

# China, Russia, and the USA in the Middle East

## The Contest for Supremacy

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First published 2024

ISBN: 978-1-032-44407-9 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-032-44408-6 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-003-37201-1 (ebk)

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The case of the Syrian conflict

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DOI: 10.4324/9781003372011-6

The funder of the Open Access version of this chapter is University of  
Edinburgh School of Law.



**Routledge**  
Taylor & Francis Group  
LONDON AND NEW YORK

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## The case of the Syrian conflict

*Kasia A Houghton*

### Introduction

In the wave of uprisings engulfing the Middle East, the Syrian conflict started as a nationwide peaceful protest by the Syrian population for dignity after 15 teenagers were interned by the Asad regime in the Dera'a governorate. It has since become a protracted, internationalised war where regional and global rivals exploit a people's struggle to further their own political and economic agendas. In the wave of uprisings sweeping across the Middle East in 2010 and 2011, it is over Syria that the global powers, namely, the USA, Russia, and China, have competed most intensely over the international norms that influence how and when intervention should take place, what constitutes sovereignty, and in whom sovereignty is vested.

To explore this contest further, this chapter is split into four sections. The chapter starts with an outline of norms and their importance to great powers. While the discussion in this chapter is not heavily theoretical, this section serves to frame the behavioural analysis in the following sections. Second, the interests of Russia, China, and the USA as they pertain to Syria and the conflict there are outlined. This section highlights that while Syria was relatively insignificant to these powers prior to the conflict, the outbreak of civil strife in the context of the Arab uprisings provided Russia and China with an unparalleled opportunity to contest US hegemony in a geopolitically strategic region. Syria became of utmost political interest for Russia and, to a lesser extent, China in their global grand strategies, which seek to promote a multipolar global order. The norms associated with the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) are outlined in the third part. R2P, adopted by the UN in 2005, proffers the conditionality of sovereignty upon a state's ability and willingness to protect its population from human rights abuses, as to relinquish this responsibility invites international intervention, including the use of military force. Since R2P was invoked by the West to induce regime change in Libya, Russia and China have sought to prevent a repetition of this, instead promoting the sanctity of state sovereignty protected by a form of democracy and equality between states. The fourth part describes the actions taken by Russia and China to contest the norms of intervention and sovereignty promoted by R2P and its proponents, namely, the USA. It considers Russian and Chinese UNSC vetoes, which blocked any action that may come under the umbrella of R2P, Russian diplomatic manoeuvring to

prevent US intervention over chemical weapons use, and the establishment of the Russian-led Astana peace process that promoted statist, authoritarian conflict management. Additionally, this section explores Moscow and Beijing's elimination of cross-border aid routes that, in their estimations, constituted violations of the Syrian government's sovereignty and the Asad regime's rehabilitation on the regional and global stage, which reinforced its claim to sovereignty despite innumerable human rights violations.

### **Norms and their importance to great powers**

While this chapter is not theoretical in nature, to frame the behavioural analysis in the following sections, it is important to outline what is meant by "norms" and why they are so important to great powers. Norms are a set of ideas that delineate what type of conduct and logic is appropriate and acceptable; they are guiding principles that influence behaviour (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998; Sandholtz and Stiles 2009). Norms are inherent to an entity's identity, which is, in turn, integral to its attractiveness to others, a central component of soft power (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998; Nye 2004). Therefore, depending on how a government rationalises its legitimacy and *modus operandi*, the integrity of which underpins its staying power, certain norms will be more or less desirable. This desirability hinges on how far a norm goes in justifying and legitimising a government's rationale and behaviour.

The staying power of a regime is often based on its ability to persuade others of its legitimacy; to do so, it must navigate a three-level game (Hentz 2008; Putnam 1988). That is, to follow through on formal and informal promises made to its citizenry, elites, and the international community and minimise the inevitable dissatisfaction of any one side within this balancing act. The constraining effect this balancing act has over time sets an actor down a path-dependent trajectory. So, the scope of choice for potential action is shaped by a regime's previous activity and rationalisation of it. If existing norms stand in the way of a government continuing to balance between its constituents in the ways that it can, based on the options available to it on its path, it will seek to alter them. The aim is to shape norms to justify and support a government's rationale of legitimacy and *modus operandi*. Regimes engage in "strategic social construction" to reorganise normative preferences, and therefore identities and social conditions, and, in turn, "the standards of appropriateness may change" globally (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998: 888). "[T]he standards of appropriateness" with regard to who should be protected within the international system and when military intervention is acceptable have certainly changed through global power interaction over the Syrian conflict.

### **The great powers' interests in Syria and the Syrian conflict**

To understand why this contest over norms is occurring, it is key to explore, at least briefly, the interests of the three global powers as they pertain to Syria and the Syrian conflict and how these fit into their global grand strategies. For the USA, Syria was and is of little interest. In fact, it was with the outbreak of conflict

that the country became a greater priority for Washington. Traditionally, Damascus has been anti-USA, anti-West, and anti-imperialist, grounding much of its claim to regional influence in its fight against Israel and its primary backer, the USA (Perthes 2000). Indeed, during the Cold War, Syria, under Hafez al-Asad, was closely partnered with the Soviet Union. This was particularly the case after the 1956 Suez Crisis and the declaration of the Eisenhower Doctrine (Bekcan and Hançarlı 2020). However, this alignment ended along with the Soviet Union, and while Russia maintained a naval base in Tartus, Syria was mostly abandoned by Moscow. During the 1990s, Washington and Damascus experienced a very brief period of rapprochement, finding themselves on the same side over the Kuwait Crisis and, due to Syria's nascent process of *infithah*, economic liberalisation. But this was short-lived, as the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 contributed to the rise of the so-called Axis of Resistance, comprising Syria, Iran, and Hezbollah, which aimed to counter what they perceived to be new US imperialism in the Middle East and worked through proxies, such as Israel and Sunni Arab states, to create a Western-dominated order in the region (Hinnebusch 2016).

Prior to the Syrian uprising in 2011, China's relations with Syria were largely based on, albeit unidirectional, trade and economic ties. Given the importance of energy to China's expanding economy, Beijing's most important assets in Syria were joint energy ventures with the Syrian Petroleum Company (Perez-Des Rosiers 2019). While Syria has not been of major importance to China, the Syrian conflict, and its ostensibly approaching post-conflict phase have produced opportunities for Beijing to expand its range of interests. This has been exemplified by China's inclusion of Syria in its ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) on 12 January 2022 (AI-Monitor 2022). Russia, having invested heavily in the Asad regime, is also seeking returns. Much like China, Moscow is keen to start, perhaps prematurely, the post-conflict reconstruction phase, with both states arguing that economic development will bring greater political stability and an end to the issues of terrorism, extremism, and separatism, characterised by the Chinese aphorism adopted by the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation of "the three evils" (Calabrese 2019; Gao 2017).

Russia, China, and the USA have all, at least rhetorically, committed to tackling terrorism in Syria and establishing political stability. However, how they have gone about doing so varies drastically due to differences in these great powers' underlying interests and motives for their involvement in the Syrian conflict. Interestingly, for China, the Syrian conflict was one of the first international issues outside of its direct sphere of influence since the collapse of the Soviet Union towards which it acted for political reasons rather than economic ones (Fung 2019). Its main concern was that the Syrian conflict would mobilise Uyghur activists and militants in its north-western Xinjiang province, and Western intervention in support of the rebels in the Middle East would further incite disaffected Chinese citizens. However, Beijing refrained from joining the coalition force against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) (Patey 2016). Similarly, for Russia, the fear that Russian-speaking Islamist extremist fighters would use the Syrian conflict as a training ground for attacks back home and incite further dissent in Russia was a contributing factor for

Moscow's military intervention in Syria, the first of its kind outside of the former Soviet Union (Kozhanov 2016: 50). Nonetheless, unlike the USA, which targeted ISIS and Al-Qaeda-affiliated groups, Moscow's assistance to al-Asad's regime was largely directed at opposition groups in populated areas where successful rebel governance had been established (Sosnowski 2020). This was to promote al-Asad's narrative that the choice was between him and terrorists.

Both states, while more obvious for Russia, have become involved in the Syrian conflict to elevate their status within the global political order, both having outwardly committed to furthering its multipolarity by promoting the notion of "democratic international relations" (President of Russia 2022). That is, to put an end to US hegemony. China has done so by spinning an intricate web of economic interdependence with much of the Global South through the BRI. In so doing, it has bought itself a say on international political and security matters that may impact its sprawling interests across the world, as most recently seen with its brokering of an agreement between bitter rivals Saudi Arabia and Iran to re-establish ties (Houghton 2023). Russia has no such ability to buy influence. Rather, it has used its limited resources vested in its military capabilities to embroil itself in international crises and become a central actor, leaving the West no option but to consider the interests of, and at times rely on, Moscow for the resolution of these issues, as has occurred in Syria and, more recently, Ukraine. Meanwhile, the USA and Europe, limited by their publics' waning appetite for foreign interventions, have been hamstrung in their available options for action and have largely receded in importance in the Syrian conflict. While Europe has been affected by the flow of refugees who have tragically been uprooted from their homes in Syria, it, along with the USA, has been mostly ineffectual in dealing with the crisis in Syria in any decisive or substantive way (Phillips 2020).

## **R2P, Russia, and China**

The Syrian conflict has been a ferocious battle not only between al-Asad's government and the tapestry of rebel forces that has emerged over the last 12 years, not to mention regional actors, but also between global powers over the rules of international relations, especially as they relate to humanitarian intervention, conflict management and resolution, and peacebuilding. This global power competition has not only shaped the trajectory of the Syrian conflict but also altered the developmental path of the norm of R2P and other human security mechanisms.

The post-Cold War's Western-dominated liberal order failed to prevent humanitarian disasters in the Balkans and Rwanda. These shortcomings led to the ratification of the *World Summit Outcome* in 2005 by the UN General Assembly. The tenets of this document, commonly referred to as R2P, have changed the focus of international security efforts from protecting states within the Westphalian nation-state system to protecting people. It sanctioned humanitarian military intervention by external actors, be they a unitary state or a coalition, in cases where governments were unable or unwilling to protect their citizens from four major crimes:

genocide, ethnic cleansing, war crimes, and crimes against humanity (UN 2005). In so doing, the notion of sovereignty also shifted. State sovereignty became conditional on a government's ability to provide security for its citizenry or else risk losing its autonomy. According to ideas of liberal peace and peacebuilding, which are intrinsically linked to liberal state building, failed states – those that fail to combat internal corruption, criminality, and terrorism – require external intervention to remedy governance-related maladies, which could contribute to the perpetration of the four major crimes listed earlier by developing democratic institutions and liberal market economics. The intended result is that the population benefits from self-determination, public services, and economic opportunity, eliminating the perceived need and opportunity for destabilising political and economic behaviours that also contribute to international insecurity (Heathershaw 2008). The way in which the three actors in question perceive the utility, veracity, and legitimacy of the Liberal Peace Theory and methods of liberal peace intervention has significantly contributed to their willingness to implement R2P in conflict settings. The implementation of R2P has been inconsistent, to say the least. This is not only due to the West's waning appetite for intervention, especially as such interventions in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya spurred protracted civil wars, but also due to the major complexities present in states experiencing the aforementioned four crimes, and the varied interpretations of R2P by international actors, not least of all the permanent five members (P5) of the UNSC.

R2P was implemented in Libya in 2011. While the UNSC sanctioned this action, with the Western powers of the USA, France, and the United Kingdom (P3) voting for UNSC Resolutions 1970 and 1973 and Russia and China abstaining, its implementation caused much consternation for the latter two. This was because UNSC Resolution 1973 called for the implementation of a no-fly zone, and Russia and China believed that this was exploited by the P3 to enable NATO intervention to topple the dictatorial regime of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi due to its frequent bombardment of locations thought to be hosting the dictator, which assisted the rebels in his capture and murder (Vandelle 2011). Despite the Syrian government's repression of protesting citizens, the P5 could not come to an agreement about the implementation of R2P there. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov noted in May 2011 that a Libya-style intervention in Syria was "very dangerous" because oppositionists had been armed from the start, which was not a sentiment shared by Western powers (Allison 2013: 798). Furthermore, al-Asad's gradual escalation of violence and tactical release of imprisoned terrorists inured the international community to the extent of the atrocities committed against peaceful protesters, curbing the international community's outrage, and precluding timely intervention (Scheller 2013). Additionally, the entrenched neopatrimonial and communal structure of the Syrian state, especially security forces and elite political circles, as well as threats levied against soldiers to obey the government's orders, precluded the significant split between hawks and doves necessary for an agreed-upon transition of power (Hinnebusch 2019). Both Russia and China indicated that the

West had overstepped the mandate of UNSC Resolution 1973, with catastrophic consequences for Libya, which mirrored the chaos unleashed by the US intervention in Iraq. Moscow and Beijing were concerned that attempts at regime change in Syria would similarly be instigated by Western powers under the guise of humanitarian military intervention.

This topic was particularly sore for the Kremlin, as the protests that swept across the Middle East, commonly known as the Arab Spring or Arab uprisings, coincided with anti-government protests in Russia after Putin and Medvedev's castling move and allegedly fraudulent legislative elections in 2011. Western-backed regime change in contexts of anti-government popular protest has, therefore, been a source of concern for Moscow since the so-called colour revolutions of the 2000s in the post-Soviet space. Russia is convinced that the West had a hand in these popular anti-Russia movements. Consequently, Russia and China have worked towards strengthening the principles of non-interference in the internal affairs of states and state sovereignty as the main normative pillars of international state engagement. The motivation for this has been to prevent the West, especially the USA, from using its hard and soft power to oust unfriendly and uncooperative governments (Averre and Davies 2015; Lewis 2020).

The Chinese and Russian governments have often referred to a form of international democracy wherein all states, regardless of their internal governance structures and dynamics, are equal on the international stage. Essentially, no state has the right to intervene in another's internal affairs unless invited to do so (President of Russia 2022). Putin (2012) has welcomed a multipolar world order wherein non-Western powers provide an alternative form of global governance that prioritises respect for state sovereignty. A joint Sino-Russian statement released in 2022 declared that

[T]he advocacy of democracy and human rights must not be used to put pressure on other countries. They oppose the abuse of democratic values and interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states under the pretext of protecting democracy and human rights, and any attempts to incite divisions and confrontation in the world. The sides call on the international community to respect cultural and civilizational diversity and the rights of peoples of different countries to self-determination. They stand ready to work together with all the interested partners to promote genuine democracy.

(President of Russia 2022)

This is not to say that Russia and China overtly endorse human rights abuses perpetrated by governments, but that the international community should support incumbent governments in addressing human security issues and not resort to non-consensual intervention, regime change, or any action that may lead in this direction, such as condemnation and economic sanctions. However, in practise, this has led to tacit support for human rights atrocities and, in the case of Russia in Syria, outright complicity.



### **Humanitarian intervention and sovereignty contested**

According to the 2005 *World Summit Outcome*, which outlines the parameters within which humanitarian intervention can take place, all other methods of intervention should be exhausted before a state or coalition can resort to military intervention. These methods include, but are not limited to, condemnation, diplomatic isolation, economic sanctions, and referrals to the International Criminal Court (ICC) and, importantly, should not inflict more damage than had these actions not been taken (UN 2005), something that is impossible to measure and, therefore, can only be assessed through subjective perception. Indeed, this escalation of actions was followed somewhat by the international community with regard to Libya and Iraq, but the Western intervening powers came under criticism, not least of all from Russia and China, due to the protracted internal conflicts that ensued from the power vacuum opened by Western-backed regime change. To counter the perceived emergence of a Western-driven norm of externally backed regime change, Russia and China sought to shield the likes of al-Asad from the same fate as Gaddafi (Chang 2013).

#### ***Russian and Chinese UNSC vetoes: a lifeline for al-Asad***

Russia and China provided a lifeline for al-Asad by utilising their positions on the UNSC to block all attempts by the P3 and other Council members, including West Asian and North African states, to formally condemn al-Asad and threaten further action. To date, Russia has vetoed 17 draft UNSC resolutions related to the Syrian conflict, and China has vetoed ten, which indicates a vehement stance from Beijing given that it had only previously used its veto ten times since 1971 (Patey 2016). While four vetoes by Russia and three by China relate to the extension of cross-border aid access, something that will be detailed further in a later sub-section, the remaining vetoes blocked any resolution that hinted at the Syrian government's (especially sole) culpability in human rights and international law violations. From the start of the Syrian uprising in March 2011, it took over a year for the first UNSC resolution to be adopted. Meanwhile, the first two Sino-Russian joint vetoes occurred on 11 October 2011 and 2 February 2012. While the first draft was far more overt in its condemnation of the Asad government's violence and violation of human rights, both drafts, especially the second, apportioned blame to both sides for extremism and violent behaviour. Indeed, under international law, the Syrian government, more so than the opposition, has a particular responsibility to protect civilians, adhere to international treaties to which it is a party, and implement political reforms to stymie the continuation of violence (UNSC 2011; UNSC 2012b). Many of the subsequent drafts vetoed by Russia and China saw the threat of sanctions and any action taken under Article 41 of the UN Charter, permitting the severance of economic and diplomatic interactions, as reasons to block the proposal (UNSC 2012a, 2017a). This was a bid to impede any escalation of intervention that the international community might take in the name of R2P under Chapter VII of the UN Charter; if action under Article 41 is deemed ineffective,



activities sanctioned under Article 42, such as military operations, could be permitted (UN 2023). Formal condemnations, notably even those that did not specifically single out the Syrian government, sanctions, and ICC referrals, were systematically blocked by Russia and China, despite several drafts having the endorsement of up to 75 states (UNSC 2014, 2016a, 2016b, 2019a).

This was to redraw the parameters of acceptable external military intervention, particularly redefining the concept of consent. Russia, specifically, claims that its intervention on behalf of the Asad regime, which began in September 2015, was legal as it was formally invited by the Syrian government. If the legality of intervention was determined purely by the consent of the state, any intervention that would be consented to by the opposition but not the regime would be considered illegal; the opposite, however, would be permitted according to the Kremlin's interpretation of international law. Nonetheless, the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties and Draft Articles on State Responsibility "prevent an intervening state from using the legal fiction of valid consent to assist a consent-giving host state in actions that would . . . manifest violations of its human rights obligations" (Crootof and Weiner 2016), something that has not governed Russia's actions in Syria.

### *The chemical weapons dilemma*

Russia, particularly, has contested the norms of intervention in the face of continuous chemical weapons use. Through diplomatic manoeuvres and capitalising on the West's waning appetite for military intervention in the Middle East, Russia managed the West's response to the use of chemical weapons (CW) in Syria. In 2012, US President Barack Obama expressed that the use of chemical weapons in Syria would be a "red line" and spur US intervention in the country. While reports of CW attacks had emerged sooner than August 2013, attacks in Eastern Ghouta and al-Moudamiyeh in August 2013, which killed around 1,400, 426 of whom were children (Warrick 2013), provided enough justification for Western powers – the USA, the UK, and France – to contemplate the use of military force to punish but not necessarily topple al-Asad. UK Prime Minister David Cameron put a proposal for intervention to the House of Commons, which was voted down, and Obama felt compelled to seek congressional approval, which was not granted. Western states, wary of entering a Syrian quagmire, turned to "surrogate warfare", where other actors would take a leading role in the conflict while Western states retained deniability of their interest in toppling the regime (Gani 2020: 213).

As the UN Mission to Investigate Allegations of the Use of Chemical Weapons in the Syrian Arab Republic was only mandated to establish whether these weapons had been used, it could not apportion blame. Nonetheless, the fact that these chemical weapons had been dropped aerially indicates that the Syrian regime had launched the attack, as the rebels did not possess aircraft. In claiming that it was the opposition that had used chemical weapons on rebel-held areas to spur international intervention by their patrons, Putin expressed his concern about a resulting Western military intervention in Syria. At the G20 summit in St Petersburg a month later, US Secretary of State John Kerry retorted that US intervention could only

be avoided if all of the Syrian government's chemical weapons were destroyed. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov proposed this to the Syrian government, which was receptive. Days later, Damascus announced it was joining the Chemical Weapons Convention, and the UNSC passed Resolution 2118, under which Syria would remove and destroy its chemical weapons arsenal under the supervision of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) (Phillips 2020). While this was a win-win-win for Russia, the USA, and Syria, it demonstrates how Moscow was willing to cooperate closely with the USA to prevent its military intervention. China participated in the removal of these weapons in 2014 but was also accused of selling chlorine gas to the Syrian government (Patey 2016).

Since this deal was brokered, CW attacks have continued in Syria. Between 2017 and 2019, Russia vetoed six UNSC draft resolutions dealing with the use of CWs in Syria, and China one. These vetoes blocked the ability of the international community to levy sanctions on any entity that assisted actors in Syria to procure CWs and eventually ended the mandate of the OPCW-UN Joint Investigative Mission (UNSC 2017a, 2017b, 2017c, 2017d, 2017e, 2018). This shielding of the Asad regime did not prevent Western military intervention, however. After the April 2017 chemical weapons attack on Khan Shaykhun in Idlib, then US President Donald Trump ordered the first strikes by a Western power on Syrian regime targets, namely Shayrat airbase, from which the chemical weapons attack was thought to have been launched. This drew criticism from the Kremlin, which denounced the strikes as an "aggression against a sovereign state in violation of international law" and a repetition of the West's invasion of Iraq (Ackerman et al. 2017). The USA, France, and Britain launched punishing but limited missile strikes on chemical weapons facilities in response to another CW attack on Douma in April 2018 (Cooper et al. 2018).

### *The Astana Process: towards a statist form of conflict management*

The Kremlin also sought to contest norms of humanitarian intervention, forwarding a statist alternative that privileges extant governance systems by rendering the UN-led diplomatic process supportive rather than central to resolving the Syrian conflict. As the previous examples show, it did so through continuous vetoes and diplomatic manoeuvring, but also with its own military intervention that weakened the political clout and cohesion of the Syrian opposition and the establishment of the Astana Process, a Russian-led diplomatic track to resolve the Syrian conflict.

Russia intervened militarily in Syria in September 2015, when it appeared that al-Asad was unlikely to be successful in his military campaign to quash rebel forces around the country. With Western powers, alongside the Arab Gulf states and Türkiye, backing the Syrian National Council, the Free Syrian Army, and, later, the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, albeit in a disjointed and limited way, al-Asad's fate appeared in jeopardy (Gani 2020; Phillips 2020). Indeed, it was also at this point that the so-called Islamic State gained strength. Russia, invited by the Asad regime and Iran, supported the Syrian army in targeting what the three governments labelled "terrorists". This was a bid

to delegitimise the Syrian opposition, whether armed, unarmed, extremist, or not. Russia and China did not distinguish between moderate and extremist elements within the opposition. Moscow accused the West of backing terrorists given that rebel fighters fluidly moved between groups that espoused different ideologies, inevitably leading to the inclusion of extremists in umbrella groupings such as the Free Syrian Army, which received, albeit limited, support from the USA (Gani 2020). Russia assisted al-Asad in targeting areas where rebel governance was emerging and relatively successful, such as Daraya, Eastern Ghouta, and Aleppo. This was to inhibit any alternative to the extant state structures from materialising and to break civilians' morale associated with hope for change (Sosnowski 2020). Moscow has consistently claimed that it does not back the Asad regime but rather the state, which, in Syria, has become synonymous with the regime due to Syria's neopatrimonial structures of governance (Rabinovich and Valensi 2021; Valter 2018).

Russia's intervention, therefore, can be understood as statist or authoritarian conflict management (Abboud 2021). The Kremlin's rhetorical commitment to a Syrian-led process, enshrined in UNSC Resolution 2254, is, therefore, not to be misunderstood as one that is inclusive of the political diversity of the Syrian population but rather a process led by the Syrian state and regime. While China remained wary of any military solutions to the Syrian conflict (Patey 2016), Russia's intervention was rationalised by Moscow and Beijing as protecting Syria's state institutions and its neighbouring regions from falling into the hands of powerful extremist political movements, such as the so-called Islamic State. The West's waning support for Syria's ostensibly moderate rebels, who had received minimal support up until then, and its far greater effort to oust ISIS can be seen in a similar light. Nonetheless, Russia's military intervention ensured that a drowning dictatorship was able not only to stay afloat but also to resurge. Within a matter of two years, wherein Russia assisted the Asad regime to unleash extreme violence on rebel-held areas, inclusive of the use of proscribed weapons, the Syrian opposition was depleted, the configuration of the Syrian population was severely altered to benefit the regime, and, as Russia and China saw it, the international community needed to look no further than the incumbent regime to resolve the Syrian conflict (Borshchevskaya 2022; Patey 2016). By 2017, there was no imminently viable alternative to al-Asad. Therefore, there was little reason or appetite from the international community to intervene on behalf of the rebels, considering that by this point the most powerful opposition groups in Syria were branded extremists or at least had extremists among their ranks.

Russia's management of the battlefield was enshrined in the Astana Process, the Russian-led diplomatic initiative to resolve the Syrian conflict. Russia used its military capacity on the ground to configure the structure of negotiations at Astana, which formally consolidated battle-field developments, in favour of the regime, and provided political openings for further battle-field successes in a cyclical process. This process is arguably more sensitive to the military situation on the ground in Syria than the UN-led talks, as reflected in the inclusion of Iran, Türkiye, and Turkish-backed Syrian militias, Jaysh al-Islam, Ahrar al-Sham, the Central

Division, the Sultan Murad Brigade, and the al-Sham Army. However, the Astana talks eschew the inclusion of other Syrian parties, especially the non-militarised political opposition, in central decision-making. While the spectrum of Syrian parties invited to participate in some Astana talks has been broader than that involved at Geneva, it is Russia, Türkiye, and Iran that make the core decisions over meaningful, externally supported developments in the conflict (Tziarras 2022). This has enabled Russia to manipulate the situation on the ground to reflect circumstances that signalled the winding down of the conflict, thus creating a narrative that competes with that propounded by the West, namely, that Syria is still as dangerous as ever due to al-Asad's permanence in power and the development of a political structure dominated by warlords (AlMustafa 2023). Many Syrians, inside and outside of the country, are still vulnerable to persecution and attack under these circumstances.

While the aim of the Astana Process was to establish a ceasefire, by gathering all of the militarily relevant parties to the conflict and promoting a sustainable peace that was sensitive to the need for political reform as per UNSC Resolution 2254, "it has been instrumentalised to both prevent Western diplomatic involvement" and circumvent UN initiatives that compete with the narrative offered by the Astana trio, but particularly Russia (Tziarras 2022: 4). With the designation of de-escalation zones at Astana in January 2017, there was an indication that the Syrian conflict had come to a point wherein the Astana trio could enforce the provision of areas where violence would ease off. However, this was just a pretence for the Asad regime, with the help of Russia and Iran, to regroup and then launch devastating attacks to gain territory by force in Eastern Ghouta, northern Homs, southern Syria (Quneitra and Dera'a), and, while the regime's military takeover is not yet complete, Idlib. Far from bringing peace to these areas, intense sieges and heavy indiscriminate bombardment forced rebels into negotiations with the regime, leading to local peace settlements or "reconciliation agreements" often brokered by Russian military personnel attached to The Russian Reconciliation Centre for Syria. Under these agreements, civilians would agree to reconcile with government control or face transportation with the rebels to northern Syria. The Astana Process and the international community's resignation to its outcomes seemingly legitimised the use of violence to bring about a statist, thin, negative, and illiberal peace in Syria. In so doing, Russia has managed the international community's response to the Syrian conflict, specifically preventing a military intervention to oust al-Asad. Indeed, the former UN-AL Special Envoy to Syria, Staffan de Mistura, spoke to the success of the de-escalation initiative and called for the opposition to accept defeat (Beals 2017). The Russian-managed reduction in violence and statist conflict management that removed any emerging alternative to the Asad regime gave the West the thin excuse it craved to avoid entering a potential quagmire, as it did in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya.

### *Cross-border aid: a sore reminder of limited sovereignty*

In addition to delegitimising the Syrian opposition by branding them as terrorists and eroding and demoralising its support base, Russia and China have gradually

blocked cross-border humanitarian access routes to reinforce the centrality of the state to the notion of sovereignty. Despite nearly all drafted UNSC resolutions vetoed by Russia and China containing a stipulation that reiterates the international community's commitment to protecting Syria's sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity, Moscow moved four times and Beijing three times to veto the provision of cross-border humanitarian routes, seeing the exclusion of Damascus in the operation of these as an infringement on the Syrian government's sovereignty. While the international community was largely outraged by this, as Wieland (2021) explains, the UN's so-called neutrality in administering humanitarian aid, which largely relies on the consent of the incumbent government, fed further into this narrative. Furthermore, in attempting to remain "neutral" in the provision of cross-border aid, the UN eschewed and competed with nascent local structures of administration, such as the Local Councils, that were emerging as alternative, more democratic, structures of governance to the regime and ultimately contributed to their erosion. In so doing, the UN's activity further fed into al-Asad, Russia, and China's narrative that only the Syrian government has the power and legitimacy to protect the state's structures and administer the population (Ibid.: 78).

After three years of devastating conflict, the UNSC adopted Resolution 2165, which opened four cross-border humanitarian delivery routes Bab al-Salameh and Bab al-Hawa on the border with Türkiye, al-Ramtha on the border with Jordan, and al-Ya'arubiya on the Syrian-Iraqi border. While the Asad regime did not consent to this development, Russia and China could not resist the international pressure that was mounting over human rights violations and the dire need of swathes of the population for humanitarian aid. Furthermore, the cross-border aid mechanism was regulated by the UN Monitoring Mechanism, which would inspect goods destined for areas out of the regime's reach and notify the Syrian government of their arrival, which "certainly constituted a humiliation of the sovereignty-centred Syrian government" (Ibid.: 83). In 2019, as tensions between the West and Russia worsened, Moscow began to press for the termination of this mechanism, claiming that it infringed upon Syria's sovereignty. In December 2019, Russia and China vetoed the extension of cross-border humanitarian delivery operations, cutting the number of routes from four to two (Bab al-Hawa and Bab al-Salameh) and shortening the renewal period from a year to six months (UNSC 2019b). All the while, the COVID-19 pandemic was wreaking havoc across Syria, particularly in areas where the regime, with the help of Russia, had destroyed medical facilities. The USA, UK, Russia, and China accused each other of politicising humanitarian aid; Russia insisted that much of the aid going to the south and east of Syria was coming from government-controlled areas (cross-line), and the Chinese ambassador, Zhang Jun, accused the USA and UK of acting like colonial powers (Wieland 2021: 85).

In the face of worsening health crises due to COVID-19 and the 2022 cholera outbreak, Russia and China vetoed proposals to reopen al-Ya'arubiya and extend the mandated period of the two crossings on the border with Türkiye. It was not until two weeks after the most devastating earthquake in modern history, which hit northern Syria and Türkiye on 6 February 2023, and killed over 50,000, that the Syrian regime, backed by Russia and China, agreed to open three cross-border

humanitarian aid routes into north-western Syria, an area where 60% of residents were already reliant on UN humanitarian aid (Amnesty 2022; UN News 2023). It is legally and normatively contested as to whether government consent and UNSC approval are needed to carry out cross-border humanitarian deliveries in cases of immense human suffering, such as during conflict or after a natural disaster, let alone both. There are legal grounds for cross-border aid mechanisms without government consent when they are not forcibly imposed, are agreed to by the states that will host the humanitarian organisations, and are welcomed by the authorities that administer the territory to which aid is destined – in this case, opposition forces (SNHR 2023). In the wake of the February 2023 earthquake, it became grotesquely apparent that the Asad regime, Russia, and China had exploited the international community’s sensitivity to and the UN’s commitment to the protection of state sovereignty to contest the emerging norm of conditional sovereignty proposed by R2P. As nearly 8,500 Syrians were dying in the aftermath of the earthquake, the Syrian government tested the extent to which it had regained sovereignty on the world stage by stalling any international response to the compounded crisis unfolding in the most vulnerable area of the country. This evinces that the might equals right conception of sovereignty promoted by Damascus, Moscow, and Beijing may be gaining acceptance, albeit with gritted teeth.

#### *Al-Asad’s rehabilitation*

Nothing attests more to the idea that al-Asad’s might in Syria equals his right to remain sovereign ruler of the country than Syria’s readmission into the Arab League (AL) in May 2023, nearly 12 years after its membership was suspended due to the Syrian government’s violent response to protests in 2011. Syria’s readmission into the AL has much to do with regional political dynamics as much as it has with the acceptance by regional states that al-Asad is here to stay. Indeed, Riyadh’s recent volte-face, namely, seeking détente with its regional rivals, was a necessary step for Syria’s reintegration into the regional institution (Cafiero and Milliken 2023). While the USA has been highly critical of this development, Russia and China have welcomed it as a major step in bringing Syria out of conflict and into a reconstruction and rehabilitation phase. Syria’s normalisation of ties, especially with the Gulf states, could signal their willingness to foot some of Syria’s \$400 billion reconstruction bill. Indeed, some regional states have expressed that the rationale for their acceptance of Syria’s readmission to the AL is that Syrians cannot continue suffering with dire living conditions with or without al-Asad. Syria’s membership in the AL may help to re-establish diplomatic channels through which regional states can manage problems created by the Asad regime, not least of all the trade of the illicit drug Captagon, through which it is thought the Asad regime has made billions of dollars (Motamedi 2023).

Through the 2019 Caesar Act, which imposes sanctions on any entity that does business with the Syrian regime, the USA has tried to prevent any normalisation of ties with al-Asad to inhibit his regime from being strengthened normatively and economically through reconstruction deals. The Caesar Act has not deterred



Russian or Iranian companies, especially those already under sanctions due to their connection to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and conflicts in Ukraine and Syria, from signing contracts related to Syria's major industries, such as hydrocarbons and telecommunications (Borshchevskaya 2022; Malkova et al. 2018). China has also been undeterred. In January 2022, Syria was welcomed into Beijing's BRI (Global Times 2022). While no Chinese projects have yet been put into motion due to the still precarious security situation in Syria, the fact that Beijing was willing to undermine the West's position that there will be no reconstruction so long as al-Asad remains in power evinces the PRC's stance that any state, no matter its internal governance system, should be sovereign over its decision-making.

Until now, in the face of great internal and international hostility, al-Asad has resisted immense pressure to leave the presidency. In welcoming Syria back to the AL and opening possibilities for economic engagement, Russia, China, and Middle Eastern states hope to increase their leverage over the Syrian government and benefit from the Syrian conflict, whether that be through reconstruction or resulting global and regional power recalibrations. The West, still holding tight to its principled position not to deal with al-Asad's government, may be going against the tide on the issue of the Asad government's sovereignty, and indeed perhaps the notion of sovereignty altogether. The normalisation of ties between al-Asad's regime and some of its staunchest rivals indicates that governments may well retain their sovereignty whether or not they protect their citizens from heinous human rights violations, and, indeed, perpetrate them. Putin's praise for the Arab states' "independent policy on the global stage", a sentiment directed as criticism of what the Kremlin believes to be the USA's attempt to control other states' foreign policies (Khalid 2023), nods towards a win for Russian, as well as Chinese, contestation of the norm of conditional sovereignty as proffered by R2P.

## **Conclusion**

The Syrian conflict has hosted multiple interlinked competitions. For the great powers, Russia, China, and the USA, it has been an arena of contestation over issues beyond those solely pertaining to Syria itself. The competition over norms that has played out in the Syrian conflict has had global ramifications that will shape the global order far into the future. Norms change not as a consequence of abstract argumentation but rather due to contention that arises from the practicalities of implementing actions prescribed by them. Norms change through the repetition and proliferation of behaviours that do not conform to existing rules. In an ever-evolving global context, norms are always contested and, therefore, changing (Sandholtz and Stiles 2009).

For Russia and China, contesting the USA's global hegemony is a documented foreign policy aim. While economic and military might are arguably key factors in realising this goal, challenging the norms that legitimise the USA's hegemony is an integral step towards establishing a multipolar world order. In the aftermath of US-led interventions in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya, which resulted in the toppling of governments unfavourable to Washington, the Syrian conflict provided



the opportunity for a resurging Russia and rising China to forward an alternative, statist form of global governance that is arguably more inclusive of diverse internal governance systems and structures and less receptive to governments' violations of human rights. In vetoing UNSC draft resolutions that hinted at an escalation of action towards Syria if human rights violations persisted and using diplomatic leverage to avert military intervention over chemical weapons use, Russia and China stood in the way of R2P being invoked in Syria. Russia's military intervention starting in 2015 and the establishment of the Astana Process reinforced an alternative statist and authoritarian form of conflict management that did not follow the UN's liberal peacebuilding blueprint. Russia was largely uninhibited in doing this, as the West sought to distance itself from previous incomplete and failed interventions in the Middle East. R2P's conditional sovereignty was challenged by Russia's and China's blocking of cross-border aid mechanisms, including during a global pandemic, a cholera epidemic, and the most devastating earthquake in modern history. Al-Asad's regional rehabilitation, supported by Russia and China, and Moscow's and Beijing's involvement in Syria's reconstruction fly in the face of the USA's attempts to curb any interaction with the Asad regime. In the early conflict, the West, alongside Arab Gulf states, recognised the Syrian National Council and its successor, the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, as the legitimate representatives of the Syrian people due to the Asad government's perpetration of human rights violations, especially against Sunni Muslims (Talmon 2013). To see al-Asad's regional rivals accept Syria's readmission into the AL with him still at the helm signals that rather than being contingent on its protection of citizens, recognition of sovereignty hinges on practicality. This is not just the work of regional states like Russia and China. The UN's management of the Syrian conflict displays that the UN's fundamental privileging of the state in conflict settings, dressed as "neutrality", is outdated and ineffective in protecting and promoting human security. It has further legitimised the narrative that state sovereignty is not contingent upon the ability of a government to protect its citizens, thus promoting an alternative norm that might equal right.

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