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THE CHANGING US POLICY TOWARD THE MIDDLE EAST: NEW ISOLATIONISM OR LEADING FROM BEHIND

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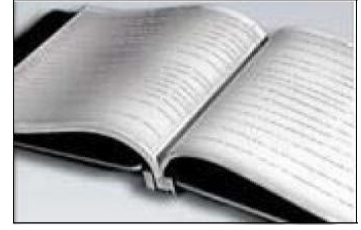
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Abstract: The US new approach toward the crises, particularly the ones linked to the Arab Spring, has been different when compared to the previous ones. This new change is closely related to the Obama's vision and leadership. However, there are some other domestic and foreign factors fostering this policy. This article provides an analytical discussion on the changing US foreign policy toward the Middle East region during Obama's presidency that has been quite obvious in the case of the so-called Arab Spring. Contrary to previous US policies towards the region, the new policy lacks direct or proactive involvement in the Middle East. Instead, the US stays behind and pushes forward some regional powers. This study examines the reasons behind this new policy, which takes some severe conservative criticisms in the US as well.

Keywords: US Foreign Policy, Middle East, Arab Spring, New Isolationism, Obama's Foreign Policy

ABD'NİN DEĞİŞEN ORTADOĞU POLİTİKASI: YENİ YALNIZCILIK MI? YOKSA PERDE ARKASINDAN YÖNETMEK Mİ?

Özet: ABD'nin özellikle Arap Baharı konjonktüründe Ortadoğu'daki krizlere yaklaşımı geçmiş krizlere olan yaklaşımlardan farklı olmuştur. Bu değişim, Obama'nın vizyonu ve liderliği ile yakından ilintili olmasına rağmen yeni politikayı zorunlu kılan başka iç ve dış faktörler de vardır. Bu makale, Obama'nın başkanlığıyla birlikte ABD'nin özellikle Arap Baharı sürecinde belirginleşen Ortadoğu bölgesine yönelik değişen politikasını analiz etmektedir. ABD'nin bölgeye yönelik önceki politikalarının aksine, yeni politika doğrudan bir



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müdahale olmaktan ve proaktif bir karakterden uzaktır. ABD krize doğrudan müdahale etmek yerine sahne gerisinden bölgesel aktörleri ön plana sürmektedir. Bu çalışma, ABD kamuoyunda da bazı muhafazakar çevrelerin sert eleştirilerine neden olan yeni politikasının arkasındaki nedenleri irdelemektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: ABD'nin Dış Politikası, Ortadoğu, Arap Baharı, Yeni Yalnızcılık, Obama'nın Dış Politikası

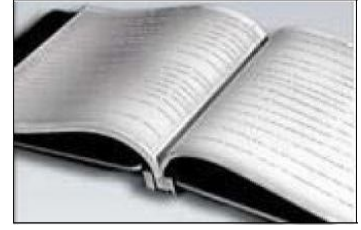
1. INTRODUCTION

The well-known doctrines of the US presidents have been an important constituent of the US foreign policy. These doctrines can roughly be divided into two categories; that is isolationist or interferant policies towards the outside world. The Monroe Doctrine was the first one suggesting isolationism. The Nixon Doctrine had an isolationist character to some extent, since it limited the US intervention in the war in Vietnam, but it launched a two-pillar policy in the Middle East. The remaining ones, including Eisenhower, Carter, Reagan, and Bush doctrines suggested more active involvement in the outer world for the vital interests of the US and its allies. Furthermore, through some of these doctrines, it was declared that the US

would not abstain from using force to help its allies and protect its interests.

As far as the Middle East, particularly the Arab Spring, is concerned, the current US policies toward the region are a little complicated. The policies shaped by the Obama administration, in fact, fall into neither of these categories. The strong support for regional powers to deal with the problems in the region instead of direct involvement, the reluctance for a military intervention despite use of chemical weapons by the regime forces, and the less support for Israel compared to the past are the main characteristics of this new policy.

The new policies have reasonable grounds when some domestic and foreign developments are taken into consideration. The syndrome for another Iraq, together with the American public opinion, which



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holds no brief for another war; the concerns of the US over the oppositions in the states where the Arab Spring was taking place; the vulnerability of the US economy; the fear for damage to the efforts launched by the Obama administration to improve the US image in the Middle East; the concentration of the US on Asia-Pacific region rather than the Middle East; and the rise of China and Russia, which refrains the US in global issues compared to the past can be said to be some key elements of this new policy.

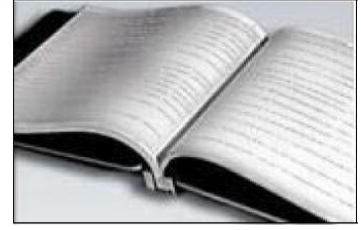
2. THE SYNDROME FOR ANOTHER IRAQ AND THE CONCERNS OF THE US OVER THE OPPOSITION

Many lessons drawn from the US-led wars in the 1990s and 2000s in the Middle East led the US authorities, as well as the public, to be cautious against similar crises in the region. Only during the Second Gulf War, the total number of coalition military fatalities was 4804 between 2003 and 2012. (Military Fatalities, 2013) The number of casualties created high expectations from the Obama

administration to bring back the troops before the presidential elections. A survey conducted in September 2007 by the BBC World Service put forward that 61 percent of Americans wanted troops out of Iraq (Global Poll, 2007). Knowing that there was a great demand for the withdrawal, during the campaigns of the presidential elections of 2009, Obama vowed to pull the troops from Iraq and finally declared that till the end of the year 2011, all American troops would have left Iraq (Tapper, 2011).

The new foreign policy of Obama received severe criticisms from some American experts and media, however. Obama was blamed for leaving Iraq to Iran and criticized for risking losing a country in which the US had invested so much time, resources, and human life (Bennet, 2011).

No sooner did the Obama administration finish carrying out the plan to pull back the troops from Iraq than the level of the conflicts resulting from the Arab Spring escalated. There was another challenge to deal with in the region. This new situation



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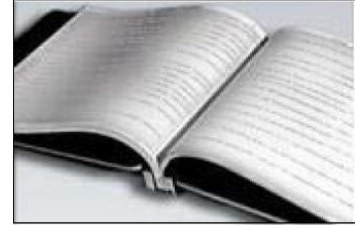
created a dilemma for the Obama administration. The US administration would either intervene in the region or isolate itself. Yet it chose neither of them.

Considering the US' unchanged Middle East policy which stands on two pillars: the security of Israel and the safe transportation of oil to Western markets, the Obama administration was not expected to stay completely outside of this new process in the region and it didn't, indeed. But the level of involvement was not as in Iraq or Afghanistan. During the Arab Spring, the US backed the French-led operation on Libya as a requirement of the alliance founded against Gaddafi, but didn't lead the operation (Little, 2011). Apart from Libya, the US avoided getting involved in any military interventions against the states where the Arab Spring was taking place.

The characteristic of the Arab Spring and the actors of this movement were some obvious reasons why the case in these states was to be likened to that of in Iraq. Upon the success of the opposition, the

only change would be Sunni dominated power instead of a Shiite one. Consequently, the US had some reservations about backing the opposition. The Islamic nature of the resistance and the active role of the Sunni centric opposition which was the dominant group in this process and which was blamed for having some connections with Al Qaida also caused the US to step backward. Moreover, there were worries with regard to the success of these groups. They could end up allying with the enemies of Israel and the US as soon as they topple the old regimes and come to power.

From the very beginning, the Arab Spring has been associated with political freedom, economic opportunity and rising against the sclerotic masters (Ajami, 2012: 56-65). However, the uprising has allowed a long-suppressed Sunni groups to gain influence in some of the states of the region. The fall of the authoritarian regimes has offered these groups to become prominent (Khalaf, 2013).



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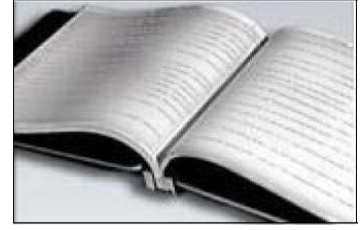
Of these Sunni centric groups, the most radical one is Salafis, which is based on an austere interpretation of Islam, calling for Muslims to return to the original teachings outlined in Koran (Bokhari, 2012). In Egypt, they gained more than a quarter of votes and came in the second place behind Muslim Brotherhood. In other states where the Arab spring has taken place, they have been on the rise.

Syrian National Coalition of Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, albeit recognized as the sole legitimate representative of the Syrian people, also harbors some groups considered as fundamentalist and it is claimed to have connections with Al-Qaida. For instance, the worries over infiltration of Nusra Front, which has obvious connections with Al-Qaida, in the Syrian opposition was voiced by the US officials (Miller, 2012). But immediately after this statement, the head of the new US-backed Syrian Coalition, Syrian National Coalition of Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, endorsed Nusra Front and asked the Obama administration to

rethink about this labeling (Enders&Allam, 2012).

The US suspects over the actors of the opposition and the applications of the groups linked to them seem to be delayed for the moment. But when these elements are considered, there are obvious indications that there is a lack of trust between the US and the opposition. Furthermore, the formation of the opposition gives some hints about the kind of the regime to be founded if the Baath regime is toppled. The risk of exclusion of different ethnic, religious and sectarian groups in the Post-Assad period raises concerns for the US and the Western world.

In addition to the US worries over the present situation, which can easily turn out to be that of in Iraq, and its doubts over the fractions fighting against regimes in the region, US citizens are not favoring another war in the Middle East. According to a survey conducted in December 2012, only 17 percent of Americans favor a US military intervention when no specifics are



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provided. However, 70 percent of Americans said they would support a military intervention led by the US if Syria were to lose control of its chemical weapons (ABC News, 2012).

3. THE VULNERABILITY OF THE US ECONOMY

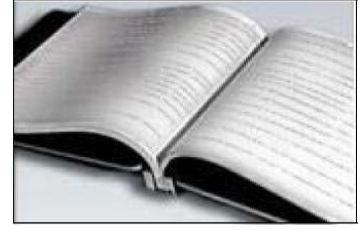
The vulnerability of the US economy can be considered as one of the most preventive factors against a US-led intervention in the region. Just before Obama entered the office, the economic figures were not pleasant. Further, there was no sign of recovery. Consequently, economy was on the top of the agenda. The unemployment rate was 7.8 percent in 2009 and this figure increased to 10 percent only nine months after Obama began his first term. The total of federal debts were about 8 trillion dollars. The stock market had nearly hit bottom by the time he took office (Factcheck, 2012). People were suffering from another Great Depression. First and foremost, the collapse of the housing bubble, which was considered to be the major cause of the

recession, severely paralyzed the economy (CEPR, 2012).

Under these circumstances, there were high expectations from Obama. As a strong candidate for the presidency, he vowed to take serious precautions for an economic recovery. He promised to create a foreclosure fund to help those facing foreclosure stay in their homes, pledged not to increase any form of taxes for the middle class, and declared that he would modernize and restore confidence in the financial system (Foxnews, 2009).

Albeit difficult, Obama succeeded in recovering some sectors to a certain extent. But he broke some of his promises concerning the economy and as a result, some sectors deteriorated. While pondering on the economic issues, there were important developments in the first couple of years of his presidency in the Middle East.

Of these developments, the most important one was the Arab Spring. This new development required an economic support as well as political and military backings.



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However, the outbreak of the Arab Spring coincided with a time that the US economy was in its one of the worst situations ever. Regarding the US spending in Iraq, which is about 800 billion dollars, and Afghanistan, which is about 610 billion dollars, (Cost of Wars, 2013) it would be a greater risk for the US economy to allocate a fund for another military intervention in the region. Moreover, with regard to the existing economic recession, it would be tough to convince Americans to invest in or direct some American financial resources of the US in this part of the world.

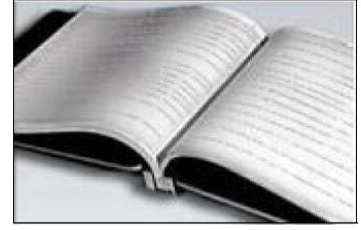
Another obstacle to launching a military intervention in the region during the Arab Spring with respect to the US economy was the strategy which had already been planned to downsize the US army to be leaner and more efficient. This new strategy led to a plan for a defense cut. The new strategy was designed to cut 450 billion dollars over the next decade (BBC News, 2012). Consequently, staying behind the scene and standing on the

regional friends to sort out this issue seemed wiser to the US policy makers. This way of involvement would be more economical.

4. EFFORTS TO IMPROVE THE US IMAGE

George W. Bush is one of the leading American presidents contributing to the negative image of the US. He was mainly disliked around the world because of the US-led military operations on Iraq and Afghanistan. He was accused of attacking Iraq without proper evidence. Some US applications after the war were considered as abuse of human rights. For instance, the treatment of prisoners in Abu Gharib and Guantanamo prisons were some of the practices severely criticized by the world public opinion.

The Bush doctrine was also one of the reasons for this dislike. According to this doctrine, the US was considered as the sole power to transform international politics, the threats would be avoided through preventive and pre-emptive wars, the US would not abstain from acting unilaterally



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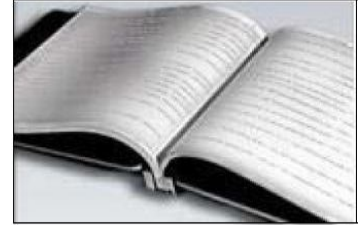
when necessary, and there was a need for the US superiority to provide peace and stability (Jervis, 2003: 365-366). The states in the world were categorized as the ones supporting the US in the war on terrorism and those which were against the US. Depending on the policies shaped as part of the Bush doctrine during the Bush presidency, the image of the US was at its worst level ever in the world, particularly in the Middle East. The results of a survey revealed just as Obama started his first presidential term in the beginning of 2009 showed the seriousness of the situation. The survey was based on interviews in 143 countries between 2006 and 2008. The results show that only 34 percent of people in the world approved the job performance and the leadership of the US. In the Middle East, the percentage dropped to 15 percent. When asked, what would improve their views, the majority of participants said “pulling out of Iraq” would improve their views of the US (Ray, 2009).

Being aware of the negative image of the US in the world, Obama took some

important steps in the direction of improving this negative image as soon as he came to power. In addition to declaring that the US would pull out of Iraq, he paid some important visits to some countries where the Muslims constituted the majority of the population.

Of these visits, one of the most important ones was to Turkey. During his visit, he tried to give warm messages to the Muslim world. In his address to the Turkish Parliament, he stressed that the US would never be at war with Islam. He said the US had been enriched by Muslim-Americans and many other Americans had Muslims in their family, or lived in Muslim-majority country (Cooper, 2009).

Having improved the image of the US to some extent, the Obama administration decided to be more careful against the developments in the Middle East. In parallel with the discourses aiming at softening and improving the relations of the US and the Muslim world, the policies shaped by the US during the Arab uprising were quite soft and far from being



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interferant. Although the US supported the oppositions against the regimes of these states, it avoided leading any kinds of attacks against them.

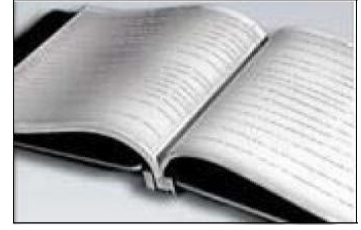
Apart from the lessons learned from the wars in the Middle East and Obama's desire for establishing a new partnership in the region, there were some other reasons leading the US to have a relatively passive role during the Arab Spring. As a member of Democrat Party, democratic values, freedom and human rights issues were considered important by the new president. While these elements were grounds for aggressive policies during the Bush era, they were considered as factors avoiding the US military intervention in any parts of the world, including the Middle East.

Last but not the least, the fact that Obama was awarded the 2009 Nobel peace prize was another factor making a US military intervention in another part of the world difficult. The prize was awarded to Obama for his extraordinary efforts to strengthen international diplomacy and co-operation between peoples. The Nobel committee

especially stressed Obama's efforts to support international bodies and promote nuclear disarmament (BBC News, 2009). Having received a Nobel peace prize certainly affected Obama's policies towards the Middle East during the Arab uprising. The US stayed behind and imposed softer policies compared to previous situations. It tried to lead the developments in the region by forwarding regional friends. Otherwise, the efforts launched by the US to improve the US image in the world would severely be damaged.

5. NEW HEARTLAND: ASIA-PACIFIC REGION

The history of the world harbors some famous geopolitical theories directing the interests of the hegemonic states to some certain locations with the intention of gaining supremacy in world politics. Since geopolitics is closely related with realism, the policymakers of the hegemonic powers, to some extent, have always been influenced by those scholars working in this field. Of these scholars, the most



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important ones were Mackinder, Mahan and Spykman. They were known with their famous terms: heartland, sea power and rimland.

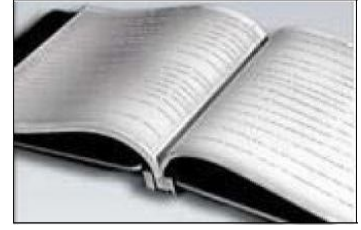
The geographical location of heartland of the world has shifted a number of times. In addition, the different locations were pronounced by different scholars of international relations. There were times when the location was extended and times when it was restricted to a smaller area. In 1904, Mackinder declared the geographical location where the Soviet Union was founded as the geographical pivot of the world. Outside the pivot area, there was an inner crescent composing of Germany, Austria, Turkey, India and China. The outer crescent consisted of Britain, South Africa, Australia, the US, Canada and Japan (Mackinder, 1904: 298-321). Mackinder stressed the importance of mainland control for the supremacy of a state.

Prior to Mackinder, there were some other ideas concerning what needed to have supremacy over other states. Contrary to

Mackinder's views concerning the heartland of the world, Alfred Mahan's views were based on the notion that sea power was the basic element needed to have supremacy over other nations. In his book named "The Influence of Sea Power upon History", he explains how the nations in the world history gained victories thanks to their sea power. He defines sea power as 'military strength afloat, peaceful commerce and shipping from which alone a military fleet naturally springs and on which it securely rests' (Mahan, 2007).

In 1940's, Nicholas Spykman put forward another theory in which he redesigned Mackinder's heartland theory by making some additions and introduced another term called rimland. To Spykman, the locations declared as the inner crescent by Mackinder were actually the critical zone. He tried to justify his views by showing the strategic patterns of the postwar world (Meinig, 1956: 554).

As far as today's world politics is concerned, the new strategic patterns of the present world fostered the US to



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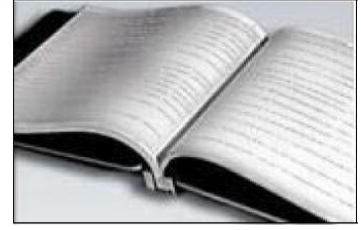
concentrate on the Asia-Pacific region rather than any other parts of the world. The rise of China in this region against the US necessitated to focus on this region. The Obama administration repeatedly explained that they were determined to protect the US vital interests in the Pacific region and the US would be more active in this zone. This new heartland which was shaped under the new conditions of the new world politics took the US attention from the Middle East and put it on the Pacific region.

The fact that the US was not very active during the Arab Spring and it stayed behind the scene in the Middle East have reasonable grounds when the importance of the Asia-Pacific region is considered for the US. In a speech in 2011, Obama declared that the Asia-Pacific region is a top priority of the US security policy and the countries in this region would play a vital role in shaping the world in the 21st century (BBC News, 2011). Consequently, despite reductions in the US defense

spending, new troops were planned to be stationed in this region (Mitchell, 2012).

With respect to this new tendency, new partnerships were set up with some states in the region. In 2002, Obama administration deployed troops in Australia and cooperated with its Asian allies. In addition, the US made some military manoeuvres with some countries in the region (Mengzi, 2012). The purpose of this move was to be deterrent against China and give the impression that the US was out there to protect its allies from the third countries.

The concentration of the US on this new heartland rather than the Middle East also results from the shift in the balance of power in this region. This change, the rising of China, gave rise to some security concerns for the US and its allies. Since the end of the Vietnam War, Asia had benefited from a unique balance of power, which provided a peaceful atmosphere for the allies of the US. The continental powers were safe from invasion due to large armies, vast territories and nuclear



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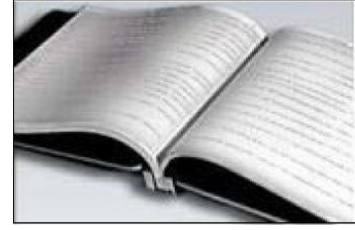
weapons (Cossa et al, 2009). However, the new security environment and the opportunities in this region prompted the US to be more active here.

Bringing the Asia-Pacific region forefront and throwing the Middle East background out of focus also had some economic grounds too. The financial crisis limited the strength of the US as a superpower. The US needed a recovery to continue its supremacy. Compared to other regions in the world, Asia seemed to be a more convenient region for economic activities since it is thought to have half of the world population, make up 43 percent of the world economy and conduct 35 percent of global trade by 2030 (Mengzi, 2012). In absolute terms mentioned above, Asia is likely to be an enormous market for the US economy in the future.

The preparations for the integration of Asia-Pacific region were started at the beginning of Obama's first term presidency. In November 2009, Obama announced the US intention to participate in the Trans-Pacific Partnership

negotiations to finalize the Asia-Pacific trade agreements. In June 2012, the Trans-Pacific countries (TPP) announced that they had reached consensus on the addition of Mexico and Canada into the negotiations. The current TPP countries are the fourth largest good and services export market for the US. With the addition of Mexico and Canada, they will be the largest market of the US. Furthermore, Japan also expressed interest in joining TPP negotiations (Fact Sheet, 2012).

Having concentrated on a safer and nearer region in which the US could boost its economy, the Obama administration took steps to pull out its troops from the Middle East and decrease the level of its intervention in the region. In the context of the Arab Spring, the US was reluctant to take an active role in leading any military interventions. Instead, the leading role was transferred to some European and regional allies and the opposition was backed by other means, such as giving military training and bringing the opposition in the forefront on different international



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platforms. This way, the US would focus on a region that would contribute to its supremacy and economic recovery.

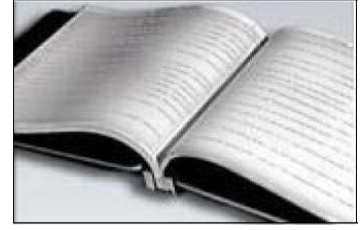
6. THE RISE OF RUSSIA AND CHINA

The indirect and fierce race between the US and Russia was believed to have finalized when the Cold War ended in 1990. The US was considered the sole super power by some analysts when the Warsaw Pact dissolved. The new international system was defined as unipolar, which was dependent on the supremacy of the US. However, it was not before long when Russia reemerged as a challenging power. In addition, there was another rising power -China- challenging the superiority of the US. The US once again had to take Russia and additionally China into the consideration whilst making important decisions concerning world politics.

There have been several attempts by Russia to get on the stage of world politics as a superpower in the Post-cold War era. Starting from the first term of Putin's presidency, Russia has challenged the US

in many issues concerning the world issues. The Bosnian War, the Kosova War, the invasion of Iraq, the Afghanistan war, the Libyan operation and the conflicts emerging in the Middle East due to the Arab Spring are some of the issues that the US and Russia dissented from each other. The nuclear weapons, the veto right in the United Nations Security Council, the energy resources and Putin's effective leadership have contributed to the rising of Russia and its becoming a serious rival against the US.

Nuclear weapons serve as status symbol, existential deterrence and deterrence of large-scale conventional forces against Russia (Sokov, 2011: 193). The fact that Russia is believed to have 12.000 nuclear warheads (Weitz, 2011: 373) raises concerns in the Western world and the US. Russia's recent attempts to retract from the agreement signed with US over the control of nuclear weapons is a sign that it is emerging as a challenging superpower. In 2012, Russia told the US that it would not extend the Nunn-Lugar weapons reduction



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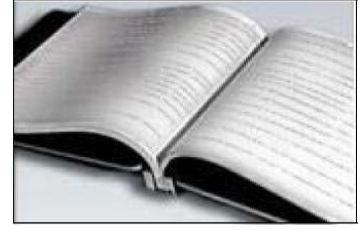
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and security agreement after it expired. The agreement had been designed to help secure the nuclear and chemical weapons arsenal of the Soviet Union after the bloc's collapse (Englund, 2012). This way, Russia has become the sole arbiter on its nuclear and chemical weapons.

Another reason contributing to the rise of Russia is linked to its dominance in the energy field. The energy resources that Russia has and the partial monopoly over the energy transport to the Western markets through state-owned companies make Russia an effective actor in world politics. The proven oil reserves in Russia were 60 billion barrels as of January 2012. The country holds the largest natural gas reserves in the world with 1.680 trillion cubic feet (EIA, 2012). It is the largest oil, gas, uranium and coal exporter to the European Union. 36 percent of the EU's total gas imports, 31 percent of EU's total crude oil imports and 30 percent of EU's coal imports originate from Russia. (European Commission, 2013).

Last but not the least, Putin's effective leadership and the popular Neo-Eurasianism stream, which challenges the US supremacy and defines Russia as a state that has imperial background highlight Russia as an actor that cannot be ignored. The Neo-Eurasianism, which dates back to Eurasianism in 1920's, suggests that there are Anglo-American attempts to create a unipolar world order and, in order to prevent this, Russia should form a kind of bloc consisting of some European and Asian states under the leadership named Eurasian empire (Şen, 2004: 138). Albeit different fractions, it propounds the notion of revival of the Soviet empire, anti-Westernism and nationalism.

The above components make Russia an important power in the world politics and foster the US to take global issues into account in relations with this state. As far as the Middle East is concerned, the level of the need to involve Russia in the developments in this region take on a new significance when the unique relations



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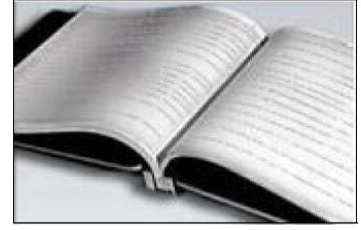
between Russia and some states in this region are analyzed. Russia's relations with some states where the Arab Spring was taking place have always been special. These relations date back to the Soviet period. The traditional pro-Arab approach during the Middle East crisis, economic and military support of the Soviet Union to Nasser's Egypt in 1950s and the Soviet support to the Arab world against Western dominance and the Soviet-supported Baath regimes (Kanet, 2006: 334-335) made these relations unique during the Cold War era. Although some of these regimes in the region were toppled down after the Cold War, the relations between Russia and them didn't change on a large scale. On the contrary, Russia was started to be considered as balancer power against the US in the region.

This unique relationship resulting from a kind of bloc brotherhood during the Cold War era between Russia and some states in the region has continued, even promoted in the context of Arab Spring. Having the veto right, Russia has blocked some

resolutions in the United Nations Security Council aiming at putting severe sanctions on Syria and it has prevented international military interventions. As far as the conflict in Syria is concerned, it has continued to back Al Assad and the Baath regime despite tens of thousands of casualties.

As for China, starting from 1990's, there have been several developments making this state a serious competitor in world politics. In addition to its challenges to the US in the Asia-Pacific region, there have been some other disagreements over certain issues with the US. Having nuclear weapons, the highest population and veto right in the United Nations Security Council, turning into an economic giant, desperate needs for energy resources in other parts of the world so as to feed this economic boom are some basic reasons why this state has started to oppose some applications of the US concerning world politics.

Albeit different opinions, China is believed to have an important number of nuclear



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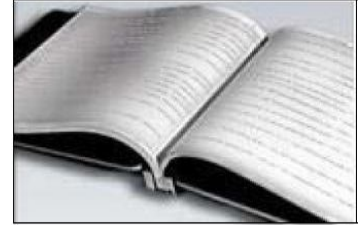
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weapons. According to one US estimate, China has approximately 240 warheads (Hsiao, 2009). But a study launched after 2008 earthquake in Sichuan, China, claimed that it had 3000 warheads. The study based its claims on some secret military documents and blogs (Dailymail, 2011). No matter how many warheads it has, China has posed a potential threat for the US and the US feels that it is required to take China into consideration whilst making important decisions about world politics.

In addition to the veto right and the economic capacity, there are some other elements that make this state an effective actor. With a population of 1.3 billion, despite some structural problems, China has overtaken Japan and become the second largest economy in the world recently (The World Bank, 2013). Furthermore, by 2030, it is expected to be the largest economy (McGreal, 2012). To sustain the economic growth, China needs vast energy resources, which is another subject of conflict with the US.

Considering the politics in the Middle East, particularly during the Arab uprising, The US had to take attitudes of China into the account as well due to the its veto right in the United Nations Security Council. As far as the Syrian Crisis is concerned, there was a strong opposition from Russia and China. They vetoed three resolutions aiming at putting sanctions on Syria over use of deadly force against civilians in the ongoing conflict (Aljazeera, 2012). Albeit denouncement by the US and its allies, the US didn't launch an independent initiative as it did previously during the presidency of George W. Bush. One reason for such a move can be explained with the high cost of competing with rising powers for a region which was not a pivot location and top priority for the US. In addition, the efforts of the troubled regimes to include Russia and China were successful to some extent due to the warm relations started during the Cold War and mutual economic dependency between the rising states and some states in the region.



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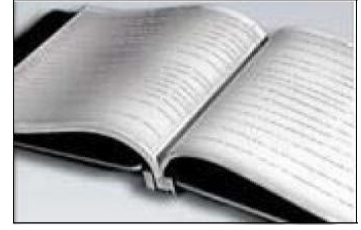
The close relationship started in the beginning of 2000s between China and some states in the Middle East also need mentioning to understand the dimension of Chinese existence in the region. Starting from the year 2001, China has started to make heavy investments in the region with respect to the “go out” policy. From 2005 to 2009, the total trade volume between China and the Middle East increased by 87 percent to 100 billion dollars and the Middle East exports to China grew by 25 percent. Investments from China grew from 1 billion dollars to 11 billion dollars in 2009 (Chen, 2011: 2). Despite being the fifth largest oil producer, China is still an important importer of oil. In 2011, the country imported 54 percent of its total oil demand and more than 50 percent of the total crude oil came from the states in the Middle East (IEA, 2012).

The growing economic independence and the expanding scope of military activities of China with the states in the region have made China an influential actor in the Middle East during the Arab Spring. As a

result of growing relations, China supported the regimes against the Western world and the US in the international platforms such as the United Nations Security Council and prevented hard sanctions or military intervention against these regimes. The dimension of relations also contributed to the prevention of a US-led military intervention in the region.

7. CONCLUSION

The intervention of the US in the Middle East in the context of the Arab Spring reached its peak when the secretary general of the US, John Kerry, announced that the US was training the armed forces of the opposition fighting against the Syrian regime (Reuters, 2013) and later threatened to start a military operation if the regime continued to use chemical weapons inside the country. Even this new level of US intervention fell behind the previous hard policies of the US towards the region. This new policy shaped during the Obama presidency has a different characteristic in the sense that it promoted soft power and drove regional powers and internal



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dynamics of the destabilized countries rather than a US-led military intervention.

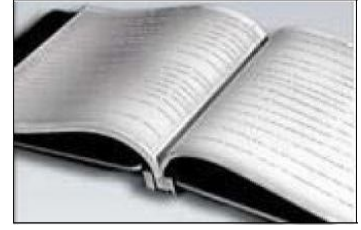
This policy was neither an isolationism nor a total intervention. The US stayed behind and tried to get the edge on the developments in this region. When closely analyzed, the US has rational grounds for this newly shaped policy.

One reason for the US comparative less intervention in the Middle East particularly during the Arab Spring was the fear that the states in which the uprising was taking place could easily turn in to another Iraq. Considering the US losses in Iraq, which has still been severely criticized by the American public opinion, a war led by the US could make these states more unstable. The composition of the opposition groups fighting against the regimes in those countries contributed to this fear and raised a lot of concerns. The anti-Western discourse, some violent applications against the civilians in Syria and the suppression of some ethnic, sectarian and religious groups by some fractions forming

the opposition caused the US to be more cautious.

As far as the Arab Spring is concerned, another reason that prevented an active US intervention was the US focus on its economy rather than an issue which didn't constitute the top priority. The fact that the US economy was in a recession similar to the years of Great Depression required the US to prioritize the economic issues and put them on the agenda. Therefore, compared to the previous crisis. the US preferred to spend less time, energy and financial resources. In addition, any kind of large-scaled support could get severe criticisms from the internal dynamic.

The risk damaging the efforts which had already started during the first term of Obama administration to improve the US image in the world also deterred the US from launching a military intervention. Obama administration became successful in their efforts to some extent and he was awarded with the Nobel Peace Prize for his contributions to international diplomacy and cooperation. Any US-led interventions



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other than the ones supported by the international organizations and community would worsen this improving image of the US.

Moreover, the rising importance of the Asia-Pacific region with regard to economic and security issues led the US to focus on this region for better strategic and economic gains. The belief for a more profitable and secured trade in this region and its hinterland together with the worries over Chinese expansion in the region were the basic motives for this new policy. As a requirement of this policy, the US needed to lessen the level of its intervention in the Middle East region.

Finally, the rise of China and Russia and their starting to be serious challenging powers against the US constituted another obstacle for independent US policies in the Middle East. The elements of power of these two states such as the nuclear weapons, the veto right in the United Nations Security Council and the growing economic competency are some of the component that the US feels that it should

regard whilst developing policies towards third countries. The exclusive relations resulting from being in the same bloc during the Cold War and the growing economic dependency between these two challenging states and some Middle Eastern countries cause the US to be more deliberate in the Middle East, particularly during the Arab Spring.

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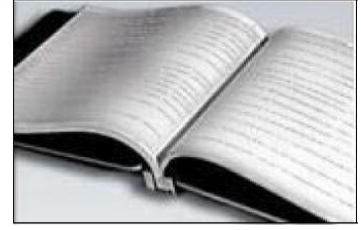
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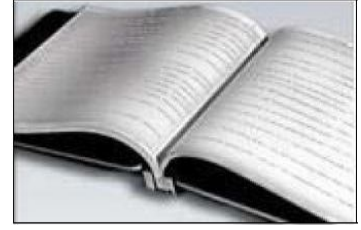
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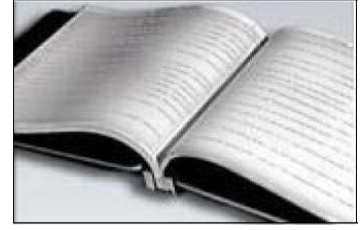
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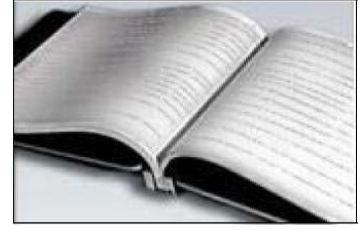
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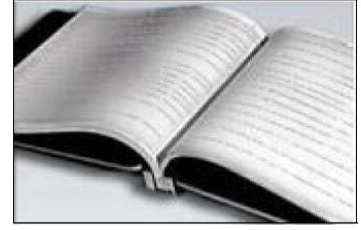
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