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Great Powers Competition in Syria

HUSSEIN TALAL MAKLAD

Al-Sham Private University, Damascus, Syria

Email: h.m.foir.aspu.edu.sy

This article examines the impact of the rivalry among the three great powers, the United States, Russia, and China in relation to a solution to the Syrian crisis and the reaching of a peaceful settlement. Each power has supported one or more sides among the regional and local actors, which has led to proxy wars among different rival parties. For example, the United States, Russia, and China are trying to maximize their own power and to increase their status in the regional and international system. However, each has different strategies and tools to achieve this goal. While Russia and the United States stress their military presence, China thinks political and economic power can be more effective, which explains why China is hesitant to get directly involved in the crisis.

KEY-WORDS: strategy, competition, rivalry of great powers

INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY:

This study is trying to answer the following questions:

Have great power politics hindered the peace process in the Syrian crisis?

If so, to what extent will the rivalry between the superpowers affect the peaceful settlement of the Syrian crisis?

Accordingly, there are three hypotheses. The first is that the competition among the three great powers has shaped and determined the trajectory of the war on Syria. The second is that the conflict of interests between the three great powers has resulted in the longevity of the crisis and the prevention of peaceful solutions. The third is that the conflict in Syria among the local parties will not be settled unless the rivalry between the great powers has been resolved.

The independent variable will be the competition among the great powers and how they have defined their national security, which means the safety of a nation against external and internal threats ranging from total war to international, economic and social threats which may affect the national security of the country. The dependent variable is the trajectory and resolving of the Syrian crisis.

Offensive realism has been chosen as a frame of analysis because of its basic assumptions and ability to explain the rivalry among the great powers as the anarchic nature of the international system and the absence of trust among the great powers, especially after the Russia – Ukraine war. Thus, this paper examines the impact of this rivalry on both the process of negotiations and the resolution of the Syrian crisis. Cunningham's (2010) approach in his study of the relationship between external powers and the dynamics of wars is employed. Hence, we will define the external powers in the Syrian crisis as international powers (Russia, China and the United States) and regional powers active in Syria. Analytical and descriptive methods are used.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The concept of great-power competition (GPC) can be studied through offensive realism, a theory of international relations. This theory holds that states are disposed to competition and conflict because they are self-interested, power-maximizing, and fearful of other states. Moreover, it argues that states are obliged to behave that way because doing so favors survival in the international system (Johnson and Thayer 2016, 1).

This concept began to take shape during the waning Barack Obama administration. In 2014, reflecting on Russia's state-on-state aggression in Europe and competition between rising powers in the Asia-Pacific region, Secretary of Defense, Chuck Hagel, lamented that enduring and emerging powers are challenging the world order that American leadership helped build after World War II. By 2015, Deputy Defense Secretary, Robert Work regularly used the phrase great power competition in reference to his efforts to maintain military superiority against adversaries (Friedman 2019).

Another example of GPC is already having a substantial impact on policies, from Donald Trump's multibillion-dollar trade war with China, to the billions of dollars that the U.S. government is directing toward both a new Space Force and the research and development of technologies for deterring or defeating great-power aggression in relation to the United States after the withdrawal from a nuclear-arms-control treaty with Russia that did not include China (Friedman 2019).

Trump's administration officially introduced a special focus on the GPC by instigating several strategies. The 2017 U.S. National Security Strategy and 2018 U.S. National Defense Strategy elevated strategic competition with China and Russia as the key feature for U.S. strategy, a paradigm shift from the low-intensity conflicts against nonstate actors that the United States had been fighting since 2001. Although strategic competition is intended to be global in nature, much of the focus

has been on Europe and Asia, leaving other regions understudied (Wasser et al. 2022 iii).

More specifically, the National Defense Strategy asserts that China is the central challenge to U.S. prosperity and security is the reemergence of long-term, strategic competition by revisionist powers, specifically China, as an economic, technological, and political competitor, and Russia, as a military opportunist power (European Asylum Support Office 2021). Russia, at present, is a revisionist power, seeking to return to its position in the international system as one of the world's great powers. For example, it desires, through Syria to return to being a great power. It is much stronger on military and economic levels compared with its position in the 1990s. It has thousands of nuclear weapons and United Nations Security Council (UNSC) permanent membership. According to Kenneth Waltz, a great power can be determined through the criteria of population and territory, economic capability, military strength, political stability, and competence (Waltz, cited in Kandrík 2021). Most often, GPC describes bilateral interactions between the United States and China (Kandrík 2021).

On the other hand, China can be classified as a rising power even though it is also a great power. If China's economy continues growing at an impressive rate of around five percent annually, it will eventually have more latent power than the United States. It has been projected that, by 2050, China will have a population advantage of approximately 3.7 to 1. If China has half of per capita gross domestic product (GDP) in 2050—roughly where South Korea is today—it will be 1.8 times as wealthy as the United States. And if it does better and reaches three-fifths of U.S. per capita GDP by then—roughly where Japan is today—it will be 2.3 times wealthier than the United States (Mearsheimer 2021, 56).

For smaller and middle states being more often objects than makers of international politics, the issue may be narrowed to the permanent interests of greater

powers. Here we are confronted with a multitude of slogans that suggest the existence of such permanent interests and fixed objects of greater powers' politics. (Schwarzenberger 1951, 44). Their modes of interactions with the so-called great powers can range from non-alignment and neutrality to balancing, hedging, shelter-seeking, or bandwagoning. Furthermore, Turkey, Iran, and Israel are considered places of special interest to the primary players due to their geopolitical position (Kandrik 2021).

EXPLANATION OF GREAT-POWERS COMPETITION ACCORDING TO OFFENSIVE REALISM

John Mearsheimer believes that the international system is anarchic, and that no state can identify the intention of another one with certainty. This uncertainty drives states to maximize their power and security and achieve dominance to preempt challenges from other states. Becoming a global hegemon today is nearly impossible. Therefore, states rather seek to dominate as regional hegemons. The aim of Mearsheimer's theory is to explain why relations between the great powers of the modern state system are fraught with conflict. Mearsheimer relies on five core assumptions. First, international politics is played out in an anarchical realm, meaning that there is no government of governments to enforce rules and punish perpetrators. Second, no state can ever be absolutely sure of each other's intentions or be sure that other states will not use force against them. Furthermore, states suffer from imperfect information about each other's intentions and intentions are in constant flux — benign intentions can quickly change into malignant ones, and vice versa. Third, survival is the primary motivation of all states in the international system. Survival must have top priority since the autonomy of the state is a prerequisite for the achievement of all other ends. Fourth, states are rational entities in the instrumental sense of the word, that is, they think strategically about their external situation and choose the strategy that seems to maximize their basic aim of survival. Fifth, states

always possess some military capacity enabling them to hurt and possibly to destroy each other (Toft and Mearsheimer 2005, 383).

Why are great powers doomed to compete? For starters, there is no higher authority to adjudicate disputes among states or protect them when threatened. Furthermore, no state can ever be certain that a rival—especially one with abundant military power—will not attack it. Countries consider that the best way to survive in an anarchic world is to be the most powerful actor of all, which in practice means being a hegemon in one's own region and making sure no other great powers dominate their regions (Mearsheimer 2021, 50).

Offensive realism holds that states are disposed to competition and conflict because they are self-interested, power-maximizing, and fearful of other states. Moreover, it argues that states are obliged to behave this way because doing so favors survival in the international system. The three core assumptions about behavior in offensive realism are self-help, power maximization, and outgroup fear (Johnson, and Thayer 2016, 6).

The ultimate goal of every major power is to become the hegemon. States maximize power, influence, and wealth to become more secure in a world of anarchy; the best way for a state to increase its odds of survival is to become the most powerful state. Simply, a state with more power is more secure than a state with less power (Lobell, 2017).

GREAT POWERS AND NEGOTIATIONS (THE THEORETICAL APPROACH)

Having said the above about competition, it is necessary to introduce another framework that complements the previous one. The framework that has been used here was developed by Cunningham (2010) and is based on great powers negotiation and bargaining behavior.

Cunningham identifies the dynamics that make negotiation, in multi-party conflicts, more difficult. For example, when a combatant with separate preferences

joins the war, it introduces an additional set of issues that need to be addressed in negotiation. The addition of these issues complicates the bargaining environment because it shrinks the bargaining range of acceptable agreements that all combatants would prefer to continued warfare. This dynamic makes it more difficult to find one specific agreement that all the combatants will accept (Cunningham 2010).

Second, when there are more parties in the conflict who must sign an agreement, the incentives for each to hold out in the hopes of getting a better deal as the last signatory increase. The ability to demand substantial concessions late in the process means that all parties have an incentive to hold out in the hope of being the last signatory, thus actors take more hardline positions toward negotiations when there are more combatants.

Finally, negotiations in multi-party conflicts are prone to breakdown because of shifting alliances between parties when different issues are introduced. These negotiating blocs are inherently unstable because combatants in multi-party conflicts can form different coalitions in relation to different issue areas. Shifting alliances in these issue areas lead coalitions to breakdown. This dynamic makes it harder for all actors to agree to one specific deal that encompasses multiple issues (Cunningham 2010).

Independent interventions have a substantial effect on how long wars last. Wars with a clearly independent intervention have an almost eighty percent chance of lasting five thousand days, about fourteen years. When an external state has intervened in a war and brought preferences that are separate from those of the internal parties and it has the military capability to block a settlement of the war, that state is likely to have little incentive to stop fighting unless it achieves its overall goals. Its participation in war, then, will lead to these conflicts dragging on (Cunningham, 2010).

THE STRATEGIES OF GREAT POWERS IN SYRIA

For Arthur F. Lykke Jr., (cited, in Eikmeier 2007) strategy is a coherent expression of a process that identifies the ends, ways, and means designed to achieve a certain goal. We might express this as $\text{Strategy} = \text{Ends} + \text{Ways} + \text{Means}$. Ends are the objectives or desired outcomes of a given strategy. The term end state is synonymous with ends. An end or ends comprise the goal of the strategy. Ways are actions. They are the methods and process executed to achieve the ends. More simply, they answer the question How are you going to get to the end-state? Means are the resources required to execute the way (Eikmeier 2007, 63).

The strategies of the three great powers, the United States, China, and Russia, in Syria will now be reviewed together with their main determinants.

American Strategy toward the Syrian Crisis

In his book “Strategic Vision; America and the Crisis of Global Power’ (2012), Zbigniew Brzezinski, former US National Security Advisor to President Jimmy Carter, argued that America failure to engage Russia after the end of the Cold War backfired as Russia has become focused on establishing authoritarianism and restoring its influence in the former Soviet Union. He believes that Russia matters because of its territory, resources and nuclear-weapons capabilities (Brzezinski 2012).

Brzezinski suggests that creative American statesmanship could bring Russia and Turkey into a revived and rejuvenated West, which might help advance the kind of liberal order the United States seeks. He recommends that U.S. policy toward Asia rests on the advantages of being an offshore, maritime power, and that the main U.S. objective in Asia should be the maintenance of a balance of power, much like British policy in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Mead 2012).

The role of the United States in Syria is constituted by some determinants:

- The United States treated Syria as secondary to and contingent on other regional policies, such as fighting the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), countering Iranian regional expansionism, managing relations with Turkey, and competing with Russia (Al-Masri, 2021).
- An American intervention in Syria or a military strike against Iran by either “Israel” or the United States itself would likely set off a region-wide explosion. Iraq is still suffering from the divisive consequences of the U.S. military invasion. It would not take much effort by Syria or Iran to ignite it. Nearby, Lebanon and Jordan are both also vulnerable (Brzezinski 2012).
- Some American scholars argue that Syria is not very important for the United States. Mearsheimer, says, what’s more, Egypt and Syria are not vital strategic interests. What happens in those countries is of little importance for American security (Mearsheimer 2014, 10). [B]ut even if diplomacy fails and the war spreads beyond Syria’s borders, it would not undermine American security in any meaningful way, as it would not lead to a single country dominating the Gulf and its oil” (Mearsheimer 2014,17).

The conflict in Syria has been relegated by three US administrations—long enough that serious reengagement would seem too audacious today, as the present domestic constraints on the Joe Biden administration are unlikely to encourage bold or risk-tolerant initiatives, and the complexity of the Syrian conflict offers no easy answers (Al-Masri 2021).

For example, the Obama administration in 2011 supported the responsibility to protect (R2P) and what it called moderate opposition (Casey 2014). Nevertheless, in 2013, Obama faced opposition from Republicans to intervene in Syria (Kaczynski, et al. 2017).

While many top Republicans opposed a Syria attack under Obama, the same top Republicans supported Trump’s intervention in Syria and praised Trump’s

strike.

Obama chose the middle solution by not intervening, but supported the moderate opposition with arms and money which led to the militarization of the Syrian conflict and transforming it into war. When Obama threatened to bomb Syria, it quickly became apparent that a large number of Americans strongly opposed using military force there. A Reuters/Ipsos poll taken on 30 August, 2013 showed some fifty-six percent of those surveyed said the United States should not intervene in Syria, while only nineteen percent supported action (Sullivan 2013).

We can classify the Trump administration as Jacksonianism, which took its name from US President, Andrew Jackson (1829–37). It means a strategy that seeks to increase American power and not to intervene in world crises unless it affects American national security, such as energy supply and geostrategic advantages, but should disregard non-vital issues, such as government change or nation-building (Spatafora 2018).

The slogan for the strategy became America First and aimed to make America great and protect the American economy. From the point of view of the Jacksonian code of honor and warfare, Trump's decision to launch missile air strikes on Syria is not surprising and reveals his Jacksonian determination to adopt a more muscular approach to foreign policy regarding countries whose governments represent a threat for U.S. vital interests. (Dimitrova 2017).

The United States tried to use military force, financial pressure, and the Kurdish autonomous zone in the country's northeast where the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) exercises territorial control over most of the Raqqa and Hasaka governorates, part of Deir Ez-Zor governorate, north-east of the Euphrates, and parts of the Aleppo governorate around Manbij and Kobane, and the area around Tal Rifaat (European Asylum Support Office 2021, 22).

Under U.S. supervision, that region developed into a semi-state with its own

army, the (SDF), and an entrenched bureaucracy—dominated by the Syrian Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG) and its political arm, the Democratic Union Party (PYD) (Ford 2021). There was a shift in Trump’s Syrian policy toward using hard power against the Syrian government, as a result of pressure from Congress and other interest groups in the United States. In order to act under this pressure, Trump ordered the launch of more than fifty Tomahawk cruise missiles on 7 April, 2017. Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson said Russia had failed to carry out the 2013 agreement to secure Syrian chemical weapons, adding that Moscow was either complicit or incompetent in its ability to uphold that deal (Rosenfeld 2017). Another time, Trump ordered the U.S. military to strike three facilities in Syria on 13 April, 2018.

In early September 2018, a newly appointed US Syria envoy, James J. Jeffrey, announced that the United States would not withdraw its troops any time soon from Syria, but rather take a more active approach with the aim to expel all Iranian military and other forces from Syria and defeat ISIS without, however, outlining how to get there.

After taking office on 20 January, 2021, the Biden administration decided to retain ground troops and U.S. Air Force assets to support the (SDF) (Sein 2021).

Biden’s Syrian strategy concentrates on maintaining a low-cost stabilization mission in northeastern Syria and economic pressure on the Syrian government without a clear policy objective (Al-Masri 2021). In private; however, members of the National Security Council (NSC) have been sending a different message.

The NSC team, led by senior coordinator Brett McGurk, the White House’s top Middle East adviser, sees that there is a bandwagoning policy toward Syria for more than one reason. In fact, the Biden administration is no longer actively opposing efforts by Arab partners to restore relations with Damascus (Rogin 2021). Proponents of normalization argue that ten years of isolation and pressure on the Syrian government have not produced any progress on a political settlement, while

sanctions have exacerbated Syrians suffering. They also argue that Arab engagement can dilute Iranian power in Syria (Rogin 2021).

In a Foreign Affairs essay entitled “Hard Truths in Syria, (McGurk, 2019) Rogin argued that the United States should cease opposing efforts by its Arab partners to normalize relations with Syria. He also wrote that the United States should encourage its partners within Syria, such as the Kurdish-dominated (SDF), to strike a deal with the Syrian government so U.S. forces can leave and Russia and the Syrian government can take over responsibility there (Rogin, 2021).

In addition, the Biden team has done nothing to oppose a new regional gas pipeline project that would bring energy to Lebanon’s struggling grid, but would be routed through Syria which would not solve the crisis. A new report by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy warns that the plan will further erode diplomatic efforts to push Damascus to negotiate a political solution (Rogin 2021). Finally, according to Rogin, the Biden administration chooses to contain Russia and deal with China as a competitor (Rogin 2021). Cook (2022) describes Biden’s strategy as ruthless pragmatism. Instead of the hawkish approach to Syria that Biden signaled, he has apparently concluded that de-escalation best serves a set of geostrategic goals that are both related to the Syrian conflict but broader than the war (Cook 2022).

Russia’s Strategy toward the Syrian Crisis

Moscow has chosen to intervene militarily in Syria, but without political or tactical co-operation with the United States, in addition to responding to a possible American threat to Russian interests in Syria. In either case, the future of the region, and American credibility among the states of the Middle East, are both at stake. Brzezinski argues that, China was more likely than Russia to assume a leadership role on the world stage. (Kakutani 2012).

A dominant public narrative has been created in the United States and much of

Europe that Russia is a revisionist power, seeking to overthrow the existing status quo, challenge the rules-based order and generally act as a spoiler in international affairs and in the lands of the former Soviet Union. There is a considerable element of truth in this portrayal (Lieven 2021). The Russia Ukraine war has proved this to be true.

Since the beginning of the Syrian crisis, Russia found that it has an opportunity to intervene in the Middle East, especially with the hesitancy of the American administration. For the first time since the end of the Cold War, Russia became a major player in the Middle East through engaging in the Syrian crisis outside its sphere of influence. However, Russia waited until 2015 to intervene militarily in Syria (Kozlov 2015). The Russian Federation's intervention in Syria creates a chance to instigate a New Global Era; however, this behavior can be explained by offensive realism as follows:

- Russia is trying to maximize its relative power in relation to the United States while the United States is trying to contain and prevent the rising powers from challenging its hegemony.
- Russia changed the balance of power in both the region and at the international level. Also, it established itself as a major actor in the Middle East.
- Russia challenged American exceptionalism as the United States perceived itself as having a unique role to play in international affairs around the world.
- Russia has been transformed into a balancer in the international system and sometimes a spoiler, which means that it can prevent America from doing things in the international arena.
- Russia used the principle of tit-for-tat, which is a mechanism of game theory, to improve its relations, use its power, and increase its military presence in Syria to exercise its hegemony on the other.
- Moscow has long insisted that the U.S. military presence in Syria is illegal (Cole 2021).

China's Strategy toward the Syrian Crisis

-China's traditional foreign policy emphasizes the twin principles of non-intervention in the domestic affairs of other states and non-use of military force (Garwood-Gowers 2012, 2).

China's short-term role in Syria remains offering humanitarian aid, with aid agreements signed in 2017 totaling to US\$40 million, in parallel with its aspirations for a long-term economic role in reconstruction as part of its economic investment project, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

-Chinese- limited humanitarian aid to Syria was combined with China's concern about the problem of Uyghur fighters in Syria. China does not want Syria to turn into a base for Uyghurs to attack Chinese citizens and interests overseas as well as in the Chinese homeland. The bombing on 30 August 2016 of the Chinese embassy in Kyrgyzstan, planned by Turkistan Islamic Party in Syria and financed by Al Nusra, is a sign of what may come if their presence in Syria continues to grow. (Lin 2016).

Moreover, the U-S Caesar Act cuts off all countries economic dealings with Syria. One provision of the law stipulates the prosecution of countries, companies, and individuals who deal with the Syrian government, and Chinese companies will fall under this prohibition (Al-Ghadhawi 2020). China has made the Middle East the centerpiece of Xi Jinping's BRI (Syria joined the initiative on 22 January 2022). The BRI can be seen as a marketing slogan for the westward expansion of Chinese economic, political, and military power. China has also ramped up its diplomatic engagement in the region, appointing special envoys for issues such as the war on Syria and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, dispatching senior officials for regional tours, and convening regional parties in Beijing in attempts at mediation (Singh 2021, 29).

China, looking to improve its position in the international system, found in the Syrian crisis of 2011 a good opportunity to improve its status in the international

order. In Syria, Beijing supported several UNSC resolutions and abstained from several others, initially reserving its veto for actions associated with the threat of forcible government change, and later seeking to preserve host- state consent. As Börzel and Zürn note, this “pushback is different from full rejection or even dissidence.’ Along with Russia, China has sought to defend the authority of the UNSC as an institution, while countering the most intrusive applications of the R2P principle (Börzel and Zürn 2021; Weiss and Wallace 2021).

In explaining its decision to veto resolutions, China emphasized the need for any UNSC action to comply with the Charter of the United Nations and the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of States (Garwood-Gowers 2012, 15). China announced that it supports the legal demand by the Syrian people to decide their destiny, and at the same time it supports the integrity and sovereignty of Syria. This strategy continued throughout the whole decade with China using vetoes to defend the Syrian government in the UNSC (Fulton 2021). Syria’s participation in the BRI means that the initiative now has no blind angle in the Middle East, demonstrating its influence and appeal, said Zhou Rong, a senior researcher at the Chongyang Institute for Financial Studies at Renmin University of China (*Global Times* 2022).

SYRIAN PEACE PROCESS

The UNSC has been deadlocked regarding the Syrian crisis because of the conflicting interests of the great powers which lead to Russia’s and China’s use of the veto. The United States and the European Union made a big mistake in declaring the Syrian government illegitimate. Brzezinski, called it an irresistible temptation to look for simplified means for solving complex external challenges (Brzezinski, 2012). In fact, it was not Russia’s veto, as presented by the mass media in the West and in some Arab countries, but this hasty statement that became an obstacle to facilitating the negotiating process (Aksenyonok 2013, 42).

The UNSC expressed support for free and fair elections, pursuant to the new constitution, to be held within eighteen months and administered under United Nations supervision, to the highest international standards of transparency and accountability, with all Syrians — including members of the diaspora — eligible to participate.

The UNSC requested that the Secretary-General lead the effort to determine the modalities and requirements of a ceasefire, and urged member states particularly members of the Support Group to accelerate all efforts to achieve a ceasefire, including all relevant parties to adhere to one.

<https://www.un.org/press/en/2015/sc12171.doc.htm>).

Cooperation between the Russian, regional, and international parties led to the launch of the Astana Peace Conference in 2017. The talks were sponsored by Russia, Turkey, and Iran.

Russia faced a new set of challenges as it attempted to move from a participant in the conflict to peace broker (Wintour 2017).

The result was the formation of the International Syria Support Group (ISSG) a group of twenty states and international organizations for the negotiation of a peace plan based on the Geneva Communiqué. The ISSG drafted a new plan, that was formalized in Security Council resolution 2254. The major powers adopted different attitudes towards the UN mediator. While Russia sent the renowned expert Vitaly Naumkin as an advisor to de Mistura, the White House showed no interest in sending a representative to support or influence UN efforts.

Under President Trump, the United States downgraded its presence on the Ceasefire Task Force, no longer sending any military representatives (Asseburg, et al. 2018).

In addition, intra-Syrian negotiations did not begin until the conflict was

already highly internationalized. The direct military intervention of regional and major powers increasingly pushed their own interests to the fore. However, these could not be dealt with during the Geneva talks between the Syrian conflict parties (Asseburg, et al.2018).

THE CONFLICTING INTERESTS OF THE GREAT POWERS IN SYRIA

In his *The International Politics of the Middle East*, Raymond Hinnebusch states that the Middle East Regional System is highly penetrated and the most vulnerable one (Hinnebusch 2003, 159). This means not only domestic politics, but also international politics of the states in the region are determined by outside powers. The war on Syria is no exception. Since the beginning of the crisis there have been many regional and global powers involved in one way or another in the conflict. Today, there are three global powers and five regional powers involved in the Syrian Crisis.

Phillips (2016), in his, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the Middle East*, wrote, “Syria is as a mirror of rival interests on an international scale that she deserves special attention. Indeed, her internal affairs are almost meaningless unless related to the wider context, first of her Arab neighbors and then other interested powers. The External Intervention Indicator considers the influence and impact of external actors in the functioning particularly security and economic of a state. On the one hand, external intervention focuses on security aspects of engagement from external actors, both covert and overt, in the internal affairs of a state at risk from governments, armies, intelligence services, identity groups, or other entities that may affect the balance of power (or resolution of a conflict) within a state.

In the case of Syria, which has experienced a long series of external interventions since 2011, external intervention indicator shows the average for 2021 based on 173 countries with the highest value in Syria at ten points compared with 5.8 in 2010. (Table 1).

TABLE1: External Intervention Indicator in Syria

	2010	2012	2016	2019	2021
Rank (of 173 countries)	48	23	6	3	3
External intervention ^a	5.8	7.9	10	10	10

^a 0 (low) to 10 (high). Source: <https://fragilestatesindex.org/indicators/x1/>

According to Cunningham (2010), states intervention in wars makes resolving wars harder for two reasons.

It is harder to resolve wars when they contain many combatants with separate preferences over the outcome of the war. When external states intervene in wars to pursue independent goals, resolving those conflicts becomes more difficult because there is an additional actor in the conflict who has to be either defeated militarily or consent to an agreement to end the war.

Russia seeks to establish itself as the main actor in the Syrian case which enhances its own position in the global arena.

CUNNINGHAM METHODS:

These methods are used to code whether interveners bring a separate agenda. (Cunningham 2010). First, one indicator of divergent preferences is external states and their internal allies engaging in armed conflict over their agenda in the conflict. The participants in each conflict are divided into “Side A² actors which are broadly on the side of the government and “Side B² actors which are broadly opposed to it (Cunningham 2010). There were several clear examples where this divergence was not present. In the Syrian crisis, for example, the United States, which is on “Side B, opposed the Syrian government, intervened in Syria to maintain its position as a leader and the only hegemon, and undermine Russian and Iranian roles in Syria. It focused on the security interests, manifested in weakening the power of the state to impose its conditions on both Russia and the Syrian government. The United States

not only controlled the most important sources of domestic product formation, depriving the Syrian economy of the most important strategic goods and product requirements, but also, most importantly, it focused on preventing Syria's communications and transport links with its surroundings. The United States and its clients controlled the border crossings with Jordan and Iraq to stop communication with Iran and Iraq and the entire Gulf. Each settlement was not in the U.S. interest. This means the United States will resort to its clients (such as Qatar, Israel, and Turkey) or it will encourage separatist movements and attempt to establish a smaller state by supporting the terrorist movement, SDF.

The United States aims at cutting off the link between north and south and between west and east to prevent Syria from re-establishing its Arab and regional position. Politically, it focused on increasing the pressure on the Syrian government and Russia to accept the UN resolutions and to achieve a gradual transfer of authority. In spite of the UNSC resolution and the progress of the peace settlement, the United States did not stop its financial and military support for Syria's opposition. Militarily, it continued its military attacks on Syrian governmental aims despite UNSC Resolution 2254 and the Astana Process of 2017. Paradoxically, the United States has removed sanctions that had been imposed on the northern part of Syria where the separatist groups are and has not removed the sanctions imposed on the Syrian people and the Syrian government. This, in turn, shows the double standards and unfair approach adopted by the United States towards the Syrian people.

Another group of "Side A" actors that are broadly on the side of the government and allied with the Syrian state, are Russia and Iran. As for Russia its interests are: as follows.

- Russia believes that it has what it takes to be a challenger.
- Reaching the warm waters of the Mediterranean and having bases at the ports of Latakia and Tartus.

- The Russian investments in Syria are in phosphate and the possibility of gas exploration in the Mediterranean Sea.

Politically, Russia tries to increase its political influence and play a larger role as peacebroker between all the internal parties of Syrian crisis and in the Middle East regional system by reinforcing its role in the crisis. Every increase in Russian influence is a gain for Russia at the expense of the United States. In addition, Russia has become the main player in the peace process, from Sochi to Geneva.

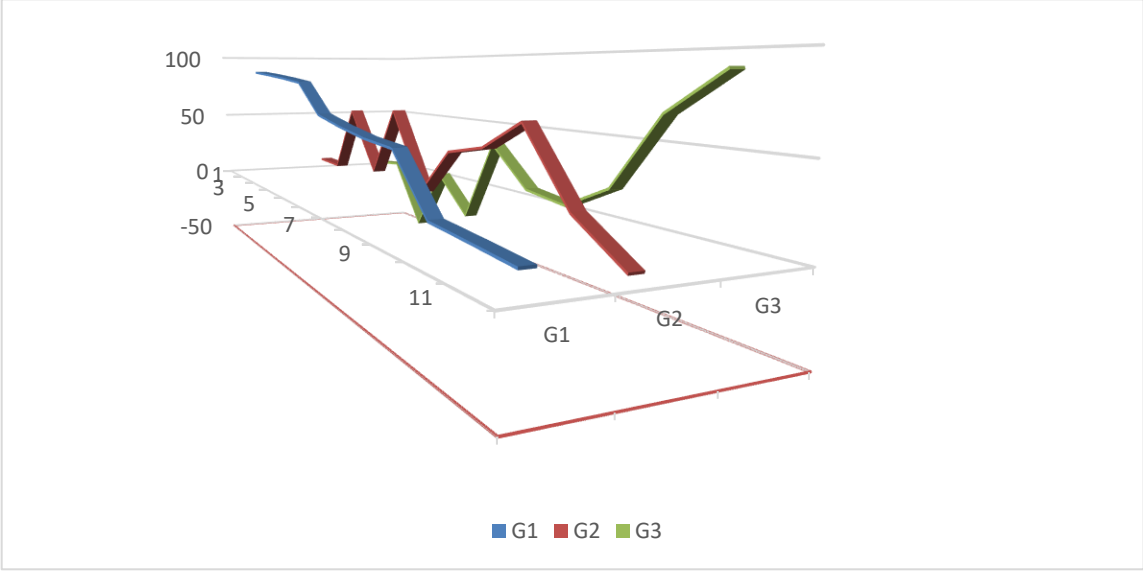
As for China, the increase of its role in the Syrian crisis means a gain at the expense of the other countries. China aspires to make the area safe to realize its interests and to participate in the rebuilding project. In turn, this explains the importance of Syria's joining the Silk Road project.

The fourth factor is the interests of the regional countries intervening in the war on Syria and the differences in their interests. Although they are considered secondary players, nevertheless, they contribute to the disruption of the peaceful settlement in Syria due to their different interests and their opposition or support of the super powers.

Each player in the Syria crisis tries to achieve its interests according to zero-game theory. This means that whatever Russia gains, the United States loses, and vice versa. Eventually, the United States believes that the more power it has, the less power Russia and China will have. Inversely, the more powerful the Russian role becomes, it will be at the expense of the other players: the United States and China. The Syrian crisis is seen through relative benefit which is in harmony with the realist approach. It always looks for individual interests rather than two-track costs. On the other hand, countries remain sensitive towards the gains of the other side which result from cooperation. Regardless of the security results created by the chaos, countries remain jealous of their international status which might be affected by the asymmetrical increase of power resulting from the uneven gains of cooperation.

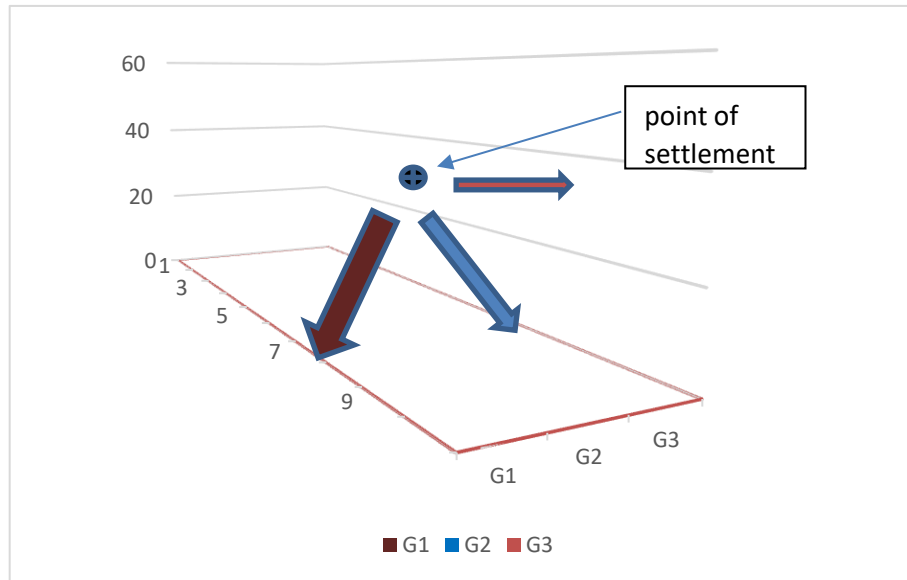
The tracks of the opposing forces interests (the three great powers: the United States (G1), Russia (G2), and China (G3)) achieved from the potential settlement points of the Syrian case did not reach a meeting point that secures the minimum any of these forces aspire to achieve. This is represented in (figure 1) and follows what has been mentioned above.

FIGURE (1): The Conflicting Interests of the Three Great Super powers:



If we want to focus on any of the points, we will realize that three different forces conflict in strength and orientation, bearing in mind that the other players who are influential in the Syrian crisis fulfill the role and interests of the super powers. Consequently, it will be difficult for these powers to head in the direction of balance which leads to settlement, as can be seen in figure 2.

FIGURE (2). The Converging of Interests of the Three Great Powers:



Another difficulty that faces the political settlement in Syria is the complexity of the Syriacrisis, Brzezinski writes, “the problem in the Middle East is bigger than Syria, and it would behoove Russia to cooperate with the U.S. which cannot, as it did in the past, rely upon the United Kingdom and France to play a decisive role in the region. But, better still, Russia might be persuaded to act with the U.S. in seeking a wider accommodation to the regional problem that transcends the interests of a single state” (Brzezinski, in Gass 2015).

If Russia does not ally with the West, Brzezinski wrote, it will face the prospect of becoming a junior partner in an alliance with China (Gass 2015). Some Russians may believe America is trying to play China against Russia, but that is more an ego-gratifying compliment than a realistic judgment. The fact of the matter is that China is considerably more important than Russia right now, but if America and China cooperate, Russia has absolutely no choice but to join. That would be in America’s interest, but it would also be beneficial to Russia in the long run (Gass 2015).

U.S. interactions with China and Russia in the region need not be viewed as

entirely zero-sum. Although opportunities might be few, the United States should identify limited areas of cooperation with China and Russia. For example, despite the partnership between Russia and Iran in Syria, this relationship is complex and the two countries are in some ways also rivals in Syria, especially regarding the control of resources and future contracts. Likewise, China proved helpful when the United States was leading the negotiations with Iran for the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) nuclear deal. Accordingly, there might be scope in future and under the right circumstances for further cooperation regarding Iran, in relation to nuclear weapons and their proliferation. More broadly, the United States, China, and Russia all have a stated interest in the maintenance of stability in the Middle East, in part to ensure their aims and activities in the region are not disrupted (Wasser et al. 2022, 85). Finally, improved relations between the United States and Iran by its joining the nuclear deal—and between the United States and Russia by ending the war in Ukraine, will open routes towards political change in Syria.

IRAN AND THE GREAT- POWERS GAME IN THE MIDDLE EAST;

There have been recent developments in the last few years, such as Iran joining the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which was approved after almost fifteen years by the bloc's seven permanent members September 2021. This marks the first time Iran becomes a full member of a major regional bloc since its 1979 Revolution, said Abbas Aslani, (a research fellow at the Center for Middle East Strategic Studies in Tehran).

Aslani pointed to the fact that Iran is subject to unilateral sanctions. This means that SCO members do not recognize those as international sanctions and that is why they have accepted Iran's request for full membership. He added that Iran is eyeing political and economic gains, especially with China, with which Iran has signed a twenty-five-year comprehensive cooperation agreement in March 2021, also seeking to improve its relationship with Russia through expanding a pre-existing cooperation

agreement (Motamedi, 2021).

China has the most invested interest in keeping good relations with Iran and the same can be said about Russia which has good reasons to work closely with Iran, especially after the developments in the Russia–Ukraine war and the American strategy to contain Russia in the Middle East by defining and constructing a new alliance composed of some Arab states and Israel against Iran.

Vladimir Putin’s visit to Iran on 19 July 2022 comes just days after President Biden visited Saudi Arabia and Israel where he spoke of fears that China and Russia were seeking to fill a power vacuum in the Middle East. “We can’t let that happen,” he said in Tel Aviv (Dixon, Robyn, Fahim, Kareem and Tsui, Karina, Washington post, July 19, 2022).

“There is a reality in the region with Russia at the center of it,” said Vali Nasr, Professor of Middle Eastern Studies at Johns Hopkins University’s School of Advanced International Studies. “This has countered the United States’ belief that the dynamic [in the region] is about Israel and the Arabs getting together against Iran. The Putin–Erdogan–Raisi meetings show that there are other players and dynamics beyond those in Riyadh last week” (Dixon, Robyn, Fahim, Kareem and Tsui, Karina, Washington post, July 19, 2022).

As the talks in Tehran got underway, the National Iranian Oil Co. (NIOC) and Russian gas producer, Gazprom signed a memorandum of understanding worth in the region of US\$40 billion. (Dixon, Robyn, Fahim, Kareem and Tsui, Karina, Washington post, July 19, 2022). This proves how important are the economic relations for China, Russia, and Iran. On the other hand, the Biden administration is trying to revive the nuclear deal, formally known as the (JCPOA). If this happens there will be an improvement of Iranian–American relations which will affect the alliances in the Middle East, especially Iranian, Chinese, and Russian relations.

THE IMPACT OF UKRAINIAN RUSSIAN WAR ON SYRIA;

Every proxy war or tension spot around the world is linked in one way or another to the other spot. For example, both the United States and Russia are engaged in measures and counter-measures in Syria and Ukraine against each other, while the United States seeks to put more pressure on the Russian presence in Syria to gain more leverage over Russia in Ukraine, and then conducting a tit-for-tat strategy in both Ukraine and Syria. The Ukrainian war, just like the war on Syria, is the result of structural adjustment of the great powers in the international system.

The United States and Russia are conducting proxy wars around the world, for example, the Russian war in Ukraine has impacted the war on Syria in many ways; each one of them is trying to support one or more local parties in the war on Syria to put more pressure on the other power, and both great powers are seeking to increase their own interests, especially from the American side to contain the Russian influence in Syria after the UN General Assembly resolution condemning the Russian military operation in Ukraine, which more than 141 countries voted in favor of, reaffirming Ukrainian sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity. (<https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/03/1113152>). The General Assembly resolution of 2 March 2022 demands an end to the Russian offensive in Ukraine.

Russia has taken many steps in Syria to influence American interests in the Syrian crisis, such as supporting the Iranians to replace the Russian troops in the south of Syria after its declaration to withdraw its troops from the south, and this has not been acceptable to the Americans, Israel, and Jordan. In addition, the United States has taken many steps to isolate Russia in Syria and contain its influence in the Middle East such as the following:

- The United States is trying to establish an alliance in the region consisting of Arab states and Israel against Russia and Iran. Jordan's King Abdullah II said in an interview with CNBC that he would support the formation of a Middle

Eastern version of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) (Ghosh 2022).

- In addition, Russian relations with Turkey and Israel moved from cooperation and coordination before the Ukrainian war to competition and conflict after it because of Turkey and Israel's support for Ukraine, NATO, and the United States. Furthermore, the recent U.S.–Iranian rapprochement and the advance in the negotiations concerning the Iranian nuclear deal framework is an indication of the possibility of the decline of Iranian–Russian cooperation in Syria.
- In addition, in order to put more pressure on Russia, Turkey has blocked Russian military and naval and air connections to Syria since 23 April 2022. This step was considered risky by many observers and one that might affect Russia–Turkey relations (Ibrahim 2022).

The political process in Geneva is likely to stall. The Constitutional Committee meeting in Geneva in July 2022 was cancelled because Russia tried to change the place of meeting from Geneva to another city.

Russia was excluded from the donors' conference in Brussels, which was held in May 2022, and the search for support for both regions which are located east of the Euphrates and in the northwest of Syria in Idlib. There was also discussion of the return of the idea of a Syrian federation in the UN dialogue which was suggested during the last Stockholm meeting. All these steps aim to isolate Russia from any regional or international solution.

Thus, the situation in Ukraine is unpredictable, and possible extreme scenarios could lead to dramatic changes in Syria because of the escalation between the West and Russia in recent months.

CONCLUSIONS

This article assumed that the competition among the great powers has impacted the solutions of the Syrian crisis in many ways. One of them is increasing the longevity of the crisis, on the one hand, and has instigated proxy wars in Syria between internal, regional, and international rivals, on the other.

In Syria we have seen great-powers politics take place based on national interest rather than public good and cooperation to solve the crisis, which has led to the longevity of the crisis, preventing a peaceful resolution of the crisis, and making the crisis longer and the suffering of Syrian people more painful up to the present time. Hence, the premise of this paper creates an opportunity for continuing future research to shed light on the relationship between the distribution of power in the international system and the resolution of the Syrian crisis. While greatpowers do not generally fight each other, they employ regional and internal powers to fight on their behalf. On the other hand, great powers will increase their interests capitalizing on the fighting of other players.

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