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The Populist Turn in Middle Power Diplomacy

Christopher S. Chivvis, Milan Vaishnav,
and Rohan Mukherjee, editors

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How Populist Middle Powers Are—and Are Not—Reshaping Global Politics

Christopher S. Chivvis, Rohan Mukherjee, Milan Vaishnav

Introduction

When leaders of European far-right parties gathered in Madrid in February 2025 beneath the Trumpian banner “Make Europe Great Again,”¹ they included an unlikely ally given their antisemitic histories: the Likud party of Israel’s Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.² At the National Conservatism Conference in Washington, DC, a year earlier, a senior politician from India’s ruling party decried global “left-liberals” for promoting “unbridled illegal immigration in the name of ‘multiculturalism.’”³ This was a striking charge from a representative of a country that sends more migrants to Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development nations than any other and whose nationals constitute the largest unauthorized immigrant population in the United States from outside the Western Hemisphere.⁴ Events like these reveal a transnational far-right populist movement that links middle powers in a global movement that extends well beyond Trump. Yet this movement remains poorly understood, despite its significant implications for efforts to construct a workable mid-twenty-first-century world order.

Liberalism has been the dominant ordering ideology of world politics since the demise of the Soviet Union’s Marxist-Leninist alternative in 1991. In the past decade, however, liberal internationalism has faced global competition from a right-wing populist alternative. Right-wing populists advance a vision of international order that contrasts directly with liberal internationalism, emphasizing the sanctity of national sovereignty, the enduring differences between nations and civilizations, and the right of states to act on their own terms rather than defer to international institutions.

U.S. President Donald Trump has been the standard-bearer of this populist vision. Some observers have noted the affinities between Trump’s populism and the views of autocrats such as Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping, but these analogies only go so far. In practice, the world’s populist middle powers—countries that

wield substantial regional power and can influence the policies of the more consequential great powers—constitute the mainstay of the new populist international movement that has coalesced around Trump’s vision.⁵

From Argentina to France, and from Türkiye to the Philippines, right-wing populists have reshaped their countries’ foreign policies in ways that echo and reinforce Trump’s narrower vision of global order. In the process, they are also cultivating closer relationships with populists abroad, building epistemic networks and sometimes seeking to tip the political scales in favor of their ideological allies.

The role and character of populist foreign policy among middle powers are understudied. Over the past year, we have curated a Carnegie series on “The Populist Turn in Middle Power Diplomacy,”⁶ which has produced seven case studies that span the globe. Our series has brought together international scholars of populism to examine how right-wing populist movements and governments are reshaping foreign policy decisionmaking, cross-border political networks, and global bilateral and multilateral dynamics. Our collection reveals how these sometimes strange political bedfellows mimic one another’s language, borrow each other’s symbols, and cooperate transnationally.

These populists’ impact on world order is growing. Our case studies make clear, however, the limits to what they can accomplish together. The very ingredients that fuel populists’ success—nativism and personalism—also create obstacles to their transnational cooperation. Because their appeal is based on the prioritization of the in-group—“America First,” for example—it will be difficult for these leaders to build a deep and lasting right-wing populist international movement.

The National Impact of Populist Foreign Policy

The foreign policies of populist middle powers share several characteristics that transcend differences in region, ideology, and cultural context. Nearly all are personalistic, in keeping with the nature of populism itself: Because populism rests on the claim that the leader uniquely embodies the will of the people, the personality of the populist leader leaves—almost by definition—a distinctive mark on the nation’s foreign policy.

Marginalization of Traditional Foreign Policy Elites

Because populists draw their power from their claim to speak for the “true will” of the people, their foreign policies tend to marginalize traditional elites. In foreign policy, this can have a marked impact when those elites include members of the professional diplomatic corps. In many countries, the diplomatic corps is not exclusively drawn from society’s elites, but the requirements of diplomatic practice—such as extensive stays overseas and the special technical expertise required—tend to reinforce its elite character. Diplomats are thus easy targets for populist anti-elitism, and the effect is only intensified when populists inveigh

against bureaucrats in general. This marginalization of existing elites has a dual impact on foreign policy. While it can open the door to new directions in foreign policy, it can come at the cost of competence and create a more politicized and personalized foreign policy. The latter, in turn, can encourage nepotism and corruption.

Consider the case of Argentina, taken up by Federico Merke in his paper on President Javier Milei, who suspended the entry examinations for Argentina's Foreign Service Institute—the first suspension since the country's return to democracy in 1983.⁷ Milei also clashed with his foreign minister, launched an “ideological screening” of the diplomatic corps, and tasked his appointees with policing the language of official documents and steering Argentina's votes at the United Nations. Similarly, in Hungary's case, Zsuzsanna Végh shows how former prime minister Viktor Orbán and his foreign minister, Péter Szijjártó, replaced roughly 70 percent of the foreign ministry's professional staff with loyalists, leaving career diplomats to implement decisions whose origins were obscured.⁸

But not all populists can disrupt their countries' foreign policies with equal ease. When the populist movement depends primarily on the personality of the leader and lacks institutional and party-level roots, its foreign policy impacts can prove ephemeral. Aries A. Arugay, for instance, points out that former Philippine president Rodrigo Duterte ran Philippine foreign policy as an extension of his own personality—typified by megaphone diplomacy and off-the-cuff pronouncements that his cabinet then scrambled to reinterpret—rather than according to codified doctrine.⁹ Yet because his anti-Western turn was never embedded in party-based networks or the bureaucracy, it did not last: His successor, Ferdinand Marcos Jr., quickly reversed course, restoring a more conventional posture. In contrast, where the populist project has become embedded in party structures—as with Orbán's Fidesz in Hungary or Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)—changes in foreign policy can be harder to reverse.

Openness to Revisionist Powers

Populist anti-elitism and revisionism tend to open the door to breaks with past practice in foreign policy. One of the most significant manifestations of this tendency is an openness to Russia, China, and other authoritarian or revisionist powers. Right-wing populist leaders, like many authoritarians, tend to be skeptical of multilateral institutions premised on interdependence and mutual compromise, which they view as undue constraints on national sovereignty and freedom of maneuver in foreign policy.

These populists also tend to approach political power through a lens of hard-edged *realpolitik*, unconstrained by constitutional norms or broader concerns about rule-breaking. This makes them more inclined to work with illiberal or authoritarian actors that traditional political leaders might eschew. Economic pressure to deliver on their promises to the people reinforces these tendencies. Most middle powers are dependent on energy imports, trade, and external financing, giving them incentives to maintain strong relationships with Moscow and Beijing.

When in power, Orbán openly disparaged “ideology-driven foreign policy,” reframing closer ties with authoritarian powers as a pragmatic pursuit of economic interest.¹⁰ He thus turned openness to China and Russia into foreign policy doctrine through his “Eastern Opening,” which was later recast as “connectivity” and “economic neutrality.” He argued that Hungary needed to break from the confines of the Euro-Atlantic bloc by doing business with any major power. During his lengthy tenure, Hungary deepened its dependence on Russian nuclear fuel and natural gas and made China the country’s largest source of foreign direct investment. The Budapest–Belgrade railway, part of China’s Belt and Road Initiative, was financed by a \$917 million Chinese loan. Hungary also received an additional €1 billion (\$1.16 billion) Chinese loan for infrastructure and energy projects.

Half a world away, a similar logic played out in the Philippines.¹¹ As an outsider with no prior commitments to the country’s long-standing alliance relationships, Duterte shelved the 2016 arbitration ruling that Manila had won against Beijing in the South China Sea, instead choosing to court China directly. The former president hailed his 2016 meeting with Xi as “springtime,” securing roughly \$24 billion in pledged deals, loans, and aid while announcing an economic and military “separation” from the United States. Duterte paired this pivot with an embrace of Russia, calling Putin his “hero” and declaring that China, the Philippines, and Russia were “three of us against the world.”

Germany’s Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) takes a similar line on foreign policy, as Jeremy Cliffe recounts.¹² Its preferred foreign policy is explicitly rooted in a multipolar worldview that would amount to a substantial increase in Germany’s ties to Russia, China, and the United States under Trump alike. An AfD spokesperson once colorfully captured this vision by proposing to replace the EU’s “smoothie”—in which member states’ national identities are dissolved—with a “fruit salad” of distinct, sovereign nation-states.

Greater Volatility and Combativeness

Because the populist style of domestic politics is often confrontational and combative—not to mention performative—the populist turn in middle power diplomacy has also heightened volatility in foreign policy. Liberated from many of the traditional pressures that constrain leaders who are otherwise beholden to their foreign policy mandarins, populist leaders are free to innovate—and to err. The result is often a combination of bombast and combativeness that increases foreign policy risk.

Modi’s policy toward India’s archrival Pakistan illustrates this pattern, as documented in the essay by Sandra Destradi.¹³ When the Pakistan-based terrorist group Lashkar-e-Taiba carried out attacks in Mumbai in 2008, Modi’s predecessor Manmohan Singh responded with notable moderation. Modi, in contrast, has been far more willing to escalate by publicizing cross-border special forces raids in 2016, launching airstrikes inside Pakistan proper in 2019—thus breaking a long-standing precedent—and, in May 2025, launching Operation Sindoor, which triggered the most dangerous military conflict between the two nuclear-armed rivals in nearly three decades. Two factors made such escalation possible: the

concentration of foreign policy decisionmaking among a small circle of trusted advisers, and Modi's efforts to mobilize domestic sentiment against Pakistan, which left little room for restraint.

The Philippines under Duterte displayed a similar, albeit more rhetorical, volatility.¹⁴ Similarly freed from the discipline of the traditional foreign policy bureaucracy and possessing a high tolerance for risk, Duterte used an early summit of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations to deliver an impromptu tirade against the United States and repeatedly threatened to abrogate long-standing defense cooperation agreements between Washington and Manila. His combative style made international headlines, but without institutional anchors, it produced only an abrupt swing rather than a lasting shift in Philippine foreign policy.

Yet right-wing populists are not always volatile and combative. Despite China's repeated incursions along its disputed border with India, its provocations across South Asia, and the long-standing sense of geopolitical competition between these two Asian giants, Modi has exhibited a markedly restrained posture toward Beijing. The contrast with Pakistan is telling: War with either country would be disastrous, but Modi's Hindu nationalism complicates relations with Pakistan in ways that it does not with China.¹⁵

The Populist Wave and Its Transnational Reach

Just as liberal democrats coordinated their foreign policies in the decades after the Cold War—and communist parties had done before them—populists have increasingly sought to do the same, drawing inspiration from Trump's Make America Great Again (MAGA) movement and, at times, actively courting direct ties to it. Populist coordination among countries as diverse as India, Germany, and Argentina is changing the global political landscape, even if it falls short of a genuine international movement.

One of the most striking cases is coordination between Indian and German populists.¹⁶ In late 2019, less than three months after the Modi government stripped the former state of Jammu and Kashmir—parts of which are disputed with Pakistan—of autonomy and cut the region's communication ties with the outside world, the government hosted a delegation of European Parliament members—many from the populist radical right, including Germany's AfD—for a guided tour of the restive region. This visit was clearly intended to build support for Modi's controversial approach to a region of great geopolitical significance in India's relations with both Pakistan and China. Although billed as a private visit, the trip reportedly included an audience with Modi himself, illustrating the government's willingness to showcase its authority before ideologically kindred outsiders.

Among middle power populists, transnational connections tend to operate in four ways: through leader-centric personal networks; party-to-party and parliamentary alliances; shared narratives and political messaging; and transnational movement infrastructure. Not all four channels are operative in every country, but virtually every populist regime has invested in at least some of them.

Arguably no actor has invested more deliberately than Orbán, who has gone well beyond seeking MAGA's imprimatur.¹⁷ Fidesz turned Budapest into a hub for the international right on a scale unmatched in Europe—hosting the first European edition of the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC), forging ties between the right-wing Danube Institute and the Heritage Foundation, and endowing the Mathias Corvinus Collegium, whose head maintained a direct channel to U.S. Vice President JD Vance. Orbán parroted Trump directly, choosing “Make Europe Great Again” as the slogan of Hungary's 2024 EU Council presidency. Hungarian banks also lent some €10.6 million (\$12.33 million) to French presidential candidate Marine Le Pen's 2022 campaign and €9.2 million (\$10.7 million) to Spain's far-right Vox party.

Whether this legacy will endure after Fidesz's April 2026 electoral defeat is an open question. State support for these organizations is likely to diminish, but the ideological networks Fidesz nurtured will not immediately disappear with Orbán's departure.

After Orbán, Milei has been among the most enthusiastic participants in this transnational right-wing universe. He has regularly appeared at CPAC events and at Mar-a-Lago, presided over a CPAC gathering in Buenos Aires, and referred to Trump in overwhelmingly laudatory terms—by one count, averaging more than one positive public reference per day on social media.¹⁸ For the broader global populist movement (if one can call it that), Argentina functions as a sort of Southern outpost—proof that right-wing populism and market radicalism can prevail in the Global South.

France's National Rally, on the other hand, shows that identification with MAGA can become a liability rather than an asset. In her essay on France, Catherine Fieschi argues that the National Rally's most important alliances operate within the European Parliament rather than through ties to Trump.¹⁹ In fact, both Jordan Bardella (the party's current leader) and Marine Le Pen (the party's traditional leader and presumptive presidential candidate) have kept the MAGA ecosystem at arm's length to protect their domestic brands. In 2025, Bardella abandoned a CPAC speech and flew home after Steve Bannon's apparent Nazi salute. Le Pen has also criticized Trump's military actions in Iran and Venezuela. Whereas Argentina advertises its MAGA ties, the French far right treats such ties as something to manage and, often, to disavow.

In the German case, the AfD's MAGA ties serve a different function, helping to compensate for unusually weak ties within Europe: Elon Musk addressed an AfD rally in January 2025, AfD co-chair Alice Weidel spoke at a CPAC gathering in Budapest, and AfD figures have been warmly received by Trump administration officials in Washington.²⁰ Lacking the European alliances available to other far-right parties, the AfD leans on the MAGA

connection both to associate with a transnational movement and to borrow a measure of legitimacy it cannot easily acquire closer to home. German nationalism, in other words, remains more problematic in European politics than its French counterpart.

Türkiye provides an alternative model of how populist foreign policy can draw on transnational infrastructure, as Murat Somer shows.²¹ Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) has buttressed leader-to-leader ties and party contacts by cultivating religious, ideological, and quasi-public networks. For instance, the AKP's relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood gave Ankara influence across the Middle East, and when the 2013 military coup in Egypt pushed the Brotherhood from power, Istanbul became a hub for its foundations, media outlets, and political activity.

The Limits of Cooperation

Despite these growing connections across parties and leaders, there are inherent limits to cooperation, rooted above all in the nationalist and nativist character of right-wing populism. The liberal democratic wave that spread around the world after the fall of the Berlin Wall was driven by universalist ideas, such as democracy and open markets, that encouraged international interdependence to succeed. By contrast, the nativist character of contemporary right-wing populism limits the extent to which its practitioners can make mutual policy concessions to craft a new political order. Shared grievances can generate temporary friendships, but much of this cooperation remains defensive and lacks a substantive vision. France is a prominent example where ingrained distrust of institutions and skepticism toward foreign powers limit the National Rally's ability to develop a coherent long-term foreign policy.

There are inherent limits to cooperation, rooted above all in the nationalist and nativist character of right-wing populism.

India offers an illustration of how the ethnonationalist core of right-wing populism constrains international cooperation. Modi has borrowed freely from the populist lexicon—using slogans like “Make India Great Again” and “India First” that echo Trump—yet the shared style has not produced shared substance. His relationship with Erdoğan shows how dueling nationalisms can hinder collective action. Despite their parallel leadership styles, Modi's Hindu nationalism and Erdoğan's Islamist nationalism are at odds: Erdoğan has frequently used international forums to frame Kashmir, the Muslim-majority territory disputed by India and Pakistan, as an issue of pan-Islamic solidarity and juxtaposed it with the case of Palestine.²²

Even the apparent personal warmth between Modi and Trump proved fragile, unraveling at least in part when Trump publicly took credit for the May 2025 India-Pakistan ceasefire, piquing Modi's ire.²³ Both leaders subsequently dug in, with Trump repeating his claims to have negotiated the ceasefire, deepening ties with Pakistan, and later punishing India with

high tariffs for buying Russian oil.²⁴ India eventually relented and scaled back its Russian imports, but the episode and its aftermath showed how personalistic foreign policy can lead to egoistic spats with real costs for both Delhi and Washington in the longer term.

Germany's AfD also illustrates how nationalism can place a ceiling on populist cooperation.²⁵ In the European Parliament, the party has been expelled from the main far-right groupings and now belongs to a small, fringe camp of its own, despite its electoral support in Germany. The reason is not hard to discern: Other European populist parties remain acutely sensitive to the history of German power. Italy's populist Lega casts itself as the heir to the northern Italian wartime resistance against German occupation; Poland's Law and Justice party has run openly anti-German campaigns; and many southern European parties still resent Berlin's role in the eurozone crisis. This greatly complicates efforts to construct a shared right-wing narrative in Europe. The AfD's internal divisions—between an Atlanticist orientation led by Alice Weidel and a Eurasian one led by Tino Chrupalla—compound this isolation.

Another potential limit on the populist tendencies of middle powers arises from their inherent reliance on multilateralism. As Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney argued in a widely noted declaration of middle power agency in January 2026, middle powers are too small to go it alone against the world's superpowers, and they can still defend their interests through multilateral cooperation: "If you are not at the table, you are on the menu."²⁶ This dependence on cooperation limits the sovereigntist approach that middle power populists prefer.

India again is a case in point. Modi has selectively deepened India's engagement with multilateral institutions—launching the International Solar Alliance, adopting a constructive stance at the 2015 Paris climate negotiations, and turning India's G20 presidency into a centerpiece of national pride.²⁷ India's support for BRICS expansion can be seen as a way of holding the West's feet to the fire. India recognizes the shortcomings of BRICS, but believes the grouping serves as a useful lever to prompt Western powers to reform multilateral bodies like the UN Security Council and the World Bank. Rather than rejecting the multilateral order, Modi has instead sought to reshape it in ways that bolster India's status and reinforce its autonomy.

Türkiye's Erdoğan has also largely refrained from rejecting the basic legal and political principles of the international order, choosing instead to target what he views as Western dominance in the management of multilateral institutions and the uneven manner in which their rules are applied.²⁸ Hungary's Fidesz too called for transformation rather than abandonment of the EU, and it selectively contested institutions rather than exiting them en masse.²⁹ Even the most confrontational populists thus work to revise and repurpose the multilateral order from within rather than dismantle it outright.

Conclusion

It has become commonplace to lament the demise of the so-called liberal international order. The global order is clearly changing from above and below: through shifts in great power politics and from governments and citizens who believe the existing order has failed to deliver on its promises. At this moment of uncertainty, the role of middle power populists merits more attention. Worldwide, they have been quick to identify and exploit discontent to extract concessions, build alliances, and reshape institutions in directions they deem favorable to their own political interests. In this respect, they have proved agile, perhaps more so than the defenders of the traditional order. The concerns they address are real, even if the effects of their policies often do as much to undermine their national interests as to further them.

While populists can often agree on what they oppose, they have been less successful in developing routine habits of cooperation and authoring a shared, future-oriented policy agenda. The network they have built looks less like an alliance than an opportunistic coalition of norm spoilers, and their cooperation is often transactional and issue-specific. Each movement ultimately answers to a distinct national constituency and prioritizes its own sovereignty. Populist leaders are typically products of particular grievances at home, and their foreign policies often reflect those grievances rather than offer constructive solutions to shared problems.

Populist leaders are typically products of particular grievances at home, and their foreign policies often reflect those grievances rather than offer constructive solutions to shared problems.

As a result, middle power populist cooperation neither threatens to overturn the international order nor proposes a radical new vision of it around which states can coalesce. Instead, it creates obstacles for states and political leaders that seek to rescue or repair the liberal order by bridging existing divides between Global North and South, East and West, rich and poor states, and great powers and the rest. The result is contestation and disorder within a system that still somehow muddles along.

In the end, the greatest obstacle to populists' cooperation may lie in the nature of populism itself. Fidesz's shock defeat in 2026 serves as an important reminder that populist governments are not immune to the laws of political gravity and may struggle to sustain their insurgent appeal as time passes and they themselves become the establishment.

Acknowledgments

The authors are grateful to Alana Brase, Haley Clasen, Helena Jordheim, and Andy Robaina for editorial assistance. They would also like to thank the contributors to "The Populist Turn in Middle Power Diplomacy" project for their insights and patient collaboration.

India's Foreign Policy in the Age of Populism

Sandra Destradi

Introduction

India's populist, Hindu-nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has been in power for over a decade and won a third consecutive mandate in 2024 under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

In many ways, Modi is a prototypical populist leader. He has styled himself as a self-made man, an outsider to the corrupt political establishment, the son of a tea seller devoted to the service of his people. This self-presentation casts him as someone able not only to speak in the name of the people, but even to personally embody the popular will against established political elites.³⁰

Populism is commonly understood as a “thin-centered” or “thin” ideology—that is, a limited set of ideas about what society should look like. Specifically, populism “considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’, and . . . argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people.”³¹ Who exactly constitutes the people and the elite is mostly determined by a “thick,” more comprehensive ideology combined with populism—in the BJP-led government of Modi, the ethnonationalist ideology of Hindu nationalism, which focuses on the notion of *Hindutva* (Hinduness). This thick ideology is promoted by the BJP and by a family of related organizations, chief among them the paramilitary volunteer organization Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS).

In the BJP's framing, India's “true people” are defined primarily as consisting of the country's Hindu majority, while religious and ethnic minorities—most notably the country's sizable Muslim minority, which accounts for roughly 15 percent of the population—are excluded.³² The “elite,” in turn, is identified with the traditional, more cosmopolitan and liberal political establishment, and particularly associated with the Indian National Congress

(INC), the party that ruled India with few interruptions from independence in 1947 until Modi's ascent. Modi and his supporters have condemned the dynastic character of the INC, which has been dominated by the Nehru-Gandhi family for seven decades.³³

Populist leaders often blur the boundaries between domestic politics and international affairs, reshaping how foreign policy is made and justified.

While populism is, in the first place, a domestic political phenomenon, it can also have important consequences for foreign policy. Populist leaders often blur the boundaries between domestic politics and international affairs, reshaping how foreign policy is made and justified. How, then, has the right-wing populism of Modi and his BJP-led government shaped India's foreign policy over the past decade, as compared to previous non-populist governments? This paper argues that populism has reshaped the processes of Indian foreign policy—but its effects are contingent. Where foreign policy issues resonate with domestically powerful identity narratives, as in the case of Pakistan, mobilization and personalization have driven escalation. Where such narratives are weaker or power asymmetries are greater, as with China, populism has been restrained, producing far less dramatic change. At the same time, Modi's populism has fostered selective transnational ties with like-minded actors abroad, even as these linkages remain pragmatic and limited.

Populism and Foreign Policy in India

While the ideology of populism is too “thin” to determine specific foreign policy outcomes, it nevertheless has an important impact on the processes through which foreign policy is made, in India and elsewhere.³⁴ Two mechanisms are particularly important in this regard: domestic political mobilization and the personalization of decisionmaking.

Continuous domestic political mobilization—the ongoing effort to rally public support—is a key feature of populist politics, including in India. Populist politicians do not confine mobilization to election campaigns; instead, they seek to continually activate and enlarge their constituency even after assuming office. In effect, populists remain permanently on the campaign trail.³⁵ This dynamic reflects a paradox at the heart of populist governance: once in power, populists themselves become part of the political establishment. To retain their anti-elitist credentials, they must therefore continue to mobilize supporters, and they often do so by focusing on foreign policy—an area in which it is typically easy to invoke crises and external threats to the people.

Under populist governments, foreign policy thus becomes more politicized, meaning that the boundary between domestic and international politics grows increasingly blurred. Foreign policy debates are frequently reframed in terms of national identity, popular will, and political loyalty, and foreign policy issues are used to discredit political opponents. Where populists are in power, foreign policy often becomes a “continuation of domestic politics by other means.”³⁶

The case of India also illustrates how populists reshape foreign policy through its personalization. This reflects the central role of individual leaders in populist politics, where leaders claim to embody the will of the people.³⁷ Modi, for example, proclaimed that his 2017 Independence Day address conveyed “the collective voice of 1.25 billion of my countrymen that resounds from the Red Fort.”³⁸ Such claims elevate the leader as the primary—and sometimes only—legitimate interpreter of the national interest. In practice, this translates into a greater role for individual leaders in foreign policy making, but it also has institutional repercussions. A more personalized foreign policy usually leads to the marginalization of professional bureaucracies such as foreign ministries, and to the centralization of decisionmaking within a small inner circle around the populist leader.³⁹ While both personalization and centralization of foreign policy making are broader trends in contemporary international politics, they are particularly pronounced under populist rule.

Different degrees of mobilization and personalization among different foreign policy issues help explain why populist governments like India’s produce varying degrees of foreign policy change. In an issue area or bilateral relationship where both mechanisms are pronounced, foreign policy departures from past practice are more likely. Populist leaders in such cases face strong incentives to fulfill the expectations they have cultivated among domestic audiences—particularly promises to break decisively with the policies of prior “elite” governments. At the same time, personalization reduces the constraining influence of professional advisers who might otherwise caution against abrupt or risky departures from established precedent.

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As the following sections show, this combination of high mobilization and personalization helps explain India’s increasingly confrontational approach toward Pakistan under Modi. It also sheds light on India’s greater engagement in international institutions and global governance. By contrast, lower levels of mobilization in India’s relationship with China help explain why populism has not driven equally dramatic changes in all areas of Indian foreign policy.

The sections that follow examine variations in India’s foreign policy under Modi’s BJP-led governments since 2014, comparing them with the approach of the previous INC-led governments under non-populist prime minister Manmohan Singh, who served two terms between 2004 and 2014.

Pakistan: Escalation Through Mobilization

The mechanisms of mobilization and personalization of foreign policy making have been particularly evident in India's approach to Pakistan, which has seen a steady deterioration of relations under the BJP-led Modi governments.

While the non-populist, INC-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA)-I Singh government reacted with restraint to a devastating Pakistan-sponsored terrorist attack on Mumbai in 2008, which left over 150 people dead, India's response pattern has changed markedly under Modi. When the Pakistan-based terrorist organization Jaish-e-Mohammad attacked an Indian airbase at Pathankot in January 2016 and killed nineteen Indian soldiers in another attack in Uri later that year, the Modi government carried out—and widely publicized—special forces operations targeting terrorist facilities in disputed territory controlled by Pakistan. Comparable operations had taken place before, but they were kept covert and not publicly instrumentalized.⁴⁰ In February 2019, following another major attack on Indian security personnel in Pulwama that killed more than forty paramilitary troops, India retaliated with air strikes on suspected terrorist sites inside Pakistan proper, breaking with the long-standing precedent of avoiding strikes on Pakistan's territory.⁴¹

More recently, a terrorist attack in Pahalgam against Indian civilians—mostly tourists from other parts of the country spending their honeymoons in Kashmir—perpetrated by Islamist terrorists on April 22, 2025, triggered the worst military escalation between India and Pakistan in three decades. On May 6, 2025, the Indian government responded by launching Operation Sindoor, targeting suspected terrorist infrastructure deep inside Pakistani territory. After the Pakistani army retaliated, a rapid escalation followed between the two nuclear-armed rivals, including air battles and missile and drone strikes on both sides. Several areas in Kashmir, Pakistan, and the Indian states of Punjab, Gujarat, and Rajasthan were affected.⁴² The confrontation subsided after four days, following a ceasefire announcement by U.S. President Donald Trump on May 10, 2025.⁴³

The Modi government's policies in crises involving Pakistan have marked a clear shift away from the more restrained approach adopted by previous non-populist governments. The mechanisms of mobilization and personalization, hallmarks of populist foreign policy, help explain this evolution.

The Modi government's policies in crises involving Pakistan have marked a clear shift away from the more restrained approach adopted by previous non-populist governments.

First, foreign policy making under Modi has become increasingly personalized and centralized. While Indian prime ministers have traditionally played a prominent role in shaping foreign policy, personalization has reached unprecedented levels under Modi.⁴⁴ Highly sensitive relations with Pakistan have been managed directly by the prime minister

and a small circle of trusted advisors, chief among them National Security Advisor Ajit Doval.⁴⁵ The Ministry of External Affairs has been marginalized over time, even though its minister, S. Jaishankar, remains close to Modi.⁴⁶ Moreover, whereas previous, non-populist governments sought opposition consensus ahead of major Pakistan-related decisions, Modi dispensed with such consultations in 2016 and 2019.⁴⁷ In 2025, he convened an all-party meeting only on May 8, after the military escalation was well under way.⁴⁸

Second, Modi has repeatedly used relations with Pakistan as a tool for domestic political mobilization, drawing on both the BJP's thin populist ideology and its thick ideology of Hindu nationalism. The BJP and the broader family of Hindu-nationalist organizations of which it is a part have long linked India's Muslim minority discursively to Pakistan—a state founded as a homeland for South Asia's Muslims at the end of British colonial rule. Under Modi, however, the intensity of this politicization has increased sharply. Muslims have regularly been depicted as a “fifth column,” while critics of the government or its Pakistan policy are often branded as “anti-national.”⁴⁹ During the 2019 election campaign, Modi portrayed himself as the *chowkidar*—the watchman guarding the nation—explicitly invoking the threat of Pakistan-sponsored terrorism.⁵⁰ In 2024, he went further, labeling India's Muslim minority as the INC's “Jihadi Vote Bank.”⁵¹ This sustained conflation of domestic identity politics and external security threats has ultimately constrained Modi's room for maneuver. By personalizing national security and repeatedly signaling resolve toward Pakistan, the prime minister has created strong domestic expectations for forceful retaliation. Following the Pahalgam attack, these expectations left little political space for restraint, compelling Modi to respond decisively in line with the image he had cultivated among voters.

China: Strategic Restraint Amid Limited Mobilization

Interestingly, Modi's right-wing populist government has not approached India's relationship with its most powerful rival, China, in the same confrontational manner. The two countries share a long history of tensions dating back to the Chinese military offensive of 1962, with the primary point of contention being their disputed border. Among the disputed territories are the entirety of the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh, which China refers to as South Tibet, and several zones along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in the western sector, including Aksai Chin.

Over time, the de facto border has become a theater of direct confrontations between Indian and Chinese forces, particularly as China has expanded military infrastructure in disputed territory. These incidents include the 2017 standoff at Doklam, an area claimed by both China and Bhutan, and a major clash in Galwan Valley in eastern Ladakh in 2020. The latter resulted in at least twenty Indian fatalities and an unknown number of Chinese casualties, marking the deadliest encounter between the two sides in decades.⁵² Lower-intensity skirmishes have continued since, including one in Tawang in 2022.

Faced with repeated Chinese incursions, Modi's approach to China has been less conciliatory than that of his predecessor, Singh, but the Modi government has consistently sought to avoid military escalation with China—in contrast with Pakistan.⁵³ There is also evidence that India has quietly tolerated a resumption of Chinese infrastructure construction in disputed territories, despite ongoing tensions.⁵⁴

Although decisionmaking on China has been highly personalized under Modi, reflecting the strategic salience of the relationship, the level of domestic political mobilization has been surprisingly limited. This restraint became particularly evident in 2020, when widespread public anger followed the Galwan clash. Indian citizens organized spontaneous protests, burned Chinese flags and goods, and called for a boycott of Chinese products.⁵⁵ Yet the government largely refrained from amplifying these sentiments for domestic political gain.

The RSS and other right-wing organizations criticized China but downplayed India's losses in Galwan and avoided calls for radical escalation.⁵⁶ Modi himself remained notably cautious. In his 2020 Independence Day speech, he praised India's resilience and military preparedness without explicitly naming China or mobilizing public opinion against it: "Notwithstanding the recent adversities, there have been misadventures along the border which threw a challenge to the country. But whoever tried to threaten the sovereignty of our country right from the LOC [Line of Control] to the LAC, the army of the country, our brave soldiers have given a befitting reply."⁵⁷

This limited mobilization marks a sharp contrast with Modi's handling of Pakistan. As a former senior Indian official put it, while India's approach to Pakistan was driven by the BJP's thick ideology, "with China, it's non-ideological."⁵⁸ The absence of an easily mobilizable identity narrative has made it possible for the government to downplay tensions with China. Most likely, this reflects a strategic calculation: mobilizing public opinion against a far stronger rival risked creating pressure for military action that India could ill afford.⁵⁹

Rather than escalating militarily, the Modi government has chosen more indirect ways of countering China, including deepening ties with the West, strengthening engagement with Taiwan, expanding cooperation within the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), and pursuing diplomatic initiatives aimed at constraining China's influence in multilateral and minilateral forums.⁶⁰

Rather than escalating militarily, the Modi government has chosen more indirect ways of countering China.

The contrast between Modi's approaches to Pakistan and China highlights two broader dynamics linking domestic politics and foreign policy under populist governments. First, the impact of populism is contingent on the domestic resonance of identity narratives (Hindu vs. Muslim, India vs. Pakistan). Populism shapes foreign policy not only through leadership style or rhetoric, but also through thick ideological filters that enable (or constrain) domestic political mobilization. Where such narratives are weak or absent, populist leaders may deliberately avoid politicizing foreign policy across issue areas.

Second, populist governments remain sensitive to material power asymmetries, much like their non-populist counterparts. In the case of China, the Modi government chose not to fully exploit existing anti-China sentiment, recognizing that confrontation with a significantly more powerful adversary carried far greater risks than escalation with Pakistan.⁶¹

Selective Multilateralism and the Politics of Global Status

How does populism shape India's foreign policy beyond international disputes? In the realm of international cooperation, specifically engagement in multilateral institutions and contributions to global governance, existing theories of populism would lead one to expect populist governments to be less willing to engage than their non-populist governments. This is because populists claim to put the people first, and are therefore often assumed to be unwilling to invest scarce resources in the provision of global public goods (which, by definition, also benefit outsiders). Similarly, populists frequently portray multilateral institutions as technocratic bodies far removed from the needs of the people, epitomizing the cosmopolitan elites they oppose.

While some populist leaders like Trump or former Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro have followed this playbook of populist aversion to global governance and multilateralism, some research suggests that populist contestation of international institutions is often more nuanced.⁶² Populist governments may be willing to engage internationally when doing so can be aligned with domestic political goals or claims to national greatness.⁶³

Rather than retreating from global governance, Modi's populist government has, in some areas, shown an increased willingness to engage in the provision of global public goods. Climate change mitigation offers a particularly striking example. At the 2015 UN Climate Change Conference in Paris, Modi surprised many observers by launching the International Solar Alliance and by adopting a far less obstructionist negotiating stance than previous Indian governments. Despite India's domestic mixed record on climate policy, Modi has consistently invested political capital in projecting India as a responsible global actor on climate issues, an interest he had already developed during his tenure as chief minister of Gujarat.⁶⁴

Rather than retreating from global governance, Modi's populist government has, in some areas, shown an increased willingness to engage in the provision of global public goods.

BJP governments have also harnessed climate diplomacy for domestic political mobilization, drawing on right-wing environmentalist tropes such as linking environmental protection to ancient civilizational wisdom and notions of purity in line with the governing party's thick ideology, but also on India's ambition for international leadership.⁶⁵ In a 2018 monthly radio address, Modi stated: "The country secured a place of pride & glory in the entire world. The highest United Nations Environment Award 'Champions of the Earth' was conferred upon

India. The world duly took notice of India's efforts in the areas of Solar Energy and Climate Change."⁶⁶ This stands in sharp contrast to the climate skepticism and denialism often associated with right-wing populists in the West.

More broadly, Modi has used India's engagement in international institutions as a vehicle for domestic political mobilization by explicitly linking his personal leadership to India's rising global stature. Ahead of the 2024 elections, India's presidency of the G20 became a centerpiece of the government's political messaging. A massive campaign elevated the rotating presidency into a symbol of foreign policy success, with the G20 logo—depicting a globe embedded in a lotus flower, the BJP's party symbol—displayed prominently across the country. Rarely has the connection between domestic political mobilization and international diplomacy been so visible.

At the same time, and in line with its stated desire to be recognized as a great power, India under Modi has remained actively engaged in the United Nations and other international organizations.⁶⁷ Rather than rejecting global governance, the Modi government has sought to shape it in ways that reinforce India's status and autonomy.

The Indian case thus reveals that populism does not automatically translate into anti-globalist foreign policy behavior. When populism interacts with national self-perceptions as a rising or established great power—and with personal ambitions of a strong leader—it can even encourage selective forms of international engagement. While many leaders seek to capitalize on foreign policy successes, populists are particularly well positioned to convert international status into personal political capital because they explicitly collapse the distinction between leader and people. In countries that seek recognition as great powers on the world stage, populist leaders can frame costly contributions to global public goods as proof of the greatness of the people they claim to represent, as well as evidence of their own capacity to command international recognition.⁶⁸ In this way, international engagement becomes a resource for domestic mobilization. By presenting himself as both the authentic voice of the people and as a globally respected statesman, Modi links external recognition to national pride. Global visibility is reframed as collective recognition of India, and the resulting sense of pride feeds back into political support for the leader who claims to have delivered it.

Populism Across Borders

Beyond leader-centric diplomacy and opportunistic alignments with authoritarian and revisionist powers, right-wing populism in India has also generated a dense web of transnational connections involving political parties, civil society organizations, and shared narratives. These linkages offer additional insight into the international dynamics of contemporary populism.

Party-to-Party Interactions

At the party level, there is ample evidence that the BJP has cultivated ties with right-wing parties abroad. One striking example occurred in late 2019, only two months after the revocation of the autonomy of Jammu and Kashmir, when a group of twenty-seven members of the European Parliament—most of whom were affiliated with populist radical-right parties—were invited on a tour of the heavily militarized region. At the time, the region was completely isolated from the rest of the world and not even accessible to the leaders of India's opposition.

There is ample evidence that the BJP has cultivated ties with right-wing parties abroad.

The delegation included representatives from France's *Rassemblement National*, Poland's *Law and Justice Party*, the UK's *Brexit Party*, Italy's *Lega*, Germany's *Alternative für Deutschland*, Belgium's *Vlaams Belang*, Spain's *Vox*, and others. Although the visit was officially described as private, the delegation reportedly met with Modi, Doval, and Jaishankar.⁶⁹ The tour was organized by a Delhi-based think tank, the *Institute for Non-Aligned Studies*, which was later identified as part of a broader Indian disinformation network.⁷⁰ The episode illustrates the BJP's willingness to engage selectively with ideologically aligned actors abroad, even at the risk of diplomatic controversy.

Transnational Movement Infrastructure

Beyond political parties, there are emerging connections at the level of transnational movement infrastructures, including think tanks and civil society organizations. For decades, organizations like the *Overseas Friends of BJP* or the *Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh*—an overseas counterpart to the RSS—have established chapters in numerous countries, especially those with large Indian diaspora communities.

Over time, these transnational engagements have evolved in two notable ways. On the one hand, recent research has traced the emergence of “neo-Hindutva” actors in the diaspora. These “new players in the Hindutva ecosphere” are more reluctant to openly associate with traditional Hindutva networks and Hindu majoritarianism, while nonetheless advancing elements of Hindu majoritarian ideology.⁷¹ On the other hand, the Hindu right has increasingly integrated itself into broader transnational right-wing and radical right networks. Representatives have participated in events such as the *National Conservatism Conference (NatCon)* in Washington, DC, in 2024, as well as the 2024 *Budapest Summit* organized by the Hungarian, Viktor Orbán-aligned *Mathias Corvinus Collegium*.⁷²

Shared Narratives and Political Messaging

At the level of rhetoric, Modi has at times borrowed directly from the language of other right-wing populists, most notably Trump. Slogans such as “Make India Great Again” and “India First” echo U.S. populist themes.⁷³ But copying Trump’s rhetoric has not translated into full alignment on foreign policy substance. This is not surprising: Despite personal affinities and rhetorical similarities, cooperation among right-wing populists is complicated by the very nature of ethnonationalist thick ideologies that put each country’s respective people “first”—and thus, inevitably, put populists at odds with one another.

This is best exemplified by the strained relationship between Modi and Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Despite similarities in leadership style and populist appeal, their respective thick ideologies of Hindu nationalism in India and Muslim nationalism in Türkiye fundamentally clash.⁷⁴ Likewise, the second Trump administration’s immigration policies, which have adversely affected segments of the Indian diaspora in the United States, have exposed the limits of transnational populist solidarity.

Relatedly, when representatives of the RSS have tried to position India as a leader in the emerging transnational global right, it has drawn some criticism at home. For example, when Ram Madhav, a member of the National Executive of the RSS and former secretary general of the BJP, argued at the 2024 NatCon that India could help “build a global cultural nationalist movement,” his remarks triggered backlash within India’s right wing.⁷⁵ Critics warned of the risks associated with aligning too closely with Western far-right and Christian nationalist groups. The case of India thus exemplifies populists’ leader-centric, opportunistic foreign policy realignments; the creation of transnational right-wing populist networks; and the spread of populist rhetoric—but also some of the inherent limitations to cooperation among right-wing populist governments.

Personalized Partnerships in a Populist Era

Modi has also expanded the country’s long-standing strategy of diversifying its international partnerships, but the populist influence in that area is more limited. Since 1947, a core tenet of Indian foreign policy has been the pursuit of an independent course that avoids binding the country to any single partner or formal alliance. After the non-aligned period of the Cold War, India moved toward a strategy of “multialignment,” under which it has sought to cultivate close ties with a wide range of international partners.⁷⁶

Modi has largely continued this trend, walking the tightrope between competing partners: deepening relations with the United States, other Quad members, and European partners such as France, while maintaining close ties with Russia, a major supplier of defense equipment; engaging simultaneously with Israel, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates in the Middle East; and expanding outreach to countries across the Global South.⁷⁷ This diversification reflects both continuity in Indian foreign policy and the flexibility afforded by India’s growing international weight.

Several of these international partnerships have been driven personally by Modi and have been particularly visible in relations with fellow right-wing populist or authoritarian leaders. Frequent reciprocal visits with Russian President Vladimir Putin—most recently Putin’s visit to India in December 2025—are a case in point.⁷⁸ During the first Trump administration, Modi and Trump also appeared jointly at mass events for the Indian diaspora, openly showcasing their personal affinity and mutual electoral appeal.⁷⁹ Modi’s 2017 visit to Israel, the first ever by an Indian prime minister, and a more recent one in February 2026, similarly underscored his personal closeness with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.⁸⁰ While bilateral ties had already been deepened under INC-led governments, Modi has made the relationship more public and elevated Israel to an important strategic partner. He has also displayed personal sympathy and affinity for other right-wing leaders, including Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni.⁸¹

Ultimately, Modi’s personal diplomacy with fellow right-wing populist leaders reveals the limits and risks inherent in leader-centric foreign policy.

At the same time, it would be misleading to describe these engagements as evidence of a coherent “populist axis.” They are better understood as part of a broader, pragmatic strategy of partnership diversification. Ultimately, Modi’s personal diplomacy with fellow right-wing populist leaders also reveals the limits and risks inherent in leader-centric foreign policy. Most visibly, Modi’s “bromance” with Trump proved short-lived.⁸² During Trump’s second administration, the United States has distanced itself from Modi, imposing punitive tariffs in response to India’s continued imports of Russian oil and pressuring India to scale them back, with potentially adverse consequences for the Indian economy.⁸³ Even after striking a limited trade pact in February 2026, India’s tariff burden is much higher than it was prior to Trump’s second administration, and the United States has threatened renewed trade penalties should India persist in purchasing Russian energy.⁸⁴

Conclusion

The populist government under Modi has changed the substance of India’s foreign policy, but the most significant impact of populism has been on the “how” rather than on the “what” of foreign policy. Populism has reshaped the processes through which foreign policy is formulated and communicated, centering decisionmaking on a leader claiming to embody the will of the people. This way of governing prioritizes personalization, centralization, and the marginalization of established elites and institutions.

Foreign policy has also become a tool for domestic political mobilization, albeit in a more selective manner. Mobilization has been strongest in areas where foreign policy dovetails with the BJP’s thick ideology of Hindu nationalism—most notably in relations with Pakistan. Here, the fusion of populism and ethnonationalism has translated into

a policy of escalation in response to terrorist threats emanating from across the border. By contrast, Modi has been far more cautious in cases where mobilization could have produced politically or strategically costly pressures. His government's deliberate decision not to amplify tensions with China illustrates how populist leaders can strategically limit mobilization to preserve room for maneuver.

Populism has led the Modi government to pursue preexisting goals more aggressively than in the past, but it has not uniformly undermined India's international engagement. On the contrary, under Modi, India has remained largely committed to multilateralism and has even expanded its role in selected areas of global governance. Demonstrating India's credentials as a responsible great power—and conveying this recognition to a domestic public—has been a central motivation behind the government's willingness to contribute as a “good international citizen.” In this sense, international engagement has served both external and internal political purposes.

Right-wing populists' commonalities are often undermined by the idiosyncrasies of personalized politics and the ebbs and flows of personal sympathies and leader turnover.

The Indian case also shows that the global populist right may be increasingly interconnected, but that it will take time until such connections become consequential. Right-wing populists' commonalities are often undermined by the idiosyncrasies of personalized politics and the ebbs and flows of personal sympathies and leader turnover. Personalization ultimately can weaken incipient alliances via its inherent unpredictability. Further, while we may observe the emergence of ever-stronger right-wing populist connections in Europe and in large parts of the Global North (at times also including Global South leaders such as Argentinian president Javier Milei), India's trajectory reveals that the emergence of a truly global right-wing populist “international” is challenged by the very features of ethno-nationalist populist thick ideologies, which inevitably focus on a narrowly defined people. Connections across the Global North–Global South divide pose particular challenges given the anti-immigrant and openly racist positions of many right-wing populists in the Global North.

Even in the absence of a coherent right-wing populist “international,” the cumulative effects of populism on world politics are likely to be significant. The Indian case illustrates three broader trends associated with populist foreign policy: rising transactionalism, heightened unpredictability, and increasingly fluid international partnerships. These dynamics do not amount to a shared policy agenda, but they are reshaping how states interact on the global stage. Understanding these shifts—and their long-term implications—will be an important task for future research on populism and international relations.

Right-Wing Populism and Strategic Realignment: Argentina's Milei Experiment

Federico Merke

Introduction

Since the return to democracy in 1983, Argentine foreign policy has been characterized by a broad commitment to multilateral engagement, regional coordination, and a balancing between autonomy and alignment. While governments differed with respect to their tone, partners, and intensity of engagement, international institutions and South American relations remained enduring arenas of diplomatic action.

The election of Javier Milei in November 2023 disrupted this long-standing pattern. A radical outsider propelled by an anti-establishment discourse, Milei assumed the presidency displaying a marked disdain for multilateralism and regionalism, favoring instead ideologically driven alignments and confrontational rhetoric. In this sense, Milei constitutes an instructive case for scholars of populism and foreign policy: He denounces Argentina's traditional populism—particularly its Peronist variant, long synonymous with economic nationalism and Third-Worldist foreign policy—yet governs through an antagonistic, personalistic style aligned with contemporary right-wing populist movements.

This tension raises a central question: To what extent can Milei be considered a populist, and how does this classification illuminate his approach to foreign policy? This article examines Argentina's foreign policy under Milei through the lenses of populism, transnational linkages, and shared policy agendas. It argues that while Milei embodies elements of a libertarian variant of right-wing populism, his government's external behavior reflects a hybrid pattern: sharp ideological gestures, intense leader-to-leader diplomacy, and selective institutional disengagement, combined with pragmatic accommodation in areas where international costs are prohibitive.

Libertarian Populism: Understanding the Milei Phenomenon

Crisis and the Demand for Rupture

Javier Milei, a self-styled libertarian economist, television commentator, and one-term congressman, rose to power amid a convergence of Argentina's economic decay, political exhaustion, and cultural upheaval. The country faced chronic inflation, mounting price and capital controls, and a state that could no longer stabilize the economy. The entrenched party system had also lost credibility. Peronists and anti-Peronists had swapped power for decades without delivering growth or predictability, severing the bond between citizens and their institutions. The country's social fabric was equally frayed: distrust, polarization, and resentment toward elites turned anti-system rhetoric into a powerful outlet for frustration.

Exploiting this predicament, Milei's appeal rested on a simple diagnosis: that a venal political class (*la casta*) had expanded the state beyond its capacity and driven the country into dysfunction. In a society where the public sector had grown by more than 60 percent in two decades,⁸⁵ his promise of a radical break resonated as the clearest departure from a discredited status quo. Together, these failures emptied the political center and created a demand not for incremental reform but for rupture—a vacuum that Milei's chainsaw politics, anti-system ethos, and promise of radical shock therapy were uniquely positioned to fill.

When Milei took office in December 2023, his government moved immediately on two fronts: stabilization and deregulation. It launched a sharp devaluation, deep spending cuts, and an aggressive fiscal adjustment that delivered a monthly surplus and began to pull inflation down (from 211 percent in early 2024 to 31 percent by December 2025) by compressing public and private budgets alike.⁸⁶ At the same time, it sought to overhaul the institutional framework that had long encouraged discretion and deterred investment. A sweeping deregulatory decree and reform package (*Ley Bases*) aimed to liberalize markets, curb bureaucratic power, and attract large-scale capital. These early measures reflected the view that Argentina's crisis was both fiscal and institutional—and that recovery required a swift correction of the first and a structural reset of the second.

Populist Style, Technocratic Substance

In sharp contrast to the technocratic ambition of his economic program, Milei's political style has been consistently combative. Even as his government pursued fiscal orthodoxy and regulatory overhaul, he has communicated in a register of confrontation—denouncing opponents as “criminals,” “parasites,” “rats,” or enemies of freedom, and turning policy debates into moral battles.

Milei's intensive use of social media amplified this confrontational tone. In October 2025, for instance, he spent an average of three hours a day on Twitter/X, a platform where rapid-fire insults, attacks on journalists—"we don't hate journalists enough"⁸⁷—and open clashes with governors and legislators became central to his style of governing.⁸⁸ This aggressive rhetoric served to sustain his outsider identity and frame resistance to his reforms as evidence of a corrupt establishment fighting for survival.

Aggressive rhetoric serves to sustain his outsider identity and frame resistance to his reforms as evidence of a corrupt establishment fighting for survival.

Seen through scholar Cas Mudde's lens of populism as a "thin-centered ideology" that pits a virtuous people—what Milei calls "*los argentinos de bien*"—against a corrupt elite, Milei's politics seem to fit the profile.⁸⁹ They rest on a moral binary rather than a programmatic disagreement: *La casta* is not simply inefficient, but "parasitic," "predatory," and deliberately destructive of national prosperity. In line with Mudde, Claudia Zilla presents Milei as an instance of "libertarian populism," emphasizing his anti-elite narrative, his depiction of the state as an inherently predatory actor, and his self-presentation as an embattled outsider.⁹⁰

Milei also shares similar characteristics with other populist leaders in what philosopher Joseph Heath identifies as a defining feature of contemporary populism: cognitive closure and a systematic rejection of expertise and institutional mediation.⁹¹ Populist leaders, Heath argues, convert intricate policy challenges into moral confrontations, dismiss technical knowledge as part of an elite plot, and view institutions not as sites of negotiation but as obstacles to be circumvented or dismantled—a pattern that aligns closely with Milei's own political style.

A Hybrid Variant: Libertarian Populism

Yet Milei departs from conventional analyses of populism in at least two ways. First, although he shares affinities with the new populist right in the Global North—U.S. President Donald Trump, Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, and French nationalist politician Marine Le Pen—on anti-woke politics and skepticism toward global governance, his ideological core is far more liberal and far less nationalist. Whereas voters in advanced economies often mobilize around economic and demographic anxieties tied to deindustrialization, cultural threat, or migration, Milei's median supporter is propelled by a different mix of factors: hyperinflation fatigue, anti-statism, and deep frustration with a decades-long cycle of economic decline. A forthcoming review by Evelyne Hübscher and Thomas Sattler shows that the rise of populism in Western Europe has tended to occur in waves that follow episodes of austerity.⁹² Milei stands out precisely because he inverts this pattern: His ascent is not a reaction *against* austerity but a mandate *for* it.

Second, Milei diverges just as sharply from the archetypal populist of the Global South, and of Latin America in particular: protectionist, statist, redistributive, and instinctively wary of the United States. Milei is not a conventional Latin American populist. He is, in effect, a populist in style and method who rejects the traditional ideological content of Latin American populism—its statism, its nationalism, its suspicion of markets. In this sense, Milei’s rise is less a mirror of Northern populism than a reaction to Argentina’s long detour away from market orthodoxy. He thus emerges as a hybrid figure: a populist communicator advancing an agenda grounded in market orthodoxy rather than redistribution.

A libertarian insurgent who deploys populist rhetoric to advance an anti-populist economic agenda—populist enough to mobilize anger, but libertarian enough to unsettle Argentina’s entrenched Peronist/anti-Peronist divide.

In line with this reading, Heinisch, Gracia, Laguna-Tapia, and Muriel offer a cautious view, describing Milei as a “partial populist” who denounces *la casta* and dramatizes crisis but lacks a fully articulated notion of “the people.”⁹³ For these authors, Milei’s position is better understood as crisis performance—the sustained invocation of emergency narratives—that legitimizes radical rupture. Political scientist Thomas Kestler, meanwhile, places him within the rise of right-wing populism in Latin America, drawing parallels with Brazil’s Jair Bolsonaro and Chile’s Antonio Kast, while noting the absence of strong nativist elements typical of European radical right movements.⁹⁴

Taken together, these strands point to a hybrid profile that blurs the boundaries of existing populist typologies. While populism and ideological orientation are analytically separable—one can imagine a non-populist libertarian just as one can imagine a non-libertarian populist—in Milei’s case the two are partially mutually reinforcing. His libertarianism is not merely the ideological payload carried by a populist vehicle: His anti-establishment stance, his sense of insurgency, and his framing of the state as predatory all flow directly from his economic convictions. Milei thus occupies an unusual ideological niche: a libertarian insurgent who deploys populist rhetoric to advance an anti-populist economic agenda—populist enough to mobilize anger, but libertarian enough to unsettle Argentina’s entrenched Peronist/anti-Peronist divide. See table 1 for summaries of Milei’s type of populism.

Table 1. Populist Features: Theory vs. Milei’s Profile

Dimension	Theory Expectation	Evidence	Fit
Anti-elite antagonism	“People” vs. “corrupt elite”	Attacks on la casta; state as predatory	High
Crisis performance	Crisis as moral/existential threat	Inflation as “theft”; Argentina as “collapse”	High
Personalistic leadership	Direct leader to people link	Centrality of his voice; bypassing institutions	High
People-centrism	Unified virtuous “people”	Focus on individuals (taxpayers/entrepreneurs)	Low
Redistributive economics	Pro-poor, pro-consumption agenda	Fiscal austerity; market orthodoxy	Low
National-cultural protectionism	Defense of national identity	Ideological, not nativist framing	Low-Med
Cognitive simplification	Suspicion of complexity/expertise	Anti-expert rhetoric; “common-sense” fixes	High

Source: Author’s own analysis.

Milei’s Right-Wing Populism and Argentina’s Foreign Policy Turn

Populist Style and the Transformation of Diplomatic Practice

A growing body of scholarship has examined how populism reshapes foreign policy, identifying several recurring patterns.⁹⁵ First, populism typically leads to the centralization and personalization of foreign policy. Decisionmaking becomes concentrated in the executive, diminishing the role of professional diplomatic institutions and elevating direct, leader-driven communication.

Second, populist leaders systematically politicize foreign policy to mobilize domestic support. They deploy anti-elite and nationalist rhetoric, construct external threats, and frame international relations as a moral struggle between the “pure people” and “corrupt elites,”⁹⁶ often prioritizing domestic political gains over strategic or institutional considerations.

Third, populist governments may pursue revisionist or confrontational international agendas—challenging alliances, multilateral institutions, and established norms—especially when nationalism forms part of their platform. This revisionism can range from symbolic defiance, such as withdrawing from international forums or rejecting expert-based regimes, to more substantive realignments of strategic partnerships and long-standing commitments.

Against this backdrop, Javier Milei has introduced arguably the most consequential transformation in Argentine foreign policy since the country's return to democracy. Even Peronist administrations critical of U.S. hegemony or global capitalism operated largely within multilateral and regional frameworks, treating them as instruments of influence rather than as adversaries. Milei represents a structural break. He sidelines regional forums, treats multilateral institutions as constraints rather than platforms, and replaces institutional diplomacy with ideological combat and leader-driven gestures.

Milei's external behavior is driven by two parallel logics—one rooted in political performance, the other in a coherent right-wing worldview.

One way to understand Milei's foreign policy is to distinguish the effects of his populist style from those of his right-wing orientation. Populism shapes the method: how he engages with the world, how institutions are treated, and how diplomacy is framed. Ideology shapes the substance: the choices he makes, the partners he elevates, and the priorities he pursues. This distinction avoids the common trap of treating populism as a foreign policy blueprint. Instead, it highlights how Milei's external behavior is driven by two parallel logics—one rooted in political performance, the other in a coherent right-wing worldview.

Seen through this lens, Milei's populist style produces four distinctive effects on Argentina's foreign policy. First, *global anti-elitism* projects the domestic divide between *la casta* and "good Argentines" onto the global arena, casting multilateral and regional bodies as a "global caste" intent on constraining sovereignty.⁹⁷ On several occasions, Milei accused the United Nations of seeking to impose a supranational government that no one ever chose.⁹⁸ Milei's government has also downgraded Argentina's participation in the G20, Community of Latin American and Caribbean States, and Mercosur; withdrawn the country from the World Health Organization as a member; pulled out of COP29 in Azerbaijan; withdrawn Argentina's Nationally Determined Contribution from COP30; and reduced its engagement at the UN Human Rights Council.

Second, *cognitive closure* reflects a rejection of complexity and deliberation, leading Milei to downplay issues such as climate change and market failures, and thus to devalue global public-goods agreements. Since taking office, Milei has advanced a strongly climate-skeptical discourse, dismissing global warming as "another lie that collapses"⁹⁹ and instructing Argentine negotiators to withdraw from COP29 in Azerbaijan on the grounds that "all policies that blame human beings for climate change are false."¹⁰⁰

Third, *moralized diplomacy* reflects a worldview defined by in-groups and out-groups rather than Westphalian legitimacy, with leaders—rather than states—judged by ideological affinity. Milei sees not an international society of states, but a cast of leaders arrayed along a moral spectrum. And those in his out-group face open delegitimization: Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva as the emblem of a discredited left; Colombian President Gustavo Petro as a “communist murderer”; former Mexican president Andrés Manuel López Obrador as “inept”; former Chilean president Gabriel Boric as “economically naïve”; and Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez as “corrupt.”¹⁰¹

Finally, *domestic institutional erosion* is apparent. Argentina’s diplomatic machinery has been hollowed out as expert voices have been sidelined and professional channels bypassed. During the same period, unconventional tools—from U.S. lobbying firms to public denunciations of diplomats—moved to the fore. In his first year, Milei suspended the entry examinations for Argentina’s Foreign Service Institute, the first interruption since the return to democracy. In November 2024, after a clash with Foreign Minister Diana Mondino, the government launched an “ideological screening” of the diplomatic corps to identify “agendas hostile to freedom.”¹⁰² And between March and September 2025, two key appointees—Úrsula Basset and Nahuel Sotelo—were tasked with controlling language in official documents and steering Argentina toward negative votes on gender, indigenous rights, domestic violence, climate change, and the UN’s sustainable development agenda, among other issues.¹⁰³

Ideological Realignment and Strategic Alignment

While populism shapes the *how* of Milei’s foreign policy—the tone, the instruments, the treatment of expertise—his right-wing orientation gives it substantive coherence. It clarifies *what* Argentina seeks to do in the world beyond the style in which it does it. This combination produces four distinctive patterns.

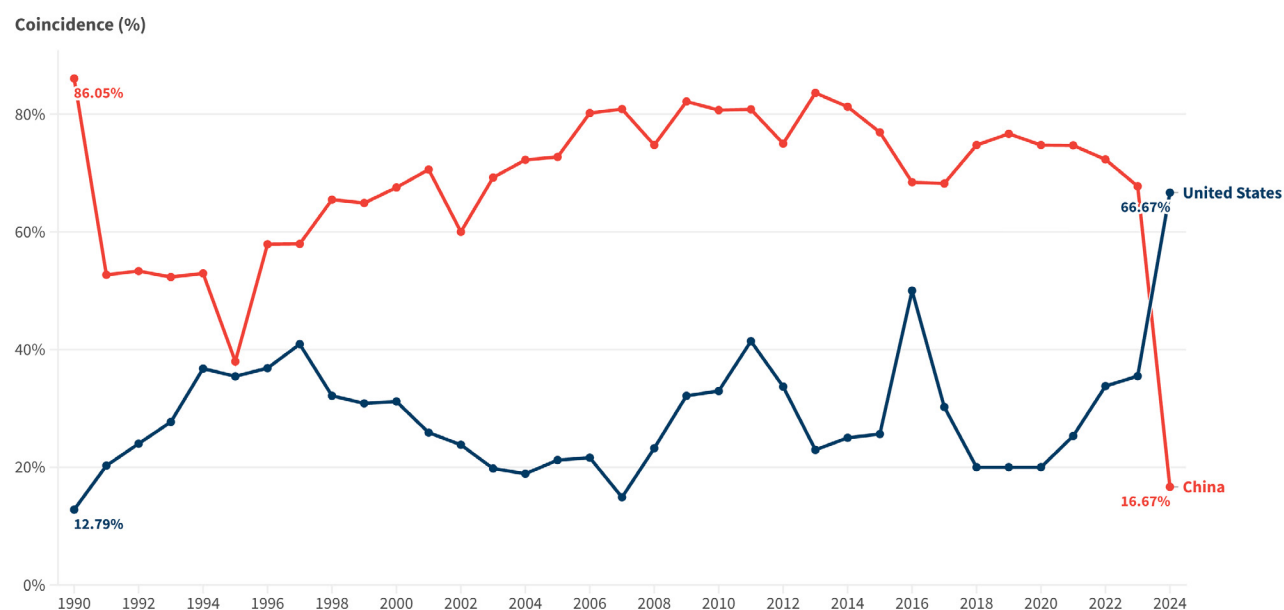
Milei’s support for Ukraine has expanded or receded in step with shifts in Trump’s stance; he has openly endorsed the capture of former Venezuelan president Nicolás Maduro; and he has expressed explicit approval of the re-emergence of the Monroe Doctrine within the U.S.

First, *ideological alignment* replaces the hedging strategies of previous governments with a narrow partnership centered on two right-wing leaders: U.S. President Donald Trump and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.¹⁰⁴ Milei has repeatedly aligned with both countries in key multilateral votes—on human rights, humanitarian access, and Middle East resolutions—while abstaining or dissenting from broad UN General Assembly majorities that previously counted on Argentine support.

As illustrated in figure 1, the sharp increase in Argentina's voting alignment with the United States at the United Nations in 2024—accompanied by a pronounced decline in congruence with China—reflects President Milei's decision to anchor Buenos Aires within a Trump-led, anti-globalist coalition. This pattern is consistent with Milei's issue-specific positioning: His support for Ukraine has expanded or receded in step with shifts in Trump's stance; he has openly endorsed the capture of former Venezuelan president Nicolás Maduro; and he has expressed explicit approval of the re-emergence of the Monroe Doctrine within the U.S. National Security Strategy. More recently, Argentina has entered advanced discussions with Washington on an unprecedented deportation arrangement that, if finalized, would allow the United States to send migrants from other nations to Argentina—a development that signals a willingness to adopt U.S.-led security frameworks over traditional regional or multilateral migration cooperation.¹⁰⁵

This alignment has brought quick rewards. It reassured markets, softened the International Monetary Fund (IMF)'s stance, and opened doors to U.S. financial power. U.S. Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent's intervention helped steady the peso, and a \$20 billion swap signaled access to emergency liquidity unavailable to previous governments.¹⁰⁶ The most striking step came in November 2025, when U.S. IMF Special Drawing Rights fell by roughly SDR 870 million as Argentina's rose by the same amount—an extraordinary maneuver interpreted as a direct U.S. transfer enabling Buenos Aires to meet an IMF repayment.¹⁰⁷ Political validation

Figure 1. Argentina's Voting Coincidence with the United States and China at the United Nations, 1990–2024



Source: Global & LAC Datahub, Georgetown University

accompanied these financial gains: Trump invited Milei to join the newly created Board of Peace, a gesture that further underscored Argentina's incorporation into his inner diplomatic circle. The result was time, stability, and political oxygen. In the short term, closeness to Washington paid off.

Second, *like-minded networking* reflects Milei's search for ideological shelter among leaders such as Marine Le Pen, Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, and Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán—fellow anti-establishment and culturally conservative figures who share his rejection of the liberal mainstream—whom he sees as part of a shared political tribe. This is less traditional alliance-building than identity politics: a coalition of anti-woke, anti-statist, and culturally conservative actors who validate one another's narratives and amplify each other's agendas.

Third, a *techno-heroic orientation* captures Milei's conviction that the future is being shaped not in state capitals but in the headquarters of firms like OpenAI, Meta, and Tesla—run by figures he celebrates as “heroes,” including Sam Altman, Mark Zuckerberg, and Elon Musk. In this view, technological innovators—not diplomats or governments—are the true engines of progress. Milei treats them as lodestars for Argentina's modernization, symbols of an entrepreneurial frontier that he believes can vault the country out of stagnation and into a new global economy. Whether this techno-heroic orientation is a feature of right-wing populism per se or a distinctive expression of Milei's libertarian ideology is debatable. What is clear is that it performs a populist function: Technological innovators replace the virtuous people of left-wing populism, while the bureaucratic state plays the role of the corrupt elite that impedes progress.

Finally, Milei's instrumental engagement with institutions such as the EU, the OECD, and the IMF can best be described as *notarial multilateralism*. These forums function as seal-of-approval mechanisms rather than arenas for negotiation or coalition-building, allowing Milei to showcase external validation while keeping his distance from the multilateral agendas he dismisses as statist or “woke.”

Rather than treating international institutions and regional forums as venues for negotiation, Milei reorients foreign policy toward bilateral alignment, ideological affinity, and symbolic confrontation.

Against this backdrop, Milei fuses populist performance with a coherent right-wing project, producing a diplomacy that is combative in style and selective in substance: hostile to multilateral norms yet eager for external validation; suspicious of state bureaucracies yet enthralled by technological elites; regionally disruptive yet strategically dependent on Washington. What distinguishes this approach is the abandonment of multilateralism as a primary arena of action and of the region as a space for political coordination. Rather than treating international institutions and regional forums as venues for negotiation, buffering,

or coalition-building—as was the case across otherwise divergent governments since 1983—Milei reorients foreign policy toward bilateral alignment, ideological affinity, and symbolic confrontation.

Transnational Linkages in Milei's Foreign Policy

Milei's foreign policy relies less on conventional diplomacy than on a dense web of transnational, ideologically aligned networks. These transnational linkages can be grouped into five categories. While they often overlap in practice, the typology helps clarify the nature, scope, and limits of Milei's international embedment.

Leader-Centric and Personalist Networks

Milei's international ties are forged primarily through direct relationships with like-minded leaders rather than through institutional channels. The paradigmatic case is Milei's relationship with Trump. Milei has repeatedly framed Trump not merely as a strategic partner but as an ideological reference point, aligning Argentina's external posture with Trump's positions on global governance, culture-war issues, and hemispheric order.

Milei's references to Trump in interviews, public speeches, and social media posts consistently reflect this feature. According to data compiled by *La Nación* Data through September 2025, out of a total of 1,320 references on X (formerly Twitter), 1,239 were coded as positive or explicitly laudatory statements by the Argentine president toward his U.S. counterpart. No negative references were identified. Over the period of analysis, this corresponds to an average of more than one positive public reference to Trump per day.¹⁰⁸

This leader-centric logic also extends to Milei's ties with other right-wing heads of government, notably Israel's Netanyahu and Italy's Meloni. What binds them is not a shared programmatic ideology—Milei's libertarian cosmopolitanism sets him apart from their nationalism—but a common adversary: the liberal progressive mainstream in politics, culture, and international institutions. Diplomatic engagement is thus organized around moral affinity and ideological kinship rather than bilateral policy agendas, producing a personalized and vertically structured diplomacy that sidelines bureaucratic mediation in favor of interpersonal trust and symbolic recognition.

Party-to-Party and Parliamentary Alliances

A second category consists of party-to-party and parliamentary linkages with rightwing and far-right political movements, particularly in Europe and Latin America. Milei has cultivated close ties with Spain's conservative Vox party, Bolsonaro-aligned networks in Brazil, and conservative actors in Paraguay and Chile. These relationships operate primarily through partisan events, joint appearances, and mutual endorsements rather than through formal intergovernmental mechanisms.

Such alliances serve two functions. Domestically, they reinforce Milei's self-presentation as part of a broader international movement resisting progressive and statist agendas. Internationally, they provide access to ideological allies who amplify narratives, normalize confrontational rhetoric, and embed Argentina within a wider right-wing political community. However, these linkages remain institutionally shallow: They do not translate into coordinated legislative agendas, joint foreign policy initiatives, or durable organizational structures.

Shared Narratives and Political Messaging

Another layer of transnational linkage operates at the level of discourse. Milei's foreign policy is embedded in a shared marketplace of ideas defined by anti-elitism, culturewar framing, and hostility toward multilateral governance. Symbols, slogans, and rhetorical tropes circulate fluidly across borders: the chainsaw as an icon of state-cutting zeal, denunciations of "woke" ideology, and portrayals of global institutions as predatory or illegitimate.

This discursive convergence does not require formal coordination. Instead, it functions through repetitive performance and mutual reinforcement, allowing actors across different countries to affirm one another as members of the same symbolic community. In this sense, Milei participates in a transnational politics of performance, where alignment is expressed through language, imagery, and public gestures rather than through policy uniformity.

Transnational Movement Infrastructures

Beyond leaders and parties, Milei is embedded in a set of transnational movement infrastructures that provide platforms, resources, and legitimacy. Chief among these is the U.S. conservative ecosystem organized around the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) and affiliated organizations. Milei's repeated participation in CPAC events, his prominence at Mar-a-Lago, and Argentina's hosting of CPAC Buenos Aires signal his incorporation into a movement infrastructure that connects activists, donors, media outlets, and political entrepreneurs.¹⁰⁹

Milei participates in a transnational politics of performance, where alignment is expressed through language, imagery, and public gestures rather than through policy uniformity.

These infrastructures function as arenas of validation and coordination rather than as policymaking bodies. They enable Milei to project Argentina as a regional node within a global right-wing movement, linking U.S. MAGA networks and European far-right actors with Latin America. In this respect, Argentina occupies a distinctive role: a Southern outpost that offers territorial anchoring and symbolic legitimacy—living proof that right-wing populism and market radicalism can prevail in the Global South—to networks that are otherwise concentrated in the Global North.

Another layer of Milei's transnational linkages emerges from religious-political networks, most prominently Chabad, the global Orthodox Jewish outreach movement. His very first act as president-elect—a visit to the gravesite of Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the late leader of the Chabad movement—signaled not only personal devotion but early alignment with a U.S.-anchored conservative and pro-Israel ecosystem. That alignment deepened in April 2024, when Chabad Lubavitch in Miami bestowed on him the title of “Ambassador of Light,” elevating him within a network that blends religious authority, diaspora influence, and political activism.¹¹⁰ The same constellation resurfaced at the September 2025 UN General Assembly, where Milei again met both Trump and Netanyahu. By November 2025, the trajectory converged in policy: Argentinian Foreign Minister Pablo Quirno and his Israeli counterpart, Gideon Sa'ar, publicly confirmed Argentina's decision to move its embassy to Jerusalem before a packed auditorium of Argentine and Israeli business leaders at the Argentina–Israel Forum.¹¹¹ What began as symbolic affinity had matured into geopolitical alignment.

The last network is composed of business forums, conservative think tanks, and right-wing parties. This arc has taken Milei to Madrid, where he appeared on stage with Vox leader Santiago Abascal and to platforms such as the Madrid Economic Forum and the *Club de los Viernes*, both of which rail against the “hegemony of social-democratic ideas”¹¹² and champion radical market liberalism. It has also drawn him deep into the American conservative and pro-market ecosystems: to the Cato Institute, where he declared that “the state is a criminal and violent organization”;¹¹³ to the Milken Institute, where he warned that the West is succumbing to bureaucracy and runaway public spending;¹¹⁴ to the America First Policy Institute; and finally, to the Heritage Foundation, whose president led a delegation to the *Casa Rosada* in March 2025.

Opportunistic Alignment with Revisionist or Illiberal Powers

Finally, Milei's transnational strategy includes selective and opportunistic alignment with states—like Hungary, through its right-wing populist leader Viktor Orbán—that challenge prevailing liberal norms, particularly when such alignment reinforces ideological affinity or signals defiance of multilateral consensus. Argentina's voting behavior alongside the United States and Israel on human rights, humanitarian access, and international criminal justice illustrates this pattern. These alignments are not embedded in formal alliances, nor do they imply comprehensive strategic coordination. Rather, they function as tactical signals that reinforce Milei's anti-progressive, right-wing identity-driven diplomacy and his rejection of multilateral norm-production.

Scope, Selectivity, and Asymmetry

Taken together, these five categories reveal a pattern of transnational engagement that is selective rather than comprehensive. Milei's overlap with the global right-wing ecosystem is issue-specific, highly performative, and weakly institutionalized. Cooperation is sustained through shared narratives, symbolic acts, and episodic coordination rather than through binding commitments or durable organizational ties.

The relationship is also markedly asymmetric. Milei depends far more on these transnational networks for validation, protection, and leverage than they depend on Argentina. For the broader ecosystem, Argentina represents a useful outpost and amplifier; for Milei, these networks constitute a central pillar of international relevance and domestic legitimation. This asymmetry underscores the personalized and contingent nature of his foreign policy: a diplomacy anchored not in institutions or regions, but in identity, affinity, and narrative alignment.

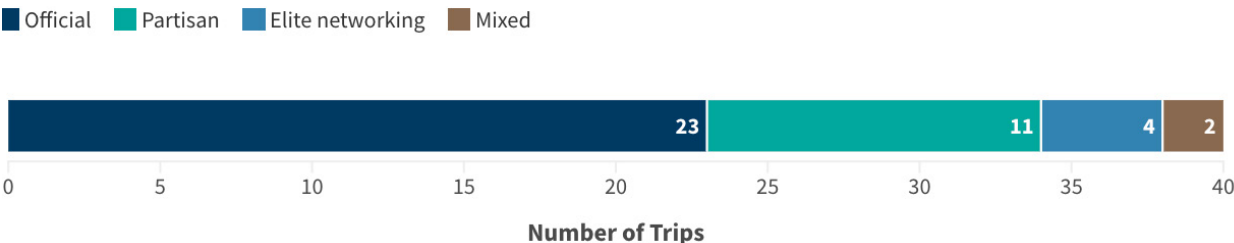
Figure 2 arranges Milei’s travels (see the appendix for the full list) from 2023 to 2025 by category, namely official (for example, UN, Mercosur), partisan (for example, CPAC, Vox), elite networking (for example, meetings with Elon Musk, speech at Heritage), and mixed travel. A clear majority of his trips correspond to official diplomatic or protocol activities, reflecting the formal obligations of the office.

Yet these conventional duties coexist with an unusually high number of partisan trips, which account for over a quarter of all travels and are heavily concentrated in events linked to the U.S. conservative ecosystem and ideologically aligned actors in Europe and Latin America. A further 10 percent of trips fall into the category of elite networking, consisting of meetings with technology entrepreneurs, financiers, and corporate leaders—again, overwhelmingly based in the United States.

Milei’s Populism and Shared Policy Agendas

The early wave of populist leaders, the “solo populists,” operated largely in isolation. Today, the social structure of global politics is shifting toward a more mature transnational right-wing ecosystem where the circulation of narratives, tactical playbooks, and policy templates is fluid and increasingly effective.

Figure 2. Classification of Milei’s International Trips (2023–2025)



Source: Author’s own analysis.

This ecosystem, however, does not form a tight policy coalition as it comprises diverse and often ideologically conflicting factions that are more united by common grievances and enemies than by a single, coherent policy platform. Rather than constituting a cohesive policy coalition, these shared agendas operate as issue-specific and short-term alignments, sustained by symbolic gestures and narrative convergence as opposed to institutionalized coordination or binding commitments.

Much of the cooperation is *performative* (shared stages, narratives, symbols—such as the chainsaw motif and culture-war vocabulary) rather than embedded in joint institutions or binding commitments. This network therefore forms a coalition of norm spoilers. It does not dismantle the international system, but it does narrow its scope and slows norm production, especially in domains the global right sees as being subjected to “overreach.”

Milei’s overlap with this ecosystem is selective rather than comprehensive—rooted in shared narratives, culture-war politics, and skepticism toward multilateralism, but diverging on economics and geopolitics. See table 2, which summarizes the core themes of this alignment below.

Table 2. Milei’s Shared Policy with the Global Right

Theme	Milei’s position	Global right alignment
Skepticism of global governance	Rejects UN Sustainable Development goals; climate skepticism; downgrades environmental policy; resists multilateral norms.	Echoes U.S./European far-right anti-globalism (Trump, Meloni, Vox); part of broader backlash against the liberal international order.
Culture wars and social conservatism	Anti-abortion; anti-gender equality policies; defends “traditional family”; attacks “cultural Marxism.”	Fully aligned with Bolsonaro, Vox, U.S. Christian right, Orbán; culture-war narratives and identity politics.
Economic liberalism and anti-state rhetoric	Extreme free-market agenda; austerity shock; deregulation; rejects redistribution.	Less protectionist than northern populists; closer to libertarian think tanks and techno-libertarians.
Geopolitical alignment	Strong tilt toward U.S./NATO; rejects BRICS; cools China ties; friction with Brazil.	Fits within emerging right-wing transnational networks; ideological kinship with Trump, Meloni, Vox, Bolsonaro.

Source: Author’s own analysis.

Against this backdrop, as shown in table 3, Argentina’s multilateral behavior in 2024–2025 displays a clear realignment toward some of the tenets of this ecosystem. The government has stepped away from broad international consensus on human rights, gender equality, refugee protection, international criminal justice, and global governance.¹¹⁵ The pattern is cross-cutting: systematic rejection of resolutions tied to global governance or normative frameworks viewed as overreaching, combined with alignment with states skeptical of these agendas. It marks a sharp departure from Argentina’s traditional voting profile and signals a broader repositioning of its external orientation.

Table 3. Argentina’s Voting and Alignment Behavior in Multilateral Forums, 2024–2025

Date	Forum	Issue	Type of Norm / Agenda	Argentina’s Vote / Action	Notable Alignment
Sep 2024	UNGA	UN “Pact for the Future”	Global governance & development	Did not endorse	Belarus, North Korea, Nicaragua
Nov 2024	UNGA	Indigenous rights	Human rights	Voted No	Isolated negative vote
Nov 2024	UNGA	Violence against women and girls	Gender rights / human rights	Only country to vote No	Complete isolation
Mar 2025	UNGA	International Day for Peaceful Coexistence (28 Jan)	Peace & coexistence norm	Voted No	United States, Israel, three countries total
Sep 2025	UNGA	“New York Declaration” on Palestinian statehood	Conflict resolution / recognition	Voted No	United States, Israel, nine countries total
Oct 2025	UNGA	Condemnation of U.S. embargo on Cuba	Sanctions / international law	Voted No	Break with long-standing Argentine precedent
Nov 2025	UNHR	Protection of refugees	Refugee protection / human rights	Voted No	United States, Israel, Paraguay
Nov 2025	UNGA	ICC annual report	International criminal justice	Voted No	United States, Israel, Russia, Belarus, Nicaragua
Nov 2025	UNGA	Condemning and abolishing torture	Human rights / anti-torture norm	Voted No	United States, Israel
Nov 2025	G20	Final Leaders’ Declaration	Global economic governance	Declined to sign	Parallels Trump’s non-attendance

Source: Author’s own analysis.

A High-Risk Realignment

Populism does not merely reshape foreign policy; it repurposes it. In a fragmenting international order, diplomacy becomes less about managing exposure and more about signaling identity. Alignments are moralized and personalized, institutions bypassed, and strategic ambiguity recast as ideological weakness. Foreign policy, in short, turns into performance—designed to demonstrate conviction rather than to absorb risk.

Argentina under Javier Milei offers a particularly stark illustration. Here, populism fuses with libertarian dogma to produce a foreign policy that is combative, selective, and conspicuously uninterested in hedging. Multilateralism is treated with suspicion, regional pluralism with impatience, and diplomacy itself is reframed as a contest between civilizational camps. Milei is not simply breaking with Argentine tradition; he is testing how far an ideologically saturated foreign policy can go for a country structurally dependent on external finance, trade, and institutional access.

This amounts to a concentrated geopolitical wager. By binding Argentina tightly to Trump's America, Milei is betting that ideological intimacy can substitute for diversification—that loyalty to a single patron and a single worldview will unlock benefits large enough to offset the costs of alienating Brazil, Europe, China, and global fora—even as pragmatic trade ties with China have proven more resilient than the ideological posture implies. It is a strategy that privileges certainty over optionality, faith over flexibility. Small and middle powers usually avoid such bets precisely because they turn external volatility into domestic vulnerability.

The wager may deliver short-term rewards. Access to U.S. financial leverage, symbolic endorsement from a superpower, and temporary insulation from market pressure all have tangible value. But the structural exposure is equally clear. Trump's coalition is unstable and deeply contingent on U.S. domestic politics. Argentina is not aligning with the United States as a durable strategic actor; it is aligning with one political moment, one faction, one temperament.

Argentina is not aligning with the United States as a durable strategic actor; it is aligning with one political moment, one faction, one temperament.

In doing so, Milei's foreign policy captures the deeper paradox of populism in international affairs. By rejecting ambiguity, it magnifies risk. By disdaining institutions, it narrows exit options. And by turning alignment into belief, it makes strategy brittle. Argentina is not merely choosing sides in a divided world—it is choosing to stand still while the ground beneath its chosen ally remains in motion.

Appendix A: Milei's International Trips, 2023–2025

Year	Country	Dates	Main Purpose / Activity	Classification
2023	United States	27 Nov	Meetings with Hasidic leaders; meeting with Bill Clinton; meetings with U.S. officials and IMF	Mixed
2024	Switzerland	15–19 Jan	World Economic Forum	Official
2024	Israel	6 Feb	Meetings with Isaac Herzog and Benjamin Netanyahu	Official
2024	Vatican City	9 Feb	Meeting with Pope Francis	Official
2024	Italy	Feb	Meetings with Sergio Mattarella and Giorgia Meloni	Official
2024	United States	23 Feb	CPAC invitation	Partisan
2024	United States	10–12 Apr	Meetings with Elon Musk; Chabad House	Elite networking
2024	United States	5–6 May	Milken Institute Conference	Partisan/Elite networking
2024	Spain	17–19 May	Vox “Europa Viva 24”	Partisan
2024	United States	28–30 May	Meetings with tech CEOs; Stanford speech	Elite networking
2024	El Salvador	1 June	Nayib Bukele inauguration	Official
2024	Italy	13–15 June	G7 Summit	Official
2024	Switzerland	15–16 June	Ukraine Peace Conference	Official
2024	Spain	21 June	Madrid regional medals	Partisan
2024	Germany	22–23 June	Hayek Medal; meeting with Olaf Scholz	Official
2024	Czech Republic	24 June	Meeting with Petr Fiala & business leaders	Official
2024	Brazil	6–7 July	CPAC Brazil	Partisan
2024	United States	12–14 July	Allen & Co. Conference	Elite networking
2024	France	25–27 July	Olympics opening; meeting with Macron	Official
2024	Paraguay	27 July	Meeting with Ambassador Guillermo Nielsen	Official
2024	Chile	8 Aug	GasAndes event	Official

Year	Country	Dates	Main Purpose / Activity	Classification
2024	United States	22–25 Sep	NYSE opening; UNGA speech; Musk meeting	Official
2024	United States	14–15 Nov	Trump’s CPAC	Partisan
2024	Brazil	18–19 Nov	G20 Summit; bilaterals with Xi Jinping, Narendra Modi, Kristalina Georgieva	Official
2025	United States	19–20 Jan	Trump’s inauguration	Partisan/Protocol
2025	Switzerland	21–23 Jan	WEF Annual Meeting	Official
2025	United States	19–22 Feb	CPAC	Partisan
2025	United States	2–3 Apr	“Lion of Liberty Award”; attempted meeting with Trump	Partisan
2025	Paraguay	9 Apr	Meeting with President Santiago Peña	Official
2025	Vatican + Italy	25 Apr	Funeral of Pope Francis; meeting with Meloni	Official
2025	Italy	6 Jun	LNG strategic agreement (YPF–ENI); Plan Italy–Argentina	Official
2025	Vatican City	7 Jun	Meeting with Pope Leo XIV	Official
2025	Spain	7–8 Jun	Meetings; Madrid Economic Forum speech	Partisan
2025	France	9 Jun	Meeting with Emmanuel Macron (UN Ocean Conference)	Official
2025	Israel	9–11 Jun	Official visit; meetings; Jewish Nobel Prize	Official
2025	United States	4–5 Sep	Business meetings; visit with Milken, Chevron VP	Mixed
2025	United States	6 Nov	Attended American Business Forum and CPAC meetings	Partisan
2025	Bolivia	8 Nov	Attended the inauguration of President Rodrigo Paz Pereira	Official
2025	Norway	10 Dec	Attended Maria Corina Machado’s Nobel Peace Prize ceremony in Oslo	Partisan

Duterte's Populist Foreign Policy as Illiberal Defiance: Consequences and Prospects

Aries A. Arugay

Introduction

Barely two months into his presidency of the Philippines, Rodrigo Duterte attended the 2016 Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) summit in Vientiane, Laos. The former mayor of Davao City had just swept the presidential election to become the first executive from outside of the Manila-based political establishment. Rather than reading a scripted speech, he launched into an impromptu tirade about colonial atrocities by the United States. Duterte went on to defend his violent war on drugs and rebut the criticisms of his equally violent purge of suspected criminals.¹¹⁶ The world was shocked by the bad manners exhibited by Duterte, especially his insult to then U.S. president Barack Obama.¹¹⁷ This was the beginning of the shift in Philippine foreign policy toward a more populist, illiberal, and revisionist posture—one that would last until Duterte's presidency ended in 2022.

This essay advances two core arguments about how Duterte's right-wing populism shaped Philippine foreign policy. First, Duterte's foreign policy was not motivated by an ideology, so much as by a *performance* anchored in symbolic defiance, personalized diplomacy, and selective norm rejection.¹¹⁸ Second, Duterte's populist revisionism ultimately collided with entrenched *structural* constraints, including the country's enduring security dependence on the United States, institutional resistance within the bureaucracy, and the democratic political succession that brought the nonpopulist President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. to power. Taken together, these constraints exposed the limits of populist foreign policy in a small and militarily vulnerable state situated on the front lines of the U.S.-China rivalry.

Since Duterte was elected, there has been widespread recognition that populism's impact goes beyond national borders. In Europe, for instance, populists tended not to touch traditional foreign policy and security issues until the 2015 refugee crisis. The wave of populism that followed was marked by a contempt for the cosmopolitan European outlook

that had long underpinned support for the European Union, liberal migration policies, and Europe's reliance on the United States for its security.¹¹⁹ Populists on both the left and right are often skeptical of multilateral institutions because they restrain state power. Venezuela's former president Hugo Chávez, for example, attempted to form alternative regional institutions in the Americas to counter U.S. hegemony.¹²⁰

The revisionist impulse inherent in populism inclines its leaders toward foreign policy adventurism, even though abrupt shifts are uncommon given the durability of national strategic interests. Populist leaders also often exhibit a high risk tolerance—especially personalist leaders in command of highly concentrated state power.¹²¹ Moreover, they often see foreign policy as a means of weakening their political opponents and consolidating power at home. They also crave international recognition, which they pursue through “megaphone diplomacy” that foregrounds their personality and charisma.¹²² The burden of managing foreign relations is bearable for the populist up to the point that strategic reality intervenes, imposing itself in ways that leave scant room for performance. Populist politics, therefore, are unable to resist the water's edge.

Populist leaders also often exhibit a high risk tolerance—especially personalist leaders in command of highly concentrated state power.

This essay proceeds by tracing the right-wing populist currents in Philippine foreign policy under Duterte through three major international issues: disputes with China in the South China Sea, the attempted abrogation of the Visiting Forces Agreement with the United States, and the country's withdrawal from the International Criminal Court (ICC). Respectively, each of these issues foregrounds one of the foundations of Philippine foreign policy that Duterte attempted to undermine: international law, the Philippines' alliance with the United States, and human rights. The essay goes on to analyze how these foreign policy stances resonated with the revisionist orientations of countries that Duterte sought inspiration from—namely China and Russia. These revisionist narratives were reinforced in the Philippines through domestic disinformation networks that learned strategies from Russia and China.¹²³ Finally, the essay highlights the implications of Duterte's populist policies under the Marcos Jr. administration and examines the prospects of their revival in the future.

Duterte's Populist Foreign Policy: Performance Over Substance

Duterte's brand of populism was not entirely new to Philippine politics. Pro-poor and redistributive populist leaders had emerged before and polarized the country. One prominent example was the celebrity-turned-president Joseph Estrada, who was impeached and ousted through the extra-constitutional Second People Power Revolution (EDSA II) revolt in 2001.¹²⁴

What distinguished Duterte as a populist was the breadth of his support—his constituency defied the traditional boundaries of political ideology, socioeconomic class, and geographical origin. He was able to successfully garner the electoral support of those who saw themselves as victims of poverty, inequality, and injustice under the country’s liberal-democratic order. The core of Duterte’s support came from conflict-ridden, underdeveloped, and politically marginalized parts of Mindanao, the country’s second-largest island. He also drew support from the urban precariat in Metro Manila and from poor rural populations in peripheral regions of the archipelagic Philippines. His base later expanded with the incorporation of other groups such as wealthier voters who prioritize law and order, as well as overseas Filipinos who long for the progress and stability of the Philippines. Duterte has a charismatic personality that induces “the people” to willingly set aside their positions on issues and replace them with his own.¹²⁵

Labeled as “Dutertismo,” this kind of populist politics displayed an emphasis on the logic of “discipline and punishment” during his presidency. Almost obsessively, Duterte made his war on illegal drugs the singular policy issue of his government. Like many other right-wing populists, he practiced “penal populism”—a style of politics that promises swift, harsh punishment of alleged criminals, especially those involved in the drug trade, in the name of protecting the “ordinary people” while sidestepping due process and human rights considerations. It frames crime as a crisis and uses tough-on-crime rhetoric and policy (including support for extrajudicial killings) to show that the leader alone can deliver order.¹²⁶

Many observers did not expect that Duterte would send a shockwave through the country’s foreign policy, but serendipitous events like the intergovernmental Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) ruling in the Philippines’ favor against China over territorial disputes in the South China Sea helped to bring foreign policy matters to the fore. In addition, the Philippines was the chair of ASEAN during its fiftieth anniversary in 2017. These events provided unique opportunities for Duterte to project his extreme and unorthodox viewpoints into international issues. However, he also created his own opportunities to articulate Philippine foreign policy in international forums and on state visits.

Duterte’s war on drugs came to define his approach to foreign policy, pushing the Philippines away from its previous emphasis on the rule of law, multilateralism, and respect for human rights. The populist firebrand divided the world into countries that supported his anti-drug campaign and those that did not. He reiterated his unconditional stance in October 2016 during his first trip to China:

You know, when I said, “I will kill you if you destroy my country,” [I meant] I will kill you if you destroy the youth of the land. By any stretch of imagination that cannot be an actionable wrong. It is an expression of self-preservation. I have every right to protect the Filipino as I am the President.¹²⁷

A month into the Duterte administration, the PCA delivered final judgments in favor of the Philippines in its long-standing dispute with China over boundaries in the South China Sea.¹²⁸ Winning the case had been a priority of the previous administration, but instead of immediately laying the groundwork for its enforcement, Duterte shelved the ruling, instead prioritizing smoothing bilateral relations with China and seeking its pledges of economic and security cooperation.¹²⁹

Duterte visited Beijing in 2016 and described his meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping as “springtime” after years of mutual discontent.¹³⁰ Both leaders pledged to continue stalled cooperative ventures and embark on new ones ranging from intelligence sharing and the combating of illegal drugs to public infrastructure, agriculture, and people-to-people exchange. This partnership reportedly entailed \$24 billion worth of deals, loans, and aid.¹³¹ In the process, Duterte praised China’s generosity, identified with its ideology, and promised to pursue a new alliance. In the same vein, he announced an economic and military “separation” from the United States. After the trip, it was reported that China’s coast guard granted Filipino fishermen access to the disputed Scarborough Shoal.

Despite Duterte’s simple and direct positions on the most divisive issues, the underlying logic of these positions was neither simple nor direct. His desire to improve the Philippines’ tumultuous relations with China was motivated by foreign policy realism defined by his acceptance of the evident power asymmetry between the two countries and China’s regional hegemony in Asia. Given that the Philippines is one of the oldest U.S. allies in the region, China possessed a strong interest in deepening relations with the Philippines. Indeed, Duterte’s anti-U.S. rhetoric communicated that his country could distance itself from its traditional ally and pursue a closer relationship with China.¹³²

Duterte’s opening to China, however, damaged his country’s relations with the United States. Duterte might have opted for a hedging strategy that situated Manila between Washington and Beijing, but he instead took an adversarial posture toward the former. Duterte’s stance was driven by his beliefs about America’s colonial sins, a bad experience with the U.S. government when he was Davao City mayor,¹³³ and the United States’ criticism of his war on drugs. Like other populists, he emphasized Philippine sovereignty, insisting that the United States had grown too comfortable with undue intrusions into the internal affairs of the Philippines. In his off-the-cuff statements, he threatened to abrogate a long-standing military alliance, invalidate an agreement called the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement, and sever diplomatic ties. These statements grabbed worldwide attention—despite his cabinet’s attempts to creatively reinterpret them after the fact to make them more benign.¹³⁴

A tipping point came in 2020 when Duterte tried to abrogate the Visiting Forces Agreement with the United States after it canceled the visa of one of his political allies. Duterte authorized the start of abrogation, but it was eventually shelved by the end of 2021. By that time, the United States had been assisting the Philippines’ response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Duterte was forced to moderate his tone with the United States because China had failed to follow through on its pledged assistance with the pandemic.¹³⁵

Finally, Duterte's disregard for human rights was epitomized during his 2018 State of the Nation address when he told human rights groups, "Your concern is human rights, mine is human lives."¹³⁶ By that time, his bloody war on drugs was in full throttle and there had been thousands of alleged extrajudicial killings of suspected drug dealers and users. This was the core of Duterte's penal populism and illiberal defiance toward norms such as human rights, which had been traditionally a key tenet of Philippine foreign policy. Even during his mayorship of Davao City, there had been much criticism of Duterte's draconian approach to security and order. He did not hesitate to exercise power to stifle any opposition to the drug war from politicians, media, civil society, and even Western countries such as the United States.¹³⁷

In 2019, the Philippines officially left the ICC. This move came after the ICC initiated investigations regarding killings linked to Duterte's anti-drug campaign. The exit significantly undermined the Philippines' normative credibility in the international community. It also hurt its ability to lobby for multilateral instruments that could promote its national interests, namely the protection of more than 10 million overseas Filipino workers. This move, however, did not hurt Duterte's popularity at home, as his war on drugs was being received positively by the majority of Filipinos.¹³⁸ In addition to successfully securitizing illegal drugs to his constituency, he was also able to securitize the threat posed by the ICC to Philippine sovereignty or more specifically to regime survival.¹³⁹

These three issues—disputes in the South China Sea, the Visiting Forces Agreement, and the Philippines' withdrawal from the ICC—represent the Philippines' main foreign policy pressure points as a minor power navigating the intensifying U.S.–China rivalry in the Indo-Pacific. Rather than relying on orthodoxy, Duterte sought to shake the normative and pragmatic foundations of Philippine foreign policy. No other president since Ferdinand Marcos in his martial law era (1972–1986) so drastically recalibrated the republic's relations with major powers. Duterte relied heavily on the convention that the Philippine president is the chief architect of foreign policy. He used foreign policy to bolster his own legitimacy—projecting the image of a politician who would not only transform the Philippines at home but also reshape how it conducts its relations abroad in order to benefit his constituency.¹⁴⁰ This employing of foreign policy to bolster domestic support was motivated largely by Duterte's resolve to defend the drug war against foreign governments who held that the violent crackdown had no place in a democratic regime. He emphasized that the Philippines must jealously guard its sovereignty and not allow undue external interference.

Transnational Linkages and Populist Networking Under Duterte

Compared with other right-wing populists like Viktor Orbán from Hungary or Jair Bolsonaro from Brazil, Duterte did not construct durable transnational populist alliances. However, he selectively leveraged personalist diplomacy, narrative convergence, and authoritarian partnerships to reinforce his domestic and international positioning. These linkages were informal, leader-centric, and opportunistic rather than institutionalized.

Populist foreign policy is often sustained through transnational linkages that facilitate ideological diffusion, strategic coordination, and symbolic legitimation. These linkages may include leader-centric personalist networks, party-to-party cooperation, shared narratives, movement infrastructures, and opportunistic alignment with authoritarian or revisionist powers. Under Duterte, such linkages were uneven and selective, reflecting the personalized and opportunistic nature of his foreign policy.

Leader-Centric and Personalist Networks

Duterte made every effort to deepen ties and forge transnational linkages with two great powers: China and Russia. Under his leadership, the Philippines became party to some of the multilateral entities established by China and adopted the Russian position on many contentious global issues. These linkages in the defense and security spheres were unprecedented given the country's historic alliance with the United States. Duterte's transnational engagements were overwhelmingly leader-centric rather than institutionalized. He cultivated personal rapport with illiberal leaders such as Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin, often framing these relationships in explicitly personal rather than ideological terms. He publicly referred to Putin as his "hero" and expressed admiration for Xi's strongman leadership style, while also echoing their illiberal defiance of the U.S.-led international order.¹⁴¹ He even attempted to portray himself, Putin, and Xi as kindred figures when he said:

I've realigned myself in your ideological flow and maybe I will also go to Russia to talk to [President Vladimir] Putin and tell him that there are three of us against the world—China, Philippines, and Russia. It's the only way.¹⁴²

In addition to his public rhetoric, Duterte instructed the Philippine security sector to work more closely with Russian counterparts to further lock in cooperation with the revisionist great power. However, the more liberal, Western-oriented military did not immediately and fully comply with the directive of its commander-in-chief given that it retains, to this day, existing security cooperation with the country's more traditional allies like the United States, Japan, and Australia. Moreover, while the Philippine government initially procured sixteen Russian helicopters worth \$217 million in 2021, the purchase was canceled by the Marcos Jr. administration due to fears of U.S. sanctions.¹⁴³ Duterte's measures did not endure because the motivation for them—his anti-Western sentiment—was not embedded in party-based networks or institutionalized within the bureaucracy. This mirrors the personalization of foreign policy in other populist regimes where diplomacy is an extension of the executive's personality rather than a reflection of codified strategy.¹⁴⁴

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Party-to-Party Networks and Parliamentary Alliances

Unlike many European populist movements that actively pursue transnational party alliances, Duterte's own political alliance and party, Partido ng Demokratiko Pilipino-Laban (PDP-Laban), did not establish strong bonds with other right-wing populist parties. While PDP-Laban formally established party-to-party links with the Chinese Communist Party, the relationship did not result in concrete alignment or a sustained partnership that went beyond a few public events.¹⁴⁵ It was also difficult for Filipino political elites to unlearn their democratic ideologies and replace them with communist ones given the historical distaste of politicians who were socialized under U.S. colonial rule. Moreover, the absence of a coherent ideological party infrastructure in the Philippines limited the emergence of formal party-to-party cooperation. There was also very little opportunity to build alliances with other right-wing populist parties in Europe or Latin America since Duterte's political coalition was primarily domestic, not ideologically transnational.

Shared Narratives and Political Messaging

Narrative convergence represented a more salient form of linkage. Duterte's rhetoric echoed core themes common to right-wing populist discourse globally, including anti-elite sentiment, hostility toward Western liberal norms, skepticism of human rights regimes, and contempt for multilateral institutions. His framing of sovereignty, noninterference, and resistance to Western hypocrisy closely mirrored narratives promoted by Beijing and Moscow. Duterte forcibly withdrew the Philippines from the Rome Statute, the treaty that established the ICC, in 2019 amid his systematic crackdown on illegal drugs. Prior to its exit from the ICC, the country had been known as one of the most consistent upholders of human rights and the rule of law.

Transnational Disinformation Networks and Shared Agendas

The linkages between Philippine and Russian actors were established through disinformation and influence operations that came to the fore during Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Duterte's visit to Moscow in 2017 included a pledged partnership of "information dissemination" between the communication offices of both governments. When Russia mobilized its forces in Ukraine in February 2022, Duterte's initial position was neutrality. This was a flagrant violation of the interstate principles that the Philippines had historically defended vigorously.¹⁴⁶ After the fact, it became clear that pro-Duterte journalists were relying extensively on the writings of pro-Russian commentators in their coverage of Philippine foreign policy issues.¹⁴⁷

These disinformation-based linkages aimed to shape public perceptions of the Philippines' own security challenges—particularly its ongoing disputes with China in the South China Sea. This boded well for Duterte's desire to accommodate Beijing. With the help of China's own disinformation machinery, this narrative helped justify Duterte's claim that the country could not be assertive with China because the Philippines would not win in a war against China. Threats of a possible China invasion were propagated in social media posts that were

diffused by domestic influencers and alternative media organizations in the Philippines—just as Russia had done to Ukraine.¹⁴⁸ In this way, Duterte relied on the Russia-Ukraine war to justify his defeatist foreign policy position.

Duterte's accommodating approach to China in the South China Sea also played a large role in his performative foreign policy. As he decried Western powers as encroaching on the Philippines' sovereignty, he simultaneously remained accommodationist and defeatist in his rhetoric with respect to China's aggression. His refusal to enforce the 2016 arbitration ruling handed down by the PCA did not help the cause of other small littoral states in the region.

However, Duterte had to invoke the ruling in several speeches in the last few years of his presidential term, to the consternation of China—the populist performance eventually had to give way to strategic realities.¹⁴⁹ In addition, Duterte acknowledged the Joe Biden administration's swift provision of vaccines during the COVID-19 pandemic, something that China originally pledged but failed to deliver.¹⁵⁰

During his presidency, Duterte established unprecedented ties with China. These linkages extended beyond just the Philippine government to include many nonstate actors such as business leaders, academic institutions, and civil society organizations. Under his watch, China became an alternative transnational partner of Philippine government institutions. According to scholars, this connection remained influential even after the presidential transition in 2022. Dubbed “United Front” work, China has spread narratives that emphasize the inevitability of Chinese hegemony in Asia, cast the United States as an unreliable security partner, and portray the Philippines as naive for believing that the United States or other Western countries would come to its aid in the event of a Chinese attack.¹⁵¹

Conclusion and Prospects

The case of the Philippines under Duterte demonstrates that a right-wing populist capture of foreign policy can still be influenced by a country's domestic and external pressures. Duterte's presidency demonstrated that illiberal foreign policy can easily become performative, but it only becomes coherent and sustainable when it is anchored in durable domestic institutions and international partnerships. The lack of an entrenched ideology prevented Duterte from fully recalibrating Philippine foreign policy toward illiberal defiance. Instead, the country merely experienced a populist moment punctuated by his performative politics.

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Under the current Marcos Jr. administration, Philippine foreign policy has shifted back to its more conventional posture that emphasizes multilateralism, international law, and human rights—so much so that it cooperated with the ICC's efforts to arrest Duterte for crimes

against humanity. It also has sought to expose the Chinese government's aggressive behavior in the South China Sea and has deepened partnerships with defenders of the rules-based international order. While this indicates something of a “de-Dutertefication” of Philippine foreign policy, a populist turn could still return for three reasons.

First, the current frontrunner to succeed Marcos Jr. as president is none other than Rodrigo Duterte's daughter, Sara Duterte.¹⁵² She shares her father's worldview and populist orientation, is highly skeptical of the United States, and maintains close ties to China. She has never publicly criticized China's incursions in the South China Sea and has instead urged the Philippine government to pursue an “independent” foreign policy from the United States.¹⁵³ Rodrigo Duterte's presidency illustrated how populist leaders can sustain foreign policy inconsistency without severe domestic political costs; he could simultaneously denounce U.S. infringement of Philippine sovereignty while tolerating Chinese maritime encroachments. This revealed a core feature of populist foreign policy: rhetorical flexibility combined with selective outrage. This is a script that Sara Duterte and her political allies may also use.

Second, there are widespread Chinese influence operations that disseminate foreign policy disinformation in the Philippines. This could catalyze the co-opting of political elites, media organizations, academic institutions, and other social actors in the Philippines—groups that may become constituencies for a renewed populist foreign policy. The likelihood of this scenario depends on how successful the current government is in institutionalizing its foreign policies. In the Philippines, Duterte-era discourse emphasizing sovereignty, anti-Western skepticism, and strongman diplomacy continues to circulate and may soon see a resurgence.¹⁵⁴

Finally, there will always be some degree of support for populism in the Philippines given persistent democratic deficits. Therefore, reforms that improve democratic governance and the rule of law can serve to undermine the appetite for populism. It must show that it can deliver results without resorting to populist appeals. The Philippines also has a unique opportunity to make good on its commitment to the rules-based order as it chairs ASEAN in 2026 and may become a nonpermanent member of the UN Security Council in 2027.

The country's ability to shape regional and even global dynamics will rest on the political tone and consistency of its foreign policy. However, as long as democratic deficits persist, Philippine foreign policy will continue to oscillate between institutional orthodoxy and populist disruption.

The French Far Right's Foreign Policy: Big Ambitions, Uncertain Direction

Catherine Fieschi

Introduction

France occupies a singular position in Europe when it comes to right-wing populist and far-right politics. The country is home to one of the oldest and most electorally successful far-right and populist traditions in Western Europe—from its pre–Second World War thinkers such as Charles Maurras and groups such as Action Française to the tax revolt movement of Pierre Poujade in the 1950s and now the political party known as the Rassemblement National (National Rally)—yet no right-wing populist or far-right party has captured the presidency since the Second World War. At the same time, in France of all European countries, such a takeover would have the most immediate and consequential foreign policy effects, given the extraordinary concentration of diplomatic and military authority vested in the French presidency itself.

The case of the National Rally offers a useful window into the intersection of populism, foreign policy, and strong presidentialism. Specifically, it highlights the difficulties populist leaders encounter in building alliances, both globally and within Europe, and helps explain why populists may end up hedging on key foreign policy positions. The possibility of a Marine Le Pen or Jordan Bardella presidency, moreover, underscores a broader risk: that right-wing populism in middle powers could erode the very international order that has enabled middle powers to attain and sustain their influence.

The differences between the National Rally's two leaders—Marine Le Pen and Jordan Bardella—are also emblematic of a broader divide among right-wing populists in Europe: On the one side, there are those who aim to reshape Europe from within by steering EU institutions in a conservative-national direction. Hungary's ousted Viktor Orbán and Italy's Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni loosely embody this side, which in France is represented by Jordan Bardella. On the other side, there are those who reject the EU's supranational constraints altogether. Matteo Salvini, Italy's deputy prime minister, represents the latter, which in France is closer to Le Pen. What makes France distinctive is that this divide exists

within a single party and between its two potential presidential candidates for 2027—with Le Pen retaining the loyalty of much of the party’s cadre, but with Bardella, despite internal resistance, also commanding broad electoral support.¹⁵⁵

In France, the question of who will campaign for the presidency will therefore be critical.¹⁵⁶ Le Pen—and her “brand”—remains the party’s strongest electoral asset and would likely have a better chance of winning a presidential election than Bardella. Yet her instincts remain more confrontational toward Europe and multilateral institutions. By contrast, while Bardella is more market-friendly and potentially less disruptive internationally, he remains—despite his popularity with voters—untested in the uniquely demanding environment of French presidential campaigning.

Institutions First: Why the Presidency Determines Everything

The French Fifth Republic concentrates power in the presidency to an extent rarely matched in other European democracies. This is especially true in foreign policy. From Charles de Gaulle onward, French presidents have personally shaped the country’s strategic doctrine and diplomatic posture. Nuclear policy, relations with NATO, Middle East policy, and European integration have all been presidential domains. Parliamentary opposition exerts limited influence over these decisions, even in the face of considerable polarization and fragmentation. To date, the National Rally’s foreign policy positions have been fluid and lacked impact on actual policy, but France’s strong presidency means that a National Rally president would amount to a radical shift.

The institutional strength of the presidency produces a paradoxical situation for the National Rally: On the one hand, despite being the largest single party in the National Assembly in recent years, the National Rally has had minimal direct impact on foreign policy. On the other hand, should the National Rally capture the presidency, the impact would be immediate and profound. French foreign policy would effectively pivot in line with the populist president’s preferences.

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The Fifth Republic’s constitution also suits populist politics well: Populism thrives on the idea of a direct relationship between a leader and “the people,” bypassing intermediary institutions. French presidential elections reinforce precisely this relationship through highly personalized campaigns and direct popular elections. Given the absence of proportional representation in parliamentary elections, a majority in the National Assembly reinforces the president’s power. A populist president could credibly claim an exceptional mandate—especially in the domain of foreign policy.¹⁵⁷ The implications are stark.

Ideological Evolution: From Immigration Politics to Global Positioning

Historically, foreign policy played little role in French far-right and populist mobilization, a pattern mirrored across much of Europe. The founder of the National Rally and the far right's previous leader, Jean-Marie Le Pen, focused almost exclusively on immigration, national identity, and law and order issues. Foreign policy themes were largely filtered through the lens of decolonization, particularly France's domestically controversial withdrawal from Algeria (which Le Pen himself opposed¹⁵⁸) and hostility to immigration from former colonies.¹⁵⁹

In the first decade of this century, globalization altered this landscape. The National Rally *intensified* its attacks on immigration and the large Islamic presence in France, both of which it systematically linked to terrorism. This focus eventually allowed for a reversal of the right's stance on Israel and Jewish communities more broadly: Whereas the National Rally's predecessor, the old Front National, was overtly antisemitic,¹⁶⁰ from 2011 onward Marine Le Pen repositioned the party as a defender of Jewish communities against Islamist extremism—at first gradually, and then more decisively from 2023 onward. This shift allowed the National Rally simultaneously to distance itself from its own past while intensifying its anti-Islam and anti-immigrant rhetoric. In essence, it has swapped a historical enemy for a more contemporary one.

After the Hamas attacks of October 7, 2023 (and the subsequent rise in antisemitic incidents in Europe), National Rally figures publicly condemned Hamas, framed the conflict as part of a broader struggle against Islamism, and argued that Jewish communities were targeted by the same “extremist ideologies” and “woke agenda” the party claimed to oppose domestically.¹⁶¹ In this context, Le Pen's controversial presence at a large march in Paris against antisemitism in November 2023 was symbolically significant, further entrenching this realignment.¹⁶²

When the Russian invasion of Ukraine began, the party framed sanctions against Russia and military aid to Ukraine as harmful to ordinary French voters—citing increased energy prices and the risk of retaliation. This reflected a consistent populist pattern: reliance on narratives of persecution and victimhood of “ordinary people.” Here and in other instances, National Rally leaders downplayed the relevance of issues of international order that other parties emphasized, portraying them as irrelevant to the nation and focusing exclusively on the domestic consequences of global developments.

Over time, and in line with the dynamics of globalization (specifically since the terrorist attacks in Paris in 2015¹⁶³), the boundary between foreign and domestic issues has blurred. External conflicts—in the Middle East, where conflicts have threatened increased migration flows or terrorist retaliation, and in Ukraine, where Russia's invasion has created mass flight—have increasingly been used to reinforce existing National Rally claims that the far left is pro-migrant, Islamists are plotting against France, and elites are privileging multilateral commitments or abstract human rights norms over the interests of the French people.¹⁶⁴

The National Rally has seized upon foreign policy issues that map onto an already polarized electorate—especially those issues that divide the left (wedge issues).¹⁶⁵ For instance, it has used the war in Ukraine to stoke tensions among center-left actors who support Ukraine in the name of sovereignty and far-left actors who view Russia as a counterweight to Western capitalism.¹⁶⁶ Similarly, it has sought to use the Israel-Hamas war to drive a wedge into a French left torn between combating antisemitism and expressing solidarity with Palestinians.

Style Versus Substance: The National Rally's Populist Foreign Policy Dilemma

While these global shifts and the right's growing willingness to address foreign policy issues have served the National Rally well in terms of mobilizing and broadening its electoral appeal, they also create new constraints. Engaging seriously with foreign policy requires building alliances, sustaining relationships, and navigating competing national interests. This creates a core dilemma for the National Rally (and other nationalist parties). While populists are drawn to the political style and communication of other major populists such as U.S. President Donald Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin, they must distance themselves when the behavior of such strongmen either undermines their own claims to national sovereignty or risks alienating segments of their electorate.

The National Rally's relations with the United States and Russia illustrate this core foreign policy dilemma for the party. Donald Trump embodies political values that resonate with the National Rally's base, including (what they see as) a willingness to upend the status quo in defense of national interests, strongman tactics, disregard for liberal norms, and anti-intellectualism. Although Trump remains deeply unpopular in France overall—with favorability ratings regularly below 20 percent—his approval among National Rally voters often exceeds 40 percent.¹⁶⁷ Trump is popular among far-right voters even though French nationalists across the political spectrum have long been suspicious of the United States and supported an independent foreign policy—positions that shape the National Rally's thinking and messaging.

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At the same time, however, Trump's policies and rhetoric that challenge European sovereignty, disrupt trade, and undermine economic stability are threatening the economic and national interests of the voters the National Rally seeks to represent. Trump's hostility toward Europe and willingness to impose tariffs are especially problematic for a party that seeks to protect French purchasing power and industry.

National Rally figures have thus often publicly distanced themselves from Trump and the broader MAGA ecosystem—such as Le Pen’s condemnation of the Venezuela operation, Bardella’s hasty withdrawal from the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in Budapest following Steve Bannon’s apparent Nazi salute, and more recently Le Pen’s condemnation of the Iran war, calling it a mistake and Trump’s goals erratic.¹⁶⁸ Questions remain, however, as to whether this distancing is substantive or merely a cosmetic move aimed at reassuring French voters.

The party’s relationship with Putin presents a similar tension. Under Le Pen’s leadership, the party’s ties with Moscow became noticeably closer, as Putin’s image as a defender of national sovereignty resonated strongly with National Rally narratives. These links culminated in 2014, when the party furtively obtained a 9 million euro (\$10.5 million) loan from the Moscow-linked First Czech-Russian Bank.¹⁶⁹ Le Pen also met Putin in the Kremlin during the 2017 presidential campaign, further highlighting the relationship.¹⁷⁰

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, however, fundamentally altered the political environment in France: Public opinion turned sharply against Moscow, making overt sympathy for the Kremlin politically costly—even for the far right. Since then, the National Rally has been caught in the dilemma of supporting Putin the strongman while avoiding the political costs of that support. It has sought to moderate its position and attenuate ties, condemning aspects of Russian aggression while stopping short of full-throated opposition to Moscow. National Rally representatives have repeatedly voted against or abstained from measures supporting Ukraine—military assistance packages to Ukraine and expanded sanctions on Russia, for example—both in the European Parliament and the French National Assembly, while never publicly agreeing with Putin.

Europe, Leadership, and the Bardella–Le Pen Divide

The National Rally’s contentious relationship with the European Union remains the cornerstone of its foreign policy thinking—and the issue where internal party divisions, and the evolving preferences of its voters, are most clearly exposed. It remains Euroskeptic and seeks to normalize Euroskepticism. Yet the party has gradually moved away from advocating withdrawal from the eurozone or the EU à la Brexit, recognizing that the prospect of economic disruption alarmed voters and damaged Le Pen’s credibility in the 2017 presidential campaign. This shift has also revealed an emerging divide within the party, reflected in the differing positions of its traditional leader, Marine Le Pen, and its current leader and potential presidential candidate Jordan Bardella. The two can be situated along a continuum: At one end there is a strongly moral form of populism, with a strong ideological core—represented by Le Pen. At Bardella’s end, there is a thin-centered form of populism (as defined by Cas Mudde¹⁷¹) that operates more as a political style and, in Bardella’s case, is layered onto a traditional right-wing conservative worldview. Were Le Pen to win, the moral core would likely dominate her foreign policy stance, producing a more radical break from current policy. By contrast, if Bardella were to run and win, the rupture would likely be less stark.

Le Pen: Confrontational Sovereignism

Le Pen remains instinctively sovereigntist. Her family heritage and her political trajectory were shaped in opposition to European integration, and she continues to view EU institutions as unacceptable constraints on French sovereignty. At the core of National Rally policy lies the restoration of what it calls the primacy of national sovereignty over European law.¹⁷²

The party's program (still a direct reflection of Le Pen's views and priorities) is scant on details, but advances a clear rationale for this position: asserting the superiority of French law over EU law in select areas, restoring national border controls, restricting immigration independently of Schengen rules, prioritizing French citizens in access to welfare and employment (called "national preference"), and renegotiating EU budgetary and regulatory constraints deemed harmful to the domestic economy.¹⁷³

For Le Pen, the EU may be a useful channel but, if given a choice, she would rather undermine it than reform it from within—unlike, for example, her Italian alter ego, Meloni. Nor does she share Orbán's vision of a Christian Europe. Le Pen's primary commitment is to France, not to Europe. For her, references to "European civilization" serve largely as a rhetorical device to oppose Islam, rather than a basis for a Europe-wide project of civilizational renewal. The focus remains national—on what *France* can extract from the EU without being constrained by it. In many respects, Le Pen's fraudulent use of EU parliamentary funds to fund her own national party is one of the clearest illustrations of her true positioning.¹⁷⁴

Were she to become president, confrontation with Brussels would likely intensify. Even absent formal withdrawal from the EU, France under Le Pen would probably find itself in repeated conflict with EU rules and institutions,¹⁷⁵ producing a de facto weakening of France's leadership role in Europe—in an attempt to strengthen its own voice on the international stage.

Even absent formal withdrawal from the EU, France under Le Pen would probably find itself in repeated conflict with EU rules and institutions.

Le Pen's brand of populism could produce, at least initially, a distinctly sovereigntist foreign policy—rooted in her clear "neither left nor right" stance. Indeed, for all her efforts to renovate the party's image, Le Pen remains very much an heir to her father Jean-Marie Le Pen, whose populism centered on a fundamental divide between the people and the establishment, with the partisan concepts of left and right treated as, at best, superficial distinctions and, at worst, a manipulative fiction created by political elites to fragment the people. In this view, the people are the only source of the legitimacy of the nation, embodied in the French case by the president. This brand of populism, however misguided, possesses a strong moral core in which the people are conceived as a morally pure entity—a distillation of national virtues.¹⁷⁶

This version of populism rejects alliances and resists bargaining and compromise. As a result, it may produce an erratic foreign policy where several key beliefs—skepticism of multilateral organizations that supposedly constrain national sovereignty (notably the EU and NATO), an exclusionary conception of citizenship, “national preference” policies for jobs and benefits, and a deep suspicion of free trade—collide with an attraction toward strongmen like Putin, whose agendas may conflict with the National Rally’s own claims to sovereignty and the interests of a middle power like France.

One paradox is that Marine Le Pen’s version of populism produces a striking vagueness about her policy aims. To this day, despite the size of the National Rally’s electoral base and personnel, it remains difficult—even off the record—to get a straight answer from any National Rally member of parliament, member of the European Parliament, or party cadre aligned with Le Pen on foreign policy. The National Rally may have mainstreamed many of its positions, but in practice—especially in foreign policy—it continues to operate with a high degree of opacity, revealing little and largely eliding a clearly articulated foreign policy program. Le Pen has not revealed how far she would go in reshaping France’s relationship with multilateral institutions like NATO or the UN, nor the extent to which she would be willing to disrupt the relationship with the EU (having essentially lost the 2017 election after committing to leaving the eurozone). This produces a form of tactical ambiguity that is characteristic of a populist opposition party with potentially radical foreign policy ideas.

Bardella: Market-Friendly Nationalism and European Pragmatism

By contrast, Bardella is in little need of populism’s fig leaf of ambiguity: His ideological commitments are comparatively clear and are shared by a significant portion of the mainstream conservative right. Bardella shares Le Pen’s cultural conservatism, but without its deep Euroskepticism. He is comfortable courting business interests and is acutely aware that French economic prosperity depends heavily on EU market integration. In contrast to Le Pen’s hostility toward Europe, his messaging increasingly links “France and Europe.”¹⁷⁷

In practice, this means that, much as Bardella is willing to seek a broad alliance between the far- and center-right at the national level, he is also comfortable doing so at the European level. This makes him a clear illustration of what some scholars term populism’s thin-centeredness—that is, a weak ideological core that can attach itself to established ideologies on the right or the left.¹⁷⁸ A good illustration is Bardella’s recent meeting with the German ambassador in Paris, as well as the interview he granted to the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* in which he positions himself as close to German Chancellor Friedrich Merz’s (and the European People’s Party’s) policy lines. Courting Germany’s political elite signals his wish to distance himself from Merz’s foe, the Alternative for Germany (AfD), and his apparent willingness to pursue a more traditional right-wing—rather than far right—agenda.¹⁷⁹ However, it is worth noting that the content of the interview suggests that Bardella is either unaware of the impact his milder policies would have or is simply disingenuous.

A Bardella presidency would therefore likely seek to leverage EU institutions when useful—especially on migration and trade—while avoiding moves that could destabilize markets or harm business. He has actively courted business leaders and engaged with employer organizations, reassuring investors about his commitment to fiscal discipline.¹⁸⁰ He has also distanced himself from earlier National Rally proposals perceived as economically destabilizing, including withdrawal from the eurozone, and business media have increasingly reported a gradual normalization of his image among corporate elites.¹⁸¹ Bardella's positioning is in this way similar to that of Italy's Meloni, who has reassured the business community through relatively moderate economic policies while maintaining conservative cultural politics.¹⁸²

Transnational Linkages

Right-wing populist successes across the globe, particularly in advanced democracies, have created the impression of an unstoppable wave that could enable greater cooperation and policy convergence across like-minded parties in Europe. The added dimension of heightened U.S. rhetorical and campaign support¹⁸³ for European populists under the second Trump administration further suggested that these actors might seek closer ties with their MAGA counterparts. Some European populist leaders have done so—most conspicuously Meloni, who has attempted to balance relations between the EU and Washington, as well as Orbán in Hungary and Robert Fico in Slovakia. More recently, however, U.S. support has proven to be a double-edged sword, prompting some right-wing populists to distance themselves from Trump. Notably, Orbán was defeated in Hungary despite backing from Trump and Vice President JD Vance. The National Rally has thus maintained more limited ties to MAGA, and its international linkages in general remain weaker than some other European parties—arguably, now, to its advantage.

Party-to-Party and Parliamentary Alliances

For years, right-wing populist party groupings within the European Parliament appeared prone to fail, often imploding under the weight of *internal* accusations of fascism or corruption. However, over the past two or three parliamentary terms (since roughly 2014), these groupings have gained prominence as their representation has grown, accounting for approximately 27 percent of seats.¹⁸⁴ With increased numbers, the incentives for cooperation have become clearer: access to influential committee positions and the ability to form credible, if largely tactical, alliances with the center-right on issues such as immigration and opposition to the European Green Deal. As a result, although the populist right remains divided across multiple parliamentary groupings, hostility among the parties has diminished.

The National Rally has helped strengthen cooperation: It is one of the largest and most influential contingents of members of the European Parliament and has played a key role in fostering greater cooperation on the right. Bardella is the chair of the parliament's

third-largest party group—the Patriots for Europe, which brings together pro-Russia parties such as the National Rally, the Freedom Party of Austria, Hungary’s Fidesz, and Italy’s League for Salvini Premier—and has become a significant actor in the parliament.

But these are developments about which the National Rally is extremely cautious. Since 2011, the party has endeavored to shed its antisemitism and racism; Marine Le Pen has expended most of her energy on mainstreaming her party’s appeal. This has de facto led the National Rally to be very picky about alliances, hence the rejection of joining a group that contained the AfD, a party viewed as far too radical and unsavory. And this is true both of Le Pen and Bardella. They have above all sought to protect their brand. This caution, however, has been balanced by seeking to leverage their party’s position inside the European Parliament. The result has been a rather half-hearted set of alliances.

This is true both of Le Pen and Bardella.

They have above all sought to protect their brand.

As a result, the tensions are at least as revealing as the alliances. The National Rally’s relationship with Meloni’s Fratelli d’Italia has been strained since 2022, when Meloni refused to endorse Le Pen’s presidential bid—two competing models of national conservatism jostling for the same European leadership space. With British parliamentary representative Nigel Farage, the story is almost comical: After years of mutual admiration, Farage publicly dismissed the National Rally’s economic agenda as a “disaster” for France in 2024,¹⁸⁵ but Bardella was back in a room with him by December 2025, talking about a “patriotic alliance.”¹⁸⁶ In a word, these are rather tactical—thus often short-lived—maneuvers rather than deep ideological partnerships.

Shared Narratives and Political Messaging

Shared rhetoric on migration, terrorism, insecurity, the EU, and other issues constitutes the most visible form of transnational linkage among European far-right populist parties. The National Rally has drawn on a well-established French right-wing intellectual ecosystem, including New Right thinkers and concepts such as differential racism, to develop and disseminate its ideology.¹⁸⁷ This ecosystem has served as a reservoir of ideas, providing the party with the intellectual scaffolding to frame, for example, immigration as a threat to European civilization, to challenge EU bureaucratic regulations, and to frame climate policy as an elite agenda.¹⁸⁸ The National Rally’s early entry into the European Parliament in 1984 has meanwhile allowed it to define the core discursive repertoire of the European far right and to play a foundational role in shaping the broader far-right agenda—especially on immigration, insecurity, and law and order.

Leader-Centric, Personalist Networks

Personal relationships among populist leaders frequently substitute for institutional cooperation, reflecting a broader distrust of formal institutions. Marine Le Pen's closest and most durable international relationships are within the European far and populist right, where party-to-party and leader-level cooperation has gradually stabilized over the past decade. Among individual leaders, Le Pen's most consistent partnership has been with Italian Deputy Prime Minister Matteo Salvini. Le Pen's relationship with Salvini highlights her distance from Meloni, who is in a less Euroskeptic grouping. Salvini and Le Pen have repeatedly appeared together at high-profile rallies and alliance-building events—notably during the 2019 European election campaign, when they presented themselves as leading figures of a nationalist bloc seeking to reshape EU politics. And for Le Pen, relationships with other figures such as Geert Wilders in the Netherlands are part of the same consolidation aimed at building parliamentary leverage and signaling ideological affinity.

Personal relationships among populist leaders frequently substitute for institutional cooperation.

On the other hand, Le Pen has maintained greater distance from Germany's AfD and from more openly extremist currents within the European far right. She is acutely aware that association with such actors, and their explicitly pro-Nazi references, would undermine her long-running strategy of political normalization in France.

Transnational Movements

Outside Europe, the National Rally's personal linkages with other right-wing populists are even weaker. While Brazil's former president Jair Bolsonaro has publicly expressed sympathy toward Le Pen, there is no evidence of direct meetings between them, and Le Pen has consistently maintained her distance. Overall, Le Pen's strongest and most functional international relationships are in Europe, while connections further afield (like, for instance, with Trump) tend to be opportunistic, symbolic, and carefully managed to avoid domestic backlash.

Bardella's international positioning reflects his attempt to project a more modern and less ideologically confrontational version of the National Rally. He has placed himself at the center of efforts to build durable far-right parliamentary influence in Brussels through the Patriots for Europe, which he chairs. Unlike Le Pen, and perhaps because of his more recent emergence in Brussels, his closest relationships are institutional rather than personal. At the same time, Bardella appears even keener than Le Pen to avoid the overtly pro-Russia or pro-Trump associations that once characterized parts of the National Rally's international posture, instead preferring partnerships that reinforce the party's image as a legitimate governing force rather than a protest movement.

Neither Le Pen nor Bardella, nor the National Rally more generally, is deeply embedded in the U.S.-led CPAC international circuit or in transnational conservative think tank ecosystems.

The most significant extra-European connection runs through former Trump aide Steve Bannon, who spent years attempting to position the National Rally as the anchor of a global populist international program. His “movement,” headquartered in Brussels, was an explicit attempt to stitch together a transnational network of nationalist right-wing parties capable of resisting what he called “the party of Davos.”¹⁸⁹ The National Rally was a natural centerpiece: large, electorally credible, and led by someone who had already done more than anyone in Europe to demonstrate that the far right could make a serious bid for power.

But this connection has always been as much a liability as an asset for the National Rally, and the party knows it. The optics became painfully clear in February 2025, when Bardella traveled to Washington, DC, for CPAC only to cancel his speech and fly home after Bannon performed what was widely described as a Nazi salute from the stage.

One connection that deserves more analytical attention than it typically receives is the connection with Likud, the leading party in Israel’s governing coalition. In February 2025, at a Make Europe Great Again rally in Madrid organized by Patriots for Europe, Likud was announced as the first observer member of the movement’s associated organization. This was a significant geopolitical realignment that reflected the new far right’s privileging of Islamophobia as its primary civilizational antagonism, which also creates surprising room for alignment with the Israeli nationalist right. The enemy of my enemy, refracted through the lens of the “clash of civilizations” framework, makes for strange bedfellows.

The National Rally is embedded in a genuinely transnational far-right ecosystem—but that ecosystem functions more like a contagion than an organized conspiracy.

What the evidence suggests, taken together, is that the National Rally is embedded in a genuinely transnational far-right *ecosystem*—but that ecosystem functions more like a contagion than an organized conspiracy. The same themes, the same rhetorical moves, and the same institutional templates circulate from one country to another through a diffuse network of conferences, platforms, and personalities. The National Rally benefits from this climate without controlling it—and frequently prefers to keep the more embarrassing parts of the network at arm’s length, precisely because its strategic priority remains the construction of domestic governmental credibility. As a result, the National Rally’s international alliances are built primarily in European parliamentary arenas rather than through formal policy or intellectual networks, and it remains one of the European parties with the least developed transnational networks.

Conclusion: Limits to Cooperation but Convergence on Dealignment

France's far-right and right-wing populist forces, including movements beyond the National Rally, are regularly portrayed as an unstoppable force poised to reshape the country's politics and, by extension, Europe's strategic direction.¹⁹⁰ However, closer scrutiny reveals a more complex and unstable picture.

Distrust in institutions, coupled with Le Pen's skepticism toward cooperation and her tendency to view foreign powers as potential adversaries, limits the National Rally's capacity to elaborate—let alone fully develop—a coherent long-term foreign policy. The party's electoral strength, coupled with its internal fragility at a crucial political juncture, contributes to foreign policy vagueness. This is reinforced by internal differences. As a result, the National Rally is frequently perceived in French political debate as lacking foreign policy fluency—a perception that, given Europe's current security environment, may prove electorally consequential.

The National Rally's foreign policy record ultimately reveals a party that has never had a coherent international vision. From Jean-Marie Le Pen's near-total indifference to anything beyond immigration and national identity, to Marine Le Pen's opportunistic flirtations with Putin and her carefully calibrated distances from Trump, and Bardella's thin-centered pragmatism dressed up as European realism, foreign policy has functioned less as a domain of strategic thinking than as a reservoir of wedge issues—a toolkit for dividing opponents and mobilizing voters, deployed and abandoned when politically expedient, and in particular in the run-up to major elections. The National Rally has used Ukraine to fracture the left, the Israel-Hamas war to reclaim a republican credential, and Russia to signal antiestablishment credentials to a base suspicious of Western elites. What it has conspicuously never done is think seriously about what France *is* in the world: a nuclear power, a permanent member of the UN Security Council, a pillar of European defense, and the anchor of whatever autonomous European strategic capacity exists or might yet exist.

**To govern France is to govern not just a nation-state
but a European power of the first order.**

To govern France is to govern not just a nation-state but a European power of the first order—one whose credibility, commitments, and capacity for strategic initiative underpin the security architecture of an entire continent. The party has spent decades treating foreign policy as electoral positioning, with genuinely opaque positions on NATO, nuclear deterrence, alliances, and multilateral burden-sharing—to say nothing of how it oscillates on Russia out of reputation management. Such a party arriving in the Élysée would represent a complete disappearance of foreign policy direction.

In a European security environment already strained to the point of fracture, with American reliability in question and Russia's war of attrition ongoing, a French presidency that treats foreign policy with such simple political logic would bring consequences far beyond France's borders, and far beyond whatever electoral cycle produced it.

The case of the National Rally illustrates a broader takeaway about contemporary right-wing populism: These parties are hardly singing from the same hymn sheet. While they share narratives about sovereignty, migration, and elite betrayal, their national interests often diverge sharply. So, too, do their foreign policy priorities. They may jointly erode liberal international norms, but they rarely cohere around a shared alternative order. Their ideological impact—for instance, in widening the Overton window on migration—or their stylistic impact in redefining acceptable behavior may matter more, however fleetingly, than any concrete policy alignment.

Indeed, the dynamic is often one of dealignment rather than alignment. In other words, right-wing populists share enough ideological overlap—skepticism toward multilateral institutions, rejection of international rules and norms, and (in Le Pen's case) hostility to the EU—to undermine existing forms of cooperation. But they lack sufficient shared priorities to build a durable alternative. In this sense, right-wing populism in middle powers is internally contradictory: It undermines the very international order that has enabled these states to attain—and preserve—their middle-power status.

Orbán, Fidesz, and Hungary's Populist Foreign Policy

Zsuzsanna Végh

Introduction

Over the past decade and a half, Hungary has become one of the most instructive cases of how right-wing populism can transform not only a country's domestic politics but also its place in the international system. Under the long rule of former prime minister Viktor Orbán and the Fidesz–Hungarian Civic Alliance party (Fidesz) between 2010 and 2026, the country has moved from a postcommunist democratization success story and committed member of the Euro-Atlantic community to an electoral autocracy with deepening ties to autocratic regimes and far-right allies across Europe and beyond.

Hungary's case is notable not only for the depth and speed of this transformation but also for the deliberate strategy with which Fidesz has pursued it. As a middle power—a state with meaningful regional influence and selective global reach, but without the material resources or structural weight of great powers—Hungary possesses limited conventional diplomatic leverage. Yet under Orbán, the country has capitalized on key characteristics of right-wing populism in its foreign policy, using conflict, personal ties, political alliance-building, and the cultivation of transnational networks to punch well above its weight internationally. Hungary thus offers an unusually clear illustration of how populism can function not merely as a governing style but as a foreign policy strategy middle powers employ to address constraints and opportunities in a fragmenting international order.

Populism can function as a foreign policy strategy middle powers employ to address constraints and opportunities in a fragmenting international order.

This paper examines how Fidesz's rise and consolidation of its power reshaped Hungary's foreign policy and external alignments, how these foreign policy choices feed into a broader transnational project, and the extent to which these linkages have produced genuine convergence around shared policy agendas.

The paper first traces the emergence and consolidation of Fidesz as a right-wing populist party, highlighting the Manichaean worldview and personalization of political authority that define its political project. It then explores how right-wing populism has led to the politicization and deprofessionalization of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and the diplomatic service. It examines how Hungarian foreign policy embraced conflict and adopted an approach to international organizations that combines confrontation and instrumental engagement. The analysis then maps the dense network of transnational linkages Fidesz has built—spanning personalist ties with authoritarian leaders, party-to-party alliances, transnational movement infrastructures, and shared narratives—and identifies anti-immigration, a postliberal culture war, and Euroskepticism that aims to transform the European Union (EU) as the shared agenda points these connections gave rise to.

Following Fidesz's April 2026 electoral defeat, Péter Magyar's government is expected to re-professionalize Hungary's foreign policy, reorient toward Euro-Atlanticism, and adopt a more consensus-driven approach within the EU. Yet the legacy of the Orbán era will endure through Fidesz's continued presence in transnational illiberal networks.

Fidesz's Transformation and the Rise of Right-Wing Populism

The rise of right-wing populism in Hungary is tied to the long-term transformation of Fidesz, the party that has dominated Hungarian politics since 2010. Founded in 1988 as a liberal, anticommunist youth movement, Fidesz initially championed democratic change and Hungary's Euro-Atlantic integration. Its evolution into a right-wing populist party was gradual and strongly shaped by electoral competition. By the mid-1990s, the party had shifted toward the center-right, developing a nationalist-conservative profile during its first term in office (1998–2002). After eight years in opposition, it returned to power in 2010 with a landslide victory that secured a two-thirds supermajority in Parliament, enabling it not only to pass constitutional amendments but to reshape Hungary's entire legal and institutional architecture.

Fidesz's populist project is rooted in a Manichaean worldview that divides the political universe into two irreconcilable camps: the “real Hungarian people,” whose authentic interests and identity Fidesz claims exclusively to represent, and a rotating cast of “enemies” said to threaten the “real Hungarians” both from within Hungary and beyond its borders. These enemies have included domestic left-wing and liberal political elites, bureaucrats in Brussels, financier and philanthropist George Soros, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), independent media outlets, migrants, and LGBTQ communities. Fidesz's us-versus-them logic frames politics as an existential struggle in which Orbán—the charismatic leader of the party—is portrayed as the protector of the nation. The personalization of power around Orbán is a defining feature of Hungarian populism: He is the party's ideological engine and chief decisionmaker.

This populist logic accelerated after 2010. Facing electoral competition from the radical-right Jobbik party, Fidesz progressively absorbed nationalist, Euroskeptic, and nativist positions—particularly on ethnic Hungarians abroad, the Roma minority, and immigration—effectively outflanking its rival and cementing its dominance on the right.¹⁹¹ This ideological radicalization unfolded in tandem with the governing party’s capture of the state: The adoption of a new constitution and electoral code, the subjugation of public media, and the erosion of judicial independence transformed Hungary from a consolidated democracy into an electoral autocracy.¹⁹² Independent media outlets and NGOs that resisted were systematically pressured and intimidated through populist rhetoric and restrictive legislation.

Fidesz divides the political universe into two irreconcilable camps: the “real Hungarian people” and a rotating cast of “enemies.”

By the mid-2010s, Fidesz’s growing conflict with EU institutions over the erosion of the rule of law accelerated its repositioning within Europe. Launched in 2018, the Article 7 procedure—the EU’s formal sanction mechanism for serious breaches of its core values—against Hungary produced no tangible results but deepened the government’s anti-Brussels posture.¹⁹³ Fidesz’s ultimate departure from the center-right European People’s Party (EPP) in 2021 marked its open alignment with the European populist radical right, a repositioning that culminated in the establishment of the Patriots for Europe group in the European Parliament after the 2024 European parliamentary elections.

How Fidesz Remade Hungarian Foreign Policy

Under Fidesz, the centralization of foreign policymaking, the politicization of diplomacy, an emphasis on leader-to-leader ties, and a combative, conflictual rhetoric have become characteristic features of Hungarian foreign policy. These reflect not only changes in policy priorities but also a deeper transformation in how foreign policy is organized and conducted.

Centralizing and Politicizing Foreign Policy Under Orbán

The Hungarian case sheds light on how right-wing populism can centralize and politicize foreign policy. The party captured the MFA, sidelined career diplomats, and concentrated decisions in a small loyalist circle around the prime minister and the foreign minister. Before 2010, Hungary was regarded as a model case of Europeanization: The MFA and its expert staff served as the center of EU affairs coordination, and Hungarian diplomats were considered to be the elite of the civil service. During Fidesz’s first term, as the party focused primarily on consolidating its domestic grip on power, Hungary’s foreign policy retained continuity with past priorities such as support for the Euro-Atlantic alliance, good neighborly relations in Central Europe, and support for Hungarian minorities abroad.

An ideological and organizational shift unfolded gradually from 2012 onward as then state secretary Péter Szijjártó, who had previously led Fidesz's youth wing and served as a government spokesman, acquired stature in the Prime Minister's Office (PMO). He championed the "Eastern Opening" policy, which aimed to expand economic ties with Russia and China.¹⁹⁴ Between 2012 and 2014, he concentrated power on these dossiers in the PMO in ways that challenged the MFA's authority.

Szijjártó's appointment as minister of foreign affairs and trade in 2014 led to a fundamental overhaul of the MFA. Approximately 70 percent of the ministry's staff was gradually replaced, with most senior positions awarded to people from Szijjártó's personal circle who lacked relevant professional experience. Career diplomats were reduced to implementing decisions from above, with little transparency about their origins.¹⁹⁵ The result was a foreign policy apparatus in which professional expertise was systematically sidelined, loyalty to the leader was rewarded, and strategic decisions were concentrated in a small circle around the minister.

Szijjártó's appointment also marked an ideological shift. Expanding on the Eastern Opening policy, the pursuit of Hungary's economic interests—with any and all partners—became the explicit guiding principle of the country's foreign policy. Orbán openly dismissed "ideology-driven foreign policy" that he associated with the Euro-Atlantic alliance and the idea that values should figure into foreign policy decisions.¹⁹⁶ Instead, the Hungarian government pursued a policy it termed connectivity and economic neutrality that sought to maintain channels with all major powers.¹⁹⁷ It argued that being confined to one bloc—such as the Euro-Atlantic alliance—was detrimental to Hungarian interests, and that the country must remain free to pursue economic ties with any partner.

Conflict as a Foreign Policy Strategy

This shift in organizational logic was matched by an increasingly explicit embrace of conflict as a foreign policy instrument. The confrontational posture of Fidesz's foreign policy is not simply a byproduct of ideology but, as Orbán himself articulated, a conscious strategy.¹⁹⁸ Because Hungary has limited conventional leverage, the government relies on the forceful assertion of national positions to generate visibility, coalition-building opportunities, and bargaining power—tools largely unavailable through consensus-seeking diplomacy but often used by smaller powers.

Where international institutions challenged Fidesz's hold on power or imposed external accountability, the party responded with confrontation, enemy-making, and delegitimization.

This logic also translated into Fidesz's approach to international institutions. Where international institutions challenged Fidesz's hold on power or imposed external accountability, the party responded with confrontation, enemy-making, and

delegitimization. Where international institutions followed an intergovernmental logic or offered platforms for coalition-building or tangible benefits without threatening executive autonomy, Fidesz engaged with them instrumentally.

As the following sections show, this logic produced two distinct modes of engagement: outright confrontation with institutions that threatened executive autonomy, and instrumental participation in institutions that offered leverage or legitimacy without imposing accountability.

Confrontation with the European Union

The EU has been the primary target of Fidesz's confrontational posture. From the early 2010s, EU institutions were portrayed as an imperial center covertly expanding their powers at member states' expense, and "Brussels bureaucrats" were cast as enemies of national sovereignty. As EU institutions became more vocal about democratic backsliding, the rhetoric escalated from criticism to outright hostility. Individuals—particularly European Commission presidents Jean-Claude Juncker and Ursula von der Leyen, and EPP President Manfred Weber—were characterized as embodiments of an incompetent and illegitimate liberal elite challenging the elected representatives of the Hungarian nation.

The initiation of the Article 7 procedure against Hungary in 2018 deepened this dynamic: Rather than moderating the government's behavior, external pressure became further ammunition for the narrative of a nation under siege. The Council of Europe's Venice Commission—whose mandate focuses on precisely the constitutional and democratic standards Fidesz dismantled—was treated with a similar hostility but, given its limited domestic visibility, was often ignored rather than actively demonized.

Instrumental Engagement with NATO and the UN

Orbán's populism also affected Hungary's approach toward multilateral organizations such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the United Nations (UN). Because NATO operates on a consensus basis, Hungary holds more leverage over NATO policy than it does within the EU. The Hungarian government under Orbán maintained formal alliance commitments and operational contributions, including, for example, to the Kosovo Force, but diverged from the alliance positions on Russia, Ukraine, and the matter of NATO enlargement. When Finland and Sweden applied to join NATO following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Hungary delayed ratification alongside Türkiye.¹⁹⁹ Hungary eventually ratified both countries' accession, but only after months of delays and a defense procurement deal with Sweden.²⁰⁰ Hungary also spent years blocking ministerial-level meetings of the NATO-Ukraine Commission over Ukraine's language law affecting the ethnic Hungarian minority in Transcarpathia—a clear example of how Orbán's use and instrumentalization of nationalism shaped Hungary's foreign policy.²⁰¹

The UN, meanwhile, offered Hungary what the EU could not: a stage on which Hungary could appear as a cooperative, even leading, international player while simultaneously building ties—in the spirit of connectivity—with partners beyond the Euro-Atlantic framework it increasingly contested. Between 2014 and 2026, Hungary diverged from common EU positions, especially on human rights and democracy.²⁰² It also sought to use activism in the UN—for example, co-chairing the UN General Assembly’s Open Working Group that produced the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development—to brand Hungary as a capable multilateral actor in water diplomacy, which also happened to be a profitable business sector where Hungary had expertise.²⁰³

Fidesz’s Transnational Network-Building

Expanding Hungary’s international partnerships beyond its Euro-Atlantic allies was central to Fidesz’s foreign policy. The transnational linkages Fidesz has built over the past decade and a half are diverse in nature—spanning personalist ties with authoritarian leaders, party-to-party alliances across the European right, and a dense network of think tanks and civil society organizations—but they share a common logic: securing Hungary’s (particularly the Hungarian government’s) economic and political position while embedding Fidesz in a broader illiberal international project.

Leader-Centric Networks and Opportunistic Alignment with Authoritarian Powers

Hungary’s deepening of ties with Russia and China exemplified the centralization and personalization that often characterize populist foreign policy globally, as well as the opportunistic alignment with authoritarian and revisionist powers it can produce. In both cases, however, leader-to-leader ties were at odds with Fidesz’s own sovereigntist rhetoric, as they created lasting dependencies on external authoritarian actors.

Hungary’s deepening of ties with Russia and China exemplified the centralization and personalization that often characterize populist foreign policy globally.

Over the past decade, the Hungarian government has deepened its—already substantial—reliance on Russian energy with no apparent intention to decouple. Hungary is also dependent on Russian nuclear fuel for its Paks power plant, which supplies around half of the country’s electricity. Moreover, it is currently building two new reactors in cooperation with Rosatom using a Russian loan.²⁰⁴ Even the 2022 revelation that Russia had hacked into the Hungarian foreign ministry’s IT systems did not cool relations between the two countries.²⁰⁵ Under Orbán, Hungary regularly slowed and watered down EU sanctions against Russia and acted as a disruptor of EU support for Ukraine while Szijjártó maintained a hotline to coordinate with his Russian counterpart, Sergei Lavrov, on these matters.²⁰⁶

Relations with China also deepened under Fidesz, demonstrating the extent to which Orbán was prepared to diverge from many other European countries. The construction of the Budapest-Belgrade railway, a flagship project under China's Belt and Road Initiative, is financed by a Chinese loan of \$917 million.²⁰⁷ Like the Paks deal, this railway deal was highly opaque. In 2024, Hungary also received a €1 billion (\$1.16 billion) loan from China—its largest current credit exposure—earmarked for infrastructure and energy investment. By the 2020s, China had become Hungary's largest source of foreign direct investment.²⁰⁸ A 2024 agreement between the Hungarian and Chinese interior ministries meanwhile facilitated law enforcement cooperation, including joint police patrols on Hungarian territory and knowledge-sharing.²⁰⁹

These ties were maintained through intensive personal diplomacy. Orbán and Szijjártó maintained close relations with both Russia and China, cultivating frequent contacts. Orbán met Putin annually until Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and resumed meetings in 2024.²¹⁰ Szijjártó held frequent meetings with his Russian counterpart, whom he hosted at his private residence and from whom he received the Russian Order of Friendship in 2021.²¹¹ High-level contacts with Chinese government officials took place regularly too, with Szijjártó even attending the Eightieth Beijing Victory Day parade in 2025 as the only senior officeholder from an EU and NATO member state apart from Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico.²¹² This personalist style, where key relationships are cultivated by a small circle around the prime minister, rather than through institutionalized diplomatic channels, allowed for the subjugation of Hungarian national interests to regime interests.

Orbán also cultivated close personal ties to U.S. President Donald Trump, who granted Hungary a one-year exemption from U.S. sanctions on Russian energy after Orbán argued that cutting off Russian fossil fuel supplies would tank Hungary's economy.²¹³ Trump's willingness to grant the exemption in November 2025 was a clear vote of his support for Orbán ahead of the Hungarian parliamentary elections in April 2026—a vote backed up by public endorsements on multiple occasions.²¹⁴ This active intervention by a sitting U.S. president in the domestic affairs of an EU and NATO ally underscores that the Orbán-Trump relationship moved beyond conventional bilateral diplomacy into the territory of transnational populist solidarity.

Party-to-Party and Parliamentary Alliances

Fidesz also intensified its ideology-driven alliance-building following its departure from the EPP in 2021. As a long-term governing party with substantial resources, Fidesz sought not merely to join the European populist radical right but also to shape and lead it. It courted parties in the European Conservatives and Reformists and Identity and Democracy groups in the European Parliament as it searched for a new political home. Uniting these groups under one umbrella failed over their divisions regarding Russia, but Fidesz played a crucial role in the establishment of the Patriots for Europe group, which absorbed the Identity and Democracy group after the 2024 European Parliament elections. Fidesz's brokering allowed the Patriots for Europe to become the third-largest group in the European Parliament and

broadened their appeal to populist Euroskeptic forces not firmly on the far right. Long-term Fidesz Member of the European Parliament (MEP) Kinga Gál now serves as first vice president of the Patriots for Europe and vice president of the affiliated Patriots.eu European party.

Fidesz sought not merely to join the European populist radical right but also to shape and lead it.

Ideological alliance-building and party coordination were reinforced by financial commitment. For example, Hungary's MKB Bank provided a €10.6 million (\$12.33 million) loan for French politician Marine Le Pen's April 2022 presidential campaign;²¹⁵ its successor, MBH Bank, lent €9.2 million (\$10.7 million) to the Spanish radical-right party Vox for its local and general election campaigns in 2023.²¹⁶ The bank's largest shareholder, Lőrinc Mészáros, is a longtime ally of Orbán, and the Hungarian state owns 30.35 percent of the bank.²¹⁷ While the Hungarian government denied any role in orchestrating the loans, the pattern of providing financing to allied radical-right parties through a partially state-owned bank linked to a key Orbán ally suggests a deliberate strategy.²¹⁸

A similar pattern was visible in the Western Balkans, where the Hungarian government provided loans to Milorad Dodik's government in Republika Srpska and to the government led by the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization—Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE) in North Macedonia—both longtime Fidesz allies.²¹⁹ These moves reflect a deliberate strategy in which alliance-building is viewed as a long-term political investment, with financial support deployed to strengthen partners' electoral prospects.

Transnational Movement Infrastructures

Beyond party channels, Fidesz has built a network of ideologically aligned organizations—including the Centre for Fundamental Rights, the Danube Institute, and the Mathias Corvinus Collegium (MCC). These organizations function as an extended soft-power arm of the party and as connective tissue that links it to think tanks, civil society groups, intellectual networks, and media circles in Europe and the United States.

The Centre for Fundamental Rights and the Danube Institute, which were both financed primarily through the nominally public but government-controlled Batthyány Lajos Foundation, were instrumental in cultivating ties with the Make America Great Again (MAGA) movement.²²⁰ Since 2022, the Centre for Fundamental Rights has co-organized the first European spin-off of the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) with its American counterpart, the American Conservative Union. The Danube Institute established a strategic partnership with the Heritage Foundation—the publisher of *Project 2025*—with which it co-hosts an annual geopolitics conference in Budapest.²²¹ After Fidesz's election defeat in April 2026, the financing of these organizations via the state budget is expected to come to an end.

The MCC occupies a distinct role in this ecosystem. Through a transfer of state-owned shares in Hungary's two biggest companies worth approximately \$1.7 billion, the MCC acquired an endowment of unprecedented size not only in Hungary but the wider region.²²² It functions as Fidesz's elite youth pipeline, cultivating the next generation through training, educational programs, and scholarships across Hungary and neighboring countries. Its Brussels branch provides a platform for voices challenging the European status quo. The future of this endowment is also in question as the new government seeks to re-nationalize the transferred assets.

Fellowship schemes run by the three organizations have brought like-minded intellectuals and media personalities to Hungary, building intellectual bridges between Fidesz's circles and the international right and facilitating the expansion of Hungary's footprint, especially across Europe and in the United States. These links ultimately have resulted in a direct channel between Balázs Orbán (no relation to the prime minister), who has headed the MCC's board since 2020 and between 2021 and 2026 served as the prime minister's political director, and U.S. Vice President JD Vance. Together, these organizations allowed Hungary to punch above its weight internationally, shaping the transnational discourse and agendas of illiberal actors with resources and reach unprecedented for a country of Hungary's size.

Shared Narratives and Political Messaging

Underlying these institutional and financial linkages is a convergence of political language and interpretive framing that both reflects and reinforces Fidesz's transnational alliances. Fidesz has actively adopted and exported the rhetoric of the international populist right, which focuses on defending national sovereignty against supranational encroachment, portraying immigration as a civilizational threat, and waging a culture war against "wokeism" that pits social conservatism against a liberal elite. The adoption of the slogan "Make Europe Great Again" for Hungary's 2024 presidency of the Council of the European Union was a deliberate signal of ideological alignment with the MAGA movement and illustrates how shared narratives travel across contexts and reinforce transnational solidarity.²²³ This discursive convergence goes beyond symbolism, creating a common vocabulary for mobilization and making it easier for Fidesz and its partners to coordinate around common causes. It is also the foundation on which shared policy agendas are increasingly built.

Shared Policy Agendas

The transnational linkages Fidesz has built—through party alliances, think tank networks, and leader-level cooperation—have created opportunities to deepen ideological convergence, but significant misalignments remain. At present, these actors are united more by what they oppose than by a shared positive program. Yet the potential disruptiveness of these alliances should not be dismissed.

Immigration has been the most powerful rallying issue for the European far right. At the 2015–2016 peak of the refugee and migration crisis, Hungary under Fidesz was at the forefront of assembling a transnational coalition against immigration, focusing initially on its Central European partners. In the mid-2010s, Hungary adopted some of Europe’s most restrictive asylum and border policies, defying EU regulations and framing its actions—erecting border fences, detaining and pushing back asylum seekers, and rejecting relocation quotas—not as technical policy responses but as existential measures to protect Hungary and Christian Europe.²²⁴ This ideological positioning paved the way for Fidesz’s alliance-building with radical-right parties across Europe, culminating in the establishment of the Patriots for Europe.

The formalization of cooperation under the Patriots for Europe carries significance beyond symbolism. The political group allows for the professionalization and shared political socialization of MEPs through coordination on the European Parliament’s agenda, while the European party, Patriots.eu, provides a platform for regular strategic exchanges among members. The group’s core priorities—national sovereignty, opposition to further centralization in EU institutions, and stricter border control—represent areas of genuine convergence, even if MEPs retain formal freedom to vote according to their conscience.

On the question of Europe’s institutional future, there is no unified vision among these parties. Rather, there is only general agreement to push for weaker supranational institutions and stronger nation-states. Fidesz voices are among the loudest, calling for transformation rather than reform of the EU. They advocate doing away with the supranational powers of the European Commission and the Court of Justice altogether, as laid out in “The Great Reset: Restoring Member State Sovereignty in the European Union,” a study published jointly by the MCC and the Polish *Ordo Iuris* Institute for Legal Culture.²²⁵ Presented in Warsaw, Budapest, Brussels, and Washington, the publication is more a discussion starter than a road map, but it illustrates that illiberal think tank networks are actively developing an intellectual agenda for a postliberal European order. The Patriots for Europe are not currently in a position to push through institutional changes, but Fidesz’s sustained cultivation of ties with rising radical-right actors reflects a long-term investment in shaping the agenda around which the European far right can coalesce if the political opportunity arises.

Beyond the EU, Fidesz also moved to contest institutions of the broader liberal international order. Hungary’s announcement of its withdrawal from the International Criminal Court (ICC) on the grounds that the organization had become politicized—a decision the new government has indicated it will reverse—served a dual purpose: It signaled solidarity with political allies facing ICC arrest warrants, including Putin and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, effectively granting them a free pass to enter Hungary, and it demonstrated a willingness to abandon multilateral commitments for purely ideological reasons.²²⁶ The move reflected the same logic as another practice associated with Fidesz: granting political asylum to prosecuted partners. Both send the message that international institutions and legal norms are seen as legitimate only if they do not constrain the governing party or its allies.

Fidesz's aim of turning Hungary into a hub for critics of the liberal order is perhaps the clearest expression of its aspirations to shape a shared right-populist agenda. Convenings such as CPAC Hungary, the Geopolitical Summit (co-organized by the Danube Institute and the Heritage Foundation), and the Budapest Global Dialogue (co-organized with India's Observer Research Foundation) bring together politicians and thinkers from across the world who are critical of the EU and the liberal international order. These are not merely networking events—they are deliberate attempts to facilitate the emergence of new coalitions and to shape the discourse about what comes after the liberal order. Although this incipient coalition remains only loosely unified and is yet to converge on a specific program, Fidesz is among the most active and, while it was in power, was one of the best-resourced architects of the infrastructure through which a more powerful coalition could emerge.

Conclusion

Hungary under Fidesz illustrates how right-wing populism can transform not only a country's domestic politics but also its foreign policy and its role in the international system—and how these transformations reinforce each other. The us-versus-them logic, personalization of power, and contempt for institutional constraints that defined Fidesz's domestic governance systematically extended into the foreign policy domain. This happened through the hollowing out of professional diplomatic structures, the recasting of international institutions as either instruments or enemies, and the embedding of the party in a dense web of transnational illiberal alliances.

The durability of these networks after Fidesz's defeat in the April 2026 election remains an open question, however. A new government in Budapest will have to contend with a foreign policy apparatus that has been deliberately deprofessionalized and reoriented. It will need to navigate bilateral ties with—often authoritarian—great powers that cultivated personalistic relationships with Fidesz. At the same time, state funding for Fidesz-affiliated organizations that are central to the party's transnational network-building will cease, which could weaken though not necessarily dismantle Fidesz's standing among the global far right. How easily and how quickly these structures may be dismantled or could be reformed will ultimately reveal the durability of the foreign policy legacy that right-wing populism has built in Hungary.

The Dual Imperative in Turkish Foreign Policy: Right-Wing Populists and Their Opposition

Murat Somer

Introduction

Türkiye offers a vivid example of how right-wing populists can reshape a country's foreign policy, while also revealing the limits of their ability to do so sustainably.

Over the last twenty-three years, Türkiye has been ruled by the governments of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (as prime minister in 2003–2014 and president since 2014) and his Justice and Development Party (AKP), elected to power in late 2002. During this period, their shifting policies and rhetoric have often puzzled domestic and international audiences about what the country's long-term motivations and allegiances are. In order to achieve more clarity, one needs to understand that Erdoğan and the AKP have been following a dual imperative. The first is shaped by a broad cross-party consensus on Türkiye's changing regional and global interests since the 1990s, and the second is formed by the AKP and Erdoğan's peculiar right-wing populist worldview. While the second imperative enables faster decision-making and flexibility, it undermines the long-term sustainability of Türkiye's foreign policy by feeding corruption, incoherence, and potential instability.

Turkish right-wing populists have been trying to advance the country's middle-power goals on the international stage based on widely shared perceptions of what these goals are among policymakers and the public, but they have been doing so in specific ways that reinforce their project of autocratic political consolidation at home. Interrogating how alternatives that are not right-wing populist would manage Türkiye's external relations differently helps to distinguish between these two imperatives. If the main opposition force, the center-left Republican People's Party (CHP) came to power, it would likely continue many policies of Erdoğan and the AKP that are shaped by how broad segments of Turks perceive the country's national interests as a middle power.²²⁷ But there would also be fundamental differences because the CHP would follow a modified dual imperative. It would advance Türkiye's middle power interests in ways that reverse democratic backsliding and support the consolidation of liberal and social democracy.²²⁸ The implications for Türkiye's long-term

alliances and its role in regional and global order would be significant: Its foreign policy would become more predictable, anchored in democratic values, treaty commitments, and law—replacing the AKP’s transactional and destabilizing approach.

The consequences for democracy over two decades of right-wing populist AKP rule have been severe.

Various forms of populism and right-wing ideologies have dominated Turkish politics since the establishment of multiparty democracy in 1950.²²⁹ However, the core vision and political strategy of Erdoğan and the AKP have represented the specific kind of populism that causes worry for many observers worldwide due to the severe threats it poses to democracy.²³⁰ They have been populist and pernicious polarizers who sought and kept power by fostering a permanent and Manichean divide between people and elites, and by weaponizing a majoritarian and unchecked understanding of popular sovereignty.²³¹ Having said that, their expressed identity and dominant policies have not been constant. After coming to power by promising democratization and clean government to the electorate, the policies and rhetoric of Erdoğan and the AKP incrementally became less liberal and democratic, and more illiberal and autocratic as they accumulated more power. Simultaneously, their right-wing discourse and policies became less “conservative-democratic” and more “Islamist-nationalist.”²³² Since 2016, they have also operated in a de facto coalition with the far-right Nationalist Action Party (MHP) and formed electoral coalitions with various Islamist and nationalist fringe parties that share their right-wing populist ideology.²³³

The consequences for democracy over two decades of right-wing populist AKP rule have been severe. The country backslid from being an established yet defective electoral democracy on the path to building liberal democracy in the early 2000s to being an electoral autocracy by the late 2010s.²³⁴

Foreign Policy Under Erdoğan

Turkish right-wing populists have transformed the country’s foreign policy, yet the underlying long-term vision and goals are not immediately obvious—obscured by shifting (and often contradictory) policies, ideology, and rhetoric.

Pursuing Türkiye’s Interests as a Middle Power

The first foreign policy imperative, which has remained constant underneath the shifting actions and motivations of Erdoğan and the AKP, has been the country’s perceived middle-power interests in a changing global order. Türkiye is considered an emerging middle power alongside countries such as South Korea, Indonesia, and Mexico. While there is no fixed definition of middle powers, they are considered to lack the capabilities of great powers such as the United States and China but to have enough power to disrupt the international order.

In the 1990s, many political leaders across party lines realized that economic growth and changing incentives in the post–Cold War era required and enabled a more activist foreign policy.²³⁵ Accordingly, Türkiye sought greater regional influence, more diverse relations from Africa to Asia, and a stronger voice in multilateral institutions. But these goals were paired with the goals of strengthening liberal democracy at home and greater integration with Western institutions, particularly the EU, of which Türkiye became a membership candidate in 1999. Thus, the country developed strategic autonomy but remained anchored to the West politically and institutionally. It had a “civilizational interest” in doing so, given its centuries-long policy of cultural-institutional Westernization while remaining West-skeptical—clear-eyed about how Western states have historically treated and will likely keep treating the rest of the world.²³⁶

Even though people may disagree over the policies through which Türkiye should pursue its middle-power interests, a cross-party consensus has been evolving on what these interests are. They stem from Türkiye’s position as a growing, export-oriented, and energy-dependent economy with a large and upwardly mobile population; as a post-imperial power with a geostrategically central location between Asia, Europe, and Africa; and as a country with historical-cultural linkages to these regions. This has significantly influenced the foreign policy outlook of successive governments, particularly in periods, like the current one, that are marked by heightened flux in the global economic and security order. Foreign policy has also been influenced by Western allies and global economic and regional geopolitical developments, which have at different times expanded or reduced Türkiye’s room for maneuver.

All this explains why Türkiye has sought to diversify its economic ties beyond the West, even as it has tried to expand its influence in Western-led global institutions. This also clarifies why the country challenges the liberal international order from within as what may be called a loyal and responsible participant.²³⁷ Rather than rejecting the order’s underlying legal and political principles, Türkiye challenges what it views as Western dominance in how multilateral institutions are managed and in how their rules are applied.²³⁸ Long-standing frustration with the EU reflects this dynamic. Turkish leaders do not reject its principles outright; rather, they object to what they perceive as the EU’s reluctance to accept their country as a full member, and, if it does, as culturally distinct, fully equal, and important, as opposed to peripheral.

Türkiye pursued its foreign-policy goals through institutional and professionalized policy-making, particularly in the Foreign Ministry and the military, as well as through a combination of soft and hard power. It significantly increased its soft power through the expansion of development aid, trade, and the opening of cultural centers in regions such as the Balkans, the Middle East, Africa, and Central Asia. It also worked to reduce its dependence on military equipment from its NATO allies by developing its arms industry, and it supported NATO and UN peace missions by deploying troops in Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Lebanon.²³⁹

Since coming to power, Erdoğan and the AKP have continued these policies whenever they also served their second imperative of autocratic power consolidation at home. Between 2003 and 2011, they relied predominantly on a discourse of Muslim democracy, which

blended Islamic identity with the language of liberal democracy. They also pursued neoliberal economic policies, maintained the country's good standing in multilateral institutions such as NATO and the World Trade Organization, and projected soft power as a dynamic trading state committed to having what then foreign minister Ahmet Davutoğlu (2009–2014) called a “zero problems with neighbors” policy.²⁴⁰

All this made sense during the global monetary expansion of the 2000s, which saw capital pouring into Türkiye, and amid Western efforts to identify liberal Muslim allies during the global War on Terror. This approach also helped Erdoğan appropriate the image of his secular political rivals as pro-democracy, pro-EU, and pro-West politicians for domestic and foreign audiences. While making sure that Türkiye's Western commitments, including the EU accession process, remained intact, he pursued closer cooperation with emerging powers and institutional alternatives to the Western-dominated global order. For example, he sought BRICS membership and joined with Brazil's President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva to negotiate a nuclear swap deal with Iran in 2010.²⁴¹

Autocratic Hegemony and Islamist Populism

The second imperative that has guided governance and the transformation of Türkiye since the AKP and Erdoğan came to power has been their partisan motivations and regime goals. These have been described as “passive-revolutionary,”²⁴² populist, political Islamist,²⁴³ Islamist-populist,²⁴⁴ neo-Ottoman,²⁴⁵ “state-conquering rather than state-democratizing,”²⁴⁶ and guided by Islamic civilizational goals and affinities.²⁴⁷

Electoral victories in 2010 and 2011 strengthened the AKP government's domestic position. The resulting growth in authoritarianism was confronted by fierce popular opposition in the Gezi protests in 2013.²⁴⁸ Erdoğan also fell out with his Islamist-nationalist Gülenist allies and faced major corruption allegations in 2014.²⁴⁹

Alongside these developments, Türkiye's foreign policy became more activist and overtly pro-Islamist. The tumultuous Arab Spring changes that swept through the Middle East and North Africa after 2010–11 may have encouraged an activist foreign policy, but not necessarily an Islamist one. Türkiye's engagement with Western allies within the EU and NATO became increasingly transactional. Erdoğan began seeking closer relations with autocratic regimes like the one in Russia and with Islamist transnational actors such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas. This shift came with an increased willingness to rely on military force, such as by deploying the military or by using radical Islamist proxies, as in Syria. Many Turkish liberal observers have described this transformation as one from constructive or “restrained” middle-power behavior toward an “excessively activist” and “assertive” posture.²⁵⁰

The changes in foreign policy went in tandem with the AKP and Erdoğan incrementally constructing a neo-patrimonial executive.²⁵¹ This transformation has been sustained by the model of state capitalism and a welfare system that the AKP and Erdoğan have gradually constructed.²⁵² As they moved away from liberal democracy, they came into values-related conflicts with the governments and civil societies of democratic states.

This ideological transformation has also shaped the AKP and Erdoğan's power perceptions, rhetoric, and actions in foreign policy, where they saw other Islamist or authoritarian national and transnational actors as trustworthy allies and sources of information. For example, in early 2011, information circulating within Muslim Brotherhood networks appears to have led Erdoğan and Davutoğlu to anticipate the rapid collapse of the Assad regime in Syria, following similar developments in Tunisia and Egypt.²⁵³ This expectation contributed to Türkiye's heavy backing of the Syrian opposition.

Ideological framing has also shaped domestic political discourse. When the CHP criticized Türkiye's Syria policy in the 2010s, for example, government officials dismissed this with rhetoric such as "The Syrian people are getting rid of their own CHP."²⁵⁴

Erdoğan's foreign policy became even more assertive and unilateral after he survived what appears to have been a failed military coup attempt in 2016.²⁵⁵ This new shift came with a stronger ultra-nationalist and Eurasian bent as Türkiye sought closer relations with Russia and developed dialogues with institutions like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.²⁵⁶ Erdoğan's rhetoric and, partly, his policies grew more openly critical of the West and more explicitly Islamist. "Zero problems with neighbors" gave way to the notion of "precious loneliness,"²⁵⁷ signaling a more coercive and self-reliant approach that privileged autonomy over diplomatic accommodation.²⁵⁸ Türkiye purchased Russian S-400 missile batteries despite objections from NATO, leading to its "costly expulsion" from the U.S.-led F-35 program.²⁵⁹

Erdoğan and the AKP have continued to develop Türkiye's defense industry, albeit now with neo-patrimonial and state-capitalist means; that is, by relying on industries close to the government and the president's family. Efforts have included the development of armed drone platforms (such as the Bayraktar TB2 and Anka systems) that have helped position the country as a major drone producer, and have been used to promote techno-nationalism and bolster the regime's domestic legitimacy.

Since 2019, Erdoğan has sought to repair relations with Western allies such as the United States and the EU as well as with regional powers such as Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, and Israel.

Partisan interests have also undermined the ability of Erdoğan and the AKP to achieve peace with the Kurds. Like previous governments, they have opposed Kurdish separatism. However, unlike previous governments, they framed initiatives to resolve the issue primarily through a narrative of Islamic fraternity, conditional upon the Kurds accepting the neo-patrimonial autocratic rule in Ankara. Erdoğan and the AKP have viewed U.S.-backed Kurdish military advances in Syria with suspicion, as most Turkish governments would. But they further complicated the issue by backing Islamist factions and missing opportunities to win the Kurds' trust by refusing to protect them against jihadi violence at critical junctures—developments critics link to ideological preferences and transnational alignments.²⁶⁰

Since 2019, as a troubled economy and a more competitive opposition have threatened his rule, Erdoğan has recalibrated once again. He has largely maintained his jingoistic rhetoric but scaled back some overreaching policies. As he has sought to repair relations with Western allies such as the United States and the EU as well as with regional powers such as Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, and Israel, he has also begun to curb engagement with the Muslim Brotherhood. Türkiye joined Trump’s Board of Peace and took a visibly restrained position during the U.S.-Israeli war against Iran—with Erdoğan staying silent on the United States and muted on Israel. This seems to contrast with the government’s fierce rhetorical condemnation of Israel’s war on Gaza and an official trade embargo—while allegedly allowing trade to continue through backchannels.²⁶¹

Erdoğan and the CHP Alternative

Table 1 illustrates how, in the pursuit of Türkiye’s perceived middle-power goals and interests, the foreign policy vision of Erdoğan and the AKP and that of the CHP compare with the cross-party consensus. This sheds light on the contrasting logics that underpin the dual imperative in foreign policy under the current regime, while suggesting how it would continue and differ under a CHP-led government.

For example, a more activist foreign policy seeking greater autonomy from the West was rational for Türkiye in terms of the cross-party perception of middle-power interests and in light of the diminished flow of Western capital after the 2008 financial crisis and the 2011 Arab Spring. However, the government’s pro-Islamist activism and rapprochement with autocratic regimes resulted from its partisan ideological and political goals.

Table 1. Contrasting Logics of Türkiye’s Middle-Power Foreign Policy

Issue	Cross-Party Consensus	Erdoğan and the AKP	Main Opposition Party, CHP
Liberal International Order	Remain a constructive member without being subject to identity-based double standards. Economic benefits. Quest for equal say in decisionmaking and flexible rules suitable for a rising economy. Principled challenges to Western domination.	Semi-loyal member willing to level identity-based criticism toward liberal institutions and seek alternative alliances with illiberal actors.	Support the order’s rules-based universalism and liberal-democratic values but demand their equal application. Criticize neoliberal bias and demand social-market principles.
Rules-Based Multilateral International Order	Uphold international rules and norms. Support rules-based institutions that provide security and predictability for middle powers, even when knowing that all states bend rules to protect their interests. Work toward making institutions such as the UN Security Council more inclusive and representative. Activism in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation.	Instrumentalize anti-West rhetoric to discredit westernization and liberal-democratic norms at home, from gender equality to secularism and the rule of law.	Reform multilateral institutions from within, based on principled criticism.

Issue	Cross-Party Consensus	Erdoğan and the AKP	Main Opposition Party, CHP
Use of Hard Power	Support a strong deterrent military with domestically produced technology. Remain in military alliances such as NATO but diversify engagement to further specific geopolitical interests. Maintain a selective military presence abroad to protect economic interests such as supply chains, sea routes, economic markets, and energy lines. Readiness to use force as a deterrent and last resort.	Readiness to use force on a case-by-case basis to amplify regional clout, enjoy domestic political benefits, and serve interest groups that are clients of the government. Readiness to use non-state actors such as Islamist/jihadi groups as proxies, based on ideological linkages.	Maximum respect for other countries' sovereignty as a major constraining principle. Avoid use of non-state actors such as rebel groups as proxies. Use of hard power through formal and institutional channels.
Use of Soft Power	Project Türkiye as a Muslim society that is modern and culturally accessible for non-Western societies, has achieved equality with the West, and engages with the non-Western world. Project Türkiye as a country that can be trusted and mediate between foes such as Russia and Ukraine and Israelis and Palestinians.	Reliance on Türkiye's Islamic and neo-Ottoman identities, and Erdoğan's image as a strong, personalist leader ("leader of the century") and "patron" of the nation. Support popular culture and globally popular television dramas reflecting neo-Ottoman, consumer-oriented Muslim identity and normalizing neo-patrimonial rule.	Bolster Türkiye's identity as a secular democracy, a member of Western institutions, a westernizing power committed to protecting the interests of non-Western people, and a country rooted in Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's legacy and progressive vision, particularly with respect to gender equality. Support popular culture and television dramas highlighting Türkiye's Muslim as well as secular, democratic, and westernizing face.
Geopolitical and Geoeconomic Position	Remain anchored in Western institutions but remain flexible to protect interests in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia. In the Global South, differentiate Türkiye from Western competitors by projecting a sense of "partnership of equals" and through "win-win" projects, humanitarian assistance, and social developmental projects. Development of an independent defense industry. Further energy security through the TurkStream gas pipeline and the Akkuyu nuclear power plant in collaboration with Russia. Protect security interests in Cyprus, Azerbaijan, Syria, and Iraq. Deepen relations with and expand market share in Africa. Protect interests in disputes over Eastern Mediterranean maritime lines and energy sources. Maintain close relations with Azerbaijan. Oppose discriminatory treatment by Western allies, such as the EU's unwillingness to accept Türkiye as a member with its own identity.	Build organic and extra-institutional relations with specific business sectors to develop state capitalism and a neo-patrimonial welfare state at home. Use disputes such as in the Eastern Mediterranean to stoke nationalism and opposition-bashing at home.	Formal and rights-based social welfare state and social-market economy. More formal and institutional relations with the private sector. Remain open to multilateral conflict-resolution in disputes such as those in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Issue	Cross-Party Consensus	Erdoğan and the AKP	Main Opposition Party, CHP
Civilizational Goals	Achieving “highest level of contemporary civilization”—the motto underlying Atatürk’s developmental vision.	Reviving Türkiye’s Islamic and Ottoman roots. Promoting a neo-patrimonial and neoliberal state-society relationship. Treating citizens more as customers, clients, and subjects.	Westernizing while remaining West-skeptical. View relations with the EU less as transactional and more as a long-term project aimed at advancing civilizational goals such as social and cultural development, the rule of law, and human rights. Republican vision of a state-society relationship based on dignified citizens, a representative state, and strong political community.
Regime Goals	Democratization and political development.	Use activist foreign policy to generate domestic support for autocratic rule. Facilitate backsliding in democracy, secularism, and the rights-based social welfare state. Nationalist, religious-nationalist, neo-Ottoman, and West-bashing foreign policy discourse and jingoism.	Consolidation of a secular, liberal- and social-democratic regime.
State Political Unity and Territorial Integrity	Oppose Kurdish separatism and irredentism. Resolve the Kurdish conflict democratically by maintaining political and territorial integrity as well as a strong, shared national identity.	Resolve the Kurdish conflict on the condition that Kurds accept a neo-patrimonial authoritarian regime, based on Islamic and Ottoman unity. Promotion of identity politics.	View the Kurdish conflict as a social conflict and a democratic deficit to be resolved through principled reforms.

Source: Author’s analysis drawing on party programs and discourse, policy record, academic writing, and relevant op-eds.

On balance, the AKP and Erdoğan’s foreign policy broadly mirrors that of other authoritarian middle powers—subordinating foreign policy to authoritarian regime survival at home.²⁶² A CHP government, by contrast, would likely pursue what Finland’s President Alexander Stubb calls “values-based realism”²⁶³—advancing Turkish interests alongside liberal and social democracy at home and rule-based external relations.²⁶⁴

Populist Foreign Policymaking: Centralization and Transactionalism

Türkiye’s foreign policy under Erdoğan and the AKP has evolved in tandem with their efforts to centralize decisionmaking in the presidency and make it less anchored in other established bureaucracies, first through what Erdoğan called a “de facto presidential system” in 2014 and then through the adoption of an executive presidency in 2018. This reflects the pattern associated with right-wing populist governments: executive centralization,

de-institutionalization and personalization of policymaking, non-diplomatic and combative discourse, predilection for dealmaking, transactionalism, and direct leader-to-leader diplomacy.²⁶⁵

The more centralized and personalized, and thus less constrained, approach allows flexibility and rapid adjustments. It also makes it easier to deploy non-state actors—such as independent or “government-organized” nongovernmental organizations, business networks, religious communities, and even armed groups—to achieve foreign policy objectives.

However, the use of personalized and extra-institutional channels also increases the risks of corruption, erosion of meritocracy, and the blurring of state policy with private gain. In Transparency International’s global corruption ranking, Türkiye ranked 124 out of 182 countries in 2025, a big fall from fifty-four in 2012 and sixty-five (out of 102) in 2002.²⁶⁶ Since Hakan Fidan, the long-time head of the National Intelligence Organization, became foreign minister in 2023, the ministry’s operational style has come to resemble that of the intelligence service: discreet, security-centered, and oriented toward strategic leverage rather than traditional diplomatic processes.

To stay in power, Erdoğan and the AKP do not only rely on populist votes; they also draw on a business community that is, in general, quite docile.

The political economy of gaining and maintaining domestic dominance is central to understanding the foreign policy style of Erdoğan and the AKP. To stay in power, they do not only rely on populist votes; they also draw on a business community that is, in general, quite docile. The corporate-owned pro-government media is instrumental in maintaining their image of being far superior to any alternative. Close ties between the state and firms also help to shore up economic conditions and finance political campaigns and social transfers in the run-up to elections.²⁶⁷ The government has strong incentives to sustain its excessively activist middle-power policy in places like Syria and Africa because this rests on a quid pro quo: firms support the government and, in return, the government facilitates their access to favorable investment opportunities in these regions.

The 2016 agreement with the EU provides a stark example of Erdoğan-era transactionalism. Türkiye agreed to staunch the flow of migrants to Europe, which led to an increase in their number in the country. Erdoğan could have used the considerable leverage from the EU’s dependence on Ankara to stem migration to secure substantial gains for Turkish citizens, such as revitalizing the country’s stalled accession process or modernizing the outdated Customs Union Agreement.²⁶⁸ Instead, he secured around €6 billion (approximately \$6.75 billion) of EU funding in exchange for the immense social, economic, and political costs of hosting around 4 million forcibly displaced people, 2–3 million of them from Syria, allowing the strategic relationship to sidestep the accession process.²⁶⁹ Promised benefits such as visa-free travel to the EU for Turkish citizens never materialized, largely due to disagreements over

Ankara's anti-terror legislation. However, Erdoğan came out of this with a major partisan benefit: He was able to use fears about migration as leverage in disputes with the EU and as a means of muting EU criticism of Türkiye's democratic backsliding.²⁷⁰

All in all, the EU's reliance on Erdoğan regarding the Syrian war, migration, and instability in Türkiye's southern and eastern neighborhoods has deepened its preference for transactional stability and "stabilitocracy over support for democracy."²⁷¹ European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen merely issued "a carefully worded expression of 'deep concern'" in response to the arrest and imprisonment of Erdoğan's main presidential rival, Istanbul Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu, and Erdoğan's crackdown on the CHP, since March 2025.²⁷² The recent strains in transatlantic relations and concerns over the future of NATO may reinforce this trend by augmenting the importance of Türkiye for European security.

Transnational Linkages

Erdoğan and the AKP have built a wide range of transnational ties. These include leader-centric networks; party and parliamentary alliances; networks rooted in shared faith, ideology, and narratives; ties with think tanks and nongovernmental organizations; and opportunistic alignments with other right-wing populist and authoritarian actors. As democratic backsliding continued, these alliances increasingly reflected the regime's autocratic priorities.

Party-to-Party Interactions

The AKP was a member of the European Conservatives and Reformists Party between 2013 and 2018. The AKP left in the aftermath of the 2016 coup attempt, as the party tightened its grip on power and moved further from the European party's pro-democracy position. The AKP has also maintained informal but close cooperative relations with illiberal parties such as the United Socialist Party of Venezuela, Fidesz in Hungary, and the Serbian Progressive Party. These alignments with other populist or authoritarian actors are grounded in a shared foreign policymaking style and view of how power works.

Transnational Movement Infrastructure

Over time, these transnational linkages have expanded and deepened. The most significant has been the relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood. The AKP traces its roots to the Islamist National Outlook movement, which has maintained ideological affinities and organizational linkages with the Muslim Brotherhood since the 1960s.²⁷³ Under Erdoğan, these ties have been strengthened, and Türkiye has provided significant support to Brotherhood-affiliated groups, including material resources, political and military training, and sanctuary.²⁷⁴ In the wake of various geopolitical setbacks for the organization, particularly the military coup against its short-lived government in Egypt in 2013, Istanbul was a primary hub for its activities, hosting its foundations, organizations, and television channels.

A second major transnational linkage, also grounded in shared faith and ideology, was the partnership between the AKP and the Gülenist movement, which collapsed due to in-fighting between 2012 and 2016. The movement is rooted in Naqshibendi-Nurcu Sufi religious orders in Türkiye, and it has members, informal networks, schools, companies, and professional associations in places ranging from Central Asia to the Balkans, Africa, and the United States. Gülenist-affiliated networks were highly influential in shaping foreign policy during the AKP's first decade in power, providing the government with information, contacts, and institutional capacity.²⁷⁵

Religious orders have also provided important cross-border networks that inform and enable Erdoğan's foreign policy. The Naqshibendi-Nurcu Sufi order, for example, has extensive influence in Türkiye and Iraq, and Erdoğan's governments used it to build a cooperative relationship with Iraqi Kurds.

These ties are informal and nonexclusive; they do not constitute formal alliances. The state is the ultimate decisionmaker and dominant partner, and it often seeks to bring religious networks under its control. At the same time, these actors significantly inform and enable foreign policy.

Institutional and State-Adjacent Networks

Türkiye has long-standing engagement with non-state actors, especially in the religious sphere. For example, it has long used cultural and religious diplomacy as instruments of soft power, through state, semi-state, and private sector organizations. These include the Directorate (now Presidency) of Religious Affairs (Diyanet), which has developed into a vast organization that runs mosques, employs preachers, and provides humanitarian assistance across Europe, North America, Africa, and Central Asia.²⁷⁶

Party and regime interests have reshaped such engagement. Before Erdoğan came to power, Diyanet promoted a form of Islamic teaching that was careful to respect constitutional secularism, to avoid organic relations with religious orders, and to exclude religious extremism. Under him, it has become a vehicle of democratic backsliding and Sunni-Muslim social engineering.²⁷⁷ Moreover, Diyanet has deepened its relations with religious orders, blurring the boundaries between the formal and informal and the national and transnational. In addition to being an instrument of soft power, religious ideology can be mobilized to bolster the regime's support among religious voters.

Implications and Takeaways

The record of the first half of the twentieth century offers a sobering reminder of the risks inherent in an international system in which great and middle powers seek to maximize their interests, unconstrained by democracy and rule of law at home or by international rules and norms abroad. The models of statecraft adopted by right-wing populist actors are not reflected well in history. However forcefully they critique existing institutions, they struggle to offer a convincing alternative to a rules-based order.

The developments in Türkiye have important parallels with those in the United States and elsewhere. Since Trump's return to office and his rapid reshaping of domestic institutions and aspects of the "post-national" liberal international order,²⁷⁸ several patterns have become clear. First, the international system is entering a period of heightened uncertainty, driven by the interaction between domestic political changes and broader geopolitical shifts. Second, populist leaders have often been quicker than their rivals to recognize and exploit these transformations. Third, liberal-democratic actors have struggled to adapt, finding themselves in a largely reactive posture.

Erdoğan and the AKP can be seen as having been early responders to shifting global conditions. They pursued Türkiye's interests as a middle power accordingly, but they did so with a populist-Islamist worldview. While this resulted in some rational policies in line with the existing cross-party consensus, it has also produced many policies that are "semi-loyal,"²⁷⁹ not only to the liberal international order led by the West, but also to a rules- and institutions-based global order. This has produced many adverse consequences for the country. These include opaque transnational linkages, strained relations with the EU and the United States, the decline of soft power as a Muslim *and* secular democracy, unfettered immigration, environmental degradation, democratic backsliding, and recurring economic instability.

As a middle power whose growing economy is deeply integrated with global supply chains and dependent on capital inflows, export markets, and oil and gas imports, Türkiye benefits from the peace, predictability, and stability that are provided by a rules- and institutions-based global order. Hence, it can be expected to support these orders based on principle. Under AKP and Erdoğan, however, Türkiye is still embedded in global institutions, but appears to support them out of necessity or for their material benefits alone. It charges these multilateral institutions with ulterior motives and ethnic-religious biases without proposing viable paths to make them more inclusive and just. And, while keeping one foot in the liberal international order, Türkiye has cultivated ties with illiberal regimes and actors.

Erdoğan's dual imperative in foreign policy may not be sustainable: Domestic autocratization and state de-institutionalization undermine rational policymaking based on national interest. Turkish foreign policy echoes that of other authoritarian middle powers—which are inherently "more self-serving . . . and volatile than their democratic counterparts"²⁸⁰—limiting Türkiye's ability to reliably contribute to European and democratic security. And should autocratization—most recently the deposing of CHP leadership—destabilize the country, the risks would extend well beyond Türkiye.²⁸¹ The contest between Erdoğan's governing coalition and opposition actors like the CHP is both ideological and geopolitical. For Türkiye, dueling visions of politics at home map onto competing orientations abroad. One vision privileges personalized power and selective defiance, while the other emphasizes institutionalized decisionmaking, democracy, and alignment with a rules-based international order. The outcome of this contest will determine whether Türkiye aligns more closely with democratic or authoritarian powers in global politics.

The Alternative für Deutschland and Germany's Unsettled Place in the World

Jeremy Cliffe

Introduction: Radicals in the Complicated German Middle

In early November 2025, reports surfaced that four legislators from the radical-right Alternative für Deutschland (Alternative for Germany, AfD) planned to attend an upcoming Europe-BRICS gathering in Sochi on Russia's Black Sea coast. The news elicited starkly different responses from the party's two co-leaders. Alice Weidel expressed frustration and urged the legislators to keep the visit low profile and avoid meeting with former Russian president Dmitri Medvedev.²⁸² Tino Chrupalla defended the trip, insisting that he did not view Russia as a threat to Germany.²⁸³ In the end, at least three of the four legislators made the journey.²⁸⁴

The gathering proved a lackluster display: a handful of German politicians attending a Russian propaganda exercise masquerading as a global summit. Yet the episode revealed something more consequential about the AfD's complexities and dangers—and what makes Germany an interesting case study of populist foreign policy among middle powers. Historically, ambiguities about the country's position within Europe and its scale as a power have generated uncertainties about Germany's geopolitical status, and the AfD's foreign policy reflects those very tensions.

With respect to its ideological positioning, Germany has been described by foreign policy theorists like the early-twentieth-century liberal politician Friedrich Naumann as occupying a contested and imprecise *Mittellage* (middle position) between West and East.²⁸⁵ In terms of power, Germany inhabits an equally ambiguous space. Since unification in 1871, it has been neither merely another member of the European concert of states nor a stable hegemon. As Henry Kissinger supposedly quipped, Germany is “too big for Europe, too small for the world.”²⁸⁶

To understand these two tensions—each a recurring source of disorder in modern European geopolitics—is to understand what distinguishes the AfD’s foreign policy from that of other populist parties. The AfD is divided between seeking a Eurasian vocation for the German federal republic and a more Atlanticist orientation embracing Donald Trump’s United States.

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On the Sochi question, Weidel represented the transatlantic tendency and Chrupalla the Eurasian alternative. But other divisions also cleave the party. Some in the AfD envision Germany as a cooperative actor among independent European nations, while others advance a more primacist vision of the country as Europe’s de facto voice (a split which maps roughly onto the party’s westward/eastward outlooks). As this paper argues, such unresolved tensions may ultimately constrain the AfD’s potential as a leader and convener among European and global populist forces.

The AfD’s Evolution: From Ordoliberal Euroscepticism to Radical Nationalism

At the tail end of the eurozone crisis in 2013, the AfD was founded as a platform for conservative critics of German membership in the eurozone—advocating a radicalized version of ordoliberalism, the West German doctrine of championing liberal capitalism within a strict legal framework. Since then, it has moved steadily rightward in distinct phases: In 2015, its founder, Bernd Lucke, was sidelined amid the European migration crisis²⁸⁷; in 2017, his successor, Frauke Petry, was ousted after attempting to make the party seem more respectable²⁸⁸; and between 2021 and 2022, under Weidel and Chrupalla, the AfD adopted a sharper oppositional tone, opposing COVID-19 lockdowns and channeling anger over rising living costs following Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine.²⁸⁹

More recently, the party has flirted with “remigration.”²⁹⁰ Conventionally an objective description of migrants moving back to their countries of origin, remigration has become a deliberately inflammatory demand on the European radical right, associated with the mass emigration—nudged or forced—of millions of citizens with migrant backgrounds.²⁹¹

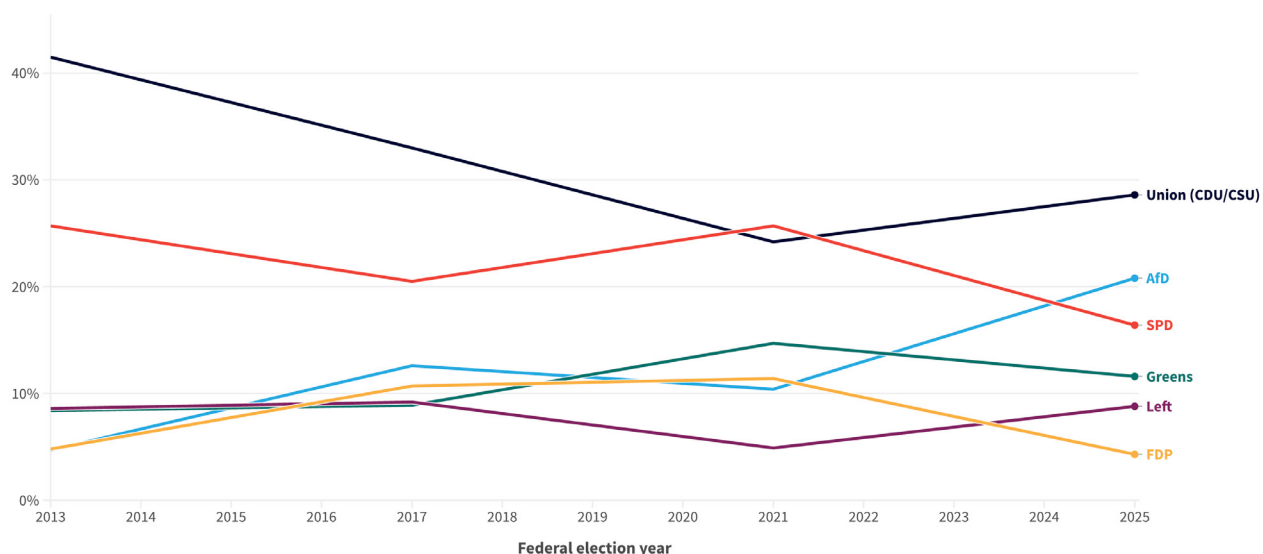
Some European populist parties, like France’s Rassemblement National (National Rally, RN), have distanced themselves from this blatantly extreme and racist policy.²⁹² The AfD, by contrast, has cited it as an objective. Admittedly, under the party’s recent bid for “bourgeois” conservative votes, its leaders have reined this back somewhat. They have banned links with Martin Sellner, an Austrian activist who advocates mandatory expulsions, and they insist that their vision of remigration would be consistent with Germany’s constitution.²⁹³ Nonetheless, this position stands as a marker of the AfD’s radicalism within the European right-populist landscape.

In the February 2025 federal elections, the AfD finished second, claiming 21 percent of the vote (see figure 1). The result saw Friedrich Merz become chancellor of a weak coalition comprising the center-right Union (an alliance of his Christian Democratic Union, CDU, and its Bavarian sister the Christian Social Union, CSU) and the center-left Social Democratic Party (SPD). As the coalition has struggled, the AfD's support has risen further. The party now regularly polls between 25 and 29 percent and, at the time of writing, is ahead of the CDU/CSU.²⁹⁴

The AfD has not yet wielded significant executive power in Germany beyond a handful of local offices, largely because of the so-called *Brandmauer*—the normative “firewall” against cooperating with the radical right. For now, the party's influence on German foreign policy therefore operates indirectly, shaping national discourse and influencing mainstream parties' positions. The party remains at some distance from formal power, but it could draw closer in the coming years. This might happen if the AfD led a state government, became an unofficial partner of a right-of-center federal government, or even led a federal government coalition. The first of these eventualities is a possible outcome of two state elections, in the eastern states of Saxony-Anhalt and Mecklenburg-West Pomerania, due in September 2026.

Concerns swirl through mainstream German politics about the AfD's potential influence—especially in a more powerful Germany whose defense spending is now on track to significantly surpass that of other major European states.²⁹⁵ In February, political scientist Liana Fix warned, “A militarily dominant Germany could prove particularly dangerous if its centrist domestic leadership starts to lose power—as it just well might.”²⁹⁶ Such anxieties speak to the two dimensions of Germany's in-between status.²⁹⁷ It is neither simply another great power nor straightforwardly committed to a Western alliance that is itself under strain.

Figure 1. Party Support in German Federal Elections, 2013–2025



Source: Die Bundeswahlleiterin (Federal Returning Officer), Federal Election Results, 2013, 2017, 2021, 2025, <https://www.bundeswahlleiterin.de/bundeswahlleiter.html>.

Understanding the AfD's Foreign Policy

The AfD's foreign policy is more an amalgam of intellectual influences, political strategy, and internal divisions than a coherent worldview. It blends German nationalist traditions with newer transnational currents of the radical right, even as the party's evolution and (thus far) exclusion from power shape its external outlook. Importantly, tensions between leaders like Alice Weidel and Tino Chrupalla run through this vision. The following sections unpack these competing strands.

Intellectual Roots: Schmitt, the *Nouvelle Droite*, and Ordoliberal Origins

The historical roots of the AfD's contemporary foreign policy can be traced to Carl Schmitt and other nationalist thinkers of 1920s Weimar Germany. Writing in the tradition of nineteenth-century German nationalism and influenced by geopolitical theorists such as Halford Mackinder, Schmitt argued against what he saw as German subordination to decadent liberal-universalist Western powers, especially the United Kingdom and the United States. In its place, he proposed a continental European bloc anchored by Germany and defended the right of powerful states to claim *Großräume*, or conservative spheres of influence beyond the reach of liberal internationalism—a vision that would form a keystone of Nazi foreign policy.

The AfD's foreign policy is more an amalgam of intellectual influences, political strategy, and internal divisions than a coherent worldview.

AfD figures like Benedikt Kaiser, a party intellectual, and Dimitrios Kisoudis, an adviser to co-leader Chrupalla, have both cited Schmitt. The party also draws heavily on the *nouvelle droite* ("new right") currents of the 1970s and 1980s—including those of the French theorist Alain de Benoist. One of de Benoist's arguments is that the post-1968 left achieved a form of Gramscian cultural hegemony that in recent decades has strongly shaped the AfD's self-conception as being part of a broader global illiberal counterrevolution.²⁹⁸

Such counterrevolutionary affinities would have seemed far-fetched at the time of the AfD's founding. Lucke was an academic economist steeped in the German ordoliberal tradition. Yet as the party has grown, it has become more radical and nationalist—arguably an expression of long-suppressed currents on the German conservative right, constrained for decades by the Brandmauer. Over the past decade, the AfD has cultivated an ecosystem of thinkers shaped by the likes of Schmitt and de Benoist.

A Global, Civilizational, and Multipolar Vision

The AfD's foreign policy outlook today stands out as one of the most stridently nationalist of the major European populist-right forces. Yet it is also instinctively—and some might argue, paradoxically—global, civilizational, and multipolar in orientation.

It is global in the sense that the party is among the European far-right forces least tethered to the continent's post-Cold War eurocentrism and most committed to building connections beyond the EU. Unlike other major populist parties of the European right, the AfD belongs to neither of the main far-right groups in the European Parliament, instead occupying a small and isolated camp of its own. At the same time, it has been one of the most vocal advocates for engagement with China, Russia, and (until the latest war in Iran, at least) the United States under Trump. Weidel has worked in China and speaks Mandarin, while other senior figures have sought closer relations stretching from Japan²⁹⁹ and India³⁰⁰ to the Middle East³⁰¹ and Latin America.³⁰² Few European populist parties pursue such an expansive international network.

The AfD is civilizational in that it portrays the world as divided into distinct cultural realms. Its civilizational focus is less explicitly religious than that of many other international populist movements—partly reflecting its strength in the relatively secular, post-communist eastern German states—but it nonetheless rests on a traditionalist sense of European cultural kinship. This framing helps explain the party's openness to engagement beyond Europe: It views such ties as relations between separate civilizations rather than as participation in a universal liberal order. As Björn Höcke, one of the party's most extreme voices, has put it: "Islam has a cultural space in which to develop . . . , but this cultural space cannot be Europe."³⁰³

Thus, as Jacob Ross of the German Council on Foreign Relations has argued, the AfD is multipolar in outlook, viewing the world as a constellation of major powers each of which is entitled to its own sphere of influence.³⁰⁴ It may regard Trump as a civilizational ally, but its senior figures have long described the United States as "*raumfremd*" in Europe, a hard-to-translate German word that means something like "territorially alien."³⁰⁵ While the party seeks closer relations with China, Russia, the United States, and other powers, it ultimately champions regional autonomy and an "alliance of nations" within Europe. Markus Frohnmeier, the AfD's foreign policy spokesman, has memorably described his party's vision as replacing the EU's "smoothie" with a "fruit salad" of sovereign states.³⁰⁶

Today the AfD channels all three of these characteristics into its approach to German foreign policy. The Brandmauer constrains the impact of this outlook—but does not eliminate it. Across the political mainstream, the AfD's rise is evident in policies that reflect its priorities.

Mainstream Impact: The AfD Effect on German Policy

Merz's political positioning is the most visible manifestation of the AfD's impact on mainstream policy. The German chancellor hails from the center-right Christian Democrats but belongs to their more conservative wing. He broke with Angela Merkel's centrist leadership of the party in the mid-2000s and lost bids for the party leadership in 2018 and January 2021—with the party in both cases choosing candidates viewed as more conciliatory and moderate. Only after the CDU's defeat in the 2021 federal election did Merz win the leadership on a third attempt in September of that year, having long pledged that his tougher brand of conservatism could cut AfD support in half.³⁰⁷

He then set about giving the party a harsher edge. Part of this reflected his tendency to speak off the cuff. Merz's early leadership saw him making a series of blunt, reactionary comments such as accusing Ukrainian refugees in Germany of "welfare tourism."³⁰⁸ But it also involved policy substance—the influence of the AfD evident in more conservative CDU stances on topics like migration and climate policy. While still in opposition, Merz sparked controversy when he relied on AfD votes to pass a Bundestag motion for significantly tightened refugee and asylum rules in January 2025.

Since becoming chancellor, he has sought to balance centrist and right-wing voters, yet the AfD's growing strength is evident in policies such as calls to end the EU's planned phase-out of non-electric cars by 2035 and a German cooling on the prospect of Ukraine joining the EU. A dash of the AfD's style—and more than a trace of its priorities—has thus filtered into federal policy. Yet tensions and even contradictions run through the AfD worldview. The following sections explore these fault lines.

The Mittellage: Germany Between East and West

German foreign policy has long been shaped by its Mittellage, its position between East and West. This conception has deep roots in German reactionary thought, including the work of Schmitt and his intellectual predecessors.

In 1918, Thomas Mann—the German author later celebrated as a pro-European liberal, but who in his youth was a strident nationalist—[distinguished](#) the Roman West (America, Britain, and France), with its bourgeois faith in reason and progress, from a deeper, more romantic German-Russian kinship personified by figures such as Friedrich Nietzsche and Fyodor Dostoevsky.³⁰⁹ Mann suggested that this "German primeval individuality . . . contains the whole basis and explanation for the lonely German position between east and west."³¹⁰ Variants of this thinking resurfaced during the Cold War among far-right West German figures such as Otto Strasser, who advocated a German "third way" between the United States and the Soviet Union.

As the dominant force for German nationalism today, the AfD casts itself as the heir to this tradition and its geoeconomic vision of Germany as an industry-rich but energy-poor state dependent on Eurasian gas and oil. The party has accordingly campaigned across the country for "peace" between Russia and Ukraine—effectively on Russian terms—and for the restoration of the Nord Stream gas pipeline.³¹¹ Its 2025 federal election manifesto declared: "Until the establishment of an independent and capable European military alliance, membership in NATO and an active role for Germany in the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe remain central elements of our security strategy."³¹² By equating the two defense paradigms, this formulation underscores the AfD's ambivalence toward Germany's traditional post-World War II Western anchoring.

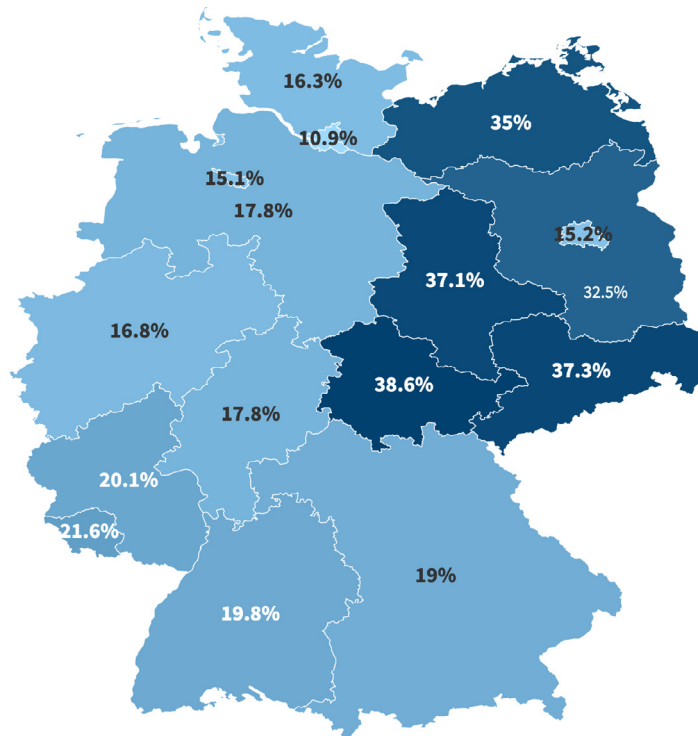
Nonetheless, there is a pronounced West-East split in the AfD about how far to take this Mittellage politics. The split maps closely onto the party's electoral geography. It performs far better in Germany's once-communist eastern states than in the west (see figure 2). Voters in the east tend to be more skeptical of the Western alliance and more receptive to Russia³¹³—sentiments shaped in part by lingering nostalgia for the former East German state and by the socialization of older generations raised learning Russian and under official veneration of the Soviet Union.

Accordingly, the AfD's eastern base tends to be more indulgent of Russian revisionism and more skeptical of Western power than its western supporters. Put differently, the Mittellage resonates more strongly in the east than in the west.

What might appear to be merely an intellectual or historical divide also reflects the differing tactical incentives the AfD faces in eastern and western Germany. In the eastern states, where the AfD now often polls near 40 percent, the party is within striking distance of circumventing the Brandmauer by forming a parliamentary majority without mainstream partners. This would mark a rupture with the German republic's self-identity as a country mindful of the lessons of mid-twentieth-century extremism.

Figure 2. AfD Vote Share by German Federal State, 2025

AfD vote share (%) 10%  40%



Source: Die Bundeswahlleiterin (Federal Returning Officer), Federal Election Results, 2013, 2017, 2021, 2025, <https://www.bundeswahlleiterin.de/bundeswahlleiter.html>.

But in the western states, by contrast, the party is currently polling closer to 20 percent—still substantial, but not nearly enough to lead. Accordingly, AfD branches there generally seek not to circumvent the firewall but to dismantle it by winning over more conventionally conservative voters and ultimately making possible coalitions with the CDU/CSU. Because roughly four out of five German voters live in the states of former West Germany, the party probably needs to pursue this course nationally if it is to wield federal power one day.

This dynamic—between moderation and maximalism—is mirrored in the tension between Weidel and Chrupalla. The former has sought to anchor the party in a civilizational West, embracing the Trump administration as a badge of respectability and a means of increasing support in population-rich western German states. The latter, by contrast, is more firmly rooted in the AfD’s eastern strongholds and is more receptive to an eastward reorientation of German foreign policy. Dimitrios Kisoudis, one of Chrupalla’s advisers, has argued that Germany should align itself with a consolidated “Eurasian” pole in world affairs.³¹⁴

These orientations are not entirely incompatible. Before his electoral demise, Viktor Orbán’s government in Hungary managed to combine an overtly pro-Trump posture with close ties to Russia and China. But in a Germany facing big choices about its defense posture, Russia’s war in Ukraine, EU enlargement, trade tariffs, industrial and digital policy, and other topics involving trade-offs between Western alignment and a more Eurasian future, they are much harder to combine. Within a party already prone to internal disagreement and rupture, the attendant tensions could easily escalate into open conflict.

The Burden of German Power

Germany’s peculiar power status—neither fully middling nor fully hegemonic—also inevitably shapes the trajectory of its leading populist party. The AfD bristles at much of the federal republic’s distinctive culture of self-restraint: a democratic system where courts rule on parties’ characters, where the firewall limits coalition options, and where forms of self-expression can be deemed unconstitutional. The party flirts with the notion that the country is a great power unjustly cut down to size by Western opponents. Prominent figures have advanced revisionist interpretations of the German past: Former AfD co-leader Alexander Gauland once dismissed the Nazi era as a speck of “bird shit” in an otherwise “glorious history”³¹⁵; Björn Höcke has chanted the Nazi-era slogan “everything for Germany”³¹⁶; and the party’s 2025 manifesto called for restoring “the best traditions of German military history.”³¹⁷

The AfD bristles at much of the federal republic’s distinctive culture of self-restraint.

Implicit in this revisionism, which is significant but not ubiquitous in the party, is a quest to “make Germany great again.” It is inherently in tension with the normalizing quest of some of the party’s leaders, especially Weidel in her recent bid for western German acceptability. And that ambiguity expresses itself in the party’s approach to building ties with other

populists internationally. These efforts have been patchy, and only sporadically successful. It helps to review them across five main forms of international populist cooperation: leader-centric networks, party-to-party alliances, shared narratives and political messaging, transnational movements, and opportunistic alignment with authoritarian powers.

Leader-Centric Networks

The AfD is less leader-centric than most populist parties. It has never had a singularly dominant figurehead in the mold of Marine Le Pen of France's RN, Jarosław Kaczyński of Poland's Law and Justice (PiS), Giorgia Meloni of the Brothers of Italy (FdI), or Nigel Farage of Reform UK, let alone figures like Trump, Narendra Modi, or Javier Milei. Alice Weidel has been its chancellor candidate in the last two federal elections but shares the leadership and is only one of several prominent party figures in the public eye. That is partially a function of the federal German traditions of party co-leadership and decentralized power, whereby national leaders wield less force than they do in more centralized systems—and therefore linked to that sense within parts of the party is the view that German greatness is hamstrung by its constraining post-1945 order.

Party-to-Party Alliances

But the lack of an internationally influential AfD figurehead also reflects others' concerns about German power, past and present. Weidel's relations with other European leaders are weak at least partly because those leaders are fundamentally wary of Germany: Farage and Le Pen both face accusations of belonging to Nazi collaborationist traditions in their own countries; Kaczyński and the PiS have actively deployed anti-German campaigns in Poland; and Meloni knows that in post-euro crisis Italy, excessive proximity to a German nationalist party carries a price.

Weidel's European solitude is reflected in the party-family map of Europe's far right. There are two main such groups in the European Parliament, both of which (or earlier iterations of which) have expelled the AfD when its rhetoric went too far even for them. In 2016, the European Conservatives and Reformists (a more Atlanticist outfit including PiS and FdI) kicked out AfD members of the European Parliament after one called on authorities to "shoot refugees."³¹⁸ In 2024, the more radical Identity and Democracy (I&D) group expelled the AfD after Maximilian Krah, the AfD's lead candidate in that year's European elections, spoke out in defense of Nazi SS members.³¹⁹

Hence, despite decent relations with Austrian and Hungarian counterparts, the AfD remains largely isolated in the parliament: While Austria's Freedom Party and Hungary's Fidesz sit in Patriots for Europe (PfE)—the successor to I&D—the AfD is relegated to the much smaller Europe of Sovereign Nations, a fringe group of mainly small, central and eastern European hard-right parties.

Shared Narratives and Political Messaging

The AfD's basic pitch rhymes with other populist narratives: a virtuous people betrayed by globalist elites in league with minorities and other outsiders. However, it struggles to fuse that account with those advanced by fellow populist parties. In southern Europe, a common populist refrain holds that Germany imposed punitive terms during the eurozone crisis—a tricky charge for the AfD to rebut, given its origins in the most hawkish strand of German economic orthodoxy. Elsewhere, historical memory further complicates matters: Italy's Lega (the party of deputy prime minister Matteo Salvini and a member of PpE) sees itself as the ideological heir to the northern Italian resistance against German tyranny during World War II³²⁰; in Poland, the country's economic renaissance and new geopolitical confidence are viewed as marking the final emergence from its long subordination from 1939 to 1989, first to devastating German occupation and then to Soviet domination.³²¹

Transnational Movements Infrastructure

What the AfD lacks in strong friendships in Europe it makes up for in its connections with the MAGA movement in the United States. In January 2025, Elon Musk addressed one of its pre-election rallies.³²² In May, Weidel spoke at a Conservative Political Action Conference in Budapest.³²³ AfD Members of the Bundestag like Frohnmeier and Beatrix von Storch have been warmly received in Washington by Trump administration officials.³²⁴ The Trump administration has made it clear that it sees attacks on the AfD as threatening to right-wing populism in the United States.³²⁵ This kinship too seems to reflect the party's sense that it seeks to restore Germany as a global power rather than to administer it as just another European one.

Nonetheless, the Trump administration's aggressive behavior over the course of 2026 thus far has cooled some of that enthusiasm. The AfD leadership condemned the United States' claims on Greenland in February and the U.S. war on Iran in April,³²⁶ recognizing that association with a conflict driving up costs for ordinary German voters could be toxic. In that respect, it demonstrated a fundamental versatility and opportunism seemingly typical of middle-power foreign policy.

Opportunistic Alignment with Authoritarian Powers

That much is also evident in the AfD's global engagements beyond its ties to the Trump administration. The Europe-BRICS gathering in Sochi illustrates how AfD figures continue to cultivate relations with Putin's Russia. So too did Frohnmeier's attendance at an economic conference in St. Petersburg in June 2026, where he met with one of Putin's top advisers and called for the reopening of Nord Stream.³²⁷ The party also boasts of close links with China. In early 2026, Chrupalla and Enrico Komning, both leading AfD members of the Bundestag, visited the country, and the party frequently receives favorable coverage in Chinese state media.³²⁸

Whether these relationships can be converted into broader AfD influence remains uncertain. The party may hope to position itself as a conduit between European populists and authoritarian powers, but it could encounter familiar constraints. Authoritarian leaders outside Europe have shown a penchant for dealing bilaterally with individual European states—witness China’s “16+1” engagement with central and eastern Europe. Here too, perceptions of Germany as a European quasi-hegemon (or an aspiring one) could generate caution elsewhere.

German Foreign Policy in a Populist Age

In 2011, Radosław Sikorski, the then and now-foreign minister of Poland, declared in Berlin: “I fear German power less than German inaction.”³²⁹ He has since reiterated the refrain on several occasions. For a Polish politician, this was a radical argument, effectively arguing that Germany is not assertive enough in Europe and has failed to live up to its size. Some observers caution that moderate allies like Sikorski should be careful what they wish for.³³⁰ Germany’s annual defense spending is expected to reach \$189 billion by the end of the decade—about twice that of France.³³¹ Germany is also weighing the restoration of mandatory conscription. Combined with Germany’s economic heft, these advances will make it even more politically dominant within the EU, especially if the country’s giant stimulus pulls it out of its current low-growth slump.

What, then, might follow if such a Germany were governed by the AfD? The authority of the German state would rest with a party that seeks its own privileged relationship with global great powers, embraces spheres of influence, wants to assemble a European and international illiberal bloc, and views the EU as an annoyance—Orbán’s Hungary with more than twenty times the economic firepower. The substantial powers of the German chancellery would thus be vested in an untested and radical-right movement that is still grappling with unresolved tensions surrounding Germany’s place in Europe and its awkward in-between size. Some of this would also apply in the scenario—more plausible in the short-medium term at least—of the party exerting significant sway over a future government but from the outside rather than within a coalition.

What this implies, then, is that a growing role for the AfD would bring long-standing ambiguities about Germany’s geopolitical status bubbling right to the surface—intensified by the party’s own radicalism and internal divisions. That, in turn, evokes the specter of a government controlled (or heavily influenced) by the AfD leading Germany into still more of a “neither/nor” space on the world stage. Surveying the party’s foreign policy instincts and positions today, it is not hard to imagine it embracing the U.S. right while being too close to the big Eurasian powers to command its trust; embracing big powers while failing to achieve a relationship of equals with them and still alienating mid-sized ones; and being alarming enough to put other Europeans on edge (perhaps forming coalitions around Germany to balance it) without being mighty enough to impose its own will.

Readers familiar with other papers in this series may note the congruence between the AfD and other examples of middle-power populism. As elsewhere, Germany's manifestation of this global trend is a party fundamentally shaped by the country's pride, anxieties, strengths, and vulnerabilities. And like its counterparts in other middle powers, the AfD seems more likely to intensify the existing geopolitical quandaries arising from those conditions than to break through them.

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