Russia is Back to the Balancing Game
Rusya'nın Dengeleme Oyununa Dönüşü

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Abstract

This research mainly aims to show the balancing game of Russia in Syria and Libya after the Arab Spring. Recently Russia has increased its influence in Syria and Libya by its own capabilities and alliances with regional and local actors. Thus, it sought to consolidate its strength and balance its rivals, predominantly the US, in the international system.

After the Arab Spring, Russia deployed its military muscle to Syria to protect its traditional ally the Bashar al-Assad regime, and restrain the US from solely dominating the region. Its attempts achieved to ensure the regime's survival and balance the US in the country. Later, it sought to expand its sphere of influence and balance the rivals in Libya. It primarily used its own capabilities and alliance relations with the Khalifa Haftar group, the UAE, and Egypt. Russia's growing presence in Libya inevitably affected the regional competition and balance of power among the states. However, the clashes among the militias supported by the external powers escalated in the fragmented country. Eventually, the UN-recognized GNA consolidated its power against the Khalifa Haftar forces and seized the control of northwest Libya, but an unstable environment still prevails in the country.

Key Words: *Russia, Libya, Arab Spring, Balance of Power, Syria*

Öz

Bu araştırma temelde Arap Baharı sonrası Suriye ve Libya'da Rusya'nın yürüttüğü dengeleme oyununu göstermeyi amaçlamaktadır. Son zamanlarda Rusya bölgesel ve lokal aktörlerle ittifak ilişkileri kurarak Suriye ve Libya'daki nufuzunu arttırmıştır.Böylece başta ABD olmak üzere rakiplerini dengelemeye ve gücünü konsolide etmeye çalışmıştır.

Arap Baharı sonrasında, Rusya ABD'nin tek başına bölgeyi domine etmesini engellemek ve geleneksel müttefiki Beşar Esed rejimini korumak adına askeri gücünü Suriye'ye gönderdi. Rusya çabalarıyla ABD'yi dengelemeyi ve Esed rejiminin hayatta kalmasını sağlamayı başardı. Daha sonra Libya'da nufuz alanını genişletmek ve rakiplerini dengelemek istedi. Esasen kendi imkanlarının yanısıra Mısır, Birleşik Arap Emirlikleri ve Halife Haftar grubuyla kurduğu itttifak ilişkilerini kullandı. Rusya'nın Libya'da artan varlığı kaçınılmaz olarak devletlerarası güç dengesini ve bölgesel rekabeti etkilemiştir. Ancak, parçalanmış olan ülkede dış güçlerin desteklediği milisler arasındaki çatışmalar kızışmıştır. Sonunda Birleşmiş Milletlerin tanıdığı Libya Ulusal Mutabakat Hükümeti (LUMH), Halife Haftar grubu karşısında gücünü konsolide etmiş ve kuzeybatı Libya'nın kontrolünü ele almışsa da istikrarsız ortam hala ülkede hüküm sürmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Rusya, Libya, Arap Baharı, Güç Dengesi, Suriye*

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Introduction

After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the US was still enjoying its unipolar position by launching military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq to counter terrorism. However, the US military interferences beyond its borders gradually weakened it in the international system. Christopher Layne underscores that the decline of the US power due to the emergence of other great powers such as Russia, China, and India and its economic weakness deepened via costly wars in Afghanistan and Iraq meant the windup of the unipolar post-Cold War era and a shift to the multipolar world politics.[1]

The US decline, thus emerging multipolarity, encouraged the Russian leadership to re-position their country as a great power in the international system which was manifested in Georgia in 2008 and Crimea in 2014. The international community, especially the USA, couldn't respond to the Russian challenges effectively. More significantly, Russia geopolitically enabled to consolidate its strength in the post-Soviet space and proceeded with its challenges in the Middle East.

The Arab Spring was another episode of the balancing game among the states. While the popular protests pushed the long-seated regimes and their authoritarian leaders in the region for a drastic shift, the international and regional powers attempted to provide regional stability in the volatile region as well as bolstering their own interests.[2] Russia mostly approached to the regional challenge more differently than its rivals— the US and European countries. It perceived such challenges as a threat to regional stability and its core interests in the region. It primarily sought to back the authoritarian regimes in Libya and Syria, which had been in its sphere of influence since the Soviet Union era.[3]

In Libya, Russia did not reject the NATO-backed military operations against the Gaddafi regime in 2011; but it abstained from voting the decision of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). In contrast, Russia constantly vetoed several UN resolutions related to the Bashar al- Assad regime and made prominent efforts to ensure the regime's survival.

Russia significantly increased its military presence in Syria and its cooperation with Iran to carry out military operations to entrench the survival of the Bashar al-Assad regime and balance the US power. Thus, the Russian

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1   Christopher Layne, "This Time It's Real: The End of Unipolarity and the "Pax Americana"'", International Studies Quarterly, Vol. 56, No. 1, March 2012, p. 205-210.

2   Philipp O. Amour, The Regional Order in the Gulf Region and the Middle East. Regional Rivalries and Security Alliances, Palgrave MacMillan, USA 2020. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-45465-4.

3   Tobias Schumacher and Cristian Notoiu, "Russia's Foreign Policy Towards North Africa in the Wake of the Arab Spring", Mediterranean Politics, 20:1, 2015, p. 99.

aerial muscle and the Iranian-backed ground force helped the al-Assad regime against the anti-regime forces.[4] Russia's presence in Syria relatively restricted the US's greater freedom of action in the region. As a result, the Kremlin enabled to give a clear message that the US was not an unrivalled and unbalanced superpower in the region.

Just after Russia consolidated its power in Syria, it re-focused on the Libyan crisis to increase its influence, guarantee its own strategic interests, balance its rivals in the region. However, the removal of its allied Gaddafi regime owing to the NATO-led military operation weakened Russia's position in Libya. While western and regional powers became more effective in designing the country in the early years of the transition period, they couldn't provide stability and peace in the country. The clashes among the local militias turned Libya into a fragmented country in which the new power centers emerged. The country has been mainly divided into two seats of governments- General Khalifa Haftar-backed House of Representatives (HoR) in Tobruk and the UN-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli in the post-Gaddafi period. Both blocs fought against each other to take the control of the country. The fragmented environment in the country led to the external powers' interference, which nourished such domestic rivalry.

This research mainly aims to show the balancing game of Russia in Libya and Syria since the Arab Spring. Recently, Russia has increased its influence in Syria and Libya by its own capabilities and alliances with regional and local actors. Thus, it sought to consolidate its power and balance regional and global powers as well as ensuring its own interests. After its achievement in Syria, Russia headed for another balancing act in Libya. Russia's activity in Libya was an extension of its efforts to bid for power and balance the US. Moreover, Russia's presence in Libya inevitably affected regional competition and the balance of power among the states.

This article is divided into five sections. The first section following the introduction highlights the theoretical framework of this article; the neorealism / the structural theory of International Relations. The second section on Russian foreign policy under the Putin Administration demonstrates the Russian political approaches and international moves until the present time. The third section attempts to reflect on Russia's role in Syria that provided a significant ground for Russia's new ambition to position itself as a great power in the international system again. Hence, Russia started its manoeuvres from its traditional ally Syria to consolidate its power and balance the US. The fourth

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4   Julien Barnes-Dacey, "Russia and the 'resistance axis', Nicu Popescu and Stanislav Secrieru (Eds.), Russia's return to the Middle East: Building sandcastles?, European Union Institute for Security Studies (ISS), Chailllot Papers, No. 146, July 2018, p. 66.

section analyses the developments in Libya in the post-Arab Spring, which stands at the core of the research. In particular, Russia's balancing and alliance relations with the other actors will be discussed. The final section delivers the output of the research resulting from Russia's manoeuvres in Syria and Libya.

Theoretical Framework: Neorealism/Structural Realism

In the International Relations (IR), neorealism has witnessed a revival since the 9/11 attacks. Hence, neorealism focuses on the structure of the international system and the distribution of power among the states it provides an adequate toolkit for the explanation of great powers behavior in the international system[5]

Neorealists contend that the international political system is anarchic because no supreme authority exists to prevent the use of force or keep peace among the states. In an anarchic system, states ultimately try to survive by using their own capabilities or power (self-help).[6] However, the anarchic system negatively affects the states' behaviours. They behave cautiously towards each other and primarily care about their national interests due to anarchy and distrust.[7] From this perspective, a sovereign state struggles with others chiefly to protect its own national interests and/or to ensure its survival.

Neorealism specifically assumes that the distribution of power determines the durability of the system. The system significantly changes if the number of great powers decreases or rises. In other words, the significant shift in the international system depends on the number of great powers.[8] When the distribution of power changes or the number of great powers changes, the polarity in the system automatically changes accordingly. It turns into a unipolar, bipolar, or multipolar system.

Also, the polarity can affect peace and stability among the states. The bipolar system is regarded to be more stable and less war-prone than the others.[9] However, competition in the bipolar system is less complicated than it

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5   Randall L. Schweller and David Priess, "A Tale of Two Realisms: Expanding the Institutions Debate", Mershon International Studies Review, 41, 1997, p. 7; Mustafa Aydın, "Uluslararası İlişkilerin "Gerçekçi" Teorisi: Kökeni, Kapsamı, Kritiği", Uluslararası İlişkiler, Cilt: 1, Sayı: 1, Bahar 2004, p. 48.

6   Scheweller and Priest, p. 6; Brian C. Schmidt, "Competing Realist Conceptions of Power", Millennium: Journal of International Studies, Vol. 33, No. 3, 2005, p. 537.

7   Aydın, p. 39.

8   Kenneth W. Waltz, "Realist Thought and Neorealist Theory", Journal of International Affairs, Vol. 4, No. 1, 1990, p. 29-30.

9   Steven E. Lobell, "Structural Realism/Offensive and Defensive Realism", International Studies, 2017, p. 7, https://oxfordre.com/internationalstudies/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.001.0001/acrefore-9780190846626-e-304?print=pdf, (Accessed September 14, 2020).

is in the multipolar system. In the bipolar system, each pole can estimate the other's combined capability. During the bipolar Cold War, the global powers -the Soviet Union and the United States- used to check each other closely by acting symmetrically and balancing each other. Their military powers were very close to each other and in balance.[10] In a multipolar system, the states relying on their material capabilities and alliances tend to calculate both the capability of others and the capability of potential coalitions since there are more than two global powers in the system.[11]

In the unipolar system, there is only one extremely capable state.[12] The US remains an unrivalled power in the system and solely dominate the system with the preeminent material and immaterial capabilities for a long time. Waltz asserts that "international politics abhors unbalanced power". In this sense, rival states attempt to provide a power equilibrium either by increasing their own strength or forming an alliance with others.[13] In the post-Cold War period, Russia tried to regain its strength and to unite the neighbouring countries including China by fostering organizations for security and economic co-operation. It has attempted to create a multipolar international system to counterbalance the US position. The US decline after the costly wars in the Middle East and elsewhere and the emergence of new rising powers such as Russia, China, and India appears to bring an end to the unipolar post-Cold War era and to bring about the transition to the multipolar international political system.[14] Russia tries to provide a counterweight to the US's preeminence since the Arab Spring. In this context, in 2015 Russia deployed its troops to restrain the US from being a single dominant power in Syria and to protect its traditional ally, the Bashar al-Assad regime. It achieved to balance the US power and maintain its patronage for the Syrian regime in the region.

The neorealists defend that the structure of the international system pressures the sovereign states to seek power. However, the offensive realists and defensive realists, which emerged from the neorealism, mainly depart from each other over the debate of how much power states want. Mearsheimer as an offensive realist contends that the system encourages the great powers for maximizing their respective power visa-a-vis other states contrary to the

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10   Kenneth N. Waltz, "Structural Realism after the Cold War", International Security, Vol. 25, No. 1, Summer 2000, p. 5-46.
11   Kenneth Waltz, "The Emerging Structure of International Politics", International Security, Vol. 18, No. 2, Fall 1993, p. 73.
12   G. John Ikenberry et al., "Introduction:unipolarity, state behavior, and systemic consequences", G. John Ikenberry, Michael Mastanduno and William C. Wohlforth (Eds.), International Relations Theory and the Consequences of Unipolarity, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2011, p. 5.
13   Waltz, 2000, p. 28.
14   Layne, p. 205-210.

assumptions of the defensive realists.[15] Because every major power ultimately seeks to become the hegemon in the system.[16] At this point, they recognize the importance of economic issues and increased interdependence in the world politics. At the same time, they argue that each state inclines to set various policies to maximize its relative power.[17] On the other hand, Waltz and the other defensive realists claim that the systemic structure compels the states with more stimuli to safeguard the balance of power (the status quo) than seek an additional increase of power.[18] He urges that in the self-help international system states are concerned to maintain their position rather than maximize their power.[19] From the perspective of Neorealism/Structural realism (offensive and defensive), Russia has struggled in Syria and Libya to balance the regional and international powers and foster its position in the international system.

Russia's Manoeuvres During the Putin Administration

Russia desired to re-position itself as a great power in the post-Cold War international system during the Putin Administration.[20] Given that "the states strive to maintain their positions in the system",[21] Russia's foreign policy was shaped by its aim of repositioning itself as a significant international power within the international system. Putin primarily focused on improving the Russian economy and building alliances to establish stability and confidence in the country,[22] because "great-power status cannot be maintained without a certain economic capability".[23] Russia had to develop its economy urgently to rise as a great power in the international system.[24] Under the Putin administration, Russia achieved to mobilize its energy resources to revive the economy. The high rise in natural gas and oil prices in the international market as well as revenues from their exports not only helped boost the Russian economy but also provided greater freedom of action for Russian political elites in their foreign policy.[25] Thus, Putin managed to make the country much more stable

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15   John J. Mearsheimer, The Tragedy of Great Power Politics, W. W. Norton & Company, New York and London 2001, p. 21-29.
16   Lobell, p. 6.
17   Aydın, p. 49.
18   Mearsheimer, p. 21.
19   Kenneth N. Waltz, Theory of International Politics, Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, Reading, Massachusetts and London 1979, p. 126.
20   Schumacher and Notoiu, p. 98.
21   Waltz, 1993, p. 49.
22   Yahya Kemal Taştan, "Ulusal Ülküden Emperyal Vizyona: Rusya'da Kimlik Arayışları", Türk Dünyası İncelemeleri Dergisi, XII/1, 2012, p. 125.
23   Waltz, 1993, p. 50.
24   Robert O. Freedman, "Russia and the Middle East Under Putin", Ortadoğu Etütleri, Vol. 2, No 3, July 2010, p. 14.
25   Olga Oliker et al., Russian Foreign Policy in Historical and Current Context: A Reassessment, RAND Corporation, 2015, p. 8-9.

economically and politically than former leaders.[26] Moreover, Russia tried to use its economic assets to achieve its political goals vis-a-vis the other neighbouring countries such as Ukraine and Georgia.[27] As a result, Russia enhanced its influence and political control on the former Soviet republics.[28] Also, Putin actively used the "Asian card" strategically against the West.[29] He tried to unify Asian powers under the collective security organisations to balance against the USA in the international system.[30] In this regard, he relatively strengthened Russia's position in the system.

The terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, became a great challenge for the robust position of the USA in the post-Cold War international system. It gave the impression that the USA was not invincible and unchallenged power and even it could be penetrated and hit on its soil. In this regard, the 9/11 attacks launched the international system to turn into a multipolarity. Russia welcomed potential changes in the international system because it had been promoting global multipolarity in its foreign policy.[31] In other words, the Kremlin defended the multipolar world and anti-US hegemony to withstand the systemic challenges and re-position Russia as a global actor in the international system. After the 9/11 attacks, President Bush targeted terrorist groups including al-Qaeda.[32] Moscow initially endorsed the US-led war in Afghanistan by providing intelligence assistance on al-Qaeda and conceding the US military deployment in the Caucasus.[33] However, Putin's attitude towards the US dramatically changed after the invasion of Iraq.[34] Russia opposed the US military intervention in Iraqi soil.

As Waltz predicted that other actors endeavour to balance the US power either by their capabilities or co-operating with others.[35] The Kremlin consis-

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26 Jeronim Perovic, "Russia's Eurasian Strategy", Jack Thompson and Oliver Thranert (Eds.), Strategic Trends 2019 Key Developments in Global Affairs, Center for Security Studies, ETH Zurich 2019, p. 47.
27 Oliker et al., p. 12.
28 Stanislav Secrieru, "Russia's Foreign Policy Under Putin: "CIS Project" Renewed", UNISCI Discussion Papers, No. 10, January 2006, p. 298.
29 A. Sait Sönmez, "Moskova'nın Kutuplaşma Çabaları: Putin Dönemi Rus Dış Politikası", Avrupa Etütleri, 37/1, 2010, p. 41-42.
30 Perovic, p. 46.
31 Yergeniy Primakov, Politikanın Mayınlı Tarlası (Çev: Fatma Arıkan), Selis Kitaplar, İstanbul 2008, p. 447.
32 Erik W. Goepner, "Learning From Today's Wars: Measuring the Effectiveness of America's War on Terror", Paremeters, 46 (1), Spring 2016, p. 108.
33 Thomas Ambrosia, "The Russo-Amercan Dispute over Invasion of Iraq: International Status and the Role of Positional Goods", Europe-Asia Studies, Vol. 57, No. 8, December 2005, p. 1195; Additionally for the geopolitical and geostrategic importance of Caucasus for Russia see: Alaeddin Yalçınkaya, Kafkasya'da Siyasi Gelişmeler: Etnik Düğümden Küreselleşme Kördüğüme, Lalezar, Ankara 2006.
34 Ambrosia, p. 1195.
35 Waltz, 1993, p. 53.

tently advocated for a diplomatic/political solution to avoid a war in Iraq. It found two other powerful actors to co-operate against the US. Thus, Russia, Germany, and France stood against the US war plan towards Iraq.[36] Eventually, the US's unilateral use of force against Iraq was opposed by other leading UNSC members.[37] In this sense, international actors didn't approve the US's desire to invade Saddam Hussein's Iraq. In the international system, global actors were seeking to balance or, at least, restrict US hegemony. In other words, the US efforts to launch a military operation in Iraq under the US counter-terrorism strategy (Global War on Terror) and Russia's strong anti-war position in the Iraqi issue eventually strengthened the prospects of a multipolar system.[38] However, Russia was then relatively weak to prevent the US-backed military operations towards Iraq then.

Neorealists assert that dominant actors gradually weaken themselves as they have to take responsibilities beyond their own borders.[39] The regional developments such as increasing revolt in Iraq and the revival of the Taliban group in Afghanistan put pressure on the US during its long stay in these countries. Hence, the US position was significantly weakened after the costly wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.[40] Neorealists also underscore that the state leaders, somehow, realize power politics as a dearly-won game and inessential for interrelations.[41] The Obama administration decided to avoid the costly wars abroad as it could not bear economic and military difficulties and eventually decided to leave Iraq in 2011.[42]

The US weakness encouraged the Russian ruling elite to change Russia's existing position in the international system. Under the Putin administration, Russia made significant military moves to show its strength in the global arena. Russia's intervention in Georgia in 2008 is an example. In the emerging multipolar new order, the USA is no longer an unbalanced power. New power centres reappeared in world politics.[43] The EU, China, Russia, India, and Japan had the high potential to become global leaders and change the international system.[44] As a result, the US couldn't fully respond to the Russian challenge in Georgia. Moreover, in 2014 Russia's annexation of Crimea substantially

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36   Alexander Thompson, Channels of Power: The UN Security Council and U.S. Statecraft in Iraq, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London 2009, p. 151.
37   Benan Kepsutlu, Amerika'nın Ortadoğu Politikası, İnkılap, İstanbul 2016, p. 69.
38   Freedman, 2010, p. 18.
39   Waltz, 2000, p. 28.
40   Peter Beinart, "Shrinking the War on Terrorism", TIME, Vol. 174, No.23, 2009, p. 25.
41   Waltz, 2000, p. 28.
42   Kepsutlu, p. 237.
43   Hasan Basri Yalçın, "ABD'nin Suriye Stratejileri", Hasan Basri Yalçın and Burhanettin Duran (Eds.), Küresel ve Bölgesel Aktörlerin Suriye Stratejileri, SETA, İstanbul 2016, p. 32.
44   Gökhan Özkan, "Unipolar, Bipolar or Multipolar International System? Defense Industry Factor", Yönetim ve Ekonomi Araştırmaları Dergisi, 6 (10), 2008, p. 108.

questioned the position of the US in the international system. The US and EU countries tried to avoid a direct military confrontation with Russia; they decided to impose sanctions after the annexation of Crimea. Yet, the EU couldn't fully succeed in their policy decision for sanctions against Russia as the Putin administration played "the energy card" very well. Moscow was quite aware of the EU's energy dependence on Russia. Thus, the manoeuvres to push Moscow to leave Crimea through the sanctions did not avail the purpose. This political behaviour and outcome seemingly demonstrated the US and the EU's collective inability/weakness against Russia as well.[45] As a result, Russia not only proved its capability in the international system but also consolidated its strength in the Black Sea region.

The Middle East regained priority for Russia under the Putin administration and it forged its presence in the region accordingly.[46] It utilized the Arab Spring to strengthen its position in the region. In other words, Russian leadership attempted to increase Russia's influence and strategic national interest while guarding its traditional allies in the region.

Russia is Back: Balancing Game in Syria

The Arab Spring, which appeared as a popular democratic movement in Tunisia in 2010, deeply affected the Middle East.[47] It intensified the anarchic regional system and led to drastic changes in the broader Middle East.[48] The regional challenge put considerable pressure on the regimes and resulted in the overthrown of long-termed authoritarian leaders.[49] Although some regional countries in transition successfully managed to respond to the challenge, a persistent chaotic environment prevailed in Libya and Syria.[50]

Syria has geostrategic and geopolitical importance for external actors. Thus, such desired to ensure their influence in the country since the start of the civil war. Syria turned into an arena of regional competition for the external

45   Ali Konak, "Kırım'ın İlhakı ile Sonuçlanan Ukrayna Krizi ve Ekonomik Etkileri", Uluslararası Afro-Avrasya Araştırmaları Dergisi, Cilt: 4, Sayı: 8, Haziran 2019, p. 86.

46   Lisa Watanabe," Russia's Renaissance in the Arab World", Jack Thompson and Oliver Thranert (Eds.), Strategic Trends 2019: Key Developments in Global Affairs, Center for Security Studies, ETH Zürich 2019.

47   Philipp O. Amour, "Regional Rivalries and Security Alliances in the Gulf Region and the Middle East.", Philipp O. Amour (Ed.), The Regional Order in the Gulf Region and the Middle East. Regional Rivalries and Security Alliances, Palgrave MacMillan, USA 2020. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-45465-4_14.

48   Philipp O. Amour, "Israel, the Arab Spring, and the unfolding regional order in the Middle East: a strategic assessment", British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies, 44:3, 2017, p. 295-297.

49   Philip O. Amour, (Ed.) The Middle East Reloaded: Revolutionary Changes, Power Dynamics, and Regional Rivalries since the Arab Spring. St. James's Studies in World Affairs, Academica Press, Washington DC 2018.

50   Katerina Dalacoura, "The 2011 uprisings in the Arab Middle East: political change and geopolitical implications", International Affairs, 88:1, 2012, p. 66.

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actors. Russia pursued a pragmatic policy towards the Syrian crisis by relying on its historical ties since the Hafez al-Assad era as well as its Tartus naval base in the country. Initially, it chose diplomacy as a principle instrument to utilize its core objectives in the wake of the uprisings.[51] It didn't approve of an international military operation against the Bashar al-Assad regime despite its attacks on Syrian civilians.[52] More notably, the Kremlin benefited from the Syrian crisis to display the US and its western allies that it could play "a crucial role" for international issues.[53]

A power void occurred in Syria after the clashes between the regime forces and the anti-regime forces escalated. It opened a window for the non-state armed actors as well as the external actors to intervene in the Syrian crisis. The DEASH terrorist organisation, opened up more areas and increased its regional influence by taking advantage of the power void.[54] The regional and international actors tried to take a lead and stop the terrorist groups in Syria through their proxy groups or coalition forces.[55] Remarkably, the US responded reluctantly to the challenge.[56] The Obama administration didn't seek to involve in the Syrian crisis directly. Weakened and exhausted by the 2003 Iraq war, the US avoided a direct and serious threat to its own security. Hence, the US-led coalition forces preferred airstrikes to stop the DEASH instead of deployment of its land troops. The coalition forces' aerial efforts became inefficient to fight against the DEASH militias. Additionally, the US couldn't pursue an efficient policy against the al- Assad regime. The US leadership desired to change the al-Assad regime but they couldn't offer an alternative option instead of Bashar al-Assad; and they did not put a considerable weight for the change of the Bashar al-Assad regime.[57] The US likely perceived the DEASH more dangerous than the al-Assad regime.[58] The US's inability to eliminate the DEASH and develop a strategy for the change of the Bashar al- Assad regime most likely

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51   Roland Dannreuther, "Russia and the Arab Spring: Supporting the Counter-Revolution", Journal of European Integration, 37:1, 2015, p. 84-89.

52   Emre Erşen, "Türkiye-Rusya İlişkileri: Jeopolitik Rekabetten Çok Boyutlu Ortaklığa", Özden Zeynep Oktav and Helin Sarı Ertem (Eds), 2000'li Yıllarda Türk Dış Politikası: Fırsatlar, Riskler ve Krizler, Nobel Yayıncılık, İstanbul 2015, p. 218.

53   Nikolay Kozhanov, "Russian Policy Across the Middle East: Motivations and Methods", Chatham House, Russia and Eurasia Programme, Research Paper, February 2018, p. 4-6.

54   Talha Köse," Uluslararası Sistemin Suriye Sorunu", Hasan Basri Yalçın and Burhanettin Duran (der.), Küresel ve Bölgesel Aktörlerin Suriye Stratejileri, SETA, İstanbul 2016, p. 175.

55   See: Mehmet Seyfettin Erol and Kadir Ertaç Çelik, "ABD'nin Suriye Politikasında Vekil Aktör Olarak Terör Örgütleri: YPG Örneği", Bölgesel Araştırmalar Dergisi, 2(2), 14-45, 2018.

56   Richard Fontaine and Michael Singh, "Rocking the Casbah", The National Interest, 2017, 148:12, p. 15.

57   Köse, p. 183.

58   Sertif Demir and Muzaffer Ercan Yılmaz, "An Analysis of the Impact of the Syrian Crisis on Turkey's Politic-Military, Social and Economic Security", Gazi Akademik Bakış, Cilt: 13, Sayı: 26, Yaz 2020, p. 6.

encouraged Russian interference in the Syrian crisis. Russia also benefited from the recent developments including the US-led coalition forces' inefficient military operations. It re-opened the political dialogue with the West, which was interrupted due to the Ukrainian crisis, and called for a new coalition with the regional actors to fight against the DEASH as well.[59]

Russia and Iran formed an alliance on the Syrian crisis both to protect the Bashar al-Assad regime and balance the US and its allies in the region. Iran previously supported Syria with military, political, and economic aids, but its support deepened considerably over time. Additionally, Iran started to send a great number of troops (as militias) to Syria especially just after Russia interfered in the Syrian crisis.[60] The Syrian regime was backed with the Russian aerial muscle and the Iranian-backed ground force against the anti-regime forces.[61] As a result, the military support of Russia and Iran alliance to the al-Assad regime put a constraint on the US freedom of action in Syria.

Russia openly threw its material and non-material support behind the Bashar al-Assad regime's survival although it maintained its neutrality/non-interference for the public protests in the transition countries.[62] The survival of the Bashar al-Assad regime was strategically important for Russia. Thus, it challenged to stand against the efforts of the international community to thrust the Bashar al-Assad regime although such policy cooled its relations with the West.[63] Russian–Iranian backup also took place to the misfortune of regional powers that had supported anti-regime groups in Syria (e.g. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), and the United Arab Emirates (UAE)). Israel too is against a permanent presence of Iranian militias in Syria; however, contrary to other regional powers, Russia and Israel have coordinated their military efforts in Syria on different occasions.

Russia desired to restore its position in the region because the Arab Spring negatively affected its political ties with its allies in the region. The Bashar al-Assad regime remained Russia's only traditional ally in the sphere of the Soviet influence in the region.[64] In contrast, the US maintained its unique position as a dominant international power in the Middle East until 2015 when Russia deployed its troops to fight against the anti-regime forces and

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59 Emre Erşen, "Rusya'nın Suriye Politikası: Fırsatlar, Riskler ve Tehditler", Hasan Basri Yalçın ve Burhanettin Duran (der.), Küresel ve Bölgesel Aktörlerin Suriye Stratejileri, SETA, İstanbul 2016, p. 16.

60 Abdullah Yeğin, İran'ın Bölgesel Faaliyetleri ve Güç Unsurları, İstanbul SETA, 2017, p. 130-146.

61 Barnes-Dacey, p. 66.

62 Alexander Shumilin, "Russia's Diplomacy in the Middle East: Back to Geopolitics", Russia Center (ifri), No. 93, May 2016, p. 11.

63 Dannreuther, p. 84-86.

64 Alexey Malashenko," Russia and The Arab Spring", Carnegie Moscow Center, October 2013, p. 8-12.

the DEASH. Later it increasingly sent more troops and military equipment to the war theatre of Syria.[65] In general, Russia used its armed forces as a tool to become an "independent centre of power" as well as securing its influence in the neighbourhood and other territories.[66] Thus, it didn't leave the US with so much power to dominate the Middle East and overthrow the Bashar al-Assad regime.

Russia's military presence in the Middle East was highly restricted to the Tartus naval base in Syria. However, it gradually increased its military capabilities in the country. Russia sought to consolidate its power in the region in the post-Arab Spring to determine its position in world politics. Syria played a significant role in Russia's desire to restrain the US's hegemonic behaviours and re-position itself as a global power in the international system.[67] Russia seized an opportunity to balance US power. It made political and military manoeuvres in Syria as a balancing act.[68] In this context, the regional dynamics forced the global and regional actors to re-negotiate their existing alliances and/or to form new alliances to compete against the rivals as well as standing for the challenges. Both Russia and the US respectively co-operated with other actors. Russia, China, Iran, and the Bashar al-Assad regime in alliance competed to balance the US, EU countries, the KSA-led Gulf monarchies in Syria.[69]

Libya: Second Stage of the Balancing Game

in the context of the Arab Spring in Libya in 2011, the UN Security Council (UNSC) proposed to launch a military operation in Libya. Russia behaved strategically in terms of both its regional allies and post-Gaddafi developments in its decision for the UN's resolutions on the Libyan crisis.[70] It considered the overthrown of authoritarian regimes as a threat to regional stability.[71] Besides, Russia's economic interests in Libya became influential in its decision to abstain from voting on using military force in Libya.[72] The Middle East has been a

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65 Anton Lavrov, "Russia in Syria: a military analysis", Nicu Popescu and Stanislav Secrieru (Eds.), "Russia's return to the Middle East: Building sandcastles?", European Union Institute for Security Studies (ISS), Chaillot Paper, No: 146, July 2018, p. 47.

66 Lukasz Kulesa, "Russia and the West: Russia's Recent Assertiveness, Western Response, and What the Future May Hold", Harvard International Review, Vol. XXXVIII, No. 1, 2016, p. 19.

67 Barnes-Dacey, p. 66.

68 Samet Yüce, "Rusya'nın Suriye'de Varlığının Nedenleri", Kastamonu Üniversitesi İktisadi ve İdari Bilimler Fakültesi Dergisi, Sayı: 11, 2016, p. 283.

69 Philipp O. Amour, "Introduction: The Regional Order in the Gulf Region and the Middle East.", Philipp O. Amour (ed.), The Regional Order in the Gulf Region and the Middle East. Regional Rivalries and Security Alliances, 1–25. Palgrave MacMillan, USA 2020. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-45465-4_1.

70 Cemal Bayat, "Rusya-Libya İlişkileri ve Birleşmiş Milletler Güvenlik Konseyi'nde Libya'ya Yönelik Askeri Müdahale Tartışmaları Sırasında Rusya'nın Politik Tutumu", Uluslararası Kriz ve Siyaset Araştırmaları Dergisi, 2(1), Mayıs 2018, p. 193.

71 Schumacher and Notoiu, p. 99.

72 Stephen Blank and Carol R. Saivetz, "Playing to Lose? Russia and the "Arab Spring". Prob-

key region where Russia dealt with both energy and arms trades. In the energy sector, Wintershall, which Russian Gazprom had % 49 shares had activities in the exploration and production of Libya's rich proven reserves for over 50 years. Additionally, Gazprom EP made an energy deal with the Libyan National Oil Cooperation (LNOC) in 2007, but it had to stop its operations due to the civil war.[73]

Moreover, Russia was one of the most important arms suppliers in the region as well. According to the $ 1.8 billion arms deal signed on January 30, 2010, Russia would be selling war equipment and vehicles including S-300 missiles, fighter jets, tanks, and helicopters. Moreover, the $ 3.8 billion arms sale agreement agreed with the Gaddafi administration remains uncertain.[74] In this regard, Russia had substantial economic losses over energy and arms trades due to the regional developments in the post-Gaddafi period. However, Moscow tried to reinstate its giant deals in Libyan oil and gas industries through Russian oil companies in the post-Gaddafi period.[75]

Under the UNSC decision on March 19, 2011, the international community declared a "no-fly zone" to save civilians in the country. NATO members (especially the US, France, and Britain) and Arab countries (e.g., Qatar and the UAE) actively started airstrikes. The airstrikes supported the rebels on the ground in their fighting against the Gaddafi forces. Consequently, the NATO-led military operation and anti-regime forces collectively removed the long-standing Gaddafi regime from Libya.[76]

The US-led hegemony sought to reshape Libya and its domestic institutions via the anti-regime forces during the transition period. However, Russia couldn't position itself at the negotiating table to design the new ruling authority in the post-Gaddafi period. It was not invited to Doha and Rome meetings where the Libyan Contact Group and 40 delegates from the Arab League, United Nations, and African Union attended. But Moscow intentionally rejected Abu Dhabi and Istanbul meetings later.[77]

lems of Post-Communism, 59:1, 2012, p. 4-5.

73 Gazprom EP International: https://www.gazprom-international.com/en/operations/country/libya.

74 Habibe Özdal, "Moskova'nın "Çekimser" Tavrı ve Arkasındakiler", 24 Mart 2011, www.habibe-ozdal.com/2011/03/24/moskova'nin-'cekimser'-tavri-ve-arkasindakiler-2/, (Accessed February 19, 2020).

75 Yulia Krylov, "Lock-in effect in the Russian-Libyan economic relations in the post-Arab Spring period", Journal of North African Studies, 22:4, 2017, p. 588-590.

76 Patrick CR Terry, "The Libya intervention (2011): neither lawful, nor successful", The Comparative and International Law Journal of Southern Africa, Vol. 48, No. 2, July 2015, p. 165-166.

77 Ekaterina Stepanova, "Russia's Approach to the Conflict in Libya, The East-West Dimension and the Role of the OSCE", Andrea Dessi and Ettore Greco (Eds.), Search for Stability in Libya, IAI Research Studies, Edizioni Nuova Cultura, Rome, 2018, p. 92.

The National Transition Council (NTC), the political representative of the transition period in Libya, transferred its duty to the General National Congress (GNC) after the first general election in August 2012.[78] However, it became highly difficult to create a fully stable government in the post-Gaddafi period. The Muslim Brotherhood and the Islamic groups that strove to be active in the new political order and those who were distant to the Islamic groups constituted two sides of the political spectrum in the country. More notably, the two laws adopted in 2013 increased the polarization and intensified the violence in the country.[79] Moreover, the excessive armament of the armed militia groups including the local tribes fighting against the Gaddafi regime did not allow the establishment of a stable government. The armed militias couldn't be integrated into the state system in the post-Gaddafi period.[80]

The GNC couldn't solve the economic, political, and security problems in the country. General Khalifa Haftar, a former soldier from the Gaddafi era, benefited from the domestic environment and launched a military campaign called 'Libya's Dignity' mainly to fight against the Islamist groups and the Muslim Brotherhood.[81] Consequently, the developments in the country forced the GNC to announce a parliamentary election for June 25, 2014. The Muslim Brotherhood and Islamists -dominated the General National Congress (GNC) could not achieve the desired results from the election and the Tobruk-based House of Representatives (HoR) emerged. However, the 2014 election led to the disputes between the GNC and the HoR, and two councils appeared in the country.[82] In other words, the 2014 parliamentary election resulted in two cores of power in Libya.

The US-led hegemony sought to end the disputes and the conflicts after the 2014 elections. In other words, they wanted to stop Libya's political crisis in their favour. They proposed a new government model to put an end to the "dual structure" of GNC and HoR through the 2015 Libyan Political Agreement/the 2015 Skhriat Agreement in Morocco. As a result of the UN-led Skhriat Agreement, the Government of National Accord (GNA) emerged as a new Libyan political power in Libya.[83] However, the conflictual environment continued in the country. The Khalifa Haftar forces and the GNA struggled politically and

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78   Amanda Kadlec, "Libya", Ellen Lust (Ed.), The Middle East, SAGE Publications, 13th Edition, Los Angeles and London 2014, p. 644.

79   Burak Güneş, "Libya İç Savaşı ve Kriz Yönetimi", Güvenlik Bilimleri Dergisi", 7 (2), Kasım 2018, p. 281.

80   Furkan Polat, "Çok Kutuplu İç Savaş Sarmalında Libya: Aktörler ve İttifaklar" ORMER Perspektif Serileri, No: 13, 2015, p. 2.

81   Güneş, p. 281.

82   Wolfram Lacher, "Libya's Local Elites and the Politics of Alliance Building", Mediterranean Politics, 21:1, 2016, p. 69, DOI: 10.1080/13629395.2015.1081451.

83   Ramazan Erdağ, Libya in the Arab Spring From Revolution to Insecurity, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2017, p. 57-58.

militarily with each other to increase their control areas in the country. The political and military camps in the country opened a window for international interference and the actors that sought to get involved in the Libyan crisis. Thus, Russia seized a considerable opportunity to increase its political influence in the pro-Gaddafi period due to the clashes between the Khalifa Haftar forces and the GNA. Nikolay Kozhanov claims that Russia's activities in Syria and involvement in the Libyan crisis by throwing its military and diplomatic support to Khalifa Haftar proved Moscow's willingness to dominate the politically and geographically nearby countries in the Middle East. In this context, Moscow's political and military assistance encouraged Khalifa Haftar to disrupt the UN-led 2015 Libyan Political Agreement/The Skhirat Agreement launched to provide "a reconciliation process" for the fighting groups in the country.[84] Thus, the Khalifa Haftar group gradually increased its weight against the UN-recognized Tripoli government.

Russia and the US competed to strengthen their positions in Libya as two major powers in the Middle East. European actors such as France, Germany, England, Italy, and Greece tried to make room for themselves in the country as well. These external actors provided military, financial, and political support to the detached local governments to ensure their interests. One of the international powers' prime concerns in the Middle East was arms sales. The arms sales to the region have significantly increased by 87 percent recently. The US, Russia, France, Germany, and China became the largest suppliers of arms between 2014 and 2018. Although Russia's share of arms sales decreased by 17 percent when compared to the sales between 2009-13 and 2014-2018, the deliveries to its main recipients Egypt and Iraq highly increased.[85] Russia also supplied military equipment, military vehicles, and arms to Libya. In other words, Russia has exported arms such as armoured vehicles, engines, ships, aircraft to Libya GNC, and Libya HoR since 2014. The US and Italy exported to Libya GNC while Belarus, Egypt, and the Netherlands exported to Libya HoR. The total price of the arms flow to the Libyan governments reached 64 million US dollars.[86]

The international actors co-operated with both regional actors and local actors to strengthen their positions and ensure their core interests in Libya. Russia, France, the UAE, the KSA, and Egypt supported the Khalifa Haftar-backed Tobruk government with their material powers.[87] Egypt desired to in-

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84   Kozhanov, 2018, p. 7-8.
85   Pieter D. Wezeman et al., "Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2018", Sipri Fact Sheet March 2019, www.sipri-org. (Accessed February 5, 2020).
86   Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), https://www.sipri.org/databases/armstransfers/sources-and-methods/.(Accessed February 5, 2020).
87   Sarah Feuer et al., "Libya: A Violent Theater of Regional Rivals", Institute for National Security Studies, 2019, p. 1.

crease its influence in Libya through the Haftar forces to eliminate the threat of the Islamists/Muslim Brotherhood, ensure its domestic consolidation and get financial aid from the UAE.[88] Additionally, Egyptian leadership wanted to uphold Egypt's economic interests in purchasing cheap oil and supplying labour to Libya's petroleum industry.[89] With the external support primarily from Egypt and the UAE, the Khalifa Haftar forces strengthened their position. They increased the territorial gains, principally by taking over the rich oil fields in eastern Libya.[90] Israel supported General Khalifa Haftar's militias similarly to its regional strategic partners Egypt, and the UAE.

Just like in Syria, the US avoided a direct involvement and backed the UN lead in Libya. However, it provided military and air support to its allies in the country to counter terrorism.[91] Additionally, the Trump administration behaved differently from the Obama administration and attempted to make a contact with General Khalifa Haftar to bring stability to the country.[92] A US delegation was sent to have a meeting for a political resolution to the ongoing Libyan conflict.[93]

In 2019, the Haftar militia forces intensified their military operations to increase their influence and seize Tripoli, where the legitimate government/the GNA was located. The clashes between the GNA forces and Haftar-led Libyan National Army (LNA) not only deepened the humanitarian, political, and security issues;[94] they also paved the way for international and regional powers' excessive involvement in Libya. Such powers increased their efforts to rebuild stability in Libya as well as ensuring their interest by backing fighting groups in the country.[95]

Russia's approach to Libya was entirely based on balancing and maximizing power policy. Libya has rich oil reserves and geopolitical importance in the eastern Mediterranean. Russia provided military, financial, and political support to the Haftar forces due to their influence on the oil fields and seaports. Thus, the possible co-operation would help Russia to consolidate its position in the eastern Mediterranean.[96] Additionally, the Kremlin hoped to

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88 Nicola Pedde, "The Libyan conflict and its controversial roots", European View, 16:93-102, 2017, p. 96.
89 Sigvart Nordhov Fredriksen and Zenonas Tziarras, "The Libya Conflict and its Security Implications for the Broader Region", Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO), Report 4, 2020, p. 12.
90 Strepanova, p. 94.
91 Emily Estella, "A strategy for Success in Libya", American Enterprise Institute, 2017, p. 7.
92 Benjamin Rhode (Ed.), "Libya's conflict", Strategic Comments, 25:5, x-xii, 2019.
93 Official site of U.S. Department of State: www.state.gov.
94 Human Rights Watch: www.hrw.org.
95 Marcel Dirsus and Tim Eaton, "Instability in Libya: Assessing the Regional Impacts", OPEN Publications, Volume 3, Number 1, Spring 2019, p. 16-20.
96 İsmail Şahin, "Rusya ile Türkiye Libya'da karşı karşıya gelir mi?", Açık Görüş, 12 Aralık 2019, https://www.star.com.tr/acik-gorus/rusya-ile-turkiye-libyada-karsi-karsiya-gelir-mi-

use the Haftar forces as a political tool against the UN-recognized GNA government to restore the major contracts of arms sales and railway construction from the Gaddafi period, to get a share in the Libyan oil industry, and to build a military base in the country.[97] Thus, Russia strategically maintained diplomatic ties with the UN-led GNA as well.[98]

Despite the Kremlin's denial, the Russian troops were strongly believed to fight for Khalifa Haftar's success on the battlefield.[99] Besides, the Russian mercenaries of the Wagner group, which was asserted that it had close ties with the Russian ruling elites and helped the Russian engagement in the regional countries,[100] backed the Haftar forces in Libya. They gave sufficient support with the advanced weapons for Haftar's military operations against the UN-recognized Tripoli government.[101] The Russian paramilitaries were used for Russian strategic missions abroad for a long time.[102] Eventually, Russia tried to balance the US and UN-recognized GNA in Libya by co-operating strategically with its allies and dominating the battlefields via the armed Russian mercenaries. In Syria, the Wagner group was actively involved in the battles to save the Bashar al-Assad regime and defend Russians interests.

Also, Russia's direct involvement in the Libyan crisis paved the way for a deeper co-operation with the key regional actors such as Egypt and the UAE. Especially, Russia established good ties with Egypt after General Sisi took the ruling power in 2013. Their trade rallied up to $5.5bn in 2014. Additionally, the Kremlin deployed special forces to the Egypt-Libyan border in 2017 for the Libyan crisis. Russia was expected to build a nuclear power plant in Egypt as well. The UAE and Egypt were the US's long-standing allies in the Middle East. However, Russia tried to balance the US and UN-recognized GNA in Libya by

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97   Raphael Lefevre, "The pitfalls of Russia's growing influence in Libya", The Journal of North African Studies, 22:3, 2017, p. 331-333.

98   Fredrisken and Tziarras, p. 12.

99   David Hearst, "Libya: The new battleground for Putin's secret army", Middle East Eye, 14 Nov 2019, https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/putins-chef-serves-trouble-libya , (Accessed March 5, 2020).

100 Alexander Rabin, "Diplomacy and Dividends: Who Really Controls the Wagner Group?", Program on National Security, Foreign Policy Research Institute, October 4, 2019, https://www.fpri.org/article/2019/10/diplomacy-and-dividends-who-really-controls-the-wagner-group/, (Accessed March 4, 2020).

101 Brian Katz and Joseph S. Bermudez, "Moscow's Next Front: Russia's Expanding Military Footprint in Libya", Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), 17 June 2020; Enes Canli, "Libya: Haftar's army of foreign machineries growing", Anadolu Agency, 10 July 2020, https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/libya-haftar-s-army-of-foreign-mercenaries-growing/1905456, (Accessed 27 September, 2020).

102 Simon Shuster, "Putin's Empire of Autocrats", TIME, April 15, 2019, p. 32; Kimberly Marten, "Russia's use of semi-state security forces: the case of the Warner Group", Post-Soviet Affairs, 35:3, 2019, p. 192-198.

co-operating strategically with the US's allies and dominating the battlefields via the armed Russian mercenaries.

The regional developments fostered the ties between Ankara and the internationally recognized Tripoli-based GNA/al-Sarraj-led government. Ankara primarily desired to end the clashes by peaceful initiatives and establish stability in the country in the post-Gaddafi period.[103] Both established a formal alliance which not only enhanced Turkey's manoeuvres in the Mediterranean region but also niched Turkey in Libya. Turkey signed a pair of agreements with the GNA on military assistance and maritime boundaries in the Mediterranean Sea. The agreements caused a rift with their neighbouring countries which desired to exploit the large reserves of the natural gas in the eastern Mediterranean. Put it clearly, the EU and the US-backed energy co-operation targeted to throw Turkey and Russia out of the game in the eastern Mediterranean.[104] However, the maritime agreement agreed by the Turkish government and the GNA disrupted the game for the energy exploitation in the eastern Mediterranean region. In this context, Turkey's presence in Libya is very significant for political calculations and balance of power.

After the formal agreements, Turkey approached positively for the UN-recognised Libyan government's call for assistance against the severe attacks of the Haftar forces and decided to send its troops to Libya. Turkey's response was to back the GNA against the Khalifa Haftar forces. In this sense, Ankara attempted to fortify the GNA's position in Libya and the eastern Mediterranean vis-a-vis its global and regional rivals. Turkey-backed GNA alliance counterbalanced Khalifa Haftar forces and changed the inner political dynamics in the country in the wake of 2020. Khalifa Haftar's sphere of influence shrank after the GNA took the control of northwest Libya.

In addition to its hard power deterrents, Russia made diplomatic initiatives together with regional and international powers for the permanent peace in Libya. Russia's diplomatic initiatives could be evaluated as to their efforts to protect their economic, military, and political interests in Libya. More notably, Russia acted as a dominant actor rather than a peace broker in Libya by relying on its good relations with Khalifa Haftar. The two parties (Haftar and al-Sarraj -led governments) came together with the participation of the other international actors in Moscow, but a convenient solution could not be reached in the Libyan issue as Khalifa Haftar left the negotiation table.[105] Also, Russia

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103 Furkan Polat, "Devrim Sonrası Türkiye'nin Libya Politikası: Kırılmalar ve Riskler", SETA, Perspektif, Sayı. 256, Ocak 2020, p. 1.

104 İsmail Şahin, "Doğu Akdeniz'de Enerji Çatışması ve İşbirliği", Rapor No: 3, ORSAM, Ankara 2019, p. 36-40.

105 Richard Spencer, "Fears of renewed fighting after Libya peace talks stall", The Times, 14 Jan 2020, https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/libya-peace-talks-stall-after-haftar-leaves-moscow-96ldfkg87, (Accessed March, 28, 2020).

participated in the Berlin summit with the international actors to de-escalate the war and negotiate a cease-fire in Libya. From this perspective, Russia actively strove for a leading role in international events as a global actor while safeguarding its interests in Libya.

Conclusion

Neorealism predicts that "dominant powers take on too many tasks beyond their own borders, thus weakening themselves in the long term".[106] The US launched military operations after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The costly and prolonged wars in Afghanistan and Iraq relatively weakened it in the international system. Thus, as neorealism predicted, the unipolarity that started weakening after the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 promoted a transition in the international system. Russia tried to re-position itself as a great power in the international system. It intervened in Georgia in 2008 and annexed Crimea in 2014. Russia's military interference in both cases demonstrated that Russia regained relative capability to protect its own interest in the post-Soviet space and acted as a counterweight to the US-dominated system.

After Russia geopolitically and geostrategically consolidated its strength in its sphere of influence, it attempted to back the authoritarian regimes in the Middle East during the Arab Spring upheavals. It sought to maintain its balancing position. In Syria, it openly backed the Bashar al-Assad regime politically, financially, and militarily. Additionally, Russia increased its military power in Syria and fought against the opposition groups and the DEASH terrorist group to safeguard the Bashar al-Assad regime. On the other hand, Syria became the basis for Russia to consolidate its regional position and balance the US in the Middle East. Thus, Russia relatively restricted the US' greater freedom of action in the region.

In Libya, it opposed the NATO-led military operations against the Gaddafi regime, at least it abstained from voting the UNSC's decision. However, Russia's political approach towards the Gaddafi regime brought about international isolation in designing Libyan political institutions in the post-Gaddafi period. Two main power centres- The Khalifa Haftar-backed the House of Representatives (HoR) in Tobruk and the UN-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA)- emerged in Libya. With external support, they started to fight against each other to gain control over the country. After the severe clashes, the country became fragmented and unstable. Russia supported the Khalifa Haftar forces militarily, financially, and politically while trying to maintain its relations with the GNA at the same time to anchor its own economic and political interests. Moreover, Russia's presence substantially increased in Libya as another balancing position in the international system.

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106   Waltz, 2000, p. 28.

Waltz contends that weaker states try to fortify their position as they feel anxious against unbalanced states.[107] From this perspective, Russia sought to maximize its strength and balance the US. In the Libyan case, Russia posed more clearly that the US was not an unbalanced global power in the region. On the other hand, the US didn't involve in the Libyan crisis on its own. It took its place beside the international community by backing the GNA. More notably, Russia protected and bolstered its interests such as energy trade and arms sales in the Middle East and the eastern Mediterranean.

The international actors made diplomatic initiatives to provide peace and stability to Libya. Neorealism asserts that peace depends on the attention and calculation of the principal actors in the international system. If they promptly give a "calculated response" to the destabilizing conditions and events, the peace will prolong.[108] As Waltz predicts, Russia and the US will probably make "calculated" efforts to create a stable environment in Libya. As for Russia, it will maintain its co-operation with the regional countries such as Egypt and the UAE as well as international countries such as France, Germany, and Italy. Additionally, it will maintain its ties with the local actors- Khalifa Haftar-backed HoR and the UN-recognized GNA to avoid risking its interests. In this regard, the Putin administration will have a further co-operation with Ankara, which has a larger influence on the GNA. Most significantly, Moscow will not be silent or neutral to the shaping movements of the US.

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