The Angry Populist as Foreign Policy Leader: Real Change or Just Hot Air?

Daniel W. Drezner

Since the start of this century, bellicose populists have been winning elections in democracies. It started with Hugo Chávez in Venezuela and spread to other Bolivarian leaders in Latin America, such as Bolivia's Evo Morales and Ecuador's Rafael Correa. In Europe, Silvio Berlusconi in Italy came and went, but Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Hungary's Viktor Orbán have cemented their grip on power. Last year, Rodrigo Duterte was elected president of the Philippines. As of January 2017, the most powerful angry populist would appear to be President Donald Trump.

Most analysts would describe the leaders listed above as populists. Defining the concept beyond "I know them when I see them," however, can be a tricky enterprise. Populists fit uneasily along the traditional left-right political spectrum. They are not always angry—see India's Narendra Modi, for example. Some politicians, such as Brazil's Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, campaign as populists but govern more conventionally; others, such as Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe, only turn to populism late in their tenure.

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Russia's Vladimir Putin cannot claim the same degree of democratic bona fides as Duterte or Trump. On the other hand, all of the available data show that Putin is much more popular than elected populists like Trump. Nonetheless, the delayed post-2008 wave of populist nationalism that fed Brexit has undeniably nourished a new generation of angry populists to be heads of state.

The emergence of populist politicians as foreign policy leaders raises an interesting question: does it matter for foreign relations? A great deal of international relations theory is devoted to the proposition that individual leaders do not matter all that much in world politics. At the same time, it seems difficult to believe that President Donald Trump will pursue the same foreign policies as, say, Barack Obama or Hillary Clinton. Recent research suggests that the traits of individual leaders affect their foreign policy behavior. Furthermore, the nature of populism itself suggests a different approach to world politics. The way that angry populists have swept to power is unorthodox enough for them to pursue policies at variance with the status quo. These leaders rely on techniques that will roil other actors in world politics. The result is likely to be foreign policies that could be "off the equilibrium path" for quite some time. This holds with particular force for Donald Trump.

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Until recently, international relations research did not focus on individual-level variables, much less on the traits of individual leaders. The major international relations paradigms in recent decades have been systemic in nature. These approaches argue that the international system imposes powerful structural constraints on state behavior. The bible of academic realists is Waltz's *Theory of International Politics*, which explicitly states, "The texture of international politics remains highly constant, patterns recur, and events repeat themselves endlessly. The relations that prevail internationally seldom shift rapidly in type or in quality. They are marked instead by a dismaying persistence." Waltz adds, "Over the centuries states have changed in many ways, but the quality of international life has remained much the same."[1]

For realists, little has changed in international relations since the days of Thucydides. Realists do not deny that individual leaders can pursue policies at variance with *realpolitik* precepts, but they predict that such behavior would be at odds with the national interest. Eventually, the anarchic system would punish an individual leader who acted in an *idealpolitik* manner. Other structural approaches are less dogmatic on this point,

but nonetheless posit a world in which structures and institutions impose powerful constraints on individual actors. Decision-makers have limited autonomy in the liberal or constructivist paradigms as well.[2] At the dawn of the century, the structural grip on international relations scholarship was so strong that it triggered laments about the deficit of research on individual decision-makers.[3]

Over the past decade, however, an increasing number of scholars have focused on the first image, suggesting multiple ways in which individual foreign policy leaders affect their country's approach to international relations.[4] Most of these studies have looked at how leaders approach the use of force. Elizabeth Saunders has argued that presidential approaches to warfighting can be explained by their *ex ante* perceptions on the sources of foreign threats. Jeff Colgan argues that leaders who emerge from revolutionary politics possess traits that will make them pursue more high-risk conflicts on the global stage. Michael Horowitz, Allan Stam, and Cali Ellis argue that a leader's biography—particularly their prior military service—has significant effects on their approach to the use of force. Allan Dafoe and Devin Caughey have argued that American presidents steeped in an honor culture approach militarized disputes differently.[5] The trend in this line of research has been to identify observable and verifiable aspects of an individual leader's biography—prior military experience, their pathway to power—to see if that has a persistent effect on their behavior.

Examining populist leaders as a category would certainly be an appropriate next step. It is possible that populists approach world politics differently from other foreign policy leaders. This gives rise to a few important questions however. What, exactly, is populism? And what would be the reasons to treat populists as distinct foreign policy leaders?

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One of the difficulties with trying to analyze populist leaders is that the very definition of populism is frequently contested. History offers little help beyond pointing out that populists come in all ideological stripes. The origins of populism as a political slogan comes from late nineteenth century United States. The People's Party was an agrarian movement that emerged in reaction to the gold standard. Gold-backed currency meant deflation, which in turn meant extremely low agricultural prices. Farmers in the Midwest and South banded together to demand a change in the monetary order. That party, during its moment of prominence, was decidedly on the left side of the political spectrum. Similarly, the Bolivarian populists in Latin America are generally perceived as being left parties. In

Europe, Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain are perceived as populist parties on the left. These parties espouse an ideology that seems at variance with the myriad right-wing law and order parties that have emerged in Europe, such as UKIP in Great Britain or AfD in Germany. Populist leaders in Turkey, Hungary, the Philippines and the United States have all come from the right side of the political spectrum. When it comes to economics, it can be difficult to assign where populist platforms fit on the liberal-conservative political spectrum.

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Other commentators have tried to associate populism with a particular style or set of tactics. Some argue that populists distinguish themselves in proposing simplistic solutions that appeal to the gut instincts of the low-information voter because of their relative simplicity, such as running the government like a business or fixing the economy by cracking down on unfair trade. Critics accuse populists of craven opportunism in their politics, offering unrealistic campaign promises designed to fool voters into supporting them. The problem with these definitions, of course, is that they apply to almost all politicians in democracies. Political campaigns throughout the democratic world consist of politicians offering common-sense solutions to complex problems. As Cas Mudde, one of the leading scholars on populism, has asked, "who decides whether policies are 'sound' or 'honest,' rather than 'populist' or 'opportunistic'?"[6] Using these rubrics seems like a way for "populism" to become an insult rather than a term with any kind of consistent political meaning.

Scholars have offered a more precise and salient definition of populism. As Mudde has pointed out, populism is defined in part by what it opposes, namely, elitism and pluralism. Populists argue that what ails society are corrupt elites that have squashed or swindled the people's true preferences. The obvious inference from this argument is that populists claim more than others that they can divine the people's true preferences. Jan-Werner Müller, in his excellent primer *What Is Populism?,* stresses the anti-pluralist nature of populist leaders. Pluralists recognize that modern societies possess a plethora of different, cross-cutting political cleavages. Variegated interests make it difficult to divine a singular general will of the people. Simply put, pluralists acknowledge the existence and persistence of minority interests. Müller notes that this runs directly contrary to how populists campaign and govern:

> When running for office, populists portray their political competitors as part of the immoral, corrupt elite; when ruling, they refuse to recognize any opposition as legitimate. The populist logic also implies that whoever does not support populist parties might not be a proper part of the people—always defined as righteous and morally pure.[7]

This exclusionary form of identity politics better explains recent voting patterns than the "economic anxiety" argument that many commentators have put forward. The analysis of polling data in both the Brexit referendum and the 2016 U.S. presidential election revealed similar findings. Although economic distress did play a supporting role in driving up support for the Remain campaign in the UK and for Trump in the U.S., there was a more significant causal factor at play. In both the United Kingdom and the United States, the bigger driver for voters to support the populist position was whether respondents felt that the racial and ethnic composition of the country was changing too fast.[8] Pew surveys reveal that Europeans who support populist parties are far more likely to believe that cultural factors, rather than civic values, are an important component of national identity.[9]

Of course, campaigning and governing are two different things. Many commentators have been hopeful that even if populists win office, their lack of experience will doom their political performance—and, therefore their ability to stay in power. It is worth noting, however, that leaders like Berlusconi and Chávez, and now Erdoğan and Orbán, have stayed in power for quite some time. Part of this is due to populists increasing the coercive and propaganda arms of the state. Müller argues that populists have displayed clear patterns of governance once in power: "Populist governance exhibits three features: attempts to hijack the state apparatus, corruption and 'mass clientelism' (trading material benefits or bureaucratic favors for political support by citizens who become the populists' 'clients'), and efforts systematically to suppress civil society." Populists might not agree on specific policies, but they do share similar theories of campaigning and governing.

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Most political analyses of populists focus on how they govern domestically, but we can extrapolate from these observations to project how they will act at the international level. We know that populists, by identifying the "real people" who support them, espouse a narrow brand of nationalism. It is not surprising that European populists have chafed against the

more cosmopolitan worldview of the European Union. Hungary's Orbán in particular has bolstered his standing by taking a harsh stand against Syrian refugees. Latin American populist parties consciously appealed to indigenous peoples and scorned their country's Europeanized elites.[10] Turkey's Erdoğan pivoted away from EU membership towards the Middle East. And as Walter Russell Mead noted recently in *Foreign Affairs*, American populists—whom he labels "Jacksonians"—are "skeptical about the United States' policy of global engagement and liberal order building." Mead explains, "They oppose recent trade agreements not because they understand the details and consequences of those extremely complex agreements' terms but because they have come to believe that the negotiators of those agreements did not necessarily have the United States' interests at heart."[11]

More than anything else, populists do not like alternative centers of power beyond their personal control. They are therefore likely to resist any kind of multilateral institution that places hard legal constraints on their ability to act. We have certainly seen this with respect to Hungarian and Polish resistance to the supranational governance of the European Union. The Brexit referendum revolved around British hostility to dictates from Brussels. During his campaign Donald Trump disparaged numerous U.S.-created multilateral regimes as antithetical to the national interest, including NATO, the World Trade Organization, and the United Nations.[12] As president, one of Trump's first actions was to withdraw from the Trans-Pacific Partnership.

At the same time, it will not be surprising to see populist leaders attempt to create alternative international organizations designed to bolster their own populist movements. This was clearly the motive behind the 2004 creation of the Bolivarian Alliance for the Americas (ALBA). Founded by Hugo Chávez, the organization was explicitly designed as a counterweight to more neoliberal regional entities. Member states consisted primarily of countries that elected Chávez-like leaders in Latin America. Even ideological sympathizers, however, acknowledge that ALBA has accomplished little in the decade plus since its creation.[13] A similar characterization could be used for Putin's Eurasian Economic Union. Another tactic has been for like-minded populist movements to organize across borders. Russia has sponsored numerous conferences to attract nationalist parties

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across Europe.[14] Steve Bannon, Trump's strategic advisor and the former chairman of the populist news site *Breitbart*, has reached out to kindred movements in Europe as well.

The populist philosophy might hint at certain foreign policy preferences—but what about populist leaders? Are there any tropes that populist foreign policy leaders will be more likely to embrace? It is worth noting that many populists achieved power less due to their individual abilities and more due to wider forces at work. Roberto Foa and Yascha Mounk have observed a secular decline in the degree to which citizens in democracies value democracy.[15] This has left many of the OECD economies increasingly vulnerable to the appeal of a populist strongman. And as Manuel Funke, Moritz Schularick, and Christoph Trebesh have argued recently, the political fallout from financial crises has been to shift political support towards exclusionary, populist parties. Indeed, on average, these parties increased their vote share by 30 percent after a financial crisis.[16] There is an interesting irony at work here: populists, who frequently rail against structural forces beyond their control, have increased their power due to those same structural factors working in their favor.

These secular forces matter because populists have not always been all that popular. To take the populist route to political power would have been considered a higher-risk strategy a decade or two ago. To be sure, all politicians are somewhat risk-loving if they run for office. Given the somewhat marginal status of populists within the pre-2008 political spectrum, however, many of these new leaders achieved power in unexpected or risky fashion. Before he was elected president of Venezuela, Hugo Chávez tried and failed to take power in a military coup. In its early days, Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party risked running afoul of Turkey's secular constitution because of its embrace of Islamism. Both leaders had to weather coup attempts while in office. Political prognosticators and betting markets did not think that Donald Trump would win the GOP primary, much less the general election.

Leaders who rise to power in lower-probability scenarios are also likely to have a greater appetite for risk in foreign affairs. This matters, as Jeff Colgan notes: "risk tolerance leads to aggression in international affairs because it increases the perceived payoff of risky gambles."[17] Populist leaders more closely resemble revolutionaries than more established politicians. And as Colgan warns, "the ambition of revolutionary leaders also contributes to aggression. Ambition makes it more likely that a leader will reject the status quo internationally as well as domestically."[18] We can see this kind of ambition on display among elected populists. Hugo Chávez

persistently proposed radical alternatives to the Washington Consensus. One longtime friend of Viktor Orbán noted, "he has always wanted to upset the status quo, to become a change-maker."[19] Orbán himself, in a meeting with Polish Law and Justice Party head Jaroslaw Kaczynski, proposed a "cultural counter-revolution" in Europe.[20] Donald Trump's inaugural address categorically rejected the postwar liberal order, arguing in favor of an "America First" approach to international relations. Populists are therefore more likely to pursue high-risk, revisionist foreign policies.

Populist leaders also care about recognition by others, and will be quick to anger if that recognition is not forthcoming. Populists build their legitimacy on their support from "their" people, but part of that support comes from displays of dominance over others. Russian president Vladimir Putin is well-known for his over-the-top efforts to look strong and powerful. These range from his shirtless photos to videos of him weightlifting to scoring eight goals in an exhibition game with former NHL All-Stars.[21] In Erdoğan's first two years as Turkey's president, the government has prosecuted more than 1,800 cases of Turkish citizens insulting him—including a former Miss Turkey.[22] Donald Trump has insulted anyone who has criticized him since he started running for president, ranging from erstwhile GOP rivals to federal judges to media outlets to a former Miss Universe to Meryl Streep.

When dealing with domestic rivals and critics, such displays of dominance are an easy strategy for elected leaders to pursue. Populist leaders engage in such behavior to project their strength and mastery over the political fates. It is tricky to do this on the international stage, however. Populist leaders will therefore be more concerned than most politicians about the personal respect afforded to them by others. At the international level, this leads to one of two outcomes: recognition by other heads of state, or a denunciation of leaders who fail to confer such recognition. If populists cannot exploit the respect conferred by others, they will be quick to reject and delegitimize the leaders who spurn them.

We can see this kind of pattern at work in how populist leaders have reacted to setbacks on the global stage. Vladimir Putin began his tenure in office with a much warmer attitude towards the West. During the first decade of this century, however, Putin lost an ally during Ukraine's Orange Revolution, and witnessed NATO expanding to Russia's borders. It was at this point that Putin began adopting a more hostile attitude towards the West. After President Obama cancelled a meeting with Duterte, the Filipino president responded with a series of tirades insulting the American president.[23] In Trump's first week as president, he faced pushback from the

Mexican president Enrique Peña Nieto on his policies for the southern border. In response, Trump tweeted that Peña Nieto should not bother coming to Washington. The Mexican president responded by canceling his visit.

Populists do not possess a monopoly on anger in politics, but most populists tend to project anger as part of their leadership style. Based on their pathway to power and their philosophy of governance, it should not be surprising that they are commonly associated with that emotion. As previously noted, populist parties do particularly well after financial crises. They are adept at exploiting the (often justified) anger that voters possess towards authorities that were in charge when the crisis happened. Former UKIP leader Nigel Farage warned of "political anger" if the United Kingdom did not follow through on Brexit. In a press conference blasting the United States, Duterte said, "If you Americans are angry with me, then I am also angry with you."[24] During one of the GOP primary debates, Donald Trump explicitly stated, "I will gladly accept the mantle of anger." Trump famously refuses to apologize when he makes controversial or problematic statements.[25] Numerous press reports suggest that Trump lost his temper with the Australian prime minister in their first phone conversation.

This wave of populist anger reverses a centuries-long western effort to contain that emotion in international relations.[26] Recent scholarship on emotions in world politics suggest that sustained levels of anger carry risks in world politics. Anger was valorized in societies with strong honor cultures and warrior castes, biologically conditioning citizens towards that feeling. Furthermore, as Neta Crawford notes, "threats that evoke anger (if they are associated with perceived insults) tend to decrease the perception of a threat and simultaneously heighten risk-taking behaviors on the part of those who feel angry."[27] This is particularly true if populist leaders find ways to institutionalize anger and resentment through new laws, executive orders, or bureaucratic structures.

This tendency towards angry rhetoric can be exaggerated through misperception and mistranslation. Conventional foreign policy leaders are prepped to stay within the lanes of "accepted" diplomatic discourse, so that observers can detect subtle shifts in phrasing as a foreign policy signal. In contrast, populists scorn diplomatic language as exercises in sophistry and hypocrisy. They rely on language designed to appeal to their base, which increases the likelihood that outside observers misconstrue their words. Angry tirades from leaders like Trump, Duterte, or Iran's Mahmoud Ahmadinejad have been mistranslated—and usually in a direction that

paints the leader as more bellicose than intended.[28] Populist leaders will be reluctant to correct such misperceptions, because that would require them to engage in the diplomatic discourse they have derided.

Displays of righteous indignation might play well with a populist leader's domestic base. The international effect of angry outbursts, however, is to narrow the zone of cooperation between countries. If a leader unleashes an angry tirade against another country, that is sure to gain considerable public attention in both nations. This automatically raises the "audience costs" for both leaders. The larger the audience that is paying attention to any dispute, the greater the political costs a leader can suffer if they back down in that dispute.[29] Displays of temper make it harder for the populist to compromise, but it will also make it more politically difficult for the object of the tirade to make any concessions. Through effects on leaders and populations, provocations make negotiations more costly and conflict escalation more likely.[30]

Perhaps the most important intellectual trait that populist leaders share is their tendency to think like hedgehogs. According to the classical Greek poet Archilochus, "a fox knows many things, but a hedgehog one important thing." Isaiah Berlin popularized that quote, arguing that intellectuals could be divided into foxes and hedgehogs. This works for decision-makers as well. Foxes will possess the necessary metacognition to adapt to new facts and new circumstances; hedgehogs will rely on their core beliefs, fitting the world into their preexisting worldview.[31] Populists are hedgehogs: the one big thing that they know is to reject the elites and technocrats who heretofore governed their country.

As Philip Tetlock observed more than a decade ago, foxes and hedgehogs have different strengths when it comes to thinking about the world.[32] Foxes are much better than hedgehogs in their predictive accuracy about world events; simply put, foxes are better at incorporating new information and updating how they think about the world. Hedgehogs are better than foxes at anticipating big and unexpected events happening in the world, such as the collapse of the Soviet Union, the 9/11 terrorist attacks, and the 2008 financial crisis. Anticipating those events requires an assuredness about the way the world works that hedgehogs are more likely to possess.

The effects of these different intellectual styles on foreign policy are straightforward. As hedgehogs, populists are more likely to have their expectations confounded in world politics. At the same time, populist foreign policy leaders will face psychological and domestic political barriers to admitting error or reversing a failing policy. Any public recognition of a misstep demonstrates a leader's fallibility—which is problematic for leaders

who claim that they can divine the general will of the people. At the same time, as hedgehogs, populists will be reluctant to take any action that deviates from the way that they think the world works.

Stepping back, we can proffer some tentative predictions of how populist foreign policy leaders will behave in the coming years. Populist foreign policy leaders are likely to reject the pre-existing liberal international order and espouse a strong form of ethnic nationalism. They might try to create alternative international arrangements to the status quo, but these efforts are likely to be Potemkin efforts, with more pomp and circumstance than substance. Populist leaders will have greater appetites for risk and ambition on the global stage. These heads of state will crave recognition from their fellow world leaders, and be quick to anger if they are spurned in this area. These displays of anger could become institutionalized and will increase the audience costs of all the involved actors, making cooperation less likely. And populists are less likely to correctly perceive how the world works, and more likely to hold firm with policies that are not viewed as working terribly well.

One disturbing conclusion to draw from this particular constellation of traits is that populist leaders are more likely to foment international crises. Breaking with pre-existing global governance structures can guarantee a crisis escalation. An international crisis can trigger rally-round-the flag effects within the domestic population and make it easier for a leader to suppress domestic dissent. At the extreme, one could envision populists threatening or launching diversionary wars to appeal to a nationalist base in times of trouble. Vladimir Putin employed this tactic. In early 2014, he was still reeling from protests over his return to the Russian presidency, and a slowdown in the Russian economy. He responded by annexing the Crimea after the fall of his ally in Ukraine, and bankrolling a secessionist conflict in Eastern Ukraine. These efforts caused his public support to skyrocket even though the Russian economy contracted in 2014 and 2015.

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It should be stressed that these are all probabilistic statements. Many of these traits are hardly unique to populists; other heads of state are likely to display some subset of these leadership traits. Still, this combination of

attributes suggest that the world is experiencing an increase in the number of revisionist, risky, and violent actions in world politics.

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The previous section suggests that a world of violent populists is a world filled with more disruption and would lead to the escalation of even picayune conflicts. There are other traits that populist leaders possess, however, that could help to mitigate conflicts. Despite their claim to be outsiders, many populists have considerable political experience. Indeed, that highlights another trait of populist leaders: they are often hypocritical, bordering on cynical, when it comes to reconciling their words and their actions.

To understand why these qualities matter, it is worth reviewing how one of the few militarized disputes between two modern populists played out. In November 2015, a Turkish F-16 fighter shot down a Sukhoi Su-24 attack plane when the Russian military aircraft flew into Turkish airspace while conducting an operation in Syria. The downing of the plane led to the subsequent death of the Russian pilot as well as a member of Russia's search-and-rescue unit at the hands of Syrian rebels. Turkey and Russia had already been at loggerheads over the Syrian civil war; this dispute threatened to further inflame the passions of two populist leaders, Erdoğan and Putin.

Consistent with the previous section, bilateral tensions ratcheted up immediately. Putin publicly described the incident as a "stab in the back."[33] Both countries immediately dispatched additional military resources to the Syrian border. The Russian Foreign Minister cancelled an imminent trip to Ankara, and Erdoğan's planned state visit to Russia was also shelved. The Russian government levied an array of economic sanctions on Turkey. All military-to-military exchanges were suspended. Erdoğan refused to apologize, arguing that the Russian plane has violated his country's airspace and that Turkey was right to "defend our brothers in Syria."[34]

Numerous commentators fretted about a further escalation of conflict between the two countries. Given the populist nature of both leaders, such an outcome would have been consistent with the arguments made in the previous section. So it is interesting to note that the crisis did not spiral out of control. After months of deadlock, in June 2016 Erdoğan sent an ambiguously worded letter to Putin. The Russian press claimed that Erdoğan apologized for the death of the Russian pilot; the Turkish press countered that the letter contained only an expression of remorse. Regardless, the letter helped to thaw relations between the two countries.[35] After an aborted coup in Turkey, and Russian support for Erdoğan's

post-coup crackdown, the warming of relations between the two leaders accelerated. As RAND's F. Stephen Larrabee concluded, however, "the rapprochement seems to represent more an economic marriage of convenience than a deeply rooted political alliance."[36]

One anecdote does not obviate the arguments made in the previous section. It does suggest, however, that there are countervailing factors that can tamp down the tendency of bellicose populists to escalate every conflict. One factor is political experience. Many of the other populist leaders discussed above might have pursued unorthodox and risky paths to governance, but they also had political and government experience prior to becoming the foreign policy leader. Viktor Orbán has been a fixture in Hungarian politics since the end of the Cold War. Hugo Chávez had served in the Venezuelan military before seeking the presidency as a civilian. Evo Morales had been an elected representative and party leader for a decade before being elected president. Both Putin and Erdoğan have been in power for well over a decade. That experience could have been the key for both sides to prevent their dispute from worsening any further.

Even if populists publicly disdain experience and expertise, they are not above exploiting such qualities to advance their foreign policy interests.[37] Political experience enables a leader, even a populist one, to recognize when they are in an untenable bargaining situation. In the crisis between Turkey and Russia, it appeared that both leaders had accurate assessments of the costs of further escalation, as well as Russia's relative power advantage. That the rapprochement accelerated after an aborted coup attempt in Turkey suggests that Erdoğan welcomed external allies in a moment of internal crisis.[38] Populists are skilled in the art of political hypocrisy, permitting them to proclaim one thing but act differently. This allowed Putin and Erdoğan to engage in a loud dispute and then loudly make up; both the severity of the conflict and the magnitude of the rapprochement have likely been exaggerated.

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It is one thing for smaller countries like Ecuador or Hungary to be led by populists. The ramifications for world politics are far greater if the president of the United States is an angry populist. This raises an important question: will Donald Trump act like other populists?

In looking at Trump, there are reasons to believe him to be even more likely to trigger conflict than a garden-variety populist. Trump is the oldest person ever to be inaugurated as president. Trump never served in the military, but he did attend military school as a child, telling a biographer that,

"[I] always felt that I was in the military" and that he had "more training militarily than a lot of the guys that go into the military."[39] International relations research suggests that older, democratically-elected leaders, and leaders who have served in the military but not have seen combat, are more likely to lead states into violent conflict.[40]

The factor that distinguishes Donald Trump the most from his populist peers, however, is his lack of political experience. Trump is the first president since Eisenhower to be elected president without previously serving in public office. He is the only president in the postwar era to have never served in a government position prior to becoming commander-in-chief. Trump's lack of experience is matched only by his lack of knowledge about foreign policy. In his initial interviews with the *Washington Post* and *New York Times* during the presidential campaign, Trump displayed little understanding of world politics; follow-up interviews on the topic suggested little in the way of learning.[41] In debates, Trump demonstrated ignorance of concepts like the nuclear triad or the Trans-Pacific Partnership. On the campaign trail, Trump backtracked, prevaricated, and flip-flopped on key foreign policy issues numerous times and had great difficulty attracting seasoned national security advisers to his team. Bereft of informed foreign policy advice, Trump's stumblings and fumblings on questions of foreign policy during the campaign were legion.[42] His erratic statements rattled foreign capitals, financial actors, and political risk analysts.[43] In his first few weeks as president, Trump continued to demonstrate ignorance on numerous foreign policy matters ranging from the particulars of his own executive orders to a refugee deal with Australia to the contents of a nuclear arms treaty with Russia.[44]

As Elizabeth Saunders has demonstrated, inexperienced foreign policy leaders are less able to constrain their subordinates from bureaucratic conflicts or pursuing risky foreign policy actions.[45] In Trump's case, this is exacerbated by his managerial style, which is to create competing centers of power within his own organization.[46] Indeed, the first few weeks of the Trump administration seem to bear Saunders' point out. Press reports suggested that Trump's populist strategic advisor Steven Bannon had created a "shadow" national security apparatus, called the Strategic Initiatives Group, to bypass the NSC.[47] Other observers argue that there are multiple, competing power centers within the White House alone.[48] The combination of a populist commander-in-chief and an unclear foreign affairs hierarchy massively increases the uncertainty surrounding American foreign policy.

To be fair, there are other attributes of Trump's brand of populism and managerial style that might make him less bellicose on foreign policy

than a typical populist. Trump himself acknowledged in *The Art of the Deal* that he is prone to bravado, or "truthful hyperbole," in his negotiations.[49] That acknowledgment suggests that he is at least aware of the difference between his own bombastic rhetoric and the actual state of the world. Trump might share the hypocrisy of populists like Putin and Erdoğan.

Trump's recognition of his own hyperbole means that he is less beholden to his prior rhetoric than many elected leaders. His tendency to dissemble gives him an out that leaders more concerned with credibility and honesty do not have. Trump can deny being insulted or disrespected in a situation he does not want to escalate by simply asserting that there was no insult. Since Trump's relationship with the truth is already strained, there is little political downside about ignoring a perceived insult when it is politically inconvenient for him to acknowledge it. This was how he handled his Supreme Court nominee Neil Gorsuch's comments, which were specifically critical of Trump's attacks on federal judges.[50] The president simply pretended that the senators who relayed those comments to the press were lying.

In his first month as president, Trump backtracked on inflammatory rhetoric in a number of foreign policy instances. The most prominent was Trump's argument that it was worth questioning the "One China" policy in order to extract concessions from Beijing.[51] During the transition, he talked with the president of Taiwan to further that bargaining strategy. Within his first month as president, however, the president had reaffirmed the federal government's One China policy in a phone call with his counterpart Xi Jinping. Trump also failed to follow through on bellicose threats targeting Iran and North Korea.

All presidents backtrack on the more unrealistic foreign policy promises they made as candidates. They usually do this during the transition period, however, whereas Trump doubled down on many of his statements during the same period. If Trump continues to back down from his inflammatory rhetoric, however, then subsequent threats will be seen as bluffs. Already, some foreign politicians are normalizing the phenomenon of a "Trump tantrum" as something to be endured and ignored—because in the end the tantrum does not affect international relations.[52] This means that Trump is less likely to blunder into a militarized conflict because he has been trapped by his own rhetoric.

Trump's increasingly predictable pattern of angry but hollow rhetoric creates problems for American foreign policy, however. When foreign policy leaders get angry as a theatrical tactic, the idea is to gain more in negotiations or to issue a credible threat. If Trump's fits of temper are nothing but

hot air, then no one will believe Trump when he actually tries to issue a real threat. Credible commitment is far more important in international negotiations than the ability to engage in truthful hyperbole. As political scientist Anne Sartori and others have argued, leaders do not bluff much in world politics because they want their promises to be believed by other countries.[53] That is the nature of deterrence. The more that the Trump administration makes threats it doesn't carry out, the more other countries will not take subsequent promises seriously. And if adversaries perceive of president Trump as a paper tiger, they could misperceive genuine warnings as more bluster. International relations scholars have debated whether reputation for resolve matters in crisis bargaining.[54] Trump' eroding credibility will be an interesting test case of contending theories in this area.

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International relations scholarship has begun to reconcile systemic approaches to world politics with other approaches that focus on leadership traits. Even realists talk about "status quo" and "revisionist" states;[55] it does not take much effort to think of populist leaders as revisionist. Even the most severe structural realist allows that foreign policies are determined by more than systemic forces. Leaders certainly matter. Systemic approaches, however, would go on to argue that leaders who pursue unorthodox foreign policies will confront systemic blowback that leads to new pressures on that state. Realists, for example, would acknowledge that some leaders might pursue revisionist or suboptimal policies; but they would predict that those leaders would inevitably suffer from such choices. To use the language of game theory, such leaders would be operating "off the equilibrium path." In these moments, it is possible that an individual leader acting in an unusual manner could surprise other states. And the outcome would be different from the predicted equilibrium. At the same time, that outcome could also be suboptimal for all the relevant actors.

Populism as a political force is not going away anytime soon, so we may be off the equilibrium path for some time.

Populism as a political force is not going away anytime soon, so we may be off the equilibrium path for some time. Leaders like Putin, Erdoğan, and Orban look entrenched in power. Newly elected leaders like Trump and Duterte have years before they face re-election. It is possible that by 2018, both France and Mexico will have elected angry populists as well. The next half-decade will offer an interesting testing ground for whether populist

foreign policy leaders behave in a different way than other decision-makers. The academic literature suggests that populists will be more likely to escalate conflicts and subvert the liberal international order.

Perhaps the most important difference between Trump and other populist leaders is Trump's lack of experience and expertise in foreign policy matters. That background suggests that he will embody populist tendencies in an even more concentrated form. Trump's tendency to bluff and bluster could erode the president's ability to credibly commit in moments of crisis.

For foreign policy professionals who are not fans of the populist worldview, this suggests a bleak picture of the next few years. If there is a silver lining for American foreign policy, however, it might be that Trump's hypocrisy and raw survival instincts outweigh his commitment to populism. In the first month of his administration, Trump asked for the resignation of his most loyal foreign policy advisor, National Security Advisor Michael Flynn. His national security cabinet consists of officials who, in their confirmation hearings, praised the very liberal international order that Trump disparaged. If Trump delegates foreign policy decisions to his cabinet—a big if—then Trump could prove to be a populist in name only. If, on the other hand, president Trump runs foreign policy through the Strategic Initiatives Group, then scholars will get to witness up close how an angry populist runs a great power's foreign policy. ***f***

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