

# Russian Response to Syrian Crisis: A Neorealist Perspective

Manzoor Khan Afridi\* and Ali Jibran\*\*

## Abstract

*This research aims to study the causes of military intervention of Russia into the Syrian crisis from the perspective of neorealism. Neorealism suggests that great powers are very careful about their structural position in an anarchic international system. This theory opines that self-help is the only rational behaviour of a state for its survival in anarchy. This study found that Russia has larger strategic and economic interests in Syria, particularly the fall of Assad's regime could be detrimental to Moscow, which could threaten its position in international system. The protection of the Russian Tartus naval facility in Syria, sale of weapons, energy interests and a shield against Qatar gas pipeline in Syria are considered as a larger economic interest of Russia in Syria. The research will discuss Russia's strategic and economic interests, which are directly related to its global position, by applying neorealism theory of international relations.*

**Keywords:** Neorealism, Anarchic International System, Relative Gains, Russia, Syria.

## Introduction

Once Winston Churchill said that he could not predict the foreign policy of Russia because foreign policy of Russia is a “riddle rapped in a mystery inside an enigma,” however, the key to solve the mystery was to look for the Russian national interest.<sup>1</sup> The “riddle” behind the Russian military intervention in Syria in September 2015, was a mystery, as it was the first time after the disintegration of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republic

---

\* The author is Head of Department, Department of Politics and IR, International Islamic University Islamabad (IIUI).

\*\* The author is a Ph.D Scholar, Department of Politics and IR, International Islamic University Islamabad (IIUI).

<sup>1</sup> “The Russian Enigma,” The Churchill Society, <http://www.churchill-society-london.org.uk/RusnEnig.html>

(USSR) that Russia intervened militarily in a region far away from its mainland. The best way to solve the “riddle” behind Russian response to the Syrian Crisis is to look for the Russian national interest. The investigation of the national interest of Russia in Syria will suggest that the Russian intervention in Syrian Crisis was not “unexpected.”<sup>2</sup> The current research paper is an endeavour to explore the national interest of Russia behind its intervention in Syria from the perspective of neorealism.

Neorealism suggests that the Hobbesian insights are still relevant in the rivalries of the super powers; patterns of global politics repeat themselves and there is endlessly recurring of events.<sup>3</sup> According to Kenneth Waltz, there is “striking sameness in the quality of international life, through the millennia,”<sup>4</sup> therefore neorealism should be able to explain the logic behind the Russian decision to intervene in Syria by analysing the ‘sameness’ through its theoretical tools. Waltz goes on further and claims that the primary concern of a state is to secure its structural position in an anarchic international world. Structural position is a broader term that entails overall national economic strength, prosperity, security, peaceful coexistence, autonomy, sovereignty and independence.<sup>5</sup> Thus, if neorealism is a good justification for the Russian intervention in Syria then there should be enough economic and strategic interests of Russia tied with Bashar al-Assad regime. In fact, the regime-change in Syria must have detrimental consequences for the Russian national interests; therefore, saving Assad regime will bring positive consequences to the Russian structural position in anarchic international world.

Neorealism assumes that at times, the states secure their structural position through helping their allies.<sup>6</sup> The assumption seems to be fitting in the Russian case. Russia seems to have enough economic and strategic

---

<sup>2</sup> Vali Nasr, “Why the Russians are not likely to Break with Assad,” *Atlantic*, April 11, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/04/russia-tillerson-putin-syria-assad-chemical-weapons/522528/>

<sup>3</sup> Stephanie Lawson, *Theories of International Relations Contending Approaches to World Politics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015), 55.

<sup>4</sup> Scott Burchill et al., *Theories of International Relations* (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 35.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>6</sup> William D. Jackson, “Imagining Russia in Western International Relations Theory,” *Miami University*, 2001 [http://www.miamioh.edu/cas/\\_files/documents/havighurst/2001/2001-jackson.pdf](http://www.miamioh.edu/cas/_files/documents/havighurst/2001/2001-jackson.pdf)

interests in Syria. Syria has been an extensive user of the Russian arms since the Cold War days. From 2007-2012, it purchased almost 78 per cent of its arms from Russia.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, the Russian oil and gas companies have colossal investments in Syria. The proposed Qatar gas pipeline would export Qatar's gas through Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Syria and Turkey to Europe. That plan was rejected by Assad in 2010, as it could be highly pernicious to the Russian economy because it would reduce European dependence on the Russian gas. On the similar lines, Russia owns a modest naval facility in the city of Tartus, Syria. Russia plans to turn it into a permanent naval base, which will play a pivotal role in future. The Russian Federation Maritime Doctrine 2020 envisages the increased patrols of the Russian Navy in the Mediterranean to checkmate the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO).

According to Neorealism, the states should be extremely careful about the relative gains made by the rival states. Some of the friendly regimes of Russia like Muammar Qaddafi in Libya were ousted. The new regimes are more interested in purchasing weapons and doing business with the West, therefore, the US was making serious relative gains. Russia does not want to lose another friendly regime (like Gaddafi) that is vital for its national interests.

The current research paper examines the sale of the Russian weaponry, its investment in energy sector and to foil Qatar gas pipeline in Syria under the ambit of the Russian economic interests in Syria while the importance of Tartus naval facility is taken as strategic interest of Russia in Syria. The causes of the Syrian civil war are not the point of focus of this paper as it is only specific to the explanation of the Russian motives behind intervention in Syria. The paper will give a brief introduction of neorealism, its theoretical framework to explain Russian rationale behind intervention in the Syrian Crisis by looking at economic and strategic interests of Russia in Syria in detail.

---

<sup>7</sup> Falcon Bjorn, "Russia's Economy Interests behind its Risky Military Move in Syria," *Inform Napalm*, May 21, 2016, <https://informnapalm.org/en/russia-s-economy-interests-behind-risky-military-move-syria/>.

## Neorealism

Liberalism became famous in the period from the World War I to World War II when the US President, Woodrow Wilson, attached his hopes with the League of Nations in deterring wars. The liberals accentuate the role of morality and international law in analysing global politics. After the tragic incident of the World War II, the realists blamed the liberals for thinking “how the world ought to be instead of how it really is.”<sup>8</sup>

Realism should not be considered a theory having specific assumptions; rather it emerged from the works of the analysts having diverse style of analysis.<sup>9</sup> The famous American and European realists such as E. H. Carr, Nicholas Spykman, Hans Morgenthau, John Herz, Martin Wight, Raymond Aron, Arnold Wolfers, Norman Graebner, George Kennan, Walter Lippmann and Reinhold Niebuhr contributed a lot to promote realism.<sup>10</sup> Realism considers international relations as an unending struggle among self-interested states; therefore conflict is the salient feature of global politics with little hope of being eliminated from international relations.<sup>11</sup> Classical realism has its roots in history and works of Thucydides, Niccolo Machiavelli and Thomas Hobbes. The classical realists believe that nature of man has not changed since antiquity and he is, by nature, power-seeker and driven by “egoistic passions.”<sup>12</sup> According to classical realists, one should apply human behaviour (individual) at international (state) level to understand international conflicts. Furthermore, classical realists believe that anarchy — that results from the absence of central authority in global politics culminates in security dilemma, which is a condition in which a state renders its search for security highly insecure, which may resort in arms race to reduce the capabilities gaps.<sup>13</sup>

Neorealism is a momentous drift from the ‘inside-out’ approach of classical realism and suggests that state behaviour is not guided by human

---

<sup>8</sup> Joshua S. Goldstein and Jon C. Pevehouse, *International Relations* (Boston, Pearson, 10th Edition, 2013-14).

<sup>9</sup> Stephen M. Walt, “International Relations: One World, Many Theories,” *JSTOR*, Spring (1998): 29-45 (31): 31.

<sup>10</sup> Ole R. Holsti, *Theories of International Relations*, (1-62) 3-4, <http://people.duke.edu/~pfeaver/holsti.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> Walt, “International Relations,” 31.

<sup>12</sup> Burchill, *Theories of International Relations*, 10.

<sup>13</sup> Holsti, “Theories of International Relations,” 3-5.

nature or regime type but by the anarchical international system itself.<sup>14</sup> Waltz, working on the Rousseauian style,<sup>15</sup> proposed that to develop a theory of the international, system-level analysis should be conducted. International system is the result of inter-state interactions and then limits their choice of action; therefore, there is “striking sameness” in states conduct through the millennia.<sup>16</sup> Despite the differences of capabilities, there is little division of labour and differentiation of function among the states.<sup>17</sup> In neorealism, two important concepts are hierarchy and anarchy. According to Weber’s point, as states have monopoly on use of legitimate force within its borders, violence can be dealt with in a state’s border through well-established agents of states. There is no such hierarchy of power at international level; therefore international system is still a fine example of ‘state of nature.’<sup>18</sup> At state level, there is a division of legislative, executive and judicial powers; but at international level, no such differentiation is witnessed and every unit must have to act according to rule of self-help.<sup>19</sup>

John Mearsheimer describes the five fundamental assumptions of neorealism.<sup>20</sup> The first assumption is that great powers are the primary actors in the anarchic structure of international politics. Anarchy does not mean chaos or disorder but it is simply the absence of central authority above the states. The second point is that every state enjoys some military capability and can inflict damage to its neighbour states, however, this capability varies from state to state and amenable to change over due course of time. The third assumption is that states can never judge the intention of other states because intentions cannot be empirically verified. The fourth assumption is that primary goal of the states is survival and all the other goals — economic prosperity, human rights and law and order — are secondary because any threat to survival is a grave concern for all aforementioned goals. The fifth assumption is that states’ behaviour is driven through the logic of rationality. They opt for the choice out of the given ones that maximizes its interests. Such behaviour leaves little room

---

<sup>14</sup> Lawson, *Theories of International Relations*, 52.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>16</sup> Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Boston: McGraw Hill, 1979), 66.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 93-97.

<sup>18</sup> Lawson, *Theories of International Relations*, 55.

<sup>19</sup> Burchill, *Theories of International Relations*, 35.

<sup>20</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, “Structural Realism,” (2006): 73-74, <http://mearsheimer.uchicago.edu/pdfs/StructuralRealism.pdf>.

for ideology in determining the state behaviour in international politics. Moreover, the differentiation among the states is of capabilities not of function.<sup>21</sup> There are not bright chances for cooperation because, in the presence of different capabilities, the states are concerned towards relative gains and losses compared with their opponent countries.<sup>22</sup>

### **Russian Response to Syrian Crisis**

Russia has been a staunch supporter of Assad regime since the popular protests against him in Syria, in 2011. At first, the Russian support was limited to the diplomatic channels and the provision of weapons to the Syrian Arab Army. But, when the Syrian opposition forces and the Islamic State of Iran and Syria (ISIS) were about to vanquish the Assad regime, Russia decided to intervene militarily. At the outset, the Russians declared that their presence in Syria was merely to checkmate the advances of ISIS in Syria. Moscow maintained that the ISIS victory in Syria could bolster the Islamists in Russia; therefore, it was vital to its national interest to thwart this militant outfit in Syria. However, soon it was clear that the real motive of Russia was to save Assad regime from all the opposition pressures.

Here, neorealism offers a novel insight to understand the Russian motives in the Syrian crisis. It suggests that states are always tempted to plunge into a 'preventive war' and strike when they are in relative strength, not waiting for the time when balance of power is finally shifted.<sup>23</sup> The neorealists think that the primary guiding logic for states' behaviour is 'national interest.' The neorealist take meaning of this national interest in a very broad sense and define 'national interest' in terms of survival, relative capabilities, security and power. Construction of this national interest was termed as 'rational hypotheses by Morgenthau.<sup>24</sup> National interest can be understood through Waltz's opinion that the first concern of a state is to maintain its relative position in the anarchical international system. The relative position of the state depends on its strategic and economic interests. The state secures its relative power through internal (military and economic capabilities) and external strategies (forging alliances).<sup>25</sup> Neorealism suggests

---

<sup>21</sup> Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 66.

<sup>22</sup> Burchill, *Theories of International Relations*, 38.

<sup>23</sup> Lawson, *Theories of International Relations*, 53.

<sup>24</sup> Holsti, *Theories of International Relations*, 5.

<sup>25</sup> Lawson, *Theories of International Relations*, 57.

that sometimes states secure their relative position through helping their allies.<sup>26</sup>

From this perspective, the Russian intervention in the Syrian crisis should be having enough strategic and material incentives for protecting the relative position of Russia in global politics. In Syria, Russia seems to be protecting its national interests under the rationale of self-help because the states that cannot protect themselves are exposed to grave dangers.<sup>27</sup> Thus, protecting Assad regime in Syria should be considered as protecting Russian own (national) interests,<sup>28</sup> in other words, its own relative position in international anarchic system. In fact, to protect the state's 'national interests' under the rationale of self-help is the only way to guarantee security in the anarchic international system.<sup>29</sup> In the following section, Russia's interests and economic incentives in Syria will be discussed as a reason of its military intervention in Syria.

### **Tartus Naval Facility**

The Russian naval facility in Taurus, Syria, is the only naval facility of Russia outside the Mediterranean which is used for repair and replenishment. It spares the Russian warships' trip back to the bases located in the Black Sea. Having an ideal location in the Mediterranean Sea, it is considered as a deep-water port that is used for commercial purposes.<sup>30</sup> Father of Bashar al Assad, Hafez Al Assad, allowed the Russians to have port, in 1971, to help the Soviet Navy fleet in the Mediterranean. Like other technical support points located in Ethiopia, Egypt, Vietnam and elsewhere; Tartus naval facility was used to provide technical help to the Soviet Navy fleet in the Mediterranean. After the disintegration of the USSR, the Russian activities at Taurus naval base reduced. However, during the last few years, Russia has been trying to increase its presence at Taurus base.

---

<sup>26</sup> Jackson, *Imagining Russia*.

<sup>27</sup> Lawson, *Theories of International Relations*.

<sup>28</sup> Indrani Talukdar, "Russia's Strategic Interest in Syria," *Indian Council Of World Affairs* (2016): 1-15.

<sup>29</sup> Lawson, *Theories of International Relations*.

<sup>30</sup> Christopher Harmer, "Russian Naval Base Tartus," *Institute For The Study Of War* (2012): 1-6,

[http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Backgrounder\\_Russian\\_NavalBaseTartus.pdf](http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Backgrounder_Russian_NavalBaseTartus.pdf)

The importance of Tartus naval facility is highlighted after the announcement of Russia's Maritime Doctrine 2020 that envisages increased patrols of the Russian Navy in the Mediterranean to checkmate NATO. This doctrine suggests that Russia should have permanent naval bases in Mediterranean to spare its fleets to go back to the Black Sea for refuelling and other purposes. The maritime doctrine accentuates the importance for Russia in the Arctic, Atlantic, Pacific and the Indian Ocean, as well as in the Caspian Sea and Antarctic region.<sup>31</sup> Tartus naval facility will play a pivotal role in the increased Russian role in the Mediterranean.<sup>32</sup>

Despite the fact that the naval facility is situated in the east Mediterranean, Russia wants to have access to the Black Sea. This has become utmost important to Moscow now that Romania and Bulgaria have joined NATO while Ukraine and Georgia have become independent. NATO announced plans to deploy forces in the Azov Sea, which connects the Black Sea through the Kerch Strait (under Ukraine control), has further pushed Russia to extend its commitment in Syria to control the Mediterranean. Because of adverse relations with the West owing to decision of the US to deploy missile defence system in Poland, it was reported that the Russians and Assad regime agreed to permanent conversion of naval facility of Tartus to a Russian naval base for accommodation of the Russian nuclear-armed warships.<sup>33</sup> President Putin vowed to set the Mediterranean as the most important region for the Russian Navy.<sup>34</sup> To manifest the seriousness of Russia to project itself as a great power, Russia plans to spend US\$600 billion for its defence in which its navy will get huge chunk of this defence budget till 2020.<sup>35</sup> The role of Tartus naval facility in the Russian navy's future has been described by Vice-Admiral Viktor Chirkov, Commander-in-Chief of the Russian Navy,

---

<sup>31</sup> Sean R. Liedman, "The Russian Navy is Back," *The National Interest*, September 30, 2015,

<http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/the-russian-navy-back-13974>

<sup>32</sup> Harmer, "Russian Naval Base Tartus."

<sup>33</sup> "Russia Moves Forward with Syrian Naval Base," *The Maritime Executive*, <https://www.maritime-executive.com/article/russia-moves-forward-with-syrian-naval-base#gs.WGe2sqY>

<sup>34</sup> Luke Coffey, "Russia's Emerging Naval Presence in the Mediterranean," *Al Jazeera*, May 27, 2016, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2016/05/russia-emerging-naval-presence-mediterranean-160526074150359.html>

<sup>35</sup> "Russia to Modernise Army for US\$ 600 Billion till 2020," *Russia Today*, September 21, 2010, <https://www.rt.com/news/russia-modernize-army-600/>.



“the base is essential to us, it has been operated (by us) and (we) will continue to operate.”<sup>36</sup> He stated that losing Tartus naval base will be tantamount to the Russian ability as a naval power in the Mediterranean.<sup>37</sup> Therefore, it can be suggested that a friendly regime in Syria is pertinent for the Russian naval presence in the Mediterranean and overall strategic interests in the region.

## Arms Sales

Russia is one of the leading weapon exporter states. According to a report of *Russia Today*, 25 per cent of total weapons sale throughout the world belongs to Russia, making it only second to the US.<sup>38</sup> This sale of weapons is a major contributor to the Russian Gross Domestic Product (GDP), any reduction in weapons sale can pose grave challenge to the Russian economy since it is not diversified like the other major economies: US, Chinese or the West European states. Syria has been an extensive consumer of the Russian arms since the Cold War, but the weapons trade intensified in aftermath of Putin and Assad’ ascendance to power in 2000. Over the last decade, Syria bought almost 10 per cent of total Russia’s international weapons sale.<sup>39</sup>

According to a report of Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Syria purchased almost its 78 per cent arms from Russia from 2007 and 2012.<sup>40</sup> It purchased weapons of worth US\$4.7 billion from 2007 to 2010. It asked Russia for more advanced weapons including Pantsir S1E air-defence systems, two Amur-1650 submarines, Yak-130 aircraft, Iskander tactical missile systems, making Syria the seventh-largest Russia’s

---

<sup>36</sup> Nicholas Kosturos, “What Drives Russia’s Unrelenting,” *Center for American Progress*, August 13, 2012, <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/news/2012/08/13/12027/what-drives-russias-unrelenting-position-on-syria/>

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> “Russia has 25% of Global Arms Sales, Second only to US – study,” *Russia Today*, (2016),

<https://www.rt.com/business/333223-russia-global-arms-market/>

<sup>39</sup> Fred Weir, “Why Russia is Willing to Sell Arms to Syria,” *Christian Science Monitor*, January 19, 2012,

<http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Europe/2012/0119/Why-Russia-is-willing-to-sell-arms-to-Syria>

<sup>40</sup> Falcon Bjorn, “Russia’s Economy Interests Behind its Risky Military Move in Syria,” *Inform Napalm*, May 21, 2016, <https://informnapalm.org/en/russia-s-economy-interests-behind-risky-military-move-syria/>

client.<sup>41</sup> In 2011, it was suggested, in another report of SIPRI that Syria's demand for the Russian-made weapons increased to 580 per cent from 2007 to 2011.<sup>42</sup> Despite massive economic troubles, the Syrian regime is still able to buy weapons due to the support of Russia and Iran. Russia reasoned that it provided the weapons to Assad regime according to the agreements some of which were signed even before the start of the conflict. Iran substantially stepped up its financial support to Assad regime because it fears that some Sunni Arab countries are providing lethal weapons to anti-Assad groups that can turn the balance of power in the favour of Saudi Arabia.<sup>43</sup>

From 2005 to 2010, Russia sold weapons of worth US\$2 billion to the Qaddafi regime. It was reported that Qaddafi was interested in buying more weapons, worth US\$2 billion dollars, prior to his regime fall.<sup>44</sup> Therefore, Russia had to face the loss of about US\$10 billion including loss of other energy and railway contracts. It happened because the new government in Libya bought advanced weapons from France.<sup>45</sup> Therefore, loss of another potential weapon buyer will be a huge blow to economic (national) interests of Russia. This becomes a rational hypothesis, according to neorealism, is to help the beleaguered ally.

## Energy Interests

The Syrian oil and gas sector attracts huge Russian investment in Syria.<sup>46</sup> The fall of Assad regime may bring other global competitors to the Russian companies in Syria, which can prove highly detrimental to their economic interests. Therefore, by protecting Assad regime, Russia has secured its energy interests in Syria. The Russian energy giant, Stroytransgaz, was involved in building a natural gas processing plant in

---

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Nicholas Kosturos, "What Drives Russia's Unrelenting Position on Syria?," Center for American Progress, August 13, 2013, <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/news/2012/08/13/12027/what-drives-russias-unrelenting-position-on-syria/>

<sup>43</sup> "Who is Supplying Weapons to Warring Sides in Syria?," *BBC*, June 14, 2013, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-22906965>.

<sup>44</sup> Dmitry Gorenburg, "Why Russia Supports Repressive Regimes in Syria," *PONARS Eurasia*, June 22, 2012, <https://russiamil.wordpress.com/2012/06/22/why-russia-supports-repressive-regimes-in-syria-and-the-middle-east/>

<sup>45</sup> Bjorn, "Russia's economy."

<sup>46</sup> Talukdar, "Russia's Strategic Interest in Syria."

some 200 km east of Homs in the Raqqa region. Furthermore, the company was providing technical support for the ambitious Arab Gas Pipeline and South Middle Area Gas Exploitation Project-a gas processing plant. Similarly, the company was involved in the “Northern Project,” a gas refinery designed for processing and production of five gas fields in the south-east region of Raqqa; and the gas pipeline between Homs, Aleppo and Idlib.

Tatneft, a Russian energy giant, started pumping Syrian oil through a combined endeavour with the Syrian National Oil Company in 2010. It decided to invest US\$12 million dollars in exploring the wells near Iraq border. Some other examples are Trubnaya Metallurgicheskaya Kompanyia (TMK), a Russian steel pipe manufacturer, ITERA International Group of Companies; a group of gas producing companies, Aeroflot, a national carrier were involved in considerable business in Syria prior to Syrian Crisis.<sup>47</sup> The Russian companies have made colossal investment in Syria worth of US\$20 billion.<sup>48</sup> In July 2015, Russia announced that it would enhance its energy contracts with Syria worth of US\$1.6 billion. Syria signed a contract for 25 years (2013-2038) with Stroytransgaz about the exploration of oil and gas in coastal areas of Syria from Tartus to Banyas covering 2190 square km.<sup>49</sup> This shows that Russia could lose its economic leverage in Syria in case Assad regime falls.

In 2010, the US Geological Survey estimated that massive energy resources might be found in Syria. Around 122 trillion cubic feet of natural gas and 1.7 billion barrels of oil might be found in the Syrian areas of the eastern Mediterranean.<sup>50</sup> According to a report published by *Arab National*, Assad regime had decided to hand over oil and gas resources to Russia in the rebel-held areas in Syria. A Syrian delegation visited Russia and gave the Russians a complete presentation of the prospects of energy in Syria and offered extensive economic incentives. Syrian Foreign Minister, Walid al-Muallam, said, while in Russia after a meeting with the Russian Deputy Prime Minister, Dmitry Rogozin, “we have data that oil and gas deposits on

---

<sup>47</sup> Bjorn, “*Russia’s Economy.*”

<sup>48</sup> Talukdar, “Russia’s Strategic Interest in Syria,” 5.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 3-4.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

a shelf off the coast of Syria have enormous potentials. And we hope to see not only Russian warships in Syria but also platforms for extracting oil.”<sup>51</sup>

Therefore, the regime change in Syria would result in the loss of massive energy interests and energy contracts; therefore, by saving the Assad regime, Russia secured its own energy interests.

### **Russia: Averting the chances of Another Libyan Episode**

Arab Spring was a series of violent as well as non-violent anti-regime and pro-democracy protests in a number of countries of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. As a result of these protests, the dictatorial regimes fell in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen and Libya. The civil wars erupted in Syria and Iraq. Russia has been highly suspicious of this political upheaval and emphasised the role of “external forces” that had vested interests in some of the (Russian friendly) regime falls.<sup>52</sup> From 1990 to 2000, the Middle East was not among the top priorities of Russia as it was occupied with its domestic problems. However, Arab Spring and rise of the Islamists as a result of these revolutions reduced the chances of Russia to recapture its Soviet legacy in the Middle East. Besides, Russia perceived the NATO-driven regime fall of Moammar Gaddafi as the West’s blatant interventionism.<sup>53</sup>

While it is reported that Russia lost US\$4 billion after the fall of the friendly regime in Libya. However, the head of Russia’s Federal Services on Military and Technical Cooperation called this figure merely “nominal” as the real Russian loss amounts to “tens of billions of dollars.”<sup>54</sup> Russia had signed multi-billion dollars arms deals with the ousted Libyan leader

---

<sup>51</sup> “Assad Preparing to Handover Syria’s Energy Sector to Russia,” *New Arab*, February 15, 2016, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/indepth/2016/2/15/assad-preparing-to-handover-syrias-energy-sector-to-russia>

<sup>52</sup> Vitaly Naumkin et al., “Transformation in the Arab World and Russia’s Interests,” *Valdai Discussion Club Analytical Report*, June 2012, [http://vid-](http://vid-1.rian.ru/ig/valdai/transformation%20in%20the%20arab%20world_eng.pdf)

[1.rian.ru/ig/valdai/transformation%20in%20the%20arab%20world\\_eng.pdf](http://vid-1.rian.ru/ig/valdai/transformation%20in%20the%20arab%20world_eng.pdf)

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>54</sup> Alexei Anishchuk, “Gaddafi Fall Costs Russia Tens of Blns in Arms Deal,” *Reuters*, November 2, 2011, <http://www.reuters.com/article/russia-libya-arms-idUSL5E7M221H20111102>

Muammar Qaddafi. The Russian companies, Gazprom, Neft and Tatnef had colossal investments in oil and gas sectors in Libya and signed multi-billion dollars deals with Qaddafi regime.<sup>55</sup> Similarly, the Russian Railways was busy in building railway track from Sirt to Benghazi in Libya amounting to 2.2 billion euro or US\$3 billion dollars. The Russian weapons sale to Libya was almost 12 per cent of the total Russian arms exports in 2010.<sup>56</sup> The economic loss, as result of regime fall of Gaddafi in Libya, worked as an eye opener for Russia and determined the strong Russian position during voting and discussions on a resolution on Syria.<sup>57</sup>

### **Qatar Gas Pipeline**

In 2009, Qatar proposed an ambitious plan for building a 1500 km gas pipeline from Qatar to Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Syria and Turkey. The US favoured the plan as Europe would receive cheaper gas and, more importantly, the European reliance on the Russian gas would be reduced significantly. However, Assad rejected the project in 2009 and showed his interest in signing a new gas pipeline that would transport the Iranian gas across Iraq and Syria to Europe under the Mediterranean Sea. Some project similar to Qatar gas pipeline was badly needed by Europe as it was opined that it had been made hostage to the Russian giant, Gazprom, as it sold almost 80 per cent of gas to Europe.<sup>58</sup> Some analysts are of the view that Assad was pressurised by Putin to reject the Qatar gas pipeline. On the other hand, Iran gas pipeline would also give the Russian gas competition in European markets but the Russian gas companies had lion's share in building the pipeline that might offset some of the losses of gas market share.

The Beta agency termed the refusal of Assad of “powerful pipeline” (Qatar Gas Pipeline) as the primary cause of civil unrest in Syria. The agency quoted Robert Kennedy Jr.'s views in which he said that Syrian civil war did not start when the peaceful protestors stood against Assad regime in

---

<sup>55</sup> Tom Balmforth, “Russia set to Lose Billions in Libya,” *Oil Price*, September 05, 2011, <http://oilprice.com/Geopolitics/Middle-East/Russia-Set-To-Lose-Billions-In-Libya.html>

<sup>56</sup> Anishchuk, “Gaddafi Fall Costs.”

<sup>57</sup> Naumkinet, “Transformation in the Arab World,” 52.

<sup>58</sup> Bjorn, “Russia's Economy Interests.”

2011, rather it began in 2009, when Assad declined to initiate Qatar gas pipeline. The US intelligence agencies along with Qatar and Saudi Arabia started financing opposition groups in Syria to topple Assad regime in Damascus.<sup>59</sup> The Saudi authorities tried their best to refrain Russia from backing Iran-Iraq-Syria pipeline. Meanwhile, Saudi Prince, Mohammad Bin Sultan, ensured Putin that the post-Assad government in Syria would fall in Saudi's hands and his country would ensure that no Middle Eastern country should build pipeline that would traverse Syria and pose challenge to the Russian gas in European gas markets. Yet, on the refusal of Putin to accept the deal, the Prince threatened military action.<sup>60</sup> Therefore, when oil prices were low it was pertinent for the Russian national interests to foil the Qatar pipeline and make it sure that outcomes in Syria should be according to wishes of Russia.<sup>61</sup>

## Conclusion

Power is the currency in episteme of neorealism<sup>62</sup> and great powers are the main players in international politics. Those states should be considered as 'great power' that possess massive economic and military capabilities along with the desire to play a managerial role in international politics.<sup>63</sup> Russia has been a great power since the period of Peter the Great, about 300 years ago. It was a major player in the Seven Years War and primary member of the Concert of Europe. Its alliance with France, in 1890s, is thought to be a major step towards WWI. It played a prominent role in defeating Nazi Germany in WWII. Afterwards, it ruled Eastern Europe through Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact. After the fall of the USSR, it had to redefine itself and find its position in the world. It became weaker than other major powers. However, since the last decade, there has been increased confidence in

---

<sup>59</sup> "Eternal War for Pipelines is what's behind War in Syria," b92, October 21, 2016, [http://www.b92.net/eng/news/world.php?yyyy=2016&mm=10&dd=21&nav\\_id=99470](http://www.b92.net/eng/news/world.php?yyyy=2016&mm=10&dd=21&nav_id=99470)

<sup>60</sup> Nafeez Ahmad, "Syria Intervention Plan Fueled by Oil Interests, Not Chemical Weapon Concerns," *Guardian*, August 30, 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/earth-insight/2013/aug/30/syria-chemical-attack-war-intervention-oil-gas-energy-pipelines>

<sup>61</sup> Fiona Clark, "Putin Calling Strategic Shots in Syria," *DW*, August 27, 2016, <http://www.dw.com/en/putin-calling-strategic-shots-in-syria/a-19504175>

<sup>62</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, "Structural Realism," 2006, 71-88. <http://mearsheimer.uchicago.edu/pdfs/StructuralRealism.pdf>

<sup>63</sup> Burchill, *Theories of International Relations*, 38.

the Russian international behaviour. Carnegie Moscow Centre expert, Dmitri Trenin, said that the period, from 2012 to 2016, witnessed rise of the Russian military because of which Russia felt highly confident.<sup>64</sup> Successful military campaigns in Ukraine and Syria are examples that Russia has re-emerged on the scene of global power politics.

Paul Kennedy suggested that the rise and fall of the great powers is relative to each other and the states that ignore the increase in the relative power of their rivals, will cease to exist as great power.<sup>65</sup> A careful look at the political developments in the Middle East reveals that the relative standing of the US has increased since the last one and half decade with the forceful regime change in Iraq in 2003, regime fall of Muammar Qaddafi in Libya and the new regimes that came in power as a result of the Arab Spring. In fact, the new regimes were extensive buyer of American and the Western weapons. This relative increase in American power occurred at the cost of the relative decline of Russia in the Middle East and North Africa, especially after the fall of Qaddafi, which resulted in huge loss of Russian weapons, energy and infrastructure contracts.

The fall of Assad regime will prove even more detrimental than Qaddafi regime in Libya. It is that Syria is not only an extensive buyer of Russian weapons but Russia also has massive energy and strategic interests in Syria, especially Tartus naval facility. Furthermore, the fall of Assad may culminate in realisation of the Qatar gas pipeline that can be a nightmare for Russia as the pipeline will reduce the European gas dependence on Russia. The fall of Assad in Syria can pose serious threats to relative position of Russia in international anarchic world. Therefore, the Russian intervention in Syria to save Assad regime is entirely a 'rational' move according to logic of self-help under conditions of anarchy.<sup>66</sup>

---

<sup>64</sup> Dmitri Trenin, "A Five-Year Outlook for Russian Foreign Policy: Demands, Drivers and Influences," Carnegie Moscow Centre, March 18, 2016, <http://carnegie.ru/2016/03/18/five-year-outlook-for-russian-foreign-policy-demands-drivers-and-influences-pub-63075>

<sup>65</sup> Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fallof the Great Power* ( Random House, 1988).

<sup>66</sup> Lawson, "Theories of International Relations."