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## **From Rhetoric to Diplomacy: Populism and Foreign Policy under Pakistan's Political Dynamics (2018–2022)**

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### **ABSTRACT**

From 2018 to 2022, Pakistan under Prime Minister Imran Khan displayed a foreign-policy style shaped by populist rhetoric, people-centrism, anti-elite frames, and moralized nationalism—interacting with structural constraints (civil–military relations, fiscal dependence, and regional security shocks). Drawing on speeches, UNGA addresses, leader interviews, and crisis episodes with India, the United States, Afghanistan, China, Russia, and the Gulf, this study argues that populism primarily affected the presentation and speed of foreign-policy choices—personalized signaling, confrontational messaging, and high-salience symbolism—more than the core strategic alignments. Key episodes include the post-Pulwama crisis and the Article 370 revocation response (2019), the “absolutely not” refusal to host U.S. bases (2021), hedging around the Taliban’s return in Afghanistan (2021), outreach to Russia during the 2022 Ukraine invasion, CPEC slowdowns and re-framing, and sensitivity to Saudi preferences. The paper proposes testable indicators—leader-centric diplomacy, volatility and reversals, anti-external-elite narratives—and evaluates them against institutional veto players and material constraints. Findings suggest that populist leadership reshaped diplomatic tone and audience targeting, but did not overturn Pakistan’s enduring security paradigm. The conclusion reflects on how populist foreign-policy styles can heighten reputational uncertainty without resolving underlying strategic dilemmas.

**Keywords:** Populism, Foreign Policy, Political Rhetoric, Pakistan

### **Introduction**

Populism has increasingly become a defining feature of global politics, influencing both domestic governance and external relations. Scholars conceptualize populism as a political style that pits the “pure people” against a corrupt “elite,” often relying on personalized leadership, emotive rhetoric, and appeals to national sovereignty (Mudde, 2017). In the realm of foreign policy, populism tends to emphasize leader-centric diplomacy, skepticism toward multilateralism, and symbolic gestures aimed at resonating with domestic audiences rather than pursuing consistent strategic alignments (Verbeek & Zaslove, 2017).

In Pakistan, the rise of Imran Khan and his Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party in 2018 marked a notable turn toward populist politics. Khan’s discourse often framed Pakistan’s challenges as rooted in the betrayal of political elites and external actors, while portraying himself as the authentic representative of the people (Yilmaz & Shakil, 2021). His foreign policy rhetoric reflected this populist style, characterized by high-profile public statements, moralized narratives, and confrontational posturing—such as his strong stance on Kashmir following



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India's revocation of Article 370 in 2019, the refusal to allow U.S. bases after the Afghanistan withdrawal in 2021, and his defiant position during the Russia–Ukraine crisis in early 2022 (Gul & Rana, 2023; Rafiq, 2022).

Yet, despite the populist tone, Pakistan's foreign policy under Khan remained bounded by structural constraints, including civil–military relations, economic dependencies, and regional security imperatives (Javaid & Jahangir, 2020). The PTI government's experience demonstrates that while populism can alter the style and presentation of diplomacy, it does not necessarily transform the substance of strategic alignments. This raises important questions about how populist leaderships in semi-democratic and security-sensitive states navigate the tension between domestic appeal and international constraints.

The Pakistan's foreign policy during 2018–2022 through the lens of populism, focusing on how leader-centric rhetoric shaped the country's diplomatic posture. By analyzing key episodes—including relations with India, the United States, China, Russia, Afghanistan, and Gulf states—this paper seeks to assess the extent to which populism influenced foreign policy outcomes and the political dynamics surrounding them.

### **Populism and Foreign Policy**

Populism, as a political style, is characterized by the dichotomy between the “pure people” and the corrupt elite, often mobilized through charismatic leadership and emotional rhetoric (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). While most studies emphasize populism's domestic implications, scholars increasingly recognize its relevance in international politics. Populist leaders tend to personalize diplomacy, prioritize sovereignty over multilateralism, and frame foreign policy decisions in ways that resonate with domestic audiences (Chryssogelos, 2018).

In foreign policy, populism manifests through several dimensions. First, populist leaders often bypass institutionalized diplomatic channels, preferring direct and symbolic gestures that reinforce their image as defenders of the nation (Plagemann & Destradi, 2019). Second, populist foreign policies frequently emphasize bilateral relationships over multilateral cooperation, as multilateral institutions are often depicted as elitist or constraining national sovereignty (Verbeek & Zaslove, 2017). Third, foreign policy is used as a platform to project populist rhetoric globally, whether through highlighting civilizational identities, contesting Western dominance, or championing marginalized issues such as inequality, Islamophobia, or climate justice (Krastev, 2020).

Comparative studies highlight variations in populist foreign policy across regions. In Latin America, leaders like Hugo Chávez framed foreign policy around anti-imperialism and South-South solidarity. In Europe, right-wing populists have often emphasized Euroscepticism, migration restrictions, and national sovereignty (Taggart & Pirro, 2021). In South Asia, populist leaders have drawn upon religion and civilizational narratives to construct distinct foreign policy agendas (Ullah, 2024).

The implications of populism for foreign policy are paradoxical. On one hand, populism can amplify neglected issues, democratize foreign policy debates, and bring greater public engagement into international affairs. On the other, its emphasis on symbolic politics and leader-driven diplomacy often produces volatility, inconsistency, and friction with established institutions (Gul & Rana,



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2023). In fragile democracies like Pakistan, these tensions become particularly salient as populist leaders attempt to balance domestic popularity with structural constraints such as economic dependency and civil–military dynamics.

### **Analyzing the Political Dynamics in Pakistan (2018–2022)**

The political landscape of Pakistan between 2018 and 2022 was marked by the rise, consolidation, and eventual downfall of Imran Khan’s populist-led government under the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI). Emerging victorious in the 2018 general elections, Khan positioned himself as the representative of the “common people” against the “corrupt political elite,” a narrative that resonated with Pakistan’s middle classes, youth, and diaspora communities (Mughal & Zaidi, 2021). His political discourse drew heavily on Islamic civilizational references, promises of accountability, and the vision of Naya Pakistan, which he portrayed as a break from dynastic and elite-dominated politics (Ullah, 2024).

Domestically, Khan’s governance combined populist mobilization with institutional frictions. His rhetoric often challenged entrenched political elites, accusing opposition leaders of corruption and foreign dependency. At the same time, PTI capitalized on social media platforms to bypass traditional media and directly engage citizens, strengthening the populist bond between leader and people (Jaffrelot, 2021). However, economic instability, rising inflation, and strained relations with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) eroded popular support and constrained his government’s ability to deliver on populist promises (The Diplomat, 2020).

Civil–military relations remained a defining feature of Pakistan’s political dynamics during this period. While Khan initially benefited from a working alignment with the military establishment, differences gradually emerged over key issues, including foreign policy decisions such as the Russia visit in February 2022 and the appointment of senior security officials (Gul & Rana, 2023). These tensions weakened PTI’s governing coalition and exposed the limits of populist autonomy in a system where the military remains a dominant actor in politics (Fair, 2022).

On the foreign policy front, Khan’s populism shaped Pakistan’s global posture. His speeches at the United Nations General Assembly emphasized issues such as Islamophobia, Kashmir, and climate change, framing them as moral imperatives rather than pragmatic diplomatic concerns (Khan, 2019). He also pursued closer relations with China and Russia, while adopting a critical stance toward Western powers, which he portrayed as exploitative and insensitive to Muslim concerns (The New Yorker, 2022). These foreign policy moves, however, often clashed with institutional preferences and the country’s economic dependencies, ultimately contributing to his political downfall. By 2022, Khan’s government faced mounting opposition, defections from coalition partners, and growing civil–military discord, culminating in a parliamentary no-confidence vote in April 2022 (Time, 2022). His removal underscored the fragility of populist politics in Pakistan, where structural constraints—economic vulnerabilities, civil–military relations, and international pressures limit the sustainability of populist leadership despite its initial mass appeal.

The period from 2018 to 2022 represents a defining era in Pakistan’s political trajectory, shaped by Imran Khan’s rise to power and the populist strategies employed by his party, the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI). This



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section examines the domestic political narrative, civil–military relations, foreign policy reorientation, and the eventual downfall of Khan’s government.

### • **Domestic Populist Dynamics**

Imran Khan’s populist discourse centered on constructing a moral struggle between the “pure people” and the “corrupt elite.” Opposition leaders from the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and Pakistan People’s Party (PPP) were depicted as self-serving dynasts who had enriched themselves at the expense of ordinary citizens (Mughal & Zaidi, 2021). The vision of Naya Pakistan promised justice, accountability, and the establishment of a welfare state modeled on the Riyasat-e-Madina, evoking strong religious and cultural imagery (Ullah, 2024).

Khan effectively harnessed digital media and mass rallies to sustain his populist momentum. PTI’s use of Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube allowed it to bypass mainstream media and establish a direct connection with the electorate, particularly urban youth and the diaspora (Jaffrelot, 2021). This strategy reinforced Khan’s image as an outsider challenging entrenched elites, thereby consolidating his populist base. However, the government struggled to deliver on key economic promises. High inflation, a depreciating currency, and repeated IMF bailout negotiations contradicted Khan’s populist narrative of economic sovereignty (The Diplomat, 2020).

These economic challenges exposed the gap between populist rhetoric and policy implementation, gradually eroding popular trust.

### • **Civil–Military Relations**

Civil–military relations remained pivotal to Pakistan’s political environment during Khan’s tenure. Initially, Khan was perceived as enjoying the tacit support of the military establishment, which saw him as a preferable alternative to the traditional parties accused of corruption and mismanagement (Fair, 2022). This “hybrid model” of governance allowed Khan space to consolidate power while the military retained influence over security and strategic policy decisions (Jaffrelot, 2021).

Tensions, however, became evident by late 2021. Disagreements surfaced over the appointment of the Director General of the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), reflecting Khan’s desire to assert civilian authority in areas traditionally dominated by the military (Gul & Rana, 2023). Moreover, Khan’s independent approach to foreign policy—particularly his visit to Russia on the eve of the Ukraine conflict in February 2022—further strained relations. These frictions weakened the PTI government’s standing and encouraged opposition forces to push for a no-confidence motion.

### • **Foreign Policy Populism**

Khan’s populist orientation extended beyond domestic politics into the international arena. His foreign policy speeches and diplomatic postures reflected a blend of civilizational populism, Islamic solidarity, and sovereignty-driven narratives (Ullah, 2024).

- **United Nations General Assembly (2019):** Khan’s widely publicized speech emphasized Islamophobia, climate change, and Kashmir. By invoking the dignity of the Muslim world and framing Pakistan as a



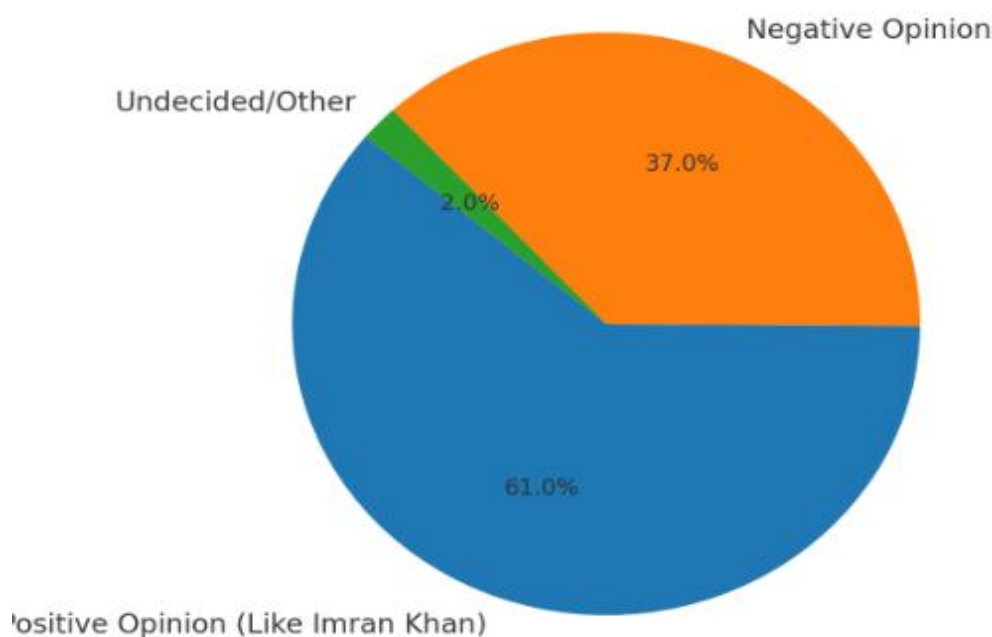
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defender of oppressed peoples, Khan sought to amplify domestic populist themes on a global stage (Khan, 2019).

- **Relations with China and Russia:** Khan deepened Pakistan's alignment with China through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) while cultivating ties with Russia, portraying these moves as steps toward a multipolar world where Pakistan would not remain subservient to the West (The New Yorker, 2022).
- **Critique of the West:** Western countries and international financial institutions were often accused of exploiting Pakistan and ignoring Muslim grievances, reinforcing Khan's anti-elite, anti-imperialist populism (The Diplomat, 2020).

While these moves enhanced Khan's image as an independent leader among his supporters, they created tensions with Pakistan's establishment, which prioritized strategic balance and stable relations with Western allies.

The pie chart of Pakistanis' opinion on Imran Khan's popularity, with clearer colors, labels, and emphasis.



- Sources of Gallup Pakistan's Public Pulse Survey (March 2023).

### Overview

According to the Gallup survey, 61 percent of Pakistanis view it positively, 37 percent view it negatively, and 2 percent are not interested in the country's political system.

### The Downfall of Populist Governance

By 2022, the contradictions of Khan's populism became increasingly evident. Economically, the country faced rising inflation, dwindling foreign reserves, and dependency on IMF assistance, undermining his promises of economic sovereignty. Politically, opposition parties united to challenge PTI, while defections from coalition partners weakened the government's parliamentary majority.



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The tipping point came in April 2022 when Khan lost a no-confidence vote in parliament, making him the first Pakistani prime minister to be ousted through this constitutional mechanism (Time, 2022). Khan responded by framing his removal as part of a foreign conspiracy backed by domestic elites, once again employing populist rhetoric to maintain his political relevance (The New Yorker, 2022). His ouster revealed both the power and limitations of populist politics in Pakistan: while effective at mobilizing public sentiment, populism struggled to withstand institutional constraints, structural economic pressures, and civil–military tensions.

The political dynamics of Pakistan from 2018 to 2022 demonstrate the dual character of populism. Domestically, it reshaped political discourse, energized public participation, and redefined debates on accountability and sovereignty. Internationally, it projected populist narratives onto the global stage, blending religious identity and nationalist pride. However, the era also highlights the fragility of populist governance in Pakistan’s hybrid political system, where structural constraints economic dependence, entrenched institutions, and geopolitical realities—ultimately curtailed the autonomy of populist leadership.

### Conclusion

The period of 2018–2022 in Pakistan underscores the multifaceted nature of populism and its profound impact on both domestic politics and foreign policy. Imran Khan’s rise to power through the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) marked a critical turning point, where populist rhetoric centered on the binary of “honest people” versus “corrupt elites” redefined political discourse (Mughal & Zaidi, 2021). By invoking narratives of accountability, sovereignty, and the *Riyasat-e-Madina*, Khan mobilized mass support, particularly among youth and urban constituencies, thereby altering the political dynamics of Pakistan.

However, the governance challenges of Khan’s tenure revealed the limitations of populist politics. Persistent inflation, economic dependency on the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and mismanagement of fiscal policies undermined his promises of economic independence (The Diplomat, 2020). The populist emphasis on confrontation and crisis mobilization failed to translate into sustainable economic or institutional reforms, exposing the gap between rhetoric and practical governance.

Foreign policy under Khan was also deeply infused with populist undertones. His discourse on Islamophobia, Kashmir, and Muslim unity sought to establish Pakistan as the moral vanguard of the Muslim world, while his pivot toward China and Russia reflected an anti-Western, sovereignty-driven outlook (Jaffrelot, 2021; The New Yorker, 2022). These moves enhanced Khan’s populist appeal domestically but strained Pakistan’s traditional foreign policy balancing, creating frictions with the military establishment, which valued pragmatic engagement with Western allies.

The collapse of Khan’s government in April 2022, following a no-confidence motion, revealed the fragility of populist governance in Pakistan’s hybrid political system. While populism can galvanize mass mobilization and challenge entrenched elites, it struggles to sustain itself against institutional constraints, economic vulnerabilities, and shifting civil–military relations (Time, 2022). Yet, even after his ouster, Khan’s narrative of foreign conspiracies and betrayal of the



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“people’s mandate” demonstrated the enduring resonance of populist politics in Pakistan.

In sum, the political dynamics of 2018–2022 highlight both the potential and limits of populism in Pakistan. It has reshaped political discourse, energized citizen participation, and influenced foreign policy agendas, but its governance failures underscore the necessity of balancing populist mobilization with institutional capacity and economic pragmatism. As Pakistan continues to grapple with internal instability and external challenges, the legacy of this period will remain central to understanding the evolving relationship between populism, democracy, and foreign policy.

The trajectory of Pakistan’s politics between 2018 and 2022 reflects the complex interplay between populism, democratic institutions, and foreign policy orientations. Imran Khan’s ascension was emblematic of the broader global populist wave, where leaders leveraged anti-elite sentiment and mass mobilization to challenge entrenched political orders. In Pakistan’s case, Khan’s narrative of corruption eradication, economic sovereignty, and Islamic identity politics provided both a mobilizing ideology and a framework for foreign policy positioning.

Domestically, populism reinvigorated political participation, particularly among youth and middle-class voters, thereby deepening democratic engagement. Yet, it also polarized the polity by framing politics as a moral struggle between “the people” and a “corrupt elite”. This antagonistic style undermined consensus-building, weakened institutional trust, and intensified political volatility. As a result, populism in Pakistan generated enthusiasm but simultaneously eroded the stability required for effective governance.

On the foreign policy front, Khan’s tenure revealed the potential of populism to reshape traditional alignments. His confrontational stance toward the United States, emphasis on Muslim unity, and proactive engagement with China, Turkey, and Russia reflected a sovereignty-first populist foreign policy. His vocal advocacy on Islamophobia, particularly at the UN General Assembly in 2019, enhanced Pakistan’s moral standing in the Muslim world while consolidating domestic support. Yet, these populist overtures clashed with Pakistan’s structural economic dependency on Western donors and international financial institutions. The tension between populist foreign policy narratives and pragmatic economic realities exposed the limits of populist diplomacy.

The collapse of Khan’s government in April 2022 following a no-confidence motion symbolized the institutional pushback against populism within Pakistan’s hybrid regime (Gul & Rana, 2023). His ouster reaffirmed the centrality of the military in shaping political outcomes and exposed the fragility of populist governance when confronted with entrenched institutional powers. However, Khan’s post-ouster mobilization, grounded in accusations of foreign conspiracy and betrayal of the people’s will, reinforced the enduring strength of populist discourse in Pakistan’s political culture.

Overall, the period 2018–2022 demonstrates that populism in Pakistan is not merely an electoral strategy but a structural feature of its political system—capable of mobilizing disillusioned citizens, redefining foreign policy agendas, and destabilizing governance. Populism’s dual legacy lies in its ability to energize democracy through mass participation while simultaneously undermining institutional norms, economic stability, and foreign policy continuity. For



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Pakistan, the challenge moving forward will be to balance populist energy with the imperatives of institutional resilience and pragmatic engagement with the international community. Unless this balance is achieved, the cycle of populist mobilization and institutional backlash is likely to persist, perpetuating political instability and uncertainty in Pakistan's democratic trajectory.

### Recommendations

#### • **Strengthen Institutional Autonomy**

Pakistan should reinforce the independence of democratic institutions—particularly parliament, judiciary, and electoral bodies—to reduce the destabilizing influence of populist politics. This would prevent frequent institutional confrontations and ensure that populist leaders operate within constitutional limits.

#### • **Balance Populism with Policy Continuity**

Long-term policy frameworks, particularly in foreign policy and economic planning, should moderate populist rhetoric. Governments must institutionalize foreign policy through bipartisan consensus so that populist shifts do not undermine Pakistan's strategic credibility.

#### • **Enhance Public Political Literacy**

Civic education and political awareness programs should be expanded to help citizens distinguish between populist rhetoric and pragmatic policymaking. This will empower the electorate to hold leaders accountable beyond charismatic appeals and symbolic politics.

#### • **Pursue Pragmatic Foreign Policy Engagements**

While populist foreign policy may mobilize domestic support, Pakistan must prioritize pragmatic diplomacy. Strategic partnerships with the United States, China, Gulf States, and regional actors should be based on economic and security imperatives rather than solely populist narratives.

#### • **Institutionalize Civil–Military Balance**

To avoid recurring populist-institutional clashes, Pakistan must institutionalize mechanisms of civil–military coordination. Clearly defined roles and non-interference principles can stabilize governance and prevent populist leaders from weaponizing anti-establishment rhetoric for short-term gains.

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