THE SYRIAN CONFLICT.
NATO'S FRAGMENTARY MIDDLE EAST STRATEGY
OR RUSSIA AS A GAME CHANGER

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Abstract: In 2015, four years after the outbreak of the Syrian conflict, which at the beginning was not on the focus and "interest" of NATO, the new actors were emerged in the campaign. Particularly, Russia's involvement in the conflict has increased the intensity of military operations and decisively changed the course of the conflict on behalf of Syrian Government Forces. Until September 2015, the main players in the theatre have been Assad regime, Free Syrian Army (FSA), ISIS, anti-ISIS Coalition Forces, and the Syrian Democratic Forces (affiliated groups). However, today "surprisingly" strengthening players of the conflict are Syrian regime, Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah that were unimaginable at the beginning of the conflict. Surprisingly – because prior to the Syrian conflict "nobody" anticipated Russian, Iranian and pro-Iranian militia groups hegemony in Syrian territory. On the other hand, U.S., its Allies in Middle East, and most of the NATO member countries backed the Syrian Opposition and the Free Syrian Army, which were struggling to overthrow the Assad regime. At the same time, U.S. and most of its Allies publicly declared the recognition of the Syrian Opposition as a legitimate representative of Syrian people. Despite these support, in fact, the Syrian opposition and the Free Syrian Army were forced to retreat from almost all key areas, inflicting heavy losses. Beside, U.S. and his Allies, who previously projected the settlement of the Syrian conflict in the replacement of the Assad regime, now suggest democratic elections to be held under the auspices of the UN, not mentioning the "regime change". Analyzing these two approaches - previous and current policy of regulation of the Syrian conflict, the considerable differences between them become evident. It seems that, the reason for this U-turn in policy is Russia's entry into the Syrian equation as a game changer.

Key words: Syrian conflict, strategic surprise, security, policy change, NATO, Middle East, Mediterranean basin, Free Syrian Army, Syrian Opposition, actor, player, UNSCR.

1. INTRODUCTION

Syria is located in the Mediterranean basin of the Middle East (ME) and possess a noteworthy geo-strategic importance for the world's leading actors, as well as for the NATO. Because it is the only state which shares a border with the NATO country and has coastline with the Mediterranean Sea.

However, nowadays for many in the Alliance, Mediterranean security has become a pressing concern in light of risks emanating from the Levant especially from Syria. Moreover, as Russia has become actively engaged in Syria and the Eastern Mediterranean, the problem of strategic stability and risk reduction with Moscow has acquired a southern dimension too (Lesser *et al*., 2018, p.14). As noticed in NATO Secretary General Annual Report 2015, Russia continued to pursue more assertive and unpredictable military posture in 2015. It reflects concerns about Russia's recent military build-up in Syria and the Eastern Mediterranean. Report also mentions that Russia began a military operation in Syria, not as part of the Global Coalition to Counter ISIS but in support of the Assad regime (Stoltenberg:2015, p.10). As a matter of fact, despite support from U.S. and its Allies (leading NATO member countries), shortly after Russian intervention, the Free Syrian Army was forced to hand over most of strategically important territories and cities (Hama, Homs, Aleppo and etc.) back to the Government Forces, inflicting heavy losses over time.

In fact, the dramatic defeat of Syrian Opposition was not only due to the military support by Russia but also Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah. However, especially Russian effective reaction to the conflict enabled Russia be a Central Player of the equation while pushing anti-Assad players to adapt new policy by ensuring his current presence as a "strategic surprise".

In our case, strategic surprise refers to the Main Actors who have strategic interest and assumptions related with Syria and Middle East. In a broader context, Syria is the vital part of Middle East. Therefore, this study aims to contribute to the necessary discussion on such a strategic issue by providing an assessment of the main indicators of Russian engagement into Syria before the September 2015, elaborate on whether "Russian strategy in Syria doomed to fail?", and refine the competency of NATO's Middle East strategy. Finally it explores UNSCR 2254 as an evidence of strategic surprise, to respond the above mentioned issues.

2. MAIN INDICATORS OF RUSSIAN ENTRY INTO SYRIA BEFORE SEPTEMBER 2015

According to some analysts, Russia was not expected to enter the Syrian conflict. Ground for this assumption was the fact that in March

2011, Russia had chosen not to veto the United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1973, which authorized "all necessary measures ... to protect civilians and civilian populated areas under threat of attack" in Libya (Charap *et al.*, 2019, p.6). In fact, ever since the end of the Cold War Moscow has manifested discomfort at the prospect of standing alone on a major dispute in the council (Engelbrekt *et al.*, 2013, p.51). However, many in Moscow were outraged when the resolution was used to justify – cynically, in their eyes – NATO's bombing of Qaddafi's forces and provision of decisive support to the rebels to overthrow his government. The episode convinced Moscow that humanitarian intervention was simply an elaborate cover for regime change and largely precluded future UNSCR's on Syria that would have authorized international action to stop the war (Charap *et al.*, 2019, p.6).

Therefore, it was not puzzling to assess that after the pro-Russian regime change in Libya Russia would play more active role in similar conflicts. In this sense, there was no doubt that Russia would engage the Syrian conflict. There were enough indicators and reasons to justify this thesis. The main ones of these indicators and reasons can be summarized as follows:

- Perception of regime changes as a national threat,

- Legal aspects,

- Russian National Security Strategy,

- Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation.

2.1. Perception of regime changes as a national threat

Russian leaders were concerned that Washington would overthrow the Assad regime and replace it with a friendly government. Russian leaders worried about U.S. regime change in Syria based, in part, on the U.S. role in overthrowing regimes in Yugoslavia in 1995, Kosovo in 1999, Afghanistan in 2001, Iraq in 2003, and Libya in 2011. Russia also assessed that the United States and its partners were involved in the Arab Spring and color revolutions in Eastern Europe and other regions (Jones:2020, p.10). On the other hand, Assad was one of Russia's last remaining close partners in the region. Keeping him in power seemed particularly important because Russia had been losing political ground in the region following the Arab Spring (Charap *et al.*, 2019, p.7).

2.2. Legal aspects

By the year 2017 Russia, backed by China, casted its 14th U.N. Security Council veto since the start of the Syrian conflict in 2011 (Nichols:2019). By the time Russia entered the Syrian conflict in September 2015, Russia had already vetoed UNSCR's four times the ones concerned with "condemnation, sanction or punish" Syrian government.

Unlike the Libyan conflict, Russia's such sharp behavior during the voting of UNSC in issues related to Syrian conflict was a clear evidence which demonstrated possible Russian engagement as a Main Actor. Moreover, the official request by the "legitimate" Government of Syria for military aid from Russia against rebel groups would be in accordance with the domestic law of both states and International Law. In another word, Russia could legitimize its military intervention as a formal request from the sovereign Government of Syria.

2.3. Russian National Security Strategy

Russian [1] recently updated basic strategic documents are full of indications about Moscow's world vision and security concerns (Isabella:2017, p.1). Thus, Russia's strategic objectives provide the starting point for understanding its campaign design in Syria. Russia's *National Security Strategy* lists two specific strategic objectives applicable to Syria—the first is security by "strengthening the country's defense," and the second is focused on international recognition and national dignity (Sinclair: 2020, p.2). Russia also views the Syrian conflict in a global context. Much of Russian foreign policy in recent years has been geared to establishing itself as a great power and global player. According to the official Russian National Security Strategy, "A solid basis has been created at this time for further increasing the Russian

Federation's economic, political, military, and spiritual potentials and for enhancing its role in shaping a polycentric world." A role in the Middle East is important to achieving that goal (Hicks *et al*., 2017). So, Intervening in Syria would increase Russia's leverage with the West and return Russia to its perceived rightful place at the high table of international politics (Charap:2019, p.7).

2.4. Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation

Russian Military Doctrine (Endowment:2015), a logical continuation of the Russian National Security Strategy providing all domestic legislation for the Russian Federation to intervene in the event of conflicts, and foreign intervention in Syria. Some parts of the military doctrine point to states that sponsor terrorist or radical groups and to these groups themselves. It mentions and underlines the risk of the establishment of regimes in "bordering states, whose policy threatens the interests of the Russian Federation" as well as "activities aimed at forcibly changing the constitutional system of the Russian Federation". All these are direct references to the color revolutions that took place in Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004), Kyrgyzstan (2005), the Arab spring, and, finally, the Ukrainian "Revolution of Dignity", which Russian officials continuously describe as an anti-constitutional coup supported by the West [8, p.9]. Article 12 of the Military Doctrine

- Military Dangers and Military Threats to the Russian Federation indicates the main external military dangers as:_deployment (build-up) of military contingents foreign states (groups of states) in the territories of the States bordering on the Russian Federation and its Allies, territorial claims to the Russian Federation and its Allies and interference in their internal affairs, the use of military force in the territories of contiguous with the Russian Federation and its Allies, establishment in the States contiguous with the Russian Federation regimes, including as a result of the overthrow of legitimate public authorities and etc.

Each of above mentioned points provides basis for Russia's military intervention in Syria, since Russia regard Syria as a closest Ally in Middle East.

3. IS RUSSIAN STRATEGY IN SYRIA "DOOMED TO FAIL"?

In October 2015, US Defense Secretary Ash Carter stated that Russia has not «thought through very thoroughly» and Russia is «doomed to fail» in Syria (Ferdinando:2015). Another view pointed out Russia's Syria war as a Strategic Trap, revealing that - Russia has been increasingly dragged into "alien war" which adversely affected its capacity for political maneuvering (Souleimanov *et al*., 2018, p.42-50). So it was anticipated that involving in the Syrian campaign Russia would squander its forces and resources, thereby undermining Russia's prestige and weakening its reputation in the world. In short, Russia was likely to sink into a bog in Syria, as the Soviet Union did in Afghanistan. However, a serious (detailed) analysis leads to the conclusion that these allegations are groundless. Because as the U.S. intelligence community's 2018 Worldwide Threat Assessment stated in February 2018, the conflict had by that point "decisively shifted in the" Syrian regime's favor, enabling Russia and Iran to further entrench themselves inside the country (Coats:2018, p.20). As a result, Russia was successful in achieving its main near-term political and military objectives in Syria, including preventing the collapse of the Assad regime (an important regional partner) and thwarting a possible U.S. attempt to overthrow Assad (Jones:2020, p.1). According to the Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS), Moscow adopted a strategy that combined airpower and ground maneuver to overwhelm a divided enemy. Instead of deploying large numbers of Russian army forces to engage in ground combat in Syria – as the Soviet Union did in Afghanistan in the 1980s. Instead, Moscow relied on Syrian army forces, Lebanese Hezbollah, and other militias and private military contractors as the main ground maneuver elements. The Russian air force and navy supported these forces by conducting strikes from fixed-wing aircraft, helicopters, ships, and submarines. In developing

this strategy, Russian political and military leaders looked closely at the positive and negative lessons of U.S. campaigns, such as the Persian Gulf War in 1991, Yugoslavia in 1995, Kosovo in 1999, Afghanistan in 2001, Iraq in 2003, and Libya in 2011(Jones:2020, p.9).

When it comes to Russian capacity for political maneuvering after the intervention, in fact, it is also expanded over time gaining more leverages in platforms dealing with Syrian conflict – in UN Security Council, Geneva Pease talks and Astana Process.

Shortly, Russia has been successful in achieving Moscow's strategic military and political objectives at a manageable cost in terms of Russian casualties and finances by successfully applying Lessons Learned from modern warfare in Syria.

4. IS NATO'S STRATEGY ON MIDDLE EAST ADEQUATE TO REASSURE ITS INTERESTS?

Conflicts taking place in the Middle East region have a direct and indirect impact on NATO's security policy. Terrorism, migration, energy security, countering proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and human security are driving policy debates, alongside more conventional concerns over regional stability. Since these threats affect and in some degree shape the security environment of the most NATO member countries, the consequences of the Syrian conflict play a pivotal role for the NATO. Despite agreement on its importance NATO countries and NATO itself never really formulated a coherent strategy for the Middle East. Western European partners approached Middle Eastern problems more from a perspective that protected their local interests, while the United States tended to view the region through the lens of the Cold War (Papascoma *et al*., 2016, p.279).

On the other hand, Russia also sought the practical benefits of strategic air and naval basing on the Eastern Mediterranean Sea as well as expanded diplomatic leverage in the Middle East (Cafarella *et al*., 2019, p.10). As a result, Russia secured forty-nine-year leases from Assad for the Hmeimim Airbase and the Tartus Naval Facility on the Syrian Coast in 2017 and 2019. In doing so, Russia can use these bases to contest NATO in the Mediterranean Sea. Apparently, Russia deployed to Syria to save Assad but also to accomplish wider goals for which Assad's regime is a useful tool. Russia's grand strategic objectives that relate to Syria include:

- Reestablishing its standing as a great power and diminishing the global influence of the U.S. and NATO;

- Disrupting and dividing NATO;

- Expanding Russia's global access to strategic basing;

- Broadening Russia's influence in the Middle East and Europe (Cafarella *et al*., 2019, p.10) and etc.

However, NATO has not maintained forces adequate for both conducting ongoing operations in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region and fighting against Russian forces in the Mediterranean. Such additional forces do not exist in the current NATO militaries or any planned expansions (Kagan:2019, p.50). Lacking of compatible and proper Syrian strategy as well as political and diplomatic division between NATO members result in inactivity during strugle over gaining a position in Middle East. And unless the Allies share a common strategic perspective, NATO will be unable to defend Allies' interests in the Middle East (Dempsey:2020).

5. UNSC 2254 AS EVIDENCE OF STRATEGIC SURPRISE

Defense Science Board of the Department of Defense of U.S. defined strategic surprise as an event for which the United States is not adequately prepared and that may result in very high cost (Vitto et al., 2015, p.1). Another definition by The Institute of World Politics defined Strategic surprise - unpredicted development that had a decisive and fundamental, transformative, sometimes revolutionary effect (Jajko:2012). That means we need to adapt our existing policy to respond effectively to an unanticipated development. Here, the word "our" refers to the Main Actors who make strategic assumption and have interests in Syrian Theatre. That is, in this case "strategic surprise"

is a term related to only for the players participated in the conflict. Therefore, it would be correct to analyze Russia's current presence in Syria as the key Actor. If have a close look at the ongoing situation in Syria from the point of view of the United States and its Allies' policy, then Russia's intervention in Syria can be considered as a strategic surprise. Because although the policy pursued by the United States and its Allies until the end of 2015 was based on the removal of the existing regime in Syria, later it was changed considerably.

United States President Barack Obama recognized the Syrian National Council (SNC) as the "legitimate representative of the Syrian people in opposition to the Assad regime," he referred to it as a "big step" (Strashun:2013, p.17). Moreover, the European Union's foreign ministers have been formally recognized the SNC as a legitimate representative of the Syrian people in Feb 2012 [2]. Generally the SNC was recognized or supported in some capacity by at least 17 members of the UN, with three of those (France, United Kingdom and United States) being permanent members of the UN Security Council as well as being the leading NATO states. In addition, according to the U.S. Congressional Research Service since 2011, U.S. policy toward the unrest and conflict in Syria has attempted to pursue parallel interests and manage interconnected challenges, with varying degrees of success.

Among the objectives identified by successive Administrations and by many Members in successive sessions of Congress have been "seeking a negotiated settlement that includes a transition in Syria *away from the leadership of Bashar al Assad* and his supporters" (Humud *et al.,* 2020, p.28). Nevertheless, in December 18th 2015, U.N. Security Council Resolution 2254 was adopted which endorsed a "road map" for a political settlement in Syria, including the drafting of a new constitution and the administration of U.N. supervised elections [3]. That is to say, while United States and its Allies policy toward Syrian conflict *was the remove Bashar al-Assad and his supporters from power* in 2011, it changed in late 2015 to *"drafting of a new constitution and U.N. - supervised elections"*.

According to UNSCR 2254, adopted on December 18th 2015, the resolution of the Syrian conflict *is not mentioning the removal of Bashar al-Assad*. On the contrary the resolution reaffirming its strong commitment to the sovereignty, independence, unity, territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic, and to the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations, stressing the "Syrian people will decide the future of Syria". In brief, "anti-Assad coalition" envisaged a political settlement to the Syrian conflict in the UN-led elections.

Therefore, UNSCR 2254 pose the policy shift of the United States and its Allies in the Syrian conflict.

The most important event in the AOI between 2011 and the end of 2015 was Russia's rapid and decisive engagement in the Syrian conflict. Russian intervention on September 2015 caused FSA's heavy losses that disabled it to overthrow the regime. This fact can be realized as the only reason for that policy shift mentioned in UNSCR 2254. In other words, Russian intervention created a new reality in the Syrian theatre which demanded adapted policy and anti-Assad coalition reflected their adapted policy in UNSCR 2254.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The continuing Syrian conflict ever since 2011 has fundamentally turned to the Assad side right after Russian intervention on September 2015. Consequently Governmental Forces disrupted Syrian Opposition Forces backed by the U.S and its Allies as well as by the NATO member countries. Anti-Assad player's doubtful activities gave an opening to Russia, enabling his main intend: to restore Russia's influence in the Middle East, while NATO appeared timid. At the end of the day, so called anti-Assad coalition agreed on UNSCR 2254, which reassure Russian dominance in Syria, borders NATO's southern flank and considered geographically and strategically important to the Western Alliance.

Obviously, stability in neighboring regions leads to stability for the Alliance. Therefore it is crucial

for the Alliance to promote stability beyond NATO's borders and to build an understanding of potential threats which might arise in its vicinity. This necessity drive NATO to take steps and in 2010 at the Lisbon Summit Heads of States and Governments of NATO countries decided to enhance its contribution to a comprehensive approach to crisis management, as part of the international community's effort, and to improve NATO's ability to deliver stabilization and reconstruction effects. In accordance with the Strategic Concept approved by NATO in Lisbon Summit, NATO undertakes to take appropriate measures by stating "The best way to manage conflicts is to prevent them from happening". Meanwhile, the Comprehensive Crisis and Operations Management Centre (CCOMC) and Strategic Direction South Hub were inaugurated in order to continually monitor and analyze the international environment to anticipate crises and, where appropriate, take active steps to prevent them from becoming larger conflicts. The motto – "prevention is always preferable to cure" is the idea behind those measures. In order to thinking, planning and acting strategically in multiple crises and operations those activities are inevitable.

Additionally, NATO can collaborate with the partner states in the region under the Mediterranean Dialogue and Istanbul Cooperation Initiative platforms to strengthen security and stability. Since the security challenges and instability in Syria are threating the sovereignty and state interests of those partners, NATO's compatible Syrian strategy can attract and even engage them to contribute peace and order in the region.

Nevertheless, NATO at the beginning of the Syrian conflict neglected weak signals that impede timely and effective response. Therefore, NATO is "tolerating" and swallows undesirable developments not only in Syria but also adjacent of it.

ENDNOTES

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