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RUSSIA'S RISING PROFILE IN THE MIDDLE EAST: ENDEAVOR TO ESTABLISH A POLYCENTRIC ORDER IN THE REGION

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Abstract

Russia declared its aim of being one of the influential centers of an evolving multipolar world in the late 1990s. This objective appeared to be much more realizable in mid-2000s thanks to the political stability, economic growth and military resurgence attained under the leadership of Vladimir Putin. This renewed morale buttressed by growing capacity led the country to show much more interest in some regions such as the Middle East which had received scant attention from Russian foreign policy makers in the immediate post-Cold War period. Russia became one of the members of the Middle East Quartet that was set up to mediate the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, worked together with the UN Security Council members and Germany to find a political settlement to the nuclear program of Iran and participated actively to the Geneva peace talks that were organized to find a way out of the civil war in Syria. This paper claims that Russia contributes to these multilateral efforts in the Middle East in order to come to an understanding with the USA and the EU which will also strengthen its hand concerning the other international matters especially with the ones pertaining to the Eurasia.

Keywords: Post-Cold War period, Russia, multipolarity, Middle East, multilateralism

Özet

Rusya, 1990'ların sonlarında dönüşmekte olan çokkutuplu bir dünyanın etkili merkezlerden biri olma hedefini ilan etti. Bu hedef, Vladimir Putin'in liderliği altında ulaşılan siyasal istikrar, ekonomik büyüme ve askeri güçlenme sayesinde 2000'lerin ortalarında çok daha gerçekleşebilir görünmüştür. Artan kapasite ile desteklenen bu yenilenmiş moral ülkenin Soğuk Savaş'ın hemen

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ertesi döneminde Rus dış politika yapıcılarının dikkatini az çekmiş bazı bölgelere örneğin Ortadoğu'ya daha fazla ilgi göstermesine neden olmuştur. Rusya, İsrail-Filistin barış sürecine arabuluculuk etmek için kurulan Ortadoğu Dörtlüsü'nün üyelerinden biri olmuş, BM Güvenlik Konseyi üyeleri ve Almanya ile İran'ın nükleer programına siyasi bir çözüm bulmak için çalışmış ve Suriye'deki iç savaştan bir çıkış yolu bulmak için organize edilen Cenevre barış görüşmelerine aktif bir şekilde katılmıştır. Bu çalışma Rusya'nın Ortadoğu'daki bu çok taraflı çabalara ABD ve AB ile uluslararası meselelerde özellikle Avrasya ile ilgili olanlarda elini güçlendirecek bir anlayışa ulaşmak için katkı sağladığını iddia etmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Soğuk Savaş sonrası dönem, Rusya, çokkutupluluk, Ortadoğu, çoktaraflılık

Introduction

The early 1990s witnessed the struggle of Russia to seek out a respectable place for itself in the international system in the midst of political crises, economic hardships and social breakdown. Being the successor state of the once almighty and assertive Soviet Union, it was difficult for the Russian statehood to adapt to a new environment which was dominated by the United States of America (USA) in political, economic, military and technological realms.

Following a brief period of hesitation and introspection and shortly after the inauguration of Yevgeny Primakov as the new Foreign Minister in January 1996[1], Russia came to the conclusion that the unbridled power of the USA could only be evened out with the formation of a multipolar world that would be based on equal partnership of the great powers.[2] In line with this new reasoning, Russia decided to pursue a multi-vector foreign policy line and to concentrate on the somewhat neglected Eastern dimension of its foreign policy. Moscow and Beijing signed an agreement in April 1996 with the participation of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan that included military confidence-building measures along the former Sino-Soviet border which ruled out

[1] Primakov acted as Foreign Minister of Russia until September 1998. After then he served as Prime Minister until May 1999.

[2] The Russian National Security Blueprint which was approved by the President Boris Yeltsin in December 1997 named the USA, the EU, China, Japan and India as great powers. See "Russian National Security Blueprint," *Federation of American Scientists*, last modified December 17, 1997, https://fas.org/nuke/guide/russia/doctrine/blueprint.html.

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attacking each other or carrying out military exercises against one another.[3] Russia and China also penned the "Joint Declaration on a Multipolar World and the Establishment of a New International Order" on 23 April 1997 which rejected hegemony and monopolization in international affairs.[4] Primakov tried to bring in India to this coupling as well. In December 1998, on a state visit to New Delhi, he stated that the establishment of a "strategic triangle" among India, Russia and China would secure peace and stability in the world.[5] However, neither China nor India embraced this notion of a strategic triangle. Furthermore, the Russian financial crisis of August 1998 and the ailing performance of economy threw cold water on Primakov's ambitious plans.

Russia declared again its desire to be part of a multipolar world order which would ensure collective resolution of key problems of the international community in the new Foreign Policy Concept which was approved by the new President Vladimir Putin in June 2000.[6] Yet, Putin opted for a low profile foreign policy in his first term and gave weight to the economic recovery and strengthening of institutional mechanisms. He was eager to cooperate with the USA in the fight against global terrorism in Central Asia in the post 9/11 period although Washington unilaterally withdrew from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty in December 2001 to build its national defense system and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) 's expansion to the east continued unabated. Russia opposed the 2003 American invasion of Iraq which took place without a mandate from the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). This political stance was backed up by France and Germany but the other European Union (EU) countries were in no way willing to break ranks with the USA by coalescing around Russia.

Russia demonstrated a much more assertive and firm attitude with regard to the regional and international matters of concern in Putin's second period thanks to the increasing material capabilities of the country. Moscow came out strongly against the color revolutions which brought forth successive changes of government in the former Soviet states of Georgia, Ukraine and

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[3] Andrea Koppel, "China, Russia Sign Treaty Easing Tension on Border", *CNN*, 26 April 1996.

[4] "Russian-Chinese Joint Declaration on a Multipolar World and the Establishment of a New International Order, adopted in Moscow on 23 April 1997", *United Nations General Assembly*, last modified January 10, 2000, http://www.un.org/documents/ga/docs/52/plenary/a52-153.htm.

[5] "Russia Favours 'Strategic Triangle' among India, Russia and China", *UNI*, 21 December 1998.

[6] "The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation," *Federation of American Scientists*, accessed July 23, 2018, https://fas.org/nuke/guide/russia/doctrine/econcept.htm.

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Kyrgyzstan. Russia also announced its unease concerning the American plan to deploy a new missile defense system close to its borders, in Poland and the Czech Republic. Yet, despite the disagreement with the Western world, specifically the USA over myriad issues, Russia was ready to be part of a global orchestra of the leading powers which would be instrumental for the resolution of global problems.[7] The Foreign Policy Concept of January 2008 also underlined Russia's interest in continuing dialogue with the USA on foreign policy, security and strategical stability issues.[8]

The August 2008 War between Russia and Georgia and the subsequent Russian victory while ending Georgia's dream for NATO membership became the final nail in the coffin of the unipolar world according to some Russian foreign policy makers.[9] The new American President Barack Obama's decision to install the anti-missile system in Romania, instead of Poland and the Czech Republic, the signing of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) between Obama and the Russian President Dmitry Medvedev in April 2010 and increasing Russian involvement in Afghanistan led Russia to consider that a controversy management culture based on pragmatism and observance of balance of interests between the two countries were on the way to development as emphasized in the Foreign Policy Concept of February 2013.[10]

Russia's scheme of a Concert of Europe-type global management among the leading foci of power which would tolerate the formation of regional spheres of privileged interests hit the wall with the EU's decision to hammer out an association agreement with Ukraine. This triggered a series of events which led to the downfall of the Russian-leaning President of Ukraine who had called off the signing of the agreement and Moscow's incorporation of Crimea into Russian territory in March 2014. The straining of Moscow's relations with Washington and Brussels especially after the imposition of sanctions on Russia following the Crimean incident engendered a more active Russian role in the Middle East as revealed by the Russian military

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[7] Sergey Lavrov, "The Rise of Asia, and the Eastern Vector of Russia's Foreign Policy", *Russia in Global Affairs* 4, no. 3 (July-September 2006), last modified July 12, 2016, http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/number/n_6865.

[8] "The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation," *President of Russia*, last modified January 12, 2008, http://en.kremlin.ru/supplement/4116.

[9] Andrei Makarychev, "The Medvedev Presidency: Russia's Changing Profile", *CIDOB International Yearbook* (2010): 167.

[10] "Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation," *The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation*, last modified February 18, 2013, http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptICkB6BZ29/content/id/122186.

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intervention in Syria in September 2015.

Russia still wants to establish a great power management system as defined by Hedley Bull in which leading nations of the world are endowed with special rights and duties which will assist them playing significant roles regarding matters that will affect the peace and security of the international system as a whole.[11] Such a system will permit creation of spheres of influence, interest or responsibility among the great powers based on informal discussions, negotiations and eventual consensus. Russia expedited its efforts to set up an archetype of this system in the Middle East in the wake of its engagement with the vagaries of the Syrian Civil War.

It is possible however, to trace the origins of Russia's renewed interest in the Middle Eastern affairs back to the early 2000s which came on the scene concomitant to the enhancing political clout and economic capacity of the country. This study will start with the examination of Russia's first experience in a multilateral structure in the post-Cold War Middle East that was initiated to pull through the Israeli-Palestinian conundrum, it will then move on to Russia's contribution to the European endeavor to find a diplomatic solution to Iran's nuclear dossier and will finalize with Russia's international efforts to end the Syrian Civil War. The paper claims that Russia's involvement in all these international structures could be explained with its desire to be part of great power multilateralism comprising of leading power of foci such as the USA, the EU and China. Russia acts as a collaborative and responsible great power to control and end crises in the Middle East and in return expects from the other great powers to accept Eurasia as its legitimate zone of influence.

Russia's Participation to the Middle East Quartet: Utilizing the Membership for Enhancing Regional Stature

The Middle East Quartet came into being as an offshoot of a crisis meeting that took place in Madrid in April 2002 amidst increasing skirmishes between the Israelis and Palestinians in the West Bank. It was set up by the UN, EU, USA and Russia with the aim of assisting the mediation of the Middle East Peace Process and supporting the state-building efforts of the Palestinian side.[12]

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[11] Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* (London: Macmillan Press, 1995), 196.

[12] "The Quartet", *Office of the Quartet*, accessed August 12, 2018, http://www.quartetoffice.org/page.php?id=4e3e7y320487Y4e3e7.

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Russia was one of the permanent members of the UNSC. It had served as the Co-Chairman of the Madrid Peace Process of 1991 along with the USA and enjoyed amicable relations with the Palestinians since the Cold War years. Moreover, Moscow's strong ties with Syria, another important actor of the Middle East Peace Process, was considered valuable by the other three parties which had run into problems with Damascus from time to time. For Russia on the other hand, being invited to an international gathering regarding a significant issue in one of the critical regions of the world meant acknowledgement of its great power status by the USA and the EU. This was deemed substantial by Moscow as the invitation had come at a time when the country was still recovering from repercussions of the serious financial crisis of 1998. Moscow chose to act with calmness, caution and moderation within the Quartet and stayed away from sharp criticisms and hard-hitting remarks in the event of divergence of opinions with the other members, particularly with the USA.

Russia fell into disagreement with its Quartet partners mostly about dealing with the leadership of the Palestinian Authority (PA) as well as composition and functioning of the peace process. Starting with the early days of 2002 up until his death in November 2004, the USA had pursued a policy of isolating PA President Yasser Arafat on the grounds that he had leanings to the terrorist circles.[13] Russia came out against this move and many Russian officials drew attention to Arafat's importance in the Arab world and his being the elected leader of the Palestinian people.[14] Yet, Russia acquiesced to the creation of the post of prime minister at the instigation of the USA which would undertake some of the tasks of the Arafat, thereby would reduce his power within the framework of a Palestinian Reform program endorsed also by the EU.[15]

Another PA leadership matter that pitted Russia against the other members of the Quartet came to the open following the landslide victory of Hamas in January 2006 parliamentary election. Hamas was listed as a terrorist organization by the USA and the EU due to its non-recognition of Israel's right to exist and the targeting of Israeli civilians by its military wing. Russian

[13] Kris Arthur Bauman, "The Middle East Quartet of Mediators: Understanding Multiparty Mediation in the Middle East Peace Process" (ph.D. thesis, University of Denver, 2009), 142-143.

[14] Andrej Kreutz, *Russia in the Middle East: Friend or Foe?* (Westport: Praeger Security International, 2007), 73-74.

[15] Nathalie Tocci, "The Middle East Quartet and (In)effective Multilateralism, *Middle East Journal* 67, no. 1 (Winter 2012): 32.

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President Putin evaluated the election triumph of Hamas as a big blow to American diplomacy and added that Russia did not designate Hamas as a terrorist grouping.[16] Even so, Russia put its signature on the Quartet statement that was released five days after the election and laid down commitment to nonviolence, recognition of Israel, and acceptance of previous agreements and obligations as a condition for the prospective Palestinian government to receive aid.[17]

Russia spent time and effort to engage Hamas in a dialogue to ensure that it would abide by the Quartet's conditions. Russia had some practice talking Fatah into recognizing Israel's right to exist in the 1970s and 1980s.[18] Drawing on this past experience and being the only Quartet member that was on speaking terms with the organization, Russia figured out that bringing in Hamas to the negotiation table would not only make a significant contribution to the peace process but would also enhance its regional standing remarkably. As per this reasoning, a delegation of Hamas led by politburo chief Khaled Mashal was received in Moscow on 3 March 2006 by the Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov. Lavrov conveyed to Hamas the position of the Quartet and advocated Mashal to transform the organization into a real political party by incorporating its military units in PA security structures.[19] However, when the new Palestinian government eschewed from recognition of Israel and denunciation of terrorist methods in its program, the primary donors of Palestine, namely the EU and the USA decided to impose a financial boycott to which Moscow had to hew.

The increasing political rivalry between Fatah and Hamas exacerbated with the precarious economic conditions brought out a violent split in the summer of 2007. While Hamas clung to its power base in the Gaza Strip, Fatah initiated a new government in the West Bank. This severe division in the Palestinian leadership, which undermined the position of PA vis-à-vis Israel

[16] "Russia Does Not Accuse Hamas of Terrorism - Putin", *Kuwait News Agency (KUNA)*, 31 January 2006.

[17] "Quartet Statement January 30, 2006", *The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation*, last modified January 31, 2006, http://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/foreign_policy/international_safety/conflicts/-/asset_publisher/xIEMTQ3OvzcA/content/id/414650.

[18] Malath Alagha, "Identity and Foreign-Policy Making: A Comparative Analysis of Self-Other Perceptions in EU and Russian Peace-Making towards the Palestinian Statehood, 2000-2012" (ph.D. thesis, University of Exeter, 2014), 179.

[19] "Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov's Interview with Arab Media, Moscow, March 15, 2006", *The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation*, last modified March 21, 2006, http://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/409358.

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and created further imbalances in the Israeli-Palestinian confrontation induced Moscow to intervene in order to reconcile the warring factions. Russian officials met with representatives from Fatah and Hamas on separate occasions and also hosted a joint meeting with officials from both of the sides to reach a settlement.[20] All in all, although Russian attempts to include Hamas in the political process via taming of its sharp rhetoric and convincing it to form a unity government with Fatah achieved meager results at the best, this mediation endeavor elevated Moscow's position in the Middle East and equipped it with additional leverage in its dealings with the USA and the EU.

The Russian views diverged from those of the USA' when it came to the composition and execution of the peace process as well. Russia, along with the EU embraced the Arab Initiative of March 2002 which proposed normalization of Arab-Israeli relations in exchange for Israel's withdrawal from the occupied territories and fair settlement of the refugee problem.[21] The USA, however, preferred rooting for Israel's Disengagement Plan in February 2004 which encapsulated its withdrawal from the Gaza Strip and limited areas of the West Bank. Although Russia tried to bridle this American unilateralism via sponsoring of a UN resolution which granted the Security Council a role in monitoring Israeli and Palestinian compliance with the Roadmap, the initiative failed and Russia along with the EU and the UN gave its approval to Israel's Plan in May 2004.[22] Russia also supported the Annapolis Conference which was organized by the USA in November 2007 to revive the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations for a two-state solution. The Conference did not produce any concrete results and Russia's attempt to seize the moment and gain the upper hand in the peace process was nipped in the bud when Israel and the USA discountenanced repeated offers made by Putin and Lavrov to host a follow-up meeting in Moscow. Russia then tried to expand the composition of the Quartet by bringing in the Arab League as a new participant.[23] The League might balance the impact of Israel in the Quartet and put forth new ideas and approaches to the resolution of the impasse. Although the EU and the UN responded positively to the offer, the USA did not demonstrate any indication

[20] Alagha, 181.

[21] Robert O. Freedman, "Russia, Israel and the Arab-Israeli Conflict: The Putin Years", *Middle East Policy* 17, no. 3 (Fall 2010): 59.

[22] Khaled Elgindy, "The Middle East Quartet: A Post-Mortem", *Analysis Paper-The Saban Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings*, no. 25 (February 2012): 17.

[23] "Remarks by Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov at the Second Session of the Russian-Arab Cooperation Forum, Khartoum, 3 December 2014," *The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation*, last modified December 3, 2014, http://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/liga-arabskih-gosudarstv-lag-/-/asset_publisher/0vP3hQoCPRg5/content/id/806359.

of embracing the idea.

The partaking of Russia in the Middle East Quartet was considered as a significant opportunity by the Russian foreign policy makers to make a comeback to an erstwhile important region which had been put on the back burner in the early post-Cold War period. Russia pursued a calm and collected and constructive policy line in the Quartet and tried to position itself as a balancer, facilitator and mediator between the discordant parties. However, Moscow's weak material and bargaining position vis-à-vis the USA which elicited a backpedaling behavior most of the time, along with Hamas' reluctance to accept the Quartet's conditions and its incessant rift with Fatah kept Russia's efforts down. Moreover, the USA's recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital following the inauguration of the Trump administration while becoming another sign of American unilateralism in the Middle East further knocked the bottom out of Quartet's Israeli-Palestinian peace process plans.

Russia's Involvement in the P5+1: Playing the Dual-Roles of Exhorter and Facilitator

The controversy surrounding the Iranian nuclear program in which Russia would also play an important role throughout the years came on the scene in August 2002 with the revelation of a uranium enrichment complex at Natanz and heavy water facility at Arak which were constructed by the Iranian authorities without the knowledge of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). The IAEA started to investigate the Iranian nuclear activities in these two units shortly after the disclosure and released a resolution in September 2003 that called on Iran to cooperate with the Agency in full transparency and to suspend all uranium enrichment-related activities.[24] The three leading members of the EU (France, Germany and the United Kingdom (UK)) decided to take the matter into their own hands in October 2003 to hinder further escalation and clinched a deal with Tehran that encompassed Iran's stopping of uranium enrichment temporarily, signing the additional protocol (which it did on 18 December 2003) and informing the IAEA of its past nuclear activities in exchange for a promise of high-tech cooperation.[25] Another agreement

[24] "Implementation of the NPT Safeguards Agreement in the Islamic Republic of Iran", *International Atomic Energy Agency*, last modified September 12, 2003, https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/gov2003-69.pdf.

[25] Robert O. Freedman, "Putin, Iran, and the Nuclear Weapons Issue", *Problems of Post-Communism* 53, no. 2 (March/April 2006): 45.

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between Iran and the EU-3 came into being in November 2004 with which the Iranian side suspended its uranium enrichment activities on a voluntary basis. The USA which had stood away from the negotiations till then due to its clouded relationship with Iran also entered the fray in March 2005 and offered economic incentives to Iran in case the former dismantled its nuclear program.[26] However, coming to power of hard-liner Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as the new President of Iran in the wake of August 2005 election complicated the Iranian deal with the EU-3 as Iran restarted uranium enrichment at the Isfahan plant soon afterward his inauguration.

Russia's playing a more active role in the efforts toward political settlement of the Iranian nuclear issue through new plans of action took place amidst growing divergence between Iran and the EU-3 in the last months of 2005. Moscow enjoyed close political and military-technical ties with Tehran. As a matter of fact, Russia had completed the Bushehr nuclear power plant in October 2004 and signed an agreement with Iran to provide nuclear fuel for the reactor on the condition that the spent nuclear fuel would be sent back to Russia. Russia felt uncomfortable with the possibility that the Iranian administration with which it retained multiple ties might be exposed to a military attack because of its nuclear program and be replaced by a new regime which would be more eager to concoct political, economic and security bonds with the West. On the other hand, Moscow was reluctant to welcome Tehran as a member of the nuclear club as Iran in possession of nuclear weapons might pose danger for its southern borders and complicate matters for Russia in the South Caucasus and Central Asia. So, Russia while contributing to the joint efforts and collective measures to sustain the global nuclear nonproliferation regime also tried its best to shield Iran from tough economic and military-technical sanctions which would imperil the survival of the regime.

Russia came up with its first proposal for peaceful resolution of the Iranian nuclear stalemate which was backed up by the USA and the EU in December 2005. The proposal anticipated the Iranian-produced uranium to be enriched in Russia, in a joint Iranian-Russian centrifuge plant and the resumption of negotiations between the EU-3 and Iran.[27] The offer received a lukewarm response from Iran which insisted on enriching some uranium inside the country. A second Russian proposal which was put forth in May 2006 and suggested the establishment of an international joint venture in Russia for

[26] Ibid., 46.

[27] Paul Kerr, "Russia Joins Diplomatic Push on Iran", *Arms Control Today* 35, no. 10 (December 2005): 31.

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uranium enrichment was rejected by Tehran that sought the facility to be located on its territory.[28]

The Iranian file had been transferred to the UNSC in March 2006 and the negotiations were taking place among Iran and five permanent members of the UNSC (China, France, Russia, the UK, and the USA) plus Germany. Disappointed and frustrated by the absence of a positive response from Iran as expressed by Lavrov, Russia decided to support the UNSC Resolution 1696 in July 2006, 1737 in December 2006, 1747 in March 2007 and 1803 in March 2008 which required Iran to halt uranium enrichment activities[29], imposed a ban on the supply of nuclear-related technology and materials to the country, froze assets on key individuals and companies related to the enrichment program[30], enacted two-way arms embargo on Iran[31] and called on Tehran to stop any research and development associated with centrifuges and uranium enrichment.[32] Yet, Russia was not happy about the USA's additional unilateral sanctions on Iran as they were perceived against the spirit of partner-like approach among the P5+1.

The Russian reset policy of the USA under the presidency of Obama introduced in March 2009 which encapsulated the renouncement of the deployment of missile defense system in Poland and the Czech Republic in exchange for more convergence of the Russian position to the American one regarding the Iranian nuclear issue, revelation of the existence of a second Iranian uranium enrichment facility in September 2009 unknown to the IAEA and Iran's rejection of sending some 75% of its low-enriched uranium to Russia and France, where it would be turned into fuel for a Tehran medical research reactor in November 2009[33] led Russia to take tougher line against Iran and Moscow gave its backing to the UNSC Resolution 1929 in June 2010 which prohibited heavy weapon exports to Tehran.[34] In accordance with the resolution Russia also declared that it had suspended shipping the S-300 air

[28] Mark Katz, "Russian-Iranian Relations in the Ahmadinejad Era", *Middle East Journal* 62, no. 2 (Spring 2008): 206.

[29] "S/RES/1696 (2006)", *United Nations Security Council Subsidiary Organs*, last modified July 31, 2006, https://www.un.org/sc/suborg/en/s/res/1696-%282006%29.

[30] "S/RES/1737 (2006)", *United Nations Security Council Subsidiary Organs*, last modified December 23, 2006, https://www.un.org/sc/suborg/en/s/res/1737-%282006%29.

[31] "S/RES/1747 (2007)", *United Nations Security Council Subsidiary Organs*, last modified March 24, 2007, https://www.un.org/sc/suborg/en/s/res/1747-%282007%29.

[32] "S/RES/1803 (2008)", *United Nations Security Council Subsidiary Organs*, last modified March 3, 2008, https://www.un.org/sc/suborg/en/s/res/1803-%282008%29.

[33] "Iran Rejects Talk of Sanctions Over Nuclear Fuel Deal", *Reuters*, 19 November 2009.

[34] "S/RES/1929 (2010)", *United Nations Security Council Subsidiary Organs*, last modified June 9, 2010, https://www.un.org/sc/suborg/en/s/res/1929-%282010%29.

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defense missile systems to Iran in October 2010.

Russia, however, still came out against the additional unilateral sanctions imposed by the USA and the EU on Iran. Discomfited by the potential adverse impact of these sanctions on Russian businesses, Russia underlined that their unilateral character contradicted the common systemic approach taken in P5+1 and the UNSC.[35] Moscow also continued to come up with new proposals to find a way out of the crisis. In September 2011, Russia suggested Iran to take steps to increase cooperation with the IAEA which would be responded by easing of the sanctions gradually.[36] The November 2013 deal reached between Iran and the P5+1 by which Iran agreed to curb its nuclear program in exchange for limited sanctions relief was appraised as a revised version of September 2011 plan by Russian foreign ministry officials and indicated the extent of Russia's contribution to the resolution of the Iranian nuclear saga.[37] However, Moscow's linking of Iranian nuclear program with the USA's missile defense system plan in Europe by asking Washington to cancel the latter due to the removal of the threat from the former did not engender a positive response from Washington.

Russia regarded its helping out to the resolution of the Iranian nuclear standoff through diplomatic means as a proper move which would raise its profile in the international area strikingly. However, this time Russian national interests were more at stake compared to the Israeli-Palestinian issue as Russia retained close political and military-technical ties with Tehran. Russia pursued a two-pronged policy regarding the issue. On the one hand, it brought forward many proposals for the peaceful settlement of the matter and used its membership in the UNSC to de-escalate the crisis. On the other hand, it approved the UNSC resolutions which would urge Tehran to cooperate more whole-heartedly with the IAEA. All these efforts which were crowned with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action for the Iranian nuclear program in July 2015 were faced with the danger of coming to naught however, following the USA's withdrawal from the nuclear deal in May 2018.

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[35] "Comments by Russian MFA Spokesman Andrei Nesterenko on the Approval by EU Foreign Affairs Council of Additional Sanctions against Iran," *The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation*, last modified July 27, 2010, http://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/maps/ir/-/asset_publisher/HUPBmpXjn4Ob/content/id/240368.

[36] Peter Crail, "Iran Welcomes Russian Nuclear Proposal", *Arms Control Today* 41, no. 7 (September 2011): 26.

[37] Moritz Pieper, "Between the Democratisation of International Relations and Status Quo Politics: Russia's Foreign Policy towards the Iranian Nuclear Programme", *International Politics* 52, no. 5 (2015): 576.

Russia's Engagement in the Syrian Civil War: Strengthening the Regional Profile via Diplomacy and Military Intervention

The Syrian Civil War which had begun in March 2011 and had incurred huge losses on the infrastructure, material well-being and human capital of the Syrian state has not come to an end yet despite the launch of many peace initiatives throughout the years. Russia proved to be one of the crucial actors in the unfolding crisis owing to utilization of its veto power in the UNSC in favor of the Syrian regime, its presentation of the Syrian chemical weapons elimination framework, its active support to the Syrian regime's military operations and finally its involvement in peace process negotiations. All these efforts beefed up Russia's position in the Middle East and led the other important players especially the USA to take more heed of Russian views regarding the region.

The protests mounted against the authoritarian and repressive rule of Bashar al-Assad grew into an armed rebellion in the summer of 2011 and were reciprocated by a harsh military crackdown. The three members of the UNSC, the USA, the UK and France imputed the turmoil in Syria mostly to the maltreatment of the opposition forces at the hands of the Syrian security units and wanted to enact resolutions in the UNSC which would impose diplomatic and economic sanctions on the Syrian government unless it ceased to use force against civilians. However, Russia along with China vetoed these resolutions[38] because they did not want to experience the repetition of the Libyan scenario. The Chinese and Russian implied assent to a similar UNSC resolution regarding Libya by abstaining from voting had paved the way for the NATO operation in March 2011 which brought the downfall of the Gaddafi regime and resulted in considerable economic losses for the two countries. Therefore, both of the countries underlined the need to give priority to the diplomatic tools and backed up the cease-fire plan prepared by Kofi Annan, the UN and Arab League Envoy to Syria in March 2012.[39] Three months later UNSC

[38] "Security Council Fails to Adopt Draft Resolution Condemning Syria's Crackdown on Anti-Government Protestors, Owing to Veto by Russian Federation, China", *United Nations*, last modified October 4, 2011, https://www.un.org/press/en/2011/sc10403.doc.htm and "Security Council Fails to Adopt Draft Resolution on Syria as Russian Federation, China Veto Text Supporting Arab League's Proposed Peace Plan", *United Nations*, last modified February 4, 2012, https://www.un.org/press/en/2012/sc10536.doc.htm.

[39] Esmira Jafarova, "Solving the Syrian Knot Dynamics within the UN Security Council and Challenges to its Effectiveness", *Connections* 13, no. 2 (Spring 2014): 29.

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members along with regional states such as Iraq, Kuwait, Turkey and Qatar gathered in Geneva and started to work on solutions that would end the internecine fighting. The communiqué, co-drafted by Lavrov and the US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton envisaged the establishment of a transitional governing body with full executive powers, commencement of a national-dialogue process encompassing all segments of the Syrian society, review of the constitutional order and holding of free and fair multi-party elections.[40] Yet, the controversy resurfaced between Russia and the USA concerning the political future of al-Assad prevented the achievement of further progress in the Geneva Process.

The incessant warfare whipped up in Syria with interference of regional powers and participation of many foreign fighters from all around the world transformed into a scathing phase with the use of chemical weapons in the country starting from December 2012.[41] The chemical assaults culminated in August 2013 when more than 1,000 people lost their lives as a result of an attack carried out in Ghouta, suburban area of Damascus.[42] While the Western countries and the opposition groups put the blame on the Syrian government, al- Assad denied the allegations. It became the Russian proposal of September 9, 2013, which anticipated the elimination of Syrian chemical weapon arsenal within a strict time-frame that ended the crisis situation. Russia and the USA signed the Framework for Elimination of Syrian Chemical Weapons on 14 September 2013 which set down the procedures for swift destruction[43] and by October 2014 nearly 98% of the declared stockpile had been destroyed.[44]

The rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), the radical Islamic armed group in early 2014 and its capture of large chunks of territory in western Iraq and eastern Syria coupled with the Syrian opposition's victories on the battlefield against the regime forces had reduced the zeal for peace negotiations by summer 2015. It became again Russia that turned the tide with its successful air campaign kicked off on 30 September 2015 against ISIL and anti-regime military units that breathed life into the Syrian regime. The

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[40] "Action Group for Syria Final Communiqué", *United Nations*, last modified June 30, 2012, http://www.un.org/News/dh/infocus/Syria/FinalCommuniqueActionGroupforSyria.pdf.

[41] Daryl Kimball and Kelsey Davenport, "Timeline of Syrian Chemical Weapons Activity, 2012-2018", *Arms Control Association*, last modified August 17, 2018, https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/Timeline-of-Syrian-Chemical-Weapons-Activity.

[42] Ibid.

[43] "Framework for Elimination of Syrian Chemical Weapons", *U.S. Department of State*, last modified September 14, 2013, https://2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2013/09/214247.htm.

[44] Paul F. Walker, "Syrian Chemical Weapons Destruction: Taking Stock and Looking Ahead", *Arms Control Today* 44, no. 10 (December 2014): 8.

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reversal on the combat zone expedited the renewal of diplomatic traffic and a peace initiative was launched in Vienna in October 2015. The talks eventuated in the formation of the International Syrian Support Group, a multilateral diplomatic body co-chaired by Russia and the USA with the aim of achieving a cease-fire and starting a political transition process. A cessation of hostilities agreement was put into action in February 2016 under the supervision of Moscow and Washington by exerting their leverage on their respective allies and proxies. However, the cease-fire process was punctured many times by both the regime and opposition military forces and strained the political interaction between Russia and the USA. Russia then in late 2016 decided to start a new format of talks in Astana on a parallel basis to the UN-led Geneva Process that was resumed in March 2016 which brought in Iran and Turkey, the two regional powers which retained control and influence on some powerful armed groups in Syria to the negotiation table. The creation of de-escalation zones in May 2017 following the discussions between the three countries and re-launch of a cease-fire in December 2017 has become a glimmer of hope for the end of the Syrian Civil War although all the relevant parties to the conflict are aware that it is a tall order.

Russia played a controversial, yet critical role in the Syrian Civil War which altered the course of the fighting. Moscow's utilization of the veto card in the UNSC along with China despite sharp criticisms from the international community ruled out the military option against the Syrian regime and its military intervention in the war helped the Syrian government to recover from severe territorial losses. Russia also emerged as a substantial partner in the diplomatic process when one took into account its contribution to the Syrian chemical weapon dismantlement procedure, Geneva Process and Astana Peace Platform. So, Russia appeared as an indispensable actor in settlement of the crisis situation and brought its status in the Syrian predicament closer to an equal footing with the USA.

Conclusion

Russia has been making steady and consistent efforts towards establishing a multipolar world order or a great power management system since mid-2000s in which leading powers of the world, principally the USA, Russia, China, the EU, Japan and India would respect each other's zone of influence, take joint actions to avoid or at least to contain wars and crises and decide on requisite measures to deal with major global issues.

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The Middle East has served as a useful testing area where Moscow could experiment the viability of such a polycentric international system since 2002. Russia became one of the members of the Middle East Quartet which tried to mediate the intractable Israeli-Palestinian peace process, contributed considerably to the multilateral efforts that sought a peaceful solution to the controversy surrounding the Iranian nuclear weapon program and supported actively, even spearheaded the peace talks which were organized to end the Syrian Civil War.

It could be said that Russia's track record regarding the formation of a multipolar system in the Middle East revealed mixed results. Both the Middle East Peace Process and the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action for the Iranian nuclear program have encountered major stumbling blocks following the inauguration of the Trump administration in the USA and none of the other great powers, including Russia seemed to equip with the capacity to induce Washington to retreat to a conciliatory position. The Syrian case however, proved to be a different story. Russia's diplomatic maneuvers along with its military propping up of the regime changed the course of the events in the war and persuaded the USA to bring in Russia as an equal partner to the bargaining table that would decide the future of the country.

Russia's contribution to the multilateral attempts to resolve the Middle Eastern problems neither relieved the tension with the West over Crimea and Eastern Ukraine nor ended the sanctions imposed. Furthermore, the USA did not demonstrate any willingness to cancel the deployment of the new missile system in Europe. The Western world rejects the Russian linkage schemes and remains aloof to the idea of formation of exclusive zones of influence around the world. So although Russia has raised its profile in the Middle East dramatically since the mid-2000s, it is still a long way away from building up a polycentric order on a global basis which necessitates the endorsement and collaboration of other great powers.

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