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Impact of Great Power Rivalry on Conflict Resolution: Russian and American Interventions in Syria

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ABSTRACT

This research critically evaluates the interrelationship between the competition of major powers within Syria and the transitional regime. This study focuses is on the reasons for the failure of the mediation structures established under the United Nations. It employs a qualitative explanatory single-case study design and process-tracing methodology with the help of neorealism and proxy war theories. Its purpose is to examine the process of transforming a regional political conflict into a prolonged international proxy war of conflicting strategic interests of superpowers. It is argued that the effective resolution of the Syrian conflict and the process of political transition have been adversely affected by the Russian-American geopolitical competition. The conflicting strategic interests of the United States and Russia, continuous diplomatic vetoes, and parallel diplomatic initiatives have paralyzed the institutional role of the UN Security Council. This failure creates significant obstacles to resolving the Syrian conflict through an agreed international process. This paper also investigates the structural motivations behind the gradual weakening of the governance structure of the Assad regime to its collapse. It shows that the Bashar al-Assad regime's external aid lifelines have been disrupted as Damascus's main external patrons become engaged in other geopolitical theatres. It also examines the transformation of the proxy war policy by the United States and Russia into pragmatic diplomacy after the establishment of a new controversial transitional government. This study has shown that major power strategic confrontations, proxy alignments and geopolitical balances are having profound effect on state transitions in the current multipolar era.



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Introduction

The Syrian conflict that began in 2011 is one of the most complex and devastating international crises in recent history. It was initially a movement consisting of local civil protests for social, economic, and political reforms. It later involved into into a multi-level military and international armed conflict. Because of the structural weaknesses of the global security structure, this internal conflict turned into an international war in the form of intense competition between the USA and Russia.

Syria is a country holding a highly significant position in the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East. Syria's geographical position holds immense importance because of its strategic access to the Mediterranean Sea and its importance in regional and global politics; for this reason, it has been a focal point for foreign powers to increase their influence. The internal balance of power in Syria holds a vital status for the national security interests of various powers. Regional and global powers in both Moscow and Washington held conflicting ideologies. As the political situation inside Syria weakened, state institutions began to weaken, and both powers started taking actions to advance their strategic interests.

From the very beginning, the USA provided logistics and material assistance to anti-government groups, and for this purpose, this external support kept regional allies involved in it. Later, under the framework of eliminating ISIS and countering terrorism, America started an operational alliance with the SDF. SDF is the name of the forces under Kurdish control in northeastern Syria. In response to this, Russia intervened directly with military force inside Syria in September 2015. This intervention completely altered the balance of power. The Syrian government, which was on the verge of collapse, stabilized due to this move and its political survival was sustained for another decade.

Actions such as diplomatic vetoes by both global powers, unbalanced frameworks, and the provision of material aid to local groups pushed Syria into a prolonged conflict, causing the political

transition process to remain stalled for several more years.

The foundation of this research paper is built on the hypothesis that whenever foreign powers become deeply involved in a local conflict, traditional conflict-resolution mechanisms become dysfunctional. Instead, external powers utilize these forums as instruments of geopolitical rivalry—as demonstrated by the United Nations being used for vetoes rather than mediation. Collectively these factors directly impacted Syria's transitional political landscape.

Great Power Rivalry, Proxy Warfare, and Conflict Resolution in Syria

The Syrian conflict is included among the most significant crises of the contemporary era. This is because the conflict journeyed from an internal rebellion to a highly internationalized conflict, in which major powers played a crucial role.

The consequences of geopolitical competition, foreign intervention, and proxy warfare are the primary focus of the available literature on Syria. Researchers agree that Russian and American intervention not only complicated diplomatic efforts but also diminished the prospects for a lasting solution to the conflict.

According to Hinnebusch (2014), prolonged political repression, such as an authoritarian style of governance, and economic inequality paved the way for public dissatisfaction with the government. This ultimately contributed to the outbreak of the uprising. In his book, *Syria from Reform to Revolt, Volume 1*, he wrote that: "The increase in foreign intervention and militancy in Syria occurred due to the Assad regime's harsh response to peaceful protests" (Hinnebusch & Zintl, 2014.p.37). According to him, international intervention transformed a domestic political crisis into a prolonged geopolitical war.

Christopher Phillips also examines Syria as an example of an internationalized civil war. In his book, *The Battle for Syria*, he argued how international and regional players supported various factions inside Syria to protect their own strategic interests (Phillips, 2016, p. 32).

According to him, had foreign powers not continuously provided military and financial assistance to the local factions, a compromise would have been reached between them, and the conflict would have been prevented from being further prolonged.

Most scholar's analysis of the Syrian crisis aligns with the framework of realist theory. In his book, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, John Mearsheimer argues that whenever opportunities arise, powerful states strive to expand their influence and maintain their strategic superiority (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 29). Scholars applying this theoretical perspective to the situation in Syria believe that Russia intervened in the country to protect Bashar al-Assad's government and safeguard its existing influence in the region. Meanwhile, the goal of the United States was to maintain its strategic position in the region and eliminate extremist groups.

Studies regarding Russian actions in Syria emphasize Moscow's geopolitical motives. Dmitri Trenin, in his book "What is Russia up to in the Middle East?", states that the military involvement Russia undertook in Syria in 2015 aimed to enhance its international influence and secure a long-term strategic military presence in Syria, particularly maintaining its naval facility in Tartus (Trenin, 2019, p. 14). He notes that the Syrian conflict provided an opportunity for Russia to challenge US hegemony in global politics. Roy Allison argues that Russia intervened by using the protection of sovereignty and the eradication of terrorism as justifications. In his article, "Russia and Syria: Explaining Alignment with a Regime in Crisis", he wrote that Moscow strongly opposed external intervention for "regime change" because, in Moscow's view, such policies pose a severe threat to the international and state system (Allison, 2013, p. 803).

International Crisis Group (2026) argues that "Under President Ahmad al-Sharaa, Syria has severed ties to the former regime's other main backers – Iran and Hizbollah – while quickly establishing positive relations with Türkiye, the Arab Gulf states, the U.S. and Europe. Yet even

amid this dramatic geopolitical pivot, Syria has retained constructive links with Russia: al-Sharaa has already visited Putin in Moscow twice (in October 2025 and January 2026) and has thus far allowed Russia to keep its main military bases – the Tartous naval facility and the Hmeimim air base – on Syria's Mediterranean coast." (International Crisis Group, 2026).

Literature concerning American policies in Syria focuses on regional security, democracy promotion, and the elimination of terrorism. According to Frederic C. Hof, the United States initially fully supported opposition groups to put pressure on the Bashar al-Assad regime, but later, as ISIS grew stronger in Syria, American priorities shifted toward eliminating terrorists (Hof, 2017, p. 118). This shift in US policy led to uncertainty regarding America's long-term objectives in Syria.

Furthermore, Daniel Byman states that US policies inside Syria were contradictory. In "Sectarianism Afflicts the New Middle East", he wrote that the US took steps while simultaneously pursuing three objectives (counterterrorism operations, pressuring the government, and managing regional alliances), which gave rise to an inconsistent policy framework. According to him, this contradictory strategy played a significant role in weakening international diplomatic efforts.

Several scholars have further highlighted the ineffective role and practical failure of the United Nations during the Syrian crisis. Simon Adams wrote that the continuous state of confrontation between Western powers (Europe and the United States) and Russia repeatedly hindered collective action within the Security Council (Adams, 2015, p. 7). Consequently, the United Nations failed to provide an effective and comprehensive mechanism for protecting human rights and resolving conflicts.

Proxy warfare constitutes another major theme discussed in this literature. According to Andrew Mumford, a situation is defined as proxy warfare when external powers attempt to strategic goals by utilizing local groups. In his book, *Proxy Warfare*, he wrote that foreign powers turned the Syrian issue into a modern proxy conflict by

supporting opposing armed groups to advance their geopolitical objectives (Mumford, 2013, p. 11).

Competition among the major powers also severely impacted peace efforts. Due to the conflicting ideologies of the US and Russia, long-term political settlement efforts in Syria—such as the Geneva Talks and the Astana Process—failed. Russia remained a proponent of sustaining the Assad regime, while the US advocated for a political transition. According to Phillips, the conflicting goals of the United States and Russia significantly undermined diplomatic negotiations and blocking a united international response (Phillips, 2016, p. 201).

In summary, current literature suggests that both the United States and Russia played a major role in shaping the Syrian conflict and sabotaging all efforts toward a conflict settlement. According to the majority of researchers, the geopolitical motives, proxy warfare, and the struggle for strategic superiority of both countries fully contributed to prolonging instability and undermining peace initiatives. The Syrian crisis can be viewed as an example of how major powers can not only damage international diplomacy through rivalry but also make the resolution of contemporary conflicts considerably more difficult.

However, despite extensive research into foreign intervention in Syria, scholarly attention has remained limited regarding how the rivalry between Russia and the United States directly affected peace talks and created obstacles within conflict resolution mechanisms. Furthermore, a systematic comparative analysis of the roles of both the US and Russia has been largely overlooked. This research attempts to fill that gap by comparing the competitive actions of the

United States and Russia for geopolitical objectives and analyzing their impact on diplomatic efforts aimed at resolving the Syrian conflict.

Research Problem Statement

According to the principles of Peace and Conflict Studies, the United Nations Security Council was established to act as an impartial mediator during violent regional conflicts to maintain regional stability. However, in the case of Syria, the Security Council completely failed to play its part. Instead of pursuing peace initiatives, major global powers acted as structural components to prolong the Syrian conflict, which constitutes the core research problem of this study.

Washington and Moscow remained in direct conflict with each other over their respective strategic objectives. As the political and legal standing of the Syrian government had weakened, the focus of United States foreign policy was the immediate establishment of a transitional government. The United States adopted a comprehensive strategic approach to reduce the influence of Russia and Iran in the region and to bring an end to their hegemony. On the other hand, the survival of Bashar al-Assad's regime was vital to Russia's geopolitical objectives. Russia needed to take measures that would ensure the protection of Bashar al-Assad's regime so that he could preserve the existing state structure. Russia's strategic goals included safeguarding its naval logistics facility in Tartus and maintaining the presence of Russian forces at the Khmeimim Air Base. For this purpose, it was essential for Bashar al-Assad to remain firmly in power.

The following model describes the structural deadlock that arose due to the rivalry between the United States and Russia in Syria.

[Independent Variable: Great Power Rivalry]

|

↳ Diplomatic Gridlock & Reciprocal Vetoes at the UNSC

↳ Material, Financial, and Military Support to Local Surrogates

|



[Dependent Variable: Failure of Conflict Resolution & Contested Transition Scenario]

Consequently, all diplomatic efforts undertaken under the auspices of the United Nations ended in failure. The Geneva Process, operating under UN Security Council Resolution 2254, reached a political deadlock due to disagreements between the two major powers regarding the structure of transitional governance. In response, Russia, with the cooperation of Turkey and Iran, initiated the Astana Process, which attempted to carve out a diplomatic route focused on reducing military tensions. Russia, with China's backing, effectively paralyzed the Security Council as an institution by repeatedly vetoing US-led resolutions. This severely disrupted the negotiated process for a political transition. As a result, instead of being resolved through political consensus, the Syrian issue mutated into a contested transitional stalemate. This study conceptualizes great power rivalry the primary independent variable from the dependent variable (the successful and organized resolution of conflicts), which directly neutralized and rendered it ineffective.

Research Questions

The following research questions were considered in this study:

Research Question 1 (RQ1):

What primary military and geopolitical motivations laid the foundation for the competitive interventionist framework between the United States and Russia in Syria after 2011?

Research Question 2 (RQ2):

Through which diplomatic mechanisms did the conflicting policies of Washington and Moscow play a role in weakening and making ineffective the mediation authority of the Security Council?

Research Question 3 (RQ3):

How did the United States and Russia continue to influence the transition of power in Syria? How did Syria's contested transitional government compel the major powers to reshape their strategic policies?"

Research Objectives

The objectives of this research project are as follows:

1. To analyze the strategic divergences between the United States and Russia in Syria. Furthermore, this research aims to conduct a comparative assessment of their foreign policy goals.
2. To examine the voting patterns and the exercise of the veto in the Security Council to determine how the competitive mutual policies of the major powers impact international peace.
3. To investigate the methods employed by the major powers to undermine negotiations and sustain military tensions in Syria.
4. To analyze the core elements of the new foreign policies of the United States and Russia following the establishment of the contested transitional government in Syria.

Research Methodology

A. Research Design

The research was completed using a qualitative explanatory case study. Since the primary variables such as (diplomatic pressure, strategic intent and institutional freezing) are complex political activities, it is very difficult to limit them to quantitative statistics. Therefore, a qualitative

method is used in this research. The reason for choosing Syria as an important case study is that it has been in a state of civil war for a long time due to foreign intervention. The local popular uprising turned into an international proxy war. As a result, a controversial interim government was established in Syria. Factors and pathways inhibiting sustainable conflict resolution have been identified using explanatory design.

This study utilizes a qualitative, explanatory single case study design. A qualitative approach is suited for this inquiry because the core variables under evaluation—such as strategic intent, diplomatic pressure, and institutional gridlock—are complex political phenomena that cannot be easily reduced to quantitative metrics.

Syria is selected as a critical case study because it offers a clear example of a highly externalized conflict, tracing the evolution from a localized popular uprising to systemic proxy competition and a contested transition scenario. Utilizing an explanatory design, this methodology seeks to identify the pathways through which structural competition contributed to the failure of ordered conflict resolution.

B. Analytical Method: Process Tracing

Process tracing has been used for analysis in this study. In political analysis, process tracing is used to identify the process by which the independent variable is related to the dependent variable.

Through this method, the conflict is described in different historical stages.

Phase 1 (2011-2013): Civil Rebellion's Journey to Institutional Divide.

Phase 2 (2015 -2018): External direct military intervention and stabilization of the military balance.

Phase 3 (2019 -2024): Frontlines frozen due to international containment.

Phase 4 (2025-Present): The emergence of a controversial interim scenario. Transferring changes to proxy war alignments.

The framework of this study examines how the internal situation in Syria has changed due to the changing strategic policies of the United States and Russia.

C. Data Collection Techniques

This study has been completed as desk research. Conducted using primary and secondary data sources. Data sources are divided into three different categories.

Level 1: The first level included records of the UN Security Council, resolutions presented at the official level, texts of vetoed resolutions, and diplomatic statements officially made.

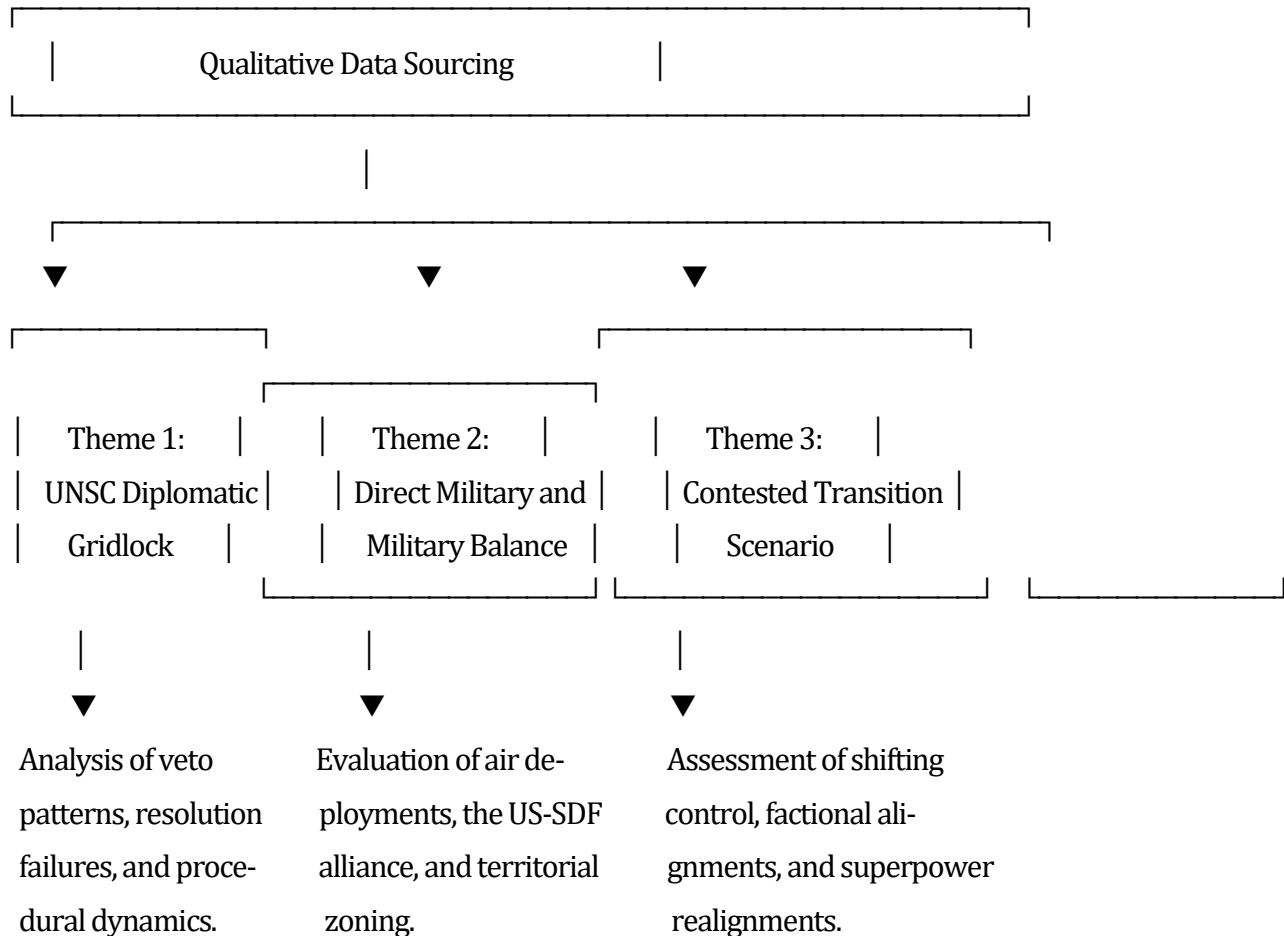
Level 2: In the second tier are think tanks' security policy reports and briefings. It also includes RAND Corporation and International Crisis Group (ICG), etc.

Level 3. The third category includes various articles, monographs, and various academic volumes covering authoritarian resilience in Syria and the governance model of Syria after the US-Russia proxy war.

D. Framework of Analysis

Qualitative content analysis and “Thematic Coding” were used to organize the collected qualitative material.

All content was filtered using three different analytical and thematic metrics.



Theoretical Framework

This analysis has been linked to international theories. To this end, the review of empirical data is conducted through two complementary theoretical lenses.

A: Neorealism/Structural Realism

According to the neo-realism theory of Kenneth N. Waltz, the international system is a kind of structural anarchic international system. which forces sovereign states to act as rational and self-interested players to maintain the balance of power and maintain their own survival. Under an anarchist system, states prioritize the pursuit of relative advantage and ignore humanitarian protection and absolute benefits. They also take steps to prevent rival states from gaining comparative advantage.

Applying neorealism to the Syrian conflict reveals why both superpowers align their strategic goals with their actions. Neorealism explained the pragmatic reassessment of US and Russian assets as central authority fragmented in the controversial transition scenario. Russia is focused on strengthening its ties with the newly emerging leadership in Syria in order to preserve its naval capabilities. On the other hand, the aims of the United States states are to strengthen its counterterrorism posture. And it is to reduce the influence of its competitors in the region. To anchor this analysis within International Relations theory, the empirical data is evaluated through two complementary theoretical lenses.

B: Proxy War Theory

Under the proxy theory, conflicts are examined in which external states are intervening. External states exert influence in a local war zone by providing material and logistical support to local

warring groups. Although external states use their financial and logistical resources for intervention but, proxy warfare enables them to shift the primary burden of human and material casualties onto local actors. A secondary level of interaction occurs in proxy war operations, where external states patronizing local actors determine their strategic calculus according to their grievances and their wartime requirements.

The proxy theory explains the length of the Syrian conflict. The resource shortages and financial needs of the warring groups in Syria were met by Russia and the United States through their support. These groups were provided with such capabilities that they were in a position to prolong the conflict. Crucially, proxy war theory dictates when the external guardian state has to engage on another front, its financial and logistical support in the proxy war gets disrupted. This allows for the emergence of rival local powers and their international legitimacy. Proxy war theory is also used to examine such a rapidly changing situation.

Theme 1: UNSC Diplomatic Gridlock and Institutional Paralysis

Maintenance of international peace and security is the primary mandate of the Security Council, which works under the charter of the United Nations. But during the Syrian conflict, the major powers turned the Security Council into an arena of geopolitical competition. The United States and Russia have consistently used Security Council rules and voting mechanisms to counter each other's initiatives.

When the crisis erupted in 2011, Russia, with the help of China, vetoed several Security Council draft resolutions concerning Syria. This pattern of vetoes was designed to achieve specific strategic objectives in such a way that it could be used when needed. NATO intervened in Libya in 2011. Russia believed that the intervention was a misuse of the Security Council Resolution 1973 mandate for regime change without authorization. Citing this precedent, Moscow resolved to block all resolutions that would have presented legal justification for external military intervention. Russia has vetoed several draft resolutions

proposing sanctions on Syria over its use of chemical weapons and human rights abuses. These sanctions were to be imposed under Chapter 7 of the UN Charter.

Whenever the Security Council tried to establish investigative frameworks, Russia vetoed it. Among these frameworks was the UN-OPCW Joint Investigation Mechanism. Russia charged that its political conclusions were biased. In contrast, the United States used the Council, along with the French and British, to pressure the Syrian government. To counter Russia's veto, the Western alliance resorted to a strategy of moral and diplomatic pressure. The United States and its allies made several attempts to isolate Russia globally using the public forum of the Security Council. US and coalition strategies depended on these considerations, in addition to their efforts to produce resolutions for immediate humanitarian corridors and demilitarized zones.

Under Security Council Resolution 2165 (2014), implement and expand cross-border humanitarian assistance mechanisms using the Bab-al-Hawa crossing. According to Rolandsen and Selvik (2023), behind the façade aim of United States was to deliver financial and military aid to opposition-controlled areas without the consent of the government. UN Security Council Resolution 2254 was adopted in 2015, in which the road map for holding general elections in Syria under the auspices of the United Nations was approved along with the ceasefire in Syria and the beginning of the political process.

The polarization of the two superpowers has stalled the momentum of the UN's political process. Implementation of Security Council resolution 2254 (2015) for enforcing the official mandate of political transition in the Geneva process has been delayed. The reason for which was the disagreement over the immediate political status of the government.

Seeing the failure of the United Nations, Russia established the Astana Process with Turkey and Iran in 2017 to bypass the Security Council. The Astana Track pushed back on the Geneva framework by insisting on the establishment of

military agreements on the ground, especially de-escalation zones. This new mechanism changed the military dynamics on the ground by consolidating particular fronts. Great power competition has badly sabotaged multilateral institutional diplomacy. The Astana process is a clear empirical example of this.

Theme 2: Direct Military Interventions and the Military Balance of Power

The Syrian conflict evolved into direct military intervention, when the institutional role of the United Nations has failed. Due to the military interventions of Russia and the United States, the balance of power in the Middle East was adversely impacted. In September 2015, Russia intervened militarily to change the course of the conflict.

Before the deployment of Russian forces in Syria, the Syrian forces were facing a severe financial and military crisis. The opposition coalition was gaining ground in the western regions. The UN Human Rights Council's International Commission of Inquiry on Syria noted that Russia deployed its Aerospace Forces to establish air superiority in

Syria and strengthened local ground forces with command structures. Russia designed the military intervention to achieve its three strategic goals. Strengthen Russia's military foothold to secure Khmeimim Air Base and naval facility at Tartus. Both of these were the main centers of Moscow's power in the Mediterranean. Russia stepped up its bombing campaign against opposition coalition logistics centers and supply lines to eliminate groups backed by Western powers. Through these measures, control of key urban centers such as Aleppo was restored to the Syrian government forces. Moscow was not ready to accept any political and military structure in Syria that would be set up in disregard of Russia's national security interests.

On the other hand, the United States has employed a limited military footprint. The United States limited its military operations east of the Euphrates River to avoid a large-scale confrontation with the Syrian government. In addition, the United States strengthened its alliance with the Syrian Democratic Forces(SDF) led by Kurds to defeat ISIS.

Table 1: *Comparison of U.S. and Russian Military Strategies in Syria*

Strategic and military parameters	US Military Model in Eastern Syria	Russian military model in western and central Syria
Primary local allies	SDF led by Kurds ,Syrian Arab Coalition and Maghawir al-Thawra	Syrian armed forces, Syrian Hezbollah, Shabiha militias, Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps(IRGC), Russian forces and private companies.
Operational Procedure	Precision Air operations, Special Operations Forces (SOF)-assisted operations, and targeted counter-terrorism operations.	Integrating command and control air strikes and joint ground military operations.
Resource and Territorial Spheres of Influence	Utilization of hydrocarbon field in Deir Ezzor, benefits from Al Hasakah agricultural area.	Control of major urban centers such as Damascus, Aleppo and Homs and use of Syrian naval facilities.
Basic strategic objectives	Eradicating ISIS, neutralizing adversary land corridors, and maintaining influence.	Protecting the state structure and Bashar al-Assad, strengthening and securing military facilities in Tartus and Khmeimim, and eliminating Western-backed militant groups.

The United States maintains its military presence in Al-Tanf, which is located at the main junction between Jordan, Syria and Iraq. By remaining in Al-Tanf, the United States strengthened the

deterrence mechanism, which maintained the geopolitical objective of the United States and helped to disable the land corridors of the belligerent adversaries. Because of this dual

intervention, Syria was divided into two zones in terms of influence. The Euphrates River remained the de facto DE confliction line between the two powers.

Theme 3: The Contested Transition Scenario and Evolving Governance

This section examines the changing stages of the Syrian conflict and examines the mechanisms through which these stages changed into a proxy standoff and transitioned into a contested transitional situation as new governance arrangements emerged in Damascus. According to proxy theory, when external patrons reduce material and military lifelines, their local active clients in intervention areas are weakened.

The structural stability of the Bashar al-Assad regime was tied to Iran's material and military support, as well as Russia's air power and financial resources. As changes in the broader world system shifted the focus of these countries, the Syrian government structure faced intense pressure from opposition groups, particularly rebel groups. As the Ukraine conflict (February 2022/present) escalated, Russia had to reinvest a large portion of its military resources, intelligence and capital into the Ukraine war, which greatly affected Bashar al-Assad's military and logistical support in Syria.

Intense regional tensions clouded the leadership of regional networks and severely affected financial flows and activities. Consequently, the regime's capacity to conduct offensive ground operations was weakened. With the lack of external aid, Syrian armed factions including Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, Al-Nusra Front, SDF, NFL and others got the opportunity to carry out new military operations. Alongside there was also a substantial shift in military balance at the internal level. The central authority disintegrated and Bashar al-Assad had to flee. While a highly controversial transitional scenario emerged. Interim arrangements often emerge whenever central control changes.

In the discussion of the various briefings of the Security Council, it was revealed that the new interim government is facing several immediate

challenges after the extraordinary circumstances (anarchy, civil war and full-scale warfare etc.). These include managing sectarian and ethnic-based factions, securing state institutions and gaining international recognition of legitimacy.

The transitional institutions established in such a situation primarily resort to specific diplomatic positions to address concerns of an international nature. It also takes measures to maintain public order, prevent chaos and protect important national assets. According to the reports of the Independent International Commission of the United Nations Human Rights Council, public assurances must be given to ensure the protection of ethnic and communal minorities.

Furthermore, reprisals against all communities that have been part of opposing factions must be avoided. (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2013). In such a transitional system, better linkages with international institutions are required to organize the political framework and maintain its formal continuity. The emergence of a controversial transition scenario in Syria at the end of 2024 has forced Moscow and Washington to change their strategic calculus. Due to which both the countries had to adapt their policies according to the practical politics out of the war situation. Syria's transitional landscape consists mostly of individuals and entities that have terrorist status in the eyes of the United States and international organizations.

Moscow changed its policy according to the principles of neorealism because the existing political arrangements faced structural limitations. Russia focused on diplomatic ties with transitional roles to preserve its remaining assets. Russia's primary strategic objective is to secure clear guarantees from the new transitional factions for the uninterrupted and permanent status of its military facilities in Tartus and Khmeimim. Whatever the system, Russia wants to maintain its access to the Mediterranean Sea. Immediately after the establishment of the new interim government, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement declaring that ensuring the safety of Russian citizens in Syria and

protecting their key military facilities (Tartus and Hmeimim) remain their primary objectives, while expressing a willingness to cooperate with the transitional authorities of Syria.

On the other hand, for Washington, the change in the Russian and Iranian regional axis is a major geopolitical development. Various Security Dilemmas also exist in this interim scenario. The main objective of the United States is to prevent the re-establishment of international terrorist organizations (eg ISIS and Al-Qaeda) due to instability and governance weaknesses in the transitional landscape. The United States is seeking stable political and regional agreements between its main local ally, the SDF, and the new administration. America's apparent goal is regional security and the end of terrorism. But actually America wants to completely eliminate the influence of Russia and Iran while maintaining its influence in the region. Both the US and Russia seek to establish better diplomatic relations with the new interim government to further their strategic objectives in the region.

The President of the United States, Donald Trump, made a statement after meeting with the Interim President of Syria Ahmed al-Sharh on May 14, 2025 in Riyadh, the capital of Saudi Arabia. He stated, "I will be ordering the cessation of sanctions against Syria in order to give them a chance at greatness. It's their time to shine. We're taking them all off. Good luck Syria, show us something very special" (Reuters, 2025).

On the other side Foreign Minister of Russia Sergey Lavrov held a meeting with Syrian Interim Foreign Minister Asad al-Shabahi. This joint

meeting was held in Moscow on July 31, 2025. After the meeting, he issued a statement that: "Our position in favour of expanding cooperation is consistent, aimed at strengthening mutually beneficial ties between our nations. It remains unaffected by shifting political dynamics or transitions in government, but is rooted in time-tested traditions of friendship and mutual respect. These relations have a long history. Today, we revisited the extensive experience of close cooperation in previous decades, including the Soviet Union's defining role in laying the foundations of Syria's modern economy, strengthening its defence capabilities, and training national personnel. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2025). These statements by the top leadership of Russia and the United States reflect the claim that both superpowers are seeking better relations with the transitional Syrian government.

In addition, another clear example of establishing better relations with the transitional government of Syria is the Security Council Resolution No. 2799. In which the name of Syrian Democratic President Ahmed al-Sharh and Interior Minister Anas Khattab has been removed from the list of ISIS and Al-Qaeda terrorists. (S/RES/2799 [2025]). During the voting process, 14 countries voted in favor of that resolution but one country did not participate in the voting process, that was people's republic of china.

Empirical Analysis and Process Tracing Timeline

Actions by competing major powers to influence the course of the Syrian conflict are listed below.

Table 2: Process Tracing Timeline

Time step	Various milestones	Mechanism of great power influence	Effects on conflict resolution (output of dependent variable)
Preliminary Phase (2011–2013)	Popular protests turned into armed conflict, the government lost control of Aleppo and the Geneva Communiqué was drafted.	Russia and China blocking Security Council resolutions through initial veto, US providing non-arms and logistical support to rebel groups.	The fragmentation of diplomatic consensus at the international level and the failure to establish a multilateral implementation framework.
Direct Intervention Phase (2015–2018)	The direct deployment of Russian forces in Syria in 2015, the return of control of Aleppo to the government, and the strengthening of the US-SDF partnership.	Russia's strengthening of its air supremacy in Western Syria, US's approval of Resolution 2254 for the Geneva talks in the United Nations and the establishment of the Astana track in opposition to the Russia-Geneva talks.	The strengthening of the Syrian government at the defense level, the weakening of the warring groups supported by the West at the military level and the delay in the process of political transition.
*Prolonged standstill phase (2019–2024)	The stagnation of the front lines (Idlib) in the north, the strengthening of the control of the Syrian forces, American Caesar, the involvement of Russia in a long war with Ukraine and the diplomatic changes at the regional level (Syria's return to the Arab League and mediation efforts for relations with Turkey)	The imposition of severe economic sanctions by the United States on Syria and the provision of diplomatic protection to Syria by Russia in the Security Council	Emergence of Frozen Conflict in Syria (large-scale hostilities decline and minor skirmishes continue but no diplomatic solution, military strength but economic weakness)
Controversial Transitional Phase (Present)	Strategic shift of external patrons to Ukraine, new actions of militant factions; The disintegration of central control, the fall of Bashar al-Assad and the emergence of a transitional administration.	A freeze on foreign proxy aid, moves to protect assets rather than direct defense, speeding up the establishment of foreign ties with the new interim administration, and efforts to delist transitional actors from the UN terrorist list.	The end of the authoritarian state government, the transformation of the proxy policy of the great powers into political diplomacy and delisting of designated individuals from the list of global terrorists under the Security Council resolution 2799

Discussion and Theoretical Synthesis

(a) Primacy of comparative advantage: An overview of neo-realism

The basic assumptions of structural realism are reflected in the Syrian conflict. The role of Russia and the United States demonstrated that state behaviour tends toward relative advantage and structural balance rather than multilateral

institutional mandates. Russia continued to support the Syrian government for a long time to prevent unilateral external actions in Syria. Which was continued under calculated geopolitical necessity. Which was to prevent unauthorized change of government and to secure its access to the Mediterranean Sea.

Likewise, the United States designed its regional presence, strategic resources, and economic

sanctions to reduce the regional influence of regional rival powers (Russia and Iran) and achieve counterterrorism objectives. After the establishment of transitional government in Syria, both powers, Russia and the United States, changed their war strategy and began to rapidly establish pragmatic and diplomatic relations with the transitional actors. Which proves that alliance is very important for strategic balance? Both powers readjusted their policies to improve their positions in the regional structure.

b) Weakening of local proxy alliances: Change of values and process of proxy (Proxy Decoupling)

In this study proxy practices have examined through highlighting the limitations of external stability. In the case of Syria where the external powers supported the local players to avoid any internal insurgency. But it also became a tool of structural weakness. Proxy wars also led to the establishment of a structural dependency by compensating for domestic actors' lack of internal resources. When these external powers face pressure in another system (either economically or militarily), the external protection of domestic actor's changes. Due to the prolongation of Russia's war in Ukraine, the Russian support to Bashar al-Assad's government has decreased significantly. This weakened the power of Bashar al-Assad and gave opportunity to the opposition forces expanded their territorial control.

This shift in equilibrium shows that proxy structures undergo rapid adjustments as the direction of external support changes. Transitional structures seek to achieve international recognition and autonomy of internal controls. They try to depend on external interests as little as possible. This change moves the dispute away from a non-arbitrated proxy situation. And it takes the form of a complex model of state stability in the global system.

The interim government established within Syria has been established by the mutual alliance of various warring groups. Due to serious differences between the interim government and the SDF, there is a serious threat to the stability of the state.

Moreover, the interim structure is headed by Ahmed al-Sharh, who is a highly controversial figure at the global level, who was once known as Al-Jolani. Al-Jolani has been the head of the Syrian extremist group Al-Nusra Front, which in the past has worked under al-Qaeda. The United States and Russia Used Security Council to remove the name of Ahmad al-Sharh and his party from list of terrorists. Both superpowers did this under their newly adjusted foreign policy in new era of interim setup.

Conclusion

If the major international crises of the twenty-first century are evaluated, the Syrian crisis represents an important pattern. It demonstrates the implications of the interaction of great powers with local movements in geopolitical competition. The study showed that strategic differences between Moscow and Washington adversely affected the conflict resolution capacity of the Security Council. Diplomatic efforts under the Geneva process became the focus of the competing policies of the United States and Russia. As a result, the region experienced a major disaster in the form of a protracted proxy war.

The transitional structure established after the end of the proxy war in Syria is continues to depend on external patrons for its survival and stability. Substantial international financial assistance is required for the safe return of millions of people displaced by the protracted civil war in Syria and for the restoration of destroyed infrastructure. Moreover, for any transitional government to be successful, it is necessary to gain legitimacy at the international level.

When an external power sponsoring a proxy actor in a proxy war has to shift its focus to another front due to global changes, its lifelines are disrupted. As a result, the respective parties have to face rapidly changing alignments in the balance of internal power. The success of the warring groups against Bashar al-Assad and the fall of Bashar's power is a clear example of this. Syria is still going through a very critical situation. Although the political landscape of a protracted proxy war is far behind, Syria still faces many

complex issues in establishing a stable and strong state structure. Furthermore, it also faces difficulties in keeping the ethnic and regional warring groups in political cohesion.

The survival of the Syrian Transitional Government requires that its emerging new leadership deal with the remaining geostrategic objectives of the United States and Russia in the best possible way. If the transitional government

of Syria maintains political stability and continues on the path of development out of these conditions, it will serve as an important test in the future. How Syria's transitional government, emerging from a bitter civil war, has protected sovereign state assets, consolidated statehood in an emerging multipolar international system, and kept the political transition of power transparent.

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