

THE SYRIAN WAR: RUSSIA AND CHINA
IN THE GEOPOLITICAL CHESSBOARD
OF INTERNATIONAL ORDER

An analysis of United Nations Security Council vetoes

MA Thesis

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List of most commonly used abbreviations

ANF – Al-Nusra Front

CCP – Chinese Communist Party

CWC – Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production, Stockpiling and Use of Chemical Weapons and on their Destruction

ICC – International Criminal Court

IS – Islamic State (of Iraq and the Levant, or Da'esh)

OPCW – Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons

P5 – Permanent Members of the United Nations Security Council

PRC – People's Republic of China

SG – Secretary-General of the United Nations

UN – United Nations

UNSC – United Nations Security Council

INTRODUCTION

The world order is inevitably changing. While the United States remains the most powerful nation in the world, Russia and China are gaining ground in the international arena, but are also arguably becoming closer to each other. While newer conflicts such as Yemen arise, older conflicts like Syria seem to never cease. As the world changes, its international institutions debatably remain unchanged. Germany is now the most powerful country in Europe, yet it is France who has a seat at the Permanent-5 in the Security Council of the United Nations. Some things never seem to change, despite the changing times.

The post-Cold War order has brought about a state of unipolarity led by the US, that certain states, those considered to be revisionist, are demanding to see changed. China and Russia are two of the most important of these revisionist states, out to challenge the current liberal rules-based international order, particularly what they see as a world dominated by the West.

Besides the shared quest for a revised international order, China and Russia share a special relationship that has only strengthened since 1991. Their special friendship culminated with the Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation, signed by Presidents Vladimir Putin and Jiang Zemin in 2001. The treaty raised alarms as uniting two former communist giants against the US and the West, but it was far from being its main purpose. While the treaty did not create any alliance, let alone a military one, it did hold practical value, as “it formalized an important tendency in international relations: the desire of two major world powers, members of the nuclear club and the UNSC, to establish closer cooperation with each other”¹. Russian scholar Alexander Lukin argues that neither China nor Russia’s intentions were directed against the United States or the West (in fact, both were interested in economic and political cooperation with the West); however, it is also true that the Russian-Chinese relationship was inspired by some negative tendencies in international affairs that were encouraged by Washington at that time. These include efforts to downplay the role of the UN, NATO’s attempts to assume the functions of the UNSC, interference in the international affairs of sovereign states, support for separatist movements, NATO’s expansion, etc.²

¹ Alexander Lukin, *China and Russia: The New Rapprochement* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018), 103.

² *Ibid.*

In fact, Lukin states that the end of the Cold War had brought out the United States as the strongest and seeking to become the sole leader of the world, however at the expense of international law. China and Russia, though weaker, were interested in coordinating their efforts to safeguard national sovereignty and international organizations, primarily the United Nations. The Russian-Chinese treaty contained obligations to preserve the UN and its role, and protect international law. The concept of a multipolar world pursued similar goals. It was the US who was moving against them, not vice versa.³

For the purpose of this thesis, the main factor uniting China and Russia is the rejection of US influence in the current international order, preferring instead a multipolar or polycentric power configuration best suited to their interests. Critical decisions should be made, according to both Beijing and Moscow, on a collective basis rather than a unipolar one. The consensus among China and Russia is that international relations are changing, the United States' power is being reduced and therefore there is space for other actors to emerge and influence world affairs. While Lukin argues that China's and Russia's efforts are not guided by an aversion to the West, this thesis will try to prove the opposite.

There seems to be a consensus that both Russia and China desire a multipolar international system. After all, both states argue so themselves. But, Russia does not possess China's economic strength and growth, while China is not as militarily strong as Russia or the US, despite recent shows of might on the 70th anniversary of the People's Republic. Thus, the strategic China-Russia rapprochement is shaping to be the strategic solution to balance against American hegemony and extended influence in the Middle East.

The Syrian Civil War will be the 'case study' for this thesis in order to argue Russia and China's changing roles in the current international order. The Syrian conflict is one of, if not the bloodiest human disaster of this century (*Encyclopaedia Britannica* lists the Second Congo War as the deadliest, but it began in 1998 and ended in 2003, hence beginning in the 20th century⁴). Since its beginning in 2011, estimations state that "over 470,000 have been killed and 1.9 million wounded. Over 4.8 million have fled the country and 6.6 million more are internally displaced, more than half the pre-war population of 21 million."⁵ Most astoundingly, one could argue, a UN

³ Lukin, *China and Russia*, 105.

⁴ Michael Ray, "8 Deadliest Wars of the 21st Century." *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

⁵ Christopher Phillips, *The Battle For Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 1.

report estimated that “by 2013, Syria had already regressed forty years in its human development.”⁶ The developmental cost is absolutely enormous: less than half of the child population is attending school, a third of Syrians live in abject poverty, diseases like typhoid and measles have returned due to lack of vaccination, and the mortality age rate has diminished significantly, from 70 to 55 in only four years⁷. Even culturally, the damage is devastating, as five of the country’s six UNESCO World Heritage Sites have been damaged or destroyed.

However, considering Russia and China’s privileged position in the Security Council, what could drive both States to ignore many chemical weapons attacks to the Syrian population through their vetoes in UNSC resolutions? What makes them veto these and other critical Security Council resolutions on Syria to then turn and militarily intervene by themselves (the case of Russia) later on in the conflict? What makes them veto and then agree to cooperate through peace processes to attempt to bring a solution to the conflict? It is precisely these questions that this thesis will try to answer.

This thesis aims to study the overlap between these three topics: the ever-strengthening roles of Russia and China in the international arena, their role in the Syrian conflict, and the two veto powers’ behavior in the Security Council throughout this conflict. It will do so by answering the following main research question: *To what extent has the voting in the UNSC on the Syrian Civil War been used as a tool for revision by Russia and China?*. To do so, it will examine the reasoning used behind the vetoes, identify the recurrent themes in the reasoning, and shed light on how these themes relate to the theoretical framework as well as to the working hypotheses.

There are a number of working hypotheses under which this thesis works, which mainly contend: (1) the Syrian War and the vetoes with regards to it in the UNSC are indeed a tool for revision of power against the West, however with the caveat that both Russia and China have their own interests, some in fact compatible with the West, such as terrorism; (2) rather than defeating the West, Russia and China want to be equal to the West, in particular to the US; and (3) Russia and China are looking for multipolarity, not tripolarity nor bipolarity.

In order to answer these questions, this thesis will employ two main methodological approaches: literature review and discourse analysis. Literature review is a staple method in

⁶ Christopher Phillips, *The Battle For Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 1.

⁷ Ben Norton, “The Shocking Statistics Behind Syria’s Humanitarian Crisis,” *ThinkProgress* (June 2014)

political science, especially when there is already much written on the topic. There is already extensive literature on the topic of multipolarity and changes in the balance of power, the Syrian Civil War and its framing as a proxy war, and Russian and Chinese involvement in the Syrian conflict. Literature review will serve to accompany discourse analysis in that it will bring the background, but also the concepts that will surround the findings of the discourse analysis. A limitation here is that while there are widespread English and Russian-authored sources in English on most of the issues the thesis covers, the Chinese side is quite lacking, also due to my own language limitations.

The discourse analysis is the essence of the thesis. No methodical research has been conducted on the vetoed UNSC resolutions by Russia and China with regards to the Syrian Civil War. Therefore, the discourse analysis will be conducted on the resolutions themselves, but most importantly, on the transcripts of the 14 Security Council meetings, which are crucial to understand what was the reasoning behind the vetoes. The rhetoric and the discourse will be analyzed, both for China and for Russia, but also for any other state deemed necessary (i.e. United States).

The thesis will be divided into three chapters. The first chapter will be the theoretical framework, which is largely structural realism or neorealism. An analysis of Russian and Chinese views on multipolarity will follow suit. The chapter is based on John J. Mearsheimer's work, particularly *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, which is best fitting to explain Russia and China's behavior. This is the chosen theoretical framework because this thesis will argue that China and Russia are revisionist powers that are using what Joseph Nye Jr. calls 'smart power', "a combination of the hard power of coercion and payment with the soft power of persuasion and attraction,"⁸ to try and change the liberal international order, as explained above. None of them desire bipolarity, however, as they have understood from the experience of the Cold War that it is far too risky and that multipolarity is far more appealing.

The second chapter will deal with the Syrian Civil War, first as a proxy war, where the fighting parties are in fact actors that clash in the name of third parties, regional or global, but which remain behind the scenes. This chapter will focus on the aggressive Russian involvement in the conflict, China's pragmatic positioning and diplomatic efforts, and also the US-Russia disagreements. The Syria crisis, on the one hand, is a case of a proxy war, but more than that, as

⁸ Joseph S. Nye Jr., *The Future of Power* (New York, NY: PublicAffairs, 2011), xiii.

this thesis will prove, is a case of the clash of great powers, to revise the current world liberal rules-based order and to change the rules of the game at the global rank.

The third chapter of the thesis is where the bulk of the analysis will be. The main aim of this thesis is to not just leave it at a discussion of the chronicle of the conflict and the numerous sources that have been written about it, but rather to go further and analyze the behavior of these great powers in the UNSC, where this conflict has been the object of debate numerous times throughout almost a decade now. Examining the China and Russia vetoes in the UNSC, the thesis will reflect upon the research question on the extent that Syria has been a tool for these two powers to advance their own interests beyond Syria and the Middle East. The fact that Russia has exercised veto power 14 times in 9 years should be clear proof of this fact. Likewise, the fact that China has exercised veto power 8 times (more than half the times China has used veto power overall) shows that Syria has gone from a bloody battle in the Middle East to a diplomatic battle in the UN headquarters. The analysis of UNSC voting will be studied in the broader context of great power relations, which will help answer the questions this thesis has posed.

CHAPTER I

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework underlying this thesis will be structural realism or neorealism. It was political scientist Kenneth Waltz who first laid out the principles of this theory in his 1979 seminal work “*Theory of International Politics*”, who subsequently influenced scholars such as John J. Mearsheimer, Robert Jervis, Stephen Walt, Barry Posen, and Charles L. Glaser.

Distinguishing between reductionist and systemic theories of international relations, Waltz argues for the need of a systems approach.⁹ The reductionist approach, which concentrates on causes at the individual or national level, has failed “to explain international outcomes analytically”¹⁰, says Waltz, while the systemic approach includes “theories that conceive of causes operating at the international level.”¹¹ The dominant behavioral approach to building international-political theory up until 1979 derived from framing propositions about the behavior, the strategies, and the interactions of states; however, these propositions at the unit level have proven to be insufficient in explaining phenomena at the systems level. Hence, Waltz argued that “a systems theory is...needed”¹², a theory that “deals with the forces that are in play at the international, and not at the national, level”¹³. Waltz defines international political structures firstly by the principles according to which these structures are ordered, secondly by the differentiation of units, and thirdly by the distribution of capabilities across units.

When considering how the structure is arranged at the international level, Waltz argues that “international systems are decentralized and anarchic”¹⁴, unlike domestic political systems, said to be centralized and hierarchic. However, if the main characteristic of international politics seems to be the lack of order and organization, how can we speak of a structure? Waltz answers the contradiction between “structure” and “anarchy” by positing that “structures emerge from the coexistence of states...formed by the coaction of their units.”¹⁵ Moreover, Waltz works on the

⁹ Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (California: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1979), 68.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Idem*, 18.

¹² *Idem*, 69.

¹³ *Idem*, 71.

¹⁴ *Idem*, 88.

¹⁵ *Idem*, 91.

assumption that the main aim of the states in the international political structure is to ensure their survival, a main point in classical realist theory as well as in neo-realism.

Academic John J. Mearsheimer, the ‘creator’ of offensive realism, describes structural realism as being different from classical realism in that, in structural realism, human nature plays no role in international politics. It is the architecture of the international system which forces states to pursue power in neorealist thought, much like what Waltz refers to when he spoke of structures. The central realist principles of ‘the state of nature is a state of war’ and ‘the world is ruled by anarchy’ rings true to both Waltz and Mearsheimer.

There is a divide between structural realists. Defensive realists, like Waltz, argue that it is “unwise for states to try to maximize their share of world power, because the system will punish them if they attempt to gain too much power”¹⁶; offensive realists, like Mearsheimer, posit that it makes sense for states to gain as much power as possible and pursue hegemony under the right circumstances, to ensure their own survival. Defensive realists, says Mearsheimer, follow the assumption that anarchy motivates states to behave defensively and maintain rather than upset the balance of power, thus creating a ‘status quo bias’.¹⁷ Mearsheimer argues that “the past behavior of the great powers has been more in accordance with the predictions of offensive rather than defensive realism.”¹⁸ He follows that while defensive realists contend that “the international structure provides states with little incentive to seek additional increments of power, instead [pushing] them to maintain the existing balance of power,”¹⁹ offensive realists believe that the international system creates powerful incentives for states to look for chances to gain power at the expense of their rivals, and to take advantage of those situations when the benefits outweigh the costs, employing a variety of means – economic, *diplomatic* (italicized for emphasis), and military - with the ultimate goal being becoming the hegemon in the system. This thesis theorizes that Russia and China’s current behavior also fits best within the framework of offensive rather than defensive realism.

¹⁶ John J. Mearsheimer, “Structural Realism”, in *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity*, ed. Tim Dunne, Milja Kurki, and Steve Smith (Oxford: OUP, 2016), 52.

¹⁷ John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc. 2014), 20.

¹⁸ Mearsheimer, “Structural Realism,” 57.

¹⁹ Mearsheimer, *Tragedy*, 21.

Mearsheimer describes a series of assumptions to explain why states would want power. First, great powers are the main actors in world politics and they operate in an anarchic system, meaning that there is no higher authority that stands above them. “Sovereignty...inheres in states because there is no higher ruling body in the international system...International institutions like the United Nations are of secondary, if not tertiary, importance because they have little coercive leverage over states,”²⁰ says Mearsheimer. Second, all states possess some offensive military capability that can inflict harm on their rivals. The higher the military capacity, the more dangerous a state is perceived to be. The third assumption is that states can never be certain about the intentions of other states. More specifically, no state can be sure that another state will use its offensive military capability to attack first. Mearsheimer here describes two types of states: *revisionist states*, who are willing to use force to alter the balance of power, and *status quo states*, who are satisfied with the existing balance of power and are thus uninterested in using force to change it. The fourth assumption is that the main goal of states is their own survival, territorial integrity and the autonomy of their domestic political order. Finally, the fifth assumption is that states are rational actors and act according to their own cost-benefit analysis.

Mearsheimer argues in *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* that there has never been an actual global hegemon, despite the common view that the US is such. While it is certainly the world’s most powerful state, it does not dominate Europe and Northeast Asia as it does in the Western hemisphere, despite being the ‘distant hegemon’ that has meddled in far-reaching regions more than once in the 20th century, which is why it is commonly referred to as an ‘offshore balancer’. The highest that states can aspire to become, says Mearsheimer, is regional hegemons and possibly hegemons of neighboring areas that are accessible over land.

There is a key debate in structural realism on whether it is unipolarity, bipolarity or multipolarity that is the most likely to cause the outbreak of war. Scholar Robert Jervis defends unipolarity, arguing that under such structure, “world war is less of a problem and more obviously separated from instability.”²¹ Waltz saw unipolarity as the “least durable of international configurations”²² for two main reasons. First, dominant powers take on too many tasks beyond their own borders, becoming weaker in the long run. Second, even if a dominant

²⁰ Mearsheimer, *Tragedy*, 30; John J. Mearsheimer, *The Great Delusion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 131.

²¹ Robert Jervis, “Unipolarity: A Structural Perspective,” *World Politics* 61, no. 1 (Jan. 2009): 195.

²² Kenneth Waltz, “Structural Realism after the Cold War,” *International Security* 25, no. 1 (2000): 27.

superpower acts with moderation and restraint, weaker states will worry about its future behavior. Waltz, in fact, believed bipolarity to be the best-working international structure, arguing that, during the Cold War, the US and the Soviet Union kept each other constrained. Furthermore, “the constancy of the Soviet threat produced a constancy of American policy.”²³

Several factors are at play here. Structural realists who think bipolarity is less war-prone offer this main supporting argument, according to Mearsheimer: there tends to be greater equality between great powers in this system, all of which balance each other. Mearsheimer argues that bipolar systems produce the least amount of fear among great powers, because “there is usually a rough balance of power between two major states in the system.”²⁴ Mearsheimer distinguishes between ‘balanced multipolarity’ and unbalanced multipolarity’, the former being a multipolar system without a potential hegemon and the latter a system with an aspiring hegemon. The scholar argues that balanced multipolarity is likely to generate less fear than an unbalanced multipolarity, but more fear than bipolarity. Extrapolating, multipolar systems, according to Mearsheimer, are more war-prone than bipolar systems, and multipolar systems that contain especially powerful states – potential hegemon – are the most dangerous systems of all, as power asymmetries among their members will be more pronounced by the gaps created by the presence of an aspiring hegemon.²⁵ In multipolarity, in addition, there is more opportunity to fight each other simply because there are more potential conflicts, as well as greater potential for miscalculation, possibly leading to the outbreak of war. As for those who argue that multipolarity is less war-prone, these are the arguments: deterrence is much easier because there are more states that can join together against a threat, and there is much less hostility because states pay less attention to each other than in bipolarity.

Multipolarity: Russia, China, and the Syrian conflict

The end of the Cold War gave the impression of the definitive victory of liberal order. Soft power began to substitute hard power, and geopolitics, for many, became a thing of the past. Thinking in terms of realism or neorealism meant going against the current. However, neorealist scholars Waltz and Charles L. Glaser argued as early as in 2000 and 2003, respectively, that

²³ Waltz, “Structural Realism after the Cold War,” 28.

²⁴ Mearsheimer, *Tragedy*, 45.

²⁵ *Idem*, 5, 45.

neorealist thinking should not be discarded. For Waltz, the end of the Cold War simply meant a (probably temporary) switch from a bipolar to a unipolar international system. For him, the switch was a matter of continuity, not of overall transformation of international politics. Glaser, similarly, sees the post-Cold War period as an era of “relative calm in major-power relations, but the possibility of major-power war has not been eliminated...At a minimum, there is room for substantial disagreement over the future of major-power relations.”²⁶ As of 2019, there seems to be a consensus among international scholars and historians that we are indeed in an increasingly multipolar system. “Putin has brought about the multipolar world that he has dreamed of since he took office determined to revisit the Americans’ Cold War victory,”²⁷ says Susan B. Glasser, acclaimed journalist and Russia expert. Similarly, Odd Arne Westad, Cold War scholar emphasizing on China, states “...the world is becoming not more bipolar but more multipolar. The process is gradual, but there is little doubt that the trend is real. Unlike in the Cold War, greater conflict between the two biggest powers today [the US and China] will not lead to bipolarity; rather, it will make it easier for others to catch up...”²⁸ In the 2014 revised edition of his magnum opus, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, Mearsheimer warns: “What the future holds for China and Russia and what the balance of power will look like in 2030 is difficult to foresee.”²⁹ As of his 2019 book, *The Great Delusion*, Mearsheimer continues to claim that, even under the liberal world order that we supposedly live in, the possibility of a major great power war has far from been eliminated; if anything, it is now closer than ever: “...in the absence of a world state, states bent on survival have little choice but to compete for power. Liberalism has to have a night watchman if it is to work: it demands a hierarchic political system such as exists inside the state itself. But the international system is anarchic, not hierarchic. As long as liberal states operate in either bipolarity or multipolarity, they have no choice but to act toward each other according to realist logic.”³⁰ He continues: “Even if one country is pursuing liberal hegemony, others are likely to act according to balance-of-power logic, which means the

²⁶ Charles L. Glaser, “Structural Realism in a More Complex World,” *Review of International Studies* 29, no. 3 (July 2003): 403.

²⁷ Susan B. Glasser, “Putin the Great: Russia’s Imperial Impostor,” *Foreign Affairs* 98, no. 5 (September/October 2019): 12.

²⁸ Odd Arne Westad, “The Sources of Chinese Conduct: Are Washington and Beijing Fighting a New Cold War?,” *Foreign Affairs* 98, no. 5 (September/October 2019): 92.

²⁹ Mearsheimer, *Tragedy*, 35.

³⁰ Mearsheimer, *Delusion*, 122.

liberalizer will meet stiff resistance from them...It appears that the structure of the international system is moving toward multipolarity, because of China's striking rise and the resurrection of Russian power."³¹

In reality, the liberal post-Cold War unipolar order was more suited to the West (the US and Europe) than to Russia, China, and a few other powers increasingly referred to as revisionist powers. China's economic rise, increasingly closer to the magnitude of the US economy, as well as Russia's military strengthening are proof of one of realism's tenets: states prioritize self-interest and self-preservation. This is reflected in these powers choosing not to conform to the current liberal international order, but instead seeking "to define their proper roles in the world"³².

What Russia and China look for, in effect, is the changing of the structure of the international global order to their favor, as the Western-but-particularly-US-dominated international order is against their interests and shared global view, besides being largely unfavorable to them while remaining very sympathetic to the West. Paradoxically, it was the Cold War order that followed the Second World War that suited Russia and China better than the post-Cold War one. While this is obviously understandable for Russia, as it was the balancer against the US, it is more complicated for China, since, to its detriment, it was at best a secondary player during the Cold War. However, there is an explanation for this: the Chinese Communist Party looks at the Cold War years, especially Mao Zedong's era, with the utmost reverence, and misses the air of economic reform brought upon by Deng Xiaoping beginning in 1979. As Walter Russell Mead writes, China and Russia (and others) "never bought into the geopolitical settlement that followed the Cold War, and they are making increasingly forceful attempts to overturn it."³³ These "forceful attempts" that Mead refers to can be considered one of the "symptoms" of the return of realist thought to the actual international arena. What unites these two powers "is their agreement that the status quo must be revised."³⁴ Russia demands to return in its role as a major international player, while China is departing from its former policy

³¹ Mearsheimer, *Delusion*, 122, 228.

³² Fyodor Lukyanov, "Putin's Foreign Policy: The Quest to Restore Russia's Rightful Place," *Foreign Affairs* 95, no. 3 (May/June 2016): 31.

³³ Walter Russell Mead, "The Return of Geopolitics: The Revenge of the Revisionist Powers," *Foreign Affairs* 93, no. 3 (May/June 2014): 69.

³⁴ *Idem*, 74.

as a secondary actor in international affairs and is attempting to limit American influence in what it considers to be its backyard.

However, not all scholars and analysts share the opinion of Mearsheimer, Glasser, Russell Mead or Westad, who argue that Russia and China are revisionist powers. G. John Ikenberry, in opposition to Mead, states that Mead's argument "is a misreading of China and Russia, which are not full-scale revisionist powers but part-time spoilers at best..."³⁵ To Ikenberry, China and Russia do not "have the interests -- let alone the ideas, capacities, or allies - - to lead them to upend existing global rules and institutions."³⁶ If anything, according to Ikenberry, "China and Russia are acting more like established great powers than revisionist ones... China and Russia are using global rules and institutions to advance their own interests... They wish to enhance their positions within the system, but they are not trying to replace it."³⁷ He further calls Mead out on underestimating the strength of the liberal order that the US has built. Nevertheless, this does not prove that this liberal order cannot be, or even is not being currently shattered. In fact, Ikenberry's reading is somewhat paradoxical: he argues that Russia and China are already strongly embedded in the current liberal international order and unwilling and unable to change it or offer an alternative order, but are still looking out for their own self-interest in the form of "search[ing] for commerce and resources, the protection of their sovereignty, and, where possible, regional domination."³⁸ These aims are more compatible with a neorealist world order rather than a liberal one.

Other scholars such as Robert D. Kaplan explain the assertive behavior of these two powers not through their strength, but rather through their current weaknesses: Russia's extended economic crisis and China's decline in economic growth. "...[I]ncreasingly, China and Russia flex their muscles not because they are powerful but because they are weak,"³⁹ says Kaplan. While it is debatable whether these two powers (and others such as Iran) are or are not real revisionist powers, it is doubtless that their behavior and policy in the international arena have dramatically changed.

³⁵ G. John Ikenberry, "The Illusion of Geopolitics: The Enduring Power of the Liberal Order," *Foreign Affairs* 93, no. 3 (May/June 2014): 80.

³⁶ *Idem*, 88.

³⁷ *Idem*, 89.

³⁸ *Idem*, 90.

³⁹ Robert D. Kaplan, "Eurasia's Coming Anarchy: The Risks of Chinese and Russian Weakness," *Foreign Affairs* 95, no. 2 (March/April 2016): 33.

The annexation of Crimea in 2014 was the first serious act of revisionist Russia, followed by its large-scale military intervention in Syria in 2015, which will be explained in detail in the next chapter. As underlined by Russian scholars, “Syrian intervention was aimed not only at strengthening Al-Assad’s position but also at forcing the United States to deal with Moscow on a more equal footing.”⁴⁰ Similarly, Carnegie Russia’s Dmitri Trenin argues that “Syria and the Middle East, in general, were a signal that Russia was returning to the global arena and was becoming a global player...”⁴¹ Meanwhile, Kaplan sees Russia’s engagement in Syria as an attempt “to restore Moscow’s position in the Levant—and to buy leverage with the EU by influencing the flow of refugees to Europe.”⁴²

Likewise, China’s stance towards the Syrian conflict, despite appearing to be more subtle and neutral, reflects both the state’s direct interests in the Middle East, particularly in the energy area, and its strong position against what China considers being Western intervention or interference (i.e. American) in China’s own backyard.⁴³

For all these reasons, the Syrian Civil War is as much a proxy war between regional powers, each with their own interests and agenda (be it economic, political, religious, etc.) – namely, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey-, as it is a great powers clash for influence and revision in the global stage, with a competition between the West, most notably the US, against Russia and China.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Lukyanov, “Putin’s Foreign Policy,” 35.

⁴¹ Dmitri Trenin, “20 Years of Vladimir Putin: How Russian Foreign Policy Has Changed,” *The Moscow Times* (August 27, 2019), para. 27.

⁴² Kaplan, “Eurasia’s Coming Anarchy,” 34.

⁴³ Leszek Byszynski, “Overshadowed by China: The Russia-China Strategic Partnership in the Asia-Pacific Region,” in *The Future of China-Russia Relations*, ed. James Bellacqua (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2010), 280.

⁴⁴ Robert D. Kaplan and Kamran Bokhari, “Halting Syrian Chaos.” *Stratfor Worldwide* (July 4, 2012), para. 3.

CHAPTER II

The Syrian conflict is considered to have begun as part of the Arab Spring: Tunisia's successful Revolution of 2011; Libya's dramatic collapse after Western intervention; Egypt's ousting of longtime President Hosni Mubarak; and Yemen's domestic conflict that continues without a solution.

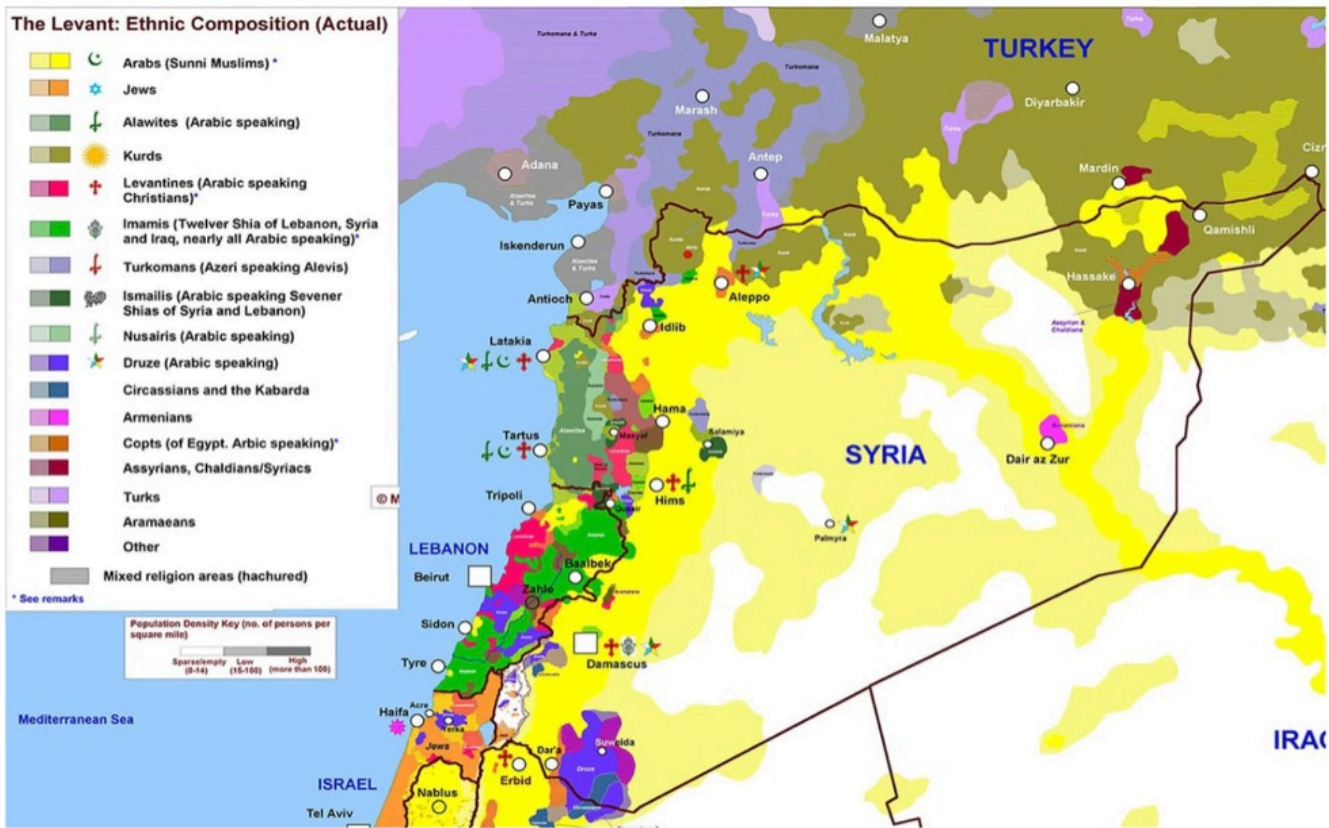
This paper, however, will only briefly touch upon the happenings of the conflict itself, as the Syrian civil war and many of its aspects and issues are topics that have already been covered extensively in academic literature. Furthermore, the complexity of the conflict would make it impossible for this paper to cover the conflict in its entirety as well as analyze Russia and China's role in it. Its larger context, meaning 'the Syrian civil war as a proxy war' is more relevant to this thesis, therefore it will be analyzed in this chapter. However, even the 'proxy war' side is too broad to cover in a thesis that aims to focus on specifically two states that take part in this proxy war (three, if we include the US), and therefore will purposefully not include too much information on Turkey and the Kurdish problem, or on Iran, which arguably very much remain crucial players in this proxy war, or are even becoming more prominent, as is the case with Turkey.

The Syrian Civil War: a short chronology and context

No war can be explained and understood without its historical context. While Syria's history is arguably one of the world's oldest, one need only focus on the past century to explain a large part as to why the Syrian conflict escalated so quickly into a civil war.

When Hafez al Al-Assad, Bashar al Al-Assad's father, seized power in the Corrective Movement in November 1971, ousting Salah Jadid from the Presidency due to intra-party conflict within the Syrian Socialist Ba'ath Party, he began to gain some support among the population, support that would be extinguished with the 1982 Hama Massacre. On February 2nd 1982, Hafez al Al-Assad seized the western city of Hama and bombed it with fighter jets, allowed tanks to access the city's narrow streets, and crushed an armed rebellion by 200-500 fighters from the military wing of the Muslim Brotherhood, a transnational Sunni organization. Twenty-seven days of military campaign left between 10,000 and 40,000 casualties and two-thirds of the city destroyed. With the massacre, the older Al-Assad managed to keep his population in fear, which he managed very successfully for thirty years, thereby oppressing any

forms of dissent. The Hama rebellion and subsequent massacre was the culmination of “the resentment that much of Syria’s Sunni Muslim majority felt at being ruled by a member of a small Shia sect.”⁴⁵ Just as his father, Bashar al Al-Assad’s repression “was being documented well before the advent of and during the Arab Spring.”⁴⁶ According to a 2010 Human Rights Watch report cited by Hardeep Singh Puri, Indian Ambassador to the UN from 2009 to 2013, Syria has remained under a state of emergency since 1963 (when the Ba’athists came to power).⁴⁷



Each color represents an ethnic or religious group. (Dr. Michael Izady, Gulf/2000 Program at Columbia University, N.Y.)

⁴⁵ The Economist, “Bashar’s World,” *The Economist* (June 15, 2000)

⁴⁶ Hardeep Singh Puri, *Perilous Interventions: The Security Council and the Politics of Chaos* (Uttar Pradesh, India: HarperCollins India, 2016), 118.

⁴⁷ Human Rights Watch, “A Wasted Decade: Human Rights in Syria during Bashar Al-Assad’s First Ten Years in Power.” *Human Rights Watch* (July 2010).

The sectarian aspect of the conflict is definitely one of the main factors in the Syrian Civil War, as the map above shows. The Al-Assads' Alawite (a Shia minority within Islam) government has long ruled Syria and has largely ignored the majority (78 percent) Sunni population's concerns, all the while monopolizing power and having a weak human rights record much before the beginning of the Syrian Civil War. This sectarian challenge that Syria presents is arguably one of the main reasons as to why it became a proxy war. The Kurdish population in the north pushed Turkey, which is in a long-standing conflict with the Kurds, to become involved in the conflict; just as Iran's Imamiyyah (Twelver) Shia government has an interest in keeping Al-Assad in place. Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, being of the Sunni branch of Islam, aims at overthrowing Al-Assad's regime and supporting the oppressed Sunni Syrian population. This, nevertheless, is only a part of the explanation for the start of the Syrian Civil War, but it cannot be neglected.

At the time when the Arab Spring began, the Middle East was already changing. The American influence over the region was arguably decreasing, first, in face of the perceived failure of the 2003 to 2011 US occupation of Iraq, the declining importance of Gulf oil, economic and military cutbacks after the world financial crisis of the late 2000s, as well as the election of Barack Obama, highly critical of his predecessor's doings and undoings in the region. Furthermore, some scholars such as F. Gregory Gause, Leonore G. Martin, Vali Nasr and Curtis Ryan argue that the Middle East is actually undergoing its own New Middle East Cold War (coined by Gregory Gause, who also argues that sectarian differences between Shia and Sunni Muslims play a major factor in this New Middle Eastern Cold War), fared between two blocs led by Iran and Saudi Arabia.⁴⁸ The author of this thesis adds another two factors: first, China's increased interest in the Middle East as a part of its Belt and Road Initiative and its aim in securing its energy with the help of Iran, and, second, as the international affairs expert of the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC) Andrey Kortunov argues, Russia's intentions of becoming a 'power broker' in a region that was historically Russia's until the end of the Cold War, after decades of avoiding meddling in the Middle East except for weakly "allying" with Turkey and Iran.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Phillips, *The Battle For Syria*, 4.

⁴⁹ Andrey Kortunov, "Russia: the power broker?," *Building trust: the challenge of peace and stability in the Mediterranean*. Italian Institute for International Political Studies (2018), 76.

Christopher Phillips, author of *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East*, argues that “[t]he failure to land a decisive blow on Al-Assad contributed to rebel recrimination and the growing appeal of emerging radical groups such as IS[IS, or IL, or Da’esh] (Islamic State, hereon after referred to only as IS).”⁵⁰ In fact, one of the main reasons that explains the prolongation of the conflict is the lack of a single command structure, as there were more than 1000 independent militias, where “personal and ideological differences, particularly over the role of Islam and jihadism, only grew as the conflict dragged on.”⁵¹ Puri agrees, stating that “[a] defining characteristic of what is happening in Syria, perhaps entirely unique, is that disputants on both sides appear to prefer chaos and disintegration to seeking a negotiated political settlement.”⁵²

Phillips’s book differs from other accounts in that he puts the international context of the Syrian conflict in the forefront, arguing three ways in which the international dimension shaped the war. First, the international as well as regional environment in which Syria’s uprising started was crucial in its transformation into a civil war. Second, the decisions made by the leading states in this proxy war in the year after the beginning of the uprisings and Al-Assad’s repression “played a major role in escalating the uprising into a civil war.”⁵³ Finally, as the war continued to escalate, the policies pursued by the international players in the conflict “shaped its character, and, importantly, ensured that it continued.”⁵⁴

Phillips argues that we are currently watching a multipolar Middle East unfold, with the Iran-Saudi Arabia rivalry only being an element of it rather than the defining feature. But, what is important, he says, is the context of regional uncertainty that allowed the Syrian conflict to escalate to such an extent: [n]ot only was the Syrian civil war shaped and driven by this regional environment, but it in turn reinforced the trend towards multipolarity and an end of US dominance.”⁵⁵

As early as in 2012, scholar Robert D. Kaplan argued that the Syrian Civil War was evolving into a proxy war, which would only complicate the conflict, and urged for a resolution

⁵⁰ Phillips, *The Battle For Syria*, 3.

⁵¹ *Idem*, 2.

⁵² Puri, *Perilous Interventions*, 105.

⁵³ Phillips, *The Battle For Syria*, 3.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Idem*, 5.

to be found as soon as possible.⁵⁶ Geraint Alun Hughes explains in 2013 that “[p]roxy warfare offers a superficially seductive policy option to any state that is willing to wound, and yet afraid to strike.”⁵⁷ Hughes however, criticizes Russia and Iran particularly for being hypocritical in condemning the violence in Syria but also any external intervention in the conflict, as will be seen later in the case of the several chemical attacks.

When peaceful protests began in southern Syria, in the town of Daraa, in March 2011, few imagined that these protests would lead to a full-scale conflict in just a few months. The Daraa massacre, where a group of teenagers were captured by Government forces and tortured for protesting against Al-Assad, was followed by uprisings in other towns and cities, including Damascus, Qamishli, Homs, Baniyas, Latakia, Tartus, Idlib, Raqqa, Deir ez-Zor, and Hama. Faced with “such violence and brutality, segments of the opposition, which emerged as a localized, largely leaderless movement, fought back.”⁵⁸ By late summer 2011, the unrest had developed into a full-blown civil war, according to the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. This also marks the beginning of organized insurgency, as it is considered the date of formation of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), the first organized military force of the Syrian opposition, aiming to remove Al-Assad from power.

In the earliest Western response, on August 18th 2011, US President Barack Obama issued a statement urging Al-Assad “to step aside”⁵⁹. On the other hand, Iran and Russia were quick to oppose any intervention to overthrow Al-Assad’s regime, and China also joined Russia in releasing a statement on August 24th urging the international community to stay out of Syria’s internal affairs. Saudi Arabia, aiming at countering Iran, but also containing the Arab Spring to ensure its own safety, initially stood by Al-Assad, advising him to end the uprising as peacefully as possible. With Al-Assad’s refusal, Saudi Arabia, keeping in mind its main threat, Iran, began to switch sides. Qatar, equally, “transformed itself from Syrian ally to leading anti-Al-Assad state in a few months.”⁶⁰ Turkey, too, saw itself transform from an ally to an enemy of Al-

⁵⁶ Kaplan and Bokhari, “Halting Syrian Chaos.”

⁵⁷ Geraint Alun Hughes, “Syria and the Perils of Proxy Warfare,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 25, no. 3 (2014): 523.

⁵⁸ Phillips, *The Battle For Syria*, 2.

⁵⁹ White House. “President Obama: “The future of Syria must be determined by its people, but President Bashar al-Assad is standing in their way.”” (August 2011).

⁶⁰ Phillips, *The Battle For Syria*, 69.

Assad's over the course of just one summer, an event that would have serious repercussions throughout the entire conflict.

The international community's first concrete response was to enforce economic sanctions against the regime, while the Arab League proposed the first peace plan in the history of the conflict, involving a commitment to end the violence, withdraw tanks from the streets, release political prisoners, and enter into dialogue with the opposition. However, only days after the Al-Assad regime had accepted the deal, the League claimed that Damascus had breached the terms, prompting a threat to suspend Syria, which became effective on November 16th, 2011, followed by more economic sanctions and a mission to Syria. Unfortunately, the mission failed very soon, in February 2012, as the Arab League did not enjoy enough traction to dissuade Al-Assad from continuing his violent maneuvers.

The League then referred the matter to the UN Security Council, which called for the establishment of a UN-Arab League Joint Special Envoy for Syria, former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan. The Special Envoy drafted a six-point plan as a roadmap to a political settlement in Syria. Following the failure of its adoption, the UN created the UN Supervision Mission in Syria (UNSMIS), which also collapsed, with Annan resigning in August after the failure in implementing the Geneva Communiqué, a version of the six-point plan endorsed by several great powers, including the US, Russia, and China. Phillips argues that "the Annan mediations established a pattern that would be repeated throughout the civil war: external powers being unwilling to prioritize ending the conflict over their own wider geopolitical agendas."⁶¹

Following the failure of the UN in the first stages, violence escalated throughout 2012 and 2013, with violent acts perpetrated by both Al-Assad's forces and the armed opposition. Rebel forces, generally grouped under the term Free Syrian Army (FSA), launched offensives in various other governorates in Syria besides the cities of Damascus and Aleppo, including Raqqa, Idlib, and Deir ez-Zor. Islamist rebels (the FSA was never explicitly secular), including what would become the Islamic Al-Nusra Front, captured the city of Raqqa by March 6th, the first major provincial capital loss for the Al-Assad regime. It was as soon as June 2013 when the FSA reported that one of its commanders, Kamal Hamami, was killed by the Islamic State, considering it a declaration of war. This would mark the first direct involvement of IS in the conflict.

⁶¹ Phillips, *The Battle For Syria*, 102.

2013 saw the first uses of chemical weapons by the Ba'athist government towards the Syrian population. In March, the Khan al-Assal chemical attack was carried out, with both the Syrian government and the opposition accusing each other of perpetrating the attack. In August, another chemical attack was carried out in the Ghouta region near Damascus, most estimates putting the death toll around 1000 casualties. In both attacks, it was claimed that sarin was used.

Syria held a presidential election on the 3rd of June 2014. Bashar al Al-Assad won, with 88.7 percent of the votes. Arguably, the elections were not transparent and were deemed illegitimate by the West. 2014 was the year of the rise of the Islamic State. The IS, however, was also at odds with Al-Assad's government, defending its bases in Raqqa and Al-Hasakah.

The unilateral American intervention on Syrian soil against IS began on September 23rd 2014, hitting targets around Raqqa first. Furthermore, the US began to officially arm the Free Syrian Army. The rest of 2014 saw even more emerging factions fighting against the Al-Assad government, IS, as well as each other. On May 21st, 2015, IS seized the town of Palmyra, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and conducted mass executions in the area.

On September 29th, 2015, Russia's military launched a full-scale military intervention in Syria, with airstrikes targeting rebel groups positioned against Al-Assad. Putin claimed they were targeting IS and other terrorist groups, but Pentagon sources indicated that they were overwhelmingly anti-Al-Assad forces, including those who had been supported and armed by the US coalition. Russia's air campaign was quick, averaging around 70 attacks every day. This gave a clear advantage to the Syrian Army, which led to the balance of forces shifting towards Al-Assad within Syria.

October 2015 saw the first round of the Vienna peace talks of the International Syria Support Group (ISSG), with the participation of Russia, China, the US, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the United Kingdom, Germany and France, among others, but ended without any resolution just like the Geneva II talks, as the participants disagreed on Al-Assad's future.

In December 2015 the unanimous approval of UNSC Resolution 2254 (to be analyzed in detail in the next chapter) was finally reached, implementing a ceasefire and establishing the first steps towards a political transition. With the resuming of the Geneva III talks in January 2016, the ceasefire was announced on February 22nd, 2016. The Islamic State, in the meantime, continued to attack and raid towns such as Deir ez-Zor, but the areas were taken back with the help of Russian Air Force fighter jets.

The establishment of Russia and the US as co-chairs of the ISSG in 2016 meant that the two powers had to work closely together to achieve the common aim of resolving the conflict. The 2016 Geneva talks had a major difference when compared to the previous ones: now the US and the West did not require Al-Assad's ousting as a prerequisite for a political transition. In fact, these states would concede that Al-Assad could remain in power during the political transition period, albeit undefined.

In April, the main armed opposition walked out of the peace talks, further damaging the peace process. In May 2016, US Secretary of State John Kerry pled to Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov to assist in containing violence in the country. For this, the US and Russia attempted to develop a map with 'safe zones' where opposition groups could shelter themselves from Al-Assad's continued attacks, and "agreed to work to reach 'shared understanding' on the territories held by IS and the al Nusra front."⁶²

However, Russia and the US' initiatives to resolve the conflict "deteriorated into mutual accusations of blame and escalating threats."⁶³ Washington responded by issuing an ultimatum to Moscow at the end of September 2016, warning that US-Russian engagement in Syria would end unless Russia ceased supporting Al-Assad in targeting rebel forces in Aleppo. Russia, in response, claimed that it had been forced to continue attacks on rebel forces because of the US' 'refusal' to differentiate among moderate anti-Al-Assad and extremist opposition forces, al Nusra, and others.

On September 22nd, the Syrian armed forces declared a new offensive in Aleppo, and on December 14th Al-Assad's government had recaptured the last remaining rebel stronghold in the city with the help of Russian Air Forces. As for Raqqa, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), uniting almost 30,000 Arab, Christian, and Kurdish troops, successfully took Raqqa back from IS.

With the chemical attack on Khan Shaykhun in April 2017, the US responded by attacking the Ba'athist government directly for the first time. Since the attack was not sanctioned by neither Congress nor the UNSC, the strike led to an emergency meeting of the UNSC.⁶⁴ Russia called the US involvement a "flagrant violation of international law and an act of

⁶² Paul J. Bolt and Sharyl N. Cross, *China, Russia and Twenty-First Century Global Geopolitics* (Oxford: OUP, 2018), 196.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ UN Security Council, S/PV.7919.

aggression...strongly condemn[ing] the illegitimate actions by the United States, whose consequences for regional and international stability could be extremely serious.”⁶⁵ The US struck again in May, when a Syrian army convoy in al-Tanf, which hosted a US airbase, was attacked by American fighter jets.

In September 2017, Al-Assad’s government was able to end the three-year siege by IS of Deir ez-Zor with the help of Russia’s military. In October, Raqqa was fully claimed by the mostly Kurdish SDF, a move considered an occupation by Al-Assad. In February 2018, Al-Assad began the Rif Dimashq offensive with an air campaign to capture Ghouta, held by the rebels east of Damascus. On April 7th 2018, the Douma chemical attack was carried out, with 70 killed and over 500 injured. Al-Assad denied using chemical weapons, but after the attack, his armed forces recaptured the city of Douma, thus ending the five-year Siege of Ghouta. Just a week after, the US, the UK, and France responded to the chemical attack by launching missile strikes against government targets. A few days after, the Syrian armed forces and allied Palestinian groups joined forces in the Southern Damascus offensive against IS. The ousting of IS signified that Al-Assad finally controlled Damascus after six years. Finally, the Southern Syria offensive in June-July allowed Al-Assad to control the Daraa and Quneitra provinces. 2018 was thus a successful year for Al-Assad, who regained control over many areas of the torn country. However, the rest of 2018 fueled rivalries with Israel and Turkey, who launched their own offensives independently against Syria and the Kurdish forces, respectively.

In January 2019, US Secretary of State announced that the US would withdraw its forces from Syria while continuing its battle against IS, but however warned that there would be no reconstruction aid for Al-Assad-held areas until Iran and its proxies left.⁶⁶ In August, the US and Turkey reached a deal creating a new demilitarized buffer zone in northern Syria, along the Turkish border. However, US President Donald Trump declared the effective withdrawal of US military forces from Syria. In October, before the zone was fully implemented, Turkey, taking advantage of the power vacuum left by the US departure, along with the Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army, launched an offensive against the Kurdish-dominated SDF and later the Syrian

⁶⁵ UNSC S/PV.7919, 10.

⁶⁶ BBC, “US to expel every last Iranian boot from Syria – Pompeo.” *BBC News* (Jan. 10, 2019).

Arab Army in northeastern Syria. At the end of October, Putin and Erdogan agreed to create a Second Buffer Zone that would demilitarize northern Syria.

On October 26th 2019, IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was killed by US forces in the Barisha raid on the Turkey-Syria border.

Russia and China's interests in Syria and the Middle East

United by many aspects, first by the fact that they are effectively ruled by authoritarian governments, both Russia and China are out to challenge the current rules-based world order, in particular what they see as a world dominated by the West. The Middle East has, in fact, been dominated by American involvement since arguably at least 1967, when the Arab-Israeli Six-Day War took place. The Gulf War in 1990 and subsequent invasion of Iraq in 2003 only served to solidify the US' hegemonic role in the Middle East. Alas, as described above, the very unsuccessful campaigns in both Iraq and Afghanistan have only served to diminish America's credibility regarding wanting peace and stability in the region. This created a vacuum that could be exploited by both Russia (especially) and China.

There are many factors that explain Russia and China's interests in the Middle East. Firstly, China and Russia share a common history in that they once had a glorious past that was shattered by wars. The Russian Empire ended just before the First World War, while the Qing Dynasty succumbed to warring with Western powers and Japan in the late 19th century only to capitulate into the Republic of China, and later on, after the Second World War, into the People's Republic of China and the Republic of China (Taiwan). Therefore, both nations consider themselves to be "unique civilizations with deep traditions that have suffered as a result of past interventions and occupations from the West"⁶⁷.

It is a priority for both nations to assert their position as players in the international arena: Russia's new National Security Strategy for 2016 includes the objective of "consolidating the Russian Federation's status as a leading world power", while Beijing's new National Security Strategy states that China will "proactively participate in regional and global governance"⁶⁸. It is true, however, that Russia's attitude tends to be somewhat more assertive than China's. China is keener to be bolder in what it is more interested in what it does best, that is, in economics and in

⁶⁷ Bolt and Cross, *China, Russia and Twenty-First Century Global Geopolitics*, 152.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

the Asian region. Bolt and Cross argue that “[g]rowing global economic influence and reach is the single most important factor establishing China as a leading world power.”⁶⁹ Russia, on the other hand, is not as strong economically, but is stronger militarily. However, its ‘backyard’ is less defined due to it being both in Europe and in Asia. Furthermore, Bolt and Cross state that while Russia tends to ‘punch above its weight’⁷⁰, attempting to (often) forcefully influence major developments in the region and beyond, China is more ‘risk averse’ and restricts its activity in the global arena to pursuing its economic interests and using diplomacy. In simpler terms, Russia plays geopolitics, while China plays geoeconomics.⁷¹

Very importantly, both countries share the concept of “non-interference” in the internal affairs of sovereign nations, uniting in opposition to Western efforts to promote democratization and regime change. In fact, Russia and China fear the democratization efforts brought about by the Arab Spring and Western intervention, along with its normative values of democracy and human rights, as it could potentially destabilize their own national regimes. This concept will come across repeatedly in this as well as in the next chapter, which will contain the analysis of the UNSC draft resolutions and the meetings that discussed them that China and Russia vetoed, as well as those that passed.

Russia’s interests in Syria are well known: Syria has been a longstanding ally for Russia since the Soviet era, and provided a major arms sales market for Russian military equipment. Moscow has been the largest arms supplier for the Al-Assad regime. Moscow’s naval facility in the Syrian port city of Tartus was established in 1971, and along with the port in Latakia the two ports have provided Russia’s military with warm-water ports and access to the Mediterranean Sea. Russia has an airbase at Palmyra in Syria, later critical in the military intervention in 2015. Furthermore, Syrian-Russian cultural ties were also close, with broad investments, educational exchanges, and tourist networks. But most importantly, beyond Russia’s own military and economic interests in Syria, its aim was to assert its influence in a region where it previously enjoyed said influence, the Middle East. Russia was concerned that if it retreated from the Middle East, it would give more space to the US to promote democratization and regime change, “deemed as fueling extremism and violence and leaving failed states”, such as Libya, thus

⁶⁹ Bolt and Cross, *China, Russia and Twenty-First Century Global Geopolitics*, 153.

⁷⁰ *Idem*, 154.

⁷¹ Marco Siddi and Marcin Kaczmarek, “Russia and China in the Middle East: Playing their Best Cards.” *Finnish Institute of International Affairs Briefing Paper 275* (Nov. 2019), 7.

threatening Russia's regional interests. Bolt and Cross argue that Russia does aim to become a 'power broker' in the region. According to them, what Putin is looking for is stepping up diplomatic and economic involvement throughout the Middle East region, as well as strengthening its relationship with Iran, becoming a stronger player in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but also strengthening partnership with traditional US allies like Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt.⁷²

Dmitriy Frolovskiy, Russian political analyst, however, argues that Syria is just a gateway for Russia to exert influence over the entire Middle East, becoming a global power broker, not just a regional power broker. "Projecting the effects of Russia's Syria campaign beyond the Middle East was always the Kremlin's goal. The conflict was always perceived as a tool to showcase ambitions that assert Russia as a global power," says Frolovskiy.⁷³ Bolt and Cross also agree, stating that "...the Syrian war provided the opportunity for Moscow to reassert influence in the Middle East as a major power and to counter the Obama Administration's claim that Russia was restricted to assuming the role only as a 'regional power.'"⁷⁴ Sergey Oznobishchev of the RIAC states that "Moscow's engagements in both Ukraine and Syria were overwhelmingly motivated by the desire to establish a relationship based on equal terms with the United States, a consideration even more important than countering terrorism in Syria."⁷⁵

Furthermore, the instability brought about by the Arab Spring in 2011 gave Russia the fear that there could be spillover effects threatening stability in Central Asia or even in the Russian Federation, reminiscent of the Second Chechen War (1999-2009).⁷⁶

China's own interests, on the other hand, are much more measured. While only supplying Syria with military hardware, registered at \$1.2 billion in 2012, China has been more concerned with stability in the region and the impact the war could have on oil supplies, worrying on the impact it would have on Iran, on whom China depends. Yezid Sayigh, senior fellow at the Carnegie Middle East Center, argues that "China's current stance [towards Syria] reflects its growing disquiet at what it sees as a US policy intended to deny it [China] access to Middle East

⁷² Bolt and Cross, *China, Russia and Twenty-First Century Global Geopolitics*, 181.

⁷³ Dmitriy Frolovskiy, "What Putin Really Wants in Syria," *Foreign Policy* (Feb. 2019), para. 2.

⁷⁴ Bolt and Cross, *China, Russia and Twenty-First Century Global Geopolitics*, 180-181.

⁷⁵ Cited in Bolt and Cross, *China, Russia and Twenty-First Century Global Geopolitics*, 181.

⁷⁶ Roy Allison, "Russia and Syria: explaining alignment with a regime in crisis." *International Affairs* 89, no. 4 (2013): 810.

energy sources...Chinese diplomacy and its approach to international affairs and to the Middle East have been primarily driven by the wish to secure its energy supplies and to increase its economic relationships in general.”⁷⁷

Furthermore, another concern for China is that there are greater numbers of Uighurs from the Xinjiang region transiting through Central Asia to fight in the Syrian conflict, joining the Turkistan Islamic Party to fight with the Al-Nusra Front. However, Bolt and Cross argue that “Beijing also tended to perceive all forces seeking to undermine the existing Syrian government as terrorist elements.”⁷⁸

Finally, it is very important to note, as seen throughout the chronology of the conflict, that Moscow, Beijing, and Washington all could find common ground in “seeking to prevent the Syrian nation from collapsing into a terrorist-held stronghold...”⁷⁹ The continued American commitment to fight terrorism in the Middle East, China’s fear of radicalized Uighurs, and Russia’s dread that there could be spillover in Central Asia and that certain former Soviet republics could ‘turn’, made terrorism probably the only issue uniting the three major powers. Nevertheless, Bolt and Cross argue that “while Moscow did claim to be in Syria to fight terrorism, defeating IS was never established as an objective for the military campaign, perhaps because the Kremlin recognized that such a goal might not be attainable.”⁸⁰

As will be shown below, the interests of each State have dictated their involvement in the Syrian conflict, be it political, military, or diplomatic, and surely also their stances in the UNSC, which is the object of this thesis.

Russia’s involvement in the Syrian Civil War

As stated earlier, Russia, in line with the doctrine of ‘non-interference’, supported Al-Assad from the very beginning. Bolt and Cross state that “Moscow had anticipated that the downfall of Syrian leader Bashar Al-Assad would leave a power vacuum, as in Iraq and Libya, that would be occupied by Islamist-inspired terrorist forces or by those who would jeopardize

⁷⁷ Yezid Sayigh, “China’s Position on Syria,” *Carnegie Middle East Center* (February 8, 2012).

⁷⁸ Bolt and Cross, *China, Russia and Twenty-First Century Global Geopolitics*, 180.

⁷⁹ *Idem*, 194.

⁸⁰ *Idem*, 192.

Russia's longstanding interests in Syria. Moscow's foreign policy community has been quite adamant in stating that they intended to avoid a "Libya-like fiasco" in Syria"⁸¹.

While the US' priorities were securing political transition in Syria by ousting Al-Assad, combatting IS and al Qaeda-affiliated ANF but avoiding a military intervention at all costs to prevent another Iraq or Afghanistan situation, Moscow's priority was to maintain the sovereign government in place, always alluding to the principle of 'non-interference'.

Moscow was diplomatically involved from the very beginning, and its influence was critical in a 2014 agreement to eliminate Syria's chemical weapons arsenal. Unfortunately, the Douma chemical attack of April 2018 proved that the agreement meant very little to Al-Assad. Moscow's diplomatic involvement also included "encouraging efforts at national reconciliation, brokering talks between the opposition and the Al-Assad government, and hosting representatives of the Free Syrian Army in Moscow."⁸²

Russia seized the moment in which IS was maximally involved and used it to its advantage when it launched its military intervention in Syria in September 2015. This was the first deployment of Russia's armed forces beyond the borders of the former Soviet Union, and the largest engagement of Russia's air force since the Soviet war in Afghanistan in 1979. Despite disagreeing over the targeting of rebel combatants and terrorists, Moscow and Washington managed to broker an agreement on the exchange of information about air operations, resulting in the signing of a memorandum on air safety over Syria in October 2015. However, Washington continued to accuse Russia of bombing indiscriminately from high altitudes, with disregard towards innocent civilians.

Russia played a key role in the Geneva meetings of 2014 and 2015, but no agreement was reached, mainly over the future of Al-Assad. In November 2015, Russia proposed an eight-step plan for resolving the conflict, which included "establishing an 18-month transitional period, creating a united delegation of opposition groups, identifying terrorist factions, coordinating international military strikes on IS, and holding simultaneous presidential and parliamentary elections."⁸³ The plan, however, was not well received by Western diplomats, who believed it

⁸¹ Bolt and Cross, *China, Russia and Twenty-First Century Global Geopolitics*, 179.

⁸² *Idem*, 183.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

gave too much power to the Syrian government in organizing the transition. Since the proposal left Al-Assad's future open-ended, the eight-step plan was not adopted.

In March 2016, Putin declared he was withdrawing Russian military forces from Syria, claiming that the objectives they had set for the military intervention had largely been met. The withdrawal was not complete, however, as Putin stated that Russia would maintain its Mediterranean naval facility in Tartus and its airbase in Latakia. Furthermore, 1000 troops would remain in Syria, and its air forces would not be removed, including S-400 anti-aircraft systems.

Bolt and Cross argue that it is significant that Russia decided to withdraw when it did, possibly with the aim of pressuring Al-Assad to cooperate in the peace process. Nevertheless, the display of military force ensured that everyone was aware that Russia was a key player without whom the conflict would not be solved. Furthermore, "Russia's significant military engagement brought further pressure on the United States to retreat from the initial insistence that "Al-Assad must go" and perhaps be more willing to compromise in working with Russia to broker a diplomatic solution."⁸⁴

China's involvement in the Syrian Civil War

In comparison to Russia (and the Western powers), China's involvement in the Syrian conflict is more distant and contained. According to Bolt and Cross, "China has refrained from incurring the level of risk or cost that other major powers have been willing to stake in the region."⁸⁵ Always abiding by the doctrine of non-interference and respecting sovereignty in Syria, China supported Russia's position that Al-Assad must stay in power. Nevertheless, Beijing was not exactly pleased with Russia's military intervention and would have preferred other means, but the fact that it was sanctioned by Al-Assad himself made it more justifiable in the eyes of China.

For Beijing, the main aim was to avoid the creation of another failed state like Libya, and China came to regret the decision to abstain and not veto UNSC Resolution 1973 allowing for the intervention in Libya. Thus, China was reluctant to allow any sanctions against Syria.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Bolt and Cross, *China, Russia and Twenty-First Century Global Geopolitics*, 193.

⁸⁵ *Idem*, 187.

⁸⁶ *Idem*, 188.

In December 2015, China implemented a counterterrorism law that would allow the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) to engage in overseas activities. Many believed that China would join Russia in a military intervention, but a Chinese official source suggested that Beijing had rather sent military advisors to Syria, with Al-Assad's approval, to train regime forces in using weapons that China had sold them.

China's role has been exclusively diplomatic throughout the Syrian Civil War: "Beijing has underscored the point that political negotiation between the competing parties is essential for resolution of the crisis."⁸⁷

In 2012, China presented a four-point plan for the resolution of the Syrian conflict, but the first proposal was not sufficiently detailed, especially when it came to Al-Assad's role in a possible political transition. For the *Geneva II* talks in 2014, China proposed a five-point proposal in the UN, that included: 1) The issue of Syria must be resolved through political means; 2) Syria's future must be decided by its own people; 3) An inclusive political transition must be promoted; 4) National reconciliation and unity must be achieved in Syria; and 5) The international community must provide assistance to Syria and its neighbors.⁸⁸ Later, in the Vienna talks, China advanced a four-point proposal that described: 1) China urges all sides in Syria to embrace an immediate ceasefire with a commitment to fight terrorism; 2) Syria's warring sides, under the auspices of the UN, should have a comprehensive, inclusive, and equal dialogue to make arrangements for political transition; 3) The UN should play the role of the main channel of mediation in the Syrian crisis; and 4) A process of reconstruction should commence among warring sides in Syria making clear the peace dividends that will result once the war ends.⁸⁹

Finally, China's diplomatic efforts have also included meeting with representatives of the Al-Assad government as well as the Syrian opposition in Beijing. In December 2015, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi hosted Syria's Foreign Minister Walid al Moualem in Beijing, followed by Khaled Khoja, President of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary Opposition Forces. In March 2016, China sent the first special envoy for the Syria Crisis, career diplomat Xie Xiaoyan, arguing that appointing a special envoy would make it possible to

⁸⁷ Bolt and Cross, *China, Russia and Twenty-First Century Global Geopolitics*, 189.

⁸⁸ China.org.cn., "China raises 5 principles for Syrian issue," (January 2014).

⁸⁹ Executive Intelligence Review News Service, "China Brought Four-Point Proposal to Syria Talks." (Oct. 2015).

contribute China's wisdom towards a settlement of the conflict.⁹⁰ Beijing has also offered humanitarian support to Syria, as well as pledged to assist in postwar reconstruction.⁹¹ In August 2016, China's Rear Admiral Guan Youfei, Director of the Office of International Military Cooperation of China's People's Liberation Army, was sent to Damascus to meet with Syrian Defense Minister Fahd Jassem al-Frej, with the end result being that Chinese military officials would provide personnel training and humanitarian aid in support of Al-Assad's government.

⁹⁰ Reuters, "China Appoints First Special Envoy for Syrian Crisis," (March 29, 2016).

⁹¹ Bolt and Cross, *China, Russia and Twenty-First Century Global Geopolitics*, 190.

CHAPTER III

The large number of UNSC passed resolutions (17) regarding the Syrian conflict is undoubtedly proof of the fact that the bloodiest conflict since the beginning of this century has been at the center of attention of main international actors, global institutions and Great Powers, all of whom have reacted to the dramatic unfolding of the conflict. The Syrian issue has clearly been on the UNSC's agenda since the beginning of the conflict, although some might argue a bit too late, since the Council waited until the conflict had fully escalated into a civil war.

On the other hand, the number of resolutions that have been vetoed by P5 members, namely Russia and China, is witness to the fact that the Syrian Civil War, besides being a full-scale civil conflict, has and continues to be an international relations conflict, where we have seen clashes due to different visions and interests. In a way, the UN Security Council has become the theater where the US and other Western powers, which seek to protect the existing international liberal order, but also their own geopolitical interests, clash with Russia and China, who seek to challenge this order, attempting to re-balance power in the international system, to establish a new balance that would protect and advance their geopolitical interests as well.

Focusing on the clash over Syria, it would be a mistake to neglect the fact that great powers are *generally* in agreement and react in a consensual way with respect to what occurs in the conflict. There is a larger number of passed resolutions than vetoed ones, after all. UNSC Member States do find a common language when it comes to the use of chemical weapons (resolutions 2118 (2013), 2209 (2015), 2235 (2015), 2314 (2016), 2319 (2016)), the fight against international terrorism (resolution 2249 (2015), although not explicitly referring to Syria), the provision of humanitarian aid (resolutions 2328 (2016), 2449 (2018)), the respect for international humanitarian and human rights law (resolution 2332 (2016)), and the establishment of ceasefires (resolutions 2336 (2016) and 2401 (2018)). Most important, however, was the high-level meeting including then-UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, US Secretary of State John Kerry, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and PRC Foreign Minister Wang Yi, where there was agreement on officially implementing the Geneva Communiqué as the roadmap to a political settlement of the crisis, culminating on the adoption of resolution 2254 (2015), perhaps the most important UNSC resolution regarding the Syrian Civil War. On the other hand, they are clearly divided when discussing sanctions and interventions against Al-Assad's regime, i.e. invocation of Chapter VII measures, R2P, referral to the ICC, or anything else that could lead to

a potential regime change in Syria and the consequences this would have. As will be argued below, Great Powers, through their votes or vetoes, project their global, regional and national interests, despite the fact that the UN Charter demands them to act in the name of the common global interests of international peace and security.

One of the main problems, however, is the differing operationalization of ‘common global interests of international peace and security’ between the West, and Russia and China. Russia itself does not escape being a proxy in the Syrian conflict. The former ‘glorious’ power has been using Syria to establish itself as a renewed great power who protects the sovereignty of nations and prevents the West from interfering in their affairs. Philip Remler of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace argues that “...much of Russia’s Syria project has to do with aspirations to show that it is once again a world power,...and that it can fill a vacuum left by U.S. disengagement.”⁹² Throughout many Council meetings, various Russian Ambassadors, especially the late Vitaly Churkin, refer to the US, the UK, and France as the ‘humanitarian troika’ or ‘Western troika’, thus effectively separating the P5 into two sides in the conflict.

Remler argues that Russia’s role in the UN is dictated by two main concepts: a rejection of the Western ‘rules-based order’ or liberal international (economic) order, and the doctrine of multipolarity, which “asserts that an oligarchic group of states must take collective action on the basis of equality and consensus...Russia’s status as a permanent member of the UNSC boosts its claim to be part of a global oligarchy and grants it the power to veto or undermine initiatives that it deems contrary to its interests.”⁹³

It is important to distinguish what the ‘rules-based order’ consists of in order to understand Russia’s (and China’s) rejection of it. This international liberal order, pioneered by the United States, is comprised of a series of universal concepts developed since the at least the 1990s, ranging from the promotion of humanitarian intervention and the responsibility to protect, to the spread of democracy and rule of law where it is needed. Dutch scholar Rob de Wijk gives it a more grim perspective: he calls this order “a number of traditions...in American foreign policy: unilateralism and the right to act unilaterally when necessary; an instrumental view of international institutions and international law, which are only accepted if they support the

⁹² Philip Remler, “Russia at the United Nations: Law, Sovereignty, and Legitimacy.” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* (January 22, 2020), 7.

⁹³ Remler, “Russia at the United Nations,” 1-2.

interests of the US; the right to defend interests in the Western hemisphere; a sense that the country is destined to play a defining role in the world; elements of cultural and political imperialism;...and the containment or combatting of competing ideologies or countries that could challenge the US.”⁹⁴ Russia sees this as a Western attempt to project its own values and interests internationally. Lavrov, in a 2018 address, stated: “Today we can trace a tendency to substitute for international law, as we all know it, some kind of ‘rules-based order’. That is what a series of our creative Western friends call it.”⁹⁵ Lavrov himself does not define this ‘rules-based order’ other than to imply that it consists of a series of practices that do not please Moscow. He does not properly define international law either. In the context of the UN, Russia defines international law narrowly, says Remler, limiting it as much as possible to the UN Charter and UNSC resolutions. If anything, Russia sees the ‘rules-based order’ as possessing double standards, being in fact expansive and territorial in its nature.

While I dealt with multipolarity in the first chapter, it is important to note here that Russia asserts its multipolar view of the world as much as possible in the UN context.⁹⁶ “Multipolarity,” says Remler, “is invoked as an expression of disapproval of perceived Western unilateral action.”⁹⁷ He further argues that multipolarity’s main value to Russia “consists of its principled rejection of the universality of liberal democratic and human rights ideals promoted by the West.”⁹⁸

China, similarly, is “actively striving for a multipolar world, with China as one of the centers of power...,”⁹⁹ being opposed to the American global dominance that has determined international relations since the end of the Cold War. De Wijk argues that China’s rising power and assertiveness in the international arena makes it increasingly able to take a stand on normative issues, rejecting Western concepts such as human rights, democracy, humanitarian intervention, transparency and individualism, or *interprets them differently*.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁴ Rob de Wijk, *Power Politics: How China and Russia reshape the world* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015), 182.

⁹⁵ Sergey Lavrov, “Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks and replies to media questions at the Rome Med 2018 - Mediterranean Dialogues, Rome, November 23, 2018,” *The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation*.

⁹⁶ Remler, “Russia at the United Nations,” 4.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ de Wijk, *Power Politics*, 155.

¹⁰⁰ *Idem*, 157.

Sovereignty

Remler argues that Russia links multipolarity to sovereignty. In Russia's view, true sovereignty is not something that all sovereign states possess. It is in fact, the P5 oligarchy along with a few select states such as Brazil, India, or Germany, who truly possess sovereignty, while smaller states and multilateral organizations are *objects and instruments* of great power diplomacy. Russia continues to see the world as divided into 'camps', each with a pole at its center, i.e. a Great Power, where each Great Power is free to exercise its influence over its 'vassal' states: its view of a multipolar world. A perfect example of this is Syria, where Russia, considering it as part of its 'camp', has gone to great lengths to protect Syria's sovereignty, with disregard to the human rights record of its sovereign Government. Remler claims that Russia's dual approach to sovereignty – all states are sovereign, but true sovereignty belongs only to the oligarchy – has led to a 'schizophrenic' character in Russian interactions at the UN, as reflected in its vetoed and passed resolutions.

With sovereignty comes legitimacy. The recognition of a state, for Russia, implies that its government is the sole legitimate determinant of that state's internal affairs, something that Russia once and again stresses in Council meetings regarding Syria. In fact, Remler states, "the specific rhetoric Russia employs at the UN with regard to Syria seems based on something else: promoting the absolute legitimacy of governments regardless of their governance, popular legitimacy, human rights record, methods of internal security, or anything else that smacks of the imposition of external norms."¹⁰¹

In the 7621st meeting of the Council on the 'maintenance of international peace and security', Member States discussed the UN's role regarding sovereignty and the protection of human rights, while arguing whether the Charter as was created in 1945 still stood the test of time. Russian representative Ilichev stated: "The basic code of conduct for States in the world is provided by the compilation of principles and rules reflected in the Charter of the United Nations — such as the independence and sovereign equality of States, non-interference in their internal affairs, the peaceful settlement of disputes and the right of peoples to self-determination,"¹⁰² therefore strictly adhering to Charter provisions with no regard for sovereign Governments that carry out human rights abuses. He continued arguing that "[t]oday we cannot turn a blind eye to

¹⁰¹ Remler, "Russia at the United Nations," 1.

¹⁰² Ilichev, S/PV.7621, 28.

what is happening as a result of undisguised interventions in the internal affairs of States through support for illicit changes of power or *the forcible imposition of foreign cultural or social norms* [italicized for emphasis]. We all clearly saw how, from the spark of popular unrest in Libya, through allegedly disinterested outside assistance, a fire was fuelled that destroyed the State, leaving in its place ashes and chaos. The same sort of illicit intervention, involving illegitimate air strikes or the provision of weapons to non-Government armed forces, led to a rise in violent extremism and radicalization in Syria...”¹⁰³

China’s first and foremost argument in all its vetoes, as well as ‘for’ votes, is that the respect for Syria’s sovereignty, territorial integrity, and unity should be of the utmost importance when dealing with the crisis, following Russia’s footsteps: “The international community...should fully respect Syria’s sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity,”¹⁰⁴ says Chinese Ambassador Li Baodong in the very first Council meeting on the Syrian issue. This is, in fact, one of China’s core doctrines regarding both itself and the international community. China itself is sensitive to breaches of territorial integrity and sovereignty, particularly in the issues of Taiwan, the regions of Xinjiang and the Tibet, as well as the South China Sea, explained later in more detail.

Non-intervention and non-interference

The concepts of non-intervention and non-interference, which Russia and China seemingly strongly respect, are arguably linked to sovereignty. Roy Allison, professor of Russian and East European Studies at Oxford University, effectively claims that “[t]he Russian position can partly be explained as one more expression of Moscow’s long-standing aversion to or fear of western-led military interventions.”¹⁰⁵ “The Russian foreign ministry’s foreign policy concept, published in February 2013,” he adds, “scorned ideas ‘that are being implemented...aimed at overthrowing legitimate authorities in sovereign states under the pretext of protecting the civilian population.’”¹⁰⁶ This can be seen throughout many Council meetings, including the first meeting on Syria, where the draft resolution that put the blame on the Syrian Government for using force against civilians prompted a veto from Russia and the following comment from Ambassador

¹⁰³ Iiichev, S/PV.7621, 28.

¹⁰⁴ Li Baodong, S/PV.6627, 5.

¹⁰⁵ Allison, “Russia and Syria: explaining alignment with a regime in crisis,” 795.

¹⁰⁶ *Idem*, 796.

Churkin: “[w]e cannot agree with this unilateral, accusatory bent against Damascus. We deem unacceptable the threat of an ultimatum and sanctions against the Syrian authorities.”¹⁰⁷

Allison states that Russia claims that it is not aligned with Al-Assad as such and “seems to have hoped that it might gain regional and perhaps wider international advantage by positioning itself as an indispensable mediator over Syria, *on its own terms* [italized for emphasis]”¹⁰⁸. If anything, Russia claims that its continued presence in Syria following its own unilateral military intervention is “...at the invitation of its lawful Government in order to combat international terrorism,...while the US is covering up for militias and terrorists.”¹⁰⁹

There are repeated attempts from Russia in particular in the UNSC to thwart regime change in Syria by the West, with Churkin arguing that “from the very beginning of the Syrian crisis some influential members of the international community...have undermined any possibility of a political settlement, calling for regime change, encouraging the opposition towards power, indulging in provocation and nurturing the armed struggle.”¹¹⁰ In the 7893rd meeting of the Council regarding the use of chemical weapons in Syria, Russian Ambassador Safronkov argued that Russia voted against the draft resolution on *imposing sanctions on Syria* (italized for emphasis) because “[t]he statements we have heard have left us in no doubt that the draft resolution was based on the Western capitals’ anti-regime doctrine.”¹¹¹ In the voting for draft resolution S/2012/538, which attempted to implement the Annan Plan (see annex for more detail), Russia jumped at the invocation of Chapter VII measures, even if they were under Article 41, which authorizes non-military sanctions in case the provisions were not to be implemented by both the Syrian authorities and the opposition, arguing that “a document, under Chapter VII of the Charter of the United Nations,...would open the way for the pressure of sanctions and later for external military involvement in Syrian domestic affairs,”¹¹² thus fearing a later invocation of Article 42 which would authorize military intervention. Later on, Russia would vote in favor of resolutions including this same invocation; therefore, it is safe to say that Russia

¹⁰⁷ Churkin, S/PV.6627, 3.

¹⁰⁸ Allison, “Russia and Syria: explaining alignment with a regime in crisis,” 800.

¹⁰⁹ Nebenzia, S/PV.8828, 4.

¹¹⁰ Churkin, S/PV.6711, 9.

¹¹¹ Safronkov, S/PV.7893, 6.

¹¹² Churkin, S/PV.6810, 8.

voted in favor when it was in its own interest or when it had no other choice, such as in the resolutions regarding the use of chemical weapons in the Syrian conflict.

When the US unilaterally intervened in Syria following the attack on Khan Shaykhun in Idlib Governorate, Russia condemned the American strike, with Ambassador Nebenzia calling it ‘a violation of every norm of international law’. In a later meeting of the Council, Nebenzia made a point on the attack, stating: “Did it look good when, at the April meeting convened after the American air strike on the Shayrat airbase, many delegations either acted as if nothing had happened or flat-out supported an act of aggression against a sovereign State?”¹¹³

In the 6810th meeting of the Council, where the aforementioned draft resolution S/2012/538 was put to a vote, China stated: “We have consistently maintained that the future and fate of Syria should be independently decided by the Syrian people, rather than imposed by outside forces...,”¹¹⁴ thus reiterating its position that interference in other sovereign states’ affairs goes against the principles of international law. China restates in every Council meeting that the only possible solution to the Syrian conflict is through a political dialogue, while keeping in mind Syria’s sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity.

The Libyan precedent and the ICC issue

Many ask the question: why did the UNSC intervene in Libya but not in Syria? This is, in fact, one of the main reasons used by both China and Russia to veto, as they both see the intervention in Libya as one of the great failures of the UNSC in recent years. In the very first meeting on Syria, the 6627th meeting of the Council, Russian Ambassador Churkin assured that “[t]he situation in Syria cannot be considered in the Council separately from the Libyan experience.”¹¹⁵ China has diplomatically acknowledged its regret for abstaining in resolution 1973 (adopted on March 17th, 2011) instead of vetoing it, as the military intervention, even with the eventual killing of Muammar Gaddafi by the Libyan National Transitional Council forces, laid the ground for further fighting in Libya. Everyone is well aware that the humanitarian situation continues to be dire in the small Middle Eastern country, and only very recently focus has switched again in its direction. China and Russia both abstained in resolution 1973 following

¹¹³ Nebenzia, S/PV.8107, 7.

¹¹⁴ Li Baodong, S/PV.6810, 14.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

their doctrine of non-interference in the domestic affairs of other States, and noting that the situation in Libya had reached a tipping point, they evaded the veto and thus allowed for the resolution to pass, their abstentions notwithstanding.

Would an early intervention like in Libya have solved the situation in Syria? It is impossible to know. It is true, however, that an early referral of the situation to the ICC *could* have positively impacted the Syrian crisis, as the use of chemical warfare early on by the Al-Assad regime on his own people was undisputable. Resolution 1970 (2011) on referring the situation in Libya to the ICC, *and enforcing an arms embargo*, was welcomed by Russia and China, who both voted in favor, with Churkin claiming that the “political means...are the purpose of the resolution adopted by the Council, which imposes targeted, clearly expressed, restrictive measures with regard to those guilty of violence against the civilian population. However, it does not enjoin sanctions, even indirect, for forceful interference in Libya’s affairs...,”¹¹⁶ despite the resolution straightforwardly invoking Chapter VII measures under Article 41, which Russia would later reject in the Syrian draft resolution. China’s response to the resolution was also a vote in favor: “Taking into consideration the special situation in Libya at this time and the concerns and views of the Arab and African countries...”¹¹⁷.

Again, why Libya and not Syria? Russia argues in draft resolution S/2014/348, concerning the referral of the Syrian situation to the ICC that “[t]he draft resolution rejected today reveals an attempt to use the ICC to further inflame political passions and lay the ultimate groundwork for eventual outside military intervention,”¹¹⁸ and that “[o]ne cannot ignore the fact that the last time the Security Council referred a case to the ICC – the Libyan dossier, through resolution 1970 (2011) – it did not help resolve the crisis, but instead added fuel to the fire.”¹¹⁹ China’s reservations were also directly connected to the Libyan situation, arguing that China believes that “any action to seek recourse to the ICC to prosecute the perpetrators of serious violations should be conducted on the basis of respect for State judicial sovereignty and the principle of complementarity,”¹²⁰ meaning that it should be first the national Syrian courts who

¹¹⁶ Churkin, S/PV.6491, 4.

¹¹⁷ Li Baodong, S/PV.6491, 4.

¹¹⁸ Churkin, S/PV.7180, 13.

¹¹⁹ Churkin, S/PV.7180, 13.

¹²⁰ Wang Min, S/PV.7180, 13.

decide on the matter, which then is complemented by the ICC according to the Rome Statute¹²¹. However, Syria was only a signatory to the Rome Statute and had not ratified the treaty, while Libya was not even a signatory party. It is interesting to note, however, that the Syrian draft resolution S/2014/348 also denounced the use of chemical weapons by non-State armed groups, which would have normally encouraged Russia and China to vote in favor.

However, Russia and China vetoed draft resolution S/2014/348 this time because it blamed the Assad regime directly. This was difficult to ignore, as stated by the representatives of France, the UK, and the US. It could also be that it was too late to refer an already three-year ongoing situation to the ICC, whereas in Libya all measures were taken as soon as the conflict began in 2011. It could also be that the Council was indeed occupied with Libya and left Syria behind, not envisaging the extent to which the crisis would spread.

The use of chemical weapons in the Syrian Civil War

The use of chemical weapons throughout the Syrian Civil War did largely generate consensus among Council Members, including Russia and China. This would be the case of resolution 2118 (2013), the first UNSC resolution regarding the use of chemical weapons in Syria and the baseline for further resolutions, the most notable being resolution 2235 (2015). With resolution 2118 (2013), Russia was confident in voting in favor, having received promises from the Syrian authorities that their chemical stockpile would be, in effect, destroyed. Russia even joined the US in threatening future action under Chapter VII if the provisions of resolution 2118 (2013) were not implemented. They were not. As long as it was not yet clear who perpetrated the attacks, Russia and China were encouraging and voted in favor of these resolutions, since the use of chemical weapons goes indeed against what both see as international law, no matter the situation. As soon as the Fact-Finding Mission of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) and United Nations Joint Investigative Mechanism delivered its conclusions on who perpetrated the 2014-2015 attacks on Talmenes, Sarmin, Marea, and Qmenas, Russia vetoed draft resolution S/2017/172 in February 2017, a draft resolution which clearly put the blame on both the Al-Assad government and the Islamic State for using chemical warfare. Russia has vetoed a total of five draft resolutions regarding the use

¹²¹ International Center for Transitional Justice. “What is complementarity? National Courts, the ICC, and the Struggle Against Impunity.” *ICTJ*.

of chemical weapons by the Al-Assad regime, while China has taken the backseat on these occasions and simply abstained, echoing nevertheless Russia's concerns that the findings were inconclusive and biased.

Terrorism: common concern, different perspectives

Perhaps the only properly common concern among the entire Council is the spread of terrorism, not only in Syria, but in the entire Middle East, as reflected in resolution 2249 (2015), which condemned the 2014-2015 terrorist acts of the Islamic State, as well as the Al-Nusra Front and other terrorist organizations associated with Al-Qaida. Nevertheless, this did not stop Russia and China from making accusations that the 'humanitarian troika', particularly the US, was ignoring the terrorism factor, and vice versa. In the UNSC meeting on the referral of the Syrian situation to the ICC in May 2014, Russia accused the West of "...long block[ing] any condemnation by the Security Council on the numerous terrorist attacks committed in Syria,"¹²² despite the fact that draft resolution explicitly condemned terrorist activity, which began to take a larger role precisely beginning in 2014. In response, in the 7785th meeting of the Council, voting on draft resolution S/2016/846 (vetoed by both Russia and China), which condemned terrorist activity and demanded a no-fly zone over Aleppo, American representative Pressman claimed that "the truth is that Russia is using counter-terrorism as an excuse to help the Al-Assad regime re-take control of Aleppo by brutal force..."¹²³ As stated in the previous chapter, there is a consensus among Western countries that Russia was indeed using terrorism as a justification for carrying out its military operations in Syria to aid Al-Assad.

However, it is important to note that the Syrian conflict itself might have been impossible to solve once the extremist element came into the picture, making it difficult to distinguish between moderate opposition (armed) groups and terrorist groups. Many did resort to terrorism to combat Al-Assad's brutal tactics, as it has been reported. This is understandable in a situation like the one that was created in Syria. Therefore, one strong argument is that the UNSC should have acted before the terrorist element became present, when it was clear that innocent civilians were the ones being targeted. Unfortunately, the first resolutions to be passed did not provide for the fight against terrorism, and were quite lenient, proposing only a political dialogue as set out

¹²² Churkin, S/PV.7180, 12-13.

¹²³ Pressman, S/PV.7785, 8.

by Joint Special Envoy Annan in the Geneva Communiqué of June 30th, 2012, over the year after the fighting started.

The 'History' factor

It is clear in many vetoed resolutions that both Russia and China believe the difficult situation in the overall Middle East was not created by the Arab Spring, but rather by previous military interventions, mostly by the US, but also by the UK (Iraq 2003, discussed later in this chapter), which have destabilized the region and converted it into a battleground for *proxies* to fight for their own interests. China is especially prone to bring up the lessons of history, as 'the Century of Humiliation' is still very much present in current Chinese political affairs.

Despite Russia's (and China's, but lesser) alignment with the Syrian Government, there are arguments that they convey correctly throughout the various Council meetings on Syria. Both China and Russia very strongly argue that it was, in fact, the West who began the entire turmoil in the Middle East, as early as in 1990-1991 with the Gulf War. On the 12th of September 2001, following the 9/11 attacks on US soil, the UNSC approved resolution 1368 (2001), condemning the terrorist attack and responding with an invocation of Chapter VII measures against those responsible for the attack. A few days later, resolution 1373 (2001), again under Chapter VII, established counter-terrorism measures. On November 14th, 2001, the Council unanimously adopted resolution 1378 (2001) which de facto authorized the US invasion of Afghanistan and affirmed the role the UN would have in the establishment of a transitional government in the country. Finally, resolution 1386 (2001) established the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) to assist the Afghan Interim Authority in maintaining peace and security in Kabul. The war in Afghanistan has not ended yet, and 18 years have passed, making it the longest war the US has fought.

In 2003, with the US-coalition (UK included) invasion of Iraq, the US created a precedent for intervention that was not in line at all with the norms of the United Nations. Then-President George W. Bush's argument was that the Saddam Hussein regime was in possession of weapons of mass destruction, and that the international community should act as soon as possible in order to stop him and to invite democracy and peace into Iraq. Only with the approval of Congress, the US launched an offensive, supported by NATO forces, in particular by the UK, against Hussein's regime. While it is true that the Iraq issue was in the UNSC's agenda for the

previous year, as reflected in resolution 1441 (2002), which offered Iraq a final opportunity to comply with its disarmament obligations, there was no explicit authorization by the Council on the use of force on Iraq. The US invasion of Iraq in 2003 is still debated on its legitimacy and legality.

In the 7893rd meeting of the Council on the aforementioned draft resolution S/2017/172 on the use of chemical weapons, Chinese Ambassador Liu Jieyi warns that the supposed existence of weapons of mass destruction has been used as an excuse in the past to unleash a never-ending and spreading war in the Middle East: “Countries in the Middle East remain beset today by the legacy of that war. The lessons of history must be learned. Only in that way can mistakes be avoided in the future.”¹²⁴ In the 8105th meeting of the Council, Russia expresses the same concern: “From a historical perspective, many have now observed that the endless distortions regarding Damascus and chemical weapons, which were in fact removed and destroyed under OPCW oversight, are strongly reminiscent of the situation in Iraq 15 years ago. At the time, the representatives of the US deliberately misled the international community, including the Security Council, in order to establish ground for the intervention that ultimately resulted in immeasurable misery for Iraq and the entire region.”¹²⁵

Furthermore, while it is not Russia or China saying it, Syrian representative Ja’afari makes a point in the 7785th Council meeting that the US has exercised its veto power 77 times, Britain 33 times and France 19 times, and especially calls the US out for blocking action against Israel whenever it is accused of human rights violations against the Palestinians, protecting its own interests. This serves to demonstrate, as Remler states, that “[t]he record of the great powers in the West – of colonialism in previous centuries and of neoconservative proselytization for spreading democracy by force more recently – has seriously compromised their ability to debate Russia [and China] on these issues in the UN.”¹²⁶

Sovereignty, non-interference, and domestic concerns of Russia and China

However, Allison argues that the Russian critique towards past Western-led interventions is not sufficient by itself to explain Russia’s alignment with Al-Assad. He also argues that

¹²⁴ Liu Jieyi, S/PV.7893, 9.

¹²⁵ Nebenzia, S/PV.8105, 13.

¹²⁶ Remler, “Russia at the United Nations,” 8.

Russia's pro-Assad position has not as much to do with arms sales or trade, as claimed by the West and argued in Chapter II of this thesis, since Russia's trade relationships with Israel and Turkey are much larger in volume and in value than that with Syria.

Allison claims that part of Russia's stance is due to aiming to keep Syria as a 'remnant' of the glorious Soviet past Russia longs for. There is a consensus, he claims, among Russian military officers that there is a vestige of solidarity remaining with Syria; however, it is more a matter of Russian material and strategic interests than of identity or loyalty. Syria, however, has expressed solidarity with Russia, with the best example being expressing public support for Russia's military intervention in Georgia in 2008, as well as in the Crimean case.

Allison's main argument is that "Russian behavior on the international stage relating to the Syrian crisis, as well as its reference to traditional legal principles and rules of conduct in this case, to a significant degree reflect instrumental concerns about political legitimacy and state cohesion within Russia and its near neighborhood."¹²⁷ Remler agrees, arguing that Russia's behavior at the UN is partly due to Putin's concern for the legitimacy of his own regime, "the obligation of obedience to appointed authority, "and what might be termed the 'divine right of presidents-for-life."¹²⁸ This is a concern also shared by China and the leadership of the CCP.

Taiwan continues to be one of the PRC's main issues on its agenda, as the small democratic country is further distancing itself from the 1992 consensus of "two Chinas" or "one China, one Taiwan" ever since the election of Tsai Ing-wen and the Democratic Progressive Party in Taiwan. China continues to consider Taiwan as part of its territory, and it is likely that with Xi Jinping's new assertiveness further escalation of tensions will occur.¹²⁹ Russia has aligned itself with China's position regarding Taiwan. In March 2005, "Moscow was quick to express its support, both in a formal statement from the Foreign Ministry and in comments by Putin himself, for an "Anti-Secession Law" passed by the Chinese National People's Congress that granted Beijing the authority to attack Taiwan should it move further toward independence."¹³⁰ When the DPP attempted to apply for membership in the World Health Organization (WHO) in the name of Taiwan, Russia aligned with China in putting forward a

¹²⁷ Allison, "Russia and Syria: explaining alignment with a regime in crisis," 796.

¹²⁸ Remler, "Russia at the United Nations," 7.

¹²⁹ de Wijk, *Power Politics*, 158.

¹³⁰ Jeanne L. Wilson, "China, Russia, and the Taiwan Issue: The View from Moscow," in *The Future of China-Russia Relations*, ed. James Bellacqua (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2010), 297.

motion to remove discussion of Taiwan's membership from the WHO's agenda. Wilson states that "Moscow reiterated its opposition to Taiwan's membership in any international organizations that consisted of *sovereign states*..."¹³¹

Domestically, the PRC has consistently attempted to block the independence of the autonomous territories of Xinjiang, where the majority of the Uighur (majorly Muslim) population resides, and the Tibet, which is widely known for its independence movement. These two autonomous regions were incorporated into the PRC in 1949 and 1951, respectively. Beginning in 2016, there are numerous reports that the PRC is targeting Uighurs and sending them to camps in order to avoid a "Islamization" of the region. Various international NGOs have referred to these camps as 'concentration camps' or even 'gulags', which would constitute a strong violation of international law by the PRC.¹³² The South China Sea is another dormant conflict that China is fighting against Brunei, Taiwan, Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia and Vietnam. The disputed islands are key for China's trade goals, but the main argument used by the CCP is that they are *Chinese territory*. The South China Sea conflict is the perfect example to illustrate China's rising assertiveness in the matter of sovereignty and territorial integrity. China's claims to the South China Sea, rich in oil and gas reserves and fishing grounds, "go back to the 13th century and were set out in the 'nine-dash line' map of 1920."¹³³ De Wijk explains that while China has claimed the entirety of the South China Sea, the situation in practice is very different, as reflected in the territorial conflict with the States mentioned above. Further north, however, China also claims the Diaoyutai/Senkaku Islands, disputed by Japan: "Japan claims to be the rightful owner, whereas China argues that the islands were 'stolen unlawfully' at the end of the 19th century and remained in Japanese hands after the country struck 'back-room deals' with the Americans."¹³⁴ However, de Wijk argues that the regime in Beijing did not make an issue out of the islands until 1968, when oil was found in the East China Sea.

The Ukraine question was also undoubtedly a factor in Russia's stance in the Security Council regarding Syria. With the Crimean conflict having begun in February 2014, it must have taken attention away from the Syrian issue for Russian diplomats. On March 27th, 2014, the General Assembly adopted a (non-binding) resolution, A/RES/68/262, titled "Territorial integrity

¹³¹ Wilson, "China, Russia, and the Taiwan Issue," 297.

¹³² The Economist, "Ethnic tension in Xinjiang: Never the twain shall meet," *The Economist*, 45.

¹³³ de Wijk, *Power Politics*, 169.

¹³⁴ *Idem*, 170.

of Ukraine”, condemning Russia’s annexation of Crimea. The UNSC was not able to take action, as the only draft resolution that condemned the annexation of the region and the planned Crimean referendum (S/2014/189) calling for respect towards Ukraine’s territorial integrity was vetoed by Russia, while China abstained. Therefore, it could be argued that Russia being under scrutiny by the UN pushed it towards being more assertive in the international arena and particularly in the Syrian case, where it had much at stake.

It is interesting to note that even China was not accepting of the annexation of Crimea at first, calling it a violation of the territorial integrity, sovereignty, and unity of Ukraine. Later, however, the PRC retracted itself stating that while the situation calls for a political solution and a Crimean referendum is not the solution, Crimea has special features, noting the region’s long-standing affiliation with Russia. In fact, it is known that Russia has used mainly historical grounds to justify its annexation of Crimea.¹³⁵ It could also be that the encouragement of Bashar Al-Assad, who stated that Putin’s aim is to “restore security and stability in the friendly country of Ukraine,”¹³⁶ that made Russia become even more assertive with its vetoes and its defensive posture towards the Syrian regime when facing the UNSC. The Syrian crisis, occurring at the same time as the Ukrainian crisis, must have fueled Russia’s anti-Western sentiment and contributed to the vetoes demanding to hold Al-Assad accountable for his Government’s actions.

The US response

The US and, more generally, the West, has not been ashamed to express outrage at Russia and China’s decisions in the UNSC. Accusations of taking Assad’s side have not been scarce. In the 7180th meeting of the Council on the referral of the Syrian situation to the ICC, US Ambassador Samantha Power makes the point that Russia and China’s vetoes “protect the monstrous terrorist organization operating in Syria. Those who would behead civilians and attack religious minorities will not be soon held accountable at the ICC either, for today’s vetoes by Russia and China protect...Al-Assad and his henchmen...,”¹³⁷ adding that it should be Russia and China who should be held accountable for their failure towards the Syrian people. In the 7785th Council meeting on the situation in Aleppo, American representative Pressman bluntly stated

¹³⁵ Remler, “Russia at the United Nations,” 6; de Wijk, *Power Politics*, 148.

¹³⁶ Charlotte Cullen, “Syria's Assad expresses support for Putin on Ukraine,” *Euronews* (2014).

¹³⁷ Power, S/PV.7180, 5.

that “Russia dropped its veto here in the UNSC to strengthen Bashar Al-Assad.”¹³⁸ He also added that “Russia is using counter-terrorism as an excuse to help the Al-Assad regime re-take control of Aleppo by brutal force...”¹³⁹ When in February 2017, on the voting on draft resolution S/2017/172, Russia vetoed and China abstained, US Ambassador Haley argued: “Russia and China made an outrageous and indefensible choice today. They refused to hold Bashar Al-Assad’s regime accountable for the use of chemical weapons...They ignored the facts. They put their friends in the Al-Assad regime ahead of our global security.”¹⁴⁰

In the 8105th meeting of the Council on the renewal of the OPCW-UN JIM for another 12 months in November 2017, Haley commented: “Russia will not be a good and trusted actor because it wants to control who is at fault; it wants to control what happens; it wants to control that area, because it wants to work with Iran and Syria to make sure that they have all under control.”¹⁴¹ In the same meeting, Haley threatens with another US intervention if it became clear that Al-Assad was using chemical weapons again. However, the most direct threat to Russia in particular was during the 8623rd Council meeting in September 2019, concerning a draft resolution condemning the continued presence of terrorism in Syria as well as the deteriorating humanitarian situation in Idlib, where newly appointed Ambassador Craft makes this very strong accusation: “It is...regrettable that the Council cannot agree on a draft resolution that includes language that would have held the Al-Assad regime and Russia responsible for their vicious attacks against the Syrian people.”¹⁴²

Geopolitical chessboard

Haley, however, is not far from telling the truth. As argued in Chapters I and II, Russia does want to be *in control* of the Middle Eastern region, filling the vacuum that the US’ on-and-off disengagement has created. If anything, one could argue that America’s partial disengagement, but serious re-engagement in the matter of Israel-Palestine in the past two years has further destabilized the region and will continue to do so. Russia wants to present itself as a solid option, a regional hegemon that the Middle East can count on.

¹³⁸ Pressman, S/PV.7785, 8.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ Haley, S/PV.7893, 4.

¹⁴¹ Power, S/PV.7180, 18-19.

¹⁴² Craft, S/PV.8623, 5.

There is indeed direct talk of geopolitics in Council meetings concerning Syria at times. Russian Ambassador Churkin says in the 6810th Council meeting on S/2012/538 on the implementation of the Geneva Communiqué, concerning what he calls the ‘humanitarian troika’: “These Pharisees have been pushing their own geopolitical intentions, which have nothing in common with the legitimate interests of the Syrian people.”¹⁴³ In the statements following the voting of draft resolution S/2017/172, Russian Ambassador Safronkov emphasized that the ‘obsession’ with the ‘destructive geopolitical project’ of regime change in Syria continues being an impediment to achieve the much-needed political settlement.¹⁴⁴ Furthermore, Ambassador Nebenzia in November 2017 argued that the ‘humanitarian troika’ wants a ‘puppet entity’ to manipulate public opinion into accusing the Syrian Government of violating international norms, based on false information.¹⁴⁵

China maintains that it has no ‘self-interest’ in the Syrian issue.¹⁴⁶ However, in the 7785th Council meeting in 2016, China admitted that an immediate restoration of peace and stability in Syria is in the common interest of the State itself, but also of other countries in the region as well as the international community. While Syria may not mean much to China, the latter’s interest lies in the wider region for various reasons. First, its concern in keeping the Middle East region stable is essential for the Belt and Road Initiative, which began in 2013 as a concrete plan of the Chinese Communist Party, as soon as Xi came to power. The Initiative’s aim is to build a global development network stretching from China to the African continent. De Wijk, however, argues that the Initiative was also intended “as a geopolitical project, particularly as a counterweight to American initiatives such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TTP), which focuses on economic cooperation with Asia while excluding China.”¹⁴⁷ Secondly, as said in the previous chapter, China relies on Iranian oil for its energy supply, and also needs the region to be stable for its channels to work.

China seeks to be, and already arguably is, a ‘hegemon’ in its own region, the Far East, and uses this position to assert its power within the Security Council. However, both China and Russia are cooperating in controlling the Central Asia region together, to then slowly move away

¹⁴³ Churkin, S/PV.6810, 8.

¹⁴⁴ Safronkov, S/PV.7893, 6.

¹⁴⁵ Nebenzia, S/PV.8105, 13.

¹⁴⁶ Li Baodong, S/PV.6810, 14.

¹⁴⁷ de Wijk, *Power Politics*, 158-159.

from the region into the Middle East, to take it away from the hands of the US, who has been controlling it since the 1990s. In fact, Allison writes that “[i]n Lavrov’s words, western accusations against Assad ‘are a cover from a grand geopolitical game... Many have in mind not so much Syria as Iran. They openly say that it is necessary to deprive Iran of a very close ally.’”¹⁴⁸ Allison argues that Russian leaders suspect that the overthrowing of the Assad regime is simply part of a broader Western strategy to destabilize and enter into conflict with Iran, who is of much more importance to Russia than Syria.

It is clear that every State, following the principles of not only structural realism, but even classical realism, looks out for its own interests and protects its own security. Therefore, according to Mearsheimer’s theory, China is just as much of a ‘balancer’ as Russia, preferring to ‘ally’ with Russia, the main ‘balancer’, being is the more assertive of the two and bearing the burden of the conflict with the West. With Russia and China being ‘balancers’, the UNSC is the perfect stage for each country to assert themselves and present their positions to the world. Has Russia abused its veto power regarding Syria? Many would argue so. Many also argue for a complete reform of the Security Council. However, that is outside the scope of this thesis.

China’s abstentions and vetoes are even more interesting, since, as stated earlier, the State repeatedly claims it has no direct interest in Syria. However, as Mearsheimer argues, ‘buck-passing’ is only possible in a multipolar system, both if it is balanced or unbalanced. Citing Barry Posen, “[t]hose states most often identified as history’s would-be hegemony have elicited the most intense balancing behavior by their neighbors.”¹⁴⁹ Both Russia and China consistently advocate for a multipolar world system in various Council meetings, while at the same time separating themselves from the ‘Western troika’ of the P5.

Mearsheimer also argues that, once a great power has established itself in the international order, it is also inevitable for it to seek regional hegemony. If one argues that Russia is already a renewed great power, it will certainly seek to claim hegemony in the Middle East, particularly because it is a US-controlled region. I posit that the opposite of what Mearsheimer argues is also true. This is the case of China, who unsurprisingly is the greatest economic and increasingly military power of its region. Japan has lost the glory it once possessed, and China’s economic growth is such that it may eventually surpass the US’.

¹⁴⁸ Lavrov, cited in Allison, “Russia and Syria: explaining alignment with a regime in crisis,” 808.

¹⁴⁹ Barry Posen, cited in Mearsheimer, *Tragedy*, 271.

Therefore, it makes sense for them to seek both regional and international co-hegemony. As Churkin says in the vetoed draft resolution S/2016/846, Russia welcomes the multilateral efforts of the ISSG, and aims to preserve these multilateral formats to provide a solution to the Syrian crisis.

The clash between the US, the alleged current global hegemonic after the end of the Cold War, and Russia and China is evident, especially in the vetoed resolutions. The US' tone is often accusatory, with Russia not receiving it well. Every time Chapter VII of the UN Charter is mentioned, Russia is wary and often exercises its veto power. A simple explanation is that it just wants to go against the US. The elaborate explanation is that Syria is a 'tool' for both Russia and China to assert their positions as global decision makers and set their footprint in the Middle East, possibly the battlefield for the establishment of global hegemony.

In Mearsheimer's words, "[o]ffensive realism predicts that states will be acutely sensitive to the balance of power and will look for opportunities to increase their own power or weaken rivals. In practical terms, this means that states will adopt *diplomatic strategies* (italicized for emphasis) that reflect the opportunities and constraints created by the particular distribution of power."¹⁵⁰ However, it can also be argued that China is the 'buck-passer' and Russia the 'balancer', especially considering Security Council behavior. Russia has exercised its veto power 14 times regarding the Syrian conflict, while China has vetoed 8 draft resolutions as of December 2019, choosing to abstain in others.

¹⁵⁰ Mearsheimer, *Tragedy*, 329.

CONCLUSION

While I was working on this thesis the Syrian conflict has continued to unfold, with new dramatic and unexpected developments on the ground. Al-Assad's regime, continuing to be helped by Russia, has advanced in the crushing of his opposition. The retreat of US troops has created a vacuum which other actors are attempting to fill, be they regional or global. In any case, the Syrian conflict seems to be far from ending. As argued by Phillips, until the external actors involved in the conflict see their goals satisfied or simply retreat from it, it is unlikely that this war will ever end.

While warring continues on the ground, so do the debates and discussions in international forums, including the UNSC. This thesis has attempted to show how Russia and China's vetoes in the UNSC regarding the Syrian Civil War have been an *instrument* for them to project their power and attempt to change the current 'rules-based order' or international liberal order that has been created and dominated by the US since the end of the Cold War. The Syrian conflict has unfortunately been used as a tool by Russia (especially) and China to assert their power in the current international order. De Wijk argues that the *Strategic Monitor* published by the Hague Centre for Strategic Studies has shown that the assertiveness levels for both China and Russia have increased. Assertiveness "is a neutral concept that refers both to work *and* deed, rhetoric *and* actual dealings, diplomatic *and* economic or military pressure."¹⁵¹ Assertiveness can be positive if a country uses its power to foster peace and stability, and it can be negative if it uses its power to impose their own will. China's assertiveness in recent years, says De Wijk, has become stronger than Russia's, but it still has not surpassed the number of 'assertive actions' that Russia has carried out. Another conclusion stated by De Wijk is that actual assertiveness has increased more than rhetorical assertiveness in both countries, meaning that there have been more 'assertive deeds' than 'words'. However, De Wijk argues that there have been more positive or neutral shows of assertiveness than negative ones in recent years. I argue the opposite, considering the Syrian case. Has this newfound assertiveness in the UNSC harmed the possibility of resolving the Syrian Civil War? The answer is: most likely. However, Russia and China are far from being the first States that have used 'smart power' to influence outcomes in international or intranational conflicts, including using the UNSC for those purposes.

¹⁵¹ de Wijk, *Power Politics*, 31.

Russia and China claim they desire to see a multipolar order, not simply a tripolar world with three 'poles' of influence, with the other being the US. They recognize that there are other emerging powers that will further limit American influence in the coming years, one of the most important (and perhaps most dangerous) being Iran. The rise of the other members of the BRICS cannot be neglected either. Russia and China's alleged aim is to shape a world in which conflicts are resolved through consensus, especially in the UNSC arena. However, it is difficult to avoid arguing that their primary motivation is an aversion to the Western liberal order that has prevailed since the end of the Cold War.

Furthermore, structural realism provides an adequate framework that shows how the struggle for hegemony has never died and that the theory is more relevant than ever. In the larger context, it is important to note that there is a growing number of scholars, authors and journalists from Mearsheimer to Ivan Krastev, Timothy Snyder or Edward Luce, who are arguing that the liberal order we have lived in since the end of the Cold War is dangerously declining. While Luce mostly attributes it to increased domestic problems in the US, especially following President Trump's election, the other abovementioned authors mainly see it as an international trend that is caused by the great economic rise of China and Russia's renewed role as a power brokers in the international system.

ANNEX

1. Vetoed draft resolutions

S/PV.6627 on draft resolution S/2011/612, 4 October 2011

Draft resolution S/2011/612, prepared by France, Germany, Portugal, and the UK, was the first official referral of the matter of the Syrian Civil War (after it had been already declared as such by the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement in July 2011), to the UNSC.

This was the first resolution to be vetoed by both China and Russia, despite the draft having been amended more than once. The final draft resolution, therefore, excluded any mention of sanctions and military intervention and focused instead on humanitarian aspect of the conflict, by expressing its “continued concerns about the ongoing violence and humanitarian needs” in the country. However, the UNSC draft “[s]trongly condemn[ed] the continued grave and systematic human rights violations and the use of force against civilians by the Syrian authorities,”¹⁵² “[d]emand[ed] that the Syrian authorities immediately: (a) cease violations of human rights...; (b) allow the full exercise of human rights and fundamental freedoms by its entire population, including rights of freedom of expression and peaceful assembly, release all political prisoners and detained peaceful demonstrators, and lift restrictions on all forms of media; (c) cease the use of force against civilians...”¹⁵³, thus effectively placing the most blame on Al-Assad’s government.

This did not please Russia and China sufficiently to vote for the draft resolution. Russian Ambassador Churkin, in his speech, stated that “[w]e cannot agree with this unilateral, accusatory bent against Damascus. We deem unacceptable the threat of an ultimatum and sanctions against the Syrian authorities.”¹⁵⁴In fact, Churkin’s argument is later refuted in the same session by US Ambassador to the UN Ms. Rice, who stated that “[t]oday, two members have vetoed a vastly watered-down text that does not even mention sanctions.”¹⁵⁵

Churkin further added that “[o]ur proposals for working on the non-acceptability of foreign military intervention were not taken into account, and, based on the well-known events in North Africa, that can only put us [Russia] on our guard.”¹⁵⁶It was the Libyan conflict that Mr.

¹⁵² UNSC, S/2011/612, 2.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁴ Churkin, S/PV.6627, 3.

¹⁵⁵ Rice, S/PV.6627, 8

¹⁵⁶ Churkin, S/PV.6627, 4.

Churkin was referring to when mentioning North Africa, warning that “[t]he situation in Syria cannot be considered in the Council separately from the Libyan experience.”¹⁵⁷ The Libyan intervention and subsequent undoing in the form of the Second Libyan Civil War is an example that will be often mentioned in other Council meetings, especially, by China, who grew to regret abstaining in Resolution 1973, which established a no-fly zone over Libya and authorized military intervention in 2011, instead of vetoing it. The Libyan case, however, is contested here by the US, who explicitly states: “Others claim that strong Security Council action on Syria would merely be a pretext for military intervention. Let there be no doubt: this is not about Libya.”¹⁵⁸

China’s stance, presented by Ambassador Li Baodong, is a reflection of Chinese diplomacy, soft power, and respect for the sovereignty of nation states. “The international community...should fully respect Syria’s sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity,”¹⁵⁹ says Li Baodong.

The US, on the other hand, is much more aggressive in its criticism towards those who vetoed the draft resolution, particularly Russia. Ambassador Rice attacks Russia for using the Libyan intervention as “a cheap ruse by those who would rather sell arms to the Syrian regime than stand with the Syrian people.”¹⁶⁰

S/PV.6711 on draft resolution S/2012/77, 4 February 2012

The next referral of the issue of the Syrian Civil War to the UNSC was in February 2012. The draft resolution, prepared by several countries including Western countries such as France, Germany, the UK, and the US, as well as by Jordan, Kuwait, Libya, Morocco, Egypt, Oman, Qatar, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia, did not differ much in its demands. The key differences between this draft and the previous draft resolution in October 2011 are two. The first is the added focus on refugees and displaced persons: “*Underscoring* the importance of ensuring the voluntary return of refugees and internally displaced persons to their homes in safety and in dignity.”¹⁶¹ The second is the explicit reference to the violent acts committed also by the

¹⁵⁷ Churkin, S/PV.6627, 4.

¹⁵⁸ Rice, S/PV.6627, 8.

¹⁵⁹ Li Baodong, S/PV.6627, 5.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁶¹ UNSC, S/2012/77, 1.

opposition, with the drafters “[c]ondemn[ing] all violence, irrespective of where it comes from, and in this regard *demand[ing]* that all parties in Syria, including armed groups, immediately stop all violence or reprisals, including attacks against State institutions...”¹⁶². This draft resolution, however, revolves around the framework proposed by the League of Arab States. The draft was again vetoed by the Russia and China.

The US, speaking before China and Russia, expressed disgust at their vetoing of the draft resolution. Taking a very severe tone, Ambassador Rice accused Russia and China of holding the Council hostage using empty arguments and individual interests, particularly in the case of Russia, who, as a well-known fact, continued to supply arms to the Al-Assad regime.¹⁶³

Mr. Vitaly Churkin of the Russian Federation argued that the veto was because “from the very beginning of the Syrian crisis some influential members of the international community...have undermined any possibility of a political settlement, calling for regime change, encouraging the opposition towards power, indulging in provocation and nurturing the armed struggle.”¹⁶⁴

China, also vetoing the draft resolution, argued that “[t]he actions of the Security Council on the Syrian issue should comply with the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations and help ease the tensions, help promote political dialogue and diffuse disputes, and help maintain peace and stability in the Middle East region, rather than complicate the issue,” again emphasizing China’s position that the conflict could only be resolved through intensive political dialogue. Wisely, the Chinese Ambassador stated that voting on a resolution when the parties within the Security Council are divided over the issue “does not help maintain the unity and authority of the Security Council not help to properly resolve the issue.”¹⁶⁵

S/PV.6810 on draft resolution S/2012/538, 19 July 2012 (contains SG report S/2012/523, 6 July 2012)

Draft resolution S/2012/538, sponsored by France, Germany, the UK, Portugal, and the US, was one of the most critical draft resolutions that unfortunately was not passed in the Council. It attempted to implement the Final or Geneva Communiqué, an action plan proposed

¹⁶² UNSC, S/2012/77, 2.

¹⁶³ Rice, S/PV.6711, 5.

¹⁶⁴ Churkin, S/PV.6711, 9.

¹⁶⁵ Li Baodong, S/PV.6711, 10.

by the Action Group for Syria, comprised of the Secretaries-General of the UN and the League of Arab States, the Ministers for Foreign Affairs of China, France, Russia, the UK, the US, Turkey, Iraq (Chair of the Summit of the League of Arab States), Kuwait (Chair of the Council of Foreign Ministers of the League of Arab States), Qatar (Chair of the Arab Follow-up Committee on Syria of the League of Arab States), and the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, who met at the UN Office at Geneva on June 30th 2012. The meeting was chaired by the Joint Special Envoy of the UN and the League of Arab States to Syria.

The Secretary General's report, along with the Action Group's efforts put forth as the Geneva Communiqué, finally put the Syrian issue on the Security Council's table once again after three months. It is of key importance to analyze the Action Group's Geneva Communiqué first in order to understand why the draft resolution S/2012/538 failed to be adopted.

The Final or Geneva Communiqué contains clear guidelines for a Syrian-led political process that would lead to a transition towards a democratic and pluralistic Syria. "The members of the Action Group are committed to the sovereignty, independence, national unity and territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic, [and] are determined to work urgently and intensively to bring about an end to the violence and human rights abuses, and to facilitate the launch of a Syrian-led political process leading to a transition that meets the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people and enables them independently and democratically to determine their own future,"¹⁶⁶ states the communiqué.

The steps and measures identified include: an absolutely sustained cessation of violence in all its forms between all parties, the implementation of the six-point plan immediately and without waiting for the actions of the opposing party; a cessation of armed violence by the Syrian Arab Republic through the release of arbitrarily detained persons, the granting of freedom of movement throughout the country for journalists, as well as a non-discriminatory visa policy for them, and the respect for freedom of association and the right to demonstrate peacefully; full respect for the safety and security of UNSMIS and cooperation with the Mission; and the allowing of immediate and full humanitarian access by humanitarian organizations.

An extensive report from the Secretary General on the implementation of resolution 2043 (2012), on July 6th, 2012, almost three months after the adoption of the resolution (whose

¹⁶⁶ Action Group for Syria, Final Communiqué, annex S/2012/538, 5.

outcome was for the mission to last 90 days as stated in the revised Annan plan), indicated that developments on the ground were far from positive and that UNSMIS was not operating effectively, not being able to achieve the points set out in the six-point plan laid out by Annan in resolution 2042 (2012).

The Secretary General's report clearly states that the six-point plan has not been implemented in any meaningful way, despite the mission's best efforts.¹⁶⁷

Draft resolution S/2012/538, presented to the Council on July 19th 2012 contains one crucial difference when compared to previous resolutions (both passed and vetoed): it makes an explicit mention that the situation in Syria constitutes a threat to international peace and security, thus the Council is '*acting*' under Chapter VII of the Charter of the United Nations, which authorizes the SC to take action with respect to threats to peace, breaches to peace, and acts of aggression. Chapter VII is invoked in the case of intervention.

Furthermore, Article 41 is cited if the Syrian authorities fail to comply with paragraph 4 of the draft resolution within ten days ("the Council *decides* that the Syrian authorities shall implement visibly and verifiably their commitments in their entirety, as they agreed to do...to (a) cease troop movements towards population centers, (b) cease all use of heavy weapons in such centers, (c) complete pullback of military concentrations in an around population centers to their barracks or temporary deployment places to facilitate a sustained cessation of violence"¹⁶⁸); the Council shall impose immediately measures under Article 41 of the UN Charter. Article 41, as stated in the Charter, states that "[t]he Security Council may decide what measures not involving the use of armed force are to be employed to give effect to its decisions, and it may call upon the Members of the United Nations to apply such measures. These may include complete or partial interruption of economic relations and of rail, sea, air, postal, telegraphic, radio, and other means of communication, and the severance of diplomatic relations."¹⁶⁹ It is important to distinguish between Article 41 and Article 42 in this case, which posits: "Should the Security Council consider that measures provided for in Article 41 would be inadequate or have proved to be inadequate, it may take such action by air, sea, or land forces as may be necessary to maintain or

¹⁶⁷ Ban Ki-moon, S/2012/523, 15.

¹⁶⁸ UNSC, S/2012/538, 3.

¹⁶⁹ United Nations Charter, Chapter VII, Article 41. <https://www.un.org/en/sections/un-charter/chapter-vii/>.

restore international peace and security. Such action may include demonstrations, blockade, and other operations by air, sea, or land forces of Members of the United Nations.”¹⁷⁰

The 6810th meeting of the Council on the draft resolution at hand was tense and full of harsh criticism towards Russia and China due to them exercising their right to veto the resolution, especially on the part of France, UK and US. “[T]his is the third time in 10 months that two members, Russia and China, have prevented the Security Council from responding credibly to the Syrian conflict. The first two vetoes they cast were very destructive. This veto is even more dangerous and deplorable,”¹⁷¹ said Ambassador Rice.

It is precisely the issue of Chapter VII and Article 41 versus Article 42 that was at the core of the disagreement between Council members, and that impeded their consensus and therefore the adoption of the draft resolution.”¹⁷²

The threat of sanctions is what pulled Russia and China back from passing the resolution. Russian Ambassador Churkin assured the Council that it knew it was useless to put the draft resolution to a vote when Russia has repeatedly and consistently maintained that it would not accept “a document, under Chapter VII of the Charter of the United Nations, that would open the way for the pressure of sanctions and later for external military involvement in Syrian domestic affairs.”¹⁷³ Russia, in fact, puts the blame on the Western members of the Council for openly including the option of military intervention (despite the fact that Article 41 *does not* provide for the use of military force) and for attempting to impose their ‘own designs’ on sovereign States. Churkin extrapolates: “These Pharisees have been pushing their own geopolitical intentions, which have nothing in common with the legitimate interests of the Syrian people.”¹⁷⁴ However, Russia herself is far from ‘innocent’ in this regard, clearly taking Al-Assad’s side, as was shown in this thesis and will also be shown in posterior resolutions’ and draft resolutions’ analysis in this annex.

US Ambassador Rice also emphasized that invoking Chapter VII was aimed at making more binding to the parties their obligation to implement the six-point plan and the Geneva

¹⁷⁰ United Nations Charter, Chapter VII, Article 42. <https://www.un.org/en/sections/un-charter/chapter-vii/>

¹⁷¹ Rice, S/PV.6810, 10.

¹⁷² Moraes Cabral, S/PV.6810, 8.

¹⁷³ Churkin, S/PV.6810, 8.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

communiqué. Very importantly as well, this was also the first Council meeting where the US raised the issue of Syria's stockpiling of chemical weapons. In her statement, Ambassador Rice warns that these weapons must remain secured and, in case of their use due to escalation of the conflict, the Al-Assad regime must be held accountable for this.

It is China which in this Council meeting has the most eloquent response as to why it vetoed the draft resolution. Ambassador Li Baodong maintains that "China has no self-interest in the Syrian issue. We have consistently maintained that the future and fate of Syria should be independently decided by the Syrian people, rather than imposed by outside forces...[T]he Syrian issue must be resolved through political means and military means would achieve nothing."¹⁷⁵ The draft resolution jeopardizes the unity of the Security Council, who was indeed able to unite for resolutions 2042 (2012) and 2043 (2012). Regarding the invocation of Chapter VII and the threat of sanctions, China is firmly opposed, just as Russia, claiming that it would "change or even repudiate the hard-won consensus reached by the action group during the Geneva meeting."¹⁷⁶

S/PV.7180 on draft resolution S/2014/348, 22 May 2014

The next vetoes by both Russia and China came almost two years after the last veto, for a draft resolution sponsored by 65 States, including many that were not members of the Security Council at the time, and fronted by France. Draft resolution S/2014/348 aimed at referring the violations of international human rights, including war crimes and crimes against humanity since March 2011 to the International Criminal Court. The 7180th meeting was far from peaceful, with plenty of criticism towards Russia and China for their vetoes, serious accusations from the Representative of the Syrian Arab Republic, and ending with an almost quarrel between France and Russia. Again acting under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, the Council, in paragraph 1, "[r]eaffirms its strong condemnation of the widespread violations of human rights and international humanitarian law by the Syrian authorities and pro-government militias, as well as the human rights abuses and violations of international humanitarian law by non-State armed groups..."¹⁷⁷ Paragraph 2 is decisive, as the Council, noting the repeated encouragement by the

¹⁷⁵ Li Baodong, S/PV.6810, 14.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁷ UNSC, S/2014/348, 2.

UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to refer the situation to the ICC, states that the Council “[d]ecides to refer the situation in the Syrian Arab Republic described in paragraph 1...since March 2011 to the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court.”¹⁷⁸

US Ambassador Samantha Power blamed Russia and China for failing the Syrian people and not allowing justice to prevail. Besides putting the majority of the blame on the Al-Assad regime and pro-government organizations who perpetrated war crimes and crimes against humanity, Power makes the valid point that Russia and China’s vetoes “protect the monstrous terrorist organization operating in Syria. Those who would behead civilians and attack religious minorities will not be soon held accountable at the ICC either, for today’s vetoes by Russia and China protect not only Al-Assad and his henchmen but also the radical Islamic terrorists who continue a fundamentalist assault on the Syrian people that knows no decency or humanity.”¹⁷⁹ Power adds that while there will not be accountability before the ICC due to Russia and China, it is precisely Russia and China who should be held accountable for their failure towards the Syrian people.

Russian Ambassador Churkin blames France for pushing for a draft resolution that they knew would not pass, thus destroying the fragile unity that the P5 achieved with resolution 2118 (2013) on the destruction of the Syrian chemical stockpile, which Russia says is about to be completed, as well as resolution 2139 (2014) on humanitarian issues. The main issue for Russia consists in that referring the Syrian issue to the ICC would aggravate the situation and completely contradict the agreement based on the Geneva communiqué of June 2012, which is to reach a settlement through political dialogue. While the draft resolution explicitly condemns terrorist activity, Russia claims that “our Western colleagues...have long blocked any condemnation by the Security Council on the numerous terrorist attacks committed in Syria.”¹⁸⁰ Churkin finalizes by calling upon Western colleagues to “abandon their futile, dead-end policy of endlessly escalating the Syrian crisis.”¹⁸¹

Chinese Ambassador Wang Min explains that China’s veto is due to some ‘serious reservations’. China believes that “any action to seek recourse to the ICC to prosecute the perpetrators of serious violations should be conducted on the basis of respect for State judicial

¹⁷⁸ UNSC, S/2014/348, 2.

¹⁷⁹ Power, S/PV.7180, 5.

¹⁸⁰ *Idem*, 12-13.

¹⁸¹ *Idem*, 13.

sovereignty and the principle of complementarity.”¹⁸² He continues stating that China always has reservations with respect to referring particular situations to the ICC. This is shown in the 6491st meeting of the Council regarding the Libyan conflict, which neither China nor Russia vetoed, hence leading to the passing of resolution 1970 (2011)¹⁸³. However, they both did express reluctance during the meetings preceding the Council meeting, but they stated that the referral to the ICC would ultimately help political dialogue. Nevertheless, China, in the Syrian case, decided not to follow the same course of action, wary of creating the same chaotic situation following resolution 1973 (2011), which authorized military intervention in Libya. This same concern is voiced by Russian Ambassador Churkin, who states that “[o]ne cannot ignore the fact that the last time the Security Council referred a case to the ICC – the Libyan dossier, through resolution 1970 (2011) – it did not help resolve the crisis, but instead added fuel to the fire.”¹⁸⁴

S/PV.7785 on draft resolution S/2016/846, 8 October 2016

The next veto from Russia, and abstention in this case from China, comes over two years after their last vetoes on the referral of the Syrian situation to the ICC. Draft resolution S/2016/846 continues to condemn the violence that has led to the death of an alarming number of civilians, as well as human rights abuses and violations of international law, especially considering the bombing of Aleppo in the month preceding the Council meeting. It strongly condemns the increased terrorist attacks carried out by ISIL, the Al-Nusrah Front and all other terrorist individuals and groups, reaffirming that terrorism constitutes one of the most serious threats to international peace and security. The draft resolution condemns the lack of implementation of resolutions 2319 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), and 2258 (2016), and invokes Article 25 regarding the obligation of Member States to abide by the Security Council’s resolutions. It also emphasizes that the humanitarian and human rights situation in Syria continues to constitute a threat to international and regional peace and security, and stresses that “there is no military solution to the conflict in Syria”¹⁸⁵. Therefore, the Council demands the implementation of the aforementioned resolutions, urges for an immediate ceasefire, *demand*s that all parties end all aerial bombardments of and military flights over Aleppo city, effectively

¹⁸² Wang Min, S/PV.7180, 13.

¹⁸³ UNSC, S/PV.6491.

¹⁸⁴ Churkin, S/PV.7180, 13.

¹⁸⁵ UNSC, S/2016/846, 2.

establishing a no-fly zone over Aleppo city (italicized for emphasis), underlines the need for an enhanced monitoring system of the respect of the cessation of hostilities, supervised by the UN, states that humanitarian aid should be able to be accessed by all and reiterates the commitment to fully implement the Geneva Communiqué of 30 June 2012 as the roadmap for a political settlement in Syria. Finally, the UNSC “*expresses its intent* to take further measures under the Charter of the UN in the event of non-compliance with this resolution by any party to the Syrian *domestic* (italicized for emphasis, as the conflict had far surpassed the point of being only domestic) conflict.

Russia presented its own draft resolution, S/2016/847, whose only difference with the French-Spanish sponsored draft resolution S/2016/846 was the request for the implementation of the Russian-American agreement of September 9th, including for the purpose of providing “immediate and unhindered humanitarian access, in particular through weekly 48-hour humanitarian pauses, and urges the co-chairs of the International Syria Support Group to ensure the implementation of this Agreement.”¹⁸⁶ The “Reducing Violence, Restoring Access and Establishing the JIC”, annexed to the Russian draft resolution, establishes a timeline for the de-escalation of the conflict by all parties and proposes a demilitarized zone in Castello Road in Aleppo. The Russian draft resolution was only approved by Russia, China, Egypt and Venezuela, therefore not being able to pass either.

After the strong criticism to Russia from France and UK representatives American Representative Pressman stated that “Russia dropped its veto here in the Security Council to strengthen Bashar Al-Assad.”¹⁸⁷ He said that the truth is “that Russia is using counter-terrorism as an excuse to help the Al-Assad regime re-take control of Aleppo by brutal force...”¹⁸⁸

After the Russian draft resolution was vetoed by all the other members of the P5 except China, who welcomed it, UK Ambassador Rycroft calls the veto of Russia’s draft resolution another ‘humiliation’, claiming that it failed because it failed to demand the end of aerial bombardments over Aleppo. Similarly, US Ambassador Pressman called the text “a deceptive attempt to get the Security Council to ratify what Russia and the regime are doing in Aleppo...”¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁶ Russian Federation, UNSC, S/2016/847, 2-3.

¹⁸⁷ Pressman, S/PV.7785, 8.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁹ *Idem*, 13.

China, on the other hand, abstained, arguing that an immediate restoration of peace and stability in Syria is in the common interests of the State itself, as well as of other countries in the region and international community.

Churkin puts the blame on the US, with whom Russia had been working with in the past several months (Russian Foreign Affairs Minister Lavrov and US Secretary of State John Kerry) to arrive to an agreement, but the US could not implement it or “manage to separate the moderate opposition from terrorists.”¹⁹⁰

The ‘colonial’ aspect is brought up by Syrian Representative Ja’afari as well, who spoke in a very accusative tone towards Western States. Calling them colonial powers, he argued that their actions prove they have malicious colonial intentions against Syria and its people. They also “demonstrate that their diplomacy is a diplomacy of chaos, coercion and the use of force, and it is not based on the principles of dialogue and peaceful conflict resolution,”¹⁹¹ adding that they seek to implement interventionist policies which violate the purposes and principles of the UN Charter.

S/PV.7825 on draft resolution S/2016/1026, 5 December 2016

Draft resolution S/2016/1026 aimed at a 7-day ceasefire in the entire city of Aleppo, to be implemented 24 hours after the adoption of the resolution, in order to allow urgent humanitarian needs in the area to be addressed.¹⁹² It demands in paragraph 2 that “all parties immediately implement and ensure full implementation of the cessation of hostilities...and *stresses* that the cessation of hostilities does not apply to offensive or defensive action against ISIL, Al-Nusra Front (ANF), and other terrorist groups, as designated by the Security Council.”¹⁹³ It strongly condemns terrorist activity, more so than in other resolutions. The draft resolution was vetoed by Russia and China.

Despite the draft resolution being sponsored by Egypt, New Zealand, and Spain, Churkin affirms that it is clear that the US, the UK, and France are behind it. UK Ambassador Rycroft had the most overtly accusative tone in the meeting, not only on Russia, but also on China. “*How does the veto serve international peace and security? How is it in keeping with the principles*

¹⁹⁰ Churkin, S/PV.7785, 17.

¹⁹¹ Ja’afari, S/PV.7785, 17.

¹⁹² UNSC, S/2016/1026, 1.

¹⁹³ *Idem*, 2.

that we are all here to uphold?”¹⁹⁴ “Supporting a regime that uses chemical weapons and carries out war crimes is not fighting terrorism,”¹⁹⁵ he adds.

After the show of hands, representative Sison of the US speaks against Russia, declaring that “Russia, together with its ally, Bashar Al-Assad, will keep bombing these people [Aleppo] instead...[I]t is Russia’s action using its veto to block a brief humanitarian pause that speaks volumes today.”¹⁹⁶ She finalizes with the threat of making sure that Russia never evades scrutiny for its actions in Syria, that they are never silent towards these ‘atrocities’, and that they will apply maximum pressure so as to stop this ‘barbaric military campaign’.

Finally, the last word pertained to Syrian representative Ja’afari, who accused the UN of having become a platform and a tool to defend, protect and promote terrorism in Syria and undermine international consensus on combating it.¹⁹⁷ Calling France, the UK and the US the ‘three musketeers’, he argues that the Syrian Government, supported by its allies, “will not give in to the attempts of those three States and their *proxies* (italicized for emphasis) to exploit the Security Council to support terrorists in Syria.”¹⁹⁸

S/PV.7893 on draft resolution S/2017/172, 28 February 2017

Draft resolution S/2017/172, sponsored by 42 Member States including France, the UK, and the US, addresses again the issue of Syria’s use of chemical weapons. “*Recalling* its determination to identify those parties in Syria responsible for the use of any chemical weapons in the Syrian Arab Republic, and *recalling* also the establishment of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (referred to as OPCW hereon after) and United Nations Joint Investigative Mechanism (JIM) to identify to the greatest extent feasible individuals, entities, groups, or government who were perpetrators, organizers, sponsors or otherwise involved in the use of chemical weapons, including chlorine or any other toxic chemical, in the Syrian Arab Republic where the OPCW Fact-Finding Mission (FFM) determines or has determined that a specific incident in the Syrian Arab Republic involved or likely involved the use of

¹⁹⁴ Rycroft, S/PV.7825, 7.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁶ Sison, S/PV.7825, 10.

¹⁹⁷ Ja’afari, S/PV.7825, 15.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

chemicals,”¹⁹⁹ the UNSC claims that the 3rd and 4th reports of the JIM state that “there is sufficient information to reach a conclusion on the actors involved in the cases of Talmenes (21 April 2014), Sarmin (16 March 2015) and Marea (21 August 2015), and the fourth report’s finding that there is sufficient information to reach a conclusion on the actors involved in the case of Qmenas (16 March 2015), and in light of these findings *concludes* that resolution 2118 (2013) has been violated.”²⁰⁰ The UNSC is greatly concerned with the JIM’s findings, and “*condemns* in the strongest terms the use of chemical weapons in the Syrian Arab Republic by the Syrian Arab Armed Forces and the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant..., who have been identified by OPCW-UN JIM as having been perpetrators, organizers, sponsors, or otherwise involved in the use of chemical weapons in the Syrian Arab Republic.”²⁰¹ The draft resolution also states that the OPCW Technical Secretariat has not been able to “resolve all identified gaps, inconsistencies and discrepancies in Syria’s declaration, and therefore cannot fully verify that Syria has submitted a declaration that can be considered accurate and complete in accordance with the CWC or OPCW Executive Council decision dated 27 September 2013 or resolution 2118 (2013).”²⁰² The UNSC, furthermore, continues to condemn ISIL and other individuals, groups, undertakings and entities associated with ISIL, Al-Qaida, and the Al-Nusra Front that continue operating in the Syrian Arab Republic, with ISIL being particularly targeted for having used chemical warfare, in breach of principles set out in Resolution 1540 (2004) regarding the use of and access to weapons of mass destruction by non-state actors.

There are numerous provisions stated in the draft resolution, but the most important is that the UNSC “[d]ecides to establish, in accordance with rule 28 of its provisional rules of procedure (which states that “[t]he Security Council may appoint a commission or committee or a rapporteur for a specified question.”²⁰³), a Committee of the Security Council consisting of all the members of the Council”²⁰⁴ with the aim of ensuring the implementation of the measures provided in the draft resolution. Finally, it is very important to note that the draft resolution invokes Chapter VII, and in particular Article 41.

¹⁹⁹ UNSC, S/2017/172, 1.

²⁰⁰ *Idem*, 2.

²⁰¹ *Idem*, 2-3.

²⁰² *Idem*, 3.

²⁰³ UN, Repertoire of the Practice of the Security Council, Supplement 2016-2017, 450.

²⁰⁴ UNSC, S/2017/172, 4.

After the voting, where both China and Russia exercised their veto power, the first to speak was US Ambassador Haley, who blatantly states: “Russia and China made an outrageous and indefensible choice today. They refused to hold Bashar Al-Assad’s regime accountable for the use of chemical weapons...They ignored the facts. They put their friends in the Al-Assad regime ahead of our global security.”²⁰⁵ She states that with the adoption of previous resolutions regarding the prohibition of use of chemical warfare as well as the establishment of the JIM, Russia and China both joined in with the rest in the quest for clarifying who used chemical weapons in Syria. She alleges that they did not like the answer, despite the conclusion being ‘irrefutably clear’: “the Al-Assad regime used chemical weapons three times from 2014 to 2015, and ISIL used chemical weapons once...There are credible reports that Al-Assad used chemical weapons many more times.”²⁰⁶ Haley claims that Russia and China will now say that the investigation was not sufficient, and that Russia’s suggestion is for the Al-Assad regime to investigate itself for use of chemical weapons. “Russia just does not want to criticize the Al-Assad regime for using chemical weapons,”²⁰⁷ says the Ambassador.

UK Ambassador Rycroft openly states that this is Russia’s seventh veto on the Syrian issue in five years. “What further evidence do we need that Russia will always prioritize the Al-Assad regime over the protection of the Syrian people?,” Rycroft asks.

Russian Deputy Representative Safronkov argues that Russia voted against the draft resolution on *imposing sanctions on Syria* (italicized for emphasis) because its authors’ concept is unacceptable. “The statements we have heard have left us in no doubt that the draft resolution was based on the Western capitals’ anti-regime doctrine,”²⁰⁸ he says. Russia emphasizes that the ‘obsession’ with the ‘destructive geopolitical project’ of regime change in Syria continues being an impediment to achieve the political settlement all parties claim to want.

Chinese Ambassador Liu Jieyi argues that at the present moment, investigations on the use of chemical warfare are ongoing, and thus it is too early to reach a final conclusion. “Relevant conclusions must be based on accurate, detailed and solid evidence that can truly stand the test of history,”²⁰⁹ says Liu. The Ambassador warns that the supposed existence of weapons

²⁰⁵ Haley, S/PV.7893, 4.

²⁰⁶ *Idem*, 4-5.

²⁰⁷ *Idem*, 5.

²⁰⁸ Safronkov, S/PV.7893, 6.

²⁰⁹ Liu Jieyi, S/PV.7893, 9.

of mass destruction has been used as an excuse in the past to unleash a never-ending and spreading war in the Middle East: “Countries in the Middle East remain beset today by the legacy of that war. The lessons of history must be learned. Only in that way can mistakes be avoided in the future.”²¹⁰

S/PV.7922 on draft resolution S/2017/315, 12 April 2017

Draft resolution S/2017/315, sponsored by France, the UK, and the US, condemns the use of chemical weapons in the Khan Shaykhun area of southern Idlib in Syria on April 4th, 2017, “causing large-scale loss of life and injuries.”²¹¹ The draft resolution, invoking Chapter VII measures again if the provisions in resolution 2118 (2013) are violated, calls for the OPCW Fact-Finding Mission (FFM), as well as for the JIM, to investigate those responsible for the attack on April 4th.

Both Chinese Ambassador Liu Jieyi and Russian Deputy Representative Safronkov argued that the draft resolution was biased. China abstained due to reservations concerning certain elements in the text, which the State felt they could have been amended to achieve consensus and unity within the Council. Safronkov claimed that Russia’s veto was due to the ‘distorted nature of the document’. “The primary problem,” says Safronkov, “was the fact that the draft resolution by the troika designated the guilty party [the Al-Assad Government] prior to an independent and objective investigation.”²¹² Russia also expressed its concern again regarding the impartiality and legality of methods used by the OPCW FFM and the JIM. US Ambassador Haley calls for Russia to use its influence over Al-Assad to “stop the madness and the cruelty that we see every day on the ground,”²¹³ claiming that Russia has become isolated in the Council and has now a lot to prove.

S/PV.8073 on draft resolution S/2017/884, 24 October 2017

Draft resolution S/2017/884 called for a one-year renewal of the OPCW-UN JIM, and requested the JIM to provide a report on relevant results. Before the voting, Russia asks for the meeting to be postponed, claiming that this meeting “has not been done out of good intentions; it is intended

²¹⁰ Liu Jieyi, S/PV.7893, 9.

²¹¹ UNSC, S/2017/315, 1.

²¹² Safronkov, S/PV.7922, 6.

²¹³ *Ibid.*

to embarrass Russia once again.”²¹⁴ Russian Ambassador Nebenzia denounces the US for quickly blaming Damascus for the use of chemical agents on April 4th, and following through with a missile strike on the Shayrat airbase on April 7th. This constituted the first unilateral military action the US took against the Syrian Government Forces, which Nebenzia called ‘a violation of every norm of international law’. US Deputy Ambassador Sison states that the US “deeply regrets that one member of the Council vetoed the text, thereby putting political considerations over the misery of Syrian civilians who have suffered and died from the use of chemical weapons.”²¹⁵ With China abstaining, Ambassador Wu Haitao contends that the draft resolution was put to a vote without having consensus within the Council, which is ultimately harmful for a Syrian political settlement. After the voting, Russia speaks again, expressing that it found the meeting absurd when the JIM would remain in place until November 17th. Ambassador Nebenzia adds: “I found it amusing today that not one but several delegations read out prepared statements condemning some countries’ use of the veto. Did they know in advance that we would exercise the right of veto today? That only confirms that today we have been witnessing a staged performance with a single goal, that of pillorying one particular country.”²¹⁶

S/PV.8105 on draft resolution S/2017/962, 16 November 2017

Draft resolution S/2017/962, discussed in the 8105th meeting of the Security Council, called for a renewal of the OPCW-UN JIM for a further period of 12 months. It again invoked Chapter VII measures in response to the violation of resolution 2118 (2013).

There were in fact two draft resolutions submitted, one being the aforementioned one, and a Russian sponsored draft. None passed, and China abstained in the ‘Western-sponsored’ draft resolution while supporting the Russian draft.

US Ambassador Haley accused Russia of vetoing a draft resolution regarding Syria for the tenth time, and for it being the fourth instance of vetoing regarding chemical weapons. Haley says: “Russia has issued vetoes before in order to prevent Council action and ensure accountability in Syria. Russia has invented reasons not to support a mechanism that it helped create, because it did not like its scientific conclusions...[T]oday, Russia has killed the OPCW-

²¹⁴ Nebenzia, S/PV.8073, 2.

²¹⁵ Sison, S/PV.8073, 6.

²¹⁶ Nebenzia, S/PV.8073, 13.

UN JIM...”²¹⁷ Haley states at the end of her second statement that Russia cannot be trusted in the political process in Syria: “Russia will not be a good and trusted actor because it wants to control who is at fault; it wants to control what happens; it wants to control that area, because it wants to work with Iran and Syria to make sure that they have all under control.”²¹⁸ Haley, however, threatens with another unilateral military intervention, stating that “[r]egardless of what its Russian protectors do in the Security Council, the Al-Assad regime should be on clear notice that the US does not accept Syria’s use of chemical weapons. As we did in April, we will do it again if we must...It would be wise for the Al-Assad regime to heed this warning.”²¹⁹

Chinese Ambassador Wu Haitao claims that the sponsors of the draft resolution should have heeded the concerns of some Council members regarding the methodology and conclusions of the JIM, and therefore China abstained.

Russian Ambassador Nebenzia, however, lays out a solid point: “From a historical perspective, many have now observed that the endless distortions regarding Damascus and chemical weapons, which were in fact removed and destroyed under OPCW oversight, are strongly reminiscent of the situation in Iraq 15 years ago. At the time, the representatives of the US deliberately misled the international community, including the Security Council, in order to establish ground for the intervention that ultimately resulted in immeasurable misery for Iraq and the entire region.”²²⁰ Russia, he argues, wants a professional investigative mechanism that will help prevent the threat of chemical terrorism from spreading, while the ‘humanitarian troika’ wants a ‘puppet entity’ to manipulate public opinion into accusing the Syrian Government of violating international norms, based on false information.²²¹

S/PV.8107 on draft resolution S/2017/970, 17 November 2017

Only one day after was presented draft resolution S/2017/970, sponsored by Japan, which “*decides* to renew the mandate of the JIM, as set out in resolution 2235, for a period of 30 days...”²²² Again, Russia vetoed, while China abstained. Ambassador Haley claimed that Russia

²¹⁷ Haley, S/PV.8105, 3.

²¹⁸ *Idem*, 18-19.

²¹⁹ *Idem*, 4.

²²⁰ Nebenzia, S/PV.8105, 13.

²²¹ Nebenzia, S/PV.8105, 21.

²²² UNSC, S/2017/970, 1.

is not interested in finding any common ground with the rest of the Council to save the JIM, and has not negotiated with the rest of the Council. “Russia has just dictated and demanded,”²²³ she says.

Chinese Ambassador Wu Haitao explained that China’s abstention was due to the forcing of a vote when there were great differences within the Council, none of which helped the Syrian process.

Russian Ambassador Nebenzia, notably, voices Russia’s overall concern with the Security Council at this point in the conflict: “Will it really add to the Security Council’s authority if we extend the life of a body [JIM] that for the past two years has been rubber-stamping *unsubstantiated accusations against Syria*, as if nothing had happened? Is that worth making the Security Council an accomplice in a grandiose fraud? Did it look good when, at the April meeting convened after the American air strike on the Shayrat airbase, many delegations either acted as if nothing had happened or flat-out supported an act of aggression against a sovereign State?”²²⁴

S/PV.8228 on draft resolution S/2018/321, 10 April 2018

Draft resolution S/2018/321 had a double scope. First, it condemned the chemical attack in the Douma area outside Damascus on April 7th, 2018, an attack that caused a large-scale loss of life and injuries, and demands an investigation by the OPCW FFM on the attack. Second, it aims at establishing the United Nations Independent Mechanism of Investigation (UNIMI) for a period of one year, stating that UNIMI should work in coordination with the OPCW to fulfill its mandate.

In addition, the 8228th Council meeting also included voting on two draft resolutions prepared by Russia: S/2018/175 and S/2018/322. The former establishes UNIMI in Russia’s terms, while the latter condemns the attack in Douma and calls for its investigation by the FFM. It is important to note, however, that throughout the meeting, Russia expresses its doubts over whether the Douma attack actually contained any use of chemical warfare, stating at one point: “They do not want to hear that no traces of a chemical attack were found in Douma.”²²⁵

²²³ Haley, S/PV.8107, 3.

²²⁴ Nebenzia, S/PV.8107, 7.

²²⁵ Nebenzia, S/PV.8228, 4.

US Ambassador Haley claims that the sponsors took every Russian proposal and criticism into consideration when submitting the final draft resolution, and despite this, there are still key differences between the two draft resolutions: the US claims that its draft guarantees that investigations will truly be independent, Russia's does not. After the voting on the first draft resolution sponsored by Russia, Haley states that Russia's proposal was all about protecting the Al-Assad regime.

Ambassador Nebenzia replies saying that the US is attempting to mislead the international community by putting to a vote a draft resolution that does not enjoy the unanimous support of the Council. Nebenzia firmly states: "We are using the veto to protect international law, peace and security and to ensure that the US does not drag the UNSC into its misadventures...Russia is in Syria at the invitation of its lawful Government in order to combat international terrorism,...while the US is covering up for militias and terrorists."²²⁶

Ambassador Wu Haitao of China declares that there should be no pre-judgement of the outcome (of the attack on Douma) or arbitrary conclusions. China abstained because "on some specific measures, [the draft resolution] does not take full consideration of some of the major concerns of certain Security Council members on improving the mechanism's working methods and ensuring an objective and impartial investigation."²²⁷

S/PV.8623 on draft resolutions S/2019/756 and S/2019/757, 19 September 2019

The first draft resolution, sponsored by Belgium, Germany and Kuwait addressed the deteriorating humanitarian situation in Idlib Governorate, the continuing presence of terrorist groups in Syria, and demands a ceasefire in Idlib beginning on September 21st 2019. The Chinese and Russian draft, S/2019/757, focuses much more on the fight against international terrorism.

The terrorism issue is the most important here for both Russia and China, who believe that the 'humanitarian troika' draft resolution does not emphasize the anti-terrorism element strongly enough, as it does not include the key provision that the ceasefire does not apply when fighting terrorist groups, thus leading to an alternative draft resolution sponsored by Russia and China. Chinese representative Zhang Jun reiterates this last point.

²²⁶ Nebenzia, S/PV.8228, 4.

²²⁷ Wu Haitao, S/PV.8228, 6.

Newly appointed US Ambassador Kelly Craft makes a strong accusation: “It is...regrettable that the Council cannot agree on a draft resolution that includes language that would have held the Al-Assad regime and Russia responsible for their vicious attacks against the Syrian people.”²²⁸ This is the first explicit mention the US makes with respect to holding Russia accountable for its actions in the Syrian Civil War.

S/PV.8696 on draft resolutions S/2019/961 and S/2019/962, 20 December 2019

Draft resolutions S/2019/961, sponsored by Belgium, Germany and Kuwait, and S/2019/962, proposed by Russia, essentially call upon all parties to ensure principled, sustained, and improved humanitarian assistance to Syria in the next year, and decide to renew the decisions in paragraphs 2 and 3 of resolution 2165 (2014), that is, authorize the use of routes across conflict lines and the border crossings of Bab-al-Salam, Bab al-Hawa, and Al Yarubiyah, excluding the border crossing of Al-Ramtha for a period of one year, in the case of draft 961, and both Al-Ramtha and Al Yarubiyah in the Russian draft, for a period of only six months. Both Russia and China vetoed draft resolution S/2019/961, effectively denying humanitarian aid to a large part of Syria.

2. Key passed resolutions

S/PV.6751 on S/RES/2042 (2012), 14 April 2012

UNSC Resolution 2042 (2012) was the first resolution to be successfully adopted by the Security Council on the issue of the Syrian Civil War, over a year after the insurgency started. It was passed unanimously, thus satisfying both Russia and China’s demands, who had vetoed two previous draft resolutions in 2011 and early 2012.

The resolution called for the institution of a Joint Special Envoy of the United Nations and the League of Arab States to Syria, former Secretary-General Kofi Annan, with his Six-Point Plan backed by the Council as well as the League of Arab States, following General Assembly resolution A/RES/66/253 of February 16th, 2012.

²²⁸ Craft, S/PV.8623, 5.

Annan's Six-Point Plan is as simple in theory as it is (and ended up being) complicated in practice. It arose out of the Arab League's failure to stop Al-Assad's violence and achieving an overall ceasefire. The Six-Point Plan consisted of: 1) commit to work with the Envoy in an inclusive Syrian-led political process to address the legitimate aspirations and concerns of the Syrian people...; 2) commit to stop the fighting and achieve urgently an effective United Nations supervised cessation of armed violence in all its forms by all parties to protect civilians and stabilize the country...; 3) ensure timely provision of humanitarian assistance to all areas affected by the fighting...; 4) intensify the pace and scale of release of arbitrarily detained persons...; 5) ensure freedom of movement throughout the country for journalists and a non-discriminatory visa policy for them; and 6) respect freedom of association and the right to demonstrate peacefully as legally guaranteed.²²⁹

The Security Council "*calls* for the urgent, comprehensive, and immediate implementation of all elements of the Envoy's six-point proposal. The Annan plan was welcomed by all, as reflected in the unanimous voting in the Council. The lack of references to sanctions, despite the emphasis placed on the Syrian government to implement the plan, made it possible for Russia and China not to veto the resolution. Furthermore, the resolution makes reference to all parties involved in the crisis, a prerequisite for previous vetoing countries in order to pass any resolution related to the Syrian Civil War.

The 6751th meeting of the Security Council on April 14th, 2012, was one of agreement among all parties on the seriousness of the situation in Syria. Ambassador Churkin states Russia's stance "against destructive attempts at external interference and against imposing any kind of illusory fixes,"²³⁰ that is, sanctions. Russia supported Resolution 2042 due to the need for a rapid deployment of a UN advance observer mission to Syria. Nevertheless, Russia argues that it agreed to the resolution based on the need to support the Annan mission, effectively providing support. "It is essential that all Syrian parties, including the armed opposition, quickly refrain from violence, strictly abide by the Annan plan and begin to organize a broad-based negotiating process,"²³¹ says Churkin, finalizing his statement.

²²⁹ Annex, S/RES/2042 (2012), 4.

²³⁰ Churkin, S/PV.6751, 3.

²³¹ *Ibid.*

China also restates its main premise: the independence, sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity of Syria must be respected by all, but also the choice and will of the Syrian people. China has consistently maintained the position that the only possible solution to the conflict would be through political dialogue between the parties involved. China also understands that peace in Syria is critical for having peace in the Middle East, and thus insists on the easing of tensions, the cessation of violence, the launch of a political dialogue, and the maintenance of peace and stability both in Syria and the region. Ambassador Li Baodong stated that China “hope[s] that the advance team will fully respect Syria’s sovereignty, act in strict accordance with the mandate of the Security Council, carry out its mission in a neutral, objective and just manner...”²³².

Syrian Ambassador Ja’afari mentions the impact the Syrian conflict is having in the international arena: “What is happening in Syria is a manifestation of a geopolitical conflict over regional roles. It is a settling of scores, some of them old and others of newer vintage.”²³³ This is absolutely relevant to this thesis, as one could argue here that the old ‘battle’ corresponds to the influence exerted by the US in the Middle East region versus the previous influence enjoyed by Russia in that same region during the Cold War. Among the newer players we find China, with a newfound interest in the region.

S/PV.6756 on S/RES/2043 (2012), 21 April 2012

Only a week after the adoption of Resolution 2042 (2012) by all members of the Security Council, the Syrian issue was again brought up, after an evident escalation in violence despite the decision to implement a ceasefire as part of Kofi Annan’s six-point plan. Thus, the Council implemented resolution 2043 (2012), which *calls for* the urgent and immediate implementation of all elements of Annan’s six-point proposal and *decides* to establish for an initial period of 90 days a United Nations Supervision Mission in Syria (UNSMIS).²³⁴

In great part, the decision to place resolution 2043 on the table came from the Secretary-General’s letter dated April 19th, where he expresses that despite the Syrian Government’s

²³² Li Baodong, S/PV.6751, 3.

²³³ Ja’afari, S/PV.6751, 12.

²³⁴ UNSC, S/RES/2043 (2012), 2-3.

commitment to implement Annan’s six-point plan and the subsequent ceasefire that was established on April 12th, very little has changed, and the situation had in fact deteriorated.

In the SG’s words, “[d]evelopments since 12 April 2012 underline the importance of sending a clear message to the authorities that a cessation of armed violence must be respected in full, and that action is needed on all aspects of the six-point plan.”²³⁵ Consequently, Ban Ki-moon proposed an expanded mission, UNSMIS, comprised of an initial deployment of up to 300 UN military observers in around 10 locations throughout Syria, “a nimble presence that would constantly and rapidly observe, establish and assess the facts and conditions on the ground in an objective manner, and engage all relevant parties.”²³⁶

Thus, only a week after the decision to implement the six-point plan, the Security Council decided to deploy its observing and monitoring mission to Syria, UNSMIS. Resolution 2043 (2012) was welcome unanimously, and it was in fact Russia and China who were the primary sponsors of this resolution.

Russian Ambassador Churkin argued that the latest resolution “is of fundamental importance in pushing forward the process for a peaceful settlement in Syria,” as well as it protects the SC’s consensus on supporting Annan’s six-point plan. Churkin, however, warns that the external players involved in the Syrian issue should act very responsibly (“any external influence imposed by us on that process could risk exacerbating the crisis”²³⁷ and adhere to the provisions stated in the resolution, a statement that Russia herself ironically would discard three years later when it intervened militarily in Syrian territory. Calling upon all parties – both the authorities and the opposition – to refrain from violence, respect the ceasefire, and uphold the provisions of the Annan plan and the resolution, Russia does not neglect saying that this resolution sends an important international legal signal that only the Security Council has the prerogative to make a decision regarding the resolution of a regional crisis, in this case the Syrian crisis.²³⁸

²³⁵ UNSC, S/RES/2043 (2012), 2-3.

²³⁶ Ban Ki-moon, S/2012/238, 3.

²³⁷ Churkin, S/PV.6756, 2.

²³⁸ *Ibid.*

China, co-sponsoring the draft of resolution 2043, restates the importance the PRC places on Syria's independence, sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity; however, this time adding that the choice and will of the Syrian people should be respected.²³⁹

The US' statement is much graver in tone and critical towards the Syrian Government threatening sanctions or a possible military intervention. "Let there be no doubt: we, our allies and others in this body are planning and preparing for those actions that will be required of all of us if the Al-Assad regime persists in the slaughter of the Syrian people," states US Ambassador Rice.

S/PV.6812 on S/RES/2059 (2012), 20 July 2012

Resolution 2059 (2012) was adopted just one day after the Russia and China vetoes of draft resolution S/2012/538, whose controversy was the invocation of Chapter VII and Article 41 of the UN Charter. With resolution 2059 (2012), the Council decided to renew the mandate of UNSMIS for a final period of 30 days, expressing its willingness to continue the mission only if the Secretary-General and Security Council reports show a reduction in the level of violence perpetrated by all parties and a cessation of the use of heavy weaponry. It also calls upon all parties to ensure the safety of UNSMIS personnel, adding that the primary responsibility for this lies with the Syrian Government.

The resolution was adopted unanimously.

S/PV.7038 on S/RES/2118 (2013), 27 September 2013

Resolution 2118 (2013) is a crucial resolution that came over a year after the last successfully adopted resolution by the Council. It strongly condemned the use of chemical weapons in Syria, particularly in Ghouta, surrounding Rif Damascus based on the incident on August 21st, 2013, where two rockets filled with sarin attacked two opposition-held areas. The victim count ranges from at least 281 people to 1729 according to the Free Syrian Army, and the incident was widely covered by international media, including photographs of children affected by sarin gas. There had been reports of other chemical weapons attacks prior to this, such as the Khan-al-Assal, Aleppo attack in March 2013, which killed at least 10 civilians, but reports were

²³⁹ Li Baodong, S/PV.6756, 8.

unconfirmed. Outraged by the Syrian Government's chemical attack in Ghouta, but nevertheless not directly blaming the Al-Assad regime for it, the UNSC states that the attack constitutes a serious violation of international law and stresses that those responsible be held accountable. The UNSC worked with the Executive Council of the OPCW, which established "special procedures for the expeditious destruction of the Syrian Arab Republic's chemical weapons program and stringent verification thereof..."²⁴⁰, but the Framework for Elimination of Syrian Chemical Weapons signed in Geneva on September 14th between Russia and the US was a more than welcome basis for resolution 2118 (2013). It marked the first time Russia and the US worked with each other directly in an attempt to settle matters in the Syrian crisis.

Resolution 2118 (2013) states that the use of chemical weapons anywhere constitutes a threat to international peace and security and condemns the attack of August 21st, calling it a violation of international law. 2118 (2013) also endorses the OPCW decision and framework for the fast destruction of Syria's chemical arsenal, and "[d]ecides that the Syrian Arab Republic shall not use, develop, produce, otherwise acquire, stockpile or retain chemical weapons, or transfer, directly or indirectly, chemical weapons to other States or non-State actors."²⁴¹ It furthermore decides that the Syrian Arab Republic shall cooperate fully with the OPCW and the UN, and, very importantly, in point 16, the UNSC "[e]ndorses fully the Geneva Communiqué of 30 June 2012,"²⁴² as well as calls for the fast convening of an international conference on Syria to implement and assess the Geneva Communiqué.

In the quasi-extraordinary 7038th meeting of the Security Council, resolution 2118 (2013) was unanimously adopted. Present were Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov and US Secretary of State John Kerry as Representatives of their States, as well as UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon. The resolution was welcomed by all Council Members, who, besides the issue of combatting the use and proliferation of chemical weapons in Syria, were also jubilant that the resolution officially endorsed the Geneva communiqué of June 30th, 2012 for the first time, albeit over a year later. Furthermore, there was concrete talk of preparations for a Geneva II meeting in November, which many States looked forward to with optimism.

²⁴⁰ UNSC, S/RES/2118 (2013), 2.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*

²⁴² *Idem*, 4.

Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov is the first of the Member States to speak and welcome the adoption of resolution 2118 (2013) after the Russian-American agreements of September 14th. Lavrov claims that the Syrian Government has already begun its process of ridding itself of chemical weapons by first joining the Chemical Weapons Convention (to which Syria was not a party until the very Russian-American meeting in September 2013), and by providing the OPCW with detailed information of its chemical arsenal. Lavrov added that Russia believed that “Damascus will continue to cooperate constructively and in good faith with the international inspectors,”²⁴³ but that the Council should not forget that there should also be commitment on the part of the Syrian opposition.

It is key to emphasize that Russia states that the resolution does not fall under Chapter VII of the Charter, but that any further use of chemical weapons by any party will be investigated by the Security Council, “which will stand to take action under Chapter VII of the Charter.”²⁴⁴ This marks the first time Russia welcomes the possible future invocation of Chapter VII since the beginning of the Syrian conflict, having vetoed all previous draft resolutions that mentioned sanctions under article 41.

American Secretary of State John Kerry stated that “...tonight we are declaring together, for the first time, that the use of chemical weapons, which the world long ago determined to be beyond the bounds of acceptable human behavior, is also a threat to international peace and security...”²⁴⁵ The US’ aim, according to Kerry, was to hold the Al-Assad regime publicly accountable for its use of chemical weapons against its own population on August 21st, and the resolution establishes that those culpable must be held accountable

It is important to note that there is one key difference between Russia’s and the US’ statements in the Council meeting. The US openly blames the Al-Assad regime, again using the word ‘regime’ which has displeased Russia in the past, while Russia rather does not make any reference to blame. The two powers, however, threaten to impose measures under Chapter VII if the resolution is not enforced by the Syrian Government (as well as the opposition). In addition, Kerry says that “[w]e must continue to provide desperately needed humanitarian aid... Only then will we have advanced our own interests and our own security and that of our allies in the

²⁴³ Lavrov, S/PV.7038, 3.

²⁴⁴ *Idem*, 4.

²⁴⁵ Kerry, S/PV.7038. 4.

region.” This is of particular interest as it was the US in particular who had previously publicly accused Russia and China of using Syria to fulfill their own interests regionally.

China also makes a strong statement. Besides reiterating that political dialogue is the only way to try to settle the Syrian civil war and that resolution 2118 (2013) is crucial in helping achieve this, Ambassador Wang Yi states that “China opposes the use of force in international relations. We believe that military means cannot solve the Syrian issue, rather, they would lead to greater turmoil and disaster.”²⁴⁶ This is in line with China’s soft power diplomacy. China also expresses satisfaction that Resolution 2118 (2013) is tied to the Geneva Communiqué of June 2012, due to its strong belief that “political settlement is the only way out”²⁴⁷.

S/PV.7116 on S/RES/2139 (2014), 22 February 2014

Resolution 2139 (2014) addressed the worsening humanitarian situation in Syria, “[s]trongly condemning the widespread violations of human rights and international humanitarian law by the Syrian authorities, as well as the human rights abuses and violations of international humanitarian law by armed groups...”²⁴⁸. The resolution calls upon all parties “to immediately lift the sieges of populated areas, including in...Homs, Aleppo, Rural Damascus, Damascus and other locations, and *demands* that all parties allow the delivery of humanitarian assistance.”²⁴⁹ Furthermore, of great importance, it makes explicit mention of terrorist activities, “*strongly condemn[ing]* the increased terrorist attacks resulting in numerous casualties and destruction carried out by organizations and individuals associated with Al-Qaeda, its affiliates and other terrorist groups; *urges* the opposition groups to maintain their rejection of these organizations and individuals which are responsible for serious violations...in opposition-held areas...and *reaffirms* that terrorism in all its forms and manifestations constitutes one of the most serious threats to international peace and security...”²⁵⁰ The resolution was adopted unanimously.

It is precisely the heavy condemnation of terrorism that pleased Russia the most. “A central element of the resolution is its strong anti-terrorism component, which is in line with the

²⁴⁶ Wang Yi, S/PV.7038, 9.

²⁴⁷ *Idem*, 10.

²⁴⁸ UNSC, S/RES/2139 (2014), 2.

²⁴⁹ *Idem*, 3.

²⁵⁰ UNSC, S/RES/2139 (2014), 4.

June 2013 declaration adopted by the G8 meeting”²⁵¹, stated Churkin. On the other hand, the resolution did not invoke Chapter VII action: “...We would like to underscore that the resolution does not provide for an automatic imposition of sanctions – the Security Council would not have allowed that.”²⁵². Churkin speaks rather ambivalently, stating that “[t]he Security Council decided relatively recently to consider the humanitarian situation in Syria, and only after it became clear that attempts to use the deterioration of the humanitarian situation to effect regime change were unsuccessful.”²⁵³ This reflects Russia’s continued stance that the West is seeking regime change in Syria and will only do so through intervention, as analyzed in previous vetoed resolutions. Churkin argues that the text of the resolution was drafted with many Russian considerations taken into account, and this is why it resulted in a document of a ‘balanced nature’.

Ambassador Power of the US had much to say regarding terrorism, but never forgetting the blame of the Al-Assad regime: “ I refer to the Syrian regime, led by Bashar Al-Assad, who has put his devotion to preserving power above the welfare of tens of millions of people...and I refer to terrorist groups like Al-Nusra and ISIS, who in the name of revolution have, in parts of Syria, imposed a new terror on Syrians, *supplementing Al-Assad’s dictatorial fanaticism with religious fanaticism* [italics added for emphasis].”²⁵⁴

S/PV.7216 on S/RES/2165 (2014), 14 July 2014

Resolution 2165 (2014) did not differ much in its condemnation of the violence in Syria, the violations of humanitarian law and human rights abuses committed by both sides of the conflict; however, in it, the UNSC expressed its appreciation for the neighborliness of the States neighboring the over 2.8 million Syrian refugees, particularly Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Iraq, and Egypt. Over 300,000 refugees had further fled since the adoption of the previous resolution, 2139 (2014). The Council also *expressed grave alarm* at the spread of extremism and extremist groups.

The key difference is that Resolution 2165 (2014) authorized the establishing and expeditious deployment of a monitoring mechanism that would monitor the loading of all

²⁵¹ Churkin, S/PV.7116, 8.

²⁵² *Ibid.*

²⁵³ *Idem*, 7.

²⁵⁴ Power, S/PV.7116, 6.

humanitarian relief consignments of UN humanitarian agencies and their implementing partners at the relevant UN facilities for a period of 180 days, subject to renewal by decision of the Secretary-General. It also authorized the monitoring force to use routes across conflict lines and the border crossings of Bab-al-Salam, Bab al-Hawa, Al Yarubiyah and Al-Ramtha, which were previously not accessible. Finally, the Council *affirms* that it will take further measures in the event of non-compliance with this resolution or the previous one (2139) by any Syrian party, as provided by Article 25 of the UN Charter, which states that “[t]he Members of the United Nations agree to accept and carry out the decisions of the Security Council in accordance with the present Charter.”²⁵⁵

The resolution was adopted unanimously, but not without criticism from Syrian Representative Ja’afari.

Russian Ambassador Churkin was content with resolution 2165 (2014) expressing deep concern about the increased terrorist activity, but also stresses that the humanitarian situation in Syria will continue to deteriorate without a proper political settlement. Churkin makes a very strong point regarding collaboration and consensus within the Council, stating that “only a collective – and not a unilateral – course of action will be effective, as demonstrated by the process of eliminating Syria’s chemical weapons.”²⁵⁶

US Ambassador Power directly blames the Al-Assad regime for refusing to allow UN humanitarian assistance to flow through border crossings it did not control, which resolution 2165 (2014) now allows.

China, with Ambassador Liu Jieyi speaking, welcomes the adoption of resolution 2165 (2014), and states that “*The international community should uphold the neutral and impartial nature of humanitarian assistance and should avoid the politicization of humanitarian issues and the militarization of humanitarian actions.* [italicized for emphasis]”²⁵⁷

S/PV.7501 on S/RES/2235 (2015), 7 August 2015

Resolution 2235 (2015) was a landmark resolution in the Syrian conflict. Adopted unanimously, it recalls resolutions 2118 (2013) and 2209 (2015), while condemning again the use of chemical

²⁵⁵ United Nations, UN Charter, Chapter V, Article 25.

²⁵⁶ Churkin, S/PV.7216, 6.

²⁵⁷ Liu Jieyi, S/PV.7216, 8.

weapons in the Syrian Arab Republic. The resolution came after it became clear that resolution 2209 (2015) did not stop neither the Syrian Government nor the terrorist groups from using chemical warfare on civilians, citing in particular the incident of March 16th, 2015, in Sarmin, Idlib Governorate, among other attacks in Idlib as well as in other regions. The resolutions also “reaffirms its decision...to impose measures under Chapter VII of the United Nations Charter.”²⁵⁸

Despite the mention of Chapter VII measures, both China and Russia voted in favor of the resolution, as it did not directly put the blame on the Al-Assad Government, despite US Ambassador Power’s hints at this in her statement during the Council meeting. Russian Ambassador Churkin takes a different stance, stating that “the question of who used chlorine remains unanswered...*Moreover, we have heard many politicized statements in that regard, which have clearly been meant as propaganda.* [italicized for emphasis]”²⁵⁹ Chinese Ambassador Liu Jieyi adds: “We support the objective, just and professional investigation of that incident and bringing the perpetrators to justice when there is hard evidence.”²⁶⁰ Syrian Representative Ja’afari retorts, stating that the Syrian Government has repeatedly expressed its concern over certain regimes that support terrorism and allow them to arm themselves with chemical weapons, while they “pretend that it was the Syrian Government that had used such weapons.”²⁶¹

S/PV.7588 on S/RES/2254 (2015), 18 December 2015

Resolution 2254 (2015) was another landmark resolution in the Syrian Civil War. It represents the first instance in which the Council as a whole endorsed the Geneva Communiqué of June 30, 2012, as the only way to attempt to settle the Syrian conflict. The resolution also reiterates the importance of the fight against terrorism, the delivery of humanitarian assistance, and the solution to the refugee problem.

In the high-level meeting, which included US Secretary of State John Kerry, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, and Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs Wang Yi, among others, there

²⁵⁸ UNSC, S/RES/2235 (2015), 3.

²⁵⁹ Churkin, S/PV.7501, 4.

²⁶⁰ Liu Jieyi, S/PV.7501, 4.

²⁶¹ Ja’afari, S/PV.7501, 9.

was a definite consensus on the importance of the United Nations as a mediator in the settlement of the Syrian conflict, but also differences on the future of Al-Assad's Presidency.

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