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Russian foreign policy in the Middle East

A classical realist perspective

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ABSTRACT

La tesi di ricerca analizza la politica estera russa in Medio Oriente con particolare enfasi nell'ultimo decennio attraverso la lente del realismo classico e l'utilizzo di un sistema analitico fondato sulla natura dell'uomo, la natura dello stato e il sistema internazionale. La tesi, cercando di rispondere a specifiche domande di natura politica, persegue il fine di dimostrare la validità del realismo classico come approccio teorico e analitico nello studio della politica estera russa nel quadrante medio orientale, talvolta enfatizzandone le limitazioni. I principali quesiti a cui la tesi di ricerca tenterà di trovare risposta sono i seguenti: quali sono stati i fattori che hanno spinto la Russia ad un rinnovato interesse in Medio Oriente a metà degli anni 2010 dopo la quasi totale scomparsa dalla regione conseguentemente la fine della Guerra Fredda? Quali sono le principali ambizioni del leader russo? Come le problematiche derivanti dalla crisi pandemica di Covid-19 possano influenzare il ruolo della Russia nella regione? La crescente presenza cinese in Medio Oriente si tradurrà in una competizione geopolitica? Infine, il ritrovato parziale interesse della nuova amministrazione americana sarà di beneficio od ostacolo agli obiettivi russi nell'area?

Per provare a dare risposta a tali quesiti, la tesi, nella prima parte, ripercorre il cambiamento politico della politica estera russa dopo la caduta dell'Unione Sovietica alla fine del XX secolo. L'analisi è stata ritenuta essenziale per comprendere il contesto internazionale e domestico nel quale la delineazione di nuovi obiettivi primari nell'area medio orientale ha avuto luogo. Successivamente, avvenimenti funzionali all'economia della ricerca verranno analizzati, con particolare attenzione alle cosiddette Primavere Arabe, la guerra civile in Siria, le crisi regionali e l'emergere di nuove potenze mediorientali, così come accordi commerciali legati all'esportazione di risorse energetiche e militari, il terrorismo transnazionale e il sorgere di nuovi rivali internazionali. La struttura della tesi segue e richiama la natura individuale, statale, ed internazionale del realismo classico, concentrandosi su come possano influenzare e anche mettere a repentaglio la politica estera russa in Medio Oriente. La natura dell'uomo si focalizzerà sulla personalità e le ambizioni del leader russo, Vladimir Putin. La natura dello stato, invece, si concentrerà sul possibile impatto del Covid-19 sulla capacità statale di proiezione di potere in merito al sistema economico, al mercato del petrolio, al commercio delle armi e alla minaccia terroristica. Infine, il sistema internazionale esaminerà i rapporti con la Cina, la quale sta affermandosi sempre più come rivale della Russia nella regione. Inoltre, un excursus sull'agenda della nuova amministrazione americana Biden sarà di interesse per comprendere possibili ripercussioni o vantaggi futuri sulla politica estera russa in Medio Oriente.

Keywords: Russia; Middle East; Foreign Policy; Classical Realism; Self-preservation; Power Position; Policy Dependency; Emerging Regional Powers; International Competition.

CONTENTS

ABBREVIATIONS

BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CAATSA	Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act
CCAWA	China-Central Asia-West Asia economic corridor
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States
CTED	(United Nations) Counter-Terrorism Committee
CSTO	Collective Security Treaty Organization
EU	European Union
EAU	United Arab Emirates
GATT	General Agreement of Tariffs and Trade
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
HTS	Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IRGC-FQ	Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Quds Force
ISIL- ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant /Syria
IS	Islamic State
JCPOA	Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action
KGB	Komitet Gosudarstvennoj Bezopasnosti - Committee for State Security
MSRI	21st Century Maritime Silk Road Initiative
MTCR	Missile Technology Control Regime
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization

NGO	Non-governmental Organization
OAPEC	Organization of the Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries
ODA	Official Development Assistance
OECD	Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development
OPEC	Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries
OPEC +	Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries + Oil Producing Countries outside Opec Area
RKB	Republics of Kabardino-Balkaria
RKCh	Republics of Karachay-Cherkessia
SDF	Syrian Democratic Forces
SIPRI	Stockholm International Peace Research Institute
SREB	Silk Road Economic Belt
START	Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism
UAV	Unmanned Aerial Vehicles
UCAV	Unmanned Combat Aerial Vehicles
UK	United Kingdom
UN	Organization United Nations
UNICRI	United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute
UNITAR	United Nations Institute for Training and Research
US	United States
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
WB	World Bank
WTO	World Trade Organization
WWII	World War II

Introduction

World politics has undergone significant changes since the end of the Cold War, forcing the Russian Federation to review its position within the international system. Although, after the fall of the Soviet Union, a unipolar configuration of the international system dominated by the United States was foreseen, starting from the new millennium, the United States gradually began to lose its global hegemonic power, opening new horizons for the Russian Federation. Indeed, by the end of the 1990s, Russia started to show geoeconomic and geostrategic interests in several geographical areas, including the Middle East, with the goal of regaining lost vigour and strengthening its international position, converting Russia's foreign policy to a new-found balance-of-power (Mankoff 2009; Lynch 2010, 7-31).

In the following pages, the thesis will attempt to analyse Russian foreign policy towards the Middle East developed, in particular, by the mid-2010s, applying a classical realist framework that outlines an analytical methodology based on the nature of man, the nature of state, and the international system. In fact, notwithstanding a *de facto* analytical approach was conceived in *Man, the State and War* by Kenneth Waltz[1] in 1959 under the name of "three-level analysis," the mentioned analytical approach's matrix is clearly visible in the classical realism's propositions and assumptions, which considers all three of what Waltz would later refer to as "images": individual, state, and international.

The thesis aims at demonstrating that although classical realism was not conceived as a foreign policy theory, but rather as a set of assumptions and propositions with the purpose of detecting correlations among diverse variables in international politics (Darrington 2014, 76), it is indeed a valuable instrument for assessing a State's foreign policy, however its limitations might be.

The main research questions that the thesis attempts to answer are: what are the drivers of the increased Russian presence in the Middle East experienced during the mid-2010s? What are the Russian leader's primary objectives in the region? How can the lack of a dynamic economic system and the difficulties created by the Coronavirus (Covid-19) emergency impact Russia's agency in the area? With the increasing Chinese presence in the

[1] Waltz, *Man, the State and War*, 99; 205 and Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 32;131.

region, will Russia find a point of agreement with the latter, or will their interests transform into a competition upon the Middle East's influence? Will the new US foreign policy agenda in the Middle East benefit or hinder Russian objectives in the area?

The thesis presents the analysis in four chapters, preceded by an analytical section. The analytical section introduces the main assumptions and propositions of the classical realist tradition in order to clarify the theoretical framework used to develop the research. Following classical realist's core tenets brief overview, the various propelling factors of Russian foreign policy in the Middle East over the last two decades are mentioned in the first chapter so as to understand in-depth the drivers that led the Russian Federation to shift its gaze back to the Middle East in mid-2010. In addition, a brief excursus on Russia's foreign policy in the area during the Soviet and post-Soviet era is presented to collocate the Russian Federation in context. The thesis, subsequently, investigates the nature of man, and, more specifically, Russian President Vladimir Putin: the policy shift, the leader's background significance, and the rationale behind the policymaker's decisions in the Middle East, which for their cruciality have already been extensively discussed by several authors, including Richard Sakwa (2004) and Mara Morini (2020). The third chapter examines the nature of state, where the Covid-19 pandemic, the oil prices crisis, the arms market, and the fight against terrorism illustrate the main trends and evolutions of Russia's current Middle East policy agenda. Ultimately, the international system, developed in the fourth chapter, is devoted to evaluating the impact of the international structure on Russia's relations with external players. To be more specific, the chapter seeks to determine whether Russia will be able to preserve the balance and achieve its objectives despite changes in the international system's power distribution, with particular examination of the Russian-Sino – being China one of Russia's principal Middle East competitors – and Russian-American relations.

Theoretical and analytical framework

The classical realist school became the dominant analytical framework of international relations, especially following World War II, replacing idealist doctrines (Brecher and Harvey 2002). It is the first school of thought and analysis of political processes to have been conceived after international relations' emergence as a discipline (Jackson and Sørensen

2013, 65-99). Indeed, classical realism has ancient roots that can be traced back even to the historians Thucydides, who tried to explain the Peloponnesian War[2] and Niccolò Machiavelli (1498-1512) with *The Prince*[3] and his analytic answers to political science concerns (Legro and Moravcsik 1999, 6).

So as to investigate international political dynamics, the classical realist tradition starts from two primary assumptions: First, "[...] politics, like society in general, is governed by objective laws that have their roots in human nature. In order to improve society, it is first necessary to understand the laws by which society lives. [...] Realism, believing as it does in the objectivity of the laws of politics, must also believe in the possibility of developing a rational theory that reflects, however imperfectly and one-sidedly, these objective laws[4]" (Morgenthau 1978, 5-14). Second, because of the very root of politics in human nature (Morgenthau 1946, 16), *international politics* is the synonym of *power politics* – a struggle for power[5] (over men) among competing units within an anarchical system (Ibid, 166).

Because objective laws find their foundation in human nature, the nature of man's dimension understanding is particularly crucial and, in this context, essential is Thomas Hobbes' (1588–1683) *anarchic state of nature*. The anarchic state of nature is a classical realist tenet on which several concurrent and subsequent realist scholars base their research assumptions (See, for instance, Hans Morgenthau 1948 and John Hertz 1950).

Hobbes' anarchic state of nature derives from both the study of the nature of man and the conditions in which human beings live. In the *Leviathan* (1651), Hobbes posits that man is individualistic and pervaded by "[...] a perpetual and restless desire of power after power, that ceases only in death" (Hobbes 1651, XI). The nature of man is then accompanied by an ungoverned system – the environment in which man exists. Since the system is a self-help system, man can act without any constraints, using all the instruments available, even the use of force, in order to guarantee power pursuit. As a result, man's life is characterised by "[...] cruelty, brutish egotism and unconstrained passion that is directed by insecurity and fear in the state of nature[6]" (Kley 2003, 9).

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[2] For an in-depth analysis, see Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War,* 42;73;434.

[3] For an in-depth analysis, see Tarlton, "Political Desire and the Idea of Murder in Machiavelli's "The Prince"", 39-66.

[4] "Hugo Grotius is the first to develop, in his philosophy of the "natural system", the idea of a world governed throughout by objective laws whose existence is independent of a divine will and which are intelligible to human reason" (Morgenthau 1946, 18).

[5] The concept was reiterated even in *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (Morgenthau 1848, 22): "[…] International politics, like all politics, is a struggle for power."

[6] Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 185-186.

Hans J. Morgenthau (1904–1980) in *Scientific Man vs Power Politics* (1946) agrees with Hobbes' assumption, stressing man's evil side, his power dependence[7], and the perpetual presence of "insecurity feelings" (Morgenthau 1946, 6). Exactly as Hobbes, Morgenthau (1946, 158) identifies a man's selfish "[...] desire to maintain the range [or power] of one's person with regard to others, to increase it or demonstrate it." Selfishness, which is also highlighted in his later work *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (1948, 4-5): "[...] political man is a selfish animal, and all human behaviour tends towards the control of others."

In a few words, the primary man's traits are selfishness and domination[8] coupled with insecurity and distrust toward the other, which leads to an egotistic competition for the power necessary to overcome insecurity.

At this point, it is crucial to define power, being strictly connected not only to the nature of man but also to the nature of state. As just mentioned, Morgenthau (1948, 14) contends that "human behaviour tends towards the control of others,[9]" the so-called *animus dominandi*: man's control over another man's mind or the ability to manipulate another man's behaviour[10]. Yet States, as argued by Hobbes (1651, XIX), are an organisation of men since the lack of a superior authority (*Leviathan*) forces individuals to establish structures to defend themselves from others. Consequently, the power concept and human driver for power become inherently primary characteristics of States themselves. States that "[...] (for their own security), enlarge their dominions upon all pretences of danger, and fear of invasion, or assistance that may be given to invaders, [and] endeavour as much as they can, to subdue, or weaken their neighbours [...]" (Hobes 1951, 248).

A linkage between units thus emerges. Such a concept is traceable to State Kant's view. Based on Hobbes' anarchic state of nature, Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) posited that an analogy involving the relations between men and those between States exists. Both men and States, in fact, live in a constant state of insecurity within a state of nature (self-help system) because lawless (Hurrell 1990, 183-205; see also Suganami 1989). Additionally, the centrality of the State as a core political agent appears, as does the importance of security as the primary issue in international politics (Jackson and Sørensen 2013, 65-99).

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[7] Morgenthau, *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics,* 145-146.

[8] Morgenthau, *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics,* 165.

[9] Power identified as a man's control over the minds and actions of others is reiterated in *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (1948, 10-14).

[10] Morgenthau, *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics,* 152-153.

Morgenthau (1978, 5-14) goes a little beyond the simple concept of power, intending power as interest: man behaves in "terms of interest defined as power.[11]" Thanks to this identification, it is possible to understand politics as an "autonomous sphere", as Morgenthau considers it necessary; otherwise, it would be impossible to differentiate between "political and non-political facts" (Ibid). Moreover, "interest defined as power imposes intellectual discipline upon the observer, infuses rational order into the subject matter of politics, and thus makes the theoretical understanding of politics possible" (Morgenthau 1978, 5-14).

In addition, as far as power is concerned, a greater emphasis is placed on materialism and more precisely on hard power (military capability), inasmuch as, in a self-help system, it is States' material power (particularly, hard power) capacity that permits States[12] to pursue national interests and simultaneously protect themselves from external lust for power and competition. However, in the international political variables analysis, classical realism does not utterly deny or demonise the presence of non-material power or material power different from military capability (Morgenthau 1948, 124-144). Indeed, Morgenthau in *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (1948, 124-144) identifies nine elements of national power that comprehend both material and non-material factors: geography, natural resources, industrial capacity, military preparedness, population (material factors), national character, national morale, the quality of diplomacy, and the quality of government (non-material factors). Confutation is the fact that "[...] power may comprise anything that establishes and maintains the control of man over man. Thus, power covers all social relationships which serve that end, from physical violence to the most subtle psychological ties by which one mind controls another [...]" (Morgenthau 1978, 4-15).

Morgenthau (1948, 7) subsequently adds another element to the realist connotation of State, which is also linked to the human driver for power: *rationality*. The State is a rational actor, calculating costs and benefits before acting within the international system so as to minimise risks and maximise gains (Sutch and Elias 2007, 109).

When discussing gains within the classical realist realm, reference is made to *relative gains* (Legro and Moravcsik 1999, 14). Insofar as power is material, it is also fixed and limited within the international system, leading States to a continuous struggle for dominance

[11] Morgenthau in *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (1978, 5-14) identifies six principles of political realism. The second principle relates to the definition of politics as "interest defined in terms of power."

[12] Morgenthau, "Another "Great Debate": The National Interest of the United States," 972-973 and Morgenthau, *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics,* 202.

and power maximisation at the expense of others in a zero-sum game (Ibid, 15-22). States compare their power to that of other States, trying to get as much as possible because the more power a State possesses, the more it will be able to satisfy its own interest and guarantee self-preservation (Jackson and Sørensen 2013, 162-164).

Because of the very existence of the above-mentioned connection between units, in order to comprehend international politics and States' foreign political behaviour, the nature of man is not sufficient since also the nature of state is needed. Yet, it is worth noting that such linkage also implies an overlapping tendency, given the commonalities shared by the two dimensions.

In reality, neither of these two dimensions alone are enough to have a comprehensive understanding of international politics; the nature of man and the nature of state, in fact, should be applied in conjunction with the third dimension: the international system (Carr 2001, 109).

As will already be deduced from the just discussed nature of man and state, the classical realist international system is dominated by permanent anarchy. Anarchy is the absence of a system-wide authority, enforcing a system law of shared rules and norms of behaviour; a circumstance generally associated with the outbreak of violence because of constraint absence over States struggling for relative power (Jackson and Sørensen 2013, 39-43; 66-79). In such a system, the harmony of interests between differing States is merely an illusion since interests always tend to collide. Conflict, thereby, cannot be avoided. As a consequence, peace for classical realists is only a temporary condition, inasmuch as the state of nature is a synonym of conflict.

Due to the fact that the international system is permeated by anarchy, States tend to employ a self-regulatory mechanism of social force and balance: a way to maintain peace between conflicting interests (Morgenthau 1948, 9). Indeed, "the aspiration for power on the part of several nations, each trying either to maintain or to overthrow the status quo, leads of necessity to a constellation which is called the *balance of power* and to policies which aim at serving it [...]" (Morgenthau 1948, 125).

The maintenance of the equilibrium between the State's relations and the avoidance of domination among units are the two fundamental functions[13] of the balance of power politics, according to classical realism (Morgenthau 1948, 131). States, in order to maintain

[13] Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace,* 131.

equilibrium[14] within the international system, can only increase their capabilities through internal efforts and military strengthening (internal balancing) or external efforts by aligning and realigning with other States (external balancing or deterrence) (Morgenthau 1948, 134-142).

Contrary to the liberal tradition, therefore, classical realism believes that, in an anarchical system, cooperation can occur but only if it aims at maximising a country's national interests (Sutch and Elias 2007, 109).

As previously mentioned, however, since States are composed of men, and one of their main traits is insecurity, distrust towards the other is a characteristic deeply rooted even in States themselves. In fact, even though they could undertake balancing in order to maintain power equilibrium within the international system, States may never be certain of the true intentions of others. Such insecurity could lead to another classical realist proposition: the *security dilemma*, strictly tied to internal balancing. The security dilemma is a concept coined by John H. Hertz (1908-2005) in *Idealist Internationalism and the Security Dilemma* (1950).

The starting point is, once again, Hobbes' anarchic state of nature and it is defined as a state in which the emergence of mutual suspicion and fear triggers a State's power increment to obtain more security, creating a vicious cycle of insecurity and (hard) power increase between units (Hertz, 1950, 157-180).

In order to analyse the motives behind the balance of power, classical realism concentrates both on State's behaviour and on the distribution of power within the international system.

Concisely, classical realism is commonly referred to as "human nature realism," given its emphasis on human nature as a driver for power-seeking. For this reason, it is frequently accused of reductionist thinking when denying the role of structures in international politics.

Notwithstanding its undeniable root in the concepts of selfishness and *animus dominandi* (Morgenthau 1946, 192), classical realism does not exclusively employ the latter as the solely reading key for explaining international political dynamics, nor does it deny the existence of international structures amidst their secondary importance.

Evidence can be provided by Morgenthau (1948, 155), stating:

[14] For an in-depth analysis, see Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace,* paragraph "The balance of power," 125-166.

> "And since no nation can foresee how large its miscalculations will turn out to be, all nations must ultimately seek the maximum of power available to them. Only so can they hope to attain the maximum margin of safety commensurate with the maximum of errors they might commit. The limitless aspiration for power, potentially always present […] in the power drives of nations, finds in the balance of power a mighty incentive to transform itself into an actuality."

And Nicholas John Spykman (1942, 446), one of the fathers of classical realism:

> "The international community is without government, without a central authority to preserve law and order, and it does not guarantee the member states either their territorial integrity, their political independence, or their rights under international law. States exist, therefore, primarily in terms of their own strength or that of their protector states and, if they wish to maintain their independence, they must make the preservation or improvement of their power position the principal objective of foreign policy."

As can be noted from these statements, although the structure is not the deep driving force for power pursuit, the circumstance in which men and consequently States behave matters. Anarchy is thus a permissive force, translating into the desire to dominate, given the absence of regulatory authority over great powers to restrain their lust for power (Morgenthau 1948, 477).

However, in an anarchic system, States would never be able to pursue their lust for power without defending themselves against others' dominance due to the inability to genuinely disclose others' intentions. Power, as a result, is an immediate aim[15] and a means for security, reflecting the need for an autonomy quest (Spykman 1942, 17-18):

> "[...] Independence is of the essence of the state, self-preservation also means fighting for independent status. This explains why the basic objective of the foreign policy of all states is the preservation of territorial integrity and political independence. [...] Power means survival, the ability to impose one's will on others [...]."

Therefore, in the end, the power struggle is mostly caused by human self-interest, but also to a small extent by the international system. This allows refuting the assumption that classical realism considers the international system, but more importantly, it demonstrates the effectiveness of the theory in the study of foreign policy. This is because, due to the power

[15] Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace,* 10; 62.

that is derived from the nature of man and/or the international system, classical realism would fail to understand the true motivations that drive a State to act – pure lust for power or self-preservation and power position in order to achieve independence and as a consequence power-seeking[16] – by focusing solely on the nature of man and the internal characteristics of the nature of state. The study of foreign policy, how the State interacts with other existing units within the international system, and how anarchy and power distribution affect the State's agency is also necessary.

The methodological approach

The classical realist framework has been chosen to analyse Russian foreign policy in the Middle East, insofar as, despite the changes that occurred in contemporary international relations, the Russian Federation is still deeply anchored in the heritage of Great Russia and the Soviet Union and thus to classical realism (Mankoff 2009). In fact, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, there was a return to the classical realist ideology since it was believed that the liberal course undertaken in the 1960s-70s during the period of integration and rapprochement with the West (Détente) had weakened the system and led to its collapse in 1991. It was, thereby, necessary to redefine the policy of the new Russia (Lync 2010, 7-12).

Yet, noteworthy is to clarify that classical realism is not a foreign policy theory; it is a theory of international politics.

As subsequently explained by Kenneth Waltz in *Theory of International Politics* (1979, 71-72), there is a distinction between international politics and foreign policy. International politics studies the international outcomes of States' behaviour and interactions, which inform us how States deal with international pressure. Foreign policy, on the other hand, analyses how States respond to international pressure. The distinction between international politics and foreign policy is a highly debated topic within the realist realm, and it is the reason why, usually, in order to understand a State's foreign policy, researchers use a combination of different analytical lenses, including classical realism, structural realism (a system-level theory of international politics theorised by Kenneth Waltz in 1979), neoclassical

[16] Morgenthau, *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics*, 184.

realism (the latest theory of foreign policy postulated by Gideon Rose and Fareed Zakaria in the late 1990s), and even social constructivism (an international relations theory based on the importance of ideational factors) (See Feng and Ruizhuang 2006, 109-134; Wieclawski 2011, 170-177; Omelicheva 2016, 708-26).

Despite the recognition that applying a multi-level analysis approach can produce a more complete picture of Russia's operating in the Middle East, classical realism taken individually seems to be much more comprehensive as an analytical approach compared, for example, to structural realism, which focuses solely on the international environment without taking into account internal constraints (Darrington 2014, 76). Without a doubt, even classical realism has limitations, highlighted in the hereby thesis; however, the approach is able to combine both the importance of internal dynamics and international pressure on individual States' actions.

As a consequence, the thesis evaluates Russian foreign policy in the Middle East, identifying the classical realist tenets, along with its limitations, and organising the analysis following the three dimensions described: the nature of man and the nature of state can explain the forces that drive the interests of the Russian Federation and its policies while the international system considers the effects of international power distribution and their impact on future outcomes.

As a result, in addition to classical works of classical realist scholars, qualitative material including academic articles and papers, information from think tanks, official agencies, and Institution's websites are used.

The driving factors of Russia's return to the Middle East

1.1 Historical background

The Cold War is considered a watershed moment in the international relations' history since, over the period, equally known as the era of bipolarity in world affairs (Scott 2016, 51-59; Cox 2016, 66-77), there has been a substantial change in the setting of the international system, characterised by the coexistence of two great powers: the United States and the Soviet Union. As it is well known, the US and the USSR had opposing ideologies, with the United States and the Western countries imbued with capitalism and the USSR and the Eastern bloc based on communism; ideologies that will shape the policies of the respective blocs and create tensions among them throughout the Cold War. On the one side, the United States attempted to spread the blessing of liberty to the entire world, reshaping the international system thanks to Roosevelt's *Grand Design (New Deal*[17]*)* so as to recover and reform the 20th century failed capitalism. On the other side, the Soviet Union aimed at promoting the world revolution against capitalism[18] and maintaining national security: a keyword on the basis of Soviet policies (Ibid). In fact, as stated by Iosif V. Stalin during the 1945 Yalta and Potsdam Conferences, the main priority as President was the survival of the Soviet Union after World War II and the preservation of its security (Karaganov 2020, 37-44). By scrutinising both the Russian domestic and foreign policy during the Soviet and post-Soviet periods, it is undeniable that national security was at the very core (Morini 2020, 150). Within these policies, however, there were other two crucial ambitions: the preservation of great-power status and the enhancement of the USSR's power position internationally (Politikasi 2018, 13-17). During the early years of the Cold War, indeed, the Stalin administration was primarily concentrated on Europe, particularly Germany, in order to ensure economic, political, and social protection; yet, simultaneously, it was also attempting to expand Russia's foreign policy in the Near East to establish new cooperative relations (Zubok 2008, 427-444).

From the main foreign policy objectives of the Soviet Union after the World Wars, it is possible to clearly observe an agenda heavily based on classical realist ideology, with the maximisation of national interests identified as the desire to increase the country's power even

[17] Arrighi, *The world economy and the cold war 1970-1990,* 23-31
[18] Marx, *Capital. A Critique of Political Economy.*

through cooperation, but that was always functional to the achievement of domestic interests. Moreover, from the USSR's foreign policy, a general line can be traced, fundamental to the research thesis, as current Russian foreign policy, in general, and more precisely, in the Middle East with minor variations, fully mirrors that undertaken during the Soviet era. Continuity in foreign policy is, in fact, considered to be of great value to the classical realists. Morgenthau observes that (1946, 62): ‘‘The fundamental foreign policies of the Great Powers have survived all changes in the form of government and in domestic policies […] Continuity in foreign affairs is not a matter of choice but necessity […].’’

Such a general line can be reconducted to the *troika,* as Julia Gurganus and Eugene Rumer (2019, 1-5) define it: a foreign policy focused on geography, great-power status, and relationship with the West. The clarification is functional since, starting from these three drivers, it is possible to comprehend all subsequent Russia’s actions throughout the new millennium.

Geography[19] has always been an essential driver since the Russian empire, as the country lacks natural protective barriers with external powers. Such an absence shaped Russian understanding of the territorial security towards possible external hostile behaviours and the response to the guarantee of the protection of national borders. In order to protect the territory, Russia started to acquire more territory since the more soil was under Russian control, the more the State could ensure security in order to pursue its lust for power (Gurganus and Rumer 2019, 3-10).

Directly correlated to geographical expansion is the great-power status, which is both a consequence and a trigger for the territorial quest. Indeed, geographic-strategic depth and power ambitions are inextricably linked: acquiring territories is functional to the power expansion, but Russia's recognition as a great power at the international level is vital to provide bases of legitimacy to the geographic conquests and the geopolitical objectives.

Lastly, the difficult relations with the West (especially the United States), permeated by both rivalry and the need for cooperation, is another pillar of Russian foreign policy and, as exposed in the research thesis, it is also tied to Russia's involvement in the Middle East (Ibid). Since the US became a great power at the end of the 19th century, competition and rivalry registered a dramatic increase, grounded on an ideological and interests opposition. On the one hand, there is the West and its values, democracy, human rights, and the governments’

[19] Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace,* 80-82.

legitimacy; on the other hand, there is Russia as the Western anti-model with its red lines, defending traditional values, the Westphalian state model, and a system rooted in the *Concert of Europe*[20], in which great powers negotiate and arbitrate their territorial and state-control rights (Gorenburg et al. 2017, 12). As a result, an interests' conflict between the two power poles emerges, and all periods of low to moderate tensions in the Russian-American relations are targeted at achieving national interests (Applebaum and Kotkin 2017).

Confirmation of the troika is the pursued Nikita Khrushchev (1953-1964)'s foreign primary objectives (Reich and Bennett 1984, 85):

1. Support of Communist governments at the United States' expense and limitation of Western interventions within Middle Eastern countries;
2. Prevention of internal regional conflicts, consolidating and increasing the Soviet Union's influence in the Middle Eastern quadrant and internationally;
3. Achievement of US strategic parity and Soviet military forces expansion.

To achieve the described objectives, the Khrushchev administration concentrated its attention on specific Arab regimes, including Egypt and Syria; indeed, it attempted to align with anti-American regimes and movements, including the Arab Nationalists[21] (Katz 2019, 39-43). Egypt was suffering a domestic revolution in the 1950s, a beneficial opportunity for the Soviet Union to Near East access gaining. The Soviet Union, therefore, started to establish arms trade ties as well as aid programs to assist *anti-Baghdad Pact*[22] countries, resulting in the emergence of a lucrative market. Egypt's connection with the Soviet Union further cemented during the 1956 Suez Crisis, thanks to USSR considerable military assistance for Egyptian President Gamal Abdel al-Nasser and his plan to nationalise the Suez Canal (Cox 2016, 66-77; Scott 2016, 51-59). Syria became the Soviet Union's subsequent customer, purchasing Soviet armaments.

Through the partnership with diverse Arab countries, the Soviet Union advocated the socialist ideology and supported the creation of new communist governmental apparatuses. The connections' benefit was evident not only for the Soviet Union but for individual countries themselves, as they served as a deterrent to the capitalist spread and the formation of

[20] For in-depth analysis, see Lascurettes, *The Concert of Europe and Great-Power Governance Today*.
[21] Sayigh, "The Arab Nationalist Movement, Armed Struggle, and Palestine, 1951-1966," 608-629.
[22] US Department of State, "*The Baghdad Pact (1955) and the Central Treaty Organization."*

Western colonial regimes in the region (Barmin 2018). Yet, despite the advantageous partnerships, during Khrushchev's successor administration of Leonid Brezhnev (1964-1982), the 1967 6 Days Arab-Israeli War negatively impacted the Soviet Union's relationship with the Arab States (Wolfe 1969, 4-6). The occurrence's negativity lied on the controversial Kremlin's responsibility in the outbreak of the war: on the one side, is argued (including Galia Golan 2006, 3-19; Isabella Ginor and Gideon Remez 2006, 88-130) that Moscow instigated the war in order to increase the Arab countries' dependence on the Soviet Union and consolidate its power in the Middle East, a strategy that would fully reflect the classical realist philosophy; while, on the other side, there are researchers (including Michael Oren 1967; Karen Dawisha 1979; Thomas Wolfe 1969, 2-8), who argue that the USSR had no intention of triggering the war. However dubious the USSR involvement in the exacerbation of the already existing crisis between the Arab States and Israel might be, the aftermath of the war equally presented the Soviet Union with some opportunities. Notwithstanding the gradual shifting towards the West, in fact, the Soviet Union managed to increase its military presence in the Middle East (in the Mediterranean Sea, Persian Gulf, and the Indian Ocean) by establishing naval military positions in local ports, notably in Egypt and Syria, for their strategic-geographical position overlooking the Mediterranean Sea (Cox 2016, 66-77; Scott 2016, 51-59).

The Soviet Union's Middle East foreign policy deterioration became apparent in the 1970s with the Arab States accusation for insufficient Soviet military support during the 1973 Yom Kippur War[23] to the Organization of the Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries against Israel as evidence (Arrighi 2010, 8; Sargent 2010, 49-53; Garavini 2019, 217).

Yet during the the 1978 *Camp David Accords*[24], the Soviet Union regained its prominence in the region, when American President Jimmy Carter created the image of favouring Israel during the mediation of a peace treaty between Egyptian President Anwar Sadat and Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin (Princen 1991, 62-67). Recovering its prior position of prominence prompted the Soviet Union to invade Afghanistan in 1979 (Gvosdev 2002; Trenin 2012), an invasion that marked the second turning point in the country's Middle East foreign policy agenda and was considered – along with the experienced

[23] For in-depth analysis see Arrighi, *The world economy and the cold war 1970-1990*; Sargent, *The United States and Globalization in the 1970s. In The Shock of the Global the 1970s in Perspective*; and Garavini, *The Rise and Fall of OPEC in the Twentieth Century*.

[24] For in-depth analysis see Princen, "Camp David: Problem-Solving or Power Politics as Usual?"

1970s and 1980s internal crisis rooted in economic, political, and social stagnation – one of the several signals of the Soviet Union's decline.

Secretary-General Leonid Brezhnev, during his administration, contributed to what is commonly known as *Détente* (1967-1979), a period of relaxation of the international tensions, marked by a combination of cooperation and confrontation and by the reaching of nuclear power equity. During Détente, the USSR began a country's opening process towards the West, in particular, for its technological advancement, and started to shift its ideological path, tending towards liberalism. In fact, it should be remembered that the Soviet Union's and Warsaw Pact countries' economies and social welfare were focused on agriculture and oil exportation, which accounted for more than 80% of their GDP, making the Soviet Union the world's first oil-producing nation. Consequently, the country's economy was almost completely dependent on foreign markets. During its opening, the Soviet Union started to realise the country's economic, political, and social backwardness (not from the military point of view as it possessed military supremacy) compared to capitalist countries. As a result, it decided to exploit the fruitful export of oil in order to import technology from the West and develop its industries and welfare state, becoming consequently indebted. With the advent of the Oil Price Crisis in 1973[25], the Soviet Union benefited greatly when OPEC countries (Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries) quadrupled their oil prices. Thanks to the oil-exporting world leadership and the substantial increase in prices, the USSR could both maintain artificially low prices in the internal market to supply the population with needed goods, continue to increase technology investments, and even ask for loans to American banks and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Yet, oil prices did not remain high long, inasmuch as OPEC countries started to reduce them in the second half of the 1970s. This is the precise moment in which the USSR began to suffer the consequences. As previously reported, crude oil export accounted for the majority of the State's revenue and, as a consequence of the decline in oil price, the Soviet Union found itself no longer able to provide subsidies to the population, low oil prices to the Eastern Bloc countries, and to repay the American banks and IMF loans. This event is known as the "1980s International Debt Crisis" (Zubok 2008, 427-443; Kotkin 2010, 80-93). The USSR was unable to maintain its great-power status and its military dominance due to a third-class economic system, the US

[25] For an in-depth analysis, see Garavini *The Rise and Fall of OPEC in the Twentieth Century* and Arrighi, *The world economy and the cold war 1970-1990.*

increasing defensive strategy of containment against the country, and rising powerful countries, such as Germany, as well as China, and Japan (the so-called *Asian Tigers*).

The Reagan administration (1981-1989) is noteworthy to highlight at this point since it is believed to have contributed to the Soviet Union's demise, along with the Afghan miscalculation and the undertaken USSR risky policies in the 1980s as a consequence of the International Debt Crisis. Ronald Reagan has been a promoter, together with the United Kingdom Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher (1979-1990), of the *Neoliberal (Counter)revolution*[26]: a series of economic and political-ideological policies aimed at restoring the American economy after the 1970s recession caused by stagflation and dollar overhang – the coexistence of high inflation rates together with high unemployment rates in a market with paper money abundance available to customers. The strategy implemented by Reagan was a restrictive monetary policy: the withdrawal of money from the market so that the currency value would appreciate, diminishing the inflation and increasing the interest rates. Thanks to this policy, the high-interest rates attracted foreign investments to balance the trade deficit present in the American current account. The huge rerouting of capital flows into the United States had disastrous consequences for countries in the Third and Second (Eastern Bloc and Asia) World since they experienced a contraction in demand of natural resources and availability of credit and investments. Furthermore, the interest rate hike proved nearly impossible for Third and Second World countries to continue borrowing money from American banks. As a result, in a situation marked by the emergence of an economic and political crisis, as well as rising interest rates, countries found themselves unable to repay loans. In order to help these countries, the Reagan administration conceived an aid programme through a "structural adjustment" known as the *Washington Consensus*[27] (Arrighi 2010, 31-44).

The (counter)revolution, in addition, marked a return to the liberal ideals in the United States and its order prior to *social Keynesianism*[28]*,* including macro stability, privatisation, liberalisation of foreign trade and capital movements, and deregulation of the market. Despite Ronald Reagan's abandonment of social Keynesianism, he did not abandon military Keynesianism, which contributed to the Soviet Union containment policies (see Anderson

[26] For in-depth analysis see Steven, *The Age of Reagan: The Conservative Counterrevolution: 1980-1989.*

[27] Arrighi, *The world economy and the cold war 1970-1990,* 2-44

[28] For in-depth analysis on Keynesianism see Arrighi, *The world economy and the cold war 1970-1990,* 2-44

2004; Arrighi 2010, 40-44; Harvey 2007, 22-29).

Concisely, domestic difficulties, combined with the "Reagan Doctrine," favoured hazardous decisions; in fact, the Soviet politician who served as the last Secretariat-General of the Communist Party of the USSR from 1985 to 1991, Michail Gorbachev, implemented the *Glasnost and Perestroika* policies with the aim of reviving the Soviet Union through modernisation, reconciliation, and the re-establishment of relations with the Western countries (Zubok 2008, 443-444). The reforms, however, failed with a negative impact not just on internal policy but also on the Soviet Union's foreign policy and role in the Middle East (Dobrokhotov 2020, 75-81).

The vulnerable position led to the Soviet Union's dissolution in 1991 and the end of bipolarity. The Cold War's conclusion ushered in an ideological shift in the new Russia, with Russian elites returning to classical realist rhetoric. Indeed, the cooperation pursuit with the West, integration with its institutions, the market economy transition, and the reformation of the political system based on democratic principles in order to be perceived as an equal partner proved increasingly detrimental to Russia. Western institutions such as NATO, the EU, and the WTO did not adapt to incorporate Russia's needs and interests, just as Western countries did not help the Russian Federation and the former Soviet bloc from the economic difficulties that were partly responsible for their dissolution (Radin and Reach 2017, 1-5; 21-23). According to the elites, which were frustrated for having believed that emulating the West would have improved their lives' quality, cooperation with the West and the pursuit of promoted liberalism was not beneficial to Russia and the serious situation it found itself in at the end of the 1990s. The West, once again, began to be perceived as an enemy (Lipman 2015).

As far as the Middle Eastern quadrant is concerned, Russia disappeared from the region's scenario, consequently the country's demise. Yet, two international occurrences in the 2000s reignited Russia's interest: the terrorist attacks on the 11th of September 2001 and the 2010s Arab Spring. The terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York highlighted a severe issue destined to become a pivotal element of Russia's Middle Eastern foreign policy agenda in the 2010s: international transnational terrorism. The 2010s Arab Spring, in conjunction with the 2011 NATO's intervention in Libya, instead refocused attention on Western countries' position in the Middle East and the threat it represented to Russian national security (Morini 2020, 153-155).

1.2 Driving factors

Despite the importance of the 11th of September 2001 terrorist attacks, the 2010s Arab Spring, and 2011 NATO's intervention in Libya as contributing factors that prompted Russia's renewed interest in the Middle East quadrant – factors discussed further below – there are other instrumental determinants to Russia's resurgence in the region.

The multipolar system

The international structure, as described in the Theoretical and analytical framework section, is considered a permissive factor in the power struggle.

The end of WWII caused a dramatic shift in the international system, no longer marked by multipolarity. Indeed, most of the great powers that dominated the scene during the first half of the 20th century were defeated during the war, leaving the challenge of reorganising and maintaining the international order to the remaining powers: the United States and the Soviet Union (Cox 2016, 66-77; Scott 2016, 51-59). The direct result was the rise of new tensions between the two countries, coinciding with the emergence of the era of bipolarity in world affairs, commonly known as the Cold War. This era was distinguished by the coexistence of the two great powers mentioned above, which shared significant political, economic, and social clout in the international arena (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni and Hofmann 2020).

The US and the USSR soon achieved strategic parity, perfectly balancing each other's power; the US possessed an exceptional economy equilibrated by strong Soviet military capability. However, so as to guarantee the maintenance of the power equilibrium and the privileged international position, it is not sufficient to possess superiority just in a single sphere. To earn the great-power status, a State has to excel in all the political, economic, military, and social spheres (Wolfe 1969, 1-15). In the 1980s, the USSR was facing economic, social, and political difficulties, to the point that it was no longer able to sustain its first-class military superiority with a third-class economy and technology. The direct consequence was the USSR dissolution in 1991, the end of bipolarity, and the emergence of a new power imbalance within the international system.

The Cold War's aftermath fostered the liberal ideology of peaceful cooperation, which in the second half of the 20th century was gaining momentum, insofar as tensions did not result in violence, contradicting classical realists' expectations (Gaiser and Kovač 2012, 51). Indeed, the assumption of warfare as a state of nature did not provide an adequate analytical foundation to explain the Cold War's peaceful resolution, becoming, as a consequence, a limitation of classical realism itself. Consequently, it is reasonable to assert that the international order established in the late 1990s and currently dominant was a liberal[29] one. Yet, the assertion appears contentious since the type of order created at the end of the Cold War is undefined (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni and Hofmann 2020).

According to Mette Eilstrup-Sangiovanni and Stephanie C. Hofmann (2020), a liberal system was never fully formed after the United States disengaged from multilateral cooperation at the end of the tensions to focus on domestic policy by engaging in more unilateral acts: liberalism began to decline gradually. The absence of Washington, during the Bush administration (1989-1993), acting as a hegemonic superpower, reshaping the international order and establishing a unipolar system that encouraged the emergence of diverse regional security poles, substantially shifting the balance of power from the Global North to the Global South, is evidence of such postulation (Gaiser and Kovač 2012, 51-57). More importantly, several of the players appearing in the new heterogeneous system's scenes were and continue to be non-democratic, undermining the liberal assumption of an international order founded on the promotion of human rights, democratic governments, and free movement (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni and Hofmann 2020).

As argued by Emel Parlar Dal and Emre Erşen (2020), the heterogeneity of the new configuration pervaded by multiple power poles combined with Russia's *duality*, proved and currently continues to be highly beneficial, as it allows the Russian Federation to gain more room for manoeuvre within the international system, adopting a flexible behaviour and adapting its policies to different circumstances and actors, cooperating with a diverse range of entities. To be more precise, the term “duality” alludes to the dual role undertaken by the country since the late 1990s: that of *great power* and *rising power* (Parlar Dal and Erşen 2020, 3).

Russia has a long history of being considered a superpower, although this role was emphasised in particular with the end of World War II thanks to its geographic size, energy

[29] Morgenthau, *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics*, 45-46.

resources, nuclear capabilities, and permanent membership in the United Nations Security Council. Despite internal challenges jeopardising its standing immediately before the fall of the Iron Curtain, the Russian Federation remained a dominant military power, which is the main reason it did not completely disengage from the international scene in the late 1990s (Waltz 1993, 44–79; Cox 2016, 66-77). The perseverance of the pursuit of a renewed relevant international status in the newly established (multipolar) system allows Russia to expand and project its influence in diverse regional areas, including the Middle East, managing to fuel and preserve the remaining power possessed after the end of the Cold War. Nonetheless, Russia has begun to play even a rising power role, as Moscow exhibits traits comparable to those of other rising powers of the Global South (such as China, India, and Middle Eastern countries), including "positional, behavioural, and functional power and strong ideological affinity in terms of challenging the Western supremacy in international relations and strive to create an alternative to the Western-dominated world order" (Parlar Dal and Erşen 2020, 4).

The desire of maintaining international prestige as well as the latter Russian trait shared with emerging rising powers are strictly connected to the *troika* and to the Russian vision of the current international order. After the Bush administration (1989-1993), in fact, the United States regained its lost vigour, refocusing on foreign policy and its ambition to, once again, become the only superpower in the international system. Thereby, the Russian view of today's international order is a US-led order that attempts to promote the Western state model, human rights principles, and Western regional institutions through regime change and support to liberal democracy. The direct consequence is that, as during the Cold War, the Russian Federation perceives the US-led order as a threat to national security and its objectives. Yet, although the US continues to pursue expansionist aims, the US-led order no longer reflects the current power distribution, which is dominated by numerous power poles: precisely this is why Russia sees the order as becoming increasingly dangerous due to the belligerent potential it can produce. The international order should be thus adapted to the current circumstances, preserving the Westphalian model of normative order based on fundamental principles, such as State sovereignty, territorial integrity, non-interference, and multilateralism. Russia, in this context, might be one of the contributing players (Radin and Reach 2017, IX; 15-19; Omelicheva 2016, 708-26).

Hence, the multipolar world order is a key permissive feature that enables Russia to boost the country's long-term aspiration to return to a prominent international role, becoming

one of the many powers of the new system, giving an alternative to the now inadequate American unipolar order ambition. Besides, crucial to mention is even the presence of numerous authoritarian players as contributing factors, which provide leverage to the Russian Federation since it enjoys widespread support in opposing Western liberal norms, considered merely a Western instrument of values promotion (Stepanova 2016, 2; Fisher 2020, 2; 7).

External powers' role: the United States and the European countries

The Middle East Crisis in the early 2010s developed during a period in which the influence and the role of main external actors – the United States and Western countries – as mediators and security guarantors, were declining in the Middle East (Stepanova 2016, 5-7; 2018, 37).

The US involvement in the Middle East traced back to the end of World War II when the confrontation with the USSR started. Although the USSR succeeded in establishing contact with several countries in the region, it is widely believed that a *Pax Americana* was even developed in the Middle East, being the US the only security provider in the area. More specifically, the United States "[had and] has a strong interest in ensuring that no power in this region, either State or non-state, has both the will and capacity to directly attack the United States" (Wechsler 2019, 14).

To comprehend the US's key objectives in the Middle East, it is necessary to frame the context in which the US operated.

The Middle East was, and is, the major global energy producer, with more than two-thirds of the world's oil production among the OPEC countries (OPEC 2020a). Because the US during the Cold War was trying to spread capitalism and the Western-state model, the oil market was crucial even though the United States was energy independent. Indeed, it possessed several national oil reserves in Alaska and alternative energy sources: the reason why the massive reduction of oil supplies towards Western countries by the Organization of the Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries (OAPEC) consequently the 1973 Yom Kippur War did not adversely affect the US (Arrighi 2010, 30). Despite the US independence and the possibility to export national oil reserves, the market for Middle Eastern oil was essential since an increase or decrease in oil prices could have led to grave consequences to energy

producers, energy prices, and inflation. Therefore, fluctuations in the Middle East market may have impacted not only the global economic growth but also the US's interests.

An additional characteristic of this region was the profound instability permeated with tensions and rivalries between State and non-state actors. Within this framework, the US attempted to secure its interests and prevent any military threat towards the country by regional or external actors. To achieve those objectives, the US implemented a national security strategy based on economic, military, and security intervention.

In terms of economics, the United States' goal was to ensure the safe extraction and distribution of energy resources while discouraging regional and external players from pursuing their own interests at the expense of the global market.

In the military sphere, the United States maintained control over the Persian Gulf thanks to its navy, and even though the military presence started to diminish in the aftermath of the 2003 Iraq War, the US continued to preserve its influence in the Middle East through military bases, military drills, and the fight against transnational non-state actors.

Finally, in the security sphere, the US tried to promote democratic ideology and respect for human rights, believing that it would bring more stability within the region. It sought to preserve the regional status quo by limiting hegemonic aspirations, getting involved in internal crises through diplomatic negotiations, and using its position as arms exporter to create new relations and prevent regional conflicts. Although the United States' ambition of democratisation revealed itself unsuccessful and the military forces progressively diminished, the US still had a dominant role in the early 2010s within the Middle East (Wechsler 2019, 21).

Thus, as William Wechsler (2019, 25-33) explains, the main reason for the US's disengagement from the Middle East should not be questioned in its capabilities but in its will. By observing the national sentiment, there has always been discontent within the American population and adversity in the US's participation in external conflicts. Examples are the 2001 Afghanistan invasion, the 2003 Iraq War, or even before in the 1970s in Vietnam, where the population had organised itself into a social movement, condemning not only the brutalities committed during the war but also the economic cost and length (Zinn 1999, 460-492; Horn 2017, 539). The United States, in fact, has repeatedly engaged in long-lasting conflicts that have required a considerable amount of funding, which instead of being spent

domestically on welfare and the economy, has been devoted to foreign policy (Basosi 2013, 471-484).

The turning point regarding the American foreign policy in the Middle East corresponded to the Obama administration (2008-2017). After the Bush administration's interventionism that damaged the country's international standing, and in order to appease his supporters, Barack Obama promised to withdraw US troops from Iraq and sign an agreement with Iran, considering the possession of the nuclear weapon as an additional threat to national security. In the 2010s, the US started to move its attention away from the Middle East, conceiving a non-aggressive, non-interventionist, and multilateral strategy, thus undermining its effectiveness as an external guarantor of regional security and contributing to a shift in the regional power balance. The consequence has been a political and military vacuum to be filled (Wechsler 2019, 1-12; 53).

As the United States' involvement in the region has dwindled, regional players such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (EAU), Qatar, Israel, Iran, and Turkey have begun to take the lead and extend their reach in the Middle East and beyond. Further evidence of the decreasing American interest in the Middle East was the decision to not directly intervene in the Syrian conflict in 2015 or to assist the Iraqi government from the growing danger of the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL, or Islamic State of Iraq and Syria – ISIS – الدولة الإسلامية في العراق والشام) (Ibid, 103-113).

The most interesting effect of the United States' gradual disengagement from the region, however, has been the enabling of the Russian Federation to fill the vacuum left by the Obama administration. The reduction of American presence in the region, indeed, proved beneficial to the achievement of national interests primarily rooted in internal security concerns, as well as the transformation of the Russian Federation into an indispensable State within the heterogeneous international order, particularly in light of the United States' inability to resolve significant regional Middle Eastern tensions. The power void left allowed Russia to directly address issues of national concern, including terrorism, foreign meddling in domestic affairs, and regime change, while also attempting to preserve the international order's traditional characteristics – including State sovereignty and multilateralism –, along with the country's survival (Inbar 2016, 9-13).

As far as the European Countries are concerned, the Middle East has always been profoundly linked to the European continent. In fact, the European countries are affected the

most by the disorders occurring in the Middle East, even more than the United States and the Russian Federation. The main consequences are related to spillover effects strictly connected to migration, humanitarian crises, and transnational non-state actors and extremist groups. Yet, despite the high degree of exposure to negative consequences of instability and conflicts in the Middle East, the European countries did not have the sufficient interest or capacity to intervene and cover the role of security provider in the area. As reported by Ekaterina Stepanova (2016, 5-7), the main type of response of Western countries was *limited containment.* Indeed, some countries have participated in the 2011 Libyan crisis and even to a certain extent in the 2012-15 Syrian civil war – namely France and the UK with limited airstrikes – ; however, they did not possess the same strategic capacity of great powers such as the United States and Russia (Stepanova 2018, 37).

The 2010s Middle East Crisis and the 2011 NATO's intervention in Libya

The *Arab Spring* (الربيع العربي) was a full-fledged systemic crisis that reached its climax in 2011. It was the outcome of a lengthy period of instability, regional conflicts, and disorders in the Arab area that erupted in the early 2000s (Goi 2013). The 2003 Iraq War, the Egyptian Kefaya (كفاية) – or officially Egyptian Movement for Change – workers movement's protests in 2004, and the 2000s Israeli-Palestinian confrontations are tangible examples of early occurrences (Lafi 2017, 677-702). The Arab Spring, more specifically, can be defined as a series of anti-government protests, uprisings, and armed rebellions across the Arab world (Guazzone 2016). Frequently they are equally described by researchers (Anderson 2013, 150-156; Mostafa 2015, 123) as "Youth Movements", representing a new form of inclusive activism due to the massive participation of young people, minorities, and women.

The particularity of these insurrectional movements was the aim and the tools used. In fact, through social media, demonstrators struggled for a coherent political and constitutional reform, expressed by the call for human rights, fundamental freedoms, dignity, and, more importantly, for democracy.

By more closely observing the events, everything started in the small city of Sidi Bouzid, Tunisia, in February 2010 when a young street vendor, Mohamed Bouazizi, set himself on fire in front of the government office as a symbol of protest against police

harassment and the critical situation in which the young population within the country was (Lafi 2017, 677-702; Chulov 2020). It represented “the hope of change to the outrage against unbearable brutality”, intending to overthrow long-lasting repressive regimes (Castells 2015, 45). Mohamed Bouazizi's suicide soon went viral, spreading the air of protest to other neighbouring countries. Examples are Egypt with the occupation of Tahrir Square against President Mubarak, Yemen with a massive demonstration against President Saleh's regime, Libya with protests against al-Qadhafi, and Syria with a demonstration that later turned into a civil war against al-Assad's regime (Lafi 2017, 677-702; Anderson 2013).

The international community's response to these protests and uprisings was cohesive, as most countries acted driven by the need to protect their national interests in the region, including Western countries and the Russian Federation. However, talking more specifically about Russia, researchers (including Mark N. Katz 2012 and Margaret Klein 2012) have noticed different reactions based on the different countries. Indeed, the response to the Libyan uprisings has been stronger than in other neighbouring countries since, unlike in Tunisia and Egypt, where the regime change was caused by local peaceful protests and interventions, the Mu’ammar al-Qadhafi regime in Libya was overthrown by external military intervention, more specifically by NATO’s operations.

Russia, which has always been a promoter of the Westphalian international order, saw NATO's operation in Libya as an interference in the State’s internal affairs and a violation of territorial integrity and of the principle of sovereign equality (Katz 2012; Robinson 2020). In 2011, such consideration was not new for the Russian Federation since, in the early years of the new millennium, it had already experienced similar interference on Eurasian soil: the Colour Revolutions discussed below. Hence, national security concerns and balance of power preservation were the reasons behind Moscow's clear decision not to support NATO's unilateral intervention in Libya, which was considered an attempt to expand the US-led order to the detriment of Middle Eastern governments.

When Libya was reached by the wave of the Arab Spring in 2011, the country was under the power of Colonel Mu’ammar al-Qadhafi, who started his mandate as Revolutionary Chairman of the Libyan Arab Republic in 1969, becoming subsequently “Brotherly Leader” of the Great Socialist People’s Libyan Arab Jamahiriya from 1977 to 2011. On the 15th of February 2011, a group of people started a peaceful demonstration against the regime in the small city of Benghazi, a demonstration that was violently repressed by the government,

causing casualties. The protests led to unrest in other cities across the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, increasing repression and killings of civilians. The precarious situation in Libya alarmed the international community, prompting the UN Secretary-General, the Arab League, and the African Union to express their concern to the UN Security Council regarding a possible threat to the country's peace and security. Consequently the call for immediate action, the United Nations decided to intervene, adopting Resolution No. 1970 in March 2011. The UN Security Council urged for an immediate ceasefire and a cessation of violence against civilians, providing measures against the Libyan regime, more specifically, an arms embargo, travel ban, and asset freeze against al-Qadhafi and his associates. In addition, Resolution No. 1970 established a Security Council Committee to monitor the implementation of the various measures imposed by the Security Council (Security Council 2016, 82-90). The international community reacted positively to the Security Council Resolution, expressing support and calling for further action in order to limit the already widespread humanitarian crisis. One of the supporters was the Russian Federation, which delegate Vitaly Ivanovich Churkin – Russia's Permanent Representative to the United Nations – during a Security Council Meeting held on the 26th of February 2011, stated:

> "The Russian Federation supported the Security Council resolution 1970 (2011) because of our serious concern over the events taking place in Libya. We sincerely regret the many lives lost among the civilian population. We condemn the use of military force against peaceful demonstrators and all other manifestations of violence and consider them absolutely unacceptable. We call for an immediate end to such actions. […] We exhort the Libyan authorities to comply with the demands of the international community, including the League of the Arab States and the African Union, whose demands have received the support of the Security Council. This is necessary in order to prevent a full-scale civil war and to preserve Libya as a united, sovereign State with territorial integrity. […] Russia, in cooperation with international and regional partners, will continue actively to help the friendly people of Libya to find a peaceful way out of the current crisis." (Security Council 2011a, 4)

The Libyan government, however, decided to not comply with Resolution No. 1970, triggering a subsequent UN Security Council response and the drafting of another Resolution on the 17th of March 2011: Resolution No. 1973. The Resolution condemned "[…] gross and systematic violation of human rights, including arbitrary detentions, enforced disappearances, torture and summary executions" (Security Council 2011b, 1). Furthermore, the Security Council voted to introduce stricter measures and to authorise intervention of UN Member

States. Indeed, a flight ban was established in the airspace of the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya proposed by the Arab League, and intervention was authorised with all necessary tools to protect Libyan civilians under attack by all Member States (Security Council 2016, 82-90; Security Council 2011b, 1).

Nonetheless, the foreign territory occupation was not allowed as reported within Resolution No. 1973:

> "Authorizes Member States […] to protect civilians and civilian populated areas under threat of attack in the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, including Benghazi **while excluding a foreign occupation force of any form on any part of Libyan territory** […]." (Security Council 2011b, 3)

The Resolution was voted and accepted by all UN Security Council Members apart from China and Russia, which abstained. Notwithstanding the enforcement of a new Resolution, the fight continued between the opposition and the forces loyal to Colonel Mu'ammar al-Qadhafi. Here comes NATO's intervention. NATO has been active in the Libyan crisis from the outset, spreading awareness within the international community of the need to protect the Libyan population. It also launched "Operation Unified Protector" with the aim of "[...] enforcing an arms embargo, maintaining a no-fly zone and protecting civilians and civilian populated areas from attack or the threat of attack," complying with the Security Council mandate (NATO 2015). However, several countries, including the Russian Federation and countries part of the Arab League, started to criticise the way in which the United States was conducting the NATO operations in the territory. Indeed, there were episodes reporting the US's support for the regime change, backing the rebel forces by training and arming them. Therefore, even though NATO may have had the primary goal of protecting the local population, it also had the objective of overthrowing the al-Qadhafi's regime and establishing a democratic government. Not only support for opposition forces but also the abuse of military actions in the area were evidence of the latter objective. For instance, after the victory in Tripoli, in August 2011, when the rebels succeeded in regaining the territory occupied by regime forces, there were a series of bombings in Quadhafi's hometown of Sirte on the 20th of October 2011. The purpose was the complete defeat of the regime; yet, the scale of the United States' military airstrike was unjustified. It was unjustified because the population living in the city of Sirte was supporting the regime, and, therefore, the bombing was not

aimed at guaranteeing the Libyan population welfare but at pursuing a personal US's interest (Prince and Harnden 2011; Aghagev 2013, 196). The Sirte attack led to the death of Colonel Mu'ammar al-Qadhafi and the collapse of the regime (NATO 2015).

The fact that the regime's armed forces were not carrying out any operations within the city of Sirte, but were stationary, as claimed by Khaled Kaim, 2011 Deputy Foreign Minister of Libya, further demonstrated the attack's unwarranted nature. Khaled Kaim, thereby, argued that: "The American and European forces were overstepping mandates from the United Nations and NATO by providing close air support to the rebels instead of merely establishing a no-fly zone or protecting civilians" (Fahim and Kirkpatrick 2011).

An investigation was needed, and the Prosecutor Office was commissioned by the United Nations to carry a thorough investigation related to all the alleged crimes committed during the conflict in Libya, including some allegations of crimes committed by NATO forces such as "the alleged detention of civilians and the alleged killing of detained combatants" (Security Council 2011c, 3).

The investigation was also supported by the Russian Federation, as stated by Mr Churkin , during a Security Council Meeting held on the 4th of May 2011:

> "[…] Unfortunately, it must be noted that actions by the NATO-led coalition forces are also resulting in civilian casualties, as was seen in particular during recent bombings in Tripoli. We emphasize once again that any use of force by the coalition in Libya should be carried out in strict compliance with resolution 1973 (2011). Any act going beyond the mandate established by that resolution in any way or any disproportionate use of force is unacceptable. We support the efforts by the International Criminal Court to carry out a fair and impartial investigation into the actions of all parties to the conflict in Libya and to bring to justice individuals involved in possible crimes against humanity and serious violations of international humanitarian law in Libya." (Security Council 2011d, 9)

The diachronic description of NATO's intervention in Libya and the overstepping of the UN Security Council mandate is useful not only in understanding Russia's stance of the international order and its presence in the Middle East but also in laying the foundation for Russia's subsequent intervention during the Syrian civil war in 2015. As discussed later in the hereby chapter, Russia decided to intervene in Syria, on the one hand, to prevent the umpteenth forced regime change by Western countries that, according to Moscow, were continuing to pursue their interventionism to spread the liberal influence as in the 2013

Ukraine Crisis case. On the other hand, it attempted to avoid an additional Security Council overreach, emphasising the international institution's failure to ensure its Members follow the United Nations Charter and its Resolutions (Fisher 2020, 2-4).

Growing regionalism in the Middle East

In order to understand the concept of regionalism, it is pivotal to clarify the difference between *region, regionalism,* and *regionalisation*. A *region* can be defined as a set of "geographical units made up of territorially based political entities, tied together by high and persistent levels of political, economic, security-based and/or cultural interaction among them [...] and/or by a shared sense of belonging" (Malmvig et. al 2016, 33). *Regionalism*, as defined by Matteo Legrenzi and Marina Calculli (2013, 1) "outlines cooperation in the economic, institutional, defense, or security fields, occurring at a political decision-making level;" while *regionalisation* "defines an increase of region-based activity, characterized by undirected economic and social interactions between non-state actors whether individuals, firms, companies, NGOs, etc."

Talking more specifically about the Middle East, regionalism started to emerge after World War II, thanks to the process of decolonisation. A direct example of regionalism in the area was the establishment of several regional organisations aimed at promoting integration and political, economic, and security cooperation among the Middle Eastern countries, including the Arab League (1945), the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC - 1981), and the Arab Maghreb Union (1989) (Legrenzi and Calculli 2013, 2-3). With the advent of the 2010s Arab Spring and the quick turning of the uprisings into civil wars and proxy wars, some regional strong powers, notably Egypt, Libya, Syria, Yemen, and Iraq, started to experience a domestic crisis; progressively losing their position within the area. Indeed, because of the seriousness of the regional context, the weakening of strong countries, and the threat to regional security during the 2010s, there was widespread concern about the possible consequences, inasmuch as the Arab Spring could have led to a change in the regional order and the collapse of the same mentioned powers. On the contrary, the Arab Spring represented, to a certain extent, an opportunity to create new ways of economic, political, and security cooperation and an opportunity for new States to emerge.

New regional actors appeared: Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar, Israel, Iran, and Turkey (Del Sarto et al. 2019, 3). As mentioned in the preceding paragraph, an additional contributing factor was the US disengagement from the Middle East. Having long been under the protection of American leadership, the Middle Eastern countries had to start imagining an order during the 2010s in which a possible American absence would reign. The absence of a major regulatory power in the area would have led to chaos, making energy resources and their production and distribution less secure; it would have led to the spread of the "free-for-all" and, thus, the possibility for each State to achieve its goals without any restrictions. In anticipation of such a scenario, some countries have unilaterally started to undertake internal and external balancing, developing their capacities and maximising their interests, establishing new relationships with regional and international actors, and asserting their positions in the area. The Gulf States, in this case, Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Qatar, improved their economies and their ability in offering economic aid. The UAE, moreover, has also developed advanced technologies in military air operations. Several countries even started to operate beyond national borders by making alliances and cooperating with unexpected actors like the example of Israel and its new intelligence and security relations with the UAE and Saudi Arabia (Wechsler 2019). Part of these new links was also composed by major powers – namely Russia and China – (Stepanova 2018, 37) since the emergence of strong players and the possibility to establish new relations with regional countries proved Regionalism to be of advantage. Furthermore, the weakening of some Middle Eastern countries and the decline of Western presence in the region allowed the Russian Federation to bridge the vacuum by mediating regional conflicts.

In fact, the rising of powerful actors did not completely eliminate the need for external intervention. The only difference was that the Middle Eastern countries did not need hegemonic external interventions as during the Soviet era, but interventions to pacify, broker, and above all, guarantee security in all those countries where governments too exhausted by the uprisings were unable to ensure it (Stepanova 2018, 37; Mamedov 2019).

At this juncture, noteworthy are the characteristics outlined by Ekaterina Stepanova (2016) concerning external interventions. She identifies a number of elements that an external actor had to possess in order to be able to intervene in the Middle East and play the role of mediator and security guarantor. External powers should have:

> "Solid experience in the Middle East and in providing support to States and people of the region; are at the same time relatively less directly and massively affected by the immediate spillover effects of regional instability, and can thus ensure a degree of balance, pragmatism and the ability, if needed, to distance oneself from any (or all) regional actors; retain a significant degree of manoeuvre, are capable of autonomous action and not tied by alliances, domestic constituencies, resources or ideologies to the extent that this could paralyze any action." (Stepanova 2016, 7)

As concluded by Ekaterina Stepanova (2016, 7), the only external players meeting these requirements were the United States and the Russian Federation. Considering the gradual disengagement of the United States from the area, as previously argued, it seems that Russia was the only other alternative present at the time. (Highlighting *the only alternative at that time* is crucial since, as known, after 2015, other great powers have appeared on the Middle Eastern scene, slowly asserting themselves, such as China)

Regimes' repression and Western intervention

Hostility towards induced regime change provoked by direct or indirect external intervention[30], especially Western intervention, has long been a key feature of Russian policy in the Middle East. Indeed, the opposition to regime change began long before NATO's intervention in Libya in 2011 and the Syrian crisis in 2012-15. It started after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and was primarily motivated by concerns about Eurasia's *Colour Revolutions (Цветные Революции)* (Stepanova 2018, 39-38).

After the Soviet Union disintegration, the post-communist countries gained independence. These countries, however, were *hybrid regimes*, as argued by Henry E. Hale (2005, 160; 2011, 23-45), which combined democratic and autocratic components, particularly in the areas of elections, mass media, and institutions. A revolutionary wave swept through post-Soviet Eurasia in the 2000s, inciting anti-regime and pro-democracy revolutions: the Colour Revolutions[31].

[30] It is defined as a direct intervention when external countries militarily intervene in a country where an internal conflict is occurring. The indirect intervention, instead, is the financing, supporting, and training of the different parties involved in the internal conflict (Belcastro 2017, 201).

[31] The demonstrations have adopted the name of a colour in order to identify the protestors and distinguish these anti-regime movements from other movements emerging at that time, even though the Serbian Revolution used the term "bulldozer" instead of a colour (Lane 2010, 113).

The term referred primarily to the 2000 “Bulldozer Revolution” in Serbia, the 2003 “Rose Revolution” in Georgia, the 2004 “Orange Revolution” in Ukraine, and the 2005 “Tulip Revolution” in Kyrgyzstan; although over time, the term more generally was also utilised to refer to international anti-regime movements (Nikitina 2014, 87).

While the constituents' demands differed from country to country, the Colour Revolutions shared some similarities. The approach and ideology behind these pro-reform movements were common: they aimed for socio-political transformation and the promotion of democratic values. They were mainly mass peaceful protests, particularly by students, who denounced political leadership, government inefficiency, fraudulent elections, corruption, inequality, and limited freedom of expression (Lane 2010, 114; 131).

Another crucial element of the upheavals was the external intervention (Nikitina 2014). External support, especially Western, permeated these movements through the use of what is called *soft power* (Lane 2010, 115). The soft power concept was first formulated by Joseph Nye, who defined it as “the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments. It arises from the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals, and policies” (Nye 2005, IX-XIII). The key is seduction since it is usually more effective than the use of force, and, in this case, as claimed by Joseph Nye (2005, 5-11), democracy, human rights, and equal opportunities are extremely attractive. Soft power means being able to indirectly influence and shape the preferences of others through different communication tools. The more advanced communication channels a country possesses, the more it is able to “promo[te] internal change through manipulation of the norms and values of citizens [...]” (Lane 2010, 115). Western countries and the United States were, therefore, during the 2000s and the 2010s the most advantaged nations as they had multiple means of communication, from digital platforms to NGOs and civil society associations (Ibid). Hence, in the end, the Western intervention, as contended by Valery Solovei (2015, 83), was not direct but indirect.

There was no direct political interference in internal affairs but a sociocultural interference: displaying different values and realities, shaping the population perception, which, together with critical local conditions, convinced the population to ask more and to take action.

The Russian Federation, however, firmly accused the West of having manipulated the population of post-Soviet countries through social media and NGOs, magnifying the desire for a regime change (Giles 2017, 14-15). To be specific, Russia began to blame Western

countries for undermining governments' stability, financially supporting the activists and youth movements, monitoring elections, spreading the democratic ideology, and prompting anti-regime protests. Precisely because of the presence of external intervention, Russia argued that in reality, the Colour Revolution were not revolutions but more *revolutionary coups d'états*, defined as "a change of the political leadership instigated by internal or external counter-elites through the agency of mass popular support" (Lane 2010, 119).

The revolutionary wave quickly spread to other former Soviet countries, including Russia itself. Indeed, even though the government began to adopt more autocratic measures in the mid-2010s, Russia, like the other Eurasian nations, can be classified as a hybrid regime. The push towards greater autocracy and the mass media were the primary factors that triggered pro-democracy demonstrations during the 2010s. Local and foreign social media became the primary tool for raising public awareness and mobilising people to engage in demonstrations by sharing and discussing common grievances (Lane 2010, 114-122). Although the Russian government had taken more stringent actions to control the political sphere as well as mainstream media, the social networks were more difficult to control due to their international reach. According to Clay Shirky (2010, 36), Russia confronted the so-called "dictator's dilemma": a dilemma created by modern media technology that facilitates public access to information, the possibility of gathering, and greater freedom of expression. As a result, an autocratic State, or, in this case, a hybrid regime, accustomed to maintaining the monopoly on public speech, finds itself disoriented in front of a clear divergence between the State's viewpoint and that of its constituents. Most likely due to the discrepancy of views within the country and the underestimation of the power of social media, Russia suffered two massive revolts related to the 2011 Parliamentary elections and the 2012 Presidential elections (Robinson 2020).

Based on the same assumptions raised during the Colour Revolutions in Eurasia, even in the Russian case, the elite and the government interpreted the democratic nature of the demonstrations as a signal of Western meddling in internal affairs, threatening Moscow's influence and security (Nikitina 2014, 56).

In the 2010s, similar events erupted in the Middle East with the Arab Spring and the anti-regime insurrectional movements. At this point, Russia, also influenced by the protests in its regional context, reviewed what had happened in the preceding years in Eurasia, convincing itself that the Colour Revolutions had spread internationally. Further strength to

this conviction was the alleged willingness, mainly widespread among the US and the Western countries, to intervene during the Arab crisis in order to bring stability within *failed* or *collapsing* States. To refute this idea, the 2011 NATO's intervention in Libya occurred, which led to a change of a stable regime through the use of force, contributing to the creation of an unstable government and weapons proliferation. In addition, Russia was the setting of another crisis in 2013-2014: the Ukraine crisis culminated in the incorporation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014 (Giles 2017, 5-10). Pro-democracy movements were, once again, to blame for the popular uprisings, and further Western meddling was interpreted as a lack of interest in Russia's priorities and ambitions. After witnessing the spread of the Colour Revolutions and Western countries' undermining of Russian influence in Eurasia, it is unsurprising that Russia has developed an aversion to external intervention, especially forced regime change. An additional reason why Russia decided to intervene quickly in the Syrian crisis in 2015 was, indeed, in order to prevent Western interference, the overthrow of the in-power legitimate regime through the use of force and the establishment of a democratic government (Stepanova 2016, 3-4).

Noteworthy at this point is Russia's concern for the international order and its stability. In fact, Russian actions over the 2010s could express an intent to restore the balance of power present during the Cold War. The bipolar system, according to Russia, was the most stable since the Soviet Union's interests perfectly balanced those of the United States. The end of the Cold War, nonetheless, signalled the emergence of the first signs of a multipolar configuration; equally beneficial as it enabled Russia to regain dominance in the international system, even though permitting the law of the strong to substitute the international law. A direct example was Western interventionism, which was a factor of instability in the 2010s, gradually eroding the idea of absolute State's sovereignty and fuelling anarchy (Giles 2017, XV). Even Valery Zorkin (2004) highlighted this theory, claiming that in the early 2000s emerged:

> "The most serious and most probable threat to the existence of the Westphalian system. [...] The Westphalian system is being attacked from two directions. First, the principles of State sovereignty and territorial integrity are being placed in opposition to human rights and nations' right to self-determination. Second, nation-states are being blamed for their inability to ensure effective governance under conditions of globalization."

The growing influence of transnational non-state actors: terrorism

Russia has a long history of acquaintance with extremist movements and the emergence of terrorism, especially in relation to Islam. Indeed, a Sunni Muslim minority resides in a consistent part of Russia in the Caucasus, including Chechnya (Чечня́) and the Muslim Republics of Kabardino-Balkaria (RKB - Кабарди́но-Балка́рская Респу́блика), Ingushetia (Респу́блика Ингуше́тия), Dagestan (Республика Дагестан), Adygea (Республика Адыгея), and Karachay-Cherkessia (RKCh - Карача́ево-Черке́сская Респу́блика) (Halbach 2001, 14). Even though, by and large, the USSR was largely terrorism-free thanks to the Soviet security system and the Committee for State Security (KGB - Комитет государственной безопасности), the territory experienced several episodes of terrorism, particularly related to ethnic conflicts, even before the dissolution of the USSR.

The situation started to change in the 1970s, when three bombs were planted in Moscow by an Armenian radical group, killing several citizens. Modern terrorism started to appear, although it became more acute after the fall of the Iron Curtain. The USSR's dissolution, in fact, created an environment in which crime could flourish. The government apparatus was increasingly weak, becoming incapable of law enforcing and security ensuring in Russia and the post-Soviet countries, leaving a political and legal vacuum (Plater-Zyberk 2014).

The First Chechen War (1994-1996) was an example of modern terrorism, which started as a Russian campaign aimed at solving the chaos produced by the USSR's disintegration by reestablishing constitutional order, eliminating anarchy, and regaining influence by preserving its territorial integrity (Dannreuther 2012, 550). In reality, there was also another objective behind the campaign: the suppression of Chechen separatism (Trenin 2005, 100). The region was struggling for independence, and a tool used to achieve this goal was precisely acts of terror. A rebel leader, Shamil Basayev, discovered the effectiveness of terrorism against the Russian forces in order to obtain concessions. This strategy rapidly spread across Chechnya, exposing the Russian government's inability to preserve order while protecting the population from attacks. Ultimately, an agreement was reached, Russian forces withdrew from the area, and Chechnya declared independence. However, the war left deep scars: in a land devastated by thousands of casualties, leaders were unable to maintain unity, sovereignty, and religious values (Klimentov 2020, 386-399; Trenin 2005, 100-101). Worth

noting is the modern nature of these attacks characterised by the use of mass media and the targets of the attacks. Indeed, thanks to the mass media reporting the clashes during the First Chechen War, rebel groups began to spread their cause, prompting further acts of terror, trying to block the agreement reached at the end of the war. Furthermore, in addition to small-scale attacks, the insurgents also began to carry large-scale attacks by introducing suicide terrorists and targeting not only authorities, leaders or law enforcement actors but also the civilian population (Plater-Zyberk 2014, 1-71). As a result, the initial Russian campaign goal was not achieved, inasmuch as Chechnya remained permeated with lawlessness. At this point, another war sparked: the Second Chechen War (1999-2009).

President Vladimir Putin's election in 2000 marked a watershed, as he was determined to eliminate all insurgents by launching anti-terrorist operations. Moreover, Putin was adamant about resolving the Chechen problem so as to restore stability and, more importantly, to counteract the rise of radical Islamist ideas. Islamist communities started to appear not only in Chechnya but also in neighbouring countries, as long as the establishment of links with the terrorist network of al-Qaeda (القاعدة), which facilitated the entry of Middle Eastern *jihadists* in the North Caucasus (Hahn 2006, 64-67). Extremists' aim was to establish across the Russian Federation an Islamic *caliphate* (جيش الخلافة) based on *sharia* law (شريعة) with the help of the terrorist network formed in the North Caucasus and other Muslim countries (Ibid; Trenin 2005, 6). Putin’s strategy focused on eliminating all forms of local and Middle Eastern support to extremists in Chechnya and outside the Caucasus, trying to reduce Muslim and Middle Eastern organisations in the region, which contributed to the radicalisation of Russia and the recruitment of civilians, to enforce detention of possible organisers of the attacks and their relatives, and to attempt to change the Muslim perception (Dannreuther 2012, 546). Unfortunately, the government's actions, as well as the violence and intimidation used by Russian forces in the war against terrorism, had the opposite effect, with new terrorist organisations proliferating both in Russia and internationally.

In terms of internal context, the year 2004, known as the year of the worst Russian terrorist attack, the “Beslan massacre”, was particularly crucial. Beslan (Беслан) is a small town in North Ossetia, where a group of armed people attacked a school, killing hundreds of people and taking hostages on the 1st of September 2004 (Valekhov 2019). As for the international one, noteworthy was the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers in the United States. Terrorism has evolved into a transnational phenomenon capable of operating across

national borders. The West started to face multiple terrorist attacks, raising the need for cooperation in order to fight against a common foe. Tensions between Russia and the United States eased, paving the ground for a joint NATO-Russia anti-terrorist agenda. In addition, Russia participated in the American "War on terror", facilitating the US campaign in Afghanistan. As a result of this cooperation, Western criticism of Russia's harsh tactics in the Chechen Wars dwindled. Nevertheless, due to Russia's criticism towards the way in which the US was leading its foreign policy and military operations in the Middle East, it did not last long (Trenin 2005, 102-114). Russia condemned the 2003 US intervention in Iraq aimed at eliminating the terrorist network of al-Qaeda allegedly responsible for the Twin Towers attack and the production of weapons of mass destruction and which contributed to creating the conditions for the emergence of the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL); bringing, as a consequence, a new wave of tension between Russia and the West (Klimentov 2020). The Iraq intervention, however, proved beneficial for Russia to a certain extent since the Muslim world's attention gradually turned away from the Chechen Wars onto Western interventionism (Dannreuther 2012, 547-549).

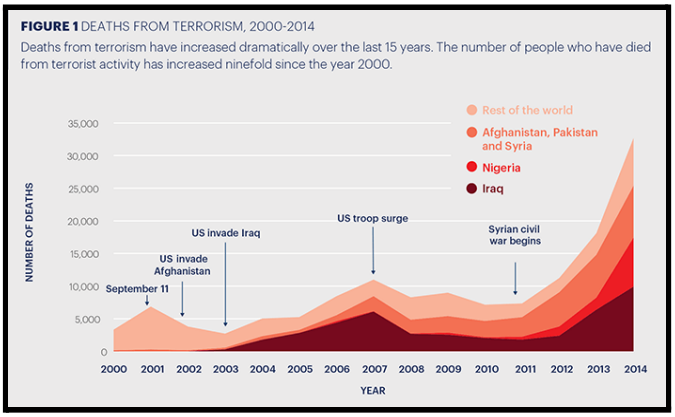
At this juncture, a crucial policy shift occurred in Russia with a change from a severe and systematic anti-Islamist approach to a broader tolerance of reformist Islamism. Russia began to make a distinction between radical jihadists, more precisely Salafist jihadists, and traditional and moderate Islamic forces, creating a policy based on political pluralism. Political pluralism will be a fundamental component of Russian foreign policy in the Middle East from the 2010s onwards, and that distinguishes Russia from other countries in the international system. In the Russian view, the best way to include political pluralism in its foreign policy was by "ensuring better representation of key regions, players and communities through power-sharing and a reasonable, but not excessive, degree of decentralisation" (Stepanova 2018, 42). The policy shift, indeed, permitted Russia to strengthen relations with the Middle East and the Muslim World, regaining their lost esteem not only in the Middle East but also in the Caucasus, in which Russia started even to provide financial assistance to Islamic communities. The improvement of the relations proved advantageous, especially with the advent of the Arab Spring (2011) since Islamist forces started to cooperate with Moscow in the fight against jihadism (Alexeev 2014, 117-119).

The Arab Spring were particularly decisive for terrorism, inasmuch as the resulting disorders, civil wars, and political instability fueled an unprecedented level of terrorism in the

Middle East, North Africa, and in other countries of the international system (Schumacher and Schraeder 2019, 198-199).

The Institute for Economics and Peace, in collaboration with the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START)'s annual Global Terrorism Index report (2015, 9-19; 2017, 9-42), provides evidence to such a statement.

According to the Institute for Economics & Peace, before and after the 2011 Arab Spring, there was a considerable change in the number of acts of terror and deaths. By and large, the trend fluctuated before 2010, abruptly increasing with the onset of the Middle East Crisis, almost doubling the number of terrorist attacks in the region. Following the start of the Arab Spring, there has been a steady and gradual rise, hitting the peak in 2014. Even in Figure 1 (2015), the upward trajectory can be seen, which provides the number of casualties caused by terrorist attacks. The number of killings oscillated until shortly before 2010, when the trend skyrocketed, passing from approximately 7.000 to almost 35.000 in 2014 (Institute for Economics & Peace 2015, 9-19; 2017, 9-42).



Source: START GTD (Global Terrorism Index 2015)

Thus, the political instability that resulted from the insurrectional movements against repressive regimes created a perfect environment for the proliferation of terrorism, which the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL), in particular, sought to exploit. In fact, ISIL took advantage of the countries' situation to expand its influence in Syria and Iraq, aiming at creating a new caliphate in 2014 and taking the more precise name of Islamic State (IS - الدولة الإسلامية). This was another reason Russia decided to return to the Middle East and intervene in the Syrian Crisis in 2015. On the one hand, to continue its campaign against international

terrorism and, on the other hand, to protect its own country. In terms of the counterterrorism campaign, in response to anti-regime protests in Syria, IS was organising an assault on the al-Assad regime in order to seize complete control of the region. If that had happened, Syria and Iraq would have been transformed into a launching pad for international terrorism, which would have quickly developed and branched out globally (Schumacher and Schraeder 2019, 203-204). As for Russia's protection, the Russian President decided to intervene to prevent future terrorist attacks in Russia as well, given the difficulties experienced in the Caucasus region related to radical Islam and the possibility of further radicalisation (Rumer 2019, 7-11).

The Ukraine Crisis and 2014 Crimea incorporation

The 2013-2014 Ukraine Crisis and the popular referendum in Crimea on the 16th of March 2014 acted as a catalyst for foreign political opposition to the Russian Federation.

Ukraine has always been a target for both the European Union and the Russian Federation: the European Union desired Ukrainian membership to the 2009 Eastern Partnership program (EaP)[32], while the Russian Federation intended to attract Ukraine and other post-Soviet countries in its Eurasian unity project. Hence, Ukraine was a crucial element of both the European Union and the Russian Federation's agendas, with each attempting to influence Ukraine's choice in a zero-sum fashion.

Yet, in November 2013, President Viktor Yanukovych (2010-2014) decided to suspend a due-to-sign economic and political EU-Ukraine Association Agreement[33], with the European Union, favouring, on the other hand, closer economic and financial cooperation with the Russian Federation. The Ukrainian President's behaviour immediately sparked mass protests against the government, denouncing the governmental apparatus's growing corruption; protests, which became known as the "Maidan," distinguished by democratic values and Russian alienation.

The United States decided to intervene; indeed, although in the early 2010s, the United States prioritised the resolution of conflicts in the Middle East, including the Arab Spring and the nuclear deal with Iran, it also backed Western countries' geopolitical strategy

[32] European Union External Action Service, "Eastern Partnership."

[33] European Union, "Association Agreement between the European Union and its Member States, of the one part, and Ukraine, of the other part."

in Ukraine, attempting to shift the country away from Russian influence. Protests eventually forced President Yanukovych to resign in February 2014 (Trenin 2014, 4-8).

Once more, the West had meddled in a country's internal affairs, favouring a regime change. Russia had no choice but to intervene with the primary objective of preventing Ukraine from joining NATO or the EU (Garcia 2018, 108). The first step was to persuade Crimea to seize power and hold a referendum to reunify with Russia. Since a popular referendum was held on the 16th of March 2014, the goal proved satisfactory (Trenin 2014, 6).

It is noteworthy that the Crimean dispute and its reunification with the Russian Federation have ancient roots that date back to the Russian empire. Peter I the Great (Пётр Алексе́евич Рома́нов - Пётр Вели́кий) and his successor Catherine II the Great (Катерина II Лексеевна- Катерина Велика) harboured the desire to transform Russia into a great empire, inspired by Europe. Indeed, Peter I had always admired Western countries for their technological advancements and values. Crimea was vital to the Russian Empire's achievement of this dream, as it embodied the European heritage that Russia coveted. The Russian urge to emulate Europe stemmed primarily from Russia's isolation from the European modernisation process, which occurred in Western countries at the end of the 18th century. Therefore, Russia lacked the fundamental elements of Greek and Latin civilisations, Humanism, and the Renaissance, which were needed to establish and improve itself in the same way as Western countries did.

Notwithstanding this, the absence of European values did not preclude Peter I the Great and Catherine II the Great from initiating Russia's own Europeanisation process. Peter I attempted to compensate for these shortcomings by importing craftsmen and scholars from European countries, studying and employing French culture, establishing new trade connections, approaching Classicism and Romanticism, and creating a new capital in European style: Saint Petersburg (Grigas 2016).

However, the process of Europeanisation never came to a satisfactory conclusion. As the famous writer Pëtr Čaadaev argued in *The First Philosophical Letter* (1829), Peter I the Great draped the Europeanisation umbrella over Russia, but nothing changed under it. Russia considered itself European, but it was not because it committed an "unforgivable crime" in the past that separated it from European civilization, stopping it from walking alongside it: evangelisation through Byzantium. It is Orthodoxy, thus according to Čaadaev (1829, ed.

Ferrari 2019), that prevented Russia from being European[34]. The Orthodoxy hypothesis is undoubtedly theoretical, but, as previously argued, Russia lacked the three foundations of European identity: Greek and Latin heritage, democracy, and the Renaissance. According to the Russian perspective, the three elements were embedded in the very Crimea. Crimea was, therefore, not only a tiny island off the coast of the Black Sea with trade links to European countries, but it had also been the site of Greek colonial settlements in the past, representing the missing link with European values.

The Crimean Peninsula (Автономна Республика Крим) was donated to the Ukrainian Socialist Republic (Ssr) in 1954 by Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev in order to mark the 300th anniversary of the *Переяславская рада*[35]. The Peninsula was primarily offered to Ukraine as a gesture of gratitude for Ukraine's post-World War II assistance to the Soviet Union. Following the USSR's collapse in 1991, Crimea proclaimed independence, preferring, however, to remain within Ukraine as an autonomous republic (Krechetnikov 2014).

Nonetheless, the peninsula has always had a substantial Russian population, which voted on the 16th of March 2014, in a popular referendum to permanently separate the peninsula from Ukraine and join the Russian Federation (Somin 2014; Manaev 2019). However, due to breaches of international law and Articles 72 and 73 of the Ukrainian Constitutional Charter, the European Union Foreign Ministers, the United States, and the remaining UN countries declared the referendum void (European Commission for Democracy through Law 2014).

Art. 72 states:

> "The All-Ukrainian referendum shall be called by the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine or by the President of Ukraine in accordance with their powers determined by this Constitution. The All-Ukrainian referendum shall be convened as a popular initiative at the request of at least three million citizens of Ukraine eligible to vote, provided that the signatures in favour of the referendum have been collected in at least two-thirds of the oblasts with at least 100,000 signatures gathered in each oblast." (Ukraine Constitution 1996, 18)

[34] Čaadaev, *Prima Lettera Filosofica e Apologia di un Pazzo*, 112-113.

[35] The Переяславская рада (Pereyaslav Rada) was a meeting held on 18 January 1654 in Pereyaslav (today Pereyaslav-Khmelnitsky), Ukraine, between the Cossacks of hetman Bogdan Khmelnitskye and Tsar Alexei Mikhailovich, with the aim of stopping the wars that were destroying Ukraine and reuniting the Russian people (Ria Novosti 2009).

Art. 73 states:

> "Alterations to the territory of Ukraine shall be resolved exclusively by the All-Ukrainian referendum." (Ukraine Constitution 1996, 18)

There was, moreover, an infringement of the Ukraine Constitution's Articles 134 and 135 of Chapter X – Autonomous Republic of Crimea (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine 2014).

Art. 134 states:

> "The Autonomous Republic of Crimea shall be an integral constituent part of Ukraine and shall resolve issues relegated to its authority within the frame of its reference, determined by the Constitution of Ukraine." (Ukraine Constitution 1996, 45)

Art. 135 states:

> "The Autonomous Republic of Crimea shall have the Constitution of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea adopted by the Verkhovna Rada of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and approved by the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine by no less than one half of the constitutional membership of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine. Regulatory legal acts of the Verkhovna Rada of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and decisions of the Council of Ministers of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea shall not contradict the Constitution and laws of Ukraine and shall be adopted in accordance with and in pursuance of the Constitution of Ukraine, laws of Ukraine, acts of the President of Ukraine and the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine." (Ukraine Constitution 1996, 45)

Despite the Crimean Parliament referendum's declaration of illegality due to the missing approval by the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, the Russian Federation stated its legitimacy and incorporated Crimea de facto.

The referendum contributed to worsening an already deep crisis in Ukraine, which saw, on the one hand, a portion of its population willing to leave the country and, on the other hand, the Russian army's invasion of the Donbas region in eastern Ukraine. The incursion that was conducted by military forces deployed in the Crimean base allegedly violated the 1997 *Partition Treaty on the Status and Conditions of the Black Sea Fleet*, which allowed Russia to

station 25,000 troops in Sevastopol and other Crimean bases until 2017 (Ukraine Foreign Minister 2014; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 1997).

Under the 2010 *Kharkiv Pact*[36], signed by former Presidents Yanukovych and Medvedev, the allocation term was later extended until 2042 in exchange for Russian gas supplies. Furthermore, the Pact stated that the Russian Federation would be allowed to increase its army in the aforementioned military bases without the permission of the Ukrainian government (Ferrari and Cella 2014, 147-156). Notwithstanding this, the Russian Federation had violated the *Black Sea Fleet Treaty*, according to the Kyiv government. Additionally, Ukrainian officials argued that the invasion was in violation of the *Budapest Memorandum on security assurances in connection with Ukraine's Accession to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons*, signed in 1994.

The Memorandum was ratified by the Russian Federation, the United States of America, and the United Kingdom with the obligation to respect Ukraine's territorial integrity (including the Crimean Peninsula) by avoiding the threat and use of force against Ukraine and Ukrainian independence. Convinced of the Russian breach of the Budapest Memorandum, the Ukrainian Parliament asked the Treaty members to reaffirm their commitment to the 1994 agreements (Memorandum on Security Assurances 1994). On the 24th of March 2014, during the Nuclear Security Summit in The Hague, the G7 members led by Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper convened a meeting to expel Russia from the summit for violating the Memorandum (European Council 2014). In response, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov clarified that the Russian Federation had not violated any agreements because the Memorandum required members not to attack Ukraine with nuclear weapons, which Russia had not done (Ferrari and Cella 2014, 147-156; Blockmans 2014).

Despite Russia's denial, the EU confirmed the Budapest Memorandum infringement, worsening the already fragile relations between Russia and Western countries.

As a consequence of this worldwide event, the European Union and the United States adopted restrictive measures against the Russian Federation, targeting three main sectors of the Russian economy: defence, energy, and finance. To be specific, diplomatic measures, individual restrictive measures, limits on economic contacts with Crimea and Sevastopol, economic sanctions, and restrictions on economic cooperation were the actions in question

[36] The Kharkiv Accords were signed on the 27th of April 2010 by Ukrainian and Russian Presidents Viktor Yanukovych and Dmitry Medvedev with the goal of lowering Ukraine's gas prices. However, a provision in this treaty extended the Russian Black Sea Fleet's stay in the Crimean military base until 2042 (Chyong 2014).

(European Council 2020). Russia was convinced at this point that Western interventionism in the Ukraine crisis and the 2014 sanctions were not only aimed at spreading democratic principles and regime change but also at harming Russian interests and undermining its economy (Karaganov 2014).

According to Keir Giles (2017, IX), Russia's military involvement in Ukraine and Crimea did not signal a substantial change in Russian strategy but rather the continuation of long-standing trends. The trends were an increasing perception of a national security threat and a regaining of sufficient power to address this threat. As previously argued, the perceived threat to Russia's stability and security was related to the 2003 Iraq invasion, the 2000s Colour Revolutions, the 2010 Arab Spring, the 2011-2012 Russian demonstrations, and 2011 NATO's intervention in Libya, all of which converged on a single point: Western interventionism and forced regime change. The only difference between the Russian intervention in Ukraine and the incorporation of Crimea in 2013-2014 and previous confrontations was that Russia had the more military, political, and diplomatic capacity to act, rather than merely protesting against Western interventionism (Stepanova 2018, 43-46).

The Russian increasing ability to contain the West from interfering within a country's internal affairs started to become clear at the beginning of the Syrian crisis in 2010-2011, rising Russian self-esteem, which enabled it to intervene in Ukraine in the following years.

Hence, when anti-regime demonstrations erupted in Ukraine, Russia perceived the immediate threat of losing the Donbas military-industrial complex and the Black Sea Fleet base in Sevastopol, convinced of Western actions aimed at overthrowing the regime and indirectly attacking Russia (Giles 2017, 8). Russia's military involvement in Ukraine had two effects: on the one hand, European countries and the United States started to recognise that their interests were incompatible with those of Russia, escalating tensions; on the other hand, Russia gained prestige across the Middle East (Garcia 2018, 104-116).

The 2015 Russian intervention in the Syrian Civil War

The Russian intervention in the 2015 Syrian civil war marked Moscow's actual return to the Middle East after a long period of absence.

In 2011, the wave of anti-regime protests also reached Syria with mass peaceful demonstrations organised in the streets against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and his

government, claiming democratic elections and less corruption. Protests calling for the President's removal were quickly met with violent repression by the Syrian National Army, sparking a civil war.

As the conflict progressed, the US and NATO made it clear that they had no desire to interfere. President Obama was hesitant, being confident in leaving the Middle East after unsatisfactory campaigns in Afghanistan (2001-2021) and Iraq (2003-2011), and, however, an intervention in Syria would have cost the nation more than it would have benefited it. Indeed, the civil war was dominated by several armed groups, making intervention to bring peace and stability risky. The Syrian National Army, which supported the government, the Sunni opposition rebels who founded the Free Syrian Army, and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), an alliance of Kurdish and Syrian militants, were among these paramilitary groups.

Because of the United States' reluctance, a power vacuum emerged favouring the intervention in the conflict of numerous regional powers, including Iran, which supported the Assad regime, Israel, which believed Iran wanted to convert Syria into a satellite State due to the majority of Shia population, Saudi Arabia, which backed various opposition groups, and Turkey with its ambivalent attitude (Lovotti 2019b, 65-78; Mamedov 2020). As a result, rather than concentrating on fighting alongside and against various armed groups in an attempt to restore order in Syria, President Obama chose to concentrate his attention on opposing terrorism, especially the terrorist groups that had proliferated in Syria since 2012.

More precisely, there was the emergence of Jabhat al-Nuṣra (جبهة النصرة لأهل الشام) (Jabhat Fateh al-Sham from 2016 up until 2017 and from 2017 onward Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, HTS - هيئة تحرير الشام), a Salafist jihadists group with strong connections with al-Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL), which was trying to sink its claws into the country to spread its influence and gain territory (Mamedov 2020).

It is noteworthy that apart from the US's disengagement from the Middle East, according to Francesco Belcastro (2017, 199), there were five factors at the basis of regional countries' involvement in an internal conflict, which can be distinguished in exogenous and endogenous factors. The exogenous factors are *capabilities, regional dynamics,* and *domestic external links*, while the endogenous ones can be identified in the *country's relevance* and *security issues and containment*.

Capabilities are defined as whether regional actors possess the political, diplomatic, economic, military, and technological resources to intervene in a civil war in a significant

way. Resources are, in fact, crucial so as to be able to influence the outcome of the conflict on the one hand, but also to ensure that the costs of the intervention do not exceed the benefits (Belcastro 2017, 206-207). *Regional dynamics*, instead, refers to the type of system present in the region. Raymond Aron (1966, 99) developed a theory distinguishing between homogeneous and heterogeneous systems.

Homogeneous systems are "those [systems] in which the states belong to the same type [and] obey the same conception of policy. [...] The system appears stable [since] the homogeneity of the system favors the limitation of violence. So long as those in power, in the conflicting states, remain aware of their solidarity, they are inclined to compromise." (Aron 1966, 100) Heterogeneous systems, instead, are "those systems in which the states are organized according to different principles and appeal to contradictory values. [...] Heterogeneity of the system produces the opposite [of homogeneity]. When the enemy appears also as an adversary, in the sense this term assumes in internal conflicts, defeat affects the interests of the governing class and not only of the nation. Those in power fight for themselves and not only for the state. [...] This crisscrossing of civil and inter-state conflicts aggravates the instability of the system." (Aron 1966, 100-101)

The last exogenous factor is the *domestic external links,* which are networks between domestic actors and external parties – whether States or other non-state actors. Usually, regional powers are more prone to intervene in a conflict so as to defend their allies when these links exist.

The *country's relevance,* being an endogenous cause, refers specifically to the country object of the civil war. It represents the relevance the country has in regional politics. The more relevant the country is from a geopolitical, strategic, military, religious, economic point of view, the more regional countries are likely to intervene and influence the outcome of the conflict. Finally, *security issues and containment* refer to whether the internal conflict generates threats that regional actors expect to spillover beyond national borders. When the risk of spillover is high, regional countries are more inclined to intervene (Belcastro 2017, 210-212).

In the specific context of Syria, the country is positioned in the Levant Gulf region, which is composed of several well-to-do and influential countries with different systems and ambitions; in a system, thus, which is heterogeneous. Furthermore, Syria is located in a

strategic geographical point because the Levant/Gulf is considered the “religious” centre of the Middle East. In addition, both the regime and the opposition forces had built well-established relationships with domestic and external State and non-state entities, including the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant, as well as foreign powers such as the Russian Federation. Ultimately, the Syrian civil war posed a threat of spillover effects in neighbouring countries and even internationally, owing to Islamist forces seeking to spread terrorism worldwide and the presence of the Kurdish minority, which had historical and political ties to Iraq's largest Kurdish community, as well as Turkey, which was concerned that Kurdish forces could seize power in the motherland (Ibid). Thereby, the emergence of regional powers and their involvement in Syria’s civil war was linked not only to the gradual US disappearance from the area, and thus the possibility of increasing their influence in the Middle East and consolidating their geopolitical position; but also to the magnitude of the stakes and the risk of conflict spreading beyond national borders.

Meanwhile, several UN Security Council meetings were scheduled in an attempt to find a solution to the Syrian civil war and prevent a humanitarian crisis. At these meetings, Russia sought to make its voice heard by vetoing any proposed military attack or sanction against the al-Assad regime by other Council members and promoting diplomatic solutions. Several diplomatic efforts were made, both by the Security Council and by Moscow itself, which consulted Syrian government Ministers several times in order to try to find a solution without success. United Nations' efforts were also unrewarded, as they came to a halt after a failed International Peace Conference in Geneva in February 2014, which resulted in a deadlock between the parties. As a result, a new strategy was necessary.

Two main factors triggered Russia's military interference. Given the radicalisation problems in Chechnya and the North Caucasus in the 2010s, Russia was concerned that ISIL's expansionist ambitions could turn the country into a terrorism hotspot, which would be detrimental and even a threat to Russia's own national security (Lovotti 2019b, 65-78; Lovotti and Sučkov 2020, 301-308). Furthermore, Russia feared external intervention and forced regime change, an apprehension intensified by the 2013 Ukraine crisis and the 2014 incorporation of Crimea, both of which the Russian government blamed on the Colour Revolutions and, as a result, on Western interventionism. Indeed, Western interference and forced regime change have always been a matter of concern for Russia, considering them as

an expansionist act and a security threat. Syria's situation is no exception. The opposition to the various measures proposed within the Security Council to compel President al-Assad to stop massacres against the population and violations of human rights was, thus, also closely related to the worsening of relations with the West, which were at their lowest point since the Cold War (Stepanova 2016, 7-11; 2018, 38-40).

Russia's initial opposition to a military intervention in Syria changed in 2014 when ISIL, taking advantage of the country's great territorial fragility and under the leadership of Abū Bakr al-Baghdādī, proclaimed the birth of a *caliphate* following the capture of Mosul in Iraq in June 2014, controlling vast territories from Baghdad to Damascus and changing its name in Islamic State (IS).

On the 28th of September 2015, Vladimir Putin made two significant announcements at the United Nations General Assembly. Firstly, Vladimir Putin attempted to advance the idea of a global anti-Islamic State coalition, creating a regional security system in order to oppose the spread of international terrorism. The Russian President (2015) stated:

> "What we actually propose is to be guided by common values and common interests rather than by ambitions. Relying on international law, we must join efforts to address the problems that all of us are facing, and create a genuinely broad international coalition against terrorism. Similar to the anti-Hitler coalition, it could unite a broad range of parties willing to stand firm against those who, just like the Nazis, sow evil and hatred of humankind. And of course, Muslim nations should play a key role in such a coalition, since Islamic State not only poses a direct threat to them, but also tarnishes one of the greatest world religions with its atrocities. The ideologues of these extremists make a mockery of Islam and subvert its true humanist values."

Secondly, the President announced the start of the unilateral Russian military operation in Syria in support of the legitimate al-Assad's regime. The declaration came as a great surprise to United Nations members as Russia had always emphasised the need for diplomatic and political solutions as well as international cooperation to address the Syrian crisis. However, the decision to intervene militarily was not taken lightly, but it was considered necessary according to the Russian government, as the Syrian government was on the verge of collapse. Being in a fragile State due to the civil war and affected by IS advance, the Syrian government would soon become the target of Western aspirations; and a regime change would have meant risking losing a strategic Middle East ally that has had strong connections with Russia since the Cold War. Additionally, after several failed diplomatic

attempts, Moscow considered military intervention as the last available means for restoring order and stability in the country (Charap et al. 2019, 3-13).

The intervention immediately yielded results, achieving the previously set objectives: by supporting the al-Assad regime, the government managed to survive and gradually regain ground, preventing and limiting the expansion of jihadist forces to some degree. In this way, Russia also helped to prevent a change of regime and, at the same time, showed its military power to deter Western interference in the country. It is crucial to emphasise that military expansionism in Syria was not the Kremlin's intention as many Western countries claimed. The objective was to bring about a balance of political power in the Middle East in order to improve international cooperation and avoid the detrimental consequences of an eventual external intervention in a strategic country where multiple interests of multiple States converge, not only regionally but also internationally (Barmin 2018; Lovotti and Sučkov 2020, 301-308).

In reality, there were two others, though minor, goals behind Russia's intervention in Syria. As Ekaterina Stepanova (2016, 7-12) states, Russia's unilateral acts aimed at improving multilateralism. Multilateralism had always been the main feature of all Security Council Resolutions; the Security Council, which since 2011 had been increasingly fragmented. A tangible consequence was the inability to find solutions. Russia relied on international cooperation and thought that intervening in Syria would improve its geopolitical position vis-à-vis the West, as would relations. This is also the reason, during the UN General Assembly, Vladimir Putin proposed an alliance to counter international terrorism and pressed for a pluralist policy with the involvement of some Middle Eastern countries and forces. Moreover, the ability to stabilise Syria, which was Russia's only close partner in the area, was crucial to reasserting its role and influence in the Middle East, which had diminished somewhat since the Arab Spring. In this way, Russia would have been able to re-establish its legitimacy at the international level, on “the global board of directors” (Stent 2018, 14).

The multilateralism and the promotion of international cooperation are visible also in the very Russian foreign policy in the Middle East that was “pragmatic and non-ideological.” These were the characteristics that distinguished Russia from any other player in the international system, especially the United States and the Western Countries. Russia, indeed, made no attempt to spread and impose its ideology or completely transform the political systems of Middle Eastern countries. Russia's short-term policy's pragmatism and

non-ideological nature offered Russia considerable flexibility, permitting it to establish cooperative connections with the major regional powers irrespective of their religion, ideology, or internal politics (Stepanova 2018, 39-53). According to Angela Stent (2018, 14), these elements enabled Russia to become the new main external player in the Middle East in the mid-2010s.

The Nature of Man: Vladimir Putin

2.1 The 2000's policy shift

As mentioned in the first chapter, the election of Vladimir Putin in January 2000 heralded the start of a new era in Russian politics. Yet, in order to understand Putin's aspirations and ambitions in the Middle East, it is imperative to take a step back and frame the circumstances in which his political career as Prime Minister and President unfolded.

Russian-Middle Eastern relations between the USSR's collapse and the rise of Putin

Following the USSR's breakup in 1991, the various countries that formed the Union became autonomous, electing their own President. The collapse of the Soviet Union exacerbated Russia's already severe internal dynamics; and Boris Yeltsin (1991-1999), the first President of the Russian Federation, found himself facing economic and political unrest, as well as a profoundly fractured society dominated by oligarchs, detaining the power and divided between nationalist and liberal parties, calling for Russia to find its own course (Sakwa 2004, 6; 34). To bridge the social divide and restore the national economy, the Yeltsin administration chose a liberal-democratic direction, attempting to rapidly transform Russia into a capitalist democratic state, a move that sparked various objections among nationalists (Trenin 2014, 9-10; Morini 2020, 14).

In 1993, a new Constitution was adopted, along with a radical market economic reform aimed at controlling state finances, liberalising prices, entrepreneurship, domestic and international trade, and stabilising the rouble zone (Aslund 1999). Furthermore, Yeltsin concentrated his efforts on re-establishing and improving ties with the West, especially with the United States, believing that it would have benefited Russia's domestic and international positions. He pursued, to some degree, Gorbachev's policy agenda, alienating Russia from the Middle East and its conflicts (Sakwa 2004, 10; 34-39).

Nonetheless, on the one side, the adopted Westernism resulted in a steeper political polarisation, exacerbating the existing divide between liberal-democratic and nationalist-ideological groups (Friedman 2015, 97-100). On the other, complete isolation from

the Middle East did not succeed. Indeed, the late-90s rise of radical Islamism in the North Caucasus, triggered by jihadists primarily from Middle Eastern countries infiltrating the region, posed a new threat to Russia's territorial integrity and security (Dannreuther 2012, 545-549; Trenin 2014, 11).

In January 1996, as a result, Boris Yeltsin appointed Yevgeny Primakov, an accomplished diplomat with extensive Middle East experience, as Minister of Foreign Affairs. Primakov advocated for a Russian foreign policy centred on mediation and simultaneous extension of influence towards the former Soviet Republics (CIS) and the Middle East (Sakwa 2004, 18). Moreover, he reintroduced *classical realism* as a component of the Russian foreign agenda that made a complete comeback under Vladimir Putin. Primakov's realism was rooted in two basic concepts: firstly, foreign policy should be determined by pragmatism (*realpolitik*) rather than ideology. Secondly, Russia's role in the international system should be improved by the strengthening of the country's economy through the establishment of ties not only with the West but also with other powers such as China, India, and Iran, all of which had a thriving market ideal for the creation of new lucrative trades, as in the case of Russian arms industries development (Tsygankov 2006, 154-155). This pragmatic policy, also known as the "Primakov Doctrine", was a multipolar foreign agenda focused on a United States' imperialistic ambitions counterbalancing and strategic Russia-China-India triangle (Sakwa 2004, 226). In fact, after the fall of the Iron Curtain, there was widespread speculation that the United States was attempting to expand its hegemony by establishing a unipolar regime, which Primakov's multipolarity could have prevented (Friedman 2015, 98-100; 102). Primakov's pragmatism is also defined as *competitive pragmatism*, presuming that Russian and Western priorities remained diametrically opposed and that any compromise, or alliance, was only temporary and based on tactical considerations (Sakwa 2004, 209).

As clarified in the introduction to the thesis, even though classical realism concentrates on military capability as the most significant material power, it does not deny the pivotal role of other material powers as long as they serve the control over the other, as in the case of the economic wealth. Indeed, military capability mainly depends on economic growth and capital accumulation. Even Thucydides, in *The History of the Peloponnesian War* (2017, 39), stated that the Peloponnesian War was "a matter not so much of arms as of money, which makes arms of use."

As stressed in the previous chapter, economic nationalism and mercantilism emerge as core elements, assuming, in a zero-sum game, that wealth achievement is crucial to the increase of military capability and, consequently, of national security through the imposition of import barriers to defend local markets, but simultaneously rising exports to generate a trade surplus (Heckscher 1994, XI-XXXV; Jackson and Sørensen 2013, 162-164). Within the aforementioned framework, economic growth and industrialisation are vital. On the one hand, in order to diversify a State's economy necessary to increase revenue and improve military capability; on the other, so as to make the economic system less vulnerable to external threats since a national trade deficit implies a weakening of the military power and in turn the inability to ensure self-preservation and power pursuit (Carr 2001, 120-22). More precisely, Edward Hallett Carr (2001, 110-25) argued that the larger a State's economy is, the more defence capabilities the State acquires. Hence Primakov's decision to concentrate on economic maximisation, insofar as the economy becomes an instrument (of hard power) to achieve relative gains and expand a State's influence by exporting capital and controlling foreign markets.

In the late 1990s, Primakov's policy also tackled the issue of Chechen insurgencies – Muslim separatist movements with a terrorist matrix – which had led to the proliferation of Islamist ideas in the North Caucasus through the establishment of connections with al-Qaeda and a resulting substantial influx of Middle Eastern jihadists in the national territory (Hahn 2006, 64-65; Dannreuther 2012, 545-548). Primakov attempted to limit Middle Eastern involvement in the region while at the same time forging close relations and creating new alliances with the so-called "soft underbelly" (Plucinski 2020, 27) – Middle Eastern countries adjoining the Russian southern border – in order to protect national territory. In establishing relations with both Asian and Middle Eastern powers, Primakov was persuaded that it would have positioned Russia as a bridge between the East and the West and as an alternative to the US (Sakwa 2004, 212-213).

Despite Primakov's policies, the Yeltsin administration did not succeed in reforming and recovering the nation, given the divisive methods of achievement utilised. It was considered more as a "transitional government" between the USSR dissolution and something greater. Boris Yeltsin himself probably agreed, considering that he has been persuaded to find his successor since the 1991 presidential election (Sakwa 2004, 15-20). Vladimir Putin first caught his attention in 1997 when covering the Deputy of the Head of the Presidential

Administration role. Yeltsin remained fascinated by Putin's skills and qualities but, more importantly, from his ability "to not allow himself to be manipulated in political games" (Sakwa 2004, 17). As a result, in August 1999, Yeltsin appointed Vladimir Putin Prime Minister, stating he would "consolidate society, based on the widest possible political spectrum, and ensure the continuation of reforms in Russia" (Ibid).

In 1999, Yeltsin resigned from the presidency, partially due to his poor health and partly due to the general discontent and the constituents' mounting pressure in the country, disappointed by the implemented unsuccessful reforms. In December of the same year, a new presidential campaign was launched, with Vladimir Putin being one of the most likely candidates (Ibid). In a country traumatised by disintegration and regression, Putin was unrivalled in that he genuinely represented the constituents and their hopes of prosperity, law, order, and stability. The primary aim, expressed during the presidential campaign, was to maintain Russia's nature and character while overhauling the State system through political and legal changes without altering the Constitution (Friedman 2015, 100-104).

Vladimir Putin's policies have been marked by the coexistence, not always harmonious, of two parallel dimensions closely linked to the President's personality and character: the "neo-Soviet" and "post-Soviet" identities since his installation. Putin's neo-Soviet identity was shaped by his upbringing, experiences, and service in the Soviet intelligence agency, which instilled pure Soviet values in the President. The post-Soviet identity, on the other hand, was marked by the recognition of communist ideology failure in the country's modernisation process, along with criticism of previous leaders' overestimation of the Soviet Union's capabilities and international relevance, which contributed to the system's collapse. Therefore, on the one side, Putin attempted to preserve Russia's essence, traditions, and values provided by communism and the Soviet legacy. On the other side, he tried to modernise the country, transforming it into a more cohesive and inclusive one while promoting improved relations with the West for national purposes, thus shifting from an ideological to a more pragmatic approach (Sakwa 2004, 36-37). Thereby, Putin followed Primakov's *realpolitik*; however, there was a slight difference between the two approaches. Whilst Primakov's pragmatism was referred to as competitive pragmatism, Putin's pragmatism was referred to as *cooperative pragmatism*, characterised by a strong sense of shared opportunities and threats, which enabled Putin to build profitable relations with different Western leaders (Sakwa 2004, 209).

The first challenge that Vladimir Putin tackled when taking office on the 1st of January 2000 was the restoration of a country in dire straits after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, as well as the reconciliation of Russia's own character with internationally recognised norms.

In terms of domestic policy, Vladimir Putin attempted to integrate Russia into the global economy by modernising the national economic system through international economic integration, consolidating society and bolstering the State's autonomy via para-constitutional reforms or framework changes without constitutional amendments (Sakwa 2004, 53-59). Vladimir Putin, in fact, recognised that Russia's economic system was no longer capable of supporting the country's ambitions. Additionally, its modernisation was necessary in order to provide favourable conditions for foreign technology investments, the development of non-energy sectors to overcome Russia's over-dependence on energy exports and the expansion of business ties abroad. Corruption was another main challenge the country was facing, which should have been tackled through administrative reforms. Putin, in addition, aimed at improving legislation and the respective bodies to enhance legislative procedures, law implementation, and compliance, but without pursuing revolution (Sakwa 2004, VIII-X; 41-42; 50-59; Zafesova 2020). Differently from the Yeltsin administration, Putin explicitly rejected the idea of the revolution as a viable means of achieving substantive political changes, promoting, on the other hand, soft power (Friedman 2015, 103). Soft power could represent a partial obstacle[37] to classical realist thought, which focuses mainly on hard power. Soft power, in fact, is a concept close to the liberal tradition that sees the power of ideas at the very heart. However, as Joseph Nye (2011, 80-110) argues, "there is no contradiction between realism and soft power." Indeed, the two powers coexist in the modern world, focusing on opposite aspects: hard power on coercive or threatening methods, while soft power on ideas, emphasising the possibility of cooperation instead of perpetual conflict. Yet, it also shows how sometimes the theory of classical realism finds difficulty in describing contemporary dynamics, as, despite the coexistence of the powers in international politics, soft power is starting to take a predominant position. As Joseph Nye explains (2011, 80-110), it is risky and expensive politically and financially in the modern system to implement hard power. Soft power, on the contrary, requires fewer resources and, most importantly, has fewer adverse effects in case of failure.

[37] Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 105-107.

Finally, the intense political polarisation, which characterised the Yeltsin period, was replaced by a centrist sentiment aimed at increasing presidential power – the so-called Russian super-presidentialism[38] – and preventing the emergence of political extremes that could have led to social unrest (Friedman 2015, 98; Sakwa 2004, 78-80). The adoption of a top-down approach is reflected in classical realism, which postulates that "domestic and international politics are but two different manifestations of the same phenomenon: the struggle for power" (Morgenthau 1948, 21).

Evidence is the changes in both Russian federalism and the country's political party system. Federalism, which is understood as the political-administrative set-up of a country that recognises extensive territorial autonomy and government functions, has always been a controversial concept in Russia, as Mara Morini (2020, 37-39) underlines. Democratic forces claimed that federalism was crucial for the democratisation of the country. Contrarily, nationalist and communist forces considered federalism a disruptive element for the USSR system. Under the Yeltsin administration, federalism did not experience a linear path, resulting in core and peripheral republics having different economic and political power capabilities in an attempt to redistribute power equally. Under Putin, the situation changed by readopting "pyramidic" federalism, convinced that too much power possessed by republics was detrimental to the State's integrity. The "pyramidic" or "vertical" system is a clear return to its origins, inasmuch as Russia has always been a tribal society. A pyramid-shaped social model, as stressed by Ron Keller[39], former Ambassador of the Netherlands to Russia (2009-2013) and current International Advisor on Geo-Politics, Finance and Economics and EU, Russia, Turkey, China Specialist, at the top of which is a small circle of oligarchs (elite) who hold power and seek to keep their wealth intact over time, preventing any endogenous and exogenous factors from undermining their position. The pivot was, therefore, moved to the Kremlin, decreasing regional autonomy and increasing power centralisation.

As for the national political party system, after a brief period of multipartyism during the Yeltsin era, a one-party system was established, with *United Russia* emerging in 1999 as the dominant party supporting Vladimir Putin and aiming at maintaining the stability of the "vertical power" and loyalty to the Kremlin. This does not exclude the presence of opposition

[38] Morini, *La Russia di Putin*, 21-26.

[39] Interview with Ron Keller, International Advisor and former Dutch Ambassador in Russia, via Zoom, 12 October 2021.

parties, represented, for example, by the Liberal-Democratic Party; however, the opposition often votes together with United Russia in order to guarantee political visibility, which would otherwise be limited. As Mara Morini (2021, 57-71) stresses, it is worth also noting that although United Russia maintains its dominance in the political arena thanks to Vladimir Putin's popularity, opposition parties are in any way often discouraged by bureaucratic practises and ideological fragmentation within the parties themselves.

In terms of foreign policy, as in the case of domestic policy, Vladimir Putin tried to follow in the footsteps of Primakov's realism. Yet, some differences arose between Primakov and Putin's. Vladimir Putin created a *new realism* with a higher degree of recognition of Russia's power limits and capacities, linked above all to economic weakness. A new realism, which was a combination of realist and traditional perspectives of Russia's national interests to be achieved within the international system in order to promote Russian integration into Western and global structures by internal stability and economic growth (Garcia 2018, 105-106). Indeed, at the beginning of the term, the improvement of Western relations was considered of primary importance, as economic recovery was a prerogative for domestic stabilisation. The solution was, therefore, to focus on the well-integrated Western capitalist markets, full of opportunities for oil and gas supply, while simultaneously avoiding becoming reliant on them (Sakwa 2004, 53-59).

If foreign policy, thereby, is framed as the achievement of interests abroad in order to serve national interests[40]; the only interest that the newly elected Russian President had, at the beginning of his mandate, was the generating of revenue so as to cement and develop an independent national economic system in order to avoid further domestic fragmentation and protect the tribal society. As already proved in the previous chapter, it is true that at the onset, Putin had some connections in the Middle East as well, to maintain good relations with fellow oil and gas exporters and interested nuclear countries; however, there was no reason in deepening those connections and starting new adventurous commitments in far-reaching geographical areas; more importantly, because it was costly. Hence, initially, the Russian leader did not have a real foreign policy agenda in the Middle East apart from teaming with former allies of the Soviet Union with relatively geoeconomic capacities.

The circumstances started to change in 2005-2006 with the Colour Revolutions and the emergence of anti-Western rhetoric. In fact, it is possible to note a dichotomy between the

[40] Morgenthau, *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics*, 60.

relations of the West with Russia and of the latter with the Middle East, as, from 2005, a slight increase in geoeconomic Russian-Middle Eastern relations has been registered. The outbreak of the 2010s Arab Spring then forced Vladimir Putin to draft a consistent foreign policy agenda in the region in order to ensure national security; and it was only in 2015 that geopolitical ambitions, which are closely related to the spread of democratic waves, and thus aimed at limiting Western expansionism, were introduced[41].

2.2 An analysis of Putin's rationale

Based on a classical realist individual analysis of Vladimir Putin's persona, the Russian leader – like all other leaders in the international community – perfectly juxtaposes *game theory*.

Game theory applies within the rational choice framework with the aim of understanding the behaviour of actors in economic and political spheres, positing that individuals are selfish, self-interested, and rational[42] (Hopman 1995, 26). As already mentioned in the Theoretical and analytical framework section, rationality is one of the tenets of classical realism, identified as the ability to conduct a careful cost-benefit analysis[43] before choosing the best solution to a given circumstance while always keeping the maximisation of national interest at the centre:

> "[...] We must approach political reality with a kind of rational outline [...]. [...] [We have to] ask ourselves what are the rational alternatives from which a statesman may choose who must meet this problem under these circumstances [...] and which of these rational alternatives was this particular statesman, acting under these circumstances, likely to choose. It is the testing of this rational hypothesis against the actual facts and their consequences which gives meaning to the facts of history and makes the scientific writing of political history possible.[...]." (Morgenthau 1952, 965-966)

Power, thereby, should guide a State's foreign policy if it is to survive within the anarchic system. Thus, because all individuals are rational and follow the same behavioural

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[41] Interview with Ron Keller, International Advisor and former Dutch Ambassador in Russia, via Zoom, 12 October 2021.

[42] Morgenthau, *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics,* 108 and Putnam, "The Logic of Two-Level Games," 427-460.

[43] Morgenthau, *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics*, 1951-1955.

patterns in order to maximise their egoistic interest, their actions can be predicted (Hopman 1995, 24-47).

Additional support to the statement and rational choice behaviour is provided by the *expected utility principle*: a 1950s behavioural rational physiological model focused on the power and preferences of particular individuals. For "individuals", the model refers to the decision-makers, leaders of a group, or an aggregation of individuals who have common resources, common willingness to use the resources on a specific issue, and a common objective on the direction to undertake to solve the issue.

The model is rooted in calculations, from which the following formula is derived (de Mesquita 1985, 156-177):

*Expected Utility = (Probability of Success*Utility of Success) –*

*(Probability of Failure*Utility of Failure)*

The formula underpins that an individual tends to make a decision by weighting the probability of success (benefits) and failure (costs) of each possible alternative, choosing the decision whose utility (net gain), at an acceptable level risk[44], exceeds one of all the other alternatives[45] (Levy 1997, 139-162).

The expected utility model, in addition, finds similarities with the relative gains concept, inasmuch as each individual's utility is compared to the expected utility of other individuals and the perception of the ability to alter a policy decision depends on the individual's expectation of gain against the others.

In a few words, thanks to this model, policymakers possessing objectives, different alternatives, and the probability of risk that the policymaker attributes to each alternative can conduct a rational cost minimisation, choosing the option that maximises the probability of success (McDermott and Kygler 2008, 49).

The Russian decision-making environment, nonetheless, is characterised primarily by formal structures[46].

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[44] Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace,* 5.

[45] For an in-depth analysis see Sebora, "Expected Utility Theory Vs. Prospect Theory: Implications For Strategic Decision Makers," 41-61.

[46] There are two types of politics within the Russian Federation's political system: formal politics and informal politics, which is defined by Mara Morini (2020, 23) as "the set of practises, institutions, and personal

Thanks to Putin's political and legal domestic reforms that reinforced and widened presidential power, Vladimir Putin enjoyed, and currently enjoys more freedom of manoeuvre, compared to his predecessor Yeltsin, to address foreign policy issues; including those in the Middle East[47] (Morini 2020, 147-150). Indeed, Russia's federal constitution enshrines absolute power to the President of the Federation in foreign policy matters along with the organs and personalities that the President has at his disposal to implement strategies beyond national borders. It refers, for instance, to the Foreign Policy Planning Department (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), which assists the President in the development of a foreign policy strategy and monitors its implementation; the Security Council, of which the President of the Federation is the chairman and whose task is to formulate guidelines on the country's foreign and military policy as well as assess threats to national security.

Furthermore, the Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov (since 2004) is in charge of representing the Russian Federation in bilateral and multilateral negotiations and signing international agreements (Constitution of the Russian Federation 1993). Additional roles are the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Oleg Syromolotov, General of the Army, who supervises the terrorism agenda and the Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov, responsible for Russian relations with the Middle East and Africa (Ferrari and Tafuro Ambrosetti 2021).

By and large, decisions are negotiated and deliberated within these formal structures, and more precisely, within a narrow and selected circle of highly trusted advisors (*siloviki*[48]), most of whom have a long-lasting acquaintance with President Vladimir Putin, with whom share a common experience in the Committee for State Security (KGB), and, as a consequence, a common ideology, a "bounded reality in terms of their foreign policy outlooks" (Gorenburg et al. 2017, 9). As a result, the lack of ideas variety among decision-making units could lead to what is defined as a "group-think bias": little space for an open and rational search for alternatives, which results in the tendency to more risk-taking behaviour.

networks based on the exchange of favours and contacts to obtain goods and services in less time and bypassing the formal procedures."

[47] Reference is made to the Russian *super-presidentialism* (Morini 2020, 21-26).

[48] The term *Siloviki* is used to indicate political figures, by and large coming from the security services, "focused on statism, central control over the commanding heights of the economy, a capable military, and a managed political system whereby all disputes are internal to one ruling party" (Gorenburg et al. 2017, 9).

Therefore, by applying the game analogy, as Steven Rosefielde (2014, 41) contends, authoritarian Russian leaders, as in the case of Vladimir Putin, are "satisficers[49]", who "perpetually manoeuver and gather power like masters of 'positional chess,' so that they can pounce when opportunity knocks; " yet, sometimes with cognitive biases[50].

The occasional irrationality of decision-makers in foreign policy is also stressed by Morgenthau (1978, 4-15), who states:

> "[...] Not all foreign policies have always followed so rational, objective, and unemotional a course. The contingent elements of personality, prejudice, and subjective preference, and of all the weaknesses of intellect and will which flesh is heir to, are bound to deflect foreign policies from their rational course. [...] Yet a theory of foreign policy which aims at rationality must for the time being, as it were, abstract from these irrational elements and seek to paint a picture of foreign policy which presents the rational essence to be found in experience, without the contingent deviations from rationality which are also found in experience. [...][51]"

Such classical realist features can also be detected when attentively observing Vladimir Putin's threefold ambitions in the Middle East: first, the regaining of great-power status (Sakwa 2004), guaranteeing the country's power position improvement and, as a consequence, independence (Spykman 1942, 7; 17–18). Second, the ensuring of national security (Morini 2020, 150), contributing, along with the first ambition, to maintain the State's autonomy and self-preservation in an anarchic system in order to satisfy the country's hunger for power. Third, the continuation of Primakov's economic aims in the area, pursuing the restoration of a national independent economic system (Freedman 2003, 66-93), essential for the sustenance of the above-mentioned ambitions (Spykman 1942, 7; 17–18).

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[49] The term satisfier refers to individuals that take a decision to a given circumstance, which, because of the presence of influencing factors, is considered satisfactory. This claim runs against classical realism because, with research progress in the field of psychology, different types of rationality have been discovered. Fundamental rationality in the hereby context is bounded rationality: the difficulty in determining all the possible alternatives and probabilities of success and failure of a given decision. Therefore, due to the impossibility of accessing all the existing possible alternatives before acting, individuals stop seeking alternatives when they believe they have found a satisfactory solution, which according to individuals does maximise their expected utility, but that in reality, it does not (Rosefield 2014, 39-44).

[50] At this juncture, an additional empirically based psychological approach, *prospect theory*, could be applied. For an in-depth analysis, see Kahneman, *Prospect Theory: An Analysis of Decision Under Risk.*

[51] Classical realism places great emphasis on the acquisition of experience for the attainment of rationality (Morgenthau 1946, 146).

First objective: Great-power status

The enhancing of the power position internationally by modifying the Western perception of Russia from a peripheral to a core country is Vladimir Putin's first ambition in the Middle East (Sakwa 2004, 208).

Such an ambition is deeply rooted in the basic human feelings of jealousy, frustration, insecurity and, more importantly, inferiority. Russia comes from a long history – the imperial era, communist, and even current – of comparison with and imitation of the West, coupled with a continuous strive for establishing itself as a global power. This sentiment of proving its worthiness and greatness to the broader international community is still present in today's society and is the direct product of an inferiority complex, much rooted in the elites and in the President himself as well. With the end of the Cold War, the inferiority complex became even more entrenched[52], as the Russian leader was forced to redefine and reaffirm the country's civilisation identity, as well as its role in the international arena, reshaping relations with partners through new balances of power (Giusti and Penkova 2008, 4). As Vladimir Putin himself declared, "[...] the demise of the Soviet Union was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century" (News 2005). Yet, the role that Russia was supposed to play within the international system was clear:

> "Russia long ago ceased to be a reduced map of the Soviet Union; it is a confident power with a great future and a great people [...]. True, Russia has ceased to be an empire, but it has not wasted its potential as a great power. [...] The new generation has got a great historic chance to build a Russia that it will not be ashamed to pass on to its children. [...] It is unreasonable to be afraid of a strong Russia, but it should be reckoned with." (Putin 2000)

The great-power status is, therefore, much more than mere status. As Andrei P. Tsygankov (2005, 133) states, it is a necessary security condition. The necessity to reclaim Russia's former position as an independent world leader capable of defining global affairs within the international arena, influencing world politics "by actively seeking to control social resources [,] coordinate the activities of key social players" (Tsygankov 2005, 140), and protecting the country from possible external threats (Giusti and Penkova 2008, 17).

[52] Interview with Ron Keller, International Advisor and former Dutch Ambassador in Russia, via Zoom, 12 October 2021.

The idea is also shared by Alan Miller[53], Strategic Capabilities Specialist at HQ US Army Europe-Africa, arguing that:

> "Relevant is the search/need for relevancy and quest for regaining an empire "lost". The Russians don't want to be dismissed as non-relevant on the world stage. [...] This rolls into ego, and it hurts their ego to feel like they don't get the respect they deserve. This respect is driven by a very real sense of an empire that existed as recently as up to the end of the Soviet Union. There is a lot of pent up resentment with the West and, especially, the United States over how that all played out. The Soviet Union was at centre stage with the United States, and when the Soviet Union dissolved, they seemed to fade to the background. The sense of empire, though, is ironically also linked to the Czarist times, even though that pushes against the theme of political culture at present. There is a romanticized notion in the Russian culture of those days from before. The respect and influence they had on the world stage, and how they were a major player."

By framing in a classical realist lens the strife for the regaining of international leverage by trying to convince the international community to take Russia's voice into consideration and recognise its restoration as a great power (Tsygankov 2005, 151; Giusti and Penkova 2008, 15), coupled with power centralisation, authoritarianism, and the re-emergence of anti-Western sentiment in Putin's second term (2004-2008), a Cold War paradigm of geopolitical competition in the Middle East with Western countries and, more specifically, with the United States is revived (Freedman 2007). As underlined by Raymond L. Garthoff (1992, 287-293), in fact, the Cold War was an ideological, geopolitical, economic, and military zero-sum competition over the loyalty of newly independent nations. The Soviet Union attempted to increase national security by regulating internal affairs and neighbouring countries; on the contrary, the United States desired military and economic supremacy, the establishment of intergovernmental organisations and institutions able to encourage international collaboration (for example, UN, IMF, WB, GATT), and a liberal international order based on free international trade and open markets. The two superpowers thus had a diametrically opposed image of the post-world wars system, which led to the emergence of a mutual feeling of hostility. Accusing each other of a desire for world domination, the Soviet Union aligned (external balancing) with revisionist anti-Western forces to counter the

[53] Interview with Alan Miller, Strategic Capabilities Specialist at HQ US Army Europe-Africa", via email, 6 September 2021.

hegemonic imperialist thrust, while the United States aligned with anti-Soviet forces to contain the USSR expansionism. The result was geopolitical tensions, intending to avoid the counterpart control over the international system (Cox 2016, 66-77; Scott 2016, 51-59).

Besides, there is criticism of this interpretation since, according to Roland Dannreuther (2012, 545), Putin did and is not behaving in a zero-sum fashion, turning the Middle East into a resource to manipulate in order to expand Russia's geopolitical hegemony at the expense of the United States. There is, therefore, an interpretation of Putin's *realpolitik* as a policy that is no longer linked to a "pure ideological commitment to geopolitical competition" (Ibid, 545) but as a more nuanced foreign policy characterised by a complex combination of multidimensional interests. Only when domestic (secessionism and radicalisation in the Caucasus) and geoeconomic political challenges (national economic consolidation) driving Russian foreign policy in the Middle East have been achieved can Vladimir Putin consider political and foreign geopolitical aims.

Following Roland Dannreuther's view, understanding Vladimir Putin's engagement in the Middle East outside the Cold War prism of zero-sum competition with the West permits to explain why Putin has managed to maintain good relations with a broad portfolio of pro and anti-Western partners over time (Ibid).

The critique seems to be further supported by Putin's acting not as a revisionist-ideological competitor in the Middle East but rather as a status quo policymaker (Giusti and Penkova 2008, 7). Vladimir Putin has no ambition in replacing Washington but positioning Russia as a reliable player in the region, offering an alternative to the United States as mediator and security guarantor by proposing and encouraging dialogue, peace conferences, or suggesting defence mechanisms, always functional to ensure the maintenance of the status quo in the region. As stated by Anna Borshchevskaya et al. (2021a), indeed, utterly replacing the United States is not possible because although, since 2003, the country is steadily withdrawing troops from the Middle East, it is not withdrawing its influence nor its "robust [counterterrorist] sea, air, and land military presence" (Rumer 2019, 41). There are still several Middle Eastern countries that perceive the US as an ally and which use relations

improving with Russia to in turn bolster relations with the US, a condition which Vladimir Putin is fully aware of (Borshchevskaya et al. 2021a).

Yet, being Russia, a status quo country does not necessarily run counter to the classical realist perspective.

Classical realism, indeed, distinguishes between three basic patterns of political policy – whether domestic or international – from which a relative foreign policy and a State's status correspond. "A political policy seeks either to keep power, to increase power, or to demonstrate power" (Morgenthau 1948, 21). A State wanting to keep power desires to maintain the power distribution of a specific point in history, favouring a *status quo policy*[54]. A State desiring to acquire power through expansion and status quo changing favours, instead, an *imperialistic policy*[55]. Finally, a State aiming at neither keeping nor increasing power but demonstrating it tends to pursue a *prestige policy* (Morgenthau 1948, 21-22).

In the Middle East, it is true that Putin is attempting to maintain the regional status quo for preserving the stability and peace in the area, functional for ensuring national security and thus self-preservation within the anarchic system[56]. This, however, does not utterly exclude the possibility of Vladimir Putin operating in a zero-sum game.

Indeed, it is possible to observe a combination of both status quo and imperialist policies, inasmuch as through the lens of classical realism, the exploitation of the power vacuums[57] left by the United States in the Middle East – offering an alternative and indirectly limiting, as a consequence, US influence in the area and simultaneously favouring a multipolar transition (Pietrobon 2021, 4; Lovotti and Talbot 2019c, 33), implying a superpower quest aimed at balancing the power internationally and reducing its asymmetry (Gorenburg et al. 2017, 17) – can be considered as taking advantage of offered opportunities in order to gain a margin of safety that allows the country to expand its influence for the improvement of the political position and of the country's independence, pursuing its lust for power.

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[54] Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace,* 22-25; 64.

[55] Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace,* 27.

[56] Interview with Dott Nazhen Sarsembekov, via email, 3 November 2021.

[57] Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace,* 36; 65.

Second objective: National security

The ensuring of national security is a long-standing Russian necessity that in the Middle East is concentrated in Syria, in which the following threats have found common ground (Morini 2020, 147-159): NATO's enlargement, the limiting of the secessionism and radicalisation in the North Caucasus, the fighting of international terrorism, as well as the opposition of Western-backed regime change.

Vladimir Putin's national security concerns are deeply influenced by the morphological territorial configuration of the country and the need to protect the national borders from external threats due to the absence of natural barriers. The necessity became even more pressing with the fall of the Iron Curtain, given the widespread fear of a possible further fragmentation of the Russian Federation, which would have resulted in additional domestic instability. Thus, prior to the Arab Spring, when the 2003 "Rose Revolution" in Georgia and the 2005 "Orange Revolution" in Ukraine erupted, and the United States attempted to strategically push these countries into NATO, Vladimir Putin and, more broadly, Russian citizens felt for the first time that the hard-won national stability was under threat[58]. It was a highly rational sentiment of fear that democracy might have spread across Russian territory, jeopardising the interests of the oligarchs and the tribal system as a whole. Consequently, when in 2010 the Arab Spring broke out, Putin feared that a domino effect could have brought the Western state model very close to the national territorial borders, given the proximity of the Arab world to Russia's southern borders; a scenario that became even more concrete when protests began to emerge in Damascus (Plucinski 2020). Indeed, as Olga Oliker (2009, XV) states, Russia has been "long focused on the possibility that political instability in a neighbouring country will involve Russia in violent unrest. Russia also fears that political change in those countries is a harbinger of instability to come within its own borders."

[58] Due to the country's geographical conformation, Russia, since the imperial era, has always tried to prevent direct external military, political, and economic expansion through a buffer states strategy: a protective barrier between the national territory and external power expansion (Ouimet 2003). Buffer states were crucial both from a strategic-protective perspective and from a zero-sum game vis-a-vis the West. Hence, with the fall of the Iron Curtain and the end of the Warsaw Pact, the buffer zone weakened. Consequently, when the Colour Revolutions and the prospect of NATO's enlargement in CIS buffer countries (as in the case of Georgia and Ukraine) emerged, Russia saw its protective barrier further threatened, becoming thus vulnerable to external (expansionist) pressures (Gorenburg et al. 2017, 59;62).

Envisioning, thereby, NATO's expansion in a zero-sum fashion, Putin is the one losing. The loss of territory under domination thus entails the seeking of "conquest" of new territory by expanding into other geographical areas and cooperating with regional actors in order to maintain territorial integrity, the nation's security, as well as increase the country's power position internationally. Hence, as stated by Borshchevskaya et al. (2021a), a dichotomy between NATO's and Russia's attitude in the Middle East can be observed: the more NATO tries to expand, intending to attract ex-members of the Warsaw Pact (CIS countries) into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the more Russia stretches its influence in the Middle Eastern quadrant (Putin 2007).

Fear thereby becomes a relevant factor in such a context. Fear is a psychological process that frequently goes hand-in-hand with security guarantees. Russia's vast geographical extent, combined with its vulnerability and the various invasions faced throughout history, has led to a sense of uncertainty and fear among the Russian population (Toal 2016), the Russian elite, and the President himself. A feeling, in accordance with Neil MacFarlane (2016, 351) reinforced by the Soviet upbringing:

> "Putin and his colleagues in the Soviet security apparatus were acculturated into this perception of isolation, hostility, and threat in their formative years. That formation may affect the cognitive framing of their current situation. [...]."

Besides, fear finds little support in rational approaches, which sees emotionality[59] as synonymous with irrationality. As underlined by Neta C. Crawford (2009, 271-288), fear prompts individuals to be more aware of potential future threats; but, at the same time, leads to a weaker cost-benefit analysis and riskier decisions. Additionally, the individual fails in seeing the behaviour as potentially threatening to other actors, "enhancing what is already a cognitive bias" (Ibid).

In reality, the concept of fear can also be attributed to classical realism, insofar as politics is described as a phenomenon determined by the humans' desire for power, facilitated by the anarchic structure, offering opportunities for zero-sum manoeuvring. The inability to genuinely foresee the true intentions of the other power-seekers prompts the self-preservation

[59] For an in-depth analysis, see Morgenthau, *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics*, paragraph "The Irrational Determination of Reason", 133-136; and paragraph "The Role of Reason in the Social World", 136 - 144.

and improvement of power position for fear of succumbing. “Power struggles [therefore] are seen as emanating either from the animus dominandi of human nature or from fear, or from a mix of the two” (Neumann and Sending 2010, 52). At this juncture, however, realists frame fear as an intrinsic rational feeling.

Fear was also evident in Putin’s 2015 engagement in the Syrian civil war, a conundrum for the opposition of the North Caucasus radicalisation, international terrorism, and Western-backed regime change.

As detailed in the first chapter, a combination of multiple political and military factors triggered Vladimir Putin’s shift of strategy in the Syrian civil war, from a moderate to a large-scale[60] intervention with the abandonment of lesser-scale means of resolution deployed at the beginning of 2011, namely diplomatic, financial, and military assistance (Parker 2017, 10-12).

These political and military factors might be summarised as follows: First, the fear of an imminent al-Assad regime collapse, which would have had severe negative repercussions to the country and to regional and Russian own national stability (Ibid, 5; Stent 2016). Second, the threat of a possible uncontrolled proliferation of IS and Jabhat al-Nuṣra, which could have resulted in a complete takeover of Syria and in the ensuing difficulty in containing terrorist waves within the country's borders. The possibility proved to be highly worrisome for the Russian leader given Russia’s history with the North Caucasus, the presence within the national territory of the largest indigenous Muslim population on the European continent (about 15%[61] mainly distributed in North Caucasus, Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, and Volga Ural region) (Kreutz 2007, 2; Stepanova 2020), as well as the presence of several Russian speaking fighters[62] among the ranks of jihadi groups (Soufan Group 2015). Third, the regime fall resulting victory of the West and the consequent legitimisation of Western-backed regime change; an additional threat to Russian national security caused by the impossibility – in the

[60] Charap et al., “Understanding Russia's Intervention in Syria.”

[61] Russia has a substantial Islamic component in its population which represents about 15% of the population. With the emergence of Islamic terrorism (al-Qaeda and ISIS), the threats against these communities further deepened not only on Russian national soil but also on Middle Eastern territory due to the large presence of Russian citizens in the region (for example, in Syria and Israel) (Kreutz 2007, 2). See also Boltuc, “Webinar “Sicurezza e Minaccia Terroristica nello Scacchiere Geopolitico Eurasiatico.”

[62] As noted by Nikolay Kozhanov (2018, 12), by early 2013, about 250 individuals were suspected of fighting with the Syrian opposition and Islamist factions. The number has risen to 2,000 by 2015, 20 percent of which were fighting in the Syrian civil war. By the beginning of 2016, these numbers had risen even higher, with 3,000 to 5,000 Russian-speaking foreign fighters reported being present in Syria and Iraq (Kavkazskiy 2016).

event of circumstances coming true – to stop the West from attempting to use similar tactics to undermine and/or overthrow Russia's government and its neighbours (Allison, 2013, 797).

Initially, Russia's military strategy was focused on combating jihadist groups – IS and Jabhat al-Nuṣra –, as well as the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces so as to prevent the regime's impending collapse and, in a second moment, on assisting Bashar al-Assad in the reconquest of opposition-held territory (Lovotti 2018, 2). Nonetheless, the decision to act militarily was the outcome of a thorough analysis of the costs and benefits, along with the probabilities of failure and success. Indeed, in comparison to the potential geopolitical gains, the risks — mainly three – were regarded as reasonable and manageable (Charap et al. 2019, 8).

The first risk was the involvement of different regional actors, namely Iran, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey, with personal disagreements. The presence of rival countries with common interests in Syria could have turned the country into a proxy platform for regional conflict resolution and geopolitical expansion. As a result, Putin's attempt in employing his multilateral realpolitik to mitigate the disagreements and bridge the divide between the parties would have minimised the cost of an eventual counterproductive scenario while maximising the benefits, as the al-Assad regime's stability would have further solidified the country's role as a broker not only in Syria but more broadly in the region and demonstrated to the West that the 2014 economic sanctions imposed failed to marginalise Russia from the international arena (Rumer 2019, 7-11; 38-42).

At the beginning of the civil war, the Syrian territory was permeated by a growing Iranian footprint, bringing difficulties in negotiating with the opposition, which rejected any Iranian involvement in the territory, as well as with Israel and Saudi Arabia. Indeed, keeping al-Assad in power was crucial for Tehran that wanted to oppose Israel and geopolitically expand its influence in the Levant by using Syria as a launching platform, fearing that a regime change would have prompted the US and Israel to undermine the Islamic Republic of Iran's position in the Middle East and lead to its collapse (Barnes-Dacey 2018; Terrill 2015). Notwithstanding Putin's desire in containing Iran's expansionism in Syria, its partnership was of pivotal importance for Syria's status quo maintenance, given the massive on-ground possessed military forces (Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) (Barnes-Dacey 2018; Jones 2019).

In the southern part of Syria, the challenge of Iranian expansionism and its allies (including Hezbollah) met Israel's unrelenting military attempts to limit Iran. Evidence is the 2018 back-and-forth rockets and airstrikes between the two regional powers, mitigated by a Russian-backed understanding on the security of the Syrian border with Israel to be guaranteed by the Syrian National Army rather than the Iranian one, and on the possibility by Israel of targeting Iranian forces: an advantageous compromise for Vladimir Putin as well (International Crisis Group 2019, 20).

Saudi Arabia, which was more concerned about Iranian troops on Syrian soil than government failure, was another actor influenced by Iran's presence on the ground (Lovotti 2018, 6). As a result, given the latter's support for the opposition, relations between Russia and Saudi Arabia were tense at the start of the conflict (Blanga 2017, 45-59). Yet the two countries soon reapproached thanks to the shale revolution that required coordinated efforts, discussed in the third chapter, and Moscow's ability, in cooperation with Iran and Turkey, to stabilise the al-Assad regime and its control over the territory.

Indeed, the *Astana Ceasefire Process* negotiated in 2017 (first round 23-24 January[63]; second round 15-16 February 2017[64]) between the Russian President Vladimir Putin, the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and the Iranian President Hassan Rouhani with the aim of improving security conditions and laying the ground for political-peace negotiations between the Syrian government and the armed opposition (Stepanova 2020, 5-10) led to regime's victory and the defeat of jihadi groups on both sides of the Euphrates River. A success that was also officially declared by the Russian Ministry of Defence in December 2017[65], coupled with the announcement of the completion of the Russian mission in the country and the partial withdrawal of the Russian military contingent[66].

These occurrences left Riyadh with no alternative but to accept Iran's presence in Syria and to enhance relations with Moscow, which was not to Riyadh's detriment in any case, inasmuch as new economic agreements could have been established and Iran's growing footprint in Syria indirectly counterbalanced (Blanga 2017, 45-59).

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[63] See also RadioFreeEurope, "Russia, Turkey, Iran Discuss Syria Cease-Fire In Kazakhstan Talks."

[64] Seisembayeva, "Second round of Syrian talks in Astana adopt mechanism to monitor ceasefire."

[65] Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, "Russian General Staff: Syria completely liberated from ISIS."

[66] The withdrawal of Russian troops was partial as they were present in the military bases of Khmeimim and Tartus (Ria Novosti 2017b).

Finally, Turkey, whose cooperation with Russia, was challenged by President Erdoğan's uncertain image of the Syrian future[67] (Lovotti 2018, 6). Since the Yeltsin administration, Russian-Turkish relations have always been a combination of confrontation and cooperation, and this characteristic continues to pervade the relations even during Putin's, even though an improvement has been registered in concomitance with the 2003 Iraq War[68] (Hill and Taspinar 2006, 81-91). As in the case of Saudi Arabia, at the beginning of the civil war, Turkey supported the opposition. The turning point came in autumn 2015 when a Russian Su-24 plane was shot down by a Turkish aircraft in what Ankara considered Turkish airspace. The incident generated a harsh reaction from Vladimir Putin, including the imposition of economic sanctions against Turkey until an issued official apology by President Erdoğan in the summer of 2016, in an attempt to relieve economic sanctions and political pressure from Moscow (Erşen 2017, 90). In June 2016, Russian-Turkish relations experienced a renewed boost thanks to Vladimir Putin's support to Erdoğan in the attempted failed coup d'etat allegedly perpetrated against the Turkish government by a faction of the Turkish Armed Forces (Tol et al. 2016) and during which changes in civil society, the military, the government, and the media sphere prompted widespread criticism among European countries and the United States. The direct consequence was a recovery in political and economic relations between the two countries since the outset of the 2015 Russian military intervention, a Turkish softening of positions on al-Assad despite continuing to maintain a military presence in northern Syria, and the cooperation with Russia and Iran in mediating the Astana Ceasefire Process (Lovotti 2018, 3-5).

However, notwithstanding the follow up of the Astana meeting even subsequently declared victory, the Russia-Turkey-Iran format did not manage to terminate the civil war nor eradicate the terrorist threat, which was concentrated in the Idlib province (Ibid). On the 3rd of May 2017, the Astana meetings established four de-escalation zones, areas deliberately formed for negotiation processes and where military operations were limited to counter terrorists: Idlib province, Rastan and Talbiseh in northern Homs province, Eastern Ghouta in the north part of Damascus, and the rebel-controlled south along the border with Jordan (Aljazeera 2017). In 2018, moreover, Putin and Erdoğan signed an additional Memorandum

[67] For an in-depth analysis, see Balci, "Turkey's Relations with the Syrian Opposition."

[68] Turkey opposed the US intervention in Iraq when, in 2003, refused to permit American troops to pass across Turkish borders in order to reach the country, gradually distancing itself from American ideology and strategic policy of regime change in Iraq, Iran, and Syria. (Freedman 2018, 108-110)

in Sochi with the aim of separating moderate opposition militants from jihadist forces, assuring the removal of the latter (Security Council 2018).

Despite thanks to the Astana Ceasefire Process, three out of four de-escalation zones returned under the control of the Syrian central government between 2018 and 2019, Idlib province became an increasingly problematic case. Idlib is located in northern Syrian territory, near the border with Turkey and in 2019 was the only de-escalation zone still out of the central government control. It was characterised by the highest concentration of militants, specifically radical Islamists belonging to Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, who escaped from the other de-escalation zones and who triggered the 2020 Idlib crisis. As a result of the crisis, relations between Moscow and Ankara, once again, deteriorated, and evidence is the Russian Ministry of Defence statement in February 2020 that "the Turkish colleagues' failure to deliver on their commitment to separate militants of the moderate opposition from terrorists who flooded these areas" was the main reason behind the Idlib crisis (Nezavisimoe voennoe obozrenie – Independent Military Review 2020).

Islamists were not the primary preoccupation of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Syria, said Ekaterina Stepanova (2020, 7), but rather the Kurdish and their attempt to seize power. Moreover, until January 2020, Turkey did not possess sufficient military capacity in Idlib territory to fight terrorist militants, considering that the government has relocated soldiers from Idlib to Libya in support of the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA) since late 2019. In February 2020, skirmishes between Turkish and Syrian forces were recorded, suggesting a potential of a direct conflict between Moscow and Ankara, as government forces almost managed to approach the province capital Idlib through the seizure of the main highways. In the end, a new bilateral deal was compromised between Putin and Erdoğan within the Astana framework on the 5th of March 2020, ending the Idlib crisis, with Syrian central government control gradually restored in the Idlib province (Stepanova 2020, 7-8; Lovotti and Sučov 2020, 301-308).

Concisely, although the Syrian civil war is still ongoing, Putin's intervention was of great benefit, as it led to an improvement in Russian relations with the above-mentioned regional powers and an undermining of the risk of regional disagreements transformation into concrete conflicts (Rumer 2019, 7-11).

In addition, by attentively analysing Putin's and his partners' counter-terrorist operations from a classical realist perspective, a balance of power rhetoric emerges. As

acknowledged so far, individuals have to autonomously guarantee self-preservation in a self-help system in order to pursue their lust for power. So as to ensure security, decision-makers can adopt an internal or external balance strategy. In the context of terrorism in the Middle East, it is possible to observe an external balancing – Putin's partnerships with regional powers, including Iran, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Syria – besides, at the same time, deterrence was perceived as the quickest way to regain control over the territories under IS power. When comparing IS military capability with that of the powers involved, it is clear the disproportionality, which implies a rational choice since the counterterrorist campaign would certainly have favoured the stronger side. Terrorist groups, however, are non-state actors; and according to classical realism, non-state actors and international organisations are considered to be entities acting on behalf of the State because of lacking the necessary power to influence the international system autonomously. They can only promote their influence within political processes through the national government since they do not possess legitimate instruments to function on an equal footing with nation-states. Thereby, following this approach, terrorist groups acting on behalf of the State also become rational, spreading terror to counterbalance Western influence in their territory (Antunes and Camisão 2018, 4).

The second risk in intervening on a large scale in Syria was related to domestic consent. Yet, as argued by Samuel Charap, Elina Treyger, and Edward Geist (2019, 8-9), "There were no significant domestic political constraints on intervening per se, and backlash for doing so was a remote prospect […] Particularly since the Ukraine crisis began in 2014 […], the public saw Putin as the defender of the country against external threats. […] More importantly, the Kremlin was confident that it could control the domestic narrative well enough to ensure that there was no significant organized opposition to the intervention, even though there was not overwhelming public support *for* it." The domestic "consensus" was then reinforced by the decision to deploy the Airspace Force (VKS) and the Russian private military security contractors (PMSCs) as the *Wagner Group*[69] rather than a full deployment of ground forces. In this way, there would have been a significant reduction in casualties and, consequently, minimisation of human loss necessary to avoid domestic social unrest[70] (President of the Russian Federation 2016b).

[69] CSIS, "The Expansion of Russian Private Military Companies."

[70] As reported by Nicu Popescu and Stanislav Secrieru (2018), Russian citizens, as a consequence of Afghanistan's detrimental consequences (1979) and the two Chechen Wars, were less tolerant in large-scale conflicts, resulting in a high number of casualties. Hence Putin's decision to concentrate on-air operations and send mercenaries to fight in the conflict.

Lastly, the third risk was related to the possibility of an eventual direct conflict with an external player operating in the area, the United States. In fact, given the decision to implement air operations, an unintended collision between the two countries in shared airspace could have happened. However, the probability of occurring was deemed minimal by the Russian President, inasmuch as the Obama administration had no intention of directly engaging the military against the regime, apart from air operations directed to the IS fighting (Razuvaev 2015). Furthermore, the American counter-terrorism operations in the area started in 2014; consequently, Vladimir Putin had more than one year to examine the American involvement in the country and understand where to operate without provoking retaliation (Charap et al. 2019, 8-9).

In a few words, Vladimir Putin fully embodies the game-theoretical personification of the individual, a chess player who always acts rationally, attempting to minimise costs and maximise gains.

Third objective: National economic consolidation

At the foundation of the two ambitions presented above, there is the economic system. As previously underlined, in fact, classical realism does not deny the role of the economy as material power, inasmuch as the more a State is able to expand its economic capacity and become economically independent, the more it will be able to sustain the internal balancing and the guarantee of the territorial integrity, as well as the external balancing by creating new connections and thus improving the country's power position internationally. Indeed, as argued by Robert E. Berls (2021), Senior Advisor for Russia and Eurasia, to be defined as a great power, a State must have "sufficient military, political, economic, scientific-technical, ideological, and cultural power that has worldwide influence." The lack of a dynamic economic system led the political elite, as well as the newly elected President Vladimir Putin, after the USSR's collapse, to realise that the consolidation of the economic system was of paramount importance in the regaining of the needed international leverage. The only thing needed was new markets. Hence the development of a more mercantilist stance towards international politics "founded on its mineral wealth, a geographic position that gives it control of important trade routes, and the fact that most of its neighbours need the resources

Russia either owns or controls" (Rumer 2007, 57). Economic development not only ensures Russia's great-power status but also allows the country to have an "impact on world affairs through participat[ing] in economic international fora" (Giusti and Penkova 2008, 11).

As a result, the third Putin's foreign policy priority in the Middle East is geoeconomics: the strengthening and consolidation of the national economic system by a pragmatic-multilateral economic strategy, adjusted to the region's intrinsic pluralism and multipolarity (Stepanova 2020, 3) in order to encourage cooperation with oil and gas countries, Russian business interests by exporting nuclear technology and military equipment, and, finally, investment funds opportunities.

Iraq

As outlined, at the beginning of the 2000s, Vladimir Putin's primary concern in the economic sphere was fruitful cooperation with oil and gas producing Middle Eastern countries: *energy diplomacy*[71]. As defined by Carole Nakhle (2018, 29), energy diplomacy "typically refers to diplomatic and foreign policy activities conducted by a consumer country to secure access to energy resources from a producer country, with a view to ensuring the security of supply. [...] Energy diplomacy may also refer to efforts deployed by a producer country to secure access to markets with a view of attaining security of the demand. [...] The growing rapprochement between Russia and countries in the Middle East [...] encompasses the two forms of energy diplomacy. It is manifest in enhanced interaction and coordination among oil and gas-producing countries pursuing a common interest [...]."

A tangible example is Iraq (Ferrari and Tafuro Ambrosetti 2021), where Putin attempted to preserve and extend the privileged relationship with Saddam Hussein, developed during the Soviet period that permitted Moscow to have favourable access to Iraqi markets. Yet, the early 2000s US economic sanctions imposed against Saddam Hussein's regime represented a hindrance to Putin's commercial large-scales desires in the country (Friedman 2015, 99). However, as Aldo Ferrari and Eleonora Tafuro Ambrosetti (2021) state, sanctions were not solely considered an impediment since they partly contributed to Baghdad's change of direction with the advent of the new US President George W. Bush in 2001. As a

[71] Morgenthau contends that energy diplomacy is a sign of imperialist policies. (Morgenthau 1948, 39)

consequence of the new presidential election, indeed, the American foreign policy toward Iraq further tightened, leaving Saddam Hussein with little choice but to turn his focus away from the United States and get closer to the Russian Federation (Freedman 2003, 69-70; Friedman 2015, 99).

The economic restrictions continued to be imposed in the years following 2001, with the start of President Bush War in Iraq in 2003. They were lifted only with the end of the war and the American monopoly in the country in 2011. As a result, Putin managed to fully make use of the Iraqi markets at Russia's advantage by concluding trade agreements on the oil and transportation energy sectors and a lucrative $4.2 billion arms deal with Baghdad only in 2012 (Friedman 2015, 105). The onset of the 2010 Arab Spring relieved itself of a contributing element, as bilateral agreements began to climb in the aftermath, driven by the rise of anti-Western perceptions among Middle Eastern countries and the need to find an alternative to the United States so focused on exporting democratic values. The peak was yet recorded after the 2014 EU and US economic sanctions against Russia (Parker 2015, 35) with an evident rise in signed agreements with Baghdad, including the 2017 agreement to purchase T-90 tanks (Ria Novosti 2017a), the 2017 entry into operation of a gas factory at Badra promoted by the Russian oil company Gazprom (Gazprom Neft 2017), and the 2020 declaration of the Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov of Russia being interested in further deepening the energy and military ties with Baghdad (Daly 2020).

Iran

Unlike Iraq, where the primary resource of interest was oil fields, Putin's economic interest in Iran focused on weapons sales and nuclear power (Malashenko 2008). Putin, in fact, in his first term in office (2000-2008), agreed to support Tehran's nuclear programme by increasing the number of nuclear reactors built and supplying nuclear fuel. The decision was taken at the outset primarily because of the cost of nuclear reactors, which were highly profitable and thus ideal for the Russian economic consolidation project. Moreover, nuclear power serves to create and maintain diplomatic, commercial, and institutional relationships with the recipient country since nuclear commerce "entails not only a multi-year effort for reactor construction but also an ongoing relationship between a supplier country and a recipient one regarding fuel supplies and reactor maintenance" (Bahgat 2019, 77). As a result,

according to Gawdat Bahgat (2019, 77), nuclear power becomes significant in the assessment of the great-power dynamics and Moscow's growing position in the region.

Yet, in contrast to Tehran, which was enthusiastic about Russian nuclear investments in the country, the rest of the international community showed some concern. The proliferation of nuclear weapons was risky in the event of a conflict. As a result, during the G-8 meeting held in Évian-Les-Bains, France, in June 2003, the United States and the European Union urged Putin to stop supplying nuclear fuel to Iran and the Iranian President, Mohammad Khatami, to return the spent fuel to Moscow. Subsequently, even the UN Security Council began to take action, holding meetings to find a solution to Iran's growing nuclear power and imposing economic, financial, scientific, and military sanctions (sanctions imposed by the US through the UN Security Council) that Russia always tried to mitigate. Only with time did Putin understand the danger of Iran possessing nuclear power and the threat it posed to national security, but at the time, it seemed an advantageous bargain to reaffirm Russia's international position through economic consolidation (Freedman 2003, 69-81).

In the end, the bilateral nuclear and trade agreements signed with President Mohammad Khatami revealed instrumental, inasmuch as Putin was not only able to further increase the country's economic independence from Western free capitalist markets, diversifying the national sources of revenues but also enhancing the State's autonomy, increasing its leverage, and evaluating its national currency (Ibid).

By 2012, commercial arms deals increased, as well as oil and gas development projects. However, despite improved Russian-Iranian relations, difficulties with the nuclear programme began to emerge. The US sanctions imposed on Iran only increased the country's willingness to enrich uranium (Robinson 2021). Tehran's non-compliance proved worrying even for Putin, who preferred not to have a nuclear country close to his borders, as Iran was a competitive power for control over the South Caucasus (Bernstein 2015). In addition, there had been episodes of radicalisation in Iran; therefore, the possession of a large quantity of nuclear energy would have led to an increase in the proliferation of weapons, extremely dangerous given the increasing terrorism in the Middle East (especially IS). In 2015, an agreement was finally reached: the *Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action* (JCPOA)[72]. Putin, besides, was somewhat reluctant to sign the JCPOA as it was afraid that it would have

[72] The JCPA is a 2015 agreement negotiated between Iran, Germany, and the five permanent members of the UN Security Council to impose restrictions on Iran's nuclear programme in exchange for sanctions relief. (Council of the European Union 2020; Robinson 2021)

negatively impacted Russia. Specifically, the Russian leader was concerned that Iran might have moved closer to the US, marginalising Russia as a business partner and undermining its international role. The removal of sanctions was equally problematic since Iran could have started exporting oil in massive quantities again, being the world's fourth-largest producer, reducing Russian exports and, consequently, its revenue. Putin was reassured by the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States in 2017 and his firm anti-Iranian stance, as well as the withdrawal of the US from the JCPOA the following year (Robinson 2021). On the one hand, the US's anti-Iran stance allowed Putin to bring Iran closer to Russia's sphere of influence by exchanging not only weaponry but also Russian goods. On the other hand, the US withdrawal proved dangerous as Iran restarted non-complying, increasing uranium's enrichment (Majidar 2017).

Turkey

Putin sought to improve relations with pro-Western countries as well, as in the case of Turkey. As previously mentioned, the pragmatic nature of Putin's foreign policy enabled him to establish cooperative relations even with countries that had previously been regarded as adversaries, turning them into viable economic, military, and diplomatic partners (Cohen 2007, 1-2). Turkey was evidently an opposing country, as it was pro-Western and a member of the Atlantic Alliance.

In economic terms, Turkey has been the largest economic and trading Russian partner in the natural gas sector in the Middle East, with trade increasing from approximately $4 billion in the 1990s to $15 billion in 2005 and over $30 billion in 2008 (Kuhrt 2013). Its significance was also evident in the massive Russian investments in the implementation of the 2003 "Blue Stream" project: a natural gas pipeline between Russia and Turkey through the Black Sea, which would be completed in 2009. The cooperation subsequently led to further trade relations, especially in the arms market. More specifically, in December 2017, Turkey signed a $2.5 billion deal for the purchase of Russian S-400 advanced air defence systems – which Ankara was previously planning to buy from the United States – (Gumrukcu and Toksabay 2017), triggering warnings and economic sanctions against Turkey by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (Mehta 2019). Their delivery in July 2019 represented a success for Putin, given the strategic rapprochement with Ankara. Further confirmation of this success

is the recent statement, in August 2021, by the Head of the Russian Rosoboronexport arms exporters regarding the possibility of a new contract with Ankara for the sale of additional S-400 air defence units in the near future (Rutigliano 2021; Reuters 2021b).

The Gulf Countries

Turkey was not the only pro-Western country transformed into a partner. At the end of Putin's second term (2004-2008), indeed, the same happened with Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia was attempting to diversify its foreign ties, permitting Putin to reposition, once again, Russia as a viable alternative to the United States by offering Saudi Arabia the deepening of oil supplies policy coordination (Dannreuther 2012, 545-552). The improvement in Russian-Saudi relations was particularly relevant as it gave Putin the incentive to start new commercial ties with other Persian Gulf countries – including Qatar – accessing a market that had previously been inaccessible for Russian companies (Friedman 2015).

In 2014, after the Ukraine crisis and the incorporation of Crimea, a steep drop in oil prices to below $40 per barrel occurred. Putin, cooperating with the new King of Saudi Arabia, Mohammed bin Salman, managed to overcome the plummeting price by rationally cutting oil production in order to lift prices accordingly. In 2017, oil prices soared to $65 per barrel as a result of the manoeuvre. In addition, in light of Saudi Arabia's possible involvement in the Syrian civil war, the new King agreed to further strengthen bilateral relations with Moscow by signing a new agreement for the purchase of advanced Russian military air defence systems, as well as energy resources agreements (Freedman 2018, 106). The new arms trade relations with Saudi Arabia had a double objective: on the one hand, Putin wanted to distance himself from the international community's idea that Putin was on the side of al-Assad and the Shiite population against Sunni Islam, given the strong cooperation with Iran during the 2015 intervention in Syria, which itself had interests in the country and which population is Shia Islam (Shabaneh 2015). On the other hand, the Russian leader intended to make Saudi Arabia increasingly distant from the US in order to indirectly weaken the US's position in the Middle East, becoming a security partner to the Arab Gulf States (Barnes-Dacey 2018, 69). Scrutinising these objectives, it is possible noting Putin's clear rational combination of geoeconomic and geopolitical ambitions, focusing on countries with economic and military advantages, as well as geopolitical.

Notwithstanding Putin's attempt to diversify the national income with arms and nuclear deals to diminish the country's overdependence on raw materials, the energy sector remains at the basis of Putin's economic strategy in the Middle East. As a result, it was not unexpected when Putin signed agreements with Qatar, with whom he entered into cooperation for natural gas supply, in 2007. Firstly, natural gas allowed Russia to diversify its economic agenda, and secondly, it allowed Moscow to intensify diplomatic engagement with Gas OPEC countries: Iran, Qatar, Libya, and Algeria (Grivach 2007; Weir 2008).

Although the conclusion of agreements with the Gas OPEC countries was not initially envisaged, during his presidency, Vladimir Putin found himself signing accords, inasmuch as it was essential to achieve objectives in Europe. In fact, even though Europe had become of secondary importance to Putin's policy in the second half of the 2010s[73], it remained a major economic partner, however politically influenced by the United States might have been. Thus, unable to eliminate the partnership, Putin decided to maintain bilateral relations with individual European countries (Morini 2020, 166-169).

Putin's ambitions in Europe may appear unrelated to his foreign policy in the Middle East, but they are, indeed, inextricably linked. Russia is the world's largest gas producer, as well as the world's largest oil producer and exporter outside of the OPEC region. It provides approximately 40% of the European continent's natural gas. The gas supply is inevitably critical for both Europe and Russia, insofar as natural gas represents a means of subsistence for European countries and a consistent part of the annual revenue for the Russian Federation. More significantly, Russia regulates not only the supply but also the delivery of natural gas to the West thanks to three corridors that originate in Norway, Russia, and Algeria (Friedman 2015, 109). In the initial period of Putin's third term, in 2012, Europe's willingness to diversify energy sources by developing a fourth corridor connecting the Caspian Sea and the Persian Gulf to Europe through Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey revealed a hindrance for Russian geoeconomic interests. Russia could not allow this to occur; otherwise, part of its annual GDP shares would have vanished; and Russia's international political status, which it

[73] The Ukraine Crisis is considered a turning point in Putin's foreign policy, as his strategy became increasingly aggressive towards the West. It is the point at which Putin began clearly to pursue geopolitical ambitions in the Middle East, and evidence is the degree of priority: in 2000, despite the desire to expand ties in the Middle East and Asia, Putin's main objective remained the West. (Garcia 2018) Following Western interference during the 2000s Colour Revolutions, American expansionist aims and forced regime change, NATO's expansion towards CIS countries, and the 2014 economic sanctions, the West has plummeted behind the Middle East, Eurasia, and Asia (Morini 2020). The *Russian Foreign Policy Concepts (*1993; 2000; 2008; 2013; 2016) provide additional confirmation (President of the Russian Federation 2000; 2008 2013; 2016a).

had gained during Putin's first two terms, would have diminished. The solution was to exploit Turkey, which attempted to become the "major energy transit state and possible future significant energy hub" from the Middle East to the European continent (Winrow 2013, 145).

Nonetheless, a problem arose. As domestic gas consumption grew in the early 2010s, Ankara struggled to hold the position of transit State and resell the gas to Europe at a profit. As a result, the country became increasingly interested in the fourth pipeline project, promoted by European countries (U.S Energy Information Administration 2017). Indeed, limiting over-dependence on Russia, diversifying the country's energy market, and attracting more foreign investments would have been advantageous. Turkey was, in effect, significantly reliant on Russian energy: it imported 50% of Russian gas, along with coal and oil. Putin's economic aspirations would have suffered the consequences of such a course; hence the Russian leader's efforts to persuade the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to abandon the Caspian Sea project in favour of forming a new partnership with Moscow. Turkey may have served as a bridge between Eastern suppliers and Western consumers (Rzayeva 2014, 11; 27; 57-63). In 2014, a project was presented to establish a new corridor from Russia to Turkey, labelled the "TurkStream" pipeline between the Russian company Gazprom and the Turkish Botas (Gazprom Neft 2014; President of the Russian Federation 2020). The agreement, subsequently, opened the door for a nuclear deal. In the same year, in fact, Putin negotiated an agreement with Erdoğan, in association with Rosatom, to develop Turkey's first nuclear plant at Akkuyu, a city overlooking the Mediterranean Sea. The project, financed by Rosatom, which holds 99.2% of the shares, is expected to be operational by 2026, making Turkey utterly reliant on Russian energy supplies, differently from the country's expectations (Sicurezza Internazionale 2021).

From a classical realist perspective, Putin's manoeuvres to achieve ambition in Europe are part of a broader strategy towards the Middle East by using economic pressure as a political tool to achieve Russian interests: an apparent return to the coercive tactics used during the Cold War. The economic pressure, in fact, seemed to have been utilised to persuade Ankara to agree with the project of the pipeline starting in Russia towards Southern Europe (Nygren 2014; Trenin 2016b, 2). In the third term in office (2012-2018), one of Putin's objectives linked to economic restoration was the aspiration in controlling the price of gas delivery to European and Far Eastern markets, maintaining it high. It was essential to influence gas delivery from Middle Eastern countries, specifically from the Gas OPEC cartel,

in order to achieve this objective. Hence the reason why Putin found himself pursuing economic agreements with countries that were not initially part of Russia's foreign economic agenda in the Middle East but which, at this point, were instrumental to achieve a broader spectrum of international influence through geoeconomic consolidation. Putin wanted, in particular, to ensure that Germany and China remained heavily reliant on Russian gas and that gas from Qatar and Iran was delivered exclusively to South Asian countries (SEA). In this way, Russia would have been able to limit the delivery of natural gas from the Middle East into Europe by redirecting it to increase its influence in European and the Far Eastern markets (Friedman 2015, 113). As noted above, controlling foreign markets can become an instrument to achieve relative gains and expand a State's influence.

The abundance of energy reserves, thereby, coupled with the strategic geographical position for the gas and oil delivery, the proximity to the two largest international markets for energy sources – Europe and Asia – , the presence in the area of Saudi Arabia and Qatar – Russia’s two main competitors in the oil and gas sectors – and, being the region the largest Russia’s competitor in the Asian market, makes Vladimir Putin's cost-benefit-based geoeconomic chess playing in the Middle East incredibly rational (Mammadov 2018).

The Nature of State: Covid-19 Pandemic crisis, oil prices, arms trade, and terrorism

As outlined in the Theoretical and analytical framework section, the State is the most significant unit within the international system, "[...] the ultimate point of reference of contemporary foreign policy" (Morgenthau 1978, 4-15). States are social structures established by intellectual entities capable of exercising power autonomously but needing the State, as a political entity, in order to project power at the international level.

The State, hence, is constituted by individuals, and consequently, characterised by human beings' inherent traits, reflected in the State's behaviour and interests. As a result of the shared similarities between units, there is an overlapping tendency between the two dimensions.

Being the State a collective reflection of the human lust for power, power-seeking then becomes the reading key even for the nature of state, along with internal dynamics, events, and personal attributes able to influence the State's capability to exert power beyond national geographical borders. Tangible instances, extensively discussed in the previous chapter and which stress, once again, the deep connection between the nature of man and the nature of state, are: the agency – power-exerting ability – , the type of society, geography[74], resources availability, the economic system, and the quality of leadership in recognising fundamental interests for the State's survival and power pursuit (Morgenthau 1948, 80-105): "No nation has the resources to promote all desirable objectives with equal vigor; all nations must therefore allocate their scarce resources as rationally as possible[75]" (Morgenthau 1952, 977).

Within this framework, the Covid-19 pandemic crisis's outset in March 2020, due to the wide reach and the provoked detrimental side effects, can be considered one of these internal dynamics capable of affecting the State's agency internationally.

[74] Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace,* 80-83.
[75] See also Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: the Struggle for Power and Peace*, 73-120.

3.1 Global oil market prices' drop and Covid-19

Until the early 2000s, the international oil market was dominated by a small circle of producers belonging to the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), the majority of which were Middle Eastern. Since OPEC is a cartel, it wields significant influence over the determination of oil prices. Yet, when at the beginning of the 2000s, new oil producers started to appear outside of the OPEC framework, the oil market began to fracture, and the cartel's dominance in the international market waned.

In accordance with Eugenio Dacrema (2020a; 2020b), the emergence of new extra-OPEC producers, such as Canada, Brazil, Russia, and Central Asian countries, was triggered by the rise in oil prices per barrel up to 2015, which led to the growth of previously considered too expensive oil fields and by technological advancement, which has resulted in lower production and transportation costs.

To be more specific, technological development permitted in the early 2000s the introduction by the United States of *shale technology*[76] for the extraction of hydrocarbons (specifically crude oil). According to Carole Nakhle, founder and CEO of Crystol Energy (2020), the new technique has transformed the oil marketplace by facilitating oil extraction and significantly increasing its production. The United States passed from being the major energy importer to one of the world's leading producers and net exporters of crude oil in a few years, even able to compete with OPEC nations (U.S. Energy Information Administration 2020). Shale technology and the emergence of the United States changed the market equilibrium both on the producers' and the consumers' side, with China becoming the major new consumer (in the 2010s) of both OPEC and extra-OPEC markets, surpassing Europe and making the oil market and prices extremely dependent on Asian economic and market fluctuations (Alterman 2020; Pellicciari 2020, 125-133).

Things started to change in 2015 when Saudi Arabia decided to increase its domestic oil production. By taking advantage of its capacity to manipulate the market prices by adjusting the country's output at will, the world's second-largest[77] crude oil country planned to

[76] Shale oil is a high-quality crude oil located between shale rock, impermeable mudstone, and siltstone strata. One difference to other wells is that oil companies drill in a vertical direction instead of creating a curve, which allows much deeper oil reserves. It was introduced by the United States, which heavily increased domestic production and turned the country into the world's largest oil producer (Amadeo 2020).

[77] In addition, according to the U.S Energy Information Administration's report (2021a), Saudi Arabia is "the world's second-largest oil reserves, at 259 billion barrels, representing 31% of proved reserves in the Middle East and 15% of global reserves" and the largest oil-consumer in the Middle East with 2.9 million b/d.

limit the rise in supply from extra-OPEC countries, especially the US, which was gradually gaining more and more market shares. By increasing production and, as a result, oil supply on the international market, a price pressure would have occurred, making shale production in the US less appealing and profitable, effectively pushing competitors out of the market. Unfortunately, the Saudi strategy did not have much success, as the American shale market remained relatively unaffected. The result was a stronger-than-expected price contraction in 2015-16, placing both OPEC and extra-OPEC countries in difficulty, as oil prices fell from over $115 in 2014 to below $30 per barrel in 2016 (Blair 2020).

The only option was to raise oil prices in order to boost supply accordingly. In 2016, OPEC +[78] – a new enlargement of the cartel – was launched, promoted by cooperation between the Russian Federation and Middle Eastern countries (Dacrema 2020a; Alterman 2020). As Carole Nakhle (2020, 3) states, the OPEC + "was the biggest kind of alliance or partnership in the history of the oil industry," being the alliance composed of both OPEC and extra-OPEC producers. The aim was to curb supply by around 1.2 mb/d (by January 2020, a reduction of 2.1 mb/b) in order to limit the international availability of crude oil and drive up prices and profits again for all Members (OPEC 2017). Thanks to this manoeuvre, the oil price was kept stable at $60-70 per barrel in the following years.

The cooperation between the Russian Federation and Middle Eastern countries, in this context, is not surprising. Indeed, as Nikolay Kozhanov (2020a, 2) claims, although Russia does not export crude oil to Middle Eastern countries, cooperation and investments between these countries is no less significant, given the Middle East's essentiality for Russia in order to maintain competitiveness within the global oil market and achieve national geopolitical interests[79].

Oil prices plummeted again in 2020 as a consequence of the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and the economic recession it caused to different countries within the international community, leading to new uncertainties and tensions. The sharp drop in prices, which hit peaks below $20 per barrel, was mainly triggered by two overlapping dynamics: the fall in oil demand and consumption due to government restrictions imposed to counter the pandemic

[78] OPEC + was created in 2016 and is a cooperation between OPEC countries and oil-producing countries outside the OPEC area (Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Brunei, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Mexico, Oman, Russia, Sudan, South Sudan) with the aim of decreasing oil production to raise prices that fell in 2014 due to oversupply. In 2020, due to the pandemic and the further drop in oil prices, former US President Trump attempted to convince OPEC + countries to continue to cut their production in order to stabilise the international market (Andriolo 2018; Bellomo 2020).

[79] Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace,* 84-86.

and the concomitant Russia-Saudi Arabia “Price War” (Dacrema 2020b).

The Covid-19 pandemic crisis forced governments across the broader international system to undertake containment measures to prevent the spread of the virus, adversely impacting the internal economy. Small and medium enterprises were those paying the highest cost, resulting in financial and economic deterioration and a decrease in the confidence of both consumers and suppliers, being uncertain about the seriousness of the economic situation and its possible recovery. There is a reorientation of national priorities, opposing the virus and focusing on citizens’ health. Expenditures are, therefore, concentrated on supporting and improving the health system and ensuring social needs, as well as avoiding protracted economic recession, increasing unemployment, and bankruptcy (International Monetary Fund 2020).

Within these severe circumstances, the oil market was one of the first markets to suffer the immediate repercussions of the pandemic. A 30% more decrease in consumer demand for commodities and crude oil has been registered (decrease in global oil demand of 8.7 mb/d in 2020 compared to 2019 – International Energy Agency 2021), leading oil producers to end up with excess supply (OECD 2020, 4). The excess of produced oil, in case of necessity, can be stocked, but the dedicated reserves that each State possesses are limited. Thus, when the maximum capacity is reached, a reduction in production is necessary.

This is closely tied to the Russia-Saudi Arabia “Price War”. When the Covid-19 crisis first surfaced in March 2020, the OPEC convened a meeting on the 5th of March 2020 in order to prolong the already existing agreement to reduce oil production signed in 2017, through an adjustment of 1.5 mb/d until the 30th of June 2020 to be applied to both OPEC (1.0 mb/d) and OPEC + countries (0.5 mb/d) (OPEC 2020c). Yet, the summit was not successful since the Russian Federation decided to not satisfy the OPEC request, withdrawing from the deal and prompting Saudi Arabia to launch an oil price war with Russia (OECD 2020).

The root of the "Price War" was Riyadh's invitation to Moscow to tighten supply even further “to compensate for declining global demand” (Alterman 2020, 2). However, Moscow refused to follow Riyadh's lead, seizing the opportunity by increasing production up to 300,000 bpd (El Gamal and Astakhova 2020) to finally push American shale producers out of the international market by exploiting the low prices. Indeed, as Eugenio Dacrema (2020a)

highlights, Russia was and is able to balance its current account even with relatively low oil sales prices thanks to reserves set aside in previous years.

Riyadh reacted adversely to the Russian decision and began to maximise its crude oil output, passing from around 9.7 million bpd to 12.3 million bpd (El Gamal and Astakhova 2020). On the one hand, the objective was to lower prices to the point where Russia would be in financial difficulty, forcing Moscow to negotiate new supply agreements with Saudi Arabia. On the other hand, it seeks to expand its market share to the detriment of extra-OPEC producers. Given that Vladimir Putin[80] signed new agreements with Riyadh[81] oil production cut on the 9th of April 2020 (Ghaddar et al. 2020) and that the Trump administration, which was also challenged by the fall in prices and the Covid-19 pandemic, requested new accords under the OPEC umbrella – occurred on the 12th of April with an on approximately 10 million b/d cut agreement[82] –, Saudi Arabian manoeuvre was unquestionably more fruitful than in 2015 (OPEC 2020d).

Confirmation of the easing of tensions and the end of the "Price War" between Russia and Saudi Arabia was the visit tour of the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs between the 8th and the 12th of March 2021 in the Persian Gulf – more specifically, in Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, and Qatar. The intention behind Lavrov visit to the Gulf was primarily related to strengthening political, commercial, diplomatic, and anti-terrorist bilateral relations by exploiting the need to oppose the pandemic (sale of the Sputnik V vaccine) while simultaneously promoting a joint security system of mutual deterrence in the Gulf (Ramani 2021). Of more importance was, however, Lavrov expressed the desire of preserving the OPEC + agreement to maintain stable oil prices.

Yet, the results of the oil production cut are still not completely visible and may be insufficient to resolve the damage inflicted by the pandemic on the international oil market

[80] On the 18th of July 2021, OPEC + countries agreed to start increasing oil production quotas and to extend the OPEC + agreement until the end of 2022. Russia's production baseline was raised from 11.0 million b/d to 11.5 million b/d beginning in May 2022, and Russia's production quota was boosted by 100,000 b/d per month starting in August 2021 (U.S Energy Information Administration 2021b).

[81] After the April 2020 OPEC/OPEC + agreement, Saudi Arabia reduced crude oil production by 3.1 million b/d. In January 2021, OPEC + decided to raise oil production by 150,000 b/d, even though Saudi Arabia decided to cut another 1.0 million b/d from February to April 2021. A subsequent gradual increase per month has been then registered, reaching in October 2021 9.8 million b/d, approximately the total oil production registered before the Covid-19 pandemic. In addition, thanks to the decline in crude oil production during 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic crisis has allowed the country to develop and increase natural gas production (U.S Energy Information Administration 2021a).

[82] See, OPEC, “The 10th (Extraordinary) OPEC and non-OPEC Ministerial Meeting concludes.”

(Dacrema 2020a; OPEC 2020b). Evidence, indeed, shows that recently, at the beginning of June 2021, a further drop in oil prices occurred (Kutlu 2021).

Oil prices' drop impact on Russian foreign policy in the Middle East

At this point of the research thesis, it is evident that the Russian Federation's economic system has always been its Achilles' heel. Despite various attempts by different Russian leaders to diversify the country's income resources, the economy has always been overdependent on energy exports. This is most likely the cause of the country's fragility, as it makes the Russian economy highly exposed to volatile energy prices (Putin 2017). Moreover, the 2014 American and European economic and financial sanctions have only worsened the already critical situation, making the Russian economy stagnate and forcing Russia to continuously ensure easy access to international markets, and, in particular, those markets that allow constant substantial investments in the country to guarantee adequate support for the national economy and the pursuit of foreign objectives (Ibid).

Such an economic framework underpins Russia's strong military and diplomatic presence in the Middle East but the near absence of the economic one. It also provides an explanation to the assumption regarding "opportunism" developed by several experts, including Chiara Lovotti and Maksim Sučkov (2020, 301-308), Dmitri Trenin, and Becca Wasser, which appears to be accurate. Indeed, as Becca Wasser (2019, 2) and Dmitri Trenin (2020a; 2020b) indicate, Russia, contrary to popular belief, is heavily reliant on investment opportunities offered by Middle Eastern countries – on the one hand, securing new markets and investments aimed at recovering the domestic economy, providing economic relief; on the other, sustaining Russia's diplomatic and military policies as well as geopolitical ambitions in the region (Alterman 2020; Nakhle 2020). It is not Russia that actually determines the policy agenda to pursue in the Middle East but regional powers themselves (especially Gulf countries), being the primary driver for Russian engagement in the region and having the ability to decide whether to constrain or boost Russia's interests and presence. Such a statement runs counter to the assumptions of classical realism in that Russia, being an independent major power, should dictate its foreign policy in the Middle East if it wants to pursue its lust for power and not the other way around.

Yet, this dependence could also be seen not as a limitation but as beneficial cooperation. Indeed, Russia exploits regional wealthiness to get the needed investments for the achievement of national interests while Middle Eastern countries exploit Russia's economic weakness to strengthen and expand their economic and political presence, in turn, becoming real regional powers. In all probability, this relationship is much riskier for Russia than for the Middle Eastern powers since if the investments of the latter decrease, the Russian presence in the area also decreases, inasmuch as the financial resources available must be implemented domestically and the remainder is sufficient, perhaps, to maintain the current Russian position in the Middle East, but not for its increase (Wasser 2019, 7).

These circumstances, in addition, provide a foundation to the short-term and low-cost commitment policy undertaken by the Russian leader, in contrast to Washington, which seeks long-term relations with regional countries. The main reason for the short-term strategy is that in order to be able to undertake, maintain, and expand policies beyond a State's national borders, financial support is necessary. Being dependent on external financing, if the domestic economy is in difficulty, the government will tend to use those foreign investments in domestic policies instead of foreign ones. Thus, if the available resources are used to satisfy domestic priorities, Russia is likely to reduce its influence internationally and in the Middle East. Due to the context created by the Covid-19 pandemic, such a scenario is highly probable on Russia's horizon.

This strategy undoubtedly brings Russia great flexibility of manoeuvre, but always in the immediate future (Wasser 2019, 8; Aris 2019).

Here it is thus possible to comprehend, once again, Russia's multilateral approach in the Middle East. Thanks to the multilateral nature of its agenda, the Russian Federation can establish diverse commercial and economic relationships with multiple Middle Eastern countries, obtaining, as a consequence, more investments. Yet, in order to attract more foreign funding, Russia should maintain its neutrality in order to cultivate good relations with as many partners as possible, regardless of their political stance. Hence the willingness of Vladimir Putin to become an active player in the Middle East and especially a mediator and security guarantor. Although Russia has so far succeeded very well in remaining neutral and not finding itself in the midst of disputes and conflicts, with the increasing capabilities and influence of Middle Eastern States becoming regional powers, the situation could change, and Russia could find itself at a crossroads, forced to choose one side or the other (examples are

Israel and Iran or Iran and Saudi Arabia). Such a situation could put Russia in difficulty and endanger its economic resources, as it would mean a decrease in investments and, consequently, a diminishment in funding its expansion in the Middle East (Wasser 2019, 9-10).

The just-exposed assumptions, stressing Russia's deep dependence on the powers of the Middle East, are instrumental in the understanding of the impact of falling oil prices and the Covid-19 pandemic on the country's foreign policy in the region.

As highlighted, most of Russia's Middle Eastern investments come from the Gulf monarchies. Although the fall in oil prices in recent years exacerbated by the Covid-19 crisis has not yet apparently significantly affected[83] Russia and the Gulf in the short term, the long-term situation remains uncertain. Indeed, if oil prices continue to remain below $30 per barrel in the long run and the pandemic crisis lingers, several consequences could become apparent. First of all, low prices could accentuate competition between different markets. By and large, consumers shift their attention to markets that provide a guarantee of supply but, at the same time, offer an affordable price. Therefore, such a situation could lead China and other Asian countries, the primary consumers of Russian and Middle Eastern (especially Saudi Arabia) oil, to switch to more profitable markets. Second, the continued decline or stagnation of oil prices may require further production cuts, which for numerous countries (including Russia) would be highly costly and unprofitable for the stability of oil companies. Finally, low oil prices are synonymous with a decrease in revenue from oil exports, and for countries like Russia and the Gulf monarchies, whose energy exports account for most of their annual GDP, this represents a consistent risk (Kozhanov 2020b).

Due to Russia's reliance on Gulf investments, if the side effects of Covid-19 will manifest at full scale and the drop in oil prices will continue and undoubtedly will have an adverse impact on the Gulf powers, the implications will also affect Russia itself and its capacity for external projection, maintenance of its position in the Middle East, and achievement of geopolitical goals. This is because, as mentioned, Russia would be forced to

[83] Covid-19 pandemic crisis coupled with the Price War did affect the national economy, energy profits, and government's budget revenues. Indeed, there has been a GDP contraction of 3.1% in 2020 (Statista 2021). However, thanks to large oil exchange reserves collected in the National Wealth Fund and budget, windfall taxation, supportive monetary policy, and a free-floating exchange rate, Russia possessed substantial resources to manage the crisis, remaining perfectly competitive even at lower price levels (The World Bank 2021c).

devote all of its remaining resources to domestic consolidation efforts, leaving nothing for foreign policy (Dacrema 2020b).

Furthermore, the detrimental implications will not affect just international players in the region but even regional actors. Through national oil fields, the Gulf monarchies have expanded their influence and strengthened their position in the Middle East over the years (Kozhanov 2020a, 7-8).

Besides, in doing so, the Gulf has entered into trade relations with regional countries, such as Egypt, which is currently over-dependent on oil from the Gulf as a source of income. As a result, instability within the Gulf countries could indirectly lead to instability in other Middle Eastern countries, producing new internal struggles, altering the Middle East's balance of power, and diminishing the regional country's budget to devote to investments and purchases in third countries (such as Russia). Consequently, Russia would confront increased instability and conflict, which would be more challenging to arbitrate due to the potential reduction in resources available to deploy on its Middle East agenda (Dacrema 2020a; Kozhanov 2020a, 2-8).

3.2 Russian arms trade and Covid-19

Since the end of the Cold War, the Russian Federation has been the world's second-largest arms exporter after the United States and is attempting to strengthen its position in new markets. Indeed, the defence industry is the primary source of domestic employment (over 3%), with Russia holding international leadership. As reported by Richard Connolly and Cecilie Sendstad (2017, 3), the "defence-industrial production is one of only a few technology-intensive economic sectors in which Russia can be considered a world leader, being the defence activity, as Vladimir Putin stated, an activity 'to serve as fuel to feed the engines of modernization in [Russia's] economy."

As hinted at in previous chapters, Russia's presence in the Middle East is not limited to a diplomatic, financial, and commercial presence strongly related to the energy sector but includes military equipment as well: *arms diplomacy* (Lovotti 2018, 3-4). This has been evident since Soviet times when the Soviet Union signed numerous arms deals with its Middle Eastern partners, including Egypt, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. With the advent of the

USSR's dissolution and the coming into power of Vladimir Putin in 2000, the Russian military presence in the Middle East underwent a considerable change in quality; a change prompted by the Russian leader's geoeconomic and security ambitions, as well as a shift in regional dynamics within the Middle Eastern area.

Since 2003, when the United States launched an attack on Iraq, the demand for military equipment from Middle Eastern countries has risen. The Iraq War, as Valeria Talbot and Federico Borsari (2020, 2-3) contend, created a geopolitical vacuum that allowed Teheran's expansionist ambitions to flourish. This unexpected rise by Iran – especially in light of its future nuclear potential – sparked a profound sense of regional insecurity, exacerbated by the Arab Spring in 2010. As a result, it is natural to believe that countries would have attempted to balance Tehran's influence in accordance with the balance of power principle. Internal balancing was implemented when Middle Eastern countries began to noticeably boost their weapons spending, allowing them to maintain regional power balance while also increasing their leverage in the region at the expense of their competitors. The region's fragmentation, poor governance, and geopolitical competition have led to increasingly frequent and deep unrest, manifested by growing rivalry, heightened geopolitical ambitions, and sometimes unilateral foreign policies.

This applies not just – but particularly – to Gulf monarchies (Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates) and their desire of becoming regional powers. Indeed, such competition is a trend that has characterised the Middle East in general; competition, which in military terms translates into strengthening and development of air – especially Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAV) – and naval military sectors (Talbot and Borsari 2020, 9; Borsari 2021, 3-4).

The Russian Federation significantly increased the volume of arms flow to the Middle East in the second half of the 2010s, consequently the Arab Spring and the economic and financial sanctions imposed by the US and EU in 2014, finding in the Middle East, as in the case of other energy agreements, new fertile ground to increase capital and regain the great-power status, expanding Russia's influence in the region and internationally (Borshchevskaya 2017, 2-5). The Middle East became Russia's second-largest arms market, only secondary to Asia (China, India, and Vietnam are the primary sources of demand for Russian weaponry in the Asian region), with exports almost tripling in 2016, from $9 billion in 2009 to $21.4 billion in 2016 (Connolly and Sendstad 2017, 6).

The expansion of Russia's arms exports was influenced not only by internal Middle Eastern dynamics but also by the financial and contractual convenience in purchasing Russian weaponry. In addition to the traditional guns and armoured vehicles, Middle Eastern countries are consistently buying Russian air defence equipment such as helicopters, supersonic combat aircraft, and anti-aircraft missiles (S-300/400/500 system) (Barmin 2017).

From a structural perspective, Russian military equipment is robust and of good quality, often equal to American weaponry, or sometimes even more effective and advanced in terms of defence technology – an example is the anti-aircraft defence system. Russian weapons are less expensive compared to Western ones, which is a definite advantage and an incentive for those States that would like to diversify their arms procurement. Another benefit of purchasing Russian weapons is that, unlike the United States and European countries, Russia does not impose restrictions – such as the prohibition of secondary sales or preconditions – such as improving respect for human rights – for their usage. Therefore, thanks to the pragmatic strategy implemented by Vladimir Putin, Russia enjoys a larger spectrum of buyers, as it makes no distinction between the different countries interested in buying Russian weapons and their political, social, diplomatic, and economic positions (Borshchevskaya 2017, 3-4). Even in this context, the Russian Federation provides an alternative to the United States.

For the above-listed reasons, Russian arms exports to the Middle East experienced growth, despite the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic crisis and the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) signed by former US President Trump in 2017. This Act is a direct consequence of the crisis in Ukraine and the 2014 incorporation of Crimea, and it allows the United States to impose secondary sanctions on all those countries that trade intelligence and defence equipment with the Russian Federation. The CAATSA continues to be applied to this day – an instance is the sanctions imposed in 2019 against Turkey for the purchase of Russian S-400 surface-to-air missiles – and it has the ability to constrain the Kremlin’s capability of signing contracts beyond national borders, limiting Russia’s opportunities to export arms and expand its share in the global market. Nonetheless, the impact of US secondary sanctions, although present, seems to a certain extent limited, as several countries, for instance, Egypt[84], continue to contract and purchase Russian arms

[84] During the Covid-19 pandemic, Egypt purchased several Russian Sukhoi Su-35 advanced combat aircraft, as well as signed a deal to purchase 30 French-made F3-R Rafale fighter jets. Egypt is moving further and further away from America, which is to the advantage of Russia in that the increase in arms purchases

despite warnings of possible sanctions from the US. In this game, indeed, the American attitude is not without dangers, as hampering the Russian partners excessively by imposing secondary sanctions could lead to the opposite effect, creating opposition and bringing these partners even closer to Moscow, shifting their market demand and counterbalancing the excessive American power and pressure against Russia.

Notwithstanding not being the Middle East Russia's primary arms market, as explained by Dmitri Trenin (2020a), the Middle East is crucial in terms of shares since it can be considered as a theatre in which to show Russia's defence capabilities to the biggest and most key buyers – Middle Eastern and non. Dmitri Trenin (2020a, 5) says:

> "The Middle East stands for the arms. Even if most important Russian clients, in terms of arms and military equipment, are not found in the Middle East, rather, but they're watching. They're watching, Russia is. So it's an exhibition, if you like, for the Russian arms industry. An exhibition that is moving, that is fighting, that is firing shots and firing missiles, so it's something that you can exploit pretty effectively."

The idea is shared by other experts, including Olga Oliker (2020), Director of Europe and Eurasia Program at the International Crisis Group, Nikolay Kozhanov (2020a, 2-3), Celeste Wallander (2020, 7-8), and Alan Miller[85], Strategic Capabilities Specialist at HQ US Army Europe-Africa. The Russian Federation uses high-tech and advanced military equipment (e.g., during the Russian intervention in Syria) as an advertising campaign in order to convince Middle Eastern countries and other potential customers to purchase Russian arms, increasing its leverage through large contracts and economic investments. In addition, arms diplomacy, as stressed by Chiara Lovotti (2018, 4), is a solid way to build geostrategic relations with regional partners and expand footprint: "strategic depth perhaps greater than that which would seem to lie behind the peace dialogues.[86]"

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allows Russia to extend its influence in North Africa, functional to the fight against terrorism (Lovotti 2018, 5). For further information, see Al-Monitor, "Egypt moves ahead with purchase of Russian arms despite US warnings" and Bowman and Thompson and Brobst, "Egypt's transition away from American weapons is a national security issue."

[85] Interview with Alan Miller, Strategic Capabilities Specialist at HQ US Army Europe-Africa", via email, 6 September 2021.

[86] Further support to the statement is the establishment of *Rosoboronexport arms exporters,* the aggregation of state and private companies operating in the defence sector in the 2000s, becoming the most important Russian national export giant. As Chiara Lovotti (2018, 4) argues, "the defence industry in the service of foreign policy."

A valuable way to achieve these objectives is via support. In fact, by supporting the establishment of ties with regional countries, those countries could even subsequently buy Russian military equipment and sign new contracts, essential for the Russian defence industry, creating favourable strategic and political circumstances (Borshchevskaya 2017). As argued by Alan Miller[87], moreover, putting Syria and other Middle Eastern countries on a show can have another advantage than solely attracting new customers from the broad international market and expanding national influence. In fact, there is clear evidence of a combination of distraction and counterbalance highly useful to draw attention away from other pressing issues, for example, in Ukraine, the Baltics, or the Arctic.

These statements could also be refuted by providing data on global arms exports and imports.

The SIPRI (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute) released a report (2019, 1-4) prior to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic crisis, identifying the five largest arms exporters in the period 2014-18 – the United States, Russia, France, Germany, and China – as well as the five largest arms importers – Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Australia, India and Algeria. The exporters and importers in the following years will not change significantly, as only Algeria will abandon its position as an importer, and China will enter its place, both exporting and importing weapons. SIPRI, moreover, registered an increase in arms exports to the Middle East by 87% at the same time period. While American global arms exports rose from 30% in 2009-13 to 36% in 2014-18, Russian's experienced a decrease by around a fifth, from 27% to 21%, widening the gap between the world's two largest arms exporters[88]. Pivotal to note is that in the period 2014-18, 55% of Russian weapons went to India, China, and Algeria and only 16% to the Middle East.

In 2020, the same Institute reported an overall increase in exports to the Middle East of 61% (period 2010-14 and 2015–19). There was no change in the global export of both the American (36%) and Russian (21%) arms sales during the period 2010-14 and 2015-19; however, it is possible to observe a rise in Russian arms share in the Middle East, passing from 16% to 19% (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute 2020, 1-4).

In the period 2011-15 and 2016-20, there has been a further rise in arms flows towards the Middle East, accounting for 25%. Additionally, an increase of 1% in American exports

[87] Interview with Alan Miller, Strategic Capabilities Specialist at HQ US Army Europe-Africa", via email, 6 September 2021.

[88] See also *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute 2020; 2021.*

has been registered (37% total - thereof 47% to the Middle East, out of which 24% to Saudi Arabia), remaining the world's leading arms exporter and a further decrease of the same amount in Russian exports, 22%. Russia's Middle East arms flow continues to gradually grow, from 19% to 21%, against a 53% diminishment in exports to India (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute 2021a; 2021b, 1-4).

From this overview of data, it is possible to understand that the Covid-19 crisis has not apparently affected the American defence industry nor the Middle East capability of importing since the region experienced a steady and substantial rise in weaponry imports due to the growing competitive pressures between Gulf countries, seeking to enhance their influence in the region – more specifically, Saudi Arabia (+ 61%), Qatar (+ 361%), and even Egypt (+ 136%) –, to the risk of the outbreak of several conflicts and disorders (such as in Syria and Libya), as well as numerous confrontations between State and non-state actors (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute 2021b, 6; Khlebnikov 2019).

Yet, the data also shows that although Russia has slightly increased the flow of arms to the Middle East over the last years (16% - 19% - 21%), the overall trend is downward as this increase is not sufficient to compensate for the drastic diminishment in imports from India (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute 2021a; 2021b, 1-4), a result of the government's decision to restrict imports, in an attempt to stimulate domestic production to become independent from Russian weaponry (Khlebnikov 2019).

The constant increase in Russian arms sales does not, in addition, translate automatically in no Covid-19 side effects on the national defence industry as a whole.

As discussed in the section on the oil price collapse, indeed, Covid-19 caused an economic recession, which partly influenced the Russian defence industry: firstly, financially – linked to State budget deficit – and secondly, monetarily since the country experienced a devaluation of the national currency. Economic difficulties and the rouble devaluation have created delays in arms deliveries, both to the Russian Armed Forces and abroad, making it difficult to comply with signed contracts. Russia has, therefore, had to follow a prioritisation strategy during the pandemic crisis and continues in this direction today while partly neglecting one of the Putin administration's fundamental pillars: national security (Luzin 2020). Due to the Covid-19, Russia does not have an abundance of resources to spend on the defence industry, insofar as it must provide the necessary health care for the population, as well as welfare policies, reviving the economy following the imposed mobilisation and

employment restrictions, and solve workers' shutdown. Furthermore, the fall in oil prices is leading to a decrease in the primary source of national income (Strokan 2020). Since military equipment is in itself a profitable market that brings substantial investment to the country, although not comparable to energy sources, and a tactical foreign policy instrument to achieve an independent foreign policy and geopolitical objectives, Russia was forced to choose between producing weapons for the national Armed Forces for the protection of the country, or dedicate the production to meet the agreements made with foreign buyers. Russia chose the second option: focus mainly on fulfilling foreign arms deals and, perhaps, enter into new contracts so as to ensure a continuous revenue stream while simultaneously not losing present or potential customers. The choice, consequently, entails a reduction in the supply of military equipment to the Russian Armed Forces for the protection of national borders, increasing the feeling of insecurity. It should also be added that the rouble devaluation not only causes delays in deliveries but also a reduction in perceived revenue, as the products fall in price. Although the price drop may discourage arms production, it could actually be one of the factors in the increase of arms sales in the Middle East because the lower the price, the more consumers tend to purchase (Talbot and Borsari 2020, 1-12).

Yet, the situation could also be seen from a second angle. The choice to focus mainly on external consumers does not necessarily result in an increased feeling of insecurity. At the outset of the research thesis, indeed, it was emphasised the key role of geography on the Russian agenda for maintaining security, given the lack of natural barriers surrounding the country. The more territory the Russian Federation acquires, the more security it gains. Forasmuch as the arms trade is also a tool for expanding influence in diverse geographical areas, including the Middle East, it can be viewed as an acquisition of new markets and control over territory and, as a consequence, over potential threats to the country.

According to Pavel Luzin (2020), the protraction of the Covid-19 pandemic crisis and its economic consequences could, in the long run, make the Russian defence industry more vulnerable financially and isolate it from the global market; which would have a detrimental repercussion on Vladimir Putin's geoeconomic and geopolitical ambitions. Yet, as a consistent body of research (including Emanuel Pietrobon, Côme Carpentier de Gourdon, and Ksenia Tabarinzeva-Romanova 2021) claim, to understand the extent of the impact of the pandemic, it is necessary to wait for the long term because the side effects are not yet utterly visible.

Drone's threat

Russia's agency in the Middle East arms market in the long run, in conjunction with the Covid-19 negative effects on domestic production of military equipment, may be further limited by the country's marginalisation in the regional Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) market.

Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), commonly known as drones, have seen a steady increase in their usage throughout the world in recent years, especially in the framework of low-intensity conflicts in the Middle East region, having regard to the willingness of regional countries to increase their military air capacity.

Yet, the introduction of the UAV system is not recent; indeed, it dates back to the early 2000s when the United States first deployed the *MQ-1 Predator UAV* in Afghanistan. Since then, there has been a crescendo in terms of investments in research and development of increasingly advanced and sophisticated UAV technology (TechSci Research 2020). The acquisition of functional images for military forces for reconnaissance and obtaining ultra-useful and reliable information during a conflict on the target – be it external or internal threats or transnational terrorist groups, as well as medium-long range attack capabilities – determine the enhancement and development of UAVs (Borsari 2021, 2-4). Drones, thereby, quickly became an essential element of Middle Eastern military equipment as various conflicts unfolded over the years: evidence of the increase in arms imports from Middle Eastern countries, as shown by the data recorded by SIRPI, and the UAV platforms' account for 82% of the Middle East regional market in 2019 (TechSci Research 2020, 5).

At the present day, 13 Middle Eastern countries use frontline drones in conflicts or intend to sign military contracts to acquire them, four of which – Turkey, Iran, Israel, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) – export domestically produced UAVs to other foreign countries (Borsari 2021, 4).

Turkey, with its technological advancement experienced in the last decade, the implementation of its domestic industry, and the reduction of import of military equipment from abroad from 70% to 30%, could become a central player in the global drone market in the near future (Talbot and Borsari 2020, 5). In fact, several countries are currently purchasing Turkish drones already, including Qatar, Tunisia, the national government in Tripoli, and Azerbaijan, which is the latest Turkish customer to be acquired, signing an agreement shortly

before the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan (Marson and Forresr 2021). Turkish domestic production, which is in the process of adding new advanced systems – the *Akinci* and the *Aksungur* – to its drone arsenal (Turkish Aerospace 2021), is primarily the result of Ankara's desire to become self-autonomous in the supply of weapons, as well as in its production. Furthermore, such ambition is compounded by constant American threats of imposition of secondary sanctions for military equipment purchase, as well as the refusal of the US Congress to supply drones to Turkey; something that, in the end, revealed beneficial, as Ankara, day after day, is becoming a major arms exporter in the broader international market (Tabrizi and Bronk 2018, 32-38).

After using Chinese-made drones such as the *Wing Loong* and *Cai-Hong (CH) 4B*, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) are also starting to develop self-produced drones, investing in hyper-technological defence system research so as to strengthen the national defence industry.

Iran has made impressive progress in the field of UAV systems in a short period of time as well, making drones a cost-effective solution for the country to improve the reconnaissance capabilities of its Armed Forces. In addition, the speed of improvement becomes a publicity campaign for Iranian capabilities to enhance the country's reputation and regional position (Borsari 2021, 4).

It is also significant to mention Israel as it is one of the primary players in the global drone market after the United States. Despite its expertise in UAV systems and its role as an exporter, Israel does not sell drones to Middle Eastern powers but to European, Asian, and Latin American countries (Ibid, 8-9).

As can be seen, the increasingly popular drone market in the Middle East is not guaranteed by the Russian Federation. The main supplier remains the US, but due to the cost and restrictions imposed on UAVs' use – especially on the Gulf monarchies – as in the case of other military equipment, the balance of power in the Middle Eastern UAV market is shifting, increasingly dominated by China and local Middle Eastern manufacturers, especially Iran and Turkey.

Federico Borsari (2021, 10) confirms the assumption by arguing that:

> "China is in the regional UAV market to stay and will likely remain one of the main exporters of combat drones in the Middle East in the future, thanks to lower prices and a no-questions-asked policy. Turkey, and possibly the UAE, will follow suit."

This does not mean that the Russian Federation does not produce UAV systems or possess the required capabilities. In fact, after the 2014 American and European sanctions, the Russian government began investing heavily in high-tech military equipment. Only that its drones – the *Orlan 10-E* (Hambling 2021), its updated version *Orlan-30*, which is the latest invented, and the UCAV *Orion-ES-70* and *Okhotnik-B (Hunter)* combat drone that will be completed by 2024 – are mainly domestically employed for the protection of those geographical areas dominated by the Russian Federation such as Eurasia[89], and also Syria[90] where the Kremlin is trying to establish a permanent settlement (AirforceTechnology 2020; 2021). The Russian Federation, therefore, has less of a market in the Middle East for UAV technology.

Additionally, the *Missile Technology Control Regime* (MTCR) restricts Russia's (and the United States') manoeuvrability in the sale of unmanned aerial vehicles. The MTCR is an informal multilateral export-control regime signed in 1987 by 35 countries with the goal of restricting missile technology proliferation. Although it is not legally binding, it establishes export norms and standards, frequently adhered to by individual governments due to peer pressure. China and the main Middle Eastern drone exporters, with the exception of Turkey, are not part of the missile control regime. Hence, they enjoy more freedom and less competition (Missile Technology Control Regime 2020; Tabrizi and Bronk 2018, 2-7). The presence of little competition in a market may, in the long run, extend the market shares that a State possesses at the expense of other exporters. Indeed, when a State enters the Middle East market for the export of drones, it can over time sign contracts for other types of military equipment, and thanks to the higher quality, lower cost, and fewer restrictions, completely drive out the market of actors. Such a scenario, coupled with partial Russia's defence-agency constraint by the Covid-19 pandemic, could, therefore, be dangerous for Russia, which sees China and Turkey as its main rivals for arms exports to the Middle East for the near future.

[89] The UAV market opened to Russia in January 2021 with the agreement signed with Myanmar for the supply of Orlan-10E Surveillance Drones (Singh Bisht 2021). In November 2021, an additional possibility opened. Indeed, the Russian New Agency reports that some Persian Gulf, African, and South Asian countries have expressed interest in a UAV production partnership developed by the Russian company Kronshtadt. More precisely, the drone in question would be the Orion-E, and as stated by Kronshtadt CEO Sergey Bogatikov during the Dubai Airshow 2021 (14-18 November 2021) (Russian News Agency 2021).

[90] To notice the latest March 2021 visit tour of the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs in the Persian Gulf, which consultations expansion on Syria proves significantly beneficial for the achievement of Russia's interests (Ramani 2021). In the short term, Moscow could attempt a more active and consistent engagement of the Gulf Arab countries in the peace process promoted by Russia in Syria since its first intervention in 2015. In the long term, Russia hopes that the involvement of the Gulf monarchies would encourage additional external investments dedicated to the Syrian reconstruction (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2021b).

3.3 The strengthening of international terrorism and Covid-19

The Covid-19 pandemic occurred in a moment of broader geopolitical competition and technological transformation, accelerated by the need to find quick and practical solutions to eradicate the pandemic, and which was exploited by criminal, extremist, and terrorist groups – whether right-wing extremist or Salafi-Jihadi – to reinforce and deepen their roots.

As reported by the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR 2021) and the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Committee's (CTED) 2021 report, several factors induced the fierce re-emergence and strengthening of terrorism in the broader international area.

Governments' responses to counter the Covid-19 fuelled in several countries pre-existing instabilities and social grievances with particular relevance on migration. Migration is the primary recruitment source for terrorist and extremist groups, a resource that travel bans have limited due to the inability of a conspicuous number of migrants to return to their country of origin or vice versa. It represented a hindrance to the spread of terrorism, yet violent non-state actors have exploited the vulnerability created by the pandemic crisis through the malicious use of technology and social media (UNICRI 2020, 1-4; UN-CTED 2020, 2). Indeed, travel measures and the introduction of smart working and online education have incentivised an online recruitment strategy. During the Covid-19 crisis, global internet usage has risen from 50% to 70%, primarily by workers and distance learning students spending most of their time on social media, gaming platforms, and forums. In accordance with UN- CTED (2020), 400 million of these students currently live in a conflict zone, thus becoming the primary targets, given their vulnerable and manipulable nature (UN-CTED 2020, 1). As a result, terrorist propaganda soars – Salafi-Jihadi groups have significantly increased their propaganda operations, using private channels such as *Al-Naba* in the Middle East, but also in Asia and Africa (Coleman 2020; International Crisis Group 2020) – along with dissemination of fake news and conspiracy theories on the origin of Covid-19,– instances are warnings against vaccination by Al-Shabaab, declaring that the virus is spread by "the crusader forces who have invaded the country and the disbelieving countries that support them" (BBC 2020) and the Global jihadist (al-Qaeda, IS) and their definition of the pandemic as the "wrath of God [and] divine retribution [against] infidels": the West (UNICRI 2020, 9) –

using the crisis to undermine the citizens' confidence towards local governments, jeopardising the governments' response efficacy and credibility, and reinforcing extremist narratives. There is a "disinformation-terrorism nexus" (Cruickshank and Rassler 2020, 4).

Travel and, by and large, movement restrictions and lockdown measures exacerbate in countries already affected by terrorism and violent extremist actions, inequalities, and gender-based violence. The emergence of humanitarian lacks and respect of fundamental rights fosters national protests and disorders among the population, facilitating the rise of feelings of hatred and discontent: sentiments exploited by terrorist and extremist groups to encourage citizens to join organisations, reinforcing the control over the territory. Furthermore, while governments focused on welfare policies to combat the virus, national and local support for counterterrorism operations, monitoring, security patrolling, and training, as well as capacities in stabilising domestic instabilities, has diminished. Consequently, governments have a reduced capacity of opposing violent non-state actors, providing more freedom of action, proliferation, and expansion, a circumstance which is aggravated in those States with an already weakened central authority, as in the Middle East. Indeed, in weak States, including Syria, Yemen, and (Afghanistan), Salafi-Jihadi extremist groups have tried to increase their power by filling the governance void by providing services, needed medical products, and informing the population about the Covid-19 and its seriousness: terrorist groups are gaining political legitimacy, posing security concerns for the long-run (UN-CTED 2020, 2; UNICRI 2020).

Noteworthy is the distinction of the pandemic impact on conflict and non-conflict States, as reported by the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Committee (2021). The number of terror attacks in non-conflict zones has diminished during the pandemic, even though violent groups such as IS and al-Qaeda are continuing to exploit the situation of emergency to plan and advance their agenda, increase their presence online, and expand the number of their affiliates. On the contrary, an upsurge in acts of terror in conflict States has been registered due to the lack of substantial governmental control on the territory. In line with a report published by al-Qaeda-aligned Thabat Media Agency (2020) (UNICRI 2020, 6-7), IS-related terrorist operations in Syria and Iraq have dramatically risen by 69% in April 2020 compared to the beginning of the Covid-19 crisis (Lister 2020). Yet, because the effects of the Coronavirus pandemic are not fully visible, according to Tova C. Norlen (2020, 16), the

benefits or the challenges posed to terrorist and extremist groups will be especially visible in the long run, depending on the groups' ability to take advantage of the economic recession, socio-humanitarian difficulties, employment uncertainty, as well as the precarious medical assistance, unequal access to vaccines, governance challenges, and social marginalisation.

It is crucial to note that the spread of Covid-19 is not the only driver for the strengthening of terrorism; in fact, the absence of Western countries in the last year has contributed as well, especially in the Middle East. In the Middle East, specifically related to the Islamic State, the terrorist attacks and the IS expansion has been, since the Arab Spring, maintained under control by US-led international cooperation. However, after the 2020 killing of the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Quds Force (IRGC-QF) Commander Qasem Soleimani and the emergence of new tensions between the US and Iran, the American administration reduced its presence in Iraq and its support to the Iraqi counter-IS operations. (Basit 2020, 267) Several European countries – France, Spain, and the United Kingdom – due to Covid-19, followed the line of the United States, announcing the withdrawal of troops. The result was an increase in the inability of local central authorities to contain the insurgency of IS, al-Qaeda and their jihadist affiliates present in other Middle Eastern countries, escalating the risk of terrorist attacks, along with the reassertion of terrorism globally (International Crisis Group 2020).

Russia and the Islamic State

The aforementioned circumstances, combined with the above-mentioned pandemic implications on the national defence industry and – albeit limited – on the economy, should have constrained Russia's ability to operate and conduct counter-terrorism operations beyond its national borders, at least in part. Russia, however, does not appear to have been particularly affected, or at least not to the extent of being unable to act. Yet, as acknowledged in this chapter, worth noting is that the commitment will be contingent on the non-yet-visible long-term Covid-19 pandemic effects.

Confirmation of such an assumption is the Russian Federation's decision to increase its military presence in Syria in December 2020. To be specific, the Russian military expanded its presence in North-eastern Syria, at the border with Turkey and Iraq, being the territory a

focal point since the rise of IS and currently a semi-autonomous region governed by the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).

The Russian advance has not stopped in the northeast of Syria but continued in Syria's Eastern Mediterranean border with the improvement of two Russian military bases. In May 2021, Russia began to increase the capacity of its naval base in the Syrian port of Tartus, with plans to create a floating dock to be completed by 2022. The military base was acquired by Russia in 2019 during the campaign to support al-Assad, who ceded the use of the Syrian port to the Russian Federation for 49 years without commission, giving Russia full jurisdiction: it is Russia's first permanent naval base outside the former Soviet geographical area. In addition, there is also a capacity expansion of the Hhmeimim airbase in Latakia – a strategic stronghold, functional to the support to Syrian central government in maintaining the status quo and consolidating the control over critical Syrian territory, Russia's pursuit of geopolitical ambitions in the Middle East, and the fight against the dramatically increased terrorism, especially in the dominated terrorist groups Idlib Province (Borshchevskaya 2021b).

Indeed, despite the ceasefire agreement reached on the 5th of March 2020 between Russia and Turkey, ongoing ceasefire violations continue, with attacks mainly targeting the Islamic State (Paverini 2021).

As reported by Jamie Dettmer (2021) during a Moscow news briefing on the 12th of May 2021, a Russian military spokesman stated that:

> "Units of Syria's pro-government troops, with the support of the Aerospace Forces of Russia, continue their search and reconnaissance missions in the Syrian desert. Since April 23, a total of 228 members of terrorist groups have been killed and 44 captured, 20 vehicles have been seized and six destroyed, 38 facilities and 45 hideouts have been demolished."

Subsequently, in early June 2021, several bombings by Russian-backed al-Assad forces have been registered in southern Idlib, and in mid-June, 40 air raids were conducted by Moscow against IS positions in the Syrian desert (Paverini 2021).

It is, therefore, evident Russia's limited-affected agency and the government's unwillingness to abandon the counter-terrorist campaign in the Middle East even during the Covid-19 pandemic crisis. Further evidence is the recent understanding reached between Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu in

Antalya on the 30th of June 2021. The two Foreign Ministers have discussed matters related to the *Russian-Turkish Supplementary Protocol to the Memorandum on the Establishment of a Demilitarized Zone in the Idlib Province* (17th of September 2018), signed on the 5th of March 2020, as well as related to the willingness to completely eradicate terrorism in the Syrian territory (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2021c). Moreover, on the 8th of July 2021, Russia and Turkey, together with Iran, have reinforced their commitment and cooperation in Syria for the defeat of the Islamic State and other forces (Reuters 2021a).

Notwithstanding the general accordance on international terrorism's surge due to the Covid-19 outbreak, the terrorist situation is under control, following the statement of Foreign Affairs Minister Sergey Lavrov during a joint news conference in Moscow on the 2nd of July 2021. The Minister argued that, in reality, although there has been an increase in IS activity, this increase is not excessively consistent in Iraq and Syria. Russia will anyway continue to support the legitimate government to eliminate the "remaining hotbeds of terrorism from their territory" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2021d).

It should be remembered, in fact, that, as Lavrov says, in Syria, the threat comes not only from IS but also from Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham. During the press conference, Sergey Lavrov also emphasised the importance of keeping a closer eye on Afghanistan because, due to the withdrawal of NATO troops from the country, IS is beginning to concentrate its forces there, particularly in the north and east part of the country. Russia is moving in this direction as well through bilateral channels and communications within the Collective Security Treaty Organization – CSTO (Организация Договора о Коллективной Безопасности) in order to protect its adjoining Central Asian allies from the growing terrorist threat (Ibid).

The International System: China and the United States

As stressed throughout the thesis, classical realism envisions the international system as an order governed by a perennial absence of a Leviathan capable of limiting the lust for power of human beings and States. Anarchy is, as a result, a facilitator of the struggle for dominance, a permissive factor, which incites States to struggle for relative power. States in an anarchic environment have the tendency to imitate each other, as they have the common goal of selfishness and animus dominandi. The consequence of such imitative behaviour is the balance of power. Indeed, as stressed by Spykman (1942, 21-22), States, in reality, do not want to achieve a balance of power; on the contrary, they want to remain imbalanced in order to gain a margin of safety and more freedom of action to pursue relative gains. The balance of power hence is an indirect consequence of imitation.

In order to understand the motivations underlying the balance of power, classical realism focuses on both the behaviour of States – discussed in the previous chapters – and the distribution of power within the international system[91]. The analysis of the international system, thereby, focuses on the "dynamics of power relations over time" (Kirshner 2012, 54), the changes in relative power within the international environment and their impact on the State's behaviour and its interactions: the key variable is the power distribution within the international system. As Morgenthau (1951, 135) contends, in fact, "States with political sense will avail themselves of the opportunity to improve their position in response to changes in the international balance of power. '[...] No nation can be so good as to not take advantage of a power vacuum'."

Therefore, the purpose of the hereby chapter is to analyse how the emergence of new rising powers, in an international system currently still dominated by the United States but whose slow waning dominance has opened new rooms for power-seeking and thus to a new distribution of power, could affect Russia's power pursuit in the Middle East.

More specifically, the rising power in question, which can be considered a potential threat and source of instability and political friction due to its expanding proportionate-to-interests capabilities, is the People's Republic of China.

Yet, of no less importance is the United States and the new Biden administration, which has expressed renewed partial interest in the Middle East for dominance maintenance.

[91] Morgenthau, *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics*, 93.

4.1 China and the Middle East

Sino-Middle Eastern relationship stretches back to the 1950s, following the 1949 Chinese communist revolution. In the beginning, the relationship between the People's Republic of China and Middle Eastern countries was permeated by indifference, followed by hostility in concomitance with the outbreak of the 1960s-70s Chinese cultural revolution and the drafting of a foreign policy reflecting China's domestic political pressures.

In the 1970s, however, Chinese leaders began to reassess the country's priorities, shifting from a revolutionary to a more pragmatic foreign policy. Indeed, policies aimed at ensuring a constant and stable inflow of natural resources and financial assistance were required to support China's modernisation process and the commencement of its globalisation-spurred economic expansion. Being the Middle East a rich mine of gas and crude oil, it was ideal for establishing economically beneficial connections to advance China's national interests (Elnaggar, 2020).

The wealthy Persian Gulf monarchies and their predominant role in the international energy markets were, consequently, a focal point for the Chinese government in the 1990s (Lons et al. 2019). A period dominated by an increasing number of bilateral economic and trade agreements facilitated by the end of the Cold War and the era of bipolarity in world affairs. The US-led order and the American predominance in the Persian Gulf soil, in fact, enabled external powers to benefit from opportunities of relations strengthening without security commitment. Opportunities that were considered advantageous even by Middle Eastern countries to diversify their international ties (Zhu 2011). In accordance with Jonathan Fulton (2020, 259), the pre-Belt and Road period was a period rooted in increasing interdependence and political and economic collaboration.

2013 marked a watershed in Sino-Middle Eastern relations. A new President, Xi Jinping, was elected in a framework characterised by the American troops' withdrawal from the Middle East under the Obama administration (2009-2017). The presidential elections prompted a policy shift from China's regional power to a global power ambition, in concomitance with the formulation of a foreign policy agenda focused on exploiting the American power vacuum left in the Middle East to expand China's soft power beyond national borders. The "One Belt, One Road" strategy (BRI), a hallmark of the Xi Jinping administration, aiming at positioning the Republic of China at the centre of international trade

networks, was and continues to be at the heart of the country's foreign policy (Lons et al. 2019). The BRI is an economic development and infrastructure initiative aimed at connecting Asia and Europe via Africa and the Middle East while also encouraging commercial linkages, financial investments, and enhanced global economic integration in order to sustain Chinese economic growth (Fulton 2020, 259-260; Conduit and Akbarzadeh 2018, 476). The initiative was launched via two speeches held in Kazakhstan and in Indonesia by President Xi Jinping in 2013. The presentation of the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB), which promotes the development of terrestrial infrastructure projects and hydrocarbons trade routes to reduce China's reliance on maritime shipping, and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road Initiative (MSRI), which concentrates on the improvement of existing port and coastal projects and missions.

The key driver of the project, its sustenance, and spreading proves to be the Middle East, a geostrategic crossroad, regarded as China's periphery extension and located in the middle of three continents – Europe, Africa, and Asia – and three maritime connection points – the Mediterranean, the Red Sea, and the Persian Gulf – pivotal for China's oil and gas cooperation and commercial routes (Ibid). Concisely, the Middle East is an important component of China's economic growth, becoming probably China's most important region outside of the Asia-Pacific area (Wasser 2019, 13-16).

To comprehend the Middle East's significance within the BRI, it is necessary to outline the underlying project idea. In order to maintain international peace and security, China, like the Russian Federation, favours a multipolar transition, recognising the inadequacy of the US-led order in the contemporary configuration of international relations, given the presence of numerous regional power poles. Moreover, China, contrary to the West, understands the concept of peace in terms of "developmental peace" rather than "democratic peace", grounding China's interpretation on materialism rather than ideology: peace is the outcome of material prosperity and economic self-sufficiency. As a result, economic development is the bedrock of peace. Following this rationale, China's willingness to expand the BRI project to as many countries as possible through a pragmatic, multilateral approach is now understandable. It explains China's decision to pursue long-term geostrategic, geopolitical, and geoeconomic objectives in the Middle East, as well as the recent expansion in its economic presence in the region: in order to achieve national interests, economic growth should be incentivised (Lons et al. 2019).

Confirmation can be found in the steady rise in Chinese investments in the Middle East. As reported by the China Global Investment Tracker (2021), Beijing is the largest trading partner and external investor in the Middle East, with financial transactions totalling $38.31 billion from 2013 to 2018 – the most crucial sectors being the energy sector ($22.12 billion), transportation ($1.62 billion), real estate ($500 million), and metals ($350 million). In the period 2019-21, a further $2.56 billion increase has been registered, although considerably lower than in the period 2018-19 ($5.33 billion), justified by the Covid-19 pandemic crisis that has decreased Chinese investment in the Middle East.

As can be noted, among the various sectors on which China's foreign policy focuses, the energy industry is undoubtedly the most prominent. China, in fact, imports more than 50% of its domestic energy consumption, approximately 43% of which comes from Middle Eastern countries (China MEDiterranean 2001-2020). Saudi Arabia is China's leading crude oil supplier in the region (84.92 million mt.), even though the country has, during the last years, concluded energy agreements with several other Middle Eastern countries, including Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Oman, and UAE. Indeed, whilst Saudi Arabia remains China's primary oil supplier, the country's government is seeking to diversify its energy imports both inside and outside the Middle Eastern area[92], opening to new markets to ensure a continuous flow of energy supply (Zhou 2021). Yet particular emphasis by the Chinese government is placed on Iran. The country lies at the intersection of the Silk Road Economic Belt and the Maritime Silk Road Initiative, representing one of the major countries along the China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor (CCAWA)[93]. Thanks to its geostrategic location, linking the Middle East and Central and South Asia, and its energy wealth, Iran is considered an important building block for the consolidation and development of the BRI in the Middle East (Dominguez 2015). In 2020, Beijing and Tehran agreed to further deepen their ties, with the signing of an agreement in March 2021, committing $400 billion of Chinese investments in Iranian territory over a 25-year strategic cooperation period in exchange for oil supply (Alamuddin 2021).

[92] China's main oil supplier is the Middle East; however, the country so as to diversify the sources of revenue imports oil even from Russia, Africa (Congo, Angola, Sudan, and South Sudan), Brazil, Venezuela, Kazakhstan, and Australia (Andersen and Jiang 2014, 26).

[93] The China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor (CCAWA) is a commercial route that follows the trajectory of the ancient Silk Road. It starts in Xinjiang and reaches the Persian Gulf, the Arabian Peninsula, and the Mediterranean Sea via Central and West Asian countries, including Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey. For an in-depth analysis see Hongjun,"Silk Road Pathways: China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor."

The trade cooperation between China and regional Middle Eastern powers proves to be consistently beneficial for national interests' maximisation. Given the abundance of crude oil and gas in the soil, China finds the needed sustenance for its economic expansion and the BRI project, achieving its national interests (Chaziza 2020a). Thanks, on the other hand, to China's economic and geopolitical development, the Middle Eastern powers see in China and its reliable market increasingly valuable long-term opportunities to exploit in order to develop, in turn, their economies and regional position (Ming 2020).

Furthermore, given the multilateral nature of its foreign policy, the anti-Western interventionism stance as well as the non-imposition of political conditionalities – including democratic reforms and human rights protection – in signing economic and trade agreements (especially arms and nuclear), China is considered a viable alternative to the West, especially the United States and a way for the authoritarian Middle Eastern States to demonstrate how economic advancement is not strictly dependent on the establishment of the Western promoted democratic state model (Sgarra 2020).

China as threat

From the description of the Chinese Republic's ambitions in the Middle East, it is possible to observe a remarkable similarity with the Russian foreign policy in the region: imitation[94].

Both countries pursue a pragmatic policy, seeking to adhere to the Westphalian state model, which emphasises mutual respect for territorial integrity, sovereignty, and non-interference in a State's internal affairs (Lons et al. 2019). They aspire to establish a stable and peaceful environment in the Middle East so as to advance national interests. Finally, they try to build positive relationships with a variety of regional powers – including Saudi Arabia, Iran, Egypt, Oman, Qatar, Djibouti, Turkey, and the UAE (Dunne 2021) – avoiding direct confrontation with the United States and attempting to limit its regional hegemony by maintaining the fragile status quo, a neutral engagement narrative, and supporting multipolarity and multilateral recognition. Hence, both countries do not intend to

[94] Interview with Dott Nazhen Sarsembekov, via email, 3 November 2021.

replace the United States in the Middle East but offer an alternative to regional powers (Berman 2019; Chaziza 2020a).

The difference between the two countries is the type of policies lying behind their lust for power. China concentrates on economic footprint expansion (geoeconomic policy agenda) in the area, boosting its domestic economic growth. The Russian Federation, on the contrary, deploys a primarily political and military security-based policy (geopolitical policy agenda) aimed at guaranteeing national security and independence.

Given their ideological parallels and the strengthening of their military, political, and economic relations over the past decade, external balancing between Moscow and Beijing in the Middle East would be expected. Indeed, the 2014 US and EU economic and financial sanctions imposed against the Russian Federation have encouraged the country to look eastwards.

New collaboration with the People's Republic of China was developed, although it was initially more of a friendship connection. Over time, Sino-Russian relations have evolved into a semi-alliance, with both countries remaining independent when necessary but never competing. China rapidly established itself as a valuable partner for Moscow, providing capital, technology, and a thriving market for the manufacture of raw materials and food products, as well as the export of energy resources (68% of Russian exports). Much more critically, Russia was able to secure its eastern borders, an issue of crucial importance for the country's security due to the absence of natural barriers protecting the territory (Karaganov 2020, 37-44; Caselli 2020, 113-124).

Yet the long-standing partnership, some experts, including Danny Citrinowicz and Roie Yellinek (2021), argue that the Middle East could, in the long run, become a field of rivalry and dominance struggle between China and Russia, leading to the possibility of belligerent acts in the area and another change in the Middle East's power balance.

The armaments market, which concerns not just the economy but, more importantly, the security component, appears to be the first possible point of contention. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the arms market is a source of revenue and foreign investment for the Russian Federation. In fact, Russia uses its no-strings-attached policy to export advanced military equipment (e.g., aircraft and missiles) in order to bolster its economy and strengthen its political and military presence in the Middle East by increasing Middle Eastern countries' reliance on Russian markets. Nonetheless, regional and external countries, especially the

People's Republic of China, are progressively dominating the armaments market. For two key reasons, China, which historically focused on geoeconomic objectives mostly related to energy resources and infrastructure, has recently begun to show interest in the transfer of armaments to some Middle Eastern countries (Al Saud 2018), including UAE and Saudi Arabia[95]. On the one side, developing the defence sector, especially small-scale weaponry, is an effective tactic to extend trade and commercial linkages and agreements in the sustenance of the BRI and China's economic growth. To an even greater extent recently, given the exponential increase in Middle Eastern demand for Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) technology that China supplies in particular to the Persian Gulf monarchies. In addition, as, for instance, with the Sino-UAE relationship, the country is forming comprehensive strategic partnerships for the development of specialised technological weapons (Ningthoujam 2021). As a result, whilst the Middle East is not China's principal arms market (Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Algeria are the top importers) (SIPRI 2021), it plays a key role in the signing of future economic and commercial agreements in the defence industry and beyond (Ningthoujam 2021).

On the other side, arms exports are considered a means of deepening security cooperation with Middle Eastern countries and gaining partial control over armaments flows, both of which are functional for ensuring regional stability. Indeed, new security challenges grow apace with the consolidation of the "One Road, One Belt" strategy: as the BRI expands, so does the risk of possible instability, economic shocks, domestic crisis, and threats from terrorist and extremist groups with a potential negative impact on the BRI project and thus on China's economic power ambitions (Wyne and Clarke 2020). Hence China's willingness to incorporate security concerns in its foreign policy towards the Middle East.

The increase in Chinese involvement in the Middle East could jeopardise Moscow's ability to project its power in the region. In terms of economics, the strengthening of Chinese commercial, economic, and financial agreements in the fields of armaments, nuclear power, economic resources, and infrastructures – specifically in the Persian Gulf, which is Russia's primary source of external investment – could result in a shift in demand from Russian to Chinese markets. The consequence would be a reduction in Russia's market share in the

[95] China in the period 2015-2019 was the fifth-world-largest arms exporter with 5.5% of the total arms exports, 6.7% of which towards the Middle East. (SIPRI 2020, 5) In the period 2016-2020, there has been, however, an overall decrease of 7.8%, reaching a total of 5.2% of the total arms exports (SIPRI 2021b, 2). Yet, arms exports towards the Middle East have risen, amounting to 7.0% (SIPRI 2021b, 7), more specifically to Saudi Arabia (386%) and the United Arab Emirates (169%) (SIPRI Database 2020).

Middle East and, in the worst-case scenario, the possible complete exit from some Middle Eastern markets, causing a reduction in the external economic support for Russia's domestic economy and its Middle Eastern foreign policy (Citrinowicz and Yellinek 2021).

The consolidated power asymmetry of the Sino-Russian relations should be considered in this scenario, an asymmetry of which Moscow is fully aware and which it seeks to limit in order to be able to pursue its great-power objectives independently and avoid becoming incorporated in the sphere of influence of "the new pax Sinica *in fieri*", as defined by Gian Paolo Caselli (2020, 122). China possesses far more advanced economic capabilities than the Russian Federation, which, when combined with a permanent seat within the UN Security Council, ensures China's global influence increases over time. In fact, there is a widening power disparity between Moscow and Beijing and growing anxiety on Moscow's part that having a lower status in the Middle East might inhibit future cooperation with regional governments (Šćepanović 2021; Caselli 2020, 113-124).

In terms of security, the future of the American presence in the Middle East is also critical.

Although not in the military field, China has started incorporating security into its foreign policy. China does not currently have a military presence in the Middle East. The government possesses a military base in Djibouti near Bab el-Mandeb waterway between the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, established in 2017, and the first signs of the 2018-announced building of a naval base in the Pakistani port of Gwadar are visible (Citrinowicz and Yellinek 2021; Blanchard and Perry 2017). Yet, as Wojciech Michnik (2021) contends, improving and expanding these military bases, as well as positioning an actual military contingent in the region, could be risky. It could, in fact, cause tensions both with Washington, which still retains a certain degree of influence within the region despite the partial withdrawal and Moscow, given the proximity of the two countries' naval bases and their overlapping interests in the Red Sea, especially now that in 2020 Russia signed an agreement to create an additional naval base in Port Sudan (The Maritime Executive 2020). Therefore, for the time being, China is concentrating on the UN Security Council operations, strategic security cooperation with regional countries, and weapons market control in order to keep the Middle East peaceful and stable. As Stefania Sgarra (2020) argues, as long as China's national interests in the Middle East are not directly threatened, the country prefers to project an image of a "responsible great power" committed to maintaining the status quo while simultaneously promoting a

multilateral transition and focusing on economic cooperation (Balasubramanian 2020). In the long run, however, an increment in Chinese military participation cannot be excluded, particularly if the US completely withdraws from the Middle East.

Here arises the second Russian concern about a possible dominance struggle with China in the Middle East. When the new Biden administration took office in early 2021, the new President ordered the complete withdrawal of American soldiers stationed on Middle Eastern soil, starting with Afghanistan and subsequently reviewing the status of US forces in Iraq and Syria (Baldor 2021). In addition, the administration is reducing military assistance for Saudi Arabia's offensive against Iranian-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen and has moved naval ships and even weapons systems out of the Middle East to focus on more direct confrontation with China and Russia in the Indo-Pacific region (Ibid; Lons et al. 2019). The definitive cessation of US engagement in the Middle East would generate a deeper political vacuum, which might be filled by emerging regional powers, Russia or China. Given China's regional and international economic importance, as well as the consolidation of the Belt and Road Initiative, it is likely that when faced with a choice of cooperation between Moscow and Beijing, Middle Eastern countries will decide to shift their attention to China, seeing the country as a significant source of political and economic support for diversification programmes, economic reforms, and Western resistance. At that point, Russia would have little room for manoeuvre in the Middle East to pursue its national interests (Rahn 2021; Citrinowicz and Yellinek 2021).

These assumptions are assumptions projected over a lengthy period of time. The reason for the long-term reasoning is that, firstly, Washington, despite troops withdrawal, has no intention of utterly abandoning its influence in the Middle East, at least in the short-medium term. Secondly, the international system is currently tested by the Covid-19 pandemic crisis, and China is no exception. Despite its still-uncertain side effects on the countries' foreign policy, the Covid-19 has already exposed some of the BRI's weaknesses. The majority of the contracts in the Middle East within the BRI framework are subcontracted to Chinese enterprises, which employ Chinese workers and provide Chinese support, ranging from raw materials to financial assistance (Hillman 2018; Chandran 2018). Due to travel restrictions, the pandemic crisis caused budget woes, as well as difficulties in transferring workers and supplies overseas, halting or slowing several Middle East projects (Tang 2020; Bradsher and Chokshi 2020). Furthermore, the serious situation in Middle Eastern countries

and the difficulty in dealing with the pandemic despite measures and vaccination campaigns draw attention inexorably away from BRI projects and into the health crisis (Chaziza, 2020b). Therefore, tensions between the three powers in the Middle East seem currently frozen, but a resumption of such tensions in the future cannot be ruled out. Finally, even if the United States decided to refocus its attention elsewhere, China would not be a full-fledged player in the Middle East yet. As argued by Mordechai Chaziza (2020c), a comprehensive independent policy is required to actively begin solving Middle Eastern conflicts; otherwise, China will have little chance to influence regional dynamics to its personal advantage. The introduction of the military component into its foreign policy could be a starting point.

The assumption posited by Danny Citrinowicz and Roie Yellinek (2021), supporting the position that an increase in Chinese influence in the Middle Eastern quadrant can lead to a decrease in Russia's one, with the consequent transformation of the relations in competition, is, nonetheless, contrasted by some experts. In particular, Emanuel Pietrobon (2021, 4) and Maurizio Vezzosi (2021, 8) are convinced that relations between the two countries in the region will evolve into productive cooperation because a "strategic connection" is present, which prevents both China and Russia "from putting into crisis their strategic security by reacting to some occasional frictions between them." Indeed, Emanuel Pietrobon (2021, 4) stresses that:

> "Russia and China, in this historical moment, are working together because they share the goal of accelerating the multipolar transition. It doesn't mean that they always work in concert, it means that the overall result of their actions, very often, is similar if not the same. In the Middle East, for instance, they keep acting in a different way, using different means, but despite this, their presence is contributing to the disintegration of the Western-designed regional geography of power. [...] Different designs, different means, but similar if not the same result. In conclusion, Russia can only benefit from the Chinese-shaped Middle East because its own historical goal in the region has been the contrast of the West. Not hegemony, but contrast: two very different things. And considering that China prefers quiet to the storm – for investment reasons –, a Chinese-shaped order in the region could only be warmly welcomed by Russia, for which the quiet Middle East means a quiet South Caucasus and a quiet Central Asia."

4.2 The United States and the Middle East

The first 100 days of the Biden administration, as highlighted in the *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance* released on the 3rd of March 2021, were marked by a change in the American strategy from unilateralism undertaken by the previous administration towards a more multilateral approach based on international cooperation (The White House 2021a).

The new administration seeks to withdraw all troops from the Middle Eastern soil and minimise American foreign military interventions and financial investments in order to concentrate on more pressing issues, including the recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic, the domestic economic difficulties, climate change, and the US-Russian and US-Sino relations; focusing thus on the Indo-Pacific region. Yet, so as to successfully address issues relating to the tense relationship with the Russian Federation and the Republic of China, it is essential to maintain peace and stability within the Middle East. As a consequence, a complete American withdrawal from the area is unlikely in the short-medium term; and evidence can be seen in the American policy agenda itself towards the Middle East. As reported by Dr Julie Norman, Deputy Director of the UCL Centre on US Politics (2021), Biden's new foreign agenda in the region focuses on "resetting the relationship with Saudi Arabia, ending the war in Yemen, and getting the Iran nuclear agreement back on track."

President Joe Biden has the intention to recalibrate the relationship with Saudi Arabia, gradually moving away from the close relations established by former President Trump, starting with the review of the American arms exports towards the country (over 70%). The President stopped the US support to the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen, even though it was minimal and unable to consistently change the conflict's outcome and announced the increase of diplomatic efforts in Yemeni soil to maintain a ceasefire, develop peace talks, and a plan to transform the country "from a failed to a fragile and eventually a functioning state" (Abo Alasrar et al. 2021). Despite the decision to stop supporting the Saudi-led coalition, the Biden administration has, nonetheless, reiterated the willingness to provide the country with defensive support against Iranian attacks (Ibid).

However, the objectives stretching into Saudi territory could be jeopardised by Biden's third objective. The President has expressed, indeed, the desire to re-join the *Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action* (JCPOA), which was mediated by the Obama administration and subsequently abandoned by the former President Trump, imposing sanctions on Iran.

Both countries – Iran and the US – have shown positive intentions regarding the US's re-entry into the JCPOA, although possible friction could arise regarding potential additional conditions on Iran's nuclear and missile programme, the number of sanctions imposed that will be lifted, as well as disagreements with other US allies such as Israel and the Gulf countries (Salem 2021; Norman 2021).

Furthermore, military and intelligence coordination with Middle Eastern allies are still relevant not only for the stability maintenance for the achievement of US national strategic interests outside the Middle Eastern area but also within the Middle Eastern area: if the US were to successfully implement its foreign containment policy against Russia and China in the Indo-Pacific region, it would certainly not want to lose leverage in the Middle East, a geographical area dominated by the latter and whose containment would ensure relative gains increase (Norman 2021).

Possible cooperation?

The objectives expressed by US President Joe Biden in his first 100 days in office (20th of January – 30th of April 2021) related to the Middle Eastern quadrant are visible in the summit with Russian President Putin held in mid-June 2021.

The two Presidents convened in Geneva on the 16th of June 2021, with the aim of alleviating tensions between the US and the Russian Federation and "restor[ing] predictability and stability to the U.S.-Russia relationship," rather than seeking consensus solutions to regional challenges (The White House 2021b). Although the Russian influence and projection in the Middle East were not expected to be the primary topics of discussion, President Biden expressed the hope for some semblance of cooperation with Russia. During the press conference, Biden hinted at an understanding with Putin to help US troops withdraw from Afghanistan and contain Iran in its nuclear and missile programs in exchange for "bringing some stability and economic security or physical security to the people of Syria [...]" (The White House 2021c).

Yet what appeared to be promising cooperation on the key concerns in the Middle East for the two countries, in reality, according to several experts, including Lt. Col. (ret.) Daniel Rakov (2021) and Joze Pelayo (2021) did not and will not produce any change in the Middle

East, let alone a “far-reaching and productive cooperation in the near future” between Moscow and Washington, as Dmitri Trenin (2021) suggests. On the contrary, American hopes for cooperation could turn out to be to Moscow's advantage (Baev 2021).

Before the dramatic developments in Afghanistan of September 2021, the Biden administration hoped for a smooth US exit and was optimistic that Russia would have not complicated the strategic decision process. Indeed, if talks with the Afghani government had failed to provide a long-term solution, Moscow could have been able to increase its engagement in the territory while preserving ties with the Taliban.

However, as proved, although Biden and Putin share a desire for a peaceful Afghanistan, the US lacks a trusting relationship with Russia to hope for beneficial cooperation (Rakov 2021). In fact, even though Afghanistan represents a “critical piece on the Eurasian chessboard as it is both a source of unrest and militancy as well as a potential bridge between Central Asia, the Far East and the Gulf/Mediterranean region” (de Gourdon 2021, 6). Moscow did not assist the US in its troop pull-out. On the contrary, seen as an important interlocutor, it expressed the desire to open its own channel for talks with the Taliban (Ria Novosti 2021).

Undoubtedly, the United States' international image as a global power has been adversely affected, allowing Russia, as well as China and other Middle Eastern powers, to seize the chance of becoming an alternative international partner in Afghanistan. In such a circumstance, Alexander Rahr (2021, 2) is convinced that in the case of Russian action in the Afghan territory, the primary concern would not be the West but rather China.

> “Russia must be worried by China‘s growing dominance in the Middle East [which] is falling under Chinese control. Since the West left the Middle East, it is now up to Russia to build a multinational alliance for containment of terrorism and extremism from the region. [...] I could well imagine the manifestation of an anti-Western Pact between Russia, China and a future broad Islamic States’ coalition. The Middle East is going to change faster than we can imagine, and surely not to the benefit of the West. The West has to hurry up in altering its relations with Russia. [...] The West has to approach Russia as a potential strategic partner in the growing North-South conflict.”

At the same time, there are experts, including Alexander Hill (2021), who contend that it is unlikely that Moscow will fill the US void in Afghanistan, despite the country's importance to Russian national security and Asian Russian partners' security bordering

Afghanistan. Indeed, as suggested by Côme Carpentier de Gourdon and Ksenia Tabarinzeva-Romanova (2021, 6), even though it is essential to maintain Afghanistan "as independent as possible from the radicalising control of the Pakistani religious/military deep state which retains expansionist designs and hegemonic aims in South Asia and the Middle East," Russia still suffers the aftermath of the Afghan syndrome[96]. It is true that Moscow is meeting "Taliban representatives [...] to build political relations with Afghanistan in order to reduce the risks of destabilization in Russia's underbelly [...];" (Tabarinzeva-Romanova 2021, 7) however, the manoeuvre seems somewhat cautious.

Emanuel Pietrobon (2021, 4) clearly summarises this syndrome and Putin's choice not to take "rash decisions":

> "Russia still remembers the Afghan trauma and is not going to fall into the Biden administration's trap. The United States hopes that the Graveyard of Empires curse may strike again, mortally wounding Russia, China, Iran and all other regional powers interested in the multipolar transition – including Turkey [...] Will it work? I don't know. No one knows. Afghanistan is still chaotic, and the only winner right now is Pakistan. All the other powers are waiting, observing and hoping that today's Taliban are not yesterday's; that one can discuss constructively with them and, above all, can do business.[...] The Afghan trauma is still fresh, sore. The élite does know that the USSR collapse was ultimately determined in this God-forgotten place and, in my opinion, rash moves are unlikely. We should ask ourselves: is recognition a rash move? I think not. Frankly speaking, why shouldn't Russia recognize the new government? Whether we like it or not – and almost everyone doesn't like it – the Taliban represent today's Afghanistan and are the clear and definite winners of the twenty-year war. Russia and the Taliban could work on several dossiers, starting from the pandemic [...] and infrastructures [...], and together they could build a richer and safer nation. [...]."

Therefore, relations with the United States on this front are yet to be defined. However, the Head of the Russian arms exporters Rosoboronexport, Alexander Mikheyev, expressed the possibility during the Army 2021 forum of a possible beneficial increase in the demand for Russian weapons by Afghanistan's neighbouring countries due to the threat of the Taliban and which "mostly operate Russian hardware," a relative gaining possibility (Interfax 2021).

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[96] The "Afghan Syndrome" dates back to the 1979 invasion, a ten-year conflict on Afghan land that claimed over 14 thousand lives. The conflict became a trauma for the population due to the length of the conflict, the resources employed, and the loss of life that eventually culminated in the 1989 withdrawal. A trauma considered a miscalculation taken at a time when the Soviet Union was at its height of power, but that most probably contributed to the USSR's 1991 collapse. For in-depth analysis, see Trenin and Malashenko, "Afghanistan, a view from Moscow."

In addition, there are other circumstances that could come back to Russia's advantage. An example is Biden's desire to rejoin the JCPOA. Biden seeks Moscow's assistance in persuading Iran to re-establish the 2015 nuclear deal, yet Russia has limited manoeuvring room or will over Tehran. Indeed, Russia reiterates its commitment to the JCPOA but expresses no will to assist in its restoration. In accordance with Pavel K. Baev (2021), the opportunity for Putin lies in the possibility of a failure to reach a compromise, given Tehran's willingness to cooperate only after all sanctions imposed against the country are lifted. This would give Putin the chance to greatly increase relations with the country at the expense of the United States.

Finally, the United State's decision to review relations with Saudi Arabia, according to Jonathan Fenton-Harvey (2021), could lead the country to look towards the Russian sphere of influence. This could be of benefit to Moscow both in the economic sphere and more specifically in oil production, as well as from the financial point of view, given the Saudi investments in Syrian reconstruction (Baev 2021).

Conclusions

In a context of a newfound security dilemma and Russia's statehood survival after the fall of the Soviet Union, the Kremlin was forced to redirect its foreign policy to the roots of classical realism, the primary reason for the theory being utilised as a methodological approach of analysis in Russia's foreign policy assessment in the Middle East. A theory of international relations with a room of applicability in international politics and foreign policy, whose primary propositions gravitate around *the nature of man, the nature of state,* and *the international system.*

Prompted by a series of factors that have facilitated its re-engagement in the mid-2010s, the Russian Federation, in search of international recognition, non-secondary role in world politics, and independent-oriented pole becoming capable of conducting an autonomous political course, is prominently returning to the Middle East as a significant player on multiple fronts: military, economic, and diplomatic.

The first facilitating element, the international system that appeared after the fall of the Iron Curtain, proved particularly advantageous. The undefined character and unbalanced power of a US-led order not conformed to the multipolar tendencies of contemporary international relations gave Russia more leeway in ensuring self-preservation and independence functional to satisfy the country's hunger for power.

The progressive disengagement of the primary operating external player, the United States, opening new opportunities for power filling was an additional contributing factor. Providing an alternative to the United States, Russia managed to increment its regional and international power position by eroding in a zero-sum fashion Western power in the area. Because of the diminishing Western authority, newly emerged Middle Eastern powers with geopolitical expansionist goals found Russia's offer highly appealing, being an easier interlocutor compared to the West and, as a result, attracting both ex-Soviet partners and pro-Western countries, envisioning the United States' disengagement as an allies abandonment.

The expansion of Russia's footprint in the Middle East was, moreover, possible thanks to the Russian President's personality. A game-theoretical individual characterised by a combination of neo-Soviet and post-Soviet traits concentrated on the country's resurgence within the international arena and able to prioritise Russian citizens' necessities by rationally

allocating the available resources to gain-maximising manoeuvres. An individual who recognises the Middle East's centrality in Russia's sphere of influence if the country wants to be positioned as a bridge between Europe and Asia. The development of a cooperative pragmatic foreign policy agenda based on the great-power status regaining, national security ensuring, and economic consolidation, coupled with a strong recognition of the country's resources limits, a sense of shared opportunities and threats, and an adaptation to the inherent pluralist features of the Middle East is evident confirmation. A vision very much aligned with the "Primakov Doctrine", stressing the historic continuity so dear to classical realists. Continuity in foreign policy, in fact, is fundamental for classical realism as it allows learning and gaining experience, vital for, as Morgenthau (1978, 5-14) contends, being able to recognise and avoid all those elements that would lead a foreign policy to irrationality.

Hence Vladimir Putin's attempts to promote and establish multiple connections with a wide range of regional players but without a direct (military) involvement in regional domestic affairs, maintaining a neutral power stance in ongoing conflicts and protecting his red lines.

The 2010 Arab Spring outbreak and the consequent transnational non-state-actors proliferation forced the Russian leader to fortify ties.

In understanding how a political system as solid as the al-Qadhafi regime in Libya could collapse due to social anti-regime protests, Vladimir Putin traced the event back to the Colour Revolutions. By framing the Arab Spring through the lens of the Colour Revolutions experienced in the post-Soviet space in the early 2000s, Russia began to accuse the West and its attempt to destabilise the regional and international system through revolution, forced regime change, and democratic values spread. An accusation further cemented by the concomitant democratic protests witnessed on national and neighbouring soil – the 2011-2012 Parliamentary and Presidential elections protests in Russia and the 2013 Ukraine crisis with the subsequent 2014 Crimean Peninsula secession – To the Western interventionist add, there was also transnational terrorism and the threat IS and other minor jihadi groups posed to the North Caucasus and the CIS buffer states in Central Asia. Reminiscences of the two Chechen Wars and the radicalism issue in the southern part of Russia arising, as well as the importance of the geographical morphological component in the protection of territorial integrity. Putin, at that point, had no choice but to deepen its involvement in the Middle East in order to balance the political situation and prevent spillover effects in Eurasia. As a result,

anti-Western rhetoric emerged, coupled with increasing authoritarianism and assertiveness, along with a need for rapprochement and renewed credibility among the Muslim World in order to prevent future terror attacks in the motherland.

The relations-deepening was yet no longer characterised by mere soft-power nature. The direct outcome, indeed, was the 2015 intervention in the Syrian civil war, the first Russian military (hard power) intervention outside the post-Soviet space after 1979 Afghanistan's.

Syria lies at the centre of Russian foreign policy in the Middle East, representing the success of Vladimir Putin in saving the al-Assad regime from imminent collapse, averting a forced regime change and protecting the State's sovereignty. It brought considerable geopolitical benefits, insofar as it changed Russia's position in the region, as, until that point, Russia had only played a marginal role in internal regional affairs. After the military intervention, it emerged as a significant power broker in Syria and the Middle East. In addition, through its large-scale involvement, Russia developed the Hhmeimim airbase in Latakia and transformed Tartus into a permanent naval base essential for Russia's spread of influence – including in North Africa and the Mediterranean Sea. It increased economic and commercial ties not only but especially in the defence sector by supplying military equipment to ex-Soviet allies, including Syria, Egypt, Iraq, and Iran and traditionally United States customers such as Turkey. More importantly, it demonstrated to the West that it had leverage to shape the outcome of a regional conflict, being a reliable partner willing to assist regional countries. Consequently, Russia became confident in its ability to influence Western and regional powers' behaviour in the Middle East and beyond since the West did not succeed in isolating and marginalising the Russian Federation internationally.

And yet, there are some limitations to Russia's lust for power in the Middle East, the most significant of which is the economic weakness. Notwithstanding efforts to strengthen the national economic system through sector diversification – energy (oil and gas), nuclear, defence, and petrochemical sectors – external investment capitals attraction, national business interests' expansion, and market share increase in the Middle East through the signing of new agreements with various regional players, Russia's economic and financial capabilities in the region remain yet limited. Russia is still unable to compete economically and politically with the United States, the reason Russia does not directly oppose the United States but rather exploits the region's pre-existing dissatisfaction at the expense of the external player.

The stagnant economy, in addition to the 2014 Western economic and financial sanctions, which provoked a Western capitals freeze, the 2017 drop in oil prices, which required new cooperation under the OPEC + umbrella, and the most recent Covid-19 pandemic crisis, which put additional pressure on the national budget, have yes permitted Russia's reach to expand and negative effects to be offset but they have simultaneously constrained its agency in the Middle East, increasing the country's reliance on Middle Eastern powers.

A dependency that regional powers are more than willing to exploit to their advantage in order to attain their own geopolitical objectives in the area. Thereby, Russia possesses an available restricted toolkit that hinders the possibility to establish itself as an indispensable full-fledged actor in the Middle East. Russia is a player whose agreement or counsel is required in several circumstances, but it lacks the necessary resources to deliver tangible solutions to regional challenges.

Noticeable evidence is the end of the Syrian Civil War and its reconstruction[97]. Moscow has long advocated for a Syrian peace settlement as the civil war solution, and the country's reconstruction is a crucial first step in that direction. Already in 2017, in Geneva, the UN Special Envoy Stefan de Mistura estimated a reconstruction cost of at least $250 billion (UN News 2017). However, the Russian annual ODA (Official Development Assistance) foreign aid allocations account for just over $1 billion (Zaytsev 2020). It is, therefore, clear the inability of the Russian government alone to provide the necessary funding for the Syrian reconstruction. Hence Moscow's decision to seek support in the Western area. Yet, neither the United States nor European countries were willing to provide funding without substantial democratic reforms undertaken by the al-Assad regime. Consequently, such a circumstance has prompted Russia to search for additional external financial investments elsewhere,

[97] Already in January 2021, Prince Faisal bin Farhan, Saudi Foreign Minister visited Moscow to conclude several collaborations in various fields of investment, development, and knowledge exchange (Askeroğlu 2021). During the same month, Iran's Foreign Minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, visited Moscow as well, with discussions related to the construction of new units at the nuclear power plant Bushehr and cybersecurity agreements; a visit that was later repaid at the beginning of April, along with Egypt (Ahmad 2021). Lavrov's visit to Tehran on the 13th of April 2021 with former President Hassan Rouhani was focused primarily on the nuclear issue, given the termination of the embargo imposed by the UN Security Council in October 2020, with particular attention to the importance of the membership return of the United States within the JCPOA (Motamedi 2021). There were also discussions on the pandemic crisis and the vaccination campaign, as well as Iran's desire to expand cooperation with Russia in Syria, Yemen, and Afghanistan in order to maintain stability in these countries and avoid Western interventionism (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2021a). Subsequently, the previous visit of Prince Faisal bin Farhan was repaid by Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov during his tour of visits in March 2021. However, the goals were not only related to OPEC + and the pandemic crisis. In fact, although these issues were predicted to be at the very core of the meeting, Syria and its reconstruction were revealed to be at the centre of attention.

particularly in the wealthy Persian Gulf, which the recent March 2021 Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs tour and the Russia-Qatar-Turkey trilateral meeting held in Doha on the 11th of March 2021[98], provide further confirmation (Ministry of Foreign Affairs – Republic of Turkey 2021).

As an indicator of this toolkit weakness, in addition to the dependency on the need for external investment opportunities to sustain Russia's foreign policy objectives and guarantee domestic economic relief, is the ability to talk and keep good relations with a broad portfolio of partners. The pragmatic and multilateral strategy employed lies, indeed, at the basis of the power-seeking, as multilateralism becomes a necessary condition for the policy agenda sustenance:

> "Russia's foreign policy in the Middle East stems from "pragmatism and political realism, characterized by a willingness to deal with all relevant players, treating no one wholly as an ally or wholly as an adversary [...] maintaining a clear focus on Russia's own national interests [...]." (Trenin 2018, 21)

Such policy agenda rooted in the pluralistic nature of the Middle East, regional values, and in respect of sovereignty allows Russia to remain a power broker in the region by maintaining a neutral stance and mediating different regional tensions – between Iran and Israel, Saudi Arabia and Iran, Turkey and the Kurds, and Sunni and Shia. However, it constraints the ability of Russia to become a renewed great power. To become a great power, indeed, Russia needs to step away from a mere interlocutor to an actual power broker capable of consistently shaping internal regional dynamics. To achieve such a condition, Russia should start to take sides in key regional conflicts and crises. Nonetheless, in order to take sides, an autonomous economic system is required.

Yet, according to some experts – including Nikolay Kozhanov (2018) and Nicu Popescu et al. (2019) – this is precisely the reason for Middle Eastern countries accepting Russia's presence and even its growing influence in the region. As mentioned in the first chapter, unlike the Soviet era, Middle Eastern countries still need a power broker, but not a hegemon, to preserve regional peace, security and stability. This is due to the United State's

[98] The trilateral meeting held in Doha, on the 11th of March 2021, between the Russian Federation's Ministers of Foreign Affairs, the Republic of Turkey's Minister of Foreign Affairs, and the State of Qatar to discuss the current Syrian situation of crisis, agreeing on further cooperation and a "lasting political solution" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs – Republic of Turkey 2021).

gradual disengagement since the early 2000s, which allowed new regional powers to emerge and progressively dominate the Middle Eastern space: the reason for their acceptance of Russia as a State hungry for animus dominandi but lacking the resources to fully gain it at the expense of the Middle Eastern countries.

The emergence of the People's Republic of China as a new rising power in a multipolar international system offering rooms for relative power-seeking and new distributions of power, coupled with the renewed interest of the newly-born United States' administration in the area further amplify the toolkit weaknesses. Yet if, on the one hand, the resurgence of American interest in the JCPOA and in resetting relations with Saudi Arabia could benefit Russia in attracting more regional countries into its sphere of influence at the expense of the US, especially in light of recent developments in Afghanistan, on the other hand, China could constrain Russia's agency.

The similarity of their foreign policy in the Middle East triggers dissentious considerations among experts (See Danny Citrinowicz and Roie Yellinek 2021; Emanuel Pietrobon 2021; Maurizio Vezzosi 2021). Indeed, in the short-medium term, an alliance that falls neatly into an alternative partnership in counterbalancing US dominance in the region and more widely worldwide, maintaining the regional status quo for national interests achievement could be the most likely option. Yet, there are some points of friction between Moscow and Beijing – ranging from an evident power and economic resources asymmetry to the arms market shares – that could lead to increased geopolitical competition for fear of partners' loss.

Concisely, Russia is returning to the Middle East in order to satisfy its lust for power, according to a classical realist worldview. However, – notwithstanding the ability in pursuing selfishness – due to economic dependency, pragmatism, and multilateralism, it has not yet achieved animus dominandi.

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