



Evolution of Syrian Crisis and Analyzing the Role of Russia: A Game Changer

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"If a crazy measure is taken against Damascus, Syria will set the entire Middle East on fire"¹

President Assad in conversation with erstwhile Foreign Minister of Turkey, Ahmet Davutoglu

Introduction:

Perhaps it would not be irrational to claim that most of the countries in West Asia and North Africa (WANA) would have been a much better place to live if the small vendor on the street of Tunisia had not set himself ablaze, becoming a trigger point for an array of uprisings in the relatively status-quoist region. To quote here the former US Ambassador to Yemen, Barbara Bodine, "The Arab world after the Arab spring is a much more complex place."²

No country barring Tunisia has been able to yield the dividends of the people's sacrifice. The story of Egypt is nothing, but back to pre-revolution era and the scenarios in Yemen and Libya are further complex. Iraq is almost a failed state where the northern part dominated by the Kurds has virtually become an independent state. GCC seems to have stemmed the tide temporarily by combined policies of coercion, pecuniary assistance, cooption and sectarian ploys.

But the Syrian situation has evolved in a manner in the five years that has changed the geopolitics of the region and, perhaps, its President Assad has rekindled the cold war rivalries between Russia and America to stymie international intervention.³ Not long after the Arab uprising reached Damascus in mid of 2011 and before opposition forces could unite themselves to confront minority Alawite regime of Assad, Syria had become a proxy for regional rivals (Iran and Saudi Arabia), and later morphed into a hub of global politics.

What has changed the character of Syrian crisis altogether is growing assertion of Russia in Syria, which was almost invisible on the global political sphere after the disintegration of erstwhile USSR. No doubt, Russia has not been as passive as many assume and there are several historical and strategic factors, which have shaped the Russian political contour in the recent past. When Russia vetoed four UNSC resolutions along with China against Assad's regime, one had assumed that it was merely a reflection of Russia's disillusionment with the western block and their hegemonic political behaviours in Libya when NATO-backed forces not only removed its ruler, but eventually killed him also.

Syrian Crisis and External Powers: Violence, Intervention, Diplomacy and the Stalemate

Nothing can prove the old adage that "there can be no war in the Middle East without Egypt, but there can be no peace in the Middle East without Syria"⁴ truer than the current crisis of Syria. The trajectory of Syria is marked by regional rivalry and all sorts of interventions making it a strategic lab for ideological, sectarian and ethnic cleavage and breeding ground for a new set of fault lines.

There was not much known at the beginning of 2011 about Syria. As late as 2011 only, a Vogue magazine introduced the wife of President Assad, Asma as "a rose in the desert and the first lady of the safest country in the Middle East."⁵

So far, the civil war in Syria has killed more than 300,000 people⁶ and the health and education sector has been completely demolished and the UN estimates that half of the population is in need of human aid.⁷ According to a report, 88 per cent of the hospital

services have been destroyed in the country and one report estimates that more than thousands of doctors belonging to an organization of human rights have been killed so far.⁸

Syria has emerged as a unique case in the span of almost five years where multiple sets of actions ranging from diplomacy to violence to interventions to division among opposition groups to the creation of moderate opposition versus extremist opposition to division among the global powers over the fate of President Assad have been taken.

The modern Syria has an Alawite, a branch of Shiite Islam, at the top social echelon. They are the largest minority in Syria and make around 12 per cent of the total 23 million population. The vast majority of the population hails from the Sunni sect, who constitute around 75 per cent and out of this number, around 10 per cent are Kurds, an ethnic group scattered across Iran, Turkey, Iraq and Syria, estimated to be 30 million.⁹

It all began with the arrest of fifteen school children in March 2011 and those boys were from the southern city of Dera'a.¹⁰ On the very next Friday of protest, security forces killed four of the protestors and it provoked furious reaction in other cities of Syria like Homs, Hama and Damascus.

Very soon, different cities witnessed well-organized state violence twined with sectarian and communal mobilization of the people. It was the killing of more than hundred Sunnis in the town of Houla on June 26, 2012, which sectarianised the war in Syria. The UN investigated the crime and it suggested that none other than the state apparatus had killed hundreds of women and children.¹¹ In July 2012, the Red Cross declared that entire country was embroiled in a civil war which meant that both sides were subjected to Geneva Convention regarding the war crimes.¹² What captured global attention over Syria was the use of chemical weapon by the regime in the suburb of Damascus in eastern Ghutain in the night of August 21, 2013 killing 913 people including women and children.¹³

According to Human Right Watch and other Arab organizations, the situation in Syria is much graver than what one had experienced during the civil war in Yugoslavia in 1990s. A report of National Reconciliation Council indicates that there were 37,000 cases of

rapes in city of Damascus only.¹⁴ The UN Secretary General summed up his observations at the plight in Syria in the following word during a visit to the memorial for the victims of the Serbian massacre in the former Yugoslavia, “I do not want to see any of my successor after twenty years visiting Syria, apologizing for what we could have done now to protect the civilians in Syria.”¹⁵

Different sectarian militias too emerged in Syria embarking either to consolidate the regime or to dislodge it. According to report published in Syria, there are dozens of prominent Shiite militia fighting alongside the Syrian army to eliminate the opposition. These are *Afghan Fatimid*, *Iraqi Abbas Brigade*, *Mahdi Force of Iraq*, *Iraq Martyr Brigade*, *Iranian Revolutionary Guard*, *Zulfiqar Brigade* and *Hezbollah of Lebanon*,¹⁶ in addition to *Quwat-al-Ridha*,” which is in Homs and itself is reportedly created by Hezbollah.¹⁷ There are other non-state actors like *Jubhat-al-Nusrah* (Victory Front), which announced itself to be Al-Qaeda affiliates in Syria, *Jeshul-Islam* (Force of Islam) and *Jeshul-Fatah* (Force of Victory). These groups, in one way or the other, enjoy the support of regional players. For instance, Saudi Arabia is reported to have created *Jeshul-Islam* and later they created *Jeshul-Fatah* as well.¹⁸

The involvement of regional players like Saudi Arabia and Iran apart from Turkey has been another feature of lingering crisis in Syria. The Pandora box of Shiite-Sunni divide has once again opened after Iraq and now Saudi Arabia seems to be interested to turn the clock back.

The *realpolitik* of Iran involves increasing its regional hegemonic position and reducing the ability of other competitors, especially Turkey to challenge its new assumed roles.¹⁹ The head of US military Central Command in a hearing said that that collapse of Assad’s regime would be a biggest strategic setback for Iran in twenty five years.²⁰

Money and arms were handed over to the opposition groups in Syria by the wealthy nation of the Gulf like Qatar and Saudi Arabia. Opposition groups are dominated by many leaders, but no one can tell who is fighting whom. According to an UN official quoted by Paul Danaher, “Even the proxy war is not coordinated there. The Turks are supporting their

own clients, Qatari its own and Saudi its own and it is very destructive.²¹ Another UN official claims that the Qatari government is pushing for an Islamic state run by the MBH in Syria, which is different from the objectives of Saudi Arabia-backed Salafist. The Saudi government is more concerned about Iran and that is its biggest monster in the present equation.

Turkey is another major power in the region with its own strategic ambition. It announced to cut its ties with Syria in September 2011. Turkey was very instrumental in the formation of a series of anti-Assad groups like Free Syrian Army (2011) under the command of fugitive Brigade General Salim Idrisi;²² Syrian National Council (SNC) in Istanbul after Hillary Clinton met with some exiles in December 2011.²³ Turkey was also instrumental in the formation of National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces in November, 2012 in Qatar.

Turkish F-4 Phantom Jet was shot down by Syrian air forces and again in February, 2104, Turkey shot down Mig-23 of Syria. In October, 2012, Turkey intercepted a plane carrying arms to Syria from Russia. Turkey has been a gateway to send the anti-Assad rebel forces in Syria and is reported to be imparting the training to them in Ankara. Turkey's interest in supporting the Islamist lies more in its objective of undermining the Kurd rebel forces in Syria in the form of PYD. A religious affairs directorate informed that the Military Intelligence of Turkey would be deployed to coordinate the extremist Islamist to rein the Kurds. An opposition member in the Turkish parliament writing in *Insurgentelligence* accuses Turkey along with NATO of harbouring ISIS²⁴ and estimated the quantity of ISIS oil sales in Turkey at about \$800 million—that was over a year ago. According to another report of *Al-Monitor*, in search of a truck going to the Syrian border, more than six metallic containers of 25-30 missiles, 20-25 crates of ammunition with the help of Turkish Military intelligence was going to Al-Qaeda in Syria.²⁵

The key political and diplomatic highlights of the last five years are as follows:

- In May 2011, the US imposed arm embargo against the Assad regime and froze the wealth of three senior Syrian officials.

- European Union also put ban on arm supplies to Syria and oil import from Syria to EU was banned in September 2011.
- The US is reported to facilitate the Gulf-purchased weapons to give it to Syrian rebel forces.
- In July 2011, the US said that Assad has lost the legitimacy to rule and on February 3, 2012, Obama said that Assad must halt his campaign of killing innocents and stop crime against his own people. He must step aside to allow democratic transition to proceed immediately.²⁶
- In August, 2011, majority of the EU nations demanded Assad's removal and in April 2012, France, UK, Italy, Germany, Spain, Canada and Australia expelled the Syrian diplomats expressing their anger over the regime's atrocities.
- In February 2012, UNSC passed a resolution calling Assad to step down, but was vetoed by Russia and China.
- In April 2012, the UN Human Right Council alleged President Assad of using military force and accused him of war crime, who is involved in blood bath.
- In September 2012, \$ 45 Million aid of non-lethal weapons announced for the first time by the US to the rebel forces and later the aid was increased to 500 million in 2014.²⁷ In January, 2013, another \$ 60 million medical and food aid was provided by the US.
- In March 2013, the U.S and Britain decided to provide non-military aid to rebel. Britain was doing it, but with a sense of deniability and there is a report that Britain was financing FSA with the help of Saudi Arabia.²⁸
- US President asked EU in May 2013 to end its arm embargo against the rebel forces and in April, 2013, the US Secretary of State in a meeting in Turkey announced another package of \$ 123 million for non-lethal weapons to the opposition forces.²⁹
- UK Prime Minister Cameron proposed to attack Syria, but the voting in Parliament blocked the move.³⁰
- Arab League came up with a Peace Plan in November 2011, seeking Assad to remove all military establishments from the civilian areas, but the plan failed and the Arab League suspended Syria. Reacting to the decision of Arab League, President Assad said, "Can a body live without heart? Who said that Syria was a throbbing heart of

Arabism, it was not a Syrian, it was President Abdel Nasser and this is still true.... without Syria, the Arab league is no longer Arab.”³¹

- In January 2012, Arab League for the first time asked Assad to resign. In the same month, Arab League decided to call back its observer mission from Syria. Arab League also called UN and international community to take the determined and necessary action against the culprit of the crime of using the chemical weapons. Arab League Foreign Minister said that those responsible for the attacks should face the trial as the war criminals face.³²
- In June, 2012, an agreement was reached in Geneva when in UN Security Council decided that at least a transition should occur in Syria. But it could not be complied because Assad’s supporters in Iran told that he must stay in power until his term ends in 2014.
- Both United Nations and Arab League in April 2012 nominated Mr. Kofi Annan, former UN Secretary General, as a joint envoy to Syria. Kofi Annan resigned in August, 2012 after his plan failed because both Russia and China imposed vigorous modification on the text of the plan.³³
- In February 2014, Lakhdar Brahimi, a reputed diplomat, was named envoy to Syria. But he also resigned on 13 May 2014 showing his frustration with the deep rooted division among the Arab world and among the warring factions. His resignation was regretted by the UN Secretary General who termed it as “a failure of us in face of the worst humanitarian crisis.”³⁴
- The UN-sponsored Talk in Geneva between the representatives of the regime in Syria and the opposition forces was held in January 2014, but it failed to make any headway and suffered the fates of all past initiatives. Another round of Geneva Talk was held in February 2014, but it also failed to bring out a permanent solution to the crisis. The most striking difference was over the future role of Assad in the transitional government of the country.
- In this hitherto long series of diplomatic initiatives, the last collective effort was made at the behest of Russia under the auspice of the UN at Vienna on November 14 2015. The resolution 2254 was unanimously approved with no mention of President Assad. The UNSC resolution stipulated that the Syrian future will be decided by Syria

and the time frame of talk was fixed for January 2016. Unlike in Geneva I and Geneva II, at Vienna, Russia was at the helm of affairs and it seemed that they were in a position to dictate the diplomatic terms on the table.

- Saudi Arabia hosted a meet of Syrian opposition groups in Riyadh to appoint the delegate-members representing the Syrian oppositions in the forthcoming talk with the regime of Syria, but Russia and Iran said that it was not an honestly-brokered deal by Saudi Arabia. Their major objection was over the inclusion of those Syrian opposition blocks, which both Russia and Iran perceived to be the terrorists.

The more regional intervention was growing on the parts of Gulf States and Turkey, the more the US was subjected to mounting pressure to lead the war against Syria for the removal of Assad. But President Obama was virtually opposed to actions in Syria without international sanction. It was perhaps reflective of his non-overarching strategy in West Asia.

President Obama is reported to have told his Secretary of State that he did not want to take the lead because he knew that he could not see a happy ending.³⁵ Moreover he did not want to own an additional problem in election years. In January 2013, Obama said, reacting to pressure to attack and arm the rebels, "I have to ask, can we make the difference in that situations. Would a military intervention have an impact? What would be the aftermath of our involvement on the ground? How do I weigh them – of thousands killed in Syria versus the tens of thousands currently being killed in Congo"?³⁶

One of the Professors on International politics commented, "No one can impose a solution. We tried to do this in Iraq and Afghanistan and Obama just does not want to get involved. Syria will have to find their George Washington in a sense. America cannot do that."³⁷

The US Secretary of Sates, Kerry was chided by Qatari Prime Minster during his first visit following the civil war in Syria. The Prime Minster of Qatar lamented the reluctance on the part of US administration and said that some rocket-propelled grenades will not threaten the world order.³⁸

The US strike seemed imminent in the aftermath of the use of chemical weapons by the regime of Syria. Mr. Obama had already announced that it would be a red line for United States and had told about seeking Congress approval. But the crisis was averted with the Russian diplomatic efforts. In August 2013, the Human Rights Watch had stated that the regime had used the chemical weapon and weapon grade nerve agent containing Sarin was also used in the attack.

Arab World and the Cold War and Post-Cold War Era

Perhaps nothing characterizes more candidly the second half of the twentieth century world politics than the Cold War between two ideological and military camps of erstwhile USSR and United States of America. It was not merely a Cold War between two global powers, but moreover, a mutual rivalry, which shaped the politics of their allies and foes together engendering the politics of wars, tactical alliances, regional encampment, collective militarization, regime change, emergence of proxies, secret operations, creation of non-state actors, propping of army regimes, endorsement of Islamic ideologies and promotion and financing of Jihadism across the globe.

The same holds true for West Asia when it comes to the encounter of the region with the Cold War politics. Moreover, the presence of oil and gas added an additional dynamics to the Cold War politics in the region whose impacts have lasted longer than the Cold War itself. From the birth of Truman doctrine in 1947 to the Eisenhower doctrine of 1957, they have all shaped the US policy in West Asia. The doctrines were primarily aimed at containing the influence of Soviet ideology and promoting the US military and economic interests in the region. A decade later, it was the Nixon doctrine of “Twin Pillars” offering economic and military assistance to Iran and Saudi Arabia.³⁹

The region’s importance for the US lies in direct access to two-thirds of the world known petroleum reserves in the region, long standing commitment to security and well being of Israel as former Secretary of State, Kissinger portrayed Israel as America’s regional policeman against the Soviet Union.⁴⁰ The stability of US’s traditional Arab allies, particularly Saudi Arabia, Gulf Sheikdoms also determine region’s importance for the US.

In fifty years history of the Cold War, every crisis in West Asia was a test for the military, strategic and diplomatic strength of either the USA or the Soviet Union, be it the toppling of the democratically elected government of Prime Minister Musaddiq of Iran in 1953, 1967 Arab-Israel war, 1967-70 war of attrition, 1973 Israel-Egypt war, Jordan crisis of 1970 or oil embargo and numerous subsequent issues.

The effect of the East-West rivalry was to suppress the emergence of democracy by promoting army regimes or strengthening the hands of executive authority of the Arab rulers.⁴¹ The adverse attitude of the US to democracy was fully utilized by the military rulers of the Arab, who dismissed democracy as misguided and a cut throat system where the biggest dog eats the rest.⁴²

Perhaps the end of Cold War ushered in solely an America moment in the Arab world. The philosophy of pre-emptive strike, war against terror, regime changes, human rights campaign, weapons of mass destruction, axis of evil and disregard for the global institutions, like the UNO were few of the additions that the international order experience for the first time. While other parts of the world witnessed the wave of democracy, but for Arab, it was a phrase of “Arab Exceptionalism” and people studied it as it was a supernatural phenomenon.”⁴³

The Gulf war of 1990-91, the incident of 9/11 and resultant US War on terror, US-led war against Iraq and Afghanistan, the departure of Saddam and apparent defeat of al-Qaeda and Taliban were some of the turning points in the global politics, which left deep scars on the regional politics.

As far as Russia is concerned, its presence in the region is not new and one knows very well about Russian relations with Egypt back in the ‘50s and the ‘60s and how difficult it was in the ‘70s, (after President Sadat came to power in Egypt) and then later with Iraq and with Syria where Syria became the major Arab country in alliance with Russia.

It was under the Bathist party, which laid the foundation of close military, strategic and economic ties between the two. The relation between them goes back to the pre-

independence days of Syria, when the two signed a secret agreement in 1946. The agreement called for the support of USSR to Syria in the international arena and military help in the foundation of Syrian army.⁴⁴ In 1950, a non-aggression treaty was signed, which was an outcome of erstwhile context and again the Baghdad Pact of 1955 and Suez crisis of 1956 reinforced the relations between the two.

After coming to power in 1971, Hafiz Assad sought more economic and military assistance from the Soviet Union. It was because Syria had modelled its military and economy after the style of USSR to make use of the aids from the eastern bloc.⁴⁵ Moreover, Russia wanted to have its presence in the eastern Mediterranean to maintain nuclear balance.

Throughout the decade of 1980s, almost all economic and military needs of Syria were covered by Russia and a comprehensive deal was signed in 1980 immediately after the Camp David Accord, which had changed the architecture of relationship between the Arab world and two rivals of the Cold War. The agreement of 1980 stipulated that in case of peace and security threat to any of the party, both will promptly contact each other. According to the annexure of secret protocol of 1980 agreement, Russia would come to assistance in case Syria is attacked by Israel. Russia had sent its military advisors along with fighter planes to Syria after they were ousted by President Sadat of Egypt in 1971.⁴⁶

But the end of Cold War changed the relationship between the cold war allies and relations between the two were now being defined and signified more in economic terms. Russia established diplomatic ties with Israel and Syria also showed the same estrangement to its close ally by joining the US-led Gulf war of 1990-91. The relations further deteriorated after Syria refused to extradite the Chechen rebel group to Russia in the year 2000.

But the relationship again revived after the coming of President Putin and Bashar Assad to the realm of power and both tried to take back the relations to the days of Cold War era. This new relationship was impelled by the changing strategic scenarios in form of

enhancing military intervention of the US and its allies in Iraq and Afghanistan and growing instability in the region.

Both surrounded each other in order to act as a bulwark against the rise of radical Islamists, which has been posing a threat to the stability in Russia, northern Caucasus and parts of Central Asia. Syria has historically remained an anchoring point for Russia to expand its strategic influence to Syria along with the other countries of the region and it is also the biggest market for Russia's weapons and ammunitions.

Analyzing the Roles of Russia

In the preceding section, we have seen how all the diplomatic efforts both at regional and global level failed completely to bring the Syrian war to an end. The following section will analyze the role of Russia in Syria and how it has confronted the West both diplomatically and strategically.

Putin's supporters see him as a challenger to US's everlasting hegemony over the region. If the intervention is not an attempt to revive the Cold War as many claim, of course, it is a demonstration of Russia's new strategic strength to break the unchallenged hegemony and unilateral actions on the part of the US, the world has been witnessing. Mr. Putin through his actions is seen not as the heir of the Czars, but of the former Soviet Union and its role as a counter-balance to US-led Western influence.

Some analysts have pointed out that long standing defence ties between Russia and Syria, importance of naval base in Tartus and the selling of Russian weapons to Syria are the factors for Russia's support but the real story is more than this. Russia's foreign policy is back to an era of Cold War when it had extended all supports to its clients, be it in Africa or Asia and Latin America to confront the influence of the United States.

Since the inception of the crisis in Syria, Russia and Iran are credited with a high degree of influence and they have become close allies and strategic backers. Russia's support to Syria has always remained crucial because of its veto power. The UN on Syria

has largely failed because of its dependence on the collective decision of UNSC permanent members. For Moscow, the Syrian crisis, together with the Iranian case provided an unexpected room to act decisively in the global power competition.⁴⁷

The intervention of Russia in Syria was not something of an overnight development, but it was in the offing gradually and steadily. Its strategy in the case of Syria was based on realism and the experience of last two decades of world politics.⁴⁸ Russia's policy since its inception in Syria has been marked by broadening its circle of engagement by seeking the cooperation of Iran and strengthening the case of Kurds in Syria and there are reports that Russia hosted a delegation of a pro-Kurdish Democratic Union Party of Syria in recent weeks.⁴⁹ Russia sought an unprecedented level of cooperation both from China and Iran and both extended cooperation on Syria and both invested heavily in strategic, political and diplomatic terms. For Iran, it was to strengthen its hold in the region as a Shiite power along with economic interests and for China, it was initially the economic interest, but now seems to be expanding because of growing ISIS threat, which later might extend into geostrategic interests.

As a result of their increasingly closer strategic interaction and partnership in global affairs, Russia and China stepped up making joint plans and actions to strengthen mutual security and international stability. This is obvious from the position that each country takes on territorial integrity and on ways of dealing with the conflict in Syria.⁵⁰ Damascus has been the traditional terminus node of the ancient Silk Road, which indicates that China sees Syria as an important trading hub. With the initiatives of One Belt One Road and the Silk Road, it is important for China to have a stable Syria.⁵¹ In addition, both Russia and Iran have held firm in their support for Assad and both portray their support to Assad as the principle stance against foreign intervention and the Salafist respectively and in Iran's case, it is the US and the Israel too while President Putin sees the Syrian case as an internal affairs and the use of violence by the regime was in response to a threat.⁵² One common factor between Russia, Iran and China, which is very important, is the inability of the West and its liberal ideas to penetrate in their countries. They are against regime changes. Interference from the West based on democracy, human rights and other liberal ideas

poses questions to these three regimes, which make them uncomfortable in their own home.

For Russia “regime change” in Syria has always remained a red line. Perhaps Russia’s vehement opposition to ‘regime change’ is primarily motivated by the past bitter experience in the region. Of late, the US has frequently resorted to the policy of regime change and succeeded in Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya and in some countries it could not achieve the objectives. The same motive of the US in Syria buttressed Russia’s fear and it viewed that regime change would bring the pro-West regime like what was seen in Iraq and Afghanistan. The new regime would not be merely pro-West, but it would be very close to the Gulf nation because the GCC’s anti-Assad campaign is largely aimed to install an anti-Iran regime to undo the existing strategic structure. The removal of pro-Iran regime in the form of Assad became more critical for GCC after the departure of Saddam Hussein of Iraq. Saudi Arabia will be able to save the face if Assad steps down. However, Iran could not like the scenario because it has expanded its influence in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon through its Shiite network. Further, a major power like Russia is inclined to put its own self-interest front and centre. In the absence of any tangible alternative in Syria, Russia would not like to see any replacement given the past experience in Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya where only instability and the collapse of the state institutions were witnessed. Russia would not like to lose its strategic ally in the form of Syria and nor would it prefer an anarchic situation not far away from its own region.

The constant low oil price in the global oil market may partly be attributed to the crisis in Syria. It is being truly seen as a part of geopolitics in the region linked to the Syrian crisis and subsequent Russian intervention. There are reports of Saudi Arabia, a global power in oil market, exerting pressure on Russia through the ‘weapon of oil’ at a time when Russia along with other OPEC nations are reeling under the effect of plummeting oil prices while there is no talk of lowering the production. One Saudi diplomat said that if oil can serve to bring peace in Syria, I do not see how Saudi Arabia would back away from trying to reach the deal.⁵³ One does not know how much Saudi Arabia is likely to gain as ancillary diplomatic benefit by allowing the price stay low. In near future, it does not seem feasible that oil politics would prompt President Putin to change the stance in Syria

because the US and EU's sanctions against Russia on Ukraine did not affect its military involvement.

Russia along with China not only vetoed the resolutions asking President Assad to step down, but equally it forced several modifications in the resolution framed to condemn President Assad and give a clean chit to the rebel forces in Syria. Vetoing of four resolutions by Russia and China was termed by the US an attempt by Russia to undermine the legitimacy of the UNO.⁵⁴ President Putin admonished the UN and its members several times to see Syrian situation in its totality.⁵⁵ He also said that it is for the country to decide the fate of the nation. Russia vetoed a resolution that would have sanctioned Assad regime. More recently, the Russian statement also condemned the language of proposed UNSC resolution because it appeared to criticize only one side failing to note rebel group's use of human shields.⁵⁶

Few of the UNSC resolutions like (2042 and 2043) were adopted unanimously in 2012 and 2013. The resolutions called for appointing Kofi Annan as joint UN-Arab League Envoy to Syria and sending UN Supervisory mission in Syria respectively. In August 2015, another UNSC resolution (2235) was passed to identify the perpetrators of the crime of using chemical weapon in Syria in August 2013, but it was short of specifying what action will be taken against the culprits.⁵⁷

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov argued that all the resolutions absolutely rule out any use of force or any application of Chapter VII (of the UN Charter). He said that any possible use of force in the future under Chapter VII will need a new resolution, if there is "convincing and unequivocal proof" of non-compliance.⁵⁸ Russia's demand is motivated by its principle of non-intervention in the domestic affairs and respect for national sovereignty.⁵⁹

One of the experts on the Russian affairs echoed the same feeling when he said, "Russian view about the world order is based on very negative attitude towards any sort of intervention without direct, clear mandate from Security Council of the United Nations and respect to national sovereignty, non-use of force unless it's sanctioned by Security Council

and, of course, the rule of international law. And so, it's well known – so it's a matter of philosophy than the matter of pragmatic interests.⁶⁰

Russia's concern is more reflected in legitimizing selective application of the international law where Russia and its close allies from the former Soviet space might be subjected to similar military foreign interventions perhaps with the consent of the UN. Russian officials have explicitly stated that their opposition to the UNSC resolution sanctioning the regime of President Assad is a response to the West's use of UN resolution against Qaddafi to eventually overthrow him.⁶¹

On the same issue, one of the experts on Russia, Vitaly Naumkin said in Brookings Doha debate that Libyan syndrome is still available in Russia. He said, "I can tell you that when Russia abstained from voting on Resolution 1973, this decision let no-fly zone pass through Security Council. Later this decision was broadly criticized in the Russian public opinion. Even Russian President Medvedev was criticized openly for his decision, and the overwhelming view was that Russia was cheated by our partners and no-fly zone turned into direct military intervention."⁶²

One of the Russian diplomats said, "We were betrayed in Libya. This has gone beyond the matter of Russia's interest; now it is a matter of ego. This time Russia shall not surrender for low price as it did in case of Libya."⁶³

Expressing similar feelings, one of the Chinese experts said, "We feel that we have been cheated over the establishment of non fly zone in Libya. The West hoped that what happened in Libya would happen in Syria. But they know little about Islamic sectarian policy. Syria is not Libya and the situation in Syria is much more complicated."⁶⁴

The most important Russian diplomatic intervention came when President Obama had called the use of chemical weapons in August 2013, as a 'red line' and both the US and France had threatened air strikes against Syria for using chemical weapons. The military strike seemed imminent after seeking congressional approval for the same. But in G-20

Summit of 2013, both President Putin and Obama discussed the idea of putting Syrian chemical weapon under international control.

Meanwhile, Russian Foreign Minister announced that Syria had agreed to do the same, which led to the Framework for the Elimination of Syrian Chemical Weapons. Russia proposed four-stage plans on Syria, starting with Damascus becoming a member of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW). Then Syria would declare the location of its chemical weapons arsenals and where they are made. The third step would include allowing OPCW inspectors into Syria to examine them. The final step would be deciding, in cooperation with the inspectors, how to destroy the weapons.⁶⁵

The process started in December 2013 with the help of Russia, China, Italy and other Western countries. The latest update on it was reported by *Sputnik* (Russian newspaper) that around 98 per cent destruction of the chemical weapons arsenal is complete.⁶⁶ For Russia, President Vladimir Putin was able to avert the attack on Syria from the US and for the US, this initiative saved Barack Obama from taking military action.⁶⁷ In 2013, Russia Foreign Minister is reported to have told America, "Learn its lesson."⁶⁸

In another diplomatic rebuff to the US, France and Britain and other states on February 10, 2014 Russia and China did not attend a negotiation on a draft UN Security Council resolution to boost its aid access in Syria. Russia's UN Ambassador, Vitaly Churkin, asserted that a pragmatic approach was needed to the crisis and that any resolution

improving the condition of Syrian people and not aggravating the situation further will be supported by everybody involved.⁶⁹

Russia actively promoted the 2nd Geneva meeting in February 2014, in order to lead the initiative on Syria issue and, on the other hand, it started to establish a permanent fleet in the Mediterranean and scaling up assistance of the S-300 anti aircraft missile system and Ruby anti-ship missiles to the regime of Syria that was gradually changing the rules of the game.⁷⁰ This move was followed by transferring its Asia Specific fleet in water in the

environs of Syria, a move that was regarded as a strong warning to the West not to intervene in the Syrian civil war. On January 17, 2014, Reutter quoted that in recent days, Russia has increased its military supplies to Syria in the form of armed vehicles, drones, precision-guided bombs and various other military equipments.⁷¹

The Syrian army was exhausted of the combat and had been losing many crucial grounds as Al-Nusrah had taken over the main highway into Latakia from Idlib and much of the Sahl al-Ghab plain to the southeast of the city was in their hands. In June 2015, Mr. Putin confirmed Russia's support to Assad and said that he was ready to work with the regime to ensure political transformation so that all Syrians have access to the instrument of power.⁷² Russia meanwhile adopted two-pronged approach: to intensify the dialogue with the West and meanwhile to increase the supplies of the arms and ammunitions to the regime so that the regime could survive and Russia has enough time and ample space to bargain with the West. In July 2015, President Assad had acknowledged that the Syrian Army faced manpower shortages and announced an amnesty for army deserters. Increasingly, the regime has abandoned its strategy of an army "in all corners" of Syria to focus on core interests, especially Damascus and a corridor leading to the coastal areas of Latakia.⁷³

Latakia: A Game Changer

In last week of September, 2015, Russia slapped a powerful new piece on the strategic board of Syria when it decided to deploy a strike force of 2000 men backed by air craft armours and intelligence kit in addition to the intelligence drones, lethal K-52 and signal equipments.⁷⁴ Russian entry into the civil war transformed the battle line of four years of civil war in Syria where it emerged as the base player if not the first player. Syrian air space so far captured by the US-led war against the ISIS was no more its exclusive domain, but was to be shared with the fighters planes of Russia also. Russia, which was already providing defence technical help stepped into the fray through providing cover to the Syrian regime from air, water and ground. Russia's military operation in Syria is the

first intervention outside its boundaries of the former Soviet Union since the end of the Cold War.⁷⁵

Russia has guided missiles to Syria over Iran and Iraq to demonstrate that both Iran and Iraq are the allies of Russia. The US Defense Secretary said that Russian ground forces are joined by the Syrian forces shattering the facade that Russia is fighting ISIS.⁷⁶ Russia wants to eliminate all the opposition so as to limit the choice of the West to choose between the ISIS and Assad. Russian airstrike is reported to target those areas, which are not merely the base of ISIS, but also a stronghold of rebel forces like Homs, Hama, Idlib, and the town of Tartus.

The Russian involvement not only shattered the hope of the Anti-Assad Gulf allies for his early departure, but it also dismantled entire calculation of the regional and global players involved in the crisis. It was a move, which not only frustrated the Saudi and its allies bent upon removing Assad before any final agreement reached on Syria. It was also a set back to the US, which despite non-compliance with the mounting pressure from the GCC and other nations to strike against Assad, wanted Assad out of power

This move on the part of Russia not only strengthened its allies, but forced many strategic changes among other anti-Assad forces. Immediately after joining the war alongside the Syrian army, Russia entered into accord with Iraq and Iran and Syria for intelligence sharing⁷⁷ which was a source of disappointment for the US, which had taken Iraq to be its client state. It was already in the process of reviving old strategic alliances with Egypt where both sides had signed a series of economic and defence agreements.⁷⁸

The world is witnessing the most significant foothold of Russia in the Middle East in a decade after it joined the Syrian war against the ISIS.⁷⁹ Russia now is using air force corridor over Iran and Iraq to transport materials and personnel to Syria.

Russia has taken over Al-Sanobar military complex where the influx of military equipments is reported. It has also taken a few airports in the coastal areas for its military

base like Bassel Al-Assad International airport is fully controlled by Russian air force with significant military build up having planes and helicopters⁸⁰ It has deployed around 17,00 military specialists to its naval repair station at Tartus. Russia has deployed Su-30 fighter jets, armoured vehicles, T-90 tanks and troops to regime-controlled air field in Latakia.⁸¹ There are reports that Russia may send 2000 personnel to the airbase of Latakia.⁸² The airbase of Hmeymym outside Latakia is also under control of Russian forces.⁸³ Russians are flying a significant number of sorties with current rate of 48-96 per day and its Black Sea fleet's flagship cruise missile *Moskva* is providing air and missile defence from the Mediterranean.⁸⁴

Russia is transporting marines; pre fabricated housing, portable air traffic control system. Iran has agreed for Russian flight to run over its country and it can be stopped only in Iraq's air space and all have added to the worries of the US.

No doubt the deployment of Russia aircraft has been in the Alawite region of coastal air base for a long time, but the current Russian action changed the entire military calculus, which might prevent an early collapse of the Assad regime. Russian embrace of Mr. Assad has accelerated this shift and change of attitude and many EU leaders including the German Foreign Minister welcomed the intervention of Russia⁸⁵ showing a sign of division among Western leaders themselves.

Israel, which was so far worried with Syria and Iran, was ready to cooperate and a series of high level meeting have been held between Russia and Israel and the Israeli Prime Minister paid a friendly visit to Moscow to take stock of the situation and Turkey's President too saw no problem in flying to Moscow. The sudden Pro-Moscow tilt left many rebel groups in Syria simmering and seething.

Amidst the argument and counter argument about the legitimacy of Russian and US action in Syria against the ISS, two consecutive incidents: Shooting down of Russian Metro jet flight on October 31 in Sinai in Egypt and Paris terrorist attack on the night of November 13 opened the door wide for Russia. In the Russian jet plane incident in Sinai, 224 persons were killed while the coordinated terror attack in Paris left 130 persons dead. The

responsibility for both the incidents was claimed by the ISIS and these two incidents legitimized the Russian argument that the removal of Assad must be preceded by an international coalition against the ISIS.⁸⁶ The deep involvement of Russia has shifted the major discourse about the fight against ISIS from US-centric to alliance-centric operation.

The two incidents appear to have left deep impact on US's hitherto policy on Syria. In G-20 Summit in Turkey after the Paris attack, President Obama and his Russian counterpart Putin met at the sidelines of the meet and President Obama is reported to have told that after a ceasefire, the UN might mediate between the opposition and the regime in Syria while the fact is that earlier they had no such plan to meet.⁸⁷ Now President Putin is likely to have a more receptive global audience. French President has already called for rapprochement between Russia and the US to fight the ISIS ⁸⁸ The nations like UK and France with the dictum of "first Assad must go" have changed the stance and started calling for a broader coalition to confront the ISIS.

Some analysis are of the views that after the call for a global coalition against the ISIS, the sanctions against Russia, which include closing western capital market for Russia state owned bank and major energy companies, imposed after the Ukraine crisis, might be revoked or may not be extended in future Though US President Obama has already stated in September 2015 UN General Assembly session that Syria will not be bargained for Ukraine.⁸⁹

The shooting down of Russian SU-24 by the Turkish F-16 on November 24, 2015 on the pretext that the Russian plane violated the air space of Turkey created a new level of escalation in the region. Over the incident, former US National Security Advisor, Brzezinski in an interview with American website *Politico* said that if the incident had taken place in the Baltic republics, the Russian retaliation would have been prompt and dangerous.⁹⁰ It was also seen that the particular incident would further expand the involvement of other players in the region because Turkey is a member of NATO. NATO called an emergency ministerial level meeting to express support for Turkey and US President Obama said, "Turkey like any other country has the right to defend its air space and territory."⁹¹ It took

place just days after Turkey had threatened Russia of grave consequences if Russia continued to attack the ISIS bases in Syria.

The downing of Russian plane has created many riddles within NATO itself. One does not know how long NATO will support Turkey in Syria or how long it will remain in effect. Will NATO be compensating Turkey for the economic sanctions Russia has put on Turkey in the wake of the shooting down of its plane or the support will remain confined to defence and military spheres. NATO has also decided to move some ships to the Mediterranean Sea and more fighter planes to the Turkey base in Anjerlek are being deployed. NATO Secretary General said on 8 October 2015 that mutual defence organization is implementing the biggest reinforcement of our collective defence system since the end of the Cold War.⁹² NATO has been trying to extend eastward and even invited new nations to join NATO, which Russia has called a danger.⁹³

What does Syria Mean for Russia?

The most pertinent question now arises what interests do crisis in Syria serve for Russia. Was it a dramatic move to join the Syrian civil war or it was sometime well expected as Australian Foreign Minister said that Russian intervention was not unexpected.⁹⁴ Russia's move in Syria seems to be reflective of Putin's broader objective than what the US and Europe seem to assume. Russia happily incurred global opprobrium for backing Assad so that it can preserve access to its last remote naval base in Tartus, which remains a symbol of Russia's global reach, discourage external interference in country's internal affairs and remain counter weight to US hegemony in the Arab world.

There are both short term and long term objectives, which seem to shape Russia's current policy in Syria. In addition, Syria is an old friendly regime that allows Russia to exert influence, a large number of Russia citizens (around 100,000) living on the Syrian territory.⁹⁵ Russia has become a primary actor and is sending the most number of ships and fighter planes to Syria⁹⁶ and its immediate aim seems to weaken the military pressure on the regime in Syria to bring a new political solution. Russia also wants to end the civil war,

which would end the refugee crisis for Europe paving the way for consolidating the ties with them. Moscow has since 1956 supplied weapons to Syria but after Hafiz Assad (father of the present Syrian ruler) in 1971 came to power, it became the biggest arms supplier to Syria and a lucrative arm pipeline started flowing. Only in 2013; Syria was the fifth biggest buyer of Russian arms and spent \$ 1,5,70,280,000.⁹⁷ Today, Russia accounts for nearly 80 per cent of all Syrian arm purchases.⁹⁸ The current Russian military action is also indicative of military achievement it has accumulated in the last one decade. President Vladimir Putin has assured to make the arm industry as one of the primary movers of Russian economy in the time of crisis. The arm export fetched revenue worth \$ 29.7 billion in 2014, while the figure for the US was \$ 26.9 billion only.⁹⁹ Russian arm industry provides 20 per cent of all manufacturing jobs in the country and employs three million people.¹⁰⁰ It has invested heavily in intercontinental missiles and built some very advanced submarines. Last year, Russia exported more fighter planes than the US and this year only, it manufactured 240 military aircrafts and aimed to replace the US in arm industry by 2018.¹⁰¹

In the longer term, Russian action in Syria is suggestive of Russia's reassertion, urge to regain the lost glory, crave for a new world order and a new regional order as well. The move also embodies the will of an egoist Russia under the leadership of Mr. Putin as one observer says that it is sign of Putin's hubris and unreflective nature¹⁰² and last but not the least, to fill the power vacuum or retreat of the US in the region. US's seemingly victory in the Cold War followed by the implementation of Pax Americana extended into more regions using military force. The first attempt was in Yugoslavia followed by Afghanistan and Iraq and later Libya.¹⁰³

During 1990, Russia failed to install the Pro-Russian regime in Serbia, and could not stop NATO from bombing Bosnian Serbs in 1995 and could not prevent a NATO attack against Serbia over the fate of Kosovo. This inaction was interpreted as a sign of Russia's decline and encouraged the former Soviet republics of Ukraine and Georgia to apply for NATO membership. In Ukraine, United States and the EU are drawing Ukraine into their

realm of power while Russia is not letting it go, seeking to keep Ukraine (or at least part of it) in its orbit of influence.¹⁰⁴ After all, a great power is judged on its capacity to defend "friends and allies" and Russia did not look like it was able to do it.¹⁰⁵

Russia says that the Ukraine crisis lies in NATO's decision to expand eastward. In a televised interview in Spring 2014, President Putin asserted, "We were promised that after Germany's unification, NATO would not spread eastward."¹⁰⁶ He also went on asserting that his fear of Ukraine's entry into NATO had partly motivated his decision to annex Crimea.¹⁰⁷

Now it seems to be a struggle for influence in the post Soviet era and in former days, the geopolitical conflict took place amid the irreconcilable ideological confrontation between communism and capitalism. Again, after twenty years, this schism has come to the fore when the Russian Policy makers and diplomats advocated for twenty years the concept of poly-centric world as an alternative to the unipolar world.¹⁰⁸

One of the experts on the subject sums up Russia's present intention in the following words:

"To Russia, Syria is not merely about the West Asian geopolitics, Cold War era alliances, arm sales or even special interest like the under renovation Tartus naval resupply facility which gives Russia some capacity to operate in the Mediterranean, Rather from Russia's policy perspective, Syria, much like yesterday's Libya , Iraq or Yugoslavia, is primarily about the world order . It is about "who decides" who decides whether to use military forces, who decides the actors for use of the forces and who decides under what rules, conditions, and oversight military force to be used."¹⁰⁹

The first and foremost objective of Russia is strategic where Russia considers Syria a part of strategic backyard and it has a sole naval base beyond the CIS countries in the form of Tartus on the Mediterranean Sea. The name "Mediterranean" was given by an Arab Khurbadbeh in his "Book of Roads and Kingdoms"¹¹⁰ and has remained a source of conflict between Russia and Europe and since 1967, the Russian watercrafts have been there.

After Russia lost its military bases in Cuba and Vietnam, Tartus is the only exception when it comes to geostrategic posturing of Russian policies as most of the multi-tasking military bases today belong to the West. Tartus is a city in Syria on the coast, which is the only point of supply and maintenance. Russia pays small taxes and does not want to lose its warm water access in the winter. Otherwise Russia will have to take a voyage to the Black Sea, a gigantic effort to protect its interest. After Tartus was given on lease to Russia in 1971, Russia forgave \$ billion 1.3 of Syria's debt.¹¹¹ Unlike Iraq, till 1990, Soviet Union did not receive regular payment for the supply of arms to Syria, so Russia was allowed to have a full and free base in Tartus as compensation.

Through the base in east Mediterranean, Russia wants to have access in Black Sea which has of late changed fundamentally after Romania and Bulgaria joined the NATO and Ukraine and Georgia became independent. Moreover, recent NATO plan to deploy forces in Azov Sea, which connects the Black Sea through the Kerch strait (under Ukraine control), has further propelled Russia to deepen its engagement in Syria to control the Mediterranean. Further, Romania signed an agreement in 2005 with the US to deploy US forces in Black Sea, what Russia had called Atlantic offensive¹¹² on the Black Sea, a major source of concern for Russia. Russia does not want to give free access to NATO in the Black Sea and through control of eastern Mediterranean, Russia can shape its naval foreign policy accordingly. Since 2008, Russia deployed a number of ships towards the Mediterranean and carried a number of military manoeuvring there.

Syria's security dynamics provide Russia a window of opportunity to play a decisive role in the regional and global strategic affairs and highly complicate the Western and Turkish strategic setting.¹¹³ Syria is also important for Russia for strategic reason as it can use Syria to exploit the tension between Iran and the US in its own favour. Russia's present action is also driven by its economic interest. The most pressing is to safeguard the supply route in Tartus and more over Russia energy companies might be interested in possible oil and gas reserves along Syrian coast line.

Russia's growing ambitions in the Arab region are quite explicit as it has been expanding the ambit of its strategic ties with countries like Egypt and Iran. After the arrival of Abdel El-Fattah El-Sissi to power in Egypt in 2013, both of the leaders have held four summit-level meetings and signed a series of huge defence deals including air missile system,¹¹⁴ which have taken the relations once again to the era of Nasser when Russia was the major provider of military equipments to Egypt.

A good relationship with the states of the region can help Russia avoid international isolation and compensate for the negative impact of US-EU sanctions. For example, in March, 2014, in the wake of Ukraine crisis, Russia had threatened to reconsider its participation in 5+1 nuclear talk with Iran, which put US in a major fix for whole of 2014.¹¹⁵ Similarly, in April 2015, Russia lifted ban on export of S-300 missiles to Iran to show that Moscow can be an independent player in the region.¹¹⁶

Both Russia and Iran too have surrounded each other. Iran, no doubt, is a natural ally of Russia against Sunni radicalism, while China, on the other hand, has allied closely with Russia on the issue of Syria but for different reasons altogether. China at the moment seems to be more enthusiastic about the energy of the region because on political front, it has many foes to engage with like Japan and Vietnam¹¹⁷

The crisis in Syria has offered an option for Russia to resolve the issue with Europe outside Europe by influencing the trajectory of events in Syria, Iran and ISIS. Now Russia can force the rest to accommodate its growing ambitions and make the West update its security framework to resolve the worst crisis of its time. It is a more crucial time for Russia when the US wants to maintain the status quo, if one notes the assertion of US President Obama when he said, "It is not a new Cold War,"¹¹⁸ while Russia wants to revisit the threat from the US. Syria may be a ploy for Russia to press the West to remove Russia's fear of encirclement by NATO.

In no way a lesser mover for Russia's intervention in Syria is its growing concern about the Islamic radicalism and terrorism in Syria and the contiguous zone of Russia. The

fear of Russia is the growing potential of instability inside and in territories close to Syria and the risk of proliferating radicalism, leaving an adverse impact on the security of West Asia.¹¹⁹

What is being witnessed of late is that regimes and states have become one and the same. The collapse of the regime is engendering the immediate crumbling of state institutions. The consequences of this in the era of global Jihadism is offering haven to the terrorists as being seen in the case of Libya and Yemen. The era of international terrorism proves the old adage true that, "A day of anarchy is worse than a hundred years of tyranny." In the view of Moscow, the examples of Afghanistan since 1992, Iraq since 2003, and Libya since 2011 have proved this argument so definitively that no further discussion is necessary for them.

Under the present circumstances, Russia feels that removing Assad would be like playing in hands of ISIS and it proves the dictum that "our son of a b***h" is no more alien to the KGB than it is to the CIA.¹²⁰

Russia already faces huge challenges at this front because of its decade old conflicts with its neighbours such as Chechnya, North Caucasus and Dagestan. In December 2014, Islamist gunmen fought Russian forces in Grozny, killing 20, prompting fears of IS-inspired violence in the northern Caucasus.¹²¹ According to one of the experts on Islamic radicalism, Oliver Roy, "Syria is a new bastion of Jihadists what Afghanistan witnessed in 1980s, Bosnia in 1990s and the conflict in Chechnya. Russia claims that more than 2000 Chechen rebel are fighting along with the ISIS in Syria and Iraq and fear that after the defeat of ISIS, they can go back to the country and indulge in the same mission.

Russia's intervention can also be seen in reflexive historical term, which may not be confined to political or military hegemony, but a move twined with the growing ambition of its old-aged cultural revivalism among the orthodox Christians around the world.

In October 2013 only, around 50,000 Syrian Christians applied for Russian citizenship¹²² and Russia's Orthodox Church expressed its concerns over the fate of Syria's

Christians, persecuted by some of Assad's opponents.¹²³ Archpriest Vsevolod Chaplin, a spokesman for the Russian Orthodox Church said that Russia cannot turn its back on Christians and other minority groups being wiped out by the Islamic State militia and other extremist forces. The church has associated the fight against terrorism to a 'holy war'.¹²⁴ The Holy see Putin and not the US as a protector of West Asian Christians.¹²⁵

Through the present action in Syria, Moscow is conveying to the global audience the message that new Russia is now for beyond the US and its world ends with the US alone. The Russian in Syria speak in volume about the long term ambitions of Russia in the region and make a point why American's resistance to the hegemony is justified. By playing the terrorist card in Syria, Russia is likely to prove a point before the world community that America is no more a trustworthy or reliable actor when it comes to fight against terrorism.¹²⁶

In his deliberation at 2015 Sochi Think Tank Meet, the Defence Minister of Russia made it clear that the US's attempt of isolating Russia globally has failed.¹²⁷ Mr. Putin, explaining some of the US unilateral policies of the past in the regions, said that the US ginned up an imaginary Iranian nuclear threat to justify its moves in West Asia and the same was true of deployment of anti-ballistic missile system in Europe. In a similar meet at Sochi, President Putin remarked that Obama used vassals against its own interest by imposing sanctions against Russia.¹²⁸

Future Scenario and Conclusion

It has been seen in the above narration that Syria was never a case like other nations of the region. It was, of course, complex because of its internal sectarian and ethnic dynamics but its strategic location and the ambition of the regional and later global powers to use it as a pawn to alter geostrategic calculus of the region further added to its complexities. The most prominent factor, which very early changed the entire discourse about the political opposition forces and trajectory was the sectarian nature of the Syrian society. Since its inception, the battle between the regime and the opposition groups was

seen as a sectarian battle between the regime of minority Alawite and Sunni majority of the people.

The region has already seen a major rupture in the strategic setting after the fall of Mr. Saddam in Iraq and subsequent growing influence of Iran, which was perceived as a major advantage for a long-cherished strategy of Iran. This perception on the part of ideological rival of Iran, Saudi Arabia and its GCC allies brought two powers in the quagmire of Syria, which very soon turned into a civil war engendering Syria into a Saudi-led Sunni fighters and Iran-led Shiite fighters. Gradually other powers like Turkey and Qatar too failed to hide its strategic objective by supporting the rebel forces in Syria.

The Syria issue further obscured when two Cold War rivals: Russia and the US, came face to face over the removal of Assad where Russia remains adhered to its stance of not letting Assad go while the US along with its Gulf and other regional partners seemed stubborn to remove Assad. Similar confrontation was witnessed between the two in the UNSC, but no doubt Russia played some constructive role by averting the looming US air strike on the issue of use of chemical weapons in August 2013.

A catalyst moment came when the US started air strike in Syria with an apparent objective of eliminating the ISIS, a proposition which many never took at face value. It had become a long wait for Russia to confront US diplomatically only and in the month of October when, it full-fledged launched its own air strikes to eliminate the same global enemy: ISIS.

The current war seems to be an unending war because the war is not against territorial and national entity but non-state actors without any blue print. The Syrian crisis could not have come at a more opportune moment than the present one for Russia because Russia had not been left out in the past only but it continued to be subjected to a series of diplomatic and economic assaults and in Syria, Russia at last has a space for strategic breathing where it has shown its diplomacy and strategic capability to confront the Western camp.

The Paris attack pushed US President Barack Obama and Putin, supported by France, to talk and work together to stem out the IS. International terrorism has pushed Russia and the West to work together. Russia is likely to make the case for Assad's staying in power with some kind of arrangement for the opposition rebels, all in the name of protecting the world from terrorism. For the time being, all the countries out of their security concern seem to ally with each other to fight the ISIS but one does not know how long this will last.

On Turkey's front, Kremlin is almost obliged to follow a tough policy vis-a-vis Ankara after it shot down its plane in the region. Economic sanctions are the safest option for the Russian side, but other things can come later. For example, Moscow can give military aid to the Kurds and NATO may assert its support for Turkey publicly while conveying their annoyance with Turkey's aggressive measure. Turkey may have to sacrifice its support for the Turkmen, and abandon its involvement in the Aleppo battle along with the rest of its operational priorities in Syria, in order not to provoke Russia and escalate the crisis into an unmanageable scale.

Today, we do not find any political or military Russian support offered to any country in the world comparable to what is offered to Syria. Perhaps, the situations demand it because the current circumstances are completely tied to Russian geopolitical options. A certain mood is, therefore, growing in Washington to let Moscow pursue its intervention in Syria and garner all the resulting risks and unpopularity, while, perhaps in the wider scheme of things, may serve long-term US interests.

Russia and the West share the common concern over radicalism but they differ on the solution to be adopted and their difference on the future role of Assad might leave further negotiation to complete international blockage. The Syrian crisis has brought China and Russia closer to an unprecedented level and the rapprochement between the two might not be taken in good spirit in the State department. Russia will pragmatically play its strategic card seeking to design future regional political geometry as to suit primarily its own evolving security and strategic objectives.

Arab Spring bears a new sign of political dynamics in the region. Sectarian divide is widened and the general strategic picture and the political geography of the region shaped by the inertest of the big players and regional actors both not only complicate the situation, but make the region externally volatile. Syria is stuck between various contradictory national ambitions and strategic rivalries and the way it will develop will have impact upon the overall regional dynamics and even global realignment. The spread of the revolution in Syria has dramatically complicated the overall strategic picture and deepened the division among the main interested actors as the political and diplomatic agenda are colliding with US policy and interests. These, so far, have made it highly unlikely that the US would do anything to block Russia's actions. The US is now faced with an interlocking set of seemingly impossible dilemmas in the West Asia.

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The Views expressed are that of the Researcher and not of the Council.

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