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The Centrality of Putin's Operational Code in the Decision to Intervene Directly in Syria

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Introduction

Direct Russian intervention in the Syrian war on 30 September 2015 marked Russia's "first large-scale military operation" far beyond its borders following its operation in Crimea in 2014 and since the fall of the Soviet Union.¹ The intervention came as a shock to observers, analysts and politicians² who believed that Russia and the United States, despite their profound differences, would continue pursuing a consensus between them on the political settlement of the Syrian issue. Besides military contracts and political support, Russia provided only minimal aid to the Syrian regime in the period preceding the direct intervention. Moreover, until its direct intervention, Russia had several political options at its disposal, such as working with the United States bilaterally or within the framework of the United Nations Security Council to broker a peaceful settlement between the regime and opposition.³

Why did Russia shift its scope from lending political and diplomatic support to the Syrian regime, opposing Western sanctions, and exerting pressure on Damascus to accept political settlement projects, to directly intervening to save the regime? What does the timing of the intervention no earlier than September 2015 tell us? What motives and factors lie behind the decision to intervene? Is there one independent variable that can explain the intervention?

Most studies have elaborated on specific interests that led Russia to intervene: the geopolitical importance of Russia's return to the Middle East via the Syrian gateway, the strategic importance for the Russian Navy, i.e. the Tartus Naval Base, and Russian commercial and military trade, as well as energy, interests. While some analysts have made reference to Russia's historical nostalgia, manifested in its desire to return to warm seas, few have devoted space to the direct security concerns, which have mostly received no more than a casual mention. Nor do they pay due attention to the role of Vladimir Putin's philosophical and instrumental beliefs, particularly his **security operational code**. However, this paper argues that the abovementioned interests do not fully explain the intervention and were merely influential rather than causal factors.

The paper argues that it is rather Russia's direct national security concerns, specifically the priority of Putin's internal security concerns over any other, that explain the intervention and, thus, represent the independent explanatory variable. Russia's acquisition or promotion of other interests has actually been the result of the intervention – that is, a consequence of the dependent variable; meaning these interests may in fact be the results, rather than the underlying causes of the intervention.

1 Anton Lavrov, "Russia in Syria: a military analysis," in: Nicu Popescu & Stanislav Secieru (eds.), *Russia's return to the Middle East Building sandcastles*, no. 146 (Paris: European Union Institute for Security Studies, July 2018), p. 47, accessed on 13/3/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3ICLmbo>.

2 Simon Allcock, "Explaining Russia's Intervention in Syria in September 2015," *E-International Relations*, 28/2/2016, p. 1, accessed on 1/3/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3mRMAuA>; Anna Borshchevskaya, *Putin's War in Syria: Russian Foreign Policy and the Price of America's Absence* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2022), p. 2.

3 Michael McFaul, "Putin, Putinism, and the Domestic Determinants of Russian Foreign Policy," *International Security*, vol. 45, no. 2 (Fall 2020), pp. 124 - 125.



The Causes of the Intervention and Their Explanatory Value

The next section will critique some arguments explaining the direct intervention in Syria laid out by the existing literature.

1. The Geopolitical Importance of Russia's Return to the Middle East

Did Russia, when it decided to intervene directly in Syria, have a Mediterranean geo-political policy or strategy? When Putin assumed the role of acting president of the Russian Federation on 31 December 1999, he did not have a vision for the Middle East. In January 2000, several weeks into his presidency, he adopted the "Russian National Security Concept" as the country's security doctrine, which made a very brief reference to the Middle East, noting that a major international threat to Russian national security was "the weakening of Russia's political, economic and military influence in the Middle East." This was reiterated in the context of the endeavour of some states "to hinder the exercise of its national interests and to weaken its position in Europe, the Middle East, Transcaucasus, Central Asia and the Asia-Pacific Region".⁴ This brief reference is evidence that the Middle East was not conceived of as a unique source of threat to Russian national security.

The series of National Security Concepts set a list of regional priorities in Russian foreign policy and, until 2013,⁵ the Middle East occupied the fifth place, behind the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the Caspian Sea, Europe, and the Asia-Pacific, while the Organization of African Unity (OAU) and Latin America were given lower priority.⁶

A common denominator in the foreign policy laid out in 2000 is the view of Russia's role as a sponsor-partner of the Palestinian-Israeli peace process, but this was overshadowed by economic interests. These interests concentrated on energy within the framework of Russia's quest to regain its role in the Middle East,⁷ while a renewed 2008 concept singled out some Middle Eastern countries by name, indicating Russia's desire to develop "relations with Turkey, Egypt, Algeria, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Libya, Pakistan and other leading regional states".⁸ Syria was not mentioned. The 2013 update shared the 2000 and 2008 concepts' emphasis on the promotion of stability in the Middle East and participation as a sponsor in the peace process, but in the light of the Libyan intervention, it stipulated a further threat to global peace and stability. It condemned attempts to "manage crisis through unilateral

⁴ "2000 Russian National Security Concept," accessed on 12/2/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3JGXetL>

⁵ Russia, in parallel with every strategy of the National Security Concept, usually issues another document based on it, known as "the Foreign Policy Concept." This document includes a standard paragraph addressing regional priorities that were divided into seven regions. The Russian foreign policy concepts were set in light of the concept of the national security and the three detailed Russian foreign policy concepts have been promulgated in 2000, 2008 and 2013.

⁶ Francisco J. Ruiz González, "The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation: a Comparative Study," Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos, (June 2013), p. 17, accessed on 15/3/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3wyZDTX>

⁷ *The Foreign Policy Concept of The Russian Federation, Approved by the President of the Russian Federation V. Putin, June 28, 2000*, accessed on 12/2/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3wyQWsl>

⁸ *The Foreign Policy Concept of The Russian Federation, Approved by the President of the Russian Federation V. Putin on 12 July 2008*, accessed on 13/2/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/37myBET>

sanctions and other coercive measures, including armed aggression, outside the framework of the United Nations Security Council.” It denounced “arbitrary interpretation of its resolutions” implemented with the aim of “overthrowing legitimate authorities in sovereign states under the pretext of protecting civilian population”.⁹ This was in reference to the NATO bombing of Libya on 19 March 2011 two days after the Security Council’s resolution under Chapter VII was adopted, followed by the fall of the Libyan regime with the killing of Colonel Gaddafi on 20 October 2011.

Following the US occupation of Iraq in 2003 and its introduction of the “Great Middle East Project” (GMEP) in 2004, Putin had expressed interest in visiting the region, in contrast with his predecessor, Boris Yeltsin, who had neglected and never visited the Middle East directly. Thus, between 2004 and 2007 Putin visited Egypt, Israel, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Jordan, Libya, Turkey and Iran, in addition to receiving Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in Moscow in January 2005.¹⁰ Moreover, Russia acquired observer status in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation and started to make use of its permanent membership status within the United Nations Security Council to influence the negotiations of the Middle East peace process. It also engaged with its role in the Permanent Five Plus One (P5+1) group conducting. Yet this momentum was not reflected a Russian-Middle Eastern policy that transcended “developing transactional relations” with the countries identified by the 2000 Strategy, nor did it lead to Russia building genuine influence in the Middle East, in contrast to the depth of US involvement.¹¹ The Middle East thus remained at a relatively low on the list of regional priorities for Russian foreign policy.¹²

In this context, the value of cooperation (trade, services, etc.) with the entire Arab world in 2010 amounted to about US \$10-12 billion per year, and the Middle East, excluding Turkey, accounted for roughly 1.7% of Russia’s total exports in the years 2011-2013, rising to 2.1% and 2.5% in 2014 and 2015 respectively.¹³

Accordingly, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s statement that “we have no geopolitical interests in Syria” indicates that a Russian geopolitical strategy had not yet emerged in the Middle East. The second stage of the development of Russia’s doctrine involved expansionist geopolitical interests, but these involved a major geopolitical regional state, aligned around the Russian World and Eurasianism concepts, in its immediate neighbourhood. This prompted many analysts, such as Dmitri Trenin, to argue that the transformation of Syria into a Russian geopolitical stronghold and military base in the region was a secondary objective of intervention.¹⁴ Trenin shared the view of many analysts, who believe that when Putin made the decision to intervene directly in Syria, “it was not at all clear whether the

⁹ Sergey Lavrov, “Russia’s Foreign Policy Philosophy,” *International Affairs*. vol. 8, no. 3 (March 2013).

¹⁰ Aron Lund, “Russia in the Middle East,” The Swedish Institute of International Affairs (2019), p. 13, accessed on 14/3/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3545SDU>; James Sladden et al., “Russian Strategy in the Middle East,” Rand Corporation (2017), p. 2, accessed on 29/9/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/3GO4dPz>

¹¹ Sladden et al., p. 8.

¹² Ibid, p. 3.

¹³ Witold Rodkiewicz, “Russia’s Middle Eastern Policy Regional Ambitions, Global Objectives,” Centre for Eastern Studies (2017), p. 45, accessed on 4/4/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3NZysYD>

¹⁴ Dmitri Trenin, “What Drives Russia’s Policy in the Middle East?” in: Popescu & Secieru (eds.), p. 21.



process would produce unexpected geopolitical gains.” These analysts place geopolitical motivations among the secondary factors to the underlying cause, which they identify as preventing the fall of the Assad regime so that extremist Islamist organizations would not fill in the void.¹⁵

2. Strategic Importance of the Russian Navy Facility (the Tartus Naval Base)

Studies dealing with the strategic interpretation of the Russian intervention have focused on Russia’s Mediterranean naval base in Tartus. However, there was nothing in Tartus that resembled a base when the intervention took place. It was rather a small service support facility, which had been classified by the Russian Navy since the 1970s as a “material-technical support facility,” only capable of servicing small vessels. Nevertheless, it was regarded as Russia’s only military presence in the Middle East,¹⁶ the purpose of which was only to temporarily dock ships,¹⁷ with limited usage and outdated facilities.¹⁸ This facility hosted no more than 50 Russian soldiers before the intervention, leading some authors to question its strategic relevance.¹⁹ Christopher Harmer notes the facility’s lack of a command centre, which means that the Russian Navy cannot direct operations from it. Nor does the limited depth of the port allow the Russian Navy’s sole aircraft carrier, the Admiral Kuznetsov, to dock there.²⁰

In early 2010, the Kremlin sought better alternatives to Tartus as a maritime support centre in the eastern part of the Mediterranean.²¹ In January 2013, four fleets of the Russian Navy conducted major naval exercises in the Mediterranean and its naval vessels visited Lebanese ports while reducing visits to Tartus.²²

This is not to say that the Tartus Naval Base and its development were not of interest to Russia. The Commander-in-Chief of the Russian Naval Forces had described the base as “essential.” However, this importance does not explain the direct intervention.²³ Strengthening the facility by transforming it, in accordance with the Syrian-Russian agreement, into a key strategic base for the Russian Navy

15 Samuel Charap, Elina Tryger & Edward Geist, “Understanding Russia’s Intervention in Syria,” Rand Corporation (2019), pp. 7-8, accessed on 19/2/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3tBKGP5>

16 Fredrik Westerlund, “The Role of the Military in Putin’s Foreign Policy: An Overview of Current Research,” Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI) (February 2021), p. 45, accessed on 18/3/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3IPs3vH>

17 Daria Vorobyeva, “Russian Foreign Policy in the Early Syrian Conflict,” in: Raymond A Hinnebusch & Adham Saouli (eds.), *The War for Syria: Regional and International Dimensions of the Syrian Uprising* (London/ New York: Routledge, 2020), pp. 229-230; Roy Allison, “Russia and Syria: Explaining Alignment with a Regime in Crisis,” *International Affairs*, vol. 89, no. 4 (July 2013), p. 806.

18 Lund, p. 9

19 Allcock, p. 3; Allison, p. 806.

20 Christopher Harmer, “Russian Naval Base Tartus,” Institute for the Study of War (ISW), 31/7/2012, p. 1, accessed on 20/3/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3umqNed>

21 Igor Delanoë, “Russian Naval Forces in the Syrian War,” in: Robert E. Hamilton, Chris Miller & Aaron Stein (eds.), *Russia’s War in Syria: Assessing Russian Military Capabilities and Lessons Learned* (Philadelphia: Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2020), p. 123.

22 Allison, p. 807.

23 Allcock, p. 3.

was a consequence of the intervention. It served to strengthen Russia's strategic presence in the Mediterranean, as well as its return as a major player in the Middle East.

Nevertheless, some analysts question the importance of Russia's development of the facility as a strategic base, considering it can now receive no more than 10 vessels and two or three submarines. These submarines were not designed for military confrontation with a dangerous opponent, so their primary mission served a political purpose. These analysts thus concluded that the move to develop the base was more symbolic than practical.²⁴ In this context, the new military doctrine of the Russian Navy approved by Putin on 26 July 2015, which is the second maritime military doctrine he has endorsed since the first on 27 June 2001, does not assign the Middle East any special status for the Russian Navy. The doctrine has identified the Atlantic Ocean, the North Pole, the Pacific Ocean, the Caspian Sea, the Indian Ocean and the South Pole as major regional areas, placing a clear priority on the Atlantic Ocean and the North Pole, given their geostrategic importance, as well as the multitude of potential threats and opportunities in both locations.²⁵

3. Economic and Military Trade Interests

Some researchers argue that arms trade is Russia's "second foreign policy".²⁶ However, others consider that although Russia's sales in the Middle East and North Africa region serve purely economic, political and security interests. In contrast to Western states that require the sale of weapons by type to meet political conditions, Russia does not generally impose political conditions.²⁷ However, in Syria Russia restricted itself to providing Damascus with defensive weapons so as not to harm its relations with Israel.²⁸

In this context, Russia froze some previously concluded military contracts to pressure Assad to settle the crisis politically, such as a deal involving the purchase of 24 fighter jets and 36 Yakovlev Yak-130 training/fighter jets. In fact, Russia froze the delivery of these fighter jets from 2012 through to April 2019.²⁹ A senior Russian official noted that Russia would not hand over any fighter jets or other new weapons to Syria while the conflict continues, limiting itself to providing the Syrian Army with 25 T-62 tanks and an estimated 10 BMP-1 infantry combat vehicles (IFV). Moreover, it had delivered three parts of a used S-300 missile system in 2018 but its efficiency in shooting down Israeli missiles

²⁴ Alexey Malashenko, "Russia and The Arab Spring," Carnegie Moscow Center (October 2013), p. 12, accessed on 19/3/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3wu96Mq>

²⁵ Alexey Khlebnikov, "The Foundations of the Military Doctrine of the Russian Navy," *Itijahat al-Ahdath*, issue No. 14, (Aylul/ Sept.-Tishrin al-Awal/ Oct. 2015), accessed on 28/4/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3LJOggE>

²⁶ Borshchevskaya, p. 83.

²⁷ Alexandra Kuimova, "Russia's Arms Exports to the Mena Region: Trends and Drivers," Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI), 1/4/2019, p. 5, accessed on 12/3/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/36odbXG>

²⁸ Derek Averre, "Russia, the Middle East and the Conflict in Syria," in: Roger E. Kanet (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Russian Security* (New York: Routledge, 2019), p. 401.

²⁹ Kuimova, p. 8.

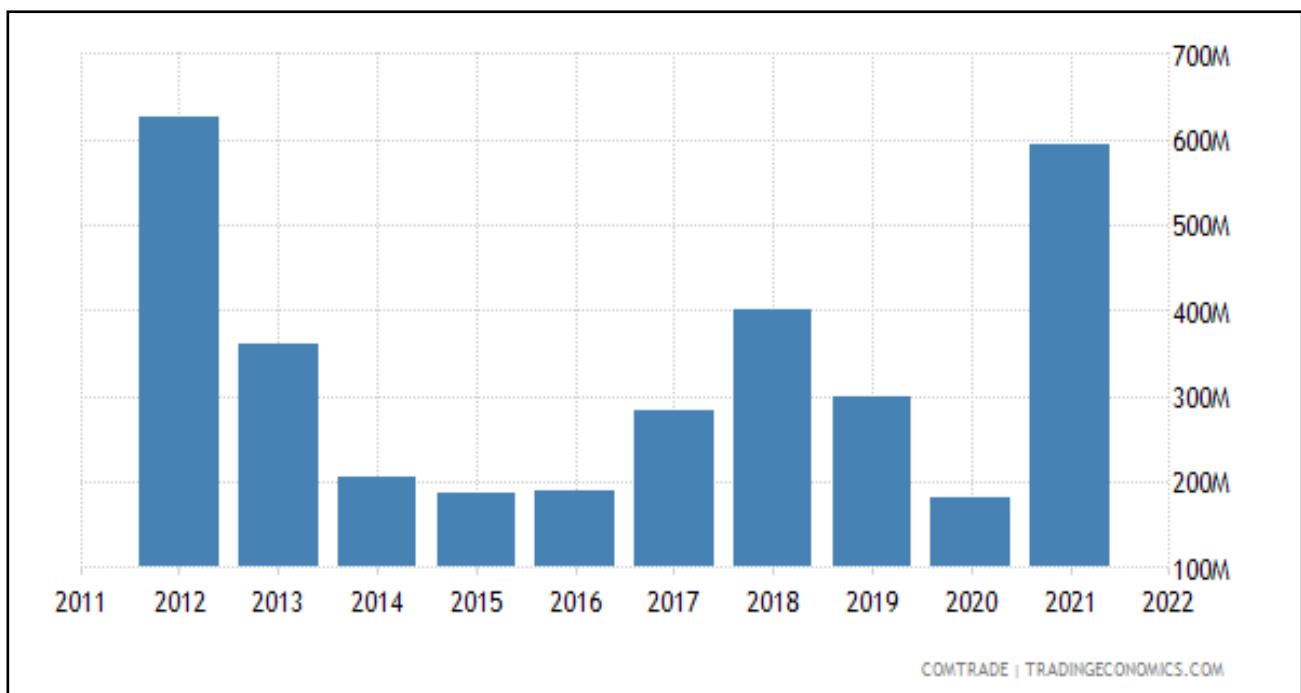


and aircraft was limited. Russia is likely to have delivered ammunition, parts, and accessories to the Syrian Army through the rapid logistical network “Syria Express”.³⁰

Consequently, it appears that Russia’s commercial and military trade interests with Syria did not factor in the intervention. When Putin decided to intervene directly in Syria, Russia’s trade-economic and trade-military interests with Syria were limited. Syria accounted for only 0.1% of Russia’s total foreign trade with the outside world in 2011, and in 2015 accounted for only 5% of Russian arms exports.³¹ Trade relations between Russia and Syria have thus never been at the top of Moscow’s priorities.³²

In fact, Russian arms exports to Syria declined against Russia’s total exports to Syria; figure (1) shows the equivalent of more than US \$600 million in 2012 in Russian exports to Syria, while a gradual decline of less than US \$100 million was observed in 2020, to rise again in 2021.³³ Regarding Russian arms exports, figure (2) illustrates that in 2011 these exports were merely a modest amount equivalent to more than \$600 million, but declining to zero in 2018.³⁴

Figure (1)
Russia’s exports to Syria



Source: “Russia Exports to Syria,” *Trading Economics*, accessed on 15/3/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3ih4NeZ>

³⁰ Ibid., p. 8; “Russia Supplying Arms to Syria under Old Contracts: Lavrov,” *Reuters*, 5/11/2012, accessed on 25/3/2022, at: <https://reut.rs/3wFvFOp>

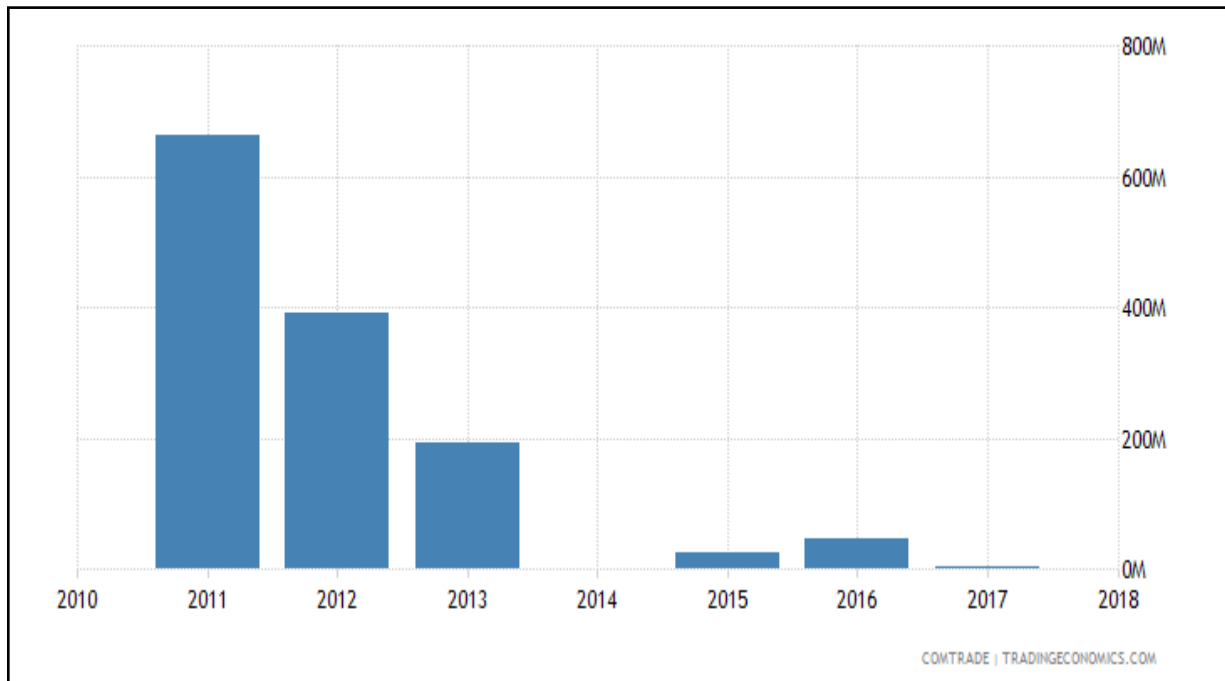
³¹ Allcock, p.3.

³² Borshchevskaya, p. 157.

³³ “Russia Exports to Syria,” *Trading Economics*, accessed on 18/6/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3ih4NeZ>

³⁴ “Russia Exports of Arms and Ammunition, Parts and Accessories to Syria,” *Trading Economics*, accessed on 15/3/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3uss8A0>

Figure (2)
Russia's arms exports to Syria



Source: “Russia Exports of Arms and Ammunition, Parts and Accessories to Syria,” *Trading Economics*, accessed on 15/3/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3uss8A0>

4. Energy

Before the outbreak of the Syrian crisis, Russian oil companies had obtained concession rights, but most of them left the country when the crisis erupted. Syria was of more value as a transit country than as an oil producer, with Syria's oil production having been declining since 1988 by between 4-5% per year. Government projections continue to predict that Syria will continue to produce oil until 2010 or 2025 at a rate of 300 thousand barrels per day together with plus or minus 10%, should there be no new oil discoveries.³⁵

One popular narrative claims that Russia intervened in Syria to prevent the Qatar-Turkey gas pipeline project and the Iran–Iraq–Syria pipeline project, also called the “Islamic Pipeline”. Both of these run through Syria, giving Russia extra time to develop its own gas pipeline projects, namely Nord Stream and South Stream, both of which run from Russia to Turkey. The logic is that Moscow seeks to control the transport and delivery of gas to Europe through Syria, while circumventing Eastern Europe.³⁶ But Russia cancelled the South Stream project in 2014, just before its direct intervention in Syria,³⁷ and

³⁵ “Syria expects its oil production to decline in 2006,” *Al-Ray*, 8/2/2006, accessed on 4/6/2023, at: <https://l1nq.com/ONKMJ>

³⁶ Malashenko, p. 12.

³⁷ Robert H. Donaldson & Vidya Nadkarni, *The Foreign Policy of Russia Changing Systems, Enduring Interests* (New York/ London: Routledge, 2019), p. 317.

then froze the Nord Stream pipeline in November 2015, after a SU-24M bomber was shot down by Turkey on the Syrian-Turkish border.³⁸

Some have gone so far as to argue that the direct cause of the Russian intervention is the conflict between the 1999 Qatar-Turkey gas pipeline project and the 2011 Islamic Iran–Iraq–Syria pipeline, both of which run through Syria as a mandatory transit point. According to some analysts, however, this interpretation resembled a conspiracy theory more than a genuine explanation, revealing widespread ignorance of Syria and the crisis.³⁹

Russia's energy concessions were the result of the intervention rather than causal factors, which were limited before and after its intervention. This refutes analyses based on Russia's support for the Syrian regime juxtaposing Qatar's opposition. These analyses explain the Russian position by linking it to Russia's pre-emptive policy aimed at blocking the construction of the Qatar-Turkey gas pipeline project, which would allow additional quantities of Qatari gas to flow into Europe that could compete with Russian supplies.⁴⁰ Simon Alcock acknowledges Russia's energy interests in Syria and its opposition to the Qatar-Turkey gas pipeline project, but he underlines the fragility of its explanatory value, given the timing and scale of the intervention. He concludes that this challenges claims by the new realists that Russia aims to preserve such interests.⁴¹

Russia undoubtedly has interests in Syria and the Middle East. However, none of these interests, even combined, adequately explain the direct intervention. Russia's position vis-a-vis the Arab Spring is, in fact, "the true turning point" in the transformation of Russian foreign policy in the Middle East toward a focus on national security, especially as tensions between Moscow and the North Caucasus aggravated. National security thus became the main priority,⁴² especially attending to the deterioration of security in the Caucasus.

The Central Role of Putin's Operational Code in Interpreting the Intervention: The North Caucasian Knot

Putin's operational code addresses two major issues in the Caucasus: The "Chechen question", which he considers an existential threat to the Russian federation, and renewed Islamism in the North Caucasus, sparked by interaction with the Arab Spring and the rapid development of events in Syria.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 441.

³⁹ Paul Cochrane, "The 'Pipelineistan' Conspiracy: The War in Syria has never been about Gas," *Middle East Eye*, 16/4/2018, accessed on 17/3/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3D8d0vC>; Borshchevskaya, p. 174.

⁴⁰ Agata Włodkowska-Bagan, "Syria in Russia's Foreign Policy in the 21st Century," *TEKA Komisji Politologii i Stosunków Międzynarodowych*, vol. 12, no. (2017), p. 12.

⁴¹ Allcock, p. 3

⁴² Lund, p. 20.

1. The Chechen Question

The Security Operational Code relates to many levels of national security and potential dangers, both domestic and foreign, constituting a part of Russian military doctrine,⁴³ based on the national security concept. When Putin became President, a radical shift in security doctrine came to bind domestic with foreign security concerns. The Second Chechen War (1999-2009) during Putin's era further fuelled this connection, which would thus become a security reality that shaped the philosophical and instrumental foundation of Putin's general political operational code, focusing on non-State security risks.

The two Chechen wars⁴⁴ were major, costly, and both were tied to foreign national security according to Putin's doctrine. They fundamentally transformed Russian foreign and domestic policy. The first war erupted during the Yeltsin era (1994-1996) and the second under Putin (1999-2009). Meanwhile, the 9 / 11 attacks turned counter-terrorism into a global issue. This was reflected in Russia's political security agenda following renewed Chechen terror attacks in 1999, 2002,⁴⁵ and in August and September 2004 when two civilian aircraft were destroyed by hijackers. Other attacks targeted a Moscow subway station in 2010 and a preparatory school in Beslan in 2004.⁴⁶

Putin had begun his reign as Prime Minister in August 1999 by pledging to eliminate the Chechen movement that had attacked neighbouring Dagestan two weeks earlier with the aim of establishing an Islamic state in the North Caucasus, stressing that the Russian Federation would disintegrate if the movement was not eliminated.⁴⁷ He subsequently destroyed Grozny and counter-terrorism became the overriding principle of Russian security policy⁴⁸, which was based on the organic link between the so-called Russian "North Caucasian terrorism" at home and "Western conspiracies" abroad. However, Putin's protracted war spawned enormous losses and hundreds of thousands of migrants, causing frictions with the West, which continued to express condemnation of grave human rights violations in both Chechnya and the North Caucasus.

In April 2009 the situation stabilized when Moscow installed a local puppet government in Grozny. However, from late 2009 through the beginning of 2010, violence escalated in the entire North Caucasus region, and many focal points of insurgencies emerged outside the Republic of Chechnya in the Autonomous Republics of the Caucasus. Thus, the North Caucasus region saw an increase in "terror" attacks by 300% during the first eight months of 2010, compared to the same period in 2009.⁴⁹ However, after interacting with the fast paced events in Syria, the Islamist threat in the

43 Wassim Khalil Qalajiyah, *Russia Eurasia at time of the president Vladimir Putin* (Beirut: Arab Scientific Publishers, 2016), p. 115.

44 Donaldson & Nadkarni, p. 174.

45 In 1999, extremist Chechen groups renewed operations in Dagestan, carrying out a series of bombings in Moscow, killing 300 and inflicting hundreds of casualties. See: Qalajiyah, p. 59. In 2002, Chechen extremists orchestrated the Moscow theatre hostage crisis, which resulted in more than 150 fatalities. See: Fid Backhouse et al., "Moscow theatre hostage crisis of 2002," *Britannica*, 23/5/2022, accessed on 18/9/2023, at: <https://shorturl.at/kuSZ2>

46 Ibid, p. 379.

47 Ibid, p. 284; Borshchevskaya, p. 45

48 Anne L. Clunan, "Russia's pursuit of great-power status and security," in: Kanet (ed.), p. 10.

49 Aslan Souleimanov, "The North Caucasus Insurgency: Dead or Alive?" *Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College*, 1/2/2017, p. 2, accessed on 5/4/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3LQBMUF>



North Caucasus began to pose a serious danger, accelerating in pace and scope. The North Caucasian issue had governed Putin's policy in the Second Chechen War (1999-2009) and had thus evolved to constitute a psychopolitical complex in his security doctrine that began to resemble a phobia early in the 21st century.

2. Syria as a Trigger for Renewed North Caucasus Unrest (2011-2015)

As events unfolded in Syria and the role of Islamist groups expanded, the North Caucasus once again felt tension and unrest take hold. Since 2011, the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) has classified some 52 leaders and militants of extremist Caucasian Islamist groups as “the most dangerous rebels in the northern Caucasus, capable of carrying out attacks in any part of Russia.”⁵⁰ In 2012, an average monthly death toll of 100 persons related to the ongoing insurgency was recorded in the North Caucasus.⁵¹

In October 2012, Qatar based Egyptian scholar, Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi called for Russia and Iran to be viewed as enemies of the “Muslim *Umma* [nation]”, for supporting Bashar al-Assad's regime in killing Sunni Muslims, on his *Al Jazeera* TV program. This call reverberated around the Muslim world, where the channel is available, including the North Caucasus, Russia's soft underbelly. Ramadan Kadyrov, President of the Autonomous Republic of Chechnya in Russia, and Putin's man in the Caucasus, responded by claiming al-Qaradawi's statement was directed “against millions of Russian Muslims.” Russia's highest Muslim authority, “*Dar al-Fatwa*,” also issued a statement to the effect that al-Qaradawi's words amounted to “an explicit call not to obey their country's laws, but to violate them,” and called on Russian Muslims not to pay him heed.⁵² Following this unrest in 2013, three suicide bombings on 21 October, 29 December and 30 December shook the city of Volgograd on the Volga River, resulting in 41 deaths and injuring dozens of people.⁵³

Moscow's concern over the repercussions of the Arab revolutions on North Caucasus region was reflected in fears that similar uprisings could suddenly take hold in Russia.⁵⁴ Massive demonstrations were held in large Russian cities, Moscow and Petersburg at their heart, against allegations of election rigging in late 2011, which Putin saw as a kind of “colour revolution” backed by the West.⁵⁵ The year 2012 saw unprecedented demonstrations in the North Caucasus against the Russian government, with protesters in Kazan city calling publicly for the overthrow of a Russian government that

50 Pieter Van Ostaeyen & Guy Van Vlierden, “Citizenship and Ancestry of Belgian Foreign Fighters,” *ICCT Policy Brief*, The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT) (May 2018), p. 10, accessed on 19/3/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3P2ChPQ>

51 Souleimanov, p. 2.

52 “Kadyrov: Al-Qaradawi makes a mistake when he considers Russia the ‘enemy of Islam’ and he has to reconsider it,” *RT*, 10/11/2012, accessed on 11/3/2022, at: <https://rb.gy/8f2yyn>.

53 Souleimanov, p. 3.

54 Donaldson & Nadkarni, p. 329.

55 On 4 December 2011, elections to the State Duma took place, and Putin's United Russia party won a majority of its seats (238 out of 440). On 10 December 2011, the largest demonstration in the Russian Federation's parliamentary history took place, with between 50 - 80 thousand participants, and similar demonstrations also took place in other major Russian cities in protest against the manipulations and breaches of the elections. Qalajiyah, p. 64.

supplies arms to the Syrian regime. Demonstrators sent letters to the Secretary-Generals of the UN and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation denouncing the “the murderous political regimes of Russia and Tatarstan,” which is located in the North Caucasus and holding absentee prayers for the martyrs of the “murderous Assad regime”. The demonstrations spread to Dagestan and a number of regions of the North Caucasus, calling for the removal of Russian flags and the assassination of some official clerics and for Muslims to pray for the victory of the Islamist movement in Syria that wants to establish the “*Sharia* [law] of God”.⁵⁶

Several Russian analysts described these events in the northern Caucasus as closely resembling the “Arab revolutions of the kind that took place in Tunisia and Egypt in 2011.”⁵⁷ Due to the influence of Russia’s security concerns over Chechens and Circassians in general with events in Syria, the Russian State Duma in 2013 explicitly rejected calls by Circassians in the North Caucasus for the Russian government to treat Syrian Circassians as Russian citizens of their republic, which would allow their repatriation to Russia.⁵⁸

On 29 October 2012, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov was forced to alleviate Muslim backlash by denying that Moscow was supplying the Syrian regime with weapons. Rather, he claimed they were implementing previous Soviet-era military contracts that were defensive in nature and did not violate any international treaties, supporting Syrian defence capabilities vis-à-vis foreign threats rather than supporting Bashar al-Assad. He accused foreign powers of supplying weapons to the opposition, warning that such weapons might fall into the hands of al-Qaeda.⁵⁹ The statement also applied political pressure on al-Assad to take steps towards a political solution in accordance with the Geneva I statement issued on 30 June 2012, envisioning the formation of a joint transitional government made up of Syrian government and opposition figures.

The proposed US-led military strike in response to the regime’s use of chemical weapons against opposition militants in Ghouta in August 2013 was replaced by a settlement between Russia and the US based on Syria’s accession to the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) and the destruction of its chemical stockpile.⁶⁰ In reaching this deal with Barack Obama, Putin thought not only of the regime, but also of the possibility that these weapons could fall into the hands of extremists, including, according to Russian security data, a Chechen battalion well placed to target the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics.⁶¹ This reflects the nature of the Operational Code and its

⁵⁶ Malashenko, p. 17.

⁵⁷ Ibid, p.18.

⁵⁸ Allison, p. 804.

⁵⁹ “Russia supplying arms to Syria under old contracts: Lavrov,” *Reuters*, 5/11/2012, accessed on 13/3/2022, at: <https://reut.rs/3wFvFOp>

⁶⁰ Averde, p. 402.

⁶¹ Donaldson & Nadkarni, p. 431.



proactive approach to security risks perceived as such by the decision maker, rather than objective risks as they actually exist.

3. The Flow of North Caucasus Militants into Syria

The declaration of the Islamic caliphate by the Islamic State (ISIS) was preceded by an influx of foreign fighters, which rose dramatically with the announcement on 29 June 2014 of the caliphate and the proclamation of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as caliph. Swathes of North Caucasus militants arrived from Russia.

In September 2014, the CIA estimated the number of ISIS militants to be anywhere between 20,000 and 31,500 fighters, while the head of the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) gave estimates of between 30 and 50 thousand fighters. The CIA estimated that this included about 16 thousand recruits, while the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs estimated about 25 thousand foreign fighters.⁶² By October 2015, the Russian Federal Security Service estimated the size of ISIS affiliates mainly from Chechnya and Dagestan was about 2,400 fighters.⁶³ The proportion of Caucasian militants in the ranks of ISIS increased in the aftermath of direct Russian intervention at record rates, with more than 7,000 militants estimated by multiple sources.⁶⁴ Other studies estimated their numbers at about 5,000-7,000 militants, making Russian one of the most widely spoken languages among ISIS affiliates, second only to Arabic.⁶⁵

Regardless of the accuracy of such figures, some investigative journalists have alleged that the party that prompted North Caucasus militants to fight with ISIS and other extremist Islamist organizations in Syria was the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) itself. They suggested that the FSB both directly and indirectly forced these militants to travel to Syria via Turkey to prevent them from disrupting the Sochi Winter Olympics on 3 - 23 February 2014. But these allegations cannot be confirmed.⁶⁶

It was a series of suicide bombings prior to the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi that had raised this security concern. The leader of the "Caucasus Emirate," (*Imirat Kavkaz*), an al-Qaida subsidiary, had called on his followers to boycott and disrupt the Olympics, describing it as "Satanic dancing on the bones of our ancestors."⁶⁷ In this sense, it is possible to understand how security concerns in the Russian FSB had led them to turn a blind eye to the Caucasians travelling to Syria via Turkey, where they can enter without visas, hoping to decrease their domestic presence and threat at a point when the Turkish Government was still allowing foreigners to cross into Syria.⁶⁸

⁶² Alexey Vasiliev, *Russia's Middle East Policy from Lenin to Putin* (New York: Routledge, 2020), p. 453.

⁶³ Włodkowska-Bagan, p. 29.

⁶⁴ Ibid, p. 29; Alexiev, p. 517.

⁶⁵ Colin P. Clarke, *Jihadist Violence in the Caucasus Russia Between Counterterrorism and Counterinsurgency* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 2017), p. 5, accessed on 2/3/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3wuk05m>

⁶⁶ Borshchevskaya, p. 19.

⁶⁷ Zachary Laub, "Background Briefing: Why is Russia's North Caucasus Region Unstable?" *PBS*, 7/2/2014, accessed on 18/2/2022, at: <https://to.pbs.org/3NjD5g0>

⁶⁸ Lund, p. 42.

In effect, the frequency of operations across the North Caucasus has declined since around 2013, by about 47%⁶⁹ to 50%.⁷⁰ In 2014, the leaders of the Caucasus Emirate, which was founded in October 2007, pledged allegiance to ISIS, switching their loyalty from al-Qaida. Consequently, the threat that militants would return to Russia more competent, experienced, and violent became a huge concern for Moscow.⁷¹

Thus, Russian officials have shifted from prioritizing domestic terror attacks to external jihadi operations in both Syria and Iraq. These militants make up a large proportion of the Nusra Front and ISIS leadership. Prior to the Nusra Front's defection from ISIS, Caucasians formed about 40% of the Front's leadership.⁷² Soon after most of the North Caucasian militants joined the ranks of ISIS, the "Army of Migrants" rose to prominence, founded by the Georgian-Chechen Omar al-Shishani, who would later become one of ISIS's most prominent military commanders, and go on to lead the takeover of the Deir ez-Zor governorate in battles from April to July 2014.⁷³ During heavy fighting between ISIS and the Nusra Front in Deir ez-Zor in June 2015, most leaders of Russian jihadi groups in the Russian Caucasus, Chechnya and Dagestan shifted their allegiance from the Nusra Front to ISIS.⁷⁴

Russia subsequently developed the security dimension of its official military doctrine on 26 December 2014, the fourth military doctrine in the history of the Russian Federation, to adapt to non-state security threats based on "recognition of the lack of distinction between internal and external security and military and non-military threats."⁷⁵ It described military-political and military-technical cooperation to suppress "the activity of terrorist organizations and individuals seeking to undermine the sovereignty of the Russian Federation, as well as the violation of its territorial integrity" and "to provoke tensions, ethnic social strife, extremism and incitement to hostility and ethnic and religious hatred."⁷⁶ The doctrine works towards "combating terrorism on the territory of the Russian Federation and combating State terrorist activities outside its territory,"⁷⁷ implicitly referring to Syria.

69 Violence in the North Caucasus decreased by about 47%, representing the largest sudden decline in violence in the history of regional insurgency. In absolute figures, only 37 people were killed in 2014, a sharp decline compared with 104 civilian victims in 2013. While 424 persons associated with the security services were killed in 2013, the number fell by almost half to 221 deaths the following year. While jihadists in the North Caucasus carried out 100 bombings in 2013, this figure shrank below 25 in 2014. On the other hand, only about 248 insurgents were killed in 2014, as a result of counter-insurgency raids, compared with 298 in 2013. See: Souleimanov, p. 3.

70 Halbach, p. 25; Carl Lamp, "Russia's Repatriation of ISIS Members," Foreign Policy Research Institute, 12/4/2019, accessed on 19/3/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/36Fi92a>; Anna Arutunyan, "ISIS Returnees Bring Both Hope and Fear to Chechnya," *International Crisis Group*, 26/3/2016, accessed on 18/3/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3qtSbbZ>

71 Mariya Y. Omelicheva, "Russia's Regional and Global Counterterrorism Strategies How Moscow's Vision of the New Global Order Effects its Approach to Terrorism," in: Kanet (ed.), p. 268.

72 Mete Ahmet, "Foreign Fighters in Syria: An Assessment of Jihadist Foreign Fighters in the Syrian Conflict," MA thesis, King's College London, 2015, p. 23.

73 *Ibid*, pp. 22 - 27.

74 Lavrov, p. 47.

75 Qalajiyah, p. 149.

76 *Ibid*, p. 124; See the full text of the doctrine in: *Ibid*, pp. 118 - 146.

77 *Ibid*, p. 132.



Russian elites came to believe that the collapse of the regime and state in Syria would eventually lead to an influx of extremist militants into the Caucasus and Central Asia.⁷⁸ The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs officially expressed his belief that a Libyan-style state failure in Syria would be a “direct threat to our national security.”⁷⁹ This reflected the Kremlin’s dominant national security view that overthrowing any authoritarian regime, especially based on corruption claims, constitutes a dangerous precedent and a potentially attractive model that could be repeated in the northern Caucasus and Central Asian republics. This geopolitical hypothesis relates to the view that the Arab Spring was an American invention aimed at installing pro-Washington regimes and that Western interventions weaken Russia and threaten its internal stability.⁸⁰ Moscow believes that the training programme conducted by the CIA at a cost US \$500 million to recruit and arm Syrian moderate opposition military factions against ISIS is politically driven to station ISIS extremists in a position to replace the regime with a pro-US government. Donald Trump stopped the programme once he arrived at the White House, given the programme’s failure and the fact some of those who were trained took their weapons and joined the ranks of extremist Islamist factions rather than fighting them.⁸¹

Having obtained the approval of the Russian State Duma to conduct an aerial intervention without men on the ground, Putin argued that if Russia does not kill terrorists in Syria, then they will inevitably return to their countries of origin, including Russia, to launch terrorist attacks there. For Putin, the intervention in Syria was thus about Russia’s self-preservation.⁸² In an interview before the intervention began, Putin said: “We are trying to prevent the creation of a power vacuum in Syria, because the terrorists will soon fill that vacuum, as is the case in Libya and Iraq, as well as in some other countries.” In another statement, he warned of their return to Russia, saying it was better to get rid of them in Syria, rather than to wait until they got back to the country. Two days before the intervention, Putin delivered a speech to the UN, covering traditional themes such as rejection of American unilateralism after the Cold War and NATO expansion, accusing the West of inciting uprisings around the world, and noting that Washington was responsible for problems in the Middle East. However, he suggested an idea he had promoted before the speech, linked to his implicit decision to intervene directly in Syria, namely leading an international anti-Islamic State coalition in Syria.⁸³

The decision to take direct intervention and when was therefore not governed by geopolitical, economic, military, trade, energy and other considerations. Instead, the principal motivation was

⁷⁸ Michael Kofman, “Syria and The Russian Armed Forces and Evaluation of Moscow’s Military Strategy and Operational Performance,” *Foreign Policy Research Institute* (September 2020), p. 39, accessed on 19/3/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3iw0jkQ>; Malashenko, p. 20.

⁷⁹ Lund, p. 22.

⁸⁰ Rodkiewicz, pp. 14 - 15.

⁸¹ *Ibid*, p. 27.

⁸² Borshchevskaya, p. 89.

⁸³ *Ibid*, p. V.

the perceived need to protect the Assad regime so that Islamist organizations would not fill in the resulting vacuum, and to eliminate any Caucasians fighting in Syria to prevent their return.⁸⁴ Political security driven fears over the cohesion of the state within Syria and within the “near abroad” namely Central Asia, has been a more decisive and fundamental motive for the intervention than any profound solidarity or material benefits derived from Russia’s relations with the Syrian leadership, it.⁸⁵ Thus, Russia did not heed the offer made by Syrian Prime Minister Wael al-Halqi in July 2015 regarding Syria’s desire to establish a free zone with Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan, and its accession to the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), established by Russia within the framework of the Eurasian dimension brought by Putin to Russian foreign policy. Assad continued to insist on that offer, but Russia showed a disregard for that urgency.⁸⁶ Meanwhile during the same period (2012-2015) Russia laid pressure on Egypt, Iran and Israel to form a free trade zone with the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU).⁸⁷

4. Direct Intervention

By mid-2015, there were strong indication that the Syrian regime was on the verge of tumbling, as it no longer controlled more than 20-30% of Syrian territory.⁸⁸ In July 2015, the Syrian government officially requested direct Russian military intervention. On 26 August 2015, the Syrian and Russian Governments signed an agreement accordingly.⁸⁹ By September 2015, Russian troops conducted some of the largest annual military exercises seen in central Russia, simulating an attack on Central Asia.⁹⁰

Putin announced on the eve of the intervention that the Russian operation in Syria would have an expiry date, and its core mission would be confined to providing air support to the Syrian troops on the ground.⁹¹ Although Russia did not achieve the swift victory that Putin had initially predicted, low Russian casualties suggest that Syria did not turn into the “swamp” that Obama had claimed it would,⁹² while the West chose to form its own international coalition against ISIS. Despite different, often opposing, perceptions, both Moscow and Washington were careful not to clash, even as

⁸⁴ Włodkowska-Bagan, pp. 32-33; Omelicheva, p. 272.

⁸⁵ Allison, p. 795; Jay Mens, “Footing the Bill: Russian and Iranian Investment and American Withdrawal in Syria,” *Journal of European, Middle Eastern & African Affairs (JEMEEA)*, vol. 1, no. 2 (Winter 2019), p. 80.

⁸⁶ Al-Assad personally continued to push for entry into the customs union until late 2017, and Syria remained on the list of interested countries in 2019. However, the status of Syria’s entry into the customs union is unclear. See: Borshchevskaya, p. 162.

⁸⁷ Nikolay Kozanov, “Russian Policy Across the Middle East Motivations and Methods,” Chatham House (February 2018), pp. 15-16, accessed on 6/4/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3urqJLk>

⁸⁸ Lavrov, p. 35; Vasiliev, p. 490.

⁸⁹ Sarah Lain & Igor Sutyagin, “The View From Moscow,” Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies (August 2016), p. 20, accessed on 15/2/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3JCb4ht>

⁹⁰ Lain & Sutyagin, p. 19; Vasiliev, p. 490; Borshchevskaya, p. 69.

⁹¹ Borshchevskaya, p. 90.

⁹² Lavrov, p. 37.



Russian leaders and US President Donald Trump himself made remarks on the return of the Cold War between Russia and the US.⁹³

In 2017, the Russian private military company Wagner, linked to Russian intelligence, recruited mercenaries and launched attacks against towns and oil sites from which ISIL withdrew, paying no attention to US warnings of progress, and clashed with the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). However, at a high-level security meeting in Washington – their first since the 1962 missile crisis in Cuba – both Russians and Americans managed to contain the situation and to agree on a non-engagement mechanism.⁹⁴ Since the end of the Cold War, the spectre of a US-Russian military clash in Syria has loomed. Trump ordered a missile strike on Syrian facilities on 14 April 2018, in response to accusations that the regime had used chemical weapons against the town of Douma in April 2018, but the strike was very limited.⁹⁵ Trump claimed that the missile attack was a deterrent so that the Syrian regime does not use such weapons again, while the US Defence Secretary made clear the strike's limitation in that it neither represents the beginning of a broader US military campaign, nor a greater shift in US policy in Syria. In early April 2018, Trump announced his intention to withdraw US troops from Syria, stressing that he no longer had any priorities in Syria, in favour of focusing on other priorities with greater security consequences for the United States. These priorities included the nuclear threat posed by North Korea, managing long-standing competition with China in Asia, confronting a resurgent Russia in Eastern Europe, and preventing Iran from developing its nuclear weapons capabilities.⁹⁶

Thus, despite rising Cold War rhetoric, both Russian and US parties have avoided a clash on Syria. The amendments to Russia's 2015 national security strategy, introduced in the wake of the first Ukrainian crisis, and the rising tension between Russia and the West, have sought to restore a constructive relationship with the US and its allies. Washington's European allies found themselves in a position closer to Russia than the US in May 2018, when Trump withdrew from the nuclear deal with Iran.⁹⁷ This keenness changed radically in the 2021 strategy, which set a pattern for Russia's transition from cooperation to confrontation with the West, setting the stage for Russia to request security assurances. The outbreak of the second Ukrainian crisis in 2022 sparked a real cold war between Russia and NATO, completely devoid of any mention of the EU even as a potential partner. Geopolitical zoning remained a regional priority as was previously the case, but the status of the Middle East remained weak, with the new confrontation taking place outside the Middle East.⁹⁸

⁹³ At the Munich Conference 2016 and against the backdrop of multiple issues, Russian Prime Minister Medvedev said: "We are rapidly entering a new phase of the cold war (...) Sometimes I am stunned: is this 2016 or 1962?" see: Henry Meyer, Ian Wishart & Andrey Biryukov, "Russia's Medvedev: We Are in 'a New Cold War,'" *Bloomberg*, 13/2/2016, accessed on 14/3/2022, at: <https://bloom.bg/37NV260>. In April 2018, President Donald Trump announced on Twitter: "Our relationship with Russia is worse than ever, and this includes the Cold War," see: McFaul, p. 96.

⁹⁴ Lavrov, p. 34; Trenin, pp. 24 - 25.

⁹⁵ Lavrov, p. 34.

⁹⁶ Christopher J. Bolan, "Strategic Insights: After the Smoke Clears in Syria: Dilemmas for U.S. Strategy Remain," *Strategic Studies Institute*, 18/5/2018, p. 2, accessed on 6/4/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3re82sB>

⁹⁷ Trenin, p. 22.

⁹⁸ Michel Duclos, "Russia's National Security Strategy 2021: The Era of 'Information Confrontation, Institut Montaigne,'" *Institut Montaigne*, 2/8/2021, accessed on 12/2/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/36o3p85>

Both the US and the Russian sides have sought to avoid any confrontation in Syria. While the United States has developed a plan to withdraw its troops from the Middle East, a systematic Russian policy in the Middle East is not yet clear. However, in March 2016, Putin announced Russia's withdrawal of the "main part" of its military forces from Syria, which he justified by declaring that the Russian armed forces had completed their tasks in Syria. This led to the departure of some of the fixed-wing strike force from the Hmeimim airbase and the return of equipment and personnel to Russia. But the Russian Deputy Minister of Defence was quick to announce that Russia would continue to carry out its airstrikes,⁹⁹ which continue till today.

Direct Russian intervention has turned the balance of power on the ground in northern and southern Syria, while northeastern Syria was at the mercy of the United States-led international coalition. The complexity of this area is beyond the scope of this article. But arguably, the active phase of the Russian military operation took 804 days, from 30 September 2015 through to 11 December 2017, in which Russian warplanes carried out more than 44,000 combat sorties, killing more than 133,000 militants according to figures provided by Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu, including 4,500 insurgents from the Russian Federation and the countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States. A total of 865 leaders of organizations were killed. Their facilities were destroyed, with the fuel refineries and plants, a primary source of resources, at their core. Russia, unlike the US, makes no distinction between moderates and extremists with regard to militants. Shoigu made it clear that he believed the Russian military operation to have achieved its objectives of preserving the Syrian State and preventing its collapse, defeating terrorist groups and not enabling any Russian militant within their ranks to return to Russia. These are the goals that Putin set out for his operation in Syria.¹⁰⁰

The Russian operation restored the Syrian government's control of about 70% of Syrian territory from about 20-30% on the eve of the intervention.¹⁰¹ However, large areas in Idlib governorate, the northern Aleppo countryside, and northeastern Syria remains outside its control.

5. What Has Russia Gained from Syria?

a. Field military expertise

Since the war in Afghanistan in the 1980s, the Russian army has not only gained an unprecedented amount of experience, but has also made significant improvements to tactics and strategies.¹⁰² Syria has been transformed into a training laboratory to hone the skills of Russian officers and soldiers.

⁹⁹ Lain & Sutyagin, p. 18.

¹⁰⁰ "Russia's Military Operation in Syria was Necessary, Helped to Defeat IS - Defense Minister," *Tass*, 30/9/2020, accessed on 15/2/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3Le33Q4>

¹⁰¹ Lavrov, p.35; Vasiliev, p. 490.

¹⁰² Lavrov, p. 89.

Three years after the start of the intervention some 68 thousand professional officers and soldiers had been rotated to acquire field experience, and all Russian military regional commanders had been rotated on the Hmeimim Center to gain experience in the Joint Operations Command (JSOC). Moreover, about 87-97% of combat aviation crews had completed at least one tour in Syria.¹⁰³ The role of the Ministry of Defence in Syria's decision-making process has increased, becoming responsible for reconciliation and settlements between opposition factions and the regime.¹⁰⁴ Russian Chechen Military Police (MP) forces have gained extensive experience in external intervention under the rubric of peace operations. Its first test came when it was sent by Russia as part of the peacekeeping forces to the South Caucasus following the Armenia-Azerbaijan war in September 2020, where it drew on practical experience gained in Syria.¹⁰⁵

b. The testing and development of a new generation of arms

Russia has tested about three hundred new types of new military equipment in real combat conditions. The Russian military announced its successful use of high-precision long-range weapons, such as a new generation of precision ammunition for fighter jets and helicopters, which also included several models still in the development phase and prototypes: Su-57 fighters, mid-altitude drones, small UAVs with laser target determinants for artillery and aviation, as well as upgraded air defence missiles and electronic warfare equipment. In addition, more unusual designs have been experimented with, such as the 12-ton heavily armed Uran-9 robot and the negative exoskeletons of combat engineers,¹⁰⁶ contributing to the expansion of the export market.

c. Strategic military privileges

Regarding permanent privileges acquired through formal agreements, a Syrian-Russian agreement was signed in 2017, providing for Russia to be allowed to retain its chartered air base at Hmeimim, as well as to keep 11 vessels at Tartus seaport, with an automatic renewal for 25 years.¹⁰⁷ Russia thus ensured a permanent and legitimate military presence in the Mediterranean Sea, until at least 2066, helping to expand its operations in the region should Moscow formulate a Mediterranean-Middle East policy, in areas such as Africa and in the Red Sea region, as well as in Libya, where Russia is seeking to establish a Russian military base, representing a bridgehead to expand into Africa itself.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰³ Ibid, p. 36.

¹⁰⁴ Westerlund, p. 44.

¹⁰⁵ Emmanuel Dreyfus, "The Russian Military Police, from Syria to Karabakh," *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo*, no. 688, The Program on New Approaches to Research and Security in Eurasia (PONARS Eurasia) (January 2021), pp. 1-3, accessed on 18/3/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/36luA3x>

¹⁰⁶ Timofey Borisov, "Russian Arms Exports in the Middle East," in: Popescu & Secrieru (eds.), p. 48; Lavrov, p. 36.

¹⁰⁷ Mens, p. 80; Lavrov, p. 36.

¹⁰⁸ Borshchevskaya, p. 80.

d. Economic concessions

In March 2018, the Syrian government granted the Russian company Stroytransgaz, which is the second largest contractor in Russia,¹⁰⁹ the concession to invest phosphate mines in Khunayfis region, which had been awarded to Iran first in 2017, for 50 years.¹¹⁰ In December 2016, the Syrian government also granted about 25% of Syria's oil and gas production to Russian energy companies Evro Polis and Stroytransgaz. Additionally, a road map was announced in February 2018 that limited rehabilitation projects related to the oil and gas sectors to Russian companies.¹¹¹ However, according to the Syrian Minister of Oil, about 90-95% of Syria's oil reserves are concentrated in the eastern region of Syria, which to today remains outside the Syrian Government's control and is under the control of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which are still supported and covered by the United States.¹¹² The oil wells still in service, which are under their control, produce, according to the official 2022 figures, some 85.9 thousand barrels per day of which 16 thousand barrels per day reach Syrian refineries, while the SDF areas produce some 70 thousand barrels per day.¹¹³ However, the real future of these investments depends on the advent of peace in Syria and the transition to the reconstruction phase. This is the fundamental challenge facing Russia after becoming a direct and present player in Syria.

Conclusion

Taking a historical and analytical descriptive approach to causal relations in this case study of both the independent (interpretative) and the dependent (result) variables, the paper has demonstrated that Moscow's economic, commercial and strategic interests in Syria were limited and not compromised until the date of Russia's direct intervention. Furthermore, Russia could have strengthened these interests without resorting to such intensive military intervention. These factors are not adequate either to interpret the direct intervention or to explain its timing and measures according to Putin's security doctrine.

This paper has instead linked Russia's direct military intervention in Syria to the centrality of the Operational Code in Putin's general political doctrine. Putin's philosophical and instrumental beliefs regarding the northern Caucasian issue, which reemerged following interaction with dramatic events in Syria, intensified over time. The paper has also attempted to produce an analytical methodology for the national security factor, which has been studied on marginally so far.

¹⁰⁹ Igor A. Matveev, "Russian-Syrian Business Cooperation: Challenges and Prospects," *Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP)* (December 2019), p. 4, accessed on 3/12/2020, at: <https://rb.gy/57bu6c>

¹¹⁰ Mens, pp. 80 - 81.

¹¹¹ Ibid, pp. 75, 80.

¹¹² "The Minister of Economy: Oil derivatives prices are likely to decline," *Akhbar Alnaft Wa Al-Ghaz Al-Suri Lahza Bi Lahza*, 16/10/2014, accessed on 7/4/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3uZFILq>

¹¹³ Ibid.

The paper thus concludes that the underlying independent variable, which includes the direct cause or trigger of the intervention, is the national security factor. However, the intervention resulted in the expansion of Russia's strategic, geopolitical and economic interests, which were a consequence of the intervention at the dependent variable level, not a cause.

Furthermore, strategic, geopolitical and economic (energy) gains can be considered the transformation of the dependent variable into a new independent variable. It is quite possible that Putin has rushed into the conflict without thinking about the endgame,¹¹⁴ and without formulating a Russian-Middle Eastern policy. The political doctrines of authoritarian and dictatorial leaders lead them to make devastating foreign policy decisions in a crucial cycle of war and peace. In this sense, Putin is no different to any other dictator in that he makes decisive decisions in light of what he perceives as strength rather than objective power measured by facts, and the impulse to resort to war without thinking about any consequences outside of wishful thinking. It may therefore not be possible to understand Putin's political behaviour in isolation from the concept of misperception in political psychology, with consequences not only for Syria, but also across the Middle East more widely.

¹¹⁴ Angela Stent, "Putin's Power Play in Syria How to Respond to Russia's Intervention," *Foreign Affairs* (January-February 2016), accessed on 5/4/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3KrzSt2>



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