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AFTER THE U.S. HEGEMONIC RETREAT: RUSSIA'S FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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Abstract: In the last years, the Russian Federation has been in the global spotlight due to a series of assertive attitudes in his 'near abroad' and beyond. A central debate in the IR discipline and the regional studies on the Post-Soviet Space and the Middle East has been on the sources and nature of that 'new' regional and global policy. Russia used to have low profile in the Middle East during the Post-Cold War years, but the escalation in the Syria Civil War due to the imminent fall of the Al-Assad Regime provoked a critical juncture that pushed Russia to support military its ally. The article argues that Russia has recovered the great power status due to a military intervention in the Middle East which has been a spin-off of the U.S. hegemonic retreat after the failure of Iraq and the Obama's decision not to act in Syria. At the same time, Russia also has operated with an acceptable degree of military efficacy on a regional order separate from its immediate zone of interest. The new involvement provides us a significant indicator of a status upgrade since the latent capabilities become actual with the projection of military strength overseas.

Keywords: Russia, Foreign Policy, US Hegemonic Retreat, Middle East, Soft Eurasianism, Military Intervention.

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I. Introduction

In the early 2000s, the American Sovietologist Alvin Rubinstein depicted a terminal picture of the Russian Federation which "lacks leadership, efficient institutions for proper governance, and a viable judicial system appropriate for a modernizing market-oriented society; its elites are rapacious, factious, and unable thus far to shape a consensus on societal transformation" and this incapacity it is also seen in the foreign policy which has no "coherent approach to the Middle East" and "compared with the late Soviet period, (…) lacks a power-projection capability, that is, the ability to intervene quickly and effectively on behalf of a hard-pressed prime client" (Rubinstein, 2004, 87-88).

After a decade and a half, Russia seems to reverse its declining trajectory, at least in terms of power-projection and support for its local allies in the Middle Eastern regional order. Recent literature on Russia highlights the aggressive and assertive foreign policy who tried to recover her status as a great power (Lucas, 2008; Mankoff, 2009; Stoner & McFaul, 2015). One critical turning point has been the Putin's Russia decision to expand its military activities in Syria and the Eastern Mediterranean to save the Al-Assad Regime from its imminent fall in September 2015. Around this decision, decision-makers, scholars and experts has proposed a series of argument from a revenge to the Western 'expansionism' in her 'near abroad', economic motives related to hydrocarbons transportation and gas exploitation or naval presence in the Eastern Mediterranean (Lipman, 2015; Orenstein & Romer, 2015; Delman, 2015).

From an IR perspective, the mainstream schools present two sides of the same coin, the military expansionism. Neo-realist arguments would highlight that military intervention is a case of regional balance against the Western bloc in the Middle East from a declining power, which is trying to demonstrate, with the Syrian 'tour-de-force', its military capabilities and political skills beyond its own region which has been threatening by NATO (Mearsheimer, 2014). In relation to the liberalism, the late Russia's aggressive behavior should be found at the increasing authoritarianism represented in the Putin's figure, the illiberalism of its institutions, and the stagnation of the modernization reforms making external crisis crucial for domestic legitimacy (Baev, 2015, 9).

Tsygankov criticizes these approaches since they emphasize one aspect at the expense of other – relative power and domestic institutions – in the formation of the foreign policy and misperceive the Russian history and system of perceptions due to the ethnocentric vision (Tsygankov, 2016, 14). In that sense, the understanding of the Russian foreign policy should be grounded at definitions of national interests. These definitions are the product of permanent

interactions between local conditions and the international context, especially related to the geostrategic environment in which a nation is directly involved. The interactions shape the worldviews of the different coalition groups, but the dominant fraction of them represented by the foreign policy makers define the foreign policy. In this paper, I presented an elite worldview continuum which has been shaped the definition of national interests and therefore the foreign policy behavior next to its goals and means at the global and regional context, paying specific interest to the regional policy in the Middle East.

II. Elite worldviews and foreign policy behavior in the Russian Federation

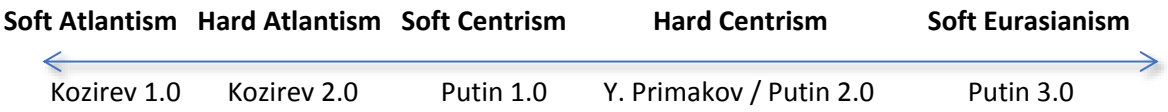
In the case of Russia, these preferences present international choices "consistent with the schools' historically established images of the country and the outside world" (Tsygankov, 2016, 204). In terms of their ideas, the domestic groups in the Russian Federation have been classified in different ways: westernizes, pragmatic nationalists and fundamentalist nationalists (White, 2011, 306; Donaldson & Nogee. 2009, 111-114), pro-Western liberals, great power balancers and nationalists (Kuchins & Zevelev, 2012), nationalists, eurasianist, centrists and atlanticists (Mankoff, 2009), and westernizers, statists and civilizationists (Tsygankov, 2016). Since all the domestic groups share a strong nationalist background it is certainly difficult to define one of this groups as nationalists, since the different understandings about Russian national interest depart from a nationalist background. In line with Tsygankov and Mankoff's approaches, the main domestic worldviews that I identify are the Atlanticist, Centrist and Eurasianist, which can be subdivided into soft and hard versions.

In that regard, the national interest varies from group to group, which historically have a certain impact on the way how Russia interprets the post-Cold War international order. The Atlantist represents the pro-Western line which favors the integration with economic and security institutions of the Western World, while also recognizing the special place of Russia in a pan-European cooperation mechanism. Relying on a pro-market and liberal democratic values, a group of high rank officers has pushed for a re-orientation of the Russia's foreign policy during the early years of Boris Yeltsin as President when Andrei Kozyrev served as Foreign Minister (1991-1996), while then become less relevant since many of the liberal officers joined the centrist camp. The Atlantist worldview is particularly status-quoist. However, the Atlantist group has two different interpretations as hardcore westernizers in the first two years, and then departing from almost automatic alignment with a special focus on the post-Soviet space with the development of the 'near abroad doctrine'.

In other direction, the Eurasianist approach understands Russia as a distinctive civilization which needs to emerge again as a great empire, achieving hegemony in the Eurasian space, and trying to become an alternative pole to the Atlantist bloc led by the U.S.. According to Alexander Dugin – the most relevant and polemic theorist – the reconstruction of the Eurasian, land-based geopolitical logic, should be the main vector to reconstruct the strength of the Russian Federation, while there will be an inevitable conflict with the Atlanticist alliance headed by the U.S. (Dugin, 2015). The Eurasianist worldview represents the greatest extreme revisionism in the Russian elite. However, in the softer version looks to create a defensive axis to resist the Atlantic bloc in their own region or beyond that. A central argument of this paper is that last Putin's government is inspired by a 'soft eurasianist'.

Finally, the centrist (or *derzhavnost*) presents a more balanced approach between the West and Eurasia that combines 'Eurasianists' emphasis on Russia's leading role in the former Soviet space next to a desire for productive, nonconfrontational relations with the West" (Mankoff, 2009, 68). The recognition as a great power is central to this worldview, in addition to a multidimensional orientation of this "Janus-like identity". This worldview has been presented in two formats, as a soft version which underlines the rapprochement with the West focusing on economic modernization and development but trying to keep Western alliances out of the Post-Soviet space. As a harder version, perceived the West not as a partner, but as a rising threat in her zone of influence, thus triggering more aggressive policies to counter Western expansive policies. The first version of Putin's government – or Putin 1.0 – (2000-2004) and the Medvedev Presidency (2008-2012) represents the first option, while the second version is represented by the Primakov's years during the late Yeltsin government (1996-1999), and the Putin's second mandate (2004-2008). (see Graphic 1).

Graphic 1. Worldview Continuum in the Russian Federation Foreign Policy.



Source: prepared by the author.

One of the central discussions in the Russian foreign policy literature – especially during the Putin era – has been related on how Russia tackle the established international order and its consequences. Grounded on the power-transition theory (A.F.K. Organski, 1958; Tammen 2000), the hegemonic transition theory (Gilpin, 198; Ikenberry, 2001) and neorealist accounts

(Waltz, 1993; Mastundando, 1997; Schweller, 2015), mostly of the realist school has been interested to figure out the regional and global behavior of the heir of the Soviet Union in terms of the evolution of the Russian capabilities, its aims and the degree of satisfaction in relation to newly constructed world order.

Since the countries can be classified as *status quo* or revisionist in relation to their goals and means to achieve them, Russia's agenda has been evaluated on the support or change within the established world order. Interpretations range from label Russia as an extreme revisionist power which looks aggressively to reconstruct its own zone of influence to a status-quo power which is trying to keep status (Carafano 2015; Kühn 2015). Additional interpretations treat Russia as a neo-revisionist power that posits an operative challenge – not a normative one – to the international order (Sakwa, 2015), or as a reformist state which is "unsatisfied with the existing rules of the "game" but it does not want to change them radically" (Sergunin, 2016, 25). In table 1, I present the elite's predominant worldview which informs different foreign policy goals, means, and specific behavior historically represented from the Yeltsin years until now.

Table 1. Dominant Domestic Worldview and Foreign Policy in the Russian Federation

Dominant Coalition Worldview	*Goals*	*Means*	*Foreign Policy Behavior*	*Historical representation*
Soft Atlanticist	Integration with the West	Peaceful	Status-quo	Kozyrev 1.0
Hard Atlanticist	Integration with the West / Primacy in the post-Soviet Space	Peaceful	Status-quo	Kozyrev 2.0
Soft Centrist	Great Power recognition	Peaceful	Reformist	Kozirev 2.0 / Putin 1.0 / Medvedev
Hard Centrist	Counter Western expansion in the region/ Regional hegemony	Mixed	Regional Defensive Revisionist	Putin 2.0 / Primakov
Soft Eurasianist	Regional hegemony / Counter Western expansion in and outside the region	Violent	Regional and extra-regional Defensive Revisionism	Putin 3.0

Source: prepared by the author.

The transformation of the Russian Foreign Policy during the post-Cold War era present a case of dynamic changes both grounded on domestic factors and the international context. The

foreign policy trajectory suffered swift changes in the last 25 years from a status-quo stance to a defensive revisionist attitude for a series of complex local and external reasons.

After the Mikhail Gorbachev's failed attempt to modernize and save the Soviet Union, the government of the new Russian Federation chaired by Boris Yeltsin implemented a structural institutional and economic reform – shock therapy – which relayed heavily on the Western political and economic support. After a short period of strong engagement with the West and facing increasing criticism, the Minister of Foreign Affairs Andrey Kozyrev made a speech at the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) 1992 summit, arguing that "the former Soviet republics are in effect a post-imperial space where Russia has to defend its interests by all available means, including military and economic ones" (The Independent, 1992). A year later, the official document signed by Boris Yeltsin "Foreign Policy Conception of the Russian Federation" is published, and the doctrine of "near abroad" is officially stated the Russia's relevance in the cooperation with CIS countries (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 1993). Since then, divisions within the Atlantic bloc deepened on the role of the Russian Federation towards the 'near abroad' and the nature of the relations with the West, since many starts perceiving lack of willingness from the West to engage Russia seriously into a pan-European security mechanism, while saw with concern about the first NATO discussion on the enlargement towards Eastern Europe. Russia becomes more and more uncomfortable with the U.S. primacy's grand strategy.

Before the 1996 Presidential Elections, Kozyrev resigned and Yevgeny Primakov took his position as Ministry of Foreign Affairs, signaling a move to calm the nationalist sectors which have been on the rise since the 1993 Parliamentarian elections. Additionally, the war in Yugoslavia and the First Chechen War presented additional pressure on the domestic coalition that supports Yeltsin. Primakov, who has been chief of the Russian SRV secret service before his appointment, developed a more confrontational attitude in the context of increasing discussions on the Western NATO-led expansion in Eastern Europe. For that reason, Russia would support – although without using force – the Milošević's regime during the disintegration of Yugoslavia by trying to block NATO operations, tried to offer a counterbalancing alliance against the U.S. to China and India, and opposed the imminent NATO expansion which was achieved after the 1999 when Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic joined the NATO at the Washington summit.

With the election of Vladimir Putin in 2000, and the U.S.' fight against terrorism after 11S, Russia took a more pragmatic stance trying to support U.S.' counter-terrorism efforts in Afghanistan and at the international fora. However, the decision of the Bush Administration to

invade Iraq put Russia and U.S. at odds again, since Russia used the veto power at the U.N. Security Council and pressed openly against an invasion not only because Russia has somewhat close ties with the Saddam's regime, but because the leadership perceived that it would be a "major political mistake" which will affect the international law by replacing to the law "by which – in words of President Putin – the strong are always right and has the right to do anything" (CNN, 2003).

After the invasion, the relation with the West become rather tense with the new NATO enlargement and the accession of Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia. The alliance reached for the first time the former Soviet Space, and additionally, Russia perceived that a series of domestic upheavals ('colour' revolutions) in her zone of influence were provoked directly or indirectly by the West in the period 2003-2005. The Russia reticence to collaborate with the U.S. and the European Union become clearer with the gas disputes with Ukraine, the strengthening of the relations with China with the open support to expand the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and finally, with the Georgian crisis in which Russia decided to use the force to resolve a conflict in the post-Soviet space.

After the 2008 'August Crisis' between Russia and Georgia, the election of the new administration in the U.S. headed by Barack Obama provided an opportunity to 'reset' the bilateral relations by improving the cooperation in relation to Afghanistan, North Korea, and Iran, and receiving promises that the U.S. would drop the missile defense shield project in Eastern Europe. In this context, Russia abstained in the multinational NATO-led operation in Libya.

However, Putin's third mandate have a quite different approach with the displacement of the liberal groups and an increasing disappointment with the West. The missile defense shield project was still ongoing and expanding, the NATO did not stop their expansion, and the support for regime change in the Middle East with the NATO intervention in Libya provoked a more radical change in the Kremlin's perception. Syria was a test case. In October 2011, Russia vetoed with China a UNSC resolution accusing Assad's regime of human rights violations and later the establishment of a no-fly zone due to the disappointment of the Libyan experience. At that moment, Russia would oppose any multilateral attempt to intervene militarily. For example, during the St. Petersburg 2013 G20 meeting, Putin made a strong opposition to the U.S. and French attempt to pursuit a military strike after the Ghouta chemical attack which Western powers alleged was the responsibility of the Al-Assad regime and Russia and Al-Assad said was carried out by opposition forces. Finally, Obama declined to attack Syria and support the Russia-led project to destroy the Syria's chemical weapons arsenal, despite

being identified the use of chemical weapons as a 'red line' for US involvement in the Middle Eastern country.

The Ukrainian crisis shaped even more the new Russia's foreign policy assertiveness. When the European Union leaders asked Viktor Yanukovych to sign an association agreement, trying to push Ukraine definitively out from the Russia's zone of influence, Russia reacted – after the displacement of Yanukovych – annexing Crimea and providing support for rebel groups in Donbass, thus triggering a civil war in Eastern Ukraine. The resistance towards the Western NATO-EU expansion was a tool of defensive revisionism. In order to keep their regional influence in Ukraine, Russia decided to use military force, thus breaking the norm of non-intervention and non-annexation of sovereign territory. In this sense, Russia shattered established international rules for the sake of her own security arguing that these rules were already broken by the Western powers. Russia paradoxically calls them "to obey their own rules and for the structures of international governance to work as they were intended" (Sakwa, 2015, 66).

The evolution of the Russian Foreign Policy and the increasing using of military force has provided several arguments for those supporters of the 'revisionist' and the 'cold war-like' approaches (Kalb, 2015), but also for those who present a Russia as a defensive power trying not only to regain a great power status, but also to keep her regional influence in the post-Soviet space (Sakwa, 2015). In this context, the analysis of the military engagement in Syria, is a test-case to address if there was a further transformation of the Russian external policy from a defensive to a fully revisionist power, or if is still the logic behind the Putin's actions are in line with the constitution of the great power status, and the preservation of influence (Tsygankov, 2011) but this time outside its zone of interest.

III. Russia's Foreign and Security Policy in the Middle East

In the official document 'Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation' released by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2016, the Middle East is identified as a region characterized by "the spread of extremist ideology and the activity of terrorist groups" due to the consequences of "systemic development problems" and "external interference". In the context of an emerging multipolar world, the main task of Russia in the region is to

> continue making a meaningful contribution to stabilizing the situation (…) supporting collective efforts aimed at neutralizing threats that emanate from international terrorist groups, consistently promotes political and diplomatic settlement of conflicts in regional States while respecting their sovereignty

> and territorial integrity and the right to self-determination without outside interference (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2016).

At the same time, identifies Syria as the main priority. This section analyzes the sources of Russian behavior in the region, its goals, policies, and priorities, in addition, to evaluating the consequences of the military intervention in Syria for the Russia's foreign and security policies in the region.

III.1. The return of Russian and the U.S. retreat in the Middle East

Russian Federation have a series of factors – internal and external – which has been shaping the policy towards the region. In that regard, a long historical experience, its Muslim population, and the extremist threats are the most relevant domestic sources of regional policy, while the geopolitical interests and the role of other great powers, particularly the U.S., represent the external ones.

In its different historical chapters, Russia had had special interests in the Middle East. The Tsarist Empire aims to use its expansion in the Black Sea region to conquest the Istanbul straits to the Ottoman Empire, which would provide definitely access to warm waters, the Mediterranean Sea. From late XVI century until the end of the World War I, the Ottoman and Tsarist Empires fought twelve times, but the ultimate goal was never reached by the Russians. Simultaneously, the Empire had another five military conflicts with the Persian dynasties (Safavid and Qajar) which gave the control of the North and South Caucasus. The Russian Revolution and the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk put a parenthesis on their aspirations in the region, while the new Soviet regime accused the European colonial presence in the whole Middle East as imperialist. The Russo-Persian Treaty of Friendship (1921) and the Treaty of Moscow (1921) with the Grand National Assembly of Turkey laid the basis of the relations with the only independent entities after the WWI. During the WWII, the Soviet invaded Iran with the British Army (1941), while Stalin started to raise again the issue of the straits trying to achieve a joint control with the Turkish administration. After the finalization of the WWII, the Soviet Union was forced diplomatically to leave Iran, and tensions with Turkey continue until late 1946 when the U.S. and the United Kingdom supported Turkey's position seriously, provoking its definitive incorporation in the Western bloc, which would be reinforced with the inclusion of Turkey in the Truman Doctrine (1947) and the next incorporation to NATO (1952).

During the Cold War, the Soviet Union supported the decolonization process in the Middle East and established – in line with the strategic needs of the period – strong relations

with nationalist regimes and national movements, especially with Khrushchev and his Third World strategy. At the same time, the strategic goals in the Middle East were especially related to the "region's proximity to the Soviet southern border and its potential as a staging ground for hostile military buildup" (Halliday, 1988). Since the 1950s, but especially after the Suez Crisis, the Soviet Union become a central external actor for the region by providing military, financial and technical assistance, establishing client states and supporting anti-American feelings.

After being heavily involved in the regional conflicts as an external balancer, Soviet Union started falling its influence in early 1970 when the Egyptian President El-Sadat expulsed Soviet military advisors and reoriented its policies towards the U.S. The Camp David Accords (1978) signed by Sadat and the Israeli PM Begin kept the Soviet Union out of the most relevant peace agreement, while Russia continued relying on the 'revisionist' camp with optimal – but not always easy – relations with Syria, and balancing attitudes towards Iran and Iraq who were engaged in the First Gulf War. However, the critical turning point related to the region would be the failed military intervention in Afghanistan which would affected negatively the perceptions of Russia in the eyes of the Muslim and the Third World, triggered a US-supported insurgency based on an radical *sunni* interpretation, and undermined the Russian military and strategic self-confidence, as Vietnam did it for the U.S. From that failure, the Russian leadership would avoid any full-scale military involvement beyond its own zone of influence. At the end of the Cold War, Mikhail Gorbachev supported diplomatically the U.S. initiatives related to the Israel-Palestine peace process, and the military campaign against Saddam Hussein after the Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, despite having long-term relations with the Baath Regime. The Russians retreated from the Middle East, a critical indicator that the Cold War was over.

Beyond the historical experience which is critical to understand the goals, interests, and practices in the region, the demography is also a fundamental element. According to the 2010 Census, 11% of the population is Muslim population, whereas if we include estimation of illegal immigrants from Central Asia it could reach around 14% (20 million) (Malashenko, 2013). The Islam has been a traditional force in regions such as the Northern Caucasus, Bashkortostan, and Tatarstan, but the increasing fundamentalist ideas, and the presence of radical elements – especially in North Caucasus – made the authorities anxious about the security externalities with the Middle East, particularly on the spread of terrorist networks to the Muslim regions of the Volga and the Caucasus, and the provision of funds, training, and weapons in the context of the Chechen Wars, and the insurgency in the North Caucasus. As the Saint Petersburg terrorist attack shows, the separatism, extremism, and terrorism are still on the top of the

domestic security agenda with a logical spillover in the determination of the Moscow's external agenda in the Middle East.

Simultaneously, these local elements are interlinked with external factors related to external intervention on its allies, and the defense of established geopolitical interests in the region like the protection to friendly regimes, the sustenance of the military buildup, the expansion of the energy and weapons market opportunities, and the coordination of energy prices. If Russia has enough capabilities to combine these elements into a thoroughly and coherent regional strategy has been a matter of tough discussion (Herrmann, 1994; Stepanova, 2016; Blank, 2014; Dannreuther, 2012). Even if Rubinstein initially argued that the post-Soviet Russia did not have any coherent foreign policy, it does not mean that Russia did not reformulate its global and regional priorities in a more coherent way. On the contrary, the place of Middle East in the Russian foreign and security agenda has changed in relation to the different reorientations of the dominant worldviews and the changing understandings of national interests, so do the specific policies, and the way how Russia has implemented. In that sense, while Russia did not delineate a grand strategy for the Middle East, it had been a general goal relatively consistent – especially since the rise of Primakov – the preservation of the Russia's influence as a major outside power in the Middle East (Trenin, 2016).

When the Atlantist worldview was predominant in the Russian leadership, the place of Middle East not only become secondary for foreign policy purposes, but an economic burden inherited from the Soviet times, which used to provide heavy military, technical and economic supplies to their allies. On the contrary, in the early Yeltsin's years, Russia looks assistance from the West, thus bringing its interests closer to the U.S. in the region. Since the Middle East did not present an appealing source of financial resources, external investments and technology transfer but continuous geopolitical tensions, the Yeltsin administration bandwagon most of the U.S.-led regional initiatives. Before Kozyrev resigned in 1995, pressures both from within the Yeltsin Government and the more nationalist Parliament – especially the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia chaired by Vladimir Zhirinovsky – changed the general approach in a more balanced way but without much influence on the Middle East policies. Later, the fatal combination of actual internal conflict in Chechenia, the initial talks about NATO enlargement, and the critical financial situation without enough Western support changed the perception in the West and their policies in the Middle East. With the new Foreign Minister, Yevgeny Primakov, Russia started to look again to the non-Western World and the Middle East, trying to become closer – or at least overcame conflictual issues of the agenda – to regional powers such as Turkey and Iran, and acting as a mediator in the recurrent Iraq crisis in the late 1990s.

Additionally, during a visit to India in 1998, Primakov offers the idea of a "strategic partnerships" triangle among Russia, China, and India to serve as a "counterbalance" vis-à-vis the U.S. which was initially rejected (Akihiro, 2007:167). The NATO started the enlargement process and Russia perceived directly as a threat.

After the Putin's election, Russia returned to a more nuanced position to the West, especially after arranging a 'counter-terrorism connection' between the 11S attacks and the terrorism in the North Caucasus. By promoting a more pragmatic approach, focused on economic and energy interests, the first Putin Government started expanding their regional network by improving further its relationship with Turkey, Iran, and Saudi Arabia without threatening the Western interests. In this context, Putin supported Washington's efforts in Afghanistan – even pressing for the opening of military bases in Uzbekistan and Kirgizstan for the U.S. – and become a key partner of the Quartet – next to US, EU and the UN – which promoted the Roadmap for Peace to solve the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. The U.S. plan to invade Iraq changed the overall equation. According to the Russia's official approach, the US adventure to spread democracy in the Iraq was doom to failure, while did not trust the narrative about the Saddam's plans on weapons of mass destruction. The US failure in Iraq with the rise of the Sunni Insurgency and later withdraw after a partial pacification affected the U.S. image, in addition to cost more than USD 2 trillion, more than 100,000 Iraqi civilians and almost 5,000 coalition lives (Trotta 2013). Russia took a harsher position regionally by opposing military actions in Iraq, while later signing agreements with Iran on the provision of Russian S-300 anti-missiles and getting closer to Turkey by enlarging the strategic investing in energy, in addition, to use military force in the Georgian conflict.

After the Ruso-Georgian war, Medvedev returned to a softer line with the 'reset' process but soon the Arab Spring would complicate the scene. After the Medvedev's decision to abstain in the UNSC voting on the imposition of a 'no-fly zone' in Libya, Putin accused the UNSC of supporting intervention as a "medieval call for crusades" and called the decision "defective and erroneous". Later, Medvedev criticized the arguments of the then Russian Prime Minister as "unacceptable" (Gorst, 2011). The political differences between Medvedev and Putin reflected a breach between the softer and harder centrist worldviews since the first is more feels closer to Western concerns about democracy and human rights violations, while the second emphasizes non-interventionism and the primacy of the national sovereignty. When Putin returned to Presidency in 2012, started to make explicit efforts to counter-balance the Western regime change policy in the Middle East by trying to neutralize Turkey from NATO, while involving progressively in the regional armed conflicts by sharing intelligence, providing

technical, logistical and military assistance, and improving their military presence both in Syria and Iraq. Finally, Russia decided to intervene fully in the Syrian Civil War by backing the Regime against the Islamist rebels and the Islamic State. This was the first unilateral overseas operation since Afghanistan and shows a change in the dominant worldview to a 'soft eurasianist' from which is critical the development of an alternative axis trying to protect its allies from the West outside its own region. In that sense, relations with Turkey and Iran has been critical to establish a common front, at least to keep the U.S. and the NATO out of their tradition role in the resolution of the conflicts in the Middle Eastern regional order.

III.2. Russia in Syria: Regional priorities and challenges

During the first wave of the Arab Spring, Russia took another approach in relation to Western-led military operations to change non-friendly authoritarian regime. In the case of Libya, despite pressures from the 'hard centrists' represented by Putin, the President Medvedev did not oppose to the multilateral NATO operation carrying criticism for the consequences of the operation which end with the Qaddafi's life and the territorial integrity of Libya. With the return of Putin, Syria has been a test case to stop the US revisionist 'strategy of chaos' and – in words of Minister of Defense, Sergey Shoigu – break the chain of 'color revolutions' (Osnos, Remnick & Yaffa, 2017).

Although the diplomatic channels were open – e.g. Geneva and Viena Talks –, the Kremlin strategy in the Syrian Civil War was progressively assertive to block Western-supported plans. First, an opposition to any multilateral action (2011-2012), then the opposition to any unilateral action led by U.S. or its allies against the regime (2013-2014), and finally the unilateral military action against rebel groups supported by the U.S., Turkey, and the Gulf countries (2015-2017). Since May 2011 – when Medvedev was still in power – Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov made it clear that Russia would not support any multilateral military involvement (Russia Today, 2011). The climax of the U.S.-led initiatives was the G20 Saint Petersburg summit in 2013 when the U.S., France, Turkey and Saudi Arabia pushed for a military action due to the alleged use of chemical weapons by the regime. Russia, China and the rest of the BRICS countries resisted the initiative. Finally, Russia and U.S. agreed, with the UNSC support, a multilateral mechanism to disarm Syria's chemical weapons, which was implemented successfully.

After the emergence of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, the U.S. decided to attack its positions with the support of the Gulf countries, thus receiving critics from Russia for

developing the operations "without the consent of the Syrian government", thus making a "gross violation of international law" (BBC, 2014). The U.S.-led military operations in Syria, next to the ongoing crisis in Ukraine with the Yanukovych resignation and the annexation of Crimea, created a tipping point that changed the dominant elite perception of the relations between Russia and the West, and the role of Russia in critical 'hot spots' outside its immediate region. A new, 'soft eurasianist' approach was emerging.

Russia adopted a risky strategy of extra-regional defensive revisionism to counter Western strategic enlargement by using military force to defend his allies and set up an anti-Western regional *ad-hoc* alliance, trying to attract those countries at odds with the West for structural – Iran – or junctural – Turkey – reasons. If the traditional instruments of the regional policy were tenacious diplomacy, energy deals, and large-scale arms sales (Blank, 2014, 13), the willing to use military force become at the center of the new elite worldview.

Since September 2015, Russia is conducting military operations against the adversaries of the Al-Assad regime, enlarging the military buildup with the transformation of Tartus Naval base and Khmeimim Air Base into permanent military facilities, and achieving access to hydrocarbon off-shore resources. However, Syria is not only the geopolitical foothold in the region but is trying to set the ground to build a new axis in the region of Iran, Iraq, and the Kurds (Trenin, 2016, 3). In that sense, Russia has been looking not only to enforce a new regional order but to displace NATO and neutralize its allies, Turkey and the Gulf countries. Going beyond the geopolitical impact of the military operation, Moscow's strategy involves three stages of post-conflict resolution: cease-fire agreements between the Regime and the weakened opposition forces which is now under the umbrella of the Astana Process, co-broker a peace deal in Syria guaranteed by Moscow and Washington which should be addressed at the Genova Peace talks, and finally the establishment of a broad coalition against the Islamic State which is still under negotiation with the Trump Administration (Trenin, 2016, 4).

In the context of the Syrian Civil War, the Ruso-Turkish ties deteriorated, instead of the rhetoric about "strategic partnership". During the 1990s, Turkey was traditionally seen with apprehension by Russian elite for three main reasons: NATO membership, indirect support for Chechen rebels and the existence of pan-Turkism tendencies in some political and societal groups. From the late 1990s until early 2000s, both countries start developing a pragmatic relation based on economic and energy interests as long as they began compartmentalizing the political differences. After the election conservative Justice and Development Party headed by Erdogan, the consensus on the complementary economic interests and the management of political differences continued and improved since both countries started perceiving negatively

the West facing with the U.S. new expansionist strategy in the Middle East (Hill & Taspinar, 2006, Sakwa, 2010). Nonetheless, the model role of Turkey as an inspiration force – supported explicitly by the West – for the social movements and new regimes in the Arab Spring, in addition to the open support for the Syrian political opposition and rebel groups against the Al-Assad Regime provoked uneasiness in the Russian leadership. From that moment, onwards, Turkey started to be perceived again as functional for the U.S. grand strategy in the Greater Middle East, and a destabilization force both to Russian interests, its allies, and the regional stability as a whole. Political high-level consultation, new energy projects and economic cooperation facing Western pressures continued as usual, but the compartmentalization was showing some cracks as the incident of the Turkish F-4 Phantom shootdown, the position in the G-20 St. Petersburg Summit in relation to the Western intervention in Syria, or the accusation of violation of the Turkish Airspace since the Russian military operation in Syria.

At the end, the compartmentalization blew up with the shootdown of the Russian Sukhoi Su-24 on 24 November 2015 and Russia reacted aggressively with comprehensive sanctions in almost every corner of the bilateral agenda unless the natural gas sales. Additionally, Russia presented serious accusations at the UN Security Council in relation to the Turkish logistical support for the Islamic State and improved its connections with the Kurdish Syrian groups labeled as terrorist by Ankara. After a tough period, Erdogan sends an apology letter and both countries started a normalization process grounded on a common approach towards Syria, the respect for territorial integrity. The 15-J failed coup attempt put Turkey closer to Putin's regional strategy since the AKP leadership accused responsibility to the Gülen Movement – banned both in Turkey and Russia – with covert support from the Western countries. After the first steps, Turkey started the 'Euphrates Shield' operation to establish a security zone to clean the area under Islamic State control and block the Syrian Kurdish linkage between the Afrin and Kobanî Cantons.

Turkey tried to move forward by capturing Al-Bab from ISIS and showed the willingness to continue operations toward Kurdish-control area of Manbij, or to the ISIS capital, Raqqa but both U.S. and Russia blocked it. On 29 March 2017, Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yildirim declared the military operations "successful and is finished" (RFE/RL, 2017). Russia has tried to neutralize Turkey's role in the Syrian conflict, enforcing an *ad-hoc* conjunction of interests and engaging Turkey in the military cease-fire process at the Astana Talks. In this context, Turkey has supported this initiative, softened its position in relation to Al-Assad and find in Moscow a common partner to join a narrative against Western pressures. However, geopolitical

tensions are already active, and a new delicate situation can appear soon or later since the "marriage of convenience" (Barkey, 2017) lacks a genuine basis to survive.

As another case of "declarative partnership" although less conflictual, Russia and Iran have found themselves in the same coin of the Syrian Conflict, which helped to increase the strategic cooperation which was crossed by swift changes in the last decade. As an example, although Russia has started investing in the Bushehr Nuclear Power Plant project, formerly supported the imposition of multilateral – not unilateral – sanctions due to the Russia's commitment to the nuclear non-proliferation regime and the regional stability (Topychkanov, 2017). For the Moscow's vision, the weaponization of the Iranian nuclear project could destabilize the whole region and generate further conflict with Israel – the other nuclear power –, in addition to affect the own regional hegemony in the Caucasus. On the other hand, Moscow collaborated actively in the 5+1 negotiation talks (with US, China, Britain, and France and Germany) both as a shield, to avoid excessive actions, and as a sword by using Iran as a bargaining chip with the U.S. (Flanagan, 2013, 172).

High-tech military technology agreement like the supplying of S-300 missile systems – signed in 2007, broken in 2010 and delivered in 2015 – has been another chapter of using sensitive bilateral projects as an element and indicator of broader negotiations with the West in which the soft centrist worldview has been more permeable to make this kind of concessions than the hard centrist. When the Syrian civil war commenced, both actors shared the maintenance the Syrian territorial integrity, and to protect the legitimate government, backing Al-Assad but also looking for an alternative post-conflict solution with a transitional period and not "keeping Assad in power forever" (Hafezi & Charbonneau, 2015). In that sense, the Russian-Iranian axis was increasingly perceived by Ankara as harmful for its regional policy. For different reasons, Russia and Iran engaged militarily in the Syrian conflict and their common approach has helped Russia for asking Rouhani's administration to use military air bases to launch air strikes, that was accepted with the condition of using based on sectarian criteria. However, it is neither a Russia's interest to deepen the *sunni-shia* sectarian cold war between Iran and the Gulf countries, nor to encourage tension between Iran and Israel. On the contrary, Russia have fluid dialogue with all the relevant actors in the region, but in the case of Iran have specific goals in relation to the coordination in energy prices, the incorporation of Iran to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and – in the context of the late soft-eurasianism – promoted an *ad-hoc* axis of common interests facing the Western pressures.

V. Conclusions

Russia is still not a fully revisionist state due to the continuation of its defensive grand strategy to preserve influence. What Moscow wants is not to lose further terrain both regionally and globally. The Syrian crisis narrowed the offensive/defensive line since, for the first time since the Afghanistan invasion, the Russian Armed Forces intervened beyond the post-Soviet 'near abroad'. The Kremlin 'soft eurasianist' worldview did not present Russia in a global confrontation – or a new Cold War – against the West but tries to defend their extra-regional allies by blocking the Western-led regime change strategy. Hard power is central for that counter-strategy. Beyond the Middle East, Russia has not abandoned its hegemonic goals in the post-Soviet area where still is the core of the foreign policy efforts. The Eurasian Economic Union and the 'Look East' Policy are the perfect example of the post-Crimea regional environment.

The 'soft eurasianist' approach keeps the dual nature of pragmatism and assertiveness present in the hard centrist approach by using a combination of soft power Russian-style and coercive means (Sergunin & Karabeshkin, 2015). As distinctive from the centrist approach, the 'soft eurasianist' looks not only to preserve regional influence, but to keep its role and status at extra-regional orders and, at the end, received recognition as a great power.

Contrary to Larson (2010), the quest for great power status it is not the central goal of the Russian foreign policy, but to sustain their regional and extra-regional influence. In that regard, the NATO and U.S. strategies and actions in the post-Soviet space and the Middle East are perceived as aggressive and revisionist in relation to the Russia's own position, pushing Moscow for an increasingly assertive reaction throughout the post-Cold War. The U.S. failure and retreat in the Middle East provided additional incentives for Russian officials to develop a new assertive policy in a critical zone for global stability.

Finally, a central question dealing with the consequences of the military intervention is if Russia can be a force to stabilize the region or if this conduct could trigger a vicious security dilemma in which regional and extra-regional powers are trapped. The evolution of the Syrian Civil War can provide interests clues on the regional impact of a defensive revisionist strategy from an extra-regional power. For the moment, just the war is the only certainty.

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