Into the Quagmire?
Explaining Russia’s Military Intervention in Syria

Karna Buggeland Sælebakke

Department of Political Science
UNIVERSITY OF OSLO
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Abstract

From 30 September 2015 until the official announcement of the withdrawal of its armed forces on 14 March 2016, Russia engaged in a large-scale military intervention in Syria. This was the first Russian military intervention outside the Post-Soviet space in the post-Cold War age. In this thesis, I therefore consider the following research question: Why did Russia conduct a military intervention in Syria in September 2015? To answer this question, I develop a three-leveled analytical approach. By combining analyses of developments at the international, bilateral, and national levels, I aim to provide a comprehensive answer that draws important theoretical insights from Putnam (1988) and Allison (1969). My results suggest that a combination of an increased security threat posed by ISIS and other Islamist terrorist groups (bilateral level), Russia’s aversion to externally imposed regime change (international level) and its interest in influencing the political outcome of the Syrian war (international level) explain Russia’s military intervention in Syria. For the larger international arena, this thesis underlines the implications of the conflicting approaches the great powers have to the legitimacy of outside interventions in civil wars.
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All mistakes and inaccuracies remain my own.
# Table of Contents

Abstract .......................................................................................................................... V  
Acknowledgements ......................................................................................................... VII  

1 | **Introduction** ........................................................................................................... 1  

1.1 Research Question ................................................................................................. 1  
1.2 Previous Research .................................................................................................. 2  
1.2.1 The contribution of this thesis ........................................................................... 3  
1.3 Research Design ..................................................................................................... 4  
1.3.1 The bilateral level ................................................................................................. 4  
1.3.2 The international level ......................................................................................... 5  
1.3.3 The national level ................................................................................................. 6  
1.3.4 Method ................................................................................................................ 6  
1.3.4 Data ..................................................................................................................... 7  
1.4 Thesis outline ......................................................................................................... 8  

2 | **Background** ........................................................................................................... 10  

2.1 The outbreak of the Syrian civil war ...................................................................... 10  
2.1.1 Initial international reactions ........................................................................... 11  
2.1.2 Diplomatic efforts .............................................................................................. 12  
2.2 The chemical weapons incident .......................................................................... 13  
2.3 ISIS advances into Syria ....................................................................................... 14  
2.3.1 The U.S.-led coalition ......................................................................................... 15  
2.4 Summary ................................................................................................................ 16  

3 | **The Bilateral Level: Russia’s strategic interests in Syria** ........................................ 18  

3.1 An intervention per invitation ................................................................................. 19  
3.2 Russia and Syria’s historical relationship .............................................................. 20  
3.3 The first explanation: Russia and Syria are allied ................................................. 22  
3.4 The second explanation: Russia’s economic and military interests are at stake ....... 26  
3.4.1 Economic ties: Arms sales and energy relations ............................................... 26  
3.4.2 Military ties: Russia’s presence in the Mediterranean ...................................... 29
3.5 The third explanation: Russia intends to defeat terrorism ................................................. 31
3.6 Summary ............................................................................................................................ 34

4 | The International Level: Balancing against the United States ........................................... 36
4.1 The theory of structural realism ......................................................................................... 36
   4.1.1 Power balancing ........................................................................................................... 37
   4.1.2 Balance of threat ......................................................................................................... 39
   4.1.3 Soft balancing ............................................................................................................ 40
4.2 The power distribution prior to the intervention ............................................................... 41
   4.2.1 The United States’ efforts to influence the conflict outcome ....................................... 43
   4.2.2 Russia’s efforts to influence the outcome ................................................................. 44
   4.2.3 An unfavorable power distribution ............................................................................ 45
4.3 Russia’s power balancing in the Syrian War ................................................................. 46
   4.3.1 Internal and external efforts ....................................................................................... 46
   4.3.2 Opposing Western-led regime change ...................................................................... 48
   4.3.3 Engaging in entangling diplomacy .......................................................................... 51
   4.3.4 The U.S. strategy in Syria ......................................................................................... 54
4.4 Implications of the military intervention ......................................................................... 55
4.5 Summary ............................................................................................................................ 57

5 | The National Level: Reform and modernization of Russia’s armed forces ......................... 59
5.1 Post-2008 military improvements ...................................................................................... 61
5.2 Russia’s subjective estimate of success ............................................................................ 64
5.3 Limiting the duration of the intervention ......................................................................... 69
5.4 Avoiding domestic audience costs ................................................................................... 73
5.5 Mapping the net utility of intervening ............................................................................. 78
5.6 Summary ............................................................................................................................ 80

6 | Conclusion .......................................................................................................................... 82
6.1 Summary ............................................................................................................................ 82
6.2 Main findings ..................................................................................................................... 83
6.3 Which explanatory factors were the most important? ..................................................... 84

Literature .................................................................................................................................. 87
Appendix 1 Map of Syria ........................................................................................................ 108
# Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AGS</td>
<td>Action Group for Syria</td>
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<tr>
<td>CSTO</td>
<td>Collective Security Treaty Organization</td>
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<td>EU</td>
<td>European Union</td>
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<td>FSA</td>
<td>Free Syrian Army</td>
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<td>GCC</td>
<td>Gulf Cooperation Council</td>
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<td>ISIS</td>
<td>Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham</td>
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<td>ISSG</td>
<td>International Syria Support Group</td>
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<td>NATO</td>
<td>North Atlantic Treaty Organization</td>
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<td>OPCW</td>
<td>Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons</td>
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<td>SNC</td>
<td>Syrian National Coalition</td>
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<td>UN</td>
<td>United Nations</td>
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<td>UNGA</td>
<td>United Nations General Assembly</td>
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<td>UNSC</td>
<td>United Nations Security Council</td>
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<td>UNSG</td>
<td>Secretary-General of the United Nations</td>
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<tr>
<td>UNSMIS</td>
<td>United Nations Supervision Mission in Syria</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1 | Introduction

On 30 September 2015, Russia began its intervention in Syria after receiving a formal request for military support from the Syrian government. Having opposed any UN-led diplomatic or military action towards Syria, the launch of airstrikes against various militant groups fighting Bashar al-Assad’s regime marked a defining crossroad for Russia’s role in the war. Shortly after intervening, President Putin stated that the operation was well planned and that it aimed to stabilize the legitimate government in Syria and to create conditions for a political compromise (President of Russia 2015a). For the first time in post-Cold War history, Russia engaged in a military operation outside the area of the former Soviet Union.

Russia’s steadfast support for the Syrian government and the repeated use of its veto power in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) prior to the intervention created severe disapproval among Western states. According to Putin, the international response to both the Syrian war and the increasing security threat posed by Islamist terrorism had failed (President of Russia 2015b). An example of a third-party intervention conducted on behalf of a government in an intrastate war, the Russian intervention in Syria can illuminate the challenges linked to international conflict resolution. This thesis aims to identify the key factors that led to Russia’s decision to intervene in Syria.

1.1 Research Question

This thesis considers the following research question:

Why did Russia conduct a military intervention in Syria in September 2015?

In order to provide an answer to this question, the analysis will consider explanatory factors at three complimentary levels of analysis: the international, the bilateral and the national. At each level, I discuss different explanations. The analyses focus on the time period between Russia’s intervention in Syria on 30 September 2015 and the official announcement of the withdrawal of its armed forces on 14 March 2016.
1.2 Previous Research

Previous research on third-party military interventions in civil wars can be divided into two main strands. The first strand concentrates on the effects of such interventions (see, for example, Regan 1996, Hermann and Kegley 1998, Regan 2002, Collier, Hoeffler and Söderbom 2004, Bueno de Mesquita and Downs 2006, Seybolt 2007, Gent 2008). In contrast, the second strand focuses on which external actors intervene in civil wars and why (see, for example, Pearson, Baumann and Pickering 1994, Regan 1998, Finemore 2004, Lemke and Regan 2004, Findley and Teo 2006, Davidson 2013, Snow 2016). I mainly draw on, and seek to contribute to, the second strand of literature.

Most previous research in this second strand has focused on the link between the strategic interests of the intervener and the behavior of the civil war state. In a quantitative study of 138 civil conflicts, Lemke and Regan (2004) find that third party states with continuing interests in civil war states are more likely to intervene in those civil wars than third parties lacking such interests. More specifically, states that are allied with the civil war state are more likely to intervene. On a similar note, Findley and Teo (2006) emphasize the convergent and divergent strategic interests between actual interveners, potential interveners and civil war states. Using longitudinal data on post-World War II interventions, they find that states engaged in rivalry with the government in a civil war state are more likely to intervene on behalf of the opposition than on behalf of the government. They also find that when a rival state has already intervened on behalf of the opposition, the likelihood of an intervention on the side of the government increases significantly. The findings from Regan’s (1998) quantitative study of the aforementioned 138 conflicts suggest that decisions to intervene result from a mixture of national security concerns, great power rivalry, the intervener’s subjective estimate of the probability of success, and the degree of humanitarian suffering in the civil war state. However, the author points out that in order to gain a better understanding of the decision calculus of an intervening state, further research should consider the context in which the decision was made (Regan 1998:25). I utilize Regan’s theoretical framework in this thesis, and follow up on his suggestion.

The research on Russia’s military intervention in Syria is relatively limited. It primarily focuses on the strategic goals Moscow wished to achieve by intervening (Kozhanov 2016, Notte 2016,
Valenta and Valenta 2016, Stent 2016) and/or whether these goals were achieved by the time Russia withdrew the majority of its armed forces (Souleimanov 2016, Zisser 2016). To my knowledge, Kozhanov (2016) was the first to offer a comprehensive study of the links between Moscow’s foreign policy interests in Syria and its military involvement in the war. Emphasizing Moscow’s diplomacy on Syria in light of its broader strategic goals in the Middle East and the historical Russo-Syrian relationship, he briefly analyzes the influence of Russian domestic dimensions on Moscow’s Syria approach. Kozhanov’s contribution provides a useful historical context for Russia’s military involvement in Syria, and establishes an important connection between the domestic and international levels of analysis – a connection that I too seek to illuminate. However, he does not undertake a systematic analysis of the driving factors behind Russia’s decision to intervene. This thesis thus represents a first attempt to fill this gap.

**1.2.1 The contribution of this thesis**

This thesis aims to contribute to existing research in two main ways. First, I seek to contribute to the literature that links Russian foreign policy to domestic factors. Previous research in this field has considered how Russian foreign policy is affected by domestic economic, political and military factors (Kaczmarski 2014, MacFarlane 2006, Karagiannis 2014). In contrast, I look at how one particular national development – military reform and modernization – influenced Russia’s decision to intervene in Syria and how this national-level factor is linked to other factors at the bilateral and international levels. To my knowledge, no previous studies have utilized this approach to explain this decision.

Second, I seek to contribute to the literature on military interventions undertaken on behalf of a government: interventions by invitation. While this phenomenon has been thoroughly analyzed by scholars,¹ the legitimacy of such military action remains a contested subject for debate (Fox 2014:31). Although this case study aims to explain Russia’s decision to intervene, I also hope to illuminate how diverging views on the status of the parties in a civil war affect international efforts of crisis resolution.

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¹ See, for example, Findley and Teo (2006), Bellamy and Williams (2005), Finnemore (2004).
1.3 Research Design

Multiple researchers before me have pointed out the fruitfulness of utilizing more than one conceptual model to provide a comprehensive explanation for events in the IR sphere. Putnam (1988) suggests that the behavior of states can best be explained by pointing to domestic conditions likely to affect policy making, and in this manner establishes a link between international politics and domestic affairs. Allison (1969) utilizes three different conceptual models in order to explain one particular event, thereby focusing on more than one possible explanatory factor.

In the case of the Russian military intervention in Syria, several factors likely influenced the decision. By combining analyses of the developments at the international and bilateral levels with one of internal developments, I aim to provide a more comprehensive answer to the research question than any single conceptualization would enable. Utilizing theoretical contributions from the fields of structural realism and military intervention, I seek to assess the impact of military reform and modernization on Russia’s choice to undertake an intervention. Overall, the three analyses aim to provide a comprehensive overview of the most important factors that explain the decision to intervene.

1.3.1 The bilateral level

The first analysis assesses the most common assumptions held by analysts and commentators attempting to explain Russia’s intervention in Syria. A common denominator is that these explanations mainly concern the bilateral level. Thus, for analytical purposes, the bilateral-level analysis will be presented first. While this structure may be considered somewhat unorthodox, it is fruitful for my purposes.

The bilateral-level analysis considers three explanations promoted as useful to understand the Russian intervention. First, I assess the explanation that Russia intervened because of its alliance with Syria, by examining (1) the formal basis of this alleged alliance and (2) Moscow’s relationship with President Assad. Second, focusing on the economic and military ties between the two countries, I discuss whether Russia intervened in order to secure these ties. Third, I consider whether the intervention was conducted to contain a potential spillover of Islamist
extremism from Syria to Russia, with emphasis on the number of foreign fighters present in Syria prior to the intervention.

Having thoroughly reviewed these explanations, I find that Russia had a clear interest in upholding the Syrian government. This interest was in part based on Moscow’s desire to maintain its economic and military-strategic relations with Damascus, and in part based on the interest in limiting the threat of a potential spillover of terrorism to Russia. Both factors contribute to explaining Russia’s decision to intervene, the latter also with regards to the timing of the intervention. Nonetheless, I also find that these explanations carry certain limitations.

1.3.2 The international level

The second analysis concerns Russia’s interests and behavior at the international level and considers the decision to intervene in Syria through the theoretical perspective of structural realism. This perspective considers the state as a unitary rational actor, and proposes that anarchy (the lack of a supranational authority) and uncertainty about other states’ intentions force states to pursue power in order to protect themselves (Waltz 1979:118). Based on the theoretical contribution by Waltz (1979), I assess the power distribution between Russia and the United States in the Syrian war, and discuss whether Russia’s intervention in Syria was an attempt to balance against U.S. influence on the war. Moreover, I draw on two additional concepts: balance of threat theory (Walt 1985) and the concept of soft balancing (Pape 2005). Based on these contributions, I discuss whether and why Russia considers the United States’ military action as a security threat. I also assess the effect of Moscow’s diplomatic efforts to constrain U.S. influence.

It is important to note that by the time Russia intervened, multiple external actors were involved in the Syrian war. In addition to the United States, regional actors such as Iran, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey all attempted to influence the relative strength between the warring parties. This in turn made analysts characterize the Syrian war as a proxy war (see, for example, Seznec 2013, Hughes 2013, Lynch 2015a). Nevertheless, while the thesis in part considers the involvement of regional actors, I limit the main focus of the international-level analysis to the interests of and the relationship between Russia and the United States in Syria.
As the empirical evidence will show, the perspective of structural realism provides a fruitful explanation for Russia’s decision to intervene, as Russia had a clear interest in constraining U.S. influence on the Syrian war. This perspective also helps explain the timing of the intervention. However, the intervention was Russia’s first military operation outside the post-Soviet space since the end of the Cold War; indeed, Russia has declined to intervene in several other civil wars where the United States has been involved. Thus, it is necessary to seek additional explanations at the national level.

1.3.3 The national level

My third analysis concentrates on the recent reform and modernization efforts undertaken by the Russian armed forces, and establishes a link between these efforts and the decision to intervene in Syria. The discussion is structured around Regan’s (1998) theoretical framework on military interventions. This framework is based on the assumption that three interlinked conditions must be met in order for a political leadership to undertake an intervention. First, there should be a reasonable expectation that an intervention will produce the desired outcome, second, the projected time horizon for achieving this outcome should be short, and third, domestic support for an intervention must be present. Central to all three conditions is the decision makers’ cost-benefit calculus. The theoretical assumption is that the expected benefits of intervening must outweigh the human, material and political costs.

The empirical evidence presented in this third analysis suggests that the reform and modernization efforts ensured the presence of all three conditions, thereby providing a basis for a positive expected net utility of intervening. Thus, the national-level analysis concludes that the improved military capabilities of the Russian armed forces prior to the intervention played an important role in Moscow’s decision.

1.3.4 Method

This thesis utilizes a qualitative case study research design, as it conducts an in depth analysis of one particular event. According to George and Bennett (2005:5), the case study approach is “a detailed examination of an aspect of a historical episode to develop or test historical explanations that may be generalizable to other events”. However, as general theories often fall short of making sharp theoretical predictions, the aim is to establish causal explanations for a
particular event, rather than to contribute to theory development by establishing contingent
generalizations (George and Bennett 2005:7-8). Levy (2008:6) names such methods theory-
guided case studies, as they aim to explain an event by structuring the analysis along the lines
of a conceptual framework that “focuses attention on some theoretically specified aspects of
reality and neglects others”. The theoretical frameworks utilized in this study thus structure the
discussion of the empirical evidence concerning Russia’s policy decision.

As causal inferences are a challenging maneuver in qualitative case studies, uncertainty cannot
be eliminated. Nevertheless, the presence of uncertainty does not mean that one should avoid
points out that case study research usually relies on linking contextual evidence together when
attempting to determine one or more causal mechanisms, as it is difficult to test the effect of
one variable while holding all else constant. As established, the overall aim of this thesis is to
provide a comprehensive understanding of the important factors that explain Russia’s
intervention in Syria. I do so by connecting the outcome – military intervention – to explanatory
factors at the bilateral, the international and the national levels, and I consider the explanations
at each level as complementary rather than competing. Including more than one level of analysis
reduces the risk of leaving out important variables.

1.3.4 Data

The data material utilized in this study consists of written sources, including a broad range of
both primary and secondary literature. The primary sources consist of a selection of official
documents, statements, speeches, meeting records and official interviews available at the
official web pages of the Russian government, such as the Kremlin, the Ministry of Defense
and the Foreign Ministry. In addition, official documents from various UN bodies are utilized.
Access to internal documents circulated in the Russian governing bodies as well as in the armed
forces would likely have provided valuable insight in the decision making process. However,
as the intervention recently occurred, and as Russia’s military involvement in Syria is still
ongoing, such documents are not accessible to the public (and may never be). Nor has it been
possible to conduct interviews with the relevant decision makers.

The secondary sources comprise scientific papers and media reports. Given the temporal
proximity of the intervention, access to relevant scientific material on the topic is limited.
However, various reports and journal articles address matters and conditions that were likely relevant for the decision to intervene and therefore constitute a significant part of the data material included in this study. As pointed out by George and Bennett (2005:97), media accounts are not a substitute for analysis of primary sources; however, they often constitute an important part of the contextual developments to which policy makers are sensitive. Thus, the media coverage provides useful understanding of the context in which Russia’s decision was made.

Two challenges stand out as relevant in terms of the data collection. First, decision makers do not necessarily express the true intentions behind a policy decision. Thus, it is necessary to take into account the purpose a statement or document intends to serve, and under what circumstances they were formulated, as official information may be selectively released to fit political interests (George and Bennett 2005:100). Second, official Russian narratives tend to differ significantly from those prevailing in the West, in particular in terms of the media coverage of various events. I have attempted to limit the impact these challenges may pose to the inferences drawn by utilizing source triangulation where possible, to determine the consistency of the findings (Yin 2014:241). Furthermore, I have utilized a wide selection of both scholarly and media sources, and have aimed to dismantle rhetorical claims by contrasting or comparing them with previous, more extensively analyzed events and statements. Overall, these efforts enable us to address the research question in an adequate manner.

1.4 Thesis outline

The thesis consists of six chapters. Chapter two provides background by briefly outlining the developments in the Syrian war – both on the ground and in terms of international diplomatic efforts – up until the Russian intervention. Chapter three examines the impact of the bilateral relationship between Moscow and Damascus on the decision to intervene through an assessment of three bilateral-level explanations. In chapter four, I discuss whether the intervention aimed to balance against the United States, in light of the balancing theories of Waltz (1979), Walt (1985) and Pape (2005). Chapter five discusses how Russia’s military reform and modernization efforts may have affected its expected utility of intervening through the lens of Regan’s (1998) decision-theoretic framework. Lastly, chapter six provides a summary and discussion of the main findings.
2 | Background

This chapter provides an overview of the developments in the Syrian war prior to Russia’s intervention, both on the ground and through international diplomatic efforts and external involvement. The aim is to outline the context surrounding Russia’s decision to intervene in Syria. Section 2.1 outlines the outbreak of the Syrian war, the initial international reactions and the diplomatic efforts that took place in the first two years of the war. Section 2.2 describes how Russia and the United States cooperated to facilitate the destruction of Syria’s chemical weapons reserves. Section 2.3 discusses the rise of ISIS in Syria and the subsequent establishment of a U.S.-led coalition against the group. These developments provide an important context for understanding Russia’s military intervention. Lastly, section 2.4 summarizes the chapter and the main dividing lines between the actors.

2.1 The outbreak of the Syrian civil war

The Syrian Civil War broke out in the context of the Arab spring, after the government repressed the nationwide protests that began in Deraa on 18 March 2011. By the end of March, the protests had spread to six of twelve provincial capitals and many other towns and cities. The protesters demanded democratic reforms and the release of political prisoners (Holliday 2011:13). Following the unrest in Deraa, government troops and tanks entered the city and conducted a five-day offensive, with security forces detaining hundreds and killing dozens of protesters. In April, the people’s demands shifted from reforms to regime change, and the clashes escalated in the central city of Homs. Shortly after, more than 100 demonstrators were killed across the country (Shadid 2011, cited in Holliday 2011:15).

In May, the Syrian army entered the cities of Deraa, Baniyas, Homs and parts of Damascus in an attempt to crush the anti-regime protests. By September, units of armed resistance engaged in insurgencies across the country. In the Rastan district of Homs, deserters from the Syrian security forces formed the oppositional Free Syrian Army (FSA) (Holliday 2011:12,16). Beginning on 27 September, security forces retook the area during a four-day operation against the insurgents and conducted multiple assassinations of civilians, making it the largest
confrontation between government and opposition forces up until that point. The clashes continued throughout October and November. By December, the Syrian government’s strategy of offensive clearance operations had succeeded in limiting the protests, despite increasing numbers of attacks conducted by the armed opposition. The government’s use of pro-regime militias created further difficulties for the armed resistance to gather across the country (Holliday 2011:24-25). In January 2012, the government began to use artillery in large quantities across the country as the clashes intensified. Despite the offensive, the opposition groups were able to defend key urban areas of Damascus, Homs and Idlib throughout March.

2.1.1 Initial international reactions

The international community shifted its attention towards the situation in Syria relatively quickly. Both the United Nations Secretary General and the EU condemned the Syrian government’s use of force just days after the protests broke out in March. Two months later, the United States imposed economic sanctions on Syrian officials, including President Bashar al-Assad, and the EU imposed a full arms embargo calling for the Syrian security forces to exercise restraint (The White House 2011, 2013). In August, the governments of the United States, France, Germany and the United Kingdom, as well as the EU, demanded that Assad step down (Mohammed and Charles 2011).

On 4 October 2011, after six months of civil unrest in Syria, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) voted on a draft resolution, which called on the Syrian government to halt its violent offensive and strongly condemned the use of force against civilians (UNSC 2011). The draft, which was formulated by four European countries, was vetoed by Russia and China. Both countries stated that the threat of sanctions against the Syrian government was counterproductive, and emphasized the importance of dialogue between the conflicting parties (UNDPI 2011). The Russian ambassador to the Council, Vitaly Churkin, stated that the Russian stance on non-acceptability of military intervention was not taken into account, and that the draft contained a “one-sided indictment bias against Damascus” (The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2011a).

In November, the Arab League suspended Syria’s membership and approved economic sanctions against Syria as an attempt to end the government’s violent crackdown on the opposition (Küçükkeleș 2012:7-8). The sanctions were a reaction to Assad’s refusal to
implement the peace treaty negotiated inside the Arab League, which the Syrian government had accepted three weeks earlier. Imposing sanctions on a member state was described as an unprecedented measure (MacFarquhar and Bakri 2011). In December, the Syrian government signed a second Arab League peace treaty which included the initiation of peace talks between the government and the opposition, an end to the violence, release of political prisoners and withdrawal of Syrian troops (Küçükkeleş 2012:9-10). Referring to this agreement, 19 Western and Arab UN member states proposed a second draft resolution on Syria in the UNSC on 4 February 2012, supporting a Syrian-led political transition facilitated by the Arab League and demanding the Syrian government to cease all violence (UNSC 2012a). The proposal competed with an alternative draft formulated by Russia and China (Anishchuk and Gutterman 2012). Similar to the outcome of the voting exactly four months earlier, the Western-Arab draft was vetoed in the UNSC by Russia and China on 4 February, and both countries’ representatives stated that the calling for regime change undermined the possibility for a political settlement, as it did not respect the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of Syria (UNSC 2012b). Consequently, the international stalemate on a solution to the Syrian civil war continued.

2.1.2 Diplomatic efforts

13 months into the war, on 12 April 2012, the UNSC unanimously adopted the first resolution on Syria. Resolution 2042 authorized an advance team of military observers to monitor the compliance of a ceasefire period between the Syrian government and the oppositional FSA. The ceasefire agreement was mediated and proposed by the Joint Special Envoy of the UN and the Arab League, Kofi Annan (UNDPI 2012a). On 21 April, resolution 2043 on the establishment of the United Nations Supervision Mission in Syria (UNSMIS) was adopted in the Council. The violence on the ground was significantly reduced in the first weeks of the ceasefire, but increased in the second week of May due to serious violations from both government forces and the armed opposition. By mid-June the level of hostilities surpassed the pre-ceasefire levels (UNSMIS n.d.). As a consequence, UNSMIS suspended its normal operations on 15 June.

Following from the worsened situation on the ground, Kofi Annan initiated the Action Group for Syria (AGS), also known as the Geneva I Conference on Syria, later in June. The conference was attended by the Foreign Ministers of the United States, Russia, China, France, the United
Kingdom, Turkey, Kuwait, Iraq and Qatar, as well as a representative from the EU. The Geneva I conference resulted in a written communiqué stating the need for the establishment of a transitional government, which “could include members of the present government and the opposition and other groups and shall be formed on the basis of mutual consent” (AGS 2012). Furthermore, the document stated that the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of Syria was to be respected, and that “the conflict must be resolved through peaceful dialogue and negotiation alone” (AGS 2012).

On 19 July, Russia and China vetoed a draft resolution on Syria in the UNSC for the third time. The resolution would have renewed the UNSMIS mandate and threatened to impose sanctions on the Syrian government unless it withdrew its military concentration from population centers and cease the use of heavy weaponry against them (UNDPI 2012b).

From June through September 2012, the fighting intensified on the ground as the insurgency moved towards the cities of Damascus and Aleppo. The government quickly fought the opposition forces off to the outskirts of the capital, but the insurgents continued its Aleppo stronghold and seized control in other important parts of the country. The standoff continued during the fall of 2012. In November, the Syrian National Coalition (SNC) was formed during opposition meetings in Qatar. The body aimed at gathering key oppositional groups within Syria and included the existing opposition coalition, the Syrian National Council, which had been formed a year earlier (Carnegie Endowment 2013). The formation of the SNC was recognized as a legitimate representative of the Syrian people by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), France, the United Kingdom, the United States and the EU shortly after (BBC 2013).

2.2 The chemical weapons incident

The first half of 2013 was characterized by a series of offensives conducted by both armed opposition groups and by the Syrian government. The armed opposition took control of the north-eastern city of Raqqa in early March, making it the first provincial capital to be taken from government forces, and launched dozens of mortar bombs into central Damascus later that month (Kajjo 2014, Holmes 2013). In April, the Syrian government and the Lebanon-based militant part of Hezbollah began an offensive against opposition-held areas near the Lebanese border, and the government continued to regain control over areas around Homs and Damascus throughout May and June (Oweis 2013, Solomon 2013a).
On 21 August 2013, news reports stated that nerve gas had been used in a rocket attack on two opposition-controlled areas in the Ghouta area of Damascus, killing up to 1400 people (Warrick 2013). 11 countries, including the United States, the United Kingdom and France immediately blamed Assad’s forces for the attack, and called for a strong international response in a joint statement released on 6 September (The White House 2013). On the same day, the U.S. Senate proposed a resolution to authorize the use of military force against the Syrian government (U.S. Congress 2013).

Six days later, the Foreign Ministers of Russia and the United States began extensive bilateral negotiations on a framework for the destruction of Syria’s chemical weapons, after an initiation from the Russian government. The negotiations resulted in the signing of an agreement on 14 September. The Syrian government agreed to hand over its entire stockpile of chemical weapons and signed the Chemical Weapons Convention the same day, thereby avoiding U.S.-led military action in Syria (Congressional Research Service Report 2014). On 27 September, the Executive Council of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) adopted a destruction plan for Syria’s chemical weapons, and the UNSC unanimously adopted resolution 2118, which endorsed the OPCW decision and authorized an advance team of UN personnel to provide assistance to its activities (UNSC 2013). The chemical demilitarization of Syria was characterized as “a major achievement in the field of strengthening the non-proliferation and disarmament regime” by Russia’s UN ambassador (UNDPI 2014).

2.3 ISIS advances into Syria

While international actors engaged in resolving the use of chemical weapons in Syria, 13 Islamist opposition groups rejected the authority of the SNC and its newly elected interim government, and called for a new Islamist front against the Syrian government (Solomon 2013b). During the fall of 2013, the fragmentation of the moderate opposition worsened, as the Islamist militant group Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS)² seized the Syrian town of Azaz near the Turkish border. The takeover was a setback for the FSA, who managed the supply lines between the Turkish border crossing and the city of Aleppo (Morris and Haidamous 2013).

² The group has three acronyms (ISIS, ISIL, IS) and an arabic term (Daesh). I use the acronym ISIS throughout this thesis.
The rise of ISIS also posed a threat to the Syrian government, which had been unable to mobilize the majority of its armed forces without risking extensive defections since the beginning of the war. Because the military deployment was limited to small, trustworthy detachments of the conventional brigades, the government concentrated its efforts on protecting limited, strategic parts of the Syrian territory (Holliday 2013:9, 15). Consequently, ISIS and various other groups managed to take control over areas in the northern and western part of Syria more easily (Jenkins 2014:9). The very manifestation of ISIS’ advance into Syria occurred in the middle of January 2014, when the group overpowerred the opposition in Raqqah and took control of the eastern city (Kajjo 2014).

Shortly after, in the first two months of 2014, the Geneva II Conference on Syria took place in Switzerland. The conference was based on an initiative announced by the Foreign Ministers of the United States and Russia nine months earlier, and aimed to bring together the Syrian government and the opposition for negotiations on a political transition process based on the communiqué from the first conference in June 2012 (UNSG 2014). Despite the efforts of the new Joint Special Envoy, Lakhdar Brahimi, the conference did not result in an agreement regarding a transitional government body (UNOG 2014). In the beginning of May, the Syrian government forces retook control over Homs following a ceasefire agreement between the government and the opposition. This marked the end of three years of resistance and repeated offensives in the so-called “capital of the Syrian revolt” (Makdesi 2014).

2.3.1 The U.S.-led coalition

ISIS continued to gain territory and to commit serious human rights abuses in Syria throughout the summer of 2014. On 10 September, U.S. President Barack Obama launched the United States’ strategy to defeat the Islamist group (Hudson 2014). Twelve days later, the United States formed an anti-ISIS coalition together with Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Jordan, and began its air campaign in Syria (U.S. Central Command 2014). Shortly after Obama announced the establishment of a U.S.-led coalition against ISIS, the Syrian government warned that an offensive within Syria would violate international law, and Moscow stated that it would not support any military action without authorization from a UN resolution (Black and Roberts 2014).
In February 2015, the Syrian government forces launched another offensive and captured several villages north of Aleppo in an attempt to cut the opposition’s supply lines to the Turkish border. As Aleppo had become the forefront of clashes between the government, Western-backed opposition groups and various Islamist groups, the third Joint Special Envoy, Staffan de Mistura, mediated a six-week local ceasefire agreement between the parties (UN News Centre 2015). Despite his efforts, the ceasefire proved short-lived as the fighting continued. On 19 February, the United States and Turkey signed an agreement to train and arm moderate Syrian opposition groups at sites outside Syria, as part of the operation against ISIS. Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Qatar also offered to host training sites for American troops (Alexander 2015). By the beginning of April, Islamist groups dominated the Idlib governorate and other strategic parts of the north, further limiting the foothold of both Assad’s government and the fragmented Western-backed opposition (Perry and al-Khalidi 2015a).

Despite the separate efforts of the Syrian government, the U.S.-led coalition and multiple rebel groups, ISIS continued to seize territories inside Syria throughout the summer of 2015. In late May, ISIS took control of the ancient city of Palmyra after a week of fighting off the Syrian Army’s counter-offensive. After Palmyra was seized, ISIS was estimated to control around half of Syria, including a vast majority of the country’s gas and oil fields (Saul 2015). Furthermore, in August 2015, armed opposition groups forced government troops to retreat from the Sahl al-Ghab Plain north-west of Hama, an area described as Assad’s Alawite “heartland” (Perry and al-Khalidi 2015b).

2.4 Summary

Due to the advancement of ISIS, the efforts of the U.S.-led coalition and the presence of various opposition and Islamist groups, Assad’s government was seriously challenged by September 2015. The repeated international diplomatic efforts to end the war had proven fruitless. The diplomatic stalemate was largely the result of China and Russia’s repeated vetoes on all resolutions calling for action against Assad’s government. In this regard, the bilateral cooperation between Russia and the United States on the destruction of Syria’s chemical
The establishment of a U.S.-led coalition that operated in Syrian airspace had further complicated the situation. Russia considered all military actions undertaken by the coalition as a violation of Syria’s sovereignty and territorial integrity, and a potential threat to Assad’s government. On 28 September, Russia’s President Vladimir Putin addressed the 70th session of the General Assembly of the UN (UNGA), stating that the refusal to cooperate with the Syrian government and its armed forces against terrorist groups had been “an enormous mistake” and called upon the international community to create a broad international coalition against terrorism based on international law (UNGA 2015). Two days later, on 30 September, Russia launched its first airstrikes in Syria. Russia’s military intervention surprised many in the international community. The driving factors behind the intervention is the subject to which we turn next.
3 | The Bilateral Level: Russia’s strategic interests in Syria

Several analysts and commentators have pointed to the two countries’ close bilateral relationship in their attempts to explain why Russia provided the Syrian government with diplomatic protection in the UN Security Council and refused to condemn Assad’s regime after the civil war broke out in 2011. The Russian position made Moscow subject to repeated criticism by other states. The criticism only worsened after Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014.

Given the severe international audience costs Russia was already paying for its stance on both Ukraine and Syria, its military intervention appears puzzling to the outside observer. By assessing three factors frequently presented as explanations for Russia’s decision to intervene, this chapter aims to determine the importance of these factors in Moscow’s calculus for the intervention. The first explanation is that Russia and Syria are allied, and the second is that the two countries have important economic and military ties. The third explanation is that Russia intervened in order to contain the security threat posed by Islamist terrorist groups. While the latter explanation may be considered domestic rather than bilateral, I will analyze this factor as a bilateral issue as Moscow and Damascus has a common interest in preventing state collapse in order to limit the further spread of terrorism.

Section 3.1 provides a characterization of the Russian intervention, while section 3.2 introduces the historical relations between Moscow and Damascus from the Second World War to the late 2000s. Section 3.3 considers the explanation that Russia and Syria are allies, and examines the formal basis for such an alliance. Furthermore, it evaluates Moscow’s relationship with President Assad both prior to and during the Syrian war. Section 3.4 scrutinizes Russia’s economic and military interests in Syria, and evaluates whether Russia intervened in order to secure these interests. Section 3.5 sets out to determine whether the intervention was conducted in order to contain a potential spillover of Islamist extremism to Russia, with emphasis on the
number of foreign fighters present in Syria prior to the intervention. Lastly, section 3.6 provides a summary of the main points of the analysis.

3.1 An intervention per invitation

In order to explain why Russia conducted a military intervention in Syria, one cannot ignore the fact that the intervention was based on a request from the Syrian government. On the same day as the first Russian air strikes were launched, President Assad’s media office said in a statement to the international news agency Reuters that "any increase in Russian military support to Syria happened and is happening as a result of a request from the Syrian state." (Makieh and Perry 2015). Furthermore, the statement emphasized that this request was based on international agreements and laws, and that it aims “to realize the interests of their nations and guarantee the integrity of their lands” (Makieh and Perry 2015).

A foreign military intervention which is based upon a request from the government of a state involved in an internal armed conflict, is often referred to as an “intervention per invitation” (Nolte 2010). Despite the fact that any intervention on the territory of other states are prohibited according to Article 2(4) of the UN Charter, several well-recognized exceptions to this rule have played out in recent history (Fox 2014:4). An invitation from a sitting government is one such exception. However, as the status and legitimacy of the warring parties involved in a civil war tend to be unclear, many question the legitimacy of interventions per invitation. Questions regarding the legal basis for interventions per invitation arise in the case of Russia’s military intervention in Syria. Despite widespread accusations of Russian airstrikes targeting moderate opposition groups inside the country, the Russian government has continuously stated that their operation in Syria is legitimate. Moreover, that they target terrorist groups, and that the intervention is in accordance with UN resolution 2249, which calls upon its member states to take “all necessary measures, in compliance with international law,” to prevent and suppress ISIS’ terrorist acts in Syria and Iraq.

Despite the fact that a large number of states quickly rejected President Assad as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people after the civil war intensified, Russia has repeatedly emphasized the request from Assad when being criticized for lacking a legal basis for the decision to intervene. According to the Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, questions regarding the legal basis of foreign activities inside Syria should be aimed at the U.S.-led
coalition rather than at Russia, as it is the former that lacks permission from the elected Syrian government for its military actions (The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2015a). Assessments claiming that Russian airstrikes have violated international law, on the other hand, have in some cases made analysts conclude that it is Russia’s legal basis which is invalid, as opposed to the U.S.-led coalition (See, for example, Mercier 2016).

The aim of this thesis is not to determine the legality of Russia’s military actions in Syria. Nevertheless, characterizing Russia’s intervention in Syria as one per invitation is important because it comprises a starting point for understanding the timing of the launch of Russian airstrikes: President Assad, the elected representative of the Syrian people, requested Russia’s support, and Moscow assisted Assad at a point when his position was threatened. But merely establishing that this military operation was an intervention per invitation does not explain why Russia chose to accept the request from the Syrian government. Consequently, it is necessary to further examine the bilateral ties between the two countries.

3.2 Russia and Syria’s historical relationship

Syria is frequently characterized as Russia’s last remaining ally in the Middle East, and Moscow and Damascus have been involved with each other since the end of the Second World War (Trenin 2012). The Ba’ath party, led by an ethnic minority of Shi’a Alawites, came to the fore in Syria’s political life in the late 1950s, and quickly aligned itself with the Soviet Union in order to secure its fragile basis (Ginat 2000:150, Aghayev and Katman 2012:2066). When the Ba’athist leader Hafez al-Assad came to power in late 1970, he quickly strengthened the bilateral ties with the Soviet Union, and asked for increased military and economic aid from the great power. One of Moscow’s geopolitical goals, in turn, was to secure a zone of influence in the eastern Mediterranean, and Assad’s anti-Western ideological grounds made increased political cooperation with Syria attractive for the Soviet Union (Aghayev and Katman 2012:2067). Two important developments occurred in the bilateral relationship between the Soviet Union and Syria in the first part of the 1980s. First, in 1980, the two countries signed a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation, which established a formal basis for their bilateral relationship (Gibler 2009:482). Second, having established a naval base in the Syrian city of Tartus in 1971, thereby achieving its aim of presence in the eastern Mediterranean, the Soviet
Union began to cover many of the military and economic needs of its Middle Eastern partner (Aghayev and Katman 2012:2067).

In the last part of the 1980s, the priority of the Soviet Union changed from finding political and ideological allies to establishing relations with significant economic partners. Furthermore, the collapse of the one-party state in 1991 led to a shift in the attention of the Russian authorities from foreign to domestic policy issues (Aghayev and Katman 2012:2068, Kozhanov 2016:6). The reasons for this shift were a combination of political insecurity, ideological concerns and a severe economic crisis, all of which characterized the domestic politics of the new Russia in the first decade after its establishment. Throughout the 1990s, as Russia focused on reorienting its foreign policy towards the Western world, the Middle East was perceived mainly as a bargaining chip for Russian relations with the United States and Europe (Kozhanov 2016:7-8). Consequently, its relations with Syria were reduced to a low-profile “matter of formality” (Aghayev and Katman 2012:2068). The foreign policy orientation of the Yeltsin government in the 1990s created an image among the Middle Eastern countries of Russia as an unpredictable partner. In contrast, when Vladimir Putin became president in 2000, he made the doctrine of a multipolar world a main foreign policy priority. Consequently, Russia (re)established close ties with less western-friendly countries in the Middle East, as part of its aim to reassert Russia’s influence in the region. In 2003, Putin declared the Arab world as one of the main vectors of Russian diplomacy (Kozhanov 2016:9). However, largely due to its inability to prevent the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, Moscow did not manage to reestablish the Soviet image of being a “defender of Arab interests” (Kozhanov 2016:10-13).

In July 2000, only months after Putin was elected the new president of Russia, Bashar al-Assad was sworn into office as president of Syria following the death of his father, Hafez al-Assad. A year before his death, Assad senior visited Moscow and reportedly made Russia freeze Syria’s $12 billion debt for arms trade. In return, the Syrian government agreed to buy new Russian weapons (Katz 2006:53-54). The agreement was considered favorable to both parties, but despite their efforts to improve the bilateral ties, significant differences remained throughout the first half of the 2000s. One reason was Putin’s unwillingness to support Syria in its stance on the Arab-Israeli issue, an issue further challenged by Russia’s sales of advanced weapons to Israel. The debt issue also remained unsolved (Katz 2006:55). However, Putin’s relations with Bashar al-Assad improved in 2005, as the two presidents met for the first time in Moscow.
There, the presidents signed a joint declaration on deepening their bilateral trade and other economic relations (The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2005). After the meeting, they announced that Russia had agreed to dismiss 73 percent of Syria’s then $13.4 billion debt. Russia also agreed to sell Damascus an air defense missile system, and two Russian oil and gas companies signed contracts to extract oil deposits and to build a gas pipeline in Syria (Katz 2006:55-56).

3.3 The first explanation: Russia and Syria are allied

After Russia launched its first airstrikes in Syria on 30 September 2015, several Western media outlets and commentators quickly based their attempts to explain the military intervention on a characterization of the governments of Russia and Syria as allied. This was mainly due to Hafez al-Assad’s close relationship with the Soviet Union throughout large parts of the Cold War (see, for example, Lynch 2015b, The Economist 2015, Coffey 2015, Coughlin 2015). Based on an examination of the political ties between Russia and Syria up until the intervention, this section aims to clarify whether the formal basis for the countries’ bilateral relationship can rightly be characterized as an alliance. Furthermore, it assesses whether such a characterization carries explanatory power for why Russia responded positively to Assad’s request for military support in September 2015.

In many ways, the improvement of relations between the two countries in the last part of the 2000s created the backdrop for Moscow’s diplomatic support for Assad when the civil war broke out in Syria six years later. However, as this section will show, characterizing the two countries as allies does not provide a well-founded explanation for why Russia granted Assad with military support last September. First, in order to establish whether the bilateral relationship between Russia and Syria should be considered an alliance, it is necessary to define such a union between countries. The concept of alliance has various definitions in the international relations literature, and thus includes various degrees of state cooperation, ranging from formal institutionalized defense alliances to loose and/or informal security cooperation (Oest 2007:11). Existing definitions can be divided into two strands: wide and narrow. Based on scholars belonging to the former, Oest (2007:15) provides a wide definition of alliances as “formal or informal explicit security cooperation between two or more sovereign states”.

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In the case of Russia and Syria, the formal basis for their security cooperation is the abovementioned 1980 Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation.³ This treaty explicitly states that the parties shall coordinate their positions and cooperate to remove a threat or restore peace “in the event of situations arising which threaten the peace or security of one of the Parties (…)” (Gibler 2009:483). Upon signing, the treaty was valid for twenty years, and it explicitly states that it will be automatically extended for successive five-year terms until one of the parties choose to terminate it. It was referred to in the bilateral contract regarding the deployment of Russian armed forces on Syrian territory signed just weeks prior to the intervention in 2015, and remains in force until this day (The Russian Federation 2015). Based on the broad definition of an alliance, the 1980 treaty provides a basis for characterizing Russia and Syria as allies. However, a more detailed classification of formal interstate alliances provided by the Correlates of War project, defines the 1980 treaty between Russia and Syria as an entente rather than an alliance (Gibler 2009:lx). An entente, in contrast to e.g., a defense pact, is the lowest level of military commitment between two states and does not obligate the members to come to each other’s aid by military means. Rather, it simply requires the parties to consult in times of crisis or armed attack (The Correlates of War Project n.d.).

Furthermore, certain disagreements between Damascus and Moscow remained after the mid-2000s, and support the notion that Russia and Syria can hardly be characterized as allies. An important case in point is Putin’s continued attempt to balance Israeli security interests with Assad’s request for air defense missiles, which in turn made Syria unable to obtain certain sophisticated weapons from Russia (Kreutz 2010:18-19, Katz 2006:57-59). This presence of both mutual interests and disagreements in the security sphere prior to the intervention indicates that rather than a firm alliance, Russia-Syria relations should be characterized as an instrumental or pragmatic friendship guided by strategic or material interests (Kreutz 2010:22, Katz 2006, Allison 2013a:803, Trenin 2013:12, Tijerina 2016). In other words, Russia’s security relationship with Syria before the intervention was not characterized by unwavering Russian support to the Syrian regime.

³ The Defense Ministries of the two countries also signed an agreement on further military-technical cooperation in 1994, which was limited to include “defensive weapons and spare parts” (Cordesman 2006:337).
Second, and relatedly, even if one portrays the Russo-Syrian relationship an alliance, this apparently does not guarantee Russian support. One recent example of Moscow’s reluctance to intervene upon request strengthens this notion, and makes the Russian military intervention in Syria even more puzzling. When ethnic clashes emerged in south Kyrgyzstan in 2010, the Kyrgyz President Roza Otunbayeva and her Russian-backed interim government rapidly declared a state of emergency, and requested military support from Russian troops (Aris 2014:166). Otunbayeva also called for external support from the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), a regional military alliance in which both Russia and Kyrgyzstan are members. In what was considered a break in its tradition of security management in Central Asia, Moscow declined Otunbayeva’s request. (Aris 2014:166-167).

There are, of course, multiple contextual differences between the Kyrgyz and the Syrian cases, not to mention a difference in scope. At the same time, they have some striking similarities. One possible reason why Russia chose not to intervene in Kyrgyzstan was that Moscow wanted to avoid involvement in a long-standing regional conflict, which could “entail considerable expenses” (Górecki 2010:1). The same argument could be invoked concerning Russian involvement in the immensely war-torn Syria, but it did not stop Putin from responding positively to Assad’s request. Another possible reason for Russia’s reluctance to intervene in Kyrgyzstan was the international criticism Moscow received when intervening in South Ossetia two years earlier (Aris 2014:170). Following this line of argument, the international criticism of Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014 as well as the subsequent Western sanctions should have generated the same reluctance in Moscow upon receiving Assad’s request for support – but it did not. Ultimately, the Kyrgyz case indicates that in Moscow’s view; even formal alliances do not automatically generate a positive Russian response to a request for military support.

Third, despite the improvement of bilateral ties in 2005, Moscow’s political relations with Bashar al-Assad have been more strained than were its relations with his father Hafez al-Assad, who was considered loyal to the Soviet Union. In the first half of the 2000s, the Syrian government was internationally isolated due to its occupation of Lebanon. When the occupation ended in 2005, several Western powers once again approached the Syrian government, and Assad junior was eager to respond (Kreutz 2010:6). Consequently, in 2007 and 2008, he reestablished political dialogue with the United States and France, a move which was unpopular.
in Moscow. Nonetheless, the easing of relations proved short-lived, as Israel and the United States accused the Syrian government for equipping Hezbollah in Lebanon and President Obama renewed U.S. sanctions against Syria (Kreutz 2010:16). This, in turn, led to an improvement of Russia-Syria relations in 2010, when then President Dmitry Medvedev visited Damascus.

The recent improvements carried certain limitations, however. Despite Russia’s provision of diplomatic support for the Syrian government from the beginning of the Syrian war in 2011, Assad ignored several of President Putin’s requests to negotiate with the opposition and to release political prisoners throughout the following years (Slim 2016). In 2012, Prime Minister Medvedev explicitly stated that Moscow did not enjoy the same “privileged relation” with Bashar al-Assad as it had done with his father, and throughout the first four years of the Syrian war, the Russian government did not invite him to the Kremlin (Slim 2016). Furthermore, despite Assad’s reluctance to negotiate, Russia hosted two meetings between the Syrian opposition and the Syrian government in Moscow in April 2015, signaling its support for regime transformation through national dialogue (Kozhanov 2016:43-44). The so-called Moscow 1 and Moscow 2 conferences were largely obstructed by Assad’s government, as it banned parts of the Syrian opposition from leaving the country to participate in the meetings, thereby making a Russian-initiated diplomatic settlement of the conflict even more difficult (al-Saadi 2015).

The fact that Russia opened up for a political transformation indicates that the argument of keeping Assad in power simply because the present Syrian government was a long-lasting ally of Moscow alone falls short of explaining the Russian military intervention. Indeed, as early as in 2012, Russia’s UN ambassador Vitaly Churkin assured the Security Council that Russia was not “wedded” to Assad, and would agree to his departure if it resulted from an agreement between the Syrian government and the opposition (Lynch 2012). This position was repeated by various Russian officials from the outset of the intervention (Saradzhyan 2015). Moreover, the empirical evidence demonstrates that the alliance between the two countries as tangled at best. If the governments of Russia and Syria were allied, one would expect the political leaders to have established a dialogue and maintain a unified position to ensure a favorable political solution from the outset of the war. As this section has shown, such efforts were lacking prior to the intervention. In sum, despite enjoying an overall close bilateral relationship for the last
70 years, significant elements of disagreement between Moscow and Damascus were present prior to the Russian intervention. However, as the remaining part of the analysis will demonstrate, Moscow still had a clear interest in upholding the Syrian government.

3.4 The second explanation: Russia’s economic and military interests are at stake

A second explanation for the intervention proposed by various analysts and commentators is that Russia has important economic interests in Syria, which have been present since Soviet times (see, for example, Knight 2015, Rainey 2015). These interests mainly include lucrative arms sales agreements and investments in the energy sector (Bagdonas 2012:63). Furthermore, Russia’s military or strategic interests are also highlighted by observers attempting to explain the intervention, in particular the desire to secure the continued access to the naval facility in the Syrian port city of Tartus (see, for example, Gwertzman 2015, Delman 2015, Bender and Bertrand 2015). In order to assess this explanation of Russia’s intervention, the following section assesses the scope and relevance of Russia’s economic and military stakes in Syria.

3.4.1 Economic ties: Arms sales and energy relations

After Putin was sworn into office in 2000, a strengthening of Russia’s economic relations with the Middle East became one of Moscow’s priorities, and the Arab countries’ share in Russian trade enjoyed a positive trend throughout the decade (Kozhanov 2016:11). This trend included an increase in Russian arms export to Syria, which had been one of the main importers of Soviet arms since the 1950s but struggled to acquire modern military equipment after 1991 (Bagdonas 2012:65). Russia and Syria’s relatively modest arms trade experienced a significant upsurge from 2005 to 2008, when Putin and Assad resolved the debt issue and agreed to resume their economic relations.4 By 2012, the total value of Syrian contracts with the Russian defense industry was reportedly estimated to over 4 billion dollars (Mankoff 2012).

Despite establishing itself as Syria’s main source of military supplies after 2007, however, the value of the Syrian market for Russian arms was relatively small. From 1991 to 2011, Russia’s

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4 The bilateral contracts signed in this period included combat aircrafts (such as MiG-29M/M2), helicopter gunships (such as Mil Mi-25), short and medium range surface to air missiles, tanks and armed vehicles (Åtland et.al. 2016).
arms sales to Syria accounted for just one percent of its total arms exports (Bagdonas 2012:66). In addition, as mentioned in the previous section, Putin’s interest in improving relations with Israel prevented Syria from obtaining certain sophisticated weapons from Russia. This arguably made Syria an even more limited market for Russian arms. Furthermore, after the Syrian war broke out in 2011, Moscow paused any new deals and limited its military cooperation with Syria to already existing agreements. The effect of this constraint was strengthened as the war dragged out and drained the Syrian budget. Consequently, after 2012, Russia began to compensate for the stagnation in its bilateral arms trade with Syria by expanding sales to other Middle Eastern states (Kozhanov 2016:2).

Russian energy companies also returned to Syria in the 2000s. The bilateral agreements in the energy sector were largely in favor of Russian exports, and the supply of Russian oil products and machinery was based on major contracts with the Syrian government (Bagdonas 2012:64). Since 2005, the Russian crude oil company Tatneft has collaborated with a Syrian state-owned company on exploring and developing oil fields, and Gazprom’s former subsidiary Stroytransgaz built both a gas pipeline and a processing plant in Syria in 2008-2009 (Bagdonas 2012:64). Furthermore, in 2013, the Syrian government signed a contract with Russia’s Soyuzneftegaz on oil and gas exploration and drilling off the Syrian coast, with a time frame of 25 years. And in July 2015, the Russian Union of Gas and Oil Industrialists announced that it seeks to invest more than 1.6 billion dollars in energy contracts when the situation in Syria “becomes stable” (al-Saadi 2015).

Various analysts have pointed to the connection between Russia’s energy interests in Syria and its dominance of the European gas market, where Russia holds a 64 percent share of the total gas imports (see, for example, al-Saadi 2015, Orenstein and Romer 2015, Butter 2015). Russia has continuously opposed all other foreign proposals to build pipelines via Syria through Turkey and into Europe, and pressured Assad to refuse Qatar’s bids to do so in 2009 (Orenstein and Romer 2015). One cannot rule out the possibility that Russia’s military presence in Syria will increase the Syrian regime’s dependence on Moscow, which in turn may increase Moscow’s influence on similar decisions in the future. However, the substance of Russia’s

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5 This included the Iskander-E tactical ballistic missile system, the S300PMU-2 air defense missile system and MiG-31E fighter jets (Åtland et.al. 2016).
strategic interests in the Syrian energy sector are uncertain (Butter 2015). First, there is no proof that Syria has offshore natural gas, and even if they do, the prospects for development and profit are uncertain. Indeed, Soyuzneftegaz withdrew from Syria on 29 September 2015, one day prior to the launch of Russian airstrikes. Second, the sharp fall in European gas consumption and the general surplus in the global gas market after 2014 makes gas a less attractive source of investment.

Overall, the importance of the economic ties between Russia and Syria has been reduced after the war broke out in 2011. Four years of intense fighting had shattered Syria’s economy. Its bilateral trade with Russia fell below 0.4 billion dollars by 2014, and the majority of investment projects were stopped (Kozhanov 2016:1). However, as a large part of Russia’s trade with Syria is based on government contracts, it is possible that an overthrow of Assad would further challenge Russia’s favorable position in both the Syrian arms market and the energy sector, in particular if the lack of an alternative, pro-Russian government persists. Thus, because Russia intervened at a time when Assad’s position was threatened, the intervention may in part have been aimed at consolidating the Syrian regime in a way that induces future bilateral trade agreements.
3.4.2 Military ties: Russia’s presence in the Mediterranean

Syria has been of strategic importance to the Russian navy since 1971, when the naval base in the port city of Tartus was established. The agreement with Syrian authorities allowed surface combatants, submarines and cargo ships to use the facilities, and thus secured the presence of the Soviet Union in the Mediterranean during the Cold War (Harmer 2012:2). Following from Russia’s economic challenges and the foreign policy changes that emerged under Yeltsin in the 1990s, both the capabilities of the Russian navy and the maintenance of the naval base in Tartus fell into disrepair. In 2006, however, President Putin’s new political priorities (and significantly improved economic position) led to substantial increase in Russia’s defense budget, which in turn led to a strengthening of the deployment of the Russian navy (Harmer 2012:2-3). Consequently, the facilities at Tartus were upgraded to support Russia’s ambitions of an increased presence in the Mediterranean. This ambition was reflected in *The Maritime Doctrine of the Russian Federation 2020*, which was renewed in July 2015 and aims to strengthen Russia’s position as a sea power (President of Russia 2015c).

In 2012, the commander-in-chief of the Russian navy characterized the base in Tartus as “essential” (Gardner 2012). However, despite the improvements in recent years, the naval base itself is of little actual military value, as its capacity is limited and the facilities mainly suitable for repair and maintenance of Russian warships (Kozhanov 2016, Harmer 2012, Åtland, Bukkvoll, Due Enstad and Tønnessen 2016). Most characterize it as a “navy sustainment center” rather than a full-scaled naval base (Harmer 2012:1). In 2012, a Moscow-based military think tank characterized the facility as “insignificant” from a strategic point of view (Gardner 2012). An interesting factor in this regard, is an agreement between Russia and Cyprus, signed in Moscow in February 2015. The agreement gives Russian navy ships a legal permission to access Cypriot ports for humanitarian purposes, including supplies of provision and refueling of vessels, as well as the evacuation of Russian nationals “from neighboring countries” (TASS 2015a). While the agreement does not directly provide Russia with a new military base, a Russian presence in Cypriot ports may over time develop as a clear alternative to the naval base in Tartus, which is unfit for permanent or long-term stationing of vessels (Saunders 2015, Åtland et.al. 2016:10).
This is not to say that Tartus is of no strategic importance to Moscow, as Russia is likely to have a clear interest in maintaining its access to the naval base in the years to come (Åtland et.al. 2016:10). In addition to its military-technical cooperation with Syria, Russia deployed military experts in Tartus to assist the Syrian army in mastering the exported hardware prior to the intervention (President of Russia 2015d). The facilities were upgraded after the Russian armed forces initiated extensive reform and modernization programs in 2008, as a part of the Russian navy’s enhanced presence in the Mediterranean. Furthermore, after the Russian intervention was implemented, the military presence at the base increased, including the presence of ground troops to protect both the facilities and the infrastructure related to the air campaign. Nevertheless, Russia’s desire to secure the naval base appear geopolitical rather than military in nature, and likely carries a symbolic value of underlining Russia’s attempts to influence the developments in the Middle East, rather than a military value of securing a more or less permanent naval presence in the Mediterranean (Barabanov and Aliyev 2012, cited in Åtland et.al. 2016:10).

It is likely that Russia’s access to the naval base could be jeopardized if Assad is removed from power or loses control over the Alawite area in Western Syria, Tartus included. Thus, if the naval base is of considerable military-strategic importance to Russia, it is unclear why Moscow waited until Assad’s position and the territorial control of the regime was seriously weakened before intervening. In particular, this is unclear because Russia’s interest in securing future access to the base largely relies on continued support from a Syrian government which allows for Russia’s disposal of the facilities. It is possible that Moscow would agree to a political transformation in Syria if it considered its strategic interests as safeguarded with an alternative government. However, as no such alternative had emerged throughout the years of conflict, one would expect Russia to intervene at an earlier stage of the war in order to secure its continued access to the facilities at Tartus. In sum, both the timing of the intervention and the relatively limited capacity of the naval base suggests that it is neither of critical importance for Russia’s military ambitions to expand its naval presence in the Mediterranean, nor that this factor alone was decisive in Moscow’s calculus when deciding upon an intervention.

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6 The reform and modernization programs and the use of ground troops in the intervention are further discussed in chapter 5.
3.5 The third explanation: Russia intends to defeat terrorism

Prior to the intervention in Syria, Russian officials justified their support for Assad by pointing to the importance of regional stability in order to contain the threat of state collapse, chaos and the spread of transnational Islamist networks (Allison 2013a:809). In addition to Moscow’s repeated emphasis on the need to uphold the Syrian state, the potential spillover of an Islamist threat to Russia has also been promoted as an explanation for the intervention, in particular after the emergence of ISIS in Syria (see, for example, Zvyagelskaya 2015, Alcock 2016, Souleimanov and Petrtylova 2015). As this section will show, Russia’s history with militant Islam in North Caucasus and the significant number of Russian foreign fighters in Syria suggests that Moscow’s interest to defeat the terrorist groups operating on Syrian soil was an important reason for why Russia intervened.

One of Russia’s main national security concerns is Islamic radicalism and terrorism in the North Caucasus, a region populated by a largely Muslim ethnic minority (Bhattacharji 2010). Chechen separatism in particular has constituted a major threat to Russia’s national security since the end of the Cold War. The link between the separatist movement and Islamic radicalism played an increased role after the first Chechen war, as several local warlords and politicians turned to radical and political Islam as a pragmatic means to pursue their separatist agendas (Wilhelmsen 2005:52). Despite Moscow’s extensive efforts to contain the separatist insurgency, violence has continued to escalate across the North Caucasus and Sunni Islamist groups have conducted multiple terrorist acts in Russia (Bhattacharji 2010, Hill 2013). Given these circumstances, analysts have pointed out that Moscow may fear a spillover of militant Islamist movements from the Middle East to the North Caucasus, which in turn may pose an increased threat to Russia’s domestic security (see, for example, Averre and Davies 2015, Allison 2013a).

When the Syrian civil war broke out in 2011, Russian authorities quickly voiced concern over the possibility that radical forces could take over the anti-government uprisings in Syria, and in turn challenge the security situation in Russia as well as Europe (Kozhanov 2016:49). Since then, Moscow has repeatedly emphasized that the rise and spread of Islamist groupings in Syria,
as well as in the broader Middle East, poses a serious threat to Russia’s national security. Moscow’s solution to contain this threat has been to emphasize the need to uphold the Syrian state institutions and prevent state collapse. This stance is not new. For years, the steadfast position of President Putin and the Russian government has been that terrorism, as a stateless phenomenon, should be fought primarily through coordinated efforts between states (Tsygankov 2013:148, Allison 2013a:816). Just days prior to the intervention, Putin stated in an interview that there is no other solution to the Syrian crisis than strengthening the effective government structures and rendering them help in fighting terrorism (SANA 2015). This rhetoric was also used by Foreign Minister Lavrov when he stated that Russia “will continue to help the Syrian government to equip the Syrian army with everything it may need to prevent the recurrence of the Libya scenario” (Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2015b). In this statement, he is likely referring to the state collapse which followed from the Western-led operation of toppling Libya’s President Qaddafi. The preservation of the existing Syrian government was likely in President Assad’s interest, as his limited efforts to truly engage in talks of a political transformation indicates that he has a clear interest in remaining in position. Thus, Moscow and Damascus unquestionably found common ground in their belief in the importance of preserving Syrian state institutions and avoiding regime change: including in order to fight terrorism.

In addition to the threat posed by terrorist groups in general, the high number of Russian foreign fighters in Syria likely accounted for a considerable part of Moscow’s security concerns. In Syria, the number of foreign fighters, including Russians, has exceeded that of any previous conflict in the modern history of the Muslim world (Rich and Conduit 2014:113-114, Hegghammer 2013). By September 2015 official estimates from Russian authorities suggested that around 2,400 Russians had joined ISIS or other jihadist groups in Syria, compared to just 800 by June the year before. A majority of these foreign fighters originated from North Caucasus (The Soufan Group 2015:14). According to Averre and Davies (2015:820-821), gains made by Islamist insurgents at the expense of Assad’s regime could lead to a strengthening of transnational links with Chechen militants. When taking Moscow’s aforementioned experience with radical Islam in North Caucasus into account, this scenario seems well-founded. A year

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8 Russia’s stance on the Western-led Libya intervention is further discussed in chapter 4.
before the Russian intervention, the presence of such links became increasingly evident. In September 2014, Russian-speaking ISIS fighters stated in a video that they promised to “liberate” the North Caucasus. Just months later, several separatist and religious leaders in the Russian region declared their loyalty to the extremist group (Kozhanov 2016:51). Furthermore, in June 2015, ISIS announced the creation of a governorate in North Caucasus after four of six subdivisions of the Caucasus Emirate pledged allegiance to ISIS (Gambhir 2015).

Ultimately, even a small number of Islamist militants eventually returning from Syria may inflict considerable violence upon an already unstable North Caucasus or more central areas inside Russia. Moscow’s concern of the return of foreign fighters is evident in a statement from the Russian Deputy Minister of Defense, Anatoly Antonov, who declared that “should [foreign fighters] return home, carrying the potential for violence and extremism, they will be preaching radical ideas in our countries or will organize subversive activities” (Russia Today 2015a). As Klimenko and Melvin (2016) point out, an intervention could indirectly function as a means of eliminating North Caucasian militants outside their own borders. Thus, one cannot rule out that the Russian intervention in part aimed to target jihadist groups operating on Syrian soil before they managed to establish themselves further in North Caucasus.

So far, the empirical evidence suggests that the threat posed by both the further spread of terrorist groups and the return of Russian foreign fighters is genuine. In this regard, the notion that the preservation of President Assad’s regime is the best way to avoid the spread of transnational Islamist networks not only underscores why Russia provided diplomatic support for Syria in the UNSC – it may also explain Russia’s rationale for providing military support to the Syrian government. Despite the year-long efforts of the U.S.-led coalition to fight ISIS, the group continued to seize Syrian territory. Indeed, in his statement to the UN General Assembly delivered two days prior to the Russian intervention, President Putin explicitly stated that ISIS’ expansion to other regions was “more than dangerous”, and that no one but the Syrian armed forces and the Kurds were “truly fighting the Islamic State and other terrorist organizations in Syria” (President of Russia 2015b). Moscow may thus have deemed the coalition’s efforts as ineffective with regard to containing the security threat Russia faced.

In isolation, the explanation that Russia intervened in order to limit the threat posed by terrorist groups and returning foreign fighters appear to fall short of accounting for the timing of the
intervention. After all, ISIS gained a foothold in Syria when the group took control of Raqqah in January 2014, 18 months before Russia launched its first airstrikes. In addition, the recruitment of Chechen foreign fighters to Syria emerged already in 2012, and the links between ISIS and Chechen groups was evident in 2014 (Allison 2013a:810, 814). Given these circumstances and the rhetorical claims made by Russian officials concerning the national threat of both terrorist groups and foreign fighters, one should expect Moscow to have launched a military operation in Syria at an earlier stage of the conflict. However, when taking the significantly weakened position of Assad’s government into account, it appears as if the scope of the terrorist threat increased substantially shortly before the intervention. Thus, the assessment that Russia intervened in order to contain the Islamist threat also contributes to explain the timing of the intervention.

3.6 Summary

The aim of this chapter has been to assess three factors presented as explanations for Russia’s intervention in Syria, and to determine whether the bilateral ties between Moscow and Damascus explain Russia’s decision to intervene. First, through a closer look at both the historical context and the legal basis for the bilateral relationship, I found that the suggestion that Russia intervened because of allied commitments to Syria lacks a formal basis. Second, as a large amount of Russia’s trade with Syria is based on existing government contracts, the intervention may in part have aimed at securing future trade agreements and continued access to Russia’s naval base in Tartus. However, as Russia’s economic and military stakes in Syria were reduced shortly after the war broke out in 2011, the explanation that Russia intervened to secure its economic and military ties with Damascus alone falls short of explaining the timing of the intervention. Finally, I found that the significant number of Russian foreign fighters in Syria and the links between ISIS and militant groups in North Caucasus likely was an important reason for why Russia intervened.

Overall, the analysis has revealed that Russia had a clear interest in securing the position of the Syrian government. This interest is based on 1) Moscow’s desire to maintain its economic and military-strategic relations with Syria, and 2) the belief that the preservation of Syrian state institutions is the best way to contain the national security threat of Islamist terrorism. Thus, despite the lack of a formal basis for an alliance, the three bilateral-level explanations presented
in this chapter are to some extent interlinked. In particular, the terrorist threat underlines the common interest of Moscow and Damascus in upholding the Syrian state institutions through a preservation of Assad’s government, and the perceived severity of this threat likely increased when Assad’s position weakened throughout the fall of 2015. So far, the analysis has provided a useful starting point for understanding the rationale behind the decision to intervene, as well as the timing of the intervention. The next chapter seeks to provide additional explanations for the intervention by assessing factors present on the international level.
4 | The International Level: Balancing against the United States

Chapter 3 analyzed three bilateral-level explanations behind Russia’s intervention in Syria. Focusing on the relationship between Moscow and Damascus, the analysis concluded that Russia had a clear interest in upholding the Syrian government. I now seek explanations on the international level, and aim to determine whether Moscow’s desire to balance against the United States can contribute to explain the Russian intervention.

Section 4.1 outlines the theoretical framework for this analysis, the balance of power theory, and supplements it with two additional theoretical concepts. This section illustrates how the theories on balancing can illuminate and refine conclusions about Russia’s interests and behavior in the Syrian case. Section 4.2 sets out to determine the balance of power between the United States and Russia prior to the intervention, and adjusts the conceptualization of power to fit the case in question. In section 4.3, I consider the efforts made by Russia to alter the balance of power in their favor, including the utilization of both military and non-military means. Furthermore, I assess Russia’s stance on previous U.S.-led military interventions with a view to placing the military intervention in Syria in a broader context. Section 4.4 addresses the implications of Russia’s military intervention. Lastly, section 4.6 concludes the chapter by summarizing the main findings of the analysis.

4.1 The theory of structural realism

The basic assumption of structural realism is that the ordering principle of the international system is anarchy, in the sense that no higher authority stands above states with the right to restrict their actions. Consequently, all states have the ability to inflict harm on others through their military capabilities and can thus never be certain about other states’ determination to use force (Mearsheimer 2010:79). Another assumption is that the main goal of a state is to secure its survival. The states operating in the international system are similar, sovereign political units, but they are distinguished by their differing capabilities. Hence, their power is a product
of their relative capabilities vis-à-vis other states. The theory of structural realism proposes that
the lack of a higher authority and the uncertainty about other states’ intentions make states
pursue power in order to protect themselves (Waltz 1979:118). The last key assumption is that
states are rational actors, in the sense that they are capable of pursuing strategies that maximize
their prospects of survival (not in the sense that they never miscalculate)⁹ (Mearsheimer
2010:80).

In his influential book Theory of International Politics (1979), Kenneth Waltz emphasizes that
the structure of the international system is defined by two essential elements. The first element
is the principle by which a system is ordered, anarchy. The second element is the distribution
of capabilities across the states operating in the system. A system may consist of one, two or
multiple centers of power, which in turn creates uni-, bi- or multipolarity in the international
system. The proposition is that changes in the distribution of capabilities between the great
powers produce a change in the system. Furthermore, Waltz (1979:126) assumes that the
primary concern of states is to maintain their positions in the international system rather than
to maximize power. The more powerful a great power is, the easier it is to secure the main goal
of survival. The circumstances created by the structure of the international system ultimately
make states compete for power at each other’s expense (Mearsheimer 2010:80). This creates a
so-called security dilemma, where steps taken by one great power to increase its own security
reduces the security of other states, who in turn counteract to reduce the security of the great
power (Mearsheimer 2010:81).

4.1.1 Power balancing

The balance of power theory is a further development of the theory of structural realism. It aims
to explain why similarly situated states – in this case the great powers – are expected to behave
in a similar manner (Waltz 1979:122). Its basic propositions are derived from the assumptions
outlined above: States are unitary actors operating in an anarchic environment who at a
minimum seek their own preservation, and at a maximum seek hegemonic power (Waltz

⁹ Theories of rationality define the concept in various ways and in strict and loose terms. As the balance of
power theory does not consider rationality a prerequisite for balancing to occur, the rationality assumption will
not be elaborated further in this analysis.

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A key proposition is that the balancing of power by some states against others recurs in the international system. Faced with unbalanced or unchecked power, states will try to increase their position vis-à-vis a more powerful state in order to prevent potential aggression from the latter. Power balancing is thus a means created by the uncoordinated efforts of the competing states to secure their basic interest, which is survival (Mearsheimer 2010:81-82, Waltz 1979:122).

Power balancing can be done through both internal and external efforts. Internal efforts include moves to increase economic capability or military strength, or to develop clever strategies in order to alter the power of the threatening state. External efforts, on the other hand, include moves to strengthen and enlarge one’s own alliance or engage in increased cooperation with other great powers (Waltz 1979:118, 168). Whether states undertake external or internal balancing efforts is in turn determined by the distribution of capabilities and the number of great powers in the international system. In a bipolar system, power balancing can occur only through internal efforts made by the two great powers, as there are no other significant great powers to ally with. When this is the case, a loss for one power automatically becomes a gain for the other. In a multipolar system, both internal and external balancing efforts are possible, because shifts in alignment by the various great powers provide an additional means of balancing against a threatening state (Waltz 1979:163). By combining military forces or increasing economic or technological cooperation, powerful states can increase their security by checking the power of the state they deem a threat to their security.

During the Cold War, as the Soviet Union and the United States engaged in intense security competition, structural realism became one of the leading theories of international politics. Through this period of bipolarity, power balancing between the two great powers was both evident and efficient (Mearsheimer 2010:86). This is not to say that power balancing does not occur in the post-Cold War era, and as I argue below, the theory is indeed fruitful for explaining why Russia chose to intervene in Syria. However, the assumption that a disrupted power balance will inevitably be restored has made the balance of power theory prone to criticism, as

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10 The distinction between preservation and hegemonic power divides the theory of structural realism into two branches; defensive and offensive realism. Defensive realism presumes that states in the international system aim to maintain status quo, while offensive realism presumes that states aim seek hegemonic power in order to survive. This thesis utilizes contributions from the theoretical branch of defensive realism.
empirical evidence has shown that this is not always the case. For instance, scholars have pointed out that years after the end of the Cold War, the United States remains the sole great power\footnote{Some scholars have argued that in later years, unipolarity has been challenged by the military and economic development of countries such as China (Mearsheimer 2010:90). The point of this analysis, however, is not to determine the number of global power centers.} (Wohlfforth 1999, Levy and Thompson 2010, Pape 2005). Following from this line of argument, the United States is not a rising hegemon, but an established one. Thus, the balance of power theory fails to explain why other states have not attempted to balance against it in previous cases, which in turn makes it fruitful to explore two additional theoretical concepts.

\subsection*{4.1.2 Balance of threat}

In his article “Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power” (1985), Stephen M. Walt modifies the balance of power theory by separating the concept of power from the concept of threat. His core argument is that states are likely to balance against a more powerful state when the powerful state in question is perceived as a threat to their security. Based on this assumption, the author considers four criteria states use to evaluate the level of threat a state poses: aggregate power, proximate power, offensive power and offensive intentions.

Aggregate power is measured by a state’s total resources: population, industrial and military capability, and technological expertise. The greater the total resources, the greater the potential of a state to threaten others (Walt 1985:9). This definition is similar to the concept of power presented in the balance of power theory. Proximate power is in turn measured by geographical distance, and the assumption is that nearby states pose a greater potential threat than those located far away. Offensive power points to one state’s ability to carry out military offensives against others, and a state in possession of significant offensive power is, all else being equal, considered more likely to provoke balancing than a state that is militarily weak (Walt 1985:11). The fourth criteria, offensive intentions, concern the states’ level of aggression. Walt argues that states which are perceived to have offensive intentions are more likely to provoke balancing efforts from other states, because “perceptions of intent play an especially crucial role in alliance choices” (Walt 1985:12).

As established, Waltz’ balance of power theory assumes that the increased power of one state is sufficient for other states to undertake balancing efforts. In other words, the theory postulates
that a greater power in itself is perceived a threat. Walt, on the other hand, presumes that states will balance against other states that pose a threat to them, but not necessarily against states simply gaining aggregate power. This contradicts the theoretical expectation of the balance of power theory, where states are predicted to simply balance against the strongest. Walt illustrates the importance of threats by showing how multiple Western countries chose to ally with the United States during the Cold War. Despite the fact that the United States had superior overall resources in terms of aggregate and offensive power, it was not perceived to have offensive intentions by its allies (Walt 1985:35). In terms of proximate power, the threat posed by the United States was also smaller, as it has only two countries on its border (Walt 1985:36). Consequently, Walt argues that states will not balance against great powers that do not pose a threat to them.

4.1.3 Soft balancing

The second addition to the balance of power theory is the concept of soft balancing, which was introduced in the late 1990s as an attempt to establish a distinction between power balancing by military means and other, non-military forms of balancing (Brooks and Wohlforth 2005:73). As the expected hard-power balancing against the post-Cold War unipolar power – the United States – remained absent in the early 2000s, the theoretical argument of soft balancing was further developed.

In the article “Soft Balancing against the United States” (2005), Robert A. Pape defines soft balancing measures as actions that include nonmilitary tools used to “delay, frustrate, and undermine aggressive unilateral U.S. military policies” (Pape 2005:10). Examples of such measures are the use of international institutions, economic statecraft and diplomatic arrangements. The author argues that the United States’ national security strategy after 9/11 is likely to lead to a “fundamental transformation” in how major states react to the future use of U.S. power, as the country’s traditional use of power has been replaced with so-called aggressive unilateralism (Pape 2005:9). Furthermore, this shift from exercising nonaggressive power in order to preserve the established political order in distant regions of the world has made other major powers undertake balancing measures to secure their autonomy.

The concept of soft balancing does not dismiss the conceptualization of power in the balance of power theory, or the importance of material capabilities. However, as military balancing
measures often are considered too costly to undertake in the short term, Pape predicts that soft balancing is more likely to occur if the United States continues on the same unilateral path (Pape 2005:10). The author challenges the prevailing view among scholars that the unipolar power of the United States cannot be balanced, and claims that the major states can attempt to restrain the actions of the sole great power and ensure their continued influence on international political affairs through the use of soft balancing measures.

In the following sections, the theoretical contributions of Waltz, Walt and Pape will serve to structure the empirical analysis. In line with the balance of power theory, the analysis will identify the internal and external efforts made by Russia to balance against the United States. Furthermore, by identifying Moscow’s stance on the United States’ military actions in Syria and elsewhere, the balance of threat theory will contribute to a comprehensive understanding of why Russia considered it necessary to intervene. Through an assessment of the diplomatic relationship between Russia and the United States throughout the Syrian war, the concept of soft balancing will serve to illuminate which balancing measures Russia put to use and why the decision to intervene was essential for Moscow’s ability to regain its diplomatic leverage.

In order to determine whether the Russian intervention may have been conducted as a means to power balance against the United States, the next section will identify the core issue between Russia and the United States in their positions on Syria, as well as the power distribution between the two countries prior to the intervention. As the analysis will show, the prospects for Russia to achieve its preferred outcome without an intervention was limited.

4.2 The power distribution prior to the intervention

In order to address whether Russia’s military intervention in Syria was a case of power balancing against the United States, it is necessary to identify the distribution of power prior to the intervention. Power is the central component in all the three abovementioned concepts of balancing. However, as the definition and understanding of power is contested, it is necessary to adjust the definition to make it fit the distribution of power in the case of the Syrian war. In Waltz’ balance of power theory, power equals relative material capabilities and functions mainly as a means to secure survival. Walt’s balance of threat theory divides power into three categories, but emphasizes that offensive intentions is the variable which determines whether balancing occurs. These conceptualizations of power were highly relevant during the Cold War,
when the United States and the Soviet Union were in a state of direct political and military tension. But as proposed by the theory of structural realism, this systemic feature disappeared when the bipolar structure of the Cold War vanished (Wohlforth 1999:5).

This thesis operates with the well-known definition of power formulated by Robert A. Dahl, which states that “A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do” (Dahl 1957:202-203). The definition differs from the power concepts found in theories of structural realism, as it concerns the relations between actors – in this case states – rather than their relative material prosperity. The point of redefining the concept of power used in the theories of Waltz and Walt is not to undermine the importance of military capabilities or material power in general, as both prevail as essential for a state’s security. However, the major difference from balancing in the Cold War era is that actions undertaken by one of the two great powers in the Syrian war do not directly threaten the survival or security of the other. Because the United States and Russia are not in direct military conflict in Syria, but rather support different parties on the ground, I argue that the core dispute concerns their degree of influence on the outcome of the war. By conceptualizing the definition of power as influence on the conflict outcome, the power distribution prior to the Russian military intervention in Syria can be addressed in a more relevant manner. The upcoming analysis will demonstrate the usefulness of such an experiment.

Conceptualizing power as influence on the conflict outcome enables us to determine the core issue and map out how the actions of Russia and the United States with regards to this issue have affected their influence, and hence their power vis-à-vis the other. The possible outcomes of the Syrian war are as multiple as they are unclear, but there is little doubt that the role of President Assad will be central to any of them. The United States and Russia have continuously stated that both countries have an interest in ending the hostilities and facilitate a political solution in Syria, and they have made numerous attempts to cooperate on diplomatic initiatives. However, they profoundly disagree on the role of Assad in the eventual outcome of the war. For the United States, the stated preferred outcome of the Syrian war is one where Assad steps down and a transition of power occurs. For Russia, the stated preferred outcome is one where Assad, as the elected president of Syria, remains in position until the Syrian people – and the Syrian people only – eventually decides otherwise. Russia’s use of its veto power to block the adoption of the first UN resolution in 2011 was the very manifestation of the diametrical
disagreement between the two great powers over the role of Assad in the outcome of the war. With this in mind, the remaining part of this section will assess the efforts made by the two great powers to influence Assad’s position on the ground before Russia intervened.

4.2.1 The United States’ efforts to influence the conflict outcome

Together with multiple Western and Arab states, the United States drafted two more resolutions on Syria in 2011 and 2012, both of which were vetoed by Russia and China. Consequently, the United States had to resort to other means of influencing the position of Assad’s regime. In July 2012, after the third resolution on Syria was vetoed, the United States authorized the non-governmental organization Syrian Support Group in Washington to begin financial transactions to the FSA (Hosenball 2012). In October 2012, U.S. Special Forces began training selected rebel fighters in Jordan (Borger and Hopkins 2013). In mid-June 2013, the United States began to provide arms and other military aid to the opposition of the Supreme Military Council, following from the use of chemical weapons in Syria for which the United States blamed the Syrian government (Madhani, Michaels and Brook 2013). On a parallel track, as the threat of ISIS intensified throughout the summer of 2014, Washington began to assess the possible options for defeating the militant group inside Syria. The United States’ involvement in the Syrian war took a serious turn on 22 September 2014, when it started an airstrike campaign against ISIS in Syria and Iraq, supported by five Arab countries. Despite criticism from the governments of Syria, Iran and Russia, who claimed that the U.S.-led intervention violated international law and the sovereignty of Syria, the coalition continued its airstrikes.

In addition to these measures, the United States’ strategic cooperation with Turkey and Saudi Arabia further strengthened the position of the Syrian opposition on the ground. Saudi Arabia has been one of the most active Arab countries in arming the Syrian rebels since the outbreak of the war in 2011. In February 2013, the kingdom reportedly delivered infantry weapons to opposition groups inside Syria, and in the fall of 2013, the United States and Saudi Arabia began to coordinate their assistance to the rebels (Chivers and Schmitt 2013, Al Arabiya 2014). Turkey permitted the first serious opposition conference to take place in Antalya in June 2011, and made attempts to coordinate the Syrian National Coalition in Istanbul two months later. The

12 The Supreme Military Council (SMC) is a unified command structure which includes the most important field commanders of the Syrian opposition (O’Bagy 2013).
country also provided shelter for essential parts of the leadership of the Free Syrian Army in October that year, and joined the Arab League and the Western states in imposing economic sanctions on Assad’s government in November (Phillips 2012, Stack 2011). In June 2012, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar set up a base to direct military aid and training to the armed opposition (Doherty and Bakr 2012). In July 2015, Turkey and the United States agreed on a plan for creating a partial no-fly zone along the Turkish border to Syria, aiming to drive ISIS out of the Euphrates area and to hinder fighter jets from the Syrian government forces to operate in the area (Ergan 2015).

4.2.2 Russia’s efforts to influence the outcome

In stark contrast to the United States, Russia has consistently supported the Syrian government and condemned the demands of regime change from the West and the Gulf countries. In addition to providing Assad with a diplomatic shield through the three UNSC vetoes, Russia continued its arms supplies to Syria from 2011 throughout 2015. As Assad’s position became increasingly challenged by both Western-backed Syrian opposition and ISIS, Russia promised to continue its military-technical cooperation with Syria and to implement the commitments regarding Syria’s defense capabilities (Said 2015). On 4 September 2015, only weeks before the military intervention, President Putin confirmed that Russia continued to provide “significant support” to Syria, including equipment, armaments and personnel training, but did not further specify the details of this support (President of Russia 2015e).

Furthermore, just as Saudi Arabia and Turkey’s support for the Syrian opposition improved the United States’ influence on the potential outcome by weakening Assad, Iran’s steadfast support for the Syrian regime bolstered Russia’s aim to secure Assad’s position. Iran provided the Syrian government with military supplies and training as part of Assad’s counterinsurgency operation when the first protests broke out in 2011, and has continued to provide intelligence services and weapons throughout the war. The supplies reportedly included small arms, ammunition, anti-aircraft guns and mortar shells, all said to have arrived with civilian aircrafts through Iraqi airspace (Fulton, Holliday and Wyer 2013:9, 15). In May 2012, an official from Iran’s Revolutionary Guard confirmed that Iranian forces were present in Syria, and in February 2013, tankers belonging to Iranian oil companies reportedly shipped Syrian crude oil to Iran, providing Assad with much needed economic support (Dehghan 2012, Sanchez 2013). Iran also
supported pro-regime militias and the Lebanese militant group Hezbollah inside Syria, which led to a further strengthening of the Syrian regime (Fulton, Holliday and Wyer 2013:20-21). In July 2015, the Iranian commander Qassem Soleimani visited Moscow, reportedly to coordinate Russian and Iranian efforts to safeguard the increasingly weakened position of Assad (Bassam and Perry 2015a)\(^{13}\).

4.2.3 An unfavorable power distribution

So far, this section has addressed the efforts of the United States and Russia to influence Assad’s position in Syria prior to the latter’s military intervention, and adjusted the realist concept of power by conceptualizing it as influence on the conflict outcome. For analytical purposes, however, it is necessary to operationalize this concept of power in order to analyze the empirical evidence. As the role of Assad in an outcome of the war is considered the main dividing line between the two great powers, the following analysis will treat power as a dichotomous variable in which the positive value indicates increased influence and the zero value indicates decreased influence on this matter. For Russia, whose preferred outcome is one where Assad remains in position, an increase in the Syrian president’s prospects for doing so equals a positive value. For the United States, on the other hand, increased prospects for the resignation or removal of Assad equal a positive value. Ultimately, and in line with the theoretical argument, this operationalization implies that the relative gain for one of the two actors equals a relative loss for the other.

In this regard, it is important to note that it is inherently more difficult to overthrow a sitting regime than to provide support for it. Regan (1996:353) finds that an intervention is more likely to succeed if it aims to support the government. In the case of Syria, the disparaging goals of the United States and Russia affected their available means of influence. While Russia could provide support for the existing government and its army, the United States’ options were confined to a fragmented opposition.

As established in chapter 2, the position of Assad’s government weakened significantly in the first half of 2015. After the Syrian government lost control of the Idlib governorate to Islamist rebels in March and of the city of Palmyra to ISIS in May, Assad’s position became gradually

\(^{13}\) The military-strategic cooperation between Russia and key regional actors during the intervention is further outlined in chapter 5.
more contested (Shaheen 2015). Furthermore, the Syrian armed forces fought against both rebel factions and ISIS in Aleppo from February throughout the summer, and armed rebel groups forced the government troops to retreat from the Sahl al-Ghab Plain north-west of Hama, an area described as Assad’s “heartland”, in August 2015 (Perry and al-Khalidi 2015b). Combined, these challenges left the Syrian government significantly weakened, and with few other alternatives than to concentrate on remaining in control of its western strongholds. Because the prospects for the survival of Assad’s government declined due to the president’s increasingly unstable position on the ground, Russia’s influence on the potential outcome of the war was reduced. Russia’s longstanding efforts to support the Syrian government was further challenged by the United States’ support for the Syrian opposition and its continued economic sanctions, as well as the limited effect of the U.S.-led coalition’s military efforts against ISIS in Syria.

To conclude, the empirical evidence suggests that the power distribution prior to the military intervention was unfavorable for Russia, particularly because its consistent support for Assad had proved insufficient for securing his position. Consequently, the prospects for Russia to achieve its preferred outcome was limited. Based on this unfavorable point of departure in terms of influence, the remaining part of this chapter aims to determine whether Russia’s military intervention can be considered a case of power balancing against the United States. The discussion presented in the next section is structured around the three theoretical contributions outlined in the previous section. It assesses the implications of Russia’s military intervention for Assad’s prospects for remaining in position, and consequently whether it increased Russia’s influence on the potential outcome of the war.

4.3 Russia’s power balancing in the Syrian War

4.3.1 Internal and external efforts

In terms of internal efforts, Russia made extensive efforts to reform and modernize its armed forces prior to the intervention. In terms of personnel reform, the main aim was to create a professionalized force with permanent combat readiness status. A second aim was to modernize
the army’s military hardware by investing in new weaponry and military equipment. By the time Russia intervened in Syria, the operational capabilities of Russia’s armed forces were significantly improved (Cooper 2016). As chapter 5 will show, however, these efforts were initiated as early as in 2008, after Russia had experienced extensive losses in the Russo-Georgian war. Furthermore, the improved capabilities materialized in Russia’s annexation of Crimea, in which Russian ground troops effectively invaded and occupied key locations. Hence, the increased military strength did not occur as a means of balancing against the United States in the case of Syria, and thus cannot be considered an effort made by Russia to tip the balance in their own favor.

In terms of external efforts, cooperation with other great powers in Syria has been rather limited. China provided important diplomatic support for the Russian position when it chose to veto all three draft resolutions on Syria in the UNSC in 2011 and 2012, thereby blocking any attempt to impose sanctions on Assad’s government. Its justification for doing so was similar to the one Russia has repeatedly put forward; any international action should comply with the UN Charter’s principle of non-interference in internal affairs (UNDPI 2011). China also joined Russia in coordinating with other BRICS states to oppose any resolution which enabled external military intervention, and in December 2011, the two countries proposed a joint alternative resolution on Syria which aimed to avoid the targeting of the Syrian regime (Allison 2013b:200). Despite China’s soft balancing efforts, however, Beijing has been remarkably reluctant to engage in any military operation in Syria, and has limited its engagement to various mediation initiatives, such as participating in the Action Group for Syria. Apart from endorsing Russia’s military intervention and emphasizing its legitimate character, China has not shown any indication that it plans to join ranks with its northern neighbor.

As outlined above, Iran is the only regional power which has supported the Russian actions in Syria both prior to and during the Russian military intervention. Weeks before Russia launched its aerial campaign, Iran was said to cooperate with Russia on securing military checkpoints in Latakia and Tartus, thereby allowing the Syrian armed forces to focus on countering ISIS. Furthermore, on 1 October 2015, hundreds of Iranian troops were reported to have arrived in Syria to join the Syrian armed forces in the Russian-supported ground offensive (Bassam and Perry 2015b). However, despite reports of the deaths of numerous members of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) in Syria, Iran has continuously denied the military presence
of Iranian troops in Syria and claimed that it serves only to provide advice and training for Assad’s forces (Karouny 2015, Riechmann 2016). Consequently, to the extent that the military cooperation between Russia and Iran in Syria can be characterized as an alliance, it remains an informal one.

So far, the analysis has shown that Russia’s internal and external efforts to balance against the United States in the case of Syria were rather limited. Internal efforts were undertaken, but prior to the military intervention: they thus fall short of explaining the intervention itself as a balancing effort. Furthermore, as Russia’s military intervention was a unilateral action, external cooperation with other great powers in order to tip the balance in their favor has been informal or confined to the diplomatic arena. The fact that Russia chose to conduct a military intervention unilaterally implies that it perceives the United States’ involvement prior to the intervention as potentially decisive for the fate of Assad. As evident from chapter 3, however, Assad should not be considered an ally to Moscow. Thus, we still lack the necessary basis for understanding why the core dispute between Russia and the United States concerns the role of Assad. As the next part of the analysis will show, Russia’s interest in securing Assad’s position is closely linked to the regime changing outcomes of previous U.S.-led military interventions. In this regard, Walt’s balance of threat theory better explains Russia’s rationale for intervening in Syria.

4.3.2 Opposing Western-led regime change

Russia’s disapproval of the situation on the ground in Syria in the early fall of 2015 was evident when President Putin addressed the 70th session of the General Assembly of the UN (UNGA) on 28 September. The Russian president stated that the refusal to cooperate with the Syrian government and its armed forces against terrorist groups had been “an enormous mistake”. Furthermore, he criticized the post-Cold War “single center of domination” for undertaking dangerous attempts to undermine the authority and legitimacy of the UN, and claimed that “aggressive foreign interference” has destroyed national institutions in both the Middle East and Northern Africa (President of Russia 2015b). Despite his avoidance of mentioning the United States by name, Putin’s statement left little doubt that the Western great power was the target of this criticism.
Allison (2013a, 2013b) argues that the Russian stance on Syria reflects a long-standing aversion to or fear of Western, U.S.-led intervention, and that this aversion can be linked to the emergence of the norm of humanitarian intervention in the UN Security Council. Three cases of U.S.-led intervention which resulted in regime change stand out as relevant in this regard: Kosovo in 1999, Iraq in 2003 and Libya in 2011. When NATO conducted its large-scale military operation in Kosovo in 1999, Russia immediately rejected the humanitarian justification for the intervention, which it considered “a cover for an illegal aggressive war motivated by power politics” (Allison 2013b:44). In a wider structural context, the Russian stance on Kosovo has been explained by Moscow’s reliance on international law and the principle of sovereignty, and is said to have reflected a fear of declining Russian influence on the European security environment. After NATO’s intervention in Kosovo, Russia’s then Prime Minister, Yevgeny Primakov, stated that “any forcible methods that NATO might employ outside its zone of responsibility must without fail be authorized by the UN Security Council” (Allison 2013b:48). The reference to the criteria of authorization in the UNSC was repeated by Russia when the United States launched its military intervention in Iraq in 2003. The lack of a UN mandate for this operation made Moscow concerned that the constraining influence of the norm of non-intervention on the regulation of force was deteriorating in the post-Cold War international system (Allison 2013b:119).

However, the most crucial case of regime changing U.S.-led military intervention with regards to the situation in Syria was the one conducted in Libya in 2011. The Libya intervention formed the backdrop of the breakout of the Syrian war, and was explicitly pointed out by Putin during his statement to the UNGA. In addition, the Russian president stated that the “export of so-called “democratic” revolutions” was a mistake, and that many of the terrorists recruited by ISIS in Syria came from Libya, “whose statehood was destroyed as a result of a gross violation of UN Security Council resolution 1973” (President of Russia 2015b). Resolution 1973, which was adopted in March 2011 and authorized a no-fly zone over Libya, was the first UN resolution which mandated the use of military force for humanitarian purposes against a functioning state. It was adopted despite the fact that Russia, who abstained from voting, proposed that a no-fly zone would be approved only after a ceasefire had been established and then broken by Qaddafi’s government (Allison 2013b:189-190). In the aftermath of the following NATO operation, Russia accused the coalition forces of a series of infringements of the resolution and
claimed that the focus of the operation on overthrowing Qaddafi violated international law, as well as the mandate agreed in the UN (Stent 2012:129, Allison 2013b:195). Consequently, Russia’s Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov warned that any future resolution authorizing the use of force, including in the case of Syria, would have to specify the rules of engagement and the limits of the use of force (The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2011b).

In his balance of threat theory, Walt (1985) concludes that balancing is the dominant tendency in international politics and that the United States has the upper hand in the balance of world power. Because the presumption is that balancing is likely to occur if a great power is perceived a threat, Walt argues that the great power should worry about so-called misplaced belligerence; as the United States is more likely to avoid balancing from other states if it avoids threatening behavior, “intervention in peripheral areas for the sake of “credibility” should usually be rejected” (Walt 1985:39). By demonstrating that its intentions are benevolent rather than aggressive, a state may thus reduce the risk of being balanced against. This argument is similar to the one presented by Mearsheimer (2010:87), who presumes that if a great power uses its military power to “reorder the politics of distant regions”, it may pose an increased threat to less powerful states. Combined, the cases of Kosovo, Iraq and Libya have led many in the Russian foreign policy establishment to consider U.S.-led military interventions as a threat to the stability of the international system and potentially to the regime stability of Russia and its near neighbors (Charap 2013:36). In the case of Libya, where the United States considered a resolution calling for “all necessary measures” as authorizing a NATO air campaign, Russian decision-makers considered the involvement of NATO as an effort to expand its military tasks and an attempt to sidestep the UN mission.

According to Allison (2013a:203), NATO’s involvement is considered incompatible with a prominent Russian role in the so-called concert of great powers, which traditionally has been expressed through the UNSC. On 31 December 2015, as Russia launched its new National Security Strategy, Moscow proved that this incompatibility went beyond mere rhetoric. The strategy identifies NATO as one of the main threats to Russia’s national security, based on its military buildup, its violation of the norms of international law and the further expansion of the alliance. Furthermore, the document explicitly states that the United States and its allies are seeking to retain their dominance in world affairs, and that these countries are implementing a policy of containing Russia (President of Russia 2015f). Adding to the experience from
previous U.S.-led interventions, the strategy left little doubt that Russia perceives the United States as having offensive intentions, which ultimately threatens Russia’s national security.

So far, the empirical evidence suggests that Russia had a clear interest in avoiding regime change in Syria. By placing the disagreement between Russia and the United States on the role of Assad in the broader context of prior U.S.-led military interventions, the rationale behind Russia’s consistent choice to provide a diplomatic shield for the Syrian government in the UNSC becomes clear: Because Russia perceives U.S.-led military actions under the norm of humanitarian intervention as a cover for regime change, it had no guarantee that a resolution authorizing a military intervention in Syria would not result in another U.S.-led operation aiming to remove the elected Syrian president. Consequently, it is likely that Russia predicted that opening for the use of force through a UN mandate would significantly reduce Russia’s influence on the conflict outcome.

Furthermore, the fear that the United States’ efforts to ouster the Syrian president could lead to regime change provides a useful explanation for Russia’s intervention. As established in chapter 3, the year-long efforts of the U.S.-led coalition to fight ISIS had not prevented the group from continuing to seize Syrian territory. In Moscow’s view, the further spread of terrorism threatened Assad’s position as well as Russia’s national security. In addition, the United States continued to arm and train various opposition groups, and did not depart from its demand that Assad had to step down in order for Washington to support the facilitation of a political solution to the war. Thus, as the last part of this section will show, Russia’s decision to intervene in Syria functioned as a catalyst for improving the diplomatic relationship between Moscow and Washington, thereby securing the continued Russian influence on the outcome.

4.3.3 Engaging in entangling diplomacy

Similar to Walt’s emphasis on the importance of demonstrating benevolent intentions rather than aggressive ones, Pape (2005:9) points out that the United States generally has enjoyed a reputation for “benign intent”, as it has used its power to preserve the established political order in the regions of the world. However, he claims that the post-9/11 strategy of so-called aggressive unilateralism has changed this reputation and given other major powers reason to fear it. As a consequence, Pape points to several non-military, or “soft”, balancing measures the major powers may undertake in order to increase the cost of the United States’ use of power,
including international institutions, economic statecraft and diplomatic arrangements (Pape 2005:38). These measures are used to delay or undermine U.S. policies in order to ensure continued influence on international political affairs.

In the case of Syria, Russia has utilized both the UN and various ad hoc diplomatic arrangements to secure Assad’s position and limit the use of force both prior to and during its military intervention. The most obvious effort to delay an authorization of the use of force was the country’s repeated use of its veto power in the UNSC. By vetoing three draft resolutions on Syria early on, Russia signaled that its consent was indispensable in the facilitation of an international political solution to the war. The vetoes also raised the United States’ potential reputational costs of launching a military intervention without a UN mandate. Furthermore, Russia continued to insist on including President Assad in a potential political transition or peace agreement. Its steadfast position on Assad explains why the Action Group for Syria’s written communiqué of 2012, which clearly expressed the need for a transitional government, merely stated that such a transition “could include members of the present government and the opposition and other groups and shall be formed on the basis of mutual consent”, and did not explicitly mention the fate of the Syrian president (AGS 2012).

As the United States refused to depart from its demand of Assad’s removal, the diplomatic stalemate was prolonged. After Russia annexed Crimea in March 2014, the prospects for an international political solution to the Syrian war seemed even more distant. The annexation led to a sharp deterioration of Russia’s diplomatic relationship with the United States and the EU, which, along with other countries, immediately coordinated and imposed economic sanctions on Russia (The White House 2014a, Christie 2015). The sanctions included restricted access to Western financial markets and services, as well as an export embargo on military goods and equipment for oil exploration and production, and inflicted significant damage on the Russian economy (Christie 2015). With reference to Ukraine, President Obama characterized Russia as a regional power that is “far more isolated in this instance than it was five years ago with respect to Georgia, and more isolated than it was certainly during most of the 20th century when it was part of the Soviet Union” (The White House 2014b). Furthermore, NATO suspended all practical cooperation with Russia one month after the annexation, and the G-7 countries released a declaration where they collectively suspended their participation in the planned Sochi
Summit of the G-8 and stated that they would meet without Russia (Emmott 2016, Council on Foreign Relations 2014).

Russia’s annexation of Crimea likely affected why the fruitless 2014 peace conference in Geneva was followed by an absence of bilateral dialogue between the two great powers. However, Russia’s military intervention in the fall of 2015 changed the circumstances on the ground and made the United States approach Russia once again, albeit in a limited way. One week into the intervention, the U.S. Secretary of Defense, Ashton Carter, accused Russia of pursuing a “tragically flawed” strategy and stated that the United States would refuse to cooperate with Russia as long as the airstrikes targeted Assad’s opposition (Stewart 2015). On the non-military track, however, the intervention made the United States seemingly more eager to reestablish its dialogue with Russia in order to facilitate peace talks between the Syrian government and the opposition. One month into the Russian military intervention, the two great powers met in Vienna as co-chairs of the International Syria Support Group (ISSG) to negotiate a peace plan. Despite the fact that Russia and the United States continued to disagree on the role of Assad in the political transition, the foreign ministers of both countries downplayed their differences when the peace plan was launched on 14 November. The U.S. Secretary of State, John Kerry, stated that “We still differ, obviously, on the issue of what happens with Bashar al-Assad. But we are relying on the political process itself – led by Syrians, which it will be, going forward, and with Syrians negotiating with Syrians – that that can help to bring a close to this terrible chapter” (U.S. Department of State 2015). Russia’s Lavrov continued on the same track, as he stated that “(…) there is a growing recognition of the need to create an effective international coalition to fight Islamic State” (Murphy and Brunnstrom 2015).

The constructive rhetoric from Vienna introduced the new level of cooperation that emerged during the subsequent months. During the G-20 summit in Turkey on 16 November, only a few days after the terrorist attacks in Paris, Obama and Putin engaged in a sidelines meeting reportedly resulting in an agreement between the two on the need for UN-mediated negotiations on Syria (Murphy 2015). A month later, on 18 December, the UNSC unanimously adopted resolution 2254, which set out a timetable for UN-facilitated peace talks between the Syrian government and the opposition beginning in January 2016 (UNDPI 2015). Furthermore, and more importantly, the resolution stated that the UNSC “stresses that the Syrian people will
decide the future of Syria” and supports “a Syrian-led political process that is facilitated by the United Nations and, within a target of six months, establishes credible, inclusive and non-sectarian governance” (UNSC 2015). During his visit to Moscow three days earlier, which aimed to bridge the gaps prior to the voting in the UNSC, Kerry emphasized that Assad’s future was to be determined by the Syrian people, and that the United States “are not seeking so-called regime change” (Karam 2015). The statement stood in stark contrast to the long-lasting and repeated demand made by the United States that the Syrian president must step down before a political transition of power was even negotiable. Rather, it reflected what the Russian stance had been since the outbreak of the war in 2011; that Assad, as the elected president of Syria, was to remain in position until the Syrian people decides otherwise.

Consequently, despite the avoidance of explicitly mentioning the future of Assad, resolution 2254 marked a watershed. Russia, a country that only weeks earlier had been condemned by the diplomatic community of the Western great powers for its airstrikes in Syria, had once again showed that its preferences had to be taken into account in order for a political agreement to be facilitated. The outcome made commentators describe Russia’s military intervention as an effort that had “increased Mr. Putin’s diplomatic leverage on an issue that has risen to the top of the priority list for the U.S. and Europe in the wake of the Paris attacks” (Sonne and Grove 2015). On the international level, Russia’s simultaneous diplomatic efforts had resulted in a peace plan for Syria which was largely enabled by an improved bilateral relationship with the United States. Pape (2005) names such efforts entangling diplomacy: By entangling the United States in diplomatic maneuvers, Russia imposed immediate constraints on the application of U.S. power. This is not to say that the military intervention made the United States and Russia agree on the preferred outcome of the war. Rather, the key point is that Russia’s diplomatic efforts on the international level, combined with its provision of momentum for Assad on the ground, made the United States recognize that Russia was indispensable to a political solution to the war. Thereby, Russia did indeed gain some power through influence.

4.3.4 The U.S. strategy in Syria

In this regard, it is important to note that Russia’s ability to constrain the application of U.S. power in part was made possible by Washington’s non-intervention strategy in Syria. The United States was for a long time reluctant to engage militarily in Syria. Prior to the
establishment of the U.S.-led coalition against ISIS in September 2014, the strategy utilized to influence Assad’s position was limited to economic sanctions and support for the Syrian opposition. As established, the United States also engaged in various diplomatic efforts to forge a negotiated settlement of the war. The Obama administration signaled early on that it would abstain from engaging in a large-scale military operation in Syria as well as in the broader Middle East. Before the launch of the air campaign against ISIS, the Libya intervention was the only exception to the intervention policy of the Obama administration, and the subsequent state collapse there likely affected its reluctance to undertake similar measures in Syria (Lynch 2015b). If Washington had decided to undertake a large-scale military intervention in Syria with the aim of overthrowing Assad’s government, Russia’s window of opportunity would likely have been significantly reduced. Instead, as the United States limited its military efforts to an air campaign against ISIS, Moscow could intervene unilaterally on behalf of Assad without risking a standoff between Russian and American forces. As this section has shown, the intervention functioned as a means to regain the diplomatic leverage Moscow had previously lacked.

4.4 Implications of the military intervention

Compared to the situation in the first half of 2015, when the Syrian government kept losing territory to both ISIS and various rebel factions, five and a half months of Russian airstrikes in Syria yielded significant improvement for Assad’s position on the ground. When Putin ordered the withdrawal of the main part of the Russian troops on 14 March 2016, he claimed the Russian forces had assisted the Syrian Army in retaking a total of 400 settlements and 10,000 square kilometers of territory (President of Russia 2016). The frequency of Russian airstrikes was nearly twice that conducted by the United States and its coalition allies in the same period (U.S. Department of Defense n.d.). Overall, the numbers leave little doubt that the military intervention tipped the scales in favor of Assad by providing his armed forces with momentum on the ground.
As emphasized in the previous section, Russia’s military intervention was supplemented by its commitment to international diplomatic efforts. On 22 February 2016, the Foreign Ministers of the United States and Russia announced that they had agreed on the terms for a cessation of hostilities after confirmation by the Syrian government and the opposition. The ceasefire, which came into effect on midnight of 27 February, was set to apply to any party engaged in military or paramilitary hostilities against any other parties except ISIS, the al-Nusra Front, or other terrorist organizations designated by the UNSC (U.S. Department of State 2016). The cessation of hostilities paved the way for the reopening of the peace talks between the Syrian government and the opposition, which formally began on 1 February but had been suspended only two days later due to differences between the parties on the priority of humanitarian issues (UN News Centre 2016).

On 14 March, the very same day as Russia ordered the withdrawal of the main part of its troops, the peace talks resumed in Geneva. Russia’s choice of timing can hardly be considered coincidental. By announcing its withdrawal, Russia provided an incentive for the Syrian regime as well as the opposition to seriously engage in the peace negotiations at a time where the situation on the ground was significantly more preferable to Assad, and thus for Russia, than it had been just months earlier. Furthermore, by concentrating its efforts on freezing the battlefield lines through a temporary ceasefire, Russia had been able to predicate that the truce would be based on a favorable configuration of forces on the ground, thereby expanding Assad’s momentum from the battlefield to the negotiation table (Gerges 2016). Consequently, the probability that any negotiated political settlement was likely to reflect a configuration preferable to Moscow increased remarkably.

As established in section 4.2, the prospects for the survival of Assad’s government declined significantly prior to the Russian intervention, due to the Syrian president’s deteriorating position on the ground. Combined with the United States’ support for the Syrian opposition and the U.S.-led coalition’s ineffective efforts to contain ISIS, Russia’s influence on the potential outcome of the war was significantly reduced. This in turn made the power distribution unfavorable for Russia. However, the situation began to change as Russia launched its first airstrikes.
The military intervention affected Russia’s influence on the role of Assad in three ways. First, by helping Assad’s forces retake control of large territories, Russia increased the prospects for the Syrian president to remain in control of its government stronghold and other strategically important areas, thereby challenging the position of the Western-supported opposition groups and their access to supply lines from Turkey and Jordan. Second, the military intervention made the United States restore diplomatic contact with Russia to negotiate a political solution, and thus increased Moscow’s bargaining position on the role of Assad in an agreement leading to a political transition. Third, by announcing its withdrawal on the same day as the UN-led peace talks resumed, Russia sent a clear signal to Assad that the negotiations were to be taken seriously, as Russia would not be able to secure his position if the negotiations were to break down.

Overall, the Russian military intervention showed the international community that Russia’s stance was to be reckoned with in any international attempt to end the Syrian war, and furthermore, that an elected head of state could not be removed by force in a legitimate way with regards to international law. By creating a shift in the power distribution between Assad and the Syrian opposition and engaging in simultaneous diplomatic efforts to find a political solution, Russia managed to shift the international power distribution in its favor in terms of influencing an eventual political outcome of the Syrian war.

4.5 Summary

This chapter has discussed the international-level factors affecting Russia’s choice to conduct a military intervention in Syria based on the theoretical contributions of Waltz (1979), Walt (1985) and Pape (2005). I found that when conceptualizing power as influence on the outcome of the war, the power distribution prior to the intervention was unfavorable for Russia, partly due to efforts undertaken by the United States to strengthen the Syrian opposition. Furthermore, by placing the disagreement on the role of Assad in the broader context of prior U.S.-led military interventions, I found that the regime changing outcomes of the latter are likely to have affected Russia’s decision to intervene at a time when Assad’s position was threatened. Secondly, in addition to changing the situation on the ground, the military intervention contributed to an improved bilateral relationship with the United States in terms of joint
diplomatic efforts. Russia’s utilization of what Pape names entangling diplomacy also imposed constraints on the application of U.S. power and made Russia de facto indispensable to a political solution to the war. Furthermore, the timing of the withdrawal is likely to have increased the stakes in an eventual breakdown of the peace negotiations that resumed the same day, thereby underlining Russia’s influence on the conflict.

Ultimately, two interrelated factors stand out as likely to have influenced Russia’s choice to intervene. 1) Russia’s concern that the weakened position of Assad and the efforts of the U.S.-led coalition to oust him would lead to regime change in Syria, and 2) Russia’s desire to participate in and influence international diplomatic attempts of crisis resolution in general, and a political transition in Syria in particular. Combined with the findings in the previous chapter, these factors have provided a more comprehensive understanding of Russia’s decision to intervene. As the next chapter will demonstrate, explanations on the national level may have further tipped the scale in favor of an intervention.
5 | The National Level: Reform and modernization of Russia’s armed forces

Chapter 4 found that the United States’ efforts to oust the Syrian president likely affected Russia’s decision to intervene at a time when Assad’s position was threatened. However, the fact that the intervention in Syria is the first military operation conducted by Russia outside the post-Soviet space implies that Russia has chosen not to intervene in a number of other conflicts taking place around the world after the end of the Cold War, regardless of U.S. involvement. Consequently, it is necessary to scrutinize developments on the national level to provide a comprehensive explanation for its decision. Russia’s armed forces underwent significant reform and modernization after its military operation in Georgia in 2008. This chapter sets out to determine whether these improvements may contribute to explain Russia’s decision to intervene in Syria.

The discussion is structured by a decision theoretic framework presented by Patrick M. Regan. The framework is based on the presumption that an intervention is essentially a policy decision, or choice, made by the political leaders of the intervening state. Regan’s contribution is useful because it provides a framework for analysis focusing exclusively on intervention in intrastate conflicts, which traditionally has been less studied than intervention in conflicts between states. While the Syrian war developed certain proxy characteristics over time due to the increasing involvement of external actors, the main parties engaging in direct military confrontation prior to the Russian intervention were the Syrian government and various local opposition groups, including both so-called moderate and extremist forces. More importantly, the core of the conflict remains a struggle over political power in Syria, despite the involvement of foreign actors. Thus, for analytical purposes, the following chapter is based on a characterization of the Syrian war as an intrastate, or civil, conflict\textsuperscript{14}.

\textsuperscript{14} The terms intrastate war and civil war are used interchangeably.
In his article “Choosing to Intervene: Outside Interventions in Internal Conflicts” (1998), Regan evaluates the conditions under which a third party is likely to intervene in an ongoing intrastate conflict. While the paradigms of realism and liberalism suggest different reasons why states intervene, Regan provides a theoretic framework for decision making that aims to bridge the two traditional strands within the literature of international relations. It includes the realist suggestion that states intervene only when clear national interests are at stake, but also the liberalist perception that domestic politics can play a leading role (Regan 1998:1, 11). Regan argues that three conditions must be met in order for a political leadership to conduct an intervention. The first condition is that there is a reasonable expectation for success. If success is an unlikely outcome, intervening will not be expected to pay off. The second condition is that the projected time horizon for achieving the outcome is short. If the intervention is likely to be prolonged, the material costs will increase accordingly, while the benefits of intervening will not – they may even decline. The third condition is that domestic support for an intervention must be present. If a lack of domestic support is evident, an intervention will generate domestic audience costs (Regan 1998:4-5). Overall, when considering whether to intervene in an intrastate conflict, decision makers will estimate the likelihood for success, and weigh the expected costs against the expected benefits to predict the net utility – that is, the ratio of benefits to costs – of an intervention. Thus, the three conditions are closely interlinked.

While it is outside the scope of the thesis to assess both the implementation of Russia’s intervention in Syria and its outcome, parts of this chapter will examine how the military operation has been conducted in order to illustrate how the improved operational capabilities of the Russian armed forces after 2008 likely affected the decision to intervene. Through such an examination, it becomes evident that the reform and modernization efforts undertaken after the Russo-Georgian war in 2008 are central for understanding how Moscow estimated the costs and benefits likely attributable to the intervention in Syria. The developments of Russia’s armed forces in recent years provided the backdrop for Moscow’s expectation of the intervention’s success, the projected time horizon of the operation and the domestic support for military action.

Section 5.1 outlines the characteristics of Russia’s military operation in Georgia and the subsequent reform and modernization efforts. In light of these efforts, section 5.2 briefly outlines the military operation in Syria, and assesses how the improved operational capabilities
of its armed forces may have affected Moscow’s expectations of success. In section 5.3, I address the duration of the intervention in light of both external events and the reform and modernization efforts. Section 5.4 discusses the domestic audience costs likely attributable to a Russian intervention, and contrasts the Syria case with public support for previous military operations abroad. Furthermore, it assesses how the state-controlled media system and the Russian authorities’ ability to shape conflict narratives affects the public opinion. Section 5.5 maps the net utility of an intervention in Syria by identifying the expected benefits of intervening. Lastly, section 5.6 summarizes the main points of the analysis.

5.1 Post-2008 military improvements

After the end of the Cold War, Russian authorities introduced a string of military reform programs, which aimed at providing traditional defense as well as meeting future challenges. During Yeltsin’s presidencies, these reforms concentrated on reducing the troop numbers, leaving Russia with a reduced mass-conscription army largely reflecting the Soviet-style armed forces. Its limitations were in part reflected in the drawn-out Chechen wars in the 1990s. After Russia’s costly military intervention in Georgia in 2008, however, reform plans aiming to produce a modern and professional Russian military were implemented (Renz 2010:58). In order to gain a comprehensive understanding of how the improved operational capabilities of the Russian armed forces affected the decision to intervene in Syria, this section provides an overview of the Russian military operation in Georgia and the subsequent reform and modernization efforts.

According to the Kremlin, the five day long Russo-Georgian war of August 2008 proved the renewed ability of Russia’s armed forces to fight a conventional war. At the same time, Russia’s rapid but uneasy victory underlined the need for substantial military changes (Renz 2010:58, Bukkvoll 2009:57). Moscow’s military strategy in Georgia consisted of a combination of massive ground deployments and supporting air and naval operations – a strategy that reflected traditional Soviet military thinking (Pallin and Westerlund 2009:403). The ground, air and naval forces were deployed within hours after the war broke out, and in particular Russia’s ability to achieve air superiority was described as necessary for the efficiency of the ground and naval elements of the operation (Pallin and Westerlund 2009:406). However, more or less serious
flaws were revealed in all three elements.⁵ The ground forces proved too slow to react, the air force was unable to provide close air support and to cooperate with the ground forces, while the navy failed to protect the Black Sea flank. Furthermore, the Russian forces lacked various military equipment, ranging from combat radios to assault landing ships and drone aircrafts (Renz and Thornton 2012:45-47). Russia’s air campaign was one of the most criticized parts of the operation in Georgia (Bukkvoll 2009:59). According to official Russian figures, four Su-25 attack planes and one Tu-22 strategic bomber were lost during the five days of the war. When including the aircrafts damaged beyond repair, Russia’s losses was estimated to exceed 10 aircrafts (IISS 2008, cited in Pallin and Westerlund 2009:408).

Despite proving able to achieve a successful outcome in Georgia, the technological and organizational shortcomings produced significant material and human costs to Russia’s armed forces. Overall, the Russian military lacked diversification in its capabilities, had significant logistical challenges between air and ground forces, and had severe constraints on its ability to wage counterinsurgency warfare (Pallin and Westerlund 2009:418). In the wake of the Russo-Georgian war, then Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov initiated an extensive process for reforms in the Russian armed forces. The main aim was to abandon the traditional mass mobilization army and instead create a professionalized force with permanent combat readiness status. In terms of personnel, the reforms set out to reduce the armed forces from 1.35 to 1 million and to reduce the number of military officers by nearly two thirds by 2012, while simultaneously improving their training and education. This included prioritizing the recruitment of full-time, professional soldiers; and improving command and control efficiency by reorganizing the structure of Russia’s armed forces (Renz 2010:58-59).

The actual implementation of the different reform initiatives has varied. Some of the structural changes undertaken to improve command and control, such as streamlining commands and creating a three-tiered structure including brigades, were rapidly implemented. Furthermore, by 2010, the military had sacked 180,000 officers in keeping with the reform plan, but 70,000 had to be taken back the next year (Renz and Thornton 2012:47). The initial recruitment of contract soldiers to replace the conscripts and professionalize the army proved more difficult than first

⁵ See Pallin and Westerlund (2009) or Bukkvoll (2009) for more detailed information on the losses and shortcomings of the operation.
envisioned, partly due to potential soldiers’ lack of will to be recruited given the lack of social provisions. However, by 2014 the number of contract soldiers surpassed the number of conscripts in the Russian armed forces. Furthermore, two brigades, five battalions and 12 special forces units had been manned exclusively with contract soldiers, according to the Ministry of Defense. In terms of personnel, these changes reflected a significant improvement (Russia Today 2014, Renz and Thornton 2012:46, Baev 2015:23).

A second aim of the 2008 reforms was to modernize the army’s military hardware. The investment in new weaponry, including cruise missiles, has been a central part of the military strategic development after 2008 (Tamnes, Bundt, Grytting, Hoel, Matlary, Toje and Wilhelmsen 2015:19). The aging equipment had long been a source of discontent within the Russian army, and the operation in Georgia largely functioned as a catalyst to improve it (McDermott 2009:68). In 2010, then President Dmitri Medvedev approved the State Armament Programme (GPV-2020) for the period from 2011 to 2020, after having criticized the Russian arms industry for its inability to create innovative technologies. The GPV-2020 aims to increase the share of Russia’s modern armaments from 15 percent in 2010 to 70 percent by 2020, with a clear priority of acquiring new arms. The total value was set out to be a staggering 20 trillion rubles, or 680 billion USD (Cooper 2016:4).

In his extensive analysis of the implementation of the GPV-2020, Cooper (2016) finds that Russia’s military capabilities were “genuinely enhanced” from 2011 to 2015, as the armed forces received new weapons of sufficient quantity and quality since the initiation of the modernization program. The most important development with regards to the ground forces was the procurement of the Iskander-M ballistic missile system (Cooper 2016:49). The delivery of new ships to the navy, which despite its shortcomings had proven the most operative element during the Georgia operation, was delayed due to the end of Ukrainian military-related deliveries to Russia and the sanctions from the EU and NATO after the Ukraine crisis (Cooper 2016:49). Nonetheless, the navy’s overall capacities have been strengthened due to its significant budget increase16. In contrast to the modernization of the equipment of the ground forces and the navy, the annual additions to the air force have been successful with regards to the ambition of the GPV-2020, and the Russian air force has undergone significant

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16 The navy was allocated 23 percent of the total budget (Oxenstierna and Westerlund 2013).
improvement considering the number of new aircrafts entering service. In 2014, the air force received 140 planes and 135 helicopters, and was expecting to obtain another 200 aircrafts or so by the end of 2015. The overall aim is to obtain around 100 new aircrafts each year in the remaining years up to 2020 (TASS 2015b, Pukhov 2016, cited in Åtland et al. 2016:37). In sum, by the time Russia intervened in Syria, its armed forces were increasingly professionalized and better trained and equipped than they had been during the operation in Georgia. In light of these recent reform and modernization efforts, the following section sets out to identify how Moscow estimated its likelihood of succeeding with a military operation in Syria.

5.2 Russia’s subjective estimate of success

Regan’s theoretical assumption is that the decision to intervene is a function of the decision makers’ subjective estimate of the likely outcome of the conflict. This estimate may be determined by factors such as the intensity of the conflict and the capabilities of the intervening state. As this section will show, the improved capabilities of the Russian armed forces were essential to Moscow’s expectation of succeeding with a military operation in Syria.

Regan (1998:7) defines a successful outcome as “one in which the intervention contributes to the cessation of hostilities”. Because intrastate conflicts with great intensity generally are more difficult to resolve, and thus carry great expected costs for the intervening state, the presumption is that interventions in such conflicts are more likely to fail. Hence, states are unlikely to conduct interventions in intrastate conflicts where serious atrocities are taking place (Regan 1998:14). Due to the intensity, the high number of casualties and the presence of multiple actors in the Syrian war, it seems unlikely that Russia’s subjective estimate of success relied on whether a military intervention would lead to a complete cessation of hostilities. However, stopping the fighting or requiring such cessation as a necessary first step for further action, may also be considered as conceptions of success by potential interveners (Regan 1998:7). As established in chapter 4, Russia’s preferred outcome of the Syrian war is one where President Assad remains in power until a democratic, Syrian-led political transition eventually is carried out. This indicates that Russia’s subjective estimate of success was based on the likelihood of its military operation resulting in an increasingly stabilized position of the Syrian government and state institutions, rather than a complete cessation of hostilities.
Overall, if Moscow did not expect that its forces would prove able to secure the position of Assad’s government and effectively target the terrorist groupings perceived a potential security threat to Russia, it seems highly unlikely that the operation would have been carried out. The result of the aforementioned reform and modernization efforts are important in this regard. As established, it is outside the scope of this thesis to assess the implementation of Russia’s military operation in Syria. Furthermore, it is more or less impossible for an outside observer to know with certainty which assessments Russian decision makers relied upon when deciding to intervene in Syria. However, examining how the Syria operation has been conducted enables us to gain a more comprehensive understanding of what factors Moscow likely emphasized in its subjective estimate of success prior to intervening.

Russia’s intervention strategy in Syria has primarily consisted of the extensive use of airstrikes, with support from both the naval and the ground forces. From the outset, the Russian air campaign was characterized by high intensity, a shifting geographical focus and the utilization of various types of weaponry. The operation was quickly described as “Russia’s first U.S.-style war”, mainly due to the launch of airstrikes from both great heights and great distances, which made it difficult for the opponents to hit back at the Russians on the battlefield (Trenin 2015, Åtland et.al. 2016). The Khmeimim airbase in Latakia, which was established for Russian use in mid-2015, functioned as the main base for Russian aircrafts throughout the operation. Both personnel and military equipment deployed at the base came from Russia by air (Åtland et.al. 2016:19). A significant amount of the aerial hardware deployed at Khmeimim was a result of Russia’s modernization efforts after 2008. The aircrafts initially deployed consisted of upgraded attack aircrafts such as Su-24, Su-25 and Su-30 fighter jets, which were deployed to cover strategic bombers and provide close air support to Syrian ground forces. Furthermore, new Su-34 fighter jets were included in the Russian arsenal. Throughout the operation, the detachment was supplied by a number of modernized Su-35S combat aircrafts and additional Su-34s. In November, the upgraded S-400 long-range air defense system was deployed at the Khmeimim airbase (Åtland et.al. 2016). Various modernized attack helicopters were also engaged to hit enemy positions at low altitudes (Kofman 2015).

The majority of Russian air-delivered missiles has been traditional, unguided munitions, such as fragmentation bombs and cluster munitions launched from medium altitude. However, around 20 percent of the total amount of air-delivered weaponry consisted of precision-guided
munitions, including laser- and satellite-guided bombs and air-to-surface missiles (Gorenburg, cited in Åtland et.al. 2016:22). The Su-34 fighter jets were supplied with new KAB-500S satellite-guided bombs, which constitute a relatively recent part of the Russian arsenal (Jenzen-Jones and Lyamin 2015). Furthermore, Russia’s air forces fired cruise missiles for the first time in Syria. The missiles were dropped from high altitude by Tu-95 and Tu-160 long-range strategic bombers operating from Russian territory (Åtland et.al. 2016:24-25). Overall, the Russian air forces carried out attacks at high speed and around the clock. The initial number of airstrikes in the beginning of October were around 20 per day, but tripled to 60 per day in the following weeks (Kofman 2015).

Led by the Black Sea Fleet, Russia’s Mediterranean squadron has also been a significant component of the operation. In addition to conducting fire support operations, carrying out escort missions and transporting personnel and equipment from Sevastopol to Tartus, the Russian navy had a central role in providing extended air defense outside the Syrian coast (Kofman 2015). By the beginning of October, several vessels were positioned outside Latakia. This included the guided missile cruiser Moskva of the Black Sea Fleet, the guided missile destroyer Smetlivy and multiple other vessels (Åtland et.al. 2016:28). With its naval variant of the S-300 air defense system, the Moskva missile cruiser provided the bulk of the fleet’s capability (Kofman 2015). Like the long-range strategic bombers operating from Russian territory, surface vessels from the Caspian Flotilla were positioned in the Caspian Sea – 1500 kilometers away – and equipped with Kalibr land-attack cruise missiles (Åtland et.al. 2016:29). The Caspian Flotilla is newer and more capable than the Black Sea Fleet, and was used to launch cruise missiles against targets in Raqqa, Idlib and Aleppo (Kofman 2015). A total of ten Russian combat vessels were participating in the operation, six in the Mediterranean and four in the Caspian Sea (The Russian Ministry of Defense 2015a, Cavas 2015). Furthermore, cruise missiles were launched from the Black Sea Fleet’s newest diesel-electric submarine Rostov-na-Donu for the first time in Syria (The Russian Ministry of Defense 2015b, Åtland et.al. 2016:30).

Compared to Russia’s military operations in both Georgia and Ukraine, the use of Russian ground forces in Syria has been significantly more limited. By October, the total number of personnel present on the ground was reportedly 1600, but the actual number was estimated to around 3000 – a small, yet significant deployment of ground troops (Åtland et.al. 2016:20).
Furthermore, an unknown number of Russia’s special forces were involved in reconnaissance missions to assist in the targeting of airstrikes (Galeotti 2016). While Russian authorities claim that the role of the ground forces was limited to protecting its military bases and infrastructure related to the air campaign, footage from Syria indicates that Russian contract soldiers have performed various tasks and at times engaged in direct combat action (Åtland et.al. 2016:30-31). Russian military advisors were reportedly used to train and organize Syrian military units and develop routines for maintenance and reparation of damaged hardware. In addition to operating tanks, air defense systems and artillery around Khmeimim, the ground forces were observed operating Syrian-bought Russian artillery during the offensives in Palmyra and Khamrat, reportedly due to lack of operating skills and effectiveness among Syrian soldiers. Furthermore, Russia provided the Syrian ground troops with new T-90 tanks and modern BTR-82 armored vehicles, which are likely to have been operated by Russian soldiers (Leviev 2016 and Ramm 2016, cited in Åtland et.al. 2016:31).

Given the efforts undertaken to improve the operational capabilities of the Russian armed forces prior to the intervention, it appears that Moscow’s prospects of succeeding were well-founded. The payoff from the reforms and modernization programs materialized in the Syria operation. The improved capacity of the military was reflected in its responsiveness, mobility and reach, as well as its ability to conduct a joint operation with improved command and control efficiency. In stark contrast to the operation in Georgia, the air-, naval- and ground forces managed to avoid major communication challenges, and instead functioned as mutually reinforcing units. Furthermore, notwithstanding the collateral damage caused by the Russian airstrikes, the material losses related to the operation in Syria were limited compared to the losses Russia experienced during the much shorter Russo-Georgian war. The operation also reflected Russia’s recent investment in modernized equipment for the military forces in general, and the air forces in particular, as set out in the GPV-2020.

Because conflict dynamics tend to develop and change, risks and uncertainties are attributable to all types of military interventions. However, as the improved hardware and operational capabilities of Russia’s armed forces were evident prior to the operation in Syria, it is reasonable to assume that Moscow was confident that the operation would be able to achieve the desired outcome when deciding to intervene. Two additional factors provide support for this
assumption. First, the military operation was well prepared and trained for. As President Putin pointed out two weeks into the operation, Russia “carried out preliminary work that involved concentrating sufficient forces, resources and equipment in the right place at the right time” (President of Russia 2015a). A month before the launch of the first airstrikes, the Russian army deployed personnel, fighter jets, helicopters, armored vehicles and artillery to Syria (Conflict Intelligence Team 2015, cited in Åtland et.al. 2016). Several aircrafts and helicopters were transferred to the Khmeimim airbase during the late summer, and the Russian navy’s presence in the Mediterranean was strengthened (Åtland et.al. 2016:20). A significant part of this military buildup was conducted under the guise of military exercises, such as the strategic-operational exercise “Tsentr 2015” conducted earlier in September. This exercise functioned as the grand rehearsal for the Syria operation (McDermott 2015).

Second, the limited use of Russian ground forces in Syria was made possible by Russia’s close cooperation with Syria, Iran, Iraq and Hezbollah, also known as the 4+1 coalition. In addition, the launch of cruise missiles by the Caspian Flotilla was made possible by the permission from Tehran and Baghdad to use their airspace (Trenin 2015). The coalition’s establishment of a joint center for intelligence-sharing in Baghdad prior to the intervention is also likely to have been considered useful for Russian intelligence. According to Putin, “the data exchanged through this center has added to [Russia’s] overall information. Thus, everything that is taking place in the air and on the ground is not spontaneous action, but the implementation of plans prepared in advance” (President of Russia 2015a). Furthermore, an intervention strategy that emphasizes the aerial and/or naval dimension necessarily constitutes a smaller risk of producing severe losses than a strategy that relies on deploying ground troops to engage in direct combat. By coordinating its efforts with these regional actors prior to intervening, Russia could limit its operation to an air campaign, while soldiers from Iran and Hezbollah constituted the main ground support for the Syrian army. The cooperation enabled Russia to provide support for the Syrian army in recapturing key areas on the ground, while at the same time limiting the risk of the intervention producing significant human and material losses.

In Syria, Russia launched cruise missiles from long-range strategic bombers, surface vessels and a submarine for the first time in real combat. New or modernized fighter jets, attack helicopters and missile systems were central to the air campaign, and the participation of the modern Caspian Flotilla strengthened the naval element of the operation. Ultimately, given the
costly experience from the Russo-Georgian war, it appears unlikely that Russia would have intervened in Syria if the reform and modernization efforts after 2008 failed to materialize. The empirical evidence suggests that the modernized hardware and the improved operational capabilities of the Russian armed forces were essential to the type of intervention Moscow could conceive in Syria, and furthermore, that these factors likely contributed significantly to its expectation of succeeding and hence its decision to intervene. The extensive preparations for an upscaling of the military involvement in Syria and the opportunity to limit the use of ground troops are also likely to have contributed positively to Moscow’s subjective estimate of success, as these circumstances reduced the expected human and material costs of the operation.

5.3 Limiting the duration of the intervention

The likelihood of succeeding with an intervention is closely linked to the second condition, which is that states only intervene in an intrastate conflict when the projected time horizon is short. Succeeding at an acceptable cost and in a reasonable time frame are decisive to an intervention’s ability to produce an effective outcome (Regan 2002:55, 59). As pointed out by Regan (1998:5), a drawn-out intervention will generally increase the material costs relative to a brief intervention, while the expected benefits remain constant or possibly decline. In such cases, the net utility of intervening is reduced. As this section will show, the improved operational capabilities of the Russian armed forces likely contributed to Moscow’s assessment of the armed forces’ ability to conduct an efficient intervention and thus limit the costs of intervening. Furthermore, I argue that the decision to withdraw the main part of the Russian forces was made possible by the success criteria of the intervention.

In an extensive analysis of 150 intrastate conflicts, Regan (2002:71) finds overwhelming support for the hypothesis that any outside intervention, regardless of its target and type, tends to prolong the conflict’s duration. Furthermore, conflicts that attract opposing outside interventions are considerably more likely to be protracted than conflicts that lack third-party support for both of the sides involved. In light of Regan’s findings, Russia’s choice to intervene in Syria appears somewhat paradoxical. By the time the Russian airstrikes were launched, the U.S.-led coalition had operated in Syrian airspace for one year, and the United States had provided arms support for Syrian opposition groups even longer. Thus, it seems likely that Moscow was well aware that the choice to provide military support for the Syrian government
and its armed forces could lead to a stalemate of the conflict, and thereby prolong the war. However, as established in the previous section, the main aim and success criteria of the Russian intervention was not to contribute to a cessation of hostilities, but rather to strengthen the position of Assad’s government. Furthermore, as the findings in chapter 4 suggest, Russia had a clear interest in limiting the influence of the United States on the outcome of the conflict. When taking these preconditions into account, the decision to intervene appears more understandable.

On a related note, it is reasonable to assume that in cases where the success of an intervention does not depend on its ability to end a civil war, it is easier for the third-party to limit the duration of an operation, and thereby limit the costs of intervening. Foreign states intervening in a civil war with the aim to produce peace or end an armed conflict do not have the same opportunity to withdraw without jeopardizing the intervention’s success. In such cases, an intervention may turn out to be drawn-out and costly, as the United States experienced in Afghanistan, or lead to renewed fighting once the foreign power(s) pull out, as happened in Libya after the NATO-led coalition withdrew its forces. As Russia’s aim in Syria differed from these cases, however, the time horizon of the military intervention depended less on the prospects for peace and more on the efficiency of the operation. This is not to say that the Russian authorities did not assess the possibility that the duration of the operation could be prolonged when deciding to intervene. Given the improved operational capabilities of the Russian armed forces, however, Moscow may have considered it likely that an intervention would stabilize the position of the Syrian government in a relatively efficient manner.

From the outset of Russia’s intervention, President Putin explicitly stated that the operation would be limited in time to the Syrian army’s offensive (President of Russia 2015a). On 14 March 2016, he announced the withdrawal of the main part of the Russian troops deployed in Syria, which was set to begin the following day. In his meeting with Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, Putin stated that the objective of the operation had been “generally fulfilled” (President of Russia 2016). According to the Defense Minister, Syrian troops supported by Russia’s air forces had liberated 400 towns and 10,000 square kilometers of territory. Furthermore, Russian strikes had driven terrorists out of Latakia, cleared most of the provinces of Homs and Hama, restored communication with Aleppo and established
governmental control over oil and gas fields near Palmyra. Moreover, the Defense Minister announced that over 2,000 “criminals” who had travelled from Russia had been eliminated on Syrian territory, including 17 field commanders – a “significant turning point in the fight against terrorism” (President of Russia 2016).

Similar to the launch of Russian airstrikes five and a half months earlier, the announcement of a withdrawal was seemingly a surprise to many in the international community. However, as the bases in Tartus and Khmeimim were to continue operating at the same levels, analysts quickly characterized it as a drawdown of the air contingent rather than an actual withdrawal of the Russian forces (Gorenburg and Kofman 2015). According to Putin, the remaining military presence in Syria was to be considered “Russia’s traditional footprint in Syria, not an operation” (Gorenburg and Kofman 2015). Nevertheless, when assessing the duration of the intervention, one cannot rule out that announcing a withdrawal of the main part of Russian forces may have been a calculated move by Moscow, aiming to limit the costs and secure the benefits of the military operation. While the scope of this thesis is limited to the period between 30 September 2015, when Russia launched its first airstrikes in Syria, and 14 March 2016, when the withdrawal was announced, Russia’s military involvement in the Syrian war is by no means over. Compared to a delimited intervention, a drawn-out intervention necessarily inflicts increased material costs upon the third party. Thus, the timing of the Russian redeployment may be considered a calculated move made by Moscow to limit further material and human costs of the Russian operation and to sharpen the focus on the diplomatic initiatives developing on the international scene. Proclaiming the objectives of an operation as fulfilled and announcing a withdrawal can thus be considered an effective way of cutting the costs linked to a military intervention.

It is difficult for an outside observer to determine whether the official duration of the intervention in Syria was longer or shorter than initially anticipated. Furthermore, certain external factors likely led to the intensification, if not extension, of Russia’s operation. The loss of a Russian passenger aircraft which crashed in Sinai, Egypt, on 31 October led to the intensification of airstrikes and the launch of cruise missiles, after the subsequent investigation

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17 See, for example, Baev and Aleksashenko (2016) for further discussion on whether the withdrawal signaled the intervention’s success.
deemed the incident a terrorist act (President of Russia 2015g). Furthermore, the terrorist attacks in Paris on 13 November, which ISIS claimed responsibility for, also led to an intensification of Russia’s air campaign. According to Åtland et.al. (2016:32), these incidents likely gave Russian authorities a need to show the Russian public and the international community increased decisiveness in the fight against ISIS. Consequently, the number of aircrafts operating in Syria was doubled, and the introduction of long-range strategic bombers was part of Russia’s retaliatory operation aiming to destroy ISIS-controlled military and oil and gas production facilities. From 17 to 20 November, these bombers launched 83 cruise missiles against targets inside Syria, according to the Ministry of Defense. By 20 November, 69 aircrafts were engaged in the military operation (The Russian Ministry of Defense 2015a).

The abovementioned incidents indicate that Russia’s intervention, like most interventions, were prone to developments outside its control. Because ISIS is perceived a security threat to Russia, as well as a threat to the stability of the Syrian government, Moscow needed to show strength in order to avoid risking the intervention’s success. Once again, the importance of the reform and modernization efforts come to the fore. By the time Russia announced its withdrawal, the air forces had carried out a total of 9000 combat sorties, consisting of massive strikes with dispersed weaponry at a distance of over 1,500 kilometers (President of Russia 2016). The frequency of airstrikes was unprecedented compared to what the Russian armed forces had proven able to conduct in previous military interventions. While it is impossible for decision makers to take into account all likely scenarios when deciding whether to intervene, Moscow – well aware of the improved operational capabilities of its armed forces – could take into account that it would be able to conduct an extensive air campaign, and an effective retaliatory operation if necessary. Perhaps most importantly, the improved operational capabilities of the armed forces allowed Moscow to do so with increased confidence.

So far, the empirical evidence presented in this chapter supports the theoretical assumption that an expectation of succeeding, and doing so in a limited amount of time, are conditions which must be present in order for a third-party to pursue an intervention. Moreover, the analysis finds support for the assumption that the improved operational capabilities of the Russian armed forces were essential to Moscow’s decision to intervene in Syria. Given the duration of the air campaign and the frequency of airstrikes, it appears highly unlikely that Russia would have
intervened in Syria if the operational capabilities of its armed forces had been at the same level in 2015 as they were seven years earlier. If the armed forces failed to improve, it is reasonable to assume that the Syria operation would either be unsuccessful or much less efficient, which in turn would reduce the net utility of intervening. Nevertheless, one cannot rule out that announcing the success of the operation and withdrawing the majority of Russia’s armed forces from Syria may have been a deliberate move aiming to limit the costs of intervening. In the words of Lukyanov (2016:35), “the pull-out of forces from Syria was a sign of the strategy’s success. Moscow had demonstrated its military prowess and changed the dynamics of the conflict but had avoided to be tied down in a Syrian quagmire”. As the next section will show, decision makers’ interest in limiting the costs of an intervention is closely linked to domestic audiences.

5.4 Avoiding domestic audience costs

As the previous sections have shown, interventions in intrastate conflicts generate certain human and/or material costs for the intervening party. But costs can also be inflicted by the domestic audience in the intervening state – the public opinion. For instance, if an intervention leads to the loss of soldiers’ lives or negatively affects the economy of the intervening state, the electorate may express opposition to the decision makers responsible for these costs. With this in mind, decision makers have to weigh the competing demands and interests of various constituency groups when deciding whether to intervene (Regan 1998:8). Because a lack of public support is likely to generate domestic audience costs, domestic opposition to a proposed intervention may negatively impact the decision makers’ expectations about prospective payoffs of intervening (Regan 1998:11). Thus, the third condition for a state to intervene in a civil war is that domestic support for an intervention must be present. As this section will show, the Russian government’s ability to control the conflict narrative depicted in Russian media, as well as its efforts to display the improved military capabilities of the armed forces to the Russian public, likely limited Moscow’s concern that the Syria intervention would produce significant domestic audience costs.

Russia’s previous military operations in Chechnya, Georgia and Ukraine all led to a spark in the public support for President Putin (Gregory 2015). In March 2014, shortly after the Crimean referendum on a reunification with Russia, Putin’s popularity increased significantly, reaching
80 percent. The support persisted throughout the subsequent Western sanctions and Russia’s import ban, and by August, 86 percent of Russians said they approved of Putin’s actions in Ukraine (Yudina 2015:1). Yudina (2015) finds that as authoritarian regimes often rely on exploiting patriotic or nationalist sentiments for legitimacy, Moscow’s emphasis on the feelings of patriotism to a great extent explains the durable public support generated by the operation in Ukraine18. Given the experience with public approval for its military actions, it is likely that Moscow relied on the same kind of support for the Syria intervention.

However, as pointed out by Barabanov (2015), the Syrian war was considered by the public as an “Arab turf scuffle” rather than a Russian concern. Consequently, and in contrast to the operations in Chechnya, Georgia and Ukraine, Russia’s military involvement in Syria arguably carried greater risk in terms of producing domestic audience costs, as it relied more on the yearning for great power status than an ethno-nationalist narrative. Furthermore, a lack of negative change in the financial situation of an individual is considered the strongest predictor of rallying domestic support in Russia (Yudina 2015). Thus, most Russians are likely to consider a worsening economy as a more immediate concern than a military operation in a war located far away from its own borders. Russia’s economic recession deepened in the first half of 2015, and was reinforced by the ongoing international sanctions against Russia for its actions in Ukraine (The World Bank 2015:ii). In an economic report published just weeks prior to the intervention, the World Bank projected Russia’s GDP growth to fall by 3.8 percent in 2015 and by 0.6 percent in 2016 before a recovery would appear (The World Bank 2015:ii). Overall, these circumstances may have posed some concern to the Kremlin, even if they managed to limit the economic costs of the operation.

Given these circumstances, Russia’s state-controlled media system unquestionably constituted an advantage for the government. The media freedom in Russia has declined sharply under Putin. Televised news broadcasts, which are most Russians’ main source of information, are largely the preserve of three national networks all under direct government control (Gehlbach and Sonin 2014:164). In many ways, this development is the result of Russia’s failure to

18 A state’s ability to produce a durable “rally round the flag”-effect among its citizens in times of crisis or war is evident in many historical cases, and is not confined to authoritarian regimes. For instance, the United States’ War on Terror after 9/11 led to extraordinary approval of President George W. Bush (Hetherington and Nelson 2003:37,42).
dominate the traditional media environment during the First Chechen War in the mid-1990s, which turned into a strategic challenge for Moscow. This experience led to increased government control over the media reporting during the Second Chechen War (Thomas 2003, cited in Giles 2016:28). After the Georgia operation in 2008, the establishment of online information troops within the military was suggested as part of the reform efforts, but failed to materialize. When the Russian public took to the streets to protest the re-inauguration of Putin in 2012, however, the Kremlin’s use of online mass communication expanded significantly (Giles 2016:30). By 2014, the government invested considerably in human capabilities to direct online debate, and the first large-scale information war between Russian and Western media appeared during the Ukraine crisis (Giles 2016:31-32). Since then, the authorities have imposed tighter restraint on internet use and gained extensive control over Russian media companies.

With regards to the domestic public opinion, the result of these efforts is that Russia has effectively isolated the population from other sources of information than those following “the Kremlin line” (Giles 2016:33). Furthermore, the state-controlled media outlets tend to mix their biased position with informational, fact-based content, which makes it more difficult for the public to be critical of the content they are presented with (Gehlbach and Sonin 2014:164). During the Crimea operation, for instance, Russian state-run media outlets utilized an ethno-nationalist narrative, which in turn amplified public support for President Putin and for Russia’s military actions19. This recent example show that the Kremlin actively uses its direct control over the media to shape conflict narratives, and implies that states with government-restricted media systems may effectively reduce the expected audience costs associated with interventions.

The ability to limit the audience costs of the Syria operation is linked to the Russian government’s effective utilization of a counterterrorism narrative to justify its actions. The argument that Islamist terrorism is essentially a civilizational threat to Russia and the world as a whole, has been reflected in Russian media, as well as in the discourses of the Foreign Ministry and the Kremlin (Notte 2016). Furthermore, Russian authorities has made extensive efforts to show the public how its modernized armed forces have been able to successfully limit

19 For more on Russia’s official narrative of the annexation of Crimea and the utilization of the state-controlled media, see Stoycheff and Nisbet (2016).
the terrorist threat. Throughout the five and a half months of the official operation, the Defense Ministry provided regular news briefings, which reported of successful anti-terrorist missions conducted by its well-equipped and well-organized armed forces. Such an extensive coverage of a military operation is unprecedented compared to Russia’s previous interventions. The images provided by the Defense Ministry to Russian media have been of a sterile character, portraying the air campaign as painless and distant, and avoiding to reveal the human suffering and civilian casualties on the ground (Borshchevskaya 2015). For instance, one month into the operation, the government-funded television network Russia Today published a collection of its most viewed “fascinating first-hand videos” from the Syria operation provided by the ministry, highlighting how the modern arsenal enabled the successful conduction of airstrikes (Russia Today 2015b). Furthermore, the Defense Ministry utilized social media to display its modernized military equipment, and numerous posts on the ministry’s official Twitter and Facebook accounts show video footage of Russian airstrikes launched at what is described as terrorist targets inside Syria. According to Giles (2016:28), the Russian government’s increased use of social media and online forums functions as a force multiplier to ensure that its narratives achieve a broad reach.

Overall, Moscow’s ability to showcase its modernized military operating successfully far away from home is considered an important factor for sparking public support for the intervention (Goodrich 2016). Taking both the recent military improvements and the increased state-control over Russian media into account, it is of little surprise that despite the grave economic outlooks in Russia prior to the intervention in Syria, Putin’s popularity has remained high. While 84 percent approved the activities of the Russian president in September 2015, the approval rate was 82 percent when the withdrawal was announced in March 2016 (Levada Center 2016). This development may not qualify as a rally effect, but it does not reflect considerable grievances among the public either. While the Russian population generally approved of the military actions in Syria, however, the red line of the Russian public concerned the use of ground troops, particularly conscripts, on the battlefield (Trenin 2015). This may, at least in part, explain why President Putin explicitly ruled out the participation of Russian ground troops in the military operation.
As established, Regan’s theoretical expectation is that decision makers have to weigh the competing demands of its constituency when deciding whether to intervene in an intrastate conflict. Given the extensive efforts of the Russian authorities to limit the access to alternative sources of information prior to the Syria intervention, one cannot rule out that Moscow predicted that the opposition to an intervention would be limited, even if one assumes that increased military spending could generate grievances among a Russian public struggling with the consequences of an economic recession. Overall, the notion that Moscow needed public support for the intervention appears to be of less relevance than the two criteria presented in the previous sections. As long as the operation was expected to succeed in a limited amount of time, it is likely that Moscow perceived the public support for an intervention as a secondary consideration.
5.5 Mapping the net utility of intervening

As briefly mentioned throughout this chapter, a military intervention will not only inflict certain costs upon the third party, but is also expected to create certain benefits. This expectation stems from the theoretical assumption that a third party gets no utility from an intervention itself. In other words, states do not intervene simply for the sake of intervening (Regan 1998:5). Thus, decision makers considering whether to intervene in an intrastate conflict will estimate the expectation of success, and weigh the expected costs against the expected benefits. The analyses presented in chapter 3 and 4 both identified certain likely explanations of the intervention, such as Russia’s interest in limiting the spillover of Islamist terrorism to its own turf and making itself indispensable to a political solution in Syria. However, as this chapter aims to determine whether the improvements of the Russian armed forces may explain the intervention, it is necessary to identify which national-level benefits Moscow likely considered attributable to an intervention.

Two benefits generated by a Russian intervention stand out as likely to have been included in Moscow’s calculus when deciding whether to intervene in Syria. First, as pointed out by Åtland et.al. (2016:39), Russia may have intended to use the military operation as a showcase for existing or future importers of Russian military equipment. Various Russian media outlets reported a spark in the interest in Russian aircrafts after the operation in Syria was launched. Algeria reportedly submitted an official application for an unspecified number of Su-32 fighter jets in December 2015, after eight years of unproductive talks with Russia (Binnie 2016). According to the Russian newspaper Kommersant, Indonesia, Pakistan and Vietnam have announced their interest for the modernized Su-35S, and Egypt has ordered 46 next-generation Ka-52 attack helicopters. The appearance of the S-400 air defense system is also said to have sparked interest from the Saudi Arabian army (Safronov 2016). As a significant part of the Russian aircrafts used in the Syria operation was a result of the modernization efforts undertaken after 2008, it is likely that Moscow predicted that showcasing this equipment could attract interested buyers and thus generate more long-term benefits to the Russian economy.

Second, in addition to functioning as a showcase for importers of Russian arms, the strategy of emphasizing the aerial component enabled the armed forces to gain useful experience with new

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20 The export version of the Su-34.
tactics and operational concepts. The intervention in Syria has been Russia’s first large-scale operation outside the perimeter of its historical empire since the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan in 1979, and thereby differs from its more recent military involvement abroad. As established, the aerial dimension also differs from Russia’s operations in Georgia and Ukraine, where the emphasis was on invasion or occupation by its ground forces. Thus, an intervention based on the extensive use of airstrikes could provide the armed forces with important training, such as of conducting airstrikes at nighttime, utilizing UAVs for surveillance and reconnaissance of potential targets, and providing close air support for forces operating on the ground (Åtland et al. 2016:38-39). This benefit was pointed out by Putin himself as he announced the withdrawal, stating that “no one has invented a more effective way to perfect one’s military skills than in real combat actions” (TASS 2015c). Overall, intervening in Syria would allow the Russian armed forces to put their renewed operational capability and modernized equipment to test in a medium-scale out-of-area operation, which in turn would make it possible to make the adjustments necessary for future operations. As the intervention strategy enabled the Russian armed forces to utilize both its air and naval elements extensively, it is reasonable to assume that Moscow considered an intervention in Syria as beneficial in terms of putting their modernized equipment to the test.

In addition to discussing the three conditions for an intervention, this chapter has identified the elements that likely were included in Moscow’s calculus of the expected costs and benefits attributable to an intervention in Syria. As established, decision makers will estimate the likelihood for success, and weigh the expected costs against the expected benefits to predict the net utility of an intervention. Overall, the risk of inflicting extensive human and material costs by intervening was limited, mainly due to Russia’s choice of intervention strategy, which emphasized the aerial dimension and confined the deployment of ground troops to include a relatively small number of contract soldiers. As the empirical evidence suggests, Moscow’s ability to limit the human and material costs of the operation were to a great extent made possible by the improved operational capabilities of the Russian armed forces, which enabled it to operate efficiently. Furthermore, Moscow likely expected the domestic audience costs of the intervention to be more or less insignificant, in part due to the efforts of Russian authorities to utilize a counterterrorist narrative which underlined Russia’s yearning for great power status, but most importantly due to the extensive state-control over national media outlets. In addition,
the expected benefits of intervening likely weighed heavily when Moscow decided to intervene, as an intervention would function as a showcase for the modernized military equipment the Russian armed forces had acquired after 2008, and provide a valuable training experience for the armed forces’ use of their improved capabilities. In sum, the empirical evidence suggests that in Russia’s case, the expected net utility of intervening was favorable to Moscow.

5.6 Summary

Based on the contribution of Regan (1998), this chapter has discussed whether the improved military capabilities of the Russian armed forces can explain Russia’s decision to intervene in Syria. The empirical evidence shows how the post-2008 military improvements contributed to limit the expected costs and thus increase the expected net utility of intervening in Syria. First of all, I found that the implementation of the reform and modernization efforts likely contributed positively to Moscow’s expectation of succeeding, as they enabled the armed forces to conduct a joint operation where the air, naval and ground units mutually reinforced each other. Furthermore, the limited use of ground troops likely reduced the expected human and material costs of the operation. Second, I found that the ability to limit the duration of the intervention was a result of 1) the improved military capabilities, which enabled the armed forces to conduct an efficient operation, and 2) the limited success criteria of the intervention, which concerned the strengthening of Assad’s government rather than the cessation of hostilities. Third, as the Kremlin has gained extensive control over the Russian media and utilized it to flaunt its renewed military capabilities throughout the intervention, I found that domestic audience costs were likely of a less concern than the success and time horizon of the military operation.

What this chapter has shown, is that the developments of the Russian armed forces prior to the intervention were instrumental to how Moscow estimated the net utility of intervening in Syria. If Moscow did not expect that its forces would prove able to secure the position of Assad’s government and effectively target terrorist groups, it seems unlikely that the operation would have been carried out. However, Regan’s contribution offers no explanation for why states intervene in an intrastate conflict, and the empirical evidence presented in this chapter offers little basis for the establishment of a causal connection between a state’s improved military capabilities and a subsequent intervention in a civil conflict. Thus, the findings do not enable
the conclusion that the recent developments of the Russian armed forces contribute to explain the Russian intervention in Syria. Ultimately, and in contrast to the findings in the previous chapters, the improved operational capabilities of the Russian armed forces should therefore be considered a prerequisite for the decision to intervene in Syria rather than an explanatory factor.
6 | Conclusion

The research question considered in this study is the following: Why did Russia conduct a military intervention in Syria in September 2015?

This final chapter provides a summary of the thesis (section 6.1) and provides an account of the main findings of the three analyses (section 6.2). Lastly, I briefly discuss which explanatory factors were most important for Russia’s decision to intervene in Syria (section 6.3).

6.1 Summary

Chapter 1 presented the research question, reviewed relevant scholarly work, and discussed methodological issues.

Chapter 2 briefly outlined the developments in the Syrian war up until the intervention, both on the ground and through international diplomatic efforts.

Chapter 3 assessed three bilateral-level explanations for the intervention. I discussed whether Russia and Syria may rightly be characterized as allies, and examined the economic and military ties between Moscow and Damascus. Finally, I considered whether Russia intervened to contain the threat of Islamist terrorism.

Chapter 4 considered international-level factors for the decision to intervene, using the frameworks of Waltz (1979), Walt (1985) and Pape (2005). First, I assessed the power distribution between Russia and the United States in the Syrian war and discussed whether Russia’s intervention in Syria was an attempt to power balance against the influence of the United States on the war dynamics. Second, I discussed whether and why Russia considered the military actions of the United States as a security threat. Finally, I assessed the effect of Moscow’s diplomatic efforts to constrain U.S. influence on the outcome of the Syrian war.
Chapter 5 set out to determine the impact of the national-level reform and modernization efforts of the Russian armed forces on the decision to intervene. Here, I discussed the presence of three conditions presented in Regan’s (1998) decision theoretic framework. Furthermore, I assessed how Russia’s improved military capabilities affected the expected net utility of intervening.

6.2 Main findings

The main findings of this analysis may be summarized as follows. The first, bilateral-level analysis revealed that, despite not being formally allied with Damascus, Russia had a clear interest in upholding the Syrian government. This interest was in part based on Moscow’s desire to maintain its military presence in Syria as well as on existing governmental contracts with Damascus. In addition, Moscow perceived the preservation of the Syrian state institutions as the best way to contain the security threat posed by Islamist terrorist groups. Both factors contribute to explaining Russia’s decision to intervene. The second factor also helps explain the timing of the intervention.

The second, international-level analysis identified two main explanations for the intervention. First, Russia was concerned that the weakened position of Assad and the efforts of the U.S.-led coalition to oust him would lead to regime change in Syria. This finding is in line with Walt’s argument that states will attempt to power balance against a dominant power whose intentions are perceived as a threat. Second, Russia desired to participate in and influence international diplomatic attempts of crisis resolution. It also wanted to participate in and influence a political transition (if any) in Syria. The decision to intervene reinforced Russia’s position in the ongoing joint diplomatic efforts, as it made Moscow de facto indispensable to a political solution to the war. Both of these factors further explain the timing of the intervention.

The third, national-level analysis revealed that the improved military capabilities of the Russian armed forces prior to the intervention were of significant importance to Russia’s decision to intervene. By assessing the presence of Regan’s (1998) three conditions for an intervention, I found that the recent reform and modernization efforts likely contributed positively to Moscow’s expectation of limiting the costs of the operation. These efforts increased the expected net utility of intervening in Syria.
As mentioned in the introduction of this thesis, the study of Russia’s decision to intervene may serve to illuminate the challenges linked to international conflict resolution. Overall, this thesis underlines the implications of the conflicting approaches the great powers have to the legitimacy of outside interventions in civil wars. The stalemate in the UNSC due to Russia’s repeated use of its veto power may be considered the very manifestation of this disagreement. But the inability of the Council to reach an agreement on a UN mandate for military action is an issue that reaches far beyond the case in point. The diverging views on Russia’s intervention on behalf of the Syrian government also confirm that the status and legitimacy of the parties involved in a civil war tend to be unclear. Another important implication of the findings is the impact that the recent improvements of Russia’s armed forces had on Moscow’s expectations of achieving its desired outcome in Syria. As the improvement of the armed forces is a process that is still ongoing, future studies of Russian military interventions in intrastate wars should take this national development into particular consideration.

6.3 Which explanatory factors were the most important?

Certain explanatory factors were present well before the decision to intervene was made, and therefore fall short of explaining the timing of the intervention. Because these factors did not cause Russia to intervene in Syria during the early stages of the civil war, it is reasonable to assume that they did not directly trigger the decision to intervene. One such factor is the security threat posed by Islamist terrorist groups. However, the weakened position of President Assad likely made this factor increasingly important, as the ability to prevent the further spread of terrorism was perceived by Russia as inherently linked to the preservation of the Syrian government. Consequently, the weakening of Assad reinforced the security threat, thereby increasing the likelihood of an intervention.

The weakened position of Assad also affected the significance of the international dimension. Two key factors stand out in this regard: the concern that the efforts of the U.S.-led coalition would cause regime change in Syria and Russia’s interest in influencing the outcome of a political transition.

First, despite the continued efforts of the U.S.-led coalition, it had failed to defeat ISIS inside Syria. Furthermore, the United States continued to arm and train various opposition groups, and
did not depart from its demand that Assad had to step down. Given Russia’s aversion to externally imposed regime change, the weakening of Assad provided Russia with a clear incentive to intervene.

Second, despite the joint diplomatic efforts of Russia and the United States prior to the intervention, the two great powers had failed to agree on the role of Assad in an eventual political transition. As Russia had a strong interest in upholding the Syrian government, the weakened position of Assad reinforced Moscow’s desire to make itself indispensable to a political solution by intervening. It is likely that Russia predicted that an intervention would improve its bargaining position on the role of Assad in an agreement leading to a political transition.

Furthermore, an interesting finding is that the improved operational capabilities of the Russian armed forces likely functioned as a prerequisite for the decision to intervene. As discussed in chapter 5, these improvements enabled the expectation that a military operation would manage to secure the position of Assad’s government and effectively target terrorist groups. The materialization of the reform and modernization efforts thus significantly increased the likelihood that the intervention would take place.

As this thesis has demonstrated, drawing on explanatory factors present on the three levels of analysis provides a more comprehensive explanation for Russia’s decision to intervene in Syria than one single level would enable. The findings suggest that a combination of simultaneous factors tipped the balance in favor of an intervention. While the factors present at the bilateral and international levels directly affected the decision to intervene, the national level improvements of Russia’s armed forces functioned as an important enabling factor for the decision.

To conclude, the evidence presented in this thesis suggests that a combination of an increased security threat posed by ISIS and other Islamist terrorist groups (bilateral level), Russia’s aversion to externally imposed regime change (international level) and its interest in influencing the political outcome of the Syrian war (international level) explain Russia’s military intervention in Syria.
At the time of writing, Russia’s military involvement in Syria is ongoing, as is the Syrian war. Given the temporal proximity of the intervention, this study has not considered its more long-term implications. Furthermore, the three levels of analysis were considered complementary rather than competing. In order to determine which level that influenced Moscow’s decision the most, future research regarding the Russian intervention should take on the task of weighing the factors operating on different levels against each other. Moreover, an eventual end to the Syrian war will enable the further analysis of Moscow’s ability to influence the conflict outcome. Additional explanations for the intervention, such as Russia’s broader strategic interests in the Middle East, also require further investigation.
Literature

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**Other sources:**


Appendix 1 Map of Syria

Source: CIA Factbook