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Russia's foreign and security policy in Syria: historical relations, Cold War paradigms, and contemporary geopolitics

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Introduction: This paper examines Russia's diplomatic and security strategy in Syria, placing its engagement in the larger framework of Cold War history and Russian-Syrian ties. The study clarifies how Russia's strategic objectives in the region, especially in connection to its "near abroad" policy, have been molded by the complex historical relationships between Moscow and Damascus.

Methods: The methodology consists in a qualitative approach, applying the security matrix model to the Russian foreign policy in Syria. From a comparative approach, the study draws attention to the similarities between Russia's military activities in Syria and Ukraine, illuminating the intricate relationship between intervention and sovereignty in both situations. The article also critically evaluates how the Kremlin has framed its engagement in Syria as a counterterrorism measure, arguing that this narrative helps to justify its actions both at home and abroad.

Results and discussion: By highlighting the connections between historical background, security strategy, and current geopolitical dynamics, the study's findings show that the intervention in Syria is anchored in a deeply rooted policy in Russia, elaborated on a Cold War heritage towards the U.S. and on new concepts of multi-polarity. The study ultimately aims to offer a deeper explanation of Russia's motives in Syria. The paper adds to the discussion of Russian foreign policy and its effects on international relations and regional stability by using this perspective.

KEYWORDS

Russia, Syria, security, near abroad policy, Cold War, terrorism response

1 Introduction

With its military intervention that started in 2015, Russia has greatly influenced the fate of the ongoing crisis in Syria, which has become a crucial arena for the dynamics of global power. Given Russia's longstanding links to Syria and its larger plan to solidify its position as a major world power, this involvement represents a turning point in the country's foreign and security strategy. Russia's activities in Syria, which are widely considered a strategic triumph, have strengthened its influence in the Middle East and woven themselves into its domestic security plan.

This essay examines Russia's complex strategy for dealing with the Syrian conflict, emphasizing how it combines hybrid and traditional military methods to meet issues of national and international security. Notably, Russia's approach in Syria is a hybrid model that deviates from Western methods, with a strong emphasis on cultural values, national identity, and state sovereignty that permeates both its military and humanitarian efforts.

Even though foreign policy and economic factors are unquestionably important, they do not adequately explain the complexity of Russia's current actions in Syria. Rather, the domestic arena is far more important, especially when it comes to advancing a powerful Russia, managing Islam's influence in its politics, and handling internal resistance to President Putin's reelection. Thus, this essay makes the case that a thorough grasp of the

development of Russian domestic politics is necessary in order to comprehend Moscow's foreign policy toward Syria and, by extension, the Middle East. This study attempts to clarify the strategic goals of Russia's engagement in Syria and the ramifications for both Russia's domestic security agenda and regional stability by looking at these interrelated themes.

2 Materials and methods

2.1 Literature review

There is a thriving body of literature about Russia's foreign and security policies. As Russia's geopolitical position and domestic issues have changed throughout time, so too has the country's conception of national security. The new national security concept, which Vladimir Putin approved on January 10, 1998, describes Russia's national interests during the "dynamic transformation of the system of international relations".¹

The necessity of addressing both internal and external threats is emphasized in Russia's national security strategy (Staar, 1998). These tactics, which reject Western materialism in favor of a distinctively Russian understanding of freedom, are based on Russia's historical mission and spiritual ideals (Chernov et al., 2023; Kortunov and Volodin, 1996).

Other definitions based on sustainable livelihoods and value systems are suggested by certain academics who contend that the phrase "national security" may not adequately convey Russia's multinational, multiethnic character as a state-civilization (Matveev and Matveev, 2014). Risk theory has been included into recent approaches to Russian national security, taking into account strategic and economic considerations described in official documents such as the National Security Strategy and Economic Security Strategy (Shumilina and Lugantsev, 2022). These developing ideas are a reflection of Russia's continuous attempts to identify and safeguard its interests in a shifting international environment. A critical critique of how Russia's insular Eurasian worldview restricts its foreign policy success in a globalized world can be found in Katzenstein and Weygandt's (2017) analysis of Russia's geopolitical strategy.

They contend that Russia's strategy, which is based on a geopolitical and civilizational framework, limits its strategic alternatives by erecting obstacles to interaction with the larger international community. Russia's foreign policy reflects this insularity, especially in how it handles perceived challenges and how it approaches global governance. By analyzing Russia's changing security strategy under Putin, Snetkov (2015) advances this conversation. His study highlights how Russia has changed its security posture to one that is more assertive and nationalistic, especially in reaction to the crises in Syria and Ukraine. This change is a component of a larger national initiative to safeguard Russia's strategic interests and reclaim its influence in the world. Snetkov's work demonstrates how Russia's internal security culture affects its exterior activities, which enhances the analysis of hybrid threats.

Russia's use of hybrid warfare, which combines traditional and unconventional tactics to further its objectives, is best

demonstrated by its engagement in Syria (Zhou, 2019). The idea of hybrid threats has drawn a lot of attention lately, which is indicative of how complicated today's security issues are. According to Lesenciuc and Cozmanciuc (2021), combating hybrid threats necessitates a thorough "whole-of-government" strategy, in which developing a strong security culture is crucial. In order to establish a robust security environment that can combat the complex nature of hybrid threats, their research emphasizes the necessity of combining different governmental and society sectors. In the context of global security, where non-traditional threats frequently mix with political, economic, and social elements, this approach is especially pertinent.

Russia has adopted a hybrid strategy that blends traditional state-centric defense with the preservation of national identity and cultural values in its approach to foreign policy and domestic security, especially in Syria (Pynnöniemi, 2018). By focusing on state sovereignty and challenging international conventions regarding humanitarian action and the duty to protect, this approach deviates from Western standards (Averre and Davies, 2015). Despite unfavorable material circumstances, Russia's involvement in Syria shows its desire to restructure the international order and co-define acceptable violations of state sovereignty (Pieper, 2019). By examining Russia's military engagement in Syria, which changed the global conversation on the right to protection in armed conflicts, Stent (2016) and Lutta (2018) delve deeper into this issue. According to Stent, this action was a pivotal point in Russia's attempts to reclaim its global power status, while Lutta highlights how it has reshaped international norms around military intervention and protection.

A shift in Russian foreign policy in Syria is indicated by the employment of hybrid warfare strategies, such as controlled warfare, proxy assistance, and disinformation campaigns (Abbasi and Hussein, 2021). This strategy, which is based on the idea of Maskirovka (literally, "masking" which means military camouflage), enables Russia to emphasize its position as a rising force in international affairs, challenge Western-dominated international standards, and pursue its strategic goals (Abbasi and Hussein, 2021; Pieper, 2019).

New Russian military concepts and technology have been tested in the Syrian conflict, showcasing a methodical approach to innovation and learning in contemporary military organization (Nikolić, 2021). Additionally, Russia established a "security matrix" in Syria, where its military police carry out a variety of tasks beyond standard security, including as peacekeeping, providing humanitarian supplies, and assisting with economic matters. In addition to fostering post-conflict healing and establishing new social realities, this multipronged strategy may serve as a template for Russian peacebuilding tactics in other wars in the future (Matveev, 2023). Together, these acts demonstrate how Russia's role in international affairs and conflict resolution has changed over time.

The strategic goals and justifications for Russia's engagement, including preserving its influence in the Middle East, defending its partner Bashar al-Assad, and rebuffing Western influence in the area, are also the key topics of this literature study. Numerous factors, including geopolitical, strategic, and internal ones, have contributed to Russia's participation in Syria. Syria, one of the few surviving Soviet footholds in the Middle East, is a vital friend of Russia, according to Pichon (2013). Moscow's strategic interests

¹ *Nezavisimoye Voennoye Obozreniye*, January 14, 1998. Translated by the U.S. Foreign Broadcast Information Service. Available at: <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2000-01/features/russias-national-security-concept>.

depend on the Assad regime being maintained since losing Syria to Western influence would seriously impair Russia's standing in the region. Pichon points out that Syria's advantageous Mediterranean coast location, which gives it access to the Tartus naval base,² gives Russia a vital military outpost, ensuring its continued influence in the Mediterranean and the broader Middle East. This aligns with Allison (2013), who examines Russia's support for the Assad government in Syria, this connection is more about preserving regional stability and defending Russia's clout in the Middle East than it is about ideological kinship or financial gain. This viewpoint is consistent with the larger discussion of hybrid threats, in which a mix of political, strategic, and security considerations drive state action.

The importance of Syria in Russia's larger geopolitical strategy is further explained by Berg (2017), who highlights that the country's intervention was a calculated move to show its ability to impact world events and subvert Western domination in international affairs rather than just an act of support for an ally. Russia intervened in Syria in order to save the Assad administration from falling, which would have left a power vacuum that could be taken advantage of by Islamist organizations that are antagonistic to both the West and Russia. Given the possible consequences in the North Caucasus and other unstable areas within Russia, Berg's research indicates that Russia's actions were motivated by a desire to protect its southern flank from the destabilizing effects of terrorism and insurgency.

Similarly, Notte (2016) contends that Russia used a counterterrorist narrative to defend its activities both at home and abroad, including its involvement in the Syrian crisis. Because it skillfully combines traditional military tactics with information warfare and diplomatic initiatives, this story is crucial to comprehending how Russia's security culture influences its response to hybrid threats. Furthermore, this strategic framework clarifies Russia's activities in Ukraine, where the Kremlin has used like language to justify its interventions as a defense of Russian-speaking populations and a reaction to perceived Western expansion threats.

Russia's activities in Syria and Ukraine are comparable, demonstrating a logical plan to restore its influence in the region while preserving its territorial integrity. According to scholars such as Pisciotta (2019), Russia's revisionist actions in both areas demonstrate a conscious attempt to subvert the Western-established post-Cold War system, underscoring the interdependence of its domestic and international ambitions. As a result, studying Russia's engagement in Syria helps us better understand its foreign policy goals and puts its actions in Ukraine in context, highlighting the wider ramifications for regional security and stability.

2.2 Theoretical framework

The analysis of Russia's involvement in Syria can be approached through a lens that distinguishes between foreign policy and

security strategy objectives versus a homeland security perspective. These two approaches may intersect in the case of Russia in Syria.

Ponsard (2006) analyzes Russia's homeland security strategy, emphasizing the conflict between foreign policy goals and internal security requirements. His observations offer a starting point for comprehending how Russia presents its military action in Syria as a component of a larger security plan. By examining comparable legal approaches to homeland security and highlighting the ways in which Russia's legal system backs national security policy, Beckman (2007) adds to the conversation. The legitimacy Russia aims to achieve through its activities in Syria is related to this analysis.

By comparing various homeland security frameworks, Morag (2018) presents a modern viewpoint on how nations handle security issues. His research highlights the value of using comparative methods to comprehend Moscow's foreign policy by placing Russia's tactics in Syria within a global framework of security policy.

Therefore, a thorough context for evaluating Russia's actions in Syria is provided by concentrating on foreign policy and security strategy, which sees them as a component of a longer-term, more comprehensive quest for influence, stability, and strategic interests outside of its boundaries. This strategy focuses on Russia's foreign ambitions and examines how its military action supports its aspirations to assert its position in multipolar geopolitics, challenge Western influence, and consolidate dominance in the Middle East, considered by Russia as part of the Rimland (Mearsheimer, 2001).

Theories like constructivism and realism provide important insights into Russia's intentions in Syria. According to Morgenthau (1948), realism highlights the anarchic character of international relations, in which governments behave only to maximize their power and security. Russia's action can be interpreted in this light as an effort to regain its position as a significant power with the ability to affect world events. The realist viewpoint supports the necessity of halting the rise of extremist organizations and preventing a power vacuum in Syria, indicating that Russia sees its engagement as crucial to both regional stability and its own national security.

In contrast, by emphasizing how identity and ideational elements influence state behavior, constructivist theories further deepen our understanding. Wendt (1992) asserts that states' identities impact their objectives and behavior. Russia sees itself as a defender of traditional values and a guardian of state sovereignty against perceived Western hegemony, and combating terrorism (Wendt, 1999), which is reflected in its intervention in Syria. Russia is positioned as a contrast to Western liberalism, and this framing aligns with the Kremlin's narrative that highlights the significance of national identity and cultural values (Zhekova, 2023).

Furthermore, according to academics like Berg (2017), Russia's actions in Syria are a part of a geopolitical calculation meant to reshape the regional order to its advantage. Russia aims to strengthen its hold on the Middle East and build ties with important regional players like Iran and Hezbollah by showcasing its military prowess and political will. In addition to giving Russia more negotiating power over Syria's future, this alignment advances Russia's overarching objective of creating a multipolar global order that limits Western influence.

Furthermore, Notte (2016) asserts that Russia's counterterrorism narrative accomplishes two goals: it strengthens the Kremlin's power at home and justifies its military activities overseas. Russia aims to mobilize public support and divert

² Tartus was established in 1971 by an agreement between the Soviet Union and Hafez al-Assad regime. It has expanded in 2017 after Russia began its direct military intervention.

attention from domestic issues, including as political dissension and economic sanctions, by portraying its engagement as a war against terrorism. This strategic narrative emphasizes how foreign and domestic policy are intertwined, with the Kremlin using international problems to strengthen its position at home.

All things considered, a closer look at Russia's foreign policy and security strategy in Syria demonstrates a complex strategy that places a high priority on gaining influence and stability in a world that is becoming more and more competitive. [Pisciotta \(2019\)](#) points out that comprehending these processes is crucial to understanding Russia's larger geopolitical goals, especially in light of its actions in Ukraine and its attempts to rewrite the norms of the international system. This article attempts to offer a comprehensive understanding of Russia's strategic intentions in Syria and their consequences for regional and global security by combining a variety of theoretical viewpoints and empirical research.

I will use the "security matrix" concept ([Matveev, 2023](#)) to examine Russia's complex strategy for its military engagement in the Syrian war. The complex dynamics of Russia's actions and strategies, which cover a variety of political-military, social, economic, and ideological components, require an understanding of this framework. A thorough analysis of how Russia manages the intricacies of the Syrian conflict while pursuing its regional and national goals is made possible by the establishment of a security matrix. The first step in the research will be to map out the several security matrix components that influence Russia's engagement in Syria. A comprehensive understanding of Russia's strategy involves an examination of its historical relations, economic investments, diplomatic contacts, humanitarian endeavors, and military activities. By breaking down these elements, the study hopes to provide light on how Russia's efforts to stabilize the Assad administration and mold the post-conflict environment have involved both military power and non-military means.

Therefore, the security matrix can be viewed as a point where constructivist and realist frameworks converge. Constructivism provides insights into the ideological reasons and identity constructions that underlie Russia's actions, while realism explains the strategic imperatives guiding these activities in terms of power and security.

3 Methodology

In this research, we used a qualitative approach to examine the Syrian war from the perspective of Russian foreign policy, paying particular attention to Vladimir Putin's statement at the United Nations on September 28, 2015 and Serguei Lavrov speech at the General Debate as part of the 79th session of the United Nations General Assembly, 9 years later, on September 28, 2024. To comprehend Russia's intentions in Syria, we examined the speech's language, main ideas, and rhetorical devices, presenting it as a crucial argument for its larger geopolitical goals, in order to analyze the continuity features of the Russia foreign policy and its implications in Syria.

We also compared Russia's role in Syria to its involvement in Ukraine and looked at the Syrian war as a test case for Russian strategies. We used comparative research methods to compare Russia's engagement in Ukraine with its activities in Syria in

order to assess how consistent Russian foreign policy approaches were in both situations. We were able to examine the possible experimental character of Russia's strategies in Syria thanks to this comparison.

4 Results

4.1 Security matrix

If Russia's intervention in Syria signals a new geopolitical era for some, in reality, it is part of a historical continuity dating back to the Cold War period. The diachronic approach shows that Putin's foreign policy is indeed the "hostage of internal legitimacy" ([Von Eggert, 2017](#)) and cannot be understood without analyzing the hostility toward the United States. By seeking to preserve the Russian naval base in Syria, Putin expresses his broader goal of restoring Russia's greatness. It is from this perspective that our analysis is framed, which examines Russian foreign policy through the lens of domestic politics and regime legitimacy. Thus, the intervention in Syria can be explained within the context of the Arab Spring, but also the Russian protests of December 2011, which lasted until 2012. These protests against the falsification of general elections in Russia raised the risk of regime change inspired by the United States. Putin reportedly accused United States Ambassador to Moscow, Michael McFaul (2012–2014), of "trying to overthrow his government" ([Lally, 2014](#)). Just like the annexation of Crimea, the intervention in Syria must be understood as part of the strengthening of Russia and its interests, but also as a matter of Russian pride, as the 2015 air operation, which particularly surprised the United States, resulted in few casualties. The Russian military intervention in Syria arises not only from a threat to its national security but also as part of a larger Russian project, intrinsically linked through a "grand strategy" ([Taminiau, 2018](#)). This raises the question: Is Russia a power by default or an alternative model to the Western vision in the Middle East?

If Syria might appear to Russians as "a distant country we know little about" ([Chamberlain, 1938](#)), Putin had to find an internal reason to engage decisively in Syria. The possibility of intervention is framed within the security context and the historical relations that the former USSR maintained with the Damascus regime. We can consider here Tsygankov's model, which offers an explanatory framework for Russian foreign policy over a long period ([Tsygankov, 2013](#)). This model allows us to observe "regularities" ([Frank, 2012](#)) between the so-called "Civilizationists" period, emphasizing Russia's imperial identity, and the contemporary period of Putin's Russia, which continues its expansionist policy toward warm seas. "Expansionism" is indeed one of the main criteria of Russian diplomacy since the 19th century ([Donaldson and Noguee, 2009](#)).

The research led to the following findings, which have been summarized under the "security matrix" heading initially ([Delanoë, 2016](#)). In the second part of our analysis, it is concluded that Moscow intends to participate in the anti-terrorist struggle and avoid destabilization in Central Asia, its "near abroad."

4.2 Historical relationships and diplomatic contacts

The debating parameters over Russia's national identity and its core foreign policy goals are rooted in five elements of Russian history: first the enduring belief exists that Russia is a great power and must be treated as a great power; second that international politics should be realist; three international economy competition; fourth the link between the Russian National identity, the domestic economic and political order with foreign policy priorities and orientation; fifth that Western liberalism is an appropriate model for Russia (Kuchins and Zevelev, 2012). Therefore, the Russian foreign policy is a long process based on continuity in change with Putin. This is very visible regarding Syria, where we observe that Russia has "enduring interests", though systems change (Donaldson and Nadkarni, 2018).

Relations with Syria were first marked by the signing of commercial agreements in November 1955 and the exchange of ambassadors that same year (Kaminsky and Kruk, 1988, p. 47). The USSR only became a true ally of Syria after the Munich attack (1972) with an offer of unlimited assistance for Damascus to respond to Israeli retaliation raids. This was primarily a strategic recalibration for Moscow after Egypt's integration into Washington's sphere of influence and to gain access to critical geostrategic positions. Thus, in 1971, Syria granted the Soviet navy a naval facility at the Syrian port of Tartus, a crucial location from a geopolitical perspective, with Russia seeking footholds in warm seas (Al Shami, 2022b). This Soviet-Syrian relationship, however, remained initially characterized, according to Carrère d'Encausse (1975, p. 244–248), as an "alliance without a treaty," until October 8, 1980, when an agreement of friendship and cooperation for 20 years was signed in Moscow by Assad and Brezhnev. It was in 1996 that the former Foreign Minister Evgueni Primakov, through a tour of several Arab countries in the region (Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan), sought to establish a new Russian diplomacy in the region, interrupted by Russia's position after September 11. Russia presented itself as the main defender of the Arab cause, confirming the importance of Soviet orientalism in Russian foreign policy.

If the intervention in Syria can be explained by historical regional policy in the Middle East, it is especially justified by Moscow's support for the Baathist regime since Hafez al-Assad came to power in 1971. In Syria, the Alawites at the head of the government are staunch secularists, open to leftist and progressive ideas. During the 1970s, the Soviet Union established strong ties with the Syrian government, providing aid, arms, and military support. When Vladimir Putin became president of Russia in 2000 and Bashar al-Assad took the presidency in Syria, this relationship was renewed, enabling Putin to add an airbase at Khmeimim (southeast of Latakia) to the Tartus naval base [a military base was also opened in 2019 in Kurdish zones]. While the rapprochement is visibly geopolitical—as Syria's borders adjoin several countries of interest to Western powers, such as Israel, Iraq, or Turkey—Putin nonetheless erased, in 2005, 75% of Syria's \$14 billion debt (Allevi, 2020). Ten years later, he continued to support Bashar al-Assad against both the Syrian opposition and Western powers that accused the latter of being a dictator. Support for Assad lasted until the fall of the Baathist regime on December 8, 2024.

This support was evident in Assad and his family's expatriation to Russia, as well as in the repayment to Russia for its

military expenses in favor of the ruling power (with \$250 million previously transferred from the Syrian Central Bank to Moscow). In addition to funding the war, this money contributed to the personal enrichment of the deposed dictator, enabling him to circumvent international sanctions (Johnson et al., 2024).

4.3 Opposition to regime change and western interventionism

Opposed to the U.S.'s "regime change" policy, Russia indeed fears regime changes within its sphere of influence (Morozov, 2020). This issue is indeed "Moscow's battle horse in the Syrian conflict" (Pichon, 2013). For Russia, the West is once again engaged in a regime change effort, much like the series of regime changes Russia believes it has suffered for many years. Support for the al-Assad regime is thus more driven by political realism, as there is no room for sentiment in Russia. Support for authoritarianism is an integral part of Russia's strategy for influence and domination in the Middle East, with Syria being the last bastion of Russian interests (Al Shami, 2022a). The Russian security matrix is understood in opposition to the Western idea of humanitarian intervention. In 2015 Putin's speech to the United Nations General Assembly and in 2024 Lavrov address at the General Debate as part of the 79th session of the UN General Assembly, Russia reiterates the its position against the West, accused of the creation and support of terrorist's groups, being responsible of the chaos and regional disorder:

"I'm urged to ask those who created this situation: do you at least realize now what you've done? But I'm afraid that this question will remain unanswered, because they have never abandoned their policy, which is based on arrogance, exceptionalism and impunity." (Putin, 2015, par. 11).

"For years, Russia has been trying to make Washington, London and Brussels, overwhelmed by their own complexes of exclusivity and impunity, understand this seemingly simple truth in the context of European security." (Lavrov, 2024a,b, par. 15). Both use the word "impunity" to characterize western intervention and dominance regarding international law in order to propagandize the Russian vision and behavior in international relations.

Russia points out as well the will of the West to impose its own vision of international affairs, that recall the Cold war context:

"Sadly, some of our counterparts are still dominated by their Cold War-era bloc mentality and the ambition to conquer new geopolitical areas. First, they continued their policy of expanding NATO – one should wonder why, considering that the Warsaw Pact had ceased to exist and the Soviet Union had disintegrated." (Putin, 2015, par. 30).

"At the same time, the West not only fails to seek the global cooperation called for by our Secretary-General, but in its doctrinal documents openly and harshly accuses Russia, China, Belarus, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and Iran of creating threats to its dominance." (Lavrov, 2024a,b, par. 16).

Nine years have passed between 2015 and 2024 and the two speeches echoes, as if the confrontation with the West is a permanent variable in the Russia foreign policy. The Syrian intervention in another example of the application of foreign policy objectives, bringing forth the ideological confrontation with the western order, as we can read it again in [Lavrov \(2024a,b\)](#) address to the United Nations: “The ‘track record’ of those who demand that the rest of the world play by their rules should not be forgotten.[...] The start of the war in Syria gave birth to Jabhat al-Nusra (now Hayat Tahrir al-Sham), Economic interests [...] We urge all those who care about the future of their countries and people to be extremely cautious about the new plots of the inventors of these very rules.”

From this perspective, we consider that the fall of the regime in Syria was part of Russia's plans to prioritize its Turkish allies over its Arab allies. Indeed, for Russia, the fall of Bashar al-Assad is not a defeat, as Putin stated ([Gebeily and Azhari, 2024](#)). In line with the trilateral meetings between Russia, Turkey, and Iran, it can be argued that Russia has built its foreign policy on a reconfiguration of multipolarism. Without abandoning its African ambitions or its strategic positions in Syria—positions that precisely serve these ambitions—Russia accepted the conditions of a regime change that would not lead to the rise of terrorists or chaos in Syria.

4.4 Economic interests

Russia's strategic and economic interests are intertwined in several important ways that are part of its security matrix in Syria, especially when it comes to economic investments. In addition to military and geopolitical goals, Russia's engagement in Syria is also strongly influenced by economic factors, as investments are made with the goal of securing long-term influence in the area.

The economic dimension of Russia's relations with Syria is crucial for understanding the true stakes of Russian foreign policy. The Cold War-era vision established Syria as a client state of Russia, primarily in terms of military armament. In the 1980s, Syria succeeded in building a substantial military arsenal, becoming the first country outside the Warsaw Pact to receive such equipment. For example, between 1982 and 1986, Syria's tank numbers increased from 3,200 to 4,400, its aircraft from 100 to 180, and it received over 4,000 pieces of artillery ([Seale, 1989, p. 398](#)). SAM-5 batteries were even delivered to protect the port of Latakia, and radar stations were installed in Kassab to monitor NATO forces. These deliveries were considered by Moscow to be defensive in nature.

In 2007, Putin signed a new agreement with Syria, continuing arms supplies, such as the SS-N-26 Yakhont supersonic anti-ship missile, delivered in 2011 ([Pichon, 2013](#)). This arms deal occurred within the context of an European Union's arms embargo on Syria. For Moscow, what matters most is the preservation of a political-military structure with Syria.

These actions reflect not just a historical alliance but a long-term strategy to maintain influence and geopolitical presence in the Middle East, which also benefits Russia's military-industrial complex.

Russia's strategic interests in the Mediterranean depend on the construction of Russian military bases, such as the air base

Khmeimim and the naval port Tartus. These bases affect the economy even if their primary function is military. They allow Russia to transport Russian military equipment from the area and give it permanent access to regional sea lanes.

The oil stakes are significant ([El Abdi, 2021](#)). In December 2013, Syria signed its first oil and gas exploration agreement with Russia, focusing on its territorial waters, which are believed to have some of the largest reserves in the Mediterranean. The 25-year deal is financed by Russia and is seen as proof of continued cooperation between Syria and Russia. “It is proof of the continuation of cooperation between the two peoples and governments of Syria and Russia,” stated former Syrian Minister of Petroleum, Sleimane Abbas ([L'Orient-le-Jour, 2013](#)). However, for Russia, the agreement is more about consolidating its strategic interests and positioning Syria as a potential energy hub in the broader geopolitical “Great Energy Game.”

Since the beginning of 2018, Russian companies have been playing an increasing role in Syria's economy, especially in the energy and mining sectors. Moscow's interest lies primarily in the country's oil and gas resources, but phosphate mining, where Syria has some of the largest reserves globally, has seen significant commercial success. In 2023, an agreement between the Syrian Ministry of Petroleum and Russian company Stroytransgaz was formalized, granting the company rights to extract and export 2.2 million tons of phosphate annually for 49 years. The company receives 70% of the revenues, while the remaining 30% goes to the Syrian government ([Yazigi, 2018](#)). This expansion reflects Russia's strategic interests in controlling critical resources and further consolidates its role in Syria's post-conflict economic landscape.

4.5 The terrorist argument

Russian public diplomacy emphasizes the success of its military operations in defeating terrorist groups and stabilizing the Syrian state, thus reinforcing the notion that Russia's actions are both necessary and just in Syria. Russian officials argued that the fall of the Assad government would lead to greater chaos, potentially increasing the spread of terrorism and undermining regional stability, which could have direct and indirect impacts on Russian security.

The main justification for Russia's military participation in Syria has been that it is a counterterrorism effort to fight terrorist organizations like al-Nusra Front and the so called Islamic State. According to the Kremlin ([Putin, 2015](#)), Russia's national security and regional stability are directly threatened by the emergence of radical Islamist forces in Syria, especially given the possibility of repercussions in the North Caucasus region, as we can read it in Putin's 2015 speech: “By establishing a stronghold in Syria and Iraq, the Islamic State is actively expanding into other regions with the goal of dominating the Islamic world—and beyond. This organization clearly has broader ambitions. The situation is more than just dangerous”.

The Russian government justified the air campaign by presenting Syria as a critical front in the global fight against terrorism. The Russian government used the homeland security narrative to address domestic concerns about radicalization. Officials warned that if terrorist groups in Syria were not

defeated, they could inspire or coordinate with Islamist extremists within Russia. This justification was aimed at securing public support for the military intervention by linking it directly to the protection of Russian citizens from terrorism and to action to stop terrorism from spreading into southern Russia, especially the North Caucasus, which has a history of Islamist insurgency. Even while its main priority remained defending its national security, Russia positioned itself as a major player in the global war on terror by joining the fight against Islamic State and coordinating its activities with a larger international effort. By using this framing, Russia was able to justify its actions by claiming that they were advancing global security, while in reality, they were advancing their own geopolitical goals.

This was the case in Putin's speech at the United Nations General Assembly in September 2015, in which he criticized Western interventions as an "enormous mistake" by not cooperating with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in the fight against the Islamic State militant group and warned of the dangers of undermining state sovereignty. He called for an international coalition to fight terrorism, underlining the importance of working with legitimate governments, including Assad's, to restore stability. This speech was a clear articulation of Russia's position that the defense of Syrian sovereignty was a matter of both regional and global security. This campaign was framed by the Russian government as a necessary action to combat terrorism and stabilize the region, which in turn was depicted as essential for Russia's own homeland security.

The State Sovereignty strategy constitutes an important feature of the Russian intervention. Russia's involvement in Syria has allowed it to strengthen its alliances with other key regional players, such as Iran and Hezbollah, creating a coalition that opposes Western influence in the Middle East. According to Berg (2017), this coalition has been crucial in securing the Assad regime's survival and in maintaining a balance of power in the region that favors Russian interests. Once the terrorist threat was no more, Putin stopped supporting Assad.

An analysis of Putin's September 28, 2015, United Nations General Assembly speech provides insight into Russia's foreign policy approach in Syria, primarily centered on the fight against terrorism (Putin, 2015). Putin explicitly frames Russia's involvement as "military-technical assistance to Iraq, Syria, and other regional countries combating terrorist groups" (Putin, 2015, para. 19). This narrative aligns with a dualistic worldview that implies a unique role for Russia, contrasting it with "others"—implicitly referring to the United States or the broader West—whom he accuses of "flirting with terrorists" (Putin, 2015, para. 17).

Putin's rhetoric is morally charged, especially in his comparison of Islamic State to Hitler, which casts Islamic State as an absolute evil against which the civilized world must unite (Putin, 2015, para. 21). He presents this anti-terrorism campaign as decisive and unyielding, drawing historical parallels to the USSR's resistance to terrorism and involvement in World War II by asserting, "Russia has always firmly opposed terrorism in all its forms" (Putin, 2015, para. 18).

Further, the speech positions Russia's Syrian intervention as a direct message to the international community, signaling a Middle Eastern policy that opposes Western interests and offers

an alternative interpretation of international law. This stance emphasizes Russian sovereignty and non-interference, resonating with domestic audiences by invoking threats to homeland security. Putin warns of the risk that "these murderers, who have already smelled blood, could return to their countries to pursue their macabre business" (Putin, 2015, para. 18).

Within this framework, Putin outlines his strategy of cooperating directly with Syrian government authorities, asserting that "no one other than President Assad's government forces... truly fights Islamic State and other terrorist organizations" (Putin, 2015, para. 19). This approach advocates for a different form of international relations, redefining concepts like counterterrorism, international law, and cooperation in alignment with Russian values and interests (Lewis, 2022), as if the war was also a war of Information (Marzal and Colom-Piella, 2021; Jensen, 2018).

Putin's choice of the United Nations as his platform is significant, as he critiques American interventionism in the Middle East and condemns European responses to radical Islam, signaling Russia's intent to reassert itself in the Middle East. His argument invokes Cold War-era "bloc thinking," framing Syria as a geostrategic zone akin to Ukraine, which he describes as another region destabilized by "foreign-sponsored armed coups" exploiting local dissatisfaction (Putin, 2015, para. 31). He draws a parallel to Syria, decrying the "export of so-called 'democratic revolutions'" (Putin, 2015, para. 10) and criticizing the Western-backed Syrian "moderate opposition" for allegedly supplying arms to terrorists (Putin, 2015, para. 16).

This perspective illustrates Russia's divergence from Western democratic values in international relations. By re-engaging in the Middle East, Russia positions itself as a critical actor in the Syrian crisis, filling a void left by the reluctance of European and American forces to deploy ground troops. Through its military involvement, Russia reaffirms its status as an essential player in determining Syria's future (Putin, 2015) and invokes a "clash of values" and opposes the postmodernism (democracy, human rights) of the West, as well as the expansion of NATO into the territory of the former Soviet space.

The framing of the Syrian conflict through the lens of terrorism serves multiple strategic purposes for the Kremlin. First, the Russian intervention legitimizes Russia's military actions under the guise of international security, allowing it to portray its interventions as necessary and justified. By portraying Syrian opposition groups as terrorist entities, Russia seeks to delegitimize any dissent against the Assad regime and rally support for its military operations. Second, it is a strategy to protect Syrian State Sovereignty, under a "Pax Russica" (Álvarez-Ossorio, 2019).

The concept of state sovereignty has been a cornerstone of Russian foreign policy, especially under President Vladimir Putin. This principle emphasizes the inviolability of national borders and the right of each state to determine its own political system without external interference. Russia's military intervention in Syria is framed within this doctrine, portraying its actions as a defense of Syrian state sovereignty against both internal threats and external aggression. This framing serves to legitimize Russia's military actions in Syria and aligns them with its broader homeland security strategy, which views the protection of allied governments as directly linked to Russia's own national security. Russia argues

that maintaining Syrian sovereignty is closely related to Russia's national security, which goes beyond the defense of Syria itself (Guibert, 2017).

According to this theory, the fall of the Assad regime would increase Middle Eastern instability and possibly leave a void that terrorist organizations may exploit. In turn, these organizations may pose a threat to Russian interests in the area and perhaps beyond its own boundaries, especially in the unstable North Caucasus. According to Russian officials, the Western strategy in Syria, which includes backing different opposition organizations, is intended to topple the current regime and cause anarchy akin to that which followed Muammar Gaddafi's overthrow in Libya. According to Russia's propaganda, such anarchy would not only destroy Syria but can cause more widespread instability in the region, which has serious implications for international security. Russia asserts that by supporting Assad, it is averting this situation and promoting regional stability as well as its own security. By using this narrative, Russia presents its intervention as both a legal requirement and a strategic imperative in the face of Western encroachment, equating the defense of Syrian sovereignty with the preservation of its own security.

5 Discussion

5.1 Critical analysis of Russia's foreign policy in Syria

The Russian intervention in Syria, initiated in 2015, reflects a deliberate strategy aimed at reshaping regional and global power dynamics. The intervention looks like a proxy war, that emphasize Russian's new foreign policy: "The Syrian conflict has become the primary battleground for Russo-American tensions. The Russians support Bashar al-Assad, bombing non-jihadist opposition while sparing Islamic State. The United States, though helping rebels moderately, targets ISIS and calls for Assad's departure. In Syria, Vladimir Putin settles scores with the United States, whom he has never forgiven for the Cold War victory. His main goal is to restore parity with the United States. This marks the first true war." (Dupuy Lasserre, 2013).

By backing Bashar al-Assad's regime, Russia reasserted its geopolitical influence in the Middle East, positioning itself as a counterweight to Western powers and their allies in the region. Moscow's engagement in Syria has been framed by its emphasis on state sovereignty, rejecting external intervention in the internal affairs of sovereign states, a message that resonates with various regional actors. This positioning is central to Russia's broader foreign policy, underscoring its commitment to a world order where international relations are governed by respect for state sovereignty and non-interference.

Russia's intervention, particularly its military support, also served as a demonstration of its growing capabilities on the world stage. While some Western analysts view Russia as a destabilizing force, particularly in light of its actions in Ukraine and Syria, other global actors, especially in the Middle East, perceive Russia as a more reliable partner compared to the United States. Given the complex dynamics of regional diplomacy, this nuanced perception

underscores the need to reconsider the image of Russia as a monolithic threat and to contextualize its intervention in Syria while the U.S. were voluntarily reducing their influence in the region. Indeed, Putin was taking advantage of a decline in American influence in the region, following the failure of the Western intervention in Libya and the adoption of the "leading from behind" strategy by the United States after August 30, 2013. This was evident when the United States president backed down at the last minute from striking Assad's regime, even though the operation, scheduled with France and the United Kingdom, was ready to begin after Assad crossed the red line with chemical weapons in Ghouta. This American retreat partly explains Putin's free hand in Crimea in March 2014. If Moscow wanted to create a bilateral conflict, the crisis in Syria is the very model of what is called a "no-win game," with no real victor and no real change in Syria. The regime of Bashar al-Assad has been consolidated, along with the "useful" Syria and the Syrian army has regained control until December 8, 2024. For almost 10 years, Russia used Syria as a cornerstone of its foreign policy in the Middle East to secure all the necessary elements to assert its dominance in the region: military bases, political legitimacy, and international recognition. Realism in international relations also involves leveraging the temporal variable. For Putin, the time has come to part ways with his Syrian ally on the ground. However, this alliance enabled him to assert his position on the regional chessboard in partnership with Turkey.

Putin intervened in Syria, among other reasons, to prevent Erdoğan from initiating regime change. The deployment in Syria was just one piece of the puzzle, as Russian President Vladimir Putin exerted geopolitical pressure on his Turkish counterpart, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan: "With Syria out of the picture, Russian-Turkish relations will pivot back to their natural geographic fulcrum: the Black Sea region. Erdoğan's choice will not be to take a risk and challenge Russia. Rather, he will continue to act as an intermediary between Putin and the West." (Bechev, 2024).

5.2 Examination of the role of state sovereignty in Russia's discourse

In Russia's discourse, the principle of state sovereignty is a cornerstone of its foreign policy, particularly in Syria. Moscow has consistently invoked the idea of respecting national sovereignty as a guiding principle in its diplomatic rhetoric. This is evident in its steadfast support for the Assad regime, despite Western efforts to shift the balance of power in Syria. By positioning itself as the defender of Syrian sovereignty, Russia also challenges the Western concept of "humanitarian intervention," positioning itself as a bulwark against foreign meddling. The Russian narrative frames the Syrian crisis as a conflict of sovereignty, where the West's involvement represents an unacceptable breach of the international norm of non-intervention.

This rhetoric has resonated strongly within the Middle East, where Russia's emphasis on traditional state sovereignty contrasts sharply with the perceived opportunism of Western interventions. Countries like Iran and Turkey, though at odds on various issues,

have found common ground with Russia in opposing Western-led interventions. By appealing to these shared concerns, Russia has solidified itself as a key player in the region, with its policies grounded in the defense of sovereignty and rejection of foreign imposition. For the Russians, the goal is also to link the Syrian issue with other international issues in order to secure concessions from Washington, particularly regarding the missile defense shield or the Caucasus.

5.3 Ukraine: a comparative analysis

The Syrian intervention must also be viewed through the lens of Russia's broader foreign policy, particularly its actions in Ukraine (Rezvani, 2020; Colin Lebedev, 2022). While the Syrian conflict served as a testing ground for Russia's military strategies and alliances, the situation in Ukraine represents a direct and significant challenge to Russia's geopolitical ambitions. The similarities between the two conflicts are evident in Russia's use of hybrid warfare, which blends conventional military tactics with information warfare, cyber operations, and political influence.

In both Syria and Ukraine, Russia has leveraged its military power, energy resources, and diplomatic channels to assert its dominance. However, the stakes in Ukraine are higher, as the country's proximity to Russia and its aspirations to join Western institutions like NATO present a direct challenge to Moscow's sphere of influence. Syria, in contrast, provided Russia with a more manageable geopolitical arena to test its foreign policy strategies.

From the standpoint of Russian foreign policy, Russia has the chance to challenge Western domination, exert its influence, and alter the balance of power in the area through the wars in Syria and Ukraine. Russia used harsh military methods to back Assad's government in Syria, taking advantage of a drop in United States engagement and justifying its actions as a defense of national sovereignty. Russia uses similar strategies, including as siege tactics and intense shelling, to establish authority and erode opposition in Ukraine. Both wars are prime examples of Russia's approach of reclaiming its dominance in former Soviet and ally areas through military force, using instability as leverage to negotiate geopolitical conditions.

For instance, the siege of Mariupol mirrors tactics seen in Syria, particularly in Homs and Aleppo. Emile Hokayem, an analyst, noted that "Mariupol is Homs or Aleppo in a week rather than three months." The Russian military's approach is a repeat of the brutal methods used in past conflicts, particularly the sieges of Grozny and Aleppo, relying on bombardments and artillery rather than ground operations. This strategy, aiming to break civilian morale and force populations to flee, is documented in *De la Syrie à l'Ukraine, les similitudes des guerres menées par la Russie* (Boy, 2022).

5.4 Reshaping international relations?

Russia's intervention in Syria marks a significant shift in global power dynamics, highlighting a challenge to the unipolar world

order dominated by the United States (Stepanova, 2016). Through its military engagement and diplomatic maneuvers, Russia has reasserted itself as a key player in Middle Eastern affairs, breaking free from the constraints imposed by the post-Cold War order. The question now is if Russia will keep its geopolitical bases or not, shifting the pivots of power to Libya, or remaining in Syria and dealing with new government, in order to prove the legitimacy of its actions for the Syrian people. As Carrère d'Encausse (2010) posed in her 2010 work, "Faut-il encore craindre la Russie?" ["Should we still fear Russia?"], the question of Russia's role on the global stage requires reconsideration, especially in the context of its actions in the Middle East. While the West may still view Russia as a threat, many Middle Eastern countries see its presence as stabilizing, offering a counterbalance to American influence. Indeed, while some Western elites, particularly the neoconservative ideological faction, view Russia as a constant threat, it is clear that the perception of Russia around the world is more nuanced. In the Middle East, Russia maintains diplomatic relations with all regional state actors, despite the Syrian crisis deepening divisions between Moscow and the Gulf petro-monarchies.

This Russian strategy now includes a discourse on a return to "tradition" and the necessity of preserving and respecting national identities on the international stage (Rasplus, 2013). This identity-driven rhetoric, promoting national sovereignty and rejecting foreign interference, resonates in the Middle East and among emerging nations, although it does not receive unanimous support within Russia itself. The long-term question remains whether Russia can maintain its status as a regional power in the Middle East.

6 Conclusion

Russia's intervention in Syria has been a complex and multifaceted operation, driven by strategic, geopolitical, and domestic considerations. The intervention has allowed Russia to preserve a crucial ally, project power in the Middle East, and challenge Western influence in global affairs. By effectively combining military force with strategic diplomacy, Russia has not only secured its immediate objectives in Syria but has also positioned itself as a key player in the region's future. As the conflict continues to evolve, Russia's role in Syria will remain a critical factor in shaping the outcome of the Syrian civil war and the broader geopolitical landscape of the Middle East.

Russia's foreign policy strategy in Syria exemplifies its use of a hybrid approach to address both global and national security challenges. By integrating conventional military force with non-military tactics, Russia has effectively advanced its strategic interests in the region while testing new methods of warfare. The implications of this strategy extend beyond Syria, offering insights into how Russia may approach future conflicts and security challenges. As such, understanding Russia's actions in Syria is crucial for anticipating its future moves on the global stage and developing effective countermeasures.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

RJ: Investigation, Writing – original draft.

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