

# The Implications of Great Power Politics in the Decade Long Syrian Civil War

Kasım İleri

**Öz:** Bu araştırma, ABD ve Rusya'nın Suriye iç savaşına müdahil olmasının Ortadoğu'nun uluslararası siyaset ve iki büyük güç olarak Washington ile Moskova arasındaki ilişkiler açısından sonuçlarını analiz etmektedir. Yapısal realist bir yaklaşımla, bu çalışma hem ABD'nin hem de Rusya'nın eylemlerinin çoğunlukla jeopolitik statüo kaygılarıyla tanımlandığını öne sürmektedir. Bu nedenle, iki ülke de büyük güç oyunlarının Suriye ile sınırlı kalmasını tercih etti. Bu çalışma, önemli bulgular olarak, Suriye'de ABD-Rusya müdahalesinin yıkımı uzattığını; bölgedeki ABD ittifaklarını sarstığını ve bölgedeki ABD'nin önemli bir hasmı olan İran'ın Rusya'nın gölgesinde nüfuzunu genişletmesine yol açtığını ortaya koyuyor. Ayrıca, daha geniş anlamda gerilimi tırmandıran güvenlik politikalarının tersine, Rusya ve ABD gerilimi kontrol altında tutma yaklaşımlarını benimseyip Soğuk Savaş araçlarını kullanarak doğrudan bir çatışmadan kaçındı.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** ABD, Rusya, Suriye, Büyük güç rekabeti, Orta Doğu

**Abstract:** This research analyzes the implications US and Russian involvement has had as two great powers in the Syrian civil war for international relations in the Middle East as well as for the relations between Washington and Moscow. Using a structural realist approach, this study suggests that the actions of both the US and Russia have mostly been defined by geopolitical status-quo concerns. As a result, they have preferred that their great power play be contained in Syria. As key findings, this study puts forward that the US-Russia showdown in Syria has prolonged the destruction and shaken US alliances in the region while allowing Iran as a key US adversary in the region to extend its influence deep into the region under cover of Russia. Furthermore, contrary to their broader escalatory security policies, Russia and the US have adopted containment approaches and avoided direct confrontation using Cold War tools.

**Keywords:** United States, Russia, Syria, Great power competition, Middle East

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## Introduction

The Syrian civil war is in its tenth year and has yet to come to an end, with the international community also having been helpless at reaching a political solution largely due to Russia's involvement on the side of the Bashar al-Assad regime against fragmented, largely competing, and conflicting opposition forces backed by the US and some other countries in the region. The emergence of radical groups such as ISIS and other factions of Al Qaeda in Syria have further prolonged the war on the ground as they've added another layer of complication to the great power involvement in the war-torn country. In other words, the proxy war has been allowed to turn into low-density direct engagements among regional and global actors on the soil and in the skies of Syria. A vast literature is found covering the reasons for Russian and US involvement in the Syrian civil war, yet much still remains to be explored with respect to the implications of their involvement in the international politics of the region and the relations between the two great powers in the context of Syria. Therefore, this article aims to handle the great power politics between Russia and the US in the context of the Syrian civil war.

The showdown between Russia and the US in Syria has yet to lead to a full spectrum conflict, nor has it spilled over into other countries in the region the same way it has transpired in Syria. This fact appears intriguing when taking into consideration the realist school's theories on great power competition. Theoretically, great power politics are believed to be played out incrementally, with great power rivalries continuing in a gradual escalation and only becoming settled when one side admits defeat or acknowledges the other side's superiority. In the case of the Syrian civil war, however, the great power competition between the US and Russia has not spilled over into the rest of the region nor has it incrementally escalated.

Theoretically, this research subscribes to structural realism and suggests that, while Russia and the US have adopted an offensive realist stance in their broader foreign policy against each other, their positions in Syria have been significantly defensive, with both sides seeking a balance rather than a challenge. Implicationally, this study suggests that due to the actions of both US and Russia being mostly defined by geopolitical status-quo concerns, they prefer to have their great power play be contained in Syria. Furthermore, due to the non-institutional relationship between the two powers and their predicted limits, the spillover effect has been prevented. As a key implication, the US-Russia showdown in Syria moreover has shaken US alliances in the region, while Iran as a key US adversary has been able to extend its influence deep into the region under cover of Russia.

This article is divided into two main sections. The first section will sketch in the theoretical framework of great power politics and its implications in international relations. This section will also dive into the literature on balance of power in today's world and its impact on the relations in the Middle East in order to comparatively make recent historical references to great power rivalry in international politics. This section will also serve as the foundation of the analysis in the second section, which will extensively address the case of Syria.

The second section will be devoted to the great power plays in the Syrian civil war as a complication that so far has only served to prolong the war. Based on the theoretical approach sketched out in the first part, the second section will analyze the circumstances that led to US and Russian intervention in Syria. It will also look into how the interaction between the two states unfolded in Syria. By asking what potential implications the great powers' involvement in the Syrian civil war would have for international politics in the Middle East, this research aims to draw conclusions about the geopolitical consequences of this interaction for international relations in the Middle East as well as for the relations between Washington and Moscow at the scale of a competition between great powers.

## **A Theoretical Framework: Great Power Politics and Its Implications**

Conceptually, power has been perennial in political science and international relations (IR). The debate regarding centrality of power in politics goes back to the foundational contributions of Thucydides in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, as well as to Niccolo Machiavelli in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and Thomas Hobbes in the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Donnelly, 2000). The epistemological roots of the realist school go back to these philosophical approaches, but many scholars agree that the failure of idealist and liberal prescriptions regarding international order and the outbreak of World War II had contributed to the emergence of the realist school as a strong approach in international relations (Baldwin, 2016; Bull, 1977; Carr, 2001; Holsti, 1964; Nye, 2007; Keohane, 1989; Mearsheimer, 2001). Therefore, the concept of power is identified with the realist school, which “envisioned power as an entity; as intrinsic to tangible things such as the military, wealth and geography” (Mattern, 2008, p. ??). Therefore, this study handles the concept of power from a realist point of view, which stress the fact that anarchical international order is driven by national interests and governed by the material power of nation states.

In the wake of World War I, idealists and liberals put forward that the destruction from the war had led to a reckoning that decades of accumulated power had ended

up in mere destruction. Those schools of thought proposed the establishment of international organizations such as the League of Nations as a way to achieve global cooperation in promoting collective security. However, the later years of the interwar period revealed that this was not actually the case, because rivalries had re-emerged and the Western world in particular had again become divided. In that context, Carr (1939/2001) emphasized in his book *Twenty Years' Crisis* the need to acknowledge the ontological implications of power. He found the idealist approach to be too prescriptive and optimistic about human reason and too indifferent toward the human lust for power, claiming his realist approach to be “the necessary corrective to the exuberance of utopianism” (p. 10). In this sense, Carr is considered one of the pioneers of the realist school in the discipline of international relations (Donnelly, 2000). Hans Morgenthau (1946) built upon Carr’s critical approach in his *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics*, in which he criticizes the overestimation of human reason and developments in science over greed and hubris in human nature as something which makes human beings fallible to miscalculations (Griffiths et al., 2009). Later in Morgenthau’s (1948/2005) *Politics Among Nations* (1948-1954), he lays out six principles for the realist school wherein he claims international politics to be grounded on human nature and based on the exertion of power for interests rather than for moral aspirations. Although Morgenthau criticized Carr for leaving room for morality in the exertion of power, both scholars are considered to be classical realists.

The classical realist approach was later on revised by structural realists (i.e., neorealists) such as Kenneth Waltz, Robert Gilpin, Randall Schweller, and John Mearsheimer, who claimed that the anarchic system in international politics rather than human nature is what pushes states into an unending search for more power. Waltz in the late 1970s and Mearsheimer in 1990s made significant contributions to the structure of states systems. For Waltz (as cited in Wagner, 2007, p. 17), “differences among anarchic systems as a result of differences in the distribution of power among constituent states” in addition to the anarchic international order have some dispositions on state behavior. Waltz (2010, p. 118) suggested that states “at a minimum, seek their own preservation,” and patterns in international politics such as status quo, balance of power, alliances, and likeliness of war emerge out of this typical behavior.

Realists such as Mearsheimer, Gilpin, Schweller, Kissinger, and Fareed Zakaria contributed to Waltz’s approach by adding the argument that the constant struggles between great power revisionists lead to an aggressive pursuit of power. Mearsheimer (2001, p. 3) called this approach “offensive realism.” Furthermore, the realists object to the idea of every state being a status quo power, as argued by Waltz, and claim that

great powers define the status quo; thus, the balance of power has some constraints (Mearsheimer, 2001; Schweller, 2006; Gilpin, 1999).

When dealing with the conceptualization of great power, all realist scholars agree that the power is not distributed equally and that some states have much great power than others in the international system. However, Mearsheimer is a key scholar who conceptualized great power politics in international relations. In *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 29), he suggested that the international system dictates states to “strive for hegemony.” He formulated his argument on five assumptions regarding the international system: anarchy, great powers’ inherent “military capabilities,” “uncertainty about state intentions,” the notion of “survival,” and great powers’ being “rational actors” (pp. 30–31). In other words, every power first and foremost seeks to maximize its own power so that it can dictate its will on others. Second, great powers compared to the rest of actors within the system have much larger military capabilities, which in turn lead them to maximize their interests at the expense of others. Third, no state can be sure about the actual intention of a rival, thus each builds up its power for the worst-case scenario. Fourth, the ultimate goal of survival in an anarchic system is achieved based on an actor’s threat level. Fifth, great powers constantly calculate the effect their actions will have on their rivals and take steps accordingly.

Based on these assumptions, Mearsheimer’s actors are driven by fear and live on deterrence, which causes them to end up in a *security dilemma*. Although shared by nearly all realists, offensive realists put more emphasis on this concept. According to Mearsheimer, fear of being attacked leads states to produce more power and pretend to be threatening toward their rivals. Regarding the threatening behaviors of states, Mearsheimer (2001, p. 36) thus concludes:

This in turn render others more insecure and compels them to prepare for the worst. Since no one can feel entirely secure in such a world of competing units, power competition ensues and vicious circle of security and power accumulation is on.

This is actually from where the tragedy of great power politics comes. In other words, no matter how powerful a state is, it will never feel secure because there will always be revisionists, and these revisionists are ironically motivated to accumulate power due to the threatening power each has. However, what great powers want in many cases is to preserve their power (i.e., their status quo). Moreover, great powers as rational actors always calculate their behavior based on the actions of the rival. Therefore, a security dilemma is not always implicative in every single interaction between great powers (Snyder, 2002; Jervis, 2017; Lynn-Jones, 1995). This is also

the point on which this article stands. The United States (US) and Russia as two great powers have built up both conventional and strategic military capabilities against each other, but their rivalry in Syria does not fit into the offensive realist formulations because both actors prefer status quo over revisionism and have contained their rivalry within Syria. The article will argue this point below in detail.

## Great Power Politics in Current Global Affairs

After the US enjoyed two decades of unipolar international order after the end of the Cold War, not only IR scholars but also American policy makers began to acknowledge that other powers such as Russia and China were also on rise and that the world order was evolving into a multipolar one (Haas, 2017; Nye, 2017; Walt, 2014; Mead, 2014). Particularly with the global financial crisis of 2008 and the shifting grounds in South Asia, Eastern Europe, and the Middle East, the neo-liberal arguments of multilevel complex interdependence, diffusion of power, and rule-based international order began to fade away. China's rise was something that had been discussed since the 1990s; at the wake of the financial crisis of 2008, however, many pundits across the spectra of politics, economics, and academia began to "argue that the United States has tumbled from its dominant position and that a fundamental, system-altering power shift away from unipolarity is occurring" (Brooks & Wohlforth, 2015, p. 7). The 2008 financial crisis on its own might not have been enough to change the world order: Some concurrent geopolitical and regional developments that were unfolding one after another also contributed to the fact that US was no longer in a position to unilaterally impose its will on other actors in the international system. Since 2007, China has imposed sovereignty over the South China Sea and air denial identification zones over the East China Sea, challenging both regional powers and the US (Glaser, 2015). After flexing muscles by intervening in Georgia in 2008, Russia conducted a proxy war in Ukraine in 2013 at the wake of the mass protests and created two autonomous regions in the country (McDermott, 2016), then it annexed Crimea in 2014 (Information Telegraph Agency of Russia [ITAR-TASS], 2014). What is more, after three years of bloody civil war and inaction by the US in Syria, Russia intervened in the war-torn country in 2015 on the side of the Bashar al Assad regime in Damascus and changed the balance on the battle ground (Bishara, 2015).

In official US documents, the argument about great power competition and discussions about polarity appeared first in the *Quadrennial Defense Review 2010* (US Department of Defense, 2010). The document suggests that the era of US dominance was passing and other powers would gain influence in shaping the world order (US

Defense Department, 2010). Emphasizing the fact that the security landscape is constantly changing and complicated, the document (p. iii) assessed:

*The distribution of global political, economic, and military power is becoming more diffuse. The rise of China, the world's most populous country, and India, the world's largest democracy, will continue to shape an international system that is no longer easily defined—one in which the United States will remain the most powerful actor but must increasingly work with key allies and partners if it is to sustain stability and peace.*

The document suggested that the rise of revisionist powers and growing influence of non-state actors had brought about a significant shift that had not been seen either “since the fall of the Soviet Union or the end of World War II” (US Defense Department, 2010, p. 5). And the first statement that mentioned the end of the unipolar system was the US National Intelligence Council’s (2012) report titled *Global Trends 2030 Alternative Worlds*, which clarified that the world order was no longer unipolar. The document (p. x) stated, “Nevertheless, with the rapid rise of other countries, the ‘unipolar moment’ is over and Pax Americana—the era of American ascendancy in international politics that began in 1945—is fast winding down.”

The document also perceived that the shift from a unipolar global order would bring about a “multifaceted and multilayered process, played on a number of different levels and driven too by the unfolding of events, both domestically and more broadly in the rest of the world” (National Intelligence Council, 2012, p. 106). And the US was not alone in acknowledging this rhetoric. Both Russian and Chinese defense review documents made similar assessments in their military doctrines and defense review documents. For example, the Information Office of the State Council of the People’s Republic of China (2010) stated:

*The international balance of power is changing, most notably through the economic strength and growing international status and influence of emerging powers and developing countries. Prospects for world multi-polarization are becoming clearer. The prevailing trend is towards reform in international systems.*

Clearly, China would definitely prefer a reform in the acknowledgement of the international balance of power, because both its expansion in Africa as well as its military build-up over the recent decades are reflective of its expansionist aspirations. Also in 2010, Russian military doctrine made a similar assessment stating:

*World development at the present stage is characterized by a weakening of ideological confrontation, a lowering of the level of economic, political, and military influence of certain states (groups of states) and alliances, and an increase in the influence of other states with ambitions for all-embracing domination, multipolarity, and the globalization of diverse processes. (Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, 2010)*

In subsequent years, US, Russia, and China's strategy documents emphasized the rapidly changing global security environment. In 2014 in particular, not only did US President Barack Obama and American security officials but also Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping pointed out how great power competition is present (Brooks & Wohlforth, 2015). In 2017, US President Donald Trump's *National Security Strategy* (White House, 2017) officially declared the US to be in a great power competition, while the Pentagon's 2018 *National Defense Strategy* explicitly stated great power competition to be a greater priority for the US military than global terrorism (US Defense Department, 2018).

The global competition among great powers has a long way to go, and the military expenditures of all great and midsize states are increasing. In addition to growing concerns regarding a rough shift in the global balance of power, a larger impact from the great power competition occurs over intra-state conflicts and tensions. Civil wars in Ukraine and Syria are still ongoing, the UN-endorsed NATO intervention in Libya ended up in a quagmire after the involvement of Russia and other regional powers, and the unresolved humanitarian crisis in Burma and political turmoil in Venezuela are all tied to the great power competition.

### Implications of US and Russia's Involvement in the Syrian Civil War

Few Middle East experts could have foreseen how the mass protests in Syria that began in March 2011 as part of the Arab uprisings, would turn into a decade-long civil war and attract global and regional power politics into the country. However, many have attributed the unfolding consequences to the state structure of the Ba'athist Syrian Arab Republic and the underlying regional and global fault lines. The uprisings began in early March 2011, with mass protests spreading into other cities of the country and forces loyal to Bashar al Assad first opening fire on demonstrators in April. Shortly after the initial wave of defections from the Syrian army to the opposition, the first wave of armed insurgency began in early July. The US and European Union (EU) sanctioned top Syrian officials, and the UN appointed a special envoy to Syria for dealing with the civil war. A ceasefire brokered by UN Secretary General's Special Representative for Syria Kofi Annan failed in days. As such, the second stage of armed insurgency began in August 2011, and US President Obama called on Assad to step down. Assad did not, and the war raged on in 2012 with Syrian forces using fighter jets and attack helicopters. In late 2012, several regional actors including Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Qatar together with the US began to train and equip opposition forces. In June 2013, supporters of the Syrian opposition convened in Doha, Qatar and officially declared that they would provide arms and equipment to



the opposition forces (De Young, 2013). According to the Arms Control Association, chemical weapons had been used on several occasions on Syrian civilians, and on August 21, 2013, a largescale chemical attack was conducted on the opposition-held suburb of Ghouta in Damascus (Davenport, 2020).

In 2014, the civil war escalated to a new stage as a result of a group of insurgents and Al-Qaeda-affiliates based in Iraq called the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL) – or in some cases the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria/Sham (ISIS) or just the Islamic State (IS) – launched its overarching insurgency in Iraq and Syria and captured a large swath of territory in both countries. This attempt quickly brought direct US involvement to Iraq and Syria. US military launched air operations, deployed troops to Iraq in June 2014, and began using air strikes in Syria in August 2014. The US later on in October led the establishment of a counter-ISIL coalition called the Combined Joint Task Force – Operation Inherent Resolve (Denver, 2014). This was the formal US intervention in Syria. When addressing the Russian involvement, Moscow has long been a partner to Assad, but approximately one year after the US-led coalition's involvement in Syria in September 2015, Russia sent a significant number of tanks and fighter jets to Syria, then launched its first air strikes in the country in October (Luhn, 2015). Shortly after Russia joined the war against the opposition groups, the US diverted its support from the Syrian opposition to a more distant non-state actor in Syria, the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) whom Turkey considers as a Syrian extension of the PKK – a designated terrorist organization by Turkey, the US, and the EU. This was a move by the US to avoid direct engagement with Russia; at the same time, however, Washington described it as an exclusive effort against ISIL.

### **First Implication: Great Power Interventions Prolong Civil Wars**

A common premise is that one key consequence of outsiders taking sides in intra-state conflicts is extensive destruction and bloodshed. Particularly if the intervening parties are great powers or substantive powers, the outcomes become more dramatic, because besides the mere national interests, credibility of strategic superiority and larger geopolitical concerns also come into play. Then a civil war turns into a proxy battle field, and each side pumps more and more resources to its proxy in order to indirectly hurt its rival and any potential stalemate in the rival's favor. This was the case in the Cold War era interventions in Vietnam where the US had waged a war against North Vietnam backed by the Soviet Union between 1954-1973, as well as in Afghanistan where the US supported Afghan Mujahedeen against the Soviet invasion in 1979 (Posen, 2017, p. 170). In both cases, the involvement of a second great power led to attrition and more destruction. Also in both cases, however, the power that

intervened directly was seen to hurt more than the other and to emerge defeated. In the case of Syria, both Russia and US are directly on the ground, with Russia having a heavier footprint while the US still maintains air superiority. Thus, the war has yet to come to an end. Moreover, the US involvement on the side of the opposition and Russia's involvement on the side of the Assad regime have currently caused the extensive destruction of all major Syrian cities, including Aleppo, Homs, and Derra. According to UN data, 5.6 million Syrians have sought refuge out of the country, while another 6 million are internally displaced (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2021). The UN has not updated its death toll numbers since 2016, which stand at 400,000 people. However, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), a UK-based independent organization tracking civilian casualties and human right abuses in Syria, estimates that by December 2020, 593,000 people had been killed since the Syrian uprisings started in March 2011 (SOHR, 2020).

Intervening in a civil war has never been easy, even when the international system was significantly unipolar after the Cold War. For example, the Bosnian-Serbian War (1994-95) had cost tens of thousands of lives by the time the US and other NATO allies acted, and the Rwandan civil war of 1994 had already led to 800,00 deaths when UN Security Council finally adopted a resolution for intervention. However, intervention in a multipolar world order is not only much more difficult but also extremely complicated. Regardless of the discussions in international platforms, "The principal powers will still be concerned with relative gains" (Posen, 2017, p. 171). Particularly when a great power began to stumble, its rivals become motivated to take advantage and support the opposing actor to inflict heavier costs on the great power. The US intervention in Syria also draws interest in that sense.

The Assad family has been a long-time ally of Soviet Union and Russia since the end of the Cold War, but whether US President Obama's call for Assad to step down had a geopolitical motivation to cripple Russian influence in the Middle East is unclear. It might have had something to do with the Syrian civil war's potential complications toward Israel's security or been a normative assertion of human rights. No matter what the motivation was, Assad's refusal to step down led to the US arming and training rebel groups. In a way, this became a face-saving effort for Washington. US involvement motivated Iran to wage a proxy war against rebels while it provided an unlimited amount of arms and financial resources to Damascus. Russian discursive and low-level military support was also in play, which was followed by actors such Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar beginning to provide support to the rebel groups.

The US reluctance to use direct force against Assad had several reasons. First of all, Obama had come to power with the promise of ending the vast invasions that

had been initiated by his predecessor George W. Bush and not putting boots on the ground again. Second, the US had no imminent interests at stake in Syria. Third, getting into an extensive operation against a Russian ally had the potential to bring heavy costs to Washington. These concerns prevailed so much that Obama could not even commit to designating the use of chemical weapons in Syria as a red line. During one press briefing, Obama (2012) stated:

*We have communicated in no uncertain terms with every player in the region that that's a red line for us and that there would be enormous consequences if we start seeing movement on the chemical weapons front or the use of chemical weapons. That would change my calculations significantly.*

However, the Ghouta attack did not change his calculations. The US failed to militarily respond to the Assad regime for the Ghouta chemical attack, simply preferring to cooperate with Russia on the removal of the Syrian chemical stockpile. This definitely was not a behavior that Mearsheimer's great power would exert. For offensive realism, a great power is expected to behave in an escalatory way and to bring heavy costs on an actor who declines its impositions. However, the US continued to feed arms and equipment into the conflict in support of the opposition factions up until late 2015 when ISIL's invasions peaked; however, the Pentagon's train-and-equip program had failed to graduate a sufficient number of fighters due to the problems in vetting opposition fighters.

With Russia's direct intervention in Syria in late 2015 and Moscow's direct call on uninvited actors to stay away from Syria in particular, the Obama administration articulated a new rhetoric regarding its presence in Syria: Fight against ISIL. The Pentagon also diverted the majority of its military support to YPG in eastern Syria, an area relatively distant from the regime-opposition battlefield. Whether the opposition would have been crushed earlier if the US had not intervened at all is still questionable, but the initial involvement of the US and later reluctance to hurt the stalemate by direct use of force can clearly be said to have prolonged the civil war. This also complicated the battle ground, because radical groups rose within the power vacuum, and the invasion of ISIL added a new layer of complication to the already bloody civil war.

When addressing Russian involvement, it came at a time when Assad was on the verge of defeat. The opposition and radical groups had inflicted heavy damage to Assad's forces, who later on had to withdraw from Homs, Aleppo, and Idlib to the outskirts of Latakia (Charap et al., 2019). Russian involvement had a relatively more consistent course, and Moscow has incrementally maintained its support for Assad.

While diving into Russia's late direct intervention in Syria, the Russian-Syrian partnership should be noted to date back to the Cold War era. The Soviet Union had established a naval base in Tartus on the shores of the Eastern Mediterranean in 1971 and deployed its 5<sup>th</sup> Operational Squadron to counterbalance the US 6<sup>th</sup> Fleet. In particular, "after Egyptian President Sadat's break with Soviet bloc and alliance with the US in the late 1970s, Moscow's assistance to Damascus reached its peak: Syria becoming the largest non-communist recipient of Soviet weapons" (Kreutz, 2010, p. 7). After the fall of the Soviet Union, however, the squadron also dissolved, with the partnership between the two countries becoming obsolete and the relations even becoming severed due to Syria's refusal to pay its Soviet debt to Russia. In 2005, Russia and Syria reached an agreement in which Russia agreed to write off "nearly three-quarters of Syria's debt, set at \$13.4 billion" (Lund, 2019, p. 15). On one hand, the Putin-Medvedev administrations had obtained a new and ambitious client who'd purchase Russian defense items, while on the other hand, the renewed diplomatic relations cleared the path for Russia to rebuild its Tartus base, which occurred in 2009.

This short background sets the foundation for Russia's deep involvement in Syria. Despite this, Russia waited four years before directly intervening in Syria. Interestingly, the Kremlin played within a legal framework and justified its intervention using Assad's call for support and the rise of ISIL (Celso, 2019). Russian fighters conducted airstrikes in Western Syria in September 2015, and Putin ordered the deployment of 2,000 troops in Syria. Anthony Celso (2019, p. 105) claimed that despite the rhetoric of legality and counter terrorism, Moscow also had a strategic angle in intervention, stating:

*The Kremlin hoped to reinforce the Assad regime's military position and fortify the Russian-Iranian-Shiite regional sphere of influence to blunt Western interests. Its Syrian policy was part of a strategy of reinvigorating Russia's presence in the Mediterranean and weakening America's historic regional dominance. Even more pressing was the need to keep thousands of Russian-born Islamic terrorists in Syria from returning to their homeland and preserving Russia's naval base in Tartus.*

All in all, Russia turned the tide in the war, and Assad gained a significant upper hand in the war after Aleppo's recapture; still, the war has ended up in a deadlock, with tens of thousands of new casualties and millions of new refugees. US involvement might not have aimed to hurt Russia initially or intended for a great power rivalry, but its reluctance to take decisive action while providing arms to opposition groups had attracted Russian intervention and led to prolonged destruction.

## Second Implication: Syria Has Proven to Be a Geopolitical Fault Line in the Region

Many scholars and policymakers would acknowledge that Syria stands on a geopolitical fault line in the Middle East due to its geographic location, interactions with Russia and Iran, and its sectarian demography (Karim, 2017; Calabrese, 2012). However, few if any must have imagined that an uprising in the country would claim hundreds of thousands of lives or attract almost all the big players in the region and the two great powers in the world into the country. Almost immediately after the armed insurgence began, regional powers like Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Jordan, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates were involved in the crisis unfolding in Syria. As global powers, the United States and Russia were also involved discursively in the crisis at early stages, as mentioned above. The geopolitical pitfall deepened with the US reluctance to use force because it stemmed from the lack of a clear strategy, which then led to a mission in disarray. The more the US remained reluctant to take direct action, the heavier the costs being borne by US allies became and the more Russian and Iranian influence deepened. As such, another key implication of great power politics in Syrian civil war is that Iran has extended its influence throughout the region at the expense of US and its partners.

Despite having a clear eye on Russian and Chinese capabilities and adopting a new policy of rivalry against them, Washington has yet to set forth a clear strategy regarding its tactical moves in Syria. This shows the weakness in offensive realist theory, because not every move of a great power may play into a greater strategy. The tactical moves by the US in Syria did not translate into action under a defined strategy. Instead, US policymakers and the US military have tried to keep an American foothold in Syria and protect the gains the US military has achieved over the years. Thus, that falls more under Waltz's notion of survival and status quo rather than Mearsheimer's offensive rivalry for power. However, the lack of a strategy shook US credibility in the eyes of American allies and allowed Iran to advance its influence in the region (Ileri, 2018).

Shortly after Obama called on Assad to step down, several regional powers including Turkey began to make similar calls in late 2011. As Assad dragged his feet on reforms and refused to step down, many US allies who'd been emboldened by Obama's direct targeting of Assad fueled the insurgency by providing financial and/or military support to the opposition groups. The US also began to train and equip opposition forces, initially through the CIA in 2012, and then directly through a defense budget in June 2013 (Borghard, 2013). Despite this, one of the key questions regularly asked of Obama officials at congressional panels regarding

Syria was if the US had a strategy in the Syrian conflict, and most of the time no clear answer would be given. Some claims were made that the US interest in supporting the opposition was related to “the Bushehr Memorandum on the construction of a new Iran-Iraq-Syria gas pipeline” which had been signed on June, 25, 2011 shortly after the mass protests began (Chakrabarti, 2019, p. 179). In other words, the US and its allies had been stimulated by the idea that the project might become blocked and therefore provided arms to the opposition. On the other hand, many analysts in Washington would claim that the lack of strategy had been due to the lack of any imminent threat to US interests, or that only “limited interests” were at stake, such as international terrorism, destabilization of the region, and the proliferation of chemical weapons (Byman, 2016, p. 174). The argument also was presented that the Obama administration had been cautious about direct and aggressive involvement in Syria because of radical elements among the opposition groups, but the US had also already convened with opposition groups in Doha, Qatar and signaled out the moderate groups from the radical ones by the time the armed conflict had reached its peak in the first half of 2013.

In the wake of the Ghouta chemical attack in June 2013, almost all regional allies of the US reminded Obama of his red-line statement in August 2012. Both at home and abroad, policymakers pressed Obama that failure to commit to his words would dangerously harm US credibility (Borghard, 2013). However, despite the Pentagon’s tacit objection, then Secretary of State John Kerry went forward and carved a deal with Russia regarding the removal of Syrian chemical stockpiles. This agreement not only weakened the moderate opposition’s hand against radical groups but also distracted US allies, because the fact that Obama would not go after Assad and get into the regime change business had become clear. The moderate opposition gradually declined, and countries like Turkey began to forge a separate opposition group while contributing to the Pentagon’s hairsplitting train-and-equip program. Meanwhile, radicals gained the upper hand because their distrust toward the US had been proven by Obama’s reluctance, and Iran with its proxies had furthermore also become emboldened in Syria.

ISIL’s rise coincides with this conjecture. In 2014, the group took control of major cities such as Mosul, Ramadi, Baiji, and Fallujah in Iraq as well as Al-Hasakah, Deir ez-Zour, Raqqah, and Northern Aleppo in Syria. When the Pentagon’s train-and-equip program failed, having only graduated 154 fighters who’d reportedly joined the Nusra Front as a controversial Islamist group, the US announced that it had ended the program and was searching for a new partner to fight against ISIL (Pizzi, 2015).

This was a major change in US policy in Syria. Since 2015, the US has concentrated its efforts in Eastern Syria in support of the YPG, whom Washington refers to as Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and whom Ankara refers to as the Syrian extension of the PKK. The US also provided support to a group called Mugawir at-Tawra, an opposition group holding a distant Syrian garrison called Al-Tanf in the southeast on the border with Jordan and Iraq. In addition, the US deployed up to 2,000 troops to Eastern Syria to join the two groups in the fight against ISIL. The US administration has given up the discourse on regime change in Syria and adopted a new rhetoric where its presence is just to degrade and defeat ISIL. Due to the lack of a clear US strategy or aggressive support, the opposition has fragmented to a dramatic level. US allies have also become disarrayed in Syria, and radical groups have gained the upper hand. Furthermore, Iran has extended its influence from Tehran to Bagdad, Damascus, and Beirut with a long supply line because of the porous borders and the commitments to Tehran in the Iraqi, Syrian, and Lebanese capitals.

### **Third Implication: Great Power Competition Is Not So Great in Syria**

Both the US and Russia have aggressively invested in advanced arms and tried to curtail one another's influence. However, the rivalry has not transpired in Syria in the same way it has transpired in other broad foreign policy moves against each other. As mentioned above, the US has acknowledged the end of unipolarity in many of its national security documents. Based on these assumptions, the Pentagon has defined its key areas of investment to be modernizing its nuclear posture, advancing cyber and space capabilities, and investing in more ships and fighter squadrons (US Defense Department, 2018). The deployment of low-yield nuclear capabilities, establishment of a Space Force, and Cyber Command being separated from the National Security Agency (NSA) are all related to the Russian and Chinese military build-up.

The Pentagon has renewed its cyber strategy (US Defense Department, 2015), taken the posture of conducting offensive cyber operations, and just recently published its irregular warfare strategy, which explicitly mentions Russia and China (US Defense Department, 2020). The US Defense spending bill in 2014 provided a \$1 billion fund for establishing the European Reassurance Initiative, which the Pentagon began referring to as the European Deterrence Initiative in 2018. The Pentagon incrementally allocated \$26 billion to the Initiative over the last five years (Congressional Research Service, 2020b). The direct aim of this spending has been to create a front against Russia's aggressive moves in Eastern Europe. In recent years, the US has felt threatened by the Russian defense deals and target scores of Russian defense firms and their client countries through its Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) signed into

law in 2017. The Donald Trump administration withdrew from the Intermediate Nuclear Force Treaty (INF) signed between the US and Soviet Union toward the end of Cold War in 1987 and developed low-yield nuclear warheads that were later deployed on submarines as cruise missiles. Interestingly enough, the newly sworn-in Joe Biden administration, which viewed Trump's foreign policy as quite radical, has also subscribed to the strain of effort from playing into the notion of the great power competition. Biden's Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin told the Senate Armed Services Committee at his nomination panel that he would keep the Trump administration's National Defense Strategy, which purports priority to the great power competition (Austin, 2021). Therefore, this clarifies that the last three administrations in Washington have had the same sentiment regarding the international security environment and Russia's role in it.

On the other hand, not only has Russia taken aggressive actions in Eastern Europe, but it has also deployed controversial cruise missiles such as the SSC-X-8 Garnet in 2017 (Gordon, 2017) and the Avangard hypersonic missile in 2019 (Barnes & Sanger, 2019). Russia has also attempted to exert its influence in Libya by abstaining from the UN Security Council's intervention resolution in 2011 while also obtaining defense contracts with US allies such as Egypt and Turkey. Moscow is also claimed to have been involved in several cyber-attacks in the US since 2014. The impact of the most recent one (i.e., Solar Winds) still persists. Russia is believed to have been "quietly reinventing itself as a milder version of the Soviet Union" (Chakrabarti, 2019, p. 176). Edvard Lucas (2014) claimed this reformulation of Russian foreign policy to have gained momentum in late 2000s under Vladimir Putin with the increase of energy prices in the global market.

Based on this synopsis, one can claim that the two powers are in a great power play, and escalations are expected to mount in time and spillover to interactions in the broader international arena. However, Syria is a battleground where both powers have boots on the ground as well as proxies, and interestingly no reflection of this gradual escalation is seen in the Syrian theatre. Offensive realist actors can also be said to be rational and to make constant calculations to get what they want without causing a catastrophe; however, this fact of being on the ground in Syria can also be characterized as a weakness regarding the offensive realist theory's understanding of great power rivalry. This article offers two propositions for this intriguing course of events in Syria. First, both powers behave with concerns toward not disrupting the geopolitical status quo in the region. Second, the non-institutional relationship established between the two powers during the Cold War still persists, and they are aware of each other's limits.



To begin with, the US got involved in the Syrian civil war on the side of the opposition, but with the involvement of Russia, the US began to shift its focus from the west of the country to the east, a relatively distant point to the Russian area of influence. As such, it has not entirely left Syria. Leaving Syria would cost a lot in terms of its credibility against Russia and lead to a total disruption of US-led status quo in the Middle East. With the rise of ISIL in particular, Syria became a gravitational center for many threats to the global and regional status quo. ISIL got into the business of erasing borders in the Middle East and launched fear in the West by perpetrating sensational terrorist attacks. Syria has become a safe haven for foreign fighters, and ISIL had more than 40,000 foreign fighters at the peak of its power, according to UN and Pentagon statistics. Furthermore, although largely failed, one of the reasons why the US has kept a foot in Syria is Iran's growing influence in the country. Washington did not want Iranian proxies to take control of the Syrian-Iraqi borders and Syrian oilfields in Deir Ez-Zour. As a result, it has kept forces in the Al-Tanf garrison along the southeastern border and in Deir Ez-Zour, although it has pulled out of most of the territory it had once controlled. Thus, rather than a direct reaction to Russia or an effort to cripple Russian influence in the Middle East, some status quo concerns are found to have kept the US in Syria with no clear strategy.

When looking at Russia, many scholars have put forward several factors, including implications of the regime change business in Russian internal politics, the threat of terrorism, and other means of changing the course of the war being exhausted, to have led Moscow to intervene (Hill, 2013; Barabanov, 2015; Parker, 2017). Many would characterize geopolitical gains and military aspirations such as access to Syrian airspace, land, and ports, as well as the US presence to be secondary factors for Russia's motivation to get involved in Syria (Trenin, 2017; Charap & Treyger, 2019). In other words, an inference based on the uprisings that unfolded in the Middle East and Ukraine had caused the Russian regime to feel threatened by a potential internal uprising in Russia orchestrated by the West. Also, Russia has a "unique perspective on radical Islamism" based on its experience in Chechnya and Moscow and "has always been concerned about the aftermath of authoritarian regime change in the Arab world" (Crosston, 2014, p. 95); hence, maintaining the status quo is less dangerous for Russia. On the other hand, Russia cannot be denied to have the objective of propelling its influence in global diplomacy and showing itself to be more relevant in the Middle East than the US. Therefore, Russia is not only engaged with the US and other actors in the Geneva process, but is also attempting to bring the parties of the conflict together in Sochi, as well as regional actors such as Iran and Turkey in the Astana process. Taking into account Russian pragmatism with the case of Syria, Moscow's struggle can be concluded to not be directly related to Assad

but to also has much to do with its internal concerns in addition to its aspirations in the Middle East.

The question then follows of how these two great powers armed to the teeth could manage to operate in an extremely complex battlefield without getting into an escalatory confrontation? Despite the high risk of direct confrontation, the two actors have not gotten into any armed skirmish. Conversely, sparks of potential conflict have been put out equilaterally, with both the US and Russia quickly deescalating. For example, Russian Su-25 and Su-35 fighters flew through eastern Syrian airspace heavily guarded by US F-22 air superiority fighters and were escorted out with no unsafe engagement (Ileri, 2017). Also, the US struck a group of Russian mercenaries attacking its partners and killed scores of them, allegedly including some regular Russian forces. However, this did not evolve into a direct conflict. Moreover, the US pulled out of certain bases throughout Northeastern Syria, which Russians then took over.

All these accounts reflect the Cold War non-institutional relationship between the two massive powers and show that nuclear power remains a valid token for stability in international politics. After the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 when the two nuclear powers came to the edge of nuclear war, an agreement was signed regarding a line of communication called the Washington-Moscow hotline (Under Secretary for Arms Control and International Security, 1963). The main purpose of this line was to allow the leaders of the two countries to prevent a potential catastrophe during urgent moments. This process paved the way for the period of *détente*. In 1969, US President Richard Nixon and his National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger adopted a policy of interaction and an end to the containment policy. Thus, although no formal relationship existed between the two states, their leaders would have summits and policy discussions, particularly in regard to limiting nuclear arms. The two states even had two rounds of Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) during this period (Keys, 2018). A very similar course is seen in countries' relationships in Syria. In 2014, the US Congress inserted an article in the defense spending bill called the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) that stipulated no funds may be "used for any bilateral military-to-military cooperation between the Governments of the United States and the Russian Federation" (United States 113th Congress, 2014). However, shortly after the Russian intervention in Syria on October 20, 2015, the Pentagon announced that a memorandum of understanding regarding air safety had been established between Russia and Syria, and this hotline between Washington and Moscow was called the Deconfliction Line (Ferdinando, 2015). According to this memorandum, the two militaries were required to report their areas of operation

and make sure that the air platforms of Russia and the US were safely deconflicted. In addition, the American and Russian chiefs of the armed forces engaged in regular teleconferences and routine in-person meetings, which the Pentagon described as not a cooperation but an effort on part of deconfliction. Thus, through those channels of communications, the two powers deescalated tensions and avoided direct conflict.

## Conclusions

Regardless of the structure of international order, civil wars bring about vulnerabilities and pitfalls into the stability of a region either through refugee crises and the power vacuums they cause or by attracting regional adversaries. The involvement of global powers in particular further complicates these pitfalls and vulnerabilities. The Syrian civil war that has been raging since 2011 is one of the latest examples of an extremely complicated civil war with unspeakable human suffering and massive refugee crisis. It has not only drawn regional powers into it but also global powers. The power vacuum has also provided a safe haven for radical groups, and adding to all these, the involvement of two global powers on opposite sides of the civil war has led to a quagmire in the war-torn country.

This article has primarily focused on US and Russian involvement in the Syrian civil war and its implications. This study has traced the discursive acknowledgement of the end of unipolar world order that came out after the Cold War from a structural realist perspective and found out that three global powers (i.e., China, Russia, and the US) have explicitly expressed in their defense review and doctrine documents that a new world order is about to be born. This paper has then gone on to trace the US and Russian postures against each other in the broader international arena to prove that the world, particularly Russia and the US, are in a great power competition. Their investments and positionings reflect the offensive realist approach of a gradual escalatory rivalry. However, this paper has instead found out their behaviors to not reflect the prescription of offensive realism, particularly due to US reluctance to escalate.

In summary and based on these analyses, this paper has arrived at three main implications of Russian and US involvement. First, US indirect involvement and position of reluctance to take direct action to hurt the stalemate prolonged the Syrian civil war and stimulated Iranian and Russian support for the Assad regime, which in turn caused more destruction and suffering. Second, US reluctance and even stepping back in later periods of its involvement weakened and fragmented the opposition, while Assad, Iranian proxies, and interestingly the radical opposition groups gained

an upper hand, with ISIL ultimately having gained momentum. Furthermore, the US allies in the region were disarrayed, and Iran was able to extend its influence in the region. Third, despite the constant investments of US and Russia and their steps against one another in broader strategies, they preferred to contain their rivalry in Syria because both powers were concerned that any aggressive rivalry might bring dangers to the geopolitical status quo. Russia also had some internal concerns. Moreover, as part of the third implication, this paper has found US and Russia to have benefited from the lessons of the Cold War and to have reinstated some non-institutional tools of the Cold War to prevent potential miscalculations and escalation. The Syrian civil war still continues, with US holding oilfields in the east and having taken control of the Syrian borders with Iraq and Jordan. On the other hand, Russia still struggles to prop up the Bashar al-Assad government and take control of the majority of Syrian territory, a portion of which is under control of the US-backed YPG other portions of which are under the control of the Turkey-backed opposition known as the National Syrian Army, and a smaller portion of which is unaligned and mostly contains radical groups.

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