DONETSK TO DAMASCUS

Russian Foreign Policy in Syria After the Ukraine Crisis

ABSTRACT

On September 30, 2015, Russia unexpectedly announced the beginning of an airstrike campaign in Syria, to be targeted at Islamic State and al-Nusra, the two major terrorist groups operating in Syria. Experts in the US and Europe immediately began accusing Russia of attacking non-terrorist rebel groups to support the Assad regime and keep Bashar al-Assad in power. These experts believed Syria was becoming a sort of proxy war between Russia and the West, continuing a trend they termed the ‘New Cold War’. This paper looks to theories of international relations to explain why Russia would want to get involved in the Syrian Civil War at all, as well as why they would want to support the Assad regime. After consideration of the theories, the best explanation for Russian intervention in Syria is a structural realist approach that says Russia wanted to stabilize Syria, since no other international intervention was making a difference. It seems as though Putin determines his country’s foreign policy based on the goal of increasing Russian power and status internationally, while protecting Russian allies and economic interests abroad, even if this comes into direct conflict with what the United States and its allies are doing in a country or region, though this is not the overarching goal as the ‘New Cold War’ proponents suggest.

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INTRODUCTION

Vladimir Putin’s announcement of the end of Russia’s main mission in Syria in March 2016 was almost as sudden and unexpected as the beginning of Russian intervention in September 2015. He claimed on March 14 that Russia had accomplished its goals, but many outside of Moscow were left to wonder exactly what those goals were to begin with. The rebel forces, though weakened, were still in control of some cities in Syria. Islamic State (IS) and the al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra were still terrorizing many parts of the country, including the eastern areas directly under IS control. Assad’s forces had begun to reclaim important cities but were nowhere near consolidating the President’s hold on power either on the ground or in the UN-brokered peace talks. In the roughly five months of Russian intervention very little had changed, except one might argue momentum in the ground war.

What, then, was Putin’s intended goal in Syria? Might it have been a response to unforeseen complications that arose from the annexation of Crimea and the prolonged conflict in eastern Ukraine? Some journalists and scholars believe Putin is trying to restore Russian power to its pre-1991 levels, and they are supported by some of Putin’s own comments and a few foreign policy documents from the Kremlin. Others point to Syria’s vital role as a client for Russian weapons and energy sectors, both of which have suffered massive setbacks since the Ukraine Crisis began in 2014. If these setbacks were unintended consequences of Moscow’s plan for the Ukraine operation, it is very likely that Russia would want to secure Assad’s patronage and keep exporting
to Syria. Keep in mind, the civil war in Syria began in 2011 and was ongoing during Russia’s annexation of Crimea and intervention in eastern Ukraine. Russia did not get involved in Syria until a year and a half after the beginning of the Ukraine Crisis.

To determine exactly what role Syria has played in the Russian foreign policy, we must look at Russian foreign policy under Vladimir Putin’s second term as President, which began in 2012. Two years before, Putin and then-President Medvedev adopted an incredibly ambitious plan to modernize the Russian military by 2020. Since 2012, Moscow has released several versions of a foreign policy strategy, the most recent one on December 31, 2015. The sense of cooperation and willingness to work with the West, which was present under Putin’s first two terms as President, was undermined when NATO and the EU began negotiations to bring Ukraine and Georgia into their ranks. Since that time, Putin has taken a very hardline stance toward the West, invoking an antagonism reminiscent of the Cold War era relations.

Part of understanding how the Syria intervention fits into Russia’s foreign policy strategy – if it does at all – depends on answering an important question. What conditions or situations in Syria did Putin analyze to spur Russia to act when they had remained largely silent for the first four years of the Syrian war? To answer this, we can turn to theories of international relations, specifically looking at structural realism to examine the power dynamics and liberal institutionalism to explain how international actions and democratic peace theory may have led Russia to believe they should join the conflict. These theories and the economic ally explanation must address two very important concerns to be plausible at all: Why did Russia want to get involved in Syria to begin with? And why did they choose September 2015 as the time to do so?

RUSSIA’S FOREIGN POLICY LEADING UP TO UKRAINE

The intervention in Syria can actually be traced back to events and decisions in the early 2000’s. As NATO and the EU began expanding toward Russia’s borders and incorporating parts of the former Soviet Union, Russia felt threatened, and Putin decided that his top foreign policy goal was to destabilize the post-Cold War Western alliances (Haddad & Thoburn, 2015). Besides getting involved in the conflicts in Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014, Putin is suspected to be quietly funding anti-EU parties throughout Europe, such as France’s National Front (FN) and populist parties in Hungary (ibid.). Putin’s first run as President – from 2000 to 2008 – was marked by generally amicable relations with the United States and Europe (Mankoff, 2008, p. 43). Part of the reason for this amicability is Putin’s belief that Russian culture is not only a European culture, but more specifically a Western European culture, owing many of its influences to German and French artists, thinkers, and writers (Lynch, 2011, p. 105). After the September 11 attacks in the US, President Bush forged a strong partnership with Putin to combat Islamic terrorism, despite the protestations of sixteen generals in Moscow who preferred to let the US handle Afghanistan itself (Donaldson, Nogee, & Nadkarni, 2014). This episode was one of the first major illustrations of Putin’s power and his ability to shrug the considerations of Russia’s institutions in matters of foreign policy.
Another view of Russian foreign policy under Vladimir Putin claims that Russia has been trying to restore its status as a great power without being necessarily for or against the West (Sakwa, 2008, p. 243). Putin – and Medvedev, when he was President – recognized that working, non-hostile relations with the West were vital to Russia continuing to grow in stature. However, Putin did not want Russia to become part of NATO or a supplicant to the West. Neither did he want to see Russia adopt a policy of contention and open animosity toward the West. Instead, Putin envisioned a world in which Russia was a great power left to its own devices, to pursue whatever goals it wanted, without sanctions or other overt opposition from NATO. Richard Sakwa compared Putin and his aspirations for Russia to those of De Gaulle and France in NATO, where France is a member but not part of the unified military command (Sakwa, 2008, p. 246).

To achieve this goal, Russia began under Putin’s first term as President to reestablish primacy in the Commonwealth of Independent States1 (CIS) region (Mankoff, 2008, p. 43). He spun off the CIS Ministry from the greater Foreign Ministry, to demonstrate the importance of retaining favorable relationships with these countries. For many of the CIS states, Russia is the main trading partner, importing much of the countries’ goods and exporting cheap energy and in some cases military equipment. Part of the reason for such close trading relationships between Russia and the CIS region is the shared cultural and ethnic identity.

This question of identity is one of the main issues surrounding the annexation of Crimea and the supporting of separatists in eastern Ukraine, namely how Russians view Ukraine. In a report for the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, Latvian representative Ojars Eriks Kalnins notes that many Russians – including Vladimir Putin – consider Ukraine to be a central part of Russia’s sphere of influence and thus not actually an independent state (Kalnins, 2015). Echoing this sentiment was another NATO Parliamentary Assembly report that noted the importance of Ukrainian manufacturing to many sectors of Russia’s economy, but especially in ships and armored military vehicles (Martens, 2015). Ukraine’s status as a transit country for gas pipelines also makes it vital to Russia’s energy sector and maintaining trade relationships with Europe. For this reason, Putin knew he could not let Ukraine join the EU or NATO and drift out of Russia’s influence. A Ukraine embroiled in civil war and inner conflict is no use to the West; neither is it helpful for Russia, except as a disruption to expanding Western influence. Russia’s intervention in eastern Ukraine is not an unusual phenomenon when viewed in context of the history of the CIS. Russia has continuously sent troops to separatist regions of CIS members, including Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia, Transnistria in Moldova, and Nagorno-Karabakh between Azerbaijan and Armenia.

One of Vladimir Putin’s most important projects since he retook the Presidency in 2012 is the military modernization project, targeted for completion by 2020. The NATO report by Martens lists the ambitious – and seemingly unattainable – goals of this project. Even before Ukraine, the project was in troubled waters, but the closing of Ukrainian factories that furnished parts of Russia’s war machine has almost entirely sunk the modernization plan. The main parts in question

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1 The Commonwealth of Independent States is a regional organization made up of former Soviet Republics created in 1994 after the breakup of the USSR. Members are: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. Georgia was a member until the Russian invasion of 2008, after which the country decided to pursue membership in NATO and the EU instead. Ukraine is an associate country but is not a full member, having chosen to ally itself more closely with Europe than with Russia from 1994 until the 2014 Crisis.
are ship motors and armored vehicles, of which the former is the more pressing concern. Russia’s Navy has been in serious disrepair for many years, at least since the collapse of the Soviet Union, if not before. Martens notes that two-thirds of Russia’s ships are not seaworthy and the ones that are need to be upgraded and modernized to be a threat (Martens, 2015). The loss of ship motors from Ukraine has hurt Russia’s feeble shipbuilding industry, and a further blow to Russia’s Navy was struck when France cancelled the sale of two new ships to Russia following the Ukraine Crisis.

As a consequence of the Ukraine Crisis and the lost manufacturing capacity from Eastern Ukraine in 2014, Russia’s feeble manufacturing industry has been forced to make up the slack in military production, and they are not faring very well so far. Further economic pain has been inflicted by the loss of the import-export relationship with Ukraine, not to mention the targeted or ‘smart’ sanctions imposed by the United States and Europe. Putin’s grasp on power relies on the tacit support of the oil and gas oligarchs, whose businesses have been hurt by the sanctions. The one or two that have spoken against Putin have suffered punitive investigations and consequences at the hands of the Russian government (Motyl, 2016). If more of these energy moguls become angered with Putin’s foreign policy hurting their profits, Motyl believes they could join together to criticize Putin without repercussion and eventually remove him from power.

Studying all of the past interventions mentioned above reveals a distinct pattern of Russian military intervention. Though Russia did not get involved in other states’ affairs often, when they did the intervention was on behalf of ethnic Russian populations in separatist regions of former Soviet countries. Crimea was – and is – overwhelmingly ethnic Russian, and a public referendum supported leaving Ukraine to be annexed by Russia. Russia’s support of Eastern Ukrainian separatists – either psychologically, monetarily, or directly military, depending on which source one reads – is also because they are ethnically Russian and want to break away from their country. The same can be said of the separatists in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, as well as those in Transnistria and Nagorno-Karabakh where conflicts are continuing.

SYRIA AS A RESPONSE TO UKRAINE

Any cursory glance at Syria will show that it does not fit into the pattern of Russian foreign policy described above. Syria was not part of the Soviet Union, and there is no major concentration of ethnic Russians in Syria, except the approximately 30,000 Russian citizens in the Tartus Naval Base. Moreover, the war in Syria was not a separatist conflict; all groups involved were trying to eliminate the others and become the sole legitimate authority in Syria. So, if the intervention in Syria was an anomalous event in Russian foreign policy that does not fit in with the previous pattern of behavior, what were the causes of Russia’s intervention?

Before the civil war started in 2011, Assad was an important trading partner for Russia and a destination for Russia’s arms exports. Since the war began, Assad has undoubtedly needed a steady supply of weapons and ammunition to combat the rebels and terrorist groups he has faced. Russia’s quiet support of Assad’s military seemed to work fine for several years, but suddenly in September 2015 – for reasons that will be examined in the remainder of this paper – Russia stepped up their support to include overt airstrikes against “terrorist groups” as defined by Assad and Putin. Much
has been made about this distinction and how Russia’s classification of terrorist groups varies from that of the Western countries. The question of whether Russia was targeting IS and al Nusra or the ‘moderate’ rebel groups the West backs is the main issue in determining Russia’s intentions in Syria and how it fits into their broader foreign policy.

On September 30, 2015, when Russia began a campaign of airstrikes in northern Syria, Putin claimed it for humanitarian reasons – to stop terrorist groups from killing innocent civilians. If we take the West’s understanding of terrorist groups, this meant that Russia was targeting Islamic State and al Nusra fighters who are, indeed, a threat to innocent civilians. The intervention would have unquestionably been for humanitarian reasons, and the West would not have raised much of a fuss about it. However, the vast majority of Russia’s airstrikes have been in territory held neither by IS nor by al Nusra. Instead, Russia has focused most of its airstrikes on areas held by rebel groups, specifically to the west-northwest of Aleppo, around Idlib, and near Homs (Institute for the Study of War, 2016). Looking at the plethora of maps provided by the Institute for the Study of War shows that there are indeed some airstrikes against IS and al Nusra territory, but the vast majority have occurred in areas held by rebel groups, who are almost universally considered not to be terrorists.

A study of the maps of Russian airstrikes clarifies beyond a doubt that Russia’s aim in their intervention in Syria has been to keep the Assad regime in power, not – as they claimed – for humanitarian or counterterrorism reasons. So, why would they use humanitarian (liberalist) rhetoric to justify this action? Simply, the United States has been using this rhetoric since 2003, if not earlier, and Putin believed he could emulate America’s methods. The reasons behind the US intervention in Iraq are too numerous and complicated to describe in this paper, but suffice it to say that promoting democracy was not the main reason, though it was the one given to the American public and the rest of the world. The United States has used liberalist reasoning – prevent genocides, oust brutal dictators, stop territorial aggression, etc. – to intervene in conflicts in Kosovo, Somalia, Bosnia, Rwanda, Kuwait, Iraq, arguably Afghanistan, and Libya. To be fair, the first four conflicts were UN mandates, where the US had the support of the international community. The last three, however, were basically unilateral US actions – despite the strategy of ‘leading from behind’ in Libya, the US bore the brunt of the military action there. Almost two decades of US liberalist interventions showed Putin he could pursue almost any goal he wanted in Syria if he just used a liberalist reasoning to justify it.

**Theory Review of Russian Action in Syria**

Russia’s actions in Syria force the West to have another look at Russia’s foreign policy to predict what Russia will do next. But understanding the future of Western-Russian relations may rely on understanding the situation that led Russia to intervene in Syria to begin with. Two theories of international relations provide this insight. Liberal institutionalism focuses on international institutions and how they can shape individual states’ actions, such as cooperation or mutual action for humanitarian reasons. Additionally, the neorealist democratic peace theory can explain why

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2 See Appendix for maps and data of Russian airstrikes.
Putin would want to get involved in Syria for non-economic reasons. Structural realism examines the power distribution in a system and allows or constrains certain state behaviors. The action – or lack thereof – on the part of the United States changed the polarity of the system in Syria, as well as the polarity of the international system as a whole. This change of polarity allowed Russia to intervene in Syria when it previously would have considered this impossible or imprudent (A Hollow Superpower, 2016).

**Liberal Institutionalism and Counterterrorism**

Looking deeper at the humanitarian or counterterrorist claim explains why Russia was able to intervene in Syria without serious international consternation, despite their use of similar rhetoric to annex Crimea and the international grievances it raised. Since the 1990’s, if not earlier, the international community has been focused on preventing grievous abuses of human rights around the world. The United Nations peacekeeping forces in Bosnia and Kosovo were meant to stop ethnic conflict and prevent a possible genocide. The UN force in Rwanda was a response to a genocide that had already begun and was spiraling out of control. The coalition sent into Kuwait in 1991 was in response to territorial aggression by Saddam Hussein’s Iraq. The international system – and the United Nations in particular – has tried to solve common problems around the world through collective action, instead of forcing one or a few countries to shoulder the policing burden (Dunne, Kurki, & Smith, 2013, p. 121).

This policy of the UN to prefer coalition action to unilateralism was put in question by the American invasion of Iraq in 2003. The United States supported intervention in Iraq under the auspices of upholding a UN moratorium on Iraqi weapons of mass destruction. The US searched for a coalition to help them in Iraq, but found few willing partners. Because the United States then decided to go almost unilaterally into Iraq, the UN policy of coalition action was weakened. However, because of the unilateralism of Iraq, the United Nations tried even harder to get members to join coalitions and receive UN blessing for future actions.

This effort was rewarded, somewhat, in Libya in 2011. Though the intervening coalition was primarily made up of NATO members, it was more or less endorsed by the international community – with a few dissidents. Whereas in previous UN interventions, the United States had been the leader and coordinator of action, the air campaign in Libya was led by France and Italy, with the US playing a major supporting role. This campaign marked a decrease in US unilateralism and a return to the coalition policy.

When the civil war in Syria broke out – also in 2011 – the international community was at odds over how to respond. Many European and Western members wanted to intervene in Syria as they did in Libya, but Russia and China opposed this, believing that the NATO members had overstepped their UN mandate in Libya by favoring regime change over conflict stabilization. The United States and its European allies wanted to oust Assad because he was a brutal dictator – arguably worse than Saddam or Qaddafi – but they also did not want to create a failed state in Syria like they had in Libya by not planning for what the country would do after the ousting of the leader. Moreover, the situation in Syria was very complex, with several rebel groups fighting not
only the Assad regime but also each other. To make matters worse, Islamic State and Jabhat al Nusra joined the conflict and brought their brutal terrorist tactics to the war in Syria. In comparison with these groups, the actions of Assad’s regime did not look so brutal and barbaric after all. Though the West could not – and still cannot – decide which group to support, they knew that they had to oppose IS and al Nusra and keep these organizations from spreading.

Russia’s airstrike campaign beginning in September 2015 promised to do just that. By vowing to attack terrorist groups’ territory, Putin ensured that the UN would not disrupt or complain about his actions. He was free to support his ally Assad by attacking rebel strongholds, without the chance that the West was going to stop him. Initially, the global community was receptive to Putin’s help in combatting terrorism in Syria, because he was believed to be helping their common cause. Even after many states realized Putin was mainly attacking rebel territory, they could not criticize him because to him – and to Assad – these groups were terrorists and he was justified in his campaign against them. To deride Putin’s classification of terrorist groups would have made the US seem like it was trying to monopolize global counterterrorism and minimize Russia’s differences in understanding of threats. Effectively, Putin joined the global coalition against terrorism and human rights abuses without actually doing what the rest of the world did. As Sakwa stated, Putin was showing that Russia was a world power able to play by the rules of the other great powers, while following their own agenda and goals (Sakwa, 2008).

From the formation of the Islamic State in 2013, the United Nations has almost unanimously agreed that its existence threatens the stability and security of all nations in the Middle East, as well as countries further away that have been targeted by terrorist attacks. The failure of the United States and other prominent UN members to find an efficient way to dispatch IS provided Russia with an opportunity to meaningfully intervene in the war while also complying with the UN consensus that IS needed to be destroyed.

**DEmOCRATIC PEACE AND PROTECTING THE BORDERS**

Democratic peace theory is one of the most intriguing current discussions in international relations. Supporters have found a wealth of cases that back up the theory, while others have found ample cases that seem to disprove it. The basic tenets of the theory hold that democratic states may go to war as frequently as non-democratic states but they hardly ever war with other democracies. There are varied explanations for why this is the case, but one of the more widely-accepted is that democracies view other democratic states as more legitimate than authoritarian states. Under this premise, democracies may invade non-democracies to establish legitimate governments or

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3 Besides al-Qaeda affiliates and the Islamic State, the ‘moderate’ rebel groups in Syria include: Free Syrian Army (which has several divisions within itself), Islamic Front, Al-Fawj al-Awal, Jaysh al-Tahrir, Levant Front, Sham Legion, al-Murabitin Brigade, al-Fatah Brigade, Jaish al-Sham, Ajnad al-Sham Islamic Union, Syrian Turkmen Brigades, Criterion Brigades, Jabhat Ansar al-Islam, Kurdish Supreme Committee, Syrian Arab Coalition, and Syriac Union Party. There are several international groups that support one side or the other: Hezbollah and others support the Assad regime; Hamas, the Muslim Brotherhood, and Grey Wolves support various ‘moderate’ rebel groups; and the PKK and a few others support the Kurdish groups.
overthrow illegitimate governments. They may also choose sides in an already-ongoing civil war depending on which side they view as more democratic and therefore legitimate.

Andrea Lynch analyzes the democratic peace theory against Russia’s foreign interventions in the twenty-first century. She considers the different responses to the conflicts in Moldova and Estonia where Russia sent troops and withheld them, respectively. She creates a table that reflects the likelihood of Russian intervention based on their views of the legitimacy of the various actors in the conflict in question.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TARGET STATE</th>
<th>OPPOSITION GROUP</th>
<th>Legitimate</th>
<th>Illegitimate</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Legitimate</td>
<td>Three-way negotiations/possible intervention as peacekeepers with all factions’ permission</td>
<td>Possible intervention on side of government</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Illegitimate</td>
<td>Possible intervention on side of opposition</td>
<td>Possible intervention to install new, unaffiliated government</td>
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*Table 1 – Legitimacy-based theory and intervention. Source: (Lopez, 1999).*

As this table shows, the Russian response in Syria was predictable, based on the premise that the Assad regime is legitimate in the eyes of Russia and all other rebel groups were illegitimate. The table also accurately predicts the Ukraine Crisis, as well as the 2008 invasion of Georgia. In both cases, Russia believed the state governments were illegitimate based on the perceived persecution of Russian ethnic minorities, and the separatist groups were legitimate. Thus, they intervened on the side of the opposition to the government: the separatist groups.

Besides this table describing legitimacy-based intervention, Lopez also argues a secondary point of democratic peace theory to explain why Russia and other great powers get involved in foreign states. According to a secondary tenet of democratic peace, democracies will get involved in elections or other domestic affairs (even civil wars) of foreign nations if they deem that the outcome of the event may create a serious or existential threat for themselves. In the case of Syria, the threat to Russia was the emergence of a radical Sunni regime. Russia has been dealing with Islamic terrorism for decades, beginning in the Soviet era. The most prominent region where Russia consistently struggles with Islamic terrorism is Chechnya. This region has been a thorn in Russia’s side for decades, and Putin has tried several different strategies to combat terrorism in the area, including centralizing regional governor positions in response to the Beslan school siege in South Ossetia in 2004 (Donaldson, Nogee, & Nadkarni, 2014). As Syria’s civil war became stalemated, Russia saw the terrifying possibility that a ‘radical’ Sunni group could overthrow Assad’s regime and take control in Syria. Such a regime would, in Russia’s estimates, likely harbor or tolerate terrorist groups, which would threaten Russian CIS allies in the Caucasus as well as the Russian naval base at Tartus. As a result of this perceived direct threat to Russian interests, Putin decided to intervene and consolidate his ally Assad’s hold on power. This action is similar to what the United States has done in the past in many Central American countries, where popular revolts
were deemed possibly harmful to American economic interests and combated with non-military methods.

**STRUCTURAL REALISM AND POWER DISTRIBUTION**

The other theory that has a bearing on Russia’s intervention in Syria is structural realism, which examines the distribution of power, termed polarity, in a system. Syria is an interesting case for the study of modern polarity, specifically for the issue mentioned above: the United States and its allies were basically forced into inaction because they could not decide which rebel group was the best to support. Other than arms support of several different rebel groups and training of a handful of militiamen in counterterror efforts, the United States has not gotten heavily involved in Syria. The Obama administration has chalked this up to war weariness from over a decade in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as not having a clear group to support in the fight. Regardless of the reasons, for the first time since the end of the Cold War – and definitely since 2001 – the ‘global watchdog’ was on the sidelines of a major conflict.

US inaction in Syria affected not only the power distribution in the Syrian conflict but also the polarity of the global system as a whole. Looking first at the Syrian conflict, neither Assad’s regime forces nor any rebel group was strong enough to dominate the war and exert control over Syrian territory. The system could accurately be described as multipolar, with the Assad regime, IS, and various rebel groups including the Kurds as the poles of power. Had the United States or its European allies gotten involved, they could have shifted power in favor of whichever group they supported, creating either a bipolar system or a unipolar one, depending on whether or not Assad’s regime was able to stand up to the group.

The structural realist maxim that multipolar systems are the most unstable was proven in Syria. In the chaos of the first few years of the war, the Islamic State was able to migrate across the border from Iraq and take over large swaths of Syrian territory. Because of the multitude of rebel groups, any map of the Syrian conflict lumps all the groups into one category for simplicity. In this chaotic system, we have seen the use of chemical weapons and the proliferation of terror as a weapon. The Islamic State has been allowed to practice some of the most brutal and barbaric terrorism the world has seen in recent times, but because of the uncertainty on the ground in Syria there is no power strong enough to crush them, and the West has been hesitant get involved for various reasons that are beyond the scope of this paper.

US inaction also moved the larger international system toward multipolarity, though most scholars still argue that the United States is the strongest power in a unipolar world system. This has been the case since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, though it has been waning in more recent years (Wohlforth, 1999, p. 8). The US was able to act unilaterally in so many conflicts because there was not a strong enough force to oppose their doing so. However, like all instances of unipolarity before it, there are some scholars who believe America’s unipolar
time is on the decline. All unipolar states⁴ have undergone a similar process of decline, featuring an over-reach of foreign expansion and slowly angering other nations who then proceed to balance against the hegemon (Layne, 2006, p. 38).

In this new quasi-multipolar system, there was not a clear hegemon intervening in conflicts around the world, as the US had pulled out of that role. Russia saw an opportunity to step up and assert its power, which Putin is still trying to methodically build back to its Soviet Union levels. As described earlier in the paper, Russia has been funding anti-EU parties to upset the Western power apparatus, and his invasions of Georgia and Ukraine were intended to slow or halt the advance of Western influence toward Russian borders. All of these moves asserted Russian power and established it as a solid second-tier power in the unipolar system, behind the United State but equal to Europe and emerging powers like China.

If Putin interpreted the situation in Syria and the overall global system to be multipolar at the time, it provided plenty of justification for getting involved in Syria. Putin was not going to send in massive numbers of Russian ground troops to change the situation on the ground, but by engaging in airstrikes against Assad’s enemies Russia was able to demonstrably and meaningfully impact a conflict that was on the radar of the world’s strongest powers (A Hollow Superpower, 2016). Despite their humanitarian claims, it became apparent very soon after the airstrikes began that Russia was intervening for self-interested reasons, namely to solidify the patron-client relationship with Assad. Soon after the beginning of Russia’s intervention, Putin renewed amicability with Barrack Obama, which highlighted Russia’s rise to global prominence but confused some in Russia, who were used to the US being one of the main enemies of the Russian Federation (Nemtsova, 2015).

**CONCLUSIONS**

Contrary to what Western media has been saying recently, Russia has had a fairly coherent and predictable foreign policy since at least 2008. Its main tenets are an opposition to Western influence expansion and invasion in separatist regions to maintain pro-Russian influence, as well as a reliance on foreign conflicts to distract from domestic problems. Analyzing Syria against these goals, it is not readily apparent how this intervention fits. Considering that the economic effects of the Ukraine Crisis could hardly have been planned for, it seems more likely that Syria was an anomaly of the foreign policy to compensate for the economic and industrial setbacks from Ukraine. This interpretation explains both why Russia wanted to intervene in Syria and why they waited until September 2015 to do so.

Lopez’s analysis of legitimacy-based intervention strategies and democratic peace theory in support of foreign intervention explains why Putin intervened on behalf of the Assad regime, but it does not explain why Russia intervened when they did. The Sunni groups looked more likely to

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⁴ Past unipolar hegemons in the Westphalian era include: United Kingdom between 1750 and 1850; France under Napoleon, before the Grand Coalition formed; and Austria in the second half of the 1800’s until World War I.
overthrow the Assad regime toward the beginning of the conflict, and Russia got involved very recently, arguably after the momentum of the rebel groups had begun to wane. Discerning between the liberal institutional rhetoric and the structural realist argument requires looking at the locations of Russian airstrikes. Both theories explain why Russia wanted to intervene in Syria and why they waited until September 2015 to do so. The difference between the two theories is their explanation of Russian support for one side or remaining neutral. The liberal institutional theory says Russia would just attack the territory belonging to IS and al-Nusra, while not attacking the Assad regime or the various opposition groups. Conversely, the structural theory dictated that Russia must pick one side if and when they did intervene, and for various reasons it was likely they would support the Assad regime over the Sunni rebels. The map and graph below show the location of Russian airstrikes to determine whether they chose a side in the civil war or remained neutral and targeted only the terrorist groups.

Figure 1 – Map of Russian airstrikes in Syria, based on a consolidation of 16 individual maps created over the six months of Russian intervention. The numbers indicate roughly how many airstrikes occurred in the area between September 2015 and March 2016. Source: (Institute for the Study of War, 2016). Compiled by: Geoffrey A. Waller.
As this data shows, it is clear that Russia chose a side in the civil war and did not remain neutral to attack the terrorist groups. Therefore, the structural realist argument is the best explanation of Russia’s intervention in Syria. Russia intervened in the war, not to protect civilians from terrorist attacks, but to give tangible support to one side in order to end the war or at least move the war more rapidly toward a conclusion. Indeed, in the aftermath of Russia’s airstrikes several ceasefires between the regime and the opposition have been upheld, despite international doubt about their effectiveness. All parties involved in the war continue to attack IS and al-Nusra, but the regime and opposition are maintaining a truce while peace talks resume.

It was clear from any quick glance that Syria was not like Russia’s other foreign interventions in recent history. It was not conducted on the basis of ethnic or humanitarian concerns, like Georgia in 2008 or Crimea in 2014. Russia’s intervention in Syria was more because they saw an opportunity to bring stability – if not an actual resolution – to the war because the US and its allies were not able to make any meaningful impact in Syria up to September 2015. Does this mean that Russia will try to usurp the United States’ position as the global policeman and get involved in every conflict in the future? In short, no; military intervention is too expensive for Russia to be conducting airstrikes or other interventions all over the globe. This role of global policeman will be left to the United States as long as this role is a cornerstone of their foreign policy. What, then, will the future of Russian foreign policy look like?
FUTURE OF RUSSIAN FOREIGN POLICY

Taking into account what Russia’s action in Syria has done to the global power dynamic and Russia’s own power position, it is necessary to examine and predict what Russia will be most likely to do in the future. Since the Ukraine Crisis in 2014, many Western journalists and scholars have described Putin’s foreign policy as confusing, abnormal, and unpredictable (Timofeev, 2015). In fact, as described briefly above, Putin’s foreign policy in recent years conforms very closely to a foreign policy he has had for many years. Despite the close relationship with the US and the West during his first time as President, Putin seems to have enacted a new foreign policy strategy in 2008, as he was leaving power. This policy has several aspects including: disrupting the spread of Western power to Russia’s borders and former members of the Soviet Union (Haddad & Thoburn, 2015); using cyber capabilities and near-border military maneuvers to provoke the eastern members of NATO (Timofeev, 2015); and using foreign conflicts to distract the Russian people from troubles at home (Nemtsova, 2015). The intervention in Syria served none of these goals, so it is reasonable to conclude that its main objectives were to solidify trade partners after the Ukraine Crisis precipitated a further decline in Russia’s already weak economy and to expand Russian power in the absence of a US presence.

So, noting that Syria may be an anomaly, yet an important occurrence that changed the way Russia interacts with the rest of the world, what can we expect from Russia in the future? There are a multitude of books and articles about this topic currently, so we can examine some claims that have been put forward and test them against past actions.

Ivan Timofeev posits seven trends in Russian foreign policy going forward from Ukraine and Syria. The first two revolve around the defensive reaction to Western expansion on Russia’s borders; Russia will continue to use cyber-attacks and provocative military drills to indicate it is unhappy with future NATO and EU expansion. Third, Timofeev believes that Russia will continue to back besieged governments in the world who are enduring civil wars. Because Russia itself is not a true liberal democracy, Putin will try to prop up as many dictators and semi-democratic leaders as he can – like he has done with Assad. The next trend is one that Timofeev shares with several other theorists and scholars: Russia’s faltering economy will continue to preclude its weakened and undersupplied military from getting seriously involved in foreign countries. Fifth, he believes that Russia will continue to pursue alternative alliances and international organizations, like BRICS, that challenge the hegemony of the West. Because Russia does not have the economic strength to make these organizations effective, it will continue to rely on its political strength in organizations like the UN to push its agenda. The sixth trend Timofeev mentions is the continual erosion – but not complete disintegration – of weapons treaties. Russia was notably absent from Obama’s recent summit on nuclear security, and treaties like New START and INF have been called into question. Finally, Putin’s insistence on drumming up a foreign conflict to distract from domestic problems will eventually run into a brick wall. At some point, the Russian public will begin to demand reforms to the economy and domestic industry, and Putin cannot imprison the entire Russian population, despite what will undoubtedly be his best attempts.

Gaddy and O’Hanlon take another approach to assessing Russia’s future foreign policy, focused on the period after Vladimir Putin leaves power. After explaining eight total possibilities, they settle on one blueprint they call “Reaganov Russia” (Gaddy & O’Hanlon, 2015, p. 208). Under this
foreign policy, Putin will indeed continue to rely on foreign intervention as a way to drum up patriotism and distract from domestic issues. Whether Russia will maintain a strong all-around military or fall back on its traditionally strong nuclear arm for deterrence is unclear, but both are likely outcomes. Because Russia cannot seriously use its military in foreign conflicts, their forces will be largely deterrent, with the option for quick interventions like we saw in Syria. As long as the United States and Europe realize this inability to go on the offensive, there should be opportunities for greater cooperation between Russia and the West. Russia and the West already have several enemies and concerns in common, such as radical Islamist terrorism. Gaddy and O’Hanlon were surprised that Russia and the United States did not cooperate more closely after 9/11, but the recent wave of terrorist attacks in Europe may be the catalyst for cooperation with Russia, especially as it has been revealed that many IS operatives come from Chechnya.

**FOREIGN POLICY AFTER PUTIN**

The most serious question when assessing Russia’s future foreign policy is the role of Vladimir Putin. As long as he stays in power, we can expect to see periodic episodes of intervention in separatist regions, like in Georgia and Ukraine. He will also try to further increase Russia’s power on the global stage by getting involved in civil wars and conflicts, especially when and if the United States stays on the sidelines.

Vladimir Putin has been able to bend the Russian foreign policy institutions to his will and impose his foreign strategies for the better part of the current century. From the time he became President in 2000, Russia has followed his personal ideas and policies in dealing with foreign countries. Allen Lynch provides one of the most cogent biographies of Putin’s foreign policy views, stating that Putin is a strident neorealist with similar notions to Kenneth Waltz. In all matters – economic, military, and political – Putin considers raw power first and foremost (Lynch, 2011, p. 98). He cooperated with the West when Russia needed an ally, but when energy prices soared and Russia became (temporarily) an economic powerhouse, Putin was less concerned with geniality toward the United States and Western Europe.

It seems that most of the non-Putin Russian foreign policy apparatus is quasi-isolationist, preferring a foreign policy similar to the theory of offshore balancing posed by some American theorists such as Stephen Walt (The Myth of American Exceptionalism, 2011) or John Mearshimer (Imperial By Design, 2011). When Putin vowed to help George W. Bush combat Islamic terrorism beginning in Afghanistan, sixteen generals wrote a letter in protest, preferring instead to let America handle the consequences of their 1980’s and 1990’s actions alone (Donaldson, Nogee, & Nadkarni, 2014). It would not be fair, however, to say the rest of the Russian government prefers a position of antagonism toward NATO and Western Europe. Many prefer to consolidate Russian influence in the CIS member states and keep the Russian military bases in foreign countries. The foreign policy institutions share Putin’s view that NATO and EU expansion to include Georgia and Ukraine would be an egregious affront to Moscow’s reputation, and even without Putin it is likely they will continue to intervene in questionable ethnic conflicts in their neighborhood states, especially if they think it is in Russia’s interest to prevent a larger conflict taking place.
There are some theorists in the United States who believe that the role of a great power in the twenty-first century is to balance threats from offshore positions, deploying forces quickly and decisively when and if they are needed. Many foreign policy experts in Russia seem to share this position and believe that this strategy will help Russia reassert itself as a global power. Of course, the main thing standing in the way is Vladimir Putin’s own worldview. As an almost prototypical neorealist, he knows that Russia’s current economic misery will prevent him from being too risky in foreign theaters, but he also realizes that Russia’s is still one of the strongest militaries in the world – despite the dilapidation of the Navy. If he sees a conflict that directly involves Russian interests and he believes he can make a meaningful impact quickly, Putin will be wont to send planes and limited troops.

Despite what American media tries to incite, there is the possibility for cooperation and partnership between the US and Russia, especially because both have a vested interest in keeping stability in the Middle East. Though Putin is currently less willing to work with the West than he was during his first eight years as President, he also recognizes the importance of having a working relationship with the US and Western Europe. Throughout the many challenges this bilateral relationship has faced recently – Syria, Snowden, proliferation summit absences – Putin has continued to insist that he wants to develop closer cooperation with the West in many issues of common concern. As the United States prepares to elect a new President, it will be interesting to see how America’s foreign policy toward Russia may change and what the future of Obama’s ‘reset’ policy will be.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


