

## **Protraction of Syrian Conflict: Interrogating Russian's Veto on Peace Resolutions of UN Security Council Members**

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### **Abstract**

Literature on Syria's conflict are a washed with efforts of different parties, countries and organisations towards solving the crisis. This paper interrogates Russia's military intervention in the conflict as well as the connection between its refusals to co-operate with the Western members of the UN Security Council in enacting peace resolutions and protraction of the conflict. Relying on the rational choice theory, the study analyzes the relationship between Russia's behaviour in the Syrian conflict and its economic interests. It discovers that Russia's failure to co-operate with the Western members of the UNSC to reach consensual peace resolutions on ending the conflict was tied to economic interests. The study recommends that the West and Russia is required to intensify negotiation and co-operation that will ensure mutual preservation of Syria, Russia and the West economic and strategic interest in the country.

**Keywords:** Bashar al-Assad, Russia, Syria, Syrian conflict, Syrian government, Syrian opposition

### **Introduction**

The multi-sided civil war in Syria is a protracted armed conflict which began as a pro-democracy and anti-Assad peaceful protest on 26 January, 2011 and escalated on 15 March, 2011 into sustained violent mass protests of the Syrian people against the authoritarian regime of President Basar al-Assad. While the peaceful demonstration turned into a protracted civil war for eleven years ongoing, serious global attention has been attracted to it. The direct military involvement of Russia, Syria's close ally, beginning from 30 September 2015 gives the Syrian civil war a more serious attention. As Russia's military presence in Syria grows bigger and stronger, and the war grows protracted, scholars in various circles are pondering the rationale for Russia's military intervention in Syria as well as the reason the civil war is prolonged and difficult to resolve. While scholars agree that the Syrian conflict is protracted, they disagree on the reasons for the protraction of the conflict. Accordingly, they proffered many reasons for the protraction of the Syrian conflict which this study finds to include five sets of scholarly accounts. For the first,

some scholars contend that *internal factors* – the dynamics of the Syrian civil war and the internal circumstances in the camps of the warring parties – account for the protraction of the civil war (Khan, 2012; Lesch, 2012; Khatib, 2014; Abboud, 2015). The next scholarly explanation is that *external factors* – such as the continuous selfish scramble for supremacy and greater leverage in Syria between pro-Assad Russia, and Iran alongside its regional allies on the one hand and anti-Assad United States, the European Union, and Saudi Arabia alongside its regional allies on the other hand – are responsible for the prolongation and difficulty in resolving the Syrian civil war (Güney, 2013; Ibrahim, 2017; Collin, 2018). The *sectarian dimension* the Syrian civil war has taken is also implicated for the protraction of the civil war (Spyer, 2012; Groarke, 2016; Rabinovich, 2017). More so, the adoption of the *violent approach*, instead of maintenance of the non-violent approach, by the Syrian protesters in confronting Syrian government’s violent repression of protest is believed to have also contributed to protracting the civil war and making it difficult to resolve politically (Dalton, 2017). It is also thought that the *buoyant economic condition* of the diverse Syrian rebel groups who make fortune from Syria’s illicit economy and the *beneficence of external patrons* constitute a key factor for the prolongation of the civil war up to now.

These scholars, in as much as they have characterised different reasons for the protraction of the Syrian civil war, have failed to examine possible linkage between Russia’s refusal to co-operate with the Western members of the UNSC to reach a united decision on ending the conflict and the protracted nature of the conflict. This paper also seeks to address this deficiency in the extant scholarly literature on the Syrian conflict. Besides the deficiencies of the largely theoretical scholarly explanations stated above, another issue of concern is that these theoretical explanations lack clear empirical evidence upon which they can be assessed, verified and substantiated, even though they are apparently plausible. It is doubtful whether they constitute a wholly empirical reason or a sound logical justification for protraction of the Syrian civil war. Therefore, taking them for granted creates some empirical problems and leads to a credibility gap, as they are not irrefutable. On the other hand, the factors which scholars have argued to be responsible for the protraction of the Syrian conflict is not grounded in empiricism; although, they leave room for the search for some empirical grounds for the protraction of the Syrian

conflict. The substance of the explanations can be accepted in part but lacks a well-rounded empirical integrity and cannot apply to the whole context of Russia's role in the Syrian conflict and the prolongation of the said conflict.

The absence of detailed empirical evidence in the theoretical explanations that constitute the extant literature reviewed on the subject-matter of this research represents some deficiencies, and thus creates a new direction of inquiry into how economic interests in Syria and the imperative to protect them may have motivated Russia's direct military intervention in the Syrian conflict and, by implication, into how Russia's role in the conflict may have contributed in protracting it.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Historical research design was adopted for this study. The historical basis of the hypothesis was revealed for a better understanding of the study. Obasi (1999: 60-61) states that the historical research design “deals with the determination, evaluation and explanation of past events essentially for the purpose of gaining a better and clearer understanding of the present and making a more reliable prediction of the future”. Obasi (1999) also states that the historical research design allows for the use of qualitative hypothesis, critical analysis and interpretation of findings in research.

The historical research design allows a researcher to depend on historical data – such as participant observers, oral histories, diaries, maps, audio and visual recording, etc as primary data, and information from books, newspapers, periodicals or archival records written by others, etc as secondary data (Obasi, 1999; Nwanolue, Onuoha & Obikaeze, 2018) – for addressing hypothesis raised in a study. The historical research design allows for reliability and validity because past information cannot be manipulated, reconstructed or analyzed subjectively. Hence, it ensures objectivity and empiricism of research as the result of the study cannot be affected differently. The activity performed by the researcher while conducting the research cannot influence or skew the established facts provided in historical data. The historical research design also helps to trace and assess the historical basis and developmental process of the phenomenon under study (Nwanolue, Onuoha, & Obikaeze, 2018).

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This study adopts the rational choice theory as its theoretical framework. Rational choice theory, also known as choice theory or rational actor theory, was developed in the 1950s by economists as a framework for studying human decisions. The theory derives its intellectual origin from game theory developed in 1944 by John von Neumann and Oskar Morgenstern (Ogu, 2013; Lopez-Aranguren, 2017). It portrays elements of behavioural psychology and was first used by economists in analyzing economic phenomena. It is a theory of decision-making which prioritizes the rationality of individual actions or choices. As a subset of decision-making theories, it explicates the logical behaviour of policymakers when they are confronted with decisional choices. Herbert Alexander Simon, a 1978 Nobel Prize Laureate in Economics, or his contemporary Gary Stanley Becker, a 1992 Nobel Memorial Prize Laureate in Economics Science, is believed to be the pioneer of the rational choice theory. In 1955, Herbert A. Simon published a model of studying rational choice in which he studied the limitations in human rationality caused by the cost of acquiring and processing information. In the same year, Gary S. Becker released a version on discrimination (Lopez-Aranguren, 2017).

The rational choice theory is, in fact, a theory used by social scientists in characterizing human behaviour and in seeking to understand it. The development of the rational choice theory by social scientists, especially sociologists and political scientists, was motivated by the need to imitate economics which has made success in using the theory to create models and principles of human behaviour based on its understanding of economic motivators of human action. In this light, the rational choice theory rests on the assumption that “all action is fundamentally ‘rational’ in character and that people calculate the likely costs and benefits of any action before deciding what to do” (Scott, 2000: 1). The rational choice theory discountenances any other forms of action outside rational and calculative action. It believes that in behaving rationally, the individual seeks to place cost and gains at equilibrium and acts to maximize personal advantages based on this balance. To this, Scott (2000: 2) states that for the rational theorist, “[a]ll social action, it is argued, can be seen as rationally motivated, as instrumental action, however much it may appear to be irrational or non-rational”.

The theory assumes that the individual makes scale of preferences and is driven to pursue the goals that relate to their greatest preference(s) within the scale. In doing this, they limit their action to specifics while at the same time act based on the information they have about the conditions under which they are acting. Rational choice theory maintains that the individual rationally anticipates the outcomes of alternative courses of action they plan to take and calculate the one which will be best for them. The Individual is a rational thinker who chooses the alternative that is reasoned to produce the greatest satisfaction of their interests (Heath 1976: 3; Carling 1992: 27; Coleman 1973). As conscious social actor engaging in deliberate calculative strategies, the individual is said to be rational. The theory further assumes that the individual is a rational being who takes rational actions that reflect his or her self-calculating, self-interested and self-maximizing nature; that in making decisions the individual chooses the most optimal alternative based on preferences, opportunities and constraints where such chosen alternative course of action is most preferred by the individual over any other course of action that could exist; that actions taken by the individual are oriented toward achieving the individual's interest and even when an individual participates in a group action, his involvement is ultimately aimed at achieving some kind of selfish interest; and that an individual may undertake a course of action only when they perceive that course of action to be the best possible option and one that will yield benefits for them (Abell, 2000). In making a rational choice, therefore, the individual follows a process which includes “definition of the problem, identification of decision criteria, weighing the criteria, generation of valid alternatives, rating of each alternative on each criterion, [and] computation of optimal decision” (Ogu, 2013: 94).

Given its significant analytical capacity and methodological soundness, political science has adopted the rational choice theory as a major analytical tool, and believes that all political actions, irrespective of their kinds, are influenced by rational decisions and informed choices. The development of the rational choice theory in political science was an achievement made during the 1950s and 1960s when American political science underwent behavioural revolution in seeking to use scientific methods to study human behaviour. Anthony Downs, an American economist, was the first to apply the rational choice theory to study electoral behaviour and party competition in his book *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (1957). In this book, he argues that

most voters in a democracy lack full information about political candidates when they want to vote, thus they resort to considering economic issues – like “to what extent should government intervene in the economy” – so as to be properly guided in resolving the problem of who to vote for. Since then the use of the approach to the study of political behaviour has gained popularity in the United States as it was used afterwards to study collective action, public choice, and rent-seeking, and can be applied to studies in policy formulation and implementation, rule formation, among others (Ogu, 2013). The rational choice theory makes the individual its focal issue; it centres on the interests of the individual person only and provides the framework for analyzing and understanding his actions and inactions as shaped by his preferences. Hence the theory establishes methodological individualism which sees “the individual as actor with an initial concern only about him or herself, as well as his or her welfare” (Ogu, 2013: 92).

Russia’s military activity in Syria in support of Bashar al-Assad and its diplomatic protection of his government both in the UNSC and in other multilateral peace talks are a manifestation of rational decision and choice. As the rational choice theory argues that the individual acts rationally in ways that protect their interests or that help actualize their goals, the Russian government, particularly President Putin and the key decision-makers surrounding him, can be literally taken to be a single individual or single entity acting as an individual. This granted, the choice to intervene militarily in the Syrian civil war, albeit official invitation by the Syrian government, is itself a rational choice taken actually to protect Russia’s economic interests and business investments in Syria. Since the establishment of diplomatic relations between Russia and Syria, the relations between the two countries have resulted in significant co-operation in diverse areas as well as in mutual dependence and trust. These achievements have been the basis of Russia’s geopolitical and geostrategic influence in the Middle East and have also attracted major Russian investments in Syria’s petroleum and natural gas industry and in Syria’s infrastructural sector among others. Syria owns the only and, of course, last naval port used by Russian navy, which is the port in Syria’s city of Tartus.

In the light of the above, Russia’s action over the Syrian civil war—beginning with blocking in the UNSC all Western efforts to get the Council to approval external military intervention in

Syria to itself formally intervening in the civil war – are instrumental actions founded upon a rational decision which the rational choice theory best explains. Thus, the picture painted above suffices in showing that Russia’s behaviour over the Syrian civil war suggests a shrewd application of the principles and ideals of the rational choice theory.

### **INTERROGATING RUSSIA’S MILITARY INTERVENTION IN THE SYRIAN CONFLICT**

Russian President, Vladimir Putin, “made it clear in an address before the United Nations in New York ... that Moscow’s aim is to assist Assad’s beleaguered government and army, which is facing manpower shortages in the punishing conflict that began in 2011” (McDonnell, Hennigan, & Bulos, 2015, para. 20). This intention of Russia as stated by Russian President Putin is revealing not just only Russia’s readiness to support the Assad government, but also the strong bond between Russia and Syria for many decades of reliable relations. Since the 1960s, the USSR, later Russia, and Syria have been close allies. Between 1963 and 1991 when the USSR collapsed, there have been military co-operation, arms trade, student exchanges, and people-to-people exchanges between Russia and Syria: the latter leading to intermarriages so that there are many Syrian-Russians and Russian-Syrians (Borshchevskaya, 2016) and over 100,000 Russians living in Syria. In public statements and broadcast in Russia, Syrians are referred to as “allies” and “friends” (Borshchevskaya, 2016: 36).

The diplomatic relations between Russia and Syria can be best described as a strategic partnership based on mutually dependent interests. The relationship, forged in July 1944 between the defunct USSR and French colonized Syria and ratified in February 1946 marking Soviet support for Syria’s independence that same year (Ginat, 2000), became strengthened during the Cold War (1947-1991) and was, on the USSR side, inherited by Russia – the legal successor of the USSR – after the collapse of the USSR in 1991. Syria is of a monumental strategic importance to Russia just as Russia is to Syria. The USSR unflagging support for Syria during the Suez War of 1956 and the Syrian Revolution of 1966 endeared the USSR to Syria for which in 1971 President Hafiz al-Assad granted the USSR permission to open and operate a naval base in Tartus port. This gave the USSR a stable presence in the Middle East (Mansfield, 2010).

In furtherance of the relations between Syria and the USSR, after Hafiz al-Assad met with Soviet leaders Leonid Brezhnev and Alexei Kosygin among others in Moscow in April 1977, the two countries signed, three year later on 8 October 1980, a twenty-year Treaty of Friendship and Co-operation (Lea, 2001). Russia essentially needs Syria to secure and strengthen its geopolitical sphere of influence and power projection in the Middle East. For example, in the whole Middle East, a region outside the former Soviet Union, only Syria houses Russia's last naval base which is at the Syrian port of Tartus. On the other hand, Syria – having Israel, a neighbouring country, as enemy, and not being a US ally – needs military, economic, political and diplomatic supports and protection from Russia. The relationship is further strengthened by the specific nature of the political environments unique to each of them. Hence, Luce (2017: 11) states that “Russia’s relationship with Syria is the longest-lasting and strongest bond forged outside the Warsaw Pact during the Cold War and outside the Eurasian Economic Union of the modern day.”

Given this vitally important relationship, Bashar al-Assad knew that Russia is the only world’s great power that can save him and his regime from formidable groups of rebels – many of which are Islamist extremists – backed by powerful and wealthy countries such as the United States, Canada, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and blocs such the European Union and the Gulf Cooperation Council. As early as 2012, Russia’s supportive role for the Assad regime had been supply of arms and ammunitions (Galpin, 2012). In an effort to deepen its military presence in Syria, the Russian government expanded and established permanent military presence at its naval base in Tartus and airbase in Hmeimim, both in Syria, following a deal signed between Russia and Syria on 18 January 2017. This was partly intended to facilitate lending of military support to the Syrian regime without delay. Also, at the end of December 2017, the Russian government announced that it would station its troops permanently in Syria (Ivanova, 2017). But as the Syrian civil war continued to escalate, the Islamic terrorist groups and the moderate Syrian opposition’s FSA continued to make more and more territorial and material gains amidst huge losses of territories and most essential materials, dampened morale of soldiers, and mounting hopelessness on the part of the Syrian regime – which had caused it to retreat from as far as the coastal province of Latakia to heavily defend Damascus – the Syrian government, when in September 2015 it looked like Bashar al-Assad had only few weeks in power, officially invited



Russia through a letter that same month to intervene to help it combat terrorist groups, especially ISIS. To this, Valentina Matviyenko, Speaker of Russia's upper legislative chamber – Federation Council – states that the Federation Council received a request of “legitimate Syrian authorities” in full compliance with international law and that “In this situation, we could not refuse Syrian President Bashar Assad and continue watching how people die, how women and children die, how historical and cultural sites are being destroyed” (Sharifulin, 2015, para. 6). This request from the Syrian regime to President Putin received the permission of the Federation Council, which voted to allow the president to carry out airstrikes in Syria. Kremlin's Chief of Staff, Sergey Ivanov, states that “The Federation Council unanimously supported the president's [Putin] request — 162 votes in favor [of granting permission]” (Sharifulin, 2015). Hence, the Russian Aerospace Forces started a sustained airstrike campaign against both ISIS and the anti-Assad FSA beginning from 30 September 2015. Both the official request from Syria and the Federation Council's permission not only make Russia the only legitimate foreign actor in Syria but also make its action in Syria lawful (Valentina Matviyenko as cited in Sharifulin, 2015, para. 1). Russia's intervention in the Syrian conflict in support of the Assad regime happened by way of providing military and economic supports.

### **RUSSIA'S ECONOMIC INTEREST IN SYRIA**

Russia's provision of enormous supports to the Bashar al-Assad regime as described below cannot have been without any important reason. The following analysis indicates that those supports Russia provided to the Assad regime to help it remain in power were tied to the protection of its own economic interests in Syria, the continued existence of which Russia believes only the Assad regime can guarantee. These economic interests include the following:

#### **➤ Arms sales and services to the Syrian government**

Moscow's arms sale to Syria constitutes an integral part of the history of Soviet Union-Syria (later Russia-Syria) bilateral relations since the Cold War era. Between 1950 and 1990 Syria purchased at least \$34 billion worth of arms from the Soviet Union, while the Syria-Soviet Union military co-operation and arms trade made the Union the primary provider of arms and training to the Syrian army. Congressional Research Service notes in its report that 90 per cent of all Syrian military arms imports between the 1970s and 1980s came from the Soviet Union (Sharp, 2008). Additionally, the Soviet Union helped in building Syria's chemical weapons during the

Cold War at huge economic profits (Borshchevskaya, 2016). But the collapse of the Soviet Union thwarted Syria's ability to acquire modern weapons (Bagdonas, 2012). While Syria has been an old customer of Russian weapons, the emergence of Bashar al-Assad and Vladimir Putin as Syria's and Russia's Presidents respectively in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (since 2000) intensified the arms trade between the two countries and gave a further significant boost the Russia-Syria relations (Borshchevskaya, 2016).

Meanwhile, the "joint declaration of friendship and co-operation" agreement signed on 24 January 2005 between Syria and Russia occasioned earnest improvement in Russia's arms sales to Syria: hence, Russia easily regained its position as the leading arms exporter to Syria. For example, according to an annual report by Richard F. Grimmett, a veteran international security specialist at the Congressional Research Service in Washington, between 2002 and 2006 Russia's arms sales to Syria stood at \$2.1 billion (Herszenhorn, 2012) whereas between 2007 and 2010 it reached \$4.7 billion, which was twice more than the value for the previous four years (Grimmett, 2011; Herszenhorn, 2012; Borshchevskaya, 2013). The fact that Syria has been a traditional arms importer from Moscow reflects in the following: Syria's arms import from the USSR reached \$825 million in 1977 and \$1 billion in 1978 (Rubin, 2007), and a yearly average of \$2.3 billion until 1985 (Golan, 1990). Altogether, the USSR exported around \$25 billion worth of military equipment to Syria and trained about 10,000 Syrian military officers (Rubin, 2007).

➤ **Direct investments of Russia in petroleum products, exploration and processing in Syria**

Besides arms sales, another key area of Russian economic interest in Syria is energy – petroleum and natural gas. Russian private oil and gas companies such as Tatneft, Stroytransgaz, Soyuzneftegaz, Gazprom Georesurs, Gazprom, Evro Polis, Gazprom Neft, Lukoil, ITERA, Rosgeo, Sibur, ST Engineering, Transnational, Technopromexport, Zarubezhneft and Zarubezhgeologia have huge economic engagement and investments in Syrian oil and gas sector, especially in exploration activity (Syria Report, 2018a). The mineral sector offers the potential for a quick return on investments for Russian companies despite the continuous US clampdown on Syria's oil exports. The sector is also a core source of the Syrian government's foreign

exchange and revenue and thus gives Russian investors significant influence over President Bashar Assad.

In 2005 Tatneft, Russia's sixth-biggest crude oil producer and most important Russian energy firm in Syria, signed a contract with the Syrian government to explore and develop new oil and gas deposits in Syria (Allison, 2013). In 2010, Tatneft entered into a joint venture with Syria's state-owned General Petroleum Corporation (Avenäs, 2016). Also, in 2010, the joint venture began to produce up to 560 barrels per day of crude oil in its first oil well in the South Kishma oil field in the north-Western Deir-ez-Zor province (Gorenburg, 2012; Avenäs, 2016). The firm has also invested \$12.8 million in drilling exploratory well in Syria's north-east, near the Syria-Iraqi border (Amos, 2011). While the operation of this joint venture was halted in December 2011 due to the civil war, the CEO of Tatneft said in June 2014 that, “. . . We're closely following the situation in Syria in order to return to the implementation of the project at the first opportunity” (“Tatneft prepared”, 2014, para. 2).

Stroytransgaz, a gas facility construction engineering company and former subsidiary of Gazprom, built the 319 km-long El Rehab–Homs section of the Arab Gas Pipeline in 2008, and a natural gas processing plant [75 kilometers south-east of Raqqa and 200 kilometers east of Homs] in 2009. This area is endowed with enormous deposits of hydrocarbons (Bagdonas, 2012; “Russia's economy interests”, 2016). The company's operation in Syria started in 2000. Amos, (2011) states that the company has the largest Russian operation in Syria. In 2010, Stroytransgaz executed projects worth \$1.1 billion for the Syrian government. Stroytransgaz's dedication to construct the Syrian section of the Arab Gas Pipeline linking Egypt to Turkey reaffirms Russia's view of Syria as strategically significant for energy transit to Europe (Allison, 2013).

While Gazprom Georesurs, a subsidiary of Gazprom, has also indicated interest in oil exploration, in March 2012, Gazprom, a major Russia's public joint-stock (gas) company with specialty in extraction, production, transport and sale of natural gas, got permission to take over Croatian company INA's oil and gas operations in Syria (Sharp & Blanchard, 2012). Evro Polis is also to start production on these fields and would be responsible for extracting, refining, transporting, storing, and selling of oil and gas together with General Petroleum Corporation,

which is the parent company of both the Syrian Petroleum Company and the Syrian Gas Company (Malkova, Stogney, & Yakoreva, 2018).

➤ **Direct investments in Syria’s manufacturing and infrastructure sectors**

Russian companies have business interests and investments in other spheres of the Syrian economy. Sitroniks signed a contract in 2008 to build a wireless network for Syria. RusskieNavigatsionnyeTekhnologii has reached a deal with the Syrian government to install GLONASS-based navigation equipment on Syrian vehicles (Gorenburg, 2012) following the decision of the 2009 session of the Russian-Syrian Inter-Governmental Commission in Damascus (Kreutz, 2010). In 2010, Uralmash signed a contract with the Syrian government to provide drilling equipment for a Syrian petroleum company. In September 2011, another deal was made in the aviation sector in which Tupolev and Aviastar-SP signed an MoU to supply three Tu-204SM passenger aero planes and provide a service center for these planes to Syrian Air. TraktornyeZavody has concluded plans for a joint venture with a Syrian company to supply agricultural equipment. The Sinara Group has a contract to build some hotel complex in Latakia worth millions of dollars (Gorenburg, 2012). Russia also secured contract with the Syrian government to supply “heavy machinery to be used by the construction industry” (The Syria Report as cited in Daher, 2018: 20). Russia has also made direct investments in business and infrastructure necessary for the “production of energy extraction equipment, agricultural equipment, aviation [equipment], automobile components and tourism [facilities]” (Avenäs, 2016: 27-33). Additionally, Sovintervod, a water engineering company, has been working in Syria for over 50 years (Amos, 2011).

➤ **Direct investments in Syria’s electricity sector**

Damascus has signed a number of MoU with Russia in January 2018 to rehabilitate Syria’s poor electricity sector, and this project is a priority for the Assad regime for two reasons. First, the sector can generate revenues quickly through charging domestic companies and individuals for their consumption of electricity on a regular basis. Second, it has the potential to increase Syria’s foreign exchange reserves from selling electricity to neighbouring countries, especially Lebanon. Indeed, a recent agreement has been signed between Damascus and Beirut for the annual export

of 100 megawatts (MW) of electricity for \$266 million. One of such MoU Russia signed with the Syrian government deals with building new electrical power plants and turbines with a total output of 2,650 MW in Aleppo, Mhardeh, Tishreen, Deir EzZor and al-Zara (Syria Report, 2018b). Russian companies are also involved in nuclear energy projects in Syria. For example, Russian state-owned nuclear-energy corporation, Rosatom, announced plans in 2010 to build Syria's first nuclear power plant. Also, Tekhnopromeksport is involved in the service and maintenance project of energy-producing facilities it has built in Syria (Gorenburg, 2012).

➤ **Direct investment in Syria's agricultural and mining sectors**

While Syria's agricultural sector contributed 19 per cent to the country's GDP in 2011, the Food and Agricultural Organization, an agency of the United Nations based in Rome, noted that Syria's agricultural sector has lost at least \$16 billion dollars since 2011 when the Syrian uprising started (Hatahet, 2019; Dutton, 2019). With a decline in the production of Syria's strategic crops such as wheat, Russia has positioned itself to control strategic crop fields in Syria, thereby reaping profits in billions of dollars. For instance, it has taken advantage of the decline in Syrian wheat production to become the leading supplier of cereals and wheat to Syria. The quantity of Russia's annual wheat supply to Syria has increased progressively from 650,000 tonnes in 2015 to 1.2 million tonnes in 2017 and was estimated to reach 1.5 million tonnes in 2018. Since 2015 Syria and Russia have increased co-operation in the agricultural sector. This has led to the signing of agreements licensing the export of vegetable oil (Hatahet, 2019) and fertilizers, as well as agreements to rehabilitate, build and manage flour mills, four grain silos in Homs at the cost of €70 million, and water treatment facilities in Syria (Syria Report, 2018c; Sinjab, 2018).

The Syrian government also granted monopoly to some Russian companies that are close to the Kremlin to export and market Syrian agricultural products (mainly citrus and olive oil) in the Russian and former Soviet markets ("Syria to replace Turkey", 2016). An unnamed source in the Syrian government revealed that the Russians are interested in long-term agricultural investments in Syria and are therefore taking their time slowly and cautiously to avoid mistakes. The source states that, "the coming period will see the arrival of a number of Russian companies

specialized in fruits and vegetables and food production, and will take measures for discussions with a number of government entities and private sector representatives to study the development of technologies for packaging, wrapping and varieties for export in terms of fruits and vegetables” (Net, 2018, para. 6).

### **Protective and Obstructive use of Veto power by Russia in the UN Security Council**

The reason for the failure of the UNSC to resolve the Syrian civil war diplomatically is because of Russia’s protective and obstructive use of veto power, with China’s help, in favour of the Syrian regime as a counter measure against the Western members of the Council (Britain, France and the United States) who started the glaring selfish politicking of seeking to use the Council to achieve the self-centred goal of overthrowing the Syrian regime militarily and setting up of a pro-West government in its place. The five Western members of the Council had also vetoed draft resolutions proposed by Russia and China perceived to work against their interests. While some co-operation between the two opposing parties helped to achieve certain UNSC resolutions on Syria, most of the UNSC draft resolutions were vetoed.

Since the civil war began in Syria, Russia has been providing the Syrian government, against all odds, with diplomatic support that has ensured the continuity of the government. The provision of diplomatic support by Russia are in two different fronts – in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and UN-backed Geneva Peace Talks, and in other peace talks not sponsored by the UNSC such as Vienna Peace Talks, Astana Peace Talks, Minsk Peace Talk, Sochi Peace Talks, etc. With the help of China, Russia has been able to frustrate all UNSC proposed-resolutions from the three Western permanent members of the Council – the United States, Britain and France – that are adverse and harmful to the Syrian regime. Instances in which Russia used veto power against draft resolutions by the Western members of the UNSC that threatened its interests in Syria are discussed hereinafter.

Following the failed promise of President Bashar al-Assad to prevent the recurrence of violence by Syria’s security forces against protesters as well as given the dashed hope of Syria’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, countries like France, Germany, Portugal and the United Kingdom submitted *UNSC Draft Resolution 612 (S/2011/612)* on 4 October 2011 to the UNSC for consideration and

adoption. The “October 2011 draft Security Council resolution aimed at holding the Assad government accountable for atrocities that had already killed close to 2,000 people” (Adams, 2015: 10) condemned the continued violation of human rights and use of violence against civilians by the Syrian government. It also demanded for an end to violence and extremism by all parties to the conflict and that the perpetrators of violence and human right abuses should be held responsible for their wrongs (UNSC, 2011a).

It indirectly urged military sanction (arms embargo) and financial sanctions related to arms supply against Syria by stating that it –

*Calls upon* all States to exercise vigilance and restraint over the direct or indirect supply, sale or transfer to Syria of arms and related materiel of all types, as well as technical training, financial resources or services, advice, or other services or assistance related to such arms and related material (UNSC, 2011a: 3).

Essentially, the Western draft resolution condemned the Syrian government for the conflict and threatened it with sanctions if military crackdown on protesters continued. However, the draft resolution failed to receive all P5 members’ positive votes and was boycotted by some non-permanent members. Nine (9) countries, including France, United Kingdom and United States voted in favour of the draft resolution, while four (4) countries including Brazil, India, Lebanon, and South Africa declined. Russia and China vetoed the draft resolution from passing. In criticism of the draft resolution and its sponsors’ interpretation of the concept of “responsibility to protect”, the Russian Ambassador, Vitaly Churkin, stressed on the principle of non-intervention and reminded the Security Council that the situation in Syria is similar to the Libyan experience; that NATO has decided that its military action in Libya, derived from its own interpretation of compliance with the UNSC resolutions on Libya, would be used as a model for future intervention in other countries to execute the responsibility to protect; and that NATO was willing to use the same model in Syria (UNSC, 2011b).

In condemnation of the negative votes of Russia and China, the United States ambassador to the UN, Suzan Rice, laments that, “Several members [of the UNSC] have sought to weaken and strip bare any texts that would have defended the lives of innocent civilians from Assad’s brutality. Today, two members have vetoed a vastly watered-down text that does not even mention

sanctions” (UNSC, 2011b: 8). This statement reveals the rift and politics in the UNSC that thwarted efforts at reaching consensus, even at the early stage of the Syrian conflict.

On 4 February 2012 Bahrain, Colombia, Egypt, France, Germany, Jordan, Kuwait, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Portugal, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Togo, Tunisia, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, United Kingdom and United States submitted *UNSC Draft Resolution 77 (S/2012/77)* to the UNSC for adoption. The draft resolution, among others, backed the Arab League’s plan of action of 2 November 2011 and the League’s decision of 22 January 2012 which essentially called on Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to step down and hand over power to a deputy to make way for a Syrian-led transition to a democratic, inclusive and plural political system to be overseen by it (Arab League) in accordance with the timetable set out by it (UNSC, 2012a; Renner & Afoaku, 2015). Russia and China vetoed this second UNSC draft resolution of 4 February 2012 while other 13 members of the UNSC, including India and South Africa, supported it. Russia argued that the draft resolution was a wrong and biased attempt at regime change in Syria.

Following the suspension of activity and withdrawal of the United Nations Supervision Mission in Syria (UNSMIS), non-implementation of Annan six-point proposal, resurgence of battles, increased humanitarian crisis, losses of lives and property, and international pressure, France, Germany, Portugal, United Kingdom and United States submitted *UNSC Draft Resolution 538 (S/2012/538)* to the UNSC for voting on 19 July 2012. The draft resolution demanded that the Syrian government should completely execute all of its commitments to the Annan six-point proposal, and withdraw troops and heavy weapons from populated areas to their barracks and arsenal in order to facilitate cessation of violence. Article 41 (Chapter VII) of the Charter of the United Nations states thus:

The 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 (Charter of the United Nations art. 41, 1945).

However, Russia and China vetoed the Western draft resolution which threatened to impose economic, communications and diplomatic sanctions on Syria. South Africa and Pakistan



declined while 11-member countries voted in favour of the draft resolution. Then Russian permanent representative to the UN, Vitaly Churkin, stated later that the Western sponsors of the rejected draft resolution knew in advance that the proposed draft resolution would fail because it did not seek to encourage dialogue among the Syrian parties to the civil war nor to demilitarise the Syrian crisis, but to encourage extremists and terrorist groups and to pursue their own geopolitical interests which are completely selfish and contrary to the genuine interest of the Syrian people (UNSC, 2012c).

Russian government defended its use of veto against the resolution through its foreign ministry by arguing that the document did not reflect the realities on the ground, was politically oriented and biased against the Syrian government whom it accused of increasing the tensions in Syria, sought to protect Jabhat al-Nusra terrorists and the militants that have joined them despite the UN commitment to fight terrorism, ignored the provocation of the humanitarian crisis in Aleppo caused by Syrian rebels, and failed to support the initiation of intra-Syrian political process which the Syrian opposition, supported by the West, was sabotaging (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2016: 1).

Russian ambassador to the UNSC, Vitaly Churkin, argued against the UNSC draft resolution before the voting by stating that the immediate ceasefire that the draft resolution demanded would be exploited, like before, by Syrian opposition fighters to refill their supplies, strengthen their ranks and secure their control over captured areas of the city of Aleppo (UNSC, 2016c).

On 17 November 2017 Japan submitted UNSC *draft resolution 970 (S/2017/970)* to the UNSC, seeking, like UNSC draft resolutions 884 (*S/2017/884*) and 962 (*S/2017/962*), to “to renew the mandate of the Joint Investigative Mechanism, as set out in resolution 2235,” but different from them as it sought renewal for “for a period of 30 days, with a possibility of further extension by the Security Council if it deems necessary” (UNSC, 2017i: 1). The draft resolution suffered defeat as it failed to pass because Russia vetoed it. The voting order was 12 in favour, including France, United Kingdom and United States; 2 against, being Bolivia and Russia; and 1 abstention being China. Russia’s negative vote defeated the draft resolution. Russian ambassador to the UN, Vasily Nebenzya, defended Russia’s use of veto in stating that no short extension of the mandate

of the Joint Investigative Mechanism was necessary unless the basic defects in its works were corrected and also because the leadership of the body is biased against the Syrian government over the use of sarin for attack in Khan Shaykhun (UNSC, 2017j).

**EMPIRICAL TABLE FOR UNSC DRAFT RESOLUTIONS ON THE SYRIAN CONFLICT (2011-2017)**

S/N	Title and code of resolution	Date of submission	Sponsors	Purpose/demand	Votes in favour	Countries that voted in favour	Votes against (veto)	Countries that voted against (veto)	Votes against (not veto)	Countries that voted against, not as veto	Number of countries that abstained	Countries that abstained
1.	<i>UNSC Draft Resolution 612 (S/2011/612)</i>	4 October 2011	France, Germany, Portugal and United Kingdom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•End to violence and extremism by all sides in Syria</li> <li>•End to human rights violation by the Syrian government</li> </ul>	9	Bosnia and Herzegovina, Colombia, France, Gabon, Germany, Nigeria, Portugal, United Kingdom, and United States	2	China and Russia	—	—	4	Brazil, India, Lebanon, and South Africa
2.	<i>UNSC Draft Resolution 77 (S/2012/77)</i>	4 February 2012	Bahrain, Colombia, Egypt, France, Germany, Jordan, Kuwait, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Portugal, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Togo, Tunisia, Turkey, UAE, UK and USA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Support for the Arab League’s plan of action essentially asking Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to step down and hand over power to a deputy to enable a Syria-led democratic transition</li> </ul>	13	Azerbaijan, Colombia, France, Germany, Guatemala, India, Morocco, Pakistan, Portugal, South Africa, Togo, UK and USA	2	China and Russia	—	—	—	—
3.	<i>UNSC Draft Resolution 538 (S/2012/538)</i>	19 July 2012	France, Germany, Portugal, United Kingdom and United States	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Requiring the Syrian government to execute its commitments to the Annan six-point proposal, which has to do with transition of power, of which failure will lead to the imposition of economic and other</li> </ul>	11	Azerbaijan, Colombia, France, Germany, Guatemala, India, Morocco, Portugal, Togo, United Kingdom and United States	2	China and Russia	—	—	2	Pakistan and South Africa

				non-military sanctions								
4.	<i>UNSC Draft Resolution 348 (S/2014/348)</i>	22 May 2014	Albania <sup>1</sup>	•Referral of the conflict situation in Syria to the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC)	13	Argentina, Australia, Chad, Chile, France, Jordan, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Nigeria, Republic of Korea, Rwanda, United Kingdom, and United States.	2	China and Russia	—	—	—	—
5.	<i>UNSC Draft Resolution 846 (S/2016/846)</i>	8 October 2016	Andorra <sup>2</sup>	•End to all aerial bombardments of and military flights [no-fly zone] over Aleppo city.	11	Egypt, France, Japan, Malaysia, New Zealand, Senegal, Spain, Ukraine, UK, USA, and Uruguay.	1	Russia	1	Venezuela	2	Angola and China
6.	<i>UNSC Draft Resolution 1026 (S/2016/1026)</i>	5 December 2016	Egypt, New Zealand and Spain	•Cessation of hostilities in the city of Aleppo by all parties to the Syrian conflict	11	Egypt, France, Japan, Malaysia, New Zealand, Senegal, Spain, Ukraine, UK, USA and Uruguay.	2	China and Russia	1	Venezuela	1	Angola
7.	<i>UNSC Draft Resolution 172 (S/2017/172)</i>	28 February 2017	Albania <sup>3</sup>	•Imposition of UN-backed economic and military sanctions, and travel ban on certain bodies and individuals suspected to be directly and indirectly involved in the use of chemical weapon in Syria	9	France, Italy, Japan, Senegal, Sweden, Ukraine, United Kingdom, United States and Uruguay	2	China and Russia	1	Bolivia	3	Egypt, Ethiopia and Kazakhstan
8.	<i>UNSC Draft Resolution 315 (S/2017/315)</i>	12 April 2017	France, United Kingdom and United States	•Deployment of the OPCW Fact Finding Mission and the OPCW-UN Joint	10	Egypt, France, Italy, Japan, Senegal, Sweden, Ukraine, United Kingdom,	1	Russia	1	Bolivia	3	China, Ethiopia and Kazakhstan

				Investigative Mechanism to investigate the use of chemical weapon in Khan Shaykhun, Syria.		United States and Uruguay						
9.	UNSC Draft Resolution 884 (S/2017/884)	24 October 2017	Albania <sup>4</sup>	•Renewal of the mandate of the Joint Investigative Mechanism for a further period of one year	11	Egypt, Ethiopia, France, Italy, Japan, Senegal, Sweden, Ukraine, United Kingdom, United States and Uruguay	1	Russia	1	Bolivia	2	China and Kazakhstan
10.	UNSC draft resolution 962 (S/2017/962)	16 November 2017	France, Italy, Japan, Sweden, Ukraine, United Kingdom and United States	•Renewal of the mandate of the Joint Investigative Mechanism (JIM)for a further period of 12 months	11	Ethiopia, France, Italy, Japan, Kazakhstan, Senegal, Sweden, Ukraine, United Kingdom, United States and Uruguay	1	Russia	1	Bolivia	2	China and Egypt
11.	UNSC draft resolution 970 (S/2017/970)	17 November 2017	Japan	•Renewal of the mandate of the Joint Investigative Mechanism for a period of 30 days	12	Egypt, Ethiopia, France, Italy, Japan, Kazakhstan, Senegal, Sweden, Ukraine, United Kingdom, United States and Uruguay.	1	Russia	1	Bolivia	1	China

## **Conclusion**

The study establishes that *Russia's failure to co-operate with the Western members of the UNSC to reach a united decision on ending the conflict accounts for the protracted nature of the Syrian conflict*. Indeed, given the priority to preserve the Bashar al-Assad government as the best way to protect its own economic interest in Syria, it became natural for Russia to deploy rationality and shrewdness in its diplomatic behaviour in order to achieve dual utilization of its veto power in the UNSC in both protective and obstructive ways: the former way to defend the Bashar al-Assad's legitimate government of Syria and the latter to stymie the West's effort to use the Council to achieve the self-centred goal of overthrowing it militarily and setting up of a pro-West government in its place. Russia's decision not to co-operate with the West on its own terms is a rational choice. Therefore, it vetoed all the Western-proposed draft UNSC resolutions that posed direct threats to the continued existence of the Bashar al-Assad government – such as the 4 October 2011 UNSC draft resolution 612 (S/2011/612), 4 February 2012 UNSC draft resolution 77 (S/2012/77), 19 July 2012 UNSC draft resolution 538 (S/2012/538), 22 May 2014 UNSC draft resolution 348 (S/2014/348), 28 February 2017 UNSC draft resolution 172 (S/2017/172) among other.

The study maintains that while Russia's decision to protect its genuine economic interests in Syria necessitated its military intervention in the Syrian conflict in support of the Bashar al-Assad government, Russia's commitment to protect those interests at all cost culminated in its unwillingness to co-operate with the Western members of the UNSC over resolving the conflict on their own terms, and this fact became the major cause of the protraction of the conflict. However, Russia's unwillingness to co-operate with the West in resolving the Syrian conflict on their own terms is only rational and does not mean Russia does not want the conflict to end but that Russia strongly believes that the West's firm position that the Bashar al-Assad government must go as a sine qua non for a peaceful political settlement of Syria's conflict is neither altruistic nor in favour of the Syrian people: rather, such position is with the ulterior motive and selfish desire to grab Syria for themselves, destroy Russia's economic interests and replace its influence.

In the light of the foregoing, the West and Russia is required to intensify negotiation and co-operation that will ensure mutual preservation of Syria, Russia and the West economic and strategic interest in the country. This is necessary because only a compromise that will certainly guarantee the protection of this mutual economic interest of these parties in Syria will make Russia to co-operate with the West on resolving the Syrian conflict.

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