

The ‘Rising Power’ Status and the Evolution of International Order: Conceptualising Russia’s Syria policies

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Abstract. Taking Syria’s armed conflict as a case study to illustrate processes of normative contestation in international relations, this paper is interested in re-examining the typology of Russia as a ‘rising power’ to account for ‘rise’ in a non-material dimension. The article embeds the ‘rising power’ label in the literature on international norm dynamics to reflect on the rationale for Russia’s engagement in Syria despite adverse material preconditions. It will be argued that Russian norm divergence from alleged ‘Western’ norms illustrates the ambition to co-define conditions for legitimate transgressions of state sovereignty.

Introduction

‘We will not create our next “Afghanistan” by sending an expeditionary force to Syria’ - That was the mantra given by Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov in February 2013 amidst speculations that Russia might intervene to stop the implosion of Syrian state structures in a war that then had been raging for more than three years (Allison 2013, p. 823). Two and a half years later, Russian air forces began to fly airstrikes in support of troop movements of the Syrian government under Bashar al-Assad. This was the first Russian military deployment in the Middle East since the infamous Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan in the 1980s. Five months after the start of Russia’s military campaign in 2015, the ‘Afghan argument’ was being rehearsed again – this time around to justify the announced Russian withdrawal from Syria in March 2016 (Pertsev 2016). What explains these shifts in Russian Syria policies, and how do they relate to Russia’s broader role and place within the ‘international system’? This paper sets out to answer this question, and in so doing re-examines the notion of Russia as a ‘rising power’. Scholarly analyses of Russian policies in the unfolding Syrian crisis since 2011 have been produced (notably Trenin 2013; Allison 2013; Charap 2013; Averre & Davies 2015), yet no conceptualisation of Russia’s Syria policies have taken place that draw on and embed their research findings in the ‘rising power’ debate. In the power transition paradigm, ‘rising powers’ are pitted against established powers to create new systems of international governance on the understanding that a growing economic weight translates into greater political participation (Gilpin 1981; Organski 1968; Organski & Kugler 1980). Yet, power

shifts also occur in non-material ways, and this article embeds the ‘rising power’ label in the literature on international norm dynamics to reflect on the rationale for Russia’s engagement in Syria *despite* adverse material preconditions. It examines Russian policies in the Syrian conflict against the backdrop of Russian norm contestation in global politics. Russian Syria policies, beyond Russia’s immediate interests in Syria, have instrumental value for the perception of Russia as an actor in the international system, and it is this link that illustrates Russia’s ‘rise’ on a normative level.

The ‘rising power’ label is associated with a level of discontent with the prevailing international power structures that are said to be US-dominated, combined with the potential and willingness to propose changes to such structures (see i.a., MacFarlane 2006, p. 41; Rynning & Ringsmose 2008; Narlikar 2013). ‘Rising powers are on the outside looking in’, Hart & Jones (2010, p. 67) formulate, but correctly point out that what is problematic in this conceptualisation is the association of ‘rising powers’ with commensurate economic weight. ‘Rise’ has somewhat one-sidedly been understood as regional clout combined with bigger global leverage through aggregate economic, military, and technological growth (Hart & Jones 2010, p. 69). The concept has been applied in intellectually lazy ways to Russian state behavior ever since the categorisation of Russia as a brick in the BRICS.¹ Russia’s inclusion in the so-called BRICS grouping by the investment bank Goldman Sachs has been a cause for debate among scholars. The BRICS label is associated with economically strong ‘rising powers’ and the changing international economic system in a multipolar world that the growing economies of these powers might bring along.² Mostly for economic reasons, the inclusion of Russia into such a category of states has been questioned by Western analysts (Sakwa 2012; MacFarlane 2006; Hancock 2007; Hart & Jones 2010, p. 67). Russia’s economy has experienced impressive growth rates between 1999 and 2008 in absolute GDP

¹ As defined first by Goldman Sachs in 2001. See ‘Building Better Global Economic BRICs,’ *Global Economics Paper No. 66*. Available at [last accessed 7 August 2014]: <http://www.goldmansachs.com/our-thinking/archive/archive-pdfs/build-better-brics.pdf>.

² See i.a. Hurrell (2006); MacFarlane (2006); Armijo (2007); Brawley (2007); Hancock (2007); Sotero & Armijo (2007); Morris (2011); Patrick (2010); Phillips (2008); Serfaty (2011); Subacchi (2008); Rynning & Ringsmose (2008); Vezirgiannidou (2013); Lieber (2014); Laidi (2012, 2014); Nel (2010); Khanna (2008); Nadkarni & Noonan (eds., 2013). In 2006, *International Affairs* devoted a special issue to ‘*Perspectives on Emerging Would-Be Great Powers*’ (2006, 82, 1). *Review of International Studies* did the same in October 2010 (36, 4, ‘Regional Powers and Their Strategies: Empire, Hegemony, and Leadership’).

numbers with an average annual growth of 7 %, largely thanks to steadily rising oil prices and a state-induced higher oil output (Stent 2014, p. 182). This, in addition to Russia's stabilisation fund, 'have raised business and investor confidence', as Lomagin (2007, p. 40) wrote in 2007. Yet, Russia has failed to modernise its resource-based economy and has been experiencing faltering growth since the 2008 financial crisis. Secondly, the equation of 'rising powers' with heightened political influence due to increased economic capabilities is a fuzzy causal assumption uncritically adopted from International Political Economy (IPE) and largely cast in neo-realist language in International Relations (IR) scholarship (Rynning & Ringsmose 2008). A growing economy, in other words, does not automatically translate into the articulation of a more influential political voice.

Instead, the position is being reiterated that Russia is halting its post-Soviet economic decline (MacFarlane 2006, pp. 56-57; Sakwa 2002, pp. 283-291). Economic policy reforms went hand in hand with Russia's quest for (a new) international identity after the collapse of the Soviet Union, in which the country underwent distinct phases of re-orientation that always involved a re-balancing of relations with the US (Sakwa 2017; Trenin 2006; Mendras 2012; Shakleina 2013, pp. 166-174; Stent 2014). As much as critiques of US power in the international system often reflexively revolve around the question of 'US decline' (for an overview, see Cox 2001, 2007; Patel & Hansmeyer 2009; Quinn 2011), debates about Russia's post-Soviet role in international relations often focused on categorisations of Russia as a potential challenger to US-dominated international governance structures in search of its new identity (Kanet 2007: 4; Stuermer 2008; Belopolsky 2009, pp. 14-28; Mankoff 2009; Trenin 2006; Tsygankov 2007; Mendras 2012; Stent 2014). Macfarlane has identified three key features of an 'emerging' power: 'regional preponderance, aspiration to a global rule, and the contestation of US hegemony' (Macfarlane 2006, p. 41).³ Yet, even if one departs from the assumption that Russia's 'rising power status' entails a 'revisionist' foreign policy agenda, Russia's track record on the latter has been mixed. Russian-Western and especially US-Russian relations oscillated between periods of tension and periods of cooperation (Stent 2014). Tensions persist over Russian regional policies and the creation of what has been termed 'frozen conflicts' in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine (Toal 2017). Where Russia reproaches the West with double standards in its talk of 'democracy promotion', the West reproaches Russia with the selective application of 'territorial integrity' in the post-Soviet space to maintain a level of 'controlled instability' (Inozemtsev & Barbashin 2014). Deyermond (2016) writes in this context of a dual approach to sovereignty that Russia applies, and identifies a 'post-Soviet' approach for its neighborhood where sovereignty is contingent, and a

³ For the purpose of this paper, the terms 'rising' and 'emerging' power are understood to be interchangeable, though the remainder of the article uses the term 'rising'.

'Westphalian' model for everyone else outside of it. But issue-specific policy coordination also led to the New-START treaty about the reduction of strategic nuclear weapons between the US and Russia, the granting of transit routes for US- and NATO troop supplies to Afghanistan, sanctions coordination on Iran and close working-level coordination in the Iran nuclear talks. At the same time, Russia's economic vulnerabilities were exacerbated in 2015 by low oil prices as well as US and EU sanctions imposed on the country in the wake of the Ukraine crisis and Russia's annexation of Crimea. The gap between Russia's foreign policy ambitions and its economic performance could not be starker. Andrew Monaghan (2016) therefore describes a Russia that is simultaneously 'resurgent and declining' (p. x).

What the present paper proposes in this context is a re-examination of the concept of 'rising power' and a conceptualisation of Russia's 'rise' that accounts for its non-material components. It is interested, in other words, in the normative dimension of Russia's rise. Such a focus helps to substantiate the conceptual debate surrounding 'rising powers' by examining Russia's normative turn as an under-studied dimension in Russian foreign policy analyses. Rather than seeking to explain why Russia supposedly rejects 'Western' norms in international relations, this article posits that norm contestation offers more options for global change than the binary categories of either full association with existing norms or outright rejection thereof. Instead of speculating about a 'revisionist' Russia or of a 'new Cold War' (Lucas 2014; Legvold 2016), it is argued, Russia emerges as a co-shaper of international security arrangements. In so doing, Russia resists norms of 'responsible state conduct' defined and propagated in the West that Moscow sees as illegitimate breaches of sovereignty. On a policy level, Russian references to 'sovereignty' and 'non-interference' are indicative of its perspectives on international law and the desirable interaction between 'Great Powers'. Its most important reference point in this endeavor remains the United States as the self-proclaimed guarantor of a liberal international order (Ikenberry 2011), which is seen to be a primary sponsor for policies that erode state sovereignty (Deyermond 2016, p. 960). From an ideational perspective, Russian Syria policies, as will be shown, contribute to norm diffusion in international relations. They create margins of permissiveness in security governance and thus shift the meaning of what counts as a standard of appropriate behavior in the long term. Norms are here understood as 'shared ideas, expectations and beliefs about appropriate behavior' (Finnemore & Sikkink 1998, p. 894). Declaring who is revolting against whose Order therefore becomes a normative exercise. Revisionism, in other words, needs to be seen as a relational term. It is here that the paper draws on the 'second-wave' literature on international norm dynamics that conceive of norms as contested political concepts (Bob 2012; Sandholtz 2007; Wiener 2008; Krook & True 2012; van Kersbergen & Verbeek 2007; Adler-Nissen 2014; Epstein 2012a, b; Towns 2012; Cortell & Davis 2000; Wunderlich 2013; Niemann & Schillinger 2016).

The paper thus combines the literature on international norm dynamics with an analysis of the role of a ‘rising’ power in security governance. This is an important conceptual innovation, as the role of ‘rising’ powers in international security governance has remained understudied (Biersteker and Moret 2015, p. 61). Russian Syria policies will therefore be analysed as an illustration of the contestation of global power structures that turn Russia into a power that rises as an actor with an influential weight in the co-shaping of norms in international relations. The argument proceeds in four sections. A first section provides a brief conceptual overview for the subsequent analysis of Russian Syria policies by embedding them in the discussion on Russia’s ‘rising’ power status and the power of norms. A second section substantiates the argument and outlines Russian material ‘stakes’ in Syria that help understand Russian behavior in the Syrian conflict. Using qualitative document analysis of selected government releases and drawing on interviews and conversations with Russian policy experts and decision-makers, the third section then dissects the rationale for military intervention in the Syrian conflict that led up Russia’s military campaign in September 2015, and its subsequent retreat in March 2016. These two sections expose the paradox between the lack of an evident utility for Russia’s engagement on an economic and regional basis, and Russia’s decision to intervene militarily despite its own rhetoric. A third section links this discussion of Russian Syria policies to Russia’s role in international relations at large, before a final section concludes the analysis. Russia’s Syria policies blur the distinction between ‘norm-setters’ and ‘norm-takers’, and it is this finding that in its implications for the evolution of International Order will be qualified in the remainder of this paper.

Russia as a rising normative power

Russian perceptions of and relations with ‘the West’, and the US in particular, have traditionally been ambivalent (Kuchins & Zevelev 2012, pp. 181-209). Cooperation with Western administrations has always been possible in areas of mutual concern, such as the international military efforts in Afghanistan, countering drug trafficking in Central Asia, disarmament talks during the Medvedev administration, or most recently the successful diplomacy in the Iranian nuclear crisis (Stent 2014; Pieper 2017, pp. 70-99). In the wake of the ‘Ukraine crisis’, Russia and the West then publicly and violently clashed with two opposing narratives about World Order (Sakwa 2015). More forcefully than ever, Russia formulated outspoken claims about its role, place and identity in international politics.⁴ President Putin spoke of the Russian deception by the West in the

⁴ It has been argued that this shift had to do more with domestic determinants of Russian foreign policy than with a factual deterioration in Russian-Western relations: Faced with the largest public demonstrations since the fall

inconclusive settling of the post-Cold War order:⁵ Neither had Russia been treated as a partner on an equal footing, nor have post-Cold War rules and norms in international relations been universally codified, so the Russian message. Subsequent Western foreign policies demanding Russian cooperation on what was seen as unilaterally crafted adventures were dictated on Western terms, so the reading. Prime Minister Medvedev formulated this in rather stark terms at the 2016 Munich Security Conference when he characterised relations between Russia and the West as descending into a ‘new Cold War’.⁶

It will be the subject of the following analysis to contextualise Russia’s Syria policies in this succession of escalatory identity clashes. Syria’s armed conflict, as will be shown in the sections that follow, has become a proxy battle for wider power implications on the international plane. Against this background, Kissinger writes in his 2014 book *World Order*: ‘Russia’s goals are largely strategic, at a minimum to prevent Syrian and Iraqi jihadist groups from spreading into its Muslim territories and, on the larger global scale, to enhance its position vis-à-vis the United States [...], thereby reversing the results of the 1973 war [...]’ (pp. 144-45) – a war following which Egypt, hitherto a Soviet ally, became a US regional ally, and which saw the Soviet influence in the region gradually reduced. While Kissinger’s reading of alliance structures stems from a neo-realist understanding of world politics (including static assumptions about ‘strategic’ interests), Russian Syria policies can also be understood in a wider normative context.

It is at this point that a non-material reading of the concept of ‘rising power’ links in with an understanding of ‘norm diffusion’ as coined by the ‘second-wave’ strand of scholarly literature on international norm dynamics. Many scholarly works on norm dynamics have tended to conflate norm diffusion with the promotion of ‘positive’, i.e. Western, liberal norms (‘altruistic norm advocacy’, Wunderlich 2014, p. 85; see also of the Soviet Union, Russian state cohesion was deemed threatened. The discursive shift towards a more assertive anti-Westernism in 2012 predated the fallout over the repercussions of the failed Association Agreement between Ukraine and Europe in late 2013, and arguably explain the linkage between domestic politics and Putin’s turn to a more vocal anti-Westernism in foreign policy (Hill & Gaddy 2013, p. 343; Allison 2013; Malinova 2014). Yet, this ‘diversionary explanation’ has also been challenged on the grounds that it fails to account for structural asymmetries in Russian-Western relations generated in a post-Cold War context (Sakwa 2017, pp. 115-121).

⁵ ‘Speech at the Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club’, 24 October 2014, *Kremlin Transcript*, available at <http://eng.kremlin.ru/news/23137/>, accessed 26 January 2015.

⁶ ‘Speech at a panel discussion with French Prime Minister Manuel Valls’, Munich Security Conference, 13 February 2016, *Full Transcript*, available at: <http://government.ru/en/news/21784/>, accessed 15 February 2016.

Acharya 2009; Risse & Sikkink 1999). In reaction to this strand of literature, new studies have been written on changes in international norms as being essentially dispute-driven (Stiles & Sandholtz 2009, pp. 323f.), on the contestation of norms (Bob 2012; Sandholtz 2007; Wiener 2008; Krook & True 2012; van Kersbergen & Verbeek 2007; Wiener 2014; Niemann & Schillinger 2016; Zimmermann 2016), and on the link between norms and power structures (Adler-Nissen 2014; Epstein 2012a, b; Towns 2012). Their works thus have contributed to the advancement of a ‘new’ generation or a ‘second wave’ of norm literature (see Cortell & Davis 2000; Wunderlich 2013) that conceives of norms as essentially contested narratives. Interpreting Russian foreign policy as reversing or obstructing historical trends, in this logic, stems from a ‘linear understanding of Russia’s development’ (Monaghan 2016, p. 147) that was steeped in the Western reading that Russia somehow needed to emulate Western governance models and policies following the dissolution of the USSR. The idea of ‘socialisation’, thus, simply implied being on the ‘right side of history’ (Monaghan 2016, pp. 13-14).⁷ Rather than conceiving of norm diffusion as such a unidirectional development that forces identitarian foreign policy choices onto so-called ‘rising powers’, it is argued here that Russian norm divergence from alleged ‘Western’ norms illustrates the power of dissent in creating alternative readings of World Order. These norms relate to the legitimacy of transgressions of sovereignty: Russian Syria policies, it will be shown, are to be explained by normative global power considerations that have to do with Moscow’s reading of sovereignty and ‘Great Power’ interaction. This adds to the literature on ‘rising powers’ in at least two ways. First, the latter term has largely been taken to mean the political equivalent of economic growth and has been left empirically unsubstantiated. Second, combining assumptions about actors rising in importance with ‘second wave’ analyses of international norm dynamics is a fruitful endeavor that reverses the directionality in orthodox readings of ‘norm diffusion’ and in so doing adds substance to the debate about how ‘rise’ relates to ideational challenges in international politics. Here, Russia is emerging as a ‘norm antipreneur’ (see Bloomfield 2016). Substantiating this argument, however, requires taking a closer look at Russian material stakes in Syria’s armed conflict. As much as classifications of Russia’s ‘rising power’ status on economic grounds have been misguided, as argued above, analyses of Russian Syria policies as expressions of a normative contestation only make sense if we can exclude tangible material gains as foreign policy factors.

Russian-Syrian relations: Instrumentality rather than dependence

⁷ See also the link between socialisation and hegemonic power in the work of Ikenberry & Kupchan (1990).

Neither economically nor politically have Russian-Syrian relations been significantly important for either side. While the Russian-Syrian trade volume continuously increased from 2001 onwards, it reached its peak in 2008 with an amount of 1.9 billion US\$. As a point of comparison: The Russian-Iranian trade volume by far exceeded the Russian-Syrian one with an amount of 3.6 billion US\$ in 2010, even though Iran was targeted by extensive economic sanctions regimes imposed in the wake of the Iran nuclear crisis at the time. Russian-Syrian economic relations also paled in comparison to the Russian-Turkish trade volume, which accounted for the largest and most important bilateral trade relation for Russia in the region. And even the Russian-Israeli trade volume usually was twice as high as the Russian-Syrian trade volume in the reference period from 2001-2014. In the years from 2011 to 2014, the Russian-Syrian trade volume dropped from 1.9 billion US\$ (2011) to 213 million US\$ (2014) as the war in Syria ravaged the country.⁸ While Russia has been more important to Syria as a provider of arms and military machinery, Syria never played a big role in Russia's external trade balance. Tellingly, Syria could only continue to afford buying weaponry from Moscow following a debt-repayment deal in 2005 by which Russia agreed to forgive 10 billion US\$ of Syria's 13 billion US\$ debts accrued from dealings with the Soviet Union (Trenin 2013, p. 8). Analyses explaining the Russian alignment with Bashar al-Assad in terms of Russian material interests therefore misrepresent a relationship with a rather burdensome client. Russia supplied larger amounts of arms to Syria only in 2005 (Malashenko 2008, pp. 20-24).

Moscow made it clear that the Russian-Syrian trade relation was a subordinate one to its economic relations with other, traditionally more pro-Western states in the region (Dannreuther 2012, p. 550). Putin's abrogation of the planned sale of the Iskander-E tactical missile system to Syria was a case in point, announced during a state visit to Israel in 2005 (Nuclear Threat Initiative 2010, p. 8). 'We are watching the balance of power in the whole region and are not interested in further escalation of tension [sic] there', then-defense minister Sergey Ivanov said in June 2005 (in: Nuclear Threat Initiative 2010, p. 7). While the Russian defence industry might be keen on upholding a lucrative commercial relation with the Syrian government (Gvosdev & Marsh 2014, p. 316), the political leadership in Russia has tended to view trade with Syria in a more instrumental way. Weapons deliveries to Syria were weighted against political spin-offs with regard to other actors in the region and beyond. For the years 2011-2014, the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) hardly registers any significant amounts of weapons supplied to Syria by Russia. Other accounts, however, report increased Russian deliveries of small arms, armored vehicles, helicopters, and missile defense systems to Syria from 2011 onwards (Bino & Krause 2017, pp. 68-69). From 2013 onwards, Rosoboronexport, Russia's

⁸ See UN trade statistics at <http://comtrade.un.org/data/>.

state-owned arms manufacturer, has increased the quantity of weapons deliveries to the Syrian government, as reported by Russian military historian Shirokorad (2016, pp. 366-367). Russia also supplied Syria with the S-400 missile defense system, its most modern surface-to-air system, in November 2015 (Bino & Krause 2017, p. 70). The timing of this increase in deliveries coincides with shifts in Russian approaches towards the ongoing conflict in Syria, which will be discussed further below.

Other oft-cited strategic factors like Russia's naval facility in Tartus are negligible. While Tartus is the only Russian naval site in the Mediterranean and the only one outside of the territory of the former Soviet Union and could therefore be considered of strategic importance, this facility has 'symbolic rather than practical value to the Russian Navy', Allison (2013, p. 807) writes. Further readings of Russian material motivations in Syria foreground the centrality of Syria for the planned future construction of a 10 billion US\$ gas pipeline traversing Iran, Iraq, and Syria (Orenstein & Romer 2015). While Russia's interest in such a proposed pipeline sponsored by Iran, an energy competitor, remains unclear, it is unlikely to constitute the exclusive motivation for the Russian leadership to accept the level of adverse reputational costs that its unwavering position in this conflict has generated.⁹ Yet, the main directorate on international peacekeeping operations of the Russian defense ministry mentions other economic factors in an explanation for Russia's Syria policies: These relate to the significance of the whole region for global oil price developments and the importance of Syria's 'territorial security', and to the related fact that the 'Islamic State' has held control over oil resources and pipelines around Raqqa and Palmyra. 'It was necessary to take steps to correct the situation', a defense ministry official stated.¹⁰

In Russia's public diplomacy, however, Syria has played a role in the wider context of Middle Eastern *systemic* questions of regional order. Russia's alignment with Assad has been publicly justified by the scenario of disintegrating Syrian governance structures. Prime Minister Medvedev puts it the following way: 'We must preserve Syria as a union state and prevent its dissolution for denominational reasons. The world will not survive

⁹ Asked about this oil pipeline project, Oleg Morozov, Senator in the Russian Federation Council and a member of the Committee for International Affairs, stated that the Iran pipeline project would be more favorable for Russia, but the economic considerations are rendered secondary by the ongoing war. Discussion with 'young leaders', including the author, at the Federation Council, organised by the PICREADI center. Moscow, 16 February 2017.

¹⁰ Main directorate for international peacekeeping operations of the Russian defense ministry in discussion with 'young leaders', including the author, at the Russian defense ministry. Discussion organised by the PICREADI center. Moscow, 17 February 2017.

another Libya, Yemen or Afghanistan. The consequences of this scenario will be catastrophic for the Middle East' (Medvedev 2016).¹¹ On a regional level, the void would be filled by militant Islamists, the latter of which would pose a security concern for Russia's already fragile Southern border. On a global level, a regime change in Syria forced by external powers is a scenario Russia wanted to avoid. That is the lesson learnt in Libya, where UNSC resolution 1973 for civilian protection was overstepped to remove Qaddafi from power, in a Russian reading. Russia's decision not to veto this resolution to establish a no-fly zone over Libya was partially motivated by the support of the League of Arab States for UNSCR 1973, as Averre and Davies note (2015, p. 818). Subsequently, however, 'by distorting the mandate obtained from the UN Security Council to secure a no-fly zone, NATO simply interfered in the war under the flag of protecting the civilian population', as foreign minister Lavrov sourly observed.¹²

Here, a widespread perception in Russia was reconfirmed that the US was not 'leading from behind', as Obama's parlance would have it, but as largely following Saudi policy (Trenin 2013, p. 14). The dangerous precedent set by the non-vetoing of UNSCR 1973 would not be repeated in Syria, as Russia's repeated vetoes against Syria resolution drafts in the Security Council have made clear.¹³ In his remarks to the UNSC before vetoing a UNSC resolution in October 2011, Russia's permanent representative to the UN Vitaly Churkin said that 'The situation in Syria cannot be considered in the Council separately from the Libyan experience' and that NATO implementing the 'responsibility to protect' could be repeated in the future.¹⁴ With the Security Council thus paralysed since 2011, state parties with 'stakes' in Syria had gradually resorted to unilateral policies to further their 'interests' in this conflict. The only UNSC resolutions that passed with Moscow's consent before

¹¹ See also foreign minister Lavrov's interview with German state TV channel ARD, available at:

http://mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/0/87653ACE6A5BEE9144257B13004058C4, accessed 5 April 2016.

¹² See Lavrov's interview with the newspaper 'Rossiskaya Gazeta' on 19 November 2013, available at:

http://archive.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/newsline/4992A5918FBBCB5D44257C280047E2D0, accessed 5 April 2016.

¹³ Russia and China jointly vetoed drafted UNSC resolutions on Syria in October 2011, in February and July 2012, in May 2014, in December 2016, and in February 2017. In addition, Russia alone has vetoed a draft resolution on Syria in October 2016. See Security Council Veto List at <http://research.un.org/en/docs/sc/quick>.

¹⁴ Minutes of the UNSC, S/PV.6627, UN Security Council 6627th meeting, 4 October 2011, p.4, available at :

<http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/Golan%20Heights%20S%20PV%206627.pdf>, accessed 26 April 2017.

the start of the ‘Vienna process’ proved to be a paper tiger as the killings continued.¹⁵ With resolution 2254 that passed unanimously on 18 December 2015, all parties involved agreed for the first time on a transitional plan leading to the formation of a unity government. The resolution refers to the ‘continuity of governmental institutions’ and thus responds to Russian concerns about undue outside interference. This could serve as the basis to retain much of the Alawite-dominated military and security apparatus, even if Assad eventually were to step down in a timely fashion. A similar logic of safeguarding Syrian state institutions underlay Russia’s initiative to negotiate a US-Russian joint agreement on the destruction of Syrian chemical weapons in September 2013 following the use of such weapons on 21 August 2013. Sensing the hesitation on the part of US President Obama to respond militarily, Putin’s government acted swiftly to address concerns over Assad’s WMD arsenal, avert the use of force that could lead to regime change in Syria, and re-confirm its power standing on par with the United States (Karaganov 2013).

Before proceeding to analyse this portrayal of Russia’s official discourse on its Syria policy in light of the ‘rising power’ debate in a later section of this article, we need to understand the extent to which Russia’s military incursion in Syria in the fall of 2015 has affected not only the political conditions in international peace negotiations, but also Russia’s role therein. The next section therefore contextualises Russia’s Syria policies from 2015 in its wider regional and geostrategic significance. Russia’s military campaign presents us with a paradox as it constituted a policy shift from Russia’s previous discourse on the Syrian conflict.

Russia’s military incursion in Syria: The geostrategic context

On 30th September 2015, Russia started flying military airstrikes in Syria. This came after an official invitation by Bashar al-Assad’s government had been issued, and after Russia’s Federation Council had officially approved of President Putin’s request to authorise the military campaign (Shirokorad 2016, p. 368). Thousands of Russian citizens had already flocked to Syria to join the ranks of the ‘Islamic State’, as Sergei Ivanov, Putin’s chief of staff, publicly stated when justifying the decision. Their return to the home country would pose a security concern, thus necessitating the fight against the ‘IS’ at its roots in Syria before the latter becomes an even bigger

¹⁵ These were UNSCR 2042 and 2043 in April 2012 authorising an observer mission to Syria, UNSCR 2118 in September 2013 requiring the destruction of Syria’s chemical weapons, UNSCR 2139 in February 2014 easing Aid Deliveries, UNSCR 2209 in March 2015 condemning the use of chlorine gas, and UNSCR 2235 in August 2015 establishing mechanisms to identify perpetrators using chemical weapons in Syria. See

<http://www.un.org/apps/news/docs.asp?Topic=Syria&Type=Resolution>.

threat to Russia, Ivanov continued (Meyer *et al.* 2015).¹⁶ The discursive shift that Russian officials underwent to explain the crash of a Russian civilian airliner over the Sinai peninsula on 31 October 2015 helped nurture the narrative of the necessity to step up efforts to fight IS. Russian and Egyptian officials had initially reacted with skepticism concerning allegations of terrorism, in spite of an Egyptian IS-affiliate claiming responsibility. In mid-November, however, President Putin's message was that Russian airstrikes 'must not only be continued - they must be intensified so that the criminals understand that retribution is inevitable'.¹⁷ President Putin was now leading a military campaign against a terror militia that was internationally condemned, presenting himself as the pioneer of a larger international coalition against tyranny. President Putin's address at the UN General Assembly in September 2015, making references to an international anti-IS coalition, had to be understood as preparing the ground for Russia's re-integration into international consultation mechanisms.¹⁸ Notte (2016) has analysed similarities in the Russian 'counterterrorist narrative' in Chechnya and Syria, respectively, noting parallels in the rhetorical presentation of Russian military operations as responses to transnational terrorism challenges that have assumed a 'civilizational character' (p. 64). Publicly framing its operations in Syria as an anti-IS campaign, however, Russia quickly started bombing more anti-Assad rebels (of which some are backed by the US) than IS positions.

Definitions of 'terrorism' are inherently relational (Egerton 2009; English 2009). What Moscow dismisses as groupings of extremists and Islamists are deemed parts of the 'moderate opposition' by Western governments. A US-Russian ceasefire plan, agreed on 9 September 2016 between US State Secretary Kerry and Russian foreign minister Lavrov broke down only a few days later. Russia does not discriminate between the IS and other 'rebel groups' (Lund 2015). In contrast to the West, Russia does not work with non-jihadist elements of the opposition. Its definition of 'terrorists' here is congruent with that of the Syrian government – to an extent even where talking points of officials become almost interchangeable. 'We're the only country that coordinates

¹⁶ Similar points were raised by the main directorate for international peacekeeping operations of the Russian defense ministry in discussion with 'young leaders', including the author, at the Russian defense ministry.

Discussion organised by the PICREADI center. Moscow, 17 February 2017.

¹⁷ 'Russia plane crash: "Terror act" downed A321 over Egypt's Sinai', *BBC Europe News*, 17 November 2015, available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-34840943>, accessed 15 February 2015.

¹⁸ 'Address at the 70th Session of the UN General Assembly', *Full Transcript*, 28 September 2015, available at: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50385>, accessed 12 February 2016.

its actions with the Syrian army’, a Russian defense ministry official remarked in a discussion with the author.¹⁹ Russia here also acts in tacit agreement with Iran, the second most influential external power backing Assad (Souleimanov 2016, p. 109). On the international stage, Russia and Iran are the two most defiant public backers of the Assad regime, even though their respective motivations differ. Where Russia sees the necessity to bolster a secular government to indirectly preserve Russian leverage in the region and contain US power, Iran sees the need to support an Alawite regime whose fall would complicate Iranian regional reach into the Levant via Hezbollah (Geranmayeh & Liik 2017). The ends differ, but the means allow for a temporary geostrategic convergence of interests between Russia and Iran. The firing of Russian cruise missiles from the Caspian Sea, for example, would not have been possible without the Iranian consent to use Iranian airspace (Trenin 2015; Shirokorad 2016, p. 373).²⁰ After an official meeting between Putin and Iran’s Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei in November 2015, Iranian officials publicly have confirmed the Iranian policy to align their stance with Russia’s, at a time where the Russian air bombings were already well into their second month (Hafezi & Charbonneau 2015).²¹ This Russo-Iranian marriage of convenience has also allowed Russia to temporarily fly sorties from the Iranian Nojeh airbase near Hamedan in western Iran in August 2016 to hit targets in Eastern Syria (Pieper 2016). Russia and Iran have also formed an informal ‘4+1’ platform with Iraq, Syria and Hezbollah to exchange information (Geranmayeh & Liik 2017, p. 91), yet Iranian and Russian suspicions of each other’s respective long-term interests in Syria persist. For example, while Russia may tolerate the activities of the Shia Lebanese militia Hezbollah on the ground for tactical reasons, Moscow does not want to appear as a pro-Shia power that falls out with other important Sunni actors in the region.²²

¹⁹ Main directorate for international peacekeeping operations of the Russian defense ministry in discussion with ‘young leaders’, including the author, at the Russian defense ministry. Discussion organised by the PICREADI center. Moscow, 17 February 2017.

²⁰ A Russian defense ministry underlined that Russia launches strikes from ‘all platforms available to us’, including submarines in the Mediterranean and aircraft carriers. Main directorate for international peacekeeping operations of the Russian defense ministry in discussion with ‘young leaders’, including the author, at the Russian defense ministry. Discussion organised by the PICREADI center. Moscow, 17 February 2017.

²¹ Oweis (2016) writes that the Russian military campaign might also have benefitted from Jordanian intelligence-sharing (p. 4).

²² Asked about Russia’s view of Hezbollah’s activities in Syria, a Russian defense ministry official elusively answered that ‘we have no bias’ between Sunni and Shia forces in the region, that ‘Russian air forces only

Russian planes have bombed areas that were not IS-controlled, and where the purpose was regime protection regardless of the enemy. Russian airstrikes reportedly targeted any group from IS, the al-Nusra front (later rebranded to Jabhat Fateh al-Sham), the Islamic Front's Jaysh al-Islam, the 'Chechen fighters' to the Saudi- and Turkish-backed 'Army of Conquest', and the Free Syrian Army.²³ Russian airstrikes have served as a cover for regime forces and Hezbollah to re-take previously held opposition areas (Oweis 2016, p. 3). Moscow's calculation to intervene militarily on Assad's behalf was born of a strategic drive not to see the regime fall, while Assad as a person, Moscow made it clear, was not something Russia would eternally be bound to (Saradzhyan 2015; Roth 2015; Souleimanov 2016, p. 112). Regime consolidation was arguably an important aspect to understand Russia's shift from diplomatic to military protection for Assad's troops at a time where the latter were largely on the defensive. The strengthening of the Syrian government's control over previously contested areas was therefore given as a rationale for Putin ordering the retreat of the Russian armed forces beginning on 15 March 2016. 'With participation by Russian troops and Russian military grouping, the Syrian troops and Syrian patriotic forces, we were able to radically change the situation in fighting international terrorism and take initiative in nearly all areas to create the conditions for the start of a peace process,' Putin noted.²⁴

The publicly declared Russian military retreat five months after the start of the bombing campaign, announced at a carefully orchestrated meeting between President Putin, foreign minister Lavrov and defence minister Shoigu, thus gives the impression of a temporary and surgical operation that is terminated in an orderly manner. Far from a genuine withdrawal, however, this was merely a drawdown of the air contingent at Latakia and a replacement of some of Russia's tactical aviation with combat helicopters (Gorenburg & Kofman 2016). The surprise withdrawal announcement, however, has given rise to speculations as to the underlying motives against the backdrop of the ongoing peace talks of the International Syria Support Group in Geneva (see Lund 2016; Blank 2016; International Crisis Group 2016): For all its domestic and international audience effects, the

provide aerial support' and that Sunni forces were used in the 'liberation of Eastern Aleppo' in December 2016 to avoid retribution on sectarian grounds. Main directorate for international peacekeeping operations of the Russian defense ministry in discussion with 'young leaders', including the author, at the Russian defense ministry. Discussion organised by the PICREADI center. Moscow, 17 February 2017.

²³ For an overview of the ideological and strategic differences between these Syrian insurgency groups, see International Crisis Group (2014; 2015).

²⁴ 'Meeting of President of Russia Vladimir Putin with Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and Defence Minister Sergey Shoigu,' March 14, 2016. *Russian foreign ministry*, available at: http://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/ckNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2141689, accessed 15 March 2016.

withdrawal was said to be partial, with the Tartus and Khmeimim military bases remaining operational, leaving a degree of politically convenient ambiguity (Kozhanov 2016). Thus exposing the dependence of Assad's survival on Russian military backing, the announced withdrawal was seen to indicate a policy of 'co-custodianship of a political process' and of a 'delinking' of Russian interests 'from the fate of Syria's current president' (International Crisis Group 2016, pp. 6-7). As a public diplomacy signal, Putin's announcement was to be read as a warning to Assad that Russia was not going to reconquer all of Syria for him. It also reframed Russia's military intervention as a victory for a domestic audience, and strengthened Russia's hand in the Geneva peace talks to the extent that it increased Assad's dependence on Moscow. The tactical withdrawal announcement therefore followed the same logic as the one that led to Russia's military intervention in the first place: to re-assert Russia's role in the regional and international security architecture, thereby forcing all stakeholders into a dialogue with Moscow. As Fjodor Lukyanov, a foreign policy analyst often consulted both in Russia and the West, told the author in his Moscow office: 'It was good strategic intuition of President Putin to intervene in Syria and reshuffle the whole conversation. The aim was to gain leverage by broadening the framework of cooperation and communication'.²⁵

Set against the background of the political fall-out between Russia and the West over clashing foreign policies in Ukraine, Russia's intervention in Syria meant that public attention to the conflict in Ukraine was diverted.²⁶ Whether or not it was in Russia's interest to 'freeze' the conflict in Eastern Ukraine, the surprise intervention in Syria re-directed world attention to a conflict that was more important to contain from a Russian perspective. The Russian advance in Syria managed to 'force [Putin's] way through to a direct dialogue with President Barack Obama' (Trenin 2015) in spite of the latter's intention to isolate Russia over its foreign policy in Ukraine (see also Souleimanov 2016, p. 110). Despite policy disagreements with the West on other issues, there was now no way Russia could be ignored or isolated in world politics (Souleimanov 2016, p. 113). The public deliberations of some European politicians that sanctions imposed on Russia in the context of the 'Ukraine crisis' should be re-considered in light of the necessity to cooperate with Russia on other policy fronts is a telling case in point for the factual diversion of attention from Ukraine to Syria (Leonard 2015, p. 24). On a logistical level, Russia's intervention in Syria has created facts that complicate potential military operations of other actors such as France and the US that had started bombing in Syria a year before. With Russian military

²⁵ Author's interview, Moscow, 14 June 2016.

²⁶ That this was one motivation underlying the decision to intervene was an assessment also shared by a European diplomat posted to Moscow, conversation with author, 15 June 2016.

jets operating in the Syrian airspace, US-led anti-Assad forces, at a minimum, now needed to coordinate flight routes with their Russian counterparts in order to avoid collisions (what in Washington is referred to as ‘de-confliction’).²⁷ In his speech at the 2016 Munich Security Conference, Russian Prime Minister Medvedev therefore called on closer working-level consultations between Russian and US military decision-makers, without which UNSCR 2254, which includes the delivery of humanitarian aid to civilians, cannot be effectively implemented (Medvedev 2016). It thus needs to be stressed that readings of Russian policy as inherently obstructionist are misleading. What Russia was opposing was externally enforced regime change without policy cooperation with Russia. As Tsygankov (2015) puts it: ‘Putin’s long-standing objective has been to establish Russia as a nation that acts in accordance with formal and informal norms of traditional great power politics and is recognized as a major state by the outside world.’

From a practical point of view, Russian operations in Syria at least complicated other major military strategies in the short to mid-term, ensuring that consultations with Moscow become a necessity. Without Russian air support, Assad’s forces also could not have secured the ‘recapture’ of Aleppo in December 2016. Russia had let it be known to Assad repeatedly that the Syrian regime’s territorial gains were thanks to the support by Russia’s air force (Winning & Lowe 2016). Assad only managed to stay in power, so the message, at the mercy of Russia. Assad acknowledged as much on his visit to Sochi on 20 November 2017, as he expressed his gratitude ‘on behalf of the Syrian people to you, Mr. President, for our joint success in defending Syria’s territorial integrity and independence [...]’ and ‘to those institutions of the Russian state that provided assistance – primarily, the Russian Defence Ministry that has supported us throughout this operation’ (Kremlin

²⁷ A Russian defense ministry official noted that a memorandum to ‘avoid incidences’ was signed between Russia and the US in 2015. Main directorate for international peacekeeping operations of the Russian defense ministry in discussion with ‘young leaders’, including the author, at the Russian defense ministry. Discussion organised by the PICREADI center. Moscow, 17 February 2017. This Memorandum of Understanding on the Prevention of Flight Safety Incidents has been suspended by Russia in reaction to the US air strikes on Syria on 7 April 2017. The latter had been carried out in response to the use of chemical weapons in Khan Sheikhoun in Northwestern Syria on 4 April 2017. See ‘Zaiavlenie MID Rossii v sviazi s vooruzhennoi aktsiei SShA v Sirii 7 apreliia 2017 goda’, (Foreign Ministry statement on US military action in Syria on April 7, 2017), Russian foreign ministry, 7 April 2017, available at: http://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2717798?p_p_id=101_INSTANCE_cKNonkJE02Bw&_101_INSTANCE_cKNonkJE02Bw_languageId=en_GB, accessed 21 April 2017.

2017). The objective of reconquering territory lost to anti-Assad forces, Assad's government has had to realise, had to come with a partial sovereignty loss as the Syrian airspace came to be filled with sorties flown by external powers. In an interview with German public television channel ARD on 1 March 2016 Assad therefore tellingly defined 'sovereignty' as a 'proportional term'.²⁸

Finally, talks to negotiate a ceasefire in Syria were convened in Moscow in December 2016 between Russia, Iran, and Turkey, paving the way for talks in Astana, Kazakhstan, in February 2017 and the creation of 'de-escalation zones' in the summer of 2017. The same format met in November 2017 in Sochi to discuss a post-conflict political settlement for Syria. This trilateral format makes clear two points. First, it excludes the United States as an interlocutor, bolstering the impression that Russia's hand was strengthened by a US administration paralysed by the power transition from Obama to Trump. Foreign minister Lavrov, explaining the sidelining of the US, pointed out his disappointment with US-Russian bilateral talks on Syria and that the International Syria Support Group (ISSG) 'has failed to play its role to ensure the implementation of the decisions that were made or to monitor the implementation process' [of UNSCR 2254] (Lavrov 2016).²⁹ Second, this format demonstrated Turkey's shift away from an anti-Assad stance to one that accommodates Russian conceptions about Syria's future (Hubbard & Sanger 2016) - despite Ankara's dislike of Russia's willingness to include Kurdish interlocutors like the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) in political talks. 'As you remember, some countries declared the goal of changing the government in Syria', Lavrov remarked with reference to Turkey's shift in positions, and continued that 'many colleagues' are now 'coming to see that the top priority should not be government change but the liquidation of the terrorist threat. The three countries that are represented here share this understanding. We have a common stand on this issue' (Lavrov 2016). The Russian-Turkish coordination of policies on Syria only became possible following a bilateral rapprochement in late June 2016 to

²⁸ *Interview with Bashar al-Assad*, ARD, 1 March 2016, available at: <http://www.tagesschau.de/ausland/assad-interview-105.html>, accessed 2 March 2016.

²⁹ Yet, asked about the two different tracks for Syria peace talks, Oleg Morozov, Senator in the Russian Federation Council and a member of the Committee for International Affairs, responded that these should not be seen as separate, but as complementary (Author's question in Moscow, 16 February 2017). Similarly, Turkish foreign minister Çavuşoğlu said at the 2017 Munich Security Conference that Astana and Geneva 'never excluded each other', but that the Kazakhstan talks were a useful 'confidence-building measure' (Statements by Turkish foreign minister, 19 February 2017. Available at <https://www.securityconference.de/en/media-library/munich-security-conference-2017/video/statement-by-mevluet-cavusoglu/>).

de-escalate the Russo-Turkish crisis in relations that had resulted from the shooting down of a Russian fighter jet by the Turkish air force in November 2015 (Mankoff 2016). With the US effectively sidelined and Turkey coordinating its policies with Russia and Iran, the way was paved for a resolution of Syria's armed conflict on Russian terms. And it is at this point that a normative reading of the concept of 'rise' fits into the puzzle to make sense of Russian foreign policy: Having excluded material benefits for Russia's engagement in Syria, the article posits that Russia's policies in Syria's armed conflict are driven by normative contestations on the global level.

Russia's Syria policies in an evolving World Order

Russia's public justification for its involvement in Syria's armed conflict was that the goal is not to keep Assad in power, but to preserve Syrian governance structures, because it is feared that the implosion thereof will have much worse consequences, as analysed thus far. With Russia's steadfast support for the regime and its military *de facto* protection thereof, Russia's stakes in the Syrian war have been raised to such a level that Moscow would inevitably have a say in talks on any negotiated transition in Syria (Irish 2016). The military involvement of Russian forces, following this logic, has strengthened Russia's hand before negotiations take place. 'Military success is only worth as much as can be translated into political leverage at the negotiating table,' Dmitri Trenin (2015) writes. The strengthening of Assad's control over contested and previously rebel-held areas in Syria 'create[s] the conditions for the start of a peace process', as president Putin tellingly noted as he ordered the retreat of Russian forces in March 2016.³⁰ The possible further radicalisation of Islamic militants in the North Caucasus because of Russia's military adventures in Syria is a possible side effect of this foreign policy that hitherto, paradoxically, put a premium on preventing secessionist tendencies and the radicalisation of Russia's Muslim minorities (Bino & Krause 2017, p. 69). The argument that Russia is supporting Syria because Putin is 'mistaking Syria for Chechnya' (Hill 2013) therefore has been undermined in a risky foreign policy move that may have repercussions on Russia's societal and statist architecture. Security considerations at Russian borders were seemingly downgraded in priority as compared to wider global power considerations. The latter finding, together with the observation made in the first section above that material motivations alone cannot explain Russia's substantial involvement in Syria's armed conflict either, then, leads us to the conclusion that Russia's Syria policies have become a translation of global power considerations onto the regional plane. Here, Russia's disagreement with Western governments over Syria has become emblematic for its broader understanding of

³⁰ 'Meeting of President of Russia Vladimir Putin with Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and Defence Minister Sergey Shoigu,' March 14, 2016. *Russian foreign ministry*, available at: http://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/ckNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2141689, accessed 15 March 2016.

International Order.

Most notoriously, Russia's scepticism about the alleged universality of Western-promoted 'norms' was channeled as a critique of the instrumental use of the idea of humanitarian interventions. Russian officials refer to regime change in Iraq in 2003 and in Libya in 2011 and rhetorically ask whether both are now safer places as a result of these Western-led interventions (Lynch 2015). Russia became especially critical of the invocation of the 2005 'Responsibility to Protect' UN doctrine. With the Libyan case at the latest, Russia regarded such arguments essentially as 'an elaborate cover for regime change', as Charap (2013, p. 38) puts it. The Russian Foreign Policy Concept of 2013 reflects this concern and warns of the 'creative application' of concepts such as 'Responsibility to Protect' that ultimately undermine the foundations of international law,³¹ and the updated 2016 version adds in its Paragraph 26(c) that [Russia intends] 'to prevent military interventions or other forms of outside interference contrary to international law, specifically the principle of sovereign equality of States, under the pretext of implementing the "responsibility to protect" concept'.³² As Averre and Davies (2015) point out, Russia's resistance to the framing of the Syrian imbroglio as an 'R2P' case is not due to its opposition to the idea of humanitarian assistance *per se*, but due to substantive reservations regarding its implementation (p. 814). As they put it: 'Russia's response [...] has been to use its diplomatic power to mitigate its weakness by enmeshing the western liberal democracies in a web of legal and normative constraints in pursuit of a foreign policy which seeks equality in a pluralist world order' (p. 827).

Russia's normative contestation places an emphasis on regime stability (sovereignty) and the principle of non-interference in the domestic affairs of other states – a position that Russia shares with other states often classified as 'emerging', in particular the BRICS (Ferdinand 2014). However, the fact that Russian foreign policies at times willfully ignore this principle or apply it selectively is the greatest paradox of such a foreign policy discourse (Deyermond 2016). Russia's own military involvement in the war in Syria (a war that Russia continuously characterised as a 'civil war') was a clear example of the latter. As a remedy to this apparent paradox between its foreign policy discourse and conduct, Russia framed its military activities in Syria as the

³¹ 'Kontspetsiya vneshnei politiki Rossiiskoi Federatsii' (2013 Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation), *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation*, 2013, available at:

<http://www.mid.ru/bdomp/ns-osndoc.nsf/1e5f0de28fe77fdcc32575d900298676/869c9d2b87ad8014c32575d9002b1c38!OpenDocument>,

accessed 5 April 2016.

³² 'Kontspetsiya vneshnei politiki Rossiiskoi Federatsii' (2016 Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation), *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation*, 30 November 2016, available at: <http://www.scrf.gov.ru/security/international/document25/>, accessed 24 November 2017.

only ones that are legitimate in international law because of the official invitation that the Syrian government issued.³³ ‘We are the only actor that acts upon the Syrian government’s request’, a Russian defense ministry official stated in a discussion with the author.³⁴ Riyad Haddad, the Syrian ambassador to Russia, has even urged other countries to join Syria and Russia in their fight against terrorism, calling the Russian intervention the only one that is in compliance with international law – in contrast to the US-led international coalition’s.³⁵

Against this background, Russian Syria policies can be conceptualised as a forceful reversal of the classical understanding of norm diffusion as outlined above. They question contingent power structures and, in so doing, resist changes to the international security structure that would come with erosions to the Westphalian-based state system. In Russia’s view, transgressions of the latter should only be possible through policy coordination with Russia. The adherence to ‘sovereignty’ as a normative reference point, however, is instrumental in securing Russia’s status as a Great Power (*derzhavnichestvo*), as the above analysis has concluded. Publicly rejecting the idea of interventionism, Russia propagates foreign policies that counteract the attempt to ‘internationalise’ norms (Bevir and Gaskarth 2015, p. 76). Rather than accepting Western policy discourses (such as R2P) to justify interventions as expressions of international norms, Russia ‘rises’ as a co-shaper of norms that should define inter-state conduct. This complicates assumptions about a socialisation of ‘emerging powers’ into a prevailing order, and blurs the distinction between norm-takers and norm-setters (see also Lewis 2012, p. 1228). It is thus more insightful to analyse processes of ‘reciprocal socialisation’ in which ‘rising powers are socialised into the order, while reshaping it when they enter’ (Terhalle 2011). From a conceptual standpoint, the above analysis has therefore shown how Russian foreign policy in the Syrian conflict is an illustrative case of what, in a Kantian analogy, becomes an ‘immanent critique’ of the normative dominance of certain actors in the international structure (see also Wyn Jones 2005, pp. 220-229). It is a critique, in other words, from within the system of international security governance that seeks to lay bare some of its

³³ Oleg Morozov, Senator in the Russian Federation Council and a member of the Committee for International Affairs, thus puts it: ‘the US doesn’t like Russian airstrikes in Syria, but we were invited by the Syrian government’. Discussion with ‘young leaders’, including the author, at the Federation Council, Moscow, 16 February 2017, organised by the PICREADI center.

³⁴ Main directorate for international peacekeeping operations of the Russian defense ministry in discussion with ‘young leaders’, including the author, at the Russian defense ministry. Discussion organised by the PICREADI center. Moscow, 17 February 2017.

³⁵ ‘Syria’s ambassador to Russia urges all countries to join Syria and Russia against terrorism’, *Syrian Arab News Agency*, 1 October 2015, available at: <http://sana.sy/en/?p=56454>, accessed 12 February 2016.

dysfunctions. Breaches of sovereignty resulting in externally-enforced regime change are seen as the expression of a unipolar world. The world should be multipolar, according to Russian officials, and Russia should be recognised as a co-equal of Western governments. The language of ‘democratic’ international relations is a seminal case in point: Russia’s official foreign policy concept of 2013 breathes the ambition to ‘democratise’ international relations (Russian foreign ministry 2013), to deconstruct prevailing power asymmetries.

Yet, rather than positing a radically new language, Russian foreign policy is steeped in the very same terminology that emanates from the domestic context of ‘the West’. It is this ironic contradiction that Viatcheslav Morozov (2013) calls ‘the normative dependence of the Russian subaltern empire on the West’ (22).³⁶ He continues: Russia ‘does not challenge the western-dominated world order in any radical way; rather, it claims a legitimate voice in the debate how this world order must evolve’ (Morozov 2013, p. 19). Sakwa strikes a similar chord in his theorisation of the term ‘neo-revisionism’, by which he understands not the attempt to fundamentally change the rules of the game, but to partially revise its functioning (Sakwa 2015, p. 31, 2017, pp. 128-135; see also Haukkala 2008). Russian foreign policy, in this reading, is not revisionist by design, but seeks to achieve a recognition as an influential Great Power. Others, however, are more circumspect and interpret Russia’s ‘civilisational turn’ as a distinctive effort to emerge as an alternative pole in the multi-polar world Russia’s government so often calls for (Linde 2016; Tsygankov 2007, 2013).

Against this background, the case study of Russia’s Syria policies here has been an illustration of the complex processes of norm contestation and global change. The Russian-led talks on Syria in late December 2016 not only illustrate the Russian success in emerging as a shaper of a future security architecture, but also raise questions about its normative implications for the US, and other Western actors. The credibility of the doctrine of the ‘Responsibility to Protect’, for instance, has suffered greatly as a consequence of its selective usage and the Russian persistent obstruction against the invocation of that doctrine in Syria. Concepts and doctrines to structure the ‘international Order’ continually evolve. Russian foreign policy in Syria’s armed conflict, however, has laid bare the difficulty in obtaining a policy consensus on what ‘norms’ ought to count as legitimate. Whether Russia’s unilateral incursion in Syria helps move Syria’s future onto a more durable peaceful path is questionable, and Russia’s consistent belittlement of the atrocities and the humanitarian catastrophe in Syria and its ‘counter-insurgency’ strategies without regard for civilian lives are sure to be remembered with bitterness by many. But it has been a crushing reminder of the rise of Russia as a normative power to be reckoned with.

³⁶ In yet another irony, Russia makes self-defined exceptions to its principle of ‘non-interference’. Policy labels such as a ‘near abroad’ and Russian semi-covert interference in neighboring Ukraine are illustrative examples.

Conclusion

This paper has analysed Russian foreign policy in the Syrian conflict as an illustration to conceptualise Russia's role in international relations. It has thereby linked its research findings to the scholarly debate surrounding 'rising powers'. Russia's military incursions in Syria in 2015 and 2016 in particular have been analysed as an attempt to shift the global balance of power to one where Russian foreign policy mirrors that of a rising normative power. The 'emergence' assumption, it was shown, is often based on economic parameters that fail to take into account processes of reciprocal norm diffusion between established powers and those said to be 'emerging'. The Syria case here was used as an illustration to demonstrate processes of global normative change. Russian material interests in Syria are seemingly minimal. The Syrian-Russian trade volume is negligible, Syria has not been a reliable payee, and Russia's military bases in Syria have been identified as largely symbolical. Against this background, Russia's steadfast support for the preservation of Syrian government structures was explained in its wider regional as well as global dimension. On a regional and interregional level, Russia explains its military involvement in Syria with its 'fight against terrorism', yet a majority of Russian sorties flown bypass the 'Islamic State'. In Russia's discourse, all anti-Assad forces are deemed terrorists. The latter observation puts Russia at odds with all other external actors involved in Syria with the exception of Iran. Thus, given the absence of a material utility for Russia to engage in Syria and its willingness to position itself as an obstructionist player, Russian Syria policies have been analysed as motivated by considerations of a global nature. Russia articulates a willingness to emerge as an inevitable dialogue partner, primarily of the United States as the most influential military actor and guarantor of a liberal international order which Russia considers to be the cause for a dangerous erosion of a Westphalian system of international relations. It was shown how the Syrian case obtains an instrumental significance in this regard. Whilst the Libyan case of 2011, in a Russian understanding, was a precedent not to be repeated, Syria has become a test case for new workings of international consultation mechanisms between Russia and 'the West' (and the US in particular). Russia's military involvement in Syria's armed conflict served to demonstrate that the Russian leadership was poised to invest considerable political capital to influence the trajectory of this conflict in a way that may be counterintuitive if we account only for tangible material motivations. Against this background, the Syria case has shown that Russia rises as a normative actor in a decisive manner— at a time where Western governments are divided over which foreign policy course to adopt.

This is not to suggest that Russia's Middle Eastern policies should be conflated with a neo-Soviet

design to support revisionist forces in the region as long as they oppose US hegemony.³⁷ It would be an analytical fallacy to associate Russian support for the Assad government with a solidarity rationale that harks back to Soviet support for the Ba'ath regime under Hafiz al-Assad in the 1970s.³⁸ Russian Middle Eastern policies should thus not be seen through an outdated Cold War prism, as Dannreuther rightly points out (2012, p. 543). Instead of analogies about a 'new Cold War' and strategic enmity, it proves more instructive to read Russia's foreign policy as that of a power demanding a role recognition by the West that includes the right to co-define the normative bases for transgressions of state sovereignty. Obama's categorisation of Russia as an 'influential regional power' was a deliberate talking point playing on that claim – and implicitly denying such a right.³⁹ It is against this understanding that this paper has linked debates about Russia's role in the international system with the literature on international norm dynamics.

'Norm diffusion' is traditionally understood in a too unidirectional way – an intellectual stance which Monaghan (2016) likens to a state of 'mental arthritis' (p. 148). It has been suggested how fruitful scholarship can be produced by conceiving norm contestation instead as a 'two-way socialisation', whereby dominant narratives of World Order and security governance are challenged in an effort to revise the functioning of governance mechanisms. These need not be formal changes to institutional arrangements such as the UN fora, and this article has process-traced when and where Russia worked through the UN to have its imprint on regional security questions. Rather, it is understood that such norm contestation aims at the establishment of more inclusive consultation mechanisms between Russia and the West in security affairs – something that Moscow refers to as the 'democratisation' of international hierarchies. Russian norm contestation aims at the upholding of the principles of regime stability, the stability of state borders, and of non-interference into the domestic affairs of other states. While this article has also pointed out the contradictions inherent in such a position given Russia's oftentimes selective upholding of its proclaimed principles in its post-Soviet

³⁷ This was a policy that, especially during the Brezhnev reign, was marred by the contradiction of supporting regimes for ostensibly ideological causes, while these very regimes made it clear that they sought to establish relations with the United States and thereby undermined Russian policies, such as Syria and Egypt (Nizameddin 2013, p. 28; pp. 176-179). In this sense, it was only with the advent of the Orientalist Evgenij Primakov as foreign minister in 1996 that Russia formulated more nuanced, alternative policies to the US in the Middle East (Nizameddin 2013, p. 56). Primakov himself thus reflected on Soviet Syria policy in his 2009 book *Russia and the Arabs*: '[...] Hafez Assad's Syria had become the mainstay of Soviet policy in the Middle East since Egypt under Sadat had distanced itself from the Soviet Union and difficulties had arisen in Moscow's relations with Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq' (p. 240).

³⁸ For a discussion of Soviet policy towards Syria under Hafiz al-Assad, see Freedman 1991. Russia had also massively supported Syria before Hafiz' reign. From 1955 onwards until 1986, Syria emerged as the biggest non-communist buyer of Soviet weaponry (Kreutz 2007, p. 16).

³⁹ 'Barack Obama: Russia is a regional power showing weakness over Ukraine', *The Guardian*, 25 March 2014, available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/mar/25/barack-obama-russia-regional-power-ukraine-weakness>, accessed 11 February 2016.

neighborhood, it has shown how Russia's foreign policy behavior in Syria corresponds to the conceptualisation of a power that 'rises' in international relations despite adverse material preconditions. Russia's veto power against Western-sponsored Syria resolutions was used to undermine the normative standing of the 'Responsibility to Protect' doctrine, while its unilateral interventionism in Syria was meant to gradually shift the margins of permissiveness in state conduct. Russian state actions in Syria have seen the emergence of Russia as a key actor in international security governance. This finding extends beyond its significance for Western-Russian relations and presents a normative challenge for Western foreign and security policies at large.

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