



Rise of Populism and Nationalism in International Relations: Implications and Challenges

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Abstract

This paper critically examines the rise of populism and nationalism in international relations, situating these forces within the broader crisis of liberal democracy and globalization. Populism, understood as a political logic that juxtaposes “the people” against “the elite,” and nationalism, emphasizing sovereignty and collective identity, have increasingly shaped foreign policy across diverse contexts. Drawing on theoretical frameworks of realism, liberal institutionalism, and constructivism, the study analyzes how populism and nationalism disrupt established norms, weaken multilateral institutions, and reconfigure global governance. The analysis identifies key drivers of these phenomena, including economic inequality, globalization backlash, migration and identity politics, democratic erosion, and the transformative role of digital media. Case studies of the United States, the United Kingdom, Brazil, Hungary, and India illustrate the concrete manifestations of populist-nationalist foreign policies, highlighting common themes of retreat from multilateralism, personalization of diplomacy, and emphasis on sovereignty. The paper further explores implications for security, economic integration, climate governance, and migration regimes, underscoring the destabilizing effects on collective action. While acknowledging critical perspectives that view populism and nationalism as corrective forces democratizing foreign policy debates, the paper concludes that their cumulative impact is destabilizing. Future trajectories suggest scenarios ranging from multipolar populism to hybrid governance, with profound consequences for global order.

Keywords: Populism; Nationalism; International Relations; Global Governance; Liberal International Order; Multilateralism

Introduction

The contemporary international system is undergoing a profound transformation, marked by the resurgence of populism and nationalism as defining forces in both domestic politics and international relations. These phenomena, while distinct, are deeply interconnected. Populism, broadly understood as a political style that pits “the pure people” against “the corrupt elite,” has gained traction across diverse political contexts, from established democracies to emerging states (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2018). Nationalism, in turn, emphasizes the primacy of national identity, sovereignty, and self-determination, often in opposition to supranational institutions and global governance frameworks (Smith, 2021). Together, populism and nationalism challenge the liberal international order that has underpinned global cooperation since the mid-twentieth century. The rise of populism and nationalism is not an isolated phenomenon but part of a broader crisis of liberal democracy and globalization. Economic inequality, cultural anxieties, and declining trust

in institutions have created fertile ground for populist mobilization. Nationalist movements, meanwhile, reassert sovereignty in ways that disrupt cooperative regimes, from trade agreements to climate accords. These forces are amplified by digital media, which enables populist leaders to bypass traditional gatekeepers and communicate directly with “the people” (Gerbaudo, 2021). The implications for international relations are profound. Populist leaders often reject international agreements, withdraw from multilateral institutions, and pursue unilateral policies that prioritize short-term domestic gains over long-term global stability. Nationalist movements, meanwhile, drive protectionist trade policies, restrictive migration regimes, and assertive territorial claims. Together, populism and nationalism destabilize the liberal international order, creating new challenges for diplomacy, security, and global governance (Ikenberry, 2020). This paper critically examines the rise of populism and nationalism in international relations, analyzing their conceptual foundations, drivers, manifestations in foreign policy, and implications for global governance. It argues that while these forces expose weaknesses in liberal internationalism, they also risk fragmenting global cooperation and exacerbating instability. The analysis proceeds in nine sections: conceptual foundations, drivers, foreign policy manifestations, implications, challenges, critical perspectives, future trajectories, and conclusion. By situating populism and nationalism within broader theoretical frameworks, this paper seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of their impact on international relations. It contends that while populism and nationalism may serve as corrective forces by democratizing foreign policy debates and fostering cohesion, their overall effect is destabilizing, undermining collective action and eroding the legitimacy of global institutions. The challenge for scholars and policymakers is to engage critically with these forces, recognizing their appeal while mitigating their risks.

Conceptual Foundations

Populism in International Relations

Populism has emerged as one of the most contested concepts in contemporary political science and international relations. Scholars generally agree that populism is not a fully developed ideology but rather a political logic or style that frames politics as a struggle between two antagonistic camps: “the pure people” and “the corrupt elite” (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2018). This binary framing is central to populist discourse, which delegitimizes established institutions and elites while claiming to restore power to the people. In international relations, populism manifests in distinctive ways. Populist leaders often portray international institutions as extensions of corrupt elites, accusing them of undermining national sovereignty and betraying the interests of ordinary citizens (Verbeek & Zaslove, 2020). This skepticism toward multilateralism translates into foreign policies that prioritize bilateral deals, transactional diplomacy, and unilateral action. For example, Donald Trump’s “America First” doctrine explicitly rejected multilateralism, framing institutions such as NATO and the United Nations as burdensome or exploitative (Ikenberry, 2020). Populism also reshapes the style of foreign policy. Populist leaders frequently personalize diplomacy, relying on direct communication and charismatic authority rather than institutional processes. This personalization undermines continuity and predictability in international relations, as foreign policy becomes contingent on the leader’s domestic political needs rather than long-term strategic interests. Jair Bolsonaro’s foreign policy in Brazil, for instance, reflected his populist denial of climate change, leading to the weakening of Brazil’s international environmental commitments (Hunter & Power, 2019). Critically, populism in IR is not monolithic. Left-wing populism often emphasizes global solidarity and critiques neoliberal globalization, while right-wing populism tends to stress sovereignty, cultural identity, and exclusionary nationalism (Inglehart & Norris,

2019). Both forms, however, share a distrust of elites and institutions, making them disruptive to established patterns of international cooperation.

Nationalism in International Relations

Nationalism, unlike populism, has deep historical roots in the formation of modern states and the conduct of international politics. It is both an identity and a political project, emphasizing sovereignty, collective belonging, and self-determination. Contemporary nationalism can be broadly categorized into civic nationalism, which stresses shared political values and institutions, and ethnic nationalism, which emphasizes cultural or racial homogeneity (Calhoun, 2018). In international relations, nationalism manifests through protectionist trade policies, restrictive migration regimes, and assertive territorial claims. It often operates in opposition to supranational institutions, as seen in the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union. Brexit was framed as a nationalist reclamation of sovereignty, rejecting the authority of EU elites and institutions (Clarke et al., 2018). Similarly, India's Hindu nationalism under Narendra Modi has reshaped foreign policy by emphasizing sovereignty, cultural identity, and regional dominance (Chacko, 2020). Nationalism also influences security policies. States driven by nationalist imperatives prioritize military sovereignty and territorial integrity over collective defense arrangements. This undermines alliances and increases the risk of regional conflict. Hungary's nationalist policies under Viktor Orbán, for example, have challenged EU norms on migration and rule of law, creating tensions within the European security framework (Krastev & Holmes, 2019). Importantly, nationalism is not inherently destabilizing. Civic nationalism can foster cohesion and legitimacy, strengthen democratic institutions and enable states to engage constructively in international relations. However, ethnic nationalism often leads to exclusionary policies, xenophobia, and conflict, making it a destabilizing force in global politics.

Theoretical Framework

The rise of populism and nationalism in international relations can be best understood through the lens of established theories of international relations, each of which offers distinct insights into the dynamics of sovereignty, cooperation, and identity. While realism, liberal institutionalism, and constructivism provide the most widely recognized frameworks, critical and post-structural approaches also enrich the analysis by interrogating the normative and discursive dimensions of populism and nationalism. Together, these perspectives illuminate the multifaceted ways in which these forces disrupt, reshape, and sometimes reinforce the global order.

Realism: Sovereignty, Power, and National Interest

Realism remains the most influential theoretical lens for analyzing nationalism in international relations. Rooted in the assumption that states are the primary actors in an anarchic international system, realism emphasizes sovereignty, power, and the pursuit of national interest. Nationalism aligns closely with realist assumptions, as it reinforces the primacy of the state and legitimizes policies that prioritize sovereignty over cooperation. From a realist perspective, the resurgence of nationalism is a rational response to the perceived failures of globalization and liberal internationalism. States facing economic dislocation, cultural anxieties, or security threats retreat into nationalist policies to safeguard sovereignty and maximize relative gains. Populist leaders often adopt realist rhetoric, portraying international institutions as threats to sovereignty and framing foreign policy in terms of zero-sum competition. Donald Trump's "America First" doctrine exemplifies this realist-nationalist synthesis, emphasizing unilateralism, protectionism, and military strength (Ikenberry, 2020). Realism also explains the militarization of nationalist populism. States driven by nationalist imperatives prioritize military sovereignty and territorial

integrity, often at the expense of collective defense arrangements. This undermines alliances and increases the risk of regional conflict. Hungary's nationalist policies under Viktor Orbán, for example, have challenged EU norms on migration and rule of law, creating tensions within the European security framework (Krastev & Holmes, 2019). However, realism's explanatory power is limited when it comes to populism. While nationalism fits neatly into realist assumptions, populism's emphasis on "the people" versus "the elite" introduces a domestic dimension that realism often neglects. Populism reshapes foreign policy not only through rational calculations of power but also through symbolic appeals and identity politics. This requires supplementing realism with other frameworks.

Liberal Institutionalism: Cooperation and the Crisis of Multilateralism

Liberal institutionalism offers a contrasting perspective, emphasizing the role of international institutions in facilitating cooperation and mitigating anarchy. According to this framework, institutions such as the United Nations, the World Trade Organization, and the European Union enable states to pursue absolute gains through rules, norms, and collective action. Populism and nationalism directly challenge liberal institutionalism by undermining trust in institutions and rejecting multilateralism. Populist leaders often portray institutions as extensions of corrupt elites, accusing them of betraying the interests of ordinary citizens. Brexit exemplifies this dynamic, as nationalist populists framed the European Union as an undemocratic bureaucracy that eroded British sovereignty (Clarke et al., 2018). Similarly, Jair Bolsonaro's populist denial of climate change weakened Brazil's international environmental commitments, undermining collective action on global challenges (Hunter & Power, 2019). From a liberal institutionalist perspective, the rise of populism and nationalism represents a crisis of multilateralism. Institutions depend on legitimacy and compliance, but populist-nationalist movements erode both. This weakens the capacity of institutions to address global challenges such as climate change, pandemics, and migration. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted this vulnerability, as nationalist populist governments prioritized unilateral responses over collective action, undermining the effectiveness of institutions like the World Health Organization (Lake et al., 2021). Yet liberal institutionalism also highlights the resilience of institutions. Despite populist attacks, institutions often adapt and persist. The European Union, for example, has weathered Brexit and continues to function as a major actor in global governance. This suggests that while populism and nationalism weaken institutions, they do not necessarily dismantle them.

Constructivism: Norms, Identities, and Discourses

Constructivism provides a third lens, emphasizing the role of norms, identities, and discourses in shaping international relations. Unlike realism and liberal institutionalism, constructivism does not assume fixed interests or rational calculations. Instead, it highlights how identities and norms are socially constructed and how they influence state behavior. Populism and nationalism are deeply discursive phenomena. Populist leaders construct narratives that delegitimize elites and institutions, while nationalist movements reconstruct collective identities in ways that emphasize sovereignty and exclusion. These narratives reshape norms and redefine the meaning of sovereignty, cooperation, and legitimacy. For example, populist discourse often portrays globalization as a betrayal of the people, while nationalist discourse frames supranational institutions as threats to cultural identity (Inglehart & Norris, 2019). Constructivism also explains the symbolic dimension of populist foreign policy. Populist leaders often use foreign policy as a stage for identity politics, framing international agreements as betrayals and unilateral actions as acts of sovereignty. This symbolic dimension cannot be captured by realism or liberal institutionalism, which focus on material interests and institutional structures. Moreover,

constructivism highlights the role of digital media in amplifying populist discourse. Social media enables populist leaders to bypass traditional gatekeepers and communicate directly with “the people,” reshaping norms of political communication and diplomacy (Gerbaudo, 2021). This discursive transformation has profound implications for international relations, as it undermines traditional diplomatic practices and fosters polarization.

Critical and Post-Structural Perspectives

Beyond the mainstream frameworks, critical and post-structural approaches enrich the analysis by interrogating the normative and discursive dimensions of populism and nationalism. Critical theory emphasizes the power structures underlying globalization and liberal internationalism, highlighting how populism and nationalism expose inequalities and exclusions. From this perspective, populism can be seen as a corrective force that democratizes foreign policy debates by challenging elite consensus (Rodrik, 2018). Post-structuralism, meanwhile, focuses on the discursive construction of identities and the contingency of political categories. It highlights how populism and nationalism destabilize established discourses of cosmopolitanism and liberalism, creating new possibilities for political mobilization. This perspective underscores the fluidity of populist and nationalist identities, which can be reconfigured in different contexts to serve diverse political projects. The theoretical framework thus demonstrates that populism and nationalism are not merely domestic phenomena but global forces that reshape the norms, institutions, and power structures of international relations. They challenge the liberal international order, expose its weaknesses, and create new dynamics of conflict and cooperation.

Drivers of Populism and Nationalism

The rise of populism and nationalism in international relations cannot be understood in isolation from the structural and contingent forces that have reshaped global politics in recent decades. These drivers include economic inequality and the backlash against globalization, migration and identity politics, the crisis of liberal democracy, and the transformative role of digital media. Each of these factors has contributed to the erosion of trust in institutions and the appeal of populist and nationalist narratives.

Economic Inequality and Globalization Backlash

One of the most significant drivers of populism and nationalism is the uneven distribution of benefits from globalization. While globalization has facilitated unprecedented economic growth, technological innovation, and cross-border integration, it has also produced winners and losers. Many communities, particularly in advanced industrial economies, have experienced deindustrialization, job losses, and declining living standards. Populist leaders exploit these grievances by framing globalization as a betrayal of ordinary citizens by corrupt elites (Rodrik, 2018). The backlash against globalization is evident in the rise of protectionist trade policies and populist rhetoric targeting international economic institutions. Donald Trump’s trade wars with China, for example, were framed as efforts to protect American workers from unfair competition, even as they disrupted global supply chains (Baccini et al., 2021). Similarly, nationalist movements in Europe have criticized the European Union for imposing economic policies that undermine national sovereignty and exacerbate inequality. Economic inequality also intersects with cultural anxieties. Populist leaders often link economic grievances to identity politics, portraying globalization as a threat not only to jobs but also to cultural traditions and national identity. This fusion of economic and cultural narratives strengthens the appeal of populism and nationalism, making them powerful mobilizing forces.

Migration and Identity Politics

Migration has become another central driver of populism and nationalism. Large-scale migration flows, driven by conflict, economic disparity, and climate change, have fueled anxieties about cultural identity, sovereignty, and security. Populist leaders exploit these anxieties by framing migrants as threats to national identity and economic stability. In Europe, the refugee crisis of 2015 intensified nationalist populism, with leaders such as Viktor Orbán in Hungary portraying migration as an existential threat to European culture and sovereignty (Krastev & Holmes, 2019). In the United States, Donald Trump's populist rhetoric emphasized building a wall on the southern border and restricting immigration, framing these policies as necessary to protect American workers and culture (Inglehart & Norris, 2019). Migration also intersects with identity politics, as populist leaders construct narratives that emphasize cultural homogeneity and exclusion. Hindu nationalism in India, for example, has reshaped foreign policy by emphasizing sovereignty and cultural identity, often at the expense of minority rights and regional cooperation (Chacko, 2020). These identity-based narratives strengthen nationalist populism by appealing to emotions and cultural belonging, making them difficult to counter with rational policy arguments.

Crisis of Liberal Democracy

The rise of populism and nationalism is also driven by a broader crisis of liberal democracy. Declining trust in institutions, political elites, and traditional parties has created fertile ground for populist mobilization. Citizens increasingly perceive democratic institutions as unresponsive, corrupt, or captured by elites, leading them to support populist leaders who promise to restore power to the people (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). This crisis is evident in the erosion of democratic norms and the rise of authoritarian populism. Leaders such as Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil and Narendra Modi in India have concentrated power in the executive, weakened checks and balances, and undermined judicial independence. These developments reflect a broader trend of democratic backsliding, in which populist leaders exploit democratic institutions to consolidate power while eroding their substance (Hunter & Power, 2019). The crisis of liberal democracy also undermines international cooperation. Populist leaders often reject international agreements and institutions, framing them as undemocratic or elitist. This weakens collective action on global challenges such as climate change, pandemics, and migration, as states prioritize unilateral responses over multilateral cooperation (Lake et al., 2021).

Populism and Nationalism in Foreign Policy: Case Studies

The abstract dynamics of populism and nationalism become most visible when examined through the foreign policy practices of specific states. Case studies provide empirical grounding for the theoretical claims advanced earlier, illustrating how populist and nationalist discourses translate into concrete diplomatic, economic, and security policies. This section focuses on five illustrative cases: the United States under Donald Trump, the United Kingdom during Brexit, Brazil under Jair Bolsonaro, Hungary under Viktor Orbán, and India under Narendra Modi. Each case demonstrates the ways in which populism and nationalism reshape international relations, while also revealing the diversity of their manifestations.

United States: “America First” and the Retreat from Multilateralism

The Trump administration (2017–2021) epitomized the convergence of populism and nationalism in foreign policy. Trump's “America First” doctrine framed international relations as a zero-sum competition in which elites and foreign states exploited the United States at the expense of ordinary Americans. This populist narrative delegitimized international institutions and agreements, portraying them as betrayals of national sovereignty (Ikenberry, 2020). In practice, “America

First” led to a retreat from multilateralism. The United States withdrew from the Paris Climate Accord, the Trans-Pacific Partnership, and the Iran nuclear deal, while undermining NATO commitments. These actions reflected both nationalist sovereignty claims and populist distrust of elites. Trump’s trade wars with China further exemplified this approach, as protectionist policies were framed as necessary to defend American workers from unfair competition (Baccini et al., 2021). The personalization of foreign policy was another hallmark of Trump’s populism. Decisions were often announced via Twitter, bypassing institutional processes and creating unpredictability in international relations. This personalization undermined continuity and stability, making U.S. foreign policy contingent on domestic political imperatives rather than long-term strategic interests.

United Kingdom: Brexit and the Reclamation of Sovereignty

Brexit represents one of the most significant nationalist populist movements in recent history. The referendum campaign framed the European Union as an undemocratic bureaucracy that eroded British sovereignty and betrayed the interests of ordinary citizens. Populist leaders such as Nigel Farage mobilized support by portraying EU elites as corrupt and distant, while nationalist rhetoric emphasized the need to “take back control” (Clarke et al., 2018). The decision to leave the EU reflected both nationalist sovereignty claims and populist distrust of elites. Brexit disrupted the European integration project, weakening the EU’s legitimacy and capacity for collective action. It also reshaped British foreign policy, as the UK sought to redefine its global role outside the EU. This redefinition emphasized bilateral trade deals and a renewed focus on sovereignty, reflecting the populist-nationalist synthesis. Brexit also highlighted the risks of populist mobilization. The referendum polarized British society, undermined trust in institutions, and created long-term uncertainty in foreign policy. The UK’s withdrawal from the EU weakened collective responses to global challenges, from trade to climate change, illustrating the destabilizing impact of nationalist populism on international relations.

Brazil: Bolsonaro and the Denial of Global Commitments

Jair Bolsonaro’s presidency (2019–2022) exemplified the rise of authoritarian populism in Latin America. Bolsonaro framed elites, institutions, and international agreements as corrupt and illegitimate, while portraying himself as the authentic representative of “the people.” His populist rhetoric emphasized sovereignty, cultural identity, and hostility to global elites (Hunter & Power, 2019). In foreign policy, Bolsonaro’s populism manifested through denial of global commitments, particularly on climate change. He weakened Brazil’s international environmental commitments, undermined the Amazon protection regime, and rejected collective action on climate change. These policies reflected both nationalist sovereignty claims and populist denialism, framing international agreements as threats to Brazilian sovereignty. Bolsonaro also personalized foreign policy, relying on direct communication and charismatic authority rather than institutional processes. This personalization created unpredictability in Brazil’s international relations, weakening its role in global governance and undermining regional cooperation.

Hungary: Orbán and the Challenge to European Norms

Hungary under Viktor Orbán represents another case of nationalist populism challenging international institutions. Orbán’s rhetoric emphasizes sovereignty, cultural identity, and hostility to elites, framing the European Union as a threat to Hungarian sovereignty and culture. His populist discourse mobilizes support by portraying migration as an existential threat, while nationalist policies emphasize cultural homogeneity and exclusion (Krastev & Holmes, 2019). In foreign policy, Orbán has challenged EU norms on migration, rule of law, and democracy. Hungary’s

nationalist populism undermines the EU's legitimacy and capacity for collective action, creating tensions within the European security framework. Orbán's policies also reflect authoritarian populism, as he concentrates power in the executive and weakens democratic institutions. Hungary's case highlights the risks of nationalist populism for regional integration. By undermining EU norms and institutions, Orbán weakens collective responses to global challenges and increases the risk of fragmentation. This illustrates the destabilizing impact of nationalist populism on international relations.

India: Modi and Hindu Nationalism

India under Narendra Modi represents the rise of religious nationalism in international relations. Modi's Hindu nationalism emphasizes sovereignty, cultural identity, and regional dominance, reshaping India's foreign policy in ways that reflect nationalist populism (Chacko, 2020). Modi's foreign policy emphasizes sovereignty and self-reliance, often framed through the populist narrative of protecting "the people" from corrupt elites and foreign exploitation. His nationalist policies emphasize cultural identity, portraying India as a Hindu nation and reshaping its regional role. This has implications for relations with Pakistan, China, and other regional actors, as India asserts sovereignty and regional dominance. Hindu nationalism also influences India's approach to global governance. Modi has emphasized sovereignty in climate negotiations, trade agreements, and migration policies, often resisting collective action in favor of unilateral responses. This reflects both nationalist sovereignty claims and populist distrust of elites, reshaping India's role in international relations. Differences include the specific narratives and policies adopted. Trump emphasized economic protectionism, Brexit focused on sovereignty, Bolsonaro denied climate commitments, Orbán challenged EU norms, and Modi emphasized religious nationalism. These differences reflect the diversity of populism and nationalism, while their commonalities highlight their disruptive impact on international relations.

Implications for International Relations

The rise of populism and nationalism has far-reaching implications for the conduct of international relations. These forces challenge the liberal international order, weaken multilateral institutions, and reshape the norms and practices of diplomacy, security, and global governance. While populism and nationalism vary across contexts, their cumulative impact is to destabilize established patterns of cooperation and create new risks for global stability.

Global Governance and Institutional Legitimacy

One of the most significant implications of populism and nationalism is the weakening of global governance institutions. Organizations such as the United Nations, the World Trade Organization, and the European Union depend on legitimacy and compliance to function effectively. Populist leaders, however, often portray these institutions as corrupt, elitist, or exploitative, undermining their legitimacy and weakening collective action (Lake et al., 2021). Brexit exemplifies this dynamic, as nationalist populists framed the European Union as an undemocratic bureaucracy that eroded British sovereignty. The UK's withdrawal weakened the EU's legitimacy and capacity for collective action, creating long-term uncertainty in European integration (Clarke et al., 2018). Similarly, Donald Trump's withdrawal from the Paris Climate Accord and the Iran nuclear deal undermined the legitimacy of international agreements, weakening collective responses to global challenges (Ikenberry, 2020). The erosion of institutional legitimacy has broader implications for global governance. Institutions depend on trust and compliance, but populism and nationalism erode both. This weakens the capacity of institutions to address global challenges such as climate change, pandemics, and migration, creating new risks for global stability.

Security and Alliance Politics

Populism and nationalism also reshape security policies and alliance politics. Nationalist leaders prioritize sovereignty and military independence, often at the expense of collective defense arrangements. This undermines alliances and increases the risk of regional conflict. Donald Trump's skepticism toward NATO exemplifies this dynamic, as he questioned the value of collective defense and emphasized unilateral military strength. Similarly, Hungary's nationalist policies under Viktor Orbán have challenged EU norms on migration and rule of law, creating tensions within the European security framework (Krastev & Holmes, 2019). The personalization of foreign policy further destabilizes security arrangements. Populist leaders often make decisions based on domestic political imperatives rather than long-term strategic interests, creating unpredictability in alliance politics. This unpredictability undermines trust among allies and increases the risk of miscalculation and conflict.

Economic Implications: Trade Wars and Protectionism

Economic policy is another area where populism and nationalism have significant implications. Populist leaders often frame globalization as a betrayal of ordinary citizens, leading to protectionist trade policies and trade wars. These policies disrupt global supply chains, weaken economic integration, and create uncertainty in international markets. Donald Trump's trade wars with China exemplify this dynamic, as protectionist policies were framed as necessary to defend American workers from unfair competition. These policies disrupted global supply chains and weakened economic integration, creating long-term uncertainty in international markets (Baccini et al., 2021). Similarly, nationalist movements in Europe have criticized the European Union for imposing economic policies that undermine national sovereignty and exacerbate inequality. The economic implications of populism and nationalism extend beyond trade. Populist leaders often prioritize short-term domestic gains over long-term global stability, undermining collective responses to economic crises. This creates new risks for global economic governance, as institutions struggle to maintain legitimacy and effectiveness in the face of populist attacks.

Climate Change and Environmental Governance

Climate change represents one of the most significant global challenges, requiring collective action and international cooperation. Populism and nationalism, however, often undermine environmental governance by rejecting international agreements and prioritizing sovereignty. Jair Bolsonaro's denial of climate change exemplifies this dynamic, as he weakened Brazil's international environmental commitments and undermined the Amazon protection regime. These policies reflected both nationalist sovereignty claims and populist denialism, framing international agreements as threats to Brazilian sovereignty (Hunter & Power, 2019). Similarly, Donald Trump's withdrawal from the Paris Climate Accord weakened collective responses to climate change, undermining the legitimacy of international agreements (Lockwood, 2018). The implications for environmental governance are profound. Climate change requires collective action, but populism and nationalism weaken the capacity of institutions to coordinate responses. This creates new risks for global stability, as states prioritize unilateral responses over multilateral cooperation.

Migration and Humanitarian Challenges

Migration is another area where populism and nationalism have significant implications. Large-scale migration flows, driven by conflict, economic disparity, and climate change, have fueled anxieties about cultural identity, sovereignty, and security. Populist leaders exploit these anxieties by framing migrants as threats to national identity and economic stability. In Europe, the

refugee crisis of 2015 intensified nationalist populism, with leaders such as Viktor Orbán portraying migration as an existential threat to European culture and sovereignty. Orbán's nationalist policies emphasized cultural homogeneity and exclusion, undermining EU norms on migration and creating tensions within the European security framework (Krastev & Holmes, 2019). In the United States, Donald Trump's populist rhetoric emphasized building a wall on the southern border and restricting immigration, framing these policies as necessary to protect American workers and culture (Inglehart & Norris, 2019). The implications for humanitarian governance are profound. Populism and nationalism weaken collective responses to migration, undermining the legitimacy of international refugee regimes and creating new risks for global stability. Restrictive nationalist policies exacerbate humanitarian crises, while populist rhetoric polarizes societies and undermines trust in institutions. At the same time, these implications also reveal the structural vulnerabilities of the liberal international order. Institutions depend on legitimacy and compliance, but populism and nationalism erode both. Alliances depend on trust and predictability, but populism and nationalism undermine both. Global governance depends on collective action, but populism and nationalism weaken cooperation. These vulnerabilities highlight the need for renewed commitment to inclusive governance, institutional reform, and critical engagement with populist and nationalist narratives.

Challenges and Critical Perspectives

The rise of populism and nationalism in international relations presents a series of profound challenges to the stability, legitimacy, and effectiveness of the global order. These challenges manifest in the fragmentation of the liberal international order, the unpredictability of diplomacy, the weakening of collective responses to global crises, and the risks of authoritarianism and democratic backsliding. At the same time, critical perspectives suggest that populism and nationalism may serve corrective functions, democratize foreign policy debates and foster cohesion. This section examines both the challenges and the critical perspectives, providing a nuanced understanding of the implications of these forces.

Fragmentation of the Liberal International Order

One of the most significant challenges posed by populism and nationalism is the fragmentation of the liberal international order. Since the mid-twentieth century, this order has been underpinned by institutions such as the United Nations, the World Trade Organization, and the European Union, which facilitate cooperation and collective action. Populist and nationalist movements, however, undermine these institutions by rejecting multilateralism and prioritizing sovereignty (Lake et al., 2021). Brexit exemplifies this fragmentation, as the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union weakened the EU's legitimacy and capacity for collective action. Similarly, Donald Trump's withdrawal from international agreements such as the Paris Climate Accord and the Iran nuclear deal undermined the legitimacy of global governance institutions (Ikenberry, 2020). These actions weaken collective responses to global challenges, creating new risks for stability and cooperation. The fragmentation of the liberal international order also has normative implications. Institutions depend on legitimacy and compliance, but populism and nationalism erode both. This undermines the capacity of institutions to coordinate responses to global challenges such as climate change, pandemics, and migration, creating new risks for global stability.

Unpredictability and Instability in Diplomacy

Populism and nationalism also create unpredictability and instability in diplomacy. Populist leaders often personalize foreign policy, making decisions based on domestic political imperatives

rather than long-term strategic interests. This personalization undermines continuity and predictability, making international relations contingent on the leader's domestic political needs. Donald Trump's use of Twitter to announce foreign policy decisions exemplifies this unpredictability, as decisions were often made without consultation or institutional processes. Similarly, Jair Bolsonaro's denial of climate change weakened Brazil's international environmental commitments, creating unpredictability in global environmental governance (Hunter & Power, 2019). This unpredictability undermines trust among allies and increases the risk of miscalculation and conflict. Diplomacy depends on continuity and predictability, but populism and nationalism weaken both, creating new risks for stability and cooperation.

Weakening of Collective Responses to Global Crises

Populism and nationalism also weaken collective responses to global crises. Global challenges such as climate change, pandemics, and migration require collective action and international cooperation. Populist and nationalist movements, however, often reject international agreements and institutions, prioritizing unilateral responses over multilateral cooperation. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted this vulnerability, as nationalist populist governments prioritized unilateral responses over collective action. This undermined the effectiveness of institutions such as the World Health Organization, weakening global responses to the pandemic (Lake et al., 2021). Similarly, populist denial of climate change undermines collective responses to environmental challenges, creating new risks for global stability (Lockwood, 2018). The weakening of collective responses to global crises has broader implications for global governance. Institutions depend on legitimacy and compliance, but populism and nationalism erode both. This undermines the capacity of institutions to coordinate responses to global challenges, creating new risks for stability and cooperation.

Risks of Authoritarianism and Democratic Backsliding

Another significant challenge posed by populism and nationalism is the risk of authoritarianism and democratic backsliding. Populist leaders often exploit democratic institutions to consolidate power while eroding their substance. This weakens checks and balances, undermines judicial independence, and concentrates power in the executive. Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil and Viktor Orbán in Hungary exemplify this trend, as both leaders have concentrated power in the executive and weakened democratic institutions. Similarly, Narendra Modi's Hindu nationalism has reshaped India's foreign policy by emphasizing sovereignty and cultural identity, often at the expense of minority rights and democratic norms (Chacko, 2020).

The risks of authoritarianism and democratic backsliding have broader implications for international relations. Democratic backsliding weakens the legitimacy of states in global governance, undermines trust among allies, and increases the risk of conflict. This creates new risks for stability and cooperation, as populism and nationalism erode the foundations of liberal democracy.

Critical Perspectives: Populism and Nationalism as Corrective Forces

While populism and nationalism pose significant challenges, critical perspectives suggest that they may also serve corrective functions. Populism, for example, democratizes foreign policy debates by challenging elite consensus and bringing new voices into the conversation. This can strengthen legitimacy and accountability, making foreign policy more responsive to the needs of ordinary citizens (Rodrik, 2018). Nationalism, similarly, can foster cohesion and legitimacy by emphasizing sovereignty and collective belonging. Civic nationalism, in particular, strengthens democratic institutions by fostering shared political values and identities. This can stabilize domestic politics

and enable states to engage constructively in international relations (Calhoun, 2018). Moreover, populism and nationalism expose the weaknesses of liberal internationalism, highlighting the need for institutional reform and inclusive governance. By challenging elite consensus and exposing inequalities, populism and nationalism create opportunities for critical engagement and reform. This suggests that while populism and nationalism are disruptive, they may also create opportunities for renewal and transformation. The challenge for scholars and policymakers is to engage critically with populism and nationalism, recognizing their appeal while mitigating their risks. This requires renewed commitment to inclusive governance, institutional reform, and critical engagement with populist and nationalist narratives. By doing so, the international community can address the challenges posed by populism and nationalism while harnessing their potential for renewal and transformation.

Future Trajectories

The rise of populism and nationalism in international relations is not a transient phenomenon but a structural transformation of global politics. While their precise trajectory remains uncertain, several possible scenarios can be identified, each with distinct implications for global governance, security, and cooperation.

Scenario 1: A Multipolar Populist World

One possible trajectory is the consolidation of a multipolar populist world, in which populist and nationalist leaders dominate major states and reshape international relations around sovereignty and unilateralism. In this scenario, multilateral institutions weaken further, as states prioritize bilateral deals and transactional diplomacy. Global governance becomes fragmented, with institutions struggling to coordinate responses to global challenges. This scenario is already evident in the retreat from multilateralism under leaders such as Donald Trump, Jair Bolsonaro, Viktor Orbán, and Narendra Modi. If these trends continue, the liberal international order may be replaced by a fragmented system characterized by sovereignty, unilateralism, and competition. This would increase the risk of conflict, weaken collective responses to global crises, and create long-term instability (Ikenberry, 2020).

Scenario 2: Resurgence of Liberal Internationalism

A second trajectory is the resurgence of liberal internationalism through institutional reform and renewed commitment to multilateralism. Populism and nationalism expose the weaknesses of liberal internationalism, highlighting the need for inclusive governance and legitimacy. If institutions adapt and reform, they may regain legitimacy and effectiveness, enabling collective responses to global challenges. This scenario requires renewed commitment from states and leaders to multilateralism and institutional reform. The European Union's resilience after Brexit exemplifies this possibility, as the EU has adapted to challenges and continued to function as a major actor in global governance (Lake et al., 2021). Similarly, renewed U.S. engagement in multilateralism under different administrations suggests that populism and nationalism may not permanently undermine institutions.

Scenario 3: Hybrid Governance

A third trajectory is the emergence of hybrid governance, combining nationalist sovereignty with selective multilateralism. In this scenario, states prioritize sovereignty and unilateralism in some areas while engaging in multilateral cooperation in others. This reflects the pragmatic recognition that global challenges require collective action, even as nationalist populism emphasizes sovereignty. Hybrid governance is already evident in India's foreign policy under Narendra Modi,

which emphasizes sovereignty and self-reliance while engaging in multilateral cooperation in areas such as trade and security (Chacko, 2020). Similarly, the European Union has adapted to nationalist populism by emphasizing sovereignty while maintaining collective action in key areas. Hybrid governance may represent a pragmatic compromise, enabling states to balance sovereignty with cooperation. However, it also risks weakening institutions and creating fragmentation, as states selectively engage in multilateralism based on domestic political imperatives.

Scenario 4: Authoritarian Populism and Democratic Backsliding

A fourth trajectory is the consolidation of authoritarian populism and democratic backsliding. Populist leaders often exploit democratic institutions to consolidate power while eroding their substance. If these trends continue, populism and nationalism may lead to authoritarianism, weakening democratic institutions and undermining global governance. This scenario is evident in Hungary under Viktor Orbán and Brazil under Jair Bolsonaro, where populist leaders have concentrated power in the executive and weakened democratic institutions (Hunter & Power, 2019). If authoritarian populism spreads, it may undermine the legitimacy of states in global governance, weaken collective responses to global challenges, and increase the risk of conflict.

Evaluating the Scenarios

These scenarios highlight the uncertainty and complexity of populism and nationalism in international relations. While a multipolar populist world and authoritarian populism represent destabilizing trajectories, the resurgence of liberal internationalism and hybrid governance offer possibilities for adaptation and renewal. The future trajectory will depend on the capacity of institutions to adapt, the resilience of democratic norms, and the ability of states to balance sovereignty with cooperation.

Conclusion

The rise of populism and nationalism represents one of the most significant transformations in international relations in recent decades. These forces challenge the liberal international order, weaken multilateral institutions, and reshape the norms and practices of diplomacy, security, and global governance. While populism and nationalism vary across contexts, their cumulative impact is to destabilize established patterns of cooperation and create new risks for global stability. At the same time, populism and nationalism expose the weaknesses of liberal internationalism, highlighting the need for institutional reform and inclusive governance. By challenging elite consensus and exposing inequalities, populism and nationalism create opportunities for critical engagement and renewal. This suggests that while populism and nationalism are disruptive, they may also create opportunities for transformation. The challenge for scholars and policymakers is to engage critically with populism and nationalism, recognizing their appeal while mitigating their risks. This requires renewed commitment to inclusive governance, institutional reform, and critical engagement with populist and nationalist narratives. By doing so, the international community can address the challenges posed by populism and nationalism while harnessing their potential for renewal and transformation.

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