

RUSSIAN DIPLOMATIC AND MILITARY STATECRAFT IN SYRIA

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Abstract

Russia has carefully employed its military and diplomatic tools of statecraft in the Syrian conflict. The Syrian war has been a quagmire with the diversity of actors involved having national, regional, and global interests. Russia's decisive role and direct involvement in the conflict has brought it to the forefront of Middle Eastern politics. Russia after taking control of the Syrian airbase can carry out missions across the Levant and Eastern Mediterranean. Moreover, Russia has not only courted the regional states into its side particularly Turkey but has also successfully averted any direct clash with the US and Israel in Syria. Russia has been able to demonstrate its strategic will to take decisive actions and transforming the risks into opportunities. Syria has brought the Russians back to the international decision-making as an important player. Moreover; Syria has provided Russia with a geopolitical advantage in the Middle East and to uphold Russian status as a global power.

Keywords: *Russia, Statecraft, Military Engagement, Diplomacy, Syrian Crisis*

Introduction

Rising powers have greater stakes in the systemic changes at the regional and global levels. To acquire a favourable regional and global environment, they indulge in making various efforts. Such states, after acquiring enough power utilize all available instruments of statecraft, enhancing their potential and scope. A similar pattern of behaviour has been followed by the Russian Federation in contemporary times, which has emerged from years of post-Soviet economic and political turmoil to re-assert itself as a great power.

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Russian foreign policy has taken advantage of external factors particularly the Syrian conflict to maximize its influence and promote its global interests. China has also supported Russia in vetoing the United Nation Security Council (UNSC) resolutions on the issue of US dominance in the Middle East; hence, sharing mutual determination of promoting polycentric international order. The Syrian crisis has provided an opportunity for Russia to project its military power in the initial phase of the conflict. Since its intervention in Syria in 2015, Russia has also successfully demonstrated its diplomatic statecraft in an effective manner. Its improved relations with Turkey and the way it has dealt Syrian peace process signifies Russia as a key player in dealing with international issues.

Moreover, regional politics has become relevant in contemporary times in the wake of a changing international order. Therefore, Russia has expanded the geographical scale of its foreign policy towards the Middle East, Africa and Latin America. Russian outreach to various regions constitutes its grand strategy aimed at a multi-polar world in which the Russian Federation would be an independent center of power. As Russia has become more resourceful due to its political and economic improvement, this vision of regionalization has become more pronounced. The Middle East has become an important region for Russian policymakers as it has provided them with an opportunity to project its power and influence.

Therefore, this paper endeavours to trace out the fundamental elements of Russian statecraft in the Syrian conflict. Three key questions are addressed in this study: What are the dynamics of Russian statecraft in the Syrian conflict? Why the military intervention of Syria was deemed necessary for Russian statecraft towards the Middle East? How the current diplomatic efforts would enable Russia to assert itself regionally and globally? The major argument of this paper is that Russia is utilizing both military and diplomacy to achieve political ends in the Middle East as well as in the global political settings. Russia has faced international isolation after the war with Georgia and the annexation of Crimea. But Syria has brought Russia back in to the international decision-making as an important player.

Contextualization of Statecraft

To understand the statecraft, it is pertinent to discuss the nature of statecraft as it appears to be elevated more so than the foreign policy or strategy of a state. Statecraft is the art of government in employing and consolidating all dimensions of a state's power, from domestic to international, military to diplomatic. Hence, foreign policy constitutes the articulation of a state's response to the external world with certain objectives vis-a-vis another state. While the strategy of a state is an effort

towards matching ends and means by prioritizing the objectives and instruments.¹

The term 'statecraft' means the construction of strategies to secure the national interests of a state in an international arena, and to understand politics and policymaking by focusing on strategic choices and challenges of a government whose leadership and diplomats execute these strategies.² The art of statecraft includes a military strategy which mainly concerns the use or threat of military force, diplomacy that concerns with negotiations; economic statecraft in which the economic means are used to pursue foreign policy goals; and propaganda which concerns mainly with manipulating or deceiving with verbal or visual symbols.³ Most of the foreign policies of a state consist of a combination of these strategies.

Diplomacy and military force, by their very nature, are considered as the means to the ends of statecraft and are the channels by which government press their agendas onto others.⁴ Both these channels are equally inherent and useful tools of statecraft, in the art of managing government affairs skilfully. Diplomacy is about verbally communicating realities that support statecraft's policy missions abroad by conducting official affairs between states that may move nations; while military action is about physical communication of a government's wishes and involves the use of military resources either positively or negatively to address the national interests.⁵ If diplomacy represents realities, military operations create them due to which statecraft is about managing these realities, combining means and ends to advance a country's interests.

Dynamics of Russian Statecraft in the Middle East

Major elements of power do not equate Russia with the United States, China or European Union. Nonetheless, under the long rule of Vladimir Putin, Russia has been able to develop an outsized ability to exercise its influence abroad.⁶ This implies that a state does not

¹ US Marine Corps, *Strategy*, MCDP 1-1 (Washington D.C., Department of Navy, 1997), www.marines.mil.

² Morton A. Kaplan, "An Introduction to the Strategy of Statecraft," *World Politics* 4, no. 4 (1952): 548-576.

³ Jean-Marc F. Blanchard and Norrin M. Ripsman, "A Political Theory of Economic Statecraft," *Foreign Policy Analysis* 4 (2008), 372.

⁴ Angelo M. Codevilla, "Tools of Statecraft: Diplomacy and War," *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, January 15, 2008, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2008/01/tools-of-statecraft-diplomacy-and-war/> ; Morton A. Kaplan, "An Introduction to the Strategy of Statecraft."

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Kathryn E. Stoner, *Russia Resurrected: Its Power and Purpose in a New Global Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 4-5.

necessarily have to be a great power that is at parity in all the realm but the willingness and ability of the leadership to effectively use its power resources and capacities in a skilful manner to bring a shift in the global balance of power. It is also argued that in order to reassert at the global level, Russia has focused more on its diplomatic and military power particularly in the areas where the West could not achieve the desired results, which has provided an opportunity for Russia to channelize its resources of power.

Vladimir Putin, after being named as the acting President of the Russian Federation in early 2000, announced that among his priorities, one is the restoration of Russia's statehood which he called 'gosudarstvennot'. He was referring to the sovereignty of Russia, a state in the aspect of domestic politics in which Russia would have the ability to act inherently as a coherent governing body.⁷ This then became a key moment in the history of Russian statecraft especially after the end of the Cold War, when Russia practically ceased to function in some respects.

To understand Russian statecraft, a recent variant developed by Toby James known as 'neo-statecraft' can be used to analyse the country.⁸ Neo-statecraft put its primary focus on the political leadership of the state and on the group of their closest advisers who are referred to as the 'court.' The main objective of the 'court' is maintaining and winning power rather than pursuing any ideological goals, they seek to achieve statecraft as rational and self-interested actors. This statecraft could be achieved by governing and managing a country's affairs, specifically the economy and by developing a winning electoral strategy. Through party management, they manage the parliamentary and constituency associations carefully through which they seek to shift a political game by introducing reforms that are favourable for them and achieve statecraft. As a result, when they successfully achieve statecraft internally, this then is asserted into their foreign policies respectively.⁹

After the end of the Cold War, the world has witnessed the exposure of the United States' statecraft, its national security policies and processes, the dominance of its economic, military, and political machinery that made it a missionary approach in the international system. However, after the rise of other powers in the international arena, this approach seemed unsustainable in the shifting of balance of power and represented as one of the major fault-lines between the US and other major powers. As seen in the recent dilemma of international affairs, the unipolar order of

⁷ "The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation," FAS, June 28, 2000, <https://nuke.fas.org/guide/russia/doctrine/econcept.htm>.

⁸ Toby S. James, "Neo-Statecraft Theory, Historical Institutionalism and Institutional Change," *Government and Opposition* 51, no.1, (2016): 84-110.

⁹ Ibid.

the US is being challenged by other rising powers such as China and Russia.

The statecraft achieved by Putin's administration in Russian Federation can be observed in its foreign policy goals and capabilities in the international arena. By using the statecrafts of diplomacy and military, Russia has demonstrated clearly that it is also an important player in geopolitics and international affairs. Its military campaign of 2015 in Syria has indicated that Russia can project its power effectively and independently in another region, reiterating that Moscow is still great power in the international system.¹⁰

Russia's military intervention in Syria's civil war was a surprise even for the closest observers of the country's foreign and security policy; as it was viewed that Moscow's military expeditions would not be carried out beyond its 'near abroad'.¹¹ With the West intervening on one side, Putin saw this intervention as a significant threat to its national security as for him the Western-backed 'regime change' has always been the source of instability in the international system. Another key factor in driving Russia's decision to intervene was the futility of a diplomatic resolution, which Moscow could not accept. The UN-led peace efforts gradually came to a standstill followed by the deadlocked conclusion on Syria in Geneva Conference on international peace in 2014.¹² However, Russia's diplomacy became active in the months between the conferences and the military intervention of 2015. Russia held many engagements on Syria, at the foreign minister and presidential levels, and organized two rounds of talks between the opposition and the Syrian government in Moscow in January 26-29 and April 6-9, 2015. The Western-backed Syrian National Coalition withdrew from the meeting and demanded a commitment for departure of Assad's regime.¹³ In the end, none of these diplomatic efforts posed any impacts on the on-ground situations in Syria that continued to deteriorate.

By summer 2015, Moscow's senior decision-makers concluded that diplomacy has failed to deliver, and the non-military means were no longer effective. This perception changed the on-ground situations in Syria

¹⁰ Michael J. Mazarr and Michael Kofman, "Rediscovering Statecraft in a Changing Post-War Order," *Texas National Security Review* 1, no. 3 (May 2018): 101-117.

¹¹ Samuel Charap, Elina Treyger and Edward Geist, *Understanding Russia's Intervention in Syria*, (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2018)

¹² "Syria Peace Talks Break up as UN Envoy Fails to End Deadlock," *The Guardian*, February 15, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/feb/15/syria-peace-talks-break-up-geneva>.

¹³ Dominic Evans, "Syria Tells Western Foes to Stop Dreaming Assad will Go," *Reuters*, 27 November, 2013, <https://www.reuters.com/article/syria-crisis-geneva-idINDEE9AQ06920131127>.

and due to the futility of diplomacy, Russia intervened with its military statecraft and supported Assad's regime with increased military hardware, in addition to the diplomatic and economic backing, against the Western side.¹⁴ With the announcement of the United States withdrawal from the Syrian war in 2019, Russia became successful in boosting its image as a new offshore balancer in the region and acquired vital opportunities on the ground in Syria. For Russia, the strategic game-plan is to construct a "polycentric" world order in which the United State will not be a hegemon and where non-Western states will have a role to play in the international arena.

Russian Military Statecraft in Syria

The internal strife of Syria had become a conflict that drew the involvement of regional and extra-regional forces into the political landscape of the Middle East. Therefore, there had been a gradual increase in the number of belligerents with different objectives. Initially, the Baathist Syrian government led by Bashar Al Assad along with its allies tried to put down the opposition with its own security apparatus and military force. However, its military forces could not hold on to all of the country and the government was controlling only seventeen percent of the territory and was on the verge of defeat. To crush the rebellion and restore the government control, the armed struggle turned into a full-scale civil war for which the regime started looking for external support. Bashar Al Assad asked Russia, a long-time ally of Syria to help them in critical times.¹⁵

Russia had supported Assad's regime since 2011, when the civil war erupted in Syria and continued its military deliveries via the Black Sea to Latakia and Tartus.¹⁶ However, indirect military support was turned into physical military intervention in 2015. At the first stage, Russia signed a secret military pact with Syria in August 2015, which was made public in January 2016. According to the pact, the military assistance could be terminated with one-year prior notice, and it allows Russian troops to have jurisdictional immunity. Moreover, it provides Russia access to Syria's Hmeimim airbase. This pact resembles the status of forces agreements (SOFAs), which usually are signed by the US with those

¹⁴ Samuel Charap, Elina Treyger, and Edward Geist, *Understanding Russia's Intervention in Syria*, (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2018).

¹⁵ "Russia Joins War in Syria: Five Key Points," *BBC News*, October 1, 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-34416519>.

¹⁶ Aron Lund, *Russia in the Middle East*, (Swedish Institute of International Affairs, 2019).

countries providing military bases.¹⁷

Full-scale military intervention in Syria was not the plan of Russian leadership because it always asserted to find a political solution to the crisis. The survival of Assad's regime was the major point of difference between the US and its western allies. The imminent downfall of Assad's regime struck Russian leadership as being fatal with long-lasting consequences. The regime collapse entailed substantial risks to the national security of Russia, for instance, the downfall of the regime would mean the victory of transnational terrorism which was perceived as a national security threat to Russia due to the spillover effect in the country. Moreover, it would strengthen the US agenda of 'regime change' in the Middle East, which could have undermined another objective of Russia that is to re-assert itself as a great power.¹⁸ Hence, when the rebel forces conquered Idlib and moved towards Latakia, the Iranian Major General Qassem Soleimani visited Moscow and warned them of the fall of their joint ally as well as Russia's military asset at Tartus.¹⁹ Russians were alarmed by the situation and convinced by Soleimani's assessment to protect its ally and the Russian facility at Tartus.

In September 2015, Russian overt military support was confirmed when Russia launched several airstrikes in Syria, informally known as 'Operation Vozmeziye' (retribution).²⁰ After the Cold War, this is the largest and most significant deployment by Russia. Approximately 2000, Russian military personnel flew to the Hmeimim base in Syria. Subsequently, Russia deployed S-400, Su-25 Frogfoot ground-attack planes, new Su-34 full-back medium bombers, Su-24 Fencer fighter jets and several helicopters. Along with these, Russia further deployed strategic bombers held in Mozdok base in North Ossetia as well as in western Iran.²¹

According to the official statements of President Vladimir Putin, the primary objective of the Russian Federation was to fight against

¹⁷ Michael Birnbaum, "The Secret Pact between Russia and Syria that Gives Moscow Carte Blanche," *The Washington Post*, January 15, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/01/15/the-secret-pact-between-russia-and-syria-that-gives-moscow-carte-blanche/>.

¹⁸ Samuel Charap, Elina Treyger, and Edward Geist, *Understanding Russia's Intervention in Syria*.

¹⁹ Laila Bassam and Tom Perry, "How Iranian General Plotted out Syrian Assault in Moscow," *Reuters*, October 6, 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-soleimani-insigh-idUSKCN0S02BV20151006>.

²⁰ Brian Glyn Williams and Robert Souza, "Operation Retribution: Putin's Military Campaign in Syria 2015-16," *Middle East Policy Council* 23, no. 4 (2016).

²¹ Ibid.

Islamic State (IS). Under the slogan of fighting international terrorism, the Russian military campaign aimed to defeat the anti-regime elements including those backed by the West. Russian official claims were widely discrepant in terms of the mission's goals and targets.²² As Russians had conflated ISIS with CIA backed armed groups, particularly Free Syrian Army, the conflict turned out to be a proxy war between Russia and the US. Initially, the Free Syrian Army had fought effectively against the Russian backed Syrian Army ground offensive with the help of US-supplied missiles. However, in subsequent campaigns, the Free Syrian Army could not stand on its feet as the US did not provide them further arms in the fear of a proxy war.²³

Russian forces also held joint operations in western Syria, Hama and Homs along with Iran and Hezbollah. During this ground assault, Russia fired 26 new Caliber cruise missiles at rebel targets in Aleppo, Idlib and Raqqa.²⁴ This signified that Russia was also taking Syria as a testing space for its new state of the art military technology. By October 2015, the regime had regained lost territory and began to stabilize with the help of Russia, Iran and Hezbollah. In November 2015, the alleged Russian Su-24 was shot down by the Turkish air defense due to the violation of air space.²⁵ As a result, the Russian forces responded fiercely and attacked Turkish backed groups in Syria; it further blockaded the Turkish economy and threatened to support PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party), which Turkey perceived as a national security threat.²⁶ However, the relations between the two countries improved dramatically when the Turkish President offered an apology.²⁷ Later, Russia and Turkey held joint operations in Syria.²⁸

Although Russia and its allies were gaining ground, it agreed with

²² Maksymilian Czuperski, et.al., "Distract, Deceive, Destroy: Putin at War in Syria," *Atlantic Council Report*, April 2016, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Distract-Deceive-Destory.pdf>.

²³ Brinbaum, "The Secret Pact between Russia and Syria."

²⁴ Williams and Souza, "Operation Retribution: Putin's Military Campaign in Syria 2015-16."

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Frida Berg, "Turkey's Security and Syrian Civil War," (Master's Thesis, Linnaeus University Sweden, 2020): 35.

²⁷ Andrew Roth and Erin Cunningham, "Turkish President Apologizes for Drowning of Russian Warplane Last Year," *The Washington Post*, June 27, 2016.

²⁸ "Joint Turkish-Russian Patrols to Begin on March 15-Latest Updates" *TRT World*, March 7, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/turkey-apologizes-for-shooting-down-russian-warplane-last-year/2016/06/27/_story.html.

the US to a cease-fire in February 2016.²⁹ However, this proved to be short-lived due to the continued use of force by President Bashar al Assad in Aleppo. Another deal was signed between the two countries to ban President Assad's air force in parts of Syria and to be replaced by joint US-Russian aerial operations.³⁰ But the deal collapsed again due to the continued use of force by the loyalists to the regime. By December 2016, the Syrian Army had retaken Aleppo from the rebels; this was termed as the biggest victory of Assad's regime since 2011.³¹ This victory turned the tide in Russia's favor encompassing regional and international politics.

In January 2017, Russia initiated the first round of peace talks in Astana. But despite the Astana peace process, fighting continued in several parts of the country. Between May 2017 and July 2018, President Assad's forces captured most of the rebel areas one by one and managed to seize those areas of eastern Syria, which were held by the IS (Islamic State group). Meanwhile, Russia supported Syrian operations with airpower, it also made sure to prevent clashes with Israel, Jordan, the US and Turkey through negotiations.³² In December 2017, Russian President Vladimir Putin declared victory against the IS.³³

The key achievements in 2018 were the decline of IS with the fall of Raqqa, which was the heart of the IS proclaimed caliphate and the territorial gains of President Bashar Al Assad. Russian air campaign had enabled the Syrian government to retake Homs, Damascus, Eastern Ghouta and Deraa.³⁴ As of 2019, out of 16 provincial capitals, 13 were under the Syrian government including all major cities. Russian military support remained the backbone of the Syrian regime in its fight against

²⁹ "Syrian Conflict: US-Russia Brokered Truce to Start at Weekend," *BBC News*, February 22, 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35634695>.

³⁰ Andrew S. Weiss and Nicole NG, "Collision Avoidance: The Lessons of U.S. and Russian Operations in Syria," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace Paper*, March 20, 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/03/20/collision-avoidance-lessons-of-u.s.-and-russian-operations-in-syria-pub-78571>.

³¹ "Aleppo Battle: Syrian City Back under Government Control," *BBC News*, December 22, 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-38408548>.

³² Sam Heller, "Aleppo's Bitter Lessons," *The Century Foundation*, January 27, 2017.

³³ Phil Stewart, "U.S. Wary of Putin's Declaration of Military Victory in Syria," *Reuters*, December 12, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-usa-russia-idUSKBN1E62L7>.

³⁴ Simon Tisdall, "Putin Holds Winning Cards as Syrian War Nears Idlib Showdown," *The Guardian*, July 21, 2018.

adversaries.³⁵ In July 2020, Russia signed an agreement with Syrian authorities, giving it additional land and coastal waters to expand its military airbase at Hmeimim.³⁶

Russian strategy mainly relied on firepower with Syrian intelligence to crush the opposition. To deal with the belligerents, Russia had been successful to engage them with an effective strategy. The belligerents particularly Israel and Turkey were told not to create hindrances for Russian operations in Syria. Israel never attacked Russian sites but only targeted Iran's site as it wanted to avoid a confrontation with Russian Federation. Russia on the other hand avoided direct clashes by setting up a coordination mechanism in September 2015.³⁷ Turkey's major concern was to forestall the Kurdish expansion of YPG (Kurdish People's Protection Units). Although, Turkey and Russia were on the opposite sides of the conflict but garnering Turkey's support for the Russian side was the turning point in the Syrian war as it marginalized the Russian opposition. With the United States, Russia very tactfully utilized the narrative of fighting international terrorism and ensured cooperation in this regard.³⁸

Russia prioritized its operations in western Syria against Syrian opposition forces. Meanwhile, Turkey was fighting against the Kurdish enclave of Afrin, which served as a template for further cooperation between Russia and Turkey. The military pressure of Russia and Turkey pushed Kurdish forces out of the area. This granted Turkey a foothold near its Southern border and helped Russia to prevent the US from establishing a military presence in Western Syria. Moreover, both countries made flexible arrangements for temporary ceasefires, which led them to hold joint patrolling in Idlib.³⁹ More recently on August 2021, talks between Russia's Special Envoy, Alexander Lavrentiev and Turkish delegation were held in Ankara in which both sides discussed the ceasefire in Idlib and

³⁵ Aron Lund, "Russia in the Middle East" The Swedish Institute of International Affairs Report 2, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jul/21/syria-idlib-putin-assad-winners-iran>.

³⁶ "Syria Agrees to let Russia Expand Hmeimim Air Base," *Reuters*, August 19, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-russia-syria-airbase-idUKKCN25F2BH>.

³⁷ Martin Russell, "Russia in the Middle East: From Sidelines to Centre Stage," Brussels, *European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS)*, November 21, 2018.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Gustav Gressel, "Managed Chaos: Russia's Deal with Turkey on Northern Syria," *European Council on Foreign Relations*, November 3, 2019, https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary_managed_chaos_russias_deal_with_turkey_on_northern_syria/.

showed a resolve to prevent the provocative attacks in the region.⁴⁰

In the wake of the change in the US leadership, there have been strained relations between the Russian Federation and the US. Syria is also a key area of tension between the two countries as Russian Embassy has criticized presence of the US troops in Syria on August 2021.⁴¹ Interestingly, US is in alliance with Israel and more recently, Russia also seems to change its position on Syria vis-à-vis Israel. There are speculations about Russia upgrading the Syrian air defense against Israeli strikes. This situation could pose a challenge to the Russian interest in the Middle East.

Russia's Hybrid Warfare

Another aspect of Russian military statecraft is the usage of hybrid warfare to reach important ends with the minimal use of military force and to shape the perception of the world. There is a clear discrepancy in Russia's stated goal, which is to defeat terrorists, primarily the IS. The inferred Russian goals in Syria to re-establishing its influence in the Middle East, restoration of its international image breaking out of the US-imposed political isolation, and testing new weapons and gaining combat experience for its forces.⁴²

Russia combined conventional air assets deployed in a conventional role, with an overarching information campaign. Contrary to the stated goal of defeating the IS, Russia's air campaign targeted the moderate rebel fighters and civilian opposition. Russia perceived the moderate rebel fighters would not be targeted by the US because they posed risks to the Syrian regime which is in the interest of the US. Therefore, Russia made a smart move and concentrated its efforts on eliminating moderate elements while also claiming in the media to attack the IS. This is how the US would engage against the IS anyway. Hence, Russia was able to preserve its air assets by employing fewer resources as compared to the US.⁴³

⁴⁰ "Turkey's Kalin, Russia's Syria Envoy Lavrentiev Discuss Syria," *Daily Sabah*, August 3, 2021, <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/turkeys-kalin-russias-syria-envoy-lavrentiev-discuss-syria>.

⁴¹ Brendan Cole, "Russia says American Forces not in Syria Legally as US Admits Error on UN Mandate Claim," *Newsweek*, August 10, 2021, <https://www.newsweek.com/russia-syria-operation-inherent-resolve-un-charter-law-error-security-council-embassy-dc-1617866>.

⁴² Michael Kofman and Matthew Rojansky, "What Kind of Victory for Russia in Syria?" *Military Review*, (January 28, 2018): 384.

⁴³ Anthony N. Celso, "Superpower Hybrid Warfare in Syria," *MCU Journal* 9, no. 2 (2018):1108-109.

In addition to the air campaign, Russia employed an information campaign, which was focused on its achievements against the terror networks and the IS.⁴⁴ This helped Russia to transform its image and influence in the international media. Moreover, the hybrid approach gave Russia an appropriate room to frame the US actions and policies in Syria as comparably ineffective. Due to this enhanced image, President Putin started interacting with the heads of the state of various regional powers, such as Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia. Russia also made strategic gains, as its arms sale also boosted in the region.⁴⁵

Private Military Companies of Russia

Private Military Contractors (PMC) have been an important tool of Russian policy since the 16th century.⁴⁶ This model has been growing and expanding under Vladimir Putin and a plausible deniability is the major reason for its employment. These PMCs do not signify their links with the leadership or the government. Hence, this uncertain association provides Russia leverage in its military statecraft to stall the adversary's response, while gaining short term strategic gains.

Slavonic Corps Limited was allegedly the first PMC employed in Syria to provide military support to Bashar Al Asaad, before the direct military intervention of Russia.⁴⁷ However, Slavonic Corps could not achieve significant results in Syria. Subsequently, the Wagner Group was deployed in Syria as an elusive entity. Wagner Group is based in Russia but registered in Argentina.⁴⁸ Because, according to article 359 of the Russian Criminal code, PMCs are illegal. However, Vladimir Putin admitted to their activity in Syria. But he asserted that the PMCs do not represent the state and had been working on oil exploration in their private capacity.⁴⁹

Moreover, the soldiers of the Wagner Group have no contract or association with the Russian Defense Ministry but the founder of Wagner

⁴⁴ Charap, Tryger, and Geist, *Understanding Russia's Intervention*, 8-9.

⁴⁵ Becca Wasser, *The Limits of Russian Strategy in the Middle East*, (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2019).

⁴⁶ Theodore Karasik, "Russia in the Middle East: Implications and Policy Recommendations," The Jamestown Foundation Report, November 20, 2018.

⁴⁷ Sergey Sukhankin, "Russian PMCs in the Syrian Civil War: From Slavonic Corps to Wagner Group and Beyond," (Washington D.C., The James Town Foundation, 2019).

⁴⁸ Kimberly Marten, "Russia's Use of Semi-state Security Forces: The Case of Wagner Group" *Post-Soviet Affairs* 35, no. 3 (2019): 12, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/citedby/10.1080/1060586X.2019.1591142?scroll=top&needAccess=true>.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

PMC, Yevgeniy Prigozhin has been a close associate of Vladimir Putin.⁵⁰ The official Russian narratives have never highlighted the losses or achievements of the Wagner soldiers because they are off the books as in the case of retaking the city of Palmyra. The victorious celebration only lauded the Russian Army and the participation of Russian Special Forces.⁵¹ The use of PMCs to cover the actual number of casualties as to demonstrate fewer casualties of the Russian Forces in the Russian hybrid warfare, presents to the world Russia's successful combat operations.

Russia's Diplomatic Statecraft in Syria

Russian engagement in Syria is comprised of complex and multifaceted elements of statecraft. Russia's use of military instruments has been closely connected to diplomatic measures. This connected feature of Russian policy has shaped the trajectory of the war. Consequently, Russia was successful in strengthening Assad's military position, shaping international negotiations as well as gaining recognition as a diplomatic arbiter. Moreover, its veto rights in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) have further strengthened its position to block actions of other states even if Russia is isolated in its stance. To achieve this, Russia has vetoed sixteen resolutions on Syria since 2011 and most of the time these vetoes were backed by China.⁵²

Russia attempted to create a political mechanism in which it could play a lead role, and which would pave the way to end the war on Asaad's terms. Moscow persuaded the US to co-initiate the US-led Syrian peace process in 2012 and to co-guarantee subsequent ceasefires. The coordination between Russia and the US has been beneficial for President Assad's regime because both the US and Russia would never want an escalation that could bring both states into direct confrontation.⁵³ This in turn fulfils Russian and Syrian objectives of avoidance of collision with the US. The major aims of Russia's diplomatic endeavour in the Syrian peace process were to further the pro-regime progress in the battleground and attain of its strategic objectives in the conflict. Russian diplomatic

⁵⁰ Owen Matthews, "Putin's Secret Armies Waged War in Syria: Where Will They Fight Next?" *Newsweek*, January 17, 2018, <https://www.newsweek.com/2018/01/26/putin-secret-army-waged-war-syria-782762.html>.

⁵¹ Luke Harding, "Palmyra Hosts Russian Concert after Recapture by Syrian Forces," *The Guardian*, May 5, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/may/05/palmyra-amphitheatre-hosts-russian-concert-after-recapture-by-syrian-forces>.

⁵² Witold Rodkiewicz, "Russia's Middle Eastern Policy: Regional Ambitions Global Objectives," *Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW)* 71, December 2017.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 20.

statecraft in complementing its military campaign can be analysed in two stages; the Geneva Process of 2016 and the Astana Process of 2017.⁵⁴

Geneva Process

Geneva Process began in 2012, which involved representatives from over a dozen countries including Russia and the US. Countries agreed on a roadmap for peace known as Geneva Communiqué, laying out the political transition in Syria.⁵⁵ Despite the regular diplomatic engagement, the Geneva Process failed to make any progress due to the differences between Russia and the Syrian opposition, which wanted President Assad to step down. However, Russia managed to engage with the US to co-initiated the ceasefire proposed by the International Syria Support Group in November 2015. Russia and the US also coordinated to pass the UNSCR 2254, which prescribed a ceasefire, constitutional reforms and election under the UN monitoring.⁵⁶

Kremlin sought to acquire the legitimacy of its actions pertaining to diplomatic initiatives as well as to leverage its military intervention. It also sought to engage the United States in accepting and recognizing Russia as the main political player in Syria. Moreover, the participation of the US in such diplomatic efforts has given Russia an equal footing in international decision-making. This diplomatic manoeuvring of Russia has been successful to get away from the international isolation imposed after the Crimean annexation. However, the ceasefire deals rapidly collapsed due to differences in the objectives of Russia and the United States. Russia and the Syrian regime continued their military campaign without any significant repercussions but the US lost its leverage by ending its support to the Syrian opposition.⁵⁷ These coordinated diplomatic efforts weakened the credibility of the US in the eyes of its allies. Meanwhile, in the wake of the collapse of the US-Russian ceasefire agreement in 2016, Moscow started talks with regional countries such as Iran and Turkey to establish a new international forum.

After nine months pause, due to the disagreement on the agenda and travel restrictions in the wake of Covid-19, the UN-led Syrian constitution talks started yet again. The fundamental objective of the negotiations has been to keep the momentum going towards a political solution to the civil war, which has lasted for nine years now. However, the viability of the Geneva talks is questioned to the disagreement of the participants involved in the talks, particularly Syrian opposition forces and

⁵⁴ Ibid., 23.

⁵⁵ James Dobins et. al., *A Peace Plan for Syria IV*, (Santa Monica, CA: 2017).

⁵⁶ Ingrid Habets, "Obstacles to a Syrian Peace: the Interference of Interests," *European View* 15, (June 2016):77-85.

⁵⁷ Rodkiewicz, "Russia's Middle Eastern Policy," 10.

the Syrian regime. Russia agreed to the UN calls for the resumption of talks and always stressed the importance of resuming the political process, but it is extremely unlikely that talks would lead to any agreement regarding the constitutional reforms.

Astana Process

Following the collapse of the joint US-Russia ceasefire agreement in September 2016, Russia resorted to a regional concert of powers. It obtained new partners, Turkey and Iran to create a new international forum. Hence, the trilateral meeting of Turkey, Iran and Russia was held in Astana, Kazakhstan in January 2017. The sides agreed to create a monitoring group to supervise the implementation of the UNSCR 2254.⁵⁸ In May 2017, the trio reached an agreement to create four de-escalation zones in western Syria. These zones were Idlib province neighbouring Turkey, the Homs province, the Eastern Ghouta region, which is situated in the east of Damascus and the areas near Jordan and Israel.⁵⁹

Astana Process made only limited progress in brokering an agreement between opposition forces and the Assad regime. However, it was beneficial for Russia, as Moscow's diplomatic efforts were meant to advance its military objectives rather than achieving peace. Russia's pivotal role in the Astana process and exclusion of the United States from regional concert allowed creating an image for itself as an actor seeking to end the bloodshed. In the wake of the hostilities between Turkish and Syrian forces, diplomatic efforts over Idlib broke down in February 2020.⁶⁰ Subsequently, in March 2020 both countries de-escalated the situation and reached a ceasefire deal and an agreement for joint patrolling along the M4 highway.⁶¹ Russia represented itself as a supporter and implementer of the ceasefires and de-escalation zone, but it has been an active combatant on the battlefield.

Conclusion

Russian diplomatic statecraft went hand-in-hand with its military strategy. Both focused on elevating Moscow's influence through the preservation of the fall of Assad's regime, entrench its position in the region and reducing the US influence. To achieve these objectives, the anti-

⁵⁸ "Joint Statement by Iran, Russia and Turkey on the International Meeting on Syria in the Astana Format," Relief Web, April 27, 2019, <https://reliefweb.int>.

⁵⁹ Ekaterina Stepanova, "Russia's Syria Policy: The Hard Path of Military Disengagement," *PONARS Eurasia*, February 1, 2018.

⁶⁰ Kofman and Rojansky, *What Kind of Victory for Russia*, 384.

⁶¹ "Russia Turkey Begin Joint Patrols along Syria's M4 Highway," *Al-Jazeera*, March 12, 2020, <https://www-fastly.aljazeera.com/topics/events/idlib-battle-syria.html>.

regime opposition was marginalized both militarily and diplomatically. Moreover, Russia has been able to establish close ties with all actors in the region and has made itself a credible partner to those seeking to diversify their foreign policy. Russia has acted upon the structural changes in regional and global politics; hence it has carefully employed diplomatic and military tools to complement each other as well as to enhance Russian position as a global actor. Like any other great power, it is cautious in its assessment of material constraints and opportunities. Syria is viewed as an important ally in the Middle East that must be retained for geopolitical advantage and to uphold its status as a global power.

Russia has understood that political settlement was necessary to be utilized along with the military ones. Hence, military actions were closely coordinated to its diplomatic activities to achieve results. Ground operations were avoided and given to the local allies and provided them with air support through air defense, intelligence, military advice, and technical assistance. Russia also kept the communication channels open to all the parties and successfully engaged them when and where needed. Russia employed its information warfare very intelligently to discredit its adversaries. Russia's authoritarian style of decision making was another leverage to react rapidly to the opportunities and blend military and political diplomacy in a unified manner.

Russian military campaign has shown that Russia's way of war has been evolving to adapt to new realities. However, fundamental strategic interests largely remain the same. Russia's diplomatic activities were successful in advancing its core strategic aims of restoring Assad's regime. However, there are certain challenges Russia has been facing that are yet to be tackled, which are Israeli strikes, military footprints of Turkey and the US and Russia's lack of control over the decision making of the Syrian regime backed by Iran and Hezbollah.

Although Russia has become an active military and diplomatic actor in the Middle Eastern region, but it is still far from being able to design a regional order on its own. Russia would have serious challenges in the region due to the US-Israeli enduring cooperation and a change in the US administration. There is a possibility of conflict between the US and Russia with heightened tensions at the global level. In this situation, Russia's regional role could turn into a strategic challenge for the US and Israel, which would have serious repercussions to the Russian objectives in the Middle East. However, as of 2021, Russia has been able to promote its strategic interests in the region with unflinching support to the Assad regime, which has secured 4th presidential term till 2028. Moreover, Russia has built a consensus partnership with China and Iran to capitalize on the US waning influence in the Middle East.

