

## Russia's Fundamental Interest in the Syrian Conflict and Strategies to Realize it

Hanjing Yue\*, Yulong Zhao

Anhui University of Finance and Economics, Anhui, China

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\*Corresponding author: Hanjing Yue

### Abstract

### Review Article

Russia is the most important force in the Syrian conflict, which is related to Russia's huge investment in the conflict. The reason why Russia invests so much in the conflict is that it has interests in the conflict that cannot be ignored. Russia's fundamental interest in the Syrian conflict is to protect the Assad regime in Syria. In order to realize this fundamental interest, Russia has adopted the following strategies: maintaining strategic coordination with China, fighting against ISIS by force, cooperating with Iran, coordinating with Turkey and so on.

**Keywords:** Russia, the Syrian conflict, interest, China, Turkey.

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## INTRODUCTION

The conflict in Syria has been going on for many years, but it still has no end, which has something to do with the complex factional struggle in Syria, and it is also closely related to the intervention of Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey and other regional countries, as well as the intervention of foreign powers such as the United States and Russia. Russia is an important participant in the Syrian conflict, it has always been the main force affecting the development of the Syrian conflict, and it is the country most deeply involved in the Syrian conflict. Russia is a country with world influence, and it is China's largest neighbor, a permanent member of the UN Security Council, a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and a member of the BRICS. Therefore, the study of Russian policies and actions in the Syrian conflict has a certain theoretical and practical significance to China's diplomacy. Why is Russia so deeply involved in the conflict in Syria? The external

behavior of the state is driven by interests, so in order to answer this question, we need to examine Russia's interests in the Syrian conflict.

Different theories have different understanding of interests and national interests. Therefore, when discussing Russia's interests in the Syrian conflict, we must first determine the concept of interests. The view of interests used in this paper is the Marxist view of interests, and its basic point of view is that interest is the unity of need and the means to achieve it; one of the most important internal contradictions of interest is the contradiction between the subjectivity of interest realization and the sociality of the ways to realize it; the essence of interests is social relations [1]. On the basis of this, the author will analyze Russia's interests in the Syrian conflict and its realization strategy. But before discussing Russia's interests in the Syrian conflict, it is necessary to analyze Russia's overall national interests.

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### Russia's National Interests

The judgment of national interests is closely related to the concept of state, so it is necessary to clarify the concept of state before analyzing Russia's national interests. Here, the author uses the Marxist view of state. According to the Marxist point of view, the state is the tool of class rule, that is, the state has a class nature, and the state always manifests itself as a state of a certain class. Therefore, the national interests of a country are essentially the interests of a specific class, that is to say, the interests of the ruling class of the country. Therefore, Russia's national interest is essentially the interest of the Russian ruling class. So what is the ruling class in Russia? According to the analysis of the Russian Communists: "The ruling class in Russia is composed of oligarchs, the new bourgeoisie and the upper bureaucracy, which holds the basic means of production and real power of the country. On the other hand, the employed working class and small owners who account for the majority of the population are the ruled class, threatened by unemployment and having no future"[2]. Accordingly, Russia's national interest is in fact the interests of oligarchs, the new bourgeoisie and the upper bureaucracy. Since Russian President Putin is actually the highest representative and wielder of Russian political power, Russia's national interests are essentially the interests of oligarchs, new bourgeoisie and upper-class bureaucrats represented by Putin.

These subjects of political power are bound to take maintaining the status of the subject of political power, that is, maintaining and consolidating the control of state power as the fundamental starting point. For this reason, the subject of Russian political power headed by Putin must take the effective possession of the means of production as the fundamental interest, and possessing the means of production means possessing the social wealth, which is the result of production. At the same time, it also means that violence, as the core component of political power, has a basis for existence. We should pay attention to the word "effective" in "effective possession of the means of production", that is to say, it is far from enough for the main body of political forces to occupy the means of production alone, and what is more important is to make effective use of them. To this end, Putin must carry out reform and institutional innovation, vigorously develop science and technology and education, and improve labor productivity. For Russia, oil and gas resources are its most important means of production, improving energy production efficiency and international competitiveness, and having stable and diversified international energy customers are Russia's important national interests. It has a direct and profound impact on Russia's financial and foreign exchange earnings, and further affects Russia's military construction.

After Yeltsin, Putin held political power in Russia for a long time. "The basic content of political rule is to build the relationship between political authority and obedience" [3]. Therefore, for Putin, the transformation of his political power into political authority is the basic content of his political rule, and the promotion of Putin's personality appeal becomes an important interest of the subject of Russian political power. Thus, according to the above analysis, it is also Russia's national interest.

One of the most important inherent contradictions of interests is the contradiction between the subjectivity of the requirements of interest realization and the sociality of the ways to realize it. That is to say, when the ruling class strives to realize its own interests, it must have this or that connection with the ruled class, and must realize its own interests in the interactive relationship with the ruled class. The interaction between the ruling class of a country and the ruled class, as well as their interaction with the ruling class and the ruled class of other countries, forms their common interests, which is part of the national interests and embodies people-wide nature of national interests. In other words, the national interest is the unity of the class nature and the people-wide nature. Unlike in domestic politics, the national interest is more obvious in international politics. For Russia, its national interest is the unity of the interests of the main body of political power headed by President Putin and the interests of all the Russian people. In international politics, Russia's national interest is to safeguard Russia's status as a great power, safeguard Russia's sovereignty, territory, national and institutional security, and create a good external environment for Russia's economic development.

Based on the above-mentioned Russian national interests, the author analyzes Russia's fundamental interests in the Syrian conflict.

### Russia's Fundamental Interests in the Syrian Conflict

The fundamental interests of Russia in Syria mentioned here refer to the interests of Russia, which runs through the Syrian conflict, which affects and even determines Russia's other interests in the Syrian conflict. Russia's fundamental interest in the Syrian conflict is to protect the Syrian Bashar Assad regime, which is determined by Russia's overall national interests. As mentioned above, Russia's national interest is essentially the interest of the Russian political power subject represented by Putin. In the process of transforming political power into political authority, the subject of Russian political power must pay attention to the Russian people's strong pursuit and eager nostalgia for Russia's status as a great power and their own citizenship of a great power. Syria, led by the Assad government, is one of the countries that can best meet

the aspirations of the Russian people in the new century. The relationship between Russia and Syria is the last relic of the Soviet Union's political influence in the Middle East. In those days, the Soviet Union meticulously supported agents all over the world to engage in a fierce global struggle for hegemony with the United States, and it had troops in all socialist countries except China and North Korea. Overseas military bases had been set up in Vietnam, Mongolia, Afghanistan, Cuba, Somalia, Angola and other countries [4]. After the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the drastic changes in Eastern Europe, Russian power quickly retreated from central Europe, and it was under such circumstances that Russia was still squeezed by NATO and the European Union. As a result, its former brothers, Georgia and Ukraine, tried to join the embrace of the West and were unwilling to be included in Russia's strategic track. After Russia pulled out of the Soviet Union's largest overseas naval port, Cam Ranh Bay, in 2002, the port of Tartus in Syria became the only overseas naval base outside the CIS that survived the collapse of the Soviet Union, a symbol of the glory of Russia as a great power. With this military port, the Russian navy can exist in the Mediterranean for a long time, and the Mediterranean Sea is not far from the Black Sea. Preserving the Assad government ensures that there is a Syria friendly to Russia, and that Russia has a port of Tartus to take advantage of. On the contrary, without the Assad government, Russia will lose a pro-Russian Syria and thus the port of Tartus. The loss of the military port means that Russia has lost its influence in the Mediterranean and even the selective means by which Russian ships continue to exist in farther waters. Without the military port, the Russian people will also have a sense of loss, which may be attributed to Putin.

About 10% of Syria's pre-war population are Christians [5], most of whom are Orthodox. Most of these Christians support the Assad government, or at least want Syria to be safe and stable. The Russian Orthodox Church fears that if the Assad regime falls, the new regime will persecute them. There is no doubt that the worries of the Russian Orthodox Church have also affected Putin's policy toward Syria. Russia has generally maintained its influence over Syria for many years because of Syria's growing insecurity and isolation from the West. Putin still hopes to profit from maintaining the pro-Russian state of the Syrian regime, thereby ensuring Russia's position as an important strategic player in Middle East politics. This is only possible if the Assad regime in Syria does not fall. After all, the Syrian National Council, established in 2011, is the largest faction in the National Alliance of opposition and Revolutionary Forces, dominated by members of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and supported by the United States, Europe and the Gulf states [6]. The Muslim Brotherhood has been on Russia's list of terrorist organizations since 2003 because Russia

believes it supported Chechen independent forces during the Chechen war.

Putin has always been determined to make Russia strong, but where is it? For a country like Russia, its strength is, of course, reflected in its international influence and in the fact that it has several loyal brothers. The Assad government in Syria has always supported Russia, even more pro-Russian than the members of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). In 2008, when Russia intervened militarily in Georgia, Syria was the second country after Belarus to publicly express its support for Russia. A few days after the conflict broke out, President Bashar al-Assad opposed some countries distorting the facts to portray Russia as an aggressor. He even welcomed Russia's deployment of a missile system on Syrian territory as a strategic response to events in Georgia and the possible deployment of a missile defense system by the United States in Eastern Europe. Russia's support for the Assad government has also made it clear to other countries from one side that Russia will not turn a blind eye to its true friends in distress, but will do its utmost to help, which will virtually increase the centripetal force of countries in Central Asia and other regions towards Russia, thus conducive to maintaining Russia's status as a great power and its image as a great power.

In particular, the conflict in Syria took place in the context of the so-called "Arab Spring", especially in the context of the overthrow of the Qadhafi regime. Under the pretext of the so-called "responsibility to protect", Western countries claimed that the Gadhafi regime had lost its legitimacy and exceeded the authority stipulated in UN Security Council Resolution 1973 to intervene in the Libyan conflict by force and strongly support the Libyan opposition. Gadhafi's government was quickly overthrown. Western countries hope to overthrow the Assad regime in the Libyan model. When the Gaddafi regime was overthrown, the West had already greatly violated Russia's will. When it voted on UN Security Council Resolution 1973, Russia, China, India and Brazil all abstained. This shows that they already have great reservations about the resolution, and the violation of the resolution has further aroused their dissatisfaction. If Western countries are allowed to implement the Libyan model against the Assad regime, it will undoubtedly weaken not only the international status of Russia, but also the international status of countries such as China. Opposing the West's use of the Security Council to promote the Libyan model in Syria will offend some Arab countries, but the Arab countries themselves do not have a very consistent view of the Assad regime in Syria. Some Arab countries that support the overthrow of the Assad government are to some extent following the crowd, not sincerely, and Iraq even opposes the overthrow of the Assad government. Although Jordan is reported to be used as a training base for Syrian opposition fighters, generally speaking, the country

takes a neutral position on the Syrian issue. Even if they had supported the West's implementation of the Libyan model in Syria, China and Russia would still not be much liked by Arab countries that oppose the Assad regime, because they would think it was to the credit of Europe and the United States. Moreover, if they supported it, China and Russia would not change their image in Western countries, they would still regard China and Russia as undemocratic countries, and they would not thank China and Russia, because they would think that China and Russia were just followers of the "trend". As a result, Russia has China's support in opposing the West's overthrow of the Syrian government in the Libyan style. With China's support, it is possible to achieve Russia's relevant policy objectives towards Syria. Interest is the unity of the need and the means to realize it. From this point of view, it can also be seen that protecting the Assad regime and opposing the West overthrowing it in the Libyan model is not only the needs of Russia, but also the needs that Russia has the ability to meet, so it is in the interests of Russia.

After the overthrow of the Gadhafi regime in Libya, the country's political development process also provides a realistic basis for Russia's opposition to the Libyan model to overthrow the Assad government. After the overthrow of the Gadhafi regime, Libya's political process in accordance with the Western model has been difficult, political forces in the east and west are hostile to each other, and political reconciliation is very difficult. This has led to continued unrest in the country, with terrorist groups such as the Islamic State taking advantage of the opportunity to create trouble. In this context, as of early 2019, Libya's "oil production is still below pre-2011 levels, and the lack of security will still hinder large-scale foreign investment or economic growth [7]. " NATO's actions not only failed to stabilize the situation in Libya, but also failed to stop the spread of instability, as Mali was plunged into chaos clearly related to the conflict in Libya. No wonder Russia has been able to veto the Western-led draft resolution on Syria many times in the Security Council.

Russian officials have often defended their position in the Syrian conflict, calling themselves a bastion of international and regional order, firmly resisting the threat of national collapse, chaos and the spread of transnational networks of Islamic extremism. Russia believes that the overthrow of the Assad government will not lead to the end of the Syrian civil war, but only the beginning of the next stage of civil war, just a change of roles between the Syrian government and the opposition. The overthrow of the Assad government will increase the risk of the spread of chemical weapons, and terrorists will have a better chance of insurrection. Moreover, Russia believes that chaos in Muslim countries and the collapse of state structures, coupled with the expansion of Islamic extremist networks, will in turn threaten Russia's

security. This defense is quite persuasive in connection with the development of the situation in countries such as Libya and even Iraq.

### **Russia's Strategy to Realize Its Fundamental Interests**

The above discusses Russia's fundamental interests in the Syrian conflict-protecting the Assad regime, and the following analyzes Russia's main strategies and means to achieve this fundamental interests.

### **Maintaining Strategic Cooperation with China**

China is an important big country and has great influence in the international arena, and Russia will not be isolated if it has China's support in major international affairs. On the Syrian issue, in the face of strong pressure from the West and Gulf countries, it is particularly important for Russia to win China's support and carry out strategic cooperation with China. Moreover, although, unlike Russia, China's interests in the Syrian conflict are not significant, it has common interests with Russia in safeguarding relevant international norms, such as the principle of national sovereignty, opposing military intervention in other countries under the pretext of "responsibility to protect", and even the use of force to change regime in other countries. At the same time, the Middle East also belongs to China's periphery. "The Belt and Road Initiative connects China with most of Asia, Africa and Europe, and it is a proposed infrastructure and trade network. The initiative lists the Middle East and North Africa as regions of vital importance to China's future [8]." In addition, China is also deeply concerned that individual Uighurs who have been bewitched and deceived from Xinjiang have joined the ranks of extremist organizations in Syria. That is to say, strategic cooperation between Russia and China on the Syrian issue is not only necessary but also possible.

The strategic cooperation between Russia and China on the Syrian issue is most obvious in the discussion on the Syrian issue in the United Nations Security Council. From April 27, 2011 to July 14, 2014 alone, during this period, "the United Nations Security Council held 18 meetings on Syria, adopted six resolutions and issued three Security Council presidential statements. Four of the draft resolutions were vetoed by China and Russia. In fact, China has used its veto only nine times since it was restored to the United Nations, and four of them have occurred on the issue of Syria [9]." Since then, China, together with Russia, vetoed the draft resolution on Syria on December 5, 2016 and February 28, 2017, respectively. On December 20, 2019, China and Russia vetoed a draft resolution on the cross-border humanitarian relief mechanism in Syria drafted by Germany and other countries, while China voted in favor of a similar draft resolution drafted by Russia. Strategic co-operation between Russia and China has also affected other Brics,



which increasingly seem to have found common ground in defending the principle of national sovereignty and been disgusted with concepts such as “contingent sovereignty” that challenge the principle of non-intervention.

On the Syrian issue, China has relatively actively adopted the policy of persuading and promoting peace talks, and has made contacts with both the Syrian government and the Syrian opposition, which can also help Russia from the side. Especially after the defeat of the Islamic State and the most difficult times for the Assad regime, Europe and the United States began to verbally abandon the goal of overthrowing the Assad government, being focused on the future political model of Syria (currently mainly focused on the composition of the Syrian Constitutional Council and its operating rules), in an attempt to “drown” President Assad in this process through the implementation of a new political model. One of the important measures adopted by Europe and the United States is that if the political development of Syria is not promoted in accordance with the requirements of the West, they will not provide funds and other support in the future reconstruction of Syria. “Many of the richest donors (mainly in the West) are also the least sympathetic to the Assad regime. Last year, 70 countries and institutions met in Brussels to discuss how to help rebuild Syria without helping Assad. However, although they propose to provide funds directly to businesses and non-governmental organizations, there is no guarantee that they will be able to avoid the intervention of the Syrian government [10].” As a result, they have a negative attitude towards aiding the construction of Syria. Russia is of course short of funds, but if Syria’s political and security conditions permit, China can play an important role in Syria’s future reconstruction, so as to promote Syria to restore stability at an early date and ease Western pressure on Russia and Syria.

### Using Force to Combat the Islamic State

Cooperation between Russia and China has repeatedly thwarted attempts by the West and Sunni countries in the Middle East to apply the Libyan model to overthrow the Assad regime at the United Nations. However, they have also taken other forms to achieve the goal of overthrowing the Syrian regime. The main means adopted by them is the establishment of the so-called “Friends of Syria” group. The group was founded by French President Nicolas Sarkozy after Russia and China vetoed the UN Security Council’s anti-Syria resolution, with the support of the United States, EU member states and major members of the League of Arab States. On February 24, 2012, the International Conference of Friends of Syria was held in Tunis. Representatives of about 60 countries, international and regional organizations attended the meeting. The main purpose of the meeting was to recognize the Syrian National Council in exile as legitimate representatives

of Syrians. The legitimate regime of Syria was not invited to attend the meeting. Both China and Russia refused to participate [11]. After the West and the Gulf Arab countries recognized the Syrian National Council (in late 2012 they turned to recognize the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces) as a legitimate representative of the Syrians, they gradually began to provide military support to the Syrian opposition. From May to June 2013, not only did the European Union lift the embargo on the provision of arms to Syrian opposition forces, but the United States also promised some degree of military assistance to the opposition. The Arab League is also in favor of its member states arming the Syrian opposition (at a meeting held in March 2013, the Arab League transferred Syria’s seat in the group to the Syrian opposition). Nevertheless, due to the diplomatic support of China, Russia and other countries, the military assistance of Iran and Hezbollah in Lebanon, and the strong cohesion of the Syrian government itself, the Syrian opposition did not have an advantage over government forces in military operations. In the process, in early September 2013, Western countries attempted to use the Syrian chemical weapons attack against the Syrian government, but with the good offices of Russia, Russia and the United States reached a framework agreement on 14 September to destroy Syria’s chemical weapons. With the conclusion of the “chemical weapons for peace” agreement, Syria has lost an important deterrent force, thus further strengthening Syria’s security dependence on Russia.

“Chemical weapons for peace” meant in part that the West would not use force directly against the Syrian government, but they have actively continued to provide political, diplomatic, and military support and assistance to the Syrian opposition. The chaos in Syria has allowed terrorists to take advantage, and they have grown into powerful groups. The most famous of these is the Islamic State. The Islamic State, which originated from al-Qaeda in Iraq and later became the Islamic State in Iraq, entered Syria as part of al-Qaeda in 2011 and split from al-Qaeda into an independent organization in 2013. It is a Salafi jihadist militant group that was once an unrecognized primitive country, embracing Sunni Islamic fundamentalism and Salafism. In early 2014, the Islamic State rose to global fame by launching an offensive in western Iraq, driving Iraqi government forces out of key cities, capturing Mosul and carrying out the Sinjar massacre. The organization is recognized as a terrorist organization by the United Nations and many countries. It is notorious for beheading and other forms of execution of soldiers and civilians (including journalists and aid workers) and for damage to cultural heritage. The United Nations holds the Islamic State responsible for human rights violations and war crimes. It also carried out historic ethnic cleansing in northern Iraq. At one point, the group controlled large areas of western Iraq and eastern Syria, where it implemented its interpretation of sharia

law. In Syria, the group carried out ground attacks on government forces and the opposition. As the opposition forces in Syria go their own ways, the number of groups and organizations that are at war with the Assad regime and at war with each other is increasing. Since 2013, the Islamic State had become increasingly important in the fight against the Assad regime [12].

The atrocities of the Islamic State posed a serious threat to the security of both Iraq and Syria, arousing opposition from all over the world, and the United States had taken the lead in forming an international coalition against the Islamic State. In August 2014, the U.S.-led coalition launched a military strike against the Islamic State in Iraq and extended its military strike to Syria at the end of September of the same year. However, the US coalition against the Islamic State has some reservations in the fight against the Islamic State, especially in Syria, which is related to the US policy toward Syria. After the “chemical weapons for peace” agreement was reached, the United States continued to support the Syrian opposition in launching armed attacks against the Syrian government. The United States is also opposed to the Islamic State in Syria, but because the Islamic State also poses a serious threat to the Syrian government. The US’s policy is to overthrow the Assad government over the fight against the Islamic State, temporarily using the Islamic State as a tool to overthrow the Syrian government. Turkey turns a blind eye to foreign militants crossing its territory into Syria to join the Islamic State because it believes jihadists will provide the means to quickly overthrow Assad. At the same time, private donors in the Gulf states are also expected to send money to the Islamic State, increasing the Islamic State’s ability to woo local residents by providing services and cash. Under the guidance of this policy of the United States and other countries, soon the area under the actual control of the Assad government in Syria was greatly reduced, and the Syrian regime was still in a precarious state with the support of Iran and Hezbollah guerrillas. After the defeat in Idlib, the Syrian regime appeared to be at its weakest in the summer of 2015, with both opposition forces and the Islamic State making significant territorial expansion. In July 2015, Assad made an unusual speech in which he acknowledged that the shortage of manpower had made it necessary to abandon the territory. Under the attack of the Islamic State, as of September 2015, Syrian government forces controlled only 20-25% of their own territory. The loss of the Syrian army in the conflict with the Islamic State had been so great that there were serious doubts about its ability to sustain operations [13].

Russia seemed to have enjoyed a great deal of glory in the conclusion of the “chemical weapons for peace” agreement, but the Syrian government had not benefited from it, and it faced an existential test under attacks by the Islamic State and other anti-government

forces. In this way, it seemed that the United States was going to have the last laugh. But the game was still going on: in September 2015, at the invitation of the Syrian government, Russia decisively sent troops to Syria to fight the Islamic State. As analyzed above, defending the Syrian Assad government is Russia’s fundamental interest in the Syrian conflict. At a time when the Syrian government is facing such a crisis, it is reasonable for Russia to be invited to send troops to help. But that is not the only motivation for Russia to send troops. Hundreds of Russian citizens had participated in the conflict in Syria by joining the Islamic State, bringing the conflict from as far away as the Middle East closer to Russia itself. In this context, the rise of the Islamic State is likely to spread to Russia’s volatile North Caucasus region. In some cases, the Islamic State may endanger Russia’s political and military interests in the Middle East, Central Asia and other regions. As jihadists from the North Caucasus occupied many important positions in the leadership of the Islamic State, some representatives of the group had issued a clear threat to Moscow [14]. Moreover, after the crisis in Ukraine, Russia has been further isolated by the West, and the dispatch of Russian troops to Syria can also divert the international community’s attention from its annexation of Crimea to some extent and alleviate the isolated situation. Russia’s main means of combat can be said to be safe because it mainly uses air strikes. In addition, Russia keeps its combat costs low through the use of ammunition made in the 1970s and 1980s. Therefore, the entry of Russian troops into Syria to combat the Islamic State is an important strategic means for Russia to safeguard its fundamental interests in Syria.

#### **Cooperating with Iran and Coordinating with Turkey**

In order to achieve the goal of maintaining the dominance of Bashar al-Assad’s regime in Syria, Russia also needs to cooperate with Iran, a great power in the Middle East. Iran and the Assad government in Syria have maintained friendly relations for a long time. The two countries have strongly supported Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas, which together oppose Israel and the United States. Iran cannot give full play to its regional influence without the support of Syria. Iran’s main interests in Syria have traditionally been to maintain its land corridors and provide weapons to Hezbollah. If the Assad government is overthrown and replaced by a Sunni government, the “Shiite crescent zone” by which Iran displays and exerts its influence will be seriously broken, and Iran’s “attractiveness” to countries such as Iraq will be weakened. In the current conflict, Syria has also become a key stage in the confrontation between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Iran even fears that if the Syrian regime falls, its opponents will be bold enough to try to overthrow Iraq’s Shiite government, which is very close to Iran. Therefore, safeguarding the Assad regime is also Iran’s fundamental interest in the Syrian conflict. Iran has

been confronted with the United States for a long time, and its relations with the West are generally not harmonious. Russia has also been suppressed by the West for a long time, and its relations with the West deteriorated further after the crisis in Ukraine. Therefore, Iran and Russia have a strategic basis for cooperation in Syria. Moreover, more importantly, Iran is a powerful country with close political, economic, historical and cultural ties with Afghanistan, Iraq and other countries. Iran's influence on these two countries has increased rapidly after the overthrow of the Taliban regime and Saddam Hussein regime. Islamic State, which has a deep Sunni background, also poses a great threat to Shiite-dominated Iran. The fight against Islamic State is not only Iran's interest in the conflict in Syria, but also its interest in Iraq. Therefore, cooperation with Iran will facilitate Russia to form an alliance against the Islamic State and achieve the goal of defending the Assad regime. At a critical moment to defend the Assad government in Syria, Iran's airport can even be used by the Russian air force if necessary. This will no doubt provide a strategic military deterrent to forces trying to overthrow the Assad government.

Of course, Iran's increased influence in Syria has caused concern in Israel, which has asked Russia to exert pressure on Iran to withdraw its military personnel and facilities from Syria, at least away from the Syrian-Israeli border. In order to regulate their respective actions in Syria and avoid conflicts, Russia and Israel have reached and implemented some conflict prevention mechanisms, so that their respective military operations in Syria do not interfere with each other and do not threaten each other. However, when on September 17, 2018, a Russian Il-20 reconnaissance plane was mistakenly hit and crashed by a Syrian missile due to the minor actions of an Israeli military plane, killing 15 Russian soldiers, [15] Russian-Israeli relations were adversely affected to a certain extent. Russia was forced to make the decision to deliver more advanced anti-aircraft missiles to Syria and immediately implemented it, thus reducing Russia's scruples about Syria's cooperation with Iran. Although Israel firmly opposes Iran's military presence in Syria, it does not take a position on the fate of the Syrian Assad government, so Russian-Israeli relations have been repaired quickly.

In order to safeguard its fundamental interests in the conflict in Syria, Russia also needs to coordinate with Turkey. In the early days of the Syrian conflict, Russia did not have much coordination with Turkey, but after Russian troops entered Syria to fight against the Islamic State, great changes have taken place in the power pattern of all parties to the Syrian conflict. Russia began to gradually strengthen its coordination with Turkey in the Syrian conflict. From the Turkish point of view, before the Russian military intervention in Syria, Turkey has been pro-active on the Syrian issue, but after the Russian military intervention,

coupled with the occurrence of major domestic political events, it has to respond passively to the Syrian issue and therefore needs to coordinate with Russia.

In terms of Turkey's overall foreign policy, it did not establish long-term contacts with Syria until the late 1990s. The so-called Turkey's Syria policy is in fact a new policy that has been developing since then. Before the late 1990s, Turkey's traditional foreign policy of separation from Middle East affairs and facing the West limited Turkey's contacts with other countries in the region, including Syria. In fact, the relations between Turkey and Syria are characterized by a series of controversial issues: Syria's territorial claim to Hatai, the dispute over water resources in the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, and Syria's support for PKK organizations. The accumulation of these challenges eventually led to serious tensions in relations between the two countries in the mid-1990s. However, the peak of tension has also prompted the two countries to take positive measures in bilateral relations. On October 20, 1998, Turkey and Syria signed the Adana Agreement, which laid the foundation for bilateral cooperation in cracking down on PKK organizations and improved bilateral relations in the political, economic, cultural and other aspects, and was thus a turning point in relations between the two countries.

Relations between the two countries have been further strengthened since Syrian President Bashar al-Assad came to power in 2000. Since 2002, Turkey has entered the era of the Justice and Development Party with Islamic religious background, and Turkey's foreign policy has also begun to change greatly, putting forward the policy of "zero problems with neighboring countries" and the goal of regional cultural and economic integration. This has provided a driving force for the further development of Turkish-Syrian relations. Especially in the second half of the 21st century, the relations between the two countries have made considerable progress, the visits of presidents, prime ministers, foreign ministers and other officials at all levels have increased, and efforts to expand bilateral relations have also increased. On January 1, 2007, a free trade agreement in the name of promoting bilateral trade entered into force. In August 2008, the Erdogan and Assad families spent a holiday on the west coast of Turkey, adding luster to the relationship between the two countries. Since 2009, the two sides have signed dozens of agreements, including visa-free agreements. In addition, Turkey, Syria, Jordan and Lebanon established a Quartet High-level Strategic Cooperation Council in June 2010 with the aim of establishing a region for the free movement of goods and people between the four countries. By 2011, the two sides had begun to discuss specific projects, such as the construction of the Kili-Aleppo gas pipeline in Syria, the rehabilitation of Ottoman-era buildings, the construction of Syrian-Turkish dams, and the export of Iranian natural gas to Syria through Turkey [16].

Turkey, a close neighbor of Syria, is extremely concerned about the situation in Syria and was hesitant about which side to support at the beginning of the anti-government protests in Syria. However, shortly after the outbreak of the Syrian crisis, Turkey worked closely with Western countries to actively promote the ouster of President Bashar al-Assad. Like Western leaders, Turkish leaders have repeatedly stressed in public that Assad must step down. The reason why Turkey has done so has a lot to do with the inherent contradictions in Turkish-Syrian relations (territorial sovereignty, distribution of water resources, Kurdish issue, etc.). Despite the warm relations between the two countries before the Syrian crisis, after the outbreak of the Syrian crisis, Turkey's economic and political goal of developing relations with Arab countries through Syria is difficult to achieve. More importantly, in order to counterbalance the opposition, the Bashar regime, based on religious minorities, began to woo the Syrian Kurds and give them higher political status, which must have upset Turkey. Turkey's support for the Syrian opposition has further promoted the cooperation between the Syrian government and the Syrian Kurds. In July 2012, the Syrian regime began to withdraw from many areas, concentrating its resources in major urban centres. This created conditions for protracted conflicts. It is worth noting that the Government withdrew from the Kurdish-majority northern region-with the exception of Hassaka and Qamishi. In the north, it signed a non-aggression pact with the Democratic Union Party, under which the party's militia, the people's Protection Units will control the local area. The Democratic Union Party's cooperation with the regime widened its differences with the opposition. Tensions have been further heightened by the Syrian opposition's continued adherence to Arab nationalist goals, alienating members of the Democratic Union Party and many other Kurds [17].

Turkey supports the Syrian opposition in exile and representatives of the domestic opposition to join forces to set up the Syrian National Council with its capital Istanbul as its headquarters. Turkey has also actively supported the Free Syrian Army, an important opposition force in Syria, and has even been reported to have links with the Islamic State, such as acquiescing in the transit of extremists recruited by the Islamic State, acquiesce in certain trade related to the Islamic State. Turkey believes that cracking down on Syrian Kurdish forces and stopping their expansion is a higher priority than overthrowing the Assad government, and overthrowing the Assad government is a higher priority than fighting the Islamic State. The Islamic State is an enemy of the Syrian government and Kurdish forces at the same time. Therefore, the Russian army's entry into Syria to combat the Islamic State has actually touched the interests of Turkey. In particular, the Russian army's crackdown on Turkish armed forces in northwestern Syria has made Turkey even more unhappy. From this point of view, it is no accident that

the Turkish army shot down a Russian warplane on November 24, 2015. The incident of Turkey shooting down a Russian warplane prompted Russia to pay attention to coordinating relations with Turkey in the Syrian conflict, while a series of other events also made Russia feel more and more necessary to coordinate with Turkey in the Syrian conflict.

Although the Turkish shooting down of the Russian warplane cast a shadow over Turkish-Russian relations, subtle changes have taken place in Turkish-US relations at the same time. The United States has entered Syria to combat the Islamic State with the People's Protection Force, an organization under the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party, as its main tool, providing them with weapons and intelligence support, and even directly sending soldiers to fight alongside it. The group gradually took control of northern Syria. Turkey believes that the People's Protection Force is a Syrian branch of the PKK, which is listed as a terrorist organization by the Turkish government, so it is extremely worried about its expansion in northern Syria and is determined to crack down on it, thus worsening Turkish-US relations. Moreover, Turkey has been trying to find a balance between the West and Russia. After the Ukraine crisis, it did not join the list of countries sanctioning Russia, and its status as an energy corridor cannot be ignored by Russia. As a result, instead of seizing on Turkey after the military plane was shot down, Russia resumed relations with Turkey soon after Erdogan sent a letter to Putin apologizing in June 2016.

The attempted coup against Erdogan in Turkey in July 2016 further promoted the coordination between Russia and Turkey in the Syrian conflict. Because the coup further worsened Turkey's relations with the West. Erdogan is angry at the refusal of the United States to extradite Fithula Gulen, a Turkish religious figure, and the refusal of EU countries to extradite Turkish soldiers and civilians, who he claims helped orchestrate the coup against him in 2016. At the end of 2016, the recovery of Aleppo further promoted the coordination between Russia and Turkey. If the recovery of Aleppo has consolidated Russia's position as a major external actor in the Syrian conflict, it has also led Turkey to replace the United States as a key interlocutor with Russia. Turkey adjusted its priorities in 2016, focusing on attempts to combat Kurdish autonomy, thus weakening its ambitions to overthrow Assad. Soon after, Turkey and Russia jointly announced that they would host direct talks between the rebels and the Syrian government in Astana, Kazakhstan, in January 2017. Russia makes full use of the contradiction between Turkey and the West, respects Turkey's interests as far as possible in the Syrian conflict, and enables it to maintain cooperation with itself as a whole, such as reaching an agreement with Turkey through negotiations and establishing several conflict de-escalation zones in Syria. Russia does not



support Turkey's war against the Syrian Kurds and has been lobbying for the Kurdish delegation to participate in negotiations on the future of Syria. But Russia clearly gave Turkey the green light to attack the Kurdish-controlled city of Avlin, driving out the People's Protection Unit that liberated the city from the Islamic State and Turkish-backed extremist groups. Some Kurds accused Moscow of betraying them. But both Russia and Iran believe that the Avelin area seized by Turkey and the Free Syrian Army from Kurdish forces should be handed over to the Syrian government [18]. On October 9, 2019, three days after Trump announced his withdrawal from Syria, Turkey launched Operation Fountain of Peace in Syria, claiming to establish a security zone in northern Syria to resettle Syrian refugees, but in fact to drive the Syrian Kurds away from its borders. On October 22, Russia and Turkey reached a memorandum of understanding in Sochi, in which Russia agreed to help meet Turkey's requirements for the establishment of a security zone and to jointly patrol the security zone [19].

## CONCLUSION

Since the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Russia has been looking for the possibility of returning to the Middle East as one of the major powers involved in regional affairs. In addition, Russian officials see the Middle East as a region that can help Russia regain its status as a great power. Russia's approach to the Syrian conflict since 2011 is based on a broader Russian foreign policy framework that attempts to implement a multipolar world order with Russia as one of the powers. Russia's policy focus is on achieving its goals in Syria, the broader Middle East and global politics. Russia's fundamental interest in Syria is to ensure the survival of the Bashar Assad regime as one of the friendly regimes in the region. In the wider region, Russia is interested in maintaining the current power relationship among the regional powers. If the Syrian regime changes, Sunni majority representatives take control of the country's future political direction, which will affect Russia's interests in the Middle East and Shiite-Sunni relations. In the global political framework, Russia's policy in Syria focuses on restricting the actions of Western countries, especially the United States, indicating that Russia will not accept regime change without its consent. Attack is the best defense, and in doing so, Russia is trying to eliminate the possibility of its own regime change by the West.

In order to safeguard Russia's fundamental interests in the Syrian conflict-the survival of the Assad regime in Syria, the important strategies that Russia needs to adopt are: maintaining strategic cooperation with China, fighting the Islamic State by force, cooperating with Iran, coordinating with Turkey, and so on. Because the United States and other Western countries have different interests in Syria from Russia, and although President Trump has claimed to withdraw troops from Syria from time to time, he has never really

fulfilled his promise, which shows that its willingness and strength to interfere in Syria's internal affairs are still very strong, so if Russia wants to realize its fundamental interests in the Syrian conflict, it may have to regard the United States as an important party in the negotiations in the future. Thus, the peace talks on the Syrian issue may once again take the Geneva peace talks as the main channel.

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