

# THE SYRIAN CRISIS AS A PROXY WAR AND THE RETURN OF THE REALIST GREAT POWER POLITICS\*

Bir Vekalet Savaşı Olarak Suriye Krizi ve Büyük Güç Politikalarının  
Realizme Dönüşü

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## **Abstract**

*This study analyzes the implications of the Syria policies of the United States, Russia and China with regard to the international system within the framework of the great power politics. In this context, the main research question of the study is as follows: What are the Syria Crisis' implications and transformative effects for the international system? The study has two fundamental arguments: First, the geopolitical struggle involving the United States, Russia and China begun after the Syria crisis turned to a proxy war between great powers. Second, this struggle also transforms the international system. The Sino-Russian dual campaign to protect the principle of state sovereignty and the principle of non-intervention of the Westphalian system against the unilateral development of intervention law of the United States in the international system.*

**Keywords:** Proxy war, Great power politics, Syria crisis, Turkish foreign policy, US foreign policy, Middle East.

## **Özet**

*Bu makalenin temel araştırma sorusu, Suriye krizinin uluslararası sisteme yönelik yansımaları ve dönüştürücü etkileri nelerdir olarak belirlenmiştir. Araştırmada iki temel argüman geliştirilmiştir: Birincisi, Suriye krizinin büyük güçler arasında vekalet savaşına dönüşmesiyle ABD, Rusya ve Çin arasında yürütülen bir jeopolitik mücadele başlamıştır. Suriye krizi üzerinden büyük güçlerin küresel nüfuz mücadelesi realist büyük güç politikasını tekrar ortaya çıkarmıştır. Suriye krizi üzerinden Ortadoğu'da ABD, Rusya ve Çin, nüfuz alanlarını yeniden belirlemeye başlamışlardır. Böylece Suriye, 21. yüzyılın yeni satranç tahtası olmuştur. İkincisi, bu mücadelenin uluslararası sistemi dönüştürmesidir. ABD'nin tek taraflı uluslararası sistemde müdahale hukukunu geliştirmesine karşı Rusya ve Çin ikilisi Vestfalyan sistemin egemenlik ve diğer devletlerin iç işlerine müdahale etmeme ilkelerini koruma yönünde mücadele vermektedir.*

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Vekalet savaşı, Büyük güç politikası, Suriye krizi, Türk dış politikası, Ortadoğu.

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## Introduction

The “Arab Spring” process that started with the public uprisings in Tunisia at the end of 2010 created great hopes for the democratization of the Middle East. The Arab Uprisings brought out the hope to have democratic regimes elected by people coming to power instead of the rooted authoritarian regimes in the Middle East and to lay the foundations of justice and freedom. However, the Arab Spring was blocked in Syria in March 2011 and the hopes were replaced by civil wars and destroyed countries. The Arab Spring that aimed for a justice and freedom caused the emergence of millions of refugees who were left homeless. Furthermore, the civil war in Syria turned to a battle for influence that takes place as a proxy war engaging global and regional powers. Geopolitical struggle restarted between the great powers including the United States (the US), Russia and China particularly over the Syria crisis. This was the beginning of a new period when the realist great power politics in international politics returned after the Cold War.

In this context, this study will analyze the implications of the Syria policies of the US, Russia and China with regard to the international system within the framework of the great power politics. In this framework, the main research question of the study is as follows: What are the Syrian Crisis’ implications for the international system? The study has two fundamental arguments: First, the geopolitical struggle engaging the US, Russia and China started after the Syrian crisis turned to a proxy war between great powers. Syria crisis served as testing ground for great powers’ new weapons and became the new chessboard of the 21st century. The global struggle of influence of the great powers restarted as the realist great power politics over the Syria crisis. The US, Russia and China begun to re-determine their field of influence in the Middle East over the Syria crisis. Second, this struggle also transforms the international system and its principles. After the Cold War, Russia and China stopped being silent and started a resistance in Syria against the unipolar, unilateral and Western guided intervention of the US policy since 1990s. The Sino-Russian bilateral campaign to protect the principle of state sovereignty and the principle of non-intervention of the Westphalian system against the unilateral

development of intervention law of the US in the new emerging international system.

## Syria Crisis as a Proxy War

The Syrian crisis started with fact that the public uprisings that started in Tunisia in December 2010 covered Morocco, Libya, Egypt and Bahrain by the domino effect of the process called as “Arab Spring” or “Arab Awakening” and but were blocked in Syria. The protests first begun in March 2011 with a reform demand from the Assad regime and turned to public uprisings that spread to all of the country in April and demanded Basher al-Assad to resign after the government used violence by the army to suppress the uprising<sup>1</sup>. The next stage included the involvement of regional powers in the Syria civil war including Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Therefore, the Syria crisis turned to a proxy war involving first the public uprisings, then civil war, and then the regional powers.

Iran and Hezbollah joined the war in 2013 next to the Assad forces. Iran provided the Assad regime with military and finance support, and started to oversee the fight of Hezbollah against the opposition forces next to the Assad army<sup>2</sup>. On the other hand, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar started to provide the opposition forces with weapon and logistic support as well as with support at the international platforms<sup>3</sup>. Moreover, the dimension of the crisis turned from regional to global with the inclusion of great powers in addition to the regional powers in the Syria crisis. That is to say that Russia and China aligned themselves with Iran (Hezbollah) that supports the Assad regime<sup>4</sup>. In contrast, the US, England, France and Germany started to take sides with the group

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1 March Lynch et al., “Syria in the Arab Spring: The integration of Syria’s conflict with the Arab uprisings, 2011–2013”, *Research and Politics*, October-December 2014, p. 1-7, p. 2.

2 Brian Michael Jenkis, “The Dynamics of Syria’s Civil War”, *Rand Perspective*, 2014, p. 3. [http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PE100/PE115/RAND\\_PE115.pdf](http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PE100/PE115/RAND_PE115.pdf), (Accessed on 04.01.2017).

3 Hussein Ibish, “What’s at Stake for the Gulf Arab States in Syria?”, *Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, Issue Paper 6, 30 June 2016, p. 3, [http://www.agsiw.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Ibish\\_GCCSyria\\_Web.pdf](http://www.agsiw.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Ibish_GCCSyria_Web.pdf), (Accessed on 12.11.2016).

4 Marcin Kaczmarek-Jakub Jakóbowski, “China on Russia’s intervention in Syria”, *OSW Centre for Eastern Studies*, Commentary, Number 193, 19.01.2016, p. 1-6, p. 1, [https://www.osw.waw.pl/sites/default/files/commentary\\_193\\_0.pdf](https://www.osw.waw.pl/sites/default/files/commentary_193_0.pdf), (Accessed on 23.09.2016)

supporting the opposition. Thus, Syria turned to be a field of proxy war between the great powers and became a geopolitical rivalry area of the global struggle for influence. This caused the Syria crisis to be internationalized and even to become a global-systemic crisis.

The problem called to be the Syria crisis went beyond the problem of a individual state and turned to a regional proxy war and then to the proxy wars of great powers. In this context, the dynamics of the Syria crisis started to escalate and diversify. The civil war dynamics within the country included sectarian clash dynamics and affected the geopolitical rivalry between the regional and global powers that participated in the civil war as proxy. This way a proxy struggle of influence started to be experienced between the dual Turkey-Iran, Saudi Arabia-Iran, the US-Russia, the US-China and Russia-China against the US. In this sense, Syria became the new chessboard of the 21st century.

On the other hand, the Syria crisis led to the failure of the Arab Spring as well as to the 21st century update of the Sykes-Picot arrangement in the 20th century. In other words, the Arab Spring created the hope of creating the new order in a democratic way according to the own demands of the people for the first time in the Middle East that were made by the design of the Western powers after the first and second World Wars in line with their own interests<sup>5</sup>. However, the blocking of the Arab Uprisings by the Syria crisis and the transformation of the crisis to a proxy war between great powers led to the new design policies of the Middle Eastern geopolitics and to the process where the region was determined again by the external powers instead of the own dynamics of the region.

The fact that Syria became the field of global struggle for influence also brought out the great power politics in a realist aspect to the international politics. A zero-sum game started to be played in Syria where one great power wins and the other loses. Particularly, the global rivalry between the US, Russia and China was transferred to Syria and a new period started where a small prototype of the third World

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5 F. Gregory Gause III, "Why Middle East Studies Missed the Arab Spring: The Myth of Authoritarian Stability", *Foreign Affairs*, Vol: 90, No: 4, July/August 2011, p. 81-90, p. 82.

War is experienced as described in the literature<sup>6</sup>. The great powers fundamentally reorganize the international system by re-determining their global and regional areas of influence over the Syria crisis. Russia and China opted to defend the principles of the Westphalian system against the fact that the US introduced its Western guided unilateral interventions into the new emerging international system<sup>7</sup>. With this geopolitical struggle among the great powers over Syria, the Middle Eastern geopolitics is determined in parallel to the interests of great powers on one hand, the 21st century principles of the international system are set on the other.

The US attempts to introduce intervention law to the new international system by the involvement in regime change in the Middle East for bringing democracy (Iraq invasion of 2003) and humanitarian interventions in the Balkans since 1990s under Western leadership by using the United Nation (the UN) and NATO, finally its attempt for responsibility to protect (R2P) in Libya (2011 NATO bombarding) received resistance of China and Russia in Syria at last<sup>8</sup>. Robert A. Pape and T.V. Paul conceptualize Chinese and Russian policy against the US as soft balancing<sup>9</sup>. China and Russia consequently stopped being silent to the intervention policy under Western policy followed by the US for twenty years and started to manifest resistance after the intervention in Libya. To prevent reoccurrence of the Libya experience in Syria, China and Russia opted to support the Assad regime against the US.

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6 Alexandra Sims, "US and Russia could 'start Third World War over Syria conflict', says Turkey", *The Independent*, 17 October 2016, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/us-russia-third-world-war-syria-conflict-aleppo-turkey-deputy-prime-minister-numan-kurtulmus-a7366571.html>, (Accessed on 04.01.2017); "Russian Media Claims U.S. is Pushing for Third World War", *Breitbart*, 12 October 2016, <http://www.breitbart.com/national-security/2016/10/12/russian-tv-warns-u-s-pushing-nuclear-war/>, (Accessed on 16.01.2017); "Trump says Clinton's Syria policy would lead to third world war", *Middle East Eye*, 2016, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/fr/news/trump-says-clintons-syria-policy-would-lead-world-war-three-1131870947>, (Accessed on 04.01.2017).

7 Markos Kounalakis, "China's position on international intervention: A media and journalism critical discourse analysis of its case for "Sovereignty" versus "Responsibility to Protect" principles in Syria", *Global Media and China*, Vol: 1, Issue: 3, September 2016, p. 149-167, p. 150.

8 Graham Cronogue, "Responsibility to Protect: Syria The Law, Politics, and Future of Humanitarian Intervention Post-Libya", *Journal of International Humanitarian Legal Studies*, Vol: 3, Issue: 1, p. 124-159, 124.

9 Robert A. Pape, "Soft Balancing against the United States", *International Security*, Vol: 30, No:1, Summer 2005, p. 7-45, p. 7; T.V. Paul, "Soft Balancing in the Age of U.S. Primacy", *International Security*, Vol: 30, No:1, Summer 2005, p. 46-71, p. 46.

Hence, China and Russia give the US the message that the Westphalian system is still valid<sup>10</sup>. In this context, the Syria policies of great powers reshape the international system in addition to redesigning the regional geopolitics of the Middle East.

## The Great Powers over Syria: The US, Russia and China

### The US policy in Syria Crisis

The historical background of the US policy in Syria dates back to the experiences of Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003. The US policy to transform the Middle East through direct military power under the Bush administration was changed during the Obama period<sup>11</sup>. The new foreign policy approach called as the Obama doctrine termed “leading from behind”<sup>12</sup>, “directly non-intervention” and “no boots on the grounds”<sup>13</sup>. The ultimate rationale of the arrangement of foreign policy strategy under the Obama administration included the great losses of the US in Afghanistan and Iraq during the Bush era, its damaged image as an invader and the increase of anti-Americanism<sup>14</sup>. The policies of the Bush administration created exact opposite results and it was the influence of Iran that increased the most in Iraq than the US. Particularly with the total withdrawal of troops from Iraq in 2011 by the Obama administration, Iran achieved the dominant power position in Iraq<sup>15</sup>. Likewise, the start of the Arab Spring process in the

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10 Ruth Deyermund, “The Uses of Sovereignty in Twenty-first Century Russian Foreign Policy”, *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol: 68, Issue: 6, 2016, p. 957-984, p. 957.

11 Katerina Dalacoura, “US democracy promotion in the Arab Middle East since 11 September 2001: a critique”, *International Affairs*, Vol: 81, Issue: 5, October 2005, p. 963-979, 963.

12 Simon Chesterman, “‘Leading from Behind’: The Responsibility to Protect, the Obama Doctrine, and Humanitarian Intervention after Libya”, *Ethics & International Affairs*, Vol: 25, Issue 3, October 2011, p. 279-285, p. 280; Charles Krauthammer, “The Obama doctrine: Leading from behind”, *The Washington Post*, 28 April 2011, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-obama-doctrine-leading-from-behind/2011/04/28/AFBCy18E\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.5b9426286171](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-obama-doctrine-leading-from-behind/2011/04/28/AFBCy18E_story.html?utm_term=.5b9426286171), (Accessed on 01.01.2017).

13 Colin Dueck, *Obama Doctrine: American Grand Strategy Today*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2015, p. 1.

14 Richard Jackson, “Culture, identity and hegemony: Continuity and (the lack of) change in US counterterrorism policy from Bush to Obama”, *International Politics*, Vol: 48, Issue: 2, March 2011, p. 390-411, p. 396.

15 Ephraim Kam, “To Iraq and Back: The Withdrawal of the US Forces”, *Strategic Assessment*, Vol: 14, No: 4, January 2012, p. 87-101, p. 92.

Middle East was interestingly in parallel to the withdrawal of the US from Iraq. After that, the Obama administration begun to implement the policies of leading from behind, directly non-intervention and no boots on the grounds generally in the global politics and particularly in the Middle East. In this context, the US policy toward Syria is shaped by its leading from behind, directly non-intervention and no boots on grounds approaches.

This new foreign policy strategy of the US includes indirect intervention without direct presence in the field but through the local allies in the ground. In this framework, the US chose PYD (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat in Kurdish; Kurdish Democratic Union Party)/YPG (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel in Kurdish; The People's Protection Units) as its local ally in Syria and follows a policy to legitimize it by having this Kurdish group fight against Daesh (al-Dawla al-Islamiya fil Iraq wa al-Sham in Arabic)-ISIL/ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria)<sup>16</sup>. In this framework, the Obama administration followed a policy of staying away from direct military intervention in its Syria policy. Furthermore, this policy of the US caused the breakdown of the relations of the US mostly with Turkey, its NATO ally<sup>17</sup>. At the beginning, the US followed a policy of overthrowing Bashar al-Assad in Syria and put Turkey forward but changed its policy later on and left the policy of overthrowing or immediately overthrowing Assad. Therefore, the alliance relations of the US and Turkey were interrupted. The joint actions of the US with PYD in Syria, which was declared to be a terrorist organization by Turkey, and even arming this group making PYD a kind of the US ally<sup>18</sup> in Syria reached to a point to damage the relations of both countries<sup>19</sup>. Despite this, the US started to provide open assistance of weapons to PYD that is accepted as a

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16 Lynn E. Davis, Jeffrey Martini, Kim Cragin, "A Strategy to Counter ISIL as a Transregional Threat", *Rand Perspective*, 2017, p. 1-24, p. 2.

17 Mark N. Katz, "U.S. Policy toward Syria: Making the Best of a Bad Situation?", *Wilson Center Viewpoints*, No: 41, October 2013, p. 1-5, p. 3, [https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/us\\_policy\\_toward\\_syria\\_making\\_best\\_of\\_bad\\_situation.pdf](https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/us_policy_toward_syria_making_best_of_bad_situation.pdf), (Accessed on 24.01.2017).

18 David Ignatius, "The United States' surprise allies in Syria", *The Washington Post*, October 15, 2015,

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-us-hastily-reevaluates-its-syria-strategy/2015/10/15/92d62c54-735c-11e5-9cbb-790369643cf9\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.3c24c14f2881](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-us-hastily-reevaluates-its-syria-strategy/2015/10/15/92d62c54-735c-11e5-9cbb-790369643cf9_story.html?utm_term=.3c24c14f2881), (Accessed on 04.01.2017).

19 "US Army report confirms direct PKK, YPG links in Syria", *Daily Sabah*, 27 March 2017, <https://www.dailysabah.com/war-on-terror/2017/03/28/us-army-report-confirms-direct-pkk-ypg-links-in-syria>, (Accessed on 30.03.2017).

terrorist organization by Turkey<sup>20</sup>. On the other hand, Turkey got closer to Russia and away from the US by quickly repairing its relations with Russia broken by the downing of a Russian warplane. With the Astana process that started in January 2017, Turkey made advances toward Russia and the US was kept out of the process<sup>21</sup>. In this context, the failure of Syria policy of the US started with its inefficacy to develop a joint policy with Turkey and opened the way that left the leadership in Syria to Russia. In this framework, the only achievement of the US in Syria happened to be its military deployment in the north of the country through PYD.

Other than that, it could be argued that the main masterpiece of the US in its Syria policy was the removal of chemical weapons from the country. The US declared the chemical weapons in Syria and the use of it to be its red line and had its rival Russia to achieve this objective in September 2013<sup>22</sup>. Even more, China and Russia supported the policy of removing and destroying the chemical weapons in Syria to prevent the US intervention<sup>23</sup>. In this sense, the US managed to have its rivals to carry out its policies without direct intervention itself. In other words, even the possibility of direct intervention of the US to the Syria crisis by military power ensured the performance of the requirements of the US policy by Russia and China. Thus, the removal of chemical weapons from Syria eliminated the direct intervention possibility of the US to the country.

In this context, the US followed a policy in the Syria crisis from March 2011 to March 2017 to ensure a political transformation without Bashar al-Assad. With the Trump administration, the US shifted to the policy of political transformation with Assad, which was a major shift

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20 Patrick Clawson (ed.), *Syrian Kurds As A U.S. Ally: Cooperation & Complications*, The Washington Institute For Near East Policy, 2016, p. 4.

21 N. Mozes-Dr. M. Terdiman, "Russian Efforts To Exclude U.S., Europe From Political Solution In Syria And Create A Framework For Bypassing Geneva I", *The Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI)*, Inquiry & Analysis Series No: 1292, 23 December 2016, <https://www.memri.org/reports/russian-efforts-exclude-us-europe-political-solution-syria-and-create-framework-bypassing>, (Accessed on 12.01.2017).

22 David S. Sorenson, "Dilemmas for US Strategy: US Options in Syria", *Parameters*, Vol: 43, Issue: 3, Autumn 2013, p. 5-15, p. 10.

23 Scott Shane, "Weren't Syria's Chemical Weapons Destroyed? It's Complicated", *The New York Times*, 7 April 2017, [https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/07/world/middleeast/werent-syrias-chemical-weapons-destroyed-its-complicated.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/07/world/middleeast/werent-syrias-chemical-weapons-destroyed-its-complicated.html?_r=0), (Accessed on 10.04.2017).



in its Syria policy. Likewise, Nikki Haley, the USA Ambassador at the UN, made a statement in 31 March 2017 “our priority is no longer to sit and focus on getting Assad out”<sup>24</sup> while the White House speaker Sean Spier, made a statement to the press in 2 April 2017: “there is a political reality that Assad’s future had to be a decision for the Syrian people, we had an opportunity and we need to focus now on defeating ISIS”<sup>25</sup>. Based on this, it is understood that during the Trump administration, the US abandoned the policy to overthrow Bashar al-Assad and will continue to carry out its Syria policy over PYD, its local ally. However, according to İlhan Uzgel, the US discontinued the policy of overthrowing Assad after negotiations with Russia<sup>26</sup>. According to this negotiation, the US would have military deployment in the Kurdish region in the north of Syria over PYD in return of giving up the policy of overthrowing Assad. Likewise, the US settles in the Kurdish region in the north of Syria by building military station and air force base in addition to arming PYD<sup>27</sup>. This could be considered to be a fundamental gain of the US without direct invasion such is the Iraqi invasion in 2003.

On the other hand, the US uses the Syria crisis to measure the resistance of China and Russia, its global rivals. The US destroyed the state of Syria, the ally of Russia, by having it bombed by everyone, even including Russia and Iran. Furthermore, it settled militarily in the country. While the US had previously no base in Syria, it has bases at least nine locations according to Journalist Ahmet Takan<sup>28</sup>. Syria, an

24 Michelle Nichols, “US no longer focused on removing Assad from power in Syria, ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley says”, *The Independent*, 31 March 2017, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/politics/us-assad-syria-ambassador-un-nikki-haley-a7659266.html>, (Accessed on 31 March 2017).

25 Michael R. Gordon, “White House Accepts ‘Political Reality’ of Assad’s Grip on Power in Syria”, *The New York Times*, 31 March 2017, [https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/31/us/politics/trump-bashar-assad-syria.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/31/us/politics/trump-bashar-assad-syria.html?_r=0), (Accessed on 31 March 2017).

26 İlhan Uzgel, “AÜ SBF’den İlhan Uzgel: “Sıkışınca ordu öne sürülüyor”, *BirGün*, 01.11.2016, <http://www.birgun.net/haber-detay/au-sbf-den-ilhan-uzgel-sikisınca-ordu-one-suruluyor-133749.html>, (Accessed on 17.12.2016).

27 “The US is building a military airfield in northern Syria as part of its ongoing campaign against Daesh, a representative of the Syrian Democratic Forces command told Sputnik on condition of anonymity”, *Sputnik News*, 04.10.2016, <https://sputniknews.com/middleeast/201610041045991523-syria-us-airbase/>, (Accessed on 28.12.2016).

28 Ahmet Takan, “ABD Suriye kuzeyinde 9 hava üssü kurdu”, *Yeni Çağ Gazetesi*, 23.03.2017, <http://www.yenicaggazetesi.com.tr/abd-suriye-kuzeyinde-9-hava-ussu-kurdu-42128yy.htm> (Accessed on 24. 03. 2017).

ally of Russia since the Cold War period, with a naval base in the Tartus port, was destroyed and Russia was left with Assad without country. In this sense, it could be argued that the predominant geopolitical achievement of the US against Russia was the destruction of Syria. In addition, the US was not directly involved in the Syria crisis and had Russia and China pay the bill of the war and presented these countries as giving support to a regime that murders its own people in the eye of the international community.

The US deliberately brings up the Syria issue on the agenda of the United Nation Security Council (the UNSC), despite knowing that China and Russia would reject, and brands the images of these countries to the international society as responsible of the people killed in Syria<sup>29</sup>. Consequently, the US isolates Russia and China regionally in the Middle East except Iran.<sup>30</sup> On the other hand, the US isolates Russia and China globally by exhausting China and Russia over the Syria crisis and by giving them a criminal image in the eyes of international community. As a consequence, the US introduces to the international community the idea that China and Russia are away from world leadership while they present themselves as alternatives to the Western system in the international system. In contrast, Russia focuses more upon geopolitical gains and follows a policy of preventing Assad being overthrown.

### Russian Involvement in the Syria Crisis

The relations Russia with Syria are based on the link of alliance during the Cold War period in particular. In addition, Russia always has had more military and economic relations with Syria than the

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29 Aleppo: US ambassador Samantha Power blasts Assad regime, Russia, Iran at UN Security Council meeting”, *ABC News*, 14 December 2016, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-12-14/un-exchange-samantha-power-blasts-russia-assad-over-aleppo/8119236>, (Accessed on 20.12.2016); “UN: Russia and China’s abusive use of veto ‘shameful’, Amnesty International, 28 February 2017, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2017/02/un-russia-and-chinas-abusive-use-of-veto-shameful/> (Accessed on 01.03.2017); “Are you incapable of shame?: Samantha Power criticises Syria, Iran and Russia over Aleppo – video”, *The Guardian*, 14 December 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/video/2016/dec/14/are-you-incapable-of-shame-samantha-power-criticises-syria-iran-and-russia-video>, (Accessed on 24.12.2016).

30 Mark N. Katz, “Russia and the Conflict in Syria: Four Myths”, *Middle East Policy*, Vol: 20, No:2, Summer 2013, p. 38-46, p. 38.

US<sup>31</sup>. Particularly, Russia has always been the first partner of Syria with respect to arms trade. Since the Cold War era, the Russian naval facility at the Tartus port of Syria was the only base of Russia in the Mediterranean and Syria was the only state in the Middle East where Russia had a military base. However, the US had several bases in many of the Middle Eastern countries. For instance, it has navy and air bases in Bahrain, two air force bases in Kuwait, a navy base in UAE, three air bases in Oman, a large air base in Saudi Arabia and the İncirlik air base in Turkey, again a large air force base<sup>32</sup>. These bases served to the military protection of the US influence in the Middle East. In contrast, Russia had only one naval base in Syria that was the only ally country.

However, the fact that the public movements that started with the arrival of the Arab Spring to Syria by a domino effect caused a civil war in the country ended up with the involvement of Russia. Russia started to intervene to the Syria crisis over the pretext of ISIL. Russia did not want to lose its only ally and base in the Middle East and first indirectly intervened to the civil war in Syria but then had a direct involvement upon the request of Assad since 2015<sup>33</sup>. Syria, its ally, was destroyed by the civil war and the bombardment of the country by coalition forces led by the US. Therefore, Russia started to follow a policy over keeping Assad in power after its ally Syria lost as a state<sup>34</sup>. After that, Russia followed a policy of military intervention in Syria in coordination with Iran on one hand, and ensured the support of China against the US on the other. In this sense, Russia set up a policy in regional alliance with Iran and in global alliance with China against the US in the Syria crisis<sup>35</sup>. Apart from that, Russia took advantage

31 Mehmet Seyfettin Erol, "Türkiye'nin Orta Asya politikasına Rusya Federasyonu ve Bölge ülkelerinden genel bir bakış", *Türk Dünyası İncelemeleri Dergisi/Journal of Turkish World Studies*, 12/1 (Summer 2012), p. 1-20, p. 4.

32 "2017 Index of U.S. Military Strength", *The Heritage*, 2017, <http://index.heritage.org/military/2017/assessments/operating-environment/middle-east/>, (Accessed on 12.02.2017).

33 Ilan Goldenberg-Julie Smith, "U.S.-Russia Competition in the Middle East Is Back", *Foreign Policy*, 7 March 2017, (Accessed on 09.03.2017).

<http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/03/07/u-s-russia-competition-in-the-middle-east-is-back/>.

34 Roy Allison, "Russia and Syria: explaining alignment with a regime in crisis", *International Affairs*, Vol: 89, Issue 4, July 2013, p. 795-823, p. 795; Dmitri Trenin, "The Mythical Alliance Russia's Syria Policy", *The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, Carnegie Moscow Center, The Carnegie Papers, February 2013, p. 1-30, p. 21, [http://carnegieendowment.org/files/mythical\\_alliance.pdf](http://carnegieendowment.org/files/mythical_alliance.pdf), (Accessed on 11.12.2016).

35 Alexander Korolev, "Theories of Non-Balancing and Russia's Foreign Policy", *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, 2017, p. 1-26, p. 7.

of the Syria crisis with China to challenge the US hegemony. In this framework, Russia did not confine itself to the Tartus base in Syria and constructed the large Hmeymim (Khmeimim) base in Latakia governorate to increase its military deployment in the country<sup>36</sup>.

Thus, Russia took over the leadership in the Syria crisis from the US and even managed to win the support of Turkey, a US ally, through the Astana process<sup>37</sup>. However, it should be noted that the Turkish-Russian rapprochement has a short term<sup>38</sup>. Because the interests of Turkey and Russia in the Syria crisis were in full conflict. Particularly, the two countries were on the brink of war with the downing of the Russian fighter jet by Turkey in 24 November 2015. After that, the two countries became closer with the Erdoğan-Putin meeting in St. Petersburg in 2016<sup>39</sup> and the Astana process that begun in the beginning of 2017 initiated the process of harmonization of the interests of the two countries in the Syria crisis<sup>40</sup>. With the Astana process, Turkey made a change in its Syria policy and turned into the policy of balance with Russia against the US. With this policy, Turkey had the chance to increase its military presence in Syria.

The fact that Russia opened space for Turkey and condoned the military entrance can be considered as an extension of Russian policy to attract the US ally and to weaken NATO. On the other hand, Russia follows a policy to increase its influence in the Middle East essentially through its ally Iran, other than Turkey. Russia did not confine itself to Iran and attempted to win Saudi Arabia as well. Therefore, it continued its dialogue talks between Syria and Saudi Arabia in Riyadh through

36 Pavel K. Baev, "Russia's policy in the Middle East imperilled by the Syrian intervention", *The Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre*, Policy Brief November 2015, [http://noref.no/var/ezflow\\_site/storage/original/application/46688c6618b09802a81738ebd990c538.pdf](http://noref.no/var/ezflow_site/storage/original/application/46688c6618b09802a81738ebd990c538.pdf), (Accessed on 02.01.2017).

37 Mehmet Seyfettin Erol, "Türk-Rus İlişkilerinde "Soğuk Savaş Sonrası Dönemde Rusya'nın Dış Politikasında Yakın Çevre ve Orta Asya", *Türk Dünyası İncelemeleri Dergisi/Journal of Turkish World Studies*, 14/1 (Summer 2014), p. 155-178, p. 162.

38 Brian Glyn Williams-Robert Souza, "Operation 'Retribution': Putin's Military Campaign in Syria, 2015-16", *Middle East Policy*, Vol: 23, No: 4, Winter 2016, p. 42-60, p. 48.

39 "Türkiye-Rusya ilişkilerinde yeni sayfa açılıyor", *Deutsche Welle Türkçe*, 09.08.2016, <http://www.dw.com/tr/t%C3%BCrkiye-rusya-ili%C5%9Fkilerinde-yeni-sayfaa%C3%A7%C4%B1%C4%B1yor/a-19461034>, (Accessed on 23.12.2016).

40 Emel Parlar Dal, "Turkey after Astana, Syria and global interplay", *Anadolu Ajansı*, 26.01.2017, <http://aa.com.tr/en/analysis-news/turkey-after-astana-syria-and-global-interplay/735532>, (Accessed on 27.01.2017).

Russian mediation in July 2015<sup>41</sup>. However, the conflict of interests with Saudi Arabia, just like with Turkey, in the Syria crisis continue to be the biggest obstacle before the rapprochement of both countries. On the other hand, Russia followed a policy to strengthen its relations with PYD, the US ally in Syria and initiated the dialogue talks in April 2015 between the regime and the Syrian opposition including the PYD representatives<sup>42</sup>. This way, Russia follows a policy to establish relations with all local actors of the Syria crisis and to manage them in line with its own interests.

By intervening to the Syria crisis, Russia maintained a struggle for great power in the realist aspect with the US as a proxy on one hand, and it entered to the effort of revealing that it returned to the international politics with a great power status with modernized army<sup>43</sup>. Likewise, Russia did not neglect to display its military superiority by bombing Syria from the Caspian Sea<sup>44</sup>. However, it is a complete irony that it bombed Syria, its ally, regardless of the fact that it bombed the anti-regime forces. Russia lost its ally state, Syria, while it clung to the policy of ensuring that Assad is not overthrown. After that, Russia's Syria policy was built on recovering the geopolitical losses. Russia started to resist against the Western led the US interventions by using UN and NATO since 1990s with the intervention in Georgia in August 2008. After that, Russia intervened to Ukraine in 2014-2016 and finally it continues its resistance against the intervention and hegemony of the US in Syria. Over the Syria crisis, Russia started to challenge the US hegemony after twenty years by being backed by China.

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41 Ghassan Kadi, "Russian Brokered High Level Syria-Saudi Arabia Discussions: Al Assad's Security Adviser meets Saudi Deputy Crown Prince", *Global Research*, 01 August 2015, <http://www.globalresearch.ca/russian-brokered-high-level-syria-saudi-arabia-discussions-al-assads-security-adviser-ali-mamlouk-meets-saudi-deputy-crown-prince-mohamad-bin-salman/5466149>, (Accessed on 15.05.2016).

42 Ghassan Kadi, "Russian Brokered High Level Syria-Saudi Arabia Discussions: Al Assad's Security Adviser meets Saudi Deputy Crown Prince", *Global Research*, 01 August 2015, <http://www.globalresearch.ca/russian-brokered-high-level-syria-saudi-arabia-discussions-al-assads-security-adviser-ali-mamlouk-meets-saudi-deputy-crown-prince-mohamad-bin-salman/5466149>, (Accessed on 15.05.2016).

43 Mehmet Seyfettin Erol-Çiğdem Tunç, "11 Eylül Sonrası ABD'nin Küresel Güç Mücadelesinde Orta Asya", *Avrasya Dosyası*, Vol: 9, Issue: 3, Autumn 2003, p. 5-28, p. 8.

44Kashmira Gander-Olivia Blair, "Russia launches missiles at 'Isis targets' in Syria from Caspian Sea", *The Independent*, 7 October 2015, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/russia-in-syria-russia-launches-missiles-against-isis-from-caspian-sea-a6684631.html>, (Accessed on 20.12.2016).

## The Role of China in Syria Crisis

China followed a policy abstaining from direct intervention to the international crisis, and maintained the leading from behind policy for Syria like the US. In other words, China followed the policy of indirectly supporting their allies from behind as required by its policy of not directly intervening to the internal affairs of countries<sup>45</sup>. China developed the policy of indirect intervention and support in the Syria crisis over Russia<sup>46</sup>. China's Syria policy was essentially shaped by the axes of the US and Russia. The Russian axis resulted in China standing by and supporting its ally Russia in the Syria crisis. The US axis caused China to create the policy of resisting the US intervention with Russia. Within this framework, the Syria policy of China challenged the US hegemony with Russia on one hand while it is carried out with supporting its ally Russia. On the global level, the China-US hostility manifested itself in Syria, while regionally; China followed the policy of expanding its areas of influence in the Middle East against the US.

China resists against the US led unipolar international system over Syria. Thus, China exhibits an opposition to the US leadership and its unilateral practices. To ensure that the US led NATO bombing of Libya in 2011, where it has large investments, not reoccur in Syria, China left its silence policy and started resistance in Syria<sup>47</sup>. In other words, Syria happened to be a point of resistance against the US. This resistance of China is also an opposition to the intervention law that the US tried to develop in the international system since 1990s. In contrast, China assumed the advocate of the Westphalian system together with Russia. Within this framework, China advocated the principles of the Westphalian system that includes the sovereignty of states and not intervening the internal affairs of countries. It opposed to the military

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45 Mu Ren, "Interpreting China's (Non-)Intervention Policy to The Syrian Crisis: A Neoclassical Realist Analysis", *Ritsumei 立命館国際研究*, Bulletin, Vol: 27-1, p. 259-282, p. 260.

46 Yoram Evron, "Chinese Involvement in the Middle East: The Libyan and Syrian Crises", *Strategic Assessment*, Vol: 16, No: 3, October 2013, p. 79-81, p. 86.

47 Graham Cronogue, "Responsibility to Protect: Syria The Law, Politics, and Future of Humanitarian Intervention Post-Libya", *Journal of International Humanitarian Legal Studies*, Vol: 3, Issue: 1, p. 124-159, 125; Yun Sun, "Syria: What China Has Learned From its Libya Experience", *East-West Center, Asia Pacific Bulletin*, No:152, February 27, 2012, [http://www.eastwestcenter.org/sites/default/files/private/apb152\\_1.pdf](http://www.eastwestcenter.org/sites/default/files/private/apb152_1.pdf), (Accessed on 26.12.2016).

interventions against sovereign countries like the US did.<sup>48</sup>

On the other hand, the Middle East became the second focus of the rivalry that goes on between the US and China in global politics after Africa. China increase its policy of increasing its commercial relations with the oil-rich producing countries of the Middle East and it became the largest trading partner of Syria in particular<sup>49</sup>. In addition, China achieved the position of a country that has the largest investments in the oil industry of Syria. Chinese foreign policy was fundamentally built on influence expansion over economic and commercial ties. As required by the policy, China established commercial relations with all countries of the Middle East. Furthermore, China developed its Arab Policy in January 2016 for the first time. According to the “Arab Policy document” that reveals the essence of the policy of China in its relations with the Arab countries, China developed a common interests policy based upon the win-win strategy in the Middle East<sup>50</sup>. In this sense, a geo-economic rivalry is experienced between China and the US.

## Conclusion

At the regional level, the Middle East experiences a geopolitical rivalry between the US and Russia and a geoeconomic rivalry between the US and China. At the global level, there is great power politics with classical realist aspect taking place between the US, China and Russia. This global struggle between great powers has the quality of transforming the structure and the principles of the new emerging international system beyond merely changing the geopolitics of the Middle East. In other words, the New Great Game is being played by the great powers in Syria, the new chessboard of the 21st century.

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48 Fei-Ling Wang, “From Tianxia to Westphalia: The Evolving Chinese Conception of Sovereignty and World Order”, in G. John Ikenberry, Wang Jisi, Zhu Feng (Eds.), *America, China, and the Struggle for World Order: Ideas, Traditions, Historical Legacies, and Global Visions*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2015, p. 44.

49 Ted Galen Carpenter, “The Syrian Civil War’s Global Implications”, *Cato Institute*, 10 September 2012,

<https://www.cato.org/publications/commentary/syrian-civil-wars-global-implication>, (Accessed on 02.03.2016).

50 “Full text of China’s Arab Policy Paper”, January 2016, *Xinhuanet*, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2016-01/13/c\\_135006619.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2016-01/13/c_135006619.htm), (Accessed on 01.02.2017).

Within this framework, the main dynamics of the Syrian crisis consists of the realist great power struggle.

In addition, the Syria crisis revealed the proxy war dynamics both between the regional powers as a civil war and between the great powers. In this sense, a proxy war is taking place between Iran and Turkey, and between Iran and Saudi Arabia. There is also another proxy war taking place between the great powers that are behind the regional powers. There is a block where Russia and China support Iran and a block of Saudi Arabia and Qatar supported by the US. At the same time, the Syria crisis also includes the sectarian clash dynamics in the regional Sunni-Shia axis. Hence, the Syria crisis became the area of redesigning the Middle Eastern geopolitics and turned to be internationalized after being regionalized. Consequently, Syria became the field of the global and regional struggle for power and influence.



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