

The Gatekeeper of Sovereignty: Analyzing Russian Framing of The Syrian Intervention

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Abstract

The Kremlin's involvement in the Syrian civil conflict was a foreign policy move that evolved as a matter of concern not only for the Western countries but also for the international community, in general. The Russian act of justifying its involvement in Syria has been a recurrent theme of debate and contention, leaving behind confused analysts, scholars and policy makers. The goal of this thesis is to highlight and analyze how the Russian intervention in Syria is being framed through speech acts, UN statements and interviews by Russian leaders such as President Vladimir Putin, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and UN Permanent Representatives Vassily Nebenzia and Vitaly Churkin internationally as well as at home to the Russian public. In this academic work, I claim that Russia uses the pro-sovereignty argument to justify its intervention in Syria. I conclude that President Putin and other Russian spokespersons are using the pro-sovereignty discourse of intervention rather than the 'Responsibility to Protect' reasoning for justifying their involvement in Syria. This paper opens up further scope for future research on the significant role that framing can play in analyzing foreign interventions. Finally, this work also emphasizes that the same pro-sovereignty argument has been used by Russia before during other instances of interventions, and thus can be used for suggesting a broader pattern of behavior from the Russian end.

Introduction

The Syrian civil war began in the year 2011 and the conflict remains active even today. Russia has presented itself as an international mediator, claiming to play by the rules of international law, in general. It has also been rather reluctant to withdraw support from Bashar-Al-Assad and his administration despite allegations of violence leveled against him. It's strongly adamant stance of continually defending the Assad regime even amidst news of alleged attacks by the Syrian government on civilians have been quite clearly demonstrated by several scholars over the past few years.¹ During several interviews and United Nations (UN) speeches, Russia has also repeatedly confirmed its positive stance towards upholding Syrian sovereignty and has hardly shied away from showing support for Assad.² Melamedov in his article mentions how during an interview with the Russian television, Putin stated that "the [Russian] intervention's main goal [in Syria] was to stabilize the legitimate Syrian government and to create conditions for a political compromise."³ The main motive of this thesis is to analyze the narratives put forward by Russian spokespersons to justify the Russian intervention in Syria: How has Russia formulated its intervention narrative in the case of Syria since 2015? Has it maintained any uniformity in its argument from the start of 2011?

This work primarily makes use of speeches given by Permanent Representatives of Russia to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), statements made by Foreign Minister Sergey Viktorovich Lavrov and interviews and speeches of President Vladimir Putin to analyze how Russia is framing its involvement with Syria, over the years. It provides detailed study of the arguments, narratives, phrases and rhetoric used by Russian spokespersons to portray the

¹ See authors Rutland and Kazantsev in "The limits of Russia's 'soft power'." *Journal of political power* 9, no. 3 (2016); Derek Averre and Lance Davies in "Russia, humanitarian intervention and the Responsibility to Protect: the case of Syria." *International Affairs* 91, no. 4; Samuel Charap in "Russia, Syria and the doctrine of intervention." *Survival* 55, no. 1 (2013); and Azuolas Bagdonas in "Russia's interests in the Syrian conflict: Power, prestige, and profit." *European Journal of Economic and Political Studies* 5.

² Refer to Vladimir Putin; Putin meeting with service personnel who took part in the anti-terrorist operation in Syria, in Kremlin Palace; December 28, 2017; Vassily Nebezia; UNSC Statement by Permanent Representative Vassily Nebezia at the UN Security Council Meeting on Syria; October 24, 2019; Sergey Lavrov; Foreign Minister Lavrov announcement after negotiations with Syria; October 29, 2013;

³ Grigory Melamedov; "Russia's Entrenchment in Syria." *Middle East Quarterly* (2018).

reason for their support for Syria. Finally, this thesis concludes that Russia is using the pro-sovereignty argument for intervention rather than making use of the discourse of 'Responsibility to Protect' (R2P) for justifying their involvement in the Syrian civil conflict. The paper showcases a continuity of the same sovereignty argument from around year 2012 till 2020 by analyzing the Russian statements of Russian spokespersons throughout the Syrian conflict. Though it stops short of suggesting an alternative motive for Russian intervention in Syria, this paper definitely opens up a wider scope for further research in how framing is used as a legitimate political tool by leaders to justify foreign and domestic policy acts.

The Russian understanding of sovereignty is unique and based on its own convenience. Morozov contends, that the notion of state sovereignty which is advanced by Russia has in itself remained a debate among analysts as they are often inclined to view "the arguments as mere figures of speech designed for purely rhetorical purposes and taken seriously neither by the audience nor by those who produce them."⁴ Ivan Krastev highlights the term 'Sovereign Democracy' and explains it to be the newfound watchword of the Kremlin administration.⁵ He further adds that the notion of sovereign democracy emerged as the Russian response to counter populist pressures during the orange revolution.⁶ Hence it can be argued that the Russian understanding of the term sovereignty is often molded and used as per the country's own convenience.

The argument of this thesis contradicts the contentions of authors such as Averre and Davis⁷ who claim that the Russian intervention in Syria is based on its differential interpretations of the R2P principle. Though they make strong arguments about Russian disposition and manifest convincing points to validate the same, this thesis argues that they tend to overlook the

⁴ Viatcheslav Morozov; "Sovereignty and democracy in contemporary Russia: a modern subject faces the post-modern world." *Journal of International Relations and Development* 11, no. 2 (2008): 152-180.

⁵ Ivan Krastev; "Sovereign Democracy", Russian-Style." *Insight Turkey* (2006): 113-117.

⁶ Ibid; 114.

⁷ Derrek Averre, and Lance Davies. "Russia, humanitarian intervention and the Responsibility to Protect: the case of Syria." *International Affairs* 91, no. 4 (2015): 813-834.

importance of Russian justifications advanced regarding Russia's involvement in the Syrian issue. For example, the authors argue that because Russia is aware that the future of the R2P and international interventions could be shaped by the fate of the current Syrian conflict, it has decided on investing considerable political capital in creating a narrative that is favorable to them.⁸ But, on the contrary this thesis claims that Russia particularly in the case of Syria is not making an effort to change the narrative of R2P but rather using the argument of state sovereignty and non-interference in internal affairs yet, again.

This paper places the argument of sovereignty as advanced by Russia in the Syrian case not just as a unique approach taken by the country but rather as a behavioral pattern that has been showcased before by Russia. The pro-sovereignty argument had also been used by Russia before in the case of Libya. Though this thesis does not go in-depth into other cases of how Russia used the pro-sovereignty argument, it is of utmost importance to show that Syria was not the first time Russia argued in favor of it. The UNSC's intervention in Libya was a significant occurrence because for it was for the first time that the international community had intervened into a sovereign state without receiving explicit request to intervene from it.⁹ Even though Russia refrained from using its veto power to block the UN intervention in Libya altogether, firm opposition was showcased from their end.¹⁰ Thus, this thesis provides scope of research on a broader pattern of Russian behavior which is not only limited to the specific case of Syria.

This debate is significant not only because it provides deep insight into how a state might want the public and international audience to view it from the outside but also because it lays down the importance of 'framing' in understanding foreign policy dynamics. It also helps fill a gap in the literature of Russian involvement in Syria as well. This is because the majority of existing

⁸ Derrek Averre, and Lance Davies. "Russia, humanitarian..."; 830.

⁹ Luke Glanville; "Intervention in Libya: from sovereign consent to regional consent." *International studies perspectives*, 14(3),(2013); 325-342.

¹⁰ Ibid; 327.

literature analyzing Russian policy towards Syria have chiefly concentrated on either evaluating the news media discourses on the issue, alone¹¹ or provided probable motives for explaining why Russia chose to intervene into Syria and defend Bashar al-Assad, time and again.¹²

This academic work makes use of framing theory to lay the base for analyzing how Russian spokespersons especially UN Permanent Representatives, the Foreign Minister and Russian President Vladimir Putin, frame and justify Russian involvement in Syria. In terms of methodology, this thesis borrows from Roland Paris' method of studying metaphors in political debates within the domestic sphere¹³ and applies it to evaluate the domestic as well as international speeches, interviews and statements given by Russian leaders. It also makes use of the model of civil conflict management rhetoric that Juraj Medzihorsky, Milos Popovic and Erin K. Jenne use in their work titled "Rhetoric of civil conflict management: United Nations Security Council debates over the Syrian civil war" in order to draw conclusions for my work, based on their contention that R2P frame is used to justify interventions against the government, whereas sovereignty frame is used to justify interventions for the government.¹⁴

The entire thesis is divided into five sections in total. The first section briefly introduces the scholarly debates surrounding why Russia has been defending Syria. The second section of this work lays out how frames are used as important political tools by leaders of states, so that they are able to draw narratives, historical references and rhetoric to justify particular policy actions to their target audiences. The third section elaborates on sovereignty and R2P frames and what they aim at achieving once they are implemented. The fourth section consists of the

¹¹ See authors Robert M. Entman; "Framing bias: Media in the distribution of power." *Journal of communication* 57, no. 1 (2007), James Brown DJ in 'Better one tiger than ten thousand rabid rats': Russian media coverage of the Syrian conflict. *International Politics* 51(1), Keith Greenwood, and Joy Jenkins. "Visual framing of the Syrian conflict in news and public affairs magazines." *Journalism Studies* 16, no. 2 (2015).

¹² See authors Roy Allison in "Russia and Syria: explaining alignment with a regime in crisis." *International Affairs* 89, no. 4 (2013); Angela Stent in "Putin's Power Play in Syria: How to Respond to Russia's Intervention." *Foreign Affairs*. 95 (2016); Jiri Valenta and Leni Friedman Valenta. "Why Putin Wants Syria." *Middle East Quarterly* (2016).

¹³ Roland Paris; "Kosovo and the metaphor war." *Political Science Quarterly* 117, no. 3 (2002): 423-450.

¹⁴ Juraj Medzihorsky, Milos Popovic, and Erin K. Jenne; "Rhetoric of civil conflict management: United Nations Security Council debates over the Syrian civil war." *Research & Politics* 4, no. 2 (2017): 2053168017702982.

methodology and how sovereignty and R2P frames are advanced in this case of Russian involvement in Syria. The fifth and the final section analyzes speeches, interviews and statements given by Russian spokespersons by drawing on sovereignty vocabulary and frames to evaluate Russian justifications about their involvement in Syria.

Russian Defense for Syria

Syria has been in a situation of civil war from the year 2011 and the violence has only aggravated for the worse, since then. Syrian civil war data and statistics updated on February 7, 2020 suggests that there were “almost 207,000 civilian casualties since the beginning of the conflict in 2011; and about 25,000 of them were children.”¹⁵ This thesis is not concerned with why Russia is actually motivated to ‘intervene’¹⁶ in Syria, but it is useful to briefly review the contentions made by scholars in this field.

The tenacity of Kremlin to maintain a friendly alliance with Damascus is surprising, because as Russian scholar Trenin argues, “Moscow has allowed its [own] policy to be held hostage by Assad.”¹⁷ Thus, unfortunately, even if this support is at a high cost, Russia is indulging in it, willingly. Charap further validates this argument by arguing that the Kremlin’s decision to issue three UN Security Council vetoes against intervention in Syria and never agreeing to remove Assad’s from authority, indeed leads to a sort of confusion regarding Russian’s increased interests towards Syria.¹⁸

Such aggravated concern from the Russian end towards the unpopular regime in Syria has brought to the table, discussions around what Russia wants to portray to its audience by taking

¹⁵ The Syrian Civil War - Statistics & facts; February 7,2020; Published by Statista Research Department; <https://www.statista.com/topics/4216/the-syrian-civil-war/>

¹⁶ Note- Russia has never used the word ‘intervention’ for Syria as it believes it has abided by international law and never disregarded Syrian government’s authority.

¹⁷ Dmitri Trenin; "The Mythical Alliance." Russia’s Syria Policy, Carnegie Papers, February (Moscow, Carnegie Moscow Center) (2013).

¹⁸ Samuel’ Charap; "Russia, Syria and the doctrine of intervention." *Survival* 55, no. 1 (2013): 36.

up such a strong stand in its foreign policy towards Syria. Russian need to strive for autonomy and power is a path that Russia often chooses to advance its foreign policy, writes Sakwa.¹⁹ Accordingly, the Kremlin's strong alliance with Damascus can very well be seen as a means to this end of establishing a region of control in the Middle East through Syria.

There are also alternative explanations advanced by scholars to contextualize the friendship between Kremlin and Damascus. Rutland and Kazantsev categorized the Russian involvement in Syria during 2013 as a 'diplomatic masterstroke' where by persuading Assad to discard his chemical weapon stockpile, Putin prevented the US from carrying on a military intervention into Syria.²⁰ On the contrary, by highlighting a broader narrative, Katz in his work quoted Putin's annual address to the Federal Assembly in 2003, where he said, "all our[Russian] actions must be subordinated to the goal of ensuring that Russia truly takes its place among the major powers."²¹ Despite an array of probable contentions, the search for the real motive behind Russia's friendship with Damascus remains beyond the scope of this work.

The Art of Framing Narratives through Political Messages

The international relations and foreign policy scholarships are highly disputed over how much attention needs to be attached towards studying how political leaders communicate to their target audiences. There is also a currently emerging trend of studying how states want to be looked at and the image might say about them, in general. Shanto Iyengar defines the concept of framing to be "the effects of presentation on judgement and choice."²² He highlights the fact

¹⁹ Richard, Sakwa; "Russia's identity: Between the 'domestic' and the 'international'." *Europe-Asia Studies* 63, no. 6 (2011): 972.

²⁰ Peter, Rutland; and Andrei Kazantsev. "The limits of Russia's 'soft power'." *Journal of political power* 9, no. 3 (2016): Pg 406.

²¹ Grigoryeva, Yekaterina; "From Clearing Away Obstructions to Pursuing a New Dream," *Izvestia* (May 17, 2003): 1, 3, in *Current Digest of the Post-Soviet Press* (CDPSP) (June 18, 2003): 2 in Katz, Mark N. "Exploiting rivalries for prestige and profit: An assessment of Putin's foreign policy approach." *Problems of Post-Communism* 52, no. 3 (2005): Pg 26.

²² Shanto Iyengar; "Framing responsibility for political issues." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 546, no. 1 (1996): 59-70.

that information can be represented and put forward in several different ways for the target audience to perceive in a particular manner.²³

Metaphors, historical references, rhetoric and phrases are often used by leaders as political tools to convince the audience to look at a policy outcome in a particularly specific way. Maria Koskina also in her academic work on analyzing how the Russian domestic media portrays the intervention in Syria argues that language is often used by leaders to manipulate readers and control their perceptions about specific issues.²⁴ Thus, framing can be understood as the act of molding information in a particular way so that it can be used to represent only a certain perspective of the message rather than the entire version of it.

It is generally always true that when political actors convey a message, they do so with a fixed motive in mind. Schaffner and Sellers argue that the politicians of the 21st century pay a lot of attention to framing their messages and they meticulously decide what issues to put emphasis on and what issues to mindfully leave behind.²⁵ The speeches that political leaders give always vary from audience to audience. The emphasis, the tone and the information highlighted are generally never the same and tends to vary depending on who are the ones that are listening.

George Lakoff who is a prominent name in the field of cognitive linguistics says that “a frame, provides a ready-made relationship between words, concepts and consequences that enables even those who don’t understand the idea to “explain” or convey that idea and its “implications” to other people.”²⁶ This is a rather intriguing manner of understanding framing and how it can be used in justifying political messages and contributing in political discourses.

Even though a lot has been talked about what exactly constitutes framing, there are certain characteristic features that can make or break a narrative. For example, Jeffery Cohen manifests

²³ Shanto Iyengar; "Framing responsibility...."; 62.

²⁴ Mariia, Koskina; (2014). Coverage of the Syrian Conflict in the Russian and American Media: Comparative Analysis.

²⁵ Brian F. Schaffner and Patrick J. Sellers, eds. Winning with words: the origins and impact of political framing. Routledge, 2009.

²⁶ George, Lakoff; The all new don't think of an elephant!: Know your values and frame the debate. Chelsea Green Publishing, 2014.

that it becomes more possible for a particular president to convince the public of a problem if the narrative concentrates on it being an issue that the government should ideally act upon.²⁷ He also mandates that the “public often has an appetite for presidential leadership.”²⁸ Thus, this statement can be used to confer that the public is more likely to be convinced by a President than the press, news reporters or any other government officials.

Other than international news outlets and local newspapers who play a significant role in contributing to the framing of narratives, speeches given by political leaders are important tools to put across a narrative that the government wants the people to hear. Through skillful framing of narratives, leaders can successfully make use of political rhetoric to manufacture audience consent, Krebs and Jackson convincingly argue.²⁹ They further add that though scholars might consider “rhetoric to be the power of the weak, the powerful often use it to increase their own influence in front of their audience.”³⁰ Concluding it, they validate that the notion of actors and rhetoric often travel hand in hand and thus what actors say tend to play a significant role in understanding policy actions undertaken by them.³¹ Thus, political actors, and what image they want to portray of themselves and the state can be important in studying how policies come into play, within practical scenarios.

Instances of Political Framing by Leaders

Political language is increasingly emerging as an important means to determine political narratives and how leaders of countries use them to manufacture consent among domestic and international audiences. Robert Entman defines framing to be “a process of culling a few elements of perceived reality and assembling a narrative that highlights connections among

²⁷ Jeffery E. Cohen; "Presidential rhetoric and the public agenda." *American Journal of Political Science* (1995): 88.

²⁸ Ibid; Pg 89

²⁹ Ronald R. Krebs and Patrick Thaddeus Jackson. "Twisting tongues and twisting arms: The power of political rhetoric." *European Journal of International Relations* 13, no. 1 (2007): 36.

³⁰ Ronald R. Krebs and Patrick Thaddeus Jackson. "Twisting tongues....."; Pg 38

³¹ Ibid; Pg 39

them to promote a particular interpretation.”³² The analogies and metaphors play important roles in arousing particular emotions among audiences.

In another work titled “Projections of power: Framing news, public opinion, and US foreign policy” Entman categorized Bush’s framing strategy after the 9/11 attacks to be consisting of a ‘patriotic fervor’ delivered with a ‘fiery rhetoric.’³³ The interesting adjectives put forth by the author help in portraying how charged up the speech by President Bush was for his targeted domestic audience in the US. It also provides a probable picture of how speeches can be viewed in the aftermath of a disastrous event like the 9/11.

Roland Paris through his work contends that in 1999, the leaders and the US Congressmen by relating the Kosovo situation to past events such as the Holocaust, tried to create a scene of validation in the eyes of the US public, so that America could legitimately intervene into the Kosovo conflict.³⁴ Thus, in an effort to justify the intervention, political leaders often make use of metaphors and history to convince the audience of their own version of the narrative .

Justifications are almost always made by political leaders to the domestic audience as well as the international media, in the aftermath of a crisis situation. Kuusisto writes that the event of gulf war and Bosnian war is depicted as both a threat to the security and freedom of people and a gross misappropriation of international law and the general ordeal of society by the leaders of United States, Britain and France.³⁵

Language and words if used a certain way can be used to create feelings of urgency and crisis among the audience at large. A third instance of studying political rhetoric through speeches of President Lyndon Johnson in the year 1964 during the Vietnam War can be analyzed by

³² Robert Entman; "Framing bias: Media in the distribution of power." *Journal of communication* 57, no. 1 (2007): Pg 164.

³³ Robert Entman; “Projections of power: Framing news, public opinion, and US foreign policy.” University of Chicago Press, 2004.

³⁴ Paris, Roland: “Kosovo and the Metaphor War”; Pg 447

³⁵ Riikka, Kuusisto; "Framing the wars in the Gulf and in Bosnia: The rhetorical definitions of the Western power leaders in action." *Journal of Peace Research* 35, no. 5 (1998): Pg 604.

referring to Richard Cherwitz's work.³⁶ The author mentions how the President's use of descriptive language and words such as 'deliberate' and 'hostile' in a repeated way indicated towards an overall situation of intense crisis.³⁷ Metaphors are indeed selective by nature as has been contended by scholars such as Lakoff and Johnson.³⁸ through their years of work on analyzing political communications. But, it cannot in any way be negated that metaphors and rhetoric do play an indispensable role and is generally always present in speeches given by political leaders.

Lastly, Zouheir A. Maalej, in his academic piece based his analysis on evaluating the last three speeches of the late President of Egypt, Hosni Mubarak and contended that they were momentary in framing the revolution in the country.³⁹ He made an important argument of how "frames [are used to] define, organize, and constrain social experience, knowledge, and communication at large."⁴⁰ These practical instances of political framing by leaders not only demonstrate the importance of framing as a practice but also show how narratives can be used to achieve different policy objectives as well.

New Media and Framing

Though this thesis does not deal with news media narratives and how news outlets frame a particular issue in the media, the rise of new media in the 21st century has led to a new dimension of development in understanding framing structures, in general. With the increasing number of new media tools, the spectrum of visibility has expanded in a massive form. The entire controversy around chemical weapons in Syria was primarily a result of circulating video

³⁶ Richard A. Cherwitz; "Lyndon Johnson and the "crisis"; of Tonkin gulf: A president's justification of war." *Western Journal of Communication (includes Communication Reports)* 42, no. 2 (1978): 93-104.

³⁷ Ibid; 98.

³⁸ George, Lakoff and Mark Johnson. "Metaphors we live by." *Chicago, IL: University of Chicago* (1980).

³⁹ Zouheir A. Maalej; "Framing and manipulation of person deixis in Hosni Mubarak's last three speeches: A cognitive-pragmatic approach." *Pragmatics* 23, no. 4 (2013): 633-659.

⁴⁰ Ibid; 635.

clips of chemical weapons killing and wounding civilians in the Middle Eastern country, writes Pantti.⁴¹ James Brown, also in his work on Russian media coverage of the Syrian conflict argues how the media discourses showcased are not always a result of public's understanding of the situation and is often used as a device by the government in power to control the narrative.⁴² Today, even the media and news outlets across the world hold the power to manipulate and manufacture consent from the audience. Thus, despite official spokespersons being present to inform the audience through speeches and addresses, the significance of media currently holds in influencing opinions cannot in any way be discounted.

Intervention Narratives

The Russian intervention in Syria, on the side of Assad clearly prioritizes the sovereignty argument in place of the R2P narrative. This conclusion drawn by the paper is based on analyzing speech acts on framing theory. Elizabeth Saunders defines military intervention “as an overt, short-term deployment of at least 1,000 combat-ready ground troops across international boundaries to influence an outcome in another state or an interstate dispute.”⁴³ Further, the manner in which she defines non-transformative strategy of foreign policy of countries who seek to resolve a global or a civil conflict without attempting to alter any domestic institutions in the intervened country⁴⁴ is a definition that can be made use of to analyze Russian policy towards the civil conflict in Syria.

⁴¹ Mervi, Pantti; "Seeing and not seeing the Syrian crisis: New visibility and the visual framing of the Syrian conflict in seven newspapers and their online editions." *JOMEC journal* 4 (2016).

⁴² James DJ, Brown; "'Better one tiger than ten thousand rabid rats': Russian media coverage of the Syrian conflict." *International Politics* 51, no. 1 (2014): Pg 47.

⁴³ Elizabeth N. Saunders; "Transformative choices: Leaders and the origins of intervention strategy." *International Security* 34, no. 2 (2009): Pg 123.

⁴⁴ Ibid; Pg 125.

Drawing on the methodology used for ‘placing speeches on a rhetorical sphere’ by Medzihorsky, Popovic, and Jenne⁴⁵ I analyze a set of intervention narratives as pointed out by the authors. They contend that “intervention framing” designates the government “as failing its basic task to protect its population [and] requiring immediate outside action ranging from humanitarian aid to military interference [for respite].”⁴⁶ Thus, this leads to the probability of the foreign country being engaged with the opposition party rather than the government which is already in place. Whereas in the case for non-intervention framing, they denote “consensual engagement with the government” who is already in power.⁴⁷ This can thus be conclusively used to say that while Responsibility to Protect principle creates provision for intervention against the existing government in power, the ‘sovereignty’ argument can be used to create the opposite, i.e collaborating on the side of the government which is already in place.

Methodology/ Research Design

This section elaborates on the methodology this thesis makes use of to analyze the speech acts, interviews and statements by Russian leaders inside the country and abroad. Other than making in-depth analysis of words, phrases, rhetoric and repeated reasonings that Russian leaders use to justify the country’s involvement and eventual intervention in Syria, this work also tests for whether the domestic discourse advanced is different from the international discourse or not by drawing two different sets of speech acts and interviews and analyzing their arguments. It eventually concludes that even though there exist differences in the tone and emphasis on different subject matters, the domestic and international framing of the conflict is not necessarily different or contradicting in nature.

⁴⁵ Juraj Medzihorsky, Milos Popovic, and Erin K. Jenne. "Rhetoric of civil conflict...." *Research & Politics* 4, no. 2 (2017): 2053168017702982.

⁴⁶ Juraj Medzihorsky, Milos Popovic, and Erin K. Jenne. "Rhetoric of civil conflict....;" 4.

⁴⁷ Ibid; 5

This thesis also makes use of Roland Paris' model of analyzing metaphors used by the US leaders domestically for the Kosovo conflict⁴⁸, to analyze international as well as domestic speeches given by Russian President Putin, Foreign Minister Lavrov and UN Permanent Representatives. By making use of his model, the commonly cited arguments, themes, phrases and words that Russian leaders use to explain and justify Russian involvement in Syria are analyzed. This research design has been prepared by drawing a table of speeches, interviews and statements based on date, event and by highlighting important quotes and phrases from each and compiled in a table attached as appendix.

This work also makes use of Medzihorsky, Popovic and Jenne's model of analyzing civil conflict⁴⁹ to develop the specific frames used in this intervention. It is from this work that I develop my argument that R2P is always aimed at justifying an intervention against the government in power whereas the sovereignty argument is used to justify the government already in power, as legitimate.⁵⁰ Thus, the Russian case is a clear case of the latter frame which has been used in the conclusion based on analysis of statements, speeches and interviews by Russian leaders.

The speeches, interviews and statements have been basically chosen within the timeline of 2015 to 2020. They are chosen on a categorical basis by emphasizing on the basis of arguments. The speeches which had repetitive or extremely similar arguments have not been represented. The compilation of the sources has continued till a saturation point with the arguments was reached. Speeches and interviews from Russian leaders before that period, mostly from 2011-2013 to analyze the uniformity in the justification. For example, whether Russia still advances pro-sovereignty arguments to support Syrian government under Assad or not. The analysis of the speeches reveals a sort of repetitive rhetorical set of arguments.

⁴⁸ Paris, Roland. "Kosovo and the metaphor war." *Political Science Quarterly* 117, no. 3 (2002): 423-450.

⁴⁹ Medzihorsky, Popovic and Jenne; "Rhetoric of civil conflict..." 4.

⁵⁰ Ibid; 4.

All the materials have been sourced from President of Russia official website, UN Permanent Representative of Russia website, Russia TV YouTube Channels, UN News and Media website and Anna Grigorieva academic piece analyzing Russian television narratives on Syria.⁵¹

Responsibility To Protect

In general, Responsibility to Protect has been under scrutiny not only because of its blurry scope but also because of its debatable field of implementation. David Chandler argues that “the notion of responsibility itself entails fundamental moral reasoning and challenges [the] determinist theories of human behavior and international relations theory and that it is based on the intention of making a state act as a moral agent in place of a realpolitik one.”⁵² On the other hand, the principle of Responsibility to Protect (R2P) mandated that states in no way could use sovereignty to be a concerted excuse for hurling atrocities towards their own civilians and preventing the international community from providing the required relief, writes Breakey.⁵³

Alex Bellamy on the other hand defines R2P as a state’s responsibility and obligation to help as a part of the international society but at the same time mentions its shortcoming to be its weakness in carrying forward non-consensual interventions, effectively.⁵⁴ Thus, the author successfully highlights the conditions of R2P and at the same time showcases its limited scope without much hesitation.

⁵¹ See links; President of Russia(<http://en.kremlin.ru>); Permanent mission of Russian Federation to the United Nations (<https://russia.un.org/en>); Russia TV Youtube Channel (<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCiySrK2pgCFrr8IsKIA1z9A>) ; UN News and Media website (<https://www.un.org/en/sections/news-and-media/>); Anna Grigorieva; "The" friend or foe" dichotomy on Russian television during the armed conflict in Syria." (2016).

⁵² David Chandler; "The responsibility to protect? Imposing the 'liberal peace'." *International peacekeeping* 11, no. 1 (2004): 59-81.

⁵³ Hugh Breakey; "The responsibility to protect: Game change and regime change." *Norms of Protection: Responsibility to Protect, Protection of Civilians and Their Interaction* (2012): Pg 12.

⁵⁴ Bellamy, Alex J. "The Responsibility to Protect and the problem of military intervention." *International Affairs* 84, no. 4 (2008): 615-639.

“Responsibility to Protect formulated in 2005 at the UN General Assembly in the World Summit Outcome Document, redefined sovereignty as responsibility.”⁵⁵ Even though there remained strong apprehensions regarding state sovereignty among some member states such as Russia, United Nations validated its implementation in front of the international community.⁵⁶ The notion of Responsibility to Protect (R2P) is now a very prominent principle. Even though it is not a new or novel concept per say, the introduction of such a principle in a way was a remarkable achievement in terms of officially defining it as an important step towards global responsibility and moral duty.

Other arguments have also been manifested regarding the principle of R2P. Scholars such as Murray and Hehir,⁵⁷ and Ziegler⁵⁸ have contended that American and western systems were the primary sources that gave Responsibility to Protect the attention and influential capacity it has today. This renewed opportunity for discussion around concepts such as foreign intervention and implementation of humanitarian principles have in turn led Chinese scholars to re-interpret the notion as well. For example, Qu Xing during his analysis of the UN Charter and understanding the concept of Responsibility to Protect argues that the logic behind Chapter VII of the UN Charter mandates that the UN is unable to intervene in the internal affairs of sovereign states unless there is an evident breach of international peace and security.⁵⁹ He also convincingly argues, that the draft resolution of intervention in Syria was vetoed by China and Russia because the countries reasoned that there was not enough legal basis for launching a humanitarian intervention inside the internal affairs of the country.⁶⁰

⁵⁵ Hugh Breakey; "The responsibility to protect: Game change and regime change." *Norms of Protection: Responsibility to Protect, Protection of Civilians and Their Interaction* (2012): Pg 12.

⁵⁶ Gareth Evans, *The Responsibility to Protect: Ending Mass Atrocity Crimes Once and for All* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2008), p. 49 in Ziegler, Charles E. "Russia on the rebound: using and misusing the Responsibility to Protect." *International Relations* 30, no. 3 (2016): Pg 346-361.

⁵⁷ Robert W. Murray and Aidan Hehir. "Intervention in the emerging multipolar system: why R2P will miss the unipolar moment. *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 6, no. 4 (2012): 387-406.

⁵⁸ Charles E. Ziegler; "Russia on the rebound: using and misusing the Responsibility to Protect." *International Relations* 30, no. 3 (2016): Pg 347.

⁵⁹ Qu Xing; "The UN Charter, the responsibility to protect, and the Syria issue." *China Int'l Stud.* 33 (2012): Pg 14.

⁶⁰ Qu Xing; "The UN Charter, the responsibility...."; 17-18.

Though the implementation and acceptance of R2P is an achievement in its own right, there revolves intense confusions and varying interpretations around the very same provision. For example, Theresa Reinold's contention that the R2P extended the responsibility to save humanity from crimes but categorically failed to use proper obligations to ensure this in a military aspect,⁶¹ pointed out the limitation of R2P and how it was unable to reach its maximum potential owing to the nature of its scope. Much unlike, Gareth Evans who argues that "R2P still offers a principled approach to react to a chemical weapons atrocity in the face of likely Security Council vetoes."⁶² Even though an important functional principle for the global community, the R2P comes with its requirements and flaws.

With the world ensuing an era of more intra-state conflicts than inter-state ones than ever before, the difficulty in this particular situation lies in the fact that Russia refuses to accept that all diplomatic options have been exhausted by the Syrian state for solving the crisis by themselves without intervention from the wider international community.⁶³ Lastly, it should be noted that there is no concerted attempt being made by Russia to redefine the R2P frame, particularly in the case of Syria.

Russian view on Sovereignty

The issue of sovereignty has remained a bone of contention between the Western countries and Russia, in general. Bellamy contends that the traditional definition of sovereignty enables "nations [to] enjoy a fundamental right to self-determination."⁶⁴ On the other hand, Ruth Deyermund identifies a core differentiation in the way Russia looks at understanding

⁶¹ Theresa Reinold; "The responsibility to protect—much ado about nothing?" ;*Review of International Studies* 36, no. S1 (2010): 55-78.

⁶² Gareth Evans; "R2P down but not out after Libya and Syria." *Open Democracy* 9 (2013).

⁶³ Vladimir Putin; BILD Reporter interview; January 13, 2020; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vwL90cQrORw>

⁶⁴ Bellamy, Alex J. Responsibility to protect. Polity, 2009.

sovereignty within its borders and outside of it.⁶⁵ He notes “that although ideas about the character of state sovereignty have been set out frequently by members of the Russian political elite in speeches, interviews, and other public forums and appear to be central to the articulation of Russian foreign policy in official documents, their primary purpose is to [only] advance particular elements of Russian foreign policy rather than to develop a consistent position on the very notion of sovereignty.”⁶⁶ This attempt at not trying to develop a consistent definition of state sovereignty also leads to a generic confusion regarding how and where Russian policy might become unpredictable. Interestingly, such a contention is also useful in pointing towards a more blurred approach from the Russian end. This can further serve the state in not only a strategic manner and but also can help in forming a leeway for using the definition as per its own convenience.

There is a high likelihood of continuous confusion remaining regarding how sovereignty will probably be used and defined in different situations. This in turn will continue to create a barrier in predicting how Russia will react in certain situations. On December 21, 2017, Foreign Minister of Russia, Sergey Lavrov during his UN General Assembly Speech was quoted saying “The Russian Federation had always abided by the principles of sovereignty, mutual respect and the equality of people.”⁶⁷ This has been repeatedly put forward by UN Permanent Representatives from Russia and also by President Putin during his interviews.⁶⁸ Though it tells us little about why Russia was motivated to intervene in the first place, it does reveal the kind of image and the sort of reasoning Russia wants to convince the world of. The ‘protecting the sovereignty’⁶⁹ argument has made a recurrent feature especially in the case of Russian intervention in Syria.

⁶⁵ Ruth Deyermond; "The uses of sovereignty in twenty-first century Russian foreign policy." *Europe-Asia Studies* 68, no. 6 (2016): 957-984.

⁶⁶ Ibid; 958.

⁶⁷ Sergey V. Lavrov; United Nations General Assembly; December 21, 2017; <https://gadebate.un.org/en/72/russian-federation>

⁶⁸ President Vladimir Putin; The 21st St. Petersburg International Economic Forum; June 2, 2017; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Gr-U80t_rc

⁶⁹ Ibid;

A state's use of the norm as per its own interest and own convenience can project an array of challenges for the international community in general. Russia looks at sovereignty as a concept and a practice that ranks higher than the notion of human rights, writes Natasha Kuhrt.⁷⁰ The author provides interesting insight by designating the elites within the Russian system as gatekeepers of the Westphalian model of understanding state sovereignty.⁷¹ Contrarily Ziegler provides a more realistic approach by citing Krasner's take on sovereignty.⁷² He states that "although sovereignty is a global norm, neither globalization nor international institutions impose genuine constraints on great powers, simply because states have sufficient power to interpret sovereignty as it suits their interests."⁷³ This can be convincingly applicable in the case for Russia and can also be used to justify the scope of the argument within this paper.

Russia may not be justifying the loss of civilian lives by attempting to turn in the sovereignty argument but instead it blames anti-government groups for heinous atrocities on civilians by declaring the government in power to be innocent. Murray and Hehir note how Wheeler contended after the Rwandan situation that, "...the principle of sovereignty was never raised...no state tried to defend the UN's stance of non-intervention on the grounds that genocide fell within Rwanda's domestic jurisdiction."⁷⁴ Though the situation in Syria is different in scope and in dimension, this statement probably still holds true.

In Kofi Annan's speech of 1999, he mentioned how the world was undergoing a change in the way it was beginning to understand sovereignty and thus, was now re-interpreting states as instruments for serving people.⁷⁵ Such a shift in thinking of sovereignty, was what led to

⁷⁰ Natasha Kuhrt; "Russia, the Responsibility to Protect and Intervention." In *The Responsibility to Protect and the Third Pillar*, pp. 97-114. Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2015.

⁷¹ Ibid; 99.

⁷² S.D. Krasner, (1999) *Sovereignty: Organized Hypocrisy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press in Ziegler, Charles E. "Russia on the rebound: using and misusing the Responsibility to Protect." *International Relations* 30, no. 3 (2016): Pg 402.

⁷³ Ziegler, Charles E. "Russia on..."; 408.

⁷⁴ Nicholas N. Wheeler; 2006. *The humanitarian responsibilities of sovereignty*. "Humanitarian intervention and international relations. Oxford: Oxford University Press in Murray, Robert W," in Murray, Robert W and Aidan Hehir. "Intervention in the emerging multipolar system: why R2P will miss the unipolar moment. *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 6, no. 4 (2012): 390.

⁷⁵ Annan, K. (1999) 'Two Concepts of Sovereignty', *The Economist*, 16 September, available at: <http://www.economist.com/node/324795>

in Deyermund, Ruth. "The uses of sovereignty in twenty-first century Russian foreign policy." *Europe-Asia Studies* 68, no. 6 (2016): 957-984.

development of Responsibility to Protect, in the manner the UN as a system views it, today.⁷⁶ The changing nature and scope of conflicts across the world today and with newer challenges emerging in general, definitions like sovereignty, the states and their responsibilities are now all assuming serious turns.

Analyzing Sovereignty Frames

To analyze sovereignty frames in this case, I use the model developed by Medzihorsky, Popovic and Jenne.⁷⁷ They compiled dictionaries of the R2P frame in their work.⁷⁸ The sovereignty framing in this scenario includes some recurrent words and phrases such as “sovereignty of Syria,” “territorial integrity,” “preserve Syrian statehood,” “illegal occupation by US,” “no external interference,” and “Russia abiding by international law.” There is the use of such terms in a repeated manner internationally as well as on national state-sponsored TV Channels.⁷⁹ These terms are mostly used by Foreign minister Sergey Lavrov and other UN Permanent Representatives from Russia. There is also the mention of some interesting statements such as “US being on the side of militants requires Russia to do the ‘right thing.’”⁸⁰ Russian TV broadcasted a program where Russian official was quoted saying “It was important for Russia to take a different path, [by] not bypassing [the] international law.”⁸¹ There was also the mention of how “Russia is leading a peacekeeping mission in Syria,” in two of the speeches

⁷⁶ 2005 World Summit Outcome Document’, United Nations, 24 October 2005, available at: <http://www.un.org/en/preventgenocide/adviser/pdf/World%20Summit%20Outcome%20Document.pdf#page=30>, accessed 18 April 2014 in Deyermund, Ruth. “The uses of sovereignty in twenty-first century Russian foreign policy.” *Europe-Asia Studies* 68, no. 6 (2016): 957-984.

⁷⁷ Juraj Medzihorsky, Milos Popovic, and Erin K. Jenne. “Rhetoric of civil conflict....” *Research & Politics* 4, no. 2 (2017): 2053168017702982.

⁷⁸ Ibid; 4.

⁷⁹ Refer to speeches NTV Channel in Russia; March 15, 2016 and Russia Public State TV Channel (Russia 1); September 30, 2015 in Anna, Grigorieva. “The” friend or foe” dichotomy on Russian television during the armed conflict in Syria.” (2016). Pg 48-50;

⁸⁰ Refer to speeches NTV Channel in Russia; March 15, 2016 and Russia Public State TV Channel (Russia 1); September 30, 2015 in Anna, Grigorieva. “The” friend or foe” dichotomy on Russian television during the armed conflict in Syria.” (2016). Pg 48-50;

on television nationally within Russia, one of them was on March 15, in the year 2016⁸² and the other on September 30, 2015.⁸³

The Russian speeches by leaders in general regarding the Syrian issue are often accompanied by phrases such as “US supporting militias” and “Americans guarding the terrorists.”⁸⁴ There also is the mention of militia or terrorists through other phrases such as “The Syrian map looks like a patchwork blanket”⁸⁵ and “Russia is participating in anti-terrorist operation”⁸⁶ in Syria.

The narratives in 2012 and 2013, towards the onset of the Syrian civil war were not very different but consisted more references to chemical attacks in general. Terms and phrases used in 2012 and 2013 were more along the lines of “chemical attacks by opposition groups,” “Syrian government submitted to investigations,” “no chemical weapons found” and US negligence.” These were specifically more relevant in the UN speeches by Vitaly Churkin, Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the United Nations during ongoing investigations initiated and conducted by Russian ‘experts.’⁸⁷ These phrases and metaphors are the general ones advanced by Russian spokespersons on topics related to Russian involvement in Syria.

Narrative Analysis

This research claims that a pro-sovereignty discourse is being used by President Putin, UN Permanent Representatives and Foreign Minister Lavrov to justify the Russian intervention in Syria. After testing for uniformity, this piece also argues that the pro-sovereignty argument is

82 NTV Channel in Russia; March 15, 2016 and Russia Public State TV Channel (Russia 1); September 30, 2015 in Anna, Grigorieva. “The” friend or foe” dichotomy on Russian television during the armed conflict in Syria.” (2016).

83 Ibid;

84 Ibid;

85 RBC TV; September 30, 2015 in Anna, Grigorieva. “The” friend or foe” dichotomy on Russian television during the armed conflict in Syria.” (2016). Pg 62- 63

86 Vladimir Putin; Vladimir Putin held a meeting with members of the government; September 30, 2015.

87 Vitaly Churkin; Informal comments to the media by H.E. Mr. Vitaly Churkin after submitting final report of group of experts to investigate allegations of chemical weapons Use in Syria; December 16, 2013; https://russiaun.ru/en/news/sc_repopcw

something that Russia has been making use of, before 2015, hence before it officially ‘intervened’ into Syria. Finally, it also summarizes that the domestic discourses do not vary much from international discourses advanced by the Russian leaders.

The aim of this analysis is to study and evaluate in detail the narratives framed by Russian spokespersons such as Russian President Putin, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov, and UN Permanent Representatives of Russia about their intervention in Syria. Firstly, it is important to note that the analysis will be divided into four sub-sections, based on the four phases of the Syrian conflict. Though the primary focus of this analysis rests between 2015-2020 after Russia officially intervened in Syria,⁸⁸ other phases of the conflict are analyzed to test for uniformity in the Russian argument. The compilation of all the speeches, interviews and UN statements are provided in Appendix Table attached below.

The four phases are divided on the basis of timelines. The first covers the years after 2015 which is the main emphasis of this thesis, the second section looks at 2013 when the news of chemical attacks on civilians shook the international community and allegations began to be leveled against the Assad government in general. Third one covers the second year of the conflict in 2012 and the first section highlights the narrative in the very beginning of the conflict.

Through this analysis, I make the argument that the R2P frame is not being redefined by Russia in this particular case but is only being actively resisted by the country. The same argument is also used to suggest that the principle of R2P did not really have a revolutionary impact on intervention practices in general. President Putin and the other Russian spokespersons make use of the sovereignty frame in justifying why Russia is involved in the civil conflict in Syria.

⁸⁸ “Russian parliament unanimously approves use of military in Syria to fight ISIS”; Russia Today; September 30, 2015; <https://www.rt.com/news/317013-parliament-authorization-troops-abroad/> (Refer to Russian Parliament authorizing the state army in Syria even though there is no mention of ‘intervention’ as Russia claims that its presence is based on permission from the Assad government)

The argument of sovereignty being advanced by Russia is being done by basically two ways. Firstly, by highlighting that Russia is abiding by international law in the Syrian case and only helping out Syria to protect its state sovereignty. Secondly, by arguing that the administration of Assad in Syria is innocent and is the only legitimate government who have the right to defend their own selves.

The analysis portrays in detail some arguments that Russia has made time and again to justify its involvement in Syria. Firstly, Russian spokespersons through their speeches have attempted to clarify that Russia's stake in the Syrian civil conflict is only to provide an opportunity for Assad and his government to solve the crisis with the help of political and diplomatic negotiation routes.

Secondly, they have highlighted that Russian official presence in Syria was an act that complied to the laws of international order and it was the US who is illegal occupying parts of Syria. It was emphasized time and again that, the USA was illegally present in the country without permission from the legitimate government headed by Assad while Russia was present in the country only after paying close attention to international legal provisions intending to help Syria solve their crisis.

Thirdly, Russia is making a strong argument regarding how the threat of terrorism is a massive one not only for Syrian sovereignty but also for the Russian borderlands and its people. In speeches given by President Vladimir Putin, he has strongly argued that Russia is involved in Syria only through a 'limited capacity' is actually making an attempt to save the Russian state and ensure its security, through it.⁸⁹

Lastly, Russian defense for Assad and its attempt at labelling him as an innocent actor and the legitimate leader of Syria can also be looked at a strong effort from the Russian end to advance

⁸⁹ Vladimir Putin; Official Visit by Putin to Damascus Command Post where Russian armed forces are deployed; January 7, 2020; <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/62551>

the sovereignty protection argument, even if it is brushed under the carpet. This was evident in the statement that Vassily Nebenzia gave in the UN Security Council where he argued that, “[d]espite inconclusive and fake evidence where people ran around sarin-bomb crater unprotected and no remains of the aerial bomb were found and many other inconsistencies, the Syrian Government was named guilty by the Joint Investigation Mechanism.”⁹⁰

Some analysts in particular have also claimed that it is in Russian interest to promote an alternative liberal order in the global scenario, one such way to do so is through the Syrian intervention, which shall be characterized by the principles of ‘state sovereignty, cultural pluralism and national interest’ writes Cunliffe.⁹¹ Finally, this analysis divided into section makes sure to argue why the sovereignty argument is being concluded as the most important and visible argument being put forward by Russia. Through a series of speeches and statements and also a couple of interviews by President Putin, this work makes a strong conclusion of how Russian use of the sovereignty argument is more potent than R2P argument, particularly in the case of Syria.

Framing of Russian Narrative after 2015 to Present Day

There has been an almost uniform trend of sovereignty arguments advanced from the Russian end to justify the country’s intervention in Syria. From President Putin to Foreign Minister Lavrov and UN Representatives from Russia, everyone has consistently advanced arguments along lines of sovereignty to justify their involvement in the Syrian crisis situation.

The speeches portrayed a repeated mention of how the notion of sovereignty was very important for Russia in aiding Syria and helping it to deal with terrorism and civil conflict

⁹⁰ Vassily Nebenzia; Statement by Permanent Representative Vassily Nebenzia at a UN Security Council Briefing on Syria; February 6, 2020; <https://russiaun.ru/en/news/syria060220>

⁹¹ Philip Cunliffe; "Framing intervention in a multipolar world." *Conflict, Security & Development* 19, no. 3 (2019): Pg 248.

turmoil. On January 7, 2020 on the occasion of the official visit by President Putin to Damascus where Russian armed forces have been deployed, he applauded the bravery of all the Russian soldiers in defending Russian state interests.⁹² He stated “You are defending our country and continuing the fight against terrorism, away from home.”⁹³ He further validated his point by saying “Here, in Syria, you are defending your home country by preventing terrorists from reaching Russia and its neighboring countries.”⁹⁴ Through such statements, he made repeated use of words such as ‘defending,’ ‘terrorism’ and ‘Russian interests’ which portrayed a strong sense of how Russia views the situation in Syria to be a ready instance of attack on sovereignty principles. Along with that, it also highlighted how the narrative took a serious turn to linking Russian state interests with Syrian state sovereignty.

Rather than emphasizing on just an image of a benevolent and powerful Russia, the narrative also directed towards carving out a state interest driven nation as well. A similar emphasis was given by President Putin towards the end of 2017, when he was addressing Russian service personnel serving in Syria.⁹⁵ Throughout the event, he repeatedly emphasized on how Russia was defending a ‘right and just cause’ and further added phrases such as “[c]elebrating you [soldiers and Russian personnel] as [the] true defenders of Russia.” Based on similar lines, these arguments also repeatedly created a pattern of linking of Syrian sovereignty to the Russian one. Thus, ‘sovereignty’ being treated as a principle that connected the Russian interests with the Syrian ones.

The narrative of Syrian sovereignty is a continuous pattern within Russian arguments. On November 14, 2019, First Deputy Permanent Representative Dmitry Polyanskiy at UN Security Council briefing on Syria was quoted saying “Reliable and long-term stabilization in

⁹² Vladimir Putin; Official Visit by Putin to Damascus Command Post where Russian armed forces are deployed; January 7, 2020; <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/62551>

⁹³ Ibid;

⁹⁴ Ibid;

⁹⁵ Vladimir Putin; “Putin meeting with service personnel who took part in the anti-terrorist operation in Syria, in Kremlin Palace”; December 28, 2017; <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/56516>

Syria can only be achieved if sovereignty and territorial integrity of Syria are observed.”⁹⁶ This narrative of ‘territorial integrity’ is also taken forward by the Deputy by blaming the US and its actions. In doing so, he makes use of words such as ‘plunder’ and ‘robbery’ to define US actions as ‘illegal’ and intruding in Syrian oil fields. A month before in October, the Permanent Representative Nebenzia, was quoted saying “Reliable and lasting stabilization and solution to humanitarian issues can only be ensured if sovereignty and territorial integrity of the country are upheld.”⁹⁷ The word ‘illegal’ to denote US actions are mentioned in a repeated manner to emphasize of how its involvement in Syria is not only not required but also not in accordance to the law. Such arguments especially in the UN, have been a repeated sight from the Russian end.

The argument put forward by Russia in terms of protecting Syrian sovereignty is manifested time and again. September 16, 2019, at the event of press meet after the trilateral meeting between the leaders Vladimir Putin of Russia, President of Iran Rouhani and President of Turkey Erdogan after the Astana process on the settlement in Syria (Ankara) made a series of arguments based on “fight against terrorism,” “humanitarian aid,” and “Syrian territorial integrity.” President Putin begins his address by highlighting that “our three countries stand for the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of Syria.” Some important phrases used during the press meet were more along the lines of, “Syrians must be able to address by themselves the serious problems their country has been facing over the past years,” “Syria’s territorial integrity will be fully restored,” “[ensuring] withdrawal of all foreign troops from the territory of the Syrian Arab Republic” and that [terrorism can be addressed if] legitimate government [of Syria] resumes control.” This portrays arguments of Syrian sovereignty and how that is an important component of the Russian side.

⁹⁶ Dmitry Polyanskiy; Statement and the right of reply by First Deputy Permanent Representative Dmitry Polyanskiy at UN Security Council briefing on Syria; November 14, 2019; <https://russiaun.ru/en/news/syria141119>

⁹⁷ Vassily Nebenzia; Statement by Permanent Representative Vassily Nebenzia at the UN Security Council Meeting on Syria; October 24, 2019; <https://russiaun.ru/en/news/syria241019>

There is a repeated emphasis on how it is important to ensure that Syrian territorial integrity is maintained without any outside influence or interferences. There is also reference and clarification on this point by President Putin, where he mentions the members of Astana process only will help Syria making decisions for their own selves. President Putin also concludes before taking further questions from the press, by saying “US Armed Forces, it is common knowledge that their presence on Syrian territory is illegal.” The narratives of “US’s presence is illegal” and “Syria should be able to retain its territorial integrity” are not only been highlighted but also strongly harped on, in a continuous manner.

Some important phrases that were used during this UN meeting consisted of “[upon examination] no confirmed cases of the Syrian government using chemical weapons during this period [was found],” “The Russian Federation made a substantial contribution to preparing the operation to remove the precursors of chemical weapons from Syria” and “since 2011 the US has been making threats against Syria at various levels and without any serious reason.” This clearly points towards a narrative of how Russia is attempting to frame its role in the Syria situation of conflict. Russia is also seen to be mentioning American direct association with terrorists. There is a constant effort from the Russian delegation’s end to mandate that Assad’s administration is guilt free and innocent while the US has been the one blaming it for unidentifiable reasons. Russian delegation also clearly states that there has been no evidence found that it was the Syrian government who used the chemical weapons and thus, they cannot be blamed or considered responsible for it.

All these phrases, words and statements are important because they repeatedly point towards the same direction. This is the direction of the sovereignty argument from the Russian end. Thus, the speech acts between 2020 and 2015 can be conclusively used to draw some kind of a uniformity in arguments of sovereignty since Russia officially intervened in Syria. On

September 21, 2017,⁹⁸ during United Nations General Assembly, Mr. Sergey V. Lavrov, the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Russia, used phrases such as “The Russian Federation had always abided by the principles of sovereignty, mutual respect and the equality of peoples,” in order to introduce the sovereignty argument and narrative into the conversation.

The notion of preserving Syrian statehood and ensuring non-interference in their internal state affairs, Russia provided strong arguments in a repeated manner throughout most UN Security council sessions and other international and domestic interviews. On June 2, 2017 at the 21st St. Petersburg International Economic Forum conference, President Putin explicitly mentioned that “Russia is trying to protect Syrian statehood.”⁹⁹ Phrases he used included “not repeating what happened in Afghanistan, Libya, Somalia,” “Preserve statehood,” “Use political means to settle,” and “Without interference from Outside.” These phrases portray a clear narrative of Russia justifying its interference in the conflict within Syria as an act of preserving and protecting Syrian state sovereignty. The argument of Syrian sovereignty and protecting statehood is seen to be a recurrent narrative from the Russian end.

This particular speech is important because it heavily refers to the argument of Syrian sovereignty and why it is of utmost necessity to allow Syria to make its own decisions without any foreign interference. Further showcasing this sovereignty argument, on December 18, 2015, Foreign minister Lavrov began his statement in the UN Security Council meeting¹⁰⁰ after the adoption of the resolution in support of the Vienna process, arguments and phrases such as “Syria must remain a single, secular, multi-confessional and multi-ethnic state which is comfortable and safe for all the groups of the population” were put forward. In the same address, he also mentioned phrases such as ‘Only Syrian people can determine their future’

⁹⁸ Sergey Lavrov; United Nations General Assembly statement; September 21, 2017; <https://gadebate.un.org/en/72/russian-federation>

⁹⁹ Vladimir Putin; The 21st St. Petersburg International Economic Forum (SPIEF 2017); June 2, 2017; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Gr-U80t_rc

¹⁰⁰ Sergey Lavrov; UN Security Council following the adoption of the resolution in support of the Vienna process; December 18, 2015; https://russiaun.ru/en/news/sc_r2254

and “Russia is present after request from legitimate government of Syria.” This can be summarized as a clear attempt to portray and highlight the sovereignty narrative and to confirm that Russian presence in Syria is at the request of the Syrian government and not illegally.

On September 30, 2015, Russia 1 devoted 30 minutes of its slot time broadcasted messages such as "Syria and Iraq are bombed by the US-led allies."¹⁰¹ There were statements such as “it [is] important for Russia to take a different path, not bypassing international law” and “when the Americans are bombing from the air it is not clear where and it is not clear why, no one knows the consequences there, and quite often it is an empty occupation, “ made. Russia tried to emphasize that due to US’s action, it was the Russian responsibility to protect Assad and the innocent administration under him. This also manifests a clear message of siding with the Assad regime and Russia trying to manifest their intention of upholding the ‘international law’ unlike the US. These allegations are rather strong ones and speaks heavily about the kind of positive image Russia is trying to build.

Framing of Russian Narrative from 2013, aftermath of Chemical Attacks

Through the Russian statements and one interview in 2013, it can be concluded that the Russian narrative during this year was more on the lines of blaming the US and advocating for an innocent Assad government. On December 16, 2013 in an informal comment session to the media after submitting the final report on investigations of chemical weapon use in Syria,¹⁰² UN Permanent Representative of Russia, Mr. Vitaly Churkin stated that UN called for investigations in Syria due to pressure from the US. At the onset of his speech, he mentioned both possible probabilities where either the Syrian government had advanced the chemical

¹⁰¹ Vladimir Putin and others; Russia Public State TV Channel (Russia 1) in Anna, Grigorieva. "The" friend or foe" dichotomy on Russian television during the armed conflict in Syria." (2016). Pg 50- 52

¹⁰² Vitaly Churkin; Informal comments to the media by H.E. Mr. Vitaly Churkin, Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the United Nations, after submitting final report of group of experts to investigate allegations of chemical weapons Use in Syria; December 16, 2013; https://russiaun.ru/en/news/sc_repopcw

attacks, or it was the opposition forces doing the deed. Even though there was mention of both probabilities, by the end of the speech, Russian representative made sure to use the word “staged.” The use of such a term not only shifted the blame from the Syrian government completely but also portrayed as all other allegations and confusions leveled against the government as false. Churkin’s use of phrases such as “US insisted investigations,” “Syrian government put no prohibitive restrictions on investigations” and “provocation was staged.” These emphasized how the investigations yielded no results that could be used to hold the Assad government responsible. There were repeated mentions of how US had staged the entire scenario, but the investigations proved the innocence of the legitimate government of Syria.

Russian view on the events ensuing with the news of chemical attacks in Syria hinted at a probable cooperation scenario, at the very onset. On September 10, 2013, President Vladimir Putin issued comments on the issue of chemical weapons in Syria from Moscow.¹⁰³ Through questions asked by journalist, in this short interview, he mentioned certain statements about Syria such as “it is a well-known fact that Syria holds chemical arsenal,” “Russia is against proliferation of weapons,” “Russia will work with the US,” and “Efforts are being made to make Syria join the OPWC.” Unlike most statements in the UN, this interview expressed very less in comparison to Russian staunch view at the UN.

It is interesting to note that the Russian interests for conducting investigation of the presence of chemical weapons and in finding out the perpetrators were instantly heightened. Citing reasons of UN activeness to defend their own activeness on the matter, the Russian representative held that according to reports from Russian experts, government Assad’s innocence was duly confirmed. On July 9, 2013, a few months before, UN Permanent Representative H.E. Vitaly Churkin began his statement by mentioning that despite Syrian

¹⁰³ Vladimir Putin; Comments on the chemical weapons situation in Syria to Press; September 10, 2013; <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/19194>

government's request to investigate the chemical attacks, UN was unable to do so, as a result of which Russia stepped up to the occasion and conducted the investigation.¹⁰⁴ The result of the investigation as found out by the Russian experts was that "Therefore, the Russian delegate argued that there was thus, every reason to believe that the chemical attacks were conducted by the armed opposition fighters who used chemical weapons in Khan al-Assal."¹⁰⁵ This was the first time after the investigation of chemical attacks that Russia said all the findings proved to be directing towards anti-anti-government forces rather than government ones. Thus, negating all allegations against the Syrian government of Assad in power. By asking an array of questions and trying to mandate that the Syrian government had nothing to do with the chemical attacks, Russia was not only attempting to steer the Syrian government clear from being blamed for chemical attacks but also harping on their apparent innocence in regard to the entire matter. The narrative also at the same time, demonstrated a strong argument favoring Russian legitimacy in conducting the investigations in Syria.

Russian Narrative of Syrian Civil War in 2012

The Russian narrative of how blaming the Assad government is 'unrealistic' and cannot be justifying by violating the principle of non-interference in state affairs of Syria is clearly put forward through the speech given by Russia at the UN in 2012. On September 26, 2012, the UN Security Council convened a meeting regarding the deteriorating peace and security situation in the Middle East.¹⁰⁶ In this meeting, Sergey Lavrov, the Russian Foreign Minister emphasized on three major points. He highlighted that protests and political rights being demanded by the people and how they were very much in line with Russian sentiments and

¹⁰⁴ Vitaly Churkin; Press statement by H.E. Ambassador Vitaly Churkin, Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the United Nations, on the use of chemical weapons in Syria; July 9, 2013; https://russiaun.ru/en/news/sc_press_statement_syria

¹⁰⁵ Vitaly Churkin; Press statement UNSC...;" <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/19194>

¹⁰⁶ Sergey Lavrov; Statement by H.E. Mr. Sergey V. Lavrov, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, at the High-Level Meeting of the Security Council on peace and security in the Middle East; September 26, 2012; https://russiaun.ru/en/news/sc_lavrov_syria

foreign policy. Secondly, that “the sovereignty and territorial integrity of States, non-interference in their domestic affairs and the non-use or threat of force” were important considerations that needed to be maintained by UN member states. Thirdly, he emphasized the ‘primacy of International Law’ by referring to President Putin’s speech in Kremlin.

But it is also significant to note that within the address, Minister Lavrov is quoted saying “we condemn the act of violence, whoever the perpetrator may be - the Government of Syria or the armed opposition.”¹⁰⁷ But, soon after, the Minister follows with it another statement where he notes that “blaming the Assad government only is ‘unrealistic.’ Thus Russia makes use of words such as ‘unrealistic’ when it comes to UN members blaming the Assad regime. The Russian approach towards the narrative of sovereignty and importance of maintaining and respecting sovereignty and non-interference principles was also rather unmoved.

The act of Russia promoting dialogue in Syria is also overt communication of Russian involvement but only as an ally, through peaceful means and to initiate solution. Foreign Minister Lavrov also puts emphasis on terms such as ‘Russian presence,’ ‘promoting communication in Syria’ and ‘dialogue’ to put forward its alternative solution to the conflict without violating the condition of sovereignty.”

Even though it would have called for a Syrian led political process to deal with the concerns and aspirations of opposition forces in Syria, Russia rejected the draft resolution for it proving a sort of uniformity in the sovereignty argument. On February 4, 2012 the UN Security Council failed to adopt the draft resolution for the second time in a row.¹⁰⁸ The explanation of the negative vote by Russian Permanent Representative consisted of reasonings such as “need for peaceful solution,” “Russia is already taking direct action,” and “peaceful settlement.” The Russian Representatives using of such statements were not the first of a kind and had been used

¹⁰⁷ Ibid;

¹⁰⁸ Vitaly Churkin; Security council Fails to Adopt Draft resolution on Syria as Russian Federation Veto Text supporting Arab League’s proposed Peace Plan; February 4, 2012; <https://www.un.org/press/en/2012/sc10536.doc.htm>

repeatedly before, almost every time the UN meetings convened in regard to the situation of Middle East or Syria. Blaming the US for trying to exert outside influence was only one of the allegations brought forward by the Russian federation. The other one which was in turn not a new argument was the ‘need for peaceful settlement by Syrians’ without any kind of interference from outside. Thus, the highlighting of the sovereignty principle was advanced yet again.

Russia Narrative of the Syrian Civil War in 2011

At the beginning of the civil conflict in Syria, and amidst the news of government crackdown on anti-government oppositions and protestors,¹⁰⁹ the Russian narrative regarding the situation was relatively less stringent and vehement. Even though a general support for Assad was not overt from the Russian side, Russia still made repeated statements regarding the need to maintain the sovereign status of Syria. On October 4, 2011, the UN Security Council failed to adopt a draft resolution condemning Syria’s crackdown on anti-governmental protestors.¹¹⁰ One of the countries, issuing a strong negative vote was the Russian Federation and while explaining the negative vote casted, the UN Permanent Representative stated reasons pertaining to ‘destabilization’ and ‘non-interference.’ These were not just strong terms which refused to take into account the amount of human right violations and violence taking place in the country but also portrayal of a uniform narrative from Russia, from the very beginning of the war in Syria.

UN Representative, Churkin used statements and phrases such as “Collapse of the Assad government can lead to destabilization of the region,” “Russian Federation would continue to

¹⁰⁹ Katherine Marsh, Matthew Taylor and Haroon Siddique; Syria's crackdown on protesters becomes dramatically more brutal; April 25, 2011; <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/apr/25/syria-crackdown-protesters-brutal>

¹¹⁰ Vitaly Churkin; Security Council fails to adopt Draft resolution condemning Syria’s Crackdown on Anti-Anti-government protestors, owing to veto by Russian Federation, and China; October 4, 2011; <https://www.un.org/press/en/2011/sc10403.doc.htm>

work with patriotic opposition groups who opposed foreign interference” and “Russia is against the accusatory tone used against Damascus.” These justifications were used to explain the negative vote casted by Russia on the occasion.

The use of recurrent wordings by the Russian Federation were once again “sovereignty,” “territorial integrity,” and “non-intervention into state affairs.” This analysis demonstrates a uniformity in the Russian argument from the very start of the conflict. The sort of arguments advanced way before in the year 2011 was also strongly based on Russia harping on principles of non-interference and sovereignty. Their rejection of the UN draft resolution argued how confrontation had to be refused but not at the cost of interference into internal affairs.

Conclusion

This work makes use of models of speech analysis and civil conflict management rhetoric model to analyze and draw conclusions based on speech acts, interviews and statements in the UN. The analysis of the speech acts, interviews and statements by Russia regarding the intervention in Syria places a clear emphasis on the state sovereignty and non-interference in state affairs to justify its involvement in Syria. The recurrent phrases that the study identifies consists of statements such as “Syrian state sovereignty has to be retained,” “US is illegally present in Syria” and “Assad is legitimate” among others, which in turn helps Russia to portray the image of being the gatekeepers of sovereignty. This thesis concludes that, the use of the sovereignty argument by Russian has turned into a matter of convenience for the country.

Arguments within the country through domestic television and on the international forum at the UN overwhelmingly portrays an emphasis on Russian intervention being based on non-interference in sovereignty state matters, as well. For example, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov in 2019 had defended Russian involvement in Syria by justifying it to be an act purely

motivated on grounds of providing civilian in the Middle East, peace and security.¹¹¹ He termed the Russian policy towards Syria to be the helping hand that the Syrian government needs in order to aid themselves in tackling the terrorism problem that is plaguing the country.¹¹²

This tripartite struggle between the international community, an adamant Russia and a desperate Assad is now the reality for not just the conflict torn Syria but the of the world, in general. In regard to the Russian framing of the crisis in Syria, two recurring arguments are strongly potent even after 10 years of the conflict completion. One is the argument of sovereignty, territorial integrity and non-interference in internal affairs of a state and how the international community needs to abide by that principle of non-interference. Second is the illegal entry and occupation of the US in Syria. Blaming the US for bypassing international law and constantly lodging allegations regarding the innocent Assad regime, are two of the arguments advanced by Russia in a repeated manner. This academic piece also concludes that the Responsibility to Protect principle introduced in 2005, necessarily did not have an overwhelming impact on intervention practices per say.

The Levada Center, in a study they conducted on the reaction of Russian public to the Syrian intervention, revealed that when the domestic public in Russia were asked about the Russian involvement in Syria, some responses were along the lines of ‘Russia not officially being present in Syria’ and ‘Russia primarily carrying out the intervention only in a limited capacity.’¹¹³ Though the latter is controversial in nature, the former argument is repeatedly put forward by Russia to justify its position in regards to the Syrian case.

¹¹¹ Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s remarks and answers to questions during the Valdai International Discussion Club’s panel on Russia’s policy in the Middle East, Sochi, October 2, 2019; The ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russian Federation; Press Release; https://www.mid.ru/en/press_service/minister_speeches/-/asset_publisher/7OvQR5KIWVmR/content/id/3826083

¹¹² Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s remarks and answers to questions during the Valdai International Discussion Club’s panel....”

¹¹³ Denis, Volkov; “Do Russians Support Putin’s War in Syria?”; 12.10.2015; Carnegie Moscow Center; <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/61583>

Hehir rightly observes that, “the response to the situation in Libya [can be] better understood as an aberration rather than the product of a new disposition and the harbinger of a new era.”¹¹⁴ This thesis also makes similar claims by arguing, that even though R2P was an achievement in terms of global responsibility and re-defining moral standing of states, it may not have been as instrumental in altering the existing norms or narratives at play. The case of Russia is one such prominent example whereas the country still primarily harps on the sovereignty argument for justifying its policy in Syria. This points towards the use of a narrative that has served it for years rather than advancing the one which has been newly interpreted and established.

Finally, the significance of this thesis does not remain limited to only furthering the research scope for understanding the effect of framing language and rhetoric on foreign interventions. It also helps in showcasing a broader pattern of behavior from the Russian end. It is not the first time that Russia has attempted to make a pro-sovereignty argument in regard to interventions. Even though the limited time and resources prevented me from conducting an in-depth research on Russian behavior and arguments on interventions in general, the Syrian case even though can be termed as the most adamant one from the Russian end is not an isolated case. Thus, framing can be an effective tool for not just political leaders but also academics and analysts alike to further future research scope on foreign interventions.

¹¹⁴ Aidan, Hehir; "The permanence of inconsistency: Libya, the Security Council, and the Responsibility to Protect." *International Security* 38, no. 1 (2013): 137-159.

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