

third section would discuss belligerents and conflict intensification in Syria. Section four deals with super-power rivalry and the victory of Russia while section five is the conclusion and recommendation.

BACKGROUND OF CONFLICT IN SYRIA 2011-2019

The Conflict in Syria is a war which began in 2011 and is ongoing as at March 2019. It is a multi-sided armed conflict which has claimed so much life and property. The crisis was part of the 2011 Arab spring conflict which began in Tunisia and spread to Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Qatar and Syria. The casus belli of the conflict, was the violent suppression of protesters calling for Assad's removal (Wilson 2011).

The war began on 15th March with violent protest in Damascus and Aleppo. The protest was caused by the dictatorial tendencies of Assad and the desire for reforms by the populace. Bashar al-Assad became president of Syria in 2000 at the death of Hafez al-Assad his father. Himself and the wife were educated in Britain and initially expounded on democratic reforms. Much later Assad abandoned the democratic reforms agenda and continued to hold onto power with dictatorial tendencies (Landis 2012). This fact coupled with the challenge by some Islamist Fundamentalist with regard to his secular administration triggered the conflict. This fact is buttressed by Assad when he noted that all the opposition forces to his administration are jihadists with the intention of scuttling his secular leadership (Landis 2012).

Since the start of its operation the US-led coalition has launched airstrikes on at least 17,000 locations in Syria to-date (AP 19-Dec-2018). Some scholars are of the perspective that the conflict is "a battle between Sunni Muslims, who tend to back the Opposition, and Shia Muslims, who tend to back the Assad government, or a proxy war between regional enemies of Saudi Arabia and Iran, or global rivals, the US and Russia" (Christopher 2018).

The later tends to better explain the intensification in the Syria conflict. The super power rivalry and proxy war motivated the US to cobble together the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), "a force led by Syrian Kurdish YPG militia but that also includes Arab, Christian and Turkmen fighters. The US has some 800 special forces embedded with the SDF" (Chase 2017).

Russia is in Syria to project its influence in the Middle East and to protect the regime of President Assad from rebels it regards as terrorists. Its military intervention earnestly began in September 2014. This intervention not only assisted Assad to reverse all his losses but to regain much of Syria. The intervention of Russia in Syria has brought Russia back to the world stage as a force or power to be reckoned with and a major player in international politics.

BELLIGERENTS AND CONFLICT INTENSIFICATION IN SYRIA

The array of powers and diverse mix of belligerents in the Syrian War has compounded and intensified the conflict. Essentially, the war is between the Ba'athist Syrian Arab Republic under the leadership of President Bashar al-Assad supported by some domestic and foreign allies on the one hand and several domestic and foreign opposition forces on the other hand (Van 2011).

The Syrian Arab Army (SAA) is officially the army of the government of Syria and they are loyal to President Bashar al-Assad. The SAA has been fighting to retain the status quo before the Syrian crisis. The SAA is the major domestic proponent and pro-Assad force. The National Defense Force is another pro-Assad militia at the domestic level. At the international level Russia and Iran are the major supporters of the faction of Bashar al-Assad (Schumacher 2018).

The foreign supporters of the embattled government of Assad are a blend of the eastern guardian and the Persian shadow to use the words of Elizabeth Schumacher. The eastern guardian refers to the forces of Russia. Russia has been supplying weapons and logistics to the Syrian army and officially joint the fight in September 2015. There intensive support turned the conflict tide in favor of Assad at the beginning of 2019 (Schumacher 2018).

Iran is the epitome of the Persian shadow and the second most important foreign supporter of Assad. Syria has been the only Arab ally of Iran over the years and as a matter of necessity motivated Tehran to be interested in what happens in Damascus. It is for this reason that Iran provided the requisite military training, strategic assistance and ground troops that Assad needed to survive since the outbreak of the war in 2011. As expected, Hezbollah supported Iran in this quest – fighting alongside pro-Assad Iranian forces. Hezbollah is an Iran-funded Lebanese Shiite militant group (Schumacher 2018). "Russia and Iran have stood by the

Government from the start, providing diplomatic, economic and military support, and more recently sending troops, air and naval power” (Christopher 2018). Invariably, the main foreign supporters of the Bashar al-Assad embattled government are Russia and Iran but Hezbollah which is a militia group based in Lebanon is also playing a major role (Marks 2018).

On the other side of the war are the belligerents fighting for the overthrow of the government of Bashar al-Assad. At the domestic level are “multiple revolutionary groups” (Schumacher 2018) The Free Syrian Army is a formidable opposition force rebelling against the Assad regime. The major mission was democratic elections after the ouster of President Assad and they were greatly supported by the US and Turkey (Schumacher 2018). These opposition forces initially made tremendous progress by capturing so much territory from the government. They were eventually ravaged by divisions and fight for supremacy. This fight between the rival groups advancing towards Damascus paved the way for Assad to gradually recover from the initial deadly blows and slowly reclaim some lost territories.

The greatest advantage to the pro-Assad forces was the sinister Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). They initially started fighting the government of Assad and later fought other opposition groups and challenged anybody on their way. "Islamic State (IS) took advantage of regional chaos to capture vast swathes of territory in Iraq and Syria in 2014. Seeking to establish its own caliphate, IS has become infamous for its fundamentalist brand of Islam and its mass atrocities” (Schumacher 2018).

The atrocities of ISIS became a point of accord for all discordant tones in the conflict. The fight against ISIS was the paramount objective for Russia, USA, Iran, Turkey, Britain France etc. The US and Russia led separate military attacks against ISIS. Brett McGurk a senior US envoy said that “We are in Syria to fight ISIS.” For this purpose and the struggle for power, the direct American troops on ground in Syria rose from 50 in late 2015 to about 2,000 in 2018 (AP 19-Dec-2018).

France and Britain are also in Syria because of ISIS but tend to work in solidarity with the US-coalition. It is for this reason that they also joined in attacks against Assad and actions to contain the influence of Russia and Iran (Krishnadev 2018). ISIS eventually distracted the attention of the opposition forces and the unifying factor for all the belligerents in the conflict as both those for and against Assad dreaded ISIS the most (Christopher 2018).

The United States of America led a coalition of more than 50 countries, including Germany to the war especially with respect to the ISIS menace (Schumacher 2018). Before the rise of ISIS in 2014, the US government attempted to curtail the crisis by using available diplomatic channels but advised Assad to step aside. Apparently, the refusal of Assad to step down made the US to support pro-democracy revolutionist and other rebels challenging the regime of Bashar al Assad.

For fear of weapons and funds falling into wrongs hands especially fundamentalist Moslem which would be counterproductive the US government was initially reluctant to send weapons and funds to support the rebels (Krishnadev 2018). Despite this initial reluctance the United States, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey etc. fought to overthrow or change of r government of Assad (Marks 2018). In a nutshell the “Opposition has been supported by Turkey, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf States, the US and others offering political and economic support, along with weaponry and training, but far less than that provided by the government’s backers.”

Syria’s Kurds have formed militia and joined the fight for the ouster of President Assad and against ISIS with the support of the US. As a matter of fact, the Syrian Democratic Force (SDF) was an alliance of Kurdish and Arab militias who are part of the US led coalition against the Islamic State. The SDF pushed IS out of its strongholds (AP 19-Dec-2018).

Turkey is a major foreign opposition force against the government of Assad. Despite been part of the US-led coalition, Turkey is in “a tense relationship with its American allies over US cooperation with Kurdish fighters, who Ankara says are linked to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) fighting in Turkey” (Schumacher 2018) Turkey is not happy with US pally with the Kurds. There is estranged relationship between Turkey and the Kurds which makes Turkey to regard the Kurds as terrorists (Knipp 2017).

The belligerents sometimes alter or engage in varying combinations. In the Arab world Sunni Muslims have the inclination of backing the opposition while Shia Muslims are inclined to back the Assad government. At the regional level the belligerents are drawn in a manner which portents a proxy war between the enemies of Saudi Arabia and Iran (Knipp 2017).

SUPER POWER RIVALRY AND THE VICTORY OF RUSSIA IN SYRIA

The Syrian War has become the centrepiece of power rivalry in the international system and pivot of Russia's desire to reassert itself as a global power. The United States of America is indisputably the sole superpower in our contemporary unipolar world order but the strategies of Russia in Syria are at conflict with the hegemonic powers of the US because Russia is using the conflict to renew influence in the Middle East beginning with Syria and stretching eastward (Cook 2018).

The superpower rivalry over the Syrian crisis began when Russia as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council used its veto powers to impede the moves of the US led coalition to interfere in the internal affairs of Syria in the aftermath of 2011 major protests in Damascus. The United Nations Security Council resolution that were drafted by Western powers for sanctions on Syria that would have adversely affected the Syrian government of Bashar al-Assad were vetoed by Russia and China (Ziadeh 2011). Russia have used its veto on more than nine occasions to impair the attempts by the United States to use the instrumentality of the United Nations as launching pad against Syria (Reuters 24-Nov-2017).

The rivalry intensified when Russia joined the big-power entanglement in Syria in the fall of 2015. Washington initially expressed reservations over the move by Moscow to come into Syria but Russia insisted that it must join in the fight against ISIS. Russia eventually came in and to avoid aerial confrontation and accidents a telephone deconfliction line was established between the United States and Russian military officials (AP 19-Dec-2018). The rivalry gathered momentum with the vociferous attacks by Russia on the UN. On September 28, 2015 – President Vladimir Putin of Russia declared that “It seems that some people continue to export revolutions, only now these are ‘democratic’ revolutions. Just look at the situation in the Middle East and North Africa” (Czuperski 2017).

A day before this comment President Putin was in New York to attend the United Nations General Assembly on September 27, 2015. In his address in the UN General Assembly, Putin accused the US and its allies of creating the monster called ISIS because a great majority of this powerful militant groups are former Iraqi soldiers empowered because of the 2003 US invasion of Iraq. Most of the recruits come from “Libya whose statehood was destroyed as a result of a gross violation of UN Security Council Resolution 1973. And now radical groups are joined by members of the so-called ‘moderate’ Syrian opposition backed by the West.” They get weapons and training, and then they defect and join the so-called Islamic State” (Czuperski 2017).

Two years after the intervention of the Russia's military the Syrian conflict sharply tilted in favour of the Bashar al-Assad government that was at a precipice in the summer of 2015 as a result of the aggressive attacks on the Syrian government multiple rebellion groups. The US supported the pro-democracy revolutionist and other rebels challenging the regime of Bashar al Assad through covert CIA programs and other assistance. The covert CIA programme began in 2013 under President Barack Obama – backing the Free Syrian Army (FSA). The CIA coordinated the offensives against Bashar al Assad through the FSA, and forces from Jordan, the Gulf Arab states and Turkey (Chase 2017).

However very recently Donald Trump scrapped the covert CIA programme to arm Syrian rebels. “US President Donald Trump has decided to end a secret CIA operation to support Syrian rebels fighting the regime of Bashar al-Assad, US media reported. The decision is an acknowledgement of the situation on the ground” (Chase 2017). This new policy is obviously in line with the reality on ground with respect to dislodgement of the opposition forces against the President Bashar al-Assad that was propped up by Russia.

There was escalation propensity at several episodes in the Syrian conflict but the shooting down of a Russian-made Syrian SU-22 war plane by the US Navy F/A-18E Super Hornet in the embattled city of Raqqa was one of the severest. It was “perhaps the most serious sign of a stepped-up US military role in the war. That could put the United States on a collision course with Russia” (Knigge 2017).

Russia was highly agitated and described it as naked aggression against the Syrian government forces. For this reason, Russian officials suspended the deconfliction channel established to prevent possible military incidents between Russia and US. The Russian government also hinted that its military forces would shoot down any foreign aircraft west of the Euphrates River – an area which Kremlin regards as its area of operations (Knigge 2017).

There have been accusations and counter-accusations by Russia and the US. Russia's Defense Ministry accused the US and its coalition of erasing Raqqa off the map on the one hand while the US and its coalition have accused Russia and Syrian armed forces of indiscriminate bombing especially in Aleppo with the offensive against the rebels (AP 17-Jul-2017). Also, US officials have countered the claims by Russia that its offensive is on IS and other terrorist groups saying that Russian airstrikes are basically targeted against non-IS rebel forces fighting the Assad government. On the other hand, the Russian government have accused the US of using the fight against IS as pretext to support rebels and other forces fighting for the overthrow of the government of Assad (DW Akademie).

The assertion by Stephen Blank (Russian foreign policy expert at the American Foreign Policy Council) that Russia intervened in Syria to establish a foothold in the region by making effective use of bases such as the Tartus port is to a reasonable extent correct (Zimmer 2017) Russia has since the Soviet era leased the Syrian port city of Tartus as a naval base to boost its maritime activities. It also has an important military airbase in the western province of Latakia. The recent conflict obviously motivated Kremlin to increase its military buildup and influence in the area and this may lead to an expanded permanent presence in the region (Kimball 2019).

The bond of affection sequel to the timely intervention of Russia in Syria is already yielding strategic dividends. Syria signed agreements to extend the control of Russia over the strategic Tartus port for a period of 49 years. The agreement allows Russia to hold sovereignty over the territory and by this singular gesture Russia dredged the Mediterranean port and installed floating berths. These massive repair works enables Russia to keep 11 warships, including nuclear-powered ships in Tartus. Russian defense leader Andrei Krasov said the deal mean that "Russia is strengthening its position in the Middle East as a peacemaker and as a guarantor of global security" (Zimmer 2017).

The refurbishment of Tartus paved the way for the deployment of the Admiral Kuznetsov to the area. Admiral Kuznetsov is the first aircraft carrier of Russia for active combat mission. It was escorted by several other battleships, including frigates with capability of launching precision cruise missile strikes. The deployment is a radical interference and flexing of muscles which is part of the super power rivalry of the Syrian war. Invariably Russia has used the Syrian conflict to "test its capabilities and flex its military muscles, including by launching cruise missiles from the Caspian Sea and using strategic bombers to pound targets" (Ulrike 2016).

The efforts and strategies of Russia is successful and Bashir al-Assad had won the civil war while the United States is gradually quitting the stage. Russia achieved its mission. After a quarter century "Russia has regained its superpower status" (Kersten 2015).

CONCLUSION

The Syrian war ultimately became the battle ground for the super-power rivalry between the United States of America and Russia. In this highly contested and intensified proxy war Russia emerged victorious. President Donald Trump ordered the withdrawal of US military from Syria on the 19th of December, 2018 (Gadalla 2019). Some scholars described the announcement as abrupt move but it is in line with the reality on ground. With the help of Russia "Syrian President Bashar al-Assad seems to have won the civil war in his country" (Krishnadev 2018). The victory of Assad and by extension Russia has brought to an end the quagmire and "Syria has become the unlikely site for what could have been the deadliest skirmish between the U.S. and Russia since the Cold War" (Bremmer 2018).

Russia now has enhanced international influence sequel to its ability to prevent a pro-Western entity from emerging in Syria. At the end of the Cold War in 1990 Russia became relatively very weak, with a collapsing economy, ageing population and a stifling political system (Czuperski 2017). Apparently, things may radically change for good with this victory as a bond of affection sequel to the timely intervention of Russia in Syria is already yielding strategic dividends. Syria signed agreements to extend the control of Russia over the strategic Tartus port for a period of 49 years.

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The period that the US had the final say and decided the rules of the game with unquestionable power in the Middle East lasted for 25 years but it's now over (Cook 2018). Nevertheless, "now that the Assad-Putin-Khamenei side of the Syrian conflict has won, there will be an opportunity for Americans to debate what is important in the Middle East and why" (Cook 2018).

The study recommends that the example of Russia whereby a government in power is supported to fight terrorist and rebellious elements should be emulated by the United States and her coalition. Western forces led by the United States of America should be more cautious in their interventionist proclivities with regards to democratization. In situations where change of regime is likely going to plunge the international system into chaos the United States of America should thread with caution.

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