

The Syrian War in Russia's Intensifying Discourse Against the Unipolar World

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ABSTRACT

This essay examines five possible reasons for Russia's military involvement in the Syrian War.

These reasons under consideration are an anti-terror policy, resistance to the unipolarity, domestic populism, overcoming Russia's isolation after Crimea crisis, and defence of the B. Assad government. I conclude that only the anti-terror and anti-unipolar world motivations were relevant and merged into a single cognitive framework that is prone to launching Syrian military operation.

Other factors, such as a paradigmatic shift of the image of the post-unipolar world, as well as overconfidence in air force and artillery, also confirm that the Syrian War cognitively prepared Russia for its future military operation in Ukraine. Russian policymakers became convinced that the unipolar world was coming to an end. In the case of Syria (2015), the ill-fated US-led anti-terror operations intensified Islamic terrorism, which created an existential threat for Russia. In the case of Ukraine (2022), the United States, whose grip on world hegemony they believed was on the decline, was trying to use Ukraine as a bridgehead for military aggression against Russia. This study is a result of an extensive survey of the relevant literature and my own expert interviews conducted in Moscow in March 2020.

KEYWORDS

Syrian War, unipolar world, Arab Spring, radical Islamism, Russia, the United States, Putin, Obama

On September 30, 2015, President of the Russian Federation V. Putin obtained the Federal Council's (Senate's) permission to send Russia's military forces abroad. Several hours later, Russian military aircraft flew from the Khmeimim Air Base in Latakia to strike jihadist bases in Homs Province. Even the Soviet Union had never involved itself directly in armed conflicts in the Middle East, so Russia's military adventure in Syria surprised the world. The fact that this event followed another of Russia's ambitious decisions to integrate Crimea in 2014, led to speculation in Western political circles as to Russia's motivation for getting involved in the war. The third, no less relevant question was: Why did Russia's military counteroffensive to what it called the unipolar world start from Syria, and not from Ukraine nor Georgia? Or: How could Russia, which had been exclusively defensive in the post-Soviet territories, be so bold in the remote Middle East?

In my view, researchers and the mass media have provided the following explanations of Russia's purposes for participating in the Syrian War:

- (1) Preventing Islamic radicalism from spreading from Syria to Russia;
- (2) Presenting an alternative to the US-led war on terror in the Middle East, thus challenging the unipolar world;
- (3) Domestic populism, aiming to raise President V. Putin's approval rate;
- (4) Overcoming Russia's international isolation since its reintegration of Crimea in 2014;
- (5) Saving B. Assad's government, Russia's ally in the Middle East.

B. Wasser from the RAND Corporation (see below) notes that Russia's most important war aim was to obtain international prestige and to have a seat at the table for key negotiations and decisions. She also notes that Russia seeks to maintain regional stability to prevent the emergence of failed states and the inflow of Islamic terrorism into Russia and its neighbouring countries. Russia's long-standing concerns over Islamic extremism have been exacerbated by Russian jihadist returnees and by further instability in Middle Eastern countries engendered by regime change and "outsider interference."¹

Largely sharing this view, this paper tries to gain a deeper understanding of how Russian policymakers perceived the situation. I find this focus justifiable because, in hindsight, Russia's military involvement in the Syrian War in September 2015 was an important landmark on its way to the large-scale military operation in Ukraine in 2022. While the causal relationship between the two conflicts is tentative at best, the Syrian War generated a cognitive apparatus that facilitated Russia's radical policy change towards Ukraine, too. Russian policymakers became convinced that the unipolar world was coming to an end. In the case of Syria (2015), the ill-fated US-led anti-terror operations intensified Islamic terrorism, which created an existential threat for Russia. In the case of Ukraine (2022), the United States, whose grip on world hegemony they believed was on the decline, was trying to use Ukraine as a bridgehead for military aggression against Russia. This peculiar combination of hope (the end of the unipolar world) and fear (an existential threat for Russia) reminds us of J. Stalin's thesis on intensifying class struggle in a socialist society.

1 Wasser 2019, 3–4.

Methodologically, I follow R. Jervis's warning against "parsimonious perception."¹ The warning guided a number of international relations specialists during the Cold War. According to R. Jervis when policymakers and even researchers face a new event, they try to construe it in a manner that does not require them to change their accustomed way of interpretation, based on their worldviews, past experiences, and stereotypical ideas. Hence, policymakers and researchers tend to think that the opponent acts in a highly centralized and planned manner, rather than taking the opponent's decision to be a result of coincidence of disparate events. Likewise, they tend to underestimate the agent's room for independent actions. These tendencies to simplification have deep roots in human nature, which tries to evade the pain of additional empirical research and ideological adaptation.

This study is a result of an extensive survey of the relevant literature and my own expert interviews conducted in Moscow in March 2020.² Among the secondary literature, the works of S. Charap and other researchers of the RAND Corporation have been particularly helpful. They conducted an expert survey in Moscow, similar to mine, in March 2019, a year earlier than I did.³ Secondly, two books – one by D. Trenin and another by F.A. Gerges⁴ – may help us understand that Russia's diplomacy in the Middle East since 2011 has been successful precisely because it has done exactly the opposite to its American counterpart. Thirdly, memoirs by Russian diplomats and experts in Middle East studies, such as A. Vasiliev and M. Khodynskaya-Golenishcheva, reveal that the issues that seemed to appear after 2015 actually had a fact deep historical origin.⁵ Lastly, C. Phillips's book is a stalwart when it comes to the military history of the Syrian War.⁶

Out of Fear that Terrorists May Return

Let me start my discussion by examining what I construe as significant motives for Russia's involvement in the Syrian War, namely, fighting terrorist threats and proposing an alternative to unsuccessful US-led anti-terror operations.

It may seem that Russian politicians often overemphasize the terrorist threat, but we should bear in mind here that the onset of the Syrian Civil War in 2011 threatened a third wave of radical Islamism, the first being the Second Chechen War in 1999–2000, and the second hitting Dagestan around 2010.⁷ As R. Jervis notes, accumulated past experiences may cause expectations and perceptual readiness on which policymakers rely.⁸ A number of specialists in Russia and the West agree that the Russian leaders perceived Islamist terror as an existential crisis for the Putin regime. Six of the nine experts I interviewed in March 2020 evaluated the anti-terror factor as "most important," "important," or "moderately important" reasons for Russia's involvement in the Syrian War. According to S. Markedonov, an expert in international relations who

1 Jervis 2017.

2 Overall, I interviewed nine experts of various fields.

3 Charap 2019.

4 Trenin 2018; Gerges 2012.

5 Васильев 2018; Ходынская-Голенищева 2019.

6 Phillips 2020.

7 Ibragimov, Matsuzato 2014.

8 Jervis 2017, 145–148.

teaches at Moscow State University of International Relations (MGIMO), an important criterion on which Russian policymakers deliberate their Middle East policy is how it affects the situation in the Russian North Caucasus. According to Markedonov, terrorist activity in the North Caucasus intensified following the Arab Spring. The suicide attacks committed by North Caucasians at Domodedovo Airport in January 2011 and in Volgograd in December 2013 testify to this.¹

In the West, R. Allison, who is generally rather critical of Russia's foreign policy, notes that Russia's diplomacy is shaped by its obsession with the idea that overthrowing dictatorships in the Middle East will cause an inflow of jihadists into Russia and other former Soviet territories.² S. Charap shares Markedonov's opinion that Russia's Middle East policy has been motivated by its domestic anti-terror measures: the Russian security organ believes that the inflow of money from charitable organizations in Arabic countries in the 1990s cultivated terrorism in Russia; the assassination of Z. Yandarbiyev, President of Chechnya in 1996–1997, who had fled to Qatar during the Second Chechen War, in Doha in 2004 devastated diplomatic relations between Russia and Qatar; and T. Batirashvili (Abu Omar al-Shishani), a Chechen from Georgia who fought in the South Ossetian War in 2008, became an ISIS field commander.³ I also find that local politicians and security officers in Dagestan tend to think that local Islamic terrorism has been promoted by the Middle Eastern countries. The idea that Islamic radicalism is a result of domestic social problems, such as the clientelism of Dagestan society, is not widespread.⁴

After the start of the Syrian Civil War in 2011, Islamist recruiters (*verbovshchiki*) in Dagestan and other Muslim regions of Russia called for their fellow believers to emigrate to Syria to participate in the jihad. The Russian security organ and police did not clamp down on them, but rather deliberately let Islamists leave Russia. Letting them leave the country was seen as a better alternative to conducting anti-terrorist operations domestically, especially given that the Sochi Olympic Games were just around the corner. In Russia, the authorities compose a list of suspected Islamists,⁵ and it is extremely unlikely that any of them could slip through the cracks without facing significant obstacles, moreover, if they are accompanying their family members. Known Islamists, if not imprisoned, are put under house arrest, and their passports confiscated. The fact that many of them left Russia for the Middle East means that someone from the security services or police facilitated their departure. For example, N. Medetov, a known Islamist from Dagestan, suddenly appeared among the ranks of ISIS⁶ in May 2015 and pledged allegiance to the organization, even though he was supposedly under house arrest in Russia. This scene was transmitted

1 Interview conducted by the author with S. Markedonov, on March 21, 2020, Fryazino City of Moscow Oblast (further, all interviews were conducted in Moscow unless noted otherwise). For more on Markedonov's views, see Угроза ИГИЛ 2016.

2 Allison 2013, 813.

3 Charap 2015, 155–158.

4 Эксперты ЦСА РАН проанализировали перспективы ислама в РФ // Российская газета. 4 апреля 2012. [Электронный ресурс]. URL: <https://rg.ru/2012/04/04/islam.html> (дата обращения: 06.12.2022).

5 For more on this list see: Matsuzato, Ibragimov 2019.

6 Banned terrorist organization in Russian Federation.

via YouTube.¹ Considering the similar situations in Uzbekistan and China, it is likely that the Uzbek and Chinese governments also tacitly facilitated the Islamists' exodus to Syria.

A. Yarlykapov, an expert in Islamic studies who teaches at MGIMO, notes that approximately 5000 Islamists have emigrated from Dagestan to Syria, while about 3000 have moved from Chechnya and the Chechen diaspora abroad to Syria.² The whole legion of Islamists from Russia and the former Soviet territories reinforced ISIS fighters significantly. Russian became the third language, after Arabic and English, among jihadists in Syria. They successfully convinced ISIS leaders to add Russia to ISIS's target regions. An ISIS video distributed soon after its declaration of statehood in June 2014 announced to President Putin that ISIS fighters would take part in the struggle to liberate Chechnya and the entire Caucasus.³

A turning point towards Russia's military intervention in Syria was the seizure of Palmyra by ISIS on May 20, 2015. US policymakers predicted that the B. Assad government would not survive until the end of the year. In Russia, military specialist I. Kramnik went against the generally held view that B. Assad would manage to survive this time, too. His article "Tempest in Levant" published on June 11 in *Lenta.ru* argued that neither Russia's supplying Syria with weapons nor the Iranian forces' participation in ground battles would be able to stop ISIS. The long-standing international sanctions have left Iran without an air force, meaning it is incapable of carrying out airstrikes, while Russia cannot participate in ground battles for domestic political reasons. The only possible way to halt ISIS's advance was Russia's airstrikes on ISIS bases. Remarkably, I. Kramnik articulated the preventive characteristics of Russia's involvement in the Syrian War as follows: "The more we eliminate ISIS fighters and commanders on the spot [in Syria], the less we will have to eliminate them in Central Asia, or possibly, other Islamic regions of the former USSR and Russia itself."⁴ This idea, though in less cruel phrases, was repeated by V. Putin in his speech at the UN General Assembly on September 28, 2015,⁵ as well as by chief of the presidential administration S. Ivanov in his explanation to the Federation Council of Russia on September 30 (see below), and in Foreign Minister S. Lavrov's statement on October 1.⁶ Overall, Russian leaders genuinely believed that if they failed to eliminate radical Islamists in Syria, then Islamists would launch terrorist activities in Russia.

When did V. Putin decide to send the Russian troops to Syria? There are two key

1 Проповедник из Дагестана Надир абу Халид присягнул лидеру ИГ// Кавказский узел. 25 мая 2015. [Электронный ресурс]. URL: <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/262856> (дата обращения: 06.12.2022). See also Reuter's interview with an activist who changed his battlefield from Dagestan to Syria, enjoying assistance from the security services in Russia. Maria Tsvetkova, "Special Report: How Russia Allowed Hometown Radicals to Go and Fight in Syria," Reuters, May 13, 2016, accessed December 6, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-militants-specialreport-idUSKCN0Y41OP>.

2 Interview conducted by the author on March 12, 2020.

3 Угроза ИГИЛ 2018, 12.

4 Крамник, И. Буря в Леванте: Какой может быть война России против «Исламского государства» // *Lenta.ru*. 11 июня 2015. [Электронный ресурс]. URL: <https://lenta.ru/articles/2015/06/10/dimashq/> (дата обращения: 06.12.2022). Later, Kramnik criticized Minister of Defence S. Shoigu in the newspaper *Izvestiya* and was released from the post of *Izvestiya's* military observer. Kramnik's article credited Russia's successful military reform to the former Minister of Defence A. Serdyukov, while accusing Shoigu's Ministry of Defence of being more interested in propaganda than in dialogue with society. See: «Известия» уволили журналиста, раскритиковавшего Шойгу // *BBC News*. 26 сентября 2019. [Электронный ресурс]. URL: <https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-49838990> (дата обращения: 06.12.2022).

5 70-я сессия Генеральной Ассамблеи ООН: Владимир Путин принял участие в пленарном заседании юбилейной, 70-й сессии Генеральной Ассамблеи ООН в Нью-Йорке // Президент России. 28 сентября 2015. [Электронный ресурс]. URL: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50385> (дата обращения: 06.12.2022).

6 Угроза ИГИЛ 2018, 14.

dates: the alleged secret visit of Q. Soleimani, commander of the Quds (Jerusalem) Division of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, to Moscow on July 24–26 to try and persuade V. Putin to supplement the Syrians and Iranians ground forces with Russian airstrikes; and the conference attended by Russian and Syrian anti-terror officers in Moscow on August 6. During this conference, Syrian representatives passed an official letter from President B. Assad to V. Putin, asking for Russia's military aid.¹ If V. Putin had decided to send Russian troops to Syria before July 24, Soleimani would not have needed to visit Moscow, but it is unclear whether Soleimani actually came to Moscow. If Putin had decided to participate in the Syrian War and inform B. Assad of this intention before August 6, it turns out that the Syrian anti-terror officers put on an elaborate play on August 6, but this is highly unlikely. Therefore, we may suppose that V. Putin decided to intervene in the Syrian War militarily after August 6.

On March 14, 2016, six months after Russia's intervention in Syria, Minister of Defence S. Shoigu reported on Syria to V. Putin, who decided to withdraw some Russian troops from Syria based on this report. In this report, S. Shoigu underscored that "in Syrian territory, more than 2000 bandits who had migrated from Russia were eliminated. Among them, 17 were field commanders."² In other words, the Russian military counted not only how many blows it had delivered to ISIS and Al-Qaeda,³ but also how many fighters from Russia it had killed.

Russia's successful war on terror in the Middle East led Russian leaders to an important understanding. If Russia is facing what they perceive as an existential threat, they may start a preventive war outside the country. In the case of Syria, however, the Russian government decided to send troops there in response to the Syrian government's legitimate request. If this is not the case, how can Russia's self-claimed right to defence and Article 51 of the UN Charter (prescribing a member country's inherent right of individual or collective self-defence) be coordinated?

Russia's Anti-Terror Operation: Resisting the Unipolar World

For the Soviet Union during the Cold War, the Middle East was a stage for geopolitical competition with the United States. In the 1990s, Russia's commitment to Middle East became more pragmatic, aimed at sustaining profitable oil prices and checking the inflow of "charity money" and "teachers" from the Middle East hoping to raise radical Islamism in Russia. In 2003, President V. Putin criticized the United States for starting the Iraq War without the permission of the UN Security Council. However, back then, Russia had barely started the process of restoring its national power after the ruinous 1990s and was incapable of initiating an alternative policy towards Iraq. After a few months, Russia recognized the presence of US troops in Iraq. The Putin administration had criticized G.W. Bush's adventurism, fearing that Iraq could turn into a failed state. It was the same logic that led Moscow to oppose the United States' retreat from Iraq before it had established a post-Hussein order in the country.

1 *Мураховский, В.* Сирийский гамбит: Российская операция в Сирии – образцовый пример успешных действий экспедиционной группировки // Национальная оборона. 28 марта 2016. [Электронный ресурс]. URL: <https://oborona.ru/includes/periodics/maintheme/2016/0328/181718097/detail.shtml> (дата обращения: 06.12.2022).

2 *Ibid.*

3 Banned terrorist organization in Russian Federation

Russia abandoned this policy of appeasement when the Libyan Crisis began in 2011. Russian policymakers construed that the failures of US-led anti-terror operations were the structural by-products of the declining unipolar world. Therefore, according to their view, it was difficult to overcome Islamic terrorism without changing the existing decision-making process in world politics. For example, D. Trenin, former director of the Moscow Carnegie Center, remarked: "Moscow's position on Syria was not so much about Syria or even the Middle East; it was about the global order."¹ Russian diplomat and Middle East expert M. Khodynskaya-Golenishcheva identified Russia's purpose as "returning" to the international arena "via the Middle East," and its "participation in the making of a more just (from Russia's point of view) world order."² A. Vasiliev vividly describes how Russian diplomats with experience in the Middle East and the Arab world became frustrated with international politics around the Middle East after the Cold War.³ D. Trenin writes: "To Russian Arabists, Americans and their European allies were no more than hapless sorcerer's apprentices who did not know what they were doing."⁴

Is it possible to think that Russian policymakers are excessively generalizing the failures of American anti-terror policy? Is this an example of what B. Jervis describes as overestimation of the opponent's "unity and planning"?⁵ Should we regard the failures of American anti-terror policies from 2003 to 2015 as a result of unfortunate, conjunctural factors, rather than as a structural flaw of the unipolar world? A historical analysis presented by F.A. Gerges, a leading British Arabist, would seem to support the structural, rather than conjunctural, interpretation of the failures of the American anti-terror policy. According to him, during the Cold War, the United States regarded the Middle East as a stage for a hegemonic battle between the United States and the Soviet Union (the globalist approach), and had special relations with Israel. These two preconditions demanded the exclusion of American Experts in Middle Eastern studies (the regionalist school) from the decision-making process. Their very expertise in the region was cursed as a "liability imperiling the national interest."⁶ The end of the Cold War entrenched globalism and the Israel-first school in American diplomacy, with the result that American experts in Middle Eastern studies lost their influence on decision-making on Middle East matters even further than during the Cold War.⁷ On the eve of the Iraq War, State Secretary C. Powell recommended to the Department of Defense that some experts on Iraq in the Department of State help out with post-war planning. Secretary of Defense D. Rumsfeld promptly declined the offer because he doubted their support for the war.⁸

During the Cold War, the United States protected Middle East autocracies as long as they were useful for the prevention of Soviet influence (the realist approach). Yet, after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, the G.W. Bush administration intended to uproot terrorism by democratizing Middle East society and thus launched the Iraq War in 2003 (the social engineering approach). Based on the experience of dissolving Nazi Germany

1 Trenin 2018, 48.

2 Ходынская-Голенищева 2019, 667. Khodynskaya-Golenishcheva earned a doctoral degree at the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences. She is a diplomat and a professor at MGIMO.

3 Васильев 2018.

4 Trenin 2018, 43.

5 Jervis 2017, 319–343.

6 Gerges 2012, 22.

7 Gerges 2012, 23.

8 Ibid., 83.

after World War II, the victors eliminated existing Iraqi state institutions, most notably the army, which made Iraq a failed state. The Bush administration found it difficult to integrate the Iraqi population by national and civic consciousness, so helped to establish a sectarian-based political system (like that of Lebanon) and thus artificially strengthened sectarianism in Iraq, which “led to a destructive intertwining of religious identity with politics.”¹

Faced with this situation, B. Obama, who opposed the Iraq War, came to the fore. B. Obama saw Bush’s unilateralism as a continuation of B. Clinton’s liberal interventionism, while B. Obama’s own ideal was to return to the “bipartisan realistic policy of G. Bush’s father, of J.F. Kennedy, of, in some ways, R. Reagan.”² In addition, B. Obama wanted to shift the focus of American diplomacy to the Asian Pacific region. After winning the presidential election of 2008, however, B. Obama called H. Clinton and other foreign affairs advisors that had served under her husband back to the White House and brought young liberal interventionists, such as S. Power and S. Rice, into the fold. Eventually, B. Obama intervened in Libya in 2011.³

Just as B. Obama in the early days of his presidency criticized America’s policy vis-à-vis the Middle East from the viewpoint of classic realist diplomacy, Russian politicians and ideologues found the West’s liberal interventionism in the Middle East (and Ukraine), represented by S. Rice, S. Power, and V. Nuland, among others, to be ideologized policy course that did not reflect the real interests of the West. They began to make a mockery of the West’s policy, while benevolently looking to the re-emergence of H. Kissinger to save the West, as the Russian TV programme *60 Minutes* frequently does. Indeed, V. Putin’s Middle Eastern policy reminds us more of the American Middle Eastern policy during the Cold War, which sought to ensure mutual prosperity with the existing rulers in the Middle East, than it does of Russia’s own Soviet precedent.

The Soviet leadership used to analyse Western imperialism and colonialism through a prism of rational choice model and, in other words, treated it with respect. But creating an image of the Russian elites as realists was fraught with caricaturing and underestimating their Western opponents. The mocking attitude of the Russian elites towards the West drastically changed again, when Putin fully embraced the anti-colonialist and world revolutionary rhetoric in 2022, possibly under the influence of the liberation discourse deriving from Donbass.

Lessons of Libya

The Libyan Crisis of 2011 marked a turning point in Russia’s (and China’s) Middle Eastern policy.⁴ Two days after the clash between government and anti-government forces in Benghazi on February 15, 2011, the UN Security Council adopted the relatively modest Resolution 1970, which froze the M. Gaddafi family’s overseas properties and dispatched a group of investigators to Syria. A month later, on March 17, 2011, the UN Security Council adopted a new, far more aggressive resolution (Resolution 1973), which established a no-fly zone over Libya. Russian and Chinese representatives to

1 Ibid., 84.

2 Ibid., 95.

3 Gerges 2012.

4 When I interviewed them, Kashin and Markedonov referred to the “lessons of Libya.” Expert interviews conducted by Charap and his colleagues came to the same conclusion (Charap 2019, 6). See also Сирийский рубеж 2016, 27–28.

the United Nations, together with their colleagues from Germany, Brazil, and India, abstained from voting, but did not veto the resolution.

Resolution 1973 allowed UN member countries to “take all necessary measures to enforce compliance with the ban on flights.”¹ Indeed, two days after the resolution, NATO began airstrikes on Libya, not because M. Gaddafi had violated the flight ban, but because B. Obama thought, even before the resolution, that any no-fly zone would be meaningless if Libya’s airbases remained intact.² After airstrikes started, NATO and the Libyan opposition operated in solidarity. In October 2011, M. Gaddafi was killed without trial. I. Zviagelskaya supposes the huge gap between the abstract wording of Resolution 1973 and the airstrikes it led to made the Russian leaders feel that they had been deceived.³ R. Falk, the UN special rapporteur on Palestinian human rights, noted that the limited mandate was disregarded almost from the beginning and that countries such as Russia and China would not have merely abstained had the true intent of NATO (and Qatari) objectives been made clear at the time of resolution. Russia’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, S. Lavrov remarked in an interview in January 2012, after the murder of M. Gaddafi, that “the international community did take sides in Libya” and that Russia would never allow the Security Council “to authorize anything similar to what happened in Libya.”⁴

According to F.A. Gerges and V. Chamov, Russian Ambassador to Libya until March 17, 2011, French President N. Sarkozy and British Prime Minister D. Cameron deeply resented M. Gaddafi for preferring China and Russia to France and the United Kingdom as a partner for concluding contracts on concessions on weapon imports, gas and oil extraction, infrastructure building, and telecommunications development in Libya. Reportedly, N. Sarkozy enjoyed M. Gaddafi’s financial aid in the 2007 presidential elections and was eager to destroy the evidence. On March 12, the Arab League’s foreign ministers meeting requested a ban on flights over Libya. B. Obama was disgusted by the Arab leaders’ hypocrisy in sacrificing M. Gaddafi to divert the target of the Arab Spring from themselves, but felt relieved at having gained the assurance that the Arab peoples would not interpret NATO’s military intervention as a religious war.⁵ B. Obama justified the intervention in Libya by referring to intelligence that the government forces were on the verge of capturing the opposition foothold of Benghazi. V. Chamov doubted the veracity of this information,⁶ and added that some of the videos allegedly showing the government forces’ atrocities later proved to have been shot in an Al Jazeera studio in Qatar.⁷

After the Libyan Crisis, Russian and Chinese representatives at the UN Security Council began to veto any resolution that might be used as a pretext for military intervention in Syria. The West and the Gulf States accused Russia and China of changing their position. A typical example was a speech delivered by US ambassador to the United Nations Susan Rice at the UN Security Council on October 4, 2011.⁸ Some

1 Резолюция 1973, принятая Советом Безопасности 17 марта 2011 г. // ООН. [Электронный ресурс]. URL: <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/s/res/1973-%282011%29> (дата обращения: 12.03.2022).

2 Obama 2020, 657–658.

3 Звягельская 2012, 534.

4 Ulrichsen 2020, 107–108.

5 Gerges 2012, 110–114; B. Obama 2020, 656.

6 Чамов 2012, 569. Chamov’s statement contradicts a famous coverage in The New York Times. David D. Kirkpatrick, and Kareem Fahim, “Qaddafi Warns of Assault on Benghazi as U.N. Vote Nears,” The New York Times, March 17, 2011, accessed December 6, 2022, <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/2011/03/18/world/africa/18libya.html>. I find this coverage highly speculative.

7 Чамов 2012, 568.

8 “Explanation of Vote at a Security Council Adoption on the Situation in the Middle East (Syria),” US Department of State, October 4, 2011, accessed December 6, 2022, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/p/io/rm/2011/175035.htm>.

may argue that, in the autumn of 2011, moderates and secularists, such as the Free Syrian Army, still composed the main group within the anti-Assad opposition, and that beheading hostages, sexual violence, massacres of Yazidis, and slave markets had not become commonplace in Syria, and therefore Ambassador S. Rice's idealization of the anti-Assad opposition was justifiable then. However, by the end of 2011, the Western mass media began to report that a significant portion of the anti-Assad opposition was made up of radical Islamists.

In opposition-controlled Aleppo, Islamists shot and killed a 14-year-old boy for making a joke about the Prophet Muhammad in front of his mother in June 2013, long before ISIS's hegemony in Syria.¹ As early as 2012, the US Defense Intelligence Agency remarked on a plan hatched by the anti-Assad opposition to establish a caliphate in East Syria and noted that this was why the Gulf States and Turkey supported the opposition. However, until 2014, the US government did not tighten control over Turkey and the Gulf States to prevent such a plan from being implemented.² In August 2014, when ISIS troops had already captured Mosul and were marching towards Baghdad, the United States and Saudi Arabia, unhappy with the N. Maliki government's allegedly pro-Iran policy, curtailed their military aid to Iraq.³ On the whole, we may conclude that the US government had noticed the imminent threat of Islamic terrorism by 2012, but prioritized other political purposes, such as overthrowing B. Assad and deterring Iran, over anti-terror measures.

In response to the atrocities in the Middle East, the criticism by Russian politicians and the Russian media of the West's "double-standards," which was observed during Russia's counter-offensive in 2008, reached new heights in the mid-2010s.

Unpopular Involvement

Let us move on to examining those factors that I consider insignificant or meritless, namely, domestic populism, Crimea, and saving B. Assad.

As M. Saakashvili's military operation against South Ossetia in August 2008 demonstrates, a government tends to go to war to earn domestic popularity when it is suffering a declining approval rate and when it expects the coming war to be "swift and victorious." In 2015, President V. Putin still continued to enjoy the high approval rate that he had earned by reclaiming Crimea the previous year,⁴ while politicians and citizens continued to suffer the trauma caused by the Afghan and First Chechen wars. Few Russians believed then that Russia's military support would save the B. Assad regime from collapsing. An opinion poll conducted by the Levada Center on October 2–5, 2015 revealed that, in response to the question "Will the Syrian conflict become a 'new Afghanistan,'" 46% of those polled answered that it "definitely" or "possibly" would, while only 38% of respondents answered that it "possibly" or "definitely" would not.⁵ It

1 "The Boy Killed for an Off-hand Remark about Muhammad – Sharia Spreads in Syria," BBC News, July 2, 2013, accessed December 6, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-23139784>.

2 Phillips 2020, 203.

3 Васильев 2018, 584.

4 Public opinion polls conducted in September 2015 showed that 84–86% of the respondents trusted V. Putin. These rates rose to 88–90% in October of that year. Remarkably, the spectacular airstrikes raised V. Putin's approval by another 4%, but few politicians would start a war to raise their approval rate from 86% to 90%. Разуваев, В. Что означает операция в Сирии для российской политики // Независимая газета. 3 ноября 2015. [Электронный ресурс]. URL: https://www.ng.ru/ng_politics/2015-11-03/9_syria.html (дата обращения: 06.12.22).

5 Дергачев, В. Большинство россиян выступили за окончание операции в Сирии // РБК. 6 мая 2019. [Электронный ресурс]. URL: <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/06/05/2019/5cc82ea09a79471391111669> (дата обращения: 06.12.22).

was the favourable manner in which events developed that released Russian politicians and the military from the Afghan syndrome.¹

Russia's involvement in the Syrian War was an unpopular policy, irrespective of its military performance. A poll conducted by the Levada Center in September 2015, on the eve of the Russian Aerospace Force's involvement, showed that only 14% of respondents supported Russia's involvement.² Even in August 2017, when the military situation had stabilized to B. Assad's advantage, as many as 49% of those polled said that Russia should wind down its operation in Syria. This was far greater than the number of people who supported the continuation of the operation (30%). In April 2019, this gap widened to 55% versus 30%.³ In contrast to the Crimean case, Russian citizens did not really emphasize with the Syrian people – they could not see any legitimate reasons for putting the lives of young Russians in danger for the sake of Syrians.

The V. Putin administration understood that any policy involving sending Russian troops to Syria would not be a popular one, so the presidential administration decided that its presence in the country would be mostly made up of contingents of its newly established Aerospace Forces, and that Russian soldiers would never be mobilized for ground battles. This policy was formulated as “war without contact” and indeed softened the public opposition to sending troops. An opinion poll conducted by the Russian Public Opinion Research Center in October 2015 showed that 40% of the respondents supported Russia's airstrikes in Syria, but that no more than 5% supported a possible participation in ground battles.⁴

When the V. Putin administration asked the Federation Council to approve sending troops to Syria on September 30, 2015, V. Putin perhaps feared that the Council might express its concern about “Afghanization” of Syria, even if it would not reject the president's proposal. This plenary session of the Federation Council looked peculiar even in comparison with the session held one and a half years before (on March 1, 2014), which approved the deployment of the Russian army in Crimea. First, the session on Syria was closed and we have not been able to read its proceedings to this day (2022). The resolution proposed by the President did not even mention Syria, the object of military action, but only stated that troops would be sent abroad “based on widely recognized principles and norms of international law.”⁵ In 2014, V. Putin's request to deploy troops in Ukraine had been deliberated at the committees on defence and diplomacy of the Federation Council, but this time there was no preliminary committee discussion. In the case of Crimea, only a deputy minister of foreign affairs attended the Federation Council session to explain the President's proposal, but, concerning Syria, V. Putin authorized three high government officers, Chief of Staff of the Presidential Executive Office S. Ivanov, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs in charge of the Middle East

1 Богданов, К. Российская операция в Сирии: военные и политические аспекты // Национальная оборона. 21 декабря 2017. [Электронный ресурс]. URL: <https://2009-2020.oborona.ru/includes/periodics/geopolitics/2017/1221/144623069/print.shtml> (дата обращения: 06.12.22); Trenin 2018, 64.

2 Разуваев, В. Что означает операция в Сирии для российской политики. // Независимая газета. [Электронный ресурс]. URL: https://www.ng.ru/ng_politics/2015-11-03/9_syria.html (дата обращения 21.12.22)

3 Дергачев, В. Большинство россиян выступили за окончание операции в Сирии.

4 Разуваев, В. Что означает операция в Сирии для российской политики.

5 В Совет Федерации внесено предложение об использовании Вооруженных Сил за пределами территории России. Президент России. 30 сентября 2015. [Электронный ресурс]. URL: <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50399> (дата обращения: 06.12.2022). This style of not qualifying the geographic scope of the military operation would be repeated on February 22, 2022, when the Federation Council approved the President's proposal to protect Donbass.

and North Africa M. Bogdanov, and Deputy Minister of Defence N. Pankov, to attend the session. Obviously, the President arranged to cope with the situation in which Senators pose substantive questions.¹

I do not agree with G. Yudin's opinion that the Russian public supports whatever V. Putin decides to do.² Public opinion in Russia regarding the Syrian War swung following the tremendous efforts of the authorities, for example. However, the Russian authorities consider public opinion when it comes to decisions on how to do something and, perhaps more importantly, on how to formulate such decisions, but not whether or not to actually make the decision.

Crimea Did Not Matter

Quite a few scholars, including Russian experts interviewed by S. Charap or me, argue that Russia sent troops to Syria to overcome its isolation from the West after the Crimean crisis.³ However, I am not familiar with a single case in which a Western country lifted its sanctions against Russia, imposed in connection with the "annexation" of Crimea, based on Russia's alleged contribution to the war on terror in Syria. Nor do I think that V. Putin would be so as to send troops to Syria expecting this to happen. Meanwhile, even the US government did not insist that Russia should not have a voice regarding the Syrian crisis because it had violated international law with its actions in Crimea.

The Crimean crisis interrupted US–Russia negotiations on Syrian matters for only three months, if at all. On February 10, 2015 (during Geneva II peace talks on Syria), B. Obama called V. Putin and pressed him regarding the war in Eastern Ukraine.⁴ Two days later, the Minsk II agreement on the Donbass conflict was signed. On May 12, US Secretary of State J. Kerry and Assistant Secretary of State V. Nuland met V. Putin and S. Lavrov in Sochi to discuss how to initiate the third round of Syrian talks after the failure of Geneva II. J.W. Parker regards these Sochi talks as evidence against the interpretation that Russia sent troops to Syria to overcome its own isolation after Crimea.⁵

Perhaps it would be going too far to assert that there was no causal relationship between Russia's post-Crimea isolation and its military involvement in Syria. But if there were some causalities at all, it was in the context of Russian policymakers' challenge to what they perceived to be the unipolar world. Three of my nine interviewees supported the thesis that "Russia intervened in Syria to overcome its isolation" after reinterpreting the situation as follows: it is unlikely that amicable relations between Russia and the West can be restored unless Russia returns Crimea to Ukraine; at the same time, however, Moscow may be able to make the West recognize that Russia is indispensable for solving global problems. For this purpose, Russia must earn points in regions where the West typically has problems. V. Kashin suggests that Russian

1 Смирнов, С., Райбман, Н. Путин получил право использовать войска за рубежом // Ведомости. 30 сентября 2015. [Электронный ресурс]. URL: <https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/articles/2015/09/30/610834-sovfed-vs-rossii-za-rubezhom> (дата обращения: 06.12.2022).

2 Yudin 2022.

3 Charap 2019, 7. Though this is not a topic for this paper, one should not forget that the reaction to Russia's reclaiming of Crimea differed significantly in the West and the Middle East. Israel did not participate in the West-led sanctions on Russia and the United States did not criticize it for this. Saudi Arabia continues to accept pilgrims from Russia-controlled Crimea to Mecca without any complaint (Naganawa 2019, 311–314.).

4 "Readout of the President's Call with President V. Putin of Russia," The White House, February 10, 2015, accessed December 6, 2022, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/02/10/readout-presidents-call-president-putin-russia>.

5 Parker 2017, 13.

leaders believed they had to wait out several electoral cycles in the United States in order to restore normal relations with the United States. Then, it seemed more advantageous to pursue Russia's national interests in the Middle East than to bet on illusory rapprochement with the West.¹

The content of V. Putin's UN Assembly speech on September 28, 2015, to which proponents of the hypothetical desire to overcome isolation often refer, need to be re-examined. Celebrating the 70th anniversary of the creation of the United Nations, V. Putin called for the spirit of the Yalta Conference to be recaptured. After the Cold War, the unipolar powers brandished law of force. They do not seem to have learnt from the lessons of the Soviet Union, which collapsed from its own attempts "to export social experiments." Only here did V. Putin move on to the Middle East and North African issues. UN Security Council Resolution 1973 on Libya (described below) was violated. The aggressive interventions of the unipolar power destroyed attempts at reform, and statehood itself, in a number of countries. In Syria, only the government forces and the Kurdish vigilante corps (*kurdskoe opolchenie*) were fighting against ISIS and other terrorist organizations. And it was precisely here that V. Putin proposed creating an international anti-terror coalition comparable to the international anti-Hitler union, but, without explaining this coalition's attributes and how to establish it, he changed the agenda to the War in Donbass and criticized Ukraine for ignoring the Minsk II agreements.²

As described, the keynote of V. Putin's UN speech was criticism, not appeasement, of the West. Yet his call for an international anti-terror coalition was not just window dressing. Russian leaders repeated similar appeals to remember the lessons of World War II in many cases: for example, President D. Medvedev at the UN General Assembly after the Second South Ossetian War in 2008, and more recently in an article authored by V. Putin published in *The National Interest* in 2020.³ The appeals of Russian leaders to learn the lessons of World War II seem to reflect their image of the post-unipolar world. At least before 2022, they did not think that a mere multipolar world should replace the waning unipolar world, but rather pretended that the Yalta-Potsdam signatory countries should continue to hold privileged leadership, as was the case of the creation of the United Nations.

After Russia demonstrated its military might by bombing the Syrian Islamists, military coordination between the United States and Russia intensified. The zones of their aerial supremacy adjoined or overlapped with each other, so the lack of frequent coordination could have caused a serious accident. A play on President D. Medvedev's characterization of Russia's intervention in the Second South Ossetian War in 2008, that it was "enforcing Georgia towards peace," started to make its way around Russian political circles: "enforcing America towards cooperation."⁴

1 Interview conducted by the author on March 10, 2020.

2 70-я сессия Генеральной Ассамблеи ООН: Владимир Путин принял участие в пленарном заседании юбилейной, 70-й сессии Генеральной Ассамблеи ООН в Нью-Йорке.

3 Выступление Президента России Д.А.Медведева на 64-й сессии Генеральной Ассамблеи ООН // ООН. 24 сентября 2009. [Электронный ресурс]. URL: <https://www.un.org/ru/ga/pdf/64russia.pdf> (дата обращения: 06.12.2022); Vladimir V. Putin, "The Real Lessons of the 75th Anniversary of World War II," *The National Interest*, June 18, 2020, accessed December 6, 2022, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/vladimir-putin-real-lessons-75th-anniversary-world-war-ii-162982>.

4 Васильев 2018, 611; M. Kofman discerningly noted the importance of practical military negotiations between the United States and Russia soon after the event: Michael Kofman, "The Russian Intervention in Syria: Policy Options and Exit Strategies," *War on the Rocks*, October 21, 2015, accessed December 6, 2022, <https://warontherocks.com/2015/10/the-russian-intervention-in-syria-policy-options-and-exit-strategies/>.

On October 25, 2015, the United States Department of Defense and the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation signed a Memorandum of Understanding on the Prevention of Flight Safety Incidents in the Course of Operations in Syria, which divided the zones of air supremacy of the two countries by the Euphrates River.¹ After the Memorandum of Understanding, the main issue for the Kerry-Lavrov talks was the problem of how to delineate between moderates and radicals among Islamists. In other words, US and Russian representatives determined whom to invite to the negotiation table and whom to bomb. J. Kerry and S. Lavrov met four times between February to April 2015 and spoke more than 25 times on the telephone.²

The United States did not refuse to cooperate with Russia on a resolution to the Syrian problem, even after the Crimean crisis, while Russia used the Syrian War to propose a diarchic (rather than multilateral) model for international decision-making.

Saving the Untrusted

Regarding relations between the V. Putin and B. Assad administrations, it should be noted first and foremost that Syria in 2015 was not an existentially important strategic point for Russia, even though the country had maintained amicable relations with Russia since the Soviet period.³ Some experts refer to Tartus, used by Russia as a naval base, but, as R. Alison and M. Kofman point out, by not deploying its fleet in the Mediterranean, Russia maintained this port poorly. Russia's military involvement in the Syrian War raised the value of Tartus, not the opposite.⁴

Were the debts and concessions that Russia owned in Syria a decisive reason for its intervention in the Syrian War? It is certainly true that all the Middle Eastern countries in which the United States carried out a military intervention after the Cold War – Iraq, Libya, and Syria – owed significant debts to Russia, deriving mainly from their purchase of weapons from the Soviet Union. These countries restructured the debts by granting Russian oil companies concessions to extract natural resources and by contracting Russian corporations to build infrastructure facilities. As was the case with the Iraq War, however, the Russian leaders sacrificed these debts and concessions when they prioritized so-called international cooperation in the war on terror. Even if debts and concessions had become an important motive for Russia's military involvement in Syria, perhaps the main concern of the country's leadership was not the financial loss *per se*, but rather the international system of decision-making that takes no notice of Russian (and Chinese) interests in the region.

Russia's attitude towards the B. Assad regime was correlated with its relations with the United States. During the mid-2010s, when the Russian leaders tried to achieve peace in Syria in cooperation with the United States, they did not exclude the possibility of B. Assad's resignation at some stage of political transition, and repeatedly stated that Russia's war purpose was not to protect the B. Assad government, but to create an anti-terror coalition composed of the B. Assad government, the Kurds, and

1 Васильев 2018, 590.

2 Лавров: американцы шепчут на ухо другим странам, чтобы они не ездили к нам // РИА новости. 4 мая 2016. [Электронный ресурс]. URL: <https://ria.ru/20160504/1426358027.html> (дата обращения: 06.12.2022).

3 Сирийский рубеж 2016, 14–24.

4 Allison 2013, 807; Michael Kofman, "What Kind of Victory for Russia in Syria?," Military Review, January 24, 2018, accessed December 6, 2022, <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/Online-Exclusive/2018-OLE/Russia-in-Syria/>.

the “patriotic opposition.”¹ Indeed, Russia’s representatives have had contacts with the “patriotic opposition” since the beginning of the Syrian crisis in 2011. This was one of the reasons why relations between V. Putin and Lavrov on the one hand, and B. Assad on the other, were at times strained. In both 2012 and 2014, the Syrian authorities demonstratively arrested opposition activists scheduled to attend the talks with the government arranged by Russia.² Thus, while exploiting Russia’s military and diplomatic power for his own political survival, B. Assad nevertheless proved to be “a deliberate spoiler”³ of Russia’s designs for political transition of Syria.

UN Security Council Resolution 2254 dated December 18, 2015 marked a victory for Russian diplomacy. The resolution restricted the characteristics of the transition government to “credible, inclusive, and non-sectarian governance” and revised the Geneva Communiqué of 2012, which effectively requested B. Assad’s preliminary resignation. Resolution 2254 presented a concrete roadmap to establishing this transitional governance within six months, but the B. Assad government did not implement it. Losing patience with B. Assad, in May 2016, Minister of Foreign Affairs S. Lavrov said at a press conference that “Syria is not an ally of Russia in the same sense that Turkey is an ally of the United States.”⁴ M. Khodynskaya-Golenishcheva expressed her misgivings about UN Security Council Resolution 2254, which has been postponed practically forever. V. Naumkin, one of the most influential Experts in Middle Eastern studies in Russia, interviewed by Vasiliev in 2017, said: “we won militarily, but have not achieved much in conflict regulation.”⁵

For diplomatic purposes, which Russia pursued at least until the mid-2010s, it would have been more beneficial to find another Syrian leader who was more flexible and competent and took Russia’s advice to the extent of rewarding the aid that Syria received from Russia. By 2006, some 10,000 Syrian servicemen had been educated at Soviet / Russian military schools.⁶ And, as was the case with civilian students, many of them married a Soviet or Russian woman and took them back to Syria.⁷ Perhaps it would not have been difficult for Russian leaders to find a candidate for Syrian president more desirable than B. Assad.

In 2016, cooperation between the United States and Russia around the Syrian problem became difficult because the US presidential election politicized the issue. In 2017, the new Trump administration practically retreated from the Middle East. Instead, the Syrian conflict would be managed by the Astana Process, and by cooperation between Russia, Turkey, and Iran. The Astana Process provided the B. Assad government with a much more comfortable diplomatic environment than before; together with traditional support from Iran, B. Assad found a new protector – the Russian military.

1 For example, see Vladimir Solovyov’s interview with Putin on October 10, 2015: Интервью Владимиру Соловьеву // Президент России. 12 октября 2015. [Электронный ресурс]. <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50482> (дата обращения: 06.12.2022).

2 Parker 2017, 23.

3 Ibid., 23.

4 Лавров: американцы шепчут на ухо другим странам, чтобы они не ездили к нам.

5 Васильев 2018, 610.

6 Allison 2013, 802.

7 In 2012, The New York Times reported that 20,000 wives of Soviet/Russian origin were living in Syria. “Russians and Syrians, Allied by History and Related by Marriage,” The New York Times, July 1, 2012, accessed December 6, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/02/world/middleeast/for-russia-syrian-ties-complicated-by-marriage.html>.

Conclusion

The US military interventions in the Iraq, Libyan, and Syrian Wars gave birth to failed states and hotbeds for terrorism, the exact opposite of what the United States had promised. This caused irreversible damage to the moral authority of the United States to lead world politics. The Libyan crisis made the Russia leaders run out of patience. If a similar easy-minded intervention was repeated vis-a-vis Syria, it seemed obvious that Syria would become a hotbed of terrorism more dangerous than Iraq. In the summer of 2015, radical Islamists nearly captured Damascus. The V. Putin administration, fearing that homegrown radical Islamists would return to Russia, decided to send troops to Syria.

Thus, two perceptions, the end of the unipolar world and Russia's existential crisis (in this case, the inflow of Islamic terrorism and, in the future case, the Nazification of Ukraine) joined each other to produce a cognitive framework that tends to radicalize decision-making. We cannot find a similar merging of perception, even when Russia faced M. Saakashvili's aggression against South Ossetia in 2008, or the Euromaidan Revolution of 2014.

When the Putin administration decided to send its Aerospace Forces to Syria, it wanted to manage the Syrian crisis in cooperation with the United States. This policy reflected a diarchic image of the post-unipolar world, in which the United States, Russia, and other Yalta-Potsdam signatory countries would continue to enjoy a privileged status. After the diarchy ceased to be effective due to the 2016 US presidential election, which made US-Russia cooperation difficult, and, later, isolationist D. Trump's victory in this election, the Astana Process (cooperation between Russia, Turkey, and Iran) came to the fore. The Astana Process represented another image of the post-unipolar world, composed of several regional power / civilization centres without any privilege of the Yalta-Potsdam signatory countries. It is obvious that, after February 2022, the second image of the post-unipolar world prevailed over the first in Russian political discourse.

The Syrian War provided Russia with an ideal opportunity to test the results of the military reforms carried out by former Minister of Defence A. Serdyukov. Based on the unsatisfactory performance of the Russian Army in the Second South Ossetian War of 2008, Serdyukov regarded the Soviet tradition of large-scale land war as an anachronism and set about strengthening Russia's air force and improving the ability of the armed forces to respond quickly. During the Syrian War, Russia helped the Syrian government with its newly founded Aerospace Forces, while Syrian soldiers fought ground battles. This division of labour veiled the weakening Russian infantry. In the military conflict in Ukraine, despite Russia's overwhelming superiority in terms of its air force and weaponry, the People's Republics are having trouble expanding the territories under their control. Russian military expert M. Khodarenok notes that, however great the damage the Alligators (Russian military helicopters) inflict on the enemy from the air, a battle cannot be won "unless our infantrymen hoist a flag on a building or a strategic height."¹ If the Russian leaders regard the military conflict in Ukraine as just a starting point of the reconfiguration of the world, it seems urgent to conduct a counter military reform to restore a "Soviet-style, old-fashioned" army capable of large-scale ground battles.

1 Mikhail Khodarenok's speech on the TV debate show 60 Minutes that aired on June 2, 2022.

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Российская военная операция в Сирии и дискурс многополярности

АННОТАЦИЯ

В данном эссе рассматриваются пять причин военного участия России в сирийском конфликте, которые полагаются в исследовательской и экспертной литературе как первопричины российской военной операции: борьба с терроризмом, сопротивление однополярности, внутренний популизм, преодоление изоляции России после начала Украинского кризиса и защита правительства Асада. Делается вывод, что борьба с терроризмом и защита многополярности стали релевантными причинами, способствующими началу сирийской военной операции. Сформированный в российском истеблишменте образ многополярности, возникающей ввиду упадка США, также подтверждает, что российская операция в Сирии психологически подготовила Россию к специальной военной операции на Украине. В случае с Сирией (2015) упадок США был воспринят как закономерное следствие плачевных результатов военных операций под руководством США в регионе, которые лишь подстегнули исламский радикализм, создав экзистенциальную угрозу для России. В случае Украины (2022) США также считались державой, находящейся в упадке и попытавшейся использовать Украину в качестве плацдарма для военной агрессии против России. Данное исследование является результатом экспертных интервью, проведенных в Москве в марте 2020 года.

КЛЮЧЕВЫЕ СЛОВА

Война в Сирии, однополярный мир, Арабская весна, радикальный исламизм, США, Путин, Обама

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