U.S MILITARY INTERVENTION IN SYRIA: A NEO-REALIST APPROACH TO THE POWER STRUGGLE BETWEEN U.S AND RUSSIA

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Abstract

The main purpose of this research paper is a well examined study of US military engagement in Syria. It tries to assess the situation in Syria, where various domestic as well as foreign parties have joined in the civil war to protect or overthrow the regime of Bashar Al-Assad. Syria, thus, has been the center of power struggle between many international actors (notably the United States and Russia) which have competed in the strategy of supremacy in the most toughest and bloodiest version of Arab Spring in the Middle East. And they are Syrians and refugees who have been suffering in the civil conflict in which the U.S. and Russia's political and geo-strategic interests take center stage. With regard to the reasons, developments and results from these elements which are mainly part of the international relations agenda of the Syrian case, the theory of Neo-Realism has been applied to the situation, in order to better compare and contrast the different factors of the conflict. The case will thus be analyzed by focusing on the clashing Syrian policy interests between major powers such as U.S and Russia and their conception of alliances in Syria.

Keywords: Military Intervention, Syria, U.S, Russia, Neo-Realism, Power Struggle.

Introduction

The discussions held on the Syrian Civil War by numerous international relations scholars have revealed a diverse analysis so far. Many experts claim that Assad's complete refusal to withdraw from the war's vital locations in the North and East and the steady retreat from the Syrian military indicate that Al-Nusra, the Free Syrian Army and Democratic Union Party's (PYD) militia forces, may soon topple the regime. Others think that dictatorship continues to resist and gets huge military backing from Russia, thus, enabling it to extend the conflict, until it is devastated by the opposition movement.

The main reason for this continuous debate is the major changes over the last couple of years in the Syrian crisis. The most noteworthy among the reasons is that both political and military forces of Syria have unified to overthrow the regime. While the Free Syrian Army has gained significant victories, the Kurdish PYD holds crucial points in the North as the fight spreads into Damascus with Assad's political and military power centers. Consequently, such on-ground realities have prompted international and regional parties to revisit their policies in the direction of Syria's ongoing civil war.

In the name of tackling the authoritarian regime and establishing a new order, the Western Alliance, for instance, have supported the opposition groups, reminiscent of a likewise alliance in Libya's case. However, in order to ensure balance of power in the area, Russia, Iran and China have attempted to participate more in Syria's growth by supporting the Assad regime. Due to Syria's Mediterranean geo-strategic importance, civil war was not just the issue of Syria, but was also the aim of major states to maintain their Near East strategic interests.

On the one hand, Syrian opposition believed that a peaceful political solution should be preferred, while on the other hand, Assad regime also proclaimed that it is ready to find a political solution if Assad is not considered to be the accountable for the ongoing horrific conflict, as the Western countries say too. The issue stemmed from Syrian allies' 'wait and watch' attitude, in particular Russia, and the failure of UN and other international institutions to take a comprehensive action against the so-called destruction and murder of Syrians under Assad's rule.

According to a UN report, the number of civilian victims at the beginning of 2013 was above 60,000. The reluctance of the international community and Syrian allies have led the Assad regime to act without major international penalties in a broader political arena. He has often repeated that he would fight all peaceful political measures supported by the Western Party to resolve the conflict, as long as the armed opposition continued to play the role of its puppet power. Moreover, he would not lose his power and wage a military fight until he overthrew every Western-supported armed opposition coalition.

The nature of the conflict, the position of various parties, and external attempts by the foreign powers to take part in the Syrian conflict, have significant strategic considerations. It is also important to underscore the impact of the Syrian conflict on nations like Turkey, the only member of NATO sharing a border with Syria.

The purpose of this study is to examine the Syrian Conflict and the power struggle between the U.S and Russia from the perspective of Neo-realism. In particular, this study utilizes the fundamental concepts of the Neo-Realist Theory, such as international system, military security, geo-strategic interests, pursuit of power, material resources, relative advantages, continuous conflict nature, the number of leading powers, the alliance system, and strategic competitions.

A Brief Historical Background to Syrian Crisis

In the Arab world, many uprisings surged in 2010 and people stood against authoritarian governments. The movement is labelled as the "Arab Spring". The uprising started in Tunisia and afterward spread to Syria, Yemen, Libya, Egypt, and Lebanon, where anti-government rebels and regimes violently clashed with each other (Williamson and Abadeer, 2014). The uprisings were perceived as the rejection of authoritarian governments in the Arab world and demanded to bring democratic regimes in their countries (Haas and Lesch, 2013). In the beginning, the movement was renowned and perceived as the end of authoritarianism and tyranny in all over the Middle East and the North African countries. However, the revolutionary movement turned out to be costly because many civilians suffered in their struggle for emancipation from non-democratic regimes. In the uprising, some protests were directed to regime change; other protests were suppressed viciously by their own governments; while some resulted in clashes between anti-government rebels and regime.

Of all the Arab countries, Syria was the most hard hit country by the Arab spring and continues to face its consequences. The conflict, which entered Syria in 2011, was directed towards overthrowing the Assad regime. So far, no party has managed the conflict and claimed any significant victory. The conflict has caused many civilian casualties where many people died, some got wounded, while other were displaced, for instance, about 6.5 million people were displaced and two to three million fled to other countries (BBC, 2013).

The conflict in Syria converted to civil war, leading to desertion from government forces and joining the anti-government rebel forces. The free Syrian army comprised many different groups. Humanitarian disaster was observed by the international community (Lesch, 2013). Although Syrian culture is highly disjointed, the Assad government is still seen as comparatively powerful and secure. Besides rebel's uprising, however, some people too supported Assad regime for the stability of Syria (Amnesty International, 2013). Assad and his family belong to Alawite Syrian minority and many people see Assad as a protector of minorities and different religions in the country. About 75 percent are Sunni Muslims in Syria who are believed to provide no support to Assad regime. Resultantly, minorities in Syria are fearful of Sunni revolution, believing that the Sunnis will take control of the government (Landis, 2011).

Many Syrian people were convinced by Assad that the external or foreign evil hands are responsible for the current crisis in Syria and are suspected for the manipulation and mobilization of the rebel forces. Assad also blamed the external actors for the turbulence, as opposed to intense domestic problems. Elite society and military officials of Syria are comparatively very supportive to Assad regime domestically, while in international community, Syria is backed by China and Russia, whose strong support has been preventing United Nations actions in Syria. Also, the global sanctions have failed to stop conflict and turbulence in Syria as Iran and Russia have been giving material support to the Assad regime (Lesch, 2011).

The issue of chemical weapons is one of the extraordinary chapters in Syrian crisis. Two or more years after the eruption of violence, the United States president Obama addressed the news circulating regarding the use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime. President Obama said that the use of chemical weapons is the red line for us and for the world's security, there would be lot of consequences of using chemical weapons in the Syrian crisis and it would change the US calculus suggestively (Aarts, 2015). Many states have taken this address as a signal for US actions against Syrian government, which are based on uncertainty and weak evidences on the use of chemical weapons. The US, its allies, and the United Nations Commission concluded that Assad regime has used the chemical weapons. Russia has intervened in this issue diplomatically and has prohibited the US to act what was taken by many states as a promised intervention in Syria against Assad regime. Russia has negotiated and made a deal with Assad that obliged Syria to demolish the chemical weapons, thus, preventing an action or international intervention (Blanchar, Humud, and Nikitin, 2015).

Discourse on Humanitarian Intervention

Humanitarian Intervention (HI), a debated topic in international relations, is for human protection purpose. The responsibility to Protect (R2P) is an attempt against the basic principles of state sovereignty. Robert Jackson describes sovereignty as an international agreement expressively based on pluralist beliefs of state's sovereignty, national self-government, and non-intervention from external forces. HI goes straight contrary to global agreement of state sovereignty, below the appearance of civilian protection human rights from their own regime's subjugation (Jackson, 2007).

In the movement of humanitarian intervention, Kofi Annan is known as one of the prominent leaders. He stated that sovereignty is not a license for states to crush on human rights and their dignity (Annan, 1999).

Francis M. Deng contends that the Westphalian system of state sovereignty reduces the efficiency of humanitarian intervention (Deng et al, 2010). This is carried on because the global consent sees sovereignty as offsetting the right of humanitarian intervention. Thomas G. Weiss endures the argument and states that the Westphalian system of state sovereignty makes the impression that states do not essentially require to intervene in other states, thus, subjugation and exploitation are as tolerable norms in utmost cases (Weiss, 2016). Samuel P. Huntington states that the idea of HI is not ethically justifiable and not politically defensible that persons of U.S military forces ought to be killed to avert the Somalis from killing each other (Huntington, 1993).

No one can exaggerate the power of international consent. The current interest in humanitarian military intervention is determined by normative apprehensions (Hehir, 2008). Humans have more respect for their rights in the changing new norms while states shapes their interests and identities. Human rights norms have changed and being shifted to civil population and military persons equally in each and every state. Fresh and changed ideas have more effectiveness over states governments, which they do not consider suitable for

their regimes. The changing international ideas and norms made states more accountable and representatives to serve their own people and protect civilian rights (Annan, 1999).

A substantial matter has been acknowledged by international relations scholars that is ethically hazardous. The ethical hazard in humanitarian intervention is the impression that the HI is to protect, and a group of people will accidently make a group of rebels by reducing the predictable cost of that group (Kuperman, 2008). Robert Rauchhaus further describes it very precisely and states that when a third state in such a situation is involved or provide a security assurance to domestic people or minority in a country, where people want to protect themselves from genocide or atrocity. In some other cases, ethical hazard may create irresponsible actors or rebels who will take benefit from civil war within the country by attacking their own people or government officials, purposely aiming to aggravate retribution against their people, so as to give a way to foreign intervention and achieve their political goals (Rauchhaus, 2009).

Goldstein argues that a profound uncertainty is there in the past because of failure which causes bitterness in humanitarian intervention by the global community. In situation like civil war or atrocity, the United Nations needs the approval from UN security council for intervention in a state to stop genocide, and where the United Nations does not approve the use of force against threats posed by a state, and/or fails to approve the use of force, then the global community has no rights to intervene in a state for human protection purpose (Pattison, 2010).

Condoleezza Rice comments on the interventionist policy and actions of the United States in the following way:

> Humanitarian crises are scarcely humanitarian problems, killing of people, taking their lives and concealment of food are political actions by state or states, when, if the US is unable and is not ready to explain the ongoing political battle and where the US stands, then military may end the conflicting groups for an unspecified time the possibility of misunderstanding the condition that end up in a diverse situations are most possible (Rice, 2000). Rice explained three issues in humanitarian intervention, firstly, when the problem is not defined properly then there is high chances for the ineffectiveness of humanitarian intervention, secondly, the foreign military intervention may lead to the unintentional situations in case there are chances, that both conflicting sides may attack the intervening forces, thirdly, there are national interests behind humanitarian military intervention of states.

There is an another idea for intervention: when states see the cost of intervention that exceed from its benefit, then the chances and possibilities of humanitarian intervention reduce, and states take less interest in stopping the atrocity in a country. Simon Chesterman further explains this that the intervention is just a political will of states and not the sovereignty that regulates the intervention by states. States always feels gratified to intervene and act against genocides. In his arguments, the only reasons behind humanitarian intervention should be

humanitarian. Countries always seek their benefit and less cost of intervention, when there is an exceeding cost than benefit, then states are less interested in intervention (Chesterman, 2001).

Richard Falk argues that difficult resistance of the doctrine of humanitarian intervention was accustomed by states that intervene in other states comportment, a high weight of influence for the need of humanitarian intervention to stop and avoid genocide against people, but they keep the cost of intervention in their minds, which can reduce the possibilities of military intervention and increase the incentives for sanctions, because states always seeks their benefit in military intervention and posing sanctions (Falk, 2014).

U.S Foreign Policy Goals, Strategic interests and Options for Intervention in Syria

In Syria, government and opposition rebel groups were fighting each other and the opposition rebel groups were backed by foreign states (U.S, UK, France, and Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Qatar). In the month of April the situation was more worsened, huge demonstrations were started against government while Assad's regime started actions against the opposition groups, Assad regime used every harsh tactics, used high artillery weapons against civil population, medical persons were targeted who were giving medical treatments to the wound persons, house to house arrest was started, hospitals, mosques, and medical centers were targeted (UN News Centre, 2017).

U.S and European states started actions against Assad's government. They imposed an economic sanction and embargo of arms supply. Beside these actions the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) members were also agreed to condemned the crisis and worse situations in Syria but the members were not agreed on response that how to respond to the Syrian crisis. U.S, other western states and the league of Arab states wanted to remove the Assad regime. U.S and western states drafted a resolution in UNSC which reminded the Assad's regime of its responsibility for the protection of its own civil population and also condemned the human rights violation by the government in Syria (UN Resolution, 2011). U.S and western states drafted a second resolution to condemned the violation against civilians and to give assistance and support to the transitional political movement in Syria (UN Resolution, 2012), the third drafted resolution was for the proposed sanction against Assad's regime (UN Resolution, 2012). Another resolution was passed by the U.S in which U.S asked for UN military observer team for the support of Kofi Annan's six points (SC Resolution, 2012). After all these efforts U.S for the first time intervened in Syria when the chemical weapons were used by Assad's regime against civilian, Assad was reportedly tried to call the incident as a fabrication and justified the use of chemical weapons as response to the U.S missile strikes on Syrian airbases (BBC News, 2017).

Also, in the opening months of the conflict, US-led Western countries felt that Assad could be stepped down like the previous Arab tyrants during the Arab Spring and the new order in Syria could be laid out according to their geopolitical interests. However, as they recognized

Syrian regime had a distinctive military defense capabilities to prolong the fight, they had to alter their approach and began to develop a direct military intervention (Dunne, 2013).

Discussions on the use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime during the middle of the year prompted the idea of US military intervention to safeguard its strategic military interests in the Middle East and to secure the safety of its allies in the region such as Turkey, Israel, Jordan and Lebanon. Following those strong demands, in August the US Congress convened to authorize Obama to intervene directly in Syria. The Congress put out some significant considerations that concern the region's lasting strategic security interests (Pita and Domingo, 2014).

Taking into account the neo-realist assumptions, the American Congress disclosed six clauses legitimizing U.S. military action against Syria. Firstly, the Syrian Chemical Arms Act of 2003 undermines the security and national policy interests, according to the Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Reconstruction Act (LSRA). Secondly, the Assad regime has breached the legal obligations under the UN Charter, the Geneva Conventions, the Geneva Protocol and the Hague Conventions for the Banning of the Use of Chemical Weapons to curtail the Assad regime in the name of preserving global security, and this factor would lead the US to penalize the Assad regime. Third, Syria is also facing severe challenges against the regional security of US partners and their regional stability and safety with the capacity and conduct of weapons of mass destruction. Fourthly, the fundamental aim of US military existence in the ME is to prevent and deter the use of anti-US (mostly Shia) states, such as Syria and Iran, of weapons of mass destruction. Fifthly, in the event that US national security interests are jeopardized, the US president has authorization to employ force. And the US will have the legal right to conduct military action when agreements on the Geneva Process are unilaterally violated by the Syrian regime (Abratt, 2017).

The decision-makers in the United States negotiated five techniques on how to implement the strategies in order to implement the provisions. (1) all forms of opposition movements that react against the regime should be brought together in the framework of a unique Syria Opposition Coalition, (2) extremist and terrorist groups should be isolated from the prospective transition and permanent Syrian governments, (3) all political opposition groups in Syria who share common values and concerns with the U.S. must be financed and equipped, (4) coordination must be strengthened with the allies and partner countries in the region, including Turkey, Israel, Jordan and Lebanon, in order to ensure that order is toppled following Assad's government and (5) measures should be accelerated to limit the support for the Syrian regime from the Iranian government and other fundamentalist Shia associations, such as Hezbollah (Blanchard, and Sharp, 2013).

As can be seen, both the U.S Congress and US politicians seek U.S. national and geo-strategic objectives, which depends on preserving power competition and the perception of alliances. Nor do the US want its strategic enemies in the ME to increase their political power by controlling the Syrian regime, as this is in conflict with critical self-interest. Indeed, the United States government's provisions and techniques reflect the realities of the international

relations system. Here, one of the core pillars of Neo-realism lies in the concept of an international system (Guerlain, 2014). The U.S has, therefore, the power to supervise the evolving geopolitical incidents within the ME by developing current strategies in order to maintain its so-called international leadership position as the only superpower of the post-cold war era (the so-called unipolar order). The United States Government's unilateral decision-making process over their theory of military intervention in Syria best reflects the neo-realist system.

Russian Geo-Political Interests in Syria

While the U.S and Western powers act as strategic actors on Syria, Russia has also sought to serve a counter-strategic actor in Syria in the name of the power balance in the Middle East as a rising 'super-energy power' in the international system and a permanent member of the UNSC. Against the U.S-led Western alliance, Russia wanted to protect Assad's regime from the unilateral intervention by the western states, has also put up a 'informal' alliance system by Russia, Iran and China (may reflect Shanghai collaboration in Syria). In this section of the research, I shall therefore adapt the ideas of the international system, IR polarity, strategic security interests, zero-sum game, resource competition, alliance system and strategic power balance between U.S-led Western alliance and Russia's strategic with Iran and China.

First, at a joint press appearance with Russian President Vladimir Putin and British Premier David Cameron shortly before the G8, Russia's missile-related transfer to Syria underlined its political commitment to Assad. The missile transferring activity was Russia's best message to the West, in which Moscow has shown its determination to Damascus, despite efforts for reconciliation in the Geneva talks, Western States did not cease off weapons assistance from the Syrian adverse militia forces. Those counter ships were Russia's P-800 Onyx rockets which are also referred to be Yakhout rockets. The missiles are equipped with well-developed radar systems capable of repelling any possible naval attack from the coast of Syria. The Western nations that want to launch an army assault against Syrian are well warned of it. In the meantime, when President Putin visited Moscow, he gave a memorandum to President Benjamin Netanyahu stating that the airstrikes of Israel on Syria were simultaneously regarded assaults on Russia. Israel's limited air strikes on particular targets in Damascus have therefore led Moscow to warn Tel-Aviv that the crisis will not grow in favor of the Western states (Ghilès, 2013).

What is the Moscow's motivation for supporting the Syrian regime so strongly? It originates with Moscow's geostrategic interests, including its energy corridors, export markets, and conventional naval policies, in the Mediterranean. That advocates the balance of power and system concepts of the Neo-realism with regard to Russian traditional strategic interests in the region, because, on behalf of the preservation of power to which Russia has traditionally been one of the main parties to the international political system since the end of the 17th century, Russia has collimated the power balance in that region. Since the era of Emperor Petro the Great, who initially sought to extend the naval interests of Russian Empire in the Black Sea and the Mediterranean. For its continued geo-political and strategic goals opposite

to western objectives, Russia's active presence in the Eastern Mediterranean as well as on Syrian territory through the Bosphorus are therefore extremely crucial to preserve its naval activity (Bagdonas, 2012). The presence of the Russian naval station in Tartus, hub of the Assyrian region in Syria, also reflects the zero-sum game for Russian military strategies in Syria that urges Western powers to accept the fact that Moscow needs to be a determining party for any political order in Syria. Russia's naval presence in Syria attempt to become the dominant actor, but in line with the relative gain (or zero-sum game) of Neo-realism, it pursues policy of deterrent against western demands.

Russia's energy interest in the Syrian crisis is clearly based upon the fact that in Moscow's security of energy demand has already been jeopardized in the region, which has its natural gas export pipeline and its markets. The idea of an autonomous Kurdish government being established in the north by the western-backed PYD could, therefore, threaten Russia's energy export corridor in the ME, as western states can transfer North Iraqi oil to these territories which bypass Russia's strategic South Stream pipeline project (Kozhanov, 2016).

In such cases, Russia may later lose its Southern and Eastern Mediterranean energy partners such as Israel, Cyprus, Greece and Italy with a significant crisis in the Mediterranean. Consequently, Moscow has been carefully controlling the process for new sources of Cyprus, and Israel's quest for the Syria case with similar attitudes towards the West. This energy-oriented strategy of Russia thus indicates that if Assad's moves were taken, Western powers would be paved the way for the creation of alternative power channels in the Northern Syria, to offset Russian energy interests in the Mediterranean (Averre, 2019). This energy-based strategic competition between Russia and the West recalls "resource competition" policy in the Neo-realism that is also fueled by the "zero sum" in which both competitive sides try to dominate energy resources and routes in the Middle East.

Regarding the notion, during the Syrian affair, Russia's alliances for Neo-realism, the shipping of sumptuous anti-vessel (Yakout) and anti-aviation (S-300) weapons to Assad and Hezbollah, Moscow has demonstrated its political and military power over Syria. In the meantime, since mid-2013 Hezbollah has waged a civil war in Syria. In fact, the main reason Hezbollah commanders opted to take part in the fight was because the Shia's political dominance and Shia authority were protected from western-sponsored Sunni politics in the region, previously indoctrinated by Iran. Also, it should be noted, that during 2008's invasion of Lebanon, Hezbollah was the only power in the ME that beat Israel. Consequently, these realities have led Moscow to sponsor and arm the Shia political-military organizations which have overlapping interests with Russians against the West. Although Moscow perceives Hezbollah as a non-state 'association' force for its strategic purposes, the Western powers accused the interference by Hezbollah in the Syrian crisis of a terrorist group in the ME (Stent, 2016). Moscow, on the other hand, says that Western countries have already supported al-Free Nusra's Syrian Army, which Russia and its closest ally, Iran, regard as also a terrorist organization. Russia cooperates strongly with Iran for its joint security interests and Hezbollah's military conduct in conflicts.

In fact, Russia is trying to preserve a big gap in the "power balance" policy with the West with this idea of alliance, because losing influence on one of its friends means loose competition between power and the West as well. Russia's idea of the balance of power is therefore a crucial element in the Neo-realism, in which it is particularly interested in supporting its mid-term goals (Zulfiqar, 2018). However, for the long-term interests of Russia, prolonged turmoil remains dubious in Syria where the internal actors and politics are so fractured. Because the Al-Nusra front, the Free Syrian Army and the guerrillas of the Kurdish PYD are still enjoying widespread arms backing from the west to support the war on Russia. Consequently, Moscow's Syria strategy is more focused on the survival of Assad's regime and Hezbollah's fighting to sustain Russian long-term strategical objectives.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Syria has been the hub of power fighting between many big competing countries in the Mediterranean and Middle East, to sustain strategic advantages. The U.S and Western countries are aiming to partition the territory of Syria in three sectors, even if it appears fractured in the short term, to be formed in the post-Syrian Sunni, Nusayri and Kurdish sectors. In the case of success, the ME would build a new political order that would endanger the security of Iran, Russia's most important partner in the region, and the major phase of the USA's 'Great Middle East Project.' Russia, on the other hand, does not want to lose its historic geo-political control over ME via Syria in the maintenance of Russia's strategic objectives with several political and naval privileges. This is because Russia does not want a unilateral western influence in Syria, it either negotiates with the Western countries (as was seen during the Geneva talks in order to share Syrian-pieces) or applies power balance, by rearming both the Syrian military and Hezbollah for the sake of maintaining their political and military dissuasions. Moreover, if Russia does not impede the differentiation of Western energy channels, it will lose its principal energy supplier role, since energy sources from the Middle East are easily absorbed by the divided Syria. The Russian naval and military activity in the Mediterranean will therefore be disrupted. Therefore, because the Syria special place in the area as long as the major states continue to negotiate or compete for their long-term strategic plans on disputes over Syria on how the new order in the ME will be developed, the power and strategy fight over Syria appears to be longer.

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