
Russia's Military Involvement in Syria: An Integrated Realist and Constructivist Approach

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Abstract: *This article examines the key factors behind Russia's military intervention in Syria since September 2015, following uncompromising alignment with the Syrian regime since the Syrian uprising of 2011. The paper emphasizes the value of combining a realist approach that stresses the importance of material motivations (military, economic), and a constructivist one that adheres to the importance of ideas and norms, and domestic politics. Russia's position in regards to Syria has been shaped by its palpable zeal to restore itself as a global actor and to advance a new multi-polar international system. However, this paper suggests that Russia's activities in Syria also involve traditional power maximization, which includes military capabilities and economic interests. This paper also examines how domestic political developments in Russia have influenced a confrontational foreign policy, which served as part of Putin's strategy for regenerating legitimacy and staying in power.*

Keywords – Russia, Syria, military intervention

Research Area: International Relations

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1. INTRODUCTION

Throughout the six-year conflict in Syria, Russia has remained steadfast in its support of the Syrian regime against various armed opposition groups. Despite sharp international condemnation, Russia adamantly defended the Syrian regime by providing military assistance, as well as by blocking all attempts in the U.N. Security Council to hold the regime accountable for indiscriminate state repression and for using heavy weapons, including chemical weapons, against rebellious areas, which caused enormous civilian casualties (Syria chemical attack, 2013). Moscow's strategic role in the survival of the Syrian regime culminated with its direct military intervention in September 2015. Certain analytic discourses have pursued a constructivist approach in analysing Russia's involvement in Syria. Bagdonas (2012) argues that Russia's position has little to do with its material interests, such as economic and military interests, but rather with its anxieties about the post-cold war western doctrine of international intervention against undesirable regimes (Kosovo, Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya). In this view, Russia's approach is shaped by the perceived need to defend the international law that respects states' sovereignty and the principle of non-interference in their domestic affairs. Dmitry Suslov (2016) pushes the latter analysis further, suggesting that Syria has become a partial display of a "systemic confrontation" between Russia and the US that has developed since 2014, first in Ukraine and then in Syrian (pp. 547). This confrontation is not a mere result of two states pursuing their national self-interests. But rather, it represents a substantive disagreement on "the basic rules and norms of the international order", such as state sovereignty, use of force, and decision-making mechanisms (pp. 547). However, this view disregards the importance of material interests in advancing Russia's desired norms and rules and of seizing the role of co-designer in the process of restructuring the international system. Also, by focusing on the international environment, it misses the importance of the domestic formation of foreign policy.

On the other hand, the realist view focuses on material power as the driving force in international relations, and thus in Russia's intervention. Power here is understood as military capability and economic resources. Realists argue that "states pursue power in an anarchic international arena, regardless of normative considerations" (Becker, Cohen, Kushi, & McManus, 2016, p.112). This view, however, fails to understand the importance of the strategic use of norms to achieve forms of power beyond material power. This includes structural power, which is "related to the establishment of or control over structures in international relations" (Fels, 2012, p.6). Moreover, by restricting their focus to the state's national interests, realists fail to understand the influence of Russia's domestic politics on its international behaviour.

This paper combines a realist and constructivist framework to account for Russia's military involvement in Syria. The materialist (military, economic) and ideational (norms, identity) views complement each other to produce a more comprehensive understanding than either framework alone can do. We argue that Russia's involvement in Syria is shaped by ideational and materialist motivations, which include its worldview of the international order, its military capabilities and its economic interests, as well as the agency and character of the Putin regime.

2. NORMS AND STRUCTURAL POWER

The official Russian discourse regarding its involvement in Syria often focuses on the ideational dimension. In justifying its offensive foreign policy, both in Syria and Ukraine, Russia keeps reiterating a rhetoric centered on defending its supposed unique Identity as well as international rules and norms. Sergey Lavrov, the Foreign Minister of Russia, considers the current tension between Russia and the west in international affairs as an echo of conflicting civilizational roots and identities. This leads him to praise Samuel Huntington, who "sagaciously predicted" the clash of civilizations (Lavrov, 2012, para. 6). It is also "a direct consequence of the pernicious practices of geopolitical engineering, interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states and regime change for objectionable governments, sometimes by force" (Foreign Minister Sergey, 2016, para. 4). Therefore, Russia's confrontation in Ukraine and Syria, according to Lavrov, is all about "making the international system fair, democratic and, ideally, self-regulating" (Lavrov, 2012, para. 5). Russia's move in Syria, thus, is less about pursuing material interests and more about defending international norms and values, which sounds partially consistent with the constructivist approach that conceives material facts as "secondary to ideas" (Jackson & Sørensen, 2016, p. 209).

Russia's confrontation, however, is not to reaffirm international norms per se or to achieve a fair world as Lavrov claims, but rather to advance its structural power. Krasner (as cited in Fels, 2012) defines structural power as "the ability to change the rules of the game" (p. 6). Constructivists argue that, states can "transform structures by thinking about them and acting on them in new ways" (Jackson & Sørensen, 2016, p. 207). This led Bagdonas (2012) to place Russia's involvement in Syria within its desire to project itself as a major global player. Russia obviously is no longer accepting the role of junior participant in the process of redesigning the international system; it is increasingly bent on seizing the role of co-designer (Suslov, 2016). In this sense, Russia's intervention would have happened whether or not it had material interests in Syria.

For constructivists, how actors think about each other matters more than their material interests. Different states world views can lead to confrontation or peace regardless of the

material facts. Russia and China, for instance, share an aversion to liberal democratic values while adhering to an imagined and inherently distinctive Chinese or Russian civilization (Ignatieff, 2014). This also explains why almost all non-Western powers, such as China, India, and Brazil and Russia show a fundamental antipathy to the post-Cold War international order dominated by the American worldview. They all “support the classic Westphalian notion of state sovereignty, reject the Western value of universality and try to limit the US’ presence (especially military one) in their neighbourhoods” (Bagdonas, 2012, P. 554).

Based on their worldviews, while Russia is in constant conflict with western countries about Syria, it is in total agreement with China. Their shared understanding of the desired international norms and values led them to support the Syrian regime. They have supplied weapons to the Syrian regime and coordinated their efforts to block “unfavorable developments in the United Nations, stalling and delegitimizing collective efforts to build pressure on the Syrian government (Bagdonas, 2012, p.60) This reaffirms the importance of ideas and norms since China has arguably no material interests whatsoever in Syria.

3. THE AGENCY AND CHARACTER OF THE PUTIN REGIME

Some constructivists, such as Finnemore and Wendt, share the neo-realists’ focus on the role of the international environment in shaping the foreign policy of states. Yet they also differ sharply, since the first stresses the importance of international norms and the second stresses the structure of the international system. Other constructivists, however, pay more attention to the domestic formation of foreign policy (Jackson & Sørensen, 2016, p.221). This includes domestic political developments, such as revolutions, elections, economic strains, and the leader’s prejudices that can transform the state’s identity and result in new foreign policy.

Domestic factors in Russia are very influential in shaping decision-making. Bobo Lo (2015) argues that the current foreign policy is highly influenced by the identity of the individuals responsible for it, each with their own prejudice and vested interest. “In Putin’s Russia, individuals make institutions, not institutions the individual” writes Bobo Lo (2015, p.10). This is particularly demonstrated by the dominant role of Russian President Vladimir Putin, who “stands at the apex of a tall and thin pyramid of personalized power” (p.10), which qualifies him for the “supreme decisionmaker” title (p.7).

In such a regime, unpredicted domestic events can have substantial impacts on foreign policy. Three events appeared to be important in hardening Russia’s attitudes towards the Arab Spring and the Syrian uprising in 2011. These are the anti-Putin protest in 2011-2012, the 2014 Ukrainian revolution, and the sharp drop in oil prices in 2014. These events were perceived by Putin as orchestrated and supported by the U.S (Lo, 2015). The intense pressure of these events appeared to erode the domestic foundations of Putin’s legitimacy, such as elite consensus, economic growth, and public support. Therefore, a confrontational foreign policy emerged as a new source of legitimacy. Lo (2015) notices that Putin’s 2012 presidential campaign was focused on foreign policy and was concerned with attacking the US and NATO.

The Arab Spring and the Syrian uprising both came in a context of growing domestic opposition to the ruling party, United Russia, and its leader Vladimir Putin, who was also prime minister. This led many to conclude that Russia’s rhetoric of opposing Western interventionism in the Arab world and Ukraine is partially motivated by the fear of democratic contagion (Dannreuther, 2015). Shevtsova (2009) makes yet broader observations when she notes that “the Russian regime is unique in its use of the tools of great-power

politics and neoimperialist foreign policy... as part of its strategy for staying in power” (p.62). Therefore, the military engagements in Kyiv and Syria were used as an effective instrument to stop the domino effect of what appeared to be a new wave of democracy sweeping the Arab world and Ukraine.

Other scholars focus on the impacts of informal political networks on Russia’s foreign policy. Marten (2015), argues that Russia’s approach in Syria is shaped by a “personalized desire to punish enemies” in addition to profiting the defense-industrial companies whose leaders have close personal ties to Putin (2015, P. 81). This is due to the “overwhelming dominance of the personal patronage system in all aspects of its [Russia] political and business life” (2015, P. 71).

4. LINKING NORMS AND INTERESTS

Constructivism places material interests as a secondary issue after ideas and norms. This is perhaps due to the assumption that “norms and laws are gaining stronger international relevancy” (Becker, Cohen, Kushi, & McManus, 2016, p. 112). However, both normative and material dimensions are integrated and overlap when states develop and advance their foreign policy. Ideas and norms cannot be independent from material power and interests. In many cases, in fact, ideas are highly shaped by material interests, and serve in turn to rationalize and advance these interests (Jackson & Sørensen, 2016, p. 210). As Beyer (2012) noted: “Even the most appealing idea cannot be realized without... material potential, such as weapons and energy resources” (p. 31). In fact, one can safely agree that “no country in history has exercised great power without great wealth” (White, 2010, as cited in Fels, 2012, p.10).

Many scholars believe that Russia’s use of international norms is instrumental. Becker, Cohen, Kushi and McManus (2016) argue that Russia’s emphasis on the norms of states sovereignty and self-determination “appears driven by national interests and traditional realist motivations of security through increased state capabilities” (p. 118). A realist tune can be heard from Vladimir Putin when he reiterates the slogan of the Soviet Union's powerful leader, Joseph Stalin: “the weak get beaten” (Lo, 2015, p.20). Although Syria was important in enhancing Putin’s image and showing his ever-growing strength both domestically and internationally, it remains part of a more ambitious goal related to maximizing the state’s overall power. While Putin does seem obsessed with charismatic power and prestige, he seems to realize that although state’s prestige and legitimacy rest to some degree on its reputation and its respect, ultimately, “the hierarchy of prestige in the international system rests on economic and military power”. (Gilpin, 1981, p. 31).

5. MILITARY AND ECONOMIC POWER

Russia’s military expansion in Syria came in a context of strenuous attempts to modernize and maximize its military power. In 2008, Vladimir Putin, then Russia’s prime minister, lunched a massive reform in order to strengthen Russia’s military capabilities. The program main objective was to replace 70 percent of Soviet-era military hardware by 2020 (Standish, 2015). Russia also has been expanding its military bases in several countries other than Syria. The official purpose behind this is “to extend its long-range naval and strategic bomber capabilities” (Goodenough, 2014). Moreover, only few months before its military intervention in Syria, Russia had amended its naval military doctrine, prioritizing confronting the expansion of the NATO, and opening the door to a permanent presence for its fleets in the Atlantic Ocean and Mediterranean Sea (Bodner, 2015). Herein lies the importance of the

Syrian cities of Tartus and Latakia, which are Russia's only outlets on the Mediterranean (Kreutz, 2007).

Russia's naval base in the Syrian city of Tartus remains a relic from the Soviet-era, but it seems very important in Russia's new expansion. This naval facility is the last Russian military base outside the former Soviet Union, and it was upgraded after the intervention in 2015 from one that only provided basic maintenance to Russian ships passing through the Mediterranean into a permanent naval base with new infrastructure for ships and a permanent military deployment (Litovkin, 2016). In January 2017, Russia and Syria signed a deal to expand and modernize this naval base for a period of 49 years ("Agreement on bases," 2017).

Russia also has been using its military campaign in Syria as a testing ground for new weaponry, to improve its military capabilities. It has used aircraft that were never before tested in warfare. This includes the Sukhoi Su-34 strike fighter, the advanced S-400 surface-to-air defense system, and the ship-based cruise missile (Myers & Schmitt, 2015). Putin acknowledged the importance of Syria's military campaign since "there is no more efficient way of training than real combat". He also acknowledged that the military action in Syria allowed its forces to test "new weapons in real action for the first time" (Vladimir Putin Says, 2016),

Russia's military presence in Syria helped expand its influence across the region, which opened the door for economic gains. Russia's military campaign in Syria helped double Russian weapons maker Kalashnikov Group's sales in 2016 (Middle East helps double, 2017). This was possible after "an effective, if gruesome advertisement for its weaponry in Syria" (Champion, M&B, Blas, J, 2016). In addition, today Russia enjoys a growing and unprecedented economic relationship with the Gulf States, which are considered traditional U.S. allies. Qatar, for example, who has supported the Syrian armed oppositions against Russia during the uprising, changed its stance relatively quickly after the Russian military intervention. It has recently invested about \$11 billion in Rosneft, Russia's largest oil producer. Russia's economic relationships are not confined to the Gulf Co-operation Council. Iran also offered oil and gas development tenders to Russian companies (Champion & Blas, 2016).

While the constructivist understanding of Russia's anxiety around the Western military intervention in Libya in 2011 focuses on opposing regime change, it misses the fact that the regime change abolished Russia's profitable contracts in Libya. Russia lost tens of billions of dollars in arm deals, in addition to several billion in energy deals signed with Muammar Gaddafi before he was overthrown in 2011. Russia's arm deals with Gaddafi's rule made up 12 percent of Russia's 2010 arms export (Gaddafi fall cost, 2011).

Focusing on international norms and disregarding material interests led suslove (2016) to conclude that Moscow's real purpose in Syria is not keeping President Assad in power, but rather affirming international rules and reaching a political settlement between the regime and the rebels. However, there is little evidence to support this claim, as Russia seems to have been successful in maximizing its material power in Syria, which shapes its perception about the future political solution.

On the other hand, Marten's (2015) emphasis on individuals' material interests within a personal patronage system would lead here to expect a sudden retreat of Russia from Syria. Putin's Syria policy, Marten argues, "was not well thought out and strategic, but instead driven by short-term tactical considerations that could shift at a moment's notice" (2015, P.

81). However, Russia's sudden and unpredicted shift on Syria never took place. Russia in fact has followed what appears to be as consistent strategic trend, as a realist might anticipate.

6. CONCLUSION

This paper has sought to understand the key factors behind Russia's military intervention in Syria. For a more comprehensive understanding, we emphasized the value of combining a realist approach that stresses the importance of material motivations, and a constructivist one that adheres to the importance of ideas and norms, and domestic politics. Our work has led us to conclude that Russia's involvement in Syria is driven by a set of interrelated factors that include Russia's worldview of the international order, the character of the Putin regime, and the need to maximize military capabilities and economic interests.

Russia's position in regards to Syria has been shaped by its palpable zeal to restore itself as a global actor and to advance a new multi-polar international system. However, this study suggests that Russia's activities in Syria also involve traditional power maximization, which includes military capabilities and economic interests. This paper also examined how domestic political developments in Russia have influenced a confrontational foreign policy, which served as part of Putin's strategy for regenerating legitimacy and staying in power. This domestic influence on Russia's Syria policy has remained generally under-examined, especially in the period of Putin's latest presidency.

Taken together, these results might explain why reaching a political solution in Syria has remained elusive over the past six years. During these years, Russia's assessment of what it can achieve in Syria was constantly changing due to the numerous intervening factors discussed in this paper.

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