

**BETWEEN PEOPLE POWER AND STATE POWER:
THE AMBIVALENCE OF POPULISM IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS**

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Abstract: Once considered exclusively a phenomenon of domestic politics, populism today attracts a strong interest from scholars of international relations and foreign policy. This chapter provides an overview of this literature and explores new avenues of research. It argues that the debate over the impact of populism on international relations has been influenced too much and for too long by the importation in IR and FPA of mainstream approaches on populism from comparative politics, and by an overtly West-centric perspective. The chapter develops in contrast a strategic-discursive conceptualization of populism that paints a more critical picture of populism's promises of popular emancipation and its relationship with state power and the international order. The chapter demonstrates its argument with a cross-regional comparative probe, placing Asian populism in a global context.

Keywords: populism; international relations; foreign policy; discourse; state; globalization

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Introduction

Populism in recent years has become a major topic of debate in the study of international relations. While for long a phenomenon and concept confined to domestic politics, in the last decade its relevance for the international order has become evident. In Western liberal democracies, populism has been associated with major developments like the election of Donald Trump to the US presidency, with all consequences this entailed for transatlantic relations, multilateralism and the global trade regime; the Brexit victory in the 2016 British referendum that has led to the UK exiting the EU; and the near-fracturing of the EU by the Eurozone and refugee crises. In the Global South, populism has been ascendant in powers like India, Brazil and Turkey, as well as regional players like Venezuela, Thailand and the Philippines.

This chapter explores the theoretical implications of the international rise of populism. The main argument is that, while the study of populism in world politics still draws heavily on important insights of comparative politics and political theory, viewing it as a distinct concept and phenomenon of international relations yields novel perspectives on its nature and consequences more generally. If the conventional view of populism, especially among Western political, academic and lay audiences, is one of disruption to democracy and the international order, appreciating populism's position on the interface of state power, domestic society and international system provides a more nuanced picture. While populism indeed challenges entrenched elites, in a context of economic globalization and internationalization of political rule, its main role becomes to accommodate and incorporate popular demands in a new equilibrium between international and domestic politics that shelters political power from societal demands.

The chapter begins by presenting the main directions in the literature on populism and international relations and foreign policy before discussing how populism can be conceptualized as a phenomenon of international relations. On the basis of this, I will put forward a strategic-discursive perspective that I think is the most appropriate to capture populism's rise, presence and effect on international politics today. I will then summarize the implications of this perspective for how we can understand a range of international phenomena and populism's role in them, including politicization of foreign policy, regional integration and its contestation, and the fragmentation of the international multilateral order. The effects of populism will be demonstrated on the basis of a cross-regional comparison that also places developments in Asia in a global context.

Populism, International Relations and Foreign Policy: The State of the Art

Research on populism and international relations can be divided into two broad areas: the literature that seeks to explain the rise of populism with reference to international factors; and the literature that looks at the impact of populism on world politics. The first stream falls generally within the field of international relations (IR), although often these works fail to draw explicit connections with the field of IR, operating from within comparative politics, international political economy or political theory. The second stream has been developed in the sub-discipline of foreign policy analysis (FPA), where works on the influence of populism have proliferated in recent years.

Although often unacknowledged, the international dimension has been present in the evaluation of the rise of populism since early analyses of this phenomenon. For example, the emergence of populism as a function of modernization can also be seen as a reaction to a transnational structural development (Ionescu and Gellner 1969). The agrarian populism of the US People's Party was a response to the unequal integration of a peripheral economy in international capitalism in the 1890s (Goodwyn 1978). A comparable dynamic was observed in the post-colonial populism of new independent states in the 1970s (Johnson 1983). The voluminous literature on Latin American populism has accounted for the different geopolitical and economic conditions impinging on Latin America in a changing international system (for an overview see Grigera 2017). Finally, the end of the Cold War has been indirectly acknowledged as a factor influencing the shape of populism in Latin America as well as in Europe (Weyland 1999).

Populism was for long a predominant feature of politics in the Global South, especially Latin America but also Africa and Asia. In this sense, it is both ironic and telling that the academic literature's preoccupation with it increased only when populism started making its appearance in Western democracies. When it comes to populism in the West, the debate in recent years over the reasons behind its rise can be understood as one between cultural factors like immigration and economic/material factors like trade exposure. Both draw on the notion of globalization as the structural process affecting the functioning of democracy at the national level, but they differ in their understanding of the nature of globalization and its effect on national sovereignty.

The cultural perspective sees globalization as effecting a cultural anxiety about ethnic and national sovereignty, induced especially by the rise of immigration and multiculturalism. The effect of immigration as a major policy issue in Western democracies has caused the emergence

of radical right-wing populist parties, especially in Northwestern Europe (Kriesi et al 2008). Populism in this sense is operating in conjunction with nativist and right-wing authoritarian sentiments (Brubaker 2020; Mudde 2007). The economic perspective sees populism in a straightforward way as a reaction to economic crisis and material dislocation, especially in a context of successive failures of neoliberal capitalism in the US and Europe after 2008. The economic perspective was common in analyses of populism in the Global South, but was relatively novel for Western democracies where the focus was for long on the populist radical right. Yet phenomena like the Eurozone crisis and the emergence of a new variant of leftwing populism in the EU's Southern periphery brought economic explanations for the rise of populism to the forefront (Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2014).

Donald Trump's polarizing discourse on trade and protectionism also pointed to economic factors behind the rise of populism, particularly in the post-industrial 'heartlands' of the US Midwest and Northern England that heavily supported Trump and Brexit in 2016. For this reason, rather than immigration or the crisis of neoliberalism, some scholars attributed populism's rise to exposure to free trade as the key feature of contemporary globalization (Rodrik 2017). Although the economy vs. culture debate has often been conducted on binary terms, more nuanced accounts have attempted to combine them, seeing economic crisis or international economic exposure as a trigger for the emergence of right-wing nativist populism, or understanding populism as an expression of compounding feelings of economic, cultural and political peripheralization (Gidron and Hall 2020; see also Woods 2009). In this way, globalization emerges as a systemic condition that intensifies multiple pathologies of democracy and political economy at the national level.

On the other hand, the study of populism and foreign policy expanded substantially in recent years. Here as well, works on populism and foreign policy existed already (e.g. Chryssogelos 2010; Mead 2011; Schori Liang 2007), but it was in the mid-2010s that FPA undertook a more systematic analysis of patterns and effects of populism in this area. This increase of interest was again concentrated on Western democracies, but has spread to populism in the Global South as well (for example Latin America: Ellis 2014; Wajner 2021).

Most works on populism and foreign policy embark from the ideational perspective, viewing it as a thin-centred ideology and examining whether its ideological tenets are translated into foreign policy implementation (Chryssogelos 2011; Verbeek and Zaslove 2015; 2017). Populism's anti-elitism is considered to drive especially positions and policies that are antithetical to major

international or regional institutions (Zürn et al 2012), as well as established powers like the US, as these are seen as the ‘elites’ of international relations (Dodson and Dorraj 2008). Populism’s exaltation of the ‘people’ on the other hand drives a focus on sovereignty, ostensibly of popular sovereignty that however often morphs into an emphasis on national sovereignty and independence (Chryssogelos 2020). Populism’s anti-pluralism impacts primarily on the functioning and modes of foreign policy making (Destradi and Plagemann 2019). Given populism’s antipathy towards entrenched bureaucracies, technocratic elites and experts, we can expect populist governments to be particularly detrimental to the functioning of foreign policy bureaucracies, the independence of the diplomatic branch and the impartiality of the decision-making process (Lequesne 2021).

While these considerations stemming from the mainstream ideational perspective of populism yield interesting first-cut hypotheses about its impact on foreign policy, more recent works undertake a more sophisticated assessment of the influence of populism. For instance, the ideological impact of populism must be separated from that of the thicker ideologies with which populism co-exists (Chryssogelos 2017a; Plagemann and Destradi 2019). While populists do tend to mistrust international organizations for example, this may not be due to populism as such but due to the influence of their core ideologies – e.g. far-right nationalists distrust the dilution of national sovereignty while radical leftists oppose neoliberal economic institutions. The effect of the thicker ideologies puts into question what is the exact role of populism in foreign policy, leading foreign policy scholars to consider other theoretical frameworks to conceptualize it.

A second source of ambiguity are the differences and similarities with the foreign policies of non-populists. While in some cases populists indeed bring about a fundamental reorientation in some areas of foreign policy, the exact impact of populism on foreign policy reorientation and change is actually much more unclear (Chryssogelos 2021a). In other cases, the changes brought about by populists are not reversed by their opponents when they come to power, as has been the case with Joe Biden and US trade policy, raising the possibility that these changes were not really due to populism but rather a response to new international conditions that populists simply expedited or were better placed to ‘sell’ to domestic audiences.

In light of the above, the argument has been put forward that populism may not bring about changes on its own, but rather intensify pre-existing trends in world politics. This has been discussed especially with reference to populism’s anti-pluralism and its effect on foreign policy making processes and institutions (Destradi and Plagemann 2019). Populism is often seen as the

reason behind the increasing personalization of foreign policy and international politics, the proliferation of new methods of direct cross-border communication (e.g. through social media), and the strengthening of executives over foreign policy bureaucracies. But in reality, these trends have been evident for some time now and populism just intensifies them. In this sense, populism is less a cause than a symptom of underlying changes in international politics.

At the same time, even populism's unproblematic association with sovereignty can be qualified. First, populism may not always have a nationalist character because it can speak for and represent a transnational 'people' – an anti-imperialist Latin America, the downtrodden Muslim umma, the world's poor, the EU South etc. (De Cleen 2017). This demonstrates the analytical difference between populism and nationalism, although the two are often conflated because of their seamless co-existence in the European and North American populist radical right (Brubaker 2020). Populism mobilizes the 'people' against the 'elites' in an antagonistic vertical dimension of politics, while nationalism differentiates nations along a horizontal inside/outside dimension. In this sense, popular sovereignty may often co-exist, overlap or intensify nationalist attitudes, but the two are analytically distinct (De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017).

For foreign policy, this means that populism is not always a driver of nationalist and anti-institutionalist foreign policies. Many populists actually support, and want their state to become more involved with, at least some international institutions. For such populists, the international representation of the 'people' necessitates its recognition in the international system, symbolized in their state's prominent position in processes of negotiation, treaty-making, summitry etc. This is one of the main areas of differentiation between populists in the West and the Global South. As their states are deeply enmeshed in dense webs of regional and international governance that impinge on sovereignty, populists in the West seek their emancipation from these institutions. Populists in the Global South on the other hand tend to view international institutions from the vantage point of the outsider, perceiving them as unfair and unrepresentative. For them, differently to Western populists, the representation of the 'people' means more involvement with, not retreat from, international institutions (Chryssogelos 2017a; Plagemann and Destradi 2019).

Thinking about Populism as Concept of International Relations

Despite the increase in the number of works studying populism in IR and foreign policy, there is still a lacking theorization of populism as a concept and phenomenon of international relations. IR and FPA scholars engage with conceptualizations of populism from comparative politics – e.g. populism as a thin-centred ideology – but essentially import those into the IR field, rather than match them to concepts and debates in the IR or FPA literature. Having said this, there are some efforts to understand populism as a concept of international relations, especially in light of the complex and ambiguous picture about populism’s policy influence that we painted above.

Efforts to conceptualize populism in international relations have taken place primarily in a critical and discursive perspective. In a special issue, Hadiz and Chryssogelos (2017) understood populism as an antagonistic mode of politics that emerges as reaction to the dislocations of neoliberal globalization. They thus drew on Laclau’s (2005) discursive approach, but combined it with a materialist ontology that took seriously class struggles and elite strategies in the face of popular frustrations with globalization and the state’s need to adapt to it. In this way, populism is seen as both a potent instrument to challenge the hold of traditional elites through the construction of heterogeneous and fluid class coalitions, and a strategy to restructure power relations in states embedded in globalization. This political economy approach built upon a cross-regional comparative methodology, similarly to works that also see populism on the interface of state power, neoliberal economics and international structure (Aytac and Onis 2014; Zarakol 2013).

Closer to more typical IR considerations, Chryssogelos conceptualized populism as a distinct discourse of international relations, drawing on constructivist premises. At issue here is the transformation of the role, capacities and relationship of the state with its domestic society as its functions become transposed and diluted in a web of supranational institutions and global governance processes. Populist discourse juxtaposes the demand of the rooted and territorialized political community to representation against the legitimating discourse of global governance focusing on efficiency, flexibility and expertise. As a result, populism results in foreign policies that, irrespective of their policy content, aim at the re-territorialization of the functions of the state and their re-alignment with popular representation at the national level. Crucially however, the focus on representation and dignity of the ‘people’ need not result in fundamentally new, genuinely pro-popular foreign policies; rather, it can act as a novel, more effective legitimating discourse of

state power operating in a modified and updated equilibrium between domestic societal demands and the exigencies of the international system (Chryssogelos 2020; 2021b).

A different way to view populism via the prism of IR theory is provided by Cadier, who understands it as a set of practices (Adler and Pouliot 2011). Here, populism in foreign policy is understood as a practice that embodies, reproduces and perpetuates a specific understanding of the political community, its relationship with power, and the state's relationship with important international 'others': other states, international or regional organizations, the state's own history etc. This approach also eschews the problem of the policy indeterminacy of populism, as its importance lies more in the specific way that it allows leaders to present the political community as a downtrodden 'people' in the international system, discursively framing available options of foreign policy if not always determining precisely its content (Cadier 2021; Cadier and Szulecki 2020). In a similar vein, Wojczewski (2020) uses another concept from international studies, that of security/securitization, to showcase how populist discourses perform a similar function of 'securitizing' (presenting as threats) the opponents of the 'people'.

This emerging agenda of engagement with populism from the perspective of international relations highlights three issues. First, any work that discusses populism as phenomenon and concept of international relations must take seriously the state as an actor and arena where populist ideas play out. Second, an account of populism in the international system must incorporate the international structural/systemic dimension, especially the shifts in the international structure that impinge on the state and complicate its relationship with domestic society. Third, such analysis can benefit from engaging with the as of yet underdeveloped debate in comparative politics over populism's dual nature: as a genuinely emancipatory phenomenon rising from below to challenge elites, and as a political strategy from above to occupy and employ state power.

a) Populism from above and from below

Starting with the third question, leadership indeed has often been identified as a core feature of populism, especially since populism's loose ideological character and espousal of often contradicting positions can be resolved by being embodied in a strong, usually male leader (Eksi and Wood 2019). But developments like the channeling of populism in long-standing political parties in the last four decades in Europe (Heinisch and Mazzoleni 2019) and the entry of populists in power for long periods of time across the world also belie the idea of populism as a genuinely

emancipatory phenomenon, as opposed to a political and mobilizational strategy used by outsiders or peripheral members of the elite (Barr 2009). This perspective is mostly associated with Kurt Weyland, whose work on Latin American populism led him to argue in no uncertain terms that populism is a political strategy devoid of any other ideational content (Weyland 2001; 2017).

And yet, for another set of scholars the concept of populism describes primarily cases of broad and mass anti-establishment mobilization of inclusive and ideologically ‘empty’ popular identities (Laclau 2005). These mobilizations, whether they develop from specific occupational groups like peasants and farmers (Goodwyn 1978) or they engulf the whole society, often acquire a movement-like character, without clear leadership. Anti-austerity mobilizations in the Southern countries of the Eurozone in 2011-12 (Greece, Spain, Italy) fulfill many of the criteria of this genuine, emancipatory ‘empty’ populism (Aslanidis 2017). The question is, can this bottom-up perspective of populism be reconciled with the top-down, leader-driven one?

Despite their diametrically opposed understandings, the discursive and the strategic perspectives overlap in a limited definition of populism on the basis of its ideologically empty appeals to a broad and heterogeneous ‘people’ in opposition to the ‘system’. The presence of other, thicker ideological traits in a populist discourse – nationalist, socialist, religious etc. – dilute its genuinely populist character, and it then becomes crucial to examine to what extent the core ideals of populism are not displaced as central nodes of a discourse by these other ideological traits (Stavrakakis et al 2019; Weyland 2017). This definition of populism has an advantage that it translates easier in political contexts where well-developed thick ideologies, like those that exist in the West and largely provide the precise policy content of different populisms, are lacking. In Latin America, Africa and Asia on the other hand, this ‘empty’ perspective of populism may be a more realistic way to understand this phenomenon.

The second area of overlap between the two perspectives is their focus on agency, contrary to the ideational perspective, which sees populist ideas as ontologically objective and existing irrespective of who holds them (Hawkins et al 2018). Political agency picks up available dimensions of popular frustration and grievances and chooses how to combine them in an overwhelming popular identity mobilized against the system. Whether from below, by street activists and movement entrepreneurs, or from above, by maverick or anti-system politicians (Barr 2009: 32), populist discourses construct and articulate the political identity of the ‘people’, united

by a demand for recognition, representation and the intention to construct an alternative hegemony to that of entrenched elites (De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017).

In this sense, the bottom-up and the top-down nature of populism can be seen as two sides of the same coin i.e. as different expressions of a phenomenon distinguished by its constructed and discursive nature, reflecting the availability of popular frustrations in a specific social context, and politicizing the relationship between people and the political system as its core message (Aslanidis 2017: 307; for the application of this in Asia see Lee et al 2021). The bottom-up and top-down faces of populism are parts of the same cycle, especially in societies without strongly and independently organized societal interests, where successive waves of popular mobilization against the elites of the time are picked up by leaders aiming to occupy power, usually relying on unmediated appeals to the people rather than permanent party structures (Weyland 2001).

b) Populism and the state

If populism seeks primarily to politicize the relationship between the state and the political community, this on its own is an important departure from most IR works that see state-society relations as relatively stable background conditions or, at most, intermediate variables of the impact of international factors on domestic politics (Checkel 1999; Risse et al 1995). Populism however forces us to view the state as an active player in its own right, aiming to maintain its domestic legitimacy and ability to extract resources from society in light of international geopolitical, economic and ideological pressures. Viewed this way, populism forces IR scholars to problematize the state's ability to domesticate domestic society and to enquire about the conditions under which this relationship breaks down and society reconstitutes itself as a 'people' mobilized against authority (Chryssogelos 2017b).

Populism's role can be better understood if we turn to the notion of *incorporation*, used by Mouzelis in an older, but no less relevant today, strand of post-Marxist literature of populism. For Mouzelis, populism can incorporate in a top-down, paternalistic fashion popular masses that had remained politically disenfranchised even though economic modernization had raised their needs and importance. Incorporation by populism differs from horizontal sectional and occupational bottom-up mobilization of self-aware social classes, like the labour unions and parties of Western Europe in the 19th century. Rather, populist incorporation mobilizes the masses from the top, using anti-elite discourses and the promise of popular empowerment to satisfy the demand of political

participation, all the while populist leaders remain sheltered from genuine societal interest-formation (Mouzelis 1985).

The point here is that populism, especially in its top-down, leader-driven variant, is a distinct form of connecting the state to its domestic society, based on anti-establishment appeals and a discourse that articulates, constructs and mobilizes a political identity of the ‘people’ against the ‘elites’ – understood usually as the dominant groups of previous unresponsive regimes. This form of mass incorporation becomes catalyzed by a disruption or breakdown of state-society relations, when a political regime’s traditional modes of incorporation and suppression of societal demands fail. In this sense, populism is but a different iteration of state power, updating the link between domestic society and the state, using the promise of enfranchisement, representation and recognition of the ‘people’ to neutralize deeper and more far-reaching material demands.

c) The international dimension

Finally, an international perspective of populism needs to account for why state-society relations enter this condition of rupture that necessitates a restructuring of modes of incorporation by the state. Every political system has different representational deficits that create pressures on state-society relations and hurt the legitimacy of the elites. But international change – geopolitical pressures, economic competition, change in the values, norms and rules of appropriate statehood in the international system – can accentuate them, generating costs for groups exposed to these pressures (Rodrik 2017) or hampering the ability of the state to satisfy them. The state itself is caught in the double pressure of incorporating domestic society and adapting to these international pressures for the sake of its survival, integrity or reproduction in the international system (Chryssogelos 2017b). As satisfying both the conditions of domestic and international legitimacy becomes untenable, states face generalized discontent as well as the need to devise new ways to absorb it. In its bottom-up and top-down forms, populism performs both these functions.

International change can have a more indirect, but no less important, role on the breakdown of state-society relations and the emergence of populism: it can be an argumentative resource for discursively weaving together a variety of frustrated demands – political, economic, ideational – as an overarching call of the ‘people’ to fight back against the ‘elites’. Even if state-society gaps and ruptures are endogenous, the international system may generate suitable ‘others’ for the people to mobilize against: geopolitical foes and historical enemies who the entrenched elites do not do

enough to fight; intrusive supranational organizations who conspire and enable domestic elites to escape accountability at the national level (Cadier 2021); new values and norms that challenge a domestic society's traditions and mores; structures of global inequality that populists can attack as systemic impediments to the people representational equality and recognition etc. In all these ways, the international system allows populists to bring together multiple disenchanted groups and articulate their common frustration as an overarching condition of *peripheralization*, akin to the state's own (perceived or actual) peripherality internationally (Johnson 1983; Zarycki 2000).

d) Populism as concept of international relations

Based on the above, we can now outline a conceptualization of populism as phenomenon of international relations. Populism is understood as a discourse of international relations i.e. it reflects the agency of leaders, entrepreneurs, actors etc. who articulate politics as a binary struggle between the 'people' and the 'elites', seeking to galvanize a broad (and floating) popular identity on the basis of the frustrated demands of multiple groups. These frustrated demands intensify or catalyze a sense of representational exclusion from the political system, a rupture in state-society relations that combines political, material and ideational disenchantment. These facets of disenchantment create a compound sense of peripheralization of parts of society.

Domestic peripheralization is a function of the state's inability to satisfy domestic demands under pressing international conditions, understood in terms of geopolitical pressure, economic competition or international normative and value change. In trying to reproduce internationally, the state loses sight of domestic societal demands and is faced with a generalized call for removal of the 'elites' by the 'people'. However, populism is not an automatic consequence of objective material dislocation brought about by the state's effort to adapt to international conditions. Rather, successful populist mobilization only takes place when frustrated societal demands are articulated in terms of the moral call for representation of the people against the dominant ideas and norms of the international system underpinning notions of appropriate statehood. In other words, populism can be understood as a *counter-normative discourse of world politics*, challenging international orthodoxy with a rival call for restitution of popular sovereignty.

This discourse can be expressed from below, by leaderless social movements and mobilized groups, or from above, by leaders of parties and eventually governments. When it acquires power however, populism's importance for international politics lies in its ability to act as a new mode

of top-down incorporation of society by the state. Populists may seek to redefine the terms of the state's incorporation in the international system, but in effect this deflects domestic societal and material demands to an open-ended and elusive quest for representation, recognition and sovereignty in the international system. Populist foreign policy can appear more disruptive or transactional than its predecessors, but it ultimately creates a new equilibrium between a state's relationship with its domestic society and its adaptation to the international system. Populism ends up being an updated way to incorporate domestic societies into the functioning of the international system, which however pays the price in terms of heightened demands for sovereignty, inter-state tensions, and fragmentation and politicization of global and regional governance institutions.

How Populism Matters for International Relations: A Cross-Regional Perspective

Cross-regional comparison is an essential methodological tool for assessing the relationship of populism with international relations and foreign policy (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2011). This is especially important today, where there is a heightened interest in populism in Western liberal democracies and their foreign policies, but the centrality of Western thought and priorities tends to colour global assessments of populism. As hinted above, many assumptions about Western populism's approach to international relations – its focus on national sovereignty, opposition to international and regional institutions, anti-Americanism, belligerent foreign policy posture – are not always applicable to the stances and actions of populists in other world regions, including Asia.

One area where such a nuanced perspective would have been in order is the relationship and response of populism to economic crisis, especially when it comes with a perception of loss of sovereignty and imposition by foreign actors like international financial institutions. In the past decade, two such populist explosions in Western democracies lent credence to the idea of populism as a reaction to external economic shocks and, consequently, a phenomenon challenging the international liberal order: the emergence of left-wing populism in the EU's Southern periphery in response to the Eurozone crisis in 2010-15 (Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2014); and of right-wing populism in Anglo-Saxon democracies in 2016 in Trump and Brexit attributed to the nativist turn of the peripheralized 'left-behind' post-industrial working class (Gest 2016). These two populist waves seemed to translate into the West patterns already experienced in other regions, especially Latin America where the dominance of IMF-imposed neoliberalism in the 1990s is seen as the

main incubator of the leftist ‘pink wave’ populism of the 2000s (Grigera 2017). Cross-regional comparison, e.g. between Turkey and Argentina (Aytaç and Öniş 2014), also traced the rise of populism as reaction the consequences of IMF restructuring programs at the turn of the century.

But on closer inspection, these populist waves have had in practice far less radical effects on world politics than what their emancipatory discourse would suggest. In reality, populism was much more consequential in reconstituting relations between state power and domestic society at home than fundamentally altering the course of international affairs.

In the most impressive example of populist reversal, Greece’s populist coalition led by Alexis Tsipras succumbed to EU pressure in 2015, signed a new bailout agreement and implemented the same austerity it had once castigated for another four years in power in 2019. In that period, its foreign policy was a paradoxical mix of populist proclamations and increasing alignment with the priorities of the US and the EU (Chrysosgelos 2021). In Italy, the two populist forces that formed a Eurosceptic coalition in 2018, the Five Star Movement and the Lega, have now joined an all-party technocratic government led by their old nemesis, ex-ECB chief Mario Draghi.

Right-wing populism in Anglo-Saxon democracies in the second half of the 2010s has arguably had a more tangible effect, with Great Britain leaving the EU in 2020 and the US under Donald Trump severely disrupting the international trade regime. But here as well there have been developments that create a more complex picture. In the US, Trump’s protectionism and suspicion towards trade multilateralism have been largely kept in place by the Biden administration, shedding doubt on the idea that such stances are distinct definitional characteristics of populism and not expression of an overall reassessment by the US of its interests in a geopolitical context defined by competition with China. In the UK, Brexit has gone hand-in-hand with an over-compensatory internationalist posture captured by the term ‘Global Britain’, expressed in a flurry of new trade deals, engagement with Asia and activist diplomacy on global issues like climate.

In sum, structural crisis does foster the rise of populism as a reaction, but this populism does not appear in turn to lead to a general overhaul of states’ foreign policies or a deconstruction of international regimes. Rather, populism fosters international disruption due to a more selective, politicized and ideological engagement with the international order. This engagement reflects populists’ domestic strategies of mobilization of followers, antagonism against foes and effort to control institutions. What emerges is a new equilibrium, where new types of links between states

and domestic societies end up underpinning a transformed, fragmented, more politicized international order that however retains many of its liberal institutional characteristics.

Western observers could perhaps have anticipated that populism is a midwife of a new equilibrium between structural crisis, reconstituted state power and a transformed but not wholly undone international order if they had paid closer attention to the trajectories of populism in other world regions. A paradigmatic leftist populist who rose on an anti-neoliberal wave, Evo Morales of Bolivia, is a good example of how populism in power ultimately results in the incorporation and neutralization of popular movements through technocratic governance and strategic cooptation (McNelly 2020). Similar trends were also visible in Brazil under Lula. Viewed this way, the cooptation of Southern European populism by EU power structures was not a surprise, just as the shifts in US and UK foreign policy after 2016 towards protectionism and Eurosceptic internationalism respectively have had little practical impact (especially for the material grievances that fed right-wing populism) than to act as legitimators of a more ‘people-minded’ state power.

In Asia, the best example of this ambivalent nexus of structural crisis, populism, state power and the international order is Thailand under Thaksin. On first sight, the rise of populism in a royalist-authoritarian setting appears related to the Asian financial crisis of 1997 and the IMF-driven response, analogous to Erdogan’s rise in Turkey and of left-wing populists in Latin America in the same period. The dislocation of the crisis generated various populist streams from below (McCargo 2001) that were harnessed by Thaksin in his electoral victory of 2001. Leaving aside the conceptual question of whether Thaksin was initially a populist (Hewison 2017; Phongpaichit and Baker 2008), the effect of his tenure was less to undo Thailand’s economic development model than to restructure and re-legitimize it along popular-participatory lines, which themselves were not necessarily at odds with the diktats of international technocracy at the time (Jayasuriya and Hewison 2006). Even this was of course too much for Thailand’s traditional elites that sought repeatedly to unseat Thaksin. It is interesting however that the deep polarization in Thailand left the main tenets of Thai foreign policy untouched (a pragmatic alignment with the US, engagement with regional institutions, equivocal relations with China), or at least has not affected them in clear, politicized patterns (Pongsudhirak 2016). As expected by the latest works in the literature on populism and foreign policy, the impact of Thaksin was seen primarily in the procedure and personalization of foreign policy conduct rather than its content (Chachavalpongun 2010).

Another alleged feature of populist foreign policy that observers of Western politics have detected is its problematic relationship with international and regional institutions. In Europe, Euroscepticism is a defining feature of populism, as the EU is seen by populists of the left and right as the quintessential ‘elite’: undemocratic, aloof, technocratic, operating beyond the reach of conventional mechanisms of accountability. In the US, Trumpian populism is extremely hostile towards all kinds of international institutions, even long-standing US-led alliances like NATO. An antagonistic posture towards some or all institutions of the post-war liberal international order is also evident in various populisms of the Global South, including Latin American left-wing populism’s opposition to the IMF, or Erdogan’s combative stance towards NATO and the EU.

But here as well the picture is more mixed. While it is true that Western populists are preoccupied with the threats to sovereignty from intrusive international institutions, they still remain members of them, seeking to steer them from the inside while accruing political capital domestically by posing as their foes. The nationalist-populist governments of Hungary and Poland who constantly castigate ‘Brussels’ while receiving big sums of EU money are typical examples (Chryssogelos 2021a). Similarly, Trump never acted upon his threat to leave NATO. If anything, the US withdrawal from or complex relationship with various institutions of the international order – the WTO appellate body, UNESCO, the UN Human Rights Council, the International Criminal Court – both preceded Trump’s populism and are expected to persist after him.

At the same time, regional integration is not always inimical to populism. Populists may dislike highly institutionalized, technocratic and supranational structures of regional governance, but they see value in intergovernmental regional or sub-regional groupings that legitimize their model of sovereignty-minded engagement between ‘strong leaders’. Latin American populists for example have sought to create alternative structures of ideological regional integration (Wajner 2021), while the governments of Poland and Hungary have cultivated the Visegrad 4 sub-grouping as an alternative paradigm of regional integration influencing EU policies.

Asia presents an interesting case in this sense due to the presence of ASEAN, arguably the most advanced experiment of regional cooperation in the world after the EU, although falling short of its supranational character still. Following a Western-influenced view of populism, one would expect ASEAN to be a ripe target for Asian populists. Under a critical perspective, one can see ASEAN as the regional projection of authoritarian regime legacies in Asia against which populists have historically emerged. However, at the same time ASEAN’s operation is in many ways in

agreement with populist priorities in the international stage such as enabling ‘performances of sovereign equality’ (Nair 2019). In this sense, ASEAN reminds us that any assessment of the relationship between populism and regionalism needs to always consider the specific nature of institutions and their rooting in distinct regional patterns of state-society relations.

Two contemporary examples of Asian populists and their foreign policy showcase the ambiguous relationship between populism and regional cooperation. Joko Widodo, Indonesia’s president since 2014 and mostly known as ‘Jokowi’, signaled in the beginning of his presidency a more transactional, sovereigntist and unilateral approach in his foreign policy and in relations with ASEAN in what he touted as ‘pro-people diplomacy’. As such, Jokowi fits the model of populist foreign policy that is inward-looking and pursues a narrower definition of the national interest over broader *milieu* goals of regional cooperation. A changing tone of foreign policy however has not meant a substantially new content in Indonesia’s foreign policy, nor in engagement with ASEAN which continued essentially unchanged from previous administrations (Andika 2016; Lundry 2018). Once again, the main effect of Jokowi’s foreign policy is in the domestic arena, using a personalization of diplomatic practices to foster communication with his followers (Wicaksana and Wardhana 2021), which underpins Indonesian populism’s role in updating state power without fundamentally altering class relations inside Indonesia (Hadiz and Robison 2017).

A better-known example of Asian populism to international observers is the president of the Philippines Rodrigo Duterte, who owes his notoriety as much to his outspoken style as to the coincidence of his election in 2016 with the Trump victory in the US. The first years of Duterte’s presidency exhibited foreign policy features familiar to scholars of Western populism. An attempted realignment from the Philippines’ strategic reliance on the US and towards China fit the model of populist foreign policy as guided by anti-elitism, anti-Americanism and orientation towards the emerging powers of a multipolar world, particularly authoritarian ones. The pro-China turn also was perceived as going against Philippines’ role in ASEAN, a regional bulwark against Chinese expansionism, in favour of a unilateral approach of securing gains on the expense of partners (Magcamit 2020; Sevilla 2018). These initial moves however have been followed by a more sanguine perspective of China’s role, as well as a return to the multilateral framework by Duterte, who since 2018 has tried to re-engage the US, fostered a security partnership with Japan, and promoted an ASEAN-China code of conduct in the South China Sea (Castro 2020).

Thus, regional institutions make a convenient target for populist rhetoric of independence and sovereignty, but they also remain an important resource for asserting populist leaders' international status. In this sense, given ASEAN's origins in authoritarian modes of state-society relations in Asia and its identification with an elite-driven, technocratic conception of democracy, populism's accommodation with it should cause a more critical assessment of both its democratic and emancipatory proclamations and of liberal regional institutions' self-avowed role as guardians of democracy in their region. If anything, populism and regionalism can always settle in a pragmatic and eclectic cohabitation: populists gain legitimacy from their participation in regional institutions while they update the terms of incorporation of domestic societies by the same state power that underpins structures of regionalism. The overtly idealistic view of EU 'values' and membership as inherently inconsistent with populist and illiberal modes of state power as practiced in Hungary and Poland may then need to be reassessed in light of the Asian experience.

Finally, Asia is home to one of the most prominent populist leaders in the world stage, Narendra Modi of India. That the world's largest democracy is led by a populist is indeed proof of the global relevance of this phenomenon. Modi is seen as part of the populist wave of the 2010s, particularly its right-wing nativist variant. Indeed, the combination of populism with the 'thick' ideology of Hindu nationalism makes Modi comparable with the European populist radical right (Mudde 2007) as well as with Trump and Bolsonaro, with whom he shares similarities in his exclusionary racial and religious conception of the 'real people'. Of course, the prominence of nativism in Modi also raises the question whether populism is the primary, or even indeed relevant at all, frame to analyze him. As noted above, scholars embarking from different methodological and theoretical assumptions converge on the view that genuine 'empty' populism must be devoid of highly ideological conceptions of the people (Stavrakakis et al 2019; Weyland 2017).

When it comes to his foreign policy, scholars converge on the view that Modi's positions and actions are primarily dictated by his thick ideology of Hindu nationalism rather than populism's thin tenets of being pro-people and anti-elite. The populist impact is seen primarily in the procedural aspects of his foreign policy, with an increased personalization, the sidelining of the diplomatic bureaucracy and the use of new media technologies to directly contact his followers. Modi's example however also belies the Western-informed view of populism as irreconcilable with the international order and preoccupied with state sovereignty. Modi certainly showcases the potential of populism to reach out to a 'people' extending beyond state borders (De Cleen 2017),

in his case the Indian diaspora, as well as the ability to remain engaged in international multilateralism and global public goods provision (Plagemann and Destradi 2019). Modi is indeed the strongest demonstration of how populism's effect and dispositions towards world politics differ between the West and the Global South (Chryssogelos 2017). But it also gives credence to a more critical perspective of its relationship with state power and domestic society, with foreign policy serving as a 'boundary-drawing practice' that reproduces specific understandings of the people and their identity with the populist leader domestically (Wojczewski 2019).

Conclusion

The study of populism is a growing area in the international relations and foreign policy analysis literature. This does not mean however that relevant scholarship has made use of the whole arsenal provided by the populism literature in comparative politics or of all relevant concepts from IR that could help paint a more nuanced picture of populism's effect on world politics. By engaging with critical perspectives in the populism literature and IR, this chapter has tried to show that populism's relationship with international relations is more complex than simplistic accounts predominating in Western public, policy and even scholarly debates. By developing a strategic-discursive conceptualization, I argue that populism in international relations is best understood as a counter-normative discourse that articulates a new relationship between the state and the international system in a way that updates and reproduces the terms of incorporation of domestic society by state power under changing international conditions. This implies a more critical assessment both of populists' democratic and pro-people proclamations and of the alleged liberal democratic character of global and regional institutionalism. As both these views predominate in Western discourse (albeit emanating from different quarters of the public debate), the chapter has shown how cross-regional comparison, bringing in cases from the Global South including Asia, is essential to understand populism's role in international relations beyond facile stereotypes.

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