

United States-Russian Political Economy of Interests and Management of Syrian Conflict, 2011-2020

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Abstract

The unparalleled suffering, destruction and disregard for human life in Syria has shocked the world's conscience. The conflict has once again portrayed the international system for what it is; a brutal arena where states look for opportunities to take advantage of each other and do what it takes to achieve their interests. Thus, the study is guided by the following research questions: (i) did the interventions by the big powers account for the hike in humanitarian crisis in Syria? (ii) Did the US- Russia strategic interests implicated on their economic relations with Middle East? The theoretical framework of analysis for this study was anchored on the structural-realist theory. Methodologically, the study relied on documentary method, and data were sourced through text books, journal articles, internet sources and official documents. The findings of the study revealed that the conflicting interests of United States and Russia is fuelling Syrian conflict, thereby undermining the management of the conflict. The study underscored that a lasting peace will not be achieved if United States and Russia continue to undermine each other in Syria. The study therefore recommends for a reset in US-Russia relations, one that will lead to deeper co-operation between the two great powers. To assuage the human suffering in Syria, and to effectively manage the conflict, both United States and Russia should relinquish their zero sum game and instead channel their power and influence towards bringing out a negotiated solution that will involve compromise by conflicting parties on the basis of mutual consent.

Keywords: *US-Russia Relations, Syrian conflict, Hegemony, Humanitarian crisis, Middle East.*

Introduction

The Syrian Conflict has raised a lot of issues and unanswered questions. As the conflict deepened over the years, new actors and new threats have emerged which have further affected the balance of the already complex nature of the conflict. As the humanitarian crisis worsens every day, the chances for peace had remained slim and all attempts to end the bloodshed had proven futile. More worrisome is the fact that instead of settling for a political solution that will end the humanitarian crisis in Syria, United States and Russia are engaging in conflict-deepening strategies with United States arming the rebels and Russia, the Syrian government.

Existing literature on the aforementioned topic falls into two major schools of thought. The first

school anchored their explanation on realist framework of analysis while the second school of thought anchored their explanation on political economy analysis. The first school argued that the Syrian conflict is actually a return of great power politics played by both United States and Russia during the cold war. They argued that the power struggle and geopolitics between United States and Russia in Syria and the Middle East is what have fuelled and prolonged the Syrian conflict, making it difficult to manage. This school of thought holds that the Syrian conflict is actually a geo-political struggle for power and influence between United States and Russia. Both are in Syria and ultimately in the Middle East to restrict each other's sphere of influence. These scholars argued that the war in Syria is part of US grand strategy to expel Russia from the Middle East, restrict China's access to the vast resources in the region, pursue their policy of regime change and democratization in the region and ultimately retain their global hegemony. The major proponent of this is Menkiszak (2013). Indeed, his studies reveal that Russia's attitude towards the Syrian crisis was highly influenced by their perception of the US foreign policy. For him, Russia believes that the United States is trying to advance geopolitically by using two instruments of regime change: support for the domestic opposition in targeted countries by soft power means and the use of military force to overthrow unwanted governments.

Hove and Mutanda (2015), in discussing the struggle for power between United States and Russia in Syria, maintained that Russia grabbed the Syrian conflict to demonstrate that she was not only the world's biggest country geographically but a force to be reckoned with in military circles. Both scholars went further to argue that Russia was determined to demonstrate that the aftermath of the cold war was not to be misconstrued for a weaker Russia whose allies could easily overrun the hegemonic tendencies advanced in the name of defending human rights. Furthermore, Russia conveyed unto the world the message that post- cold war era was not a world dominated by one superpower – the US. In addition, Russia intended to thwart United States arrogance whereby she toppled regimes decisive for Russia's aspirations and installed puppet regimes.

Moreover, Plakoudas (2016) and Muharrem (2017), maintained that the United States and Russia are using the Syrian conflict to contend for power and influence in the Middle East. Carpenter (2013) concluded that the various factions in Syria are interlocked in a *bellum omnium contra omnes* (war of all against all): the kurds, the Islamic State, the Free Syrian Army, the Syrian Arab Army, Iran, the Iraqi Shia Militias, other jihadists (eg Jabhat al-Nusra) the US-led international coalition, Turkey and Russia. This, according to him, had turned the Syrian conflict into a sanguinary stalemate, making peace difficult to achieve. Carpenter (2013) argued that the Syrian conflict is not merely a civil war but a theater in a dangerous power struggle. He argued further that an even bigger concern for Russia and China is that the US policy regarding Syria is just the latest manifestation of an overall strategy of forcible regime change to advance the interests and policy preferences of the United States and its Western Allies. This according to

him is why Moscow and Beijing continue to endorse the traditional state system embodied in the Peace of Westphalia, the core principle of which is a general prohibition against the outside interference, especially by great powers in the internal affairs of their countries. He argued that Russian and Chinese leaders believe that the new western fondness for forcible regime change creates the potential for chaos in the Middle East and other regions. Carpenter concluded that officials in Moscow and Beijing view suspiciously US strategy of regime change to be a power play to achieve undisputed US/Western global dominance.

In interrogating the geopolitics of the Syrian civil war and the Russian case, Pispinò (2017) argued that Russia's strong desire of re-taking the international prestige of Superpower and willingness to extend to its area of influence cannot be ignored. He went further to point out that the slow but steady decline of the United States and its always less influential role in the Middle East, are seen by Russian Leadership as unequivocal signs of a change in the international system. Opportunities which must be taken. Muharrem (2017) supported this view and argued that the US attempts to introduce intervention law to the new international system by the involvement in regime change in the Middle East for bringing democracy (Iraq invasion of 2003) and humanitarian interventions in the Balkans since 1990s under Western leadership by using the United Nations and NATO, finally its attempt for responsibility to protect in Libya received resistance of China and Russia in Syria at last. The systemic framework introduced by Khashanah (2014) argued that the revolt was used as an entry point to realign Syria ideologically and geopolitically. She introduces a *geogram* and theory that pits Iran, China and Russia to the -left and whilst the -right|| has USA, Canada, the European Union and Turkey. Countries such as Qatar and Saudi Arabia that are in the vertical axis of the geogram are part of the right. The aim of the US led international coalition is to move Syria to the right. The realignment could be seen as necessary since Syria is strategic geopolitically (Musarurwa and Kaye, 2016).

The second school of thought - Johnson (2015), Freeman (2016), Szénási (2017), Guner and Dilan (2017), among others, argued that the Syrian conflict is a conflict for access to oil and control of pipelines. United States want to thwart a Russia-backed attempt to build an Iran-Iraq-Syria gas pipeline that was to be built between 2014 and 2016 from Iran's giant South Pars field through Iraq and Syria. With a possible extension to Lebanon, it would eventually reach Europe, the target export market. USA and her allies are interested to build a more northbound pipeline from Qatar and Saudi Arabia via Syria and Turkey. Syria being a key link in this chain needs to be governed by a West-friendly regime. The European Union, a major US ally, beneath its superficial performance of trying to halt the refugee crisis, in reality wants to ensure that the gas gets into its citizens' homes.

Johnson (2015) questioned the timing of the uprising and signing the Bushehr Memo of 25 June 2011. This agreement created the Iran-Iraq-Syria gas pipeline. Szénási (2017) argued that an

entire country – that is Syria – was destroyed because various parties of the conflict attempted to pursue their own interests in order to build their own preferred pipelines. Guner and Dilan (2017) maintained that the question at the core of the power struggle among states key to Middle Eastern stability and global balance is the question of who controls whose natural gas flow via whose territories? They argued that core U.S. interest is to prevent a single state from becoming a hegemonic power in Europe. The diversification of energy supplies is therefore a concern due to European dependency on Russian energy resources. The goal of the United States, according to them, is to end Europe's dependence on Russian energy resources.

Most worrisome is the fact that in spite of the profundity and undoubted logical elegance of these studies, they do not deal directly with the linkages between the interventions of the big powers and the humanitarian crisis in Syria; the economic interests of Russia and United States and its impact on the management of the Syrian conflict; and the US Middle East strategic policy and its impact on her relations with Russia. Most of the empirical works on the United States-Russian relation and their involvement in the Syrian conflict centered mostly on the effect their opposing interests in the region will have on the conflict. Guner and Dilan (2017) noted that the incompatible aims of United States and Russia is fuelling the Syrian conflict. Dejevsky (2017) argues that competition between Washington and Moscow for a say in any peace deal is increasing the danger of a wider war starting by accident. She concluded that what is going on has the echoes of the proxy conflict fought by the Superpowers during the latter stages of the cold war but with added elements of risk because the accepted rules and formal channels of communication to a large extent no longer exist.

Pispinò (2017), Muharrem (2017), Carpenter (2013), Plakoudas (2016), Menkiszak (2013), Hove and Mutanda (2015), and Menkiszak (2013) interrogated the power struggle between United States and Russia but failed to explore the link between the interventions of United States and Russia and the worsening humanitarian crisis in Syria. Scholars, such as, Johnson (2015), Freeman (2016), Szénási (2017), and Guner and Dilan (2017) argued that it is merely a war for oil and pipeline but failed to interrogate the critical factors behind the escalating violence in Syria. The commanding *problematique* of this study, however, is that despite the interventions of the big powers in the Syria conflict, the war seems not to be abating and the raging escalation of the violence and stark increase of humanitarian crisis in Syria call for scholarly investigation.

Therefore, most existing literature has not explored the link between the interventions of the big powers and the humanitarian crisis in Syria; the economic interests of Russia and United States and its impact on the management of the Syrian conflict; and the US Middle East strategic policy and its impact on her relations with Russia. Against this background, therefore, attempt is made here to transcend the existing analyses to closely interrogate the organic link between United States-Russian relations and the management of the Syrian Conflict; meanwhile, our task and thrust of the study is to establish the link between the interventions of the big powers and the

humanitarian crisis in Syria; the economic interests of Russia and United States and its impact on the management of the Syrian conflict; and the US Middle East strategic policy and its impact on her relations with Russia within the period under study.

Theoretical Framework of Analysis

The deadly power play and bloodshed unraveled in the Syrian Conflict has once again cast a grim picture of international politics. The conflict has once again portrayed the international system for what it truly is; a brutal arena where states look for opportunities to take advantage of each other and to prevent each other from becoming the most powerful actor in the system. As the conflict in Syria rages on, the need to fully analyze its dynamics becomes necessary.

In analyzing the impact of United States-Russia Relations on the management of the Syrian conflict, this study adopted *Structural Realism* also known as Neo-realism as a viable tool of analysis. Structural Realism is an ideological departure from classical realism which located human behavior which is egoistic and selfish as the root cause of the machinations of international politics and which shapes the behavior of States within the international system. Structural Realism veered off from this argument and maintained that the structure of the international system is what shapes the behavior of states within the system. Neo-realist scholars such as Waltz (1979); Buzan (1993); Herz (1951); Hanami (2003); Oye (1986); Jervis (1978); Mearsheimer 2001; and several others agree that anarchy inherent in the structure of the international system is the driving force of international politics. The major proponent of this theory Kenneth Waltz in his magnum Opus, *Theory of International Politics* argued that –the structure of a system is generated by the interaction of its principal part.

In this case the, states are the principal parts of the structure. (Waltz, 1979: 72). Waltz further noted that state actions and behaviour are affected by the structure –through socialization of the actors and through competition among them.

To this end when state A and state B interact, each –is not just influencing the other; both are influenced by the situation their interaction creates (1979:74). In other words, the structure can be seen as the intervening variable between the action of state and their outcomes. Neo-Realist scholars sees the cause of all power struggles and rivalries that go on in the international system not as a function of the nature of states but as a function of the structure of the international system. Daily life is essentially a struggle for power, where each state strives not only to be the most powerful actor in the system, but also to ensure that no other state achieves that lofty position (Mearsheimer, 1994-1995: 9).

From the analysis, the basic assumptions include:

1. The international system is anarchic: there is no higher central authority that can enforce

rules over individual states.

2. Given this context, states act on the basis of self-help: They operate with the aim of survival and their interactions with other states reflect their desire to survive.
3. All states possess some offensive military capability and therefore cannot be certain of the intentions of other states
4. The structure only changes if great powers take actions that will lead to a change. Most states have no power to change the structure. Given this context, states as rational actors will try to balance against each other because they will try to increase their chance of survival.
5. In striving for security, states seek to expand their capabilities vis-à-vis rival states. Thus ensuring territorial, economic and military security constitutes the national interest calculus of a state. At the same time, the level of capability a state possesses vis-à-vis others, constrains or equips states to pursue such interests. In turn, the scope and ambition of a country's interests are driven by its level of capability (Telhami 2003: 109).

Accordingly, Waltz (1979: 79-101) maintained that there are two important attributes of structure of the international system. Firstly, Waltz maintained that unlike the domestic politics which has hierarchical structures, the ordering principle of the international system is anarchy. Anarchy does not imply the presence of chaos and disorder. It simply refers to the absence of a world government (Waltz 1979: 88). Consequently, this implies that the international system is a self-help system. This is because each state is free to define its own interests and must strive to ensure its own security and survival. This system is thus composed of self-regarding units, who primarily seek to survive. The second attribute of the structure of the international system is the character of the units. Waltz posited that all states in the system are alike in having anarchical structures. However, there are also structural differences in the distribution of power among the constituent states. This implies that the structure of international system is affected by the distribution of capabilities (Waltz, 1979: 79-101). Sovereign states are thus the constitutive units of the international system, and the primary actors in world politics. For Waltz, apart from the role played by the state as the primary actor in the international system, states are also sovereign entities which recognize no authority above themselves. He state as follows:

"To say that states are sovereign is not to say that they can do as they are free of others influence, that they are able to get what they want..... to say that a state is sovereign means that it decides for itself how to cope with its internal and external problems, including whether or not to seek assistance from other" (Waltz, 1979: 96).

In an anarchic international system, as states seeks to pursue power in order to survive, this eventually leads to security dilemma, making states to perpetually feel threatened by a potential attack from others. In the words of Waltz, -where no one commands by virtue of authority, no

one is obliged to obey (Waltz 1979: 88-93). While Neo-realists agree that the structure of the international system is the primary impetus in seeking security, there is disagreement among Neo-realist scholars as to whether states merely aim to survive or whether states want to maximize their relative power. Accordingly, there are two strands of thoughts in structural realism. Offensive Realists, it argues that the anarchic nature of the international system forces states to be aggressive. Mearsheimer (2001), the chief proponent of Offensive Realism maintained that –the sad fact is that international politics has always been a ruthless and dangerous business, and it is likely to remain that way. Although the intensity of their competition waxes and wanes, great powers fear each other and always compete with each other for power. The overriding goal of each state is to maximize its share of world power, which means gaining power at the expense of other states. But great powers do not merely strive to be the strongest of all the great powers, although that is a welcome outcome. Their ultimate aim is to be the hegemonic—that is, the only great power in the system (Mearsheimer, 2001: 1). On the other hand, Defensive realists to which Kenneth Waltz belongs to, argued that even states inclined to aggression are forced by the anarchic structure of the system to create balances of power instead.

Application of the Theory

The link between the United States-Russia relations and its impact on the management of the Syrian conflict is explained in the light of Structural Realism. The basic assumption of the Structural-realist theory is that the anarchic structure of the international system, propels each state to define its own interests and as a consequence, each state strive to ensure its own security and survival. We argue that both United States and Russia has strategic and economic interests in Syria which they are striving to protect. At face value, US appears to be fighting terrorism in Syria (especially the dangerous ISIS extremists), preventing nuclear proliferation and making sure that the chemical weapons stockpiles in Syria does not fall into the wrong hands. But beneath these false pretenses and rhetoric, the goal of United States in Syria is to expel Russia from the Middle East and retain her global hegemony. Indeed, the war in Syria is part of US grand strategy to expel Russia from the Middle East, pursue their policy of regime change and democratization in the region and ultimately retain their global hegemony which is under threat due to gradual structural shift in world power equations.

Thus, they strive to achieve by isolating Iran, pursuing a policy of regime change to install a puppet regime in Syria and therefore maintain the security of Israel. Another important part of this grand strategy is to ensure access to and free flow of oil in the Middle East and prevent Russia from becoming a hegemonic power in Europe. This they intend to achieve by thwarting a Russia-backed attempt to build an Iran-Iraq-Syria gas pipeline which will ensure that Europe no longer depend on Russia for supply of energy resources. The plan for the construction of this

pipeline also known as the Islamic Pipeline was outlined in the Bushehr Memorandum of June 25, 2011 and was projected to be built between 2014 and 2016 from Iran's giant South Pars field through Iraq and Syria, with Europe as its target export market. In thwarting the building of this pipeline, United States and her allies are interested in building a more northbound pipeline from Qatar, and Saudi Arabia, through Syria and Turkey.

However, for this to be possible, Syria needs to be governed by a West Friendly regime. On the other hand, as facts from the Syrian conflict has shown, Russia is heavily invested in Syria, its only ally in the Arab World. Russia is using the Syrian conflict to challenge the US hegemony and reclaim its position in the international System. It should be noted that after the cold war in 1991, Russia was weak at all fronts following the fall of the Soviet Union. As Russia battled with economic woes in the 90s, United States continued to wax stronger, channeling its hegemonic tendencies all over the world even in Russia's near abroad, over-running Russia allies (Kosovo, Afghanistan, Iraq,) in the name of defending human rights. . However, with the advent of Putin, Russia has become more assertive in pursuing its interests. The Western military engagement in Libya has further provided Moscow with a negative reference point over what they perceive as the United States foreign policy which Russia is now resisting in Syria. Indeed, Russia's posture on international action on the Syria crisis has more to do with anxieties about the implications of US power than it does with Syria itself. In echoing this view, Bagdonas (2012: 3) stated thus:

"The initial perception of the situation in Syria was heavily influenced by the assessment of the events unfolding in Libya. Russian foreign policy decision-makers felt that Russia's abstention on UN Security Council's resolution 1973 authorizing a no-fly zone over Libya was grossly misinterpreted and abused by Western countries to oust Gaddafi and change Libya's regime, thereby undermining not only Russia's stance on the issue but also the authority of the Security Council and thus the very foundation of Russia's place in the international system. Russia saw Western moves to condemn Assad's regime's actions in the UN as an attempt to implement the Libyan scenario in Syria and was determined not to allow it. The Libyan experience shaped Russia's opposition to any requests by the international community for Assad to step down, demands for the unilateral removal of government forces from population centers, or UN-authorized sanctions" (Bagdonas 2012, p.3).

In addition, Russia intended to thwart United States arrogance whereby she toppled regimes decisive for Russia's aspirations and installed puppet regimes (Hove and Mutanda, 2015). It should be noted that Russia took advantage of the Syria Conflict to challenge the US Hegemony, protect her interests and enhance her relative power position in the international system. To achieve this, on 28 April 2011, a condemnation of the Syrian regime endorsed by the US-led coalition was vetoed by Russia. On the 2nd of August, 2011, US call for Assad to resign was

countered by Russian Leader Medvedev who warned Western states not to increase pressure on Syria because this was –absolutely not needed. Washington’s new attempt to urge the UN Security Council to impose sanctions against Syria failed on 21 September, 11 failed because it was vetoed by Russia. Another resolution threatening sanctions against Syria was vetoed by Russia and China on 4 October, 2011. Since 2011 when the conflict started, Russia had refused to back any demand that President Bashar al-Assad step down as a precondition for talks. In 2017, as the United States continued to lead a coalition of states targeting ISIS in Iraq and Syria, as well as to support the Syrian Democratic Forces in the same offensive, Russia, along with the Iranian government, continued to provide the Syrian government with military assistance, disrupting the peace process. In fact, Russia’s heavy military backing and consistent international political support of the Assad regime had been largely successful in foiling US-backed attempts to end the conflict in a way that will enable United States to achieve her grand strategy in Syria and the Middle East.

Furthermore, the Neo-realists are of the opinion that states are unitary, rational actors. This rational nature/attribute of a state helps it to evaluate policy options according to its cost benefit analysis, in order to know areas it will give priority attention. Therefore, the use of coercive methods (coercive diplomacy) and conflict deepening strategies (with Russia arming the Assad regime and US arming the rebels) by the both the US- led coalition and Russia in managing the Syrian crisis will be explained in this light, and because both United States and Russia have vital national interests that they strives to protect, the conflict has become a zero- sum game with each striving to gain the upper hand. This is major factor that has prolonged the conflict, worsening the humanitarian crisis. Both great powers are also in a delicate balance with respect to curtailing each other’s aggression in Syria, as this dangerous power play may result to a wider war starting by accident.

The relevance of this theory in the understanding of the impact of the US- Russia Relations on the management of the Syrian Conflict cannot be overemphasized. This theory will dispel the general and misguided application of the realist and political economy approach in the understanding of the relations between the two great powers especially as it concerns the Syrian conflict. Moreover, the theory is relevant in the understanding of the nature of international politics which is unraveling in Syria. It will help in revealing the contours of the US-Russia relations especially as it concerns Syrian in particular and the Middle East politics as a whole. It will equally assist us in exposing the overall picture and the ultimate aim of the two great powers - United States and Russia, as it concerns their involvement in the Syrian conflict. Precisely, the theory is relevant in understanding the main factor which is shaping the behavior and policies of United States and Russia in Syria – the structure of the international system. The structure of the international system is what shapes the behavior of states within the System and anarchy inherent in the structure of the international system is the driving force of international politics.

The fundamental implication of this theory is that in absolute terms, if United States and Russia continue to play their zero sum game in Syria, the conflict will drag on for years, and peace will remain even more elusive. By implication, we will be seeing a replay of Vietnam War where the proxy war between United States and the then Soviet Union lingered for years. Indeed, as United States and Russia pursue their aggressive and conflicting policies in the Middle East in order to protect their interests and enhance their relative power positions in the international system, international organizations such as United Nations has remained powerless in the face of the deadly ambitions of the two great powers and the worsening humanitarian crisis in Syria. To assuage the human suffering in Syria, both United States and Russia should prioritize political and diplomatic options over military engagement. In this study, we will devise a solution on the best possible way United States and Russia can effectively manage the conflict and bring back peace in Syria.

Literature Review

This section of the study reviewed scholarly works related to the topic under investigation. Specifically, it thematically reviewed pertinent literature under the following sub-headings that were derived from the research questions, with the view to locate the gap in literature.

- **Interventions by the big powers and the hike humanitarian crisis in Syria**

In this section, we shall focus on the studies that dwell on the interventions of the big powers and humanitarian crisis in Syria. The conflict in Syria has created an unprecedented humanitarian crisis. Whilst the figures of the death toll from Syria vary according to source, scholars agree that it has become the worst crisis in our lifetime since the end of the Second World War, affecting more people than the combined impact of the Haiti Earthquake, the Indian Ocean Tsunami and Hurricane Katrina (World Vision, 2015 cited in Musarurwa, & Kaye, 2016). Regardless of this fact, it has not been met with matching attention and responses (Musaruwa &Kaye, 2016). According to the UN Under-Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs, –the appalling suffering inflicted on ordinary women, children, and men by this conflict is completely unacceptable... words, despite their ability to shock, cannot really paint a picture of the grim and gruesome reality of Syria today.

As of December 2013, 9.3 million people inside Syria needed humanitarian assistance, including 6.5 million who had been forced to flee their homes and faced one of the harshest winters ever in Syria; the number of Syrian refugees in neighbouring countries was approaching 2.3 million; 3 million people were unemployed; 3 million children had been forced to leave their education (Aaronson, 2014). Hartberg, Bowen, and Gorevan (2015) pointed out that despite being central to the 2014 United Nations Security Council Resolutions, humanitarian access to large parts of

Syria has actually diminished over the past year. The number of people living in areas that are difficult or impossible for aid agencies to reach has almost doubled from 2.5 million in 2013 to 4.8 million at the start of 2015. The scholars stated that UN inter-agency convoys reached only 1.1 million beneficiaries in the worst affected areas, almost 1.8 million fewer people than the year before. Similarly, between February and June 2014, in areas defined by UN aid agencies as difficult or impossible to reach, there was a 96 percent reduction in the amount of food and agriculture aid being received (Hartberg, Bowen, & Gorevan, 2015).

The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (2016a), equally observed that as at 2016, more than 250 000 people have been killed in the Syrian crisis. An estimated 4.3 million are now refugees and 6.6 million have been internally displaced. Approximately USD7.7billion is needed to meet the urgent needs in Syria during 2016 with USD5.3billion having been raised by October 2016 (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 2016b). The crisis is an evident case of the impact of the international community's failure to fulfill its responsibility to protect global citizens (Solberg-Henriet, 2015). Uzu (2017:6) interrogated the extent of the humanitarian crisis in Syria and observed that six years of war has torn Syria apart... Syrian children and families have borne the brunt of the conflict's disastrous consequences. Hundreds of thousands have been killed and more than half of the population — 11 million people — have been displaced from their homes and needs humanitarian assistance. The scholar pointed out that March 15, 2017 marks the sixth anniversary of the war's outbreak. Since then, 5 million Syrians have fled to other countries as refugees and more than 6 million displaced within the country. In many cases, children caught up in this crisis have fared the worst, losing family members or friends to the violence, suffering physical and psychological trauma, or falling behind in school (Uzu, 2017:6).

In interrogating the interventions of the big powers in the conflict, scholars such as Gorevan et al, (2015) and Shaw (2013) observed that attempts to find a solution to the conflict began in late 2011, when the Arab League launched two initiatives, but without much success. Russia in January 2012 and in November 2013 suggested talks in Moscow between the Syrian government and opposition. In March–May 2012, hopes were on a United Nations/Arab League plan coordinated by Kofi Annan. In January and February 2014, the Geneva II Conference on Syria took place, organized by Lakhdar Brahimi, then UN envoy to Syria. On 30 October 2015, further talks started in Vienna involving officials from the US, the EU, Russia, China and various regional actors such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Turkey and, for the first time, Iran. Peace talks with rebel leadership continued in Astana, Kazakhstan in 2017. (Gorevan et al, 2015; Shaw, 2013)

Scholars have pointed out that no fewer than 17 attempts have been made to try and resolve the conflict and end the humanitarian crisis in Syria (Gorevan et al, 2015; Shaw, 2013). These attempts included the involvement of the United Nations, neighbouring states as well as the Arab

League and the big powers. Despite such concerted efforts, the proposed peace plans have failed. The main reason for this failure could be that there have been in some ways too many players and that the disunited agendas of each have continued to plague the region and country (Al-Fattal, 2016). There have been reports of mistrust as well as counter-accusations of sides breaching ceasefire agreements and causing more civilian casualties in the process (Crilly, 2016; Issa, 2016).

Human Rights Watch World Report on Syria echoed this same and noted that Peace talks held by the United Nations in Geneva have failed to achieve momentum. In January 2017, Russia, Iran and Turkey met in Astana, Kazakhstan along with representatives of the parties to the conflict to pursue a de-escalation of the conflict. While consecutive Astana meetings have resulted in a decrease in violence following a May agreement on four de-escalation zones, they have failed to realize a stop to the violence completely. The Syrian government, Russia and other actors repeatedly violated these ceasefires. In October, Turkey deployed troops inside *Idlib* province.

Interrogating the key reasons why the interventions of the big powers in the conflict have not been fruitful, Al-Fattal (2016) maintained that most of these initiatives were launched by international or regional powers (often missing key players), working on advancing their self-interested myopic agendas or trying to score points against adversaries. Also, these efforts were made without the main parties being present — the Syrians which represent government and opposition groups. The scholar stated that this is not the most conducive atmosphere to achieve a lasting peace in Syria (Al-Fattal, 2016). Barnes-Dacey (2017) argues current de-escalation efforts are doomed to fail because they lack a viable national political track linked to the ceasefire arrangements. In contrast to the sequencing of current negotiations, the scholar argues that the national politics need to come front and centre in de-escalation efforts and cannot be delayed until after the implementation of sustainable ceasefires. Barnes-Dacey (2017) pointed out that local ceasefires would only be durable if directly tied to a national political vision that the different warring parties, and the regime in particular, buy in to. Without a clear sense of a wider strategic political umbrella, every ceasefire remains, at best, fragile, and, at worst, a prelude to an entirely new phase of civil war (Barnes-Dacey, 2017).

On the other hand, Al-Fattal (2016) noted that despite failed attempts and missteps, some notable progress has been achieved over the past four years. Two failed Arab League attempts in 2011 and 2012, followed by a Russian call for talks between the Syrian government and opposition groups in 2012 and 2013, which was also unsuccessful, ultimately turned into a United Nations/Arab League plan in 2013, and culminated with something resembling a real initiative the Geneva II Conference in 2014.

As Turkmen (2014) pointed out, the UN Security Council would attempt, on 28 April 2011, a

condemnation of the Syrian regime endorsed by France, Great Britain, Germany and Portugal, only to be vetoed by Russia and China, and denied by India and Lebanon. Neither the immediately subsequent condemnation by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, nor the arms embargo, travel ban and freezing of assets of the Syrian leadership imposed by the EU were to bring any results, as the main international instrument had been blocked from the start (Turkmen, 2014: 19). He argued further that the summer of 2011 was marked by desperate attempts by the international community to put pressure on Assad: on 2 August, the EU expanded their embargo; on 6 August the Gulf Cooperation Council issued a condemnation; envoys from different countries traveled to Damascus on August 9 to convince Assad to end the violence, with the US and the EU prompting him to resign; on 2 September the EU imposed an oil embargo to Syria. In response to that decision, Russian President Medvedev warned the Western states not to increase pressure on Syria because this was –absolutely not needed. As a result, not only Washington’s new attempt to urge the UN Security Council to impose sanctions against Syria failed on 21 September, but another European-sponsored resolution threatening sanctions if Syria did not immediately halt its military crackdown against civilians, was vetoed by Russia and China on 4 October (Turkmen, 2014).

The diplomatic cat and mouse game continued throughout 2012, with former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan’s nomination as Special Envoy of the UN and the League of Arab States (LAS) and Assad first seeming to accept the terms of a LAS peace plan and not implementing them at the end, backed by a third Russian-Chinese veto blocking the peace plan on 11 February 2012. In July 2013, the UN said more than 100,000 people had been killed in Syria and stopped updating the death toll (Turkmen, 2014). In 2016, two of the ceasefire attempts have been short-lived with the first one, of September 2016 lasting seven days. Fighting resumed with Russia and USA accusing each other of initiating the breach to the ceasefire agreement (Dorell & Hjelmggaard, 2016). The fighting that ensued since 19 September 2016 has led to increased fighting in the Syrian second city of Aleppo. A second cease-fire attempt was made to bring peace in Aleppo but only lasted for 10 hours (Reuters, 2016 cited in Musarurwa, & Kaye, 2016).

Demir and Rijnoveanu (2013) observed that Russia and Iran are credited with a high degree of influence over the Syrian regime as they become its closest allies and strategic backers. Moreover, Russia’s support is crucial because it holds a veto as a permanent member of the Security Council, a posture that allows it to obstruct any United Nations Security Council initiative against the Assad regime. The United Nations has largely failed, because it depends on agreement among the permanent members of the Security Council. Moreover, either solution, including tougher sanctions against Assad regime, would have limited impact, as long as big players such as Russia and China ignore them. The worsening of the Syrian conflict and the lack of any real perspective for a rapid solution forged Russia as a key strategic player in this extremely complicated international dossier. It is worth mentioning that Russia has major

strategic stakes in Syria and therefore, its position should be understood in a broader perspective strongly related to Moscow's ambitions to recover its place in the global power game (Demir & Rijnoveanu, 2013).

Both scholars further pointed out that the growing strategic concerns motivated Russia to push for its own agenda towards the Syrian crisis: it refused to back any UN Security Council resolution threatening sanctions or military force against the Syrian government and refused to back any demand that President Bashar al-Assad step down as a precondition for talks. Russia's stance is motivated by the need to defend the principle of non-intervention in the domestic affairs and respect the national sovereignty of states. The major Russian concern is that by legitimizing the selective application of the international law, Russia and its closest allies from the former Soviet-space might be subject of military foreign intervention, perhaps with the consent of the UN (Demir & Rijnoveanu, 2013).

At this point, there is no doubt that the extant literature reviewed above such as Hartberg, Bowen, & Gorevan, (2015), Shaw, (2013), Dorell & Hjelmgaard, (2016) Turkmen, (2014), Al-Fattal, (2016), Crilly, (2016), Issa,(2016), Demir & Rijnoveanu, (2013), Uzu, (2017), Solberg-Henriet, (2015), Aaronson, (2014) and several others have made attempts to establish a positive or inverse relationship between the interventions of the big powers and the humanitarian crisis in Syria. However, their efforts, as reviewed above, have not adequately explored the issues directly linking the interventions of the big powers and humanitarian crisis in Syria.

- **US-Russia strategic interests and its impacts on relationship with Middle East**

In this section, we shall focus on studies that dwell on the US Middle East Strategic Policy and its impact on her relations with Russia. To this end, Byman and Moller (2016), observed that the United States has long been involved in the Middle East, and its role has only grown since the end of the Cold War. Yet in contrast to Europe, another region of longstanding interest, or Asia, where the United States plans to -pivotll in the years to come, trade relations and cultural ties remain weak, and the region's military power marginal. During the Cold War, the Middle East's energy supplies and several communist-leaning regimes rendered it part of the US-Soviet chessboard. In the 1990s the United States expanded its security presence in the region to contain Saddam Hussein's Iraq and the clerical regime in Iran. At the same time, Washington engaged in an energetic and sustained, but ultimately unsuccessful, effort to bring about peace between Israel and its Arab neighbors (Byman & Moller, 2016: 2).

Arguing further, both scholars pointed out that following the 9/11 attacks, US involvement grew even greater. The United States deepened counterterrorism cooperation with longstanding allies like Egypt and Jordan and pushed to establish more extensive ties with hitherto neglected or adversarial regimes, like Yemen and Libya. Most dramatically, of course, in 2003, the United

States invaded Iraq and, in so doing, triggered an insurgency that led to a sustained US presence in the country until the end of 2011. Both scholars pointed out that US interests in the Middle East can be broken down into five areas: ensuring the free flow of oil; preventing nuclear proliferation; fighting terrorism; maintaining the security of Israel; and promoting democratization (Byman & Moller, 2016).

Accordingly, Rosenthal (2010) opined that the ruling elites in the United States have clear interests in the Middle East that they have consistently pursued for nearly a century. Those interests can best be summed up as imperialist interests that have always centered on the pursuit of geo-strategic advantages in control of the region's energy resources—oil and natural gas, the pipelines and sea lanes that connect them to global markets. After World War II, the United States superseded the British as the dominant imperial power in the Middle East. Its interests consisted of three interrelated objectives: (1) To control the oil and gas resources of the region; (2) To control certain regimes in the region as much as possible, especially Israel, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Iran, Egypt, and Pakistan; and (3) To prevent the rise of any popular movements—whether communist, socialist, nationalist, or religious—that might threaten US control of the region's energy resources and the stability of its client regimes.

Echoing the same view, Kontos (2017) observed that the main, long-term American interests in the region were to secure the flow of oil and gas to the western markets, to deal with the emerging threat of Islamic terrorism, as well as to inhibit the spread of weapons of mass destruction. Furthermore, Kontos (2017) argued that retaining influence in regions with high geostrategic value, such as the Middle East, serves the goal of safeguarding the US-led global order, a long-term strategic interest with both security and economic parameters. Huessy (2017) writing on the United States strategic objectives in the middle East stated thus: -The Trump administration has put together an emerging coalition of nations led by the United States that seeks five objectives:

- (1) The defeat of Islamic State;
- (2) The formation of a coalition of the major Arab nations, especially Egypt and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, to clean up in their own back yards financing terrorism and providing terrorists with sanctuary
- (3) Driving out sharia-inspired violence and human rights abuses from the region's mosques and madrassas;
- (4) A joint partnership with Israel as part of an emerging anti-Iran coalition -- without letting relations with the Palestinian authority derail United States and Israeli security interests; and
- (5) The adoption of a strategy directly to challenge Iran's quest for regional and Islamic hegemony, while ending its role in terrorism (Huessy, 2017).

Importantly, scholars such as Pispinò (2017), Muharrem (2017), Carpenter (2013), Plakoudas

(2016), Menkiszak (2013), Hove and Mutanda (2015), and Menkiszak (2013) have argued that the war in Syria is part of US strategic policy in the Middle East to expel Russia from the Middle East, restrict China's access to the vast resources in the region, pursue their policy of regime change and democratization in the region and ultimately retain their global hegemony. They pointed out that this had resulted to a power struggle and geopolitics between United States and Russia in Syria and the Middle East which have fuelled and prolonged the Syrian conflict, making it difficult to manage.

Accordingly, studies conducted by Menkiszak (2013) revealed that Russia's attitude towards the Syrian crisis was highly influenced by their perception of the US foreign policy, a perception that prevails among the conservative top members of the Russian ruling elite. Russia believes that the United States is trying to advance geopolitically by using two instruments of regime change: support for the domestic opposition in targeted countries by soft power means and the use of military force to overthrow unwanted governments. Arguing further, he maintained that various factors have influenced Russia's strategy towards the Syrian crisis. Among them are concerns over strategic and economic interests in Syria as the last symbolic outpost of Russian influence in the Middle East, as well as a fear of the consequences of a regional imbalance, involving the spread of Islamic radicalism, spilling over to Russia itself. Obviously, the Western military engagement in Libya strongly influenced Russian behaviour, providing Moscow with a negative reference point (Menkiszak 2013).

Hove and Mutanda (2015), arguing in the same direction maintained that Russia grabbed the Syrian conflict to demonstrate that she was not only the world's biggest country geographically but a force to be reckoned with in military circles. Both scholars went further to argue that Russia was determined to demonstrate that the aftermath of the cold war was not to be misconstrued for a weaker Russia whose allies could easily overrun the hegemonic tendencies advanced in the name of defending human rights. Furthermore, Russia conveyed unto the world the message that post-cold war era was not a world dominated by one superpower – the US. In addition, Russia intended to thwart United States arrogance whereby she toppled regimes decisive for Russia's aspirations and installed puppet regimes.

Moreover, Plakoudas (2016) and Muharrem (2017) maintained that the United States and Russia are using the Syrian conflict to contend for power and influence in the Middle East. Pisanò (2017) argued that Russia's strong desire of re-taking the international prestige of Superpower and willingness to extend to its area of influence cannot be ignored. He went further to point out that the slow but steady decline of the United States and its always less influential role in the Middle East, are seen by Russian Leadership as unequivocal signs of a change in the international system. Opportunities which must be taken. Muharrem (2017) supported this view and argued that the US attempts to introduce intervention law to the new international system by

the involvement in regime change in the Middle East for bringing democracy (Iraq invasion of 2003) and humanitarian interventions in the Balkans since 1990s under Western leadership by using the United Nations and NATO, finally its attempt for responsibility to protect in Libya received resistance of China and Russia in Syria at last. He noted that Russia took the advantage of the Syrian conflict to challenge the US hegemony.

Rosenthal (2010) maintained that the end of the Cold War period brought with it the end of the challenges to US imperial interests from the Soviet bloc and its sponsored communist and nationalist movements in the Middle East. Secular leftist forces throughout the Middle East declined in strength and influence. This provided a brief window of opportunity for the US to launch the first Gulf War against Iraq without any Soviet opposition. Soon, however, new forces rose to challenge US hegemony in the Middle East. As the US sought to expand its military presence in the region, in order to bring oil resources and governments more securely under US control, States in the European Union, Russia, and China increasingly saw a world dominated by a lone superpower as contrary to their own interests and challenged US policies in the region. For example, Chinese and Russian support enabled Iran to pursue a path that challenged US interests, and Iran supported groups such as Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Palestine that resisted the US backed Israel government and its allies in Lebanon ([the-us-foreign-policy-and-the-middle-east.htm](#)).

Carpenter (2013) argued that an even bigger concern for Russia is that the US policy regarding Syria is just the latest manifestation of an overall strategy of forcible regime change to advance the interests and policy preferences of the United States and its Western Allies. That policy was on display in the Balkans during the 1990s, in Iraq during George W. Bush's administration, and more recently in Libya. This according to him is why Moscow and Beijing continue to endorse the traditional state system embodied in the Peace of Westphalia, the core principle of which is a general prohibition against the outside interference, especially by great powers in the internal affairs of their countries. He argued that Russian and Chinese leaders believe that the new western fondness for forcible regime change creates the potential for chaos in the Middle East and other regions. Carpenter concluded that officials in Moscow and Beijing view suspiciously US strategy of regime change to be a power play to achieve undisputed US/Western global dominance. In interrogating the deadly power struggle between United States and Russia as each of them strive to get the upper hand in the Syrian conflict and to ultimately restrict each other's influence in the Middle East, Dejevsky (2017) observed that competition between Washington and Moscow for a say in any peace deal is increasing the danger of a wider war starting by accident. She pointed out that what is going on in Syria has the echoes of the proxy conflict fought by the Superpowers during the latter stages of the cold war but with added elements of

risk because the accepted rules and formal channels of communication to a large extent no longer exist.

A study by Nazemroaya (2006) is of particular relevance to an understanding of a core US strategic policy in the Middle East. Nazemroaya (2006) noted that this core US strategic policy is the 'New Middle East' project which was introduced publicly by Washington and Tel Aviv with the expectation that Lebanon would be the pressure point for realigning the whole Middle East and thereby unleashing the forces of –constructive chaos. This –constructive chaos— which generates conditions of violence and warfare throughout the region— would in turn be used so that the United States, Britain, and Israel could redraw the map of the Middle East in accordance with their geo-strategic needs and objectives. *Nazemroaya (2006) quoted former US Secretary Condoleezza Rice* who stated during a press conference on July 21st 2006 that –what we're seeing here [in regards to the destruction of Lebanon and the Israeli attacks on Lebanon], in a sense, is the growing the birth pangs of a New Middle East' and whatever we do, we [meaning the United States] have to be certain that we are pushing forward to the New Middle East (and) not going back to the old one.

Nazemroaya (2006) maintained that the overhaul, dismantlement, and reassembly of the nation-states of the Middle East have been packaged as a solution to the hostilities in the Middle East, but argued that this is categorically misleading, false, and fictitious. He pointed out that the advocates of a –New Middle East and redrawn boundaries in the region avoid and fail to candidly depict the roots of the problems and conflicts in the contemporary Middle East. He pointed out that what the media does not acknowledge is the fact that almost all major conflicts afflicting the Middle East are the consequence of overlapping Anglo- American-Israeli agendas. He stated that from White House's own admissions; there is a belief that –creative destruction and chaos in the Middle East are beneficial assets to reshaping the Middle East, creating the –New Middle East, and furthering the Anglo- American roadmap in the Middle East and Central Asia.

Trenin (2012) interrogated the impact of US strategic policy in the Middle East on her relations with Russia and provided a clear assessment of Russia's strategic posture towards the Syrian crisis: –To Moscow, Syria is not primarily about Middle Eastern geopolitics, Cold War- era alliances, arms sales—or even special interests, like the under-renovation Tartus naval resupply facility which gives Russia some capacity to operate on the Mediterranean...Rather, from a Russian policy perspective, Syria—much like yesterday's Libya, Iraq, or Yugoslavia—is primarily about the world order. It is about who decides: who decides whether to use military force; who decides the actors for use of that force; and who decides the actors for use of that force; and who decides under what rules, conditions, and oversight military force is to be used. Also, Trenin (2012) pointed out that Russia's stated principles are closely linked to its national

interests and maintained Moscow is concerned that allowing the United States to use force at will and without any external constraints might lead to foreign interventions close to Russian borders, or even within those borders—namely, in the North Caucasus. Charap (2013) agreed with Trenin (2012) and pointed out that many in the Russian foreign-policy establishment believe that the string of US-led interventions that have resulted in regime change since the end of the Cold War – Kosovo, Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya – is a threat to the stability of the international system and potentially to ‘regime stability’ in Russia itself and its autocratic allies in its neighbourhood...Russia therefore uses what power it has to shape the international system (Chapman, 2013).

He further noted that in the case of Syria, Moscow could not be convinced that US motives are purely driven by the humanitarian calamity that Assad has created. Instead, it sees sinister geopolitics: the United States moving to get rid of a government with a foreign policy that had long contradicted US interests, particularly by aligning with Iran. The scholar maintained that Russia’s stance on international action on the Syria crisis has more to do with anxieties about the implications of US power than it does with Syria itself. At this point, it is important to note that the extant literature reviewed at this level such as Byman and Moller (2016), Rosenthal (2010), Kontos (2017), Huessy (2017) Pispinò (2017), Muharrem (2017), Carpenter (2013), Plakoudas (2016), Menkiszak (2013), Hove and Mutanda (2015), Menkiszak (2013), Dejevsky (2017), Nazemroaya (2006), Trenin (2012), and Chapman (2013) and several others have contributed in the area of United States strategic Policy in the Middle East and the impact of this policy on United States relations with Russia. It is apparent that efforts have been made to explain the link between the United States Strategic Policy in the Middle East and its impact on her relations with Russia.

Conclusion

The Syrian conflict has led to one of the worst humanitarian crisis in the world. The unparalleled suffering, destruction and disregard for human life in Syria has shocked the world’s conscience. The deadly power play and bloodshed unraveled in the conflict has once again cast a grim picture of international politics. The conflict has once again portrayed the international system for what it truly is; a brutal arena where states look for opportunities to take advantage of each other and to do what it takes to achieves their national interests. And sometimes it doesn’t matter that they are playing politics with people’s lives. Suspicions, mistrust and disunited agendas of the key parties in the conflict has undermined the peace process. Worse still, cases of opposing sides breaching ceasefire agreements and indiscriminate attacks and airstrikes from opposing forces on hospitals, residential buildings killing had led to huge civilian casualties including the

killing women and children, all victims in a deadly power play and controversial ambitions of big powers - that had already started destabilizing the whole of Middle East.

It must be noted that no direct military engagement will bring back peace in Syria. The pursuit of all-out military victory would in essence lead to the complete destruction of Syria. The fundamental implication of our study is that in absolute terms, if United States and Russia continue to play their zero sum game in Syria, the conflict will drag on for years, and peace will remain even more elusive. By implication, we will be seeing a replay of Vietnam War where the proxy war between United States and the then Soviet Union lingered for years. Indeed, as United States and Russia pursue their aggressive and conflicting policies in the Middle East in order to protect their interests and enhance their relative power positions in the international system, international organizations such as United Nations has remained powerless in the face of the deadly ambitions of the two great powers and the worsening humanitarian crisis in Syria. To assuage the human suffering in Syria, both United States and Russia should prioritize political and diplomatic options over military engagement.

Recommendations

In the light of our analyses of the study and subsequent findings, we put forward the following recommendations.

1. A lasting peace in Syria will not be achieved if United States and Russia continue to undermine each other in Syria. As the conflict appears to have reached a deadlock, a normalization of United States Russia relations remains the key to untangling the web of the conflict. Therefore, there is an urgent need for a reset in US-Russia relations, one that will lead to deeper co-operation between the two great powers. Scoring cheap political points will only continue to undermine the peace process and prolong the conflict unnecessarily. Instead of focusing on divisive issues that could escalate tensions and cause ideological conflict between the two big powers, United States and Russia should focus more on areas of common interest and for the sake of the Syrian people, make painful compromises that will help change the narrative in the conflict, and end the bloodshed in Syria.
2. As a matter of urgency, there is need for both United States and Russia to lead the effort in brokering a ceasefire agreement between the Syrian government and the opposition forces. Immediate peace summit should be convened and a binding treaty ironed out with the input of United States, Russia, the Arab league, the Assad Regime and the Opposition forces. The eventual arrest of the humanitarian conflict in Syria is contingent upon the cessation of the war. This ceasefire will open up channels of communication once again and bring all the parties back to the negotiating table.
3. To assuage the human suffering in Syria, both United States and Russia should prioritize political and diplomatic options over military engagement. For the sake of the Syrian people and to effectively manage the conflict, both great powers should relinquish their zero sum game and instead channel their power and influence towards bringing out a negotiated solution that will involve compromise by conflicting parties on the basis of mutual consent.

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