



Populism and Foreign Policy: The Case of Pakistan (2018-2022)

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Abstract:

Populism has become a global phenomenon that influences both the domestic and foreign policies of nations. In their foreign policies, populist governments around the world tend to pursue radical departures from their predecessors, challenge intermediary institutions, and adopt a personalized or centralized approach. They prioritize bilateral engagements over multilateral cooperation, engage transnational audiences actively, capitalize on cultural ties, and employ media-centric diplomacy, especially through social media. Religion and culture also play a significant role in shaping the foreign policies of populist-led nations. Certain national, historical, and geopolitical factors may lead to deviations and distinctive characteristics in the foreign policies of populist governments, despite the fact that these characteristics are commonly observed to varying degrees. The purpose of this study is to examine the case study of foreign policy under the populist government of PTI Pakistan and its conformity to these hypothesized common characteristics. In the context of Pakistan's national, historical, and geopolitical elements, it examines any deviations or distinctive characteristics Pakistan's populist government exhibits in comparison to populist governments around the world.

Keywords: Pakistan, Imran Khan, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf, populism, foreign policy

INTRODUCTION

Populism has emerged as a significant influence on the political landscapes of numerous democratic nations, serving as a means to sway voters, secure electoral victories, and advocate for the people's interests through domestic and foreign policies. Due to a combination of sociopolitical factors and altering global dynamics, it has evolved and risen globally. The economic discontent caused by issues such as income inequality, job insecurity, and the perceived marginalization of certain

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groups has contributed significantly to populist sentiments. The rapid pace of globalization, technological advancements, and the eroding of national boundaries has generated concerns about the loss of national identity and sovereignty, thereby contributing further to the rise of populism. In addition, cultural and social factors, such as identity politics and immigration, have become more prominent, with populist leaders using these issues to mobilize support (Moffitt, 2017). The proliferation of social media and digital platforms has enabled populist movements to bypass traditional media and institutions and directly communicate their messages. In addition, disillusionment with established political parties and institutions, coupled with a desire for change and a perception of a lack of representation, has fostered the rise of populism. These factors, coupled with broader global political shifts, have led to the emergence and growth of populist movements in numerous countries, reshaping political landscapes and posing challenges to the status quo (Chryssogelos, 2017).

LITERATURE REVIEW

While the precise definition and underlying principles of populism remain debatable, Muller's (2016) concept provides a valuable foundation for understanding its essence. Central to this framework are the concepts of 'anti-elitism' and 'anti-pluralism.' Populist movements typically employ a strategy that emphasizes the separation of society into two distinct groups: the 'evil elite' and the 'pure people' (Mudde, 2004). In doing so, they are attempting to legitimize their leaders as the sole representatives of morally virtuous citizens. Therefore, such governments frequently employ this strategy to discredit and weaken opposing forces by placing them in a category outside the realm of morality (Plagemann & Destrati, 2019). Weyland defines populism as "A political strategy by which a personalistic leader seeks or exercises government power based on direct, unmediated, non-institutionalized support from a large number of predominantly disorganized followers" (Weyland, 2001).

Populism at Domestic Level

On the domestic front, populist governments frequently adopt a more confrontational and polarizing stance, which challenges established norms and institutions. They tend to emphasize the will of the majority, claiming to represent the "true people" in opposition to perceived elite or corrupt interests. Utilizing social media platforms to bypass traditional media channels and connect directly with their supporters, populist leaders frequently employ direct and charismatic communication styles. They give priority to issues that resonate with their base, such as nationalism, immigration, and identity politics, while frequently ignoring the concerns of minority groups. In addition, populist governments have a tendency to centralize power; concentrating decision-making authority in the hands of the leader at the expense of democratic checks and balances. This can result in the erosion of institutional norms, attacks on the judiciary and the media, and a decline in the autonomy of regulatory bodies. While populist movements vary in their ideologies and policy agendas, these general practices are frequently observed in populist governance, influencing domestic politics and policy outcomes (Sharlamanov, 2021).

Populism and Foreign Policy

Populist governments exhibit distinctive patterns in their foreign policies, commonly observed among various populist regimes across the globe, albeit to varying degrees. Once in power,

populists seek a radical departure from the foreign policies of their predecessors, emphasizing a shift in strategy and priorities. They frequently contest intermediary institutions, preferring a centralized and individualized foreign policy-making process that aims to strengthen their direct connection with the people. In their international interactions, they adopt a transactional perspective and prioritize bilateral engagements over multilateral cooperation. Moreover, populists actively engage with transnational audiences, including Diaspora communities around the world, utilizing their influence to promote and protect their national interests in foreign countries (Verbeek & Zaslove, 2017). Religion or cultural ideologies play an important role in their foreign policy, fostering closer ties with nations that share similar values. Notably, populists utilize media-centric diplomacy, particularly social media platforms, to effectively shape narratives and foster direct connections with their constituents and other nations (Destradi et al., 2021).

FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY

Drawing upon the research framework used by Plagemann and Destradi (2019), this case study delves into various attributes of the foreign policy pursued by the populist government of PTI-led by Imran Khan in Pakistan. Employing qualitative research method, this analytical case study considers the following hypotheses in context of Pakistan's populist government, which are commonly observed as "common features" of populist governments' foreign policies worldwide:

1. Populists advocate for a radical departure from their predecessors' foreign policies.
2. Populists prefer a transactional approach, prioritizing bilateral engagements over multilateral cooperation.
3. Populists pursue a centralized and personalized foreign policy-making process.
4. Populists actively engage transnational audiences in shaping their foreign policy.
5. Populists extend religion or cultural ideologies in their foreign policies to foster stronger ties.
6. Populists adeptly employ media-centric diplomacy, leveraging social media platforms for communication.

This study aims to examine the foreign policy of right-wing populist government under PTI, Pakistan focusing on the common traits observed in the foreign policies of other right-wing populist governments worldwide such as Recep Tayyip Erdoğan government in Turkey, Donald Trump's presidency in the United States, Narendra Modi government in India. By analyzing these common populist foreign policy traits, the study seeks to determine the extent to which PTI's government in Pakistan aligns with these patterns and identify any deviations or distinctive features.

PAKISTAN'S POPULIST GOVERNMENT AND FOREIGN POLICY ANALYSIS

Populists advocate for a Radical Shift from Predecessor's Foreign Policies

In general, populist governments advocate for a radical shift from their predecessors' foreign policies in various ways, such as demonstrating disdain for institutions that seek to mediate between the leader and the people, such as bureaucracies, ministries of external affairs, and the media; re-negotiating treaties; engaging the transnational audience in their foreign policy; demonstrating media-centric diplomacy; and preferring bilateralism over multilateralism. Populism asserts its representation of the "true people" and places greater emphasis on economic relations with other countries (Benczes & Szabó, 2022). Under populist leadership, President Donald Trump's foreign policies diverged from those of his predecessor, Barack Obama. Key examples

include Trump's withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade deal, his renegotiation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) into the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA), and his withdrawal from the Iran Nuclear Deal (JCPOA). In addition, Trump's "America First" strategy posed a challenge to traditional alliances by calling into question NATO's relevance and requiring European allies to shoulder a greater share of the burden. These actions signaled a shift towards a more unilateral and transactional foreign policy approach compared to the multilateral and cooperative stance of the Obama administration (Wojczewski, 2019b). Under Erdoğan's leadership, Turkey altered its foreign policy by increasing its involvement in the Syrian Civil War, supporting opposition groups against the Assad regime, and engaging in the Libyan conflict to increase its regional influence. Turkey's foreign relations were drastically altered as a result of its emphasis on Muslim solidarity and an independent foreign policy, which strained relations with Western nations (Taş, 2020). Similarly, India's foreign policy adopted a proactive and assertive stance under the leadership of Narendra Modi. His administration strengthened ties with the United States (US), forged partnerships with countries in the Middle East, established a "Special Strategic and Global Partnership" with Japan, and enhanced ties with Israel. This approach marked a departure from previous administrations, prioritising strategic alliances and economic cooperation with key nations worldwide (Jaffrelot & Tillin, 2017).

The foreign policy of Pakistan's populist government led by Imran Khan also shows deviations from that of the previous administration. Pakistan's foreign policy towards India has diverged significantly from that of its predecessor. In February of 2019, forty Indian paramilitary personnel were killed during the response to the Pulwama Attack. Imran Khan condemned the attack and expressed a willingness to cooperate with the investigation, whereas his predecessor's government tended to minimize such incidents or provide conventional diplomatic responses. He demanded that India provide proof of Pakistan's involvement and vowed to take action if it was proven ("Pakistan will address," 2019). Following airstrikes conducted by the Indian Air Force in response to the Pulwama Attack, Wing Commander Abhinandan Varthaman, an Indian pilot, was captured. Instead of engaging in lengthy diplomatic negotiations, as its predecessor did in similar situations, Imran Khan's government released the pilot as a "peace gesture" to deescalate tensions between the two countries (Riaz, 2019). The construction of the Kartarpur Corridor highlighted the differences in methodology. The corridor, which facilitates visa-free travel for Indian Sikh pilgrims to visit the Gurdwara Darbar Sahib in Kartarpur, Pakistan, was established and accelerated by the government of Imran Khan. This project aimed to improve people-to-people contact and promote religious tourism between India and Pakistan, in contrast to the previous administration's lack of focus on these issues (Hasan & Khalid, 2020). During his September 2019 address to the United Nations General Assembly, Imran Khan criticized India's actions in Jammu and Kashmir, focusing on human rights abuses in the region. This populist approach to highlighting the Kashmir conflict on an international stage and appealing for international intervention diverged from the more restrained diplomatic approach adopted by the previous administration (Aslam, et al., 2022). These examples illustrate how Imran Khan's populist foreign policy towards India differed from that of the previous government, which was led by Nawaz Sharif. Imran Khan's administration exhibited a more assertive and responsive stance, taking direct action, engaging in symbolic gestures, and highlighting contentious issues on international platforms.

Khan's government also sought to engage with the US on an equal footing by adopting an independent and assertive foreign policy, responding with "no more" to the US's "do more" mantra. This action was viewed as a departure from the previous administration's desire to maintain close relations with the US. In addition, Khan's government adopted a more critical stance towards US drone strikes in Pakistan's tribal areas, emphasizing the violations of sovereignty and civilian casualties resulting from such operations. In December 2018, the Pakistani Foreign Office publicly condemned a US drone strike in Baluchistan province, labeling it a violation of Pakistan's territorial integrity. In his speech to the United Nations General Assembly in September 2019, Khan brought up the Kashmir dispute and criticized the US for its inaction, arguing that Pakistan should not be treated as a hired gun for the US (Shamil & Miri, 2020). Moreover, Khan's administration pursued a multidirectional foreign policy, seeking closer ties with other nations as a counterbalance to the US. Pakistan signed significant investment and economic cooperation agreements with China, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, reducing its reliance on American assistance.

Khan sought to increase cooperation and lessen historical mistrust in Pakistan's relations with Russia, a notable change. In 2018, Khan became the first Pakistani leader to participate in the Eastern Economic Forum in Vladivostok, Russia, signaling an intention to strengthen economic ties (Siddiqui, 2019). Subsequently, both nations agreed to establish a Joint Military Consultative Committee with the objective of enhancing defense cooperation. In 2019, Pakistan and Russia conducted their first-ever joint military exercise, dubbed "Friendship-2019," strengthening their defense ties ("Russian, Pakistani special," 2019). Another significant event was the signing of an agreement between the two countries to construct the North-South Gas Pipeline, which promoted energy cooperation (Ebrahim, 2022). Additionally, Khan's government took measures to improve relations with neighboring nations, particularly Afghanistan. Under his leadership, Pakistan played a crucial role in facilitating peace talks between the US and the Taliban, with the goal of achieving a peaceful and stable Afghanistan (Idrees et al., 2020). Pakistan's stance towards Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states also underwent a significant change. Khan's government, while maintaining close ties, sought to balance its relationships and pursued a more independent foreign policy, focusing on mutual respect and economic cooperation rather than relying solely on financial aid. This was made clear by Khan's opposition to joining the Saudi-led military coalition in Yemen and his efforts to diversify Pakistan's economic partnerships with nations such as Iran, Turkey, and Malaysia (Khan, 2020). In addition, Khan's government actively pursued stronger ties with Turkey and Malaysia to increase cultural and economic cooperation among Muslim-majority nations (Bastos, 2021). These efforts included joint military exercises, trade agreements, and an increase in interactions between people. With its populist stance, the Khan administration represented a deviation from the previous administration. To call it a complete paradigm shift in foreign policy would be unwarranted.

Populists Prefer Bilateralism Over Multilateralism-A Transactional Approach

There is a systematic inclination in populist foreign policies towards bilateralism rather than multilateralism, which is a less effective approach to addressing "global challenges" (Csehi & Heldt, 2021). The claim that populist leaders represent the will of the people may inhibit their willingness to actively contribute to global issues such as climate change. Due to their emphasis on national sovereignty, simplified decision-making, prioritization of national interests, political messaging,

and perceived flexibility and negotiating power, populist governments frequently favor bilateralism over multilateralism. They view bilateral agreements as a means of exerting greater control over their nation's affairs, making quicker decisions, focusing on specific domestic issues, projecting themselves as defenders of national interests, and tailoring agreements to their specific requirements. However, populist leaders' preferences can vary based on their ideologies and geopolitical considerations. Former U.S. President Donald Trump prioritized bilateral trade deals and agreements. To protect American interests, he withdrew from multilateral agreements such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and renegotiated bilateral trade agreements such as NAFTA (Wojczewski, 2019b). The Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, prioritized bilateral relationships in his foreign policy. To forge closer ties with individual nations such as the US, Japan, and Israel, he pursued bilateral trade agreements and engaged in high-level diplomatic visits. President of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdogan adopted a more assertive foreign policy and favored bilateral over multilateral approaches. This included closer cooperation with nations such as Russia and Qatar and the pursuit of individual trade, defense, and security agreements.

One example of the populist administration of the PTI in Pakistan is the administration of economic aid. Instead of pursuing multilateral loans or aid packages, the PTI government pursued bilateral loans from China, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, among others. Pakistan secured a \$6 billion loan package from Saudi Arabia in 2018, bypassing multilateral institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) (Johnson & Shahzad, 2018). A second illustration is Pakistan's approach to regional conflicts. The government of Imran Khan favored bilateral negotiations and dialogue with neighboring nations, such as India and Afghanistan, over multilateral platforms. Khan's government, for instance, pursued talks with India to de-escalate tensions and improve relations, emphasizing direct engagement rather than relying solely on multilateral forums such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). In the realm of trade agreements, PTI's preference for bilateralism is also evident. The government has demonstrated a preference for bilateral trade agreements over multilateral trade frameworks. For instance, Pakistan initiated bilateral trade agreement discussions with Turkey, Malaysia, and Qatar, emphasizing mutually beneficial economic ties over membership in larger multilateral trade blocs. While the PTI-led populist government in Pakistan favored a bilateral approach to international relations, it did not demonstrate a strong propensity to withdraw from regional or international organizations or treaties.

Populists Pursue Centralized and Personalized Foreign Policy Making Process

Under populist leadership, foreign policy tends to be highly centralized and individualized (Destradi & Plageman, 2019). Consequently, traditional foreign policy institutions, such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, have lost some of their former authority. Diverse democratic governments with populist tendencies in their foreign policies retain their distinctiveness and individuality in both substantive and procedural aspects of their foreign policies. For instance, the Prime Minister's Office manages foreign affairs directly, involving the national security advisor (NSA) and the foreign secretary while bypassing External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj. The NSA, Ajit Doval, and the BJP party chief, Ram Madhav, have joined former Foreign Secretary Jaishankar, who served until January 2018, as Modi's top foreign policy advisors. Jaishankar personally handled all of Modi's external engagements, consolidating the Prime Minister's Office's decision-making

authority. Consequently, Swaraj's visibility in foreign affairs has been limited to assisting individual Indian citizens in distress abroad, and major foreign policy decisions are now made by the Prime Minister's Office rather than the Ministry of External Affairs (Ganguly 2017).

Pakistan's populist government, led by Imran Khan, demonstrates a pattern similar to that of other populist leaders worldwide, with a personalised and centralized foreign policy. This strategy involves direct engagement in international relations, thereby bypassing the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other stakeholders involved in the procedural aspects of formulating foreign policy. Numerous visits and meetings demonstrate Imran Khan's preference for a hands-on approach to diplomacy, which is evidenced by his active role in reaching out to foreign countries and leaders. Khan's desire to establish personal connections and exert influence over key foreign policy decisions reflects his populist style of leadership, which he demonstrates by assuming a more direct role. For instance, shortly after assuming office, he initiated peace talks with India and emphasized the need for dialogue to resolve the Kashmir conflict. Khan delivered his first address to the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in the same year, addressing such topics as Islamophobia, money laundering, and corruption. He travelled to Saudi Arabia to seek financial aid for Pakistan's struggling economy, followed by a December 2018 trip to Qatar to discuss bilateral trade and investment opportunities. In 2019, he also visited Turkey, where he met with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to strengthen ties, and Malaysia, where he addressed the Malaysian Parliament and met with Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad to strengthen bilateral cooperation. Later, he visited the US, where he discussed the Afghan peace process and regional stability with President Donald Trump. In July 2019, he returned to the US to further discuss the Afghan peace process.

In addition, Imran Khan visited Iran in August 2019 to mediate between Iran and Saudi Arabia amidst escalating tensions in the region. In September 2019, he delivered a speech at the UNGA highlighting the Kashmir issue and calling for international intervention. He travelled to Malaysia and Qatar to discuss bilateral trade, investment, and other issues. He has been a pivotal figure in the entire Afghan peace process. Khan's trip to Sri Lanka and Uzbekistan to strengthen bilateral cooperation, particularly in the areas of trade, investment, and tourism, demonstrates his involvement in foreign affairs. Additionally, he personally received the foreign delegates. Khan met with the Chinese ambassador to Pakistan, Nong Rong, in the same month to discuss bilateral cooperation and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) project. During Blinken's visit to Pakistan, he also met with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken to discuss regional security and the Afghan peace process.

During Imran Khan's presidency, a significant development in Pakistan-Russia relations occurred when Khan proceeded with his planned visit to Moscow despite Western countries' requests to postpone the trip due to Russia's invasion of Ukraine (Basit, 2022). Khan defended his visit by stating that bilateral issues dominated the discussions (Schleich, 2022). However, he was criticised by the opposition, and he claimed he was unaware of the invasion and would have considered postponing it if he had known (Basit, 2022). Despite Khan's emphasis on the importance of negotiations and diplomacy, many experts viewed this visit as a diplomatic disaster that could isolate Pakistan and strain its relationship with the West, especially the US. This action also had economic repercussions, given Pakistan's reliance on IMF loans. During the visit, Pakistan's military chief was in Brussels, causing chaos at home (Shams, 2022). It demonstrates that many domestic

stakeholders were ignored during the decision-making process. Notably, no signed agreements or memorandums of understanding were reported between Pakistan and Russia following the visit. According to the statements of former Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi, some experts interpreted this visit as a step towards Pakistan pursuing an independent foreign policy (Schleich, 2022). In addition, towards the end of his premiership, Imran Khan made reference to a "foreign conspiracy letter" and implied that the US was behind the alleged plot, tying it to his visit to Russia during the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Khan retracted his statements in his final address to the nation (Malik, 2022). Thus, like other populist governments around the world, the populist government under the PTI displayed a centralized individualistic foreign policy.

Populists Engage Transnational Audience in Their Foreign Policy

Furthermore, populist governments in countries such as the US, the United Kingdom, and the United Arab Emirates engage their respective Diasporas, leveraging their influence to promote national interests abroad (Plagemann & Destrati, 2019). For example, the Indian government has actively engaged with its Diaspora, also known as Non-Resident Indians (NRIs), around the world under populist leadership. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has worked to strengthen ties with the Indian Diaspora, acknowledging their economic, cultural, and political importance. The Pravasi Bharatiya Divas (Non-Resident Indian Day) is an annual event that engages the Indian Diaspora and encourages their participation in India's development. The government encourages NRIs to maintain ties with India and contribute to the country's growth through initiatives such as the Overseas Citizenship of India (OCI) scheme. Similarly, under President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's leadership, Turkey has actively engaged with its Diaspora, particularly in Europe. Erdogan's government has sought to strengthen ties with Turkish communities around the world, a strategy known as "Turkish Diaspora politics." The government intends to mobilize the Diaspora through organizations such as the Union of European Turkish Democrats (UETD) to promote Turkish interests and influence political decisions in their host countries. This includes organizing rallies, cultural events, and assisting Diaspora members. The Turkish government's efforts were especially visible during election campaigns and issues concerning Turkish identity and politics (Koprulu, 2009).

As a populist leader, Imran Khan has actively engaged the transnational audience and Pakistani Diaspora in shaping Pakistan's domestic and foreign policies. In his first address to the nation, he invited significant Overseas Pakistani professionals to help shape "Naya Pakistan." One notable example is his efforts to reach out to and involve overseas Pakistanis in national decision-making. Khan launched the "Diaspora Initiative" in 2018 to mobilise the Pakistani Diaspora and leverage their expertise, resources, and networks for the country's development and foreign policy goals. Imran Khan actively engaged with the Pakistani Diaspora through community events and gatherings during his international visits (Aziz, 2018). These interactions provided a forum for overseas Pakistanis to express their concerns, share their experiences, and make recommendations on national issues. Imran Khan's government has implemented a number of initiatives and policies to encourage foreign direct investment (FDI) from overseas Pakistanis, including the Roshan Digital Account and public-private partnerships (PPP) with overseas Pakistani investors. He expressed support for granting overseas Pakistanis voting rights. He introduced a savings scheme for overseas Pakistanis to boost the national economy, as well as "Naya Pakistan Certificates" in order to draw

investment from overseas Pakistanis. He implemented a number of initiatives to streamline remittance procedures, reduce transfer costs, and promote the use of digital platforms for remittance transactions, such as the Sohni Dharti Remittance Programme (SDRP) ("PM launches," 2021). Overseas Pakistanis also supported Imran Khan through various means and forums, such as organising Kashmir rallies, providing financial support for dams, and using social media platforms and digital activism to support Imran Khan's foreign policy agenda (Irfan, 2022). Thus, like other populist leaders around the world, the PTI's populist government sought participation from the Pakistani Diaspora in both domestic and foreign policymaking.

Populist Extend Religion or Cultural Ideologies in their Foreign Policies

The religious or cultural ideologies of populist government leaders have a significant impact on their domestic and foreign policies. Religious and cultural ideologies shaped foreign policy under Donald Trump's populist leadership. Trump's emphasis on Christian values, as well as support from conservative religious groups, influenced his approach to issues such as Israel and the Middle East. His decision to recognize Jerusalem as Israel's capital and relocate the US embassy there was in line with the religious beliefs of his conservative base. Furthermore, his travel ban targeting predominantly Muslim-majority countries reflected a cultural ideology aimed at addressing perceived national security concerns (Wojczewski, 2019). Similarly, in India, the populist government led by Narendra Modi has been associated with Hindu nationalist ideology. This ideology has had an impact on foreign policy, particularly relations with neighboring countries such as Pakistan and Bangladesh. Modi's government prioritized the issue of illegal immigration from Bangladesh, which aligned with the cultural and religious concerns of Hindu nationalist supporters. The contentious Citizenship Amendment Act, which expedited Indian citizenship for non-Muslim migrants from neighboring countries, was seen as a reflection of this ideology (Wojczewski, 2019a). In Turkey, Islamic ideology has influenced foreign policy decisions under the populist leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Erdogan's government has taken a more assertive and proactive stance in the Muslim world, positioning Turkey as a leader and protector of Muslim interests. For example, Turkey's support for Islamist movements in the Middle East, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, reflects the alignment of foreign policy with Islamic ideologies. Erdogan's rhetoric and actions have resonated with his conservative Muslim base, shaping Turkey's approach to regional conflicts and relations with Muslim-majority countries (Delibas, 2009).

Religion and culture played an important role in both Khan's domestic and foreign policies. His foreign policy approach reflects a strong emphasis on religious and cultural ideologies, particularly in the context of Pakistan's relations with Muslim-majority countries. In his efforts to broaden Pakistan's ties with the Ummah beyond Saudi Arabia and the Gulf, Khan personally visits Turkey, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, fostering closer ties (Bezhan, & Khattak 2020; Siddique 2020; Huseynov 2021; "What's behind," 2021). Notably, the Turk-Pak alliance is a prominent example of this effort. Within this framework, the concept of "the others" emerges, which Khan accuses of imposing "foreign culture" and posing security threats to the homeland.

Khan's visit to the families affected by a terror attack on the Shia Hazara community was a clear manifestation of this ideology. During his visit, he informed the bereaved community about India's alleged involvement in the attack, claiming that the incident was part of a larger game (Shahid 2021). Khan went on to express his vision of uniting not only Pakistan but the entire Muslim

Ummah, attempting to bridge the gap between Saudi Arabia and Iran. This ambition to position himself as a leader of the Muslim world and to deflect blame onto perceived enemies is consistent with his populist civilizationism.

Furthermore, Khan has used social media and international platforms to highlight the Ummah's victimhood, drawing attention to rising Islamophobia in the West and criticizing hijab/ headcover bans as "secular extremism" (Raza 2021). However, it is important to note that this concern is part of his Islamist populist civilizationism rather than a purely humanitarian one. Critics argue that Khan has not taken sufficient steps to address issues such as vandalism against places of worship, forced conversions, and unjust imprisonments of non-Muslims in Pakistan (Gannon 2020). Furthermore, he has remained silent on China's treatment of its Uighur population, denying genocide and accepting the Chinese version of events due to Pakistan's strong relationship and trust with China (Yilmaz, & Shakil 2021a).

Khan's selective outreach to Muslim countries and tendency to criticize the West are consistent with his populist Islamist civilizationism. This concept portrays the Ummah as victims, instilling fear in "the people" and encouraging them to maintain their Muslim identity. Simultaneously, Khan demonizes and dehumanizes "the conspirators" and their non-Muslim and Western allies, instilling fear, resentment, misjudgment, and distrust in "the others." This civilizational divide reinforces the perceived need for a strong Islamist populist leader like Khan.

Examining Khan's approach to media, education, women's rights, and engagement with Muslim "brothers," it becomes clear that "New Pakistan" is shaped to present not only Pakistanis but also the Muslim Ummah as protagonists, while Western ideas are portrayed as antagonistic hegemony or mind colonization. Dissenting voices within Pakistan are frequently dismissed as either being influenced by Western propaganda or as conspirators against "the people" and the Ummah, leaving little room for pluralism. In a society where radical right-wing religious ideals already predominate, this type of populism easily gains support at the expense of alienating "the others" and deepening xenophobia towards other nations, races, and religions (Shakil & Yilmaz, 2021b). Thus, like other populist leaders around the world, Khan's domestic and foreign policies are influenced by religious or cultural ideologies; however, as previously stated, there are some points where these ideologies are not the dominant determinant of foreign policy.

Populists Employ Media-Centric Diplomacy

Populist leaders have frequently used media diplomacy as a powerful tool to shape public opinion and directly communicate their policies to their supporters. This approach was seen prominently during Donald Trump's presidency in the US (Sandre, 2015). Trump used Twitter extensively to bypass traditional media channels, issuing unfiltered messages, policy announcements, and criticisms of opponents, all with the goal of connecting directly with his base of supporters. Similarly, Recep Tayyip Erdoan of Turkey used both social media and traditional media to address the public directly, allowing him to establish a direct line of communication and bypass traditional diplomatic channels. In India, Prime Minister Narendra Modi used social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook to directly engage with the public, sharing government initiatives and policies and building a strong connection with his followers. Other populist leaders who have extensively used social media platforms to communicate their policies, interact with supporters,

and counter criticism from traditional media outlets include Matteo Salvini in Italy, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, and Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines. Populists have effectively controlled their messaging, reached broader audiences, and fostered direct connections with their supporters by leveraging media-centric diplomacy.

Media diplomacy is a hallmark of populist leaders, and Imran Khan is no exception. During his tenure, Imran Khan has ranked ninth on Twiplomacy's "50 Most Followed World Leaders" list in 2020. As a frequent Twitter user, he has kept an active presence on the platform since March 2010, amassing over 12 million followers to date. As a result, like other populist leaders around the world, Khan has actively used "Twitter Diplomacy" to communicate with both national and international audiences, addressing important issues and shaping public opinion or gaining popular support (Urcan, 2021). He has extensively used social media platforms, particularly Twitter, to raise awareness about India's and Pakistan's ongoing Kashmir conflict. He has frequently tweeted about human rights violations in Kashmir, pleading for international attention and support for Kashmiris (Azeema et al., 2020). During diplomatic squabbles with other countries, he has used social media to engage in public diplomacy. During a tense exchange with the US in 2018, for example, Khan took to Twitter to criticize President Donald Trump's remarks about Pakistan, expressing his disappointment and defending Pakistan's stance on terrorism. Furthermore, in the aftermath of the Charlie Hebdo caricature scandal in Europe, Imran Khan launched a social media campaign condemning Islamophobia and urging the international community to respect religious sensitivities. He used social media platforms such as Twitter to spread his message and gain support from Muslims all over the world ("Pakistan PM condemns," 2020). He has also used social media to promote tourism in Pakistan. Khan, like other populist leaders around the world, aims to bypass traditional channels and connect with people on a personal level through his media-centric approach, presenting him as a relatable and accessible leader.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, Imran Khan's foreign policies as Prime Minister of Pakistan, like those of other right-wing populist parties around the world, demonstrated several populist trends to varying degrees. Notably, media-centric diplomacy emerged as the most prominent and comparable feature, with Khan expertly using social media platforms to communicate and shape his foreign policy message. Furthermore, he used elements of Islamic civilizationism to broaden religious and cultural ideologies in order to strengthen ties with Muslim-majority countries. Khan's approach to foreign policy was centralized and personalized, as evidenced by his visits to other countries and his personal reception of foreign delegates. While he preferred bilateral engagements, Khan did not completely reject multilateralism, though his primary focus remained on developing individual relationships. Furthermore, while Khan addressed the Pakistani Diaspora, they played a minor role in shaping his foreign policy, implying that Diaspora politics were part of his media-centric diplomacy strategy to gain domestic support. Overall, populism's influence on foreign policy appears to have had less significant consequences in terms of policy outcomes and more impact on procedural aspects in Khan's case. This is consistent with the broader hypothesis that populism is primarily a political style rather than a substantive ideology, with implications for foreign policy (Weyland, 2017).

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