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"Populism at home, revisionism in the world": the case of Turkey's peacemaking engagement in a changing world order

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Populism has emerged as a transformative force in global politics, questioning the legitimacy of liberal democratic institutions and reshaping the contours of foreign policy—especially in emerging powers governed by populist leadership. This article investigates the intersection between domestic populist governance and international revisionism, focusing on Turkey under President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and the Justice and Development Party (AKP). It argues that populism in power reconfigures not only the institutional architecture of the domestic political arena but is also conducive to revisionist agendas at the international level. This revisionist ambition is anti-institutional at its core, averse to processes of mediation and deliberation and favors more personalistic, less transparent politics, usually affirming the leader's direct, personalized mandate from "the people". In Turkey's case, this transformation marks a departure from the founding Kemalist principle of "Peace at home, peace in the world" toward a more assertive foreign policy orientation that might be described as "Revisionism at home, revisionism in the world." The AKP's discourse merges sovereignty and injustice into a populist logic that positions Turkey as both a regional power and a moral actor in global politics. This revisionist posture has been especially evident in Turkey's peacemaking engagements, where humanitarianism and diplomacy are mobilized as instruments of strategic assertion. The central question guiding this analysis is: What is the relationship between Turkey's domestic populist political imagination and its revisionist foreign and peacebuilding policies? And what does this relationship reveal about the international behavior of populist regimes more broadly? These questions are addressed through a focus on Somalia. With Turkey's strategic presence in the country spanning over 15 years, the case of Somalia offers a critical vantage point to observe Turkey's shift from reformist multilateralism to populist-revisionist assertiveness, and a critical site in which domestic narratives of injustice, contested sovereignty, and national vindication are projected outward and reconfigured as a distinctive mode of international engagement. Methodologically, the article adopts a discursive approach, treating discourse as both performative and constitutive—a practice that not only represents but enacts political realities. It emphasizes how populist-revisionist foreign policy is animated by symbolic narratives, historically situated emotional economies, and appeals to national memory and grievance. This analysis highlights how populist leaders translate domestic logics of sovereignty, justice, and moral exceptionalism into international conduct, contributing to an emerging foreign policy paradigm that disrupts liberal international norms. By examining Turkey's evolving international engagements, this article offers insight into how populism travels across scales—from domestic arenas to the global

stage—reshaping not only institutions but the meanings and practices of foreign policy itself.

KEYWORDS

populism, revisionism, Turkey, peacemaking, Somalia, Syria, Libya, foreign policy

Introduction

In recent years, the intersection of domestic populist governance and international engagement has reshaped the foreign policy trajectories of several emerging powers, blurring the boundary between domestic political logics and strategic behavior at the international level. This article explores this dynamic through the case of Turkey under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdogan and the Justice and Development Party (AKP), focusing on its peacemaking engagement in Somalia as a lens into the broader transformation of its foreign policy. Turkey's early involvement in Somalia marks a formative moment in its evolving international posture—one that foreshadows the more assertive and reoriented approach evident in its subsequent interventions in Syria and Libya. I argue that Turkey's international conduct reflects a populist logic that extends from the domestic sphere to the global stage, shaping an increasingly revisionist stance in the international order. The Somali case thus provides a valuable lens through which to explore an emerging and under-theorized mode of international conduct that I term *populist-revisionist peacemaking*—a form of foreign policy that fuses humanitarian rhetoric with sovereign assertion, challenges the Global North's monopoly in defining and enacting peacemaking, and is animated by a populist-inflected logic of antagonism—one rooted in narratives of historical grievance, denial of rightful agency, and a moral imperative of popular/national restoration.

The paper unfolds in three parts. First, it revisits key theoretical approaches to populism and offers a conceptual framework that informs the analysis of populist foreign policy and the transformation of liberal peacebuilding. Second, it examines the emergence and consolidation of populism in Turkey, with particular attention to the discursive and institutional logics underpinning this shift. Finally, it turns to Somalia as a critical site in which domestic narratives of injustice, contested sovereignty, and national vindication are projected outward and reconfigured as a distinctive mode of international engagement.

Rethinking populism

Populism is a concept often stretched or truncated to fit a wide range of national and international dynamics, frequently used descriptively or associated with charisma and personalistic leadership. These broad associations risk obscuring more than they reveal. The closest thing to a contemporary consensus defines populism as a "thin ideology" Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017), built on a moral dichotomy between "the pure people" and "the corrupt elite." As a "thin" ideology, populism is said to rely on attachment to a "thicker" host ideology—such as nationalism, socialism, or conservatism—for substantive policy content and normative direction. Yet this paradigm tends to portray populism as inherently derivative: an amplification of pre-existing ideologies rather than a dynamic system of meaning-making in its own right. This neglects the affective, symbolic, and institutional configurations that populism produces, particularly under regimes where it becomes hegemonic.

Far from being an ideological add-on, populism can structure the political field, redefine legitimacy, and transform both the language and landscape of political contestation. While the conceptual economy of the "thin ideology" approach has been useful for comparative classification, it limits our grasp of populism's transformative capacity. First, it reduces populism to a largely empty discursive or stylistic form, devoid of ideological substance or sociohistorical contingency. Second, it treats both populism and its "host" ideologies as stable, modular entities—reifying categories that are in fact fluid, contested, and processual. Nationalism or socialism, for example, are not fixed containers into which populism is poured; they are themselves shaped and rearticulated through populist practices. This framework obscures how populism can act as a generative political logic—redefining discourse, institutions, sovereignty, and citizenship. Populist practices frequently challenge liberal notions of representation by advancing majoritarian or plebiscitary legitimacy. These are not mere stylistic deviations but deep contests over the foundations of democratic authority. Rather than embracing pluralism and institutional mediation, populist regimes often assert a direct, unmediated link between the leader and a unified national body, thereby marginalizing dissent and narrowing the space for democratic negotiation (Metawe, 2020; Fiorespino, 2022).

This erosion of institutional pluralism often entails a redefinition of political subjectivity—of who is entitled to speak, act, and be represented in the public sphere. As Sofos (2021, 2022b) shows, symbolic spaces like Hagia Sophia have been mobilized in Turkish populist discourse to redraw the boundaries of national identity and political legitimacy. Participation in sovereignty rituals staged by the governing party confers political capital, while abstention is framed as a betrayal of the people's will—aligning nonparticipants with both domestic and foreign forces accused of undermining national sovereignty. Through such symbolic acts, populism constructs a moral order that transcends procedural norms and institutional checks, privileging affective alignment with the regime over deliberative participation.

Expanding on this view, populism can also be understood as a generative discourse in the Foucauldian sense—one that not only frames political style but also structures the very horizon

of political imagination and action (Foucault, 1980). It does not merely reflect interests but constitutes them, offering a lens through which both domestic and international realities are visualized. Populist discourse defines who counts as a friend or foe, what is seen as a national interest, and what modes of action are considered legitimate. Combining this Foucauldian lineage with Laclau's (2005) conception of populism and Glynos and Howarth's (2007) emphasis on political logics, populism operates as a repertoire of discursive practices that sets the terms of debate, shapes affective investments, and delineates the field of possible responses—especially in times of crisis. While populism is one of several interpretive frameworks available to political actors, it remains a particularly powerful one: fusing emotion, moral clarity, and strategic purpose into a worldview that can deeply reshape foreign policy preferences, choices, and behavior.

Populism should be understood not as a rhetorical mode or a tactical repertoire, but as a powerful interpretive framework—one that shapes how political actors define their identity, perceive adversaries, and engage with the international order. It delineates the boundaries of national interest and legitimacy, not only by naming friends and foes, but also by framing what is considered morally justified or pragmatically necessary. This is particularly evident in contexts where populist actors frame international affairs through emotionally charged narratives of betrayal, sovereignty, and justice. For example, Turkish military operations against the YPG in Syria have been justified not just on strategic or security grounds, but through the lens of a populist discourse that casts Kurdish movements as part of a wider conspiracy against "the people"—a narrative anchored in perceived historical grievances and existential threats to national unity. In this way, populism infuses foreign policy with symbolic resonance, recoding pragmatic decisions in terms of national pride and moral redemption, shifting in this way the definition of what is pragmatic and necessary.

While this article focuses on populism as a structuring force in foreign and peacebuilding policy, it does not suggest that populism alone accounts for state behavior. Rather, it proposes that populism plays a significant—if often underacknowledged—role within a broader constellation of historical, environmental, institutional, and geopolitical variables. Recognizing this does not require reducing complexity; it simply means taking seriously the ways in which populist worldviews shape the terrain of international action, inflecting both policy content and the logics through which it is justified and performed. Populism, in this view, is not simply instrumental but constitutive—it generates the horizon within which policy, morality, and strategic interest are imagined and enacted.

Mainstream analyses often do not peer beyond the elite/people dichotomy thus overlooking a deeper current associated with it in populism: its reconceptualization of democracy and sovereignty through anti- and extra-institutional means. Populism is not limited to a stylistic or discursive critique of elite power; it seeks to reconfigure democratic governance itself by bypassing traditional institutional structures. Democracy is reimagined not as a pluralistic and deliberative process, but as the direct expression of a unified and indivisible popular will. This yields a form of legitimacy grounded in majoritarianism and immediacy—frequently at the expense of institutional mediation and constitutional balance (Metawe, 2020; Fiorespino, 2022).

Populist actors frequently portray democratic institutions—parliaments, courts, and independent agencies—not as neutral arbiters, but as illegitimate structures that obstruct the direct expression of popular sovereignty. These bodies are framed as part of a mediating apparatus that distorts, rather than channels, the popular will, and are thus seen as obstacles to be bypassed or subordinated to executive authority. Within this logic, liberal-democratic mechanisms—particularly those designed to protect minority rights or mediate among divergent interests—are reinterpreted not as safeguards of pluralism, but as instruments that dilute or suppress the voice of the "real people." What liberal democracy upholds as representation and procedural balance is recast by populist discourse as technocratic obstruction and elite gatekeeping. Consequently, institutions that enshrine non-majoritarian protections are depicted as fundamentally incompatible with authentic popular rule, which is imagined instead as immediate, unified, and unmediated.

Consequently, mechanisms designed to protect minority rights and mediate between diverse social interests are recast in populist discourse as impediments to democratic immediacy. Accordingly, such institutions not only obstruct the direct articulation of the popular will but also obscure the structural asymmetries embedded within liberal democratic orders. Liberal democracy—grounded in non-majoritarian protections and pluralism—is thus portrayed as fundamentally incompatible with genuine popular sovereignty, replacing the immediacy and unity of the people with mediation, proceduralism, and elite gatekeeping. In contrast, populism reifies the idea of a homogeneous sovereign people and posits the existence of a singular, pre-political popular will that institutions must enact rather than interpret or mediate (Sofos, 2022b; Urbinati, 2014). This shift from individual or particular rights to an undivided collective will signals not only a different conception of sovereignty but also engenders an exclusionary form of democracy. Those who fall outside the populist construction of "the people"—whether ethnic, ideological, or institutional others—are not seen as legitimate dissenters but as adversaries to be disempowered. Their exclusion is framed not as a breach of democratic norms, but as a defense of democratic authenticity.

Yet the imagined unity of "the people" presents a paradox: such an abstraction cannot be directly accessed through conventional democratic processes. Populist leaderships resolve this through performative politics—rallies, referenda, and symbolic acts—that simulate immediacy while bypassing deliberation. These performances are central to the populist style of rule, which relies on emotional appeal, spectacle, and the claim of an unmediated connection to the people's will (Moffitt, 2016; Ostiguy, 2017; Sofos, 2022b). The leader becomes the sole legitimate interpreter of that will, displacing institutional mediation with personal authority. In doing so, populism does not merely bypass liberal democratic institutions—it reconfigures the democratic ideal itself, substituting pluralism with moralized unity, representation with embodiment, and accountability with symbolic affirmation. The result is a system that mimics democratic responsiveness while marginalizing dissent and institutional constraint.

From domestic politics to the international field

The populist logic of governance extends beyond the domestic sphere and into international relations. As will be explored in greater detail below, populist actors often collapse the boundary between internal and external politics, treating foreign policy as both an extension and amplification of their domestic mandate (Metawe, 2020). For populist leaders, foreign policy becomes a domain where the will of the people is enacted, national sovereignty affirmed, and their own intuitive authority publicly staged.

This assertion often takes the form of defiance against institutions perceived as dominated by unaccountable "globalist elites," and by extension, against ideologies such as cosmopolitanism, European integration, and multilateralism—frequent targets of contemporary populist leaderships (Löfflmann, 2022). Such stances undermine established diplomatic norms, promoting a unilateral and often confrontational posture abroad. This dynamic is not confined to external behavior; it reverberates back into domestic politics, reinforcing anti-elitist and anti-institutional narratives at home (Stengel et al., 2019). The relationship between populist narratives and foreign policy is thus reciprocal: both realms are constructed as battlegrounds in the same antagonistic struggle, and foreign policy becomes a key stage for the symbolic performance of sovereignty.

This political logic finds expression in the foreign policy practices of several revisionist emerging powers, where populist leadership has reshaped both the content and conduct of international engagement. Populist leaders often frame international disputes as moral battles over sovereignty and justice. Thies and Nieman (2019) demonstrate how rising powers like Brazil, Russia, India, and China pursue revisionist strategies that aim to reshape global institutions and norms in line with elite conceptions of the international order. When populism and revisionism intersect, diplomacy becomes more confrontational and increasingly challenges the liberal international system.

India provides a telling example. As a key BRICS member and revisionist force in global politics, India under the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Prime Minister Narendra Modi has infused foreign policy with Hindu nationalist themes that mirror domestic populist narratives. Modi's "India First" doctrine, his emphasis on civilizational uniqueness, and his resistance to perceived foreign interference position India as both a strategic and a unique spiritual and cultural power. Although less overtly confrontational than Erdogan, Modi leverages global platforms to assert Indian exceptionalism and promote a unified, Hindu-centric national identity (Wojczewski, 2019, 2020; Destradi et al., 2022). This vision reimagines India as a civilizational state reclaiming its rightful global role while marginalizing both its Islamic heritage and regional Muslim-majority rivals, especially Pakistan and, to a lesser extent, Bangladesh (Jaffrelot, 2021).

Brazil under Jair Bolsonaro also illustrates the synergy between domestic populism and international revisionism. While aligned ideologically with Western conservatism, Bolsonaro adopted an explicitly anti-globalist foreign policy, targeting institutions like the United Nations and World Health Organization for allegedly infringing on Brazilian sovereignty. These critiques were framed not simply as policy disagreements, but as affirmations of Brazil's autonomous national will—resonating with populist narratives that valorize the people's voice over elite or external control (Farias et al., 2024). His administration's withdrawal from international environmental accords and its aggressive stance toward traditional allies were portrayed as efforts to restore national dignity and reclaim foreign policy independence. Bolsonaro also cultivated symbolic alliances with far-right leaders globally, casting international politics as a moral struggle between sovereign peoples and a globalist elite (Thiers and Wehner, 2023; Mongelli et al., 2023).

A particularly salient case of populist governance within the European Union—especially in foreign policy—is Hungary under Viktor Orbán. Orbán's electoral victory in 2010 marked a decisive shift from the country's pro-European orientation, seeking integration and normative alignment with the EU, as Hungary pivoted from cooperative multilateralism to a sovereigntist, revisionist approach. Since then, the Fidesz government has systematically obstructed EU consensus, challenged joint foreign and security policies, and cultivated closer ties with authoritarian powers such as China and Russia. As Jenne (2021) notes, populist leaders often politicize foreign policy to serve domestic narratives, recasting international alliances in ideological terms and portraying multilateral obligations as threats to national sovereignty. Orbán's rhetoric exemplifies this strategy by framing foreign policy as a defense of Hungarian autonomy rather than a technocratic or diplomatic domain. Hungary's populist trajectory has also made it a democratic spoiler within the EU. Kelemen (2020) demonstrates how Hungary contributes to an emerging authoritarian equilibrium in the Union—eroding institutional norms, reassigning authority, and weakening democratic checks, all while formally complying with EU membership obligations. A particularly telling example of this strategy is Hungary's "Eastern Opening" policy, which seeks to deepen bilateral relations with non-Western states—especially China—under the guise of economic pragmatism. Yet beyond its economic rationale, the policy also functions as a tool to distance Hungary from EU norms and construct an alternative diplomatic identity. Recent scholarship underscores the destabilizing implications of such alignments: Balázs (2019) highlights Hungary's broader strategic reorientation away from EU-centered diplomacy. These developments systematically disrupt and undermine the coherence of the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and raise broader questions about compliance and unity within the bloc.

This pattern corresponds to what Bickerton (2012) characterizes as the transformation from substantive political integration to instrumental membership, whereby states maintain formal participation in the European Union while simultaneously disengaging from its normative foundations. It also resonates with Aggestam and True (2020) concept of "double-edged diplomacy," which captures how states engage with international institutions while contesting or reshaping their underlying norms.

Finally, we turn to the question of foreign policy conduct—specifically, how populist discourse and governance shape revisionist international practices. Populist foreign policy diverges from both authoritarian and liberal-internationalist models. As Chryssogelos et al. (2023) and Sofos (2022a, 2024a) argue, it features centralized decision-making and personalized diplomacy. While authoritarian regimes also centralize power,

they often rely on bureaucratic control and ideological discipline. Populism, by contrast, legitimizes centralization through appeals to majoritarianism and the leader's direct embodiment of the "will of the people" (Wajner and Giurlando, 2024). In Turkey, President Erdogan's self-styling as the indispensable vessel of sovereignty has produced a foreign policy in which dissent is cast not as opposition but as betrayal (Plagemann and Destradi, 2019).

Populist diplomacy also contrasts with the technocratic, institutionalized practices of liberal internationalism. Rather than quiet backchannel negotiations, it is theatrical, direct, and performative. Leaders like Erdogan prioritize leader-to-leader summits, symbolic gestures, and public spectacles that dramatize sovereignty and reinforce their personal authority. This approach often yields transactional, erratic, and loyalty-driven foreign policy, undermining institutional consistency and multilateralism (Wajner et al., 2024). Turkey's engagements in Syria, Libya, the Balkans, and the South Caucasus exemplify this trend (Sofos, 2022a, 2023, 2024a).

To this current of thinking about populist foreign policy, one needs to juxtapose work that comes from the field of the study of the behavior of emerging powers such as Salaymeh et al. (2025), who argue that emerging powers are crafting a "middle way" approach to sovereignty—avoiding both the intrusiveness of liberal interventionism and the rigid passivity of traditional non-intervention. In their view, these actors promote partnerships that respect national ownership, emphasize state-led development, and avoid imposing external values. Drawing on cases such as Brazil in Haiti, India in Nepal, and Turkey in the Horn of Africa, they argue that while these actors reject Western peacebuilding templates, they do not retreat into isolationism. Instead, they construct alternative frameworks grounded in *pragmatic sovereignty*, understood as a flexible, context-specific approach that emphasizes state agency, mutual benefit, and postcolonial sensitivity.

Although I will focus later in this paper on the case of Somalia in greater detail, I would argue here that the authors' notion of *pragmatic sovereignty* is analytically problematic and normatively insufficient. While presented as a balanced alternative to liberal internationalism and rigid non-intervention, *pragmatic sovereignty* often reifies a state-centric understanding of autonomy that sidelines grassroots actors and democratic inclusion. The emphasis on "local ownership" in these partnerships is frequently reinterpreted through elite brokerage, privileging political or economic actors who are already embedded in asymmetric power relations with the intervening state. Far from being neutral, these practices bypass multilateral mechanisms in favor of bilateral, loyalty-based arrangements that replicate the very hierarchies liberal peacebuilding was accused of perpetuating.

Rather than representing a truly pluralistic or emancipatory model, this approach enables symbolic domination, instrumental moral authority, and strategic selectivity—with sovereignty employed more as a rhetorical device than as a commitment to inclusive political agency. In fact, the structure and discursive framing of these engagements often mirror populist understandings of sovereignty, where "the people" are abstractly invoked, but real authority is centralized in elite networks aligned with external actors. The result is a model that conflates state strength with popular will, while undermining democratic contestation, institutional transparency, and inclusive participation. In this sense, Salaymeh et al.'s "middle path" not only fails to adequately interrogate the normative content of sovereignty as practiced by emerging powers, but also risks legitimizing illiberal forms of influence cloaked in the language of anti-imperialism and postcolonial solidarity. It presents a softened façade of state-centric domination, which, while rhetorically distinct from liberal peacebuilding, perpetuates many of the same asymmetries through different means. By focusing on formal sovereignty and bilateral diplomacy, the model displaces meaningful engagement with bottom-up voices and civil society actors, thereby eroding the participatory dimensions of peacebuilding and reinforcing dependency under a different banner.

This resonance between emerging power strategies and populist practices suggests the need to examine sovereignty not only through structural alignments but also through the performative and anti-institutionalist logics that underpin populist foreign policy.

Drawing on Trump's peace initiatives, Landau and Lehrs (2022) framework identifying three key features of populist peacemaking—rejection of elite mediation, centralization of peace efforts around the leader, and the moralization of diplomacy as service to "the people"—provides a useful and more systematic entry point. While I build on this model, I argue that it underestimates the structural implications of anti-elitism. For Landau and Lehrs, anti-elitism is largely rhetorical—meant to assert the leader's symbolic authority. I suggest instead that it facilitates a deeper strategic anti-institutionalism: a rejection not only of personnel (e.g. diplomats) but of the multilateral norms, institutions, and procedures underpinning liberal peacebuilding. In Turkey's case, "anti-elitist narratives" legitimize bypassing inclusive international mediation in favor of bilateral, loyalty-based influence. Populist peacemaking thus often becomes a vector of revisionist foreign policy—combining populist performance with the goal of constructing an antagonistic, sovereignty-centered international order. This rhetorical rejection of elites enables the abandonment of complex, rules-based institutions in favor of informal, opaque, and personalized diplomacy. The resulting preference for unilateralism or bilateralism, and sovereign reassertion reflects populism's broader anti-institutionalist emphasis. Turkey's embrace of informal personal networks in the Balkans and its participation in opaque forums like the Astana Process—over more institutionalized venues such as the UN-backed Geneva talks on Syria—demonstrates this shift in both the style and substance of global politics under populism (Sofos, 2022a, 2024a).

Building on the broader patterns observed in emerging powers such as India, or Brazil, as well as Hungary's revisionism within the European Union, Turkey represents a particularly salient case where populist leadership, aspirations for emerging power status, and peacemaking initiatives intersect to shape a distinctive foreign policy trajectory.

Populism and emerging power diplomacy: the case of Turkey

The founding foreign policy principle of the Turkish Republic, articulated by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk as "Yurtta sulh, cihanda

sulh" (*Peace at home, peace in the world*), captured a vision of stability and moderation, both domestically and internationally. First expressed in 1931, this maxim reflected Atatürk's commitment to internal cohesion as a precondition for a foreign policy grounded in non-aggression, multilateralism, and respect for sovereignty. It came to symbolize Turkey's early Republican international identity: cautious, rule-bound, and embedded in the liberal international order. Over time, this vision was institutionalized, serving as a normative anchor for Turkish diplomacy. Yet, the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdogan and the Justice and Development Party (AKP), is emblematic of the parallel developments between the emergence of domestic populism and Turkey's newly found status as an emerging, revisionist power. Following the AKP's consolidation of power, in the early 2010s, Turkish foreign policy increasingly framed external engagement as an assertion of sovereign agency, positioning Turkey as a mediator in regional conflicts while simultaneously challenging established international norms. Much of the recent literature positions Turkey as a hybrid or reformist actor in global politics, this article contends that its peacemaking engagement in Somalia exhibits features more accurately described as revisionist. Scholars such as Öniş (2014) emphasize Turkey's pursuit of "strategic autonomy" or "hybrid hegemonism"—a balancing act that seeks regional influence while avoiding a full rupture with the liberal international order. Similarly, Altunışk (2020) highlights Turkey's selective norm contestation, arguing that it reshapes rather than rejects key principles of international diplomacy. Writing before the more tangible transformation of Ankara's foreign policy, Bilgin (2011) warns against binary classifications such as revisionist vs. status quo and advocates for analyzing Turkey through the lens of non-Western pluralism, stressing the contextual and historically situated nature of its foreign policy logic. Özpek and Tanriverdi Yaşar (2018) on the other hand outline in some detail the ideological and strategic transformation of Turkish foreign policy under the AKP, particularly following the rupture of the Kurdish peace process and the 2013 Gezi Park protests. They argue that this period marked a significant shift away from pro-European liberalism toward a foreign policy rooted in populist anti-Westernism, characterized by the rejection of pluralism, suspicion toward multilateral institutions, and a conspiratorial framing of international actors. Although they do not provide a formal definition of "revisionism," their analysis supports a bolder interpretation—that Ankara's foreign policy acquired a revisionist orientation, as it began to contest the liberal international order's normative and institutional foundations. They show how domestic populist logics—constructing a unified and morally righteous "people" against both dissenters—translated into a more confrontational and sovereignty-focused diplomatic posture. Indeed, the emergence of populism in Turkey during the 2000s marked not just a shift in party politics but a rearticulation of sovereignty, democracy, and legitimacy. Central to this transformation was the AKP's invocation of the "national will" (*milli irade*) as the supreme source of political authority, set against the perceived illegitimacy of republican institutions. Following the 1997 military memorandum, which ousted Prime Minister Erbakan and led to the banning of the Welfare Party, Turkey's political establishment reaffirmed a model of secular tutelary democracy, where unelected elites—particularly the military, judiciary, and bureaucracy—claimed to safeguard the republic's foundational values. Under this framework, democracy was acceptable only when it aligned with secularism, nationalism, and statist unity. The AKP, emerging from the remnants of banned Islamist parties, rebranded itself as a "conservative democratic" force, ostensibly transcending the Islamist–secularist divide (Sofos, 2022b). Yet it mobilized a powerful narrative of historical injustice, portraying the Kemalist regime as an exclusionary order that had long marginalized conservative, religious, and rural constituencies (Arisan, 2022; Sofos, 2022b). Rooted in resentment, disappointment, and betrayal, this emotional register underpinned the AKP's populist mobilization. The party styled itself as the authentic representative of the "long-silenced national will," symbolized most clearly in acts like the reconversion of Hagia Sophia into a mosque—a spatial expression of sovereign reclamation (Sofos, 2021). In this context, republican institutions were recast as suspect at best, illegitimate mechanisms of domination—obstacles to the realization of popular sovereignty, defined as the immediate, moral expression of a religious nation long denied its rightful agency. AKP electoral victories were thus framed not merely as political success but as the vindication of a dispossessed majority, reclaiming power from entrenched secular elites and their international allies.

According to this populist logic, sovereignty is unitary and indivisible, embodied in a homogeneous national will that requires no institutional mediation. Parliamentary deliberation, judicial oversight, and bureaucratic procedure are reinterpreted as hindrances to democratic immediacy. In line with other populist regimes (Urbinati, 2014; Sofos, 2021, 2022b), intermediary institutions are hollowed out in favor of plebiscitary mechanisms—mass rallies, referenda, and centralized executive rule. This strategy reached in Turkey symbolic heights during political crises such as the 2007 e-memorandum, the 2013 Gezi Park protests, and the 2016 coup attempt. In each instance, the AKP cast itself as the sole guardian of the national will against domestic and foreign conspirators. Mass mobilizations—spontaneous or orchestrated—were framed as performative enactments of unmediated popular sovereignty. Physical occupation of public space became a ritual of direct connection between the people and their leader, rendering formal institutions increasingly irrelevant. These moments were infused with historical memory, activating a powerful binary between the "White Turks" and the "Black Turks"—a divide not just sociological but politically weaponized to reinforce the narrative of exclusion and rightful reclamation (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2013; Ferguson, 2014).

The AKP's narrative of injustice redefined democracy as a moral affirmation of an already unified people, which could find its expression solely through their leader.[1] While the AKP initially promised inclusion, it ultimately entrenched a majoritarian and authoritarian model. Rather than overcoming polarization, it made it a constitutive element of its populist project. In this context,

1 This, to be sure, was not the degeneration of pluralist democracy but the closure of a long-suspended democratic opening long obstructed by partisan republican institutions.

sovereignty was reified as indivisible and framed within a zero-sum logic, where peace was not negotiated but achieved through the triumph of the popular will, as defined by the AKP leadership. Consequently, Turkish populism is not merely a style or an adjunct to a "host" ideology like nationalism or Islamism. It is a generative political logic—one that reshapes the symbolic, institutional, and affective foundations of the polity.

The remainder of this analysis turns to Turkey's evolving approach to peacemaking as a critical domain where the discursive commonality, continuity, and complementarity linking populist politics "at home" with revisionist politics "in the world" can be clearly observed and its evolution traced. Turkey's international revisionism is not merely contemporaneous with its domestic populism—it is structurally and discursively entangled with it. Both are underpinned by a shared redefinition of sovereignty and injustice, framed through the indivisibility of the national will, a deep mistrust of mediating institutions, and a zero-sum, antagonistic understanding of political contestation. Just as domestic pluralism and liberal-democratic checks were recast as obstacles to popular sovereignty, so too were international institutions and norms depicted as illegitimate constraints on Turkey's rightful global agency. In this context, Turkey's populism and revisionism appear not as parallel trajectories, but as dual expressions of a unified political logic—one that transcends the domestic-international divide and reorders both spheres in its image.

It is in this context that Turkey's evolving approach to peacemaking must be understood—not as a sudden rupture but as a gradual reconfiguration and eventual radicalization of earlier foreign policy trends. What began in the 1990s as a multidirectional yet still liberal-aligned orientation gave way, over the 2000s, to a more assertive and ideologically charged trajectory, transitioning from reformist ambition to populist revisionism. From the late 2000s onward, domestic narratives of sovereignty and exclusion were increasingly projected outward, reshaping Turkey's international conduct beyond the norms of the liberal order. As Sofos (2022a) points out, notable shifts in Turkey's conception of peacemaking and, more broadly, foreign policy began to crystallize toward the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century. This transformation was driven by converging domestic and international dynamics: the 2008 global financial crisis, the Arab uprisings, and the Western retreat from MENA created space for Turkey to pivot. Abandoning multilateralism, its foreign policy grew increasingly assertive, strategic, and sovereigntist—centered on national autonomy, civilizational identity, and regional leadership. In this new paradigm, peacemaking became not a neutral norm-driven activity but a tool of domestic legitimacy, national prestige, and geopolitical assertion.

Ankara's shifting peacemaking engagement

Peacebuilding and peacemaking today encompass a broad set of practices addressing the complex, interconnected causes of conflict. While once focused on halting violence, rebuilding institutions, and promoting social cohesion, these efforts have expanded to engage with issues such as human insecurity, socioeconomic inequality, nationalism, sectarianism, underdevelopment, and environmental degradation (Adler and Barnett, 1998; Mac Ginty, 2011). Interventions combine coercive tools like military deployments with non-coercive strategies including dialogue, development aid, capacity-building, and diplomacy (Richmond, 2005). Approaches range from state-led, top-down models to grassroots, community-based initiatives. Greater attention is now paid to the gendered dimensions of conflict, challenging earlier masculinist frames (Ní Aoláin, 2010; Shepherd, 2008; Paffenholz, 2015). For much of the post–Cold War era, liberal peacebuilding dominated, emphasizing democratization, human rights, the rule of law, and market reforms—often implemented through multilateral institutions rooted in Western norms (Paris, 2004; Chandler, 2010). Yet this model has been widely criticized for its technocratic approach, lack of sensitivity to local agency, and reinforcement of global power asymmetries (Mac Ginty, 2011; Richmond and Mitchell, 2012). In response, alternative paradigms—post-liberal and hybrid approaches—have emerged, foregrounding local ownership, negotiation, and context-specific understandings of peace (Richmond, 2011).

During the Cold War and its aftermath, Turkey's peacemaking engagement was limited, sporadic, and largely security-driven. Notable examples include the 1974 Cyprus intervention—framed domestically as a "peace operation"—and Turkey's mediation during the Iran–Iraq War, which Ankara viewed as destabilizing due to its implications for regional Kurdish movements (Aydin, 2000; Balta and Özel, 2021). Overall, foreign policy during this era was marked by caution and a defensive posture, aimed at safeguarding borders and maintaining alignment with Western security frameworks, particularly NATO. Peace initiatives were largely expressions of responsible international citizenship, reinforcing Turkey's aspiration for deeper Euro-Atlantic integration rather than projecting independent agency (Aras and Karakaya Polat, 2007).

This liberal-internationalist orientation persisted into the 1990s, as seen in Turkey's contributions to multilateral missions such as UNOSOM II in Somalia (1993–1995) and KFOR in Kosovo from 1999 (Narli, 2000; Aydın, 2003; Ülgen, 2011).[2] Meanwhile, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Balkan conflicts prompted a strategic shift. Turkey began to leverage ethnic, religious, and cultural ties with Turkic republics in Central Asia and Muslim communities in the Balkans, combining humanitarian aid with economic and diplomatic outreach (Öniş and Yilmaz, 2009). These experiences laid the groundwork for later civil society-oriented peacebuilding and development models.

The ascent of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in 2002 marked a pivotal transformation in Turkish foreign policy. From the outset, the AKP leadership articulated a vision of Turkey as a central geopolitical actor—not only within its immediate

2 UNOSOM II was established in March 1993 to establish throughout Somalia a secure environment for humanitarian assistance. To that end, UNOSOM II was to complete, through disarmament and reconciliation, the task begun by the Unified Task Force for the restoration of peace, stability, law and order. UNOSOM II was withdrawn in early March 1995. KFOR (Kosovo Force) has been a NATO-led international peacekeeping force established to ensure security and stability in Kosovo following the 1999 conflict with Serbia.

neighborhood but also across the broader former Ottoman and Islamic worlds (Murinson, 2007). This perspective reflected deeper ideological and geopolitical currents embedded in Turkish Islamist thought, including notions of civilizational responsibility, Islamic solidarity, and a rejection of Turkey's post-Kemalist geopolitical introspection. These currents were not only discursive but also practical, shaping the AKP's early foreign policy posture well before the formal appointment of Ahmet Davutoglu as Foreign Minister. It was Davutoglu, however, who would go on to systematically codify these ideas—first in his influential book *Strategic Depth* (2001), and later through his tenure at the helm of Turkish foreign policy—transforming them into a coherent doctrine of assertive, multidimensional engagement (Kutlay and Öniş, 2021). This included civilizational geopolitics, Islamic solidarity, and a neo-Ottoman conception of Turkey's regional role—ideas rooted in the National Outlook Movement of Necmettin Erbakan, whose worldview was structured around oppositional binaries such as Islamic vs. Western identity and colonized vs. colonizer (Yavuz, 2022). As Yavuz (2022) argues, the AKP's foreign policy has consistently included a revisionist ambition grounded in neo-Ottomanism, aligned with its authoritarian populist style of governance. Even during its early pro-European phase, the AKP's liberal internationalist posture was largely instrumental—serving to dismantle the military's guardianship role—rather than reflecting deep normative alignment with Western liberalism (Onar, 2009).

Davutoglu's *Strategic Depth* provided a theoretical framework for what had already become a strategic orientation within the AKP. He argued that the Turkish Republic's early secular-Western turn had severed its connection to a broader Ottoman-Islamic civilizational space, stunting national self-realization. According to this vision, the Kemalist abandonment of the Balkans, Middle East, and Central Asia was more than strategic oversight—it was a betrayal of Turkey's authentic identity and moral purpose (Davutoglu, 2001). In this framing, Turkey's re-engagement with its Ottoman hinterlands was both a geopolitical imperative and a moral duty, resonating with the AKP's populist narrative of dispossession and restoration (Onar, 2009). Thus, *Strategic Depth* provides a geopolitical expression of the populist structure of feeling[3] that characterizes AKP-era governance: "the people" is portrayed as historically wronged, deprived of their voice and civilizational mission, with the current leadership cast as the authentic vehicle for redressing this injustice. Foreign policy activism, particularly in regions once linked to Ottoman rule, becomes an extension of domestic populist narratives of sovereignty, pride, and moral governance, reasserting Turkey's place in a world from which it had been illegitimately marginalized. In this framework, peacebuilding was reinterpreted as a means of asserting regional leadership, enhancing national prestige, and presenting Turkey as a cultural and political bridge between civilizations.

Despite differences in tone and emphasis, the three major AKP foreign policy phases identified by Yavuz (2022) are underpinned by a redefined national identity rooted in Ottoman-Islamic heritage, a resentment toward the West's assumed complicity in the denial of agency to the Turkish people and nation, and a recurring theme of Turkish exceptionalism. These developments, as Sofos (2021, 2022a) and Aras and Karakaya Polat (2007); Aras (2019) also show, reflect a populist reimagining of sovereignty as the indivisible expression of a unified national will, projected domestically and externally. This undercurrent in AKP's international orientation is crucial in understanding the redefinition of Ankara's peacebuilding, diplomacy, and regional engagement as domains through which Turkey has been seeking to assert national pride, challenge global hierarchies, and reinforce domestic legitimacy. Turkey's outreach to the Balkans, Africa, and the Middle East—via humanitarian aid, business diplomacy, cultural engagement, and selective mediation—becomes a symbolic enactment of restored sovereignty and civilizational leadership, aligning with both Davutoglu's geopolitical theory and Erdogan's populist practice.

Concrete initiatives during this period reflected the AKP's reimagined foreign policy role, which consistently framed Turkey as a pivotal actor within a revived Ottoman geopolitical space. Turkey actively promoted its identity as a bridge between East and West, straddling civilizational and strategic divides (Aydin-Düzgit and Rumelili, 2022). It co-sponsored the UN's Alliance of Civilizations to foster intercultural dialogue (Richmond, 2005), engaged in mediation efforts in Iraq (Murinson, 2007), brokered indirect peace talks between Syria and Israel (Benn and Harel, 2004), and attempted to mediate between Israel and Hamas (Al Jazeera, 2009). Ankara also played a key role in facilitating nuclear negotiations with Iran (Tehran Times, 2008) and co-founded the Friends of Mediation initiative at the United Nations with Finland (Paffenholz, 2015). These initiatives reveal a strategic ambition consistent with the AKP's long-standing revisionist outlook: they sought to position Turkey as a diplomatic intermediary and normative actor—aligned with, yet distinct from, the Western liberal order.

By the early 2010s, however, a convergence of domestic and international developments catalyzed a more decisive transformation. The stalling of EU accession talks, mass protests culminating in the Gezi Park demonstrations, and institutional attempts to challenge the AKP's authority—especially by the military and judiciary—destabilized the earlier balance (Sofos, 2022a; Tziarras, 2022). Simultaneously, global shifts—marked by Western retrenchment and intensifying regional polarization—provided Ankara with the latitude to adopt a more assertive, confrontational stance.

In this new context, foreign policy became one of the primary domains through which the AKP articulated its populist political posture. Turkey's peacemaking ambitions—broadly conceived—were repurposed as tools of sovereign affirmation and domestic legitimation. Initiatives once framed in cooperative terms were increasingly recast as symbolic expressions of an indivisible

3 The term *structure of feeling*, coined by Williams (1977), refers to the lived, affective experiences and emergent cultural formations that exist before they are fully articulated in formal institutions or ideological systems. It captures the emotional tone and imaginative frameworks through which people perceive and respond to social and political realities. In this context, I use *structure of feeling* to describe the affectively charged and historically sedimented disposition underpinning AKP-era populism—particularly the longing for national restoration, moral clarity, and sovereign assertion—that prefigures and animates the geopolitical vision articulated in *Strategic Depth*.

"national will." The populist imaginary displaced pluralism and rule-based multilateralism in favor of a zero-sum logic consistent with the domestic reconfiguration of Turkey's political order.

The Arab Spring presented a crucial moment of opportunity. Ankara rapidly positioned itself as a regional model for democratic transition in the Middle East and North Africa (Özkirimli and Sofos, 2013), encouraging regime change in Tunisia and Egypt. In March 2011, President Abdullah Gül and Foreign Minister Davutoglu visited Cairo to meet with interim authorities and the Muslim Brotherhood (Ahram Online, 2011), while Davutoglu held high-level talks with Tunisia's Prime Minister Mohamed Ghannouchi (Imai, 2017, p. 117). This diplomatic activism culminated in Erdogan's 2011 regional tour across Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya (Tol, 2011), where he promoted the so-called "Turkish model"—an ostensibly harmonious blend of Islam, democracy, and secular governance—as a template for post-authoritarian transformation (France24, 2011). These visits also had a strong economic component, with Erdogan accompanied by a large business delegation, further cementing the AKP's linkage of political ambition to economic outreach.

This vision extended beyond the traditional Ottoman hinterland. Turkey's engagement with Africa, particularly after 2005/s "Year of Africa," marked a strategic expansion into a region historically neglected by Ankara but central to Davutoglu's civilizational outlook (Davutoglu, 2001, p. 206). Drawing on Ottoman ties with East Africa and the Horn, Turkey's Africa policy combined development aid, trade, security cooperation, and Islamic solidarity. Erdogan personally led many of these initiatives, visiting dozens of African capitals emphasizing historical affinity and shared religious-cultural bonds, and portraying Turkey as a benevolent, non-colonial partner. Ankara presented itself as an alternative to Western powers, advancing a model of engagement free from reform conditionality. As in its MENA strategy, this outreach fused economic pragmatism with symbolic assertion—anchoring AKP foreign policy in a continuity of neo-Ottoman, populist, and sovereigntist themes.

The anti-colonial rhetoric and lack of conditionality inherent in Turkey's reach to Africa signaled an initial effort on the part of Ankara to distinguish itself from its European partners and allies and articulate its own vision of engagement with Africa, but also the Middle East, the Balkans and Central Asia. This initial, modest rift started expanding rapidly and by the mid-2010s, Turkey's foreign and peacebuilding discourse grew increasingly confrontational toward the West. In an emblematic speech before the Angolan Parliament in October 2021, Erdogan rejected "Western-centric orientalist approaches" and affirmed Turkey's commitment to engage with African nations "without discrimination" and without preconditions. Erdogan also repeatedly criticized French policies in West Africa as neo-colonial and destabilizing, reinforcing Turkey's distinct positioning (Anadolu Agency, 2023) while promoting security treaties with former French colonies Mali, Chad and Niger, and represented Turkey as a key ally of the demand of African nations to gain a voice in international fora, using the phrase "The world is bigger than five," to contrast the veto powers of the five permanent Security Council members against African underrepresentation in most international institutions. Turkish diplomats similarly echoed this narrative, emphasizing Ankara's "shared memory of anti-imperialist struggle" with African societies and framing Turkey's engagements as based on a "win-win" philosophy rather than the "profit-driven" motives attributed to China (Sofos, 2022a).

Through a multifaceted strategy—encompassing humanitarian outreach, development cooperation, infrastructure development, military training and security partnerships, religious diplomacy, political support and commercial links that form part of Ankara's contemporary understanding of peacemaking—Turkey positioned itself as a champion of the "decolonization" of engagement with the Global South, and increasingly with the former colonial periphery of Europe. Interestingly, the domestic popular sovereignty discourse deployed by the AKP is one of decolonization or, at least, one of countering the power of the establishment within Turkey and the foreign interests they are associated with (see for example Erisen and Sar, 2025). In this process, Ankara minimized or reinterpreted the Ottoman Empire's expansion into the Mediterranean, the Balkans, and the Middle East as a non-colonial encounter. By projecting itself as a historically empathetic and culturally proximate actor, rather than a former imperial power, Turkey successfully carved out space for itself in regions where Western actors are often regarded with suspicion, resentment, and mistrust. This strategy not only bolstered its influence in Africa and parts of Europe's margins but also enabled Ankara to present its growing international activism as more legitimate and morally grounded than that of its Western competitors.

From reformism to revisionism: Somalia and the recasting of Turkish peacemaking

Somalia constitutes a threshold case in the transformation of Turkey's peacemaking and broader foreign policy posture. While Turkish interventions in Syria and Libya reflect more overtly militarized and revisionist strategies, its long-standing engagement in Somalia reveals an earlier, subtler articulation of the same logic. With a strategic presence spanning over 15 years, Somalia offers a critical vantage point to observe Turkey's shift from reformist multilateralism to populist-revisionist assertiveness. It illustrates how Ankara's foreign policy ambitions—shaped by civilizational narratives, a particular mode of injustice framing, and sovereign reassertion—began to reshape both the practice and meaning of peacemaking under the AKP. Although not yet a fully-fledged theater of revisionist peacemaking during the early stages of Ankara's bilateral engagement in the country, Somalia clearly exhibits the early contours of this shift. As I show in what follows, Turkey's selective bypassing of multilateral mechanisms, preference for bilateralism, training of ideologically aligned forces, and cultivation of personalized diplomatic networks reflect an effort to shape post-conflict spaces in line with its own strategic and normative vision. Rooted in symbolic solidarity, moral responsibility, and historical continuity, these practices mark a move away from liberal peacebuilding toward a structurally revisionist paradigm. This trajectory furthermore aligns with

what Pack (2022), in his work on Libya terms "revisionist pragmatism": a blend of ideological narrative and transactional power politics.

This is evident in Turkey's preference for loyalty-based state-building partnerships, particular modalities of cultivation of religious and cultural ties, and its unilateral role in shaping local security and governance institutions in Somalia. While hybrid elements remain, the Somali case illustrates a clear pivot toward a model of populist-revisionist peacemaking—mirroring the AKP's broader political transformation and foreshadowing a more aggressive revisionist engagement in subsequent interventions. A focus on Somalia, captures the formative moment at which Turkey's populist and revisionist trajectories converge in the realm of peacemaking. It is here that the normative and operational reimagining of sovereignty, legitimacy, and international order under the AKP first come into view, revealing both the ambitions and ambiguities of Ankara's evolving regional and international role.

Turkey's evolving engagement in Somalia offers a vivid illustration of its transition from a humanitarian actor to a strategic power consolidating influence through state-building and military infrastructure. This transformation, which began as early as 2010, reflects Ankara's broader ambition to project a religiously inflected, civilizational foreign policy. In the Horn of Africa, this strategy aimed to balance the growing influence of regional contenders like Ethiopia and Kenya by anchoring Turkish presence in a north-south Red Sea axis spanning Sudan and Somalia (Sofos, 2022a, 2024b; Özkan, 2014). In May 2010, the Somali and Turkish governments signed a military training agreement, in keeping with the provisions outlined in the Djibouti Peace Process of 2008 (AU Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), no date), which was supposed to pave the way for the cessation of armed conflict and the building of representative governance structures in Somalia. However, Ankara's regional vision faced major disruptions. The devastating effects of the continuing violence in Somalia were compounded by the drought and famine of 2011 that brought about an unprecedented humanitarian crisis that decimated communities throughout the Horn of Africa. In the same year, the secession of South Sudan from Sudan weakened Khartoum's regional stature and eroded Sudan's state capacity, shattering Ankara's plans to establish a presence in the northern part of the Red Sea region (Tubiana, 2023).

The developments in Somalia were more advantageous for Turkey despite the devastating effects of the 2011 famine. The Somali crisis provoked an extraordinary wave of public sympathy in Turkey, activating civil society networks and state institutions and resulting in Turkey becoming the single largest donor to Somalia in that year, offering approximately USD 201 million in humanitarian aid. This figure included contributions collected through an extensive public fundraising campaign involving Turkish civil society organizations, businesses, and government agencies such as AFAD (Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency) and TIKA (Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency) (Sofos, 2022a). This moment enabled the AKP government to channel domestic emotional capital into foreign policy, portraying Turkish assistance as the will of the people and positioning Somalia as a flagship of Muslim solidarity and national pride. The AKP cast its engagement in Somalia as an instance of foreign policy reflecting the popular/national will. It was also portrayed as a symbolic restoration of Turkey's rightful place in world affairs, correcting the injustices of the past where Turkey had been sidelined or constrained by external forces (Anadolu Agency, 2011, 2015; Daily Sabah, 2017). After a stalemate of almost 2 years in the civil war that had torn the country apart, Kenyan troops crossed the border into Somalia and waged a campaign against the Islamist al-Shabab movement which had entered the capital, Mogadishu. The Transitional Federal Government forces with the AMISOM forces, reinvigorated with the injection of the Kenyan units began to push back Al-Shabaab, starting with forcing its forces to move out of Mogadishu in August 2011. Erdogan took the opportunity to make a highly symbolic visit to Mogadishu—the first by a non-African leader in decades—accompanied by his wife, daughter, and cabinet members, promising to open an embassy in Mogadishu to support aid and reconstruction efforts.

Ankara had previously demonstrated its interest in Somalia by hosting a first international donor conference (2010), which were followed by further conferences in 2012 and 2015, as well as by the High-Level Partnership Forum on Somalia in Istanbul in February 2016. Erdogan's first visit to Somalia was not simply humanitarian but profoundly performative, embodying the populist logic of direct responsiveness to public sentiment. It was framed domestically as an act of courage and moral leadership, underscoring Turkey's willingness to stand with oppressed peoples where others hesitated, and further inflaming national pride by highlighting Turkey's exceptionalism and bravery on the world stage. The sight of Erdogan walking in Mogadishu confirmed the unmediated connection he had with "his people," his ability to listen to "it" and translate "its will" into action. It linked Turkish domestic politics to an emerging moral economy of international engagement: one that emphasized unmediated solidarity, risk-taking leadership, and an alternative to the bureaucratic conditionalities typically associated with Western interventions. This popular legitimacy was quickly institutionalized. Agencies like TIKA and AFAD implemented over 160 development projects, while Turkish companies were contracted to rehabilitate critical infrastructure, including the Mogadishu port and airport (Akpınar, 2015). What began as humanitarian diplomacy soon morphed into a comprehensive presence—blending soft power with hard assets and discourses of moral responsibility with strategic assertiveness.

In this context, the military dimension rapidly gained prominence. A 2010 military training agreement with the Somali government, in line with the Djibouti Peace Process (AU Mission in Somalia, n.d.) that had preceded the famine and its impact on public opinion, culminated in the 2017 establishment of Camp TURKSOM—Turkey's largest overseas military training base. Through this base, Turkey began training elite Somali units—the Gorgor forces (Sofos, 2022a), and the Haramcad police unit (Ahmed, 2021).

The Gorgor battalions have developed a reputation for strong loyalty to Ankara (Sofos, 2023) and have played key roles in counterterrorism operations against Al-Shabaab. However, they operate outside the coordination structures of AMISOM and the Somali Ministry of Defense and are equipped exclusively with

Turkish-made weapons such as the MPT-76 rifle, in contrast to the Kalashnikov-based systems used by the rest of the Somali National Army. This parallel provisioning has hindered interoperability with other units and entrenched logistical dependence on Turkish military supply chains. Moreover, the units' distinct esprit de corps, their Turkish-language training, the close involvement of Turkish officers, and their reported deployment in support of Ankara-aligned political actors—most notably former President Mohamed Abdullah Farmaajo in the run-up to the 2022 elections—suggest that Turkey's role in Somalia has become increasingly partisan and politically interventionist. This configuration also reflects Ankara's broader policy shift: an effective rejection of multilateral coordination in favor of bespoke, bilateral partnerships that reinforce loyalty and ensure greater operational autonomy and influence over local outcomes. Similarly, the Turkish-trained Haramcad police unit has been accused of targeting political opponents of former President Mohamed Abdullah Farmaajo (Ahmed, 2021) and journalists covering militant violence in Mogadishu. On 16 February 2022, during a reporting mission following a car bombing and gunfight at multiple police stations and checkpoints, several journalists were violently attacked by officers from the Haramcad unit, and four were captured, blindfolded, and transported to an undisclosed location, beaten with rifle barrels and nail-studded wooden sticks, and sustained serious injuries. Their phones and cameras were also confiscated during the attack. This incident highlights growing concerns about the conduct of Turkish-trained security forces and their alleged role in suppressing media freedom in Somalia (Horn Observer, 2021). Critics argue that this model effectively establishes a parallel security architecture under Turkish tutelage, contributing to fragmentation rather than cohesion in Somalia's security sector and enables Ankara to leverage its influence in the pursuit of desired political outcomes.

Beyond security, Turkey has cultivated Somali elites through scholarships, religious training, and cultural diplomacy. This new, pro-Turkey elite layer—graduates of Turkish institutions—derives legitimacy not from multilateral processes but from personalized patronage, reinforcing Ankara's bilateral, loyalty-based engagement strategy (Akgün and Özkan, 2020). As Akpınar (2015) notes, this approach challenges the liberal peacebuilding paradigm, replacing technocratic norms with civilizational narratives of Muslim solidarity and post-colonial rectification.

Turkey's evolving approach to peacemaking in Somalia reveals a distinctive departure from the liberal peacebuilding paradigm that dominated international interventions post-Cold War, including the ones Turkey had participated in. While early Turkish engagement overlapped with multilateral efforts, such as participation in AMISOM and Combined Task Force 150 against piracy (Sofos, 2024b), since 2021, Ankara increasingly privileged bilateralism and sovereignty-based cooperation over multilateral frameworks. This shift was framed domestically as a reclaiming of Turkey's rightful voice and agency in global affairs, celebrating the country's ability to chart an independent path without deferring to Western multilateralism. This reflected a conceptualization of peace not as a pluralistic, inclusive governance project, but as the stabilization and consolidation of central authority aligned with Turkey's strategic and normative priorities.

The 2024 Turkey–Somalia maritime security agreement marked a major escalation in Turkey's strategic footprint in the Horn of Africa, consolidating its long-term presence through expanded military cooperation and naval access. The agreement secured Ankara's decisive entry into one of the most vital geopolitical corridors connecting the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea—offering not only commercial and military advantages but access to the natural resources of Somalia's territorial waters and Extended Economic Zone (Sofos, 2024b). Unlike past multilateral security efforts, this bilateral accord shows how Ankara is increasingly favoring direct, one-on-one partnerships with other states over broader international alliances and away from Western-dominated security architectures. Domestically, the agreement was celebrated as another chapter in Turkey's reassertion of maritime influence, widely interpreted through the language of historical restoration and national pride. While much of the public discourse framed this move within Turkey's traditional African diplomacy and moral outreach, its significance in securing strategic access to critical maritime chokepoints signals a growing synergy between Turkey's Red Sea engagement and broader naval ambitions.[4]

The maritime agreement marks a further evolution in Turkey's approach—what might be termed a strategy of competitive bilateralism: pursuing exclusive bilateral partnerships that confer strategic advantage while sidelining regional competitors. In Somalia, this approach is most evident in Ankara's rivalry with the United Arab Emirates (UAE). As both countries have been vying for influence across Africa and the Middle East, Turkey's deepening presence in Somalia—via infrastructure development, military training, and security cooperation—eclipsed Emirati influence. This displacement accelerated following the UAE's controversial deal with the breakaway region of Somaliland, granting it access to a Red Sea port, a move recently mirrored by Ethiopia, and the revelation that the UAE was smuggling funds in Somalia in an effort to buy political influence (Sofos, 2024b). Turkish media and political elites have portrayed this shift as a moral and diplomatic victory—an affirmation of Turkey's principled engagement over what they cast as the transactional, interest-driven interventions of its rivals. Turkey's growing entrenchment in Somalia is held up as proof of its ability to outmaneuver regional competitors by offering a more holistic and "loyalist" model of

4 Though differing in geography and institutional context, the strategic rationale behind Turkey's Red Sea posture and its maritime assertiveness in the Eastern Mediterranean—often articulated through the "Mavi Vatan" (Blue Homeland) doctrine—reflects a shared emphasis on maritime sovereignty and regional influence. See Sofos (2024b) and Yaycı (2020). This vision gained additional prominence through Turkey's diplomatic and military backing of Libya's Government of National Accord (GNA), culminating in a maritime boundary agreement that challenged Greek and Cypriot claims in the Eastern Mediterranean. The country's intervention in Libya's civil war was widely represented as an effort to reclaim the Ottoman Mediterranean space lost to European imperialism (Alarabiya, 2020; Presidency of the Republic of Turkey, 2020). The popular celebration of Turkey's involvement was symbolically amplified by the circulation of images of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's 1911 military service in Libya (Haber, 2020), presented as a historical parallel legitimizing contemporary action.

partnership—one that combines development, humanitarian aid, and military cooperation.

This emphasis on direct, sovereign-to-sovereign agreements reflects Ankara's broader move away from multilateral diplomacy and toward a more independent foreign policy path—evident not only in the Horn of Africa, but also in the Sahel and the Balkans. While Turkey maintains tactical, increasingly transactional alignments with NATO and Western allies—particularly in the fields of counterterrorism and anti-piracy—it simultaneously advances an autonomous agenda aided by critiques of Western neocolonialism and appeals to postcolonial solidarity (Anadolu Agency, 2023). These actions are framed not merely as diplomatic strategy but as moral triumphs—proof that Turkey stands tall among nations, defending the oppressed and resisting subordination to Western hegemonic frameworks. This posture extends beyond the UAE. Turkey's antagonism with France—particularly in the Sahel and Libya, where the two powers back opposing factions—have replicated its Somali strategy. In Libya, while formally endorsing multilateral peace processes such as the Berlin Conference, Ankara simultaneously pursued direct bilateral alliances with the Government of National Accord (GNA), reinforcing its autonomous influence outside institutionalized frameworks and allowing it to endow its competition with France, which refused to recognize the GNA, with anti-imperialist qualities (Sofos, 2022a). Similarly, in the Sahel, Turkish critiques of French presence, although associated with Ankara's strategy of striking security and infrastructure deals, are represented as acts of righteous anticolonial solidarity.

In this light, Turkey's broader approach may best be described as a model of competitive coexistence: cooperating with Western and regional actors where interests align, but asserting unilateral initiatives, often through pursuing the exclusion of rivals where divergence offers strategic advantage. Somalia's fragile sovereignty, in this context, has become a testing ground for Turkey's distinct model of peacemaking—one rooted in moral economy and populist sovereignty rather than technocratic liberalism.

Some see Turkey's approach in Somalia as reflecting a view of sovereignty that puts local leadership first—supporting the idea, described by Salaymeh et al. (2025), that rising powers take a middle path between Western-style intervention and total non-interference. Turkey's engagement in Somalia tells a more complex story. Far from promoting inclusive national ownership, Ankara has systematically cultivated elite dependencies through exclusive military training programs, infrastructure control, and bilateral agreements that bypass multilateral oversight. The creation of special forces loyal to Turkish-trained commanders, and Turkey's tacit support for preferred political actors, reveal an approach that privileges strategic loyalty over local legitimacy. Rather than a balanced sovereignty model, Turkey's practices in Somalia suggest a populist-revisionist agenda that uses the language of sovereignty to mask domination, reinforcing asymmetric relations under the guise of partnership.

Somalia has thus served as a blueprint for Ankara's broader African (and Middle Eastern) peacemaking engagement. Turkey's multifaceted model—combining humanitarian aid, infrastructure development, military training, and elite cultivation—has been replicated in countries like Niger, Senegal, and Togo. This exportable strategy is framed as Turkey's "gift" to the Global South: a sovereign, moral, and non-colonial alternative to Western conditionality. Yet this model is not without its critics. It raises troubling questions about democratic accountability, militarized patronage, and dependency. Turkey's initial humanitarian overture in Somalia has gradually evolved into a dense web of strategic entrenchment, and this transformation—from compassion to coercion, from solidarity to structural intrusion—illustrates the operationalization of a populist-revisionist model of peacemaking. One that prizes sovereignty over democracy, loyalty over inclusivity, and symbolic performance over institutional pluralism. It is in Somalia that the contours of this model are most clearly visible, offering an indispensable window into the new architecture of Turkish foreign policy in Africa and beyond.

Although the increasing humanitarian aid capacity of Turkish public agencies such as AFAD and TIKA cannot be ignored, in Ankara's vision, peace is not defined by the promotion of inclusive governance or liberal institutionalization. Rather, it is construed as the stabilization of sovereign states through capacity-building in security, governance, and infrastructure—aligned to Ankara's broader strategic and ideological orientations. This view of peace echoes the populist domestic narrative of strength, order, and national renewal, projecting Turkey's model of sovereignty outward into the international arena.

Sovereign performance, rather than democratic negotiation, constitutes the main currency of legitimacy. Thus, Turkey's engagement in Somalia—and the recent maritime security pact—exemplifies a broader populist-revisionist understanding of peacemaking: one that fuses humanitarian morality with strategic statecraft, sovereignty with populist responsiveness, and bilateral loyalty with the reassertion of regional influence. The case of Turkey's engagement in Somalia thus offers more than a study of strategic expansion or humanitarian activism; it provides a window into the operationalization of a distinctly populist-revisionist model of peacemaking. Through the fusion of humanitarian discourses, sovereign assertion, and appeals to national pride, Turkish foreign policy in Somalia reconfigured traditional notions of peacemaking, projecting a vision grounded in unilateralism, moral exceptionalism, and competitive bilateralism. This trajectory invites a broader interrogation: can there be a specifically *populist* peacemaking, and more generally, a *populist* foreign policy? If so, what distinguishes it from conventional forms of diplomacy and conflict resolution? And crucially, how do the underlying political logics of domestic populism translate into the international sphere, reshaping the practices, meanings, and norms of global engagement? It is to these questions that the following section now turns.

Can there be such a thing as a populist peacemaking?

Throughout the preceding analysis, there has been a conscious sliding between the terms *peacebuilding* and *peacemaking*. This is not merely terminological variation but reflects important conceptual and empirical distinctions that demand theorization.

Peacebuilding, as developed within critical peace studies and post-liberal scholarship (Richmond, 2005; Mac Ginty, 2011; Paffenholz, 2015), refers to the most advanced and holistic approaches to conflict transformation. It conceptualizes peace not simply as the containment or cessation of violence but as an ongoing, dialogic process—one that fosters spaces for voice, mutual recognition, negotiation, and the construction of shared political horizons. In this tradition, peace is understood as an inclusive and participatory project, requiring the empowerment of conflict-affected communities and the cultivation of political processes that can accommodate diversity and dissent.

In contrast, Turkey's interventions more accurately fall under the rubric of *peacemaking*. Despite notable humanitarian contributions by agencies such as TIKA, AFAD, and Diyanet, Turkey's overarching approach privileges stabilization over transformation, containment over dialogue, and sovereign performance over negotiated political settlements. Peacemaking here is conceptualized as the imposition of order through the strengthening of state capacity—often by cultivating bonds with select elites or forging new elite formations dependent on Ankara's support. As in domestic populist governance, politics is not imagined as a site of negotiation or institutional pluralism but as the enactment of a singular, morally infused national will.

Ankara's model of peacemaking thus resists the premises of negotiation, dialogue, and inclusive mediation that lie at the heart of critical peacebuilding. Security and stabilization are prioritized, but not as part of a broader transformative spectrum; instead, they function as ends in themselves. As in Turkey's domestic political sphere under populist rule, politics is not imagined as a process of pluralist mediation, but rather as the performance of a unified sovereign will. Turkish foreign policy through peacemaking reflects this same ethos: the consolidation of authority, the bypassing of multilateral institutions, and the pursuit of bilateral loyalty—a sovereign project grounded in a moralized national identity.

Turkey's approach to peacemaking thus emerges as a direct extension of domestic populist dynamics. The foreign sphere becomes a theater for the projection of internal political logics: the centralization of voice, the valorization of sovereignty, and the framing of international engagement as an act of historical redress. The highly moralistic discourse that accompanies Turkey's external interventions—particularly its critiques of Western colonialism and imperialism—is rooted in this populist imaginary. Foreign policy, conducted through the vehicle of peacemaking, is framed as the restoration of national dignity against external constraints and historical injustices.

Nevertheless, it is critical to recognize that populism is not the sole explanatory frame. Turkey's international activism is also driven by regime security concerns, economic interests, and strategic imperatives that cannot be collapsed into populist narratives alone. The pursuit of influence along maritime corridors, competition with Gulf rivals such as the UAE, and the quest for economic opportunities across Africa all reveal layers of pragmatic calculation beneath the moralized populist veneer. Even in such cases, however, populism may play a significant—if often underacknowledged—role within a broader constellation of historical, environmental, institutional, and geopolitical variables. As it has already been argued earlier in this paper, populist worldviews and logics can shape the terrain of international action, inflecting both policy content and the ways through which it is justified and performed. Populism, in this view, is not simply instrumental but constitutive—it generates the horizon within which policy, morality, and strategic interest are imagined and enacted.

But can there be such a thing as a *populist peacemaking*—and, more broadly, a *populist foreign policy*? If so, what makes foreign policy "populist," and how does it relate to the patterns and logics of domestic populism? Turkey's engagement in Somalia offers critical insights into these questions, illustrating how populism can extend beyond domestic governance to reshape international behavior and norms. Several key takeaways emerge.

Turkey's engagement in Somalia offers an instructive window into the possibilities and limits of a "*populist" foreign policy* and, more specifically, *populist peacemaking*. As this article has shown, Turkish interventions in Somalia have progressively diverged from liberal-internationalist peacebuilding templates, instead privileging sovereign consolidation, bilateralism, and strategic utility. Turkey's evolving approach in Somalia—and increasingly across Africa and the Middle East—exemplifies a *populist-revisionist model of peacemaking*: a sovereign-centered, elite-driven, and strategically instrumental vision of order-building that challenges the inclusive, transformative ideals associated with liberal peacebuilding. Through Somalia, Turkey has pioneered a distinctive model where humanitarian engagement, moral discourse, and sovereign assertion coalesce, offering critical insights into how populism reshapes not only domestic governance but the very foundations of international peace practices.

The case of Somalia reveals how Turkey's foreign policy under the AKP increasingly embodies a populist-revisionist logic: one that fuses moral economies of national pride and historical grievance with elite-driven strategies of influence projection. Erdogan's performative diplomacy, appeals to the national will, and rejection of multilateral conditionalities reflect a broader political logic in which domestic and international spheres are collapsed. Peacemaking becomes not a pluralistic or dialogic process but an extension of sovereign agency, governed by a majoritarian and often antagonistic understanding of political legitimacy.

Crucially, this model is not confined to Somalia. It is echoed across Turkey's external engagements—in Libya, Syria, the Balkans and the Sahel—where the interplay of strategic ambition and populist moral framing continues to challenge the norms and practices of liberal international order. The Somali case exemplifies how populism, far from being a "thin" ideology, operates as a generative logic capable of reshaping institutional practices and international alignments. Turkey's actions demonstrate that populist regimes are not only domestic disruptors but also active agents in the reconfiguration of global norms—privileging sovereign performance, civilizational identity, and moral exceptionalism over liberal-institutional constraint. However, a note of caution is due at this point. Although I would argue populist actors are prone to developing what I called populist revisionism writ large, not all do adopt the exact same modalities of revisionism. Whereas the literature reviewed suggests that most populist actors opt for a more transactional international engagement (with transactionalism being a disruptive strategy in its own right), some adopt more limited revisionist modalities than others. Hungary's geopolitical position and capacity and the

populist regime's degree of legitimacy, for instance, may provide space for a strategy of eroding institutional norms, reassigning authority, and weakening democratic checks within the European Union, whereas India or Turkey may be in a better position to move beyond the threshold of democratic spoiling and disruption, pursuing militarized, and intensely antagonistic strategies toward competitors, actively undermining international institutions and creating alternative fora for decision making and coordination.

Looking ahead therefore, the concept of *populist revisionist peacemaking* warrants further empirical and theoretical development. Comparative research across emerging powers—India, Brazil, and Hungary among others—could illuminate whether similar dynamics are at work, and under what conditions populist regimes reconceptualize international engagement. Greater attention to the affective and symbolic dimensions of populist foreign policy could enrich our understanding of how global order is being reshaped not only by material interests or power shifts, but also by the emotional and discursive architectures that populist actors mobilize. In this light, Turkey's engagement in Somalia is more than a case study in strategic outreach or foreign aid. It represents a paradigmatic shift in the conduct of international politics—where populism emerges as a generative force in the transformation of global norms, alliances, and the meaning of peace itself.

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The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

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