamas attack on October 2023 and the threats and missile attacks by Iran and its allies, the Lebanese Hizballah, the Houthis or the Shi'ite Iraqi militias, leading to retaliate forcefully in Lebanon, Syria and more recently, Yemen. In the case of Turkey, the Kurdish struggle for independence was crushed as Erdoğan attempted reviving the vision of historical regional and civilizational preeminence and expanded Turkey's armed presence beyond its borders, primarily in Syria and Libya.

In the United States under Donald Trump's second presidency, a mitigating factor was the shifting programmatic balance toward isolationism, even if not implemented effectively. Trump rode into power with his MAGA rhetoric anchored in wider isolationist attitudes shaped by the outcome and costs of US wars in the 1990s–2000s. Once in power, his drive to be recognized as a peace-deal maker led him to remain active internationally, while the pro-active and even hawkish attitudes of past conservative elites were replaced by forms of economic protectionism, which President Trump embodied and projected. On the international scene, he has not refrained from military action in East Africa and the Middle East, and has turned the imposition of tariffs into a tool of coercive foreign policy. While rooted in claims of global trade unfairness, the latter policy has been increasingly used not

just to renegotiate terms of trade with other countries but also for handling political crises. Still, a receding commitment to long-standing international alliances has added likelihood for regional conflicts to develop into risky armed conflicts, as reflected in the Middle East or South Asia.

In the case of India under Narendra Modi, internal polarization has been carefully calibrated to prevent it from sliding into full-fledged international confrontations. Modi's pragmatic approach has taken into account India's geopolitics with Pakistan and China as nuclear-armed countries, leading him to lead a restraining foreign policy towards them and when clashes have erupted, looking for ways to bring them to a rapid closure.

Another factor that intervenes in mitigating a slide of confrontational politics onto the international arena is the relative capacity of national institutions and of civil society to reduce the eagerness of populist leaders to show muscular strength vis-à-vis international adversaries. The weakening of institutional checks and balances, of autonomous civil society organizations and the public media facilitate the projection of nationalist narratives and bellicose, adversarial rhetoric onto the international arena, triggering policies such as those pursued by Donald Trump in his second presidency and armed conflicts, such as those involving Turkey and Israel in the Middle East. The targeting of autonomous civil society organizations, the public media and institutional check-and-balances, accused of being a 'deep state' precluding populist leadership effectiveness, increase the spiraling danger that rhetorical aggressiveness turns into a catalyst of international confrontations due to the lack of institutional or social deterrence.

Concluding remarks

This article was conceived as contributing to a growing domain of research linking domestic and international aspects of populism by approaching the unexplored domain of populism and international conflict and war. Stressing leadership performance and communicative style as key to defining populism, it discussed several aspects that turn populist leaderships into riskier for the international global order, among them populism's antagonistic character, emotional tonality and personalistic concentration of decision-making. More specifically, it analyzed cases of full-blown populist leaders who brought about regime change altering the constitutional and unwritten rules of the political game and through their personalistic political and communication strategy dominated foreign policy decisions and led to international confrontation and war.

Traditionally, studies of populism have explained the emergence and perdurance of populism in terms of domestic variables. Yet in the last few decades it has been impossible to ignore the international impact of full-blown populist leaderships, discourses and practices, which led to stressing the promise and perils of populism from global perspectives. This text claimed that, unless there are mitigating institutional, social or geopolitical factors, as in the case of India, full-blown populists in power may turn confrontational not just at the nation-state level but also in their foreign policy praxis. Due to their antagonistic character, emotional tonality and tendency to centralize decision-making against institutional checks-and-balances, populism increases the potential not just for internal conflict but also, under conditions of

prospective political gain, the likelihood of an extrapolation of aggressive policies onto the international arena, in the form of antagonistic economic policies or military confrontations. Under such circumstances, populist leaders define the public agenda and those who suggest moderation do not convince and may even be defined as the internal enemy.

In a context of global multipolarity, weakening of the international liberal order and receding role of a hegemonic power, the likelihood of regional populist leaderships engaging in aggressive international strategies has increased. Among the specific factors found to be conducive to confrontational international policies are also the tendency of full-blown populists to concentrate decision-making also in foreign policy matters, the polarizing dynamics delegitimizing internal critics and weakening institutional checks-and-balances and the autonomy of civil society organizations and the public media, the use of supremacist interpretations of civilizational narratives to embolden collective self-confidence, while promoting among supporters a paradoxical sense of vulnerability and victimhood combined with assertiveness and heroism, that the leader also embodies.

When nations enter the road of conflict, polarization rules. For nations at war, the confrontation—especially if successful—can help full-blown populists in power to retain or invigorate popular support at home and personally hold the keys to transition back to peace. While social sciences, including international relations, have given increasing attention to the weight of populism worldwide, more research is needed on the interplay between its localized national significance and the impacts on the international arena, especially concerning the management of international conflict and war.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author/s.

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