

**T.C.
SAKARYA UNIVERSITY
SOCIAL SCIENCES INSTITUTE
DEPARTMENT OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS**

**RUSSIAN FOREIGN POLICY IN THE MIDDLE EAST IN THE
PUTIN ERA: SEEKING HEGEMONY?**

Mariya ERKAN

PHD DISSERTATION

Supervisor: Assoc. Prof. Ismail EDIZ

JANUARY - 2023

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“This dissertation was defended online on 26/01/2023 and was unanimously accepted by the jury members whose names are listed below.”

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Mariya ERKAN

26/01/2023

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My doctoral path was an exciting adventure and a fruitful period of my life, which gave me the opportunity to meet new interesting people, professionals in their field, fascinating and captivating, to gain valuable knowledge, to be imbued with a different culture and live this segment of life, gaining new experience and learning something new every day. All this, of course, became possible due to the fact that my life was filled with people around me who contributed to my academic life and supported me throughout this time. I would like to take this opportunity to express my gratitude to my supervisor, Assoc. Prof. Ismail Ediz, for his guidance, interest in my research project and encouragement, responsiveness and patience over the course of my doctorate studies at Sakarya University. His mentorship has been pivotal to my research process. I am thankful for his time and insights.

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the members of my dissertation monitoring committee, Prof. Dr. Tuncay Kardaş and Assoc. Prof. Ismail Numan Telci, for their recommendations on earlier drafts of this manuscript, as well as for their critical guidance and insights, invaluable academic support and advice. I received extensive feedback through several meetings, allowing me to enhance the final draft of this dissertation. It was an honour to debate every insight that I proposed in this dissertation with them.

My research would not have been possible without the financial support of the Türkiye Scholarships program funded by the government of the Republic of Türkiye. It was an honor and a great achievement for me to receive a PhD scholarship, which provided me with financial independence to embark on this research project.

My heartfelt gratitude will always be to my parents, Grigoriy Chernikov and Olga Chernikova, and my younger sister Nina, who have been there for me over the years.

Last but not least, I am grateful to my husband Engin Erkan, for entering my life, for his love, care, understanding, support and advice throughout this process.

Mariya ERKAN

26/01/2023

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ABBREVIATIONS

EAEU	: Eurasian Economic Union
FPE	: Foreign Policy Executive
FSB	: Federal Security Service
GDP	: Gross Domestic Product
IAEA	: International Atomic Energy Agency
IMEMO	: Institute of World Economy and International Relations
INF	: Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces
IS	: Islamic State
ISIS	: Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
JCPOA	: Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action
KGB	: Committee for State Security
MENA	: Middle East and North Africa
MW	: Megawatt
NATO	: North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NPT	: Non-Proliferation Treaty
OPEC	: Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries
R&D	: Research and Development
SCO	: Shanghai Cooperation Organization
START	: Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty
UAE	: United Arab Emirates
UAV	: Unmanned Aerial Vehicle
UN	: United Nations
UNSC	: United Nations Security Council
US	: United States
USSR	: Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
WWER	: Water Water Energy Reactor
YPG	: People's Protection Units

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ABSTRACT	
Title of Thesis: Russian Foreign Policy in the Middle East in the Putin Era: Seeking Hegemony?	
Author of Thesis: Mariya ERKAN	
Supervisor: Assoc. Prof. Ismail EDIZ	
Accepted Date: 26/01/2023	Number of Pages: vii (pre text) + 248 (main body) + 37 (add)
This dissertation is devoted to the foreign policy pursued by Russia in the Middle East in the modern period, designated as the Putin era (from 2000 to the present). The purpose of this research is to examine Russia's foreign policy behavior in the Middle East, characterized by the transition from a relatively low profile to a high profile, in order to find out whether its efforts to increase its power are aimed at pursuing regional hegemony or it has other incentives. Taking neoclassical realism as a theoretical foundation, this study includes an analysis of independent (systemic) variables and intervening (unit-level) variables to identify the causal relationship of Russia's foreign policy decisions regarding the Middle East, which allows a different perspective on Russia's foreign policy behavior in the region (dependent variable), as well as on a global scale. Using a soft positivist approach as a methodological framework, this study tests theoretical assumptions on the example of Russian foreign policy regarding the Iranian nuclear crisis and the Syrian conflict. Thus, focusing on the geographical area of the Middle East in a certain time frame (the Putin era), this dissertation provides an insight into the pattern of Russia's interaction within regional subsystem, and also reveals its place and role in the regional balance of power. The answer to the question of whether Russia seeks hegemony in the Middle East contributes to a clearer understanding of the limits of its ambitions and capabilities, both at the regional and global levels. 	
Keywords: Russia, Middle East, Foreign Policy, Hegemony	

ÖZET	
Başlık: Putin Döneminde Ortadoğu'da Rus Dış Politikası: Hegemonya mı Arıyor?	
Yazar: Mariya ERKAN	
Danışman: Doç. Dr. İsmail EDİZ	
Kabul Tarihi: 26/01/2023	Sayfa Sayısı: vii (ön kısım) + 248 (ana kısım) + 37 (ek)
Bu tezde, Putin dönemi olarak adlandırılan modern dönemde (2000'den günümüze) Orta Doğu'daki Rus dış politikası incelenmiştir. Bu araştırmanın amacı, Rusya'nın Orta Doğu'daki nispeten düşük bir profilden yüksek bir profile geçişle karakterize edilen dış politika davranışında gücünü artırma çabalarının bölgesel hegemonya peşinde koşmaya yönelik mi yoksa başka amaçlarının olup olmadığını incelemektir. Neoklasik realizmi kuramsal bir temel olarak ele alan bu çalışma, Rusya'nın Ortadoğu'ya ilişkin dış politika kararlarının nedensel ilişkisini belirlemek için bağımsız (sistemik) değişkenler ve müdahaleci (yerel düzeyinde) değişkenlerin analizini içermekte ve bu da hem Rusya'nın bölgedeki, hem de küresel ölçekte dış politika davranışına (bağımlı değişken) farklı bir bakış açısı kazandırmaktadır. Metodolojik bir çerçeve olarak yumuşak pozitivist bir yaklaşım kullanan bu çalışma, İran nükleer krizi ve Suriye ihtilafına ilişkin Rus dış politikası örneğinde teorik varsayımları test ediyor. Bu nedenle, belirli bir zaman diliminde (Putin dönemi) Orta Doğu'nun coğrafi alanına odaklanan bu tez, Rusya'nın bölgesel alt sistem içindeki etkileşim modeline dair bir fikir vermekte ve aynı zamanda bölgesel güç dengelerindeki yerini ve rolünü ortaya koymaktadır. Rusya'nın Ortadoğu'da hegemonya arayışında olup olmadığı sorusunun cevabı, hem bölgesel hem de küresel düzeyde hırs ve yeteneklerinin sınırlarının daha net anlaşılmasına katkı sağlıyor.	
Anahtar Kelimeler: Rusya, Orta Doğu, Dış Politika, Hegemonya	

INTRODUCTION

Russia's relations with the Middle East have a long history with varying degrees of intensity in different periods. Despite the strategic importance of this region, it has never been at the top of Russia's foreign policy priorities, although it has its place in Russian foreign policy concepts and has received more attention in the Putin era, especially in the last decade. The issues of security, economy, trade, energy and technological development are of great importance throughout the history of Russia's relations with the region. Back in the time of Peter the Great, the testament attributed to him indicated the need to move as close as possible to the Straits (the Bosphorus and Dardanelles) and Istanbul, as well as the Persian Gulf, and it was noted that whoever rules these territories will rule the world. The empire does not exist more, but imperial ambitions still exist in modern Russia, which is conditioned not just by its desire to satisfy historical aspirations, but also by a set of objective factors of a systemic and domestic nature. Therefore, nowadays Russia is actively operating in the Middle East, attracting the attention of scholars studying the phenomenon of its return to the region.¹

After Vladimir Putin came to power as a President of Russian Federation, Russian foreign policy in the Middle East received a significant impetus, which is particularly evident in the last decade. Playing the role of a major actor in dealing with Middle Eastern issues, it raises the question of pursuing hegemonic intentions operating in the region or rather merely tending to upgrade its international status acting in the Middle East indirectly through third parties and getting the proxies in the contemporary transforming international system. Thus, this research examines the Russian foreign policy conducted in the Middle East in the Putin era (from 2000 to present) to reveal whether it positions itself as a hegemon or a dominant restraining force that ensures the balance of power in the region.

¹ See, for example, Jakub Grygiel, "Russia's Return to the Middle East," *The Caravan* 1924 (December 2019), <https://www.hoover.org/research/russias-return-middle-east>. Access Date 29/12/2022; Shay Har-Zvi, "The Return of the Russian Bear to the Middle East," *Middle East Security Studies*, no. 120 (May 2016); Marco Siddi, "Russia's Return to Middle Eastern and Mediterranean Geopolitics and Implications for West-Russia Relations," in *Threats to Euro-Atlantic Security: A Collection of Essays from Members of the Young Generation Leaders Network on Euro-Atlantic Security*, ed. Andrew Futter (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019); and Angela Stent, "Russia's Return to the Middle East," *The Foreign Service Journal* (July/August 2020): 73-76.

This dissertation endeavours to uncover the logic for the development of Russia's foreign policy, characterized by relatively low profile in the first years of 2000s towards consistent build-up of influence and power in the region of the Middle East to date. It does so by using a theoretical analysis of the Type III neoclassical realism in order to provide the understanding of Russia's external behaviour, and more accurately to identify Russia's rationale for the restored activity in the region and to determine how that rationale derives from the historical and current international situation.

Thus, the purpose of this dissertation is fourfold: conceptual, since it considers the definition of terms and their differentiation; theoretical, as it is built on the framework of neoclassical realist approach; empirical, attempting to explain Russian foreign policy towards Middle East in the insufficiently explored period of Putin's being in power; and methodological, because it applied a series of methods and tools to the geographical case that is Middle East giving special attention to Iranian nuclear crisis and Syrian civil war. It has to be noted that this dissertation does not attempt to study Russia's relations with each of the Middle Eastern states, as it primarily focuses on the behavior of Russia per se with a detailed study of two cases.

Conceptual Framework

The current state of the system of international relations demonstrates instability. It is constantly changing requiring states and non-state actors to transform the political course responding to new global challenges and threats. This study examines such concept as hegemony in the context of Russian presence in the Middle East exploring its reassertion as a great power through a series of events. Specifically, it makes conclusions on the factors that determine the extent of Russian assertiveness in the Middle East, as well as provides an analysis of the nature of its intentions.

The concept of hegemony makes a significant contribution to a better understanding of contemporary international relations and the meaning of power. What does hegemony mean? How great powers achieve hegemony? How do the other actors in the international system react to the presence and the exercise of a hegemonic power? Answering these questions can help to explain the nature and the drives of the foreign policy-making of the great powers, namely the character of Russian ambitions in the Middle East and its attempts to upgrade its status.

The origins of the term “hegemony” come from ancient Greek “hegemonia” that literally means the dominant and oppressive status of one element in the system over the others.² The concept of hegemony has evolved with time. Despite the age-old history of this concept, it has not lost its relevance. Scholars note that the Middle East has historically been the subject of conquest by various empires and superpowers, pursuing hegemonic goals and using various means, including those distinguished by their extreme nature.³ Nowadays, the international community is witnessing the attempts of states that are trying to maintain the hegemonic status or are trying to achieve or getting closer to it.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, which thus marked the end of Cold War, the international system lost its bipolarity and became unipolar, led by the United States, which in fact received unlimited opportunities to exercise its influence and became the dominant power in the post-Cold War era. Its power and influence in the international system have been so significant that the majority of the scholars were talking about its hegemony.⁴ Indeed, the United States became a hegemonic power in the global system pursuing the interests of its power elite as its “national interest” which affects the primacy in the hierarchy of the global system.⁵ However, the unipolar system is not stable one due to the changing strategic environment, characterized by the rise of other states associated with the accumulation of their power, and consequently leading to changes in the relative distribution of material resources in the international system. Accordingly, the twenty first century is marked by shifts in the international system due to the emergence of competing powers for influence in the world. It is primarily about China and Russia. Therefore, the scholars argue that the US hegemony has been declining over the years.⁶

² Sait Yilmaz, “State, Power and Hegemony,” *International Journal of Business and Social Science* 1, no. 3 (December 2010): 194.

³ Simon Tsipis, “Soviet and Contemporary Russian Foreign Policy: Comparative Perspective Analyzed through Three Case Studies: Egypt, Syria, and Iran” (PhD diss., Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität Bonn, 2022), 7.

⁴ See, for example, Lavina Rajendram Lee, *US Hegemony and International Legitimacy: Norms, Power and Followership in the Wars on Iraq* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010); Carla Norrlof, *America's Global Advantage: US Hegemony and International Cooperation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); and Arturo Santa-Cruz, *US Hegemony and the Americas: Power and Economic Statecraft in International Relations* (New York: Routledge, 2020).

⁵ Aswini K. Ray, *Western Realism and International Relations: A Non-Western View* (New Delhi: Foundation Books, 2004), 148-160.

⁶ See, for example, Chris Brown and Kirsten Ainley, *Understanding International Relations* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 46; Reinhard Hildebrandt, *US Hegemony: Global Ambitions and Decline*

Focusing on Russia as the main subject of this study, the question arises, how great is its potential to take the place of a hegemon? Is such a scenario possible? But, first of all, it is worth asking the question, does Russia have such a motivation or is it driven by other goals?

Conceptually, there is a difference between hegemony and dominance (military, economic or technological) that should be clear understood. Dominance includes the actual or threatened use of coercion. Hegemony, in its turn, suggests the willing suspension of disbelief within a society against the superior virtues and interests of the hegemon.⁷

The term “hegemony” is used in this research in its realist conception that means the ability to set rules of actions and ensure their compliance, as well as the willingness to act in accordance with this ability, while accepting a view of the world in which the state is the central subject, and well differentiating the concepts of domestic and international.⁸ The key element of realism’s understanding of hegemony is the hegemonic stability theory that states, “A strong dominant power ensures stability, but when that strong power begins to slip and a new challenger rises, war is more likely.”⁹ Robert Gilpin argues that the existence of a superpower that is a hegemon determines the stability of the international system, since the configuration of other powers will develop relative to the hegemonic actor.¹⁰

According to offensive realism, great powers aim to gain as much power as possible in order to be able to survive and, ideally, achieve hegemony.¹¹ However, geopolitically projecting their power on a global level requires a large amount of resources and is associated with high costs, which in itself complicates the achievement of the goal of becoming a hegemon on a global scale. A simpler option is to achieve regional hegemony, which means dominating one’s own geographical area.¹² Thus, for example, in the Middle

(Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2009); and Justin Massie and Jonathan Paquin, eds., *America’s Allies and the Decline of U.S. Hegemony* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020).

⁷ Ray, *Western Realism*, 148-160.

⁸ Brown and Ainley, *Understanding International Relations*, 46, 90-91.

⁹ Joseph Nye, *Understanding International Conflicts: An Introduction to Theory and History* (New York: Longman, 2007), 64.

¹⁰ Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

¹¹ John J. Mearsheimer, “Structural Realism,” in *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity*, 3rd ed., ed. Tim Dunne, Milja Kurki, and Steve Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 78.

¹² Mearsheimer, “Structural Realism,” 89.

East, American relatively measured response to the Syrian crisis, following its focus on Asia, Obama's moderate policy towards Russia, and security concerns over the increasing terrorist threat, have reinforced the aspirations of other global (Russia) and regional actors (Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Türkiye) to join the struggle for the redistribution of power in the Middle East. In the absence of a regional hegemon this struggle took a similar form. However, the question of how much these players are interested in and are able to sustain the position of the regional hegemon remains open. This study helps to clarify this question regarding Russia's place in the Middle East subsystem.

Thus, by applying a realist understanding of hegemony to the modern international system with its transforming nature, a special focus is made on the analysis of the features of Russia's foreign policy towards the Middle East.

Since this study is carried out within the framework of neoclassical realism, an important role in the formation of Russia's foreign policy is given to the influence of domestic factors. To what extent Russia's aspirations to increase its power or to seek hegemony in the Middle East are linked to the period of Vladimir Putin's rule, what is the role of his personality, strategic culture, relations between the state and society, as well as the structure of the state itself. All these factors have a different degree of influence on the foreign policy decision-making process. This dissertation attempts to determine the extent of this influence on decisions regarding the Middle East. To what extent Russia takes into account these intervening variables and which of them still have more weight in Russian foreign policy.

Theoretical Framework

Realism is seen as a rich set of statements about the world based on pessimism about moral progress, belief in the essentially conflictual character of international interactions resulting from the anarchic nature of the international system and an understanding of power as the final arbiter of all things political.¹³ This theory has been central to the study

¹³ Robert G. Gilpin, "The Richness of the Tradition of Political Realism," *International Organization* 38, no. 2 (1984): 287-304, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2706441>. Access Date 02/01/2023; Martin Griffiths, *Realism, Idealism and International Politics: A Reinterpretation* (London: Routledge, 1992), 130-154; and Juha Mononen, "War or Peace for Finland? Neoclassical Realist Case Study of Finnish Foreign Policy in the Context of the Anti-Bolshevik Intervention in Russia 1918-1920" (master's thesis, University of Tampere, 2008), 1.

of international phenomena in the field of international relations over the past century. However, classical realism and neorealism are focused on the developments of system level and the importance of system structure. Their theoretical opponent, liberalism, pays too much attention to the domestic motivations and institutions. Multi-level approaches do not take into account the intermediary link between the external environment and domestic drives of state's foreign policy. Since the current topic requires review of both international (systemic variables) and domestic (intervening unit-level variables) environments in connection with each other, the analytical framework of this research draws on neoclassical realist theory, which appears to be the best developed epistemologically and ontologically to explain Russian foreign policy (the dependent variable) capturing both levels of analysis and their components. It seems to be the most appropriate model for tracing the logic and motivations behind Russian foreign policy decisions and for analysing the consequences of them. In this dissertation, two notable international events were selected as case studies, namely the Iranian nuclear crisis and the Syrian conflict, to be tested within the scope of neoclassical realism.

It is known that Russian foreign policy is a power politics, the theoretical substantiation of which is realism.¹⁴ Reichwein points out three reasons why is it suitable to study Russian foreign policy in terms of neoclassical realist theory: (1) the focus of the Russian IR discipline on the realist view; (2) features of the Russian foreign policy decision-making process based on the perception of decision makers about power politics and its correspondence with Russian foreign policy; (3) features of Russian foreign policy behavior that are not always explicable within the framework of structural realism.¹⁵

Following Russia's intervention in the Syrian civil war in September 2015 and its military successes, it is considered that Russia has returned to the Middle East, as well as restored its status as a great power in the international arena. What prompted Russia to take active steps towards the Middle East? Why did Russia make such decision of military

¹⁴ Alexander Reichwein, "Realism and European Foreign Policy: Promises and Shortcomings," in *The SAGE Handbook of European Foreign Policy*, ed. Knud Erik Jorgensen et al. (London: SAGE, 2015), 102, <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781473915190.n7>. Access Date 02/01/2023.

¹⁵ Alex Reichwein, "Security, Geopolitics, or Irredentism? Explaining Russian Foreign Policy from a Neoclassical Realist Perspective" (paper presented at the 57th ISA Annual Convention 2016 "Exploring Peace", Atlanta, GA, March 16-19, 2016), 10-11, http://www.uni-giessen.de/fbz/fb03/institute/ifp/Lehrende_Team/Mitarbeiter_innen/reichwein/data/NCR_Russian_Foreign_Policy_ISA_2016_Reichwein. Access Date 04/05/2019.

engagement? What lies at the bottom of the Russian strategy? Is there just an issue of security resolving through the means of such strategies as the balance of power, balance of threat, or regional hegemony against potential challengers and competitors in the region?¹⁶ Is it looking for a new sphere of influence in accordance with its geopolitical and geostrategic calculations? It may not be enough to answer these questions from the perspective of traditional realist theories. In this sense, the advantage of neoclassical realism is its focus on the relationship between systemic pressures and domestic factors that are involved in the shaping of state's foreign policy decisions. It integrates the systemic level and the domestic level into a single multilevel framework of explanation, representing an advanced tool for analyzing and explaining foreign policy.¹⁷ Hence, within the framework of the neoclassical realism, the challenge is to consider a set of parameters that include external factors and a range of domestic imperatives, covering such categories as leader images, strategic culture, state-society relations and domestic institutions, as well as to demonstrate how they affect the outcome of the decision-making process, that is, the policy responses of the state. Taken together, they make it possible to conduct a detailed and theoretically informed analysis of Russia's foreign policy, in particular, to explain its policy choices in response to particular international circumstances, to determine Russia's grand strategy and its adjustment, and to explain international outcomes and changes in the nature of the international system across time and space.

The central assumption of neoclassical realist analysis argues that the greatest importance within the international system in the anarchic environment belongs to the distribution of material power capabilities among states and their position, since they determine and shape the foreign policy of these states. Herewith, Alex Reichwein adds that the formation

¹⁶ Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979), 102-128; Stephen M. Walt, "Alliance, Threats, and U.S. Grand Strategy: A Reply to Kaufman and Laps," *Security Studies* 1, no. 3 (1992): 448-482; Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987); and John J. Mearsheimer, "Back to the Future: Instability in Europe after the Cold War," *International Security* 15, no. 1 (1990): 5-56; John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton, 2001), 29-54.

¹⁷ Brian Rathbun, "A Rose by Any Other Name: Neoclassical Realism as the Logical and Necessary Extension of Structural Realism," *Security Studies* 17, no. 2 (2008): 294-321; Alex Reichwein, "The Tradition of Neoclassical Realism," in *Neoclassical Realism in Europe: Bringing Power Back In*, ed. Asle Toje and Barbara Kunz (Manchester: University Press, 2012), 30-60; Reichwein, "Security, Geopolitics, or Irredentism?," 2; and Gideon Rose, "Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy," *World Politics* 51, no. 1 (1998): 144-172.

of foreign policy is a response to the appropriate balancing behavior, which is the most common model of state's behavior,¹⁸ thus placing the balance of power theory as the main structural realist baseline for the neoclassical realist theory development, although there are other options for the theory development (defensive and offensive realism or hegemonic and power transition theories), but for this dissertation, Reichwein's statement is an axiom.

Regarding the concept of hegemony within the framework of neoclassical realism, Christopher Layne, a neoclassical realist, agrees with John Mearsheimer that hegemony generates changes in the structure of the international system, since the achievement of hegemony by one state entails the transformation of anarchical system into a hierarchical one.¹⁹ Consequently, a unipolar world with the United States at the top relative to other states represented a hierarchical system, but with the gradual weakening of its leading role, which is again associated with the distribution of material capabilities, the hegemonic order also lost its contours, and the international system again acquires an anarchic nature. Meanwhile, the Arab Spring became a milestone in the Middle East processes, which has changed the regional political situation and the geopolitical configuration, stirring up the international system and accelerating the shifts and its transformation that had begun in it. The powerful actors in the international system, represented by the Western allies of the United States and the European Union, have been unable to respond appropriately due to contradictions in reaching a consensus on a joint response to events taking place in the Middle East, except by calling on these countries for a political transition. Thus, a power vacuum formed in the Middle East, presenting opportunities for other major actors, both regional and international, who sought to gain more power and assert themselves in a new role by upgrading their status. Russia has become one of these actors, using the Middle East in pursuit of its grand strategy, which consists in its comprehensive efforts to create a world order that corresponds to its ideas, combining all the various means of "hard" and "soft" power at its disposal. Yeşilada and Tanrıkulu claim that Russia tops the Middle East's hierarchy while pointing that Türkiye

¹⁸ Reichwein, "Security, Geopolitics, or Irredentism?," 18.

¹⁹ Christopher Layne, *The Peace of Illusions: American Grand Strategy from 1940 to the Present* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 4; and Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy*, 415 n. 13.

and Iran follows it at near parity,²⁰ but does this mean that Russia has taken the place of hegemon in the Middle East?

Layne highlights four defining traits that characterize hegemony. The first is the possession of hard power. The most powerful military is the main indication of hegemon. An economic component is crucial for serving the military capabilities of the state. George Friedman points out two main goals of Russia's diplomatic activity and military intervention in Syria: (1) a demonstration of the military power of the state, which should be perceived accordingly, and which is the backbone of Russian diplomacy; and (2) creation of such conditions, under which the United States is forced to publicly perceive Russia as a partner, not an adversary.²¹ But how indicative is the demonstration of military capabilities to assert Russia's military power, knowing that its economic capabilities are limited? This issue has become even more relevant with the escalation of the conflict in Ukraine.

The second trait is the dominant power's ambitions. As Layne notes, a hegemonic power acts in its own interests to create an international order that will provide stability, security, and serve its economic and ideological interests.²² Russian ambitions grew along with the disproportionate growth of the power of the United States in the international system, which, in turn, threatened the fundamental interests of the hegemon. In this way, Russian ambitions reached the Middle East region and show lasting results of its presence there.

The third trait is polarity. Since the hegemon has acquired more power than the other actors, the system has become unipolar by its definition. Since the US-USSR bipolarization sunk into oblivion, and as post-Cold War Russia struggled with economic transformation and its reliance on global oil and gas prices, exacerbated by negative demographic trends, the United States assumed the role of hegemon. However, the Putin era, especially his first two presidential terms, is characterized by a significant rise in the Russian economy, which became the basis for strengthening its position within the international system due to the relative distribution of material capabilities. Russia gained power that reflected its economic growth and declared its disagreement with the contours

²⁰ Birol Ali Yeşilada and Osman Göktuğ Tanrıkulu, "Regional Power Transition and the Future of Turkey," *Uluslararası İlişkiler* 13, no. 52 (2016): 23-46.

²¹ George Friedman, "Why Putin Went into Syria," *Geopolitical Futures*, March 15, 2016, <https://geopoliticalfutures.com/why-putin-went-into-syria>. Access Date 02/05/2019.

²² Layne, *The Peace of Illusions*, 4.

of the existing world order. Since then, the trend towards multipolarity has been gaining momentum and acquiring clearer outlines.

The final trait mentioned by Layne is a will. This suggests that the hegemon is not merely the holder of overwhelming power by default, but also purposefully practices the use of this power “to impose order on the international system.”²³

Beside the systemic level, neoclassical realism includes two types with four comprehensive categories of domestic intervening variables at the unit level, which determine the process of forming the foreign policy of the state at the stages of decision-making and policy implementation. These include cognitive (the leader’s perception of the international distribution of power, the intentions of other actors, and threats in the international environment or the region and its adjacent territories in which the state operates) and state factors (organizational and bureaucratic structures of the state; domestic actors, including state leaders, elites and informal political networks, whose interests are of concern, and who are involved in the formation and implementation of foreign policy decisions; strategic culture; interaction between the state and society, and other internal processes and mechanisms that influence the decision-making process) that guide or constrain the choices of a foreign policy executive. In fact, Russian domestic politics is full of different interest groups, including but not limited to military lobby, oligarchs, raw material sector and different camps of the governing elite that affect the foreign policy. That is why the reference to the internal determinants represents an important layer considering the foreign policy of Russia.

Undoubtedly, there are various justifications for Russia’s more active foreign policy behavior in the Middle East and its involvement in regional affairs, and, in particular, its military engagement in the civil war in Syria, among which are security concerns, geopolitics, domestic politics, or ideologically driven humanitarian interventionism. Neoclassical realism represents a comprehensive research program for the study of international political phenomena and the foreign policy of states as one of the possible ways to deal with this puzzle and questions.

Research Subject

²³ Layne, *The Peace of Illusions*, 4.

Neoclassical realism argues that in the conditions of anarchy in the international system, there are various uncertainties that encourage states to respond to them in an attempt to shape and control their external environment. As its relative power grows, the state will want to increase its influence beyond its borders using all possible means, and as its relative power falls, its actions and ambitions will decrease accordingly. Thus the more power it has, the more influence it will seek. Russia's foreign policy in the Middle East in the Putin era has to be analysed as a long-term strategic venture aimed at positioning itself as a great power in the international system. Relying on the tenets of neoclassical realism, Russia, observing the systemic changes and guided by the dynamics of the domestic environment, saw a window of opportunity after the Arab Spring and the events that followed it, and used the situation around Syria in order not to be on the periphery, but to gain advantages, and further build up its "muscles" in this region to improve its own strategic positions.

Russia is not a newcomer to the Middle East. Since imperial times, Russia has been involved in the Middle East affairs, solving issues of war and peace, facing challenges in the face of Ottoman Empire and Persia, while the Arab world "lay just outside the limit of St. Petersburg's geopolitical ambitions."²⁴ Nowadays, the international community discuss Russia's return to the Middle East as an accomplished fact.²⁵ Russian cooperation intensifies in all directions, from the selling of arms worth billions of dollars to Algeria and Egypt, interacting with Saudi Arabia to regulate the global oil prices to working closely with Iran, Türkiye, and Israel in Syria, and maintaining relations with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Qatar, as well as keeping in touch with a host of other nations and regional actors.²⁶

Russia's ambitions and its permanent military presence in the Middle East, together with the recent conflict of interests with United States in both Syria and Ukraine, are compared to the old Cold War dynamics of the former rivals. Since World War II, the Middle East has served as a strategic zone of influence for the United States, initially predicated on

²⁴ Dmitri Trenin, *What Is Russia Up To in the Middle East?* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018), 16.

²⁵ See, for example, Aron Lund, *Russia in the Middle East* (Stockholm: Swedish Institute of International Affairs, 2019); Robert Mason, "Russia in Syria: An Unequivocal Return to the Middle East?," *Middle East Policy* 25, no. 4 (Winter 2018): 101-15; and Nicu Popescu and Stanislav Secrieru, eds., *Russia's Return to the Middle East: Building Sandcastles?* (Paris: European Union Institute for Security Studies, 2018).

²⁶ Lund, *Russia in the Middle East*.

the energy resources of the region, and later diversified into keeping Soviet influence out of the region during the Cold War. After the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the bipolar system, Russia lost its status as one of two hegemonic powers, as well as the international bargaining power that came along with its position. According to Alexey Gromyko, director of the Institute of Europe of the Russian Academy of Sciences, “1991 was a catastrophe. A catastrophe, not a crisis... in economic, social and security terms, which not many states in the world could survive.”²⁷ The 90s of the 20th century are characterized by Russian low diplomatic and military activity in the Middle East. During the presidency of Vladimir Putin, the so-called Putin era, Russian foreign policy in the Middle East underwent a radical change. He began to pursue a consistent policy of establishing contacts and building up ties with the countries of the Middle East. Iran and Syria were among the long-standing allies with whom Russia has intensified its cooperation. Russia perceives Iran as a bulwark of stability on its southern flank, and Syria as an outpost of its influence in the Middle East.²⁸ Accordingly, events in both of these countries that have an impact on the international system were chosen as case studies for this dissertation.

The Iranian nuclear crisis that erupted in the early 20th century was both an opportunity and a challenge for Russia’s foreign policy. From one perspective, the Iranian nuclear program threatens Russia’s security and very survival in the international system. From other perspective, it became an opportunity to participate in international affairs and assert Russia as one of the major powers or even great power, whose opinion and interests matter and must be taken into account.

The Syrian crisis was one of the recent opportunity to assert itself as a great power in the international arena as well as to show the weight Moscow has had on the diplomatic and military scene. Russian military actions in Syria together with active diplomatic component created a solid basis for Russia’s return to the great power game,²⁹ which

²⁷ Carmen Amelia Gayoso Descalzi, “Russian Hegemony in the CIS region: An Examination of Russian Influence and of Variation in Consent and Dissent by CIS States to Regional Hierarchy” (PhD diss., London School of Economics and Political Science, 2011).

²⁸ Igor Delanoë and Aurélie Bros, “Iran-Russie : une alliance sans lendemain ?” [Iran-Russia: an alliance without a future?], *Politique Internationale*, no. 155 (Printemps 2017): 288.

²⁹ Brice Didier, « Faire grand avec peu » : la crise syrienne, catalyseur du retour de la Russie sur la scène internationale » [“Doing big with little”: the Syrian crisis, a catalyst for Russia’s return to the international scene], *Open Diplomacy*, May 16, 2016, <https://www.open-diplomacy.eu/blog/faire-grand-avec-peu-la-crise-syrienne-catalyseur-du-retour-de-la>. Access Date 02/04/2019.

indicate, in its turn, the beginning of a new era of great power antagonism in the Middle East.

The Iranian nuclear crisis, with its complex dynamics of “one step forward, two steps back,” and the Syrian crisis, with its definitely multifaceted conflict, involving multiple actors, religious and ethnic aspects, and the problem of terrorism, are of great interest for numerous studies. This study is intended to examine the deeper systemic issues affecting regional and international rivalry that the crises under investigation reveal, and to identify Russia’s domestic factors, through which systemic incentives are transformed into foreign policy decisions.

Adhering to a neoclassical realist approach, this study analyzes to what extent Russia’s reassertion through its diplomatic and military activities in the Middle East, paying special attention to the Syrian civil war and Iranian nuclear crisis, leads it to the status of a regional hegemon or fail to do it. It argues that in the international political vacuum created by the Arab Spring, Russia has taken a strategic advantage to improve its position in the region and globally, but the question of Russia’s aspirations for the status of a regional hegemon and its ability to achieve it remains open. Now Russia faces the challenge of consolidating and keeping the gains achieved. This study emphasizes systemic (distribution of power capabilities among great powers), and domestic cognitive (Russian perceptions of the Middle East) and bureaucratic/organizational variables (Russian strategic culture, interaction between the state and society and domestic political institutions, both formal and informal).

Significance of the Research

This research examines Russian foreign policy in the Middle East in the Putin era by exploring the key turning points that has affected its direction and has changed the role it plays in the relevant region. It represents the most important feature of the present study. There are many works dedicated to the Russian foreign policy in the Middle East and the contemporary dynamics of its politics in the relevant region with different focus, starting from the critical analyses of Russian foreign policy towards particular Middle Eastern countries to the Russian involvement into the Syrian civil war and its implications. Authors use different theories, from realism to geopolitics, and methodological approaches, from archival research to focus groups, to explain and make understand the

nature of Russian politics in the Middle East. All approaches have the right to assert their uniqueness and are valuable in their own way; however, an approach that embraces both theory and policy seems to be more relevant for this study.

This research addresses to the Russian foreign policy in the Middle East limited to the presidency of Putin (from 2000 to the present) viewed through a prism of neoclassical realism and emphasizes Russia's efforts to assert itself as a great power, and give an answer whether Russia strives to secure the position of the regional hegemon or pursues another interests and strategy in the region. Insights from theory help to explain different aspects of Russia's Middle Eastern foreign policy and to understand the logic of the decisions made by the foreign policy executive. The literature review together with an examination of the available data, allows pointing out a knowledge gap that is addressed and filled in due to this research by bringing together two sorts of literature – those dedicated to the practice (Russian foreign policy) and theory (neoclassical realism) – and contributing to each of them separately. Briefly, as it was mentioned above, this work served several objective: first, to explain and analyse Russian foreign policy in the Middle East jointly through Russian areas studies; second, to contribute to the development of neoclassical realism; third, to bring additional value by appealing to the conceptual foundations of hegemony; and, fourth, to apply a multimethod methodology to the geographical case, highlighting several examples. This dissertation is expected to open up new horizons for future research of Russian foreign policy in the Middle East both from an international position and from “within” skilfully applying the explanatory power of neoclassical realism and concepts directly related to it in the context of the transformation of the contemporary international system, as well as internal changes in the country.

Research Objective

The purpose of this research is to investigate the Russian foreign policy in the Middle East in the Putin era and to find out whether there are any prerequisites to determine Russia's status in the region as “a hegemon,” or whether Russia's actions are conditioned by other circumstances. The analytical focus of this research is a conjunction of external and domestic factors that generate conditions for the accumulation of such power that can lead the state to achieve hegemony in the international system structure. Priority is given

to observing the process of changes in the external and domestic environment of Russia that affect its decision-making process, and, accordingly, the results of which influence the international outcomes and bring to the shifts in the global distribution of power. As case studies, this research applies a theoretically informed historical narratives of Moscow's policymaking in two cases – the Iranian nuclear crisis and the Syrian civil war.

Research Questions

The neoclassical realist theory distinguishes between the concepts of a “research question” and a “research puzzle.” Both of these concepts are aimed at identifying the cause and effect of a particular phenomenon or phenomena, but the difference lies in their functional purpose. Research questions imply an appeal to a theoretical basis, without touching the empirical component of the subject under study. They are deductive and abstract in nature. The research puzzle, on the contrary, raises empirical problems for existing theories and is inductive in nature. Therefore, this study takes this difference into account when formulating research question and research puzzle. As such, the research question is formulated as follows: How does a rising power, dissatisfied with its position in the international system, respond to the decline of a global hegemonic power in order to gain global recognition as a great power and influence at a subsystem level?

Given the theoretical framework of the research question, the following research puzzle can be formulated:

To what extent and under what conditions does the combination of international and domestic policies of Russia lead to the reassertion of its status as a great power through its activities in the Middle East, and whether or not this prompts the establishment of Russian regional hegemony in the relevant region?

This research puzzle is built around the following sub-questions:

1. How does international system influence foreign policymaking in Russia, and how do the shifts at system and subsystem levels affect the evolution of the Russia's Middle Eastern strategy?
2. How have domestic factors affected Russia's foreign policy responses regarding Middle East?

3. What international and unit-level variables are at interplay in the formation and implementation of Russia's foreign policy regarding the Iranian nuclear crisis?
4. How independent and intervening variables affect Russia's foreign policy regarding the Syrian conflict?
5. Is there any evidence that Russia took or seeks to take a place as the leading power, i.e. regional hegemon, in the Middle East?

Providing reasoned answers to these questions by looking at the place of the Middle East in Russian foreign policy and strategy, this research is mainly based on testing the following hypotheses.

Hypothesis 1: Russia's foreign policy in the Middle East is conditioned by the combination of independent (systemic) and intervening (domestic unit-level) variables.

Hypothesis 2: Russia's foreign policy behavior aims to ensure its survival in the anarchic international system and improve its position through the projection of its power in the Middle East as a part of its global strategy.

Hypothesis 3: The greater autonomy of the state leader enable to offset the intervening influence of formal institutions and bureaucratic oversight in foreign policy, as he/she can use, change or modify, as well as make rules to meet his/her needs and to serve his/her interests through the system of power he/she has created.

Hypothesis 4: Russia is not keen on the hegemony in the Middle East, it is more eager to expand its influence by getting proxies, among other things, who would act in its interests in the region.

Methodology of Research

In line with the neoclassical realist theory, the methodological framework of the study is built on a "soft" positivist approach, which recognizes the main elements of positivism, arguing that theory testing is possible and necessary through careful experimentation or case studies, but at the same time taking into account the problems of the limitations of theory testing regarding cognitive factors, and also the subjectivity of human perception and interpretation, which complicate the objective definition and evaluation of

phenomena.³⁰ Accordingly, this study is built on a soft positivist approach with theory tested through case studies of Russian foreign policy in the Middle East in the Putin era regarding the Iranian nuclear crisis and the Syrian conflict.

The analysis of Russia's foreign policy is conducted to explore the main research question. Russia is the primary unit of analysis and its foreign policy is the dependent variable. This study is rooted in a qualitative epistemological position that recognizes the importance of locating the research within a particular political, social, cultural, and historical context. Thus, the neoclassical realist theory represents the main analytical tool of this dissertation.

Being incorporated into neoclassical realism framework, Russian foreign policy is examined through theoretical analysis taking into account the influence of the external environment (independent variable), domestic political environment (intervening variables), and Russia's foreign policy formation and the attempts of grand strategic adjustment in the Syrian conflict and Iranian nuclear crisis (dependent variables). Such approach is a useful conceptual tool for analysing foreign policy by identifying the components of its complex mechanism or, as noted by Taku Tamaki, by making it divided into "smaller chunks – or "levels" – so that studying it becomes easier, enabling us to determine what decisions are made by whom, and under what constraints."³¹ Furthermore, this approach allows finding a common ground of different levels and tracing how each of them is connected to each other. Hence, it is reasonable to employ it to understand the Russian approaches towards Middle East and, in particular, the Iranian nuclear crisis and Syrian civil war.

The structures of international system such as unipolarity, bipolarity and multipolarity, as well as the relative material capabilities of Russia, its position in the international system determine the factors of its foreign policy behaviour in a general way. Development or changes within Russia, such as ideological discourse, the characteristics of political leaders and their perceptions are a significant way to explain foreign policy behaviour.

³⁰ Norrin M. Ripsman, Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, and Steven E. Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 105.

³¹ Taku Tamaki, "The Levels of Analysis of the International System," in *Encounters with World Affairs: An Introduction to International Relations*, ed. Emilian Kavalski (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), 86.

The quantitative methods, which are relevant for neoclassical realist studies, are case research, historical and analytical narratives, and the identification of causal mechanisms between causes and outcomes (process tracing method),³² that were used for this study. The case study of Russian foreign policy covers the period of Putin's stay in power until nowadays for answering the research question. The extent of involvement of Russia in the Middle East and the scope of its ambitions (hegemonic or not) are tested with short-to-medium term foreign policy cases (Iranian nuclear crisis and Syrian Civil War cases) within the framework of neoclassical realism. This method justifies its effectiveness since it "insists on the uniqueness of the foreign policies of each state."³³ Such method as process-tracing will help to provide an explanation for causal relationships between independent and dependent variables.³⁴

As it was mentioned above, Russian foreign policy decisions and actions covered by this research were monitored over a period of the rule of Vladimir Putin (from 2000 to the present). All information for this research was collected exclusively from open sources. The research methodology requires gathering relevant data from the official documents, relevant books and research papers, materials from Russian and foreign media, analytical reports and reviews, as well as other publications and internet resources, and compiling databases in order to analyse the material and arrive at a more complete understanding of the process of Russian foreign policy decision-making and historical reconstruction of foreign policy actions. Special attention was paid to such documents as the Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation and Russia's National Security Strategy. These documents allowed analysing Russia's aspirations in its foreign policy and identifying approaches to solving global and regional problems. The theory served as a guide to find interesting sources regarding related questions.

Literature Review

³² Björn Alexander Lindemann, *Cross-Strait Relations and International Organizations: Taiwan's Participation in IGOs in the Context of Its Relationship with China* (Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien Wiesbaden, 2014), 38.

³³ Fatih M. Tayfur, "Main Approaches to the Study of Foreign Policy: A Review," *METU Studies in Development* 21, no. 1 (1994): 125-126.

³⁴ David Collier, "Understanding Process Tracing," *Political Science and Politics* 44, no. 4 (2011): 824, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096511001429>. Access Date 02/01/2023.

Russian foreign policy in the Middle East has been the subject of many academic studies and analytical research in recent years, which have made a huge contribution to a comprehensive understanding of Russia and the formation of its foreign policy, as well as enriched this dissertation providing various facts, nuances, details, interpretations and their arguments. However, there is a lack of literature, among other things, that examines Russia's foreign policy from the neoclassical realist perspective, without taking into account the geographical aspect, the role of domestic environment and internal dynamics in the Russia's foreign policy responses to the systemic pressures, Russia's foreign policy behavior in specific regional cases and its causal inferences about observable phenomena.

The literature studied in the course of working on this dissertation is classified below according to the main issues raised in it. In addition, all literature can be divided into two categories that are of importance to this study, namely theoretical and empirical literature.

Neoclassical Realism

This group of the literature represents theoretical works dedicated to the deeper understanding of neoclassical realism theory and its ways of foreign policy explanation to approach it appropriately to the examining subject and strengthen the theoretical perspective of this research.

Some works point out that realism and its various approaches (classical realism, structural realism, neorealism, neoclassical realism) are a good match for analysis of Russian foreign policy as such.³⁵ Paying special attention to the neoclassical realism, some scholars consider it as the most promising and effective research avenue within realism for the analysis of Russian foreign policy.³⁶ A feature of the neoclassical realist theory, which distinguishes it from other realist schools of thought, is the study of international

³⁵ Jacek Wieclawski, "Contemporary Realism and the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation," *International Journal of Business and Social Science* 2, no. 1 (January 2011): 170-179.

³⁶ Balkan Devlen and Özgür Özdamar, "Neoclassical Realism and Foreign Policy Crises," in *Rethinking Realism in International Relations. Between Tradition and Innovation*, ed. Annette Freyberg-Inan et al. (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2009), 136-163; Annette Freyberg-Inan et al., "Introduction: What Way Forward for Contemporary Realism?," in *Rethinking Realism in International Relations. Between Tradition and Innovation*, ed. Annette Freyberg-Inan et al. (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2009), 1-20; Tudor Onea, "Putting the 'Classical' in Neoclassical Realism: Neoclassical Realist Theories and US Expansion in the Post-Cold War," *International Relations* 26, no. 2 (2012): 139-164; Reichwein, "Security, Geopolitics, or Irredentism?"; Wieclawski, "Contemporary Realism"; and William C. Wohlforth, "Realism and Foreign Policy," in *Foreign Policy. Theories, Actors, Cases*, 2nd ed., ed. Steve Smith et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 35-53.

political phenomena with the inclusion of both independent system variables and intervening unit-level variables, represented by such categories as domestic organizational and bureaucratic mechanisms, institutional arrangements, state-society models of interaction, and ideational variables. In this sense, “traditional” realist concepts that explore Russia’s foreign policy behavior continue to focus on such concepts as power and influence, security and survival, competition and war, security dilemmas and strategies of balancing, buck-passing and bandwagoning, and others, discarding intervening variables that reveal the causal logic of the selected models of state behavior.³⁷

The specificity of the formulated research subject and the proposed theoretical focus of its analysis predetermine the significance of fundamental works on the neoclassical realist theory, including the studies of Gideon Rose, Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, Nicolas Kitchen, Norrin M. Ripsman, Randall Schweller, Steven E. Lobell, and many others that have appeared recently, due to the growing interest in the neoclassical realism theory and its relevance in the study of international politics and vast amount of foreign policy aspects.³⁸ These studies provide a comprehensive explanation of the neoclassical realist research program, from the origin of the concept itself to the step-by-step methodology for conducting research within the framework of the neoclassical realist theory.

The theoretical underpinnings offered by Steven E. Lobell, Norrin M. Ripsman, and Jeffrey W. Taliaferro in their most recent common work *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics* serve as fundamental work to understand the neoclassical realism assumptions and to apply them to the Russian foreign policy case in this dissertation. The methodology and research design proposed by the authors are used as a framework for conducting a qualitative research in order to explain phenomena during the definite

³⁷ Elena Kropatcheva, “Power and National Security,” in *Routledge Handbook of Russian Foreign Policy*, ed. Andrei P. Tsygankov (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), 55.

³⁸ Nicholas Kitchen, “Systemic Pressures and Domestic Ideas: A Neoclassical Realist Model of Grand Strategy Formation,” *Review of International Studies* 36, no. 1 (2010): 117-143; Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory*; Rose, “Neoclassical Realism,” 144-172; Randall L. Schweller, *Unanswered Threats: Political Constraints on the Balance of Power* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006). See also Ali Balci et al., “War Decision and Neoclassical Realism: The Entry of the Ottoman Empire into the First World War,” *War in History* 27, no. 4 (2020): 644, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0968344518789707>. Access Date 29/12/2020; and Ismail Ediz, “A Neoclassical Realist Explanation of the Balfour Declaration and the Origins of the British Foreign Policy in Palestine,” *Tarih İncelemeleri Dergisi* 34, no. 1 (2019): 99-122.

timeframe, examining independent and intervening variables and their impact on the foreign policy pursued by the state. Indeed, the understanding of neoclassical realism requires the familiarity with its first wave of studies. The concept of neoclassical realism was first articulated in 1998 by Gideon Rose in his fundamental article, which mentioned this notion, and later popularised by other scholars. Rose explained the core feature of the neoclassical realism, which consisted in explicit incorporation of both external and internal variables.³⁹ Another proponent of neoclassical realism, Fareed Zakaria, argues that a good theory of foreign policy should first ask and answer what influence the international system has on national behavior, because the most powerful generalizable characteristic of a state in international relations is its relative position in the international system.⁴⁰ However, he emphasizes that discussing systemic implications is not enough to study foreign policy decisions, so he suggests that the focus should ultimately be on particular variables, such as types of domestic regimes, bureaucracies, or political leaders.

Historical Background

Since this study began with an overview of the historical retrospective of Russian foreign policy from the time of the Russian Empire until the rise to power of Vladimir Putin in the late 1990s, a separate category of sources on the history of Russia and its foreign policy is distinguished, the consideration of which is important for understanding the continuity and change in the current Russian foreign policy and strategy towards the Middle East.

The article on the historical background of Russia's foreign policy, written by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, is of great importance for understanding the political elite's perception of the role that Russia assigns to the historical component in shaping Russia's foreign policy and strategy.⁴¹ A significant contribution to the literature on Russian foreign policy is made by the works of Mark N. Katz, who also touches on historical issues, drawing analogies between Soviet foreign policy and the invasion of

³⁹ Rose, "Neoclassical Realism," 146.

⁴⁰ Fareed Zakaria, "Realism and Domestic Politics – A Review Essay," *International Security* 17, no. 1 (1992): 197, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2539162>. Access Date 02/01/2023.

⁴¹ Sergei V. Lavrov, "Russia's Foreign Policy in a Historical Perspective," *Russia in Global Affairs*, no. 2 (April/June 2016), <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/russias-foreign-policy-in-a-historical-perspective/>. Access Date 23/12/2022.

Afghanistan with modern Russian policy towards Syria.⁴² Among the Soviet scholars considering the issues of Russia's foreign policy in the Middle East, one can single out A. V. Fadeyev, V. A. Georgiyev, and V. I. Sheremet, and among the recent Russian and foreign researchers studying Russian foreign policy in the Middle East from a historical aspect, one can note the works of O. V. Orlik et al., Viktor Taki, and I. M. Shklyazh et al.⁴³

Russia's Foreign Policy in the Middle East

Numerous works have been written about Russian foreign policy and its various aspects. But of all the variety of topics covered, there is a paucity of literature on Russian foreign policy in the Middle East in the modern period, although in recent years there has been an increase in this regard. Most likely, it is conditioned by the secondary role of this region in Russia's foreign policy in previous periods. In the last decade, with the activation of Russia in the Middle East, academic scholars and analysts have begun to show more interest in this topic. This is confirmed by the appearance of a large number of studies dedicated to Russia's "return" to the region.⁴⁴ The majority of the literature is also focused on the Russian foreign policy in the Middle East in the context of its confrontation with the United States.⁴⁵

⁴² Mark Katz, "Moscow and the Middle East: Repeat Performance?," *Russia in Global Affairs*, no. 3 (July/September 2012), <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/moscow-and-the-middle-east-repeat-performance/>. Access Date 23/12/2022.

⁴³ A. V. Fadeyev, *Rossiya i Vostochnyy krizis 20-kh godov XIX veka* [Russia and the Eastern crisis of the 20s of the XIX century] (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Akademii nauk SSSR, 1958); V. A. Georgiyev, *Vneshnyaya politika Rossii na Blizhnem Vostoke v kontse 30 – nachale 40-kh godov XIX v.* [Russia's foreign policy in the Middle East in the late 30s – early 40s of the XIX century] (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo moskovskogo universiteta, 1975); O. V. Orlik et al., eds., *Istoriya vneshney politiki Rossii. Pervaya polovina XIX veka (Ot voyn Rossii protiv Napoleona do Parizhskogo mira 1856 g.)* [History of Russia's foreign policy. First half of the XIX century (From the wars of Russia against Napoleon to the Peace of Paris in 1856)] (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnyye otnosheniya, 1999); V. I. Sheremet, *Turtsiya i Adrianopol'skiy mir 1829 g.: iz istorii Vostochnogo voprosa* [Türkiye and the Peace of Adrianople 1829: From the history of the Eastern question] (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo "Nauka", 1975); I. M. Shklyazh et al., comps., *Vostochnyy vopros vo vneshney politike evropeyskikh gosudarstv i Rossii (konets XVIII – nachalo XX v.)* [The Eastern question in the foreign policy of European states and Russia (late XVIII - early XX century)] (Nikolayev: Nikolayevskiy gosudarstvennyy universitet, 2003); and Viktor Taki, *Tsar' i sultan. Osmanskaya imperiya glazami rossiiyan: Monografiya* [Tsar and Sultan. The Ottoman Empire through the eyes of Russians: Monograph] (Moscow: Novoye literaturnoye obozreniye, 2017).

⁴⁴ See, for example, Grygiel, "Russia's Return"; Har-Zvi, "The Return"; and Mason, "Russia in Syria," 101-15.

⁴⁵ See, for example, Abdulwahab Al-Qassab, *The American-Russian Strategic Competition in the Arab Middle East* (Washington DC: Arab Center, 2017); Burhanettin Duran, "In Trump's Middle East, Vladimir Putin Is the Real Master of the Art of the Deal," *Daily Sabah*, November 6, 2019,

One of the relevant analysis of the foreign policy of contemporary Russia is *Going Legit? The Foreign Policy of Vladimir Putin* by Bobo Lo.⁴⁶ Although he does not delve into the topic of Middle Eastern dimension of Russian foreign relations, he examines overall Russian foreign policy taking into account the close connection between the leader (Vladimir Putin) and the state (Russia), thereby providing valuable insights for this dissertation.

Another research related to this topic is Brett A. Schneider's study, which is devoted to the priorities and effectiveness of Russian foreign policy in the Middle East. Schneider identifies six categories (arms transfers, great power status, influence over former Soviet territories, Islamic terrorism, natural resources, and trade) in Russian foreign policy in the Middle East that influence its actions in the region, and explains Russian strategies according to these categories, giving an assessment of their effectiveness.⁴⁷

Probably the most up to date contribution to the literature on the relevant topic is a book *Russia Rising: Putin's Foreign Policy in the Middle East and North Africa* edited by Dimitar Bechev, Nicu Popescu, and Stanislav Secrieru.⁴⁸ It provides a comprehensive overview of Russian foreign policy in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) during the Putin era, covering topics ranging from the historical retrospective of the Soviet Union to regional partnerships. However, since this is a multiauthored-edited volume, it lacks a single paradigm of thinking.

The works of Russian authors, both in Russian and in other languages, represent an important layer among the sources covering this research. It has to be especially mentioned that there are not many works in Russian literature dedicated to Russian foreign policy in the Middle East in the Putin era because "the period of Putin's stay in power is not over, and therefore, to date, writing books about his foreign policy in the

<https://www.dailysabah.com/columns/duran-burhanettin/2019/11/06/in-trumps-middle-east-vladimir-putin-is-the-real-master-of-the-art-of-the-deal>. Access Date 29/12/2022; and Mark N. Katz, "Can Russia Succeed Where America Failed in the Middle East?," *LobeLog*, February 23, 2018, <https://lobelog.com/can-russia-succeed-where-america-failed-in-the-middle-east/>. Access Date 29/12/2022.

⁴⁶ Bobo Lo, *Going Legit? The Foreign Policy of Vladimir Putin* (Sydney: Lowy Institute, 2018).

⁴⁷ Brett A. Schneider, "Russian Foreign Policy in the Middle East: Priorities and Effectiveness" (master's thesis, University of Denver, 2012), <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/etd/583>. Access Date 14/12/2020.

⁴⁸ Dimitar Bechev, Nicu Popescu, and Stanislav Secrieru, eds., *Russia Rising: Putin's Foreign Policy in the Middle East and North Africa* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2021).

Middle East, if not timely, but it is a little uncomfortable. [...] Therefore, the options are quite scarce.”⁴⁹ This is why the available sources are of great importance for this research due to their value-added perspective in providing an “inside view” of the issues related to the present study. Reflecting a more mainstream Russian perspective is Dmitri Trenin’s *What is Russia up to in the Middle East?* The short answer to this question is that it seeks to transform the global order from US hegemony to an oligarchy that includes Russia. Trenin analyses Russia’s geopolitical relationship with the Middle Eastern region, with a particular focus on its participation in the Syrian civil war, and the implications for Russian strategy. The book examines this topic through a few categories; first, it looks at Russia’s history in the region, second, its participation in warfare in the area, third, its diplomatic presence, and, finally, its economic/trading interests.⁵⁰ Another Russian scholar Alexei Vasiliev provides his own assessment of the Russian foreign policy pursued by Putin in relation to the Middle East.⁵¹ He considers Putin the only leader who prioritizes the pursuit of Russian national interests. His work is of interest because of his different view from many Western analysts on Russia’s prospects in the Middle East, seeing it as a replacement for the United States as the dominant power in the region. One of the features of the book that is useful for current research is transcripts of interviews that the author conducted with knowledgeable Russian figures, including Russia’s deputy foreign minister Mikhail Bogdanov, longtime Russian Middle East specialist Vitaly Naumkin and former Russian ambassador to Kuwait, Türkiye and Israel Petr Stegnyy, as well as other sources.

Beside these inspiring books, most of which deal with *Realpolitik*, there is a wide range of more or less realist analysis of Russian foreign policy in the Middle East.⁵² However,

⁴⁹ Maxim Savinykh, Expert’s Comment about Russian Sources Dedicated to Russia’s Foreign Policy in the Middle East in the Putin Era, February 17, 2019, <https://thequestion.ru/questions/476072/posovetuete-pozhaluista-knigi-poslednikh-let-izdaniya-2016-2019-gg-rossiiskikh-i-zarubezhnykh-avtorov-po-vneshnei-politike-rossii-na-blizhnem-vostoke#/comments/476072>. Access Date 11/05/2019.

⁵⁰ Trenin, *What Is Russia Up To*.

⁵¹ Alexey Vasiliev, *Russia’s Middle East Policy: From Lenin to Putin* (Moscow: Tsentrpoligraf, 2018).

⁵² See, for example, Igor Delanoë, “Moyen-Orient : le chemin de la puissance russe ?” [Middle East: the path to Russian power?], in *Russie 2017 : Regards de l’Observatoire franco-russe* [Russia 2017: Insights from the Franco-Russian Observatory], ed. Arnaud Dubien (Moscow: Novyi Vek Media, 2017), 41-49; Valery Dzutsati and Emil Aslan Souleimanov, “Schrecken ohne Ende” [Endless Terror], *Osteuropa*, no. 68 (2018): 381-391; Henrique Alves Garcia, “Evolution of Russian Foreign Policy and the Middle East,” *JANUS.NET e-journal of International Relations* 9, no. 1 (May-October 2018): 103-121; Talal Nizameddin, *Putin’s New Order in the Middle East* (London: C. Hurst & Co. Ltd., 2013); Maxim A. Suchkov, *Essays on Russian Foreign Policy in the Caucasus and the Middle East* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2015); and Dmitriy

there are only a few realist contributions to the study of Russia's aspiration for hegemony and its assertion as a regional hegemon in the Middle East.⁵³ Almost all scholars present rather neorealist/structural realist interpretations focusing on the consequences of Russian military engagement in the Syrian conflict, relations between the actors involved, and power shifts in international politics per se, rather than detailed neoclassical realist analysis of Russian foreign policy in the Middle East. An important contribution in this context was made by Brice Didier's work both from a conceptual and substantive point of view. Although the author has focused on transatlantic relations, this paper contains many details regarding Russia's hegemonic reassertion in the Middle East. It argues that in the power vacuum created by the Arab Spring, the military engagement of Russia in Syria has highlighted the limits of American and European approaches to the region.⁵⁴

Russia's Domestic Policy

This category of literature includes works of Russian and foreign academics and analysts, that can make an additional contribution to this dissertation by enriching it with the details classified as intervening unit-level variables.

A large number of studies, research projects and evaluations have been carried out on the personality of President Vladimir Putin and his contribution to the foreign and domestic policy of Russia. Perhaps one of the features is the identification of the period of his tenure as a separate concept, expressed in different notions, such as "Putinism," "Putin's phenomenon" or "Putin's Russia."⁵⁵ In a similar vein, the discussion about Russia's strategic culture, which importance in decision-making process is acknowledged by different authors, has revived in the recent decade.⁵⁶ It is much more difficult to find

Trenin, *Rossiia i krizis v Sirii* [Russia and the crisis in Syria] (Moscow: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2013).

⁵³ Shlomo Ben-Ami, "Is Russia the Middle East's New Hegemon?," *The Strategist*, November 22, 2019, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/is-russia-the-middle-east-s-new-hegemon/>. Access Date 29/12/2022; and Igor Delanoë, "La Russie, un nouvel hégémon au Moyen-Orient" [Russia, a new hegemon in the Middle East], in *Russie 2016 : Regards de l'Observatoire franco-russe* [Russia 2016: Insights from the Franco-Russian Observatory], ed. Arnaud Dubien (Moscow: Novyi Vek Media, 2016), 48-56.

⁵⁴ Brice Didier, "The Syrian Conflict and Russia's Search for Regional Hegemony in a Contested Middle East: Implications for the Euro-Atlantic Community," *EU Diplomacy Paper* 10 (2017): 5, 7.

⁵⁵ Brian D. Taylor, *The Code of Putinism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018); Stephen White and Ian McAllister, "The Putin Phenomenon," *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* 24, no. 4 (2008): 604-628; and Anna Politkovskaya, *Putin's Russia* (London: Harvill Press, 2004).

⁵⁶ See, for example, Pavel Baev, "Transformation of Russian Strategic Culture: Impacts from Local Wars and Global Confrontation," *Russie.Nei.Visions*, no. 118 (2020); Fritz W. Ermarth, *Russia's Strategic*

relevant studies that assess the relations between the state and society, as well as the procedures for the functioning of domestic institutions in the foreign policy making. Nevertheless, among the extant literature the works of Anna Borshchevskaya, Irina Busygina, and Ariel Cohen provide valuable insights on the impact of domestic factors on Russian foreign policy.⁵⁷ Besides that, Kimberly Marten uses an informal political network perspective to analyse Russian foreign policy, which allows to examine it from a different angle and is useful for understanding Putin's actions in the Middle East, and, particularly, in Iran and Syria.⁵⁸

Russian-Iranian Relations

In order to examine Russia's foreign policy in the context of the Iranian nuclear crisis, a wide range of literature dedicated to Russian-Iranian relations was studied to gain a comprehensive understanding of the causality in decision making. While there is a large number of works on bilateral relations of two countries and their various aspects, Russia's foreign policy in the Iranian nuclear crisis remains underexplored in the existing literature. Numerous scholars endeavour to investigate Russian-Iranian relations through the prism of the confrontation between Russia and the United States at the global level.⁵⁹ Most studies take into account only the systemic level, discarding domestic political factors influencing foreign policy. In this regard, the greatest interest was aroused by numerous works of Moritz Pieper on the Iranian nuclear dossier with a comprehensive analysis of Russia's foreign policy towards it, Mark Katz's studies on Russian-Iranian

Culture: Past, Present, and... in Transition? (n.p.: SAIC, 2006); and Roger E. Kanet, "Russian Strategic Culture, Domestic Politics and Cold War 2.0," *European Politics and Society* 20, no. 2 (2019): 190-206, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2018.1545184>. Access Date 23/12/2022.

⁵⁷ Anna Borshchevskaya, "The Role of the Military in Russian Politics and Foreign Policy over the Past 20 Years," *Orbis* 64, no.3 (2020): 434-446, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orbis.2020.05.006>. Access Date 23/12/2022; Irina Busygina, "Domestic Factors' Impact on Russia's Foreign Policy (The Case of Federal Relations)" (paper prepared for the First Regional Powers Network (RPN) Conference at the GIGA German Institute of Global and Area Studies, Hamburg, Germany, September 15-16, 2008), https://www.academia.edu/48668819/Domestic_Factors_impact_on_Russias_Foreign_Policy_The_Case_of_Federal_Relations_. Access Date 29/12/2022; and Ariel Cohen, "Domestic Factors Driving Russia's Foreign Policy," *Background*, no. 2084 (2007).

⁵⁸ Kimberly Marten, "Informal Political Networks and Putin's Foreign Policy: The Examples of Iran and Syria," *Problems of Post-Communism* 62 (2015): 71-87, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2015.1010896>. Access Date 27/12/2022.

⁵⁹ See, for example, Abbas Milani, "Russia and Iran: An Anti-Western Alliance?," *Current History* 106, no. 702 (2007): 328-332, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/45318157>. Access Date 29/12/2022; Hamed Mousavi and Amin Naeni, "Iran and Russia Pivot to the East: Was It U.S. Pressure?," *Middle East Policy* 26, no. 3 (2019): 107-122, <https://doi.org/10.1111/mepo.12441>. Access Date 02/01/2023; and Witold Rodkiewicz, "Defying America. Russia's Policy towards Iran," *OSW Commentary*, no. 319 (2020): 1-9.

relations with an emphasis on the Putin era, as well as Robert O. Freedman's research, although rather outdated, it reveals nuances that are still relevant to current Russian foreign policy towards Iran and its nuclear program.⁶⁰

Russia and the Syrian Conflict

There is a large body of scholarly works on the Syrian conflict and its various aspects, including Russia's involvement and its foreign policy towards the Syrian civil war due to the relative recentness and continuing relevance of the issue. Nevertheless, out of all the variety of topics and aspects covered, there are very few works that consider Russian foreign policy, taking into account both the systemic and domestic levels, which was one of the reasons for choosing and testing this case in the framework of the present study.

In an effort to lend depth and clarity to the understanding of the Russian foreign policy in the Syrian conflict, this study draws on various scholarly and academic studies, one of which is Mary Levocz's research *Russian Foreign Policy: What Drives Russia's Support for the Al-Assad Regime?*, which analyses the internal factors influencing Russia's foreign policy towards Syria, showing that Russia's support for the al-Assad regime goes far beyond Russian interests in Syria and Russian-Syrian relations.⁶¹ This study displays how Russia's decision regarding the Syrian regime has affected its international status, in an attempt to demonstrate Russia's largest foreign policy goal, namely the great power status. Thus, this research is useful for understanding the domestic factors that drive and shape Russian foreign policy.

Another book that is of interest for research is *Russia and the Syrian conflict: Moscow's Domestic, Regional and Strategic Interests* written by Nikolay Kozhanov.⁶² The author analyses the influence of Russia's internal aspects on the Kremlin's approaches to foreign

⁶⁰ Robert O. Freedman, "Putin, Iran, and the Nuclear Weapons Issue," *Problems of Post-Communism* 53, no. 2 (2006): 39-48, <https://doi.org/10.2753/PPC1075-8216530204>. Access Date 29/12/2022; Mark N. Katz, "Russia and Iran," *Middle East Policy* 19, no. 3 (2012): 54-64; and Moritz Pieper, *Hegemony and Resistance around the Iranian Nuclear Programme: Analysing Chinese, Russian, and Turkish Foreign Policies* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017).

⁶¹ Mary Levocz, "Russian Foreign Policy: What Drives Russia's Support for the Al-Assad Regime?" (master's thesis, American University in Cairo, 2015), <http://dar.aucegypt.edu/bitstream/handle/10526/4427/Thesis-%20Levocz%20%20copy.pdf?sequence=2>. Access Date 29/12/2022.

⁶² Nikolay Kozhanov, *Russia and the Syrian Conflict: Moscow's Domestic, Regional and Strategic Interests* (Berlin: Gerlach Press, 2016).

policy in the Middle East, thus giving ground for reflection on intervening variables, including leader images, social and political institutions that are considered to intervene in the process of “rational” policymaking.⁶³

Although the list of sources used is not exhaustive, the literature mentioned above is important in providing an overview of the international and domestic factors that drive Russian foreign policy in the Middle East, as well as historical, strategic, and ideological determinants that shape relations between Russia and the Middle East. Understanding these components is essential for understanding the current Russian foreign policy in the region.

Research Limitations

This dissertation is limited to using open sources only. The study focuses on Russia’s foreign policy in the Middle East and the concept of hegemony in the context of the weakening of the US position in the region and Russia’s assertion as a great power globally, which naturally raises the question of strengthening its position in the Middle East and the possible prospects for achieving or not achieving (regional) hegemony, which requires the need to identify its real goals. This research focuses on the period since Vladimir Putin came to power in Russia; however, minor part of the research discusses Russian history to uncover the root causes of Russia’s behaviour. Therefore, the lack of access to archival documents of the modern period and classified documents limits the possibility of a deeper and more thorough analysis of the subject under study. Currently, it seems impossible to achieve a level of data saturation even in cases where the primary information appears to be comprehensive, because it is not possible to reconstruct a completely accurate picture of the decision-making process. Consequently, it is impossible to achieve complete certainty in the research and it is necessary to take into account that access to additional information may affect the formulated conclusions.

In addition, the soft positivist approach, which serves as the foundation for the epistemology and methodology of neoclassical realism, because of the inclusion of unit-level variables of a cognitive and ideological nature, which do not always allow to be adequately assessed in terms of facts and value, limits the theory testing to human

⁶³ Kozhanov, *Russia and the Syrian Conflict*.

subjectivity and interpretation of phenomena.⁶⁴ Therefore, it is impossible to definitively “prove” or “disprove” the larger comprehensive theoretical claims under investigation, the most appropriate in this case that seems possible is to provide compelling confirming or disconfirming evidence.⁶⁵

Another important limitation is that the cases under consideration and the situation in the Middle East in general continue to unfold while the work is going on, which may jeopardize some of the theses, rendering them controversial, due to new circumstances. This means that the policy pursued by Russia towards the Middle East may be part of something larger, or longer-term, than the period analysed in this dissertation.

Despite the existing limitations, this study encourage further research, analysis, and debate on the relevant issues in the future creating a number of analytical jumping-off points.

Dissertation Outline

This dissertation is divided into five chapters. The first chapter examines the historical background of Russia’s foreign policy in the Middle East from imperial times, when Russia began its expansionist policy to the south, to the early twenty-first century, when Vladimir Putin became a President of the Russian Federation, in order to place this study in the broader context of the evolution of Russian foreign policy and trace its continuity and change in modern times. This chapter is devoted to three periods of Russian history: imperial, Soviet and post-Soviet times.

The second chapter discusses the external environment in which Russia operates at the global (systemic) and regional (subsystemic) levels. Following the logic of neoclassical realism, in order to study Russia’s external behavior, such determinants as state’s power and its position in the international system are primarily considered. This is followed by an overview of structural modifiers (geography, development and diffusion of new advanced technologies and offense-defense balance in military technologies) that define the parameters for Russia’s likely strategic choices, as well as identify its strengths and

⁶⁴ Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory*, 105.

⁶⁵ Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory*, 137.

weaknesses relative to international structure. The chapter concludes with an analysis of regional dynamics and Russia's power projection at the regional level.

The third chapter analyzes four categories of unit-level intervening variables (leader images, strategic culture, state-society relations, and domestic institutions), determining the extent of the impact they have on the decision-making process and policy responses to systemic incentives. It argues that Russia's foreign policy towards the Middle East is predetermined not only by international systemic factors, but also depends on the domestic environment, processes, routines and mechanisms, through which Russia formulates its foreign policy.

The fourth chapter presents an empirical in-depth case study of Russia's foreign policy towards the Iranian nuclear crisis. It begins with a brief historical overview of Russia's involvement in nuclear cooperation with Iran and continues with an analysis within the framework of neoclassical realism. The chapter is structured in such a way as to consider the Iranian nuclear issue in the international context at the system level, then introduce relevant intervening variables, and finally analyze the dependent variable – Russian foreign policy behavior and the outlines of its grand strategic adjustment, if there is any, since a period of more than two decades allows trace attempts to construct a grand strategy. In light of the escalation of the Ukrainian conflict, this chapter highlights its impact on Russia's position in the Iranian nuclear crisis. It concludes with an evaluation of the neoclassical realist theory and the applicability of its conceptual lens to the study of the present case.

The fifth chapter examines Russian foreign policy in the framework of the Syrian conflict. This chapter is structured almost in a similar way to the previous case study. First, an external system variable is evaluated, then attention is paid to intervening variables specific to the Syrian case. Finally, this chapter presents a dependent variable – Russian foreign policy behavior and the contours of Russia's grand strategic adjustment – emphasizing the role that Syrian military campaign played in Russia's return to the Middle East, the changes that have taken place in Russia's strategy at different stages of the Syrian conflict, and Russian-Iranian cooperation in Syria, all of which together demonstrate the interaction between independent and intervening variables. This chapter also briefly highlights the impact of the Ukrainian conflict on Russia's position in Syria.

The chapter ends with an evaluation of the neoclassical realist theory and its applicability to the study of the present case, and historical-comparative perspective on contemporary Russian foreign policy.



CHAPTER 1: HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF RUSSIAN FOREIGN POLICY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Referring to the words of Napoleon I, which he wrote in 1807: "...for a man twenty-five years of age there is always a gap of fifty years preceding his birth for which there is no history. This gap leads to many difficulties, requires a work that is always imperfect and often useless, in order to make one's way from past events to the present."⁶⁶ Although the interaction of Russia with the Middle East has taken new forms in recent years, its presence in the region is by no means a random episode of its foreign policy and strategy. The historical past shows the indisputable relationship of Russia with the Eastern Mediterranean and adjacent regions, which has lasted over the course of nearly three centuries. During this time, Russia as a political entity has passed through different forms – from the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union to the contemporary Russian Federation. Throughout all these stages of the Russian state development, its foreign policy proves the continuity of purpose and method that can be traced through the ages.

This chapter looks at the historical background of Russia's Middle Eastern foreign policy, trying to find its contemporary features in the roots of the past. Historical case analysis is an important component to determine systemic (international) and domestic (unit-level) variables. The main purpose of this chapter is to provide a general understanding of Russia's foreign policy in the Middle East from the period of its turn to the south and the growing interest in expanding its borders beyond the Black Sea, culminating in Russia's participation in the Eastern question at the end of the eighteenth century to the beginning of the twenty first century, when Vladimir Putin came to power, and examine whether systemic and domestic variables have influenced Russia's foreign policy (dependent variable) in terms of change or continuity.

1.1. Russian Empire's Foreign Policy towards Middle East

⁶⁶ Jay Luvaas, *Napoleon on the Art of War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999), 26.

For centuries, Russia has sought to expand its borders and reach the shores of warm seas. To achieve this goal, Russia pursued its expansionist policy in the Caucasus and Eastern Anatolia to reach the Gulf of Iskenderun and beyond, the Persian Gulf.⁶⁷

Russia's perception of its geographical position in relation to the Middle East differs from the Western view. It represents not the East but the South for the Russia. The proponents of traditional historical perspective assumes that Russia, surrounded and threatened by enemies, always had defensive position.⁶⁸ Nevertheless, another point of view suggests, "Russia developed a long-term strategy not in response to immediate threats but in line with its own expansionist urges to control the Eurasian Heartland."⁶⁹ The geographical location with access to the northern waters did not allow conducting year-round trade and developing its vast territories. Relying on the postulates of neoclassical realism, geography acts as a limiter creating constraints and providing some opportunities for states to choose the strategies for interaction with each other within the relevant structure of the system.⁷⁰ In this context, the northern border of Russia could not be pushed further, due to the geographical border with access to the sea, which was a natural limiter. Thus, the southern borders opened up some opportunities. The strategic goal of Russia was to unite the commerce of the Baltic with the Black Sea and through that to possess almost all of the Levant commerce.⁷¹

Factors such as domestic political situation and economy, geopolitical context, military strategy as a part of broader notion of Russian strategic culture, the impact of the involvement into wars, and the structure of the international system – all influenced the environment, in which Russian power was deployed.

Russia's imperial ambitions led to its move towards Middle East, which is closely related to its penetration into the steppe that lies beyond the southern borders of its ancestral lands. This region was mainly inhabited by Muslims, anthropologically close to the

⁶⁷ Selami Kılıç, *Türk-Sovyet İlişkilerinin Doğuşu* [The Birth of Turkish-Soviet Relations] (Istanbul: Ülke Kitapları Yayınları, 1998), 15.

⁶⁸ See, for example, Igor Delanoë, "Le retour de la Russie en Méditerranée" [Russia's Return to the Mediterranean], *Cahiers de la Méditerranée*, no. 89 (Décembre 2014): 24.

⁶⁹ See John P. LeDonne, *The Grand Strategy of the Russian Empire, 1650-1831* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), ii.

⁷⁰ Ripsman, Taliaferro and Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory*, 41.

⁷¹ Herbert Kaplan, *Russia and the Outbreak of the Seven Years War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 55.

peoples of the Ottoman Empire, Iraq, Persia and Afghanistan, located on the southern outskirts of Russian Empire and occupying vast territories from the Caspian Sea to Outer Mongolia.⁷² The role of this region is twofold. Firstly, it represented a link between Russia and the Middle East. Secondly, it determined the nature of their further interaction. Despite the fact that the main reasons for the expansion of new lands were trade and commercial interests, in the case of the Middle East, Russia pursued initially ideological goals, and only then took a pragmatic position. Russia's involvement in the Middle East was associated with its religious mission of preserving and protecting the Orthodox Christian tradition, which was especially evident after the Ottoman conquest of Istanbul in 1453. However, the idea of the return of Istanbul repeatedly prevailed in tsarist Russia at different times.⁷³ As famous Russian novelist and philosopher Fyodor Dostoevsky stated, "Sooner or later Constantinople must be ours."⁷⁴

Following the Treaty of Karlowitz (1699), a large number of Russian pilgrims rushed to Palestine, bypassing Syrian lands. The religious context embedded in Russian influence in the Middle East, frequently used for political purposes, was maintained and strengthened through the activities of the Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society, founded in 1882, which had about 100 schools in the Levant by 1914. The mission of these establishments was primarily to provide support to Russian pilgrims, but also to promote cultural links by giving education to young Syrians and supporting the local population through a network of hospitals, schools and refuges. It has to be mentioned that the society continues to function nowadays. That is, in fact, Russia's penetration into the Middle East began with the use of "soft power" as a foreign policy tool to expand its sphere of influence.

One of the first Russian rulers who started to expand its borders to the south was Peter I "the Great," who led his troops to the Caspian coast holding them for a decade. Furthermore, he is considered as a great reformer in the Russian history. Peter the Great sought to turn Russia into a great power, for which it was necessary to modernize the

⁷² G. E. Wheeler, "Russia and the Middle East," *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-)* 35, no. 3 (July 1959): 295, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2612281>. Access Date 20/12/2019.

⁷³ *Encyclopedia of Western Colonialism since 1450*, s.v. "Empire, Russian and the Middle East," <https://www.encyclopedia.com/history/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/empire-russian-and-middle-east>. Access Date 28/03/2019.

⁷⁴ Feodor M. Dostoevsky, *The Diary of a Writer*, trans. Boris Brasol (New York: George Braziller, 1919), 362.

army and build a navy. This has had a transformative impact on Russian strategic culture. His successors continued his policy.

Thus, the move to a new strategic direction of the Russian foreign policy focusing on the access to the Black Sea and beyond was realized in the late 1760s as a response to internal pressure for obtaining greater benefits than was possible within the borders of central Russia.⁷⁵ In that time, the Ottoman and Persian Empires were on its way to the south, which resisted attempts to “cut a window” to the southern seas and penetrate into the Middle East. Diaries and memoirs of the participants of the wars, testimonies of prisoners and diplomatic correspondence confirm the centrality of the confrontation with the Ottoman Empire in order to carry out Russia’s discovery of the Middle East due to common border that Russia had been pushing gradually southwards into the Ottoman lands.⁷⁶ This was, in fact, the starting point for Russia’s engagement in the international diplomatic issue, known as the Eastern question, which refers to a complex of contradictions – from control over Istanbul and Straits (the Bosphorus and Dardanelles), the fate of the Christian population to the survival or dissolution of the Ottoman Empire – in the rivalry in the Middle East and the Balkans between the great powers of that time (Austria, Britain, France, the Ottoman Empire, and the Russian Empire). This study focuses on Middle Eastern affairs respectively. An integral part of the Eastern question was the Persian question, which was the struggle of the great powers for dominance in Iran. As Leonid Semenov noted, this struggle “was associated both with the struggle in Türkiye and with the struggle for positions in the Caucasus and Central Asia, as well as in India for Britain.”⁷⁷ In the policy of the European powers, Iran represented a counterweight to the Ottoman Empire. Russia along with Britain and France used the existing contradictions between them on religious and territorial grounds to its own advantage.

The appearance of Eastern question was caused by two factors. First, due to the process of the disintegration of feudalism in the Ottoman Empire that intensified in the second

⁷⁵ John P. LeDonne, *Ruling Russia: Politics and Administration in the Age of Absolutism, 1762-1796* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 82.

⁷⁶ Taki, *Tsar' i Sultan*, 16.

⁷⁷ Leonid Sergeyevich Semenov, *Rossiia i mezhdunarodnyye otnosheniya na Srednem Vostoke v 20-h gg. XIX v.* [Russia and international relations in the Middle East in the 20s of the XIX century] (Leningrad: Izd-vo LGU, 1963), 5.

half of the eighteenth century and the extremely weakening of the once powerful Ottoman Empire. Secondly, due to the intensification of the colonial expansion of the great powers in various parts of the world and, particularly, it concerned the Middle East.⁷⁸

As a result of a series of victories by Tsarina Catherine II “the Great” in the 1770s, the Russian Empire seized ports on the Black Sea and acquired the right to pass through the Turkish Straits, thus gaining access to the warm waters of the Mediterranean Sea, bypassing the long way from the ice-covered Baltic sea. She was the first Russian ruler who sent a navy into the Mediterranean where the Ottomans were defeated in the Battle of Cheshme. In addition, she also provided her subjects with the opportunity to enter Jerusalem and other holy places, thereby securing for Russia the position of the protector of Orthodox Christianity (in accordance with the provisions of the 1774 Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca), which would continue to be the main claim for Russians for decades to come.⁷⁹ Thus, this circumstance (defeat of Ottoman Empire) and the consequences arising from them (opening of the Turkish Straits for Russia and the observance of the religious rights of Orthodox Christians in the Ottoman Empire, who received the protection of the Russian Tsarina) made it the major power in the Black Sea region, which the provisions of the Treaty of Jassy (1792) reaffirmed. The international outcome of the combination of systemic (the defeat of the Ottomans) and domestic factors (Catherine the Great’s decision to send a fleet to the Mediterranean) was the improvement of Russian Empire’s status as a major power in the regional subsystem (Black Sea region). It has to be mentioned that the contemporary Russia relies strongly on the historical role of political and spiritual heir to Istanbul being part of the context for current policy making.⁸⁰

In the nineteenth century and later, the ideological mission of protecting Orthodox Christians and their holy places was strengthened and then replaced above all by Russia’s increasing imperial ambitions to be recognized as a great power, guided by strategic and geopolitical considerations, and to preserve this hard-won status.⁸¹ Actually, there is no consensus among researchers about the time when Russia exactly attained the status of

⁷⁸ Georgiyev, *Vneshnyaya politika Rossii*, 1.

⁷⁹ Isabella Ginor and Gideon Remez, “The Russian Revolution’s Middle Eastern Legacy: Plus Ça Change...,” June 11, 2017, <https://historynewsnetwork.org/article/167404>. Access Date 15/03/2019.

⁸⁰ Trenin, *What Is Russia Up To*, 12.

⁸¹ Taki, *Tsar’ i Sultan*, 16.

great power.⁸² By this time, Russian Empire had already gained a solid material basis (concentration of material capabilities) for the realization of its goals. It had reached its greatest territorial extent in the southern theatre and accumulated strong military capabilities by the standards of that time. The Russian Empire perceived the Middle East as an arena for asserting its growing naval and military power, which it began to develop back to the reforms of Peter the Great.⁸³ The geographical location of Moscow, quite remote from the borders of the Ottoman Empire, which represented sufficient strategic depth, provided favorable conditions for launching powerful deep strikes in order to destroy the regional hegemony of the Ottoman Empire, maximize its power, thereby changing the distribution of material capabilities within the system and, accordingly, fill the vacuum with Russia's own hegemony in the Middle East.⁸⁴ Yet, a very simple strategic calculation showed that the instability of the Ottoman Empire could provoke the European great powers to intervene. This, in its turn, could possibly threaten Russian interests in the Turkish Straits and the Black Sea.

During the nineteenth century, five tsars changed in Russian Empire, and four times it waged a war against Ottomans. The successor of each previous tsar undertook a strategic review of the previous ruler guided by modernized concepts and strategies that have influenced the foreign policy course for the years ahead and the echoes of which some scholars find in the contemporary period.⁸⁵ As Bernard Lewis mentioned, "It is always tempting to seek parallels in the past for the troubles of our own time."⁸⁶ He identified three aspects for comparing Russia's past and present foreign policy in the Middle East, namely Russia's approach to this region, the methods and goals of Russia's engagement in the region, and the nature of Russia's relations with the West.

⁸² Norbert Eitelhuber, "The Russian Bear: Russian Strategic Culture and What It Implies for the West," *Connections* 9, no. 1 (Winter 2009): 6, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26326192>. Access Date 02/01/2023.

⁸³ *Encyclopedia of Western Colonialism since 1450*, s.v. "Empire, Russian and the Middle East."

⁸⁴ LeDonne, *The Grand Strategy*, 4.

⁸⁵ See, for example, Robert Legvold, *Russian Foreign Policy in the Twenty-First Century and the Shadow of the Past* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); Olga Oliker et al., "Russian Foreign Policy in Historical and Current Context: A Reassessment", *Perspective*, RAND Corporation, 2015, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE144.html>. Access Date 20/12/2019; and Andrei P. Tsygankov, *Russia's Foreign Policy: Change and Continuity in National Identity* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019).

⁸⁶ Bernard Lewis, "Russia in the Middle East: Reflections on Some Historical Parallels," *Round Table* 60, no. 239 (1970): 257.

In that time, the Middle East had remained an arena of strategic competition between Western European imperialist powers and tsarist Russia.⁸⁷ The Russian Empire continued its foreign policy course of maintaining its position in the Black Sea, ensuring control over the Straits and access to the Mediterranean, as well as preventing the European powers from receiving similar privileges. At those times, strategic goals dominated over ideological ones. This epoch (1813-1907) is known as the so-called Great Game in the history of international relations and the Tournament of Shadows in Russia. It was described by the English spy Arthur Connolly as a confrontation between the British and Russian Empires in the struggle for dominance in Central Asia.⁸⁸ More widely, it is used for description of global confrontation between tellurocratic Russia and thalassocratic Britain, which includes the developments, occurred in the Middle East. Russian control of the Straits worried Britain, whose position in the Mediterranean could be challenged by another power. Moreover, the collapse of the Ottoman Empire could undermine the balance of power in Europe.⁸⁹

In the early nineteenth century, Tsar Alexander I ascended the throne of Russian Empire and followed a policy of preserving the integrity of the Ottoman Empire and resolving disputes within the framework of bilateral agreements.⁹⁰ The main concern of Russia's foreign policy was to end the wars with Ottoman and Persian Empires.

Regarding Persia, Russia was involved in a series of Russo-Persian wars that assured Russia's military superiority over the Persians through the provisions of the Treaty of Gulistan (1813) and the Treaty of Turkmenchay (1828), according to which Russia was able to expand its borders by annexing vast Persian territories (the present-day Republic of Azerbaijan, Dagestan, Armenia, Eastern Georgia, Igdir, the Yerevan Khanate, and Nakhchivan) that came into its possession, and the Tsar gained the title of Protector of

⁸⁷ Saman Zulfqar, "Competing Interests of Major Powers in the Middle East: The Case Study of Syria and Its Implications for Regional Stability," *Perceptions* 23, no. 1 (Spring 2018): 126.

⁸⁸ Alexander Dugin, "Crimean War and Beginning of the Great Game," *Geopolitika.ru*, March 30, 2016, <https://www.geopolitika.ru/en/article/crimean-war-and-beginning-great-game>. Access Date 25/05/2019.

⁸⁹ *Encyclopedia of Western Colonialism since 1450*, s.v. "Anglo-Russian Rivalry in the Middle East," updated September 11, 2020, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/history/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/anglo-russian-rivalry-middle-east>. Access Date 30/10/2020.

⁹⁰ A. N. Sytin, "Velikoye protivostoyaniye" [Great confrontation], chap. 1 in *Istoriya vneshney politiki Rossii. Pervaya polovina XIX veka (ot voyn Rossii protiv Napoleona do Parizhskogo mira 1856 g.)* [History of Russian foreign policy. The first half of the 19th century (from the wars of Russia against Napoleon to the 1856 Peace Treaty of Paris)], ed. O. V. Orlik et al. (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnyye otnosheniya, 1999), 33-34.

the Persian Crown, which actually meant the transformation of Persia into a protectorate of the Russian Empire. Since then, Britain was concerned about Russia's military successes in Persia. Thus, the main point of contradiction between Russia and Britain turned out to be on the southern borders of the Russian Empire due to its proximity to the British colonies or to their zone of interest and influence.

The revolutions that erupted in Europe in the early nineteenth century had a negative impact on the situation in the Ottoman Empire, whose government found itself in a difficult situation due to simultaneous uprisings in both European and Asian regions. The major European powers saw in the weakness of the Turks a favourable opportunity for the realization of their plans regarding the territorial possessions of the Sultan. At this time the Eastern question took a central place in the Russian foreign policy. Russian Empire's interests were to ensure free access to the Mediterranean Sea, which was associated in its turn with the development of foreign trade and the providing of security of its Black Sea coast. This naturally threatened the interests of the Ottoman Empire.⁹¹

The Russo-Turkish war of 1806-1812 during the reign of Alexander I and the Russo-Turkish War of 1828-1829 during the reign of Nicholas I allowed Russia to implement successfully a strategy of consistent undermining of the Ottoman influence in some of its possessions and their subsequent withdrawal. Accumulating its power at the expense of the Ottoman Empire and trying to strengthen its influence, the Russian Empire secured the status of the patroness of all the Christian subjects belonging to the Sultan. This assertive position was bolstered by Russia's internationally recognized status as "a power with system-wide interests as well as a say in matters pertaining to the management of the system"⁹² following the Congress of Vienna in 1815.

The outcome of the Russo-Turkish War of 1828-1829 was the Treaty of Adrianople, which opened a new stage in the development of the Eastern question. Russia decided that keeping the Ottoman Empire as a weak and dependent power corresponds to its interests at that time. The Treaty of Hünkâr İskelesi (1833) represented the culmination of Russian power and influence in Istanbul that gave Russia the right to block the passage

⁹¹ Sheremet, *Turtsiya i Adrianopol'skiy mir*, 3-4.

⁹² Friedrich V. Kratochwil, *Rules, Norms, and Decisions: On the Conditions of Practical and Legal Reasoning in International Relations and Domestic Affairs* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 83.

of warships of any power in the Black Sea, however, it failed to preserve this privilege, losing it in 1841.

The most important events of this period in the relations of Russian Empire with Middle East, which was at that time in the possession of the Ottoman Empire, were the Crimean War of 1853-1856, which became the turning point of the Great Game, and Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878. Both of these conflicts were about the control of the decisive point – “the key to the Russian house”⁹³ – the Turkish Straits, which represent “a lock” for the implementation of the project of geographical openness for such a continental power as Russia.

The direct confrontation between the great powers took place during the reign of the Tsar Nicholas I, whose individuality was crucial for the Russian foreign policy and decision making respectively. The thirty years between 1825 and 1855 were a time of extraordinary consistency in Russian policy. This period was characterized by the character, temperament, and intellect of the Tsar Nicholas I, which proves a significant importance of leader image that, in its turn, can affect the perception of the incoming systemic stimuli.

The Eastern question occupied a special place in the foreign policy agenda of Nicholas I. Under his rule, Russia abandoned the plan of partition of the Ottoman Empire, which was central in the foreign policy of previous rulers, namely Catherine II and Paul I. He had completely different approach to this issue. Once Nicholas I said, “My brother bequeathed to me very important affairs, and the most important of all is the Eastern question... If all my allies are not in unanimity and do not conscientiously strive for the same goal – the earliest end of this affair, then will force me to tackle it and commit it alone...”⁹⁴ Thus, one of the first questions to be resolved by Tsar was the following: to be or not to be a war with the Ottoman Empire? Russian foreign policy at the beginning of his reign was characterized by a commitment to peaceful coexistence. Therefore, he wanted to resolve

⁹³ David Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, “Russian Foreign Policy: 1815-1917,” in *The Cambridge History of Russia, Volume 2: Imperial Russia, 1689-1917*, ed. Dominic Lieven (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 557.

⁹⁴ O. V. Orlik, “Rossiya i Vostochnyy krizis 20-kh godov” [Russia and the Eastern Crisis of the 1920s], chap. 5 in *Istoriya vneshney politiki Rossii. Pervaya polovina XIX veka (ot voyn Rossii protiv Napoleona do Parizhskogo mira 1856 g.)* [History of Russian foreign policy. The first half of the 19th century (from the wars of Russia against Napoleon to the 1856 Peace Treaty of Paris)], ed. O. V. Orlik et al. (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnyye otnosheniya, 1999), 210.

Eastern question in the peaceful way and used all the diplomatic means at his disposal to sustain the international stability. However, to a certain extent he had to rely on his armed forces, although mainly as an instrument of deterrence and intimidation. Yet, intimidation was not always successful. In the case of the war, Nicholas I turned to a linear and geometric strategy. The army, as befitted a military institution, the *raison d'être* of which was to threaten, not necessarily to fight, supposed to be large and formidable, but at the same time as cheap as possible.⁹⁵

The weakening of Russia's influence in Istanbul and the subsequent establishment of international control over the Straits forced Nicholas I in the 1840s to openly raise the question of the division of the "inheritance of a sick man," which denoted Turkish possessions.⁹⁶ Although there were various systemic stimuli, which had an impact on the dynamics of the struggle for dominance in the Middle East, domestic factors such as the role of personality, beliefs and leader image could explain the path of Russian, European and Ottoman diplomacy that led to the Crimean war. Michael Florinsky noted that "the personal element [...] played probably a decisive part in shaping the course of events."⁹⁷ As mentioned above, Nicholas I was committed to maintaining the status quo in Ottoman Empire, relying on his attachment to order and the principle of legitimacy. His minister of foreign affairs, Nesselrode, supported him, as Russia was interested in preserving the Ottoman Empire in Europe. However, perception of the Tsar and his beliefs in this situation destroyed the once conciliatory position, which was enshrined in a number of international agreements. Tsar Nicholas I was convinced that the demise of a "sick man" on the Bosphorus was inevitable, and he insisted on taking measures to resolve this problematic situation.⁹⁸ Nesselrode, in his turn, was of the opinion that such an outcome could be avoided. In addition to Tsar's vision, the militant hostility towards Russia of the then British foreign secretary Lord Palmerston, who later took the post of British prime minister, and Sir Stratford Canning, British ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, stemmed from the Treaty of Hünkâr İskelesi, which was a true turning point in Britain's attitude to

⁹⁵ William C. Fuller Jr., *Strategy and Power in Russia, 1600-1914* (New York: Free Press, 1992), 219.

⁹⁶ Yevgeniy Viktorovich Tarle, *Krymskaya voyna. Soch., t. VIII* [The Crimean War. Op., vol. VIII] (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo AN SSSR, 1958), 102-103.

⁹⁷ Michael T. Florinsky, *Russia: A History and an Interpretation, Volume II* (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1953), 826.

⁹⁸ Florinsky, *Russia*, 826-827.

Russia, played a crucial role in the outbreak of the Crimean war. As Harold Temperley noted, “the anti-Russian feeling of these two men was one profound cause of the Crimean War.”⁹⁹ At the very end of life of Tsar Nicholas I, he led Russia to the greatest humiliation of the nineteenth century, the Crimean War, which represents the pivotal moment of the Great Game.

The foreign policy of Russia before the war had been in fact conservative. Thereafter it became revolutionary.¹⁰⁰ Until 1856, Russia held a special position at the court of the Sultan due to the validity of the main provisions of the 1774 Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca, which secured the exclusive right of Russia as the patron of Orthodox Christians in the Ottoman Empire, which Russia subsequently took advantage of to support revolutionary and anti-imperialist ideas and sentiments in the Middle Eastern colonies of the great powers, thereby giving it the opportunity to realize its interests in the region.¹⁰¹ The formal motive of the Crimean War was therefore a contradiction between Russian Tsar Nicholas I and French emperor Napoleon III both of which wanted to possess the keys to the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem and to act as a protector of all followers of Christ in the Holy Land.

Against the background of the confrontation between Britain and Russia, the balance of power formed on the eve of the Crimean War did not favor Russia’s position, since it found itself face to face with an alliance of maritime powers in the absence of allies in Europe. Britain and France supported the Ottoman Empire by joining it in 1854 in the war against Russia. As for the Austrian Empire, it left Russia at a critical moment despite its help in the suppression of the Hungarian revolution because of fears of the strengthening of Russia’s position, and moreover threatened to enter the war on the side of the enemy alliance, thereby increasing systemic pressure on Russia. Hence, Russia became isolated from all possible allies that marked a huge diplomatic success of Britain.¹⁰²

The atmosphere that was created around the collision of the Ottoman Empire and Russia involved different powers in the resolution of the conflict, creating a complex

⁹⁹ Harold Temperley, *England and the Near East: The Crimea* (London: Routledge, 2019), 74.

¹⁰⁰ Hugh Ragsdale, *The Russian Tragedy: The Burden of History* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1996), 83.

¹⁰¹ Muharrem Erenler, “Russia’s Arab Spring Policy,” *Bilge Strateji* 4, no. 6 (Spring 2012): 170.

¹⁰² Dugin, “Crimean War.”

configuration of diplomatic maneuvers with European powers (Britain, France and Austria). The Austrian approach to the conflict consisted in the conservative policy of Metternich aimed at the preservation of the status quo, while the Anglo-French alliance pursued a policy of weakening and disintegrating the Ottoman Empire, if possible, but with the condition that Russia could not gain advantages at its expense. Therefore, considering Russia's policy in the Eastern question, it is important to understand the dynamics of geopolitical activity in the relevant region.

Geopolitically, the unification of the power of Britain and France into a military alliance of maritime powers had an anti-land character, displayed by the Russian Empire. France changed its status as a land power, maintained during the Seven Years' War and Napoleon's conquests, into a maritime profile, which is natural to Britain. The Austrian Empire proved itself as a continental power with a moderate position, which was reflected in the policy pursued by Metternich, committed to the principles of the Holy Alliance (preserving the status quo by guarding postwar borders and preventing revolutionary influence). The Ottoman Empire operated mainly within the framework of the land power model, which was subjected to systemic and internal pressure, weakening it and facilitating the invasion of great powers. The Russian Empire continued its foreign policy aimed at maintaining the status of a great power and tried to increase its power by expanding its zone of influence against the backdrop of the crumbling Ottoman Empire, which was not always successful, including due to the inability to abandon its imperial ambitions and change its identity. Thus, the general geopolitical image during this period was characterized by strict adherence to the basic geopolitical laws.¹⁰³

In this vein, the confrontation between the Russian and the Ottoman Empire resulted in a military conflict, the main theater of which was the Crimea. Firstly, Russia intended to stand on the defensive against the Turks on land, but eventually it undertook offensive naval action, thereby provoking the involvement of France and Britain in the conflict. This, in its turn, contributed to the weakening of the military positions of the Russian Empire although Russian army had successfully repelled Turkish attacks during the first

¹⁰³ Dugin, "Crimean War."

months of the war. As a result of the actions of the joined coalition forces, the strategically important port of Sevastopol was surrounded, forced to surrender in August 1855.¹⁰⁴

The three-year Crimean War ended with the signing of the Treaty of Paris in March 1856, after the death of Nicholas I and the accession of Alexander II to the throne. In accordance with the provisions of the Treaty, Russia could not deploy its naval forces in the Black Sea or place arsenals and fortresses. Russia became weak in the region and was unable to continue its policy. The Treaty of Paris was a great geopolitical victory. Nevertheless, its conditions were so humiliating for Russian Empire that it was worth expecting a revenge from a great power.

The Crimean war represented the end of the Nicholas I's system and had a significant impact on the Russian military establishment. For more than a century and a half, the Russian military system with its impressive peasant army was effective in defensive and offensive terms, providing reliable protection for the Empire. The Russian army was an integral part of the state strategy and was its main instrument. However, the Crimean War showed that this system lost its advantages and was no longer valuable in the changed conditions of the war. The system required reforms and changes that had to be implemented during the reign of the next Tsar Alexander II.

The formulation of an economic policy is an important part in the pursuance of a grand strategy. Its goal is to provide the means to maintain a fundamentally offensive strategy on a continental scale.¹⁰⁵ The Crimean war caused great damage to the Russian economy, causing enormous human and material losses, a significant increase in public debt and the disorganization of the monetary system along with Russia's backwardness and limited financial potential. The military defeat showed that without a modern industrial and transportation base, the Empire would not be able to retain its status of a great power. In order to boost the economy, Russia had to refuse from a system of forced labour and to pass to the system of free labour, to leave the administrative methods in the favour of market methods of modernization. That is how Russia began its Great reforms after the war, which included an economic transformation. Henceforth, the main ideas of economic liberalism, such as private property, private initiative, and competition, took an important

¹⁰⁴ Dugin, "Crimean War."

¹⁰⁵ LeDonne, *The Grand Strategy*, 227.

place in the minds of members of the government circles and society. The Finance Ministry's many years of effort were, however, largely expunged by the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878, in which political considerations again prevailed over economic interests.¹⁰⁶ Russian efforts to appease the Caucasus were completed successfully in 1865, which raised the possibility that Russia might want to cross the Heartland's periphery toward Baghdad and Aleppo.¹⁰⁷ In sum, even that campaign, victorious as it was, gave rise to another round of financial disarray and industrial crisis.

The reign of Alexander II ended, as it began, with a major setback in the Middle East. Russia's fourth war with the Ottoman Empire in the nineteenth century erupted over another anti-Turkish uprising among its restive Slavic subjects in 1875.¹⁰⁸ In 1876, as the Ottomans faced growing resistance in their Balkan territories, Alexander II started a military campaign to take Istanbul with the aim of controlling the marine exit from the Black Sea.¹⁰⁹

The war of 1877-1878 was a repeat of the war of 1826-1828. It was even more successful, despite the fact that the Russians had no navy and the Ottomans had ironclad warships to ferry troops and supplies to their fortresses.¹¹⁰

One of the new and uncommon characteristics was the impact that public opinion had on tsarist policy. This was due to the fact that the tsarist foreign policy weakened its noble-dynastic character, increasingly involving the public in foreign policy issues.¹¹¹ The press actively promoted the need for military assistance to the Orthodox subjects of the Ottoman Empire.¹¹² Thus, in conducting war against Ottoman Empire, the Tsar got the necessary support of the society that had extremely importance in reaching his goals. As E. H. Carr argued, "Power over opinion is therefore not less essential for political

¹⁰⁶ Valerii L. Stepanov, "The Crimean War and the Russian Economy," *Russian Studies in History* 51, no. 1 (Summer 2012): 28-29, <https://doi.org/10.2753/RSH1061-1983510101>. Access Date 02/01/2023.

¹⁰⁷ John P. LeDonne, *The Russian Empire and the World, 1700-1917: The Geopolitics of Expansion and Containment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 322.

¹⁰⁸ Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, "Russian Foreign Policy," 565.

¹⁰⁹ Robert Service, *Russia and Its Islamic World: From the Mongol Conquests to the Syrian Military Intervention* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2017), 5.

¹¹⁰ LeDonne, *The Russian Empire*, 140.

¹¹¹ V. I. Bovykin, *Ocherki istorii vneshney politiki Rossii. Konets XIX veka – 1917 god: Posobiye dlya uchitelya* [Essays on the history of Russian foreign policy. The end of the XIXth century - 1917: A teacher's manual] (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoye uchebno-pedagogicheskoye izdatel'stvo Ministerstva prosveshcheniya RSFSR, 1960), 4.

¹¹² Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, "Russian Foreign Policy," 565.

purposes than military and economic power, and has always been closely associated with them. The art of persuasion has always been a necessary part of the equipment of a political leader.”¹¹³ That was a success for Alexander II and his foreign policy.

This time Britain did not want to bind itself with an alliance with the Ottoman Empire and to participate again in the war against Russia. London could not count on the support of the Austrian Empire as well in view of the Alliance of the Three Emperors concluded in 1873, which implied first a consultative pact, and later, in 1881, an agreement on neutrality, which provided Russia with a favorable international environment and guaranteed it benevolent neutrality of Germany and Austria-Hungary in the event of a war with England, and also weakened the danger from the British fleet in the Black Sea.¹¹⁴ In the midst of negotiations with London, Franz Joseph sent a letter to Alexander II, claiming him: “Whatever happens and whatever turn the war may take – nothing can induce me to recede from my given word. England has been informed in a decisive manner that she cannot count, in any event, on an alliance with Austria.”¹¹⁵ This time the balance of power was different from the Crimean War. The Ottoman Empire pinned all its hopes on a successful defense. Russian plans were based on the calculations of conducting the war in one campaign, but the state of the army was far from brilliant, which affected its actions.¹¹⁶

The Berlin Congress turned out to be a terrible diplomatic disaster for Russia that plunged the Eastern question into the stalemate, which lasted until 1907. None of the signatories of the Treaty of Berlin of 1878 was satisfied with its terms, and most of all it caused indignation of the Foreign Minister of Alexander II, Prince (Knyaz) Gorchakov, although the Russian-led coalition won the war. Despite the fact that Russia received some territories in the Caucasus and Bessarabia under the terms of the Treaty, Russia perceived it as a humiliating failure. Similar to the situation with the Congress of Paris in 1856, the Russian Empire again found itself in diplomatic isolation. However, these obstacles did

¹¹³ Edward Hallett Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919–1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), 132.

¹¹⁴ Bovykin, *Ocherki istorii*, 6.

¹¹⁵ George H. Rupp, *A Wavering Friendship: Russia and Austria, 1876-1878* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1941), 405.

¹¹⁶ Oleg Ayrapetov, *Vneshnyaya politika Rossiyskoy imperii (1801-1914)* [Foreign policy of the Russian Empire (1801-1914)] (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo “Yevropa,” 2006), 322.

not discourage Russian diplomacy from penetrating the Middle East. Control over the Straits and dominant political influence throughout the region remained the ultimate goals of Russian policy.¹¹⁷

After the assassination of Alexander II by members of the terrorist revolutionary organization “Narodnaya Volya” (“People’s Will”) in March 1881, his son Alexander III ascended to the Russian throne, who from the very beginning of his reign realized the need for internal stabilization and preservation of peace. One of the high-ranking diplomats of that time, Vladimir Lamzdorf, who later became Russian Foreign Minister, described the foreign policy priority of the new tsar as “establishing Russia in an international position that will permit it to restore order at home, to recover from its dreadful injury and then channel all of its strength towards a national restoration.”¹¹⁸ Despite the fact that Alexander III was perceived as a reactionary leader, he managed to achieve his goal of peaceful coexistence, which confirms the absence of any military actions by Russia and the maintenance of peace during his reign.

The nineteenth century in the history of the Russian Empire is characterized by the gradual search for the resolution of the Eastern question that had the great importance in the foreign policy of the state. Analyzing the key turning points led to the determination of the Russian grand strategy that expresses the integrating vision of the military strategy together with commercial ambitions, economic policy and diplomacy. Russian grand strategy in that period represented the establishment of its hegemony within the Heartland and the protection of its periphery, as well as strategically expanding of its “defense perimeter” gaining the access to the warm seas. The goal of the Russian grand strategy in the Middle East was to challenge the Ottoman hegemony and eventually destroy it replacing it with Russia’s own hegemony within the larger territorial framework of the Heartland.

Russian Empire was a warrior state with strong peasant army able to realize both defensive and offensive functions. However, the Crimean war showed that crossing the Russian Empire periphery could brought unfavourable results. The Crimean war was a

¹¹⁷ Yakov Zakher, “Konstantinopol’ i prolivny” [Constantinople and the Straits], *Krasnyy arkhiv: Istoricheskiy zhurnal* 7 (1924): 48.

¹¹⁸ Vladimir Nikolayevich Lamzdorf, *Obzor vneshney politiki Rossii za vremya tsarstvovaniya Aleksandra III* [Overview of Russia's foreign policy during the reign of Alexander III], GARF, F. 568, op. 1, d. 53, p. 1.

heavy defeat for Russia. It made clear that social and governmental modernization, as well as military and economic, was crucial for Russia to preserve a status of a great power.

The Russo-Turkish war of 1877-1878 was completely different in comparison with Crimean war. The balance of power had been changed. The Ottoman Empire was in its decline while the Russian Empire extended its frontier in the south and its influence into Ottoman territory.

Thus, Russian grand strategy in the Middle East in the nineteenth century represented an essentially political concept, recognizing no discontinuity between peace and wartime. The key turning points shows that the empire's grand strategy was indeed tested and reshaped to meet the needs of hegemonic expansion.

After Russian Revolution of 1905 decision-making environment in Imperial Russia had undergone some changes. Although the supreme control over the military and foreign policy of the Empire belonged to the Tsar, the new institutions that were created as a result of revolution had both direct and indirect leverage even on the formulation of the tsarist high policy.¹¹⁹ Another unusual feature for the Imperial period at this time was the focus on the domestic public opinion. The situation was twofold, since Nicholas II did not take into account the importance of domestic public opinion. However, influential ministers from his circle, on the contrary, began to consider it more seriously, which hypothetically represented domestic constraints, narrowing the potential range of foreign policy choices, as well as affecting their ability to develop and carry out various policy alternatives. The image of the Tsar in the eyes of society fell both due to failed domestic policy and foreign policy decisions, namely those related to the war. The tension in society was growing, but foreign policy interests prevailed.

In fact, the Great Game continued until early twentieth century. By this time, it represented the great power competition for the spheres of influence that was not limited by one region but covered the territories all over Eurasia. The rivalry between Russian and British Empires officially ended with signing an agreement, the Anglo-Russian Convention, in 1907 that regulated their economic and political interests. As a result, it delineated spheres of influence in Persia, designating all of northern Iran, including Tehran, as an exclusive sphere of influence for Russian interests. The southern Persia was

¹¹⁹ Fuller, *Strategy and Power*, 407.

recognized as British sphere of influence, respectively. The entente with Britain was definitely a victory for the Foreign Ministry and Russia in general. However, there is no doubt that anti-Russian sentiment persisted in Britain.

Although “the signature of the Anglo-Russian convention did not, by any means, imply the conclusion of an Anglo-Russian understanding”¹²⁰ from the beginning, it eventually became one of the pillars of the Triple Entente that united France, Great Britain and Russia in the alliance in the World War I.

Russia’s participation in the World War I was to a large extent dictated by the desire to resolve the Eastern question, namely, to take control of the Turkish Straits, which would provide direct and unhindered access to the Mediterranean Sea, as well as control over a possible external act of aggression by its opponents. When the Ottoman Empire joined the Central Powers, Russia opposed the Turks, pushing them into eastern Anatolia, as well as occupied the neutral northwestern provinces of Persia.¹²¹ Thus, the miscalculation of Ottoman Empire when deciding to enter the World War I led to dramatic geopolitical consequences, expressed in its collapse and the emergence of new political entities in the Middle East, as well as contributing to the collapse of the Russian Empire.¹²²

In 1915, the Triple Entente (Russia, Britain and France) concluded a secret agreement, which implied to give Istanbul and the Dardanelles to the Russians in case of victory. These spheres of influence were expanded as a result of the Sykes-Picot Agreement, which gave part of Eastern and Southern Anatolia to Russian control. According to the agreement, Britain received territory corresponding to what is today Jordan, southern Israel and Palestine, southern Iraq, as well as areas that included the ports of Haifa and Acre to allow access to the Mediterranean. France received the southeastern part of Türkiye, northern Iraq, Syria and Lebanon.

The Eastern question, as a historically rooted international issue, lost its relevance with the final collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the abolition of the sultanate and the creation of the Republic of Türkiye in 1923. Nevertheless, the issue of passage through the Turkish

¹²⁰ Harold Nicolson, *Sir Arthur Nicolson, Bart., First Lord Carnock: A Study in the Old Diplomacy* (London, Constable, 1930), 263.

¹²¹ Trenin, *What Is Russia Up To*, 15-16.

¹²² Balci et al., “War Decision,” 644.

Straits and further to the Mediterranean Sea has remained fundamental regarding Russian interests, as it satisfies ambitions for opening up and it provides access to the Middle East.

The state-society relations played an important role in this period of Russian history, as the events happened inside the Russian state influenced the whole international system. The accumulated discontent of the Russian people with domestic and foreign policy resulted first in the February Revolution of 1917, and then finally put an end to the bourgeois rule of Russia, resulting in the October Revolution of 1917 and the establishment of Soviet power. Russia as an imperial entity ceased to exist. But have the country's imperial ambitions become obsolete?

1.2. Russian Foreign Policy towards Middle East in the Soviet Period

After the Revolution, when all the secret archives of tsarist Russia were made public, it became clear that Russia had never abandoned the policy of the Straits.¹²³ The conclusion of the Treaty of Versailles as a result of the World War I, as well as the Russian Revolution, formed a completely new balance of forces in the international system, radically changing its structure. It was characterized among other things by the involvement in politics of the “dependent peoples” of the new colonies, the emergence of the Soviet Union and their opposition to the West, and the subordination of the two former powers (Germany and Austria).¹²⁴ The period between the two world wars did not provide the Soviets with any significant success in the Middle East. Britain and France maintained their dominant position, just as there was no actor on the world stage who could resist them in the region. The time of their weakening and temporary rise of the Soviet Union in the Middle East fell on the period after the World War II. Up to this point, foreign policy had been characterized by the pragmatism of a great power in the Middle East. Despite the complete rejection of the former world order by the Bolsheviks, the international system exerted its influence, forcing the Soviets to coexist with other states, and obeying the rules of conduct in the international arena. Soviet foreign policy options were constrained by its internal situation expressed in the struggle to consolidate the power of the revolutionary government, as well as by its external environment, pressing

¹²³ Zakher, “Konstantinopol’ i proliv,” 48.

¹²⁴ Paul Bew et al., *The State in Northern Ireland, 1921-72: Political Forces and Social Classes* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1979), 27.

it to deal with the growing threat on its Western front. Although ideology formed the basis of the Soviet state, practice shows that the real interests determined the nature of its behaviour in the international arena, including the Middle East, which continued to be the region of traditional Russian concern and efforts to establish correct and mutually beneficial relations as soon as possible.

The October Revolution of 1917 itself had a great impact on the approach of Russian foreign policy in the Middle East since it brought a new dimension to traditional Russian objectives there, replacing some of them with a completely different set of values and priorities. Soviet Russia published and denounced the secret treaties and agreements concluded by the Tsar with the Western powers, which included, among other things, arrangements for post-war Russian control of Istanbul and the acquisition of several Turkish and Persian provinces. The fact that Russia became Communist and officially atheistic after the revolution required an appropriate policy in the region where the religious context was one of the main components. This policy was covered by Lenin's "progressive and revolutionary ideological tactics" on the national question, which implied support for the national liberation struggle of colonial peoples against Imperial domination.¹²⁵ In July 1920, Lenin said that "world imperialism must fall when the revolutionary onslaught of the exploited and oppressed workers in each country [...] merges with the revolutionary onslaught of hundreds millions of people who have hitherto stood outside of history and have been regarded merely as the object of history."¹²⁶ As long as imperialism continued to exist, the task was to pursue a policy of implementing the closest alliance of all the national and colonial liberation movements with Soviet Russia. This mission was undertaken by the Comintern, which supported the communist parties in the Middle East in their efforts to undermine European colonial rule and ensure the protection of the interests and security of the Soviet Union.

With the formation of the Soviet Union in 1922, the Leninist concept of the world proletarian revolution, opposed to the ideals of Western capitalist domination, captured the minds of the Soviet leadership and pushed for the search for allies among the colonial and dependent territories. Initially, interest in the Middle East was huge. The reasons

¹²⁵ Andrej Kreutz, *Russia in the Middle East: Friend or Foe?* (Westport: Praeger Security International, 2007), 46.

¹²⁶ U. S. Congress. House. Committee on Un-American Activities, *Hearings: Activities of Ku Klux Klan Organizations in the United States* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1965), 1395.

seemed more pragmatic. Soviet Union attempted to secure its southern borders and form its circle of allies against Western bloc.

The main focus of Soviet Middle Eastern policy was the establishment of close relations with Türkiye. The Soviets supported Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in his quest for the formation of the Republic of Türkiye, supplying arms to Ankara. Although ideologically Mustafa Kemal Atatürk was an opponent of the Bolsheviks, Türkiye, independent of Western influence, represented a significant geopolitical buffer in the Black Sea and the Caucasus region.¹²⁷ Another potential buffer was Iran, with which the Soviets signed a Treaty of Friendship in 1921. This document gave the Soviet Union the right to enter Iran if a third party took hostile action against the Soviet Union from Iranian territory, which its government was unable to prevent. This provision was used with the beginning of the World War II, when Soviet forces invaded and occupied the territory of Northern Iran due to the potential threat from the pro-Nazi Iranian leadership.

The Soviet Union tried to establish relations with other Middle Eastern countries. Thus, mistaking the religious movement of Ibn Saud's Wahhabism as "a major blow to England's policy of creating an Arab vassal state,"¹²⁸ the Soviet Union was the first state to provide diplomatic recognition to the government of King Ibn Saud in 1926. However, this did not contribute to the conclusion of a trade agreement in 1928, the negotiations on which failed. In the same year, there was some success in relations with Yemen. Two countries signed a Treaty of Friendship and Commerce, which resulted in the opening of a permanent Soviet trade mission.

Despite the efforts of the Comintern and the emergence for short time of strong communist parties in some Middle Eastern countries (Iraq, Syria), Bolshevism was not widespread in the region. This was caused mainly by the mistrust of the masses to the atheistic orientation of communism. Thus, in addition to high-profile slogans, several foreign policy achievements, as well as economic cooperation and trade, the USSR had tenuous contacts and showed little activity in the Middle East in the 1920-1930s being preoccupied with its internal situation and with the growing threat of Germany and Japan.

¹²⁷ Trenin, *What Is Russia Up To*, 18.

¹²⁸ Stephen Page, *The USSR and Arabia: The Development of Soviet Policies and Attitudes Towards the Countries of the Arabian Peninsula 1955-1970* (London: The Central Asian Research Centre, 1971), 17.

USSR continued to strengthen its position in the Mediterranean Sea, primarily through the provisions of the Montreux Convention (1936), which removed restrictions on freedom of passage and navigation by sea in the Straits, as well as through expanding of a network of naval bases (Egypt, Syria, the Red Sea), thereby pushing back its defensive perimeter. This, in its turn, contributed to the advancement of Russia in the Middle East.¹²⁹ In 1939, during a meeting with the Foreign Minister of Nazi Germany, Joachim von Ribbentrop, People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs of the USSR, Vyacheslav Molotov, talked about the general interest of the USSR in the sphere of influence south of the Batumi-Baku line in the direction toward the Persian Gulf. On the one hand, these ambitions were interpreted by Russia's "age-long striving" for warm seas, on the other hand, the task for Moscow was to eliminate the prevailing British influence in the areas bordering the southern Soviet republics and prevent the establishment of German domination there.¹³⁰ Nevertheless, the existing balance of power did not allow expanding the influence of Soviets in the region. In addition, the outbreak of the World War II diverted the attention of the Soviet Union from this idea.

During the war, Türkiye has taken many diplomatic efforts to maintain a neutral position and joined the anti-Hitler coalition only at its last stage. However, the growth of Nazi influence was very distinctive.¹³¹ Researchers reflect different points of view on this issue. Some of them, chiefly Turkish ones, claim that Türkiye made every possible effort to prevent participation in the war on the side of any of the warring parties.¹³² Other scholars, primarily Soviet ones, tend to believe that Ankara was hesitant. At a certain stage of the war, namely in the case of the fall of Stalingrad, it planned to enter the war on the side of the Axis powers and was ready to attack the Soviet Union in the fall of

¹²⁹ Delanoë, "Le retour de la Russie," 26.

¹³⁰ Aleksey Vasil'yev, *Ot Lenina do Putina. Rossiya na Blizhnem i Srednem Vostoke* [From Lenin to Putin. Russia in the Near and Middle East] (Moscow: Tsentrpoligraf, 2018), loc. 51-52 of 1384, FB2.

¹³¹ Walter Laqueur, *The Soviet Union and the Middle East* (New York: Praeger, 1959), 128.

¹³² See Suat Bilge and Duygu Sezer, eds., *Olaylarla Türk Dış Politikası. Cilt: 1 (1919-1973)* [Turkish Foreign Policy with Events. Volume: 1 (1919-1973)] (Ankara: Ankara Üniversitesi Siyasal Bilgiler Fakültesi Yayınları, 1982); Selim Deringil, *Denge Oyunu: İkinci Dünya Savaşı'nda Türkiye'nin Dış Politikası* [Balance Game: Türkiye's Foreign Policy in the Second World War] (Istanbul: Tarih Vakfı Yurt Yayınları, 2003); Selim Deringil, *Turkish Foreign Policy during the Second World War: An 'Active' Neutrality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Mümtaz Faik Fenik, *Bu Harbin Kitabı. 1939 Harbi. Türkiye-İngiltere İttifakı ve Büyük Britanya İmparatorluğu* [This Is the Book of War. The War of 1939. Türkiye-England Alliance and the Empire of Great Britain] (Ankara: Zerbamat Basımevi, 1941); and Metin Tamkoç, *The Warrior Diplomats: Guardians of the National Security and Modernization of Turkey* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1976).

1942.¹³³ This is evidenced by the fact of the tightening of Turkish troops on the Caucasian border.¹³⁴ As the war ended, Stalin demanded from Türkiye the territory in Eastern Anatolia, as well as granting the USSR special privileges in the Straits. It was about revising the Montreux Convention, which would allow the Soviet Union to exercise control over the Straits along with Türkiye, and grant the right to build air and naval bases there. This requirement was in contradiction with the interests of Ankara and prompted it to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 1952, which literally meant Turkish alignment with the Western bloc during the Cold War. It was a significant blow to the strategic positions of the Soviet Union. Once a neutral country with a half-million army, Türkiye became part of the rival alliance and provided territory for the deployment of American military bases on the southern borders of the USSR. In conjunction with Stalin's demand on Türkiye, he made an attempt to obtain a United Nations' trusteeship for the Soviet Union in Libya, which was not successful. Both of these requests demonstrated Russian long-term strategic interest in the Black Sea and Mediterranean.¹³⁵

The first post-war crisis in the relations of the Soviet Union with its Anglo-American allies concerned Iran. Although the war was over, the Soviet Union was reluctant to withdraw its troops from Iranian territories as stated in the Soviet-Persian Treaty of 1921. Stalin hoped that Iranian Azerbaijan would eventually be able to detach from Iran and incorporate into the Soviet Union. However, some authors pointed out, that the main goal was not to be completely cut off from Iran by a hostile government supported by the

¹³³ See Nikolay Matveyevich Lavrov, *Turtsiya v 1918-1956 godakh. Uchebnyy material* [Türkiye in 1918-1956. Educational material] (Moscow: n.p., 1956); Nikolay Matveyevich Lavrov, *Turtsiya v 1939-1951 gg.: Lektsii, pročitannyye v VPSH pri TSK VKP(b)* [Türkiye in 1939-1951: Lectures given at the HPS under the Central Committee of the CPSU(b)] (Moscow: n.p., 1952); Anatoliy Filippovich Miller, *Kratkaya istoriya Turtsii* [A brief history of Türkiye] (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoye izdatel'stvo politicheskoy literatury, 1948); Anatoliy Filippovich Miller, *Ocherki noveyshey istorii Turtsii* [Essays on the contemporary history of Türkiye] (Moscow: Izd-vo Akademii nauk SSSR, 1948); Erica Schoenberger and Stephanie Reich, "Soviet Policy in the Middle East," *MERIP Reports* 39 (July 1975): 3-28; Nail' Shayakhmetov and Boris Malorodov, "Turtsiya v gody Vtoroy mirovoy" [Türkiye during the Second World War], *BezFormata*, November 19, 2010, <http://ufa.bezformata.com/listnews/turtciya-v-godi-vtoroj-mirovoj/276796>. Access Date 11/09/2019; Aleksandr Borisovich Shirokorad, *Tysyacheletnyaya bitva za Tsar'grad* [The thousand-year battle for Tsargrad] (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Veche, 2019); and Dmitriy Yevgen'yevich Yeremeyev, *Turtsiya v gody Vtoroy mirovoy i "kholodnoy" voyn (1939-1990)* [Türkiye during the Second World War and the Cold War (1939-1990)] (Moscow: Akademiya gumanitarnykh issledovaniy, 2005).

¹³⁴ Ivar Spector, *The Soviet Union and the Muslim World, 1917-1958* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1959), 201-202.

¹³⁵ Trenin, *What Is Russia Up To*, 108-109.

United States.¹³⁶ Both of these intentions undoubtedly contradicted the interests of the Anglo-American allies. Still, Stalin had to give in and withdraw Soviet forces in 1946. However, the period of Soviet occupation left a lasting imprint in Iranian society, having an impact on Iran's foreign and defense policy for more than forty years. The threat from the north was perceived by Iran as a threat to its survival.¹³⁷ In such way, Iran's Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi entered into alliance with the United States, pushing back the Soviet Union and its long-standing ambition to reach the Persian Gulf.

The outcomes of the World War II altered the global balance of power. The international status and prestige of the Soviet Union has changed in a positive way. The USSR won the war and received the status of superpower in the established post-war world order. Another superpower appeared in the international arena, the United States, which had no imperial past and attracted representatives of new classes and many intellectuals with its ideas of freedom. Soviet grand strategy during the Cold War was formed as a result of Soviet-American disagreements regarding the actual distribution of power after the World War II and the influence of communist ideology.¹³⁸ As Jacek Wieclawski claims, "the bipolarization during the Cold War was a reflection of the hegemonic rivalry with the United States as the first player in the system and the Soviet Union as the main challenger."¹³⁹ These global shifts affected the Middle East, where a period of economic and industrial growth began, which contributed to the acceleration of social changes and activation of nationalist political movements of a radical nature.¹⁴⁰ However, the Soviet Union did not see the Arab countries as potential allies for its bloc. Since they have long been satellites of Great Britain and France, even after gaining independence, they looked like unreliable partners for Moscow. Moreover, many servicemen from Egypt and Syria were trained in Nazi Germany, and Libya was completely under Italian rule. Actually, the enemies of Britain became the friends of the Soviet Union whatever was their identity, ranging from anti-British Zionists in Palestine to medieval theocratic despotism in

¹³⁶ See Gabriel Kolko, *The Politics of War: The World and United States Foreign Policy, 1943-1945* (New York: Random House, 1968), 310; and *MERIP Reports*, no. 37 (May 1975).

¹³⁷ Nicola Pedde, "Russia's Strategy toward Iran and the Gulf," in *The MENA Region: A Great Power Competition*, ed. Karim Mezran and Arturo Varvelli (Milan: Ledizioni LediPublishing, 2019), 129.

¹³⁸ See William C. Wohlforth, *The Elusive Balance: Power and Perceptions during the Cold War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993).

¹³⁹ Wieclawski, "Contemporary Realism," 175.

¹⁴⁰ Kreutz, *Russia in the Middle East*, 47.

Yemen.¹⁴¹ The Soviet foreign policy in general and in the Middle East particularly was significantly influenced by the deepest trauma of the war. Leaders and society were obsessed with security. The strategic threat for the USSR from the south was posed by the American military bases (in Libya, Morocco, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Türkiye) and British military bases (in Egypt, Iraq, Libya, Palestine, Transjordan).

Later, in 1983, Ismail Fahmy, the former Minister of Foreign Affairs and Deputy Premier of Egypt, highlighted a number of limitations in Soviet foreign policy that “must be understood by anyone dealing with it.”¹⁴² Firstly, he pointed out an “unshakeable memory of the horrors of the Second World War.”¹⁴³ The Soviet leaders were not ready to take decisive steps that would lead to war or other colossal loss of human lives. The most important priority of Soviet foreign policy was to improve its relations with Washington and reach agreement with it on key international issues. Secondly, the lack of resources compared to the United States. Finally, the very nature of the Soviet system, which implied a slow decision-making process, so that Soviet policy did not keep pace with changes in the international situation.

After Stalin’s death in 1953, there was a consistent progress in developing positive relations with these states. The Middle Eastern policy of the new Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev was to assist these countries in gaining and consolidating their independence, which, in its turn, would accelerate the process of declining of the capitalist West. The task was to turn the entire region into a group of politically independent neutral states that did not have foreign troops and bases on their territory, maintaining friendly relations with the USSR.¹⁴⁴ Without putting much effort in economic and political terms, the Soviet Union managed to balance US policy in the region and extend its influence to areas of Western interest. Unlike previous strategies, the ideological component was eased. Moscow did not build hopes on the revolutionary potential of these countries. Particular diplomatic activity was directed to the strategically important countries of the region, Türkiye and Iran. On 30 May 1953, the Soviet Union sent a friendly note to Türkiye stating that it had no territorial claims to Türkiye, expressing a desire to improve relations

¹⁴¹ Vasil’yev, *Ot Lenina do Putina*, loc. 369 of 1384, FB2.

¹⁴² Ismail Fahmy, *Negotiating for Peace in the Middle East* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), 124.

¹⁴³ Fahmy, *Negotiating for Peace*, 124.

¹⁴⁴ Vasil’yev, *Ot Lenina do Putina*, loc. 74 of 1384, FB2.

and negotiate on existing contradictions.¹⁴⁵ Thanks to the growing anti-American sentiment on the Cyprus issue and the overall American presence in Türkiye, the Soviet Union was able to normalize Soviet-Turkish relations.

With regard to Iran, relations continued to remain at a low level. The Soviet Union caused concern about Iran's great-power ambitions in the Persian Gulf. Moreover, Iran joined the Baghdad Pact. However, Moscow supported the West-oriented monarchical regime, which repressed the Communists in Iran. This logic was dictated by the danger posed by the regional military alliances for the security of the USSR. In order to undermine and dissolve them, the Soviet Union used every opportunity, including the support of nationalist, religious and even anti-communist regimes. The Soviet Union itself entered into alliances with several Middle Eastern countries that favourably perceived Soviet attitudes and provided an opportunity for counterbalancing the Western pressure on its southern flank.¹⁴⁶ In 1955, Kremlin began selling arms to Egypt through an agreement with Czechoslovakia, so as not to look like an outright fomenter of Middle Eastern conflicts. This period marked the first major entry of the Soviet Union in the geopolitics of the Middle East, which turned it into a key player in the region. After Suez Crisis of 1956, in which England, France and Israel launched a military attack on Egypt to regain control of the Suez Canal, the Middle East was of particular interest because of its pivotal position in the Soviet-American rivalry during the Cold War.¹⁴⁷ The strategic importance of the Middle East was reinforced by its links to Africa, Indian Ocean and South Asia. On February 11, 1957, Moscow submitted a draft of its "Basic Principles of the Declaration of the Governments of the USSR, the USA, Britain and France on Peace and Security in the Middle East and on Non-Interference in the Internal Affairs of the Countries of this Region." The Western acceptance of such initiative would mean weakening its position, so Washington rejected it as a game designed to make the West recognize the USSR as a great power operating in the Middle East.¹⁴⁸

The situation in Syria was also favourable for the USSR politically. Since the mid-1950s, Syria has become the key country of Moscow's political influence and intelligence

¹⁴⁵ Vasil'yev, *Ot Lenina do Putina*, loc. 131 of 1384, FB2.

¹⁴⁶ Delanoë, "Le retour de la Russie," 26.

¹⁴⁷ Trenin, *What Is Russia Up To*, 20-22.

¹⁴⁸ Vasil'yev, *Ot Lenina do Putina*, loc. 103-105 of 1384, FB2.

presence in the region.¹⁴⁹ At that time, it was home to the largest Communist Party in the entire Middle East. A particularly unpleasant surprise for Moscow was the formation of the United Arab Republic as one of the goals of its creation was to neutralize the rapidly growing power of the communists in Syria. Therefore, its disintegration in October 1961 was welcomed in Moscow.

Until the mid-60s, the role of Middle East in the Soviet foreign policy was limited by determining it as strategically important region in the global balance-of-power struggle with the West. Having close relations with a number of Middle Eastern countries, Moscow was free enough to conduct politics on its own terms and could confine its ties with existing regimes. However, the Six-Day War of 1967 changed the situation. At first, the Soviet Union remained aloof from the Arab-Israeli conflict, providing just political support for its Arab allies. As the contradictions grew, this approach could undermine the position of the Soviet Union. The Soviet leadership faced a dilemma. On the one hand, it was an opportunity to expand and strengthen Soviet influence in the Middle East. On the other hand, the possibility of Arab defeat and overthrowing the friendly regimes, as well as potential increasing of confrontation with the United States, were not in favour of an open military confrontation. The situation required a more active involvement of Moscow. The Soviet Union condemned Israel's attack on Egypt and Syria responding with, among other things, a severance of diplomatic relations with Israel and a massive rearmament of the allies thereafter. Although this step was not primarily a gesture in favour of the Arabs, but a reluctant act in the domestic political struggle. Soviet "hawks" insisted on the military participation of the Soviet Union in the Arab-Israeli conflict. To avoid it, Andrei Gromyko, the Soviet Minister of Foreign Affairs, put forward a proposal to sever diplomatic relations.¹⁵⁰ The United States, bogged down in the Vietnam War, avoided being military involved in any conflict in the Middle East. Eventually, Arab allies were defeated, which undoubtedly dealt a blow to Soviet prestige, but it did not mean the collapse of Soviet position in the Middle East. By the autumn 1968, an estimated 2.5\$ billion worth of arms had been delivered to the Arab states that equalled roughly the

¹⁴⁹ Trenin, *What Is Russia Up To*, 56.

¹⁵⁰ Trenin, *What Is Russia Up To*, 149.

volume of all Soviet deliveries to the region since 1955.¹⁵¹ Consequently, it saved the day and Soviet influence in the Middle East increased significantly.

As a result of the Arab-Israeli war of 1967, anti-Western sentiment intensified in the Arab world. This led to coups in a number of countries – Iraq, Sudan and Libya. In Iraq, despite the 1968 coup that restored the Baath's right wing to power under Hassan Al-Bakr, relations with the USSR were declared the basis of the new government's foreign policy. This time was marked by the first major Soviet involvement in the oil production in the Middle East. The USSR pledged to assist in the development of the North Rumailah oil fields and provided technical and economic assistance to Iraq's industry after the war. In Syria, the 1966 coup had a positive impact on Soviet-Syrian relations. Baathism became more moderate, contributing to the internal socialist development of the country as a precondition to unity with other Arab states, which suited Moscow's interests. The Syrian Communist Party pledged to cooperate with the Baath and thus strengthened for some time its influence. Still Syria was a problematic ally for USSR as its often unpredictable actions caused further complications.¹⁵² In Egypt, the Soviet Union supported Nasser. His moderate stance was in line with Moscow's expectations of maintaining a balance between extremists of the left and right who shared a common hostility to Israel.¹⁵³ Therefore, his demise in 1970 marked the end of the Nasserist era in Soviet-Arab relations.

In terms of global political strategy, the Soviet Union managed to expand its influence in Western spheres of interest in the Middle East. The military power of the Soviet Union increased due to the appearance of warships in the Mediterranean. In 1968, the Mediterranean squadron was formed, which was still inferior to the U.S. 6th Fleet, but had the potential for development. Without military bases, the maintenance of the Mediterranean squadron was expensive. The Soviet leadership dealt with a challenging issue of obtaining bases in one of the friendly countries of the Mediterranean. It was fundamentally contrary to the principles promoted by the Soviet foreign policy in the Middle East, namely the elimination of foreign military presence and military bases in the region. The closest Soviet ally was Nasser, who agreed to provide a number of

¹⁵¹ Schoenberger and Reich, "Soviet Policy," 17-18.

¹⁵² Vasil'yev, *Ot Lenina do Putina*, loc. 165 of 1384, FB2.

¹⁵³ Schoenberger and Reich, "Soviet Policy," 18, 20.

Egyptian ports (Alexandria, El Salloum, Marsa Matrouh, Port Said in the Mediterranean Sea and Berenice in the Red Sea) for Soviet needs. Thus, in the late 1960s, the Soviet influence in the Middle East was reaching its moment. As Walter Laqueur noted:

“The Soviet position in the Middle East is stronger today than it was ten years ago. This was not the result of invasion, nor of infiltration by stealth: the Soviet Union became a Middle East power by invitation. It has seized no military bases, but was offered the facilities it wanted by the governments of Egypt and Syria, Algeria and the Yemen, of their own free will.”¹⁵⁴

However, the Soviet influence was limited despite the multibillion-dollar military and economic support, which was one of the important components of the Middle East strategy of the Soviet Union. The attractiveness for the Arab countries was represented by quite favourable conditions for granting loans or credits, in comparison with the West. Typically, Soviet loans were repayable at 2.5 percent interest in kind or in local currency within 12 years after the project was completed. Although the Soviet leadership emphasized exclusively the economic component of aid, it never hid that it was a means of deepening political relations with Middle Eastern countries. The mistake of the Soviet leadership was to maintain financially bourgeois and petty-bourgeois regimes, which were susceptible to certain elements of socialist ideology, but were not communist. The Communist parties in the Middle East, in their turn, had no power and their ideas, dictated by Moscow, were not popular in society, as they had nothing to do with local reality.¹⁵⁵

The 1970s began dramatically for the Soviet Union in its regional rivalry with the United States. The rise to power of Anwar Sadat, the new president of Egypt, had a negative impact on the position of the USSR in the region. Due to strong domestic pressure to retake Sinai along with his lower popularity than that of his predecessor Gamal Abdel Nasser, Anwar Sadat faced with the choice of unleashing a war with powerful Israel to remain in power.¹⁵⁶ Conducting a war required weapons that he expected to receive from the Soviet Union. The true sympathies of Sadat belonged to the USA, the rapprochement with which was hampered by the presence of more than 20,000 Soviet military and civilian specialists in Egypt. Domestic discontent in the armed forces and among the

¹⁵⁴ Walter Laqueur, *The Struggle for the Middle East: the Soviet Union and the Middle East, 1958-1968* (London: Routledge, 2016), 181.

¹⁵⁵ Schoenberger and Reich, “Soviet Policy,” 22, 23, 27.

¹⁵⁶ Ripsman, Taliaferro and Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist*, 3.

population with the foreign military presence also required Sadat to take some action. As a result, in 1972, he decided to expel military personnel and terminate Soviet basing rights in Egypt in response to the Soviet reluctance to fulfil all his military requests. Thus, the Soviet Union's Middle Eastern strategic position was significantly weakened.¹⁵⁷ After that, Sadat was not bound by the need to consult with Soviet advisors in matters of war and could not be restrained by them. Vasil'yev notes that a number of American scholars claim that the Soviet leadership was against the war of the Arabs with the Israelis until the spring of 1973. The opposite opinion emerged as a result of the domestic confrontation between various factions in the Soviet establishment, some of which saw a benefit in undermining the détente.¹⁵⁸

In October 1973, Egypt and Syria launched a war with Israel. The Soviet Union continued to stand by its Arab allies, supporting them. The regional rivalry between the Soviet Union and the United States reached such a peak that it could escalate into a nuclear war at the global level. At the same time, their possession of nuclear arsenal served as a deterrent in the Soviet-American confrontation, due to which the possibility of a deliberate military clash between the two superpowers and their allies, as well as their client states in the Middle East was minimized. The United States Secretary of State Henry Kissinger's shuttle diplomacy helped deescalate the tensions. Eventually, the Arabs had to seek peace with Israel.

This war demonstrated the increased ability of the Soviet Union to project its military power: to concentrate its naval forces in the Eastern Mediterranean, to provide maritime communications to Syria and Egypt, as well as to counterbalance to the possible American intervention in the conflict.¹⁵⁹ Along with the internal political trends of the Middle East countries, the emergence of oil monarchies oriented to the West, the domestic situation in the USSR and other socialist countries was a key factor of Soviet foreign policy. A comprehensive crisis was brewing within the Soviet Union and the socialist bloc, which diminished, in its turn, the Soviet influence in the Middle East. The effective decision-making process was hindered by the volatility of the administrative command system, which did not withstand the new trends of the time. Since 1970s, the economic

¹⁵⁷ Trenin, *What Is Russia Up To*, 25.

¹⁵⁸ Vasil'yev, *Ot Lenina do Putina*, loc. 209-210 of 1384, FB2.

¹⁵⁹ Vasil'yev, *Ot Lenina do Putina*, loc. 219 of 1384, FB2.

capabilities of the Soviet Union weakened, which led to a decrease in economic and technical assistance and an increase in the military component of aid. The only criterion for the country's superpower was production and distribution of military equipment. The country failed to rebuild its economy for peaceful purposes. Moreover, the settlement of the Middle East conflict left USSR beyond its process, increasingly alienating Moscow from Middle Eastern countries and their realities.

On October 1, 1977, the Soviet Union and the United States signed a joint statement on the Middle East, which called for the convening of the Geneva Conference on the Arab-Israeli settlement and stated the willingness of the two powers to participate in the guarantees of the terms of settlement. It would seem that there have been positive shifts in the partnership of the two major powers to determine the Middle East policy. However, there was much criticism from Israel and American establishment about the renewed engagement of the Soviet Union in solving Middle Eastern issues that impeded the implementation of the agreements. Washington's goal was to exclude Moscow from participation in regional affairs in order to prevent the Middle East from falling under Soviet influence. As a result, Moscow did not take any part in the peace process that culminated in the 1978 Camp David Accords. Consequently, the USSR lost its position in Egypt, which switched sides to the United States. Egypt joined the group of Middle Eastern countries represented by Imperial Iran, Israel, and Saudi Arabia, which were the vehicles of American influence in the region. Henceforth, the closest ally in the region was Syria, which allowed the Soviet Union to use Tartus as a supply and maintenance facility for its Mediterranean Squadron instead of the previously used Egyptian ports.¹⁶⁰

The 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran brought controversial results for Soviet politics in the region. On the one hand, geopolitically it was a major gain for the Soviet Union, since Iran ceased to be an ally of the United States, the "Great Satan," named by the Iranian authorities. Nevertheless, "the American losses did not mean the Soviet acquisitions."¹⁶¹ On the other hand, the religious component of the revolution contributed to the rise of political Islam in the region, which in turn weakened the influence of the Soviet Union, designated as "Little Satan." Encouraged by the success of pulling Iran out of the sphere of influence of the United States, Moscow took a great risk, getting involved in the war

¹⁶⁰ Trenin, *What Is Russia Up To*, 27.

¹⁶¹ Vasil'yev, *Ot Lenina do Putina*, loc. 256 of 1384, FB2.

in Afghanistan, which became a serious political defeat and national tragedy for the Soviets. It was another case of violation of the promoted principles of Soviet policy towards the Third World countries, namely, the strengthening of the political and economic independence of the Middle East and non-interference in internal affairs. The international community again remembered the Imperial ambitions of access to the warm seas and gaining control of the Persian Gulf that would undermine the oil import-dependent economies of Western Europe and Japan, as well as the power of NATO. As American political scientist, Alvin Z. Rubinstein, noted in 1988, “Interventions have become an integral part of Soviet policy in the Third World.”¹⁶² The Soviet Union was seen as revisionist state not interested in the status quo with aim of destroying the existing order by providing the conditions of insecurity and instability and creating a new international order in the Middle East that would serve the interests of the superpower in gaining more political sway and influence. But, in fact, Soviet influence in the Middle East had been in decline since 1960s and it was interested in keeping the status quo. The lesson the Soviets learned for the subsequent authorities was never again try to impose one’s ideology and one’s rule on a Muslim country. It was during Mikhail Gorbachev’s leadership when the Soviet foreign policy was revising in accordance to this principle. However, the war in Afghanistan significantly undermined Soviet position in the Middle East.¹⁶³

During the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in June-September 1982, the USSR experienced internal metamorphosis associated with the death of Leonid Brezhnev. A power struggle broke out in the Kremlin. The problems of the Middle East have taken a back seat. Moscow did not take any action, confining itself to condemning Israel and the United States. Consequently, Soviet inactivity damaged its political reputation. Since 1975, the attitude of the Soviet Union towards Lebanon could be characterized as “lack of policy is also a policy.”¹⁶⁴ It needed to keep friendly relations with Syria, despite its position on the Lebanese problem. In order not to lose Syria and not to upset the balance of power in American favour, the Soviet Union, led by a new leader Yuri Andropov, decided to supply

¹⁶² Alvin Z. Rubinstein, *Moscow’s Third World Strategy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 162.

¹⁶³ Trenin, *What Is Russia Up To*, 29, 32.

¹⁶⁴ Vasil’ yev, *Ot Lenina do Putina*, loc. 273-274 of 1384, FB2.

weapons that would exceed Israeli capabilities. At the same time, thousands of Soviet servicemen were sent to Syria to ensure the defense of a friendly country.

The Middle East continued to be an arena of confrontation between two superpowers when Mikhail Gorbachev came to power in March 1985. The Soviet Middle Eastern policy was in crisis, torn by the problems of the protracted conflict in Afghanistan and the internal fracture of the Soviet society, as well as the exhausting military and strategic competition with the Western bloc. Despite the change of leaders, Soviet politics in the Middle East kept following its usual direction. The main task was to ensure the security of the southern borders and prevent the superiority of the West undermining its position by the former method of supporting those governments and political forces that are opposed to the United States or at least seek to strengthen their political independence from the West. Acting in accordance with this task, the Soviet Union was on the side of its Arab allies – Syria, Iraq, Algeria, Libya and the Palestine Liberation Organization – in their conflict with Israel. The United States from its side continued the policy of removing the Soviet Union from Middle Eastern affairs, gradually undermining its position, even to the point of abandoning its symbolic role in the region.

During the Iran-Iraq war, the USSR supported both Iraq and Iran at different times. Having learned the lesson of the Camp David process, the Kremlin could not allow the United States to become the only external guarantee for the Arabs against Iran.¹⁶⁵ Eventually the Soviet foreign policy took a completely different direction with Gorbachev's rule. Actually, the concepts put forward at the time were not new, but the methods and principles differed from the ideas of former USSR. In order to play a more active role in the Middle East settlement process, the Soviet Union went to rapprochement with Israel, restoring diplomatic relations in October 1991. Egypt became again the top priority of Soviet Middle Eastern policy. Accordingly, Soviet-Syrian relations began to decline due to Gorbachev's refusal to provide Syria with the necessary weapons to counter Israel.

Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in August 1990 was strongly condemned by the USSR. However, by the beginning of the 90s, the international system had undergone

¹⁶⁵ Robert O. Freedman, "Moscow and the Middle East since the Collapse of the Soviet Union: A Preliminary Analysis," in *The Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation*, ed. Roger E. Kanet and Alexander V. Kozhemiakin (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 125-126.

fundamental changes. The end of the Cold War redefined the roles of the former actors in the international system and in the Middle Eastern subsystem respectively. The new role of the USSR did not allow it to take any decisive steps regarding the Kuwait crisis. The only world power capable of it was the United States. Trying to rehabilitate himself in the Middle East, Mikhail Gorbachev attempted to mediate between Baghdad and Kuwait. His efforts were not successful. This was the end of the Soviet Union's role in the Middle East and the beginning of the new world order with the only one world superpower.¹⁶⁶

1.3. Post-Soviet Russia's Policy in the Middle East until 2000

The policy of post-Soviet Russia in the Middle East can be divided into four phases: 1992-2002; 2003-2010; 2011-2015; and from 2015 to present. This chapter covers its first phase until Vladimir Putin took a presidential office in December 1999.

By the early 90s, it became obvious that the economic and financial capabilities of the USSR were not unlimited, and the rules of the Cold War did not allow a direct clash of superpowers. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 was the moment that marked the end of the Cold War and changed the balance of power in the international arena. This significant systemic shift put Russia into greatly weakened geopolitical position. The bipolar world collapsed. It was replaced by a unipolar system led by the United States. Great power politics and hegemonic practices received a new impetus. An important role in the fall of the Soviet Union, along with objective economic and political factors, played the Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev at the time. As William C. Wohlforth noted, the dissolution of the Soviet Union that ended the rivalry between two superpowers of the last century was caused by the relative decline in Soviet power, as well as leader's perception of "reduced capability to continue competing."¹⁶⁷ As a result, the structure of the international system changed fundamentally bringing a new pattern of distribution of power. The successor to the USSR, the Russian Federation, lost a significant part of former Soviet territory and pushed its borders away from the Middle East. These critical points have significantly constrained the Russian capabilities to influence the global

¹⁶⁶ Trenin, *What Is Russia Up To*, 32-34.

¹⁶⁷ William C. Wohlforth, "Realism and the End of the Cold War," *International Security* 19, no. 3 (Winter 1994-1995): 96, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2539080>. Access Date 04/10/2020.

affairs, as well as Middle Eastern ones. Russia's role reduced to local issues, losing a place of superpower in the international scene. But this did not mean losing the desire to return to its greatness, which has been the focus of Russia's grand strategy since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

In the first post-Soviet decade, Russian Federation as a new political entity was essentially preoccupied by its own internal problems caused by the collapse of the Soviet Union, post-Communist transformation, as well as the outbreak of the Chechen conflict. This was a time when Russia was adapting to the new realities of a unipolar international system with its status declining and the United States dominating it. Permissive strategic environment let Russia focus on the internal threats to its survival. Although the Middle East took a back seat in Russian foreign policy, the resolution of internal problems was directly related to the foreign affairs, and, in particular, concerned the Middle East. New conditions of the geopolitical environment, related to the emergence of new states on the borders of Russia, including six countries with a predominantly Muslim population in the south, dictated the need to focus on the Middle East region and the challenges it brought. Being the successor of the USSR, Russia nevertheless retained the established base for cooperation with the countries of the Middle East. The most favorable countries in this regard were Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Libya, Syria, the Palestinian Authority, the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, as well as Iran and Kuwait.¹⁶⁸

After Boris Yeltsin came to power as a president of an independent Russia, his foreign policy approach to the Middle East remained largely unchanged at first. Representing a continuation of Soviet-era power politics, he continued the line of previous Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev and did not show much activity in the region. Meanwhile, Middle Eastern role in the Russian foreign policy was seen as a potentially promising market, especially for Russian arms, and as a potential source of finance.¹⁶⁹ Realising that with the shifts in the international system post-Soviet Russia faced new geopolitical challenges in the Middle East, which in one way or another affected its foreign policy, Yeltsin moved

¹⁶⁸ Nikolay Kozhanov, "Russian Foreign Policy in the Middle East: New Challenge for Western Interests?," in *The Russian File: Russia and the West in an Unordered World*, ed. Daniel S. Hamilton and Stefan Meister (Washington, DC: Center for Transatlantic Relations, 2017), 102.

¹⁶⁹ Alexander Shumilin, "Russia's Diplomacy in the Middle East: Back to Geopolitics," *Russie.Nei.Visions*, no. 93 (May 2016): 3.

away from an ideologically determined policy to a pragmatic approach.¹⁷⁰ Influenced by the conservatives, Yeltsin became imbued with the orientalist ideas of Evgeny Primakov, who was appointed as Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation in January 1996, although this did not bring much difference in Yeltsin's course towards Middle East. Nevertheless, a step in this direction has been taken. Primakov called for the development of "constructive partnerships" with the Asian countries, emphasizing relations with Iran, Iraq and Libya.¹⁷¹ Primakov is considered the architect of modern Russian foreign policy, who advocated active and multifaceted participation of Russia in international politics.¹⁷² In this sense, one can notice the continuity of Russian policy with imperial times, as well as the continuation of this course by the current government.

One of the factor, which prompted Russia to cooperate with Middle Eastern countries in 1990s, was the outbreak of the Chechen conflict. The domestic situation contributed to the activation of external relations. There were three elements that required Kremlin's actions. Firstly, the prevention of external financial and ideological support for the Chechen independence movement. Secondly, the human factor that represented suppression of recruitment of militants. Thirdly, the religious component that consisted in depriving the Chechen rebellion of religious legitimacy. An efficient policy aimed to address these elements began with the coming to power of Vladimir Putin and continued in the 2000s that do not cover the period of this chapter.

The key countries for cooperation in the region mainly from a defensive point of view rather than expanding its influence continued to be Iran and Türkiye, bordering Russia on the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea. The key determinant to improve relations with these countries was the need to decrease the conflict potential at the borders to ensure internal stability and security within Russia itself, taking into account the Chechen factor. Syria, which was the USSR's closest ally in the Middle East from the 1960s through the 1980s,

¹⁷⁰ Robert O. Freedman, "Russian Policy toward the Middle East: The Yeltsin Legacy and the Putin Challenge," *Middle East Journal* 55, no. 1 (Winter 2001): 58, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4329582>. Access Date 02/01/2023.

¹⁷¹ Alvin Z. Rubinstein, "Russia Adrift: Strategic Anchors for Russia's Foreign Policy," *Harvard International Review* 22, no. 1 (Winter 2000): 19, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A30585778/AONE?u=anon~394c51ac&sid=googleScholar&xid=8ccbc09d>. Access Date 02/01/2023.

¹⁷² Samprity Biswas and Suryasekhar Chakraborty, "Russo-Iranian Relations in the Light of Putin's Foreign Policy and the Iranian Nuclear Crisis," *Jadavpur Journal of International Relations* 23, no. 2 (2019): 185, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0973598419864905>. Access Date 09/05/2021.

lost its status after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Israel, previously seen as a regional opponent, was no longer an enemy. Russia during the Yeltsin era did not take such an active interest in the Arab-Israeli conflict, which was radically different from the Soviet era, when it was used as a tool of Soviet policy to increase its influence in the Middle East. In that way, the United States took a dominant position in the settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict.¹⁷³ Significant changes in Russian policy towards Middle East during this period also occurred in relations with Iraq.

Relations with Iran were based on a pragmatic approach to develop a close tactical alliance. Although immediately after the collapse of the USSR, against the background of Russia's desire to get closer to the West and its emphasized commitment to Western values of democracy and human rights, Russian-Iranian relations suffered and were strained. A special role was played by such an internal factor (intervening variable) as the personality of the then Minister of Foreign Affairs Andrei Kozyrev, who adhered to a pro-Western course. He has consistently declared that there was a real Islamic threat to Russia coming from Iran.¹⁷⁴ This factor was smoothed out with the appointment of Yevgeny Primakov as a Minister of Foreign Affairs. Iran, initially suspicious of Russia's pro-Western foreign policy, has softened its stance too.¹⁷⁵ Indeed, the domestic factors played a decisive role in the defining Russian foreign policy course towards Middle East at this period.

Russia saw Iran as a major regional power and a key regional ally. Despite the growing Islamic fundamentalism in Iran, Russia continued to sell weapons to it, while rejecting American position of isolationism and showing its independence in making foreign policy decisions regarding any country. This did not include nuclear related trade, as it was not in Russian interests to contribute to the development of Iran's nuclear potential since it would represent a threat for Russian security. In April 1996, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Albert Chernyshev expressed Russian position regarding Iran claiming that Moscow supports Teheran and opposes its isolation in the international system, which

¹⁷³ Robert O. Freedman, "Russia and the Middle East under Putin," *Ortadoğu Etütleri* 2, no. 3 (July 2010): 12.

¹⁷⁴ Shireen Hunter, "Iran's Pragmatic Regional Policy," *Journal of International Affairs* 56, no. 2 (Spring 2003): 135, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24357722>. Access Date 22/06/2021.

¹⁷⁵ Adam Tarock, "Iran and Russia in 'Strategic Alliance'," *Third World Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (1997): 207, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3993220>. Access Date 22/06/2021.

Washington insists on. He stressed that Russia cooperates with Iran and does not intend to stop it.¹⁷⁶ Furthermore, Russia saw Iran as a possible ally in the confrontation with Taliban. Another reason for close cooperation was also Russian concern about the spread of Pan-Turkism ideas among Iranian elite.

Russo-Turkish relations in this period were characterized as a very mixed, mostly focused on active economic cooperation due to growing shuttle trade, which became widespread among ordinary Russians. Since the Iron Curtain has gone down, the Russian tourists have started to discover Türkiye. At the same time, political relations were strained by the legacy of the past and the Cold War in particular. Western-orientated Turkish political establishment did not trust Russia as it was a new state but with the old Soviet political elite, which until very recently so persistently preached the ideas of socialism and communism, and, in fact, led the transition of the former Soviet society to a “new” capitalist society. Russia, in its turn, was outraged by the actions of the Turkish Circassian diaspora, which supported Chechen militants in the North Caucasus. By opposing Turkish interference, as well as responding to Türkiye’s restrictions on Russian commercial traffic in the Straits, Moscow used a Kurdish card giving the go-ahead to open a PKK office in Russia and even allowing Abdullah Öcalan to stay in Russia for a while. Besides these factors, the Kremlin was also wary of the Pan-Turkic orientation of the then president Turgut Özal, which could have had an impact on relations with the former Soviet Central Asian republics and Azerbaijan.¹⁷⁷ By 1997, Russian-Turkish relations had improved significantly due to the systemic imperative expressed in the American assistance to the Kurds of Northern Iraq (independent variable), which posed a threat to Türkiye, and thereby pushed it towards rapprochement with Russia, which, in its turn, decided not to sell the SAM-300 surface-to-air missile system to Southern Cyprus, and led both sides to sign a major natural gas agreement (dependent variables) involving the construction of the Blue Stream trans-Black Sea gas pipeline, by which natural gas is delivered to Türkiye from Russia..

To summarize, the historical evolution of Russia’s foreign policy in the Middle East is inextricably linked to the development of the Russian state itself, from the Empire to the

¹⁷⁶ Robert O. Freedman, “Russia and Iran: A Tactical Alliance,” *SAIS Review* 17, no. 2 (1997): 103, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/45345742>. Access Date 02/01/2023.

¹⁷⁷ Trenin, *What Is Russia Up To*, 35-36, 101.

modern independent Russian Federation. Throughout history, the Russian approach has been pragmatic.

In Imperial times, Russia sought to expand its borders and secure its southern borders. Access to the seas was of strategic importance. After the Bolsheviks came to power, Russian foreign policy received the ideological coloring of communism. However, it continued its policy of ensuring security and stability. This was especially evident during the Cold War. The Middle East became an arena of confrontation between two superpowers, the Soviet Union and the United States. Despite the military conflicts, neither side sought to unleash a global war. The task of the USSR was to achieve superiority over the United States in the region by uniting loyal regimes into a friendly bloc. With the collapse of the USSR, the balance of power was changed. First post-Soviet decade Russia was predominantly occupied with its internal problems. The Middle East moved away geographically from contemporary Russian borders and was abandoned for a while.

CHAPTER 2: EXTERNAL ENVIRONMENT AS AN INDEPENDENT VARIABLE: RUSSIA'S POWER AND POSITION IN THE MODERN INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM

Empires wax and wane; states cleave asunder and coalesce.

– Lo Kuan-Chung, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms**

The present chapter begins the empirical study of the Russian foreign policy in the Middle East under the systemic independent variable of neoclassical realism. The system level is focused on the nature of the international order, the configuration of states in the international system, their relative share of material capabilities that determine their power and position within the international system, therefore, representing a catalyst for their external behavior. The chapter discusses the development of Russia's foreign policy activity, which is undergoing profound changes in its capabilities and influence, within the international system that is itself in the process of far-reaching transformation. As neoclassical realism proceeds from a "top-down" rationale, this section, being based on deductive approach, proceeds firstly from the analysis of the global distribution of power, beginning the study by testing the structural realist baseline, in order to explain the nature of Middle Eastern regional order. This chapter draws upon balance-of-power theory, thus providing a structural realist baseline to develop an argument supporting the suggestion that structural shifts play a determinative role in shaping Russia's foreign policy in the Middle East but it tends to omit the nuances by including the intervening variables put forth by the theory of neoclassical realism.

Relying on the historical basis presented in the previous chapter, this section and all subsequent ones are devoted to the Putin era, which spans over twenty years, beginning in 2000, when Vladimir Putin was elected as a President of the Russian Federation for the first time, and continuing to the present, referring to historical facts and events if necessary, as they represent one of the crucial components in Russian foreign policy.

2.1. Contemporary International System and Russia's Place in It

* Lo Kuan-Chung, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, trans. Charles Henry Brewitt-Taylor, vol. 1 (Rutland, VT: Charles E. Tuttle, 1959), 1.

The central assumption of the neoclassical realist theory states that state's foreign policy is primarily determined by its power and position within the relevant international system, and more specifically by the distribution of material capabilities expressed in their relative share among units.¹⁷⁸ This research considers the international system as a single global international entity that contains regional subsystems, including, inter alia, the Middle East that is of particular interest for current study. Thus, given the framework of this research, the temporal scope of the international system is taken to cover a period of more than twenty years, from the beginning of the twenty-first century to the present (2022), with a geographical focus on the Middle East region.

Although neoclassical realism does not deny the diversity of actors in the international system, it is nevertheless more inclined towards a state-oriented concept of the international system, recognizing territorial states as the primary units with an emphasis on the great powers, with the anarchic ordering principle.¹⁷⁹ Therefore, this study focuses on the global and regional players, relying primarily on state entities, without denying, nevertheless, the role of other actors, and, if necessary, taking into account their activities as well.

The contemporary international system is in its transit phase, from hegemonic structure to a more pluralistic one, when United States' status as a hegemon loses its ground and the normative validity of other countries can be acknowledged. In an attempt to shape the new world order, the academic community and analysts refer to this period as a less centralized post-hegemonic global governance system, characterized by increased interaction of rising powers in regional subsystems to moderately reform international rules and norms.¹⁸⁰

Starting from the premise of the theory of realism that the behavior of states is conditioned by the necessity of survival in an anarchic environment, states strive to maximize their power to ensure their security, including the constant pursuit of military power. In this

¹⁷⁸ Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist*, 56.

¹⁷⁹ Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory*, 35.

¹⁸⁰ Amitav Acharya, *The End of the American World Order* (London: Polity Press, 2014); Peter M. Haas, "Post-Hegemonic Global Governance," *Japanese Journal of Political Science* 16, no. 3 (2015): 434-441, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1468109915000109>. Access Date 18/12/2022; and Miles Kahler, "Rising Powers and Global Governance: Negotiating Change in a Resilient Status Quo," *International Affairs* 89, no. 3 (May 2013): 711-729, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12041>. Access Date 18/12/2022.

regard, the international system is an arena of clashing interests of major powers, resulting in diplomatic disputes and military conflicts, as states seek to increase their relative material power capabilities.¹⁸¹ Nowadays, there are at least two states, Russia and China, which seek to alter the status quo, challenging the United States' geopolitical advantage and competing for power. As the theorist of American hegemony Zbigniew Brzezinski points out, there is a dangerous trend to weaken the geopolitical position of the United States.¹⁸² Russia refuses to accept the rules of the West-installed international order led by the United States and seeks to maintain its position alongside the main drivers of global change. China claims to be a global economic leader, increasing its capacity, but it is still inferior in a number of areas to become a hegemon. It does not represent an immediate threat, rather than a long-term challenge.¹⁸³ European countries adhere to the centuries-old traditions of democracy and are not able to sacrifice their principles in the struggle for power, and despite their unity, they are very disparate, as well as the majority of them do not have sufficient material power capabilities to determine the framework of the future order. Asian countries, whether Japan or India, while continuing to build up its economic potential, are politically weak.

Russia acknowledges the formation of a polycentric international system with three key centers, one of which is Russia.¹⁸⁴ Although it does not mention the other two centers, it can be assumed that it is talking about the United States and China, with which Russia agrees to equal positioning within the international system. Thus, as there are other great powers (Russia and China) and major states (Germany, Brazil, India, etc.) in existence that participate in the distribution of material power capabilities, as well as they are able to extract and mobilize required resources (for example, Russia's campaign in Syria), the system is by definition multipolar. Is this really a present case? And what place does Russia occupy and what role does Russia play in the contemporary international system?

¹⁸¹ Michael E. Becker et al., "Reviving the Russian Empire: The Crimean Intervention through a Neoclassical Realist Lens," *European Security* 25, no. 1 (2016): 113, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09662839.2015.1084290>. Access Date 05/08/2021.

¹⁸² Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Second Chance: Three Presidents and the Crisis of American Superpower* (New York: Basic Books, 2007), 176-177.

¹⁸³ James Dobbins, Howard J. Schatz, and Ali Wyne, *Russia Is a Rogue, Not a Peer; China Is a Peer, Not a Rogue: Different Challenges, Different Responses* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2018), 2, <https://doi.org/10.7249/PE310>. Access Date 17/06/2020.

¹⁸⁴ Sergei Lavrov, "Vneshnopoliticheskaya filosofiya Rossii" [Russia's foreign policy philosophy], *Mezhdunarodnaya Zhizn'*, no. 3 (2013), <https://interaffairs.ru/jauthor/material/826>. Access Date 16/05/2021.

What shifts in the structure of the international system are factors in changing Russia's behavior?

As it was developed above, the place of the state in the international system is determined by its relative material power capabilities, which can serve as a basis for different foreign policy maneuvers, or constrain and limit the way the state behaves in the international system. On the one hand, Russia is traditionally represented as a great power in the IR literature. This status is justified by a number of parameters, such as impressive geographical size, the possession of significant natural resources and energy potential, the presence of nuclear weapons, as well as permanent membership in the United Nations Security Council, all of which allow Russia to exercise relative autonomy in the international system, presenting a wider range of possible foreign policy choices compared to other states with a greater degree of dependence on external constraints, expressed in the changing nature of external power balances. On the other hand, Russia is regarded as a rising power taking in consideration its similar characteristics to other rising powers with respect to positional, behavioral and functional power.¹⁸⁵ Thus, Russia found itself in an intermediate position between the great powers and the rising powers.

This contradiction is directly related to the policies pursued by Russia. After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the actual loss of the status of one of the poles of power, post-Soviet Russia, however, made some efforts to maintain the status of a great power, in spite of internal difficulties. Another pattern of behavior is comparable to rising powers such as China, India, and Brazil, which care about their structural position in an anarchic international system and seek to upgrade their status.

The first decade of the twenty-first century was characterized by controversial events that had an impact on the international system. Russia's foreign policy, including Russian Middle Eastern policy, was adapting to the new conditions ensuring its own survival in an anarchic structure. Russia entered the new century as a politically, economically and socially weakened state. The unipolar structure of the international system that emerged as a result of the dissolution of the Soviet Union imposed significant constraints, but at the same time created various opportunities for Russia. Meanwhile, Washington enjoyed

¹⁸⁵ Emel Parlar Dal and Emre Erşen, "Russia and the Changing International System: An Introduction," in *Russia in the Changing International System*, ed. Emel Parlar Dal and Emre Erşen (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 3.

a permissive environment during this time, since it was a period of apparently unlimited opportunities for the United States, opened up by unipolarity, and uncertainty in Russian foreign policy that was characterized by a significant minimizing of its influence, a decrease in its status relative to the United States as a leading world power, and prudent international behavior. By enhancing its security and accumulating as much power as possible through NATO's eastward expansion approaching the Russian borders, US-sponsored colored revolutions in the post-Soviet states (Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, and Ukraine) and forced democratization of the Middle East countries (including invasion of Iraq), deployment of military defense missile system in close proximity to Russia, and US withdrawal from Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty,¹⁸⁶ the United States has thereby undermined Russia's security by threatening its survival. The structure of the international system that "emerges from the coexistence of states"¹⁸⁷ determined the share of Russia's participation in world affairs, reducing it to a minimum, and thereby limiting its status as a local power, but not a global one.¹⁸⁸ So, one could talk about regional power with global ambitions. Even in the second decade of the 2000s, Russia was still perceived as a regional power by other major players. Thus, in 2014, after Russia's annexation of Crimea, the then US President Barack Obama outlined the status of Russia as a "regional power," although this rhetoric was later changed.

Such negative dynamics of the Russian position in the international system was also facilitated by domestic factors. The de facto lack of renewal of power and the monopoly of the old Soviet nomenclature continued the traditions of the Soviet model of leadership, undermining the foundations of a democratic state. Despite public discontent, the Russian society preferred to maintain the status quo and to keep the existing order. The country's economy was based on the division of profitable areas between the oligarchs, which clearly did not contribute to the growth of the Russian economy. Militarily, Russia also was a vulnerable state (not taking in consideration the possession of nuclear weapons) due to the lack of necessary funds until the military reforms were carried out in order to increase its military capabilities, which signaled about Russia's intention to pursue security by internal balancing along with its engagement into alliances with weaker states,

¹⁸⁶ Biswas and Chakraborty, "Russo-Iranian Relations," 192.

¹⁸⁷ Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 71.

¹⁸⁸ Wiclawski, "Contemporary Realism," 174.

thereby confirming the hypothesis underlying the balance-of-power theory. At the same time, the United States, by maximizing its power, created distrust and fear in Russia over a perceived power gap, which eventually led to proxy conflicts in a number of various regions, not bypassing the Middle East.

Under these circumstances of manipulating the images of “winner” and “loser” in relation to the United States and Russia since the end of the Cold War, Vladimir Putin’s rise to power was marked by an assertive course to return to former “grandeur” and restore the lost status of a great power that was reflected in the strategic document entitled “The strategy of social and economic development of the Russian Federation for the period up to 2010” (“Strategy 2010”). Besides that, the American hegemony has been criticized in all recent Russia’s foreign policy concepts (2000, 2008, 2013, 2016), expressed in the need to create such an international system in which there would be no place for the unilateral control of hegemon, that is a multipolar world, which suggested a balance of power. In a similar way, Sergei Lavrov charges that securing collective leadership in the form of multipolarity prevents confrontation of powers competing with each other for global dominance, and supports the idea of forming “flexible, including mutually intersecting unions of countries in accordance with their modern interests,”¹⁸⁹ thus maintaining the idea of a balance of power.

Restoration of a strong Russia both internally and externally was declared to be the central point of Putin’s presidency. It would seem that permissive strategic environment, given the absence of significant external threats, provided Russia with the opportunity to focus on internal reforms, but from the very beginning, Putin set a foreign policy goal to restore Russia’s self-defined rightful role in the international system. During his first term, Russia enjoyed significant oil revenues due to high oil prices, which made it possible to ensure internal security and stability, as well as restore its military potential. Consequently, Russia improved its economic situation and gained enough material resources to implement its preferred foreign security policy. As a result, Moscow has reiterated its claims to the status of a great power.¹⁹⁰ Nevertheless, the 2008-2009 global financial crisis with oil prices collapse, imposed sanctions on Russia after the Crimea-related events of

¹⁸⁹ Lavrov, “Vneshnopoliticheskaya filosofiya Rossii.”

¹⁹⁰ Brandon Friedman, “Putin’s Russia in the Middle East,” *Middle East Book Review* 6, no. 1-2 (2015): 93.

2014, and more recently economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic expose the main weakness of Russia that is its limited economic capability, not allowing it to exercise fully great power status. Moreover, the transition of the Ukrainian crisis into a military dimension also demonstrates Russia as a weaker conventional military power than it was represented, with limited capacity to sustain a major conventional conflict.

The first challenge to the international system in the twenty-first century was the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, which allowed the ideological convictions of the neoconservatives in the United States to be realized. In 2003, guided by the principle of the “spreading democracy,” justified under the pretext of destroying weapons of mass destruction, the United States made a strategic blunder invading and occupying Iraq. Since the international system has a feature to constrain and shape the response of the state, despite the condemnation of such policy Russia had no leverage to influence Washington’s decision to wage a war and had no room for maneuver in this situation abandoning the policy of confrontation with the United States and the West. Thus, returning again to an important systemic change, such as the collapse of the Soviet Union, which actually made the United States the only superpower, it turns out that this contributed to the aggravation of instability in the Middle East, freeing the hands of the global hegemon.¹⁹¹

The turning point in Russian politics, as well as the pivotal moment for the international system, was Putin’s landmark speech at Munich Security Conference in 2007. He made it clear that Russia did not agree with its position in the international system and advocated the creation of a new world order based on the ideas of a multipolar world, cooperation and the elimination of double standards. This forms the basis of the Russia’s grand strategy. Moreover, Vladimir Putin opposed the United States’ disregard for international law, and the policy of imposing their standards on other countries, thereby indicating the Russian position on increasing its role not only on a global scale, but also in the Middle Eastern region. This position is consistently reflected in the speeches of Putin and senior Russian officials, as well as in official documents. Therefore, Russia’s 2015 National Security Strategy re-emphasizes the need for “further increasing the Russian Federation’s economic, political, military, and spiritual potentials and for

¹⁹¹ Zeynep Dağı, “Russia: Back to the Middle East?,” *Perceptions* 12, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 123.

enhancing its role in shaping a polycentric world.”¹⁹² In this regard, Russian strategists consider the current system decline as an opportunity to challenge powerful states.¹⁹³

The second decade of the twenty-first century was marked by a revolutionary wave that began in Tunisia and swept across the entire Middle East, destabilizing the situation in the regional subsystem. This could not bypass Russia either. Vladimir Putin’s return to power as a president in 2012 is associated with a more assertive approach to the Russia’s global positioning. His new political course towards the Middle Eastern region can be traced in the then updated key documents, the 2013 Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation and the 2014 Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation.¹⁹⁴ These documents secured Russia’s strategy of defending its national interests abroad, also by military means if necessary, as well as increasing Russia’s role in ensuring global security. This marked a new era in Russian foreign policy, one that differs from Russia’s behavior on the international stage during Putin’s first two terms, and radical change of foreign policy of the 90s during the presidency of Boris Yeltsin. Experts attribute such a turn in foreign policy and adjustment of the Russian military strategy to the influence of such events as the 2008 August war between Georgia, on one side, and Russia backing the self-proclaimed republics of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, on the other, the Arab Spring uprisings, the military intervention of the international coalition forces in the civil war in Libya and, as a consequence, the overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi, and the 2014 Ukraine crisis, which triggered Russian activism in the Middle East.¹⁹⁵ Moreover, Moscow argues that the roots of the current chaos in the region are in the American invasion and

¹⁹² Russian National Security Strategy, December 2015 – Full-Text Translation, December 31, 2015, <http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/OtrasPublicaciones/Internacional/2016/Russian-National-Security-Strategy-31Dec2015.pdf>. Access Date 06/12/2020.

¹⁹³ Benjamin Jensen, “How the International System Shapes the Character of War: Order, Geography, and Networks,” *War on the Rocks*, June 5, 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/06/how-the-international-system-shapes-the-character-of-war-order-geography-and-networks/>. Access Date 20/04/2021.

¹⁹⁴ Kontsepsiya vneshney politiki Rossiyskoy Federatsii (utverzhdena Prezidentom Rossiyskoy Federatsii V. V. Putinyam 12 fevralya 2013 g.) (utratila silu) [Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation (approved by the President of the Russian Federation V. V. Putin on February 12, 2013) (no longer valid)], February 12, 2013, https://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptICkB6BZ29/content/id/122186. Access Date 24/11/2020; and Voyennaya doktrina Rossiyskoy Federatsii [Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation], December 25, 2014, <http://static.kremlin.ru/media/events/files/41d527556bec8deb3530.pdf>. Access Date 24/11/2020.

¹⁹⁵ Yuri Barmin, “Russia in the Middle East until 2024: From Hard Power to Sustainable Influence,” in *Russia in the Middle East*, ed. Theodore Karasik and Stephen Blank (Washington, DC: Jamestown Foundation, 2018), 339.

occupation of Iraq (2003-2011), which also became a pivotal moment in the relations of Russia and the United States.¹⁹⁶

The culmination of the transformation of international system was Russian direct involvement into the Syrian conflict after an official request by the Syrian government for military aid against rebel groups in order to save its ally's regime of President Bashar al-Assad. This provided very clear signal about its geopolitical ambitions, reasserting itself as a major player in the international system. As pointed out by Bassam Haddad, "Russian leadership are trying to establish its intervention in Syria as a crown on the country's ascension to global power," "likely to be an attempt to establish a Russian moment [...] that is eager to [...] be heard loud and clear."¹⁹⁷ Therefore, the fall of the Assad regime could jeopardize its position in the international system. It was the first time since the end of the Cold War that Russia had directly intervened militarily in a war outside the borders of the former USSR. The shifting structure of the international system gave Moscow a room for maneuver preventing American direct intervention. Thus, the Syrian intervention gave Russia a foothold to expand its influence in the Mediterranean and the Middle East, to challenge the United States, which previously had no military competitor in the region, and to reassert itself as a power broker at the crossroads of the world.¹⁹⁸ In the Syrian case, Moscow is interested not so much in Syria or even the Middle East, as in its own global positioning.¹⁹⁹ Syria represents a tool for Russia to reassert its position as a major global player capable of influencing the patterns of changes in the international system.

The most recent turning point in the international system following Russia's military successes in Syria has been the escalation of the Ukrainian conflict into a military phase with Russia's direct involvement. Russia, which has so far preferred to participate in local and regional conflicts through proxies, has moved into an offensive position. Within the

¹⁹⁶ Trenin, *What is Russia Up To*, 40.

¹⁹⁷ Bassam Haddad, "The Russian Moment via Syria," in *Disrupting the Chessboard: Perspectives on the Russian Intervention in Syria*, ed. Payam Mohseni (Cambridge, MA: Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, 2015), 17-18.

¹⁹⁸ Carnegie Endowment, "A Brief Guide to Russia's Expanded Presence in the Middle East," *YouTube* video, 3:07, October 23, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HOUVXIGIrNI>. Access Date 24/06/2020.

¹⁹⁹ Trenin, *What is Russia Up To*, 48.

framework of the international system, the conflict in Ukraine can be viewed as an indirect clash between Russia and the West over the revision of the existing world order. Thus, the international community has been witnessing a transformation of the international system since the second decade of the 2000s. The lines of its structure that appeared after the end of the Cold War keeps getting blurred, shifting the United States from the position of hegemon. Russian political scientist Sergei Karaganov argue that the end of Pax Americana resulted in the governance vacuum that is likely to be replaced by a new world order, in which Russia will hold a special role.²⁰⁰ However, the goal of Russia is not to fill that very vacuum due to the lack of both interest and capabilities for this, but to get the U.S. acceptance of Russia as a co-equal political and military partner.²⁰¹ As Richard N. Haass, a veteran American diplomat, similarly maintains that the hegemony of the United States is weakening, creating a vacuum, but there is no rival power comparable to the notion of “hegemon” that can influence other actors, just as there is no willingness on the part of the world community to favorably accept anyone’s leadership.²⁰² The modern world is no longer unipolar and not bipolar, but also it is not multipolar yet. The frames of the order are not clear yet. Such situation with emerging multipolarity creates opportunities that can be used to improve Russia’s position in the international system. Structurally, these opportunities appeared due to factors that were not directly dependent on Russia: the rapid economic development of China in the 2000s and the imperial and financial overstretch of the United States.²⁰³

Henry Kissinger points out that the vitality of an international order rests on a balance of legitimacy and power that can change and evolve. His statement echoes with Waltz’s theory about the recurrent formation of balances of power.²⁰⁴ Once the balance is broken, the so-called revisionist states take the opportunity to realize their offensive potential. In this logic, the weakening of the position of the United States in the Middle East gave

²⁰⁰ Sergei Karaganov, “Mutual Assured Deterrence,” *Russia in Global Affairs*, February 22, 2017, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/mutual-assured-deterrence/>. Access Date 27/05/2020.

²⁰¹ Trenin, *What is Russia Up To*, 63.

²⁰² Richard N. Haass, “The Unraveling: How to Respond to a Disordered World?,” *Foreign Affairs* 93, no. 6, (November/December 2014): 70-79.

²⁰³ Christopher Phillips, “Structure, Agency and External Involvement in the Syria Conflict,” *POMEPS Studies: Shifting Global Politics and the Middle East* 34 (March 2019): 70.

²⁰⁴ Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 123-128.

other actors, in particular, Russia, the opportunity to show their potential, thereby breaking the balance. The disorder lasts until a new system of order is established.²⁰⁵

The post-Cold War period, namely the cold peace years (1989-2014), is characterized by a shift in equilibrium in favor of legitimacy (values), whereas after 2014 it has been shifting towards the power side manifested in such phenomena as the imposition of sanctions and a return to the great power politics.²⁰⁶ Dissatisfied with Russia's position in the international arena, Vladimir Putin reiterated in 2017 his intention to improve Russia's international status. Moscow consistently seeks to establish a new international order, in which Russia plays a central role, thereby making other actors recognize it as the major power. In the perception of the Russian leadership, among the existing models of the world order, the multipolar world order is considered more equitable and able to restrain the hegemonic claims of particular countries. In this sense, the fundamental foreign policy document of Russian Federation, the 2016 Foreign Policy Concept, is exemplary. It states that the structure of international relations is becoming increasingly complex, forming a multipolar international system. It is pointed out that the dominance of the traditional western powers in the global economy and politics is declining, and the global power and development potential is shifting to the Asia-Pacific region.²⁰⁷ Russian turn to the East has taken the form of a strategy entitled "the Greater Eurasia," which supposes the formation of power center with Russia playing a major role, aimed at countering American hegemony along with strengthening Russian position in the new world order.²⁰⁸ For comparison, the two main strategic documents of the United States, the 2017 National Security Strategy and the 2018 National Defense Strategy, identified Russia and China as the revisionist powers that challenge American power and influence in order to shape a world antithetical to US values and interests and expand their own

²⁰⁵ Henry Kissinger, *World Order: Reflections on the Character of Nations and the Course of History* (London: Allen Lane, 2014), 66.

²⁰⁶ Richard Sakwa, "The International System and Models of Global Order: Liberal Internationalism vs Conservative Internationalism," *Russia in Global Affairs* 17, no. 3 (July-September, 2019): 14, <https://doi.org/10.31278/1810-6374-2019-17-3-8-31>. Access Date 02/01/2023.

²⁰⁷ Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation (approved by President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin on November 30, 2016), December 1, 2016, https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptICkB6BZ29/content/id/2542248. Access Date 18/11/2019.

²⁰⁸ Mousavi and Naeni, "Iran and Russia Pivot," 108.

influence.²⁰⁹ Indeed, Russia has repeatedly openly criticized the imposition of Western values on the world, which are in contradiction with other civilizational patterns, and it positions itself, in this sense, as a distinctive civilization.²¹⁰ Thus, Russia strives to change the existing international system, and Washington is well aware of Moscow's efforts in this direction. What distinguishes their perspectives is that, from Russia's point of view, it demonstrates an answer to the temporary changes that the West tried to make permanent by imposing US hegemony and the transformation of the fundamental principles laid down by the previous world order.²¹¹

However, a multipolar international system is not ideal and carries some risks, since it has a destabilizing potential.²¹² An example of the conflict potential and security threats shows the events in Syria and Ukraine. Some researchers adhere to a different opinion. Thus, Richard Sakwa, comparing the hegemonic international system with a system where various models compete with each other, concludes that the latter can be more balanced and ordered able to respond more coherently to global challenges.²¹³

A group of Russian academics from the Institute of World Economy and International Relations (IMEMO) proposed their informal version of the system structure, where they identified four levels of the centers of power. The highest level is occupied by the United States as the largest military power with high economic and technological indicators. The second level included the European Union as a collective entity and China, which are close to the United States in their economic potential. The third level is occupied by regional powers, and the last level is for the countries with the least potential to influence international processes. The Russia's position in this case is defined as intermediate between the third and second levels. As a regional leader in economic and technological

²⁰⁹ United States Department of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge*, 2, <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>. Access Date 11/01/2023; and White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: White House, December 2017), 2, 25.

²¹⁰ See, for example, Lavrov, "Vneshnepoliticheskaya filosofiya Rossii."

²¹¹ Fyodor Lukyanov, "Putin's Foreign Policy: The Quest to Restore Russia's Rightful Place," *Foreign Affairs* 95, no. 3 (May/June 2016): 31.

²¹² Igor' Aleksandrovich Istomin, "Refleksiya mezhdunarodnoy sistemy v ofitsial'nom diskurse i nauchnom osmyslenii" [Evaluation of the international system in Russian official discourse and academic analysis], *Vestnik MGIMO-Universiteta* 50, no. 5 (2016): 23-24.

²¹³ Sakwa, "The International System," 29.

spheres, Russia at the same time has the characteristics of a great power, given its nuclear status, its permanent membership in the United Nations Security Council and the level of influence in solving global problems. Thus, Russia is a unique case, which has incorporated the characteristics of a traditional great power and a rising power at the same time.²¹⁴

Based on the research of Russian and international scholars, it can be concluded that their positions are similar regarding the place occupied by Russia in the structure of the international system. Being in an intermediate position, Russia has the characteristics of both a great power and a rising power, which it skillfully uses in its interests.

Thus, to sum up, the structure of the contemporary international system is undergoing radical changes with a relative weakening of the United States and an increasing role of another powers. In the absence of a new hegemon and the emergence of new centers of power, the system takes the form of multipolarity. Russia's role in this context is to maintain a balance of power, to prevent the rise of a new hegemon, while ensuring security and stability. Russia is fueling its balancing role through the alignment with global supporters of the "anti-hegemonic agenda."²¹⁵ Despite the problems of an economic and political character, such factors as geographical position and geopolitical weight, the size of its territory, the possession of nuclear weapons, high raw material potential and significant reserves of pure drinking water are decisive for Russia's positioning in the international system. This is also justified by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in his article, where he writes about the role of Russia as an independent actor from some other key player on the international arena, which is conditioned by such factors as the geographical size of Russia, its unique geopolitical position, centuries-old historical tradition, culture and self-consciousness of the Russian people.²¹⁶ He maintains that Russia rightfully belongs to the role of one of the leading centers of the contemporary international system, providing the values of development, security and stability. That is, Russia has all the prerequisites to become one of the poles of power in the emerging international system. Hence, Russia claims to be a great power, however, the indicators

²¹⁴ Parlar Dal and Erşen, "Russia," 1.

²¹⁵ Richard Sakwa, *Beyond the Impasse* (Berlin: Dialogue of Civilizations Research Institute gGmbH, 2018), 25.

²¹⁶ Lavrov, "Vneshnopoliticheskaya filosofiya Rossii."

of its economic development correspond to the parameters of a regional power. Western scholars, in their turn, rank Russia among the revisionist powers, if not a revanchist nation-states, expanding its spheres of influence.²¹⁷ This research considers Russia as a great power with important structural position within the international system. Therefore, system-level shifts directly affect its foreign policy formation, which is evident from the empirical research. Besides that, as it is shown in the second chapter, the place of the state in the modern system of international relations is determined not only by systemic factors, but also by domestic variables.

2.2. Structural Modifiers and Their Effect on Russia's Interaction Capacity

It is evident that Russia has been working actively in recent years to restore its role of great power in the international stage. There is a series of systemic factors that gives Russia to exercise its politics of "greatpowerness." According to Waltz, the distribution of capabilities across units helps to determine if a state is to be counted as a great power. He names the following parameters to differentiate the status of power: size of population and territory, resource endowment, economic capability, military strength, political stability, and competence.²¹⁸ Mearsheimer also notes that the relative distribution of material capabilities (primarily economic and military) of states, and in particular of great powers, plays an important role in ensuring and maintaining security.²¹⁹ In the framework of neoclassical realism such systemic factors as geography, the pace of development and diffusion of advanced technologies and the offense-defense balance, concerning military technologies, represent structural modifiers that alter the influence of other structural determinants on the process of interaction between units, while not being the interaction itself.²²⁰

2.2.1. Geography

²¹⁷ See, for example, Joseph Roger Clark, "Russia's Indirect Grand Strategy," *Orbis* 63, no. 2 (2019): 225-39, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orbis.2019.02.002>. Access Date 05/10/2020; Jensen, "How the International System"; and Walter Russell Mead, "The Return of Geopolitics: The Revenge of the Revisionist Powers," *Foreign Affairs* 93, no. 3 (May/June 2014): 69-79.

²¹⁸ Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 131.

²¹⁹ Mearsheimer, "Structural Realism," 78.

²²⁰ Glenn H. Snyder, "Process Variables in Neorealist Theory," in *Realism: Restatement and Renewal*, ed. Benjamin Frankel (London: Frank Cass, 1996), 169.

Such a structural modifier as geography is one of the great importance since it functions as a provider of constraints and opportunities for the states, as well as the means of strategic interaction with another actors within the relevant international system structure.²²¹ In the Russian case, the significance of the geographical factor is extremely high for its foreign policy because it justifies the historical continuity of its policies that legitimize the ambitions of the Russia's leadership for decades, including the Putin era.

The geographical position of Russia provides huge opportunities due to its largest territory in the world that covers seventeen million square kilometers vast with eleven time zones. At the same time, it complicates the situation due to its location, expansive size, and lack of significant natural geographic barriers (oceans, rivers, or mountains) making Russia vulnerable to security threats. These factors have shaped the Russian state, having an impact on the formation of its security policy and decision-making process, making it constantly preoccupied with its "territorial self-sufficiency and secure borders."²²²

Historically, it is the length of Russian borders, not their qualitative characteristics that act as a barrier against aggression of its enemies. Russian land borders are not tied to any natural boundaries. Their length is more than three thousand kilometers. Protecting such a border is also a particular challenge. However, such long border is a problem for those who want to conquer Russia. This is due to its strategic depth, which refers to the distances between the front lines or battle areas and the main industrial centers of the involved conflicting party, capital cities, and other important regions with high concentration of population or military production.²²³ Considering the absence of natural protective barrier, Russia seeks to reinforce its strategic depth as the only way to ensure its survival and provide secure buffers against external threats by expanding the space around the core so as not to be caught off guard.²²⁴ Historical examples prove the inability of the invaders to provide permanent supply lines for their armies, as a result of which

²²¹ Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist*, 41.

²²² Andrei P. Tsygankov, *Russia and the West from Alexander to Putin: Honor in International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 31.

²²³ Robert Harkavy, "Strategic Geography and the Greater Middle East," *Naval War College Review* 54, no. 4, art. 4 (2001): 47, <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol54/iss4/4>. Access Date 04/06/2020.

²²⁴ Julia Gurganus and Eugene Rumer, "Russia's Global Ambitions in Perspective" (working paper, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington, DC, 2019), 3; and Lukyanov, "Putin's Foreign Policy," 32.

they were defeated. Such situation was in the case of the war with Napoleon in 1812, as well as during both world wars, in 1914-1918 and 1941-1945, in the confrontation with Germans. Attempts to conquer from the Asian side also present considerable difficulties for the invaders. The harsh climate has secured the Asian borders of Russia. Even in the case of the seizure of Asian Russia, its retention is hampered by harsh climatic conditions, its strategic depth, as well as the constant risk of a counterattack. Thus, Russian security strategy has traditionally been built on defense.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, modern Russia occupies a territory comparable in size to the territory of the Russian Empire in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. 23.1 thousand kilometers of land borders of Russia account for 38.5 thousand kilometers of sea borders. Thus, the ratio is in favor of maritime borders. Despite the existing access to the world ocean through the North and the Far East, the loss of ports on the Baltic and Black Seas was a significant blow from a geopolitical point of view. The estrangement from a number of world transport routes was also one of the negative consequences of the collapse of the Soviet Union, and, as a result, a decrease in Russia's power.

However, Russia, with its largest territory, positioned at the intersection of West and East, is a key state of Eurasia. As Treivish states, "Russia remains a vast transcontinental power with a powerful belt of neighboring countries and a transitional contact position between Europe and Asia."²²⁵ Being a Eurasian power, Russia uses its transport potential with multiple major transport routes (the Trans-Siberian Railway, the Baikal-Amur Mainline, and the International North-South Transport Corridor), increasing its capacity and modernizing its infrastructure. These routes connects Russia with different regions, including Middle East.²²⁶

As for the geographical location of Russia in relation to the Middle East, this conflict-ridden region is close enough to the Russian borders and perceived as a part of its greater Eurasian neighborhood, which is of particular concern from a security perspective. Historically, the geographical factor determined the nature of Russian relations with the region. Russia belongs to one of the countries that actively interacted with the Arab and

²²⁵ Andrey Il'ich Treyvish, "Rossiyskaya geopolitika ot Gostomysla do nashikh dney" [Russian geopolitics from Gostomysl to the present day], *Znaniye – sila*, no. 8 (1995): 16.

²²⁶ Ebru Birinci, "Interview with Professor Vladimir M. Kapitsyn on Russia's Foreign Policy in the Middle East," *Political Reflection* 6, no. 1 (2020): 29-30.

Muslim world. The nature of the interaction was at times positive, but much more often it was confrontational due to the invasions of the Islamic armies that reached the foothills of the Eastern Caucasus in Derbent, and the establishment of contacts with the local population. One of the oldest Russian cities, Derbent, was called Bab al-Abwab by the Arabs, which means “Gate of the Gates.”²²⁷ Thus, Derbent was of strategic importance for the penetration of the Arabs into the Caucasus and further into Europe. Threatening its national survival, Russia faced a security dilemma that required it to enhance its own security at the expense of the security of other states by pursuing the expansionist policies and expanding its territory in order to create buffer zones to resist enemy invasion.²²⁸

Today’s territory of Russia is separated from the region by a number of states. It has no common borders with any of the Middle Eastern countries. However, as it was mentioned in the first chapter, Russia’s desire to reach the shores of warm seas would mean the expansion of its borders and influence. Modern foreign policy demonstrates continuity of purpose. If earlier the Ottoman Empire and Persia stood in its way, today “the key” to the Mediterranean Sea is in the hands of Türkiye, and the path to the Persian Gulf lies through Iran.

After cascading protests across the Arab world in 2011, Russia took advantage of the US policy vacuum to maintain and enhance its geographical status.²²⁹ The instability of the region poses threats to Russia’s security, which makes Kremlin to take steps to ensure it. As noted by the historian Stephen Kotkin, Russian security has traditionally been based on moving outward in order to prevent external attacks,²³⁰ and has historically been provided by its military power. Due to the development and the diffusion of new technologies (artificial intelligence and machine learning, cybersecurity, and robotic process automation) and modern weapons (air power, ballistic missiles, and nuclear weapons) along with their easier and more affordable transportation, the loss-of-strength gradient is reduced. However, the deployment of ground forces remains a strong

²²⁷ Eyyad Abu-Shakra, “Rossiya v istorii Blizhnego Vostoka” [Russia in the history of the Middle East], *Dal.By*, April 11, 2016, <http://www.dal.by/news/174/11-04-16-7/>. Access Date 24/11/2020.

²²⁸ John Berryman, “Geopolitics and Russian Foreign Policy,” *International Politics* 49, no. 4 (2012): 531-532, <https://doi.org/10.1057/ip.2012.15>. Access Date 02/01/2023.

²²⁹ Francis Ghilès, “The Middle East Helps Russia’s Comeback as a Global Power,” *CIDOB Opinió*n, no. 508 (December 2017): 1.

²³⁰ Stephen Kotkin, “Russia’s Perpetual Geopolitics: Putin Returns to the Historical Pattern,” *Foreign Affairs* 95, no. 3 (May/June 2016): 4, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43946851>. Access Date 04/05/2021.

argument for reflection, especially in the current situation, when Russia demonstrates poor training of conventional troops in the confrontation with Ukraine, a country directly bordering Russia. Accordingly, hypothetically, in the case of the Middle East, more resources and time are required for the transfer of conventional forces and their commissioning.

2.2.2. Technological Diffusion

The term “technological diffusion” refers to the process of spreading innovations among the actors of the international system, leading to a competitive environment in which state leaders promote the adoption of policies that accelerate the development of new technologies. Technological diffusion can be considered when the international community has sufficient information to rationally assess the potential of innovation. Innovations in the military sphere are demonstrated mainly during military operations or war. However, it can also take place in peacetime, which, in its turn, causes a response from other actors of the international system.²³¹ Consequently, the rate and the way of technological diffusion in the international system has an impact on key issues in international politics. It can affect the balance of power and the nature of war. Modern highly advanced military systems have reduced the distance and compressed the time, jeopardizing previously unattainable goals, which in its turn shortens the time frame for decision-making.

The rate of technological diffusion is one of the main characteristics of the development of a state, which shows its ability to claim the status of a great power or remain outside of this category. It has increased significantly, which means that in the future the gap between competing states will be quickly bridged. Moreover, the technological diffusion nowadays is not limited to military power, which undoubtedly remains the leading indicator of the state’s relative power. International actors are making efforts to develop such areas as cyber, directed energy, quantum technologies, robotics, and space. At the same time, the model of the state’s development plays an important role. Some countries rely on physical hardware. Others prefer to develop software. The ideal model certainly

²³¹ Michael C. Horowitz, *The Diffusion of Military Power: Causes and Consequences for International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 8.

includes both components. However, the capabilities of actors vary. Therefore, not everyone can afford high-tech developments.

Russia's position in this regard is ambiguous. Although the goal of Russian industrial complex is to manufacture both military and non-military products, the main focus is made on the weapons production which boosts simultaneously the entire economy. On the one hand, Russia is one of the exporters of high-tech innovations, mainly in the military sphere, on the other hand, it imports numerous technologies. The past is echoed in this area too. The technological capabilities of Russia are largely based on the supply of components from abroad, a considerable share of which is accounted for Western countries and Ukraine as well, the supply of which has been suspended due to the military conflict between Russia and Ukraine and the sanctions imposed on Russia. After the collapse of the USSR, the destruction of previous economic ties disrupted the unified production cycle and made Russia dependent on the newly independent states. Referring to data from the SIPRI Arms Transfers Database related to sales and deliveries in the 2000 to 2019 period, Ukraine and Czechia were Russia's the most valuable foreign arms suppliers.²³² After the imposition of sanctions related to events with the Crimea, Russia was deprived of a number of foreign-made components, without which Russia's significant powerful military assets are not able to operate. Consequently, it was forced to diversify its sources of procurement or to start developing its own. As for arms exports from Russia in the same period, Algeria holds the record for purchasing Russian weapons, followed by Egypt and Iraq.²³³ After the outbreak of the civil war in Syria, Moscow supplied ammunition and weapons to the Assad regime, as well as equipped Syria's advanced air defense systems, which served as a deterrent to the intervention of international forces, thereby ensuring the survival of the current regime.²³⁴ The effectiveness of the Su-35 in Syria gave impetus to negotiations on its supply to China and India. Yet, the most recent and controversial Russian arms exports' deal in the Middle East was a delivery of S-400 air defense system to Türkiye. Russian air defence systems are known for their effectiveness, ensuring the security of Russian military bases in Syria

²³² SIPRI Arms Transfers Database (TIV of arms exports to Russia, 2000-2019), https://armstrade.sipri.org/armstrade/html/export_values.php. Access Date 05/10/2020.

²³³ SIPRI Arms Transfers Database.

²³⁴ Emil A. Souleimanov and Namig Abbasov, "Why Russia Has Not (Yet) Won over Syria and Libya," *Middle East Policy* 27, no. 2 (Summer 2020): 81, <https://doi.org/10.1111/mepo.12496>. Access Date 02/01/2023.

by repelling numerous attacks from enemy drones and missiles. They also benefit from the inability of extremely expensive US systems to fend off drone attacks by Houthi rebels on Saudi oil facilities in September 2019. According to Yevgeny Shugaev, Head of Federal Service on Military-Technical Cooperation, the aviation and air defense systems account for 40 percent each of the Russian defense exports to the Middle East and North Africa.²³⁵

Meanwhile, the technological gap between Russia and the West prompted the Russian leadership to take measures to eliminate it. The terms “modernization” and “innovation” have firmly entered the vocabulary of President Vladimir Putin, which he skillfully operates. The concept of technological innovation and high-tech research and development (R&D) is a goal of current Russian senior leadership with a focus lying predominantly in the military sphere. In 2011, Russia began to implement a large-scale State Armament Programme, which was originally designed until 2020. 19 trillion rubles were allocated from the budget to equip the armed forces with modern weapons systems, including funding for research and development relating to the development of armaments – fundamental, exploratory and applied.²³⁶ Due to the recent economic and political environment, the program was revised and replaced with a new one designed for the period 2018-2027. The key objective has not changed. The program provides for the modernization of 70 percent of weapons and equipment intended for the armed forces.²³⁷

It is obvious that new technologies are kept secret and the published program reveals only a general part of the essence of the matter. However, new technologies are gaining recognition, which helps to draw some conclusions about technological diffusion.

In 2018 and 2019, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced new military developments that have no analogues in the world. This category of military innovations

²³⁵ Yury Laskin, “Russian Weapons in Middle East Conflicts,” *European Security & Defence*, November 29, 2019, <https://euro-sd.com/2019/11/news/15424/russian-weapons-in-middle-east-conflicts/>. Access Date 13/12/2020.

²³⁶ Julian Cooper, “Russia’s State Armament Programme to 2020: A Quantitative Assessment of Implementation 2011–2015,” *FOI Report FOI-R-4239-SE* (Stockholm: FOI, March 2016), 13-14, https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Julian_Cooper2/publication/299338379_Russia%27s_state_armament_programme_to_2020_a_quantitative_assessment_of_implementation_2011-2015_FOI_Report/links/56f11db508aead0f31f235d/Russias-state-armament-programme-to-2020-a-quantitative-assessment-of-implementation-2011-2015-FOI-Report.pdf. Access Date 04/05/2020.

²³⁷ Tomas Malmlöf, “Russia’s New Armament Programme – Leaner and Meaner,” *RUFS Briefing*, no. 42 (Stockholm: FOI, March 2018).

includes intercontinental ballistic missiles (the *Sarmat* multiple-warhead heavy intercontinental ballistic missile), hypersonic delivery systems (the *Kinzhal* air-launched hypersonic ballistic missile, the *Avangard* boost-glide hypersonic vehicle, and the *Tsirkon* sea-launched cruise missile), new advanced strategic weapon delivery systems (the *Burevestnik* intercontinental nuclear-powered cruise missile and the *Poseidon* intercontinental nuclear-powered torpedo) and laser weapon system (the *Peresvet* laser combat system). Although there are areas where Russia does not reach the NATO standards, an introduction of new hypersonic weapon systems put Russia on the leading position within missile technology.²³⁸

New technologies also include the development of heavy military equipment. The Uralvagonzavod Corporation is responsible for the production of the T-14 Armata next-generation main battle tank, as well as the T-15 heavy infantry fighting vehicle, both based on the Armata universal combat platform. Another universal combat platform is Kurganets-25, developed by the state-owned corporation Rostec. Due to more advanced means of armored vehicle production, lighter combat platforms will reduce maintenance and modernization costs.²³⁹ In 2015, the new generation 2S35 Koalitsiya-SV self-propelled tracked howitzer was officially unveiled, the development of which was launched in 2002 in response to the most powerful conventional artillery systems of NATO countries.²⁴⁰ The category of Russian multiple launch rocket systems was also complemented by the latest-generation Tornado system, which has a much higher combat effectiveness compared to its predecessors.

Another fairly new category of modern weapons is the production of unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV). In 2019, Russia ranked third in the world in the operation of UAV (about 4000 units).²⁴¹

²³⁸ Hilde-Gunn Bye, "From Norway to North America: Differing Views on New Russian Weapon Systems," *High North News*, February 24, 2020, <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/hypersonic-weapon-systems-tip-iceberg-strategic-game>. Access Date 13/05/2020.

²³⁹ Defense Intelligence Agency, *Russia Military Power: Building a Military to Support Great Power Aspirations*, 2017, <https://www.dia.mil/Portals/27/Documents/News/Military%20Power%20Publications/Russia%20Military%20Power%20Report%202017.pdf?ver=2017-06-28-144235-937>. Access Date 17/05/2020.

²⁴⁰ Andrey Kots, "Triumfal'naya "Koalitsiya". Kak novaya rossiyskaya SAU prevzoshla artilleriyu NATO" [A Triumphant "Koalitsiya". How the New Russian SPG Surpassed NATO Artillery], *RIA Novosti*, September 4, 2017, <https://ria.ru/20170904/1501727858.html>. Access Date 17/05/2020.

²⁴¹ Laskin, "Russian Weapons."

2.2.3. Offense-Defense Balance in Military Technologies

There are multiple definitions of the concept of the offense-defense balance, which are often contradictory. Early research point to a direct connection of the concept with military technologies that determine their offense or defense nature, as opposed to politics.²⁴² In the framework of neoclassical realism theory, scholars emphasize the impact the offense-defense balance has on the strategies of individual states and dyadic interaction, which are adjusted in the response to the development of military technologies that intensifies the security dilemma in its turn. It is not observed within the international system as a whole but within particular units (groups or pairs of states) or geographic entities (regions).²⁴³ This paragraph seeks to explain how the offense-defense balance, which is primarily expressed in the nature of military technologies, is linked with Russia's Middle East strategy and how it affects the security dilemma in the region.

To analyse Russian stance towards the development and use of military technologies, it is useful to refer to the President Vladimir Putin's words. He said that artificial intelligence, which presents both great opportunities and unpredictable threats, is the future for all humankind. He also noted that the leader of this sphere will rule the world,²⁴⁴ probably pointing out the need to intensify work in this direction, given the threats that Russia faces. Artificial intelligence has become extremely important for the development of cyber weapons, as well as maintaining control of autonomous tools like drones.

Since the US announcement of its intention to withdraw from the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, Russia has started to develop new, long-range, ground-based cruise missiles and new quasi-ballistic hypersonic, medium-range, missiles.²⁴⁵ Russian military technologies arsenal and potential demonstrates their

²⁴² See Jack S. Levy, "The Offensive/Defensive Balance of Military Technology: A Theoretical and Historical Analysis," *International Studies Quarterly* 28, no. 2 (June 1984): 223, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2600696>. Access Date 23/05/2020.

²⁴³ Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory*, 41; and Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, "Security Seeking under Anarchy: Defensive Realism Revisited," *International Security* 25, no. 3 (Winter, 2000-2001): 138, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2626708>. Access Date 23/05/2020.

²⁴⁴ James Vincent, "Putin Says the Nation That Leads in AI 'Will Be the Ruler of the World'," *Verge*, September 4, 2017, <https://www.theverge.com/2017/9/4/16251226/russia-ai-putin-rule-the-world>. Access Date 06/12/2020.

²⁴⁵ Dmitry Grafov, "Offensive versus Defensive Realism: Russia's Policy of Countering the United States in Syria and Beyond," *Contemporary Arab Affairs* 12, no. 3 (2019): 36, <https://doi.org/10.1525/caa.2019.123002>. Access Date 24/05/2020.

purpose more for the deterrence and defense than offense. The emergence of new advanced models of weapons is of concern to major actors in the international system, since the measures taken by Russia to strengthen its security pose a threat to other actors making them to take countervailing actions. Thus, the security dilemma is gaining momentum, which carries the risk of turning into an arms race and crisis-ridden competitions, increasing the likelihood of war.²⁴⁶

As President Vladimir Putin mentioned, Russia has developed unique offense weapons not to achieve any offensive objective but to ensure strategic balance and to create such conditions when none of the states has an intention to wage a war.²⁴⁷ The substantial investments in the air defense systems and in long-strike capabilities of the last decade provide defense from high-technology air-land campaign.²⁴⁸ Russia's 2010 Military Doctrine asserts that the use of high-precision weapons is supposed to prevent military conflicts "in the context of the implementation [...] of strategic deterrence measures of a forceful nature."²⁴⁹

However, Russia chooses a defensive course of action, since it seems more expedient than offensive one, primarily due to a lack of resources. It is more keen on getting the proxies acting in the Middle East through third parties, not direct, pursuing the so-called "buck-passing" strategy. Thus, as Levy argues, "the defensive superiority reduces the likelihood of war."²⁵⁰ But one should not lose sight of the historical context of Russia's foreign policy, which makes it possible to expand the scope of understanding Russia's modern foreign policy strategy. Turning to the words of Catherine the Great, "I have no better way to defend my borders than to extend them," one can clearly understand the ratio of the offense-defense balance in official Russian thinking.²⁵¹

²⁴⁶ David A. Shlapak, *The Russian Challenge* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2018), 2, <https://doi.org/10.7249/PE250>. Access Date 17/06/2020.

²⁴⁷ Associated Press, "Putin Boasts about New Russian Weapons, Calls Them Defensive," *MilitaryTimes*, March 2, 2020, <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/your-military/2020/03/03/putin-boasts-about-new-russian-weapons-calls-them-defensive/>. Access Date 23/05/2020.

²⁴⁸ Keith Crane, Olga Olikier, and Brian Nichiporuk, *Trends in Russia's Armed Forces: An Overview of Budgets and Capabilities* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2019), 66.

²⁴⁹ "The Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation" Approved by Russian Federation Presidential Edict on 5 February 2010, § 22, 27, https://carnegieendowment.org/files/2010russia_military_doctrine.pdf. Access Date 11/12/2020.

²⁵⁰ Levy, "The Offensive/Defensive Balance," 221.

²⁵¹ Anna Borshchevskaya, *Putin's War in Syria: Russian Foreign Policy and the Price of America's Absence* (London: I.B. TAURIS, 2022), 12.

2.3. Russia's National Power

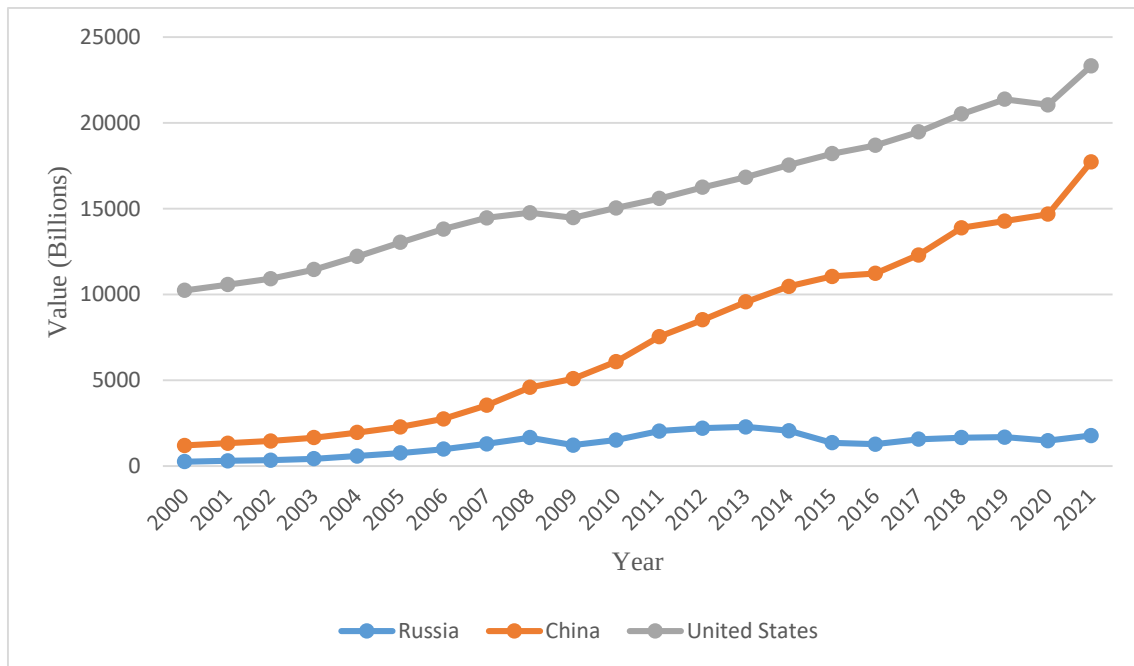
As it was developed above, structural modifiers create a framework for Russia's possible strategic choices, limiting or, conversely, allowing it to act in one way or another. For a comprehensive understanding of its place in the international system, it is also crucially to consider the indicators of Russia's power in order to observe the correspondence of its ambitions in striving for the status of a great power to actual material capabilities. Following the assumptions of neoclassical realist theory, which, like other branches of realism, presents international politics as an endless struggle of actors for power and influence in the face of limited resources and constant uncertainty of the international system, the concept of power is amounted to the material capabilities of the state, falling under the framework of the straightforward approach of the elements of national power, considering it in terms of resources. Thus, neoclassical realism offers a number of measurements that together comprise the aggregate power of the state. Each of these indicators in relation to Russia is discussed in more detail below.

Gross Domestic Product (GDP)

The primary indicator of the power of the state is its GDP, which reflects the value of all goods and services produced in the country over a certain time frame. Despite the fact that GDP is an economic indicator, researchers use it to measure the economic and military potential of the country, since, if necessary, states convert economic capabilities into military power. Thus, GDP is a flexible measurement that reflects not just the economic power of the country, but also combines military and political resources.²⁵²

In terms of GDP, the Russian economy appears to be a weak component in its aggregate power, given the political and military dimensions. It is much smaller than the economies of the other two global actors, competing for the dominant position within the international system, namely the United States and China, and even comparatively smaller than the EU economy. In 2021, Russia's GDP value was 0.79 percent (1,78 trillion dollars) of the global economy, compared to 7.94 percent (17,73 trillion dollars) of China's GDP and 10.41 percent (23,32 trillion dollars) of US GDP (Graphic 1).

²⁵² Emilio Casetti, "Power Shifts and Economic Development: When Will China Overtake the USA?," *Journal of Peace Research* 40, no. 6 (2003): 663, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00223433030406003>. Access Date 22/01/2023.



Graphic 1: Gross Domestic Product (Current US Dollar) – Russia, China, United States

Source: The World Bank. (n.d.). *GDP (current US\$) – Russian Federation, United States, China* [Data file]. Retrieved from

https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?contextual=default&end=2021&locations=RU-US-CN&most_recent_value_desc=false&start=1960. Access Date 22/01/2023.

At the end of 2015, after Russia began its military campaign in Syria, Putin approved a new national security strategy, which emphasized, among other things, the trend to continue its efforts in increasing Russia's influence and prestige in the world and maintaining national unity, theses associated with his general worldview about the place and role of Russia in the international system. Indeed, it was also noted there that Russia is one of the great powers of the world; accordingly, it also set a goal to increase its GDP to a leading position on a global scale.²⁵³ Given the dynamics of growth over the past two decades, the scenario that Russia will be able not only to overtake its competitors, but also to reach their level, seems unlikely, although again there is a feature of uncertainty about state capabilities inherent in the international system. Russia's highest GDP value during the years of Putin's presidency was 2,29 trillion dollars in 2013, which corresponded to the same indicator of China in 2005 and slightly below US GDP in 1978

²⁵³ Olga Oliker, "Unpacking Russia's New National Security Strategy," CSIS, January 7, 2016, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/unpacking-russias-new-national-security-strategy>. Access Date 22/01/2023.

(2,35 trillion dollars) with their steady growth thereafter against the backdrop of periods of growth and decline of Russian economy (Graphic 1).

Level of Annual Defense Spending

As alluded earlier, in the early 2000s, Russia remained a relatively weak state, not only economically but also militarily, apart from the possession of nuclear weapons. Since Vladimir Putin came to power as a president, Russia's military spending has dramatically increased. In addition, the shift in the balance of political elites, namely economic liberals and siloviki (security forces), discussed in Chapter 3, in favor of the latter, especially in the last decade, contributed to further allocation of funds for military needs, which simultaneously coincided with the growth of the Russian economy (2009-2013), despite the ongoing economic crisis. Thus, in 2008, Russia announced large-scale reforms of the armed forces, which required correspondingly financial investments. Military spending rose from 3.1 percent of GDP in 2008 to 4.1 percent in 2021, reaching its peak in 2016 (5.4 percent, respectively), related, among other things, to Russia's military presence in Syria (Graphic 2). However, after the completion of the active military phase, Russia's defense budget began to decline.

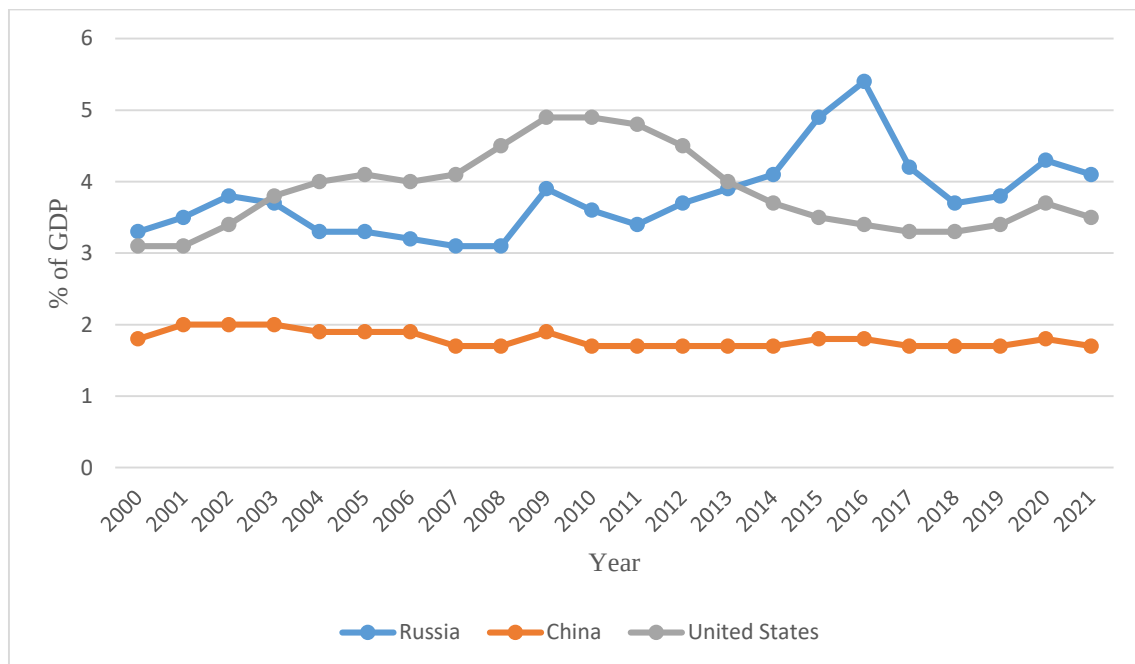
Size and Composition of the Armed Forces

According to the Global Firepower ranking, which is based on an indicator that comprises more than 60 factors, including the size and composition of the armed forces, Russia is among the top five world powers, ranking second out of 145 countries for 2023.²⁵⁴ It would seem that Russia's successful campaign in Syria demonstrated its military might, elevating it to the rank of a military power. However, the escalation of the Ukrainian conflict with Russia's military involvement in it has demonstrated the limitations and gaps in its military potential, despite the quantitative superiority of its armed forces and material equipment in comparison with Ukraine.

However, the size of Russia's armed forces remains at a high level broadly comparable to that of the United States. In this regard, China is almost twice as large as its global

²⁵⁴ "2023 Russia Military Strength," *GFP*, n.d., https://www.globalfirepower.com/country-military-strength-detail.php?country_id=russia. Access Date 23/01/2023.

rivals, despite the consistent reduction of its armed forces over the past two decades (Graphic 3).



Graphic 2: Military Expenditure (% of GDP) – Russia, China, United States

Source: The World Bank. (n.d.). *Military expenditure (% of GDP) – Russian Federation, China, United States* [Data file]. Retrieved from <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/MS.MIL.XPND.GD.ZS?end=2021&locations=RU-CN-US&start=2000>. Access Date 22/01/2023.

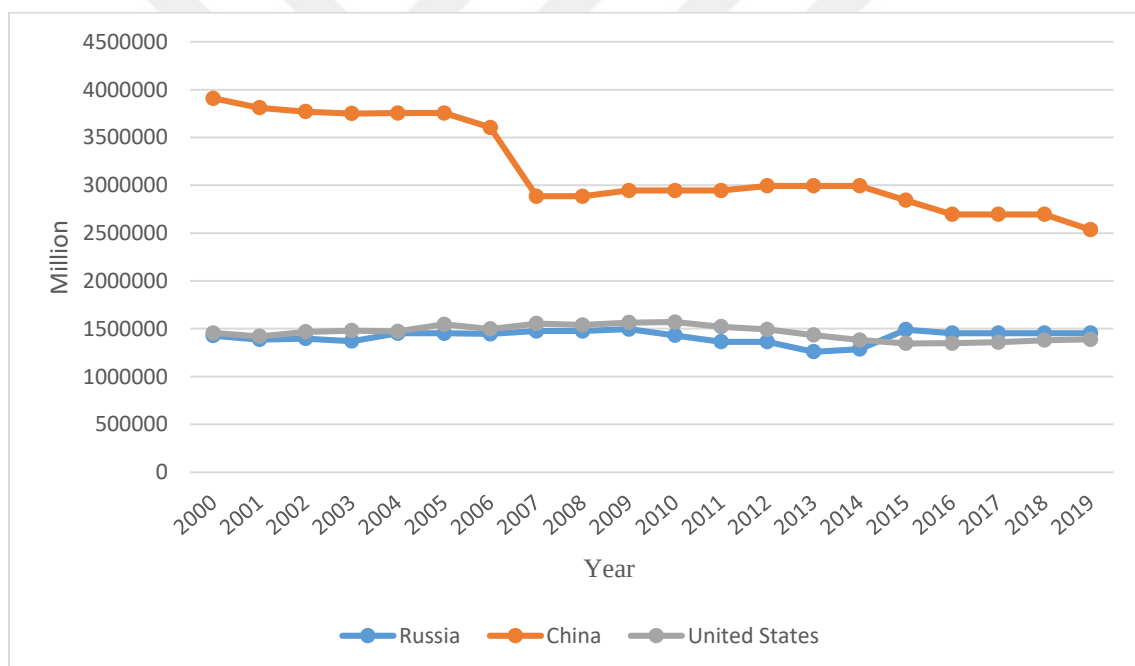
In addition, the constant growth in the other categories of China's military power and the decline of Russian ones in the face of military losses and international isolation can lead to castling of their positions. It follows from this that despite the military advantages of Russia, the goal of its strategic forces is still to deter other nuclear powers (primarily the United States), while its conventional forces are comparable in some respects or even inferior to the forces of the other two global players, the United States and China (Table 1), and are intended for defensive tasks.²⁵⁵

Military Research and Development

Russia's military research infrastructure has a long history. It consists of about 600 organizations, divided into three types: (1) research institutes; (2) design bureaus; and (3)

²⁵⁵ Valery Konyshov and Alexander Sergunin, "Military," in *Routledge Handbook of Russian Foreign Policy*, ed. Andrei P. Tsygankov (London: Routledge, 2018), 175-176.

research and production associations. In general, military research and development in Russia is carried out in seven main areas: (1) ammunition and specialty chemicals; (2) aviation; (3) conventional weapons; (4) nuclear technology; (5) radio electronics and communication systems; (6) shipbuilding; and (7) space technologies. In addition, as mentioned earlier, the Russian government is prioritizing new critical areas of military technology such as artificial intelligence, robotics and autonomous systems.²⁵⁶ The conflicts of recent decades, in which Russia has been involved have demonstrated significant gaps in its military capabilities, which have become increasingly evident not only in Ukraine but also in Syria. For example, Russia is experiencing serious difficulties with the development of strike drones, which is due to the lack of the necessary elements for their production previously imported from abroad, but the supply of which was stopped due to sanctions imposed after the annexation of Crimea by Russia.



Graphic 3: Armed Forces Personnel, Total – Russia, China, United States

Source: The World Bank. (n.d.). *Armed forces personnel, total - Russian Federation, China, United States* [Data file]. Retrieved from <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/MS.MIL.TOTL.P1?end=2019&locations=RU-CN-US&start=2000>. Access Date 23/01/2023.

²⁵⁶ Johan Engvall, *Russia's Military R&D Infrastructure – A Primer* (n.p.: FOI, 2021), 4.

Table 1: Composition of the Armed Forces – Russia, China, United States

Item	Russia	China	United States
Military personnel			
Active			
	900,000	2,035,000	1,395,350
Air	165,000	395,000	329,400
Airborne	45,000		
Army	280,000	965,000	489,050
Coast Guard			41,650
Command and Support	180,000		
Marine Corps			179,250
Navy	150,000	260,000	349,600
Other		150,000	
Railway Forces	29,000		
Space Force			6,400
Special Operations Forces	1,000		
Strategic Missile Force	50,000	120,000	
Strategic Support Force		145,000	
Gendarmerie & Paramilitary			
	554,000	500,000	
Reserve			
	2,000,000	ε510,000	843,450

Source: The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2022, pp. 48, 193, 255.

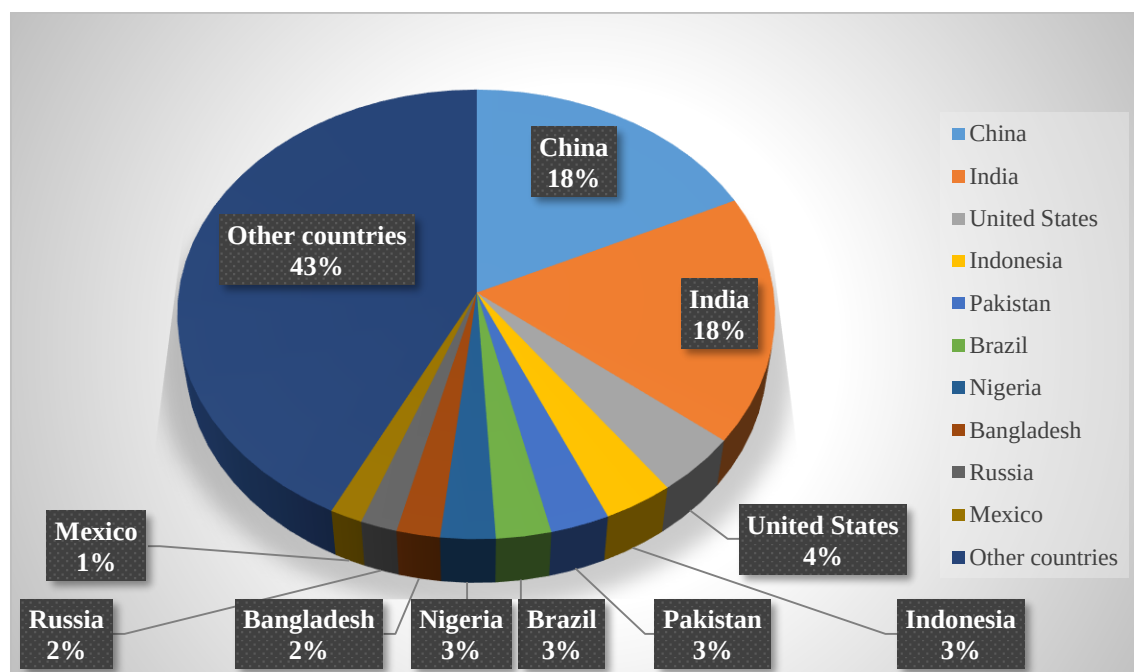
Among the unique developments tested by Russia in Syria was the second-generation Uran-9 heavy combat robot, designed for reconnaissance and fire support for combined arms and reconnaissance units. Although its performance received mixed reviews, it is reported that it has been adopted and entered production.²⁵⁷ Overall, Russia's military campaign in Syria has had a profound impact on the research, development, testing, evaluation and use of the advanced military systems. The Syrian experience has also streamlined and centralized efforts related to the new military technologies.²⁵⁸ However, as the events in Ukraine show, this was not enough in the current conditions of warfare.

Size of the Population and Demographic Trends within the Population

²⁵⁷ RIA Novosti, "Boevoy robot "Uran-9" prinyali na vooruzheniye rossiyskoy armii" [The "Uran-9" combat robot was adopted by the Russian army], *RIA Novosti*, January 24, 2019, <https://ria.ru/20190124/1549807789.html>. Access Date 23/01/2023.

²⁵⁸ Johan Engvall, *Russia's Military R&D Infrastructure – A Primer* (n.p.: FOI, 2021), 42.

Russia is among the top 10 countries in terms of population with over 143 million inhabitants, which is about 2 percent of the world's population, which is extremely small within its vast borders and in comparison with the largest countries by this indicator, China and India (18 percent respectively) (Graphic 4).



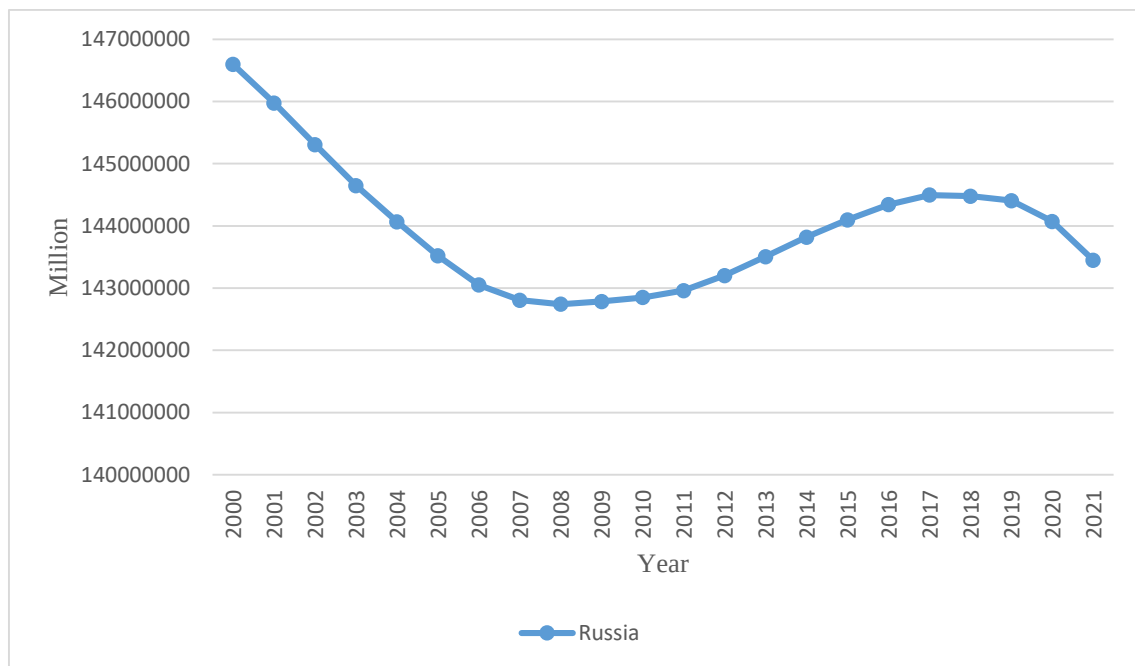
Graphic 4: World Population 2021

Source: The World Bank. (n.d.). *Population, total* [Data file]. Retrieved from https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?end=2021&most_recent_value_desc=true&start=2000. Access Date 23/01/2023.

Over the past two decades, the demographic situation in Russia has continued to deteriorate (Graphic 5). In 2006, Putin, in his address to the Federal Assembly, highlighted the demographic problem as a key challenge for the entire country, noting an annual population decline of 700,000 people.²⁵⁹ The government, in the hope of stabilizing and improving the situation, has introduced a comprehensive family support package aimed at providing financial support to young families, which has had some favorable impact on the demographic situation, however, internal instability, health problems, a harsh climate, as well as an aggravated problem with human losses in

²⁵⁹ Vladimir Putin, "Poslaniye Federal'nomu sobraniyu Rossiiskoi Federatsii, 10 maya 2006 goda, Moskva, Kreml'" [Address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation, May 10, 2006, Moscow, Kremlin], 2006, <https://www.prilib.ru/item/438192>. Access Date 23/01/2023.

conflicts, has a negative impact on population growth. The power of the state in terms of population is characterized by the size of its able-bodied population, capable of supporting the effective functioning of the state in key areas to ensure its survival in the system of international relations, therefore this parameter seems to be one of the key indicators of the material capabilities of the state.



Graphic 5: Dynamics of Population Growth in Russia

Source: The World Bank. (n.d.). *Population, total - Russian Federation* [Data file]. Retrieved from <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?end=2021&locations=RU&start=2000>. Access Date 23/01/2023.

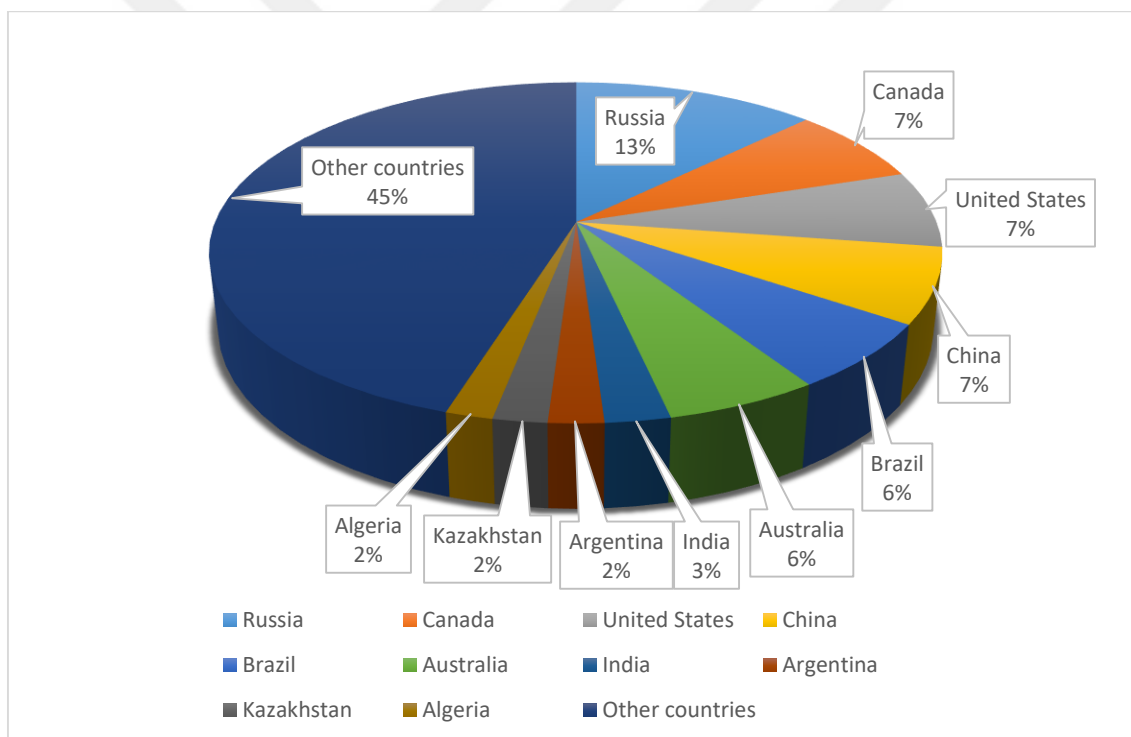
Natural Resource Endowments

It is obvious that Russia, with its largest territory in the world, has numerous natural resources, covering the entire periodic table. The major share of Russia's GDP is the profit from the export of its natural resources. It has the world's largest natural gas reserves and the second largest coal reserves. Being the second largest oil exporter after Saudi Arabia, it has the 8th oil reserves potential in the world. In addition, Russia has numerous reserves of metal ores (gold, silver, iron and nickel), which are extremely necessary for industrial production. Thanks to its natural wealth, Russia has geopolitical leverage to use in its relations with the West, which is largely dependent on Russian energy carriers. Although Russian natural endowments provide a great advantage in terms

of power accumulation, due to its weak monodirectional economy, which is associated with inefficient management and use of resources, rooted in deeply entrenched problems of Russian society, such as unequal distribution of wealth, corruption and control of narrow groups of people over entire resource-extracting sectors of the economy, therefore, Russia's GDP depends on and suffers greatly from fluctuations in world energy prices, which puts it in a vulnerable position.

Size of Territory

Russia is the largest country in the world in terms of its size, occupying geographical space within the borders of Europe and Asia. The total land area is 17,098,250 km² (13 percent of the world's total surface area), which is about 1.7 times the size of territory of its competitors, China and the United States (Graphic 6).



Graphic 6: Size of the Territory

Source: The World Bank. (n.d.). *Surface area (sq. km)* [Data file]. Retrieved from https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/AG.SRF.TOTL.K2?end=2020&most_recent_value_desc=true&start=2000. Access Date 23/01/2023.

The total length of the Russia's coastline is 37,653 km. However, it is one of the most sparsely populated countries in the world. The size of its territory presents both

opportunities and challenges for its foreign policy and security. Keeping such a large territory under control presents certain difficulties, including from the standpoint of the security of its borders. But even in the case of the potential large-scale invasions, the enemy will have to make a lot of efforts, since strategic depth allows Moscow to maintain control and repel attacks in the medium and long term, as can be seen from historical examples.

2.4. Middle East as a Regional Subsystem: Regional Dynamics and External Influences

This paragraph aims to explain which impact have international system's shifts at global level on the regional dynamics in the Middle East, and to investigate how developments unfolding in the Middle East affect the international system, thereby demonstrating the interdependent nature of regional subsystem with the international system as a whole. Special focus is made on the Russia's foreign policy in the region and its position taking in consideration Russia's global role and its projection at the regional level, proving once again the interconnectedness of regional subsystems with the global international system and vice versa.

To understand the Middle Eastern regional subsystem, it is rationale to define what is actually meant by the Middle East as a region and if it is equal to the concept of the Middle Eastern regional subsystem to identify the regional interaction boundaries. Many Middle East scholars refers to a renowned naval historian, strategist, and geopolitical theorist Alfred Thayer Mahan's article, published in 1902, as one of the first paper, where was the term "the Middle East" used. According to them, Mahan's term referred to "a shifting strategic concept [for an area that] had been and would be in the future a geopolitical no man's land ... destined to be a disputed area between Russia and the maritime powers."²⁶⁰ However, none of his biographers, who cite his article "The Persian Gulf and International Relations," mentioned his supposed invention of this term,²⁶¹ as well as there is no such

²⁶⁰ See, for example, Gulshan Dietl, "Iran in the Emerging Greater Middle East," *COPRI Working Papers* 6 (1999): 1; and Ergenekon Savrun, "Tarihte Araplar ve Türk-Arap İlişkileri" [Arabs in the History and Turkish-Arab Relations], *International Journal of Humanities and Education* 4, no. 9 (2018): 229-257.

²⁶¹ See William E. Livezey, *Mahan on Sea Power* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1947), 20, 60; W. D. Puleston, *Mahan: The Life and Work of Captain Alfred Thayer Mahan* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1939), 236-237; Charles Carlisle Taylor, *The Life of Admiral Mahan, Naval Philosopher* (New York: George Doran, 1920), 119-122.

explanation in the reprinted version of it.²⁶² The Middle East region is one of the most debated and ambiguous concept as there is no consensus about exact size and boundaries of it. Some scholars define geographically the Middle East region (the Middle East and North Africa or the Greater Middle East – if one includes also Maghreb countries) as an area that covers about 24 countries located on three continents, which have rich natural resources, impressive demographic potential, bringing together numerous ethnic groups, different religions and sects and various types of regimes.²⁶³ But conceptually, the notion of the Middle Eastern regional subsystem does not necessarily coincide with its geographical boundaries and unites countries according to the principle of interaction of national elites. Thus, the concept of a regional subsystem is quite flexible in terms of including individual states in it. However, a mandatory regional criterion is the general proximity.²⁶⁴ For Russian policymakers, the Greater Middle East with the Caucasus, Central Asia and Türkiye as its components is of strategic interest since these subregions are most vulnerable to threats from the Middle East itself, and the instability of the “near-abroad” poses a security threat to Russia.²⁶⁵

To consider the Middle East as a regional subsystem, rather than an autonomous one, is to recognize that it is a subject to fluctuations in the global international system. The shift towards multipolarity at the global level has made relevant repercussions at the regional level, rejecting US-led unipolar system and sweeping away a bipolar system based on Saudi-Iranian contradiction. At the same time, being an integral part of global international system, the events taking place in the region, as well as the configuration of forces, have a direct impact on it. It is one of the most dynamic, turbulent and volatile elements of the global international system, characterized by rising instability, which

²⁶² A. T. Mahan, *Retrospect and Prospect: Studies in International Relations, Naval and Political* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1902), 209-251, <https://archive.org/details/retrospectprospe00maha/page/n7/mode/2up?q=no+man%27s+land>. Access Date 17/06/2020.

²⁶³ Anoushiravan Ehteshami, “Middle East Middle Powers: Regional Role, International Impact,” *Uluslararası İlişkiler* 11, no. 42 (Summer 2014): 30, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43925850>. Access Date 02/01/2023.

²⁶⁴ William R. Thompson, “The Regional Subsystem: A Conceptual Explication and a Propositional Inventory,” *International Studies Quarterly* 17, no. 1 (March 1973): 96, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3013464>. Access Date 15/08/2021.

²⁶⁵ Ilya Bourtnan, “Putin and Russia’s Middle Eastern Policy,” *American Enterprise Institute*, June 5, 2006, <https://www.aei.org/articles/putin-and-russias-middle-eastern-policy/>. Access Date 11/06/2021.

causes a number of challenges not only for the local players in the region, but also for international actors, and ongoing reconfiguration in the balance of power.

Under circumstances of systemic pressure rather than domestic political considerations, the issue of maintaining and enhancing Russia's presence at the regional level forces it to make optimal political responses for emerging challenges among a limited number of potential options to create a regional order that would correspond to its national interests and foreign policy goals. Despite the complex configuration of situation and interaction in the region, characterized mainly by numerous conflicts and confrontation of both regional and global actors, Russia recognizes the Palestinian-Israeli conflict as a key factor influencing regional stability.²⁶⁶ Meanwhile, since the revolutionary wave of the Arab Spring of 2011 swept through the Middle Eastern countries, it has made a continuous impact on every dimension of their internal and foreign policies. Such regional developments as ongoing conflicts in Libya, Syria and Yemen together with rising Islamic extremism influence the security environment of the regional subsystem, which contribute to the transformation of the entire international structure. There have been a number of significant shifts in the Middle East: decline of traditional hegemonic power – the United States – and its influence over regional affairs and “transition from a post-Cold War “American order” to some kind of “post-American (dis)order”;²⁶⁷ intensification of rivalry for regional power; active involvement of regional players such as Türkiye, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates; and the changing nature of alliances.²⁶⁸

The chaotic nature of the regional system with a power vacuum in the absence of a regional hegemonic power provides an opportunity for external players to intervene. From another side, the pivotal states themselves are interested in the involvement of a potential extra-regional hegemon able to provide security within the region. For a long time, this role was given to the United States. Following the fall of the Soviet Union and the establishment of a unipolar system with the United States' as a hegemonic power, Washington and its allies expanded their sphere of influence into the Middle East. A

²⁶⁶ Irina Zvyagelskaya, “Russian Policy in the Levant,” *Uluslararası İlişkiler* 15, no. 60 (2018): 121, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26605039>. Access Date 02/01/2023.

²⁶⁷ Morten Valbjørn, “Global/Regional IR and Changes in Global/Regional Structures of Middle East International Relations,” *POMEPS Studies: Shifting Global Politics and the Middle East* 34 (March 2019): 18.

²⁶⁸ Raffaella A. Del Sarto, Helle Malmvig and Eduard Soler i Lecha, “Interregnum: The Regional Order in the Middle East and North Africa after 2011,” *MENARA Final Reports*, no. 1 (February 2019): 3.

distinctive feature of regional rivalry for dominance was the unequal position of competitors. On the one hand, the militarily and economically powerful United States and its Western allies, and, on the other hand, the scattered weak regional players like Iran, Iraq, Libya, Syria, as well as non-state entities such as Hezbollah and Hamas. The foundations of this order were shaken in the 2000s due to several regional developments, which resulted in transformation of regional, as well as global structural conditions.²⁶⁹ Primarily it was the invasion of Iraq in 2003 that led to disastrous consequences radically transforming the Middle East system. At that time, Russia was a weak actor in the Middle East and had no influence on the processes in the region. The result of the second Gulf War was the structural shifts of post-2003 Iraq that led to the strengthening of existing jihadist groups, as well as the emergence of new quasi-state actors such as ISIL/ISIS. In this sense, the United States triggered a mechanism of shifts and changes in the regional dynamics, which disrupted both the distribution of power at the regional level and changed the status quo of other global actors in the Middle East. Henceforth, the United States was perceived not as a provider of regional security, but as the main destabilizer in the Middle East.²⁷⁰

For Russia, the 2000s were marked by a turn in Russian foreign policy towards the Middle East with the coming to power of Vladimir Putin. Unlike his predecessor, Boris Yeltsin, who, in the 1990s, left this region out of Russian foreign policy focus, Putin outlined the contours of a return to the Middle East from the very beginning, although it has to be mentioned that Russia's interest in the region was at a low level during Putin's first presidential term. Nevertheless, the "return policy" was largely inspired by Yevgeny Primakov's well known anti-Western posture and pro-Eastern pivot, which was fundamentally reflected in Russia's adherence to multipolar order. In fact, this idea is not new, and here one can trace the continuity of the ideas of the Imperial Russia. Back in the nineteenth century, the father of Russian geopolitical thought, philosopher and historian Nikolay Yakovlevich Danilevsky declared his "preference for Asia to the detriment of the "Romano-Germanic" world, for Islam or Buddhism against Catholicism, for the Turks

²⁶⁹ Phillips, "Structure, Agency," 67.

²⁷⁰ "Russia's Role in the Middle East: A Stabilizing Force?," *Castlereagh Associates*, July 12, 2019, <https://castlereagh.net/russias-role-in-the-middle-east-a-stabilizing-force/>. Access Date 21/01/2023.

against the Latins.”²⁷¹ In contemporary Middle Eastern realities, Russia assumes the role of a counterbalance to any hegemonic attempts from external actors, primarily the United States, and also regional actors such as Iran, despite its status as a “stable partner for a long time,”²⁷² Türkiye or Saudi Arabia.

In the early 2000s, Russia had rather narrow interests in the Middle East, limited mainly to arms supplies and nuclear cooperation with Iran. This is also confirmed by Putin’s first visit to the Middle East, which took place only in 2005, accompanied by the chief executives of the MiG Corporation and Rosoboronexport.²⁷³ It shows that Russia’s primary interests were linked to other regions and other actors outside the Middle East. Such a detached policy towards the Middle East was the result of Russia’s policy towards the United States, NATO and the European Union, aimed at rapprochement and avoiding confrontation, including in the Middle East. This was expressed in support for cooperation with the United States after the terrorist attacks in 2001, initial support for the NATO military campaign in Afghanistan, as well as a rather lenient attitude towards the 2003 United States-led invasion of Iraq. But Russia’s ambitions, growing simultaneously with its material capabilities, were aimed at expanding the spheres of cooperation with the Middle Eastern countries, which would accordingly increase the possibilities for exerting its influence in the region. Russia’s desire for great power status and participation in international politics on an equal basis with the United States has become a *modus vivendi* of Russian foreign policy. From now on, Putin forged multiple political and diplomatic ties, established economic influence, cooperating with the Middle Eastern countries in the arms transfers, energy and nuclear technology.²⁷⁴

The second pivotal moment in the contemporary history of the Middle East is the Arab Spring, a wave of protests that swept across the Middle East, rejecting previous regimes in search of changes, which, however, turned into a real disaster for a number of countries, and the repercussions of which can be seen all over the region. The Arab Spring marked

²⁷¹ Marlène Laruelle, *La quête d’une identité impériale : le néo-urasisme dans la Russie contemporaine* [The quest for an Imperial identity: Neo-urasism in contemporary Russia] (Paris: Petra, 2007), 15.

²⁷² Hannes Adomeit, “Russia’s Iran Policy: Global and Regional Objectives, Political and Economic Interests,” *SWP Comments* 9 (March 2006): 1.

²⁷³ Liudmila Romanova, “Security. Putin Offers the Middle East Peace and Weapons,” *Gazeta*, April 27, 2005.

²⁷⁴ Anna Borshchevskaya, “Russia’s Strategic Objectives in the Middle East and North Africa,” *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, June 15, 2017, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/russias-strategic-objectives-middle-east-and-north-africa>. Access Date 19/06/2021.

a period of uncertainty for all actors involved in the regional affairs in the anarchic environment. It shook up the international system, putting forward a number of challenges for the actors, but also provided them with new opportunities, which Russia took advantage of to assert its global and regional role. The Russian political elite perceived the Arab revolutions with suspicion, as it was familiar with the effect of color revolutions. In addition, the history of Russia itself is marked by revolutions that changed its polity in 1917 and 1991,²⁷⁵ which became significant not only for Russia, but also for the entire international system, destroying in the first case the multipolar system and establishing a bipolar world order, and in the second case transforming a bipolar world into a unipolar one. Unlike its counterparts, the Western powers, Russia had not had a clearly defined Middle East policy that could negatively affect its relations with the Middle Eastern countries or become a sticking point in their further development. Therefore, Russia faced the task of adapting to the new political situation in the Middle East.²⁷⁶

One of the links in the chain of revolutionary protests of the Arab Spring and its continuation became the Libyan crisis. During the outbreak of protests in Libya in February 2011, the presidency of the Russian Federation was held by Putin's protégé Dmitry Medvedev. However, it is worth noting the role of Putin himself, who served as prime minister, but had leverage over the conduct of foreign policy continuing to wield real power. At that time, the task was to form a comprehensive partnership with the West, covering the political, economic and military spheres. In this regard, Russia did not block the United Nations Security Council resolution establishing a no-fly zone in Libya to prevent reprisals against Gaddafi's opponents in Benghazi. Despite the fact that Russia had economic interests in Libya, namely arms contracts and infrastructure projects worth seven billion dollars that it would like to keep, there were no special political ties with Gaddafi and his regime. Thus, with the prospect of improving relations with the United States and Europe, Russia put Libya on the line. Subsequently, as it turned out, this step was a huge mistake. As a result of the use of NATO forces against the Gaddafi regime, Libya actually ceased to exist as a state, becoming one of the main havens of Islamic

²⁷⁵ Karina Fayzullina, "Iran-Russia Relations in Light of Iran-US Rapprochement," *Al Jazeera Centre for Studies*, April 2, 2014, <https://studies.aljazeera.net/en/dossiers/2014/04/20144295214736271.html>. Access Date 05/10/2021.

²⁷⁶ Robert Mason, "Introduction," in *The International Politics of the Arab Spring: Popular Unrest and Foreign Policy*, ed. Robert Mason (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 5.

extremists in the MENA region and representing only a geographic object. The conclusions made by Russia have echoed in the Syrian context.²⁷⁷

So, the next major regional development is the Syrian civil war. Both regional events, Syrian conflict and the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, are considered by scholars to varying degrees as the causes of American decline in the Middle East. Some researchers attribute to US overstretch in Iraq, while others note its inability to take more decisive steps in Syria. Obviously, a number of shifts at the system level – American imperial overstretch and failure in Iraq in 2003-2010, as well as 2008 financial crisis and global shifting focus to Asia – contributed to the gradual decline of the role of the United States in the Middle Eastern region making it less prone to politics of interventionism. It is not associated to its material capabilities, as the United States still remain the most powerful actor in the world being at the forefront of military spending, maintaining numerous military bases and alliances in the region. The core issue is in its policy choices from the range of options available and inability to use existing capabilities to its advantage. This was exacerbated by profound uncertainty about the real intentions of the Trump administration.²⁷⁸

Uncertainty is a characteristic feature of the international system and multipolarity makes it even more unclear. World powers are struggling to determine their proper role in it. Today's international security environment demonstrates its lack of clarity. In the fall of 2018, Washington announced plans to maintain its substantial military presence in the Middle East despite the suppression of the terrorist threat from the Islamic state in order to counter Iranian influence. However, soon Trump decided about the imminent withdrawal of thousands of American troops. Such uncertainty made regional players confused and limited their available options for optimal policy response. Another example is the United States' response to the blockade of Qatar that also raised many questions. While the optimal response should have been to support the unity of the Gulf states in opposing Iranian influence, President Donald Trump supported the blockade,

²⁷⁷ Trenin, *What is Russia Up To*, 45-47.

²⁷⁸ Marc Lynch and Amaney Jamal, "Introduction: Shifting Global Politics and the Middle East," *POMEPS Studies: Shifting Global Politics and the Middle East* 34 (March 2019): 3-4.

which, according to the military and diplomatic corps, was detrimental to the vital interests of the United States.²⁷⁹

Thus, the systemic regional crisis in the Middle East coincided with the decline of the influence of major external powers that of the United States and its Western allies, providing rivaling great powers an opportunity to increase their presence in the region and enabling regional powers to play a more significant and independent role.²⁸⁰ The transatlantic attitude towards Syrian crisis, condemning Russia's actions against the "moderate" rebels and emphasizing the importance of cooperation with Russia, has become a catalyst for Russia's insertion into the hegemonic rivalry in the Middle East.²⁸¹ Therefore, on the one hand, Russia, that had pursued low profile policy towards the Middle East for the past quarter-century, adjusted its Middle Eastern policy and strategy towards active engagement in the regional affairs and ultimately has secured its military presence in Syria and continues to strengthen its position at the regional level, using this moment in order to undermine the alliances and influence of the United States. Russian experts emphasize rising Russia's power in the Middle East with a greater potential to resolve the various conflicts amid American decline, while Russia maintains good relations with the almost all the parties there in contrast to worsening American relations both with its opponents and traditional allies represented by Saudi Arabia and Egypt,²⁸² but point out at the same time that Moscow "has no interest, no resources, and no intention" to replace Washington as the major actor providing security in the region.²⁸³ It follows from this that Russia does not seek hegemony in the Middle East. As Matthew Bodner put it, "Russia's star is rising as U.S. standing in the region is falling."²⁸⁴ Russia's Middle Eastern activity shows its assertive position to play a major role in the contemporary international system, going beyond its traditional post-Soviet sphere of influence connected with its historically occupied imperial lands. Its actions in the region

²⁷⁹ Lynch and Jamal, "Introduction," 4.

²⁸⁰ Ekaterina Stepanova, "Russia and Conflicts in the Middle East: Regionalisation and Implications for the West," *International Spectator* 53, no. 4 (2018): 36, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2018.1507135>. Access Date 27/05/2020.

²⁸¹ Didier, "The Syrian Conflict," 9.

²⁸² Katz, "Can Russia Succeed."

²⁸³ Trenin, *What Is Russia Up To*, 2-3.

²⁸⁴ Matthew Bodner, "What Was Russia's Putin Up To after the Death of Iran's Soleimani?," *DefenseNews*, January 15, 2020, <https://www.defensenews.com/global/mideast-africa/2020/01/15/what-was-russias-putin-up-to-after-the-death-of-irans-soleimani/>. Access Date 11/06/2021.

are therefore driving changes that are contributing to a fundamental reshaping of the international system.²⁸⁵

On the other hand, China realizes its economic diplomacy without intervening militarily into the region. Thus, the United States found itself in a situation where other world powers are actively involved in Middle Eastern affairs but still does not face any peer rival.

As such, Middle East represents a subsystem with multilayered regional order in terms of actors involved in the regional affairs, which complicates its overall dynamics. Its changing nature affects the configuration of relations between powers, deepening rivalries at both the regional and global levels. To make sense of these power trends, one should track changes in the relative distribution of power at both the systemic and subsystemic levels since it provides incentives for extra-regional hegemon, great powers and middle powers within the region to adjust their foreign and security policies.²⁸⁶ The interaction between the distribution of power at the system level and the regional one is based on two factors. First, the capabilities of great powers operating at the systemic level should exceed the capabilities of regional ones. Secondly, there should be a strategic interest of system actors in regional powers.²⁸⁷ According to the realities of the contemporary international system, both conditions are satisfied.

It was determined above that there are currently three major actors (“the first layer”) in the international system, the United States, Russia and China, which have the capabilities and the interest to project their influence into geographically remote regions, in this case, the Middle East (see Table 2). Currently each of these countries can be considered as potential extra-regional hegemon. While the international community is witnessing a decrease in the role and involvement of the United States in the region, Russia’s participation in Middle Eastern affairs is increasing. China, in its turn, has chosen to pursue a low profile over militarily issues and actively shows itself economically. Overall, given the uncertainty of the international system, which carries a high level of conflict

²⁸⁵ Trenin, *What Is Russia Up To*, back cover.

²⁸⁶ Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, “Neoclassical Realism and the Study of Regional Order,” in *International Relations Theory and Regional Transformation*, ed. T. V. Paul (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 76.

²⁸⁷ Gil Merom, “Realist Hypotheses on Regional Peace,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 26, no. 1 (March 2003): 112, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390308559310>. Access Date 05/06/2020.

risk, there is a possibility of involvement of external forces with different interests in regional conflicts, which can lead to a change in the balance of power in the region.

A significant role in the regional affairs is played by three non-Arab countries – Iran, Israel and Türkiye. Together with Saudi Arabia, they represent the “second layer” of the regional order (see Table 2), while traditional powers such as Egypt, Iraq and Syria, which historically determined main regional trends, have been relatively displaced from the leading positions in regional affairs to the category of fragile states. The instability of the internal situation in these countries created their inability to project power and made them a subject to the influence of external powers. Other Middle Eastern countries, such as Lebanon, Yemen and Palestine turned into political fragmented units and, as a result, the object of geopolitical ambitions of regional and external players.²⁸⁸

One of the characteristics of the regional dynamics in the period under review is the expanding influence of Iran in the Middle East, which is in contradiction with Russia’s strategic interests in the region. The impetus for Iranian activation was the fall of Saddam Hussein’s regime due to the United States’ invasion in Iraq in 2003 and the favorable economic situation for Iran that allowed preparing a basis for the realization of its regional ambitions. One of the source of increasing its power is providing assistance to state and non-state actors in Syria, Iraq and Lebanon. As a result of US actions in Iraq, which not only overthrew the authoritarian regime but also disrupted the regional order that had existed since the 1970s, Iran seized the opportunity to get greater regional power and to exercise its influence by supporting a growing network of Shi’a political parties, which increasingly expanded their presence in the domestic political institutions of Iraq. After the events of the Arab Spring, which led to the destabilization of the region and, as a consequence, to the takeover of a large part of the territory of Iraq by ISIS, Iran has strengthened its influence, providing the support to the Iraqi government necessary to ensure the state’s survival.²⁸⁹ Furthermore, at the regional level, Iran has been the strongest supporter of Assad’s regime. Together with Russia, they represent key allies of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Their tactical alliance in the Syrian conflict is based on pragmatic reasons. Iran’s policy is primarily aimed at countering the influence of the

²⁸⁸ Waleed Hazbun, “In America’s Wake: Turbulence and Insecurity in the Middle East,” *POMEPS Studies: Shifting Global Politics and the Middle East* 34 (March 2019): 16.

²⁸⁹ “Russia’s Role in the Middle East: A Stabilizing Force?”

United States and Israel and undermining their positions in the region. In this regard, Iran is also supporting Hezbollah, its longtime ally in Lebanon, using it as a force multiplier to efficiently confront Israel and threaten its survival. All of this contributes to the expansion of Iran's regional power. Meanwhile, the strengthening of Iran's position leads to an intensification of the security dilemma, as it weakens the positions of other regional players, in particular, the Arab countries of the Persian Gulf. The very lack of unity among Iran's traditional competitors loosens their ability to effectively counter Iran's spreading influence.

The most competitive Iranian regional rival is Saudi Arabia. Its active participation in the Middle Eastern affairs is closely linked to the need of containing Iranian regional ambitions. Increasing Iran's sway in the region against the backdrop of post-2003 Iraq raised concern in Riyadh. The events of 2011 in Syria were seen as an opportunity to change the existing regional imbalance.²⁹⁰ Many scholars maintain that Syria became a battleground for Saudi-Iranian regional rivalry.²⁹¹ While Tehran sees Moscow as a reliable partner, its opponents see Russia as a deterrent to Iran's hegemonic ambitions in the region. In this case, Iranian antagonists favor Moscow's activity in the Middle East in order to counterbalance Iran's growing role in the region. Russia, playing its geopolitical game, repeatedly used Iran as a bargaining chip dealing with the West, and, particularly with the United States. Being interested in Saudi investments, hypothetically it could use the same strategy in relations with Riyadh. Nevertheless, the outcomes of external and domestic pressures that Saudi Arabia faces (e.g. low oil prices, a budget deficit and the Saudi Arabian-led intervention in Yemen) together with assessments of the risks to deteriorate relations with Iran, a long-time ally of Russia, in exchange for improved relations with Saudi Arabia, a long-time adversary, influence Russia's policy choice in favor of balancing between the two countries.²⁹²

Saudi Arabia, supported by the United States at the global level and the United Arab Emirates at the regional level, has made efforts to project its own regional influence,

²⁹⁰ Phillips, "Structure, Agency," 69.

²⁹¹ Alexey Khlebnikov, "The Middle East Riddle and Russia's Role in It," *Russia Direct*, December 14, 2016, <https://russia-direct.org/analysis/middle-east-riddle-and-russias-role-it>. Access Date 20/06/2020.

²⁹² Mark N. Katz, "Russian-Saudi Rapprochement? Iran and Economic Strain Will Make It Tough," *Russia Matters*, September 28, 2017, <https://www.russiamatters.org/analysis/russian-saudi-rapprochement-iran-and-economic-strain-will-make-it-tough>. Access Date 19/06/2021.

positioning itself as a regional hegemon. This is justified by its aggressive military policies, including the establishment of Saudi and Emirati military bases in the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean, Saudi Arabia's involvement in the Syrian War by supporting rebel groups, and in the war in Yemen against the Houthi rebels, having failed to secure the post-Uprising transition.²⁹³ However, it does not have universal regional support and the consent of other interested parties. Although the Saudi-Iranian confrontation contributed to the formation of blocs, the systemic factors of the global (trend towards multipolarity) and regional level (Türkiye's entrance into regional rivalry) did not allow the bipolar order to strengthen in the regional subsystem.²⁹⁴

As it was mentioned above, in the confrontation between Iran and Saudi Arabia Russia prefers to take a neutral position and maintains a dialogue with both regional players. In conflict situations between the two countries, such as the aggravation of relations in early 2016 due to the execution of the Shi'a cleric and critic of the government in Saudi Arabia Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr and the subsequent protests in Iran with the attack on the Saudi embassy, Russia sought to take advantage of the opportunity to play the role of mediator, which, once again, would demonstrate its involvement in international affairs and the ability to influence them, as well as the regional policy of the Middle East, thereby strengthening its position in asserting itself as a great power and a significant player in the Middle East.

In the late 2000s, Türkiye and Qatar stepped up their efforts to ensure their influence in the region. Yet both of these countries are unlikely to be able to become regional hegemon alone. Despite the geographical proximity and its relative material power capabilities (economic, demographic and military potential), the fundamental obstacle for Türkiye to achieve the position of regional hegemon is its non-Arab identity in the predominantly Arab region. This is also the case for Iran. Qatar, in its turn, having financial resources and being an Arab country, does not have other necessary criteria. It is too small to exercise its power over all Arab states, especially in the presence of such a neighbor as Saudi Arabia. By combining their efforts and the political potential of the pan-Arab network of Muslim Brothers, the tandem of these two countries quite clearly presented

²⁹³ Hazbun, "In America's Wake," 16-17.

²⁹⁴ Phillips, "Structure, Agency," 67.

its aspiration for regional hegemony, especially after the events of the Arab Spring.²⁹⁵ It became possible due to the structural shifts occurred in the period of 2003-2011. The Arab Spring provided them with an opportunity to take part in the establishment of a new regional order based on newly elected governments and corresponding to their political line of emerging political Islam. However, their excessive efforts have resulted in their involvement in regional conflicts (in Libya and Syria). Syria, once a pillar of the regional subsystem, became a battleground of regional and global actors for proxy wars amid an active struggle for regional hegemony and international interests.²⁹⁶

Another important geopolitical shift on the Middle Eastern arena was Türkiye's decision to purchase Russian S-400 missile defense system. This decision was made against the background of deteriorating relations within the alliance between the United States and Türkiye, which in itself put Russia in a more advantageous position in the region and once again confirmed its growing influence as a major strategic power in the Middle East. In addition, after decreasing the aggravation of Russian-Turkish relations associated with the fighter jet crisis in 2015 and the assassination of the Russian ambassador in Türkiye in 2016, cooperation between the two countries was restored largely thanks to the friendly relations of the presidents of both countries.

The shifts appeared at the international level are usually seen as the main drivers of Russia's change of behavior due to its change of relative power, which affects, consequently, its position in the international system. However, domestic transformations in the country make it possible to supplement the existing ideas of the systemic level and understand the factors that allowed Russia to conduct a more active foreign policy in the Middle East, in the region that, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, moved to the bottom lines in the priorities of Russia's foreign policy.

²⁹⁵ Andrey Korotayev, "Iran – Russia Relations within the Context of Regional Hegemony Struggles in the Middle East," in "Iran and Russia after the U.S. Withdrawal from the JCPOA; Opportunities and Obstacles to Cooperation," *IRS Papers*, no. 2/97 (September 2018): 7.

²⁹⁶ Aurora Sottimano, "Regional and International Dimensions of the Syrian Conflict," in *La Primavera Árabe y sus perspectivas regionales e internacionales: una publicación científica y de análisis político* [The Arab Spring and its regional and international perspectives: a scientific and political analysis publication], ed. Najib Abu Warda el Shandoghli and Dolores Rubio García (Madrid: Diwan Mayrit, 2018): 165, https://www.academia.edu/38079370/Regional_and_International_dimensions_of_the_Syrian_conflict. Access Date 06/12/2020.

Table 2: Indicators of the Material Capabilities of States

Country		Gross Domestic Product (GDP)		Annual Defense Spending	Size and Composition of the Armed Forces	Size of the Population		Size of Territory
		\$ billions		\$ millions	Number of People	millions		sq. km thousands
		2010	2018	2019	2017	2000	2018	2018
Great Power (Major Power)	Russia	1,524.9	1,657.6	65102,6	1,454,000	146.6	144.5	17,098.3
	United States	14,992.1	20,544.3	731751,4	1,359,000	282.2	326.7	9,831.5
	China	6,087.2	13,608.2	261081,9	2,695,000	1,262.6	1,392.7	9,562.9
Regional Power (Middle Power)	Iran	487.1	454.0 (2017)	12623,2	563,000	65.6	81.8	1,745.2
	Israel	234.0	370.6	20464,9	178,000	6.3	8.9	22.1
	Saudi Arabia	528.2	786.5	61866,7	252,000	20.7	33.7	2,149.7
	Türkiye	771.9	771.4	20447,7	512,000	63.2	82.3	785.4

Source: The World Bank. (n.d.). *World Bank open data* [Data file]. Retrieved from <https://data.worldbank.org/>. Access Date 22/01/2023.

CHAPTER 3: DOMESTIC POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT AS A SHAPING VARIABLE OF THE CURRENT RUSSIAN FOREIGN POLICY

Russia cannot be understood by the mind,

Russia cannot be measured by the common arshin;

Russia has its own character.

One can only believe in Russia.

– Fyodor Tyutchev*

As analyzed, previously, international systemic pressures are at the heart of international politics, grand strategy, and foreign policy. However, it is not sufficient to focus only on the external environment, as foreign policy reflects the state of domestic policy, that influence the decision-making process and the formulation of the policy responses, which have, in its turn, an impact on the international outcomes. Russian domestic political and economic environments represent a complex phenomenon that is taken into account in the shaping of its foreign policy. Although there is a point of view that Russian foreign policy is a product of external systemic pressure, over the course of a century-long history, its changes have been a reflection of the domestic policy of the existing political regime, which can be traced in Chapter 1 of this dissertation. Neoclassical realism offers four intervening variables that act as regulatory factors, each of which can influence the state's response to external stimuli.²⁹⁷ This chapter introduces all four domestic intervening variables: (1) beliefs, images and perceptions of key decision makers; (2) state's strategic culture; (3) state-society relations; and (4) domestic institutional arrangements, which help to understand the degree of importance of each of them on the processes and mechanisms of foreign policy decision-making, and discusses how systemic pressures are translated through them.

3.1. Leader Images

* Vitalii Borovoi, "The Religious and Spiritual Factor in the Making of a New Russia," in *Remaking Russia: Voices from Within*, ed. Heyward Isham (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1995), 252.

²⁹⁷ Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory*, 59.

Often, when analyzing the foreign policy of states, researchers operate the notion of “state” as an impersonal actor of international relations. Neoclassical realism includes in the analysis of foreign policy an intervening variable of leader image that represents a crucial component to understand Russian foreign policy. Russian foreign policy towards the Middle East represents a combination of interests, calculations and concerns of particular persons and interest groups. Therefore, to understand the nature of Russia’s relations with the Middle East, it is necessary to identify the group of influential and powerful players involved in the decision-making process.

As neoclassical realist theory states, an important role in the formation and implementation of foreign policy belongs to the so-called *Foreign Policy Executive* (FPE), which usually includes high-ranking decision-makers in the state, represented by the president, prime minister, ministers, and also advisors responsible for foreign and security policy.²⁹⁸ This is the so-called governmental group of actors. Their formed core values, beliefs, and perceptions, based on previous experience, influence the decision-making process and, in particular, their response to external stimuli. Thus, the foreign policy has its face as a collective concept of persons involved in the decision-making process. As Henry Kissinger mentioned, “As a professor, I tended to think of history as run by impersonal forces. But when you see it in practice, you see the difference personalities make.”²⁹⁹

Since “leader images” as a domestic intervening variable refers to the personality and character of the individuals, that are mental characteristics in one way or another, and the human nature in general, its analysis seems to be a rather difficult matter. Referring to the classical realists, it is significant to note that human nature causes competitiveness and anarchy in international relations. One of the principles of political realism that Hans Morgenthau set out in *Politics among Nations* is that politics, like society in general, is governed by objective laws that have their roots in human nature.³⁰⁰ Classical realists believe that to understand international conflicts one should apply human behavior

²⁹⁸ Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist*, 61.

²⁹⁹ Daniel L. Byman and Kenneth M. Pollack, “Let Us Now Praise Great Men: Bringing the Statesman Back In,” *International Security* 25, no.4 (Spring 2001): 108, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3092135>. Access Date 20/09/2020.

³⁰⁰ Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 6th ed., revised by Kenneth W. Thompson (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2004), 4.

(individual) at international level.³⁰¹ Neoclassical realism suggests that personality matters as the perception of systemic stimuli has a direct impact on the decision-making process. During acute international crises, leader images are the most important element in the process of shaping the state's responses, as the temporal range for decision-making is limited. On the contrary, when there is enough time to make an informed foreign policy decision, other forces and groups are involved in the process, and the FPE becomes more dependent on domestic support and vulnerable to public opinion.³⁰² The example of Russia in this case is unique, since the image of its leader, Vladimir Putin, has become a household name. Its influence can be traced in all key foreign policy decisions, making him the "supreme decisionmaker."³⁰³ As Angus Roxburgh holds, "The national leader of Russia, Vladimir Putin, is not like any other president or prime minister. Just by shaking hands with Putin, you can see that he is a strong man."³⁰⁴ Indeed, since the first presidential term of Putin, many leaders of states have changed on the world stage, and Putin himself is the current president for the fourth time, and plans to run for the next presidential elections.

In the study of the foreign policy of any state, one should consider the portrait of a person in power in order to have an idea of the possible reasons for a particular state's behavior in the international arena. Regarding Russia, this plays an extremely important role in every historical period, since Russian politics is characterized by an extraordinary personalization of power and a closed structure of the decision-making process.³⁰⁵ Based on the combination of historical facts, expert opinions, articles and books, this paragraph deals with basic biographical information – age, childhood, relationship with parents and experience, and specific details focusing on personality traits, character, and worldviews of the FPE, which are useful for understanding its influence on the Russian foreign policy in the Middle East, the logic of Russia's foreign policy choices, their impact on the international outcomes and structural changes related to its decision-making process.

³⁰¹ Manzoor Khan Afridi and Ali Jibran, "Russian Response to Syrian Crisis: A Neorealist Perspective," *Strategic Studies* 38, no. 2 (Summer 2018): 59, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48539137>. Access Date 20/09/2020.

³⁰² Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory*, 94.

³⁰³ Bobo Lo, *Russia and the New World Disorder* (London: Chatham House, 2015), 7.

³⁰⁴ Angus Roxburgh, *The Strongman: Vladimir Putin and the Struggle for Russia* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2012), vii.

³⁰⁵ Nikita Chernyshev, "The Influence of Institutional Decision Making Mechanism in Russia on the Relations with the European Union," *International Organisations Research Journal* 9, no. 3 (2014): 19.

Russian foreign policy decision-making mechanism differs in its quite extensiveness, centrality on a single leader and opaqueness. It is hierarchically divided into three levels: federal, regional, and local. Within the scope of this paragraph, the federal level, represented by key government officials involved in decision-making process, is of the greatest interest as its actors can be determined as Russia's *Foreign Policy Executive*. There are two types of federal executive bodies: President-related (the President and his administration) and the Cabinet of Ministers-related (ministries, committees, services, etc.) with some agencies of the government reporting to both the President and the Prime Minister.³⁰⁶

Now, the central figure of Russia's FPE is its President Vladimir Putin, a powerful leader that managed to consolidate domestic power and strengthen Russia's role on the world stage. Here, it can be seen one of the features and continuities of Russian foreign policy, that is "the concentration of political power [...] in the hands of a small number of people, often just one man or woman", like it was the cases of Peter the Great, Catherine the Great, or Joseph Stalin,³⁰⁷ and now the case of Vladimir Putin. Referring to history, Russia formed its state system not through institutions and laws, but through persons. The head of state has historically been the key figure of the Russian foreign policy-making process, assigning other institutions only a secondary role. As Bobo Lo notes, "In Putin's Russia, individuals make institutions, not institutions the individual."³⁰⁸ This feature is related to the geopolitical factor of the over-stretched and vulnerable position, due to which the mobilization of resources during crises required a special approach of Russian rulers. The traditional way was to use the power of local strongmen, rather than appeal to institutions and laws. Such practice lasted for centuries, starting from the 16th century, which naturally left its mark on the modern state system. That is what a British historian of Russia and the Soviet Union Geoffrey Hosking called the statization of personal power.³⁰⁹

³⁰⁶ Alexander Sergunin, "Foreign Policy Decision-Making System," chap. 4 in *Explaining Russian Foreign Policy Behavior: Theory and Practice* (Stuttgart: ibidem-Verlag, 2016), 169.

³⁰⁷ Alfred J. Rieber, "Persistent Factors in Russian Foreign Policy: An Interpretative Essay," in *Imperial Russian Foreign Policy*, ed. and trans. Hugh Ragsdale, asst. ed. Valerii Nikolaevich Ponomarev (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 321.

³⁰⁸ Lo, *Russia and the New World Disorder*, 10.

³⁰⁹ Geoffrey Hosking, "The Political System: From Soviet Past to Post-Yeltsin Future" (paper presented at "Russia in the International System" Conference, Airlie House, Warrenton, Virginia, 21-23 February 2001), https://fas.org/irp/nic/russia_conf.html. Access Date 19/04/2021.

As noted previously, the time of Vladimir Putin's coming to power is characterized by the transition of Russia to the capitalist system, instability and confusion generated by it, which was used by both legal and illegal elements of society. Thus, a circle of the so-called "oligarchs" was formed, seizing key sectors of the economy and industry. When Putin became a president for the first time, he managed to squeeze the stratum of oligarchs out of politics, but still left most of them loyal to his regime. Putin has served four presidential terms in total, two four-year terms and two six-year terms due to the amendments initiated by Dmitry Medvedev, which extended the legitimate presidential term to six years. The constitutional amendments of 2020 nullify the previous presidential terms of Vladimir Putin and allow him to run for the presidency two more times. Researchers often compare him to Joseph Stalin, the leader who has held the longest in power in the modern era.³¹⁰ How has Putin managed to maintain such a strong grip on power for decades? What underlies his prior experience? What values, beliefs, and images shape his worldview and which impact they have on his interaction with outside world? To answer, one should first understand the environment, in which the future President was born and raised, because the life principles of a person are laid in his/her childhood, and the character is formed with age through experience, going through certain life stages. As Karl Marx put it, being determines consciousness.³¹¹

Vladimir Putin's commitment to traditional values and conservatism at the state level, which is also reflected in Russia's foreign policy, probably has a connection with his family values. As he recalls himself, "I come from an ordinary family, and this is how I lived for a long time, nearly my whole life. I lived as an average, normal person and I have always maintained that connection."³¹² His mother survived the siege of Leningrad and his father was a participant in the Great Patriotic War, the event, which is often the rationale for Russian behavior in the international stage as the successor of the victorious power in the World War II and one of the designers of the modern world order, which has a "rightful" place to be a great power and be recognized by other major actors. This also represents an important fact that influenced the character-building of Vladimir Putin

³¹⁰ Christina Pazzanese, "The Rise of Vladimir Putin," *Harvard Gazette*, December 19, 2019, <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2019/12/analysts-discuss-the-20-year-rule-of-vladimir-putin/>. Access Date 27/11/2020.

³¹¹ Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Nahum Isaac Stone (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr & Company, 1904), 11-12.

³¹² Biography: Childhood, <http://en.putin.kremlin.ru/bio/page-0>. Access Date 11/09/2020.

and all Soviet people, in general, who knew the atrocities of the World War II from their own experience or from experience of someone related to them. Patriotism is deeply imprinted in the minds of the Soviet people, ready to defend the interests of their country at the cost of their own lives. He praises Mother Russia. Loyalty to his own state is one of the “master beliefs” that guides Putin in making decisions. However, there is more to it. Some researchers outline the ideology of Russian exceptionalism in Putin’s policy, which consists in the belief in the mystique of the Russian soul and the special purpose of Russia in Eurasia.³¹³

From his childhood, Vladimir Putin was interested in sports, enthusiastically engaged in judo and achieved significant results in it. Sport develops such personal qualities and character traits as determination and discipline. Judo is a martial art, in which the use of the opponent’s strength is fundamental. These characteristics can be traced in the foreign policy decisions and actions of the President of Russia.

One of the most important part in everyone’s life is education that affects individual’s personality, as well as the way of absorbing information and responding to it. Vladimir Putin received a law degree, after which he started his career in the state security agencies, pursuing “a profession that required him to work quietly, deceptively, often under cover.”³¹⁴ Right before the dissolution of the Soviet Union, he served at the local intelligence office in Dresden, East Germany, which influenced his further position in Russian-German relations and the European Union as a whole. His career path was fast, as already in 1999 he became the Prime Minister of the Russian Government, and then the President.

All this has developed in him the qualities that make him today the President who holds power in his hands for 20 years in the largest country in the world with the second most powerful nuclear arsenal and large natural resources. His career path at the Committee for State Security (KGB) and the Federal Security Service (FSB), and his life experience in terms of Cold War made him more inclined to behave assertively in the international arena and pursue hawkish policies. Indeed, these years of his biography had a profound

³¹³ Fiona Hill and Clifford G. Gaddy, *Mr. Putin: Operative in the Kremlin* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2013), viii.

³¹⁴ Strobe Talbott, “Foreword,” in *Mr. Putin: Operative in the Kremlin*, Fiona Hill and Clifford G. Gaddy (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2013), ix.

effect in the shaping of his worldview. What is interesting here is Putin's experience that he lived during the civilian clashes with Stasi and local police serving as a KGB officer in Dresden. As Mary Elise Sarotte points out, "having witnessed protesters first get the better of local authorities and then distant rulers, he will do whatever he deems necessary to prevent the same scenario from repeating itself."³¹⁵ Drawing an analogy with the events in the Middle East, namely the Arab Spring, one can conclude that Putin was familiar with the fear felt by the heads of countries in which revolutions took place. He sided with Bashar al-Assad in Syria, trying to prevent the crowd from seizing power, as chaos and state weakness represent an existential threat in his mind.³¹⁶ The perceived threat of the spread of revolutions from the Middle East to Russia only strengthened his vision of the situation. The decision to use military force abroad, away from Russian borders may be explained by his belonging and the dominance within the political leadership of the so-called "silovikis" group.

There are numerous studies, devoted to Putin's personality, beliefs and worldviews, and their role in the Russian assertive foreign policy.³¹⁷ The scholars do not deny that the external environment is a determining factor in the Kremlin's behavior in the international arena. However, they emphasize the need and importance of taking into account the individual factor, that is, personal characteristics, values and ideas that guide the country's leader Vladimir Putin. Despite the fact that the formation of Putin's personality took place under communism, his belief system differs significantly from its foundations. At the beginning of his career, Putin was guided by neoliberal ideas, which, however, were eventually replaced by right-wing ideas. Like the whole Russian foreign policy, Vladimir Putin perceives the external stimuli through his cognitive filter of realism that is informed by his view of Russia's history.³¹⁸ Under Putin, the Orthodox Church received a new

³¹⁵ Mary Elise Sarotte, "Putin's View of Power Was Formed Watching East Germany Collapse," *Guardian*, October 1, 2014, 21.18 BST, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/oct/01/putin-power-east-germany-russia-kgb-dresden>. Access Date 16/10/2020.

³¹⁶ Stephen Benedict Dyson and Matthew J. Parent, "The Operational Code Approach to Profiling Political Leaders: Understanding Vladimir Putin," *Intelligence and National Security* 33, no. 1 (2018): 93, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02684527.2017.1313523>. Access Date 01/10/2020.

³¹⁷ See, for example, Hill and Gaddy, *Mr. Putin*; Allen C. Lynch, *Vladimir Putin and Russian Statecraft* (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2011); and Roxburgh, *The Strongman: Vladimir Putin*.

³¹⁸ Boris Barkanov, "How Putin's Domestic Audience Explains Russia's Behavior," *Washington Post*, March 14, 2014, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2014/03/13/how-putins-domestic-audience-explains-russias-behavior/>. Access Date 26/09/2020.

impetus, which he supports. Moreover, Putin bases his hopes for Russia's future on nostalgia for its pre-Soviet period. In this sense, searching for a Russian national idea, he is not just post-communist, but can be considered as a pre-communist, and even anti-communist.³¹⁹ Some authors characterize Putin's interaction with the outside world in terms of deep-seated fear and suspicion, which can also be seen as one of the "side effects" of his experience in security structures.³²⁰

The complex research of Putin's biographers Fiona Hill and Clifford Gaddy is of great importance from the point of view of tracing individual's prior experience and values, beliefs and images. They agree that Putin's beliefs can be easily retrieved from his political speeches, as he states directly his goals and policies.³²¹ Their analysis shows that Putin combines the plurality of identities. They associate these roles with how his worldview is formed, and, accordingly, the influence it has on decision-making and foreign policy in general. Thus, they highlighted a number of beliefs that help understand Putin's personality: the need for a strong state (Statist); Russian exceptionalism (History Man); the importance of strategic planning focused on zero-sum thinking and relying on his own means, using everything to achieve his goals if necessary (Survivalist); thinking outside the box (Outsider); the importance of economics in contemporary world politics (Free Marketeer); and preference for a delicate balance to war (Case Officer).³²² For example, the identity of Free Marketeer can be traced in Putin's personal participation in brokering an accord between Iran and Saudi Arabia in late 2016 that helped to reach a deal to cut oil production within the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), and then between OPEC as a whole and non-OPEC producers that was implemented making oil prices rose. This marked a great success for Russian energy diplomacy.

According to neoclassical realism, leader's "operational code" that is a range of fundamental beliefs about politics, strategies, one's own place in the political world and adversaries' images contributes to leader's processing of incoming information and leads him in decision-making process, which, in its turn, can influence national foreign policy responses. Additionally, as Alexander George stated that general beliefs about

³¹⁹ Hill and Gaddy, *Mr. Putin*, viii.

³²⁰ Roxburgh, *The Strongman: Vladimir Putin*, 121.

³²¹ Hill and Gaddy, *Mr. Putin*, 210.

³²² See Hill and Gaddy, *Mr. Putin*.

fundamental issues of history and central questions of politics “serve as a prism that influences the actor’s perceptions and diagnoses of the flow of political events,” that has, in its turn, an impact on “the actor’s choice of strategy and tactics, his structuring and weighing of alternative courses of action.”³²³ Researchers distinguish three components of the leader’s operational code: 1) philosophical beliefs about political world (conflict or cooperation); 2) instrumental beliefs about leader’s choice of strategy and tactics to achieve his/her interests (hostile or cooperative); 3) images of one’s enemy and oneself.³²⁴

Stephen Dyson and Matthew Parent carried out research on the operating code of Vladimir Putin based on the collection of his speeches and interviews on thirteen different foreign policy topics from his first day as acting President of Russia until the final day of 2016.³²⁵ Their study demonstrates that Putin has predominantly typical beliefs of contemporary mainstream leaders about international politics, but there are certain trigger topics that he is hostile and even violent about. These topics include terrorism and sources of disorder that lead to chaos. Both of these issues can be traced in the Middle Eastern affairs and the former usually results from the latter. The continued turmoil gives rise and fuels terrorism, which is a threat to both regional and global security, and, for Russia, the problem of terrorism is urgent. Putin’s response to terrorism is reflected in his immediate actions following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States. Moscow has undertaken an important strategic manoeuvre, offering its full support to Washington, hoping for close cooperation in the Middle East. However, Washington did not appreciate these intentions, seeing Russia as a power in consistent decline.³²⁶ After the terrorists exploded the plane with Russian tourists over Sinai, Vladimir Putin announced that the perpetrators would be found. At a meeting of the Security Council of Russia, he said, “We will search for them wherever they are hiding. We will find them anywhere in the world and punish them.”³²⁷

³²³ Alexander L. George, “The “Operational Code”: A Neglected Approach to the Study of Political Leaders and Decision-Making,” *International Studies Quarterly* 13, no. 2 (June 1969): 191, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3013944>. Access Date 01/10/2020.

³²⁴ Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory*, 64.

³²⁵ Dyson and Parent, “The Operational Code Approach,” 84-100.

³²⁶ Trenin, *What Is Russia Up To*, 38-39.

³²⁷ “Putin: my naydem vzorvavshikh A321 v lyuboy tochke planet i pokarayem” [Putin: we will find those who blew up the A321 anywhere in the world and punish them], *Vesti.Ru*, November 17, 2015, <https://www.vesti.ru/article/1737943>. Access Date 04/05/2021.

Content analysis applied to open source material about Putin's behavior shows his opportunistic rather than strategic approach towards international politics. His focus is on maintaining power and exercising control. He is an adherent of order, and the inability of maintaining it or any violation of order, that is, chaos, is a threat for him and his power.³²⁸ The scholars see Putin as a rational politician and pragmatic statesman defending Russian interests in the international arena and ensuring the preservation of his power within the state.³²⁹ However, there is another point of view which shows Putin as a rogue leader, considering politics to be a zero-sum game, where one side benefits at the expense of the other side's loss.³³⁰ Yet, the latter is not a conventional wisdom. Putting all together, one should not forget although Putin appears to be a pragmatic realist ready to cooperate in the case of sufficient common interests, the main goal of all his period in power have been a restoration of rightful place of Russia as a great power (global player) in the international system through the revision of a post-Cold War settlement which was resulted in the significant loss of control over huge territory and simultaneously expansion of Western spheres of influence.³³¹ As US Representative Mike Rogers described him in such manner, "He goes to bed at night thinking of Peter the Great and he wakes up thinking of Stalin,"³³² which reveals him as a man with a shrewd intellect, powerful leader, courageous person with ability to manage complex and volatile situations in order to consistently defend Russia's national interests and preserve his own particular considerations, but at the same time, this does not exempt him from possible errors due to incomplete or contradictory information or, conversely, excessive information overload, as well as the risk of detachment from reality due to many years in power and loss of connection with society and its pressing problems. Indeed, some researchers and journalists draw a parallel between the policies of Putin and Peter the Great, pointing to their common desire to raise the status of Russia to a great power, modernize the army

³²⁸ Dyson and Parent, "The Operational Code Approach," 84-100.

³²⁹ See, for example, Bruce Bueno de Mesquita et al., *The Logic of Political Survival* (Boston, MA: MIT Press, 2004).

³³⁰ Robert M. Gates, "Putin's Challenge to the West," *Wall Street Journal*, March 25, 2014, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702303725404579460183854574284>. Access Date 12/10/2020.

³³¹ Peter Baker, "3 Presidents and a Riddle Named Putin," *New York Times*, March 23, 2014, <https://nyti.ms/1ggn5I1>. Access Date 04/05/2021.

³³² Baker, "3 Presidents."

and strengthen the navy.³³³ Moreover, Vladimir Putin calls himself a modern Peter the Great.³³⁴

Thus, Putin's philosophical beliefs about political world fit into the framework of great power politics. An important role plays other actor's treatment and behavior towards him. In response, he mirrors the actions carried out by his opponents. Hereby, one of his fundamental or "master" beliefs is mutuality.³³⁵ The Western world, with its system of values, which it imposes on other states, including by military means, did not accept the Russian position on the existence of its own value features and their integration as a "norm," which set Putin antagonistically towards the Western worldview. Krastev describes Putin's opposition to Western rules as following, "He has refused to play by Western rules. [...] His foreign policy amounts to deep rejection of modern Western values and an attempt to draw a clear line between Russia's world and Europe's."³³⁶

Putin's instrumental beliefs about choice of strategy and tactics to achieve his interests follow from his political beliefs then. If his opponent shows hostile intentions and actions in relation to him, so would be his strategy and tactics. Otherwise, he pursues cooperative mode of relations. Scholars argue whether Putin is more prone to strategic or tactical thinking. John Mearsheimer believes that Putin is "a first-class strategist, who should be feared and respected by anybody challenging him on foreign policy."³³⁷ However, there

³³³ See, for example, Jamie Dettmer, "Is Putin Following in Steps of Peter the Great?," Europe, VOA, updated January 22, 2022, <https://www.voanews.com/a/putin-following-in-steps-of-peter-the-great-/6407149.html>. Access Date 30/11/2022; Maxwell C. McGrath-Horn, "What Putin Learned from Peter the Great," Crossroads Asia, *The Diplomat*, July 14, 2016, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/07/what-putin-learned-from-peter-the-great/>. Access Date 30/11/2022; and Lidiya Zubytska, "Putin as Peter: Russia's Reemergence as a Great Power," Events, *Wilson Center*, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/event/putin-peter-russias-reemergence-great-power>. Access Date 30/11/2022.

³³⁴ "Putin Calls Himself a Modern 'Peter the Great' amid Ukraine War," World News, *NDTV*, June 10, 2022, <https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/russia-president-vladimir-putin-calls-himself-a-modern-peter-the-great-amid-ukraine-war-3054277>. Access Date 30/11/2022.

³³⁵ Stephen Benedict Dyson, "Drawing Policy Implications from the Operational Code of a New Political Actor: Russian President Vladimir Putin," *Policy Sciences* 34 (2001): 343, <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1012627604580>. Access Date 19/01/2023.

³³⁶ Ivan Krastev, "Russian Revisionism: Putin's Plan for Overturning the European Order," *Foreign Affairs*, March 3, 2014, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2014-03-03/russian-revisionism>. Access Date 18/12/2022.

³³⁷ John J. Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault: The Liberal Delusions that Provoked Putin," *Foreign Affairs* 93, no. 5 (September/October 2014): 84, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24483306>. Access Date 16/10/2020.

is another point of view, where Putin is seen as an opportunist.³³⁸ As contemporary international system is characterized by its uncertainty, Putin recognizes a need to act with tactical flexibility.³³⁹ So, what is the nature of Russia's actions in the Middle East? Despite its strategic leap in the region, Russian limited presence and influence indicate its tactical nature. Especially, it can be seen comparing to American comprehensive influence with a strategic focus, although decreasing. In general, here one can also trace the lines of continuity in Russian foreign policy, which historically gave preference to expediency and pragmatism, overshadowing ideological considerations. From this, one can conclude that the Kremlin is not guided by its grand strategic considerations towards Middle East, rather than performing a series of tactical maneuvers.³⁴⁰ Russian political scientist Fyodor Lukyanov regards Putin as a good tactician with a vision, but without a strategy.³⁴¹ This makes him unpredictable in his actions, because it is virtually impossible to foresee his actions outside the specific circumstances and his perception of the environment.³⁴² However, Putin's strategic choices regarding the Middle East, made at the beginning of his presidency a decade ago, showed his foresight and strategic approach in the long term, in contrast to the opportunistic nature of short-term political responses. Consistently building relations in the Middle East, over the first decade of the 2000s, he was able to establish relations with almost all significant Middle Eastern actors, with the exception of Al-Qaeda, which wants to have relations only with its ideological adherents, and Russia under Putin categorically rejects terrorism. In general, Russia's "return" to the Middle East is broadly a product of Putin's foreign policy, referring to his tough response to the Libyan crisis in 2011, the launching of the military campaign in Syria in 2015, the

³³⁸ See, for example, Dyson and Parent, "The Operational Code Approach," 94; Tom Parfitt, "Interview with Gleb Pavlovsky," *New Left Review* 88 (July/August 2014): 55, <https://newleftreview.org/issues/II88/articles/gleb-pavlovsky-putin-s-world-outlook.pdf>. Access Date 16/10/2020; and Andrew Wilson, *Ukraine Crisis: What It Means for the West* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), 185.

³³⁹ Lo, *Going Legit*, 1.

³⁴⁰ Mark N. Katz, "Incessant Interest: Tsarist, Soviet and Putinist Mideast Strategies," *Middle East Policy* 27, no. 1 (Spring 2020): 141, <https://doi.org/10.1111/mepo.12480>. Access Date 02/01/2023.

³⁴¹ Wilson, *Ukraine Crisis*, 185.

³⁴² Dyson and Parent, "The Operational Code Approach," 95.

improvement of Russian-Iranian relations in the second decade of 2000s, and an open confrontational stance in the fighter jet crisis with Türkiye.³⁴³

The influence that Putin exerts on the shaping of Russia's foreign policy is undeniable. The very Putin's regime is characterized by authoritarian nature. He prefers to keep his eye on ball and control political developments. His policy choices at the domestic level stems not only from his desire to maximize his political power and promote his security, but are also a response to his perception of the external stimuli (threats) to his control.³⁴⁴ Nevertheless, one should not exaggerate his role, discounting such a factor as domestic political pressure. Despite the concentration of power and the personalized nature of foreign policy, it is worth taking into account the internecine struggle of the elites, elections and public opinion.

Certainly, without detracting from the role of the President of Russian Federation in shaping the foreign policy course, there are other key persons who make a significant contribution to the decision-making process, being in charge of making the foreign policy choices and, therefore, can be also determined as Russia's FPE. This includes the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sergei Lavrov, responsible for diplomacy and policy, and the Minister of Defence, Sergei Shoigu. Moreover, Russian FPE also include the Head of the Foreign Intelligence Service, Sergei Naryshkin, charged with national security and other federal ministers and head of agencies or committees that cover specific area related to particular questions (e.g., Minister of Energy, Nikolai Shulginov, General Director of Rosatom, Alexey Likhachev, etc.). However, given the ambiguous nature of Russian regime and the so-called "the statization of personal power", the President Vladimir Putin has obviously disproportionate influence over foreign policy decisions. If some researchers may disagree over inclusion of certain individuals in the category of Russia's FPE, then the presence of President Vladimir Putin in this capacity is beyond any doubt.

The role of certain individuals in the decision-making process, including foreign and domestic ones, can be traced based on the shifts in the political establishment (see Appendix 1). One of the features of the Russian political environment is the relative

³⁴³ Leonid Issaev, "Domestic Factors in Russia's Middle East Policy," in *Russian Foreign Policy towards the Middle East: New Trends, Old Traditions*, ed. Nikolay Kozhanov (London: Hurst & Company, 2022), 89.

³⁴⁴ Robert Person, "Balance of Threat: The Domestic Insecurity of Vladimir Putin," *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 8 (2017): 44, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.euras.2016.11.001>. Access Date 25/11/2022.

immutability of the political elite, which is in the permanent process of rotation. One may also notice that one person can hold the same position for years. More to the point, Russian FPE is quite homogenic in its ideational and ideological composition.

The most prominent role after the President in the foreign decision-making process, formulation and implementation of foreign policies belongs to the Minister of Foreign Affairs and Minister of Defence. Although the time frame considered in this research covers twenty years and the Russian government has witnessed eight cabinets of ministers during this time, there were just two Ministers of Foreign Affairs (Igor Ivanov and Sergei Lavrov), and four Ministers of Defence (Igor Sergeyev, Sergei Ivanov, Anatoliy Serdyukov, and Sergei Shoigu) (see Appendix 1).

All the above-mentioned Ministers are about the same age, that is, people of the same generation, born during the Cold War, growing up within the socialist system, facing its collapse and standing at the origins of the creation and development of a new state. Both Igor Ivanov and Sergei Lavrov were born in Moscow, the capital of Russia. Sergei Ivanov was born in Leningrad, as was Vladimir Putin. All of these factors left an imprint on their individuality.

Igor Ivanov served as a Minister of Foreign Affairs during the first years of Putin's presidency. His stance in relation to the Middle East was based on Russia's active participation in the regional affairs, which he saw as natural due to its geopolitical position and all the ensuing consequences of it. It was about Russia's interest in maintaining peace and stability in the region. Ivanov proposed an initiative of creating a zone of peace, security and cooperation in the Persian Gulf.³⁴⁵ In the new Mikhail Fradkov's second cabinet the post of the Minister of Foreign Affairs was given to Sergei Lavrov. Both Igor Ivanov and Sergei Lavrov are professional diplomats with appropriate educational background.

Sergei Lavrov is in office since 2004 and he is one of the longest serving Russian cabinet members, so more attention is paid to his personality.

³⁴⁵ Igor' Ivanov, *Novaya rossiyskaya diplomatiya. Desyat' let vneshnei politiki strany* [New Russian diplomacy. Ten years of the country's foreign policy] (Moscow: OLMA-PRESS, 2001): 166, 169.

Sergei Lavrov is reliable and loyal minister, and he is often criticized for the pursuing of Kremlin's politics rather than directing his own foreign policy line.³⁴⁶ Nevertheless, during his work in the United Nations as Russia's representative (1994-2004), he demonstrated much more independent stance from his government's directives in comparison with other delegates.³⁴⁷ From his speeches, one can understand that he is characterized by his devotion to Motherland, so he acts in the interests of Russia and for its benefit. He is the one who expresses and assertively defends Russia's position in the international arena, including Russia's military campaign in Syria and its role in the Libyan crisis.

To explain Sergei Lavrov's treatment towards outside world, particularly in relation to the Middle Eastern countries, and his understanding of it, his response to external stimuli is illustrative. In 2006, during the first Prophet Muhammad's cartoon controversy, Sergei Lavrov declared Russia's firm support of Spanish-Turkish initiative for an Alliance of Civilizations, calling to counter the "clash of civilizations" narrative. His other move was demonstrated in the series of articles, in which he advocated the formation of system based on a partnership of civilizations, maintaining an idea of equal participation in the elaboration of common values, denying messianic behavior that just bring harm in the international relations. He referred to the Syrian case, warning external players about the impact that foreign intervention could have in the process of imposing a new political system in Syria.³⁴⁸ Lavrov also described Russia's position on the "transforming diplomacy" of color revolutions as unacceptable, including pointing to its consequences on the example of state-building in Iraq, noting that accelerating this process is an irresponsible act.³⁴⁹ Describing the current situation in the region of the MENA, he stated

³⁴⁶ "Sergei Lavrov: The Inscrutable Face of Russian Diplomacy," *France 24*, January 21, 2020, <https://www.france24.com/en/20200121-sergei-lavrov-the-inscrutable-face-of-russian-diplomacy>. Access Date 22/11/2020.

³⁴⁷ "5 Reasons Why Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov Is Your Bro," *Sputnik*, updated January 23, 2016, <https://sputniknews.com/politics/201503211019834863/>. Access Date 22/11/2020.

³⁴⁸ Sergei Lavrov, "Russia in the 21st-Century World of Power," *Russia in Global Affairs* 10, no. 4 (October/December 2012), <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/russia-in-the-21st-century-world-of-power/>. Access Date 22/11/2020.

³⁴⁹ Sergei Lavrov, "Containing Russia: Back to the Future?," *Russia in Global Affairs* 5, no. 4 (October/December 2007), <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/containing-russia-back-to-the-future/>. Access Date 22/11/2020; Sergei Lavrov, "The Present and the Future of Global Politics," *Russia in Global Affairs* 5, no. 2 (April/June 2007), <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/the-present-and-the-future-of-global-politics/>. Access Date 22/11/2020; and Sergei Lavrov, "The Rise of Asia, and the Eastern Vector of Russia's Foreign Policy," *Russia in Global Affairs* 4, no. 3 (July/September 2006),

that it “is a direct consequence of the pernicious practices of geopolitical engineering, interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states and regime change for objectionable governments, sometimes by force.”³⁵⁰

As it was mentioned above, other strata of Russian FPE is a Minister of Defence. The first Minister of Defence during Vladimir Putin’s first presidential term was Marshall Igor Sergeyev, who actually continued his service from the time of former President Boris Yeltsin. Since the time of the collapse of the Soviet Union, he faced the difficult task of overcoming the decline of the Russian armed forces and adapting them to the new geopolitical situation in unfavorable conditions of internal disruption and lack of funding. He did not stay in this post for a long time under Vladimir Putin, and soon a new Minister of Defence, former KGB general Sergei Ivanov, known as one of Putin’s closest associates, was appointed in his place. Ivanov was not a random person. He is one of the representatives of Putin’s inner circle of confidants who participate in the decision-making process and have access to confidential information. Moreover, he was the one of those persons that appeared in the list of possible successors of Putin after his second presidential term. His main task as a new Minister was to develop and implement a new military doctrine, which was named “Ivanov Doctrine.” The modernized armed forces was to become one of the main elements and indicators of Russia’s power for its restoration to the status of a great power. In fact, he did not have significant success on this post, and was replaced later by Anatoly Serdyukov, which previously had no experience working with military, but coped with the required tasks. Meanwhile, Sergei Ivanov did not disappear from the Russian politics, continuing later his service as a Chief of Staff. Anatoly Serdyukov entered Putin’s inner circle in 2007. He was an effective Minister, which practically completed the military reform (the “New Look” reforms), but he was not favoured by the military. Moreover, he was involved in the corruption scandal and fired. Serduykov was replaced by the popular Sergei Shoigu, the former Minister of Civil Defence, Emergencies and Disaster Relief.

<https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/the-rise-of-asia-and-the-eastern-vector-of-russias-foreign-policy/>.

Access Date 22/11/2020.

³⁵⁰ “Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s Speech and Answers to Questions at the Meeting with Representatives of the Association of European Businesses (AEB), Moscow, October 25, 2016,” *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation*, October 25, 2016, https://www.mid.ru/en_GB/press_service/video/-/asset_publisher/i6t41cq3VWP6/content/id/2506106.

Access Date 27/11/2020.

3.2. Strategic Culture

The strategic culture of Russia is an important explanatory variable having an impact on the shaping of the country's foreign policy, since it is commonly believed that there is a particularly strong connection between Russian culture, mentality, and historical heritage with its strategic thinking and behavior.³⁵¹ It can help to find roots to the sometimes irrational behavior of a state that is not stemmed from its material capabilities. Russian strategic culture is a quiet steady variable with the features of continuity taking in consideration its prevailing threat perception and constant quest for great power status, which, in turn, stem from "political culture and psychology shaped by geography."³⁵² Meanwhile, it can also demonstrate some changes related to dramatic shocks, which can be seen in Russian post-Soviet era.

What does Russian strategic culture mean, and what makes it different from others? How does it influence the Russian foreign policy in the Middle East? Historically, as it was observed previously in the Chapter I, traditional Russian strategic culture has been characterized as one of the most martial and militarized. Despite its belligerent nature, Russia did not militarily invade the Arab countries of the Middle East. It must be borne in mind that, historically, this region has never been among strategic priorities in the Russian foreign policy. Traditionally, Russian interests were bound with three important centers – Türkiye, Iran and Israel – adjacent to Arab world.³⁵³ This position of the Middle East on the periphery of the foreign policy agenda of Russia is a product of its strategic culture. Russian elite worldview traditionally perceives the West as a top priority, as it appears to be a threat to its domestic political order.³⁵⁴ Therefore, Russia's involvement in the Middle East can be considered as a tool in its relations with the West.

Some changes in the Russian strategic culture happened with the breakup of the Soviet Union. Consequently, it lost its assertiveness and was significantly demilitarized shifting

³⁵¹ Julia Fetisova, *Cooperative Strategic Stability and Strategic Culture (Case of Russia)* (Moscow: PIR Center, n.d.), 1, <https://posse.gatech.edu/publications/6-fetisova-policy-memo-cooperative-strategic-stability-and-strategic-culture-case-russi>. Access Date 07/12/2020.

³⁵² Ermarth, *Russian Strategic Culture*, 3.

³⁵³ Andrey Kortunov, "Russia: The Power Broker in the Middle East?," *Russia in Global Affairs*, November 22, 2018, <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/analytics/russia-the-power-broker-in-the-middle-east/>. Access Date 09/06/2021.

³⁵⁴ Eugene Rumer and Richard Sokolsky, *Russia in the Mediterranean: Here to Stay* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2021), 1.

its focus to the economic sphere in the last decade of the twentieth century, but left open the possibility to restore its traditional nature,³⁵⁵ which can be clearly seen during the Putin era.

Talking about strategic culture as a concept, scholars distinguish two directions. The first direction involves the practice of achieving strategic goals through the use of military methods. The second direction comprises broader notion of strategic culture. Although military component plays significant role, Russian strategic culture is not just about military culture. Since neoclassical realism considers strategic culture as a collection of entrenched interconnected assumptions, beliefs, norms and worldviews that represent the shared expectations of a society, ultimately shaping the strategic vision of political leaders and elites, societal groups and the general public,³⁵⁶ Russian strategic culture can be viewed as a combination of political, foreign policy, economic and military culture, which have a mutual impact on each other.³⁵⁷ Strategic culture is closely bound with the leader's perceptions of systemic stimuli, as it forms and influence the parameters of cognitive perception of information, serving as a filter.

As noted previously, there are characteristic traits of Russian strategic thinking and behavior that have resulted in the following continuities in the Russian strategic culture: first, the awareness of its grandeur and the perception of itself as a great power, however, with some difficulties due to its geopolitical position (an open geographic landscape with unprotected long borders, subject to frequent foreign invasions); second, the active involvement and participation of the military establishment in the state's foreign policy; third, the lack of trust even in allies or partners, which perpetuates the principle of self-help as the only proven strategy for Russia's survival, and, as a consequence, the perception of a security environment as surrounded by enemies.³⁵⁸ Therefore, the concept of threat is perceived as the possibility of control of space by another power.³⁵⁹

Besides the features mentioned above, scholars also identify other cultural features in Russian behavior. One of them is a failure to meet previously voiced expectations. This was common for the Soviet period when Soviet military ideas had such a great scope that

³⁵⁵ Ermarth, *Russian Strategic Culture*, 3.

³⁵⁶ Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory*, 66-67.

³⁵⁷ Ermarth, *Russian Strategic Culture*, 3.

³⁵⁸ Fetisova, *Cooperative Strategic Stability*, 2.

³⁵⁹ Eitelhuber, "The Russian Bear," 10.

was not compatible with real material capabilities to realize them. An attendant trait is a tendency to show off, which betrays a desire to appear as someone who in fact the actor is not. All of this can be observed in the Syrian case. Although the Syrian conflict is not over and the military operations continue there, though to a lesser extent, Russia has already announced its victory and withdrawal of forces.³⁶⁰ Furthermore, the Russian campaign abroad, like any foreign military campaign for any state, is quite an expensive enterprise that requires a significant resource extraction. Russian officials compared the cost of the Syrian operation to the ongoing military exercises.³⁶¹

Despite all the pragmatism of Russian foreign policy, an important place is given to messianism, which is based on beliefs about the special role of Russia and its purpose in the world. Russia appears as a spiritual center entrusted with the mission of saving Christian civilization and the world. Throughout history, the attitude of politics to religion in Russia has been ambiguous. The Soviet period was marked by the least intrusion of religion into political discourse. On the contrary, the Putin era is characterized by a rather significant influence of the Russian Orthodox Church on both internal and external aspects of politics. The wave of uprisings in the Middle East coincided with the increasing role of religion and messianism in Russian ideology and politics. Thus, Russia's involvement in the Syrian conflict acquired a sacred meaning, supported by the idea of the need to protect the Christian faith, especially against the background of the Western inaction, and provided moral and psychological comfort to Russian leadership,³⁶² justifying its actions as a common good. This also contributed to the domestic support of Syrian campaign, which helped to easier mobilize required resources for its implementation. This cultural feature, then, represent a historical continuity primarily from time of Russian Empire.

Contemporary Russian strategic culture has been developed and changed according to the external and internal security environment and their shifts, the need to respond adequately to the modern threats and to achieve Moscow's strategic goals. These factors shape the

³⁶⁰ Dmitry (Dima) Adamsky, "Russian Campaign in Syria – Change and Continuity in Strategic Culture," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 43, no. 1 (2020): 6-7, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2019.1668273>. Access Date 11/12/2020.

³⁶¹ Trenin, *What Is Russia Up To*, 70.

³⁶² Adamsky, "Russian Campaign in Syria," 8-9.

nature of Russian conduct in the Middle East, having formed certain strategic approaches to the region.

First, the Russian leadership is guided by a systemic approach in its strategy. Any action in the Middle East arena is part of a global strategy that links global, regional and domestic levels together. Therefore, Russia's participation in the military conflict in Syria, as well as expanding and deepening ties with other regional actors is aimed not at destroying its rivals, but at weakening their positions within the international system through fragmentation, decomposition, systemic paralysis and neutralization.³⁶³

Secondly, Russian strategy is based on the integrated approach, which Dmitri Adamsky named as cross-domain coercion.³⁶⁴ It implies Moscow's skillful combination of military and non-military forms of influence in the conventional, nuclear and cyber spheres. Scholars distinguishes two periods in its evolution, which is related to the development of understanding of the changing nature of war. First period continued from 1991 until 2010, when the focus was mainly made on the nuclear weapons in deterring conventional aggression. The second period, which started from 2010 and continues until present, is characterized by the development of other tools of coercion along with the nuclear factor. It comprises non-nuclear and informational (cyber) component.³⁶⁵ In general, one can see a noticeable shift from nuclear deterrence to non-nuclear forceful deterrence, which involves the use of military, political, diplomatic, technical and economic means, as well as recognizing informational warfare as its main element, which was outlined in the Russia's 2014 Military Doctrine.³⁶⁶ However, this in no way diminishes the role of the nuclear factor in Russian politics. The Russian approach of cross-domain coercion, which combines hard and soft power tools, is globally in service, not limited by the Middle East region.

Thirdly, one of the new things in contrast to the traditional view of Russian strategic culture is its acting in the Middle East, including its engagement in conflicts, through

³⁶³ Adamsky, "Russian Campaign in Syria," 5.

³⁶⁴ Dmitry (Dima) Adamsky, "From Moscow with Coercion: Russian Deterrence Theory and Strategic Culture," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 41, nos. 1-2 (2018): 33, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2017.1347872>. Access Date 11/12/2020.

³⁶⁵ Adamsky, "From Moscow with Coercion," 33-34.

³⁶⁶ Adamsky, "From Moscow with Coercion," 44.

third parties, not directly, using a military strategy of hybrid wars, which is clearly demonstrated in Syria and Libya.

The latter feature is related with a new cultural aspect successfully applied in the Russian involvement in Syria. This was the first time in the history of modern diplomatic and military relations, when Russia has resorted to coalition-building and management, while traditional Russian strategic culture implies self-reliance and self-sufficiency in the military affairs.³⁶⁷

Thus, an understanding of strategic culture can help to explain some aspects of Russia's strategic behavior both in the Middle East and globally.

3.3. State-Society Relations

The relations between state and society represents an important intervening variable that allows, among others things, to judge the level of state's democracy, since the degree of society's ability to influence domestic, as well as foreign policy processes and decisions is directly proportional to the level of its democratic development. While some researchers stress an authoritarian turn in the state's governance in the Putin era, which is paradoxically supported by a large part of the population, confirming its stability and popularity,³⁶⁸ other scholars emphasize the existence of democracy and a market economy in Russia, which have their own characteristics that differ from the Western ones.³⁶⁹ In Russia itself, at the state level, the rhetoric about "Russia's special path," which differs from the Western pattern and its values, is ideologically supported. To reinforce the idea of Russia's identity and its peculiarities of development in society, a special term of "sovereign democracy" was introduced, coined by Vladislav Surkov, who served as Deputy Chief of Staff in the presidential administrations of both Putin and Medvedev from 2000 until 2011 (see Appendix 1).³⁷⁰ This concept involves the development of its own version of democracy and the prevention of the imposition of

³⁶⁷ Adamsky, "Russian Campaign in Syria," 12; and Trenin, *What Is Russia Up To*, 9.

³⁶⁸ Magnus Feldmann and Honorata Mazepus, "State-Society Relations and the Sources of Support for the Putin Regime: Bridging Political Culture and Social Contract Theory," *East European Politics* 34, no. 1 (2018): 57, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2017.1414697>. Access Date 13/12/2020.

³⁶⁹ Hosking, "The Political System."

³⁷⁰ Peter Pomerantsev, "The Hidden Author of Putinism: How Vladislav Surkov Invented the New Russia," *The Atlantic*, November 7, 2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/11/hidden-author-putinism-russia-vladislav-surkov/382489/>. Access Date 12/12/2022.

external values that are traditionally unacceptable in Russian society. Therefore, due to such a plurality of approaches, it is hard to adequately assess and provide accurate data on the extent of public support for the Putin regime as it could differ according to the position of a particular researcher. However, it is undeniable that the public support for the government and the president in particular has high ratings throughout Putin era.³⁷¹ Referring to the survey conducted two years after the launch of Russia's military operation in Syria by Pew Research Center, in 2017, the majority of Russians (59 percent) supported the president's foreign policy activities, pointing to the improvement of Russia's status in the international arena as a merit of Putin's policies.³⁷² For comparison, the highest point of support for his foreign policy during his entire tenure was 72 percent.³⁷³ However, evaluation of domestic processes found much less support. In addition, despite the positive assessments, in retrospect, before the operation in Syria, they were twice as high even against the backdrop of a number of his unpopular socio-economic decisions and the protracted economic crisis.³⁷⁴ Thus, the bulk of Putin's popularity in Russian society comes from his foreign policy.

The time of rise of Vladimir Putin to power was characterized by chaotic situation in Russia. The emergence of a young leader in the political arena with his past connection to the special services with a declared goal of restoring "rightful" place of Russia as a global power in the world made the society inspired for the upcoming establishment of order against the background of ongoing lawlessness. Therefore, Vladimir Putin gained significant popularity during his two first terms in office. He renewed national security, military and foreign policy concepts in order to shape a multidirectional, balanced, and pragmatic approach to Russia's external strategy. In his annual message to the Federal Assembly at the start of his second presidential term, he outlined the main task of Russian foreign policy, which meant serving the cause of the country's comprehensive

³⁷¹ See Timothy Frye et al., "Is Putin's Popularity Real?," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 33, no. 1 (2017): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2016.1144334>. Access Date 20/04/2021.

³⁷² Margaret Vice, "Russians Remain Confident in Putin's Global Leadership," *Pew Research Center*, June 20, 2017, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2017/06/20/russians-remain-confident-in-putins-global-leadership/>. Access Date 12/12/2022.

³⁷³ Issaev, "Domestic Factors," 88.

³⁷⁴ Vice, "Russians Remain Confident."

development and modernization.³⁷⁵ He managed to achieve significant success and results thanks to a favorable domestic environment, with the support of the public majority.

After a decade of devastation and uncertainty, Russia's rapid development and changes affecting ordinary citizens of the country, coupled with significant foreign investment in resource industries, doubled the effect of the fruitful work of the Russian leader. All of this satisfied both material and moral expectations of society. However, there is a catch in this. A side effect of equating the restoration of Russia's power with the undeniable leader's prestige is attempts to "verticalize" power, which constrain the initiatives of an independent society and the media.³⁷⁶ Yet, along with the changes in the economy, the consciousness of the people also developed, taking into account the access to foreign education, the penetration of new ideas, the demonstration of new opportunities, and access to various sources of information, which were the product of globalization. At the same time, the tendency towards a special position for Russia in the international system with an anti-Western connotation, which intensified after the Ukrainian crisis of 2014, was met with more restrictive environment and international pressure, expressed in increased sanctions against Russia, which affected domestic mechanisms, imposing constraints in various spheres of the state and society. Russia has increasingly begun to look to the East in order to diversify its foreign relations, searching for alternative partners and allies. Thus, the Middle East, which objectively is not a priority region in terms of Russian national interests, has gradually become a part of its foreign policy agenda.³⁷⁷

The political castling of Putin-Medvedev took place during the severe financial crisis of 2008. The political and economic metamorphoses taking place both on the domestic and international level eventually led to an increase in discontent among a part of the population, which, since 2011, has repeatedly organized mass political demonstrations, the main demands of which were fair elections and changes in the country. This time coincided with protests in the Middle East. Putin perceived the Arab Spring and the events that followed it in Syria as the machinations of the United States and the results of

³⁷⁵ Tatiana Zakartseva, "The Current Foreign Policy of Russia," in *Eager Eyes Fixed on Eurasia*, ed. Iwashita Akihiro (Sapporo: Slavic Research Center, Hokkaido University, 2007), 87-88.

³⁷⁶ Pekka Sutela, "The Economic Transition," (paper presented at "Russia in the International System" Conference, Airlie House, Warrenton, Virginia, 21-23 February 2001), https://fas.org/irp/nic/russia_conf.html. Access Date 05/05/2021.

³⁷⁷ Issaev, "Domestic Factors," 89.

Western soft power politics. He saw the connection of the implications of Arab Spring events with Russia's societal situation.³⁷⁸ This has led to the tightening of Russia's position in relation to them.³⁷⁹ Emphasizing the strength and stability of the Middle Eastern regimes prior to the Arab wave of uprisings, some experts expressed concerns about the possibility of a repeat of the Arab Spring scenario in Russia, as it became clear that there is a persistent risk of overestimating the stability and popularity of the authoritarian regime.³⁸⁰ However, given the cultural and mental characteristics of Russian society, events are developing in their own way. One of the features of the Russian political system is the concentration of loose and unstable coalitions usually around an individual, rather than a political party.³⁸¹ Although political parties exist and come up with their own programs, in fact, during the period under review, they quite organically act in the interests of the existing government, and do not represent a real opposition to it.

Prior to the protest movements of 2011-2013, researchers were of the opinion about the satisfactory state of Russian society, which did not pose an existential threat to the existing regime, not least because of its fragmentation and poor organization, which, in general, affects the level of response to initiatives of political leaders or resistance to them.³⁸² This does not mean that the society was completely politically passive until 2011. Rallies did happen, but their scope was limited to a specific geographic region or a specific contentious issue. Typically, the state has been adept at quelling such disagreements by preventing such protests from growing or spreading.

³⁷⁸ Hadar Glottman, "The Decision Calculus of Putin," in *How Do Leaders Make Decisions? Evidence from the East and West, Part B (Contributions to Conflict Management, Peace Economics and Development, Volume 28B)*, eds. Alex Mintz and Dmitry (Dima) Adamsky (Bingley: Emerald Publishing Limited, 2019), 10, <https://doi.org/10.1108/S1572-83232019000028B015>. Access Date 18/11/2021.

³⁷⁹ Salam Alsaadi, "Russia's Military Involvement in Syria: An Integrated Realist and Constructivist Approach," *International Journal of Law, Humanities & Social Science* 1, no. 5 (September 2017): 89, <https://www.ijlhss.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Russias-Military-Involvement-in-Syria-An-Integrated-Realist-and-Constructivist-Approach.pdf>. Access Date 18/11/2021.

³⁸⁰ Feldmann and Mazepus, "State-Society Relations," 57.

³⁸¹ Hosking, "The Political System."

³⁸² Vladimir Gel'man, "Cracks in the Wall: Challenges to Electoral Authoritarianism in Russia," *Problems of Post-Communism* 60, no. 2 (March-April 2013): 6, <https://doi.org/10.2753/PPC1075-8216600201>. Access Date 13/12/2020; Hosking, "The Political System."

However, 2011 turned out to be a turning point that revealed new forms of opposition and public protest, highlighting the instability of the Putin regime.³⁸³

One of the important elements in the puzzle of state-society relations is civil-military interaction,³⁸⁴ which, indeed, plays a significant role in Russian state. As it was noted previously, it is reflected in its strategic culture and the position that military elites occupy in the Russian decision-making process. The first thing that attracts attention is the existing government headed by President Putin, which is based on the Russian security services, armed forces and power ministries. From the very beginning of his presidency, he appointed former security officers to senior positions, both in Moscow and in central ministries, thereby effectively distributing his supporters to all the main levers of power in Russia.³⁸⁵ This became possible thanks to the activities of the first president of Russia, Boris Yeltsin, who, against the backdrop of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the internal chaos that followed, contributed to the assertion of such a role of the president, which in fact replaced the entire Communist Party of the Soviet Union.³⁸⁶ Some researchers even compare the position of the Russian president with the tsar.³⁸⁷ Vladimir Putin has repeatedly promoted new constitutional and legal provisions on the election or appointment of officials, their powers and, perhaps the most significant of the latest, an amendment to reset the two-term presidential limit to zero that give him the right to run for two more consecutive terms. Thus, formal rules seem ambiguous. On the one hand, Putin acts in accordance with the legal interpretation of the law; on the other hand, he subordinates the laws to his will, influencing their modification or the creation of new ones.

In this vein, returning to the civil-military interaction, especially in the last decade, military considerably increased its stance within the broader Russian strategic community, which is not least due to the appointment of the post of Minister of Defence

³⁸³ Ammon Cheskin and Luke March, "State-Society Relations in Contemporary Russia: New Forms of Political and Social Contention," *East European Politics* 31, no. 3 (2015): 261, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2015.1063487>. Access Date 13/12/2020.

³⁸⁴ Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory*, 73.

³⁸⁵ Pazzanese, "The Rise of Vladimir Putin."

³⁸⁶ William Partlett, "Separation of Powers without Checks and Balances: The Failure of Semi-Presidentialism and the Making of the Russian Constitutional System, 1991–1993," in *The Legal Dimension in Cold-War Interactions: Some Notes from the Field*, ed. Tatiana Borisova and William Simons (Boston: Martinus Nijhoff, 2012), 113.

³⁸⁷ Marten, "Informal Political Networks," 73.

by Sergei Shoigu (since November 6, 2012 (see Appendix 1), a close and reliable ally of President Putin. In addition to the personal factor, Russia's military successes in Crimea in 2014 and in Syria since the beginning of the military operation in 2015, which resulted in the survival of the Assad regime, have played a significant role. As Jason W. Davidson emphasizes, the extent of influence that the military wields and exerts within the ruling political coalition determines the fundamental orientation of the state towards maintaining the international status quo or challenging it, along with the main systemic indicators of relative power and position within the international system.³⁸⁸ It follows from this that the increased influence of the military elite in Russia contributes to its more assertive foreign policy. Indeed, the intrusion of the military into the sphere of foreign policy cannot but irritate professional diplomats, although the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation denied the possibility of any government part or group to seize some kind of monopoly in international relations, pointing to the leading role of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in foreign policy making.³⁸⁹ However, the activity of the Russian Minister of Defence Sergei Shoigu in foreign policy issues, manifested by holding high-level talks with the President of Syria, the Prime Minister of Israel, and the Emir of Qatar, demonstrates the opposite, given Russia's strict protocol, which implies the possibility of holding talks only with direct foreign counterparts. In this case, the problem of civilian control over the military (a contradiction between the principal and the agent) is clearly visible, since the strengthening of military has led to an increase in their influence on Russia's foreign policy strategy. Nevertheless, despite such domestic distribution of power, one should not forget the historical lessons of the reprisal of Marshall Tukhachevsky by Stalin in the 1930s and Marshall Zhukov by Khrushchev in the 1950s, whose excessively increased authority threatened political leadership.

3.4. Domestic Institutions

Neoclassical realists single out domestic political institutions as a separate intervening variable, thereby arguing that they influence the decision-making process and its implementation, thus affecting the policy responses of the state on international systemic

³⁸⁸ Jason W. Davidson, *Revisionist and Status Quo States* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

³⁸⁹ Andrew Osborn and Jack Stubbs, "Backed by Putin, Russian Military Pushes into Foreign Policy," *Aerospace & Defense, Reuters*, December 13, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/russia-politics-military-idUSL8N1O43TV>. Access Date 19/12/2022.

pressures. The degree and scope of influence varies according to the type of the political regime. In Russia, electoral institutions, being an instrument of power, play an informative role, providing leaders with information when appointing regional authorities, improving the ability to monitor results, or reducing the potential for conflict between elites.³⁹⁰ The central authorities uses electoral laws to shape local results, while the cabinet appointees enjoy relative power at times of policy uncertainty, being able to influence the decisions of the center due to their special expertise.³⁹¹

The 1993 Constitution of the Russian Federation determines who can contribute to the formation of Russia's foreign policy. It states that the main body in foreign policy decision-making is the President, who determines the main directions of foreign policy, represents Russia in international relations, conducts international negotiations, signs treaties, and appoints diplomats.³⁹² The role of the Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Defence and the Ministry of Economic Development is limited in initiating foreign policy responses. They amount to executive bodies of an advisory nature, providing leadership with expert information and recommendations on various issues.³⁹³ Since Putin came to power in the late 1990s, there has been an increasing tendency to subordinate the Russian parliament (the State Duma) to the executive branch. *United Russia* became the dominant political party, pushing other political parties to formal positions, effectively eliminating the possibility of opposition.³⁹⁴

When Vladimir Putin came to power as President of the Russian Federation for the first time in January 2000, significant changes in the structure of domestic policy followed. One of the first steps he took in order to centralize control was the elimination of quasi-independent actors in Russia's domestic and foreign policy, such as the oligarchs. In addition, there have been reshuffles of key figures in the Russian government. Putin replaced the Minister for Atomic Energy, Yevgeny Adamov, guilty of his penchant for

³⁹⁰ Ora John Reuter and Graeme B. Robertson, "Subnational Appointments in Authoritarian Regimes: Evidence from Russian Gubernatorial Appointments," *Journal of Politics* 74, no. 4 (October 2012): 1023–37.

³⁹¹ Vladimir Gel'man, "Subversive Institutions, Informal Governance, and Contemporary Russian Politics," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 45 (2012): 295-303; and Iulia Shevchenko, *The Central Government of Russia: From Gorbachev to Putin* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004).

³⁹² Russian Federation's Const. of 1993. art. 80 III, IV; art. 86 b, d.

³⁹³ Lo, *Russia and the New World Disorder*, 6.

³⁹⁴ Angela Borozna, *The Sources of Russian Foreign Policy Assertiveness* (Cham; Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 14.

making deals with Iran without proper Kremlin confirmation, with a more suitable figure in his eyes, Alexander Rumyantsev. A key figure in Gazprom, which has been already deeply involved in Middle Eastern policy, its director, Ram Vakhirev, was also replaced by Alexei Miller. The changes did not bypass the defense area either. Sergei Ivanov was appointed the new Minister of Defence, replacing Igor Sergeyev in this post (see Appendix 1). Furthermore, Putin has merged the main arms sales agencies into a single entity, Rosoboronexport, which allowed him to gain greater control over the lucrative sector of the economy. Unlike his predecessor, Boris Yeltsin, Putin's relationship with the Duma developed in a favorable way, providing him with a high level of autonomy to enact and implement its domestic and foreign policy.³⁹⁵ But even though Russian regime has a tendency to authoritarianism and the President is in fact able to act almost autonomously, this does not mean that he is not influenced by other factors or actors. According to neoclassical realism, domestic institutions in non-democratic states determine the extent of the leader's authority, reducing or expanding the limits of his/her powers, and the degree to which he takes into account the interests of major internal players, such as the military, the aristocracy, and the business elite.³⁹⁶ The weaker the autonomy of domestic political institutions, the more pronounced is leader's authority and his influence on the decision-making process. However, neoclassical realism emphasizes that in addition to the existing formal institutions that define the bureaucratic framework for foreign policy decision-making, there are less formal institutions, internal decision-making mechanisms and procedures, and domestic practices that are involved in the decision-making process, exerting an implicit influence on it.³⁹⁷ As some scholars point out, during the Putin era, a system of informal politics was particularly entrenched in Russia, characterized by the overwhelming predominance of personal patronage in all aspects of its political and business life, in which various factions retain their influence on foreign policy decision-making.³⁹⁸ In such a system, state power is concentrated not just in the hands of high-ranking officials within the state structure, but is also distributed among key state and state-controlled corporations, as well as conditionally private enterprises and businesses, that control profitable sectors of the economy. In this vein,

³⁹⁵ Robert O. Freedman, "Putin and the Middle East," *Demokratizatsiya* 10, no. 4 (Fall 2002): 509-510.

³⁹⁶ Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory*, 77.

³⁹⁷ Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory*, 77.

³⁹⁸ Borozna, *The Sources of Russian Foreign Policy Assertiveness*, 245; and Marten, "Informal Political Networks," 71.

Fiona Hill and Clifford Gaddy conclude that the political system Putin has built consists of a small number of trusted figures, the so called “inner circle”, who has real power to make decisions, “while Russia’s formal political institutions have to varying degrees been emasculated.”³⁹⁹ On a scale of the degree and scope of informal politics within the state, Kimberly Marten places Russia somewhere close to Saddam Hussein’s Iraq or Muammar Gaddafi’s Libya, compared to more institutionalized China under the Communist Party rule and even the most personalized informal European system of Italy.⁴⁰⁰

Vladimir Putin has consistently consolidated his power by eliminating the possibility of influence of various factions or interested parties on the foreign policy decision-making process and its implementation. In his first two presidential terms, he strengthened the role of the President by reducing the powers of Parliament. He expelled the liberal parties from the Duma, thereby strengthening the power of *United Russia* and limiting the “checking and balancing” role of the government in relation to the current authorities.⁴⁰¹

Putin skillfully used the balance of power policy within the state as well, balancing the remaining factions in the Duma and preventing them from gaining more influence. He was especially successful in this in the 2000s, when there were no dominant coalitions in the Duma. This position facilitated a course of foreign policy that corresponded to his worldview and values, his perception of threats and opportunities. Although at the beginning of his presidency, Putin favored the development of relations with the United States, considering them beneficial, this point of view was not supported by representatives of the military circles, a number of Duma deputies, and some foreign policy analysts.⁴⁰² External factors, as well as the internal fragmentation of ideas on foreign policy, prompted Putin to turn to the idea of multipolarity, which was inspired by Yevgeny Primakov. Then Putin turned his attention not only to the West, but also shifted his gaze to other regional centers, including the Middle East.

The system of government that was created under Vladimir Putin is informally divided into two groups, that is, “siloviki”, represented by members of Putin’s personal network

³⁹⁹ Hill and Gaddy, *Mr. Putin*, 5.

⁴⁰⁰ Marten, “Informal Political Networks,” 71-72.

⁴⁰¹ Sarah Whitmore, “Parliamentary Oversight in Putin’s Neopatrimonial State. Watchdogs or Show-Dogs?,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 62, no. 6 (2010): 246, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2010.489266>. Access Date 02/01/2023.

⁴⁰² Borozna, *The Sources of Russian Foreign Policy Assertiveness*, 246.

linked largely to KGB (later FSB) and other security forces, and “civiliki.” The leaders of both these groups are from the circle of people close to Putin. The “siloviki” under the leadership of a presidential aid Igor Sechin are represented respectively by the military elite, while “civiliki” under the leadership of Dmitry Medvedev, include economic modernizers.⁴⁰³ Both of these groups are in ideological conflict, including foreign policy issues, and seek to obtain great influence, resulting in their competition over policy, defined by Philip Hanson as Churchill’s “dogfight under a carpet,”⁴⁰⁴ which is balanced by both the President and their own efforts to prevent the opposing group from gaining more influence.

The Arab Spring coincided with a wave of protests in Russia in 2011, taking the then-President Medvedev administration by surprise and demonstrating its unpreparedness for such a course of events. The elite miscalculation and misperception about the role of social networks in the mobilization of protesters resulted in intrapolitical shifts. The leader of civilian operatives Vladislav Surkov was replaced by Vyacheslav Volodin. Such miscalculation and shortsightedness of “civiliki” strengthened the “siloviki” faction, which has acquired a solid basis after the end of 2011. However, this happened after Russia’s decisive response to NATO’s military intervention in Libya. Consequently, the foreign policy decisions were not influenced by the “siloviki” at that moment. Rather, the destabilization of the domestic situation in Russia, which threatened regime survival, contributed to the strengthening of the “siloviki” faction.⁴⁰⁵

⁴⁰³ Nikolas K. Gvozdev and Christopher Marsh, *Russian Foreign Policy: Interests, Vectors, and Sectors* (Thousand Oaks: CQ Press, 2014), 51-52.

⁴⁰⁴ Philip Hanson, “Networks, Cronies, and Business Plans: Business–State Relations in Russia,” in *Russia as a Network State: What Works in Russia When State Institutions Do Not?*, ed. Vadim Kononenko and Arkady Moshes (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 135.

⁴⁰⁵ Andrei Soldatov and Michael Rochlitz, “The Siloviki in Russian Politics,” in *The New Autocracy: Information, Politics, and Policy in Putin’s Russia*, ed. Daniel Treisman (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2018), 98.

CHAPTER 4: RUSSIAN FOREIGN POLICY IN THE IRANIAN NUCLEAR CRISIS

This chapter introduces the first empirical in-depth case study of the Russian foreign policy towards the Iranian nuclear crisis that is chosen as the unit of analysis in order to demonstrate the importance of both systemic and domestic factors that determine its nature, and, consequently, give a better understanding of the overall Russian stance in the Middle East. So, why is the Iranian nuclear crisis chosen among the existing cases? The fact is that the Iranian nuclear crisis is a prime example of “a proxy arena for competing visions about the functioning of international relations.”⁴⁰⁶ Russia’s role in the Iranian nuclear crisis is central though contradictory one. On the one hand, Moscow has political, economic and military relations with Tehran, and at one time protected Iran from sanctions in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). On the other hand, Russia joined international efforts to contain the Iranian further advancement of its nuclear program, when supported anti-Iran sanctions, which paved the way for the elaboration of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). As this controversial role has emerged against the backdrop of an increasingly active and assertive Russian foreign policy, this chapter aims to explore how this case relates to the more general characteristics of Russia’s foreign policy and its relations to the international system and domestic situation.

This chapter begins with a brief historical outline of Russian involvement in the Iranian nuclear issue in order to tackle the roots of the question under investigation and further understand the development of events. Further, this chapter examines the process of transformation of the Iranian nuclear issue from a peaceful program into a threat to the world community and Russia’s position in this regard. Based on the logic of the theory of neoclassical realism, this section considers the systemic conditions that influence the formation of Russian foreign policy on this issue and analyses the internal incentives. Then follows an observation of policy responses that affect both international outcomes and may have an impact on the structure of the international system itself in the long-term perspective. By linking the system level and the unit-level (domestic) variables, the study of particular components of the Iranian nuclear issue – the construction of the Bushehr

⁴⁰⁶ Pieper, *Hegemony and Resistance*, i.

nuclear power plant, anti-Iranian sanctions and the Iran nuclear deal – in different time periods demonstrates the importance of both the external and internal environment for analyzing Russian foreign policy towards Iran, as well as Middle East, and in a broader context towards the world as a whole.

4.1. Historical Context: Russia's Involvement in the Iranian Nuclear Issue

Iran is an important strategic partner of Russia, relations with which have a long history and are based mainly on mutual geopolitical interests. The Russian establishment perceives Iran as a significant but difficult Middle Eastern partner, having common interests and sharing positions on certain issues but being able to find strategic compromises where necessary. Russia's varied relations with Iran throughout history have left their mark on the Russian mind characterized by such opposing perceptions as "respect with apprehension" and "fascination with revulsion."⁴⁰⁷ Iran is a partner who is familiar with the language of power politics; it is a bulwark of anti-American power and influence both in the Middle East region and in the world as a whole. An important element of Russian relations with Iran is also its influence on the geopolitical situation in the South Caucasus (also known as Transcaucasia) and Central Asia, in the regions located on the southern outskirts of Russia. Ensuring the stability and security of these regions, preventing the spread of negative Western influence, is a key factor in ensuring Russia's security.⁴⁰⁸

Russia's involvement in the Iranian nuclear issue was not spontaneous. It was conditioned by a number of factors both on the part of the international system (independent variable) and the implementation of its national interests (intervening variable).

The issue of Iran's possession of nuclear technology goes back to the time of the reign of the Shah. At that time, the Western countries under the leadership of the United States helped the Shah's regime in Iran to develop a nuclear program and obtain nuclear technology. However, further events disrupted this process. In particular, as a result of the 1979 Islamic Revolution and its subsequent consequences, the United States stopped supporting Iran's nuclear program. Further interest in nuclear power was sparked by the

⁴⁰⁷ Dmitri Trenin and Alexey Malashenko, *Iran: A View from Moscow* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2010), 2.

⁴⁰⁸ Rodkiewicz, "Defying America. Russia's Policy," 1.

Iran-Iraq war, which coincided with a deterioration in relations with the United States. Then, the idea of obtaining nuclear weapons to ensure security in the hostile international and regional environment arose in Iranian security circles. Nuclear weapons were seen as a way of survival for Iranian early revolutionary political elite. Despite the fact that Islam does not accept nuclear weapons, the worldview of the Iranian political elite of that time was thoroughly imbued with the global confrontation of nuclear powers. Accordingly, the perception of the world presupposed survival through the possession of nuclear weapons. Regardless of the purpose of possessing nuclear technology – for peaceful purposes or for the production of nuclear weapons – Iran needed outside help to develop its own nuclear program. Tehran tried to seek support from Brazil and China, but these efforts were not successful. Thus, the most suitable partner for this at that time seemed to be Russia.⁴⁰⁹

The decision of Russia to provide assistance in the nuclear issue to Iran was dictated by the significant decline of its status in the international system, as well as a deterioration in its economic situation within the country. Russia needed funds to develop its economy, which was in a deplorable state in the 90s. As such, the economic sector was initial driver for Moscow's engagement in relations with Tehran.⁴¹⁰

The very beginning of Russia's involvement in the Iranian nuclear issue is associated with the Kremlin's decision taken back in the early 1990s to complete the construction of the Bushehr nuclear power plant. Russian-Iranian negotiations began after Iran's futile attempts to convince the German government to complete what Germany's Siemens had begun, as well as, as it was mentioned earlier, the refusal of Brazil and China to cooperate on this issue. However, the issue of cooperation between the two countries was ambiguous. On the one hand, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the unfavorable economic situation in the country pushed Russia to cooperate in a profitable industry. On the other hand, the country's orientation towards the West and increased attention to domestic problems outweighed the importance of international cooperation with the Middle East.

⁴⁰⁹ Bulent Aras and Fatih Ozbay, "Dances with Wolves: Russia, Iran and the Nuclear Issue," *Middle East Policy* 13, no. 4 (Winter 2006): 132, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-4967.2006.00275.x>. Access Date 02/06/2021.

⁴¹⁰ Helen Belopolsky, *Russia and the Challengers: Russian Alignment with China, Iran, and Iraq in the Unipolar Era* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 35.

In 1995, the Russian Minister of Atomic Energy, Viktor Mikhaylov, met with his Iranian counterpart, Reza Amrollahi, the head of the Iranian Atomic Energy Agency, which culminated in an agreement to complete the construction of the half-build Bushehr nuclear power plant by Russia under the supervision of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). Following the course of nuclear nonproliferation, Russia certainly did not intend to provide Iran with technologies that would help it produce nuclear weapons. It was assumed that Russia would supply the nuclear power plant with three light-water reactors with a capacity of 1,000 MW each, as well as invite 20-30 Iranian nuclear scientists to study at their higher educational institutions and provide technological and scientific assistance.⁴¹¹

Back in 1999, Vladimir Putin, as head of the FSB under Yeltsin, met several times with his Iranian colleagues. The essence of these meetings is not known for certain, but presumably it was about the escalating situation in Chechnya, where war soon broke out. However, the researchers link the initial security contacts with other areas of cooperation between Russia and Iran that could have taken place. As such, it is noted that the headquarters of the two main industrial enterprises (Power Machines (Silmash) OJSC and United Heavy Machinery (OMZ) involved in the construction of the Bushehr nuclear power plant are located in St. Petersburg, which is Putin's hometown. Although there is no evidence of Putin's connection to the predecessors of these enterprises (Leningrad Metal Works and Izhorskie Zavody enterprises) during his years in the government of St. Petersburg, it is pertinent to highlight that he used his professional skills to collect detailed financial information, tax and privatization reports of all local enterprises, which he, arguably, later used to put pressure on their management. This could explain Putin's rapprochement with the leading managers of these enterprises in the early years of his presidency.⁴¹²

In 2000, the year Vladimir Putin came to power as President, Alexey Mordashov, who is also included in the list of people close to Putin, joined the board of directors of Izhorskie Zavody enterprises (the predecessor of OMZ). Mordashov studied in St. Petersburg and worked as an assistant to Anatoly Chubais (the author and coordinator of the privatization program), through which he had the opportunity to create contacts with many people who

⁴¹¹ Aras and Ozbay, "Dances with Wolves," 133.

⁴¹² Marten, "Informal Political Networks," 78.

would later be close to the Kremlin. Back in the early 90s, he successfully invested in the metallurgical industry and gold mining, becoming the general director of Severstal steelworks. Thanks to his growing income, he was able to invest in OMZ, and in 2004 he was included in the Forbes world list. At the same year, he contributed to Putin's presidential election campaign. In 2007, his economic interests in Iran increased with the purchase of a 30 percent stake in Silmash.⁴¹³

The completion of the construction of the nuclear power plant was not an easy process, as it took more than 15 years. Initially, it was assumed that Russia would make the first deliveries of fuel for the commissioning of the first reactor block in 2003, but the facility (Bushehr-1) was completed only in 2011 and it was decided to be expanded with two more reactors, Bushehr-2 and Bushehr-3, by 2025 and 2027 respectively.⁴¹⁴ This delay was due to the ups and downs in Russian-Iranian relations. Iran accused Russia of being exposed to United States' pressure. Russia, in its turn, charged Iran with late payment. Another reason for Russia's delays was Iran's initial refusal to return spent nuclear fuel to Russia.⁴¹⁵

4.2. Iranian Nuclear Issue in the International Context

The systemic level plays an important role in the shaping of Russian foreign policy towards Iran. In order to understand better the strategic choices of Russia, its behavior and strategic interaction with Iran on the nuclear issue, as well as subsequent international outcomes, the first thing is to determine are the parameters the structural modifiers set for potential cooperation and interaction process itself.

From geographical point of view, Russia does not have a common land border with Iran. However, Iran is located on the southern outskirts of the Caspian Sea. This geostrategic position allows it to influence the regions directly adjacent to the borders of Russia: the Caspian Sea region, the Caucasus and Central Asia. The history of Russian-Iranian relations has witnessed centuries-old competition between both sides for control and influence over these strategically important territories that lie on the crossroads of goods

⁴¹³ Marten, "Informal Political Networks," 78.

⁴¹⁴ "Bushehr Nuclear Power Plant," *NS Energy*, n.d., <https://www.nsenergybusiness.com/projects/bushehr-nuclear-power-plant/>. Access Date 17/11/2022.

⁴¹⁵ Witold Rodkiewicz and Szymon Kardaś, "The Consequences for Russia of the Nuclear Deal with Iran," *OSW Commentary*, no. 177 (2015): 4.

and peoples. In view of the increased activity of Russia in the Middle East, mainly related to its involvement in the Syrian civil war, Iran's importance to Russia has also increased significantly in recent years. As such, against the backdrop of Russian expanding presence in the region, Russian-Iranian relations nonetheless generate pervasive uncertainty about the driving forces behind their alignment, adding complexity to an already mired region in a lack of clarity.⁴¹⁶

The basis of interaction between two countries is mainly determined by their opposition to the hegemonic aspirations of the United States and the limitation of its influence. This is based on a mutual worldview about the need to create a multipolar world, more just and inclusive, the concept of which was introduced as one of the main pillars of Russia's foreign policy by the Russian statesman Yevgeny Primakov. Iran considers this factor on a regional scale, while Russia challenges the hegemonic position of the United States and asserts its status as a great power on a global scale.⁴¹⁷ Both Russian and Iranian efforts to counter American assertiveness demonstrate their security culture of resisting hegemony.

In the 1990s and early 2000s, when Russia was economically drained and militarily weak, its only survival strategy as a threatened state was external balancing through the forging of alliances with other states, in particular through the development of closer cooperation with China and other major Eurasian states, one of which was Iran. This corresponds to the model of global multipolarity advocated by Moscow, differentiating states according to their importance and placing Russia in the first row of states, and Iran and other regional players in the second row, which are capable of influencing the situation in the Middle East.⁴¹⁸

On the one hand, Russia perceives Iran as a major regional actor, cooperating with which Moscow is able to balance against the United States and its European allies in the international system. On the other hand, recognizing Iran as an important regional player in the Middle East, the Russian political elite, particularly, the so-called Eurasianists,

⁴¹⁶ Ghoncheh Tazmini, "Russia and Iran: Strategic Partners or Provisional Counterweights?," in *Russian Foreign Policy towards the Middle East: New Trends, Old Traditions*, ed. Nikolay Kozhanov (London: Hurst & Co., 2022), 158.

⁴¹⁷ Rodkiewicz, "Defying America. Russia's Policy," 1.

⁴¹⁸ Emil Avdaliani, "Post-Soleimani, Russia's Role Will Grow in Iran's Geopolitical Thinking," *BESA Center Perspectives Paper*, no. 1481 (2020).

argued that in order to limit Western influence in the Middle East, Iran should become a stronghold of Russian influence in the region.⁴¹⁹ Hence, Russian-Iranian relations are largely a by-product of Russian-American relations, thus being a dependent variable of the larger rivalry between Moscow and Washington at the systemic level, which includes both geopolitical competition and ideological confrontation with Atlanticist standards in the international system regarding the establishment of norms, beliefs, and practices of the changing world order.⁴²⁰ Russia exploits its relations with Iran as a bargaining chip in the Middle Eastern geopolitical game to counterweight a balance with the United States and Europe. This was especially true in the 1990s and the first decade of 2000s. When Russian-American relations were characterized by tension, Russia moved closer to Iran. In the opposite case, Russia was tightening its policy towards Iran.

Iran's stance towards Russia is an important factor in Moscow's ability to exert influence and maneuverability in the Middle East. Therefore, it is extremely important for Russia to maintain Iran at least neutral.⁴²¹ While keeping Iran as an anti-American ally on its southern borders, Russia opposes United States' attempts to interfere in Iran's internal affairs in order to change the regime to one loyal to the West, and does its best to create such conditions, under which economic sanctions would have limited impact on Iran. Russia consistently pursue a policy of comprehensive political and diplomatic settlement of the Iranian nuclear crisis through dialogue taking in consideration nuclear non-proliferation terms. Recognizing Iran's role in the Middle East as a major regional actor, Russia acknowledge Iranian natural historical right to protect its interests in its sphere of influence. This position was expressed by Russian President Vladimir Putin, as well as repeatedly confirmed by Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergei Lavrov.⁴²² Iran's belligerence also benefits Russia by diverting American attention from other Russian spheres of influence in Eurasia. Without engaging in a direct military clash with the United States, Iran, nevertheless, is able to create tension by influencing the situation in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Yemen, the Persian Gulf and Afghanistan.⁴²³ It operates successfully through proxies against the United States, as can be seen from 1983 Beirut

⁴¹⁹ Avdaliani, "Post-Soleimani, Russia's Role."

⁴²⁰ Biswas and Chakraborty, "Russo-Iranian Relations," abstract, 180.

⁴²¹ Avdaliani, "Post-Soleimani, Russia's Role."

⁴²² Rodkiewicz, "Defying America. Russia's Policy," 1-2.

⁴²³ Avdaliani, "Post-Soleimani, Russia's Role."

bombings, the 1996 Khobar Towers bombings in Saudi Arabia, and its support for insurgents who attacked Americans in Iraq after 2003.⁴²⁴ Of great importance in Russia's relations with Iran is also its cooperation with other countries in the region, which are traditionally considered as Iranian regional opponents and, in some cases, even enemies, such as Israel and Saudi Arabia. On the one hand, both of these states have close ties with the United States, which makes Russia cautious about them. On the other hand, recently Russia's relations with Saudi Arabia have been on a positive trend, and Russia has "strong ties of friendship"⁴²⁵ with Israel due to the numerous immigrants with post-Soviet roots that count around 20 percent of Israel's population.⁴²⁶ These factors shape the configuration of the balance of power in the region.

To sum up, Iran is an important strategic partner of Russia in the Middle East that is functionally beneficial in such key points as: 1) maintaining the balance of power in the international system (on a global scale); 2) preventing the rise and strengthening of other regional powers and maintaining a balance in the regional subsystem (on a regional scale); 3) using Iran as a foothold for expanding Russia's influence in the Middle East; 4) containing Iran from accumulating more power and thereby decreasing Russia's power and, as a result, decreasing its security, which threatens its survival; 5) strengthening Russia's position in the Syrian conflict.

Thus, consideration of Russian-Iranian relations at the systemic and subsystemic levels demonstrates that Moscow views Iran in several ways: 1) as a proxy for achieving its goals in relations with the West, and above all with the United States; 2) as an intermediary in the implementation of plans of a regional scale, mainly related to Syria; 3) as the main regional power, recognizing its right to a privileged sphere of interests in the Middle East; and 4) as a potential competitor in the energy market. In order to ensure its own security and preserve the economic status quo, Russia is building constructive relations with its southern neighbor.⁴²⁷

⁴²⁴ David Albright et al., "After Withdrawal from the JCPOA: Strategies for the Trump Administration," *Middle East Policy* 25, no. 3 (2018): 13, <https://doi.org/10.1111/mepo.12359>. Access Date 17/11/2022.

⁴²⁵ Petr Topychkanov, "What Does Russia Really Want in Iran?," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, December 19, 2014, <https://carnegiemoscow.org/commentary/57571>. Access Date 27/10/2022.

⁴²⁶ Dmitri Trenin, *Russia's Policy in the Middle East: Prospects for Consensus and Conflict with the United States* (New York: The Century Foundation, 2010), 3.

⁴²⁷ Marten, "Informal Political Networks," 78.

The following paragraphs reveals the nature and basis of Russia's relations with Iran in different time periods analyzing systemic and domestic factors, its policy responses under the circumstances and the international outcomes they led to.

4.3. The Impact of Domestic Environment on the Russia's Foreign Policy Regarding Iranian Nuclear Issue

Even though Russia perceives Iran as a regional leader in the Middle East, capable of resisting the Western powers, Russia perceives itself as a global player, a self-proclaimed superpower (mainly due to its nuclear potential), which occupies an equal position with the United States and China in the international system, which accordingly elevates it above Iran.⁴²⁸

It is reasonable that some researchers associate Russian perception of the Iranian nuclear program with its desire to put an end to the policy of American unilateralism and coercion.⁴²⁹ Any improvement in the interaction of Iran and West is seen as a threat to Russian-Iranian cooperation. Russians fear to lose not only its position towards Iran but in a whole Middle East region, which would affect its global positioning as well. However, one cannot be limited only by the framework of rivalry between the United States and Russia at the systemic level. There are other objective factors too.

The perception of Iran in the above mentioned context is not static for Russian foreign policy, as changes in the dominant identity discourses among the Russian political elite make their own adjustments to Russia's behaviour towards Iran. A similar picture could be observed at the very beginning of the 2000s, when the Russian political elite was dominated by Atlanticist views of the world, which were fuelled at that time by Putin's loyal attitude towards the West. But after a few years of Putin's presidency, his view of the West changed dramatically, and he proclaimed a course towards multipolarity. The Russian political elite and academic circles were increasingly permeated by the ideas of Eurasianism, thanks to which Iran acquired special significance for Russia and Moscow's relations with Tehran received a new impetus.

⁴²⁸ Igor' Ivanov, "Iranskaya yadernaya programma: pozitsiya Rossii" [Iranian nuclear program: Russia's position], *RIAC*, September 21, 2012, <https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/comments/iranskaya-yadernaya-programma-pozitsiya-rossii/>. Access Date 03/09/2022; and Tazmini, "Russia and Iran," 162.

⁴²⁹ Biswas and Chakraborty, "Russo-Iranian Relations," 181.

It is clear that a nuclear-armed Iran would pose a threat to Russia's security. The principled position of Russia on the Iranian nuclear issue lies in its unacceptability of the development of nuclear weapons by Iran, which signed the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). In Russia's view, the world community should make every effort to keep Iran within the framework of the NPT and to control its nuclear program by the IAEA. A nuclear-armed Iran is geopolitically disadvantageous and dangerous to Russia. Vladimir Putin perceives a nuclear Iran as a threat to Russia primarily due to its geographical proximity in comparison with European countries or the United States.⁴³⁰ When in 2003 the Iranian leadership expressed a desire to launch space satellites with missile carriers in the framework of the Russian-Iranian cooperation in space technology, Russia rejected this possibility, since such projects may involve the risk of deploying nuclear weapons in space, which fundamentally contradicts Russia's interests. In addition, Iran's technological backwardness and weak security, linked, among other things, to its deep strategic cooperation with military and paramilitary groups in the region, jeopardizes the security of nuclear weapons and access to them, as well as the nuclear non-proliferation regime. Taken together, this can lead to disastrous consequences, jeopardizing the regional and global security. For Russia, this can also destabilize the situation in the southern regions of the country, namely in the North Caucasus.

In January 2006, expressing Russia's attitude on this issue Sergei Lavrov noted that,

"We recognize Iran's right to create its own nuclear cycle under the IAEA's control, but we cannot ignore factors such as the lack of economic sense and the absence of any real need for it. These are issues which continue to feed suspicions that this programme may have a secret military aspect...It is cheaper for Iran to buy fuel abroad than to spend money on the creation of its own fuel cycle, at least at this stage."⁴³¹

This position does not exclude, however, the development of Iran's civilian nuclear program. Russia is one of the key participants in the diplomatic process with Iran, along

⁴³⁰ Lily Galili, "Putin: Nuclear Iran Is Strategic Threat to Russia," *Haaretz*, October 11, 2007, <https://www.haaretz.com/amp/1.4984152>. Access Date 09/05/2021.

⁴³¹ Mark A. Smith, *Russian Perceptions on the Iranian Nuclear Issue* (Shrivenham: Defence Academy of the United Kingdom, 2007), 1.

with the other permanent members of the UNSC and Germany, aimed at ensuring the peaceful nature of the Iranian nuclear program.⁴³²

From the very beginning of Russia's engagement into Iranian issue, an important role was played by domestic institutions, which defined the framework of competition over policy among different divisions. Their pursued goals did not always coincide, which led to disagreements over the extent and level of cooperation between Russia and Iran. There are multiple interest groups that are directly interested in cooperation with Iran to one degree or another. These groups represent the interests of military sector (Ministry of Defence, State Corporation for Assistance to Development, Production and Export of Advanced Technology Industrial Product Rostec), nuclear power sector (State Atomic Energy Corporation Rosatom), energy sector (Ministry of Energy, Gazprom, Lukoil, and Transneft), and Russian aerospace industry.

In addition, as discussed in Chapter 3, the Russian Orthodox Church received a significant momentum during the Putin era, becoming both a lever of influence and an instrument Russian foreign policy. It would seem that there could be no religious component in Russian-Iranian relations; however, this tool is also used by both countries. Positioning itself as a conservative power, which has become especially noticeable since the second decade of the 2000s, the Russian Orthodox Church has established contacts with the Iran's Shi'a clerical establishment. In 2017, at the annual meeting of Orthodox and Islamic leaders, representatives of the two countries denounced the hegemony of secular values, which, according to them, should be abandoned by "adherents of traditional morality,"⁴³³ which corresponds to the worldview of both countries regarding the confrontation with the West. By lobbying the interests of Kremlin's foreign policy, the Russian Orthodox Church contributes to the spread and strengthening of the Kremlin's anti-Western rhetoric, thereby sympathizing with the opponents of the West in the Middle East.⁴³⁴

⁴³² Smith, *Russian Perceptions*, 1.

⁴³³ Russian Orthodox Church, Department for External Church Relations, "Communiqué of the 10th Meeting of Joint Russian-Iranian Commission for Orthodoxy-Islam Dialogue," September 28, 2016, <https://mospat.ru/en/2016/09/28/news136265/>. Access Date 31/12/2022.

⁴³⁴ Clément Therme, "Iran and Russia in the Middle East: Toward a Regional Alliance?," *The Middle East Journal* 72, no. 4 (Autumn 2018): 559, <https://doi.org/10.3751/72.4.11>. Access Date 31/12/2022.

At the public level in Russia as a whole, there is very little knowledge about Iran's foreign policy. First of all, this is due to the rather apolitical position of the Russian society. Today, in connection with the dramatic events in Ukraine and the imposition of sanctions against Russia, when society suffers from the constraints imposed within the international system, it becomes more active and involved. Nevertheless, the circle of its political interest is limited and rarely goes beyond the neighbouring states. Russian public is familiar with the nuclear issue of Iran and its confrontation with the United States, but there are no systemic manifestations in this regard. As for perception, Iran is still presented in Russian society as a pariah state with many restrictions inside, primarily with regard to human rights.⁴³⁵

In March 2007, several Russian media outlets criticized Kremlin's policy towards Iran. The journalists of *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* called it ambiguous, since Russia's position encouraged the Iranian leadership to resist Western pressure on the issue of creating nuclear weapons. The newspaper claimed that Iran possessing nuclear weapons does not meet Russia's interests. According to the publication, Moscow should have clearly stated its position of disagreement with the emergence of a new nuclear state near its borders.⁴³⁶ Another media, *Yezhednevnyy Zhurnal*, claimed that Moscow, in an effort to demonstrate its independent position from Washington, fell victim to Tehran's policy.⁴³⁷

4.4. Russia's Foreign Policy Behavior and Grand Strategic Adjustment

4.4.1. 2000-2006: From the Intensification until Vanishing Cooperation

In the early 2000s, the international tensions around Iran heated up, fueled by revelations about Iran's uranium enrichment efforts in 2003 and 2004. Despite this, Moscow continued technical cooperation with Tehran in the nuclear field and showed its diplomatic support. However, Russo-Iranian partnership faltered noticeably during this period.⁴³⁸ What caused such fluctuations in Russian foreign policy? What systemic

⁴³⁵ Yulia Sveshnikova, "Yulia Sveshnikova: 'I Would Not Call the Ties between Moscow and Riyadh Cordial, Neither Moscow's Relationship with Tehran'," *IRAS*, November 14, 2017, <http://www.iras.ir/en/doc/interview/3416/yulia-sveshnikova-i-would-not-call-the-ties-between-moscow-and-riyadh-cordial-neither-moscow-s-relationship-with-tehran>. Access Date 13/11/2022.

⁴³⁶ Editorial, *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, March 15, 2007.

⁴³⁷ Aleksandr Gol'ts, "Izviv suverennosti" [Convolution of sovereignty], *Yezhednevnyy zhurnal*, April 10, 2007, <http://www.ej.ru/?a=note&id=6659>. Access Date 09/05/2021.

⁴³⁸ Eric D. Moore, *Russia-Iran Relations since the End of the Cold War* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), 29.

imperatives and domestic factors determined its behavior in the international arena during this period?

As discussed in previous chapters, with the rise to power of Vladimir Putin, Russian foreign policy towards Middle East received a new impetus. As for Iran itself, by the time Putin came to power, Russian-Iranian relations were already quite strong, and at that moment Iran was Moscow's closest ally in the Middle East. At the same time, the Clinton administration actively tried to improve relations with Iran by lifting some of the sanctions in 1999 and 2000, which apparently caused Moscow concern along with the overwhelming majority of reformers coming to power as a result of Iran's Majlis (parliamentary) elections, which, however, did not happen due to pressure from the conservatives. Fearing to lose Iran as a Russian ally, back in October 2000, shortly before the US presidential elections, Putin signaled his intention to strengthen cooperation with Iran by publicly unilaterally canceling the 1995 Gore-Chernomyrdin Pact, which was aimed at ending Russian military sales to Iran.⁴³⁹ This was followed by the signing of an agreement on October 2, 2001, on the sale of conventional arms to Iran in the amount of up to \$300 million a year.⁴⁴⁰ Potentially, these foreign policy decisions could contribute to such negative international outcomes as US sanctions against Russia that could affect their space cooperation or limit US investments in Russia, or US influence on the IMF to block the possibility of restructuring Russian debts.⁴⁴¹ Although this did not happen, the outcome of Putin's decisions to improve relations with Iran was the deterioration of Russian-American relations.

Russian-Iranian cooperation was built on a mutually beneficial basis. Thus, Russia needed to accumulate resources for the state's domestic development, while Iran needed to restore its conventional armed forces, which were exhausted during the war with Iraq. Already at the beginning of the Putin era, Moscow and Tehran agreed on the inadequacy of the United States position on the formation of a unipolar world. Both countries shared a common vision of a multipolar world order. Weakened from within, these countries perceived the unipolarity of the international system led by the United States, capable of

⁴³⁹ Borshchevskaya, "Russia's Strategic Objectives."

⁴⁴⁰ Sharon LaFraniere, "Russia, Iran Reach Deal on Conventional Arms Sale," *Washington Post*, October 3, 2001, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/2001/10/03/russia-iran-reach-deal-on-conventional-arms-sale/79818a68-8d96-4f7b-b1d1-75c0b83fbd7a/>. Access Date 11/02/2022.

⁴⁴¹ Freedman, "Putin and the Middle East," 511.

penetrating the region, as a threat, which pushed them towards balancing. At the regional level, the Taliban-ruled Afghanistan posed an immediate security threat to both countries, further highlighting the need to act together.

The beginning of the Iranian nuclear crisis almost coincided with the time of the change of power in Russia. Thus, on the one hand, Putin faced a new challenge in the international arena, which has prominently become one of the main contemporary issues. On the other hand, the Russian domestic situation has created several knots of tension in Russian-Iranian relations. One such challenge was the Chechen war initiated by Putin, which resulted in the death of numerous Muslims inhabiting this region. Following the logic, Russia, fearing for the survival of its state and being under the threat of Islamist radicalism, should have allied with the United States against Iran, which would have been an opportunity to establish closer relations with the West. However, Russia did not go for rapprochement with the United States, continuing to maintain cooperation with Iran. Preventing the threat from Iran in supporting Russian Muslims, Moscow agrees to supply Iran with nuclear reactors and cooperate in the field of regional security. Iran, in its turn, being at that time the chairman of the Islamic Conference, decided not to confront Russia and reacted very modestly simply by condemning its actions in Chechnya. Eventually, Iranian state interests prevailed over Islamic rhetoric, and Tehran recognized this problem as an internal affair of Russia.⁴⁴²

Russian-Iranian cooperation has been growing rapidly. In February 2002, the parties concluded an agreement according to which Russia was to provide nuclear fuel to Iran and take back the used fuel to Russia. Later that year, Russia and Iran agreed on a ten-year plan for cooperation in the nuclear field, which supposed the construction of six nuclear reactors. Therefore, the beginning of the crisis with the Iranian nuclear program, associated with the disclosure of information in August 2002 by an Iranian opposition group in exile about the existence of nuclear facilities in Iran that were not subject to International Atomic Energy Agency control, shocked the international community and was a serious blow to Moscow, both economically and politically. In doing so, Iran had violated its obligations under the Non-Proliferation Treaty, which it joined in 1968.⁴⁴³ By

⁴⁴² Freedman, "Putin and the Middle East," 510-511.

⁴⁴³ Moritz Alexander Pieper, "Perspectives on the Iranian Nuclear Programme: Analysing Chinese, Russian, and Turkish Foreign Policies" (PhD diss., University of Kent, 2015), ProQuest (AAT 10178237).

that time, Russia was already in long-term relations with Iran, being the main supplier of civilian nuclear technologies and conventional weapons, which put it in a special position. On the one hand, the United States has criticized Russia, accusing it of transferring nuclear technology and selling weapons to Iran, as well as assigning it partial responsibility for the development of the missile program, and, on the other hand, Russia has become a link with the Iranian leadership in international efforts to resolve the nuclear crisis. As for American criticism, Russia has been rejecting all US accusations, referring to the inability of the nuclear technologies and weapons exported to Iran due to their qualitative and quantitative limits to upset the balance of power in the region.⁴⁴⁴ Thus, Russia has taken an important place in the negotiation process with Iran on the nuclear issue.

This position provided Moscow with both economic and political opportunities. Embraced by the idea of restoring the status of a great power, the Russian leadership saw advantages in undertaking efforts to defuse the international crisis related to the Iranian nuclear program. Russia consistently supported Iran, emphasizing the strategic nature of the relationship between the two countries and rejecting the American vision of Iran as a rogue state and a sponsor of international terrorism. Moscow has also rejected the idea that Tehran is seeking nuclear status. In 2005, after negotiations with the Iranian side, Putin assured that the steps taken by Tehran showed that it had no plans to develop nuclear weapons, thereby convincing Moscow to continue cooperation in all areas, including nuclear energy. Later that same year, after negotiations, the parties agreed to a deal for the supply of 30 Tor M1 surface-to-air missile systems worth approximately US\$700 million.⁴⁴⁵

While the United States proposed to bring the “Iranian nuclear issue” to the UN Security Council for the possibility of imposing sanctions, Russia, along with China, rejected this idea, insisting on continuing the dialogue. Russia also took other step in this direction, proposing the creation of a joint Russian-Iranian enterprise that would enrich uranium in Russia for further use at the Iranian nuclear power plant in Bushehr, which was largely supported by all five permanent members of the UN Security Council. Making every effort, Russia was guided by its desire to eliminate the possibility of a nuclear-armed Iran

⁴⁴⁴ Adomeit, “Russia’s Iran Policy,” 2.

⁴⁴⁵ Adomeit, “Russia’s Iran Policy,” 1, 3.

on its southern borders and nuclear proliferation in the Middle East in general, to promote itself as a peace broker in the international arena in search of achieving the status as an influential player, and to secure its economic interests in Iran.⁴⁴⁶

However, in 2006, the threat level of the Iranian nuclear program increased. Ultimately, the Iranian nuclear dossier was referred to the UN Security Council, which resulted in the formation of a negotiating format that includes the five permanent UN Security Council members and Germany (P5+1). This year was also a turning point in Russia's position towards a nuclear Iran. Having hitherto supported Iran and rejected sanctions measures against it in every possible way, Russia radically changed its policy by joining UNSC Resolution 1696, the essence of which was the need to suspend all nuclear enrichment and plutonium processing activities in Iran by August 2006 and threatened with further UNSC measures in case of non-compliance.⁴⁴⁷ Though, from the very beginning, the difference in the positions of the participating sides to the Iranian nuclear program became obvious. Moscow and Beijing continued to join their forces to counter the position of Western countries.

4.4.2. 2007-2011: State of Decline

In response to Washington's intention to deploy new defense missile systems in Eastern Europe and NATO's support to Georgia and Ukraine on the issue of their membership in the organization, Russia pushed towards rapprochement with Iran in 2006-2009.⁴⁴⁸ Thus, such systemic incentives as the deployment of weapons in close proximity to the borders of Russia and intrusion into its traditional sphere of interests (independent variables) influenced its foreign policy, leading to a rapprochement with Iran (dependent variable).

Putin's rejection of American hegemony and the downplaying of Russia's role once again reflected his vision of the need to create a world order that is fair in his opinion and to provide equal conditions to all states in the international arena. Regarding Iran, this is mentioned in the Russia's Foreign Policy Concept of 2008, stating that "Russia will fully

⁴⁴⁶ Lionel Beehner, "Russia's Nuclear Deal with Iran," *Council on Foreign Relations*, February 28, 2006, <https://www.cfr.org/background/russias-nuclear-deal-iran>. Access Date 26/12/2022.

⁴⁴⁷ UN Security Council, Resolution 1696, Non-Proliferation, S/RES/1696 (July 31, 2006), [https://www.undocs.org/S/RES/1696%20\(2006\)](https://www.undocs.org/S/RES/1696%20(2006)). Access Date 15/02/2022.

⁴⁴⁸ Biswas and Chakraborty, "Russo-Iranian Relations," 186.

contribute to finding political and diplomatic ways of solving the situation regarding the nuclear programme of the Islamic Republic of Iran based on the recognition of the right of all State Parties to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty to the peaceful use of nuclear energy [...].”⁴⁴⁹

However, with the coming to power in the United States of Barack Obama and the launch of the reset of Russian-American relations, relations with Iran gradually became more complicated.⁴⁵⁰ As soon as the Obama administration abandoned the idea of deploying a defense missile system in Eastern Europe and agreed to sign a new Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) providing Russia with strategic parity with the United States, Russia supported the imposition of the UN Security Council sanctions on Iran in 2010, which resulted in the cancellation of supplies of the already partially paid S-300 air defence system.⁴⁵¹

4.4.3. 2012-Nowadays: Signs of Recovery and Solidarity

The changing geopolitical environment caused by a number of system-level events, such as the annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014 and the subsequent sanctions and the deep crisis in relations with the West and, in particular, with the United States, the diversification of Russia’s ties with an orientation to the East, as well as the strengthening of Russia’s position in the Middle East due to diplomatic and military successes in Syria, influenced Moscow’s approach to relations with Iran. Since Vladimir Putin took office again in 2012, he has actively begun to restore relations with the Middle Eastern countries after a period of decline in their relations under Dmitry Medvedev’s presidency.

The crisis in relations between Russia and the West, caused by the geopolitical shifts of 2014 related to the events in Ukraine, certainly affected Russia’s relations with Iran. If earlier Russia largely used Iran as a trump card in relations with the West, and in particular with the United States, then under the pressure of systemic stimuli, namely Western sanctions imposed on it, some shifts have appeared in Russia’s grand strategy, signaling a rapprochement with Iran based on the defending of its national interests. In search of allies for its further survival, Moscow chose a strategy of rapprochement and

⁴⁴⁹ The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, January 12, 2008, <http://en.kremlin.ru/supplement/4116>. Access Date 23/12/2018.

⁴⁵⁰ Biswas and Chakraborty, “Russo-Iranian Relations,” 186-87.

⁴⁵¹ Rodkiewicz, “Defying America. Russia’s Policy,” 2.

strengthening of relations with Tehran in various areas (nuclear energy, military technology, trade, transportation, and space exploration), putting forward initiatives for cooperation in both bilateral and multilateral formats. Thus, on November 11, 2014, the parties signed a Protocol to the Intergovernmental Agreement of 1992, which expanded bilateral cooperation in the peaceful use of nuclear energy. According to the Protocol, it was supposed to cooperate in the construction of eight nuclear power plants operating with water water energy reactors (WWERs), as well as the building of the second stage of the Bushehr nuclear power plant.⁴⁵²

At the same time, the West resumed dialogue with Iran on postponing progress in developing Iran's military nuclear capability, which ended first with the signing of an interim agreement in November 2013, and ultimately led to the multilateral nuclear agreement with Iran, the so called Iran nuclear deal. Hence, on July 14, 2015 the five permanent members of the UNSC (China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States) plus Germany and the European Union signed an agreement, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, with Iran. According to this deal, Iran agreed to the restriction of its nuclear program and allowed international control for 15 years, subject to the gradual lifting of international sanctions imposed on it, including unilateral ones by the United States and the EU.⁴⁵³ Russia played a prominent role in the preparation of the Lausanne framework agreement, announced in April 2015, and then the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action of July 2015. Meanwhile, the latest attempts by the Russian side to achieve greater concessions on the lifting of international sanctions against Iran than was stated in the JCPOA were abandoned.

Russia perceived the conclusion of this agreement as a threat to its position both in Iran and in the Middle East as a whole due to Iran's possible rapprochement with the West. In Russian elite's perception a pro-Western Iran represent a greater external threat than a nuclear Iran.⁴⁵⁴ Another systemic factor that interplayed in Russian-Iranian relations was Obama's persistent incentive to seek a nuclear agreement with Iran and his personal

⁴⁵² Topychkanov, "What Does Russia Really Want."

⁴⁵³ Rodkiewicz and Kardaś, "The Consequences for Russia," 1.

⁴⁵⁴ Referring to Rajab Safarov, a former member of the Russian Federation Presidential Political Council and head of the Iran Commission at the Moscow Chamber of Commerce and Industry. See, Javad Heiran-Nia, "Iran Won't Break with Russia over Ukraine. Here's Why," *Atlantic Council*, March 20, 2022, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/iran-wont-break-with-russia-over-ukraine-heres-why/>. Access Date 01/11/2022.

attitude towards Middle East that threatened Russia's stance. Moreover, Hassan Rouhani's reformist presidency tended to improve Iran's relations with the West, which would also undermine its relations with Russia. An illustrative example is that just a few years after the conclusion of the nuclear deal, in 2017, Iran announced that the concluded economic contracts amounted to 86 billion dollars, most of which accounted for European companies, while the share of Russian contracts was less than 2 percent (1,4 billion dollars). Thus, Russia, which made efforts to conclude a nuclear deal and carried out preparatory work to seize the economic market of Iran after the lifting of sanctions, actually found itself on its sidelines, which, accordingly, caused Moscow's discontent. As expressed by Russia's ambassador to Iran,

"The Iranians prefer to buy Boeing, Airbus or ATR. We really helped in lifting the sanctions and expected Iran to buy from countries that helped with the lifting of sanctions, not the countries that imposed the sanctions. I'm surprised that you say we will not forget the sanctions period, but at the same time buy Boeing and Airbus planes. Where are the Russian planes?"⁴⁵⁵

This explains the statements of former Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif in March 2021 that Russia's role in negotiations on the Iranian nuclear program was destructive, trying to prevent the conclusion of an agreement. He noted that,

"The Russians have been trying to prevent the nuclear deal (JCPOA) since 2015 and [Foreign Minister] Sergei Lavrov wanted to disrupt everything on the night of the agreement. After the JCPOA, when Lavrov returned to Russia, he was attacked by the Russian media. Why did you allow this agreement to be reached and Iran to get closer to the West?"⁴⁵⁶

Despite the fact that the implementation of this agreement may have negative consequences for Russia in the long term, the failure of diplomatic efforts in this direction and the refusal to participate in it would contribute to destructive consequences for Russian foreign policy, opening up opportunities for Western-led military action against Iran that could undermine regional security and threaten its national security (since the US military presence in Iran would give them direct access to the Caspian sea), and also

⁴⁵⁵ Mousavi and Naeni, "Iran and Russia Pivot," 113.

⁴⁵⁶ Heiran-Nia, "Iran Won't Break."

contradict Russia's interests in the region. Washington acknowledged Moscow's role, which refrained from vetoing UN sanctions, in negotiating a deal to limit Iran's nuclear program. Without Russia's support, this deal would not have taken place.⁴⁵⁷ Positioning itself as a global player, Russia seeks to strengthen its stance in the international system, acting as a reliable and responsible partner. The improving of perception of Russia can bring benefits for its relations both regionally and globally. The Russian strategy is aimed at maintaining a manageable crisis, which, on the one hand, would not hinder the development of trade and technical relations with Iran, and, on the other hand, would not allow an improvement in Iran's relations with the West.⁴⁵⁸ Thus, those factors have an impact on the strategic interaction between both Russia and Iran, and between Russia and the United States, as well as their external behaviors.

The threat of Iran-US rapprochement became more imminent at this period and endangered Russia's influence in the Middle East making its strategic environment more restrictive. The positive development of US-Iranian relations affected the balance of power in the region. First of all, it was perceived by Moscow as a rejection of its initiatives. This perception had a corresponding impact on the decision-making process, which ultimately pushed Russia closer to the Sunni countries of the Middle East, which were also concerned about the emerging thaw in relations between Iran and the United States.⁴⁵⁹

Meanwhile, some experts feared that the escalation of tension between Russia and the West over the Ukrainian crisis could undermine the negotiation process on Iran's nuclear program. Although Russia has voiced its unwillingness to take advantage of the Iranian nuclear crisis "as an element of the game of raising the stakes," it still did not completely rule out such a possibility, threatening retaliatory measures if necessary.⁴⁶⁰

A new round of aggravation of the Iranian nuclear crisis occurred in 2018, under the Trump administration, due to the United States' withdrawal from the JCPOA and the

⁴⁵⁷ Jonas Bernstein, "Russia's Stake in Iran Nuclear Deal," *Voice of America*, July 18, 2015, <https://www.voanews.com/a/russias-stake-in-iran-nuclear-deal/2867710.html>. Access Date 10/10/2022.

⁴⁵⁸ Heiran-Nia, "Iran Won't Break."

⁴⁵⁹ Zvi Magen, "Russia in the Middle East: The Drive to Enhance Influence," in *Strategic Survey for Israel 2013-2014*, eds. Shlomo Brom and Anat Kurz (Tel Aviv: Institute for National Security Studies, 2014), 101.

⁴⁶⁰ Michael Crowley, "Obama Officials: Putin Won't Sabotage Iran Nuclear Talks over Crimea," *World, Time*, March 20, 2014, <https://time.com/31205/russia-iran-nuclear-talks-crimea/>. Access Date 01/09/2022.

reimposition of sanctions. The situation had radically changed pushing aside the threat of a thaw US-Iranian relations and thereby providing a permissive strategic environment for Russia. Since then, Russia has taken a key position in preserving the agreements with the other participants, and has actively taken part in the resumption of economic ties between the Western European parties in the agreement with Iran, despite the American position and sanctions. Moreover, Moscow announced a fifty billion dollars commitment of direct investment in the Iranian oil and gas sector, which opens up opportunities for Russia to benefit from Iran's future access to world markets.⁴⁶¹ From another side, Russia seems as one of the winners of such American moves towards Iran, since the implementation of JCPOA means an emergence of strong competitor to Russia in supplying gas to Europe. American sanctions blocked the possibility for Europeans to make investments in Iranian gas production. This made a clear advantage for the Russian interests.

As neoclassical realism put it, the international system is characterized by its lack of clarity and uncertainty, therefore, both Moscow and Washington could have miscalculated their intentions. Realizing that Iran, which possesses nuclear weapons or even has the capabilities to develop them, poses a threat not only to Western adversaries, but also a danger to Russia itself due to its close geographical location, and also reduces its strategic advantages as a nuclear power both in the region and in the world, Moscow chose a diplomatic method of resolving the crisis among different acceptable policy options. As Ali Vaez, the International Crisis Group's senior Iran analyst, observe, "Russia is seeking to revive the agreement because alternatives to Russia are not attractive at all. If Iran goes to nuclear weapons, it is possible that some other actors and Russia's neighbors, such as Türkiye and even Azerbaijan, want to go in this direction, or the Arab countries of the Persian Gulf, and this will be a real big problem for Russia."⁴⁶² Thus, the US withdrawal from the agreement became a systemic imperative that required, on the one hand, the need to adapt Russia's policy to respond to the threat, and, on the other hand, provided a possibility to create a split among Western partners, or even to ally with Europe and Iran to create a united anti-American front, which supports the deal. What is more, Russia put a lot of effort into negotiating the original agreement, which elevated it to the rank of key actors, so the failure of this deal will be seen as its diplomatic failure.

⁴⁶¹ David Albright et al., "After Withdrawal from the JCPOA," 10.

⁴⁶² Heiran-Nia, "Iran Won't Break."

However, even this situation provided Russia with an opportunity to blame the United States for the failure of the deal, using this situation of “credible Russia versus an unreliable, volatile United States” as one of the components of its broader strategy to counter the United States both at the regional and systemic levels. In economic terms, the US withdrawal and the reimposition of sanctions on Iran, ignoring which seems risky for other states, also pushed back the prospect of competition between Russia and Iran in the oil sector, in addition, raising oil prices by 30 percent in just one year, which was also partly a consequence of the Trump administration’s decisions regarding the Iranian nuclear deal.⁴⁶³

Since the international system did not give clear signals and information about Iran’s intentions, Russia faced a strategic dilemma. The US withdrawal from JCPOA has jeopardized overall regional security putting at risk Iran’s further abandonment of nuclear development and provoking possible escalation of Iranian-Israeli and Iranian-Saudi hostilities. In the event of Iran’s conflict with these regional actors, the United States would provide support to its allies, and Russia would be faced with a choice of aligning with Iran, which would destroy its long-term efforts to establish relations with Arab countries and Israel, or stay on the sidelines and thereby lose Iran’s confidence.⁴⁶⁴ Furthermore, Russia currently find itself in a rather vulnerable position in the Middle East because of its military actions in Ukraine, since any new regional conflict would put it in a more difficult situation, where the domestic environment limits the available options for policy response. The restrictive strategic environment jeopardizes Russia’s ability to defend Iran as it is linked with a likely lack of public support and growing of opposition for extracting and mobilizing Russian power. Further inability to shield against domestic pressures may prove fatal for the survival of the Putin’s regime.

Meanwhile, earlier in 2018, even before the international situation escalated due to the events in Ukraine, tensions between the United States and Iran received a new impetus. This was facilitated by the US drone strike at Baghdad International Airport in early 2020,

⁴⁶³ Emily Tamkin, “Why Russia Is the Big Winner of the Iran Deal Fallout,” *Worldviews, Washington Post*, May 8, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2019/05/08/why-russia-is-big-winner-iran-deal-fallout/>. Access Date 12/01/2023.

⁴⁶⁴ Mark N. Katz, “Russia and Iran: Common Interests, Ongoing Differences and Growing Risks,” *LSE (blog)*, May 7, 2018, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2018/05/07/russia-and-iran-common-interests-ongoing-differences-and-growing-risks/>. Access Date 17/11/2022.

as a result of which a senior Iranian military leader Qassem Soleimani was killed. Iran responded with a series of missile strikes that injured US military personnel. Such retaliation was reinforced by Tehran's confidence in the possible support of Russia, its ally and major military power, if necessary. Indeed, Russia has provided diplomatic and military support to Iran. Since the crisis occurred in the shorter term, Russia had to operate in fairly fixed international conditions determined by a given distribution of material capabilities in the international system. Putin perceived this crisis as a clear signal of an immediate threat that required him to respond in a quick manner. Based on the relevant balance-of-capabilities and assessments of the US short-term intentions, Putin has taken a number of precautionary steps. Immediately after the escalation of the conflict, he decided to go on an unscheduled visit to Syria before traveling to Türkiye. There he met with his Syrian counterpart President Bashar al-Assad at the Russia's regional operations and command centre. This was not just an ad hoc visit; rather, Putin's behavior signaled to the West that Moscow was monitoring regional dynamics and would defend its national interests in the region in the case of crisis escalation. To reinforce this perception, after a visit to Türkiye, he took part in large-scale naval exercises of the Russian Navy in the Black Sea, once again demonstrating Russia's military power, including of an offensive nature.⁴⁶⁵

The signs of improvement in Russian-Iranian relations during this period are largely associated with the Putin's return as Russia's president for the third time.

Considering Russia's place in the resolving Iranian nuclear crisis, a considerable role is played by the state-society relations, namely the nature of interactions between the government (in the face of Putin) and various economic groups. A huge cluster of these interactions falls on the energy and military industrial sector, which can have some impact on the Russian foreign policy towards Iran, although it should always be kept in mind that in authoritarian states, the final decision is usually made by one person.

4.5. How the Ukrainian War Affected Russia's Position in the Iranian Nuclear Crisis

⁴⁶⁵ Alexey Muraviev, "Russia Makes Its Presence Known in Iran Crisis," *The Interpreter*, June 15, 2022, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/russia-makes-its-presence-known-iran-crisis>. Access Date 10/12/2022.

Referring to the thesis about the interconnectedness of the systemic level with the subsystem, outlined in Chapter II, the impact of the Ukrainian conflict on the dynamics of the Iranian nuclear crisis seems natural. Russia, as one of the parties directly involved in the Ukrainian conflict and a participant in the nuclear talks with Iran, is capable of changing the course of both events. Experts fear that the unleashed military actions in Ukraine may have a negative impact on Iranian nuclear negotiations.⁴⁶⁶ After a long period of uncertainty over the nuclear deal, which seemed to be coming to a logical conclusion, shortly after the start of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine, in March 2022, Moscow demanded sweeping guarantees to continue its trade with Iran against the backdrop of sanctions imposed against Russia, as the external environment became even more restrictive, and Russia needed room to maneuver in order to secure its national interests, including in the Middle East, without losing Iran as an ally and preventing its rapprochement with the West. Initially, the United States and the European Union rebuffed Russian requests for guarantees and suspended further negotiations. Iran cautiously perceived this behavior of the West. The lack of clarity in the international system and the uncertainty of the intentions of the participants in the nuclear talks prompted Tehran to seek a way out with Moscow. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov assured that Moscow received written guarantees from Washington regarding its demands. In the acute global situation on the energy market, Washington and European allies are interested in a nuclear deal with Iran and the lifting of sanctions, followed by the restoration of Iranian oil exports to mitigate the consequences of the global energy crisis. In turn, Iran is also interested in removal of all "maximum pressure" sanctions imposed since 2018, as the escalation of the conflict in Ukraine opens up opportunities for Tehran in the European energy market. Moreover, the protracted conflict in Ukraine contributes to an increase in the supply of Iranian weapons to Russia, despite the fact that both sides have repeatedly denied the fact of Russian purchases of Iranian drones.⁴⁶⁷ Going even further, it should be noted the growing cooperation between Iran and Qatar,

⁴⁶⁶ Samuel Hickey, "Iran, Russia and the JCPOA: Is a Year of Negotiations at Risk?," *MED This Week, ISPI*, March 18, 2022, <https://www.ispionline.it/en/pubblicazione/iran-russia-and-jcpoa-year-negotiations-risk-34174>. Access Date 27/12/2022.

⁴⁶⁷ Andrey Morozov, "Iran otritsayet postavki Rossii oruzhiya dlya SVO" [Iran denies Russian arms supplies to SMO], *Gazeta.ru*, October 7, 2022, <https://www.gazeta.ru/army/news/2022/10/07/18742939.shtml?updated>. Access Date 14/01/2023.

which is the second largest exporter of liquefied natural gas in the world. Thus, Iran's regional weight is growing, which, as noted previously, is not in Russia's interests.

4.6. Evaluating Neoclassical Realist Theory

As this analysis shows, the Iranian nuclear crisis is a destabilizing factor in the Middle East, which, however, poses both threats and opportunities for Russia. It allows Moscow to use its diplomatic and political means in its settlement to assert itself as an influential regional player with an attempt to project this status at the global level, and to manage the situation in order to prevent Iranian rapprochement with the West and thus reserve itself an advantageous position within Iranian energy sector, as well as preventing Western interference, including the military, in the internal affairs of Iran in order to change the regime. However, regional collisions and the protection of Russia's national interests determine its balancing behavior towards regional players. Accordingly, Moscow is not ready to go for a full-fledged alliance with Iran to the detriment of its national interests and constructive interaction with regional powers.

Thus, with regard to the theoretical implications of this case study, it can be said that in pursuing a policy of balance of power, Russia's responses, whether in support of Iran or the forces opposing it, have been aimed at protecting its own national interests, dictated by both external and internal factors (Hypothesis 1). At the same time, this confirms Moscow's interest in maintaining and expanding its influence in the Middle East through a third party, but not the willingness and ability to take full responsibility, taking the position of hegemon (Hypothesis 4). The assessment of potential opportunities and risks, combined with elite consensus, led to bilateral and multilateral cooperation between Russia and Iran in the beginning of 2000s and after 2015, and the lack of elite consensus contributed to leaps in their relations, expressed in Russia's support for sanctions against Iran during Dmitry Medvedev's presidency. Thus, neoclassical realist theory reflects well the dynamics of the shaping of Russian foreign policy in the course of the Iranian nuclear crisis.

CHAPTER 5: RUSSIA'S GROWING INFLUENCE IN THE MIDDLE EAST: THE SYRIAN CASE

Russia's involvement in the Syrian crisis has become a significant development in the transforming international system. Initially acting politically as a mediator in the conflict, then providing military assistance, eventually Russia's foreign policy changed its tone, becoming an active military participant since September 2015. Why did Russia decide to support the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and enter the Syrian civil war? How did the decision to intervene take shape? Such a turn in Russian foreign policy in the Middle East requires an in-depth analysis of the reasons for its foreign policy behavior. This chapter presents a neoclassical realist analysis of the Russian decisions regarding Syria taken by foreign policy executive as a result of dynamic interactions between systemic stimuli and intervening variables, and consistently influenced the strategic calculus of the actors involved. Despite its practical significance for International Relations scholarship, the Russian decision has remained underexplored as the Russian decision-making process lacks transparency and it is quite difficult to reconstruct its true facts. However, this chapter attempts to fill this gap by offering a different theoretical perspective to the study of the case under investigation.

5.1. Russia's Foreign Policy towards Syria through Systemic Level Lens

The Russia's decision to intervene in Syria in 2015, supporting the regime in Damascus, proved to be one of the most important events in the changing international system.

On September 28, 2015, in Vladimir Putin's speech held at the 70th General Assembly of the United Nations, Russian president accused the West of destabilizing the Middle East and, as a consequence, of the Syrian crisis. He proposed measures that could be undertaken by international community to counter terrorist threats by creating an international coalition to fight the Islamic State (IS) and developing a national transition plan with the participation of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad as the only actor, along with the Kurdish militia, capable of fighting IS, thus trying to legitimize Assad's position in the international arena. To summarize Putin's speech, there are three turning points on a regional scale prior to 2015 that have affected Russian foreign policy: 1) the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, perceived with apprehension in the Kremlin due to its unconstrained

unilateral approach; 2) the Arab Spring, perceived as a move designed by the United States to change regimes in the Middle East and North Africa objectionable to the West, which represented one of the links in the chain of color revolutions in the Eurasian space; 3) the Libyan conflict, perceived by Russia as a precedent that violates international law and has had a significant impact on its further foreign policy and strategy in the Middle East and globally.⁴⁶⁸

There are several systemic level factors that gave an impetus to direct and indirect intervention of regional and global powers into the Syrian conflict. As contemporary international system is characterized by its transformation to the multipolarity, the very system itself encouraged regional and global actors to intervene and gave them an opportunity to join the struggle for a leading role in the region. Another important stimulus was an apparent decline of America's role in the region and globally, and the blurring of its hegemonic status. Against this background, Russia was one of those international actors who considered participation in the Syrian conflict as an opportunity to reassert its great power status. However, along with the unfolding struggle for power in Syria, Russia faced challenges at the subsystem level, resulting in a proxy conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia in Yemen; the assertion of the regional role of Türkiye, a member of NATO, seeking to coordinate its domestic and external priorities; Israel's position towards Iran and Syria, which support Hezbollah and have influence in Lebanon; the threat of terrorism, which has escalated during the period of the expanding network of ISIS and other extremist groups.⁴⁶⁹ All this together complicated Russia's actions in an already confusing and mired in uncertainty and instability region.

Structural modifiers provided some opportunities for Russia, which reflected in strategic interaction with Syria within the given structure of the system. Technological diffusion, being one of the main measures of assessment of the status of great power, became one of the pillar of Russia's presence in Syria. Back in 2008, before a wave of protests broke out in the Middle East and Syria was mired in civil war, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, describing the state of Russian-Syrian relations, outlined that

⁴⁶⁸ Melike Janine Sökmen, Irene Martínez, and Nicolás de Pedro, "Russia, Iran and Turkey, a Common Strategy in Syria?," *Notes Internacionales CIDOB* 196 (May 2018): 2.

⁴⁶⁹ Derek Averre, "Russia, the Middle East and the Conflict in Syria," in *Routledge Handbook of Russian Security*, ed. Roger E. Kanet (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), 400-401.

“Syria and we [Russia] already have a whole array of contracts signed, and they are being successfully carried out. We are prepared [...] to consider the Syrian side’s proposals regarding purchases of new types of weapons. Our position is clear [...] we will be prepared to supply Syria with weapons that, in the first place, bear a defensive character and which in no way upset the regional balance of power.”⁴⁷⁰

This demonstrates Russia’s intentions to accumulate power on its consistent path to reassert itself as a great power within the international system.

Russia has long-term interests in the Middle East, and Syria represents one of its core ally in this region, that hosts Russian Tartus naval facility giving it strategic advantage in the Mediterranean and the MENA region respectively, which allows, in its turn, to project Russia’s power globally. As structural realism suggests, states can maintain their position in the international system by helping their allies. Thus, the abandoning to support Assad’s regime in Syria could have pernicious consequences for Russia’s strategic interests in the region and beyond. On the contrary, by helping its ally, Russia has secured an opportunity to upgrade its status in the anarchic international system.⁴⁷¹

Russia’s engagement in Syria is driven not only by its material interests (economic and military). An important role is played by such a systemic stimulus as the practice of Western countries to intervene in other states without UN Security Council authorization in order to overthrow unwanted foreign regimes (e.g., in Iraq, Afghanistan, Kosovo). This external stimulus prompted Russia to respond, as it perceived Western policy as a violation of the basic principles of international law, the principle of sovereign equality and the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of states. In addition, such precedents open the way for similar scenarios of destabilization of the situation in Russia, which threatens Putin’s regime and puts Russia’s very survival at risk, which, accordingly, could not be allowed.

Syria has become one of the pieces of puzzle of “systemic confrontation” between Washington and Moscow, which challenges the hegemonic status of the United States

⁴⁷⁰ “Transcript of Remarks by Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov Following Talks Between President Dmitry Medvedev of the Russian Federation and President Bashar al-Assad of Syria, Sochi, August 21, 2008,” *The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation*, August 22, 2008, <https://www.mid.ru/en/maps/sy/1599651/>. Access Date 30/12/2022.

⁴⁷¹ Afridi and Jibrán, “Russian Response to Syrian Crisis,” 57.

and asserts itself as a great power in the international system.⁴⁷² Capable of conducting its independent policy using both the means of skillful diplomacy and military tools in the arena of one of the most turbulent and complicated regions of the international system and gain success made other actors recognize Russia's restored global status as a great power.⁴⁷³

Russian involvement in the Syrian conflict is presented as the culmination of the logical development of the chain of events of the 2008 Russian-Georgian war and the events in Ukraine in 2014. In the regional subsystem, Russia seeks to expand its influence in the Middle East and equalize its regional position with Washington. Russian-American systemic confrontation is not just about pursuing one's own national interests, but about fundamental differences on the functioning of the international order, focusing on such issues as respect for state sovereignty, the right to use force and decision-making mechanisms.⁴⁷⁴ Russia is not merely an observer of changes in the international system, but it positions itself as one of the main designer of a new, post-American world order.

By defending the current regime in Syria, Russia has also sought to demonstrate its credibility to regional players, showing that Moscow is a reliable partner and ally to deal with, despite the fact that the international outcome of Russian decision to provide support to Bashar al-Assad's regime at the global level has become increasingly international isolation. In addition, Russia's military campaign in Syria significantly worsened Russian-Turkish relations at the initial stage, and also aggravated Russia's confrontation with the European countries and NATO especially deepened after its annexation of Crimea. In this regard, Russia's increased political influence in the Middle East has given it leverage to manage its relations with Europe, since Moscow could use the process of the Syrian conflict settlement to its advantage, dealing with the European Union that has been hit hard by recurring waves of the refugee crises.⁴⁷⁵ As for Türkiye, its position towards Russia, among other things, was influenced by systemic incentive in the form of the US determination to support the Kurdish formations in Syria, in particular, its intention to cooperate with the People's Protection Units (YPG), which was in

⁴⁷² Dmitry Suslov, "US–Russia Confrontation and a New Global Balance," *Strategic Analysis* 40, no. 6 (2016): 547, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09700161.2016.1224069>. Access Date 02/01/2023.

⁴⁷³ Trenin, *What is Russia Up To*, 63.

⁴⁷⁴ Suslov, "US–Russia Confrontation," 547.

⁴⁷⁵ "Russia's Role in the Middle East: A Stabilizing Force?"

contradiction with Ankara's interests, as well as a domestic factor in the form of the situation following a failed coup attempt in Türkiye, leaving nationalist political elites wary of the West. This contributed to the revision of Ankara's policy towards Moscow, pushing it towards rapprochement. At the same time, Russia also provides support to the Kurds, which ensures it with the ability to influence all the regional actors. However, Türkiye does not show the same discontent with Russia's actions as in relation to the United States, its NATO ally.⁴⁷⁶

5.2. Russia's Foreign Policy towards Syria through Domestic Level Lens

Ideational factors play an important role in the shaping of Russian foreign policy responses to international systemic pressures. The case of Russian involvement in Syria is no exception, as ideational factors are often present in the official Russian discourse. Relying on the article of Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergei Lavrov, one can conclude that Russia's military engagement in Syria is the one of the manifestations of Russian foreign policy goals to make "the international system fair, democratic and, ideally, self-regulating."⁴⁷⁷ As such, Russia, supporting Assad's regime in Syria and confronting western collective efforts to exert pressure on the Syrian government, perceives itself as a defender of international norms and values. Otherwise, the possible fall of the Assad regime in Syria is perceived by the Kremlin as a "victory" of the West.⁴⁷⁸ In addition, the Russian elite's perception of its failures regarding the Libyan crisis played a significant role in the decision making on military engagement in Syria. The Western intervention and NATO bombardment of Libya created the impression that the West had deceived Russia through the ambiguous wording in the UN Security Council Resolution imposing a no-fly zone over Libya on March 17, 2011, pursuing its own goal of forced regime change, thereby setting a precedent. Thus, the attitude of the Russian leadership and society in relation to the civil war in Syria was formed taking into account the Libyan experience.⁴⁷⁹

⁴⁷⁶ Janine Sökmen, Martínez, and de Pedro, "Russia, Iran and Turkey," 4.

⁴⁷⁷ Lavrov, "Russia in the 21st-Century."

⁴⁷⁸ Theodore Karasik, "Arabskaya vesna i polozeniye Rossii: Liviya i Siriya" [The Arab Spring and the situation of Russia: Libya and Syria], *InoSMI.Ru*, July 13, 2011 <https://inosmi.ru/asia/20110713/171987436.html>. Access Date 10/10/2021.

⁴⁷⁹ Zvyagelskaya, "Russian Policy," 125.

One of the hallmarks of Vladimir Putin's rule is his commitment to legal formalities, the origins of which can be traced back to his professional education. In this regard, in order to prevent external military intervention in Syria, Russia, with the backing of China, has repeatedly vetoed UN Security Council resolutions, consistently arguing that any use of military force to prevent massive human rights violations, which was used as a main driver of Western states, should adhere to the international legal norm of non-interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states and be authorized by the UN Security Council decision, while emphasizing the violations of this norm and illegal actions by NATO in the former Republic of Yugoslavia in 1999, as well as by the American-led Western coalition in Iraq in 2003.⁴⁸⁰ In the same vein, Russian participation in the Syrian civil war was referred to the 1980 Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation. Although this Treaty does not constitute a military alliance, it nevertheless stipulates the possibility of providing military assistance. After receiving an official request from the Syrian government, Putin agreed to it on the same day. Guided by the prevention of the collapse of statehood in Syria, which would lead to chaos and rampant terrorism and extremism that could spill over the borders of Syria and more broadly the Middle East and spread beyond it, threatening the survival of Russia and Putin's regime, Vladimir Putin followed the principle learned from his youth, "if a fight is inevitable, strike first." Maybe this approach was not popular within the civilian establishment, but received support of the military elite.⁴⁸¹ A possible regime change in Syria posed a clear danger to the Putin regime, since a similar scenario, which Russia believed was regulated from the outside, namely by the United States (since the "domino theory" was formulated in the early 2000s by neoconservatives of the Bush administration), could also be implemented in Russia. Unlike the West, which thinks in terms of "authoritarian (dictatorial)" and "democratic" regimes, Russia perceives the Middle East situation in terms of "order" and "chaos."⁴⁸² Presenting a clear threat to the survival of the state, coupled with structural economic problems, Putin needed to bolster his domestic legitimacy, which he did by appealing to the sense of pride of Russians for restoring Russia's status as a great power.⁴⁸³ To do this, it was necessary to present a powerful enemy against which it would be quite easy to rally

⁴⁸⁰ Averde, "Russia, the Middle East," 400.

⁴⁸¹ Trenin, *What is Russia Up To*, 55-56, 60.

⁴⁸² Delanoë and Bros, "Iran-Russie," 288.

⁴⁸³ Alexander Brockwehl et al., "Syria and Beyond: Managing Russian Ambitions in the Middle East," *WWS Graduate Policy Workshop Report* (January 2018): 7.

Russian society. But since direct confrontation with the United States is ruled out by the possibility of mutual destruction, Syria was one of the opportunities that occurred at that moment.

Having learned the lesson of the devastating war in Afghanistan, Russia took a position of military non-intervention in the regional conflicts of the Middle East. Russian involvement in the conflict in Syria marked the first time that Russia's military force was used in this region.

One can note a significant change in the approach to Russia's military strategy. For the first time, Moscow has emulated American military strategy, emphasizing the use of air forces instead of ground forces,⁴⁸⁴ unlike experience in other conflicts before.

Speaking about public support for Russia's engagement in the Syrian conflict, there is a rather low interest of the Russian society in the current events. After the formal consent of the upper chamber of the Russian parliament to deploy the nation's military in Syria to fight terrorism at a request from the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, several thousand demonstrators hold a protest against this decision, but the majority of Russian public widely supported it. This is proved by Putin's approval rating, which was 90 percent at the beginning of the Russian military campaign in Syria.⁴⁸⁵

At the height of the storm in Aleppo in November 2016, there was an attempt to hold a solidarity demonstration, but it was unsuccessful due to the actions of the authorities. There is also some solidarity with the Syrian people on Russian social networks, but at a fairly modest level relative to other societies.

There are several factors that determine such underreaction of the Russian society towards the Syrian issue. First of all, this is political censorship, despite its prohibition by the Constitution of the Russian Federation, and propaganda. The state controls the media coverage of the situation in Syria and represents Russia as a defender of the civilian population and an implacable fighter against terrorists. This works successfully. The threat of Islamic terrorism that can penetrate into Russian territory from Syria is a

⁴⁸⁴ Kozhanov, "Russian Foreign Policy," 101.

⁴⁸⁵ Tom Porter, "Russia: Vladimir Putin Approval Rating Hits 90% Following Syria Bombing Campaign," *International Business Times*, October 23, 2015, <https://www.ibtimes.co.uk/russia-vladimir-putin-approval-rating-hits-90-following-syria-bombing-campaign-1525181>. Access Date 10/10/2021.

sensitive issue for the Russian society, which has experienced acts of terror in its history. Therefore, Russia's involvement in the Syrian conflict is identified primarily as the fight against terrorism, overshadowing other aspects of the Syrian civil war.⁴⁸⁶ Another important factor is the lack of information about the situation in Syria and the isolation of Russian realities from Middle Eastern affairs. The complex configuration of forces in the region is difficult to understand for the average person. The level of cultural affinity is also low compared to the Ukrainian case, which makes the level of empathy for the Syrian people low too.

Meanwhile, the level of consensus and cohesion of the Russian political elite at the very beginning of events in Syria was one of the sources of concern. On the one hand, due to the current situation, there was increased activity regarding the protection of Moscow's strategic goals in the Middle East. On the other hand, the political disagreement was evident. Some advocated closer diplomatic ties with the West, while others were tended to more actively defend Russia's interests at the expense of relations with the West.⁴⁸⁷ This situation also had a significant impact on the Kremlin's strategic behavior and the adoption of an appropriate strategic decision on Syria.

5.3. Russia's Foreign Policy Behavior and Grand Strategic Adjustment

Within the framework of neoclassical realism, the temporal dimension plays an important role. Neoclassical realists argue that shifts in the distribution of power encourage strategic adjustment in the form of a more or less expansive grand strategy.⁴⁸⁸ The outcome of the 2008 Russian-Georgian war and the events in Ukraine in 2014 allowed Russia to be more confident in its power capabilities, prompting Russian policy makers to adjust and modify their strategic choices in favor of a more assertive foreign policy. As the conflict in Syria has been going on for more than a decade, Russia's foreign policy has evolved over time, making it possible to trace its strategic planning or its attempt to construct grand strategy for the Middle East based on the political choices it has made over time. During this

⁴⁸⁶ Sergei Davidis, "Why Are Russians Indifferent to the Syrian Conflict?," interview by Syria Untold and Editors Of OpenDemocracy Russia, *openDemocracy*, July 20, 2017, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/why-are-russians-indifferent-to-syrian-conflic/>. Access Date 22/11/2020.

⁴⁸⁷ Karasik, "Arabskaya vesna."

⁴⁸⁸ Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory*, 70.

period, Russia's strategic environment has changed its nature, as well as the dynamics of the conflict in Syria has undergone its changes.

As mentioned earlier, the lack of a clear response from the West generated uncertainty about its intentions regarding the Syrian conflict. At the same time, Russia firmly followed the position of denying any possibility of foreign intervention in Syria. Given the opportunistic nature of Russian foreign policy, some researchers point to the tactical logic of Russia's behavior towards the Assad regime, designed for the short term.⁴⁸⁹ Thus, depending on the situation, Moscow could promptly adjust its policy in response to changes in the external environment. As such, in 2013, preventing foreign military intervention in the conflict after the alleged chemical weapons attacks carried out by regime forces against the opposition-held areas, Russia suddenly called on the Syrian authorities to put the existing chemical weapons under international control; allow UN representatives to enter Syria to monitor, collect and destroy weapons under international auspices; and join the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons.⁴⁹⁰

At the very beginning of the outbreak of the civil war in Syria, some researchers noted a rather modest share of Russian investments in the Syrian economy, so it was not about getting a benefit in monetary terms when Russia was involved in the conflict.⁴⁹¹ Its primary goal was nevertheless to assert its status as a great power and to reaffirm its position as an influential player in the Middle East with high diplomatic significance in resolving international issues and regional conflicts, especially where the American role was discredited due to taking the side of one of the participants (Israel-Palestine, Libya, Saudi Arabia-Qatar). Economic interests, however, were a function of its strategy to draw Syria into political dependence and display loyalty on its part, thereby tying it to its sphere of influence and thus facilitating Russia's access to the Middle East.⁴⁹² An example of this is Russia's agreement to renegotiate the terms of Syria's debt repayment on very favorable terms, which Russia had previously refused in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

⁴⁸⁹ Marten, "Informal Political Networks," 81.

⁴⁹⁰ "Russia Urges Syria Hand Over Chemical Weapons to Intl Control to Avoid Strike," World News, RT, September 9, 2013, <https://www.rt.com/news/lavrov-syria-chemical-weapons-handover-615/>. Access Date 14/01/2023.

⁴⁹¹ Dmitri Trenin, *The Mythical Alliance: Russia's Syria Policy* (Moscow: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2013), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep13011>. Access Date 17/01/2023.

⁴⁹² Matthew D. Crosston, "Cold War and Ayatollah Residues: Syria as a Chessboard for Russia, Iran, and the United States," *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 8, no. 4 (Winter 2014): 97, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26270818>. Access Date 17/01/2023.

In addition, Syria was also a springboard for the technological diffusion of Russia's advanced weapons systems, not only demonstrating Russia's military power, but also attracting potential customers to sell Russian weapons.

Thus, the beginning of the second decade of the 2000s is characterized by the prioritization of political goals for the survival of the Putin regime over economic ambitions, which prompted him to promote and support like-minded and friendly regimes abroad,⁴⁹³ including the Middle East (this applies to both Syria and Iran). In this regard, Russia's Middle East strategy has successfully fit into the broader context of Russia's grand strategy, positioning itself as a distinctive actor balancing the West. Whereas in Putin's first presidential terms the grand strategy was formulated as an incentive to move away from the position of a weak player to the status of a great power on friendly terms with the West, reflecting Russia's response to systemic pressure from the global terrorist threat, in the last decade there have been grand strategic adjustments to a more isolated status of Russia with a patriotic and anti-Western overtones, associated both with external factors of destabilization of the post-Soviet countries that are part of Russian sphere of privileged interests (Georgia, Ukraine), and with domestic challenges, expressed in protest sentiments within the country, but, according to the ruling regime, orchestrated from outside to change the existing power.

5.3.1. Russia's Return to the Middle East and Its Decision to Intervene in the Syrian Conflict

According to the neoclassical realist theory, Russia's involvement in the Syrian civil war is a derivative of systemic and domestic factors that influenced the foreign policy decision-making process as a result of the interaction of the external environment and cognitive variables, strategic culture, the societal situation, and domestic institutional arrangements.

Three key domestic events have contributed to the change in Russia's behavior regarding the Syrian conflict: the anti-Putin protests in 2011-2012, which coincided with a wave of protests in the Middle East, i.e. Arab Spring, and the rise of opposition forces; the

⁴⁹³ Aglaya Snetkov, "From Crisis to Crisis: Russia's Security Policy under Putin," *Russian Analytical Digest*, no. 173 (2015): 2.

Ukrainian revolution of 2014 and the subsequent annexation of Crimea to Russia; and the sharp drop in oil prices in 2014.⁴⁹⁴ Putin perceived these events as one chain of phenomena that was purposefully implemented by external forces in the face of the United States to undermine the situation in Russia and the subsequent regime change, thereby threatening the survival of the Putin regime. These events had a negative effect on the Putin's legitimacy, increasing the fragmentation of the political elite and the level of social cohesion. The potential domestic political risks for the Putin regime were quite high. Under such conditions, it was necessary to find a new source of legitimacy for Putin and his regime. Such a source became the consolidation of society on a patriotic basis against the external threat to Russia's survival, which was interpreted in a confrontation with Western adversaries, in particular, the United States, a direct clash with which seemed impossible, but an indirect confrontation occurred within the framework of the Syrian civil war with the beginning of the Russian military operation on September 30, 2015, which decisively changed the balance of power in the conflict. In this case, Putin skillfully used the foreign policy narrative of Russia's struggle for its rightful equal position in the international system and the discourse of "greatpowerness," which has contributed to strengthening his position in Russia. Russian foreign policy, in its turn, which had long denied the possibility of using military force abroad, gradually eroded with the intensification of the patriotic and anti-Western narrative, which intensified after the protests against the ruling regime in 2011-2012, which actually became the trigger and rationale for a more assertive and aggressive Russian foreign policy abroad, resulting in support for the Assad regime in Syria. As Lilia Shevtsova put it, "the Russian regime is unique in its use of the tools of great-power politics and neoimperialist foreign policy – up to and including nuclear weapons – as part of its strategy for staying in power."⁴⁹⁵ Indeed, a feature of the Putin-era policies is the identification of the regime security with the state security. Therefore, the relevant political events, both internal and external, are tightly interconnected and serve the interests of the regime's survival represented as a survival of the state. This can be seen in the examples of the Chechen conflict, which was inscribed in a broader political context of the need to centralize power; the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, as well as the NATO military intervention in Libya in 2011, used to

⁴⁹⁴ Alsaadi, "Russia's Military Involvement," 89.

⁴⁹⁵ Lilia Shevtsova, "The Return of Personalized Power," *Journal of Democracy* 20, no. 2 (April 2009): 62, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.0.0082>. Access Date 17/12/2022.

demonize the image of the West as an unreliable ally, a traitor, a violator of international norms, and ultimately a provider of destabilization; and military intervention of Russia in Syria in 2015, presented as a need to counter an external threat, prove itself as a powerful actor, establish itself as a reliable partner and a stabilizing force. The events preceding Russia's military campaign outside the post-Soviet space (the conflict with Georgia, the annexation of Crimea and the escalation of the conflict with Ukraine) gave a signal to the international system about Russia's increasing intentions to expand the geographical scope of its use of military might, which, obviously, was not correctly perceived by the major powers. In addition, Moscow used the Syrian case to draw Western attention to the Middle East, a region far more distant from Russia than its "sphere of privileged interests" in Eastern Europe (the post-Soviet space), and specifically in Ukraine, and is not its foreign policy priority,⁴⁹⁶ therefore the stakes of military involvement in the Middle East were lower, rather than in the case of Ukraine.

From the very beginning of Russia's military involvement in the Syrian conflict, Russia has repeatedly pointed to its legitimate position in Syria, which was the result of an official invitation from the Syrian government led by President Bashar al-Assad to preserve Syrian statehood and fight the terrorist threat, a deep rooted trigger in Putin's mind due to Russia's long conflict in Chechnya. As suggested by the balance-of-power theory, international threats and opportunities enable states to mobilize easily their material and human resources.⁴⁹⁷ In this way, the security threats to Russia posed by the conflict out of control of the Syrian government were used as the main context to justify Russian military intervention to the Russian public, which was concerned about foreign military actions as a result of the old trauma of Soviet-Afghan war (1979-1989). To cover these fears, the focus was made on the problem of terrorism, which is also familiar to the Russian public. It is widely known that Syria hosts a cohort of former Soviet Union jihadists that threaten to bring jihad back to Russia. For the Russian society, the Syrian campaign is successfully justified, first of all, by the need for a preemptive strike against terrorist elements in order to prevent their spread and penetration into Russian territory.

⁴⁹⁶ Kontseptsiya vneshney politiki Rossiyskoy Federatsii (utv. Prezidentom RF 12.02.2013) [The Foreign policy concept of Russian Federation (approved by the President of the Russian Federation on 12.02.2013)], Part IV, February 12, 2013, <https://legalacts.ru/doc/kontseptsija-vneshnei-politiki-rossiiskoi-federatsii-utv-prezidentom/>. Access Date 31/12/2022.

⁴⁹⁷ Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory*, 144.

Moreover, Moscow wanted to be perceived as a provider of stability in the region, as opposed to the US image of interventionist, which could further strengthen its stance in the wider Middle East, contributing to the positive attitude of other states, making them potential allies or clients.⁴⁹⁸ Russian engagement in Syria has also been used as a way to divert attention both domestically and globally from Ukrainian events.

Since 2013, the external environment has become more restrictive for Russia as a result of increased tension in the Kremlin's relations with the West. This strengthened the conviction of the Russian political elites in the need to diversify foreign relations and expand contacts with the Middle East. Addressing the Federal Assembly on December 4, 2014, Putin emphasized that Russia's "goal is to have as many equal partners as possible, both in the West and in the East. We will expand our presence in those regions [...] We will continue our cooperation with Africa and the Middle East."⁴⁹⁹ Later in 2015, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov noted that the changes in Russia's foreign policy were not "opportunistic,"⁵⁰⁰ from which one can draw a conclusion about the strategic orientation of Russia's activities in the Middle East.

Since Syria is in the protracted military conflict, one of the important motivations for Russia's presence there is an opportunity to use it to test new armaments and practice operations, train forces, as well as demonstrate weapons systems to potential buyers of Russian arms, in addition to selling weapons to Syria itself.

One of the largest economic interest for Russia in Syria is in its energy sector. The instability and chaos in Syria does not let to advance Qatar's plans to build a gas pipeline, which would export gas through Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Syria and Türkiye to Europe. This threatens Russia's strategic interests to be a de facto monopoly on the European gas market. Back in 2010, this plan was rejected by Bashar al-Assad, thereby meeting the interests of Russia.

⁴⁹⁸ Janine Sökmen, Martínez, and de Pedro, "Russia, Iran and Turkey," 3.

⁴⁹⁹ Vladimir Putin, "Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly," Events, *President of Russia*, December 4, 2014, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/47173>. Access Date 18/12/2022.

⁵⁰⁰ "Vystupleniye i otvety na voprosy studentov i slushateley Diplomaticheskoy akademii MID Rossii Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V.Lavrova, Moskva, 27 fevralya 2015 goda" [Speech and answers to questions from students and listeners of the Diplomatic Academy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov, Moscow, February 27, 2015], *Ministerstvo inostrannykh del Rossiyskoy Federatsii*, February 27, 2015, https://archive.mid.ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/971662. Access Date 18/12/2022.

The result of Russian foreign policy towards the Syrian civil war became its recognition as a major player in the MENA region.

The Russian political elite's perception of Russia's position (a systemic imperative), improved due to military successes in Syria and reinforced by its international recognition as an influential global player, has become a catalyst for shaping its foreign and security policy towards the Middle East.

5.3.2. Russia's Grand Strategic Adjustment after 2015

After the end of the acute military phase in Syria, the significance of the Russian military presence became increasingly blurred, bringing to the agenda the issues of a political settlement of the conflict in Syria. This does not play in Moscow's favor, as it requires its greater efforts to maintain a dominant position in the political dialogue. In this dimension, a significant role is played by regional actors, namely Iran, Türkiye and the Arab countries of the Persian Gulf, which are able to challenge Russia's leadership, posing, in its turn, a threat of weakening Russian position in the Middle East. In this regard, Qatar-based Russian scholar Nikolay Kozhanov suggests that a new successful military adventure in the Middle East could boost Russia's prestige in the region,⁵⁰¹ which seems justified from a structural realist point of view, as the great powers look for every opportunity to shift the balance of power in their favor.⁵⁰² However, Russia's military operation in Ukraine makes such an enterprise risky, and, in general, extremely unlikely.

The Astana peace process, initiated by Iran, Russia and Türkiye and launched in January 2017, which diminished the significance of the Geneva peace talks on Syria, was one of the manifestations of Russia's relatively autonomous behavior in the international system aimed at demonstrating its status as a great power, which is capable to initiate and engage in international affairs on a par with the West and even excluding its participation, since the United States was granted only observer status. As such, Moscow has become a leading player in a decisive triumvirate together with Ankara and Teheran, which are involved in determining the political fate of the Assad regime in Syria.⁵⁰³ It is pertinent to highlight that this form of cooperation between the three countries does not represent

⁵⁰¹ Nikolay Kozhanov, "Introduction," in *Russian Foreign Policy towards the Middle East: New Trends, Old Traditions*, ed. Nikolay Kozhanov (London: Hurst & Company, 2022), 18.

⁵⁰² Mearsheimer, "Structural Realism," 80.

⁵⁰³ "Russia's Role in the Middle East: A Stabilizing Force?"

their allied relations, rather it demonstrates the existence of large disagreements on certain issues within the framework of the Syrian conflict settlement and the lack of trust between the participants, and also it amounts to an official platform for declaring their interests, balancing them and coordinating their actions, as well as asserting their dominant positions in Syria.

5.3.3. Russian-Iranian Cooperation in Syria

After the outbreak of the nationwide civil war in Syria, there was little evidence of Russian-Iranian strategic cooperation. But the number of simultaneously convergent and mutually exclusive interests of both countries has created a new political dimension for Russian-Iranian regional cooperation. The need to limit increasing Iranian influence and maintain the balance of power in the region, as well as the opportunity to use Teheran as an agent of Russia's interests, prompted Moscow to develop close military cooperation and political coordination with Iran in the Syrian conflict. In fact, Russia and Iran agreed on a mutually beneficial deal, according to which Tehran increases its contribution to the stabilization of Syria within the framework determined by Moscow, and in return receives an expansion of bilateral cooperation in the nuclear sphere.⁵⁰⁴

Iran and Syria constitute important allies of Russia in the Middle East. These two states represent like-minded countries with an anti-Western stance and a desire to push the United States out of the region as opposed to the Sunni Arab countries and Israel. Guided by the idea of Eurasianism in confrontation with the West, Putin has put a lot of effort into creating the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). Despite the fact that only post-Soviet countries are members of the EAEU, in 2013, Russian and Iranian officials started talking about the possibility of Tehran joining this organization.⁵⁰⁵ In 2019, Vladimir Putin supported Iran's accession to the EAEU announcing as follows, "I am pleased to say that we are working together on Iran's accession to the Eurasian Economic Union. I am confident that this work will benefit our countries."⁵⁰⁶ In addition to the EAEU, Putin

⁵⁰⁴ Delanoë and Bros, "Iran-Russie," 288.

⁵⁰⁵ Ivan Zuyev, "Iran prositsya v Evraziyskiy soyuz, no ego sozdaniyu "meshayut prozapadnyye byurokratii Rossii i Kazakhstana" [Iran asks to join the Eurasian Union, but its creation "is hindered by the pro-Western bureaucracies of Russia and Kazakhstan"], *Nakanune.RU*, March 20, 2013, <https://www.nakanune.ru/articles/17576>. Access Date 20/12/2022.

⁵⁰⁶ "Meeting with Iranian President Hassan Rouhani," Events, *President of Russia*, October 1, 2019, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/61692>. Access Date 26/12/2022.

approved Iranian full membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which he announced in 2016. Drawing a historical parallel, Sean McMeekin notes the beginning of the process of absorption of northern Iran by the Russian Empire in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which was interrupted by the Bolshevik revolution.⁵⁰⁷ Moreover, at the end of the eighteenth century, Catherine the Great, expanding the territories of the Russian Empire to the south, sent troops to the North Caucasus, which was at that time under the rule of Iran. However, her death was probably the reason that prevented the seizure of these territories.⁵⁰⁸ In modern realities, this highlights the continuity of Russia's historical interests and its foreign policy, increasing Tehran's concern against the background of centuries-old distrust in bilateral relations.

A consistent Russian policy that supports Iran's engagement in regional structures also has a twofold purpose. On the one hand, there is probably some sort of agreement on Russia's support for the gradual involvement of Tehran in international processes against the background of a long period of Iran's isolation, on the other hand, Russia benefits from involving Tehran in multilateral cooperation when it will be more difficult for it to evade agreements, which is facilitated by an interdependent structure of international organizations. As for the first statement, after Putin supported Iran's full membership in the SCO in June 2016, already in August of the same year, Russian media disclosed an information about the use of Iran's Hamadan airbase by Russia, which contradicted Iranian legislation prohibiting the deployment of foreign bases on its territory. The parties managed to soften the public outcry on this issue by maintaining that the Iranian military base was provided only for the refueling of Russian warplanes in the framework of cooperation between Russia and Iran in the fight against terrorism.⁵⁰⁹

Russia was also the initiator of Iran's involvement in the Astana Process on Syria in January 2017. Due to the uncertainty of Iran's intentions, Moscow tried to tie it to official agreements in order to be able to at least have some control over the situation on Iran's interaction with various regional forces/groups. But the goals pursued by involving in the

⁵⁰⁷ Sean McMeekin, *The Russian Origins of the First World War* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011).

⁵⁰⁸ Borshchevskaya, *Putin's War in Syria*, 11.

⁵⁰⁹ Allen Cone, "Russia Gets Permission to Use Iran's Hamadan Air Base for Syria Airstrikes," *UPI*, November 30, 2016, https://www.upi.com/Top_News/World-News/2016/11/30/Russia-gets-permission-to-use-Irans-Hamadan-air-base-for-Syria-airstrikes/8251480520159/. Access Date 28/12/2022.

Syrian conflict of conditional allies varied. Russia took a leading position in the diplomatic dimension on Syria, while it was Iran that invested its material resources in the military component, which, accordingly, did not satisfy Iranian ambitions. Sökmen et al. designated such a position of Russia as “geopolitical leadership à la Ryanair,” literally meaning “profits and effectiveness at low cost.”⁵¹⁰ In the Iranian view, Tehran’s participation in the Syrian conflict contributes to the realization of its goal of creating a Shi’a Crescent and gaining access to the Mediterranean, using Damascus as a tool for implementing its plans on a regional scale, at the subsystemic level, while Moscow uses the Syrian conflict to achieve its goals on a global scale, at the systemic level. If for Iran, the preservation of the Assad regime plays a key role in its plans to be realized, then Moscow is not tied specifically to the Assad regime, but rather seeks to avoid the chaos that would follow the change of the authoritarian regime and maintain a status quo that poses fewer risks to Russian interests. Iran, in its turn, perceives it as a threat to achieve its goals, since the Kremlin can use this as a bargaining chip in dealing with the Western countries.

At the beginning of 2019, Russian-Iranian relations over Syria escalated mainly due to the redistribution of spheres of influence and natural resources.⁵¹¹ In order to maximize their share of power, both sides acted to put pressure on each other. A series of events (Assad’s downing of a Russian plane) and mutual accusations (Iran blamed Russia for disabling missile defense system during Israeli attacks on Iranian targets in Syria) increased the tension. Russia used Israel’s confrontation with Iran, opening the Syrian airspace for Israeli strikes on Iranian targets, in order to achieve coordination of Iranian movements in Syria in line with the Russian vision, thereby showing a balancing stance in the Iranian-Israeli controversies. At that time, Russian deputy foreign minister Sergei Ryabkov noted that the nature of relations between Russia and Iran cannot be called allied, but rather they can be defined as cooperative.⁵¹²

⁵¹⁰ Janine Sökmen, Martínez, and de Pedro, “Russia, Iran and Turkey,” 1.

⁵¹¹ Jaime Dettmer, “Rossiya i Iran konkuriruyut za vliyaniye v Sirii” [Russia and Iran Compete for Influence in Syria], VOA, May 2, 2019, <https://www.golosameriki.com/a/syria-russia-iran/4900974.html>. Access Date 28/12/2022.

⁵¹² Sergei Ryabkov, “Top Kremlin Official: We Are Not That Threatening,” interview by Frederik Pleitgen, CNN, January 25, 2019, <https://edition.cnn.com/videos/world/2019/01/25/sergei-ryabkov-russian-deputy-foreign-minister-pleitgn-dnt-tsr-vpx.cnn>. Access Date 28/12/2022.

Thus, Iran combines a dual role for Russia in Syria (as well as in the Middle East as a whole), representing both a regional ally and a competitor. The Russian political elite is aware of the trend of a gradual increase in tensions with Tehran as the Iranian military presence in Syria continues, which is viewed as a tangible rising threat to Russian interests in the Middle East. To contain Iran and to maintain its leading position in the region, Russia need to adequately balance against this threat. As can be seen from the example above, Russia is successfully coping with this by using Israel as a counterbalance to Iran, which is its main enemy and target in the Middle East. Israel, in its turn, recognizes the stabilizing role of Russia in the region and positively perceives its attempts to contain Iran. As long as the heightened confrontation between Iran and Israel has not harmed Russia's interests since the beginning of the Syrian crisis, Moscow prefers not to interfere.⁵¹³ Consequently, the international and regional pressure exerted on Iran by the United States and Israel is pushing it towards rapprochement with Russia and forcing Tehran to take into account Russian interests, thereby strengthening Moscow's regional position.

With Russia's military involvement in the Ukrainian conflict since February 2022, Iran's importance in Syria has increased for Moscow, as it experiencing difficulties to mobilize internal resources for two fronts.

5.4. How the Ukrainian War Affected Russia's Position in the Syrian Conflict

Russia's military successes in Syria and the strengthening of its regional and international position have influenced the perception of the Russian leadership regarding the potential success of a military operation in Ukraine. In reality, the results of Russia's military invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, in a fairly short time, demonstrated its unpreparedness and miscalculation of the actual and real distribution of power. It is likely that the display of advanced developments of the military-industrial complex and the silence of negative aspects and failures formed an incomplete or contradictory picture in the perception of the Russian leader about the military readiness of the state, without taking into account its nuclear arsenal. In addition, the lack of clarity in the international

⁵¹³ Basel Haj Jasem, "Moscow and Tehran in Syria: Competition or Partnership?," *Daily Sabah*, September 5, 2020, <https://www.dailysabah.com/opinion/op-ed/moscow-and-tehran-in-syria-competition-or-partnership>. Access Date 26/12/2022.

system regarding the intentions of other actors could create the misperception that Russia would experience a similar Syrian scenario of Western impotence and relative non-interference in the conflict in Ukraine. In this regard, it is obvious that Russia has strategically miscalculated.

Against the backdrop of a protracted positional and attrition warfare in Ukraine, the possibility of further Russian military presence on the same scale has become questionable. The Kremlin responded quickly, announcing an imminent, but partial, reduction of its military contingent in Syria, withdrawing its Su-25 attack squadron, a battery of S-300 anti-aircraft surface-to-air missile systems and the cargo ship SPARTA III.⁵¹⁴

However, so far, the conflict in Ukraine has not led to a significant reduction in Russia's tactical capabilities in Syria, but rather undermined its regional influence and the perception of it by the Middle Eastern countries as a "balancer" or an alternative economic and political partner, since its position turned out to be quite vulnerable in the conditions of military presence in the two countries. Realizing the consequences of the current situation and rejecting any option to lose its regional position, for the achievement of which a significant part of the domestic resources was extracted and mobilized, Moscow is making efforts to strengthen its diplomatic presence in the Arab countries. However, the image of a Russian foreign policy backed by hard power is eroding amid Russia's military setbacks in Ukraine, negatively affecting the perception by Middle Eastern countries of its ostensible power position, which it has successfully used over the past decade.

5.5. Evaluating Neoclassical Realist Theory

The results of this case study as part of a theory testing mean that, in the case of the Syrian conflict, structural justifications alone are insufficient to explain Russia's behavior. Only the threat of overthrow of the Assad regime in Syria would probably not have caused a corresponding reaction from Moscow, which explains its strategic timing for intervening in the conflict. However, the threat to the survival of the Putin regime, coupled with the

⁵¹⁴ Anton Mardasov, "Keeping Up Appearances: The Ukraine War's Effect on Russian Deployments in Syria," *Middle East Institute*, December 16, 2022, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/keeping-appearances-ukraine-wars-effect-russian-deployments-syria>. Access Date 31/12/2022.

strengthening of the military elite after the successes in Georgia in 2008 and, in particular, in Ukraine in 2014, offers an explanation of why Russia did not intervene militarily earlier in the Syrian conflict, respectively, confirming hypotheses 1 and 2. Using the Syrian case to assert itself as a great power and increase its influence in the Middle East, Russia focused on maintaining its gains and position in the system, rather than attempting to maximize its power in order to seek regional hegemony, preferring the balance of power, thereby confirming the validity of hypothesis 4.

5.6. Historical-Comparative Perspective on Contemporary Russian Foreign Policy: Some Patterns Revisited

Comparing and contrasting the current pattern of Russia's foreign policy behavior with earlier ones within the framework of three large historical eras of Russia – contemporary Russian Federation, the Soviet Union and imperial Russia – allows defining the distinctive features of Russian foreign policy towards the Middle East in the Putin era. Summarizing the data obtained in the course of the study, the synthesis of the systemic and domestic correlates of Russian foreign policy helps to identify and elucidate the continuities and change between three above-mentioned epochs.

Historically, Russia's interaction with the Middle East has been conditioned by the development and behavior of Western countries, creating a complex configuration of forces in the region. As Andrei P. Tsygankov notes, one of the main criteria for Russia's foreign policy choices over the centuries has been the extent to which the Russian establishment perceives and evaluates the international actions of the West in recognizing Russia as an equal and legitimate member of the world community.⁵¹⁵ Thus, the Middle East was assigned multifaceted roles, being an arena of confrontation with the West, a “key” to global power projection and regional influence, a buffer zone, a “soft underbelly,” a tool to contain regional players, an ideological ally and an economic competitor. With all the variety of roles assigned to it, Russia's foreign policy in the region has evolved, retaining some elements, modifying them or adding new dimensions to its regional strategy.

⁵¹⁵ Tsygankov, *Russia's Foreign Policy*, 1.

First and foremost, it must be borne in mind the geographic scope in the relations between Russia and the Middle East on the temporal scale, since this structural modifier is crucial for determining the pattern of strategic interaction within the given international system. Geographically, the Russian borders were closest to the Middle East in the imperial period, and the most distant are the borders of the modern Russian Federation. The Soviet Union was also geographically close to the region and politically involved in regional affairs, so from a geopolitical point of view, the USSR perceived itself as a Middle Eastern power with a special right to take its opinion into account in Middle Eastern issues, primarily due to its geographical location and historical past linking it with the region.⁵¹⁶

While the interaction of Russia in the imperial times with the Middle East began with ideological foundations, it eventually took the form of a geopolitical projection of Russian power, which was related with the transition from the religious autocratic Russia to the increasingly secular sovereign statehood in the seventeenth century, which coincided with the coming to power of Peter the Great. Although the religion embodied in the Eastern Orthodox Church continued to play a prominent role, from now on it increasingly fit into the general context of the Russian grand strategy. Just like in the time of the imperial Russia, Moscow's current foreign policy engage the Russian Orthodox Church, employing it as an instrument and its lever of influence, including in the Middle East. In this vein, Russia's international policy in the imperial period, along with Europe, became a policy of accumulating national power.⁵¹⁷ Such a political transformation prompted Russian growing ambitions to expand its borders and reach the shores of warm seas.

As for the Soviet foreign policy in the Middle East, it was quite effective in terms of Soviet presence and control over regional affairs, especially during the period from the 1950s to the 1970s. Since during the Cold War the Middle East was an arena of confrontation between the two superpowers, the United States and the USSR, the main goals of Soviet foreign policy in the Middle East were to ensure such conditions under which the prestige of the USSR and its status as a superpower were preserved.

⁵¹⁶ Mark V. Kaupi and R. Craig Natio, eds., *The Soviet Union and the Middle East in the 1980s: Opportunities, Constraints, and Dilemmas* (Toronto: Lexington Books, 1983), 43.

⁵¹⁷ Tsygankov, *Russia's Foreign Policy*, 2.

Given the wary attitude of the leadership of the Arab countries towards the communist ideology and its actual rejection, despite the orientation of some of them towards the Soviet Union (such as Gamal Abdel Nasser, Ba'athists and other Arab nationalists), Moscow pushed back its ideological and doctrinal goals, sacrificing them and giving priority to the pragmatic approach, incorporating the Middle East into the framework of its larger strategy. The restrained reaction of the Soviet Union to the repressions carried out against the Arab communists leads to this conclusion.⁵¹⁸ Comparing the Soviet period with the Putin era, it is pertinent to highlight that the Soviet Union built mainly friendly relations with the anti-Western revolutionary regimes in the region, while Putin managed to establish a constructive dialogue with all Middle Eastern governments, as well as a number of significant regional non-state actors. Back to the Soviet Union, despite the change in political formation, it still retained its adherence to certain features of the imperial Russian foreign policy in the Middle East.

It is apparent that the Cold War period, spanning decades, was characterized by ups and downs in relations between the Soviet Union and the countries of the Middle East. Various theoretical schools interpret the goals of Soviet foreign policy in the region in different ways. Thus, the proponents of defensive realism argue about the defensive nature of the Soviet foreign policy in the Middle East, aimed at ensuring the security of its flanks and maintaining a buffer zone in the region, as well as preempting any hostile actions directed against the Soviet Union through Middle Eastern proxies. This perspective is reinforced by Russia's behavior towards Iran at the beginning of the World War II.⁵¹⁹ Offensive realists claim that Moscow's goals in the Middle East during the Soviet period were to secure a dominant position in order to prevent the United States and its allies from having access to the region's rich energy resources, strategic communications routes and other assets.⁵²⁰

The penetration of the Soviet Union into the Middle East was expressed in its aggressive policy, which included ideological, military and economic components, thanks to which Moscow gained political leverage and the opportunity to project its power regionally, as

⁵¹⁸ Tsipis, "Soviet and Contemporary Russian Foreign Policy," 8.

⁵¹⁹ Tsipis, "Soviet and Contemporary Russian Foreign Policy," 9.

⁵²⁰ Robert O. Freedman, *Soviet Policy toward the Middle East since 1970*, 3rd ed. (New York: Praeger, 1982), 1.

well as globally, through military-strategic assets in the form of naval bases, Soviet military presence and air force overflight right.⁵²¹

However, the extensive presence of the Soviet Union in the region, expressed in the provision of material and military assistance, confronted it with the choice of intervening in local affairs. Meaning, on the one hand, the Soviet Union was at risk of intervening in regional military conflicts on the side of its Arab clients. On the other hand, the refusal to support them meant the loss of influence, prestige and trust in the region.⁵²²

By the end of the Cold War, with the fading power of the Soviet Union, its influence in the Middle East became increasingly blurred. As Western observers noted, during this period, Soviet foreign policy was characterized by sharp jumps in escalation and complete indifference to regional affairs.⁵²³

During the 1990s, interest in the Middle East waned in proportion to the growth of Western sentiment among the Russian political elite, which eventually almost ousted the Middle East from the Russian agenda. Under the leadership of then Foreign Minister Kozyrev, Russian foreign policy contrasted the “authoritarian” and “backward” East with the “democratic” and “prosperous” West.⁵²⁴ Identifying Russia as an overly Asian state, he promoted the idea of transforming Russia’s characteristic Eastern despotism into Western democracy.⁵²⁵ Many of his supporters were inclined to believe that the Middle East was following a similar path with the Soviet Union and, due to its undemocratic nature, would eventually collapse. This policy continued until Yevgeny Primakov, the immediate mastermind behind the ideas of multipolarity and Russia’s pivot to the East, began to serve as Minister of Foreign Affairs and later as Prime Minister of Russia. Turning to the balance of power politics, Primakov advocated Russia’s global role in preventing the formation of a dominant opposing coalition or hegemon in the international system by maintaining global balance in relations with all foreign partners,

⁵²¹ Shlomo N. Sas, “Gorbachev’s New International Outlook and the Eastern Mediterranean” (Defense analytical study, Air University, 1990), 4.

⁵²² Tsipis, “Soviet and Contemporary Russian Foreign Policy,” 9.

⁵²³ Richard Herrmann, “Soviet Policy and the Arab-Israeli Conflict: Actions, Patterns, and Interpretations,” *Political Science Quarterly* 102, no. 3 (Autumn, 1987): 417-440, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2151401>. Access Date 12/02/2023.

⁵²⁴ Tsygankov, *Russia’s Foreign Policy*, 75.

⁵²⁵ Eugene Bazhanov, “Russian Policy toward China,” in *Russian Foreign Policy since 1990*, ed. Peter Shearman (New York: Routledge, 1995), loc. 295 of 600, FB2.

both Western and Eastern. In his understanding, Russia's geopolitical position as part of Europe and Asia shaped its multilateral or multi-vector foreign policy interests, which included the Middle East. Such a position, in his opinion, contributed to Russia's maintenance of the status of a great power.⁵²⁶ Referring to the times of imperial Russia, this situation echoed the strategy advocated by the State Chancellor Alexander Gorchakov after Russia's defeat in the Crimean War and, accordingly, the signing of the Treaty of Paris of 1856. Then the defeated Russia set a course towards subordinating foreign policy to the needs of the country's internal development in order to create a basis for advancing its further plans to assert the status of a great power.⁵²⁷ Primakov was guided by the same logic. As a firm proponent of special relations with the countries of Asia and the Middle East, he sought to involve these states in the balancing against the growing influence of the West and its containment.⁵²⁸

The last two decades, marked by Vladimir Putin's stay in power, have made their own adjustments to Russia's foreign policy in the Middle East. In the early years of Putin's presidency, he continued Primakov's course towards the great power balancing, adding to it a new component of pragmatic cooperation, which was clearly shaped after the terrorist attacks on the United States in September 2001. He seized the opportunity to rapprochement with Washington by offering Russian support to the Bush administration in the fight against terrorism. Thus, in the early 2000s, Russia made an attempt to bandwagon with the United States, which corresponded to the early post-Soviet policy of the 90s, but, ultimately, the West did not perceive Russia as an equal global player. As such, the Putin era is characterized by a transition from pragmatic cooperation amid economic recovery and the emergence of new threats to a more assertive foreign policy against the background of economic decline, further developed into civilizational and asymmetric assertiveness.⁵²⁹ The culmination of such a foreign policy course in the Middle East was the relatively low-cost campaign in Syria in terms of material resources.

Unlike his predecessor, Boris Yeltsin, and his political associates, who accepted the new reality of Russia as a weak player, unable to manage world affairs and found itself on the

⁵²⁶ Tsygankov, *Russia's Foreign Policy*, 100.

⁵²⁷ Yevgeniy Primakov, "Rossiya v mirovoy politike" [Russia in world politics], *Mezhdunarodnaya zhizn'*, no. 5 (1998).

⁵²⁸ Tsygankov, *Russia's Foreign Policy*, 105.

⁵²⁹ Tsygankov, *Russia's Foreign Policy*, 22.

periphery of the great powers, Vladimir Putin rejected this state of affairs from the very beginning, aiming to return Russia to the so-called concert of the great powers.

Comparing modern Russia in the first decade of the 2000s with Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union, its position differed significantly in a negative direction. It had no political weight in solving not only world issues, but also regional problems. An illustrative example in this case is Moscow's attempt at mediation between Saddam Hussein and the West to prevent the invasion of Iraq in 2003, which ended in failure. Moreover, the former Soviet republics – Georgia and Ukraine – took part in the Iraq war, despite Russia's position on this issue, which further weakened its image of an influential player capable of managing global and regional affairs. Against this background, anti-Western sentiments and rhetoric of the Russian political establishment intensified, forcing out pro-Western politicians.

The second decade of the 2000s, in particular after the return of Vladimir Putin as President of Russia in 2012, is characterized by a shift to a more assertive course in foreign policy, expressed in an aggressive policy towards Ukraine and participation in the military campaign in Syria. Russia sought to compensate for the crisis in relations with the West, which deepened after the intervention in Ukraine, and to regain recognition as a global actor, by demonstrating its military power, aimed at securing its geopolitical significance.⁵³⁰

Thus, comparing the three eras, it is possible to distinguish continuity and change in Russia's foreign policy towards the Middle East. Throughout Russian history, its activity in the Middle East has been driven by strategic geopolitical ambitions. But unlike Imperial Russia, which pursued an expansionist policy and included new territories in its composition, Russia is geographically distant from the region. It has framed its strategy in the notion of multipolarity, rejecting bandwagoning and opting for a policy of balancing with Western powers that can be traced in its handling of the Iranian nuclear crisis and the Syrian conflict.

⁵³⁰ Tsybankov, *Russia's Foreign Policy*, 225-226.

CONCLUSION

Russia's foreign policy has always been the subject of close attention of the international community, politicians and researchers, and in recent years, interest in its study has been growing against the background of ongoing events in the international arena. This dissertation is devoted to one of its significant components, namely, Russia's foreign policy in the Middle East in the Putin era. This topic has been studied within the framework of neoclassical realist theory as the most appropriate research program for studying the causes-of-effects logic of Russia's foreign policy behavior in the international system and the regional subsystem as part of it. This study has attempted to aggregate, explain and evaluate systemic and domestic factors deemed crucial to Russian foreign policy in the Middle East and international outcomes drawing from Russia's political responses to systemic stimuli. The question arose about Russia's Middle Eastern ambitions in the wake of its rise, Russian foreign policy activity and successes in the international arena. The main question identified in the topic of this dissertation is whether Russia is seeking regional hegemony. In order to give a comprehensive answer to this question, it was decided to turn to the origins of Russian foreign policy in the Middle East and determine the continuity and change that had taken shape up to the modern period.

By referring to historical retrospective of Russian engagement with the Middle East region, applying systemic and domestic variables to the Russian foreign policy, and addressing to country-specific cases (Iran and Syria) as a dependent variable, this study has led to a comprehensive understanding about the nature of Russia's behavior towards the Middle East, elucidating its role in the region and its motivation, which has historical and contemporary features.

At the very beginning, Imperial Russia based its interaction with the Middle East on ideology, but eventually it took the form of a geopolitical projection of its power. It was associated with its desire to expand its borders and reach the shores of warm seas. Moreover, Russia has always been concerned about the security of its long borders; therefore, Russian leaders have perceived an immediate threat from the West and its "soft underbelly," which refers to the Caucasus and the Middle East.⁵³¹ In shaping the foreign

⁵³¹ Borshchevskaya, *Putin's War in Syria*, 7.

policy of the Russian Empire towards the Middle East, it is important to keep in mind the role of Peter the Great, since Vladimir Putin associates himself with him today. It was Peter the Great who placed “greatpowerness” (velikoderzhavnost’) and the expansion of borders to the coast of the southern seas at the head of the imperial Russian foreign policy, control over which could give Russia influence over the adjacent regions, including the Middle East. However, despite all the progressiveness of Peter the Great’s policy, Russia remained an economically weak country with limited material capabilities. That is why, under these conditions, its strategy was aimed at gaining control over geopolitically important nodes, control over which extended beyond its borders, and not at gaining control over the region as a whole.⁵³² Russia’s current behavior in the Middle East is of a similar nature, experiencing the issues of scarce material capabilities in the situation of economic weakness. Through its naval base in Tartus, Russia has access to the Mediterranean and its adjacent regions, but its influence in the Middle East and North Africa is generally limited.

Since the end of the eighteenth century, the so-called “Eastern question” has taken root in Russian foreign policy. Until the middle of the nineteenth century, Russia enjoyed its geopolitical influence within the international system and regional subsystem represented by its expanded role in the Levant and forward positions on the Mediterranean, but the turning point in its foreign policy was the defeat of Russia in the Crimean War. This defeat had a significant impact on Russia’s position and role in the Middle East, which lost its influence in the region for many decades.

The next turning point in the international system and Russian politics was World War I, as a result of which Russia had to gain Istanbul and control over the Straits, continuing to pursue its enduring national interests and its imperial ambitions. However, the Revolution that broke out in Russia brought the Bolsheviks to power, and later to the formation of the Soviet Union in 1922.

During the bipolar confrontation between the Soviet Union and the United States, Moscow successfully implemented foreign policy initiatives in the Middle East, entering into alliances with many countries and cooperating in various fields (political, economic, military, and cultural). But despite the change in political formation, the Soviet Union

⁵³² Borshchevskaya, *Putin’s War in Syria*, 11.

still remained committed to certain features of the imperial Russian foreign policy in the Middle East. Although it has changed its ideological discourse, the Soviet Union continued to be guided by aggressive and expansionist aspirations, pursuing an offensive policy towards its southern neighbors, namely Türkiye and Iran, and seeking to gain access to important geostrategic waterways and infrastructure to exercise its control over the adjacent regions. In particular, during World War II, the Soviet Union invaded and occupied Iran, firstly, to prevent Tehran from falling into the zone of influence of Nazi Germany, and, secondly, to gain access to oil fields and vital supply lines. At the end of World War II, the USSR reluctantly left Iran under international pressure, and demanded as reparations, among other things, a number of eastern territories of Türkiye and the right to a trusteeship over the Libyan province of Tripolitania.⁵³³ However, his demands were not met.

The view of the USSR and the United States on the world order became increasingly different after the end of World War II and eventually resulted in a bipolar confrontation, called the Cold War. Back in those days, Washington was not satisfied with a system based on the balance of power, appealing to its instability and failure in maintaining peace and security, proposing a new world order based on international institutions, but with a reservation about the leading role of the United States,⁵³⁴ such implicit, veiled hegemonic ambitions, which matured by the end of the Cold War with the dissolution of the USSR. Naturally, such an approach contradicted Stalin's worldview, who saw the USSR, one of the victors of World War II, as the dominant actor in the world order and a great power in the international system.

In the global confrontation between the Soviet Union and the United States, the great powers struggled to acquire clients and allies at the regional level in the Middle East, contributing to dramatic shifts in the international system, and, accordingly, making shifts in the relative distribution of power and influencing the level of external threat. With the collapse of the colonial system and the rise of Arab nationalism, the British and French power in the Middle East began to decline, creating a vacuum and opening a window of opportunity for other states to intervene. Despite the fact that Arab nationalists saw the

⁵³³ Robert O. Freedman, *Moscow and the Middle East: Soviet Policy since the Invasion of Afghanistan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 15.

⁵³⁴ Harry S. Truman, "Speech of President Harry S. Truman at a Symbolic Raising of the American Flag in Berlin, Germany," *Official Gazette of the Republic of the Philippines* 41, no. 6 (1945): 501.

former colonial powers as their enemy, the Soviet ideology did not become attractive to them. The first country in the Middle East to move closer to the USSR in the 1950s was Egypt, led by Gamal Abdel Nasser, whose anti-imperialist rhetoric coincided with the ideas of Marxism-Leninism. Systemic factors such as the collapse of the colonial system and its consequences, resulting in a decline of British and French power in the Middle East, the inability of the United States to cooperate with emerging political movements and revolutionary regimes, and domestic factors such as Nikita Khrushchev's and Gamal Abdel Nasser's concurring views on domestic development gave Moscow an advantage to achieve regional influence and prestige. Already in the 1970s, more than half of the Middle Eastern countries overthrew the monarchical regimes under the slogans of Arab nationalism and socialism, which was a significant success for Moscow's foreign policy. At the same time, the USSR gained access to the Egyptian support bases in Alexandria and Mersa Matruh, and also established a naval base in Tartus, in Syria, thereby strengthening its regional position and expanding its influence by projecting its power.

However, despite the initial successes of the Soviet Union in the Middle East, the subsequent "offensive was in a state of total collapse."⁵³⁵ None of the Middle Eastern countries was completely faithful to friendly relations with the Soviet Union, turning to its adversary if such an opportunity presented itself and was beneficial to them. When Mikhail Gorbachev came to power with his strategy of new political thinking aimed at improving relations with the West, the Middle East fell into the shadow of Soviet foreign policy.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia was significantly weakened by both geopolitical shifts and the domestic situation. From the standpoint of neoclassical realism, the international system has undergone changes, including structural ones. The once huge Russian Empire and then the Soviet Union lost their territories, geographically distancing itself from the Middle East that apparently modified the system effects on the interaction process of both entities. Geography as a structural modifier has changed the configuration of the international structure, conditioning the relative distribution of power and power trends in the international system. However, this did not diminish Russia's desire to have

⁵³⁵ Mohamed Heikal, *The Sphinx and the Commissar: The Rise and Fall of Soviet Influence in the Middle East* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), 275.

access to warm seas and exercise its influence in the Middle East. Thus, continuity has been preserved in modern Russian foreign policy with regard to its aspiration for the great power status, which it has achieved in the past and is not going to abandon it in the present or the near future; its participation in international affairs on an equal basis with other major actors, in particular the West; and also its access to strategically important waterways in order to project its power at the global level, as well as to have access to the critical trade routes and their infrastructure. It should be borne in mind that Russia's participation in landmark historical events testifies to its special role in world history, which, among other things, justifies its claims to be an integral part of the new world order, assigning itself a high position and a prominent role within the international system.

In the 1990s, Russia's low interest and participation in Middle Eastern affairs persisted until Yevgeny Primakov tried to revive Russia's activities in the region. Although his efforts were not given enough attention during the Yeltsin presidency, they received the greatest impetus after Vladimir Putin came to power. Consequently, Russia's foreign policy towards the Middle East was shaped not only under the influence of the international factors, but also under the influence of the perception of the Russian leader and the political elite (unit-level intervening variable). Primakov can be considered the main figure, "the grandfather" of modern Russian foreign policy, who played a key role in its shifts, influencing Vladimir Putin's strategic choice in favor of multipolarity and Russia's pivot to the East, which had a significant impact on both international outcomes and the structure of the international system itself.

Thus, from the time of the Russian Empire to the Putin era, a string of events has connected the past with the present like a red thread. Times are changing, state formations replace each other, the geopolitical situation is being transformed, but the trace of history remains, expressed in continuity with respect to certain items on the foreign policy agenda. The historical path of Russian foreign policy constitutes an important component for understanding the nature and character of current Russia's interaction with the Middle East, as its current pattern matches with the Russian traditional foreign policy strategies. Comparing the goals of Russian leadership in different historical periods (Imperial, Soviet and contemporary Russia), it can be concluded that throughout history, the common goal of Russia was to spread its influence in the Middle East. During the imperial period, the struggle for geopolitical dominance took place, as a rule, with the means of hard power.

The Soviet Union used such means as arms sales, economic assistance and diplomatic support, spreading communist ideas and supporting national democratic parties, although this line did not have much success in the region, but it did legitimize Soviet regime domestically. In fact, the Putin regime also uses foreign policy to legitimize itself in Russian society. Unlike previous historical periods, modern Russia found itself among the outsiders in the region in the early 2000s, so its primary goal was to restore the lost position of a great power, which fit into the broader context of its grand strategy. The Middle East provided such an opportunity to assert itself in an upgraded status and gain a foothold in the region. In addition, with the growing international isolation of Russia, it faced the challenge of diversifying its economic ties, which prompted Moscow to look for potential investors and expand trade ties in the Arab states of the Persian Gulf. A new dimension for the foreign policy of modern Russia has become security due to the need to repel the threat of radical Islam. Thus, to fully explain the foreign policy behavior of modern Russia in the region, the external environment and domestic political dynamics, with illustrative case studies of Russian foreign policy towards the Iranian nuclear crisis and the Syrian conflict, considered in the Putin era, with appropriate historical references, reveal a comprehensive perspective on the formed pattern of Russian foreign policy, into which the Middle East fits organically.

Russian foreign policy in the Middle East in the Putin era has been transformed, it has acquired a new form in comparison with the Yeltsin period and with the more recent first decade of the twentieth century, but its content continues to retain the features of the traditional approach. From a minor actor in the Middle East region in the post-Cold War era, Russia has become a major player. This evolution of Russia's role in the Middle East has occurred due to the combined influence of systemic and domestic factors. Russia accumulated its power, increasing its material capabilities and promoting the narrative of its greatpowerness. Although its strategic environment has gradually changed from permissive to restrictive one, Russia has managed to use the opportunities it has created to its advantage in order to assert itself as a global player. Against this backdrop, Kremlin has stepped up Russia's Middle Eastern activity.

In this vein, Vladimir Putin's first presidential term (2000-2004) was characterized by the consolidation of his power at the domestic level. In the following presidential terms, in the wake of strengthening his authority and improving the domestic situation, a new

impetus was given to foreign policy activity, which took on the character of an assertive foreign policy, including its relations with the Middle East. During this period, there emerged a number of events that seem particularly salient in evaluating Russian foreign policy towards Middle East and were chosen for case research, that are Russia's involvement in the Iranian nuclear crisis with its set of diplomatic maneuvers avoiding military tools to resolve it and Russia's military intervention in Syria in 2015, which represents a turning point in Russia's struggle for its "rightful" place in the international system through the Middle Eastern arena. It is also of interest that Russia applies different approaches (non-military and military) to these states in the same geographical area (Middle East).

There were several factors that affected the international system, which, in its turn, allowed Russia to be more active actor within it. Firstly, it is an economic rise of China in the early twenty-first century and, secondly, the imperial and financial over-stretch of the United States.⁵³⁶ In a multipolar international system, the strategic environment tends to change in accordance with the presence of threats and opportunities and the scope of their imminence and magnitude. The first decade of 2000s was characterized by an apparently permissive strategic environment for Russia, which has gradually changed to the opposite in the last decade. Therefore, the first presidential term of Vladimir Putin (2000-2004) was broadly associated with his commitment to the rapprochement and cooperation with the West, demonstrating a partial shift from the Primakov's balancing foreign policy and a turn towards great-power pragmatism devoid of ideological underpinnings, in contrast to the Soviet period. However, this idyll in relations between Russia and the West did not last long. A number of systemic factors, such as the intensification of terrorist activities domestically and globally, color revolutions in the post-Soviet space and the destabilization of Central Asia, required more assertive measures to protect national interests, as they posed a threat to Russia's survival. At the same time, the internal stabilization of the situation in Russia, associated with its economic growth, contributed to the accumulation of domestic resources for an effective response to systemic imperatives. In this vein, Putin's idiosyncrasy influenced the perception of systemic stimuli, which resulted in the development of a new ideology that

⁵³⁶ Phillips, "Structure, Agency," 70.

combined Primakov's ideas and traditional values inherent in Russian society as opposed to Western liberal values. Thus, he formed the image of Russia as a modern great power, which has a right to occupy an equal position in the international system with other great powers, which has its own voice and is able to influence international processes, that is, to exercise and project its power. As Russian researcher Fyodor Lukyanov describes, "Russia once and for all wants to reserve a seat at the table where the future of the world is decided."⁵³⁷ The West, continuing to ignore Russia's attempts to be recognized as a great power, along with proceeding with its efforts to impose a Western-dominated world order, has pushed Russia to change its foreign policy, which has acquired an assertive anti-Western connotation. Using the potential of Russia, defined, among other things, by the concept of "structural modifiers" in neoclassical realism, the Kremlin's policy responses to systemic incentives modified the effect of the system's structure, expressed in the relative distribution of capabilities, on the parameters of Russia's strategic interaction with other actors, including the Middle East.

As neoclassical realism posits, structural modifiers (geography, technological diffusion, and offense-defense balance in military technologies) amounts to the independent systemic variables that affect the pattern of strategic interaction of states in a given international system. Geography is a rather stable variable in the modern international system, capable of changing mainly as a result of military conquest.⁵³⁸ Russia in the Putin era is a vivid example of adjustments in the international system, because of its expansionist policy. It skillfully uses geography in its national interests. The question of whether Russia belongs to Europe or Asia, on the one hand, creates a number of constraints for it in its interaction with other states and ensuring its security, effectively responding to external threats. On the other hand, such ambiguity provides it the opportunity to balance between Europe and Asia, and in different periods to give preference to one or another foreign policy direction.

Technological diffusion and offense-defense balance in military technologies have contributed to Russia's strategic advances in the Middle East. After the 2008 military reform and the swift annexation of Crimea in 2014, Russia has become more confident

⁵³⁷ Fyodor Lukyanov, "Indispensable Nation," Expert Opinions, *Valdai Club Foundation*, September 23, 2013, https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/indispensable_nation/. Access Date 29/12/2022.

⁵³⁸ Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory*, 42.

in terms of its material capabilities, providing Russian diplomacy with a backbone of hard power. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia has managed for the first time to project and retain power in a remote region outside its traditional sphere of influence. It turned out to be a competitive arms producer, increasing arms sales both to its traditional partners, such as Iran and Syria, and to US allies and clients, such as Egypt and Türkiye, which is also a member of NATO. Moreover, Russia is actively seeking access to the market of the Gulf Arab countries.

According to neoclassical realism assumption, purely systemic factors do not reflect the whole picture of the cause-of-effects link of foreign policy responses and international outcomes. They are translated through the prism of the perception of norms, attitudes, values and beliefs of the leader of the state and the strategic culture that influences the decision-making process and policy implementation, which, in turn, are also influenced by the strategic culture, the character of interactions between the state and society, and the institutional structure of the state. As William Wohlforth noted, “If power influences the course of international politics, it must do so largely through the perceptions of the people who makes decisions on behalf of the states.”⁵³⁹ Indeed, the central figure of the foreign policy executive is the President of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin, who has concentrated power in his hands. This is a historically developed feature of Russia, which requires a tough hand to keep its vast expanses under control. Consequently, all important decisions pass through the prism of Putin’s perception, his values and prior experience. Vladimir Putin responded assertively, if not aggressively, to the changing regional environment, as evidenced by a number of events in Russian foreign policy, namely the 2008 Georgia war, the annexation of Crimea to Russia in 2014, the military intervention in Syria in 2015, and the most recent conflict in Ukraine in 2022. Thus, the shifting structure of the international system provided space for Russia to act.

Russian foreign policy represents a combination of particular ideological tendencies and cold calculation. The changes in identities (from a weak state after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, playing second fiddle in international affairs, to greatpowerness) and discourses (the need to revise the international order to make it fairer from the Russia’s point of view) that occurred in Russia in the first decade of the twenty-first century were

⁵³⁹ Wohlforth, *The Elusive Balance*, 2.

the result of major economic (growth mainly due to significant oil revenues associated with high oil prices) and political (centralization of power) changes. As soon as Vladimir Putin came to power in the late 1990s, he showed a clear determination to restore Russian status as a great power. Putin himself has become synonymous with power and policy in the contemporary Russia over the past two decades. The scale of his authority can be gauged by the discourse that scholars and public use to define Putin's stay in power, such as "the Putin phenomenon," "the Putin system" or the quasi-ideology "Putinism," as well as "Putin's Russia," which represents the considerable association between leader and country.⁵⁴⁰ Eventually the present study itself is limited to a time frame called "the Putin era."

There is a number of fundamental beliefs in accordance with which Putin builds his strategy such as unwavering belief in Russia's eternal "greatness" and unique identity; entrenched political and social conservatism; and a deep distrust of democratic sentiments. In the terms of neoclassical realism, the main foreign policy goal of Putin's Russia comes from domestic conditions and represents its own regime's self-preservation. Whatever the nature of Russian foreign policy narrative, it is the result of domestic politics and leader's personal interest. Russia's participation in the Middle East affairs is one of the indicators of its promotion as an indispensable power, without which there can be no real security in the world.⁵⁴¹ Given the number of years during which Putin has been in power, an entire political generation has grown up in Russia, having absorbed a characteristic strategic culture. Accordingly, one should not expect any radical changes in it in the nearest future, but it cannot be denied that there can be certain shifts in the long-term perspective.

The strategic culture plays important role in the Russian foreign policy, which is based on realist assumptions from Thomas Hobbes, Niccolò Machiavelli and is seen from the geopolitics of Alexander Dugin. Relying on this background, the most important feature is a belief in the primacy of hard power. Back in the days of Tsar Alexander III (1881-

⁵⁴⁰ Politkovskaya, *Putin's Russia*; Taylor, *The Code of Putinism*; White and McAllister, "The Putin Phenomenon," 604-628; and Grigory Yavlinsky, *The Putin System: An Opposing View* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019).

⁵⁴¹ Lo, *Going Legit*, 1.

1894), he noted that Russia had just two allies, the armed forces and the navy.⁵⁴² The ultimate goal is not to please others, but to win by any means necessary. Since the beginning of the civil war in Syria, Russia has played a key role in the settlement of the crisis by diplomatic means, although in September 2015 it has launched its military operation in Syria. International condemnation of Russian actions in Syria did not affect it much. Vladimir Putin, as a successful leader against his predecessor's Boris Yeltsin failures, is seen effective by the political elite and public in the achieving his aims. Negotiating from the position of strength, using leverage where it is possible and not surrendering to others are the key notions to understand Russian strategic culture. Russia effectively uses such means as military might and geopolitical possibilities. It can be seen from the major military exercises, such as Vostok-2018, which are used to convey the message of Russian power and self-confidence.⁵⁴³ In addition, one of the tools effectively applied in Russia's foreign policy is the use of an ideological and legal background for tactics that actually serves as a geopolitical driven strategy, gradually leading Russia to the status of a great power. In the Syrian case, official rhetoric is Russian commitment to international law and to the Syrian state, not to Assad personally. Although Russia's activities in the Middle East bring some risks and had an impact on its relations with the United States, it has received undeniable benefits, such as enhanced global prestige, greater regional influence, some new economic investment, and added leverage over Western adversaries.⁵⁴⁴

However, Russian foreign policy towards Middle East cannot be divided from the numerous actors of political and economic elite, directly or indirectly involved in the decision-making process, as Russian economic considerations move to the top priorities in the foreign policy, especially in the last decade. This study highlights the importance of informal politics in Russia, traced against the backdrop of a deep Russian cultural-historical institutionalism, which stretches back to the time of Catherine the Great. Modern Russia is characterized by an essentially similar model of imperial times, when the state was ruled by factionalized and competing personal networks that had an

⁵⁴² *Putin Agrees with Emperor That Russia's Only Allies Are Army and Navy*, April 16, 2015, <http://tass.com/russia/789866>. Access Date 11/12/2018.

⁵⁴³ Lo, *Going Legit*, 7.

⁵⁴⁴ Lund, *Russia in the Middle East*, 46.

influence on the choices of tsarist foreign policy.⁵⁴⁵ This model was also adopted by the Bolsheviks up to Stalin's time.⁵⁴⁶ But despite the continuity that can be traced in this direction, it would still be imprudent to assume that Russia only uses the historically established governance tools. The combination of internal and external factors in a certain time frame determines the formation of such a governance system within which it operates. This is especially visible on the example of Russian domestic situation in the last decade, which is swinging progressively, threatening the survival of Putin's regime. In this situation, the Middle Eastern agenda received a new impetus in an effort to assert Putin's legitimacy in Russian public opinion. Thus, domestic intervening variables are of great importance in explaining Russian foreign policy, as they reveal a deeper understanding of specific responses to international systemic pressures.

The Arab Spring has become a major challenge for both the regional subsystem and the international system, which opened up a period of uncertainty, but at the same time provided Russia the opportunity to return to the region. Yet, Russia has responded to the systemic pressure through its own lens of perceptions and political calculations. On the one hand, the Arab Spring was perceived as a threat to Russian domestic security due to increasing growth of radical Islamists in the Middle East and their possible expansion on the other Muslim regions as, for example, Caucasus in Russia or return of militants from post-Soviet countries and destabilization of situation, and on the other hand, it was seen as an opportunity to project its power at the regional and global levels. Thus, the Kremlin decided to kill two birds with one stone and cooperated against the imminent threat to its security and stability, and also seized the opportunity to increase its influence in the Middle East and upgrade its status in the international system by supporting the legitimate government of Syria.

The decade preceding the events in Syria is marked by the number of structural changes that have had a significant impact on the conflict and have shaped the reaction of external players on both regional and global levels. The gradual shift from unipolarity to multipolarity would become more visible during the Syrian conflict, but its features were already present by 2011, starting with the strategic miscalculation of the 2003 Iraq war

⁵⁴⁵ Robert K. Massie, *Catherine the Great: Portrait of a Woman* (New York: Random House, 2012).

⁵⁴⁶ J. Arch Getty, *Practicing Stalinism: Bolsheviks, Boyars, and the Persistence of Tradition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013).

and its unintended consequences , which resulted in the destabilization of the region and the aggravation of the power struggle, which became even more acute against the background of a wave of protests and civil wars. The balance of power in the region has become volatile. The power vacuum in the absence of a regional hegemon has facilitated the intervention of regional and global actors along with their proxies in weak states such as Iraq, Syria and Yemen. Against this background, Russia's military intervention in Syria caused an increase in its economic and military influence throughout the region, which in turn has shifted the distribution of power in the Middle Eastern subsystem, affecting the configuration of relations with regional players, in particular, Iran and Türkiye, as well as the traditional global adversary, the United States.

Hence, the pivotal moment in Russian foreign policy towards the Middle East in the Putin era has become Russian military involvement in the Syrian civil war in September 2015 to support the regime of President Bashar al-Assad. The political and military support of the Syrian government forces has demonstrated Russia's ability to extract and mobilize the required resources when needed. This was a radical change in the Russia's strategy towards the region as it was the first time since the end of the Cold War that Russia has conducted military activities outside the post-Soviet space. Such actions were justified by several reasons that show the neoclassical realism's interplay between domestic and foreign factors, such as the avoidance of regime change, the scenario preferred by the United States and its allies, and ensuring the survival of the Putin regime; strengthening of Russia's regional position and its assertion as a major power whose interests have to be reckoned with; maintaining the balance of power in the region by curbing Iran's ambitions and maintaining constructive relations with all major actors in the Middle East (anti-Western (Iran and Syria) and pro-Western Arab regimes (Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Egypt), American-installed regimes (Iraq and Afghanistan under Hamid Karzai and his successor Ashraf Ghani), Israel, as well as non-state actors such as Fatah, Hamas and Hezbollah); and the relative weakening of US influence in the region. From strategic point of view, Damascus is of great importance for Russia providing opportunities for political influence and military projection, primarily through the Tartus naval base: firstly, it is a South gate that unlocks Russia's geographical isolation; secondly, it is a way to strategically expand its "defence perimeter"; and, finally, it is an opportunity to project

its influence within the region and globally.⁵⁴⁷ These assertions make it possible to focus the research on Syria, which has taken a central position in the Russian Middle East foreign policy ever since the collapse of the Soviet Union.⁵⁴⁸

Although Syria is considered as a nexus of Russian campaign to expand and deepen its regional influence, it does not seek to become a regional hegemon in the Middle East. As Stepanova observes, the military involvement of Russia in the conflict in Syria represents a unilateral act of imposing multilateralism, since Russia's initially limited material resources and its extraction capacity imply the engagement of other regional and global actors in the post-conflict phase of crisis management.⁵⁴⁹ Simply put, Syria represents a valuable regional agent for Russia that provided an opportunity for reasserting its great power status. Moreover, some scholars argue that Moscow needs Washington's support to assert its role as a great power.⁵⁵⁰ Hence, Russia's aspirations are reduced to the desire to enhance its influence. Over the past decade, Moscow has managed to prove its role as an influential player in the Middle East by consolidating its power and strengthening its ties with a wide range of partners, which is also considered as one of the means of Russia's strategy to avoid international isolation.⁵⁵¹ However, the question of how long it will be able to enjoy the results of its success in Syria and how much power will be enough to maintain its position in the Middle East, taking into account domestic and external factors, remains open.

The alliance between Russia and Iran was created against the backdrop of the unfolding events in Syria. This became possible due to similar worldviews and the pursuit of resembling foreign policy interests, primarily aimed at consolidating power against Western military intervention. But the prerequisites for their rapprochement are beyond the Syrian issue. Russia is a long-standing partner of Iran, which has repeatedly supported it on the nuclear dossier. However, this alliance is not without flaws, because despite the support of Iran in the nuclear issue, Russia has repeatedly used it as a bargaining chip in

⁵⁴⁷ Didier, "The Syrian Conflict," 26.

⁵⁴⁸ Tugce Varol Sevim and Merve Sune Ozel, "Rethinking Russian Mission to Syria," *European Scientific Journal* 9, no. 19 (July 2013): 445.

⁵⁴⁹ Ekaterina Stepanova, "Does Russia Have a Grand Plan for the Middle East?," *Politique étrangère* 2016, no. 2 (2016): 7.

⁵⁵⁰ Trenin, *What Is Russia Up To*, 82.

⁵⁵¹ Nikolay Kozhanov, *Russian Policy across the Middle East: Motivations and Methods* (London: Chatham House, 2018), 5.

the confrontation with the Western counterparts, applying the carrot and stick policy towards Iran. After Vladimir Putin came to power and Russia sought to establish ties with the Middle Eastern countries, the most suitable partner for returning to the region at that time was Iran, with which Moscow began cooperation back in the 90s by signing an agreement for the construction of a nuclear power plant in Bushehr. But in fact, a nuclear scandal erupted immediately, the essence of which was the revelation of information about the development of military nuclear program in Iran.

As the Iranian nuclear crisis unfolded, Moscow drew a distinction between what it considered peaceful nuclear cooperation and the threatening development of Iranian nuclear program. From the very beginning, Kremlin stressed the lack of convincing evidence of a “possible military dimension” of the Iranian nuclear program, as well as Iran’s right to nuclear energy, thereby protecting its national interests related to lucrative contracts in the Iranian nuclear sphere.⁵⁵² When the nuclear issue was ultimately referred to the UN Security Council, Russia allied with China to support Iran and slow down pressure on Tehran by eroding the drafts of sanctions resolutions.⁵⁵³

Systemic and domestic factors influencing Russia’s foreign policy regarding the Iranian nuclear crisis and the civil war in Syria are important for analyzing and explaining the outcomes of Russia’s foreign policy in the Middle East as a whole, since one can trace the general line of Russian foreign policy behavior and its nuances in the strategic environment, in which various actors operate, whether of global or regional scale. This research has shed light on the true motives of Russia’s behavior, whether it is trying to fill the vacuum left by the United States in the region and is striving to become the dominant power, i.e. the hegemon.

Since the time frame studied in this dissertation covers decades under the same person Vladimir Putin has been in power (the period of Dmitry Medvedev’s rule is also considered within the framework of Putin’s patronage), this research provides an opportunity to observe not only its foreign policy, but to trace the pattern of Russia’s grand strategic adjustment in relation to the Middle East too. If during the first decade of the 2000s Russia sought to establish and strengthen relations with the Middle East,

⁵⁵² Pieper, “Perspectives,” 214.

⁵⁵³ David Patrikarakos, *Nuclear Iran. The Birth of an Atomic State* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2012), 224.

seeking for a way to “return” to the region,⁵⁵⁴ then after 2010 it has become significantly more active in the region, especially after the launch of the military operation in Syria. Its strategic dimension has also been changed, from the security area to the political and economic sphere. In fact, Russia’s strategic adjustment towards the Middle East was in contradiction with Russia’s strategic culture, namely its refusal to intervene militarily into the Middle East after the devastating war in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, Russia’s political elite took such a risk and reoriented its calculations in response to systemic imperatives that opened a window of opportunity for global power projection, as well as Russian assertion as a great power. Having achieved international recognition against the background of the active military phase of the Syrian conflict, Russia has faced the task of maintaining its status of influential regional player and gaining a foothold in the region in recent years. In the course of implementing this task, Russia faces some systemic constraints, as other regional players, such as Türkiye, Iran, and Saudi Arabia, also take part in the struggle for power and influence in the Middle East region, in conditions of limited resources and uncertainty about rivals’ intentions and capabilities. Moreover, its political dominance in the settlement of Syrian crisis and post-war reconstruction is under question. The reason for this lies in Russia’s domestic environment, namely in its economic weakness, since Moscow cannot simply mobilize its material and human resources in the absence of a threat that has been declared at the domestic level as a fight against terrorism and its possible penetration into the country. In addition, Russia’s military involvement in the Ukrainian crisis, which has become a central issue for the survival of Putin’s deeply personalized regime, as well as the informal politics system he has built, has undermined Russia’s state extraction capacity necessary to efficiently respond to systemic stimuli, in particular in the Middle East. However, despite these systemic and domestic constraints, Russia is not going to abandon the region as it plays a strategically important role in its political and economic interests. Rather, it will seek to maintain its position by acting through its proxies.

Russia’s foreign policy towards the Middle East represents a combination of traditional perception about the region as a proxy arena for the confrontation with the West and the

⁵⁵⁴ See, for example, Roland Dannreuther, “Understanding Russia’s Return to the Middle East,” *International Politics* 56 (2019): 726–742, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-018-0165-x>. Access Date 08/12/2022; Har-Zvi, “The Return”; and Stent, “Russia’s Return,” 73-76.

emergence of new factors contributing to Russia's increased interest in the region. One of these factors is Russia's desire to establish interaction and cooperation with all regional players, maintaining a balance of power, which it successfully manages to do. As for the continuities in the Russian approach, here stand out its striving for "grandeur" and recognition as a significant global and regional player; its ability to project its power, including military, by deploying its military bases in the Middle East and concentrating its naval forces in the Eastern Mediterranean, and being able to counterbalance the Western penetration into the region; its economic rivalry for profitable projects and agreements; and ensuring its domestic security.

Examining two cases of Russian foreign policy, towards the Iranian nuclear crisis and the Syrian conflict, one can conclude that both of these phenomena contributed largely to the improvement of Russian position within the international system, extending its influence and strengthening its role as "a major independent geopolitical player,"⁵⁵⁵ which plays a leading role in the international diplomatic processes and whose status is acknowledged by other major international actors. At the same time, Russia's prestige and image, its credibility and reliability were admitted by the Middle Eastern states. As Russian scholar Maxim Suchkov notes, Moscow has achieved its goals "to be consulted, heard and feared" in the Middle East, becoming "a primary go-to for regional states [...] to solve their own regional, local and even tribal conflicts of interests."⁵⁵⁶

This study has a number of theoretical implications. Firstly, the conducted analysis confirmed the hypothesis that Russia does not seek hegemony in the Middle East, despite its ambitions to become a great power, but uses regional actors, conventionally called allies, and takes advantage of the opportunities arising from the events taking place there, as a tool for expanding its influence in the region, at the subsystem level, through which it asserts itself as an influential international actor, upgrading its status at the systemic level. The issue of place and role of Russia in the international system is a matter of its very survival. In this connection, advanced military capabilities are considered by Russia not only as a defense tool, but also as a guarantee of its successful foreign policy.

⁵⁵⁵ Trenin, *What is Russia Up To*.

⁵⁵⁶ "Russia 'Consulted, Heard and Feared' in the Middle East," *Al-Monitor*, December 30, 2017, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2017/12/russia-position-middle-east-syria-jerusalem-trump.html>. Access Date 28/12/2022.

However, the major consequence of Russia's improvement of its position in the global balance of power is a decline of other states, which relative power decreases.

Although at the height of the Syrian conflict, as well as during the evolution of Iranian nuclear crisis, the West was militarily present in the Middle East, it did not dare to deploy a full-fledged contingent of forces in any of these crises, as in the cases of Iraq and Afghanistan. Russia has shown much greater assertiveness in this sense to ensure its national interests, taking a leading position in the negotiation process on Iranian nuclear program in order to prevent a military solution to this issue, and launching a military campaign in Syria, preventing the overthrow of the Assad regime, thereby creating obstacles for the West. The Syrian crisis shows that hard power continues to be relevant in the modern realities of the international system, and therefore power struggle requires states that challenge dominant or hegemonic positions to invest in the development of their material capabilities, namely the economic and military potential of the state in order to be able to compete with other major actors. Emphasizing the importance of Russian incentives in the Middle East, the question of whether they have hegemonic or other nature, has provided a different perspective on Russia's foreign policy in the Middle East, allowing to examine the policies of the great powers in exerting their influence through third parties, i.e. proxies.

Second, this study supports the hypothesis that the greater autonomy of the state leader enable to offset the intervening influence of formal institutions and bureaucratic oversight in foreign policy, as he/she can use, change or modify, as well as make rules to meet his/her needs and to serve his/her interests through the system of power he/she has created. However, the informal political network created by Vladimir Putin, which represents the interests of various state and non-state actors involved generally in profitable sectors of the economy, has an impact on the decision making process, as demonstrated by the cases of Iran and Syria.

This dissertation provided another analytical tool for predicting the choice made by the rising power challenging the position of hegemon. Despite the right circumstances, when the power vacuum was created in the Middle East after the relative US withdrawal from the region, Russia did not attempt to gain more power pursuing hegemony to ensure its own survival at US expense, but instead chose to maintain a balance of power in the

region. This confirms Waltz's assumption that states prefer to maintain their position in the international system rather than accumulate more power, especially those states that already enjoy great power status.⁵⁵⁷ Thus, the hypothesis that Russia does not seek regional hegemony in the Middle East, but rather is aimed at securing its status of a great power, has again received confirmation. In addition, a wave of protests erupted in the Middle East, influenced by the Western soft power projection, which resulted in the overthrow of a number of long-standing rulers, threatened to destabilize Russia and its current regime. Under the pressure of international and domestic incentives, Russia has changed its foreign policy, aggressively responding to the events in Syria, however, after the end of the acute military phase and the successes achieved, its foreign policy has focused on preserving the gains obtained, rather than acquiring new ones.

Recognition of Russia's place and role in the international system as a great power, participating on an equal basis with other actors in solving international affairs, has become a *modus vivendi* of modern Russian foreign policy. Although there is still some trickery in declaring the equality of states within the international system due the asymmetry in the distribution of power, and since Russia has its own sphere of privileged interests, it seeks to accumulate power using the opportunities that open up, and, in the end, it is not devoid the "imperial syndrome" transmitted through the perception of Russia's leadership, as well as the foundations of which are laid in its strategic culture of being a great power. Its undeniable characteristics of "grandeur", expressed in geography, rich natural resources, the status of a permanent member of the UN Security Council, possession of nuclear weapons, are imperatives for great power, if not imperial, aspirations. However, the internal weakness of the state, expressed in an unfavourable monodirectional economy, scarce human resources in relation to the size of its territory, a deeply corrupt regime, miscalculations of the leadership and misperception of the balance of power, the intentions of other states and the time horizons it faces, as well as an extremely restrictive strategic environment, manifested in growing international isolation, conflicts and increasing confrontation with major players, limits its capabilities and the likelihood of a struggle for a hegemonic position. Indeed, as Hugh White emphasizes, "No country in history has exercised great power without great wealth, and

⁵⁵⁷ Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 31-33, 110-116.

the country with the most wealth always ends up with the most power.”⁵⁵⁸ Therefore, the most convenient form of world order for today’s Russia seems to be multipolarity, which it has promoted over the past two decades, since by joining forces with other great powers, it is much easier to contain an aggressive state with prevailing power. It follows the same model at the regional level, joining forces with Iran and Syria against the United States and its regional allies.

In general, the results of this research demonstrated another possible perspective for studying Russian foreign policy in the Middle East. Having theorized this topic, it became possible to trace the patterns of Russia’s external behavior at the regional level, to answer the question of its role and place within the regional subsystem, and to outline the boundaries of its actions. Despite the difficulties of theory testing in the social sciences, the subscription to a soft positivist epistemology in the framework of the neoclassical realist theory allowed this study to identify elements of comparability in two selected cases in the Middle East (Iran and Syria), namely, Russian support for their authoritarian governments, which Russia believes are at risk of Western intervention threatening the regime stability and its own vital interests. However, there are still a large number of possible directions for future research that have not been taken into account in this dissertation. A similar pattern of Russian behavior can be tested on other cases in other regions. Furthermore, future research might put forward studying the actions of private security and military companies, in particular of Wagner group in the Middle East, and the rhetoric of Russia, its FPEs and political elites regarding the engagement of such non-state actors in the Middle East conflicts, how this rhetoric evolves and what its changes are connected with, what external and internal factors influence it, as well as the influence of such non-state actors on the foreign policy of Russia and the conditions under which they can be used as force multipliers. This dissertation was more state-oriented and was focused on the confrontation of the rising power of Russia against the waning hegemon represented by the United States with a special emphasis on the Middle East and the development of the scenario of Russian behavior regarding the power vacuum within the regional subsystem.

⁵⁵⁸ Hugh White, “Power Shift: Australia’s Future between Washington and Beijing,” *Quarterly Essay*, no. 39 (2010): 19.

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APPENDIX

Appendix 1: Composition of the Government of the Russian Federation

President of Russia	Boris Yeltsin II Term (1996-1999)	Vladimir Putin I Term (May 7, 2000 – May 7, 2004)		Vladimir Putin II Term (May 7, 2004 – May 7, 2008)		Dmitry Medvedev I Term (May 7, 2008 – May 7, 2012)	Vladimir Putin III Term (May 7, 2012 – May 7, 2018)	Vladimir Putin IV Term (May 7, 2018 – May 7, 2024)	
Prime Minister	Vladimir Putin	Mikhail Kasyanov (May 17, 2000 – February 24, 2004) Viktor Khristenko (acting) (February 24, 2004 – March 5, 2004)	Mikhail Fradkov (March 5 – May 7, 2004)	Mikhail Fradkov (May 20, 2004 – September 24, 2007)	Viktor Zubkov (September 24, 2007 – May 8, 2008)	Vladimir Putin	Dmitry Medvedev	Dmitry Medvedev (May 18, 2018 – January 15, 2020)	Mikhail Mishustin (January 16, 2020 – Present)
Composition of the Russian Government									
First Deputy Prime Minister	Mikhail Kasyanov Nikolay Aksyonenko Viktor Khristenko			Dmitry Medvedev (November 14, 2005 – September 24, 2007) Sergei Ivanov	Sergei Ivanov Dmitry Medvedev	Viktor Zubkov Igor Shuvalov	Igor Shuvalov	Anton Siluanov	Andrei Belousov

President of Russia	Boris Yeltsin II Term (1996-1999)	Vladimir Putin I Term (May 7, 2000 – May 7, 2004)		Vladimir Putin II Term (May 7, 2004 – May 7, 2008)		Dmitry Medvedev I Term (May 7, 2008 – May 7, 2012)	Vladimir Putin III Term (May 7, 2012 – May 7, 2018)	Vladimir Putin IV Term (May 7, 2018 – May 7, 2024)	
Prime Minister	Vladimir Putin	Mikhail Kasyanov (May 17, 2000 – February 24, 2004) Viktor Khristenko (acting) (February 24, 2004 – March 5, 2004)	Mikhail Fradkov (March 5 – May 7, 2004)	Mikhail Fradkov (May 20, 2004 – September 24, 2007)	Viktor Zubkov (September 24, 2007 – May 8, 2008)	Vladimir Putin	Dmitry Medvedev	Dmitry Medvedev (May 18, 2018 – January 15, 2020)	Mikhail Mishustin (January 16, 2020 – Present)
Composition of the Russian Government				(February 15 – September 24, 2007)					
Deputy Prime Minister	Ilya Klebanov Valentina Matvienko Vladimir Sherback Nikolay Koshman Sergey Shoygu Viktor Khristenko	Viktor Khristenko Alexei Kudrin Ilya Klebanov Boris Aleshin	Alexander Zhukov (March 9 – May 20, 2004)	Alexander Zhukov Sergei Ivanov (November 14, 2005 – February 15, 2007) Sergey Naryshkin	Alexander Zhukov Alexei Kudrin Sergei Naryshkin	Alexander Zhukov (May 12, 2008 – December 20, 2011) Vladislav Surkov (December 27, 2011 –	Dmitry Kozak Arkady Dvorkovich (for Industry and Energy) Dmitry Rogozin (for	Alexey Gordeyev (for Agro-Industrial Complex, Natural Resources and Ecology) Vitaly Mutko (for	Viktoria Abramchenko Yury Borisov Tatyana Golikova Alexei Overchuk

President of Russia	Boris Yeltsin II Term (1996-1999)	Vladimir Putin I Term (May 7, 2000 – May 7, 2004)		Vladimir Putin II Term (May 7, 2004 – May 7, 2008)		Dmitry Medvedev I Term (May 7, 2008 – May 7, 2012)	Vladimir Putin III Term (May 7, 2012 – May 7, 2018)	Vladimir Putin IV Term (May 7, 2018 – May 7, 2024)	
Prime Minister	Vladimir Putin	Mikhail Kasyanov (May 17, 2000 – February 24, 2004) Viktor Khristenko (acting) (February 24, 2004 – March 5, 2004)	Mikhail Fradkov (March 5 – May 7, 2004)	Mikhail Fradkov (May 20, 2004 – September 24, 2007)	Viktor Zubkov (September 24, 2007 – May 8, 2008)	Vladimir Putin	Dmitry Medvedev	Dmitry Medvedev (May 18, 2018 – January 15, 2020)	Mikhail Mishustin (January 16, 2020 – Present)
Composition of the Russian Government		Valentina Matviyenko Galina Karelova Alexey Gordeyev Vladimir Yakovlev		(February 15 – September 24, 2007)		May 21, 2012) Sergei Ivanov (May 12, 2008 – December 22, 2011) Dmitry Rogozin (December 22, 2011 – May 21, 2012)	Defense and Space Industry) Olga Golodets (for Social Affairs) Alexander Khloponin Yury Trutnev (Presidential Envoy to the Far	Construction and Regional Development) Yury Borisov (for Defense and Space Industry) Dmitry Kozak (for Fuel–Energy Complex and Industry)	Marat Khusnullin Dmitry Chernyshenko Yury Trutnev (Deputy PM – Presidential Plenipotentiary Envoy to the Far Eastern

President of Russia	Boris Yeltsin II Term (1996-1999)	Vladimir Putin I Term (May 7, 2000 – May 7, 2004)		Vladimir Putin II Term (May 7, 2004 – May 7, 2008)		Dmitry Medvedev I Term (May 7, 2008 – May 7, 2012)	Vladimir Putin III Term (May 7, 2012 – May 7, 2018)	Vladimir Putin IV Term (May 7, 2018 – May 7, 2024)	
Prime Minister	Vladimir Putin	Mikhail Kasyanov (May 17, 2000 – February 24, 2004) Viktor Khristenko (acting) (February 24, 2004 – March 5, 2004)	Mikhail Fradkov (March 5 – May 7, 2004)	Mikhail Fradkov (May 20, 2004 – September 24, 2007)	Viktor Zubkov (September 24, 2007 – May 8, 2008)	Vladimir Putin	Dmitry Medvedev	Dmitry Medvedev (May 18, 2018 – January 15, 2020)	Mikhail Mishustin (January 16, 2020 – Present)
Composition of the Russian Government						Igor Sechin Dmitry Kozak (October 14, 2008 – May 21, 2012) Alexander Khloponin (January 19, 2010 – May 21, 2012)	Eastern Federal District (August 31, 2013 – May 7, 2018) Vitaly Mutko (for Sport, Tourism and Youth Policy) (October 19, 2016 –	Yury Trutnev (Presidential Envoy to the Far Eastern Federal District) Tatyana Golikova (for Social Policy) Olga Golodets (for Tourism, Sport and Culture)	Federal District) Alexander Novak

President of Russia	Boris Yeltsin II Term (1996-1999)	Vladimir Putin I Term (May 7, 2000 – May 7, 2004)		Vladimir Putin II Term (May 7, 2004 – May 7, 2008)		Dmitry Medvedev I Term (May 7, 2008 – May 7, 2012)	Vladimir Putin III Term (May 7, 2012 – May 7, 2018)	Vladimir Putin IV Term (May 7, 2018 – May 7, 2024)	
Prime Minister	Vladimir Putin	Mikhail Kasyanov (May 17, 2000 – February 24, 2004) Viktor Khristenko (acting) (February 24, 2004 – March 5, 2004)	Mikhail Fradkov (March 5 – May 7, 2004)	Mikhail Fradkov (May 20, 2004 – September 24, 2007)	Viktor Zubkov (September 24, 2007 – May 8, 2008)	Vladimir Putin	Dmitry Medvedev	Dmitry Medvedev (May 18, 2018 – January 15, 2020)	Mikhail Mishustin (January 16, 2020 – Present)
Composition of the Russian Government						Alexei Kudrin (May 12, 2008 – September 26, 2011)	May 7, 2018)	Maxim Akimov (for Transport, Communications and Digital Economy)	
(Deputy Prime) Minister – Chief of Staff of the Government	Dmitry Kozak	Igor Shuvalov (May 19, 2000 – May 28, 2003)	Dmitry Kozak	Dmitry Kozak (May 20 – September 13, 2004) Sergei Naryshkin	Sergei Naryshkin	Sergey Sobyenin (May 12, 2008 – October 21, 2010)	Vladislav Surkov (21 May 2012 – 8 May 2013) Sergei Prikhodko	Konstantin Chuychenko	Dmitry Grigorenko

President of Russia	Boris Yeltsin II Term (1996-1999)	Vladimir Putin I Term (May 7, 2000 – May 7, 2004)		Vladimir Putin II Term (May 7, 2004 – May 7, 2008)		Dmitry Medvedev I Term (May 7, 2008 – May 7, 2012)	Vladimir Putin III Term (May 7, 2012 – May 7, 2018)	Vladimir Putin IV Term (May 7, 2018 – May 7, 2024)	
Prime Minister	Vladimir Putin	Mikhail Kasyanov (May 17, 2000 – February 24, 2004) Viktor Khristenko (acting) (February 24, 2004 – March 5, 2004)	Mikhail Fradkov (March 5 – May 7, 2004)	Mikhail Fradkov (May 20, 2004 – September 24, 2007)	Viktor Zubkov (September 24, 2007 – May 8, 2008)	Vladimir Putin	Dmitry Medvedev	Dmitry Medvedev (May 18, 2018 – January 15, 2020)	Mikhail Mishustin (January 16, 2020 – Present)
Composition of the Russian Government		Konstantin Merzlikin (May 28, 2003 – March 9, 2004)		(September 13, 2004 – September 24, 2007)		Vyacheslav Volodin (October 21, 2010 – December 27, 2011) Anton Vaino (December 27, 2011 – May 21, 2012)	(22 May 2013 – 7 May 2018)		
Federal Ministers									

President of Russia	Boris Yeltsin II Term (1996-1999)	Vladimir Putin I Term (May 7, 2000 – May 7, 2004)		Vladimir Putin II Term (May 7, 2004 – May 7, 2008)		Dmitry Medvedev I Term (May 7, 2008 – May 7, 2012)	Vladimir Putin III Term (May 7, 2012 – May 7, 2018)	Vladimir Putin IV Term (May 7, 2018 – May 7, 2024)	
Prime Minister	Vladimir Putin	Mikhail Kasyanov (May 17, 2000 – February 24, 2004) Viktor Khristenko (acting) (February 24, 2004 – March 5, 2004)	Mikhail Fradkov (March 5 – May 7, 2004)	Mikhail Fradkov (May 20, 2004 – September 24, 2007)	Viktor Zubkov (September 24, 2007 – May 8, 2008)	Vladimir Putin	Dmitry Medvedev	Dmitry Medvedev (May 18, 2018 – January 15, 2020)	Mikhail Mishustin (January 16, 2020 – Present)
Composition of the Russian Government									
Defence Minister	Igor Sergeyev	Igor Sergeyev (May 18, 2000 – March 28, 2001) Sergei Ivanov (March 28, 2001 – March 9, 2004)	Sergei Ivanov	Sergei Ivanov (May 20, 2004 – February 15, 2007) Anatoliy Serdyukov (February 15 – September 24, 2007)	Anatoly Serdyukov	Anatoly Serdyukov	Anatoly Serdyukov (May 12, 2008 – November 6, 2012) Sergei Shoigu (November 6, 2012 – May 7, 2018)	Sergei Shoigu	Sergei Shoigu

President of Russia	Boris Yeltsin II Term (1996-1999)	Vladimir Putin I Term (May 7, 2000 – May 7, 2004)		Vladimir Putin II Term (May 7, 2004 – May 7, 2008)		Dmitry Medvedev I Term (May 7, 2008 – May 7, 2012)	Vladimir Putin III Term (May 7, 2012 – May 7, 2018)	Vladimir Putin IV Term (May 7, 2018 – May 7, 2024)	
Prime Minister	Vladimir Putin	Mikhail Kasyanov (May 17, 2000 – February 24, 2004) Viktor Khristenko (acting) (February 24, 2004 – March 5, 2004)	Mikhail Fradkov (March 5 – May 7, 2004)	Mikhail Fradkov (May 20, 2004 – September 24, 2007)	Viktor Zubkov (September 24, 2007 – May 8, 2008)	Vladimir Putin	Dmitry Medvedev	Dmitry Medvedev (May 18, 2018 – January 15, 2020)	Mikhail Mishustin (January 16, 2020 – Present)
Composition of the Russian Government									
Minister for Antimonopoly Policy and Support to Entrepreneurship	Ilya Yuzhanov	Ilya Yuzhanov	ABOLISHED						

President of Russia	Boris Yeltsin II Term (1996-1999)	Vladimir Putin I Term (May 7, 2000 – May 7, 2004)		Vladimir Putin II Term (May 7, 2004 – May 7, 2008)		Dmitry Medvedev I Term (May 7, 2008 – May 7, 2012)	Vladimir Putin III Term (May 7, 2012 – May 7, 2018)	Vladimir Putin IV Term (May 7, 2018 – May 7, 2024)	
Prime Minister	Vladimir Putin	Mikhail Kasyanov (May 17, 2000 – February 24, 2004) Viktor Khristenko (acting) (February 24, 2004 – March 5, 2004)	Mikhail Fradkov (March 5 – May 7, 2004)	Mikhail Fradkov (May 20, 2004 – September 24, 2007)	Viktor Zubkov (September 24, 2007 – May 8, 2008)	Vladimir Putin	Dmitry Medvedev	Dmitry Medvedev (May 18, 2018 – January 15, 2020)	Mikhail Mishustin (January 16, 2020 – Present)
Composition of the Russian Government									
Minister for Atomic Energy	Yevgeny Adamov	Yevgeny Adamov (May 18, 2000 – March 28, 2001) Alexander Rumyantsev (March 28, 2001 – March 9, 2004)	REORGANIZED						

President of Russia	Boris Yeltsin II Term (1996-1999)	Vladimir Putin I Term (May 7, 2000 – May 7, 2004)		Vladimir Putin II Term (May 7, 2004 – May 7, 2008)		Dmitry Medvedev I Term (May 7, 2008 – May 7, 2012)	Vladimir Putin III Term (May 7, 2012 – May 7, 2018)	Vladimir Putin IV Term (May 7, 2018 – May 7, 2024)	
Prime Minister	Vladimir Putin	Mikhail Kasyanov (May 17, 2000 – February 24, 2004) Viktor Khristenko (acting) (February 24, 2004 – March 5, 2004)	Mikhail Fradkov (March 5 – May 7, 2004)	Mikhail Fradkov (May 20, 2004 – September 24, 2007)	Viktor Zubkov (September 24, 2007 – May 8, 2008)	Vladimir Putin	Dmitry Medvedev	Dmitry Medvedev (May 18, 2018 – January 15, 2020)	Mikhail Mishustin (January 16, 2020 – Present)
Composition of the Russian Government									
Minister for Crimean Affairs							Oleg Savelyev (March 31, 2014 – July 15, 2015)	ABOLISHED	
Minister for North Caucasus Affairs							Lev Kuznetsov (May 12, 2014 – May 18, 2018)	Sergey Chebotaryov	ABOLISHED
Minister for Tax and Revenue	Alexander Pochinok	Gennady Bukayev	Anatoliy Serdyukov (acting)	REORGANIZED					

President of Russia	Boris Yeltsin II Term (1996-1999)	Vladimir Putin I Term (May 7, 2000 – May 7, 2004)		Vladimir Putin II Term (May 7, 2004 – May 7, 2008)		Dmitry Medvedev I Term (May 7, 2008 – May 7, 2012)	Vladimir Putin III Term (May 7, 2012 – May 7, 2018)	Vladimir Putin IV Term (May 7, 2018 – May 7, 2024)	
Prime Minister	Vladimir Putin	Mikhail Kasyanov (May 17, 2000 – February 24, 2004) Viktor Khristenko (acting) (February 24, 2004 – March 5, 2004)	Mikhail Fradkov (March 5 – May 7, 2004)	Mikhail Fradkov (May 20, 2004 – September 24, 2007)	Viktor Zubkov (September 24, 2007 – May 8, 2008)	Vladimir Putin	Dmitry Medvedev	Dmitry Medvedev (May 18, 2018 – January 15, 2020)	Mikhail Mishustin (January 16, 2020 – Present)
Composition of the Russian Government									
Minister for the CIS	Leonid Drachevsky	ABOLISHED							
Minister for the Development of the Russian Far East and Arctic							Minister for the Development of the Russian Far East	Alexander Kozlov	Alexei Chekunov
							Viktor Ishayev (May 21, 2012 –		

President of Russia	Boris Yeltsin II Term (1996-1999)	Vladimir Putin I Term (May 7, 2000 – May 7, 2004)		Vladimir Putin II Term (May 7, 2004 – May 7, 2008)		Dmitry Medvedev I Term (May 7, 2008 – May 7, 2012)	Vladimir Putin III Term (May 7, 2012 – May 7, 2018)	Vladimir Putin IV Term (May 7, 2018 – May 7, 2024)	
Prime Minister	Vladimir Putin	Mikhail Kasyanov (May 17, 2000 – February 24, 2004) Viktor Khristenko (acting) (February 24, 2004 – March 5, 2004)	Mikhail Fradkov (March 5 – May 7, 2004)	Mikhail Fradkov (May 20, 2004 – September 24, 2007)	Viktor Zubkov (September 24, 2007 – May 8, 2008)	Vladimir Putin	Dmitry Medvedev	Dmitry Medvedev (May 18, 2018 – January 15, 2020)	Mikhail Mishustin (January 16, 2020 – Present)
Composition of the Russian Government							August 31, 2013) Aleksandr Galushka (September 11, 2013 – May 7, 2018)		
Minister of Agriculture							Nikolai Fyodorov (May 21, 2012 – April 21, 2015)	Dmitry Patrushev	Dmitry Patrushev
	Alexey Gordeyev	Alexey Gordeyev	Alexey Gordeyev	Alexey Gordeyev	Alexey Gordeyev	Alexey Gordeyev (May 12, 2008 – March 12, 2009)			

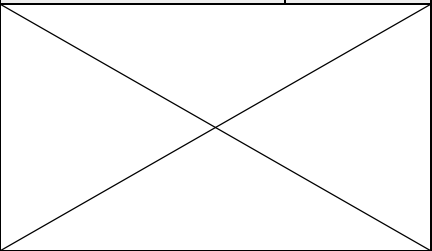
President of Russia	Boris Yeltsin II Term (1996-1999)	Vladimir Putin I Term (May 7, 2000 – May 7, 2004)		Vladimir Putin II Term (May 7, 2004 – May 7, 2008)		Dmitry Medvedev I Term (May 7, 2008 – May 7, 2012)	Vladimir Putin III Term (May 7, 2012 – May 7, 2018)	Vladimir Putin IV Term (May 7, 2018 – May 7, 2024)	
Prime Minister	Vladimir Putin	Mikhail Kasyanov (May 17, 2000 – February 24, 2004) Viktor Khristenko (acting) (February 24, 2004 – March 5, 2004)	Mikhail Fradkov (March 5 – May 7, 2004)	Mikhail Fradkov (May 20, 2004 – September 24, 2007)	Viktor Zubkov (September 24, 2007 – May 8, 2008)	Vladimir Putin	Dmitry Medvedev	Dmitry Medvedev (May 18, 2018 – January 15, 2020)	Mikhail Mishustin (January 16, 2020 – Present)
Composition of the Russian Government						Yelena Skrynnik (March 12, 2009 – May 21, 2012)	Aleksandr Tkachyov (April 22, 2015 – May 7, 2018)		
Minister of Civil Defence, Emergencies and Disaster Relief	Sergei Shoigu	Sergei Shoigu	Sergei Shoigu	Sergei Shoigu	Sergei Shoigu	Sergei Shoigu	Vladimir Puchkov	Yevgeny Zinichev	Yevgeny Zinichev
Minister of Construction,							Mikhail Men (November	Vladimir Yakushev	Irek Faizullin

President of Russia	Boris Yeltsin II Term (1996-1999)	Vladimir Putin I Term (May 7, 2000 – May 7, 2004)		Vladimir Putin II Term (May 7, 2004 – May 7, 2008)		Dmitry Medvedev I Term (May 7, 2008 – May 7, 2012)	Vladimir Putin III Term (May 7, 2012 – May 7, 2018)	Vladimir Putin IV Term (May 7, 2018 – May 7, 2024)	
Prime Minister	Vladimir Putin	Mikhail Kasyanov (May 17, 2000 – February 24, 2004) Viktor Khristenko (acting) (February 24, 2004 – March 5, 2004)	Mikhail Fradkov (March 5 – May 7, 2004)	Mikhail Fradkov (May 20, 2004 – September 24, 2007)	Viktor Zubkov (September 24, 2007 – May 8, 2008)	Vladimir Putin	Dmitry Medvedev	Dmitry Medvedev (May 18, 2018 – January 15, 2020)	Mikhail Mishustin (January 16, 2020 – Present)
Composition of the Russian Government									
Housing and Utilities							1, 2013 – May 7, 2018)		
Minister of Culture	Vladimir Yegorov (August 19, 1999 – February 8, 2000) Mikhail Shvydkoy (February 8 – May 7, 2000)	Mikhail Shvydkoy	Minister for Culture and Mass Media			Aleksandr Avdeyev	Vladimir Medinsky	Vladimir Medinsky	Olga Lyubimova
			Aleksandr Sokolov	Aleksandr Sokolov	Aleksandr Sokolov				

President of Russia	Boris Yeltsin II Term (1996-1999)	Vladimir Putin I Term (May 7, 2000 – May 7, 2004)		Vladimir Putin II Term (May 7, 2004 – May 7, 2008)		Dmitry Medvedev I Term (May 7, 2008 – May 7, 2012)	Vladimir Putin III Term (May 7, 2012 – May 7, 2018)	Vladimir Putin IV Term (May 7, 2018 – May 7, 2024)		
Prime Minister	Vladimir Putin	Mikhail Kasyanov (May 17, 2000 – February 24, 2004) Viktor Khristenko (acting) (February 24, 2004 – March 5, 2004)	Mikhail Fradkov (March 5 – May 7, 2004)	Mikhail Fradkov (May 20, 2004 – September 24, 2007)	Viktor Zubkov (September 24, 2007 – May 8, 2008)	Vladimir Putin	Dmitry Medvedev	Dmitry Medvedev (May 18, 2018 – January 15, 2020)	Mikhail Mishustin (January 16, 2020 – Present)	
Composition of the Russian Government	Minister of Digital Development, Communications and Mass Media	Minister of Press, Broadcasting and Mass Communications (transformed)				Igor Shchyogolev	Nikolay Nikiforov	Konstantin Noskov	Maksut Shadayev (January 21, 2020 – present)	
		Mikhail Lesin	Mikhail Lesin							
		Minister of Communications and Informatization		Minister of Transport and Communications	Minister of Information Technologies and Communications					
		Leonid Reiman	Leonid Reiman	Igor Levitin	Leonid Reiman					Leonid Reiman
Minister of Transport	Sergei Frank	Sergei Frank	Igor Levitin		Igor Levitin	Igor Levitin	Maksim Sokolov	Yevgeny Ditrikh	Vitaly Saveliev	

President of Russia	Boris Yeltsin II Term (1996-1999)		Vladimir Putin I Term (May 7, 2000 – May 7, 2004)		Vladimir Putin II Term (May 7, 2004 – May 7, 2008)		Dmitry Medvedev I Term (May 7, 2008 – May 7, 2012)	Vladimir Putin III Term (May 7, 2012 – May 7, 2018)	Vladimir Putin IV Term (May 7, 2018 – May 7, 2024)		
Prime Minister	Vladimir Putin		Mikhail Kasyanov (May 17, 2000 – February 24, 2004) Viktor Khristenko (acting) (February 24, 2004 – March 5, 2004)	Mikhail Fradkov (March 5 – May 7, 2004)	Mikhail Fradkov (May 20, 2004 – September 24, 2007)	Viktor Zubkov (September 24, 2007 – May 8, 2008)	Vladimir Putin	Dmitry Medvedev	Dmitry Medvedev (May 18, 2018 – January 15, 2020)	Mikhail Mishustin (January 16, 2020 – Present)	
Composition of the Russian Government	Minister of Economic Development	Minister of Economy	Minister of Trade	Minister of Economic Development and Trade				Andrei Belousov (May 21, 2012 – June 24, 2013) Aleksei Ulyukayev (June 24, 2013 – November 15, 2016) Yevgeny Yelin (acting)	Maxim Oreshkin	Maksim Reshetnikov	
		Andrey Shapoval'yants	Mikhail Fradkov	Herman Gref	Herman Gref	Herman Gref	Elvira Nabiullina				Elvira Nabiullina

President of Russia	Boris Yeltsin II Term (1996-1999)		Vladimir Putin I Term (May 7, 2000 – May 7, 2004)		Vladimir Putin II Term (May 7, 2004 – May 7, 2008)		Dmitry Medvedev I Term (May 7, 2008 – May 7, 2012)	Vladimir Putin III Term (May 7, 2012 – May 7, 2018)	Vladimir Putin IV Term (May 7, 2018 – May 7, 2024)	
Prime Minister	Vladimir Putin		Mikhail Kasyanov (May 17, 2000 – February 24, 2004) Viktor Khristenko (acting) (February 24, 2004 – March 5, 2004)	Mikhail Fradkov (March 5 – May 7, 2004)	Mikhail Fradkov (May 20, 2004 – September 24, 2007)	Viktor Zubkov (September 24, 2007 – May 8, 2008)	Vladimir Putin	Dmitry Medvedev	Dmitry Medvedev (May 18, 2018 – January 15, 2020)	Mikhail Mishustin (January 16, 2020 – Present)
Composition of the Russian Government										
								(November 15 – November 30, 2016) Maksim Oreshkin (November 30, 2016 – May 7, 2018)		
Minister of Education	Vladimir Filippov		Vladimir Filippov	Minister of Education and Science					Olga Vasilieva	Sergei Kravtsov
Minister of Science and				Andrei Fursenko	Andrei Fursenko	Andrei Fursenko	Andrei Fursenko	Dmitry Livanov (May 21,	Mikhail Kotyukov	Valery Falkov

President of Russia	Boris Yeltsin II Term (1996-1999)	Vladimir Putin I Term (May 7, 2000 – May 7, 2004)		Vladimir Putin II Term (May 7, 2004 – May 7, 2008)		Dmitry Medvedev I Term (May 7, 2008 – May 7, 2012)	Vladimir Putin III Term (May 7, 2012 – May 7, 2018)	Vladimir Putin IV Term (May 7, 2018 – May 7, 2024)	
Prime Minister	Vladimir Putin	Mikhail Kasyanov (May 17, 2000 – February 24, 2004) Viktor Khristenko (acting) (February 24, 2004 – March 5, 2004)	Mikhail Fradkov (March 5 – May 7, 2004)	Mikhail Fradkov (May 20, 2004 – September 24, 2007)	Viktor Zubkov (September 24, 2007 – May 8, 2008)	Vladimir Putin	Dmitry Medvedev	Dmitry Medvedev (May 18, 2018 – January 15, 2020)	Mikhail Mishustin (January 16, 2020 – Present)
Composition of the Russian Government									
Higher Education							2012 – August 19, 2016) Olga Vasilyeva (August 19, 2016 – May 7, 2018)		
Minister of Energy			Minister of Industry and Energy (abolished)			Sergei Shmatko	Aleksandr Novak	Alexander Novak	Nikolai Shulginov
	Viktor Kalyuzhny	Alexander Gavrin (May 20, 2000 –	Viktor Khristenko	Viktor Khristenko	Viktor Khristenko				

President of Russia	Boris Yeltsin II Term (1996-1999)	Vladimir Putin I Term (May 7, 2000 – May 7, 2004)		Vladimir Putin II Term (May 7, 2004 – May 7, 2008)		Dmitry Medvedev I Term (May 7, 2008 – May 7, 2012)	Vladimir Putin III Term (May 7, 2012 – May 7, 2018)	Vladimir Putin IV Term (May 7, 2018 – May 7, 2024)	
Prime Minister	Vladimir Putin	Mikhail Kasyanov (May 17, 2000 – February 24, 2004) Viktor Khristenko (acting) (February 24, 2004 – March 5, 2004)	Mikhail Fradkov (March 5 – May 7, 2004)	Mikhail Fradkov (May 20, 2004 – September 24, 2007)	Viktor Zubkov (September 24, 2007 – May 8, 2008)	Vladimir Putin	Dmitry Medvedev	Dmitry Medvedev (May 18, 2018 – January 15, 2020)	Mikhail Mishustin (January 16, 2020 – Present)
Composition of the Russian Government		February 5, 2001) Igor Yusufov (June 16, 2001 – March 9, 2004)							
	Minister of Industry, Science and Technologies (abolished)					Viktor Khristenko	Denis Manturov	Denis Manturov	Denis Manturov

President of Russia	Boris Yeltsin II Term (1996-1999)	Vladimir Putin I Term (May 7, 2000 – May 7, 2004)		Vladimir Putin II Term (May 7, 2004 – May 7, 2008)		Dmitry Medvedev I Term (May 7, 2008 – May 7, 2012)	Vladimir Putin III Term (May 7, 2012 – May 7, 2018)	Vladimir Putin IV Term (May 7, 2018 – May 7, 2024)	
Prime Minister	Vladimir Putin	Mikhail Kasyanov (May 17, 2000 – February 24, 2004) Viktor Khristenko (acting) (February 24, 2004 – March 5, 2004)	Mikhail Fradkov (March 5 – May 7, 2004)	Mikhail Fradkov (May 20, 2004 – September 24, 2007)	Viktor Zubkov (September 24, 2007 – May 8, 2008)	Vladimir Putin	Dmitry Medvedev	Dmitry Medvedev (May 18, 2018 – January 15, 2020)	Mikhail Mishustin (January 16, 2020 – Present)
Composition of the Russian Government									
Minister of Industry and Trade	Mikhail Kirpichnikov	Aleksandr Dondukov (May 18, 2000 – October 17, 2001) Ilya Klebanov (October 17, 2001 – November 1, 2003) Andrey Fursenko				(May 12, 2008 – January 31, 2012) Denis Manturov (February 1 – May 21, 2012)			

President of Russia	Boris Yeltsin II Term (1996-1999)	Vladimir Putin I Term (May 7, 2000 – May 7, 2004)		Vladimir Putin II Term (May 7, 2004 – May 7, 2008)		Dmitry Medvedev I Term (May 7, 2008 – May 7, 2012)	Vladimir Putin III Term (May 7, 2012 – May 7, 2018)	Vladimir Putin IV Term (May 7, 2018 – May 7, 2024)	
Prime Minister	Vladimir Putin	Mikhail Kasyanov (May 17, 2000 – February 24, 2004) Viktor Khristenko (acting) (February 24, 2004 – March 5, 2004)	Mikhail Fradkov (March 5 – May 7, 2004)	Mikhail Fradkov (May 20, 2004 – September 24, 2007)	Viktor Zubkov (September 24, 2007 – May 8, 2008)	Vladimir Putin	Dmitry Medvedev	Dmitry Medvedev (May 18, 2018 – January 15, 2020)	Mikhail Mishustin (January 16, 2020 – Present)
Composition of the Russian Government		(acting) (December 6, 2003 – March 9, 2004)							

President of Russia	Boris Yeltsin II Term (1996-1999)	Vladimir Putin I Term (May 7, 2000 – May 7, 2004)		Vladimir Putin II Term (May 7, 2004 – May 7, 2008)		Dmitry Medvedev I Term (May 7, 2008 – May 7, 2012)	Vladimir Putin III Term (May 7, 2012 – May 7, 2018)	Vladimir Putin IV Term (May 7, 2018 – May 7, 2024)	
Prime Minister	Vladimir Putin	Mikhail Kasyanov (May 17, 2000 – February 24, 2004) Viktor Khristenko (acting) (February 24, 2004 – March 5, 2004)	Mikhail Fradkov (March 5 – May 7, 2004)	Mikhail Fradkov (May 20, 2004 – September 24, 2007)	Viktor Zubkov (September 24, 2007 – May 8, 2008)	Vladimir Putin	Dmitry Medvedev	Dmitry Medvedev (May 18, 2018 – January 15, 2020)	Mikhail Mishustin (January 16, 2020 – Present)
Composition of the Russian Government									
Minister of Federal Affairs, National and Migration Policy	Minister of Federation Affairs and Nationalities	Alexander Blokhin (May 18, 2000 – October 16, 2001)	ABOLISHED						
	Vyacheslav Mikhailov (August 19, 1999 – January 6, 2000) Alexander Blokhin (January 6 – May 17, 2000)								
Minister of Finance	Mikhail Kasyanov	Alexei Kudrin	Alexei Kudrin	Alexei Kudrin	Alexei Kudrin	Alexei Kudrin (May 12, 2008 –	Anton Siluanov	Anton Siluanov	Anton Siluanov

President of Russia	Boris Yeltsin II Term (1996-1999)	Vladimir Putin I Term (May 7, 2000 – May 7, 2004)		Vladimir Putin II Term (May 7, 2004 – May 7, 2008)		Dmitry Medvedev I Term (May 7, 2008 – May 7, 2012)	Vladimir Putin III Term (May 7, 2012 – May 7, 2018)	Vladimir Putin IV Term (May 7, 2018 – May 7, 2024)	
Prime Minister	Vladimir Putin	Mikhail Kasyanov (May 17, 2000 – February 24, 2004) Viktor Khristenko (acting) (February 24, 2004 – March 5, 2004)	Mikhail Fradkov (March 5 – May 7, 2004)	Mikhail Fradkov (May 20, 2004 – September 24, 2007)	Viktor Zubkov (September 24, 2007 – May 8, 2008)	Vladimir Putin	Dmitry Medvedev	Dmitry Medvedev (May 18, 2018 – January 15, 2020)	Mikhail Mishustin (January 16, 2020 – Present)
Composition of the Russian Government						September 26, 2011) Anton Siluanov (December 16, 2011 – May 21, 2012)			
Minister of Foreign Affairs	Igor Ivanov	Igor Ivanov	Sergei Lavrov	Sergei Lavrov	Sergei Lavrov	Sergei Lavrov	Sergei Lavrov	Sergei Lavrov	Sergei Lavrov
Minister of Healthcare	Yury Shevchenko	Yury Shevchenko	Minister of Health and Social Development				Veronika Skvortsova	Veronika Skvortsova	Mikhail Murashko

President of Russia	Boris Yeltsin II Term (1996-1999)	Vladimir Putin I Term (May 7, 2000 – May 7, 2004)		Vladimir Putin II Term (May 7, 2004 – May 7, 2008)		Dmitry Medvedev I Term (May 7, 2008 – May 7, 2012)	Vladimir Putin III Term (May 7, 2012 – May 7, 2018)	Vladimir Putin IV Term (May 7, 2018 – May 7, 2024)	
Prime Minister	Vladimir Putin	Mikhail Kasyanov (May 17, 2000 – February 24, 2004) Viktor Khristenko (acting) (February 24, 2004 – March 5, 2004)	Mikhail Fradkov (March 5 – May 7, 2004)	Mikhail Fradkov (May 20, 2004 – September 24, 2007)	Viktor Zubkov (September 24, 2007 – May 8, 2008)	Vladimir Putin	Dmitry Medvedev	Dmitry Medvedev (May 18, 2018 – January 15, 2020)	Mikhail Mishustin (January 16, 2020 – Present)
Composition of the Russian Government									
Minister of Labour and Social Protection	Minister of Labor and Social Development		Mikhail Zurabov	Mikhail Zurabov	Tatyana Golikova	Tatyana Golikova	Maksim Topilin	Maxim Topilin	Anton Kotyakov
	Sergey Kalashnikov	Alexander Pochinok							
Minister of Justice	Yury Chaika	Yury Chaika	Yury Chaika	Yury Chaika (May 20, 2004 – June 23, 2006) Vladimir Ustinov (June 23, 2006 –	Vladimir Ustinov	Aleksandr Konovalov	Aleksandr Konovalov	Aleksandr Konovalov	Konstantin Chuychenko

President of Russia	Boris Yeltsin II Term (1996-1999)	Vladimir Putin I Term (May 7, 2000 – May 7, 2004)		Vladimir Putin II Term (May 7, 2004 – May 7, 2008)		Dmitry Medvedev I Term (May 7, 2008 – May 7, 2012)	Vladimir Putin III Term (May 7, 2012 – May 7, 2018)	Vladimir Putin IV Term (May 7, 2018 – May 7, 2024)	
Prime Minister	Vladimir Putin	Mikhail Kasyanov (May 17, 2000 – February 24, 2004) Viktor Khristenko (acting) (February 24, 2004 – March 5, 2004)	Mikhail Fradkov (March 5 – May 7, 2004)	Mikhail Fradkov (May 20, 2004 – September 24, 2007)	Viktor Zubkov (September 24, 2007 – May 8, 2008)	Vladimir Putin	Dmitry Medvedev	Dmitry Medvedev (May 18, 2018 – January 15, 2020)	Mikhail Mishustin (January 16, 2020 – Present)
Composition of the Russian Government				September 24, 2007)					
Minister of Natural Resources and Environment	Minister of Natural Resources					Yury Trutnev	Sergei Donskoi	Dmitry Kobylkin	Alexander Kozlov
	Boris Yatskevich	Boris Yatskevich (May 18, 2000 – June 16, 2001) Vitaliy Artyuhov (June 16, 2001 –	Yury Trutnev	Yury Trutnev	Yury Trutnev				

President of Russia	Boris Yeltsin II Term (1996-1999)	Vladimir Putin I Term (May 7, 2000 – May 7, 2004)		Vladimir Putin II Term (May 7, 2004 – May 7, 2008)		Dmitry Medvedev I Term (May 7, 2008 – May 7, 2012)	Vladimir Putin III Term (May 7, 2012 – May 7, 2018)	Vladimir Putin IV Term (May 7, 2018 – May 7, 2024)	
Prime Minister	Vladimir Putin	Mikhail Kasyanov (May 17, 2000 – February 24, 2004) Viktor Khristenko (acting) (February 24, 2004 – March 5, 2004)	Mikhail Fradkov (March 5 – May 7, 2004)	Mikhail Fradkov (May 20, 2004 – September 24, 2007)	Viktor Zubkov (September 24, 2007 – May 8, 2008)	Vladimir Putin	Dmitry Medvedev	Dmitry Medvedev (May 18, 2018 – January 15, 2020)	Mikhail Mishustin (January 16, 2020 – Present)
Composition of the Russian Government		March 9, 2004) Andrey Fursenko (acting) (December 6, 2003 – March 9, 2004)							
Minister of Property Relations	Farit Gazizullin	Farit Gazizullin	ABOLISHED						

President of Russia	Boris Yeltsin II Term (1996-1999)	Vladimir Putin I Term (May 7, 2000 – May 7, 2004)		Vladimir Putin II Term (May 7, 2004 – May 7, 2008)		Dmitry Medvedev I Term (May 7, 2008 – May 7, 2012)	Vladimir Putin III Term (May 7, 2012 – May 7, 2018)	Vladimir Putin IV Term (May 7, 2018 – May 7, 2024)	
Prime Minister	Vladimir Putin	Mikhail Kasyanov (May 17, 2000 – February 24, 2004) Viktor Khristenko (acting) (February 24, 2004 – March 5, 2004)	Mikhail Fradkov (March 5 – May 7, 2004)	Mikhail Fradkov (May 20, 2004 – September 24, 2007)	Viktor Zubkov (September 24, 2007 – May 8, 2008)	Vladimir Putin	Dmitry Medvedev	Dmitry Medvedev (May 18, 2018 – January 15, 2020)	Mikhail Mishustin (January 16, 2020 – Present)
Composition of the Russian Government									
Minister of Railways	Vladimir Starostenko (August 19 – September 16, 1999) Nikolay Aksyonenko (September 16, 1999 – May 7, 2000)	Nikolay Aksenenko (May 18, 2000 – January 3, 2002) Gennadiy Fadeev (January 4, 2002 – September 22, 2003) Vadim Morozov	ABOLISHED						

President of Russia	Boris Yeltsin II Term (1996-1999)	Vladimir Putin I Term (May 7, 2000 – May 7, 2004)		Vladimir Putin II Term (May 7, 2004 – May 7, 2008)		Dmitry Medvedev I Term (May 7, 2008 – May 7, 2012)	Vladimir Putin III Term (May 7, 2012 – May 7, 2018)	Vladimir Putin IV Term (May 7, 2018 – May 7, 2024)	
Prime Minister	Vladimir Putin	Mikhail Kasyanov (May 17, 2000 – February 24, 2004) Viktor Khristenko (acting) (February 24, 2004 – March 5, 2004)	Mikhail Fradkov (March 5 – May 7, 2004)	Mikhail Fradkov (May 20, 2004 – September 24, 2007)	Viktor Zubkov (September 24, 2007 – May 8, 2008)	Vladimir Putin	Dmitry Medvedev	Dmitry Medvedev (May 18, 2018 – January 15, 2020)	Mikhail Mishustin (January 16, 2020 – Present)
Composition of the Russian Government		(October 7, 2003 – March 9, 2004)							
Minister of Regional Development				Vladimir Yakovlev (September 13, 2004 – September 24, 2007)	Dmitry Kozak	Dmitry Kozak (May 12 – October 14, 2008) Viktor Basargin (October 14, 2008 –	Oleg Govorun (May 21 – October 17, 2012) Igor Slyunyayev (October 17, 2012 –	ABOLISHED	

President of Russia	Boris Yeltsin II Term (1996-1999)	Vladimir Putin I Term (May 7, 2000 – May 7, 2004)		Vladimir Putin II Term (May 7, 2004 – May 7, 2008)		Dmitry Medvedev I Term (May 7, 2008 – May 7, 2012)	Vladimir Putin III Term (May 7, 2012 – May 7, 2018)	Vladimir Putin IV Term (May 7, 2018 – May 7, 2024)	
Prime Minister	Vladimir Putin	Mikhail Kasyanov (May 17, 2000 – February 24, 2004) Viktor Khristenko (acting) (February 24, 2004 – March 5, 2004)	Mikhail Fradkov (March 5 – May 7, 2004)	Mikhail Fradkov (May 20, 2004 – September 24, 2007)	Viktor Zubkov (September 24, 2007 – May 8, 2008)	Vladimir Putin	Dmitry Medvedev	Dmitry Medvedev (May 18, 2018 – January 15, 2020)	Mikhail Mishustin (January 16, 2020 – Present)
Composition of the Russian Government									
Minister of Sport	Minister of Sports, Physical Culture and Tourism (transformed) Boris Ivanyuzhenkov					May 21, 2012)	September 8, 2014)	Pavel Kolobkov	Oleg Matytsin
						Minister of Sports, Tourism and Youth Policy (transformed) Vitaly Mutko	Vitaly Mutko (May 12, 2008 – October 19, 2016) Pavel Kolobkov (October 19, 2016 – May 7, 2018)		

President of Russia	Boris Yeltsin II Term (1996-1999)	Vladimir Putin I Term (May 7, 2000 – May 7, 2004)		Vladimir Putin II Term (May 7, 2004 – May 7, 2008)		Dmitry Medvedev I Term (May 7, 2008 – May 7, 2012)	Vladimir Putin III Term (May 7, 2012 – May 7, 2018)	Vladimir Putin IV Term (May 7, 2018 – May 7, 2024)	
Prime Minister	Vladimir Putin	Mikhail Kasyanov (May 17, 2000 – February 24, 2004) Viktor Khristenko (acting) (February 24, 2004 – March 5, 2004)	Mikhail Fradkov (March 5 – May 7, 2004)	Mikhail Fradkov (May 20, 2004 – September 24, 2007)	Viktor Zubkov (September 24, 2007 – May 8, 2008)	Vladimir Putin	Dmitry Medvedev	Dmitry Medvedev (May 18, 2018 – January 15, 2020)	Mikhail Mishustin (January 16, 2020 – Present)
Composition of the Russian Government									
Minister of the Interior	Vladimir Rushailo	Vladimir Rushailo (May 18, 2000 – March 28, 2001) Boris Gryzlov (March 28, 2001 – December 24, 2003) Rashid Nurgaliyev	Rashid Nurgaliyev	Rashid Nurgaliyev	Rashid Nurgaliyev	Rashid Nurgaliyev	Vladimir Kolokoltsev	Vladimir Kolokoltsev	Vladimir Kolokoltsev

President of Russia	Boris Yeltsin II Term (1996-1999)	Vladimir Putin I Term (May 7, 2000 – May 7, 2004)		Vladimir Putin II Term (May 7, 2004 – May 7, 2008)		Dmitry Medvedev I Term (May 7, 2008 – May 7, 2012)	Vladimir Putin III Term (May 7, 2012 – May 7, 2018)	Vladimir Putin IV Term (May 7, 2018 – May 7, 2024)	
Prime Minister	Vladimir Putin	Mikhail Kasyanov (May 17, 2000 – February 24, 2004) Viktor Khristenko (acting) (February 24, 2004 – March 5, 2004)	Mikhail Fradkov (March 5 – May 7, 2004)	Mikhail Fradkov (May 20, 2004 – September 24, 2007)	Viktor Zubkov (September 24, 2007 – May 8, 2008)	Vladimir Putin	Dmitry Medvedev	Dmitry Medvedev (May 18, 2018 – January 15, 2020)	Mikhail Mishustin (January 16, 2020 – Present)
Composition of the Russian Government		v (acting) (December 24, 2003 – March 9, 2004)							
Minister without Portfolio	Alexander Livshitz (August 19, 1999 – May 7, 2000; acting until June 28, 2000)	Minister for the Chechen Republic		Vladislav Putilin (First Deputy	Vladislav Putilin (First Deputy		Minister for Open Government Affairs		

President of Russia	Boris Yeltsin II Term (1996-1999)	Vladimir Putin I Term (May 7, 2000 – May 7, 2004)		Vladimir Putin II Term (May 7, 2004 – May 7, 2008)		Dmitry Medvedev I Term (May 7, 2008 – May 7, 2012)	Vladimir Putin III Term (May 7, 2012 – May 7, 2018)	Vladimir Putin IV Term (May 7, 2018 – May 7, 2024)	
Prime Minister	Vladimir Putin	Mikhail Kasyanov (May 17, 2000 – February 24, 2004) Viktor Khristenko (acting) (February 24, 2004 – March 5, 2004)	Mikhail Fradkov (March 5 – May 7, 2004)	Mikhail Fradkov (May 20, 2004 – September 24, 2007)	Viktor Zubkov (September 24, 2007 – May 8, 2008)	Vladimir Putin	Dmitry Medvedev	Dmitry Medvedev (May 18, 2018 – January 15, 2020)	Mikhail Mishustin (January 16, 2020 – Present)
Composition of the Russian Government	Konstantin Lubenchenko (January 14 – May 7, 2000; acting until June 28, 2000)	Vladimir Yelagin (November 28, 2000 – November 6, 2002) Stanislav Ilyasov (November 6, 2002 – March 9, 2004)		Chairman of the Military-Industrial Commission under the Government of the Russian Federation) (March 20, 2006 –	Chairman of the Military-Industrial Commission under the Government of the Russian Federation)		Mikhail Abyzov		

President of Russia	Boris Yeltsin II Term (1996-1999)	Vladimir Putin I Term (May 7, 2000 – May 7, 2004)		Vladimir Putin II Term (May 7, 2004 – May 7, 2008)		Dmitry Medvedev I Term (May 7, 2008 – May 7, 2012)	Vladimir Putin III Term (May 7, 2012 – May 7, 2018)	Vladimir Putin IV Term (May 7, 2018 – May 7, 2024)	
Prime Minister	Vladimir Putin	Mikhail Kasyanov (May 17, 2000 – February 24, 2004) Viktor Khristenko (acting) (February 24, 2004 – March 5, 2004)	Mikhail Fradkov (March 5 – May 7, 2004)	Mikhail Fradkov (May 20, 2004 – September 24, 2007)	Viktor Zubkov (September 24, 2007 – May 8, 2008)	Vladimir Putin	Dmitry Medvedev	Dmitry Medvedev (May 18, 2018 – January 15, 2020)	Mikhail Mishustin (January 16, 2020 – Present)
Composition of the Russian Government		Ethnic Affairs Minister Vladimir Zorin (December 6, 2001 – March 9, 2004)		September 24, 2007)					
Federal Services and Agencies									
Director of the Federal National Guard Service							Viktor Zolotov (appointed)	Viktor Zolotov	

President of Russia	Boris Yeltsin II Term (1996-1999)	Vladimir Putin I Term (May 7, 2000 – May 7, 2004)		Vladimir Putin II Term (May 7, 2004 – May 7, 2008)		Dmitry Medvedev I Term (May 7, 2008 – May 7, 2012)	Vladimir Putin III Term (May 7, 2012 – May 7, 2018)	Vladimir Putin IV Term (May 7, 2018 – May 7, 2024)	
Prime Minister	Vladimir Putin	Mikhail Kasyanov (May 17, 2000 – February 24, 2004) Viktor Khristenko (acting) (February 24, 2004 – March 5, 2004)	Mikhail Fradkov (March 5 – May 7, 2004)	Mikhail Fradkov (May 20, 2004 – September 24, 2007)	Viktor Zubkov (September 24, 2007 – May 8, 2008)	Vladimir Putin	Dmitry Medvedev	Dmitry Medvedev (May 18, 2018 – January 15, 2020)	Mikhail Mishustin (January 16, 2020 – Present)
Composition of the Russian Government							on April 5, 2016)		
Director of the Federal Security Service	Nikolai Patrushev	Nikolai Patrushev		Nikolai Patrushev		Alexander Bortnikov	Alexander Bortnikov	Alexander Bortnikov	
Head of the Chief Directorate for Special Programmes of the Russian President	Viktor Zorin	Alexander Tsarenko		Alexander Tsarenko		Alexander Tsarenko (until October 31, 2011) Dmitry Ryzhkov	Dmitry Ryzhkov (until March 10, 2014) Vladislav Menshchikov (March	Alexander Lints	

President of Russia	Boris Yeltsin II Term (1996-1999)	Vladimir Putin I Term (May 7, 2000 – May 7, 2004)		Vladimir Putin II Term (May 7, 2004 – May 7, 2008)		Dmitry Medvedev I Term (May 7, 2008 – May 7, 2012)	Vladimir Putin III Term (May 7, 2012 – May 7, 2018)	Vladimir Putin IV Term (May 7, 2018 – May 7, 2024)	
Prime Minister	Vladimir Putin	Mikhail Kasyanov (May 17, 2000 – February 24, 2004) Viktor Khristenko (acting) (February 24, 2004 – March 5, 2004)	Mikhail Fradkov (March 5 – May 7, 2004)	Mikhail Fradkov (May 20, 2004 – September 24, 2007)	Viktor Zubkov (September 24, 2007 – May 8, 2008)	Vladimir Putin	Dmitry Medvedev	Dmitry Medvedev (May 18, 2018 – January 15, 2020)	Mikhail Mishustin (January 16, 2020 – Present)
Composition of the Russian Government									
							18, 2014 – April 7, 2015) Alexander Lints		
Head of the Federal Guard Service	Yuri Krapivin	Yevgeni Murov		Yevgeni Murov		Yevgeni Murov	Yevgeni Murov (until May 26, 2016) Dmitry Kochnev	Dmitry Kochnev	
Head of the Federal Service for			Andrey Malyshev	Andrey Malyshev (until	Konstantin Pulikovskiy	Konstantin Pulikovskiy (until	Nikolai Kutyin	Alexei Aleshin	

President of Russia	Boris Yeltsin II Term (1996-1999)	Vladimir Putin I Term (May 7, 2000 – May 7, 2004)		Vladimir Putin II Term (May 7, 2004 – May 7, 2008)		Dmitry Medvedev I Term (May 7, 2008 – May 7, 2012)	Vladimir Putin III Term (May 7, 2012 – May 7, 2018)	Vladimir Putin IV Term (May 7, 2018 – May 7, 2024)	
Prime Minister	Vladimir Putin	Mikhail Kasyanov (May 17, 2000 – February 24, 2004) Viktor Khristenko (acting) (February 24, 2004 – March 5, 2004)	Mikhail Fradkov (March 5 – May 7, 2004)	Mikhail Fradkov (May 20, 2004 – September 24, 2007)	Viktor Zubkov (September 24, 2007 – May 8, 2008)	Vladimir Putin	Dmitry Medvedev	Dmitry Medvedev (May 18, 2018 – January 15, 2020)	Mikhail Mishustin (January 16, 2020 – Present)
Composition of the Russian Government									
Environmental , Technological, and Nuclear Supervision				December 5, 2005) Konstantin Pulikovskiy		September 20, 2008) Nikolai Kutyin	(until April 2013) Alexey Ferapontov (acting) (until January 13, 2014) Alexei Aleshin		
Head of the Foreign Intelligence Service	Vyacheslav Trubnikov	Sergey Lebedev		Sergey Lebedev	Sergey Lebedev (until	Mikhail Fradkov	Mikhail Fradkov (until	Sergei Naryshkin	

President of Russia	Boris Yeltsin II Term (1996-1999)	Vladimir Putin I Term (May 7, 2000 – May 7, 2004)		Vladimir Putin II Term (May 7, 2004 – May 7, 2008)		Dmitry Medvedev I Term (May 7, 2008 – May 7, 2012)	Vladimir Putin III Term (May 7, 2012 – May 7, 2018)	Vladimir Putin IV Term (May 7, 2018 – May 7, 2024)	
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Composition of the Russian Government					October 9, 2007) Mikhail Fradkov		October 4, 2016) Sergei Naryshkin		

CURRICULUM VITAE

Name-Surname: Mariya ERKAN	
Education Information	
Bachelor	
University	Al-Farabi Kazakh National University
Faculty	International Relations
Department	International Relations
Master	
University	University of La Rochelle
Institute Name	Faculty of Letters, Languages, Arts and Humanities
Major Specialization	Human and Social Sciences
Program	International Relations and History of the Atlantic World
Master	
University	Al-Farabi Kazakh National University
Institute Name	Faculty of International Relations
Major Specialization	International Relations
Program	Problems of International and Regional Security
Articles and Publications	
1. Erkan, M. "Russian Foreign Policy and the Libyan Crisis: A Neoclassical Realist Assessment." <i>Farabi Journal of Social Sciences</i> 8, no. 2 (2022): 39-44. https://doi.org/10.26577/FJSS.2022.v8.i2.05. 2. Erkan, Mariya. "A Neoclassical Realist Perspective on Russian Foreign Policy in the Eastern Mediterranean in the Putin Era." <i>KazNU Bulletin. International Relations and International Law Series</i> 97, no. 1 (2022): 63-70, https://doi.org/10.26577/IRILJ.2022.v97.i1.07. 3. Chernikova, Mariya. "Amerikanskiy proyekt "Novyy shēlkovyy put'": prakticheskaya realizatsiya i perspektivy" [The United States "New Silk Road" Project: Practical Implementation and Prospects]. <i>Sbornik materialov mezhdunarodnoy nauchno-parkticheskoy konferentsii "Problemy bezopasnosti v Tsentral'noy Azii i perspektivy uregulirovaniya Afganskogo krizisa posle 2014 goda," 18 Aprelya 2013</i> [Proceedings of the International Scientific-Practical Conference "Security Issues in Central Asia and Resolving the Afghan Crisis after 2014", 18 April 2013], 76-82, n. p. 2013. 4. Baizakova, Kuralai, and Mariya Chernikova. « Dialogue transatlantique du travail : le potentiel du developpement » [Transatlantic Labour Dialogue : The Development Potential]. <i>KazNU Bulletin. International Relations and International Law Series</i> 61, no. 1 (2013): 21-24. 5. Chernikova, Mariya. "Rol' transatlanticheskogo sotrudnichestva v obespechenii global'noy sotsial'noy bezopasnosti" [The Role of Transatlantic Cooperation in Promoting Global Social Security]. In <i>"Sovremennyye integratsionnyye protsessy: kachestvenno novyye formy": Materialy mezhdunarodnoy nauchno-prakticheskoy konferentsii KazUMO i MYA im. Abylay khana</i> ["Modern Integration Processes: Qualitatively New Forms": Proceedings of the International Scientific-Practical Conference of Ablai Khan KazUIR and WL], 241-246. n. p., 2013. 6. Chernikova, Mariya. "Sotsial'noye izmereniye Transatlanticheskikh otnosheniy: Transatlanticheskii trudovoy dialog (TATD)" [A Social Dimension of Transatlantic Relations: The Transatlantic Labour Dialogue (TALD)]. <i>Germaniya – Tsentral'naya Aziya: aktual'nyye voprosy vneshney politiki i mezhdunarodnykh otnosheniy: sbornik dokladov i vystupleniy studentov i molodykh uchenykh na ezhegodnoy nauchnoy konferentsii "Mir nauki" (KazNU im. al'-Farabi, Almaty, 23-26 aprelya 2012 g.)</i> [Germany - Central Asia: Topical Issues of Foreign Policy and International Relations: Proceedings of the Annual Scientific Conference of Students and Young Scientists «The World of Science» (Al-Farabi KazNU, Almaty, 23-26 April 2012)], 34-38, n. p. 2012.	